Part I

Late Chosŏn
Introduction

Starting a *Handbook of Modern Korean History* with the late nineteenth century will naturally fail to plumb the depths of the rich tapestry that contributes to Korean notions of kingship, state, society, culture, foreign affairs, and a host of other things that populated the minds of nineteenth-century Koreans. It is impossible to attempt a summation at the outset and not commit further violations against historical sensibilities, so the best I can do is to warn the reader that this essay can only suggest a few arguments, warnings, and suggestions about where we are beginning and how ignorant we really are.

The first warning is already well known. We must resist ‘presentism’ and ‘futurism’. It is tempting to view the potential of the late Chosŏn period (from ca. 1600 onwards), and especially the nineteenth century before the Treaty of Kanghwa in 1876, as nothing more than a prelude to the storms that were to engulf Koreans in the latter half of the nineteenth century. After all, modern times are different from pre-modern times, and the discontinuities clearly overwhelm the continuities. By beginning with the late nineteenth century, we are announcing our concern with the creation of the modern world and only looking back for the origins of things that we know will come; why should we pause, even briefly, to survey the death throes of things that we know will not survive? Or, the reverse of that coin: if we must, let us identify who were the villains and who were the heroes who misread or who clearly read the future; where and when were the lost opportunities? Because we know that the Chosŏn state and society failed to resist Japanese imperialism and Koreans lost their sovereignty, we therefore run a significant risk towards engaging in a kind of perverse Whig history: ransacking the archives for the origins of later disasters or for wishful instances of potential salvation.

Rather, we should take the nineteenth century in its own right and see it through the eyes of the people who knew their own past but, like most of us, could only dimly see their own future. Concern with the problems of ‘what went wrong’ or ‘who is to blame’ is common to later ages, like our own, when peace and security offer the luxury of hindsight. Just as Southern Song intellectuals pondered why the Northern Song was routed by barbarians, many of us in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have long considered questions surrounding a failed ‘modernity’ in nineteenth-century Korea: How and why did the society and state that King
Sejong (r. 1418–1450) envisioned fail to cope with the challenges of the nineteenth century? What happened to the promise of the alleged golden age of Kings Yŏngjo (r. 1724–1776) and Chŏngjo (r. 1776–1800)? The Chosŏn state produced a general peace and prosperity for over five centuries and even survived a horrible invasion from Japan in the 1590s and further humiliations in 1627 and 1636 at the hands of the rising Manchus. What became of that peace, prosperity, and resilience by the nineteenth century? These are not bad questions if handled carefully.

In drawing a sharp discontinuity between the pre-modern and the modern, scholars have developed a standard litany of explanations for why late Chosŏn state and society failed to meet the various problems of the nineteenth century: unresponsive and corrupt politics, the irrational and feudal nature of Korean-style Confucianism, and seriously worsening economic conditions. I argue that the internal crises met in a conjunction sometime between the 1830s and the 1860s, and then, from 1876, they were augmented by external threats beyond the control of Koreans. The problem for us is that we have often focused solely on the crises with judgemental hindsight, or sometimes wishful views, and in so doing we have overlooked the rationality and ‘modernity’ that had held state and society together.

This essay is highly selective and attempts to raise only a few questions and point to a handful of departures for research. It is not comprehensive of the rich and extensive secondary literature that is developing, and I would encourage the reader to follow the growing body of literature in English and to tap the sea of outstanding work in the Korean and Japanese languages. My overarching argument is very simple: we would benefit by rejecting the notion of a disjuncture between the ‘modern’ and the ‘pre-modern’, which was originally designed to explain European scientific and technological prowess and came to generalise the European political and social transition from feudal, ascriptive societies to post-feudal, meritocratic societies.1 Korean society was not technologically advanced but neither was it backward; it was post-feudal and meritocratic, however imperfectly achieved, and had been meritocratic or at least meritocratically oriented stretching back into the Koryŏ period. Chosŏn political and social, and in some ways even economic, ‘modernities’ pre-dated European modernities. Therefore, if we wish to gain a comparative understanding of Chosŏn state and society in their twilight decades, I would argue that we should approach them in search of their strengths as well as their weaknesses and consider aspects of ‘modern rationality’2 in pre-1876 Korea.

The inherent weaknesses of meritocratic bureaucracies and corruption

King Chŏngjo was nearly ten years old when his father was starved to death by his grandfather, King Yŏngjo. His father, Prince Sado, never became king, and that sad tale is related in the outstanding contribution offered by Jahyun Kim Haboush’s translation of the writings by Prince Sado’s widow, Lady Hyegeyŏng (Haboush 1996). There we can glimpse the monstrous ideological and political pressures on the royal family and the monstrous results they produced in driving Prince Sado to become a psychopathic murderer. The ten-year-old boy, who was to become King Chŏngjo, was favoured by his grandfather and succeeded King Yŏngjo at age twenty-three. He carried on the attention to good governance established by his grandfather, and his accomplishments were extensive. He established the Kyujanggak, the Royal Library, in 1776 to function as a focus for creative statecraft, bringing to mind the Chiphyŏnjŏn of King Sejong’s time. He built the Hwasŏng Fortress in Suwŏn between 1794 and 1796 to commemorate his father and created a satellite city for the capital. He carried forward his grandfather’s vision of reforming the Chosŏn state and updating the fundamental charters of the state to meet the
needs of their times. He carried on King Yongjo’s t’angpyŏng ch’ack or the policy of rotating factional appointments to placate court factions and dampen their rivalry. Revised or new publications were continued or originated for state ritual (Sŏk oreyŏi 1744), diplomacy (Tongmunku hŭngŏ 1788), history (Kukcho pŏgan 1782), legal codes (Taejon t’ongpyŏn 1785), literature (Munwŏn pohul 1787 and Hongjae chŏnsŏ 1799), language (Kyujang chŏn’u’i 1796), reference works (Ch‘anggo tongguk munhŏn pigo, begun in 1770), and didactic literature (Oryun haengsil[-to] 1797).

He knew and sponsored the leading intellectuals of the time: Pak Chiwon (1737–1805), Chŏng Yagyŏng (1762–1836), Yu Tŭkkong (1749–1807), and Pak Chega (1750–1815). Just a few months before turning forty-eight in 1800, King Chŏngjo died. His sudden death engendered suspicions that have yet to be settled. Although we have an excellent study by Jahyun Kim Haboush of King Yongjo’s reign and the motivations of the king (Haboush 1988, 2001), we lack a good study of King Chŏngjo’s reign and of the man and his world.

Politics took a turn for the worse with the enthronement in the seventh lunar month of 1800 of King Chŏngjo’s successor, King Sunjo (r. 1800–1834), who ascended the throne in the same month he became ten years old. Until 1804, Chosŏn was governed by a regent (Queen Chŏngsun, 1745–1805), a Kyŏngju Kim woman, who authorised a Catholic persecution in 1801 and allowed the Noron (‘Old Doctrine’ faction or ‘Patriarch’s Faction’) to come to the fore. King Sunjo married an Andong Kim woman (Queen Sunwŏn, 1789–1857), died at age forty-four, and his queen later served as regent for two kings: 1834–1841 and again in 1849–1852, firmly placing the Andong Kim clan in a position to exploit power to drain the state fiscally. The first regency was for King Hŏnjong (r. 1834–1849), a grandson who took the throne at seven and died at age twenty-one. A second Catholic persecution was launched in 1839, and in 1840, King Hŏnjong’s mother’s clan, the P’ungyang Cho, briefly took power until 1849, when Queen Sunwŏn (and the Andong Kim clan) returned to power as regent. The second regency was for King Ch’ŏljong (r. 1849–1863). Although he ascended the throne at age eighteen, he may have been illiterate, thus allowing the Andong Kim to continue their in-law rule of the state. King Ch’ŏljong was succeeded by King Kojong (r. 1863–1907), who also rose to the throne as a minor, age eleven. His father was thought malleable by the Cho and Kim clans, and the father was made regent with the title Hŭngsŏn Taewŏn’gun. He is commonly known as the Taewŏn’gun (1820–1898, regency 1863–1873). In other words, from 1800 to the 1860s, control of the Chosŏn state shifted from the court to the in-law clan councils with the result that the machinery of state lost its apical arbiter, reflexive action became very difficult, and corruption spread downwards even to local administration.

If the Chosŏn state had not persecuted Christians (i.e., Catholics) from 1801 to 1873, then a Christian connection may have opened an opportunity from the late eighteenth century for Chosŏn society to gain access to the wider world. This argument would have us consider that such access may have contributed to ‘modernization’ in Korea and prevented colonization by 1905, but this argument is trapped in the pathology of a single locus of modernity. The persecution of 1801 was triggered by a perceived threat to the state (high treason as embodied by a letter from a Korean Christian to the Bishop of Beijing requesting support from the French Far East Fleet) and also by the ideological and social threats lurking within the displacement of loyalty to a ‘transcendent object’, the shift to subjectivity (Torrey 2012: 129), and the insinuation of egalitarianism. High treason was entirely adequate to launch a persecution, but the wider significance of the persecution was that it marked the end of a period of tolerance at the court for diverse ideas and allowed a conservative faction (Noron) to police orthodoxy, giving it the power to turn on its rival factions (particularly the Nam’in or ‘Southerner’ faction) with charges of entertaining heterodoxy. Koreans were not ignorant of Christianity. Fr. Gregorio de Cespedes probably converted captured Koreans in Japan in the 1590s. Korean intellectuals had known...
of Christianity from the early seventeenth century via Beijing (Baker 2012: 2), and Koreans influenced by their experiences in Beijing had begun professing Christianity by the 1780s. There was an official persecution in 1785; and by the end of 1794, a Chinese-ordained priest arrived (Cawley 2013: 24 ff.). Leading, experimental intellectuals such as Chŏng Yagyong, who had been close to King Chŏngjo, were implicated in the persecution, as were a number of others associated with the Nam’in faction. Scholars debate the impact of Christianity from the late eighteenth century. Perhaps intellectuals re-fashioned their epistemology after exposure to Catholicism (Torrey 2012: 129), or, perhaps Christian individualism and a greater respect for women were inserted into society and had some effect (Choi 2012). But, did a reactionary Confucian mandarinate close off the opportunity to profit from contact with Europeans and Americans and modernise their society?

The problem is again ‘modernity’. The mandarinate and the yangban very likely considered themselves to be ‘modern’, if we take that to indicate developed forms of rationality not entirely bounded by feudal claims to authority. Catholicism had long ago alienated itself from Chosŏn and probably most East Asian societies by the 1715 Papal Bull declaring that converts could not practice ancestral rites or attend Confucian temples. Kwon Kŭn (1352–1409), as early as the fourteenth century, had clarified that ancestral ritual was not religious, that its practice was not a worship of some ‘subtle animating principle that coheres and does not die, but . . . remains in some boundless realm’ (Lee, Vol. 1, 1993: 606). Although the Papal authority had no access to Kwon Kŭn’s arguments, they did reject Jesuit and Chinese arguments that ancestral rites were a civil rite and so failed to appreciate the ‘modern’ nature of the societies in which the rites took place. How could Pope Clement XI (r. 1700–1721) have even understood their arguments? European society had not yet rejected the feudal legitimation of authority in which religion, politics, and inheritance were indistinguishable. No European state had yet to establish a meritocratic bureaucracy. The Pope could not be expected to understand that filial piety was the centrepiece of the construction of loyalty to king and state in a post-feudal, meritocratic society.

Even the construction of political loyalty most commonly used in East Asia for millennia has still never been seen in Europe. Whereas Europe and Japan used feudal inheritance or patron-client relations and later mass nationalism to create loyalty to king and state, the post-feudal mandarinites of East Asia (China, Korea, and Vietnam) had, at least from the Song Dynasty, called on Confucian ethics to overcome the self-esteem deficit among mandarins. The mandarins’ ‘self-esteem deficit’ (Woodside 2006: 46–55) derived from the nature of meritocratic bureaucracy: if they were lucky enough to have an appointment, the mandarins had been objectively qualified to staff a bureaucracy by preparing for examinations (at the most prestigious level) that did not test practical knowledge, and after appointment they had to endure humiliating performance-based accountability exercises that eroded their self-image as moral leaders. Korean mandarins were often driven to be focused more on their own careers than on public service. This problem now increasingly confronts most contemporary governments and corporations, but it is not new. The problem is how to counter careerism and obtain loyalty and dedication. Ironically, they drew on feudal virtues of hierarchy and duty to give themselves greater purpose within a ‘modern’, impersonal institution. Filial piety (with its associate virtues in ‘chaste women’ and ‘loyal ministers’) ameliorated the mandarins’ alienation by offering them a noble vision of themselves and their actions. UK Whitehall mandarins draw on a sense of clientage to the British monarch to satisfy similar needs, but while Whitehall mandarins might compose position papers on care for the aged, they will never enthuse on the virtues of filial piety or link that to loyalty to the state.

Confucian ethics also ameliorated the ‘solidarity deficit’ (Woodside 2006: 70–74) between the mandarins and most of the people. The mandarins obtained their positions by demonstrating
a mastery of texts and were prone to suffer from bureaucratic subjectivity or a preference for the mastery of texts, what we might call models concocted by inter-agency policy councils and external consultants, over direct experience. The mandarins solipsistically and self-righteously created visions of society that local people either could not comprehend or could not feel any reason to act on and so met the mandarins’ initiatives with apathy and non-compliance. Public and private rituals that celebrated filial piety (with their ‘archery rituals’ and ‘wine-drinking rituals’) as well as quasi-legal community compacts were attempts at artificially creating corporate communities that would help enact the bureaucracy’s visions.

In these connections, to reject filial piety was not a religious matter at all. Rejecting the continuity of lineage was political. It was a threat to the virtues that supported the fundamental management principles of the state, to say nothing of the personal and social problems attendant on the implied rejection of identity, status, and patronage.

All this is not to say that politics did not narrow from the public space of factional debate to the kitchen governments of in-law clans or that corruption did not grow. That did happen from King Chǒngjo’s death onwards. But even factional struggle itself was much more than the pursuit of self-interest. Widespread debates that involved yangban in and out of government and occasionally crossed factional lines usually displayed sincere motivations at work in the consideration of subjects as profound as Korean identity (Haboush 1999). Again, the intensity and depth of such debates reflected the strength of the meritocratic order, where most yangban had passed even more stringent examinations than most Western universities now conduct and considered themselves informed and meritorious. Such confidence, however, can easily spill over into self-righteousness. Over the seventeenth century and certainly by the eighteenth century, Korean mandarins and the wider yangban ‘public’ (Haboush 2009) were accustomed to extensive and widespread debate on Confucian ethics and their political applications. The number of Chosŏn academies (sŏwŏn) per capita may have far eclipsed the number of Chinese academies per capita (Woodside 2006: 22–23), and the academies certainly took their role as sites of Confucian cultivation very seriously (Ch’oe 1999). The yangban may have been ‘too public-spirited, with an individual and group moral zealoussness that could not be harmonized enough with that of others to permit the empire’s governance’ (Woodside 2006: 42–43) and therein we see factional struggle.

The problem in nineteenth-century Korea was that Korean kingship in the Chosŏn period (and even earlier) had rarely been strong, much less autocratic. Strong leadership should not be confused with autocracy. Strong leadership makes decisions when government is divided. When King Chǒngjo passed from the scene in 1800 and boys were placed on the throne over the course of the nineteenth century, the state possessed even weaker authority to mediate who was most meritorious and deserving and to impose discipline on the corrupt and criminal. Although we know the political fortunes of those decades and some of the results of misrule, we still lack extensive studies on the politics of the court, the involvement of the clans, and the actual conduct of governance. We are fortunate to have very good studies that focus on the time from the early 1860s when state mechanisms were being refurbished so that central negligence could be overcome and state efficacy could be strengthened. When the Taewŏn’gun became regent from early 1864, he consciously set about trying to establish a clear mediating authority by amalgamating power and resources around the throne (Choe 1972 and Palais 1975). He had mixed results, but before the project could be carried forward, imperialistic pressures came to bear on the kingdom from the outside. The main problem was (and is today still) that meritocratic bureaucracies are inherently weaker at creating loyalty than loyalties based on feudalistic patron-client relations or on mass-based nationalisms or on religious sectarianism, and the pressures on that Korean state weakness after 1876 became overwhelming (Woodside 2006: 10). In short, Chosŏn Korea was quite ‘modern’ already.
Response from the ruled and the strength of Confucianism

While the ruled are always unruly, the nineteenth century was a century marked by many rebellions (seventy tax revolts in 1862 alone) (Kim 2007b: 993). Studies of rebellions in earlier centuries offer comparative benchmarks, and fortunately, we now have good studies of the major rebellions of 1728, 1812, and 1862 that allow us to catch a view of the quality of Chosŏn governance over quite a long period. These studies offer glimpses of local society as well. Rebellions generate reports, statements, manifestoes, and other documents, and these documents offer historians a window on locality. We need more such windows. In short, we need more micro-history and not just of trying times but of ordinary times, as well.

In these important micro-studies of rebellions, we can also see the inadequacies of higher officials’ bureaucratic subjectivity, the breakdown of practical application of governance, and the complexities of local societies. Consistently, the studies reveal attempts by local (and sometimes even central) elites to mobilise ordinary people to participate in rebellion, belying analyses that rely on class warfare. For example, the Musillian Rebellion of 1728 (named after the year) was an affair of high politics and was focused on a possible coup d’état (Jackson forthcoming). The Hong Kyŏngnae Rebellion of 1812 (named after its putative leader) grew from a conflict between central and local elites over dwindling resources that was complicated by the peculiarities of the northern region (more mercantile than agricultural and often the object of discrimination) (Karlsson 2000 and Kim 2007a). The Chinju Rebellion of 1862 (named after the place) sprang from a tax-resistance movement among local elites and indicted arbitrary taxation and extreme corruption among local officials and clerks (Kim 2007b). Additionally, both the 1812 Hong Kyŏngnae Rebellion in the north and the 1862 Chinju Rebellion in the south had complex economic circumstances behind them: increasing monetization of the economy and increasing competition between centre and locality over control of resources. Although prophecies and messianic messages appeared in 1811–12, a focus on these can obscure the essential ‘modern’ characteristics of the nineteenth-century rebellions: competition over control of the instruments of state, competition over resources in changing economic circumstances, and calls for an end to corruption.

It also appears that the assumed rationality of the state structure was so strong that, despite increasing class polarization and social stratification, the 1812 rebels were engaged in a ‘defensive’ exercise and did not seek to create a new state (Karlsson 2000: 275). Belief in the dominant ideology was still so strong in the 1860s that Confucian ideals of justice could be construed to condone violent resistance in the 1862 Chinju Rebellion without calling for the overthrow of the state (Kim 2007b: 1018). Although feudal in origin, Confucian ideology had been appropriated as long ago as the Han Dynasty to shore up a post-feudal, rational bureaucratic vision that was clearly still strong in nineteenth-century Korea. Problems inevitably occurred, however, when the centre received incomplete or false data, and in the course of imposing its vision, the situation worsened when difficulties, such as local rebellions, appeared that required clear mediation. Hence, in the course of the centre depriving the provinces of resources or seeking to extend central control over local resources, the administrators on the ground were forced to invent new taxes to fill the deficits opening up in their accounts. In 1862, the central government took notice of this problem and devised reforms of land, military, and the grain loan tax structures that would have reformed local administration up and down the country, but the reforms lapsed and were abandoned in the midst of royal succession in the capital (Kim 2007b: 1017–1018).

Although modern bureaucracies such as the Chosŏn state engaged reflexively in knowledge acquisition and analysis, the weakness of bureaucratic subjectivity was never far away. The mandarins had acquired their positions from the mastery of classical texts and recruitment through
exams that tested their knowledge of classical texts. Their accomplishments were powerfully self-reinforcing and imparted a feeling of ‘book-based omniscience’, which mirrored the Enlightenment belief ‘that the rationalist use of mathematical and scientific thinking procedures could make the entire world calculable’ (Woodside 2006: 82). Administrators in the centre operating from bad or incomplete data and captive to their subjectivity not only risked devising inappropriate policies, but also commonly ‘mythologize[d] the desired future in such a text-bound way that the future became an intellectually closed domain whose definition was controlled almost entirely by bureaucratic elites’ (Woodside 2006: 94). Note that this problem applies to any post-feudal bureaucracy, not just to those dominated by Confucian ethics. Although Confucian ethics apotheosis the Zhou, it does not mean that nineteenth-century Korean mandarins wanted to return to the sixth or fifth century BCE. They could be just as self-reflective and future-oriented as twenty-first century bureaucracies, but the mandarins monopolised the language needed to discuss the future, and from that monopoly they derived their power. Herein lies the strength of the firebrand conservative Yi Hang-no (1792–1868) (Chung 1995), who railed against compromise with the West and Japan. Foreign ideologies were not just alternative views of society, politics, and just about everything else; they were rejections of the basis of the Korean post-feudal, rational bureaucratic order.

**Macroeconomic models and capitalist rationality**

Controversy surrounds the economy of the late Chosŏn period. Some (Jun and Lewis 2006; Jun et al. 2008, 2009) argue that from the late seventeenth century, over the eighteenth century, and into the early decades of the nineteenth century was a period of prosperity and stability. This could be called an ‘efflorescence’ or a time in which economic expansion and creative innovation expanded rather rapidly only to be followed by a collapse (Goldstone 2002: 333–334), and in Korea’s case that collapse came in the nineteenth century. The ‘efflorescence’ of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a case of Smithian growth or total economic growth in which the land market expanded because it was protected by legally recognised property rights that were strengthened after the Imjin Waeran of 1592–1598 to encourage farming. Although land rents and land prices were declining, which suggest declining productivity, land conversion from dry fields to paddy was expanding, resulting in an expansion of available paddy land. More available land, in part spurred by speculation, contributed to declining land rents and land prices: the quantity of paddy land was expanding but its quality was declining from the early nineteenth century. There was an increase in prosperity in agricultural production over the eighteenth century because surpluses were sufficient to buoy up skilled wages and support high prices for manufactured goods, which were traded in expanded and integrated markets. Rice prices stabilised and rice price volatility fell over the eighteenth century as production expanded and markets integrated, but prices and volatility then began rising again from the middle of the nineteenth century as systemic collapse began. General grain prices had been stable over the eighteenth century and lower than the prices of manufactured goods, but that relationship reversed itself from the 1830s when food prices began to rise and the prices of manufactures began to fall, indicating that the structures of food production were decaying and surpluses that had supported the prices of manufactures were disappearing. Government had supplied infrastructure for irrigation and social welfare as grain storage and tax exemptions for bad harvests, but from the early nineteenth century, government investment in irrigation fell off considerably, grain storage became a target for corrupt officials, and tax exemptions ceased to be related to agricultural production from around 1860. Heavier rains over the nineteenth century washed over progressively deforested (Totman 2004) hillsides and
Silted up rivers and irrigation infrastructure, which were no longer being maintained. Imperial pressures after 1876 opened up new economic dynamics and distracted government, thereby considerably worsening matters.

Others dispute this depiction and argue that recovery from the Imjin War did occur in the seventeenth century only to be followed by long, slow decline from around 1700 to a nadir that was reached in the late nineteenth century. From 1700 until the late nineteenth century, declining real government wages, the declining price of labour, and declining land rent indicate a decline in productivity, not a rise (Cha 2009). Declining land rents are mirrored by declining land prices, and both reflect declining land productivity as a result of advancing deforestation. The decline in land productivity was somewhat offset by the state dedication to storage that offered greater food security and encouraged the production of cash crops and domestic manufactures. Nevertheless, markets contracted after the mid-eighteenth century as trade with Japan was considerably curtailed from 1745 and trade with China went into deficit. Confucian ideology was ‘dogmatic’ and ‘destroyed incentives to work hard and stifled savings and investment. Instead, the Confucian ideology encouraged people to improve their social and political status by means of rent-seeking activities’ (Rhee 2014: 10). The ‘stagnation, recession, and crisis’ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ‘were so deep and serious as to cause Korea eventually to be occupied by Japan’ (Rhee 2014: 2). The overall macroeconomic situation for the eighteenth century is debatable, but there is a general consensus that the nineteenth century, especially from around the 1830s onwards, saw serious decline.

There is a lot of work that needs to be done to test these models and devise alternatives. Unlike literary studies or political history, economic history relies on quantitative data-gathering and analysis and is difficult for individuals. Partnerships with Korean and Japanese scholars can be very fruitful. We need to reach a finer-grained resolution on regional economies for the distribution of products and land use. We need more work on demographic and population history and to come to terms with very difficult questions related to biased reporting and small data samples. Research into quality of life indicators (e.g., height) has just begun and is still fraught with difficulties (Lewis et al. 2013). Work needs to be done on the prevalence of endemic disease, water quality, hygiene, and other determinants of the quality of life.

If we return to the theme of ‘modern’ rationalities lurking in what was supposedly a ‘pre-modern’ and ‘pre-rational’ world, we can find multiple examples of ‘modern’ rationality at work in the pre-1876 Korean economy. For example, we know that a full-blown, apparently indigenous, double-entry accounting method was practiced by Kaesŏng merchants from at least as far back as the 1780s and probably earlier (Jun et al. 2013), and we can find its echo in the accounts of non-profit agricultural cooperatives from the 1740s (Jun and Lewis 2006) as well as in the accounts of eighteenth-century Confucian academies. The extraordinary sophistication of these accounts is remarkable enough, but the contents reveal capitalistic activities. Vast sums were being deployed as investments in ginseng with its six-year term of maturity. There were significant merchant groups in Kaesŏng (Kang 1978), Seoul (Kang 1979), and Tongnae (Kim 2004), aside from those merchants who possessed retail monopolies in the centre of Seoul, which will be discussed in a later essay in this volume, but we still know very little about the lives and commercial activities of Korean merchants.

Conclusion

Our greatest challenge is to overcome assumptions about what constitutes our world and not confuse technological intensification with institutional sophistication. In short, we have to come to doubt the following definition of modernity:
When we speak of modernity, however, we refer to institutional transformations that have their origins in the West. . . . In terms of institutional clustering, two distinct organisational complexes are of particular significance in the development of modernity: the nation-state and systematic capitalist production. Both have their roots in specific characteristics of European history and have few parallels in prior periods or in other cultural settings. . . . Is modernity distinctively a Western project in terms of the ways of life fostered by these two great transformative agencies? To this query, the blunt answer must be “yes.”

(Giddens 1990: 174–175)

If we think that our capitalist nation-states are the height of rationality and that there is a clear disjuncture between pre-modern irrational behaviour and rational modern behaviour, then we risk reducing human history before the railroad to a timeless, agricultural idyll or a dark, oppressive purgatory, depending on your preference. What is worse, we risk dismissing the rest of the world outside Europe to a place where people simply waited to be given what Europeans had made in their workshop and finally we risk ignoring lessons to be learned from the deep experiences Koreans have had with post-feudal, rational structures.

Glossary

Chiphyŏnjŏn (集賢殿) Hall of Worthies
Chŏljong (哲宗) King
Chŏng Yagyong (丁若镛, 1762–1836) personal name
Chŏngjo (正祖) King
Chŏngsun wanghu (貞純王后, 1745–1805) Queen
Chŏngbo tongguk munhŏn pigo (增補東國文獻備考, begun in 1770) Supplemented Reference Compilation of Documents on Korea
Hongjae chŏnsŏ (弘齋全書, 1799) Collected Poems
Hŏnjong (憲宗) King
Hong Kyŏngnae (洪景來, 1780–1812) personal name
Hŭngsŏn Taeŭng'gun (興宣大院君, 1820–1898, regency 1863–1873)
Hwasŏng (華城) place name
Imjin Waeran (壬辰倭亂) Imjin War or Hideyoshi’s Invasion of Korea
Kaesŏng (開城) place name
Kojong (高宗) King
Kukcho pogam (國朝寶鑑, 1782) Precious Mirror for Succeeding Reigns
Kwŏn Kūn (權近, 1352–1409) personal name
Kyujang chŏn'ŭn (奎章全韻, 1796) A Complete Rhyming Dictionary
Munwŏn pobul (文苑黼黻, 1787) Beautiful Literature
Musillan (戊申亂) name of rebellion
Nam’in (南人) Southerners’ faction
nobi (奴婢) un-free labour
Noron (老論) Old Doctrine Faction or Patriarch’s Faction
Oryun haengsil[-to] (五倫行實[-圖], 1797) The [Illustrated] Five Moral Rules
Pak Chega (朴齊家, 1750–1815) personal name
Pak Chiwŏn (朴趾源, 1737–1805) personal name
P’ungyang Cho (豊壤趙氏) Cho clan of P’ungyang
Sok oryeŭi (國朝) Extended Five Rites of State
sŏwŏn (書院) private academy
Sunjo (純祖) King
Sunwŏn wanghu (純元王后, 1789–1857) Queen
Suwŏn (水原市) place name
Taejong t’ongpyŏn (大典通編, 1785) Comprehensive National Code
t’angpyŏng ch’ae (蕩平策) Policy of Impartiality
Tongmun hwigo (同文彙考, 1788) Diplomatic Letters
Tongnæ (東萊) place name
yangban (兩班) civil and military officials
Yi Hang-no (李恒老, 1792–1868) personal name
Yŏngjo (英祖) King
Yu Tŏkkong (柳得恭, 1749–1807) personal name
Zhou (周) Chinese dynasty

Notes
1. Looking for societies dominated by capitalism or organised as nation-states as universal markers of modernity is probably a dead end because these characteristics seem too peculiar to Europe. Setting aside capitalism and the nation-state, we should consider the constitution of the ‘modern’ mind. Although Anthony Giddens clings to the nation-state and occasionally capitalism, he also offers us a summation of ‘modernity’ as a project to develop impersonal patterns of thinking (Giddens 1990: 53–54). His ideas rest on ‘disembedding’ and the ‘reflexive appropriation of knowledge’. Disembedding begins with the separation of time and space from place, so that time and space can be ‘emptied’ and standardised without regard to locality. Further disembedding is achieved through ‘symbolic tokens’ and ‘expert systems’ that require trust (with a sense of risk), not confidence. Therefore, the transition from pre-modern to modern is the reorientation of perspectives from who and where people are to what functions, almost entirely impersonal, that people perform. Finally, knowledge is reflexively acquired and applied: ‘social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character’ (Giddens 1990: 38). The constant alteration means that knowledge does not produce certainty. The paradigmatic example of this is the perspective of the natural sciences where certainty only lasts until the next laboratory test. Any appeal to prior custom or practice carries no value, and change is normal and expected. ‘Disembedding’ and the ‘reflexive appropriation of knowledge’ were part of the scaffolding of pre-modern East Asian bureaucracies.

2. Capitalism (Marx) and industrialism (Durkheim) did not come to dominate Chosŏn society, but rationality (Weber) did (Giddens 1990: 11–12).

3. The question of Christian conversion among Chosŏn intellectuals is an excellent entry point to examine fundamental questions of ontology, cosmology, metaphysics, belief, and the self and the state and still has yet to be extensively explored in a self-conscious comparative framework that relativises assumptions about modernity. We might compare Korean individualism in a post-feudal society with European individualism in feudal societies and examine the significance of the hierarchical nature of Catholicism in comparison with Confucianism.

4. Yi Saek (1328–1396) equates filial piety with loyalty. See 伯中親贈李狀元別 (‘On the courtesy name of Paekchung: Presented to the First Place Laureate Yi at parting’) in the fifteenth-century literary compilation, the Tongmunsŏn (東文選), book 97: ‘When you serve your parents well, it is called filial piety. When it is shifted to the lord, it is called loyalty. The terms (filial piety and loyalty) may be different, but the principle is the same’.

5. In Korea (and possibly in China), the land market was a larger part of economic activity than labour markets or capital markets; the land market was highly liquid and property rights probably more protected than in Europe, but European labour and capital markets were more extensive, better protected, and more elaborated.

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References


