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Working Women in Chosŏn Korea:
An Exploration of Women's Economic Activities in a
Patriarchal Society

Michael J. Pettid

This paper examines the economic activities of women in Chosŏn Korea in an attempt to uncover the realities of their lives in terms of economic contribution and support of the well-being of their households. Despite the prevailing rhetoric of the "Confucianization" of late Chosŏn, it is the belief of this writer that such a situation probably did not apply strictly to rural society or in matters of the necessity of economic strength. Rather I will argue that the economic realities of late Chosŏn and farm life in general valued the labor and contributions of all members of a household, and such a situation would have been of benefit to women. The highest value of such a society was economic contribution, not necessarily adherence to Confucian standards. This study uses period records, aspects of folk practices, and other sources to demonstrate that much of what is assumed about Chosŏn Korea in terms of women and their lives needs to be reconsidered¹

Introduction

The preface to *Kyuhap ch'ongsŏ* [Encyclopedia of women's daily life] written by Yi Pinghŏgak (1759-1824) states that this work was intended for her daughters and daughters-in-law as a comprehensive guide to all that a woman should know or maintaining a healthy life and managing a household.² The work is indeed a road and all-encompassing companion to a woman's life in the late Chosŏn period and devotes chapters to cooking, sewing and weaving, medical remedies concerning childbirth and child rearing, and managing natural forces such as spirits and unwanted ghosts. The third chapter in this work is of most concern to this paper as it discusses the management of a rural household and goes into great depth explaining when to plant various crops, when to harvest, and how to

raise livestock. The book is not written from a spectator's viewpoint either: it is clearly designed to give women the knowledge they need to successfully raise crops, vegetables, and the livestock essential to their lives. Consider the following instructions for planting and harvesting scallions, "The day for planting is the same as that for garlic. When planting the roots, liberally spread either pig or chicken dung."³ Likewise, her instructions for planting kat (a type of leafy mustard) are equally detailed and aimed at a timely harvest and saving seed for the next year's crop:

When planted in the eighth month, it can be harvested for kimjang⁴ and if planted in the spring the seeds can be gathered. The seeds should be spread in the sunshine and take care that there is no dew at night or it will render the seeds useless. The fine black seeds are good for planting and the yellow seeds are for eating.⁵

These instructions leave us with the clear impression that women, even of the upper status groups, were expected to do a considerable amount of work in gardens and around the farm, even if just in the form of supervising slaves or servants.

Such a view is the starting point for this paper and my larger project. It is my contention that women were far from bystanders when it came to life in rural settings in Chosŏn Korea. Labor was far too precious of a commodity for half of the population to simply take leave. While women did not necessarily participate in tasks such as plowing fields, they most certainly contributed to the household economy in other means, such as planting, tending, and harvesting vegetables, tending livestock, and assisting with labor intensive tasks such as transplanting rice and weeding fields. Moreover, tasks such as weaving (*kilssam*) have long been regarded as a duty of women in Chosŏn and earlier periods.⁶ The economic importance of cloth—used as both a means to pay taxes and as a de facto currency in the Chosŏn period—clearly demonstrates economic participation by women. Yet, we are not commonly given the image of women as being a part of

³ Ibid., 257.

⁴ *Kimjang* is the time in the late fall when winter *kimch'i* is prepared.

⁵ *Kyuhap ch'ongsŏ*, 255.

⁶ Records of women working at various weaving tasks date back to at least the Three Kingdoms period (1st century BCE – 7th century CE) and are recorded in the *Samguk yusa* [三國遺事 Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms].

I would like to thank Professor Hyangsoon Yi of the University of Georgia for her insightful comments and close reading of this paper that greatly helped me in creating a better paper. Additionally, I presented a working version of this paper at the Korean Women's Institute at Ewha University in July 2010 and also received much helpful feedback and suggestions from the audience. Yi Pinghŏgak, *Kyuhap ch'ongsŏ* [閩閩叢書 Encyclopedia of women's daily life], Chŏng Yangwan, trans. & annot. (P'aju: Pojinjae, 2006), 2.

the economy of Chosŏn, but rather as being consigned to the women's quarters in relative isolation from the outside world. Such a view only serves to perpetuate myths of women's activities, or more accurately lack of activity, in Chosŏn and does not allow an understanding of the varied lives and important contributions made by women in past times.

Economic activities seem to be not so much dictated by social status but rather by economic need. Women of wealthy households would not participate in these activities, especially the more difficult tasks of transplanting rice plants or weeding fields, to the degree that women of poorer households would. Thus, I would argue that economic status was the prime determiner for a woman's participation in farm household labor rather than social status or adherence to Confucian dictates. It seems almost trivial to state that whatever the values of official society might have been, in farming households the most important value was a successful harvest and a surplus of goods. As I hope to demonstrate, a "good" Confucian woman could also be understood as one who contributed to the economic strength of a house.

One additional point that should be emphasized before moving forward is that I will attempt to examine these women's activities in the context of the late Chosŏn period. We cannot extend 21st century understandings of "autonomy" or "economic power" to the women of late Chosŏn. Rather, we must examine their lives with a full acknowledgement that the dominant social system of that time was Confucianism and women lived a major portion of their lives within that sphere. While we will see that women certainly were economically productive in this time, we cannot expect that this led them to act in a manner akin to women in the present age. Instead, these women acted within the confines of the Confucian social system and pursued autonomy also in that same social system.

Late Chosŏn: Economic Turmoil and Growth

The time from the early to the late Chosŏn was a period of great change in agrarian productivity. Farming in early Chosŏn was extensive, not intensive. Labor was at a premium and the use of slaves to farm fields was a necessity. Early in Chosŏn, the adoption of the *kwajŏn-pŏp* (rank land law) led to most lands being cultivated by small-scale landowners of freeborn status. Yet the taxes were onerous and these farmers gradually became impoverished and fell into tenant arrangements with wealthier landlords. Such a situation was worsened by relatively equal inheritance practices in the period that generally saw family lands

divided equally among all children.⁷ A mid-15th century entry in the dynastic record indicates that approximately 30% of commoner status farmers did not have their own land (*mujŏn chi min*).⁸ Smaller land holdings and a heavy tax burden made farming a difficult occupation and as a result, tenant farming became common by the mid-Chosŏn period.

Along with the fractionalization of lands and an increasing prevalence of tenant farming was an overall general lack of labor. There is little doubt that all members of a farming household participated in the operation of the farm, but even with that, the difficult tasks of plowing were made all the more arduous by the lack of oxen to pull the plows. A 1431 entry in the dynastic record informs us that there was approximately one ox for every ten households.⁹ Even with various measures enacted by the government—such as loaning government cattle (*kwanu*) to farmers—the dearth of cattle was a significant factor in the relatively low output for most small-scale farmers.¹⁰

However, a combination of the aftermath of two disastrous sets of invasions (Hideyoshi invasions of 1592-1597 and the Manchu invasions of 1628 and 1636) and a long lasting cold stage¹¹ caused agrarian output in the 17th century to become even poorer with famine commonplace. While the lower temperatures had caused earlier winters and thus shorter growing seasons that had negative effects on harvests, in truth it was the invasions that caused the most serious consequences. Some 70% of farm land was damaged or not under cultivation in the aftermath of the Manchu invasions and there was also a significant reduction in the population of peasants working the fields.¹² The amount of taxes collected

⁷ Yi Hoch'ŏl, *Chosŏn chŏn'gi nong'ŏp kyŏngje sa* [A history of the agrarian economy of early Chosŏn] (Seoul: Han'gilsa, 1986), 125.

⁸ *Sejo sillok* [世祖實錄 Veritable records of King Sejo], 11: 3a (1461-01-17).

⁹ *Sejong sillok* [世宗實錄 Veritable records of King Sejong], 54: 34a-34b (1431-12-13).

¹⁰ Yi Hoch'ŏl states that this was the most important factor in agrarian production in the early Chosŏn period. See, *Chosŏn chŏn'gi nong'ŏp kyŏngje sa*, 470.

¹¹ This cold age seems to have been present throughout Asia and somewhat overlaps with the Little Ice Age experienced in Western Europe and North America. For Chosŏn Korea it was the period from 1601-1800 when temperatures were generally colder and agricultural production suffered. See Woo-Seok Kong and David Watts, "A Unique Set of Climatic Data from Korea Dating from 50 BC, and Its Vegetational Implications," *Global Ecology and Biogeography Letters* (July 1992): 133-138.

¹² Pae Yŏngdong, *Noggyŏng saenghwal ūi munhwa ilkki* [Reading the culture of farming life] (Seoul: Minsogwŏn, 2002), 329.

by the government were reduced greatly and caused the government to explore methods to alleviate the tax burden on peasants while at the same time ensure compliance.

One response of the government was to largely eliminate the tribute tax system and enact the Uniform Land Tax (*taedong-pöp*) which simplified taxation and lowered the tax rate to about one percent of the harvest.¹³ This had a very positive effect on the peasants by lessening their tax burden as the system was enacted throughout the country slowly from the early 17th century over the next one hundred years.

There were also numerous technological advances in the early to mid-Chosön period such as the use of seedbeds (*mop'an*) to plant rice and subsequently transplanting (*iang-pöp*) the seedlings. The main savings was in labor, especially the onerous task of weeding. This benefit is seen in that before the widespread adoption of transplanting seedlings it would take the labor of 8.5 people to plant and weed one *mal* (*mal*) of rice seed by the direct planting method; using transplanting, the same amount of seed could be managed with the labor of three people.¹⁴ However, a prerequisite to this technique was to have a regular water supply so irrigation projects were necessary. From the early to late 15th century, building and reconstructing dams was a major focus of the government and by the reign of Yejong (1468-1469) some 769 were built throughout the country.¹⁵

Of note is that certain folk customs arose in the period subsequent to the adoption of the transplanting method. The *homi ssisi* festival, held in the seventh lunar month after the weeding of fields was completed, came to prominence in the 17th century after the transplanting of rice seedlings had become widespread. This was a communal festival that mirrored the operation of the communal *tur* labor pools that collectively weeded the rice paddies.¹⁶ The efficiency of the new

farming methods allowed a short respite from the difficulties of farming and a time to celebrate.

While the adoption of the transplanting method had obvious consequences on the labor required for producing rice, it also had the collateral effect of allowing double-cropping to become much more widespread.¹⁷ This in turn would allow farming families to become stronger economically and allow at least part of their output to be devoted to cash crops. It has been argued that one can realize an increase in agricultural output by either expanding the area under cultivation or by improving the productivity of existing farmland.¹⁸ For the farmers of Chosön, the answer was in increasing productivity through better techniques; particularly, it was the widespread adoption of double-cropping that allowed increased crop yields. By the 18th century, the practice of double-cropping was widespread and allowed the harvest of a winter crop of barley before planting the summer rice crop. At the same time, new specialized crops were developed that allowed some farmers to greatly increase their wealth. Cotton, tobacco and ginseng were chief among these crops and eventually became produced in such a surplus that they were exported to both China and Japan.¹⁹ Moreover, cotton cloth was an important form of currency in Chosön in light of a relatively weak metal currency.²⁰

What does all this have to do with women in farming households and their economic contributions? Everything. Labor was at a premium for rice, cotton, and even tobacco, which require intensive amounts of labor at peak moments of production. For rice this is seen in transplanting and weeding, for cotton in the harvest, and for tobacco in the drying and baling of the leaves. The labor of women was quite necessary to these processes and to other farming activities that occurred simultaneously.

¹³ See Ki-baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, Edward W. Wagner with Edward J. Shultz, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 224-225.

¹⁴ A *mal* is a unit of measure equal to approximately 18 liters. Yi Hönch'ang, *Han'guk kyöngjesa che 3 p'an* [The economic history of Korea, third edition] (Seoul: Pöbmunsä, 2006), 46-47.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Pae Yöngdong, "Chosön hugi homi ssisi hyöngsöng üi nong'öpsajök paegyöng" [The agricultural historical background of the formation of the weeding festival in late Chosön], *Nong'öpsa yön'gu* 2 (December 2003): 60.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Francesca Bray, *The Rice Economies: Technology and Development in Asian Societies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 27.

¹⁹ Ki-baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, 228.

²⁰ Yi Tae-Jin, *The Dynamics of Confucianism and Modernization in Korean History* (Ithaca: Cornell East Asia Series, 2007), 103.

Accounts of Economically Productive Women

An examination of literary and historic records of Chosŏn reveals a wealth of accounts about women and their economic and labor activities. We find that women participated in all manner of labor. While these are certainly not only accounts of upper status *yangban* women, the fact is that women contributed significantly to the economy of their family or household. We find some depictions that can be termed idyllic such as a whole genre of poem-songs that depict young women in cotton fields such as the following folk song:

O girl picking cotton in a long dense field,
I'll pick cotton and cotton ball for you,
So let's pledge a marriage bond.²¹

Another example is in the following *hansi* poem written by Sin Kwangsu (1712-1775):

A girl wearing a blue skirt comes out from the cotton field,
Seeing a traveler, she turns and stands by the road.
A white dog chases after a yellow dog,
Both running to their master.²²

While such images are quite idealized from a male view, they do indicate a seemingly common situation of women working in cotton fields, although I do suspect that not all women working in the cotton field were young. Other literary records also demonstrate that for women working in the various aspects of a farm, the work was nothing exceptional and simply part of life. In *Nongga wŏllyŏng ka* [Song of the farmer's calendar], written by Chŏng Hagyu (1786-1855) in the first half of the 19th century, we can see numerous images of women working on farms such as the following verse describing the seventh lunar month's activities:

The young girls are busy on one hand, but also excited.
The vegetables and fruits are commonplace and stored away [in their minds].

The pumpkins are sliced and dried, the cucumbers and eggplant are thinly sliced,
In the winter will these not be very precious side dishes?²³

Further, the ongoing nature of the various tasks around the farm for all is seen in the following line from the eighth lunar month:

Finally, our daughter-in-law is given a rest and can visit her natal home.²⁴

This reveals the both difficulty of farm life for women and their importance to the overall operation of a family farm: a woman could only hope to visit her natal home after the harvest was finished and her duties momentarily fulfilled.

Along with idyllic depictions of women picking cotton or simply managing their chores, we have somewhat harsher descriptions of women working fields or weeding. In the late Chosŏn period novel *K'ongjwi p'atchwi-jŏn* [*The tale of K'ongjwi and P'atchwi*] we can note that one of the tasks thrown upon K'ongjwi by her evil stepmother is to plow a stony field. In a lengthy folk song we also hear of a woman's complaints against her in-laws for having her weed a field with a wooden hoe on a hot day.²⁵ One account concerning Cheju Island reads, "Weeding and harvesting, cutting wood and cutting grass, all of these onerous tasks are done by women."²⁶ A passage from the aforementioned *Nongga wŏllyŏng ka* clearly reveals the disagreeableness of the height of weeding season for all:

For the young, the task is none other than weeding the paddies.
In the paddies, row after row in turn are weeded.
At the same time, in the cotton field others are toiling just as hard.
In spare moments the vegetable plot is also weeded so they can grow strong.
The grasses that have grown under the fence are also gone.

²¹ *Nongga wŏllyŏng ka*, seventh month, 138-139.

²² *Nongga wŏllyŏng ka*, eighth month, 146-147.

²³ "Wretched Married Life," Peter Lee ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Korean Poetry*, 271-276.

²⁴ Yu Ōnho, "Cheju o chŏllyŏ-jŏn" [濟州五節女傳 The tale of five chaste women on Cheju], Yi Kyŏngha, ed., *18 segi yŏsŏng saenghwalsa charyojip* [Collected materials concerning women's lives in the 18th century], vol. 2 (Seoul: Pogoso, 2010), 458. However, it should be mentioned that the writer is criticizing the customs of what he considers a barbaric group of people.

²¹ "Transplanting Song," Peter Lee ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Korean Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 268.

²² *Sŏkpuk-jip* [Literary collection of Sŏkpuk], *kwŏn* 5.

From the break of dawn they grasp the hoe and there is not a moment to rest until the sun's rays are long.

The ground is wet from streaming sweat, breathing is laborious and the pulse rapid.²⁷

Such images contrast sharply with the rather pastoral depictions of women gaily picking cotton and seem to demonstrate that farm work was difficult and toilsome for women as well as men.

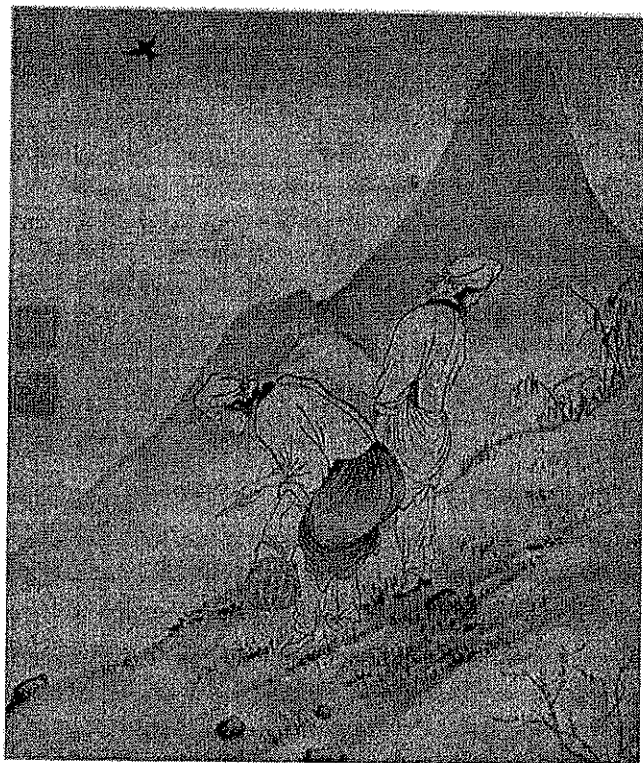


Fig. 1: Namul K'aegi [Gathering greens]; Yun Tusō (1668-1715)

In conjunction with the aforementioned *homi ssiti* festival in the seventh lunar month, a late 18th century record notes: "On the full moon of the seventh lunar month, the men and women of farming households prepare food and liquors and enjoy this together. This festival is called *Sesōyōn*."²⁸ If we build on

the idea that the *homi ssiti* festival was an occasion for the farmers who participated in the *ture* labor pools to come together and relax as a collective group as put forth by Pae Yōngdong, it is notable that this record specifically mentions that women partook in the festivities as well. Another 19th century poem-song helps us better envision how men and women worked together at peak seasons. Entitled *Wōlyō nongga* [Farmer's song over the months], this mid-19th century song describes the various tasks throughout the year. The following passage is from the fourth lunar month:

In every village, all men and women scurry about frantically,
From now, there is no time at all for staying home;
All day long, the twig gate is firmly closed in the shade.
Although grains are precious, much cotton needs to be planted as well.
This will be the cloth for weaving clothes; it is here (to be planted).
Corn, millet, mung beans, and sesame are planted at this time.
If we are without some it will not do as they are farmer's foods.
Pluck and shred the new oak leaves, and spread them about the fields,
Pluck and shred grass as well, mix it [with the oak leaves] and use this to fertilize the fields.²⁹

Further discussion of female participation in *ture* is no doubt needed. Kim T'aekkyu has written that male *ture* were concerned with farming or burial processions whereas female *ture* were concerned with the production of cloth.³⁰ Such a clean division of labor, however, seems a bit unlikely to this writer in view of the fact that women and men often shared other tasks related to the processing of grains, vegetables and crops such as cotton. Labor, in short, went where labor was needed. Distinctions based on gender were not particularly germane when pressing tasks such as weeding fields was needed. Indeed the old adage of men farm, women weave (*namgyōng yōjik*) seems far too simplistic and does not account for the dynamic nature of farm work that is a series of constantly shifting and transforming needs that must be managed on a timely basis. Paintings from

²⁹ Kim Hyōngsu, *Wōlyō nongga* [月餘農歌 Farmer's song over the months], fourth month, 233-234.

³⁰ *Han'guk nonggyōng sesi ūi yōn'gu* [A study of seasonal customs in Korean farm operation] (Seoul: Chōnnam taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 1985), 324.

²⁷ *Nongga wōlyōng ka*, sixth month, 120-123.

²⁸ U Hayōng, *Ch'ōnil-rok* [千一錄 Record of one-thousand days].

late Chosŏn clearly demonstrate that both men and women participated in farming and cloth-making activities.



Fig. 2: Ōmul changsu [Dried fish peddler]; Sin Yunbok (1758-?)

In truth, the shift from the ideal of women pursuing 'womanly' tasks (such as embroidery) was likely the result of larger shifts in the composition of Chosŏn society in the 18th century. The ranks of the *yangban* class had swelled considerably by this time creating a much broader upper status group than in early Chosŏn. Moreover, by the late Chosŏn period, economics became more significant as many families of the *yangban* upper status level had fallen on hard times and become part of the so-called fallen *yangban* (*mollak sajok*) group that now had to compete economically without the government stipends provided by officeholders. Moreover, other groups such as merchants and the *chung'in* (middle people) were able to accumulate wealth and were thus challenging the

notion that social status was of paramount importance. Of course, economic matters were not just the concern of the uppermost classes, but all social status groups. By the 18th century Chosŏn had moved away from a state based wholly on the concept of the traditional four classes of Confucianism³¹ and towards a model that not only acknowledged the desirability of wealth, but one that oftentimes pursued it with a vigor.

We can see this emphasis in economic matters in some of the literary works of late Chosŏn. One such example is "Poksŏn hwaŭm-ga" [Song of to the good comes fortune and to the evil comes calamity] written by a *yangban* woman as a didactic poem song for the proper management of the household by women. From the song we can deduce the following: the writer was raised in a wealthy home, she married a poor scholar, she managed the household skillfully, and in her old age she became quite wealthy and lived happily.³² The song, presumably written for her daughters, also describes a rural life and the tasks that needed to be accomplished. However, the song is mostly of overseeing help rather than a guide to actually carrying out tasks.³³

Accounts of women's lives recorded in memorials after their deaths seem to reinforce the notion that women were a major part of a family's economic well-being. The writings by their sons, fathers, and husbands demonstrate that upper status women did not simply remain in the inner quarters, but rather that they were active in the management and carrying out the chores of their household. Commonly praised are excellent management of the household, directing servants, and the preparation of food. Of course, this is somewhat expected given that these memorials were written to exalt the women by their relations.

³¹ This is not to state that Chosŏn was ever based on such an ideal entirely, but after the invasions and with the changes in Qing China, economic matters became more prominent. The four classes of Confucianism ranked the scholar first, followed by the farmer, artisan with the merchant at the bottom of the scale.

³² Yi Tongyŏn, "Chosŏn hugi yŏsŏng ch'isan kwa 'Poksŏn hwaŭm-ga'" [Household management by women and 'Poksŏn hwaŭm-ga' in the late Chosŏn period], *Han'guk kojŏn yŏsŏng munhak-hoe*, ed., *Han'guk kojŏn yŏsŏng munhak yŏn'gu* [A study of premodern Korean women's literature] 4 (2002), 288-289.

³³ The song is recorded in Yi Chŏngok, *Naebang kasa ūi hyang'yuja yŏn'gu* [A study of those who enjoy kasa of the women's quarters] (Seoul: Pagijŏng, 1999), 271-287.

Another area in which we can note overly laudatory accounts of women are the narratives that were created for didactic purposes by men for women. There is certainly no shortage of such works that were often written for female relations before marriage. Many stress not only Confucian behavioral guidelines, but also what we can call economic aspects of a woman's life such as weaving and the preparation of foodstuffs. One such example was written by Pak Yunwŏn (1734-1799) for his daughter-in-law, instructing her "...to be devoted to weaving, and that to dedicate oneself to preparing liquors and food are the duties of a woman."³⁴ While the tasks permitted to her are certainly within the house and the traditional women's quarter of Confucian society, the fact remains that these duties, particularly the weaving of cloth, are economic activities that added to the wealth of the household.

Even in such Confucian inspired accounts we can find the importance of a woman's economic participation in the household economy. Another account written by Yi Chae (1680-1746) as a record of the life achievements (*haengchang*) of his maternal uncle's wife (*k'ŭnsungmo*) tells that during a family crisis, "...they were so poor and suffered greatly, even to the extent that having three meals a day was difficult. However, Lady Yi did not even change her complexion with worry, but sewed everyday in order to manage the household economy."³⁵ Such accounts are common and demonstrate that even when heavily couched in Confucian propriety and male understandings of what exemplar women should do, economic matters did figure prominently.

The idea of a woman participating in society as a member of a merchant family is one that is easily verified throughout Korean history. Women who contributed to the handicraft industry of the Koryŏ dynasty were highly valued.³⁶ Such a situation continued in Chosŏn as revealed in numerous literary accounts and artistic depictions. There is a *yadam* (an unofficial history account) entitled

"Tŭk hyŏnbu pinsa sŏng kaŏp" [Of the wise daughter-in-law of the poor family who was successful in the family business] that tells of a woman who rose early every morning and sold *kamch'o* (a type of licorice root used in medicines and teas) and became wealthy.³⁷ She was called a *hyŏnbu* (wise daughter-in-law) for that reason by the people. Here we can see the close relationship between economic savvy and the Confucian concept of being a good daughter-in-law.

Another tale, although lacking in much of type of Confucian morality evidenced in the above account, is entitled "Chamnyŏ sŏl" [Tale of the diving woman]³⁸ and tells of the difficulties of a diving woman on Cheju Island who gathers abalone for her livelihood. The account was recorded by Kim Ch'unt'aek (1670-1717) while he was exiled on Cheju Island. This woman is not wealthy though and laments her difficult life and low station:

I am a commoner (*paeksŏng*), and abalone are delicious. As a commoner I must find and supply the king with delicious things; also, I should gather for the government officials as well, and for the people that they wish to treat. This is my duty.

Beyond literary accounts, we also have artistic depictions that concretely show women selling fish, salt, and liquor at the marketplace. Given that there are numerous paintings that show in part the many outside economic activities of women, it is easy to surmise that such situations were not unusual and simply part of life by the late Chosŏn period.³⁹

³⁴ Pak Yunwŏn, "P'aljo nyŏgye sŏjong chabu Yi-ssi ch'imbyŏng" [팔조녀게서종자부이씨침병 八條女誠書從子婦李氏寢屏 Eight admonishments for a daughter-in-law written on the folding screen in the sewing room], Sŏ Kyŏnghŭi, ed., *18 segi yŏsŏng saenghwalsa charyojip* [Collected materials concerning women's lives in the 18th century], vol. 6 (Seoul: Pogoso, 2010), 249.

³⁵ Yi Chae, "Paekkumo chŏnggyŏng puin Yŏnan Yi-ssi haengjang" [백구모정부인연안이씨행장 伯舅母貞敬夫人延安李氏行狀 A record of the life of maternal aunt Yŏnan Yi-ssi], Sŏ Kyŏnghŭi, ed., *18 segi yŏsŏng saenghwalsa charyojip*, 104.

³⁶ Kangwŏndo punyŏ pokchikwa, ed. *Kangwŏndo yŏsŏngsa* [A history of women in Kangwŏndo] (Ch'unch'ŏn: Kangwŏndo pokchigwa, 1996), 172.

³⁷ Recorded in *Ch'ŏnggu yadam* [청구야담 靑邱野談 Unofficial tales of the green hills], Kim Kyŏngjin ed. (Seoul: Kyohaksa, 1996), 1. 286-287.

³⁸ Recorded in Kim Nami, ed. *18 segi yŏsŏng saenghwalsa charyojip*, 7 [Collected materials concerning women's lives in the 18th century], vol. 7 (Soul: Pogoso, 2010), 418-421.

³⁹ Kim Sŏnghŭi, "Chosŏn sidae yŏsŏng ūi kanaeoe esŏui ilsang saenghwal: Chosŏn hugi hoehwa e na'an an yŏsŏng ūl chungsim ūro" [Women's indoor and outdoor everyday life in the late Chosŏn period as expressed in paintings] *Taehan kajŏnghakhoeji* [Journal of Korean family studies] 42 (2004): 19.



Fig. 3: Chari tchagi [Straw mat loom]; Kim Hongdo (1745 - ?)

Yet another narrative tells of a woman who guides and assists her husband in becoming wealthy and demonstrates that economic wherewithal was more important to some of the upper status group than Confucian virtues such as extending one's lineage,

After his parents passed away, a poor scholar (*sŏnbi*) from Sangju named Kim married at age twenty-six or seven. The first night the bride suggested to her groom the following: "For the next ten years let us amass a fortune. If we have a son now we will not be able to save up—let us sleep in separate rooms and not lay together, everyday eating but a bowl of porridge and working." The husband agreed to this and from that day they slept separately and began to gather money. The husband made straw shoes and the wife weaved. At night they dug seven or eight holes in the vegetable plot and stuffed each hole with tufts of straw and dog dung they found by the road. In the spring they planted barley in the plot and harvested some 100 sacks (*sŏm*) of barley. They also planted tobacco and in six or seven years their house became overflowing with grains and money. And they continued to have but a single bowl of porridge a day.

On the last night of the ninth year, the husband came to his wife and requested to sleep together. However, she told him yet another day remained and spurned him, telling him they would build a new house with a good room where they could enjoy the rapture of sleeping together. Thus they continued to sleep apart. They became very wealthy and built a new house and slept together, but by that time childbearing age had passed. With no other choice, they adopted an heir and after that their house flourished.⁴⁰

It is not such a far stretch to see economically productive women as being Confucian exemplars. The designation of the *kamch'o* peddler as a *hyŏnbu* reeks of Confucian propriety and is one that we might expect to be reserved for the woman who faithfully served her in-laws in sickness or after the death of her husband. Further, for the poor *yangban* couple the idea of becoming wealthy had more significance than concepts such as extending their lineage and thereby honoring their ancestors; furthermore, there is no mention of seeking to pass the civil service examination (*kwagŏ*) as well. Rather, wealth oftentimes equated status by late Chosŏn as reflected in the last narrative.

Clearly, notions of what a woman should or should not do varied quite significantly from the early Chosŏn to the late, and many times too much emphasis is put on the Confucian "transformation" of the Chosŏn period. While there is no doubt society did undergo some very significant changes in terms of the dominant worldview and a shift towards a much stricter patriarchal system over the 500 year Chosŏn dynasty, there are numerous markers that help us understand that this change was far from total and, moreover, never fully realized.⁴¹ In discussing the paintings of women in the late Chosŏn period, Kim Sŏnghŭi argues that to think that women of this period—women who, had fairly strong rights in the early Chosŏn period—were vanquished to the inner quarters

⁴⁰ Recorded in *Ch'ŏnggu yadam*, 2, 575-578.

⁴¹ The evidence that women retained many of their rights and exercised considerable autonomy at all levels of society is seen in various aspects such as the retention of the right to be householder, the failure to fully implement Chinese-style marriage customs in Chosŏn by the ruling elites, and even the tacit ability to remarry for some women. See Youngmin Kim and Michael J. Pettid, eds., *Women and Confucianism in Chosŏn Korea: New Perspectives* (Albany: SUNY Press, forthcoming, 2011).

entirely is an overly excessive reading of the influence of Confucianism, especially in the case of women outside the ruling class.⁴²

Moreover, the dynamic nature of Chosŏn society itself is at play here: there is little doubt that there was a shift in the construction of the economic system by late Chosŏn.⁴³ While it seems clear that the dominant Confucian ideology of the day was not necessarily advocating commercialization of the country, the ruling elites did desire a stable rural economy that would provide the economic basis for the country.⁴⁴ Women, of course, were a very significant part of this rural economy.

The Economics of Autonomy

One characteristic of the legal codes implemented in the Chosŏn dynasty was to attempt to economically disenfranchise women and thus create women who were many times at the mercy of those who held economic power. This was pursued through a variety of means such as reconstructing marriage living arrangements that moved daughters from their natal homes to that of their husband, legislating changes that made it more difficult for a woman to serve as a householder after the death of her husband, and changing laws concerning inheritance that favored sons over daughters, and son-in-laws over their bride. While all of these changes had many loopholes and were not truly realized in full, the cumulative effect was to curtail many economic rights that women had held in the Koryŏ and early Chosŏn dynasties. Moreover, restrictions on remarriage for upper status women also caused them to be tied to their husband's family in perpetuity.

However, in rural communities I believe such limitations were significantly lessened and for those outside of the ranks of *yangban* were oftentimes

meaningless. Confucian notions were the "official" ideology of the upper status groups and ruling elites of Chosŏn (at most times). Yet there were many spaces where such ideals did not prevail nor trespass, including areas of home, religious, and economic life. In matters of economics, especially in rural homes where the productive activities of all were needed, it is difficult to see Confucian morality being the prime determiner of relationships and hierarchies. Women, such as Yi Pinghŏgak who wrote the accounts on farming practices for her daughters and daughters-in-law at the opening of this paper, clearly saw themselves as being an integral part of the household economy. While I am not arguing for necessarily equal relations within the household, I am of the opinion that economic roles were understood in rural households and such economic participation by women did afford them significant rights and autonomy within the household. Moreover, as the benefits of being economically successful became more pronounced in late Chosŏn, even upper status group families could see the wisdom of pursuing wealth rather than decorum. Women were a very important part of this drive and also undoubtedly used this for areas that they held very strong domain over.

Glossary

Chamnyŏ sŏl	潛女設
Chŏng Hagyu	丁學游
chung'in	中人
haengchang	行狀
hansi	漢詩
hami ssisi	호미씨이
hyŏnbu	賢婦
jang-pŏp	이양법
jamch'o	甘草
gilssam	길쌈
Kim Ch'unt'aek	金春澤
Kongwi p'atchwi-jŏn	공위팔취전
ŭnsungmo	큰속모
kwagŏ	科擧
kwajŏn-pŏp	科田法
kwamu	官牛
Kyuhap ch'ongsŏ	閨閣叢書
mal	
molak sajok	沒落士族

⁴² Kim Sŏnghŭi, "Chosŏn sidae yŏsŏng ŭi kanaeoe esŏui ilsang saenghwal," 19-20.

⁴³ However, I am not claiming this was in any such way "early modernization" or the roots of a rudimentary capitalist system developing within Chosŏn. I just see that there is a significant change in the importance of and emphasis on wealth from early to late Chosŏn.

⁴⁴ Yi Tae-jin, *The Dynamics of Confucianism and Modernization in Korean History*, 117.

mop'an 모판
 mujŏn chi min 無田之民
 namgyŏng yŏjik 男耕女織
 Nongga wŏllyŏng ka 農家月令歌
 paeksŏng 百姓
 Pak Yunwŏn 朴胤源
 Poksŏn hwaŭm-ga 福善禍淫歌
 Sesŏyŏn 洗鋤宴
 sŏm 섬
 sŏnbi 선비
 taedong pŏp 大同法
 Tŭk hyŏnbu pinsa sŏng kaŏp 得賢婦貧士成家業
 ture 두레
 Wŏlyŏ nongga 月餘農歌
 yadam 野談
 yangban 兩班
 Yi Chae 李緯
 Yi Pinghŏgak 憑虛閣 李氏

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National Language Beyond Nation-States: Vernacular Literary Language in Yi Kwang-su

Sangjin Park

The influence of Chinese and Japanese language and literature on Korea has been significant. The influence of Western notions of the modern nation-state in East Asia has also been significant. All of these influences collided in Korea. Through translation, the foreign is made comprehensible, but it is also changed and may be misunderstood. Through the process of translation, the influence of one language upon another is often underestimated, misappropriated, or hidden. The best literature attempts to reveal and transcend these hidden or unconscious dimensions. The importance of understanding the process by which such underlying influences impact culture, especially as forms of resistance and as asserting one’s unique identity, may also, unfortunately, be underappreciated. Languages compete when put into the service of nation building. Writers such as Yi Kwang-su (1892-1950) tried to negotiate, resist, and make sense of this new and highly competitive landscape. The collision between multiple national languages may cause an exclusive nationalism. However, if we can hypothesize that the resistance of a national language is not directed to the (language of) outside but rather to all kinds of homogenized (language) space, we can consider that a national language applies the power of resistance to that homogenized space which is based on nationalism. This kind of literary resistance, which can also be named self-negation, is primarily related to the capacity to allow the Other to exist within oneself. This is the process in which the particularity formed through its resistance to a universality forms another universality: namely, the process of appropriating universalities. Literary language is generated and flourishes in the process of such de-homogenization. Literature, by means of deconstructing the oppression of a universality, receives the Other as a force for reconstructing what yet may become another universality, thus building up a field where multiple universalities are contested. In Yi Kwang-su’s bilingual way of writing, I will try to trace an example of the literature that built up such fields beyond both ideas of “Korean” and “modern.”

The Problem of Yi Kwang-su

One may say that the fundamental elements of a nation’s literature are inevitably the concepts of the nation-state, national language, and nation; a national literature should be established on national sovereignty, written and read with a national language, and by the people of a nation. However, this kind of definition based on a modern value system might look somewhat narrow in