

## Women in Korean History

Lee Bae-yong

Translated by Lee Kyong-hee

Ewha Womans University Press

## Queen Janghwa Assists Cementing Royal Power

Queen Janghwa, also known as Lady Oh, was the second consort to King Taejo, the founding monarch of the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392), and one of his 29 wives. Taejo's numerous marriages were part of a grand strategy to forge alliances with landed gentries while territories were being unified. His marriages may be divided into three periods: Those of the early period when he served as a commander for Gungye, the king of Later Goguryeo, in his hometown Songak, which would later be renamed Gaegyeong (present-day Gaeseong) as the capital of Goryeo; the middle period after he founded Goryeo; and the last period when he was engaged in completing the unification of Later Three Kingdoms.

Queen Sinhye, or Lady Yu, was the first wife of King Taejo, whose name was Wang Geon. She was born in Jeongju, near Gaeseong, as the daughter of local gentry Cheongung. According to legend, Wang as a commander for Gungye was passing by Jeongju one day and met a young girl with a virtuous appearance by a stream — the daughter of the village leader. Wang stayed at her house that night. His troops were lavishly entertained and Wang was served by the young girl under orders from her father. She became a nun when she did not hear from Wang for a long time after that night. But she eventually became his

first wife.

Queen Janghwa came from Naju, now in South Jeolla Province. She was the daughter of the Lord of Daryeon, a rich nobleman. Sometime after she dreamt of a dragon entering her belly, Wang advanced to Naju as a navy commander. When he had his ship anchored at Mokpo, he saw five-colored clouds and followed them until he found a girl doing laundry beside a well. Wang called on her and slept with her. She became pregnant and had a son, who later became King Hyejong, the second ruler of Goryeo.

According to an anecdote in *History of Goryeo (Goryeosa)*, Wang was reluctant to have a child by Lady Oh because her family was rich but not powerful enough. So he ejaculated on the mat but Lady Oh quickly took in his semen and became pregnant. Her son, who later became King Hyejong, had many wrinkles on his face, so people called him the "Wrinkle King." They said he got his wrinkles from the mat.

Wang's storied waterside encounters with women suggested that they had a maritime background. Their families accumulated wealth through sea trade, mostly on the West or the South Seas. They came from regions where he actively staged military campaigns. By marrying these daughters of wealthy and powerful local gentries, Wang effectively took control of their native places, Jeongju and Naju, and greatly benefited from their economic support.

After he ascended the throne, King Taejo continued to marry the daughters of powerful local gentries from various regions to secure as much support powers as possible amid unceasing political confusion. Actually, chaos lasted over six months after he proclaimed the founding of a new dynasty. He married 25 out of all his 29 wives during this period. They came from all over the peninsula, including Hwanghae, Gyeonggi, Gyeongsang, Chungcheong, Gangwon and Jeolla provinces. Thus he could stabilize his royal power, paving the road toward unifying Later Three Kingdoms.

Three out of his 29 wives were referred to as the "queen consort" (*wanghu*), three others as the "queen dowager" (*taehu*), and the remaining 23 as the "lady" (*buin*). All the three queen consorts were probably the official wives. There seems to have been little difference in their status.

King Taejo is officially recognized to have had 25 sons and nine daughters. Of his 25 sons, seven became kings or monks and 11 of the remaining 18 sons called themselves "crown prince" (*taeja*) and the rest "prince" (*gun*). In other words, all of the 11 princes considered themselves successor to their father. It indicates they all had powerful family backgrounds on their mothers' sides. Also, there was yet no clear distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children at the time.

King Taejo appointed Lady Oh's son, Mu, his successor. Mu was Taejo's only son when he founded a new kingdom and he had a virtuous personality required for a royal heir. Upon ascending the throne, King Taejo wanted to name seven-year-old Mu as his successor but hesitated because of Lady Oh's insignificant background. Her family was of a relatively humble means compared to those of his other wives and had no realistic ability to mobilize troops. Therefore, Taejo clandestinely instructed his powerful army commander, Bak Sul-hui, who had made meritorious contributions to the establishment of Goryeo, so he would propose the young prince's investiture as heir to the throne. In 921, the fourth year of King Taejo, Prince Mu at age 10 was formally appointed *jeongyun*, the first in line to the throne, or the crown prince.

Queen Janghwa was alongside King Taejo through all the volatile years while he founded a new kingdom, unified the divided territories and consolidated his power. Taejo had to move from one battle ground to another year after year. All this time he had to stay alert against insurgency by local gentries. His conciliatory gesture of marrying their

daughters and the sons they produced threatened Queen Janghwa and her son. But she coped with the precarious situation most wisely and devoted herself to supporting the king and educating the crown prince. Thus she successfully assisted her son in succeeding to the throne and strengthened her position as well. In the process her maiden family and the residents of her native place, Naju, rendered unsparing support and cooperation.

## Yeom Gyeong-ae Stands Out as a Model Housewife

During the Goryeo period, a man named Choe Ru-baek was listed as a filial son in the "Biographies" volume of *History of Goryeo (Goryeosa)*. When his wife, Yeom Geyong-ae, died, he wrote an inscription for her tomb plate in deep grief, expressing his love and respect for her great deeds as a wife and mother. His soul-touching expression was a rarity: few other husbands in his days wrote inscriptions for their wives' tomb plates. Besides, the tomb plate of Yeom Gyeong-ae is the oldest extant one for a woman in the country.

The beautifully named Yeom Gyeong-ae was born to a reputed family. Her mother, Lady Sim, was the daughter of a high-ranking official of the Royal Secretariat (*Chumirwon*). She was smart and diligent, drawing praise from her early childhood. She became an impeccable wife and mother, educating all of her four sons and two daughters very well. Gyeong-ae was her elder daughter and grew up as a wise and virtuous young lady in a Confucian family environment.

At 25 she married Choe, a man of outstanding filial devotion whose ancestors served as local functionaries in Suwon. After a tiger fatally mauled his father, the 15-year-old Choe went into the mountains, defying everyone's objections, and beat the tiger to death. He opened the beast's belly to collect his father's remains and buried them. Then

he built a grass hut beside his father's grave and mourned for three years, after which he prepared for the civil service examinations while supporting his mother. Choe passed the examinations but only gained a low-ranking government post with a meager salary. Consequently, his wife struggled to make ends meet while bringing up their six children.

Although Choe eventually became a senior royal advisor with the title *jwajeongeon*, he had to remind his elated wife that his salary would not yet be high because a royal advisor was expected to be of high repute. She replied: "My heart will rejoice if you can ever stand only once on stairs to the throne hall and face the king to discuss right and wrong. I will never mind living in poverty until the day I die, wearing hemp clothes and a thorn bush hairpin, and carrying a basket on my head."

Her remarks immensely touched her husband, ever deepening his trust and respect toward her. He realized once again that his wife was no ordinary woman. Ironically, she died a year later when their financial condition had finally improved substantially. She was 47. The following is the last part of the inscription written by her grief-stricken husband:

Our confidence and vows unforsaken,  
Grieved that we failed to die together.  
Our sons and daughters flying like geese,  
Surely to prosper through generations  
As you so wished.

Through the inscription Choe extolled his wife for fulfilling her filial duties toward her parents-in-law and successfully educating their children while devotedly assisting him. She supported his mother with all her heart and held memorial rites for his father the best she could, regretting that she had not been able to serve him while he was alive.

She carefully prepared foods and clothes to offer at the rites. Also, when her husband was leaving for battle, she made him a purple coat to be worn over his armor. Sometimes, she sent food to the frontline in spite of her dire circumstances.

Choe also rhapsodized about his wife's extensive knowledge and insight, her unerring words and actions stemming from her righteous mind, and her prominent judgment. She tried to manage all the household needs in order to help her husband devote himself to his public career and her children to their studies. She ceaselessly worked, weaving and doing all kinds of exchange work with her neighbors. But she always worried about one thing: "My ability as manager of family economy is limited so there are things I fail to do as I wish even though I do my best regarding my family's clothes and food. I am afraid that, when my children get high salaries and find things go smoothly as they wish, they may think I was incapable and forget all the hardships I had to make ends meet."

Here she pointed out that her children could lack abilities as public officials when they fail to realize the difficulties and value of home management. She was indeed thoughtful. Her husband recalled later that the higher salaries he earned after her death did not lead to a family life that was better than the old days when she struggled to manage their household.

Finally, Choe's inscription expressed his amazement at his wife's marvelous insight and chivalrous spirit that few men matched. He complimented her for wisely and justly coping with all situations. Indeed, she greatly encouraged her husband when he was appointed a royal advisor by imbuing him with a sense of mission and pride in his work regardless of his income.

A handful of queens and queen mothers represent the elite women of the Goryeo period who are known today. There are fewer Goryeo women recognized for their intellectual ability than those from the

subsequent Joseon period. In this regard, the inscription on Yeom Gyeong-ae's tomb plate, admiring her as a woman of intellect, is worthy of special note. Living at a time when women had no opportunity to advance to public posts or engage in social activities, she was the driving force that inspired her husband and children to serve their country and society. There is little doubt that if she had been born today, she would demonstrate far greater ability than most men in society.

## Chapter 7

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