

Discrepancy between the required standard and actual phenomenon: Women and their lives in pre-modern East Asia

Kim Kyung-ho

Academy of East Asian Studies, Sungkyunkwan University

Abstract

In the first century BCE in ancient China, there existed a book called *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (Lienüzhuan), compiled during the Han Dynasty. This book stands as China's first collection of women's biographies and serves as an educational guide, encapsulating various archetypes of ancient women. Due to this, it played a crucial role in defining the image of women in East Asian societies by the modern era.

Following the establishment of Confucianism as a prominent ideology after the Han Dynasty, the Confucian image of women, emphasizing obedience, became dominant. However, in reality, one can observe the depiction of autonomous women in different periods and societies. This phenomenon is not unique to China but can also be easily identified in the Joseon Dynasty of Korea. For instance, there is a perception that "Joseon women lived confined lives after marriage," "Women in the Joseon Dynasty did not have property rights, let alone inheritance rights," and "Widows were not allowed to remarry and were expected to maintain chastity." However, it is essential to note that such ideas were emphasized ideologically, and the actual societal reality may have been different.

Beyond the stereotypical portrayal of women presented in the 'Biographies of Exemplary Women (Lienüzhuan),' this lecture aims to delve into the actual circumstances faced by women of that era, seeking a closer understanding of their real-life situations. To accomplish this, the lecture utilizes various sources such as excavated materials, legal documents, contemporary contracts, illustrations, and more to examine the realistic portrayal of women in pre-modern East Asian societies.