

## Book Notes

*Carving Status at Kŭmgangsan: Elite Graffiti in Premodern Korea* by Maya K. H. Stiller. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021. 240 pp.

Why were so many names written on a mountain? Why and how do we study and interpret inscriptions on rocks? Maya Stiller's book seeks answers to these questions through a detailed analysis of thousands of autographic rock inscriptions scattered in Kŭmgangsan, one of the most celebrated mountains in Korean history among religious pilgrims and literati visitors. Based on multidisciplinary research of literary texts, court documents, local gazetteers, maps, songs, calligraphy, and paintings, Stiller's study eloquently presents the significant role of inscriptions on stone embedded in a landscape as an index of social memory construction and competition for social recognition (p.104).

Stiller's delicate readings of autographic inscriptions carved on a rock are organized into four chapters. Chapter 1, "Privileged Journeys," discusses the multilayered aspects of Kŭmgangsan as a spiritual pilgrimage site and an important place for creating collective social memory. From the myriad examples cut into the rocks from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, the author deftly demonstrates how landscapes transformed into a site for social memory imbued with literary, ideological, and religious significance.

In Chapter 2, "Carving for Distinction," the author investigates the social status and group identity of inscribers and carvers, and claims the importance of rock inscriptions as "an index of competition for social recognition" (p. 16) among Joseon elites from various social strata, from *pŏryŏl*, the most powerful central aristocracy and local bureaucrats to low-ranked officials, near-elites, and marginalized *yangban*. As abundantly quoted in Stiller's text, Joseon elites from

one of the most prestigious families visited the mountain to find rock inscriptions by their ancestors and to order their names to be carved beside their family members' carvings, resulting in the formation of "agnatic clusters." This reveals a unique feature of the centralized bureaucratic system supported by the patriarchal order. The agnatic inscriptions of Kŭmgangsan were created for high elites to reaffirm high-status aristocratic ancestral pedigree and fortify their social identity. It indicates the political and social dominance of *pŏryŏl* elite, for whom travel stipend and state support for transportation was offered through their connections to local government officials near Kŭmgangsan. On the other hand, lower elite (i.e., aspiring elite) travelers wrote their names in ink in the seventeenth century, but they began to carve their names in rocks with the emergence of a "carving service" from the eighteenth century onward. By doing this, the marginalized elites intended to strengthen the cultural link to higher social strata of the privileged inscribers of the past and "thereby compete with the central elite's memory construction and commemoration at the mountain" (p.62). The increase in near elite- and wealthy commoner travelers who could afford the journey and carving names facilitated the competition between super elites and lesser elites, transforming the place into a heterotopic and third space. Vivid photos of carvings in situ, maps, and charts included in the book offer a sense of the spatial context of the person's inscriptions and the social context of clustered names.

Did, as the text suggests, rock inscriptions in Kŭmgangsan serve as a "public" statement? How did those who composed and carved inscriptions expect them to be read? Who was the intended audience? Significant expenses and cultural capital were required for the travel to Kŭmgangsan even in the late nineteenth century, which denotes the limited accessibility and invisibility of the inscriptions to most people in Joseon society. Questions ensue: Are autographic rock inscriptions of only the traveler's name a more effective way to broadcast his social status and fame as an erudite scholar and showcase his command of literary skill and cultural sophistication than other forms of text, such as travel diaries and journey poems or longer rock carvings of the past poetry and poetic names of sites? If the literate elite who can also afford travel expenses are the targeted audience, could texts on paper, including prints, be a better alternative to attract a wider audience? Furthermore, writers of rock inscriptions had various social statuses, and so were viewers. Accordingly, they manifest the diverse layers of the expectation, experience, and appreciation of different social groups. More serious and conscientious travelers would read stone inscriptions all the way up the mountain; they would stop to inspect various inscriptions, trace the history of previous writers, appreciate the aesthetic beauty of writings,

and compose a poem correspondingly. On the other hand, wealthy commoners, low-ranking military officials, or other marginalized elite groups would respond to carvings differently. Thus, the process of production and the dynamics of visitors' interactions with rock inscriptions and landscape reveal the characteristics of carved writings.

Chapter 3, "Kŭmgangsan as Social Battleground," interprets the scale, location, and script type of rock inscriptions as an indicator of the prominence and social status of the signatories and their cultural sophistication. Here the author aptly evokes the social competition between high-ranking officials from a privileged family, *pōryōl*, and lesser, low-ranked officials, *chungin*. The autographic inscriptions evidence the social motivation of visitors, high-ranked government officials, and aspiring or near-elites who intended to associate themselves with ancestors or scholarly lineages. From the eighteenth century onward, thousands of scholars who had passed civil service exams and achieved literary elite status but did not ascend to the high-level officialdom engaged in various cultural activities aiming to demonstrate their worth as elites, and carving names on rocks would be a sort of elite activity to reveal their cultural capitals. Along with the examination of the spatial contexts, size, location, and spatial arrangement of names, the temporal dimensions, such as the order of the carvings and accumulation or overlapping of inscriptions over time, are also crucial to their interpretation as they reveal the physical condition of characters and reading experience. Also, we need to point out not only why the carvings were made but why they have been treasured by the audience contemporary to the inscriptions and the later generation. A close reading of literary contents of longer inscriptions such as poetry and place names, the aesthetic of calligraphy, and the scholarly reputation of writers would shed light on the historical and cultural circumstances under which they were viewed and experienced.

In Chapter 4, "Virtual Travel to Kŭmgangsan," Stiller brings our attention to the non-textual, visual, performative, and sonic dimensions of the culture of the journey by taking into consideration hitherto unstudied primary sources by Korean scholars in the field. She deals with a wide range of materials, such as "narrative paintings" of Kŭmgangsan, atlases, songs, and board games, which provide the experience of virtual travels to Kŭmgangsan for elites from diverse societal standings. The author emphasizes the narrative and educational functions of the large-scale folding screen of Kŭmgangsan in the nineteenth century. However, it requires further evidence to prove screens of Kŭmgangsan researched here were used as "aids for imaginary journeys" and "educational tools" for non-elite or lower-ranked elites. Travelogues, local gazetteers, and geography and picture-like maps that offer more detailed information and accurate

geographical explanation would be better fitted to the audience looking for virtual travel and educational instruments. For example, Kŭmgangsan in the collection of Leeum Museum of Art (fig. 4.1) and Sin Hakkwŏn's "Complete View of Kŭmgangsan" (fig. 4.4) reveal a striking contrast in their styles, executions, and skills of painters, which indicates a broad spectrum of Kŭmgangsan paintings in the nineteenth century. This, therefore, presents various social status and economic conditions of the audience as well as their different attitudes toward the mountain and viewing experience of the paintings.

In addition, the author should provide accounts of why a screen was preferred over an album format for virtual travel; an album would effectively contain rich information for imaginary trips because it presents travel itineraries in chronological order and delineates narratives related to famous sites in a textual form. The social context of screen format in the late Joseon period, the function and its three-dimensional physicality of the screen should be considered in this connection. The author further claims that along with these paintings, literary songs and board games served as "virtual" devices of the journey to Kŭmgangsan for those who could not afford an "actual" trip, mostly marginalized literati, *chungin* (intermediate class), and wealthy commoners. Despite her interesting interpretation of this material culture, the popularity of these objects is seemingly concerned with the emergence of the art market, the flourishing leisure culture, and the commodification of elite culture in the nineteenth century. The high-elite cultural tradition was admired and mimicked by lower, marginalized elites and wealthy merchants; they were knowledgeable enough to compose poetry and publish their literati anthology and rich enough to travel to Kŭmgangsan. Besides, a few examples of Kŭmgangsan screens with detailed geographical location names are associated with the high elite, and board games were also enjoyed by elite officials to demonstrate their command of classical literature.

*Carving Status at Kŭmgangsan* is the first study in a Western language devoted exclusively to carved rock inscriptions at thousands of scenic and historical sites of Kŭmgangsan in North Korea, a currently inaccessible site to most people. The author's thoughtful analysis of carefully selected cases from rock carvings, maps, paintings, and board games brings insightful perspectives of the culture of journey, religious and secular visions of Kŭmgangsan, history of calligraphy, and material culture relevant to travel in the late Joseon era. The issues of the style of calligraphy as an expression of cultural sophistication, size of inscriptions as an indicator of social status, processes of production involved by elites, monks, and carvers, and reception by later generations, as well as the

questions of intention and motivation are meticulously delineated. In addition, Stiller is well informed about Western theoretical research on the place, social memory, and rituals and draws on insights from the fields of religion, literature, social and cultural history, and art history. The book provides stimulation to scholars in the field of Korean studies and facilitates interdisciplinary approaches. Readers will benefit from numerous photos taken by the author during her on-site fieldwork, drawings of eroded characters, and a series of maps and charts to show their location, scale, and condition, all of which provide a comprehensive view of the geography and development of stone inscriptions in Kūmgangsan.

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*Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire: Alliance, Upheaval, and the Rise of a New East Asian Order* by David M. Robinson.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 327 pp.

Ilsoo David Cho has already reviewed David M. Robinson's *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, and his review, capturing all the main points of the book, has come out a few weeks ago. Thus, I find it better to ask some questions instead of repeating the same story. Jung Donghun, who studies Goryeo Korea-Mongol Yuan relations, has indicated that many of the conventions that gradually developed into institutions constituting the protocols of the tribute-investiture relationship in the later period, precisely during the Ming and Qing periods, were established during the Yuan period. Then, it is very likely that the reign of Goryeo King Wang Gi (r. 1351–74) would have also been marked with events and occasions that had long-lasting effects instead of having been mere one-time exceptions and isolated incidents.

Throughout the history of China, it is ironic that a world order centered on a China-based empire first came into being when the Mongols ruled the continent. The Mongol Yuan established Jeongdong Haengseong 征東行省 (provincial government in Goryeo for the Eastern (Japanese) campaign) in 1280 and appointed the Goryeo king as minister of the very institution. This resulted in unintentionally setting a precedent for Sino-Korean relations because, from this point on, China's bureaucratic institution, previously applied only to