



# Redefining Medical Knowledge in a Nineteenth-Century Encyclopedia for Women

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## Abstract

*Though often taken as an objective science, medicine is more than a systematic study of the human body, evaluated through scientific methods and experiments; descriptions of various symptoms, illnesses, and cures are linked inextricably to socio-cultural factors. The widely circulated Gyuhap chongseo 閨閣叢書 (Encyclopedia of Women's Daily Life, 1809), by Lady Yi (1759–1824), outlines various symptoms and remedies based on experience. It also tends toward supernatural cures, often engaging in rituals and performance. Lady Yi's work captures medical accounts of heterogeneous spaces containing both experiential and spiritual dimensions. This study illuminates how Lady Yi's work empowered women as primary caretakers of the household, and how women's intermediate position in the Confucian patriarchy enabled them to formulate in-between knowledge—a synthetic and comprehensive approach to various situations in the domestic sphere. To unravel what women observed, recorded, and treated in terms of health and medicine, this article investigates pervasive individual prescriptions covering a wide range of medical conditions and conceptualizes aspects of divine knowledge that incorporate performative, written, and oral cultures.*

**Keywords:** *Gyuhap chongseo* (Encyclopedia of Women's Daily Life), Joseon medicine, gender, healing rituals, talisman, incantation

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## Women as Caregivers

The outbreak of COVID-19 has affected every corner of our daily lives. Pandemic distress has infringed on the medical system and healthcare services and heightened insecurity in the private sector. It also exacerbated existing gender disparities. During one pandemic surge, women formed 70 percent of the healthcare and social services workforce at home and in public (Boniol et al. 2019, 1). Such circumstances also increased the vulnerability of women, who were exposed to a higher risk of domestic infection through frontline caregiving activities (de Paz et al. 2020, 5). While women's roles as primary caretakers, specifically in the home, have long been sustained, women employed diverse diagnostic and therapeutic methods to provide care. In premodern Korea, women also found themselves in situations in which they had to function as caregivers dealing with the patients and elders at home, or even as healers seeking remedies for injury and illness. They often relied on divine power or shamans to combat epidemics, although this was discouraged by the Confucian patriarchy and dismissed as unscientific or superstitious, at least to modern eyes. While women sought spiritual power and divine knowledge, they transformed the domestic space into a central site where diverse medical practices were infused and interwoven for the sake of family health.

To uncover the underpinnings of Joseon women's engagement with supernatural power for healing, this article examines one of the important female-authored texts, *Gyuhap chongseo* (Encyclopedia of Women's Daily Life, 1809), by Lady Yi (sobriquet: Bingheogak 憑虛閣, 1759–1824), which outlines the ways in which women assumed responsibility for domestic work and promoted the family's health. Specifically, this study aims to explore what *Gyuhap chongseo* tells us about women's roles as caregivers in various medical situations and how they confronted patriarchal arrangements that excluded women from participation in other forms of official knowledge. It also demonstrates how *yangban* women mediating between high (elite, written) and low (folk, oral) cultures were able to form *in-between* knowledge.

To do this, this study investigates medical accounts located in sections

of *Gyuhap chongseo*, which is divided into five books: “Jusau” 酒食議 (Advice on Food and Beverages), “Bongimchik” 縫紉則 (Guidelines for Sewing and Weaving), “Sangarak” 山家樂 (Happiness in a Farm Household), “Cheongnanggyeol” 青囊訣 (A Small Book in a Blue Pocket), and “Sulsuryak” 術數略 (Epitome of Divination and Numbers). The first three outline wise household management, or *chiga* 治家 (home-making); the latter two, which this article focuses on, provide medical tips and methods for *yangsaeng* 養生 (nurturing health), ranging from pregnancy and childbirth to practical first-aid, and various treatments for medical symptoms, diseases, and emergencies.

As for the text, the original manuscript of *Gyuhap chongseo* does not exist, and while being copied and transcribed, the editions underwent major linear and structural changes. Of the ten existing editions of *Gyuhap chongseo*, “Cheongnanggyeol” is included in Jeong Yangwan’s first edition and the Tokyo University edition,<sup>1</sup> while “Sulsuryak” is only available in the latter, which compasses all the five books and is most likely to have been copied from the original version.<sup>2</sup> Because these books are included in only a few editions and their contents were omitted or shortened in other versions, many assume that they were less popular. Regardless, they still require our attention as important source material that unravels the veiled relationship between Joseon women and medical practice.

Through a close examination of the two aforementioned books (‘Cheongnanggyeol’ and ‘Sulsuryak’), this study addresses the intersection of women’s observation, experience, and religions inscribed in the accounts, thereby relocating their place in the medical discourse of nineteenth-century

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1. The ten editions include two woodblock editions (*mokpanbon* 木板本): the Karam edition and the Korea National Library edition; eight hand-written editions (*pilsabon* 筆寫本): the Korea National Library edition, Jeong Yangwan’s three editions, Sogang University edition, Joseon University edition, Tokyo University edition; and the Kanazawa Shoshaburo 金沢庄三郎 edition, also known as the Yeongpyeongsa 永平寺 edition. For philological details, refer to Park (2000, 287–295); Yeonghye Kim (2016, 40–86); and Jihyeon Kim (2016, 168–245).
  2. The Tokyo University edition indicates the author’s intent of dividing the topics into the five themes of food, sewing, farming, medicine, and divine practices under the title *Gyuhap chongseo*.

Korea. Often, this encyclopedia is treated as a single-authored work by Lady Yi, but the editions with variants and deviations challenge the authenticity of single authorship. Rather, the work was created through the collaborative efforts of anonymous transcribers and co-writers who intervened and recreated multiple editions. Thus, the work suggests the creation of space where we can access both individual and collective ideas of medicine circulated throughout the century.

### Healing Rituals in Modern Eyes

Joseon women's contributions to medical science have been understudied and, more often, untreated, as few accounts include written or spoken medical discourse by women. In reality, Joseon women had limited access to educational opportunities or the public sphere, preventing them from pursuing careers or participating in official knowledge. After the Joseon state (1392–1910) adopted a Neo-Confucian ideology, the feminine ideals of filial daughters 孝女 (*hyonyeo*) and faithful wives 烈婦 (*yeolbu*) and the cult of chaste martyrdom were propagated by the government and male literati (Jungwon Kim 2019), such conditions also increased a woman's likelihood of both accepting and resisting the dominant ideology. Specifically, confining women's tasks and activities to the domestic sphere reinforced female domestication but also subversively encouraged them to develop a subculture of *anchae munhwa* (inner chamber culture) (Jo 1988, 78–88), or to create *uterine family* networks.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, domestic duties called for women's strong leadership in terms of family care and well-being. Joseon women, regardless of social status, were the household managers and custodians of family health and thus responsible for ensuring the family's material and physical wellness (Sonja M. Kim 2019, 14–50).

Under such circumstances, women were confronted with various medical situations and employed solutions for the problem. One solution

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3. Margery Wolf coined this term to indicate women's invention of a support system that contests the norms and rules of patrilineal descent (1972, 32–41).

was to hire a shaman or a fortuneteller, or to turn to divination or shaman rituals. Women's dependency on shamanism and other folk religions was regarded as a great threat to the male elites advocating Neo-Confucian learning in Joseon society. For example, the Confucian scholar Yi Ik 李穡 (1681–1762) condemned those immersed in the study of *pangsul* 方術 (divination) as naïve and evil (Yi Ik [n.d.] 1977), and Yi Deokmu 李德懋 (1741–1793) harshly warned against women's heavy reliance on shamans:

Today, it is popular among women that if they observe or hear about the outbreak of epidemics such as measles or smallpox, they reject the preparation of ancestral rites. Likewise, when a family member becomes ill, they hasten to convince the head of the household that they have to cancel the ancestral rituals, making an excuse that they fear that the illness will spread to others. Then, they set up another ritual for the deity and invite a shaman and musicians to perform prayers and sacrifices. The more intense and violent the shaman woman becomes, the more obediently the worshippers behave. Some women willingly give a great amount of money and offerings to the shaman woman. Ironically, male members do not forbid their women from doing so. They just remain in their studies and do not think of such conduct as disgraceful or shameful... The rituals are usually initiated by female servants, who tend to trick masters into engaging in indecent and humiliating acts. (D. Yi [n.d.] 1993, 240–241)<sup>4</sup>

Simultaneously, male literati admired elite women's aversion to *eumsa* (shamanic ceremonies) as noble and virtuous (Deuchler 2003, 158), and shamanic ceremonies were banned as worship of or obedience to illegitimate gods or deities in opposition to *jeongsa* (righteous ceremonies) (*Seongjong sillok* 86, 8 [1477]/11/26). Yet despite the hostile attitudes toward religious healing in the official records, the Joseon court frequently invited shamans to seek cures for the royal family or conducted rain-calling ceremonies in the court up until the 16th century; at the same time, they adopted

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4. All translations of titles and passages are mine, while any emphasis has also been added by me, unless otherwise indicated.

restrictive policies regarding divination and magical practice (Seokju Yi 2010, 423). These ambivalent politics juxtaposing both Confucianism and shamanism also applied to Korean households, where male elites turned a blind eye to shamanistic practice and condoned women's opinions regarding shaman healers or rituals (Walraven 1999a, 160–198). In private realm, frequented are the cases where male *yangban* sought the help of shaman and engaged in shamanic rituals. For the sake of his wife, grandson, and servants in severe conditions, male *yangban* asked shamans to perform the rituals at home, as recorded in *Mukjae ilgi* (Yi Mungeon's Diary) (Sin 2014, 490–497). The records verify that male elites did not completely reject the power of shaman rituals or folk remedies.

Korean women's reliance on folk practice and shamanic solutions, however, was viewed more critically and problematically after Korea's colonization by Japan. Once the Chōsen sōtokufu (Japanese Government-General in Korea) encouraged scholars to study Korean culture, the collected materials were used to support imperialist propaganda for the cultural assimilation of Koreans into the Japanese state (Walraven 1999b, 222). Colonial scholars, including Akiba Takashi 秋葉隆 (1888–1954) and Murayama Chijun 村山智順 (1891–1968), studied Korean folkloric customs and contended that *jeombok* (divination) had been a native *superstitious* practice in Joseon society, primarily popular among women. Akiba's ethnographic survey focused on locating and collecting materials on Korean folk culture and local customs, while Murayama's emphasized the archaic, primitive, and irrational character of the Korean people in order to argue that their backward nature hindered the modernization of Korea (Walraven 1999b, 225). Specifically, Murayama's government reports on hygienic conditions and medical practices of rural Korea referred to folk remedies as "*misin chiryo*" (superstitious methods). In descriptions, Korean patients and caregivers utilized things, ingredients, or methods, accessible and achievable from ordinary life, to seek healing and recovery, but engagements with such folk practice were characterized as unclean, barbarous, and superstitious (J. Han 2013, 206).

The notion of superstition was often confused with indigenous practices or Confucian traditions that Korean people had retained. In Western

missionary records, Koreans' almanacs and astronomical knowledge were the vicious influence of shamanic superstition (Korean Repository [1895] 1964, 71–72), although they were derived from the observation of celestial patterns and seasonal cycles and the accumulation of meteorological data, in line with the view that the human world constantly correlates with the universe. The belief in the existence of supernatural beings, intimately associated with an individual's life and fortune, was also believed to be a byproduct of taboos and superstitions (Korean Repository [1895] 1964, 71).

Under such suspicions regarding women's superstitious practices, what conjunctions can we make in interpreting women's medical discourse? *Gyuhap chongseo* is an invaluable source that encompasses knowledge of domestic and material culture but also incorporates ways to draw on supernatural forces when seeking solutions in daily life. If so, where should we position ourselves to best understand the link between women and divine knowledge? A large number of studies address the relationship between the author and her specialized knowledge, focusing on descriptions of cooking and sewing, and treat the text as an excellent contribution to Korean culinary history (Seong-woo Yi 1982; G. Han 1982; Song 1983; H. Kim 2004; Kim et al. 2012; M. Han 2013; Ro 2016). Others discuss the author's scholarly, practical, and professional approaches to domestic tasks and illuminate her contribution to Joseon intellectual history (Jeong 1997; H. Yi 2007, 191–249). However, not many studies investigate or interpret the superstitious or supernatural elements prevalent in the work, while the medical accounts are placed outside the discussion and rarely mentioned in the scholarship. The tendency to deny the perception of a different reality, distinct from rationalism and scientific methods, can obfuscate our understanding of the wide spectrum of women's roles in the medical realm.

Recent studies have attempted to bring awareness to the author's expansive knowledge and enthusiasm for providing real-life solutions for medical emergencies and argue that Yi's work features a combination of practical knowledge and folk belief (Won 2002), or assert her tendency to prioritize women's experiences such as pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare (Won 2005; Lee 2017, 221–223). However, the considerable descriptions of

spiritual solutions, including rituals, divination, incantation, and talismans, still remain undiscussed, or even avoided as a topic of exploration. They are said to be “a practice or belief that is inexplicable to medical science” (Won 2005, 178). Such modern assessments, however, tend to deny the possibility that scientific methods may not account for all realities, while also obscuring our understanding of women’s medical wisdom. Under the shadow of modern ideals that worship scientific rationality but reject myth, magic, and superstition as knowledge systems, how then can we assess divine knowledge? What does *Gyuhap chongseo* tell us about the existence of mystic power and its ability to prevent malevolent influences from entering the house? More importantly, what is the significance of juxtaposing spiritual solutions with ample descriptions of experiential knowledge gleaned from reason and the senses? These questions incorporate inquiries regarding the boundaries of experiential knowledge and what subjective or objective observation, assessment, and interpretation means in this context. By configuring Lady Yi’s and anonymous compilers’ efforts to cope with various situations and redefine the legitimate sources of medical knowledge, this work evaluates Joseon women’s place in medical discourse in the 19th century, prior to the introduction of Western medicine to Korean soil.

### **Medical Knowledge for Women**

*Gyuhap chongseo* is one of the largest encyclopedic collections of essays, recipes, and methods and demonstrates both the profundity and practicality of an elite woman’s knowledge. The work attests to Lady Yi’s wide spectrum of intellectual interests and knowledge obtained from preexisting sources that were rearranged and rewritten from the author’s own perspective. Yi’s work was heavily influenced by both her native and marital family traditions. The author was a member of a prominent noble family of the Jeonju Yi clan; she married into the Dalseong Seo clan, a scholarly family that engaged in encyclopedic projects, which had become a popular writing practice among the elite class and privileged families, stimulated by the introduction of new materials from Qing China and the West during the



18th century (K. Kim 2012, 338). Lady Yi's husband, Seo Yubon 徐有本 (1762–1822), was a devoted scholar. His grandfather, Seo Myeongeung 徐命膺 (1716–1787), was well known for his comprehensive work, *Gosa sinseo* 攷事新書 (New Interpretations of Old Affairs). Seo Yubon's father, Seo Hosu 徐浩修 (1736–1799), compiled the expansive *Haedong nongseo* 海東農書 (Studies of Agriculture in Korea), displaying a vast knowledge of astrology, mathematics, music, and nature. Seo Yubon's younger brother, Seo Yugu 徐有渠 (1764–1845), was the author of *Imwon gyeongjeji* 林園經濟志 (Treatises on Rural Economies), the largest collection of essays, theories, and knowledge in premodern Korean history. Yi's own work, *Gyuhap chongseo*, served to standardize indigenous knowledge and expand the parameters of knowledge for daily life. Its contents outline practical approaches to household chores and provide knowledge of pregnancy, childbirth, and medical emergencies, and they also describe mystical practices which are believed to drive away evil.

Specifically, the fourth book, “Cheongnanggyeol,” which takes its name from Hua Tuo's medical treatise *Qingnang jue* 青囊訣 (*Cheongnanggyeol* in Korean), provides tips applicable to diverse medical situations or problems, prioritizing information relevant to women. The first section centers on pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare and how experiences differ between the sexes, as well as examining medical practices through the lens of motherhood.<sup>5</sup> The book begins with prenatal education (*taegyo* 胎教) and provides suggestions for prenatal women (*taejung jangni beop* 胎中將理法), then lists food and medicine to avoid during pregnancy (*imsin geumgi* 妊娠禁忌). Female interests were not confined to reproduction, but extended to the skills and knowledge needed to respond to various medical situations, particularly emergency treatment (*gugeup* 救急). Each entry discusses a plausible event or situation and provides easy-to-grasp treatments to cope with everything from boils to a sore throat to dysentery. The book then illustrates the methods used to repel harmful animals and insects, including lice, flies, and cockroaches. Finally, the “*gyeongheombang*” (methods

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5. For more information on Lady Yi's attention to women-related medical matters and her writing strategies, see Lee (2017, 211–232).

[learned] from experience) section at the end of the book suggests manifold approaches to possible problems, including how to soothe a toothache, handle a fish bone stuck in one's throat, relieve stomachaches caused by eating a variety of foods, deal with flu, *hakjil* (malaria), or *ijil* (dysentery), soothe sore eyes, and remove summer mold. The entries in this category are usually short and simple, indicating that they are experience-based or from local sources.

The fifth book, “Sulsuryak” 術數略 (Epitome of Divination and Numbers),<sup>6</sup> often translated as “quantitative arts and medicine,” focuses on geomantic, ritualistic, and esoteric methods to protect the family's health, and supports the idea that employing divine skills can help maintain a good life. Each item in “Sulsuryak” offers medical aid in conjunction with the three categories: geomancy (風水), divination, incantation, and talisman (占卜, 呪術, 符), and physiognomy (觀相). The first section, entitled “*Jintaek jeonggeo*” 鎮宅淨居 (Principles of Building a House and Purifying a Living Space), provides advice on when to build a house and its elements, a well, and a lavatory, as well as folkloric methods to determine whether one's luck will be good or bad based on dreams, the weather, animal behavior, and bodily symptoms.<sup>7</sup> The second section provides knowledge relevant to divination, which recommends one carefully observe signs in nature and coordinate one's decisions with a major universal system, such as the movements or

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6. The terminology of *sulsu* 術數 originates in *Qilue* 七略 (Seven Summaries) by Liu Xiang (79–8 BCE) and Liu Xin (53 BCE–23 CE), who suggested six of categories of writing: 六藝 (six arts of the classics), 諸子 (philosophical masterworks), 詩賦 (verse), 兵書 (military works), 術數 (treatises on the technical and quantitative arts and medicine), and 方技 (miscellaneous works). Meanwhile 術數 often intermingles astronomy, calendrical studies, medicine, and calculus, and the idea became prevalent until the Tang dynasty. See Nickerson (1994, 48–49).

7. The author also outlines the fundamental elements constituting the forces of the house: *geon* (heaven) and *gon* (earth), which represent *yang* and *yin*, respectively. The interaction of the opposing elements of *yin* and *yang* produce the five elements of *hwa* (fire), *mok* (wood), *su* (water), *geum* (metal), and *to* (earth). Specifically, fire and wood belong to *yang* energy, while water and metal are close to *yin* energy. The earth occupies a neutral position between the two forces. These five elements constitute the fundamental principles for geomancy, as they are associated with the twelve geomantic directions in accordance with the twelve zodiac symbols (B. Yi 2009, 60–65).

cycles of the heavenly bodies. Divinatory knowledge is concentrated on prognostic vision and skills for avoiding inauspicious events, and in a similar vein, incantations and talismans are also included to promote health and protect people from evil forces. The employment of these methods will be further discussed in the following section. The third section focuses on physiognomy, which describes how to assess personality from a person's physical traits, such as their skull shape, hairline, complexion, wrinkles, or moles. Furthermore, affluence and class privilege are believed to be viscerally inscribed in the visible physiognomy of a woman's skin, facial features, or silhouette. The section describes "nine good and bad signs of a woman," "tips to determine a woman's background," "tips to read a woman's mind," "signs of a wise woman," "signs of an ominous woman," "a song of female physiognomy by Master Gwigok," "a song about a housewife in the story of Chudam," and "discussion of women by Daoist Masters of Maeui and Chudam," all of which concentrate on the physiognomy of women but do not describe how to interpret a man's physical features.

### **The Power of Experiential Knowledge**

The holistic view in *Gyuhap chongseo* seems to originate mostly from the author's experience in the domestic sphere, where she constructed *experiential knowledge* based on what she observed, heard, and discovered in daily life. In fact, women's activities in the kitchen, ranging from cooking, fermentation, distillation, and brewing, require information about functional ingredients or medicinal ideas, and the process of preparing liquors, *jang* (fermented bases), and *cho* (vinegar) involves an understanding of chemical changes. Women's domestic work demanded the production of commodities through the making food and crafting daily necessities, and exposed them to tangible and material culture. In this way, women's *labor of love* helped them to make a distinctive perception of the material things and craft their skills of observation.

Yet, experiential knowledge represents conflicting tendencies in the way the author(s) tell us about the validity of the discussed methods. On the one

hand, the description successfully legitimizes the knowledge by providing evidential experience, which is objective in the sense that it does not merely depend on one's beliefs or ideas. On the other hand, the author(s) suggest the methods that engage with magical properties such as spells and incantations, which could be true or false, are thoroughly subjective.

The following examples exemplify the complex nature of the experiential knowledge embedded in the text. In the first, the author notes the discovery of new healing methods. It is unclear whether the observation is made from the position of a patient, observer, or healer, but the text traces how she came to combine warming and draining as a new remedy to remove boils:

Healing methods based on experience

Moxibustion is the best method for removing a boil formed under the skin. When fingers are swollen or they feel numb and dull for no particular reason, you should not ignore these signs. These minor symptoms can be a sign of boils...It is recommended to bind the swollen area, put minced garlic on it, and burn it with dried mugwort. After waiting for a few days, prick the reddened, tender area with a needle [to make a small incision on the boil], and then you will see the release of the pus from the area. You can repeat this for four to five days. In my observation, the symptoms began on the eighth day of the third month and the boil was gone on the twelfth. *I was so amazed by this method that I recorded it in my diary as well.*<sup>8</sup>

As this passage indicates, the author tested the method herself and charted the duration of the symptoms and the curing process in her diary, gathering evidence and obtaining the knowledge born of experience. The final

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8. “경험정유 [line change] 정이 거죽으로 나도 뜨는 것이 제일이다. 손이 갑자기 트집 없이 붓고, 평평하고 저리고 무거운 것이 풍정이라는 것이니 모르고 그냥 두면 온 손이 다 들뜨고 크게 되기 쉽다. ... 즉시 새를 잡아 불이고 자고 몹시 아픈 데다가 마늘 쪽을 구멍을 내어 놓고, 쪽으로 수 없이 뜨고 며칠을 그렇게 한 후, 그 자리가 무른 듯하거든 침으로 탄 즉 누르스름한 물이 나오고, 가죽이 들러붙을 것이다. 그 위를 또 많이 뜨면 사오일내에 성한 손이 된다. 삼원 초파일 시작 십이일 성한 손이 되니 신통하기 일기책에도 썼다” (Hanguk jeongsin munhwa yeonguwon 2001, 3-4; B. Yi 2009, 380).

statement, “I was so amazed by this method,” seems to emphasize that her examination and observation has demonstrated the method’s reliability. In addition, the text consciously distinguishes the author’s own discoveries from pre-existing methods, as she marks her own findings as “*gyeongheombang*” (methods learned from experience), “*sinjeung*” (new examination), “*sinbang*” (new method), or “*ubang*” (another method), often recording the time and place of the event, followed by the specific treatment method drawn from observation or experience.

In this way, *Gyuhap chongseo* directs the reader’s attention to the importance of experiential knowledge empowered by the skills of observation, and also creates an authentic voice by referring to what she actually heard or witnessed. Furthermore, the author often scrutinizes and questions the efficiency of the methods. Even classical methods, as long practiced and transmitted in literary Chinese, prompt the author to raise questions about their validity. When she determines it to be effective, the passage ends with a remark of confidence; if she does not find the method convincing, she expresses her doubts. For example, an entry in “Cheongnanggyeol” documents a method to switch a baby’s sex before birth. In this description, the narrator is only partially convinced:

A method for turning a female fetus into a male

Before three months of pregnancy have passed and without letting others know, dress in one’s husband’s hat and clothes, go to the well of the house alone at the third watch, walk around the well to the left three times, and implore “man is *yang*, woman is *yin*” three times, bend the body to make a reflection of herself in the well, and return [to the house] without looking back. She will then definitely have a baby boy...*It is unlikely that a female embryo would become a male embryo, but I write this here since it is recorded in medical books and there were cases that people had experienced it at that time.* However, I am afraid that the womb could be easily shaken if a pregnant woman becomes frightened after walking outside in the middle of the night unless she is quite plucky, and this could make one guilty for a hundred cycles. (Pettid and Cha 2021, 139)<sup>9</sup>

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9. “우 일방 [line change] 석달 채 못 되어 한밤중 삼경에 사람이 알지 못하게 그 남편의 갓을 쓰고

Similar methods are also found in the medical canon *Dongui bogam* 東醫寶鑑 (Precious Mirror of Eastern Medicine), which recommends the use of medication, an amulet, or other items<sup>10</sup> to deliver a baby boy and implies people's preference for sons to provide financial and emotional care in their old ages. The author confesses that, although the methods were included in significant works, published by the Joseon court, and proven by others, she believes it is almost impossible to change a fetus's sex. As such, the author questions the effectiveness of the method, even if the method appeared sufficiently authenticated, transmitted in the classical canon for centuries.

“Cheongnanggyeol” reflects the author's attitude, which favors knowledge gained from experience and through the use of her own senses. In particular, the power of sight appears instrumental in the presentation of objective evidence or to support the authority of Lady Yi's text. Rather than relying solely on what has been done, observation is considered an important medium for predicting upcoming events. The text shows that taking notice of bodily symptoms, such as sneezing or buzzing in the ear, or the cries of birds or the movement of animals, can enable one to foresee bad luck or poor health, while changes in one's environment can foretell catastrophic events. In addition, the close observation of celestial and natural phenomena is beneficial to predicting auspicious or inauspicious signs of future events.

How to predict rain with your oil lamp

If the sky is bleak and wet for several days, but the lamp is brightly sparkling, the rain will stop tomorrow. If dark smoke comes out of the

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옷을 입고 홀로 집안에 우물이 있거든 가에 가서 왼편으로 세 번을 돌고 축수하기를 남위양이오 여위음이라 세 번 하고, 우물을 굽어 스스로 그림자를 비치고 올 적에 돌아보지 말면 필경 아들을 낳는다. ... 대개 아기 될 때 좌우가 각각 나뉜다 하니 여태가 바뀌어 남태될 리 있으리오만 의서에 정히 기록하였고 시속에 또한 경험한 이 있음에 쓰긴 쓰되, 만일 답이 크지 못한 즉 한밤중에 섬뜩하고 놀래어 도리어 태가 흔들리기 쉽고 또 백회에 죄인이 될까 두렵다” (Hanguk jeongsin munhwa yeonguwon 2001, 112–114; B. Yi 2009, 355). Emphasis added.

10. “懷娠三月，名曰始胎，血脉不流，象形而變。是時男女未定，故服藥方術，轉令生男也。” “Japbyeong pyeon” (Miscellaneous Cases), 10, in *Dongui bogam*, 7, Hanuihak gojeon DB (Database of Traditional Korean Medical Classics), <https://medicclassics.kr/books/8/volume/18> (accessed June 1, 2022).

lamp, and the lamp gives a flat flame, you will have rain tomorrow. If there is no smoke but the flame is weak, it will be a windy day. If the flame is red and stays upright, it will be sunny tomorrow. If the smoke fills the room and the flame stays still, the rain will stop. If it has been dry and the flame is short, small, and weak, it will rain soon, within a few days.<sup>11</sup>

Here, the text proposes that a close examination of an oil lamp's shape or condition could provide insights into predicting the weather, as the shape of the lamp's flame may indicate the level of humidity in the air. This approach engages with conventional forms of divinatory mapping, such as producing cracks on bones or casting stalks to construct a pattern, identify the sign, and then inferring a causality between the sign and the event, illustrating that divination is closely related to observatory science, stemming from the scrutiny of anomalous occurrences in the natural world.

The text engages in both experiential and spiritual worlds, adopting practical solutions found in real-life situations while seeking divine tools to fix problems or prevent issues from arising. This is noticeable in the descriptions of *hakjil* 瘧疾, which is commonly interpreted as today's malaria and literally means "intermittent fever." At the time, *hakjil* was one of the most widespread but difficult diseases to cure. Incidences soared during the summer and autumn seasons, as the boundless mosquito-breeding potentials of the rice paddies during Korea's monsoon season always increased the infection rates. Until scientists discovered that malaria is transmitted through the bites of infected mosquitoes, medical experts alleged that *hakjil* was triggered by the invasion of an evil force, an imbalance of bodily harmony, or problematic human emotions (Kang et al. 2013, 157–158), also known as a notoriously incurable sickness until the late 19th century, when missionary doctors and Japanese physicians identified

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11. “등화점청우법 [line change] 하늘이 음산하게 비 오는 날이 오란데 등화가 갑자기 광채가 있어 밝고 윤택하며 다음날 개고, 검은 내가 위로 흐르고 불꽃이 아래로 드리워 어두우면 다음날에 비 오고, 내가 없고 붉은 불이 좌우 뒤흔들려 고정치 못하면 이튿날 큰 바람이 불고, 붉고 광채가 있어 흔들리지 않으면, 이튿날 개고, 내가 뻑뻑이 있고 빛이 움직이지 않으면 이튿날 개고, 바람이 불고 가무는 때에 등잔의 붉은 등화가 짧고 작으며 점점이 불이 떨어지면 사흘 안에 비가 온다” (B. Yi 2009, 453).

cyclical infection by mosquitoes and introduced quinine (advertised as *geumgyerap* 金鷄蠟) as a treatment (Yeo 2011, 56). Against this background, *Gyuhap chongseo* suggests a healing ritual for effective treatment:

Malaria

On the day of a solar eclipse, and while facing the sun, repeatedly write the Chinese character for the sun (日) with cinnabar; next, burn the characters and eat as many as the number of seizures one has suffered. In addition, cut out all the white paper of the prior year's book calendar, burn all the letters without missing even a single letter, mix with water, and drink. It is said that people can defeat the disease if they eat the entire year of suns, moons, and stars. (Pettid and Cha 2021, 167)<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, the ritual constitutes a bodily performance of writing of a certain Chinese character with cinnabar ink, and by engaging the power of letters, or the written culture, it ascribes divine power to the signs of language.<sup>13</sup> The subsequent act of burning the calendar seems to symbolize the effort to engage with the forces of heavenly bodies to maximize healing energies.

In contrast to the method above, the author(s) also suggests two pharmaceutical methods, describing an herbal medicine formula that aims to provide nutritional help and ameliorate the patient's symptoms:

Malaria

Add three *don* [11.25 grams] of *siho* [bupleurum euphorbioides Nakai] to *yangwitang*; on an empty stomach, take two packs on days with no

12. “학질에 [line change] 일식할 때 주사로 날 일자를 해를 향하여 서서 수없이 썼다가 학지 직수 대로 글자를 살라먹고 바로 전 해 책력 한 권을 흰 종이는 다 베어 버리고 글자는 한자도 빠지지 말고 모조리 살려 물에 섞어 먹으면 된다 이는 일년 일월성신을 온전히 먹으며 병을 물리친다고 한다” (Hanguk jeongsin munhwa yeonguwon 2001, 157; B. Yi 2009, 390).

13. A similar method is found in *Uihwi* 宜彙 (Collections of Appropriate Methods), medical scripts written by an obscure author around 1871, which proposes the writing and burning of a particular Chinese letter and drinking the burnt letters in ashes as treatment. *Uihwi*, Hanuihak gojeon DB (Database of Traditional Korean Medical Classics), [https://mediclassics.kr/books/60/volume/1#content\\_1244](https://mediclassics.kr/books/60/volume/1#content_1244) (accessed June 1, 2022).



symptoms and take one pack on days when malarial symptoms occur. It is then wonderfully efficacious.

Steam five or six Korean apricots when cooking rice, make forty-nine pellet medicines, boil Korean apricot tea before sunrise, and take seven pills with the tea seven times on a day when malarial symptoms occur. This is also very efficacious. (Pettid and Cha 2021, 200)<sup>14</sup>

This passage ends with “Sinjuchon bangmun,” indicating the method was transmitted from Hong Seongcho (penname: Insudang). It is also included in the medical canon *Dongui bogam* (Precious Mirror of Eastern Medicine), which describes *yangwitang* as the use of ginseng to treat *hakjil*.<sup>15</sup> According to *Hyangyak jipseong bang* 鄉藥集成方 (Collection of Native Prescriptions), *maesil* (Korean apricot) is most effective.<sup>16</sup> This passage indicates the author’s familiarity with the major medical documents and ends with the mark of the author’s confidence, saying “This is also very efficacious.”

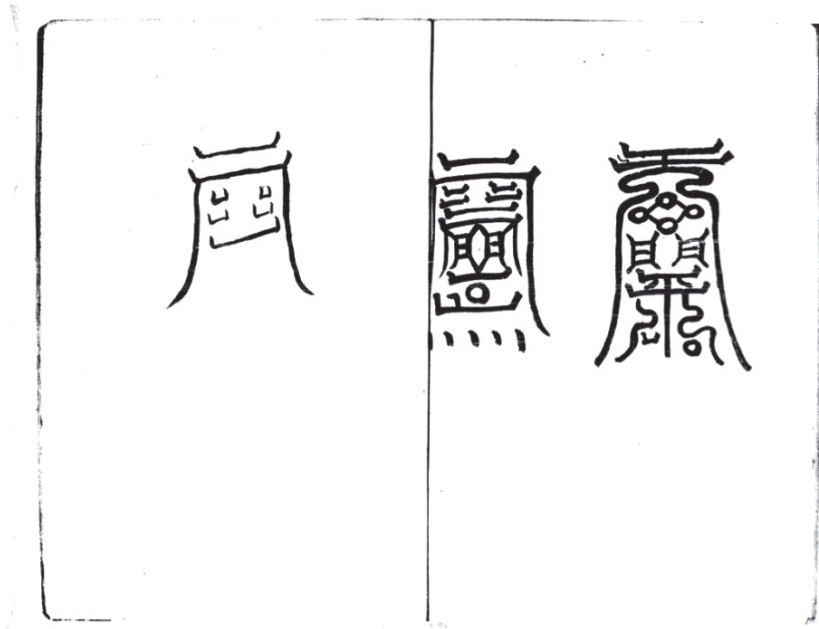
## Healing Rituals, Talismans, and Incantations

Throughout “Cheongnanggyeol” and “Sulsuryak,” both ritualistic and pharmaceutical solutions appear as effective remedies for illnesses, particularly those obscure in origin and resistant to conventional cures. The book “Sulsuryak” tends to place more emphasis on the use of talismans and

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14. “양위탕에 시호 서 돈을 넣어서 쉬는 날 두 첩 먹고 직날 빈속에 한 첩 먹으면 신효하다. 매실 대엿을 밥 위에 썬서 마흔 아홉 개 환약을 만들어 직날 해 둔기 전에 매실차를 달이고 일곱씩 일곱 번에 삼키면 신효하다” (Hanguk jeongsin munhwa yeonguwon 2001, 210–211; B. Yi 2009, 434).
  15. “自感寒而得，寒多熱少，宜人參養胃湯方見寒門·交解飲·果附湯·草果飲·柴胡桂薑湯，” “Japbyeong pyeon” (Miscellaneous Cases), 7, in *Dongui bogam*, Hanuihak gojeon DB (Database of Traditional Korean Medical Classics), [https://medicclassics.kr/books/8/volume/15#content\\_96](https://medicclassics.kr/books/8/volume/15#content_96) (accessed June 1, 2022).
  16. “梅實 陳藏器云 梅實本功外，止渴，令人膈上熱。烏梅去痰，主瘧瘴，止渴調中，除冷熱痢，止吐逆。梅葉搗破湯洗，衣易脫也，” *Hyangyak jipseong bang* (Collection of Native Prescriptions), 84, Hanuihak gojeon DB (Database of Traditional Korean Medical Classics), [https://medicclassics.kr/books/93/volume/85#content\\_75](https://medicclassics.kr/books/93/volume/85#content_75) (accessed June 1, 2022).

spells for protection or healing. Below are the visual talismans found on the inside page of the back cover of “Sulsurak” in the Tokyo University Edition, a copy of which is housed in the Jangseogak.

It is unknown whether the images were in the original manuscript or added by later transcribers or copiers. However, the images indicate their relevance to *Okchugyeong* 玉樞經 (*Yushu jing* in Chinese) (Scripture of the Jade Pivot),<sup>17</sup> a popular Daoist canon containing fifteen talismans designed



**Figure 1.** Inside back cover of the eighth volume of the *Gyuhap chongseo*

Source: *Gyuhap chongseo* microfilm, Jangseogak Library, Academy of Korean Studies.

17. The name 玉樞經 is an abbreviation of 九天應援雷聲普化天尊 玉樞寶經 (Scripture of the Jade Pivot of the Celestial Worthy of Universal Transformation Whose Sound of Thunder Responds to the Primordial in the Nine Heavens). The canon was circulated among households, implying the proliferation of the Daoist practice in late Joseon.

for longevity and protection against evil forces. This canon, emerging from Buddhist monasteries in fourteenth-century Yuan China, entered Joseon Korea, where it became one of the popular Daoist scriptures (Seul Yi 2008, 131–133). Referring to the canon, the far right image is identified as the talisman of “The Sixth Tohwangjang” 土皇章 employed to handle any inauspicious event triggered by annoying the earth gods. The talisman in the middle is assumed to be “The Eighth Joseongjang” 鳥鼠章 for treating bad dreams, mental illness, or sickness from birds, rats, and insects. The far-left image appears to be incomplete, remaining obscure in origin.

The employment of such magical symbolism seems prominent throughout “Sulsuryak,” but interestingly no explanations are offered with regard to these images or objects. Rather, the content of “Sulsuryak” suggests phrases and spells under the subheading *chihakbang* 治瘧方 (methods to treat malaria).

#### Methods to treat malaria

Make the two kinds of talismans with cinnabar. Then, apply the talismans to the sick and attach them to every wall, the main gate, and entrances between rooms.

*Barhak, barhak, sahae ji sin, yukjeong saja, suyee jeonggi, sokkeo sokkeo, saanaebak, odo janggun, seobyeeo sinho, myeonpongchain, geupgeup yeo yullyeong.*

#### Talisman to sever malaria

*Pobaekbangyungwiyksin yonggwinanbicheonsimhwak  
Hogeukkyochangmangapsin chichwaeheupnaejinbalhae  
Aassanggakjugungmin janggwontapabungonmyeon  
Garyeonsujejanagwi seongmupungchigwioeyul.*<sup>18</sup>

18. “치학방 [line change] 주사로 이 두 부적을 써서 학질 앓는 이에게 채우고 사망 벽과 대문, 지계 문에 붙인다. 발학 발학. 사해지신. 육정사자. 수여정기. 속거속거. 사아내박. 오도장군. 섭여신호. 면봉차인. 급급여울렁”; “절학부 [line change] 포백반규귀약신 용귀난비천심확 호극교창만갑신 치쾌흡내진발해 아아쌍각주궁민 장권타파분곤면 가련슈제잔아귀 성무풍치귀외울” (Hanguk jeongsin munhwa yeonguwon 2001, 925–926; B. Yi 2009, 462).

These spells are likened to magical words like *abraxas* (or *abracadabra*) that stem from an ancient language and no longer carry a specific meaning beyond the power that comes from the words (Gal 2021, 193). The esoteric, indecipherable expressions in the descriptions imply the parallelism of different sources of traditions in the making of talismans in Korea (Kim and Lee 2016, 4).<sup>19</sup> The first spell signifies the strong influence of Daoism embedded in the text, and the expression “*geupgeup yeo yulleong*” also appears in other entries with talismans: “Jinmongbu” (Incantation for Relief from Nightmares)<sup>20</sup> and “Jinje goebu” (Incantation for Averting All that is Strange).<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the second spell features compositional forms inherited from literary verses of Confucian classics, featuring seven syllabic regulated verse (七言律詩). The talismans from two different sources exemplify the fact that Daoist and Confucian practices were not in conflict, but rather shared a complementary relationship.

More importantly, the obscure phrases were transliterated into the vernacular, given no Chinese characters. Such vernacularization was not regarded as a loss or lessening of their magical power. Historically, the talismans, on an object or sheet of paper, were created or produced by

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19. In premodern Korea, the formulation of talismans derived from three sources: the traditions of Buddhist exorcism rites, Confucian literature, and Daoist meditation practices (Kim and Lee 2016, 2). The spells derived from Buddhist tradition are characterized by the ending *sabaha* 娑婆詞, a Sanskrit word that means “boundless achievement.” The Confucian literary influence that also permeates the incantations are structured into four-, six-, or seven-syllable line poems. Meanwhile, Daoist meditation practices involve the recitation of phrases ending with *geupgeup yeo yullyeong* 急急如律令, which literally means “this will be effective as soon as the words are pronounced.”

20. “진몽부 [line change] 밝고 밝으니 해는 동방에서 떠오른다. 내 이 부적을 붙이니 사나운 꿈의 상서롭지 못한 기운이 모두 물러간다. 울령과 같이 급히 시행될 지어라. 이를 외우고 써서 머리 두는 벽에 붙이랴” (Hanguk jeongsin munhwa yeonguwon 2001, 920; B. Yi 2009, 459).

21. “진제귀부 [line change] 모든 상서롭지 못한 조짐이 있거든 놀라 마음 흔들려 말하지 말고 세 번 이를 딱딱 두드린 후 좋은 물을 입에 머금어 동쪽을 향하여 뽕고 다음 같이 외워. 좋은 말을 밝고 밝으며 지극히 양강한 기운으로 꾸짖노니 해는 동방에서 떠오른다. 내 이 부적으로 명하노니 두루 상서롭지 못한 기운을 제거하고 해는 삼매의 불을 토해내니 문음의 빛을 굴복시켜 날리고 요괴로 잡는다. 천봉 역사로 하여금 질병을 일으키는 더러운 자취들을 깨뜨리게 하고 금강으로 하여금 요괴를 굴복시켜 길하고 상서롭고 변하게 하도다. 울령과 같이 급히 시행될 지어다” (Hanguk jeongsin munhwa yeonguwon 2001, 936–937; B. Yi 2009, 469).

priests and professional healers and based on a perception that venerates the symbolism of signs. It had long been believed that visualized letters or images can draw divine power, so one must carry a copy of the spell and attach it to a wall for protection from demons. Yet, Yi's work challenges the visual symbolism of the letters, as the vernacularization of talismans could help practitioners, especially women familiar with vernacular Korean, to copy or memorize them and access the divine knowledge.

The text of "Sulsuryak" reveals cultural belief in the efficacy of talismans (*bu* 符), but the vernacular version expands the usability of talismans that one can write and copy, or chant and recite to control the uncontrollable. Still, these tools and their evidence are abstract and personal. Instead of noting efforts to legitimize or verify the effects, the author chooses to transfer the wisdom of metaphysical or spiritual phenomena that are not constrained by common paths to knowledge into vernacular script that women and lay people can read and use. The text thus shows efforts to distill knowledge that can be learned not only from experience but also from a belief that the potency of healing rituals is a powerful tool, and in this regard blurs the boundaries between sacred and mundane texts.

### **Rethinking Medical Knowledge**

The article has demonstrated that Lady Yi's comprehensive point of view tends to integrate both objective and subjective evidence while building medical knowledge. In accordance with the first, the encyclopedia illuminates her efforts to compile her own experience and observation into canonized classical knowledge. Specifically, the text calls attention to the principle of making the best use of one's own experience. The subcategorization of many different "formulas" (*bang* 方) signals authenticity by stating the origin of the recipe or indicating that the method is derived from her own experience or experiential observation. Meanwhile, her interests in divine, esoteric, and magical elements for healing may suggest that subjective experiences involving multiple contexts and connotations contribute to medical knowledge. Lady Yi's inclusion of diverse methods

reveals the complexity and incoherence in medical accounts that go beyond the dualism of objective vs. subjective knowledge. Such a combination of heterogeneous sources of evidence and knowledge represents the interdependence of objective and subjective experiences in the construction of scientific knowledge.

The down-to-earth approach of the text is evidenced by the author's willingness to move beyond traditional written formulas, freely accepting and incorporating performative, written, and oral elements. Lady Yi's most significant contribution is the integration of indigenous practices of households, in which patients or practitioners mutter an incantation, write a certain character, drink the ashes of a burnt charm, or wear talismans to avert demonic power. As such, Yi's work can be described as "a fusion of folk beliefs with practical experience" (Pettid and Cha 2021, 17), one which traverses oral and written communications and folk and elite cultures.

However, while the text includes tips, hearsay, and knowhow, this does not mean that Yi simply absorbed all possible solutions from popular practices without reserve. The author's intent was to assist other women from being misled by shamans, soothsayers, and fortune-tellers, as clearly indicated in the preface of *Gyuhap chongseo*: "The writing of *Sulsuryak* is from my wish to help people prepare for unexpected troubles and avoid being deceived by *mudangs* (shamans)" (B. Yi 2009, 20). Lady Yi recognized the problems of women's blindness and indulgence in shaman culture, born of fear or ignorance, and instead proposed the use of healing rituals, talismans, and incantations, sifted through her own perspective distinguishing between what is divine and what is demonic. In modern eyes, *Gyuhap chongseo* seems to merely acknowledge the validity of shamanism and supernatural healing for family well-being, but the author's attempt was to construct proper ways to engage in divine power knowledge. *Baksu* and *mudang* (male and female shamans, respectively) also drew on supernatural power from deities or spirits, and healing rituals were held by specialists in the 19th century. However, *Gyuhap chongseo* suggests no reliance on shamans or professional healers. Rather, the methods the work elucidates aim to draw a line between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge among contemporaneous magical practices. In this context, healing rituals, talismans, and incantations are

deemed reliable, legitimate methods that can be applied and practiced at home.

The preface also clarifies that the author's passion and sympathy lie with fellow women who have coped with various problems; Lady Yi aims to encourage women to train and cultivate their faculties and also to provide them with confidence that problems can be resolved. Specifically, the books "Cheongnanggyeol" and "Sulsuryak" were designed to promote "*yangsaeng*" 養生 (nourishing health): "Although this work has many entries, all are concerned primarily with maintaining a healthy life and with the methods necessary for managing a household. They are, in fact, all indispensable to daily life and deal with things women should investigate and study. Thus, with this preface, I write this encyclopedia for the daughters and daughters-in-law of our family" (B. Yi 2009, 20). This deems women to be the primary caregivers in their households and the bearers of remedial knowledge.

From the early Joseon, the government endeavored to spread medical knowledge by publishing the vernacular version of medical treatises, including *Gugeupbang eonhae* 救急方諺解 (Prescriptions for Emergency Treatment, 1599), *Eonhae taesan jibyoo* 諺解胎產集要 (Collection of Essentials of Childbirth, 1608), and *Eonhae duchang jibyoo* 諺解痘瘡集要 (Prescriptions for Smallpox, 1608) to facilitate women's active participation in medical emergencies and childbirth (Y. Kim et al 2019, 220–225). Unlike these treatises, the vernacular text of *Gyuhap chongseo* did not simply transmit medical knowledge, but transformed observation and experiences into valid descriptions and also recommended divine solutions to help Joseon women access religious and sacred knowledge and rituals for daily use. In the realm of domestic life, women's activities may have been confined to the household premises, but the text provides an excellent opportunity for understanding the intermediary position of Joseon elite women, who navigated material and spiritual worlds and constructed experiential knowledge on their own.

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