

The Imjin War and the Official Discourse of Chastity*

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Patriarchal societies use the concept of chastity as a control mechanism for female sexuality. In Chosŏn society, which was based on Confucianism, female chastity was seen as a method to achieve social cohesion, and it was especially emphasized in the rectification of customs and the establishment of order. The concept of chastity underwent some changes, however, following the Imjin War (also known as Hideyoshi Invasions) of 1592-1598. The war produced many cases of women dying for the sake of chastity and even in the chaos of war, the government did its utmost to uncover such cases and give them meaning. These were seen as acts of resisting the enemy and not yielding to the violence of the enemy army. As soon as the war ended, the work of commemorating not only loyal ministers and filial sons but also chaste women started in earnest. During and right after the war, female sexuality, interpreted as the object of the enemy's conquest, was mobilized as part of the strategy to recover the state's reputation. Accordingly, the state wanted to show, through examples of women who died to uphold their chastity, values of fidelity and moral obligation. After the war, reconstruction was the most urgent task facing the government but rather than material reconstruction, spiritual reconstruction by remedying the corruption of vital morality by the war was regarded as the more vital task. Thus, as is reflected in its changing discourse, female chastity, as an ideology, was used to reconstruct a country ravaged by war.

Keywords: Chastity, Imjin War (1592-1598), Confucianism, gender, sexuality

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The Concept of Chastity

Patriarchal societies always aim to control female sexuality. As such, Confucian societies have regarded chastity as a vital mechanism for controlling female sexuality and maintaining social cohesion. Confucian theories of social cohesion emphasize the importance of the subservience of subordinates to superiors, younger to older, and women to men. The ethical terminology related to this includes loyalty (Kor. *ch'ung* 忠, Chin. *zhong*), filial piety (Kor. *hyo* 孝, Ch. *xiao*), and indeed chastity.

The concept of chastity may be expressed by such Sino-Korean terms as *yŏl* (Chin. *lie*), *chŏng* 貞 (Ch. *zhen*) and *chŏl* 節 (Ch. *jie*); similar in meaning to each other, they are often used together in compound words such as *chŏngjŏl* 貞節, *chŏngnyŏl* 貞烈, and *yŏlchŏl* 烈節. These terms are, however, distinguished according to the specific action being described, with *chŏng* being defined as “maintaining one’s chastity in the face of poverty and hardship” and *yŏl* being defined as “to be so overwhelmed with sadness as to give up one’s own life.”¹ By these definitions, *chŏng* refers to maintaining one’s chastity by refusing to remarry after the death of one’s husband, while *yŏl* refers to committing suicide upon the death of one’s husband. *Yŏl* is thus a much more radical action than *chŏng* since it involves suicide.

Although chastity was originally a technique for maintaining the integrity of patrilineal descent by controlling the sexuality of women, as patriarchy became more entrenched, chastity itself departed from its practical origins to become an elaborate and abstract concept. For instance, chastity was increasingly demanded even of women who were largely uninvolved in the production of descendants. In other words, just as with other concepts, chastity has been constructed within ever-changing historical contexts. From a mid-sixteenth century text, for example, we can see differences between the concept of chastity in Chosŏn Korea and Ming China.

In China, the memorial arches raised in honor of chaste widows are called “*zhenjie zhi men* 貞節之門;” the memorial arches known as “*zhenlie zhi men* 貞烈之門” are reserved for those women who commit extreme acts of chastity. In Chosŏn, however, memorial arches are referred to by only one term, *yŏllyŏ chi mun* 烈女之門. Because the women of our country all maintain their chastity, we only raise such arches to those women who have revealed really extraordinary

1. “Yŏbŏm ch’ŏmnok” 女範捷錄, in Yi Sugin [Lee Sook-in] tr., *Yŏsasŏ* 女四書 (Seoul: Yŏiyŏn, 2005), 246.

chastity. We do not otherwise divide chaste women into separate categories.²

That is to say, while in China distinctions were made between different categories of chaste women, in Chosŏn the only women who were provided with a memorial arch were those who committed suicide upon being widowed. New categories of chaste women were created, however, during the late Chosŏn period. Thus, Yi Tŏngmu (1741-1793) was able to assert:

There are three categories of chaste women. Those who maintain their chastity after widowhood are called *chŏlpu* 節婦. Those who commit suicide upon widowhood, or who commit suicide rather than submit to rape, are called *yŏlpu* 烈婦. Those who maintain their chastity to the man from whom they have received engagement gifts are called *chŏngbu* 貞婦.

While the categories of *chŏng*, *chŏl* and *yŏl* all involve the wife showing her loyalty to the husband, the fact that chastity was now expected even of women who were not married suggests that these terms had become closely associated with women's sexuality.

Although control of women's sexuality had been emphasized since the founding of the Chosŏn dynasty, these controls became more stringent later in the Chosŏn dynasty as the state increasingly treated the discourse of chastity as an ideological and political tool for strengthening social cohesion. The Imjin War (1592-1598), which is often seen as a key dividing line in the periodization of the Chosŏn Dynasty, also has important significance for women's sexuality. It is true that the war did not significantly change the pre-war understanding of women's sexuality. Rather, well-established ways of thinking about sexuality were revealed in a new form during the war. As a result, it is impossible to separate attitudes towards chastity as they existed before the war from the understanding and performance of ideal womanhood in early Chosŏn.

Official Policy on Chastity before the Imjin War

Elite desire to control the sexuality of women was already expressed in the first legal code of the Chosŏn Dynasty, the *Code of Administration of the Chosŏn Dynasty* (*Chosŏn kyŏngguk chŏn* 朝鮮經國典, 1394). The elites of early Chosŏn believed that the state had a vital role to play in controlling the licentious

2. Ŏ Sukkwan, *P'aekwan chapki* 裨官雜記 2; see the *Han'guk kojŏn chonghap database* (<http://db.itkc.or.kr/>).

desires of its subjects. In order to achieve beautiful customs and good governance it was necessary, they thought, to control sexual desires through both rites and punishments.³ In principle both men and women were to be controlled. In practice, however, limits were placed only on female sexuality, and the concept of chastity itself was one aspect of this control of female sexual desire.

The issue of women's chastity was first raised in 1406 when the remarriage of divorced women was interpreted as a violation of chastity.⁴ The "Code of Punishments" in the *Great Code of Administration* (*Kyōngguk taejōn* 經國大典) of 1461 asserts that "records should be kept of elite women who acted immorally."⁵ Examples of "immoral acts" by elite women included visiting of the natal home without permission and entering a monastery.⁶ Here "acting immorally" (*sirhaeng* 失行) should be understood to imply the loss of chastity (*silchōl* 失節), with women's "actions" being primarily understood in relation to their sexuality. In the *Great Code of Administration*, which reflects the discourse of the first seven or eight decades of the Chosŏn dynasty, the descendants of women who "act immorally" are forbidden from taking important positions in the state bureaucracy.⁷ Originally, a woman was defined as having acted immorally if she married three or more times. Eventually,

3. "Pōmgan" 犯姦 (Adultery) in *Chosŏn kyōngguk chōn*; included in Chōng Tojōn, *Sambong chip* 8, *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan* 5 (Seoul: Minjok munhwa ch'ujinhoe, 1990-1996).

4. *Taejong sillok* 06 [1406/06/09]. [Note: here the first numeral refers to the year of a king's reign (6th year of King Taejong); in brackets, the first numeral is the year according to the Western calendar, the second numeral the month (6th lunar month), and the third the day (9th day)]: "Because the spousal bond is the very source of all human relations, the 'three womanly submissions' should not be interpreted as allowing women to remarry. It is common these days for the primary wives of *yangban* men to remarry after being widowed or divorced. In some cases it is their parents who are at fault, in other cases the women gussy themselves up and arrange their own marriages. It is a blot on our customs and manners when women feel no shame at all at a second or even third marriage. We must rectify wifely morals by recording, in accordance with Koryō Law, the names of all thrice-married *yangban* wives in the *Register of Licentious Women* (*Chanyōan* 恋女案)."

5. According to the "Code of Punishments" (*hyōngjōn* 刑典) in *Kyōngguk taejōn* (Kyōngsōng [Seoul]: Chosŏn ch'ongdokpu Chungch'uwōn, 1934): "*Yangban* women who lose their chastity should be recorded in the *Register of Licentious Women* (This applies also to thrice-married women)."

6. *Sejong sillok* 13 [1431/06/25]: "The Six Codes of Administration' (*Kyōngje yukchōn* 經濟六典) states that 'the wives of *yangban* should not visit people other than their parents, their brothers, their natal uncles and aunts; those who violate this will be considered to have acted immorally;'" Also *Sejong sillok* 16 [1434/05/01]: "Women are deemed unchaste if they consort with nuns or monks in temples."

7. *Sōngjong sillok* 14 [1483/07/06].

however, the category was expanded to include even women who married twice.

It was already stipulated in early Chosŏn that “widows who maintained their chastity are to be granted ‘land to preserve faithfulness’ (*susinjŏn* 守信田).”⁸ Presumably the original purpose of this prebend was to allow widows of officials to maintain themselves and their children with the income from the rank lands originally granted to their husbands. As the following passage from the *Sŏngjong sillok* suggests, however, the primary role of this institution became the encouragement of female chastity.

Land to preserve faithfulness is intended to encourage the chastity of wives. It is an extraordinarily important institution . . . playing no small role in the moral transformation of the populace and the correction of customs.⁹

The Chosŏn state rewarded women who preserved their chastity by raising memorial arches in their honor and by granting them or their descendents immunity from taxation and labor service. Indeed, in 1392, during the first year of the Chosŏn dynasty, King T’aejo stipulated that “loyal subjects, filial sons, virtuous husbands and chaste wives are all important for good morals, and so must be encouraged.”¹⁰ His successors actively sought out chaste widows, whom they subsequently protected from all miscellaneous labor service.

In 1432, the *Illustrated Guide to the Three Bonds* (*Samgang haengsil* to 三綱行實圖) was published. The compilers of this text “found 100 people each for the categories of filial son, loyal subject and virtuous woman, produced pictorial representations of their deeds and also provided a textual record of their actions, with a poem attached to each section.”¹¹ Every monarch before the outbreak of the Imjin War presided over the generation of diverse discourses of female chastity. While some officials did point out problems caused by restrictions on widow remarriage, the court as a whole always justified sanctions against remarriage by asserting the “principle that women do not change husbands.” In 1481, the *Conduct of the Three Human Bonds with Illustrations of Virtuous Women* (*Samgang haengsil yŏllyŏ* to 三綱行實烈女圖) was printed in the vernacular script and distributed to women in both

8. “Pujŏn” 賦典, *Chosŏn kyŏngguk chŏn*; in *Sambong chip* 7, *Han’guk munjip ch’onggan* 5.

9. *Sŏngjong sillok* 04 [1473/07/30].

10. *T’aejong sillok* 01 [1401/07/28].

11. *Sejong sillok* 14 [1432/06/09]. A copy of the *Samgang haengsil* to printed in 1434 is kept in the Kyujanggak archives, Seoul National University.

capital and countryside as an aid for moral improvement.¹² Under Yönsan'gun (1494-1506) it was declared that the observance of three years of mourning should no longer merit a memorial arch as it was an unexceptional act, entirely unlike the cutting off of one's fingers or the removing one's own flesh to sustain dying parents.¹³ Such policies were continued right up to the eve of the Imjin War, as both Chungjong (1506-1544) and Sönjo (1567-1608) treated the exemption of chaste widows from service obligations as beneficial for public morality.

Female Sexuality and the Imjin War

Armies approach the sexuality of women differently depending on whether the women are allies or enemies. As a general rule, when soldiers invade a region they seek to conquer the local women, while the soldiers defending that region consider the sexuality of their women as something to be protected. That Chosön women suffered hardship through the sexual violence of the Japanese army is well-attested to in a number of "true records" (*silgi* 實記) of the war.

We are told, for instance, that the Japanese army frequently decapitated all the young men of a locale and carried off all the attractive women – along with the goods they had stolen – on the backs of horses and oxen.¹⁴ While they were occupying Seoul, the capital city, we are informed of a procession of twenty Japanese officers dressed in red clothes and hats, riding in palanquins and surrounded by an impressive bodyguard, a seemingly endless line of women riding in pairs advancing ahead of them.¹⁵ During his assault on the Japanese position in Chiryé, Kim Myön (1541-1593) encountered many beautiful young women of Chölla Province who had been taken prisoner by the enemy. They begged for their lives, only to be burned to death by the Chosön guerrillas along with the Japanese.¹⁶ The key interests of the Japanese soldiers are described as granaries, local geography, and beautiful women.¹⁷ Moreover,

12. *Söngjong sillok* 12 [1481/03/24].

13. *Yönsan'gun ilki* 11 [1505/01/04].

14. Cho Kyöngnam, *Nanjung chammok* 亂中雜錄 1, Sönjo 25 [1592/04/26], in *Taedong yasöng* 6 (see <http://db.itkc.or.kr>)

15. *Nanjung chammok* 1, Sönjo 25 [1592/06/06].

16. *Nanjung chammok* 2, Sönjo 25 [1592/08/03].

17. *Nanjung chammok* 2, Sönjo 25 [1592/08/04]: "Ch'oe Makküm, the educational officer of Sach'ön, joined with the enemy in Kosöng. He was captured while he was going home. His confession was as follows: 'I did not willingly join with the enemy, but when I was captured by

Japanese soldiers commonly seized married Chosŏn women to keep house for them, also gathering together grain and horse fodder in preparation for a long stay.¹⁸ Japanese soldiers are also described as stealing oxen, horses and other goods, as well as binding young women and driving them in front of them. The wife of a certain Hŏ Yŏhyŏng, a lower-ranking official, for instance, was one such woman.¹⁹

Rape is often used during war as “the ultimate blow against the enemy.” Conquering enemy women is both a powerful symbolic assault upon enemy men and a way of boasting about one’s own strength. Soldiers rape enemy women to anger and humiliate enemy men. Underlying this violence is the belief that female sexuality does not belong to the women themselves but exists to provide sexual gratification and descendants for their men.²⁰ Indeed, during the Imjin War Korean women were assaulted not only by Japanese soldiers but also by the Ming Chinese soldiers who had been sent to help them.

The Ming soldiers who came to our country married our women and settled in Honam and Yŏngnam. When they left, they brought their Chosŏn wives with them. Prevented from passing the Shanhai-guan, these women formed unions with local runners. During this period there were tens of thousands of Chosŏn women in this situation. All were returned to Chosŏn in 1608.²¹

Many Korean women were taken prisoner by the Japanese. Through the efforts of the Chosŏn court, some of these women were released and allowed to return home. During this process many Chosŏn women were sexually assaulted by Chosŏn soldiers as well.

In the fourth month more than three thousand prisoners-of-war were returned to Chosŏn. Those who had been taken prisoner when they were young often only knew that they were Koreans, but had no knowledge of their family backgrounds or surnames. The officials in charge abused the ignorance of these returnees by claiming them as their own slaves. In some cases, officials had the husbands of

the Japanese, I begged for my life and was thus brought into the enemy camp. They asked me how much grain could be found in the Chinju granaries, what the fastest routes to Chŏlla Province were, and finally where the most beautiful women were. I said that I did not know where the beautiful women were, but I did tell them approximately how much grain was in Chinju, and that the fastest rout into Chŏlla Province was through Hadong.”

18. *Nanjung chamnok* 2, Sŏnjo 25 [1592/09/09].

19. *Nanjung chamnok* 3, Sŏnjo 26 [1593/12/05].

20. O Miyŏng, “Kunsajuŭi wa yŏsŏng ŭi seksyuŏllit’i,” *Yŏsŏng yŏn’gu nonmunjip* 14 (2003): 110.

21. *Nanjung chamnok* 3, Sŏnjo 27 [1594/08/02].

beautiful women shackled and pushed overboard. These officials then took the beautiful women for themselves.²²

It was in this context that the Chosŏn court decided to honor the chaste women of the Imjin War by recording and publicizing their achievements.²³ In this, the Chosŏn court was assuming the role of protector of Chosŏn women. The technique by which the Chosŏn court protected its women, however, was essentially to encourage them to commit suicide. In the third year of the war the Office of the Inspector General (Sahŏnbu) declared that, in the interest of improving public morality, a search would be made for such loyal subjects and chaste women that were worthy of public honors. This hunt for exemplary people was motivated by the widespread feeling that proper relationships and social control had collapsed during the war. Indeed, the selection of virtuous women was considered to be as important as the training of military officials and the education of Confucian scholars.²⁴ The monarch himself insisted that the cause of the death of each candidate be properly reviewed; should a decision be made to grant her public honors, the king himself insured that her heroic actions were recorded and printed for wide distribution.²⁵

The honoring of loyal subjects, filial sons and chaste women began in earnest with the end of the Imjin War. It was difficult, however, to establish exactly what had happened to any one individual during the chaos of war. Not all of the stories concerning chaste woman were reliable, and it was often difficult to determine the precise rank according to which an individual chaste woman should be honored. Moreover, the widespread destruction of documents in the period before 1597 meant that the officials had to rely on first or second hand oral accounts; the resulting accounts were often contradictory and of uneven veracity. The chaste women had to be categorized according to those who were to be honored with a memorial arch, those whose kin were to be granted a bureaucratic rank, those whose kin were to be given

22. *Nanjung chamnok* 3, Sŏnjo 38 [1605/04].

23. *Sŏnjo sillok* 26 [1593/09/20]: “The Border Defense Council memorialized the king: ‘There were those who, in the midst of war, proved themselves loyal subjects, filial sons and chaste women; we can see no reason not to honor them by recording their acts and including the records of these acts in books to be widely distributed.’ The king gave his assent to their proposal.”

24. *Sŏnjo sillok* 28 [1595/07/18]: “We cannot stand idly by in the face of such corruption of human morality and destruction of social order. It is a matter of considerable urgency that we restore moral order by having the relevant officials discover all cases of filial sons, loyal subjects, and chaste wives, and then formally honor the home villages of these paragons with memorial arches.”

25. *Sŏnjo sillok* 28 [1595/07/10].

exemptions from miscellaneous duties, and those whose kin were granted material rewards.²⁶ Higher ranks were given to those whose heroic actions had the greatest emotional pull or were in some way unusual or extraordinary.

After the Imjin War, the Chosŏn court gathered together documents concerning chaste women from all eight provinces. In 1603 provincial officials expressed annoyance at the delay in honoring Kyŏngsang Province's numerous chaste women, whose information they had provided to the court long ago. The governor of Kyŏngsang Province declared that chaste women should be honored to counter the climate of moral disorder in the war-ravaged southern provinces. The Board of Rites defended itself against the implication of laziness, arguing that the sheer number of candidates, and the extreme difficulty of correctly providing a rank to each of them, was to blame for the long delay.²⁷

Indeed, this process was resolved only with great difficulty during the reign of Kwanghae-gun. The King ordered that the honoring of chaste women from the Imjin War be brought to its conclusion; by doing so, he argued, the state "could be seen as encouraging good morals."²⁸ Yet, as under Sŏnjo, the process was mired within established procedures,²⁹ and by the mass of confused documentation that had been accumulated concerning hundreds of candidates.³⁰ According to the Board of Rites, the original plan to complete the process was delayed when the court demanded the elimination of 200 names, more than half of what it considered to be a bloated list. The names that were removed were those of rural women whose achievements were otherwise barely distinguishable from those who were to receive honors.³¹ Minister of the Board of Rites Yi Chŏnggwi (1564-1635) expressed his frustration with this development:

Numerous women died to preserve their chastity during the recent war. We have accumulated a vast number of documents on the loyal subjects, virtuous women,

26. *Sŏnjo sillok* 34 [1601/04/21].

27. *Sŏnjo sillok* 36 [1603/06/09].

28. *Kwanghae-gun ilgi* 01 [1608/10/17].

29. *Kwanghae-gun ilgi* 01 [1608/10/20]: "It is the responsibility of the Board of Rites to review the reports submitted by the provincial administrations, and then to determine whether the person in question is to be honoured by the construction of a memorial arch, the provision of a bureaucratic title, protection from miscellaneous taxes and duties, or the granting of a material reward. Having sorted the candidates into one of those four categories, the Board of Rites must then submit all information to the State Council. The State Council will review this material and make the final decisions."

30. *Kwanghae-gun ilgi* 01 [1608/10/20].

31. *Kwanghae-gun ilgi* 02 [1609/01/17].

and filial sons of every province Chaste women are an especially large category. Those whose deeds have been reported to the court have already become part of local public tradition. While it is can hardly be denied that some of the surviving accounts may be exaggerated or even utterly fraudulent, it should also not be forgotten that the deeds of many chaste women have been lost, leaving their reputation far less impressive than their heroism deserved. Considering the large scale destruction caused by the Japanese, even though it is reported that hundreds of women have died to preserve their chastity, one cannot say that it is a large number. As this project is vital for the restoration of order and good morals, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that all these women receive the same honors.³²

By 1612, although all the filial sons, loyal subjects and chaste women from the beginnings of the Imjin War had already been honored, new reports of chaste women, needing investigation and categorization, continued to come to light.³³ In that same year, the Office of Special Councilors (Hongmungwan) was put in charge of the records of the chaste women. In particular, the office took responsibility for publishing and distributing the stories of these women through an illustrated volume later called the *New Continued Illustrated Exemplars of the Three Bonds of Korea* (*Tongguk sinsok Samgang haengsil* to 東國新續三綱行實圖). A number of officials counseled caution when publishing a text that would surely be read by countless future generations. Others pointed out the incredibly large number of accounts to be anthologized even when considering only those to be honored with the raising of a memorial arch.³⁴ A further group of officials worried that many of those women called “chaste women” had not left any very reliable records, with some of their chaste acts being lost to history, even as other women unworthy to be considered chaste women had been included.³⁵ The Office of Special Councilors itself divided accounts of filial sons, loyal ministers, and chaste women into three categories – superior, medium and inferior.³⁶ Yet doubts persisted:

It is true that a great many women died during the war, mostly because the Japanese took pleasure in killing. Many of the “chaste women” recorded in the book had, in fact, died quite pointlessly, with no claim to chastity at all. Their kin, however, eager to make them seem more heroic than they were, exaggerated

32. “Yi Chönggwi haengjang,” in *P’ojöjip* 浦渚集 34, *Han’guk munjip ch’onggan* 85.

33. *Kwanghae-gun ilgi* 04 [1612/05/28]; 04 [1612/06/01].

34. *Kwanghae-gun ilgi* 04 [1612/06/01].

35. *Kwanghae-gun ilgi* 05 [1613/06/04].

36. *Kwanghae-gun ilgi* 05 [1613/12/12].

their deeds. In some extreme cases, the women in question actually lost their chastity when they were taken prisoner by the Japanese, yet their families attempted to conceal their filthy actions through false reports. The court published this book without distinguishing the imposters from the true chaste women, or the significant cases from the insignificant, and, as a result, the people all ridiculed it, with some using its pages as wallpaper, and others using it as covers for jars of soy sauce.³⁷

In the third month of 1617, the court, ignoring considerable opposition,³⁸ began the publication of the *New Continued Illustrated Exemplars of the Three Bonds of Korea*, a text in which were included the filial sons, loyal ministers, and chaste wives of the period following the outbreak of the Imjin War. Of a total 18 volumes, chaste women make up eight volumes, amounting to a total of 717 biographies. Of the women described, one each is from the ancient dynasties of Paekche and Silla, 24 are from the Koryŏ Dynasty and 691 are from the Chosŏn Dynasty. Of the biographies from the Chosŏn dynasty, 66 are from the reign of Sŏnjo and 487 are from the reign of Kwanghae-gun. That is to say, of the total, 73 percent are from the period during or following the Imjin War.³⁹

In other words, Chosŏn women during the war suffered from extreme sexualized oppression. So many women had been killed that it was impossible to record them all. The dead, of course, could not speak for themselves. According to the reports of the male compilers, the glorious martyrdoms of these women were discovered either by their own families or by strangers and the motivation for these “discoveries” varied considerably. There were cases of

37. *Kwanghae-gun ilgi* 05 [1613/12/12].

38. *Kwanghae-gun ilgi* 06 [1615/07/11]: “There are, in total, 1123 filial sons, loyal subjects and chaste women to be included in this book. If we give each a picture, translate their accounts into the vernacular, and illustrate the volumes with poems, then even if each volume is 100 pages long, we will still need 11 or 12 volumes. This is more than 10 times the length of the previously printed *Illustrated Guide to the Three Bonds*. We simply do not have sufficient resources or printing equipment for this project.”

39. *New Continued Illustrated Exemplars of the Three Bonds of Korea* has 8 volumes of filial sons, one volume of loyal subjects, 8 volumes of chaste women and one supplementary volume. The supplement includes the 72 Koreans recorded in the earlier *Illustrated Exemplars of the Three Bonds* and *Continued Illustrated Exemplars of the Three Bonds*. In the *Illustrated Exemplars of the Three Bonds* 16 out of 105 of the biographies are of Koreans, out of which 6 are chaste women, while in the *Continued Illustrated Exemplars of the Three Bonds* published under Chungjong, 56 out of 70 of the biographies are of Koreans, out of which 20 are chaste women. The Koreans included in those two books include people from the Silla, Paekche, Koryŏ and Chosŏn Dynasties. See Pak Chu, “*Tongguk sinsok samgang haengsil to – yŏllyŏdo ūi punjŏl*,” *Yŏsŏng munje yŏn’gu* 20 (1992): 84-85.

women whose achievements surpassed those of chaste woman, but who were not categorized as chaste women because they had no connections nor anyone to argue on their behalf, or were from lowly origins. In *The New Continued Illustrated Exemplars of the Three Bonds of Korea*, nearly 54 (35 percent) of those chaste widows recorded from the period between T'aejo and Sŏnjo were from families described as holding positions in the civil or military bureaucracy, while 37 (24 percent) were from families who were described as having received a civil service degree or at least having Confucian student (*yuhak*) status; in total, then, 58 percent must be categorized as members of the *yangban* elite. Of those chaste women recorded from the reign of Kwanghae-gun, 481 are clearly provided with a class background. Of these 111 are from families with positions in the civil or military bureaucracies, and 208 are from families that had received a degree of some sort or had Confucian student status; 69 percent, in other words, were the wives of members of the elite *yangban* class.⁴⁰ One should not assume from these figures that women of the most thoroughly Confucianized class were therefore more likely to value chastity. The process of becoming a chaste woman was not so much based on “fact” as it was on the verbalization of facts. In other words, in a situation where the honoring of a chaste woman involved economic rewards for her family, members of the educated class simply stood a far better chance of successfully claiming their women to be chaste martyrs.

The sexuality of Chosŏn women was mobilized to restore the honor of the state during and after the war. This physical and ideological labor to restore the state from the ravages of the Imjin War occurred mostly during the reigns of Sŏnjo and Kwanghae-gun. What was the social context of this massive, state-organized effort to uncover stories of chaste women during and after the Imjin War? We must investigate the social mechanism by which chaste women became far more dominant as a category than either filial sons or loyal subjects, despite the fact that all three equally ideal Confucian types were part of the same post-Imjin process of investigation, honoring and anthologization.

Gender Politics of the Post-War Recovery

Chastity, a key concept for the understanding of women's sexuality, was utterly transformed during the Imjin War. One aspect of this transformation was quantitative, as the number of recorded chaste women increased enormously.

40. Pak Chu, “Tongguk sinsok samgang,” 89.

The other aspect was qualitative, since chaste women, now treated as key for the restoration of the state, gained new social significance. We have already seen the context for the vast increase in the number of chaste women during the Imjin War. Indeed, wartime stories concerning chaste woman differed in numerous respects from those of peacetime. It should be acknowledged, however, that these changes seem to be matters of degree, with the Imjin War bringing into view understandings of femininity that had previously been widespread, if less noticeable.

While the concept of chastity was originally expressed exclusively within the context of the husband/wife relationship, it has a deep and essential connection to female sexuality. Chaste women during times of peace were defined by the husband/wife bond. However, chaste women during the Imjin War are described as defending themselves from assault from enemy soldiers and are largely unconcerned with either family or spouse. Of course, their decision to resist through suicide is closely related to the concept of chastity, yet the social pressure to commit suicide had grown far beyond the lives of individual women or families. That is to say, women chose to escape the enemy through suicide in such large numbers because the culture itself had already become infused with the code of chastity.

The 204 chaste women recorded from between the reigns T'aejo to Sŏnjo in the *New Continued Illustrated Exemplars of the Three Bonds of Korea* may be divided into 11 categories. The largest category is made up of widows who did not remarry but who maintained their chastity while engaging in memorial sacrifices to their husbands or while serving their parents-in-law. Of these, the majority are described as keeping their chastity despite having been widowed before the age of thirty.⁴¹ Yi Hyesun has argued that until the sixteenth century no real woman is described as committing suicide in order to maintain her chastity.⁴² The majority of the chaste women described during the Imjin War, however, are considerably different from those of earlier periods. Attempts have also been made to categorize the biographies of chaste women included in gazetteers from both early and late Chosŏn. According to this research, the biographies can be divided into three categories, with category A comprising those women who are exemplary in maintaining their chastity or in fulfilling their wifely duties, category B those women who disfigure or kill themselves to preserve their chastity, and category C those women who are killed, or who

41. Pak Chu, "Tongguk sinsok samgang," 86.

42. Yi Hyesun, "Yŏllyŏsang ūi chŏnt'ong kwa pyŏnmo – *samgang haengsil* to esŏ Chosŏn hugi ūi yŏllyŏ chŏn kkaji," *Chindan hakpo* 85 (1999), 178.

disfigure or kill themselves, when faced by unexpected circumstances.⁴³ Most chaste women during the Imjin War belong to category C.

The state discovered and honored these chaste women and then sought to inform the entire state of their actions. It seems unlikely that the officials in charge were primarily interested in succoring the souls of unfortunate individuals. In fact, these officials believed that the state benefited by providing recompense to the families of the chaste women, recording their acts, depicting these stories graphically, and then combining all these features into a book intended for wide distribution.

Good governance begins when the state causes morality to flourish and restores proper customs. For this reason the honoring of filial sons and chaste women is of enormous importance.⁴⁴

By building memorial arches and protecting the families [of chaste women, filial sons and loyal subjects] from miscellaneous taxes and services, we are causing the common people to gain true realization of proper human morality.⁴⁵

According to these two passages, chaste women, along with filial sons and loyal subjects, were pioneers in improving customs and manners. Chaste women were understood as having a vital role to play in the politics of moral transformation. Officials during the reign of Kwanghae-gun argued successfully that the court should restore chaste woman status to those whose names had previously been removed from the list; this must be done, they asserted, “not only to bring succor to both the living and the death, but also because doing so will aid us in transforming the people and restoring order.”⁴⁶ Clearly, their primary political motivation for honoring chaste women was to provide examples of proper behavior to the living. Significantly, to a court then overwhelmingly concerned with restoring order to a war-ravaged country, spiritual order was seen as more vital than material recovery. Public morality was believed to have been dangerously corroded by the war: “The most important task for the court is to reward virtuous acts by establishing memorial arches in the villages of faithful and loyal people. Only by doing so may we cause good morals and virtuous governance to flourish.”⁴⁷

43. Yi Chǒngju, “Chǒn’guk chiriji rŭl t’onghae pon Chosǒn sidae *ch’ung - byo - yŏl* yulli ūi hwaksan yangsang,” *Han’guk sasang sabak* 28 (2007), 316.

44. *Kukcho pogam* 11, Sejo 3 (1458) (see <http://db.itkc.or.kr>)

45. *Chungjong sillok* 23 [1528/08/12].

46. *Kwanghae-gun ilgi* 02 [1610/01/17].

With no memorial arches to distinguish good and evil actions, local village society has no model for good conduct. Because their eyes and ears are not being inspired to follow a moral life, they are not ashamed when they abandon their monarch, ignore their parents and leave their own husbands. The state is seriously failing to live up to its duty to encourage loyalty and filial piety.⁴⁸

To the state, chaste women were a model for both fidelity and righteousness. “Fidelity and righteousness are the very pillars of moral learning and the cure for immorality; we must put into effect all ceremonies which encourage these virtues.”⁴⁹ The court worried that failure to honor chaste women would merely cause resentment; chaste women simply had to be remembered and honored.⁵⁰ Moreover, the ruling class considered the willingness of Chosŏn women to commit suicide during the Imjin War to be the result of the dynasty’s moral governance. In the words of Yi Sibal (1569-1626), the governor of Kyŏngsang Province: “Why did ignorant ordinary people, though faced by death upon the sharp blades of the enemy, chose to preserve basic morality? They could not have done so without the benefit of many generations of our dynasty’s edifying moral influence – this is truly wonderful!”⁵¹

Despite the state’s effort to encourage fidelity, the ruling class was disappointed with the fidelity shown by men during the Imjin War. Many high officials charged with defending Seoul to the death simply sought to preserve their own safety.⁵² There were also many high officials who did not follow the monarch into exile, thus breaking the vital relationship between king and subject by running away.⁵³ The post-Imjin War period saw the rise of songs lamenting the corruption of the state.⁵⁴ The historic shock of the Imjin War revealed the utter incompetence of the ruling class. There are a number of “true records” (*silgi*) that describe Chosŏn men during the Imjin War and the East

47. *Sŏnjo sillok* 34 [1601/12/26].

48. *Sŏnjo sillok* 36 [1603/06/09].

49. *Sŏnjo sillok* 36 [1603/07/09].

50. *Sŏnjo sillok* 34 [1601/12/26]: “Yi Tŏkhyŏng, the Supreme Commander of the Four Southern Provinces, reported: ‘Numerous women of elite families committed suicide to preserve their chastity during the recent invasion from the south. Even those of old cannot rival the chaste deeds of our women, yet the court was not yet granted them public honors. The people of this province are left to angrily lament this injustice.’”

51. *Sŏnjo sillok* 36 [1603/06/09].

52. *Sŏnjo sillok* 25 [1592/05/09].

53. *Sŏnjo sillok* 36 [1603/08/02].

54. Ko Sunghŭi, “Imnan ihu 17 segi uguk kasa ūi chŏn’gae wa sŏngkyŏk,” *Han’guk kojŏn yŏn’gu* 2 (1996), 126.

Asian wars that followed. These true records tend to show men begging for their lives, failing to look after their families, or even acting on behalf of the enemy to attack Chosŏn. In these accounts men are even denounced for being more opportunistic than women.⁵⁵ “The Story of Three Chaste Women,” for instance, suggests some differences between men and women in both their understanding and practice of fidelity.

From birth *yangban* men read the writings of men of old and admire their fidelity. They say: “We would rather die honorably than live dishonorably!” However, with the state actually in danger and *yangban* men at risk of capture, barely one or two out of a hundred actually chose an honorable death. By contrast, there were a number of women, married and unmarried, who made that choice; indeed, in our family there were at least three chaste women.⁵⁶

Fidelity and righteousness were considered vital elements for recovery from the Imjin War, with the fidelity and righteousness of an individual being treated as more important than life, and the fidelity and righteousness of the king being treated as more important than the survival of the state.⁵⁷ Chaste women were not honored because the state wanted to praise them as individuals, but because of the good example they showed to other people of a person who, despite all difficulties, remained faithful.

A woman hanging herself in a mountain valley or killing herself in a thatched hut would seem to be of concern only to her home village. What possible relationship do these acts have with the affairs of states? Yet kings raise memorial arches to honor these women and historians preserve their biographies for later ages. They do so because the fidelity and righteousness of humanity resides in the three bonds alone, which must therefore be nurtured and encouraged without fail.⁵⁸

55. Chŏng Hwan’guk, “16-17 segi tongasia chŏllan kwa aejöng chŏn’gi,” *Minjok munhaksa yŏn’gu* 15, no.1 (1999), 55-56.

56. Yi Chŏngam, “*Samjŏlpu chŏn* 三節婦傳,” *Saryujae chip* 四留齋集 7. Quoted from Yi Hyesun and Kim Kyŏngmi, eds., *Han’guk ū yŏllyŏjŏn* (Seoul: Wŏrin 2002), 47.

57. *Sŏnjo sillok* 37 [1604/08/26]: “King Sŏnjo was deeply ashamed of his failure to protect the state from the ravages of the Imjin War. His ministers tried to comfort the king, reminding him of numerous examples over the ages of chaste women and loyal subjects who surrendered their own lives and that of their families. They said: ‘your majesty’s boundless loyalty, righteousness and fidelity shone out through the cosmos during the recent war. This would have been of great glory even if the dynasty had fallen, so how could your majesty’s brief relocation of the capital besmirch this glory?’”

58. An Chŏngbok, “Sugin Cho ssi haengjang 淑人趙氏行狀,” in *Sun’am sŏnsaeng munjip* 25, *Han’guk munjip ch’onggan* 230.

When the ruling class sought to restore confidence and legitimacy to the state, it did so by emphasizing the role of the three bonds. Chastity and honor were used as tools of social cohesion, and seem to have been emphasized especially in the context of an otherwise weak material basis for the state. For instance, filial piety and chastity were especially emphasized during Chungjong's administration because of Chungjong's weak legitimacy. Chungjong, who took power through a coup, criticized Yŏnsan'gun (r. 1494-1506) for his un-Confucian destruction of memorial arches.⁵⁹ The image of the chaste woman seems also to have been used as a tool for social renewal. By praising chaste women while comparing their chastity to faithless high officials and ministers, male elites were engaging in self-criticism. If the increase in the number of stories of chaste women during the period of dynastic transition from Koryŏ to Chosŏn in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries may be related to the rise of the new literati,⁶⁰ then the writing of stories of chaste women after the Imjin War should surely be connected with the desire among male intellectuals to restore their own tattered reputations and to criticize the disloyalty and hypocrisy of high officials. To the authors of these accounts, chaste women provided extraordinary examples of unwavering loyalty that even men of great righteousness would have difficulty matching.

Did the chaste women themselves, as the state and male intellectuals claimed, willingly and passionately chose death over dishonor? What are the problems with exalting women who committed suicide rather than be sexually assaulted? What sort of lessons would living women have received from such descriptions of suicide? Countless chaste women during the war committed suicide or were described as having done so; as their stories were propagated throughout the land, the dream of becoming a "chaste woman" ceased to be a distant fantasy. To use somewhat exaggerated language, society after the Imjin War became one in which the suicide of chaste women was encouraged.

The Implications of Post-Imjin Discourses of Chastity

Evaluations of war-time activity began with the end of the war. Those women who had died during the war were praised as chaste women, while those who survived received brutal treatment.

59. Yi Chŏngju, "Chŏn'guk chiriji," 300.

60. Yi Hyesun, "Yŏllyŏjŏn ipchŏn ūsik kwa kŭ sasangjŏk ūi," in *Chosŏn sidae yŏllyŏ tamnon*, ed. Han'guk kojŏn yŏsŏng munhakhoe (Seoul: Wŏrin, 2002), 27.

Requests for divorce and remarriage were made by the in-laws of women of elite families who had been captured by the enemy armies. However, the court did not approve these requests. King Sŏnjo said: “Their loss of chastity cannot be compared to unchaste acts engaged in willingly, so these women should not be divorced.”⁶¹

The problem of how to deal with women who returned alive from the enemy camp is revealed in more detail in the discourse of “returned women” (*hwanhyangnyŏ* 還鄉女) in the wake of the Manchu invasion of 1636-7.⁶² Following this invasion there was considerable discussion of the punishment to be received by the women who returned to Chosŏn after having been Qing prisoners-of-war. Chang Yu (1587-1638) requested that the Board of Rites allow for the divorce of his daughter-in-law. He argued that since she, the wife of his only son Chang Sŏnjing, had been captured by the enemy, she was no longer worthy to serve as his son’s spouse or to perform sacrificial duties for the lineage’s ancestors. At the same time former Royal Secretary Han Igyŏm (b. 1581), angry that his daughter was threatened with divorce because she had been a prisoner-of-war, had his servant make an oral petition to the court.⁶³ The court was unable to find a proper solution to this conflict, with fathers of sons and fathers of daughters inevitably having such contrasting interests.

It was in this context that Councilor for the Left Ch’oe Myŏnggil (1586-1647) argued that women who had returned must not be divorced, reasoning that if divorce were allowed women would refuse to return, and would thus die in a foreign land. Furthermore:

“If we evaluate women’s chastity in this manner, how will any woman during war-time be able to escape a false charge of having lost her chastity? That is why we cannot treat absolutely every woman who has been taken prisoner as having become unchaste.” Despite his arguments, all the sons of elite families remarried, and there were no cases of reconciliation with their brought-back wives.⁶⁴

Although Ch’oe Myŏnggil’s call for the protection of these “returned women” sets him apart from those scholar-officials who demanded an indiscriminate rejection of all the abducted spouses, his argument was still predicated on the

61. Yi Kŭngik, “Choya ch’ŏmjae 朝野僉載,” in *Yŏllyŏsil kisul* 26 (<http://db.itkc.or.kr>).

62. Known as the *pyŏngja horan*, it started when Chosŏn refused to show the Manchu Emperor Taizong due respect after he had declared the Qing dynasty in 1636 and pronounced that Chosŏn and Qing were ‘brother states.’

63. *Injo sillok* 16 [1638/03/11].

64. *Injo sillok* 16 [1638/03/11].

assumption that not all the returned women had lost their chastity. Moreover, although Ch'oe Myōnggil's argument received royal support, these returned women were expelled from their families. The basic argument for not continuing marital relationships with the returned women was as follows: Because those women who were taken prisoner did not commit suicide, they had broken their moral bond with husband and household, so that any attempt to bring them once more into the marital relationship would only sully the elite household in question. Indeed, these elite households bitterly criticized Ch'oe Myōnggil for arguing against divorce.⁶⁵

During the later Chosŏn period, large-scale disasters ceased to be a cause of suicide by chaste widows; instead, the husband's death became the more usual motive.⁶⁶ A comparison of the *Augmented Survey of the Geography of Korea* (*Tongguk yōji sūngnam*) of the early Chosŏn with the *Detailed Survey of Korean Geography* (*Yōji tosŏ*) of the late Chosŏn reveals that in the early Chosŏn the ratio of biographies of chaste women to filial sons was 47.1 percent while in the late Chosŏn it rose to 61.6 percent. The increasing prevalence of chaste women in late Chosŏn gazetteers suggests that late Chosŏn society was becoming increasingly patriarchal.⁶⁷ Moreover, the actions ascribed to chaste women in the late Chosŏn period became ever more extreme. Late Chosŏn biographies of chaste wives include one story of a wife who, deaf to the cries of her own young children, was so overwhelmed with grief as to drink poison upon the death of her husband,⁶⁸ and another story of a woman who was prevented three times from hanging herself upon her husband's death, after which she was discovered in a side-room, the air thick with the smell of poison.⁶⁹

Male intellectuals saw in such gruesome scenes the achievement of spiritual victory and moral perfection. Narratives of chaste women were nearly all written by male intellectuals, and may thus be seen as a critical reflection on powerless male intellectuals. For instance, at times chaste women who pursue proper morals with no fear of death are contrasted with male intellectuals who, despite being fully literate and aware of morality, are not at all ashamed of their extremely immoral actions.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, there were those who made

65. *Injo sillok* 16 [1638/03/11].

66. Yi Hyesun, "Yöllyōsang ū chōnt'ong," 178.

67. Yi Chōngju, "Chōn'guk chiriji," 300.

68. An Chōngbok, "Che yöllyō yōhōng Yi ssi haengnok hu 題烈女驪興李氏行錄後," in *Sunam sōnsaeng munjip* 19, *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan* 230.

69. An Chōngbok, "Sugin Cho ssi haengjang."

70. An Chōngbok, "Che yöllyō Yōhūng Yi ssi haengnok hu."

theoretical arguments against this development. For instance, Song Siyöl (1607-1689) argued that “the moral basis for loyal subjects not serving two kings is the same as that of a chaste wife not serving two husbands. Why, then, has our country failed to abolish ministers from serving two kings while strictly enforcing the rule against women serving two husbands?”⁷¹

In the Chosŏn dynasty “fidelity” was a key aspect of human morality, and was the supreme value which made humans truly human, regardless of gender. If male fidelity was the virtue required of a subject in his interactions with the monarch, then female fidelity was the key value required of women in spousal relations. During the Chosŏn dynasty, however, fidelity was transformed into the key framework by which a woman’s worth was described and evaluated. Female fidelity combined both physical and spiritual aspects, and thus became expressed as chastity. Chastity was understood to be something which should not be abandoned under any circumstances; as a result, one woman after another chose death over dishonor.

Both the understanding and the practice of chastity changed during the Chosŏn dynasty and as such distinguishing early Chosŏn from late Chosŏn is a convenient periodization. While the transformation of Chosŏn Confucianism can explain some of these changes, the Imjin War also seems to have played an important role in altering understandings of female sexuality. There are diverse ways by which one may approach the political and social meanings of Chosŏn Korea’s emphasis on female chastity and on the discovery of chaste women. The key aspect that must be noted is that chastity became the primary mechanism for controlling women’s sexuality and maintaining patriarchal social mores. This article has examined some aspects of this mechanism, revealing how understandings of female sexuality were transformed within the context of the Imjin War. Both the ideology of chastity and its extreme manifestation in the suicide of “chaste women” are historically-situated cultural discourses concerning female sexuality produced within patriarchal Confucian society.

71. Song Siyöl, “Tap Kwŏn Sasŏng 答權思誠 – kihan’nyŏn 己亥年 [1659/08/12]” in *Songja taejŏn* 39, *Han’guk munjip ch’onggan* 230.