

Book Notes

Politics of Public Opinion: Local Councils and People's Assemblies in Korea, 1567–1894 by Ingeol Kim, trans. Eugene Park. Brill, 2025 (Korean Studies Library, vol. 9). xxiv, 231 pp.

This book is a translation of Kim Ingeol's 2017 work *Joseon hugi gongnonjeongchi ui saeroun jeongae: 18, 19-segi hyanghoe, minhoe reul jungsim euro*, published by Seoul National University Press. As is clear at first sight from the author's name—he is a highly renowned professor emeritus of Korean history at Seoul National University—the place of publication, and the title (even more academic-sounding in the original), this is a monograph from the Olympus of Korean academia, originally intended for a highly specialized academic readership. Since English translations of books of this kind—rather than more introductory works such as general histories—remain relatively rare, the very fact that such a book has appeared in translation may be celebrated as a testimony to the maturation of Korean Studies in the West, even taking into account that the publisher received financial support from the Academy of Korean Studies.

Yet translations of academic works can be even trickier than those of literary works. In this case, one could hardly wish for a better translator: Eugene Park, a Korean history specialist with a Harvard PhD, has himself written and edited several important books on the social history of the Joseon period. And yet even a translator of his qualifications and stature could not escape a problem concerning the book's main keyword, one that must be addressed before we can say more about its contents: “public opinion,” the translation chosen for *gongnon* 公論. The fundamental difficulty posed by this term lies in its synchronic and diachronic polysemy, as the book itself duly discusses. Whether, and at what

point, a concept of “public opinion” (in the sense contemporary readers would understand the term) and related practices existed and developed during the Joseon Dynasty is precisely the research question around which Kim Ingeol’s monograph revolves. In such a situation, any decision a translator makes is problematic. Both adhering to the iron rule of using a single translation for key terminology and departing from that rule in order to reflect contextual variation may confuse the reader. Given the shifting and sometimes ambiguous semantics of the term in the original, the latter option may not even seem available to a translator (whereas the author of an original English-language study might have chosen different terminology depending on their interpretation of the primary sources in question).

What, then, is *gongnon*? As explained toward the end of the Introduction (1–16),¹ “Chosŏn’s public opinion”—i.e., the term *gongnon* as traditionally used—has little to do with the views of the majority of the populace, or at least of the opinion leaders, as the term “public opinion” suggests in modern usage. Rather, it refers to “[w]hat all human minds deem natural” insofar as it follows “the heavenly principle ... in correspondence with the human mind,” in the formulations of Yi I and Zhu Xi, respectively (14, 13). *Gongnon* denotes opinions embodying reason, righteousness, and impartiality, and the pursuit of the common good.² Obviously, *gongnon* in this sense could easily function as a polemic term serving to present a particular position as irrefutable; as Zhu Xi states, “no dissent can arise” once *gongnon* has been established (13). Thus, the phrasing Kim Ingeol most often uses to define “Joseon public opinion” is, in Eugene Park’s translation, “a deliberation-based consensus pursuing the heavenly principle.” “Politics of public opinion,” *gongnon jeongchi*, could therefore perhaps be translated more effectively as “rule by consensus”—a formulation that might help mitigate the danger of readers misconstruing Joseon’s *gongnon jeongchi* as something akin to modern procedures for securing majority support for political decisions.

Even during the Joseon period, however, there existed a tension within the semantics and practice of *gongnon*, which is well reflected in Kim Ingeol’s definition of the term quoted above—namely, the tension between “deliberation-based” and “pursuing the heavenly principle.” On the one hand, the heavenly principle is understood as fixed and within the reach of human knowledge; “deliberation” can therefore only mean a collective effort to arrive at this preexisting

1. Unless otherwise specified, all page references are to the English edition under review.

2. A connotation also inherent in the term “public,” but much more so in its pre-Enlightenment usage than today. See Vincent Price, *Public Opinion* (Sage Publications, 1992), 6–7.

truth, which in turn is equivalent to reinstating a social order based on irrefutable cosmic patterns. On the other hand, the need, or willingness, to reach a consensus on the mandate of the heavenly principle in a given situation through deliberation, i.e., through the consideration of differing perspectives and assessments, introduces into the concept of *gongnon* an element of openness and collective procedural generation of new solutions. This fissure within the seemingly tight ideological web of Joseon political thought and practice may have helped propel the social changes that this book traces: the widening of the social base involved in decision-making processes during the eighteenth and, especially, the nineteenth century.

This idea is not new. However, as Kim argues, earlier scholarship in this vein has suffered from two problems: first, the attribution of modern sensibilities such as “the equality of all people” to the eighteenth century, which is “a stretch considering the realities of that time” (20); and second, the description of the nineteenth century as “a rupture in Chosŏn political history” (21) due to the hegemony of consort families at court. In contrast, Kim Ingeol never loses sight of the fact that, throughout the Joseon period, we are dealing with a hierarchically stratified society in which social status structured most forms of human interaction, including political decision-making. At the same time, by making local society rather than the royal court his primary object of inquiry, he is able to demonstrate continuity rather than rupture in the widening of the social base involved in the production of *gongnon*.

This book is thus first and foremost a detailed study of two forms of local collective decision-making, “local councils” (*hyanghoe*) and “people’s assemblies” (*minhoe*). In five chapters, it traces their development, changing characteristics, and mutual interaction, from the rise and decline of the power exercised by the landed gentry through local councils to the rise of people’s assemblies in the late eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century. The micro-historical studies of these local consensus-finding bodies, which constitute the empirical core of the book, are always carefully embedded in a broader account of the development of deliberative and consensus-oriented politics during the Joseon period. With his consistent effort to “locat[e] the people’s proper place in Joseon political history,” while remaining fully conscious that he is discussing a “historical age in which the ‘people’ could not step forth as political actors” (20), Kim provides an innovative yet never imbalanced perspective on late Joseon developments. The insights he offers into the workings of local society are invaluable even for readers who may doubt the validity of his claim that these procedures constitute the roots of present-day Korean democracy (xiv, xviii), as well as the underlying presupposition that “history is the foundation of self-identity” (3). While only portions of the book may be suitable for classroom use, given the specialized

knowledge on which it builds, it is essential reading for any serious scholar of Joseon politics and society.

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