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Creative Women of Korea

The Fifteenth Through the Twentieth Centuries

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Introduction

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This book, *Creative Women of Korea: The Fifteenth Through the Twentieth Centuries*, was conceived with the specific aim of filling a certain gap in available Western-language materials on Korean women's contributions to the humanities. It introduces to the English-speaking world aspects of important contributions by women in traditional and modern Korea, from the fifteenth through the twentieth centuries. From the outset, three questions were posed:

- (1) Have Korean women, especially those in the Confucian Korea of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), been passive recipients of the subservient status imposed by that society, or have they had their own agency?
- (2) In what historical and social context did some of the most creative women achieve their artistic triumphs?
- (3) What are the key characteristics of their creativity? Are there any shared traits in their creativity?

Creative Women of Korea consists of nine chapters that discuss literary and artistic works by women that may be considered Korean classics. Most of the women included in this book lived during the Chosŏn dynasty, with the exception of two moderns whose work presents

contrasting reactions to past conventions in the wake of Korea's modernization. I excluded living artists, many of whom are among the top literary and artistic figures of contemporary Korea.

The names of most women artists in traditional Korea are unknown to us because their creative activities were not meant to be publicized beyond the world of women. A small number of women—Queen Sohye, Sin Saimdang, Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn, Hwang Chini, and Lady Hyegyŏng of Chosŏn-dynasty Korea, and Kim Iryŏp and Hahn Moo-Sook of modern Korea—have achieved great fame. Their works occupy a public space, each by different circumstances.

All the women discussed in *Creative Women of Korea* are from the upper class (*yangban*), with the exception of Hwang Chini, a courtesan entertainer, or *kisaeng*, who, according to legend, was at least partially noble in origin. It is no coincidence that what literary and artistic works by women have survived are by noblewomen. They were the educated ones, with enough leisure and presence of mind to participate in creative endeavors, unlike lower-class women for whom education was thought useless as they would be too busy tending to daily chores. There may have been exceptions, but even if lowborn women did write and create, their productions were probably considered too unimportant for anyone to preserve whatever they left behind.

Propriety demanded that the literature and works of art by noblewomen not be publicized, even if these women, in their hearts, wished for their works to be discovered. In premodern times, therefore, among creative pieces by female authors and artists, anonymous works far exceed in number those whose creators are known. Women's work was meant to circulate among their own gender, although circumstances made some of their works known among the general public. So, the creative women discussed in this book may share similar backgrounds, but their individual works are extremely varied in their originality and provenance. Thus, while those works represent the range of Korean women's achievements, in no way is their presentation here meant as a characterization of Korean women in general.

Nevertheless, the force behind their creation is very much of one thread. Creative activity was the road to self-discovery. Each artist possessed a clear sense of self-confidence and an urge to express her creativity. Each wrote, painted, and made objects from a sincere and genuine desire to express deep emotions, trying to lead a life of harmony, good taste, and beauty emanating from within (*mŏi*), while guarding her

personal creed, integrity, and dignity, in her own particular ways. These women occupied unmistakable spaces of their own in traditional Korea; they often challenge the view of Korean women of the past commonly held today.

How did a woman of traditional Korea feel about herself? Was she miserable about her wretched "life of bondage" in the service of men? Conventionally, a traditional Korean woman has been considered as powerless under the burdens and abuses inflicted upon her by the patriarchal norms of Confucian society. An "ideal" woman was one of noble birth, who remained cloistered within the inner quarters (*anch'ae*). In fact, the higher her status, the more she was sequestered.¹ The assumed inferior position of women in human relationships and the presumed paucity of women's works in pre-modern Korean literature and art would seem to attest to the verisimilitude of such preconceptions.² Women had no room of their own in the sense of Virginia Woolf, the English writer, as they were ostensibly silenced into non-existence.³

The Neo-Confucian politico-moral system supposedly was adopted as the set of governing principles of the Chosŏn dynasty at its founding. And current scholarship informs us that, as the dynasty progressed, women—especially of the *yangban* class—gradually became less publicly visible.⁴ Under a dogmatic interpretation, the "proper" place for women was narrowly defined in terms of the physical and abstract sphere they occupied. A wellborn woman belonged to the inner quarters behind the thick walls of her family's house—and those of her husband's abode after marriage. In Confucian Korea, the world of a decent woman was private; the public sphere belonged to men only. An ideal woman was neither to be visible to, nor to communicate with, the opposite sex, with the exception of male servants, who were "less than normal" human beings. She was modest, diligent, frugal, faithful, docile, patient, and, above all, discreet. A system of female doctors, chosen from the lower classes, was created because aristocratic women refused to see male doctors.⁵

Among the key characteristics of Korean civilization are rites, lineage structure, literature, and education. In a Confucian society, rites are of the utmost importance, because "correct" acts are considered crucial for enhancing harmony among the members of society.⁶ In an ideal Confucian state, the moral conduct of the people was thought to contribute directly to the health of society and the vigor of the nation. Three cardinal human relationships (*samgang*) and five moral imperatives (*oryun*) were the inviolable creed, which regulated people's behavior in

minute detail. *Samgang* concerned the relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife. *Oryun*, reinforcing and clarifying *samgang*, prescribed righteousness between ruler and subject, affinity between father and son, separation of functions between husband and wife, proper order of birth between elder and younger brother, and fidelity between friends.⁷

To maintain proper human relationships, ritual and etiquette were mandated. Of the Four Rites (*sarye*)—adulthood, nuptials, funeral, and ancestor worship (or the remembrance ceremony)—the institution of ancestor worship brought about the most profound change in Korean society. Ancestral worship categorized members of the descent group into a hierarchy. In the early Chosŏn dynasty, well before the seventeenth century, when Korea was completely Confucianized, women were equal participants in ancestral rites, but gradually the main line of the eldest sons came to assume the heaviest responsibility in ritual obligations. The system of primogeniture was thus solidified, and unequal inheritance customs ensued. Patriarchy was considered the most natural requirement for an orderly life. Women's participation in ritual gradually but surely came to be limited to the preparation of sacrificial foods and proper ceremonial garb for men.

On the surface, a woman's status seemed to be determined uniquely by the men in her life. The "etiquette of Three Dependencies" (*Samjong chi ūi*) meant that a woman obeyed her parents as a child, her husband as a wife, and her son as a widow. With the wholesale Confucianization of society, women seemed to lose their identity completely. However, in contrast to most patrilineal systems, in Confucian Korea the old custom of women playing a pivotal role in determining the social status of their offspring persisted. It is well known that the issue of illegitimate or secondary consorts met with discrimination. Protest literature, such as the *Hong Kiltong chŏn* (The Tale of Hong Kiltong) by Hŏ Kyun, attests to the unhappiness felt by victims of the system and their sympathizers.⁸

However, there has been substantial variation and complexity even in the matter of gender and class in traditional Korea, depending on the historical period, personal life cycles, and, finally, individual qualities and talents of the person in question. With the common belief of *pubu ilch'e* ("a couple is one body"), even in the worst period for women, a woman received due respect from all who respected her husband. For the same reason, filial piety did not apply only to one's father, but to both parents. This is well reflected in linguistic protocol. Due to

an elaborate honorific system in the Korean language, the choice of the appropriate forms of address and referent honorifics is the most overt representation of interpersonal relationships. A husband and a wife have not used equal speech levels to each other of late, but early twentieth-century novels indicate that, until quite recently, aristocratic couples used to address each other by equal-in-level polite forms. A mother may use a formal speech style to a grown son (or daughter), especially if he (or she, as is manifest in Lady Hyegyŏng's memoirs) attained high social status, but in no way would a son "talk down" to his own mother or elder sister, however high a position he or she may have reached.

Recent studies have shown that the social institutions affecting women in the gravest ways were fully implemented only by the seventeenth century.⁹ Even in the most unfavorable times for women, a noblewoman often exercised considerable power by virtue of her birth, station, and upbringing. Her ancestry bestowed privilege upon her. Married, she became an opposing but complementary half in the *yin* and *yang* whole, playing a key role in establishing the legitimacy of a noble lineage. In other words, although one's aristocratic lineage was through one's father, one's mother's aristocratic origin was equally important in confirming one's nobility in the Korean tradition. At a certain stage of her life cycle, a woman would even become a lead manager of not only the inner quarters but of the entire household. Thus, Korean "women opened up arenas of freedom for themselves without directly challenging the ideal norms promulgated by the official ideology."¹⁰

There is a clear parallel here to Dorothy Ko's portrayal of traditional Chinese women:

[I]f the assumptions of patriarchy were not being challenged outright in the seventeenth century, in practice they were being constantly mitigated. Although men still claimed legal rights over family property and fathers enjoyed authority over women and children, the housewife as de facto household manager, mother, and educator of children had ample opportunities to influence family affairs. In the context of everyday life, women were hardly outsiders to the family system.¹¹

Indeed, stories abound about virtuous Asian women who lectured their corrupt (official) and undiscerning husbands. The quantity of known women's writings and artwork in Korea is minimal compared to men's, as women were not supposed to be visible in the first place. However, a few works by identifiable women authors, and by countless anonymous

others who are clearly women, allow us a glimpse of the world of women and an idea of their sensibility, intelligence, and dignity. In almost every work, there is a surprising sense of self-confidence or self-awareness on the part of the author or creator as an important and often daring and innovative participant in artistic life, even when some women may have been lamenting their destiny.

Women wrote mainly in *han'gŭl*, the Korean alphabet invented in the mid-fifteenth century. Only men held public office, and official positions were filled through the civil-service examination, which was based mainly on the Confucian classics. Therefore, it was mandatory for men to study literary Chinese. In fact, "literacy" meant familiarity with Chinese classics. All official documents and much of the nation's literature continued to be written in Chinese.¹²

Men preferred to write in Chinese to lend their writing an air of officiality, formality, intellectualism, and, of course, prestige, because literary Chinese was far more difficult to master than writing in the vernacular and in *han'gŭl*, the simple alphabetic Korean writing system. In written language, at least, all educated men were completely bilingual in Chinese and Korean, and, in some cases, monolingual only in literary Chinese, that is, they did not know *han'gŭl*.

The Korean language, which shares numerous typological similarities with Japanese, is syntactically very different from Chinese. After trying for centuries to use the essentially nonphonetic Chinese characters to transcribe the polysyllabic vernacular with myriad affixes and other grammatical markers, many Korean writers just wrote in classical Chinese. Most of them, however, did not know any spoken Chinese. The literati wrote mainly in Chinese except when writing *sijo* or *kasa* poetry, mundane notes, casual records, and the like. Thus, as in Japan, true writing in traditional Korea meant literary Chinese. As such, the act of writing was in itself foreign and the style was always formal and classical. There was a great distance between the spoken and written forms of language in space and time, much as with Europeans' use of Greek and Latin during the eighteenth century.¹³

Teaching women Chinese was considered a waste of time, not only because they were thought inferior but also because they did not need literacy to fulfill their womanly tasks. However, if learning Chinese was perhaps considered futile or impertinent, it was not actually banned for women. On the contrary, those who managed to acquire a "masculine" education were highly respected. As a consequence, some women

managed to become literate; they learned Chinese classics "over the shoulder" (*ōkkae nōmō*), as their brothers and fathers recited in a loud voice, which was a common way of reading and learning books. Some fathers and brothers, as well as mothers, actually instructed their daughters and sisters who showed exceptional intelligence. Such women certainly earned the respect and praise of all, so long as they did not neglect womanly duties.

Even those women who did learn Chinese, however, used it only for certain poetic works; mostly they opted to use *han'gŭl*. In fact, *han'gŭl* was nicknamed *amk'ul* ("female writing"), a term almost always used pejoratively.¹⁴ Thus, unlike Chinese—and more like Japanese—women, Korean women wrote in what they viewed as their own medium of writing, thus empowering themselves.

Writing in the conveniently easy alphabet gave them a crucial tool for literary creations, which were at times spiritual and reflective, at times spontaneous, playful, and frank. Consequently, women's works reveal thought and inner feeling more directly and powerfully than men's, because women were speaking both their mind and heart in their own language.

"Virtuous women" were thought by many to be vital to an ideal Confucian society. Moral conduct was prescribed in the Chinese classics. Though a few Korean women were well versed in the classics, most did not read Chinese. Many scholars have pointed out that one motive for Sejong's invention of the Korean alphabet in 1443 or 1444¹⁵ may have been to enhance literacy; but the ultimate goal was moral education.¹⁶ When the Chinese classics became accessible to commoners, women, and children with the help of an easy writing system—Sejong may have thought, according to these scholars—the basic moral principles of the Three Bonds (*samgang*) could be upheld, and everyone could live in harmony with the "natural" order of the Confucian universe.

Various circumstances served to elevate the queen to an extraordinarily powerful position, far above any other woman in fifteenth-century Korea. The well-educated Queen Sohye, mother of King Sōngjong, took upon herself the task of women's education by compiling a textbook entitled the *Naehun* ("Instructions for Women," 1475), which included quotations from various Chinese classics. Queen Sohye was from an illustrious family, her close relatives were politically mighty, and she was chosen as a royal consort, enjoying the status of "mother of the nation." Hers thus became the voice of authority beyond the sphere

reserved for women, even as Chosŏn *yangban* women were gradually being deprived of the social and economic equality enjoyed by their foremothers.

However, what distinguished the queen even more impressively was the fact that she was educated in the Confucian classics. Her privileged station allowed her to compile selections in literary Chinese, the "male language of public business," with a *han'gŭl* translation—in a manner reminiscent of moral primers authored by men of the time.

In his chapter entitled "The *Naehun* and the Politics of Gender in Fifteenth-Century Korea," Professor John Duncan (hereinafter, all honorific titles will be omitted) investigates "how elite women of the Chosŏn period sought, within the strictures of the Confucian gender system, to define a space wherein they could play meaningful social, cultural, and political roles" (in this volume, p. 27; further cross-references given simply with *p.*). Maintaining her discourse at men's level, Sohye strove to claim important social, cultural, and even political roles for women, as "exemplars of ritual propriety and as confidants and advisers to their husbands" (p. 53). Sohye was an extraordinary woman possessing considerable self-assurance and a sense of responsibility for her country's destiny. In the final analysis, Sohye was pleading for education for women so that they could fulfill proper roles within the Confucian system. No one had ever done this publicly, and eloquently, before her.

Even when Korean families were restructured according to the Confucian patrilineal descent group, and women's status in family and society was transformed from adviser and helpmate to submissive spouse and dutiful caregiver, Koreans continued to be conscious of the centrality of women's roles and the importance of their wise judgment in fulfilling those roles.¹⁷ Education, formal and public, was neither accessible nor considered relevant for women; its purpose was the preparation of scholar-officials. However, women's wisdom and proper upbringing were still considered important, because Koreans believed that the vicissitudes of a family and a society crucially, if not primarily, depended on them.

Another woman enjoying privilege and high acclaim was Sin Saimdang (1504–1551), the subject of Yi Sŏng-mi's chapter "Sin Saimdang: The Foremost Woman Painter of the Chosŏn Dynasty." Sin Saimdang was born into the illustrious family of Sin. Like her mother, she was taught to read the Chinese classics by her father, who gave her the pen name *Saimdang*. Again like her mother, Lady Sin stayed with her natal family for many years, even after her marriage,

before joining her husband's family, in accord with the custom of uxorilocal residence.¹⁸ This living arrangement is likely to have given her the freedom, away from her husband's family and from all the responsibilities of a daughter-in-law, which must have been a huge contributing factor toward her growth as an artist.

Sin Saimdang is known for having been a good wife and the wise mother of Yulgok, also called Yi I (1536–1584), one of the two most eminent Neo-Confucian philosophers in Korean intellectual history. Lady Sin was known for her exquisite paintings, embroidery, calligraphy, and poetry. Yi Sŏng-mi, however, strongly believes that Saimdang's social and intellectual position as the mother of the prominent and influential thinker helped create a new image for her, creating what Yi terms a "Saimdang myth." Many works of uneven quality thus came to be attributed to Sin Saimdang on account of her fame. Yi's research offers hope not only in identifying some important characteristics of Saimdang's artistry but also in clarifying her contribution to the development of Korean art.

Although Lady Sin is famous for her embroidery, her ink paintings fall within the general framework of literati painting of her time, according to Yi Sŏng-mi. Yi's research on Sin Saimdang and her art suggests that an important link exists between the Korean and Chinese painting traditions prior to the sixteenth century, and what we have of works attributed to Saimdang, in some cases, serves to fill in the missing links in the chain of stylistic development of painting in the Chosŏn period.

Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn (1563–1589) is another talented woman from a distinguished family whose many members were known for scholarship and literary creativity. In his chapter entitled, "Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn and 'Shakespeare's Sister,'" Kichung Kim compares an imaginary gifted sister of Shakespeare—reconstructed by Virginia Woolf in her classic work, *A Room of One's Own*—with Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn who lived in Korea, also in the sixteenth century. In Kim's view, the two women would have had much in common as victims of male-dominated societies. Unlike Shakespeare's sister, however, Lady Hŏ's birth and circumstances gave her educational opportunities to become literate. She was surrounded by a loving, talented family and by a library of "10,000 books."¹⁹ Her cultural foundation and her personal sensitivity are two crucial ingredients of her poems; her work has been anthologized and praised in China and Japan as well.

The unsheathed sorrow in many of Lady Hŏ's poems as well as some

remarks on her brief life by others, including her brother Hŏ Kyun, has led scholars and readers to speculate about the origin of her melancholy. Kim, like many researchers on Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn, finds the source of her agony in her sense of failure as a woman, notwithstanding her talents and position, in light of what was expected of a virtuous lady of her time. Kichung Kim, at the same time, embraces as plausible the hypothesis—proposed by scholars such as Martina Deuchler, Mark Peterson, and John Duncan—that women may have been relatively less confined at the time of Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn. Kim thus suggests that Lady Hŏ might have been able to write the kind of poetry she did—both in quantity and quality—because she had probably been allowed to remain with her own family for some time after her marriage.

The sense of alienation and loneliness expressed in Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn's works may not all derive from her actual experiences, warns Kichung Kim. They could have originated in books or the people around her. She also empathized with people suffering from analogous feelings of loneliness and unhappiness, such as fishermen's wives and unmarried seamstresses. These intense feelings, whatever their reason or origin, made Lady Hŏ want to write, not necessarily for others but for herself. Writing about her sadness sublimated her worldly misery to spiritual joy. That is probably why she wished her work to be burned after she died—not because she did not want to have another woman poet ending up as miserable as she was, as some researchers have claimed.²⁰

Kichung Kim invites us to ponder the relationship between Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn's realistic sad poems and her fantastic dream poems: two very different modes, both in form and content, of Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn's art. By expressing frankly her mind and heart, she sought to experience catharsis. By freely traveling into the world of immortals, she tried to find philosophical meaning and peace in her life. In both cases, her urge to create, to turn her feelings into an aesthetic experience, is evident. Kichung Kim's essay suggests that Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn, in spite of her sad, short life, was luckier than Shakespeare's sister.

In traditional Korea, especially in the late Chosŏn, a noblewoman's physical place was within the inner quarters. However, most women from the lower classes were free to appear in public. Servants, commoners, women doctors, shamans, and *kisaeng* (women entertainers or courtesans) were officially allowed into the public space, but that space was not an honorable one for women. In the case of *kisaeng*, their space was different from other women's in that they mingled with men, if only

as their playmates. Even though from a lower class, the *kisaeng* underwent strict, formal training in etiquette, poetry, painting, calligraphy, singing, dancing, games, and so on, in an effort to emulate the education of the noblemen whom they would eventually entertain. Nevertheless, "repeated attempts to cleanse official society of these women indicate that the *kisaeng* were viewed as being subversive of proper decorum."²¹

Hwang Chini (1502–?) is an eternal name in Korean literary history. Her works are limited to six *sijo* poems and seven poems in Chinese. Hwang Chini is unlike most of the *kisaeng* poets: Most songs and poetry by these women tend to express their longing for an absent lover, their lament for a lost love, or their nostalgia for the days of their youth and glory.²² Hwang Chini's poems present her as a secure woman—strong, confident, forthright, playful, decisive, and in control of her emotions, one who knows her own mind, who seeks perfection in herself and in her company, and who could laugh at her own foibles as well as the foibles of others. More important, her poems evince a poet with a refined sensibility and remarkable literary talents.

Hwang Chini's identity remains obscure. This has provided ample opportunity for admirers of her poems to create the "Hwang Chini myth." Kevin O'Rourke's chapter, "Demythologizing Hwang Chini," espouses the need for separating the historical and the mythical Hwang Chini for the sake of proper evaluation of her artistic achievement.²³ O'Rourke examines her work against the canvas of her times and the work of her peers, male and female. He points out that the early sixteenth century was not a great time for poetry in general in Korea, and he carefully avoids superlatives in describing her works because he does not believe there is evidence to support such qualitative judgments. He believes that hyperbolic expressions, in fact, are part of the myth that he sets out to debunk.

O'Rourke's analyses of Hwang Chini's poems in Chinese and of her Korean *sijo* poems, however, make evident her genius, her clearly thorough literary education, and her keen sense of beauty in nature and in human relationships. Hwang Chini's poems evoke traditional Korean and East Asian literary traditions, but her artistic skills of expressing in lyrical language her true feelings, while being able to detach herself from them using irony and contrasting imagery, are distinctive.

In the chapter entitled "Private Memory and Public History: The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyŏng and Testimonial Literature," JaHyun Kim Haboush contemplates the works of an eighteenth-century princess.

Lady Hyegyŏng (1735–1815) was the wife of Crown Prince Sado, whose tragic life and death have become known thanks to her writings.²⁴ Haboush discusses *Memoirs* in the context of testimonial literature. She analyzes how Lady Hyegyŏng organizes memory to construct her narratives, thus turning private memory into public history. Haboush also reflects on the gendered sense of self represented in her memoirs, and investigates the relationship between such a sense and genres of testimonial literature, noting the preponderance of women writers in this category of writing.

Haboush distinguishes testimonial narratives written in *han'gŭl* from official petitions-memorials written in classical Chinese, which are legal documents. Lady Hyegyŏng, writing private narratives in vernacular Korean, thus unofficially contests the official historiography on Sado's death and the events leading to it—a subject of the highest sensitivity and importance touching on dynastic legitimacy, and taboo for discussion. Haboush investigates cultural imperatives that led Lady Hyegyŏng to write her memoirs and the cultural context in which she wrote them.

Lady Hyegyŏng wrote the history of a king and his heir as the story of a father and son. Her remarkable achievement in this testimony, according to Haboush, was how she could turn her private memory into public history, in a way no man, let alone any woman, was to do.

Lady Hyegyŏng's testimony was as much for herself as for history. She clearly wrote to keep the record straight; however, what essentially drove her creativity was her quest for self-identity. Like Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn, by relating what had happened and entering it into the written record, she could come to terms with her own self and with her destiny. That is, at a most personal level, she could finally mourn the loss by recognizing that it had happened, thereby bringing it to closure. She was at last free from the cords of life that had bound her.

It is noteworthy that just as Korean women, especially noblewomen, were effectively marginalized and segregated, more of them participated in literary activities. Because of their invisible status, most of their names are not known but, from content and other circumstantial evidence, their gender is certain. In a completely Confucianized Korea, even noblewomen were no longer educated in Chinese classics. Therefore, almost all writings by women were in vernacular Korean. Chŏng Pyŏng'uk notes, "From the Korean literary historical point of view, a 'fortunate consequence' of women's segregation was that Korean literature was no longer bound by the narrow definition of writing in classical Chinese."²⁵ Lady

Hyegyŏng's memoirs, together with *Hunmin chŏng'ŭm*, the proclamation document of the Korean alphabet of 1446—whose scientific, philosophical and humanistic qualities are now well established—surely belong among the great literary works of human civilization.²⁶

A traditional noblewoman, especially in Confucianized late-Chosŏn Korea, was not supposed to express her feelings. The creative urge, however, can be even more intense when a person is so confined. These women saw opportunities for creativity in ordinary customs and mores involving themselves. Women wrote letters by obligation and of their own accord. A *yangban* woman was required to write salutary letters to her parents-in-law, if they were away. These letters were strictly formulaic, and not writing exactly as required was a sign of bad upbringing. Personal letters between a woman and a confidant were another matter. It is not surprising that many moving narratives are written in the form of letters. A particular form of poetry called *kasa* (literally, "prose song"), possibly developed as a form of letter, was the favorite literary genre chosen by *yangban* women of this period.

In the chapter entitled "*Kyubang kasa*: Women's Writings from the Late Chosŏn," Sonja Häußler discusses works by anonymous women writing in *kasa*, which are long poems written in the Korean vernacular with a set rhythmic pattern. *Kyubang kasa* ("*kasa* of the inner chambers") were written on rolls of paper (*turumari*) and handed down from woman to woman. Some *kyubang kasa* were written collectively, and became quite long, as women kept adding to the received text. Häußler's study features some poignant examples that help us understand the nature and origin of this genre.

Häußler observes that *kyubang kasa* originated directly from the Confucianization of Korea and its effect on women. *Kasa* probably started as a cycle of personal missives filled with moral and psychological encouragement from a mother to her daughter leaving the natal home for her affine family. These poems were also a part of the home she was leaving behind that the marrying daughter carried with her: "Touching the scroll and looking at the calligraphy of her beloved, she would be with them."

Kyubang kasa, therefore, may belong to the category of didactic literature, and literature for women at that. However, with time, the range of subjects expanded to encompass all forms of ceremonial greetings and wishes including homilies, travelogs, and, finally, fiction. In a crucial manner, writes Häußler, women tried to emulate men by writing

poems on Chinese and Korean history, thus penetrating men's jealously guarded domain. In contrast to *kasa* by male poets, women's historical narratives included accounts of queens, upholding female virtues. Then followed women's involvement in political life, and their vision soon extended to the world beyond Korea. *Kyubang kasa* thus truly came to present "a kaleidoscopic view of Korean life."²⁷ More important, they give a glimpse of the inner thoughts and feelings of wellborn women of the late Chosŏn. *Kyubang kasa* provide authentic sources for studying the intellectual and psychological state of many Korean women of the past.

The effort to render the life of the inner room more meaningful and beautiful was not limited to literary creation. An important aspect in the life of good taste and style was the visual. One of the imperatives for a traditional woman was to keep herself and her surroundings as clean and beautiful as possible. If frugality was praised and extravagance looked at askance, a beautiful object created from meager means received utmost respect. One area in which Korean women of the past showed remarkable ingenuity is in some highly original designs that embellished daily necessities, as well as in purely decorative small embroidered ornaments called *kwebul*. One of the objects in which women demonstrated their refreshing creativity is *pojagi* (wrapping or covering cloth), which had a particular significance in the Korean cultural context.

Kumja Paik Kim, in the chapter entitled "A Celebration of Life: Patchwork and Embroidered *Pojagi* by Unknown Korean Women," discusses the nature, meaning, and art of *pojagi* (covering), with illustrations of some of the most exquisite examples. Kim believes that the custom of *pojagi*-making started at the court, where the rules of proper conduct had to be strictly adhered to. Later it not only became an integral part in the protocol of the court (*kung po*) but also in the daily life of ordinary people (*min po*).

Covering expressed respect for the objects covered, seriousness toward the occasion, and esteem for the receiver of the items covered. People believed, too, that by wrapping something they would capture good fortune (*pok*) to be associated with the enclosed object. Naturally, women made them with the seriousness and care any precious object required. Kumja Paik Kim also discusses spiritual aspects of *pojagi*-making. Virtues of patience, frugality, and devotion would add to the good luck of the user and blessings of the object to be covered. What is unique in this endeavor, however, is that Korean women did not just follow templates to produce them mechanically, but demonstrated their creativity by designing and making original pieces. *Pojagi*, although

all by anonymous women, represent the ethos and distinct, sophisticated aesthetic sensibilities of traditional Korea.

The traditional Confucian social and political order came to be seriously challenged in the nineteenth century. As early as the late eighteenth century, a group of scholars of Qing studies known as Northern Learning (*Pukhak*) within the Practical Learning (*Sirhak*) movement had advocated foreign trade with Western nations and enlightened reform embracing Western technology.²⁸ Unfortunately, the regent Taewŏn'gun's isolationist policy—made even fiercer following the destruction of an American merchant ship, the *General Sherman*, in 1866, which gave him a misguided sense of superiority—led the country to constant predicaments in its transactions with other, more powerful nations. Korea, hopelessly weakened by many ills toward the end of the Chosŏn dynasty, succumbed to the ambition of Japan and became its colony in 1910. It would regain its independence only in 1945.

In a rapidly declining nation, the Reform of 1894 (*Kabo kyŏngjang*) brought about extensive changes that affected all aspects of the political, economic, and social life of Koreans. The reform touched on vital issues in various social practices and conventions, including those involving women. The existing social class system was totally eradicated.

In 1895 King Kojong issued an edict emphasizing the importance of education in preserving national sovereignty. Already in 1883, the first modern private school, Wŏnsan Haksa (Wŏnsan Academy), was founded in Wŏnsan, a port city whose residents wished to establish the school to meet the challenge from abroad. In 1886, American missionary organizations established private schools. Among these was Ewha Women's School, Korea's first educational institution for women. The zeal for education was quite high among the public at large, and many more schools for young women as well as for men were founded, responding to public interest in the education of the younger generation. The number of private schools reached some 3,000 before Korea became completely dominated by the Japanese.²⁹ These schools not only offered a Western curriculum but also became breeding grounds for the patriotic movement. At first the *yangban* were not interested in mass public education, especially for women. Thus, in the beginning, these private schools were attended mostly by children of non-*yangban* (including some Christian) families.

One of the most devastating effects of the failed March 1 Independence Movement of 1919 was a terrible sense of frustration, hopelessness, res-

ignation, decadence, and escapism. Korean literature truly joined the modern era in this grim situation. Earlier writers engaging in "new literature" wrote didactic material with a politico-social agenda to enlighten the people with a view to the country's salvation. As the new "art for art's sake" trend started, a pathetic mood reigned as writers experimented with various types of realism and naturalism, inspired by European and American writers whose works in translation became increasingly available. Many of these writers went to study in Japan, and were also influenced by Japanese colleagues who were drawing upon Western examples. A handful of women writers joined this group of writers, but much of their attention was given to the social issue of women's liberation. Bonnie B. C. Oh's chapter entitled "The Conflicting Worlds of Kim Iryöp" is about one of these women, Kim Wönju. Kim Wönju is better known by the pen name Iryöp (One Leaf) she used before joining the Buddhist order, rather than by Hayöp (Lotus Leaf), her Buddhist name.

Kim Iryöp (1896–1971) is well known in Korea, but remains an intriguing and controversial personage. Iryöp is most unusual in that "her thinking, lifestyle, and personal conduct in the 1920s clearly verged on moral anarchism by the standards of her time, and perhaps even by those of today."³⁰ For many, Iryöp was a revolutionary thinker and an activist who tried to elevate women's status in the arts and letters in the early years of Korean modernization.³¹ Like two of her close contemporaries, Kim Myöngsun and Na Hyesök, she was ridiculed and denounced by Korean society. It seemed as if they did a disservice to the true women's liberation movement by being such "bad" examples. However, unlike her colleagues, Kim Iryöp eventually came to be at peace with herself and with those surrounding her. Kim Iryöp sought and found a place for herself to make a difference in this world, which gave her renewed creative energy. The place she found was seemingly antithetical to her earlier life—one of total abstinence, calm, and meditation. However, even as a born-again Buddhist, she would not just seek her personal salvation. Unlike the usual *Sön* or Zen Buddhist, she continued to work for the multitude, especially the women, sacerdotal as well as lay.

Indeed Kim Iryöp's life seems to lie in the confluence of two conflicting worlds. And yet, somehow, the two worlds are closely interconnected: It is as if her unhappy experiences and bold experimentation in her secular life were some kind of preparation for her reincarnation as a Buddhist cleric, karma of a sort. Bonnie Oh's essay introduces the basic nature of Kim Iryöp's Buddhist thought and literary creativity. Iryöp's

joy and urge to spread her newly discovered faith were so strong that she continued to write even after becoming a cleric, violating her vow not to write after entering the monastery. She eventually secured a place of respect for herself, and in some sense for her departed colleagues who were not as fortunate.

It is true that women's status in general improved greatly over the years. Because mass education became available only rather recently in Korea even for men, women had equal opportunity in public education and voting from the start of the modern era. The word *suffragette* does not evoke any feeling among Koreans. Women's legal status also improved: Widows could remarry, and women could divorce their husbands. Economically, women took charge of household finances.

In practice, however, old habits die hard. An ideal woman was still a *hyönmo yangch'ö* (a wise mother and a good wife) whose place was at home. A sonless woman was still to be pitied, and inheritance law discriminated against women until very recently. Even after the law provided equal inheritance, people managed to override the principle by various means to maintain primogeniture or at least to usurp the daughters' inheritance. Furthermore, rule by the Japanese, in whose culture women were assigned a definitely inferior position, put an unfortunate brake on Korea's modernization as far as women were concerned. Traditionally, as noted before, noblemen used to address their wives with respect. However, even former aristocrats began to speak down to their wives in a way their ancestors did not, but more like the way Japanese husbands spoke to their wives. However, modern Korean women, equipped with modern education and with increased communication with the outside world, have come to participate in public affairs, except perhaps in the arena of politics and public finance, still viewed essentially as masculine spaces.

In this climate, a new profile of an ideal modern woman has emerged. Today the powerful Korean Housewives' Club annually chooses a woman of the year with a huge celebration in Töksu Palace in central Seoul. The award is named after the celebrated Sin Saimdang. The Sin Saimdang Award is given to "a professionally successful woman who is first and foremost a good mother and wife." In 1973 the Club chose as its fifth Sin Saimdang laureate Hahn Moo-Sook (Han Musuk, 1918–1993), a writer who had had a 30-year literary career while carrying out all her duties as an "exemplary" mother, wife, and daughter-in-law, considered still a difficult feat for a career woman to attain. Such an award might

not necessarily have been viewed positively in the literary circles of the time, and might even have adversely affected her image in the general field of literature. However, such a goal is not unrelated to what Hahn tried to pursue in her life as a writer and as a person.

Yung-Hee Kim, in her chapter "Dialectics of Life: Hahn Moo-Sook and Her Literary World," examines how Hahn Moo-Sook's views of life and human existence are articulated in three of her narrative works.

Kim identifies Hahn as a perceptive literary mediator, who sought harmony and balance between contrasting forces, seeing human existence in terms of "dialectic interactions of [these] seemingly binary opposites" (p. 196). Kim adds that the distinguishing hallmark of Hahn Moo-Sook is her acute awareness of the enduring presence of Korean traditional culture which operates in the lives of modern Koreans. Hahn, viewing Korean culture as threatened with extinction, seems to have devoted her energy to its preservation, along with the national language, affirming and fostering a literature consonant with the modern Korean history.

Many critics agree with Yung-Hee Kim who observes that Hahn's works are informed by "the need for negotiating a felicitous balance between tradition and change, past and present, each illuminating the other rather than negating each other." Her "eclecticism or integrative stance," however, "is not limited simply to Hahn's embracing of the indigenous and foreign cultural traditions. It extends to many other areas of concerns in her works, which deal with different conceptual dyads such as love/hate, joy/sorrow, happiness/misery, the sacred/the profane, transgression/redemption, past/present, life/death" (p. 195). Life's meaning is in "accepting, and ultimately celebrating them as interlocked and integral parts of human existence" (p. 196).

Yung-Hee Kim's critical framework is helpful for understanding the way in which the binary opposites of rationality and spirituality are resolved in the figures of Tasan and his nephew Hasang in Hahn's novel *Encounter*, according to JaHyun Kim Haboush.³² Haboush then proposes an interesting analysis of Tasan's progression from Confucian rationality to Catholic spirituality, noting: "Confucianism, which represents rationality, is in this sense affirmed as a preparatory stage for modernity rather than rejected as a past to be overcome."³³ Don Baker also supports Yung-Hee Kim's critical apparatus, observing how Hahn "accommodates the Western concept of sin within a dialectic of binary opposites

provided by Korean tradition," often with an "explicit presentation of the complementary nature and interchangeability of sin and sanctity."³⁴ Popular writer Ch'oe Inho offers a similar comment about Hahn's motivation in writing *Encounter*. Ch'oe says, "In meeting her God who dwelled deep in the abyss of her heart, she [Hahn Moo-Sook] made an apology for her own human weaknesses through the character of Chŏng Yagyong, while expressing her passionate fervor for God through the martyrdom of his nephew Chŏng Hasang."³⁵

A remark by Hahn Moo-Sook herself seems to support Yung-Hee Kim's critical device. In the epilogue to the Korean original of *Encounter*, she wrote:

This gigantic but lonely soul [Tasan Chŏng Yagyong], paradoxical and impregnated with human weaknesses, has long captivated me. His very human faults and trespasses came to move me just as deeply as his greatness. Another personage that I have adored is Tasan's nephew, St. Paul Chŏng Hasang, who unlike Tasan trod the road of unwavering faith, for which he willingly sacrificed his life. St. Paul Hasang's immaculate life has always cleansed my soul. These two souls, contrasting as they are, have filled my heart, one just as dearly as the other . . . (translation, Young-Key Kim-Renaud)

Ironically, it was not her meeting with the West but her arranged marriage into an archconservative Korean family that shocked her the most. What really struck her, however, was her discovery that the differences she observed were only superficial, and that the two families shared the same, deep-rooted cultural values. Her Korean sense of identity, grown faint after years of Japanese schooling, now solidified. Silently but forcefully she said to herself, "I want to write!"

It is such creative urges that inspired the women discussed in this book. The creativity manifested by these women is varied in the themes, style, spirit, and messages they convey, in spite of the limited quantity of their works in comparison with men's. Through these sparks of creativity, we have a glimpse of the fire that has been burning within, the fire that has warmed our hearts and bodies, the fire that has made our nourishment, the fire that has brightened our paths, the fire that has given birth to many other sparks still to be discovered and to be studied.

Special circumstances have enabled each of these women to occupy a visible space. Even though the goal of this book is not to essentialize

what Korean women were or are, there is a certain pattern that all the creative women of Korea show. Traditionally they have considered *han'gŭl* their own writing system, enabling them to express themselves more freely than men with their Chinese. They all speak from their heart and with confidence. Their works manifest self-assurance and enjoyment in innovative work; all have endeavored to be different from ordinary beings, all the while pursuing "authenticity." Far from being passive and pessimistic about the societal norms that constrained women, they have a clear sense of themselves, and each occupies a clear space in the life of family and society. They are strong.

As mentioned before, this book is rather limited in its scope in that almost all the women discussed are from the aristocratic *yangban* class. Because professional artists were viewed as artisans and craftsmen and given low status, especially in Confucian Korea,³⁶ most women's works have gone unnoticed and often are completely lost. Such is the case particularly for lower-class women. Because of the easy Korean writing system, however, there must have been at least some lower-class women who wrote and made beautiful objects. We really know very little about commoners' lives and their creative activities. Therefore, sparks to be studied more seriously include songs and tales handed down to us through *p'ansori* singers, *kisaeng*, shamans, beggars, grandmothers, and children, as well as those material and spiritual objects that have embellished our lives but that we have taken for granted, because they are such an integral part of our lives—like *pojagi*. From what little is visible, one notices a strong vitality and creativity in the works of marginalized people, too. They are beyond the realm of this book, but they certainly demand their own space.

Notes

1. Kendall and Peterson, *Korean Women*, 5.
2. Mattioli, *Virtues in Conflict*, ix; Chung, *A Korean Confucian Encounter with the Modern World*, 182–83.
3. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.
4. However, more recent scholarship (for example, Haboush, "Gender and the Politics of Language in Chosŏn Korea"), suggests that women have played an important role even in the latter part of the Chosŏn dynasty, departing from what was previously proposed.
5. Hong and Kim, "King Sejong's Contribution to Medicine," 103–10. A Chosŏn dynasty official, Hŏ To, wrote on March 15, 1406, "Ladies, who beget an illness, are shamed to consult with a doctor, which leads to death in extreme cases. Therefore, if dozens of girls are educated about acupuncture and examination for ladies, they will

greatly help their cure." Hŏ's proposal was apparently accepted and the female-doctor institution was created (Yang Sung-jin, <http://english.gija.com/click17.htm>).

6. Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 25.
7. Deuchler, "Rites in Early Chosŏn Korea," 38.
8. Hŏ Kyun's authorship of *Hong Kiltong chŏn* is seriously questioned by such scholars as Paik in "Kosŏsŏl Hong Kiltong chŏn ŭi chojag-e taehan chae kŏmt'o," 307–31. Most scholars, however, agree with Kim, in *Chosŏn Sosŏlsa*, 70–82, who first proposed it. These scholars give as evidence a statement left by a near contemporary Yi Shik (1584–1647), who commented that Hŏ Kyun wrote the novel emulating the Chinese *Shui Hu Zhuan* (Tale of the Water Margin), which he supposedly admired (Paik, 310).
9. See, for example, Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*; Kendall and Peterson, *Korean Women*.
10. Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 11.
11. Ibid.
12. Lee, Introduction to *The Traditional Culture and Society of Korea*, 3.
13. Jones, "The Power of Reading," 175. As Sonja Häußler [personal communication] notes, this statement probably should not be limited to the eighteenth century, because the same could already be said about the medieval age in Europe.
14. The Korean morpheme *amh-* is a biological term meaning "female," usually referring to animals.
15. Which year depends on how the date is calculated according to the Western calendar.
16. See, for example, Ledyard, *The Korean Language Reform of 1446*, 131, and Ramsey, "The Korean Alphabet," 49.
17. Haboush, "Women's Education," 46.
18. We now know from recent studies that uxori-local residence among well-to-do women of the yangban class was not so unusual during her lifetime.
19. As Sonja Häußler [personal communication] notes, 10,000 was a symbolic number for the expression of "many" in East Asia and should not be taken literally.
20. See, for example Hŏ, *Han'gug yŏryu munhangnon: kojŏnp'yŏn*, 52.
21. McCann, "Formal and Informal Society," 134.
22. For example, most of about ninety poems left by Xue Tao, one of the two most distinguished women poets of the Tang dynasty, are love poems addressed to her male patrons in their absence, or occasional poems celebrating their brief unions, and many critics apparently dismiss her poetry as mere erotic and occasional verse of no significance. See Nienhauser, *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, 439. I am indebted to Jonathan Chaves for this reference.
23. In his chapter, Kevin O'Rourke refers to Hwang Chini as "Chini." Widely used in the popular literature, this appellation evinces the kind of affection Koreans feel toward her. Her low social status might also have something to do with the usage of the given name, which is a condescending term of reference in Korean. However, "Chini" seems merely to be perceived or transformed as a kind of pen name by many literary critiques.
24. Lady Hyegyŏng wrote four memoirs, together known as *Hanjungnok* (Records Written in Silence) or *Hanjungmallok* (Memoirs Written in Silence), at separate occasions for different purposes, from 1795 to 1805, the last one at the age of seventy. The most recent and acclaimed translation appeared in a book by Haboush,

The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyŏng, 1996. Other translations include Grant and Kim, *Han Joong Nok*, and Choi-Wall, *Memoirs of a Korean Queen*.

25. See Chŏng, Pyŏng'uk, and Yi Ŏyŏng, *Kojŏn ūi pada*, 321.

26. See Kim-Renaud, *The Korean Alphabet*.

27. Expression used by Kongdan Oh when she commented on Häußler's paper during the 1998 GW-HMS Conference, "Sparks of Creativity: Women in the Korean Humanities."

28. See Lee, tr., Wagner with Shultz, *The New History of Korea*.

29. Lee, *The New History of Korea*, 332.

30. Commentary on Bonnie Oh's paper made by Yung-Hee Kim during the 1998 GW-HMS Conference, "Sparks of Creativity: Women in the Korean Humanities."

31. Commentary on Bonnie Oh's paper made by Kongdan Oh during the 1998 GW-HMS Conference, "Sparks of Creativity: Women in the Korean Humanities."

32. Hahn, *Encounter*.

33. For a discussion of *Encounter*, see Haboush, "In Search of HISTORY in Democratic Korea," 189–214.

34. Commentary on Yung-Hee Kim's presentation made by Don Baker during the 1998 GW-HMS Conference, "Sparks of Creativity: Women in the Korean Humanities."

35. Ch'oe In-ho, "Literature as Encounter and Discovery," 3.

36. Lee, *Introduction to The Traditional Culture and Society of Korea*, 11.

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