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**Queen Min of Korea: Coming to Power\***

**Tatiana M. Simbirtseva**

Queen Min was the wife of the 26th King of the Yi Dynasty, Kojong (高宗). During the twenty years, from 1874 till 1895, she was the most powerful person in the country, and still we can call her a mysterious figure of the late Yi period. Usually chronicles told about queens only in connection with such official occasions as marriages, the bearing of royal children.

Little was known of her mother, nor how she spent her childhood, nor the cause of her parents’ early deaths. Her real name, some novels say, was ‘Cha Young’ (紫英), “Purple Beauty,” but there are no facts to confirm this. Before marriage she was simply called ‘daughter of Min Chi Rok (閔致祿),’ and after she became queen, she was called ‘Her Palace Majesty (중정마마) after her death she was called by a posthumous name, ‘Myongsong hwanhu (明成皇 后).’

“A politician who deceived Russia, China, and Japan.” “the woman who planned to eject the Japanese from the Korean peninsula by making an alliance with Russia,”1 “the most politically influental woman ever produced by the T. Dynasty,”2 these are only a few of the opinions of her abroad. Even her enemy, Japanese Count Inoue, who played a big role in her assassination, said, “Her Majesty has few equals among her countrymen for shrewdness and sagacity. In the art of conciliating her enemies and winning the confidence of her servants she has no equal.”3

In Korea the opinion of Queen Min varied in different periods. In the 1950s many intellectuals, for example historian Choe Byong Ik (최병익), considered her “an embodiment of all the evils of the decaying dynasty.” One could not find the Queen in the list of the most important personalities of Korean history. Until recently people avoided even speaking about her, as “she had dealt too much with foreigners and ruined the country”4 Only in the last two or three years has the attitude toward Queen Min’s activities suddenly [page 42] changed. This is undoubtedly connected with the policy of globalization pro-claimed by Kim, Young Sam’s government and the improvement in relations with Russia. Queen Min became a main character in a big musical. Many films praising her as an exemplary Mother of the Country are shown on Korean TV, and newspapers have been publishing novels about her. She is becoming a new banner of Korean nationalism, a means of propaganda, and thus her image and real role in Korean history are becoming even more vague. The purpose of this article is to introduce some facts about the Queen and the author’s personal opinion of this woman, who was simultaneously a very typical and a very unusual representative of Korean traditional society.

Queen Min’s visage is hidden from history. The supposed photographs of the Queen deliver only the image of an enigma. One of them was published in Hulbert’s *The Passing of Korea* in 1905, entitled ‘A palace woman in full regalia’; the second, in the book *The Spirit of Independence* by the first Korean president, Syngman Rhee, written in 1906 and published in San Fransisco in 1920. There are, however, many objections to these alleged portraits of the Queen. For example, as Nah, Hong Ju writes in his book Critics of Assassination of Queen Min,”5 “even now it is difficult to imagine an intelligent woman having pictures taken while placing her feet apart. It is even more difficult to imagine that a Korean queen, Mother of the Country, who traditionally followed all the rules of the court and exercised Confucian manners to the greatest extent, would have had a picture taken in such a posture.’6 Faces of kings and queens were always concealed from the public. Nobody was allowed to see their majesties’ images, and not a single artist was considered excellent enough to depict their dignity and perfection.

Koreans got to know about photographs for the first time in 1876 when tangsang (official with the rank above upper senior third grade) Kim, Gee Sue (김기수) went to Japan with an official mission after the conclusion of the Kanghwa Treaty.7 Those, who support the idea that the portrait in Syngman Rhee’s book is that of Queen Min, insist that it was taken in 1882, during the Imo revolt. That is why, they claim, the Queen is seen in a common woman’s dress,8 but traditions usually begin to fade not from above but from the bottom. It is difficult to imagine that in 1882,the Korean queen only six years after photographs had become known in the country and desperately seeking for a shelter, surrounded with spies who were sent to kill her, would have found time to pose for pictures in such unsuitable dress.

Sunoda Fusako, relying on Korean historian Synn, Gee Sue (신기수), writes that there was one more photograph of Queen Min made by a Japanese who had his studio in the royal palace and that this photograph was used by [page 43] the assassins to identify the Queen.9 Eyewitnesses to the drama, which took place in Kyongbok Palace on October 8th, 1895, such as a Russian architect Seredin-Sabatin, made it clear, however, that several court ladies were killed on that early morning only because the assassins did not know exactly what the Queen did look like.10 Besides, the Queen was strongly anti-Japanese, the main reason for her death, and certainly would not have used the services of a Japanese photographer.

Sometimes Koreans say that all the photographs of the Queen were destroyed by the Japanese, but it seems that there were no photographs of her at all. Lilias Underwood, an American missionary, who came to Korea in 1888,was appointed the Queen’s doctor and enjoyed her full trust and intimate friendship, left very sincere and vivid descriptions of the Queen:

“I wish I could give the public a true picture of the queen as she appeared at her best, but this would be impossible, even had she permitted a photograph to be taken, for her charming play of expression while in conversation, the character and intellect which were then revealed, were only half seen when the face was in repose. She wore her hair like all Korean ladies, parted in the center, drawn tightly and very smoothly away from the face and knotted rather low at the back of the head. A small ornament... was worn on the top of the head fastened by a narrow black band. Her majesty seemed to care little for ornaments, and wore very few. No Korean women wear earrings, and the queen was no exception, nor have I ever seen her wear a necklace, a brooch, or a bracelet. She must have had many rings, but I never saw her wear more than one or two of European manufacture... According to Korean custom, she carried a number of filigree gold ornaments decorated with long silk tassels fastened at her side. So simple, so perfectly refined were all her tastes in dress, it is difficult to think of her as belonging to a nation called half civilized... Slightly pale and quite thin, with somewhat sharp features and brilliant piercing eyes, she did not strike me at first sight as being beautiful, but no one could help reading force, intellect and strength of character in that face...”11

It seeems that Mrs. Underwood’s description is the most reliable portrait of the Queen available. Very specific Korean traditions concerning women leave no doubt about it. Here is an abstract from Korea and Her Neighbours by British traveller and writer Isabella Bishop, who visited Korea several times betweem 1890 and 1896.

“Korean women are very rigidly secluded, perhaps more absolutely so than the women of any other nation. In the capital a very curious arrangement prevailed. About eight o’clock the great bell tolled a signal for men to retire into their houses, and for women to come out and amuse themselves... The rule [page 44] which clears the streets of men occasionaly lapses, and then some incident occurs which causes it to be rigorously reinforced. So it was at the time of my arrival, and the pitch dark streets presented the singular spectacle of being tenanted solely by bodies of women with servants carrying their lanterns... At twelve the bell again boomed, women retired, and men were at liberty to go abroad. A lady of high position told me that she had never seen the streets of Seoul by daylight”12

The Queen, being at the top of the social pyramid, had to endure such restrictions to the extreme degree. For example, Korean doctors, always men, who treated the queen, “felt” her pulse by using a cord, one end of which was fastened about her wrist, and the other, which was carried into the next room, was held in the doctor’s fingers. The royal tongue was extended through a slit in a screen for the physician’s observation.13 The above mentioned examples prove that it would be somewhat naive to believe in the existance of photographs of Queen Min. The era of the photograph came to the royal palace after her death, when the conservatives, whom she had led, lost their influence, reforms increased and traditions hundreds of years old began to retreat under the pressure of the temptations of Western civilization.

The Queen belonged to a noble family. There is only one Min clan in Korea in contrast to Kims, Parks, or Yis. The clan originated in Kyongi Province in Yoju-gun (驪州). Queen Min was born there on the 25th of September, 1851,and lost both her parents when she was eight. There had been two other queens from this family: the first, the wife of the third king of the Yi Dynasty, Taejong (太宗 1401-1418), and the second the wife of the 19th king, Sukjong (肅宗 1675-1720). The clan had boasted many highly positioned bureaucrats in its illustrious past, but by the time Queen Min was born, the clan found itself battling poverty, and was completely without influence. During more uneventful eras such an impotent clan would never have bred a queen, but the political situation in which Korea found itself then, provided the very specific catalyst for the Min clan’s being raised to royal stature once more.

Power had been almost universally seized in the beginning of the 19th century by the tyrannical Andong Kims, a clan which had provided several queens. The social stagnation that resulted was a breeding ground for unrest. Corruption and embezzlement from the treasury were taken to extreme levels, and the inevitable exploitation that resulted, reached staggering proportions. One rebellion after another was accompanied by natural disasters. Indeed it was one of the most gloomy periods in the country’s history. [page 45]

Only the goal of preserving influence existed for the Andong Kims. Their fierce campaign to dominate the royal house had led to a situation in which almost all the representatives of the royal family fled from Seoul. When the Yi royal family produced intelligent and appropriate candidates for appointment as kings, they were either accused of treason and executed or sent into exile, so when king Honjong (憲宗 1835-1849) died leaving no son, no one acceptable could be found to succeed to the throne. After a long search the future king, Cholchong (哲宗 1850-1863), was found on Kanghwa Island where his family had fled to hide from oppression.

When envoys arrived on Kanghwa Island to seek out the heir, they found the remaining clan barely surviving in wretched poverty. Cholchong was proclaimed King amidst degradation and poverty. Though from the start of the dynasty Korean kings had given top priority to the education of their sons, the new King could not read a single word on the notice delivering congratulations to him on his elevation to the royal throne. Although Cholchong ruled the country for thirteen years, until his last days he had not yet learned how to move with dignity or to wear royal clothes, so that even in the most luxurious robes he looked like a fisherman. For the Andong Kims, Cholchong was an excellent choice. They married him to one of their daughters. His illiteracy made him manipulatable and vulnerable to their control.

All this has been stated to set the stage for the appearance of a man who also could never have made his entrance in a more stable period: namely Yi, Ha Ung (李昰應), afterwards known in Korean history as the Taewongun (大院君), or Great Prince. Amidst the decay and despoilment of his clan that surrounded and shaped his early life, he rose to become one of the most powerful despots of the Korean state, and was known for his severe rule (1864-1874). Yi Ha Ung’s grandfather was a younger brother of King Chongjo(正祖 1777-1800), so his blood connections with the royal family were without doubt. It is quite difficult to imagine that during the 1850s this future tyrant spent his time sitting in cheap drinking-houses for the lower class, singing songs with them, and not deeming it a low thing to attend a peasant’s marriage ceremony, and to sing at the request of the guests, because he had a good voice. He was licentious in nis affairs with women, infamous for scandalous behaviour. To intensify his image as a hapless ne’er-do-well, he frequently visited houses of Kim clan members, appearing as a beggar asking for hand-outs. Strange and unprecedented was the behaviour of this representative of the royal family, considering the Confucian directive hallowing the importance of one’s public image. It is suspected that all this was done for protection, lest the Andong Kims ever imagine that behind the face of a drunken clown was concealed an [page 46] ambitious tiger.

The Taewongun was well aware of who would be the one to choose the heir-apparent upon the death of King Cholchong. Her name was Dowager Queen Cho (趙大王大妃) from the Pung-yang (풍양) Cho clan.

Various ranks of queens resided within the palace. Kings generally lived short lives. Of the twenty-seven kings of the Yi Dynasty only twelve lived to see their 40s and only five lived to 60,so their mothers and wives remained as dowagers and members of the court. Old Queen Cho was the wife of the heir to the throne, a son of the 23rd king, Sunjo (純祖 1801-1834),who died before he became king. Being the oldest, it was her right to appoint the heir in case Cholchong died. As the Andong Kims had reduced her own clan to a forgotten status, she dreamed of revenge, and the Taewongun realized it. He cleverly approached the two young nephews of this woman and revealed his plan to make his second son, Lee Myong Bok (李命福), king. He assured them that above all he desired to see an end to the rule of the Andong Kims who had disgraced the ruling dynasty. It happened that even his very reputation for philandering made a poor impression on the court ladies who certainly had heard about him.

These were the first strains of the overture heard as King Kojong entered the arena of the royal Korean court. The symphony of events that followed were the sudden death in 1863 of King Cholchong, who left no heir, and the decision taken at the subsequent meeting, called by old Queen Cho, of all the top administrators of the court. The death of the king came so suddenly, and old Cho acted so quickly, that the Andong Kims could not offer a mutually satisfactory choice. Yi Myong Bok was proclaimed the new king. He was twelve years old.

The story runs that when the messengers from the palace arrived to anounce to Yi Myong Bok his elevation to the royal throne, they found him playing in the backyard with some very common children. The dilapidation that surrounded them was personified by a fence full of holes, through which every neighbour gazed when the procession entered the confines of the garden, but these holes did not discourage Yi Ha Ung, who met them as though he had already become a high and dignified personage. From this point on his elevation to great power came quickly.

Though he was small of stature, he spoke well and convincingly, and pos-sessed a strong will, sharp wit, and an excellent education. He proceeded as if to the manor born, and somehow his haughtiness and authoritarian demeanor was never questioned. This charisma of his had its effect on anyone with [page 47] whom he came into contact. As father of the king, he was granted the honorary title of the Taewongun. Although old Cho was officially the regent (she was regent util 1866), she entrusted all the power to the Taewongun and he faithfully fulfilled his promises to her. Her relatives were promoted while she herself was surrounded with great respect. The Taewongun immediately instituted reforms, the purpose of which was to revive the glory of the first kings of the dynasty. The Andong Kims were either executed or sent into exile. To underline the prestige of royal power, the Taewongun began to rebuild Kyongbok Palace, which had lain in ruins since the Japanese invasion at the end of the 16th century. It was an enormous burden on the state treasury, so the regent began to sell positions to get the required money. When all the existing positions had been sold, he invented different taxes, which were ruinous for the people. Thus with favouritism, corruption, and the elimination of enemies increasing, Korean court history began to find its level once again in the government of the Taewongun, and the stage was finally set for the entrance of Queen Min.

When King Kojong reached the age of fifteen, his father decided it was time for him to be married. He was diligent in finding a queen without close relatives, who would harbour political ambitions, yet with noble lineage, in order to justify his choice to the court and the people. Candidates were rejected one by one, until the wife of the Taewongun proposed a bride from her own clan. His wife’s description of the girl was quite persuasive: orphaned, beautiful of face, healthy in body, level of education no less than of the most noble in the country. The first meeting of the proposed bride with the Taewongun was easily arranged as she lived in the neighborhood in Anguk-dong.

This meeting finished successfully, and in 1866 on the 20th of March by the lunar calendar, a wedding took place in the Injongjon Pavilion (인정전) of Changdok Palace (창덕궁). In a coronation ceremony the girl became the Korean queen. It is known that the wig which was usually worn by royal brides at weddings was so heavy that a tall court lady was specially assigned to support it from the back. This ceremony had hardly finished, when another three-day ceremony for the reverencing of ancestors started We can only imagine how difficult it would have been for a fifteen year old girl having neither father nor brothers for support to endure such ceremonies without breathing the slightest complaint. We can suppose that from an early age she was determined to steel herself with iron patience in the face of all problems, and overcome all obstacles with dignity.

Her efforts, however, did not touch the heart of the young king. To use a [page 48] Korean expression, for more than five years she ‘guarded an empty room(빈 방을 지켰습니다).’15 That means that the king paid no attention to her as a woman. In this also the young queen demonstrated the poised quietness and ability to behave that she evidenced during the first tiresome ceremonies. She learned from experienced court ladies, carefully acquiring the behaviour necessary to a queen, and spent all her time practicing her new skills without the smallest deviation. She became expert at obeying every restriction of the court and never showing anyone distress or anxiety over anything. She was respectful to her in-laws, kind to the servants, and eventually won the praise of all.

Her free time was devoted entirely to reading. These were very special books usually read by high-ranking officials: *Springs and Autumns* (春秋) and *Notes of a Chwa on Springs and Autumns* (춘추좌씨전). These were the chronicles of the No (魯) Kingdom in China from the 8th century BC through the 3rd century AD. Of course, she did not read such dry and tedious books simply to combat loneliness. Many observers suppose that through these first years Queen Min was watching her husband, studying his character, and trying to find a way in. She discovered that while Kojong was king, he did not possess any real power, but that his father was the real ruler, and that his son was afraid of him.

He had not a single friend or counselor. The officials around him did only what they were told. The queen soon came to the conclusion that her husband needed a partner, a confidant. She was sure that the day would come when she herself could become this confidant and her husband’s love would be secured. There were many women around the king, but she could do nothing about it. She knew that there were seven ‘evils’ (*ch’ilgo chiak*), or seven conditions for expelling a wife according to Confucian teachings. Divorce was socially accepted if the wife was guilty of one of the folowing: disobeying parents-in-law, bearing no son, committing adultery, jealousy, carrying a hereditary disease, garrulousness, and larceny.16

Another Queen Min, the wife of the 19th king, invoked a powerful curse on an heir who was born to one of the palace concubines. For this she was in exile for six years. The wife of the ninth king was sent to a far island for jealousy, and there poisoned, so Queen Min saw to it that her behaviour betrayed not a trace of jealousy. Very early on, she understood the palace to be a battlefield, and launching her desperate yet meticulous campaign, she mused upon different ways of becoming victorious in the struggle.

Soon she received a shattering blow. One of the palace women bore the King’s first son. The blow was even more bitter as that woman was not even of noble origin. There were many noble women in the palace. They were [page 49] called *naemyong-bu* (內命婦) and were divided into seven ranks. Women who were not noble were called nae-in (內人). These came to the palace early in childhood, and did the washing, cleaning, and sewing. After thirty five years of service, they received the title of fifth rank *sanggun* (상궁). If a woman, who was not noble, received special attention from the king, she could receive the title of special *sangung* (특별상궁). The woman who bore king Kojong’s first son was a special *sangung* named Lee, Youngbodan (the name of the pavilion where she lived), and her son was named Wanhwagun (完和君).17

Nobody knows what the feelings of the Queen were upon receiving such devastating news, but it is known that the next day she sent a very expensive gift to the new mother, as if showing that ‘joy for the king is joy for the queen.’ Then during some official ceremony, with a happy face she congratulated the king. No doubt, he was surprised by such unusual behaviour. It is difficult to be sure, but Sunoda presumes that this was the starting point in the new relationship of the royal couple, and at the same time the beginning of the Queen’s feud with the Taewongun, which lasted to the end of their lives and influenced many events and the policy of the country.18 The Taewongun was very glad that a grandson had been born and frequented the palace to see the boy. The Queen saw this as a direct insult to her. Also, the Taewongun possessed enough power to make this illegal son a legal heir. The new baby was a danger for Queen Min. The thoughts that were born in her head at that moment became reality ten years later when Wanhwagun suddenly died in unknown circumstances.

The Queen waited patiently for the time of her triumph, and at last it came. In 1871 she became pregnant. She was already 20, and it was her sixth year in the palace. She remembered too well that the women not able to bear a son were expelled from the palace and she prayed to the Spirit of the Mountains and invited many shamans to the palace. During her pregnancy the Taewongun sent her a large amount of wild ginseng. The roots were considered the best medicine and were so expensive that if somebody found one, he could support his family for a year on the price it would bring. The Queen may have hated her father-in-law, but she ate the roots with great pleasure every day, hoping to asssure a healthy birth.

On the 9th of November she delivered a boy, but he had a gastric problem. The Taewongun and the Queen had opposing opinions as to how the child should be treated. While they were arguing, the child died. Her despair knew no bounds. In her heart she blamed the Taewongun for the death of her son, claiming that he had purposely sent her too much ginseng. In order to ‘quiet the spirit’ of her child, Queen Min ordered many pompous ceremonies [page 50] to be held in the palace. She invited several hundred shamans, who were to sing his spirit to the other world for ten days straight. Then there was a very elaborate chesa ceremony to give ‘self-assurance’ to the spirit. Thousands of Buddist monks of Kumgansan and the Chirisan Mountains were ordered to pray for several days without cease. All this became an extreme burden on the exhausted treasury. At the same time, the Queen ordered the shamans to discover who was guilty in the death of the child. They brought back the verdict that it was malicious activity on the part of Chang sangung and Lee sangung, the mother of that first son, Wanhwagun. Lee managed to escape execution, but the other woman was executed after horrific tortures. That was the price she paid for the king’s attention.

The system of secondary wives had always existed in the court. And nobody was surprised if some of the court ladies or servants bore a child. But Queen Min did not think it was to be tolerated. From 1877 when a Chang bore a third son to Kojong, Uihwagun (의화군). For all the 18 years the Queen reigned in the palace, the king did not father a single offspring from the ladies of the court. Two years after Queen Min’s death Lady Om bore a son for him, and a lady called Poknyondan bore the final offspring, princess Tokhye (덕혜).

When Kojong became twenty, he began to long for the power he should have as king, but he feared confrontation with his father, and was insecure about his ability to lead the country. The strong-willed Queen played a central role in the take-over of power. She managed to unite all the Min clan. By 1874 some thirty representatives of the clan were established in strategic positions of power. At first their anti-Taewongun movement could not be seen from the outside. Simply, noblemen who had lived in poverty, or even the Taewongun’s close relatives, neglected by the regent, began to receive signs of affection from the Queen. They were becoming the stone that she was preparing to throw at her father-in-law. For example, the elder brother of the regent Lee Ch’oe Ung (李最應),who had been living for many years without any favours from the court, was easily swayed by the honours he was being suddenly offered by the Queen. He became one of the most faithful servants of Her Majesty, and when Kojong came to power was appointed prime-minister. The Taewongun’s elder son, Lee Jae Myon (李載暴), called block-head by his father was also successfully cajoled by the Min clan. Later, when the Taewongun fell from power, Lee Jae Myon was appointed to watch his father and to inform the court about his behaviour. Thus he became a spy in his own family.

Many prominent Confucian scholars were also attracted to the Queen’s [page 51] party. During the Choson period there was a law according to which anybody could address the king with a letter. On the 25th of October, 1873,one of the leaders of the leading philisophical trend - wijong choksa - Ch’oe Ik Hyon (崔益絃) sent a letter to Kojong and accused the Taewongun of lack of virtue, which caused great trouble for the people. The King was very pleased with the letter and appointed Ch’oe to a high position. The Taewongun wanted to punish Ch’oe and ordered the ministers of the right and of the left to write letters, denouncing his activity, but on the 3rd of November Ch’oe wrote one more letter: “The Taewongun is the father of the King, and it is the law to respect him, but he can’t rule the country forever. The King has grown up and must take his throne himself.” The Taewongun sent secret killers to Ch’oe, but Kojong immediately sent the philosopher into exile on Chejudo and ordered many people to guard him. It was done to save Ch’oe from the regent’s anger.

On the 5th of November Kojong issued a proclamation stating that he had taken the reins into his own hands. The same day the entrance to the palace used by the Taewongun was bricked over. Who actually gave this order is not recorded, but could it not have been done though the influence of the Queen?

The Taewongun had underestimated his daughter-in-law’s cunning, as she had seemed to him primitive and incapable of master minding intrigues. In the end, there was nothing for him to do but retire to his house in Anguk-dong in Seoul. Only his son from a secondary wife, Lee Jae Son (李載先), remained near him. Several days after his fall there was a big fire in Kyongbok Palace as a result of an explosion in the sleeping palace of the Queen. One of the servants of the Taewongun was arrested, but as concrete evidence was lacking the matter was drooped. Queen Min was sure that her father-in-law was at the bottom of the incident, but she could not pursue the matter, as in Confucian society the father of one’s husband is not subject to any form or judgement. Some days later a beautiful box was brought to the house of Min, Sung Ho (민승호),the closest confidante and relative of the Queen. When the box was opened, an explosion occurred and Min, his mother and a child were killed on the spot. Then there was a big fire in the house of Lee Ch’oe Ung, elder brother of the Taewongun and a devoted servant of the Queen. Again a servant of the former regent was arrested, and again the Taewongun himself remained safe. These attempts on the lives of the Queen, her family members, and closest aids were the first in numerous plots which threatened her during all her life in power. Following the traditional policy of Eastern cunning, the queen always managed to escape. There were ups and downs in her life, but she invariably succeeded in restoring her influence. On the 8th of February, 1874, she bore a son, Prince Chok, who eventually became the last king of the Yi [page 52] Dynasty, Sunjong (純宗 1907-1910). This event secured her position. As the mother of the heir and the head of the conservative party she began to enjoy the utmost power. She reigned from behind the curtain, and everybody knew that although orders were pronounced by the King, they were formulated by the Queen, but Kojong was not a mere puppet in her hands.

Historians suppose that relations between the king and his wife were not always ideal. For example, he supported the so-called ‘party for reforms (개화파), led by Kim, Ok Kyun (김옥균), and the conservatives led by the Queen (수구파),were against them. It was surely with the support of Kojong, who was said to be deeply interested in new and unknown things, that the reformists were promoted to nigh positions, but their plot turned out to be not only unsuccessful, it also threatened the throne ana increased the foreign presence, so the position of the Queen and her party proved to be right. Her consistency was a counterbalance to Kojong’s political experiments. Their differences in opinions could not greatly undermine the close relations of the royal couple.

Some modern authors speculate on whether the Queen loved her husband. Sunoda supposes that she really loved him with a kind of motherly Jove and found new strength for political intrigues in his weakness. Maybe it was so, but we should not forget that Queen Min lived in another world and belonged to a civilization where the concept of love in its modern understanding did not exist. Love, as we understand it now, appears only when people acquire freedom of choice. Confucianism never gave this freedom to women. Love was not included in the codex of behaviour for virtuous wives and queens, and the mentality of that time never exceeded that frame. The Queen was not an exception; the idea of love never occupied her mind. She shared with her husband all the difficulties and often took the responsibility for decisions concerning state matters. She fiercely and bravely struggled for preserving his absolute power and securing the same power for her son. Kojong undoubtedly was deeply attached to his energetic wife. It was clearly proved when three days after the assassination of the Queen, the Taewongun and his supporters, still cherishing hatred and revenge in their hearts, made a draft of a royal edict which deposed her from the rank of Queen and reduced her to the level of the lowest class, and asked the king to sign it. Being very much afraid for his own life, Kojong had already signed many edicts by then, but here he decisively refused and said that he would rather have his hands cut off.19 This was the most romantic expression of his devotion to his wife which can be found in historical documents.

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**NOTES**

**\* Text of speech given at the R.A.S. meeting on May 8, 1996**

1. Sunoda Fusako, Assassination of Queen Min, 1988, Choson Ilbo Ch’ulp’ansa [쓰노다 후사코 1988(민비암살), 조선일보 출산사], p. 32

2. The Women of Korea, A History from Ancient Times to 1945, Ewha Womans University Press, Seoul, Korea, 1976, p. 116

3. Bishop, Isabella Bird, Korea and Her Neighbours, p. 274

4. This statement is based on the author’s personal experience.

5. Assassination of Queen Min is a book by a Japanese writer Sunoda Fusako was published at the end of 80s and quickly became a best-seller in Japan

6. Na, Hong Ju, Critics of Assassination of Queen Min p. 16

7. Deuchler, Martina, Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys: The Opening of Korea. 1875-1885, University of Washington Press, 1977, p. 73

8. Queen Min barely escaped death during the Imo revolt and fled from the palace in a servant’s dress.

9. (민비 암살),p. 300

10. The author is grateful to Dr. Underwood who kindly presented her an English translation of the Seredin-Sabatin evidence, written several days after the assassination of the Queen.

11. Underwood, Lilias Horton, Fifteen Years among the Top-Knots, p. 89-90

12. Bishop, Isabella Bird, Korea and Her Neighbours, p. 47

13. Underwood L.H., Fifteen Years among the Top-Knots, p. 25

14. For detailed information see Choe Ching Young, The Rule of Taewon’gun, 1864-1873. Restoration in Yi Korea, Harvard East Asian Monographs 45, Cambridge, Mass.

15. Minbi Amsal (The Assassination of Queen Min), p. 59

16. The Woman of Korea, pp. 52-53

17. Minbi Amsal p. 71

18. Minbi Amsal p. 71

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