
Book Review of *The Routledge Handbook of Early Modern Korea*

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Reviewed Book

Eugene Y. Park. ed. *The Routledge Handbook of Early Modern Korea*.
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Following the recent publications of comprehensive handbooks on early modern China and Japan, Korean historiography now welcomes its first scholarly handbook dedicated to early modern Korea. *The Routledge Handbook of Early Modern Korea* presents an ambitious synthesis of Korean history spanning nearly five centuries, from the founding of the Joseon dynasty in 1392 to 1873, when Korea's leadership began engaging with imperialist forces (p. 1). This comprehensive volume represents an impressive editorial achievement, bringing together international scholars—both established figures and emerging voices in the field—to examine Korean history through the analytical framework of “early modernity.”

The concept of “early modernity” serves as more than an organizational framework for this handbook. As emphasized in the introduction and opening Chapter 1, this periodization serves as a meaningful analytical lens for understanding the various facets that characterized Korea during this era. By applying this concept to Korea, through diverse topics and discussions, the handbook makes important contributions to broader scholarly debates about periodization and “early modernity” while illustrating Korean characteristics and demonstrating how Korean experiences both parallel and diverge from other early modern states.

The handbook is systematically organized into six thematic sections that progress from macro to micro perspectives. The first section on Joseon in Time and Space situates Joseon Korea within early modern East Asian foreign relations, examining Korea's complex relationships with China and Japan. Particularly compelling are the different perspectives of Korea during this era, not limited to Korea's self-identity as “Little China” (*So Chinghwa*) but extending to Japanese perceptions of Korea. This section illuminates the characteristics of the prolonged early modern East Asian world order, which provided Korea with a relatively stable environment for development during this era.

The second section examines state formation, power structures, and resources, demonstrating how these elements, particularly politics, the military, and the economy, provided the foundation for Joseon Korea's relatively sustained development. This section also acknowledges that

governmental development was not a smooth trajectory toward modern statehood, but rather a complex process marked by both centralization and resistance to central authority.

The third section examines Joseon social structures, analyzing both family organization characterized by status hierarchies and legal codes that strictly regulated women's moral conduct. However, this section also addresses more dynamic aspects of Joseon society, including women's various economic and cultural activities, homosexuality, and transgender identities. While early Catholic missionaries experienced persecution in Korea, the integration of foreigners in early modern Joseon society primarily encompassed Ming Chinese and Japanese populations following the Imjin War, as well as Ming refugees fleeing the Ming-Qing transition and Jurchen settlers. Neighboring East Asian people still constituted the main foreign communities during this era.

The fourth section explores Korea's distinctive philosophical and religious landscape, examining the coexistence and interaction among Confucianism, Buddhism, popular religions including Shamanism and Daoist traditions, and some other village and district rituals, and Catholicism. This religious and philosophical diversity distinguishes Joseon Korea from many contemporary European states and demonstrates the complex processes of Western religious integration, resistance, and reformation.

The fifth section addresses intellectual culture through language, education, and scientific traditions, situating Korean developments within broader early modern patterns of knowledge production. Due to space constraints, this analysis focuses on four major scientific domains: mathematics, astronomy, geography, and medicine. Particularly compelling is Don Baker's analysis of Korean mathematical culture, which contributes to a less studied field and reveals unique approaches that differ substantially from contemporary Chinese and Japanese traditions. Other important scientific developments including military technology and printing innovations are integrated into Chapter 3 (The Military) and Chapter 19 (Literature) respectively.

The last section explores creative expression in early Korean soci-

ety, revealing the rich artistic life that flourished across social boundaries. Elite cultural forms included court music, court painting, landscape painting, royal kilns, rear gardens of royal palaces, performing arts for the literati, and sung poetry. Popular cultural traditions encompassed vernacular fiction, genre paintings, porcelain, group drumming music, *p'ansori*, and mask dance dramas, several of which have gained recognition as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. Buddhist artistic traditions and religious performances in both Buddhist and Shamanist contexts remained accessible to broader populations.

The handbook succeeds admirably in several key areas. Most significantly, it provides a comprehensive introduction to early modern Korean history that will serve both graduate students and researchers in Korean studies, as well as scholars of comparative early modern history seeking to understand non-European contexts. The breadth of topics covered—from foreign relations and politics to technology and creative arts—offers readers a holistic view of Joseon society.

The handbook's approach to periodization reveals its strengths in handling historical continuity. All chapters effectively illustrate the continuity of the targeted field within the prolonged early modern Korean history and some chapters directly mention and highlight the continuity witnessed in particular fields of history (e.g., pp.43, 97, 114, 134, 218). Meanwhile, although the definition of "early modernity" in this book begins with the founding of the Joseon dynasty, many chapters necessarily trace development from earlier periods—the Goryeo Dynasty or even earlier—to establish detailed historical context. This approach effectively demonstrates the continuity of Korean history leading into the early modern period, as evident in discussions of religion, mathematics and other fields that have developed over centuries.

However, the varying chronological coverage across chapters creates inconsistencies that may confuse readers about the temporal boundaries of early modernity. Some chapters focus primarily on the Joseon dynasty, others culminate in the mid-eighteenth century, while a few extend connections to the modern period. This variation creates the impression that different authors may hold slightly different understandings of

early modernity, somewhat undermining the coherence of the periodization framework. Although the epilogue attempts to bridge the early modern and modern periods by covering Korea since 1873, it provides only a brief political overview given word-count limitations. The handbook would benefit from greater emphasis on continuity between the early modern period and other phases of Korean history, even though, I also agree with Wang Sixiang's acknowledgment regarding the discussion of links between Joseon's political culture and modern anti-colonial movements or pro-democratic and minjung movements that "direct lines of continuity are hard to draw" (p. 17).

While the handbook provides some useful maps at the very beginning, readers, especially those unfamiliar with Korean history, would also benefit from more comprehensive coverage of the Korean peninsula's natural environment, such as its landscape, climate and agricultural system during the early modern period. The handbook focuses predominantly on politics, culture, and social dimensions of early modern Korean experience, leaving some gaps in our understanding of the contemporary environmental context that all these activities are based on. For example, the volume provides little information about climatic variations, landscape transformations, or the introduction of new crops during this era. Similarly, readers miss the chance to know how Koreans adapted to and managed environmental challenges, such as mountainous terrains and climatic anomalies (pp.32-35). Given that natural conditions formed the foundational context for the socioeconomic activities examined throughout the handbook, this environmental dimension deserves more attention.

The handbook could also benefit from greater engagement with broader global history. Readers familiar with early modern European history may expect more discussion of early encounters with Europe, given that the great voyages of discovery heralded the dawn of a global era during this period. While careful readers can find relevant discussions such as in Chapter 15 on Catholicism, there could be more to say beyond a religious perspective. Moreover, although the significance of seventeenth-century climate change during the Little Ice Age was mentioned in Chapter 2 on foreign relations, the absence of a dedicated chapter on environ-

mental history represents a missed opportunity to engage with broader discussions of early modern environmental changes. Given that Part II is named “State, Power, and Resources,” readers may have expected discussion of early modern exploitation of various natural resources.

Similarly, despite references to punishment in the section on state and power, as well as norms and laws for women, the handbook lacks a dedicated discussion of the development of Joseon Korea’s legal system. This omission is particularly notable given that legal frameworks, including disaster relief regulations, became extremely important during the continuous disasters of the seventeenth century and constituted a significant aspect of politics (p. 84).

While these limitations are understandable given the scope of the scholarship, *The Routledge Handbook of Early Modern Korea* successfully fulfills its mission as a comprehensive overview of early modern Korean history with thoughtful emphasis on Korean characteristics and specificities. This approach provides essential groundwork for future comparative and interconnected historical research. The handbook will undoubtedly serve as an invaluable reference for students and teachers alike, while offering historians, art historians, and literary scholars a solid foundation for more specialized investigations. By establishing early modern Korea as an important field of inquiry, this volume makes a significant contribution to both Korean studies and comparative early modern history, demonstrating that Korean experiences deserve recognition within broader narratives of world historical development.