

# The Review of Korean Studies

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## Guest Editor's Introduction

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### **Welcome to the Discussion of the Koryŏ Dynasty's Latter Half**

While reading history, many people want to feel good and also see justice being served, so from their point of view, grim and dark periods may simply be not their cup of tea. They tend to prefer more exciting, sometimes more peaceful, or sometimes more dramatic, but not too gloomy periods for a casual reading. On the other hand, the historians, as professionals who could not afford to be picky in choosing their subjects, do not mind exploring more serious periods, as determining the nature of those time periods would enrich the society's understanding of the past. However, sometimes even the historians would be trapped in the illusion that they succeeded in determining the very nature of a specific time period, and remain oblivious to the fact that what is envisioned by them may be just another version of interpreting how things went in the past.

The 13-14<sup>th</sup> centuries is for sure not a time period the general public of Korea would want to read and hear. It is usually regarded as a time of despair and oppression, and therefore it is not an exciting chapter in the Korean past, nor a period when the evil supposedly paid some price to serve poetic justice. This kind of general image of this period has been sadly shared by the scholars as well, as only recently historians began their efforts to view this period somewhat differently from the way they had been viewed before.

These last two centuries of the Koryŏ dynasty period (918-1392) constitute only a small part of the entire Korean history, but there have been so many different choices that were made to analyze it. As a result, numerous conflicting ideas have surfaced over the years. We can safely say it is one of the most controversial time periods in the Korean people's history. But fortunately, that is not stopping scholars and researchers from continuing their efforts,

as they are charging ahead with the task of reevaluating this particular time period, to lead us to a better understanding of the era. Not only scholars in the field of Korean history, but also those in the Asian history field are jumping into the job of determining the nature of the Koryŏ-Yüan relationship, or defining the internal situation of Koryŏ, during the so-called Mongol Yüan period.

### Conception of this Special Study

In 2015, my colleagues and I had the opportunity to organize a presentation in front of an audience composed of both Korean and foreign scholars, who were apparently from different areas of expertise but must have shared interest in general Koreanology. It was at “Bochum AKSE 2015,” a symposium biannually arranged by the Association of Korean Studies in Europe, in which the gathered presenters intended to examine the issue of “Mongol Hegemony,” and how it was reflected in the Koryŏ situation.

It was planned to present current works of three or four scholars who have been actively announcing academic papers—based upon new perspectives—for the past few years. Lee Kang Hahn, Lee Myungmi, Jung Donghun, and Soe Eun Hye joined the project, while Professor Lee Ik-joo at University of Seoul served as chairman of the panel, offering his own insight concerning the matter. Lee Myungmi and Jung presented an argument regarding the nature of the Mongol hegemony, in terms of political situations involving either the king or the Koryŏ government, while Lee Kang Hahn tried to determine what kind of trade environment was established by the Mongol empire, and how it affected the Koryŏ people. Seo provided an analysis of the calendrical system devised by Yüan, as well as the Koryŏ dynasty's embracement of that.

Later I suggested that we enhance our respective presentations, and publish them through a journal. Three of four articles were substantially revised, and the chair person also graciously agreed to provide us with an overview-type article. The overview article would review trends, strengths, and weaknesses of previous studies that had been published up until the early 2000s. And the other three would present their own ideas and analyses upon specific themes.

### Relationship amongst the Four Articles, and Some Differences

So, the readers could see that the first article is a bit different from the following three. It is not an examination of a particular theme, but a review article with suggestions regarding prudent paths that future studies should take. On the other hand, the other three articles have particular themes. The second article's theme is economic in nature, as it examined foreign merchants' visit to the Korean peninsula and the Koryŏ government's response to such phenomenon, while the third and fourth ones tackled upon political issues, as the third one explored how Koryŏ king's ascension to the throne was engineered in this period, and the fourth analyzed diplomatic protocols that were observed between Koryŏ and Yüan at the time.

What should be noted is that Professor Lee Ik-joo is somewhat critical of the academic trend of the late 2000s and early 2010s, and that he reflected such sentiment in the epilogue of his article, whereas the authors of the other three articles happen to represent an academic attitude that Professor Lee Ik-joo chose to criticize, at least to some extent. He has been in action since the early 1990s, whereas the other three have only recently achieved doctoral degrees, with Prof. Lee Kang Hahn in 2007, Dr. Lee Myungmi in 2012, and Dr. Jung in 2016. The readers may find some differences and even tension between the first and other three articles, and should be aware that there are certain portions in Professor Lee Ik-joo's arguments that are not shared or agreed on by the other three.

For example, Professor Lee Ik-joo argues that the relationship that existed between Koryŏ and the Mongol Yüan empire should be considered as yet another variation of the traditional Appointment-Tribute relationship. But Drs. Lee Myungmi and Jung seem not to be sharing such viewpoint, and they also exhibit ideas and approaches different from each other. Meanwhile, Prof. Lee Kang Hahn does not endorse such a choice to prioritize a task of labelling (or conceptualizing) a relationship's nature, when learning of all the diverse aspects of the time should precede any such attempt. So there are some differences amongst all four authors which should not be ignored.

But I'm sure Prof. Lee's comments are meant as constructive criticism, and the other three heartily agree that any perspective of any author should be put under scrutiny and openly discussed. So let's briefly examine what the authors have to say.

## Respective Points Made in the Individual Articles

Lee Ik-joo reviewed past achievements in historical studies of the “Koryŏ-Mongol” (the “Mongol Yüan Empire” or the “Khan Ulus in China”) relationship in the 13-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. He also made some suggestions that would be best taken in future studies. He reckoned that there have been three distinct periods in past studies, in terms of their stances and perspectives. According to him, during the first period which prevailed during the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s, a nationalistic consciousness was more than apparent in historical studies. Then in the second period, which lasted from the late 1980s through the 1990s, former nationalistic approaches were criticized and overcome, in an effort to gain structural understanding of the history of Koryŏ-Mongol (Yüan) relationship. And in the third period, which has begun in the 2000s, Lee noted that researchers have been trying to achieve a more objective insight upon the Koryŏ-Mongol (Yüan) relationship, by consulting more researches done in Korea and foreign countries alike, and he also observed that a trend to obtain a world (global) historical perspective was developed in the process. In his article he also presented his own debate with a Japanese scholar named Morihira Masahiko, and added a few comments on recent studies made since 2000, at the end of his article.

Lee Kang Hahn wanted to examine foreigners (foreign merchants to be exact) who visited the Korean peninsula during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, while assessing the nature of the Koryŏ people’s (actually the Koryŏ government’s) response to the situation as well. He got interested in the fact that Central and West Asian traders, even including entities from India and Iran, began to come to Koryŏ for a variety of reasons, which were not necessarily the same with those of the Chinese merchants who had earlier visited the Korean peninsula rather frequently in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. He first examined the imperial government’s foreign trade policy, which was initiated in mid-13<sup>th</sup> century and usually manifested an open stance toward foreign trades, but at times featured a “reversed” position as well. Then he determined that periods when Central/Western Asian merchants visited Koryŏ, interestingly overlapped with periods when the Yüan imperial government was not that supportive of the concept of foreign trades, and rather prevented Mongol, Chinese, and other foreign traders from actively interacting with each other. According to Lee, this indicates that these foreign traders came to

Koryŏ in times when they were experiencing troubles with their Chinese and Mongol counterparts, and when they were placed in a position that would have demanded alternative markets which would be useful in minimizing their losses caused by shutdowns in their operations with the imperial Chinese market. Then finally, he also examined what kind of foreign trade policies were devised by the Koryŏ government (and kings such as Ch’ung’ryŏl, Ch’ungsŏn, Ch’ungsuk, and Ch’ung’hye) as a response to such vibrant visits from the outside. He was able to find two tracks of efforts on the Koryŏ people’s part, which were to create a human network that would facilitate the government’s future endeavors to generate profits in upcoming foreign investments, and to establish a production mechanism to ensure efficient manufacturing of exportable items with finer qualities and competitiveness.

Lee Myungmi examined Mongol Yüan empire’s intervention in the succession of the Koryŏ throne, and argued that it was done not with sheer appliance of brutal force, but actually in accordance with Mongol traditions which had been observed by them in their forming of relationships (with nearby political entities) in the past. According to her, as relations with the Yüan emperor and the imperial family became more and more important to the Koryŏ royal family’s maintaining of its own authority and the right to succeed the throne, traditional blood ties within the Koryŏ family became less and less crucial. In other words, the Koryŏ crown prince used to succeed the throne based on traditional Koryŏ ties, but such ties were no longer enough. Instead the kešig system kicked in, while the original Koryŏ power system continued to be disfigured, leading to a new structure in which the king was unable to control other powers as efficiently as before. Simply speaking, the original power network, which had the Koryŏ king at the center, was restructured with the Yüan emperor at the top. Her ultimate argument is that in order to observe the changes that occurred in Koryŏ’s relationship with Yüan-ruled China, we should be able to examine the situation from a “Mongol perspective” as well, and be aware of traditional Mongol methods that would have contributed to the unfolding of events as now we see today. She also concluded that Mongol’s intervention resulted in the Koryŏ royal authority itself being “marginalized” and even “relativized,” compared to that of the Yüan emperor. We can easily imagine that such change would have directly affected the Koryŏ king’s status as well as his relationship with his own vassals, and not to mention the process of the Koryŏ throne succession, which is the main

focus of her article.

Jung Donghun examined the status of the Koryŏ kings from the 10<sup>th</sup> century through the 14<sup>th</sup>, in terms of Korea-China relations, and with a number of diplomatic systems in mind. He tried to explain that Korea-China relations, as well as principles in the international order, have gradually turned from an “Investiture order” to a rather “Bureaucratic order.” According to him, in pre-modern East Asian societies, there was a monistic international order with an established center inside China, and many Koryŏ kings were “appointed” by many Chinese kingdoms, as “leaders” of the Koryŏ dynasty. The action of China then was that of granting an investiture. Then during the “Koryŏ-Yüan period,” the Koryŏ king newly began to assume an actually “(Yüan) governmental” position, sort of a “vassal”-level position literally, as a “minister” of the branch secretariat of Yüan’s Chŏngdong Haengsŏng (征東行省 Provincial government for the Eastern campaign). He argues that we can see the previous order based upon investitures was indeed weakening, as a bureaucratic relationship between the Korean peninsula and China was newly forming. And if we examine the Koryŏ-Ming relations, he also utters that we can see the existing “investiture” order completely disappeared, with only bureaucratic aspects remaining, in the Koryŏ kings’ titles bestowed from China. His final argument is that changes in the operating principles of the East Asian international order led to changes that occurred inside the Chinese society, and they were also reflected in the Koryŏ kings’ position and the nature of its throne, as we can see from their appointment processes by the leaders in China.

### **A Response to Some Criticism, from a Next Generation to the Past**

At this point, there are some things that I would like to say. As mentioned earlier, there is sort of a generational gap between the author of the first article and the other three. And I can certainly respect his point of view, as well as his evaluation of recent studies. But I feel at least one point that he raised deserves a rebuttal, and that is his opinion concerning the nature of some supposed “problems” that according to him have been exhibited in works published in the 2000s.

There could be various forms of criticism, based upon a diverse array of

perspectives representing all spectrum of thoughts. But one of Professor Lee Ik-joo’s criticisms struck me as a little bit odd. He criticized that the works since the mid 2000s are somewhat “obsessive” of suggesting “alternate perspectives,” while I myself have always believed that the new generation was trying to steer away from the “old habits,” like “labelling” things, regardless of them being either periods, relationships, or phenomena. It was an effort to not be trapped in self-imposed, predetermined points of views (“perspectives”) at all, which would lead to preconceptions as well as misconceptions. Hence, accusing certain new line of works of being entrenched in “searching for new perspectives,” does not seem to be fair at all.

As Professor Lee Ik-joo said, it was important for the earlier generations to have done so, and such approach (trying to establish a perspective, and thus “labels” and “concepts” as well) contributed to the overall evolution of Korean historical studies immensely in the past. But as he also iterated, such approach would have to be supported by evidences and if there were not enough of them, then the historical resources themselves were to be critically evaluated first and carefully examined next. I’m not saying previous studies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were not backed by adequate amount of practical evidences, or lacked an effort to compensate for the insufficient nature of historical resources that only scarcely remain. I’m only saying that there is no evidence that studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> are intentionally oblivious to such necessities either.

Just as it was the atmosphere of the 1990s to reevaluate the achievements of the ’70s and ’80s, it was the general sentiment of the 2000s to revisit the accomplishments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well, and if possible to offer new angles as well as fresh ideas to the overall arena of discussion. And therefore, instead of conceptualizing things, studies chose to analyze systems, structures, actions, and thoughts themselves. Grand words were no longer uttered, and macroscopic views were either replaced by or supplemented with microscopic examinations.

However, Professor Lee Ik-joo is even saying that recent studies, which have been so intent upon forwarding new perspectives, sometimes lack accurate interpretation of historical records, or only see them in the way they would like to see, even to the extent of committing willful misinterpretation of records (or remaining passive to such misinterpretations). Such blatant criticism may not be found acceptable by some scholars in the field, and is certainly not either by my personal standard.

That being said, there is actually another bone to pick. Studies of the 1990s have successfully shed the nationalistic dogma, but they are not entirely free from an attitude that tends to evaluate people's actions or government's policies with "only the results." Sometimes they turned a blind eye to the environment and conditions that would have surrounded a person or an entity while it was trying to do good things, and therefore judged such efforts solely by the outcome, which in my eyes does not seem like a fair approach in the appraisal of past events. That is an attitude that the studies of the 2000s have also been trying to correct. This particular problem of the 1990s' studies is not mentioned in Professor Lee Ik-joo's article, so I felt the need to mention it here, in the spirit of constructive criticism.

## Final Thoughts

This special study is composed of four separate works, contributed by people who have all been engaged in studies and researches of the history of the Koryŏ-Mongol relationship, or the history of Koryŏ during the Mongol imperial period in East Asia. As mentioned earlier, they represent different angles, which culminated in a collection of works that chose to examine the same period (13-14<sup>th</sup> centuries) in terms of a same theme (Koryŏ-Yüan relationship, Koryŏ society), yet from different perspectives. The outcome may look weird, as works gathered in this form should generally share a specific point of view and also stand together in their overall evaluation of the past, even when they chose to examine different themes, objects, and periods. But as mentioned earlier, it should be kept in mind that this period had such a diverse nature, so we felt that the efforts behind this special study would only garner honest results when we reveal our own similarities and differences as they are.

In retrospect, there were so many types of people in this period who were intending to advance in even more directions. Ten different approaches in life would lead to one hundred aspects in human existence, and one hundred aspects would easily breed one thousand outcomes and various interpretations. So it would only be natural for all of us to develop multiple evaluations on the past, and there was no need to approach the subject dealt with here any differently. We did not want to reduce the scope of our studies, so we presented our own unique insights and individual evaluations of the past. Please bear with us.