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Moving Beyond Politics: *Western Scholarship on Joseon*

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Abstract

In the English-speaking world, the history of Joseon is underrepresented on library shelves displaying books on East Asian history. Academic works in English on early modern Chinese and Japanese history greatly outnumber academic studies of Joseon. Moreover, even within the field of Joseon history, much more attention has been paid to political history and the history of war than to most other areas. Several studies of Joseon-era religion and philosophy, especially Confucianism, have also been published. However, only a small part of the scholarship on Joseon produced by scholars in the West deals with social or economic history. There is even less published on the history of science, medicine, and technology. Similarly, few monographs have been published that focus on Joseon's cultural history. This lack of breadth in English-language scholarship may be the reason there is as yet no comprehensive one-volume survey of Joseon history, and why there are not as many books on Joseon in libraries as there should be. Fortunately, there are signs that the scholarship on Joseon is starting to multiply and diversify. That gives us hope that, in that not-too-distant future, Joseon may be able to claim the space it deserves on library shelves.

Keywords: Politics, war, Confucianism, religion, society, the economy, science, culture

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If you peruse the English-language holdings in East Asian history of any major academic library in North America, be it the Widener Library at Harvard, the Gardner Library at the University of California at Berkeley, or the Robarts Library at the University of Toronto, you will not only notice scores of volumes on Chinese history in general but also many works focusing on individual Chinese dynasties. I don't mean books narrowly focused on aspects of the politics, philosophy, or economics of those dynasties, though there are plenty of such publications, of course. I mean academic surveys devoted solely to the overall histories of individual major dynasties, such as the Zhou, Han, Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing. None of those Chinese dynasties, except the ancient Zhou, lasted as long as Korea's Joseon dynasty, yet they all have drawn enough scholarly attention to merit coverage in their own volumes.

There is not as much English-language scholarship on Japan. Nevertheless, important periods in Japanese history, such as the Heian, Kamakura, Muromachi, and Tokugawa, all have scholarly tomes devoted to them and them alone. Yet, just like we saw in the case of China, none of those Japanese historical periods are nearly as long as Joseon Korea. Moreover, there are multi-volume Cambridge Histories dedicated to China and Japan, providing comprehensive coverage of the various epochs in Chinese and Japanese history. But as yet, there is no multi-volume Cambridge History of Korea (though one is planned).

Moreover, the West has not given the five hundred and eighteen years of Joseon the same sort of monographic displays of respect shorter periods in Chinese and Japanese history have received. There is today nothing in English comparable to the surveys of different eras of Chinese and Japanese history Western scholarship has produced over the last few decades. This relative lack of attention paid to Joseon may be due to the fact that there have been Westerners living and working in China and Japan for much longer, and in greater numbers, than there have been living and working in Korea. That has resulted not only in more Westerners being able to write knowledgeably about China and Japan but also in universities appointing professors specializing in Chinese and Japanese history decades before they hired any professors well-versed in Korean history. Nevertheless, as

understandable as it may be, the limited amount of space books on Joseon claim on library shelves, and the lack of a modern academic monograph surveying its five centuries, is distressing for someone like myself who finds Joseon history fascinating and the study of Joseon history intellectually rewarding.

That does not mean, of course, that there has been no English-language writing about Joseon. Plenty has been written in English about Joseon over the last half-century or so. And we can even find writings in English about Joseon when Joseon was still a living dynasty. However, no one as yet has brought that scholarship together to produce a comprehensive narrative of the more than five centuries of Joseon history.

The First English-Language Studies of Joseon

The first substantial introduction of Joseon to the English-language world appeared in 1704, when the English translation of the journal of the Dutchman Hendrik Hamel (1630–1692) was published in London (Hamel 1994). Hamel was not a historian. He was a seaman whose ship had run aground off "Quelpaert" (Jeju Island) in 1653. He spent thirteen years in Joseon before he was able to escape to Japan and then return to his hometown in Holland. Once home, he wrote a report on what he had learned during his involuntary stay in Joseon. That report includes cursory descriptions of the Joseon government, justice system, economy, society, religion, mourning customs, and even housing (Hamel 1994, 52–73). He did not attempt to write a history of Joseon; nevertheless, this was the first time the West learned about Joseon other than through a few remarks made by Europeans in China who had heard the name and not much more.

It was not until almost the end of the 19th century that we see the first attempts to produce histories of Korea in English. These histories were written during last decades of Joseon, but they were not histories of Joseon per se. They instead tried to tell the story of Korea from its beginning up to the time the authors were writing. Nevertheless, since those histories were written during Joseon, they devoted more space to the Joseon period

than they did to any earlier period. We must, therefore, give them credit for providing the first substantial accounts of Joseon history to English-speakers.

However, none of the authors of those works (John Ross, William Elliot Griffis, Homer Hubert, and James Scarth Gale) were professional historians. All four were Protestant missionaries. They wrote their histories for two reasons: first, to provide essential cultural background for future generations of missionaries so that they could be more successful in converting Koreans to Christianity. Second, three out of the four had come to know Koreans quite well (Griffis never lived in Korea or among Koreans) and had grown quite fond of the people and their culture; thus, they wanted to share their love of Korea with other English-speakers.

Since they were not professional historians, and were aware that they were introducing Korean history to people who knew nothing about it, none of them tried to write a critical history that interrogated sources to determine their reliability. Instead, Hubert and Gale took interesting stories from Korean history, mostly about political developments and military battles, and simply put them into English. Their histories are essentially summaries of traditional Korean chronicles. Ross drew on Chinese sources for his history of Korea. Finally, Griffis relied on Japanese accounts of Korean history as well as what he learned from reports by French Catholic missionaries and by North American Protestant missionaries.

William Elliot Griffis, though he never even visited Korea as far as I can tell, was the first Westerner to produce a history of Korea in English, *Corea: The Hermit Nation* (Griffis [1882]1894). He wrote that book in the United States after he had spent some time as a missionary in Japan. Griffis was a popular writer in his day. He also published several works on Japan, all of which appear to have sold well. *Corea: The Hermit Nation* went through at least nine editions and has been described as the "most widely read book on Korea in English prior to World War II" (Han-Kyo Kim 1980, 42). Most of the book focuses on Korean culture and the history of Joseon, though the history he presents is more a collection of interesting tales drawn from the past than an attempt to present a coherent picture of how Joseon changed over time.

John Ross was the second Westerner to produce a history of Korea in English, and the first who was able to draw on an ability to read Korean sources, and who actually had lived among Koreans. However, Ross never actually lived in Korea. The Koreans he knew lived in Manchuria, where Ross had established a mission station. Ross published his *History of Corea* in 1891, after he had already written (as guides for future missionaries inside Korea) books on the Korean language. He seems to have been more fascinated by ancient history than by recent centuries. The first couple hundred pages of this book carry Korea up to Joseon. He then devotes only about thirty pages to a brief summary of five centuries of Joseon, focusing primarily on wars it fought.

The final two histories of Korea by native speakers of English not only draw primarily on Korean sources, they also both devote the majority of their texts to Joseon. Hulbert's *History of Korea* appeared first, in 1905 (C. Weems 1962). It is essentially a chronicle, a narrative of important events over the course of Korean history. Hulbert did not do any original research in primary sources; he simply reproduced what he found in Joseon-era surveys of Korea history, which meant that he followed their focus on the court, politics, and war (C. Weems 1962, 74–75). The 1962 edition was published in two volumes, with approximately one quarter of the first volume and the entirely of the second dedicated to Joseon.[1]

History of the Korean People, by James Gale, appeared serially in the 1920s in the missionary publication *Korea Mission Field* (Rutt 1972, 77–78). It is shorter than Hulbert's history and does not give as much weight to Joseon. He spends more time on the period before 1392 and only devotes around 90 pages to Joseon. Nevertheless, we actually learn more about Joseon from Gale than we do from Hulbert because Gale, who had a much better command of literary Sinitic than Hulbert, fills his Joseon chapters with translations of poems and excerpts from essays by Joseon scholars, allowing us to hear about Joseon from the people of Joseon. Moreover, his focus is somewhat broader than that of Hulbert. He still focuses on the

1. In 1906, Hulbert also published a one-volume history that focuses on Joseon's final decades (Hulbert [1906]1969).

writings and doings of the ruling elite, but, in his history he includes works of Confucian scholars who did not hold high government office. Moreover, since he wrote after Hulbert, he is able to bring his narrative of Joseon history all the way up to that dynasty's end in 1910.

I should not overlook one other early book about Joseon, although it is written from a Chinese perspective. The author of *China's Intercourse with Korea from the XVth Century* to 1895 was William Rockhill, who was US chargé d'affairs in Seoul for a short time, from 1886 to 1887. He confesses at the beginning of his work that "I have endeavored to explain with the aid of official Chinese publications and writings of Chinese holding official positions…the nature of Korea's relation to China" (Rockhill 1905, 1). Since he is only interested in China's relations with Joseon, Rockhill jumps from the foundation of the dynasty to the Manchu invasions of the 17th century, and then focuses on relations between Qing and Joseon in the 19th century. He also includes a brief description of what he calls the "laws and customs of Korea," which he repeatedly compares and contrasts with the laws and customs of China. There is not much that sheds light on Joseon history per se in this early work, except where it provides a glimpse of how China viewed Joseon before China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1895.

After the publication of Gale's *History of the Korean People*, interest in Joseon history faded for the remainder of the time Korea was under Japanese colonial rule and unable to assert a separate and distinct identity on world maps. Westerners did not resume publishing on pre-modern Korean history until after Korea regained its independence in 1945. Unfortunately, the first book published in English about traditional Korea after liberation, M. Frederick Nelson's *Korea and the Old Orders in Eastern Asia*, was not about Korea per se but about how Korea related to its neighbors China, Japan, and Russia (Nelson [1946]1975). Moreover, Nelson relied entirely on material in English, a sad reflection of the state of Korean Studies in the English-speaking world at that time. A much better work, Hilary Conroy's *The Japanese Seizure of Korea, 1868–1910*, appeared almost a decade and a half later (Conroy 1960). However, Conroy relied on Japanese-language materials rather than materials produced by Koreans in Korea, since his focus is on why Japan decided to colonize Korea rather than why Korea was

unable to resist Japanese imperialism. His work, therefore, cannot really count as a work of Korean history.

Early Works by Professional Historians of Joseon

It was not until the mid-1960s that we finally begin to once again see scholars publishing in English using Korean materials to write about the Joseon period. In 1964, we have the first monograph on what remains a popular theme in English-language studies of late Joseon. Benjamin B. Weems turned his MA thesis on the Donghak religion and associated uprising into a book with the title *Reform*, *Rebellion*, *and the Heavenly Way* (1964). That was soon followed by a work from the same press on a very different subject. John Meskill was a historian of China, but he found himself fascinated by a 15th-century Korean's account of being swept away by a storm off Korea's shores and ending up in China. Though most of *Ch'oe Pu's Diary: A Record of Drifting across the Sea* (1965) is about what Ch'oe P'u (Choe Bu) experienced in China, since it shows how a man from Joseon's first century viewed the culture and government of China of his day, it sheds light on how the educated elite of early Joseon thought, and therefore should be considered a significant contribution to English-language scholarship on Joseon.

Six years later we get a reverse approach to understanding Joseon: instead of showing us how a person from Joseon viewed a foreign country, Gari Ledyard showed how a person from a foreign country viewed Joseon (Ledyard 1971). *The Dutch Come to Korea* gave us a description of Joseon by the Dutch sailor Hendrik Hamel who had been shipwrecked and then held captive on the peninsula for over a decade. Though Hamel's account had been published in English long before, this was the first scholarly presentation of that text by a historian of Korea and therefore it, too, should be credited with contributing significantly to a better understanding of Joseon in the Western world. That same year, knowledge of Joseon in the English-language world was further enhanced by the publication of an annotated translation of the 15th-century poem *Songs of the Dragons Flying*

to Heaven (Hoyt 1971). Though there were clearly many aspects of Joseon that had not yet been introduced in English, another scholarly translation of that important poem appeared only four years later when Harvard University Press published Peter Lee's *Songs of Flying Dragons: A Critical Reading* (Lee 1975). A year earlier, Western readers were given a chance to learn about the prose side of Joseon's literary history when Richard Rutt and Kim Chong-un's translations of "Nine Cloud Dream, the True History of Queen Inhyŏn [Inhyeon]" and the story of Chunhyang were published in a single volume (Rutt and Kim 1974).

Literature was not the only feature of Joseon history that was attracting academic attention in the 1960s. Countering Conroy's explanation from a Japanese perspective of how Japan was able end the five centuries of Joseon rule over the Korean Peninsula, in 1968 C. I. Eugene Kim and Han-Kyo Kim drew on not only Japanese but also Chinese, Western, and, of course, Korean sources to tell the same tragic story (C. Kim and H. Kim 1967). Their *Korea and the Politics of Imperialism: 1876–1910* was but the first of several monographs analyzing the final years of Joseon to appear over the next decade. In the 1970s, in quick succession, four more monographs appeared that all addressed the same question: what problems did Joseon face in its last half-century and why was it unable to overcome them? Two of those monographs focused on the Daewongun and his attempts to put the Joseon dynasty back on a sound financial and administrative footing. Both Ching Young Choe's *The Rule of the Taewŏn'gun, 1864–1873: Restoration in Yi Korea* and James B. Palais' *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea* examine the financial problems the Joseon government faced as it tried to extract from those it governed the resources it needed to stay on a sound footing (Choe 1972; Palais and Monkkonen 1975). Choe casts a somewhat wider net than Palais, devoting three chapters to diplomatic problems Joseon was encountering at the time.

Two other books published that decade examined the ten years after King Gojong pushed the Daewongun aside and claimed the right to rule on his own. Harold Cook examined the failed attempt by some of Joseon's first modernizers, with their coup in 1884, to change the course the Joseon government was following (Cook 1972). Martina Deuchler turned our

attention instead to the foreign policy challenges Joseon faced between 1875 and 1885 (Deuchler 1977). Then, at the beginning of the next decade, Key-Hiuk Kim, who was then at the University of California, Davis, published a Joseon-centered work with a broader focus (K. Kim 1980). Key-Hiuk Kim's *The Last Phase of the East Asian World Order* analyzes the last gasp of the traditional sinocentric world order by focusing on how Japan and China wrestled over their completing plans for the Korean Peninsula. Though this work could be classified as a study of East Asian history in general, since Kim treats Joseon as the ground on which the changing East Asian world order began to dissolve, it should be seen as a major contribution to the study of Joseon as well. His study of Joseon's encounter with the new world order was followed by a monograph focusing on attempts at reform at home in the last decades of Joseon. Vipan Chandra analyzes the attempts by members of the educated elite to push the Korean court in a new direction, one more compatible with the modern world (Chandra 1988). Over a decade later, in 2002, Andre Schmid added to our understanding of Joseon's last decades with *Korea Between Empires, 1895–1919*. Despite its title, this monograph focuses on changes in how late Joseon Koreans defined civilization, and defined Korea itself, in the first decade of the 20th century (Schmid 2002).

The monographs by Choe, Palais, Cook, Deuchler, and Chandra on late Joseon were all based on doctoral dissertations produced at Harvard University under the guidance of Edward Wagner. Wagner also published his own monograph on Joseon about the same time, but it had a very different focus than what we see in the works by his students (Wagner 1975). Wagner looked back more than four centuries before Joseon fell to try to explain how politics worked in early Joseon. His study of the literati purges of 1498 through 1519 provided what was at that time a rare scholarly exploration in English of the political history of Joseon before it went into decline in the second half of the 19th century.

Studies of Joseon Confucianism

Wagner's monograph, like those of his students, was still a political history. The dominance of political history in these first studies of Joseon history from within the walls of academia is understandable. First of all, the Korean sources scholars had the easiest access to in the first decades after liberation were official accounts of debates at the Joseon court and of decisions made and policies announced by Joseon government officials. The *sillok* (veritable annals) of Joseon and other documents compiled by the central government were a rich resource, and access to the information in them was facilitated by the indexed summaries contained in the colonial-era product *Chōsenshi* (Chōsenshi Henshūkai 1938). It is only natural that the first academic explorers of Joseon history would begin their explorations with the richest, and most accessible, lode they could mine.

It is also to be expected that the first attempts to subject aspects of Joseon history to scholarly analysis would tend to begin with political history. After all, history is the study of change over time, which can only be done when time is divided into easily distinguishable segments. When measuring change over years, decades, or centuries, useful markers for distinguishing one time period from another can be the rise and fall of states, the beginning and end of wars, the reigns of kings, and other moments of political change. With political change providing the skeleton on which a history can be more easily constructed, historians tend to focus on strengthening that basic framework first before they move on to investigating changes within that basic structure.

It is also easier to begin with political change before examining cultural, social, economic, or even religious change, because, as already noted, political documents are often greater in number and better preserved. When historians begin to expand their focus beyond central government politics, they usually turn their attention to literary and cultural products of the ruling class, since those, too, tend to be greater in number and better preserved than what the general population has produced and preserved. That is what happened when scholars in the English-language academic world began moving beyond court-centered history and literary translation

toward in-depth explorations of Joseon society and culture more broadly.

We begin to see an expansion in both the number of academic works on Joseon as well as the subjects they focused on in the last quarter of the 20th century. One reason for this change was the increase in the number of scholars on campuses with a strong interest in Korea's past. That increase was fueled largely by immigration from Korea, but we also find Westerners who had become interested in Korea because of military service there during and after the Korean War, as well as the occasional scholar who had grown up in missionary households in Korea before settling down in the West. Some, though of course not all, of this addition to what had been a very small Korean Studies field turned their attention to Joseon, recognizing that you cannot understand the present if you do not understand the past from which it emerged. With more people researching Joseon history, it is not unexpected that the subjects they studied would grow more diverse.

Starting in the 1980s, for example, we began to see books paying attention to Joseon's Confucian foundation. One was a pioneering study by William Shaw of the Confucian roots of legal thought and practice in Joseon (Shaw 1981). That monograph was followed by a slender collection of chapters by different scholars that was published by a small university press in southern California. *Traditional Thoughts and Practices in Korea*, which appeared soon after Shaw's study of Joseon law, was not solely on Joseon. However, over half its chapters dealt with various aspect of Joseon Confucian culture, ranging from a discussion of the philosophical differences between Toegye Yi Hwang (1510–1570) and Yulgok Yi I (1536–1584) to an exploration of women's lives in Confucian Korea (Yu and Phillips 1983). This was soon followed by a much heftier work, though that work, too, was a collection of chapters by different scholars rather than a monograph. Nevertheless, *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea* gained greater visibility in the English-speaking world for Joseon intellectual culture, since it appeared as one volume in a highly-regarded series of volumes on Confucianism in East Asia (de Bary and Haboush 1985).

Three years after this, the first in-depth study in English of a pre-nineteenth-century monarch appeared. JaHyun Kim Haboush analyzed how King Yeongjo (r. 1724–1776) used Confucian rhetoric and ritual to bolster

his legitimacy in the eyes of his Confucian subjects (Haboush 1988).

That same year, the first monographs on important Confucian philosophers in Korea written by scholars based in the English-language world began to emerge. Published the same year as Haboush's study of King Yeongjo, Michael Kalton's translation and explanation of Toegye's *Seonghak sipdo* (Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning) focused on how that important Joseon scholar explained Confucianism to his king (Kalton 1988). That study of Joseon Neo-Confucianism was immediately followed the following year by a monograph that also paid more attention to philosophy than politics. Young-chan Ro's *The Korean Confucianism of Yi Yulgok* was the first book-length analysis of Joseon philosophy to be published in North America that was not primarily an explication of a translation (Ro 1989). It was not to be the last work of that sort.

In the next decade, two more monographs focusing on Confucian philosophy per se were published. Edward Chung expanded on Young-chan Ro's earlier study of Yulgok to produce a comparative study of Yulgok and Toegye. Chung presented the differences between those two men as rooted in different approaches to the Neo-Confucian project of cultivating a moral character (E. Chung 1995). Mark Setton then introduced Dasan Jeong Yagyong (1762–1836), the third great Joseon Confucian philosopher, to the English-speaking world (Setton 1997). Setton portrays Dasan (Tasan) as an innovative and original thinker who drew on the work of recent Chinese and Japanese scholarship to make an argument in the 19th century for returning to what he believed was original, and therefore true, Confucianism, cleansed of much of the *i-gi* metaphysical apparatus of Neo-Confucianism. Before those two monographs appeared, another important translation of Joseon Confucian texts was produced by a team of scholars with expertise in Korean, Chinese, and Japanese Confucianism. The 1994 translation by Michael Kalton and five others of the 16th-century letters that sparked Joseon's long-lasting Four-Seven Debate, together with other works on Joseon Confucianism that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, ensured that a solid foundation was laid for a sophisticated understanding of Joseon Confucian philosophy (Kalton et al. 1994).

That enhanced understanding of Joseon Confucian philosophy as philosophy made possible more sophisticated articulations of the role Confucianism played in Joseon politics and society. In 1992, Martina Deuchler made the first deep dive by a scholar based in the West into the nature of Joseon society. Her *Confucian Transformation of Korea* paved new ground for the English-language scholarly community by showing in great detail how much Confucianism changed Korean concepts of the family, and of the role of women in society, as Joseon gradually became more and more Confucianized over its first couple of centuries (Deuchler 1992). Three years later, Chai-sik Chung returned our attention to the last century of Joseon with his study of how one conservative Confucian scholar, Yi Hangno (1792–1868), reacted to the political and ideological challenges to his world posed by the intrusion of Christianity (C. Chung 1995).

In 1996, studies of the intersection of Confucianism and politics in Joseon reached a new level with James B. Palais' encyclopedic study of the 17th-century Confucian scholar Yu Hyeongwon (1622–1673) (Palais 1996). Yu was not a philosopher. He thought more about concrete political and economic issues such as land reform, the state of Joseon's military, and the role of metal cash in the economy than he did about metaphysical issues. But he was a Confucian, and his proposed solutions to the many problems Joseon faced in the aftermath of Japanese and Manchu invasions reflect the importance of Confucian principles, and Confucian examples, in the thinking of Joseon elites. In a further display of an expanding interest in the 1990s in the intersection of Confucianism with society, politics, and culture, JaHyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler joined forces to edit a collection of explorations by various Western experts of Joseon on the theme of culture and the state in late Joseon. The chapters in their volume range from studies of Confucian academies to how Buddhism, Catholicism, and popular religion fared under Confucian hegemony (Haboush and Deuchler 1999).

No discussion of English-language scholarship on Joseon in the 20th century can overlook the importance of translations. One barrier to a greater understanding of Joseon in the English-speaking world has been the lack of scholarly resources for those who do not read Korean or Literary Sinitic

(the language the vast majority of Joseon texts were written in). We have already seen that the first steps toward making Joseon culture accessible to non-Korea specialists were taken in the 1970s with literary translations. That project moved one step further in the late 1980s by adding translations of philosophical texts. However, those first translated works were still narrow in scope. It was necessary to make a wide range of Joseon voices available. Though they are not monographs or collections of academic studies, the contribution made by the two volumes of *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization* cannot be overlooked (Lee et al. 1993, 1996).[2] Building on the examples of similar collections of short translated texts for Chinese, Japanese, and Indian civilization, those books contain hundreds of short translations of key documents from the entire range of Korean history. Over two hundred pages in volume one and almost three hundred pages in volume two are devoted to Joseon, and most of the translated documents show Confucian influence.

Ironically, after this flurry of publications on Confucianism at the end of the 20th century, at the beginning of the 21st century scholars in the West appear to lose interest in Confucianism for a decade, at least as far as such interest is revealed in book publications. It was not until 2010 that we see another monograph on Joseon Confucianism. Shin-ja Kim's *The Philosophical Thought of Tasan Chŏng* was originally published in German, but an English translation appeared in 2010 (Shin-Ja Kim 2010). One year later a collection of studies of Joseon women Confucians was published (Y. Kim and Pettid 2011). Six years after that another edited volume appeared, this one a collection of chapters on Korean philosophers by several different scholars, half of whom worked in the English-speaking world. All but one of the ten chapters in *Traditional Korean Philosophy: Problems and Debates* discuss Confucian philosophers in Joseon (Back and Ivanhoe 2016).

2. These two hardback volumes were later revised with the help of Wm. Theodore de Bary and JaHyun Kim Haboush and published in paperback as *Sources of Korean Tradition* (de Bary, et al. 1997–2001).

Studies of Religion in Joseon

However, that slowdown does not mean that scholars based in the West lost interest in Joseon beliefs and values. Instead, that interest shifted into new areas, including interest in other aspects of Korea's religion culture. The Donghak religion in particular attracted attention. Three books on Donghak appeared over a five-year period, starting with the publication of Paul Beirne's *Su-un and His World of Symbols* (Beirne 2009). It was quickly followed by George Kallander's Salvation *Through Dissent* (2013) and Carl Young's *Eastern Learning and the Heavenly Way* (2014). Those three works were joined four years later by a study of another non-Confucian tradition, one that does not fall under one clear religious or philosophical category but was an important element of belief and thought in the second half of the Joseon era. John Jorgensen's *Foresight of Dark Knowing* is both a translation of the prognosticating work *Jeong Gam Nok* and an in-depth study of prognostication in pre-modern Korea in general (Jorgensen 2018).

Early Christianity in Korea has also been the subject of scholarly analysis. A few years ago, I published an analysis and translation of the "Silk Letter" of Hwang Sayeong, which provides a first-hand account of the 1801 bloody persecution of Joseon's infant Catholic community by its staunchly Confucian state (Baker and Rausch 2017). My work on the Catholic version of Christianity in early 19th-century Joseon was preceded by a study of Protestant Christianity in late Joseon by Seung-Deuk Oak. However, Oak's *Making Korean Christianity* pays as much attention to how Western missionaries responded to traditional Korean religions as it does to how Joseon Koreans responded to the Western Christian proselytizing drive (Oak 2013).

Though Buddhism was marginalized during the five centuries of Joseon, it remained a part of the religious landscape and eventually drew the attention of scholars based in the West. The only research monograph so far on Joseon Buddhism appeared in 2012. Hwansoo Kim looked at how Korean Buddhists interacted with Japanese monks over the last three decades of Joseon, arguing that Korean monks tried to take advantage of growing Japanese influence on the peninsula, including an expanding

Japanese Buddhist presence, to improve their own standing vis-à-vis the Joseon government and society (Hwansoo Kim 2012). This research work was soon followed by two important translations of Joseon-era Buddhist texts. A. Charles Muller introduced the English-language world to an important debate in early Joseon between the Confucian scholar-official Jeong Dojeon (1342–1398) and the Buddhist monk Gihwa (1376–1433) (Muller 2015). That same year, John Jorgensen turned our attention to mid-Joseon with his explication and translation of a guide to Buddhist practice by Seosan Hyujeong (1520–1604) (Jorgensen 2015).

Histories of Joseon Society

As we have seen, politics and its philosophical underpinnings dominated English-language scholarship on Joseon up into the 21st century. The appearance of several books on religion in Joseon in the new century shows that the range of academic scholarship on Joseon was expanding. Religion was not the only area of Joseon history to belatedly draw the attention of Western scholars. Inspired by the increasing diversity of Korean-language scholarship on Joseon, scholars in the West began to also write about the social history of Joseon. Deuchler's *Confucian Transformation of Korea* (1992) stood alone in its examination of Joseon society for half a decade. Then Mark Peterson published his study of adoption and inheritance practices in Joseon (Peterson 1996). Four years later, John Duncan shared with us his examination of the ruling class at the end of Goryeo and the start of Joseon (Duncan 2000). That exploration of the intersection of social, political, and ideological factors in the transition from Goryeo to Joseon was followed four years later by Kyung Moon Hwang's exploration of the roles played by what he calls "secondary status groups" (*jungin*, sons of secondary wives, *hyangni*, military officers, and northerners) in the second half of Joseon (Hwang 2004). Hwang's book was the first detailed analysis in English of the social classes just below the civilian *yangban* elite and, as such, was a major contribution to our understanding of Joseon society in the West.

Hwang's introduction to the role of military officers in Joseon was amplified three years later when the monograph by Eugene Y. Park on military examination graduates in the latter half of Joseon was published (E. Park 2007). That same year, Sun Joo Kim turned our attention to what she calls the "marginalized elites" of northwestern Korea and the role their resentment at discrimination by the yangban in the capital played in the Hong Gyeongnae Rebellion of 1812 (Sun Joo Kim 2007). Filling out our picture of secondary status groups, in 2014, Eugene Park published his study of his own ancestors, a *jungin* lineage (E. Park 2014). The next year, Martina Deuchler produced her study of another social class between capital *yangban* and the general population. She focused on rural *yangban* and their use of genealogies and Confucianism to maintain the high status in local areas they were denied in Seoul (Deuchler 2015).

This expansion of which Joseon Koreans were worthy of scholarly examination also moved women from the background to the forefront. The first serious English-language exploration of women in Joseon appeared in 2004. *Creative Women of Korea: The Fifteenth Through the Twentieth Centuries*, is a collection of studies of famous Joseon women, from Sin Saimdang (1504–1551) through Hwang Jini (1506–1544) to Lady Hyegyeong (1735–1815) (Kim-Renaud 2004). A little more than a decade later, Jisoo Kim published her analysis of women's legal petitions seeking redress of grievances. Jisoo Kim did not confine her case studies to elite women but instead revealed that women of different social classes, including commoners and even slaves, could exercise legal agency (J. Kim 2015). Sun Joo Kim and Jungwon Kim also delved into the intersection of social and legal history by translating and analyzing 19th-century inquest records, many of which involved women and also involved people of both sexes from different social classes. These pioneering works shed much light on how men and women in Joseon, including men and women occupying different rungs on the social ladder, interacted (S. Kim and J. Kim 2014; J. Kim 2015).

In 2019, Eugene Park further increased the range of subjects Western scholarship on Joseon found worthy of scrutiny. He focused on the descendants of the royal Wang family of Goryeo, tracing changes across the five centuries of Joseon in their status and roles in Joseon society (E.

Park 2019). Going even farther afield, Adam Bohnet studied immigrants to Joseon, from both Japan, China, and even Manchuria, to see how they fit into what was an extremely homogenous society (Bohnet 2020).

Though it is not, strictly speaking, a monograph, I cannot leave this discussion of the recent interest in the social history of Joseon without mentioning a collection compiled in 2009 by Jahyun Kim Haboush of translations of Joseon letters. By providing glimpses of letters between friends and family members, and by and among scholars, *Epistolary Korea* (2009) shows us Joseon society not as an abstraction but as composed of real individuals who had real concerns, friendships, and loves. For those of us who teach the history of Joseon, Haboush provided a treasure chest of material to share with our students (Haboush 2009).

Political, intellectual, religious, and social history have attracted the most interest from scholars studying Korea in the West. Economic history has been given much less attention. Though a few articles have been published on the Joseon economy, there is, as of 2021, no monograph by a Western scholar analyzing the changes in the financial affairs of the government, in the relationship between *yangban* land and slave holdings and the *yangban* scholar lifestyle, or in the ways in which ordinary Joseon Koreans earned a living. There are however, three works that explore the intersection of commerce and international relations. The first such monograph appeared at the start of this century. James B. Lewis looked at trade relations between Tokugawa Japan and Joseon, paying special attention to the Waegwan (Japan house) on the southeastern coast as a site of commercial and political interactions (Lewis 2003). A few years later, Kirk Larsen published his study of political and commercial relations between China and Joseon in Joseon's final decades. He shows how the Qing tried to maintain its long-standing privileged position in Joseon by using not only military and political tools but also by working to integrate the Joseon economy more closely with the late 19th-century Chinese economy (Larsen 2008). A third monograph with relevance for the economic history of Joseon was produced by Seonmin Kim, a scholar who is now based in Korea. However, since her book draws on her doctoral dissertation from Duke University and was published by an American university press, *Ginseng*

and Borderland (2017) should be counted among products of scholarship in the West on Joseon history. Kim explores the role of ginseng trade in relations between the Manchu and Joseon, with a special focus on how both the gathering of ginseng and the trade in what was gathered influenced the delineation of Joseon's northern border.

Renewed Interest in Politics and War

Trade across borders always involves politics as well as economics, so we cannot point to those studies as signaling a shift away from politics entirely. Moreover, interest in politics in its most virulent form, war, has not faded. Since the turn of the century, four studies of the Japanese invasion of the 1590s have been published. The first was Samuel Hawley's military history of the conflict from a Korean perspective (Hawley [2005]2014). That was quickly followed by Kenneth Swope's military history of the conflict from a Chinese perspective (Swope 2009). In the middle of the following decade, two more scholarly studies of that conflict appeared. James B. Lewis edited a collection of chapters that discussed the history leading up to the war, the fighting itself, and the impact of the war on the generations that followed (Lewis 2015). That work was followed the next year by the posthumous publication of Jahyun Kim Haboush's argument that violent conflict with Japan in the late 16th century created a new sense of community among the people of Joseon, paving the way for Korea's modern nationalism (Haboush 2016). Before her untimely passing, Haboush joined with Ken Robinson to translate the writings of a Korean taken captive by Japanese troops and forced to spend three years in Japan. Their translation of Kang Hang's account of his captivity allows us a glimpse into what it was like to be caught up in that war (Haboush and Robinson 2013). In so doing, it complements the earlier publication of an English translation of *Jingbirok*, Yu Seongnyong's account of the war from the perspective of a high official at the time (Yu 2002).

The Japanese invasion at the end of the 16th century is not the only episode of political violence on the peninsula in Joseon times to attract

academic interest. George Kallander recently published his translation of Na Man'gap's account of his experiences during the Manchu invasion of 1636 (Na 2020). A few years earlier, Andrew Jackson gave us his analysis of an episode of internal violence in 1728 (Jackson 2016). Three years before that, Yumi Moon challenged the standard narratives of Joseon's last decade by telling the eye-opening story of a Korean group, the Iljinhoe, which supported the Japanese both during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 and for a few years afterwards (Moon 2013). Her monograph, when read alongside Michael Finch's study of Min Yeong-hwan, a high official who committed suicide rather than live in a Japanese-controlled Korea, allows us to see the different ways Koreans reacted to Joseon's inability to survive in the turbulent international environment at the beginning of the 20th century (Finch 2002).

Expanding the Scope of Joseon Historiography

Even though war and violent uprisings continue to attract quite a bit of interest from scholars of Joseon based in the West, we can still see work being done on other aspects of Joseon's history. However, court politics continues to draw the most attention. For example, recently Christopher Lovins shared his research on King Jeongjo trying to strengthen royal authority vis-à-vis his *yangban* bureaucracy (Lovins 2019). That was only the second monograph published in English on a Joseon ruler before Gojong but also the second one, after the study by Haboush of Jeongjo's grandfather Yeongjo, of an 18th-century king. The many kings of Joseon before the 18th century, including even King Sejong the Great or any of the other rulers deserving a monograph of their own, have yet to receive the scholarly attention in English they deserve.

That, of course, is not the only lacunae you may notice when you look at the Joseon section of library shelves. There are entire areas of history that are neglected. I have already mentioned the lack of books on the Joseon economy, save for a few studies of trade with neighboring countries. Social history has fared a little better, as noted earlier, though more is needed. A

few recent works by art historians help us fill in the gaps that remain. J. P. Park's study of landscape paintings and genre paintings from the last two centuries of Joseon provides much insight into the society that produced them (J. P. Park 2018). Also in 2018, Sunglin Kim's examination of art and the consumer culture of those she calls the "professional class" (*jungin*) in Seoul in the last decades of Joseon shed new light on that segment of Joseon society (Sunglim Kim 2018). Similarly, Sin Nae Park, though she focuses on literature in late Joseon, specifically the popular prose tales known as *yadam*, tells us quite a bit about the urban society of Seoul in the 18th and 19th centuries (S. Park 2020).

Another important area underrepresented in Western-language studies of Joseon is regional history. Scholars of Japan and China can find scholarly works in English on cities and local regions in pre-modern times. We do not even have a history of premodern Seoul in English, much less histories of other major cities or provinces—with one exception. Sun Joo Kim edited a collection of papers on *The Northern Region: History, Identity, and Culture* (2010) with half its chapters on the period before 1910. That work appeared over a decade ago. We need more like it, on other parts of the Korean Peninsula.

Notice how many of the books on Joseon history I have mentioned focus on the years since 1592, after Hideyoshi sent his samurai to attack Joseon. Outside of studies of the 16th-century Confucian philosophers Toegye and Yulgok, an analysis of a Buddhist-Confucian debate around the time Joseon emerged, and the works by Duncan and Deuchler on society in early Joseon, the focus has been almost entirely on more recent centuries, especially Joseon's last decades. There are a couple of works I have not yet mentioned which do not ignore early Joseon. In 1986, Joseph Needham and his collaborators at Cambridge University published an important study of the Joseon astronomical technology from the late 14th through the 18th centuries (Needham et al. 1986). And a few years ago Young Kyun Oh published his study of the Confucian morality primer *Samgang haengsildo*, which was initially printed in the first half of the 15th century (Oh 2013). Such studies are relatively rare, however. Usually, the first centuries of Joseon are either ignored or relegated to a prelude to what the historian of Joseon

wants to focus on.

The two above works are rare for another reason as well. Needham's study of Joseon astronomy is one of only two books Western scholarship has produced on the science and technology of Joseon. And we had to wait more than three decades after that study of early Joseon astronomical technology for that second work on Joseon science to appear. Sangho Ro's *Neo-Confucians and Science in Korea: Humanity and Nature, 1706–1814* (2021), as is the case with most English-language monographs on Joseon, focuses on the final centuries of that dynasty.

Joseon medicine has been largely ignored as well. Not even the famous *Dongui bogam* (Treasury of Eastern Medicine), the most famous Korean medical work in history, has attracted enough attention to have a book dedicated to analyzing it. Similarly, Oh's study of *Samgang haengsildo* stands alone as a study of Joseon book culture. Besides Si Nae Park's study of *yadam* (popular vernacular stories), there are no other monographs in English informing scholars of the reading and publishing habits of Joseon Koreans.

Fortunately, the bias in favor of the second half of Joseon is not as pronounced in the books published so far in a major project, funded by the Academy of Korean Studies and administered by UCLA, to publish translations of Korean classics. In addition to the translations of Buddhist texts and the *Jeong Gam Nok* already mentioned, this project has resulted in three translations of early Joseon works (Jeong 2016; Siseup Kim 2020; H. Yi 2016 and two works from later Joseon (Bak 2019; J. Yi 2019). However, translations published apart from that series reflect the usual preference for works from the latter half of Joseon (Haboush 1996; E. Chung 2020, Hongkyung Kim 2016).

Conclusion

As a historian of Joseon, I am pleased to see the increase in scholarly output on the history of Joseon in recent decades. I am particularly pleased to see more English translations of important works that I want to introduce to my students. However, at the same time, I recognize that Joseon has still not

been given its due in the scholarly world in the West. There is still no single-volume history of Joseon, though there are plenty of such books for the dynasties of China and for the major periods in Japanese history. The lack of a comprehensive survey of Joseon history may be due to the narrow scope of studies of Joseon in the West. Not only are works on the first few centuries of Joseon underrepresented,[3] politics, and politics in its violent form as war, dominates the available monographic literature in English. We need to further expand the range of Joseon scholarship to include not only more on the entire time period of Joseon but also more social history, more economic history, and more on the history of science, medicine, and technology. We also need studies of urban life in Seoul as well as life outside of Seoul over Joseon's five centuries. We need cultural histories, tracing the history of literature and art over those same five centuries. And it would be useful to have a least one work in English on the history of the environment in Joseon and the impact of agriculture on the land.

I am both hopeful and concerned about the future of scholarship on Joseon in the English-language world. I am hopeful because of the progress that had been made over the last half century. I am also hopeful because I am beginning to notice much greater diversity in the subjects covered in articles published in academic journals (articles I was unable, because of space limitations, to discuss here). Since many of those articles are by younger scholars, they give me hope for the future.

However, I remain concerned because, first of all, we still have a long way to go to catch up with studies of Muromachi and Tokugawa Japan and of Ming and Qing China. Of greater concern, however, is the difficulty I see in attracting enough members of the younger generation of scholars into the study of Joseon history. The problem is the language of the sources. Most of the material we need to work our way through to better understand the dynamics of Joseon politics, society, and culture is written in Hanmun (Literary Sinitic). Learning Hanmun is a much more challenging task than learning Korean. Young scholars interested in Korean history can travel to

3. I accept some of the blame for this. My own work has focused on the 18th and 19th centuries.

Seoul and become immersed in a Korean-language environment, improving their Korean simply by using Korean on a daily basis. They can therefore learn relatively quickly to read primary documents from the 20th century. Learning to read Hanmun texts, however, requires sitting alone at a desk reading ancient texts with no native speakers to offer assistance. With no reinforcement from conversing with friends, watching television shows, and reading newspapers and magazines, it can take much longer to become comfortable reading Hanmun than it does to become comfortable reading Hangeul.

I personally believe that the rewards of such a long-term solitary endeavor are worth the effort. Joseon Korea was a fascinating place. Its history is filled with political intrigue, philosophical and religious debates, social tension and unrest, scientific and medical advances, and cultural innovations. Moreover, there are still many corners of Joseon history waiting to be explored and introduced to English-language scholarship, including but not limited to aspects of economic, social, cultural, and regional history. In particular, if younger scholars can move beyond the focus on politics in the capital, and on war, so evident in most of the work of their predecessors, and uncover details of how the people of Joseon, not just the elite but the people in general, lived their lives, both in work and in play, they can win a larger audience for studies of Joseon history than exists today. If they can do that, and I strongly urge them to try, then Joseon will finally claim the space on library shelves it deserves.

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