

*International Journal of Korean Humanities and Social Sciences*

vol. 10/2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14746/kr.2024.10.04>

## **IMAGE OF JOSEON WOMEN IN THE EYES OF EUROPEANS IN THE 19TH CENTURY: TRUTH AND MISUNDERSTANDING**

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**Abstract:** This research examines the depiction of Joseon women in the eyes of 19th-century European visitors, juxtaposing it with historical records from Joseon itself, particularly Sabeobpumbo. European accounts, influenced by Orientalism, often portrayed Korean women as oppressed, passive figures. However, these narratives also captured moments where women exerted agency and autonomy, challenging stereotypes of submission. Through comparative analysis of European travelogues and Sabeobpumbo, the study highlights that women in Joseon played active roles in family and community life, often stepping beyond traditional boundaries. This nuanced exploration aims

## *Boram HAN: Image of Joseon women in the eyes...*

to reveal the complexities of women's lives in Joseon, challenging both contemporary and modern misconceptions.

**Keywords:** Joseon Women, Sabeobpumbo, European visitor, Europeans' Records, Women's Roles

### 19세기 유럽인의 눈에 비친 조선 여성의 이미지: 오해와 진실

**초록:** 본 연구는 19세기 유럽 방문자들의 시각에서 본 조선 여성의 묘사를 조선의 역사 기록, 특히 《사법품보》와 비교하여 분석한다. 유럽인들의 기록은 오리엔탈리즘의 영향을 받아 조선 여성을 억압되고 수동적인 인물로 묘사하는 경우가 많았다. 그러나 이러한 서술들은 또한 여성들이 주체적으로 행동하는 순간들을 포착하여 순종적인 이미지에 도전하는 모습을 담고 있다. 본 연구는 유럽의 여행기와 《사법품보》를 비교 분석함으로써 조선 여성들이 가족과 공동체 생활에서 적극적인 역할을 했음을 강조하며, 전통적인 경계를 넘어서는 모습을 보여준다. 이러한 다층적 탐구를 통해 조선 여성의 삶의 복잡성을 드러내고, 현대와 당시의 잘못된 인식을 바로잡고자 한다.

**핵심어:** 조선 여성, 사법품보, 서양인 방문객, 유럽인 기록, 여성의 역할

## 1. Introduction: Unveiling the Imperialist Perspective

Since the opening of Joseon's port in the late nineteenth century, many Europeans including Britons, Germans, and French, traveled to Joseon. They documented their experiences and observations in travelogues, often focusing on the women of Joseon. These accounts frequently depict women as victims of societal inferiority, enduring isolation and patriarchal oppression, and being subjected to exhausting labor. Some even likened them to slaves. These views highlight the Europeans' limited knowledge and understanding of foreign cultures, stemming from the lens of Orientalism. It described the East as uncivilized from Western imperialist perspectives. However, the

Europeans also recorded instances that challenged the prevailing stereotype of submissive victimhood, such as wives who abandoned or even physically abused their husbands. As such, these travelogues provide a more nuanced and realistic perspective of Joseon society, informed by a range of experiences and perspectives.

While it is true that the Europeans' outsider status sometimes led to prejudice and misunderstandings about the reality of women's lives, their perspective could also be objective. Therefore, this research aims to examine the experiences of Joseon women in greater detail by comparing and analyzing the external perspectives of Europeans with the internal reality of Joseon society.

The accounts of Korean women by Westerners who came to Korea in the late 19th and early 20th centuries have been discussed in the literature. Some studies have examined the records of seven Westerners who visited Korea during this period, describing their impressions of Korea and Koreans, including notable content about Korean women (Finch 2012). Other studies have focused specifically on descriptions of Korean women in Western accounts (이 배용 Lee 2002), while some have noted that the portrayals of Korean women created by Westerners were grounded in Orientalist discourse (김희영 Kim 2008).

More recent studies have noted that, although Western records were grounded in imperialist discourse, the narratives themselves showed inherent contradictions and ambiguities (강정구 Kang 2016). Research has also highlighted how Western missionaries documented women's subjectivities without stereotyping the status and lives of Korean women (김소영 Kim 2021).

Building on these existing studies, this paper seeks to examine the actual experiences of women in Korea by comparing European records from the late 19th and early 20th centuries with those from Joseon.

To undertake this research, the female-related records of nine European writers from the relevant period were reviewed. The primary focus was on examining the imperialist perspective evident in their

accounts and assessing the knowledge they derived from their encounters. I then distinguished between their firsthand observations and their preconceived notions upon entering Joseon. Furthermore, a comparative analysis was conducted by examining the recorded cases of women found within The Judicial Records, *Sabeobpumbo* (사법품보; 司法稟報).<sup>1</sup> This extensive collection of court records from Joseon provides a vivid depiction of women's lives that is rarely documented.

By combining these two sources, we can gain a richer understanding of the reality of women which has often been obscured due to limited documentation. Moreover, this research offers an opportunity to deepen cross-cultural understanding by examining the prevalent misconceptions that emerged during the initial encounters between Europe and Joseon in the late nineteenth century.

## **2. Differentiating Hearsay from First-Hand Accounts in European Narratives**

European accounts of Joseon women often present contradictory statements. On one hand, they are depicted as marginalized and oppressed individuals without any rights and freedoms. On the other hand, they are portrayed as being safeguarded and esteemed within their social roles.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sabeobpumbo* is judicial records from the late Joseon Dynasty to the Korean Empire (1894-1907) with details of various civil and criminal cases, testimonies from people involved, and sentences from the state. It is currently in the possession of the Seoul National University Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies. A total of 180 books remain, including 128 books of “*사법품보 (갑)*” *Sabeobpumbo (Gap)* and 52 books of “*사법품보 (을)*” *Sabeobpumbo (Eul)*.

## **2.1 Contrasting Narratives of Female Seclusion**

### **2.1.1 Depictions of Marginalized and Oppressed Women**

Europeans described women as lacking rights and freedom. They believed that women lived in isolation from the world, similar to social outcasts, and evaluated this as a barbaric custom. They mentioned that if a married woman disobeyed her mother-in-law, she would face harsh physical punishment, emphasizing the barbarism of the East.

Siegfried Genthe, a German journalist who visited Korea in 1901, wrote the following about Korean women:

“What a disappointment European women must feel regarding the lives of Korean women! Here, women have neither rights nor freedom. They live secluded from the world like sinners and are more strictly regulated than the women of India, where the higher the rank, the longer they sit behind a curtain. When will this barbaric custom yield to a system of freedom” (Genthe 1905: 229)?

He wrote that Korean women live in seclusion and under strict regulation, with neither rights nor freedom, and he described these customs as barbaric. This perspective reflected the imperialist view of the East as barbaric, common among Westerners. However, while he lamented the so-called “barbarism” of Korea, he immediately followed with a positive portrayal of Korea’s potential.

“But even in this land of sleeping fairy tales, a new era is dawning. The Korean people, with their broad-mindedness and bright intellect, will likely be swept up in the wave of Western thought and institutions, perhaps even more quickly than their neighbors. During my last visit to a German school in Seoul, I was convinced that Korea would one day undergo rapid change. The thriving and developing

*Boram HAN: Image of Joseon women in the eyes...*

German language schools are clear evidence of the limitless potential of the Korean people” (Genthe 1905: 229).

In Genthe’s view, Korean women and the state of Korea itself were steeped in barbarism, yet his hope for Korea lay in its infinite potential for Western-style progress. Genthe’s understanding and recognition of Joseon was confined to acknowledging the possibility of Western development, illustrating the limitations in the typical Western perspective on Korea at the time.

In the eyes of Europeans, who viewed Korean women as barbarically oppressed, marriage was seen as a primary means of subjugating Korean women. Emile Bourdaret, a Frenchman employed as a railroad engineer by the Korean Imperial Government around 1903, meticulously documented the Korean wedding process (Bourdaret 1904: 149-155). The Korean bride’s appearance on her wedding day was portrayed as one of suffering, filled with oppressive elements.

The bride is dressed in elaborate attire, similar to the robes of palace noble ladies, and wears a large, inflated wig on her head, which is so heavy it nearly crushes her. She is unable to see anything during her wedding day, as her eyebrows are entirely glued down. She must endure the day as a “doll,” unable to open her eyes, speak, or smile. As part of the ceremony, she undergoes a test: two women sit between the groom and the bride and say things so funny that they bring tears to one’s eyes, to see if she will laugh. While the groom is free to laugh as much as he wants, the bride is expected to suppress any reaction, even an eyebrow twitch, lest she be judged as disrespectful. The test does not end there. When the ceremony is over and the newlyweds are alone, the groom loudly declares that he does not want to marry someone he cannot talk to or see. If the bride protests indignantly, the marriage is annulled. Bourdaret notes that such annulments due to the bride’s reaction were not uncommon. Thus, the bride, who should be the main figure in the ceremony, spends one of the most important days of her life without being able to see, hear, or express herself in any way.

Even if a bride endures all these trials and proves herself “worthy” of becoming a man’s wife, the path that follows is not a happy one, but rather one of greater hardship. The fearsome Joseon mother-in-law awaits her. As a daughter-in-law, she is expected to endure mistreatment for a long time, patiently awaiting the day when she, too, can become a mother-in-law. With very few exceptions, the bride embarks on a harsh, thorny path.

According to Bourdaret’s account, Korean women of that era were like slaves, with no rights, and forced to spend their lives in abuse. But can any society survive if it relentlessly oppresses some of its members? The Europeans of the time not only failed to answer this question but also showed no interest in considering it, as Korea, in their minds, was simply a “barbaric” country in the East.

## **2.1.2 Portrayals of Protected and Empowered Women**

However, the actual experiences witnessed by Europeans differed from these prevailing perceptions. Europeans depicted women in Joseon as one-sided victims, deprived of all the fundamental human rights to see, hear, and speak—everything a person should be able to enjoy. However, they also testified to a reality in which Korean women were respected in ways that are difficult for modern people to imagine. They observed that Korean women enjoyed a degree of protection and exercised a certain level of freedom. An instance was recorded where a man carried a fatigued woman on his shoulder after a prolonged walk on the street (Varat and Chaillé-Long 1994: 95). In addition, being a mother of a son granted women specific legal safeguards. For example, if the mother took extreme action against her son's persistent mistreatment, the law would provide her with protection. These examples show the honor and shelter they received within the family unit.

*Boram HAN: Image of Joseon women in the eyes...*

One of the most intriguing aspects of the respect given to women in Joseon was the existence of designated times and spaces where women could move freely. Europeans were particularly fascinated by the gender-specific nighttime curfew, which applied only to men. In Seoul, at sunset, a bell would ring, signaling everyone to return home, and travel was restricted until dawn. However, women were exempt from this rule. During curfew hours, they could move around freely without any restrictions. If they encountered a man, he was required to turn his face towards the wall to avoid looking at her.

In his description of Seoul's bell tower, Emile Bourdaret introduced the Joseon curfew system of *injeong* (人定) and *paru* (罷漏). From 1401, during the reign of King Taejong, until 1895, during King Gojong's era, the *injeong* bell was rung at sunset to signal the beginning of the curfew and the *paru* bell at sunrise to announce its end. Bourdaret explained that this curfew system, marked by the ringing of bells, was intended to allow women to move freely through the streets without fear of encountering unruly men, enabling them to roam as the true hostesses of the city. He described this and other aspects of Joseon as mysterious, quaint, and astonishing.

“An hour after sunset, the bell rang twenty-eight times, signaling men to hurry home. If they didn't, the police would catch them, detain them overnight, and release them the next day only after administering ten lashes with a rod. The ringing of the bell was intended to open up the city for women. They could move about as hostesses in the city, if only for a few hours, without fear of encountering unruly men. At midnight, the bell rang thirty-three times, and soon the city gates reopened, signaling the start of a new day. Thus, this country was once shrouded in deep mystery, appearing quite strange. Its attire, customs, and beliefs were all remarkable” (Bourdaret 1904: 111-113).

Emma Kroebel, a German woman who arrived in Korea in 1905 as a protocol secretary to King Gojong, left the following record of the atmosphere she observed and heard about:

“Until recently, men could wander the streets and public squares during the day, while women were only allowed to go out at night.

For women who lived secluded and confined lives, nighttime was the only time they were granted the freedom to go out without the risk of encountering men. Although many of these restrictions have been relaxed now, women of the upper class still travel in covered palanquins when they must go out during the day” (Kroebel 1909: 204-205).

For Joseon women, who lived isolated and confined in their daily lives, nighttime was a time of freedom without the risk of encountering men. Considering that isolation was a defining characteristic of the image of Joseon women, the freedom they enjoyed at night goes beyond modern imagination. Although daytime belonged to men, nighttime was left as a time reserved for women. Men were expected to respect this time and space exclusively for women.

French folklorist Charles Varat’s account captures the respect Joseon men showed for the time and space designated for women.

“Women were not subject to this curfew, and if a man happened to encounter a woman on the streets at night, it was customary for him to turn his face towards the wall to avoid looking at her. Thus, the freedom to walk the capital’s streets after nine o’clock at night belonged solely to women. Ironically, noblewomen, who would never show their faces in public during the day, could freely reveal themselves and breathe in the night air under the cover of darkness. After leaving this blissful freedom to the women, we hurried back to the embassy, where the night guard had already begun” (Varat and Chaillé-Long 1994: 95).

If a Joseon man found himself in a time designated for women, he was expected to be mindful of his presence as an uninvited guest. During the nighttime, if a man encountered a woman on the street, he would turn his face towards the wall to avoid causing her any discomfort, respecting her as the rightful presence of that time. The daytime scene was not entirely male-dominated either. European accounts reveal that women comprised about half of the public marketplace, and the number of women walking the streets of Seoul

far exceeded their initial expectations. Europeans also noted the polite and respectful behavior shown by men toward women they encountered on the streets.

The Neo-Confucian principles that governed Joseon society required each individual to fulfill their role within their designated place. Under this foundation, men and women were expected to remain committed to their respective roles. It was perhaps inevitable that Europeans, with their limited perspective, failed to fully understand the principles that shaped Joseon society. To them, Joseon appeared to be a society that barbarically oppressed women. However, the Joseon they observed firsthand also offered women certain freedoms of time and space. While these instances challenged the biases they held, they merely recorded these observations without attempting any further interpretation.

## **2.2 Contrasting Narratives of Women's Empowerment**

### **2.2.1 Women as Passive, Servant-like Figures**

Another European stereotype of Joseon women is that they do not have any authority. They explained that women were considered subservient to men like maidservants, and this mindset was deeply ingrained in the consciousness of society since a long time ago. In the eyes of Europeans, Korean women have consistently been subjugated to men, embracing discrimination as an inherent facet of their being.

Andre Eckardt, a Catholic missionary from Germany who came to Korea, documented his experiences staying in a common farming family in Korea in his book. He recorded his observations of the lady of the house as follows.

“After about half an hour, it was already evening. The lady of the house—who didn’t appear to be over 30, though her husband called her ‘manura’ (meaning ‘kind old woman’)—brought a small dining table into the room, carefully placed it in front of me, and bowed deeply, just like the children in the village school. When women bow, they slowly kneel, sit down, and respectfully lower their heads to the floor with dignity. She didn’t say a word while bowing, as silence was considered etiquette for women.

When I briefly expressed my thanks, she nodded once more, then backed out of the room. I was truly surprised to see even rural people observing such etiquette. This behavior was influenced by Confucian customs, or perhaps by *Ye-ghi* (禮記, *Book of Rites*), a classic text on etiquette related mainly to religious ceremonies. However, it also stemmed from an ancient mentality deeply ingrained in this society, which viewed women as subservient to men. Although democratic and political ideas like women’s suffrage have begun to take root, this deeply ingrained attitude persists, especially in rural areas, even to this day” (Eckardt 1950: 94).

While observing the polite demeanor of Korean women, Eckardt noted that silence was considered a form of etiquette for them. Regarding this aspect of Korean women, he concluded that, for a long time, women in Korea had been regarded as servants to men, a mindset deeply embedded in the consciousness of the Korean people. He further commented that, even though Western democratic ideals had begun to emerge in Korea, the Korean attitude of looking down on women was ingrained to the core. According to him, Korean women remained confined to a low, servant-like status.

Mrs. Bishop, an Englishwoman, discussed the status of Korean women as follows.

“Korean women have always borne the yoke. They accept inferiority as their natural lot; they do not look for affection in marriage, and probably the idea of breaking custom never occurs to them. Usually, they submit quietly to the rule of the *belle-mère*, and those who are insubordinate and provoke scenes of anger and scandal are reduced to order by a severe beating when they are women of the people. But in

### *Boram HAN: Image of Joseon women in the eyes...*

the noble class custom forbids a husband to strike his wife” (Bishop 1898: 143).

In Bishop’s view, Korean women lived under a yoke, like oxen or horses. They accepted discrimination from men as a given and had no expectation of joy in married life. Furthermore, their passivity made it impossible to expect any initiative to break free from old, harmful customs. To her, Korean women were seen as beings who had to endure endless suffering, bearing punishment and abuse from their mothers-in-law without protest.

## **2.2.2 Empowered Women Sharing Authority**

However, the Korean women that Europeans actually observed did not remain merely passive beings. The actual experiences of Europeans in the presence of women contradicted these stereotypes. They observed occasions where women wielded equal authority as husbands within the family structure. In this regard, Frenchman Charles Varat wrote the following.

“The incident took place at a tavern called Saesulmak. I was suddenly jolted awake from a rare afternoon nap by an unexpected and terrible scream. I hurriedly opened the door and rushed outside, only to find several members of our party tangled up in a fight with some villagers, with one of them pinned down under one of our carriage drivers, struggling to get free. Realizing the gravity of the situation, I immediately grabbed the driver by the wrist, lifted him up, and threw him onto a pile of straw stacked in the yard. Then, I helped the villager on the ground to his feet. When I whistled, my interpreter and the two soldiers guarding me pushed through the angry villagers who were closing in and quickly surrounded me. I loudly asked who had started the fight. At that moment, I witnessed something I had never seen in China or Japan: the tavern mistress, displaying the full dignity of a country woman, boldly stepped forward and scolded our driver, declaring that he was the cause of all the trouble. .... The proud

tavern mistress thanked me multiple times for settling the disturbance. As we left, I asked the interpreter how a Korean woman, who had been so shy and hidden when we first arrived, could step forward so confidently in the midst of such a dangerous situation. He replied that, since the incident happened while her husband was absent, she had no choice but to intervene, even if she might not have wanted to. He added that, in this country, even among the upper classes, women often exercised undeniable authority” (Varat and Chaillé-Long 1994: 132-133).

In this way, Charles Varat bore witness to the dignified manner in which Joseon women took charge of resolving issues in the absence of their husbands. The actions of the innkeeper at the tavern where he stayed during his travels through Joseon left a strong impression on him. When he first arrived, the innkeeper appeared shy and passive, hiding herself from view. However, when he was awakened from his nap by sudden shouts, the innkeeper’s demeanor had completely transformed. The situation was as follows: a fight had broken out between one of his carriage drivers and a local villager. As Varat tried to intervene, seeing one villager struggling beneath a driver, he witnessed a scene he had never encountered in China or Japan. The innkeeper confidently stepped forward, declaring that the driver was at fault, and loudly scolded him, assigning blame. The driver, visibly unsettled, exhibited the typical nervous behavior of someone in the wrong. When Varat informed the villagers, through his interpreter, that he would dismiss the troublemaking driver, the villagers’ hostility subsided. Once the situation was resolved, the dignified innkeeper thanked him multiple times for restoring order.

After the situation was resolved and they resumed their journey, Charles Varat was curious. He asked his Korean interpreter, “When we arrived in the village, the Korean woman seemed so shy and hidden—how could she step forward so boldly in the midst of such a dangerous situation?” The interpreter replied that since the incident had occurred in her husband’s absence, she had no choice but to take action, even if she might not have wanted to. This testified to the fact that women in Joseon shared in their husbands’ social roles and had an

*Boram HAN: Image of Joseon women in the eyes...*

identity tied to this joint responsibility. The interpreter also added, “In Joseon, even among the upper classes, it is not uncommon for women to exercise undeniable authority.”

British diplomat Charles Campbell also had a similar experience. He recorded an instance where, upon entering a rural village in Joseon, he needed assistance from the village chief, but in the chief’s absence, his wife stepped in to fulfill his role.

“I usually relied on the village chief for help, and when I heard that he was absent, it seemed impossible to proceed on my journey. However, the village chief’s wife stepped in for her husband, proving to be a more capable collaborator than even she might have expected. She was a splendid, full-figured middle-aged woman who commanded the porters on what tasks to perform, sent for additional porters in a hurry, and handled reluctant individuals with remarkable eloquence. She even offered makgeolli to several travelers stranded by the rain. She showed enough composure to extend her kind attention to a mud-covered foreigner and his dog, whom she had never seen before. I had been thinking that if these facts were widely known, the women of this region could hold higher positions in society and exert greater influence than previously imagined. The chief’s wife only served to confirm this belief” (Campbell 1891: 138-139).

The wife skillfully directed the porters and mobilized the villagers to assist the foreigner by carrying all of his party’s belongings to where they needed to be. Witnessing this scene, Campbell was astonished, asserting that “Korean women attained a higher status and exerted a greater influence than what might be expected in theory” (Campbell 1892: 252-253). These firsthand encounters shattered the prevailing myth of female subordination in the East, leaving Europeans amazed at the reality they encountered.

The Korean women that Europeans observed at the time were characterized by their sense of responsibility for the community and their authority as community members. They established their positions as key figures within their communities, sharing their husbands’ authority, and taking over male roles seamlessly in the absence of their husbands. Joseon women were constantly striving to

stand as autonomous individuals within the bounds of their mobility. This effort was not merely directed toward achieving the ideal position expected of women in Joseon society, such as being a submissive and virtuous woman. Rather, they navigated and transcended boundaries to take on roles that society typically expected of men—serving as community leaders and practicing Neo-Confucian principles as proactive agents. Even though Europeans held preconceived notions, upon witnessing Korea firsthand, they accurately identified and documented this significant aspect of Korean women’s lives.

### **3. A Comparative Analysis of Women’s Roles in Sabeobpumbo (司法稟報) and Europeans’ Records**

#### **3.1 Woman in Sabeobpumbo (司法稟報)**

It is intriguing that the depiction of Korean women directly observed by Europeans is also found in the historical records of *Sabeobpumbo*. Many of the women depicted in *Sabeobpumbo* were far from passive or subordinate, aligning with the observations made by Europeans. Women represented their family members and pursued personal resolutions or legal actions, highlighting their role as active agents within their families (김경숙 Kim 2023; Kim 2016). A notable example is the case involving the family cemetery, where a woman took the initiative to solve the problem. When an unauthorized grave was secretly constructed near her father-in-law’s grave, widow Noh took matters into her own hands. Carrying her young child, she personally dug up the grave and became a litigant in the case. While her male relative was initially accused, she testified that she was the one responsible, explaining that the relative was a feeble one who could not be deeply involved. The judge recognized and commended

Widow Noh's actions as a demonstration of filial duty despite the fact that she was a weak female. By actively addressing her family's challenges, she asserted her agency and sought recognition as a human being within society (*Sabeobpumbo*).

Another example is the case of Widow Jo. When a man named Gangju secretly built a grave near her family's ancestral tomb, Jo went to the site at midnight, dug up the grave, and revealed the coffin before surrendering herself to the authorities. The judge doubted that Widow Jo could have done this alone at night and ordered her male relatives to be brought in for questioning. This reflects the societal belief at the time that women could not be the direct agents of acts of retribution. Nevertheless, the women of that era demonstrated their agency by protecting their family's honor and positioning themselves as the legal representatives of their households.

Moreover, *Sabeobpumbo* also depicts women directly seeking revenge for their husbands or parents. For instance, in one case, the wife Seo went to the location where her husband's murderer was being investigated and personally stabbed him to death (Han 2022: 110-112). The judge regarded her act of revenge positively, acknowledging her strength despite being an ordinary woman. In another case, the Song sisters beat the ex-husband to death with a stick in response to his involvement in their mother's death. Once again, the judge viewed their actions as an act of justice in accordance with human decency, avenging their parent's enemy (Han 2022: 112-113).

These real-life cases demonstrate that women recognized themselves as active participants within the family community.

### **3.2 Common Testimonies in Foreign Records and *Sabeobpumbo* (司法稟報)**

European visitors to Korea in the nineteenth century viewed the country through the lens of Orientalism, shaping their perceptions of

Joseon women based on preconceived notions of obedience and sensuality associated with the Orient. To them, Joseon women were naturally seen as victims of submission and discrimination.

However, a different story emerges when examining the diverse sources documenting that period, including foreign records and *Sabeobpumbo*. These sources reveal females in active roles as agents of their time. They shared authority and responsibilities within the family same as their husband, and, moreover, sought to establish their position as universal human beings by actively demonstrating behaviors traditionally associated with men, such as filial duty towards their biological parents beyond their in-laws.

The women, who played a significant role in history, were faithfully fulfilling their responsibilities within the reality they lived in. Society, in turn, accepted their roles. Moreover, they transcended the limitations imposed by society, continuously expanding their territory beyond the boundaries traditionally seen as male domains. The proactive and autonomous actions of these women were vividly described by European visitors who witnessed them firsthand.

#### **4. Conclusion: The Imperialist View and the Limitations of Modern Perspectives**

During the imperialist era of the nineteenth century, Europeans often depicted the Korean people as barbaric, viewing Joseon through the lens of European cultural norms. For this reason, they failed to recognize the distinct characteristics of the collective culture of Korea and the resulting differences in lifestyle.

Interestingly, similar limitations can also be found in the modern Korean perspective. Within a society where Western modernity has taken root, nineteenth-century Joseon is often perceived as anything but modern. Women, who were denied equal rights as men, were typically seen as passive, oppressed, and abused within

Joseon society. Modern Koreans cannot deny that they view their own traditions through a Western lens. For this reason, the true nature of women from the late 19th to early 20th century has remained largely obscured both in Korea and in the West.

However, the women documented in historical records tell a different story. They constantly fought for their identity as universal human beings. Moreover, Joseon society itself underwent transformations through the interactions with the activism of women. This research aims to uncover the realities of history that have shaped modern Korea and foster cultural understanding between Europe and Korea.

### **Conflict of interest statement:**

The author states that there is no conflict of interest to disclose.

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*Boram HAN: Image of Joseon women in the eyes...*

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