



Review of “Moving Beyond Politics: *Western Scholarship on Joseon*”

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Professor Baker’s article reviews the research trends on the Joseon period (15th to 19th centuries), to include the Korean Empire period (1897–1910), in Western English-language academic communities over the past century or so and across varying subjects. As the title indicates, the Western English-language academy’s study of Joseon began with an examination of Joseon’s political history in a broad sense, inclusive of the international order. Subsequently, research interests gradually expanded to other areas. Entering the 21st century, scholars based in the West are extensively broadening the scope of their research such that the diversity of subjects is worth mentioning—although still noticeably lacking compared to premodern Chinese and Japanese history. The author welcomes this shift, and also stresses that it is critical to spur on the diversification even further.

In providing ample information on the Western academy’s research stream regarding Joseon, Baker’s essay takes on five main features. First, it introduces a wide gamut of English-language works on Joseon produced over the last century. The coverage is so thorough that a specialist of the Joseon period will be able to grasp the current status of research by simply perusing the bibliography. Second, though he is a historian, Baker covers research outcomes widely and across disciplines without confining himself to the history of Joseon per se. Even literary and philosophical inquiries, which are essential for any examination of a country’s intrinsic aspects, are

introduced in detail. Third, he covers translations of primary sources on Joseon to the extent possible. Considering that a historical study begins with the interpretation of historical sources, such information on the availability of translations is very useful. Fourth, research produced over the past century is broken down by temporal period and subject. Thanks to this, readers interested in specific topics can consult Baker's article as a reference.

Fifth, he offers a nice summary of what is needed for English-language studies of Joseon in the current decade of the 2020s. There are English-language diachronic histories of the Ming-Qing dynasties taken together, and the same goes for the Muromachi-Tokugawa eras in Japanese history. But no such thing exists for Joseon Korea of the equivalent periods, something Baker points out and criticizes.

Though the above five features are not the exclusive strengths of Baker's essay, there are some limitations to be mentioned as well. Endeavoring to fit a large body of research into such a limited space inevitably comes across as an attempt to merely collate a huge body of bibliographical information. This is to say, the essay somewhat lacks a review and critique of research trends. What are the views of the Western English-speaking academy on Joseon, as seen through its research outcomes over the past century? A brief analysis of this would enrich the discussion. Absent as well is any historiographical investigation of the characteristics of books written by non-historians between the 1880s and 1940s; of why scholarly works on Joseon appearing during the 1960s and 1970s deal mainly with the nation foundering amidst the changing international order in East Asia during the second half of the 19th century; or of the common interests or traits of studies made on Confucianism from the 1980s.

Readers of the review article, which introduces research outcomes of the past century or so, are expected to discern research flows and shifting trends from one period to another only through a glance at the output. But this hardly allows for a clear differentiation between periods, or a discernment of how research streams changed from the 1970s to 1980s to 1990s and then to the most recent two decades. This seems to be due to the essay's current structure. While the discussion is organized by period up to the 1970s, it is done by subject from the 1980s onwards, making it difficult to delineate

research flows of the past 40 years by decade. If there were numerous studies produced on Joseon in those years, it might make more sense to classify them by subject. But there were not that many. Hence, I think, it would be more useful to trace the trends by decade rather than by subject. This is even more the case when one considers that research in Korean Studies has been invigorated by the remarkable boost of Korea's international status over the past 40 years.

Let us now review the essay by section. Setting aside translations of some literary works, Western historians' studies of Joseon came out in full swing between the late 1960s and the 1970s (C. Kim and H. Kim 1967; Ledyard 1971; Choe 1972; Cook 1972; Wagner 1974; Palais 1975; Deuchler 1977; K. Kim 1980). In the essay, these are grouped together under the section, "Early Works by Professorial Historians of Korea." Their commonalities and differences are not examined. Upon close examination, however, one can identify the prime academic interests of Western scholars regarding Korea during the 1970s. These scholars all offered some form of answer to the question of why Korea trod a completely different path from its neighbor Japan at the beginning of its modern era (C. Kim and H. Kim 1967; Choe 1972; Cook 1972; Palais 1975; Deuchler 1977; K. Kim 1980). While most of these scholars attended to the external environment of the fast-changing international order in the second half of the 19th century, Palais notably focused on Joseon's internal conditions before it began opening its ports to foreign intercourse (1876). In short, in the 1970s most Westerners studied Korea (Joseon) to trace the process and find the reasons for its failure on the threshold of the so-called modern era. In this regard, it can be claimed that studies of Wagner and Palais stand out for moving beyond their international colleagues' primary concern with why Korea fell, and instead focusing on the history of Joseon *per se*.

From this point, Baker organizes his discussion by subject. The section, "Studies of Joseon Confucianism," introduces Shaw (1981), Yu and Phillips (1983), de Bary and Haboush (1985), Haboush ([1988]2001a), Kalton (1988), Ro (1989), Deuchler (1992), Kalton et al. (1994), Edward Chung (1995), Palais (1996), and Haboush and Deuchler (1999), among others. But I wonder if all these studies can be grouped under the category of

Confucianism. It would seem more appropriate to categorize Shaw (1981) as legal history, Haboush (1988) as political history, Deuchler (1992) as politico-social history, Palais (1996) as politico-socioeconomic history, and Haboush and Deuchler (1999) as politico-cultural history. Joseon placed great importance on Confucian values. Therefore, virtually any study of Joseon is concerned with Confucianism in one form or other. If Confucianism has to stand as an independent category, then it should be limited to philosophical inquiries of Confucianism, or more specifically, Zhu Xi thought (Neo-Confucianism). Furthermore, while Western scholars who studied Joseon in the 1970s paid attention to the international surroundings that brought down Joseon, those in the 1980s began to turn to its Confucianism, but why? An analytic explanation of this natural question would make the discussion more substantive.

The Confucianism section is followed by “Studies of Religion in Joseon.” Here an immediate question that comes to mind is whether Confucianism in late Joseon might be conceived as a religion. One reason for regarding it as a non-religion is the absence of an explanation for the afterlife. However, the extremely doctrinized strand of Confucianism that appeared in the latter half of Joseon had a *sufficient* façade of religion, equipped with detailed specifics on the rituals of mourning, funerals, and ancestral rites. According to the current practices of world academia, the Confucian codes of mourning and funerals would make it categorizable as a religion. In addition, one might question whether several of the studies cited in this religion section (e.g., Beirne 2009; H. Kim 2012; Kallander 2013; Oak 2013; Young 2014; Muller 2015; Baker and Rausch 2017) can be treated simply as religious studies. Some may more properly be placed under, say, politics, social affairs, intellectual history, etc. Specifically, Kallander (2013) and Muller (2015) seem more suitable for politico-social history and intellectual history, respectively.

The following section, “Histories of Joseon Society,” presents studies on Joseon’s social history. Some leading works are considered here (Deuchler 1992 and 2015; Peterson 1996; Duncan 2000; Hwang 2004; Park 2007 and 2014; S. Kim 2007). Notwithstanding, one thing I would like to point is that any introduction of studies on Korea’s social history would

be incomplete without mentioning James Palais' *Views on Korean Social History* (Seoul: Institute for Modern Korean Studies, Yonsei University, 1998). It is an exemplary work illuminating Joseon from the relatively objective viewpoint of a Western scholar, in contrast with domestic Korean Studies imbued with nationalist undertones grounded on the so-called internal development theory. Palais' discussion of slave society, a rare subject of contestation between English-language scholars and Koreans, is a particularly outstanding analysis of Joseon social history. Its publication in Seoul may have been a drawback in terms of securing a broad readership in Anglophone academic circles, but it is worthwhile introducing this book by an American historian.

The next section, "Renewed Interest in Politics and War," introduces Finch (2002), Hawley ([2005]2014), Swope (2009), Moon (2013), Lewis (2015), Haboush (2016), Jackson (2016), etc. But readers may be a little perplexed by the title, as there is no preceding section addressing studies of Joseon's political history. Indeed, the phrase in the essay's title, "beyond politics," strongly hints that studies of Joseon have been concentrated on political history up to the present, and only recently have research trends shifted to various other areas. As a matter of fact, however, political history is discussed nowhere in the article. On the contrary, Confucianism and religion take up the larger share of the discussion compared to other fields. On the other hand, many studies introduced in the politics and war section are actually concerned with political history. Additionally, it is doubtful that Haboush's posthumous manuscript can be placed simply under the category of war—though it deals with the Imjin War (1592–1598). Printed posthumously, it reads somewhat incomplete, but it seems closer to social history (if one were to force a classification). Further, I am not sure if Moon (2013) on the Iljinhoe and Finch (2002) on Min Yeong-hwan (1861–1905) are best placed in this section.

In the next section, "Expanding the Scope of Joseon Historiography," are listed Joseph Needham, et al. (1986, astronomy), Sun Joo Kim (2010, northern regional history), Young Kyun Oh (2013, Confucian practices), J. P. Park (2018, painting), Sunglim Kim (2018, social status), Christopher Lovins (2019, King Jeongjo), Si Nae Park (2020, popular prose tales), and others.

It is meaningful to note these recent studies, but to discuss the expansion of research topics of Joseon with just those works falls too short. Referring to Needham's book, released in the 1980s, may invite a misunderstanding that it is representative of the work of the 2020s. Oh's volume would more appropriately be included in the part on Joseon Confucianism. Sunglim Kim's study of Joseon's intermediary social class, called *jungin* 中人, needs to be understood in the context of Eugene Park's sequential publications on this topic, rather than being cited as a case of a new endeavor trying to expand the boundary of research on Joseon. Further, Lovins' book on King Jeongjo (r. 1776–1800) has little to do with the expansion of the scope of scholarship; it is simply a work of political history whose focus is on a monarch. It may be critiqued in combination with Haboush's (1988) examination of King Yeongjo (r. 1724–1776).

In his "Conclusion," Baker's key message and concern is the lack of interest in Joseon among researchers of the younger generation. But what are the reasons for this lack? He notes that the predominant usage of written Chinese (Hanmun) in the materials of that era makes the study cumbersome. Yet this is not a problem unique to Korean (Joseon) history and culture. Command of written Chinese is a must to study Chinese (Ming and Qing) and Japanese (Muromachi and Tokugawa) history as well. In particular, for the Qing, these days an understanding of the Manchu language is also needed. Hence, his explanation is not very persuasive. Why then are there not many young researchers who want to study Joseon? It is mainly due to the relatively low level of interest among Westerners in Joseon Korea in general. Between the 15th and the 19th centuries, Korea (Joseon) was seldom an independent player in East Asia. It was under the strong grip of the Ming- and Qing-centered international order. This is why many Western scholars dwell on the question of why Joseon's trajectory differed from that of Japan. In this regard, it is really encouraging to observe lately a steady flow of research conducted on Joseon's domestic conditions.

Despite some shortcomings, this article carries great significance in providing a comprehensive review of research made by English-language academic communities concerning the Joseon period. Frankly speaking, it is no easy task to pull together such an extensive body of research spanning

over a century, and to include works of translation as well. I would like to convey my utmost respect and deep appreciation to the author for energetically continuing his academic pursuits even in advanced age and delivering a well-organized overview of existing studies. Perusing it as a discussant, I find it very informative and illuminating. I believe readers will also find much that is useful in this essay.