

**Kim Hyön-ju, Pak Mu-yöng, Yi Yönsuk,
and Hǒ Nam-rin eds. *Women in Two
Chosöns: Body, Language, and Mentality.*
Seoul: Hyeon, 2016, 435 pages.**

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Joseon can mean many things, at least to Koreans. For example, “Two Chosöns” in the book’s title can be easily read as alluding to the two regimes existing side by side on the Korean Peninsula, given that one of them proudly uses the name of the last royal dynasty in the official name of the country and refers to its people as “people of Chosön.” Yet, to the majority of people living in the other half of the peninsula, “Chosön” is neither a word necessarily used for self-identification as a citizen of a nation, nor something they feel deeply connected to in everyday life. Although South Koreans are very familiar with the word “Chosön,” more often than not it evokes emotional distance of a sort we have when thinking of something of the past. South Koreans have no doubts about being the descendants of Chosön; however, they cannot but feel the existence of a certain rupture between themselves and Chosön people.

That is even more so when it comes to the women of Chosön. Sometimes portrayed as volitional subjects determined to overcome their own fate and harsh realities of the time, sometimes described as pathetic victims of repressive Confucian society, they tend to give us a kind of relief in realizing that we are lucky to live in another world, whenever we encounter them in historical books

or fictional stories.

In this context, the recent boom of academic interest in the subject of emergence of the “modern girl,” or the formation of modern female subject during the colonial period, may reinforce the perception that women in Joseon needed to undergo a drastic existential transformation to become contemporary Korean women—because, and therefore, they are different beings—regardless of whether the argument confirms or denies the existence of fundamental transformation during the period. This line of thought has its own merits in revealing certain aspects of the reality as most simplified arguments do; yet it somehow shapes women of Joseon into an object of some kind of anthropological interest and there by alienates them.

In this respect, the reason why the book’s authors chose the title of “Two Chosŏns”—despite the risk of its being misleading—may be to suggest historical continuity between women in two Chosŏns, namely those of the late Chosŏn period and of colonial Chosŏn, rather than to overtly deny the claim of Imperial Japan regarding the legality of its colonial rule in Korea, or Chosŏn. To avoid the confusion, the implicit suggestion of the historical continuity does not mean that the authors try to reconstruct the history of the female subject of the time in terms of so-called spontaneous modernization theory. Instead of taking it for granted that the new social conditions of the colonial period gave birth to the modern female subject, they attempt to restore the multi-faceted historical context in which discourses, practices, and struggles took place in transforming the female subject.

The three parts of the book respectively focus on the subject of body, language, and mentality, and each chapter within a part deals with a specific historical case which may illuminate the reader regarding how the continuity and transformation traverse and are inserted into historical strata. The aim of the book is not to give its readers a comprehensive understanding of the women’s history of the time, and its value is not in attempting to construct a plausible grand narrative but in its detailed and interpretative efforts to meaningfully locate the bodily and discursive experience in historical context, thereby inviting readers to discover how closely they can relate to that experience. In the editors’ words, the woman should be read as a “multilayered text” since “it is an “event” in itself, for “it is a conclusive ‘location’ in which actual and ideal movements of tradition and modernity

(coloniality) had exerted and exercised compositive force” (p. 6).

The first part of the book primarily deals with a woman’s body in terms of “the location of consumption and production,” as stated in the part’s title. Two of the five chapters examine child delivery in the royal family and the knowledge about it during the late Joseon period, and one investigates the material and discursive circumstances of servant women during the colonial period. The remaining two chapters—somewhat curiously, given that the book contains a separate part on the language—focus more on the discursive dimension of women during the colonial period, by discussing the feminism of Na Hye-sök and the portrayal of *kisaeng* (female entertainers) in literature.

Among the five studies, those on obstetric knowledge in the royal family are exemplar in their combination of the close text analysis with careful interpretation and appreciation of meanings in historical context. Some readers will likely feel that the two studies did not go far enough in engaging in an ambitious task of suggesting a new direction for theoretical inquiry regarding a woman’s body as productive locus from the knowledge-body relationship perspective. To this reader, however, that does not seem to be the authors’ objective.

The chapters on *kisaeng* and servant women are more theoretically ambitious but not as inundated with intriguing historic details as the ones on child delivery. Yi Hye-ryöng investigates the material and discursive conditions from which *kisaeng* emerged as a dominant image of women in colonial Chosön. In her view, Yi Kwang-su suggested in *Mujöng* that people of colonial Joseon, symbolized by heroine Yöng-ch’ae and presented as a “virgin prostitute” (p. 115), cannot be “signified without deconstruction of existing social relations” (p. 113). In her methodologically different yet thematically parallel study, SöChi-yöng observes that female servant became the predominant image of not only Chosön women but of the entire Chosön in the eyes of Japanese colonizers (p. 145). Resonating with subaltern studies, the author reveals the oscillating dual characteristics of the relationship between servant women and Japanese employers.

The second part of the book delves deeper into the territory of discursive formation. This part covers a variety of themes including the existentially repressive discourse of fidelity, international influence in the role of gender in

literature, and women's participation in the making of the public space in terms of their strategic acceptance and modification of the dominant male discourse.

The last chapter of the part is perhaps the most conspicuous one both for the selection of subject and its approach using psycho analytical literary criticism. Kim Yŏng-hui examines how women's excreta in oral narratives such as legends and myth symbolically function in conveying and simultaneously resisting the attempts to discipline the female body. At first, the excreta are used to denounce a woman's civility and to deny her own capacity or right to control her own body; yet, they somehow continue to escape the disciplinary hierarchy intended to reaffirm the superiority of male power, defying the order of signification and revealing a relationship between the creativity of women's sexuality and Goddess the creator.

The third part comprises a number of engaging discussions on a rare domain in late Chosŏn where women's leading role violently collided with established social norms. Song Chi-yŏn reads the movement of Catholic women's pledging to remain virgins as a struggle to find an appropriate language to define and express themselves and to secure space for an alternative religious community outside the family-marriage institution, which was only possible by breaking the established patriarchal structure. The scholar points out that it was more like a crevice forming in the clash between Eastern and Western patriarchies than a rationalized struggle of the West versus the traditional East, as demonstrated in the decision of French missionaries that the male priest should be responsible for granting permission to the oath to live as a virgin (p. 335).

Another fascinating story about the domain of belief in late Joseon is the cult for self-claimed living Buddha, examined in the book by Choe Chong-sŏng. In the mid-eighteenth century, several famous female shamans with their religious charisma gave rise to a kind of messiah movement, deviating from conventionally accepted (though not highly esteemed) way of traditional shamanism and ordering their believers to abandon and destroy idolatry including shamanistic ritual places. The movement became a national scandal and drew attention of the central government and the king. While it was quelled with the execution of the shamans—who were believed to be immortal by the believers—it preceded the introduction of Christianity as well as the foundation of Tonghak (p. 365)¹⁾and

brought a broad shock to the ruling class intellectuals particularly because it was led by female shamans who were regarded as the lowest class having no say in the society.

Overall, the book is truly worth reading as it challenges many normally uncritically accepted perceptions and satisfies intellectual appetite. Readers are invited to take a journey into a crucial period of rapid transformations and flourishing discourses, a journey made even more enjoyable with abundant and extravagant textual amusement and thematic variety. Most of its chapters achieve a certain amount of success in either illuminating a familiar subject with new or wider perspectives or excavating a relatively unfamiliar subject and assigning it a due significance. While nearly all chapters are developed to the extent that each reads as an independent study covering one subject and containing distinct argument and sufficient evidence to support it, some of the chapters have more potential than others to inspire further studies in the field.

To me as a reader, one thing wanting is that, perhaps due to the independent character of each chapter, the book as a whole does not present a very convincingly cooperative vision for a historical gender study. It is a collection of various perspectives, methodologies, and approaches which by themselves are meaningful, but the editors do not seem to have fully exhausted the possibility of building a consistent outlook. They started the book with an ambitious statement that the woman is (was) “an event” (p. 6), but what readers actually find in the book is many *events*. Perhaps the editors rightfully departed from their own statement in pursuit of plural events, since the affirmation of any subsisting meta-event behind events would make an event a non-event.

1) It should be noted, however, that Koreans' first encounters with Catholicism date back to the seventeenth century.