

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Gendering Modernity: Korean Women Seen through the Early Missionary Gaze (1880s–1910s)

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The early Protestant mission archives on Korea, especially those archives concerning the lives of native Korean women during a time of great social upheaval, are among the most eclectic sources in the modern world collected by a single entity. The allure of a new Western religion attracted many Korean women to Christian programs in churches, schools, and hospitals. The church built the first modern schools for girls and trained them to become Bible women, nurses, and teachers. Due to their widely acknowledged religious and Orientalist biases, however, the missionary documents have been used mostly to research topics including mission history and Western perceptions of non-European societies. Nevertheless, the mission archives offer intimate and unique accounts of native Koreans and local history, especially during the period between the 1880s and 1910s. This essay introduces a set of photographic images of Korean women collected and produced over three decades by the Protestant missions, mostly the Methodist Episcopal Church. Some of these images were widely circulated, while others are relatively unknown. Together, these photos tell a visual story of the vicissitudes of life of some Korean women. The images were captured during these women's encounters with modernity and the West at the turn of the twentieth century, a time when Korean women experienced major challenges and changes.

In the traditional society of Chosŏn, women were largely identified as either unmarried girls (*kyeojip*) or married women (*punye*). Under the strict Confucian laws of *naeoi* (inside and outside), women were restricted to the inner quarters of houses and forced to limit their mobility. Even small thatched houses often had a little wall creating two gendered interior spaces.¹ Truly, the centuries-old traditional gender ideology—manifested in such Confucian tenets as *samjong*

chido (the three subordinations of a woman), *namnye yubyŏl* (the distinction between men and women), and *namjon yŏbi* (men revered, women despised)—posed great obstacles to the women’s ability to embrace the modern changes. From the late nineteenth century on, the identity of Korean women evolved from a traditional one based on marriage to a gendered one based on being women (*nyŏsŏng*), who gradually gained new status in society, reflected in their employment as students, nurses, writers, artists, educators, and so on.

Photographing women was not an easy task due to their segregation from public space and strict gender norms, especially in the middle and upper classes. Many foreigners expressed frustration when attempting to observe the lives of these women and complained about the difficulty of procuring images of them. In 1884, Percival Lowell, one of the first foreigners to photograph Korea, said, “It was entirely a question of sex that had stood in our way. In Korea there is, so far as I could judge from numerous instances, no superstitious fear of being photographed such as exists in China, where with the image it is believed is taken away a part of the personality” (Lowell 1885, 313–314).

Despite the challenges to accessing the lives of Korean women, the photographs from this period still manage to display a good variety of female life. The subjects of the images range from low-class women with exposed breasts, women in *jang-ot* (long jackets designed to cover the face and body during trips outdoors), helpless female entertainers (*kisaeng*), and female shamans (*mudang*), to women engaged in various forms of domestic work, genteel upper-class women, girls on school field days and at graduation ceremonies, and women in modern professional jobs. The scope of this compilation suggests that a fair number of Korean women did not shun photographers or the opportunities to experience modernization; instead, they confronted and embraced photographic opportunities, returning the gaze of the camera with their own. Reading through these images, we are still left with important questions: How did these women break out of their inner quarters to reach the outside world? How did they encounter modernity?

Amid the dearth of historical resources on the lives of Korean women, the mission photo archives, with their astounding collections, stand out. The missionary community in Korea functioned as a Korean branch of the well-organized metropolitan missionary societies in the United States, which dedicated generous financial support and mission personnel (evangelical, medical, and educational) to Korea. In return, the missionaries in Korea sent records of their

interactions with the locals to the metropolitan center, including private letters, reports, photographs, drawings, and objects. The regional and main branches of the mission centers published some of these materials in journals, pamphlets, newsletters, and books for their targeted readership of fellow believers, supporters, and patrons. Lantern-slide lectures were another platform in which many photographic images were used, as shown in some of the photos showcased here.

What is most fascinating and useful about the mission photo archive is the fact that it offers relatively reliable historical sources with unusually detailed information. Sitters often reappear in multiple images over an extended period of time. Subjects' names and institutional affiliations, and the dates and descriptions of the occasions for which they were photographed, are generally recorded on or with the photograph, and the photographs are occasionally annotated with more detailed information. For example, a Korean woman named Grace Lee appears in multiple photographs in the archives. Lee was one of the first students to graduate from the Nurse Training School of Pogŭ yŏgwan (the Salvation of All Women Hospital), the first women's hospital built by a missionary, Mary F. Scranton, in Korea. Lee's images provide a sweeping view of the transformation of her life, from a nursing trainee to a senior nurse in uniform, and from a single woman facing a tough life to a married Christian with a professional job. During her training, she met and married Hayŏng Lee, a Korean pastor, on the oath of her continued professional commitment even after marriage, which was radical to the point of being almost unheard of. In her wedding picture, taken on January 30, 1907, the bride proudly wears her nursing uniform instead of ceremonial traditional Korean attire or a Western dress, showing how attached Lee was to her new life as a nurse and how her professional nursing uniform embodied her new identity not only as a professional but also as the subjective human being she had become.

There were many Grace Lees who received their own personal names for the first time through Christianization. Most Korean girls were given informal nicknames, such as Kannani (간난이, meaning "baby"), Ippŭni (이쁜이, "pretty one"), or even Sŏpsŏpi (섭섭이), an onomatopoeic expression of regret that suggests her parents would have preferred a son. Once girls got married, these nicknames changed to names that reflected a geographical location or their husbands' names; for example, a lady of Ansŏng (안성댁), a woman from the Ansŏng area, or a wife of somebody, at best. Many Korean women adopted Western names after conversion as

a sign of their rebirth as a modern, Christian being. This act also reflected their growing awareness as individuals and their subjectivity as women. The 1909 Civil Register Law required for the first time that all Koreans, including girls, register their individualized names for public records. Before that time, many Korean women had kept their Christian names as their personal (real) names that could at least be used in their social lives, such as in religious or educational programs.²

Kyōngsōn Lee is another woman who appears several times in missionary archives. Lee became a Christian in 1909, trained as a junior nurse at the Nurse Training School of Pogū yōgwan, and became a capped nurse on May 28, 1914. The visual epiphany represented in the two photos of Lee in this photo essay is remarkable. It displays a two-step transformation of her persona: the first step involves a premodern heathen woman becoming a Christian; the second step involves a still premodern native convert becoming a trained professional nurse. Together, the photos provide compelling evidence that the modern vocational training facilitated by Christian religion and education helped to successfully modernize Korean women.

By 1900, taking photos had become a ceremonial and ritual part of most events in churches and was gradually penetrating Korean society as a whole. Many women, like Grace Lee and Kyōngsōn Lee, had taken radical steps in exchanging their places at the lowest levels of society for places at the vanguard of Korea's first modern social reformation, as leading embodiments of modern woman. The twenty-two photographs selected for this photo essay are presented in thematic order: stereotyped Korean women, Korean women in modern schooling, Korean women in Christian teaching, and Korean women entering professional nursing. The visualized life of these women epitomizes the emergence of a new gender identity under the activities of the church. Protestantism developed by actively adapting to native cultural norms, especially gender norms, throughout the twentieth century in Korea; however, regardless of these women's awareness of the revolutionary aspects of their choices, the photos in these early archives make clear that Christianity was a source of "disrupting power" to centuries-old gender norms in Korea.

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Notes

- 1 The Confucian village of Hahoe Village in Andong has a small one-building house that still maintains a dividing wall that stretches out in a tiny front yard. The wall functions to block the view of female activities from the men's section.
- 2 The Civil Register Law was implemented by the Resident-General's Office of Japan in March 1909. A supplement to the 1896 Family Census, it tightened up control over individual members of families especially for the purpose of stricter taxation.

References

Lowell, Percival. 1885. *Chosön, the Land of Morning Calm; A Sketch of Korea*. Boston: Ticknor and Company.