

Depictions of the Koryŏ Period (918-1392) in General Korean History in the West

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Abstract

This paper examines how the Koryŏ period has been depicted in two recent general history books published in the West. The books place Koryŏ in the greater context of East Asia with an emphasis on Koryŏ's relations with both China and Japan, and they also highlight cultural elements such as music, arts, philosophy. However, they ignored scholarly research published in Korean language, and by relying completely on the outdated works in English, they perpetuated factual mistakes and biased perspectives. The most serious problem is the China-centered and overly culturalistic interpretation of the premodern East Asian interstate relations. Koryŏ is merely taken as a "tributary state" that "served" the Chinese empire without consideration of the multi-centered East Asian world order. Thus, the books often over-emphasize the role of Song China while ignoring important role played by Koryŏ and other non-Han Chinese states such as Khitan, Jin, and the Tangut Xia. The pre-18th century history of Korea often received only cursory treatment in college courses in the US, and this led to a "confirmation" of the biased view of pre-modern Korea as merely a copy of the "larger and superior" Chinese civilization. There remains a need for general history books that are able to convey a more accurate and comprehensive understanding and appreciation of the crucial period in Korean history.

I. Introduction

After suffering through the harsh colonial rule and the civil war in the 20th century, Korea has emerged as a major economic power, and there is now a recent cultural phenomenon known as *hallyu* or the “Korean Wave.” Many foreigners began to show interest in Korean popular culture as well as history and language, and a number of colleges in the West now offer several courses in Korean language, history, art, and literature. We have also seen a very encouraging development in Korean studies overseas as talented graduate students have enrolled in advanced degree programs. However, teaching and research on Korea in the West are still overwhelmingly focused on the modern period [after mid-19th century]. Korean history courses offer only superficial treatment and at times simply omit the “traditional” period. Such lack of “traditional Korea” may lead to “confirmation” of the bias of many Western scholars [especially those specializing in Chinese and/or Japanese studies] who take premodern Korea as a “copy” of the larger and superior Chinese civilization.

Until the 1990s, most college courses in the US used *A New History of Korea* (1984), a translation of Yi Kibaek’s *Han’guksa sillon*. The book had been intended for Korean readers, and despite wonderful job of the translators, it was not always received enthusiastically by students and instructors. A few years later, there came a revised version of the book with the title of *Korea Old and New: A History* (1991) in which a number of Western scholars had expanded coverage of the modern age while shortening further the pre-modern history. Thus, there remained an acute need for books that can be utilized for traditional Korean history. Finally in 2006 we find a couple of new Korean history books that covered the traditional period more in depth: Keith Pratt’s *Everlasting Flower: a History of Korea* (Reaktion, 2006), and Michael J. Seth’ *A Concise History of Korea: From The Neolithic Period Through The Nineteenth Century* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

In the ongoing efforts for globalization of Korean studies, proper understanding of Korea’s premodern past is undoubted one of the utmost importance. One cannot overemphasize the need for accurate and proper accounts of Korean history that can be utilized in

introductory courses in the West. Here I analyze contents and problems in the above mentioned books in the hope for better scholarly collaborations in the future. Due to space and time constraints, my discussion is limited to the contents that deal directly with the Koryŏ period [918-1392].

II. Coverage of the Koryŏ Period

Michael Seth's *A Concise History of Korea* is the only general history book devoted exclusively on the pre-19th century. The book is composed of 9 chapters and the Koryŏ period is covered in chapters 4 and 5 that together take 45 pages, representing about 20% of the 225 pages. The Chapter Four is titled simply as "Koryŏ," but it covers only the pre-1170 military coup. Its contents include "The New Koryŏ State," "Koryŏ in East Asia," "Internal Politics 935-1170," "Koryŏ Culture," "Koryŏ Society," and the *Samguk sagi* ["History of the Three Kingdoms"]. At the end of the chapter is the translation of King Taejo's *Hunyo sipcho* 訓要十條 ["Ten Injunctions"] taken from the *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization, Volume I: From Early Times to the Sixteenth Century* (Peter H. Lee, ed., Columbia University Press, 1993). The title of the Chapter Five is "Military Rulers and Mongol Invaders," and it covers "Military Rule" "Sŏn Buddhism," Koryŏ and Japan, "Korea, Japan, and Feudal Europe," "the Mongol Invasions," "the Legacy of the Mongol Period," "Late Koryŏ Society," "The End of the Koryŏ," "Late Koryŏ Culture," and "The Rise of Neo-Confucianism." The chapter also includes an episode of the Manjŏk's rebellion from the *Koryŏsa* as translated in the *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*. While one cannot expect an in-depth and balanced account of 500 year history of Koryŏ in mere 40 plus pages, Seth appears to have successfully conveyed many important facts and interpretations of Koryŏ history. It is more detailed and nuanced than Patricia Buckley Ebrey, Anne Walthall, and James Palais's *East Asia: A Cultural, Social, and Political History* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006), one of the more popular Asian history textbook used in US college courses.

Seth tried to approach the Koryŏ history from a greater East Asian perspective. For

example, he points out the similarity of the relatively high social status of women in Koryŏ with that of Heian Japan. He states that “high status and rights of women in Koryŏ was ... in many ways ... similar to Japan in the Heian period” and further attributes such similarity to “common origins of the two peoples” (93). Seth does not offer much credible evidence for such claims, but it brings attention to the relations between Korea and Japan during the Koryŏ period. Seth also claims that “many of the important transformations in Japanese feudal society took place simultaneously in Korea” (104). There remains much controversy regarding the “feudal” character of Koryŏ, but the “failure” of Korea to fully adopt the feudal system similar to Japan or Europe may be a topic of great interest to other Asian historians and readers in the West.

Keith Pratt’s *Everlasting Flower: A History of Korea* (2006) covers the entire span of Korean history down to the 20th century. Pratt’s specialization is in China, but he has shown much interest in Korean studies, especially the music and art of traditional Korea. Pratt, along with Richard Rutt and James Hoare had compiled *Korea: A Historical and Cultural Dictionary* in 1999. Unlike the majority of previous works that focus mostly on politics and international relations, Pratt approaches Korean history from cultural perspective and devoted a great deal to music, art, and philosophy. He makes a conscious effort to incorporate recent research in archaeology and art history. Pratt’s book covers Korean history from the ancient period to the 20th century in three parts and nine chapters. Part I takes readers from the earliest to the 18th century, and the chapter 4 on the Koryŏ period takes up only 30 pages out of more than 300 total pages or 10%. Thus, the coverage of Koryŏ is much less than most other history books. The title of the chapter four is “Koryŏ, 918-1392: The Struggle for Independence,” which seems to suggest that Koryŏ’s independence was constantly threatened.

The chapter four contains a number of major historical developments in each century during the Koryŏ period. The tenth century included Wang Kŏn, the *Ten Injunctions*, Confucianism and Civil Service Examinations, political system, Buddhism and music, and Koryŏ-Song relations. The eleventh century covered the war with the Khitan and Koryŏ’s cultural interactions with other states. The twelfth century focused on the rise of the Jurchens, *Kaoli tujing* 高麗圖經, land system, the military coup of 1170, and the political

dictatorship of the Ch'oe Family. The thirteenth century contained mainly a discussion of Mongol invasions and domination, expedition against Japan, and cultural exchanges. Finally, the fourteenth century dealt with the transmission of neo-Confucianism, the reign of King Kongmin, and dynastic changes in Korea and China. Finally in a section called "Cultural Developments," Pratt details compilations of the *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa*, printing technology, writings of Yi Kyubo, and the Koryŏ celadon. Pratt also provides more details on Koryŏ culture by including a number of photographs on masks, Confucian rituals, *Tripitaka Koreana*, and celadon.

III. Factual Mistakes in the Accounts of the Koryŏ period

While these new general history books on Korea written in English are welcome and praiseworthy, the most serious problem is that the authors appear to have more or less ignored research by Korean scholars published in Korean language. They relied almost exclusively on a few books and articles, some of them decades old, published in English in the West, and the result has been reproduction of old mistakes and incorrect and biased assumptions. Some are simple factual mistakes, but others may be serious enough to distort our view of Koryŏ history.

A few examples of factual mistakes in Seth's book include referencing Xiao Sunning as "the Khitan ruler" (83), whereas Xiao was actually a commander-in-chief of the invading army. It was said that "the Jurchens claimed Koguryŏ ancestry" (85), but according to *Koryŏsa* or *Jinshi*, the Jurchens claimed their ancestry back to Silla or Koryŏ, not Koguryŏ. In the twelfth century, when the Jurchens replaced the Khitan as the new power in Manchuria, it was described that Yi Chagyŏm and his party tried "to align the dynasty with the rising Jurchen state of Jin in Manchuria and Northern China" (86), whereas "[h]is opponents wanted to maintain good relations with Song rather than submit to yet another northern barbarian state" (86). This is a gross simplification of the foreign policy as mere reflection of political power struggle between two "parties" without careful consideration of the domestic and diplomatic political complexities.

Seth also wrote that “perhaps slaves accounted for up to one-third of the population,” (91) in Koryŏ. This figure of the percentage of “slaves” appears to be a backward projection of the Chosŏn data as there is no real historical data for the Koryŏ period. There have been numerous books and articles on the institution of “slavery” during Koryŏ, but there is yet no consensus on the exact number and nature of slaves in Koryŏ. The idea that one can simply project history of Chosŏn onto the Koryŏ period is a very dangerous one, as it may imply no real progress from Koryŏ to Chosŏn, the basic contention of the so-called “stagnation theory” of the colonial historiography. Another problem is the use of the English word “slave” to denote “nobi” 奴婢 in Korean historical records. Due to some fundamental differences between the concept of slavery in the west and the system of bondage in Korea, many Korean and several foreign scholars have used the “nobi” instead of translated word “slave.”

Pratt’s book also contains a number of mistakes and unsubstantiated assertions. For example, he claimed that the family of Wang Kŏn “came from the north-western island of Kanghwa” (86) without any documentary annotation. He also wrote that Koryŏ “had established a dozen independent schools (*sŏwŏn*)” (88), but the *sŏwŏn* in Korea was established only after the mid-Chosŏn period. The claim that “the balance of trade in official gifts stood economically in China’s favor” (95) is contradicted by many detailed studies that show Koryŏ actually benefitted more from the exchanges. The statement that Song Huizong honored King Yejong of Koryŏ “with the title of ‘true king’” (96) is also incorrect as Huizong merely removed the prefix *kwŏn* or *quan* (權) [“provisional”] from the official titles given to Yejong, thereby signifying that the king was now truly vested with the royal power. There are other examples of over-generalization such as the claim that Yi Sŏnggye’s “allegiance to the Ming dynasty” “was a Confucian step” (107).

The books also suffer from numerous romanization mistakes. Both books also employ “Yalu” and “Tumen” exclusively instead of “Amnok” and “Tuman” for rivers that form the boundary between Korean peninsula and Manchuria, although their maps did use the “East Sea” [with “the Sea of Japan” in parenthesis]. As these books were intended as

introductory or general history for beginning students, it is regrettable to see only the modern Chinese pronunciation of important place names. Seth even used the term “Yi dynasty” (99), a remnant of Japanese colonial historiography of late 19th and early 20th century. These problems seem to stem in part from the uncritical acceptance and adoption of the contents that had been published decades earlier in the West.

IV. Problem of the China-centered View

The works by a few specialists in premodern Korean history in the West are still too few in scope and depth to provide adequate and comprehensive basis for the writing of general Korean history. Thus, one must consult and use substantial amount of research by Korean scholars, but as mentioned above, these two books ignored many new findings by Korean scholars have all been ignored. For example, Seth’s description of the Mongol invasion of Korea [covered in the pages 106-109] is basically a summary of William E. Henthorn’s *Korea: The Mongol Invasions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1963) that was published more than half a century earlier. This is not to critique any problem or shortcoming in the research by Western scholars but to point out the potential problem of perpetuating the existing bias and mistakes. When the research and perspectives of Korean scholars are excluded, it can also result in the China- and Japan-centered views of Korea in the US, where Chinese and Japanese studies have dominated Asian history field. The most obvious examples can be found in the descriptions of Koryŏ’s foreign relations based on the “tribute system” and its participation in the “East Asian World Order.”

However, the “tribute system” model simply reduces Koryŏ as a “loyal” tributary state under the domination by the “empires” in China and Manchuria such as the Khitan, Song, Jin, and Mongol. Koryŏ would remain an object of not only of their political domination but also a willing recipient of the ideological, cultural superiority of “suzerain” states. While there have been much critical rethinking about the tribute system, especially with China’s relations with northern nomadic tribes, Korea was believed to be the “almost the ideal model” (John K. Fairbank, “A Preliminary Framework.” In John K. Fairbank, ed.,

The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 11-12, 16). For example, the aforementioned book *East Asia: A Cultural, Social, and Political History* correctly assessed the reality of international relations during the Song as “China Among Equals,” but it continued to identify Koryŏ as “tributary state” of the “Chinese Dynasties” without careful consideration of the actual nature of the interstate relations between Korea and its larger neighbors to the north.

Even as scholars continue to hold on to the validity of the “tribute system” model, it is inadequately equipped to provide the proper understanding of interstate relations of the time. There were new geopolitical settings, open conflicts and negotiations, substantially different from the earlier and later periods. While the language and rituals was typically Han Chinese, many practices and policy strategies in foreign relations had been shaped by both Koryŏ and the China. The claimed of the “almost the ideal model” is a direct result of overemphasis and exaggeration of ideological and cultural aspects in pre-modern East Asian interstate relations. There is an urgency to reexamine the true meaning of the “tributary state” during the period of “China among equals.”

The tribute system model has been much discussed and criticized by many recent Korean works, but Seth and Pratt simply repeat the old “theoretical” assumption that the suzerain-vassal relationship was instrumental in the rise of other dynasties as foreign rulers as they would strive to achieve imperial status took place within the institutional framework of the tribute system. Thus, we find Seth’s account of the unification of the Later Three Kingdoms and the establishment of the Koryŏ dynasty as a result of the “nomad threat posed by the Khitans” (75) and influence from the “strong unified state that Tang represented” (75-76). However, the multistate system and treaty relations of the period show that the rise and founding of independent states may have been possible only with the breakdown of the tributary system. Moreover, when Koryŏ completed political unification of the Korean peninsula in 935, the Khitan did not yet represent a threat, and the Tang was an empire in name only for several decades before its eventual and official death in 907.

The tribute system often fails to appreciate or ignores the multi-centered geopolitical

reality from the 11th to the rise of the Mongol empire in the early 13th century. Though smaller, the states of Koryŏ and the Xia tried to remain free of continental entanglements and skillfully played one against the other. Khitan military threats intimidated both Koryŏ and the Xia to formally submit to the Liao suzerainty, but they remained vassal states only in name. The Khitans did not gain any military advantage from its suzerain status, and nominal acceptance of the Khitan suzerainty never completely barred Koryŏ or the Xia from dealing directly with the Song. Indeed, Koryŏ's acceptance of Khitan suzerainty never shielded "the Koreans from multi-state reality" as asserted by Michael C. Rogers ("The Chinese World Order in Its Transmural Extension: The Case of Chin and Koryŏ" *Korean Studies Forum* 4 (1978), 10). On the contrary, Koryŏ and the Xia asserted its own ethnocentric worldview in the Northeast Asian multi-state system.

In Seth and Pratt's accounts of the Koryŏ, there is no discussion of recent and ongoing critical rethinking of the tribute system model. They remain firmly within the framework of the typical tribute system model still prevalent in the West. Thus, Seth claimed that "Koreans generally accepted the idea that there was only one emperor, the Chinese emperor" and that Koryŏ king' imperial "pretension was abandoned when the Song dynasty was able to reassert Chinese authority in the region" (78). It is not surprising that Seth would state that "Song culture and its diplomacy did exercise considerable influence on Korea" (83). On the other hand, there is not a single mention of the Song's military troubles and diminished political influence, and that Song never had much political leverage with Koryŏ. Indeed, the glaring example of break in the official relations between Song and Koryŏ for more than four decades was never brought up. There is no trace of Koryŏ's independent and assertive foreign policy. Koryŏ was basically depicted as a passive "tributary" state.

Seth wrote that Koryŏ "became a tributary state of Liao as it had in the past been a tributary of Tang" (84). As Koryŏ had never been a tributary of the Tang, Seth may have assumed a similarity between Silla's "submission" to the Tang and Koryŏ's "submission" to the Khitan. The notion of Korea as a tributary state continues to even to the late Koryŏ period as Seth sees that Mongol domination was also "not a radical break with tradition" (109). When the new Ming dynasty and Koryŏ established official contacts, they were

viewed as reestablishment of “the old tributary relationship between Korea and the Chinese court” (112). Such assertions of “continuity” of the “tribute system” obscure our understanding of the changing and complex nature of interstate relations throughout the Koryŏ period.

Seth’s coverage of the Mongol period also appears to have been based on an assumption that the Mongol empire is the “Yuan Dynasty” in Chinese history. Fundamental differences between Han-Chinese and Nomadic [or “Conquest Dynasties”] tradition were ignored. One must not simply assume that the period of Mongol rule is an integral part in the general histories of China. The linear approach of continuity of Chinese political tradition is inadequate. For the late Koryŏ period under the Mongol domination, we must keep in mind that the history of the Mongol conquest and rule in many ways transcends Chinese history. Of course, the Mongol or Yuan Empire was the time when Mongol and Chinese history overlapped, and Mongol-centered and China-centered perspectives both have historical significance. However, Mongol and Chinese history were not one and the same, especially before and after the Mongol rule of China. It is truly unfortunate that such Sinocentric bias and prejudice remain in general Korean history books intended for introductory courses.

Pratt also seems to take Koryŏ as a part of Sinocentric world as he quotes works of Michael Rogers that reveal Sinocentric view as in the phrase like “cut the Sino-Korean *umbilical cord* with fire and sword” [italics mine] (94). He states that “Korean kings, unlike Chinese emperors, did not generally bolster their position by claiming a heavenly mandate for their actions” (89). Again, new researches by Korean scholars have detailed much more assertive picture of Koryŏ’s place in complex geopolitical configuration of the time.

Pratt makes a great effort to put greater emphasis on the cultural aspects of Korean history. However, there is much highlighting of Song’s influence rather than Koryŏ’s native tradition. It is true that Koryŏ adopted and integrate their political culture with a seemingly sinicized institutional and governmental structure. For example, the names of bureaucracy give the impression of a high level of sinicization, but their actual function and operation

was geared to, and shaped by, Koryŏ's own domestic political interests. Moreover, just because the Han Chinese provided the administrative tools and ideological instruments of centralization, one must not equate Koryŏ's effort to centralize power with sinicization. There was always tension between "native" and "outside" traditions as in adopting political institutions and cultural pursuits. While many Koryŏ elites followed and admired the Han Chinese literate tradition, there were equally strong efforts to maintain an identity separate from China. These tensions, one of the central themes in Koryŏ history, were not adequately presented here. Any comprehensive treatment of Koryŏ history must include in-depth accounts of not just Song China but also the Khitan, Jurchen, Tangut, and Mongol. It is not enough to simply say that they were nomadic and aggressive. In short, there is a real danger that many Western readers may remember Koryŏ's "imitation" of Song China rather than unique development of Korean history during this crucial time.

The great efforts by Seth and Pratt to produce general history of Korea should be welcomed, but there remain serious problems in their description of the Koryŏ period. They overemphasized the Chinese cultural influence and failed to appreciate the fact that cultural interaction in Northeast Asia was never flowed in one direction only as the Chinese historical sources seem to imply. Foreign scholars, especially those specializing in Chinese and Japanese history, often lack linguistic proficiency to read works in Korean language, and one of the most serious consequences has been their tendency to uncritically accept the notions of acculturation and sinicization. There remains a very typical scholarly tendency to see China as the center of everything in East Asian history and to ignore the agency and perspectives of the "peripheral" entities and the reverse flow and contributions of ideas and innovations from the "periphery." The acceptance of the Han Chinese institutions does not signify a capitulation to a superior or advanced Chinese culture. The study of pre-modern East Asian interstate relations is not merely an inquiry into the Chinese viewpoints as reflected in Chinese historical records. We still look forward to a general history of pre-modern Korea based on balanced and unbiased perspectives of the greater East Asian historical tradition.