

The Power of the Brush: Epistolary Practices in Chosŏn Korea by
Hwisang Cho. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020. 276 pp.

Hwisang Cho's *The Power of the Brush* is a welcome addition to a series of publications regarding textual culture in Chosŏn Korea that have recently come out in English. By focusing on the "epistolary revolution," the explosive increase in the sheer number of letters and the development of epistolary networks starting in the sixteenth century, the book reconstructs how letter writing became an indispensable textual practice in philosophical, social, and political interactions. It challenges the presumption regarding the epistolary genre as a mode of private, bilateral, and mundane communication, instead highlighting the centrality of epistolary writing in generating significant transformations in domestic exchange, knowledge production, social intercourse, and political participation in the late Chosŏn period.

The book's argument foregrounds its redefinition of the epistolary genre. On the one hand, Cho widens the scope of the epistolary genre, the flexibility and adaptability of which is evidenced by diverse usages, functions, and meanings in the Chosŏn context in accord with a variety of cultural, social, and political factors. Instead of being confined to a standardized or commercialized form, the epistolary genre in the late Chosŏn period manifested itself in a variety of forms, such as spiral letters, circular letters, and joint memorials, and served both communicative (between sender and receiver) and noncommunicative (addressing academic scrutiny and sociopolitical agendas) functions. It thus did not necessarily adhere to a preset format but constantly negotiated preexisting cultural norms and political power relationships, thereby exercising "epistolary self-reflexivity." On the other hand, Cho demonstrates that the mode of letter writing exercised control over the meaning of texts. The intrinsic capabilities of the epistolary genre, such as initiating interpersonal connection, cementing a sense of community, and evoking the importance of every practice, added another layer of meaning to the messages conveyed by the letter form and caused the domains of private communication and public writing to converge in an intricate fashion.

The Power of the Brush consists of six chapters with a prologue and epilogue. Chapter 1 introduces the background of the epistolary revolution that began in the mid-sixteenth century and explains how the invention of the vernacular Korean script precipitated the surge in letter writing and the multiplicity of its material forms across gender and class distinctions. Chapter 2 centers on spiral letters, a unique Korean phenomenon, which defied the lineal textual layout by rotating the given page to generate spiral forms and incorp-

orated bodily movement and cognitive process into its form. This type of letter emerged as a vernacular textual style associated only with nonofficial settings to serve diverse purposes of self-fashioning. Chapter 3 discusses the elevation of letters as a central academic genre. In focusing on the endeavor of Yi Hwang (1502–1571) to shape letters as the most effective genre for Neo-Confucian studies, the chapter reconstructs Chosŏn male elites' attempt to redefine their identity as the authentic inheritors of orthodox Neo-Confucianism by embracing letters as academic texts. Chapter 4 traces Yi Hwang's local academy movement and its ramifications to show how letters served as a medium for building local academy networks and fostering the new identity of nonofficial local Confucian scholars as a legitimate political community. Chapter 5 explores the social epistolary genre in such forms as circular letters (*t'ongmun*), court newsletters (*chobo*), and memorials (*sangso*). It discusses their role in enhancing dyadic connections between local literati groups, improving rural elites' ability to disseminate political information to wider audiences, and providing opportunities for their political participation. Chapter 6 focuses on the ways in which the collective writing of political epistles, such as circular letters and joint memorials, integrated the discourse of *kongnon* (public and impartial opinion) and political activism of local scholars. Local elites' delivery of political epistles, often involving contentious public performances, shaped the distinctive ways the state and those elites interacted and negotiated.

Throughout the chapters, it is clear that the epistolary writing that flourished in late Chosŏn Korea was a major mode of communication comparable to the medium of print in other cultures in the early modern period. The book thus revises the narrative of the technological advance from manuscript to print as an inevitable linear progression and points to the need to consider the historical contingency in which the usage and meaning of each medium was calibrated. Nevertheless, the overemphasis on the versatility of the epistolary genre often dilutes the singularity of the genre itself and presents letters as barely distinguishable from other media of communication. In particular, the book attributes the specificity of the epistolary genre in Chosŏn Korea to the “changed linguistic environment after the invention of hangul, the process of Confucianization, and the novel mode of social leadership and political interaction with the state by nonofficial rural scholars” (8), but the inconclusive correlation of cause and effect obscures the characteristics of the overarching Korean epistolary writing and fails to make the disparate realms of domestic, intellectual, and political communication cogently interrelated.

Through the lens of epistolary practice, *The Power of the Brush* revisits many important issues required for a critical understanding of late Chosŏn

society, such as the effect of the invention of the Korean alphabet on textual communication, the Korean appropriation of Neo-Confucianism, the political agency of nonofficial local elites, and the interrelationship between the state and the *sarim*. Its careful examination of the materiality of letters, based on extensive archival research sprinkled through the chapters, calls attention to their physical form and effect on the semantic and functional values of the text. I recommend this book for scholars who are interested in textual culture, the history of communication and technology, and Korean studies.

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Seeds of Control: Japan's Empire of Forestry in Colonial Korea by
David Fedman. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2020.
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As many of us are spending our days behind a screen rather than in a forest or a field, we tend to forget that plants are immensely fundamental to human beings: they harvest solar energy and turn it into things that support us for free. It follows that any civilization thrives when it is in control of its vegetal resources. Countries progress durably when their plants prosper. Japan, after abandoning its feudal society that closely and frugally had tried to manage the vegetal wealth of its limited lands—including colonized Hokkaido—was inventing ways to harvest trees from its expanding new colonial empire in Korea, before the collapse that came with war. It is this fascinating story of trial and error that forms the topic of David Fedman's book *Seeds of Control: Japan's Empire of Forestry in Colonial Korea*.

Forestry as “a vital element of state power” gets the attention that it deserves in this book. This is a most important point that Fedman makes: that forestry in colonial Korea was crucial and fundamental and that it came in tandem with many other things. Harvesting trees brought with it the necessity to invest in nationwide governance with legal systems and infrastructure, which in turn brought roads, settlements, and cities, and enticed mining companies into exploration. In the case of the Yalu River, it even brought in border security efforts. We learn how forestry further south brought similar control and imperial indoctrination—disguised as social discipline—and efforts were much