

## BOOK REVIEWS

GEHLMANN, M., & GLOMB, V. (Eds.). (2024). *Beyond the State Examinations: Evaluations of Knowledge in Premodern Korea*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag. 184 p. ISBN 978-3-447-12147-7. <https://doi.org/10.13173/9783447121477>  
<https://doi.org/10.31577/aassav.2024.33.2.06>  
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The government service examination system is unquestionably an important topic in the field of the social history of Korea and East Asia in general, however, along with this social phenomenon, the other modes of knowledge evaluation applied in Korean society should not go unnoticed. The editors and co-authors of the book *Beyond the State Examinations: Evaluations of Knowledge in Premodern Korea*, Martin Gehlmann and Vladimír Glomb, argue that the notorious state service examinations or clichéd master-disciple relationships may be the most well-known, but not necessarily the most representative parts of a much broader discourse on the evaluation of knowledge in pre-modern Korea. The collective of seven authors range beyond the elite-centred and male-based testing and evaluation of knowledge and focus also on non-elite social groups and types of non-hierarchical peer-to-peer evaluation on both formal and informal modes of knowledge evaluation within various communities and social platforms, e.g., Buddhist monks, women, military circles, literati gatherings, and educational settings.

Vladimír Glomb examines in detail the complicated relationship between Confucian academies and the state examinations. The academies, which strove to delineate borders between the realm of dedicated Confucian studies and the mundane domain of the state examinations, emphasized the importance of learning for oneself and struggled with the rigid mode of the state examinations system which, according to the Confucian academies, ignored the component of self-cultivation and was noble-status focused. Academy scholars appropriated Confucius' saying that "ancient scholars studied for themselves, current scholars study for others" as their manifesto, refusing to study in order to impress an audience (more precisely examiners) and so focused solely on one's own cultivation. The struggle between "study for oneself" and "study for others" can also be observed in the present when considering *suneung* (the College Scholastic Ability test). Taking into account the "learning for oneself" ideal espoused by Confucian academies and the collegial and non-competitive nature of their rules (for the purpose of examination sessions rather than to help to understand the complicated issues of Confucian doctrine and not to eliminate students), preparation for today's *suneung* may basically be regarded as "learning for others". Returning to the subject of self-cultivation, Glomb points out the paradoxical reversal of the state examination strategy: while failure or success in state examinations was assessed by textual knowledge and not moral qualities, students in

academies were predominantly disciplined or rewarded for their behaviour, but not for their study results. Thus, being a good Confucian scholar did not always mean intellectual brilliance as moral qualities and upright behaviour were a *sine qua non*. This led to a situation in which even students of only mediocre talent could study in the academies if they could fulfil the strict ritual requirements of the institution. As Glomb concludes, the spirit of “learning for oneself” endured through the multiple transformations of Korean academies in the following centuries and became a reminder that although the state examinations were an unavoidable fixture on the way to officialdom for many scholars, a true scholar could still pursue more lofty values via studies in the academies.

In connection with the aforementioned self-cultivation in the education process, Martin Gehlmann, among other issues, explores the issue of the shift from state examinations which were originally framed as celebrations of talent and moral righteousness to the system of student evaluation focusing on the elimination of students. Gehlmann claims that the examination’s restrictive focus reveals how strongly the implementation of the examination was actually influenced by socio-political pressures and/or fiscal considerations, and that the examination was only superficially discussed as an instrument for the objective assessment of knowledge. The author explains the reformation of the student evaluation examination (*kyosaeng kogang* 校生考講) introduced at the beginning of the 17th century during which the state sought to strengthen its underfunded military after the Japanese invasions of the 1590s. This reformation resulted in the student evaluation examinations being adjusted to punish failure by revoking student exemptions from military obligations. As already indicated above, another bone of contention was that financial interests became more important than educational concerns, which means that the modification of the evaluation examinations regulations included the financial penalties for failing the examinations. This so-called capitalizing on the examinations also provided local schools with fertile ground for another policy: granting limited or, in some cases, even lifelong exemptions from the evaluation examinations on the basis of paying a fee, which of course concerned the elite class. As Gehlmann argues, the actual subject of controversy between students and state concerning the examinations was less about content than about who actually had to sit for the examination and how failure was to be punished. Thus, the problem was not the test itself, but its new negative consequences and the capital elites had quickly used their power to elude the threat posed by the examination and its burden shifted on to the countryside, where the state faced a minefield in enforcing the examinations without challenging the local elites.

The instrumentalization of examinations by the state in an attempt to suppress a certain group was used also in order to regulate the Buddhist clergy. The promulgation of anti-Buddhist policies in early Chosŏn state brought fundamental changes to the Buddhist examination system in Korea, which started to be used as a tool not to promote but rather suppress the Buddhist community and strip Buddhist clerics and Buddhist institutions of legal recognition. Gregory Evon analyzes the process of politicization of the Buddhist examinations and emphasizes that with respect to these examinations there was a vast difference between theory and practice, e.g. abolished clerical examinations were briefly reinstated as a reward for monks recruited to the army who killed Japanese soldiers during

the Great East Asian War, but the reinstatement of the examinations was merely a temporary measure to motivate monks to kill as many Japanese soldiers as possible to help secure victory. At the same time, Evon emphasizes that the use of the term examinations seems quite probably to be misleading and it appears that, rather than conducting actual examinations (whether for licensing or ranking) – the government deemed monks to have passed the examinations if they supplied the heads of Japanese soldiers killed in combat. In the aftermath period of the war with Japan, monks were integrated into the military-taxation system and the abolition of clerical licences caused difficulties. As Evon states, the central problem is clear: monks had no legal right to be monks. But on the other hand, although monks could not obtain licences and thus had no official governmental approval of their status as monks, they participated in the military taxation system. This participation gave them *de facto* – not *de jure* – recognition of their status as monk. Evon rightly concludes that this gap between reality and legislation is striking: on the one hand, the court documents record the participation of monks in the military system after the end of the Great East Asian war – an issue in which the government had an understandable interest. On the other hand, various revisions to the legal code were largely silent on the issue until the final decades of the dynasty and in this respect, the various versions of the legal code were a monument both to the ideal of a dynastic order free of Buddhism and to the failure of that ideal in practice.

Felix Siegmund, another contributor to this publication, presents his findings related to the practical assessment of knowledge in the Chosŏn military. Unlike the well-researched examination systems for civil and military officials and the thorough research on the military service examination (*mu'gwa* 武科), there is not a single research paper dealing with the practical assessment of knowledge in the Chosŏn military. Thus, despite Siegmund's stating that he will not be able to offer a conclusive narrative and instead would rather emphasize the preliminary character of his findings and interpretations, the results of his research are already a significant contribution. Siegmund explains how military skills were assessed at different levels and how candidates prepared for examinations. The author also analyzes the system of less prominent and less official evaluations of military skills, which tested military skills after soldiers had already been enlisted. He also identifies two levels of skill examinations in the military: examinations which took place on highly formalized levels, as in the military examinations and in regulated practical examinations during training, and examinations on an informal level, described in some of the military manuals, in dynastic records and in the institutional records. Tests of military skill and knowledge outside of the state examinations were only loosely regulated and practice seems to have varied widely. The assessment of military skills was closely linked to the system of rewards and punishments. Tests were thus part of the system of control in the military and served both to evaluate skills and to maintain discipline. Fear of punishment and bad results caused cheating which became a common problem. Cheating was a well-known problem in bow-shooting examinations and examination candidates and active soldiers used to illicitly hire proficient bowmen to stand in for them in the bow shooting examination under a false name. Very prone to cheating were the tests for salaried soldiers. Siegmund claims that since this is a recurring problem in the records, it seems that it was never really solved. Relating to the regulations,

on the one hand they were very clear about the skills and the testing of these skills that soldiers should expect. On the other hand, such tests could be held at any time and so there was the element of surprise. According to the author, this should have been an effective system for controlling and enforcing a skill level among military personnel but it remains unclear for now how exactly this was handled in actual practice.

Barbara Wall takes us outside the framework of standardized forms of knowledge evaluation and explores an area where the testing of knowledge is conducted on a peer-to-peer level, in an informal and fun fashion. Wall brilliantly analyzes abbreviated storytelling as a method of knowledge evaluation and focuses on the encoding and decoding of the famous Chinese novel *The Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西遊記) in the seventeenth century and today. The author explores two clusters related to this one of the most popular stories in East Asia (hereafter *Journey*). The first cluster comes from the beginning of the 17th century when a group of Korean scholars around Yu Mongin 柳夢寅 (1559–1623) first collectively decoded a painting as an allusion to *The Journey* and then encoded *The Journey* again in their inscriptions on the painting. The painting in question was one work from the Ming painting collection *Gushi huapu* 顧氏畫譜 (Mr. Gu's Painting Manual, 1603), which depicted a monkey (more precisely Sun Wukong). The second cluster focuses on three more recent examples that each encoded the “jump out of Buddha's palm” scene from *The Journey* to initialize its story world. These three latter examples include the short story *Tubŏntchae sangbong* (두 번째 상봉 Second Meeting) by the North Korean novelist Han Ungbin 한웅빈, the novel *Pimyŏng ŭl ch'ajasŏ* (비명을 찾아서 In Search of an Inscription) by the South Korean novelist Pok Kŏil 북거일, and the seventh episode of the South Korean TV series *Ssŭlssŭlhago ch'allanhasin – Tokkaebi* (쓸쓸하고 찬란하神 – 도깨비 Guardian: The Lonely and Great God, 2016–2017). Wall suggests imagining *The Journey* not as a static work that has been adapted into various versions, but rather as a story cloud that includes all versions and the story cloud changes form when new versions join or old versions fall into oblivion. Simply said, *The Journey to the West* is a story cloud in constant flux. The author examines 60 Korean variations with a relatively stable group of 64 actants (including 12 characters, 3 objects, 6 places, 6 motifs, the title, the author, and 38 episodes). Wall rightly notes that abbreviated storytelling does not necessarily mean that a variation is short and simple but, in her article, abbreviated storytelling implies that a variation uses only a limited number of actants from the actant pool of *The Journey*. Through the inscriptions on the abovementioned Ming painting collection *Gushi huapu* the author explores how three men playfully used the actants on the painting as a code for *The Journey* and how this play or kind of poetry jam in 17th century Chosŏn might have served both to evaluate and to confirm knowledge within the group. Barbara Wall makes the interesting point that if we understand the poetry jam in the 17th century as a creative and playful event based on literary knowledge, it would seem that any of the inscriptions might be more or less creative, but does not lend itself to any objective test of right and wrong and it is possible that the inscribers' aim might not have been to demonstrate their knowledge at all, but rather to play with their knowledge without prioritizing facts in all cases. The second cluster focuses on a more anonymous way of knowledge evaluation, where it is not a group that evaluates knowledge, but rather the readers themselves. Thus,

unlike three inscribers in the 17th century who decoded and encoded *The Journey* primarily for the group's private use, the following three above-mentioned intertexts encode the "jumping out of Buddha's palm" scene totally independently from each other (one is a novel from South Korea published in 1987, another is a short story from North Korea of 1999, and the third is a K-drama from the years 2016–2017). Wall explains that while the poetry jam in the 17th century served as a means to evaluate the literary knowledge in a small group of poets, the potential self-evaluation of literary knowledge in the second cluster of intertexts is connected to the reading pleasure we can feel when we can connect new nodes in our network of literary knowledge. This means that while the knowledge evaluation in the 17th century poetry jam helped to strengthen the identity of a concrete "in-group", the self-evaluation of literary knowledge in the second cluster of examples is instead limited to the readers themselves. But the author also argues that this kind of self-evaluation of literary knowledge is also related to the feeling of belonging to an "in-group", albeit a relatively abstract one.

A world far from the conventional perceptions of knowledge evaluation is captured in Sung Eun Thomas Kim's contribution. The author deals with strategies to test enlightenment or progress in the process of attaining Buddhahood, the knowledge which is impossible to measure or evaluate. At the beginning of the article, Kim pays attention to the widely accepted monastic educational system that was established in late sixteenth-century Korea, which consisted of a structured monastic curriculum that was part of an overall scheme of monastic training. Based on this precursory training, the practising student progressed to meditational practices in pursuit of enlightenment. Thereafter, Kim focuses on the *kanhwa sŏn* 看話禪 tradition (also referred to as *kong'an* 公案 practice in the form of a question-response format) which was adopted in Korea in the twelfth century and practised as one of the main forms of meditational practice for the purpose of inciting and bringing the practitioners' mind to awakening. In this way, as Kim asserts, *kanhwa sŏn* was also a form of evaluating the state of a students' mind to determine how far or close they were to enlightenment. Kim puts forward an interesting argument that while the records of wordless teachings and iconoclastic interactions seem to be paradigmatic of *kanhwa sŏn*, the use of words and language in most cases cannot be separated from the Buddhist traditions, even the anti-lingual tradition of *kanhwa sŏn*. The author argues that though this is indeed true for the scholastic school (*kyojong* 教宗) where the study of texts is fundamental in its curriculum and instructions, it also applies to the meditation school (*sŏnjong* 禪宗), and particularly in the practice of *kanhwa sŏn* where conceptual terms and language are used differently. The purpose of practising *kanhwa sŏn* is to remove the "defects of conceptual understanding in order to find the road leading to salvation", which means that it cleanses the deluding effects of conceptualizing words. Despite this, however, according to Kim, as ironic as it may seem, the practice of *kanhwa sŏn* cannot be carried out in the absence of words and the use of words and language is very much part of *kanhwa* practices as ques or reference points which is part of a different method of communication.

Since it is well known that Buddhist monks have long turned to poetry to express the inexpressible non-discursive thoughts and insights, Thomas Kim also discusses poetry as a method of communicating and verifying, or testing one's attainment of an awakened

state of mind. Kim also refers to giving and receiving influences and adopting elements between Buddhism and Confucianism. During the Chosŏn period which is known as a time of Buddhist suppression, there remained a rich literary supply of poetry written by Chosŏn monks and they were often exchanged with Confucian literati or scholar-officials. The elements of *kanhwa sŏn* practices have been adopted into *such'ang* 酬唱, or “parleying recitation”. This practice was popular among the Confucian scholar-officials and literati, who often gathered at temples and exchanged poetry as a form of play over drinks of alcohol, and at times together with poet monks. Thomas Kim concludes that between the two forms of practice, the element of testing plays an important role. In *kanhwa sŏn*, testing is done in order to verify the state of enlightenment of the practitioner’s mind. In the literary practice of poetry composition, a milder version of testing is part of the enjoyment in sharing the nuanced mood and insight contained in the poems and being able to respond in kind with one’s own poem.

In the last chapter of the book, Miriam Löwensteinová ushers us into the fictional space of the *kodae sosŏl* 古代小説 (classical novel) genre which gave readers (mostly women) a broad spectrum of virtual opportunities. In *kodae sosŏl*, the female protagonists experience situations in which they would hardly find themselves in real life and possess a higher level of literary knowledge than expected by patriarchal society: in *kodae sosŏl* stories, girls perform poetic dialogues or monologues, in which they choose their partner. Such situations were unrealistic, as freely picking one’s partner was not possible in medieval Korean society and composing poetry (which was always connected with prestige and a pathway for scholars to gain glory and respect) was not a part of the vast majority of women’s everyday lives. Thanks to *kodae sosŏl*, women but also men had the virtual opportunity to “test”, evaluate and choose the future partner, and so the work of fiction allowed the impossible. As the protagonists choose their partners, they write poems. Poems are thus a precondition for making love and getting married, for both the male and female protagonists and the use of poems is a proof of a partner’s quality. Another similar albeit less frequent motif is that of the protagonists being examined about their knowledge of famous musical compositions. Löwensteinová emphasizes that all poetical and musical examinations serve to confirm a pre-chosen partner, who may have been picked by the author, the mother or father of the future bride or groom, a matchmaker (*maep’a* 媒婆), or another person. The author adds that nowhere in this genre do we encounter a situation in which a protagonist’s incapability to compose poetry or sing results in being rejected by a bride or a bridegroom. In these texts, the “exam” takers are always well prepared, except for in one case, which Löwensteinová mentions in the latter part of her study. The author also discusses the differences between male and female protagonists. In these stories, women engage in various activities for one purpose: to eventually get married. The girl in these stories is proficient in astrology, medicine, exorcism, sorcery, and so forth. But after proving her skills, the female protagonist usually returns to her initial position and, after getting married, ceases to make these excursions out of her limited space. Thus, after successfully demonstrating her abilities, she returns home and waits quietly for her husband. The she-warrior stops fighting, the dancer stops dancing, and the murderess stops killing. *Kisaengs* are an exception (a *kisaeng* offers herself as a concubine, but only after he fulfils his “duties” as a man, including passing

the state exams), but they too are always tied to a certain place and limited in their actions. Men, in contrast, engage in short-term activities and initiatives connected with the erotic because they are predestined to continue on their path to glory and focus on passing the state examinations (as a graduate of the state examinations the hero is more attractive for a future marriage). It means, that in *kodae sosŏl*, the protagonists first attain status and only then do they consider their private lives (if the hero gets married before reaching the top, a problem arises). Löwensteinová points out that in reality it works the other way around. In the real world, early marriages were common (in the teenage years) and it was rare for a sixteen-year-old male to pass the state examination. Here, it is therefore probably a metaphor for exceptionality. The author also refers to *Kuunmong* 九雲夢 (The Cloud Dream of the Nine) and characterizes this novel as the richest *kodae sosŏl* in terms of its heroes, plot, and subplots which contains many situations that influenced later works and fully uses the motif of composing poetry and poetic dialogues (as well as monologues) for wooing. Löwensteinová asserts that all the twenty-five poems are purposeless and they are just means for moving the plot forward. The poems stabilize the logical order and content of the examination – wooing, meeting, acquaintance – the steps necessary before entering the marriage, a desirable state that everybody in premodern Korea must respect as a duty.

Despite the editors' claim that this volume is only a cursory picture of various strategies, participants, or results of the evaluation of knowledge in premodern Korea, it nonetheless represents a rich source of information and is a great inspiration for further studies in this field. From the very first to the last chapter, the authors display their deep knowledge of the chosen issues and their painstaking work with sources, which was not an easy challenge given the lack of documentation. The authors brilliantly guide us through the issues of knowledge evaluation in Korea and, thanks to their determination to ask not only what people in Chosŏn Korea knew but also what they did not know, they gave this publication an added value. This book constitutes a very rich resource not only for experts in Korean Studies but also for all who seek to go beyond the state examinations phenomenon in premodern Korea and are looking for, as it were, alternative voices.

Zuzana Hritzová