

Ryu Sŏngnyong, Chancellor of Chosŏn Korea: On the Battlefield and in Memory by Choi Byonghyon. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2022. 560 pp.

Many years ago, I taught an undergraduate class in Halifax about the Imjin War (1592–1598), a massive invasion of Chosŏn Korea by Japan under the *kampaku* (regent) of Japan, Hideyoshi (1537–1598), which elicited a military intervention from the Ming empire. The class went notably well, in part thanks to the primary text that I used, namely passages from the *Chingbirok* (Book of corrections) by Yu Sŏngnyong (1542–1607), translated by Choi Byonghyon. It was a popular choice and elicited a productive argument between two members of the Canadian military attending my class. One officer, who primarily worked behind the scenes assessing risks, was impressed by what he perceived to be Yu’s clarity and forthright discussion of the failures of the Chosŏn state during the Imjin War—I remember that he described Yu Sŏngnyong as “a straight shooter who didn’t sugarcoat problems.” Another student, a naval officer with a naval officer’s strident opinions, who was clearly on tense terms with his senior officers, thought that Yu Sŏngnyong resembled a “bean counter,” and compared him to a politician working far from the front who had no understanding of the real challenges of war, but who was adept at creating a convenient narrative that largely absolved himself from blame. What was wonderful about this discussion was that both students could base their opinions on an internal analysis of the text, beautifully translated by Choi into English. Their disagreement, moreover, continued debates that extended back to Yu Sŏngnyong’s own lifetime. It is clear that Yu, while writing the *Chingbirok*, genuinely wanted to understand the causes of Chosŏn’s military failures, but at the same time he generally avoided taking responsibility for wartime disasters, and it is indeed true that he spent the war primarily in court, directing the military in relative safety from behind the scenes.

I was thus most pleased to learn that Choi Byonghyon has also now translated a biography of Yu Sŏngnyong (1542–1607), or “Ryu Sŏngnyong,” following his rendering of the surname.¹ Yu was a highly significant political figure, who rose to the very top of the civil bureaucratic hierarchy of Chosŏn, and who served prominently before and during the Imjin War. Yu was also a prolific author and

1. As he writes on xvii in the author’s note, Choi’s romanization follows that preferred by the descent group itself. I have no problem with this decision, but note that he generally follows standard McCune-Reischauer for all other surnames in the text. For consistency, I am using McCune-Reischauer throughout this review.

scholar. His many writings about the war are key sources for all who study it, and include the aforementioned *Chingbirok*, a work that analyzes what he saw to be the causes of Chosŏn's failures in the war as an admonition for later generations. Yu was also controversial in his own lifetime—as an affiliate of the Southerner (*Namin*) faction, he was criticized by rivals among the Westerners (*Sŏin*) and Northerners (*Pugin*). An early memorial by Yu criticizing what he saw to be rampant “factionalism” in the Chosŏn court was interpreted by political rivals as a factional move itself. As a prominent leader during the war, he was, rightly or wrongly, blamed for the many disasters and controversial decisions of the war, including the flight by the king and high officials from the capital to escape the invading Japanese. He was also attacked for his perceived support for the later peace negotiations between the Ming Empire and the Japanese. On the other hand, his memory was honored both by his descendants and by affiliates of the Southerner faction, especially in the vicinity of Andong, his home region. He is thus an unquestionably worthy topic for a biography.

This biography is nicely written and quotes a number of new translations of other writings by Yu, including poems, letters and other documents. These translations on their own are a valuable contribution, which I will almost certainly use in my teaching. The biography is quite long, at more than 490 pages not including notes, and is structured as a chronological narrative. It is divided into five sections: Book I, which discusses Yu's early life and studies; Book II, which discusses his early career as civil official, with a focus on his relationship to the factional politics of that era; Book III, which discusses his role as high official during the Imjin War; Book IV, which discusses the end of the Imjin War, the brief postwar period and his death; and Book V, which addresses later memory of Yu Sŏngnyong and his legacy.

Much though I appreciate many aspects of this biography, I found certain aspects problematic. First, this is not a critical exploration of Yu Sŏngnyong's life. Rather, the author has explicitly set out to write a hagiography, calling Yu a hero in the preface and then comparing Confucian heroes (in which category he clearly places Yu) to Christian martyrs (xi). His summary of Yu's career in the preface marks him as the most important figure in the entire war: “Once established in officialdom, [Yu Sŏngnyong] had to fight a four-front war: first against domestic opponents due to factional strife; second against the Japanese invaders; third against the Ming armies that tyrannized the Korean government under the pretext of providing relief; and fourth against his own king, who cared only for his own safety, betraying his country and his own people. Sŏngnyong coped with all these challenges without a misstep, saving the country from ruin” (xii). A description on the book's cover describes Yu's

Chingbirok as involving “agonizingly detailed records and admonitions for posterity” that “were no less fierce and stirring than Yi Sunsin’s last battle at Noryang strait.” Though the *Chingbirok* is a fascinating work, it is absurd to compare a book written in comfort by a landed gentleman in Hahoe Village after he had been forced out of office at the end of the war to the tremendous violence of the battle of Noryang Strait.

The author creates this improbably perfect figure, who never made a misstep, through a generally uncritical approach to sources. Only rarely does the author explicitly critique or discuss his sources, and when he does, there are significant problems with his approach. In Choi’s most extensive analysis of the sources, which he leaves to the end of the book (475–488), he briefly allows for the possibility that writing by members of Yu Sŏngnyong’s own Southerner faction might contain distortions, but overwhelmingly focuses on critiquing accounts of Yu by rival factions, in particular the biographical assessments written on Yu’s death in the two versions of the *Veritable Records* for the reign of King Sŏnjo (1567–1608): The *Sŏnjo sillok* (Veritable records of Sŏnjo), which was compiled by the Northerner faction, and the *Sŏnjo sujŏng sillok* (Revised veritable records of Sŏnjo), which was compiled by the Westerner faction. In fact, both acknowledge that Yu has considerable ability, and the *Sŏnjo sujŏng sillok* is in fact generally laudatory, although both accuse Yu, among other things, of opportunism, duplicity, and factional loyalties maintained covertly under a façade of righteousness. Frankly, I expect similar accusations could be launched with justice against any political leader during the Chosŏn period. Rather than defend his hero’s honor, I think it would have been better for Choi to try to understand why Yu’s rivals might have justly been less enthusiastic.

Such attempts at source criticism, however problematic, are a rarity. In some cases, one may read through quite a number of pages without seeing any citation to a primary source at all. In other cases, Choi provides more extensive citations, but does not discuss or compare accounts, simply listing the primary source consulted in the footnotes. For the most part, he represents the contents of these sources accurately. However, all surviving sources have pitfalls and problems that need to be discussed and analyzed. The two versions of the *Veritable Records* for Sŏnjo’s reign suffer not only because of the factional orientation of the editors that Choi notes, but also because most of the documents needed to compile the account of the early part of Sŏnjo’s reign were destroyed during the violence surrounding the Japanese capture of the capital in 1592. On the other hand, writings by Yu Sŏngnyong’s himself, such as the *Chingbirok*, may be useful for understanding the war, but certainly should be used very cautiously indeed when assessing Yu himself—self-evidently, we should not trust

a politician, however impressive and skilled, to provide an honest assessment of their own achievements.

In many ways, this book is written less like a work of history than a work of historical fiction. Frequently, Choi attributes statements and actions to Yu that seem mostly based on Choi's own imagination of what Yu might have done or said, although, on account of unclear relationship between citations and the narrative, it isn't always clear to me what is based on Choi's imagination and what is based in the sources. For instance, Choi often describes Yu's internal thoughts without providing any justification. On page 247, Choi writes that "Söngnyong was distressed to see a royal command taken so lightly but realized it was the king himself who had undermined rightful authority." Yu would never have written so explicit a criticism of the monarch, of course. As the surrounding sources are all from Yu's description of the fall of P'yöngyang in the *Chingbirok*, in which I can find no similar phrasing, it seems that this is not Yu's analysis of the situation, but Choi's; if Choi wants to establish that Yu thought something of this sort, then he needs to abandon the narrative and discuss why he thinks such an opinion is implicit in the *Chingbirok*.

Choi also often seems to assume that Yu and others knew things that we now know, without clearly providing evidence. As an example, on page 161–162, Choi describes Yu having some initial knowledge of Japan, even before the war, based on his reading, including his youthful reading of poems by the late Koryŏ official Chŏng Mongju (1338–1392) and, later, a survey of Japan and Ryukyu called the *Haedong chegukki* (Account of the countries of the Eastern Sea), by prominent early Chosŏn official Sin Sukchu (1417–1475). Both claims are plausible—but once more, Choi provides no citations and no evidence. Yu presumably did read Chŏng Mongju's poetry, as he wrote a preface to Chŏng Mongju's complete works in 1585 (Yu 1633, *kwŏn* 18)—but I have found no evidence that he was particularly interested in Chŏng Mongju's poems about Japan. As for Sin Sukchu, in the *Chingbirok* Yu makes reference to Sin Sukchu's diplomatic mission to Japan, but I can see no reference at all to the *Haedong chegukki* (Yu 1647, 1: 1a–1b; Yu 2002, 20–21)—this might almost amount to proof that he had not read it, although I did find exchanges in the *Veritable Records* from later in the war where other officials discussed that text in Yu's presence. If Choi has evidence that Yu had the responses that he attributes to him, he needs to provide it to the reader, or alternately, he should be clear that he is making a strong guess on the basis of other information.

On page 164, Choi describes Yu Söngnyong's thoughts on the Japanese *kampaku* Hideyoshi, implying that Yu knew already in 1587, when Hideyoshi first began to pursue active diplomacy with Korea, that Hideyoshi had once had

the position of a sandal-bearer for the warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582). Yet even in the *Chingbirok*, which Yu composed after the Imjin War, Yu did not refer to Oda at all, but rather described Hideyoshi's predecessor as a monarch with the surname Genji, by which he meant the Ashikaga shoguns who Oda in fact had displaced before Hideyoshi rose to power; Yu also made no reference to Hideyoshi's status as sandal-bearer, but refers to an account that imagined Hideyoshi to be a migrant from China who had gathered firewood and later served as a soldier of the Genji (Ashikaga) family (Yu 1647, 1: 1a–1b; Yu 2002, 21). Vagueness about recent Japanese history is also visible in the *Veritable Records*. Both the *Sŏnjo sillok* (completed in 1616) and the *Sŏnjo sujŏng sillok* (completed in 1657) similarly lack explicit reference to Oda; they both identified that Hideyoshi was from a poor family who rose in the ranks, although both described this process differently (*Sŏnjo sillok* 26: 1a, Sŏnjo 25 (1592)/4/13; *Sŏnjo sujŏng sillok* 21: 27a, Sŏnjo 20 (1586)/9/1). As for the sandal-bearer story, my impression is that this is a later tradition, and is first seen in mid-eighteenth-century Japanese narratives. Considering the near-total ignorance of Japan that characterized Chosŏn elite culture between the mid-fifteenth century and 1592, it would be surprising if Yu had known all that precise information in 1587. I note that Yu also mentioned the mid-fifteenth-century interruption of contact between Chosŏn and Japan in his *Chingbirok* (Yu 1647, 1: 1a–1b; Yu 2002, 20–21)—seemingly, it was one of the many failures of the Chosŏn state that he felt the need to record for later generations. In fact, the Japanese invasion of 1592 forced a rapid expansion of Korean knowledge concerning Japan, in part through former prisoners-of-war like Kang Hang (1567–1618), although the above cited passages from the *Veritable Records* suggest that this new knowledge did not extend to a good understanding of Oda Nobunaga. If Choi has some sources that show that Yu had more solid information on Hideyoshi's relationship with Oda in 1587 than the editors of the *Sŏnjo sujŏng sillok* had in 1657, he should provide a proper citation.

Another case is on page 465: Choi tells us, concerning Yu's last words, that "People also compared his [Yu's] last words to Hideyoshi's." Yet this is tied only to a citation to the biography of Hideyoshi by Berry (1982, 235)—and Berry certainly does not make any comparison of Hideyoshi's last words to Yu's. It frankly seems unlikely that Hideyoshi's final poem circulated in Chosŏn, considering general attitudes to Hideyoshi. Which people, then, is Choi claiming compared Yu's last words to those of Hideyoshi? Were Hideyoshi's words even known in Chosŏn, or Yu's final words known in Japan? Perhaps they were, but Choi has not provided any evidence to prove this, and I suspect that the sentence should be changed to: "I [Choi Byonghyon] compare his last words to

Hideyoshi's."

As the work of Jonathan Spence reminds us, there is a place for work that straddles the boundary between historical scholarship and historical fiction. I imagine that Choi's decision to write a fictionalized narrative, and not a more typical work of historical scholarship, was inspired by a desire to make his work accessible to a broader public. Indeed, the traditional tools of the historian's trade—detailed source criticism, elaborate citations, avoidance of anachronism—all provide a burden to the non-specialist reader. I admire Choi's attempt to write a readable and accessible biography. Yet, as I compared this biography to some of Jonathan Spence's work (for instance, Spence 2002), I couldn't help but notice that Spence is generally far clearer about his use of sources, and far more critical in his use of them. For another comparison, Haboush's 2001 biography of the late Chosŏn monarch Yŏngjo (r. 1724–1776) is, in my view, overly sympathetic to its subject and also occasionally makes unwarranted assumptions about Yŏngjo's internal thoughts, yet the book is not a hagiography. Haboush is clear about her use of primary sources (so her assumptions about Yŏngjo's internal thoughts usually seem credible), and she doesn't try to claim that he was an actual sage king; rather, she allows that Yŏngjo was engaged in "the politics of sagacity," which is to say, he was an imperfect human being, using the Confucian language available to him to pursue his own political goals within the constraints of eighteenth-century Chosŏn. By contrast, Choi, by writing a highly fictionalized hagiography, deprives his readers of the ability to understand Yu as a person in his own time, living his life chaotically in the moment, and without the broad understanding of the context that is available to historians now. People in the past had to figure out information that we can now conveniently access through a quick trip to the library, and the most brilliant of people (I can agree with Choi that Yu was a notably competent leader) will inevitably make poor judgments on account of limited or false information, the incorrect application of past experiences, the limitations of their world view, or the practical challenges that are presented to them. Faced with the unprecedented crisis of the Imjin War, involving a recently unified Japan with a highly experienced army and new weapons, the only leader who would make no missteps would be a god, and I think that we can safely deny divine status to Yu. I very much enjoyed this biography, and appreciate Choi's attempt to write an accessible text, but a biography that allowed for more imperfection in its subject would have been more satisfying intellectually. I hope that academic presses will publish more biographies of prominent Chosŏn figures, although ideally in the future they will look for texts that reach a better balance between readability, on the one hand, and scholarly caution on the other.

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