

Sociopolitical History of Chosŏn: Status of the Field*

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Sociopolitical history of Chosŏn Korea as a field has featured a wide range of interpretive frameworks in the modern era. Colonialism, nationalism, Marxism, and globalization are just a few of major forces that have shaped the field. The number of scholars outside Korea who work on sociopolitical history of Chosŏn remains small, but international exchange of views among those who work in the field is livelier than ever before, in part thanks to a widely shared perception that researchers who publish in English have attained a critical mass. Regrettably, a comprehensive, critical presentation of Chosŏn history in English is long overdue, as the multi-volume *Cambridge History of Korea* first proposed three decades ago is only now getting under way.

As one of the three editors of the Chosŏn volume, I would like to discuss the project by offering a broad, overview of the state of the field of Chosŏn sociopolitical history. I will begin by first providing review history of the field, as far back as a century ago. Then I will discuss organization and content of the Chosŏn volume of the *Cambridge History of Korea*. While articulating the author's own understanding of the topic, it is the intention of the volume editors that each chapter will also be mindful of modern history of the research on the chapter topic as a

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relevant context.

Japan's colonization of Korea in particular made a strong impact on the modern historiography. A century ago when Japan annexed Korea, official Confucian historiography legitimizing the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) as the successor and the new recipient of the mandate of heaven lost practitioners. Sociopolitical history in particular attracted attention of colonial historiography, which rationalized Japanese takeover of a supposedly backward Korea mired in a pre-feudal stage of development—contrasted against modern Japan and the West featuring booming capitalism and industrialization. Initial response of indignant Korean scholars such as Sin Ch'aeho (1880–1936) was an emotional, nationalistic argument, urging their countrymen to find inspiration in more glorious chapters of earlier Korean history, generally the ancient period. Exceptional in this regard is An Hwak (1884–1946) whose search for ideas and institutions relevant to modernizing Korea did not exclude the Chosŏn period. The nationalist scholarship's interest in better understanding Korean culture, folklore, geography, and language, as exemplified by works of Ch'oe Namsŏn (1890–1957), received a boost in the 1930s when a generation of Korean positivist historians, such as Yi Pyŏngdo (1896–1989), acquired more empirical, modern historical methodology while studying in Japan and went on to lay the foundation for training future generations of academic historians in South Korea. At the same time, other Korea historians, such as Paek Namun (1894–1979), sought to demonstrate that Chosŏn Korea was indeed a feudal society and by doing so, he laid the foundation for Marxist scholarship on Korean history.

Even after the Japanese colonial rule ended in 1945, historical scholarship in divided Korea coped primarily with the legacies of colonialism, at least until the emergence of Korean Studies as a larger field in the West. While shunning more overtly Marxist terminology utilized

by intellectual heirs of Paek Namun in North Korea, until the 1990s, mainstream South Korean scholarship accepted *prima facie* a Hegelian notion of history as progress. From such perspective, many South Korean historians such as Yi Kibaek (1924–2004) sought to identify new sociopolitical forces for periodizing Korean history—writing about the likes of *sarim* (“rusticated literati”) and *hun’gu* (“meritorious old”) factions for early Chosŏn. In comparison, Kim Yongsŏp (b. 1931) elaborated on earlier works of Paek Namun by understanding late Chosŏn as the time when feudal Korea produced two different courses of socioeconomic reform: one privileging peasantry, another limiting the change to protect the landed interest. Presenting a more positive narrative of Chosŏn sociopolitical history and its potentials as a modern nation-state, to a degree, scholars such as Han Yŏnggu (b. 1938) and Yi T’ae-Jin (b. 1943) steered the field away from the Chosŏn dynasty for the Japanese colonial rule.

Since the 1960s, Western scholarship on Korean history has demonstrated that some claims made by Korean scholarship stand on less-than-solid empirical foundation. In the 1970s and ‘80s, a wide range of topics fueled lively debates, including status hierarchy, the definition of *yangban*, nature of major political upheaval, social mobility, and local society. A pioneering figure who helped to spark these debates is Edward W. Wagner (1924–2001), who closely analyzed examination rosters and genealogical records. Offering more sweeping pronouncements, James B. Palais (1934–2006) highlighted both stability and conservatism of Chosŏn sociopolitical order as maintained by a strong aristocracy keeping monarchs at bay. Then in the last three decades, while actively engaging evolving Korean scholarship, Western scholars such as John B. Duncan (b. 1945)—who weighed elements of change and continuity vis-à-vis the Koryŏ-Chosŏn dynastic change—have increasingly found inspiration in works in other fields and disciplines, applying relevant theories and finding new subjects for historical inquiry.

Certainly not claiming to issue the final word on every major issue, the editors of the Chosŏn volume of the *Cambridge History of Korea* nonetheless intend it to reflect the depth and breadth of scholarship on Chosŏn sociopolitical history. Accordingly, we want each chapter will strike a balance between critical engagement of the literature on the topic of the chapter and articulating the chapter author's own argument. The majority of Chosŏn sociopolitical historians working in English received their academic trainings at English-language institutions, and for the most part, backgrounds and current affiliations of contributors to the volume reflect this. With no contributor authoring more than one chapter, the volume comprises seventeen content chapters, and every author is either a mid-career or a senior scholar.

Of the seventeen, the first six will be chronological political histories. Since no particular periodization can satisfy all scholars, we were mindful of the reigns of monarchs in dividing the Chosŏn period of some half millennium into six segments—making the chronological coverage scope increasingly narrower for more recent time spans. The six chapters are (1) “Establishment of Chosŏn Political System, 1392–1495” by John B. Duncan (UCLA); (2) “Nadir of Royal Power, Emergence of Hereditary Factionalism, and Wars with Japan, 1495–1608” by Yong-ho Choe (University of Hawaii at Manoa); (3) “Wars with Manchus and Apogee of Factional Strife, 1608–1724” by Seung B. Kye (Sogang University); (4) “Dynastic Renovation, 1724–1800” by Eugene Y. Park (University of Pennsylvania); (5) “Royal In-Law Governance, 1800–1864” by Sun Joo Kim (Harvard University); and (6) “Korea and Imperialism, 1864–1910” by Han Cheolho (Dongguk University).

The rest are topical chapters, eleven in all, and in selecting them, we were mindful of more traditional subject categories as well as more recent research areas. Among the eleven, five will have significant amount of content relating to social history: (7) “Institutional History” by

Anders Karlsson (University of London); (8) “Class” by Oh Soo-chang (Seoul National University); (9) “Gender” by Jisoo M. Kim (George Washington University); (10) “Discontent and Uprisings” by George L. Kallander (Syracuse University); and (11) “Daily Life” by Michael J. Pettid (Binghamton University).

Once the Cambridge University Press instructs the volume editors to move forward with soliciting chapters, we intend to organize an annual meeting of chapter contributors. At such meetings, we hope to make sure that all authors make progress with the overall mission of the volume in mind. Also, each meeting will address a range of stylistic issues, including terminology translation. It is our hope of the volume editors that not just sociopolitical history but the Chosŏn dynasty as covered by our volume will offer a cohesive narrative and a critical discussion by the current English-language scholarship on Chosŏn Korea.