A Good Wife and the Making of History: Re-reading Madam Cho's Diary in 17th Century Korea

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Thomson Hall 317

Born into an elite family, married to a man of high office and scholarship, and performing her wifely duties expected by the society of that time, Madam Cho (1574-1645) was an exemplary yet also an ordinary wife in the eyes of her peers. Appearing as a diligent, obedient, and faithful wife in her husband's epitaph, Madam Cho was just one of many good wives commemorated this way over the many centuries of the Choson dynasty (1392-1910). Yet such a short written description in her husband's epitaph, however laudatory, hardly enables us to imagine the richness of Madam Cho's individual story or how she actually felt. It would be difficult for us to approach the real world she lived through had she not taken up her brush and kept a diary that includes the tumultuous war periods when armies rushed to the Choson capital under the leadership of Hong Taiji (1592-1643), who proclaimed himself emperor of a new Qing dynasty in the winter of 1636. With her husband accompanying two Korean princes to China as refugees, Madam Cho felt the impact of the war quite strongly, although most other Koreans also suffered the trauma of the invasion. In this paper, departing from existing studies on Madam Cho's diary to access a typical elite woman's domestic duties in early seventeenth-century Korea, I revisit this non-canonical source to examine how Madam Cho constituted herself as a historical actor at such a historical moment, interweaving her emotions and the exigencies of wartime as well as the postwar periods by performing the seemingly ordinary act of writing a few words each day in her diary.

Jungwon Kim is Assistant Professor of East Asian Languages and Culture at Columbia University. She specializes in gender, family, and legal history of Choson Korea (1392-1910). Her broad research interests include women's writings, ritual and expression of emotion, crime and punishment, and the use of legal archives. Her recent publications include Wrongful Death: Selected Inquest Records from Nineteenth Century Korea (with Sun Joo Kim at Harvard, University of Washington Press, 2014); "You Must Avenge On My Behalf: Widow Chastity and Honor in Nineteenth-Century Korea," Gender and History (Vol. 26.1, 2014); "Deeper than the Death: Chaste Suicide, Emotions, and the Politics of Honour in Nineteenth-Century Korea," in Carolyn Strange, Christopher Forth, and Robert Cribb eds., Honour, Violence, and Emotions in History (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). She received her Ph.D. from Harvard University, taught at the University of
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