

*Everyday Life in Joseon-era Korea: Economy and Society*, edited by The Organization of Korean Historians and translated by Michael D. Shin. Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2014, 296 pp., US \$145.00, ISBN: 978-9-0042-6112-9 (hardcover)

*Everyday life in Joseon-era Korea* is an immensely ambitious endeavor packed into a relatively slim volume. A collection of short (typically no more than ten pages) essays on a variety of topics, the work seeks to illuminate numerous aspects of the lived experience of Koreans, mostly but not exclusively commoners, during a more than 500-year period.

Michael Shin begins the volume with an elegantly-written introduction that offers a brief overview of the Joseon period as well as some of the most salient historiographical debates regarding the period. Two sections follow: the first focusing on the economy and the second on society. The economic topics examined range from the extremely broad—farming and agriculture, taxes and currency, domestic and foreign commercial activity, etc.—to the more circumscribed—salt, mining, etc. What emerges is a variegated portrait of the traditions and travails of Korean farmers, merchants, and workers. Coverage tends to be more descriptive than comparative with the notable exception of Ko Dong-hwan’s essay on “When did Joseon’s Population Reach Ten Million?” which rightly notes that Joseon Korea, like neighboring Japan, reached this important demographic milestone long before most European countries.

The section on society is equally diverse. Some essays treat phenomena or developments that had wide-ranging impacts and significance—the influence of Zhu Xi’s community compact on Joseon rural society, marriage and divorce, the penal system, eating culture, etc.—while others, while still significant, focus on more narrow topics—fake genealogies, the rebellion of Im Ggeokjeong, tea and tobacco, royal outhouses, and the like. Here, too, the overall picture that emerges is of a diverse and dynamic culture, albeit one in which commoners, not to mention those beneath them in the social hierarchy, often labored under difficult social and cultural constraints.

The essays’ attention to the issue of change over time varies considerably. Some clearly delineate how conditions changed over the centuries, thereby correcting the older historiographical caricature of Joseon Korea as “stagnant.” Others tend to perhaps inadvertently reinforce the notion of a “stagnant” Joseon by presenting a temporally static portrayal; however, this may be as much a

result of the limitations imposed by the brevity of the essays as any underlying historiographical proclivity.

Another perhaps unfortunate tendency is the almost complete lack of source citation (in either footnotes or endnotes). The interested reader has nowhere to go to follow up on or learn more about the sources used to support various claims made by the authors. Similarly, after Shin's historiographically-sensitive introduction, questions of historiography—either those raised by Shin in the introduction or those more closely connected to the specific topic of an essay—virtually vanish from the volume. The result of both of these tendencies is the implicit conveying of authorial omniscience that one suspects most if not all of the essays' authors would actually regard rather uncomfortably.

Many of the essays include a myriad of untranslated Korean terms, sometimes in lists or rapid succession. Some, but certainly not all, of these terms are translated in a glossary in the book's appendix. But the presence of so many Romanized Korean terms in the text will likely make some of the essays slow and heavy going, especially for the reader unfamiliar with Korean language and history.

Finally, although it may be more than a little ungrateful to highlight what is not covered in such a wide-ranging work, it is curious that the *nobi* (often translated into English as “slaves” although this volume chooses to use “unfree people”) don't receive any focused attention in a stand-alone essay. Given the significance of “unfree people” in Joseon society and economy (particularly in the first half of the period), this lacuna is curious and somewhat unfortunate.

These observations and objections should not distract from the fact that *Everyday Life in Joseon-era Korea* is a remarkable volume. It contains a treasure-trove of information about a dizzying array of topics—everything from the details of the traditional farmer's calendar to the fact that Joseon Koreans had at least 11 words for “outhouse.” Stories of individuals—ranging from the Japanese interpreter Byeon Seungeop who used his position to become perhaps the richest man in Seoul in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the bandit and rebel Im Ggeokjeong whose raids in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century shook the Joseon Kingdom to its foundations—serve to enliven and humanize history in a way broad survey textbooks can seldom achieve. Readers of all levels of expertise in Korean history will likely find much that is intriguing, fascinating, and often new, ranging from the remarkably recent provenance of the *gimchi* to the Arabic origins of *soju*; from the inventive and gruesome methods of torture used in the penal system

to the ways in which the early-19<sup>th</sup>-century rebel Hong Gyeongnae used the prospect of working in gold mines to recruit followers; and from the tradition that even *yangban* were said to stop riding their horses and dismount when they encountered the banner of a village *dure* (mutual aid and labor organization) to the seven legal grounds a husband could use to divorce his wife (with the wife having recourse to divorce in only two rarely-invoked situations). The fascinating detail and anecdote are often supplemented by vibrant illustrations (with the paintings of Gim Hongdo often receiving pride of place) which invariably enhance the text. The translations, accomplished by Michael Shin and Edward Park, are generally lucid, parsimonious, and elegant.

In short, *Everyday Life in Joseon-era Korea* is a work that will be of interest to many readers. It could easily and readily be used to supplement a more traditional textbook in university-level survey histories of Korea. Graduate students interested in Korea or in various aspects of society more generally will also find much to stimulate thought, conversation, and further inquiry. Both specialists and the general reader will be sure to find much of interest within its pages.

Kirk W. LARSEN (kwlarsen67@gmail.com)  
Brigham Young University

