

Other Female Identities in Chosŏn Korea: Overcoming and Subverting the Confucian Model for Womanly Behavior

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Introduction

There is little argument concerning the position of Confucianism in the late Chosŏn period. It was the governing ideology supported by the ruling elites of the dynasty, mastery of this worldview was necessary to enter government service, and the ideals that can be termed Confucian had permeated society at most every level.¹⁾ Confucianism was, in short, the most dominant worldview of the period and shaped how people lived. Yet, notwithstanding the prestige and power of this ideology, it did not exist alone and rather shared space in people's lives depending upon such factors as time, place, social status, and gender.

We should understand Chosŏn society as being influenced by numerous aspects. In terms of the upper status groups, there is a strong tendency in some scholarship to disregard the diverse means in which men and women lived their lives. Without doubt Confucianism was of the utmost importance in "official" society; that is, spaces where one might have interacted with officialdom, with other upper status families in social events such as marriages, or even where contact with the legal system was required. However, such a Confucian space is simply one of numerous spaces, spaces that were dynamic, overlapping, and ever-changing depending upon a host of considerations.

The focus of this article is on these other spaces: spaces that co-existed with the dominant Confucian space on some levels and subverted it on others. These alternate spaces are where many found relief or entertainment, and include worldviews such as Buddhism or shamanism. While the use of these spaces was not limited to any single gender or social status group, this particular investigation will focus on how women used these places to undermine aspects of Confucianism that they might have seen as oppressive, or at the very least, bothersome.

Patricia Ebrey, in *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period*, stressed that we should seek to understand how women lived in the context of their time and move away from simply labeling them as victims. She wrote, "Emphasizing women's victimization ... only tends to obscure what women were able to accomplish."²⁾ It is with such an understanding that I approach the idea of Chosŏn period women subverting what might be termed as Confucian mores. I do not see these women as victims, but rather as individuals who were able to achieve what they desired in creative and purposeful ways. There are no real victims in this article, just successful women who well understood the world in which they lived.

The women examined here will demonstrate that despite the seeming restrictions

that a Confucian society might have placed on their personal freedoms, there were many ways that women were able to express themselves and find space for individual autonomy. It is hoped that such an understanding will permit a broader understanding of women's lives in late Chosŏn.

Legal Constraints on Women in Chosŏn³⁾

In creating a society based upon Confucian understandings of human morality, legislators in early Chosŏn attacked long present worldviews such as Buddhism and shamanism. Buddhism was understood as corrupt and anti-social, and held as a key reason that the previous dynasty of Koryŏ (918–1392) had decayed and fallen. Moreover, Buddhist mass gatherings, with the volatile mingling of men and women, were condemned as being ruinous to the country.⁴⁾ Shamanism and its rituals were also disparaged by Confucianists as being immoral rites (淫祀 *umsa*), and officials aimed various laws at eradicating shamanic practices.⁵⁾ In fact, the persecution of either worldview would have been tantamount to attacking both, since by the twelfth century the two systems had intermingled to the point that they were virtually inseparable.⁶⁾

For women in the Chosŏn period the persecution of Buddhism directly touched their lives not only in the practice of this worldview, but also in attempting to restrict gatherings with other women. It has been argued that the primary concern of early administrators in regard to women was in keeping them at home, and the biggest worry were the visits of women to temples.⁷⁾ As legislators wanted to establish Confucian ideals for proper womanly behavior (婦德 *pudŏk*), women were to be kept away from the corrupt influences of Buddhism, particularly the mingling of the sexes that was common at temples. Thus, the dynastic record of the first years of Chosŏn is full of complaints against Buddhism, accounts of women who violated the laws in visiting temples, and calls for further restrictions.⁸⁾ Significantly, legislation in early Chosŏn prohibited women from upper status group families (兩班 *yangban*, the two orders of officials) from visiting Buddhist temples and gathering for ceremonies or festivities where there might be mixing of the sexes. The punishment for such a violation was one hundred strokes with a cudgel.⁹⁾

Likewise, upper status group women were also legally prohibited from visiting shamans or attending shamanic rites. These elements were viewed as corrupt, and moreover, as at Buddhist temples, such rites provided an occasion for the mixing of the sexes. Indeed, a central point of similarity between Buddhism and shamanism was the fact that both allowed men and women to be together in an uncontrolled environment—or at least an environment not controlled by Confucian ideals. Royal edicts degraded the social standing of shamans along with Buddhist clergy, pushing them and their worldviews further from mainstream society.¹⁰⁾ Moreover, shamans soon were barred from even living within the walls of Hanyang (漢陽, present-day Seoul) and women of upper class families prohibited from attending shamanic rites.¹¹⁾

Not only was the *yangban* woman guilty of such misconduct subject to punishment according to the Chosŏn legal code, so too were her descendants. The repercussions for the family and descendants of a woman who behaved in an inappropriate manner were significant, and included the ineligibility of male *yangban* descendants to sit for the civil service examinations. For example, the sons of a woman guilty of misbehav-

ior or who remarried were not allowed to serve in either the civil or military bureaucracy.¹²⁾ While there are some inconsistencies in the copious legislation, the main points are clear enough: a woman's actions could easily thwart the careers of her male descendants. Given the wide range of offenses that could be penalized, families sought to protect their future prosperity by closely guarding the actions of their womenfolk.

The elites of Chosŏn wanted to cleanse society of such improper womanly behaviors and accordingly created the body of regulations, social norms, and penalties collectively known as the *naeoebŏp* (內外法), or rules of the inner and outer. Inner refers to women while outer indicates men. We can understand this set of regulations as being aimed at keeping the sexes apart except for specific situations and for strengthening patriarchal society.

In essence, the *naeoebŏp* sought to restrict women to their homes and isolate them from men outside of their close relations. Not only could women not leave their homes at their leisure or have contact with men outside of relatives, the women that did would be guilty of misconduct and of not practicing fidelity.¹³⁾ The enforcement of such a strict system of controls was part of the overall push by the ruling elites to create a strong patriarchal and ordered society.

Shamanism, Buddhism, and Womanly Virtue (*Pudŏk*)

Notwithstanding the tremendous amount of legislation and effort put into controlling women's activities in connection to either Buddhist or shamanic practices, neither of these two worldviews disappeared in Chosŏn. Instead, these worldviews became increasingly entrenched in the lives of women and men as an outlet for activities that Confucian decorum might not allow. This goes for every level of society as there are numerous records which reveal that shamans and monks were still commonplace at the royal palace. Perhaps one of the best known and often cited examples of this was the patronage of shamans and the holding of shamanic rites at the palace by Queen Myŏngsŏng (1851–1895).¹⁴⁾ We also find similar accounts of palace visitations by shamans in the literature of late Chosŏn. One example is found in the early seventeenth century novel *Unyŏng-jŏn* (雲英傳 *The Tale of Unyŏng*), where the close relationship between palace women and a shaman is detailed. The shaman in this fictional work states that she “sometimes visit[s] the palace to perform rites,” and the narrative later details how she enters the palace without problem.¹⁵⁾ What can be taken from the activities of Queen Myŏngsŏng and accounts in fictional works is that shamans visiting the palace and performing rites was commonplace in late Chosŏn. This being the case in the highest level of Chosŏn society, we can easily surmise that shamans also visited the homes of upper status group women, or that these women went out to attend rituals. For those of the lower status groups, with fewer potential legal liabilities, visits to shamans would have been everyday occurrences not even worthy of mention.

Clearly, then, despite the possibility of censure, women of all classes continued to visit shamans and temples throughout the Chosŏn dynasty. Such a situation begs the question of why. What purpose or need did the shamanic or Buddhist worldview offer to women in Chosŏn? I believe the utility of shamanism and Buddhism is in balancing the social notion of womanly virtue (婦德 *pudŏk*) expected of upper status

group women in the late Chosŏn period. In terms of shamanic rites, Cho Hyejŏng has written that attending shamanic rituals and listening to the narrative songs was so effective at releasing the pent up anger and frustrations of women that women were able to live their lives in accordance with the strict and Confucian code of Chosŏn.¹⁶⁾

The burdens placed upon women to maintain certain social standards were quite severe. By late Chosŏn an upper status group woman needed to carefully adhere—at least outwardly—to very strict regulations concerning her behavior. Quite simply, for a woman to succeed in life, she needed to follow the prevailing social current of the day, and this was the brand of Confucianism that was practiced in the upper levels of Chosŏn society. By following the norms of behavior, she was able to marry, have good relations with both her natal and in-law families, develop a satisfying bond with her husband, and help her offspring succeed in society. Thus, an upper status group woman would have wanted to be an outcast for her to outwardly reject the most highly valued social system of late Chosŏn.

Yet, for all the social utility of the Confucian value system of late Chosŏn, it did not fulfill some aspects of a woman's life. In particular the functions of shamanism and Buddhism in terms of the afterlife, explaining illness, expelling misfortune, and providing hope in the form of supernatural intervention are all in stark contrast to the Confucian worldview that answers very little in these areas. The deficiency of Confucianism in providing for these areas was acknowledged by Yi Pinghŏhak (1759–1824), a renowned female Confucianist, in her *Kyuhap ch'ongsŏ* (閨閣叢書 Encyclopedia of Women's Daily Life). Here she discusses ways to purify the house of ghosts and spirits, which will prevent misfortune and enable women not to be deceived by shamans.¹⁷⁾ It is notable that a woman praised for her accomplishments in Confucian studies admits the necessity of purging baneful spirits and provides explanation for doing so. We also see the standard portrayal of shamans as untrustworthy in her account.

Beyond the areas we can term as “religious,” shamanism and Buddhism also offered distinct spaces where women could experience a different reality from that of Confucianism. Such spaces are both physical spaces where the decorum of everyday society momentarily ebbed and mental spaces where women could find refuge, catharsis, or adventure that reality did not allow.

The physical spaces here are the temples and shamanic shrines where women would visit and encounter the different social code of the Buddhist temple or enjoy the spectacle of a shamanic rite. Both of these spaces were decidedly non-Confucian and operated under different, and freer, norms of behavior. However, these were unofficial and often times unacknowledged spaces by the upper status women who visited temples and shrines. This duality of space allowed a woman to still exhibit womanly virtue to official society and satisfy other needs outside of official, or public, space.¹⁸⁾ Thus, women could enjoy a momentary break from the rigorous social code they were expected to follow.

The other space where women found release was mental, and that space permitted the expansion of social roles and permissible activities. While this mental space coexisted with the physical spot of the temple or where the shamanic rites were conducted, it was perhaps even more important as it allowed mental release for frustrations. Sha-

manic narratives (巫歌 *muga*), primarily created by women and for a female audience, illuminate well the function of providing a mental space for fulfillment and release.

Interesting in many shamanic narratives is the prominent role of women and how they are able to contend with difficulties on their own. Unlike official or public life where women were somewhat limited in their public roles, shamanic narratives opened new spaces and roles to women. Fictional characters were able to overturn injustices, contend with discrimination, and accomplish things that men could only dream of doing. These shamanic “superwomen” provided women with momentary release from the difficulties, or at the very least, the confinements of reality. As with any fictional work, the audiences of these narratives were able to live vicariously through the protagonists, and this allowed them to contend with hardships or limitations elsewhere in their lives.

Perhaps the most frequently examined shamanic narrative in this regard is that of *Pari kongju* (바리공주 The Abandoned Princess).¹⁹⁾ In this narrative we find a female protagonist who overcomes every sort of difficulty, ably fills the role of an eldest son, travels to the next world and back, and even overturns death! What man could accomplish such a litany of deeds?

Pari kongju was a well-known narrative in premodern Korea, but performances were still well attended. The importance of the narrative was in providing women with a positive role model, one who was able to overcome the difficulties in Chosŏn society that many upper-status group women faced: social discrimination in regard to males, inability to take active roles outside of the home, and lack of choice in their futures. Through Princess Pari, women could vicariously experience many aspects of life that were otherwise off-limits to them. Moreover, through the gatherings with other women to listen to this song, women could share moments of drama, heart-wrenching sorrow, and elation.²⁰⁾ It was very much through models such as Princess Pari that women were able to contend with the difficulties of the strict patriarchal system of the late Chosŏn.

Other shamanic narratives display a similar model of strong and able female role models such as Princess Pari. *Chesŏk kut* [帝釋 天 Rite to the Chesŏk Deities]²¹⁾ features another female protagonist that is able to surmount difficulties resultant from a restrictive social system. The protagonist of this narrative is Tanggŭm-aegi, a daughter of an upper-status home who is impregnated out of wedlock by the magic of a monk. Abandoned by her family, she manages to alone raise three sons—who become Buddhist deities—and eventually travels to India to find the father of the children. Here the resolve of the protagonist to overcome the unwarranted rejection by her family and raise her sons properly is a model for women put into difficult circumstances.

As in some literary works of the late Chosŏn, we also find women that control great military power in shamanic narratives. These songs demonstrate to female audience members the ability of women to act in roles not open to them in reality and allow vicarious satisfaction in the ability to solve their own problems, especially in terms of security. *Ch’ilmŏrit-dang* [칠머릿당 Song of Ch’ilmŏrit Shrine] retells the history of a goddess who leads an army one million strong to Cheju Island, where she settles at a shrine in Cheju City.²²⁾ Here, the goddess protects the island people against invasion and also grants prosperity to those who worship at her shrine. While this is not a par-

ticularly well-developed character, the fact that a goddess leads such an imposing army reveals desires for personal safety of women audience members and, further, the hope to ensure such safety without the help of males.

Buddhism also provided an important space for women in late Chosŏn. Unlike shamanism, Buddhism provided some women a more-or-less permanent space where they could escape the problems of life outside the monastery. As there was a strict prohibition on remarriage for women in Chosŏn, women who were widowed at a young age were often times forced to live lonely and difficult lives. One woman whose name we do not know wrote a *kasa* (歌辭) poem-song, entitled “Chŏngch’un kwabu-ga” (青春寡婦歌 Song of the Youthful Widow) about her experiences and ultimate decision to enter a monastery and devote her life to Buddhism.²³⁾ In short, the poem-song tells of a young woman who was widowed before twenty and also childless. She struggles with memories of her husband and the sorrow of loneliness before one day meeting a Buddhist nun and then entering a monastery. While this song at 366 lines is too long to translate in its entirety, there are some lines that reveal the emotions of the writer:

I want to see, I want to see,
I want to see the face of my love.
I want to hear, I want to hear,
I want to hear the voice of my love.
...
We lived joyfully as husband and wife,
Yet due to my fortune,
Before twenty I became a widow.
The good seasons of the autumn moon and spring breeze,
I pass them all with flowing tears.

The poem drips with such sorrowful sentiments before the chance meeting with a Buddhist nun who brings the writer to the temple where she devotes her life to preparing for the next life.

Now I have come to know,
This and that are all to be cast aside,
Reciting the sutras,
I polish and seek the road to the next life.

Other *kasa* demonstrate that life at the temple and devotion to the Buddhist path was not always an easy choice for those women who joined the Buddhist clergy. The following lines are from a *kasa* entitled “Chaesong yŏsŭng-ga” (재송여승가 Song of Again Sending the Buddhist Nun):²⁴⁾

King Xiang and the fairy of Wushan,
Had the morning clouds that became evening rain,²⁵⁾
In the Milky Way, Chignyŏ and

Kyōnu were able to meet.²⁶⁾

This song too ends with the writer devoting herself to following the way and preparing for the next life. We may surmise several features of the anonymous writer: first, she was well-educated in traditional literature; second, that whatever her age, she felt longing for a lover either in her past or present; and third, that devotion to the Buddhist life was at times difficult.

Love, Sex, and the Virtuous Woman (*Yōllyō*)

The other pillar of womanly conduct in late Chosŏn was that of the virtuous woman. In reality, the notion of womanly virtue is simply an extension of the ideal of the virtuous woman and indicates a woman that remains faithful to her husband or simply chaste in the absence of a spouse. While this ideal had a variety of forms, the most common manifestation was the woman honored by the government as being virtuous. Such a condition is seen in the extreme in the hundreds of women so honored by the government in the aftermath of the Hideyoshi invasions (1592–1598) for supposedly taking their own lives rather than suffering rape at the hands of Japanese troops.²⁷⁾ However, this is not the virtuous woman that will be examined here. Rather, I will look at narratives which demonstrate that while the model of a virtuous woman might have been something officially upheld by the ruling elites, in reality women in the Chosŏn period—just like women at any other time in history—not only pursued sexual and love relations that might have been officially proscribed, but enjoyed such opportunities.

Yet, uncovering narratives written by upper status group women detailing their love lives is not an easy or perhaps even possible undertaking. Women had far too much to lose if such writings came to light. Even a tradition of “love letters” is not one that has been uncovered as of yet in Chosŏn period documents.²⁸⁾

What we can find in literature of the late Chosŏn is a “smoking gun” indicating that the ideal of the virtuous woman was simply one side—the public face—of women’s lives. This evidence is in the poems that women wrote and the literature that they enjoyed; while these might not always indicate an improper relationship, they do reveal a strong degree of passion. And passion is the antecedent of sexual relations.

One group of women who did write about love and relationships were the *kisaeng* (妓生), the female entertainers of Chosŏn. These women were, for the most part, in the service of the government and certainly did not have a great deal of freedom in their lives. They were also educated and in constant contact with upper status group males, a situation that has resulted in a considerable body of poetry that reveals some of the anguish they felt at the margins of official society. The following *sijo* (時調) poem-song is attributed to Kyerang (1513–1550):

As the pear blossoms are scattered by falling rain, I cry and clutch my departing love.
When the autumn wind scatters the falling leaves, does my love think of me?
Only in my distant and lonely dreams does my love come and go.²⁹⁾

While not an upper status group woman, we can note the longing for a loved one in

this short poem. A similar sentiment is seen in the next poem, also written by a *kisaeng*, which demonstrates a sense of futility in waiting:

At night in the mountain village, from afar I hear a dog's bark.
Opening the brushwood gate to see, there is the cold moon in the sky.
That dog! What use is barking at the moon lighting the empty hills?³⁰⁾

Both of these poems exude a deep thirst for a lover, but simultaneously a sense of hopelessness. *Kisaeng*, for all their legendary charm and beauty, were simply secondary to legitimate wives in Chosŏn.

The same loneliness is seen in a *hansi* (漢詩) poem by Pak Chuksŏ (1817–1851). Her pen name was Panadang and she was of *sŏnyŏ* (庶女; a daughter born of a secondary wife) status; she eventually became a concubine. She passed her time writing poems and after she died some 166 of these were compiled in the *Chuksŏ sijip* (竹西詩集 Collected Poetry of Chuksŏ). In her poems, we see a great deal of sadness and desire for her lover, as in the following:

The blanket is so cold I cannot sleep,
In the mirror I can only think of a gaunt, sorrowful countenance.
Why, [after you] leave do I only have this loneliness?
From old, one life never reaches a hundred years.³¹⁾

The sentiment in this poem and the above are similar: these women are longing for their lovers. While perhaps these women did not reach out to find a new love, we should be cognizant that many probably did.

Other women, however, were much more direct in their poems. The following is an anonymous narrative *sijo* (辭說時調) of late Chosŏn,

I think that I will miss the man I slept with last night.
As the son of a tile-maker works clay, he kneaded me; as the son of a mole rum-mages about, he groped me; as a boatman thrusts with his pole, he thrust me;
in my whole life, I've never had such a wanton night!
Though I have met many kinds of men, truly I'll never forget the guy who was
with me last night.³²⁾

Certainly we can see a more direct expression of passion and desire in this poem. Unlike the poems above, this writer is a woman who has evidently enjoyed a sexual tryst with a man that she does not seem to have known particularly well. What type of conclusions can be drawn from such a poem?

First, we should acknowledge that sex was a pleasurable activity for women. This seems a nonsensical statement until we take into account the body of didactic literature aimed at women in Chosŏn designed to create the image that sex was, at most, a practical matter aimed at procreation. Chaste women were rewarded by the state and lewd women were most certainly punished.³³⁾

Second, the model of the docile woman, sitting in the *anbang* (i.e., the women's

quarters) and waiting for her husband to call on her, was not always the norm. Some women were much more straightforward about their sexuality and desire for satisfying relationships with men. While I do not expect to find such poems as the above signed in the literary collections of late Chosŏn women, I do think the substantial body of such poems and literary sketches demonstrates that these women were not social aberrations, but rather, closer to the mainstream of “unofficial” society.³⁴⁾

In fictional works of late Chosŏn we can also note the strong presence of romantic plot lines featuring the pursuit of love by women. While many of these pieces were not written by women, some writers were quite sympathetic to the situation of women, the primary audience that read these works. One novel that might well have been written by a woman is the aforementioned *Unyŏng-jŏn*, written in the early seventeenth century. This work features unbridled passion on the part of the female protagonist Unyŏng and also her blind fall into a passionate yet illegal love affair.³⁵⁾ In the following excerpt from a letter written by Unyŏng to the object of her love, we can see the depth of her longing:

Looking at you through the beaded blinds, I imagined my fate as your wife, and seeing you in my dreams, I continued the love that I will never forget. I was too sad to listen to the song of the cuckoo in the pear tree or the sound of the night rain on the leaves of the paulownia tree. I could not even gaze at the trails of the fireflies outside my window or the lonely shadow of the solitary lamp in my room. Sometimes I just sit absently by the folding screen, and at other times, I alone go out to the railing where I secretly appeal to the blue sky for relief from the pent-up rancor that binds the blood in my breast. I do not know: is my love also thinking of me? If I suddenly die before seeing my dearest, even if the heavens and earth vanish, my deeply sorrowful heart will not disappear.³⁶⁾

In this work, the female protagonist does not simply long for her lover, but takes an active role in realizing her wishes. She arranges for a secret tryst with him at the palace. She describes their first night together as:

I put out the lamp and went to the sleeping mat with him; the pleasure of that night, I cannot describe with words. The night soon turned to dawn; as the rooster urged the daybreak, the *chinsa* rose and went back.³⁷⁾ From that time on, there was not a night that he did not come at dusk and take leave at dawn. Our love became deeper and our affection for each other grew even warmer: we did not know how to stop these meetings.³⁸⁾

While this is a fictional work, I believe that the focus on romantic love—as opposed to novels focusing on sexual conquest by males—matches the expectations that many women had for their own lives.

A final aspect of life in late Chosŏn that merits attention is the prohibition on remarriage. As mentioned above, there was tremendous social pressure on widowed women to remain chaste and to not remarry. Remarriage would not only cause ruin of a woman’s natal family, but also the family that she had married into, by denying

male descendants the opportunity to serve in officialdom.³⁹⁾ Marriages, first and foremost, were made between families, and the fact that they would continue after the death of the husband demonstrates the permanency of the marriage bond, at least for a woman.

However, for a young woman widowed at an early age, these restrictions made for a difficult life. Beyond the prospect of living life alone, widowed women often times were in very difficult economic situations and were unable to support themselves. They were a burden to their families also in this regard. Hence, the custom of “carrying a widow off” (과부 업어 가기 *kwabu ŏbŏ kagi*) became a socially acceptable means of dealing with widows while still preserving the façade of not allowing remarriage.

This custom was, for the most part, one of the middle and lower status groups in Chosŏn. A widow in a farming household or in a similar situation was a burden to the family. Moreover, the fate of living out a life alone was also one that those close to her would have most likely considered pitiful and unnatural. Thus, the family would “allow” a man—most likely someone that she already had some feeling for or relationship with—to “kidnap” her in the middle of the night. Even if this was reported to the local government office, there was generally tacit consent and the matter not legally pursued.⁴⁰⁾ This practice was thus supported by people around widows and the state alike.

Sometimes, however, there were other ways to allow remarriage, as seen in the following narrative:

There was a thirty year old widow with no children who lived fairly well. In the same village there lived a poor widower; he wanted to marry the widow but as of yet had not been able to realize this wish. One day he came up with a scheme and asked his friends, “Tomorrow morning I will secretly enter this widow’s room and I want you all to go there early and spread the rumor of me being in her room around the village.” The next day he went to the widow’s house and surveyed the situation. The widow had come out of the house and was cooking rice in the kitchen; he stole into the house and lie down on her sleeping mat, covering himself with a blanket. At that time his friends arrived as promised and asked to borrow [the widow’s] ox so they could plow a field. At that instant, the widower flung open the room’s window and replied firmly, “As I am going to plow our field today, I cannot lend you the ox.” The friends spread this story around the village and several people came to the widow’s house to see if she had remarried with the widower. The widower grabbed the dumbfounded widow and explained that this rumor had now spread and it would be hard to continue to live on her own. Having no choice, the widow lived with the widower thereafter.⁴¹⁾

Rather than reading this as a story of deception, I think it is more accurate to see the story as a means to allow a remarriage in a society that did not permit such a practice openly. Thus, under the banner of preserving a woman’s reputation, second marriages also took place.

Despite the official prohibition on remarriages in Chosŏn that stemmed from the

desire to preserve the purity of lineages, there was unspoken acceptance that this was not natural and was against basic human nature. Accordingly, we can note the duality of practices surrounding remarriage: on one side, the official prohibition and on the other, customs that permitted women to remarry without censure. Such a dichotomy mirrors that of the virtuous woman of late Chosŏn, as we know there were two sides to that model, as well.

Conclusion

The notions of womanly virtue and the virtuous woman were the foundations upon which the model of the ideal Confucian woman of late Chosŏn was erected. This model was one that was furthered by the governing elite through education, bestowment of recognition, and penalties for non-compliance. Exemplar women such as Sin Saimdang (1504–1551) and Lady Chang of Andong (1598–1680) have long been cited as the embodiment of womanhood in this period.⁴²⁾ Yet such models are decidedly one-sided and do not permit a full understanding of how women lived.

Engaging with official society in any capacity required acknowledgement of the Confucian social order that regulated many aspects of status, social interaction, and decorum. Women and men alike needed to adhere to social norms in order to be able to function within society. However, the Confucian social system did not provide for all needs in life, and thus worldviews such as Buddhism and shamanism continued to fill important areas in the lives of the people. Moreover, Confucian ideals of “proper” sexual behavior for women also did not meet reality, and consequently female sexual desire and passion found an outlet in areas beyond the reach of the official Confucian social ideals.

The duality of late Chosŏn society was a necessary construct due to the rather limiting qualities of the dominant Confucian worldview. This is all the more true for women who faced notable restrictions in the public sector and elsewhere in their lives. Yet, outward rejection of the dominant social system of the day was not possible. Accordingly, women found ways to subvert the system to meet their needs for mental and physical comfort through alternative spaces and worldviews. Our understanding of Chosŏn in general is more complete by acknowledging that there was a multiplicity of social spaces and individuals lived their lives in constant motion between such layers. Women, too, managed their lives within these spaces, not as victims, but rather as masters of various realms.

Notes

- 1) I wish to acknowledge that even terming a set of practices as “Confucian” can be misleading as Confucianism was many things to different people. It was not a universal value system that all people understood the same way. However, some term is needed to describe the ideology supported and propagated by the Chosŏn governing elites, and Confucianism seems the closest.
- 2) Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 8.
- 3) This section is based in part on Michael J. Pettid, *Unyŏng-jŏn: A Love Affair at the Royal Palace of Chosŏn Korea*, (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2009), 6–10.
- 4) A notable description of the evil influence of Buddhism is found in an account in the *Chungjong sillok* [中宗實錄] 20:26a–26b [1514.4.29]. This record faults King T'aejo (r. 918–943), the founder of the Koryŏ dynasty, for not purging the popular customs at the onset of the dynasty. The entry continues

to condemn Buddhism for its “lewd music and beautiful women who could easily bewitch those men near to them.”

- 5) By the reign of King Sōngjong (r. 1469–1494) various laws were in place to restrict shamanic practices such as a prohibition against shamanic practitioners from plying their trade in the capital and members of the upper *yangban* class from participating in shamanic rituals. The enforcement, however, was lax and as such a call was made to enforce these measures more diligently. See *Sōngjong sillok* [成宗實錄] 10:44b [1470.6.18]; *Sōngjong sillok* 88:20a [1477.1.20].
- 6) Yu Tongshik, *Han'guk mugyo ūi yōksa wa kujo* [The History and Structure of Korean Shamanism], (Seoul: Yōnse taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 1978), 168.
- 7) Ch'oe Sukkyōng and Ha Hyōngang, *Han'guk yōsōngsa: Kodae Chosōn sidae* [A History of Korean Women: From Ancient Times Through the Chosōn Period], (Seoul: Ihwa yōja taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 1993), 304.
- 8) For example, see *Sejong sillok* [世宗實錄], 30:10b [1425.11.8] and *Sejong sillok* 30:14a [1425.11.15] for an account condemning the wife of an official who frequented a temple with other women of the upper status groups.
- 9) The *Kyōngguk taejōn* [經國大典], 4:7a, holds a prohibition against women of scholar families from visiting temples along with forbidding *yangban* women from attending night rituals (野祭 *yajje*) or celebrations.
- 10) For example, the descendants of shamans, Buddhist clergy, *kisaeng* and others were barred from receiving stipend lands. See *Taejo sillok* 4:14a–14b [1394.12.28].
- 11) For example, see *Sejong sillok* 53:3b [1431.7.13]; *Sejong sillok* 53:5a–5b [1431.7.17]; *Sejong sillok* 101:34b–35a [1443.8.25].
- 12) *Kyōngguk taejōn*, 1:4b–5a.
- 13) Yi Sun'gu, “Chosōn sidae ūi sōngnihak kwa yōsōng” [Women and Neo-Confucianism in the Chosōn Period], in *Uri yōsōng ūi yōksa* [The History of Korean Women], ed. Han'guk yōsōng yōn'guso, (Seoul: Ch'ōngnyōnsa, 1999), 185–186.
- 14) See Ch'oe Kilsōng, “Hanmal ūi kungjung musok” [Shamanism at the Palace in the Late Han Period], *Han'guk minsokhak* no. 3 (December 1970), 255, and Kim Yongsuk, *Chosōnjo kunjung p'ungsok yōn'gu* [A Study of Palace Customs in the Chosōn Dynasty], (Seoul: Iljisa, 1987), 268. One could argue that since Queen Myōngsōng was the leading power of the Chosōn government at various times this might be an exception. However, there are a significant number of records that indicate that shamans visited the royal palaces and residences throughout the Chosōn dynasty, especially in the case of illnesses. See Pak Kyeong, “Kūnse mugyōk ūi sahoejōk kinūng-e taehayō” [On the Social Function of Shamans in the Modern Age], *Han'guk minsokhak* no. 4 (June 1971), 8–12.
- 15) *Unyōng-jōn* [The Tale of Unyōng], 24 (Asami version). For more, see Pettid, *Unyōng-jōn*. The Asami version of this work refers to the handwritten manuscript held in the Asami Library at the University of California, Berkeley.
- 16) Cho Hyejōng, *Han'guk ūi yōsōng kwa namsōng* [Women and Men of Korea], (Seoul: Munhak kwa chisōngsa, 1988), 87–88.
- 17) Yi Pinghōhak, *Kyuhap ch'ongsō* [Encyclopedia of Women's Daily Life], translation and annotations Chōng Yangwan (P'aju: Chusik hoesa pojinja, 2006), 1.
- 18) This understanding of dual cultural spaces of “official” and “unofficial” is informed by the binary spaces proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin; that is, an official society dominated by hierarchy and etiquette and an unofficial society that operated by a much freer set of rules. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 154.
- 19) Recorded in Akiba Takashi and Akamatsu Chijō, *Chōsen fūzoku no kenkyū* [A Study of Chosōn Shamanism], (Tokyo: Osaka Yagō Shoten, 1937), 1.3–60.
- 20) For more on the social functions of *Pari kongju*, see Michael J. Pettid, “Late Chosōn Society as Reflected in a Shamanistic Narrative: An Analysis of the *Pari kongju muga*,” *Korean Studies* no. 24 (2000), 113–141.
- 21) Recorded in Kim T'aegon, *Han'guk muga chip 3* [Collection of Korean Shaman Songs, 3], (Seoul: Chimmundang, 1992), 269–281.
- 22) Recorded in Hyōn Yongjun, *Chejudo musok charyo sajōn* [Encyclopedia of the Shamanic Materials of

- Cheju Island], (Seoul: Sin'gu munhwasa, 1980), 597–598.
- 23) Recorded in Yi Sangbo, *Pulgyo kasa chŏnjip* [Collection of Buddhist *kasa*], (Seoul: Chimmundang, 1980), 391–397.
 - 24) Recorded in Yi Sangbo, *Pulgyo kasa chŏnjip*, 385–386.
 - 25) King Xiang (?–223 BCE) of the Chinese Ch'u kingdom is said to have taken a nap one afternoon and slept with a woman in his dream. The woman told him that she lives on a high crag of Mt. Wushan and that every morning she becomes a cloud and every evening she becomes rain. The phrase “morning clouds, evening rain” (朝雲暮雨) is thus a metaphor for sexual relations.
 - 26) The legend of Chignyŏ and Kyŏnu (the names are transliterated in *han'gŭl* as the text is in Korean) dates to the Chinese Zhou dynasty (1027–771 BCE) and tells of the daughter of the Jade Emperor and a farmer who lived across the Milky Way. After the two fell in love they neglected their chores—respectively, weaving and herding—and the Emperor forbade them to meet. However, he felt pity for them and allowed them to meet once yearly, on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month. On this day all the magpies fly to the heavens and make a bridge for the lovers to cross and be together again.
 - 27) For more on this particular aspect of the virtuous woman, see Michael J. Pettid, “Fashioning Womanly Confucian Virtue: The Virtuous Woman (*yŏllyŏ*) in Post-war Literary Discourse,” in *Imjin Waeran—Hideyoshi's Invasion of Korea: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. James B. Lewis (in editing).
 - 28) Love letters were a part of fictional works. For example, the aforementioned *Unyŏng-jŏn* contains a number of love letters exchanged between the female and male protagonists.
 - 29) Recorded in Chŏng Pyŏnguk, *Sijo munhak sajŏn* [Encyclopedia of *sijo* Literature], (Seoul: Sin'gu munhwasa, 1980), no. 1701, 396.
 - 30) Recorded in Chŏng Pyŏnguk, *Sijo munhak sajŏn*, no. 1062, 255; The author of this poem is a *kisaeng* by the name of Chŏn'gŭm of an unknown period.
 - 31) Recorded in Cho Tuhyŏn, *Han'guk yŏryu hansi* [The Chinese Character Poems of Korean Women], (Seoul: T'aehaktang, 1994), 113.
 - 32) Recorded in Chŏng Pyŏnguk, *Sijo munhak sajŏn*, no. 64, 19. The poem is actually attributed to one Yi Chŏngbo (1693–1766), a prominent civil official; however, this is just the humor of the compiler of the volume where this poem was first recorded. In fact, putting the name of a lofty official on a “lewd” poem such as this was common practice. Cho Tongil, in citing this very poem, states, that it is proper to believe that “wherever there was a song, someone would put Yi's name on it.” See Cho Tongil, *Han'guk munhak t'ongsa* [A Complete History of Korean Literature], (Seoul: Chisik sanŏpsa, 1992), 3.294.
 - 33) There is a large amount of legislation directed at sexual relations deemed as improper. *Kyŏngguk taejŏn* [經國大典 National Code] lists numerous activities that were proscribed for women.
 - 34) For more on sexual narratives and women, see Michael J. Pettid, “Sexual Identity in Chosŏn Period Literature: Humorous Accounts of Forbidden Passion,” *The Review of Korean Studies* no. 4 (June 2001), 61–85.
 - 35) Unyŏng is a palace woman (宮女) and thus in the service of the royal family. As such, she was not free to pursue a sexual relationship.
 - 36) *Unyŏng-jŏn*, 39.
 - 37) *Chinsa* (進士) was the term for those who had passed the preliminary state examination called the literary licentiate examination (進士科).
 - 38) *Unyŏng-jŏn*, 45.
 - 39) Kim Yongsuk, *Han'guk yŏsoksa* [A History of Korean Women's Customs], (Seoul: Minŭmsa, 1989), 190–191.
 - 40) Ch'oe Sukkyŏng and Ha Hyŏngang, *Han'guk yŏsŏngsa: Kodaie Chosŏn sidae*, 438.
 - 41) Recorded in *Kyosu chapsa* [攪睡雜史 Miscellaneous Histories by Kyosu], 42–44. *Kyosu chapsa* is an anonymous work of an unknown date and recorded in *Kogŭm soch'ong* [古今笑叢 Collection of Humor, Old and New] (anonymous, n.d.).
 - 42) Yi Sŏng-mi notes of Sin Saimdang that “even today, she is revered as the model of *hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ*, or a benevolent mother and good wife.” Further, an association of Korean housewives selects a model woman each year for the Saimdang Prize. See Yi Sŏng-mi, “Sin Saimdang: The Foremost Woman

Painter of the Chosŏn Dynasty,” in *Creative Women of Korean: The fifteenth through Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Young-Key Kim-Renaud, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), 59, and note 4. Finally, it should be noted that the present administration of South Korea valued Sin as being such an exemplar woman that she was selected in 2009 above all other women in Korean history to be the first female depicted on Korean currency (the 50,000 *wŏn* note).