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**About the Journal**

*The Journal of Northeast Asian History* (JNAH) is a peer-reviewed, biannual, open-access journal published by the Northeast Asian History Foundation. It aims to elucidate the contexts and current situations of historically contentious topics in the Northeast Asian region across all periods. The journal seeks to test diverse methodologies, including interdisciplinary and transnational approaches, textual and inter-textual interpretations, and media and visual analyses. By publishing high-quality academic papers, book reviews, and research trend reports in English, JNAH provides a platform for international dialogue among scholars in the humanities and social sciences while fostering exchanges with policymakers and practitioners. Dedicated to promoting academic and practical discussions, the journal contributes to a deeper understanding of Northeast Asia's past, present, and future.

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# Research Article



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# Norm and Deviance: Some Considerations on Eroticism in Ancient Korea

Andrea DE BENEDITTIS

## Abstract

This article explores the intersection of gender, power, and normative transgression in early medieval Korea through an analysis of historic chronicles (*Samguk sagi*) and anecdotal narratives (*Samguk yusa*). By examining cases involving queens, concubines, and female figures situated at the margins of legitimacy, the study interrogates the symbolic and political construction of gender deviance within the framework of dynastic ideology. Drawing on theoretical approaches from gender history and the anthropology of the gift, the article highlights how sexualized behaviors, jealousy, and bodily anomalies were inscribed into official discourse as mechanisms of exclusion or moral warning. Particular attention is paid to narrative strategies that blur the boundaries between hagiography, exemplarity, and historical record, revealing an underlying tension between patriarchal control and the disruptive agency of women. The study proposes that representations of ‘deviance’ served not only as focal points of moral tension, but also as narrative tools for negotiating dynastic crises and legitimizing succession. Through this lens, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of premodern Korean historiography and the gendered dynamics of its political imagination.

## Keywords

body, sexuality, erotism, sexual narrative, ancient Korea

Andrea De Benedittis is Professor at University of Naples l’Orientale. (adebenedittis@unior.it)

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## 1. Introduction

This article examines the multifaceted nature of eroticism in ancient Korea, with a particular focus on the Three Kingdoms period, through the lens of historical, literary, and archaeological sources. Drawing on Georges Bataille's theoretical framework, eroticism is approached not as mere sexual instinct, but as a culturally mediated space of prohibition, transgression, and symbolic exchange (Bataille 2017, 17, 187). This notion of eroticism is fundamentally tied to the regulation of sexual instincts, from which taboos such as incest emerge (Bataille 2017, 18, 198). It also links these restrictions to values like chastity and fidelity, which become central to erotic discourse. At the same time, defining the boundaries of human sexuality inevitably entails the possibility of their transgression (Bataille 2017, 50, 647). In this context, values such as chastity, fidelity, and reproductive duty emerge not only as moral imperatives, but also as markers of gendered social order and political stability. By analyzing selected passages from foundational texts such as *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa*, this study investigates how sexuality was discursively constructed, regulated, and occasionally subverted. Erotic agency, as portrayed in these texts, is profoundly asymmetrical: while male sexuality oscillates between heroic virility, excess, and deviance, female sexuality is framed within a rigid moral dichotomy—chaste or shameless, fertile or failed—closely tied to patriarchal control over the body and its symbolic value. Special attention is given to extraordinary or fantastical elements—including hyperphallic figures, 'wild' sexual unions, magical seductions, and scandals or erotic punishment—that function both as narrative devices and as sites of ideological contestation. These episodes reveal how desire, pleasure, jealousy, and bodily spectacle intersect with questions of power, status, and legitimacy.

Ultimately, the article argues that early Korean erotic discourse cannot be reduced to either Confucian restraint or folkloric indulgence; rather, it emerges as a complex, often contradictory field of representations in which the social, political, and supernatural dimensions of sexuality were deeply intertwined. Given the limited and fragmented nature of extant

materials, this study necessarily focuses on selected episodes and representations rather than attempting an exhaustive account. While acknowledging that ancient Korean society was complex and varied across regions and periods, the present analysis prioritizes thematic coherence over full chronological or geographic coverage. This approach is not meant to flatten such diversity but to highlight certain recurring symbolic patterns within the constraints of available sources. Further research will be needed to refine and expand this inquiry with greater contextual and temporal specificity.

## 2. Toward a Grammar of Eroticism: Sexual Norms and Symbolism in Early Korea

While no codified system of customs—*no mos maiorum*, so to speak—has survived from ancient Korea, it is nevertheless clear that early Korean societies swiftly developed norms to regulate sexual behavior. Bodily impulses, desires, and sexual instincts were increasingly subordinated to the dictates of morality, custom, and law. Evidence of this regulatory process can be found in *Samguk yusa*, where it is noted that women were educated in “modesty, loyalty, filial piety, and sincerity.” According to the text, the king selected beautiful maidens and designated them as *weonhwa*, organizing them into groups and instilling in them the core values of modesty, loyalty, filial piety, and sincerity—virtues deemed essential for the governance of the realm (Iryeon 2016, 234). An idealized image of society is also presented in the phrase: “people do not steal, leave their doors open, and women are virtuous and not lustful” (婦人貞信不淫) (Kim, Bu-sik 1999, 512). Here, the character *eum* (淫), encompassing meanings of “desire” and “excess,” functions as a moral boundary marker, denoting that which lies beyond accepted social norms. In extant visual representations, the human body is typically portrayed in a modest and desexualized manner—fully clothed and devoid of erotic charge. Nudity, by contrast, is symbolically associated with the bestial or the demonic, as illustrated for example by the depictions in the mural from the tomb at Sunheung Eumnae-ri.



**Fig. 1.** Detail of a creature depicted in the tomb of Yeongju Sunheung Eumnae-ri.  
Source: Korea Heritage Service.

The wall paintings of Geoguryeo, which constitute the most extensive and sophisticated iconographic corpus of ancient Korea, are notably devoid of explicit erotic imagery or overt sexual themes—especially when compared to the mural traditions of classical antiquity, such as those of Greece or Etruria, where explicit scenes of sensuality, nudity, and even intercourse were common in funerary and domestic contexts. In Geoguryeo tomb art, representations of the human body are typically idealized, clothed, and framed within ritualistic, mythological, or martial settings, reflecting a worldview in which sexuality was either symbolically sublimated or rigorously confined within socially sanctioned forms. A rare, albeit indirect, exception can be found in the dynamic compositions of the Tomb of the Wrestlers, where partially nude male figures are depicted in combat. In this context, nudity does not function erotically per se but rather serves to emphasize physical strength, virility, and heroic masculinity. The exposed body becomes a visual metaphor for power and dominance, aligning more closely with martial valor than with sensual pleasure. This restrained



Fig. 2. Detail of the wrestling scene in the Tomb of the Wrestlers, depicting two partially nude male figures engaged in ritual combat.

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

visual regime suggests that, in the culture of Geoguryeo, eroticism—if present at all—was not expressed through direct iconographic means but instead remained embedded in symbolic registers or filtered through allegorical or moral frameworks. It also reinforces the broader tendency in early Korean visual culture to subordinate the body to ideals of social order, virtue, and cosmological harmony.

In recent years, archaeological excavations across the Korean peninsula have brought to light a variety of sex-related representations that suggest the ritualized deployment of erotic symbolism in ancient societies. While these artifacts are striking, they do not collectively constitute a structured or coherent tradition of erotic imagery. Two particularly notable finds—a wooden phallus and an earthenware one—were discovered at the Anapji site in Gyeongju, the former capital of Silla. These objects are widely interpreted as having served a ritual or protective function, possibly linked to fertility cults or the symbolic safeguarding of sacred or political space.



**Fig. 3. Wooden phallus from Gyeongju.**

Source: Gyeongju National Museum, Weolseong 1038.



**Fig. 4. Earthenware phallus from Gyeongju.**

Source: Gyeongju National Museum, Anapji 1157.

Even more remarkable is a phallic-shaped *mokgan*—a wooden tablet typically used for administrative or ritual purposes—excavated from the site of Neungsan-ri in Buyeo, one of Baekje’s final capitals. Unlike standard *mokgan*, this example appears to have been deliberately carved in the form of a phallus, suggesting a symbolic intention beyond bureaucratic use. It could be interpreted as a talismanic or apotropaic object, possibly linked to shamanic practices or boundary rituals aimed at warding off evil forces and invoking fertility or protective energies. Its distinctive shape and its discovery in a peripheral context support its likely role within the ritual culture of late Baekje.

Complementary evidence can be found in the Bangudae petroglyphs of Ulsan, which, while primarily depicting animals and hunting scenes, include anthropomorphic figures that may reflect fertility symbolism. Similarly, clay figurines from the Silla period—such as those uncovered in Tomb No. 30 at Gyerim-no—depict male and female fig-



**Fig. 5. Wooden phallus from Buyeo.**

Source: Buyeo National Museum, Buyeo 8293.



Fig. 6. Male and female clay figurines engaged in an intimate pose excavated in Suncheon, Jeollanam-do. Source: National Gyeongju Museum, Gwangju 841.

ures with overt sexual features, some in explicitly sexual poses (Hanguk yeoksa yeonguhoe 1998, 1). These figurines are typically interpreted as apotropaic or fertility charms, intended to protect the deceased or promote abundance in the afterlife. Despite the diversity and symbolic richness of these artifacts—from petroglyphs and figurines to carved wooden talismans—they remain isolated examples rather than components of a systematic erotic tradition. Collectively, they reflect a ritual-symbolic engagement with sexuality, deeply embedded in cosmological, shamanic, and protective frameworks that are suggestive yet remain only partially understood.

Visual arts such as painting and sculpture in ancient Korea offer only a limited iconographic repertoire related to sexuality, insufficient to provide an unfiltered cross-section of the erotic imagination of the peninsula's early inhabitants. For this reason, the present study focuses primarily on literary sources. In particular, a comparison between *Samguk yusa* and *Samguk sagi* reveals significant differences in tone and narrative

treatment of bodily and sexual elements. *Samguk sagi*, compiled by Kim Bu-sik, adopts a restrained, annalistic style, offering terse and dignified portrayals of rulers. For example, in reference to Maripgan Jijeung (r. 437?-514), it merely notes his imposing physique and extraordinary courage (王體鴻大, 膽力過人) (Kim, Bu-sik 1999, 106). In contrast, *Samguk yusa*, compiled by the monk Iryeon in the late 13th century, introduces an extravagant and eroticized elaboration: Jijeung is said to have a penis four spans long—so large, in fact, that he could not find a sexual partner (Iryeon 2016, 67). The situation is resolved only when he encounters the feces of an extraordinarily tall woman, through which he infers compatibility. This anecdote, though fantastical and grotesque, reveals Iryeon's inclination toward vivid corporeal detail and a fascination with the extraordinary, offering a window into a more imaginative and sensually charged mode of historiography.

Elsewhere in *Samguk yusa*, erotic imagery is employed in both metaphorical and playful ways. In one account, a character remarks, “If a male organ enters a female organ, it will surely perish” (Iryeon 2016, 67) framing sexuality in terms of fatal consequence and mythical warning. Another vivid example concerns the monk Wonhyo, who, upon seeing bees and butterflies flitting among flowers, is overcome by desire and walks the streets of Gyeongju singing: “Who will lend me an axe that has lost its handle? I wish to cut down a heaven-supporting pillar” (Iryeon 2016, 106). The song is a thinly veiled sexual metaphor. Later, he encounters a woman washing her menstrual cloth beneath a bridge. In jest, he asks, “May I have a sip of the cool water?” She replies boldly, “Of course, come and drink,” and scoops some of the soiled water into a half-moon-shaped gourd, pressing it to his lips. Wonhyo drinks deeply and continues on his way, quenching his thirst with water from the mountain stream. The narrative combines humor, eroticism, and ritual impurity in ways that blur the boundaries between desire, taboo, and enlightenment.

In addition to the inherent challenges of interpreting anomalous or symbolic passages such as those previously discussed, the attempt to reconstruct the erotic sphere in early Korean history encounters further methodological obstacles. Most significantly, due to the scarcity and

fragmentary nature of the available sources, it is impossible to undertake a detailed or comprehensive analysis of erotic practices specific to the individual polities of the Three Kingdoms period. Nevertheless, it remains essential to attempt a general discursive reconstruction of sexuality and its representations. Evidence suggests that significant regional differences likely existed in sexual customs. For instance, polygamy among rulers was permitted in Baekje and Goguryeo, while in Silla it appears to have been prohibited.<sup>1</sup> These divergences may reflect broader ideological, political, and religious distinctions among the kingdoms. Further complicating the analysis is the issue of authorship and perspective. The historians responsible for compiling our principal sources—such as *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa*—were male, and in the case of Iryeon, a Buddhist monk. As such, they lacked access to the intimate and private lives of the individuals they describe, particularly women. Moreover, there is no evidence that women contributed directly to the composition of these texts. Thus, any attempt to approach women's everyday experiences or their subjective perception of sexuality must necessarily pass through the prism of the male gaze. This results in an inevitably phallogocentric discourse, in which female sexuality is often reduced to a moral dichotomy: a woman is either virtuous and chaste or shameless and corrupt (Girod 2013, 4501). The androcentric perspective of *Samguk sagi* is made particularly explicit in a misogynistic aside by Kim Bu-sik, who expresses astonishment that the Kingdom of Silla did not fall into ruin despite being ruled by a female sovereign, Queen Seondeok (Kim, Bu-sik 1999, 121). Gender asymmetry is thus a defining feature of how erotic behavior was represented and likely regulated in early Korea. Free men may have been allowed to engage in sexual relations with concubines, and kings were

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<sup>1</sup> The status of women was considerably lower in Baekje; as Ju Bodon notes, the *Baekje Annals* and funerary inscriptions do not mention the personal names of queens. This suggests that women—even royal consorts—lacked individual identity, being defined primarily as daughters and later as wives. By contrast, the *Silla Annals* do record the names of queens, and monogamy was the prevailing system. The accession of three female rulers in Silla—the second such case in East Asia after Japan—though contested, indicates that women's status was relatively higher there than in the other Korean kingdoms. (Ju 2010, 35-56).

accompanied by different partners without moral reproach (Kim, Bu-sik 1999, 512). Upon the death of his wife, a man could remarry (Kim, Bu-sik 1999, 343); by contrast, widow remarriage was considered inappropriate for a woman of virtue.

*“A virtuous widow may never take another man, and a loyal minister may never serve another dynasty”* (Iryeon 2016, 155).

This aphorism encapsulates the ideological framework that confined female desire within strict moral boundaries while simultaneously legitimizing male sexual liberty. A paradigmatic example of female virtue in early Korean literature is the wife of Kim Je-sang, who, after her husband was deported to Japan, remained steadfastly facing the sea in the direction of his exile, mourning in sorrow until her death (Iryeon 2016, 50). Within the moral framework of the time, women were granted virtually no margin for transgression. In an effort to codify and exalt the ideal of chastity, historical sources recount stories of women who had sexual relations with only one man in their lifetime—figures reminiscent of the Roman *uniuirae*, idealized as models of ancient moral rectitude. One particularly notable case is that of a beautiful woman from Baekje, the wife of Domi, who may be regarded as a Korean analogue to Lucretia, the quintessential Roman heroine. After the death of her husband, she was summoned to become the concubine of the king (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 475). Refusing to submit, she resisted the monarch’s advances, thus embodying the ideal of chastity not merely as abstention from sexual activity, but as a moral integrity grounded in fidelity and honor. Chastity (*castitas*), in this context, is presented as a core ethical value that defines a woman’s virtue. It transcends mere sexual behavior and encompasses a broader moral purity. Violations of this standard, especially by women, are met with extreme punitive violence. The sources describe brutal punishments for adultery, including being beaten to death with a red-hot iron applied to the genitals or execution by fire:

*“She slept with another man, that’s what happened. [...] So he heated an*

*iron club in the fire and struck her in the vagina until she died. Then he killed her two sons”* (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 508).

Another episode involves a woman becoming pregnant outside of wedlock. Upon learning of it, Kim Yusin scolds her:

*“How dare you get pregnant without parental permission?”* (Iryeon 2016, 81)

He then publicly shames her and declares his wish to burn her alive. The irony in this passage is striking: Kim Yusin, who himself led a tumultuous and highly active sex life, is portrayed elsewhere in the *Samguk yusa* as entertaining himself with three different women simultaneously. This moral double standard highlights the asymmetrical expectations placed upon male and female sexuality in historical discourse. The most emblematic case of infidelity is that of Cheoyong’s beautiful wife, who, in her husband’s absence, becomes the object of desire for the spirit of the plague. The spirit infiltrates their home and lies with her, symbolizing not only sexual violation but also cosmological disorder.

### **3. Sexual Union and the Politics of Reproduction in Ancient Korea**

Women are portrayed in ancient sources as forging emotional bonds, and their circulation—whether voluntary or coerced—emerges as one of the most effective mechanisms in the socialization processes of the time. From the standpoint of structural anthropology, sexual union represents the most elementary basis for social ties. In discussing women in ancient Rome, Virginie Girod observes that their fate was typically limited to two outcomes: to become either a respectable mother of a family or a prostitute (Girod 2013, 63). This dichotomy appears to be broadly applicable to ancient Korean society as well. Entry into one of these opposing categories was determined by a variety of factors, including social class and

lineage, but the decisive criterion was, above all, sexual conduct. Importantly, this behavior was not always a matter of personal choice: a woman's fate was most often decided by her father. In fact, women were rarely granted the autonomy to select their romantic or sexual partners; such decisions were almost invariably negotiated by their families. The seductive or affective dimension of a woman's value was thus subordinated to the material interests involved in her "transfer" (Bataille 2017, 432). In both early societies and, to a lesser degree, among rural populations, a woman functioned as an economic asset (Bataille 2017, 437), belonging first to her father and later to her husband. This notion is illustrated clearly in a statement by the character Dohwarang, who, when rejecting the advances of the king, declares:

*"What a woman must uphold, she does not serve two husbands"* (Iryeon 2016, 69).

The female body is thus conceived as inseparably bound to its rightful owner. This conceptualization is also evident in the *Taejong Chunchu-gong* narrative in *Wonder 1*, where the court ladies of King Eui-ja of Baekje choose to throw themselves from the northern cliff of Buyeo alongside their sovereign, rather than allow themselves to become spoils of war and property of the victorious enemy. As Claude Lévi-Strauss demonstrated, the archaic institution of marriage functioned as a system of exchange and redistribution (Bataille 2017, 245). To marry a woman was to acquire a precious asset—a form of wealth whose value was simultaneously economic, political, and sacred (Bataille 2017, 335). This is confirmed in Korean historical sources, which recount that, in times of famine, a daughter could be sold as a survival strategy (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 277); if particularly beautiful, she could be offered as a gift to the king (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 86) or even to the emperor (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 114). Unlike prostitution, the commodification of the female body in this context was legalized and normalized within the framework of patriarchal morality. Marriage, therefore, is framed not as a mutual emotional bond, but as a transactional gift, a transfer of property that serves

to create alliances between two family groups.

*“You have saved my life,” the old man said. “In gratitude I offer you my daughter as your wife”* (Iryeon 2016, 130).

*“I have two daughters. Choose whichever you prefer to be your wife”* (Iryeon 2016, 122).

*“King Namhae was pleased with youth’s wisdom and granted him his daughter in marriage. This was the lady Ani”* (Iryeon 2016, 40).

Such passages reflect the prevailing conception of women not as autonomous agents, but as instruments of alliance, wealth, and moral legitimacy in the fabric of early Korean society (Mauss 2016, 2221). Women’s social maturity in ancient Korean society was essentially marked by a true rite of passage: marriage. This institution formalized the transfer of the woman as a “gift” and functioned, in the words of Marcel Mauss, as a *“total social fact”*—a phenomenon charged with social and religious, magical and economic, utilitarian and sentimental, juridical and moral significance (Bataille 2017, 358). Marriage was not merely a personal union, but a culturally dense practice through which the affective and biological dimensions of human life were woven into the political and structural fabric of society. Wedding rites, in particular, served to ritualize and publicly affirm the transformation of individual affective relationships into socially recognized bonds. Through the formalization of these unions, the dialectic of sexuality was reconfigured into a political language, especially when marriage involved elite or royal families. In such contexts, marital alliances acquired an explicitly strategic function, becoming critical tools for inter-clan solidarity, regional integration, and dynastic legitimacy. Far from being a private affair, marriage in premodern Korea was a crucial axis around which the future of social groups and entire polities could turn. This is evident in the dynastic politics of the Later Three Kingdoms period. For example, the alliance between Silla and Goryeo was further strengthened when King Gyeongsun bestowed

the beautiful daughter of his uncle upon Wang Geon, the founder of the Goryeo dynasty, as a royal bride (Iryeon 2016, 135).

*“The founder of our kingdom, having united the two royal families through friendly ties, soon recognized Silla’s culture and gave his daughter in marriage. He restored his loyalty, and now the two kingdoms are united, ruling together over the Three Han”* (Iryeon 2016, 136).

This gesture was not merely matrimonial, but symbolic of the transfer of legitimacy, the sealing of an alliance, and the integration of two dynastic lineages. Such a marriage represented a fusion of bloodlines and political destinies, essential for stabilizing power and ensuring continuity. Moreover, these marriages often had implications beyond the immediate families involved. They could affect regional peace treaties, military alliances, tribute relationships, and even the transmission of cultural and religious capital. The woman in these cases, although often silent in the sources, functioned as the living embodiment of inter-political cohesion. Her body became a symbolic and functional terrain on which alliances were enacted and sovereignty was negotiated. In sum, marriage in ancient Korea was not simply a personal or familial matter—it was a central institution through which gender, power, economy, and cosmology intersected. The woman’s transition into marriage marked not only her entry into adulthood, but also her inscription into the broader structures of political economy and symbolic exchange. Marriage, as a recognized sexual union between a man and a woman, also played a significant role in pacification and the prevention of conflict. It functioned not only as a domestic institution but as a diplomatic tool, often used to mark the end of hostilities or to solidify political alliances. In this context, unions with foreign women were not uncommon. One example is the legendary marriage between King Suro of Geumgwan Gaya and the princess of Ayuta, a kingdom located in what is now India—an episode that reveals how the symbolic and reproductive functions of marriage were intertwined with early international diplomacy (Iryeon 2016, 162).

However, in Three Kingdoms society, the union of sexed bodies through marriage was celebrated primarily for its reproductive potential. The survival of the household, the clan, and the state itself depended on fertility. In an agrarian and pre-antibiotic context, a woman's ability to conceive and bear children was considered her most valuable physical trait. Unsurprisingly, classical Korean sources promote a model of sexuality that is tightly regulated by conjugal duty, with its primary aim being reproduction rather than pleasure. A woman who failed to fulfill this reproductive role could be repudiated or marginalized (Iryeon 2016, 113). Infertility was almost exclusively regarded as a female failure, with no apparent reflection on the possibility of male sterility. One striking example appears in the case of King Gyeongdeok, whose sexual potency is explicitly described:

*“King Gyeongdeok’s member was eight inches long, yet his queen could not bear him a son. Consequently, he sent her away, bestowing upon her the title Lady Saryang, and took Lady Manwol in her place”* (Iryeon 2016, 113).

Similarly, another queen, though formally welcomed at court, failed to produce an heir. After her father's political insurrection, she too was expelled. These examples illustrate how a woman's fertility status could determine her political and social fate. Even Queen Seondeok, one of the most celebrated monarchs in Korean history, was subtly criticized for her presumed infertility. Chinese envoys are said to have gifted her a painting of peonies without bees—a veiled allusion to her inability to reproduce, despite her success as a ruler. Conversely, the sources also record and glorify women of exceptional fertility, offering them up as models to inspire others and reinforce reproductive norms. Fertile women were publicly praised and materially rewarded:

*“In October, the wife of the Taesa Geummo gave birth to three sons”* (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 277).

*“In December, a woman from the Gomi district had triplets—all three were boys” (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 303).*

These celebratory reports echo the Roman *lex iulia de maritandis ordinibus*, a law promulgated under Augustus and recorded by Dio Cassius, which incentivized procreation among Roman citizens through a system of fiscal rewards for families with three or more children (Girod 2013, 66, 1051). A comparable reward system appears to have existed in ancient Korea:

*“In the autumn, the wife of the Hwangjinaema of Taeyanggwan-gun in the Udu region gave birth to two boys and two girls, and the king rewarded her with 100 seok of rice” (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 278).*

*“On the tenth day of the third moon in the third year of Linte (Byeong-in, 666), a female slave named Giri, belonging to a commoner, gave birth to triplets; and on the seventh day of the first moon in the third year of Tsungchang (Gyeong-o), a female slave belonging to Ilsangupgan of the Hangi Department bore quadruplets—one girl and three boys. The king rewarded each woman with two hundred large bags of rice” (Iryeon 2016, 101).*

These passages reveal a politics of fertility, in which women’s reproductive capacity was both surveilled and celebrated, punished or rewarded, depending on whether it conformed to the state’s demographic and symbolic priorities. Sexuality, thus, was not only personal but also institutionalized, moralized, and economically inscribed into the core of early Korean statecraft.

#### **4. Sex, Deviance and Body**

Although the historical texts under consideration were certainly not written with the explicit aim of documenting the sexual customs of the peo-

ples of the Three Kingdoms period, references to sexuality nonetheless animate numerous passages. *Samguk yusa*, for instance, opens with a strikingly symbolic scene of interspecies union: the myth of Korea's founding begins with a female bear being transformed into a woman and uniting with a heavenly deity—an act that results in the birth of Dangun, the mythical ancestor of the Korean people. Here, sexuality plays a legitimating role, particularly in origin myths, which frequently revolve around acts of seduction or miraculous, often oviparous, births. Even though the compilers of such texts—especially monks like Iryeon—were skeptical of their historicity, they nevertheless chose to record these episodes, aware of their symbolic and narrative power (Iryeon 2016, 137).

In one passage from *Samguk sagi*, it is noted that people attach great importance to sex (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 496), though sexual pleasure itself is not depicted as a central element of happiness or fulfillment. Rather, in the language of these sources, the act of sex is often described with the term *gyotong* (交通) (Iryeon 2016, 142), a word that more literally means “communication” or “exchange.” This linguistic choice likely alludes to the interpenetration and mutual entanglement of two bodies, understood as a form of embodied dialogue rather than hedonistic indulgence. However, desire is not always fully contained by public morality. Bodily impulses frequently override social conventions and rational restraint. Several passages recount extramarital sexual encounters, often infused with dreamlike or fantastical elements:

*“One month after his appointment, Suljong-gong and his wife both had the same dream in which a young man, radiant with beauty, entered their bedroom”* (Iryeon 2016, 107).

The sources refer to these unauthorized sexual episodes as *yahap* (野合)<sup>2</sup> (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 438), literally “wild unions” or “rustic inter-

<sup>2</sup> The term “wild union” (野合) appears in both Chinese and Korean sources to denote unions or

course” — a term that emphasizes the instinctual and untamed nature of desire, likening it to bestiality or primal behavior. While abstaining from sex is not condemned (Iryeon 2016, 299) and, in some cases, is even praised — such as in the lives of Gwangdeok and his wife (Iryeon 2016, 346), or of the two strikingly handsome monks Nohil Buduk and Taldal Bakbak (Iryeon 2016, 238) — an excess of libido is treated with deep suspicion. Uncontrolled lust is repeatedly portrayed as a destabilizing force, capable of undermining moral order and political authority. The sources often associate sexual excess with dynastic decline, framing it as one of the principal causes behind the collapse of royal mandates.

Thus, although sexuality is not presented as a pursuit of pleasure or liberation, it occupies a central and ambivalent place in the historical imagination of early Korea — simultaneously a force of creation, seduction, disruption, and collapse. Sexual indulgence as a sign of political decay is a recurring theme in both Korean and Chinese historiography. Numerous rulers are condemned not merely for administrative failures but specifically for their unrestrained pursuit of sensual pleasure. King Gyeongae, for example, is described as having abandoned himself to merriment and indulgence, frequenting the Pavilion of the Stone Abalone (*Seokjeonnu*) where he reveled in the company of courtiers and chosen beauties (Iryeon 2016, 137). His neglect of state affairs in favor of personal gratification is portrayed as a symptom of the kingdom’s imminent collapse. Similarly, King Saryun, after only four years on the throne, was deposed by his own people — his misrule and sexual excesses cited explicitly as the cause of popular rebellion (Iryeon 2016, 137). This moralizing framework echoes broader East Asian historiographic traditions. Chinese historical records recount the downfalls of King Jie of the Xia dynasty and King Zhou of the Shang, both infamous for indulging in the

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couplings that fall outside formalized marriage practices or normative spousal relations. In Chinese historiography, it often implies illicit or unsanctioned sexual activity, whereas in Korean usage, it more commonly refers to irregular unions — those lacking formal betrothal, ritual sanction, or social approval — rather than unrestrained erotic excess. In this study, the term is interpreted with caution, as a descriptor of non-normative sexual or marital behavior, without assuming inherently transgressive or ecstatic connotations.

pleasures of sex and wine. Their obsessive pursuit of pleasure, it is said, allowed corruption to fester, drove competent ministers from court, and ultimately led their empires into ruin (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 247). In the face of these crises, Kim Chijeong of Ichan, taking advantage of the growing unrest, gathered a coalition and laid siege to the royal palace. The king's sexual misconduct, more than a private vice, is here portrayed as a cosmological and political transgression, one that disturbs the natural order and invites rebellion (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 247). These narratives frame the body of the ruler as not merely private but politically symbolic: his ability—or failure—to control desire becomes a metaphor for the state of the kingdom itself. Erotic excess is thus never just a personal flaw, but a harbinger of wider disorder and collapse.

Not even women were immune to the sin of lust, but power intoxicates those who hold it and inhibits their sexual restraints. In secret, the queen summoned two or three beautiful children to court and engaged in lascivious relations with them. She even appointed them to positions in the realm, leaving the affairs of the Kingdom in their hands (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 304). During her six-year reign the Queen loved many court men, who usurped her power and misused her authority. This led to a collapse of morals so that famines increased, the people fled and bands of brigands rose up against the government (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 146).

Excess was not the only form of abnormal conduct. In creating a systematic definition of morality and paradigms of behavior, the historian's interest inevitably shifts to deviations. Deviance is exemplified by King Hyegong and his effeminate behavior, which caused the government to weaken, the kingdom to descend into utter confusion, and the rise of thieves everywhere. The sources do not contain explicit references to homoerotic love, but this passage seems to betray an absolute intransigence towards non-heterosexual attitudes, so much so that, in the end, public morality forced the king to repent of his [womanish] ways (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 115).

Within this moral discourse, beauty and the physical body emerge as central elements in the construction of erotic attraction. The case of Princess Seonhwa is particularly illustrative: it is her legendary beauty

(美艷無雙)—of which Seodong hears long before seeing her—that triggers his desire and motivates his journey to find her (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 142). In this narrative, the body precedes and determines love, functioning as both stimulus and justification for erotic action (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 124, 301). In fact, throughout Korean historiography, the body is not merely physical—it is symbolic, a visible manifestation of inner virtue and legitimacy. Historical descriptions often begin with physical characteristics, which are then followed by observations about a person’s character or intellectual abilities. This reflects a cultural belief that moral qualities are naturally reflected in the appearance of the body. Tall stature, handsome features, and physical symmetry are often equated with moral strength, wisdom, and fitness to rule.

Thus, beauty is never a neutral attribute: it plays an active role in the erotization of virtue, in the justification of desire, and in the shaping of historical memory. The sexed body—marked by gender, beauty, and desire—becomes both a social index and an ethical signifier, capable of reinforcing or destabilizing the order to which it ostensibly belongs.

*“The king was seven measures tall, was magnanimous and loved others”* (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 107).

*“The king had a peculiar face and an imposing body; he was poised and witty”* (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 111).

*“King Muryeong stood eight measures tall and possessed facial features as if he had been drawn; he was also charitable and magnanimous”* (Kim, Bu-sik 2006b, 84).

*“Among these, the fourth son, Geumgang, was tall, handsome and intelligent”* (Iryeon 2016, 154).

This ideal of perfection corresponds to the Greek ideal of *kalokagathia* (καλοκαγαθία), which finds its effective translator in Iryeon’s expression ‘(her) virtue and appearance are both beautiful’ (德

容雙美, Iryeon 2016, 135). In addition to height and physical prowess, the face mainly embodies the erotic drive; so do the teeth (or smile) and the eyes. Sometimes the eyebrows were like “two eight-colored rainbows” like those of Yao, the sage-king of ancient China, and “his eyes sparkled with double pupils” like those of Shun, Yao’s son-in-law (Iryeon 2016, 146). But it is in the gaze that the magic of seduction is concentrated. The gaze takes on an essential role; it is the vehicle of the power of Eros, the material emanation of the loved object.

*“His heart rejoiced, and he cast her a seductive glance”* (Kim, Bu-sik 2006b, 353).

*“A virgin followed him as she prayed, casting glances until their eyes met. [...] He took her to a secluded place, they entered, and there they exchanged outpourings of love”* (Iryeon 2016, 279).

In the end, the phallus constitutes one of the most conspicuous elements of the human body. It is a symbol of sexuality itself, and hyperphallicity even becomes a tool for legitimizing the power of a sovereign. References to the penis recur in various passages of the sources, and we do not know if what today is perceived as obscene, polluted by excessive modern materialist positivism, could simply have held a prophylactic or cathartic value (Girod 2013, 11, 116).

*“The monk drew himself up with dignity and said —Who is more to blame, a man who carries a dead fish on his back or a man who holds living flesh between his legs? And with these words he departed”* (Iryeon 2016, 348).

*“The King was a big man and his phallus measured one foot five inches, so that it was difficult to find a suitable queen for him”* (Iryeon 2016, 67).

In these narratives, beauty is not only portrayed as a sign of virtue, but also—conversely—as a dangerous weapon. As *Samguk yusa* warns,

“The dream of a beautiful woman is a pernicious dream” (鰥夢蛾眉賊夢藏). The allure of the body is thus both powerful and perilous, and its effects—like the beauty itself—are ultimately transient. This ambivalence is poignantly reflected in the despair of Josin’s wife:

*“When I first met you your face was beautiful and you were in your prime. Your clothes were neat. Together, we tried all kinds of food. Together, we wore all kinds of fabrics. For these fifty years, our affection has grown ever deeper, and our love more intense; ours has been a destined love. But many years have passed since then, ailments and diseases have increased over the years, and we suffer more and more from hunger and cold. The shame of living under the roof of others and begging to eat weighs on us like a mountain. A couple who can no longer protect their children from hunger and cold, how could they enjoy their love? Our colorful faces and our beautiful smiles are now like dew on the grass. Even our promises that once smelled of gromwell and orchid are now like a pussy willow trembling in the wind. I have become a burden for you, and you are a cause for concern for me. If I think back to the happiness of the past few days, I think that is the beginning of my concern. How did we end up in this state?”* (Iryeon 2016, 250)

If, on the one hand, the sources exalt the beauty of the bodies and exalt all the seductive weapons of a handsome body, they at the same time abhor and mock what is ugly or anomalous. “Extremely ugly” (甚寒寢) is the description given of the princess, daughter of King Gyeongseon, literally ‘extremely frigid in bed’. Ugliness is singled out as something monstrous and is repudiated and denigrated.

*“The child was the laughingstock of the village because of his big head and flat forehead, like a wall. The people called him Daeseong (Big Wall)”* (Iryeon 2016, 380).

*“Ondal had an anomalous face and made people laugh”* (Kim, Bu-sik 2006b, 427).

Deformed or unnatural bodies disturb, terrify, or even become a fatal omen.

*“In the third month, a woman from Mamiji District in Mujin County gave birth to a son, but he had two heads, two bodies, four arms. When she was giving birth to him dazzling lightning appeared in the sky”* (Kim, Bu-sik 2006a, 247).

*“During the first year of King Munmu’s reign, the body of a huge woman came floating on the sea south of Sabisu. Her body was seventy-three feet long, her feet six feet long, and her vagina was three feet long”* (Iryeon 2016, 97).

In reflecting upon these narratives, it becomes clear that the body—admired when symmetrical and beautiful, feared when deformed or ambiguous—serves not merely as a biological fact but as a moral and political text. Physical appearance becomes a mirror of virtue, a vehicle of legitimacy, and a battleground for anxiety over disorder, sexuality, and social control. Ultimately, these stories reveal less about individual bodies and more about the societies that judged them—societies obsessed with ideal forms, but haunted by everything that resisted or exceeded those ideals.

## 5. Love and Jealousy

A traditional semantic analysis applied to the different contexts of use of the term *éros* reveals that in the earliest classical texts, it generally referred to a desire for glory or political power, rather than simply a desire for a physical relationship (Sissa 2003, xxviii). It is, however, the obsessive desire for a particular person that gives rise to expressions such as *erân* (“being in love”) and *erasthēnai* (“falling in love”). The term ‘pye’ (嬖, “to love and favor”) translates the love—exchanged for favors—that Queen Jindeok feels for the men of the court. The term ‘chin’ (親)

expresses Dangun's desire for Habaek's daughter. Yet both are surpassed in intensity by the term 'ae' (愛), which is more accurately translated as "true love," stemming from emotional attachment. This is the feeling that the daughter of Taesu Kim has for Josin. He returned to the statue of Gwaneum and accused her of not having fulfilled his dream. As the days passed, he wept until, exhausted by his own feelings, he fell asleep, and the daughter of Taesu Kim appeared in a dream. Joyfully, she entered the door and, smiling and showing her beautiful teeth, said: "Ever since I beheld your face for a moment, I have loved it in my heart, and I have never forgotten it. But, pressed by my parents, I have been forced to become betrothed to another" (Iryeon 2016, 248). Beyond unions regulated by rigid social norms and domesticated by economic and political interests, there are others marked by pure feeling or instinctive, uncontrollable passion. Seodong's story also belongs to this context: he courts Seonhwa until she falls in love with him (Iryeon 2016, 142). Love is a spell, as perhaps also demonstrated by the magical jewel with which Myojong causes the king to fall in love with him to the point of not letting him go (Iryeon 2016, 119). As soon as the emperor confiscates the jewel, no one loves or trusts him anymore (Iryeon 2016, 119).

*"Josin came to the farm and he liked the daughter of Taesu Kim Heun, he was deeply attracted to her; he often went in front of the Gwaneum, secretly praying that his love could be crowned with success, but many years passed and she now had a partner"* (Iryeon 2016, 248).

Love and passion do not seem to be synonymous with happiness; rather, they can also be a source of torment or misfortune. Evidence of this can be seen in tales of unrequited love, exemplified by the sovereign who is madly infatuated with the beautiful Dohwarang: "the King learned of her beauty, invited her to court and began to desire her" (Iryeon 2016, 69). Further proof of this attitude is the misery to which Josin himself has been reduced. At last, wiping away her tears, the old wife spoke to her husband: "When I married you in the flower of my youth and beauty, you kissed my blushing cheeks and called them roses.

Then we had fine clothes to wear and good food to eat, and our married love deepened as long as the mellow wine flowed from our barrels. No one in this wide world will give us so much as a night's sojourn in a storeroom or a bottle of soy sauce. We have become a laughingstock" (Iryeon 2016, 250). As previously discussed, the gender difference in ancient Korean culture is fundamental and extends to all aspects of life. With its apparent fragility and weakness, the female body is understood as unarmed and helpless; it is a human body but lacks defenses. However, in the dialectic of eroticism, the woman is not merely a passive object of man's desire; rather, she is physiologically able to make men vulnerable to her beauty. Man has never been able to deny that sensuality can render even sovereigns, princes, and monks vulnerable to female beauty.

*"The woman entered the cell and the monk lowered the wick of the burning candle in the niche and chanted Buddhist prayers without stopping a moment in order to keep the temptation of a pretty woman out of his pure mind" (Iryeon 2016, 239).*

*"The King returned to the palace and shot an arrow into the harp case. When it was opened, he beheld his Queen in the loving embrace of a monk, both pierced by the arrow and dead" (Iryeon 2016, 51).*

*"As for me, I was too weak to resist her charming beauty, and turned her away for fear of falling in love with her and going to hell instead of heaven" (Iryeon 2016, 241).*

*"Lady Suro was a peerless beauty, and whenever she traveled, whether to mountains, lakes or seashore, she would be seized by gods and dragons because of her charms" (Iryeon 2016, 110).*

Another aspect of women's erotic nature is the rivalry in love—jealousy—which appears to theatrically characterize the female experience of eros. It is described as an intensity of feeling to such an extent that they may even be driven to kill for love: a love that intoxicates and

leads to violence and murder.

*“The two women were rivals (in beauty) and jealous of each other and Junjeong lured Nammo by inviting her to her house, offered her some liquor and got her drunk, then dragged her to a river and threw her in, killing her” (Iryeon 2016, 110).*

*“(The king loved her incredibly) [...] then the queen became jealous and planned to kill her” (Iryeon 2016, 244).*

In this way, jealous love becomes a perilous deviance, even leading to the murder of one’s rival. These narratives show that love, while celebrated as a force of union and transcendence, is also fraught with contradiction. It ignites devotion and joy, yet just as easily slips into sorrow, obsession, and destruction. Jealousy, in particular, emerges not merely as an emotional by-product of love, but as a defining axis of its drama—capable of transforming affection into violence. Erotic desire, when thwarted or rivaled, turns inward, becoming both a torment and a motive. In the end, love in these stories is not just a feeling, but a force—capable of elevating or unraveling the self, and shaping the destinies of those who fall under its spell.

Betrayal—or the disruption of marital trust—emerges as an almost inevitable narrative element in both historical records and literary traditions. Ancient Korean poetic narratives often encode tensions surrounding desire and conjugal disruption in indirect yet symbolically rich ways. Songs such as Hwangjo-ga (黃鳥歌), Haega (海歌), and Cheoyong-ga (處容歌) explore triangular relationships marked by the temporary unraveling—and eventual restoration—of marital order.

Among various interpretations, Hwangjo-ga has been read as King Yuri’s lament for his solitude following a failed romantic triangle involving two women, revealing both male vulnerability and female agency in early Goguryeo court life. In Haega, the abduction of the noblewoman by a sea deity triggers collective resistance, where the act of singing becomes a performative tool of moral enforcement. Similarly, in Cheoy-

ong-ga, the eponymous protagonist chooses not retaliation but dance and poetry to reclaim his violated household, prompting the demon's surrender and the restoration of harmony.

These narratives share a structural logic in which disorder—often instigated by divine or royal forces—does not lead to erotic indulgence or emotional collapse, but rather to the reaffirmation of normative values. Female virtue, male restraint, and the symbolic power of performance coalesce to restore social equilibrium. In this light, erotic deviance in early Korea appears less as an expression of personal passion and more as a threat to (or mechanism for reaffirming) cosmic and familial order.

## Conclusion

While fully acknowledging the methodological limitations of this research—chief among them the difficulty of reconstructing regional specificities and variations, and the fact that all surviving records are filtered through a male-centered perspective shaped during the Goryeo period, which likely embraced different cultural and social paradigms—this article has sought to shed light on key aspects of erotic discourse in Three Kingdoms Korea through close readings of selected passages from *Samguk yusa* and *Samguk sagi*. These narratives are far from being neutral records of desire; rather, they articulate a moral cartography that clearly demarcates the boundaries between normative and deviant behaviors. In doing so, they contribute to the construction of two distinct and asymmetrical models of sexuality: one masculine, heroic, and active; the other feminine, chaste, modest, and above all reproductively functional.

While male deviance is typically expressed through abstinence or excessive libido, the former is treated benignly, even valorized in monastic figures, whereas the latter—especially when embodied by kings—is consistently associated with political failure and moral collapse. The king's inability to restrain his sexual urges becomes a metaphor for a kingdom out of control, as pleasure supplants governance and the ruler's body mirrors the degeneration of his mandate. Likewise, the rejection of

masculine norms, particularly through effeminacy, is cast as a direct threat to the ideal of heroic virility. The case of King Hyegong, whose perceived non-masculinity is said to have contributed to political disarray, illustrates how gender nonconformity was framed not only as social deviance, but as a destabilizing political force—one that ultimately demanded repentance and moral correction.

On the other hand, female deviance is defined by a very different set of concerns. In a predominantly agricultural society marked by high mortality and continuous warfare, procreation was essential to the survival of the household and the state. Within this framework, infertility is not merely a biological misfortune—it becomes a form of sexual failure that strips a woman's erotic value of its economic and social utility. Infidelity, too, is portrayed as a distinctly feminine transgression. Unlike men—whose multiple sexual partnerships are tolerated, even normalized—women who violate sexual exclusivity face extreme punishment, including torture or execution by fire. Such asymmetries lay bare the deeply entrenched gender hierarchy in the regulation of desire.

The body—and its aesthetic value—is another crucial axis of this erotic discourse. While the sources celebrate beauty and physical vigor, they are equally unforgiving toward the grotesque or the malformed. The bodies of figures such as Taeseong or Ondal are mocked and marginalized, reminders that ancient Korean society was deeply invested in strict corporeal standards: only beautiful, symmetrical, and virtuous bodies were deemed worthy of narrative legitimacy. Yet even within the discourse of beauty, two divergent paradigms emerge. Male beauty is typically read as the external expression of internal moral or political virtue. Female beauty, by contrast, is associated with seduction, temptation, and danger. It is commodified, exchanged, and subjected to paternal control—yet it also becomes a weapon of agency. The female figure, though often depicted as the object of male desire, does not remain passive. She manipulates her own erotic capital, ensnares men, monks, and even spirits, and can become a disruptive force within the sexual order.

The sources even allow space for the *femme fatale*: the woman who kills out of jealousy, asserting erotic dominance by overturning the norms

of submission and modesty. In this theatrical inversion of roles, she ceases to be the victim and emerges as the executioner, transgressing both moral and gendered expectations.

Ultimately, these narratives do more than regulate behavior; they moralize sexuality, imbuing it with guilt, anxiety, and fear. Through the constant reiteration of dichotomies—male/female, active/passive, virtuous/deviant—the texts reinforce a binary sexual logic that leaves little room for ambiguity or fluidity. The result is an artificially rigid system, one that amplifies the distance between two sexual worlds that barely communicate, creating a structurally asymmetrical relationship between the sexes and a vision of eros profoundly shaped by moral, political, and gendered imperatives.

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# Seeing Silla through Besila in *The Kushnameh*<sup>\*</sup>:

## On Literary Interventions in the Historiography of Transcultural Silla

Jihyeong Lee

### Abstract

This article reconsiders the study of Silla’s interregional history with the Persian world, a field largely framed through archaeological finds from Gyeongju. While such approaches have been crucial for situating Silla within broad Silk Road networks, they often rely on an ambiguous category of “Sasanian Persian” and perpetuate the cognitive distance implicit in the enduring geographical label of *seoyeok* (lit. “western region”). As an additional avenue, this article turns to *The Kushnameh*, a twelfth-century Persian epic that contains extensive textual references to Besila—possibly a distant recollection of the long-vanished Korean kingdom, refracted through the imagined grandeur of the Sasanian Empire. Read not for factual verification but as a site where memory, imagination, and archival potential converge, *The Kushnameh* challenges positivist certainties in ancient Korean historiography and opens the field to interdisciplinary and multiperspective approaches that invite us to see the Persianate world beyond the lingering perception of the “other.”

### Keywords

Kushnameh, Silla-Persia Studies, Transcultural memory, Positivist historiography, New Historicism, Ḥakim Iranshāh ibn Abū’l-Khayr.

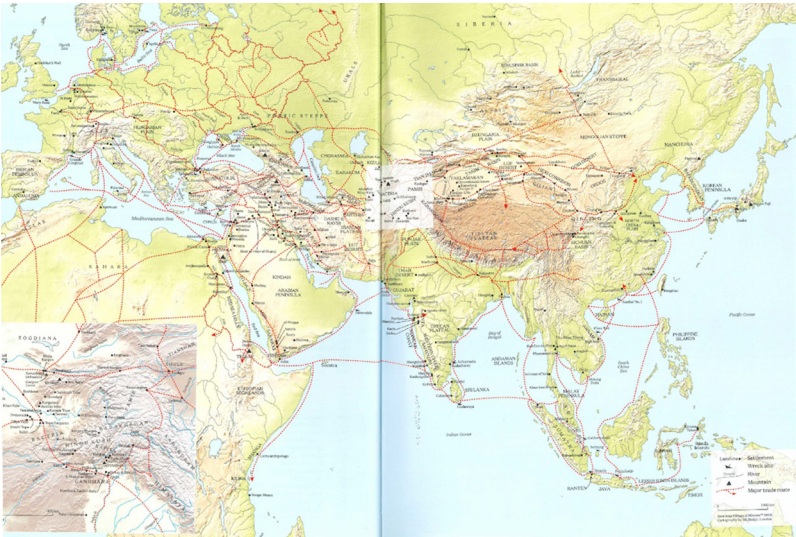
Jihyeong Lee is a lecturer in Korean art history at Freie Universität Berlin (Germany). (jihyeong.lee@fu-berlin.de)

<sup>\*</sup> In Persian, “کوشنامه”, transliterated variously as Kushnama, Kūshnāmah, Kūš-nāme, among others.

## Rethinking the Category of “Sasanian Persian” in Silla’s Transcultural History

The historical encounter of the Korean kingdom of Silla (57 BCE–935 CE) with Persian culture is among the most widely explored topics in ancient Korean interregional and transcultural history. This attention largely stems from the art historical and archaeological scholarship that has traced Silla’s presence within the vast cross-continental network, often conveniently termed the Silk Road, where goods, cultures, customs, and ideas flowed and circulated. Building on these studies, it is now widely accepted that by the eighth century at the latest Silla found itself as part of this intricate intercultural nexus, part of which linked its capital, Gyeongju, through the Tang (618–907) capital of Chang’an, to regions as distant as Baghdad and Constantinople (Fig. 1).

Extensive scholarship has produced a widely recognized catalogue raisonné of artifacts that attest to Silla’s interaction with the pre-Islamic Persian cultural sphere as early as the Three Kingdoms Period (57 BCE–



**Fig. 1. Map of routes on Silk Road**

Source: Whitfield 2019, 8–9.



**Fig. 2.** Excavation of Hwangnamdaechong Northern Mound, 1970s.

Source: Cultural Heritage Administration, accessed October 13, 2024. [https://www.cha.go.kr/cop/bbs/selectBoardArticle.do?nttId=82389&bbsId=BBSMSTR\\_1008](https://www.cha.go.kr/cop/bbs/selectBoardArticle.do?nttId=82389&bbsId=BBSMSTR_1008)

676 CE).<sup>1</sup> This chronology partially overlapped with that of the Sasanian dynasty (224–651), which has long served as a central point of reference in this established field of inquiry. The foundation of what may conveniently be termed “Silla–Persia studies” rests largely on the archaeological excavations of Gyeongju tomb sites, among which, for example, the excavation of Hwangnamdaechong in the 1970s (Fig. 2) stands as one of the most representative. These investigations provided the empirical basis for the dominant historiography and theoretical frameworks that continue to shape scholarly discussions of Silla’s transcontinental presence. The excavated objects—diverse in type, form, and material—have often been interpreted as bearing Persian influence. For example, the shape of a gilt–silver bottle dated to the later Sasanian dynasty served as a com-

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, see Gwon 1997; Lee 2016; Yim 2002; Jeong 2001a; Jeong 2001b; Ham 2008; Lee Hansang 2010; Lee Hee Soo 2009; Heo 2015; Hong 2021; Kim 2017.



**Fig. 3. Comparison**

(Left) Gilt-silver bottle, Sasanian dynasty (224-651), 6th-7th century, Miho Museum, Japan.  
Source: Miho Museum.

(Right) Glass bottle and cups from Hwangnamdaechong Southern Mound.  
Source: Cultural Heritage Administration, Korea.



**Fig. 4. Comparison**

(Left) Silver vessels, Sasanian dynasty (224-651), National Museum of Iran.  
Source: Kwon 2014.

(Right) Silver cup, 5th century, excavated from the North Mound of Hwangnamdaechong,  
National Museum of Korea.  
Source: National Museum of Korea.



**Fig. 5. Comparison**

(Left) Stucco wall panel, Iraq, 6th–7th century. Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, Inv. Nr. KtO 1084.

Source: Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin.

(Right) Decoration from the Stone with lion and peacock designs, Unified Silla (668–935), Gyeongju National Museum.

Source: Gyeongju National Museum.

parison point for a series of glass bottles and cups unearthed from the southern mound of Hwangnamdaechong (Fig. 3). Likewise, close parallels have been drawn between Sasanian silver vessels—such as one now housed in the National Museum of Iran, Tehran—and those excavated from the northern mound of Hwangnamdaechong, including an example currently in the National Museum of Korea (Fig. 4). Another case in point is the medallion design of a carved stone fragment, extensively studied by Kim Hongnam (2017) and now preserved in the Gyeongju National Museum, which has been juxtaposed with remains from the Persian cultural sphere—for instance, a stucco wall panel from Iraq, part of the Sasanian Empire until the Arab conquest of the seventh century (Fig. 5).

These kinds of visual comparisons have been taken as primary evidence of Silla–Persian interaction. This interpretive framework has become especially prominent in curatorial and exhibition contexts. A notable instance is the 2017 exhibition *Silla and Persia: A Common Memory*,



Fig. 6. Poster of the exhibition *Silla and Persia A Common Memory*, organized by the National Museum of Gyeongju and the National Museum of Iran, held at the National Museum of Iran, Tehran, November 4–December 15, 2017. Source: Gyeongju National Museum; National Museum of Iran.

jointly organized by the Gyeongju National Museum and the National Museum of Iran, and held in Tehran (Fig. 6), which explicitly foregrounded this theme of cultural entanglement.

Yet despite the seeming clarity with which “Persian” connections have been presented, the precise meaning of this designation remains far from straightforward. The application of the “Persian” label to Silla’s material remains often functions more as a conventional shorthand than as a rigorously defined category. This ambiguity is not entirely surprising, given the difficulty of delineating Persia itself as a coherent cultural system, linguistic community, or ethnic identity. When this already complex cultural entity is mapped onto artifacts discovered in the distant context of Silla, the interpretive challenges inevitably multiply.

In particular, talking about the Sasanian Empire assumes this complexity. It was not a monolithic polity but rather a dynamic formation that integrated diverse ethnicities, languages, religious traditions, and artistic



Fig. 7. Map of the Sasanian Empire

Source: World History Encyclopedia. “Sasanian Empire.” Last modified January 14, 2021. [https://www.worldhistory.org/Sasanian\\_Empire/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Sasanian_Empire/).

practices. Its cultural sphere absorbed elements from earlier Iranian traditions, while simultaneously inheriting legacies from the Parthians (247 BCE–224 CE). Moreover, it stood at a crossroads of multiple interregional currents: engaging with Rome and Byzantium to the west, as well as the Kushans and Hephthalites to the east (Fig. 7). These exchanges created a composite cultural fabric that permeated the Sasanian realm and continued to shape the cultural patterns of subsequent Islamic dynasties as well.

Consequently, to speak of the empire as a conveyor of “Persianness” to Silla risks oversimplification. Any cultural forms that traveled across such vast distances would likely have undergone processes of assimilation, fusion, and reinterpretation. By the time they reached Silla, these elements may have borne only a mediated or transformed relationship to their Sasanian prototypes. Thus, the designation of certain Silla artifacts as “Persian” points less to a stable cultural essence than to a complex, layered history of cross-continental interaction, adaptation, and reinterpretation.

This consideration requires critically reassessing the widespread



**Fig. 8. Gyerim-ro Jeweled Dagger, 5th–6th century.**

Gold inlaid with garnet and glass. L. 36 cm. National Treasure No. 635. Gyeongju National Museum.

Source: Gyeongju National Museum.



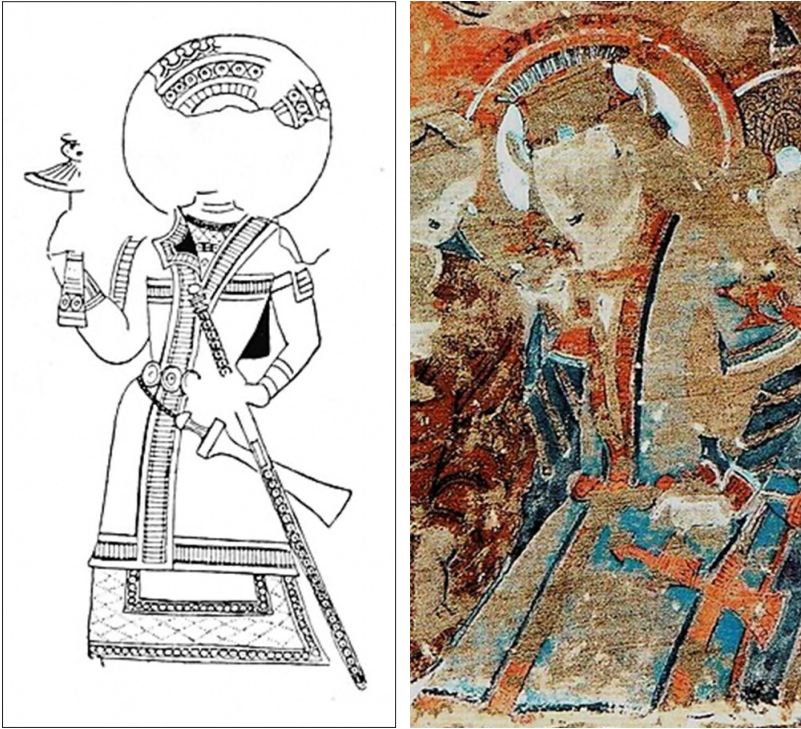
**Fig. 9. Pre-Scythian ceremonial dagger.**

Northeastern Bulgaria, ca. 8th century BCE.

Source: Topal 2024.

tendency to subsume diverse and heterogeneous artifacts under the single, and often undifferentiated, label of “Persian.” To illustrate this problem, I turn to a particularly well-known example: the jeweled dagger excavated in 1973 from the Gyerim-ro area of Gyeongju, specifically from royal tomb No. 14, attributed to King Michu (r. 262/264–284)(Fig. 8). Dated to the fifth or sixth century, this object has frequently been invoked as compelling evidence for Silla’s cultural ties with Sasanian Persia.

Yet the dagger’s markedly non-indigenous appearance has generated a wide range of interpretations, each situating the artifact within different cultural lineages. Its polychrome cloisonné inlay—glass and gar-

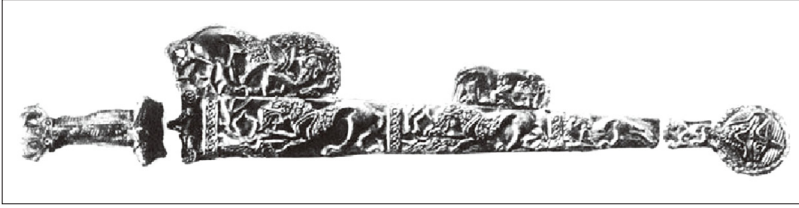


**Fig. 10. Comparison**

(Left) Tocharian Kumtura Caves (Right) Kizil Grottoes, Cave No. 69.

Source: Kang 2019.

net set in thin strips of gold—has been linked stylistically to pre-Scythian daggers from the Black Sea region (Gyeongju National Museum 2010) (Fig. 9). The spiral-patterned roundel has invited comparisons with Celtic decorative traditions (Yoshimizu 2002), while its meander motifs have been traced to Greco-Roman origins (Lee 2013). Additional parallels have been proposed with Central Asian artistic repertoires, such as the depiction of a man wearing a similar dagger on the ceiling of the entrance to Cave 69 at Kizil in Xinjiang (Commemorating Kazakhstan 2019) (Fig. 10). Further still, the suspension mounts have been interpreted as deriving from the nomadic Hephthalite Huns, who may have



**Fig. 11. Akinakes, dagger with two suspension mounts of the Hephthalites.**  
from the Solokha kurgan, ca. 4th century, Ukraine.

Source: Kageyama 2015.

played a key role not only in producing such objects but also in transmitting them across vast regions (Kageyama 2016) (Fig. 11).

Taken together, the Gyerim-ro dagger illustrates the broader problem already outlined: the inadequacy of ‘Persian’ as a categorical label. The object demonstrates rather the necessity of recognizing the complex trajectories through which artifacts traveled and the multiple cultural influences that became embedded in their forms. The recurrent use of “Persian” as a catch-all descriptor thus risks conflating a broad spectrum of heterogeneous, diasporic, and non-indigenous elements—each shaped by intricate entanglements of regional, temporal, and ethnic factors—in our scholarship. As such, the label often functions less as a marker of analytic precision than as a convenient umbrella term, one that risks obscuring, or even precluding, closer investigation into the specific affiliations, circulations, and transformations that defined an artifact’s individual history.

Further, the commonplace practice of grouping artifacts as Persian in Silla studies may be reconsidered in light of the more traditional historical notion of *seoyeok* 西域, literally meaning “Western Regions.” Although this term is often narrowly interpreted as corresponding to modern-day Xinjiang, in practice it encompassed a far wider expanse. Depending on context, *seoyeok* could include West and Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and, on occasion, even parts of Europe, which partly overlapped with what we now identify as the pre-Islamic Persian cultural sphere.

Rather than designating a fixed geographical entity, *seoyeok* in pre-modern East Asian texts conveyed a sense of cognitive and cultural distance, referring to peoples and regions perceived as lying beyond what might today be termed the East Asian cultural ecumene. The persistence of this category in modern-day scholarship—particularly within Silla studies—can be attributed not only to its frequent occurrence in historical sources foundational to our research but also to the difficulty of finding a precise contemporary equivalent that adequately conveys its semantic elasticity. Against this background, current Silla-Persia studies remain indebted to this premodern conceptual framework and are often conducted within the larger disciplinary orbit of what is called Silla-Seoyeok History (*Sillaseoyeoksa* 신라서역사). In this sense, the interpretive category of “Persian artifacts” continues to bear the associations of cultural alterity encapsulated in the term *seoyeok*—the “other” situated in a vaguely defined “beyond.”

I believe that this binary conceptual lens has profoundly shaped the methodologies and narratives of Silla-Persia studies. It is evident in the way the construction of visual typologies and genealogies of objects has become a central scholarly task, often with the explicit aim of discerning the allochthonous within the autochthonous—that is, classifying the “foreign” within ancient Korean material culture. This approach has, in turn, reinforced what may be described as a diagnostic mode of inquiry, one that seeks to provide punctuated and definitive answers to the questions of “what,” “when,” and “from where to where” in order to facilitate typological categorization. Within this framework, artifacts tend to be treated as discrete evidentiary units—isolated points on a map of intercultural exchange—rather than as participants in complex and ongoing processes of circulation, adaptation, and transformation, which might be more productively envisioned in terms of continuity and relationality. The label “Persian,” accordingly, has functioned as a convenient shorthand, designating any odd intervention into Silla’s material record, often without sufficient regard for the multiple trajectories such artifacts may have embodied.

## When Texts Become Proof

Another notable aspect of Silla-Persia studies is their pronounced focus on objects. This is largely a consequence of the scarcity of contemporaneous textual records that might otherwise serve as alternatives or complements. No extant accounts from the Korean Three Kingdoms period, nor from the era preceding the fall of the Sasanian Empire, provide direct evidence of contact between the two regions. Scholars have therefore had to rely on later sources which, though chronologically distant, are interpreted as offering indirect testimony for reconstructing the nature of such interactions. Korean textual references remain exceedingly scarce, whereas Middle Eastern writings—primarily Arabic and Persian texts from the ninth century onward—contain a comparatively richer set of some twenty-two references to Korea.<sup>2</sup>

In much of the earlier scholarship, these texts have been assigned a subordinate role, used mainly to corroborate conclusions readily drawn from studies of material culture. One of the most frequently cited examples is the *Book of Roads and Kingdoms* (*Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik*), written in Arabic by Ibn Khurdādhbih (820/825–913), a high-ranking Abbasid bureaucrat and geographer of Persian descent. Published in 846 and again in 885, the text contains a brief but striking reference to “al-Silla,” which has been interpreted as indicating Silla or as a more general designation for the Korean peninsula.

At the far end of China, beyond Qansu, there are many mountains and numerous kings, and there lies the land of Silla, abundant in gold. The Muslims who enter it settle there because of its pleasantness, and no one knows what lies beyond.

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<sup>2</sup> This count is based on the report by Hee-Soo Lee, published in Lee 2011, 12. Since the foundational essay “Arab Geographers on Korea” by Chung and Hourani (1938), many scholars have expanded the list of Middle Eastern accounts on Korea included in Lee’s text; see also Kim 2005 and Lee 2011.

Whoever among the Muslims reaches the land at the far end of China called Silla, where there is abundant gold, will settle there due to its pleasantness and will never leave.<sup>3</sup>

Ibn Khurdādhbih describes al-Silla as a distant, gold-abundant land situated at the far end of China—unknown yet paradisiacal. Variations of this description recur in numerous later Arabic and Persian sources, suggesting that his account helped shape a lasting perceptual image of Silla within the medieval Islamic world.

It is quite striking how consistently these Arabic passages have been presented across various studies of Korean history. They are almost invariably treated as evidence to reaffirm what archaeological findings already suggest—or fail to suggest; for example, that Silla was rich in gold, as illustrated by the celebrated corpus of excavated burial goods such as the gold filigree earrings now housed in the British Museum (Fig. 12). This tendency reflects a broader pattern in the treatment of other relevant Middle Eastern texts. Far less attention, however, has been given to their semantic and rhetorical dimensions, the political or religious affiliations of their authors, their intended audiences, or the wider cultural meanings these descriptions might convey. Even in the case of Ibn Khurdādhbih—whose career, intellectual milieu, and writings are comparatively well documented by Islamic Studies (e.g., Bosworth 1997)—scholars have rarely explored the interpretive possibilities his work affords.

In my view, this approach reflects two persistent tendencies in the field. First, it shows the limited integration of non-Korean perspectives and historiographical traditions into the study of Silla's interregional history, thereby curtailing opportunities for international scholarly exchange and the use of sources of diverse origins. Second, it reveals the rigid disciplinary mindset that privileges tangible archaeological and material ev-

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<sup>3</sup> This reference is from the 1889 edition of *Kitab al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik* by Ibn Khurdadhbih as cited in Kim 2005, 81–82, 261. See also Ibn Khurdadhbih 1889, 70 and 170.



**Fig. 12. Gold filigree earrings, 5th–6th century, Silla Kingdom, Korea.**

British Museum, Registration No. 1938,0524.245.a–b.

Source: The Trustees of the British Museum.

idence, while relegating literary sources to a secondary role at best. Such narrowing of scope constrains the interpretive possibilities of Silla studies and inhibits the development of more multi-perspectival understandings of Silla’s place within broader Eurasian contexts.

### **Silla and/as Besila in *The Kushnameh***

In light of these considerations, *The Kushnameh* (lit. “The Story of Kush”) calls for renewed attention as a historical source that may open new avenues for scholarship within Silla–Persia studies. *The Kushnameh*

is a Persian epic that compiles orally transmitted tales of legendary Iranian history. Composed in the early twelfth century, most commonly dated between 1108 and 1110 CE, it is attributed to Ḥakim Iranshān ibn Abū'l-Khayr, a Persian poet active during the Seljuq Empire (1037-1194). The work now survives in a single fourteenth-century manuscript preserved in the British Library (Or. 2780).

From the late twentieth century onward, the epic underwent a process of rediscovery. In 1998, the Iranian scholar Jalāl Matīnī published a critical edition of this manuscript, making the text widely accessible to Iranian academia (Īrānshāh ibn Abī al-Khayr 1998). A decade later, Daryoosh Akbarzadeh, then curator of the East Asia Department at the National Museum of Iran, advanced the hypothesis that the epic's spatial setting of "Besila" (also "Basilla") refers to the Korean kingdom of Silla (Akbarzadeh 2008). This theory subsequently brought *The Kushnameh* into Korean scholarly debates, particularly through the extensive and rich research of Lee Hee-Soo, a specialist in Middle Eastern studies.<sup>4</sup>

According to Matīnī's edition (Īrānshān ibn Abī al-Khayr 1998), *The Kushnameh* comprises 10,129 couplets, of which a significant portion—3,914 couplets (Nos. 2011-5925)—is set in the city of Besila. In this context, Lee Hee-Soo (2010) has suggested that the name "Besila" may derive either from the preposition *ba*-combined with "Sīlā," or from the adjective *beh* (lit. "good" or "better") combined with "Sīlā," both involving phonological shifts.<sup>5</sup> While the precise relationship between Besila and Silla remains debated, there appears to be a broad scholarly consensus that the two are, in some manner, connected.

To understand *The Kushnameh*'s literary framework, it is important to recall its indebtedness to Abū'l-Qāsem Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (lit.

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<sup>4</sup> Hee Soo Lee stands as the leading authority on *Kushnameh* studies in both Korean and international academia, having pioneered much of the foundational research that informs the present article. See for instance, Lee 2010; Lee 2012; and Lee 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Lee 2018, 17-19. M. B. Vosoughi insists that the word *Silā* in the Islamic sources refers to the Peninsula of Korea, and the word *Basillā* refers to the Island of Korea. See Vosoughi 2014, 47-72. Hee Soo Lee also discussed this in Lee 2018, 17-19.

*The Book of Kings*), completed in the late tenth or early eleventh century. To offer a necessarily compressed introduction to this vast epic, *The Shahnameh* recounts the legendary history of Iran through the reigns of fifty monarchs, culminating in the fall of the Sasanian Empire.<sup>6</sup> Building upon this model, *The Kushnameh* develops the story of King Abtin—only briefly mentioned by Ferdowsi—expanding it into an elaborate narrative. Oppressed by the Arab tyrant Zakhāk, Abtin seeks refuge with King Behak of Machīn.<sup>7</sup> From there, he is introduced to Tayhur, ruler of Besila, where he ultimately finds sanctuary.

In this context, *The Kushnameh* describes Besila in extraordinary detail, as is exemplified by the following passages:

“On the fifth day he [Abtin] reached the city of Besila. No one has seen anything upon the earth like Besila. Two leagues wide and just as long, filled with gardens, the gardens filled with jasmine. It was the throne of Tayhur, not a city but a heaven filled with houris. Every lane had fountains and running streams lined with cypresses. Its streets and markets were adorned, its walls built of stones laid one upon the other so neatly, nothing could fit in the cracks. Its height was so great that a hawk could not reach the top in a day. The moat encircling the city wall was so vast that the Red Sea possessed but a portion of it. Water flowed through it, and ships—more than a hundred.

When the city’s gatekeeper opened the gate, it was as if heaven had sent a portion of itself. Such a fragrance wafted from that city that one’s heart and mind would be lost. The steeds strutted spiritedly ahead and they cast gems before Abtin. Every lane and district was filled with delights, decked with Chinese embroideries. A sweet-sounding musician played on every rooftop, the whole city crying out in songs and tunes. This was

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on the connection between *The Kushnameh* and *The Shahnameh*, see Iranshah ibn Abu’l-Khayr. 2022, 7-26.

<sup>7</sup> In many Arabic and Persian geographical texts, the term “China and Machin” is often understood to refer to “China and its neighboring regions.” See Iranshah ibn Abu’l-Khayr 2022, 71, fn. 11.

how the fortunate king brought Abtin to his throne.

In the elder son's soaring palace, the crowned king Abtin alighted. They decorated that heavenly abode as God adorns heaven: everywhere was gold upon lapis lazuli, the seats encrusted with rubies and yellow garnets."

(Īrānshāh ibn Abī al-Khayr 1998, couplets 2242-2260)

As a locus where Persian literary imagination intertwines with Silla, Besila is envisioned as a paradisiacal kingdom: abundant in gold, blessed with a favorable climate, and inhabited by beautiful people. Strikingly, this image resonates with other Middle Eastern references to Silla that portray the country as a hidden and mysterious land of wealth and ideal living conditions, as exemplified in Ibn Khurdādhbih's account. Yet *The Kushnameh* is distinctive in the exceptional vividness and extent of its description, unparalleled by any other Middle Eastern text. Its elaborate depictions of Besila's urban architecture, palatial spaces, natural environment, and social life far exceed the level of detail found in any other known source.

It should also be noted that the surviving manuscript contains eleven illustrations, though these have not yet been systematically studied. Akbarzadeh (2022, 163) briefly introduces one miniature dated to the 14th-15th century, interpreting it as a scene of Abtin and his retinue entering Besila depicted in Timurid miniature style. This image, however, requires closer examination for a precise reading and interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, *The Kushnameh* further distinguishes itself from other accounts by presenting Besila not only as a paradisiacal land but also as a trusted political ally of Iran. By integrating Silla into a legendary narrative framework, the epic reimagines the historical trajectory of late antiq-

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<sup>8</sup> My own attempt to consult all of the manuscript's illustrations at the British Library was unsuccessful, as the manuscript is not currently available after the cyber-attack at the library in 2023. It is to be hoped that the remaining unpublished illustrations will be made accessible and reported in scholarship in the near future.

uity, situating Besila within an alternative, counterfactual scenario of the Arab conquest of Sasanian Persia in the seventh century. This reconfiguration culminates in the marriage between the Persian prince Abtin and Besila's princess Fararang, whose union gives birth to Faridun, one of the most prominent kings and cultural heroes of the Iranian epic tradition. Faridun eventually restores the Zoroastrian empire by overthrowing the tyrannical Arab ruler Zahhak, thereby inverting the historical outcome of the Arab conquests.

Through this genealogical fiction, *The Kushnameh* symbolically locates the ancestral homeland of Iran's epic savior in Besila, transforming the distant eastern kingdom into a narrative site of resistance and resilience. In this way, paradisiacal Besila is recast as the generative source of Iran's cultural renewal under the weight of foreign domination.<sup>9</sup>

Composed under Turkic Seljuq rule in the twelfth century, *The Kushnameh* is best understood as a retrospective reimagining of the Arab conquests and the subsequent collapse of the Sasanian Empire in the seventh century. Its considerable temporal distance from the actual events, together with its deliberately mythical register, sets it apart from other accounts of Silla that are regarded as "historical"—that is, factual, verifiable, and grounded in evidence. These very qualities of fictionality and retrospection have contributed to the text's marginalization in scholarship. Previous studies of Silla's history have often approached it in a narrowly extractive manner, concerned chiefly with evaluating its degree of "historical reliability."

Much like Ibn Khurdādhbih's account, *The Kushnameh* has thus been consulted in a largely passive way: valued only insofar as it might corroborate preexisting knowledge, rather than engaged on its own terms as a work of Persian literary imagination since its first appearance in Korean historical discourse. One prominent example of such efforts to "historicize" the text is the attempt to identify an actual prototype for Abtin.

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<sup>9</sup> My understanding of *The Kushnameh's* plot is based on the English translation in Iranshah ibn Abū'l-Khayr 2022.

Scholars have pointed to possible parallels with the flight of Peroz III (636–c.678), son of the last Sasanian king Yazdegerd III (624–651), who sought refuge at the Tang court during the reign of Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (628–683) after the Arab conquest of 651 (Comparati 2024). Read in this light, Abtin’s journey from Machin to Besila has been interpreted as a literary recasting of the historical episode, in which the fantastical realm of Besila offers refuge to royal exiles after China’s withdrawal of support for the Sasanians, until their hoped-for restoration of the homeland—thereby casting Abtin as a fictionalized counterpart to Peroz III (Lee 2018).

Such endeavors are undoubtedly meaningful and intellectually rewarding. Yet they also reveal how deeply our reading of *The Kushnameh* remains bound to positivist historiography and its promise of certainty. Scrutinizing the text’s factual accuracy is, of course, important—if only to satisfy our curiosity about its correspondence with reality beyond the text. Yet such an approach ultimately reinforces the entrenched assumption that history—unlike, or in contrast to, literature—must necessarily mirror an external reality, a conviction that has become increasingly difficult to sustain, particularly if we acknowledge the postmodern critique that has sought to dismantle the rigid boundary between faction and fiction, within the discipline of history. Why, then, should we expect this fantastical medieval Persian epic “to be an exact mirror or have a one-to-one relationship with objective reality” (Pasco 2004, 374).

It might be useful to pre-empt possible misreadings of the argument developed here. At this present stage—when the material, textual, and contextual sources on Silla–Persia relations remain markedly limited—it is clear that *The Kushnameh* cannot be mobilized to expand or sharpen our understanding of “actual” relations between Silla and the Persian world.<sup>10</sup> To be clear, I am not proposing that, for example, Silla

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<sup>10</sup> Interpretations that rely on literary sources to advance speculative factual claims have long faced criticism, a concern fully acknowledged in the present study. Such claims often center on the Cheoyong tale in the *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms), particularly within what is now termed “Silla–Seoyeok history.” Readings that take the tale as evidence for a Muslim

and Persia possessed any form of political closeness resembling what the narrative of *The Kushnameh* sets forth. Nor do I intend to imply that the text offers evidence for any bidirectional encounter between the Korean peninsula and the Seljuk world through concrete, verifiable contact.

My point, rather, is that *The Kushnameh* provides an opportunity to test how the disciplinary boundary of history might be extended when literary intervention is allowed to operate beyond the criterion of correspondence to “facts.” In this sense, not only the historical elements embedded within the literary text, but also the historicity of its fictional dimension, may be recognized as deserving a status parallel to the forms of scholarly attention that currently prevail.

Instead of limiting our inquiry to verifying accuracy or exposing fabrication, we might ask how legend, myth, and fiction functioned as constitutive elements within medieval and later Persian historiography. In this light, the significance of *The Kushnameh* for Korean history emerges not simply in its factual claims but in the way it incorporates Silla into the symbolic recollections of the Sasanian Empire. The literary image of Besila, transmitted through subsequent traditions as a vehicle of cultural memory, thus offers new insight into how Silla was imagined and remembered beyond its borders. This perspective allows *The Kushnameh* to illuminate the “states of mind, conscious and unconscious assumptions, attitudes, opinions, prejudices, and emotions of the people that lived then” (Pasco 2004, 373) in relation to the Korean kingdom—as a locus of historical reality and imagined geography alike—while at the same time challenging the object-centered, Korea-focused historiography that has long dominated studies of Silla’s interregional connections—where Persia has too often been reduced to a vaguely defined “western region.”

Acknowledging this perspective opens the way for history and literary criticism to collaborate in Silla studies toward shared intellectual goals. As Wiener notes, “historical scholarship can profit from adopting

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 community settled in Silla—common across literary studies, history, musicology, and folklore—risk conflating imaginative projection with historical fact. For a study adopting this critical stance, see Lim 2022.



Fig. 13. A Depiction Potentially Interpretable as either Abtin's Arrival in Besila or Taihur Riding in Procession.

Illustration from *The Kushnameh*, British Library Manuscript Or. 2780 (f. 202v), dated 1108–11 or 1397–1398, following the reading by Daryoosh Akbarzadeh.

Source: The British Library Archive. <https://www.imagesonline.bl.uk/asset/1861/>

literary practices—such as tolerance of complexity and contradiction in one’s sources, a readiness to put off closure, and a greater sensitivity to the workings of imagination, to the ‘fantasy’ dimensions of human experience” (Wiener 1998, 620). Ultimately, this mode of inquiry requires a genuinely interdisciplinary platform, where historians, literary scholars, and specialists in area studies and material culture engage in sustained dialogue across fields.

### **Imagined Besilla, Remembered Silla: *The Kushnameh* and Diachronic Zoroastrian Inflections in Persian Visual and Literary Traditions**

The purpose of this article is to raise a critical question concerning dominant patterns in the historiography of Silla-Persia relations within trans-cultural Korean history. Rather than advancing definitive historical claims, it argues for the heuristic value of allowing literary and imaginary materials to participate in historical inquiry, with the aim of broadening the scope of research to include sources that are known, overlooked, or yet to be examined.

Given the limits of space, I introduce a single example that has received little attention in Korean historical scholarship in order to illustrate how *The Kushnameh* might be foregrounded in the manner suggested here. The material appears in a brief study by Akbarzadeh (2022), who reproduces an image (Fig. 14) preserved in the National Archives of Iran that bears particular relevance to the discussion.

The illustration belongs to a lithographic edition published in Tehran in 1904 by Ḥājji Muḥammad Nāṣir Khānsārī, based on the widely transmitted *Ajāʿib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharāʿib al-mawjūdāt* (Wonders of Creation and Oddities of Existence),<sup>11</sup> preserved in multiple copies span-

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<sup>11</sup> One of the earliest introductions of the Arabic text of this source to a Western scholarly audience was produced by Heinrich Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (1808–1899) in mid-nineteenth-century Germany. His edition, issued in two separate parts, is now available online; see Qazwīnī 1848 and



**Fig. 14. A Man of Silla and White Falcons**

From the lithographic edition published in Tehran in 1904 by Ḥājji Muḥammad Nāṣir Khānsārī, based on *Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharā'ib al-mawjūdāt* and illustrated by Abbās-Ali Tafreshī.

Source: Reproduced from Akbarzadeh (2022), after the original held by the National Archives of Iran.

ning several centuries. Composed in the thirteenth century by Zakariyyā' ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Qazwīnī (c. 1202-1283)— a cosmographer writing in both Arabic and Persian and serving as qāḍī in Wāsiṭ and Ḥilla during the reign of the last Abbasid caliph, al-Musta'ṣim (r. 1241-58) (Smithsonian Institution 2025)— the text functioned as an authoritative exemplar of medieval Persian imaginative geography and cosmography. The lithographic version prepared by Khānsārī was illustrated by Abbās-Ali Tafreshī, about whom virtually nothing beyond his name is

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Qazwīnī 1849.

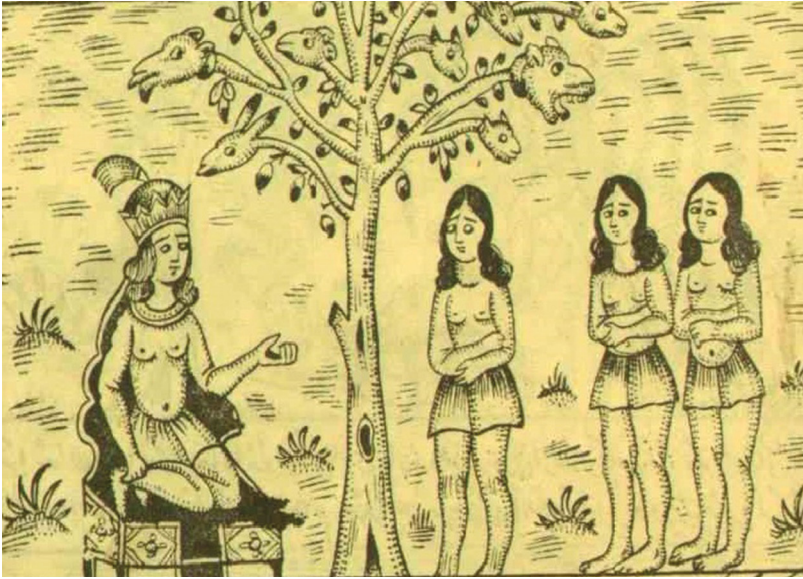
known (Akbarzadeh 2022, 164).

In visually accompanying the text, Tafreshī produced a striking representation of the people associated with the conventional toponym *Silla*: a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and holding a long firearm, while four birds—identified as falcons and hawks—occupy the compositional center in a disproportionately dominant scale (cf. Akbarzadeh 2022, 166). Such an image feels puzzling when presented as a depiction of a man of *Silla*, and prevailing scholarly habits would readily emphasize the absence of correspondence to Korean attire or the irrelevance of the motifs to the country. Yet a more productive approach is to ask what interpretive possibilities arise from this visual incongruity and how its fictive features illuminate the imagined status of “*Silla*” in a twentieth-century source.

Akbarzadeh proposes that the motif of falcons or hawks draws upon medieval Persian literary and visual conventions and possibly upon pre-Islamic Zoroastrian symbolism in which such birds signified auspiciousness, divinity, and nobleness (2022, 167–168). He further observes that the figure’s European-style clothing may have conveyed connotations of refinement or elite status within Qājār-period visual culture (1789–1925) (2022, 169). This stands in contrast in Khānsārī’s edition to depictions of neighboring regions such as Japan—designated by the traditional toponym “*Vāq vāq*”<sup>12</sup>—whose inhabitants, along with those representing South Asian territories, appear half-naked and thereby implicitly aligned with visual codes of primitivism or civilizational inferiority (Fig. 15 and Fig. 16).

Interpreting the aristocratic coding of the *Silla* figure together with the pronounced Zoroastrian motifs in this otherwise unexpected twentieth-century lithograph becomes most coherent when considered in relation to the depiction of “*Besilla*” in *The Kushnameh*, as it is the only known textual source to explicitly formulate such an association. Reading *The Kushnameh* alongside Tafreshī’s image suggests that the literary

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<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of toponyms associated with Japan in classical Persian sources, see Akbarzadeh 2015.



**Fig. 15. People from the Island Vāq vāq**

Source: Reproduced from Akbarzadeh (2022), after the original held by the National Archives of Iran.

imagining of Besilla continued to circulate into the early twentieth century within Persian cultural memory, likely intertwined with the enduring significance of the seventh-century Arab invasion as a “critical event” (Veena Das 1995) that remains formative well into modern Iranian identity and historical consciousness (Fozi 2015, 12).

A diachronically recurring Zoroastrian inflection attached to Silla endowed the imagined land of Besilla with a form of historical presence in Persian collective memory. Attending to this phenomenon, I propose, offers a productive point of entry into interregional and transcultural discussions of Silla-Persia relations—not necessarily as evidence of empirical historical contact, but as evidence of historical imagination.

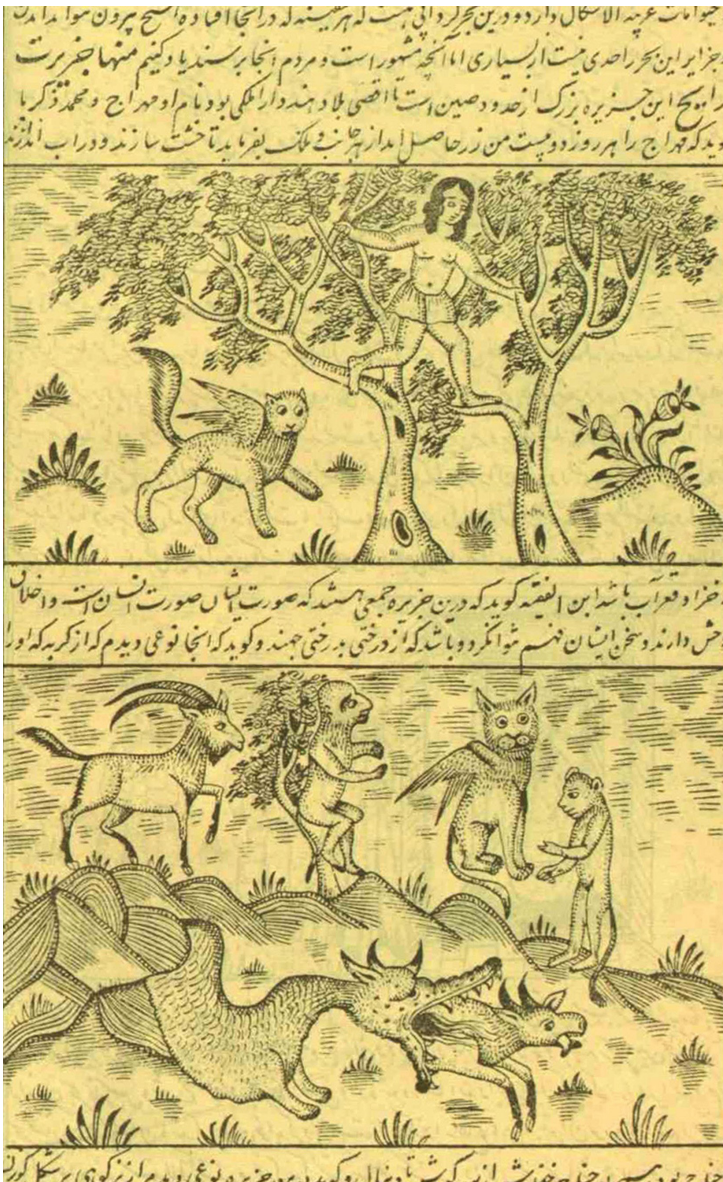


Fig. 16. People of South Asian territories

Source: Reproduced from Akbarzadeh (2022), after the original held by the National Archives of Iran.

## Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has sought to problematize the category of “Persian” in the study of Silla’s material culture and to reframe the terms of inquiry through which Silla–Persia connections have traditionally been understood. By tracing how artifacts have been labeled “Persian,” how the conceptual legacy of *seoyeok* shaped those designations, and how textual sources like Ibn Khurdādhbih’s *Book of Roads and Kingdoms* and *The Kushnameh* have been mobilized—or marginalized—within scholarship, it becomes clear that the prevailing frameworks of Silla–Persia studies are at once both productive and limiting. They have enabled the recognition of Silla as an actor in expansive trans–Eurasian networks, yet they have also risked reducing complex cultural entanglements to typological categorization.

Attending to *The Kushnameh* as “literature as historical archive”<sup>13</sup> highlights the potential of approaching Silla’s intercultural history not solely through positivist confirmation but through an interdisciplinary method attuned to imagination, memory, and the porous boundaries between fact and fiction. Such a perspective encourages us to see Silla’s place in Eurasia not as a series of fixed exchanges between discrete cultural units but as a long unfolding of circulation, reinterpretation, and symbolic reconfiguration across centuries.

Ultimately, interpreting Silla through the lens of Besila in *The Kushnameh* opens a site of intersection: a space where Persia and Silla converge, where history and literature meet, and where fact and fiction intertwine. At this interdisciplinary and interregional crossroads, we gain not only a deeper understanding of *The Kushnameh* but also a renewed awareness of the textuality of our own historiography. It is here that the study of *The Kushnameh* may find its most vital contribution: reframing the connectivity of Silla–Persia relations from a fresh perspective.

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<sup>13</sup> The expression is borrowed directly from the title of the article Pasco 2004.

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# Pointed Cusped Arch\*: Islamic Architectural Element of the Goryeo Dynasty\*\*

In-Sung Kim HAN

## Abstract

This paper explores the influx and localization of Islamic cultural elements into medieval Korea through the architectural style of the cusped arch, which emerged during the Goryeo Dynasty. ‘Pointed cusped arch’ or simply ‘cusped arch’ referred to here is a polylobed arch with a pointed apex, a style that Korean art historians have long attributed to Islamic influences, labeling it as Arabic or Persian style. While the Song Dynasty, Goryeo’s primary diplomatic and trade partner, has traditionally been attributed to the introduction of this style, this paper demonstrates, through literature and material cultural evidence, that the Liao, then a dominant force in East Asia, actually served as an agent of cultural transmission. Furthermore, by exploring the Islamic architecture of northern India and Afghanistan, where the Ghaznavids, a major trading partner of the Liao Dynasty, were located, this paper traces the trajectory of the transmission of this Indo-Islamic architectural style to Goryeo. It confirms that the cusped arch style originated in Indian Islamic architecture, not in the architecture of Arab or Persian Islamic regions, as commonly presumed. This allows for a more precise conceptualization of the term “Islam,” previously used vaguely, within the context of the contemporary geopolitical landscape, and broadens the horizon of Korean medieval art.

## Keywords

Goryeo, Khitan Liao, the Ghaznavids, Islam, Hyeonmyo Pagoda of State Preceptor Jigwang, Arch (cusped arch, pointed arch, corbel arch).

In-Sung Kim HAN is a Research Associate at SOAS, University of London.  
(iskim.han@gmail.com)

\* This term can be translated into Korean as ‘첨정다엽(尖頂多葉)형 아치’.

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## Introduction: The Research Issue

The subject of contact between the Korean Peninsula and the Islamic world has long remained largely unfamiliar to most, except a few specialists (Kim Du-jong 1961; Yoon 1984; Go 1983; Jeong 1992, 2013). While prominent historians, including art historians, have suggested various connections between these two cultures (Jin 1999), the lack of in-depth follow-up studies has resulted in little impact. In an increasingly globalized world, however, Korea has had to engage with geopolitical developments surrounding the Islamic world, which has led to a shift in this academic climate and a surge in research output. It is now widely accepted that the Korean Peninsula has long been exposed to the peoples and cultures of the Islamic world. In particular, many Muslims migrated to the peninsula during the Goryeo period under Mongol rule (c. 1270–1356), and lived alongside the local people until the early Joseon Dynasty.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, the Korean Peninsula was by no means the “Land of the Morning Calm,” as often misunderstood previously.

In addressing the topic of contact between these two different cultures, this paper examines examples of material culture from the Goryeo Dynasty to explore the influx and localization of Islamic cultural elements into Korea. To date, I have uncovered and presented numerous examples of this in various aspects of Korean material culture, such as vessel shapes, decorative motifs, and artifacts (Kim 2025). These cases can be broadly divided into two categories, depending on whether they allow us to identify, or at least infer, the trajectory of interaction between the two cultures. That is, while it is difficult to determine the route and process by which Islamic cultural elements, such as vessel shapes or decora-

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<sup>1</sup> Muslims entered the Korean Peninsula during the late Goryeo Dynasty, actively participating in various social activities and living alongside the local population while maintaining their religious and cultural identity. In 1427, King Sejong issued an edict requiring Muslims living on the Korean Peninsula to abandon all their cultural expressions and fully assimilate into Joseon culture. No records of Muslims living in Joseon after this date remain. See the article of April 4 (9th year of King Sejong’s reign) in the *Annals of King Sejong*.

tive motifs, entered the Peninsula, in some cases it is possible to trace the route of their introduction and the agents that facilitated such movements.

As a case study to understand the trajectory of Islamic cultural inflow into Korean culture, this paper examines the architectural decoration of the ‘pointed cusped arch,’ a type of polylobed arch with a pointed apex (abbreviated as ‘cusped arch’ hereafter). The first instance of a cusped arch is shown in the Hyeonmyo Pagoda (or Stupa) of State Preceptor Jigwang in 1085. As will be discussed later, at least two other examples of this feature have been identified, both dating to the final stage of the Goryeo Dynasty. There appear to be no further examples of this style in the mid- and post-Goryeo period. As the absence of such examples from the mid-Goryeo period is highly likely due to the lack of surviving Goryeo relics, it would be reasonable to argue that this architectural style is characteristic of its era. The Pagoda is often cited as an example of the internationality of Goryeo architecture, both in its structure and decoration. Particularly the cusped arches that adorn the Pagoda’s body part are considered to have been influenced by Islamic architecture, leading Korean art historians to refer to them as ‘ornamental windows of Persian style (Ko Yu-seop)’ or ‘Arabian-style arches (Ahn Hwi-Joon)’ (Lee 1985, 43–46, 60–71).

The cusped arches of the Pagoda are one of the very rare instances in Korean culture where Islamic artistic elements have been academically recognized. The discovery of an Islamic artistic element in Korea is a significant finding that can vastly broaden the horizon of Korean medieval arts. Nonetheless, research on Islamic art and architecture related to this pagoda, particularly regional characteristics and its historical changes, is severely lacking. As Islam spread across Eurasia during this period, from the West of China to Andalusia in Spain, Islamic arts and architecture underwent diverse regional variations which cannot be explained away by single terms like ‘Arab’ or ‘Persian.’

Taking these points into account, this paper aims to fill the gaps in existing research and explore the following questions: 1) If the artistic expression in the Pagoda reflects Islamic architectural style, through

what channels did it enter Goryeo; 2) who or what facilitated its influx? ; and 3) If it is Islamic, what kind of Islam are we referring to? Further to identifying the conduits of the artistic transmission, this study will help define the term ‘Islam’ within a more specific temporal and spatial context, thereby contributing to a more concrete reconstruction of the medieval world to which Goryeo belonged.

## 1. Cusped Arches of Goryeo

As the first and foremost example of cusped arch, the Hyeonmyo Pagoda of State Preceptor Jigwang (Fig. 1) is a Buddhist shrine to commemorate the life of monk Haerin (海麟 984–1070), who served as the royal preceptor (Wangsa) before holding the state preceptor (Guksa), the highest Buddhist rank of the period, during the reign of King Munjong (r. 1046–1083). Originally located at the Beopcheon Temple site in Wonju, Gangwon Province, it was disassembled and taken to Japan, then returned to Korea before moving to various places (Park Jiyoung 2018, 166). After a lengthy conservation process at the National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage due to its structural fragility since 2016 (Shin and Jo 2015; Jo 2015), the Pagoda was finally returned to its original location in Wonju in 2024.

The stone Pagoda was completed in 1085 (2nd year of King Seonjong of Goryeo), fifteen years after the monk’s passing. This is one of the earliest surviving examples of a square-based Pagoda, in an era when the octagonal base was in fashion. Although lost during the Japanese occupation period, the Pagoda’s body part contained the monk’s cremated remains as a relic within it (Hong 2015, 80–92). Haerin, the object of worship in the Pagoda, was from a powerful Wonju family. His rise to prominence as a central figure in East Asian Yogacara (法相宗)(Nam 2009) was as much due to his renowned scholarship as to the support of the Inju Lee clan, a prominent clan of the time (Shin 2005, 259–296). Lee Jayeon (李子淵), the head of the Lee clan, sent his son Sohyun (韶顯) to Haerin to become a monk (Lee 1995; Hong 2015, 93–96). Naturally, his funeral was held with solemnity and reverence befitting a person of the highest

social ranking. The epitaph accompanying the Pagoda at the same site records that, by royal decree, the funeral procession received full financial support from Wonju Granary and Storehouse (原州倉) (Lee 1995).

In keeping with such high patronage, the Pagoda demonstrates the mature and refined artistic achievements of Goryeo stonemasons and artisans in many aspects. Its square-shaped core stone forms a perfect symmetry along the North-South and East-West axes, while the corners were decorated in bamboo shapes. The entire surface of the Pagoda is densely covered with Buddhist symbols, various decorative motifs, and narrative scenes (Park Jiyoung 2018). In particular, on one side of the pedestal are two narrative scenes, each depicting two people carrying a



**Fig. 1. Hyeonmyo Pagoda of State Preceptor Jigwang.**

Originally located at the Beopcheon Temple site in Wonju, Gangwon Province, Korea; built in 1085 (the 2nd year of King Seonjong of the Goryeo dynasty), Goryeo period.



Fig. 2. Core stone, detail of Fig 1.



Fig. 3. Detail of Fig. 2.

Two cusped arches (three-lobed arches with a pointed apex) on the side of the core stone.

palanquin with a sarira casket in it, which seems to be a reenactment of the funeral of State Preceptor Jigwang.

As the main point to discuss, the core stone is adorned with cusped arches alongside hanging jewels, beads and flowers. The north and south side of the stone have seven-lobed niches, with a door ornament placed in the centre (Fig. 2). The east and west side each have two ‘windows’ and are surrounded by baluster railing. Each ‘window’ has two three-lobed arches with a pointed apex with hanging jewels within the arch. Two bees and butterflies with splendid wings are placed inside the window (Fig. 3).

Before getting into the main topic, let us first explain the basic concepts that will be discussed in this paper, especially the types of arches and the definition of a ‘cusped arch.’

## 2. Concept and types of Arches

As Hamlin succinctly put it, all architecture is the result of “a struggle between the force of gravity pulling things down, and the strength of materials and the way they are used holding things up (Hamlin 1953, 12).” Over the long evolution of architecture, four fundamental principles have been discovered that allow the protected space below and the surrounding wall openings to be safely covered by a roof, floor, or wall above. These principles are commonly referred to as post-lintel construction, corbel or cantilever construction, arch and vault construction, and truss construction (Fig. 4) (Hamlin 1953, 13).

Among them, arches and vaults appear to have originated in Mesopotamia and began to be widely used around the 4th millennium BCE. From the earliest arch structures, the arch refers to any covering over of an open space below with small units of wedge-shaped material (*voussoirs*) placed with radiating joints (Sturgis 1901, 100-122). While a semicircular form is typical of arches, a ‘flat (Jack) arch’ with a completely flat underside (*intrados*) is also possible only if the joints of the component parts radiate (Hamlin 1953, 13-14). The voussoir at the top,

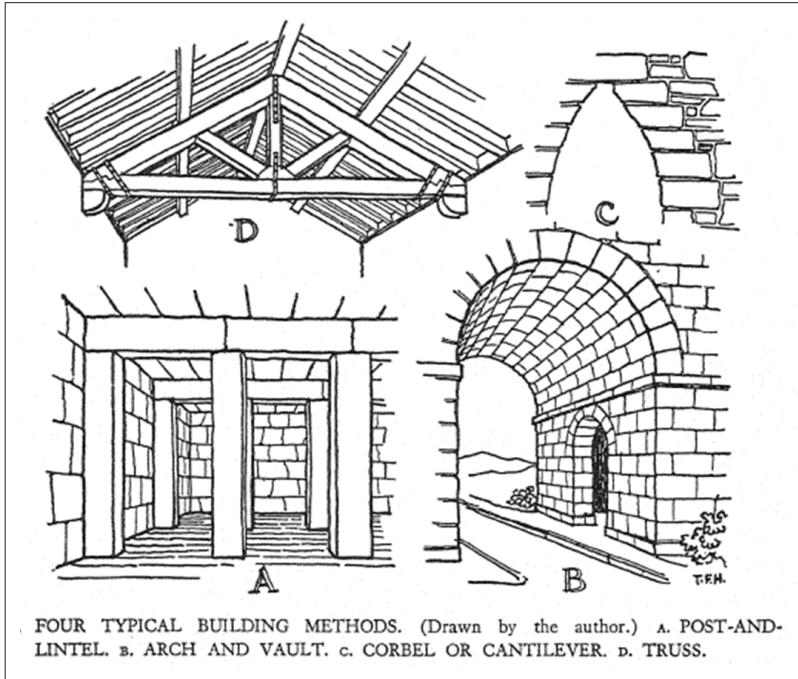


Fig. 4. Four building methods. (Hamlin 1953, 13)

or keystone, plays a crucial role in firmly fixing the components tightly, resisting thrust (outward horizontal force) and creating stability without relying solely on tension.

The arches from the Goryeo Dynasty, including the Hyeonmyo Pagoda, take the form of a ‘cusped arch.’ This refers to an arch with cusps or foliations worked on the intrados and “a point made by the intersection of two curved lines of members (Sturgis 1901, 732).” A cusped arch can thus be summarized as a composite of multiple lobes on the intrados and a pointed crown (the highest point of the arch). Depending on the element emphasized, this type of arch is variously called a foiled arch, foliated arch, lobed arch, pointed arch, ogee, or ogival arch (Sturgis 1901, 116).

An architectural element particularly reminiscent of Islamic styles here is the pointed shape of the arch. Pointed arches were prevalent in Is-

lamic architecture long before European Gothic architecture, becoming a defining feature of Islamic buildings. This perception has led to the assertion that the arches of the Hyeonmyo Pagoda bear Islamic resemblances. Widespread throughout the Islamic world from Syria to Iran and Spain, pointed arches were attributed to Islamic origins by prominent Islamic art historians of the first half of the 20th century, such as Ernst Herzfeld (2016 [1910], 35–6) and K.A.C. Cresswell (1958, 103). However, pointed arches were used even before the Islamic era, and can be found in the famous Nippur Arch in Iraq, which dates back to the Bronze Age (before 2700 BCE) (Peters 1897, chapter 5, especially 109; Fischer 1905). Although the pre-Islamic origins of the pointed arch are now irrefutable (Warren 1991, 61–63), its widespread use and architectural maturity in the Islamic world make its connection to Islamic architecture impossible to ignore.

One thing to underline here is that the pointed arch of the Hyeonmyo Pagoda, even when viewed on its flat surface, differs significantly from a so-called ‘true arch.’ A true arch is a self-supporting structure, relying on voussoirs held in compression by a central keystone. This point becomes clearer in the actual arch structures used in late Goryeo architecture. The Pagoda of Venerable Boje (普濟尊者) of Sinreuksa Temple was built in the fifth year of King U’s reign (1379) and dedicated to the late Goryeo Zen Master Naong Hyegeun (慧勤, 1320–1376). The stone lantern accompanying the pagoda features an opening decorated with cusped arches and lintels running horizontally just below the top of the arches (Fig. 5-1, 5-2). While these arches appear to be true arches with their curved shape and pointed crown, they belong to ‘false arches’ in a structural sense relying on the lintel for holding the shape in place.

Another cusped arch from the Goryeo period is also in the category of a false arch. A nine-story, 12.9cm-tall, gilded pagoda dating from the 14th century was discovered among the sarira reliquaries of Sujongsa Temple in Namyangju in 1939 (Fig. 6). The first floor of this small pagoda features entrances in the shape of cusped arches. One of the four identical arches is surrounded by a latticework pattern reminiscent of the door decoration of the Hyeonmyo Pagoda. While they look similar to true



**Fig. 5-1, 5-2. Stone Lantern for the Pagoda of Venerable Boje.**

Stone lantern for the pagoda of Venerable Boje (普濟尊者, Zen Master Naong, Hyegeun 慧勤), Sinreuksa Temple, Namyangju; dated to 1379 (the fifth year of King U's reign), Goryeo period.



**Fig. 6. Nine-Story Gilt-Bronze Stupa Reliquary.**  
Nine-story gilt-bronze stupa reliquary, height 12.9 cm; Suzong Temple; 14th century, Goryeo period.

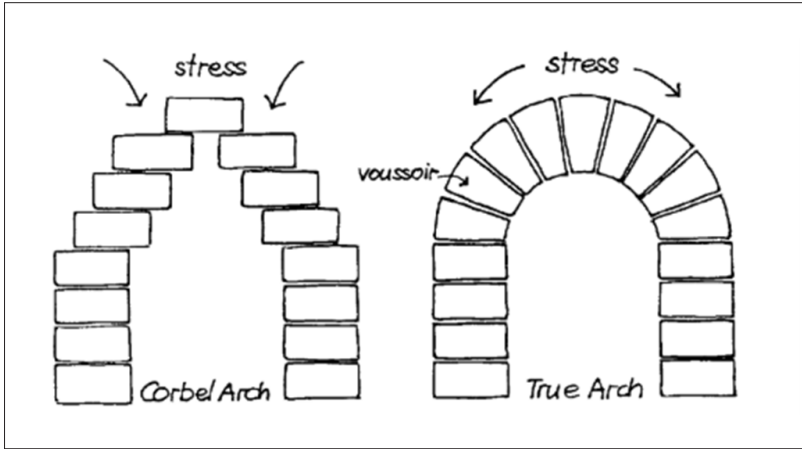


Fig. 7. Corbel arch and true arch. (Loofs-Wissowa 1986, 239)

arches, these arches actually lack voussoirs or keystones to support the structure. Instead, they resemble typical corbel arches, constructed by overlapping material cobbled together. The inner undulations, or foliations, of the arches are believed to have been created by trimming the overlapping sections that were brought together. The structural differences between a true arch and a corbel arch are illustrated in the figure above (Fig. 7) (Loofs-Wissowa 1986, 239).

This type of arch is likely a natural phenomenon of East Asian architecture, which was centered around wooden architecture. The *Yingzao Fashi*, the comprehensive architectural manual compiled during the Song Dynasty, focuses heavily on timber-frame construction and generally does not discuss arches in the structural sense used in Western masonry architecture. While the manual includes sections on stonework and brickwork, the architectural element of the structural arch is generally considered outside its scope. In the section of ‘*Liang* (梁 Beams)’ in Volume 5 of *Yingzao Fashi*, load-bearing timber members such as *Yueliang* (月梁, literally meaning ‘moon beam’ or ‘crescent-shaped beam’), *donggualiang* (冬瓜梁, meaning “winter melon beam”), and *hongniliang* (虹蜺梁, meaning ‘rainbow beam’) are described as having an arched or curved façade

or cross-sections (Li ② 7-10). However, these structures are thought to have been associated with a type of beam structure (*mingbu* 明楹, ‘exposed load-bearing member’), particularly below the ceiling. While this construction method creates a visually appealing arched form, it is not a true arch in the structural sense, as it is not self-supporting but relies on other beams. This demonstrates that East Asian architecture of the time relied on a flexible post-and-lintel timber system even when constructing arches. The Goryeo arches currently under discussion are also built using this structure.

### 3. The Agent of the Transmission: Muslim traders or Song merchants?

As mentioned earlier, the cusped arches on the Pagoda are reminiscent of Islamic architecture, a style never previously seen in Korean material culture. The sudden appearance of foreign elements during this period has been explained by unprecedented occurrences recorded in the official dynastic histories, *Goryeosa* [*History of the Goryeo Dynasty*] and *Goryeosa jeolryo* [*Essentials of Goryeo History*]. *Goryeosa* records Muslim traders visiting Goryeo during the eleventh century (see Table).

**Table: Muslims as ‘Daesik’ in Goryeosa corroborated by Goryeosa jeolryo**

Date <sup>2</sup>	King (reign year)	Translation	Original Text
1024/10	Hyeonjong (15)	This month (in the ninth month), <i>Yeol-Raja</i> [ <i>Al-Raja?</i> ] and 100 people from <i>Daesik</i> have paid tributes. <i>Daesik</i> is in the Western Regions.	是月大食國 悅羅慈等一百人來 獻方物大食國在西域

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<sup>2</sup> The dates in the table are ordered by year, month, and day, following the conventions of the Korean calendric system. All dates in the primary source follow the traditional Chinese lunar calendar. 1024/10, for example, refers to the tenth (lunar) month of the year 1024. In most cases, lunar months do not correspond exactly to Gregorian months.

1025/9	Hyeonjong (16)	In the ninth month, <i>Haseon</i> [ <i>Hassan?</i> ], <i>Raja</i> [ <i>Raja?</i> ] and 100 others have come from Sea of <i>Daesik</i> to pay their tributes.	九月辛巳 大食蠻夏訛羅 慈等百人來獻方物
1040/11	Jeongjong (6)	In the eleventh month, <i>Daesik</i> [Muslim] traders like <i>Bonagae</i> (or <i>Bonahap</i> ) [ <i>al-Bukhara</i> or <i>Baraka?</i> ] have paid tribute in form of mercury, Dragon's Teeth, sandalwood, myrrh, sappan and other valuables. And the King ordered for arrangement for luxury during their stay in the official guesthouse and awarded them gold upon their departure back to their homeland.	十一月丙寅 大食國客 商 保那蓋(盒?)等來 獻水 銀龍齒占城香沒藥蘇木 等物 命有司館得優 厚 及還厚賜金帛

There are records of three visits in the 15th year of King Hyeonjong's reign (1024), the 16th year (1025), and the 6th year of King Jungjong's reign (1040). Specifically, during King Hyeonjong's reign, 100 Muslims visited each time. While they were collectively known as '*Daesik* (大食)', some of them were also known by their names in Chinese characters, such as 悅羅慈, 夏訛, 羅慈, and 保那蓋. Since these names can be pronounced as 'Yeolraja', 'Haseon', 'Raja', and 'Bonagae' in Korean, it is highly likely that these names could mean 'al-Raja', 'Hasan', 'Raja', and 'Baraka' or 'al-Bukhara'. In 1040, during King Jungjong's reign, the tributes and trade goods they presented during their visit were listed in detail, including mercury, Dragon's Teeth,<sup>3</sup> sandalwood, myrrh, and sappan and other valuables.

When *Goryeosa* mentions *Daesik*, we almost automatically refer to them as Arab Muslims, without much scrutiny. East Asians at the time were unaware of the ethnicity of *Daesik* and the distinction between the terms, Arabs and Muslims. As scholars have rightly pointed out (Agius

<sup>3</sup> A type of medicinal item, probably believed to be good for heart disease. Refer to the 'Biography of Rok Jin (祿眞傳)' from *Samguk Sagi* (三國史記) Volume 45: "At that time, Chung Gong Kakkan held the rank of Grand Master, sitting in the Hall of State Affairs, overseeing the appointment of officials both inside and outside the capital. After retiring from public service, he fell ill and summoned the imperial physician to examine his pulse. The physician said the illness was in his heart and he needed to take Dragon Tooth Soup."

時, 忠恭角干爲上大等, 坐政事堂, 注擬內外官. 退公感疾, 召國醫診脈, 曰病在心臟, 須服龍齒湯.

2008, 8-13; Redford and Ergin 2010, 1-11), however, a certain danger lies in equating Arabs with Muslims in general. The Arabian Peninsula has been inhabited by people of diverse ethnicities, religions, and languages, intermingling with outsiders from other regions. ‘Arabs’ thus cannot be equated with ‘Muslims’, as Jews, Christians, and other religious communities existed and still exist in Arabia and the Islamic world. Hence, the term ‘Muslim’ can encompass not only Arabs but also Persians, Turks, East Africans, Indians, Southeast Asians, and many more.

Given the lack of detailed geographical knowledge of China and Korea in the medieval times (Park 2012; Waugh 2013, 207-208) Goryeo Koreans did not have a generic term to define Islam or Muslims. Goryeo people used a rather metonymical term to refer to Muslims when the foreign traders first came to the Peninsula. The ethnic or religious identity of their new trading partners would not have been of great interest to local Koreans. Their foreign appearance and strikingly different costumes must have been the most visible difference of Muslim visitors and traders. Suffice it to say that *Daesik* refers to Muslims or Muslim traders from distant places, including but not limited to Arabia.

Although these records claim to reveal the remarkable diversity of Goryeo’s trading partners, there are no written sources that mention Muslim visitors settling in Goryeo at the time, or Muslim artisans among the visiting Muslim groups. The mere presence of Muslim traders on the Korean Peninsula does not support the transmission of the Islamic architectural style during the Goryeo period, nor does it explain the sophisticated artistic expression of the Hyeonmyo Pagoda. If there were artisans or craftsmen among the Muslim visitors not recorded in historical documents, their artistic influence on Goryeo art would not have been limited to this architectural decoration alone. The absence of similar examples of Islamic influence further makes the involvement of Muslim craftsmen seem improbable.

More importantly, the arches of the Hyeonmyo Pagoda, as inferred from the Pagoda’s other decorative elements, provide a reasonable basis for assuming that the structure containing such decoration actually exist-

ed. The scenes of a palanquin being carried, for example, carved on the platform beneath the arch decoration, can be compelling evidence that it reenacts an actual event occurring at the funeral of State Preceptor Jigwang. Similarly, rather than viewing the arch as a mere fictitious architectural decoration, it would be more accurate to view it as a representation of an actual Buddhist structure of the time. The fact that Buddhist buildings in contemporary China adopted this architectural style lends support to this argument. Unlike portable items such as ceramics, glassware, or textiles, architectural styles could not have been transmitted solely through the visits of foreign traders. Moreover, the complex processes of creating elaborately decorated structures required the involvement of skilled experts.

Instead of Muslims' involvement, it has been proposed that the path of cultural transmission can be traced to trade and diplomatic relations between Goryeo and Song China (960–1279) (Hwang 2010, 64–66; Shin and Jo 2015, 225–227; Park Jiyoung 2018, 185). Park Dae-nam(2018, 227–230) emphasizes the strong Muslim presence in Quanzhou in Fujian Province, an international port city during the Song Dynasty, and argues that the city's multicultural and global nature may have contributed to the transmission of Islamic architectural styles to Goryeo.

A major issue regarding the Song influence on the arches of the Hyeonmyo Pagoda lies in the uncertainty surrounding the dating of the relevant architectural examples. While mosque ruins in southern China are presented to have played a significant role in the transmission of the arch style, their construction dates are unclear. These ruins are often attributed to the Song and even Tang Dynasties, but it is difficult to determine which parts of the structure were rebuilt and which survived the turmoil of Chinese history. Regarding the cusped arches, some mosques in Quanzhou bearing this particular style date back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), while others were rebuilt at a later date. Most of Quanzhou Muslim tombstones feature the cusped arch design (Fig. 8), but their inscriptions indicate that they were created from 1171 to 1381, making them later than the Goryeo Pagoda.



**Fig. 8. Muslim Tombstones of the Qingjing-si Mosque.**

Located at the Qingjing-si Mosque in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China; dated to 1171–1381, Yuan Dynasty.

This raises the question of whether Southern Song cities may have served as conduits for the introduction of Islamic artistic elements into Goryeo. While the Song's active maritime trade fostered a multicultural society across the port cities of Fujian Province, similar arched styles have been found in pagodas built in other parts of China further north. In Jiangsu Province, the Tiger Hill Pagoda of Yunyan Temple (雲岩寺 虎丘塔, 959) in Suzhou (蘇州) (Fig. 9), the Stone Pagoda in Lingyin Temple (靈隱寺), the Longhua Pagoda of Longhua Temple (龍華寺, 977) in Shanghai (Fig. 10), and the Luohan Twin Towers (羅漢院 雙塔, 982) of Suzhou all attest to the wider adoption of the cusped arch style during the Northern Song period (960–1127). Furthermore, cusped arches are also found in several Liao Buddhist architectural structures. The Main Hall of the Shanhua Temple (善化寺) in Datong, Shanxi Province (山西省), built



**Fig. 9. Tiger Hill Pagoda of Yunyan Temple. (Detail)**

Yunyan Temple's Tiger Hill Pagoda (雲岩寺虎丘塔), Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, China; dated to 961, Song Dynasty.



**Fig. 10. Cusped Arch of the Longhua Pagoda (龍華寺) (detail).**

Longhua Temple (龍華寺), Shanghai, China; dated to 977, Northern Song Dynasty.



**Fig. 11. Main Hall and Cusped Arch Entrance of Shanhua Temple.**

Main Hall (大雄宝殿) and its cusped arch entrance (detail) at Shanhua Temple (善化寺), Datong, Shanxi Province, China; dated to the 11th century (1038), Liao Dynasty.



**Fig. 12. Detail of the White Pagoda.**

Ten Thousand Copies of the Huayan Sutra Pagoda (萬部華嚴經塔), Hohhot (呼和浩特), Inner Mongolia; 1047–1049, Liao Dynasty.

in the 11th century during the Liao dynasty, has an opening with the cusped arch having a multi-lobed arch with a pointed apex (Fig. 11). The nearly faded finial is surrounded by wooden architectural ornamentation. The same arch style is also found in the Ten Thousand Copies of the Huayan Sutra Pagoda (萬部華嚴經塔, 983), commonly known as the White Pagoda (白塔), located about 20 km east of Hohhot (呼和浩特) in Inner Mongolia (Fig. 12).

These examples point out that the arch style of the Hyeonmyo Pagoda was not limited to the Song Dynasty, but was influenced by a style that was widespread in northern China. While cusped arches appear in the Buddhist architecture of the Northern Song, they cannot be claimed to be a unique style of a single dynasty, either Song or Liao, because of the continuity of material culture amid the dynastic changes and power shifts in the relevant regions. Yunyan Temple shows that this arch style may have been present in Chinese pagodas prior to the Song dynasty. While the Temple was completed in 961 during the Song dynasty, construction of the pagoda began in 907 during the later Five Dynasties, when Suzhou was part of the Wuyue (吳越) kingdom. Shanhua Temple is a similar case. Originally built during the Tang dynasty, particularly during the Kaiyuan period (713–741), it was maintained during the Liao Dynasty before being largely destroyed by the wars of the late Liao Dynasty. It underwent extensive restoration around 1128 during the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234) (Liang 1984). Other regions also show such cultural continuity. Even within Song territory, the southeastern Shanxi province during the 11th and 12th centuries reflects some of the architectural styles of the northern region, rather than the capital city of Kaifeng (Steinhardt 1995; Miller 2008).

At the time when cusped arches were a widespread artistic phenomenon throughout northern China, it was not Song but the Khitan Liao that ruled much of the region. Since the 10th century, as the entire Eurasian continent underwent rapid change, China experienced significant border shifts during a long period of division following the fall of the Tang Empire. Contrary to popular belief, the multi-ethnic society of the Tang Dynasty was inherited by the Liao Dynasty of northern China (Twitchett

and Tietze 1994, 43-153). This stands in stark contrast to our common belief that the Liao dynasty was alien to Chinese tradition, a belief that has emphasized historical continuity within the standard Tang-Song lineage (Chun 2011, 171-197). Recent archaeological excavations and analysis have shown that the Liao prided itself on being the successor to the Tang dynasty and its imperial family, securing its legitimacy in the Central Plains, whereas the Song dynasty, founded 50 years after the fall of the Tang dynasty, found its cultural identity in the Five Dynasties (Tsao 2000, 3-21). The material cultures of the Tang and the Liao richly demonstrate the continuity between the two dynasties. As the cusped arch appeared in northern China since the early 10th century, the Liao, inheriting the artistic traditions of the region, most likely played the role of the cultural agent transmitting the style to Goryeo.

#### **4. Liao as the Cultural Agent between the Islamic World and East Asia**

To understand better the cultural contact between Goryeo and the Islamic world, it is necessary to view East Asian medieval history from the perspective of the Eurasian continent, not just the Han Chinese. From the fall of the Tang Dynasty to the rise of the powerful Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), China experienced the political upheaval of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907-960), which fragmented the region into competing powers. While the Song Dynasty was culturally the most advanced, East Asia experienced fierce competition among equally powerful states such as the Khitan Liao (915-1125), the Song Dynasty (960-1279), the Tangut Dynasty of Xixia or Western Xia (1038-1227), the Jurchen Jin (1115-1234), and the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1396) on the Korean Peninsula (see map). As international trade intensified amidst constant conflicts over political hegemony, these states competed to maintain constant contact, both directly and indirectly, with other parts of Eurasia including the Islamic world. Overland contact and exchange with the Islamic world developed significantly during the Tang Dynasty, which was



Map. Asia in the 11th century.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asia\\_1025ad.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asia_1025ad.jpg)

inherited and flourished by the nomadic kingdoms in northern China, most prominently the Liao.

The eleventh century, when the Hyeonmyo Pagoda was built, was the golden age of the Liao Dynasty, whose cultural influence was no less than that of the Song Dynasty. As Liao and Goryeo formally established diplomatic relations during the reign of King Hyeonjong of Goryeo (1009–1031), and continued to engage in national and commercial exchanges between the two countries, cultural elements of the Liao were transmitted in greater variety than ever before, and their influence on Goryeo was further strengthened. While most of their pagodas and temples are poorly preserved, their grand scale and elaborate decoration of the remaining sites demonstrate the patronage of the Liao imperial court. Contemporary with Song and Goryeo, the Khitans built a variety of magnificent Buddhist monuments to disseminate their faith to other states of East Asia including Goryeo (Solonin 2013, 184–214; Nam 2013; Kim 2014, 13–14; Park 2021, 179; Kim 2022; Jung 2023, 141–151). The title of State Preceptor (國師) itself, which originated in the Northern Qi Dy-

nasty, was adopted by the northern nomadic peoples of the Western Xia and Liao Dynasties before being transmitted to the Goryeo Dynasty (Heo 1975). When Buddhism in East Asia exhibited esoteric tendencies from the early 9th century onward (Lü 1955; Kim 2021, 78-88), the Liao played the cultural forerunner of East Asia by adopting the Buddhist traditions of the conquered territories and developing them to a higher level. The First Edition of Tripitaka Koreana, *Shinjo Daejang-gyeong* [literally meaning ‘newly carved Tripitaka’], one of the finest Tripitaka produced during the Goryeo period (Kim 2012, 269-278), is known to have been influenced by the Khitan Tripitaka (Ha 2020), which has recently been proved to have left an influence on the extant Tripitaka Koreana as well (Yoo 2004; Yoo 2011). The Liao also encouraged active exchanges between monks (Kim 2022, 5-6; Jung 2023, 143-148). Since Buddhism was central to Goryeo culture, this high level of interaction between the two countries implies active economic trade and cultural diffusion (Jung 2022). The Liao's powerful influence is also evident in aspects of Goryeo material culture, such as ceramics, metalwork, and Buddhist monuments (Jang et al. 2011).

Apart from cusped arches in the core stone of the Hyeonmyo Pagoda, Liao's cultural expressions are found in other aspects of the Pagoda. The square foundation of the Hyeonmyo Pagoda echoes the finest Liao pagodas, such as the Chaoyang South Pagoda (朝陽南塔, 984) and Chaoyang North Pagoda (朝陽北塔, 1043-1044) in western Liaoning Province. Some of the decorative motifs of the Pagoda also point to the artistic expressions of Liao material cultures. Among them are the motifs of cloud and treasure surrounding the cusped arches and a row of hanging jewels with bees and butterflies in the inner space of the arch. Known as one of the Liao's signature objects (Ahn 2010), a lotus-shaped, long-handled incense burner appears in the commemorating stele accompanying the Hyeonmyo Pagoda; a graceful apsara in the upper part of the stele elegantly holds this incense burner.

Another quintessential Liao item is the palanquins carved in the upper stylobate stone of the Hyeonmyo Pagoda. The presence of the palanquins in the funerary architecture evokes the Liao tomb painting in the



**Fig. 13. Women Standing beside a Carriage with a Bride (Princess?)**

Wall painting from Tomb M1 at Qianweulibugecun, Nailingagongshe, Kulun Banner, Inner Mongolia (Source: Xu 2012, Fig. 169).

Kulun Banner (库伦旗), which depicts a bride standing next to a carriage (Fig. 13). According to contemporary records, a crucial part of the bride's trousseau was the coffin in which she would be buried. The carriage in the funerary painting is actually a funeral bier intended for use at her death (Hansen 2000, 311-313). Relating to this Liao custom, the palanquins, both sumptuously decorated, may symbolize the grand funeral ceremony for the eminent monk. The Liao court, particularly during the reigns of King Gwangjong and King Munjong, sent luxurious carriages and palanquins to the Goryeo kings and their families, a practice mentioned more than a dozen times in *Goryeosa*.

Probably the more important point here is that most of these artistic expressions are the Liao's adoption of cultural heritage that has been long passed down in Tang and other states of northern China. Among the cases that show such cultural inheritance are the canopy carved along the edge of the roof stone of the Pagoda, which is more likely another decorative technique of northern Chinese stone architecture, rather than simply a Liao invention as suggested by Ahn (2010, 119–120); the decoration of neatly arranged curtains with short tassels, which can be found on a small Northern Qi stupa, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; and the motif of flamed Chintamani also used in Buddhist paintings of Xixia, another northern state in China at the time. Like other nomadic states, the Liao artisans and craftsmen were not just Khitans but from many ethnic and religious groups within its territory, creating an artistic synthesis of northern China and its contacting partners. In this respect, borders during the Medieval period were not defined as "thin, artificial lines" like today's but as "quite fluid territories" (Naum 2010, 102).

As recorded in its history, the Liao established a multi-ethnic empire. This empire included not only the pastoral-nomadic Khitans and other nomadic tribes, but also the Han-Chinese, refugees from defeated states like Balhae (Bohai) and Silla, immigrants, and traders, most notably Muslims (Wittfogel and Feng 1949, 46–49). By the time of Shengzong (982–1031) of the Liao Dynasty, a dual governmental structure was firmly established with the Northern Privy Council largely governing Khitan populations while the Southern Privy Council ruled the non-Khitan area, a majority of which was a Han Chinese population. These records reveal the Liao's conscious process of cultural blending (Twitcsett and Tietze 1994; Seo 2006).

The inclusive attitude of the Liao nobles is best testified to in the astrological maps painted on the vaulted ceiling of the tomb chambers of Zhang Shiqing and Zhang Gongyou in Xuanhua, Hebei. They combine the Chinese lunar lodges with the twelve symbols of the Western Zodiac in the ceiling paintings (Wu 2010, 160–163, 177–179). In addition to this remarkable mixture of different cultures, many of the findings from the tombs of the Zhang family also indicate the tantric Buddhist belief of the

deceased. As their surnames reveal, the Zhang family was Han-Chinese, as Zhang Shiqing was a Han official serving the Liao court. His grandson married a woman of the Yelu clan, the royal lineage of the Liao Dynasty. The Khitan Liao dynasty, in particular, produced many high-ranking Han Chinese officials and diplomatic envoys, including Han Chun (韓楸) and Meng Chu (孟初), who were Liao's congratulatory envoys for the royal birthday (賀生辰使) dispatched to Goryeo (Kwon 2022).

While embracing East Asian cultures of Confucian principles and Buddhism, the Liao maintained trade and diplomacy with the dynamic world of Inner Asia through its continental network with Muslims. Like great powers of all times, the Liao adopted every cultural element channeled into their territory and utilized it to the fullest extent in their cultural endeavours. Through this process of integrating diverse ethnic groups within the empire, the Liao emerged as one of the major powers in Inner Asia. The Khitans pacified the Turks, Tibetans, Shatuo, and other ethnic tribes one by one, monopolising the northern and southern routes to the Tianshan, a frequent passage of trans-cultural trade. They received tributes from 59 states and emerged as one of the main players of the Silk Roads (Kim Chai Man 1961, 87)

The ecumenical attitude of the Liao was reflected in their willingness to trade with Muslims despite Buddhism being the Khitan's religious belief. This attitude of embracing diverse beliefs and cultures allowed the Western Liao Dynasty to be established after the fall of the Liao Dynasty, and gave rise to a unique dynasty of Buddhist Khitan people ruling over a Muslim population.<sup>4</sup>

Shangjing, the capital of the Liao, had an establishment of Turkic Uighurs, who played a vital role in the Silk Road trades (Shangjing, Geography, Book 37, *Liaoshi*). Through their network, the Liao formed the basis for intercontinental trading with Islamic states like the Kara-Khanids, Ghaznavids and, even farther, Abbasid Baghdad, and could enjoy

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<sup>4</sup> For the probable reason of Qara Khitai's observance of Buddhism amidst Islamic lands, see Biran 2005.

exotic cultural imports from the Islamic world. The frequent contact of the Liao with Turkic Muslims was not confined to trade and commerce. They made several marriage offers to Islamic states. *Liaoshi* mentioned a marriage proposition of 1022, in which their marriage partner might have been the Qara-Khanid ruler, Yusuf Qadir Khan (r.1026-1032), the Persianate Turk (Wittfogel and Feng 1949). The name ‘Goryeo (Korea),’ or ‘Kaoli’, was most likely spread to the Islamic world through the Liao Dynasty’s extensive trade network.

The objects (Shen 2006) and the murals (Su 1989) found in the Liao temples and tombs,<sup>5</sup> as evidenced by elaborate funeral practices involving the use of funerary masks, demonstrate that the Liao maintained a traditional culture with nomadic roots, and at the same time, imported goods from the Islamic regions of Central Asia and Inner Asia. Archaeological finds from the tomb of the Princess of Chen (Xiao Shaoju) in northern China (dating back to 1018) help us better understand the connections between the Liao and Islamic art (Archaeological Institute of Inner Mongolia et al.1993, 48; Shen 2006). The finds from the Liao sites include a large number of luxury objects, with elaborate ornaments made of exotic material, including amber and crystal. Islamic glassware, in particular, clearly demonstrates their familiarity and fascination with Islamic artefacts. Among them are glass bottles excavated from the tomb of the Princess of Chen State at Qinglongshan, Naiman Banner, in Inner Mongolia, and a glass pitcher containing a miniature ewer discovered in the underground chamber of the Northern Pagoda in Chaoyang (sealed in 1043) (Fig. 14). Alongside these rarities, everyday objects from the Islamic world, exquisitely decorated, are also discovered. A bronze wash-basin unearthed from the tomb of the Princess of Chen State (Fig. 15-1, 15-2) is such a case. It is densely engraved with Persian script along its interior rim, with its base adorned with a hexagonal star pattern.

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<sup>5</sup> Nancy Steinhart (1997, 363-379) argues that Liao tombs were not based on Tang Chinese models, but were sourced from their northern pastoral-nomadic world. She finds particularly close links between the tomb structures of Liao and those of Goguryeo, the strongest power among the three kingdoms of Korea.



**Fig. 14. Persian Glass Jug with Miniature Ewer.**

Persian glass jug containing a miniature ewer, from the underground palace of the Chaoyang North Pagoda (朝阳北塔), Chaoyang City, Liaoning Province, China; palace sealed in 1043, Liao Dynasty  
Source: Waugh 2011, 68.



**Fig. 15-1, 15-2. Basin (and Its Detail.)**

Source: Bronze basin with Persian inscription, excavated from the tomb of the Princess of Chen and Xiao Shaoju at Qinglongshan Town, Naiman Banner; Liao Dynasty/Persian, dated to 1018 or earlier; height 19 cm, diameter (mouth) 57 cm, diameter (base) 9.33 cm.

Source: <http://sites.asiasociety.org/arts/liao/swf/main.html> (accessed 2015)

Like other excavated Islamic items from the tomb, this basin may have been an import from the western part of the Persian cultural domain. It could have been a commodity or a gift from local Muslims, mainly Uighur merchants who had already settled in the Liao territory with their trading business (Wittfogel and Feng, 1949, 170-173). Considering the Liao's trade connection and diplomatic contacts, the Ghaznavids (975-1186) would be the most likely source of such influx. The Muslim writer Sharaf al-Zaman Tahir Marwazi (1050-1120) recorded the arrival of a Liao envoy from Emperor Shengzong (r. 982-1031) to their court (Marvazī c.1120, 19-20). Shengzong's letter of 1024 to Mahmud of Ghazni (r.998-1030) is a unique document revealing the Khitan's internationality and multi-cultural mentality at the peak of its dynastic power.<sup>6</sup>

## 5. Arches of the Indo-Islamic World

Given the geographical proximity and historical evidence, the cusped arch style we are now discussing can be traced back to the contemporary Islamic architecture of the Ghaznavids (977-1186). As the map shows, the Ghaznavid territory under Mahmud of Ghazni (r.998-1030) stretched from the Oxus, the Indus River, and the Indian Ocean in the east to Rey and Hamadan in the west (Bosworth 2012). Although the Ghaznavids invaded northern India and sacked Delhi, their centre of power continued to be in present-day Afghanistan, where they built two massive palatial cities: Ghazna and Lashkari Bazaar in Bust. They built numerous palaces, mosques, madrasas, bathhouses, gardens, and villas for their nobles in the cities they conquered, all of which now lie in ruins. The remaining Ghaznavid sites are almost entirely scattered in Afghanistan, including palaces, mosques, and minarets in Ghazna, Lashkari Bazar in Bust, square-

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<sup>6</sup> Mahmud was unwilling to entertain closer relations with the Khitans until they accepted Islam. Karl A. Wittfogel and Jiasheng Feng 1949, 50-52.



**Fig. 16-1, 16-2. Central Palace (Lashkari Bazaar), Exterior and South Façade.**  
Exterior view showing the gate and south façade with the main entrance, Bust, Afghanistan;  
11th century, Ghaznavid Dynasty (photo taken in 1960).  
Source: [https://www.archnet.org/sites/19955?media\\_content\\_id=145728](https://www.archnet.org/sites/19955?media_content_id=145728)

domed tombs made of brick in Bukhara, Merv, Sarakhs, and Mar Sharif.

The vast ruins of Lashkari Bazaar, a symbol of the glory of the Ghaznavid dynasty, were partially excavated between 1949 and 1951 by the French Archaeological Delegation (DAFA: Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan), led by Daniel Schlumberger (Schlumberger et al 1963; Allen 1988-1990). They stretch for 1.4 kilometers along the river in the ancient city of Bust on the eastern bank of the Helmand River in southern Afghanistan (Fig. 16-1, 16-2). The site contains the remains of hundreds of mudbrick residential and military structures, nearly all of which feature pointed arches for various functions, including archways, portals, niches, and windows. The pointed arches also appear at the portal of Ziyarat-i Baba Hatim, Afghanistan, set in a rectangular frame of a thick, knotted brickwork in Kufic script. As a rare example of Ghaznavid architecture in Iran, the burial site of Arslan Jadhib, an official of Sultan Mahmud, is located in Sang Bast, Iran, where each side of its internal transition zone is articulated with a pointed segmental arch. Despite being badly damaged, the Ghaznavid sites attest to the use of pointed and lobed arches in their various types of architecture from religious buildings to domestic residences.

A point to note here is that the presence of cusped arches in Ghaznavid Islamic architecture does not necessarily mean that they are a unique creation of that dynasty. Because of the continuity from previous cultures to the Ghaznavids, it is difficult to sharply demarcate specific works of art or artistic styles inherited from the earlier years to the Ghaznavids. This also applies to the art and cultures between the Ghaznavids, Ghurids, and the Seljuks as well because of their rivalry in the same territory. Moreover, Ghazna, the capital of the Ghaznavids, was an ancient place where Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism flourished and were integrated. For example, Nalanda, a renowned Buddhist mahavihara, was supported by numerous patrons of both Buddhists and non-Buddhists (Krishnan 2016, 17). Ghazni had been the capital of the Buddhist reign of Zunbil until the 9th century,<sup>7</sup> and the local Buddhist site of Tepe

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<sup>7</sup> The Korean Buddhist monk Hyecho, visiting in 726 CE, recorded that the kings of both Kabul



**Fig. 17. Shewaki stupa, Kabul, Afghanistan, 3rd -5th century, The Kushan Empire.**

Source: [https://issuu.com/aliphfoundation/docs/en\\_aliph\\_dc\\_program\\_single-page\\_2022\\_01\\_28/s/14684304](https://issuu.com/aliphfoundation/docs/en_aliph_dc_program_single-page_2022_01_28/s/14684304)

Sardar near Ghazni reflects a fusion of Buddhist-Hindu culture which dates back in time (Rugiadi 2009). Belonging to the final phase of Buddhism in Afghanistan, the site demonstrates a ‘common international style’, combining artistic features from Gandharan and Hellenistic art with Hindu elements (Verardi and Elio 2005, 433). In this respect, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni was no exception despite his notorious aversion to

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and Zabul were Turkic and “highly revere the Three Jewels (Buddhism)”. He noted the presence of many monasteries with over ten thousand monks, primarily studying Mahayana teachings.” (Jeong 2004, 319-323). In fact, their faith has not been researched as much with some scholars suggesting their Hinduism (Wink 1991, 118-119).

Hindu idolatry. In sacking Delhi, he broke down or burned all the Hindu idols to amass a vast quantity of gold and silver, but harbored a deep admiration for Hindu architecture and its magnificent structures (Ferishta n.d., 58–59). It is therefore not surprising that the Islamic monuments of the Ghaznavid dynasty, despite being strictly fundamentalist Islam, contain spoils and remains of Hindu and Buddhist architecture, some of which still retain iconographies with distinctively religious features.

The appearance of pointed arches in this region suggests a close connection to pre-Islamic local traditions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. For example, the Shewaki Stupa, an important Buddhist monument in Kabul, Afghanistan, still preserves a band of niches decorated with pointed arches along the round body of this ancient monument (Fig. 17).<sup>8</sup> The Stupa, recently reconstructed, was built during the Kushan period, probably between the 3rd and 5th centuries. It was once a major stopover for Buddhist pilgrims on the religious route from lowland India to Bamiyan in Afghanistan. The architectural vocabulary of a niche decorated with a pointed arch has long been adopted in Buddhist architecture from Central Asia to China, becoming one of its most distinctive and iconic architectural features, a visual marker of Buddhist buildings.

In Buddhist art and architecture, niches decorated with a blank arch with a pointed apex often contained images of worship, and the devotion this artistic form evoked in worshippers was carried over to the niches themselves, and particularly their arches. Hence the pointed arch was a religious symbol even before Muslims adopted it in architecture. The adoption of the pointed arch as an artistic expression in Islamic architecture led to religious associations of the mihrab, or prayer niche, in mosques and other religious communities, marking the beginning of the structural application of the Islamic arch. Like the niche containing the Buddha statue, the mihrab came to indicate the direction of Mecca, the holy city (Havell 1913, 14–38).

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.aliph-foundation.org/en/projects/conservation-of-buddhist-era-built-heritage>; <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/context-culture/the-largest-standing-stupa-in-afghanistan-a-short-history-of-the-buddhist-site-at-topdara/>

For a long time, European scholars assumed that there were no arches or domes in Indian architecture before Islamic times (Petersen 1996, 25).<sup>9</sup> More recent archaeological evidence and analysis, however, confirm the existence of true arches in India before Islamic times, including ones in pre-Mauryan or Nanda period (5th century BCE) and at Harappa dating to around 1900–1300 BCE (Vats 1940, vol.I. 488, vol II, plate 139). Coomaraswamy mentions eight examples of true arches, including Bodh-Gaya, all situated in the northern part of the peninsula, from Kashmir in the west to the gates of Bengal in the east (Coomaraswamy 1965, 73). The prevailing scholarly consensus today is that while the true arch was known and used occasionally for specific structures like drains, furnaces, and certain palace or temple elements (e.g., at Kausambi, Bhitargaon, and the Mahabodhi Temple), the trabeated system (post and lintel) remained the dominant architectural style to form a corbel arch, which was gradually replaced by the widespread introduction and systematic use of the true arch style during the Islamic period.

Whether constructed with corbelling or a true arch, most arches in Indian architecture have both components of the cusped arch discussed here: a multi-lobed intrados and a pointed crown. The multi-lobed structure inside the arch, one of the components of the cusped arch discussed in this paper, is an architectural style that has been used for a long time in Indian architecture before the Islamic era (Manchanda 2006; Meister 2010, 31, 36–37; Flood 2009, 196–199). The existing theory that the polylobed arch originated in Al-Andalus (Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins-Madina 2001, 87–89) has been refuted by evidence from a small mosque ruin of the 8th-century Umayyad Empire (Arce 2008), but it is clear that this form was more widely used in earlier Indian architecture. Hindu temples, particularly those in Kashmir and the western Himalayan

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<sup>2</sup> There has been much criticism that Europeans unfairly disparage India and Indian art, probably because of their deep-rooted colonial attitude. Lawrence notes that the ‘vast and numbingly circular literature on Islam in South Asia’ that asserts a depressing teleology of decline centered on the colonial experience (Lawrence 1955); Europeans often gave negative, almost hateful, evaluations of Hinduism and Hindu art in particular (Mitter 1992).

region, are characterized by the widespread use of trefoil arches within triangular pediments on the temple facades. In view of this, the existing polylobed arch structures of Mughal architecture can be seen as a continuation and refinement of local architectural traditions, particularly those of Hindu temples of the 7th and 8th centuries (Patel 2012, 148, 157).

In addition to the polylobed internal structure, another element of the cusped arch—the pointed top—may have originated in Indian architecture. Because India was geographically distant from the heart of the Islamic world, its long-standing architectural traditions gave the emerging Islamic architecture a unique character and identity, a prime example of which is the pointed arch. Now considered the quintessence of Islamic architecture, the pointed arch was originally a “synthesis of Indian aesthetics”(Patel 2012, 6, 139-164), favoured in the architecture of eastern Iran and Afghanistan (Flood 2009, 118, 144-149). In summary, the cusped arch shown in the Hyeonmyo Pagoda and other Buddhist structures of the Goryeo Dynasty, combining a pointed apex with a multi-lobed internal feature, is an architectural style that constitutes the defining characteristics of Indo-Islamic architecture.

The first surviving example of a perfectly finished pointed arch in Islamic architecture is the Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra mosque in Ajmer. Originally a Sanskrit college built by the Chauhan ruler Vigrha Raj, the structure was destroyed in 1194 during the late Ghurid dynasty (786-1215) to make way for a mosque (Fig. 18-1, 18-2). The portals, iwans, and mihrab of this mosque show the finest examples of cusped arches of a multilobed interior with a pointed apex. Despite its date, the rapidity with which it was built suggests that the Ghurid Mosque incorporated materials and architectural styles from earlier periods.<sup>10</sup> Like numerous mosques built on the remains of existing Hindu and Buddhist architecture, including one of the oldest mosques at Banbhore (Petersen 1996, 32), Ghurid buildings are well known for their ‘ubiquitous reuse’ of

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<sup>10</sup> The literal meaning of ‘Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra’ is “shed of two-and-a-half days”, referring to the legend that a part of the mosque was built in just two-and-a-half days.



**Fig. 18-1, 18-2. Seven-Arch Façade and Mihrab of the Adhai Din-ka-Jhonpra Mosque.**

Seven-arch façade and mihrab of the Adhai Din-ka-Jhonpra Mosque, Ajmer, Rajasthan, India; dated to 1194, Ghurid Dynasty.

building materials (Flood 2009, 137–150). Much of the reused material from the Kaman Mosque originated from Hindu pavilions and monasteries of the late 8th or early 9th centuries. Some of the recycled materials from the Qutb Mosque are stylistically similar to those from Hindu temples in Rajasthan and Jain temples of the same period. The materials re-

used in Ajmer were taken from Jain and Hindu temples that had existed on the site, indicating that the cusped arches of the Mosque were an Islamic appropriation of age-old Indian architectural vocabulary.

The accomplished and widespread use of cusped arches in extant Ghurid architecture suggests that this architectural style was used in earlier periods as well. The polylobed arches were already widely adopted in pre-Islamic Indian architecture, and numerous examples of pointed arches have been found at the Ghaznavid sites. The Ghaznavid dynasty, an Islamic state contemporaneous with the Liao, Song, and Goryeo dynasties, despite its religious exclusivity, inherited various existing religious architectural traditions from northern India and Afghanistan, creating a unique Islamic architectural style much like later Islamic dynasties, including the Ghurids. Given the architectural examples of the Ghurids, it is highly likely that the Ghaznavids had already adopted this arch style. The Liao, a contemporary trading partner of the Ghaznavids, likely adopted this architectural style through diplomacy, trade, and personal exchange, and subsequently incorporated the cusped arch style into their Buddhist architecture.

At the same time when Islamic architectural styles spread to northern China through exchanges between the Ghaznavid and the Liao, some of the Goryeo Buddhist practices and material culture show influences from the northern states of China, including the Liao Dynasty. During this period, the cusped arch style was transmitted through continuous cultural contact and human movements between Goryeo and the Khitan Liao. Gifts and tributes contributed to the inflow of new artistic vocabularies, whereas interaction between Goryeo and the Liao became more intense over time due to trade, diplomatic interactions, and frequent wars. Beginning around 1010, a constant stream of Khitan refugees and immigrants arrived in Goryeo (Park 2002, 17-18). Surrendered soldiers from the Liao were incorporated into the Goryeo army ('Guards,' Book 12, *Gaoli Tujing*). Meanwhile, other Liao refugees fled eastwards and took refuge in Goryeo. Many of these refugees appear to have been skilled artisans and craftsmen as the Song envoy, Xu Jing (徐兢) astutely observed:

What I also heard is that, among tens of thousands of Khitan prisoners of war who had surrendered to Goryeo, there were craftsmen at a ratio of ten to one, and those with exceptional skill now worked in the royal workshop. This is reflected in their household vessels and dresses increasingly sophisticated these days ('Commoners,' Book 19, *Gaoli Tujing*).

Most Liao exiles with advanced skills were assigned to the state-run workshop of textiles (幞頭所) and to those of building and repairs (將作監) in Goryeo. The fact that these craftsmen were so directly involved in Goryeo culture suggests that they may have left a significant impact on Goryeo architecture and buildings that was noticeable to Su Jing

This direct intervention by Liao craftsmen into Goryeo culture appears to have led to the infusion of Islamic architectural styles into the material culture of Goryeo Buddhism. Specifically, Goryeo and Liao, sharing common religious beliefs and artistic expressions, actively utilized newly introduced artistic vocabularies to further develop the material expression of Buddhism. These arches reappear in a stone lantern and a small gilded reliquary pagoda dating from the 14th century, when Goryeo was under the rule of the Yuan China, becoming part of the Mongol Empire. This reflects a cultural fusion of the time, intensified by the strong influence of nomadic states known for their penchant for exotic expressions. In this respect, the cusped arches of the Goryeo remains occupy a unique position in the history of Korean art, as examples of the cross-fertilization of diverse artistic elements brought about by the migration of craftsmen across Buddhist Asia.

## Conclusion

This paper explores how the cusped arches of Goryeo Buddhist shrines demonstrate the diverse cultural exchanges within contemporary societies of Asia, and argues that the international style of Liao craftsmen who long accumulated artistic traditions in northern China and were also ex-

posed to the architectural style of the Islamic world made an impact on Goryeo architecture. A major cultural trend of the time, Islamic arts moved across the Eastern part of Eurasia to Goryeo through the agent of the Khitan Liao. The paper also identifies the Islamic cultural sphere associated with Goryeo art as northern India and present-day Afghanistan by tracing the route through which Islamic artistic elements entered Goryeo. This pathway of cusped arches indicates that the Islamic art style introduced to the Korean peninsula was Indo-Islamic among various styles of Islamic art, not Arabic or Persian as is commonly believed.

Despite the gap in time, experience, and knowledge spanning more than a millennium from the Goryeo Dynasty to the present, we still tend to make the same mistake as Goryeo people in identifying ‘Daesik’ as Arabs. And we simply associate certain artistic styles with vaguely defined regions or religions, overlooking cultural nuances. This problem is particularly pronounced in understanding Islamic art. The word ‘reservoir’ is often used to describe the multilayered complexity of Islamic art. When Islam rose in the 7th century, Islamic art inherited elements from Byzantine, Sassanid, and Hellenistic traditions, developing its own distinct artistic features. By placing ‘Islam’ or ‘Islamic art’ within a more specific temporal and spatial context, this paper will help to avoid the mistake of the synonymous use of ‘Islam’ with Arab due to our unexamined habit and potential Orientalist thinking (Said 1978).

While we tend to categorize art among the Song, nomadic culture, Islam, Buddhism, and Goryeo, the diverse cultures of the Medieval Ages were not isolated but interconnected. The period we are discussing witnessed a global trend of cultural convergence, and the cusped arch discussed in this paper is one of the medieval examples of such cultural blending and fusion. It shows a local translation of distinct Islamic artistic expression created through multicultural interactions. By tracing Goryeo’s transcultural contact with the Indo-Islamic region, this study offers an opportunity to examine medieval Korean art in a broader and more fluid context.

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# Vietnam-China Trade Relations under French Colonial Administration in Late Nineteenth-Century Vietnam

Trần Thị Phương HOA

Cao Việt Anh

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## Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Sino-Vietnamese commercial relations from 1860 to the end of the nineteenth century, against the backdrop of the French conquest of Vietnam and the imposition of a colonial administration. It situates the historical circumstances that enabled France to intervene in the trade between Vietnam and China—two countries that had long maintained a tributary relationship and continued the exchange of envoys until as late as 1882. By this period, however, such missions had lost their commercial significance and had become purely ceremonial. The interplay between commerce, military intervention, diplomatic negotiations, and the resort to force constituted the necessary prelude to the dramatic commercial treaties involving the three principal actors: Đại Nam (Vietnam), Đại Thanh (China), and Đại Pháp (France). The article further highlights the new features of Sino-Vietnamese trade under French colonial oversight, including statistical data on bilateral exchanges and the reconfiguration of trade routes between the two sides. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how colonial interventions reshaped long-standing regional trading patterns and altered the balance between tributary ritual and commercial pragmatism in late nineteenth-century East Asia.

**Keywords** Vietnam-China relations, nineteenth century, trade, trade tributary relations

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Trần Thị Phương Hoa holds a PhD and is affiliated with the Institute of History, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS). (tranphhoa@yahoo.com)

Cao Việt Anh is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of Social Sciences, VASS.

Vietnam–China trade relations in the nineteenth century were far more than conduits for economic exchange; they constituted a complex matrix in which political authority, military presence, cultural norms, and societal dynamics intersected across East Asia. Within this broader geopolitical and commercial landscape, the incursion of Western merchants—most prominently the French—and the imposition of a French administrative regime represented a decisive rupture, profoundly restructuring Vietnam’s traditional commercial networks and altering patterns of regional economic power.

In the latter half of the century, trade between Vietnam and China unfolded along two intertwined yet distinct trajectories. The first, rooted in longstanding practice, encompassed the tributary system, formally endorsed by monarchical authorities, and largely unregulated free commerce along both terrestrial and maritime routes. This channel experienced a marked decline, symptomatic of the erosion of dynastic authority, the inherent limitations of traditional bureaucratic institutions in regulating commerce, and the growing sway of extralegal actors. The second trajectory emerged under the aegis of French intervention, reflecting a deliberate strategy to penetrate the Chinese market via Vietnamese intermediaries and to assert economic influence within a competitive environment of expanding Western imperial presence in East Asia.

While prior scholarship has extensively mapped the tributary trade within the broader panorama of Vietnam–China commercial relations, this study foregrounds the role of French involvement, offering a critical, nuanced analysis of how French policy and administration actively reshaped the commercial architecture of Vietnam–China interactions in the late nineteenth century, setting precedents for colonial economic strategies and regional power negotiations.

## 1. Scholarship on Nineteenth-Century Vietnam-China Trade Relations

From the perspective of “state” versus private actors, existing scholarship reveals a clear imbalance, with research tending overwhelmingly toward state-centered relations. Within this framework, studies have focused chiefly on interactions at the highest political level—namely, court-to-court relations—particularly the tributary system and the forms of court-directed commerce associated with it. Such emphasis reflects the structure of the available sources, which consist largely of official records documenting diplomatic exchanges and state-regulated trade.

By contrast, commercial activities involving private merchants have received far less attention, largely because they left fewer formal traces in official documentation. As a result, the historiography of nineteenth-century Vietnam-China trade has been shaped primarily by materials that foreground state-led interactions, giving prominence to diplomatic and ceremonial dimensions over the more routine practices of private commerce.

Nevertheless, this article also reviews several studies that address aspects of private trade—an arena that was inherently unstable due to shifting court regulations and, at times, outright prohibitions. These works, though fewer in number, offer valuable insights into the ways private traders operated within (and sometimes beyond) the constraints imposed by the courts.

### 1.1. Scholarship on Vietnam-China trade in tributary relations

The Vietnam-China tributary relationship has become an academic platform attracting the research of many scholars, with numerous studies highlighting the crucial role of tributary relations in the exchange of goods between Vietnam and China throughout history, and particularly during the nineteenth century (Fairbank 1942, Yu 2009, Anderson 2013, Feng 2019, Li 2012, Nguyen 2022). Fairbank’s seminal study (1942) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the origins, de-

velopment, and eventual decline of the East Asian tributary system with China as the center. The author situates the tributary system within a cultural and ritualistic framework, emphasizing that it was fundamentally rooted in the perception of Chinese cultural superiority and the moral hierarchy of Confucian cosmology (Fairbank 1942, 129–132). Tribute was not merely a diplomatic instrument but a ceremonial practice through which neighboring states acknowledged the civilizational centrality of China. The material contributions of tributary missions were largely symbolic, valued more for their uniqueness and local specificity than for their economic worth.

The study also traces the evolution of commercial interactions within the tributary framework, as Fairbank (1942, 138) notes, “Tribute as a cloak for trade”. Trade initially developed along the overland Silk Road connecting China with Western regions through Russia, Central Asia. Subsequently, maritime tribute trade expanded through Southeast Asia and South Asia, culminating in the famous expeditions of the eunuch Cheng Ho in the early fifteenth century. Over time, the economic dimension of the tributary system became increasingly prominent, as commercial motives often surpassed the ritual and diplomatic aspects of tribute. This is evident in maritime tributaries such as Ryukyu and Siam, where tribute missions became more frequent than statutorily required, largely reflecting trade activity rather than ceremonial obligation.

The arrival of Western trade in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries further fragmented the tributary system. Commerce from European nations flowed into the pre-existing channels of Chinese maritime trade, increasing the volume of economic activity while leaving the Confucian bureaucracy intellectually unprepared to confront this new reality. Ironically, the heightened frequency of tributary missions in the early 19th century from countries like Ryukyu and Siam—stimulated by trade—reinforced traditional ceremonial forms, even as the underlying commercial logic eroded the authority of the system (Fairbank 1942, 145).

Despite this broader trend, certain states, notably Korea and Vietnam, maintained the ritualistic and cultural essence of tributary relations, continuing to observe the traditional ceremonial forms alongside their

commercial engagements. Their adherence illustrates the persistence of the cultural-ritual core of the system, even as the economic dimension increasingly dominated the practical functioning of Chinese foreign relations.

Feng Chao (2019) offers a comprehensive review of scholarship on the Chinese tributary system by Japanese and Chinese researchers, highlighting its multifaceted cultural, political, and economic dimensions. From a cultural perspective, he cites scholars such as Nishijima, Watanabe, Xing, He, and Huang, who interpret the system in terms of ritual practice, Confucian values, and symbolic authority, emphasizing China's central role in structuring the East Asian order. Economically, Feng draws on Hamashita's analysis, which frames the tributary system as an extensive network of trade and tribute linking China with neighboring states. Politically, these studies underscore a center-periphery configuration, wherein China exercised influence over peripheral polities through hierarchical relations and soft power. Collectively, these works suggest that the tributary system functioned simultaneously as a practical mechanism for interstate interaction and as a symbolic framework reflecting a China-centered regional order. Feng further notes that political science and international relations scholars have sought to interpret the tributary system through the lens of cultural and political hierarchies, drawing parallels with Westphalian conceptions of interstate order. In practice, he concurs with Fairbank that tributary relations were not uniform: certain groups, particularly in western regions, were more commercially oriented and eventually evolved into robust trade networks, whereas the East Asian group—including Vietnam and Korea—retained predominantly cultural and ritualized relations with China.

The Vietnam-China tributary model has also been examined by James Anderson from a realist perspective. While questioning Fairbank's assertion that tributary missions primarily served as a disguised vehicle for trade (Anderson 2013, 261), Anderson argues that the tribute relationship nonetheless created structured opportunities for commodity exchange. He emphasizes tributary relations as "fluid opportunities to negotiate the balance of status and authority existing between Chinese and

Vietnamese rulers” (Anderson 2013, 261), oriented toward three principal domains: commercial objectives, border security, and domestic political considerations (Anderson 2013, 260). Drawing on analyses of specific tributary missions, Anderson identifies historical fluctuations in the relative strength of the two states. His framework delineates periods of “political asymmetry,” including Strong China/Weak Vietnam during the pre-Qin empire (before 221 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), the Sui-Tang era (581–907), the Ming annexation (1407–1427), and the Southern and Northern courts period of Vietnam (1533–1592). Conversely, periods of Strong China/Strong Vietnam are associated with the Đinh-Trần dynasties (968–1400), the Later Lê dynasty (1427–1527), and potentially the Lê Trung Hưng period and early Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1858). Weak China/Strong Vietnam is identified during 907–960, following the Tang collapse and throughout the Five Dynasties period. Finally, the asymmetry of Weak China/Weak Vietnam prevailed from the Opium War to the French conquest of Vietnam (1840–1885).

Yu illustrates this “weak China” phenomenon with the temporary suspension of Vietnam’s tributary missions for sixteen years following the outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion in 1851, only to be restored in 1868. The symbolic nature of the tributary relationship is further underscored by the Qing court’s continued listing of Vietnam and Korea as tributaries in the 1899 edition of the *Ta Qing Hui Dian*, despite Vietnam’s recognition of French protection in 1884 and France and Japan’s acknowledgment of Korean independence in 1894 (Yu 2009, 85). Aware of China’s weakened position, Vietnam refrained from seeking Chinese intervention during the French assault on Đà Nẵng in 1858 or the subsequent campaign to occupy Cochinchina in 1859, and similarly did not inform China when ceding Cochinchina under the 1862 treaty or opening ports to trade in 1874, all while maintaining tributary missions after 1868 (Yu 2009, 107). Furthermore, Yu emphasizes that the early Nguyễn dynasty, conscious of Vietnam’s cultural distinctiveness and encouraged by the Qing’s rapid decline—a dynasty established by a foreign ethnic group—constructed its own vision of a “Đại Nam world order,” adopting Chinese institutions and culture yet retaining political independence (Yu 2009, 108).

Despite its symbolic character, the tributary system also possessed a functional dimension, particularly in facilitating trade. Economic considerations were a significant factor motivating the Nguyễn dynasty to maintain tributary ties with the Qing court. Unlike contemporary free-market conditions, both the Qing and Nguyễn dynasties restricted private trade. Consequently, the tributary system mediated state-regulated commerce: Qing merchants were permitted limited trade in Vietnam, whereas the Nguyễn court strictly prohibited Vietnamese merchants from traveling to China and even restricted personal travel abroad. Within these constraints, tributary missions became essential for procuring state-required goods, meticulously specified for envoys to acquire for imperial use, official gifts, or rewards. Envoys could face penalties for failing to obtain designated items (Yu 2009, 97–98). Contrary to assumptions that the Nguyễn dynasty engaged in trade with China for profit or commercial expansion, the primary objective of tributary missions was to obtain rare and unique commodities unavailable domestically. These goods—ranging from exotic items to luxurious objects—served not only the imperial household but also reinforced authority by being distributed as gifts or rewards to officials and envoys, thereby consolidating administrative and political networks (Yu 2009, 99).

Li Tana offers a nuanced portrayal of Vietnam-China commercial relations in the nineteenth century, concentrating primarily on the first half of the century, and identifies two principal channels of exchange: tributary commerce and unregulated trade along overland and maritime routes. Tributary trade was instrumental in the movement of goods, as missions not only transported tribute items serving state objectives but also carried substantial personal merchandise, occasionally surpassing the volume of official consignments (Li 2012, 73). Li notes that “members carried so much of their own cargos that they hired four to five thousand laborers at each courier station to transport their goods” (Li 2012, 73). Beyond the official mission pathways, she further underscores the overland and maritime networks that facilitated unregulated commerce between China and Vietnam, enabling the circulation of significant commodities and sustaining robust economic interactions across borders.

## 1.2. Literature on Private Trade Activities between Vietnam and China

Trade with China occupied a central position in Vietnam's foreign commerce during the first half of the nineteenth century, following the Nguyễn court's imposition of restrictions on Western traders due to concerns over national security and cultural conflicts. Commercial exchanges between the two countries were relatively vibrant, conducted primarily by sea, with Chinese merchants playing a particularly significant role. Statistical records of the Nguyễn dynasty indicate that in the first half of the nineteenth century, hundreds of Chinese vessels arrived annually at Vietnamese ports, carrying substantial quantities of goods and numerous passengers—including Chinese merchants seeking commercial opportunities or permanent settlement in Vietnam. Conversely, these ships also transported goods and Vietnamese passengers to China, possibly involving human trafficking (Nguyễn 1971, 252–280; Đỗ 2019, 115–140; Trương, 1981, 59–65).

According to Nguyễn Thế Anh, beginning in the reign of Gia Long (1802–1820), vessels belonging to Qing merchants were required to display distinctive identifying marks; moreover, ships arriving from different Chinese provinces—such as Hainan, Chaozhou, Guangdong, Fujian, and Shanghai—were instructed to fly different flags corresponding to differentiated tax rates. The state further regulated the weighing and measurement of ships as the basis for tax assessment, reflecting an early effort to systematize maritime trade supervision.

Under Minh Mạng (1820–1840), these regulatory measures were reinforced and extended. Western merchants were permitted to dock and trade only at the port of Đà Nẵng, a restriction motivated by the court's concerns over national security and cultural conflict. Several commodities were prohibited from export, including agarwood, aloeswood, gold, silver, and copper coins; conversely, certain goods imported from China could not be sold to private individuals because their purchase was monopolized by the state. These policies revealed an increasingly stringent framework designed to assert royal control over foreign commerce and

regulate both the movement of goods and the conduct of traders (Nguyễn 1971, 256-258).

Trương Thị Yên (1981, 64) indicates that the Nguyễn court granted Chinese merchants a number of privileges, including lax oversight of Qing vessels entering Vietnamese ports—particularly those carrying consumer goods intended for court use. Taking advantage of this leniency, many Chinese merchants evaded taxes and smuggled prohibited goods into Vietnam. She also notes that along the border regions with China, the Nguyễn court established *bạc dịch trường*—marketplaces intended to attract residents and merchants from both sides of the frontier to engage in trade and exchange goods. Particularly in Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn, the Court set up *giao tử vụ*, a form of banking institution modeled on Chinese practices that allowed transactions to be conducted using promissory notes. The establishment of such *giao tử vụ* in Cao Bằng, a key border region, suggests a deliberate policy to encourage and facilitate cross-border commercial activities (Trương 2006, 69-72).

Taken together, scholarship on nineteenth-century Vietnam-China relations shows that the tributary system functioned not only as a diplomatic framework but also as an important channel of commercial exchange. Tributary missions routinely carried both official gifts and private merchandise, enabling the circulation of goods within a stable yet flexible regional order. Alongside this tributary trade, private commercial activity between the two countries was remarkably vibrant. Following the Nguyễn court's restrictions on Western traders, China became Vietnam's primary external partner, with hundreds of Chinese vessels arriving annually at Vietnamese ports. These ships transported substantial quantities of goods and numerous passengers, including merchants seeking economic opportunities or long-term settlement, while also carrying Vietnamese products and travellers to China.

Yet, while the tributary system and private Sino-Vietnamese trade are well documented, the commercial activities introduced by the French—particularly under the early colonial administration—remain comparatively underexplored. The French presence introduced a nascent but significant layer of trade that interacted with and gradually reshaped

existing Vietnam–China networks, yet the extent, organization, and economic impact of these interventions require further scholarly attention. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of late nineteenth-century Vietnam–China commerce necessitates integrating the entrenched tributary framework with the emergent French commercial influence, highlighting both continuity and transformation in regional trade practices.

## **2. France and the Ambition to Connect Trade with China**

### **The Motives Behind the Conquest of Vietnam**

#### **2.1. France’s Ambition for Expanding Commerce in the Far East**

France’s engagement in trade with Vietnam—and more broadly with China and the Far East—formally commenced in the seventeenth century. Compared with other European powers, such as Portugal, the Netherlands, England, or even Denmark, which had established an early foothold in Asia, France’s entry into the region was relatively belated. It was not until 1664 that France founded the French East India Company, designed as a vehicle to penetrate Asian markets and to compete within the maritime trade networks already dominated by earlier European rivals (Thompson 1937; Cady 1954; Heijmans 2019; Cussen 2023).

Among the earliest French visitors to Vietnam whose accounts have proven invaluable—later serving as a reference and source of inspiration for subsequent French and foreign travelers—was the Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes (1591–1660). In his writings, de Rhodes highlighted Vietnam’s attractiveness not only for its abundance of natural resources and fertile lands but also for its strategic geographical proximity to China, a gateway that numerous European states of the period sought to access. He underscored Tonkin’s prime location as an ideal site for stimulating trade and ensuring the success of economic ventures. The region attracted a substantial presence of Chinese merchants, who brought porcelain and printed fabrics in exchange for silk and agarwood. De Rhodes

foresaw that, should European merchants establish trading bases in Vietnam, they would encounter exceptionally promising markets<sup>1</sup> (Desfosses 1883, 5).

Vietnam's rich natural resource and its geographical proximity to China left a strong impression on the missionaries, who played the dual role of merchant and missionary (Thompson 1937, 22). Consequently, they vigorously advocated the establishment of a French trading base in Tonkin, affirming that French commerce would find abundant opportunities for development in this region, yielding considerable profits. It is evident that the bombardment of Đà Nẵng in 1858 and the conquest of Cochinchina in 1859 formed part of an ambition that French colonial circles had been nurturing for over two centuries.

After securing the three provinces of southern Cochinchina, the French administration planned an expedition into the interior of southern China via the Mekong River. The Mekong Exploration Mission (1866–1868), initially led by Doudart de Lagrée and later by Francis Garnier, aimed to assess the river's potential as a commercial artery linking Cochinchina to Yunnan. Despite confronting formidable natural obstacles and severe health risks, the mission produced essential geographic, ethnographic, and scientific knowledge, shaping France's strategic and colonial ambitions in Indochina.

The vicissitudes that thwarted French colonial ventures in the Far East—ranging from an abortive invasion of Korea in 1866, through the Tientsin insurrection which claimed the life of the French consul, to the crushing humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871—proved insufficient to temper the nation's imperial ardor. Such unwavering determination was especially pronounced among fervent young actors like Francis Garnier, as well as among enterprising merchants such

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<sup>1</sup> By 1882, when France launched its second military campaign in Tonkin, the de Rhodes's observations were recalled at the Paris Conference on Commercial Geography, underlining the importance of Tonkin to France's ambition to trade with China. Castonnet-Desfosses, a member of the French Society of Geography, cited de Rhodes and other missionaries' regarding the favorable geographical position of Vietnam within the global commercial routes (Desfosses, 1883).

as Jean Dupuis, who ceaselessly pursued opportunities to extend French influence and secure footholds in the region.

The doctrine linking colonialism with the imperative of market expansion was clearly manifested in the first French attack on Tonkin, provoked by the merchant Jean Dupuis. In his correspondence with Admiral Dupré, then the Governor of Cochinchine, Dupuis argued that whoever first set foot in Tonkin would be able to secure easy lines of communication with southwestern China. In April and May of 1873, Dupuis began exchanging letters with the French Ministry of the Navy, urging attention to Tonkin on the grounds of its commercial connections with China. “This country”, he wrote, “borders China and constitutes the natural gateway to the wealthy southwestern provinces of the empire—a matter of vital importance for the future of French domination in the Far East” (Dupuis 1898, 27)

Central to France’s ambition to assert control over Vietnam was the dual impetus of rivalry with Britain and the allure of the immense wealth the latter had accumulated through resource extraction in its South and East Asian colonies—an enticement that made the prospect of colonial conquest particularly compelling. In practice, the British had long sought access to these lucrative Chinese markets, which represented significant commercial opportunities. Admiral Dupré further argued that, should Vietnamese authority over these territories collapse under the strain of internal upheaval, a foreign power could easily establish a foothold in Tonkin, thereby becoming France’s immediate competitor and neighbor in the Far East—or alternatively, China itself might consolidate its dominion over the Red River region. Moreover, France sought to be the sole European power sharing a border with southern China, the most densely populated and economically prosperous region of the Qing empire—a strategic position that would enhance French influence and access to trade in the Far East. To preclude such scenarios, Dupré contended that it was essential to secure a French presence in Tonkin “as the ally of Tu Duc, in order to restore his authority and ensure its respect” (Dupuis 1898, 28).

To avoid being sidelined like Belgium or Switzerland, the propo-

nents of the Tonkin expedition argued that France had to act decisively. They emphasized that France's commercial activity lagged behind other European powers: Germany was expanding its trade and merchant navy tonnage, while Britain already commanded an Asian empire of 250 million people, with India alone generating 3.2 billion francs in external trade. Remaining passive, clinging to the status quo, and engaging in fruitless quarrels would, in their view, effectively sign France's death warrant as a great power within a century. By establishing a foothold in Tonkin—at the mouth of the Red River—France could access the western provinces of China and eastern Tibet, control a vast flow of commerce, dominate eastern Indochina, create a new colonial empire, and secure recognition of its supremacy from over twenty million people (Desfosses 1883)

## 2.2 The French Conquest of Vietnam and Seeking Commercial Connections with China

Beginning with the attack on Đà Nẵng in 1858 and followed by the successive campaigns in Cochinchina (1859–1867) and Tonkin (1873–1882), France advanced step by step to dismantle Vietnam's territorial integrity and political autonomy, while simultaneously seeking to open a commercial route deep into southern China via the Red River. This vision was strongly fueled by the French trader Jean Dupuis, whose extensive experience in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands and close ties with Yunnan officials enabled him to obtain permission to navigate the Red River. Sailing under the dual insignia of the French flag and the banner of the Viceroy of Yunnan, Dupuis used the pretext of “bandit suppression” to transport goods and arms into Tonkin—an enterprise that violated Vietnamese regulations and escalated regional tensions. His reports portraying the Red River as a navigable corridor linking the East Sea to the mineral-rich interior of Yunnan elevated Tonkin into a strategic priority for policymakers in Paris, shaping the logic behind French interventions in 1873 and 1882 and ultimately paving the way for the full-scale conquest of the region.

Throughout this process, Qing China—despite its nominal suzerainty over Vietnam within the tributary framework—offered virtually no substantive intervention. Capitalizing on both Vietnam’s military vulnerability and China’s strategic hesitation, France coerced the Nguyễn court into a series of unequal treaties that steadily expanded French authority over Việt Nam.

After seizing Vietnamese territory by force, France compelled the Nguyễn court to sign treaties couched in remarkably euphemistic language, such as the “Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Cession between France, Spain, and Annam” (commonly known as the Treaty of Saigon, signed in 1862), followed by the Philastre Treaty of 1874 (often referred to as the Second Treaty of Saigon). Central to these agreements were provisions on commercial liberalization, including the opening of ports and the regulation of trade. At the same time, the treaties prominently affirmed Vietnam’s status as an “independent” state—a formulation that enabled France to avert potential diplomatic complications with China. In practice, this clause strategically positioned China at a disadvantage in the diplomatic confrontations that would unfold with France over the question of Vietnam.

Despite the confirmation of Vietnam as an independent state in the first article of the Treaty of 1874, in Article 2, France asserted its protective role over Đại Nam<sup>2</sup>: “If Đại Nam is invaded or disturbed by foreign enemies and the King of Đại Nam requests assistance, the King of France shall immediately provide support as circumstances require, with all expenses borne by France itself” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 9). Likewise, Article 3 reinforced French protection in the sphere

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<sup>2</sup> In the main text, the modern term “Vietnam” is used for consistency. However, direct quotations preserve the historical nomenclature found in the original sources. Under Emperor Gia Long, the title “Việt Nam” was formally adopted in 1804; this was later changed to “Đại Nam” by Emperor Minh Mạng in 1838. Accordingly, excerpts from nineteenth-century Nguyễn documents cited in this article retain the designations “Việt Nam” or “Đại Nam,” depending on the period of the original text. The French colonial sources frequently use the term “Annam” to refer to Vietnam. In addition, “Annam” also refers to the central region of Vietnam, along with Tonkin (North) and Cochinchine (South).

of foreign relations: “The King of Đại Nam, in return for this promised assistance, agrees that any communication with foreign states must be discussed with France. If there have been prior relations and exchanges of envoys with a certain country, these may continue unchanged. However, should Đại Nam wish to conduct trade or negotiate commercial treaties with other states, such treaties must not contravene the existing agreements between Đại Nam and France. When concluding such treaties, the Nguyễn court must inform the French court in advance” (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 10).

The French government was determined to exclude China from discussions over Tonkin, treating the matter as a bilateral issue with Đại Nam alone. They even fabricated—or deliberately exploited—a supposed misunderstanding of the texts in order to pressure the Qing court into acknowledging that ‘Vietnam was an independent state, no longer a vassal of the Qing.’ This would facilitate the conclusion of the 1874 treaty, through which France sought to assert its protectorate over Tonkin and Annam<sup>3</sup>. In early 1882, Gambetta, then Prime Minister of France, made it clear to Marquis Tseng of China—who played a central role in Qing diplomacy with the West—that France would not accept “the Chinese government disputing a treaty that had existed and been in effect for nearly eight years”. In May of the same year, de Freycinet, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, reinforced this position, stating that measures related to the implementation of the 1874 treaty “concern only the two signatory nations, and therefore we have nothing to explain to the Chinese government” (Billot 1888, 6).

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<sup>3</sup> A story of diplomatic misunderstanding circulated at the time. Acting on behalf of the Qing, Prince Kong sent a letter to the French side rejecting certain clauses of the 1874 Treaty, particularly Article 2, which stipulated that “The King of France recognizes that the King of Annam exercises sovereignty and is not subordinate to any other state.” Prince Kong insisted that Vietnam remained a “vassal” of China. However, in translation from Chinese into French, the interpreter rendered the verb in the past tense rather than the present: instead of “Vietnam has been a Chinese vassal,” it was rendered as “Vietnam was a Chinese vassal.” The French consequently interpreted this as referring solely to the past and proceeded to ratify the treaty on March 15, 1874 (Chere 1978, 15).

Following the 1874 Treaty, France established a network of intermediary diplomatic representatives in Tonkin and Annam. Rheinart was appointed *Chargé d'affaires* in Huế, Kergaradec became Consul in Hanoi, Truc in Haiphong, while on the Vietnamese side Nguyễn Thành Ý served as Consul in Saigon. However, French envoys were not allowed direct access to the emperor and had to communicate through the *Thương bạc* officials<sup>4</sup>. Exchanges thus grew increasingly strained, as the Nguyễn court officials deliberately created obstacles, while Emperor Tự Đức himself displayed open hostility.

At the same time, the Nguyễn court continued to dispatch tribute missions to the Qing in 1873, 1877, and 1880, in accordance with the triennial custom of presenting gifts and reporting local conditions. These missions heightened French anxieties over potential Chinese intervention in Tonkin. Patenotre, the French commissioner in China, together with the envoy Burrée in Beijing, repeatedly reported to Paris urging measures to forestall Qing involvement, thereby facilitating France's control over Vietnam.

Meanwhile, in the northern borderlands, trade routes with China—especially at Lào Cai, where the Red River enters Vietnam—fell under the control of the Black Flag Army led by Liu Yongfu. Following their victory at Cầu Giấy in 1873, which forced French troops to withdraw from Tonkin, Liu earned the trust of the Huế court and was allowed to oversee the Sino-Vietnamese trade route along the Red River. A commercial survey led by Consul Kergaradec observed that the trade in salt—a state monopoly—was subjected to taxes levied by the Black Flags at six times the official rate; in addition, they imposed numerous other levies, payable in silver, opium, tea, or tin (Bradley 2014, 386). Determined both to avenge past military defeats and to open commercial routes, the French resolved to eliminate the Black Flags' influence. For their part, the Qing tacitly supported Liu Yongfu to safeguard southern

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<sup>4</sup> The *Thương bạc* was an institution established under the Nguyễn dynasty, tasked with overseeing commercial activities, collecting taxes, and undertaking diplomatic functions when necessary.

China, fearing that if Tonkin fell under French domination, it would directly threaten their southern frontier. Some Vietnamese historians have argued that the Qing viewed Vietnam as a defensive frontier: “Vietnam is a vassal of the Qing, a protective screen for China. Should Vietnam fall, China itself would be endangered. The French ambition does not merely aim to swallow a fragment of the Southern Land.” (Đặng 1962, 19).

In 1879, Jauréguiberry was appointed Minister of the Navy and Colonies. Together with Foreign Minister Fraycinet, and later Jules Ferry, he became a fervent proponent of establishing a French protectorate in Tonkin. Jauréguiberry sought to convince the French Parliament to act swiftly, both to curtail Chinese influence and to preempt the ambitions of other European powers—such as Britain, Germany, and Spain—keen to extend their commercial and diplomatic reach in Southeast Asia.

Although France had stationed permanent diplomatic representatives in Tonkin and Annam, relations between Huế and the French authorities steadily deteriorated. As Munholland observes, “Tự Đức preferred reconciliation with insurgents such as Liu Yongfu—or even Chinese intervention—over accepting the French” (Munholland 1979, 19). Within the treaty-based Western diplomatic framework imposed by France, the Nguyễn court was unable to secure any substantive concessions, despite Emperor Tự Đức’s hope that negotiation might lead to revisions of the imposed terms. Two missions to China between the two Tonkin campaigns (1877 and 1880) proved largely ceremonial, accomplishing little to forestall the second French invasion, which ultimately culminated in the 1884 treaty formally recognizing the French protectorate over Tonkin and Annam.

Not only did France impose pre-drafted treaties on the Nguyễn court without allowing any genuine negotiation, but the French authorities also pursued a policy of ‘gunboat diplomacy’ toward China, forcing the Qing to accept diplomatic terms under the pressure of military force.

After France occupied Hanoi in April 1882, Emperor Tự Đức appealed to the Qing court for support. In response, the Qing government dispatched additional troops to reinforce the regular military forces stationed in border provinces such as Cao Bang and Lang Son. It was pre-

cisely at this point that China officially entered the Sino-French negotiations concerning Tonkin.

These negotiations were marked by numerous misunderstandings and delays on both sides. Chinese representatives, such as Li Hongzhang and the Zongli Yamen<sup>5</sup>, often adopted a conciliatory and amicable tone toward French proposals, leading French envoys—including Bourée and later Tricou—to believe that their demands were broadly acceptable to the Qing court and to transmit correspondingly optimistic reports back to Paris. However, within the Qing bureaucracy, influential anti-French factions—most notably figures such as Marquis Tseng—actively sought to repudiate agreements, even those already concluded. This internal discord repeatedly derailed diplomatic progress and ultimately compelled France to resort to coercive measures, including targeted military operations along Qing territory and the imposition of indemnities as instruments of negotiation.

The negotiations between the two sides ultimately compelled China and France to sign the Tientsin Treaties twice—first in 1884 and again in 1885—thereby formalizing China’s withdrawal of its troops from Tonkin and its recognition of the treaties previously concluded between France and Vietnam. On 11 May 1884, the Tientsin Treaty was formally signed for the first time. It comprised four articles: In the first provision, France committed to respecting and safeguarding China’s southern borders adjoining Tonkin against any form of aggression. The second provision required China to immediately withdraw its forces from Tonkin and recognize the established relations between France and the Vietnamese court; the third provision made a formal commitment guaranteeing free trade between Tonkin and the southern provinces of China.

The draft of the Tientsin Treaty initially comprised three articles. Chinese negotiators, however, proposed an additional provision relating to the Harmand Treaty, signed between France and Vietnam on 25 Au-

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<sup>5</sup> In 1861, the Qing court established the Zongli Yamen as an institution in charge of foreign affairs. However, this body remained completely silent regarding the 1874 Treaty between Vietnam and France.

gust 1883. To preserve national honor and avoid perceived humiliation, China requested modifications to the earlier Franco-Vietnamese treaty. This concerned a clause stipulating that France would oversee Annam's relations with all foreign powers, including China. The phrasing of this clause caused offense in Beijing. To accommodate Chinese sensitivities, the French agreed to include a fourth article stating: "The French government undertakes not to use any language in the final treaty with Annam that might compromise the dignity of the Celestial Empire; this treaty shall supersede all previous agreements concerning Tonkin" (Billot 1888, 165). Nearly a month later, on 6 June, the Nguyễn court and France concluded the Patenôtre Treaty, a revision of the Harmand Treaty. Notably, the clause stipulating that "France shall represent Annam in its relations with all powers, including China" was amended by removing the final four words, "including China" (y compris la Chine), aligning with Article 4 of the 11 May 1884 treaty and ensuring that no language would compromise China's prestige in dealings with Vietnam.

However, subsequent developments did not unfold in accordance with the provisions of the treaty. Assuming adherence to the 11 May and 6 June treaties, on 22 June 1884 French forces advanced to Bắc Lệ, Lạng Sơn, intending to take over garrisons from the Chinese army. A sudden shock ensued: Chinese troops opened fire and refused to hand over the positions as stipulated by the Treaty. In a starkly unequal engagement at Bắc Lệ—800 French soldiers facing 10,000 Chinese troops (Billot 1888, 190)—the French were compelled to withdraw. Paris immediately engaged with Beijing and received a reply from Li Hongzhang, the signatory of the Tientsin Treaty, that anti-French factions had emerged, rejecting the agreement. Moreover, officials of the Zongli Yamen conveyed that no provision in the Tientsin Treaty stipulated the evacuation of Lạng Sơn or set a specific date for withdrawal from Tonkinese positions. Invoking Article 2, they argued that the arrangement should be considered preliminary, intended only to prepare for a "formal treaty" and, from their perspective, troop withdrawal would not occur prior to its ratification (Billot 1888, 193).

In addition, China accused France of having humiliated the Qing

court by destroying the imperial seal conferred on the Nguyễn court<sup>6</sup>, an act that contravened Article 4 of the Tientsin Treaty. France, in turn, charged China with unilateral treaty violations and demanded 250 million francs in indemnities, initially planning a strike against the Petchili Gulf, Port Arthur, and Wei-hai-wei.

Following China's violation of the 1884 Tientsin Treaty and its continued support for Qing forces and Liu Yongfu's Black Flags in Tonkin, France issued an ultimatum on 12 July demanding the immediate execution of Article 2—namely, the withdrawal of all Chinese troops from Tonkin—accompanied by an imperial edict published in the Beijing Gazette. China was also required to pay compensation for treaty violations and to reimburse the costs of maintaining French expeditionary forces, estimated at no less than 250 million francs.

While applying diplomatic pressure in Beijing, France simultaneously prepared a decisive naval lever intended to force Chinese compliance. On 13 July, Admiral Courbet was ordered to concentrate all available vessels at Keelung (Taiwan) and Fuzhou, though he was expressly instructed to use force only if attacked so as not to trigger a formal state of war that might compromise ongoing negotiations.

When the deadline expired on 1 August, France occupied the port and coal mines of Keelung, thus transforming the site into a strategic hostage designed to compel Chinese concessions over Tonkin. The subsequent Battle of Fuzhou (23 August) marked one of the most overwhelming naval victories in French colonial history. Despite China's numerical superiority—eleven warships, twelve armed junks, ten torpedo boats, and several fireships—the French squadron, composed of three cruisers, two gunboats, and two torpedo boats, destroyed or incapacitated virtually the entire Chinese fleet. China lost twenty-two vessels, forty of-

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<sup>6</sup> This event was also recorded by the Nguyễn court. After signing the treaty on 6 June 1884, the Nguyễn dynasty destroyed the seal previously granted by the Qing court in order to cast a new one. Prior to this, the French had requested that the seal be returned to the Qing. Nguyễn Văn Tường proposed its destruction to produce a new seal, and the French consented (see Đại Nam thực lục, Volume 9, 75).

ficers, and roughly 2,000 sailors and soldiers (Billot 1888, 236). Courbet then bombarded the shipyard, and within twelve hours all coastal defenses within artillery range were destroyed. The damage inflicted on Fuzhou equalled the war indemnity China would later owe France (Billot 1888, 238).

Subsequent operations consolidated French superiority, including the renewed occupation of Keelung on 4 October and victories at Kep and Chu on 8 and 10 October. The combination of naval dominance, the strategic seizure of Keelung, and French advances in Tonkin left the Qing court with no viable alternative but to negotiate. Ultimately, China agreed to sign the Second Tientsin Treaty (1885), to withdraw all forces from Tonkin, and—most consequentially—to abandon entirely its centuries-old suzerain relationship over Vietnam, thereby recognizing French dominion.

### **3. Vietnam - China Trade Relations from 1860 to the End of the Nineteenth Century**

#### **3.1. The Decline of the Tributary Trade Relations**

Between 1858 and 1885, the Nguyễn dynasty dispatched six embassies to China, in the years 1868, 1870, 1873, 1877, 1880, and 1882. The 1882 mission was primarily sent to seek military assistance rather than to present tribute. Thus, during the period from the French conquest of Cochinchina until 1885, tributary embassies were sent on average once every five years, less frequent than in earlier times when, over the fifty-six years from 1802 to 1858, the Nguyễn court sent twenty embassies, averaging one every three years. In 1868, the Vietnamese mission presented accumulated tribute for the three missed cycles (1856, 1861, 1865), which had been postponed because the Qing court was preoccupied with the Taiping Rebellion.

According to the *Khâm định Đại Nam Hội điển Sự lệ* (Imperial Commissioned Regulations and Precedents of Đại Nam), the Nguyễn dy-

nasty laid out detailed stipulations regarding the protocol and quantity of tribute items to be presented to the Qing court. Beginning in the twentieth year of the Minh Menh's reign, every four years a diplomatic mission was sent to the Qing court (Nội các triều Nguyễn 1993, 311) The prescribed tribute consisted of one pair of elephant tusks, two rhinoceros horns, 100 bolts each of chou silk (thick silk cloth), fine silk, plain silk, and cotton fabric; 300 lượng (approx. 11 kg) of agarwood, 600 lượng (approx. 22 kg) of tóo hương (aloeswood chips), and 45 cân (approx. 27kg) each of cardamom and areca nut (Nội các triều Nguyễn 1993, 312).

The tribute volume increased significantly in 1868 when the Nguyễn court had to provide the offerings for all three missed cycles, making the total four times the usual amount. This practice is recorded in both the Thanh thực lục [Qing Veritable Records (Qing shilu)]<sup>7</sup> and the Đại Nam thực lục [Dainam Veritable Records] (Hồ 2019, 77; Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2007, 1323). In 1661, under the reign of the Qing Emperor Shunzhi, regulations were established regarding the bestowal of rewards to Vietnamese envoys “500 taels of silver, two large embroidered dragon brocades, two decorated brocades, two pieces of damask, ten inner brocades, and ten outer brocades for the king; as well as clothing, silk, and fabric for the envoys.” (Hồ 2019, 39) Over time, this regulation came to be treated as an established convention for bestowing rewards on Vietnamese envoys.

From 1873 onward, with the embassies of 1873, 1877, and 1880, the tribute offerings were reduced by half, marking the visible decline and eventual dissolution of the centuries-old tributary relationship between Vietnam and China. By 1880, the once-vibrant trade activities of Vietnamese embassies had largely ceased. Deveria's *Histoire des relations de la Chine avec L'Annam-Việt Nam du XVIIe au XIX siècle* reports that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Annamese en-

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<sup>7</sup> Drawing from the Qing Veritable Records (Qing shilu), which comprise 4,433 fascicles spanning thirteen reigns of the Qing dynasty, Hồ Bạch Thảo extracted all entries related to Vietnam and compiled them into the two-volume work *Qing Veritable Records: Sino-Vietnamese Relations from the Seventeenth Century to the Early Twentieth Century*.

voys were permitted to open markets for several days, while envoys from Korea and Ryukyu could trade daily (Devéria 1880, 70). Trade was restricted to the official mission period and supervised by local authorities to ensure fairness. By the late nineteenth century, however, tribute missions had become largely ceremonial. The 1877-1878 embassy, for instance, received modest gifts—letters, silk, and animal hides—conveyed by the Governor-General of Guangxi, in stark contrast to the earlier extensive trade and tribute. The report’s language emphasized the Qing court’s status as a “great power” bestowing “special privileges” on a “small state,” reflecting the symbolic rather than material significance of the missions (Devéria 1880, 74-75).

The gradual decline in tribute missions and the symbolic nature of the gifts by the late nineteenth century underscore a broader shift in regional power dynamics. While the Nguyễn court maintained ritualized relations with the Qing, these exchanges no longer provided tangible protection against foreign encroachment. The diminishing material and diplomatic value of the tributary system coincided with the increasing pressure exerted by France through military and diplomatic means, signaling the erosion of Vietnam’s ability to rely on traditional Sinocentric frameworks and the ascendancy of European colonial influence in the region.

### 3.2. Vietnamese - French and Sino - French Trade Treaties

For France, trade relations with China held particularly significant importance. In most treaties concluded with the Nguyễn dynasty, the French side consistently included provisions on “opening seaports for commercial exchange” or “permitting French merchants to travel and trade freely”. In addition, France concluded separate commercial treaties with both the Nguyễn court and the Qing empire. With the former, this was the Treaty of 1874, signed after the completion of the Second Treaty of Saigon; with the latter, these were the Second Tientsin Treaty of 9 June 1885 and the Commercial and Boundary Treaty of 26 June 1887.

Immediately after the signing of the March 1874 treaty regulating the opening of ports to trade, France and the Huế court concluded, in Au-

gust of the same year, a commercial treaty comprising twenty-nine articles. This treaty strategically prioritized trade along the Gia Định-Yunnan route, thereby facilitating direct access to the Chinese interior through Yunnan (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, Vol. 8, 53). While this corridor was promoted for commercial exchange, the treaty simultaneously treated the Qing dynasty on equal footing with other foreign powers, applying identical prohibitions, customs duties, and trade regulations to Qing vessels as to those of other treaty nations (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 53). Goods in transit through Đại Nam along the East Sea-Yunnan route were required to pay a single customs duty upon entry and were thereafter exempt from additional internal levies, although the court retained the right to issue regulations preventing counterfeit or prohibited goods from entering the domestic market (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 53).

A detailed tax regime further specified that goods departing from Gia Định to other Đại Nam ports or directly to Yunnan were entitled to a half-rate tax reduction, contingent upon certification from the French military authority and the Đại Nam consulate in Gia Định (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 54). Conversely, goods traveling from Yunnan or Đại Nam ports to Gia Định were required to temporarily pay the half-reduced tax, with refunds issued upon presentation of valid documentation or a full guarantor (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 64). This system ensured proper tax collection, minimized fraud, and safeguarded merchants' rights while fostering trade along this strategic commercial corridor.

Crucially, the treaty imposed strict prohibitions on transporting firearms, weapons, or ammunition aboard ships along the Yunnan corridor, even for self-defense. Any exceptions required prior authorization from both Vietnamese authorities and the French consul, and such arms were only returned once the vessel had either departed the port or arrived safely in Yunnan (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2007, Vol. 8, 57). This provision highlights French strategic concerns that weapons might be smuggled into Đại Nam with potential support from the Qing court, reflecting a cautious balance between facilitating commerce along a vital continen-

tal corridor and maintaining security and control over military materials.

In November 1874, the French revised the August 1874 treaty by amending Article 6 on authority over tax administration and expenditure. In the August version, the article explicitly stipulated that customs duties payable by both Qing and Đại Nam merchant vessels were to be collected and managed solely by Đại Nam customs authorities, with all decisions regarding their expenditure made independently by Đại Nam officials. In the November supplement, however, this provision was entirely omitted, leaving the article to emphasize only the uniform application of duties and prohibitions, without explicitly reaffirming Đại Nam's autonomous control over tax management and revenue allocation. This alteration signaled a move away from underscoring sovereign fiscal authority toward a formulation prioritizing parity in trade practices among all treaty partners.

Overall, the treaty reflects a deliberate policy aimed at facilitating trade with Yunnan and the Chinese interior, upholding the principle of equal treatment for Qing merchants, and maintaining strict oversight over strategic commodities—particularly weapons—along this critical commercial corridor.

The evolution of import-export administration and the taxation of circulating goods, as reflected in the 1874 and 1884 treaties, reveals a clear transition from Vietnam's nominal authority, exercised with French assistance, to the establishment of full French control. This transformation marked a significant consolidation of French authority over trade regulation and customs revenue in Indochina. Under the 1874 Treaty, customs administration and the collection of duties formally remained under Vietnamese jurisdiction, albeit with the assistance of French personnel (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 8, 63). By contrast, the Patenôtre Treaty of 1884 explicitly stipulated that both customs administration and the collection of duties were to be managed exclusively by the French (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2007, Vol. 9, 74).

France also concluded several treaties with China, which emphasized the establishment of a corridor facilitating bilateral trade. The Tientsin Convention of 9 June 1885, comprising ten articles, constituted the

foundational instrument that redefined Franco–Chinese relations following the conclusion of the Sino–French conflict in Tonkin (1884–1885). Although conceived as a peace treaty to end hostilities, it rapidly evolved into a framework for reorganizing the political and economic landscape along the Tonkin–South China frontier. The centrality of commerce is most clearly expressed in Articles 5 to 7, where provisions on cross-border trade, the opening of inland customs posts, and the establishment of consular and commercial representatives reveal the strategic economic logic that underpinned France’s conquest of Tonkin (*Ministère des affaires étrangères* 1885, 285–286).

A pivotal component of the treaty was the creation of formal overland trade routes accessible to both French (and French-protected) merchants and Chinese traders. Two strategic gateways—one at the upper reaches of Lào Cai leading toward Mengzi in Yunnan, and another beyond Lạng Sơn giving access to Guangxi—were designated as inland “treaty ports,” enabling regulated export–import activity under reciprocal administrative oversight. This marked the first time that Qing China agreed to open inland border points to a Western power, a development of immense importance for France, as Tonkin thus became the shortest commercial corridor linking Yunnan to the sea.

Beyond opening the frontier, the treaty authorized France to establish consulates at these commercial points, endowed with powers analogous to those enjoyed in China’s maritime treaty ports. This provision effectively enabled France to implant a permanent commercial–diplomatic presence at the very edge of southern China’s trading networks. By contrast, Chinese consulates in major Tonkinese cities could only be established with French approval, a clause designed to inhibit the extension of Qing administrative influence over France’s new protectorate (*Ministère des affaires étrangères* 1885, 283–286).

Through these measures—cross-border access, preferential trading arrangements, rights of residence for merchants, and the institutionalization of French consular authority—the Tientsin Treaty transformed Tonkin into a gateway for penetrating the vast markets of inland southern China. It thus functioned not merely as an instrument to terminate a war,

but as a blueprint for a transfrontier commercial regime that would, in the decades to follow, integrate Tonkin economically with Yunnan and Guangxi and solidify France's long-term strategic position in the region.

If the Tientsin Treaty of 1858 established the political and diplomatic framework that ended hostilities, formally terminated the Qing empire's long-standing suzerain relationship over Vietnam, and recognised France's authority in Tonkin, the 1887 Convention translated this new order into concrete mechanisms of cross-border trade, tariff regulation, and frontier administration.

The Commercial Convention of 26 June 1887 constituted the concrete and operational framework for regulating cross-border exchange between French-controlled Tonkin and the southern provinces of the Qing empire. While the 1858 agreement authorized only two trading points, the 1887 Convention expanded this to three official gateways: Longzhou in Guangxi, Mang-hao on the river route linking Lào Cai to Mengzi, and Mengzi itself, located deep within Yunnan's mineral-rich interior. This expansion from two to three entry points reflected France's strategic intent to establish Tonkin as a direct commercial interface not only with Guangxi but also with the economically promising uplands of western and southwestern China. At these designated posts, France was entitled to establish consulates and to extend full protection and residency rights to its merchants—privileges equivalent to those granted at China's maritime treaty ports (Pallu de La Barrière 1890,13).

Equally significant were the substantial tariff concessions codified in the Convention. Foreign goods entering China through these border posts were granted a 30 percent reduction on the standard maritime customs tariff, while Chinese goods entering Tonkin benefited from an even greater reduction of 40 percent. These measures were designed to enhance the competitiveness of merchandise circulating via the Tonkin route. The Convention also imposed a strict ceiling on inland transit taxes (likin) and legalized the export of native Yunnan opium, thereby countering the long-standing dominance of British Indian opium. Moreover, the authorization of river and overland navigation between Lạng Sơn, Cao Bằng, and Longzhou—subject only to a minimal duty—further in-

creased the attractiveness of the Tonkin corridor for traders in Guangxi and Yunnan (Pallu de La Barrière 1890, 14–19).

### 3.3 Vietnam – China Trade in the Age of French Colonial Administration

The French involvement in the Vietnam–China trade network from the 1860s to the late nineteenth century was documented by various French individuals from diverse professions, including merchants, military officers, physicians, and politicians. Although these accounts do not constitute a specialized or systematic synthesis, they nonetheless provide a relatively detailed perspective that, despite lacking coherence, allows us to grasp the overall landscape of the flow of commodities and commercial activities along the key routes connecting Vietnam and China under French rule.

#### **The sea and overland trading routes with China**

Under French administration, customs stations were established at both seaports and inland border crossings. Tax collection was placed entirely under French authority in accordance with the Treaty of 1884. Seaports existed in all three regions of Vietnam: Saigon in Cochinchina; in Tonkin: Hanoi, Hai Phong, Nam Dinh, and Móng Cái; in Annam: Tourane (Đà Nẵng), Faïfoo (Hội An), Quang Ngai, Qui Nhon, and Cam Ranh. Inland ports were established exclusively in Tonkin, all situated along the trade route with China, notably Lào Cai and Thái Nguyên (De Lanessan 1889, 409).

The commercial prospects that French policymakers envisioned for Tonkin must be situated within the broader dynamics of Sino–foreign trade in the late nineteenth century. In 1890, Pallu de la Barrière submitted to the French Parliament a comprehensive report on the Chinese market and the role of France within it. In this document, he outlined a forward-looking vision of France’s potential position in China’s vast domestic trading networks—one that could counterbalance the maritime commerce then dominated by the British.

By 1885, China's foreign commerce had already reached an enormous scale, rising from 118,988,134 Haikouang taels in 1870 to 153,205,729 taels in 1885, or nearly one billion francs (Pallu de la Barrière 1890, 20). Yet France's share remained negligible. Of this total, 118,959,571 taels belonged to Britain and its colonies, while France accounted for only a fraction (Table 1), limited largely to a few silk-buying houses in Shanghai. As contemporary observers remarked, France had "failed to enter the Chinese market," despite enjoying the same treaty rights as other powers. Structural weaknesses—including exorbitant domestic transport costs and a failure to adapt French manufactures to Chinese tastes—meant that France stood on the margins of an already well-established commercial order dominated by British shipping, British capital, and British Asian entrepôts (Pallu de la Barrière 1890, 23).

**Table 1. China's Foreign Trade in 1885 (Haikwan taels)**

Region / Country	Value (H. taels)
Great Britain & Colonies	118,959,571
Europe (excluding France)	9,822,717
Russia (Khiakhtha-Odessa-Manchuria)	4,147,023
Korea	145,437
Japan	6,755,215
Philippines	324,697
Cochinchina	304,699
Siam	579,953
Java	485,196
Turkey & Egypt	370,753
South America	4,168
United States	11,643,124

Source: Pallu de la Barrière 1890, 23

This marginal position was reflected clearly in the early export statistics of Tonkin and Annam. In 1887, out of nearly 10 million francs of exports from the two regions, only 167,000 francs were shipped to France, while more than 2 million francs went to Cochinchina and almost the entire remainder to China, primarily via Hong Kong—a British entrepôt that absorbed most of the regional commercial flows (de Lanessan 1889, 409). The hierarchy of export ports further underscored this trend. In 1886, Đà Nẵng led with over 2,700,000 francs, followed by Hà Nội (1,971,000 francs), Nam Định (1,642,000 francs), Hội An (Faifoo) (over 1,000,000 francs), Qui Nhon (872,000 francs), Hải Phòng (726,000 francs), and the inland port of Lào Cai with less than 110,000 francs (de Lanessan 1889, 409). Far from emerging as the arterial corridor linking Yunnan to the sea, Tonkin remained commercially peripheral, overshadowed by the older and vastly more efficient maritime circuits of southern China.

This pattern is best understood against the long-term shift from overland to maritime commerce in Sino-Vietnamese exchange. As Li Tana notes, in the early nineteenth century “the value of overland trade in the early 1820s was approximately five to seven times that of maritime trade at northern Vietnamese ports” (Li 2012, 74). But by the late nineteenth century, maritime routes had decisively supplanted the older caravan systems. Under French rule, de Lanessan’s 1887 data show that in Tonkin and Annam exports shipped through seaports were six times greater than those transported overland (de Lanessan 1889, 404). Hong Kong—integrated into a global network of steamshipping, credit, insurance, and Chinese merchant houses—proved far more attractive than any corridor through Tonkin. As a result, the commercial ambitions embedded in the Franco-Chinese agreements of the 1880s remained largely unrealized: Tonkin did not become the transit hub for Yunnanese trade that Paris had imagined, and French commercial influence in the region remained limited.

The observations of a military officer stationed in the frontier military territory of Tonkin and China partly explain why the Vietnam-China trade route shifted from overland to maritime channels. In his view, Chinese commercial competition was a “delicate” and “difficult” issue, often

magnified in the discourse of the French community in Indochina as a supposed attempt to “kill French trade.” (De Grandmaison 1898, 150). He described the predominance of Chinese merchants at border markets such as *Đông Đăng*, *Kỳ Lừa*, and *Cao Phong*, where they not only conducted trade but also established permanent markets and settlements — effectively creating “Chinese colonies” that monopolized exchanges with the local population. In his account, the upland Vietnamese were only marginally involved, providing small surpluses of subsistence crops, while cross-border trade was essentially controlled by Chinese networks. Yet he also recognized that such competition was merely a secondary obstacle, while the true impediments to French commerce lay in the irrational administrative barriers and tariff systems imposed by France itself.

The construction of the *Lạng Sơn-Đông Đăng* railway (1893–1895) introduced profound changes: the rice market expanded rapidly, and Chinese merchants were the first to exploit the new transport routes, but falling prices simultaneously pushed local peasants into economic crisis. The officer observed that the railway had been expected to redirect *Guangxi*’s trade flows toward Tonkinese ports, yet in practice French goods remained uncompetitive, as imports from *Hong Kong* were cheaper and more efficiently distributed. He further warned that extreme measures such as sealing the border with prohibitive tariffs would jeopardize political stability, while the economic benefits were uncertain at best (de Grandmaison 1898, 252–254).

From the vantage point of a military administrator on the frontier, this analysis illustrates both the colonial ambition to control and reorient Sino-Vietnamese trade and the structural contradictions within French policy, especially when confronted with the transboundary strength and communal solidarity of Chinese commercial networks.

These advantages enabled higher trade volumes and attracted a greater number of trading firms, including European and Indochinese merchants, who preferred the security, reliability, and convenience of *Hong Kong* over mainland Chinese ports.

The limited direct trade with Chinese ports may also be attributed to the relative inefficiency of French commercial enterprises at the time.

Despite geographic proximity, French merchants had not yet fully exploited the potential of the China-Vietnam trade network, resulting in a situation where Hong Kong, rather than the Chinese mainland, remained the primary gateway for Indochinese goods. Consequently, until the end of the nineteenth century, Indochina's principal maritime trade route with China relied on Hong Kong, highlighting both the strategic importance of well-managed ports and the limitations of French commercial operations in maximizing market opportunities in mainland China.

At the time the French established their protectorate over Tonkin, the overland trade route to Yunnan—long envisioned as a major conduit for commerce—was effectively nonfunctional (de Lanessan 1889, 459). Geographic and hydrological constraints rendered the Red River route highly impractical: steep, uncultivable mountains flanked the river for over 150 kilometers, with sparsely populated highlands and rocky, shallow stretches navigable only by small boats during the low-flow season. French authorities further imposed strict customs and regulatory measures, while Chinese provincial officials actively discouraged trade along the river. In contrast, merchants continued to favor the longer route from Guangdong to Yunan, which, though more distant, passed through fertile, densely populated regions and offered more secure and profitable opportunities for commerce. Consequently, the practical overland connection to Yunnan remained minimal, despite the ambitions of the French administration.

One of the reasons why the overland connection to Yunnan via Lào Cai was weak is that Chinese merchants who had previously settled in Lào Cai were forced to abandon their homes and businesses due to insecurity. They subsequently relocated to Chinese territory, where they were warmly received by the local authorities, who were eager to establish a commercial center in a place that had previously been devoid of one. Consequently, Lào Cai by the late 19th century was no longer a “former market,” as its name suggests, but merely a transit point, with all substantial trade taking place in Song-Phong, on Chinese territory (de Lanessan 1889, 459)

The military doctor Edmond Courtois also shared the consensus, arguing that trade along the Red River up to Yunnan was inefficient be-

cause the region was sparsely populated and geographically rugged. He stated, “Placing great hopes on such a commercial route (the Red River), and on impoverished lands such as those through which the Red River flows in northern Tonkin and China, is clearly to expose oneself to serious disappointment. Moreover, the Chinese government has, in recent years, multiplied its efforts to divert Yunnan’s trade away from the Red River route and towards the Canton River (the Pearl River)” (Courtois 1891, 128).

According to Courtois, the route from Hong Kong and Canton into China would be considered the best one in the eyes of many specialists even though it was longer than the Red River route. For him, Pakoi was the truly important gateway into China. By the 1880s, this route had already become fairly busy, with most of the trade flowing toward Yunnan and Guangxi (Courtois 1891, 128).

### **Principal commodities of Vietnam–China trade**

According to the most straightforward commercial logic, the annexation of Vietnam was primarily aimed at opening the country to French goods, which could then be transported to China, turning Vietnam into a gateway for French merchandise to penetrate deep into the Chinese mainland. Immediately after the French conquest of Gia Định in 1859, French merchants swiftly relied on the Chinese trading networks to establish channels of import and export through the port of Saigon, thereby laying the foundation for the presence of French goods in Asian markets. Garnier observed that “five years ago, it was hardly possible to find in these three markets (Shanghai, Singapore, and Hong Kong) any products of French origin; today, Parisian goods, French manufactured items, and French foodstuffs have flooded them” (Garnier 1864, 28), noting that by 1863 the port of Shanghai had already received 22 French vessels, whereas previously France had been entirely absent.

From this reality, he asserted that Saigon could become a strategic gateway for French commodities to compete directly with British and German goods in a dynamic Chinese market, “where French products could compete successfully with those of England and Germany thanks to the

links between Vietnamese and Chinese ports” (Garnier 1864, 37-39).

Extending this vision further, Garnier connected the growth of Saigon to the prospect of global commercial integration once the Suez Canal was opened, envisioning that “Marseille, thanks to this great enterprise, will become the meeting point of all Eastern commerce... and there will be two obligatory poles belonging to France—Marseille and Saigon” (Garnier 1864, 44-45). In his view, the new maritime route would ensure that “the flag of France, French industry and commerce will attain an irresistible supremacy in one of the most important markets of the world: the Chinese seas” (Garnier 1864, 45).

Additionally, Garnier recognized the potential of exploiting local Vietnamese products for export. He emphasized the immense resources that Vietnam and the Indochinese-Yunnan hinterland could offer, ranging from the fact that “in 1863 six ships loaded with timber were dispatched to Shanghai” to the supposition that this region contained “the entire range of rare plants belonging to the Himalayan flora,” such as aloeswood, star anise, ginseng, precious timber, gutta-percha, styrax, and others (Garnier 1864, 22, 33). These examples illuminate Garnier’s imperial vision: Saigon was not merely a local port but a springboard for France’s penetration of China and, more broadly, a nodal point within a global strategy aimed at reshaping the balance of trade in the Far East.

Brunat, an official working for the Lyon Chamber of Commerce who had spent many years in Shanghai, evaluated China as a potential market for Vietnam, where a variety of Vietnamese exports could find favorable reception. The first and most important commodity was silk. In 1884, according to customs statistics, approximately one thousand peculs (approx. 60,500 kg) of silk were exported to China; however, these figures were certainly inaccurate, as smuggling continued on a large scale. From Tonkin, exports also included raw cotton and cotton fabrics to China, Annam, and Cochinchina. Chinese traders held Thanh Hóa cotton in particular high regard, which was then shipped to Hainan, where the bales were re-sorted before being sent on to Guangzhou (Brunat 1884, 41).

According to Brunat, legumes were also a potential export product to China. Dried legumes in general, and beans (*haricots*) in particular,

were already being exported from Tonkin to China in substantial quantities; peas (pois) were likewise used for oil production. Timber from the region served not only domestic needs but was also partially exported to China. Brunat emphasized that this trade would undoubtedly expand once forest exploitation in mountainous areas could be conducted under safer conditions (Brunat 1884, 49). Northern Vietnam also abounds in bamboo, widely used for multiple domestic purposes, with part of the harvest exported to China. Furthermore, rattan—an article in high demand in China—grows well in Tonkin, representing a crop with considerable potential for further development.

Tonkin also produced and exported honey and white beeswax to China, with the finest products originating from Thanh Hóa (Brunat 1884, 51). In addition, exports included live pigs, salted or smoked pork, lard, live or dried chickens, preserved eggs, and salted fish. Finally, an extremely important commodity not to be overlooked was salt, which had long sustained significant trade with neighboring Chinese provinces. These provinces had previously relied almost entirely on supplies from Tonkin. Although recent conflicts had disrupted this commerce, it was expected to recover and expand once secure transportation routes to Yunnan were reestablished.

Calixte, a merchant based in Haiphong, was well acquainted with the Tonkinese products favored by the Chinese and commonly exported, identifying several key commodities. Sharks were abundant along parts of Tonkin's coast, where coastal inhabitants actively traded with inland provinces. After butchering and drying the fish, they extracted a layer of fat that was processed into a dark yellow oil, used partly for food but primarily for lighting and the production of soft soap. The most valuable product, however, was shark fins, sun-dried and highly prized by the Annamites, who sometimes made notable sacrifices to obtain them. Properly prepared, this delicacy could also appeal to Europeans. The Chinese valued it even more, and exports to China were steadily increasing, promising substantial revenues (Imbert 1885, 19-20).

Mushrooms constituted another important export. They grew widely, especially in the regions around Hanoi, Nam Dinh, Thai Binh, and

Thai Nguyen. Two main types—common mushrooms and forest mushrooms (*tongris*)—belonged to the same family as those consumed in Europe. Like other foodstuffs, they were sun-dried. Mushrooms were in high demand among the Chinese and were becoming increasingly appreciated by Europeans as well (Imbert 1885, 49).

The Vietnamese, who favored fried meats, dried a wide variety of foodstuffs, including fish, shark fins, game, and vegetables. Among these, dried shrimps (*chevrettes sèches*) were particularly significant, consumed in large quantities by both the Chinese and the Vietnamese, with especially strong demand in China. This trade with the southern Chinese provinces continued to expand, as dried shrimps were abundant and highly esteemed (Imbert 1885, 60).

More precise data on the quantities of goods were provided by politicians, especially after 1886 when the French customs institutions were established in all parts of Vietnam. The official data presented by de Lanessan indicate that, in trade between Tonkin and Annam with foreign countries, the value of transactions conducted via maritime routes was six times higher than that conducted overland (de Lanessan 1889, 404). The value of exports via land borders in 1887 amounted to approximately 1 million francs, an increase of more than 800,000 francs compared to 1886. The majority of these exports passed through Lao Cai, destined for Yunnan. They included the following products: salt, 363,740 francs; tobacco, 136,779 francs; raw cotton, 183,431 francs; spun cotton, 15,280 francs; European fabrics, 29,338 francs; indigenous fabrics, 39,081 francs; clothing made of silk or cotton, 44,007 francs; peanut oil, 10,887 francs, etc. All of these goods were of foreign origin, usually Chinese. In reality, they merely transited through Tonkin; therefore, they should be distinguished from exports by sea, the majority of which were produced domestically. Only the latter should properly be included in the official export figures (de Lanessan 1889, 405). Overland, Chinese goods from Guangdong entering Tonkin and then being re-exported to Yunnan were a fairly common phenomenon.

Among the export commodities of Tonkin, raw silk (*soie grège*) and reeled silk, frisons, and other silk by-products were the leading items,

accounting for nearly 40% of the total export value. In 1887, the export of raw silk amounted to approximately 3,200,000 francs, an increase of 800,000 francs compared to the previous year. However, when comparing with 1886, it should be noted that the customs administration in Tonkin and Annam was still in the process of being fully established, so some goods that were not declared in 1886 were recorded in 1887. Silk production in Nam Dinh—the largest silk-producing province in Tonkin—remained stable.

Cinnamon ranked second, mainly exported through the ports of Tourane and Faïfoo in Quang Nam, Annam. This province was the only one where locals cultivated cinnamon, but the bark from cultivated trees was less valued than that from wild trees in nearby mountains. Part of the cinnamon bark was exported directly to China, while the remainder was shipped by coastal vessels to Hai Phong or Nam Dinh before being exported. The total value of cinnamon exports from Annam and Tonkin in 1887 was nearly 2 million francs.

Cu nau was also a high-value product, with exports totaling 714,000 francs, primarily through the ports of Tourane, Faïfoo, Nam Dinh, and Hai Phong, all directed to China, where this dye material was highly prized.

According to Governor-General Paul Doumer's statistics, the most valuable export from Indochina was foodstuffs, primarily rice. Rice exports increased from 727,749 tons in 1893 to 915,635 tons in 1900, with Tonkin contributing 63,226 and 168,622 tons, respectively (Doumer 1902, 300). In 1899, China absorbed 504,000 tons out of a total export of 894,000 tons of rice from Cochinchina and Tonkin (Doumer 1902, 302). Although Tonkin's export volume remained significantly lower than that of Cochinchina, its growth rate was remarkably higher, nearly tripling over this period, reflecting the region's emerging role in the Indochinese rice trade. All rice exported from Tonkin was routed through Hong Kong, from where a substantial portion was subsequently re-exported to Guangdong (Doumer 1902, 301), highlighting Hong Kong's role as a strategic entrepôt facilitating trade between Indochina and southern China.

Among Indochina's rice-importing territories, Hong Kong consistently ranked first, with imports reaching 409,150 tons in 1899, while direct rice exports to China in the same year amounted to only 14,448 tons—a disparity that represented the largest gap observed during the 1897–1900 period, reflecting both Hong Kong's dominant role as a transshipment hub and the relatively limited direct trade with mainland China. Most of the rice exported to Hong Kong was later re-exported to southern China (Doumer 1902, 301). This pattern underscores the indirect nature of Indochina's rice trade with China, mediated through colonial commercial hubs, and suggests that while Tonkin's absolute export figures were modest, its relative growth and integration into broader regional trade networks were significant. This distribution reflects a key structural feature of regional trade: British-controlled Hong Kong offered far more efficient import mechanisms, legal protections, and commercial infrastructure than Chinese ports.

#### **French competition in the Chinese market**

Western economic engagement in China during the late 19th century was characterized by intense competition and the pursuit of strategic market advantages. While the French presence in the region predated many developments, they were comparatively latecomers in terms of trade activity. Nevertheless, France enjoyed a distinct strategic advantage: direct geographic proximity to China, a benefit no other Western power possessed. This unique position offered opportunities to influence trade networks and regional commerce despite the challenges posed by established competitors.

Colonel Bouais, author of *De Hanoi à Pékin*, was both a military officer and a diplomat, serving as one of the commissioners appointed to the negotiations with China to delimit the frontier between China and the northern provinces of Tonkin. He offered a broader perspective on the potential of Sino-Vietnamese trade relations once France became China's neighbor, with a land border extending nearly one thousand kilometers. During his survey of the Chinese market in the early 1890s, he recognized the importance of this vast market and outlined what France

needed to do in order to develop commercial relations with such a neighbor. The French, he argued, already had a model to emulate—Hong Kong—which the British had transformed from a barren rock into a prosperous city (Bouinai 1892, IX). There, the number of British merchants far exceeded that of the French, whose attitude he criticized as indifference toward all affairs (Bouinai 1892, XII).

Following the French conquest of Vietnam, France's trade with China experienced a notable increase, particularly in exports. In 1888, French exports to China amounted to approximately 135 million francs, of which 115 million consisted of silk, while imports from China remained relatively modest. Despite this growth, France still ranked only fourth among European powers in China, excluding Japan as an Asian competitor. Ahead of France were England, with 297 trading houses and 3,682 nationals; Germany, with 71 trading houses and 607 nationals; and the United States, with 29 trading houses and 1,020 nationals. France itself had 19 trading houses and 467 nationals, while Russia, limited by the geographic situation of Siberia and its privileged position in Mongolia under the 1881 treaty, maintained only 11 trading houses and 119 nationals. Spain, Italy, and Austria held only very secondary positions (Bouinai 1892, 163).

While the British invested in and transformed Hong Kong, a rocky island, into a bustling commercial port, the French saw only economic stagnation in China.

In his visit to China in late 1890, Bouais remarked upon the decline of the Chinese empire, pointing to its filthy cities and economic stagnation. He described how navigation on the Yangtze River was obstructed by sandbanks that posed serious concerns for riverine transport. The Chinese, however, for defensive purposes, regarded these sandbanks as a "heaven-sent barrier"; they neither wished to dredge them nor allowed Europeans to undertake the task. He further noted the silting of canals, despite the fact that thousands of boats had once traveled along these waterways to reach Tientsin (Bouinai 1892, XV).

In July 1889, the voyage of the small steamship *Laokay* from Hanoi to Lao Cai, undertaken by Marty and d'Abbadie, drew considerable at-

tention in both France and Britain, highlighting the strategic significance of Tonkin's waterways. French observers emphasized the potential of the Red River as a conduit for trade into Yunnan and southwestern China, portraying this as a major commercial achievement. British newspapers, however, responded with a competitive lens, acknowledging French successes while simultaneously critiquing them. The *Daily Press* questioned the river's year-round navigability yet recognized the French accomplishment in establishing access to southwestern China. The *China Mail* underscored that French ambitions—exploiting coal mines and using the Red River to penetrate Yunnan—posed a challenge to British interests, while also satirizing the limitations imposed by French fiscal policies (Courtois 1891, 127). British and French media closely monitored each other's commercial activities in China, openly reflecting their rivalry. Implicit in these accounts is a broader Anglo-French competition: Britain viewed French efforts both as a benchmark and as a rival claim, particularly regarding control over inland trade routes to China, contrasting the longer but more commercially viable route through Guangdong and Guangxi that British merchants preferred. This episode thus reflects not only logistical and economic considerations but also a keen awareness of imperial rivalry in East Asia at the close of the nineteenth century.

Many French newspapers frequently referred to “our rivals,” implying that other European powers often discovered more convenient and easily developed trade routes into the Chinese market, whereas France had to struggle with routes that, although shorter in appearance, were fraught with economic risks due to isolation and inaccessibility (de Lan-*essan* 1889, 461). The conquest of these new routes, therefore, was less a matter of genuine economic practicality than a demonstration of French resolve and determination.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the Vietnam-China trade relationship against the complex backdrop of historical, political, military, cultural, and eco-

conomic developments in Vietnam within East Asia, all occurring under the watchful eye of Western capitalist powers. The French pursuit of access to the Chinese market emerged as a significant motivation for their conquest of Vietnam. The Patenôte Treaty of 1884 consolidated French authority by placing customs administration and tax collection entirely under French control, marking a decisive shift in the management of trade.

By 1880, Vietnam-China commerce still retained many traditional forms, including tribute trade and largely unregulated cross-border trade, alongside commercial activity under French supervision. However, exchanges conducted within the tribute system had greatly diminished in economic significance, serving primarily ceremonial and formal purposes. Cross-border trade, particularly in frontier regions, was occasionally manipulated or disrupted by outlaw bands, illustrating the challenges of maintaining security and order in the absence of centralized control.

The final two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the end of tributary trade. Overland routes of commercial exchange across the Sino-Vietnamese border also weakened, as Chinese merchants retreated further into the Chinese interior under France's tightening control. At the same time, maritime routes, bolstered by modern steamships, emerged as the dominant conduits of commerce.

Starting from 1886, customs data became more complete, showing that the commercial exchange between Vietnam and China was conducted primarily via maritime routes. The Vietnamese exports to China with the highest value were rice, silk, and cinnamon, mainly shipped through Hong Kong to reach China. Overland trade accounted for only about 10% of the total export value, and Vietnam (Tonkin) primarily served as a transit point for Chinese goods—moving from Guangdong through Vietnam and then being re-exported to Yunnan. Both the volume and value of trade increased in the period between 1886 and 1900, with rice remaining the principal export to China. Hong Kong continued to serve as the primary outlet for Vietnamese goods, while direct trade with inland China remained very limited.

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# Toward a Full History of Coal Mining: Korean Miners in the Japanese Coal Industry, 1910s–1930s

Kyohei SAGAWA

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## Abstract

This report examines the presence and role of Korean laborers in Japan’s coal mining industry following the annexation of Korea, dividing the period into three phases: the WWI period (late 1910s), the 1920s, and the 1930s. The Chikuhō region of Fukuoka Prefecture, Japan’s largest coal-producing area and the site where the greatest number of Korean miners worked, serves as the central focus of this study. This paper introduces the characteristics of Korean miners in each period and provides perspectives on how historical experiences up to the 1930s connect to wartime labor mobilization.

When the “Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution” were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2015, UNESCO’s advisory body, ICOMOS, included in its recommendation for registration that the plan should also provide an understanding of each site’s “full history”. This paper demonstrates that the relationship between Japan’s coal mining industry and Korean miners, which began in the 1910s, is an indispensable element in understanding the full history of the coal mining industry—whether the coal mine sites have been registered as World Heritage or not.

## Keywords

Coal Mining Industry in Japan, Korean Coal Miners, Chikuhō coalfield, Technological Innovations, Residential Area, Female Coal Miners, Samhan Unification, historical terms

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Kyohei SAGAWA is a Researcher of the National Museum of Japanese History

## Introduction

In 2015, when the “Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution” were inscribed on the World Heritage List, ICOMOS, a UNESCO advisory body, made several recommendations. One of them was as follows:

Preparing an interpretive strategy for the presentation of the nominated property, which gives particular emphasis to the way each of the sites contributes to OUV and reflects one or more of the phases of industrialization; and also allows an understanding of the full history of each site; industrialization; and also allows an understanding of the full history of each site;<sup>1</sup>

It is a well-known fact that the focus of discussion at the time centered on the issues of Korean, Chinese, and POWs from allied countries forced to work during WWII. However, a consideration of the “full history” of Japan’s coal mining industry—including several coal mines designated as World Heritage sites—cannot be achieved by looking only at the wartime period. Japanese coal mines had long relied on marginalized labor groups, and the employment of Korean laborers became more established during the period of World War I.

This report examines the relationship between coal mines and Korean laborers that developed well before WWII. Such an inquiry is essential for understanding the “full history” of Japanese coal mining. Moreover, this study demonstrates that the history of Korean miners prior to WWII is also crucial for analyzing labor issues during the wartime period.

Research on coal mining labor history in Japan has accumulated a substantial body of work.<sup>2</sup> However, the primary subjects of these studies have been Japanese male laborers. Separate from this research trend, studies exist on marginalized labor groups who worked in coal mines,

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<sup>1</sup> Advisory Body Evaluation (ICOMOS). <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1484/documents/>

<sup>2</sup> Representative studies are as follows: Tanaka 1984; Ogino 1993; Ichihara 1997.

such as members of historically discriminated communities (Buraku communities), Koreans and Chinese mobilized during WWII, and Allied prisoners of war. Yet these two research streams have not necessarily been fully integrated<sup>3</sup>. It is necessary to reconstruct coal mining history by incorporating these marginalized groups<sup>4</sup>.

## 1. Overview of the Japanese Coal Mining Industry in the Prewar Period

The major coal-producing regions of Japan are located in Hokkaidō and Kyūshū. The Chikuhō (筑豊) coalfield, located in Fukuoka Prefecture in Kyūshū, was particularly large, producing half of Japan's coal in the prewar period. The Chikuhō Coalfield had over 100 coal mines of various sizes located within a short distance from each other. This was a defining characteristic of Chikuhō, significantly different from Hokkaidō, large-scale mines were scattered, or the Miike coalfield in Fukuoka Prefecture [Mitsui Miike (三井三池) Coal Mine], where a single mine monopolized an entire coalfield.

The number of miners engaged in the coal mining industry is shown in Graph 1. The graph shows that the number of coal miners varied greatly from period to period, and the following characteristics can be noted.

- The number of coal miners increased rapidly during WWI, forming a peak.
- The number of coal miners declined sharply due to the depression that followed the end of WWI, and remained stagnant during the 1920s.

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<sup>3</sup> A recent study attempting a historical narrative of the Miike Coal Mine (Fukuoka Prefecture) while considering labor diversity is Ikai 2025.

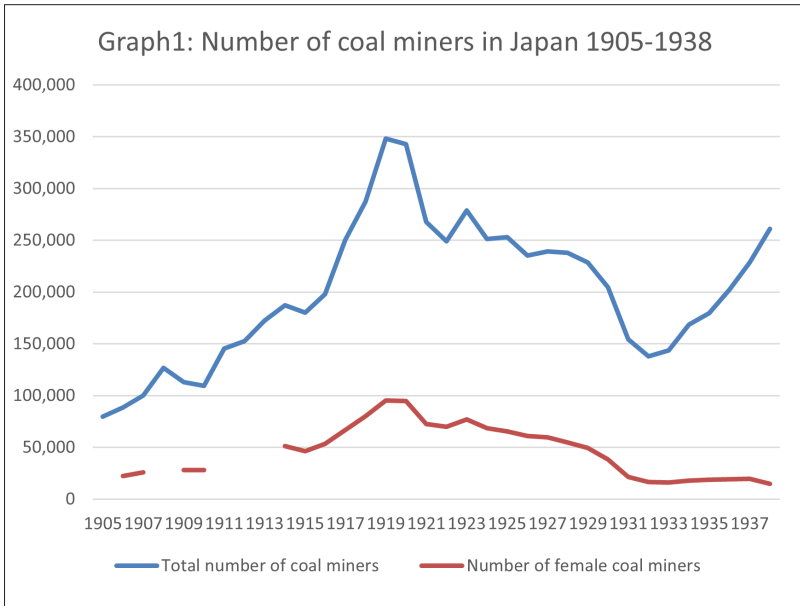
<sup>4</sup> One outcome of that endeavor is Sagawa 2021, on which much of the content of this report is based.



Fig. 1. Major coalfield locations in Japan

- The number of coal miners further declined sharply during the Showa Depression around 1930, and then rapidly increased as business conditions recovered after the Manchurian Incident.

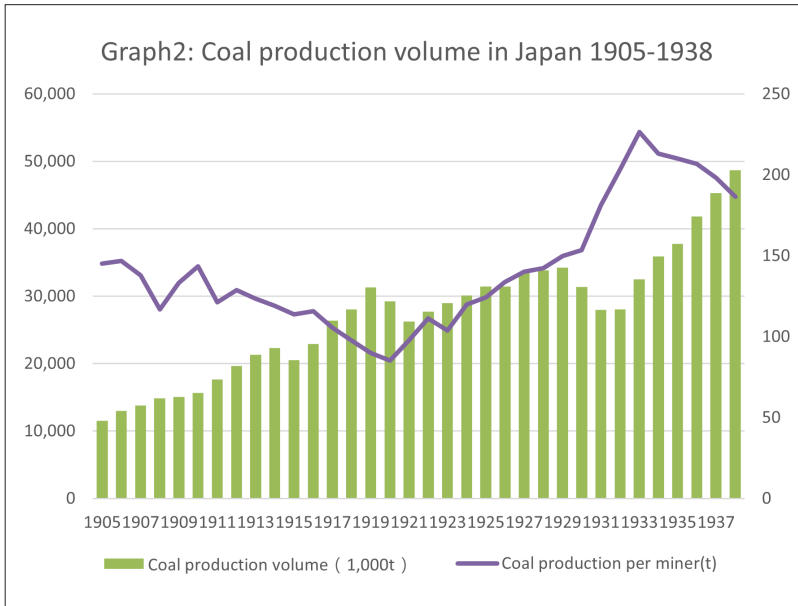
Another characteristic of the coal mining industry in Japan is the large number of women miners, especially in Chikuhō and Miike in Fukuoka Prefecture, where many women went into the mines with men to engage in coal extraction labor.



**Graph. 1. Number of coal miners in Japan 1905-1938**

Source: Research and Statistics Division, Ministry of International Trade and Industry 1963.

Graph 2 shows coal production and coal output per capita. While coal production generally continued to increase steadily, the trend in coal output per capita and the number of coal miners is not necessarily proportional. Coal output per capita declined during WWI, when the number of coal miners increased rapidly (below 100 tons per year from 1918 to 1921). At that time, coal extraction labor was performed manually, and it was necessary to increase the number of miners in order to increase the amount of coal produced. At the same time, however, skilled labor was essential for coal extraction. In the booming economy brought about by WWI, the coal mining industry increased the number of miners to increase coal production, but the number of unskilled laborers increased, resulting in a decline in coal output per worker. On the other hand, coal output per worker reached its highest level during the prewar period from the Showa Depression to the early 1930s (more than 200 tons were re-

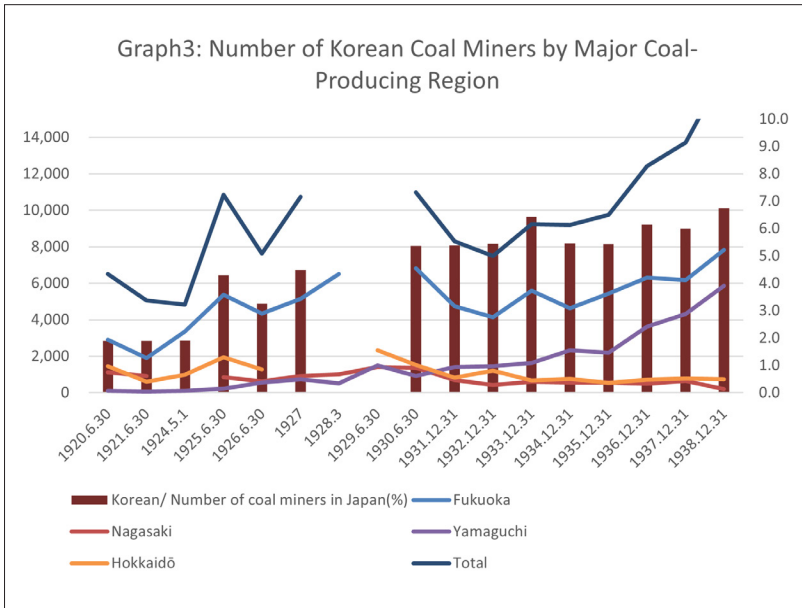


**Graph. 2. Coal production volume in Japan 1905-1938**

Source: Research and Statistics Division, Ministry of International Trade and Industry 1963.

corded from 1932 to 1936). During this period, the major coal mines were proceeding with reduced coal miners, while technological innovations led to the widespread use of machinery for coal extraction, replacing the traditional manual extraction of coal by skilled miners. This technological innovation led to a significant improvement in the efficiency of coal extraction. However, in the wartime period, the shortage of labor and supplies led to the mobilization of large numbers of Koreans and others unfamiliar with coal mine labor to work in the mines, and the efficiency of coal extraction continued to decline.

Next, the number of Korean miners is reviewed. The presence of Korean miners in Japanese coal mines can be seen even before the annexation of Korea, with Chōja (長者) Coal Mine in Karatsu, Saga Prefecture in 1897 and Furukawa Shimoyamada (古河下山田) Coal Mine in Chikuhō, Fukuoka Prefecture in 1898 attempting to introduce Korean



Graph. 3. Number of Korean coal miners by major coal-producing region.

Source: Sagawa 2021, 34.

workers from the Korean Empire<sup>5</sup>.

However, the Japanese coal mining industry did not begin to fully utilize Koreans until after Japan annexed Korea in 1910. The outbreak of WWI in 1914 served as a major catalyst for the employment of Korean laborers. The bar graph shows the percentage of Korean miners among all miners. The bar chart of Graph3 shows that the percentage of Korean miners gradually increased, from 4% in the late 1920s to 5–7% in the 1930s. Looking at regional trends, Fukuoka Prefecture consistently employed the largest number of Korean miners throughout the entire period. In the 1920s, Nagasaki Prefecture and Hokkaidō also employed many Korean miners. However, by the 1930s, the number of Korean miners in

<sup>5</sup> Tōjō 1994.

Nagasaki Prefecture and Hokkaidō decreased, while it increased in Yamaguchi Prefecture.

Based on the above overall trends, we will confirm the actual situation and characteristics of Korean miners' employment during the WWI period, the 1920s, and the 1930s.

## 2. World War I Period

The Japanese coal mining industry sought to increase coal production by hiring more miners in the economic boom during WWI. As Japan's domestic labor force was depleted, attention was focused on the people of Korea. Various coal mines throughout Japan began to recruit workers on the Korean Peninsula, and many mines expanded their use of Korean miners. It was not only zaibatsu-owned mining companies such as Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship Co., Ltd. (北海道炭礦汽船株式会社) and Mitsubishi Mining Company Ltd. (三菱鉱業株式会社), or major local mining companies such as Kaijima Coal Mining Co., Ltd. (貝島鉱業株式会社) (Fukuoka Prefecture), that recruited Korean miners. Smaller-scale mines such as Kamishiro (神代) Coal Mine (Fukuoka Prefecture) and Matsushima (松島) Coal Mine (Nagasaki Prefecture) did the same. Many Korean miners were engaged in coal extraction and other underground labor, but they did not perform as well as the mines had hoped. According to a survey of several coal mines in Chikuhō, Fukuoka Prefecture, published in May 1919, the performance of Korean miners was reported to be lower than that of Japanese miners by a maximum of 0.6 points for coal miners, 0.1 to 0.6 points for carriers, and 0.4 points for miscellaneous laborers, when Japanese miners were given 1.0 points<sup>6</sup>. Newspapers and surveys at the time sometimes explained that the reason for the poor performance of Korean miners was due to the ethnic characteristic of the Korean people. However, the main reason for the poor performance of Korean min-

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<sup>6</sup> *Fukuoka Nichinichi Shinbun* (福岡日日新聞) June 28, 1919.

ers was that coal extraction labor at that time required skilled techniques. Most Korean miners were from rural areas and had no previous experience in coal mine labor. It was difficult for Korean miners to quickly achieve good results because it took about one year to acquire the necessary skills for coal mining. There were also a series of brawls between Korean miners and Japanese supervisors, and between Korean miners and Japanese miners. 25 brawls involving Korean miners occurred between August 1918 and March 1920<sup>7</sup>. The majority of these incidents were between Japanese and Korean miners. The background to these incidents was the growing dissatisfaction and anxiety of the Korean miners and the ethnic contempt of the Japanese. Some coal mines stopped using Korean miners after the brawl. A newspaper article in August 1918 discussed the use of Korean miners in coal mines in the Kyūshū region, saying that “the results were close to failure” due to their poor performance and hostile relations with the Japanese<sup>8</sup>.

### 3. The 1920s

Despite a temporary decline in the number of Korean miners after WWI, the number of Korean miners increased in the 1920s, as confirmed earlier. This was due to the intensive use of Korean miners by certain major mining companies, such as Mitsubishi Mining Company Ltd. and Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship Co., Ltd.. In particular, at the end of the 1920s, Mitsubishi used about 40% of the nation’s Korean miners. Specifically, in 1928, 625 Koreans worked at the Bibai (美唄) Coal Mine in Hokkaidō, 341 at the Takashima (高島) Coal Mine in Nagasaki Prefecture, and 3,434, or 27% of the total number of miners at Chikuhō Kōgyōsho (筑豊礦業所), which consisted of four coal mines in Chikuhō,

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<sup>7</sup> Ogino 1993, 191–196, 226–229.

<sup>8</sup> *Kawakita Shinpo* (河北新報) August 5, 1918.

Fukuoka Prefecture<sup>9</sup>. This 27% ratio is comparable to the levels seen in individual coal mines after wartime mobilization policies began during WWII.

Viewing the phenomenon of people traveling from the Korean Peninsula to Japan from a broader perspective, the Rice Production Expansion Plan (産米増殖計画) beginning in 1920 led to widening disparities in Korean rural areas and an increase in impoverished people. Furthermore, the decline in rice prices in the late 1920s dealt a blow<sup>10</sup>. As a result of such Japanese colonial policies, increasing numbers of people reluctantly chose to go to Japan as migrant workers. Among them were those who eventually came to stay for extended periods. The population of Koreans residing in Japan changed over time, increasing from approximately 40,000 in 1920 to about 180,000 in 1925, 400,000 in 1930, and 760,000 in 1935<sup>11</sup>. In Japan, industries that welcomed Koreans as a source of cheap labor existed, with manual labor in coal mines and in civil engineering and construction sites serving as the most representative examples.

Below, we clarify the characteristics of Korean miners who went to work in Japanese coal mines based on surveys conducted in the 1920s<sup>12</sup>.

- (1) Gender: The majority of Korean miners were male, with 98% (4,282) male in 1924 and 97% (6,832) male in 1928, according to a large-scale survey of coal mines in the Kyūshū region. This trend was also true in Hokkaidō, where 99% were male according to the 1928 survey.
- (2) Family Status: Many of the men who made up the majority of Korean miners were singles, and in the 1924 survey of the Kyūshū region, singles accounted for 86% of the miners. However, “single” in the survey meant living alone at the mine; in reality, many had left

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<sup>9</sup> Fukuoka Regional Employment Service Office 1929; Kitazawa 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Itagaki 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Tamura 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Fukuoka Regional Employment Service Office 1929; Ministry of Internal Affairs, Social Affairs Bureau 1924; Ōtsuki 1930; Tokyo Regional Employment Service Office 1925.

- families behind in their hometowns to work alone.
- (3) Age: According to a 1924 survey of the Kyūshū region, 55% of the workers were in their 20s and 30% were in their 30s, and the data available for individual mines also confirm that the majority of the workers were in their 20s and 30s.
  - (4) Educational Level: No large-scale survey on educational level was conducted; data specific to individual coal mines were presented. In Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship Co., Ltd. (1925), 60% had no schooling, 25% had dropped out of elementary school, and about 10% had graduated from elementary school. In Fukuoka Prefecture, at the Mitsubishi Hōjō(方城) Coal Mine (1928), 92% of the employees were not enrolled in school. In terms of Japanese comprehension, 59% of the workers at the Mitsubishi Hōjō Coal Mine (1928) did not understand Japanese.
  - (5) Place of Origin: According to a 1928 survey conducted in Chikuhō, Fukuoka Prefecture, the largest number of Korean miners came from South Gyeongsang Province (2,212), followed by North Gyeongsang Province (1,606), South Jeolla Province (651), North Jeolla Province (467), North Chungcheong Province (251), Gyeonggi Province (119) and South Pyongan Province (118). In Chikuhō, workers mainly came from the geographically proximate southern regions of the Korean Peninsula. Meanwhile, at Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship Co., Ltd. (1925), workers from South Gyeongsang Province, South Hamgyong Province, and Gangwon Province were numerous, constituting 80% of the workforce (detailed breakdowns by region were not recorded). In Hokkaidō, some coal mines employed not only workers from the south but also many from the north. However, it is believed that individual coal mines had their own distinct regional composition in terms of worker origins.
  - (6) Former Occupations: According to a 1924 survey covering Fukuoka, Saga, Nagasaki, and Yamaguchi Prefectures, 42% of Korean miners' former jobs were in the coal mining industry and 49% in agriculture, with only 9% of those who changed jobs from other industries into the coal mining industry. On the other hand, 85% of the Korean min-

ers working for Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship Co., Ltd. in 1924 were inexperienced coal miners, and 80% of those recruited in Korea were agricultural workers. The majority of Koreans working in the mines were either new arrivals who had been engaged in agriculture on the Korean Peninsula, or people already living in Japan who had prior experience working in other Japanese coal mines.

Among the attributes of the Korean miners examined above, (1) Gender, (2) Family Status, (3) Age, and (4) Educational Level were generally similar in each region. These characteristics did not differ significantly from the overall trends among Koreans residing in Japan. On the other hand, the characteristics of (5) Place of Origin and (6) Former Occupations varied somewhat by region. These characteristics may be largely attributable to the method of recruiting Korean miners for the coal mines operating in each region. Incidentally, when coal mines recruited workers on the Korean Peninsula, they were required, under the 1918 Worker Recruitment Control Regulations (労働者募集取締規則), to submit employment conditions—including contract periods—to the Government-General of Korea (朝鮮総督府) in advance and obtain recruitment approval. However, from the 1920s onward, recruitment methods for Koreans not governed by these regulations also became more common. For example, methods included recruiting relatives of Koreans already employed in coal mines or hiring Koreans already residing in Japan. Additionally, brokers smuggled Koreans into Japan on clandestine ships, circumventing restrictions on Korean travel, and arranged for their employment in coal mines<sup>13</sup>. Such recruitment methods did not require a fixed contract period. Nevertheless, coal mines often independently set contract periods, typically around one and a half years, in order to en-

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<sup>13</sup> Throughout the 1920s, police implemented a system that screened Koreans entering Japan for financial resources, Japanese-language ability, and employment prospects. Those deemed unqualified were denied entry, preventing from tens of thousands to more than one hundred thousand people from traveling each year. Denials increased further in the 1930s (Tonomura 2008, 33, 49–54).

courage Korean miners to continue working by providing allowances upon contract completion or extension<sup>14</sup>. This was necessary because, as will be discussed later, Korean miners frequently moved between jobs. This differs significantly in purpose from the contract periods established during WWII, which aimed to bind mobilized Koreans to work sites for a fixed duration.

#### 4. Korean Miners at Mitsubishi Chikuhō Kōgyōsho (三菱筑豊礦業所)

Below, we would like to introduce the work and life of Korean miners, using Mitsubishi Chikuhō Kōgyōsho, which employed many Korean miners in the 1920s, as the main case study. Chikuhō Kōgyōsho is a division that controls the coal mines operated by Mitsubishi Mining Company Ltd. in the Chikuhō Coalfield in Fukuoka Prefecture, and consists of four large coal mines: the Namazuta (鯨田), Shinnyū (新入), Hōjō (方城), and Kamiyamada (上山田) Coal Mines. These four mines employed more than 3,000 Korean miners in the late 1920s. During WWI, human-powered coal extraction was still the mainstream method, and Korean miners produced less coal than their Japanese counterparts and were unable to achieve good results. Since the 1920s, however, the value of traditional skill has declined as new coal mining techniques and methods were introduced at major coal mines. The coal extraction method changed from the room and pillar mining method to the intensive longwall mining method. In addition, the introduction of coal mining machinery such as coal drills, coal picks, and coal cutters replaced the pickaxe, and coal extraction using dynamite blasting also became widespread. Transportation of mined coal from the working face also shifted from manual labor to troughs and the water-flow method (戸樋流し) or conveyors. These technological innovations increased the efficiency of coal extraction by Kore-

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<sup>14</sup> Mining Council 1932, 639.

an miners, the majority of whom were inexperienced coal miners, and Mitsubishi began to actively hire them. Mitsubishi was one company that actively pursued such technological innovations. These technological innovations increased the efficiency of coal extraction by Korean miners, the majority of whom were inexperienced coal miners, and Mitsubishi began to actively hire them.

The Korean miners worked not in mixed groups with Japanese miners, but in groups organized by Koreans. At Mitsubishi Kamiyamada Coal Mine, a comparison was made between the results of coal extraction using a drill by Korean miners and the results of coal extraction using a pickaxe by experienced Japanese miners, and the results showed that the Korean miners performed better<sup>15</sup>. On the other hand, there are cases where Korean miners at Chikuhō Colliery were engaged in a working environment that Japanese miners considered unpleasant and unclean, and where Korean miners were always in charge of the night shift of a two-shift day/night system. A university student who received practical training at Mitsubishi Hōjō Coal Mine recorded that the Korean miners were physically strong and patient, and that they were willing to work in filthy places and harsh conditions, which Japanese miners avoided<sup>16</sup>. The Korean miners endured such treatment because the workplaces for Korean laborers in the Japanese interior were extremely scarce (the most common jobs were day laborers) and because they were strongly motivated to send money home to their families in their hometowns<sup>17</sup>. However, in reality, not a few Korean miners could not endure the unfamiliar underground labor and harsh working conditions and fled the mines.

As mentioned earlier, half of the Korean miners working in Fukuo-

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<sup>15</sup> Arashima 1926, 28 -29.

<sup>16</sup> Tasaki 1923, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Documents from this period frequently note that Korean miners were conscientious in sending remittances and saving money. A household survey conducted at a coal mine in Hokkaidō found that single Korean miners devoted roughly 30 percent of their monthly income to savings and remittances to their hometowns (Ōtsuki 1930, part 2, 100 -104).

ka Prefecture's coal mines were new arrivals who had been engaged in agriculture on the Korean Peninsula, and half had migrated from other mines. Chikuhō Kōgyōsho hired inexperienced coal miners from the Korean Peninsula, and it did not hire Koreans who had worked in other Japanese coal mines. Chikuhō Kōgyōsho's view of those who had worked in the mines was that they were not attached to making money, lacked work ethic, were steeped in bad habits such as fighting and gambling, and would not settle in the mines, and were therefore very poorly regarded.

Chikuhō Kōgyōsho initially sent mine attendants and recruiters to the Korean Peninsula to recruit miners. However, they gradually began to place more importance on the network of local and consanguineous Koreans enrolled in the mines, a trend that became more pronounced as the number of Korean miners increased. Recruitment using geographical and blood ties of enrolled Koreans is called nepotism, and in the late 1920s, recruitment of Korean miners was conducted exclusively by nepotism. In Chikuhō Kōgyōsho's nepotism recruiting, the employer did not lend money for travel and living expenses, and applicants came to the mines either by providing their own funds or by borrowing money from an introducer who worked at the mines. When the number of days worked reached a certain standard, the miners and their introducers were given bonuses and introduction fees by the mines. This recruitment method was designed to avoid wasting recruitment costs if workers moved to other mines after a short period.

The recruited Korean miners were managed by influential Koreans who had earned the trust of the coal mining companies. These influential men were long-term employees who had wives and were called "Sewakata" (世話方) or "Hanbanushi" (飯場主), a type of foreman. The coal mining companies also expected them to be able to recruit miners on the Korean Peninsula through their social and familial networks. The system of foremen managing miners was applied equally to both Japanese and Korean miners, but Korean miners were rarely managed by Japanese

foremen<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, while the management system for Japanese miners at major coal mining companies shifted during the 1920s toward a system in which mine officials directly managed the miners, no such change occurred for Korean miners, as it was considered crucial that the role of managing Korean miners be filled by Koreans themselves, who could communicate effectively with them. Under the supervision of influential Koreans, called “Sewakata” or “Hanbanushi,” Korean miners often resided in residential areas established by the coal mines.

The reason why the miners established a residential area for Korean miners is thought to have been to minimize contact between the two sides to avoid the frequent fights and brawls that occurred between them and the Japanese during WWI. Major coal mining companies such as Mitsubishi sought to engage miners during this period by organizing various cultural and sporting events and establishing groups comprising both miners and staff. However, little evidence exists that Korean miners participated in these events or groups. It can be considered that within the internal society of the coal mines, Korean miners were effectively marginalized<sup>19</sup>. As a result, this living space, isolated from the Japanese, also became a place where the Korean community and its culture could be maintained.

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<sup>18</sup> This miner management system can be situated within the lineage of the “naya (納屋)” stable system established during the Meiji era. Naya foremen (納屋頭) recruited their own miners, housed them in bunkhouses, controlled their daily lives, allocated work, supervised labor, and patrolled the mines (Nishinarita 1994, 62). At major coal mines, the naya stable system was abolished around 1900, and the direct employment and management of miners by the mines became widespread. However, individuals who performed functions similar to those of naya foremen remained crucial for recruiting miners and overseeing their daily lives until the 1920s (Ichihara 1997, 74 – 83, 168 – 174).

<sup>19</sup> Ichihara 1997, 113–118, 121–122, 130–133.

**Table1: Number of Koreans Hired, Dismissed, and Transfer Rates at Major Coal Mines in the Kyūshū Region During March 1928**

Prefecture	Coal Mine Name	Hire	Dismissal	Number of Korean Employees at Month-end	Monthly Transfer Rate(%)
Yamaguchi	Okinoyama (沖ノ山)	100	48	411	18.0
	Total within prefecture	228	89	516	30.7
Fukuoka	Mitsubishi Namazuta (三菱鯉田)	274	262	1,738	15.4
	Mitsubishi Shinnyu (三菱新入)	140	144	944	15.0
	Mitsubishi Kamiyamada (三菱上山田)	60	142	339	29.8
	Mitsubishi Hōjō (三菱方城)	65	43	413	13.1
	Nakajima Iizuka (中島飯塚)	752	568	1,768	37.3
	Asō Yoshio (麻生芳雄)	75	36	138	40.2
	Asō Tsunawaki (麻生綱分)	26	29	126	21.8
	Kajjima Ōnoura (貝島大之浦)	39	17	212	13.2
	Total within prefecture	1,887	1,617	6,511	26.9
Nagasaki	Mitsubishi Takashima (三菱高島)	11	36	341	6.9
	Kyūshū Colliery & Steamship Sakito (九州炭礦汽船崎戸)	92	60	650	11.7
	Total within prefecture	103	97	1,010	9.9

Source: Fukuoka Regional Employment Service Office 1929, 83–91.

Among the Korean miners working at Mitsubishi Chikuhō Kōgyōsho, the number of long-term workers who continued to work at the same mine for several years gradually increased. Most, however, did

not stay long and left the mines after a short period of time. Table 1 shows the movement status at each coal mine during the month of March 1928. In order to encourage Korean miners to stay, Chikuhō Kōgyōsho did not recruit those with coal mine labor experience, but used the nepotism of those who were enrolled in the mine. These efforts resulted in a lower turnover rate at the Chikuhō Kōgyōsho compared to the Iizuka(飯塚) Coal Mine and Asō Shōten Co., Ltd. (株式会社麻生商店), which employed miners with prior coal mining experience. However, even so, about the same number of Korean miners left Chikuhō Kōgyōsho every year, and about the same number were newly hired from the Korean Peninsula. In other words, in order for Chikuhō Kōgyōsho Works to maintain the number of Korean miners at 3,000, about 3,000 new miners had to be hired every year. According to the mine's survey of reasons for Korean miners leaving the mines, the most common reason other than homecoming was to escape. In short, many Korean miners disappeared without permission from the coal mining companies. Such escape could be seen as an expression of dissatisfaction with the working environment and working conditions, and as immediate resistance by the Korean miners.

On the other hand, even if those who left Chikuhō Kōgyōsho sought employment in Japan, the number of jobs available to Koreans was extremely scarce except in coal mines or civil engineering work. Especially in the Chikuhō region of Fukuoka Prefecture, where coal mines are densely concentrated, some mines began hiring Koreans who had left Chikuhō Kōgyōsho, recognizing the value of their experience. The number of Korean miners in Fukuoka Prefecture increased, with Chikuhō Kōgyōsho serving as a single point of contact for several thousand new recruits from the Korean Peninsula each year.

## 5. The 1930s

During the Showa Depression in the early 1930s, the number of coal miners decreased significantly, especially at major coal mines, where many miners were liquidated through rationalization, such as the intro-

duction of coal mining machinery as mentioned above. At the Yubetsu (雄別) Coal Mine in Hokkaidō and the Iizuka (飯塚) Coal Mine in Chikuhō, both effectively managed by Mitsubishi, it has been confirmed that Korean miners were the first to be targeted for layoffs during the Showa Depression<sup>20</sup>. As the economy recovered in the mid-1930s, the number of Korean miners began to increase, but Mitsubishi and Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship Co., Ltd. did not resume hiring new Korean miners, leaving only those who had been working since before the Showa Depression.

In the 1930s, the main coal mines that hired Korean miners were Asō Shōten in Chikuhō, Fukuoka Prefecture, and the Okinoyama (沖之山) and Higashimizome (東見初) coal mines in Ube, Yamaguchi Prefecture, with a tendency to scatter them among the smaller mines in Chikuhō, Fukuoka Prefecture, and Ube, Yamaguchi Prefecture<sup>21</sup>.

Coal mining companies employing Korean miners in the 1930s lagged behind the major zaibatsu-affiliated coal mining companies like Mitsubishi in terms of technical standards and working conditions, and also had lower miner retention rates. Furthermore, in 1933, female underground labor was prohibited in principle, significantly impacting coal mines that had previously employed female labor, particularly in regions like the Chikuhō Coalfield. Amidst this, as the economy recovered, the need arose to increase the number of miners, leading some coal mines to turn their attention to Korean miners. Additionally, the presence of unemployed workers in the surrounding areas who had been laid off from mines like Mitsubishi also encouraged the use of Korean miners.

Thus, from the 1920s to the 1930s, coal mining companies employing Koreans underwent significant changes. For Korean miners, howev-

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<sup>20</sup> Sagawa 2021, 157–189.

<sup>21</sup> The Chōsei (長生) Coal Mine in Yamaguchi Prefecture was also nicknamed the “Chōsen” Coal Mine—“Chōsen” meaning “Korea” in Japanese—because of the large number of Korean miners working there. At this mine, many Koreans died in a flooding accident in 1942. In August 2025, remains believed to belong to victims of that accident were discovered during an underwater survey conducted by a civic group, attracting considerable public attention. <https://www.chouseitankou.com/>

er, this meant being excluded from the relatively better-paying large coal mines and finding their labor market increasingly limited to small and micro-sized mines with poor working conditions and little business continuity.

In the Chikuhō coalfield of Fukuoka Prefecture, where many Korean miners continued working throughout the 1930s, the coal mining company Asō Shōten replaced Mitsubishi Mining as the primary employer of numerous Korean miners.

Asō Shōten was a prominent local company operating multiple small-scale mines within Fukuoka Prefecture. However, it differed significantly from major mining companies like Mitsubishi in terms of operational scale, technical standards, and the character of its miners. The low productivity of Asō Shōten's coal mines can be illustrated, for example, by comparing coal production per worker in the Chikuhō region. In May 1930, Asō Shōten's production was 1.08 tons. This figure was only about half that of the largest companies, Mitsui and Mitsubishi, or regional powerhouses like Kaijima and Meiji (明治). The cause of Asō Shōten's low productivity was the delay in introducing new coal mining techniques. However, by the early 1930s, during the Showa Depression, Asō Shōten, though still lagging behind other large-scale coal mining companies, showed some progress in technology adoption. Around this time, the use of Korean miners began to expand.

**Table2: Comparison of Efficiency and Wages by Coal Mining Company in Chikuhō During May 1930**

Coal Mining Company Name	Coal Production Per Coal Face Worker	Percentage of Coal Face Workers among All Miners	Daily Average Wage Per Coal Face Worker
<b>Major Zaibatsu Coal Mining Companies</b>			
Mitsui (三井) (5 mines)	2.60 t	34.8 %	2.245 Yen
Mitsubishi (三菱) (4 mines)	2.32 t	32.6 %	2.208 Yen
Sumitomo (住友) (1 mine)	1.53 t	44.8 %	2.143 Yen
Furukawa (古河) (2 mines)	2.72 t	29.0 %	2.137 Yen

<b>Major and Small Local Coal Mining Companies</b>			
<b>Asō Shōten (麻生商店) (6 mines)</b>	<b>1.08 t</b>	<b>57.0 %</b>	<b>1.611 Yen</b>
Kaijima (貝島) (6 mines)	1.98 t	35.2 %	2.007 Yen
Meiji (明治) (7 mines)	2.11 t	44.5%	2.062 Yen
The other major local coal mining companies (8 mines)	1.52 t	45.3%	1.624 Yen
Small coal mining companies (27 mines)	1.09 t	56.6 %	1.331 Yen

Source: Ayukawa 1997, 22

Furthermore, the prohibition of female miners' underground labor during the Showa Depression period also contributed to Asō Shōten's expansion of Korean miners' employment. The 1928 revision of the Regulations concerning Relief for Miners (Kōfu rōeki fujo kisoku 鉱夫労役扶助規則) prohibited, in principle, women and minors from working underground or performing night shifts in coal mines. This law had a significant impact on the coal mining industry in the Chikuhō region, where it was common for husbands and wives to work together as pairs in coal extraction. Consequently, a five-year grace period was established for the law's implementation, and exceptions were also created. This legislation forced coal mining companies to reorganize their labor structures and transform their coal extraction techniques. Furthermore, the ban on women working underground significantly affected the livelihoods of coal miners who relied on dual incomes to support their families. Women could no longer engage in high-paying underground work, leading to a reduction in household income.

The response to the ban on women working underground differed greatly between large and small coal mining companies. While some major companies, like Mitsubishi, actively introduced new technologies from the 1920s, this was not the norm. Particularly, introducing troughs and the water-flow method or conveyors into the coal transport process at the coalface meant taking work away from the women (wives) who had traditionally performed this task. In other words, advancing mecha-

nization necessitated dismantling the traditional miner's custom of working as a couple and the labor organization. However, miners resisted mechanizing coal transport at the coalface because they disliked the loss of income that would result from their wives (or partners) no longer being able to work underground. In the 1920s, some mines, like the Sumitomo Tadakuma (住友忠隈) Coal Mine, faced miner sabotage and had to suspend mechanization efforts<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore, since women were not prohibited from working underground in the 1920s, if one mine attempted to force mechanization of coal haulage from the face and dismantle the labor organization, the miners would simply move to another mine. In fact, this was precisely the phenomenon occurring at Mitsubishi Chikuhō Kōgyōsho. The use of Korean miners at Chikuhō Kōgyōsho expanded to replace the married miners who had moved away during the process of introducing new technology.

By the late 1920s, large coal mining companies recognized the labor organization of couples working together as a factor hindering productivity gains through mechanization. Consequently, these major mining companies did not oppose the enactment of laws prohibiting women from working underground. Instead, they actively leveraged this legislation as a lever for reorganizing labor structures and advancing mechanization as rationalization measures during the Showa Depression. For example, at the Mitsui Tagawa (三井田川) Coal Mine, while transferring wives working underground to surface jobs or arranging home-based work, the company simultaneously pursued thorough rationalization and mechanization. This aimed to increase coal extraction efficiency and raise the wages of husbands (coal miners), ensuring households could maintain their livelihoods even if wives' wages decreased<sup>23</sup>. On the other hand, at Mitsubishi, the legal ban on all female underground labor reduced the need to rely on Korean miners for labor as had been the case previously. Due to the blanket ban on women working underground, Jap-

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<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Internal Affairs, Social Affairs Bureau 1924, 98.

<sup>23</sup> Noyori, 2010, 139 - 148.

anese miners who had previously worked as couples could no longer transfer to other coal mines merely because their wives were prohibited from working underground. If they wished to continue working as a couple, their only option was to move to small- or micro-sized coal mines where women's underground labor was exceptionally allowed. Most miners preferred to remain at the large coal mines, where the husband served as the household breadwinner while the wife engaged in supplementary aboveground work, rather than move to smaller mines with less favorable conditions. Amid these changing circumstances, Korean miners at Mitsubishi's coal mines became primary targets for layoffs.

Meanwhile, the response of small and micro-sized coal mining companies to the ban on female underground labor was entirely different from that of large mining companies. Operating under poor mining conditions and lacking financial resources, these smaller companies could neither advance mechanization nor offer husbands wages high enough to support their families. Consequently, in stark contrast to the large mining companies, small and micro-sized mines strongly opposed the ban on female underground labor. These companies demanded and secured an exception clause during the legislative process allowing female underground labor in mines where mechanization was difficult. Consequently, female underground labor continued widely in small and micro-sized mines throughout the 1930s.

Of particular interest is the position of Asō Shōten, which expanded its use of Korean miners in the 1930s. As a company lagging in rationalization progress and productivity, Asō Shōten likely found it difficult to substantially raise coal miner wages through efficiency gains, unlike other major coal mining companies. Thus, while the actual conditions of the mines it operated were closer to those of small and micro-sized mines, Asō Shōten was a major regional coal mining company. Its founder had even served as the representative of the Chikuhō coal mining operators' association. Consequently, unlike other small and micro-sized mines, it could not continue employing female underground workers. Thus, Asō Shōten's position—lagging behind major coal mines in rationalization efforts yet unable to continue employing female pit workers like small

and micro-sized mines—led it to expand the use of Korean miners as female pit labor became prohibited. Furthermore, the mines operated by Asō Shōten were located near Mitsubishi Chikuhō Kōgyōsho. Asō Shōten could utilize Korean miners dismissed by Mitsubishi as a labor source. Unlike Mitsubishi, which recruited new arrivals from the Korean Peninsula, Asō Shōten employed former coal miners residing in Japan.

Korean miners employed by Asō Shōten also often worked in areas separate from those of Japanese miners, as was the case at Mitsubishi. A 1935 report compiled by the local labor union (Japan Coal Miners' Union 日本石炭坑夫組合) pointed out that at Asō Shōten, Koreans were assigned to sections with high gas concentrations and poor ventilation—areas that Japanese miners normally avoided<sup>24</sup>. The report also provides examples from several small-scale coal mines where Koreans were likewise placed in locations eschewed by Japanese workers. In the same year as the labor union's investigation, a student who conducted practical training at Asō Shōten's coal mine recorded that the company evaluated Koreans as physically robust, capable of enduring arduous labor, highly obedient, and displaying what the company regarded as a pronounced focus on improving their economic situation<sup>25</sup>. As discussed earlier, many Korean miners endured harsh working conditions because they needed to send remittances to their families in their hometowns and because their employment options were severely limited. Mine managers, however, praised their physical stamina and used such evaluations to justify assigning Koreans to work environments that Japanese miners avoided.

## 6. Wartime Labor Mobilization

Finally, I would like to offer some perspective on how the history up to the 1930s is connected to the emergence of people who were mobilized

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<sup>24</sup> Japan Coal Miners' Union 1935, 161.

<sup>25</sup> Morisawa 1936, 9–10.

to work in the coal mines under the wartime labor mobilization policy. Coal mining companies had differing attitudes toward labor mobilization policies for Koreans. While coal mining companies with experience in using Korean miners, such as Mitsubishi, Asō, and Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship, were proactive, coal mining companies that had never used Korean miners before, such as Mitsui Mining Co., Ltd., initially adopted a stance of avoiding their use. According to a survey conducted by the Institute for Science of Labor (労働科学研究所) during the war, Mitsubishi, which had a small number of Korean miners remaining, and Asō Shōten, which used a large number of Korean miners, assigned one registered Korean miner to each group of 10 to 20 mobilized Koreans to supervise and instruct their work<sup>26</sup>. Additionally, regarding living conditions, Korean miners who had been employed previously were involved in managing and caring for the dormitories and camps where mobilized Koreans were housed. However, the presence of Korean miners who had worked in the coal mines before the wartime mobilization policy began did not yield the results the coal mining companies had hoped for. For example, it is known that quite a number of mobilized Koreans escaped from the mines during the war, and at Asō, the number of escapees was larger than the average for Fukuoka Prefecture. In other words, the presence of Korean miners employed before the war period did not prevent mobilized Koreans from escaping. Moreover, the coal miners and security authorities assumed that the enrolled workers were involved in some way in escapes, such as by guiding the escapees. Thus, those who had been enrolled prior to the labor mobilization policy were placed in the complicated position of having to guide and manage the mobilized Koreans, while at the same time being the object of scrutiny by the security authorities and the coal mines. However, further examination is needed regarding the relationships between Korean miners mobilized during WWII and those employed at worksites prior to wartime mobilization, both in production areas and living quarters, as well as the differences in their treatment.

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<sup>26</sup> Institute for Science of Labor 1943, 1784.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the long-standing relationship between Japanese coal mines and Korean workers, demonstrating that a comprehensive understanding of the history of coal mining requires considering the presence and roles of Korean miners in the pre-WWII period. This issue is closely related to the ongoing World Heritage debates. For example, the Industrial Heritage Information Center<sup>27</sup>, which introduces the “Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution,” presents testimony from the son of a Korean miner who had been working at the Hashima Coal Mine since before the wartime mobilization began. Such testimonies, however, can only be properly contextualized by examining the prewar role and status of Korean miners. Furthermore, beyond the coal industry, there existed specific industries in Japan that employed Korean laborers prior to the wartime mobilization. Some of the coal mines in which they worked, as well as the dams and tunnels whose construction they contributed to, continue to exist today either as industrial heritage sites or as facilities that remain in operation. Any attempt to present a comprehensive historical account of such industries needs to incorporate the experiences of Korean laborers as an integral part of that history.

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<sup>27</sup> The problems with this facility’s exhibition are discussed in detail in the report by Johnsen (2021) presented below.

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# A Regional Contextualization of the Transition to the Post-Cold War Era in East Asia

Yujin LIM

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the transition to the post-Cold War era in East Asia, highlighting the period between 1989 and 1994. Its narrative highlights 1972 as a pivotal year, witnessing the Sino-U.S. rapprochement and the July 4 South-North Joint Communiqué, alongside the two Koreas' domestic constitutional amendments that solidified their respective leaderships despite underlying tensions. Then, the paper moves on to discuss the transitional period of 1989-1994, marked by South Korea's normalization with the Soviet Union and China, inter-Korean agreements, and ultimately, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter's 1994 visit to Pyongyang and Kim Il Sung's subsequent death. The paper concludes that the Korean Peninsula transitioned into the post-Cold War era in 1994, highlighting how a series of interconnected regional events led to its distinct conclusion.

## Keywords

Cold War, Korean Peninsula, East Asia, Regional Dynamics, Détente

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Yujin Lim earned a PhD in History (International Relations) from the University of Leeds in 2025. (yujinlimm@gmail.com)

## Introduction

This article reframes the transition to the post-Cold War era in East Asia, with a primary focus on the period between 1989 and 1994. While the year 1972 marked a pivotal moment of strategic change and presented an early opportunity for a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations, this article revisits it as essential historical background rather than the direct commencement of the post-Cold War transition. The research then directly draws the landscape of historical changes from 1989, which ultimately led the Korean Peninsula to the post-Cold War era in 1994. In taking this approach, the paper acknowledges a significant temporal gap in the direct narrative, recognizing that the intervening period has been thoroughly explored by many well-grounded studies (Wu 2024; Gray 2022; Liu and Sakai 2018). The proposed framework shifts the analytical focus from a universally applied Cold War timeline to a regionally specific understanding, arguing that the intricate dynamics of East Asia necessitate a distinct periodization for this transformative epoch.

This paper aims to enhance the reader's understanding of this East Asian history by revisiting events that occurred in 1972, a pivotal year that witnessed a significant diplomatic overture from the United States towards China, fundamentally altering the strategic calculus for East Asian states, including North Korea. This reorientation, highlighted by President Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in February 1972, initiated a complex web of diplomatic realignments that reverberated across the region (Radchenko and Schaefer 2017). This period marked a departure from the rigid bipolarity of the earlier Cold War, fostering an environment in which states like South Korea began to pursue independent diplomatic initiatives, ultimately leading to the establishment of relations with China in the early 1990s (Hwang and Choi 2015).

During the Cold War period, East Asia exhibited stark ideological divisions, sustained military standoffs, and the solidification of alliance networks oriented toward either the United States or the Soviet Union. The region functioned as a primary arena in which global bipolar confrontation was vividly enacted. Over the ensuing decades, the Korean

Peninsula endured as a profoundly militarized divide. These structural dynamics engendered a geopolitical milieu defined by inflexible blocs, constrained diplomatic latitude, and persistent security dilemmas. Articulating these attributes furnishes a vital benchmark for appraising assertions of a post-Cold War transition. The strategic implications of the U. S.-China rapprochement in 1972, for instance, compelled North Korea to reassess its security posture, influencing its engagement with South Korea (Saraiva and Nunes 2019).

Within this milieu, the early 1990s heralded a confluence of developments that betokened a rupture from the entrenched paradigms of the Cold War. The normalization of diplomatic ties among principal regional powers, the advent of multilateral bodies such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the intensification of economic interconnections conjointly reconfigured the modalities of interaction throughout East Asia. These transformations denoted a progression from a domain governed by zero-sum security dynamics to one progressively oriented toward diplomatic interchange and collaborative apparatuses. Construed as a trajectory wherein an inflexible, ideologically bifurcated order incrementally yielded to more supple and variegated paradigms of regional governance, these alterations evince East Asia's accession to a post-Cold War epoch (Iwashita and Boyle 2022).

Concurrently, salient features of Cold War-era structures persisted, particularly on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea has maintained a communist-derived, Juche-oriented authoritarian regime while advancing nuclear and missile programs that perpetuate antagonistic relations with the United States, Japan, and the wider liberal international order. Although inter-Korean relations have occasionally manifested episodes of reconciliation, the essential state of division, the paradigmatic emblem of the Cold War, remains unaltered. Nevertheless, contemporary East Asia cannot be conflated with its Cold War antecedent: despite these enduring anomalies, the region now functions amid a substantially transformed strategic and diplomatic milieu, defined not by bipolar antagonism but by intricate interdependence, institutionalized deliberation, and pluralized power configurations. This dialectic of transformation and continuity lies

at the heart of East Asia's post-Cold War trajectory. This nuanced perspective allows for an examination of how regional actors navigated a bipolar global order while simultaneously confronting their unique historical legacies (Selden 2009).

The article introduces the events of the transitional years in two separate sections. The section on the year 1972 captures the events that occurred in East Asia to describe this year of strategic change. The improved relations between China and the U.S., and the Joint Communiqué between North and South Korea, signaled a significant possibility of a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations, demonstrating how regional dynamics shifted with the change in relations between great powers, thereby influencing inter-Korean relations. Following the Joint Communiqué, both North and South Korea amended their constitutions, which resulted in the solidification of their respective leaderships. The subsequent section focuses on the period between 1989 and 1994 to reveal how the Korean Peninsula gradually transitioned to the post-Cold War era. The normalization of relations between South Korea and the Soviet Union initiated a domino effect of improving diplomatic relations across the East Asian region. The Cold War history centered on the Korean Peninsula concluded in 1994 with the abrupt death (The Economist 1994) of Kim Il Sung, following President Jimmy Carter's visit to Pyongyang and the promise of reopening channels for inter-Korean dialogue. The illustrations presented in this article lead to the conclusion that the Korean Peninsula transitioned into the post-Cold War era in 1994. This specific timeframe critically highlights how regional dynamics, rather than solely global events, decisively shaped the trajectory of geopolitical shifts and the eventual resolution of Cold War tensions in this particular arena.

## **Methodology and Archival Considerations**

This scholarly investigation draws upon a multidisciplinary array of primary and secondary sources, including declassified government documents, diplomatic communiqués, memoirs of key political figures, and

contemporary news analyses, to construct a comprehensive narrative of this pivotal period. While this article is informed by established historical facts, its primary impetus stems from the pivotal, contingent events that shaped its narrative, rather than a rigid adherence to a theoretical framework. Unlike a political science study that might employ theory as a strict model for hypothesis testing, this historical analysis utilizes theory merely as a guiding perspective. The objective is not to identify a universally applicable, predictive model, but rather to reconstruct and elucidate the distinctive circumstances of the past. This nuanced approach acknowledges the complexities inherent in historical analysis, where the interplay of structural forces and agentic choices often defies simplistic categorization. This approach also acknowledges the significance of small state identities and their vulnerability in shaping foreign policy decisions.

The research incorporates relevant sources found in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series to illuminate the Korean Peninsula's intertwined history with the U.S. Moreover, the research acknowledges other valuable sources, such as those from the Carter Center and the Academy of Korean Studies, as they offer multidimensional perspectives beyond official government documents like those from the National Archives and Presidential Archives.

Given that government archival sources on the latter half of the Cold War are rarely available due to classification reasons, this article relies more heavily on testimonial writings from individuals who were part of the historical events. Specifically, it engages with the memoirs of Roh Tae Woo, the president of South Korea from 1988 to 1993, and Park Cheol Eon, a policy advisor to the Presidential Secretariat who was instrumental in Roh Tae Woo's 'Nordpolitik' and played a vital role in normalizing relations with Russia and China.

Additionally, sources related to inter-Korean relations made available by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Unification of South Korea are utilized. In the realm of English-language materials, the U.S. Department of State's Office of the Historian provides major historical documents on U.S. foreign policy through the Carter administration.

## 1972, The Year of Strategic Change

The rapprochement between the United States and China in 1972 stemmed from mutual geopolitical imperatives, foremost among them the shared interest in countering Soviet ascendancy against the backdrop of the escalating Sino-Soviet schism in the late 1960s. By the late 1960s, the Sino-Soviet rift had escalated into overt antagonism, profoundly reshaping the strategic triangle among Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. Both the United States and China discerned mutual strategic benefits in offsetting Soviet power, thereby establishing the foundational rationale for their rapprochement (Goh 2004). The Nixon administration endeavored to capitalize on fissures within the communist sphere to realign its foreign policy and extricate itself from Vietnam. Simultaneously, China, facing increasing isolation and border disputes with the Soviet Union, sought to leverage a relationship with the U.S. to mitigate Soviet encirclement (Son 2023).

The developments illustrate that the pivotal diplomatic achievements of 1972 were not isolated events but rather the outcomes of converging geopolitical shifts, domestic political pressures, and broader systemic changes. The reconfiguration of great-power alignments, particularly the emergence of triangular diplomacy among the United States, China, and the Soviet Union, created new imperatives for regional actors to adjust their strategies. This fusion of global and regional dynamics ushered in a period of diplomatic flexibility across East Asia, enabling the United States, China, and both Koreas to realign their approaches and pursue options long blocked by the rigid bipolarity of the early Cold War.

Tensions and conflict continued in East Asia, whether stemming from ideological differences or internal and external state conflicts. Despite these challenges, regional actors endeavored to improve external relations. As a result, China normalized relations with the U.S. in the 1970s and with South Korea soon after the end of the Cold War. The modernization movement during the Park Chung Hee administration in South Korea, North Korea's solidification of its national identity, and most importantly, the normalization of relations between China and the U.S. all

occurred in the 1970s. These events signaled a new era. Interestingly, although East Asia, and the Korean Peninsula in particular, was at the forefront of the Cold War confrontation, movements indicating significant future change were already underway two decades before the official end of the Cold War. This complexity reveals the long-term, multilevel facets behind a global historical event.

1972 stands as a monumental year, marked by China and the U.S. establishing peaceful relations and North and South Korea signing the North-South Joint Communiqué. Concurrently, both Koreas amended their constitutions: South Korea adopted Yushin, an authoritarian constitution granting formidable power to Park Chung Hee, while North Korea enshrined Juche, an ideology of independence and resistance to foreign intervention. The Sino-U.S. rapprochement on February 21 and the North-South Joint Communiqué on July 4 eased the regional atmosphere. Conversely, the declaration of Yushin on October 17 and the institutionalization of Juche on December 27 intensified domestic tensions within both Koreas. In essence, leadership was solidified in both nations, and structural divisions appeared to deepen, even amidst rhetorical moves aligning with the broader regional détente.

1972 was a dramatic year, and the connections and disconnections among events require further analysis. The foreign relations atmosphere in East Asia shifted in 1972 with the Sino-U.S. rapprochement (Ostermann 2011). Both China and the U.S. recognized the importance of maintaining peace on the Korean Peninsula, a sentiment reflected in two paragraphs of the Shanghai Communiqué, which included general clauses about the Korean Peninsula and regional peace. Kim Il Sung welcomed the rapprochement, hailing it as a “great victory for the Chinese people and the revolutionary peoples worldwide” (Chen 2001). He advocated for leveraging this opportunity to achieve unification on the Korean Peninsula, a process that, in North Korea’s view, included the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea. China supported this aspiration, envisioning the plan collaboratively, especially given Kissinger’s statement that the U.S. intended to withdraw a “substantial percentage” of its forces from South Korea (FRUS 1971). Thus, 1972 marked a strategic shift for

North Korea, with Kim Il Sung's unification idea at its core (Kim 1975). However, the unification model he envisioned was not agreeable to South Korea. Unlike Kim Il Sung, Park Chung Hee did not warmly welcome the rapprochement between China and the United States. Peaceful relations between the great powers would undermine the justification for the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea. As South Korea was not prepared to confront North Korea militarily, the establishment of Sino-U.S. ties necessitated a more strategic approach for Park Chung Hee, compelling him to consolidate his domestic political power while strategically managing military ties with the United States.

With the new tide of international relations in East Asia, North and South Korea signed their first Joint Communiqué in July 1972. The 1972 Joint Communiqué between North and South Korea emerged from transformations in the wider Cold War landscape, coupled with shifting domestic and regional imperatives. The Washington-Beijing rapprochement unsettled long-held strategic presumptions on the Korean Peninsula, compelling both Pyongyang and Seoul to recalibrate their diplomatic orientations. Pyongyang, anticipating a possible attenuation of its preferential ties with China, pursued alternative channels to affirm its legitimacy and authority. Concurrently, under President Park Chung-hee, Seoul grappled with mounting international calls for political liberalization while striving to safeguard external alliances amid flux in great-power alignments. Furthermore, the international impetus toward détente, manifest in U.S.-Soviet arms control accords and nascent diplomatic overtures throughout Asia, engendered a propitious milieu for inter-Korean engagement (Westad 2017). Within this context of strategic ambiguity and guarded optimism, both Koreas recognized mutual benefits in initiating talks, culminating in the July 4 Joint Communiqué, which for the first time enunciated tenets for peaceful reunification and reciprocal nonintervention.

This statement established the three principles of peaceful unification: self-reliance, peace, and national unity. The principles are elaborated within the statement: first, unification must be resolved independently, without reliance on or interference from foreign powers; second, unification should be achieved peacefully, not through the use of force against

each other; and third, it is necessary to promote national unity as one nation, transcending differences in ideas, ideologies, and institutions (Kim 1977). This document was the result of the meetings between Lee Hu Rak, the head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, and Kim Young Joo, head of organizational guidance in Pyongyang, from May 2-5, 1972, followed by Park Sung Chul, the DPRK's Second Deputy Prime Minister, visiting to Seoul from May 29 to June 1, 1972 (Nambuk Daehwa No. 1 ~1973.4). At this moment, the two sides openly exchanged views with a mutual desire to bring about peaceful unification. They also agreed to 'take active measures to prevent unexpected military clashes, not slander each other, large or small, and to ease tensions and create an atmosphere of trust.' This indicates that the two sides shared the view that they lacked trust and recognized the need to ease tensions to create an atmosphere of trust (Ruzicka and Keating 2015).

The Joint Communiqué was cautiously worded, leaving room for interpretation, and North Korea subsequently used it as a basis to demand the U.S. troop withdrawal from South Korea. This was achieved through a stretched interpretation of self-reliance, building a logic for removing the U.S. from the Korean Peninsula. Ten days after the announcement of the Joint Communiqué, Kim Jong Il issued a document entitled "Let's fight firmly to carry out the three principles of the country," in which he argued for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea and the abolition of the South Korean alliance with the U.S (Malzac and Mahomed 2024). He further contended, "Regardless of communism or nationalism, it is necessary to eliminate evil laws such as the anti-communist law and the national security law, as it transcends the difference between ideology, political opinion, faith, and party."

Apart from newly established diplomatic channels, North and South Korea also solidified leadership domestically by amending their constitutions. In October 1972, the Park administration in the South introduced Yushin with the alleged spirit of rejuvenating the country (Park 1972). Park asserted that the country was in disarray, hindering the national objective of unification. He dissolved the National Assembly and advocated for systemic reform, eliminating the political system that chal-

lenged his leadership by regulating democratic political activities. Meanwhile, North Korea enshrined the Juche ideology in its constitution in December 1972. Juche, rooted in Marxism-Leninism, emphasizes independence and sovereignty, promoting the belief that a country should prosper through self-reliance in politics, economy, and military.

The Joint Communiqué initiated inter-Korean dialogues with the aim of fostering peace on the Korean Peninsula. However, this mood of reconciliation proved short-lived. North Korea began dispatching spies through tunnels dug from North to South Korea. One such tunnel was discovered in Yeoncheon, Gyeonggi Province, in November 1974, with North Korean artifacts serving as evidence (National Archives of Korea 1978).

These tunnels reveal North Korea's dual strategy towards the South, employing both dialogue and infiltration. This tactic also involves appeasement during dialogue coupled with military provocation, a strategy of brinkmanship. North Korea has a history of employing such mixed approaches, dating back to the Korean War. During the armistice negotiations, which commenced in July 1951, North Korea would demand negotiations when the front lines were unfavorable but refuse them when they were favorable. Ultimately, North Korea exploited the two years of negotiations by combining combat and diplomatic discussions. North Korea did not abandon its aggressive tactics even when dialogue channels reopened two decades later. According to Kim Bu Seong, a former designer of the tunnel who defected to South Korea, the tunnel was constructed in 1971 with the intention of invading the South (Jung 2017).

Another tunnel was discovered in Cheolwon on March 19, 1975 (Oberdorfer 1975). In total, four tunnels were found, with two more discovered in 1978 and 1990. North Korea's persistent efforts to infiltrate South Korea, irrespective of the ongoing dialogue process, only deepened South Korea's distrust of the North. This clandestine military infrastructure, designed for rapid troop deployment, further substantiated the South Korean perception of Pyongyang's deceptive and aggressive intentions despite overt diplomatic overtures (Han 1979).

The momentum of reconciliation in 1972 did not translate into con-

structive cooperation, as the two Koreas repeated the conflict and cooperation patterns characteristic of the Cold War. Chun Doo Hwan, president of South Korea from 1980 to 1988, emphasized the importance of trust between North and South Korea in his 1981 New Year's address (Chun 1981). This speech initiated a hopeful start to inter-Korean relations in the 1980s. However, despite this optimistic beginning, both sides expressed conflicting interests and did not hesitate to voice harsh criticisms later in the decade. The peaceful atmosphere of the early 1980s could have easily been shattered by the Rangoon bombing in 1983, North Korea's assassination attempt on Chun Doo Hwan (Tan and Bridges 2019). This significant and undeniable event deepened South Korea's distrust of North Korea. While available archival sources do not clearly delineate the sequence of events or dialogues that led to deteriorating inter-Korean relations, the scattered incidents across different periods suggest that distrust consistently drove these relations, which is why the division of the Korean Peninsula remains unresolved even after the end of the Cold War.

## **Transition to the Post-Cold War Era, 1989-1994**

The end of the Cold War is widely accepted to have occurred in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Gaddis 2005). The traditional view of the end of the Cold War centers on the history of great powers. John Lewis Gaddis, a proponent of this traditionalist perspective, argues that U.S. strategies, such as military buildup, pressured regional actors and ultimately contributed to the end of the Cold War (Gaddis 2005). While this point is valid, it is limited in its ability to capture regional dynamics. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's edited volume on the East Asian Cold War, which incorporates Japan's history into the traditionalist view, helps to balance these shortcomings (Hasegawa 2011). He asserts that the Soviet Union's decision to normalize relations with regional actors—China, Japan, and South Korea—directly impacted the end of the Cold War era. However, this meaningful effort to capture regional dynamics still faces

criticism due to its primary focus on great powers.

The traditional view overlooks the perspectives of regional actors like China, North Korea, and South Korea. Scholars have acknowledged China's role during this period, with Jian Chen examining its contribution (Chen 2001). Similar efforts have been made in Korean studies. Victor Cha primarily explored South Korea and Japan, focusing on their roles as close allies of the U.S., while Charles Armstrong examined North Korea's unique position during this historical timeframe, noting that its economic and diplomatic isolation hindered its transformation from the Cold War era (Armstrong 2013; Cha 1999). This regionalist perspective has enriched the study of the Cold War's end in East Asia.

Just as Odd Arne Westad emphasizes that traditionalist views on the end of the Cold War are 'mono-dimensional', this article acknowledges that the conclusion of the Cold War resulted from a series of events rather than a single one (Westad 2017; 2014). The end of the Cold War had multiple endings, and dynamic events around the world influenced its conclusion. His view on these multi-dimensional endings suggests a broader perspective for understanding the history (Pons and Romero 2014). This article focuses on some of the major events that occurred on the Korean Peninsula during the transition to the post-Cold War era, aiming to understand the Cold War from a small-state's angle rather than the traditional great power perspective. This approach helps clarify the Cold War timeline in East Asia.

As much as this timeline of world history, the end of the Cold War in 1991, is relevant to the Korean Peninsula, it does not fully apply. The process of the end of the Cold War started in 1989 and concluded in 1994 in East Asia (Lee 2022). Several important events occurred during this timeframe. While the U.S. presidential transition from Ronald Reagan to George H.W. Bush happened across the Pacific Ocean on January 20, 1989, a student-led demonstration took place at Tiananmen Square in Beijing on June 4, 1989. In June, Roh Tae Woo and Mikhail Gorbachev met in San Francisco, leading to the normalization of relations between South Korea and the Soviet Union on September 30, 1990. North and South Korea signed the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression,

and Exchanges and Cooperation on December 13, 1991 (Ministry of Unification 1992). Two weeks later, the Soviet Union dissolved on December 26. On January 20, North and South Korea announced another historic declaration, the Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2008). Three months later, North Korea revised its Socialist Constitution on April 9, and Kim Jong Il received the title of *wonsu*, denoting the highest military rank in North Korea, four days before the April 25 Military Foundation Day in 1992. In the same year, Kim Dal Hyeon, the then Deputy Prime Minister of North Korea, visited Seoul between July 19 and 25 to encourage South Korean private sector investment in North Korea. Shortly after this, China and South Korea normalized relations on August 24, 1992 (Hwang and Choi 2000). On June 16, 1994, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter visited North Korea with his wife, responding to Pyongyang's invitation from 1991. Three weeks after the visit, Kim Il Sung died of a heart attack on July 8, 1994.

Among the major events that occurred from 1989 to 1994, the newly established relations across different ideologies deserve scrutiny as a historical breakthrough. This is because ideological rivalry supported a bipolar power structure in East Asia, a key characteristic of the Cold War (Kramer 2014). The two different systems of North and South Korea, each aligned with its respective allies, naturally created the ideological backdrop of the Peninsula, thereby influencing their relations.

South Korea's normalization with the Soviet Union initiated a domino effect in East Asian international relations, ushering in a new era. While detailed data on normalization are available, the research relies on memoirs from historical figures present at key moments (Moon 2023). The most valuable memoirs are those of Roh Tae Woo, the South Korean president at the time, and Park Chul Eon, a policy advisor to the Presidential Secretariat. Park Chul Eon's memoir thoroughly captures the background of South Korea-Soviet Union relations. Similar to other public diplomatic relations, the groundwork for normalization was laid by working groups from both governments. Park Chul Eon played a crucial role in paving the way for these relations. He held a secret meeting

with the senior vice president of the International Department of the Soviet Communist Party on March 22, 1990. During this meeting, Park Chul Eon delivered a letter from South Korean President Roh Tae Woo, expressing hope for normalization ‘to promote stability and peace’ (Park 2005). Park recalled Roh’s letter stating his wish for the wave of reconciliation and cooperation prevalent in Europe to extend to East Asia.

After a few more exchanges through unofficial channels, Roh Tae Woo and Gorbachev met in San Francisco on June 4, 1990. Although the summit did not immediately conclude with the normalization of relations, South Korean delegations, including Senior Economic Secretary Kim Jong In and Senior Secretary of Foreign Affairs Kim Jong Hwi, visited Moscow in August 1990. While South Korea was interested in building diplomatic relations, the Soviet Union primarily focused on economic cooperation. However, economic cooperation without normalization proved challenging. Therefore, on September 30, 1990, South Korea and the Soviet Union normalized interactions at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, with their respective foreign ministers, Choi Ho Jung and Eduard Shevardnadze, signing the agreement (Park 2005).

According to Roh Tae Woo’s memoir, the newly established ties between the two countries provided China with a stronger impetus to build relations with South Korea (Roh 1984). In the memoir, Roh reminisces about his meeting with former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz on October 17, 1990. Shultz informed Roh about his meeting with a former Chinese ambassador to the U.S. approximately three to four weeks prior. According to Shultz, this ambassador, Zhu Qichen, voluntarily expressed China’s desire to expand economic and trade relations with South Korea after Shultz mentioned he would be meeting with Roh Tae Woo. Roh reflects on the impression Shultz conveyed to him: it seemed to Shultz that China needed South Korea more than South Korea needed China. This section of the memoir is titled ‘China will walk into your arms,’ a direct quote from Shultz to Roh Tae Woo.

The desire to build relations was mutual, with Roh himself showing an effort to bond with China from the beginning of his administration. Even before Schultz stated that ‘China will walk into South Korea’s

arms,' Roh was maneuvering his way through the great powers. When students and citizens protested for democratization in Tiananmen Square in June 1989, Roh raised this matter with President Bush and Schultz, as well as British Prime Minister Thatcher. At the time, China's diplomatic relations were strained due to harsh criticism against the Communist Party, and the Western world maintained a firm stance on human rights. Roh emphasized that the world should approach China with more caution, respecting its history and culture. He recalls:

I don't know how much what I said worked, but their attitude seemed to have softened considerably. U.S. Defense Secretary Richard Cheney and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Colin Powell, who visited Korea in November 1991 to attend the Korea-US Security Council, said, The history of the communist regime is over and the flow of world history has changed, and the results are now becoming clear. However, because China is slow to change, the U.S. Congress and the media will have to refrain from hurriedly demanding improvement of human rights in China. I think it is wise to pursue policy toward China slowly (Roh 2011).

China responded to these changes. Roh believed this was due to South Korea's elevated status in international society, a result of its newly established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and its joining of the United Nations. Roh concluded that 'despite the blood alliance with North Korea, it is inevitable to choose South Korea.' (Roh 2011) His confidence was also rooted in South Korea's amicable relations with Japan and the U.S.

According to Roh Tae Woo, an outer factor that directly influenced both China and South Korea in building relations was a sporting event. In his memoir, he recollects sports as an essential bridge for building connections with China. China participated in the Seoul Olympics, having won the Asian Games two years prior. The friendly atmosphere fostered by these two events persisted, and diplomatic relations matured in the early 1990s. Roh believed there was no reason to deliberately delay

diplomatic relations between Korea and China and hand them over to the next government. He was determined to complete his Nordpolitik, a policy aimed at establishing diplomatic relations with countries north of the Korean Peninsula, and normalization with China was crucial to achieving this before his term ended. His resolve was evident when he met with George Shultz, the former U.S. Secretary of State, on November 4, 1991, expressing his intention to establish diplomatic relations with China by the end of 1992 (Roh 2011).

As a final step toward officially establishing diplomatic relations with China, Roh Tae Woo met with Qian Qichen, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, to demonstrate South Korea's recognition of China as a key regional player. Roh conveyed to Qian that South Korea hoped China would persuade North Korea to denuclearize and contribute to maintaining peace. Roh recalled that China appreciated South Korea's acknowledgment of its significant regional role (Roh 2011).

As a result of various efforts, both before and after this meeting, South Korean Foreign Minister Lee Sang Ok visited China on April 13, 1992, to attend the General Assembly of the Economic and Social Committee of the Asia-Pacific region, where he proposed diplomatic relations with China.

Kim Young Sam, a civilian president reinstated after a prolonged period of military leadership, was inaugurated in 1993, marking a significant transitional period for both domestic politics and external relations. Kim Young Sam established the Presidential Segyehwa Promotion Committee to address globalization (Presidential Committee for Globalization 2006). South Korea leveraged its enhanced value as a trade partner to China following the Sino-Soviet split. Kim Young Sam's administration aimed to achieve advanced-nation status through economic policy, which prompted China to re-evaluate its relationship with South Korea. This, in turn, created a context in which Jimmy Carter's visit to North Korea appeared natural. North Korea invited Carter to Pyongyang in 1991, and he made the visit in 1994. Traveling as a civilian, Carter became the first person to cross the Korean Demilitarized Zone since the peninsula's division. Following a two-day dialogue, Kim Il Sung agreed

to freeze his nuclear program in exchange for the resumption of talks with the U.S. The Clinton administration received diplomatic confirmation from North Korea upon Carter's arrival, with Clinton hailing the trip as "the beginning of a new stage" ("Carter Trip Paves the Way for U.S.-North Korean Pact" 1995).

With the new winds of foreign policy in East Asia, Seoul showed interest in reconnecting with the North, and the two sides agreed to hold the first inter-Korean summit since the division on July 25-27, 1994. This marked a new turning point. However, Kim Il Sung died on July 8, roughly twenty days before the scheduled meeting, halting the newly changing atmosphere on the Korean Peninsula. The friendly atmosphere fostered by Carter's visit ended with his abrupt death, and North Korea entered a new era under the leadership of Kim Jong Il.

North Korea's drastic change after 1994, which contrasts greatly with South Korea's foreign policy orientation, clearly indicates that the Korean Peninsula transitioned into the post-Cold War era. North Korea cemented the Juche ideology, and Kim Jong Il succeeded to leadership. Unfortunately for him, North Korea began to tread an uneasy path politically and economically. Trade and aid from the Soviets ended due to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The most critical blow to the country was the rapid decline of food production caused by famine. The March of Suffering, from 1994 to 1998, represents the hardest period of recent North Korean history, surpassed in difficulty only by the Korean War itself. Public food distribution dropped by 95.5%, and the mortality rate reached up to 28.7%, according to the Korean Buddhist Sharing Movement's statistical reports from 1998. In the 1990s, a shortage of electricity, caused by a shortage of coal, impacted flood-affected electrically powered irrigation systems. China was a crucial supporter of North Korea, especially during this time. North Korea's high dependency on trade from China—which constituted nearly one-third of its foreign trade—added to its dependence. Even amidst these hardships, North Korea did not abandon its nuclear development. Its nuclear program developed exponentially in the 2000s. The material difficulties at home did not diminish North Korea's growing confidence in diplomacy surrounding its nu-

clear power. Consequently, North Korea preferred bilateral talks, excluding its ostensible Chinese patron. This represents a contrasting foreign policy compared to the era of the Six-Party Talks in the 2000s. The description of a ‘lonely state’ no longer fits in the 2010s, as North Korea had diplomatic relations with 164 countries, and until early 2017, it had visa-free or visa-upon-arrival arrangements with 27 countries (Korhonen and Tomoomi 2019).

## Conclusion

The historical review of the Korean Peninsula reveals its complex entanglement in the history of great powers, with each period of Korean history being wholly intertwined with them. Consequently, the Cold War, driven by these great powers, was highly relevant to Korea. However, the destiny of the divided reality was ultimately in their hands. They recognized the momentum for peace and, following the 1972 Joint Communiqué, made peace with other countries in the early 1990s, demonstrating a capacity for reconciliation despite differing ideological backgrounds.

1972 marked a significant shift for Korea, witnessing the Sino-U.S. rapprochement, which altered regional dynamics, and also saw North and South Korea issue a historic Joint Statement outlining their mutual vision for unification. Furthermore, both Koreas amended their constitutions, solidifying their respective leaderships. While the first two diplomatic events may seem disconnected from the latter two domestic occurrences, a connection emerges when leaders focused on leveraging their consolidated power to achieve unification in light of the Joint Communiqué or to foster peace with ideologically diverse nations. This prompts a deeper inquiry into the political priorities and actions of these leaders, specifically their vision for unification and the efforts undertaken to achieve peace. A series of crucial events between 1989 and 1994, including South Korea’s normalization of relations with the Soviet Union and China, and Carter’s visit to Pyongyang, arguably signal the end of the Cold War in East Asia. With the death of Kim Il Sung, the region transi-

tioned into the post-Cold War era in 1994. By this time, the peninsula's division, a symbol of the Cold War, had solidified into a defining characteristic of Korea.

Despite various chances for reconciliation prior to 1994, the pursuit of peace did not culminate in unification. Therefore, the article centrally argues that the period from 1972 to 1994 signifies the conclusion of the Cold War in East Asia, underscoring the profound shift in regional dynamics and the trajectory of Korean history. This perspective warrants further research into the underlying causes of this outcome.

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# Book Review



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

Baihui DUAN

(Reviewed Book)

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Routledge, 2025.

**Beyond Japanese Frames:  
Reading Yuko Takahashi's *Korean Nuclear Diaspora***

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Korean Atomic-Bomb Victims in Japan*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024

**Book Review of *The Crafting of the Postwar Peace Treaty with Japan,  
1945–1951***

Jaeik AHN

(Reviewed Book)

Kang, Seung Mo, *The Crafting of the Postwar Peace Treaty with Japan,  
1945–1951*. Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2025



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

Baihui DUAN

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## Reviewed Book

Eugene Y. Park. ed. *The Routledge Handbook of Early Modern Korea*.  
Routledge, 2025. 384 pages. ISBN 9781032200620.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The last section explores creative expression in early Korean soci-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





# Beyond Japanese Frames: Reading Yuko Takahashi's *Korean Nuclear Diaspora*

E.J.R. CHO

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## Reviewed Book

Takahashi, Yuko, *Korean Nuclear Diaspora: Redress Movements of Korean Atomic-Bomb Victims in Japan*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024. 246 pages. ISBN 9781666935752.

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E.J.R. Cho is a researcher at the Korea Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS). (ejrcho@inss.re.kr)

## Hibakusha Revisited

From the first pages of Yuko Takahashi's *Korean Nuclear Diaspora: Redress Movements of Korean Atomic-Bomb Victims in Japan*, I had the sense of being led into a carefully curated archive that had been waiting, almost too patiently, for someone to spend time with it. The book traces Korean hibakusha across three interlocking spaces—Japan, South Korea, and North Korea—and follows the slow, fractured emergence of their redress movements from the early post-war years into the twenty-first century. Takahashi is at once historian, archivist, and listener. She reconstructs political organisations such as *Hiroshima Chohikyo* (Korean Hibakusha organizations) and *Nagasaki Chohikyo*, chronicles medical support initiatives in Hapcheon, and introduces us to a constellation of individuals whose lives have been shaped by nuclear exposure, colonialism, and national division. Her narrative is dense with detail yet rarely feels pedantic; instead, it unfolds with a methodical rhythm that mirrors the “uninterrupted enthusiasm” she ascribes to Korean *hibakusha* themselves (p. 159).

## Entering Takahashi's World: When the Archive Breathes

The book begins by situating Korean presence in Hiroshima and Nagasaki within the broader history of Japanese colonial expansion. Takahashi outlines how Koreans came to be in those cities not as incidental residents but through layers of structural compulsion: economic migration under colonial hierarchy, mobilisation for industrial and military labour, and wartime conscription (pp.1–2). She is careful to note regional origins—many from the south-east of the Korean peninsula, clustered in particular neighbourhoods—and to distinguish patterns between Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hiroshima is depicted as a site of longer-term settlement, where families formed and a more stable community life emerged. Nagasaki, by contrast, appears more as a node of labour, especially in shipyards and munitions factories, with a higher proportion of single men

and more transient arrangements (p.14). This early differentiation later helps her explain why the trajectories of *hibakusha* activism in the two cities diverged so markedly.

After 1945, the Korean survivors' journeys fracture in several directions. Some remain in Japan as *Zainichi* Koreans (ethnic Koreans residing in Japan) entering a legal and social limbo that deepens after the San Francisco Peace Treaty strips them of Japanese nationality. Others return—voluntarily or under pressure—to a devastated Korean peninsula, where they find little infrastructure and almost no recognition for their experiences as atomic bomb victims. A smaller number move, through complex political and humanitarian channels, to North Korea. One of the strengths of the book is that it refuses to treat these paths as parallel but separate stories. Instead, Takahashi constantly loops back across borders, showing how policies in one jurisdiction reverberated in another: how Japanese welfare law defined eligibility for *hibakusha* certificates, how the absence of diplomatic relations with either Seoul or Pyongyang impeded transnational medical supports, and how South Korean anti-communism shaped which *Zainichi* organisations could openly engage with whom (pp.22, 27, 85–88).

Chapter 3, “Bridges over the Korea Strait”, is where the narrative truly comes alive. Here Takahashi introduces a network of Christian actors—*Zainichi* Korean pastors, Japanese doctors, and Korean clergy—who together constitute what she calls an “international” but “not quite transnational” solidarity (p.64). The distinction matters. For Takahashi, these actors did not transcend their national identities; on the contrary, their national histories as former colonised Koreans and a former coloniser were precisely what made the solidarity compelling. She follows Gang Mun-hui, a *Zainichi* Korean *hibakusha* whose trip to Hapcheon, a rural county in South Korea where many *hibakusha* had resettled after repatriation, and his encounter with the neglected survivors there transform personal memory into a political and ethical commitment (p.49). Alongside him stands the Japanese Christian doctor Kawamura Torataro, whose sense of postcolonial responsibility leads him to view medical support for Korean *hibakusha* as a matter of moral debt rather than humanitarian

charity (pp.52–55). Together with figures such as Pastor Kim Sin-hwan, they help create medical missions and clinics that operate across the Korea Strait.

In these pages, the book's strengths are unmistakable. Takahashi is at her best when she allows specific lives—Gang's letters, Kawamura's reflections on his own positionality, Kim's theology of *missio dei*—to bear the weight of larger structures. The Christian networks she describes are not idealised; they are shown to be shot through with the tensions of nationalism, denominational rivalry, and the politics of Cold War alliances. Yet Takahashi convincingly argues that these networks provided a space where a particular kind of ethical imagination could take root: one that acknowledged colonial guilt and refused the comfort of a purely abstract humanism (pp.64–66).

Chapter 4 shifts the focus northwards, both geographically and politically. Here the protagonist is *Hiroshima Chohikyo*, an organisation of North Korea-affiliated Korean *hibakusha* based in Japan. Takahashi reconstructs the life and activism of figures such as Lee Sil-geun, who, while operating within the orbit of *Chongryun* (*Chōsen Sōren*: the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan) and identifying strongly with the DPRK, also developed a distinctive identity as a “North Korean *hibakusha* living in Japan” (pp.73–76). This positionality leads to a complex repertoire of action: solidarity with Japanese anti-nuclear organisations, participation in international conferences, and repeated but constrained attempts to establish contact with *hibakusha* in North Korea itself (pp.81–84). Takahashi's portrayal is careful not to romanticise. She shows how Cold War alignments limit what can be said and done; there are hints of surveillance, suspicion, and the hardening of ideological boundaries. Yet she also insists that these activists were not mere mouth-pieces of Pyongyang. They tried, within narrow channels, to articulate a politics that combined Korean unification, anti-imperialism, and nuclear abolition.

In Chapter 5, Nagasaki becomes a laboratory for a more fragile experiment in internal plurality. *Nagasaki Chohikyo*, whose activities Takahashi narrates in detail, tries to bring together *hibakusha* with different

registrations (“Chosen” and “ROK”), different organisational loyalties (*Chongryun* and *Mindan*), and a shared history of forced labour in Japanese shipyards and factories (pp.99–106). The chapter’s subtitle—“Unity within Disunity, Disunity within Unity”—is not rhetorical flourish; it captures both the aspiration and the constant unraveling of this project. Takahashi follows leaders such as Park Min-gyu and Seo Jeong-u as they attempt to build alliances across ideological divides, all while facing a local political economy in Nagasaki where Mitsubishi’s corporate power leaves little room for Korean claims to visibility and responsibility (pp.108–111). It is a story of partial success, repeated disappointment, and stubborn persistence.

By the time we reach the conclusion, Takahashi has brought us along several intertwined threads: the Christian mediation of medical support to South Korean *hibakusha*, the DPRK-facing activism of *Hiroshima Chohikyo*, the fragile pluralism of *Nagasaki Chohikyo*, and the broader ways in which Korean *hibakusha* have thought about “homeland”, “diaspora”, and “unification” over decades. Her claim that these actors embodied a distinct orientation towards unification—that for them, the end of nuclear violence and the healing of the divided peninsula were inextricable—feels both earned and suggestive (pp.160–162). It points beyond the specificities of the case towards a larger question about what it means to live in the wake of multiple, overlapping violences.

## What the Book Makes Visible and Where the Silences Echo

The most important gift Takahashi’s book offers is, to my mind, an altered vantage point. It recentres people who were always there but rarely seen as subjects of history. Korean *hibakusha* have appeared before in scholarship, of course, but often as footnotes, appendices, or “special cases” folded into a narrative whose normative subject was implicitly Japanese. By following Korean survivors as they move between Japan and Korea, between south and north, between the church, the courtroom,

and the local office, Takahashi makes it difficult to maintain that framing. Korean *hibakusha* become central to any serious understanding of the human and political consequences of the bombings.

This recentering is not a simple additive gesture—“let us now include Koreans in our existing story of Hiroshima and Nagasaki”—but a reorientation. When Takahashi describes how many Korean *hibakusha* were conscripted to work in Mitsubishi shipyards in Nagasaki other places in Hiroshima, she reminds us that the atomic bombs struck not an abstract “Japan” but a colonial empire whose peripheries had been moved into the centre as labour (pp.7-8). When she shows how post-war Japanese welfare institutions drew boundaries that excluded Koreans abroad, especially those in North Korea, she reveals that the state’s so-called ‘universal’ support for *hibakusha* was always quietly racialised and nationalised (pp.38-41). Through these concrete examples, the comfortable image of Japanese innocence—of a peaceful nation struck by a singular, external catastrophe—is steadily undone.

A second layer of visibility concerns political subjectivity. Takahashi is attentive to the ways Korean *hibakusha* acted upon their circumstances, often in conditions where “acting” meant small, contentious steps rather than grand gestures. The Medical Support Committee, for instance, is not romanticised as pure altruism; it is described as a messy, contingent coalition, sustained by a mixture of ethical commitment, transnational Christian networks, and the hard work of fundraising and negotiating with reluctant states (pp.54, 57-58, 62-65). The narrative makes clear that agency is not the opposite of constraint but something that emerges through and against it. When Gang Mun-hui, after years of navigating Japanese bureaucracy as a *Zainichi* Korean *hibakusha*, decides to devote his life to improving conditions for other Korean survivors, we can see his activism as both a product of structural injustice and a refusal to be fully determined by it (pp.49-51). This double vision is one of the book’s subtle achievements.

Takahashi’s multiscalar approach is another of her strengths. She refuses to keep the story either at the level of local experience or abstract structure. Instead, she moves between the street and the summit: from the

details of a medical examination in Hapcheon, to the deliberations of the Japanese Diet, the stance of the South Korean foreign ministry, and speeches made by Korean *hibakusha* representatives at international anti-nuclear conferences (pp.81–83, 159–165). This movement allows us to see how decisions in Tokyo, Seoul, and Pyongyang bore directly on whether a particular Korean survivor could get a *hibakusha* certificate, or whether a medical mission could cross a border.

Finally, the book's archival and methodological contributions should not be underestimated. Takahashi has gathered and interpreted materials that were scattered across churches, local organisations, municipal offices, and personal collections. She draws on Korean and Japanese sources, on organisational newsletters and pamphlets that might otherwise have vanished without trace, and on interviews conducted over many years. The sections on *Nagasaki Chohikyo's* research into forced labour, culminating in the publication of *Genbaku to Chōsenjin*, for example, are not simply citations of an existing text but a reconstruction of how that text came to be produced in antagonistic local conditions (pp.103–104). For future scholars, this labour will be invaluable.

## What Slips Through the Net

Precisely because the book accomplishes so much, its limitations stand out not as simple flaws but as missed opportunities for an even more ambitious conversation. Reading as a Korean woman working in nuclear security and international politics, I felt these gaps quite sharply.

The first and most obvious is the lack of sustained reflection on the politics of the term *hibakusha*. Takahashi uses the term expansively and inclusively, applying it to Korean survivors with no hesitation. In one sense, this is a politically generous gesture: it insists that Koreans should be recognised within the same moral and institutional category as Japanese *hibakusha*. Yet there is also something disquieting about how this move is made. When we call a Korean forced labourer who survived the Nagasaki bombing a “*hibakusha*”, we are using a Japanese lexical tool to

name an experience that was produced by Japanese imperialism. For Japanese activists and scholars, this may feel like an act of solidarity. For Korean observers, it can feel like yet another layer of incorporation into a Japanese frame. I am not suggesting that Takahashi should have abandoned the term; I am suggesting that, given the critical acuity of her work elsewhere, her relative silence on this conceptual question feels louder than it otherwise might.

A second area where the book feels thin, given its other strengths, is in its treatment of the Cold War. Takahashi clearly understands the Cold War as a structural context; she shows how anti-communism in South Korea and the alignment of *Zainichi* organisations with North or South shaped what was possible in terms of activism (pp.59, 100-101). But the Cold War also functioned as an epistemic and emotional regime: it provided languages of legitimate anger, justified certain forms of solidarity and stigmatised others, and made some harms visible while rendering others unspeakable. In Chapter 4, we learn that North Korea-affiliated *hibakusha* framed their activism in terms of anti-imperialism and Korean unification, and that these frames resonated in some international contexts but provoked suspicion in others (pp.73-83). Yet we are not invited to think more systematically about how these ideological languages shaped the very structure of claims for justice. For someone trained to see nuclear politics as deeply enmeshed in security discourse, the absence of this level of analysis is keenly felt.

A related limitation is the book's focus on organised activism at the expense of non-organised responses to harm. Takahashi herself notes that many Korean *hibakusha* chose not to step forward, fearing discrimination in employment or marriage, or simply exhausted by the bureaucratic and emotional labour of seeking recognition (p. 100). These people appear in the book as a sort of negative space, a silent majority against which the activists' courage is highlighted. But silence is itself historically meaningful. A refusal to join an organisation can be a political act, a strategy of self-preservation, or an expression of distrust rooted in earlier betrayals by states and institutions. Here again, Takahashi's own material could support a more layered reading.

Thirdly, there is the question of comparative perspective. The book gestures briefly, in the conclusion, towards the notion of “global *hibakusha*” and acknowledges that people affected by nuclear testing, accidents, and facilities elsewhere might be considered alongside the Koreans she studies (p.163). But this remains a gesture. There is no sustained comparison with Marshall Islanders, Kazakh villagers, or Ukrainians around Chernobyl, for example. Of course, no single book can do everything. Yet because Takahashi’s work so effectively provincialises the familiar Hiroshima–Nagasaki frame, it places itself in an ideal position to open such conversations. The fact that it stops just short of doing so feels like a minor sadness rather than a major flaw—but it is there.

Precisely because Takahashi’s archival and narrative reconstruction of Korean *hibakusha* activism is so rich and convincing, certain analytical silences become more visible. A further limitation concerns the analytical treatment of gender and state power. The medical missions led by Kawamura (pp.52–54) are analysed in terms of postcolonial ethics, but the gendered labour of Korean women who staffed clinics or provided daily care remains invisible. This is striking given the rich feminist scholarship on nuclear disasters—from Lisa Yoneyama’s analysis of Hiroshima survivors to Kate Brown’s work on Chernobyl—that demonstrates how radiation harm is experienced and managed along gendered lines.<sup>1</sup> Korean feminist historians have developed sophisticated frameworks for analysing wartime sexual violence and women’s political mobilisation; applying these tools to Korean *hibakusha* would significantly deepen our understanding.<sup>2</sup>

This focus on survivor agency is one of the book’s major analytical

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War crimes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Kate Brown, *Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Chunghee Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

strengths, allowing Korean hibakusha to emerge as historical actors rather than passive victims. On state power, while Takahashi rightly foregrounds Korean hibakusha agency, the states most responsible for their exposure—the United States and Japan—remain curiously underanalysed. The US atomic bombings and Japan’s colonial labour conscription are acknowledged as historical context (pp.19–27), but are not interrogated as ongoing political and legal problems. For example, Chapter 2 discusses the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty’s stripping of Korean nationality (p. 38) without examining how this legal architecture was designed to limit compensation liability. Similarly, the book traces bureaucratic obstacles to medical certification (pp.74–76) but stops short of analysing these as deliberate policy choices that shifted responsibility from perpetrator states to victim communities. The analytical focus, while powerfully foregrounding survivor agency, leaves less room for sustained scrutiny of the states whose military, colonial, and bureaucratic decisions shaped the conditions of exposure. This is not a narrative flaw so much as an analytical imbalance, one that future work might productively redress. A more sustained analysis of state decisions—including archival evidence of policy deliberations, if available—would strengthen the book’s critical intervention.

Both absences point to a similar pattern: it is precisely where Takahashi excels at illuminating Korean hibakusha’s creativity and resilience that the structural forces shaping their conditions—gendered care labour and state legal architectures—retreat into background context.

## Where the Conversation Might Go Next

Despite these criticisms, I do not read *Korean Nuclear Diaspora* as a book to be “corrected” by later scholarship so much as a foundation on which a broader, more plural conversation can now rest. For Korean scholars in particular, this book fills a critical gap. Until now, Korean experiences of nuclear harm have been fragmented across disparate literatures: comfort women studies addressed wartime colonial violence; de-

mocratisation scholarship examined post-authoritarian movements; security studies focused on North Korea's nuclear programme. Takahashi is among the first to show how these threads—colonialism, diaspora, Cold War division, and nuclear exposure—are inseparable in Korean lives. Her careful reconstruction of *Zainichi* Korean organisations, medical networks across the Korea Strait, and North Korea-affiliated activism provides empirical ground that Korean scholars have long needed but lacked access to, particularly regarding Japanese archival sources and *Zainichi* community histories. This foundation opens several concrete research directions.

First, on gender and care labour: Building on Takahashi's organisational histories, scholars could examine how Korean women navigated radiation stigma, managed intergenerational health anxieties, and sustained daily care work in contexts where medical infrastructure was minimal. Church networks (pp.64–66) and medical missions (pp.52–55) are obvious sites for such inquiry, but so too are family correspondences, oral histories of return migrants, and records from women's organisations in Hapcheon and other hibakusha communities.

Second, on comparative nuclear geographies: Takahashi's framework—nuclear harm intersecting with colonialism and Cold War division—is directly applicable beyond Korean cases. Kazakh communities affected by Semipalatinsk testing, Marshall Islanders displaced by US nuclear experiments, and Indigenous peoples near uranium mines all experienced nuclear violence through colonial structures. Systematic comparison would provincialise the Hiroshima–Nagasaki paradigm and reveal patterns in how states externalise nuclear risk onto marginalised populations.

Third, on state accountability: Future research could trace policy deliberations that produced legal exclusions—not just the 1952 San Francisco Treaty but subsequent Japanese welfare law amendments, bilateral negotiations (or their absence) between Tokyo, Seoul, and Pyongyang, and US Cold War strategies that shaped compensation frameworks. Such analysis would shift focus from victim resilience to perpetrator responsibility.

Fourth, on silence and non-participation: Takahashi notes that many Korean hibakusha chose not to engage with redress movements (p. 100). Ethnographic or oral history research could explore these decisions not as absences but as strategic responses to institutional betrayal, revealing alternative forms of survival and meaning-making that organised activism cannot capture.

## Conclusion

Taken together, this book establishes Korean hibakusha not as marginal figures, but as actors whose lives and movements expose the entanglement of colonialism, Cold War geopolitics, and post-war regimes of recognition. Only after following Takahashi's narrative across Japan, South Korea, and North Korea did I find myself returning to a word that anchors the entire book: hibakusha. Takahashi adopts it as her basic category, stretching it from those who survived Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 to encompass wider circles of people affected by radiation. I stay with her term in this review, because it is the language through which her actors speak and organise. Yet as a Korean reader and nuclear policy scholar, I feel a certain friction. The term is inescapably Japanese in origin and institutional history. It emerged within a post-war memory regime that foregrounded Japanese suffering while often placing Japan's role as a colonial and imperial aggressor into the background. When we use hibakusha to describe Koreans who were conscripted as forced labourers, or to think about people irradiated in Bikini, Semipalatinsk, Chernobyl, Fukushima, or Yongbyon, we are borrowing a word that carries the gravitational pull of that regime. It can, unintentionally, make the Japanese experience feel normatively central and others derivative. To me, this is not an argument to abandon the term, but a reason to handle it with care—which Takahashi's own material, perhaps more than her explicit framing, quietly demands. This unease about language is not merely semantic; it points toward a deeper analytical question about where responsibility is located, and where it quietly recedes.

Yuko Takahashi's *Korean Nuclear Diaspora* makes two essential contributions. First, it demonstrates that nuclear harm cannot be understood apart from colonial histories and Cold War divisions—a claim with implications far beyond Korean cases. Second, it provincialises the Japanese-centred hibakusha category, showing that Koreans do not fit neatly into existing frameworks but rather unsettle them from within. These interventions make the book indispensable for scholars working at the intersections of nuclear history, Asian studies, diaspora studies, and postcolonial theory. The book should be read by historians of modern Korea and Japan seeking to understand how nuclear violence operated through colonial and Cold War structures; by security scholars who too often treat “North Korea’s nuclear programme” as disconnected from lived experiences of radiation; by scholars of transnational activism interested in how solidarity operates across borders without transcending national identities; and by anyone working on comparative nuclear geographies who needs a detailed case study of how nuclear harm, colonialism, and division become inseparable. What remains to be done is substantial: gendered analyses of care and stigma, systematic comparison with other nuclear-affected communities, archival research into state policy decisions, and attention to those who remained silent. But Takahashi has given us the ground to stand on. *Korean Nuclear Diaspora* is not an endpoint but an opening—one that demands we take seriously the plurality of nuclear harm, the politics of naming, and the unfinished work of accountability. For that, scholars across disciplines are in her debt.



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# Book Review of *The Crafting of the Postwar Peace Treaty with Japan, 1945-1951*

Jaeik AHN

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## Reviewed Book

*The Crafting of the Postwar Peace Treaty with Japan, 1945–1951.*

By Seung Mo Kang. Routledge, 2025. 208 pages.

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## Introduction

Recently historical and territorial disputes have intensified in East Asia. In August of this year, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on the Taiwan issue in relation to the San Francisco Peace Treaty<sup>1</sup>. The statement read: “The so-called ‘Treaty of San Francisco’ is an illegal and invalid document issued by the United States after World War II by assembling a number of countries to conclude a separate peace with Japan, while excluding the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union. The historical and legal fact that Taiwan belongs to China is indisputable.”

On November 7, Sanae Takaichi, the Prime Minister of Japan, remarked at the House of Representatives Budget Committee that Japan might exercise its right to collective self-defense in the event of a military clash between the United States and China over Taiwan (Jiji Press, November 7, 2025),<sup>2</sup> which has since exacerbated tensions between China and Japan.

Meanwhile, Korean academia have critically reviewed the San Francisco Treaty system focusing on colonial rule, wartime compensation, and territorial disputes, including Dokdo.<sup>3</sup> Against this backdrop, it is timely to examine both the significance and the limitations of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which continues to shape the international order of East Asia today. Seung Mo Kang’s book undertakes this task. This

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<sup>1</sup> *Renmin Ribao*. 2025. “Waijiaobu: suowei ‘Jiujinshan heyue’ feifa wuxiao, Taiwan shuyu Zhongguo de lishi he falv shishi burong zhiyi” [Ministry of Foreign Affairs: The so-called ‘San Francisco Peace Treaty’ is illegal and invalid; the historical and legal facts of Taiwan belonging to China are beyond doubt]. August 18. Accessed November 24, 2025. <https://world.people.com.cn/n1/2025/0818/c1002-40544961.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Jiji Press*. 2025. “Taiwan yuji to sonritsu kiki jitai o meguru yaritori” [Exchange concerning a Taiwan contingency and survival-threatening situations]. November 7. Accessed November 24, 2025. <https://www.jiji.com/jc/v8?id=20251107yosan>.

<sup>3</sup> 5th International Conference, Beyond the San Francisco System, December 15, 2023, The Asiatic Research Institute; Kim, Young-ho, ed. 2022. *Saenpeuransiseuko chejereul neomeoseo: Dongasia naengjeongwa singminji-jeonjaeng beomjui cheongsan* [Beyond the San Francisco System: The Cold War in East Asia and the liquidation of colonial and war crimes]. Medici Media.

book not only prompts a reconsideration of the historical value of the peace treaty but also offers useful insights for understanding the ongoing conflicts among East Asian countries.

## 1. Book Overview

According to the author, most of the significant research on the San Francisco Peace Treaty had been conducted before the 1980s. Since then, despite the treaty's importance, it has not received sufficient scholarly attention. Instead, researchers have continuously drawn to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and the period the US occupation of Japan. Responding to this academic trend, the author emphasizes that the peace treaty, the security treaty, and Japan's occupation policies overlap in certain respects and therefore need to be considered together. As a reason for such consideration, the author points out that "the whole point of the Japanese peace treaty was to end the occupation and declare the termination of a state of war with Japan. Furthermore, the Japanese peace treaty was premised on the assumption that a separate security treaty would be signed between Washington and Tokyo to allow the continued American troop presence in Japan" (p.3).

After stressing the need to reexamine the conclusion of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the author attempts to explain how one should approach this process. He notes that the peace treaty was fundamentally "a multilateral effort that involved more than 13 different countries" and "a product of delicate compromise that sought to balance differing interests." Most importantly, the author highlights that "the treaty was impacted by factors that did not even seem directly relevant to Japan." These observations are valid, given that previous research has primarily focused on dialogues between the United States and Japan during the treaty-making process (p.1).

From this critical standpoint, the author raises the following question: while countries such as Korea, which experienced Japanese colonial rule, China, which was a direct party to the Second Sino-Japanese War,

and the Soviet Union, one of the most important Allied powers in World War II, were excluded from participation in the treaty, “why were Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam invited to sign the treaty?” (p.4).

The author argues that “The very fact that postwar German and Italian settlements, as well as the question of Western European security wielded influence on the Japanese peace treaty negotiations indicates that the fate of the Pacific and Europe could not be divorced from one another.” His argument is supported by sufficient evidence throughout the book (p.4).

Building on this discussion, the author asserts that the most important feature of the book is its reexamination of the conclusion of San Francisco Treaty from an international perspective. In his opinion, “this allows one to look at the Japanese peace treaty from a fresh viewpoint. In turn, this [perspective] allows one to better appreciate the complexity of the postwar Pacific.” (p.4). As shown below, the book is so organized as to support this point.

The book is broadly divided into two parts, each consisting of several chapters. The first part is a chronological account of the treaty’s conclusion, spanning Chapters 1 through 3, and covering the period from the end of the Asia-Pacific War in 1945 to the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951. The second part explores the issues that arose during the drafting process of the treaty and is composed of six chapters in total. This structure allows the author examine the process of concluding the peace treaty in a chronological sequence while also addressing the treaty’s major issues in detail.

Most importantly, as the author makes clear in the introduction, the book scrutinizes various countries’ perspectives and political calculations in the treaty-making process. In the final analysis, the author seems to agree that in the conclusion of the peace treaty, the United States exerted considerable effort to enforce its own intentions, and that the treaty faithfully reflected American interests.

## 2. Main Issues

The first main issue of the peace treaty, discussed in Chapter 4, is about the signatory countries. As noted earlier, among the belligerent powers, the Soviet Union and China were excluded, while India, despite being part of the non-Communist bloc, did not sign. Korea, which had long suffered under Japanese colonial rule, was not included as a signatory either, due to its ambiguous international legal status as neither a victor nor a defeated nation, and its division into North and South and the ongoing civil war. The author explains that the selection and exclusion of signatories were not carried out according to uniform principles but dictated by the interests of major powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Therefore, the author argues that by examining the selection process, one can discern the American objective in the peace treaty: “to entice Japan to ‘align itself with the U.S’ away from the ‘forces inimical to the U.S.’” (p.53). This appears to be a valid interpretation.

To be specific, in the case of China, the United States and the United Kingdom considered the participation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the peace treaty. However, prioritizing their relationship with the Republic of China (ROC) government in Taiwan, they concluded that the international community should not recognize the PRC as the official government of China. At that time, there was little international support for the participation of the ROC government as a signatory. In response, the U.S. government proposed a separate bilateral treaty between China and Japan after the conclusion of the peace treaty, a solution that gained the support of the international community (“Exclusion of China”, pp.54–56).

In the case of Korea, when Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945, the problem lay in its ambiguous legal status. The author explains that “despite the end of Japan’s colonial rule of Korea, there was no express renunciation of the 1910 annexation treaty, which meant that Korea’s legal status—whether or not it was independent in a juridical sense—remained unclear” (p.57). In addition, the division of the peninsula further intensified debates over which government legitimately represented Ko-

rea and what the legal status of that government was.

The author points out that as early as 1947, the United States had already excluded Korea from the list of signatory states, and even in December 1949—after the establishment of the South Korean government—the U.S. continued to regard Korea's legal status as uncertain. In the United States' understanding of international law, even after the founding of the South Korean government in 1948, the 1910 annexation treaty had not been formally abrogated nor replaced by another treaty. Furthermore, the South Korean government strongly wished to participate in the conclusion of the treaty and simultaneously sought to claim reparations from Japan amounting to more than two billion dollars. However, this conflicted with the U.S. position, which sought to avoid imposing any heavy burden on the Japanese economy, and thus appears to have influenced the American decision to exclude Korea from the list of signatories. Lastly, in the context of an intensifying Cold War, rejecting North Korea's participation while recognizing only South Korea's participation would have imposed considerable political burdens on the United States.

The United Kingdom also questioned Korea's international legal status. The author explains that from the perspective of the British government, Korea was not yet an independent state in the juridical sense, and it would only acquire the qualifications of an independent nation upon the conclusion of the peace treaty with Japan. Accordingly, Britain's position was that Korea had no right to sign the treaty. According to the author, what laid behind was Britain's concern that recognizing the South Korean government as a signatory might provoke the Communist bloc and, in turn, affect its numerous colonies in Asia, such as Malaya and Singapore.

The South Korean government also expressed to the United States its intention to normalize bilateral relations with Japan through separate negotiations. As a result of the positions taken by the various countries involved, Korea was not able to participate as a signatory to the San Francisco Peace Treaty. The author emphasizes that by reaffirming the fact that the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea had never been recognized by the international community, the U.S. Department of State concluded that Korea did not have the qualifications to sign the

peace treaty as a victorious nation (“Exclusion of South Korea,” pp.57–62).

The next noteworthy section is Chapter 8, which addresses the provisions of the San Francisco Peace Treaty concerning territorial issues. As is widely known, Japan has territorial disputes with neighboring countries: with Russia regarding the Northern Territories, with South Korea over Dokdo, and with China concerning the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Although not directly related to Japan’s territorial claims, there are also disputes between China and other nations over Taiwan, as well as conflicts in the South China Sea over the Spratly and Paracel Islands. The origins of many territorial disputes in the Western Pacific region can be traced back to the San Francisco Treaty.

It is the author’s position that these problems ultimately stemmed from the ambiguous attitude of the United States toward territorial issues in the conclusion of the San Francisco Peace Treaty. The U.S. deliberately adopted this stance with regard to territorial questions in the Far East, and it is Article 2 of the treaty that embodies the stance. The author further suggests that the United States chose this vague approach because taking a clear position on any specific territory could have created difficulties in relation to other territorial disputes.

The United States applied the following principle to many of the island territories that had once belonged to the Japanese Empire. First, the peace treaty explicitly declared Japan’s renunciation of sovereignty over these areas. However, the treaty provisions did not specify which country would hold sovereignty over them. For example, in the case of territories that clearly aligned with American national interests—such as the Mandate Islands in the southern Pacific, which Japan had acquired from Germany after World War I—the San Francisco Treaty explicitly stipulated Japan’s renunciation of ownership (Article 7), yet it contained no clear provision regarding which state would exercise sovereignty over those islands.

Taiwan underwent a similar process. Taiwan became a Japanese colony after the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, and the peace treaty stipulated the renunciation of Japanese claims to it. However, the United

States was ambiguous about Taiwan's ownership. Washington neither recognized Taiwan as belonging to the PRC nor to the ROC. The author explains that this was because the Nationalist government, having retreated to Taiwan after its defeat in the Chinese Civil War, sought to secure the island and maintain its regime, and the United States deemed that such a path for Taiwan aligned with its own interests. Consequently, as noted earlier, the Chinese government today, claims that the San Francisco Treaty was illegal and invalid. The reason can be traced back to the fact that the treaty's territorial provisions were deliberately drafted in an ambiguous manner.

The four islands at the southern end of the Kuril chain, which had historically belonged to Japan, were occupied by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II. The United States did not demand their return from the Soviets. According to the author, this was because the Soviet Union might obstruct America's attempt to occupy Okinawa by invoking the issue of the Kuril Islands. Given the way Okinawa was handled, this explanation is highly plausible. In this chapter, the author notes that the United States "formally adopted the idea that the US should retain Okinawa and build bases there 'on a long-term basis'" and, in order to remain faithful to this plan, deliberately refrained from specifying sovereignty over the Okinawa Islands in the peace treaty. In practice, the United States did not return the territory to Japan until the mid-1970s.

In brief, the United States sought to handle the territorial issues of the former Japanese Empire in a manner that best served its own interests. In the Kuril Islands and Okinawa cases, where the interests of the Allied powers could potentially conflict, and in the Taiwanese case, where complex international political problems including territorial divisions were entangled, Washington deliberately chose not to clarify sovereignty and instead left matters in an ambiguous state. This ambiguity, the author argues, can be regarded as the fundamental cause of the complex territorial disputes that continue to trouble East Asia today.

In conclusion, the author evaluates the character of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in the following way. First, he emphasizes that it was a generous deal for Japan: "a lenient peace treaty emerged, which was in-

tended to avoid imposing any harsh economic or political terms on Japan and was geared toward containing the Soviet Union” (p.168).

The author repeats that the reason for such a lenient peace treaty was the United States’ intention to contain the communist bloc. Regarding John Foster Dulles, the then US Secretary of State who played a central role in the conception and negotiation of the treaty, the evaluation is as follows: “He shrewdly employed a mixture of appealing to anti-communist camaraderie, stressing the importance of rebuilding Tokyo’s economy so as to curb Soviet influence and lift the financial burden off the US of having to continue sustaining Japan, and promising security guarantees to those countries concerned about Japan’s potential re-emergence as a threat.” The author further notes that Dulles was able to employ such strategies precisely because “After all, the whole point of the Japanese peace treaty was to contain the communist bloc.” In order to counter the Soviet Union and restrain the communist bloc in the Far East, the United States needed to “firmly anchor Japan to the West” (p.169).

The author also explicates the American intention to prevent Asian countries from demanding reparations from Japan: “Furthermore, Article 14—which was premised on the tacit understanding that Japan would repay the initial American aid provided during the early phase of the occupation—was later used by the US to create a counterpart fund in Japan and steer the latter to assist with the economic development of Southeast Asia and Korea.” In other words, the United States prioritized Japan’s economic reconstruction over the reparation claims of various Asian countries, and sought to quell their dissatisfaction by rebuilding the Far Eastern economy with Japan at its center.

Thus, the author is right to say that under the framework of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, drafted in line with America’s vision for peace in the Far East, Japan emerged as the greatest beneficiary. The author details Japan’s “benefit” as follows: “the US led the effort to minimize Japan’s reparations payment for the sake of helping Japan keep its precious foreign exchange and to avoid the possibility of the US indirectly paying for reparations. Yoshida and his cabinet were also able to achieve two of Japan’s most important goals: independence and putting rearmament on

hold to concentrate on economic development” (p.170). In the end, it becomes clear that the United States prioritized the economic reconstruction of the entire region in order to prevent communist forces from dominating the Far East and to use the region as a means of containing the Soviet Union. To achieve this, Washington sought to assign Japan a central role.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, this book provides a thorough examination of the international debates surrounding the formation of the San Francisco Peace Treaty and its main issues. It can be said that the author has achieved the stated goal in the preface—namely, to shed new light on the treaty’s conclusion from an international perspective. That said, one cannot help but feel some regret that the book did not supplement its analysis with a fuller account of the internal discussions within the United States and Japan during the treaty’s formation, although earlier studies may already have addressed this sufficiently. Such additions would have made the work more accessible to readers encountering this subject for the first time.

The author’s ultimate argument is that the San Francisco Peace Treaty was shaped in a way that served American national interests. Yet questions remain as to how much new insight this offers when compared with existing scholarship. Above all, given the author’s stated aim of examining the formation of the treaty from an international perspective, it is somewhat disappointing that the book does not clearly illuminate how the diverse opinions of the international community influenced the process by which U.S. interests were formed and secured through the treaty.





The background of the page is a dark, textured surface with large, expressive brushstrokes in shades of blue and purple. The strokes are thick and layered, creating a sense of depth and movement. The colors transition from a deep blue on the left to a rich purple on the right, with some lighter, more translucent areas where the strokes overlap.

# Conference Proceeding

**[International Conference in Honor of the  
80th Anniversary of the Liberation of Korea]**

Searching for New Perspectives on Contemporary History of Korea: Rethinking  
Decolonization, Military Occupations, and the Ideas for a Democratic Korea

August 4-5 2025 / KCCI, Seoul

[Hosted by Northeast Asian History Foundation,  
Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies (SNU), Institute of Social Sciences (SNU)]

## **Conference Proceeding**

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The Liberation of Korea and Its Impact on Japan**

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**The Dilemma of Acknowledging Victimhood  
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Jung-Ae PARK

## Decolonization as a “Nonevent”?: The Liberation of Korea and Its Impact on Japan

Deokhyo CHOI  
University of Maryland, College Park



Where did the “empire” go in the history of postwar Japan? How can we overcome the historiographical “amnesia of empire”? In Japanese history, the aftermath of World War II is primarily a story about the US (Allied) occupation of Japan and US–Japan(ese) relations. The Japanese empire lost its colonies instantly as a result of defeat in World War II. Thus, scholars have argued that, unlike France, which eventually had to relinquish French Algeria after a drawn-out colonial war, decolonization had no significant impact on Japan and its imperial past fell into immediate oblivion. Yet, such narratives of “instant decolonization” overlook the critical aftereffects of imperial demise that could still be felt in early postwar Japan, whether through the presence of large numbers of Korean and Taiwanese imperial subjects or the return of over 6.6 million overseas Japanese from former colonies and occupied territories. This paper challenges the dominant narrative of instant decolonization by illuminating the critical aftereffects of imperial demise brought by the “liberation” of over two million Korean imperial subjects in Japan and the return of 700,000 Japanese colonial settlers from Korea. Moreover, drawing on my discoveries from the Gordon W. Prange Collection at the University of

Maryland, the paper sheds new light on firsthand accounts of Japanese repatriates from Korea and examines how they experienced and remembered colonial liberation in Korea.

Japan’s defeat in the war sparked the massive return to Japan of some 3.5 million overseas Japanese civilians (and some 3.2 million military personnel), including colonial settlers from Korea (700,000) and Manchuria (1.2 million). Most of the Japanese settlers repatriated between late 1945 and 1947, and their firsthand accounts of colonial experience and forced repatriation immediately appeared in the Japanese print media. My preliminary research on the archives of the Gordon W. Prange Collection at the University of Maryland has resulted in a new discovery about these writings. The Prange Collection is the “most comprehensive archive in the world of Japanese print publications issued during the early years of the occupation of Japan, 1945–1949” and includes 102,800 books, pamphlets, and magazine and newspaper titles.<sup>1</sup> All publications in US-occupied Japan were subject to the occupation’s censorship, and Gordon W. Prange, who worked for General Douglas MacArthur, brought these censored publications back to the University of Maryland where he taught after his return from Japan. Currently, all the newspapers and magazines from the Prange Collection are available on microfilm, and the online catalogs and search engines allow researchers to search and locate newspaper and magazine articles. By using these search engines, I was able to identify 1,794 magazine articles whose titles include the keyword “repatriation” (*hikiage*), 1,271 with the keyword “Korea” (*Chōsen*), and 429 with “Manchuria” (*Manshū*). Among these, some titles are easily identifiable as autobiographical essays and memoirs written by repatriates from Korea and Manchuria. For example, such titles include: “I miss Korea” (published in April 1946); “To My Students in Korea” (November 1946); “Repatriating from Manchuria” (November 1947); “On My Exodus from Korea” (March 1948); “My Life in Korea for Thir-

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon W. Prange Collection home page. <https://www.lib.umd.edu/collections/special/japan/holdings>

ty Years” (June 1948); and “My Last Day in Manchuria” (August 1949). Through my preliminary research, I have found and collected over fifty essays written by Japanese repatriates from Korea.

My analysis of these repatriate writings shows a common narrative of nostalgia, suffering, and colonial betrayal; a sense of nostalgia is also commonly found in the narratives of European colonial settlers.<sup>2</sup> In Japanese repatriate writings, nostalgia is often expressed as the memory of Korea’s beautiful rural landscape, women’s white *hanbok* (plain traditional clothing), food, and certain smells. In their memory of colonial liberation, the narrative of suffering and victimization is a key and common feature. The repatriate memory of exodus from the inverted colonial world resonates with what historian James Orr has called a Japanese “victim mythology”; that is, the idea that ordinary Japanese people were misled by their militarist leaders and victimized by war catastrophes.<sup>3</sup> The repatriate writings present the memory of empire in a sanitized form by erasing the traces of Japanese colonialism. Moreover, Koreans rarely appear as individuals with their own names and personalities—they simply dissolve into a nostalgic landscape or merge into the spectacle of vengeful crowds who are ready to punish the Japanese. Such narratives of nostalgia and victimization can easily be subsumed under a victim mythology, sanitizing the memory of empire and rendering the imperialist context invisible.

But is there any possibility that the colonial experience could be remembered and told in a different way that could unsettle victim consciousness and “imperial amnesia”? Could repatriate memory have opened up a new dialogue for postcolonial reconciliation? There is one text that shows such a possibility—to my dismay, I could only find one

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<sup>2</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Andrea L. Smith, ed., *Europe’s Invisible Migrants* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003); Amy L. Hubbell, *Remembering French Algeria: Pleds-Noirs, Identity, and Exile* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> James J. Orr, *The Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001).

among the over fifty repatriate writings I researched. A short autobiographical essay written by a Japanese man named Hayami Shigeo, titled “My Memories of Korea” and published in a leftist journal in July 1949, vividly depicts what the injustice of colonialism looks like in everyday life. Hayami argues:


I learned many lessons during my eight-year-long life in Korea. Among those many lessons, what I learned and what convinced me the most was that colonial rule must surely be the most intolerable form of national humiliation and suppression. We can easily understand this when we think about the ill feelings that Koreans in Japan held toward the Japanese and also the boundless joy of liberation that they have expressed in the wake of Japan’s defeat, which [the Japanese] have considered as an excess.

Hayami’s essay also shows how his colonial memory was profoundly informed by his present reality and political view of the US occupation of Japan as quasi-colonial subjugation. In his recollection, Japanese-colonized Korea apparently overlaps with the reality of US-occupied Japan. I will analyze Hayami’s essay as a critical historical text that compels us to consider the possibilities and limits of Japanese leftist discourse on interethnic solidarity and postcolonial reconciliation at the time.

Deokhyo CHOI is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at the University of Maryland, College Park. He specializes in the history of modern Korea and Japan and US-East Asia relations. His work has been published in three languages (English, Japanese, and Korean) in leading journals, including *The American Historical Review* and *Critical Asian Studies*.

## **Between the Collapse of the Japanese Empire and Normalization with South Korea**

Toyomi ASANO  
Waseda University



This paper aims to discuss the origins of historical issues in relation to diplomatic history, thereby establishing an intellectual foundation for calm dialogue between nations. It examines how emotional issues related to the collective memory that shapes a nation were discussed and suppressed in diplomatic negotiations.

First, it traces the process by which the Japanese Empire, which had become the cause of “aggression” in the war, was occupied and dismantled, focusing on the perceptions of the Edwin Pauley Reparations Mission. This process reveals the existence of a regional concept that sought to divide and dismantle the empire and reorganize it into a “region” quickly, composed of independent nations, including the former imperial nation and ex-colonized nations.

This paper examines how each national emotion became entangled in the international political issues, surrounding the treatment of forcibly mobilized and evacuated peoples and their private property, resulting from the failure of the quick imperial dismantlement.

What became clear is that the claims between the two sides were composed of property claims deeply linked to wartime mobilization and

colonial rule. Furthermore, due to the forced relocation of people and territorial division accompanying the dissolution of the empire, social discussions over ex-colonial relationships associated with property and people were disregarded, reducing the issue to a simple matter of monetary value. This led to intense conflict between the two national sentiments over the amount of compensation.

The claims that South Korea had against Japan consisted of claims to the property of the Governor-General's Office and companies headquartered in Korea located in Japan, as well as claims arising from old public bonds and claims issued by the Governor-General's Office, such as the Korea Development Bond, and the minimum legal claims of Koreans, known as "determined debts." The amount specified in the War Reparations Settlement Document was left almost unchanged, but its substance consisted of property that had been part of the imperial society but was placed outside the independent Korea.

On the other hand, the Japanese government also faced compensation demands from repatriates who had relied on the use of lost property for substantial public compensation, while asserting claims to Japanese private property in Korea.

Furthermore, even the settlement of claims arising from the liquidation of the imperial social order and the total war conducted under it was complex. However, relying on Korea's claim that the annexation itself was illegal, the process of converting claims into monetary value became increasingly fluid, simplified, and emotional.

Also, standards of decolonization were not clear. Japan relied on international law regarding territorial separation and refused to accept a legal interpretation that would retroactively apply Military Government Order No. 33 to the time of acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration. Additionally, with South Korea's claims to property in Japan in mind, Japan retained assets of the Governor-General's Office and the Korean royal family that had been frozen during the occupation period under Allied military directives. On top of that, Japan was asserting a "reverse claim" for private property left behind by repatriates in South Korea.

In this emotionally charged situation between Japan and South Ko-

rea, the United States mediated by having Japan recognize the retroactive effect of military government orders in exchange for South Korea making claims with the intention of confiscation. By severing the diplomatic monetary exchanges from the national sentiments and meanings of each side, the United States effectively contained the emotional conflict.

In the present day, how should the issue of war compensation, which remains entangled with ethnic sentiments, be positioned within this broader historical context? In short, it can be concluded that, within the political context of the time, these claims were politically offset. Both the spiritual compensation for war victims sought by Koreans and Japan's "counterclaim" tied to how to view the colonial era were ultimately regarded as political claims and deemed completely resolved.

The framework of economic cooperation, which sought practical changes in the material world, severed emotional conflicts linked to numbers from the realm of meaning and reduced them to the size of simple physical support. However, it is worth noting that this framework did not initially enjoy the support of Japanese society as a whole. Among the repatriates, there were indeed progressive forces that argued that attention should be paid not only to guarantees for Japanese repatriates but also to the suffering of other nations as war victims.

However, in the end, no shared memory was created between the two nations, and the universal values each side upheld remained at odds, politically sealed off until the democratization of South Korea and the onset of the globalization era. In other words, U.S.-South Korea relations and U.S.-Japan relations functioned not only as a security framework but also as an economic framework for the reconstruction of the material world, with the United States serving as the hub. Economic cooperation such as technology transfer and loans was carried out separately from claims that could sway emotions, contributing to the material reconstruction of the two countries. Meanwhile, the compensation paid to repatriated Japanese in Japan, a measure implemented in 1967, was a mechanically calculated payment based on the length of their stay, implemented in 1967, while the issue of compensation for war victims in South Korea became a major driving force for democratization, continu-

ing to shake the Japan-South Korea relationship.


Now, the role of the United States, which has sealed off mutual national sentiments, is undergoing significant change, and empirically substantiating the structure of this containment will serve as foundational work for resuming the stalled dialogue. By calmly examining the structure of the clash of social meanings in each nation, without taking sides, but focusing on the connection between cultural memory and experience as well as universal human values and compensation, we can clarify how claims rooted in wartime experiences and colonial rule have been moralized and have come to exert a significant influence on the evaluation and attitudes of individuals in both Japan and South Korea.

The tasks of unraveling the connection between the settlement of imperialism and war reparations, delving into its emotional dimension, and linking it to the collective experiences of the wartime and occupation periods and universal values, and tracing it back to the postwar and liberation periods, remains a contemporary challenge. Discussing such sensitive issues calmly, delving into the moral and emotional dimensions that underpin each individual's political stance, and engaging in cross-national dialogue will provide a starting point for such dialogue. The framework for normalized diplomatic relations achieved through political settlement has been exposed to objections from the people since the 1980s, alongside the progress of democratization in Asia.

Toyomi ASANO is a professor in the Dept. of Political Science and Economics at Waseda University. Through arguing for the development of economic corporation program as a materialistic aspect of decolonization, he has concentrated on the spiritual aspect of decolonization. Through his involvement in Reconciliation Studies (<https://memory.waseda.jp/en>), he is trying to show possible ways in which the dignity and human rights of all victims can be assured by multinational cooperation.

## **Formal Decolonization and Informal Reconnection: Korean and Japanese Christian Intellectuals in the Post-colonial Era**

Motokazu MATSUTANI  
Tohoku Gakuin University



This paper seeks to trace the historical formation of that progressive Christian movement (hereafter referred to as the “progressive faction”) which emerged in the 1960s and grew into a meaningful current in Korean society. Specifically, it asks how, in a religious landscape dominated by conservatism, such an alternative current was able to take root and expand. I propose that one of its key origins can be found in the theological education that Korean students received in Japan during the colonial period. The progressive Christian intellectuals who came to prominence in the 1960s had, in many cases, studied not at the conservative seminaries within colonial Korea but at theological institutions in Japan—such as Aoyama Gakuin or Kwansai Gakuin, or Doshisha—where they encountered relatively liberal and open academic environments. The intellectual formation and networks they developed in Japan significantly shaped their political and social engagement after liberation.

To support this argument, this paper first provides an overview of the theological landscape of colonial Korea, highlighting the limitations of domestic seminaries. It then turns to the Korean Christian youth who, critical of these conditions, chose to study in Japan, where they were ex-

posed to more progressive theological education. The paper demonstrates that many of these individuals later became central figures in the progressive Christian movement in post-liberation South Korea. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate the intellectual continuities that linked the colonial and post-colonial eras and to argue for the transnational dimensions of modern Korean Christianity.

My research has focused particularly on two institutions: Aoyama Gakuin University and Kwansai Gakuin University. Using enrollment records, internal documents, and alumni memoirs, I have reconstructed the experiences of Korean students at these schools. In the following section, I highlight key individuals and analyze the background and significance of their study-abroad experiences. The main conclusions can be summarized in three points.

First, Korean students who studied theology in Japan were motivated not only by frustration with the limited opportunities for higher education in colonial Korea, but also by dissatisfaction with the conservative theological education dominated by American missionaries within the Korean church. Additionally, they were disillusioned by internal issues such as regionalism and factionalism. Many of these students were critical thinkers who deliberately distanced themselves from the dominant structures of the Korean ecclesiastical establishment.

Second, through their study-abroad experience, these students became more theologically and socially progressive, further distancing themselves from traditional norms of the Korean church. They engaged with advanced theological and academic scholarship, encountered Christians from diverse national and denominational backgrounds, and interacted with politically progressive Christian socialists. These multifaceted academic and cultural encounters expanded their vision of Christian civilization and enabled them to critically reassess the state of Korean Christianity.

Third, upon returning to Korea, many of these students became leading figures in the progressive faction within Korean Christianity and worked to reform its conservative culture. While their activities were often constrained under Japanese colonial rule, some went on to establish new theological institutions grounded in a progressive understanding of

Christianity—ideas and institutions that had previously not existed in Korea. One such institution was the Chosŏn Theological Seminary (朝鮮神學院) founded in 1940. This seminary survived the colonial period and continued into the post-liberation period. In 1951, the institution was officially recognized as a university by the government of the Republic of Korea. It is known today as Hanshin University, a Christian institution whose students and faculty would later play an active role in Korea’s democratization movements beginning in the 1960s.

The early faculty, students, and affiliates of the university included many individuals who had received their education in Japan—not only Kim Jae-jun from Aoyama Gakuin, but also Sō Namdong (徐南同) from Doshisha University, Chang Chun-ha (張俊河) from the Nihon Theological Seminary, and Ham Sōkhōn (咸錫憲), a graduate of the Tokyo Institute of Technology and a disciple of Uchimura Kanzō, the leader of the Non-Church Movement. Their efforts influenced a new generation of Christian youth. Furthermore, many remained active as progressive Christian intellectuals even after Korea’s liberation and played significant roles in the democratization movements of the 1960s and beyond.

This paper does not seek to emphasize that these liberal Christian elites were simply “educated by the Japanese.” Rather, it seeks to shed new light on an important dimension of the Japanese Empire as a space that housed a diverse range of Christian cultures and institutions. Within this broader arena, “Japan-educated” Koreans had the opportunity to engage with more liberal and varied strands of Christian thought, and the intellectual and cultural influence they absorbed continued to exert a vital impact on Korean society long after liberation.

Motokazu MATSUTANI earned B.A. from International Christian University (1998), M.A. from the University of Tokyo (2002) and Ph.D. from Harvard University (2012). His research interests are in the modern history of East Asia with a special focus on the development of church-state relations in colonial and post-colonial Korea. His major publications include “Church over Nation: Christian missionaries and Korean Christians in Colonial Korea” (Ph. D. Diss., Harvard University, 2012), “US Occupation Policy on Shinto in Postliberation Korea and Japan,” in *Belief and Practice in Imperial Japan and Colonial Korea* (Springer Singapore, 2017), and 『民族を超える教會』(明石書店, 2020).

## Decolonization on the Waterfront: Fukuoka, Pusan, and the End of Empire

Hannah SHEPHERD  
Yale University

From August 1945, crossing the maritime boundary of the Tsushima Strait transformed colonial subjects into citizens, and settlers into repatriates. In the immediate wake of Japan's defeat and Korea's liberation in 1945, the waterfronts of Pusan and Hakata became hubs of decolonization.

In this paper I offer a regional perspective on the period on either side of August 15, by tracing the perspectives of actors who lived and travelled through the two key repatriation ports of Pusan and Hakata, to understand how this moment was understood and experienced by those on the ground, as well as how longer histories in both port cities affected, and were affected by this turbulent transition. First, how did the attitudes of those "on the ground" impact these processes? Over the longer term, how did these processes affect the urban histories of these two key repatriation ports? Finally, how are these processes remembered—in local history and urban space—today? Using sources such as the *Minju Jungbo*, the successor Korean-language newspaper to the colonial era *Pusan Nippō*, and the local Fukuoka zainichi publication the *Seiki Shinbun*, I ar-

gue that the incremental processes and logistics of decolonization, and the perspectives of those involved in their mechanics, must be understood in a longer-durée regional perspective, both prior to August 15, 1945, and in the weeks, months, and years after it as well.

Hannah SHEPHERD is an assistant professor of history specializing in modern Japan and its empire in the Department of History at Yale University. Before joining the Yale faculty, she was a Junior Research Fellow in History at Trinity College, University of Cambridge. She holds degrees from Harvard University (AM, PhD), SOAS (MA), and the University of Oxford (BA Hons). Her first book, *The Narrowing Sea: Fukuoka, Pusan, and the Rise and Fall of an Imperial Region*, is due to be published in December 2025 by the California University Press.

## The Crisis of the Divided Economy and the Creation of a National Economy: Korea in the late 1940s

Chaisung LIM  
Rikkyo University

This paper analyzes how the Korean economy, under U.S. military rule, sought to establish an independent economy capable of countering socialist North Korea, which had severed its division of labor with the Japanese Empire. The analysis is conducted from the perspective of economic systems theory. Additionally, it employs a comparative approach with Japan, the former colonial power, to offer nuanced insights into Korea's post-liberation economic restructuring.

The analysis delves into Korea's distinctive post-liberation economic restructuring, juxtaposing it with Japan, the erstwhile colonial power. The U.S. policy during this period was that of an occupation that sought to disarm the Japanese military; consequently, it lacked a comprehensive long-term economic program and instead implemented provisional measures.

However, the initial liberalization of the market resulted in economic chaos. The dissolution of the interregional division of labor within the former empire, in conjunction with the division of the Korean Peninsula, engendered challenges related to dependence on capital goods and raw materials from external sources.

In response to these developments, the U.S. Military Government acknowledged the imperative for post-war control, a move precipitated by the challenges posed by inflation and severe shortages of essential goods. Consequently, the Central Economic Committee, which had been established within the Military Government, resumed the centralized management of the Korean economy.

Economic operations were maintained through resource procurement by GARIOA, albeit with great difficulty. As economic activities gradually began to recover, certain achievements were made by the spring of 1948.


However, the ongoing crisis of the divided economy was further exacerbated by North Korea's decision to impose a power cutoff in response to the unilateral elections. In response, the United States allocated ECA aid, initially established for the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan), to the recently established Republic of Korea. The objective of this allocation was to reduce imports and promote exports by developing industries such as coal, railways, fertilizers, textiles, steel, and cement. This phenomenon can be characterized as import-substitution industrialization.

However, the domestic economic situation was dire, with most government-affiliated enterprises operating at a loss, private companies unable to escape their small-scale nature, and the country experiencing rapid inflation on a macroeconomic level. Prior to the implementation of a comprehensive reconstruction strategy, it was imperative to restore the fundamental economic functions of the entities in question and to pursue economic stabilization. In this context, the term "economic stabilization" did not denote the implementation of conventional inflation control policies. Instead, it served as a harbinger of a transition toward a market economy, akin to Japan's "Dodge Line" policy. Consequently, the Five-year economic and industrial plan implemented with ECA assistance can be regarded as a pioneering program that laid the foundation for surmounting the crisis of the divided economy and achieving self-reliance.

Chaisung LIM is a professor affiliated with the College of Economics at Rikkyo University in Japan. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Tokyo in 2002. His publications (in Japanese) include *A Wartime Economy and Railroad Management* (University of Tokyo Press, 2005), *High Growth as History* (co-edited, Kyoto University Academic Press, 2019), *Eating and Drinking Korea* (University of Nagoya Press, 2019), *South Manchuria Railway in East Asia: Frontier of the Railroad Empire* (University of Nagoya Press, 2021), *Corporate Types and Industrial Development* (co-edited, Kyoto University Academic Press, 2022), *Health in Korea* (Nagoya University Press, 2024), and *Empire and Private Railways* (Kyoto University Academic Press, 2025). His current research examines the economic development, infrastructure development, labor hygiene and health, and food issues in East Asia.

## 1945: The Soviet Army's Rule over North Korea and the Coming of Kim Il-sung

Fyodor TERTITSKI  
Korea University



This presentation will focus on a short but highly important period in the history of North Korea, starting with the Soviet-Japanese War of August 1945 and concluding with the provisional appointment of Kim Il-sung as the future leader of the emerging state. The central argument is that North Korea, as we know it, was not a predetermined outcome, but rather emerged due to a series of unlikely events.

After the defeat of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union began preparing to attack Imperial Japan, as agreed with Britain and the United States at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. The war was officially declared on August 8. At this point, Moscow had little to no detailed plans regarding Japan's territories, including Korea, and most decisions were made in an ad-hoc manner. For instance, the decision to divide Korea along the 38th parallel was proposed by the United States on August 10, while a Soviet document from the previous day indicated that the Soviets had initially planned to march directly to Seoul.

The Soviet entry into the war, coupled with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, forced Japan to accept the Allies' conditions and surrender. However, even at this time, the Soviets were still unclear

about their plans for Korea. For example, the decision to make Pyongyang the capital was made by General Chistyakov on August 25, likely influenced by his visit to Hamhung the day before. He was presented with a choice between Hamhung and Pyongyang and chose the latter.

The first month of Soviet rule in Korea was a chaotic one, marked by typical post-war events such as the formation of right-wing parties and even pro-American demonstrations. However, such occurrences soon became unthinkable in the North. Unlike Austria or Germany, no joint administration of Korea was established, and, unlike Austria, no local provisional government was ever recognized by the Soviets or the Americans. The local People's Committees, created by the last orders of the Japanese Government-General to peacefully transfer power to the locals, were viewed with suspicion and distrust by the Soviets. This mistrust played a significant role in ensuring that the provisional institutions for both North and South Korea eventually became permanent.

Starting in September, the Soviets began pursuing a more proactive policy in Korea. They suppressed disloyal parties, and by late September, Stalin issued an order to the Soviet command, instructing them not to "Sovietize" the region but to prepare a provisional government. Notably, this order did not include any instructions to begin talks with the Americans about a unified government, signaling that Moscow was already viewing North Korea as a separate political entity. The local Soviet command was also tasked with finding a leader for the North.

In August 1945, Korea had no Communist Party, and thus no clear leader among the pro-Soviet forces. This created a power vacuum as the Soviets began searching for a suitable candidate. The Soviet generals favored their comrade-in-arms, Captain Kim Il-sung, who had served in the Red Army and spoke fluent Russian. Kim returned to Korea in September, and fate led him to Pyongyang, where the Soviet headquarters were based. His friend and future personal secretary, Mun Il, introduced him to the Soviets. Although other potential candidates were considered, none met the strict criteria set by the Kremlin. According to General Lebedev, the final push in favor of Kim Il-sung came from Lavrentiy Beria, who recommended him to Stalin.

It appears that the decision to promote Kim Il-sung was made in December 1945, when he was appointed Chief Secretary of the North Korean Bureau of the Communist Party. Notably, all of Kim's public appearances, including his famous address on October 14, were orchestrated by the local Soviet command, as evidenced by a December document that referred to Kim as a "popular leader" rather than a man designated by Moscow for ascension to power.

The political changes in North Korea were accompanied by economic changes. In 1945, the region saw a sharp economic decline, exacerbated by its separation from the South, the Japanese mainland, and Manchuria. Documents show that the first Soviet ruler of the North, Ivan Chistyakov, was ineffective in managing the economy, which began to stall, while Soviet soldiers looted without facing any repercussions. Chistyakov's mismanagement was reported by two brave officers, Georgiy Fyodorov and Yuriy Livshits, who risked speaking out. Only in 1946, when General Terentiy Shtykov assumed de facto control of the North, did the USSR begin making significant investments, leading to the start of economic recovery.

The events of 1945 were decisive in shaping North Korea's history, laying the groundwork for both the division of Korea and the rise of Kim Il-sung's regime.

Fyodor TERTITSKIY is a lecturer at Korea University in Seoul. He has authored several books in both English and Korean on North Korean history and military affairs, including *Accidental Tyrant: The Life of Kim Il-sung*, *The Forgotten Political Elites of North Korea: Woe to the Vanquished*, *Soviet-North Korean Relations During the Cold War*, and *The North Korean Army: History, Structure, Daily Life*.

## Soviet Occupation Policies in North Korea, East Germany, and Austria: Similarities and Differences

Balázs SZALONTAI  
Korea University

The paper compares Soviet occupation policies in North Korea (1945–1948), East Germany (1945–1953), and Austria (1945–1955) to explain why Korea’s post-liberation path of state formation turned out more similar to that of Germany than that of Austria. It points out that the institutions and economic objectives of Soviet occupation were largely similar in the three countries. Despite their evident preference for the local Communist activists, and especially for the Communist leaders repatriated from the USSR, the Soviet military authorities initially strove to build a coalition with the non-Communist East German, Austrian, and North Korean parties. Still, their policies yielded considerably different results in the three countries. In Germany and Korea, the military occupation zones were gradually transformed into rival state structures, whereas in Austria, their continued existence until 1955 did not preclude the emergence of a multilaterally recognized nationwide government and the holding of all-national elections as early as October–November 1945. This contrast may appear fairly paradoxical, because in 1943–1945, the Allied powers had effectively placed Austria and Korea into the same category (i.e., Axis-occupied countries whose independence should be

restored after the end of the war, but which lacked Allied-recognized governments-in-exile), thus distinguishing them from Germany, an enemy power. It seems that the factors which enabled Austria to avoid the fate of political division were the following:

The Soviet attempt to set up a provisional coalition government headed by Karl Renner, a veteran Social Democratic politician, created a very special situation. Since Vienna, the capital of Austria, was under exclusive Soviet occupation at that time, the Soviets strove to extend the authority of the Renner government to the Western-occupied zones, too, instead of confining it to the Soviet zone. Their interest in persuading the Western powers to recognize the Renner government enabled the U.S. and Britain to set conditions (e.g., a four-power agreement on the joint occupation of Vienna), which in turn created a favorable environment for holding free, democratic elections. To Moscow's chagrin, the elections of November 1945 were won by the conservative People's Party (ÖVP), with the Austrian Communist Party receiving a mere 5% of the votes, but by then it was no longer possible to tamper with the Austrian political system in such a way that the Soviets did in the East European countries.

In contrast, Seoul, the capital of Korea, was under exclusive U.S. occupation from September 1945, and thus the Soviets were not only unable to create an all-Korean provisional government akin to Renner's but actually feared the prospect that a U.S.-affiliated, conservative Korean government might be established in Seoul, with an authority extended to the entire country. Under such circumstances, they sought to ensure that the composition of the would-be all-Korean government would reflect their political preferences (i.e., it should be dominated by the leftist Korean parties), and if this could not be achieved, then a separate state structure should be set up in the northern zone. That is, they tried to shape the composition of the Korean government through bilateral talks with the U.S. occupation authorities instead of allowing the holding of free elections (as was done in Austria). Their obstructive attitude may have been influenced by the unfavorable results of the recent Austrian elections, but it was rooted primarily in their conflict with the non-Communist Korean nationalists over the Moscow Agreement (December

1945). While Renner and other non-Communist Austrian politicians sought to achieve their aims by adopting an at least outwardly cooperative attitude toward the Allies, and implicitly accepting the temporary curtailment of Austrian sovereignty, the non-Communist Korean nationalists openly rejected the trusteeship that the Allies planned to impose on Korea. Their defiant attitude induced the Soviet military authorities to take forceful measures against them in the North, and to refuse to accept their presence among the politicians who were to represent the South in the would-be all-Korean government. While Austria had a deeply rooted, ideologically coherent, election-oriented multi-party system since the late 19th century, the post-1945 Korean parties lacked experience in electoral competition, and they were less inclined to make compromises than Austria's two main post-1945 parties, the People's Party and the Social Democrats.

At the same time, North Korea's path gradually diverged from East Germany's, as well. Due to Korea's limited strategic significance and its status as a non-enemy country, the occupying powers were more willing to withdraw their troops from there than from Germany, but by doing so, they unintentionally increased the risk of a military conflict between the two Korean states. In Germany, where both the USSR and the Western powers stationed strong military forces on a long-term basis, an armed clash between the two German states was likely to engulf the superpowers, but in Korea, Stalin could reasonably expect that the USSR, having refrained from signing a security treaty with Pyongyang, would be able to avoid entrapment even if Kim Il Sung's invasion of the ROK were to encounter unexpected obstacles. Furthermore, the political rift between North and South Korea was deeper than that between West and East Germany. While the West and East German authorities definitely regarded each other as illegitimate, they did not present themselves as the single lawful government of the entire country (including the territory under the control of the rival government) as forcefully as their Korean counterparts did. While South Korea's first constitution declared that the authority of the ROK government covered the entire peninsula, North Korea's first national legislative elections (August 1948) were said to have been

secretly carried out in South Korea, too, resulting in the peculiar situation that the majority of Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) members nominally represented the southern half of the nation. In 1948-1949, West Germany's Communist Party (KPD) duly participated in the provincial and national elections, whereas the South Korean Workers' Party (SKWP) called for a boycott of the country's Constitutional Assembly elections (May 1948), and even tried to disrupt them by violent means.

Balázs SZALONTAI is a Professor of North Korean Studies at the Department of Korean Unification, Diplomacy, and Security of Korea University, Sejong Campus. He received his Ph.D. in history from Central European University, Budapest. He is the author of *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953-1964* (2005). His other research fields include Southeast Asian, Mongolian, and East European history.

## Braiding Two Revolutions: Yan'an Group and Manchurian Koreans in the Chinese Revolution and the North Korean Revolutions, 1945-1950

Claudius (Kyung Yeob) KIM  
University of Texas, Austin

On June 14, 1950, as the Chinese Civil War was drawing to a close, mainland China had mostly fallen under Communist occupation. Chŏn Sang-hong, a soldier of the Korean People's Army (KPA), wrote two separate letters to his mother and lover, Chang Kwi-ran, in Songjiang province, China. The postscripts of these letters invite curiosity. To his mother, Chŏn concluded his letter in Chinese, "*geming chenggong zaijian ba* (Let us meet again after the victory of the revolution)." To Kwi-ran, Chŏn wrote a Korean transliteration of a Chinese sentence: "let us meet again after the revolution (Korean: *kŏd ming ihou tchaeijaenba*; Chinese: *geming yihou zaijian ba*)." Which revolution was Chŏn referring to in both contexts? Was it the Chinese Revolution, the Korean Revolution, or perhaps the worldwide revolution of the proletariat?

This paper seeks to understand what revolution meant for Chŏn Sang-hong and other Manchurian Koreans by navigating their collective experience, ideological worldviews, and political ethos. Drawing on Yan'an Group's<sup>1</sup> party archives, Korean-language newspapers in China,

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<sup>1</sup> Yan'an Group refers to a group of Korean revolutionaries who fought with Mao Zedong's Eighth

and Manchurian Korean soldiers' personal letters and notebooks captured during the Korean War, it explores how these actors made sense of their participation in the Chinese Civil War and the seamless transition into the Korean War. To do so, I argue that it is essential to examine how Manchurian Koreans engaged with and internalized two intersecting revolutionary discourses: the Northeast Revolution and the Asian Revolution.

The Northeast Revolution thesis, developed by Yan'an Group cadres in late 1945, envisioned Manchuria as the rearguard base and the launchpad for the Korean Revolution, where two million Manchurian Koreans would be mobilized and trained for the anticipated civil war in Korea. Having fought with Mao's Eighth Route Army during World War II and later risen to leadership positions in North Korea, Yan'an Group cadres maintained close ties with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Leveraging these connections, they devised a distinctly transnational strategy for North Korea's military buildup, recruiting as many as 70,000 Korean veteran soldiers from China into the KPA by 1950.<sup>2</sup> The mobilization process was not entirely top-down. Manchurian Koreans internalized the Yan'an Group's revolutionary vision over the course of the Chinese Civil War, and then developed what I call the "rear-front imaginary." This geospatial concept cast Manchuria as the rear and Korea as the frontline of their revolutionary war, which they called the Northeast Revolution, shaping their decision to join the CCP forces.

At the same time, Manchurian Koreans actively engaged with the CCP's emerging revolutionary vision. As victory loomed in China, CCP leaders began to articulate the ambitious project of what Shen Zhihua termed the Asian Revolution, through which Chinese Communists increasingly positioned themselves as leaders of revolutionary movements

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 Route Army in North China during WWII. After the war, they gained important positions in North Korea's government, army, and party until their purge in the late 1950s. Shen Zhihua and Xia Yafeng, *A Misunderstood Friendship*, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1962), 10-11.

in the East.<sup>3</sup> While the CCP offered only cautious gestures of support abroad, Manchurian Koreans went further. Even before Chinese military intervention in October 1950, they called for the CCP's intervention, without foreknowledge of its eventual involvement. When they returned to fight in Korea, they described their war not through China's later official slogan "Resist America, Aid Korea," but rather as "The War for the Defense of the Homeland." What shaped this terminological choice? What did this war—or revolution—mean to Chŏn Sang-hong and other voiceless Manchurian Koreans who stood at the forefront of the Korean War?

Historians have acknowledged the strategic importance of Manchurian Koreans in the war's outbreak. Cold War scholars often view the transfer of Korean soldiers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to the KPA as a matter of inter-socialist state relations.<sup>4</sup> Wada Haruki went further, portraying these soldiers—many of them CCP members and citizens of the People's Republic of China—as instruments of the Chinese Revolution. In his view, by virtue of their participation, the Korean War became an extension of the Chinese Revolution.<sup>5</sup>

The tendency to treat Manchurian Korean soldiers as passive instruments of elite diplomacy raises questions about their own agency.<sup>6</sup> The institutional perspective risks simplifying the motives and world-views of the very actors who spearheaded the war.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, Yŏm

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<sup>3</sup> Shen Zhihua and Xia Yafeng, *A Misunderstood Friendship: Mao Zedong, Kim Il-sung, and Sino-North Korean Relations, 1949-1976* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Shen and Xia, *A Misunderstood Friendship*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Wada Haruki, trans. Frank Baldwin, *The Korean War: An International History* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20; Weathersby, "Korea, 1948-50: To Attack, or Not to Attack? Stalin, Kim Il Sung, and the Prelude to War," *Cold War International Project Bulletin* No. 5 (Spring 1995): 1-9; Sergei N. Goncharov, John Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> As Chen Jian rightly pointed out, one must examine "the logic, dynamics, goals, and means of Communist China's foreign policy" to understand why China entered the Korean War, rather than assuming its behavior as a passive response to the U.S. foreign policy. This same logic should be applied to the study of Manchurian Koreans' entry into the Korean War. Chen Jian, *China's Road*

Inho's important work has revealed Manchurian Koreans' complex political consciousness, illustrating these historical actors' own initiative in joining the war. Yet even Yöm's analytical framework is surprisingly nation-centered. His focus remains largely on the diasporic community's resilient ethno-nationalism and the inner dynamics of their revolutionary movement in connection with North Korea. Little attention has been paid to how they interacted with the CCP, the broader dynamics of the Chinese Revolution, and the discourse of the Asian Revolution.<sup>8</sup>

To understand the Korean War's origins, we must move beyond the boundaries of nation-states—whether demographic or geospatial. As Pak Myōng-nim has argued, this war was never an indigenous civil war; Soviet and Chinese actors were too deeply involved in its making.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Korean War was part and parcel of the long trajectory of China's ongoing revolution. Chinese leaders viewed intervention in Korea as a means of turning external threat into the generation of revolutionary momentum at home; their enthusiasm to ensure the success of the North Korean Revolution was justified on the premise of fueling the momentum of the Asian Revolution.<sup>10</sup>

Highlighting the agency of ordinary Manchurian Korean soldiers, this paper examines how they developed their revolutionary ideology, identity, and objective over the course of the Chinese Civil War. It also demonstrates how they internalized the Asian Revolution discourse but not exactly in the way the CCP had intended. It is the argument of this paper that they constructed a uniquely transnational identity—one drawn from the Northeast Revolution and the Asian Revolution discourses—as *Korean* vanguards of the Asian Revolution. In contrast to earlier civil or

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*to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Yöm In-ho, *Tto hanaüi han'gukchönjaeng manju chosöninüi 'choguk'kwa chönjaeng* (Seoul: Yöksa pip'yöngsa, 2010), 683.

<sup>9</sup> Pak Myōng-nim, *Han'guk chönjaengüi palbal kwa kiwön*, Vol. 2 (Seoul: Nanam Ch'ulp'an, 1996), 895.

<sup>10</sup> Chen, *China's Road*, 21, 110, 129–30, 215.

Cold War origins theories, this study thereby offers a transnational perspective on the Korean War that highlights its Sino-Korean origins, with a focus on the role of Manchurian Koreans' initiative in starting the war.<sup>11</sup>


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<sup>11</sup> The prominent proponent of the civil war thesis is Bruce Cumings, who argues that the Korean War was an extension of a domestic struggle between the revolutionary Left—composed of patriotic, progressive, populist forces—and the counter-revolutionary Right, represented by a minority class of pro-Japanese landlords and capitalists backed by the U.S. According to Cumings, the outbreak of war on June 25 was merely the culmination on this deep-rooted conflict, which had begun with the U.S. occupation and its crackdown on the Left. Cold War historians such as Shen Zhihua and Kathryn Weathersby offer a more nuanced interpretation, emphasizing the complex diplomatic interactions between Kim, Mao, and Stalin, as well as highlighting Stalin's role in enabling the Korean War. Still, they generally concur that the initiative for the invasion came from Kim Il-sung, who persistently lobbied Stalin and Mao for approval of his plan to unify the peninsula by force. Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945–1947*, Vol. 1, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981); Weathersby, "Korea, 1948–50," 3.

Claudius (Kyung Yeob) KIM received his Ph.D. in Modern Korean and Chinese History from Stanford University in 2025. His current book project, "Revolution on the Move: Korean Migrants and Sino-Korean Relations in Trans-War East Asia, 1932–58," examines the intertwined histories of Chinese and Korean revolutions through the transnational lens of the Korean diaspora over the course of WWII, the Chinese Civil War, and the Korean War. He is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Clements Center for National Security, the University of Texas, Austin. He received his BSc. in Global China Studies from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology in 2017.

## **Victims of Victory: Power and Strategy in Postwar East Asia**

Barak KUSHNER  
Cambridge University



This paper investigates the complex legacy of Korean participation in the Japanese imperial military and their ambiguous status as both victims and perpetrators of imperial violence in the wake of World War II. I interrogate the postwar treatment of Korean individuals who served in or alongside Japanese forces, analyzing their fragile position within the shifting legal, military, and political frameworks of post-imperial East Asia. The central argument is that these individuals existed in a “grey zone” of historical responsibility, where colonial coercion and imperial complicity intersected, defying simple victim-perpetrator binaries.

I aim to emphasize how imperial legacies continue to shape regional memory and identity. My research looks to assess a less tangible, but no less enduring, imperial legacy: the Korean men who were militarized under Japanese rule later found themselves caught between collapsing empires, rising nationalist regimes, and the mechanisms for adjudicating postwar justice.

Despite the formal dissolution of the Japanese empire in 1945, the demobilization of its military apparatus generated new problems of accountability. Koreans and Taiwanese who had served the empire were of-

ten excluded from the primary war crimes trials, yet many were later prosecuted as B and C-class war criminals, particularly by the British and Australians. These individuals occupied a fraught legal status—neither fully Japanese (to be protected under Japanese legal sovereignty) nor fully independent actors (to be held solely responsible for their actions).

My presentation argues that the pursuit of justice in postwar East Asia was shaped not just by law, but by the political imperatives of emerging regimes. In Korea, the need to establish a functional police and military force often superseded concerns about collaboration. Many Korean ex-soldiers with Japanese training were quickly absorbed into the newly formed South Korean police and then the military. Ironically, possession of a Japanese military identity card often ensured employment. This paradox—where imperial experience became a qualification rather than a liability—illustrates the complex legacy of demobilization in the region.

I demonstrate how the legal and political fates of these individuals varied dramatically depending on geography. In Japan, Koreans were scapegoated in the aftermath of empire. The Yorii Incident of 1947, where Japanese mobs lynched Korean men, exemplifies how postwar violence echoed colonial hierarchies. In China, however, Koreans were seen as “secondary devils,” beneficiaries of Japanese aggression. Many were prosecuted by the KMT authorities for civilian torture, having served as interpreters for the *Kempeitai*, Japan’s military police. Recent access to Chinese trial transcripts reveals that these prosecutions were often grounded in substantial evidence of direct participation in acts of violence, despite the legal ambiguity surrounding their national identities.

Initially barred from military service, Koreans were only integrated into the armed forces when Japan’s manpower shortage became acute. Even then, their roles were mostly auxiliary—guards, laborers, or interpreters—though a few did rise to officer ranks, especially those trained in the Manchukuo Military Academy.

The chaos of imperial collapse created immense difficulties for repatriation and demobilization. Competing jurisdictions—the Soviets, Chinese Nationalists, and Chinese Communists—sought to control or

expel these remnants of empire. The Chinese government initially treated Korean soldiers as Japanese collaborators but eventually reclassified them as ethnic minorities eligible for naturalization. The Provisional Korean Government, meanwhile, attempted to reabsorb these militarized Koreans into a national army, though with limited success due to the disorder and conflicting allegiances of the time.

A key episode examined is the 1948 Yeosu–Suncheon Rebellion in South Korea, where mutinous soldiers and the brutal government crackdown that followed revealed how colonial military habits and affiliations continued to influence violence in the postcolonial period. Some of the officers leading the repression wore Japanese uniforms or had served in the Japanese army, highlighting the lingering material and institutional legacy of empire.

Based on this discussion, I turn to the trials of Korean war criminals. Many were prosecuted in British and Australian courts for abuses against Allied POWs. In China, however, charges centered around the torture of civilians. Interpreters, in particular, were frequently tried for aiding Kempeitai interrogations. I look at several cases where Korean interpreters were found guilty of exceeding their duties and committing acts of torture. These cases complicate assumptions that Koreans were merely passive tools of the Japanese empire. Many were fluent in Japanese and Chinese, carried weapons, and operated with some level of autonomy.

However, the legal standing of these Korean war criminals remained ambiguous even after Japan regained sovereignty in 1952. A habeas corpus petition by Korean and Taiwanese prisoners at Sugamo Prison was rejected by Japan's Supreme Court, which ruled that they were still war criminals, despite no longer being Japanese citizens after the San Francisco Peace Treaty was promulgated. This legal contradiction—where Korean perpetrators were held accountable in ways that Japanese war criminals were not—speaks to the unresolved nature of colonial justice.

In the 21st century, South Korea has re-examined the status of these individuals. Commissions under President Roh Moo Hyun cleared

many Korean B and C-class war criminals, recasting them as victims of colonial mobilization. These actions reflect a growing sentiment in Korean civil society that collaboration under duress should not be equated with moral or legal guilt. Yet as historian Jie-Hyun Lim warns, this turn toward “victimhood nationalism” risks transforming individual perpetrators into collective victims, erasing the moral complexity of their actions.

I conclude that the experience of Koreans under Japanese imperialism challenges standard historical narratives about war responsibility. The roles they played—in China, Japan, and Korea—demand a more geographically based framework for understanding agency and complicity in colonial contexts. The binary of victim versus perpetrator collapses under scrutiny, replaced by a complex web of survival, coercion, and selective justice. This ambiguity continues to shape historical memory, diplomatic relations, and national identity in East Asia today.

Barak KUSHNER is a professor of East Asian history in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge. He has edited and written eight books, most recently *The Geography of Injustice: East Asia's Battle between Memory and History* (Cornell University Press, 2024). He also starred in an NHK documentary, *In Deep with Ramen*, which explores Japanese ramen from a historical perspective

## Why do Differences in Historical Perception Arise?: The Influence of Strong Mobilization in a Weak Empire

Masaru TONOMURA  
Tokyo University

Historical issues have long been a source of conflict between Japan and South Korea. Despite various efforts to establish a shared understanding of history, opposing viewpoints have persisted. To understand this conundrum, this study examines how the realities of colonial rule are perceived, remembered, and narrated as history, and how the differences in perception between Japanese and Korean people arise.

First, the common recognition between Japanese and Korean people is that “the colonial rule of the Japanese Empire was extremely powerful.” This is acknowledged not only by those who emphasize the harm inflicted by the Japanese Empire but also by so-called “colonial modernization theorists.” However, the Japanese colonial government did not completely monitor, manage, or indoctrinate the people. This was the case in the Japanese mainland as well.

It is true that Japan’s wartime mobilization was very coercive. This “strong mobilization” was, in fact, a product of its “weak rule.” It was because of its incomplete management of residents, the lack of surveys or registration of the labor force required for mobilization, and the difficulties in administrative procedures for conscription that the colonial ad-

ministration had no choice but to forcibly gather people in every possible way. Additionally, the recruitment of “comfort women” was also carried out in a situation where the administrative authorities could not adequately monitor or manage the Korean communities, leading to legal violations such as abduction and fraudulent recruitment.

However, few people knew that “weak rule” led to “strong mobilization.” Instead, the Korean people subject to these policies thought that they were direct measures taken by the powerful administration equipped with legal authority to control and mobilize the people. This perception persisted and spread widely even after the war. Regarding labor mobilization, the term “jing-yong (conscription)” of the National Mobilization Act and the National Conscription Order was used. It encompassed different cases, including a kind of formal contract between an employer and an individual (although in reality, state coercion was often involved). Nonetheless, labor mobilization was perceived as a policy-driven and legally based practice authorized by the National Mobilization Act.

Regarding the mobilization of “comfort women,” during the war, there was a saying that they were recruited as Women’s Volunteer Corps (yeoja jeongsindae) in Korea and Japan, and then, after liberation, the words became a record in historical texts as evidence of the policy-driven and organized mobilization of “comfort women.” In Japan, such discourse was virtually nonexistent, but from the 1970s onward, it began to emerge as a narrative based on information from South Korea. Today, it has been confirmed that the mobilization of Women’s Volunteer Corps to military factories and other locations was separate from the mobilization of “comfort women,” but the explanation based on the abovementioned perception that the Japanese Empire mobilized “comfort women” through policy and institutions has been generally accepted.

In contrast, the view of the Japanese imperial bureaucrats differed from the discourse that had been passed down in Korea.

First, addressing the question of legal grounds, they said that the mobilization of Koreans to workplaces in Japan under the National Mobilization Law and the National Conscription Order occurred after September 1944, and that the work of “comfort women” did not fall under

the scope of national mobilization, thus being unrelated to the National Mobilization Law (this implies that “comfort women” were not recruited as Women’s Volunteer Corps under the Imperial Order for the Mobilization of Women for Labor). Additionally, addressing the “Yoshida Seiji testimony,” they said that even considering factors such as the administrative command structure, the relationship between civilian officials and military personnel, and the destabilization of public order, there was no basis for the claim that the Yamaguchi Prefecture’s Labor Service Association (Labor Service for the Nation Association) conducted “slave hunting” in Jeju Island pursuant to military orders. These explanations were accurate and reasonable.

However, it is not possible to simply dismiss the perceptions and memories of the Korean people as inaccurate or meaningless. Regardless of whether there was legal basis or official involvement, the Korean people perceived the labor mobilization as no different from the organized coercion of the Japanese Empire, as for them, it represented a form of wartime mobilization.

At the same time, it is necessary to point out that there were possible errors with the perceptions and memories of the ruling class, which could provide accurate explanations based on legal interpretations. Under “weak rule,” Japanese imperial bureaucrats could not manage or control the internal dynamics of the Korean people’s independent communities. They had no way of knowing what was happening within those communities, nor could they fully understand how the Korean people viewed the Japanese. Therefore, even though there were cases of forced mobilization, illegal abductions, and fraudulent recruitment leading to the recruitment of “comfort women,” they were unable to fully grasp this reality. As a result, the Japanese came to hold perceptions and memories that were at odds with the actual situation, believing that they maintained good relations with the Korean people.

And those Japanese who failed to fully grasp the reality of colonial rule often speak of the past as if they alone possessed the accurate facts. Such an attitude stems from the colonialist mindset that the Japanese are capable and the Koreans are ignorant and incapable. Overcoming the af-

tereffects of colonial rule and deepening historical understanding is the path to resolving these historical conflicts.

Born in 1966, Masaru TONOMURA received a Ph.D. from Waseda University in 2003. In 2007, he was appointed an Associate Professor at the Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies, the University of Tokyo, and has been serving as a Professor since 2015. His primary research interests include the history of Koreans in Japan and wartime mobilization in colonial Korea. His major publications include *A Historical Study of Korean Communities in Japan* (Ryokuin Shobō, 2002) and *The Forced Mobilization of Koreans* (Iwanami Shoten, 2012).

## The Dilemma of Acknowledging Victimhood and the Alienation from One's Own Memory

Jung-Ae PARK

Northeast Asian History Foundation

It is said that the memories surrounding the Japanese military's "comfort women" have entered the post-memory era. It has become not uncommon to read news articles about the deaths of "comfort women" victims and to count the number of remaining "survivors." As of July 2025, out of 240 Korean "comfort women" victims, 234 have passed away, leaving only six survivors. What does the term "remaining survivors" mean to us at this point? Those who have concluded their lives transitioned from "survivors of victimization" to simply "victims." Do they represent a different meaning now?

One of the typical narratives about Japanese military "comfort women" is that "after being suppressed for over 50 years, the memories of the victims have finally found an audience who can empathize with them, making it possible to write history from the victims' perspective." Similarly, in response to the "2015 Korea-Japan Agreement," which prioritized national political interests, the principle of "victim-centered problem-solving" was reaffirmed. So, what is a "victim-centered approach"? Have the "voices" of victims that we have encountered thus far been "victim-centered"?

To answer this question, this article focuses on three aspects. First, it focuses on the “oral accounts” of victims that have competed with the socially recognized “victimhood.” It examines the interviewers’ purposes and the victims’ narratives: the narrative here means not only the spoken words but also avoidance, silence, and contradictions. Second, this study also investigates changes in the social memory of the Japanese military “comfort women” issue, focusing on news reports and mass media, and the two-way process of how they both draw from and shape victims’ memories. Third, it traces the effects that the denial of Japanese military “comfort women” victimhood produces. By delving into the missing links in social memory, this paper explores how the denial narrative, which has gained momentum by exploiting these gaps, is reconfiguring the same social memory from which it originated.

In South Korea, to recognize someone as a victim of the Japanese military “comfort women,” one must possess “expert knowledge and judgment.” In June 1993, Korea passed its first law to support the livelihood of survivors. Since then, the Korean government has maintained “protection, support, and commemoration programs for victims of the Japanese military ‘comfort women.’” This law defines victims as “those who were forcibly mobilized by the Japanese imperial regime and compelled to live as comfort women.” These two conditions, “forced mobilization” and “compulsion to live as comfort women,” became the focus for the investigators and review committee members’ assessment of the victims’ claims. Moreover, when investigating victims’ claims, the experts naturally pay more attention to their process of forced mobilization and life in comfort stations. The problem was that in the early 1990s, there were no “comfort women lists” collected by credible authorities (consulate police, military police, or business owners), and there was only a small body of academic research on the history of Japanese military “comfort women.” There was a widely accepted perception that the Japanese military and government operated an organized system of wartime sexual violence, and that this was the most significant characteristic of the Japanese military “comfort women” system. However, whether there was a structural connection between the “organized and systematic”

nature of this system and the practices of “forced mobilization” and “coercion into becoming comfort women” was not thoroughly examined. As a result, the decision regarding “comfort women” victimization had to rely heavily on the testimonies of the victims themselves.

Many victims found it nearly impossible to rigorously reconstruct their experiences into “testimonies.” These women, who experienced their initial mobilization, transportation, and assignment between their mid-teens and early twenties, were not provided with reliable information. Some reported their experiences based solely on the memory of being “taken away during the war and subjected to hardships by the Japanese military,” without knowing what “comfort women” meant. In most cases, circumstantial memories took precedence over factual memories regarding by whom, when, why, where, and how they were taken. Japan’s disclosure of documents was minimal, and academic research was slow to progress and was not shared uniformly among experts. The place name “Doraku” remaining in the victims’ memories was recognized by those who were involved as “Indonesia,” and the “comfort station where they were taken by truck for two days from Harbin Station” was simply recorded as a comfort station in Harbin. Victims who were at a comfort station in Taiwan, which was used not only by soldiers but also by civilians, worried that others might not recognize their experiences as “victimization.”

Above all, the victims lacked the language to describe what they had experienced. The Japanese military “comfort women” system was operated within the framework of modern Japan’s prostitution management policies, with regulations on working hours, fees, and leave restriction. Life in the comfort stations, where relationships with pimps, soldiers, and fellow victims, as well as state surveillance, intertwined, was not solely characterized by violence. It was not until the 1990s that the term “sexual violence” came into widespread use to describe all forms of sexual violence arising from power dynamics, beyond physical violence. Victims, when asked about their experiences by interviewers, could only describe what was then considered “sexual harm” according to prevailing norms. Describing moments of “sexual harm” was no easy task for those

who had lived in an era when “chastity was considered a virtue for women,” both for the speakers and the listeners. Their experiences of “sexual harm” were imagined through harsh language, silence, emotional turmoil, awkwardness, and the inability to speak up.

Nevertheless, when examining the oral interview records left by the victims, it becomes clear that they have shared their experiences in diverse ways within the category of victimhood. This is a crucial aspect that must be reexamined, as it transcends the socially defined notion of “victimhood.”

There are some recent studies that focus on the popular narrative about Japanese military “comfort women,” which has been told since Korea’s liberation. They point out that the social memory of “comfort women” underwent a transformation starting with Kim Hak-soon’s testimony in 1991. In the 1980s and 1990s, narratives about Japanese military “comfort women” were consumed as sensational stories combining “national tragedy” with the sexual experiences and violence endured by women with low social standing, amid the convergence of commercial journalism and nationalism. With the underlying nationalism and misogyny being unchallenged, the public began to hear the testimonies of survivors, and the media and the public expanded the narrative of the “comfort women” based on their existing perceptions. As a result, the experiences of the “comfort women” were interpreted within the scope of what was considered acceptable as “sexual violence victims” at the time. The media and public outlets selectively edited or framed victims’ experiences to fit the narrative of “safe sexual violence victim stories.” Although the victims’ experiences originated from the pretext of serving Japan’s “national interest,” they converged with Korean nationalism, and the part of the victims’ stories that did not fit seamlessly into nationalism was dismissed as “dangerous” and was not allowed to become a topic of public discussion.

Without criticism of nationalism and misogyny, social memory solidified around the victim narratives that fit the discourse of “victimhood.” The stories of victims were materialized as the stories of girls and grandmothers. As state-led right-wing politics gained momentum, his-

torical revisionists gained power and intensified their attacks on victims in the name of “Japan’s honor.” Through this process, the victims’ oral testimonies were stolen and turned into weapons used to stab them. They were called fake victims because “they signed a contract,” “they made money,” and “they had relationships with soldiers.” Although many experts, politicians, and “good-willed citizens” are angry about this historical distortion, they have been unable to avoid relying on the existing “victimhood” discourse to respond to historical revisionism. Their debate became trapped by the framework set by the revisionists who turned it into a political issue, and within the public discourse, the “victimhood” of the Japanese military “comfort women” became further reinforced. Some parts of memory of the victims were seen as undermining their “victimhood,” and these undesirable memories were pulled out of the popular narrative of the “comfort women.”

The “victimhood” regulates the victims’ experiences. It continues to function as a criterion for judging their experiences. This inversion makes it difficult to approach the victims’ language and experiences, to reflect on the Japanese military “comfort women” issue, and to seek solutions. We need productive debate, not meaningless political wrangling. The social memory of Japanese military “comfort women,” which has been fossilized as mere stories of girls and grandmothers is losing its connection to reality. There are concerns that these stories of victims, which have affected the cause of “preventing the recurrence of sexual violence,” would become nothing more than “old stories” for the so-called “post-memory” generation. We must deconstruct the “victimhood” rooted in nationalism and misogyny, and restore the memories of victims excluded from the “typical comfort women narrative” to fully explain the suffering of Japanese military “comfort women.” Only when we dismantle the structural repetition of wartime and peacetime sexual violence and discuss the responsibility of the state and civil society can a victim-centered narrative of the “comfort women” history be possible.

Jung-Ae PARK is historian specializing in modern Korean gender history. I received my Ph.D. from Sookmyung Women's University with a dissertation on *kōshōsei*(公娼制, the state-regulated prostitution system) in colonial Korea. Since 1999, I have conducted oral history interviews with survivors of the Japanese military "comfort women" system, and since 2005, I have carried out truth-finding and victim investigations in this field at public institutions dedicated to historical issues. I am currently a research fellow at the Northeast Asian History Foundation. My research focuses on the Japanese military "comfort women" issue from gender, postcolonial, and Asian perspectives.

# Notes for Contributors

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NH Life Bldg, 81, Tongil-ro, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea

Tel: +82-2-2012-6000 Fax: +82-2-2012-6186