

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Professor Jenie Hahn, a lecturer and administrator at Jeju National University in South Korea, to talk about the businesswoman and philanthropist Kim Manduk, who saved the people of Jeju in the 1790s. Now we'll get into that, but first could we start with a bit of context around her origins and Jeju at that time?

JH: Jeju is the biggest island of the Republic of Korea. It is located at the southernmost tip of the Republic of Korea. It used to be, as a matter of fact, a different country before it was annexed and became part of the mainland. So Jeju at the time, during the Joseon dynasty, it was actually a place that not many people would have wanted to live in, because it was a place famous for exile. The infrastructure in the society during that time was not very good, and I don't know if people are familiar with the word yangban. I do know that it is in the Oxford dictionary now, but yangban actually means the aristocratic class, and in Jeju, there were not as many yangban class, so the Jeju people actually did not have that much of a voice in the government. So all around, the general society in Jeju was not a very pleasant one to say the least.

AT: So her father was yangban, and her mother was yangmin, which was a lower social class, and if you were the child of parents of different classes, you were assigned a lower class, so she was assigned to this lower class from birth, and then my understanding is by the time she was 12, she had lost both of her parents.

JH: Yes, that is correct. The yangmin class is definitely considered a lower class, but there was also this class called cheonmin, which is lower than a yangmin, so she was not considered to be bottom of the bottom class, but she was of an acceptable social status. But as you pointed out, both her parents had died. She did have two older brothers, but because of the circumstances, I think she did not have any other choice. There's not like a whole factual literature based on this, but we assume that she did not actually have any choice or other relatives that she could go to, which is why she had to go to a gisaeng that she knew, and the gisaeng took her in as her foster daughter.

AT: Can you tell us what the gisaeng means?

JH: It's a very interesting question, because I think a lot of people who already know about Japanese culture, or are familiar with the Japanese culture, like to think that because the term geisha is so common amongst English-speaking people, that a lot of people think that they're one and the same. In terms of the purpose, they are the same, but in terms of the cultural context, they are not, they would not be the same. So I would say the term gisaeng actually means, which was created for the same purpose as geishas, is to entertain men, and I guess in that sense, they are very similar. But in terms of social context, they would have had different functions and different meanings. The class of gisaeng would be considered in a very bottom of the bottom class. In other words, her social status actually became worse than the one that she was born into, and according to literature, and according to some of the facts that we do know about her, she wasn't born a gisaeng. She was born, as you pointed out, as a yangmin, but

because the gisaeng took her in as her foster daughter, she was, it was not by her choice. She was actually registered in the gisaeng registry, not by her choice, but I think because she was being taken care of by the gisaeng, that she was considered a gisaeng in this sense.

AT: And so as a gisaeng, she would have learned how to sing and dance. She would have been actually quite well educated because in that role as someone who entertains men, you have to be able to carry on a conversation and keep them interested intellectually as well as the, shall we say, prettier arts. And my understanding is that traditionally, gisaeng houses were in the town center near the market. So there's this supposition that she probably also picked up some knowledge of business just being in that environment and being around men who were participating in trade.

JH: Oh, I'm sure. And you know, as they say, environment makes a person or environment definitely creates the person that you are. And by the time she was 20, I mean, we can tell that she was a very smart person to begin with. So she must have picked up things very quickly. So she was educated in all the arts, plus the fact that she, being a very smart person, she'd have learned the ways. And you can tell because in 1758, when, I think when she turned 20, she actually became the head gisaeng. So she rose up in terms of the, I think for eight years, she basically picked a lot of things, I'm sure. So add it to her intelligence and add it to her experience. I think she was definitely more advanced in many ways than some of the other women who were her peers.

AT: And so when she was about 24, she left gisaeng life. She convinced them to take her off of the registry and left that to go into business for herself. And it's really fascinating because she, her business interests are so varied. When you look at all of the different aspects of what she was doing, she definitely diversified.

JH: Yes. Well, but I think that would have come from her experience of dealing with all sorts of people when she was growing up. And I think apart from, I think she definitely had a business sense, there's no doubt about that. And so I think she realized very quickly what she could do to make money and how she had to fend for herself and variously saying, a girl's got to eat. And basically, she had nobody to rely on at the time. So she basically came up with her own means and she was very observant, I'm sure. And she, one of the things that she noticed was, "ah, okay, some of the things that she did people think are not very valuable would be very valuable to the mainland people" and vice versa. This kind of thing doesn't come just accidentally. I think she had inside, she had a business sense. And I'm sure other people would have seen the same thing, but she saw something in between that, "ah, I can earn money with this." So, and another thing that I really admire about her is, once you get into the registry, gisaeng registry, it was almost impossible to basically get out of that situation. Once you're set, when you're put in a box in certain social situation, it's impossible to basically emancipate yourself. She must, from what we know, I think she basically tried to persuade the local magistrate and the administration to let her out of the registry for several reasons. I mean, she probably kept going with them and saying, "look, I wasn't born gisaeng, I have papers to prove that." And this

is all conjecture on my part. But for example, once we're given a name in modern society, I think in American society, it's quite nowadays, it's quite easy to change your name officially, but you have to go through all the legal procedure and it's very complicated. And in Korea, it used to be impossible to change your name, because how can you change your name that your parents gave you? In those days, it would have been almost impossible to change your status, change your social status. It would have been kind of like a camel going into a needle hole, but she pulled it off. And that just tells me, wow, this is such a resourceful, very persuasive, very convincing kind of person. And to have been able to pull that off, she's no ordinary person.

AT: What you're touching on here is, I believe referred to as soft power. So a woman might not have the hard power, like being the king or having a lot of money in her own right, but if she has influence, if she's able to persuade, which you would think that as a gisaeng, she would have also developed skills. We're speaking to the power of that persuasion and influence that someone with no power can put herself in a much better position. So when she left gisaeng life, so she's 24, she opens an inn for the merchants. She starts a commission agency for port trade. So she was acting as this intermediary between the folks on the mainland and the folks in Jeju. And so she's selling the local specialties, horse hairs, seaweed, earshell, ox bezoar, pearls, clothes, cosmetics. And then she's getting grain from the mainland and selling it to the locals.

JH: Right. So she actually, which is something that I touched on very briefly just now, is that she saw what was needed from both sides. And she cleverly, she was manipulating it. I mean, she was definitely using the system to her advantage by, not in a negative way, but she actually saw what was needed in Jeju. And was being demanded in the mainland and she quickly saw, "okay, I could use this as my advantage." And she, I think, used it to her full capacity. And that's how she earned, was doing business, just exactly what any merchant or any businessman or woman would do these days. That's exactly what business is about. And this is why she sometimes first referred to as the first CEO of Joseon, you know, first woman CEO of Joseon. And again, it's remarkable in terms of, during the Joseon Dynasty, women had no status. They were supposed to stay indoors and not be seen. And for her to actually venture out to do this on her own and her by her own design and using her resources to the best of ability is just, I think, amazing.

AT: Well, when we're talking about women during Joseon, you've already touched on the fact that Jeju had its own culture. It was kind of separate. So even if it was technically part of it, culturally, there is that distinction. And my understanding is that Jeju has been more receptive to women in power and women doing things that otherwise would be considered "men's work." So how much do you think that that played a factor in her ability to take control of her own life?

JH: In Jeju society, it is always, well, traditionally, it was the women, the women sea divers who actually were the bulwarks of the household. They were the ones who did the housework. They went out to the sea. They dived. They brought up the abalones. They brought up the shells and they were doing all the work and they were earning money as opposed to the men. And I think that social structure, definitely, there's actually a very interesting record where during the Joseon dynasty, this one administrator from the Joseon government came down to check up on Jeju.

And he said he was scandalized because he basically wrote down, "there are a lot of half naked women around the island" because then they were the women sea divers. And how would you swim? I mean, would you be swimming in full gear in the water? So he basically wrote down that the island is full of immoral women. But of course, he didn't understand the Jeju culture at the time. But it was basically the women who were doing a lot of the economic work. It definitely does give a foundation or the basis that Kim Manduk didn't see anything wrong with being a person who earns the money. So I definitely think the environment would have been completely different from the mainland. So it definitely did contribute to the fact that she was able to venture out and become an independent businesswoman.

AT: Picking apart the fact and fiction about her life is quite difficult. And we'll discuss that more later. But I did read that her mother was actually one of the divers. So I can't vouch for how true that is, but...

JH: It's very possible that she, her mother being a Jeju woman, it's very likely that she was a woman diver, a sea woman diver. And I think Manduk would have seen that and she would actually have, if her mother had not passed away, it would probably stand to reason, she could have become a woman diver herself too. It is possible, but we don't know that for a fact because there's no actual proof or actual literature that supports that statement. So I think definitely her mother would have influenced how her mind, even though she was 12, because the women sea divers actually started diving very young. So it would, yes, it's definitely possible.

AT: So then if we want to take it a step further, it sounds like there's also a good chance that she would have gone diving with her mother when she was a child and sort of seen this firsthand and that likely would have helped shape her perspective on what women can do, to, again, what a girl on the mainland might have been seeing growing up.

JH: Yes. And of course, in the mainland, it would have been scandalous for any woman to dive into the water, to have undressed or, it would just not have been feasible, no. But it's definitely Jeju culture.

AT: And so she spent decades building this empire. And I also saw that she was exploiting tax laws. So again, she's thinking very strategically about running her business. And she ended up with a monopoly on rice and salt. And so by the time she was 50, she was supposedly one of the two richest people in Joseon.

JH: Yes, that's what the records say. And I believe it, given her way of doing business and given her business sense and everything. I believe that. Yes.

AT: And so this brings us to saving Jeju. Jeju was hit with a famine in 1792. And there were also strong winds and high tides. So it was very difficult for boats to get there, in addition to crop failures and floods. And so people were starving.

JH: The Joseon government was actually taxing Jeju atrociously. So, that also added to a lot of different things. So things got from bad to worse. And obviously, people were starving because they had to pay abalones and tangerines as taxes. And they had to give up all their food. They weren't able to farm any kind of food. So they were barely surviving. But as you said, to add salt to the wound, it just became worse and worse. And it was at this time, I think the highlight came in 1795, when she actually used her own stores of rice. And she used all her means to send out all the people that would take the ship to the mainland. And so she gave up all her, most of her assets. Like she used her money, she used the storage of rice, and she used everything that was at her disposal to try to save the people. So she actually was able to distribute rice and food to the people. She had accumulated all this wealth over a number, for decades, for a long time. But for her to actually give that up, because you have all this wealth, you have all this money, and then to just give it all up in the name of the people.

I'm also thinking that the situation in Jeju, she had love for her hometown. She had love for the people. And I'm sure there were a lot of reasons for her doing that. But I'm not saying that made it easy for her to give up all her assets, but she did it anyway, which is why I think, people still admire her so much, because it's something that not all people can do. That is how, because it was such an amazing, and so something unimaginable for, I think, most Joseon aristocrats to imagine doing that it got reported, the Jeju governor actually reported to the king. Jeongjo was the name of the king of the time. It got reported to him, and the official record actually states that she used all her assets to save the starving people of Jeju.

And because Jeongjo was so impressed, the king was so impressed that he wanted to reward her, to give her some kind of reward. And she actually refused any kind of compensation. But when asked about her wish, and this is another thing that really makes me go, "wow, would I have been able to ask the same," or really makes me, "wow, this is a person that I could really admire or could have loved to meet," is she wanted to travel to Kumgangsan. Kumgangsan is a mountain. The reason why this is so remarkable is that during that time, what happened was that people couldn't stand to live here. They basically were seeking ways to escape, and many people did escape, that it got to a point where the central government, in fact, said Jeju people cannot leave the island. So there was a 200-year ban where Jeju people could not leave. It would have been illegal to leave Jeju. So if they left, they would have been arrested, they would have been banned criminal. So the fact that Kim Manduk asking, "I want to travel outside of Jeju", all the way to Kumgangsan, was something that really reflects a lot of things. So you would have to understand the background situation of this, because this wish, because I think some people, if they hear, if they don't understand the cultural background to this, they would say, "oh, why didn't she ask for gold? Why didn't she ask for more money? Why didn't she ask for something else?" But she was asking for something that was not usually granted. It was something that Jeju people were not free to ask for, but she did it, to ask, "oh, I want to travel outside of Jeju." Again, it reflects a lot of different things, but it also shows her character of being a pioneer. It reflects how she wanted to be knowledgeable, how she wanted to venture out, how she wanted to know things, how adventurous she was. So it tells a lot of things about her in that aspect. This for the record is the only official record about her that we know about. There are tons of other literature about her, but I think this is the only part where it's officially recorded as a factual historical record. All the others are in contention, but this one, this is undeniable.

AT: There have been fictionalized versions of her story almost since it happened. So if you want to start with the earliest fictional account that we know of, or at least not 100% accurate, shall we say, through to like, there's a musical about her, there's a K drama. So do you want to just tell us a bit about the various versions of her story that people have told over the centuries?

JH: It would take a week. (laughter) No, I have to admit that I'm not a huge K drama fan. So I have to be honest and say, I only saw bits and pieces of the actual K drama. The K drama is actually pretty old, so it's a period piece. But the earliest biography about Kim Manduk was written by a very credible man, he was a prime minister under King Jeongjo. He was so impressed with her that he actually wrote a book called Man-deok jeon, which means the biography of Manduk. And many people actually go by that. And I think that was one of the earliest ones. And the more modern ones, as you mentioned, there's a musical, there's a K drama. But the most recent one that I know of, there might be more that I'm not aware of, because she's such a fascinating character. But the last one that I do know of is a 2009 fictional book written by a woman named Yun Seong-min. And this one, I don't know if it's out of print, because it was published in 2009.

There are, I think mostly factual, they try to follow most of the factual things about her life. But again, with most literature or fiction, they try to embellish it with a slight romance, or sometimes tries to exaggerate certain details for dramatic purposes. But all this, I think just attests to the fact of how fascinating a person she was, and how she spent her life, which is very unusual for a Joseon woman, or any woman during those days. And it just attests to the fact that she was that great. All this literature, I think, speaks to the fact that she was a great woman.

AT: And her legacy is also very strong today. In Jeju, there's a museum that bears her name. There are scholarships in her name. There is the Kim Man-duk award that is given out to women of exemplary conduct. So she is still very recognized locally.

JH: Oh yes, yes, she is. If you ask, I think any ordinary Jeju person, they would know her name. She is still revered. And as a matter of fact, she died in 1812. And she actually lived a very full and prosperous life. And I don't know if I want to say this and have a lot of people kind of criticize me. But I think it was for the fact that she didn't have a husband that kind of mastered her. She was actually a very independent, very active woman. So she lived up to 74, which is unusual. She lived a very long and fruitful life.

There's this instance where for Koreans, he's a very familiar name. But I guess for a lot of English-speaking people, he might not be as familiar. But there was this very, very famous calligrapher named Kim Jeong-hui. His full name actually is Chusa Kim Jeong-hui. Chusa is kind of like an acronym. And he actually was exiled to Jeju, which is about 30 years after her death. But because he was so, so impressed by her story. So even after 30 years, her story still lingers. Which is not surprising because it still lingers still today. But he was so impressed that he wrote down this calligraphy writing on a wooden plank. He wrote down "eun gwang yeon she", which actually means "the light of grace spurs out to the world." So he is actually recognizing her generous and altruistic and magnanimous, this huge feat of giving up her riches to save the lives of the people, and his writing, by the way, would command lots of money. His writing is

very valued as well. So he gave that wooden calligraphy writing to her adopted son, and that writing still exists today. So it just gives an idea, I think that gives the idea of how influential her story is throughout the ages.

AT: And so as someone who was not born a Jeju local, what is it about her story that really made you want to talk about her today? Because you are very passionate about her story. And I think we've mentioned several reasons that she was awesome, but is there anything in particular that really draws you to her?

JH: When I was in elementary school, I did not like history, I did not. So for some reason, it was just a subject where I just memorized the dates and the numbers and the people that I have no idea what, who they are. And I have to actually say, who is this? Why do I have to memorize all this? But I think it takes more meaning once you understand. And for those people who hate history, I'd like to tell them that once you understand, a whole new world will open up for you. And you can definitely, definitely find lots of interesting, interesting things that you can learn from history. And I believe it was, was it Winston Churchill? And I hope I'm not quoting him wrong. But I think he basically said something to the fact that there's no future for a nation who has forgotten its history. Something that we also talk about a lot these days is that it should not just be *history*, but it should be her story as well. And I guess that's what keeps me going in terms of finding out what really happened, because we will never know what really happened. And we can only try to put things together. So it's almost like a mystery. I love solving mysteries. So you get enough clues, and then you are basically able to resolve or get the riddle done. And the euphoria or the joy, the sheer joy of actually coming up with the answer at the end is just indescribable.

I admire her for being such a strong role model despite her circumstances, She's a hero. Her actual story is so, there's so very little left. And we have to kind of figure out what was actually happening behind all the meager, factual things that we do know about her. And I think the fact that we're able to imagine, it's kind of like a jigsaw puzzle in a way. We have little pieces here and there, and to try to put it together, and then to come up with a picture, which might be raw, which might be completely out of focus. But it's fun. I mean, it's fun to kind of imagine. And I think she inspires a lot of imagination, plus a lot of respect, and a lot of different things. Unfortunately, our human beings have a tendency to repeat history despite, you would think that we would have evolved. And it just makes me think that we need more people like her to make the world a better place in some ways. And I think we need people like her to inspire us and say, "yes, the world is still a good place. The world still has people that inspires us and that makes us carry on and gives us hope." And she's that kind of person. This is something that I also admire a lot about Jeju women in general. So that's why when Jeju people say the spirit of Kim Manduk, I think she actually represents or personifies all the spirit of the strong Jeju culture that has me transmitted on to now.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.