Fertility and Childbirth among Royal Women in Nineteenth-Century Korea

Kim Jiyoung, Seoul National University

Abstract

This study offers a look into the daily life of royal women in nineteenth-century Korea through an examination of fertility and childbirth. From the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty, the royal family identified fertility with the state’s prosperity. In spite of the emphasis placed on fertility, there was a crisis of declining royal childbirth from the seventeenth century on. As Joseon kings were official figures, royal childbirth was an event of public importance. Though the primary responsibility for childbirth was on the royal women, the process of childbirth therefore became part of the institutional system. Unlike wedding ceremonies and rites of death, the rites of childbirth in Joseon Korea remained unchanged by the Confucian system. Because human beings cannot control all the risks in the process of delivery, divine assistance was invoked for safe delivery, bringing Daoist elements into the rites of childbirth. Nonetheless, Confucian discrimination between a wife and a concubine, an eldest son and the other sons and daughters were projected into the birthing process.

Key Words: fertility, childbirth, nineteenth century, Korea, royal women, royal family, daily life

Introduction

Childbirth is a universal event. In most societies, giving birth and childcare belong to the realm of women’s responsibilities. Brigitte Jordan, medical anthropologist and pioneer in the field of the Anthropology of Birth, states that if we consider the ethnographic record, no known society treats birth merely as a physiological function. Around the world, childbirth is socially marked and shaped. However, in Joseon Korea (1392–1910), the theme of childbirth has been ignored in the ethnographic record. This can be attributed in part to Confucianism’s focus on patriarchy and the simple fact that the primary actor in childbirth is female.

The adoption of Confucianism during the Joseon period greatly transformed the role of women in Korean society. By the late seventeenth century, the patriarchal family system including its clan rules had begun to take root in people’s daily lives. As a result, women’s lives were dominated by men: in childhood a woman followed her father, once married, she followed her husband, and later in life, she followed her son. Over the course of a woman’s life, her social identity shifted from being defined as someone’s daughter to someone’s wife and finally as someone’s mother. By the late Joseon, since only the eldest son could carry on the family name, women felt the heavy burden of the need to give birth to a son. Women who gave birth to many sons could establish their identities more firmly than women who failed to do so. In sum, a woman’s identity was primarily determined by her ability to give birth to a son.

Women during the Joseon period could not avoid the burden of childbirth and childcare. As Confucian ideology spread over the whole of Joseon society, distinctions between males and females were becoming increasingly rigid
while the sphere of women’s activities was narrowing to focus on the family.\(^3\) In the epitaphs of ruling aristocrats of the time, males were described as having official careers in the public sphere, while their wives as females were defined by their duties in the private sphere, namely childbirth, childcare, and domestic management. Even though this new social climate highlighted the importance of childbirth, it became an event that occurred in invisible, private, and silent spaces.

Whereas Western society includes childbirth in the rites of passage, Joseon society excluded it from such rites. People’s daily lives in Korea were organized around Confucian family rites as established by the Chinese Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200). These rites included the coming-of-age ceremony, marriage, death, and ancestor worship. With lives centered around the activities of men, childbirth was noticeably absent from official rites.

Confucianism’s promotion of patriarchy and continuance of the family line led to an increased interest at the time in the fertility of women. Despite the importance of women’s fertility and childbirth for Joseon society, and royal society in particular, the study of childbirth has received little attention from Korean scholars. Some data has been collected in the name of sansok (folk knowledge of childbirth).\(^4\) However, the materials that the folklorists have gathered, have focused primarily on traditional practices of delivery in modern rural areas. Since the arrival of Western medicine in the late-nineteenth century, these birthing traditions have undergone tremendous change.

Since 2000, female anthropologists in Korea have begun to pay attention to childbirth among the middle class in modern cities.\(^5\) The studies focusing on childbirth among royal women in the palace have dealt primarily with court customs and court medicine.\(^6\) As a result of this research, we can now visualize the scenery of the delivery room in detail. However, it is important not only to describe the setting but to understand the meanings of fertility and delivery in the context of Korea’s gender history. So the examination of fertility and childbirth in Joseon society can give us a chance to understand the cultural meanings of the behaviors of female agents in nineteenth-century Korea.

In order to understand the culture of childbirth among royal women in Joseon society, we must answer questions such as: Who were these women giving birth in the palace? What were their social positions? How did the fertility of royal women change during the nineteenth century? What was the process of childbirth? Where in the process did women’s social positions become distinct from one another?

This paper will first explore the idea of fertility among the Yi royal family and the institution through which the idea came into reality. The differences in status among women in the palace were usually determined by their relations, whether in private or in public, with the king, and whether or not they gave birth to a royal baby. Focusing on some characteristics of their fertility in nineteenth-century Korea, I will also expand the coverage of the study into the late Joseon Dynasty. Next, this paper will examine the process of childbirth among royal women by comparing Queen MyeongSeong (1851–95), who gave birth to the last emperor, SunJong (r. 1907–10), with the royal concubine Eom-ssi (1854–1911),
whose son was Young Chin-Wang (1897–1970). This comparison will reveal in
detail how the process of delivery differed according to a woman’s social status.

As might be expected, there are very few documents which record childbirth
in Joseon Korea, whether it occurred inside or outside the palace. As a result,
there are limits to understanding childbirth among royal women in the context
of the everyday life of the royal family. This paper relies on general sources of
court history such as the Code of Law known as the National Code, the Annals of
the Joseon Dynasty, and the Daily Records of the Secretariat. Other sources which
are especially related to delivery have also been consulted; these documents,
primarily from the nineteenth century, include the Manual for a Queen’s Childbirth,
the Diary about Royal Concubine’s Delivery, and Inner Palace Registries. Among
the Inner Palace Registries, one finds informal stories about royal women giving
birth as recorded by court ladies; these record events and details that the more
formal histories of the court would not cover. Additional historical sources
related to the prosperity of the royal family have also been referenced as well as
the Book of Genealogical Lineage of the Joseon Royal Family. Last but not least,
this paper will also examine a painting that appeared in royal wedding ceremonies
in nineteenth-century Korea. Though the painting is very important for us to
understand childbirth in the Joseon Dynasty, it has not received any attention
from scholars until now. As will be seen, all of these materials give context to
childbirth among royal women in nineteenth-century Korea.

The Royal Family’s Desire for Fertility

The royal family during the Joseon period referred to having many children as JongSa-Ji-Kyeung. JongSa is a kind of grasshopper that lays about ninety-nine eggs
at a time. So the phrase may be translated into “a cause for congratulations for
having numerous children like a large swarm of grasshoppers.” The term first
appeared in the Chinese classic the Book of Odes. It symbolically reveals the royal
family’s desire for fertility.

From the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty, its founder King Taejo (r. 1392–98) hoped that the royal family would follow the model of the Zhou Dynasty
in ancient China by having many offspring and prosperity, generation after
generation.

During the Joseon Dynasty, the phrase JongSa-Ji-Kyeung appeared in at least
two different contexts. First, we can find it in references to the wedding ceremony
of the royal family. It appears in documents called Ok-ChaekMun, which were a
kind of formal letter of appointment to a queen. In addition, we can also find
the phrase in documents which were used to select and install a concubine for
obtaining an heir to the throne. The most important obligation of women who
came into the royal palace through marriage was to give birth to royal children.
Women who fulfilled this obligation could retain and oftentimes even improve
their social standing.

We also find the phrase in congratulatory messages offered to royal
newlyweds. The following is a congratulatory message from some ministers to
newlyweds King Gojong (r. 1863–1907) and Queen MyeongSeong on March 22,
1866:
The rite of marriage went smoothly on the perfect day and at the perfect time. Your highness came in person to the venue and accepted many other people’s congratulations. The marriage in which a king gains a queen is a cause for congratulations and a source of all blessings…. We are singing the song which congratulates people for having [numerous] children like a large swarm of grasshoppers [emphasis added]. For the following thousands of millions of years, there will be a beautiful story about this…. We, [your] subjects, desperately hope that your highness will have the cause for congratulations for having a lot of children.12

Second, the term appeared when the elderly in the royal family and the king’s men expressed their concerns about a king or a crown prince not having children, especially when there was no heir to the throne. In the following example, the queen’s grandmother expresses her concerns about the lack of an heir apparent:

The queen’s grandmother Sunwon [1789–1857], said to the ministers, “The fate of the Kingdom only depends on the king. But even though he is in the prime of his life, we have not been able to see the happy event of having babies. Unfortunately, the queen has been sick but the medicine has not worked for her, which has deeply distressed the queen’s mother and myself. All the people in the country are expecting the happy event to take place, not to mention the king’s ancestral spirits. It is urgent that the king have an heir to the throne.

If we, following the royal family’s precedent, choose one daughter among the aristocratic class as the king’s concubine, we will secure an heir to the throne. I am sorry that I am giving you this instruction in Korean instead of classical Chinese. But as this matter is very crucial to the fate of the kingdom, I have had no choice except to give such an instruction. You should make sure that we can see a cause for congratulations for having children like a large swarm of grasshoppers [emphasis added].”13

The birth of royal children was one of the primary concerns of elders of the royal family, including the king and queen, because it determined the perpetuity of their dynasty and the prosperity of the royal family. When a king took over the throne after his father passed away, the royal family was looking forward in earnest to having an heir for him. So if the birth of the king’s eldest son was delayed, like in the case of King Heonjong (r. 1834–49) above, the delay was considered as a kind of crisis for the kingdom.

In the royal family, fertility meant prosperity of the state itself as well as the royal family. So JongSa-Ji-Kyeung was considered to be identical to “a cause for congratulations for the kingdom,” which was also called JongSa-Ji-Kyeung. Here, Jong, an abbreviation for Jongmyo, means “the royal ancestor’s shrine.” Să stands for SaJik, or “the gods of soil and grain.”

The royal wedding ceremony also shows that the royal family eagerly desired fertility. The desire for fertility appeared, for example, in the process of choosing the officials in charge of the wedding ceremony. They were selected among the “entirely blessed,” people who had shared years happily together with their spouses, led a healthy life without illness, had long lives, and had many “sons.”14 Joseon society became a patrilineal one due to Confucian clan rules. The essence of the patrilineal society was the success brought to a man’s family through his sons. Thus, in late Joseon, people eagerly wanted to have sons, not daughters.

In the nineteenth century, a new painting appeared in the royal wedding ceremony. The painting supports the argument that fertility became a very important obligation for royal women in late Joseon. Just prior to marriage, the
The bride would spend time in the detached palace, Byeolgung. This palace was a temporary place, where the bride would stay and receive an education during the period between being selected as the future queen until she entered the main palace, Jounggung, along with the king. Once selected, she could no longer visit her home outside the palace.

Within the detached palace there was a special folding screen on which was painted the *Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi*. The painting first appeared in the 1802 royal wedding ceremony and offered well-wishes for fertility and continued to appear in the detached palace through 1882.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>The Wedding Ceremony (King/Queen)</th>
<th>Folding Screen Placed in the Detached Palace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1802</td>
<td>King Sunjo/Queen Sunwon, Andong Kim-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1819</td>
<td>King Ikjong/Queen Sinjeong, Pungyang Cho-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1837</td>
<td>King Heonjong/Queen Hyohyeon, Andong Kim-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>King Heonjong/Queen Hyojeong, Namyang Hong-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>King Cheoljong/Queen Cheolin, Andong Kim-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td>King Gojong/Queen Myeongsseong, Yeoheung Min-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>King Sunjong/Queen Sunmyeong, Yeoheung Min-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*Table 1. Royal Weddings in the Nineteenth Century and Making Folding Screens)*

G: Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi
B: Bird and Animal
H: Hundreds of Children

The main subject of the painting was a general-turned-king named Guo Ziyi (697–781) from the Tang Dynasty in China, who had suppressed the revolt of An Lushan (703–57) in the year 755. As a result of his distinguished service to the imperial court, he was made a prince. Guo had many children—fifteen in total, eight sons and seven daughters—and lived a long life, reaching the age of almost eighty-five. He symbolized a person who had been blessed by heaven. So *Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi* was called *Guo Ziyi Palja-Chilseo-Do*, which can be translated as “Painting of Guo Ziyi Who Has Eight Sons (Palja) and Seven Sons-in-Law (Chilseo).” There was also a novel, *Guobunyang-Jeon*, which described the life of Guo. Both the novel and the painting were popular among the upper class in nineteenth-century Korea.

Why did the *Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi* suddenly appear in royal weddings in nineteenth-century Korea? According to an analysis from art history, the painting did not appear anywhere in China. It is said that the
painting was created during the late Joseon by combining several features from other paintings which had different themes.\textsuperscript{16}

The first reference to the painting appears in \textit{Eoje-si}, a poem written by King Sukjong (r. 1674–1720).\textsuperscript{17} There are actually two poems written by the king that contain references to the painting.\textsuperscript{18} King Sukjong bestowed both the poems and the painting on his successor who later would become King Kyeongjong (r. 1720–24):

\begin{quote}
\textit{Giving the painting \textit{Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi} to my son.}

\textit{Traditionally, it is said that Guo Ziyi was a very blessed man}
\textit{There are sons, sons-in-laws, and grandchildren together in the painting}
\textit{It is not an accident that the painting was drawn on canvas}
\textit{Do put the picture next to you and appreciate it at all times}
\textit{Receive every happiness in the world and longevity}
\end{quote}

King Kyeongjong, who in 1696 married the daughter of Sim ho, later Queen Danui Sim-ssi (1686–1718), had suffered from diseases after his birthmother Huibin Jang-ssi (d. 1701) passed away. So King Sukjong gave the painting to his son, hoping that his son, who was weak and had no children, would be like the main character, Guo Ziyi, who lived a long life free from disease and blessed by many children.

Prior to the sudden appearance of the painting in 1802, there had been a continuous decrease in the number of royal children, especially after the reign of...
King InJo (r. 1623–49).\(^1\) The decrease in the number of royal children from the seventeenth century caused a variety of political problems related to succession to the throne in the eighteenth century. Finally, in the nineteenth century, as the power of the royal family weakened, its authority fell as well. For example, in the nineteenth century, King Heonjong (r. 1834–49) had no children to take over his throne and was forced to adopt a son from a collateral line. This son, who became King Cheoljong (r. 1849–63), had no successor either. As a result, King Gojong, the heir of King Cheoljong, also came from a collateral line. The more the royal family desired fertility, the more “eight sons and seven daughters” became the goal of the royal family. The placement of the folding screen with the painting *Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi* in the detached palace, where the women were educated, reveals that for women the duty of delivering children became more important than ever.

**Royal Women in the Nae-Myeongbu**

Before examining childbirth among royal women during the nineteenth century, one must first examine how the hierarchy among royal women was solidified through a system of royal concubinage put in place to ensure numerous offspring for the royal family. The system of royal concubines started being discussed during the early Joseon Dynasty. By the reign of King Seongjong (r. 1469–94), regulations concerning concubines had an achieved statutory form.\(^2\) A statute called for the creation of a governmental department known as *Nae-Myeongbu*. It consisted of all the women in the palace and was controlled by the queen. Within the *Nae-Myeongbu* were two groups: the *Nae-gwan* and the *Gung-gwan*. The *Nae-gwan* included royal concubines who were given a title corresponding to “one of the eight ranks of *Nae-Myeongbu*.” The *Gung-gwan* was comprised of court ladies who had a chance to become the king’s concubine and were conferred a title corresponding to “one of the ten ranks of *Nae-Myeongbu*.”

However, the statute was not fully realized, and in practice varied depending upon the situation of the royal family. During the reign of Emperor Sunjong, a couple of senior court ladies once said that the titles listed in the statute were not really given to court ladies, except during special events such as weddings and banquets of the royal family. Court ladies were usually called just *Nain*, which means “a women in the palace,” and their ordinary tasks determined their real titles.\(^3\)

Court ladies served the members of the royal family. They were forbidden to marry and were not permitted to leave the palace. In general, they were nothing but “women of the king.” Their duties included washing, cooking, cleaning, sewing, making beds, etc. Those who worked as personal maids and waited on the king in his bedroom were called *Jimil-Nain* and had the chance to receive *Seungeun*, the king’s blessing. In this case, *Seungeun* means to go to bed with the king. *Jimil-Nain* were only three to four years old when they entered service as court ladies, much younger than the age of twelve when other court ladies usually entered the palace. If they had the king’s blessing they had the chance, albeit rare, of being promoted to royal concubine.\(^4\)
There were two kinds of royal concubines: Gantaek-Hugung and Seungeun-Hugung. Gantaek-Hugung were selected from among the daughters of aristocratic families. King Taejong (r. 1400–18) made a statement that there should be three Gantaek-Hugung. This differed from China, where a king could choose nine women. Gantaek-Hugung started climbing up a ladder of titles from a higher level than Seungeun-Hugung, who are discussed below. Nevertheless, as the social distinction between wife and concubine was very strict in the late Joseon Dynasty, aristocratic families were reluctant to give their daughters away to the king to be a concubine as opposed to his queen.

Before King Seonjo (r. 1568–1608), there were some cases of a concubine giving birth to a son being elevated to the position of queen. But during later reigns, even if there was a concubine who delivered a son, the royal family preferred selecting a new queen rather than promoting a concubine. Towards the late Joseon, as clan rules became more concretized, the distinction between wife and concubine became stricter than earlier.

On the other hand, the Seungeun-Hugung was a court lady who was blessed with the king’s grace and given the title of king’s concubine. In general, Seungeun-Hugung were from the lower class. If she bore a king’s child, she was given a title. But this title was no higher than that of a Gantaek-Hugung. King Gojong had no women of the rank of Gantaek-Hugung, only those at the level of Seungeun-Hugung, eight of whom gave birth to his children. One of his concubines, Eom-ssi, had simply been a court lady until 1897, when she gave birth to the prince who would later become Youngchin-Wang. Just three days after his delivery, she was given the title of royal concubine.

According to the Book of Genealogical Lineage of the Joseon Royal Family, during the entire Joseon Dynasty there were a total of 273 children in the royal family. Of these, 93 children had been delivered by queens and 180 were from royal concubines, some two thirds of the total. Of the 273 royal children, 151 were sons and 122 were daughters, namely there were more sons than daughters. The statistics show that the practice of having concubines actually helped the royal family produce more offspring.
Declining Fertility among Queens

How fertile were queens in nineteenth-century Korea? How was fertility defined during this period? In order to answer these questions, I will compare Queen MyeongSeong with other Joseon-period queens, in terms of age at the time of marriage, age at the time of first delivery, the interval between deliveries, and number of the children.

In late-Joseon Korea, queens got married earlier than in previous years. In the early years of the Joseon Dynasty, the age of queens at the time of marriage was usually thirteen–fifteen years old. In the mid-seventeenth century, starting from Queen MyeongSeong, who was the wife of King Hyeonjong (r. 1659–74), the age at the time of marriage was lowered to ten–eleven years old. In the late-Joseon period, however, when the first queen happened to pass away, the king had to remarry a new queen. In this case, they called the new queen Gye-Bi, which means “a successor to the first queen.” The age at the time of marriage for the Gye-Bi was relatively high at around fifteen years old.

While age at the time of royal marriage decreased toward the late Joseon, the average age of first delivery for queens remained consistent at about twenty years old throughout the period. The interval between deliveries varied from one year to three years. Queens tended to start giving birth to children at around age twenty and stopped in their early thirties. It is clear that queens did not give birth to children throughout the normal childbearing period from age fifteen to forty-nine. There are many reasons that queens stopped giving birth, but most likely this was due to the fact that it was dangerous to give birth to children later in life, and many queens suffered from postnatal diseases.

The most fertile queen of the Joseon Dynasty was Queen Soheon, wife of King Sejong (r. 1418–50), the well-known creator of the Korean alphabet, Hangul. She had eight sons and two daughters. Looking at her pregnancies, one finds an interesting fact about the fertility of the queens during the Joseon period.

Queen Soheon married King Sejong at the age of fourteen and gave birth to their first child at the age of eighteen. In the beginning, she gave birth almost every one or two years, producing a total of six children in a row. About seven years later, she started giving birth again and delivered four more children until she reached the age of forty. It would not have been possible for the queen to raise all the children without the help of wet nurses selected from the lower class from outside the palace and babysitters who were selected among the court ladies. These women lessened the queen’s burden in raising her children so that she could give birth to several children in a row.

Due to the support of the royal family, there were no financial difficulties for raising children. But giving birth to children in quick succession could potentially cause health problems for the queen, so she needed some time to rest and regain her strength. In addition, the queen had to officially play a role in controlling the Nae-Myeongbu.

In the nineteenth century, the fertility of queens rose slightly except in the case of King Heunjong’s queen. Most royal babies died early, except for those of King Sunjo. After King Injo, the fertility of the royal family dropped notably and the death rate of royal children rose sharply. As a result, the number of living children in the royal family decreased. The death rate of royal children...
peaked during the nineteenth century. For example, among the offspring of King Cheoljong, namely one son and ten daughters, only one daughter, Princess Yeonghye, daughter of Seungeun-Hugung Sukui Beom-ssi, survived.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King</th>
<th>Queen</th>
<th>Year of Birth</th>
<th>Age at Marriage</th>
<th>Age at Delivery</th>
<th>Birth Order</th>
<th>Name of Child</th>
<th>Child's Birth Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunjo</td>
<td>Sunwon</td>
<td>1789</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Munjo</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Princess Meongon</td>
<td>1810</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>3rd</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Princess Dukon</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<td>Cheolin</td>
<td>1837</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>Myeong-seong</td>
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<td>Sunjong</td>
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<td>13</td>
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</table>

(Table 3. Fertility of Queens in Nineteenth-Century Korea)

In the late-nineteenth century, Queen MyeongSeong had four sons and one daughter in total. She married King Gojong at the age of sixteen, which was considered slightly late. From the age of twenty-one to twenty-eight, she gave birth every one to two years and had five children. The age at which she stopped giving birth appears to be somewhat early when compared with the cases of other queens. Why was this? In the nineteenth century, children of the royal family usually died soon after birth. Queen MyeongSeong’s children were not exempt from such a harsh fate. Four of her five children died shortly after birth. Also, the political situation in the late-nineteenth century was notably unstable. The royal couple was married in 1866, when a skirmish with France occurred. This period was followed by armed conflicts with other Western countries. In
1876, after the Treaty of Ganghwa was signed with Japan, Joseon was forced to open its doors to Western cultures. During this process, King Gojong did not get along with his father Heungseon-Daewongun (1820–98). In the middle of the antagonism of her husband against his father, she received death threats from her father-in-law during a military uprising in 1882. In an 1884 coup led by a third force, the Progressive Party, many relatives, including her mother, were murdered. The queen was always exposed to some kind of danger. In this situation, though her babies had died shortly after birth and only one son had survived, she could not afford to have more babies.

In sum, from the late-seventeenth century until the eighteenth century, the fertility of Joseon Dynasty queens declined. Queens who were unable to give birth to viable children all appeared during this period. As a result, the legitimate eldest son of the queen did not succeed his father to the throne. Instead, the sons of concubines had the privilege of rising to the throne. In the case of King Jeongjo (r. 1776–1800), when his Gantaek-Hugung concubine Subin Pak-si gave birth to King Sunjo (1790–1834), the royal family referred to the event as “A Great Cause for Congratulations” in 1790.

The Birthing Process among Royal Women: Sansil-cheong vs. Hosan-cheong

The birthing process in late-Joseon Korea began with preparations for delivery within the palace. At the time a royal woman became pregnant, the king usually ordered the establishment of one of two temporary organizations: the Sansil-cheong (Delivery Office for the Queen) and the Hosan-cheong (Delivery Office for Concubines). These organizations belonged to the medical center for the royal family during the Joseon Dynasty. The most notable difference between these organizations was the social status of the pregnant women.

In preparation for a birth, regulations were followed that dictated when the organizations should be set up, how they should be staffed, and what level of prenatal care the woman should receive. The major responsibility of the Sansil-cheong was to help a pregnant queen safely deliver the child. Three managerial officials, several male doctors, and two female nurses were charged with frequently checking on her health, determining what medication she should take, and preparing for emergencies. These officials were assigned to a location set up near the delivery room, where they could attend to and care for her.

Examining the case of preparations made for the delivery of Queen MyeongSeong’s third child provides one with an understanding of the process of setting up the Sansil-cheong. The Sansil-cheong for MyeongSeong was organized on January 03, 1874 (by the lunar calendar), after the doctor examined her and predicted the due-month. Though regulations stipulated that the Sansil-cheong should be set up three months in advance of the due-month, it was generally organized only one month prior. The Daily Records of the Secretariat reveals what was discussed at the time: for example, the date when the pregnant Queen MyeongSeong would be examined and the date when the Sansil-cheong should be set up. Despite being near her delivery date, preparations for the delivery were delayed, whatever the reason might be. In addition, due to a fire engulfing Gyeongbok Palace on December 10, 1873, the royal family, including the
pregnant queen, were forced to move to another palace, Changduk Palace, ten
days later on the 20th of December. The date noted for her medical examination
was scheduled for the 28th, eight days after the move.

The establishment of the Sansil-cheong signaled the beginning of the official
preparations for the delivery. This would enact strict regulations related to
childbirth to be followed not only by people inside the palace, but by those
outside the palace as well. For example, executions were postponed for 100 days,
and the imprisonment of criminals and slaughtering of animals were forbidden
for twenty-one days from the day of setting up the Sansil-cheong until twenty-one
to 100 days after delivery. In Joseon Korea, there was a widespread belief that
because everything in the world is related to one another, at least when a king’s
baby is about to be born, whatever could, even indirectly, have bad effects on it
must not be allowed to happen.

Twenty-four staff members were assigned to the Sansil-cheong. If necessary,
additional doctors and attendees could be added to the staff. First of all, there
were three high officials, including a minister, who served as administrators. The
Sansil-cheong had a Gwoncho-gwan (special high official), who was blessed with a
long life free from disease and was the father of many children. It was believed
that his merits would have positive effects on the delivery, bestowing the baby
with good health and good fortune.

The Gwoncho-gwan was in charge of the Gwoncho-je, the ritual which was
held for a newborn on the seventh day after birth. At the time of delivery, a straw
mat was spread out on the bed. Immediately after childbirth, the Gwoncho-gwan
would order his men or women to remove this mat from the delivery room and
to hang it on the top of a special door near the room for a period of seven days.
On the seventh day, when the ritual began, the Gwoncho-gwan would roll the mat
up and put it into a chest or a precious box. The chest and other items related to
“long life without diseases” were placed on a table for worship. The Gwoncho-
gwan then burned incense and made a low bow twice.

Until the late-sixteenth century, palace rules governing the delivery of
concubines were very strict, dictating that concubines give birth outside of
the palace in private homes. Only queens were allowed to give birth within
the palace. However, during the reign of King Seonjo (r. 1568–1608), two
concubines, Kim-ssi and Jeong-ssi, lost their lives after deliveries outside the
palace. Thereafter, the king permitted concubines to deliver their babies within
the palace. According to the Annals of the Joseon Dynasty, sometime between
the early-seventeenth century (1619) and the late-seventeenth century (1688),
the special organizations for delivery, Sansil-cheong and Hosan-cheong, were
institutionalized. The Sansil-cheong had some staff members that did not exist in
the Hosan-cheong, which were set up for deliveries by royal concubines. In the
Hosan-cheong, a medical doctor substituted for the Gwoncho-gwan in performing
the ritual Gwoncho-je. For instance, in 1897, the Gwoncho-je for the newborn baby
of the concubine Eom-ssi (who later became YoungChin-Wang), was officiated by
a medical doctor.

There was another difference between the Sansil-cheong and the Hosan-
cheong. The number of doctors in the Sansil-cheong was larger than that in the
Hosan-cheong. In the case of the delivery for Queen MyeongSeong, there were
sixteen medical staff on duty: eleven doctors specially assigned to the king, an
acupuncturist, two pharmacists, and two female nurses.\textsuperscript{35}

On the other hand, the medical staff assigned to the concubine Eom-ssi
numbered only six in total: two lower-level medical doctors, two staff for making
decoctions of medicinal herbs, and two female nurses.\textsuperscript{36} Without the special order
of the king, the royal physicians assigned to the king did not assist in deliveries
by royal concubines.

Despite these official regulations, in reality, the staff assigned to the Hosan-
cheong could be quite different. In the late Joseon, if a queen was unable to
produce an heir, the king would select a Gantaek-Hugung to provide him with an
heir. If she became pregnant, even though she was a concubine, a Sansil-cheong
(usually only allowed for birth by a queen) was organized for the concubine’s
delivery.

However, Seungeun-Hugung from among court ladies still had no benefits
as such. There was a court lady named Eom-ssi, who was the object of King
Gojong’s love. On September 25, 1897, she gave birth to a baby, but did not
receive the official title of royal concubine until then. On the day she successfully
delivered a boy, King Gojong ordered the organization of a Hosan-cheong for
postnatal care and following rituals. Three days after delivery, she received the
second highest title, gwiiin, and rose to become a royal concubine.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{The Delivery Room}

When preparing for the birth of a royal baby, many rooms were set aside. Among
these, the most important was the delivery room. Prior to giving birth, the queen
would live in a building called Gyotae-jeon when she was at the Gyeonbok
Palace, and in a building called Daejo-jeon when at the Changduk Palace. The
meaning of both Gyotae-jeon and Daejo-jeon here is “wishing for queens to have
many children.” For example, the first delivery room for Queen MyeongSeong
was in the Gyotae-jeon at Gyeongbok Palace. Of course, there were exceptions.
For example, for her third delivery, she lived in the Gwanmul-heon at Changduk
Palace, where the crown prince usually resided. This change in residence was
most likely due to the damage caused by the big fire at Gyeongbok Palace.

In cases of delivery by concubines, especially by a king’s favorite concubine,
the concubine’s living quarters prior to giving birth were usually located near
the king’s office. Eomssi, concubine of King Gojong, gave birth to her baby at the
Sukong-jae at Gyeongun Palace, where King Gojong was in residence during that
period.

Once the location of the delivery room was determined, it then needed to be
decorated to ensure a safe delivery and future fertility. The decorating process,
known as sansil-baeseol, transformed the space from one for daily use into a
sacred space. This was a very complicated process that required many types of
materials and people.

According to the \textit{Manual for a Queen’s Childbirth}, the delivery room was
decorated with auspicious charms. A “hasten-birth talisman” was attached to
the north wall of the delivery room to speed up the delivery process. A “tenant
talisman” was attached to the same place as a request to the Daoist gods for
permission to use the room. Both of these charms were drawn in red.
Sansil-Baeseol (産室排設)
Decorating the delivery room for safe delivery and fertility

Hasten birth talisman (催生符)
Lucky Charms
Tenant talisman (借地法)

Hidden doors
North
West
South
East

Reins (馬韁)
Hide of a white horse

The Delivery Mat

hides of flying squirrels
Hide of a white horse
Two sheets of oilpaper (油紙)
Two sheets of wool (羊毛緞)
Made of six straw mats (草席)
Made of six straw bags (磐石)
A stack of dry yellow grasses (黃草)
A special mat was placed in the delivery room, upon which the pregnant woman would lie down to give birth. The special mat consisted of several layers of different materials. At the very bottom of the mat would be placed a stack of dry yellow grass. The next layer was made of six straw bags. This was followed by a sheet of six straw mats, then two sheets of wool, upon which were layered two sheets of oilpaper, designed to collect the various secretions from the delivery. On the very top was placed the hide from a white horse. The hide would be placed so that the horse’s head faced in the direction most auspicious for a safe delivery. The horse’s tail corresponded to the direction where the placenta would be placed after delivery. The hides of two flying squirrels were then placed on either side of the horse’s head. Last, under the horse’s head was spread a type of ramie. There were also reins made out of deerskin which served as a sort of handle. This was installed on the wall behind the delivery bed for the woman to grab onto while in labor. If the delivery did not occur during the planned month, the direction deemed auspicious for a safe delivery was changed resulting in all the materials having to be rearranged to face the new direction. These materials, including the charms, special mat, and white horse’s hide were believed to help the woman giving birth to have a safe delivery and to protect her life as well as that of her newborn baby.

The Role of Women in Assisting with Delivery and Childcare

There were four groups assigned to assist royal woman with the delivery and childcare. The first group consisted of male doctors in the Sansil-cheong. The second group consisted of women who were directly involved in the birth and subsequent childcare. The third group belonged to the organization that provided a variety of delivery supplies. The last group was responsible for miscellaneous tasks. The following discussion will focus on women involved in the second group, namely in the delivery process and childcare.

There were two “female nurses” assigned to the Sansil-cheong. Their responsibilities included attending to the pregnant woman, keeping a close eye on her condition and reporting it to the male doctors, bringing to the delivery room the prescriptions that the male doctors gave them, and administering those prescriptions. These female nurses, among the best of the nurses, belonged to the medical center for the royal family. They were trained in checking the pulse, acupuncture, and gynecology.

There were also three to four women assigned to the delivery room. According to the handbook *Useful Tips for Delivery and Childcare*, which was written in the nineteenth century, these women had been “selected among those old, knowledgeable, docile, and careful women outside [the palace]” to assist with the delivery by “… hold[ing] her on the bed to help delivery.” It is possible that one of them played the role of midwife.

The rest of the women taking part in delivery were the Bongbo-Buin, the Aji, the woman’s mother, a wet nurse, and court ladies. The Bongbo-Buin was the king’s former nanny and held a high position at court. She was qualified to take part in every event of the royal family. The Aji was the queen’s lady-in-waiting and came to the palace with the queen after her wedding ceremony. She was the closest woman to the queen in the palace. The queen’s mother also entered the
palace in advance to assist her daughter during delivery. A wet nurse served as
the nanny for the newborn baby, and a babysitter was selected among the court
ladies in the palace.

Royal newborns were breastfed by a wet nurse. The wet nurse was carefully
selected to ensure the good health of the royal child. She was required to be
both healthy and have a good disposition. The wet nurse would serve the royal
child for their whole life, following them even after they became married. She
was often a slave attached to one of the government offices.

The Gungjung-balgi records the third delivery by Queen MyeongSeong,
which assessed the contribution of the women participating in delivery and
nursing. For example, some parts of the Gungjung-balgi explain how court
ladies were paid for being part of the queen’s delivery. On the seventh day after
Queen MyeongSeong gave birth, the women who had assisted in the delivery all
received money. The amount of money given to each differed according to the
roles they played during the delivery. The funds were provided by the pregnant
woman’s family and relatives. In this instance, those who received money were
court ladies, a wet nurse, a Bongbo-Buin, and an Aji. The highest ranks of the
court ladies were given 50 nyang (Joseon unit of money) respectively. The maid
attending the queen was given 30 nyang and the former wet nurse for the king 20
nyang, the wet nurse was given the least amount, 15 nyang. Other lower-ranking
court ladies in attendance to the queen were given a little money as well.

Another Gungjung-balgi notes that on the hundredth day after her childbirth,
those who helped raise the child were given cloth and firewood. These recipients
belonged to the palace where the eldest son of the king lived. The cloth and
firewood were provided by the woman’s mother-in-law. The senior court lady
among those babysitting the king’s eldest son received the largest amount among
them.

According to another Gungjung-balgi, on the same day her family gave some
money to women who were court ladies, the Aji, the Bongbo-Buin, and the wet
nurse. The amount of money given to each differed slightly from that given to
them on the seventh day. The money given to the maid attending the queen and
the former wet nurse of the king decreased slightly, while the money given to the
wet nurse increased slightly. This reveals that the role of a wet nurse caring for
the child grew more important with time.

Conclusion

Until recently, childbirth has been recognized not as a social and cultural event,
but as a merely physiological function. As the history of women has gained
importance since the late-twentieth century, pregnancy and childbirth have now
begun to receive the attention they are due.

The ruling aristocrats ran the Joseon Dynasty with the goal of establishing a
Confucian utopia. To achieve this, they adopted the Confucian patrilineal system.
As a result, it became more and more important for Joseon women to carry out
their duties of keeping house, especially giving birth and taking care of children.
Only women who fulfilled these duties exercised power in the family.

The fertility of royal women meant not only prosperity for the royal family,
but also for Joseon Korea. As a result, fertility among royal woman received
more attention than that of women of other classes. As members of the upper privileged social classes in Joseon society, royal women could deliver the king’s babies. As we have seen, there were two groups of royal women: queens and royal concubines. Royal concubines were further divided according to social status: Gantaek-Hugung and Seungeun-Hugung. While Gantaek-Hugung were selected from yangban (ruling aristocratic) families to become the king’s concubines, Seungeun-Hugung were usually selected from court ladies of a lower class.

The desire for fertility was conspicuously revealed in royal weddings. In the nineteenth century, in particular, folding screens upon which were painted the Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi were set up in the detached palace. Here, a woman from a private house outside the palace received education in preparation prior to her transformation through marriage into a royal woman. The placement of the painting sent a clear message to the young bride that having many children like Guo Ziyi was the goal of royal women.

The concubine system for the royal family’s fertility was arranged from the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty. However, the system operated differently in the early and late Joseon. As Joseon society became more Confucian, the differences between wife and concubine became more distinct and discrimination between legitimate and illegitimate children became more serious. Though this trend affected all of Joseon society, the discrimination against illegitimate children in the royal family was not as serious because they were, in the end, the king’s offspring. However, by the late Joseon, the number of concubines steadily decreased. When it comes to Gantaek-Hugung, for example, they were selected only when the queen at that time was infertile and another concubine, on behalf of her, had to give birth to a royal baby who would succeed to the throne. If the concubine gave birth to the crown prince, she earned a good position in the royal family.

Infertility among queens was quite common in seventeenth- to eighteenth-century Korea, however, fertility among queens slightly increased in the nineteenth century. However, because infant mortality was also high, the number of royal children actually did not increase.

When a royal woman got pregnant or gave birth, in order to help her deliver a baby, the king would order the establishment of one of two temporary organizations that belonged to the medical center for the royal family. The scale of these temporary organizations and the status of the people in charge were determined by the social status of the pregnant or delivering women.

In the case of a queen’s delivery, they set up a Sansil-cheong directed by three managerial officials. To prepare for an actual emergency in delivery, it had male medical doctors including a doctor for the king, and two female nurses. It was supplied by each government department with medication and necessities for delivery.

In the case of a royal concubine’s delivery, they set up the Hosan-cheong. However, unlike with Sansil-cheong, there were not three managerial officials in charge. The male doctors replaced them instead. The social status of male doctors also was not higher than those in Sansil-cheong and their number was less than
those in Sansil-cheong. Nonetheless, the medication and necessities for delivery were supplied with the same amount as in the Sansil-cheong.

After the eighteenth century, with several queens in succession being infertile, the royal family began to bring in Gantaek-Hugung in order to ensure a successor to the throne. When the selected Gantaek-Hugung got pregnant, though she was only a concubine, the king ordered the establishment of a Sansil-cheong that was similar to that of queens.

For the history of women in Joseon Korea, the theme of childbirth and childcare can show us their lives in detail. As stated above, however, the theme has been neglected and there have been few studies on the subject. This has been due in part to lack of understanding about the importance of the topic, scarce data available, and lack of an established research methodology.

By examining the deliveries of royal women’s children and the cultural system related to it, this article widens the horizon of understanding about the hierarchical system among royal women, the importance of delivery, and how the distinctions of social status were revealed in the delivery process.

Toward the nineteenth century, royal women’s deliveries began to become a political issue, as declining royal fertility diminished the royal family’s authority and the king’s power. The meaning of delivery varied between social groups, notably the royal family and the common people. To the women of the royal family, delivery was of public importance. It was state-controlled, institutionalized, and ritualized. In the process, childbirth became closely related to the Confucianism that the royal family had adopted as their political ideology, which eventually created a new culture for royal women.
Figures

Fig. 1. *Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi*. Accession Number: Deoksu 3153. Each 143.9 x 52.7cm. Panels 3 to 6 out of 8 panels. Source: http://www.museum.go.kr.

Fig. 2. *Sansil-Baesol*. 
Glossary

A Great Cause for Congratulations  GyeongsulDaegyeong  庚戌大慶
Acupuncturist  Chimui  鍼醫
Annals of the Joseon Dynasty  Joseon wangjo sillok  朝鮮王朝實錄
Babysitter  Bomo  保姆
Book of Genealogical Lineage of the Joseon Royal Family  Seomtsoon-gyebo-giryak  增修系譜記略
Book of Odes  Sigyeong  詩經
Cause for congratulations for having numerous children like swarm of grasshoppers  JongSa-Ji-Kyeung  螽斯之慶
Cause for congratulations for the kingdom  JongSa-Ji-Kyeung  宗社之慶
Clan rules  jongbeop  宗法
Concubine receiving king’s grace  Seungeun-Hugung  承恩後宮
Court ladies  gungnyeo  宮女
Daily Records of the Secretariat  Seungjeongwon ilgi  承政院日記
Detached palace  byeolgung  別宮
Diary about a Royal Concubine’s Delivery  Hosan-cheong ilgi  護產齋日記
Fertility  Dasan  多產
Formal letter of appointment made of jade  Ok-ChaekMun  玉冊文
Gods of soil and grain  SaJik  社稷
“Hasten-birth talisman”  Choesaengbu  催生符
Inner Palace Registries  Gungjung-balgi  宮中件記
King’s eldest son  WonJa  元子
King’s nanny  Bongbo-Buin  奉保夫人
King’s poetry  Eoje-si  御製詩
Main palace  Jounggung  正宮
Manual for a Queen’s Childbirth  Sansilcheongchonggyo  産室廳總規
National Code  Gyeonggukdaejeon  經國大典
Officer in charge of the Gwoncho-je  Gwoncho-gwan  推草官
Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi  Gwakbunyanghaengnakdo  郭汾陽行樂圖
Palace Matron  SangGung  尚宮
Queen’s lady-in-waiting  Aji  阿之
Receive the king’s grace  Seungeun  承恩
Ritual held on seventh day after birth  Gwoncho-je  推草祭
Royal ancestral temple  Jongmyo  宗廟
Royal physicians assigned to the king  Eoui  御醫
Successor to first queen  Gye-Bi  繼妃
“Tenant talisman”  Chajibub  借地法
Three high officials  Samjejo  三提調
Useful Tips for Delivery and Childcare  Limsanyejibub  臨產產知法
Wet nurse  Yumo  乳母
Notes

1 Brigitte Jordan 1993.
3 Kim Jisoo 2010.
4 Han Yang Myung 1999. He pointed out that the previous “folk knowledge of childbirth” has limits and advised for the studies to be more systematic.
7 Ju Youngha et al. 2005, p. 18.
8 This important source is often overlooked.
9 Taejong Sillok 太宗實錄 [Veritable Records of King Taejong], vol. 27, January 16, 1414 (the 14th year of King Taejong’s reign).
10 Danjong Sillok 端宗實錄 [Veritable Records of King Danjong], vol. 10, January 22, 1454 (the 2nd year of King Danjong’s reign). Ok-Chaek 玉冊 is a kind of book in which letters were inscribed in honor of kings’ or queens’ virtues. When a lady was installed queen, the Ok-ChaekMun was made with the installing document. Ok-ChaekMun were made of jade into which the letters were inscribed.
12 Gojong Sillok 高宗實錄 [Veritable Records of King Gojong], vol. 3, March 22, 1866 (the 3rd year of King Gojong’s reign).
13 Heonjong Sillok 憲宗實錄 [Veritable Records of King Heonjong], vol. 14, July 18, 1847 (the 13th year of King Heonjong’s reign).
14 A hanging board in 1730, 22.5 × 62 cm., National Palace Museum of Korea, Seoul.
15 Sukjong Sillok 肅宗實錄 [Veritable Records of King Sukjong], vol. 30, April 27, 1696 (the 22nd year of King Gojong’s reign); and vol. 37, September 14, 1696 (the 28th year of King Gojong’s reign).
16 Yi Seong-mi 1994, p. 87; see also Park Eunkyeong 2012, p. 93.
19 Kim Jiyoung 2011.
20 Lee Mi Sun 2012.
21 Kim Yongsuk, pp. 4–87.
23 Taejong Sillok 太宗實錄 [Veritable Records of King Taejong], vol. 3, January 08, 1402 (the 2nd year of King Taejong’s reign).
26 Jongyu-nyeon Hosan-cheong-So-Ilgi.
27 Kim Jiyoung 2010b, appendix 1.
28 Kim Yongsuk, p. 256.
29 Diary of the Royal Secretariat, vol. 50, December 01, 1873 (the 10th year of King Gojong’s reign).
Ibid., vol. 50, December 24, 1873 (the 10th year of King Gojong’s reign).

Ibid., vol. 50, December 25, 1873 (the 10th year of King Gojong’s reign).

Ibid., vol. 50, December 30, 1873 (the 10th year of King Gojong’s reign).


Jongyu-nyeon Hosan-cheong-So-Ilgi (K2-3618).

Diary of the Royal Secretariat, vol. 50, February 14, 1874 (the 11th year of King Gojong’s reign).

Jongyu-nyeon Hosan-cheong-So-Ilgi (K2-3618).

Kim Jiyoun 2010a.

Limsan-Yeji-Bup 臨産豫知法 (K6-4861). Seongnam: Jangseo-gak Library, Academy of Korean Studies.

Sunjo Sillok 純祖實錄 [Veritable Records of King Sunjo], vol. 12, August 11, 1809 (the 9th year of King Sunjo’s reign). The selection process for wet nurses was also described in Donguibo-gan [Principles and Practices of Eastern Medicine], which is an encyclopedic bible of medical knowledge and treatment techniques, compiled in Korea in 1613. It was edited by Heo Jun with the collective support of medical experts and literati according to royal instructions.
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Fertility and Childbirth among Royal Women / Kim


Kim Jiyoung studies cultural and gender history of Korea. She received her Ph.D. from the AKS Graduate School of Korean Studies in Korea. She was a researcher at the Jangseogak Archives in Korea from 2003 to 2010, and held a postdoctoral fellowship at Seoul National University in Korea from 2011 to 2012. She is a researcher at the Institute of Cultural Studies at Seoul National University. She has taught “Korean History and Culture,” “Introduction to Cultural Anthropology,” and “Cross-Cultural Studies” at Hansung University and the Academy of Korean Studies. She is participating in publishing a series of books called “A Library of the Royal Family’s Culture.”