



Special Feature

History and Literature of Joseon: Foreign Perspectives

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Editor's Note

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Last summer, the *Review of Korean Studies* (hereafter, *RKS*) hosted a group of studies generously delivered by gifted Korean scholars who have for a long time dedicated their studies to Korean literature, language, medicine, music, and architecture. The *RKS* had earlier asked if it would be possible for them to integrate in their work a focus on the 15th century, as it was an important period in Korean history, bookending the Goryeo period (918-1392) and opening Joseon (1392-1910). They all graciously agreed, and the result was an outstanding Special Feature section of the June 2019 issue of the *RKS*.

This time, for the December issue of 2019, the *RKS* invited several foreign and Korean scholars who have been engaged in Korean studies outside Korea. In contrast to the Summer issue, we wanted to welcome works from scholars who haven't necessarily been involved or related to the trends in Korea right now, and from scholars who could relay to us what kind of topics are being discussed and examined in foreign academic circles and societies nowadays. And for this occasion, we did not limit the focus of respective articles to a particular century. Broad perimeters seemed more preferable and appropriate in inviting foreign studies, which tend to have entirely different perspectives and objectives from the Koreans' traditional point of view. Only one thing was asked: If they could select any topic that would sit within the boundary of the Joseon dynasty's history and literature. And here we are, presenting four scholars' wonderful works concentrating on various aspects of the Joseon dynasty's history and culture.

Marion Eggert from Ruhr-University Bochum contributed a very interesting article under the theme of "Narrating Dissent in Joseon Literati Discourse." Dissent is an important aspect of any human culture. Any society without them could hardly be called either lively or healthy. With three separate examples in which a certain level of dissent was expressed, ranging from feuds derived from philosophical differences (in interpreting Confucian notions) to value-driven conflicts triggered by different stances toward embracing foreign

cultures, Professor Eggert tried to ascertain the nature of certain well-hyped or relatively lesser known incidents of academically or philosophically different perspectives clashing with each other. She also tries to determine how such differences were dealt with by all the involved individuals, who either only harbored intentions to clarify the validity of their stances or were willing to take one step further to resolve their differences. Circumstances surrounding all that could very well serve as an indicator to the nature of that society, and her examination covers that too. Overall, she delivered a fascinating look into the Joseon elites' philosophical attributes and passionate attitudes.

Then Wook-Jin Jeong, who recently received PhD from the University of Washington, sent us his work entitled "About *Fu* 賦 Compositions of Early Joseon." In a study that could be regarded as a simple review on a specific form of literature (in this case, "*fu*"), Dr. Jeong decided to examine how the Joseon scholars and literary figures approached the matter of "writing" itself. It is true that some scholars of the time tended to prioritize artistic writing above all else, and considered that to be the first and foremost quality any elite should strive to cultivate, while others showed a tendency of being more interested in achieving ultimate knowledge of neo-Confucianism instead of immersing themselves in refining their own writing skills. Jeong highlights this with his own comparative review of three separate *fu* pieces and their writers, who chose to instill the *fu* writings they authored with their own conviction concerning the nature of writing as well as their stance toward the question of how to write a genuine *fu*. The result is a recreation of an interesting trail of different types of *fu* pieces that began to appear during the later periods of Goryeo and continued to be written in the beginning days of Joseon, which gives us a clue on individual authors' "view on writing" in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Meanwhile, two foreign scholars who happen to be working in Korea right now also agreed to contribute articles to this occasion. Thomas Quartermain, who now works at Woosong University of Korea, contributed an article under the theme of "State Symbols, Group Identity, and Communal Memory in Jeong Gyeong-un's *Godae illok*, 1592-1598," while Joshua Van Lieu, now at Keimyung University of Korea as well, contributed an article entitled "The Guan Yu Cult and Joseon-Qing Visions of State Legitimacy, 1882-1894."

The war with the Japanese in the 1590s was nothing short of a horrific catastrophe for the Joseon people. And as the experience itself was too painful and distinctive, according to records of the time no less, some scholars came to

regard it as a defining moment for the buildup of a group consciousness for the Korean people. There have been views advocating such evaluation and there have been views with an alternate perspective, but both sides have been agreeing on one thing that there is simply not that much hard evidence to firmly suggest either way. Professor Quartermain suggests that a more personable record may be useful for the efforts to determine whether a group consciousness was a product of this particular time or not, whether it was also a result of many other origins, and most importantly, what was the level of coherence and stability of this collective consciousness in retrospect. His take on the matter, that a shaken up yet relatively stable collective perspective can be identified from records he examined, signifies great many things.

In times of trial, people, essentially those in power try to find ways to rally all the help they could get, and sometimes they do so in order to promote and propagate one's own legitimacy, or to secure one's own justification in doing certain things. Such determination would prompt leaders to resort to interesting actions and arguments, and the Chinese-oriented "Guan Yu myth" was apparently one of those things that was utilized by King Gojong and his wife Queen Min in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Beside all the Joseon leaders' efforts (or counter-efforts for that matter) of trying to modernize the country and at least save it if possible, there were other aspects to the reality of the time that hasn't been made that well known so far, and Professor Van Lieu here examines those aspects from a diplomatic and political perspective. He highlights the process of the Joseon people trying to escape from traditional thinking and their entrance into a new phase of notions, by using quite a traditional piece of mythology that happened to grace some chapters of the medieval age of East Asia and by revealing how the Korean people put this myth to a certain use.

These four works cover various stages of the Joseon history. Jeong's work features examination of the late Goryeo and early Joseon *fu* works, with a focus on the 15th century yet with attention also paid to the late 14th century. Quartermain deals with the war that occurred at the end of the 16th century, as well as the almost psychological effects that immediately followed it. Eggert's work concentrates upon the 18th and early 19th centuries, introducing or reintroducing great philosophical minds wrestling with each other. And Van Lieu deals with the political efforts of Joseon leaders at the end of the 19th century. It is most rewarding that we managed to invite works that chose to

focus upon different time periods throughout the Joseon era, as despite the fact that Joseon has been a period that received the most attention by foreign scholars, there are still much to be further examined in its history.

What should also be noted is that the themes featured here are quite diverse. While Eggert's work is about philosophical and academic discussions among scholars, Quartermain's is about how people would remember extreme circumstances and identify themselves within the confines of such experiences. Jeong tries to examine how the Joseon people would have viewed the concept of Writing, when Van Lieu tries to explain how the Joseon leaders pursued a different political agenda from China and discovered new political capital in the process. All these four works succeeded in tackling unique aspects of the Joseon history and culture, and made this Special Feature section all the more memorable.

It is most gratifying for all of us at the *RKS* to be able to host these four extraordinary individual studies. We appreciate their genuine interest in Korean history and culture, and salute their ongoing efforts to study previously unknown, misunderstood, and underappreciated aspects of the Korean history and culture.