

## Where *Joseon sidaesa* Stands in the Thirty-year History of the Korean History Society

*Joseon sidaesa 1* [A History of Joseon, vol. 1], by Sunmin Hong, Sanggwon Han, Byeongyu Son, Seong-u Kim, Donghwan Ko, Myeonggi Han, Useong Bae, and Daehwan No. Seoul: Pureunyeoksa, 2015, 384 pp., KRW 17,900, ISBN: 979-1-156-12047-6 (paperback)

*Joseon sidaesa 2* [A History of Joseon, vol. 2], by Hunsik Kim, Yeongjin Ko, Jinyeong Jeong, Geontae Kim, Yeonsik Jeong, Ho Kim, and Huisuk Han. Seoul: Pureunyeoksa, 2015, 356 pp., KRW 16,900, ISBN: 979-1-156-12048-3 (paperback)

### The Publication of the Korean History Society's History Series

*Joseon sidaesa* (*A History of Joseon*) forms part of the ten-volume “Korean History Society’s history series” (hereafter, “history series”) that was completed in the fall of 2018. The Korean History Society, founded in 1988 and currently comprising over 700 scholars, represents the field of Korean history in South Korea. The “history series” was intended to be a two-volume-per-period project that would cover the entire history of Korea, divided into the ancient period, Goryeo, Joseon, and the modern and contemporary periods. Beginning with the publication of *Joseon sidaesa* in 2015, the series continued to be published until *Hanguk hyeondaese* (*A History of Contemporary Korea*) was published in 2018, thereby completing a sixteen-year project which was initially conceptualized in 2002.

The year of the project’s completion (2018) is also the Society’s thirtieth anniversary. Although this probably is more of a coincidence given that it was planned in 2002, the “history series” is in effect the product summarizing the society’s thirty-year history. Over a span of sixteen years and with the contributions of fifty-three members each representing their fields, this project aptly deserves to be the touchstone of the accomplishments and capacity of the Korean History Society and even of the entire field of Korean history.

This review is about *Joseon sidaesa*, the first of the “history series” that was released back in 2015. I will first summarize the composition of the book and its contents, then expand on the outcome of the project, and finally end my

review by expressing my thoughts on the status of *Joseon sidaesa* as well as the entire “history series” in the thirty-year trajectory of the Korean History Society.

## Organization of *Joseon sidaesa*

*Joseon sidaesa* comprises a total of sixteen thematically different chapters divided equally between two volumes under the themes of “The State and the World” (volume one) and “Human and Society” (volume two). This thematic composition is completely different from the usual organization of history books surveying certain periods, as well as that of other volumes in the “history series.” The narration of *Hanguk geundaesa* (*A History of Modern Korea*) and *Hanguk hyeondaesa* clearly follow a chronological order, as does volume one of *Hanguk godaesa* (*A History of Ancient Korea*).

*Goryeo sidaesa* (*A History of Goryeo*) differs from *Joseon sidaesa* in its arrangement of themes in that the eight themes selected for the former are undisputedly the key to understanding the Goryeo period. For instance, the chapters constituting volume one of *Goryeo sidaesa* center on the political history, central governing system, local administration system, and foreign relations; volume two is composed of chapters on family relations, land and agriculture, and Buddhism and Confucianism. In contrast, as I will lay out more specifically below, the sixteen chapters of *Joseon sidaesa*—exactly twice as many themes as in *Goryeo sidaesa*—are a kaleidoscopic collection of themes that would not have made it into more conventional introductory books.

This uniquely non-chronological and wide-ranging composition of *Joseon sidaesa* is the result of a deliberate decision made by the sixteen coauthors. According to the preface “A Guide to *Joseon sidaesa*,” this book was, from the start, explicitly designed not to be an introductory text or a diachronic account. The sixteen selected themes were not to encompass the entire period or facets of Joseon but to give a deeper understanding of Joseon; hence, specific subthemes usually untouched in general or introductory history books were chosen evenly and dealt with.

To organize *Joseon sidaesa* in this way is a risky choice to say the least. Choosing not to follow a chronological order makes it difficult to explain what changes occurred in a certain period and how that period could be further divided into subphases accordingly. Offering accounts on an unconventional

selection of themes covering only parts of the period can end up failing to provide readers with a comprehensive picture of Joseon's history. Moreover, attempting to squeeze in sixteen themes into the series' limited space of two volumes may prevent one from being able to thoroughly examine each independent theme. If this was indeed a conscious choice made by the authors, then the reader must take their intention into account and read and assess its outcome accordingly.

### **The Sixteen Themes of *Joseon sidaesa***

Volumes one and two each have eight chapters. The topics covered in volume one, "The State and the World," are statecraft and governance, state finances, hereditary social status relations, trade, international relations and war, worldview, and isolationism and the opening of ports; volume two, "Human and Society," deals with the distribution of neo-Confucianism, the formation of schools of thought, village governance by local literati, changes in the concept of kinship, agricultural management, everyday life and culture, the medical environment, and the occurrence of anti-establishment movements. As we can discern from this list, some are themes that usually would not have been considered in writing an overview of this period. Even the more conventional themes in the list were thought through in unique ways beyond the standard introductory approach.

The first chapter of volume one, "Changes in Statecraft and the Throne's Authority: An Overview of the Political History of Joseon Seen through the Changing Status of the Throne's Authority," surveys the political history of Joseon divided into four phases—early, middle, late, and end—depending on the status of the authority of the throne. According to Hong Sunmin, the early, regime-establishing phase is defined by the fight over governing power between those advocating dominance by the throne and those advocating dominance of high-ranking central scholar-officials, while the middle phase is marked by the period in which factional politics ensconced itself in tandem with the emergence of the rural neo-Confucian literati (*sarim*). The late phase, Hong goes on to explain, is marked by the weakening of factional politics along with the transition to "governance by the throne" and "the policy of impartiality," and lastly, the end phase was the In-law Government period when ruling power

moved from the king to in-law families. In sum, Hong focuses on giving a standard and well-organized summary of the political history of Joseon.

In the second chapter, “Reformation and Punishment: How to Rule the People,” Han Sanggwon analyzes state governance through the lens of reformation and punishment. This chapter also deals with politics, but Han specifically traces the changes in how the state exerted power in its relationship with the people. Han sees early Joseon as the period when a reform-centered ruling system prioritizing rites and music over punishment became established, which is related to how local literati families seized power in rural areas and took it upon themselves to preside over local administration through village codes of self-governance. On the other hand, punishment had become a governing rule of the law-based governance of late Joseon, particularly after the mid to late eighteenth century. This change, according to Han, reflects how the king and the state’s authority seized control over central politics while local magistrates gained power to administer reformation in lieu of the local literati. Han argues that although the reformation-centered ruling system of early Joseon is a manifestation of Confucian ideals of ruling, it was also a means of the *yangban* ruling class to make the people voluntarily forego their entitled rights. Thus, the shift in late Joseon towards a legally just ruling system is, in Han’s view, a positive change.

“The Obligations of Peasant Farmers and the Responsibility of the State: State Finances from the Perspective of State Redistribution” gives a well-structured account on the features of state finances as well as their changes and limitations throughout the Joseon period from the standpoint of the state’s rational redistribution of resources. Son Byeonggyu argues that the Joseon government strived to centralize state finances by setting fixed items and amounts of taxes to prevent arbitrary taxation by state agencies. At the same time, however, Son explains how the Joseon state also implicitly allowed or even guaranteed a decentralized administration of taxation in order to reduce the enormous expenses that would have resulted from unifying the entire process of finances, thus ultimately pursuing a rationale of frugality in state finances. Hence, in Son’s view, the disarray in the tax system known as *samjeong*, or the “three levies,” and the demands for reforms in state finances during the nineteenth century stemmed from the contradictions in the rationality of Joseon’s state finances that started surfacing in the late eighteenth century, when most of the taxes that were paid became fixed as regular revenue.

“The Binds of Bloodline and the Restraints of Hereditary Social Status: The Emergence of the *Yangban* Class in Joseon and Changes in the Hereditary Social Status System” traces the changes in Joseon’s hereditary social status system over time. Since Joseon aspired to establish equality by way of policies to comfort and stabilize the people in fifteenth century, the state-assigned occupation system and the freeborn-lowborn social status system, terms alluding to a “hereditary social status” in which one’s status is inherited through one’s bloodline were not elaborately developed. Kim Seong-u writes that the so-called “*yangban* ruling system” (i.e., a society led by the *yangban* class), finally began after the early sixteenth century when the class of freeborn commoners had collapsed while the literati class, in the process of post-1592 Japanese invasion restoration, was building a social order that would guarantee their social status indefinitely. In this context, Kim argues that the disintegration of the hereditary social status system following changes in state-assigned occupations listed on official household registers, previously understood as indicating changes in the hereditary social status during late Joseon, was simply an illusion resulting from the failure of the freeborn-lowborn social status system to function. In fact, the changes in hereditary social status during late Joseon were more complex: the statuses along the lower rungs of the hierarchical ladder disintegrated while the *yangban* class at the very top became a fixed social class.

The topics of “Trade, Markets, and the City: The Birth and Development of Joseon’s Markets” by Ko Donghwan are commercial trade and the market places of the Joseon period. I suspect a chapter on markets was included in the “State and the World” volume of *Joseon sidaesa* due to the understanding that the mainstay of trade in early Joseon was state redistribution not driven by profit, and that commerce conducted by government-licensed shops, a vital element of late Joseon marketplaces, was also closely interrelated with the state. However, the focus of this chapter is set on how profit-driven trade in markets gradually became the dominant mode of trade as agricultural productivity began to increase after the seventeenth century and commercial agriculture correspondingly picked up pace in response. Ko contextualizes the development of markets in late Joseon by largely dividing them into three groups: city markets, local village markets, and port markets. In terms of the city markets based in Seoul, Ko argues that the privilege granted to government-licensed merchants as well as the establishment of the state-designated occupation system and the six-licensed-shops system after the late seventeenth century led

to a huge increase in government-licensed commerce. Unauthorized commerce was also vitalized due to the growth of an economy based on the circulation of commodities. As for the local village markets, Ko sees them as increasing after the sixteenth century to reach more than a thousand around the mid-eighteenth century, generating a dense network of markets throughout the country over time. Finally, the port markets also started to flourish after the mid-seventeenth century, thereby connecting river ports throughout the country, with the Gyeonggang river as the hub.

“International Relations and War: The Perilous Diplomatic History of the ‘Caught-in-between’ Joseon” dives into Joseon’s diplomatic relations until the early seventeenth century by looking at major events including the Japanese invasion of 1592, the second Manchu invasion of 1636, and the transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasty. As implied in the subtitle’s expression “caught-in-between,” Han Myeonggi first examines Joseon’s foreign relations during the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries with the Ming dynasty, Japan, and the Jurchens separately, then moves on to look at how these relations changed in the aftermath of the drastic upheavals of the invasions from Japan and Manchu as well as the dynastic transition in China. Joseon suffered massive damage during the 1592 Japanese invasion, and according to Han, the sense of gratitude and debt Joseon harbored towards Ming for providing the much-needed relief forces led to severe constraints in Joseon’s options during the political turbulence of the Ming-Qing dynastic shift. Joseon intellectuals perceived the series of rapid catastrophic changes that took place in the early seventeenth century, such as the capitulation of Joseon during the 1636 Manchu invasion, the fall of Ming and the subsequent inauguration of the Qing dynasty, as a resounding shock comparable to the world turning on its head, and the anti-Qing stance of Joseon afterwards took the shape of an ideology arguing for loyalty towards Ming and a Joseon-centered Sinocentrism.

“The World Imagined by the People of Joseon: From Sinocentrism to the Wider World” examines how the people of Joseon perceived the world from a geographical point of view. Bae Useong draws attention to the borders of the world as seen by the people of Joseon and to the unique way they perceived the world geographically. Bae first describes how the people of Joseon imagined the world whose end would be up to Ryūkyū kingdom and later expand after the seventeenth century to Taiwan and the Netherlands—the latter thought to be in Southeast Asia at that time—as Northeast Asia underwent a series of changes.

He then analyzes the Sinocentric worldview, the basic framework structuring the worldview of the people of Joseon, and the way they perceived themselves in relation to it. Joseon intellectuals expounded and sought meaning in the proximity between their own history and culture and those of China; later they internalized Sinocentrism following the shift from Ming to Qing China, thus giving rise to the belief that Joseon was the only country to inherit and pass on orthodox Sinocentric culture. Finally, while western world maps made their way into late Joseon via China, Bae argues, their interpretation of these maps still—albeit in different versions—displayed their traditional understanding of the world, which was constituted by the Central Kingdom (i.e., China) and the unknowable others surrounding it.

The last chapter of volume one, “The Opening of Doors in the Course of World History and Joseon’s Choice: Policy of Isolation and the Opening of Ports,” outlines the international relations of Joseon after the seventeenth century by focusing on the disintegration of the East Asian international order after the nineteenth century and how Joseon eventually opened its doors. No Daehwan presents the shifts in the East Asian international order following the demands from the newly emerged western forces for trade, together with the various sides of the debates that occurred within Joseon surrounding the opening of doors. The early diplomatic policy of Daewongun’s regime cannot be assessed simply as an isolationist strategy nor can it be seen as having diverged from the earlier, traditional line of diplomacy. No narrates how Daewongun’s policies became increasingly closed, fueling the discontent of Joseon intellectuals. King Gojong sought to change foreign relation policies immediately after he took over the throne; however, No reminds us that the discussions surrounding the opening of doors were embroiled in disputes, making reaching a social consensus regarding this issue the more urgent task. Such conflicts finally erupted in the form of the coup d’etat of 1884, leading to the fall of the members of the radical Enlightenment Party, which in turn not only compromised the capacity of enlightenment reform, but also spread resentment towards enlightenment and further amplified the clashes surrounding the opening of the country’s doors.

Volume two opens with the chapter “The Formation of a Neo-Confucian Human: The People of Joseon Live through a Neo-Confucian Era,” which describes the spreading of neo-Confucianism in Joseon through the life of a mid-sixteenth-century figure named Bak Seong living in the town of Hyeonpung in Gyeongsang Province. Kim Hunsik interprets the exemplary



neo-Confucian human as one who strives to cultivate and improve oneself to “uphold the way of heaven and set aside personal desires” and argues that this model took shape in earnest starting from the sixteenth century. According to Kim, the distinctive feature of this neo-Confucian human was their efforts to carry out the five cardinal human relationships. Through examining Bak’s efforts to practice the *Family Rites of Master Zhu (Zhuzi jiali)*, the emphasis he placed on the *Elementary Learning (Xiaoxue)*, his contemplations of the origin of all things, and his efforts to conduct himself appropriately, Kim attempts to show readers the formation and emergence of a neo-Confucian human being.

In “The Formation of Scholarly Networks: Schools of Thought and Intellectual Exchange,” Ko Yeongjin traces how schools of thought were formed, which was an important feature of Joseon neo-Confucianism. Ko’s view is that as the overall standards of Joseon neo-Confucianism improved, theoretical and regional differences contributed to schools of thought shaping around private academies in the mid-sixteenth century. The Seo Gyeongdeok School, the Yi Hwang School, the Jo Sik School, the Honam School, the Yi I School, and the Seong Hon School are given as examples. Rather than parsing out scholarly matters and differences among these schools of thought, Ko sheds light on the camaraderie and relationships between master and pupil. Ko goes on to examine the various methods as well as contents of scholarly exchange between several schools of thought mainly in the Honam area. He argues that scholarly interaction was lively among different schools of thought until the early seventeenth century through serving as local magistrates or people who were exiled and through socializing or exchanging letters; after the mid-seventeenth century, however, antagonism towards each other and the absence of interaction changed the relationship among these schools as the disputes over the mourning rites took place and Zhu Xi’s philosophy became increasingly dogmatized as orthodoxy.

“Local Literati Become Rulers of the Countryside: The Formation and Changes of the Literati’s Dominance over Local Areas” deals with the local literati who constituted the ruling class in local rural areas, and their local governing structure. Jeong Jinyeong explains how the local literati, shaped between the end of Goryeo and early Joseon, emerged as the local ruling class and outlines the ruling system they established to govern the local areas. He then documents the changes that occurred in this system after the eighteenth century. This chapter offers a somewhat textbook-like explanation of the defining feature



(i.e., the literati's dominance) of Joseon's local society and its administration. Jeong emphasizes how the local literati's power over the countryside was made possible by giving in and compromising with the magistracy, the proxy for central authority, and stresses the important role the literati's strict practice of self-discipline and sense of community played.

"From Family to Paternalistic Clans: The Story of Family Lineage and Its Formation" offers an overview on how the boundaries and characteristics of family relations and kinship changed during the Joseon period. Yi Haejun gives a multifaceted look into the changes in the concept of kinship and customs that occurred between early and late Joseon. Interestingly, Yi chooses to present a fictitious example to show the typical changes rather than drawing on an actual historical case. The kinship system encompassing both one's matrilineal and patrilineal relatives transformed into a patrilineal kinship system revolving around the eldest legitimate son in the mid- to late seventeenth century. Such changes in the concept of kinship manifested themselves as a shift to primogeniture in inheritance practices instead of equal inheritance between sons and daughters, the overall preference placed on males, a large decrease or simplification in the range of relatives in the same patrilineal clan listed in genealogical records, the generalization of adoption practices, and the formation of single-lineage villages. Yi argues that the paternalistic lineage organizations (*munjung*)—a hallmark of late Joseon understanding of kinship—which became common between the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century was the result of new demands for familial bonds, as personal, horizontal ties such as one's in-laws or matrilineal relatives became limited following the aforementioned changes in the concept of kinship.

"Tenant Farmers Farming, Landowners Collecting: Farm Management by *Yangbans*" takes readers through the development of the agricultural structure and technology in Joseon by focusing on how *yangbans* managed farms. According to Kim Geontae, large-scale agricultural estates farmed by slaves flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when uncultivated land was still abundant. The landowners ran their farms by making their slaves work the land, and the fifty-fifty crop-share tenant farming played more of a supportive role. Although there were some commoners who owned as much land as *yangbans* did in late Joseon, most borrowed farmland to make a living. After the eighteenth century, when the slave system disintegrated and fifty-fifty crop-share tenant farming became more common, Kim writes, landowners exploited

the situation commoners were in to transform the practice of cost-share farming to their advantage, thus securing their position as landowners. In late Joseon, efforts were made to use agricultural technology to counter the fall in labor productivity by investing more labor as well as intensifying and diversifying the farms. Kim argues that landowners also supported this agricultural intensification and diversification, and concludes that the development of landlordism in late Joseon went hand in hand with the stabilization of peasant-farmers' lives.

“Everyday Life in Joseon: Everyday Culture of Joseon Seen through the Clothes, Food, and Homes” introduces the everyday culture of Joseon by looking at the main characteristics in the clothes, food, and homes. Jeong Yeonsik first explains how clothes were highly different depending on one's social status and mentions the existence of fads in women's fashion such as the length of jackets (*jeogori*) and hairstyles. Next, he introduces the food situation of Joseon including the staple grains and other various ingredients for side dishes. Jeong specifically mentions the import of red pepper powder as bringing a large change in Joseon's eighteenth-century food culture. Lastly, Jeong documents how there were different restrictions regarding one's house depending on social status. In particular, as Confucian ethics were introduced, *yangbans* separated the living spaces for men and women, with women becoming more confined within the homes. In terms of architecture, Jeong touches upon thatched roofs, wood flooring, and the floor-heating system (*ondol*) as hallmarks of Joseon's housing structure, adding that the floor-heating system became common throughout the country from late Joseon.

“Seoul with More than Enough Medicine and Doctors, the Countryside without Even Enough to Eat: The Medical Landscape of Late-eighteenth-century Joseon” documents the medical environment of Joseon; however, as the subtitle makes clear, it focuses on the late eighteenth century instead of surveying the entire Joseon period. Kim Ho draws upon *Heumyeong*, the diary of a *yangban* named Yu Manju, to depict the activities of pharmacies and clinics in Seoul. Goods were overabundant, and no medicine was unprocurable in Seoul at that time. The sheer number of doctors led to each specializing in a specific area, and even obesity from overeating was at times an issue. Kim then uses *Jeokso ilgi*, the diary of Kim Yakhaeng written during his exile to Jindo, to shed light on the dire situation of rural areas, including the scarcity of food, the spread of epidemics, and a harsh medical environment. Kim argues that the

stark difference in the medical environment between Seoul and the countryside was merely a slice of the vast discrepancy between the two areas.

“Escape and Resistance: Escaping from the System, Fighting against the System” provides an overview of the major anti-establishment movements that occurred in Joseon including the small-scale forms of resistance involving landless wanderers and bandits, and manifesting the form of spreading false rumors, hanging anonymous notices of accusations or propaganda, and beating gongs and appealing directly to the king. The chapter also goes on to analyze the causes and forms of peasant uprisings that became full-fledged in the nineteenth century, such as the Hong Gyeong-rae Rebellion, and the 1862 peasant rebellion. The landless peasant wanderers, in Han Huisuk’s view, were the result of discrimination based on social status, heavy taxes, and natural disasters, among others. Well-known brigands—either fictional or real life—including Hong Gildong, Im Kkeokjeong, and Jang Gilsan, according to Han, also stemmed from people’s livelihoods being threatened. Han argues that the aforementioned small-scale forms of resistance that manifested in various ways, or the extreme violence against the ruling class, continued to develop, and transformed into large-scale peasant uprisings in the nineteenth century. Such peasant rallies in turn developed into the Donghak Peasant War, which called for the overthrow of the feudal social structure and the rejection of foreign powers.

### **The Singularity, and the Merits and Drawbacks of *Joseon sidaesa***

The readers of *Joseon sidaesa* may want to come with a different set of expectations than when they read other introductory books given the unique singularity of its conception, as we see above. Themes that represent the Joseon period were carefully chosen and written with great care by authors nonpareil in their respective fields; therefore, to the ordinary person interested in the history of Joseon, *Joseon sidaesa* presents a nonintimidating way to gain a comprehensive picture of Joseon that does not involve having to read an entire book: one can simply go about reading the themes which most appeal to you. Another strength of this book comes from the project’s bold decision to select themes that could be regarded as marginal or secondary: the book offers readers a multidimensional history of Joseon while simultaneously inviting them to

newly consider previously overlooked aspects of Joseon's history. On a side note, researchers may find the separate list of references provided for every chapter to be useful.

Despite such merits, *Joseon sidaesa* does have a few flaws. First, not choosing to follow a chronological narrative does not exempt the book from the criticism that each chapter utilizes different periodizations and characterizes the changes between such periods in varying ways. Demanding that a wide array of themes that each apply their own criteria of historical change—not to mention the diverse viewpoints of the authors—conform to single set of criteria would be problematic. However, what I find more troubling is the absence of any effort to search for a common historical landscape running through the assortment of different themes and areas of research. In short, the sixteen chapters of this book seem unable to produce a well-integrated narrative and ultimately fall short of providing a comprehensive view of the Joseon period.

I am also concerned whether the readers will be able to relate to this collection of themes, putting aside for a moment the careful deliberation that went into choosing them. For example, the chapter on the people's geographical worldview or the chapter comparing the medical environment of eighteenth-century Seoul and the countryside are undoubtedly intriguing and well-written in and of themselves, but I find it difficult to consider their inclusion as appropriate for a project aiming to depict the entire history of Joseon in just sixteen themes. Also, the way the discussion of foreign relations spans two separate chapters—before and after the seventeenth century—with the latter focusing on the opening of doors after the nineteenth century, eliminates the possibility of examining Joseon's foreign relations during the two hundred years following the Ming-Qing transition and how the people of Joseon perceived themselves during that period.

Finally, I would like to point out the lack of continuity with Goryeo, the period preceding this book, and the modern period, which comes after. Although this again may partially be the consequence of deciding not to follow a chronological narrative, none of the chapters make any effort to compare or connect with the periods preceding or following it. Perhaps the authors intentionally focused on revealing the true side of Joseon in order to break free from understanding Joseon's history merely as what comes before the modern period. That being said, for *Joseon sidaesa* and, by extension, the "history series" to culminate into one complete project in its entirety, the narration of each

period's history must consider how the periods relate or do not relate with one another and the course of history of Korea as a whole.

### **The History of the Korean History Society and the Position of *Joseon sidaesa***

The distinct strengths and weaknesses as well as its peculiarity as an introductory book aside, *Joseon sidaesa*, including its deliberate narrative structure, will prove worth reading depending on the reader's needs. In this last section, I will briefly sketch out where *Joseon sidaesa*, as part of the "history series" conceptualized by the Korean History Society, stands in the Society's history.

The finalization of the "history series" was probably not intended to coincide with the thirtieth anniversary of the Korean History Society; still, one cannot deny the importance the publication of this series carries in the Society's history. Included at the very beginning of each book in the series is what could be seen as a preface to the entire series titled "Upon Publication of the Korean History Society's History Series." This preface makes it very clear that this series is a continuation of the Society's previous publications, such as *Hanguk yeoksa* (*A Korean History*) or *Hanguk yeoksa immun* (*An Introduction to Korean History*). Even in the interview conducted between the *Hankyoreh* and the Society's president Yi Ikju to honor the completion of the series, Yi explicitly states that the "history series" was conceived of very early on to inherit and pass on the critical awareness of the aforementioned book projects, all of which had in turn been planned upon the inception of the Society to embody the standpoint of "history as practice."

It would be then worth asking whether the "history series" is faithfully following the footsteps of those early publications, projects that had been conceived of to carry out the original cause of the Korean History Society. The daunting task of assessing whether certain books do indeed succeed others requires undertaking a meticulous yet comprehensive examination. In conclusion, my answer to the question raised above is an unquestionable and definite no—the "history series" very obviously bears no relation to the earlier projects of the Korean History Society.

*Hanguk yeoksa*, the Korean History Society's 1992 publication, is a typical example of book that embodies the critical awareness which propelled the

Society's founding in 1988: as a book surveying the entire Korean history, it was the product of pursuit for a scientific approach and methodology of writing history. The book's narrative formulae and principles are outlined clearly in its preface, "Upon Publication." The writing of *Hanguk yeoksa*, the preface tells us, proceeded in the following way: all the diachronic history books that had been published until then were reviewed and assessed collectively. Based on this evaluation, in addition to the publishing committee and research subcommittees for each historical period, the respective research groups and learning groups all participated in discussions to determine the total table of contents. The more-than-fifty members of the Society then composed drafts, and finally the publishing committee established the overall structure of the book, mediating and resolving differences in opinion within and between the subcommittees. The preface thus underscores how the book was a strictly collaborative effort and that it was fundamentally different from previous diachronic history books that were, for the most part, personal endeavors.

*Hanguk yeoksa* also clearly lays out its narrative principles. The point that stands out in particular is that it was written from the perspective of progress of social formation. Specifically, the book, by taking "the perspective of progress of social formation, foregrounds the structural contradictions and the formation and development of the forces of change in each period," and "divides the periods based on developmental stages in terms of progress of social formation, but takes into account the characteristics of each period's social structure and structural contradictions or historical tasks in the process" (p. 5). Following this principle, the book divides Korean history into the primitive, ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary periods, categorizes Joseon, along with Goryeo, as a medieval and feudal society, and accordingly chronicles Joseon's history under titles such as "The Restructuring of a Feudal Society," "Social Changes between the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries and the Ruling Class' Response," "Economy and Society during the Disintegration of the Feudal Society," "Politics and Ideologies during the Disintegration of the Feudal Society," and "The Unfolding of Anti-feudal Peasant Rebellions."

Compared to *Hanguk yeoksa*, organized by a strictly collective and social-development-oriented stance, it is painfully obvious how far the "history series"—and *Joseon sidaesa* as part of it—has strayed. Although *Joseon sidaesa* is the product of a collaborative project of the Korean History Society, the individual voice of each author is plainly apparent in the narration of each

chapter; moreover, there is no apparent effort to adjust the discrepancies in the periodization or how each author understands that history. The stance of progress of social formation is nowhere to be seen, let alone the term “feudal society,” and even the concept of “medieval” seems to not carry any significance in each of the writer’s research.

Of course, as the preface of the “history series,” “Upon Publication of the Korean History Society’s History Series” states “already a generation has passed by since the research society was first established,” and “during that time, the world and the Korean society has changed immensely, and even our academic circle has undergone considerable change” (p. 6). Naturally, research trends have changed as well. In fact, the more unnatural response would be to insist on the same research methodologies and trends and past ways of doing things from thirty years ago, which is not a short span of time. Collective research and collaborative research methodologies are not always the right answer. Given the way of “history as practice” the Korean History Society prides itself on pursuing, the tireless efforts to adapt their research methodology according to societal changes may be only natural.

What I would ultimately like to point out in this review is that this plainly obvious distance between the 2018 “history series” and the Korean History Society’s earlier book projects—a gap even researchers like myself who have just set foot into the field can spot—is being ignored by those brilliant researchers who participated in planning and writing this series. They still maintain that it has inherited and is carrying on the critical awareness and methodologies of the past thirty years since the founding of the Korean History Society. This discrepancy between the beliefs buttressing the project’s conception and the actual outcome—regardless of whether or not this accomplishment itself has value—cannot but raise the question of whether the Korean History Society has come to terms with how it is conducting historical research at present.

The founding of the Korean History Society was the product of fierce agonizations over the significance of historical research, its methodologies, and its social value. Not a single researcher will dispute the fact that the accomplishments the Society and its members have achieved over the years since they have contributed immensely to the development of the field of history as well as transformed the ordinary citizen’s perception of Korean history. And the fact that the Society has, over a long period of time, kept its long-ago promise of publishing a diachronic history, a treatise on research methodology, and finally



a history series is only proof of how loyally the Society strove to fulfill that promise.

Still, in a work that marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Korean History Society, does the gap between the principles of historical research the Society is so proud of and the actual results of that work signal an absence of direction the Society is currently suffering? If the contents of the promise were judged to be no longer valid, wouldn't the more responsible choice be to return to the beginning and ask themselves what historical stance and methodology they should adopt; what being scientific means in the field of history, and what the practice of history entails; how historical research should deal with the changes in the times and in society; or whether such questions themselves are even necessary? I may be the only one, but *Joseon sidaesa* made me ask myself anew where I am and what I am doing today in an unexpected way.

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