Korea in the Middle

Korean Studies and Area Studies:
Essays in Honour of Boudewijn Walraven

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Contents

List of figures
Contributors
Acknowledgments
Foreword
About Boudewijn Walraven

Introduction. The area in the middle, or: The globalisation of eccentricity
Remco E. Breuker & Koen De Ceuster

CENTRIPETAL AND CENTRIFUGAL TENSIONS

1. Time, place, and language: The impact of globalisation on Korean Studies
Ken Wells

2. Colonial modernities in the 14th century: Empire as the harbinger of modernity
Remco E. Breuker

3. The World in a Book: Yu Kilchun's Sŏyu kyŏmun
Koen De Ceuster

4. Repositioning Hamel: The linguistic significance of the first European cross-cultural account of Chosŏn
M. S. Chi

5. Koguryŏ as a missing link
Martine Rabbets

VOICES FROM WITHIN

6. Shamanic nostalgia
Laurel Kendall

7. Them Pig-Feet: Anti-Japanese folksongs in Korea
Roald Maltiangkey
8. Fifteenth-century history and Buddhist approaches to colonial landscape in Hong Sayong’s writings from the early 1920s
   Jung-Shim Lee

9. The reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated. The importance and the development of Buddhist painting in Chosŏn as seen through Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva paintings
   Ken Vis

10. Beyond kimpap and pudaen chigsae: Chewing on Korea’s modern history
    Katarzyna J. Cwiertka

11. The story of Prince Golden Calf and tale type 707: A translation and comparison
    A. M. Olof

CROSSING BORDERS

12. Mapping the “Divine Country”: Sacred Geography and International Concerns in Medieval Japan
    Lucia Dolce

13. Should Confucianism be studied as a religious tradition?
    W.J. Boot

14. Royal pain: How the king of Koryŏ became the empress of China, or: A diplomatic problem of 1080
    Ivo Smit

15. Fighting in Korea: Two early narrative treatments of the story of Xue Rengui
    W. L. Ideva

16. The Korean Embassies and Amenomori Hôshû: A biographical sketch of an early Koreanist
    M. L. M. Tjoa

Appendix: Publications of Boudewijn Walraven

List of figures

Fig. 5.1 Minimal scenario for the linguistic classification of Japanese, Korean and Koguryô.

Fig. 8.1 An illustration in the first edition of Paekche.

Fig. 8.2 A cartoon during the Russo-Japanese War (1905).

Fig. 9.1 Painting A. Ink and colours on silk, 14th century. 109 x 56.8 cm. Asian Art Museum, East Asian Art Collections, National Museum in Berlin, inv. no. 1966-14.

Fig. 9.2 Painting B. Ink and colours on silk, 1562, 94.5 x 85.5 cm, Kōmyōji, Onomichi, Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan. (From Yi Tongju, Hanguk teobwason, pp. 325-329.)

Fig. 9.3 Painting C. Ink and colours on silk, late 18th century, 143 x 135 cm, Museum of Korean Buddhist Art, Seoul. (From the catalogue The 1st special exhibition of Chosŏn Buddhist paintings.)

Fig. 10.1 A label of canned Korean crab, packed by Sanko & Co in Osaka and destined for the American market, 1931.

Fig. 10.2 Kimpap displayed on a food stall in Seoul, 2003.

Fig. 10.3 A supermarket shelf with Spam along with domestic luncheon meat, 2003.

Fig. 12.1 Diagram of Japan in the shape of a vajra (I).

Fig. 12.2 Diagram of Japan in the shape of a vajra (II).

Fig. 12.3 Diagram of Japan in the shape of a vajra (III).

Fig. 12.4 Gyôki map from a sixteenth-century copy of the Shôgaihô.

Fig. 12.5 Gyôki-style map from the Nichûrekki.

Fig. 12.6 Gyôki map from the Ninnaji archives.

Fig. 12.7 Gyôki map from the Shômyô-ji archives.

Fig. 12.8 Seventeenth-century ‘map of earthquake’.

Fig. 12.9 “Map of Japan” from the Myôhô-ji archives.

Fig. 12.10 Two documents explaining the Myôhô-ji map.
In the light of these developments, academic regionalism is now perhaps the best means of ensuring a measure of pluralism in Korean Studies and of expanding a many-sided appreciation of Korea around the globe. There is something liberating, for instance, about not having to approach Korean history under the shadow of belonging to a superpower or a country caught up in superpower politics, of not feeling obliged to relate modern Korea to one’s domestic or foreign politics, of not having to choose sides or be tempted into a patronising defense of the honour, integrity or cultural value of the Korean people. It is perhaps not surprising that pioneering works in literary-history, microhistory, and non-American diasporas, together with reinterpretations of the transformations from the mid-19th to late 20th centuries in terms of the historical agency of culture, thought and religion, have emerged over the last two decades not only in Korea but in Germany, France, The Netherlands, the UK, Scandinavia, and even in Australasia.

Experiences over the past two decades leave little room for any expectation that the relation between academia and political-economic power will ever be sundered, and so if the current concentrations of power continue, a world without academic regionalism can only portend the most successful cultural imperialism of all time. In academia, what we depend on now more than ever, in fact depend on critically, is the globalisation of eccentricity.

Colonial modernities in the 14th century: Empire as the harbinger of modernity

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The term “modern” was fatally compromised by its provincialism right from the outset.

Introduction

In 1277 a young Venetian, accompanied by a small group which included his father, travelled to the Holy Land. From there, the group travelled through Lebanon along one of the routes of the Silk Road. Abandoning their original plan to proceed from the Persian Gulf to China by way of India and Southeast Asia, they opted for the land route to the northeast. They crossed the high Pamir and stayed some time in Badakhshan, after which they descended into Kashgar. Then they entered the territory of the great Khubilai Khan. On their way to the capital of the Great Khan in they travelled south of the Tarim Basin and crossed the desert of Lop. With stops and prolonged business and business to attend to along the way, the journey took them an estimated three and a half years.

Although the travel companions traversed many different countries and states despite the fact that their journey took them through Catholic, Greek-Orthodox, Nestorian, Buddhist territories ruled by aristocrats, princes, religious leaders, and khans, they were offered significant protection by the golden tablet of the Great Khan which promised safe journeys and guaranteed hospitable reception at the road in the much-praised postal stations (jams) of the Mongol empire. A classic overland journey such as this, undertaken by a small group of men and their families through the Mediterranean Sea, Israel, Palestine, Iran, Iraq, Central Asia, Afgh:

This is certainly not the case in South Korea, where non-native speakers must teach in substandard English to students whose grasp of the language is far from perfect and will remain so. Indeed, now that English has declined as a national and instructional language in Hong Kong, instructors at the University of Hong Kong are encountering growing numbers of students whose command of English is poor and certainly does not measure up to what used to be expected.

and China would nowadays probably be impossible and certainly more dangerous. Instead of one golden tablet, the travellers would need at least a dozen visas.

When the travellers arrived, they arrived in the heart of a vast multicultural and multilingual empire, which used paper money, possessed a postal system which was vastly superior to anything the world would know until the middle of the 19th century, which connected western Europe with Southeast Asia, was engaged in intensive diplomacy with the West and possessed an economic structure that was internationalized ("globalized") to such a degree that it would not be seen again until the advent of the expansionist empires of the 19th century. In this empire, men of talent were given chances to Excel and succeed, commodities, ideas and skills were freely traded across seas and deserts, absolute freedom of religion was enjoyed by its inhabitants and a well-established legal system was strictly enforced and rationally executed. Both the journey of these men and the empire they travelled to possessed many characteristics one would nowadays distinctly associate with the quality of being modern.

What it means to be 'modern', what it means to have entered that much-coveted state of 'modernity' is not an easily answered question. Among modernists—that is, advocates of the theoretical position that divides history into a modern and a pre-modern period—and historians or social scientists who study modern subjects, different definitions of modernity exist, many of these quite plausible in their contexts. Among

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3 If indeed we ever have been modern, that is, according to Bruno Latour, we have never been modern, but have merely replaced belief in God with belief in science and progress. Instead of having separated nature and society, we have created "a myth of the soulless, omnipotent bureaucracy, [which] like that of the pure and perfect marketplace, offers the mirror-image of the myth of universal science laws." See Bruno Latour, We have never been modern (translated by Catherine Porter) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), cited in Woodside, Last modernities p. 4.

The discussion on modernity has, surprisingly perhaps, shown relatively little variation in content; the ingredients of modernity are well-established. It is about the particulars and modernity's significance that the discussion gets hazy. Four major themes surface in the mainstream discussion of modernity in Western discourse. First, the individual takes precedence over the community. The centre may not hold, but the individual at the centre of experience does. Second, a rather rigidly rationalist perception of science and progress and concomitant claims to knowledge are emphasized. Third, there is a strong idea of the solvability of all problems, including political ones. Fourth, man can and will know everything there is to be known. As a consequence, he will master nature. The ways these themes have been elaborated upon has directed the debate on modernity towards an idea of an exportable and ontological modernity, in the sense that modernity is something all societies will eventually have to face and that it is fundamentally independent from historical and cultural circumstances. Despite the often clearly anti-Orientalist stances taken in research on modernity outside of Europe and North America, the modernity discourse is perhaps the most successful and certainly most subtle product of Orientalist discourse. It is successful because it is inextricable historical ties to colonialism and piggybacked its way to significance; subtle because it claims (and often also aims) to subvert the values of colonialism, but cannot do so and ends up strengthening the claims of the precedence of the western European historical experience. See the following works for reference: Marshall Berman, All that is solid melts into air. The experience of modernity (London: Verso, 1993); Thomas A Springens, Jr. The irony of liberal reason (Chicago: University

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extended multi-ethnic, multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious sphere, necessitating the release of existing values and roots as well as provoking the need to re-establish or re-root society and oneself in such a way that the newly constructed integrative qualities of life are meaningfully understood. This paper will also argue that the colonial period in Korea (1910–1945) was not the first time the peninsula was faced with an imposed form of 'modernity'. Much like the Japanese government-general, the Yuan administration of Koryo was (at times) brutal, oppressive, authoritarian, unwanted and subjected the entirety of Koryo to the needs of empire. Again much like the early twentieth century, Koryo intellectuals were much drawn to the marvels and novelties offered by this internationalized and multi-locally rooted civilization with competing sets of institutionalized values and found it hard to reject its empire-legitimating logic, while simultaneously earnestly resisting it. The predicament of the late 13th and early 14th century Koryo intellectual was in many regards similar to that of the colonial Korean intellectual. This paper is a preliminary investigation of the issues, questions and problems connected to the reconceptualization of 'colonial modernity' during pre-modern times.

Colonial modernity

The debate on colonial modernity in Korea has been long, heated and intense. The debate on modernization and modernity has been a continuing debate for over a century. Two characteristics of the discussion are of particular importance for my purposes here. First, the debate has been politicized to a very high extent, making it difficult for an index of contemporary political sentiments than of the characteristics of modernity. Second, it fundamentally relies on Western conceptions of modernity; to be more specific, despite the prevalence of the existence of the concept of a specific 'East Asian modernity', this modernity has only been depicted as a reaction to the classical idea of Western Enlightenment modernity. Given the fact that Korea's modernity was colonial, it is important to state here that I do not intend to make any meaningful distinction between modernity and colonial modernity an sich. Although I am fully aware that Korea's colonial modernity was for a large part imposed and as such historically—but not analytically—different from the modernity reached by, for instance, Great Britain, I also think that modernity is only ever achieved in constant interaction with other communities, be that interaction imposed or not. Hence, in this paper I shall focus on that interaction and disregard the historical differences between different forms of modernity. In varying constellations and intensities, the Korean form of East Asian modernity is argued to possess the following three broad constitutive categories of the modern experience: man's triumph over nature (industrialization, humankind's increasing triumph over its tendencies to wards oppressive political and social systems; (depending on the point of view this triumph includes the independence struggle, communism, anti-communism or the democratization movement) and the replacement of an aristocratic elite by a professional, knowledge-based meritocratic elite (the demise of the yangban). Specific historical background which infuses the different expressions of the narrative towards the realization of these three goals has traditionally pitted Korea's failed late-19th century attempt at modernization against Japan's success, Choson's perceived backwardness against colonial and post-colonial Korea's progress, colonialist imperialism versus nationalist independence, 'righteous nationa pride' against 'evil external domination', Japan against Korea, Korea against China, Korea against West, landowners against the oppressed masses and so forth. All these narratives of the modernization of Korea can be traced back to a very strong conviction of the validity of the logic of linear historical development. In other words, independ
ent from the political colour of the argument and independent from the precise binary opposites invoked, the path runs from tradition to modernization. And it makes a necessary detour through Western Enlightenment to pick up the indispensable ingredients of modernity. While historical narratives were certainly aligned to the imperatives of national and international demands, it was also the other way round. Dominant conceptions of history also shaped political and social imperatives. The sheer force of the seeming inevitability of Western modernity fatally prefigured the possible paths to be taken.

I do not argue that there was no such thing as colonial modernity in early 20th-century Korea; this would fly in the face of the very different society that came into being during this time. The many changes that happened during this time obviously had many different causes, but that colonial modernity was one of the most important results is agreed upon by a majority of the scholars working on the colonial period. Nor will I argue that the example of Western modernity as (partly) mediated through China and Japan did not exercise a defining influence on colonial Korea’s intellectuals, activists and population. Although I do think that sometimes Western and Japanese influences on Korea are, somewhat complacently, overemphasized and given a unique status they do not deserve, I do not fundamentally disagree with the argument that the Japanese presence in Korea in the first half of the 20th century demarcated much of the boundaries of Korea’s colonial modernity. I will argue, however, that the conflation of modernity with progress, of modernity with national identity by a majority of intellectuals, and of modernity with imperialism by many Japanese intellectuals ‘fatally compromised’ the idea of colonial modernity in Korea. It also obscures striking similarities this period in Korean history posses when compared with the period of Mongol domination. The proximity of the colonial period makes it: more real, dramatic and significant than the Mongol rule over Koryo, but see larger historical frameworks, the Mongol period was of similar formative and decisive influence; it lasted longer (roughly a century), it also occasioned radical upheavals, and exploited the peninsula. It simultaneously forced and seduced scholars to enter its ranks and become part of the Yuan Empire’s administrative machine, thereby plunging many of them into the abyss of an identity crisis. The central period, then, was not the first time a state on the peninsula was confronted with imports, persuasive and forced modernity. However, in marked contrast with the period of Japanese colonial rule over Korea, the Yuan Empire and Koryo’s failure to excite many people’s political sensibilities, except for the odd scholar. But objectives or a political agenda are only tangentially connected to historical considerations on the Yuan and Koryo.

Modernism as a legitimating strategy was first used by the Japanese scholars early 20th century who endeavoured to support the expansion of the Japanese empire. The politicized nature of the modernity debate in pre-war Japan was clearly underpinned by the fault lines along which the distinction between regions possessed of moc and those without it was made. The spread of modernity became co-terminous with the expansion of the empire; sometimes it dressed in a sabiru suit and someti uniform of the imperial army. From a position of frustration rather than at but during the same period, Korean intellectuals also used the concept of modernties to argue for the modern with the modern that merely camouflage this civilization’s historical self-centeredness. We Last modernities, p. 9.

With the caveat that Korea’s colonial modernity as it developed was only one of several possible modernities. Other alternative modes of modernity were proposed by Korean intellectuals, but they lacked the political and social backing to succeed and have been relegated to the dustbin of failed modernization attempts. Scholars, such as Kim Tae-yong or Yi Nunghwa whose ideas on Korea’s past, present and future were, in an understated way, radically different from their more well-known contemporaries such as Shin Ch’aeho, are nowadays usually described as conservatives who were not able to read the times. Many of their ideas, however, were anything but conservative, although their rhetoric and style of argument were. A thorough investigation and analysis of these forgotten figures of the late 19th- and early 20th century (forgotten in the sense that their writings have not been taken seriously in the way that those of Shin Ch’aeho have been) would illustrate the presence of viable alternatives to colonial modernity in Korea. Alexander Woodside has argued persuasively against relying one modern experience in favour of looking at alternative modernities and at Asian anticipations of Western modernity: “Modernity in the singular suppresses historical lived time and ignores the various modes of resistance to power, legitimate or illegitimate.” Modernities pluralized, in contrast, allows us to uncover traditions of discursive rationality that

9 Such as rationalism (putatively a fundamentally Western characteristic), the concept of the nation-state and the capitalist world-system, representative democracy, individualism, the increasing role of science and technology, spread of social movements, urbanization, mass literacy and proliferation of mass media, and industrialization.


11 With the caveat that Korea’s colonial modernity as it developed was only one of several possible modernities. Other alternative modes of modernity were proposed by Korean intellectuals, but they lacked the political and social backing to succeed and have been relegated to the dustbin of failed modernization attempts. Scholars, such as Kim Tae-yong or Yi Nunghwa whose ideas on Korea’s past, present and future were, in an understated way, radically different from their more well-known contemporaries such as Shin Ch’aeho, are nowadays usually described as conservatives who were not able to read the times. Many of their ideas, however, were anything but conservative, although their rhetoric and style of argument were. A thorough investigation and analysis of these forgotten figures of the late 19th- and early 20th century (forgotten in the sense that their writings have not been taken seriously in the way that those of Shin Ch’aeho have been) would illustrate the presence of viable alternatives to colonial modernity in Korea. Alexander Woodside has argued persuasively against relying one modern experience in favour of looking at alternative modernities and at Asian anticipations of Western modernity: “Modernity in the singular suppresses historical lived time and ignores the various modes of resistance to power, legitimate or illegitimate.” Modernities pluralized, in contrast, allows us to uncover traditions of discursive rationality that

12 And, one should perhaps add, of modernity with free market capitalism by post-war West icy makers and analysts. See for instance Cho Tonggol, Hyŏndae Han’gyouksa (Seoul: Ch’ulp’an, 1998); Cho Tonggol, Han Yongu and Pak Ch’ang-san (eds.), Han’gyo yŏllyang: (Two vols., Seoul: Changak-kwa p’limyŏng, 1994); Han Yongu, Han’gyo minjinkouchi (Seoul: Ichokak, 1993).

13 It is no coincidence that some Japanese historians identified the Mongol domination of Koguryo as the precedent for Japanese rule over the peninsula. See Breuker, “Contested objectivities.”

14 And undoubtedly it is for people who experienced it themselves.

15 See Shin and Robinson, Colonial modernity in Korea.

16 It is important to note here that this did not necessarily mean that the achievements associated with modernity that were exported by the Japanese were in some way unreal or merely political means that the motives for choosing to emphasize certain modern assets were political.
with strong Japanese inflections, to achieve a political goal. In texts that brimmed over with frustration about the peninsula’s past, they located the reason for Chosón’s loss of independence in the absence of modernity. Korean communists used modernity in a more positive way, arguing that the truth of historical materialism made Korean colonial modernity inevitable. Ironically, after liberation, anti-communists, Pak Chônghyū, foremost among them, used modernity to legitimate the repressive social order of the 1960’s and 1970’s that was geared to create a capitalist system in South Korea. Meanwhile, on the other side of the 38th parallel, modernity was still firmly associated with the coming-into-being of a socialist and then a communist society. Modernity, however, was a fickle mistress. From being the showpiece of Pak Chônghyū’s drive to economic growth, it went over to the minjung activists of the 1980’s whose theoretical underpinnings of their activism recognized the workings of modernity, in yet another garb, beneath the squallid reality of abused and exploited labourers. Modernity was one of the strategies invoked by way of which minjung activists distanced themselves from the reactionary forces of the dictatorship. ‘True’ modernity has perhaps had to wait, however, until the advent of sogyeoksa or modernity in a business suit. Korea’s partaking in the wealth of nations was predicated upon its inclusion in the international community. Where Pak Chônghyū had used modernity to enslave labourers and to erect barriers to protect the domestic market, in the ‘go’s the same concept was enlisted to promote globalization and the breaking down of the domestic market’s protectionist barriers. Finally, to underscore that modernity as a legitimizing strategy is anything but uncontested, various civic groups also bear the banner of modernity in the furthering of their respective causes: a progressive conception of modernity, akin to that of the minjung activists, is used to support campaigns of women’s liberation movements.

If the history of modernity on the Korean peninsula shows anything, it is that it has been used to shore up many different goals and causes. It shows the enduring attraction of the concept and its chameleon-like transpositions, rather than the consistency of its contents. The history of modernity on the peninsula is crucially important to understand Korean history since the late 19th century, because it offers such a good index of battles that were waged ideologically. Conceptions and counterconceptions of what modernity was and what it meant for what persons played at times decisive and always influential roles in contemporary politics and society.

Koryó under the Yuan

A proper study of the issue under consideration here would need a volume to itself at the very least. Hence, here, due to spatial restrictions, I will have to limit myself to pointing some of the most salient modern characteristics in a supposedly pre-modern era, the abundance of resources of human rationality in community construction projects in a period outside Europe and before Europe’s Renaissance and Enlightenment, and lastly, suggest that modernity’s modernity has been greatly exaggerated. It is another example of Eurocentric posturing. Modernity in the sense that I have described it above could very well occur independently of the capitalist world-system, Western modes of industrialization and Western expressions of rationalization processes.

The Koryó state that was incorporated into the Yuan Empire after a decades-long struggle had been driven to the point of collapse due to the devastations wrought by

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7 The essays on individual historians who were active during the colonial period in Cho Tong-gol, Han Yôngu and Pak Ch’ans’un (eds.), Han’guk yŏksa-ga wa yŏksabak are very helpful to understand the respective historical visions of these colonial period historians. The chapters in Han Yonggu, Han’guk minjokch’i yŏksabak also are of help. Also see Kenneth M. Wells, New God, new nation: Protestantism and self-reconstruction nationalism in Korea, 1896–1957 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990).
9 Suggesting, again ironically given modernity’s history in western theory, that modernity pre-existed a full-blown capitalist system and that hence there was no necessary causal relationship between the two.
12 The title of the English translation of Kim Young-sam’s selected speeches is particularly enlightening: Kim Young-Sam, South Korea’s quest for reforms & globalization: Selected speeches of President Kim Young Sam (Korea: The Presidential Secretariat, The Republic of Korea, 1995). Also see Kim Young-sam, Kim Yong-sam Tae’onyong yangol munjip (Seoul: Ta’eonyong Pid’ok, 1994–1996); Yi Ch’ŏngbok, Han’guk yŏksa no ch’ŏnch’i yŏksabak (Seoul: Shul taehakk’ak ch’ŏnch’i, 1997).
14 For a very good treatment of how different concepts of nation, modernity and state fought for precedence in Korea since the late 19th century, see the first two parts of Gi-wook Shin, Ethnic nationalism in Korea.
15 The key to understanding Koryó’s successful resistance against the Mongol onslag lies in its mow: of the capital to the island of Kanghwa-do, decentralized resistance based in mountain fortresses persistent attempts at diplomacy by dispatching envoys to the Mongols, and the Koryó army’s guerrilla tactics. See Yun Yong-hyeok, Koryó samgyeoknyŏl tae’-mong bongjang (Iheisa, 2000). The only English language account available on the details of Koryó resistance to the Mongols was written from a Song studies point of view and suffers from a severe lack of understanding of Koryó history. See Huang K’uan-chung, “The experience of the Southern Song and Korea in resisting the Mongol invasions,” in Warfare in Chinese history (Leiden: Brill, 2006), edited by Hans van de Ven.
by the Mongol armies, the economic, social and emotional strains of protracted domestic warfare and the disintegration of the military rule of the Ch’oe lineage. The incorporation into the Yuan empire brought no immediate solace, either. Before long, Koryo was faced with a serious domestic rebellion which took two years and Mongol military assistance to suppress. Then, in an ironic twist of fate, the maritime and ship-building skills that had kept the Mongols at bay for 28 years, became Koryo’s economic downfall; the two failed invasions of Japan undertaken by Kubilai Khan were as far as ships were concerned mainly built by Koryo artisans on Koryo wharfs using Koryo resources and manned using Koryo sailors and marines. The Yuan’s exploitation of Koryo provided Koryo’s first taste of economic integration into the Yuan Empire and of economic subjugation to the requirements of empire.

Colonial administration

The first obvious consequence of Koryo’s incorporation into the Yuan empire was the establishment of Mongol indirect rule (at times extending to direct rule) over the peninsula. While the Koryo bureaucracy was kept in place, it was made subservient to the Invade the East Branch Secretariat (征東行省) or to the Mongol oversees (daryubat) who kept an eye on Koryo affairs from close up. The Invade the East Branch Secretariat was the institutional means through which the Yuan prepared, executed and funded its two invasions of Japan. After the conquest of Japan had ceased to be a viable option, the Invade the East Branch Secretariat became Koryo’s highest administrative institution, through which Koryo was administered. Although officially the branch secretariat reported to the Koryo king, in practice the Mongol daryubat was responsible. Add to that the Mongolization of the Koryo royal lineage which meant that each ruler spent his formative years until his accession to the throne in Dadu (present Beijing), the heart of the empire, and married a Mongolian imperial princess, this resulted in a situation where in most cases the Koryo king was closer to his Yuan in-laws than to the people he ruled (indeed, it was through the Koryo king that the Yuan symbolically ruled Koryo). The parallel with the Japanese treatment of the imperial Yi lineage of Choson will be apparent. It is not the parallel treatment of the respective royal families that we should pay attention to here, but rather the institutional ways a community such as Koryo was submerged in the Yuan Empire. One such way was the absorption of the royal family into the Yuan imperial lineage.

The clustering of ‘modern’ characteristics to have come into being, a successful submersion of Koryo in Yuan was an absolute prerequisite, just like six centuries later, the successful incorporation of Choson was vital for the Japanese Empire to sustain its empire and hence its modernity. Against this background, the forced marriages the Koryo heirs to the throne faced acquire a more significance than being a mere symbol of the loss of a state’s independence. The interplay between the branch secretariat, the mongolized royal family of Koryo and Dadu turned the switches and opened up the road to Eurasia for Koryo.

Surrounding the branch secretariat, a special class of colonial administrators came into being, administrators who were raised and educated in Koryo (the most promising ones went to Dadu), but conversant with Yuan bureaucracy and hence eminently suited to administer the country and profit from their knowledge and position to further the interests of their lineage. The introduction of Yuan-style patterns into the Koryo bureaucracy also gave rise to the influx of foreigners into the Koryo bureaucracy as well as offering Koryoans opportunities to succeed in Dadu and beyond.

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28 In the aftermath of six devastating Mongol invasions, the extreme Mongol demands on Koryo in terms of ships, sailors and soldiers for the ‘conquest of the East’ broke Koryo’s economic back, in particular since the failure of the first invasion and the perishing of the fleet during the second invasion meant that there was no return whatsoever, in terms of ships, material, men or booty, for Koryo to be had. Everything invested was pure loss. See Henchorn, The Mongol invasions of Korea.
30 The military exploitation of Koryo by the Yuan (in the form of forced conscription, the merging of the Koryo army into the Yuan expeditionary forces, the extraction of resources and skills, and the mobilization of much of society to serve the war effort) is eerily similar to the Japanese mobilization of Korean resources during the Pacific War. See Carter J. Eckert, "Total war, industrialization, and social change in late colonial Korea," in The Japanese wartime empire, 1937-1945 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), ed. by Peter Duus, Ramon H. Myers, and Mark R. Peattie.
31 Pak Yongun, Koryo shidae sa (Seoul: Ichisa, 1988).
32 Who had lost its claims on an imperial status when the Koryo ruling family was made a part of the Yuan imperial family. See Beuker, “Koryo as an independent realm: The emperor’s clothes?” Korean Studies 27 (2003): pp. 48-94.
33 See for example, Yi Fangsi, The world is one: Princess Yi Fangsi’s autobiography (Seoul: Los Angeles: Taewon, 1973), translated by Kim Sukkyu; edited by Joan Rutt.
35 Several tens of thousands of foreigners are estimated to have settled in Koryo during the period of Mongol ruler, many of these Mongol, Song Chinese, Central Asian and Western Asian. They seem to have been few obstructions on the path to high office. The descendants of the first generation immigrants married into well-established Koryo aristocratic lineages. See Peter Yen, "Mongols and Western Asians in the late Koryo ruling stratum.” International journal of Korean history (2000): Ed.
The Yuan incorporation of Koryo brought with it a new structure and gave rise to the emergence of a specialist class of colonial administrators, but some of the defining characteristics of Koryo bureaucracy were maintained and even strengthened: the bureaucracy was based upon transparent rules and principles, while personnel was, ideally, recruited independently from social and hereditary status. The struggle between the feudal privileges of the aristocracy and the ideal of a merit-based bureaucracy continued in the Mongol period. In all, bureaucracy as a series of processes of increasing rationalization was not significantly altered.

Colonial economy

Economically, Koryo's economic imperatives were subjugated to those of the empire. Following Koryo's military assimilation into the Yuan military machine, a significant part of the Koryo economic structure was devoted to the support of the invasions of Japan. The forced mobilization of Koryo artisans, ship wharfs and so forth into a military-economic structure gave rise to the heavy militarization that was to characterize late Koryo until its demise. A very concrete and physical example of the military-economic subjugation of Koryo is the transformation of T'anna (present-day Cheju-do), which was turned into a giant breeding station and pasture for Mongol horses after the rebellion of the Three Special Patrols had been put down; this meant that administratively, militarily, economically and physically, Cheju-do was wrested from Koryo control and inducted into the empire. In more than one sense, the Yuan radically altered Koryo's pre-existing economic structure by re-aligning it to the state to a much greater degree than previously had been the case. Census records, also, were forwarded to the Yuan, which cemented Koryo's position in the Yuan fiscal and economic structure.

Another form of colonial exploitation occurred in the form of the 'tribute' Koryo was expected to bring to the Yuan court. At times crippling, demands the Yuan court

the careers of Koryoans in the Yuan, see Chang Tongkik, "Wŏn-e chich'ŭlan Koryŏn," in Koryo hugi oegyosa yŏn gu, pp. 171-247.

39 Aristocratic domination of the bureaucracy seems to have been slightly less under Yuan domination, although the superpositioning of Yuan dangbap was in itself anything but meritocratic. A significant exception to the ideal of meritocracy during the Koryo and Choson periods was the fact that people of unfree status could not enter the bureaucracy.

Henthorn, The Mongol invasions of Korea, pp. 194-225.

35 Henthorn, The Mongol invasions of Korea, pp. 194-225.

36 Henthorn, The Mongol invasions of Korea, pp. 198-199.


38 Although the terminology is the same, it is important here to distinguish the tribute Koryo brought

made consisted of desirable commodities such as paper, silver, gold, ginseng, hawks, marmots, otters, ceramics, and medicines, but more importantly also of people. As is well known, the Mongol empire considered useful or valuable persons a commodity as any other commodity and tribute was also exacted in the form of human beings. In the case of Koryo, this human tribute consisted of eunuchs, artisans and, most importantly, young girls. This last category in particular wreaked havoc in Koryo society, both on account of the psychological and emotional damage inflicted by the forced sending away into sexual slavery of young girls and on account of the number of these girls. Again, there seems to be a parallel with the sexual policies of the Japanese empire; young girls, often from less protected backgrounds, were forcibly sold into sexual slavery abroad or given as wives, consorts and concubines to Yuan officials in Koryo through the intermediation of local middlemen. As in colonial Korea, colonial Koryo both resisted and accommodated the demands of the colonial ruler, but in the end, the demands of the colonial ruler were usually realized.

Another important aspect of late Koryo economy was the presence of large groups of uprooted and displaced migrant workers. Traditionally, the emergence of large groups of former farmers roaming the country looking for work and food, is seen as one of the signs of the imminent fall of the ruling dynasty. Modern historical analyses of the same phenomenon do not fundamentally depart from the traditional view: farmers are forced off the lands they work on account of warfare or crop failure, but mostly by a collapsing tax system. The state is no longer powerful enough to levy taxes from the landowning elite, so it takes recourse to taxing the farmers twice. This emergency measure has a definite deadline and before long farmers will start to leave their lands and roam the country. The modern account is in effect very similar to the traditional account. Both fail to consider—the traditional account understandably—how Koryo's yamen ("roaming people" or large groups of refugees) can be understood as one outcome of several simultaneous processes of recuperation from war damages, displacement of a significant element of the ruling class, radical restructuring of the central and local administrative structures and broadly executed exploitation strategies through

Song, Tribute to the Yuan was compulsory and extremely onerous, while previous tribute had been much more about diplomacy, trade and sharing cultural resources, and despite the terminology employed had been much more equal. See Henthorn, The Mongol invasions of Korea.

41 Henthorn, The Mongol invasions of Korea, pp. 204-205.

42 Some historians hold the Mongol habit of exacting tribute in the form of young female virgins accountable for the lowering of the marriage age in Koryo, extending into Choson where betrothals (on paper at least) would take place before children had reached their teens. This apparently was a strategy to subvert the Mongol demands, since married women (no matter how young they were) could not be made to go to Dadu.

43 Kuksa, K'ōnd'ae hun hwahwa, "Kwŏngje ku'o-ŭi ūmhwon," in Han'iuksa 10 (Kwach'ŏn: Kuksa
taxes, corvée labour and simple appropriation. These processes resulted in the appearance of large groups of displaced labourers who no longer had land to work on or other means of support and who had no way to influence what was going on around them except by acting as a mass. As a mass—or more appropriately as masses—they brought to bear upon Koryo society the full force of frustration and needs of the displaced, giving rise to frequent social panic attacks.40 This phenomenon, the pitting of the power of the mass against the oppression of the state, has been described as a uniquely modern occurrence.41 A new look at the widespread emergence of jinmin or mobs of refugees suggests that this phenomenon was not limited to the modern period.

The Yuan incorporation of Koryo also entailed much more positive consequences. Trade, as always, continued, but the establishment of the Mongol empire meant that overland travel to Manchuria, China and Central Asia had become safe, making it no longer necessary to cross the Yellow Sea, a route fraught with dangers. The overland route was available for traders for a sustained period of time. This meant that foreign commodities could reach Koryo easier than before and that the market for Koryo commodities now stretched into Central Asia, Southeast Asia and even Europe. Thomas T. Allsen has described how extensive, influential long-lasting and comprehensive Sino-Iranian exchange and contacts were. Exchange in the context of the Mongol empire included the exchange of skilled artisans, bureaucrats, administrators, engineers and so forth.42 Through these official networks, Koryo was now connected through Central Asia to Iran. Trade also went the other way, reaching Southeast Asia. Again, this would not have been possible on the same scale without the infrastructure of the Mongol empire and the Mongols’ heavy rewarding of commercial agents who served their interests.43 One consequence of this policy which among others encouraged a Chinese pirate fleet to transform itself into a multinational transport fleet, was that not only the empire itself benefited, but also traders and merchants in general, because they could profit from increased transportation frequency and volume, safer journeys and easily made contacts through regions previously hard to traverse. Research by Korean scholars has indicated how Koryo profited from the Mongol empire’s stimulation of trade.44 Similar, but politically and emotionally infinitely more sensitive research has also been done on the economy of Korea during the period of Japanese colonial rule.45 The outcomes have been much the same; although it is impossible to say that Korea and its population benefited equally from Korea’s position in the Japanese empire, economically, huge profits were made. Again, like in Koryo, the accessibility of those profits and their distribution was, to put it euphemistically, uneven.

Travel, transportation and landscape

The journeys of Marco Polo are the most famous instance of the changes the Mongol empire brought about in the field of travel and transportation. Travel along the Silk Road increased in frequency and volume, while diplomats traveled from the heart of the Mongol empire to the seat of the Pope and back.46 The postal network the Mongols established was unique, not in its conception, but in its execution and its consequences: “The Mongols were among the first to introduce a transcontinental network of communications, thus encouraging the movement of peoples and ideas.”47 The jam or postal system made it possible to cover up to 250 miles a day for a courier in the case of emergency, an astonishing feat in a world that had no means of mechanized transport and where everything depended on long-term planning, infrastructure, the ability to ‘imagine’ the workings and functions of this systems across vast spaces and cultural zones, feelings of imagined professional affinity with the many different ethnicities and cultures encountered, the ability to prioritize the empire’s requirements, and operational flexibility of the highest level.48 A consequence of the establishment of roads and routes to travel and of the jam was the incorporation through accessibility into the empire of locales otherwise harder to reach. The Koryo landscape had been Koryo’s main source of legitimation as an independent community and had functioned as the one category

41 See the excellent article by Kwon Taeok for a review of the debates surrounding Korea’s economy during the colonial period. See Kwon Taeok, “Kŏndachwa, tonghwa, shinjinjukkyŏn,” 47; Morris Rossabi, Travels from Xanadu: Rabban Sauma and the First Journey from China to the West (Tokyo, New York, London: Kodansha International, 1992).
that traditionally had been thought to be able of deciding between competing claims at legitimacy. This landscape was now part of a colonial structure and became a tourist destination for travelers from the empire. The consequences for the perception of travel within Korea and for the function of the landscape for the Koryŏ community were quite drastic. Instead of a historicized and politicized space that functioned as the ultimate source of legitimacy for the rulers of that community, the Koryŏ landscape lost much of its history and politics and re-emerged as a largely dehistoricized and depoliticized space that henceforth functioned as a kind of projection screen for metaphysical ruminations instead of historical remembrance.

To a certain extent, the dramatic increase in the quality, quantity and reach of lines of transport under the Mongol empire may be compared to the opening up of Manchuria and northern China by the Japanese empire. The Southern Manchuria Railway Company’s significance for the imperialist endeavours of Japan is comparable to that of the jam postal system for the Mongol empire. Even the establishment of the state of Manchukuo, in itself the very epitome of modernity, is not unlike the way the Mongol empire used buffer states in strategic zones it preferred not to occupy directly.

Koryŏ intellectuals under the Yuan

The transformations Koryŏ intellectuals underwent during the period of Mongol domination is traditionally the best researched aspect of the Mongol period in Koryŏ history. For many historians, the access gained by Koryŏ intellectuals to Yuan intellectual trends signified the beginning of the end of the Koryŏ dynasty and the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty. Although other research has convincingly shown that neo-Confucianism as such was known in Koryŏ before the advent of the Mongols and

service of the Yuan Empire. They could purchase as many books as their purse allowed of the internalization of learning and style of learning, neo-Confucianism was a modern ideology par excellence, of which the goals to be achieved were the methods used were clothed in the hotbeds of neo-Confucian debate. Exclusively went through Yuan channels, processes of knowledge exchange, would conceivably have been much the digested Song New Laws Confucius would have joined debates as an equal, as an equal and subjects of the same empire. Pushik was Koryŏ-inflected to such intellectuals; late Koryŏ scholars were

of intellectual exchange and as such continental circumstances than the parallel with colonial intellectual adopting new technologies, acquiring their own identities, will be clear the Mongol rule over Koryŏ and their attempts to construct workable in a novel in an environment in which
the forced participation in a world order dependent on the requirements of empire. In between the demands of empire, Koryo and Korean intellectuals tried to steer a course that would allow them the maintenance or construction of their own identity, while working with or against the exigencies of empire, depending on personal inclination, circumstance and ability.

There is a tantalizing correspondence between Mongol Koryo and colonial Korea in terms of identity formation by the intellectual classes. During the late Koryo period, perhaps as a delayed expression with regard to the disappearance of Koryo’s previous ways of maintaining identities by strongly associating history, landscape and community, the *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk yusa* 三國遺事) for the first time mentions the myth of Tan gun. The Tan gun myth became the constitutive myth of the Korean people; it re-emerged as a candidate for the *mythomoteur* of Korea in the 19th century and became cemented into place as such during the colonial period. Ironically, this correspondence between Yuan Koryo and colonial is the only one positively acknowledged by most scholarship. Whether it is truly a meaningful correspondence remains to be seen; the role of the Tan gun myth in the 13th and 14th centuries seems to have been rather restricted, while it assumed nation-wide importance in the late 19th to early 20th centuries. It does show, however, how those two periods have at least something in common.

### The modernity of Koryo in the Yuan empire

According to a commentator from the 30’s of last century, Marco Polo’s account demonstrated the many strikingly modern features of Khubilai Khan’s empire. In his enumeration (that of an exact scientist), he included the existence of multi-masted vessels, ships with water tight compartments, public carriages, sanitary measures such as mouth and nose mufflers and individual drinking cups, suspended beds, ventilators, huskless barley, hybrids of yak and cow, dried ('instant') milk, block printing, fire alarm systems and the grand canal. Although such achievements may easily be mistaken for technological oddities exhibiting a superficial similarity with the accomplishments of modern civilization, they may also be meaningfully viewed under the concept of world culture. In a penetrating study of the East Asia modern in the founding of the state on Manchukuo, Prasenjit Duara employed this concept that is similar to that of modernity, but simultaneously less hegemonic, regionally privileged and exclusivist. According to Duara, world culture is a concept that envelops the diffusion of increasingly standardized cultural and technological resources across the world. Although Duara’s idea of world culture is less hegemonic and exclusivist than monolithic modernity discourses, it nonetheless presupposes that the 20th-century exchange of world culture was unique. World culture or the diffusion of standardized practices is not a phenomenon limited to the 20th century. A short index of the Mongol empire’s achievements will suggest as much.

It should not be forgotten that the Mongols had little choice but to incorporate as many usable foreigners and their ideas and technologies as possible, since the number of Mongols was so limited. Consequently, the Mongol empire was per se multicultur-al, multilingual, multireligious. It offered chances for talented men, not merely for men from the right background; the Yuan bureaucracy counted among its members southern and northern Chinese, Jurchen, Khitan, Mongols, Koryoans, Uighurs, Nestorians, Russians, Central Asians, Western Asians, Europeans, Indians. Most ethnicities were represented in a vast region of interconnected domains. The paper money promoted by Khubilai was also exported to Iran, while the Mongol empire’s *yasa* legal code was enforced all through the domains of the Mongol empire, even after it stopped being unified and split into three parts. Despite the exacting and unforgiving nature of the Mongol *yasa* and its rather bad popular reputation, its enforcement was in general rational. The legal categorization of all subjects of the empire, even if not all had equal rights, was reflected in the absolute freedom of religions that existed throughout the empire. Again, it should be stressed that all these achievements were born out of necessity. The Mongols possessed too few skilled people to govern and control the empire to give free reign to internationalization (globalization) and open up the ranks for any capable person, so that, quite feasibly, a Venetian merchant’s son could end up at Khubilai’s court, while a Nestorian monk from Central Asia could bring the Great

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61 According to one estimate, there were between 700,000 to 1,000,000 Mongols during the period of the Mongols’ greatest expansion. The population of South China alone comprised at this time probably 50,000,000 people. See Frederick W. Mote, "Chinese society under Mongol rule," in *The Cambridge history of China: Volume 6, Alien regimes and border states*, ed. B. R. Faile and D. Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), edited by Herbert Franke and Dennis Twitchett, pp. 616-665.


63 Their economic, cultural and other relationships were maintained after the split up of the Mongolian Empire into three politically independent states. See Allen, *Culture and conquest*, p. 24.

64 See Allen, *Culture and conquest*, p. 24.
Khan’s tidings to the Pope in Rome. In between these two extremes, all shades of social and physical mobility existed in the vast interconnected domains of the Mongol empire, which were largely ruled by the strict but rationalist yasa. Koryo was a part of the Mongol empire, although it was relatively independent; Mongol rule was mostly indirect and as long as the imperial demands were met, Koryo retained some semblance of independence, although the conventional Korean name for this period, ‘period of Mongol intervention’, is not undeserved. As a part of the Yuan Empire, Koryoans travelled the world. In turn, an unprecedented number of nationalities entered Koryo and its bureaucracy.66 Koryo’s literati were nobles volens connected to Yuan intellectual trends, while Koryo’s economy became a cog in the economic structure of the empire and Koryo’s merchants roamed Asia. The technologies of the Mongol empire should also not be forgotten; the organization of its bureaucracies and its postal systems demanded a sophistication in several respects that is more easily associated with modern times. What is more, the intense acts of imagining of and identification with people never to be met, speaking languages never even to be heard and residing in places never to be visited, that were necessary to devising these institutions and successfully executing their activities also have a distinct modern flavour; printing press capitalism was necessary in Europe to occasion these imaginings, so runs the argument.68 So what is it to be modern? If we take one influential account of the experience of modernity, it seems to be about the disappearance of certainties, “To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air.” 68 People living under the yoke of modernity:

are moved at once by a will to change—to transform both themselves and their world—and by a terror of disorientation and disintegration, of life falling apart. They all know the thrill and the dread of a world in which “all that is solid melts into air.” To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organizations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be deterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight to change their world and make it our own. It is to be both revolutionarily and conservatively: alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead, longing to create and to hold on to something real even as everything melts.69

If this indeed is the experience of modernity, how then should we categorize late Koryo literati, who lived in a world of paradox and contradiction (indeed, Koryo was defined by paradox and contradiction), who knew the “terror of disorientation and disintegration, of life falling apart”, having experienced it only recently when the Mongol armies overran their country and changed their ways of life, who were “overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organizations” of the Yuan and to a lesser extent of Koryo itself that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives69 and who yet embraced a branch of neo-Confucianism that was “both revolutionary and conservative; alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure” how else should one describe the visions of utopia crafted in the late Koryo period by neo-Confucian scholars who rejected the “nihilistic depths” to which the corrupt Buddhist institutions had sunk? Whether there is significance in the presence in the Yuan and Koryo of a cluster of characteristics that are usually described as modern remains to be seen. I merely pointed out possible avenues to investigate and re-evaluate. It offers the suggestion that first, as an instance of Eurocentric posturing, modernity’s modernity is greatly exaggerated; many achievements of modern, and post-modern, times have been realized before in decidedly “pre-modern” times. Second, it suggests that while the centre may not hold in modernity, the imperial centre surely does. It is the empire which is the main ingredient of modernity, an empire which takes on a decided oppression, authoritarian and often unwanted shape it if comes in the guise of a colonial ruler. Koryo and Korean literati/intellectuals, faced with the imposition of new ways of looking at things, showed remarkably similar reactions, in which admiration, resistance, recognition and curiosity were all present. If modernity is defined as belonging to the masses, the Yuan Empire has no business being modern; the emergence of mass culture as we know it today was unknown during the Yuan. But if we step past this category (which leads straight to those other ‘indispensable’ components of modernity, namely capitalism and democracy), and look at modernity as a perennially possible form of collective human experience in which new achievements which require greater political, cultural, intellectual and economic integration are realized in constant interaction within an extended multi-ethnic, multicultural, multilingual and multireligious sphere and notice that such—a imposed interaction calls for eradication of existing values and roots in favour of a novel attempt at establishing society and oneself in a way meaningfully, it then becomes plausible that it was empire, both in Korea and in

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66 The number of nationalities was unprecedented, not the number of immigrants. The Parhae immigration of the mid-10th century was unequalled in this respect, since approximately 100,000 to 200,000 fugitives from Parhae sought refuge in Koryo, what amounted then to 5 to 10% of Koryo’s total population.

Koryŏ, that was the harbinger of modernity. The often ignored remarkable nature of the Koryŏ-Chosŏn transition in terms of ideology then becomes somewhat easier to understand, while the tendency to equate neo-Confucianism of the past with stuffiness and stagnation gives way to a more plausible estimation of late Koryŏ, because if modernity is associated with anything, it is with dynamics and change. And the dynamics and changes of Koryŏ under Mongol tutelage were of such fundamental depth, reach and import that only the changes in the colonial period surpassed them in these respects. As I mentioned before, this paper must stop at suggesting things; a thorough study which appreciates the many similarities (but does not ignore the differences) of the colonial period and the Mongol period in Korean history and which de-privileges modern history as somehow more unique than pre-modern history, may be able to shed some new light on colonial modernity and pre-modern history alike.

What a difference a book makes

Yu Kilchun's Sŏyu kyŏmunn (Observations on a travel to the West, 1895) is known in Korea as the first book length publication to use 'mixed script' (kuk-hannun hanyonge)'国英混用體'), a mixture of Korean sentence structures with a Chinese character vocabulary. That in itself would warrant its status as a landmark publication, but the book is also an important document in the intellectual history of Korea. Given the timeline frame of its publication and the targeted readership, the book is the first Korean educational text offering a comprehensive introduction in 'Western civilisation.'

What is particularly fascinating to me is that along with an analysis of this civilisation model, Yu Kilchun also presents as a universal truth that civilisation theory that supported and justified the imperialist drive of the West. One of the motivations for Yu Kilchun to write this book was the realisation that knowledge is power, but he seemed unaware that power also produces knowledge, a knowledge that presented itself as universal knowledge. That Western science in general was imbued with imperialist ideology becomes strikingly clear when one looks over Yu Kilchun's shoulder as he copies the theories that inevitably refer Korea to the fringes of the world. Despite the alleged equality of states in the international order he introduces in his book, the fact of the matter was that the model was highly hierarchical. How Yu Kilchun deals with this contradiction and its consequences for Korea and its place in the world, is what this paper is about.

To fully understand the historical significance of this book, it is important to remember that late nineteenth century Korea was waking up in a brave new world. Fol

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