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The Dynamics of Elite Domination in Early Modern Korea

(Review Essay)

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Martina DEUCHLER, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes: Kinship, Status, and Locality in Premodern Korea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press, 2015. 629 Pages. ISBN: 9780674504301 (Hardcover). 79.95 USD.

One of the major themes in the history of early modern Korea are the ways *sajok* 士族 aristocrats responded to the peculiar lack of *de jure* protection of social status (Deuchler 2015a, 397). In Chosŏn (1392–1910), aristocratic status depended on the prestige attached to service in *yangban* officialdom—that is, the civil and military branches of the central bureaucracy. For an aristocratic house to be recognized as such, at least one male heir had to pass the competitive high-level civil or military examinations and be appointed to one of the eighteen ranks of *yangban* offices. Before the late sixteenth century, a relatively open regime allowed some upward mobility and the flow of provincials into the capital. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, local *sajok* aristocrats faced severely limited access to central *yangban* offices and thus devised alternative strategies of status retention. They created associations and rosters that excluded outsiders, for example, and promoted ideological and cultural activities that distinguished the local *sajok* from the common folk.

Martina Deuchler's *Under the Ancestors' Eyes: Kinship, Status, and Locality in Premodern Korea* examines this historical process in relation to the persistence of what she calls "kinship ideology" in premodern Korea. To an extent, this book continues to explore the societal impact of what she refers to interchangeably as "Confucian," "patrilineal descent," and "agnatic" ideology in her 1992 work *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology*. The notion of "kinship ideology" is an extension of this perspective. Deuchler holds that the Korean reading of Confucian philosophy and ritual canon—putatively stricter and more literal than the Chinese reading—provided *sajok* aristocrats with a powerful means of defending the local and regional status quo. The ideological restructuring of *sajok* households according to the principles of patrilineal organization allocated extra material resources to the main heir for ritual obligations, abolished uxorilocal marriage, and excluded women from inheritance, among other changes. Such cultural practices added another layer of social distinction at a time when the *sajok*

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eagerly sought unofficial and symbolic markers of status.

Deuchler's central argument is that Korea was a type of "kinship society" throughout its premodern history. A native tendency to value kinship organization dating back to the days of unified Silla (668–935) evolved into a more refined form with the imported Confucian idea of patrilineal descent. As outlined in *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, the turning point came with the introduction of Neo-Confucian thought toward the end of Koryŏ (918–1392) and the early Chosŏn state's supposed declaration of Neo-Confucianism as its official ideology (64). What distinguishes Under the Ancestors' Eyes from Deuchler's previous research is that the new monograph no longer treats Confucianism as something foreign that replaced pre-existing Korean social organization. Rather, Deuchler prefers to interpret the Confucian patrilineal principles from China as something that was laid on top of the native Korean predisposition to value kinship. If this master narrative sounds somewhat essentialist that is because Deuchler indeed claims to have discovered a timeless Korean ideology. In her own words: "the indigenous kinship ideology, with its celebration of status hierarchy and status exclusivity, ran like a red thread through Korea's history from early Silla to the late nineteenth century" (408).

As a work of history, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* has many merits. Over 400 pages of lucid and crisp prose provide rich descriptions of social behavior and ritual practices that contributed to the solidarity and stability of local communities outside the walls of Seoul. Much of what is discussed in this book is absent from previous Anglophone studies of Korea, though the reading experience will be different for those familiar with South Korean scholarship. Two southern locations are covered in detail "because of the rich historical record they have preserved" (10). Andong in northern Kyŏngsang is an obvious choice; it was the area where T'oegye (1501–1570) was from, the spiritual center of a major political faction, and evokes an image of frugal and secluded scholarly life. Namwŏn in eastern Chŏlla, the other selection, offers a useful contrast to Andong as the so-called Kiho region is associated with another political faction and more closely tied to court politics.

Deuchler's narrative is built around political events and personalities; abstractions and structural explanations are avoided. Through the cases of Andong and Namwŏn, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* delineates the sixteenth-century transition from "the political" to "the social" in the dynamics of *sajok* domination (38, 408). That is, from this point of Korean history forward, aristocratic status depended more on local sources of power ("the social") than the central *yangban* offices ("the political"). According to Deuchler, the backdrop to the mid-Chosŏn restructuring was the central state's efforts to regain local control in the decades following the Imjin War of 1592–1598 (260–61) and the formalization of factional politics following the Injo Restoration of 1623 (237). Whether this change was accumulative or cataclysmic is left ambiguous.

Perhaps structural explanations are unnecessary for this project's ends. Deuchler claims that *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* is a work of social history: "the most exacting of the historical disciplines" (xiv). On this point, again, a comparison with her earlier book is useful. In *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, which was

emphatically "not a social history" (5), Deuchler does not distinguish the center from the local. Korea's Confucian transformation is a foregone conclusion. The external stimulus provided by China's Confucian thought is assumed to function as the main agent of social change, and thus the book focuses on identifying the tipping point. The success of patrilineal ideology resulted from Korea's encounter with Neo-Confucian thought in the late Koryŏ and the legislating of Confucian social norms during the first century of the Chosŏn dynasty. According to this teleological framing, the two hundred-odd years between the late 1300s and the early 1600s were an incubation period, during which, gradually and belatedly, Korea became a Confucian patrilineal society. In contrast, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* offers a different perspective. As Deuchler puts it: "the persistence of the native kinship ideology . . . determined the flow of Korean history and led to the rigidification of Korean society in late Chosŏn—and not Neo-Confucianism, as is generally assumed!" (Deuchler 2015b, 4). It offers a narrative of events in which conjunctures and meso-level structures are downplayed. Stories pertaining to economic activities and slave labor, Confucian philosophical schools, court intrigues, the local *sajok*'s pushback against the central state's intrusion, and the publication of local gazetteers, among other topics, are organized in an encyclopedic and episodic format. This structure is by design: it provides details for Deuchler's *longue durée* narrative of premodern Korea's kinship ideology.

Under the Ancestors' Eyes consists of fourteen chapters grouped into five parts. Part I offers a compressed history of premodern Korea's kinship ideology from unified Silla to early Chosŏn, concluding with the sixteenth-century Neo-Confucian construction of the "succession of the Way" (*tot'ong* 道統) genealogy. The three chapters that constitute Part II deal with the ways the local *sajok* responded to the central government's efforts to take direct control of the countryside through the cases of sixteenth-century Andong and Namwŏn. In Part III, the coverage of Andong is extended into the seventeenth century with a discussion of the creation of patrilineal *sajok* lineages, Neo-Confucian learning and ritual practices, and the building of local rosters, organizations, regulations, and so forth. Part IV describes the *sajok*'s involvement in the intensifying factional strife in the capital using mostly materials from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Andong. Part V recounts the stories from Andong and Namwŏn pertaining to both the resilience of the *sajok* and the challenges they faced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some portions of this book contain illuminating accounts of local life in Chosŏn's southern region; other sections, especially portions of Parts I and II, should be read with caution for reasons that will be elaborated later. In brief, this book's major flaw is its failure to directly engage with the work of South Korean historians.

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Since the 1990s, social historians of Silla, Koryŏ, and Chosŏn have produced detailed studies of individuals, status groups, communities, and regions previously downplayed or neglected. This body of research has brought a welcome change from the historical scholarship of the nation-building era, which paid too much

attention to the political elite, the capital region, formal institutions, signs of class conflict, and sprouts of early modernity. This is not to suggest that the turn toward social history signaled a radical departure from the older historiography. In many ways, social historians have built on their predecessors' strong tradition in empirical and evidential research. Rather than prematurely fit their case studies into a universal framework, however, they investigate the experience of various underprivileged and marginalized people, most of who resided outside of Seoul, Kaesŏng, and Kyŏngju, and left behind almost no direct accounts of their activities.

Expert opinions vary on how one defines Korean social history and what has motivated and shaped this trend. It is difficult to make conclusive statements in the absence of formal and balanced reviews of South Korean historiography's complex and diverse landscape, particularly developments that began in the mid-1990s. After all, if this generation of Korean historians has one feature in common, it is skepticism of sweeping generalizations. As for what prompted this departure from the older historiography, one possibility is South Korea's twenty-some years of experience as an industrialized democracy in a globalized world, which resulted in growing dissatisfaction with the single-nation and developmental narratives of the premodern era. Another reason could be external influences from sister disciplines, such as the Annales school, labor history, and the social history of China and Japan.

Sources are another factor to consider. Social historians have a penchant for claiming that their research does not follow a predefined agenda. Primary sources are said to guide the course of their individual projects. Regardless of whether one agrees with the claim to objectivity, it is important to recognize the extent to which sources impact the fashioning of research topics. Social historians of premodern Korea overwhelmingly rely on indirect, mediated, or passing observations of the society's privileged segment: government bureaucrats and the educated few. Snapshots of the non-elite segment of society or life outside the royal palace are extraordinarily rare. Before the twentieth century, those responsible for most tax and corvée duty remained uneducated and illiterate, unable to even sign their own names. Writing by ordinary people is difficult to find and unmediated accounts are virtually non-existent. Historians of Silla and Koryŏ rely on a small number of Chinese ethnographic surveys, stone inscriptions, wooden slips, and household registers. While Chosŏn sources are relatively abundant, no formal organization preserved records documenting the activities of commoners and slaves. There is no Korean equivalent of early modern France's parish records or Japan's monastic archives.

A balanced and fair evaluation of *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* should consider Deuchler's responses to these common challenges facing all social historians of premodern Korea. In this sense, it is puzzling to find a general absence of discussions of historiography; the few instances appear as passing remarks or in endnotes. Deuchler opens this book with the claim that "[m]ost historians . . . by focusing predominantly on the central bureaucracy (and using centrally produced documents), identified the ruling elite in terms of examination success, office holding, or status privileges" (2). While it is not clear which generation of historians she has in mind, this statement is a misleading characterization of the past twenty-five years of South Korean scholarship. With regard to social history

specifically, Deuchler remarks: "there exists already a copious literature with 'social history' . . . in their title. Yet . . . the majority of them are merely descriptive, lack a historical perspective across dynastic boundaries, and, above all, do not show how social reality is intertwined with the political, economic, intellectual, and religious life of the country" (Deuchler 2015b, 3). However, Deuchler's book itself is highly descriptive and resists systemic explanations, which is hardly surprising given social historians' general penchant for investigating specific cases to challenge preconceptions and broad-brush narratives. In fact, it is not clear why Deuchler expects that a monograph of social history should cover a long time span. It is indeed the case that what sets Deuchler apart from South Korean historians is her *longue durée* conjecture of "kinship ideology" that sums up nearly a millennium of premodern Korean history. Why her approach should be regarded as the standard for social historians is open to question.

On local history, Deuchler writes in an endnote: "'local history' (*chibangsa*) was long ignored by historians as being of little relevance to national history. Only in recent years has local history become a topic problematized as to its contents, materials, and methodology" (Deuchler 2015a, 441n43). She mentions three examples of such studies:

> Han'guksa Yŏn'guhoe p'yŏn, ed. *Han'guk chibangsa yŏn'gu ŭi hyŏnhwang kwa kwaje* (The present state and task of the study of Korean local history). Seoul: Kyŏngin Munhwasa, 2000.
> Kuksa P'yŏnch'an Wiwŏnhoe. *Chiyŏksa yŏn'gu ŭi iron kwa silche* (Theory and practice of local history). Special issue of *Han'guksa ron* 32 (2001).
> Chŏng Tu-hŭi and Edward Shultz. *Han'guksa e issŏsŏ chibang kwa chungang* (The periphery and center in Korean history). Seoul: Sogang University Press, 2003.

These three books are state of the field reviews, meaning that by 2003 local history had already accumulated enough dissertations, monographs, and case studies to warrant reflection. By 2015, when *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* was published, a staggering amount of scholarship in premodern Korean social history was available. The following list is a sampling of major books and dissertations in local history and center/local dynamics, divided by dynastic periods:

Silla

McBride, Richard, ed. *State and Society in Middle and Late Silla*. Cambridge, MA: Korea Institute, Harvard University, 2010.

Chŏn Tŏkchae. *Han'guk kodae sahoe ŭi wanggyŏngin kwa chibangmin*. Seoul: T'aehaksa, 2002.

Yun Sŏnt'ae. "Silla t'ongilgi wangsil ŭi ch'ollak chibae: Silla komunsŏ wa mokkan ŭi punsŏk ŭl chungsim ŭro." Ph.D. dissertation, Seoul National University, 2000.

Koryŏ

Sin Ansik. *Koryŏ muin chŏngkwŏn kwa chibang sahoe*. Seoul: Kyŏngin Munhwasa, 2002.

Ch'ae Ungsŏk. *Koryŏ sidae ŭi kukka wa chibang sahoe: 'Pon'gwanje' ŭi sihaeng kwa chibang chibae chilsŏ*. Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2000.

Kim Iru. *Koryŏ ch'ogi kukka ŭi chibang chibae ch'egye yŏn'gu chŏ*. Seoul: Ilchisa, 1998.

Chosŏn

Kim, Sun Joo. *Voices from the North: Resurrecting Regional Identity through the Life and Work of Yi Sihang (1672–1736)*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

Kwŏn Kijung. *Chosŏn sidae hyangni wa chibang sahoe*. Seoul: Kyŏngin Munhwasa, 2010.

Ch'oe Sŏnhye. *Chosŏn chŏn'gi chibang sajok kwa kukka*. Seoul: Kyŏngin Munhwasa, 2007.

Kim, Sun Joo. *Marginality and Subversion in Korea: The Hong Kyŏngnae Rebellion of 1812*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007.

Kim Kŏnt'ae. *Chosŏn sidae yangbanga ŭi nongŏp kyŏngyŏng*. Seoul: Yŏksa Pip'yŏngsa, 2004.

Kim Sŏkhŭi. *Chosŏn hugi chibang sahoesa yŏn'gu*. Seoul: Hyean, 2004.

Yi Sugŏn. *Han'guk ŭi sŏngssi wa chokpo*. Seoul National University Press, 2003.

Im Yonghan. *Chosŏn chŏn'gi suryŏngje wa chibang t'ongch'i*. Seoul: Hyean, 2002.

O Such'ang. *Chosŏn hugi P'yŏngan-do sahoe palchŏn yŏn'gu*. Seoul: Ilchogak, 2002.

Kim Sŏngu. *Chosŏn chunggi kukka wa sajok*. Seoul: Yŏksa Pipŏyŏngsa, 2001.

Karlsson, Anders. "The Hong Kyŏngnae rebellion 1811–1812: Conflict between Central Power and Local Society in 19th-century Korea." Ph.D. dissertation, Institute of Oriental Languages, Stockholm University, 2000.

Yi Hŭigwŏn. *Chosŏn hugi chibang t'ŏngch'i haengjŏng yŏn'gu*. Seoul: Chimmundang, 1999.

Yi Sugŏn. *Chosŏn sidae chibang haengjŏngsa*. Seoul: Minŭmsa, 1989.

_____. *Han'guk chungse sahoesa yŏn'gu*. Seoul: Ilchogak, 1984.

_____. *Yŏngnam sarimp'a ŭi hyŏngsŏng*. Kyŏngsan: Yŏngnam Taehakkyo Minjok Munhwa Yŏn'guso, 1980.

While some of the abovementioned books are cited for facts and specific points, Deuchler does not critically engage with their main arguments or contributions to Korean social history. Of course, no one is expected to reference every secondary source. On the other hand, the omission of some studies is more problematic than that of others. For example, Silla is fundamental for Deuchler's overarching argument that premodern Korea's kinship ideology and descent group system originate from this period. Her four-page treatment relies on the studies of Yi Kibaek (1974), Yi Kidong (1980), Yi Chonguk (1999), Ch'ae Chaesŏk (1983)—survey accounts and studies of institutions and capital-based aristocrats (442n5). Her reconstruction of Silla society would have benefited from referencing Richard McBride (2010), Chŏn Tŏkchae (2002), and Yun Sŏnt'ae (2000), all of whom are widely respected among historians of Silla for the quality of their research. Their studies paint a dynamic picture of changing relations between the bone-rank aristocrats in the capital and the subjugated settlements and maritime traders in the provinces, using official records, stone inscriptions, and recently-excavated wooden slips.

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Despite its assertions to the contrary, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* is a study that owes a great deal to South Korean social historians. Its philological strategies,

for instance, are remarkably similar to the ways South Korean historians interpret primary sources. Deuchler aims to distinguish this monograph from others by advancing on one hand a *longue-durée* narrative of kinship ideology, and on the other, an inductive argument that her local cases of Andong and Namwŏn mirror national patterns. This book would have been more persuasive, however, as a social history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Chosŏn's southern provinces seen through the lens of Andong and Namwŏn. In addition, it could have contributed more to social history if, rather than painting a homogeneous picture of the late Chosŏn and presenting an essentialist narrative of premodern Korean history, it had emphasized diversity and variation—of politics, of social trends, of Confucian scholarship, of economic activities, and so on. Deuchler is a gripping writer and storyteller who skillfully breathes life into the stories of Korean personalities buried in obscure archival materials. Yet, the selection and organization of the various stories at times appear indiscriminate. Quantitative and genealogical sources are used in numerous instances to confirm a priori assumptions, rather than in an exploratory manner to add complexity to the overall picture. Most importantly, this book does not explicitly state the limits of its geographic scope: the *sajok* represented in this book are almost entirely residents of Chosŏn's southern provinces. Most of these blemishes could have been avoided if *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* had remained genuinely a work of local and social history.

A case in point is Deuchler's chapter on the origins of Korea's descent group system in pre-Confucian Silla and Koryŏ, which relies heavily on historical terms and biographical sketches. The philological approach was once commonly used by South Korean historians but has been gradually been abandoned in favor of more reliable methods. Deuchler's evidence for the existence of a kinship ideology in Silla is based on her reading of the bone-rank institution and "the Chinese-derived term *chok* 族 [that] implies patrilineality" (20). In the case of Koryŏ, she pays attention to "descent groups" that "gained recognition as 'great' (*taejok* 大族) or 'famous' (*myŏngjok* 名族) or 'long-lasting' (*sejok* 世族)" (31) and other linguistic clues such as *munbŏl* 門閥, which she curiously translates as "ruling class" (30). The term *chok* is brought up again, but in the Koryŏ context, it does not connote patrilineal descent but rather "embrac[es] matrilateral and patrilateral kin and on occasion also affines . . . [and] a multilaterally connected body of people that perpetuated its social status and thus retained its political influence" (31). Deuchler's definition of Koryŏ *chok* is based on historical research outside the semantic features of this Sinitic character—research drawn from both her *The Confucian Transformation of Korea* and South Korean pioneers of kinship studies. In that case, why should the Silla *chok* be assumed to refer to descent groups and, more specifically, descent groups with a strong implication of patrilineality? Why did the early Koryŏ aristocrats abandon Silla's supposedly patrilineal practices? In fact, the historical research shows that they did not.

We should not expect historical actors' categories to map neatly onto modern theoretical and social scientific concepts. Likewise, we should not assume that categories in medieval and early modern texts are used consistently. The term *chok* likely meant different things in the 900s, 1100s, and 1700s. Nor should we treat all

instances of *munbŏl* or *sejok* in documents from the same time period as though they were necessarily employed with the rigor expected of today's anthropologist. Furthermore, we should not overemphasize the influence of formal institutions such as the Field and Woodland Rank System (30). It is important to note that these institutions are in part a product of later historiographical imagination, especially of the compilers of the *Koryŏsa*, who sought to reconstruct the social and political workings of a world five hundred years before their time. Readers might want to consider Remco Breuker's claim (2006) that early Koryŏ was characterized by ideological pluralism and ad hoc measures, rather than bureaucratic regularity.

Another danger of Deuchler's philological analysis is that some influential patriarchs who attained noble titles and informal appellations such as *taejok* and *myŏngjok* for their so-called descent groups might have failed to bequeath their status to posterity. Deuchler uses the example of the Kyŏngwŏn Yi, undoubtedly the most powerful aristocratic house in twelfth-century Koryŏ; however, her claim that "the Kyŏngwŏn Yi . . . not only survived but indeed preserved their great social prestige as *sejok* into early Chosŏn" (31) is incorrect. The South Korean debate regarding Koryŏ's "aristocratic" (related to heredity and stability) and "bureaucratic" (related to meritocracy and mobility) status has taken place for good reasons. The Kyŏngwŏn Yi genealogy shows that almost the entire extended family was eliminated from Koryŏ politics following the failed coup of Yi Chagyŏm (d. 1127). The Kyŏngwŏn Yi that survived into the early Chosŏn was a minor segment by way of Yi Illo (1152–1220), not the patriline of Yi Chagyŏm. And Kyŏngwŏn Yi is not an exceptional case. In fact, the quantitative data of Yi Sugŏn and John Duncan that Deuchler cites to argue that a small number of descent groups monopolized power (27–28) contains a caveat: juxtapose the early Koryŏ and late Koryŏ/early Chosŏn lists and one discovers that the majority of early Koryŏ's formidable aristocratic houses failed to retain their privileges in the long run. The story of the P'yŏngsan Pak (28) also illustrates the challenges of self-perpetuation in Koryŏ: "the P'yŏngsan Pak belonged firmly to the early Koryŏ capital elite—an august social standing that they were, however, apparently unable to maintain until the end of the dynasty" (28). A more accurate retelling of the P'yŏngsan Pak story is that the family produced a queen early in the dynasty but failed to retain power; the progenitor's sixth-generation descendant by the name of Pak Illyang (d. 1096) then reversed the situation once again; the family's success in producing central officials continued for two generations, only to give way to another decline in social standing. In the case of the P'ap'yŏng Yun, Yun Kwan (d. 1111) had five sons who also became respected officials in the capital, which "established the P'ap'yŏng Yun as eminent capital-based aristocrats" (28). However, are two generations of success enough to call that family an eminent aristocratic one? It is the opinion of the present reviewer that kinship terms should be applied more cautiously with closer attention to evidence and data; actors' categories should not be understood as technical concepts with a priori meanings.

Generalization and representation are another aspect of Deuchler's book worth discussing. *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* is presented as a work of social history supplemented by the insights and methods of sociocultural anthropology. To

anyone familiar with Deuchler's long and impressive academic career, this is a well-known fact. Yet, her historical analysis in this book frequently runs contrary to expectations. A social historian, one would suspect, would be inclined to privilege heterogeneity, variation, and diversity. This book is structured along the lines of a pre-determined master narrative and is geared toward inductive generalization from a small number of cases, as though the anecdotes from Andong, Namwŏn, Chinju, and Seoul stand for the whole of the Chosŏn dynasty. As Deuchler herself notes, Andong and Namwŏn were chosen because of the unusually high availability of local sources (10). The abundance is precisely what makes these two sites exceptional in the Chosŏn context—not every locality in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Korea operated in a similar manner as those southern communities with a strong *sajok* presence.

In this sense, it would have been welcome, and perhaps even necessary, to see a comparison of Chosŏn's northern and southern regions. The society and culture of the northern region has been carefully explored in the recent publications of Kim Sun Joo (2007, 2010, 2013), Anders Karlsson (2000), O Such'ang (2002), and others. The northern elites struggled with the regional stereotype that "there are *no yangban* in the north" and fashioned their self-image as national leaders with a stake in the faction-divided court politics taking place in Seoul. Paek Kyŏnghae (1765–1842), for example, directly challenged the cultural authority of *pŏryŏl* 閥閱 oligarchs in Seoul with Confucian scholarship based on a uniquely P'yŏngan-centered world view (Kim Sun Joo 2005). Such activities and trends run counter to the southern *sajok*'s preoccupation with long ancestry in the area (genealogy compiled in Deuchler 2015a, 363–66), retention of prestige (the politics of enshrinement shown in 368–69), and local-level *pŏryŏl*-ization (366). A short discussion regarding the contrasts between the north and the south would have helped the readers see *Yŏnggaji* 永嘉誌 and *Yongsŏngji* 龍城誌, the local gazetteers of Andong and Namwŏn respectively, as unique and exceptional sources in terms of their content, their format, and timing of their publication, rather than simply a type of historical record different from others such as collected writings, epitaphs, genealogies, and diaries (411–15).

Furthermore, at times, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* conflates etic and emic perspectives. This book does not always make it clear who is the observer and what is being observed. Deuchler's tendency to map actor's categories onto modern academic concepts has already been noted. In other situations, Deuchler tends to over-trust or give too much weight to historical actors who make broad observations. The introduction to Part I, for instance, begins with a quotation by Ryang Sŏngji (1415–1482), a famous fifteenth-century statesman, who mentions the importance of *taega sejok* 大家 世族 for social order. Deuchler renders that term into "great and hereditary descent groups" (15). While this translation expedites her narrative, one should not prematurely assume that what Ryang had in mind was an aristocratic group with a common patrilineal ancestor. The term appears in Ryang's philosophical justification for treating "merit subjects" (*kongsin* 功臣) with special consideration for their exceptional loyalty to the throne. Given this context, and considering its variants such as *sega* and *taejok*, and sega *taejok*, the term *taega*

sejok should probably be interpreted as a figurative term referring to prominent established households, not necessarily a concept that captures fifteenth-century Korea's social configuration. In a discussion elsewhere regarding the transformation of certain southern local societies into *sajok* oligarchies, Deuchler cites Yi Ik's (1681–1763) checklist and evaluation that this is a "remnant of Silla's *kolp'um* 骨品 system" (367). The implication is that Yi Ik strengthens Deuchler's notion of kinship ideology originating in Silla.

In a number of instances, anecdotes and quantitative data in *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* are arranged to fit a preconceived mold. The fascinating stories of the local *sajok* excavated from these rarely-used materials are not recounted to demonstrate seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Chosŏn society's diverse and heterogeneous landscape, but to advance a generalized picture based on the experience of a few southern communities. The desire to fit evidence into something determined a priori is noticeable in the way Deuchler handles quantitative data in some cases. For example, she brings up an important statistical figure regarding the number of single-surname villages from 1930s Korea as a proxy for understanding "the development of lineage culture from the mid-sixteenth century" (10). The figure is 14,672 out of 28,336 (10), or about 52 percent, and this data is attributed to "a Japanese survey" without a citation. According to Kwŏn Naehyŏn (2010, 1), this survey overestimates the existence of such villages because of Japanese colonialist prejudices about Korea's countryside. The criteria for a single-surname village was defined by the deliberately low threshold of ten percent of residents with the same surname. Regardless of whether one agrees with Kwŏn on the touchy issue of Japanese colonialism, the criteria for defining a single-surname village should have been made explicit. In another context, Deuchler brings up the intermarriage between Andong Kwŏn and Munhwa Yu to demonstrate that "not only can the early Chosŏn ruling elite be regarded as an endogamous status group . . . the marriage radius seems to have even narrowed in relation to the concentration of examination graduates and office holders in the capital-bound elite descent groups" (58). Deuchler claims that among "a total of 3,416 *munkwa* graduates between 1392 and 1567, roughly 60 percent are listed in both genealogies, that is, were related to each other by marriage" (58). From the twenty-six years between 1392 and 1418 to circa 1550, this figure rose from 26.3 to 70 percent (58). While this quantitative analysis is intriguing, it is troubling to find that the endnote simply reads: "I owe these figures to Edward Wagner."

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Under the Ancestors' Eyes purports to advance a unique synthesis of political, social, economic, and cultural aspects to illuminate the dynamics of elite domination in premodern Korea. The present reviewer would like conclude with an assessment of Deuchler's originality and contribution to Korean social history. To readers who are not familiar with South Korean scholarship, most of this book's contents should be new. For this contribution alone, the publication of this work is most welcome. However, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* is not a book intended

for non-specialists and non-Korean readers. It expects familiarity with technical issues to which Anglophone Koreanists have paid limited or no attention, such as the formation of the *pŏryŏl* capital oligarchy, sixteenth-century land reclamation projects, the slave economy, factional politics, and the subdivisions in Korea's Confucian tradition. Some discussions are difficult to digest without prior exposure to such topics. For this reason, the way Deuchler glosses over historiography as the generic work of "most historians" (3) or "conventional wisdom" (342) is troubling. Readers might want to consider carefully what *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* adds to the field by combining the various "divergent interpretations" (3) of premodern Korean social history.

Under the Ancestors' Eyes is best appreciated if it is read as a contribution to recent advances in Korean social history, not as a study that stands on its own. As an illustration of this, the following juxtaposition places side by side a set of excerpts taken from *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* and from Kim Kŏnt'ae (Kim Kuentae). The intention of this exercise is to critically reflect on the dynamics of elite domination in early modern Korea through the words of these two giants in the field of Korean social history. Deuchler offers a synthesis of political, social, economic, and cultural elements; Kim is a socioeconomic historian and the author of the acclaimed book *Chosŏn sidae yangban'ga ŭi nongŏp kyŏngyŏng* (The agricultural management of *yangban* households in the Chosŏn period) published in 2004.

On *sajok* (士族)_localization:
Martina Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 399:

> It was the Injo Restoration of 1623, which gave rise to an exclusive capital-bound body of descent groups monopolizing the higher levels of the bureaucracy, that started to limit the landed elite's political participation at the center. Fighting marginalization, the latter responded with vigorous lineage building to defend their elite status. As this study has demonstrated, lineage building proved crucial for safeguarding these descent groups' primacy in local society as well as for resisting the central government's repeated attempts to bring the countryside fully under its control. Only those descent groups able to organize themselves in lineages survived with their high social status intact; those lacking the cohesion and support of an elaborate agnatic safety net faced slow social decline. The seventeenth century thus witnessed the unprecedented social fracturing in the countryside, as well as between center and periphery, exacerbated by intense factional strife that threatened national cohesion—a critical situation that King Yŏngjo recognized and attempted to ease with his policy of "grand harmony."
>
> In sum, then, it was a dynamic process of social diversification and competition that from mid-Chosŏn onward led to a contraction of elite forces at the center while a much larger number of localized elite descent groups dominated the countryside. Often no longer regularly engaged in national politics, the landed elites nevertheless continued to understand themselves as part of a larger sociopolitical nexus. A determining role in shaping their strategies to maintain their claim to high social status was played by Neo-Confucianism. This leads to a brief reconsideration of how kinship, Tohak learning, and political power

worked together to transform Chosŏn society.

Kim Kŏnt'ae, *Chosŏn sidae yangban'ga ŭi nongŏp kyŏngyŏng*, 465–70:

> In the late Chosŏn, local progenitors of single-surname *yangban* villages were mainly personalities who migrated to their wife's hometown in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Among their descendants, some succeeded in entering central officialdom via the examination system. The majority of the late Chosŏn *yangban* were their offspring. In the early Chosŏn, those who wished to attain an examination degree required a deep understanding of Confucian scholarship and the accumulation of such profound scholarship required material support.[1]
>
> . . .
>
> In contrast to early Chosŏn's *yangban* landowners, later Chosŏn's *yangban* landowners effectively abandoned their ambition to pursue political careers in the central bureaucracy. Deeper into the later Chosŏn period, the rusticated yangban landowners' avenues for entry into the central bureaucracy became narrower. During the Injo Restoration [of 1623], the Greater Northerners' regime collapsed and the Purge of 1694 resulted in the elimination of Southerners from court politics. From the eighteenth century forward, the concentration of power at the center by capital-based oligarchs drove out the majority of the *yangban* from official life.
>
> As central authority was increasingly monopolized by a small number of households, it became difficult to find large estate owners in later Chosŏn's rural societies. That is because in Chosŏn, promotion into an official position of high rank facilitated the acquisition of large plots of land. In addition, the amount of land conducive to reclamation gradually decreased and the practice of partible inheritance continued. Due to these factors, the scale of *yangban* land ownership diminished over time.[2]

On slavery and the slave economy: Deuchler 408:

> Slavery in Korea was undoubtedly most widespread during the first three centuries of the Chosŏn, when the *sajok* used slave labor to establish their landed estates. As this study has shown, large slave forces, often reaching several hundred men and women, were a sine qua

[1] 조선후기 동성촌락을 형성하고 있던 양반들의 입향조는 대체로 15~16세기에 처향으로 이주한 인물이다. 처향으로 이주한 인물의 후손들 가운데서는 과거를 통해 관직 진출에 성공하는 사람들이 생겨났으며, 조선후기 양반의 대다수는 바로 이들의 후손이었다. 조선전기 자제를 관직을 진출시키기 위해서는 많은 재력이 뒷받침 되어야 했다. 과거에 합격하려면 유학에 대한 깊은 지식이 필요했고 깊은 지식을 쌓기 위해서는 재력이 필요했기 때문이다.

[2] 조선전기 양반지주들과 달리 조선후기 양반지주들은 대부분 중앙정계에 진출하여 자신들의 야망을 펼쳐보겠다는 꿈을 사실상 접을 수밖에 없었다. 조선후기로 갈수록 향촌의 양반지주들이 중앙정계로 진출할 수 있는 통로가 좁아졌기 때문이다. 인조반정으로 대북정권이 몰락하고, 갑술환국으로 남인들이 정계에서 축출되었다. 18세기 중엽 무렵부터 중앙권력이 경화사족에게 집중됨으로써 다수의 양반들은 관직에서 멀어질 수밖에 없었다.

non for bringing new land under permanent cultivation. Slaves thus did have an important economic value, and elite wealth was initially measured in numbers of slaves rather than acreage of land. Only when land began to become scarce in the seventeenth century did slave labor become unprofitable and started to mutate into tenancy. Domestic slavery, however, persisted, with its economic value at least as high as its symbolic value.

A remarkable aspect of Korean slavery was the assiduousness with which the government repeatedly shifted the demographic balance between commoner population and slaves to suit its economic needs. Intermarriage between commoner and slave was prohibited by law, but the very law, which stipulated that slave status was inherited from the mother ("matrifilial law"), was often changed along ideological lines or to augment their workforces.

…

Korean slavery, then, was a multifaceted phenomenon that was never seriously questioned as to its human justifiability because it was critical for the existence of the elite far beyond its economic significance. Indeed, it was a sine qua non of Korea's premodern social system.

Kim Kŏnt'ae 465–74:

In the early Chosŏn, landowners took advantage of peasant-commoners who were experiencing social decline under the pressure of heavy taxation. Having placed [the peasant-commoners] under their influence, the landowners managed to increase the number of their slave holdings with ease. Landowners encouraged the intermarriage of commoners and slaves and took their offspring as slaves. Among some landowning households, there are cases in which more than half of the slaves were born from commoner-slave mixed marriages.[3]

…

In the late Chosŏn, sharecropping (*pyŏngjak* 竝作) emerged as the preferred means of managing agricultural land; unlike tenant farming (*chakkae* 作介) it could be sustained without the backing of a system of hereditary stratification. The large estates of the early Chosŏn necessitated slaves; thus, *yangban* landowners made substantial investment in maintaining the institution of slavery. To keep slaves a part of their household, landowners had to provide for their livelihood and protect them from government overreach. Only if their master treated them well did slaves demonstrate loyalty and sincerity.
However, when sharecropping became the norm, *yangban* landowners no longer made the

중앙권력이 소수 가문에 집중되는 현상이 심해지면서 조선후기 향촌사회에서는 대지주를 찾아보기 어렵게 되었다. 왜냐하면 조선시기에는 높은 관직에 오르면 오를수록 토지를 대규모로 집적하기 용이했기 때문이다. 나아가 조선후기에는 개간 가능지가 점차 줄어들고, 분할상속이 지속으로 이루어짐으로써 양반지주가의 토지소유 규모는 점차 줄어들었다.

[3] 조선전기 지주들은 부세의 압박을 견디지 못하고 몰락하는 양인농민(良人農民) 을 포섭함으로써 어렵지 않게 노비를 늘려갔다. 지주들은 노비들에게 양천교혼(良賤交婚) 을 적극 권장한 다음, 그 후손을 노비로 삼았던 것이다. 지주가의 노비들 가운데 절반 이상이 양천교혼 소생인 경우도 있었다.

effort to increase their slaveholdings, unlike their ancestors. Rather than pressuring their tenant slaves, who were prone to being lackadaisical and to hiding some of the harvest for their own use, landowners had the option of selecting diligent tenants. The system of slavery was costly; it was not in their interest to expand it. Managing manservants and kitchen-maids was enough. However, if the master's ability to protect them diminished, slaves did not remain loyal. As slaves escaping from bondage became commonplace, some regions far from slave owners' homes came to be occupied by commoners starting in the early eighteenth century.[4]

The beginnings of localization in the sixteenth century was not a temporally isolated phenomenon. The Koryŏ/Chosŏn transition also introduced to the *yangban* new agricultural technology and the ability to reclaim land, which allowed the tremendous increase in the availability of tillable land in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Some early Chosŏn *yangban* who took advantage of this situation grew into large estate holders, and their goal was not merely to preserve their social standing but to acquire even more property, wealth, and influence. Thus, they applied enormous pressure on their offspring to partake in the highly-competitive civil examinations and be appointed to a central *yangban* office. This sociopolitical configuration could not be sustained for an extended period of time and already in the late sixteenth century had begun to plateau. No doubt the Japanese invasions of 1592–1598, the Manchu Invasions of 1627 and 1636, the Injo Restoration of 1623, and the ensuing factional strife had a substantive impact on the reversal of early Chosŏn patterns. However, it seems more likely that war and politics spurred an already-ongoing trend.

When Deuchler is read in conjunction with Kim Kŏnt'ae and others, a fuller picture emerges. For example, the ways slaves escaped during wartime chaos (226) and the widespread late seventeenth-century phenomenon of fugitive slaves acquiring commoner status (391) are entwined with other social elements. We should consider the broader shifts in the southern *sajok*'s slave-dependent agricultural economy, the details of which Kim Kŏnt'ae supplies. To be sure, Kim Kŏnt'ae writes rather nonchalantly about the plight of Korean slaves and Deuchler rightly condemns this regrettable premodern Korean social practice. Nonetheless, Kim offers a comprehensive study of something that in Deuchler is limited to a few pages (135–41; 346–49): the changing relationship between *sajok* landowners and the slaves who contributed to their household's economic subsistence and prosperity. In the middle Chosŏn, the localized southern *sajok*'s loss of access to

[4] 조선후기 지주제를 지탱시켜준 병작은 작개와 달리 신분제의 도움 없이도 유지될 수 있는 농업경영 형태였다. 조선전기 농장에는 노비가 반드시 필요했기 때문에 양반지주들은 노비제를 유지하는 데 적지 않은 비용을 지출했다. 노비를 곁에 두기 위해서는 수시로 양식을 제공하고, 관의 침탈로부터도 보호해주어야 했기 때문이다. 노비들은 상전이 자신들을 잘 거두어줄 때라야 비로소 충성을 다했다.
그런데 병작이 일반화되면서 양반지주들은 노비 수를 늘리기 위해 자신의 조상들처럼 애쓰지 않았다. 양반지주들은 태업과 곡물 은닉을 일삼는 노비들에게 굳이 작개를 강요할 필요 없이, 성실한 사람을 선택하여 병작지를 경작시킬 수 있었기 때문이다. 많은 비용이 드는 노비제를 굳이 확대할 필요가 없었던 것이다. 마당쇠, 부엌어멈 정도만 잘 보살피면 되었다. 그런데 상전의 보호막이 약해지면 노비들도 생각을 달리하게 된다. 노비의 도망이 속출하면서 지주가에서 멀리 떨어진 지역에서는 18세기 전반부터 이미 작인의 대부분을 상민이 차지하게 되었다.

yangban offices had a devastating effect and profoundly reshaped the workings of local communities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Once deprived of political influence, many *sajok* aristocrats had to abandon their early Chosŏn ancestors' ambition to transform their respective households into prominent descent groups with massive estate holdings operated by hundreds of private slaves. Instead, the social conditions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries prompted the *sajok* to adapt with the times, to think in terms of smaller scales, safety nets, and longevity, and to turn their attention away from power and wealth to gaining local respect and prestige.

The stories recounted in *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* offer glimpses of life in this complex mingling of historical processes. The dynamics of elite domination in eighteenth-century Korea should not be framed as a push/pull competition between central and local interest groups or as the aristocracy's response to challengers from below. Instead, the aristocrats in early modern Korea, whether *pŏryŏl* oligarchs in the capital or the southern *sajok*, feared substratification more than anything. As Deuchler puts it, there was a "contraction of elite forces at the center while a much larger number of localized elite descent groups dominated the countryside" (399). The framing should be tweaked: the center did not experience "contraction" but consolidated into a small number of extraordinarily powerful households, whereas in the southern provinces, the *sajok* became a larger but diffuse status group due to "social fracturing" (399). The formation of the capital-based *pŏryŏl* oligarchy was not simply a product of hereditary factionalism or the logical outcome of the ideological divisions within Korean Neo-Confucianism. A host of factors contributed to the unusually high concentration of political influence to a minority of descent groups in Seoul and no outsider group in Chosŏn succeeded in challenging the hegemony of *pŏryŏl* oligarchs. Perhaps the *pŏryŏl* remained unchallenged because of the intense pressures of substratification. By the eighteenth century, the southern *sajok* engaged in a new mode of agricultural production suitable for relatively small landowners who preferred to invest in symbolic sources of social power. Collectively, the *sajok* constituted a larger group than the *pŏryŏl*, but as individual households, the *sajok* experienced diminished influence and reduced prestige. While local rosters (212–13) and affinal ties (365–66) helped with status preservation, on the whole, however, the *sajok* were highly reluctant to, or unable to, organize a unified front against the status quo (323–32).

Together, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* and recent South Korean publications in social history offer penetrating insights into the changing relations between the center and local societies in early modern Korea. This new body of research takes on local perspectives to help us rethink the local *sajok*'s struggles for survival and status retention in a fascinating world of factional politics, competition for material resources, marriage alliances, and Confucian cultural activities. The dynamics of elite domination in early modern Korea cannot be explained away using an argument of national essence or as the local *sajok*'s responses to the central government's intrusions into the countryside. To grasp the changing structures of power, reading Deuchler alongside other social historians reminds us of the need to understand the complexities of early modern Korea, particularly considering

other perspectives and factors such as: the relationship between political events and socioeconomic forces; regional differences; the short-term and long-term impact of war and diplomacy; the links between social power and cultural activities; and multiple scales of time including one that, as Deuchler stresses, challenges dynastic boundaries.

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