BOOK REVIEWS


Discussing Korean modernity some scholars tend to treat modernity as the result of a specific historic and global development with a given time and space, leading up to the society we live in today. For these scholars the tumultuous late nineteenth century and the colonial period constitute the beginning of Korean modernity, a process to a large extent dependent on external factors, and these scholars often pay minimal attention to late Choson socio-economic change. Other scholars treat modernity as a set of qualities that in theory could be found anywhere and anytime, qualities like rationality, nationalist sentiments, and capitalist relations. Many of these scholars argue that Korean modernity can be traced back to the late Choson period, and that the events at the turn of the twentieth century rather halted this development. As these scholars often charge these modern qualities with a positive value, for them the colonial experience can not be understood within the framework of this Korean modernity. So whereas the former scholars avoid bringing in late Choson developments into their arguments, the latter group find it difficult to extend their narration of Korean modernity into the colonial period.

The above situation makes Kyung Moon Hwang’s *Beyond Birth: Social Status in the Emergence of Modern Korea* a valuable contribution to the study of Korean modernity, as it bridges the late Choson situation with the developments at the turn of the twentieth century. While strongly stressing the historicity of Korean modernity, and while regarding the late nineteenth century and the colonial period as most crucial in its formation, he still argues that “although Korea, like other civilizations, was stimulated from outside to undergo a process of comprehensive transformation, its road to modernity was paved more by internal than external demands” (p.330). These “internal demands” go back to late Choson society, and with what seems to be a contradictory twist, the dynamics of these demands had its roots in the strictly hierarchical status system of Choson.

At the core of Hwang’s study lies the fact that in the early stages of Korean modernization groups that previously had been excluded from top positions in the bureaucracy came to the forefront and in many cases came to lead this development. This might seem as a clear break with tradition, but in fact
these people were themselves a product of the traditional socio-economic order, and for them the transformation was more a recognition of a status they considered themselves always to have had. Furthermore, the struggle for this recognition had a long history. They were not commoners, but rather what Hwang calls “secondary status groups”, placed between the yangban aristocracy and the rest of the populace. The factors that enabled them to take the lead was not only the new circumstances and possibilities of the era, but also an “accumulation of potential” that had been going on since late Choson and that was a result of their position in the status hierarchy. These “secondary status groups” were the changgu, experts with practical and technical skills; the hyanggu, the local clerks that managed provincial and county affairs; the sittol, the illegitimate sons of the yangban; the northerners, members of the elite of the three northern provinces of P'yongan, Hanyang and Hwanghae excluded from top positions in the bureaucracy; and the numan, the military elite. The “potential” they had accumulated was in terms of practical and technical knowledge and skills, wealth, experience of the outside world, and an urge to be recognised combined with an eagerness for social advancement.

In chapter one, “Birth and Bureaucracy: Social Stratification in the Choson Era”, the study starts by depicting the central role the state and its bureaucracy together with the examinations system played in ordering Choson society in clearly defined status groups. It was the yangban that passed the munhwa examinations that monopolized the highest positions in the bureaucracy; the numan, passers of the military munhwa examinations, and changun, the passers of the practical and technical changhu examinations, held lower and less prestigious positions; the hyanggu managed the provincial and local extensions of the bureaucracy; and as for the sittol and northerners, their group identity was closely intertwined with the fact they were discriminated against in the examination system and the staffing of the bureaucracy regardless of their education or accomplishments. The social standing of each group was dependent on its relation with the bureaucracy.

The second chapter, “Opening the Ranks: Appointment to the Bureaucratic Elite, 1880-1930”, shows how this order was changed as the Choson state was reformed in the late nineteenth century and as the educational emphasis shifted towards practical and technical knowledge and skills. With the establishment of the new Tongui Anum organs in the 1890s these groups that previously had been excluded from top positions rose to prominence due to their skills or their ability to buy themselves positions or the education needed to obtain them. The study also shows the central role members of these groups played in both the failed Kapsin coup and in the Kabo-reforms. This trend continued into the colonial period. One group of prominent “secondary status” personalities in the period were pro-Japanese reformers who had lived in exile in Japan after the Kapsin coup and after the group behind the Kabo-reforms were ousted from power, and who later returned and were given top positions during the protectorate and after the Japanese annexation. Another group mainly came from the hyanggu, but also from other “secondary status groups”, and they filled the rapidly expanding provincial and local administration. Particularly positions within the police force became the starting point for a successful career.

Chapter three through chapter seven then introduces each of the “secondary status groups”. The author gives the history of their formation, discusses their self-identity, depicts their struggle for recognition in late Choson, details their role at the turn of the twentieth century and during the colonial period, and also gives a few case studies of prominent lineages within each status group. Each chapter ends with a discussion of that specific group’s role both in traditional society and in the modern transformation, and in these discussions comparisons are made with social stratification and status demarcation in other countries or civilizations.

The study provides a very good overview of the social status system of Choson and the position of these groups between yangban and the commoners. The discussion of their self-identity is highly interesting as they all sought recognition by the aristocracy and in their efforts tried to distance themselves from the other groups. They wanted to reform the system, not so much to recognise ability instead of birth, but rather to recognise their status as equal to that of the yangban, a recognition that would open up for advancement in the bureaucracy. This zeal for social advancement continues into the modern period and many members of these groups would seize the opportunities provided by the ever-growing bureaucracy of the Japanese colonial government, a bureaucracy that played the same role in bestowing social status as the Choson bureaucracy had done.

The argument that these secondary status groups to a large extent staffed the modern bureaucracy and also came to hold leading positions in civil society is not supported by any extensive statistical analysis in comparison with other status groups, but rather by a number of cases of prominent figures of this background and their lineages. In the view of this reader this is the weak point of this otherwise excellent study as the author claims that they were able to take the lead in the modernization of Korea due to their position as members of the “secondary status groups”. Although these cases are good illustrations of the argument put...