

Book Notes

Under the Ancestors' Eyes. Kinship, Status, and Locality in Premodern Korea by Martina Deuchler. Cambridge (MA) and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015. xvi, 609pp.

This is a massive work, certainly in terms of its volume and scope, but also in the sheer amount of challenging insights it presents. Its aim is to trace the evolution of the Korean descent group through history, from the Silla period (before unification) to the late Chosŏn period. More specifically, the work purports to show the durability of the descent group as the central agent of social and political life, providing continuity across dynastic change. This does not mean that there was no change in the composition of the elite descent groups, but that power was always framed in terms of ascription (status), severely limiting the possibility of the sudden emergence of new groups to challenge the power of the leading descent groups. The author refers to this as an “indigenous kinship ideology” (398) that provided the basis for social stability, taking precedence even over the political realm (406).

This conclusion is certain to cause some controversy, but to this reviewer it is in fact not the chief contribution of the book. It is impossible to condense the flow of history in a few observations; while it may well be true that in Korean history, “the ‘state’ could be no more than an extension of society” (397) and that this society was formed by descent-based elites, this is a level of abstraction that is difficult to either ascertain or disprove. Moreover, a similar statement could surely be made about many other societies. Instead, what I found most enlightening in this work is the “thick description” of Chosŏn society. It is in the close-up analysis of Chosŏn society at the grassroots level that I could find its

most trenchant insights.

In terms of methodology, the author zooms in on two particular regions, Andong and Namwŏn. This is due to the availability of sources on the one hand, and to the fact that each region absorbed and developed the Neo-Confucian lineage concept in slightly diverging ways on the other. The main sources used are two gazetteers: for Andong it is the *Yŏnggaji*, compiled by Kwŏn Ki in 1608, and for Namwŏn the *Yongsŏngji*, compiled almost a century later in 1702. Apart from these gazetteers, a wide array of other sources has been marshalled, from the veritable records to literary collections, from genealogies to documents (*komunsŏ*). Indeed, apart from archeological sources and Han'gŭl letters, virtually every possible source available has been mined.

As mentioned above this leads to fascinating insights into the construction of descent groups at the local level. Especially the chapters dealing with Andong in the fifteenth century describe in detail how powerful descent groups emerged through the fortuitous interplay of different factors. Besides social capital, *munjung* (descent groups) also needed economic means, and the pattern that emerges in this period is that talented and ambitious young men without means married into local families who possessed land and local influence. While it is well-established that uxorilocal marriage was one of the “native customs” that was hard to eradicate, it is still surprising to see that so many of the leading descent groups of Chosŏn, such as the Ŭisŏng Kim or the Kwangsan Kim, laid the foundations for later success by forming a firm economic basis through strategic marriage, moving into the villages of their in-laws (in-marrying son-in-laws; see pp. 97–101).

Chapter 6 explores in more detail how these landed estates were developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Besides acquiring land through marriage, estates were also expanded by opening up new land: this was a period of agricultural expansion and innovation in cultivation techniques. A crucial role was played by slaves (*nobi*): As the “hands and feet” of the elites, they played an essential part in bringing new land into cultivation and in managing the estates for their masters. It is therefore hardly surprising that pressure by local elites influenced the laws concerning slave status: Although the law initially forbade mixed unions (i.e. between commoners and slaves), in 1454 it was decreed that the offspring of unions between male slaves and female commoners would inherit their father's status. Elites actively encouraged such unions to ensure the maintenance of a sufficient number of slaves (139), and also took advantage of crisis times to draw new people into servitude (226).

This economic basis helps to explain the emergence of the *sarim* (rusticated elites; the author does not venture her own translation), a name given to scholars

who rejected the traditional avenue to power, the examination system, and prided themselves on the purity of their learning (73). Given their almost puritanical zeal, they often clashed with those who happened to be in power, leading to violent purges alternating with periods when *sarim* were called into office to revitalize the Confucian moral fiber of the government. More often than not, however, they found themselves out of power, and retired then to their landed estates. Thus they were not dependent on office to maintain their status as (local) elites (367), as long as they could perform the appropriate rites and act as community leaders, they could maintain their status and always had the option of returning to government. Still, if unable to obtain government office and the ensuing emoluments for several generations, for many lineages economic deprivation could eventually lead to the loss of their status (354).

Economic clout was of course but the necessary condition for status. To effectively project it the elites presented themselves as paragons of Confucian learning. Perhaps putting it in such terms is too cynical, suggesting that this learning was merely used as an instrument. The passion with which many defended their views on orthodoxy, even paying for it with their lives, shows the opposite is true. Yet one of the merits of this book is that it shows how Tohak did not exist in a vacuum, but had very practical implications: Tohak could act as a moralistic instrument of power (400). The community compact (*hyangyak*), for instance, ostensibly meant to edify the local populace, can also be seen as a means to maintain and legitimize social boundaries (232). This was especially true after the Imjin Wars, when Confucianization intensified.

This was not only for the purpose of maintaining social boundaries; Confucian orthodoxy was also invoked to keep landed estates together. By the seventeenth century, no more new land became available, so to prevent the partitioning of estates through shared inheritance, the patrilineal descent principle became much more important: by narrowing kin boundaries to lineal descendants, the lineage could keep land together and hence maintain its influence (402). An unintended consequence of the intensification of Confucian learning and morality is that the interpretation of what constitutes orthodoxy ossified along factional lines. The metaphysical speculation evident in the famous debates on the four beginnings and seven feelings, the author shows, was initially a minor debate (175), subordinate to discussions of the correct performance of ritual. Yet due to the formative influence of T'oegye Yi Hwang and Yulgok Yi I as inspiring mentors, the networks that formed among their respective disciples turned into political factions, each holding the metaphysics of its first mentor as primordial. At one point the dominance of the Westerners, invoking Yulgok as their mentor, was such that King Yōngjo (r. 1724–1776) was unaware of

T'oegye's ideas (335).

The economic basis of the Chosŏn elites and the interaction of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy with social needs have been highlighted here because they still jar with mainstream expositions on the Confucianization of Chosŏn as a purely ideological process. While most of the author's conclusions can also be confirmed by referring to Korean scholarship, the merit of this work is that it brings several lines of investigation together in a single narrative. The drawback is that the author tries to emphasize the continuity of Korean kinship ideology too much. The "indigenous descent groups of Silla" are briefly summarized in a few pages (18–21), but are clearly a projection backward of the author's views on Chosŏn elites. Our knowledge of society in unified Silla or early Koryŏ is simply too scant to state anything with certainty. Likewise, the end of the traditional status system in the nineteenth century is handled too summarily (392–396) to be convincing. The difficulties in maintaining their status and control over slaves for the *munjung* up until the end of Chŏngjo's reign (1776–1800) described in the rest of Chapter 14 ("The End of *Sajok* Supremacy?") are, however, fascinating, and much more convincing in explaining the erosion of the status system in late Chosŏn.

Sem Vermeersch
Professor, Department of Religious Studies
Seoul National University

Seoul: Memory, Reinvention, and the Korean Wave by Ross King.
Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018. 344 pp.

Ross King's *Seoul: Memory, Reinvention, and the Korean Wave* provides a sprawling tour of the South Korean capital, ranging from the city's Chosŏn-period history through to its cultural efflorescence at the center of the Korean Wave. King—a Professorial Fellow at the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne not to be confused with the Professor of Korean Language and Literature of the same name at the University of British Columbia—describes his work as an analysis of space and memory. Toward that end the author concerns himself with two dialectical relationships he sees as characterizing the city's modern history. The first of these is a "creative destruction" underpinning Seoul's growth propelled by "the imagining of a new form of nation" that crystallized around Japan's 1910 annexation of Korea and

the 1919 March First Movement, but that was “always already immanent in the culture.” The second is between “the local and the ‘hyperspatial,’” or the tension between the city’s local conditions and global capital that King describes as characteristic of the era of “late capitalism” (x).

The study is divided into six chapters. Chapter One provides a general introduction to Seoul and the study of memory. Chapters Two and Three attempt to situate the book’s larger project historiographically, providing an analysis of Korean history before and after 1945, respectively. Chapter Four, the most engaging of the book and also the closest to King’s own background in architectural and urban studies, provides a spatial analysis of the city through visual conceits such as the “boxland” and an analysis of the city’s expansion along major transit lines. Chapter Five discusses the Korean Wave, while Chapter Six provides a future-looking conclusion that describes Seoul as a post-national space at “the end of history” (257).

Notably, the book takes up a topic that has seen a great deal of scholarly interest in the past decade. Serious monographs on Seoul’s modern and early modern past in Korean include Ko Tonghwan’s *Chosŏn sidae Sŏul tosis* (History of Seoul in the Chosŏn period, 2007) on the city’s changes from the beginning through the close of the Chosŏn Dynasty, Kim Paekyŏng’s *Chibae wa konggan* (Space and domination, 2009) on struggles around the city’s remaking in the colonial period, and Yŏm Pokkyu’s *Sŏul ūi kiwon Kyŏngsŏng ūi t’ansaeng* (The Birth of Kyŏngsŏng, origin of Seoul, 2016) on colonial urban planning. In English, Todd Henry’s *Assimilating Seoul* (2014) has focused on the limitation of the Government-General’s assimilation projects by looking at contact zones in Seoul where Korean subjects came into contact with colonial authorities and programs. As a work that attempts to “read” the city through its contemporary spaces, King’s work in its best moments resembles something between a walking tour and a spatial history, somewhat reminiscent of Korean-language work such as Chŏn Uyong’s engaging *Sŏul ūn kipta* (Seoul is deep, 2008) or Cho Han’s *Sŏul, konggan ūi kiyŏk kiyŏk ūi konggan* (Seoul, space of memory, memory of space, 2013).

King’s book, however, is not always easy to situate in this larger body of literature. Indeed, the majority of the book constitutes a synthetic assemblage of English-language secondary literature that moves frequently between decades and topics. The references consulted here are often far removed from one another, and include writers from diverse fields such as anthropology, history, film and urban studies, as well as theoretical touchstones such as Frederick Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Nora, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Few topics are visited at length and through-lines are not always apparent, a structural issue

that could have perhaps been addressed with attention to Korean-language sources, or anchoring in English-language work from scholars who have written on Korean memory and urban space such as Hyung Il Pai, Guy Podoler, and Hyun Kyung Lee (in fairness to King much of Lee's work is new or forthcoming, but a good-faith effort to learn about people and trends in this field would have been helpful).

Korean studies is enriched by openness to new voices, and as a scholar who has previously worked on Thailand, King is poised to offer insights from far outside the mainstream currents of the field. But felicity with Korean language and history should be a first step toward such a contribution. Beyond issues with romanization (Chosŏn is romanized on page 25 as Joseon, Chōsen, and Chosun, a scattershot attempt that sheds doubt on the author's mastery of Han'gŭl) many of King's historical characterizations are troubling. The author writes, for example, that "Kim Il-sung and Syngman Rhee and their respective regimes... emerged from the two opposed ideologies of the maelstrom of 1930s and 1940s China" (72), and speaks in outdated culturalist terms such as Asian values (254), the Korean "dread of the past" (249), and the Buddhist "contemplative spirit" (253). Most troubling for an urban studies text are category errors such as the confusion of the history of *t'oji kuhoek chōngni* (land readjustment) and *chaegaebal* (urban redevelopment), a mix-up that suggests at best a shaky understanding of the two most fundamental urban planning mechanisms behind Seoul's growth in the twentieth century.

Such concerns notwithstanding, students of Korean urbanism will be interested in King's extensive bibliography, which offers a compendium of secondary English-language sources. The book is also replete with photographs and maps that help to give a sense of Seoul's layout and appearance. Neighborhood descriptions and biographies of notable persons such as Kim Swoogeun (Kim Sugŭn) should be handled cautiously but will be of interest to those with an interest in Korean modern architecture. Chapter Four in particular, with its account of the contrast between housing estates and the "boxland" of *pang* (e.g. *noraebang*) culture and medium-rise development in Seoul, helps to give a sense of the spatial and visual disjuncture the city presents to many a Western sojourner. Such urban "reading" will undoubtedly provoke strong opinions from those who are familiar with the city, but may also be useful to think with, as well as against, in future studies.

Russell Burge
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of History, Stanford University

Rewriting Revolution: Women, Sexuality, and Memory in North Korean Fiction by Immanuel Kim. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. 220pp.

It was in the 1980s that South Koreans began to study North Korean literature in earnest. Prior to that time, North Korean literature studies in South Korea was mainly supported by the government and took on a role of revealing the brutal reality in North Korea. In 1988, the prohibition on reading or studying the works of writers who had traveled to the North was lifted. Although North Korean art and literature are bound to the politics of the Cold War, South Korean scholars have acknowledged North Korean literature as an academic subject, endeavoring to apply objective and rational methodologies to understand it.

Scholars have turned to various methodologies in reading North Korean literature. South Korean scholars have critically studied "Juche Literary Theory" (*Juche munhak ron*) as a creative system, and have read the social, cultural, and political elements of the present age symptomatically. Considering the boundary between art and propaganda, North Korean literature is much more inclined toward the latter than the former.

As a researcher who has studied North Korean literature for quite some time, it is a great pleasure to encounter the fresh perspective presented in Immanuel Kim's *Rewriting Revolution: Women, Sexuality, and Memory in North Korean Fiction*. Like a pharmacon, which is can be both medicinal and poisonous, North Korean literature exhibits the characteristics of both propaganda and art. Readers can interpret the text with respect to an ideological state apparatus or in a completely different way. The more various the reading method, the more North Korean literature transcends repetitive meaning. Kim's *Rewriting Revolution* demonstrates one such new way of reading. The book eschews "the expectation of finding samizdat literature in North Korea" (2) often assumed by Western scholars. Instead, North Korean literature is presented as an echo of a propaganda machine. I am in favor of the author's opinion that "the virtue of an echo is that it is not the same and will never be the same as that which produced it" (3). This view may help to address South Korean scholars' attempts to interpret North Korean literature symptomatically. The book excels by moving beyond a symptomatic reading, attempting "to expose the limits of political discourse that is designed solely to transform individuals in fiction to become Kimilsungist revolutionaries" (6).

Immanuel Kim tries to show that "irony, instability of political meaning, undecidability of concepts, and play have always been at work within the

supposedly impervious political discourse in North Korean literature” (7) in “the portrayal of women, the nuclear family, and the state in literary works of the 1980s” (8) through Derrida’s deconstructive method. Kim also analyzes the projection of changing family values, sexual inequality, and gender norms as unique to North Korean fiction of the 1980s. According to Kim, North Korean literature in the 1980s, which explores women’s sexual desire, marital disillusionment, sexual discontentment between husband and wife, and divorce, shows that women’s agency has been a comprehensive part of the political framework of traditional gender identity.

Chapter One, “Desexualizing Motherhood: The Lost Referential of Women,” provides the historical context for forging a revolutionary family based on political discourse delineating the state-prescribed mother, Kang Pansök (Kim Il Sung’s mother). “The discourse of elevating Kim Il Sung and his family was a state-sponsored strategy of regulating and sterilizing the people of their sexual desires, implementing revolutionary love that transcends all carnal desires,” (25) writes Kim. Kang’s body was “the vessel that housed the savior of the DPRK, a tale analogous to the hagiography of Mother Mary” (29). Chapter 1 clearly shows that such political discourse is not about two women, Kang Pansök and Kim Chöngsuk, but about iconography, a metonym of the teleological function of the state that reproduces revolutionary individuals. In North Korean literature Kang Pansök speaks a male discourse, endorses the patriarchal society, and represents motherhood. However, Kim’s analysis also notes that “Kang Pansök is not a woman in the literal sense but a discursive instrument through which the state secures its national identity and political legitimacy” (28). This characteristic is unusual in some ways among North Korean literary phenomena. In this book, Immanuel Kim grasps “an allegorical reconstitution of the Oedipus complex” (34) through Kim Il Sung’s childhood memories and emphasizes that “North Korean fiction perpetuated the representation of motherhood to substantiate the patriarchal hierarchy” (39) through Kang Pansök’s narrative.

Chapter Two, “Kiss and Tell: Words That Come Undone,” discusses the process of revealing the discourse of affection and sexuality in the profession of personal and political love for leaders and nations. The North Korean literary strategy illustrates “the hero’s supernatural ability to transcend personal emotions and erotic desires for the achievement of pure political consciousness” (73). And at the same time, the novel reveals “the hero’s unstable identity and competing desires” (74).

Chapter Three, “The Woman Question(s): Desiring a Happy Marriage,” examines the institutional problems of oppressed women in patriarchal sociopolitical structures and sees the revolutionary subject as unstable, which

reveals the ironies and limitations of political discourse. In this chapter, the “woman questions(s)” is analyzed in terms of the crisis of the male-dominated state as “the voice of the doubting wife disrupts the romanticism and glamorization of the Hidden Hero campaign” (106).

Chapter Four, “Women, Divorce, and the State,” raises the issue of divorce. The book shows that divorce is an expression of women’s resistance to men and that in reality women’s problems are subordinated to patriarchal culture. As Kim explains, “A wife’s marital problems with her husband are a metonym for her dissatisfaction with the institution of marriage, her resistance to becoming a state-desired woman, wife, and mother” (137). The heroine of the novel refuses to answer and maintains her own language through her reverie. This nonresponse reflects “her position of disassociating herself from the oppressive linguistic hegemony” (145).

Chapter Five, “Motherhood Revisited: Disrupting National History,” analyzes the re-conceptualization of memory function in the great national narrative. In the mother’s memory, her son is reconstructed into the future of political society according to her own desires and values, not according to the state standards of education. Kim writes, “Memories or flashbacks in North Korean fiction typically conjoin and construct the linear grand narrative of the nation” (157). The personal memory of a character is a part of national history. Kim discusses a novel that “contradicts the conventional writing practice in North Korea by demonstration that personal memory and the nation’s narrative are mutually exclusive” (161). Literature is a part of the technologies of memory. North Korean literature plays a role as a constructive narrative in memorizing and recording important things to remember while selecting and adjusting experiences.

In this book, Immanuel Kim analyzes desexualizing motherhood based on national narrative, schizophrenic conflicts between the revolutionary subject and sexual desire, the woman’s question preventing her from reaching a “happy ending,” and reconstruction of events or memories to create the past. The conclusion of the book is summarized in a single phrase: “Literature can never speak the Party’s political discourse in unison” (180). Immanuel Kim thus finds cracks in 1980s novels by showing the characteristics of North Korean literature. Ironically, the 1980s North Korean novels analyzed in the book are featured in a canonized list in the North Korean literature dictionary.

Yee Ji Sun
Senior Researcher, The Center for Social Sciences
Seoul National University

