

Outside In: Rethinking Borders in Premodern Korea

“The Foreign” in Premodern Korea

As with any country, discussions of Korea often revolve around well worn yet little explored stereotypes. One of the most frequently appearing is that of the “hermit kingdom.” According to conventional wisdom, Korea obstinately refused to open to the outside world for much of its existence. Historical and literary records, however, demonstrate that such was not always the case; on the contrary, sources reveal that periods in which Korea turned inward were both brief and infrequent. The unfounded designation of Korea as hermit ultimately amounts to a gross distortion of fact and a facile reduction of Korean history.

Historical and literary materials both bear witness to Korea’s long and meaningful interaction with the outside world, even prior to the twentieth century. What becomes striking, then, is the lack of scholarly attention devoted to exploring the images of those people and places beyond Korea’s borders appearing in premodern texts.

Defining “The Foreign”

To begin with, a careful definition of terms is in order. Among other things, this study argues for a plurality in Korean conceptions of selves and others that has been largely obscured in the various drives for homogenization since the end of the nineteenth century. As such, no single term exists to express perfectly the various conceptions of those people and places beyond Korea’s geographical borders prior to the twentieth century; however, a process of elimination yielded “the foreign” as the best compromise. Originating from the Latin *foranus*, or “from

beyond the doors,” etymologically, it represents more spatial than psychological distance. The existence of a common world order and civilization rendered many geographically distant locales and racially heterogeneous peoples merely “beyond the doors,” but not truly foreign.

Myth of the Hermit Kingdom

Given this tradition of awareness of and concern with “the foreign” in both historical records and literary accounts, one cannot help but puzzle over the conventional conception of Korea as hermit. The genealogy of the term and idea of Korea as “hermit kingdom” is fascinating, but the designation is ultimately fallacious. William Elliot Griffis bluntly titled, *Corea: The Hermit Nation*, the first work to apply this label to Korea, appeared in 1882—ironically, the same year in which Korea signed a treaty of amity and commerce with the United States of America, its first treaty with a Western nation and its first official recognition of a new international order. Equally ironic is the fact that Griffis never visited Korea. Rather, he gathered his ideas and formed his opinions while in Japan.

Historical Examples

There are several fruitful ways in which to return discussion to the origins of Korean interaction with “the foreign.” Though it is perhaps closer to legend than history, nevertheless, the pride taken by Koreans until relatively recently in the story of the “Chinese” Confucian sage Kija and his founding of the state of Kija Chosŏn on the Korean peninsula reveals much about Korean conceptions of their own beginnings. Concerning those periods for which some historical materials are available, albeit lacking the sort of volume and precision demanded of later sources, it is largely agreed that some of the earliest rulers of states on the Korean peninsula came from abroad. Wiman, the founder and first king of Wiman Chosŏn was a refugee who fled war and turmoil in China. He brought with him upwards of 1,000 followers and was entrusted by the king of Old Chosŏn with the defense of that country’s northwestern borders. That he later betrayed the king is not so important to the present study as is the fact that he, a “foreigner,” was naturalized

and entrusted with high official responsibility. Furthermore, historical records written and reproduced prior to the twentieth century do not characterize such situations as either abnormal or undesirable. Rather, such texts reveal a certain pride in establishing a concrete bond of both blood and culture between various “Korean” and “Chinese” kingdoms.

China was not the only source of a unifying transnational civilization in Asia. For a millennium kingdoms on the peninsula looked outward to India and Buddhism as their models. Textual and archaeological, as well as anecdotal, evidence suggests that, at the very latest, from the beginning of the Three Kingdoms Period (18 B.C.-668) material and cultural exchanges had gone beyond China and flourished with places as far off as the Middle East. The foundation myth and subsequent history of the kingdom of Kaya, or Karakguk as it is referred to in the *Samguk yusa*, contains a noteworthy instance of such interactions. Suro, king of Kaya, is said to be looking for a wife. But, as he is of heavenly descent—also a sort of “foreign-ness,”—he will not take a bride from among his own people. He sends his courtiers out to sea in search of a fitting bride. Before long a ship is spotted, upon which rides a beautiful princess. She soon has an audience with the king from which the reader learns she is from India.

Though much of the *Samguk yusa* is usually not taken as fact, the above passage bears further comment. The kingdom of Kaya was located at modern-day Kimhae. To this day in South Korea, members of the Kimhae Kim clan and the Kimhae Hŏ clan are forbidden to marry under the law that prohibits marriages between people with the same surname and same geographical origin, or *tongsŏng tongbon*. Thus, the entirety of the events outlined in the passage quoted above can hardly be dismissed as merely being the stuff of legend.

It has often been noted that the *Samguk yusa* was written during the Mongol invasions of Koryŏ in order to foster a sense of national awareness and solidarity. It is worth noting, however, that the concept of Korean-ness contained therein was not narrowly circumscribed by myths of a common bloodline. Nowhere in this volume, or in almost any other premodern text, will one find references to anything resembling the unsupportable claims of racial purity, or *tanil minjok*, put

forth so freely throughout the twentieth century. Rather, as seen above, the *Samguk yusa* sought to set down a common record of past happenings on the peninsula, some of which included foreigners being naturalized to Korea, and others that included Koreans leaving never to return.

The above also suggests, of course, that such exchanges were not unidirectional; Koreans often ventured abroad as well. Buddhism made its way to Korea from India via China, but that did not prevent Koreans from making pilgrimages to the birthplace of their religion. The Silla monk Hye Ch'o (704-787) departed for China, never to return, when he was only twelve years old. He later wrote his *Wangoch'ŏnch'ukguk-chŏn* following a journey that began in southern China and took him through Indonesia into India and beyond through much of Central Asia. Hye Ch'o elected to remain in China, and in so doing demonstrated that although the homeland was a matter of birth, home was a matter of choice. Korea made up a crucial part of a cosmopolitan and transnational Buddhist world in which Koreans were free to move about uncircumscribed by narrow conceptions based on blood or territory.

It should also be stated that Koreans were not unilaterally traveling abroad while hermetically sealing the borders of their own countries to outsiders. Works such as the *Haedong Kosŭng-chŏn*, compiled in 1215 by the Koryŏ monk Kakhun and one of the primary sources used by Iryŏn in compiling his *Samguk yusa*, detail the lives of several monks other than Hye Ch'o who also journeyed to China, India, and Central Asia. Particularly noteworthy in this volume, however, is the fact that of the seven biographies contained within its first chapter, three (or four) concern monks of foreign origin.¹ Just as Korean monks traveled to China and India to deepen their knowledge, foreign-born monks ventured to Korea in order to teach. Their acceptance at the times and in the kingdoms of their arrival reveals to us much about the receptiveness to “foreign” people and ideas at the time. In fact, the very term Haedong, or east of the sea, to refer to Korea, places Korea in a well-established international order and context. While later canonization in

¹ This number could be increased to four depending on how one interprets the information given for the monk Ado.

these biographies under the general heading *Haedong kosŭng*, or eminent *Korean* monks, also tells us much about the open attitude toward them during the Koryŏ dynasty as well.

Finally, no reckoning of Koreans from the Three Kingdoms Period who held sway abroad would be complete without mentioning Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn (857-?) and Chang Pogo (?-846). Lest the reader be given the mistaken impression that Buddhist devotees were the most famous and influential Koreans to travel abroad, neither Ch'oe nor Chang was a religious figure. Both wielded considerable power in the secular world. Ch'oe, a native of Silla and an aristocrat, was sent off to study in T'ang China at the age of twelve. Tradition has it that his father's final words to him were, "If you are unable to pass the official government examinations within ten years, you are no longer my son." He passed at the age of eighteen. Following an official career in which he won renown as a civil official, military strategist, writer, and calligrapher, Ch'oe returned to his native Silla at the age of 29.

Although he never enjoyed Ch'oe's renown as a civil official or man of letters, Chang Pogo did enjoy two successful military careers, while his exploits as a merchant were without parallel. He appears not only in Korean histories such as the *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa*, but also in Chinese and Japanese histories. Like Ch'oe, Chang at an early age also left Korea for China where he made a name for himself, literally. Unlike Ch'oe, however, he was a commoner and, as such, had no surname. In China he took the rather prevalent surname Chang. He made his fortune there, first as a military man and later as a merchant.

Such travels and exchanges, in both directions, lasted long beyond the Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla periods. When Wang Kŏn (877-943) founded the Koryŏ dynasty in 918, the peninsula had already been unified for 250 years. Though Silla itself fell, there were no major concomitant changes in terms of borders, languages, or cultures. Thus, a considerable amount of intra-dynastic continuity might reasonably be expected, and, indeed, during the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392) contact with other countries continued. Instances of forced interaction with those outside its borders understandably receive much attention. They provide illustrative accounts of

past national solidarity while also meshing quite nicely with more recent constructions of Korea as a sort of isolationist and pacifist nation, oft invaded but never invading. The fact, however, is that Koryŏ, though at times in conflict, was sovereign and unoccupied for the vast majority of its 474 years. And for these times, the *Koryŏsa* and the *Koryŏsa chŏryŏ* record commercial and diplomatic visits between Korea and Arabia, Thailand, and the Ryukyus. The first recorded instance of an Arab coming to Koryŏ was in 1024, and the *Koryŏsa* records some 300 Arabs arriving between the years of 1024-1040. Arabs had established themselves in Sung China, first as itinerant merchants then later as permanent residents. Due to the close relations between the Sung and Koryŏ, it was only a matter of time before Arab ships reached Korean shores to trade mercury, myrrh, sapanwood, and spices for things such as Korean gold, silver, and silk. Later, as they had in China, some settled in Korea. Later in the dynasty, albeit under a strong Mongol influence, Tibetan lamas also came to practice and teach in Koryŏ. There were, however, also monks from other countries who appear to have ventured to Korea without official patronage. The Indian monk Dhyānabhadra, known in Korea as Chigong (1236-1363), provides one example. On the official diplomatic front, in 1391 Thailand sent the envoy Nai Gong and seven other men with an offering of native products and a letter. The letter, however, was suspected to be a forgery by members of the Koryŏ court and so no official action was taken to establish relations. Koryŏ would fall the following year.

Koryŏ was followed by the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910). Much like that between Unified Silla and Koryŏ, the transition between Koryŏ and Chosŏn, though at times violent, was marked by considerable continuity. It should not be surprising then to find that the official history of this dynasty, the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, also provides us with numerous examples of Korean interaction with “the foreign.” Here, rather than repeating the process above of investigating the various entries for a single year, we will examine the entries concerning a single person, Yi Chiran (1331-1402).

Yi was a Jurchen and born with the family name T'ung and the given name K'urunt'urant'imurū. His father, Arabuk'a, was the sixth descendent of Namsong Akbi and a Jurchen military official. He inherited his father's position. In 1371 he took his men to Koryŏ where he applied for and was granted Korean nationality. He received the family name Yi for which a new clan seat, or *pon'gwan*, was created at Ch'ŏnghae. Yi Sŏnggye (1335-1408), a Koryŏ general and, later, founder of Chosŏn, also lived near Koryŏ's northern border. Some of his most intimate friends were from among the Jurchens, or, rather, Jurchen-Koreans, who lived rather harmoniously with the Koreans in that region. One of them was Yi Chiran. Yi Chiran had no trouble establishing himself as a Korean military officer, and served beside Yi Sŏnggye in his many campaigns to combat the frequent raids made by Japanese marauders. He later played an integral role in the founding of Chosŏn, for which he was made a "Dynastic Foundation Merit Subject of the First Order"—the highest award bestowed by Yi Sŏnggye, now King T'aejo.² Furthermore, he married into the highest echelons of Chosŏn society; his wife was the niece of T'aejo's queen. He is mentioned several times in the *Koryŏsa*, while the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* contains no fewer than 41 separate direct references to him. The first, entered for T'aejo 01/07/17, tells us that Yi was one of the officials charged with personally delivering the royal seal to T'aejo's residence following the abdication of Koryŏ's final king, Kongyang. The following month, when assigning the various hierarchical gradations to his appointments for merit subject, T'aejo is quoted as having said of Yi Chiran and the other merit subjects of the first order:

They understood both the course of action dictated by the Mandate of Heaven and the disposition of the people's hearts. They decided upon their plan having discerned the great righteousness of both the common people and the guardian deities of the State. And, having taken this unworthy man as their ruler, together we accomplished our great undertaking. Their merit is of such magnitude that even were the Yellow River to trickle narrow as a belt, and Tai Shan Mountain wear down to a whetstone, it would be difficult to forget!³

² The title is 開國一等功臣.

³ T'aejo 01/08/20.

Though the language of official dynastic histories may be somewhat dry and formulaic, we should not let this obscure the fact that Yi Chiran, a “foreigner,” was present at the creation of the Chosŏn dynasty. And he was not merely present as an observer, but as an active participant in the process of creating the latest, the final, and the most enduring dynasty on the Korean peninsula. Equally worth noting, particularly from our present vantage point, is that he was publicly acknowledged and rewarded for his crucial role.⁴ What is puzzling, then, is that despite the great reverence accorded him in historical sources such as the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, no mention is made of Yi Chiran in today’s standard Korean history texts. It appears that even the most seemingly objective historians are unable to work Yi in to their narratives of sameness.

Given Yi Chiran’s conspicuous absence from current secondary sources, one might wonder whether Yi quickly faded from official recognition and memory following the abdication of his friend and benefactor, T’aejo. This, however, was not the case. In the second year of King T’aejong (1400-1418)—T’aejo’s fifth son, Chosŏn’s third monarch, and a man not unwilling to rewrite history to his own liking—we are given a report of Yi Chiran’s death. From the beginning, the entry makes no attempt to disguise his foreign origins, explaining that his “original name was Turanch’ŏpmoga.”⁵ We are further informed that he was born with a pure-minded disposition and possessed great military talents. References to Yi Chiran and the official ceremonial respect accorded to him continue to appear through the reigns of Yŏngjo (1724-1776) and Chŏngjo (1776-1800). The final reference to found in the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* is for the tenth year of Sunjo’s (1800-1834) reign and records an order by the king to have memorial services performed by the state for Yi Chiran nearly 400 years after his death.⁶

⁴ The entry for T’aejo 01/09/16 details the various rewards bestowed upon merit subjects by the king. Yi Chiran was given the third largest award, 170 *kyŏl* of cultivated land and twenty slaves.

⁵ T’aejong 02/04/09.

⁶ The legitimacy of Yi Chiran’s rank as a Chosŏn noble may be most accurately gauged by the treatment accorded his progeny. Yi’s sons retained their father’s official titles and lands, and also served as high-ranking Chosŏn military officials.

In addition to this great openness toward and push for naturalization of those on its northern borders, Chosŏn also maintained contacts with those across the seas. As was the case in late-Koryŏ, commercial and diplomatic visits to the Korean court from places such as the Ryukyus, Thailand, and Indonesia continued. Chosŏn-Ryukyuan relations were particularly numerous, and began immediately after T'aejo's coronation in 1392. In later official correspondence, both sides bear witness to a system of international relations that, while perhaps appearing hermetic to the West, ran relatively smoothly and according to its own internal logic.

A letter from Sejong to the king of Ryukyu provides a good example of Korea's views on the subject: "Our country had for generations esteemed friendship with your country. Now Your Majesty, mindful of maintaining the good will shown by our predecessors, has sent us envoys with presents, further indicating your interest in [wish for] continued communication and intercourse. We accept these with deep gratitude and appreciation."⁷ Notice (as did his Ryukyuan counterparts in earlier correspondence) Sejong's stressing the normalcy of and historical precedent for such amicable relations conducted among nations that, though physically and politically separate, operated in a common cultural milieu.

A final, and particularly graphic in light of the prevailing historiography, example that includes both naturalization and the remarkably open attitude of Korea toward even its fiercest "enemies" from across the sea is embodied in the person of Kim Ch'ungsŏn (1571-1642). Kim was born Japanese. He first came to Korea in 1592 as a mortal antagonist, leading Japanese troops as part of Hideyoshi's initial invasion. But before a year had passed, and despite overwhelming Japanese victories, he sought out Pak Chin (?-1597), the Korean military Commander-in-Chief of Kyŏngsang province, and voluntarily surrendered. Contrary perhaps to contemporary expectations and conventional wisdom, he was not treated as a barbaric Japanese war criminal, but was welcomed, pardoned, and given a high position in the Korean military. And

⁷ Sejong 13/11/15 as quoted in Atsushi Kobata and Mitsugu Matsuda, *Ryukyuan Relations with Korea and South Sea Countries*, (Kyoto: Atsushi Kobata, 1969), p. 9.

he was not alone. One biographical entry concerning his considerable exploits as a Korean military man reads as follows: “Following this (naturalization), he was granted an official position for his impressive victories in Kyōngju, Ulsan, and the surrounding areas. During the second wave of the Hideyoshi Invasions in 1597, together with Son Siro and a number of other former Japanese officers, he fought in the Battle of Ŭiryōng where he rendered much meritorious service.”⁸ This shows that he and other former Japanese fought as Koreans against their former countrymen almost immediately following their naturalization. Though this may appear nearly unconscionable, both to the Japanese who switched loyalties and to the Koreans who embraced them, when viewed through the contemporary prism of nationalism, it makes perfect sense in historical context. In fact, both acts were possible for the same reason—both the Japanese who sought naturalization in and were willing to fight for Korea and the great majority of Koreans themselves all subscribed to the same view of the world and of civilization. Furthermore, common and earnest participation and belief in this universal and transnational civilization was sufficient for absolution from all previous beliefs no matter how heterodox, and superceded racial and national differences.

For the valor he displayed in this battle, the Chosŏn court bestowed upon him the title of *Kasŏn taebu*. Later, on the recommendation of such notable figures as General-in-Chief Kwŏn Yul (1537-1599) and Royal Inspector Han Chun’gyŏm (1557-1627), the king granted him a Korean surname and a given name, and promoted him to the position of *Chahŏn taebu*. Korean sources give Kim’s original name as Sayaga 沙也加, a random trio of Chinese characters, devoid of meaning and used only for their phonetic value. The characters comprising both his Korean given name, chosen by the King, and his pen name, chosen by Kim himself, stand in stark contrast to the purely phonetic Sayaga, their meaning signifying everything and their pronunciation an afterthought. Kim chose Mohadang 慕夏堂, or “the scholar who yearns for

⁸ Yi Hyŏnjae et al., eds., *Han’guk minjok munhwa taebaek kwa sajŏn* [Encyclopedia of Korean Culture],

Hsia,” for his pen name. Kim’s choice of sobriquet also expresses his motivation for leaving Japan (barbarity) and joining Korea (civilization). Hsia represents not China as a present and mutable political entity, but China as an eternal and universal culture and civilization. The Hsia dynasty may be mythical and never have actually existed as a physical political and racial entity. This lack of a concrete geographical location and racial composition further facilitates its role both as a literal utopia and as a universal paragon. Although the barbarian Manchus would not topple the Ming for another 52 years,⁹ Kim already believed that Korea was the true repository and conservator of this universal “Chinese” civilization and culture. The name bestowed by the King affirms Kim’s motivations and desires. His given name is composed of characters representing two of the primary and transnational Confucian values—忠 loyalty and 善 goodness. As such, the name itself provides an enduring and salient badge of his unimpeachable qualifications for inclusion as a Korean. Subscribing to and sharing in these sorts of universal values, and not present notions of race and nation, were the prerequisites for membership in Korean society, and, by extension, in the “civilized world.”

Certainly the Hideyoshi Invasions, which spanned in different levels of intensity the years 1592-1598, from Japan, and the Manchu Invasions, which occurred in 1627 and again in 1636, did force Chosŏn into a relatively reclusive stance. To the east, the Japanese had violently displayed designs on the continent and a willingness to shed Korean blood in order to achieve them. The Koreans had little indication of whether or when the Japanese might come again. As for the Ming Chinese who had aided Korea against Japan, they had been toppled by the Manchu “barbarians” who established the Ch’ing dynasty. Thus China, which had been a center of both classical civilization and military aid, was now not only overseen by an uncivilized nomadic tribe but also posed a military threat.

vol. 5 (Seoul: Han’guk chŏngsin munhwa yŏn’guwŏn, 1991), p. 10.

⁹ Kim enjoyed a long and illustrious career as a Korean military officer. He distinguished himself for another 40 years in defending Korea’s northern borders from various Manchu invasions. Due to the protest

Despite such difficulties, however, Chosŏn continued to participate in international relations. As seen above, there were numerous contacts with the Ryukyus. Lingering mistrust notwithstanding, relations with Japan were normalized a mere eight years later in 1606. Until the close of the nineteenth century there were no further hostilities between the two countries. Diplomatic missions and trade, albeit on a restricted basis, progressed smoothly. This continued a long tradition of Korean cultural influence on Japan. As for the dynastic changes in China, following the humiliating, yet brief, invasions at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Chosŏn was left largely in peace, so long as it continued with traditional relations. As mentioned above, the Manchus, though they had conquered China, were not bent on revolutionizing the East Asian world order. Instead, they took a lead part in it and, in the process, were largely Sinicized. Prior to these countries' encounters with the West, their relationships, and their concept and practice of international relations, remained essentially stable and peaceful.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

One of the largest and most important differences between premodern and early modern Korea lies in the criteria for inclusion. In premodern Korea, the divide was not made along racial or national lines. There was no significant discussion of Korean race versus foreign. Nor was there any discussion of a "yellow race" versus a "white" or "black" one (This held true even through Korea's initial encounters with the West.¹⁰). Rather, a single demarcation line was drawn between the categories of "civilized" and "barbarian." Thus, inclusion in Korea and in the "civilized" world was granted or withheld regardless of race or color and solely on the basis of belief and practice.

of a Ching official, he was finally relieved of his official position in 1643, at the age of 72. Kim retired to Taegu where he continued to work independently on village compacts and local education.

¹⁰ The accounts concerning/of men such as Jan Janse Weltevre and Hendrik Hamel and his men bear this out.