

Premodern Korea in a Global Context

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Korea's history needs to be firmly set in world history. Korea received scant treatment in most world history surveys.¹ Although newer textbooks in English speaking countries give a bit more attention to Korea, in most it still receives only a paragraph or two in discussions of East Asia and appears again as a setting for the Korean War. Placing Korean history into a global context not only addresses this problem but provides valuable insights for understanding Korean history.

The importance of Korea in East Asian and world history may be obvious to Korean specialists but it is less so non-Koreanists. While compared to its neighbors, especially China and Russia, Korea seems small, it is, in fact, not so small. The combined area of the two Koreas is about the same as Great Britain and its population of seventy million is a bit larger than Britain or France, a little smaller than Germany. Perhaps it can best be compared to Italy, another similarly shaped peninsular state; it is slightly smaller than Italy in area, a bit larger in population. Korea is the home of a distinctive cultural tradition that has a two thousand year written record. But the main arguments for its relevance for world history are: its rich and well-documented historical heritage which adds to our knowledge of the human experience, its role in East Asia that gives insight into that important cultural tradition, its usefulness in understanding cross-culture interactions, its importance in understanding economic and social development, and the ways its historical experience the ways its adds to our understanding of the broader narratives of regional and global history.

Although much of Korean culture is derived from China it has nonetheless, maintained a distinctive and rich cultural heritage. Dress, housing design and construction, cuisine, music and dance differed from its neighbors. *Minsok-hwa* style paintings that playfully depict everyday life, for example, have no counterpart elsewhere in East Asia. Although Buddhism, Confucianism and more recently Christianity have profoundly influenced Korea, the indigenous shamanism has remained an important component of the society's spiritual life. Korea's script *han'g'ul* developed in the fifteenth century is the only major writing system in use that does not have its origins in the ancient Middle West, India or China. Many Koreans can cite a number of other examples of a dynamic and sophisticated cultural tradition: the earliest moveable metal type, the earliest extent printed document, the first iron clad ships (the fifteenth century turtle boats), the first rain gauges and the longest tradition of recording rainfall, the world's largest compendium of Buddhist scripture- the *Tripitika Koreana*, and the highly sophisticated porcelain wares such as the Koryŏ celadon to name a few.

Cross-cultural exchanges is a major concern of world historians and Korea provides an excellent, well-documented case study of cross-cultural interaction. Of particular interest is the process of cultural

¹This paper is based on observations from the book I have just written *A Concise History of Korea: From Earliest Times to the Nineteenth Century*, (Boulder, Co: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

adaptation. Throughout its history Korean society has been characterized by a process of looking abroad from cultural models and then adopting them. But something changed when Korea borrowed models abroad, they both modified them and adhered to them with a distinctive zeal. An obvious example is the Neo-Confucianism of Song that became a rigid ideology in Korea shaping its institutions to a degree

unknown in China. A similar case is the adaptation of Marxism-Leninism in North Korea. The process by which Korea was borrowed from the West, often via Japan, is quite interesting. Nor is this process any longer, one way. In recent years the "Korea Wave" has seen Koreanized versions of Western pop culture influence popular culture in China, Japan, Taiwan and to a lesser degree Southeast Asia.

Korea's cultural tradition is well documented making it accessible to world historians. Although the oldest extant history the *Samguk sagi* dates only from the twelfth century, few societies have taken the role of the historian and the writing of history as seriously. The result is a large number of premodern historical works of a high standard. There are hundreds of volumes of surviving works by pre-twentieth century historians, an invaluable record into a premodern, non-Western society. A large body of literary works exists the earliest dating from the Silla period (676-935). This includes poems, essays, religious texts, biographies and hundreds of premodern novels, although only a few have been translated into English. For world historians of considerable interest is Korea's role in East Asia. The society can be seen as both a distinctive variant of a larger East Asian civilization and a bridge linking China and Japan. The influence on Japan is well-known to many historians. Missionaries from the Korean kingdom of Paekche introduced Buddhism and literacy to Japan in the sixth century. Much of Japan's borrowing from China came via Korea and often reflected Korean adaptation of Chinese culture. The process was especially important in the fifth through eighth centuries. Japanese tribute missions to China during the Nara and Heian periods generally traveled via Korea, often on Korean ships. The Japanese often imported Korean manufactured goods and art works which were used as models. For example, archaeology suggests that the distinctive swords and armor of the samurai are probably of Korean origin. Borrowing and influences from Korea were continuous: bonsai trees, raku ware pottery, and Neo-Confucianism were imported from or influenced by Korea. The process by which Korea adopted and adapted aspects of Chinese culture and then the Japanese adopted and adapted them from Korea is a fascinating one. Korea played a pivotal role in the Chinese tribute system. Korean elites regarded themselves, especially from the fourteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, as part of a larger cosmopolitan world centered in China. They maintained cultural exchanges with Chinese, as well with Japanese, Vietnamese, Okinawans and at times with sinified Central Asians.

Korea's historical importance suggests how it can be incorporated in world history. Many world history texts treat China and Japan as two distinctive civilizations or cultures, with the latter drawing much from the former. Others regard both part of an East Asian civilization. When Korea is included it is clear that there is a cultural continuum stretching from the North China Plain to northern Hokkaido and southward into the Vietnam. While even China itself is a complex and varied society, there is a higher cultural tradition derived from classical China shared by the peoples outside the Chinese polity. Looking at both the Korean and Japanese societies the links and variations along this cultural continuum become more apparent. Korea's role as a bridge between China and Japan enable us to see the pattern of cultural transmission across Asia more clearly.

Korea developed as part of an interactive system that linked the Korean Peninsula, the Chinese subcontinent, the northwest frontier of Inner Asia and the Japanese archipelago. Events in Korea are linked to this larger region. It is not accurate to see Korea's historical development as being autonomous nor as a passive recipient of outside forces but as part of a regional dynamic. This regional interactive sphere was linked to a broader hemisphere-wide network of trade, communication and migration which after 1500 became a global network. At all times in its historical development Korea was both shaped by and helped shape these regional and global networks, although the degree varied during different periods.

Paying attention to these larger regional and global contexts not only places Korean history in better perspective it also enriches our understand of East Asian and world history and thus benefits both Korean and non-Korean specialists. Examining its pre-nineteenth century history at several points illustrates how Korea was intertwined with the larger world in complex ways. This can be clearly seen in the fourth , seventh, tenth, fourteenth and eighteenth centuries.

The fourth century is a pivotal one in Korea: the Chinese commanderies disappeared, the two of the three kingdoms: Paekche and Silla appear uncontestedly in the historical record as states, Buddhism enters the peninsula and indigenous peoples adopt literacy. The fortunes of the Chinese commanderies fluctuated with those of those of the Chinese heartland. Toward the late second century the Later Han dynasty went into decline. In 220 C.E., the Han empire broke up into three states. Wei, the northern most, controlled the North China Plain, the heartland region of ancient China and the region closest to Korea. As part of the efforts by the Wei to consolidate their power they launched a series of campaigns were waged against the belligerent peoples of the northeast from 238 to 245, which became one of the most impressive displays of Chinese power in the history of Korea. A main target of the campaign was Koguryŏ which the Chinese defeated destroying their capital in 244. The revival of Chinese authority, however, did not last long and the Jin dynasty that temporarily reunited the Chinese empire rapidly declined in the early fourth century. A civil war broke out in North China in 301. In 311, the Xianbei, a steppe nomad peoples, sacked the imperial Chinese capital Luoyang. Six years later the Jin relocated their capital to the lower Yangzi region and all effective administration in northern China collapsed. This inaugurated a period of Chinese history whose troubled nature is exemplified in the convention of referring to it as the Period of the Five Dynasties and the Sixteen Kingdoms (317-589).

The Lelang and Taifang commanderies, cut off from the rest of China by a series of nomadic intruders that had overrun northern China, continued a shadowy existence. By tradition Lelang was conquered by a resurgent Koguryŏ in 313 and its southern outpost Taifang by the emerging kingdom of Paekche in 316. It appears, however, that some sort of rule by local Chinese elites continued well into the fourth century.² After four centuries the Chinese presence in Korea disappeared. One reason for the lack of a continued Chinese presence was the geographic remoteness of Korea. The commanderies in Korea were distant outposts of the empire that could not be maintained in troubled times. With the withdraw of China, the people of the Korean peninsula had several centuries to develop their societies without direct Chinese intervention. It was during these centuries that the first literate indigenous states emerged.

It is clear that the fourth century was a period of disunity in the north Chinese heartland but the decline of China provided the space for indigenous development on the Korean peninsula as well as on the Japanese archipelago for the fourth century saw the emergence of clear indigenous state formation in Japan with the emergence of the Yamato state. State formation then in both Korea and Japan was not only contemporary but part of a larger East Asian process by which indigenous states emerged on the periphery of the Chinese heartland. This can be extended to southern China as well where culturally sophisticated political flourished centered at Hangzhou in the lower Yangtze.

Events in China have long been linked by historians with that of Western Eurasia where the Roman Empire began its demographic, military and economic decline. In both parts of the world new otherworldly religions were emerging that would have profound impact: Christianity in Europe, Buddhism in East Asia. The reasons are not yet well understood but a vast change was taking place in Eurasia related to the spread of epidemic disease, changes in weather patterns and the pressures from the

² Kenneth .H.J. Gardiner, *The Early History of Korea: The Historical Development of the Peninsula up to the Introduction of Buddhism in the Fourth Century A.D.* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1969), 42, 52-58.

Inner Asian nomadic peoples. On both the eastern and western peripheries new indigenous states were emerging, although the process seems to be a century or two later in Europe. The emergence of the Three Kingdoms thus was part of a larger pattern of state formation on the peripheral regions of Eurasia.

The peoples of Korea were an active part of this process. At the time, the boundary between the peninsula and Manchuria to the north was not the major cultural divide it later became and tribal people especially the Koguryŏ were important actors in the “barbarian” pressures on the Chinese empire. They can be roughly seen as analogous to the Franks, Saxons or Visigoths, who, taking advantage of the demographic and economic decay of the core regions and subjected to pressures from Inner Asian grassland intruders, contributed to the retreat of the core-cultural empires. What emerged from this time of troubles was a geographically wider and richer cultural region both in East Asia and in Europe. Korea was now a major center of high culture and a military and political factor in East Asia as was Japan.

The stabilization of the steppe-agricultural frontier in Eurasia, and the demographic recovery led to the re-emergence of China as a major, unified empire. This ushered in a more active Chinese involvement in Korea and contributed to both the unification of the peninsula in the seventh century and the economic and cultural flowering of eighth century Silla. The creation of a unified, stable and prosperous Korea, helped pacify China’s eastern frontier and contributed to the Middle Kingdom’s prosperity. It also contributed to the newly unified and prosperous Japan of the Nara and early Heian periods. It can hardly be a coincidence that the economic and cultural peak of Nara and early Heian coincided almost exactly with that of Silla. A unified and stable Japan was both a military threat but also a trading partner of Silla. Sillan unity secured the sea lanes that facilitated Sino-Japanese trade. The eighth century saw a general retreat of the Inner Asian incursions in other parts of the world: leading to stability in Europe, the rise of Merovingian and Carolingian empires, the expansion of Byzantium, the recovery of trade in the West, and the completion of the unity of the Middle East under the Umayyads and their Abbasid successors.

The ninth and tenth centuries were another time of troubles. Norsemen, Magyars and Bulgars disrupted Europe; the fragile Carolingian empire broke up; the Khazars raided Islamic borderlands. In China, the process started early with pressures from Uighurs and others but the collapse of the empire took place a little after that of the Carolingian. The process was similar. Political instability and cultural decline occurred from the Bay of Biscay to the Korea Straits. Silla’s economic and political troubles in the ninth century led to a decline that was simultaneous with that of Tang. Consequently, the cultural output of the ninth century did not equal that of the previous one. Japan, more insulated with no Khitans and other Inner Asian tribes to threaten it, nonetheless, went into an institutional decline with a weakened central state unable to support the cultural achievement of the eighth. Then in the tenth century things stabilized. In Europe, Otto the Great subdued the Magyars at Lechfeld in 955 restoring some order to Europe and the Norse adopted Christianity, created orderly kingdoms or settled in and integrated into European society. The Song reunified China, the Khitan settled down as the Liao, the Tanguts as the Xi Xia, and Korea was reunified.

Thus one can see how Korean history is part of larger regional and trans-regional patterns. Geographically Korea is on the periphery of East Asia, but peripheries are important both as a necessary part of the larger picture and as active players in the affairs of the core regions. The pattern can be seen again in the 13th to 14th century. Koryŏ’s history became part of the larger narrative of the Mongol period. This extraordinary rise of the Mongols led to the creation of Pax Mongolica from the late thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth century. The subjugation of Korea largely completed by 1270 was part of the process of Mongol consolidation as they needed to control Korea to protect their eastern border as they completed the conquest of China. With the fall of Baghdad in 1258, subjugation of all of Central Asia and Russia, and the final fall of the Southern Song in 1279 the Mongols created Eurasia’s greatest historical unity. They thereby inaugurated an unusually rich period of cross-cultural encounters. Korea was very much part of

the new cosmopolitan Eurasia associated with the travels Marco Polo and Rabban Sauma. It was during this period that cotton, originally from India, gunpowder from China and many other new items were introduced to Korea. Never before in its history as a literate kingdom had the Korean people encountered so many foreigners, and foreign ideas and products.

The new open trans-Eurasian trade routes also led to the spread of bubonic plague that contributed to the rapid collapse of the Mongol regime and the contraction of trade across Inner Asia. It was a devastating blow to Europe, the Middle East and East Asia, but it also meant China and Korea, as well as Russia and Persia were free of Mongol rule. The reconstitution of the Chinese empire, combined with the cosmopolitan exposure of Koreans had a profound effect that led the creation Chosŏn state under the Yi dynasty, the longest lasting dynastic state in Korea. Chosŏn was a state based on Neo-Confucianism that Korean contacts with China during the Mongols period had introduced along with cotton and gunpowder. A strong Ming China stabilized the border with Korea, allowing it to flourish while its military gradually atrophied. The demographic and economic recovery of Korea occurred along with that of China and incidentally of Europe and Persia. Korea then went on to become part of the cosmopolitan Neo-Confucian world. Koreans introduced Neo-Confucian thought to Japan in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and Korea commentaries on Zhu Xi were read by Vietnamese scholars.

At the same time the painful Mongol experience led to a more guarded attitude toward foreigners in all the lands they had ruled. This was notable in Ming China and Chosŏn Korea, less so in Japan into the seventeenth century. All East Asian societies in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries took pains to limit but not exclude contact with outsiders. Yet this also a prosperous period. Following the, not well understood crisis of the seventeenth century felt across Eurasia, China, Korea and Japan enjoyed great prosperity in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is interesting that this was a culturally rich period. Japan seemed especially innovative during this time departing in some ways from East Asian models. But Korea too underwent the development of distinctive indigenous forms in art and literature.

This is just a brief survey explaining how Korean history can be incorporated into the larger regional and global narrative. There are many issues that need to be addressed to better understand the inter-relations between Korea and its neighbors. For example, there is the simultaneous rise of military rulers in Korea and Japan. Korea under the military governments developed institutions that in some ways resembled feudalism. This merits examination since it illustrates the rich potential of Korean history for comparative world historians and the usefulness of placing Korean history in a larger perspective to see it clearly.

Feudalism is usually defined as a decentralized political system in which a landowning or land controlling warrior aristocracy supported by peasantry bound to the land is linked in a hierarchical scheme of political loyalty. It became a fully developed and the dominant political-social system only in medieval Western Europe and in medieval Japan. Historians have long noted the similarities between Japanese feudalism and Western European feudalism. Less well appreciated is that many of the important transformations in Japanese society that took place in the twelfth century to establish the classic feudal system took place simultaneously in Korea. As one scholar has observed A Civil aristocratic societies characterize both Korea and Japan at the start of the twelfth century.³ In Japan, as in Korea, the court and dynasty lost effective power to new military lineages, and in both after a period of struggle among military men a strong military leader emerged. In Japan this leader was Minamoto Yoritomo who

³ Edward J. Shultz, "Ch'oe Chunghon and Minamoto Yoritomo," *Japan Review* 11 (1999): 31-53. Much of the comparison between Koryŏ and medieval Japan is drawn from this article.

in 1185 became paramount ruler of Japan taking the title of Shogun in 1192; and in Korea Ch=oe Ch=ung-hŏn emerged the effective ruler in 1196. In both countries the military hegemony established a parallel clan government with effective power while maintaining the dynastic organs of government. Both Ch=oe and Yoritomo made use of an elaborate system of personal retainers and military leaders who pledged to serve their military ruler through ties of loyalty, and who derived income from their personal and extensive land holdings. Both recruited men of letters to serve in their private agencies and relied on these educated men to help them in administering the country. In both cases the old clans that had supplied the court with officials continued to serve as officials, although without the power and influence they previously had. Both patronized Zen (S4n) Buddhism that became the religion of the warriors. In Japan, as well as in Korea, the late twelfth and thirteenth century became the great age of meditative Buddhism that with the help of official support emerged as a major religious and cultural force. Military rulers in both Korea and Japan fiercely resisted the Mongol invasions.

But there were important differences. Yoritomo came out of a Heian order that witnessed the expansion of warrior and regional autonomy, while Ch=oe emerged from the Koryŏ system in which the military was closely tied to the dynasty. In Japan local autonomy and military culture grew stronger, while in Korea the Ch=oe, searching for appropriate forms of governance, restored many dynastic agencies working closely with the king and his officials, thus reaffirming the importance of civil traditions in Korea. While in Japan the military traditions emerged dominant, in Korea the civil traditions prevailed. Partly this was due to the use of the civil exams by the Ch=oe family to recruit men of learning for office and thus reinforcing the importance of scholarship. There was no civil exam system in Japan. In Japan, the emergence of military rule was a consolidation of trends that had been taking place for several centuries as power slipped away from the court and into the hands of local military elite. By contrast, in Korea, the emergence of military rule was a more dramatic break with tradition. Koryŏ monarchs were active in governing in the twelfth century, private armies had been effectively uprooted in the tenth century, the military was clearly subordinated to civil authority and the central hierarchy was more clearly defined.

Even under the Ch=oe the Korean government remained more centralized than was the case in either Europe or Japan. The military rulers of Koryŏ were based in the capital and maintained an orientation toward centralized rule. Yoritomo, by contrast led a coalition of warriors rooted in the countryside. Furthermore, he had his own large provincial power base on the Kantŏ plain. Ch=oe had no such power base and was much more reliant on key court and military officials to support him.⁴ Also the *mun=gaek* retainers were considerably smaller in number than those available to Yoritomo and the shoguns that succeeded him. More significantly retainers in Korea could not own land, unlike the vassals that served their lords in Europe and in Japan. An entire system of feudal law emerged in Japan and in Europe, but in Korea the Chinese patterned legal system continued to function. So for all the parallels with developments in Japan, Korea never developed a truly feudal system. It is possible, of course, that with time Korea might have developed a more feudal-like system, but the tendency to recruit ever more civil officials during the Ch=oe clan=s rule does not suggest this was going to happen. Perhaps Korea, unlike Western Europe and Japan that were relatively free from outside invasions, simply could not function without a centralized state. Geography made Korea less secure. Unlike Europe or Japan, Korea had to deal with powerful and often aggressive neighbors from the Manchurian plains and grasslands of Inner Asia.

⁴ See Jeffrey Mass *Warrior Government in Early Medieval Japan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

The final question is why such institutions appeared in Japan and Korea around the same time, in fact, almost exactly the same time? The answer to this is not well understood but the fact they did suggests that Korean and Japanese historical developments are more closely linked than most scholars have previously appreciated. Both were in contrast to China where no similar trends occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth century. The power of the Chinese military aristocratic clans had declined sharply in the eighth to tenth centuries and saw no revival.

Two other examples of the rich potential of Korean history for comparative world historians and the usefulness of placing Korean history in a larger perspective its women's literature and its travel accounts. It is interesting to note that although Korea was a male dominated society there was a distinctive Chosŏn legacy of women's literature. In recent years scholars have rediscovered much of this large body of feminine writing. The percent of women who were literate was small since even yangban girls were discouraged from learning. Nonetheless, a small number of women became quite accomplished in letters. Lady Yun mother of Kim Man-jung, is said to have tutored her two sons to pass the civil exams. Lady Shin Saimdang mother of Yi I (Yulgok) was reported to have been very learned. Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn, a beautiful and highly intelligent daughter of a high-ranking official, was so talented as a youth that she attracted the attention of well-known poets who tutored her. Tragically she died at the age of twenty-three and destroyed many of her poems before her death. Her famous brother Hŏ Kyun collected what remained. These proved to be enough to earn her a reputation as an accomplished poet. *Kisaeng* such as Hwang Chin-i in the sixteenth century were often accomplished poets as well.

As in Japan, Korean women wrote primarily in indigenous script while men stuck to the more prestigious Chinese characters to express themselves. Women if they learn to write generally wrote in *han-gŭl* which was regarded as fitting for them. *Han-gŭl*, in fact was sometimes referred to as *amgŭl* (female letters). Women, following cultural expectations, generally wrote about family matters. Korean women produced *kyuban* or *naebang kasa* (inner room *kasa*). These originated in the eighteenth century and were largely anonymous. They included admonitions addressed to daughters and granddaughters by mothers and grandmothers on the occasion of a young woman's marriage and departure from home. Young brides would arrive with these *kasa* copied on rolls of paper. They would pass them to their daughters with their own *kasa* added. Other inner room *kasa* dealt with the success of their sons in taking exams, complaints about their lives, and seasonal gatherings of women relatives.⁵

Another genre of women's literature was palace literature written by court ladies about the people and intrigues of court. A large body of this literature, much of it still not well studied, survives. Among the best known are the anonymously authored *Kyechŏk ilgi* (*Diary of the Year of the Black Ox*, 1613) the story of Sŏnjo's second queen Inmok. Queen Inmok is portrayed as a virtuous lady who falls victim to palace politics and jealousies. She struggles to protect her son and is imprisoned by Kwanghaegun. It ends when the doors of the palace where she is imprisoned are suddenly opened following Kwanghaegun's overthrow.⁶ Another work *Inhyŏn Wanghu chŏn* (*Life of Queen Inhyŏn*) tells the virtuous life of Queen Inhyŏn who married King Sukchong in 1681. She too is victimized at the hands of the evil rival, Lady Chang. Today the most read of these palace works is the *Hanjungnok* (*Records Written in Silence*) by Lady Hyegyŏng (1735-1815). This is the autobiography of the wife of the ill-fated crown prince Changhŏn. Written in the form of four memoirs it is a realistic and in most

⁵ Kichung Kim, *Classical Korean Literature*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 123-124.

⁶ Kim, *Classical Korean Literature*, 99.

respects accurate story of her mistreatment at court, the tragedy of her husband's mental illness and the death, and the sufferings of her natal family by their political enemies. Her memoirs are a literary masterpiece, and because of their honesty and her astute insights, they are a valuable window into court life in the eighteenth century. Biographical writings by women in East Asia are very rare and one by a woman of such high intelligence and so close to the center of political life is especially important.⁷ This women's literature, including Kisaeng poems is an valuable source for comparative historians. Why did Korea produced such a literature? How does it compare with women's literature in other premodern societies? These are questions to be addressed.

Another important source for understanding Korean history and for gaining insights into cross-cultural studies is the travel literature. Koreans continued under the Qing to send three tribute missions a year. All totaled about 700 missions went to Beijing during the two and a half centuries from inauguration of the Qing dynasty in 1644 to the end of the tributary system in the late nineteenth century. The typical mission consisted of about thirty officials who along with their scribes, translators, servants and porters came to about 200 to 300 persons. They followed a proscribed land route that took up to eight weeks each way and stayed in Beijing for about two months in the Hall of Jade River in the south part of city. Although technically diplomatic missions, the members privately engaged in trade with merchants along the way and in the Chinese capital. Upon arrival there were official functions to attend and the audience with the emperor to prepare for, but much of the time was spent seeing the sights, meeting with Chinese and the occasional foreigner in Beijing, and of course shopping. Other than translators who held the humble status of *chungin* few Koreans could speak Chinese, but they could read and write it. They therefore communicated with their Chinese counterparts in what they called "brush talk," that is through writing.

For most Koreans the trip was a once in a life time opportunity and they tried to make the most of it. Many educated members wrote travel accounts when they got back. About forty of these travel diaries from the Ming usually called *Choch'ŏnrok* (*Audience with the Emperor*) and 500 from the Qing *Yŏnhaerok* (*Travel Records to Beijing*) have survived. They provide a glimpse into how Koreans saw themselves as well as what they saw in China. By the eighteenth century these travel diaries became a vehicle to critically compare Korea with China, generally with the aim of pointing to the need for reform in their society. This school of critical writing became known as *Pukhak* (Northern Learning), the north a reference to Beijing. Thus a uniquely Korean literary form combining travelogue with criticism emerged that had no counterpart elsewhere in East Asia. The diarists were impressed by the level of commercial activity in China. Markets were open all day and night, every day unlike in Korea where markets generally opened only on market days. And their size and variety was impressive. One observer writing in 1828 wrote "The lengths of these people will take to make a living are really ingenious. There are some who will even cut other people's hair, others will administer baths, still others will cut people's fingernails. And there is a gadget for everything, even for picking paper out of privies or for carrying horse manure."⁸

Korean travel diarists used their works to criticize their own society. Among the important works travel diaries were Hong Tae-yong's *Yŏn'gi* (*Beijing Record*). Accompanying an uncle to as a military

⁷ . JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyŏng: the Autobiographical Writings of a Crown Princess of Eighteenth-Century Korea* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1996), 6-10.

⁸ Gari Ledyard, "Korean Travelers in China over Four Hundred Years, 1488-1887," *Occasional Papers on Korea* (March 1974), 1-42.

aid Beijing in 1766 Hong wrote of the order and prosperity of China under the Qing Qianlong emperor.⁹ Pak Chi-wŏn's *Yŏrha ilgi (Jehol Diary)* saw China's wealth as a model for Korea. China possessed good roads, canals and canal locks, made use of carriages, baggage wagons and wheelbarrows. Korea had a mountainous terrain, Pak noted, but even China's mountainous regions had good roads. Why not Korea? he asked. He was also aware of the less rigid class distinctions in China and the greater ability of men of talent to rise to high office without belonging to elite families. Another famous critique is Pak Che-ga's *Pukhak 卍 (A Proposal for Northern Studies)* a memorial to the King Ch4ngjo in which he argued that Korea must emulate China's technology and commerce.

Koreans travelers to China, however, also found much to be critical of. They commented on the subservience of the Chinese to their "barbarian" Manchu rulers. While Koreans proudly wore Ming-style fashions, such clothes were prohibited to their hosts. Especially notable was the custom by which Chinese men shaved the front part of the scalps and tied their hair in the back of their heads into queues. This practice, ordered by the Manchus to distinguish the Chinese from themselves, was to many Koreans a shameful sign of subservience. They could not help contrasting this their own proud adherence to the practices of venerable Ming dynasty and their own freedom from domination by a foreign ethnic group. Hong Tae-yong while engaging in a "brush talk" with a Chinese scholar, for example, was explaining the Korean custom of showing respect for the former dynasty by leaving a blank line before writing the name Ming. The Chinese scholar upon seeing the character for Ming quickly tore up the paper before authorities could see it.¹⁰ Thus, while Koreans increasingly admired the Qing, especially under the Kangxi and Qianlong emperors, they also became acutely aware of their differences, including their greater ideological purity.

Koreans also journeyed to Tokugawa Japan on the twelve missions to that country between 1607 to 1811. Travelers to Japan, also wrote diaries and noted the differences between their society and Japan. Since such missions were fewer and held less prestige than those to China they never developed into a Japanese equivalent to the Northern Studies literature. They do, however, provide insights into how Koreans contrasted themselves with the Japanese. Korean envoys were impressed by the prosperity of Tokugawa Japan, by the size of their cities and their cleanliness. Osaka was larger than Seoul, but almost entirely devoted to commerce with a vast number of shops. There was no equivalent commercial center in Korea. Travelers also commented the high quality of Japanese craftsmanship and the sophistication of agriculture technology. The cities and towns were clean and bustling, the countryside prosperous, and the people were well dressed. Japanese steel making in particular, was of a high standard. They also commented on Japan's military strength.¹¹

Yet there was much they did not admire about Japan. Japanese moral standards were woefully inadequate. Men and women socialized too openly, and the women were flirtatious. Prostitution and brothels were everywhere, and people of the same surname married. Most shocking was the sight of men and women bathing naked together. Although Koreans themselves had once practiced this custom, in Yi

⁹ Gari Ledyard, "Hong Taeyong and His Peking Memoir" *Korean Studies* 6(1982): 63-103.

¹⁰ Ledyard, "Korean Travelers in China over Four Hundred Years, 1488-1887," 26.

¹¹ Hur, Nam-lin, "Korean Officials in the Land of the Kami: Diplomacy and the Prestige Economy, 1607-1811," in *Proceeding of the 1st World Congress of Korean Studies: Embracing the Other: The Interaction of Korean and Foreign Cultures*, The Korean Academy of Korean Studies (Seoul: July 2002), 82-93.

times this was scandalously in violation of propriety. The principle of segregating of men and women was not practiced; boys and girls played together, and were not separated at the age of seven as in Korea. Also disturbing was the practice of homosexuality that confused the distinction between men and women, a cardinal Confucian virtue. Koreans found the level of civilization in Japan to be lower than in their own country. Japanese scholarship was inferior to their own, since the Japanese showed less mastery of the Confucian classics. They had internalize less of what they did know. There were no altars to Confucius, no ritual robes at funerals, nor did the Japanese properly carry out the rites to their parents or ancestors. Koreans were unimpressed by Japanese literature. The lack of propriety between men and women, their inferior knowledge of Confucian literature and ritual, and the Japanese practice of blackening their teeth were all signs of their semi-barbarian nature. Patronizingly some Koreans noted the Tokugawa state sponsorship of Neo-Confucianism, commenting that they were making some progress. Koreans could point with pride that the Zhu Xi school of Neo-Confucianism had been introduced to Japan by a Kang Hang (1567-1618) a Korean scholar the had been taken to Japan as a prisoner of war. Kang worked with Fujiwara Seika the Japanese scholar who helped established Neo-Confucianism as an officially sponsored school of thought during the Tokugawa period. Visitors also noted that Yi T'oegye was studied and admired in Japan. Yet visitors from Seoul also noted that Confucian scholars were lower in social status than warriors.¹² Overall the level of learning in Japan, Koreans felt was much inferior to their own. A few scholars, notably Tasan, took Japanese scholarship seriously enough to study it. But for many the Japanese were "barbarians like the beasts and the birds."¹³

Korea's premodern history offers a rich field for global comparative and trans-regional history. It is not marginal, as it has so often been treated but very much central to the human experience. At the same time, Korean scholars need to address a larger audience and work at more comparative studies. Korea needs to be firmly placed in the broader narrative in regional and global history. Doing so provides a better understanding of Korean history and of the larger world of which it has always been a part.

¹² Chai-shik Chung, "Changing Korean Perceptions of Japan on the Eve of Modern Transformation: The Case of Neo-Confucian Yangban Intellectuals, *Korean Studies* 19 (1995):39-50.

¹³ Hur Nam-lin, "Korean Officials in the Land of the Kami: Diplomacy and the Prestige Economy, 1607-1811," 88.