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The Significance of Visual Sources in Studying the Women's History of Korea (Late 19th – Early 20th Century)

Nodira Nazarkulova

Republic of Uzbekistan, Tashkent city, Mirzo Ulugbek district

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ABSTRACT

Visual sources play a significant role in studying the history of women who lived in Korea in the late 19th to early 20th centuries. Unlike other traditional materials, visual sources are important because they vividly depict the history of Korean women and provide researchers with a broader perspective. Based on various types of visual sources from this period, such as photographs, videos, artistic, and documentary films, they allow for a more precise exploration of various aspects of the social, economic, political, and cultural life of women during this period.

This article provides a brief examination of the socio-political changes that took place in the lives of Korean women in the late 19th to early 20th centuries during the final period of the Joseon Dynasty, partly based on visual sources, particularly photographs.

Main Section. The Emergence of Visual Materials Relying on visual sources is a relatively new direction in historical research, closely tied to the advent of the first photographic techniques in the early 19th century.[1] Visual studies, which initially emerged in ethnography, entered anthropology as a novel field. While in ethnography, visual materials serve as a means to study aspects like customs, clothing, and cuisine of various peoples, in anthropology, they are used to examine interactions among people in different societies and humanity itself. The difference between sociology and anthropology at this point could be the cultural aspects, because anthropology, more specifically saying social or cultural anthropology mostly focused on studying humanity from the cultural point of view, yet sociology as its name does study from exceptionally societal point of view. Although three two disciplines have several differences both have main goal – to study human beings in general.

With the aid of image processing equipment, individuals were able to see places and individuals that were previously impossible to discern up close, events occurring thousands of kilometers away. Photographs represent an opportunity for historians to record events in their original form and pass them down to future generations. Today, we have access to a wealth of information about numerous indigenous peoples in Africa, New Zealand, Oceania, who are currently undergoing profound changes thanks to the work of individuals like Margaret Mead, Gregory

[1] https://www.nfi.edu/when-was-the-camera-invented/

Bateson, and others.[2]

Artificial images are a kind of visual materials that in the process of making them the least possible human intervention occurs. These kinds of images are created using cameras or any other means of visualization. The photographer cannot directly interfere with the image or the behavior of the objects reflected in photos, making them perceivable as objective material by third parties.

Since the inception of recorded human history, prevailing historical narratives have often focused predominantly on the lives of men, encompassing their political, social, economic, and cultural spheres. However, a discernible reality emerges from empirical evidence: women constitute an equal proportion of a country's populace. Consequently, it is evident that women played significant roles in historical processes. Despite written accounts frequently marginalizing or simply not mentioning the historical significance of women, artistic endeavors such as sculptures, paintings, and poetry prominently feature women, underscoring their importance. The Greco-Roman civilization stands as a prominent testament to this phenomenon.

From the early 19th century onwards, coinciding with the proliferation of photography, the role of women in historical contexts, encompassing political, social, economic, and cultural dimensions, witnessed a progressive evolution. This transformation has been chronologically documented through imagery, captured and disseminated through diverse forms of mass media, including illustrations and caricatures. Irrespective of the textual content found in historical sources, photographs published via various mass media outlets serve as tangible evidence illuminating the status of women across different countries.

Photographs that encompass cultural, social, political, and economic information directly reflect the outcomes within these domains. For instance, the global movements for women's emancipation, suffragism, and feminism in the early 20th century stemmed from challenges shaped by pre-20th century political, economic, social, and cultural circumstances. Considering that religion and political ideologies often serve as primary ideological influences in shaping cultural and moral facets, one can identify that religious shifts occurring concurrently in a country play a pivotal role. Consequently, it is pertinent to delve into the religious-ideological landscape that has significantly influenced the depiction of women's roles and images in visual materials when studying the position and significance of women in society.

Views of Neo-Confucianism and Other Socio-Philosophical Schools on Korean Women

When it comes to Korean women of the 19th century, the new Confucian doctrine is often cited as the most crucial factor shaping their socio-political status in society. Established as the state's official political ideology in the late 14th century, this doctrine not only established the political, ideological, administrative, and moral order of Korean society but also reshaped the lives of women. By the second half of the 17th century, women were nearly excluded from political and economic life and relegated to the confines of the "*anban*," or the women's quarters in the interior of the house. As a result, the lives of Korean women became secluded and hidden. On the other hand, it should be noted that some rules imposed by the Joseon Dynasty allowed women to interact with each other. Additionally, a closer examination of certain sources and photographs from the Joseon era reveals that the impact of new Confucianism was not uniform for all Korean women but varied depending on their social hierarchy. This is one of the distinctive features of Korean women's history.

In the late 19th century, reformist and enlightenment movements emerged in Korea, aiming to

[2] Nazarkulova, N. (2021). "Visual Anthropology and Its Significance in History," *Oriental Renaissance: Innovative, Educational, Natural and Social Sciences*, Volume 1, Issue 6, pp. 324-332. (In Russian: "Визуальная антропология и её значение в истории," *Oriental Renaissance: Innovative, Educational, Natural and Social Sciences*, Том 1, Выпуск 6, стр. 324-332.)

counter the country's developmental lag and medieval conditions. The most widespread of these movements was Sirhak [or *Silhak school*], which focused on reforms in the social, economic, and political spheres of society. Despite the strong influence of Neo-Confucianism, the Korean Enlightenment, or Sirhak, emphasized modernization. The modernization period on the Korean Peninsula involved expanding women's rights in its programs, making changes to the lives of widows, and creating opportunities for women's education.

Ideas that came from abroad spurred a local independence movement, and the "progressive" sirhak school (the "Practical Learning" doctrine) had a positive impact on Korea's initial modernization.[3] Tonghak also established a new order based on human touch, "*innechon*" or "people are divine,"[4] which became a central principle of the religion. These changes somewhat weakened class distinctions and gender barriers, contributing to the education and development of women.

However, among the ideas of these two doctrines, there were hardly any radical demands for a profound reform of the social status, particularly in terms of changing the position of women. Nevertheless, the traditional phrase "a husband treats his wife well, and the wife obeys her husband" can also be found in orthodox Confucianism.[5]

It is indeed challenging to find explicit demands for women's participation or equality in other national reform movements. However, the fact that the idea of women's education was warmly received by some segments of the population and that Queen Min (Empress Myeongseong, posthumously honored as Empress, 1851-1895), together with Americans, founded the first English-language school for Korean girls in 1883, were significant achievements of this period.

Therefore, it can be concluded that women began actively engaging in societal life. Naturally, the changing order that gave rise to education and the utilization of other new social opportunities should itself begin to be reflected in the sources of that period. Among these sources, photo and video archives hold a crucial place.

The First Visual Materials in Korea

The first visual materials related to the history of Korea date back to the second half of the 19th century. This is associated with the significant influx of foreigners during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910). Merchants and missionaries were accompanied by numerous travelers and journalists. The primary goal of this group of people was to inform the world about the peninsula and its life, culture, and people. Merchants and missionaries, on the other hand, also had access to cameras, adding photographs to their accounts of their trips to Korea as an additional source and as keepsakes in their personal diaries. Elizabeth Keith, Paul Jacoulet, Lilian Miller, Willie Selje, Berta Loom, and Yoshida Hiroshi are examples who visited and wrote about the life in Korea in the first quarter of the 20th century.[6]

Not only are images of women rarely found in photographic sources from the period until the end of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), but they also strongly reflect traditional influences [see Figure 1]. After 1910, women could often be seen in photographs (including illustrations) more frequently.

[3] Young C. Kim, "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1975," *Asian Survey* 16, no. 1 (1976): 82–94.
[4] Kristen Bell, "Cheondogyo and the Donghak Revolution: The (un)Making of a Religion," *Korea Journal* (2004): 123–148.
[5] Hyaeweol Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea: New Women, Old Ways* (London: University of California Press, Ltd., 2009): 38–40.
[6] http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150205000944

Figure 1. From *Passing through Korea* by Homer Bezaleel Hulbert Doubleday, 1906.
Source: https://susannaives.com/wordpress/category/historical-fashion/:

Based on the results of the current research, visual materials used as sources in the study of Korean women's history can be divided into three main groups:

1. Publicist and research works by foreign tourists, missionaries, and merchants, as well as photographs and videos taken for personal purposes.
2. Materials related to the Japanese colonial system, including periodicals, personal photo and video archives of Japanese officials.
3. Photo and video collections by local Korean journalists, educators, and any other individuals who had access to cameras.

Although there is relatively little video material from this period, the available material is crucial for studying the lives of Korean women during this era. In addition to this series of materials, one can include caricatures depicting various aspects of "shin yeoseong" (new women) life. Caricatures, which appeared in both Korean and Japanese newspapers and magazines, embraced modernist ideas and rejected traditional norms. They are particularly noteworthy for reflecting the emerging negative attitude towards traditional norms (discussed below).

The Emergence of the Image of the New Korean Woman in Visual Materials

Even before Korean female intellectuals adopted the name "shin yeoseong" (new women) as a sign of the emerging culture that resonated with their thoughts and behaviors in society, foreigners were the first to express thoughts about them in newspapers and magazines. With their short haircuts and short skirts, these new women began the process of transforming the Korean woman's identity. The "women's question" was one of the most common topics during the colonial period from the 1920s to the 1940s and was covered in more than 230 articles in the newspapers "Chosun Ilbo" (조선 일보) and "Dong-a Ilbo" (동아 일보).[7]

Thanks to the efforts of Western missionaries and Korean educators in women's education in the

[7] Hyaeweol Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea: New Women, Old Ways* (London: University of California Press, Ltd., 2009). pp. 58-59.

first quarter of the 20th century, a new layer of educated women emerged. This education system led to unexpected results for Korean women, even surprising the missionaries themselves. In the 1920s and 1930s, these women, who showed great interest in Western culture and ideology and amazed with their assimilation of the missionaries, formed a new group called "shin yeoseong" (신 여성) – "new [Korean] women." Women of this group serve as role models for even contemporary generations of Korean women in terms of education, career choices, equal participation in society, and free thinking.

When we study the sources of that period regarding the emergence of "shin yeoseong," we encounter numerous visual materials about them, as well as sources written by foreigners, local intellectuals, and the "new women" themselves. The significance of various visual materials in shedding light on this topic is well-known, given that the most prominent characteristic of the "shin yeoseong" group of that period was reflected in their clothing and behavior in society.

Figure 2. Postcard from the collection of Willard Dickerman Straight and Early U.S.-Korea Diplomatic Relations, Cornell University Library. Date: 1904
Source: https://rosalindnoor.medium.com/un-veiling-the-joseon-period-6979c9eb83

It is significant that, on one hand, Korean intellectuals held a strong aversion towards this category of women and expressed their views with great fervor in newspaper articles and magazines – both in text and caricatures. At the same time, there was a more favorable attitude towards the "shin yeoseong" depicted or drawn by Japanese, whether in realistic depictions or caricatures.

Figure 3. Caricature for the Pyol'gongon, December 20, 1927.

Some Korean intellectuals did not necessarily object to the so-called new women embracing modernity but did not support their complete rejection of old traditions either. Just 20 years ago, women who were prohibited from leaving their homes at times other than specific hours, and even then, only with special '*chan-ots*'[8] (see Figure 2), have reached the present day and transitioned to more open attire. Their defiance of family and their rejection of traditional Confucian morality greatly concerned these intellectuals.

Perhaps for this reason, cartoons with critical content were primarily created by local Korean and national publications, as well as individual authors.

In photographs and cartoons, sometimes accompanying articles, two different attitudes towards these new women can be observed. Below is a caricature from the 1927 issue of the magazine "Pyolgon'gon" [see Figure 3].

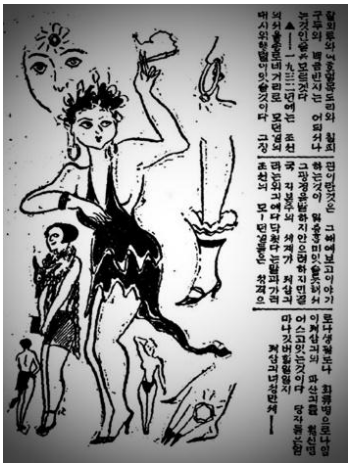

Figure 4. 3rd Protest Parade in Moch'ŏl in 1932, Predicted by a Caricature Artist (Edited). 1932.

The caricature depicts a new Korean woman climbing onto a sack of rice [to make her shoes clearly visible, according to the author] and displaying her new shoes to her father. For Koreans, whose staple food is rice, this is considered highly immoral, as evidenced by the expression of astonishment and the question in the father's eyes (the author emphasizes this further with the use of a question mark).

In the illustrations [Figure 4], a similar negative theme is depicted, which serves to present *new women* in a negative context to the readers. From this, it can be inferred that Korean intellectuals had difficulty accepting such drastic changes in women. Additionally, the women's rejection of age-old routines, as well as the realization of entirely new perspectives and ideas, were challenging for Korean society as a whole to embrace.

[8] Or jang-ot (장옷/長衣; lit. 'long gown'), also known as janot, jang-eui, jang-ui (장의/長衣), is a type of po worn by women of the Joseon Dynasty period as a headdress or veil to cover their faces by the mid-18th century.

Visual Materials from the Colonial Period

The Japanese colonial regime was a government that encouraged Korean women to study not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in Japan, the United States, and Europe. Typically, the "shin yeoseong" intelligentsia consisted of Korean women who were fortunate enough to avail themselves of this privilege. However, another part (perhaps the majority) did not have the opportunity. Japanese authors portray "shin yeoseong" in the context of freedom and modernity, and anyone who sees visual materials about them will conclude that they are encouraging other ordinary Korean girls to follow their example (see Figures 5-6).

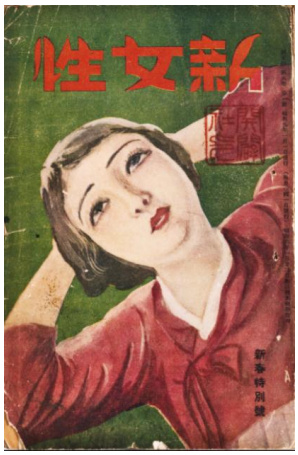

Figure 5. New Woman (During Japanese Colonization, from 1920s to 40s).
Source: https://museumnews.kr/197ex01/?ckattempt=1

Let's take a look at the next photo on the front page of one of the Japanese publications [Figure 5]. This image, depicting a special New Year's edition of a magazine, is not a photograph but a unique portrayal of the attitude towards the new women of that time. The special issue is titled "Attractive New Woman" (性女新 – [*segame-shin*] – "Sexual new woman"). As evident from the female clothing and hairstyle on the cover, it belongs to the modern Korean women of that era. She is depicted symbolically looking into the distance. She clearly appears more interested in her future life than anything else.

Figure 6. Journal *Woman* [婦人] – Front Page (1922).

Similarly, Figure 6 leaves a similar impression: although the image incorporates elements of Japanese culture (for instance, the fan is both a Korean and Japanese element), the woman is most likely Korean. Judging from her hairstyle and makeup, we can assume that she is a modern woman.

Conclusion: Who were the "shin yeoseong" really?

Figure 7. Editor Kim Hwallan with a Short Haircut, Popularly Known as 'tanbal mori' in Korean or Bobbed Hair Cut in English. 1922.

It should be noted that despite conflicting opinions and propaganda, the stratum of Korean women known as "shin yeoseong" that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s consisted of modern-thinking women who received a formal education, knew foreign languages, and were familiar with Western cultures. Among them were many scholars, writers, and journalists who had received their education in various countries in America and Europe. Although they did not dress as provocatively as depicted in the caricatures, of course, they did not wear *chan-ot* as before [Figures 7-8]. It is worth noting that these women served as role models for young Korean girls to emulate.

Some of these women also actively participated in the struggle against the Japanese colonial system, while others remained neutral and dedicated themselves to supporting the education of Korean wo men. These "new women" were confident, financially independent, and often dressed in European fashion. For conservative segments of Korean society, rooted in Confucian ideals, the process of changing the status and self-awareness of women appeared catastrophic. In these circles, there were concerns and condemnations about the breakdown of the family institution, the decline of morality, and the distortion of traditions brought about by feminist sentiments.[9]

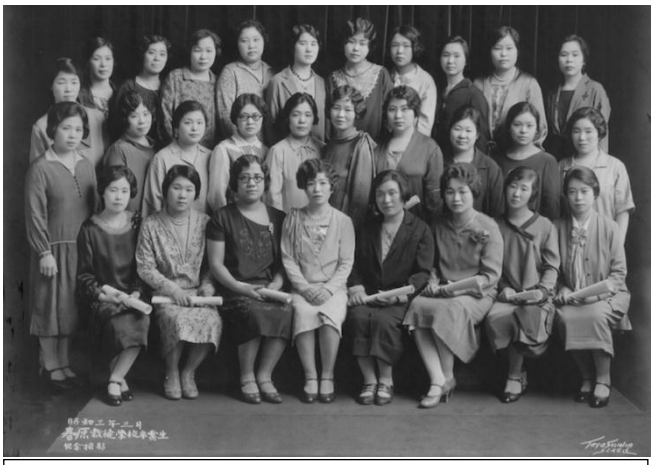

Figure 8. From the Wing Luke Museum Collection: "Graduates of Sunohara Dressmaking School, 1925.
Source: https://www.seattlemet.com/arts-and-culture/2012/08/see-asian-american-masters-of-fashion-furniture-wing-luke

Visual materials are indeed a valuable source for studying the emergence, formation, and evolution of women's fashion over time. It's worth noting that this process is more readily reflected in the material aspects of Korean women's lives. Indeed, visual materials have become a relatively new and rich avenue for historical research.

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