

The Most Influential Woman at the Chosŏn Court: Queen Min and her Evaluations in Russian-language Academia

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The second half of the nineteenth century became a time of many dramatic events on the Korean peninsula. With opening the country to trade and diplomacy with Westernized (Japan) or Western (USA, France, Great Britain) countries led to a division within Korean society, since the 1880s Chosŏn (Korea) has entered the age of political and social turmoil. Several fractions, supporting different diplomatic approaches, guided by influential political figures, were formed at the Korean court. It is their constant clashes that can be partly blamed for the inconsistency of Chosŏn's diplomatic and political course at that time.

In light of the above, it is noticeable that, rather than stressing Kojong's authority or hinting at the political influence of Hŭngsŏn Taewŏn'gun, the Russian-language part of Korean studies academy is generally paying attention to the Queen, labeling her as the main figure who guided the state policy from the shadow of her husband's back. In the Russian analytical literature, Queen Min, also being the head of the influential Min-clan, is responsible for seizing power by removing Taewŏn'gun from office; requesting China's military support to solve the Imo incident of 1882; being involved in appealing to China in 1894 for suppressing the peasant uprising that had brought up the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895); and generally guiding Chosŏn's diplomacy throughout 1880s and 1890s, ensuring the country's rapport with China, the United States, and, later, with Russia. Finally, by Russian-speaking scholars, it was Queen Min's firm resistance to Japan's involvement in Korean state affairs in the mid-1890s that ultimately brought her assassination in October 1895.

This paints a vivid picture of Queen Min as one of the most influential politicians of her time, which stays unchallenged and largely unexplained in the Russian-language part of Korean studies academia. This paper is an attempt to shed some light on the roots of this analytical concept. The authors will attempt to outline Queen Min's assessments present in Russian academia and trace their original source. A critical analysis of these evaluations will also be performed with the aim of revealing the true historical role that Queen Min played in Chosŏn politics and diplomacy in the late nineteenth century.

To achieve these goals, the authors will carry out an analysis of narratives regarding Queen Min and her political role, present in publications of Russian-language scholars (such Tatiana Simbirtseva, Oleg Kurbanov, Vladimir Tikhonov), comparing them to available primary sources (for instance, Kojong Sillok, Queen Min's diary of 1882, Yun Chi Ho's diary, memoirs of Lilia Horton Underwood and other) and narratives, present in relevant publications of scholars from English-speaking part of an academia.

Keywords: Chosŏn (Korea), Kojong, Queen Min, politics, 19 century.

Introduction

The end of the 19 century in the Chosŏn state was characterized by the opening of the country to foreign policy relations with Western countries. Traditionally, Chosŏn had maintained trade and diplomatic relations only with neighboring China and Japan. Therefore, the newly-established contacts with countries outside the historically-formed geopolitical environment naturally caused internal political changes, ensuring the split of Chosŏn's political elites. If the reign of Taewŏn'gun (r.1863-1873)¹ was characterized by the country's enforced isolation from foreign presence, then after Kojong came to power, starting late 1870s, external contacts with, first, westernized (Japan, 1876), then, Western countries (the United States of America, 1882; England and Germany, 1883; Italy and Russia, 1884 and other) gradually intensified.

Against the background of the strengthening of foreign policy contacts, the domestic political life of Chosŏn is also becoming more active. Drawing inspiration from the successful example of westernized Japan, as well as getting more and more knowledge about the state of political and social affairs of the West and its level of technological development, part of the Chosŏn political elites aimed to pursue the transformation of the country through excessive (not necessarily rapid) reforms. The other part of the high society, however, continued to insist on maintaining the tradition, refusing to implement any foreign methods on the Korean soil. This split had marked the beginning of an intense power struggle within the Chosŏn government, with Taewŏn'gun leading the conservatives, while his son, Kojong, struggling to implement some moderate reforms to strengthen the country.

This period of Korean history is characterized by many figures that contributed, one way or another, to the development of the country. While the list of such actors may vary from one scholar to another, it is noticeable that Queen Min (1851-1895) is also often mentioned alongside Taewŏn'gun and Kojong. Noticeably, the Russian-language scholars in Korean studies tends to depict the queen as one of the most influential politicians of her time.

This paper aims to introduce the above-mentioned evaluations of Queen Min, spread among Russian scholars, analyze and compare them with information from primary sources and the approach generally accepted in other parts of Korean studies academia to assess the accuracy of a role assigned to her by Russian scholars to Queen Min in the late 19 century.

Queen Min in Russian-language Academic Publications

Queen Min, her political influence and historical significance, as well as the political influence of the Min clan take a special place in the Russian-language academia. Despite that, presently there are no standalone publications dedicated to the political or diplomatic activities of the queen or the role that she has played in

¹ Yi Haŭng (1821-1898) also known as Hŭngsŏn Taewŏn'gun (often referred to as Taewŏn'gun), was king Kojong's biological father and from 1866 to 1873 served as regent and de-facto ruler of Korea.

the most significant events in her country (such, for example, the Imo Incident of 1882, or the Kapsin Coup of 1884). However, Russian-language scholars are paying vested interest to the circumstances surrounding Queen Min's assassination in 1895.² This distinguished feature of scientific knowledge is explained by the peculiarity of the analytical approach common among Russian-speaking scholars: the assassination of Queen Min is often analyzed as a catalyst for Russian-Korean rapprochement and the escape of King Kojong to the Russian diplomatic mission in February 1896.³ It is significant, however, that even in the absence of analytical works devoted to the queen's political and diplomatic activities, Russian-language Korean scholars unambiguously describe Queen Min as an active politician and diplomat who influenced the situation not only within Korea but also beyond its borders. Such narratives can be found in several significant Russian-language publications.⁴

For this research, several publications by Russian-language scholars that describe and analyze Queen Min were selected. Among them are two works by Tatiana Simbirtseva⁵ as they provide a thorough examination of the queen's figure, her personality, relationships, and, of course, her political activities. These publications are particularly noteworthy and comprehensive, as they specifically focus on the figure of Queen Min, while building up the argument that the queen's political and diplomatic activities led to her assassination in 1895. As well as two monographs on the complete history of Korea, authored by Vladimir Tikhonov in collaboration with Kang Mangil,⁶ and Sergey Kurbanov⁷ respectively. These texts are noteworthy not only because they are widely used as teaching materials in Korean studies faculties all around Russia, but for their detailed descriptions of the reign of King Kojong and the activities of his wife, Queen Min, as well.

Despite obvious differences, these publications draw a rather coherent image of the queen. However, their source base sometimes is unclear, which puts a question mark on the produced historical evaluations. Therefore, aiming at tracing the original sources of Queen Min's assessments present in Russian-language

² Pak, Boris. *Rossia i Korea* [Russia and Korea]. 2nd ed. (Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2004), p. 220-230.

³ Such narratives can be found in Bella Pak's "Rossiyskiy diplomat Karl Veber i yego Koreya" [Russian Diplomat Karl Weber and His Korea]. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2013. pp.176-221.

⁴ For example, Boris Pak claims that the queen was "the main obstacle to Japan's expansionist policy in Korea and advocated for the preservation of the Korean state's independence, relying on the aid and support of Russia." See: Pak, Boris. *Russia and Korea*. p. 223.

⁵ Simbirtseva, Tatiana. "Ubijstvo vo dvorce Kyonbokkun" [The Gyeongbokgung Palace Murder]. *Vostochnaya collestia*, no. 3 (2004): 127-142. <https://koryo-saram.site/tatyana-simbirtseva-ubijstvo-vo-dvortse-kyonbokkun/>. Simbirtseva T. Koroleva Min (1851-1895): put' k vlasti (biograficheskiy ocherk po knige TS. Fusako «Ubiystvo korolevy Min») [Queen Min (1851-1895): The Path to Power (a biographical essay based on Ts. Fusako's book "The Assassination of Queen Min")] // https://koryo-saram.site/koroleva-min-1851-1895-put-k-vlasti-biograficheskij-ocherk-po-knige-ts-fusako-ubijstvo-korolevy-min/#_ftnref8.

⁶ Tikhonov, V., Khan, Mang-il. *Istoriya Korei: v 2 tomah. Tom 1: S drevneyshyh vremen do 1904 g.* [The history of Korea: in 2 volumes. Volume 1: From Ancient Times to 1904]. St. (Petersburg: Vostochnaya Kniga Publishing House, 2011)

⁷ Kurbanov, Sergey. *Ostoriya Korei: s drevnosti do nachala XXI veka* [History of Korea: from antiquity to the beginning of the 21st century]. 3rd ed. (St. Petersburg: Saint Peterburg University Publishing House, 2018)

academia, authors of this paper will compare the narratives of the above-mentioned publications with written statements of Queen Min's contemporaries.

Given the significant role that Queen Min presumably has played in Chosŏn politics, the Russian-language scholars in Korean studies pays a keen interest to her early days, apparently attempting to trace the growth of the queen as an influential politician. In publications, it is frequently pointed out that the future queen was born into an impoverished aristocratic Min family. As a child she became an orphan – her father, Min Ch'irok had died when the girl was only eight years old. She was only 15 years old when she was married to Yi Chaehwang, future king Kojong, then the crown prince of the Chosŏn state. Analyzing the circumstances of this marriage, Tatiana Simbirtseva and Oleg Kurbanov pointed out that Taewŏn'gun, Kojong's biological father, had "played a key role in arranging"⁸ it and personally selected "an intelligent girl from the poor aristocratic Min family, renowned for her exceptional abilities",⁹ adding that a significant factor in this choice was also the fact that the future queen was a relative of the Taewŏn'gun's wife.¹⁰ Such a narrative stipulates the obviously political nature of the marriage. However, the Russian scholars go in their analysis even further, suggesting that this union was planned by Taewŏn'gun to strengthen his own power by influencing the young ruler, for whom he served as regent:¹¹ a weak wife, completely dependent on her husband and, thus, his father, was necessary to make it easier for Taewŏn'gun to control his son.¹²

It is noticeable that the historical concept introduced above is not supported by the introduction or reliance on any primary sources. Therefore, it is difficult to trace its origins. However, the authors of this article are assuming that, at least partially, it could be inspired by Lillias Horton Underwood's writings.¹³ Indeed, Mrs. Horton's writings contain a narrative of a very similar nature: "The older man was greedy of power, keen and crafty, and not inclined to hand over the reins of government; he therefore selected a wife for his son from a family of his near friends choosing a woman he supposed he could easily control..."¹⁴

Another significant feature of the introduced analytical approach is that it ignores the clan Min factor: at the early stages of Kojong and Queen Min union, her family is not evaluated by the Russian scholars as a political force. It is, however, important to note that the Kojong-Queen Min marriage in 1866 ensured a strengthening of the Min clan's already existing political influence. Taewŏn'gun's wife's father, Min Ch'igu (1795-1875), held a high position as the Chief of the

⁸ Simbirtseva, "The Gyeongbokgung Palace Murder", p.138.

⁹ Kurbanov, *History of Korea*, p. 201.

¹⁰ Simbirtseva, "The Gyeongbokgung Palace Murder", p. 138.

Taewŏn'gun was married to Min Ch'igu's - Min Ch'irok's relative - eldest daughter.

¹¹ Taewŏn'gun was appointed as Kojong's regent from 1866 to 1873.

¹² Kurbanov, *History of Korea*, p. 201.

¹³ Lillas Horton Underwood (see: Stirling, 1851–1921) was an American missionary. She came to Korea with her husband Horace Grant Underwood (1859-1916) in 1888 and eventually became a physician of queen Min. She wrote and published several books about her experiences in Korea, the most famous of which is "Fifteen Years Among the Topknots", which was first published in 1904.

¹⁴ Underwood, *Fifteen Years Among the Topknots or Life in Korea*. 2nd ed. (Boston, Newyork: American tract society, 1904), p. 26.

Office of the Ministry of Personnel at the end of the reign of king Ch'öljong (r. 1849-1864).¹⁵ Thus, his grandson, Kojong, ascension to the throne did not start but rather boosted Min Ch'igu's political career: in 1864, right after young Kojong was crowned to the Korean throne, Min Ch'igu was appointed as the Vice Minister of the Office of Public Works.¹⁶ The same goes for the queen's father, Min Ch'irok (1799-1858), who, although did not hold a constant position in central government, took several important positions in regional governments, including the governor of Tökch'ön¹⁷ and the governor of Yöngch'ön.¹⁸ In 1858, he was summoned to serve in central government, which highlighted the growth of his political influence. After Min Ch'irok's sudden death his authority was succeeded by his adoptive son, the queen's elder brother, Min Süngho (1830-1874), who, in 1886,¹⁹ was appointed to the Office of Special Advisors. Since then and until his assassination in 1874, Min Süngho subsequently served as Vice Minister of Finance, Minister of Justice, and Minister of War.

The above-written makes it possible to deduce that, although the choice of a girl from the Min family was, indeed, a strategic decision, it was made not to control the future king through a weak wife but to boost Taewön'gun's political influence through the family relations that the girl (and Taewön'gun's wife) had with of the Min family serving on different positions in Chosön government.

The next significant event emphasized in the works of Russian-language scholars is related to the transfer of political power from Taewön'gun to Kojong in 1874. Tatiana Simbirtseva assigns the main role in the events to the queen: "She realized that Kojong, while formally king, held no real power, though he dreamed of it. He feared his father, who was harsh with his son and clearly had no intention of relinquishing the throne. The young king was surrounded by officials who merely carried out their orders. He had neither the friends nor the intelligent advisers he so desperately needed, and the queen was determined to become her husband's confidant and friend. It took a long time before she succeeded, but she had no shortage of patience."²⁰ "Taewön'gun was finally forced to hand over power to his son. He was forced to do so primarily by the actions of Queen Min, who had rallied a strong opposition to her father-in-law. The core of her party consisted of members of the Min clan, 30 of whose members occupied strategically important government positions by 1874."²¹ "When Kojong issued the decree announcing his assumption of power, the palace entrance usually used by Taewön'gun was bricked up. There are no surviving documents indicating who issued this order, but it can be assumed that the queen was involved."²² To sum up, by Tatiana Simbirtseva, whose statement is supported by Vladimir Tikhonov, the ousting of Taewön'gun was a result on Queen Min's efforts as "significant influence at the court of the

¹⁵ Kojong Sillok, 1863/12/13. Available at: https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kza_10012013_002.

¹⁶ Kojong Sillok, 1864/12/20. Available at: https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kza_10112020_006.

¹⁷ Kojong Sillok, 1845/09/16. Available at: <https://sjw.history.go.kr/id/SJW-I11090160-01700>.

¹⁸ Kojong Sillok, 1857/11/28. Available at: <https://sjw.history.go.kr/id/SJW-J08110280-01900>.

¹⁹ Kojong Sillok, 1866/12/07. Available at: https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kza_10312007_002.

²⁰ Simbirtseva, "The Gyeongbokgung Palace Murder", p. 139.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 141-142.

²² Ibid, p. 142.

weak and easily influenced Kojong belonged to his wife, the tough, decisive, and ambitious Empress Min, and her Min clan”.²³

Once again, no primary sources to back up this assumption are introduced by the above-mentioned scholars. But yet another part of the text from Lillias Horton Underwood’s writings possesses a significant similarity with the introduced analytical construct. Mrs. Underwood openly claims that Taewŏn’gun was displaced “through a coup d’état of the queen”.²⁴ The writer further explains that these events brought on the Queen Taewŏn’gun’s “rage [that] knew no bounds, and from that time forth he planned her destruction.”²⁵ She added later that the queen “had suffered long and malignant persecution at the hands of a cruel father-in-law, whose wicked ambitious schemes and greed of power she had balked, and nothing that a fertile brain and hate combined with wealth and in-fluence could contrive was left undone to bring about the ruin of this unhappy lady.”²⁶ While not subjecting Mrs. Underwood’s statement to critical or historiographical analysis, it is, however, important to note that she arrived at Seoul in March 1888²⁷ - more than decade after the event she is writing about. Therefore, her statement must be perceived critically.

Despite that, the Russian-language scholars, presumably relying on Mrs. Underwood’s statements, draw the conclusion that in the mid-1870s the conflict between the queen and her father-in-law unfolded. Moreover, its outcome is analyzed as the Min clan’s grasping the ultimate political authority in the country. For instance, Sergey Kurbanov states that “relatives and supporters of Queen Min were introduced to key positions in the state apparatus.”²⁸ While describing the limits of this influence, he further claims that “the arrival of Queen Min’s relatives and supporters to key positions in the government apparatus meant that a course had been set for a gradual end to the policy of “closing the country.”²⁹

Overall, the Russian-language scholars in Korean studies analyzes the transfer of power that occurred in 1874, and the events that followed right after, as the result of Queen Min and her trustworthy allies’ efforts. Tatiana Simbirtseva summarizes: “as the mother of an heir³⁰ head of the Conservative Party, she [Queen Min] acquired unlimited influence on state affairs.”³¹ Nevertheless, even relying on the recollections of contemporaries, such - Mrs. Underwood, does not constitute sufficient evidence to establish the fact of Queen Min’s active participation in state politics. Yet, Russian-speaking researchers tend to make categorical assertions in this regard.

Society’s perception of the queen and the Min clan’s rule is analyzed by Russian-language scholars against the backdrop of the soldiers’ rebellion of 1882 (so-called Imo Incident) and the attempted coup d’état of 1884 (the Kapsin Coup). In both cases, Queen Min is noted as one of the key figures, which is, once again, used as

²³ Tikhonov, *History of Korea*, p. 379.

²⁴ Underwood, *Fifteen Years Among the Top-knots or Life in Korea*, p. 26.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Underwood, *Fifteen Years Among the Topknots or Life in Korea*, p. 25.

²⁷ Underwood, *Fifteen Years Among the Topknots or Life in Korea*, p.1.

²⁸ Kurbanov, *History of Korea*, p. 201.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Queen Min and Kojong’s only survived child, future emperor Sunjong, was born in 1874.

³¹ Simbirtseva, “The Gyeongbokgung Palace Murder”, p. 142.

evidence of her prevailing political influence. A main narrative feature of Russian-language historiographic publications analyzing these events, is the belief that the queen took an active role in state affairs and could even be considered the *de facto* ruler, governing the country behind her husband's back.

Thus, the Imo Incident is described as people's retaliation against the state corruption as well as the new open-door policy of the Chosŏn government.³² Naturally, main figures of the Min clan, including the queen, being the leading political force in the country, were set as main targets by the rebels. It is noticeable that during these events the queen is introduced as a *de-facto* leader of the Min clan by Russian scholars.³³ The geopolitical aspect of military units, rashly dispatched by China to the peninsula to take the situation under control, serving as a support of this claim: tracing the origins of the Qing's intervention, the Russian scholars are unanimously attributing it to the actions of the queen. By Sergey Kurbanov, Queen Min had called for Chinese support.³⁴ This narrative is also introduced as a statement with no marked reliance on any primary source.

However, to properly analyze this narrative, one must point out two major factors: the queen's whereabouts in late July and the day when the Chinese government became aware of the situation on the peninsula. The queen fled the Ch'angdökkung palace incognito on July 25, when a raging crowd of rioters burst into the palace aiming to kill her. At that time, Queen Min's escape was so secretive, that for some time she was deemed deceased and funeral rites were performed in her honor.³⁵ The next confirmed record of the queen's whereabouts is dated July 27 – the date of the first entry in Queen Min's diary "Records of the 6 month of year of Imo."³⁶ This leads to the assumption that between July 25 and July 27, her circumstances, including security, were not ensured. Meanwhile, Chinese state officials became aware of the situation in Seoul on August 1. On the next day, the dispatch of Chinese troops to the peninsula was approved.³⁷ The extremely short time window – only three days – leaves no room for speculation about whether Queen Min did call for China's help or not: hiding in a rural area with her prospects uncertain, she simply had no time and means to promptly call for the Qing.³⁸ Moreover, an analysis of the diaries suggests that the Queen was seriously ill while in hiding; consequently, her entourage was occupied with caring for and treating her, and she had no contact with anyone outside her immediate circle.³⁹ This information also highlights the difficulties of the Queen's situation away from the palace, leading

³² Tikhonov, *History of Korea*, p. 400.

³³ Kurbanov, *History of Korea*, p. 201.

³⁴ Kurbanov, *History of Korea*, p. 205.

³⁵ From July 25 to July 29, Chosŏn wangjo sillok contain descriptions on the Queen's funeral.

³⁶ "*Imo yuwŏl ilgi*" [Records of the 6 month of year of Imo] is a diary that Queen Min wrote while hiding from the rioters at her relative's house in Ch'ungju from July 27 to September 12, 1882.

³⁷ Lee, Yun-Seop 이윤섭. *Segye sok Han'guk kŭndesa* 세계 속 한국 근대사 1 [Modern History of Korea in the World 1]. (Seoul: Palmek Publishing House, 2012), p. 299.

³⁸ An assumption that the Chinese government became aware about the riot in Seoul thought its minister in Tokyo appears to be more logical. On July 29, Japanese minister to Chosŏn that fled the country, arrived at Nagasaki. For detail, see: Lee, Modern History of Korea, p.299.

³⁹ "*Imo yuwŏl ilgi*" [Records of the 6month of year of Imo] , July 29, 1882. Available at: <http://www.davincimap.co.kr/davBase/Source/davSource.jsp?Job=Body&SourID=SOUR002416&Lang=%ED%95%9C%EA%B8%80&Page=1>.

to the logical conclusion that it would have been impossible for her to send requests abroad on her own at that time. Therefore, lacking a source base, the abovementioned narrative that Queen Min called for China's help during the events of the Imo incident, spread among Russian-language part of the Korean studies academia, can be challenged for its historical inaccuracy.

Shedding some light on the reasons behind the Kapsin coup, Russian-language scholars are tending to highlight a socio-economic crisis that hit the state due to "the Min clan's ... course to replenish the treasury through the mass production of cheap coins" amidst the "corruption, unprecedented tyranny of both the oligarchs from the Ming clan and their Chinese patrons."⁴⁰ It is further noted that "any attempt at innovation coming from the young supporters of reform, met with powerful resistance from the "conservatives," in particular from the Queen Min group"⁴¹. Therefore, although in 1884, the queen was not directly targeted by the rebels, they still took a challenge to eliminate the main political figures of the Min clan, which the queen supposedly was leading:⁴² the rebels, "acting on behalf of Kojong, sent fake summonses to urgent audiences to key members of the Min clan and their supporters. As soon as their political opponents showed up at the palace, they were killed."⁴³ Despite that, by Russian-language scholars, Queen Min's role in the events was far from passive. Vladimir Tikhonov, for example, claims that she, "through her close courtiers, managed to convey to the Chinese commanders a request to suppress the rebellion."⁴⁴ Segrey Kurbanov does not support this claim, introducing a rather vague explanation that for China, reforms initiated by the rebels who were "oriented towards Japan, as well as the overthrow of Queen Min's loyal faction, were extremely disadvantageous, as they meant the loss of Chinese influence in Korea." Therefore, "Chinese troops stationed in Korea since the events of 1882 began preparing to storm the royal palace."⁴⁵ Despite that, both authors unanimously claim that expecting Qing's intervention, the queen rushed to persuade Kojong to return to the Ch'angdökkung palace, which was large and, therefore, difficult to defend.⁴⁶

Analyzing this narrative, it is important to point out that, according to Kim Okkyun, upon the start of the rebellion on December 4, both king and queen were moved to Kyöngugung palace.⁴⁷ Moreover, Kim's writings explain that the news about Chinese troops coming to storm the palace was delivered on the morning of December 6, by the translator of the Chinese legation in Seoul. Interestingly, Kim did not clarify the pretext on which the Chinese troops resolved to act. After hearing the news, Kim and his allies decided to evacuate "the crown prince, the

⁴⁰ Tikhonov, *History of Korea*, p. 410.

⁴¹ Kurbanov, *History of Korea*, p. 207.

⁴² For instance, Min T'aeho (1834-1884), who since 1883, was appointed as the left minister of the State council.

⁴³ Tikhonov, *History of Korea*, p. 411.

⁴⁴ Tikhonov, *History of Korea*, p. 413.

⁴⁵ Kurbanov, *History of Korea*, p. 208.

⁴⁶ Kurbanov, *History of Korea*, p. 208; Tikhonov, *History of Korea*, p. 413.

⁴⁷ Kyöngugung palace (景祐宮) – originally built in 1824 as a shrine in honor of Lady Park Subin, the birth mother of King Sunjo.

queen and the crown prince consort.”⁴⁸ Although Kim Okkyun did not specify the exact destination of the evacuation of the above-mentioned persons, he did write that “they were on the way to the *Puksan* 北山 (North Mountain)”, with the king staying at the Kyōngugung palace.⁴⁹ In this historical document, however controversial,⁵⁰ neither Queen Min’s idea, nor the Ch’angdōkkung palace is mentioned. Adding to this, it seems worth pointing out that at the time of the Kapsin coup, Kyōngugung palace was located to the north from Ch’angdōkkung palace.⁵¹ This debunks the above-mentioned claim of Russian-speaking scholars, also placing a question mark on the assumption that Queen Min had any impact on the military operation performed by Chinese troops at the Kyōngugung palace on the afternoon of December 6, 1884.

After the suppression of the Kapsin Coup and up until the events of October 9, 1895,⁵² the narratives of Russian-language scholars do not focus on the queen and her political activities. Characterizing the political struggle in the country at that time, Vladimir Tikhonov labels “*the Min clan*” as the main, if not only, political force in a weakening Korea, holding it responsible for corruption,⁵³ “rising prices and inflation,”⁵⁴ and, finally, promoting the idea to call for the Qing’s help to suppress the Tonghak peasant uprising⁵⁵ in 1894. Oleg Kurbanov, however, continues to exploit the idea of Queen Min’s leading political role: the narrative of this period contains wording that implies queen’s leading position in the clan (such: “Queen Min’s faction”), however lacking examples of her executive decisions.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, while explaining the circumstances surrounding the queen’s assassination, both mentioned scholars highlight her anti-Japanese standing as the main cause of the event.⁵⁷ Agreeing with this evaluation, Tatiana Simbirtseva explains that “Queen Min served as the center of resistance to Japanese influence at court in 1894-1895. She led an influential group at court (the Ming clan), which relied on conservative officials and the country’s most prominent Confucian dignitaries.”⁵⁸

⁴⁸ Ch’oe Ik-hyŏn 최익현, Hwang Chun-hŏn 황준헌, Kim Pyŏng-guk 김병국, et al. *Wŏnmun saryo ro ingnŭn Han’guk kŭndaesa* [Korean Modern History Read through Original Historical Documents]. Edited and translated by Yi Chu-myŏng 이주명. (Seoul: P’ilmaek, 2014), p. 124.

⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 124-125.

⁵⁰ No original copy of Kim Okkyun’s writings “Kapshin illok 甲申日錄” survived to this day. Adding to that, several of its copies, stored both in Japan and South Korea, contain several differences in the text. This, unavoidably, raises doubts about the document’s authenticity, largely discrediting it among Korean historians. For detail, see: 山邊健太郎, 甲申日錄の研究, 朝鮮學報 17, 天理大學朝鮮學會, 1960; 李光麟, 金玉均의 「甲申日記」에 대하여, *진단학보* (33), 1972.

⁵¹ In 1896, Kyōngugung palace was moved from Kyedong district of Seoul to Oktong. See: <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0002706>.

⁵² This day the queen was assassinated in Kyōngbokkung palace.

⁵³ Tikhonov, *History of Korea*, p. 423.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 425.

⁵⁵ Tonghak peasant uprising was a civil uprising led by leaders of Tonghak religious sect that took place between 11 January 1894 and 25 December 1895.

⁵⁶ Kurbanov, *History of Korea*, p. 218, 220 and etc.

⁵⁷ Kurbanov, *History of Korea*, p. 220; Tikhonov, *History of Korea*, p. 446.

⁵⁸ Simbirtseva, Tatiana. “Ubijstvo vo dvorce Kyonbokkun” [The Gyeongbokkung Palace Murder]. *Vostochnaya kollestia*, no. 3 (2004): 127-142. <https://koryo-saram.site/tatyana-simbirtseva-ubijstvo-vo-dvortse-kyonbokkun/>.

While it is hard to disagree with the above-introduced assessments, as they were, apparently, shared by the majority of Japanese diplomats, a summing-up of the incident, given by the queen's relative, Min Yŏnghwan,⁵⁹ adds some layers to them. In summer of 1896, while in Russia, Min Yŏnghwan claimed that Queen Min was assassinated "because her partiality for Russia, [which] brought on her the hatred of the pro-Japanese party."⁶⁰ This statement put in the spotlight a political rivalry within the Korean government, rather than Japan's blunt decision to eliminate the queen of the neighboring country for her anti-Japanese views and hints at the limit of the political influence of the Min clan.

If to sum up the above and to draft a portrait of Queen Min based on the works of the authors cited above, the following line emerges: Queen Min was chosen as King Kojong's wife by Taewŏn'gun, who intended to control the ruler of Chosŏn through her. However, after strengthening her influence at court, the queen made every effort to remove Taewŏn'gun from the regent's position and oust him from the state policy. Ultimately, her efforts were successful, and King Kojong assumed full power, sparking the conflict between Taewŏn'gun and Queen Min, in which the latter prevailed, accumulating the ultimate political authority in the country in her and her clanmate's hands. The rule of the Min clan led by the queen was defined by increased corruption and poverty among Chosŏn's population that sparked several civil (1882, 1894) uprisings and at least one failed coup (1884). It continued up until 1895, when assassins, led by Japan's minister to Chosŏn, killed the queen. Therefore, in Russian-language academia, Queen Min is painted as an active and, more importantly, productive political figure supported by her family and allies and acting on her own political and diplomatic agenda.

Queen Min as Analyzed in Foreign⁶¹ Academia

As an opposite to the above-introduced Queen Min's assessment, shared by Russian-language scholars, foreign, such – non-Russian speaking, part of the Korean studies academia introduces a variety of queen's evaluations: some similar to their Russian-speaking colleagues, some drastically different.

Among the former – Frank Jacob, who describes Queen Min as "one of its most powerful female rulers."⁶² While evaluating the queen's level of political outreach, Jacob is generally following the above-mentioned concept shared by Russian-language scholars. That is no surprising, as the article published by Tatiana Simbirtseva in English language,⁶³ is one of the main sources of his research. However, Jacob as well fails to present the examples of Queen Min's applied

⁵⁹ Min Yŏnghwan (1861–1905) – was an influential politician and diplomat. In the summer of 1896, he visited a Russian special envoy.

⁶⁰ Vol. 4. 1895–1896. -Yun Chi-ho's diary (Seoul: National History Compilation Committee, 1975), p. 202.

⁶¹ By "foreign" the authors of this article mean non-Russian or Korean part of academia.

⁶² Frank Jacob, "Queen Min, Foreign Policy and the Role of Female Leadership in Late Nineteenth-Century Korea." In *The Routledge History of Monarchy*, edited by E.Woodcare, L.H.S. Dean, C.Jones, R.E.Martin and Z.E.Rohr (London: Routledge, 2019) p. 700.

⁶³ Frank Jacob. Queen Min, Foreign Policy and the Role of Female Leadership in Late Nineteenth-Century Korea. At *The Routledge History of Monarchy*, edited by E.Woodcare, L.H.S. Dean, C.Jones, R.E.Martin and Z.E.Rohr, p. 700.

political actions or, at least, primary sources, instead relying on excessive quotations of the analysis produced by other scholars, which makes his work largely derivative. Despite that, Frank Jacob's work is, by the time of this publication, a rare example of the concept, shared by Russian-language academia, leaking into global Korean studies and gaining more and more recognition.

However, the majority of foreign scholars writing about Korean history in the 19 century offer an alternative perspective to their Russian-speaking counterparts. The main difference lies in the direction and focus of their analysis. While Russian Korean historians, focusing on the domestic policies of the Chosŏn government, analyze how it influenced the country's foreign policy and its effect on the balance of power on the peninsula, foreign scholars prefer to approach this period from a geopolitical perspective, paying attention to the interests of the states surrounding the Korean Peninsula and analyzing how these interests influenced the domestic political situation in the Chosŏn. The following is set to mark the variety of Queen Min's assessments present in the non-Russian-speaking part of the Korean studies academia.

In his monumental monograph "Balance of Intrigue: International Rivalry in Korea & Manchuria, 1884-1899", Geoge Lensen hints at a duality of Queen Min's character. On one hand, on par with Russian-language scholars, Lensen suggests that, in the early 1870s, Queen Min "had placed her relatives in key positions in the government and had forced [Hŭngsŏn Taewŏn'gun] out." Therefore, concluding that the queen was "as energetic and ambitious"⁶⁴ as Hŭngsŏn Taewŏn'gun. On the other hand, hinting at the queen's naivety, Lensen compared her to "the last empress of Russia, Aleksandra Fedorovna", admitting that the Queen "was deeply affected by her son's delicate health and paid undue heed to religious charlatans".⁶⁵ By Lensen, the Queen had maintained a firm anti-Japanese disposition since 1888 – long before the dramatic escalation of Sino-Japanese rivalry in 1894. By 1895, Japanese officials in Korea were positive that "Queen Min was looking to Russia for support" that "alarmed" them.⁶⁶ It is evident that Lensen analyzed the Queen as the main political agent that shed some influence on the "weak and passive" King.⁶⁷ This evaluation also corresponds with the assessments produced by the Russian-speaking part of the Korean studies academy. When tracing the origin of this similarity, it is possible to assume that it is a result of an excessive reliance on Russian primary sources, shared by Lensen and Russian-speaking scholars. However, although tempted to paint the Queen as a puppeteer behind the King, Lensen still set a limit to her political authority, implying that by 1895 her influence had diminished, while attempts "to regain her former influence" did not succeed "amidst to freedom of action left to Kojong [by Japanese]".⁶⁸ This later assessment completely contradicts the queen's portrait, drawn by Russian-language scholars. Overall, by Geoge Lensen, Queen Min was ambitious and active in politics, but nonetheless not almighty.

⁶⁴ George Lensen, *Balance of intrigue, International Rivalry in Korea and Manchuria, 1884–1899*. 2 vols. (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, for Florida State University, 1982.), p. 18.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 531.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 18.

⁶⁸ Ibid, pp. 531-532.

In this light, it is even more noticeable that Peter Duus, author of “The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910”, shares the same as George Lensen sentiments regarding the political ambitions of the queen. The main difference is, however, that Duus insists that the king and the queen were political allies. By him, by late 1894, amidst Kabo reforms, Japanese officials in Seoul came to a realization that “it would be impossible to remove the queen without removing the king as well, and that was out of the question.”⁶⁹ Apparently, the tension between the royal couple and Japanese diplomats, who seek to weaken Chosŏn government, played a significant role in the ousting of the queen. Duus reveals that at the end of the power struggle, in early December 1894, “the queen promised not to meddle in political affairs anymore”, but only after the Japanese assured the king that they would “support” him and “four new vice-ministers, all members of the Min faction” were appointed to the government.⁷⁰ While noting that Duus’s research is largely relying on Japanese primary sources, it is necessary to point out a fundamental difference between his assessment of the queen and Lensens’: by Peter Duus, Queen Min did not control the King but acted alongside him. That makes her not a standalone politician, competing in a power struggle and causing problems for the Japanese agenda on the Korean peninsula, but a significant part of a larger political group that Japanese officials in Seoul have to suppress to bend Chosŏn to their will. With the means to eliminate the leader of this group – King Kojong, Japanese officials weakened it by assassinating the queen.⁷¹

Another foreign scholar examining events on the Korean peninsula in the second half of the 19 century is Andre Schmid. His work, “Korea Between Empires,”⁷² examines changes in the ideology and culture of the Chosŏn state in the late 19 and early 20 centuries in an attempt to describe how domestic political forces tried to balance between China and Japan at a time when foreign policy pressures were sharply increasing and the conservative traditions championed by some Chosŏn elites were in crisis. Following this goal, Schmid also emphasizes the queen’s importance as a political figure. He states that 1895 “the queen was targeted for removal, having been vilified in the Japanese media as a conservative obstacle to reform and the expansion of Japanese interests.”⁷³ However, in contrast to Russian-speaking scholars, who are hinting at the egoistic nature of Queen Min actions, Schmid focuses on the image of Queen Min after her assassination, noting that her death prompted “various militia groups... to offer armed resistance to the Japanese

⁶⁹ Peter Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 86.

Duus further explains that attempting to neutralize the Queen’s influence, in November 1894, Inoue proposed that “the king become a constitutional monarch whose exercise of power would be constrained by law”.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p.87.

⁷¹ Kim Young-Soo’s research of 2008, confirms this Duus’s assertion, stating that in Japanese sources at that time the Queen was seen as a key obstacle to the implementation of Japanese policy in Korea. For detail, see: Kim, Young-Soo. “Two Perspectives on the 1895 Assassination of Queen Min.” *Korea Journal* 148, no. 2 (Summer 2008), pp. 172-173.

⁷² Schmid, Andre. *Korea Between Empires, 1895–1919* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)

⁷³ Schmid, A. *Korea Between Empires, 1895–1919*, p. 28

presence in the peninsula.”⁷⁴ Overall, Schmid’s work introduces a rather unique approach to the evaluation of Queen Min persona, where her lifetime achievements are deemed as far less important than her perception by Koreans after 1895. This work examines the image of Queen Min as an integral part of the emerging Korean national identity, which is important for a broader understanding of the public perception of the queen and her role.

Queen Min’s evaluations in the non-Russian-speaking part of the Korean studies academia draw a rather vague and blurry portrait. Unlike their Russian-speaking colleagues, foreign scholars are failing to produce a unified concept of the queen. The plurality of opinions about Queen Min, her political standing and limits of its outreach, highlighted by the above-mentioned examples, can be, at least partially, explained by the variety of primary sources used by foreign scholars.

Queen Min as Seen by her Contemporaries

It is noticeable that the firsthand written evidence about the Queen, left by her contemporaries, is painting quite a contradicting picture as well. For example, one of the earliest accounts, made by Rosalie von Möllendorff,⁷⁵ paints a picture of the Queen as an invested but not precisely active participant in Chosŏn policies, whose interest lies predominantly in diplomacy. While not specifying her exact input, Frau von Möllendorff, describes the queen’s support of the efforts to involve Russians in the Komundo case in 1885.⁷⁶ Frau von Möllendorff also hints at co-joined efforts of the king and the queen to retain Paul Georg von Möllendorff in Chosŏn despite the pressure from China, demanding his dismissal in late 1885.⁷⁷ Through the lens of Frau von Möllendorff’s narrative, Queen Min is perceived rather as a supporting character than as a standalone figure. Her actions are aimed at assisting her husband, king Kojong, and the prosperity of the country.

This evaluation is supported by Lillas Horton Underwood, who, in 1888, portrayed the queen as a “subtle and able diplomatist” who “usually outwitted her keenest opponents”, “a sovereign of broad and progressive policy, patriotic, and devoted to the best interest of her country and sought the good of the people to a much extent than would be expected of an Oriental queen.”⁷⁸ Although, by Mrs. Underwood, Queen Min described as a proactive politician, she clearly is painted as a hero and patriot.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.44.

⁷⁵ Rosalie von Möllendorff (nee: Holthausen, 1846-?) was a wife of Paul Georg von Möllendorff (1847-1901), a German diplomat, who served as the adviser to the Korean government from 1882 to 1885. In this capacity von Möllendorff, serving as Kojong’s agent, was involved in several unofficial attempts of Russo-Korean rapprochement.

⁷⁶ O.N. Denny, *Denny munsŏ Möllendorff munsŏ* 데니 文書 뮐렌도르프 文書 [Denny documents Möllendorff documents]. Edited and translated by Kim Un-gyŏng 김운경, Ch’oe Su-gŭn 최수근, and Sin Pong-yong 신복용 (Pyeongminsa Publishing House, 1987), p. 84.

In April 1885, this Korean island, located as the south-east part of the peninsula, was occupied by the British Royal Navy. Korean government failed to attain China’s support in pressing the Brits to leave the island, therefore it turned to England’s geopolitical rival at that time – the Russian empire.

⁷⁷ O.N. Denny, *Denny munsŏ Möllendorff munsŏ*, p. 89.

⁷⁸ Underwood. *Fifteen years among the top-knots*, p. 24.

Although Frau von Möllendorff and Mrs. Underwood have never met, their assessments of Queen Min are allied not only by positive impressions, but also by hinting at the role that the queen has played in Korean politics, especially from the late 1870s to early 1880s. Supporting the assumption of the main part that Queen Min played in ousting Taewŏn'gun from power in 1874, Frau von Möllendorff claims that, holding a grudge against the queen, in 1882, Taewŏn'gun had exploited the circumstances of military riot in Seoul (the Imo Incident) to kill her and other members of the Min clan.⁷⁹ It is, once again, necessary to note that Frau von Möllendorff did not witness the events she was writing about — she arrived in Seoul in early 1883. However, the striking similarity between her and Mrs. Underwood's narratives suggest that at least in the 1880s this was, more or less, generally accepted interpretation of events. Finally, it is noteworthy that, by Frau von Möllendorff, it was the king who called for China for help during the Imo Incident.⁸⁰

Both Frau von Möllendorff and Mrs. Underwood paint Queen Min as the king's trusted ally. This narrative is further supported in an account by Owen Nickerson Denny,⁸¹ first published in "Chinese times" on June 30, 1888. Denny described the queen as a "bold and clever woman, whose mind is swayed by two powerful impulses – the impulses of a strong individuality – personal ambition and patriotism."⁸² In Denny's eyes for the first time the queen appears not only as a sidekick for the King, but rather as an ambitious and politically active figure driven by her patriotism. This assessment is supported by Denny's claim that the queen is a leader of the king's faction (sic! Not the Min clan faction), which "aims at independence, while it trusts ultimately to foreign help to effect a complete and final rupture of all ties to China."⁸³ By this account, Queen Min not only appears to be acting alongside the king, but also representing the Korean public's opinion: Denny stipulates that in regard to Sino-Korean relations and the king's struggle for independence of his country, "it is possible that [the queen] may represent correctly the vague but actual desire of the people."⁸⁴

This line of narrative, focusing on the political ambitions and influence of the queen, is continued in Yun Chiho's diaries. He first shed some light at the Queen Min's political influence, introducing a story about how Yun's mother tried to "intercede with the Queen for [his] father's pardon"⁸⁵ but "the Queen proved stone"

⁷⁹ O.N. Denny, *Denny munsŏ Möllendorff munsŏ*, p.56.

⁸⁰ O.N. Denny, *Denny munsŏ Möllendorff munsŏ*, p.56.

⁸¹ Owen Nickerson Denny (1838-1900) was an American diplomat, who served as the adviser to the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1886 to 1890. In this capacity, Denny was deeply involved in Korea's diplomacy. For example, he negotiated and signed the Korea-France treaty in 1886.

⁸² *An American Adviser in Late Yi Korea: The Letters of Owen Nickerson Denny*. Edited, with an introduction by Robert R. Swartout, p. 119.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Yun Chiho's father, Yun Ungnyŏl (1840 – 1911) was affiliated with the radical progressive party behind the events of the Kapsin Coup (1884), which brought on him the king's displeasure. Although an entry in Yun Chiho's diary is dated November 1885, it is possible to assume that residing outside of Korea at that time, Yun Chiho was describing the events right after the Kapsin Coup's failure.

and “declined to pardon [Yun Chiho’s] father.”⁸⁶ These hint at Queen Min’s disapproval of the Kapsin coup and its participants, even minor, while highlighting her political outreach.

About ten years later, in July 1894, right around the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, Yun Chiho once again mentioned the queen in his diary, labeling her “*selfish*”. Although he is not dwelling on Queen Min’s exact actions that brought this evaluation, it is possible to deduce that Yun, who at that time perceived that “a perfect neutrality would be [Korea’s] safety”,⁸⁷ was blaming the queen for siding with China in its conflict with Japan. Yun has kept these sentiments through next year. On February 16, 1895, he spoke at length describing the Queen: “*It has been and is the practice of Her Majesty – to set Ministers one against another by skillful use of intrigues. Her weapon is slander. By this means she makes every one devoted to her interest but antagonistic to his colleagues. Her selfish ends are thus promoted as the total expense of the welfare of the kingdom... The Queen desires to grasp the power no matter how foul may the means she uses be.*”⁸⁸ Evidently, such evaluation was triggered by the incident with Yun’s ally and one of the key participants of the Kapsin coup, Pak Yŏnghyo.⁸⁹ In July 1895, Pak was accused of plotting the assassination of the queen, which led to him fleeing Chosŏn to Japan. Yun openly states that “*one can see the deft hand of the Queen in the fall of Pak [Yŏnghyo].*”⁹⁰ Evidently, the queen maintained her disapproval of the Kapsin coup’s participants. With certain reservations this can be interpreted as a consistency of her political views, of which Yun wrote in October 1895, right before Queen Min’s assassination. By Yun the queen was cooking up the plan to “*disband the Japanese drilled soldiers on the pretext of their quarrel with the police.*”⁹¹ Although this evaluation strengthens the assumption of anti-Japanese political standing of the queen, Yun quite noticeably does not connect Queen Min’s political activities with her assassination. Apparently, the concept of a retaliation that the queen has brought on herself for her struggles to restrain Japan’s influence at the Korean peninsula was not shared by all Chosŏn’s state officials. This can be interpreted as a limitation of her political outreach.

Overall, Yun’s evaluations paint a picture of an ambitious, manipulative by nature and politically active queen, a self-serving, influential politician, whose actions, noticeably, were not related either to the interests of the Min family or the king. Yun culminates his impression of the queen by stating that he “*may even advocate her deposition, if she could not be in any way made to give up her intrigues and*

⁸⁶ National History Compilation Committee. *Yun Ch’i-ho ilgi* 尹致昊日記 [Yun Chi-ho’s diary]. Vol.3 (Seoul: Tamgudang, 1974), p. 221

⁸⁷ *Yun Ch’i-ho ilgi*, vol 3, p.345.

⁸⁸ *Yun Ch’i-ho ilgi*, vol 4, pp. 25-26.

It is worth mentioning that this Yun Chi Ho’s bitter evaluation of the Queen may be fueled by his conviction that the Queen was behind his father’s voluntary redundancy from the government.

⁸⁹ Pak Yŏnghyo (1861 – 1939) – was a prominent politician and an active participant in the Kapsin Coup in 1884. Later, Pak led the Korean government during the so-called Kabo reforms of 1895-1896.

⁹⁰ *Yun Ch’i-ho ilgi*, vol 4, p.47.

⁹¹ *Yun Ch’i-ho ilgi*, vol 4, p.75.

evil favorites.”⁹² It is noticeably a thoroughly negative portrait by a contemporary, which radically differs from the above-mentioned favorable accounts. Such a difference can be explained by Yun’s personal grudge against the queen for the above-mentioned case of his father and by his political views that gravitated to the support of the rioters in 1884.

Who was Queen Min? (In lieu of the Conclusion)

Combining all the above-introduced evaluations of Queen Min made by her contemporaries, a rather complicated and controversial portrait can be drawn. The queen’s persona seems to be woven from contradictions: she pursues her own ambitions, yet supports her husband’s policies; she defends the political will of her clan, yet acting on her own; she sides with China, defending conservative values in the country, yet seeks the independence of her country. Evidently, firsthand-written evidence of her contemporaries fails to shed some proper light on Queen Min. This provides fertile soil for historical revisions, producing different analytical approaches to her persona, found in related literature around the Globe.

For example, Russian scholars, relying on a narrow source base, are tending to exaggerate Queen Min’s political ambitions and outreach. By them the queen, supported by her clanmates that she brought to power, was the mastermind behind both the domestic and foreign policies of Chosŏn, ousting her own husband, the king. This evaluation fails to find any support from both foreign research and available primary sources. That draws attention to the necessity to pay some extra effort to build up a solid and historically accurate answer to the question “Who was Queen Min?”

⁹² *Yun Ch’i-ho ilgi*, vol 4, p.70.

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