

Finding Söndök: Uncovering a Female King through Samguk Sagi and Samguk Yusa

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ABSTRACT

One of only three females to be listed in *Samguk sagi*'s "kings list," King Söndök was widely hailed as a ruler full of wisdom and virtue who promoted the arts, sponsored Buddhism, and built the foundations for the Silla unification of the three kingdoms through her astute foreign diplomacy. This article attempts to use the portrayal of this female king of the Silla Dynasty of Korea to explore the importance of contemporary conceptions of gender and power when studying primary sources. The author examines the context in which two significant histories were written, one in the era in which the events took place and another in the following dynasty. Through a comparative analysis of the portrayal of King Söndök in each text, including a detailed background on the respective authors, this article explores the implications of recording the lives and actions of famous women as the position of women in society fluctuates with time.

INTRODUCTION

Söndök (r. 632-647) was the first female king¹ and 27th ruler of the Korean Peninsula's Silla dynasty (57 BC-935 BCE). She was selected by the court and her father to succeed the throne due to his lack of a male heir² in the sönggol³ (holy bone) rank. One of only three females to be listed in *Samguk sagi*'s "kings list,"⁴ King Söndök was widely hailed as a ruler full of wisdom and virtue who promoted the arts, sponsored Buddhism, and built the foundations for the Silla unification of the three kingdoms⁵ through her astute foreign diplomacy.⁶ The primary characteristics for which she was known are divine wisdom, intelligent political strategy, and all-encompassing compassion.

During her lifetime, King Söndök foretold three prophecies which then reportedly came true, and for which she came to be regarded as possessing divine wisdom. The first prophecy was her prediction that peonies from T'ang China would be scentless, after gazing at a painting of them. The second prophecy was her interpretation that the croaking of frogs at a certain pond signified the encroaching attack of Paekche soldiers from the west. The third prophecy, made near her death, was King Söndök's prediction of her time of death and location of her burial.

King Söndök's strategic thinking was highlighted through her consistent maintenance of important political relations. Domestically, she cemented the relationship between the two politically and militarily powerful families of Kim Kim Ch'unch'u (later T'aejong Muyöl the Great) and renowned General Kim Yu Shin through arranging the marriage of Kim Ch'unch'u to Yu-sin's sister⁷. The combined force of these two clans allowed for a centralization of power in Silla, enabling the nobles to act as a unified body towards their counterparts in rival states Paekche and Koguryö. King Söndök balanced diplomatic relations to Silla's strategic advantage with foreign powers, as well. Initially, when Paekche attacked Silla, she cultivated an alliance with Koguryö. However, when Paekche and Koguryö allied with one another to attack Silla, King Söndök changed tactics and began to cultivate friendly relations with T'ang China to repel her rival neighbors. She accomplished this by regularly sending royal emissaries and noble students to T'ang China⁸, as well as building the Hwangryongsa Pagoda as a strategic display of aggression towards her enemies and a commitment to dynastic security. This nine-story pagoda, a full eighty meters in height, listed each of Silla's nine neighbors that the dynasty sought to dominate⁹.

Finally, King Söndök's compassion was displayed in her domestic policy. She focused on the wellbeing of commoners, and her kindness to lowly admirers became legendary. Her agenda for her court who dealt with internal affairs was to decrease poverty and increase welfare for the peasant classes.¹⁰ She continued to use buildings as symbolic and literal manifestations of her policies when she built the Ch'ömsöngdae observatory, which was used for agriculture¹¹. Where the Hwangnyongsa was a reflection of her foreign policy that aspired to dominate Silla's neighbors, the Ch'ömsöngdae was a reflection of her domestic policy which sought to encourage agriculture and the livelihood of the common people. In a legend in which a commoner by the name of Jigwi waited day and night for a glimpse of King Söndök but fell asleep before she arrived to the temple, King Söndök allegedly left her bracelet as a show of acknowledgement on his chest¹². This tale illustrates how King Söndök did not brush off commoners, but acknowledged them and treated them with kindness. Since her rule, King Söndök has been recorded, reprimanded, and reimagined in various incarnations, by scholars and laypeople alike, throughout different eras of Korean history.

The purpose of this paper is to find the various ways in which King Söndök and her reign have been translated, recorded, and imagined. More specifically, this paper will explore the ways in which two of the oldest works on Korean history, *Samguk sagi* (History of the Three Kingdoms) and *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) portrayed her. There will be a specific focus on use of language of the authors of these works with consideration of the conceptions of gender and power at the time.

We will begin by exploring the historical context of the Silla and Koryŏ dynasties and their conceptions of gender and power. We will then learn the context in which *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa* were written. Once these foundations have been set, we will examine instances in which King Söndök appears in the text, and how she portrayed. Finally, we will conclude with

a comparative analysis of themes in the portrayals of King Söndök in these texts. Through this exploration, this paper seeks to gain a better understanding of King Söndök as a historical figure, the historical conceptions of gender and power during the Silla and Koryŏ dynasties, and how these conceptions shaped historical portrayals and writing.

SILLA CONCEPTIONS OF GENDER AND POWER

The Silla dynasty (57 BCE-935 CE) was a kingdom that rose out of a chieftdom in the southeastern Korean peninsula. Though it was founded by three ruling families that rotated the succession to the throne, it eventually was monopolized by the Naemul Kim clan.¹³ The early Silla dynasty practiced shamanism as could be signified by their origin myth of a divine princess¹⁴ and prince¹⁵ coming together in marriage and starting a kingdom¹⁶ as well as the shape of the royal crown which featured stylized deer antlers and bear claws¹⁷, reminiscent of shaman leaders throughout Central Asia.¹⁸ It was during the middle of the Silla dynasty that Buddhism became the state religion and a source for establishing divine legitimacy to the throne. Buddhism was able to make a smooth transition from China into the native tradition of Korea through its ability to absorb the native shamanistic traditions and beliefs.¹⁹

Even before King Söndök, there was historical precedent for women holding power in Silla through religion. The prominence of shamanism, which in the Silla context featured a majority female leadership, and Buddhism, which encouraged generally egalitarian relations between sexes in Silla society, meant that Silla women held a relatively high social status, on par with that of their male counterparts. Before Silla kings adopted the term "wang" (Chinese for king), early rulers often used "chachaung" or shaman as their title.²⁰ Molony, Thiess, and Choi describe the role of the shaman as one who mediates between heaven and earth, drives away bad spirits, and brings good fortune.²¹ Many

indigenous ceremonies and worship revolved around divine beings in female forms. Aro, the daughter of the founder of Silla and sister to the second king of Silla, was one of the most famous female priests of Silla, and eventually rose to become the highest religious leader in the kingdom. Molony, Theiss, and Choi speculate that this may indicate a division of leadership roles in early Silla of women to the religious and ceremonial realms and men to the military realm.²²

Another aspect of Silla society that reflected the position of women in society was the practice of matrilineal traditions such as tracing the lineage of a child through both maternal and paternal lines to determine their social status, having married couples take residence in the wife's native home, and the equal inheritance practice of land and slaves between siblings regardless of gender.²³ From stories of noble women traveling on horseback in *Samguk yusa*, it can also be determined that women were allowed to move freely in the Silla dynasty.²⁴ A woman of an equal bone-rank to her husband could not be displaced by a woman who was of a lower bone-rank on the whim of her husband.²⁵ Marriage, in this context, was a partnership between social equals.

Finally, archeological evidence uncovered from the burial sites of Silla royalty suggests that early Silla practiced complementary pairings of rule. Some scholars suggest there could have been a division of leadership between men and women in the religious and military realms -- in the roles of kings and queens. It is known that the Japanese islands of early Silla times often practiced co-rule of a queen and king pairing, and some Japanese scholars have suggested that this was customary of Paekche and Silla as well.²⁶ The burial of kings and queens in married pairs in identical tombs side by side²⁷ suggests a partnership of rule.²⁸ Further, in an equally bone-ranked marriage, the tombs of both king and queen were equally extravagant. The sex differentiation was indicated only by the inclusion or absence of a sword.²⁹ The inclusion of a sword indicated a male tomb. Further, *Samguk yusa* stated that

the indication of a ruler was through his or her golden crown and belt. There have been tombs uncovered in which the female tomb carried the golden crown and her husband carried the silver crown with a sword³⁰. This suggests that a woman was recognized as king in her own right.

Power in Silla was determined by bloodline through the bone-rank system and often perpetuated by the divinity bestowed upon kings through shamanistic ritual and Buddhism. The bone-rank system (kolp'um) was a code that used bloodline as a means of dividing society and creating limitations for the occupations an individual could hold, the clothes they could wear, and the possessions they could own.³¹ The bone-rank system had eight different levels. The Holy Bone (sǒnggol) were at the top of the hierarchy; they consisted of the royal house Kim and were the only ones eligible to inherit the throne. The True Bone (chin'gol) were directly below; they were nobility that were of the house Kim but not able to succeed the throne. The True Bones were, however, able to act as heads of government and other high-ranking military posts. Below the True Bones were Head Ranks 6, 5, and 4. Head Rank 4 members were those that occupied the lower ranks of governmental offices. Finally, head ranks 3, 2, and 1 consisted of the commoners and those with no privileges.³² The Silla dynasty had a strict social hierarchy which composed of an aristocratic state centered around a monarchy.³³ The monarchy sought to further distinguish itself from its nobility through strategically using Buddhism as its state religion. Silla kings stylized themselves as the wheel-turning kings of the Ksatriya caste. The most explicit display of this was when King Chinp'yǒng (r.579-362) named himself Suddhodana and his wife Maya. Sǒndǒk, his daughter, took the Buddhist name of Srimala.³⁴

Despite the centralization of monarchical power, it should be noted that the Silla dynasty practiced the political tradition of sharing monarchical political power with a council of nobles in its day to day deliberations and ruling of the state. The Hwabaek

(Council of Nobles) consisted of an “Extraordinary Rank 1” noble, who was appointed by the ruler, who headed a council of “Extraordinary Rank 2” nobles. Together, the Hwabaek would deliberate on important state matters such as throne succession and war declarations. The Hwabaek convened at religious sites, and made decisions unanimously.³⁵ In addition to the Hwabaek, the Silla rulers also relied on the Hwarang (Flower Youth), a group of elite noble youth that headed the military. These youths were famed for their beauty, religious virtue, loyalty to the king, and military strength.³⁶

In sum, conceptions of power overruled conceptions of gender in the treatment of women and their status in Silla society. Religious tradition and bloodline acted as stronger determinants for power than a person’s sex. In addition, the support of a ruler’s council of nobles and military was necessary for a ruler’s sustained maintenance of the throne, suggesting that Söndök’s succession to the throne was supported by her majority male court.

KORYŎ CONCEPTIONS OF GENDER AND POWER

The Koryŏ dynasty (918-1382) was the successor to a unified Korean peninsula left by the Unified Silla dynasty. Its founder, King T’aejo (r. 918-943) also known as Wang Kŏn, was a man of Koguryŏ descent. Koryŏ was influenced by its Buddhist heritage from the Silla dynasty as well as the incoming influence of the increasingly powerful Confucianism from Yuan China (1271-1368) and later Ming China (1368-1644)³⁷. Overall, Koryŏ was a strongly Buddhist society that centered most of its cultural and social activities around Buddhism. Additionally, the state sponsored Buddhism and many Buddhist monasteries owned vast land holdings. Buddhist monks in turn contributed to the security of the Koryŏ state through ritual protection prayers and even fighting for the Koryŏ state at times.³⁸ Similar to Silla society, Koryŏ society was a hereditary aristocracy that consisted of distinct classes:

the yangban, meaning the two types of noble elite that acted as military or civil officials; the sangmin, the commoner middle class of famers, tenants, merchants, and craftsmen; and the chunmin, the lowborn class that were comprised mostly of slaves.³⁹

According to historian Martina Deuchler, women held a relatively equal status to their male counterparts during the Koryŏ dynasty. Women were able to head households, inherit property equally with their siblings regardless of gender or birth order, travel outside, and were generally not stigmatized for divorce or remarriage. When a woman died, her property was passed on to her siblings and children rather than her husband. With regard to marriage, the woman’s family was not required to pay a dowry, and marriage ceremonies took place in the woman’s home. Women were married at an average age of 17 to men of the average of 20, and the married couple would reside at the woman’s house until she was 30 years old. The relatively small age gap between the married couple suggests a relatively equal spousal partnership. Genealogies would also include matrilineal as well as patrilineal records. Finally, in line with Silla tradition, the status of a child would be traced and determined by considering both matrilineal and patrilineal descent.⁴⁰ However, it should be noted that during the Koryŏ dynasty, there was a departure from the shaman traditions of the Silla dynasty with the increased embrace of Buddhism and later Confucianism. Whereas shamanism had allowed for female leadership in religion, Buddhism did not allow for the leadership of women outside of the congregation and service as nuns.⁴¹

The relatively high status of Koryŏ women meant that conceptions of power in the Koryŏ dynasty were also determined by the influence they gained through marriages. Power as a whole in Koryŏ was defined by class, gender, age, and cognizance of external influences that could threaten the Koryŏ dynasty. As mentioned above, Koryŏ was a hereditary aristocracy where bloodline determined the career and status of a person. Succession to the throne was determined as follows:

eldest legitimate son, eldest legitimate grandson, then the second legitimate son, and the eldest legitimate son of the second legitimate son, the illegitimate grandson, and finally the female child but only through her own son.⁴² In terms of external influences, we see the transition that the Koryŏ court made from fully embracing Buddhism as the state religion when the legacy of Silla was still strong, to slowly incorporating more elements of Confucianism in parts of state ideology as Koryŏ began to establish stronger relations with Ming China in the later half of the dynasty.⁴³

Marriage as a source of power in Koryŏ was clearly demonstrated by the dynasty's founder, King T'aejo. He used a series of strategic marriages to the daughters of wealthy and powerful families to consolidate and unify state power. In total, King T'aejo had 29 wives, three of which were "queen dowagers," three of which were "queen consorts," and twenty-three of which were "ladies." The six queens were all considered to be official wives with little difference in status among them.⁴⁴ Although this situation of multiple marriages may be interpreted as the attempts of noble families to offer their daughters as tribute to gain political power themselves, it should be noted that within Koryŏ society where it was a common practice for son-in-laws to be treated as sons. They shared their parents-in-law's activities as well as bearing the honor, shame, and penalties of the family and sometimes even being raised in their in-laws' homes⁴⁵. Considered in this light, King T'aejo's marriages were in part offering himself as tribute to these families in exchange for their powerful alliances.

The power that women held in Koryŏ society, especially through marriage bonds, is highlighted in the following anecdote from *The History of Koryŏ (Koryŏsa)*. When King T'aejo was engaged in sexual relations with the daughter of a wealthy nobleman, he did not wish to have a child by her (Lady Oh) due to the fact that her family was not politically prestigious enough. As a result, he ejaculated onto the mat but Lady Oh quickly took in his semen and became pregnant with the child who would later become King Hyejong.⁴⁶ This

understanding that if he were to get her pregnant, he would have to take her in marriage and acknowledge the child due to his noble birth displays the importance of women in Koryŏ. He could not simply abandon her to be disgraced due to the power of her family. Of King T'aejo's officially recognized twenty-five sons and nine daughters, eleven of the sons were referred to as "crown princes." This indicates that all eleven of these princes considered themselves to be successors to the throne due to the legitimacy of the powerful families of their mothers.⁴⁷ In sum, though the status of women had decreased in terms of their ability to hold official and public positions of leadership, Koryŏ women still held considerable power in their importance as bridges for significant alliances as daughters, wives, and mothers.

BACKGROUND OF THE SAMGUK SAGI AND SAMGUK YUSA

Before examining the various portrayals of Female King Sŏndŏk, we must first understand the historical context in which the two sources, *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa*, were produced.

Samguk sagi, was written in 1145 by Kim Pusik (1075-1151) during the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392). It is one of Korea's oldest surviving written histories and is widely regarded as an invaluable source of ancient Korean history. Kim Pusik was a scholar-official of the Koryŏ dynasty who was of noble Silla descent. King Kim I Jong of Koryŏ (r. 1112-1146) commanded Kim to produce this work. In writing the *Samguk sagi*, Kim relates a history of the Three Kingdoms that outlined their origins, their unification by Silla, unified Silla's downfall, and the rise of the Koryŏ dynasty as its successor. Following the orthodox Confucian practice of historical writing, Kim used the Chinese Kijon format which consisted of annals, treatises on various topics, and selected biographies of kings and other relevant figures.⁴⁸ Kim Pusik was well-versed in both Buddhist and Confucian lines of thought and expressed them through his writing. He believed that the purpose of history was to educate leaders in governance, and oneself in self-improvement.⁴⁹ For this reason, Kim includes his personal

commentary—another historical writing tradition of the time—to “praise and blame.”⁵⁰

Some modern scholars have criticized Kim’s southern orientation of Korean history. They maintain that Kim’s focus on the history of the peninsula, as opposed to the more northern areas of the mainland, limited the geographic scope of Korean history and was thus un-nationalistic.⁵¹ Kim has also been critiqued by these scholars for holding positive sentiments towards Yuan China through his emphasis on Korean tributary relations with China⁵². However, historian Stella Xu argues that Kim’s writing was reflective of an acute political awareness of state relations. She asserts that his non-inclusion of the histories of earlier dynasties that reached deeper into mainland Asia and into the territories of Chinese dynasties was out of political tact rather than a lack of nationalism.⁵³

Samguk yusa was written in 1281 by Iryŏn (1206-1289), a Buddhist monk of the Koryŏ dynasty. Along with *Samguk yusa*, it is one of the oldest surviving written works on ancient Korean history. Unlike its earlier counterpart, *Samguk yusa* is also a collection of myths, legends, and anecdotes as well as histories of the Three Kingdoms. The Yuan emperor at the time commanded King Ch’ungyŏl (r. 1274-1308) to provide a comprehensive report on Koryŏ. King Ch’ungyŏl thus commanded a national history to be compiled.⁵⁴ What is notable about the *Samguk yusa* is that Iryŏn was not a conventional producer of historical works for the time. He was not a member of the Confucian literati class of the Koryŏ court. Nonetheless, he applied Chinese literary tradition to structure his work. Iryŏn used the Chinese *yishi* structure—a collection of informal narratives and anecdotes—to produce a history with more flexibility both structurally and organizationally.⁵⁵

Samguk yusa is often dismissed as a serious source for Korean history due to its inclusion of various supernatural myths and origin stories. Additionally, Iryŏn’s promotion of Buddhism due to his status as a prominent Buddhist monk should be noted. In the same vein, Iryŏn has been critiqued for praising Silla

excessively, as the Silla dynasty had been a paragon of Buddhist-state promotion.

In sum, from *Samguk sagi* we should expect both Confucian and Buddhist ideological opinions in the form of chronological records; and from *Samguk yusa* we should expect more sensationalized stories of important historical figures with strong Buddhist influences.

KING SÖNDÖK IN SAMGUK SAGI AND SAMGUK YUSA

Samguk sagi provides a comprehensive account of King Söndök’s life and reign, documenting every year of her sixteen-year rule. In total, King Söndök is recorded as having performed roughly sixteen distinct acts as “queen.” It is interesting to note that one of the first actions that King Söndök is recorded as doing is leading a ritual sacrifice, which is aligned with the Silla practice of having female leaders of religion. Her court is recorded as having performed ten actions: holding sacrifices, proclaiming general amnesty, exempting taxes, appointing people as the head of the Hwabaek, commanding generals to lead troops, ordering generals to assemble and reassure people, sending noble sons as scholar-ambassadors to the T’ang dynasty, sending foreign envoys to request for military assistance, approving nobles’ requests, and finally, dying. The court on the other hand executed the following actions: overseeing administration of governmental affairs, sending officials to inquire the state and conditions of the country, and sending envoys to Great T’ang to present tribute and local goods. Already, through the differences in these verbs, we are able to identify the role of the Hwabaek as dealing with domestic affairs and diplomatic niceties. Söndök, on the other hand, is primarily preoccupied with religious activities, military strategies, and ensuring the overall well being of her subjects. Though King Söndök is portrayed as less involved with everyday domestic issues, she is clearly the executive head of state as seen through the duties she performed.

Though King Söndök dominates the action in the text, in terms of dialogue she only speaks three distinct times. These moments are when she interprets the meaning of the peony painting, when she interprets the meaning of the croaking bullfrogs, and when she pleads with General Yu Shin to go back into battle. Her contemporary, Emperor T'ai-tsung of the T'ang dynasty, on the other hand, is featured in two distinct instances of dialogue which span at least a page in length each--far longer than King Söndök's three instances of dialogue combined. T'ai-tsung's dialogue critiques the rule of a woman, though this may be a reflection Kim Pusik's personal interpretation of the situation. Finally, there are six other instances of dialogue by various different officials, envoys, and generals.

Samguk yusa on the other hand begins with a brief introduction to King Söndök and her lineage, and explores only her prophecies at any depth. It is important to note that as a work written after *Samguk sagi*, the *Samguk yusa* was definitely influenced by the undertones of Kim Pusik's authorship.⁵⁷

Below is the introduction to King Söndök in *Samguk sagi*:

Queen Söndök was enthroned [632]. Her personal name was Tongman and she was the oldest daughter of King Chinpyöng. Her mother, Lady Maya, was of the Kim lineage. Tongman by nature was generous, humane, and intelligent. When the King died without a son, the people of the country enthroned Tokman and gave her the title Sonjo hwanggo.⁵⁸

Kim Pusik includes King Söndök's paternal and maternal lineage and records her nature as "generous, humane, and intelligent." Though "generous" and "humane" could be attributed to more feminine characteristics that were praised in this era, it is important to note that Kim acknowledged her intelligence. Further, despite the fact that he underlines the King's death without a male heir as the reason for her ascension to the throne, we also see that her accession to the throne is attributed to the "people of

the country." This suggests that King Söndök had the support of her court and people as ruler.

Below is the introduction to King Söndök in *Samguk yusa*:

The twenty-seventh sovereign of Silla was Queen Tokman (post-humous title Söndök, 632-647). She was the daughter of King Chin-p'yong and ascended the throne in the sixth year of Chen-kuan of T'ang T'ai-tsung. During her reign she made three remarkable prophecies.⁵⁹

It was also this queen who built the stone astronomical observatory called Ch'omsong-dae.⁶⁰

Queen Tokman, daughter of Chinpyöng and Lady Maya. Succeeded when her father died without male issue. Prince consort Um Kalmun-wang. Her reign title was Inpyong.⁶¹

Iryön also includes King Söndök's maternal and paternal lineage, and interestingly enough includes her contemporary counterpart in T'ang China as a further reference to her rule. He does not include any explicit mention of her characteristics, but rather includes her actions and accomplishments such as her remarkable prophecies and the construction of the Ch'omsongdae observatory. Iryön also mentions her father's death without a male heir as a reason for Söndök's ascension. However, unlike Kim Pusik, he does not mention the will of the people as having had a role in her ascension.

The next two extracts present a comparative description of King Söndök's first prophecy: the scentless peonies. Below is the prophecy in *Samguk sagi*:

In the time of the former King, he obtained from China a painting of peonies and some peony seeds which he showed to Tongman. Tongman said, "although these flowers appear to be very beautiful, they must have no fragrance." The King laughed saying, "How do you know this?" She replied, "The flowers are painted without butterflies, so I know this. Generally, if girls are extremely beautiful, boys will follow them. If flowers have fragrance, the bees and butterflies will follow. Accordingly, although these flowers are very

beautiful, in designing the painting without bees or butterflies, they must be flowers without fragrance.” In planting the flower seeds, it was ultimately as she had said. Her prescience was like this.⁶²

Kim Pusik’s account of the tale suggests that the King was not paid his respects by the T’ang Emperor via a gift of peonies, the symbolic flower of the T’ang Dynasty. The dialogue in which King Söndök attributes only great beauty to the value of girls suggests the presence of gender norms in which women were valued aesthetically. However, her ability to speak freely to her father the king and to gain his recognition as a young girl also signifies the respect with which she was treated. Kim Pusik even acknowledges her prescience in the last line of the paragraph.

Below is the story of the same prophecy in *Samguk yusa*:

First, the Emperor T’ai-tsung (of the Chinese T’ang dynasty) sent her a gift of three handfuls of peony seeds with a picture of the flowers in red, white and purple. The Queen looked at the picture for a while and said, ‘The flowers will have no fragrance.’ The peonies were planted in the palace garden, and sure enough they had no odor from the time they bloomed until they faded.⁶³

During her lifetime the courtiers asked the Queen how she had been able to make these prophecies. She replied: “In the picture there were flowers but not butterflies, an indication that peonies have no smell. The T’ang Emperor teased my having no husband.”⁶⁴

Iryön paints a more explicit relationship of respect by T’ang China to Silla Korea by having the T’ang Emperor T’ai-tsung gift the painting and peony seeds to King Söndök herself. This gift from a more powerful state could signify respect and a desire to establish diplomatic relations. Further, King Söndök’s interpretation of the gift itself also speaks volumes. Unlike with Pusik’s rendering, there is no flowery dialogue regarding beauty nor the love of boys for girls. King Söndök simply asserts that there will be no scent,

and it was so. Later, the courtiers ask for an explanation -- King Söndök on explains that she interpreted the gift as a criticism of herself as a woman with no husband. Criticism regarding King Söndök’s womanhood by Emperor T’ai-tsung is also mentioned by Kim Pusik later on in *Samguk sagi*: [T’ang Emperor says] “I can deploy several tens of hundreds of ships loaded with armed soldiers, silently cross the sea, and directly attack that country. But because your country has a woman as a ruler, neighboring states belittle it. As you have lost the authority of the ruler, thus inviting the enemy to attack, no year will enjoy peace.”⁶⁵

Kim Pusik’s portrayal of the prophecy sets the foundation for asserting King Söndök’s prescience from a young age while Iryön’s asserts King Söndök’s almost divine wisdom by which she states a prophecy which subsequently comes true. The latter promotes King Söndök’s sanctity as a divine Buddhist ruler, which is in line with Iryön’s intentions.

The next two events in the texts that we will compare are King Söndök’s second prophecy: the croaking frogs. Below is the prophecy in *Samguk sagi*:

Summer, fifth month. Frogs gathered in a great number west of the palace at Jade Gate Pond. The Queen, hearing this, called her attendants, saying, “The bull frogs have anger in their eyes looking like that of soldiers. I once heard in the southwestern region there was a place called ‘Jade Gate Valley.’ Have perhaps some neighboring country’s troops secretly infiltrated there?” She commanded General Alch’on and P’ilt’an to lead troops to go and search for them. As expected, Paekche General Uso, wishing to lead a raid on Mount Toksan Fortress, led five hundred armed troops who came hiding there. Alch’on made a surprise attack killing them all.⁶⁶

Kim Pusik’s account features King Söndök hearing of a gathering of bullfrogs at the Jade Gate Pond. She interprets the anger in their eyes to be that of soldiers and also associates the Jade Gate Pond as the southwestern region of the Jade Gate Valley. She then

commands her officers to lead an attack. She correctly interpreted the situation, and her men were able to defeat the Paekche soldiers. The language that King Söndök uses features a softening of assertions and many conditional phrases such as “I once heard,” and “Have perhaps.” These indicate a more feminine approach in asserting her interpretation of the situation.

Below is the prophecy in *Samguk yusa*:

Second, in the Jade Gate Pond at the Holy Shrine Temple a crowd of frogs gathered in winter⁶⁷ and croaked for three of four days. The people and courtiers wondered at this, and asked the Queen what its significance might be. She immediately commanded two generals, Alch'on and P'ilt'an, to lead two thousand crack troops to Woman's Root Valley on the western outskirts of Kyongju to search out and kill enemy troops hidden in the forest.

The generals set off with a thousand troops each, and when they reached the valley found five hundred Paekche soldiers hidden in the forest there. The Silla soldiers surrounded them and killed them all. Then they found a Paekche general hiding behind a rock on South Mountain, whom they also killed. Finally, they intercepted a large Paekche force marching to invade Silla. This they routed, killing one thousand three hundred in the process.⁶⁸

[She replied]...Jade gate refers to the female genitals⁶⁹. The female color is white, which is also the color symbolic of the west, so I knew the invaders were coming from the west⁷⁰. If a male organ enters a female organ it will surely die⁷¹ so I knew it would be easy to defeat the enemy.⁷²

In Iryön's account, on the other hand, the people ask King Söndök about the meaning of the frogs at the pond. She is able to interpret the cosmological significance of croaking frogs at a specific location and translate that into military action. This formation of the story puts King Söndök in a more active role, gathering the information herself. Notably, the Silla people and courtiers asked Seondeok about the significance of the

croaking frogs. Seondeok was trusted and expected to understand the situation and explain it to her subjects. Another important point is the fact that her subsequent military commands went unquestioned and were implemented immediately by her male generals. Iryön does not mention any sort of deliberation that could have occurred between King Söndök and her courtiers. The language of the text illustrates her decisiveness and competence as a ruler. The usage of the word “commanded” suggests the masculine nature of her reaction, which renders her depiction as consistent with those of male kings. Her response reveals a deep understanding of natural cosmology and an unabashed discussion of coitus and the physiology of sexes. In this instance, the term “surely die” refers to when a penis is no longer erect upon ejaculation. King Söndök's prowess for cosmological interpretation highlights her wisdom and spirituality. Iryön's characterization of Söndök and her prophecy once again showcases her wisdom, but this time with an element of decisive leadership. King Söndök's intellect and actions are mythologized, not her gender nor her physical being.

Both authors give King Söndök credit for interpreting the situation correctly and dispatching troops accordingly. However, Kim Pusik shies away from the explanatory aspect of the tale, while Iryön focuses on the cosmological foundations of King Söndök's interpretation, giving her further credit as a religious and divine expert.

The third prophecy is only mentioned by Iryön and is the following:

Third, one day while the Queen was still in perfect health, she called her courtiers together and said, ‘I will surely die in a certain year, in a certain month, on a certain day. When I am gone, bury me in the middle of Torich'on.’ The courtiers did not know the place and asked the Queen where it was, whereupon she pointed to the southern hill called Wolf Mountain.... On the very day she had predicted the Queen died, and her ashes were interred on the site she had chosen. Ten years later (656) the great King Munmu had Sach'onwang Temple (The Temple of the Four Deva

Kings) built beneath the Queen's tomb. Buddhist scripture alludes to two heavens called –Torich'on and Sach'onwangch'on. All were amazed at the Queen's prescience and knowledge of the afterlife.⁷³

This myth shares the similar theme of King Söndök's quasi-divine insight and prophetic power. In contrast, however, it is structurally different from the aforementioned tales. There is no phenomenon to be observed or interpreted -- instead, King Söndök simply prophesies her time of death and burial site. Once again, the language of “awe” is used to describe how her subjects and courtier viewed her. Unsurprising considering the historical precedent of the potency of her prophecies, her burial site came to symbolize a Buddhist heaven. An argument could be made that this was a self-fulfilling prophecy; King Munmu could have been well aware of his predecessor's prophecy and sought to fulfill it. However, the point that Iryön desired to make through this myth is King Söndök's profound attunement with Buddhism—a factor of regnal legitimacy in both Silla and Koryö.

Kim Pusik, on the other hand, ends with the following commentary:

As I understand, in ancient times there was Lady Nuwa who assisted Fuxi in administering the nine districts, but she was not the son of heaven. Coming to Impress Lu and Wu Zhao, they assisted young and inexperienced rulers, and made decisions as if they were emperors. The histories did not officially label them as rulers but only called them “High Empress Dowager” Lady Lu and “Heavenly Empress Dowager” Lady Wu. According to the laws of heaven, yang is firm and yin is gentle and according to the laws of man, man is honorable and woman is demeaning. How can one permit an old woman to leave the woman's quarters and determine the governmental affairs of the state? Silla, helping a woman to rise to occupy the royal throne, is a product of an age of unrest. It is fortunate that the state did not collapse. There is a phrase in Shiji (Records of the Historians), “The hen does not announce the morning.” And in Yijing (The Book of Changes) there is the phrase, “An emaciated sow

still seeks to romp around.” How can this not be a warning?⁷⁴

Kim openly critiques the establishment of a woman as a ruler during the Silla dynasty. Though he does include historical precedent of woman leadership in earlier times and in China, he notes that these instances have been under unofficial statuses. However, in his depiction of King Söndök and her reign, he does acknowledge her military strategy as having been critical for the survival of the Silla dynasty.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Kim Pusik and Iryön paint a complex portrait of a female king who was known for her divine wisdom, military strategy, and general competence. What is more telling of these accounts of King Söndök however, is the complex relationship that these two men had with the concept of gender, especially in light of the loss of status and power of women at the time. The different political motivations of both authors in writing their histories were clearly displayed in Kim Pusik's attempt to attribution of King Söndök's feats to herself while also acknowledging Confucian ideology by including a critique of the establishment of a female ruler. Iryön's desire to promote Buddhism through the great rule of the divinely wise Buddhist Söndök was tempered by his views towards women who were viewed to be lower in status though still religiously relevant in later Koryö. Through this paper's search for King Söndök, we have highlighted the importance of conceptions of gender and power through the lens of time.

NOTES

1. The word “queen” in English can be used to describe many different positions: the wife of a king, the mother to a king, a regent for a minor, or a female ruler. Often, English has the property of causing confusion due to a lack of terms for specific conceptions. In the case of Sondok, her title of yeowang, female king, was lost in translation from classical Chinese to English. In Korean she was differentiated as yeowang, female king, rather than just wang, king, in order to create a distinction between her and a later male king by the same name.
2. It should be noted that she was the eldest daughter of King Jinpyeong, suggesting that succession was first determined by bloodline status, gender, and then age.

3. The Silla dynasty operated on a class system determined by bloodline, song-gol was the highest rank one could be born into and originally the only line eligible to take the throne.
4. Nelson, 77
5. Baekje (18 BCE-660 CE), Goguryeo (37 BC-668 BCE), and Silla (57 BCE-935 BCE)
6. Lee Bae-young, 137
7. Ibid, 139
8. Ibid, 139
9. Ibid, 140
10. Ibid, 139
11. Ibid, 140
12. Ibid, 140
13. Eckert, 28
14. Who was told to have had a dragon queen as a mother.
15. Who was allegedly born from a beautiful mystical egg.
16. Nelson, 83
17. Seth, 42
18. Nelson, 89
19. Peter H. Lee (1993), 62
20. Nelson, 89
21. Molony, Thiess, and Choi, 24
22. Ibid, 24
23. Ibid, 23
24. Nelson, 83
25. Ibid, 83
26. Ibid, 88
27. Ibid, 85
28. Ibid, 88
29. Ibid, 88
30. Ibid, 87
31. Eckert, 32
32. Ibid, 32
33. Ibid, 28
34. Peter H. Lee (1993), 63
35. Eckert, 34
36. Ibid, 35
37. Seth, 90
38. Ibid, 90
39. Yong-chung Kim, 47
40. Seth, 97
41. Yong-chung Kim, 21
42. Ibid, 47
43. Ibid, 79
44. Lee Bae-young, 151
45. Yong-chung Kim, 48
46. Lee Bae-young, 150
47. Ibid, 151
48. Seth, 93-94
49. Xu, 49
50. Seth, 94
51. Xu, 75
52. Ibid, 175
53. Ibid, 175
54. Ibid, 52
55. Ibid, 53
56. Ibid, 175
57. Nelson, 89
58. Kim Pusik, 147
59. Iryŏn , 73.

60. Ibid, 75
61. Ibid, 389
62. Kim Pusik, 147-148
63. Iryŏn, 73
64. Ibid, 74
65. Kim Pusik, 153
66. Ibid, 149-150
67. (when frogs are normally hibernating) Iryŏn, 74
68. Ibid, 73-74
69. "(and so is the similar to the name of the valley, which contained the expression Okmun, jade gate)" Iryŏn, 74
70. "(i.e. from Paekje)" Iryŏn, 74
71. "(lose its erection after orgasm)" Iryŏn, 74
72. Iryŏn, 74
73. Iryŏn, 74
74. Kim Pusik, 156-157

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