Theme Issue: Bridging Korea, Old and New

Guest Editor's Introduction*

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This special issue of the *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* invites readers to rethink the ways we divide the history of Korea from the formation of the earliest states through to the twentieth century. The established periodization scheme, based on dynastic units such as Old Chosŏn 古朝鮮 (–108 BCE), Silla 新羅 (–935 CE), Koryŏ 高麗 (918–1392), Chosŏn 朝鮮 (1392–1910), and modern and contemporary Korea (1910–the present), may be convenient, but is problematic for numerous reasons. To begin, setting regime change as the line of demarcation places the explanatory burden of epochal transformation on

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*"Bridging Korea, Old and New" was conceived in 2012 when Javier Cha, John S. Lee, and Holly Stephens realized that our doctoral research did not agree with the established periodization models in the field of Korean history. To what began as an exercise of collecting our respective observations in a shared Google document, we invited the contribution of Mark E. Byington and eventually organized a panel for the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting held in Philadelphia in 2014. The positive feedback we received from our discussants and audience members encouraged us to organize a follow-up conference at the University of Hong Kong on January 29, 2016. This event was made possible by the Academy of Korean Studies Conference and Research Support scheme (AKS-2015-C15) and a matching grant from the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Hong Kong.

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individual political events. A war may be interpreted as an exogenous shock, but a coup does not necessarily drive the restructuring of society and culture. In fact, social, intellectual, and cultural historians of Korea already employ trans-dynastic intervals such as the late Silla–early Koryŏ period (*Namal Yŏch'o* 羅末麗初) or Koryŏ-Chosŏn transition. Second, dynastic periodization presupposes the *a priori* existence of "Korea" before the emergence of first-generation states in the Korean peninsula and southern Manchuria. Whether one accepts the modern, early modern, or medieval origins of a "Korean" collectivity and political charter, the idea of "Korea" in all its multiplicities should be taken as a product of both historical and historiographical developments. The shifting boundaries and scope of what "Korea" is at different moments needs to be taken into consideration.

Third, dynastic periodization carries the baggage of South Korea's grand narrative of "internal development" (*naejaejŏk palchŏllon* 內在的發展論), which has framed the national history of Korea as consisting of dynasty-level stages of growth. Whether one espouses or challenges notions such as the sprouts of capitalism or revolutions led by small and medium landowners, there is more to the preindustrial history of Korea than the resolution of these debates; we contend that looking beyond the categorization of dynastic stages presents an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the processes of social and economic change. Fourth, the longevity of Korean dynasties reduces their utility as temporal segments. The beginning and end of the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties, each of which lasted for about five hundred years, are drastically different. Early Chosŏn, for example, experienced state centralization and the maturation of the *yangban* 兩班 aristocracy, whereas later Chosŏn was characterized by localization and elite substratification. It is also often unclear whether "late Chosŏn" refers to the seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth centuries, each of which can be interpreted as a distinct time of its own. Fifth, as indistinct labels do not provide a description of the era, dynastic periodization makes it difficult to situate Korea in world historical contexts. Our definition of early modern Korea, from circa 1500 to 1800, for example, is based on our recognition that the Chosŏn state's expansion of local institutions and governance by brokerage shows remarkable parallels to similar practices found elsewhere in the early modern world.

For these reasons, the contributors to this volume propose reperiodizing the history of Korea in a manner that is consistent with our critical review of the empirical scholarship and our own observations, rather than fit Korean history into a preconceived mold. Our aim is to visualize Korea's past as a collection of social processes which deal with the legacies of both the near and distant past,

and that inform the shaping of later times. We reframe conventions such as early, medieval, early modern, and modern to stress the need to foreground Korea's parallels with broad patterns in world history. Our approach seeks to challenge the widespread use of dynastic divisions, that outworn legacy of Confucian historiography, and, more importantly, the temporal myopia that comes with the ongoing segregation of the so-called "premodern" and "modern" eras. Instead, we value question-driven historical inquiries that tease out connections across multiple periods, not necessarily in a linear fashion. It is our hope that our exercise will generate insights into Korea's institution building, center/local dynamics, and culture of patronage and brokerage from long-term perspectives. In each article, we do not aim at comprehensive coverage, as our goal is not to come up with an all-encompassing model. Nor do we claim that our take is the only valid one. Rather, we present an analysis of specific issues close to our individual subfields—namely early state formation, medieval patron/client ties, early modern resource management, and the fiscal institutions of the long nineteenth century—as a lens through which to elucidate the broader features of our respective time periods.

"Bridging Korea, Old and New" does not assume that the idea of "Korea" preceded the formation of early states. Mark Byington's overview of Korea's distant past lays bare the dynamics of ancient settlements and communities that made cultural contributions to the polities that came to be identified as "Korean." The ethnic and linguistic makeup of the early Korea-Manchuria region was complex, and the spatio-temporal extent of what is now identified as Korea is, as he puts it, "an artifice of historiography." Though archaeologists have accumulated a substantial amount of data over the years, some significant gaps still exist. Byington cautions that it is best for us to recognize this limitation and wait until enough reliable excavations and classifications are conducted. For instance, early Koreanists are still not yet able to reliably subdivide the lithic periods and account for regional variations in the spread of pottery types and metallurgy. As for first-generation states, the emergence of complex societies can be found at around 300 BCE, which is around the time when the Old Chosŏn state probably came into existence. Despite the desire of some South Korean historians to identify the existence of Old Chosŏn in the eighth century BCE, there is no way to support this claim using archaeological evidence.

With respect to early Korea, one of our largest questions was the extent to which we should mention the politics of the past. Our conclusion was to illustrate to our readers how the received historiography and historical research based on documentary and material sources are entwined. Consider the Three

Kingdoms period (*Samguk sidae* 三國時代). The deceptive simplicity of national historiography and dynastic periodization obscures the contingent nature of community formation and disintegration across different parts of the Korean peninsula and southern Manchuria. Medieval historians grouped together Paekche 百濟 (–660 CE), Koguryŏ 高句麗 (–668 CE), and Silla as the Three Kingdoms with the intention of establishing a Korean parallel to China's famous Three Kingdoms (*San guo* 三國): Wei 魏 (220–266), Shu Han 蜀漢 (221–263), and Wu 吳 (222–280). Citing foundation myths, historians assigned a clear beginning to each of the three kingdoms—18 BCE, 37 BCE, and 57 BCE, respectively—in order to implicitly heighten the legitimacy of Silla during a period of irregular dynastic succession. This framing masks the coexistence of other polities in early Korea-Manchuria and the processes by which the first-generation states conquered their neighbors and consolidated heterogeneous elements to form larger wholes. Koguryŏ acquired the Lelang Commandery 樂浪郡 in 313 CE, for example, and eventually moved its seat of power there. Silla absorbed the last of the Kaya polities 伽倻國 in 562 CE. After the vanquishing of Paekche and Koguryŏ in the 660s, the situation continued to be unstable. The increasingly Tungusic-dominated story of southern Manchuria was dropped from mainstream Korean historiography. "Unified Silla" (*T'ongil Silla* 統一新羅, 676–892), the most common designation for post-668 Silla in South Korea, kept only a sliver of Koguryŏ's peninsular territory and failed to incorporate a considerable portion of Koguryŏ's population, which ended up in Tang 唐 (618–907) and Parhae 渤海 (698–926).

The idea of "Korea" as a peninsular imaginary has medieval roots. Initially, post-Silla residents of the Korean Peninsula held plural views of the land variably referred to as Samhan 三韓, Haedong 海東, Tongguk 東國, Tongbang 東方, or Ch'ŏnggu 靑丘.[1] Inconsistency was the norm, and legitimacy was drawn from heterogeneous sources, as shown in the simultaneous claiming of "the legacies of Chosŏn, Kaya, Chinhan, Pyŏnhan, Mahan, the Three Kingdoms, and the Later Three Kingdoms."[2] Yet over time, hard boundaries were drawn and ideological coherence came to be preferred over ambiguity. The land of Haedong had its northern reaches delimited symbolically by the Amnok River 鴨綠江, and Koryŏ eventually built a fortified wall in the north to separate its domain from the world of outlanders. Meanwhile, Confucian historiography, which gained influence starting in the twelfth century, introduced dynastic periodization and

1. Remco Breuker, *Establishing a Pluralist Society in Medieval Korea, 918–1170* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 30–44.

2. Ibid., 95–97.

the tripartite division of history into ancient, middle, and modern times. The standardized lore of the demigod Tan'gun 檀君, the Chinese nobleman Kija or Jizi 箕子, and the founders of Koguryŏ, Paekche, and Silla retrospectively projected the neat chronology of dynastic succession onto the tangle of the pre-Koryŏ past.[3]

Alongside such epistemic changes and territorial demarcation, medieval Koreans built a centralizing regime previously unseen in the Korean peninsula. Javier Cha examines the workings of this socio-political process through changing webs of patrimonial domination and conjugal bonds. This story begins where Byington's coverage of early Korea ends: the tenth-century collapse of Silla's bone-rank order (*kolp'um che* 骨品制). As one among several systems of aristocratic distinction found in the first-generation Korean-Manchurian states, bone-rank was based on belief in the founding ruler's divine origins and the sanctity of his offspring. This rigid system of social organization enforced the strict separation of the administrative centers and the provinces, while a set of sumptuary and sartorial laws sanctioned garments, footwear, residence, utensils, and transportation according to one's ascriptive rank. In contrast, Koryŏ was founded by an alliance of provincial strongmen who were unable to claim hallowed ancestry. After an arduous search for a suitable replacement for bone-rank, the ensuing *yangban* aristocracy demanded that every eligible candidate earn an appointment in the central bureaucracy. No matter how prestigious his house, a *yangban* had to demonstrate his ability via an examination procedure, relocate his family to the capital, and hope that his descendants would continue to replicate his success.

The medieval *yangban* patriarchs sought to establish their base in a fiercely competitive environment without legal protection of their status. Kings, regents, and heads of factions sought to recruit talented provincials as their henchmen, and local strongmen found ample opportunities to enter the capital and change their fortunes. Some individuals of humble origin successfully climbed the social ladder at a remarkable pace, and a few even managed to reach the upper echelons of the court bureaucracy within their lifetime. However, this patron/client arrangement proved too dynamic, to the point of being better described as unstable. Those at the top of the political hierarchy had a precarious existence, and those who fell out of power lost their status spectacularly. Many eminent *yangban* houses of the early and middle Koryŏ days failed to retain their standing into late Koryŏ and Chosŏn.

The medieval patrimonial regime followed a centripetal arrangement

3. Ibid., 98–110.

whereby provincials entered the administrative center in search of opportunities provided by a political leader's patronage or vacancies left open by perished predecessors. Over time, *yangban* newcomers learned how to achieve permanent residence in the capital and consistently produce bureaucrats over multiple generations. In other words, the *yangban* aristocracy effectively crystallized into an ascriptive system, while the zenith of the centralizing process simultaneously initiated the localization of society. By the end of the sixteenth century, the *yangban* establishment by and large ceased the active recruitment of outsiders and fought against the forces of substratification.

Early modern Korean society thus bifurcated into two worlds. At the court, a small number of *yangban* houses transformed into oligarchs. About half of all civil examination degrees went to candidates whose reported address was the capital region; the remainder was shared among those from the rest of the country. Not that an examination degree functioned as a gateway to social advancement any longer; by the middle of the eighteenth century, oligarchs received about seventy-five percent of appointments at senior third rank and above and produced ninety percent of queens.[4] Due to limited access to service in the central bureaucracy, local *yangban* families devised alternative strategies to assert their political relevance. Over time, clerks, wardens, monks, and mutual aid organizations also joined the local *yangban* in playing administrative roles on behalf of the central state in the context of their regional communities.

John S. Lee's study of brokerage shows how this new form of governance proved effective in holding together the administrative center and the peripheral regions. The Chosŏn dynasty survived the early sixteenth-century fiscal crisis, two wars with Japan, the Manchu incursions, and devastating famine outbreaks caused by the Little Ice Age; all the while, except for a few isolated incidents, the local elite generally remained loyal to the Chosŏn state. The spread of Neo-Confucianism in the early modern period contributed to this remarkable political and social stability. Factional strife and intellectual rivalries notwithstanding, Neo-Confucianism promoted investment in local academies, shrines, charities, associations, and compacts by a spirit of voluntarism.[5] In this environment where Neo-Confucianism fostered cooperation, the brokered state retained its function as an arbiter of status and allowed the muddled use of resources for official or private purposes. Local *yangban* facilitated the operation of official matters in their community while protecting their interests.

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4. Ch'a Changsŏp, *Chosŏn hugi pŏryŏl yŏn'gu* (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1997), 73 and 164.

5. Peter Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008).

In turn, the central state utilized administrative agents such as clerks and the military to guarantee its expected supply of revenue, tribute, and corvée. The Chosŏn state thus expanded through an array of brokers from various status groups sharing few objectives beyond the processual integration of central and local interests.

In the nineteenth century, however, the early modern brokered administration no longer maintained its robustness. The rise of wage labor introduced impersonal market transactions and complicated local institutions and economies, while the dominance of capital oligarchs increased to even more extreme levels. By the early nineteenth-century, a staggering eighty-six percent of high-level central bureaucratic positions were given to oligarchs, up from seventy-five percent in the previous century.[6] State expenditure increased to the point where brokers could no longer supply the balancing income. Downward mobility intensified and local communities expressed their resentment toward the central state in nationwide and trans-regional rebellions in 1811, 1862, 1894, 1907, and 1919. The advent of Western imperialism, commercialization in the open ports, and Japan's increasing claims upon Korean sovereignty only added to the sources of conflict. By this time, solutions to domestic challenges were to be drawn from not only the Confucian tradition but from the body of Western knowledge that Koreans had been in touch with since at least the seventeenth century. In addition, early experiments with modern technologies, such as electric power, industrial agriculture, and transportation infrastructure, fueled the concentration of pecuniary and energy resources at the administrative center. All of these political and fiscal demands necessitated bureaucratic innovation and more effective means of tax collection.

Holly Stephens probes how three regimes from the early 1800s to the 1940s—the Chosŏn dynasty, the Korean Empire (1897–1910), and the Japanese colonial government (1910–1945)—responded to this new situation. The long nineteenth century was a time of increased government spending: the regency of the Taewŏn'gun (1863–1873) committed to costly ventures involving the royal palace, grain loans, and foreign incursions; the Korean Empire's investment in technology, infrastructure, diplomatic missions, and education further depleted the treasury; and, perhaps surprisingly, the Japanese colonial government continued this trend as expenses incurred in programs to improve agricultural productivity, cultural activities, and railroads were larger than increased tax receipts. In order to increase revenues, each of the three regimes sought to modify the existing tax system through a combination of both ad hoc and

6. Ch'a Changsŏp, *Chosŏn hugi pŏryŏl*, 164.

systemic reforms. In tandem, local associations and cooperatives underwent reorganization and restructuring to accommodate the demands of the state as new local partners emerged in line with the shifting priorities of the central government. Yet, to view these changes as governed by a distinct, emerging, modern rationality overlooks the parallels to, and continued reliance upon, earlier forms of brokerage, political conflict at the center, and the negotiation between local interests. What is more, the significance of modern methods is also frequently overstated; for all its bureaucratic innovation, even the Japanese colonial government struggled with financial self-sufficiency as did earlier Korean governments.

Questions of "centralization" and "localization," or center-local dynamics, recur throughout the articles in our discussions of the ways in which the Korean state interacted with the population at different times. Korean history is remarkable for the dominance of a centralized socio-political order from 1000 CE onward relatively unmarked by the outbreaks of warlordism that recur in Chinese history to the twentieth century and dominate imaginations of pre-industrial Japan. Thus, developments from all angles, be they social, cultural, economic, or environmental, necessarily invite discussion of how the state and its administrative institutions took on meaning within the lives of Koreans across the peninsula. In this way, we think of centralization as a multivarious process: not simply a stage in a simple progression or a singular phenomenon, but as a process integrated in relations among individual actors, families and lineage organizations, and central and local institutions across regional boundaries. Not all aspects of centralization proceeded evenly—while the modern regimes discussed by Stephens arguably had success in centralizing the management of state finances, other aspects of tax collection and state funding remained outside of state control. The formation of a centralized aristocracy in the Koryŏ era as described by Cha established patrimonial networks crucial to state formation but with limited institutional means to administer localities directly. Nonetheless, centralization is a compelling object of historical analysis. The rise of the early states on the Korean peninsula in the first millennia CE and the expansion of the brokered state in the early modern era, as discussed by Byington and Lee respectively, were more than mere administrative feats. The very concept of "Korea" as a peninsular imaginary and object of historical and cultural production was contingent upon processes of centralization and center-local interaction as laid out in these four articles.

Readers of this special issue may read the articles in sequence or in any order. The contributors were asked to allow their study to stand on its own while drawing connections to the preceding and succeeding periods in their

introduction and conclusion. We expect some readers to readily identify with our *problématique* and others to approach it with caution. This is welcomed, for we do not claim our reperiodization as a panacea. Merely, we hope our readers will notice our efforts to challenge the assumptions of modernization theory and modernist studies in Korean history. Our work is not simply an exercise in finding the exact points of demarcation for each time period. Rather than reducing Korea to the politics of the past, our respective studies examine how Korea became Korea. Instead of assuming that every civilization naturally undergoes centralization, we ask what initiated this process at different times and through different methods. Rather than highlighting the presence or absence of a single bureaucratic rationality, we ask how the early modern regime was held together. And, instead of framing modern Korea as a radical departure from the pre-industrial era, we look for lessons and comparisons for the modern in what came before. Overall, we aim to paint a dynamic picture of overarching patterns so that readers may develop some sense of Korean society's inner workings as well as its possible areas of failure. That is because our analysis recognizes that institutions and social practices, no matter how well-designed and well-intended, have unintended consequences. The civil examination system was meant to be impartial but was historically subjected to patronage culture. The early modern Korean state's creation of restricted forests did not keep those vital resources out of reach of the local population.

Our study is candid about its limitations. There are many worthy topics of discussion yet to be explored in our paradigm. In just four articles, we do not claim to be capable of covering all issues equally, but we do think that our approach—in challenging conventional modes of periodization—promises to shed better light on additional topics beyond the narrow scope of the papers presented here. If these directions are taken together, we hope that it would only further refine the long-term and multifaceted historiography explored in this collection.