

Reply to

“The Dynamics of Elite Domination in Early Modern Korea” by Javier CHA, Review Essay on Martina DEUCHLER, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes: Kinship, Status, and Locality in Premodern Korea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

It is the privilege of a reviewer to argue and even disagree with the general arguments of a book under review, but it is regrettable when he puts forward his own ideas of what, in his view, the book should have been about at the expense of outlining and discussing the book’s contents and main arguments. Dr. Cha devoted seventeen pages to the review of my book—an indication, it seems, that he thought the book important enough to give it a thorough examination. This is commendable, but the result is a lengthy, rather disorganized, and idiosyncratic ramble that will leave the reader of the review bewildered rather than informed. It is for this reason that I have decided to take the rather uncommon step to take issue with some of Dr. Cha’s assertions.

The very first sentence of Cha’s review puts my statement that “the descent-based elite never needed legal definition of its status” into the wrong time-frame of “early modern Korea,” a controversial period designation he applies to the Chosŏn period (1392–1910). In contrast, I have tried, whenever possible, to overcome conventional periodization by de-emphasizing dynastic barriers—often used artificially for proposing “new beginnings,” and take “premodern” as meaning the time span from early Silla to the late nineteenth century. It is in this extended timescale that the above sentence has validity. This sentence is then followed abruptly by a “summary” of “aristocratic status,” starting with: “In Chosŏn (1392–1910), aristocratic status depended on the prestige attached to service in *yangban* officialdom.” This is a poor introduction that merely repeats standard wisdom. My book’s major claim is, in contrast, that throughout Korean history elite status depended on *birth and descent*, i.e., the “social,” and not, or only secondarily, on bureaucratic merits, the “political.” It is therefore equally misleading for the reviewer to state on page 94 that “*Under the Ancestors’ Eyes* delineates the sixteenth-century transition from ‘the political’ to ‘the social’. . .” In fact, the book argues that the *social*, meaning certified birth and descent, took precedence over the *political* right from Silla’s beginnings when positions in the fledgling bureaucracy were distributed according to social origin. What took place in the sixteenth century was the separation of *scholar* from *official* as the result of “legitimizing the pursuit of ‘true learning’ [that is, Learning of the Way] as a vocation befitting a member of the *sajok* elite” (*Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 186).

One of the most curious statements in the review reads: “In brief, the book’s major flaw is its failure to directly engage with the work of South Korean historians” (95). Another equally puzzling statement reads: “Despite its assertions to the contrary, *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes* is a study that owes a great deal to South

Korean social historians” (98). How could this book have been written without close engagement with South Korean scholarship? Not only have I acknowledged my indebtedness to a great number of scholars with whom I continually discussed major issues and conclusions of my book over many years, I also recognized all the works consulted—primary as well as secondary—in over one thousand endnotes and in the Bibliography (of thirty-eight pages). Of course, there are undoubtedly a few recent works that I may have missed, but none would have substantially changed my conclusions drawn also from many as yet rarely used *primary* sources.

As the reviewer rightly remarks, there is a certain danger of overinterpreting terms such as *chok*, “descent group.” It is evident, however, that this term’s meaning changed when it was adopted in Korea. While the Chinese *chok* (Chin. *tsu*) connotes patrilinearity, *chok* in the Sillan context clearly denoted a *bilateral* kin group. And in this sense it was also used in Koryō. Koryō society continued to be bilateral, although certain patrilineal features eventually started to appear in response to intensified Chinese influence (see *Under the Ancestors’ Eyes*, 20, 31). The reviewer should therefore revise his understanding of the social transition from Silla to Koryō (99).

Although the reviewer thinks that I should have confined myself to a monographic study of Andong and Namwōn in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (99), why should I not have attempted, based on the abundance of primary and secondary sources now available, to put pieces together and try to come up with a history of the Korean “descent group” (*ssijok*), which I see as the backbone of Korean society throughout its long history from the fifth to the late nineteenth century? This has not been done before. The work may have lacunas, but the time has come, I think, to represent Korea’s history and the peculiarities of its society in bolder contours, even at the risk of having my *longue durée* approach to social history criticized with: “Why her approach should be regarded as the standard for social historians is open to question” (97). Is there any such assertion in the book?

What I regard as the centerpiece of my book is the story of why and how the originally bilateral descent group was transformed into a Confucian-style lineage system over a timespan of several hundred years—a subject that necessitated the broad study of social, political, economic, and intellectual developments that were involved in the historic Confucianization of kinship practices. In this multi-layered narrative the “Confucian transformation” was not “a foregone conclusion” (95). On the contrary, the study describes many elements inherent in Korea’s social, economic, and religious tradition that either accelerated or hindered this process. Remarkable is the extraordinary resilience of the *native* kinship system: the Confucian-style patriline would never have become a central feature of Korean elite society in late Chosōn without compromising with the horizontally constituted native descent group. As a result of such compromise, the Confucian-style patriliney focused on the ancestral shrine was counterbalanced by native-based *munjung*, a contractual group of kinsmen in the tradition of fraternal equality, focused on an ancestral grave. Unfortunately, this unique juxtaposition that makes the Korean lineage system so different from Chinese lineages, here analyzed for the first time

in great detail, deserves in Dr. Cha's review not more than half a line in a sketchy summary of the book's contents (95).

The reviewer is also unhappy about my "generalizations." Indeed, are Andong and Namwŏn, my two test locations, representative for the entire country, including the Northern regions? I dare say that even though local mentalities and social settings may have varied, local elites did not fundamentally differ from region to region in their eagerness to become "Confucian" and to adhere to Confucian rituals in competition with the central elite. Regrettably, there are no documents available from the North comparable to the local materials compiled and published as *Komunsŏ chipsŏng* by the Academy of Korean Studies. The comparison of elite lineages in Andong and Namwŏn has nevertheless shown interesting convergences in social organization and Confucian culture, despite their adherence to divergent scholarly orientations (*Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, 404). Similar convergences may well have existed in the social traditions of at least Hwanghae and P'yŏngan Provinces.

In brief, a complex book such as the one under review is never perfect and provides ample scope for criticism and contrary ideas. Dr. Cha has taken this up with a vengeance, but without much wisdom. As a result, the reader of his review is left puzzled, in certain places even misled, and regrettably does not get a proper foretaste of what the book is really about. A Korean translation will soon be available.

Martina DEUCHLER
Professor Emeritus of Korean Studies, SOAS
martina.deuchler@sunrise.ch