

*The Five Hundred Years of Pre-Modern Joseon and China**
[Joseon gwa Jungguk geunse obaeknyeon eul gada]

By Kishimoto Mio and Miyajima Hiroshi

Seoul: Yeoksa bipyeongsa

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“Global Perspectives”

This Japanese work, originally published by Chuokoronsha (中央公論社) as part of the “World History” series, is an introductory book on “Asian history” whose target was aimed at Japanese readers. Then, there must be certain limitations for a Korean reader to comment on this book. Particularly, the intentions and objectives of the authors may not be accurately understood if the book is reviewed solely from the Korean history perspective. Furthermore, the book not only discusses the history of The Joseon dynasty but also provides an introduction to the Ming-Qing histories while noting that I do not have any expertise in Chinese history. With these basic limitations for Korean historians in mind, I would like to be faithful to my duties as a reviewer by sharing some thoughts after my perusal in terms of “studying and learning.” By and large, the general readers, accustomed to the narratives of Korean historians on Joseon history may find the table of contents in the book unusual. The table of contents is as follows:

* The original title for this book is *Min shin to richō no jidai* 明清と李朝の時代 published by Chuō Kōronsha (Tokyo) in 1998, and this review is translated from the Korean manuscript originally published in the *Yeoksa bipyeong* (역사비평), issue 66, February 2004.

1. Upheaval of East Asia

Legacy of the Song-Yuan Dynasties / Faltering Goryeo Dynasty / Peasants' Rebellion during the Late Yuan and Zhu Yuanzhang / The Ming Dynasty's Establishment of Dominance / The Foundation of the Joseon Dynasty / Widening Global Perspective

2. Expansion of the Ming Empire

"The South and the North" during the Early Ming / Development during the Reign of Yongle / Tributary Systems during the Ming / The Ming Empire on the Defensive Strategy / State and Society during the Mid-Ming Period

3. The Century of *Yangban* (Aristocrat): Joseon in the 16th Century

Yu Hui-chun and *Miam ilgi* [Diary of Miam] / *Yangban* Bureaucracy / Composition of Relatives / Rural Society and Governance / *Yangban* Mentalité / Transition of the Era

4. The Light and Shadow of the Late Ming Empire

Defense of the North and Financial Crisis / Japanese Pirates in the Southeast Coast / Cities and Farming Villages during the Late Ming / Communities and Order/Seasons of Politics

5. Chinese-Barbarian Transformations

World System and East Asia / The Imjin and Jeongyu Wars / Self-Reliant Powers in the Frontier / Growth of the Qing Dynasty / Collapse of the Ming Dynasty / Establishment of Dominance under the Qing

6. Establishment of the Joseon Traditional Society

The Manchu Invasions and Another Center of Confucian Civilization / Victims of Political Strife / Reorganization of the Ruling Class / Formation of Traditions

7. Peace of the Qing Dynasty

International Circumstances during the Kangxi Period / Two Faces of the Qing Emperor / The Reversal of the Qing Dynasty / China Seen from Europe

8. New Contenders: Late Joseon

The Hegemony of Rural Society / Silhak and Catholicism / The Dreams and Frustration of King Jeongjo / Premonition of Social Changes / Forecasting the Modern Times

9. From Prosperity to Crisis

Hong lou Meng [Dream of the Red Chamber] and *Rulin waishi* [Unofficial History of the Literati] / Emperor Qianlong, “the Old Man of Ten Victories” / Era of Prosperity / The Economy of Mountain Areas and Religious Revolt

10. People and Society: Comparative Theory of Traditional Society

“Family” (家) and Social Groups of China / Joseon’s Social Organizations with a Focus on Intermediate Groups

The above table of contents of the book with ten chapters informs that the authors intend to understand Korean history from the perspective of “East Asian history,” interconnected with Chinese history, rather than as the history of Korea “itself.” This interstate aspect is clearly shown in Chapter 1 where the collapse of Goryeo and the foundation of Joseon are described under the title, “Upheaval of East Asia” as well as in Chapter 5 that deals with the Imjin and Jeongyu Wars under the title of “Chinese-Barbarian Transformation.” Such approach might be quite unfamiliar to Korean readers who are used to the descriptions that offer a glimpse of political, economic, social and cultural events and changes of the Joseon period from the late 14th to the late 19th century mostly in a chronological order.

Along this line, the titles of the chapters and subtitles show that the authors emphasize “global perspectives” in which a broader framework of “East Asia” is employed. Such examples can be included, “Widening Global Perspective” in Chapter 1, “Transition of the Era” in Chapter 3, “World System and East Asia” in Chapter 5, and “China Seen from Europe” in Chapter 7.

In “Widening Global Perspective” of Chapter 1, Miyajima takes *Honil gangni yeokdae gukdo jido* [Map of Integrated Lands and Regions of Historical Countries and Capitals], Shin Suk-ju’s *Haedong jegukgi* [Chron-

icle of the Countries in East Asia], and *Nosongdang Ilbon haengnok* [Nosongdang's Travelogue of Japan] written by Song Hui-gyeong as the constructive examples for his positive evaluation that Joseon made effort to properly understand the situations of Japan and other neighboring countries until the 15th century. However, after the 15th century Miyajima especially pays attention to Joseon's gradual shift of the global insight to a passive attitude towards new trends as in the case of the issue of silver trade. With an emphasis on political factors, he attributes this unproductive change to the Sarim faction's attempt to eradicate the evils of the Hungu faction without any particular pressure from the outer world in the 16th century. In this line, he also associates such a "home-oriented" attitude of Joseon with one of the ensuing causes for the Imjin War, or the East Asian War (1592-98).

Chapter 5 seems to be the most distinctive part of this book due to the topic of global perspectives. Silver, treated already with respect to the "mixed residence (雜居) of the Han Chinese and the non-Han Chinese barbarians (華夷)" in the previous chapter, reappears as an important issue in this chapter. Here, Kishimoto argues that global commerce, boosted by silver, made an impact on Japan and the New Continent in the 16th century to escalate tensions across regions and within social classes alike. This kind of phenomena came to invoke the intrastate and interstate disputes over integration, the emergence of new powers, the dynamic movement of human and material resources, urban development, religious reformation against social disturbance, and new social ideology for the source of sociopolitical order. In particular, Kishimoto explains, Ming's action to prevent trade by *kenminsen* 遣明船 (The tribute ships from Japan to Ming) after the "Ningbo Incident" in 1523 served as a "barrier" to the movement of silver in East Asia. As armed smugglers, Japanese pirates made effort to destroy the barrier and finally witnessed the maritime blockade relived by the Ming.

Meanwhile, military tensions, caused by the Mongols and the Jurchens in the north, increased national defense revenue of the Ming, which led to the growing investment of silver in the border regions. This change in northern China begot "silver shortage" in south China where more of the armed smuggling, organized by the Japanese pirates in desperate pursuit of silver, stood out. The transformation, propelled economically and militarily

both from the northern and southern frontiers, gained a felicitous advantage of narrowing the breach between the Han Chinese and the barbarians in the Ming. At the same time, as compared with bureaucrats and merchants, benefited out of the transformation in one way or another, farmers became poor as they sold grains at an extremely low price in order to get silver and pay taxes, thereby falling into agricultural exodus or reaching the helpless state of economic dependence. It is the Yangming School (陽明學) which stressed “the fundamental solutions” for restoring social order and collectivity in counter to the egoism, spread unchallenged, and the severe gap between the rich and the poor in China.

Following the above theme of frontier or external impetus surrounding mainland China, this chapter characterizes the Imjin War from a different angle that reinterprets Japan in terms of the rise of the new military power less than mere invaders. This revisionist orientation also recontextualizes the significance of the war in the regional integration of East Asia under the “global mechanism,” thus connecting the war to the higher demand for silver in China, the increase of silver production in Japan, and the emergence of Portugal and Spain from the late 16th century to the early 17th century. It is worth noticing here that Joseon is defined as “the country that evinced the strongest objection to the introduction of silver.” The authors also take note of the growth of “outsiders” on the border lines especially by enumerating the prominent military leaders of Li Chengliang (李成梁) and Nurhachi in northern China and the famous maritime warlords of Zheng Zhilong (鄭芝龍) and Zheng Chenggong (鄭成功) in southern China, all of whom actually built up their power by way of control over border trade in silver. Still, the hegemonic competition among the powerful outsiders was finalized when the Qing mounted a successful campaign against the “Revolt of the Three Feudatories,” in modern Yunnan conquered Taiwan, and subsequently exerted full maritime control over South China before the influx of the western powers several centuries later. In other words, the last winner of the long-term struggle diplomatically and militarily among the neighboring powers of the Ming, as well as culturally between the confrontation between civilization and barbarism, was the Qing dynasty during the 17th century.

In brief, Chapters 4 and 5 shed ample light on the multi-layered and complex, far from separate and dispersive, development of the Joseon and Ming-Qing histories in the 16th and 17th centuries. What is added to this historical complication is the role of Japan as an integral factor. For instance, according to these chapters, the diplomatic, economic, social, and military impacts of Japanese silver, Japanese pirates, and the Imjin War on the dynamic shape of East Asian history at that time should not be discounted. That is, Japan took a very important part in the great transition of the Joseon and Ming-Qing histories during the times. From the global perspective, this period is also called the Age of Discovery when the Western powers such as Portugal and Spain started advancing into the rest of the world, including East Asia, beyond Europe. Japan was the most vigorous actor in contacting and trading with the western forces and that exchange had a crucial bearing on the historical change of East Asia in its entirety. In fact, the evaluation of Japanese invaders as “the cosmopolitans transcending regional and national barriers in pursuit of trade” instead of “Japanese pirates making a habit of pillage and slaughter” faithfully speaks for the stance of Japanese scholars, including Ishihara Michihiro (石原道博), Amino Yoshihiko (網野善彦), Arano Yasunori (荒野泰典) and Murai Syosuke (村井章介). Such interpretation may seem unfamiliar to Korean readers who are used to the Korean history narrative that Joseon history in specific, developed “independently” and “inherently,” but it is worth understanding how the Japanese historians reformulate East Asia into a pattern of regional history and colored this new version into a larger narrative of global history in order to rethink and to expand the perspective of Korean history.

Strengths and Weaknesses

As a Korean historian, it is difficult for me to concretely and meticulously criticize the writing of Kishimoto. Still, my impression through the reading is that his descriptions on the Ming-Qing histories are highly refined and well organized. Therefore, an intensive reading of the book would be very useful in comprehending the broader, positive and negative picture of the Ming-Qing histories in conjunction with the history of the Joseon dynasty.

Meanwhile, I locate several interesting points in Miyajima's description of Joseon. First, with the focus on a yangban elite family of Yu Hui-chun (柳希春, 1513-77), or the author of *Miam ilgi* [Diary of Miam] in the 16th century, Miyajima makes use of the diversity and richness of the content of the diary to bring forth the various aspects of the Joseon society encompassing the composition of kinship, rural society and central government, social classes and status, the economic power and the mentality of *yangban* elites, the process of factional strife, and the like. What is interesting is that in explaining the *modus vivendi* of the yangban Miyajima stresses the passing of state service examination (*gwageo*) as an important precondition for the preservation of the *yangban* identity. Alongside this, he also intimates the nature of the *yangban* not so much as a category of status as that of class with reference to the stories of Yu's descendants in local registers (*hyangan*), thereby indicating the sensitivity of the *yangban* elites themselves to social change at that time.

Next, the book under review is distinctive from most of the introductory books on Korean history which tend to account for the 16th century as a "period when historical achievements from the 15th century crumbled." The author's view of the 16th century is shown in the following sentences: "Oligopoly was not very serious in the 16th century and the original purpose of *gwageo* was well preserved. The novelty of Yu Hui-chun, as captured in *Miam ilgi*, represents that of the other *yangban* elites of the day." (p. 101); "Joseon in the 16th century was a society with a fluidity of movement where massive migration and settlement took place." (p. 111); and "the vitality of the 16th century in search of new politics" (p. 130). These fresh points, which Kang Man-gil and Lee Tae-jin have already argued, deserves some attention for a better understanding of the history of Joseon in the 16th century.

What is more, what should not go unnoticed is the question of objectivity. Miyajima maintains that

[A]s is well known, Joseon made the world's first metal type in the history of printing, but opinions vary on this point. Some speak highly of the first-ever metal type while others refuse to acknowledge its histori-

cal significance. The second view estimates that the development of Western metal type and typography invented by Gutenberg had sufficient cultural, social, and political significance to the “printing revolution” whereas Joseon’s metal type did not play such a noticeable role. Both opinions, I think, seem to go to extremes; what I would like to point out is the characteristics of Hanja (Chinese character) which are probably not suitable for typography. It is easy to mechanize the type-casting for (western) alphabet composed of a small number of letters. Given tens of thousands of the Hanja characters, in contrast, we can expect something like the “printing revolution” with ease. Discussions without such a matter seem almost pointless. The significance of Joseon’s metal type has to be reviewed under the circumstances that Joseon was facing at that time (p. 126).

The author’s cautious evaluation of historical facts provides some implications for understanding the issues that we overlook oftentimes. An example would be how to compare the commercial development among Korea, China and Japan. The author mentions that “Joseon’s commerce lost its light” vis-à-vis China and Japan during the 16th and 18th centuries by reason of “the passive attitude of the government” towards commerce. In this regard, he takes up the ruling class’s way of living as the more fundamental cause on the grounds that the majority of the *yangban* elites, except for their relatives and bureaucrats living in Seoul, resided in agricultural villages and procured daily supplies from their servants or farmlands without the help of market economy. On top of this self-sufficient system, he counts the residence of the *yangban* families in a locality instead of downtown as an obstacle in promoting the development of commercial cities such as *Xiancheng* (縣城) of China or *joukamachi* (城下町) of Japan. Still, Miyajima asks for a more careful interpretation as follows:

During the colonial period, Japanese scholars identified the phenomena such as commercial doldrums and lack of urban development as the stagnant trait of Joseon society. Post-liberation Korean scholarship criticized this colonialist reading and conversely repacked the phenomena in

the embryonic capitalism theory (資本主義萌芽論). However, both of these arguments tended to ignore Joseon society's independent structure and apply historical experiences of Europe or Japan mechanically to Joseon. Far from remaining stagnant, Joseon witnessed certain changes in a self-referential mode. This is why a structure-based theory of transformation is required (pp. 263-64).

To be certain, some scholars in Korea have begun to reanalyze economic activities of the *yangban* families from the "self-sufficient" perspective by analyzing the massive amount of letters left by the *yangban* elites who resided in rural villages especially in the 19th century. Therefore, Miyajima's argument invokes the need for more elaborate research in this field.

Last, the way Miyajima distinguishes Korean Chinese from the Han Chinese also receives attention. Different from the characteristics of the Han Chinese in the two-folded spirits of "being calculating and ethical" on the one hand and "being selfish and friendly" on the other, he argues, Korean Chinese do not possess or accept these attributes and this divergence enabled them to prevent themselves from "assimilating into the Han Chinese" (pp. 380-81). Such a bold hypothesis, if controversial, would be very useful in addressing some important yet interesting questions including "why Korean Chinese could withstand the force of Chinese assimilation."

However, the book also comes with quite a few weaknesses. I would like to leave out minor errors and touch on some salient flaws. First, the book deals with the history of Joseon and the Ming-Qing history in parallel and this direct comparison method can be both a strength and a weakness. The approach is helpful for securing a "global perspective" emphasized consistently by the authors but some essential premises to be more specified are missing. In particular, it is problematic to have little discussion on the history of the relationship between Joseon and the Ming-Qing China, other than the Manchu Invasions, in writing about the history of Joseon and the Ming-Qing history from the 15th to the 19th century. It is regrettable that the authors barely discuss the Korea-China relations as one of the main topics in such a limited way that the relations are intermittently treated for the roles of Japan or the West in the historical unfolding of Joseon or

the Ming-Qing China under the motif of “global perspective.”

Second, some important research achievements of Korean scholarship since the 1980s are not properly reflected in the overall narrative. Because the book was originally published in Japan, this matter might be inevitable but it can undermine the originality of this book. For example, even though acknowledging the new waves of research in Korea (p. 243), the book uncritically includes expressions such as “standing up all night for political strife” under the title of “Victims of Political Strife” to describe power struggle. The background of the “political strife” is simply rated as “competition over public posts.” It is lamentable that the book phrases the 400-year political history of Joseon merely in “political strife.”

These debilities may not be questionable considering that the book was originally written for “Japanese readers” but reconsideration will be required when the translated edition is meant to be an “introductory book on the Joseon history for Korean readers.”

Conclusion

Concerns exist over the future of East Asia, especially the Korean Peninsula located between China and Japan, as the hegemonic rivalry between the United States and China intensifies due to the rapid and powerful reemergence of China. Further, a resolution of historical conflicts between Korea and Japan seems distant since last year. Koreans have no choice but to keep a close watch on the situations of China and Japan even if the two neighbors pledge to avoid “Sinocentric hegemony” and “pre-1945 conservative turn” since Korea had long been a “victim” of these movements maneuvered by the two countries. What should Korea do in order to play a leading role in bringing about peace in East Asia and stay away from regional turbulence in the future? First and foremost, Koreans need to have a complex and multi-dimensional perspective on Chinese history and Japanese history, maintain high-quality research capacity for the academic development of Korean history, and properly understand Northeast Asia and East Asia. Despite the fact that the book writes about Korean history and Chinese history from the eyes of Japanese researchers, it is useful to look

back on the established thoughts and viewpoints of Korean scholarship for a new start in a productive way. To some degree, I felt a sense of jealousy as I read the book by these two Japanese historians who have enough academic attainment to author an introductory book on the history of “foreign countries.” This scholarly adventure does attest to the breadth and depth of Japanese scholarship on Korea and China. When would we be able to write about our neighbors’ “past,” or better yet East Asian history from our own perspective in tandem with global perspective?