

# Commoner Women's Lives in 19th and early 20th Century Korea<sup>1</sup>

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In the autumn of 2007, a coalition of feminist groups organized a boycott of the Bank of Korea proposal to print the portrait of painter Sin Saimdang (1504-1551) on the new fifty thousand wŏn bill. While feminist organizations lauded the initiative to represent a woman on Korean currency for the first time, they criticized the choice of Sin Saimdang, known as the mother of Confucian philosopher Yi I (pen name Yulgok, 1536-1584) and as the embodiment of the Confucian ideal of “womanly virtue” (*pudŏk*) and “wise mother, good wife” (*hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ*).<sup>2</sup> The debate which followed the Bank of Korea announcement questioned how representative is Sin Saimdang for Korean women today and opposed the symbolic promotion of dated ideals of womanhood. Feminists particularly castigated the preservation and promotion of patriarchal ideals that Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) intellectuals cultivated and imposed on women, like narrowly prescribed social roles and moral imperatives.

Any discussion of Sin Saimdang opens the ground for critical reflection about the social standing of Chosŏn women within family and society. It is paradoxical how little we know about one of the most famous women of the Chosŏn era, and we owe what we do know to her connection to philosopher Yulgok, her son. For instance, we do not know her given name: Sin was her father's family name, and Saimdang—her pen name. She was mythicized by Yulgok's followers for several centuries after her death, to the point that the individual disappeared. Confucian intellectuals remembered and revered her as the mother of the famous philosopher, and went as far as to interpret her paintings as an expression of motherhood and prenatal care (Lee 2008, 23). The Bank of Korea would have us celebrate the painter and poet Sin Saimdang, memorializing her as an outstanding female artist of Chosŏn dynasty, when the very epoch that created the Sin Saimdang myth saw her merely as a devoted mother. One cannot but cynically

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<sup>2</sup> Although commonly associated with Sin Saimdang today, the phrase “wise mother, good wife” is a cultural import from Japan (Jap. *ryōsai kenbo*). The Meiji and Showa governments coined and instrumentalized the concept in order to shape female citizens as subjects loyal to the empire, contributing through their roles of managers of domestic affairs and educators of children. After being employed in Korea for similar purposes by Japanese colonial era educators (1910-1945), the ideal “wise mother, good wife” was exploited by post-colonial Korean governments (particularly the Park Chung Hee government, 1961-1979) in order to revive Confucian virtues.

wonder if the artist celebrated today would exist in the collective memory without the connection to Yulgok.

We know even less about women of lower social status from Chosŏn dynasty. Since they were uneducated (with the exception of cultivated entertainers, *kisaeng*), women lacked the means to express their own thoughts in written forms that were somewhat accessible to aristocrat *yangban* women, such as memoirs, novels, poems, or instructions for their daughters. Our present-day knowledge about commoner women from Chosŏn dynasty relies on historical sources written by Confucian male intellectuals who devised the very rules that determined the secluded life of women. This constitutes exactly the biased point of view that has been criticized by the feminists who opposed the election of Sin Saimdang as a representative symbol of Korean women. The male historians and thinkers who interpreted Sin solely as a perfectly virtuous woman also decided the marginal role (if any) played by commoner women in history, and omitted them from mainstream historical narratives.

However, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, progressive intellectuals who militated for the elevation of women through education and Western travelers to Korea started to write substantially about the role of women in Korean society. The present paper explores the life and status of commoner women, as seen through their writings—critical essays, newspaper editorials by Korean intellectuals, memoirs and travelogues written by Westerners. Despite being written by authors from very diverse social and cultural backgrounds, these writings bear striking similarities in tone, message and objectives. Their common denominator is the critique of the social inequalities affecting women during Chosŏn and in the first decades of the twentieth century, and their objective was to elevate the status of Korean women from all walks of life. Using different expressive registers, they started to militate for social change, promoting the so-called “New Woman” (*sinyŏsŏng*)—the educated, independent and modern woman.

During the last years of Chosŏn dynasty, there were more and more voices who criticized the inferior position to which women had been relegated for centuries. Intellectuals who set to redefine the social status of women expressed their concern about the unequal and unfair gender hierarchy created by the Confucian ethos. In their view, women were subjected to the inferior position of “lesser beings” (An 1907/2013, 22), “lowly creature(s),” disrespected as men’s “objects of pleasure” and “not considered human beings” (Ibid., 23). An editorial published in the progressive paper *The Independent (Tongnip sinmun)* in 1896 lamented that Korean women were “the most pitiful being[s] in this world,” “unfortunate,” “deprived of [their] rights to freedom, treated like a criminal in prison,” despite being “far superior to man.” (*Tongnip sinmun* 1896/2013, 19). British author Louise Jordan Miln (1864-1933), who dedicated two lengthy chapters to the life and social position of Korean women from all walks of life in her book, “Quaint Korea” (1895), remarks that only the condition of very poor people equals the wretched fate of even wealthy Korean women (Miln 1895, 91). In the following decades, writers such as these set to analyze the roots of women’s vulnerable position in society. They identified a series of causes that I will investigate below.

An incipient feminist movement blamed, above all, the unjust and disrespectful way men treated women: “they [men] do not show any affection, loyalty, or courtesy toward them [women]. A man treats his wife like some despicable creature, without the slightest trace of affection. He follows traditions in which he acts in forceful and authoritative ways that

excessively oppress his wife.” (*Tongnip sinmun* 1896/2013, 19) This gender inequality started early in life, as children were socialized in a way that prepared them for strictly defined roles: parents laid a newborn son up on the table, and a newborn girl on the floor, “to instill the idea that women were lower and weaker beings meant to exist under other people and that they needed to be diligent” (Kwon 2014, 190). This reflects the neo-Confucian principles of *namjon yōbi* (lit. “elevation of men and subjection of women”), and *namhak yōmaeng* (lit. “learned men, ignorant women”). Boys were taught abstract things such as numbers, the calendar, sexagenary cycles, while girls learned etiquette rules such as how to walk in their in-laws’ house or how to respond slowly and politely (Ibid.). It is interesting that sexual education played an important part in the training young girls received, with a focus on understanding the biological functions and rhythms of their own bodies (Kwon 2014, 190-191). This emphasis on biology can be better understood when considering the main duty of a woman: adding prestige to the family by providing male progenitors who would carry on the family line. This gendered education excluded from the start many of the choices and opportunities that men enjoyed later in life, among which the most important were access to education, a rich social life, and the ability to provide for themselves. For instance, the reality reflected in Sin Saimdang’s life story and her posthumous reputation is that social rules modelled by Confucian orthodoxy prevented women from seeking fame for themselves as intellectuals or artists. Being famous for one’s literary or artistic accomplishments and demonstrating erudition outside the family home were thought to harm the “womanly virtue” and alter a woman’s character. Absolute modesty was ingrained in the notion of virtue, and this notion was inculcated in young upper-class girls through rigorous education within the family, tailored to prepare them for prescribed roles: daughter, wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. The striking common denominator of these roles is that they are all connected to life within the family and the domestic sphere, which indicates that women had no opportunities to become public figures or get involved in civic affairs in any way.

Louise Jordan Miln observed at the end of the nineteenth century that marriage actually reinforced gender inequalities in Korea, because the marital status provided men (and men only) with a lot of freedom and with social standing, facilitating the immediate transition from boyhood to manhood, while women experienced little change through marriage: they were simply transferred from their household to their in-laws (Miln 1895, 86).<sup>3</sup> Marital customs of Chosŏn dynasty ensured that women got married by default, at an early age, as a result of what resembled a contractual settlement negotiated by her family. Marriage was a practical affair that ensured benefits for all social classes: As married women, *yangban* girls’ vital contribution to society was to offer offspring for the proper continuation of the family line, and at the same time maintain the domestic realm in order and harmony. Among commoners, bridegrooms provided workforce for the brides’ families for three years, because very often men could not pay the required betrothal price to their in-laws (the equivalent of a cow or a pig) (Yoo 2008, 24). So marrying girls, especially in families with many daughters, was a profitable business for commoners, which explains the practice of child marriage. Marrying off their daughters at a very young age was also a way for commoners to get rid of a burden, in case their daughters moved out of the household to live in their husbands’ houses. Robert Moose, one of the Western observers who have written

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<sup>3</sup> She also commiserated the fate of bachelors, because men who had never been married (because they were not able to afford to pay for a wife) were treated as children all their life, even when they grew old (Miln 1895, 81).

detailed accounts of Korean social mores at the beginning of the twentieth century, deplored the fate of little girls who were forced to live with their in-laws from early childhood, in “bondage and degradation” that drove them to despair:

These girl wives are literally the slaves of the household into which they are carried. The mother-in-law rules with a hand of iron and a rod of steel. Many women have two, three, four, or more of these young daughters-in-law under their care, and take peculiar pleasure in making them understand what is what and who is who. Either before marriage or after, it is all the same; the girls are bound by the law of obedience to the mother-in-law from the day they enter her home. They are slaves, literally grinding at the mill and doing all sorts of work about the house that would be done by slaves if the family were able to own them. (...) Is it any wonder that these young wives often find their burdens greater than they can bear and end the matter by taking their own lives? (Moose 1911, 110-111)<sup>4</sup>

Just as marriage provided mothers-in-law with help around the household, marriage among slaves provided their aristocrat owners with a chance to increase their wealth. The *yangban* encouraged slaves from the same household to marry each other, or women slaves to marry poor farmers who could not afford a wife otherwise, because their children inherited the social status of a slave and automatically belonged to the same owners (Yoo 2008, 25-26). An astute observer such as Robert Moose remarked the paradoxical discrepancy between the low social standing of women in Korean society and the need for them, because marriage validated men into adulthood. But their value, he noted, was rather practical and economic, viewed “from the same standpoint from which the farmer estimates his mules or his cows;” a woman matters for her husband not as an equal partner, but as a “servant, a being of inferior quality, always to be spoken to in low forms of speech by her lord and master—in short, his slave” (Moose 1911, 115).

Some contemporary studies (Deuchler 1995; Kwon 2014) have suggested that married life actually provided women with the empowering opportunity to exercise complete authority over the domestic realm, a job compared to running a state. It was within the household that women could be totally in charge over a domain where men did not interfere, because of the strict separation of roles between husband and wife. The role prescribed for women included the organization of domestic affairs, the preparation of ancestral rites for her husband’s predecessors, and the education of children. As mothers, they had the responsibility to provide basic education for their sons during early childhood (after that, their education was assigned to a tutor), and prepare their daughters for the complex challenges of married life and motherhood. According to the neo-Confucian ethos, a woman’s success in these undertakings depended on her “womanly virtue,” which was defined as a manifold mixture of frugality, modesty, chastity, loyalty and obedience to one’s husband and parents-in-law, filial piety, the skilled management of household resources so as to provide food and clothes for her husband and his relatives, and the ability to preserve peace among servants and appease tensions among concubines. But despite their power as administrators of the household and educators of children, women’s lives were severely restricted by patriarchal social rules presumably designed to protect their virtues.

Perhaps the most consequential rule was the interdiction for women to engage in social life outside the domestic realm and the family. Neo-Confucian legislators who devised rules for

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<sup>4</sup> Moose further notes, not without sadness, that the only hope such miserable girls have is that they too, one day, will become mothers-in-law with enough authority to torment their daughters-in-law (Moose 1911, 112).

proper social behavior early on at the beginning of Chosŏn dynasty considered that this interdiction was the best way to preserve women's chastity and morality. Women of high social class were never supposed to be seen outside during daylight, and if necessity would take them outside during the day, they had to wear a veil covering them almost completely, from head to toe. Women were free to go out and socialize with their relatives and women friends only during the night, when they could not be seen by unfamiliar men, because of a curfew imposed on men to stay indoors at night. Towards the end of Chosŏn dynasty, even middle-class women had adopted the mores and rules of the *yangban*, like the veil, while women of the working class were not bound by such rules at all. The hard work they had to perform in the fields, domestic errands, raising children and so forth, made it impossible for working women to cover themselves or stay indoors during the day.

William Richard Carles, who served as a British Vice-Consul in Korea in the 1880s, was astonished at how secluded *yangban* women lived, and noted the distant sight of women quickly entering a house, in hiding, as something extraordinary. Some of his acquaintances had failed to see any women (presumably, any aristocrat women) during their trip to Korea the previous year (Carles 1888, 19). Carles did see, however, women of low social standing, and was unimpressed with their uncovered faces, which “bore the signs of smallpox, hard work, and hard fare,” and with their unsophisticated attire (working women wore short bodices which sometimes left their breasts exposed, so children could be easily fed) (Carles 1888, 28). For Robert Moose, paradoxically, “the slave women are in some sense the freest women in the country, since they are not bound by the laws of custom which holds the women of the upper class with a never-ending grip” (Moose 1911, 74-75).

Early twentieth century intellectuals in Korea spoke of women's liberation and self-awakening, which, they strongly believed, could be achieved only through education. Women had been oppressed by laws made by men, and placed in a position of inferiority, but modern thinkers challenged the idea that this inferiority was innate or biological. Any socially created gender inequality could be overcome through women's education, so Korean Enlightenment thinkers and Western Christian missionaries debated what sort of education they should provide in order to achieve women's self-enlightenment. They stressed the importance of cultivating women's ability to judge by themselves the social and political situation (for instance, by reading newspapers and magazines). They also encouraged women to discover, develop and display their own (artistic) skills, set goals in life and achieve them (Na 1914/2013, 28). But critics of patriarchy and of hierarchical social relations within the family were also quite harsh on women as well:

Think about it. There are 20 million people in Korea. Only half of the population is working—the men. The other half serves at the beck and call of men, like slaves. How terrible are the conditions Korean women live in! The boundary between the worlds of men and women has been created by men. Men have appropriated women's rights. Women have been oppressed by men, have not experienced the pleasures of society, and have spent their entire lives in anguish and sorrow. How miserable they are! However, a more important reason for the condition of women is their own failure to take responsibility [for self-determination], as well as a lack of education and occupation. To rescue these miserable women in contemporary Korea, education should be offered to women, so that they can break the habit of laziness, prepare themselves for the strenuous efforts of life, engage in an occupation, wean themselves

from dependence on others to adopt a spirit of autonomy and self-reliance, and awaken to their own responsibilities. (Kim 1920/2013, 31)

The solution for progress and sovereignty was clearly women's education, but not just academic education: an education tailored towards making women active members of society, exercising their talents and abilities beyond the private sphere of domestic life. This was an education beyond the ideal of "wise mother, good wife" that came to be identified with Sin Saimdang. Women should work, vote, participate in intellectual, social and political life, and thus contribute to national social progress, an objective all the more important because Korea was at the time under Japanese colonial occupation. The rejection of Confucian tradition was reinforced by the rhetoric that rigid, dated social rules had been the major cause of Korea's stagnation, its backwardness, and, consequently, its colonization. Korean intellectuals equated the suffering of the colonized nation with the sorrowful plight of women, and, through this discourse, womanhood was given political value. For this reason, the emancipation of women became a nationalist project of anti-colonial salvation.

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