

# *The Institutional Basis of Civil Governance in the Chosŏn Dynasty*

compiled and translated by John B. Duncan, Jung Chul Lee, Jeong-il Lee, Michael An, and Jack A. Davey  
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This book is a collection of translated, and in the process lightly edited, articles by renowned South Korean scholars on Confucian institutions and their social context in Joseon-period Korea. The articles represent influential works in South Korean historiography and the collection displays a good spread in terms of topical coverage and methodological approach. The aim of the volume, as stated in the Introduction by John B. Duncan and Jung Chul Lee, is to cater to the growing interest in the study of Korea and Korean history and introducing works on an area the translators feel have been underrepresented in English-language scholarship on Korea: “the key institutions of the distinctive Confucian political culture of the Joseon era.” As indicated by the title, the theme that is the overarching principle behind the collection of articles is civil governance, or as it is also called in the Introduction, the “tradition of cultured rule.” While acknowledging existing English-language scholarship of Joseon-period Confucian statecraft, the Introduction argues that there has been a tendency in that scholarship to theorize the Joseon dynasty based on one or two institutions and claims to attempt to overcome this “by conceptualizing the Joseon as a system of ‘cultural rule’ in which education, examinations, bureaucracy, and historiography [the topics of the

volume] formed a closely integrated whole”.

The first article, “The Political and Social Roles of the *Sōwōn* in the Chosōn Dynasty” by Man Jo Chung, analyses the developing role of these private academies in the changing political landscape of Joseon from the sixteenth century to the late seventeenth. The focus is on the *sarim* and its socio-political struggle with the *hun-gu* faction. Man Jo Chung describes how the first academy was established against the background of the political struggle of the two groups, although not by the *sarim* to promote their interests, how later the *sarim* took control over the establishment of such private academies – but still not overtly using them for political purposes - and later, when the *sarim* seized political power at the centre, these *seowon* became political platforms and involved in the developing factional struggles.

Whereas the article by Man Jo Chung combines institutional history with social history, the second article, “The Government Service Examinations of the Chosōn Dynasty” by Song Mu Lee is predominantly straightforward institutional history. Based on a close reading of the provisions in *Gyeongguk daejeon* (經國大典, *A Complete Code of Law*) the article describes the qualifications required by examinees, after which follows a detailed discussion of the examination subjects. In the third and fourth parts the article connects these exams with the socio-political situation by discussing the official appointments given to examination passers and the general characteristics of these examinations in the Joseon period.

After Song Mu Lee’s article is appended (as supplementary material) a short piece by Chun Ho Song titled “Information on the Older Passers of the Licentiate Examinations.” Although the Introduction is correct in saying that it is anything but a *dry and uninteresting* collection of material, it is indeed mainly a collection of material with little analysis. Still, it sheds interesting light on the changing function of these examinations from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth.

The third article, “The Establishment of the Early Chosōn Political

System” by Doo Hee Chung discusses the political reforms of King Taejong that “culminated in the independent administration system of the Six Ministries.” Through a detailed analysis of these reforms Chung argues that these should not only be understood as the consolidation of royal power, but that these reforms also “brought the government more in line with the collective opinion of the Neo-Confucian literati.”

The penultimate article, “The Power Structure of *Sarim* Politics in the Chosŏn Dynasty” by Chan Sik Song, revisits the political activities of the *sarim*. Whereas Man Jo Chung’s article discusses the struggle with the *hun-gu* faction, Song’s article analyses how this group executed its power within the institutional structure of the state. This study is another fruitful combination of institutional and social history that shows the importance of the official positions of *Jeongnang* and *Jwarang* for this group to maintain its hold on political power.

The book concludes with Hang Nyeong Oh’s study “The Meaning of Ritual Practices in the Compilation of the *Chosŏn Sillok*.” Through a comparison with the compilation of veritable records in China, this article highlights the unique characteristics of *Joseon wangjo sillok* (朝鮮王朝實錄, *The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*) and, as the title suggests, pay special attention to the rituals surrounding their compilation. This study lacks the social aspects of the previous chapters, but it provides interesting insights into the rigid system of historical compilation that aimed at securing objectivity.

Not only are the original Korean articles influential and well-recognised works, many are also rather old (mainly from the 1980s), so it would make little sense to discuss their strong and weak points in this review, and instead the focus will be on the compilation and translation project. To begin with I would like to state that I think that the compilers and translators have done the scholarly community a great service by making these articles available in English. We need solid scholarship that displays both detail and depth, as reflected in the individual articles of this volume, and a broader picture, in this case provided by the synerget-

ic effect of bringing these articles together. The translations are well executed, at times simplifying the texts to make them more accessible to Western readers and providing footnotes to explain key terms, institutions and historical figures.

If I were to raise any criticism it would be that this compilation and translation project fails somewhat short of its potentials. Another goal of this project, as stated in the Introduction, is to provide “a better perspective to understand Korean history in relation to Chinese and Japanese history.” The articles by themselves, as they have been selected, does not really provide this perspective and an introductory chapter longer than the existing one would be needed, broadly discussing these institutions and their social contexts from a comparative point of view.

There are also other reasons why this reviewer feels that a more comprehensive introductory chapter could have improved the synergetic effect. This volume introduces some contested topics in Korean history; for example, what does the term *sarim* represent, or how are we to understand the role of the factional struggles within the political system of Joseon? Not only are there subtle differences in the understanding among the scholars represented in this volume, these work were produced some time ago and the understanding of these issues has changed over time. A discussion of the changing notions of these concepts, placing these articles in their historiographical context, would greatly help the reader to get a better understanding of the broader picture the volume aims to provide.

To give a concrete example: both the first and the fourth chapters provide footnotes (added by the translators) explaining what the *sarim* was. These explanations are more or less identical, but with the important difference that the footnote in Man Jo Chung’s article does not state, as does the one in the fourth chapter, that this group had its powerbase in the countryside. This review will avoid the discussion of whether the term *sarim* represented “rustic scholars,” but I get the impression that this information was omitted from the footnote of the first chapter since

it would not fit well with the argument put forward in the article that the establishment of private academies was an attempt by the *sarim* to seize political power in the countryside. Why would they need to do that if that was where they had their power base? Issues like this could have been addressed in the introductory chapter.

To conclude, a more comprehensive introductory chapter introducing and discussing with chronological depth the key issues discussed in the selected articles would have enhanced the synergetic effect of this volume and would have facilitated its use, not only in teaching but also in comparative research. Still, this does not diminish the value of this project. As stated above, this is a volume that dexterously combines broad conceptualization and analytical depth, and it constitutes an important contribution to English-language scholarship on Korean history.