

*A Korean War Captive in Japan, 1597-1600:
The Writings of Kang Hang*

edited and translated by JaHyun Kim Haboush and Kenneth R. Robinson.
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Joshua Van Lieu
LaGrange College

With the publication of *A Korean War Captive in Japan*, the late JaHyun Kim Haboush and Kenneth R. Robinson have made a valuable contribution to the Anglophone history of early modern northeast Asia. The text includes a complete, annotated, and highly engaging English translation of *Kanyangnok* (看洋錄), Kang Hang's account of his three-year captivity as a prisoner of war in Japan in the last years of the sixteenth century. The text also offers a scholarly introduction that nimbly frames the translated text in the literary, political, and cultural currents of the time so as to render the work accessible and legible to the broadest of audiences. The work as a whole is a fascinating and illustrative exploration of the fear, loss, and dislocations of war, the complexities of the navigations of cultural difference, and the negotiations of power and identity amid overlapping and potentially conflicting discourses of the local and the universal.

The power of Haboush and Robinson's translation is apparent from the first chapter, "Encounters with the Adversities of War." Kang's account of the confusion and terror of the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1597 assaults the reader with the cries of abandoned children swept into

the sea and the wailing of those captured and shipped to fates unknown in Japan. The death and despondence continued in captivity with the loss of the young and the weak. Kang wrote:

“On the fifth, Yewŏn, my third brother’s daughter, died of illness. On the ninth, Kahŭi, my second brother’s son, died of illness. We brothers carried them and buried them by the sea. Of six children born of us, three drowned and two died in Japan, leaving only one, a little girl. This is exactly what a poem by Sandu describes:

‘I have killed you; it is my fault.

My shame and pain will last a hundred years; will tears ever dry?’

How pitiful! We deeply grieved but also envied their oblivion.” (8)

Through a near frictionless translation, Haboush and Robinson bring to the fore a combination of the raw emotional exhaustion of a parent’s loss of a child and the terrified helplessness of the abductee. This is typical of the at times brutal narrative of the first chapter and the anti-Japanese polemics of the second chapter, and even continues in the more formal reports on conditions in Japan to the Chosŏn government in the final chapters of the work, which has been translated with a consistent quality throughout.

The second chapter, “An Exhortation to Koreans Still Held Prisoner in Japan,” is of a wholly different rhetorical form from the first, yet the translation remains smooth and effective. Kang sought to exhort Korean captives to persevere, remain loyal, and refuse to submit to their captors as he recounted the violence exercised upon the people of Korea during the Japanese invasions:

“Let us speak of what they did to earn the undying enmity of our own people. They burned our family shrines and disinterred our ancestors; they raped and assaulted our women, old and young, and bound and seized our brothers and children. Those bodies cut in two at the waist, those were our parents who gave birth to us and raised us; those

bodies that fell from their spears as if in a dance troupe, those were our beautiful and lovely young children. We could not keep our betrothal vows to our spouses, nor could we aid our brothers in need. This was a disaster to common humanity! This is what the affections of kin suffered!” (25)

The imagery of the broken and violated bodies of women and men, adults and children, and even the living and the dead, together with the frustration of having failed to honor the deepest and most intimate of emotional obligations makes for a clarion call of unrelenting persuasiveness. Here again, Haboush and Robinson maintain an immediacy in their translation that communicates the strength and urgency of Kang’s prose.

As graceful and arresting as the translation is on its own, Haboush and Robinson have also done an exemplary job in rendering it understandable to a general readership in their greatly enriching translators’ introduction. They locate Kang’s account in a genre of war captive diaries in which the former captive must account for being captured and yet returning alive; in this context survival is suspect (xi-xii). The most important function of Kang’s account was to establish his loyalty to the Chosŏn throne and assure the authorities that he did not cooperate with the Japanese even though the very fact that they did not kill him would suggest some kind of *quid pro quo*. Read in this light, Kang’s frequent declarations of rage over Japanese atrocities and of general Japanese savagery and inferiority appear not only as the wholly understandable reactions of one who has undergone the trauma of war, but also as a forceful yet delicate declaration of loyalty in an atmosphere of acute political peril. There can be no doubt that Kang measured every word carefully by this metric and Haboush and Robinson have done the reader a great service in thus framing the text as a “starkly political document” (xvii).

In explicating the fourth chapter entitled, “A Memorial Sent from

Captivity,” Haboush and Robinson characterize the document Kang submitted to the Chosŏn throne as “...a tour de force display of the Confucian rhetoric of loyalty; it also articulates a sense of Korean ethnicity and of Chosŏn as homeland” (xvii). These are the themes around which Haboush and Robinson have built the analytical portion of their introduction. Kang’s longing for his homeland Chosŏn is unproblematic and requires no interrogation here, but the first two assertions raise questions. First, Confucianism emerges throughout the introduction as a conceptual category to which the translators assign significant explanatory power. Kang’s text, Haboush and Robinson write, is a “master tale of Confucian loyalty” (xi). Moreover, in searching for an explanation for the allegedly loyal Kang failing to kill himself to avoid captivity, they write, “One of the duties of a Confucian man in the patriarchal system was to preserve his line, and Kang, leading his family, might have felt compelled to abide by this” (xii). They also understand Kang’s identity as “informed by the Confucian concept of loyalty” (xiv). Finally, they state that Kang’s memorial is “entirely informed by a Confucian political sense of self” (xvi). Loyalty is indeed an important quality in this context, but is there a particular form of loyalty that is uniquely Confucian? As for Kang’s deciding to survive in order to sustain his family line as a “Confucian man,” one might speculate that he was motivated by a more generic self-preservation simply as a man. Furthermore, would it be different to suggest that Kang’s writing is informed by a political sense of self rather than a Confucian political sense of self? Whether considering Kang’s interest in loyalty to the Chosŏn throne or his motivation for surviving in Japan, the value of Confucianism as a heuristic here is dubious. Would any analytical power become lost if the reader considered Kang’s loyalty without the Confucian modifier? A consideration of what “Confucian” means in this context would be beneficial.

Second, in establishing a case for Kang’s articulation of a Korean ethnic identity, Haboush and Robinson propose that there is in his writing a contradictory sense of civilization in which the civilized is at once

geographical, and thus exclusive to a particular place and its people, and yet also manifest as a set of universal values transcendent of place and thus inclusive of all those who share them (xiii). While it is clear that Kang felt very strongly that the adoption of particular values marked one as what we might now call civilized, the exclusive spatiality of this civilization is a more difficult question. The translators point to Kang's "An Exhortation to Koreans Still Held Prisoner in Japan," stating "this letter articulates most clearly and vociferously the notion of an exclusive civilization, without ambiguity" (xv).¹ The letter is indeed a rousing call to perseverance in the face of captivity and clearly illustrates a strong politics of identity, but the nature of this identity appears differently based on particular translation and punctuation choices. Haboush and Robinson's translation of the opening passage reads:

"Though miserably incarcerated in isolation, we hail from a country of civilization, a place where the ideas of Confucius and Mencius infused government academies, village schools, and family beliefs. All of us were born and raised in this culture. There is none who has not heard and learned of the way of kings Yu, Tang, Wen, and Wu, and the Duke of Zhou, and of Confucius." (23)

In this rendering, the "country of civilization" from whence the prisoners hail, namely Chosŏn, is itself the site of the moral qualities that set it apart from the land of their captors where they are "miserably incarcerated in isolation." Here we see the exclusive notion of civilization the translators pose in their introduction. We can also perceive the inclusive notion as

¹ The original title is *Ko puinggyŏk* (告停人獄) and so might be translated without ethno-national identifiers as "An Exhortation to Prisoners." See this in a bilingual Literary Sinitic-Korean edition of Kang Hang's *Kyangnok* in Minjok munhwa chujinhoe, trans., *Gukyeok Haehaeng Chongjae* [Korean Translation of *Haehaeng chongjae* (海行摠載)] (Seoul: Minjok munhwa chujinhoe, 1977), 29b. The page number refers to the original Literary Sinitic text.

well in that Koreans are civilized by virtue of their adherence to universal norms of the civilized as defined by Confucius, Mencius, and the sage rulers of the past.

The translators, however, alert the reader in an endnote at the end of the first sentence of the passage that indicates that the original text "...has 'Zou and Lu' (鄒魯). Zou refers to the home state of Mencius. Lu was the home state of Confucius" (145). What this note indirectly indicates is that Haboush and Robinson have omitted the reference to the states of Zou and Lu in their translation. A translation unbereft of these references might read, "Though subjected to exile and misery, we all come from districts of Zou and Lu where scholarship flourishes" (哀此流離瑣尾之屬盡出文明鄒魯之鄉).² Kang identified Chosŏn with districts of the ancient kingdoms of Zou and Lu, suggesting that the universal values of the sage rulers of the past are neither literally nor inherently tied to a particular time or place; those who adhere to the teachings of Mencius of Zou and Confucius of Lu all hail from Zou and Lu regardless of where they actually come from. In other words, any place where people share the values of Mencius and Confucius may be considered figuratively as Zou and Lu. This metaphorical spatiality of civilization is not a marker of exclusiveness, but rather a universal inclusiveness that transcends the bounds of the historical and geographical. It was not Chosŏn itself as a demarcated territory that bore the marks of civilization; it was the collective adoption of civilized ways of being on the part of the individuals therein that removed both people and place from the realm of the coarse and unlearned.

In further asserting an articulation of a Korean ethnicity, Haboush and Robinson suggest that Kang's fervent desire to see Pusan again is a "poignant expression of his sense of Korean ethnicity" and couple that with his identification of Korea as "the locus of a civilized people" (xvii).

² Ibid.

However, as seen above, the notion of Korea as a space of civilization is not necessarily an exclusive ethnic claim, but more a transcendent claim of sharing in the universal traits of true humanity. In fact, the reader is hard pressed to find reference in Kang's writing to anything that might be considered particular to a specifically Korean ethnicity and its possible identification with civilization. Kang understood ethnicity as local socio-cultural practices at variance with the universal values of the sage rulers of antiquity and indeed located ethnicity thus conceived at the very foundation of his anti-Japanese polemic. In Haboush and Robinson's translation, Kang wrote:

“Look at this repugnant place where teeth are blackened! These slit-eyed ones are genuinely of a different race! This is a place not yet graced by King Yu's influence, where even the cart wheel is different from that of Zhou.” (24)

The translation of *iryu* (異類 different kind or category) as “different race” in this context is arguably anachronistic.³ However, the remainder of the passage shows that Kang's criticism of the Japanese was not a matter of their being ethnically *Japanese* per se, but that they were ethnic at all, as signaled by the cultural practice in which some Japanese women blackened their teeth. It was their very ethnic-ness, their local practices at variance with the universal, that separated the Japanese from the civilizing

³ An alternate translation might read, “This repugnant land of blackened teeth, however, is truly [populated by] a different kind of people” (願茲漆齒之陋邦實是橫目之異類). Kang is now turning his attention to the people of Japan and their uncouth ways after describing Chosŏn participation in the universal values of human civilization. See Ibid. Rather than “slit-eyed ones,” a seemingly modern racial slur of peculiar positionality on Kang's part, one can read *hwoengmok* (橫目, horizontal eyes) as a reference to human beings in general who are distinguished from other living beings in that their eyes are arranged horizontally across their faces. For the origins of this interpretation in the *Zhuangzi* and other texts, see the entries for 橫目, 橫目之民 [people of horizontal eyes], and 橫目縱鼻 [horizontal eyes, vertical nose] in Morohashi Tetsuji, comp., *Dai Kan-Wa jiten*, vol. 6 (Tokyo: Taishūkan shoten, 1985), 569.

influence of King Yu and the other sagely exemplars. For Kang, being ethnic is at the root of Japanese inferiority, while the adoption of the universal and the elision of the ethnic are hallmarks of Chosŏn's inclusion in the civilized world.

According to the above formulation, then, there is no tension between two conceptions of civilization because Kang only had one: a universalism built upon shared understandings of scholarship, propriety, and socio-political order as embodied by Kings Yu and Tang, Kings Wen and Wu, the Duke of Zhou, Confucius, and Mencius. It is therefore not only not surprising, it should be expected that while he was in captivity, Kang would develop a friendly relationship with people such as the Japanese Neo-Confucian scholar Fujiwara Seika. Haboush and Robinson suggest that this relationship was characterized by the tension between inclusive and exclusive notions of civilization they propose in their introduction, but the friendship between Kang and Fujiwara was based on a transcendence of their respective ethnic and geographic identities. The translated text does not make clear what civilizational tensions there were between the two or even within their own minds individually. Ethnicity and geographic location were not markers of civilization for these men; it was the adoption of universal values and practices that separated the civilized from their opposition.

These differences of interpretation, however, impinge neither on the overall power and quality of the translation nor on the value of this work as a contribution to the English-language literature on this period. This translation is an important piece of scholarship that illustrates in very human and immediate terms the material and corporeal struggles of civilians during war and the larger articulations of political and civilizational identity precipitated by combat and captivity that are rarely accessible to those unable to read the source languages. Haboush and Robinson have raised important questions and provided a great service to students and scholars of early modern East Asia in translating and annotating this important work.