

Min Yǒng-hwan: A Political Biography

Review >
Korea

Famous during his lifetime, Min Yǒng-hwan (1861-1905) is most remembered in Korean historiography for his death. A former diplomat, Min found it difficult to stomach the forced handover of Korea's foreign relations to Japan in 1905. Along with many other courtiers, he tried in vain to put pressure on Emperor Kojong to take action against this unlawful protectorate treaty, forced upon the Korean government by the Japanese envoy Itō Hirobumi. Realizing the inappropriateness of sending memorials to the throne, Min opted for more forceful action, and committed suicide in protest of the treaty.

By Koen De Ceuster

This biography is the first book-length study in a Western language of this icon of Korean resistance to Japanese encroachment. Contrary to what one might expect, Michael Finch does not concentrate on Min's suicide, but rather on his political career in the run-up to his suicide. He justifies this choice by referring to the existing distortion in standard political histories of pre-annexation Korea in favour of radical reform factions. Considered to run against the tide of the times, conservative forces in Korea's political landscape have consistently been underrepresented in scholarly research.

The standard reading of Korea's pre-annexation political history roughly discerns three contesting political forces. Most research interest has gone to the progressive reformists, who during the 1880s and 1890s unsuccessfully sought dominance in Korean politics. Diametrically opposed to these progressive forces were the neo-Confucian diehard conservatives living mostly in (self-) imposed domestic exile. The political middle ground (and power) was held by the embedded courtier clique, which

was allegedly completely preoccupied with holding on to power. This clique consisted of the 'Min cronies', who were mainly relatives of the queen. Indeed, Min Yǒng-hwan was himself a nephew of Queen Myǒngsǒng.

By focusing on Min Yǒng-hwan, Michael Finch demonstrates how an overly rigid application of this standard interpretation fails to do justice to the political stance of individual actors who were not hampered by any, apparently impermeable, political boundaries. Min Yǒng-hwan admittedly shared the reformers' sense of crisis. When confronted with the West, he realized the dire straits Korea was in, and he became a promoter of domestic change. However, not unlike his contemporary Yi Wan-yong, portrayed in traditional Korean historiography as the arch-traitor, his upbringing and social background made him stop short of radical institutional changes. Reform was his trade, not revolution. His motivation, above all, was a deeply ingrained loyalty to the monarch.¹

Though commendable for putting the spotlight on this forgotten politician and diplomat, and interesting for Finch's depiction of how Min's reform

ideas changed following his exposure to Russia, the United States, and Europe in the course of his diplomatic missions, this monograph suffers from a number of weaknesses. Admittedly, the subject himself, Min Yǒng-hwan, does not make things easy on any biographer. Min did not leave many documents behind. He never kept a diary from which one could have glimpsed his personal musings on the political peripeties of his day. As it is, this biography is a thorough analysis of the *Min Ch'ungjǒnggong yugo* ('The posthumous works of Prince Min'), a compilation edited and published by the National History Compilation Committee in 1971. Organized in five sections, this compilation records Min Yǒng-hwan's memorials addressed to the throne between 1877 and 1905, a long political essay written around the time of the Tonghak rebellion (1894), two dull and dry 'diaries' of his diplomatic missions to the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II (1896) and to the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations of Queen Victoria in London (June 1897), and a compilation of various writings about Min in the aftermath of his suicide.² The two diaries consist of hardly more than agenda entries, list-



Min Yǒng-hwan in official Chosŏn court attire. The photograph was taken in St. Petersburg during Min's mission to Russia in 1896.

ing who he had met, but utterly silent on the content on the discussions, let alone on his own thoughts.

Given the scarcity of materials related to Min Yǒng-hwan, Michael Finch has succeeded in painting a credible picture of this unfortunate diplomat. Regrettably, the packaging is not very appealing: Finch has produced a dissertation rather than a book. He goes out of his way to show he knows the tricks of the trade of a professional historian, debating the dating and authorship of documents, and corroborating details with collateral evidence. All attention is so focused on the 1971 compilation of documents that we see Min Yǒng-hwan clearly – albeit in a not very lively fashion – but the historical background remains rather vague.

Only documents authored by Min himself attract the author's research zeal. Once Min stops writing, Finch's interest peters out. When he turns to the posthumous accounts in the compilation, he is disinterested in showing who wrote these documents, and offers only a sketchy analysis of the texts. So, do not expect a climax at the end. Min's suicide is treated as just another

episode of his life, seemingly unrelated, certainly unexplained. In fact, after reading this biography, you are none the wiser as to why someone like Min Yǒng-hwan eventually took his own life in protest at the signing of the protectorate treaty. Despite having an eminently political motivation, Min's suicide is not treated as an integral part of this political biography.

Regardless of this unfortunate finale, this book does serve an important purpose in reminding us that we have been too gullible in imposing our own political preference for radical reform when analysing pre-colonial Korean history. Michael Finch has made a relevant contribution to getting the historical balance more even.

- Finch, Michael, *Min Yǒng-hwan. A Political Biography*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (2003), pp. xii + 256, ISBN 0-8248-2520-9

Dr Koen De Ceuster is associate professor at the Centre for Korean Studies, Leiden University, and Korea editor of the IIAS Newsletter.

k.de.ceuster@let.leidenuniv.nl

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- 1 On Yi Wan-yong, see Koen De Ceuster's book review of Yun, Tǒk-han, *Yi Wan-yong Pyǒngjǒn. Aeguk kwa maegukŏi tu ōlgul* ('A bibliography of Yi Wan-yong: The two faces of patriotism and treachery') Seoul: Chungsim (1999), in: *The Review of Korean Studies*, 5:2 (December 2002), pp.334-340.
- 2 The Tonghak rebellion was a formidable peasant uprising that threatened to unseat the central government in Seoul. To quell the uprising, the Korean court called in Chinese troops, which provoked a Japanese intervention, resulting in a Japanese-inspired palace coup, and setting off the Sino-Japanese war (1894-95). The exact dating of Min's document is relevant in so far as it explains Min's changing attitudes towards the major regional powers.