

QUEEN MIN

GRADE LEVEL: 10-12

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SUBJECT: Global History, East Asian Civilization

TIME REQUIRED: 2 class periods

OBJECTIVES:

1. Gain insight into the life and times of one of Korea's most interesting historical figures
2. Grasp the importance of using first-hand accounts when trying to understand what an historical figure was actually like as a human being

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- Readings provided with lesson
- Copy of a possible photograph of Queen Min

PROCEDURES:

1. Discuss Reading #1 in class and focus on the following questions:
 - a. Who was Queen Min?
 - b. Why was she chosen to be queen?
 - c. Was this a wise choice? From whose viewpoint?
 - d. How did she try to maintain Korea's independence? Did she succeed?
 - e. What can her death tell us about the measures imperialists will take to ensure their interests?
 - f. Do you admire her? Why or why not?
2. Discuss Reading #2 in class and focus on the following questions:
 - a. Who was Isabella Bird?
 - b. What were Ms. Bird's first impressions of Queen Min?
 - c. What might the clothes and jewelry worn by Queen Min tell us about her view of her place in Korean society?
 - d. Which personal characteristics of the Queen tell us about what kind of woman she was?
 - e. Which personal characteristic of the Queen's do you feel is the most revealing? Why?
 - f. Would you like to have met Queen Min? Why or why not?

EVALUATION:

- Have students write summary essays on both readings.

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READING #1

QUEEN MIN: HEROINE, MYSTIC, OR UPPITY FEMALE?

Few figures in Korean History have had as much of an impact on their times as Queen Min. But just who was this controversial yet intrepid woman?

The future Queen Min was born in 1851. She was from a noble family that lacked powerful ties at court. In 1866, at the age of 14, she married the heir to the Choson dynasty's throne, King Kojong. Kojong's father, known by the title of the "Taewon'gun," ruled in his name. He felt that the young queen would be a compliant wife to his son and pose no threat to his authority.

In 1873, Queen Min convinced her young husband to declare himself king in fact as well as in name. His father, at the height of his powers, was bitter at this turn of events. Queen Min made a powerful enemy for life. In fact, the bad blood between Queen Min and her father-in-law went back even further than this. The Queen had a difficult time giving birth to a son, who was necessary to continue the Choson Dynasty line. In Korea, a woman could not inherit the throne in her own right. Therefore, having a son was crucial to the success of any queen. The Taewon'gun grew impatient with her failure and arranged for his son to have a child by another woman. Needless to say, this greatly hurt the young queen.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century was a time of great change for Korea. Occupying a strategic position at the intersection of Chinese, Russian and Japanese interests, it became a victim of imperialism. Queen Min recognized that her husband and his kingdom were in grave danger. She used her intelligence and guile to play one imperialist "suitor" off against the other so that Korea could gain time in order to make progressive reforms, build infrastructure and develop the modern technology necessary to hold its own in an increasingly hostile world. Queen Min was seen as both a resourceful and supportive wife by some and as a meddling, power hungry mystic by others.

In 1882, the Military Mutiny erupted, and she was one of their prime targets. The queen barely escaped with her life. Queen Min returned to the court and continued to develop a policy of balancing Chinese, Russian and Japanese interests in Korea while continuing to keep her father-in-law at bay. She did all of this while raising her young son to become the future king.

She was clearly an energetic and dynamic woman. In 1895, the Japanese reached the conclusion that they would never be able to dominate Korea as long as Queen Min lived. After defeating China in a war fought over Korea, Japan's sole rival in Korea was Russia. Queen Min cultivated close contacts with the Russians, which infuriated the Japanese and frustrated their efforts. On October 8th, a team of Japanese assassins and their Korean collaborators broke into the royal palace, stabbed Queen Min, and set her body on fire. Queen Min was 44 years old.

Within two decades of Queen Min's death the Choson Dynasty was officially ended by the Japanese. The Japanese had defeated the Russians on the battlefield, and in so doing, gained a free hand to do as they pleased in Korea. Their occupation of Korea left many scars. Queen Min has recently been immortalized in a musical play called "The Last Empress." This play portrays her as the embodiment of all that was best in Korea. It appears that she has achieved in death what was denied her in life.

READING #2

QUEEN MIN (a personal view)

History often presents us with flawed images of those we are studying. The essence of what a person was becomes lost in a haze of names, dates and larger historical forces. The essence of Queen Min, wife of King Kojong of Korea in the latter half of the nineteenth century, certainly falls into this category. The Japanese all but erased her name from the collective memory of the Korean people. Her story, fascinating though it was, had been marginalized by historians. The fact was that she was a woman living in a male-dominated world and that she had been on the losing side in a hopeless struggle.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, an English author named Isabella Bird became renowned as one of the world's foremost travelers. Her journeys took her to the four corners of the earth and off the beaten track. Korea, the "hermit kingdom," certainly fell into the latter category. Little was known about Korea outside of East Asia, and even less was known about its remarkable queen. It appears Ms. Bird's reputation preceded her and upon arriving in Seoul she was granted an audience at court. Her observations during these meetings with the Queen are an invaluable resource for those who want to gain a glimpse of what Queen Min was actually like. The following passages are from Ms. Bird's memoir *Korea and Her Neighbors*, which was published in 1897, two years after the Queen's death:

Her majesty, who was then past forty, was a very nice-looking slender woman, with glossy raven-black hair and a very pale skin, the pallor enhanced by the use of pearl powder. The eyes were cold and keen, and the general expression one of brilliant intelligence. She wore a very handsome, very full, and very long skirt of mazarine blue brocade, heavily pleated, with the waist under the arms, and a full sleeved bodice of crimson and blue brocade, clasped at the throat by a coral rosette, and girdled by six crimson and blue cords, each clasped with a coral rosette, with a crimson tassel hanging from it. Her head dress was a crownless black silk cap edged with fur, pointed over the brow, with a coral rose and full red tassel in front, and jeweled aigrettes on either side. Her shoes were of the same brocade as her dress. As soon as she began to speak, and especially when she became interested in conversation, her face lighted up into something very like beauty...

...I was impressed with the grace and charming manner of the Queen, her thoughtful kindness, her singular intelligence and force, and her remarkable conversational power even through the medium of an interpreter. I was not surprised at her singular political influence, or her sway over the king and many others."



Current scholarly opinion suggests that this is a lady in waiting of the Min Court. It seems the Japanese destroyed any physical traces of the Queen.