BOOK REVIEW


Yi, Taejin is one of the towering figures in Korean historiography for the last four decades. He has published extensively on just about every period of Korean history and his interests range from social to economic history, from Koryo institutional history to the role of Confucianism as a force of modernization, from a historical and legal reevaluation of the early twentieth-century treaties between Japan and Korea that made annexation possible to the influence of the Little Ice Age on Choson. The versatility of his historical interests is well matched by the influence of his studies. In that regard it is certainly gratifying to have a volume entirely dedicated to Yi Taejin’s scholarship available in English. Translated by a team of academics and professional translators, it is edited by Michael D. Shin and published in Cornell’s East Asia Series. Although usually for reviews of works like this, the quality of the translation is only mentioned in the very last paragraph and often presented by a few translation errors that slipped past the editor, I would like to start this review with an appraisal of the translation since it is absolutely vital for the accessibility and usability of the book. Five different translators have worked on this volume, which in a way is a compliment to the versatility of Yi Taejin. I am sure I am not alone in stating that I would feel confident of being familiar with the field and the terminology of only a few of the studies collected in this book. The translations are excellent. They read very well in English and the sentences themselves do not give away the fact that they are translations from Korean (the overall structure of the studies sometimes does appear like that, but that is a mere observation, not a point of criticism). The translators have succeeded in rendering Yi’s Korean into readable English, finding good English-language equivalents for the many specific Korean terms of the original papers. With regard to the editing work, I’ve also found it excellent (with one glaring exception: the header between pages 139 and 163 displays ‘adpotion’ instead of ‘adoption’).

The book has four parts: 1. Socioeconomic development and neo-Confucianism; 2. International relations in a period of historical transition; 3. Modernization and Confucianism; 4. Overcoming the distortions of Korean history. These four parts have not been created equally. The first is arguably the least interesting for most readers. It suffers from a problem inevitably associated with essay collections such as this volume: some articles, especially the older ones, will have been surpassed by more recent studies. And ironically, given the influence of Yi Taejin’s socioeconomic and social research, this is precisely what has happened to the articles collected in part one. Although one could argue that it is relevant to have these articles available in English, I have my doubts. To name but one example, the
first article “Social change during the Koryo-Choson transition” is a good example of the notion that a new class of landed gentry was responsible for the transition, but John Duncan’s research has since made this idea untenable. At the very least, an article defending the notion of the emergence of a new class during the transition must engage with Duncan’s arguments. Obviously, Yi’s article does not, since it predates Duncan’s work. This does not reflect on the value of the article, but it does put a question mark behind the decision to translate it into English now. At the same time, it should be mentioned that there is of course always a trade-off involved between aspiring to completeness and being up-to-date in the editing of a volume of such as this.

The three remaining parts incorporate increasingly more recent articles ranging from 1991 to 2004. Two of these are very general articles originally written for the Han’guksa shimin kangjwa series (Public Lectures on Korean History) which address a broad audience: broader, perhaps, than the audience that will be interested in this volume. Ideally, a review of this book would engage with all the major arguments presented. That, however, would probably result in a separate volume. Instead, I will focus on a number of Yi Taejin’s most important general arguments. Perhaps the most obvious element of Yi Taejin’s scholarship is the concern he displays to make Korean history (independent of the particular period he works on) understandable, legible if you will, as a part of world history. To this end, he makes sure his research is in touch with research done in and on Japan, China and the international world in general. As such his work on the effects of the Little Ice Age in mid-Choson was groundbreaking: it not only offered an explanan to phenomena otherwise difficult to grasp, it also made his research accessible to historians of other areas, dealing with the same problems. A minor point in his persistent efforts to have Korean history count as ‘real’ history is that it sometimes border on the preachy, which might be counterproductive.

Yi’s re-evaluation of Kojong and his (once) contested appraisal of Kojong as a strong and able monarch appeared in Korean as a monograph and has also found its way into English presentation in the form of several articles. It is certainly of importance to have Yi’s voice in English contributing to the debate on late 19th and early 20th century Korea. Too often, a sense of negativism has pervaded English-language studies on Kojong. And although I think Yi is probably a bit too positive in his reappraisal of Kojong, his view might just balance out the debate. Closely connected to his research on Kojong is his understanding of the illegal nature of the treaties that Japan forced on Korea. Focusing on the seals used (or not used), his view that the 1910 annexation treaty was never properly ratified by the Korean monarch and as such not valid, has penetrated even into the international law arena (http://opiniojuris.org/2010/08/11/the-case-of-the-wrong-seal-was-korea-legally-annexed-by-japan/). Nonetheless, despite the historiographical and perhaps moral implications of Yi’s research (which he has been conducting for years now in close dialogue with Japanese scholars, publishing in Japanese also), international law scholars seem reluctant to agree with Yi’s conclusion that lack of ratification erases

the validity of the treaty. Even so, the problematizing of the treaty signing processes is an important step in understanding how the annexation came about.

Although overall I am sympathetic to Yi Taejin’s mission to write Korean history that quite literally measures up to the histories of other parts and periods of the world, I have discerned a failure in Yi’s way to problematize the concepts he uses to draw Korean history into the international discourse. His studies on modernization and neo-Confucianism in particular are exemplary of such an approach. While understandable, methodologically the approach to use concepts developed to suit quite different historical experiences (even if like modernity they subsequently claim universal status) without thorough and critical reflection on their origins, uses and abuses may in the end turn out to be self-defeating. Like a Trojan horse, such concepts may seem to bring emancipation from a view of history that is no longer tenable, but what they deliver instead is not necessarily better. On the other hand, it needs to be said that thanks to the efforts of scholars such as Yi Taejin, other scholars can now take a more critical look at the concepts of modern historiography and emancipate Korean history not only in terms of subject and theme, but also in terms of theory and abstract notions that do not necessarily take problematic ‘universal’ concepts such as modernity as their thinking and arguing tools.

The Dynamics of Confucianism and Modernization in Korean History is a thoughtfully and carefully edited and translated collection of articles by one of Korea’s most eminent historians. Despite some of the articles having become outdated by now, the book offers plenty for students of Korean history to chew on. In virtue of the excellent translations, the articles are easily accessible. I imagine this volume will be a useful addition to the English-language scholarship in the many periods and subjects Yi Taejin has written about, foremost his reappraisal of Kojong and the controversies on the treaties.

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