

KOREAN WOMEN POETS

GRADES: 9-12

AUTHOR: Steven C. Teel

SUBJECT: Comparative Literature, World History

TIME REQUIRED: 2-3 class periods

OBJECTIVE:

1. Investigate the traditional role of women in Korea

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- Reading selections from the philosophies of Confucius and Mencius
- Selected poems from Greg Whincup's *The Heart of Chinese Poetry*
- Copies of prepared handout 1

BACKGROUND:

The following is a discussion pertinent to teachers who wish to incorporate literature, especially poetry, into their units on Asian history. The following unit begins with a look at the traditional Confucian role of women in Korea. In reading the poetry by Korean women, students discover examples of restraint, modesty, conformity to the rules of etiquette and other Confucian values.

PROCEDURE:

1. Distribute copies of handout 1 and have students read the background information in class.
2. Divide the class in small groups to discuss the questions at the end of handout 1, and as homework, have the students write their answers to the questions.
3. Distribute handout 2 and have the students read the *Kyubang Kasa*.
4. Divide the class into small groups to discuss the questions at the end of handout 2, and as homework, have the students write their answers to the questions.
5. Distribute handout 3 and have the students read Ho Nansorhon's *A Woman's Sorrow* and the poems by Hwang Chini.
6. Divide the class into small groups to discuss the questions at the end of handout 3, and as homework, have the students write their answers to the questions.

EVALUATION:

- Grades should be based on students' cooperation and participation in the discussions and the comprehensiveness of their answers to the discussion questions.

ENRICHMENT:

- Show slides from the "Profusion of Color" exhibit at the San Francisco Asian Art Gallery in March 1995. (The slides are available for purchase from Education/Outreach Department, Asian Art Museum, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, CA 94118). Discuss Korean bridal and shaman dresses as well as a num-

ber of *pojagi* (clothwrappers). In addition, discuss marriage customs and the culture of gift-giving in Korea. The importance of embroidery and the hopes of mothers for their daughters' future happiness are emphasized. The 19th century *pojagi* of upper class women can be contrasted with the *pojagi* of lower class women, whose work involves less embroidery and takes on characteristics of American quilting. The geometric patterns of the silk patches occasionally take on the look of a Paul Klee abstract painting and sometimes show a totally unexpected use of color or shape. that reveals a desire to break out of the confines of their circumscribed lives. This returns the discussion to Confucian topics and permits further exploration of the advantages of group cooperation versus the Western emphasis on individualism.

RESOURCES:

Ho Kyun. "The Tale of Hong Kiltong." Peter H. Lee, ed. *Anthology of Korean Literature: From Early Times to the Nineteenth Century*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981. p.119-147.

Ho Nansorhon. "A Woman's Sorrow." Peter H. Lee, ed. *Anthology of Korean Literature: From Early Times to the Nineteenth Century*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981. p.116-118.

Hwang Chini. Peter H. Lee, ed. *Anthology of Korean Literature: From Early Times to the Nineteenth Century*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981. p.97.

Kim, Yung-Chung, ed. and trans. *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient Times to 1945*. Seoul: Ewha University Press, 1979. p.154.

HANDOUT 1: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

During the Koryo period Korean women seemed to have enjoyed considerable freedom and status. Moreover, Koryo women's contributions were recognized to a greater degree than the Choson period (Yi dynasty) (1392-1910). For example, it was the practice to apportion property equally among male and female members of the family. Visits to Buddhist temples by all classes of women were quite common. A woman was awarded 300 *sok* of rice if she produced more than three sons who passed the state civil service exams. Furthermore, widows without male offspring to support her were allowed and expected to remarry even in the upper class.

The policy makers of the early Choson period were anxious to promote Confucian ideals. King Sejong (reigned 1418-1450), who promulgated a unique Korean alphabet called *hangul*, ordered his scholars to compile a book to be used for "enhancing women's virtue." The resulting work was a collection of stories about loyal subjects, filial piety and chaste women. *Hangul* was so much easier to learn than classical Chinese that numerous instruction books for women were published in *hangul*. This development was facilitated by the use of moveable metal type, which had been used in Korea by 1234, if not earlier. Koreans used carved woodblock print as early as the tenth century.

Soon after the establishment of the Yi dynasty, the inspector general Nam Chae made a strong recommendation to the throne deploring activities by the wives of officials for visiting the residences of powerful high officials to promote their husbands' interests at the late Koryo and early Choson courts. He asked the king to rectify this situation by prohibiting women from visiting families other than their parents, siblings and paternal and maternal uncles. This was the beginning of the severe limitations on women's freedom during the Choson period.

Furthermore, it seems that following the Manchu invasion of China in 1644, Korean leaders came to perceive themselves as the custodians of true Confucian virtue. Their adoption of the neo-Confucian teachings of the Chinese philosopher Chu Hsi included not just his philosophy but also the development of a highly ritualized way of life for the *yangban*, or the scholarly, landowning class. As in China, most of the government scholar-officials were recruited from this class. How this sense of mission and the new social institutions and practices recommended by Chu Hsi played out in the lives of *yangban* Korean women is the subject of this lesson.

According to Yi Ik, a much respected Confucian scholar of the eighteenth century, "Reading and learning are the domains of men. For a woman it is enough if she knows the Confucian virtues of diligence, frugality, and chastity. If a woman disobeys these virtues, she will bring disgrace to the family."

The sixteenth century *Book of Admonition to Women of the Inner Court*, attributed to the famous neo-Confucian philosopher Yi Hwang (1501-1570), outlines somewhat more liberal expectations from upper-class women: they should be able to compose poems, do calligraphy, read the *History*, *Lesser Learning* and the *Admonition to Ladies*, and be able to recognize the names of kings and ancestors. Nevertheless, these ladies still had to abide by the "Three Tenets of Obedience," which were obedience to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage and to her son after the death of her husband.

The "Seven Evils For Expelling a Wife" were the following: disobedience toward parents-in-law; bearing no son; adultery; jealousy (of concubines, etc.); hereditary or incurable disease; garrulousness; and theft. Moreover, For the first nine years of marriage the proper lady was expected to display complete subservience to her husband's household, by being deaf the first three years, the next three years dumb, and the next three years blind.

Gifted women who acquired a knowledge of reading and writing and displayed their learning were considered impolite and termed "problem women." Only a small number of poems by women were published during the Choson period, but Choson *yangban* women in fact wrote thousands of *kasa* ("inner room poems") in *hangul*. These poems were circulated and read among family members, relatives and close friends, especially in the southern and central provinces of Korea.

Women of high learning were a minority since most women could not read elementary Chinese characters or even *hangul*. However, the number of women able to read the Korean alphabet gradually increased. This change was accelerated as the government began to produce books on women's education in Korean instead of in Chinese. In the latter part of the Choson period, more women became interested in novels written in *hangul*. The themes of the novels were mainly concerned with censoring corrupt officials and praising loyal subjects, faithful sons and virtuous wives. The most common plot was the conflict between good and evil, which usually ended in the triumph of good.

Discussion Questions:

1. How might a woman have acquired knowledge of reading and writing and become well-educated in spite of these formal restrictions? Who might have taught her? Why?
2. How did the Confucian civil service exams as adapted by the Korean government affect the unequal relationship between men and women? In what ways do you think this would affect relationships between brothers and sisters?
3. How does a lady bring honor to her husband?

HANDOUT 2

It may be interesting to know that the role of middle and upper class women in 18th century America was quite different. After the American revolution, middle and upper class women were seen as the primary conveyors of new Republican virtues to the next generation. To perform this key role of educating youth to their new civic responsibilities, they had to know how to read and write.

In Korea, *yangban* ladies of the same period were mostly invisible. While lower class women might be with their husbands in the fields, upper class women were restricted to the inner compound of their homes. With their father or husband's permission, they might visit relatives, attend weddings or go on an annual spring picnic (when the azaleas bloom). Otherwise, their entire world was the inner courtyard. If a woman married into a *yangban* family that began to experience any financial difficulty, even visits by the wife to her parents would be rare because it was customary that her parents-in-law send a large amount of clothes, socks, delicious wine and rice cakes with her for each visit. Anytime they were in public, the women were expected to completely cover their bodies, including their heads with a hat and veil.

Upon reading the *Kyubang Kasa*, discuss the following questions:

1. What is the purpose of the first poem? Imagine how close the women must be to each other and what a momentous day this is. These poems were written by hand on paper and handed down from mother to daughter.
2. What is the subject of the second poem? What other subjects do you think are included in the poem? Imagine the anticipated and realized joy felt by these women as they prepared their foods for their day of freedom.
3. Why is marriage so important to the woman referred to in the first poem? What would life be like for an old maid? For a teenage widow? If she were to re-marry, what would her stature in her husband's family be?
4. What has happened to the woman in the third poem? Why do you think she does not re-marry? Eventually in the discussion, include the fact that upper class widows would rarely re-marry even if their husbands died at a young age. If a young widow did re-marry, her sons by that marriage could not take the important civil service exam, thus reducing considerably her attractiveness as a potential wife.

HANDOUT 3

Now imagine the courage and audacity of a gifted "problem woman." Such a person was Ho Nansorhon (1563-1589). From a talented literary family, she was the spirited, beautiful daughter of a sixteenth century, high ranking scholar-official. Her brother wrote the first Korean novel. Her own poetic gifts had been recognized from early childhood, and she had been personally tutored by one of the highly praised poets of the age. Such a woman could hardly remain silent and content with being an obedient daughter-in-law and wife, foregoing any truly creative literary outlet. To make matters worse, her husband appears to have been an intellectually inferior man who utterly failed to appreciate her as a woman, wife or gifted poet. Her own prominent family had suffered from political intrigue and factionalism at court, forcing her father and older brother into political exile.

Her younger brother Ho Kyun (1569-1618) was such a free-spirited iconoclast that he promoted the cause of illegitimate children. Implicated in a mutiny through his association with a group of discontented illegitimate sons, he was executed. His famous story *The Tale of Hong Kiltong* is about a hero who tries to fight discrimination single-handedly and create a Confucian society based on merit.

As each of Ho Nansorhon's children died and with her father and brothers in disgrace, she became more and more unhappy. Prior to her death at the age of 27, she burned many of her poems. Her elder brother had kept some of them in secret and proudly gave her posthumous work to an ambassador from China who brought it to his country and published it.

Upon reading Ho Nansorhon's *A Woman's Sorrow*, discuss the following questions:

1. What parts of this poem are definitely not autobiographical?
2. Why do you think the woman's husband left?
3. What reasons does the poet give for the circumstances that lead to her sorrow?

Upon reading the poems by Hwang Chini, a *kisaeng* (entertainer) and the most accomplished of all female Korean poets, discuss the following questions:

1. Who is the author of the poems entertaining? From what social class do you think she came? Why? How do you think she learned to read and write? Why would she be expected to read, write and converse skillfully on literary themes? What other freedoms do you think she had compared to most upper class women?
2. What special problems of a *kisaeng* are suggested in Hwang Chini's poems? In what ways would she find unhappiness if she were to fall in love with one of her patrons?
3. If one of her patrons were to make her his concubine, how would their relationship be different from that with his wife? Could the former *kisaeng* have children? Could her sons take the state examination?