

# Exploring Joseon history through the royal lives and political roles of Joseon queens: The case of the Yeoheung Min clan

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## **Abstract:**

Confucianism not only played a dominant role throughout the 500-year history of the Joseon dynasty but also became deeply embedded in various cultural, political, and social aspects of the kingdom since its establishment. Compared to the preceding Goryeo dynasty, Confucianism gained dominance during the gradual decline of Buddhism due to the “Respect Confucianism, Suppress Buddhism” policy executed by the Joseon ruling classes. However, over its long history, Joseon Confucianism itself underwent significant changes, which were reflected chronologically through the political and social transformations of the period. In this article, the author seeks to explore the royal life and political roles of Joseon queens from the Yeoheung Min clan (present-day Yeoju city, Gyeonggi-do) to shed light on the development and enforcement of Confucianism. Furthermore, this study proposes an approach to understanding Joseon history through the analysis of several influential individuals, consequently contributing to an empirical method of teaching and researching Korean political history.

**Keywords:** Joseon queens, political history of Joseon, Yeoheung Min clan.

**Classification numbers:** 5.1, 8.1, 9.3

## **1. Theoretical framework of the research**

### **1.1. Remapping of the historical periods of the Joseon dynasty**

In terms of ideology, Confucianism dominated the 500 years of Joseon history (1392-1897) and chronologically became the cultural, political, and social driving force in numerous aspects of the dynasty since its founding. Compared to the previous Goryeo (918-1392) dynasty, Confucianism became hegemonic alongside the gradual decline of Buddhism due to the policy known as “Respect Confucianism, Suppress Buddhism”, implemented by the *Sadaebu* (the nobility). However, throughout its long history, Joseon Confucianism itself also experienced various changes, which were chronologically reflected in the political and social transformations of the dynasty. This

poses a significant challenge for researchers of Joseon history - especially for foreign scholars whose approach requires more than just an understanding of the Korean language. It can be argued that a comprehensive grasp of Confucianism as the orthodox ideology of the dynasty is equally essential. Therefore, developing a concise and coherent approach is crucial for teaching, studying, and researching Joseon history abroad. One possible approach to studying Joseon political history is to examine specific periods in conjunction with the dominant ideologies of those times, as well as to analyse historical figures who represent the contemporary political trends or ideologies.

In the article “The roles of *Cheonghak* upon the relations between the Joseon dynasty and the Qing Empire via the analysis of Joseon *Wangjo Sillok*”,

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the authors proposed an approach to political and diplomatic transformation in Korea within the context of defined regional political milestones. This approach aligns Korean history with the Chinese political landscape, particularly during the transition of power between the Ming and Qing dynasties (known as *myeongcheong gyoje* in Korean historical texts), from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Based on this view, Joseon history is divided into three phases: Early, Middle, and Late Periods [1]. In other words, this interpretation identifies China as the central regional powerhouse around which Korean political history must be structured. Although this argument is not entirely incorrect, it limits the interpretation of Joseon history to a one-sided perspective, thereby overlooking the uniqueness of Joseon's socio-political characteristics throughout its five centuries of existence. In this light, Joseon is often placed as a planetary entity orbiting around the Chinese empires.

This study explores the political situation of Joseon based on a conventional historical division that is familiar to Korean historians, which divides the 500 years of Joseon history into smaller periods determined by internal political factors driven by the central ruling factions [2]. As such, the political history of Joseon can be examined through major periods such as: Early Joseon, Joseon of the *Sahwa* (literary purge) period, the *Dangjaeng* (factionalism) period, Joseon of the *Sedo Jeongchi* (Sedo factionalism) period, Joseon in its closing stage under the reign of Grand Prince Heungseondaewongun and Joseon during the period of *Kaehwa* (enlightenment) period. This division reflects the political trends of Confucian scholars and the central nobility throughout the Joseon period and helps clarify the role of influential individuals in the course of Joseon's during Joseon political transformations.

### 1.2. Research methodology

To ensure the completion of a study with such a broad scope as the Joseon dynasty of Korea, the author employs the method of analysing and

synthesising previously published in-depth research which also includes related studies conducted by the author. During the process of synthesising materials, the author selectively identifies case samples that are considered representative figures, highlighting the political and social characteristics of each examined period. Through this approach, the study aims to fulfil its objective of outlining the transformations of Confucian ideology within the political system of Joseon.

In addition to the method of analysing and synthesising, commonly used in historical research, this study adopts a microhistorical approach focusing on individuals. Microhistory, as a methodological framework - developed by pioneering Italian researchers such as Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi, etc., - seeks to illuminate macro-level historical structures by analysing the experiences, decisions, and agency of individuals whose lives intersected with significant political or ideological shifts. Within this framework, this research is designed to focus on the lives of specific individuals - namely, the three queens of the Yeoheung Min clan - as a lens through which broader socio-political transformations of the Joseon dynasty can be discussed.

### 2. The position of the Min clan in the Yeoheung region of Joseon

This research focuses on analysing the lives of the Joseon queens from the Min clan of the Yeoheung region (Yeoju city, Gyeonggi province) to illustrate the political and historical processes of the Joseon dynasty. According to historical data collected by descendants of the Min clan who remain in Korea, the Min clan of the Yeoheung region produced many influential ministers and high-ranking officials in the central government of the Goryeo dynasty, beginning with the reign of King Gongmin (the 31<sup>st</sup> king of Goryeo) [3]. Many related records affirm the social status of the Min clan within Goryeo's political framework - particularly during the late Goryeo period, when up to 80% of court officials were said to have originated from the Min clan of Yeoheung [4].

The Min clan has also been regarded by some scholars as having originated from Chinese ancestors who migrated to the Korean Peninsula during the Goryeo period [5]. Despite this theory, the genealogy website of present-day Min clan descendants asserts that their forebears were indigenous, with roots deeply established in the Yeoheung region since ancient times. However, several historical facts indicate that it was not until the reign of the 31<sup>st</sup> Goryeo king that the Min clan's political status became prominent within the kingdom - an interesting development in itself. King Gongmin's reign marked the final phase of the Goryeo dynasty, according to the Database of the National Institute of Korean History. He was particularly noted for his reform efforts of executing reform policies to minimise the influence of China's Yuan dynasty. One of those efforts was to weaken the influence of pro-Yuan political factions within the Goryeo court, aiming to restore the legitimate kingship of Goryeo royalties. King Gongmin's sudden death while pursuing that policy was believed to be related to those whose long-term interests and benefits were tied to the Yuan dynasty (China) [6].

The Yeoheung Min clan was recognised as one of the three most prestigious families throughout the Goryeo period. However, when Joseon was founded by Lee Seonggye and his supporters - *Sadaebu* (renovative noble class), the clan began to align itself with the newly established ruling power. As one of the three major clans during the Goryeo period, it has been shown that the Yeoheung Min clan maintained a strong presence as a "powerful clan" within the central government, and its political prestige was presumably tied to the influence of the Yuan dynasty on the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, during the century - long period of Yuan "intervention", the *Gwonmunsejok* (powerful noble clans) at the central governmental level of the dynasty were often linked by blood to the Yuan ruling nobility. Therefore, it is not historically unreasonable to speculate that the Min clan may have had ancestral origins in China.

Throughout its five-hundred-year history, Joseon witnessed the enthronement of a total of twenty-six kings [7], with the number of legitimate queens who held authority over the royal harem exceeding that of the kings themselves. Among the many prestigious families that produced queens, the Kim clan was the most prominent; however, the Min clan also distinguished itself, with three women of their own who were endowed with the highest status in the kingdom: Queen Wongyeong of King Taejong (the first legitimate wife of the third king of Joseon); queen Inhyeon of king Sukjong (the second legitimate wife of the nineteenth king of Joseon); and queen Myeongseong of King Gojong (the legitimate wife of the twenty-sixth king of Joseon).

These three queens appeared on the political stage of Joseon during critical periods of the Joseon Dynasty's history. Queen Wongyeong was adept at managing internal court affairs and the royal harem. She was also well known for assisting her husband in consolidating power, planning to help her husband win the throne over rival princes [2]. Queen Inhyeon became King Sukjong's second legitimate wife amid the whirlwind of fierce struggle for power of the two dominant political factions - the Westerners and the Southerners [2]. Unlike her predecessors from the Min clan, Queen Myeongseong entered the palace at a time when her family's influence was already in decline. Possessing intelligence and a strategic mind befitting a young lady from a prestigious family, Queen Myeongseong ultimately captivated her husband's heart, becoming a powerful politician that assisted the king to regain his rule [2].

### **3. Lives of the three queens of the Yeoheung Min clan and their influences on Joseon's political situations**

#### **3.1. Queen Wongyeong - the legitimate wife of King Taejong**

In the early stage of the Joseon dynasty, owing to the lingering influence of Goryeo customs, the Confucian concept of womanhood was not yet fully implemented. Presumably, this was because many

of the kingdom's founding contributors - those who were born and died alongside Lee Seonggye - had mothers who were believed to have remarried more than once. Therefore, even though the *sadaebu* (the highest nobility of the central government) announced regulations restricting women's remarriage, many still divorced and remarried multiple times. In addition, due to the prevailing cultural and social practices inherited from the previous dynasty, men and women in early Joseon society still retained equal rights in matters of property inheritance. With little differentiation between the genders, women of early Joseon were also permitted to perform as ceremonial masters during ancestral rituals [2].

Queen Wongyeong, consort of King Taejong, made significant contributions in supporting her husband, known as Prince Lee Bangseok prior to his enthronement, in his quest for the throne. Lee Bangseok is the son of Lady Han, who was married to Lee Seonggye as his first legitimate wife before he became the king of Joseon. When Joseon was founded, Lee Bangseok had already been an adult. He accompanied his father regardless of life and death, and he gained numerous achievements in the battle with Lee Seonggye - his father. In addition, compared to other princes, he was also keen on studying and better at letters [8]. Meanwhile, as a noble lady born into one of the most prestigious clans since the Goryeo period, Queen Wongyeong possessed exceptional skill in managing internal affairs and offering strategic counsel. After her husband successfully seized supreme power, she aspired to share that authority with him as a means of strengthening the political standing of the Yeoheung Min clan. However, King Taejong, whose iron rule overcame repeated political challenges - including the oppression of his stepmother, Queen Kang (the legitimate wife of Lee Seonggye), and the elimination of rival princes through two princely rebellions in 1398 and 1400 Lee Bangseok - ultimately refused to share his authority with his wife's family. Toward the end of her life, Queen Wongyeong witnessed her family being persecuted by King Taejong, with many of her relatives

exiled to their homeland. To prevent power abuse by his wife's family, King Taejong did not hesitate to get married to many other concubines, many of whom were daughters of high-ranking mandarins in the court, estranging his legitimate wife [9]. Furthermore, the Joseon policy of "Respect Confucianism, Suppress Buddhism" was also actively promoted during King Taejong's reign, as he recognised that the political interference of Buddhism had persisted since the previous dynasty [9].

Queen Wongyeong, the first queen of the Min clan, though born in the noble class of the kingdom, soon became entrapped within the newly established Confucian ideological system, in which women's rights were severely limited and dependent on their husbands' families. She can be regarded as a historical "victim" who had to be sacrificed for the solid establishment of the dynasty's political foundation. Despite all the bitterness she endured, her greatest consolation after death was perhaps the honour that her son was selected to be the fourth King of the dynasty: Sejong!

### **3.2. Queen Inhyeon - the second legitimate wife of King Sukjong**

Sukjong, the nineteenth king of the Joseon dynasty, reigned from 1674 to 1720. Joseon under Sukjong's reign experienced fierce conflicts between political factions within the central government. Sukjong's reign fell within the period of *Tangjaeng* (party struggle) in Korean history [10]. Amongst dominant factions, the Southerners and the Westerners were known to be two of the most influential forces capable of challenging even the King's authority. Sukjong's first legitimate wife was Queen Ingyeong of the Kim clan, whose family stood with the Western faction. After Queen Ingyeong's death from illness in her twenties, the Westerners immediately arranged for Queen Inhyeon of the Yeoheung Min clan to enter the palace, in order to consolidate their faction's political standing [2].

According to the *Veritable Records of The Joseon Dynasty*, Queen Inhyeon was widely adored by both courtiers and the public for her virtue and

dignity. However, when she entered the palace, King Sukjong's affection was directed toward a woman of lower birth - Royal Noble Consort Huibin of the Jang clan. Nominated by the Westerners, Queen Inhyeon was not favoured by Sukjong and could not bear him any children. When Huibin of the Jang clan gave birth to Prince Yoon, King Sukjong's affection for her grew stronger. Huibin's mother was even invited to the palace in a jade palanquin - an honour traditionally reserved for the mothers of Queens from noble families. The fact that Huibin's mother, once a servant to the previous King's Queen, was treated with such honour agitated severe opposition from the Westerners [2].

Under the pretext that the Westerners were disrespectful toward the "mother-in-law" he favoured, King Sukjong expressed his distrust of the Western faction and began appointing key positions to members of the Southerners. With the decline of the Western faction, Queen Inhyeon was left without political support. As a result, King Sukjong, together with officials of the Southern faction, managed to depose the Queen and exile her to a remote palace, where she lived the life of a commoner. Within the royal court, royal noble consort Huibin was elevated to the position of Queen, and her son was declared crown prince. However, over time, due to her commoner background and misconduct, royal noble consort Huibin gradually fell out of the King's favour. Moreover, many senior officials of the Southern faction - her key political supporters - were found guilty of corruption and abuse of power. Disillusioned and nostalgic for his lawful wife of the Min clan, King Sukjong eventually reinstated Queen Inhyeon after five to six years of living in poverty outside the royal palace. At the same time, Royal Noble Consort Huibin was downgraded her previous status in the harem in parallel with the fact that the Southern faction was no longer trusted by the King as before [2]. Although restored to her position as the head of the royal King's harem, Queen Inhyeon never fully recovered from the suffering and illness endured during her years of exile. She passed away at the age of thirty-five [9].

Queen Inhyeon's life is a tragic depiction of a noble woman in the mid-period of the Joseon dynasty. She was honoured with the highest position in the kingdom, later deposed and forced to live in poverty outside the palace, and eventually restored to her status. Despite being loved by both the people and the courtiers for her noble virtues, she remained powerless to determine her own fate, becoming a mere "pawn" in the political struggles of others. Compared to Queen Wongyeong of King Taejong, Queen Inhyeon was completely constrained within the Confucian framework of womanhood, and her life rose and fell in accordance with the political tides of the kingdom.

### **3.3. Queen Myeongseong - the legitimate wife of King Gojong**

Myeongseong, consort of King Gojong, can be regarded as the last queen of the Joseon dynasty. In Korean history, the reigns of three Kings - Sunjo, Hyeonjong, and Cheoljong - during the nineteenth century are commonly referred to as the period of *sedo jeongchi* "worldly politics". Lasting for roughly sixty years, this era was marked by intense competition for power between the King's maternal families, particularly between the Jo clan of the Pungyang region and the Kim clan of the Andong region. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that all three Kings were enthroned at a very young age [11].

When Cheoljong, the twenty-fifth king of Joseon, died without an heir, the Queen Dowager of the Pungyang Jo clan immediately nominated a successor from one of the royal members. To prevent the power expansion of the An Dong Kim clan, the Queen Dowager decided to choose a distant prince to adopt as her son, thereby proclaiming him the new successor [12].

Similar to the previous three kings, Gojong was enthroned at a very young age. Initially, the Queen Dowager of the Pungyang Jo clan served as regent. However, after some time, she entrusted the regency to Gojong's biological father, Grand Prince Heungson Daewongun [12]. Holding authority as the King's father, Grand Prince Heungseon Daewongun ruled

the kingdom over his son for approximately ten years, during which he succeeded in restoring royal power to the Lee monarchy. In order to prolong his control and prevent the re-emergence of *sedo jeongchi* - the political interference of the King's in-laws - Grand Prince Heungseon Daewongun harboured hidden motives when selecting a legitimate wife for King Gojong. His own wife belonged to the Min clan, and through her arrangement, a young lady from the same clan was chosen as Gojong's Queen. Although Queen Myeongseong hailed from a distinguished lineage, her family had long since declined in influence, as there were no high-ranking officials from her clan holding significant power in the central government who could threaten the Daewongun's authority [12].

As Queen Myeongseong entered the palace to assume the highest position in the kingdom, King Gojong at that time was deeply fond of Lady Lee. Although she was not initially loved by the King, Queen Myeongseong remained dedicated to fulfilling her duties as the head of the royal harem. Through her diligence and noble character, she gradually won King Gojong's affection. With the political support of the Min clan, she achieved her greatest accomplishment - overthrowing the regency of her father-in-law, Grand Prince Heungseon Daewongun - thereby restoring King Gojong's authority over the throne. Together, she and her husband then paved the way to actively implement reforms which tried to terminate Heungson Daewongun's isolationist policy [12].

Compared to the above two aforementioned Queens, Myeongseong appeared to be the only noblewoman who could exercise agency over both her marital life and her political destiny. Furthermore, she became a symbol of anti-Japanese resistance for the Korean people in the late nineteenth century - a stance that ultimately led to her tragic death at the hands of Japanese assassins during the *Eulmi Sageon* (Assassination of Empress Myeongseong) at Gyeongbok Palace on 8 October 1895 [13].

With hidden deliberately selected a daughter-in-law from a prestigious but deteriorating clan, Grand Prince Heungseon Daewongun was not able to speculate that a humble and fragile young lady who was living with her mother in Yeoheung would grow into a formidable political opponent. Above all, Heungson Daewongun did not expect her level of intelligence raised in a prestigious family, Queen Myeongseong could demonstrate her talent for internal and external governance in the context of foreign affairs during a period of growing foreign intervention in late nineteenth-century Korea.

#### 4. Conclusions

The Queens of the Min clan from the Yeoheung region were born into one of the most prestigious clans throughout the Goryeo period. The Min clan occupied a wide range of land with prime terrain, which had historically been seen as an exchange "hub" between the three kingdoms since the era of the Three Kingdoms. Blessed with fertile soil, the land under the Min clan's governance was also recorded as one of the major rice-producing areas throughout the Goryeo to Joseon periods. With such economic and political advantages from their homeland, the position of being a Queen was rightfully suitable for those who came from this clan. However, such family background or economic status of the clan was not the only factor that ensured the "charm" of the Queens of the Min clan within the flow of Joseon or Korean history. The attraction of the three Queens of the Yeoheung Min clan lies in the historical significance of the times in which they lived.

Queen Wongyeong of Joseon Taejong became the first "victim" of the dynasty's political ideology transition despite her struggles with such changes. On the other hand, Queen Inhyeon of Joseon Sukjong was the epitome of the opposite of a Joseon noblewoman's life. Although coming from a prominent family, in the context where women had long been closely limited by the Confucian concepts of women, Queen Inhyeon had to accept that her fate could be decided

by political factions in the mid-Joseon period. Queen Myeongseong of Gojong was born in the late period of Joseon when foreign influences and reformist ideas were being widely introduced into her kingdom along with the gradual weakening of Confucian ideas related to women's roles. She did not surrender to the ideological framework imposed on noble women, yet put her tireless efforts into assisting her husband, by which she became a powerful politician against the Japanese aggression.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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