

SPECIAL ISSUE

## Chosŏn's Office of Interpreters: The Apt Response and the Knowledge Culture of Diplomacy

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From 1392 until its dissolution in 1894, Chosŏn Korea's Office of Interpreters managed diplomatic relations with its vastly more powerful Ming and Qing neighbors. The Office was originally conceived out of a bureaucratic strategy to formalize the training of its interpreters and manage the volatile knowledge they possessed. This bureaucratizing of diplomacy created a distinct socio-economic niche for these interpreters, facilitating their social reproduction. This article argues that a distinct culture of knowledge also emerged in this process. Beyond language, interpreters also translated between multiple domains of knowledge. As experts of diplomatic protocol, they served as informants to their social and administrative superiors. As scholars, they produced compendia and handbooks that made their office legible to outsiders. As specialists, they asserted the dignity of their craft. And as diplomats, they were tasked with furnishing the "apt response" that enabled them to move between local exigency and the demands of state ideology. Herein lies the central dilemma of bureaucratic knowledge: the skill to do so required both cultivated erudition as well as accumulated experience, but its timely execution could not be legislated through bureaucratic rules—a tension between the desire to control and the need to preserve agency. The article deliberately locates bureaucracy in a domain (diplomacy), place (East Asia), and a time (premodern) that was not supposed to "have" bureaucracy in order to dispute the casual conflation of bureaucratization with modernization that has obscured the Korean Office of Interpreters in the global history of diplomacy.

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One of the longest continuously operational foreign service agencies in world history belonged to the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) of Korea. Its Office of Interpreters (*Sayŏgwŏn*) supplied the interpreters who managed the dynasty's diplomacy until its abolition in 1894.<sup>1</sup> The expertise of these interpreters, like the dragomans who mediated between European states and the Ottoman empire, extended far beyond language. They mastered protocol, understood imperial culture, and navigated deftly between different domains of knowledge.

Interpreters were familiar "go-betweeners" in the contact zones along imperial frontiers, but the Korean interpreters stand out in the early modern period as a product of a *bureaucratic* strategy.<sup>2</sup> Chosŏn recruited its interpreters from among its own subjects, training and evaluating them through an examination system. Once in state service, their deployment, promotion, salary, and functions were governed by explicit regulations.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Ottoman dragomans were usually recruited from ready-made talent in the

<sup>1</sup> An officer of the agency was referred to generally as a *yŏkkwan* (interpretation officer). When his services were appended to a diplomatic mission, he was appointed as a *t'ongsa*, ("mediator of affairs," a translator). See Pak, "Yŏmal Sŏnch'o t'ongsa," 251–52.

<sup>2</sup> Schaffer, et al., *Brokered World*, ix–xxi; Gürkan, "Mediating Boundaries," 111–16.

<sup>3</sup> Paek, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi yŏkkwan." For an English-language overview, see Baek, "Official Interpreters."

population, much like how local Brahmin families were recruited by the Portuguese as translators in India.<sup>4</sup> In the Ottoman orbit, only the city-state of Ragusa dedicated comparable attention to the training and evaluation of their intermediaries.<sup>5</sup>

At first glance, diplomacy, with its dynamic and high-stakes exigencies, seems ill-fit for bureaucratic routine and rule-making. The use of bureaucratic strategies in diplomacy by Chosŏn and its predecessor, Koryŏ (918–1392), can be explained by a division of labor that corresponded to and reproduced social hierarchies at court. The leaders of Korean diplomatic missions, as well as the chief administrators of the interpretation Office, were usually ad hoc appointees drawn from the court aristocracy. It was they who represented the Korean ruler in formal rituals and corresponded with imperial officials. In contrast, the interpreters, hailing from a lower social echelon, usually managed the logistics of the missions, handled diplomatic documents, and translated for their superiors. Rather than the substance of diplomatic negotiation per se, the Office controlled the personnel charged with executing its procedures.

Interpreters became targets of control because of their perceived unreliability. To their social and administrative superiors, their ability in foreign tongues tendered intimacy with imperial politics that could upend established hierarchies within Korea. Limiting the agency of these “go-betweens” through bureaucratic mechanisms was supposed to guard against this possibility as well as reduce the volatility of diplomacy in general. What resulted was a familiar bureaucratic dilemma. The Korean Court required reliability and predictability, but diplomatic exigency demanded local discretion and on-the-ground flexibility. Bureaucracy proscribed the interpreter to be a mere tool of mediation, but effectiveness depended on preserving his freedom of action.

This dilemma placed a range of demands upon the interpreter, who traversed several domains of knowledge. In addition to translating language, he bridged knowledge of his office with the broader workings of the state apparatus, a process which involved making the Office of Interpreters legible to outsiders and asserting the dignity of his specialized craft. The Korean interpreters, especially those who managed relations with imperial China, also served as informants and guides to their social and administrative superiors who rarely ventured beyond the country's borders. Once abroad, they also moved between local exigency and an imperial metanarrative that couched these diplomatic relations in terms of Korean fealty to a universal sovereign and a rhetoric of tribute.<sup>6</sup> In many cases, it fell on the interpreters to square this overarching discourse with the unseemly diplomatic underbelly of bribery, extortion, and dissimulation.

Diplomacy was therefore made possible by the knowledge produced and maintained by the Korean Office of Interpreters. In this sense, diplomacy entailed a particular culture of knowledge. Akin to the “epistemic culture” of scientific or technical communities, the interpreter “create[ed] and warrant[ed] knowledge” particular to the values and practices of his context.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, the Office maintained the expertise necessary for both diplomacy as such and its bureaucratic operation, covering both “know-what”—diplomatic institutions, discourses, and protocols—and “know-how”—the procedural knowledge of how to operate the “know-what” in response to specific contingencies.

In line with the methods modeled by Martin Mulso and Lorraine Daston, the ensuing discussion adopts a *longue durée* perspective on the Korean Office of Interpreters' “knowledge culture.”<sup>8</sup> This vantage underscores how the central dilemma of reliability that informed the bureaucratic solution continued to shape the Office's institutional development long after its establishment. The long view also allows a focus on the stratum of diplomatic activity below the drama of state-to-state political negotiation: the quotidian, procedural, and often obscured world of the Korean interpreter. Since the bulk of the diplomatic record focuses on formal aspects of state-to-state interaction, to reach below this register means approaching it from an eclectic source base: a range of material produced by the hands of the interpreters themselves as well as reading against the grain of anecdotal accounts in which interpreter activities only appear in the margins.

<sup>4</sup> Rothman, *Brokering Empire*, 167–71; Flores, “Lingua cosmopolite.”

<sup>5</sup> That is, by “sponsoring their education” and “groom[ing] them for duties much more complex than one would assume of an expert linguist.” Zecevic, “Translating Ottoman Justice,” 402–4.

<sup>6</sup> Van Lieu, “Chosŏn-Qing Tributary Discourse,” 80–87, 92–100.

<sup>7</sup> As first described in Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures*, 1–4.

<sup>8</sup> Mulso and Daston, “History of Knowledge,” 159–87; see also the introduction to this special issue, 5–6.

## The Office of Interpreters and the History of Diplomacy: A Historiographical Perspective

To see the Office of Interpreters as an example of bureaucracy deliberately locates bureaucracy in the “wrong” places: in diplomacy, in East Asia, and before the nineteenth century. Although many of the “questions and controversies” surrounding bureaucracy were, in the words of Alexander Woodside, “explored in [East Asia’s] mandarinates a long time ago,” a sense of inaptness persists because of outdated conceits surrounding bureaucracy’s meaning in social theory. As discussed in the introduction to this special issue, these conceits owe in part to bureaucracy’s peculiar relationship to European imperialism at the turn of the nineteenth century. But how they have been intertwined with the historiography of diplomacy means they require more than a routine debunking before the story of the Korean Office of Interpreters as a bureaucracy can be recovered.<sup>9</sup>

Prevailing narratives of diplomacy’s history tend to sidestep the long-standing practice of formalized diplomacy in Korea and East Asia. Primarily concerned with the emergence of the “modern” international system, they thread its genealogy from the permanent legations of late medieval Italy through the Peace of Westphalia—the fabled origin of treaty-based international law, territorial sovereignty, and the legal parity of sovereign states. Korea’s diplomacy with imperial China, along with its distinct institutions, carried out through ad hoc envoy missions timed to a ritual calendar, stands apart from this Eurocentric narrative.<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, the allure of the Westphalian myth has faded.<sup>11</sup> With growing awareness of more diverse histories, East Asian diplomacy “before the West,” no longer a mere curiosity or an epitome of Oriental inadequacy, has inspired alternative scholarly methodologies as well as anticipated imminent futures.<sup>12</sup> But did it ever make sense to mark these differences in diplomatic practice so sharply as East or West, modern or non-modern? In the heart of Europe, the Holy Roman Empire stood as a living, ironic counterpoint to the supposedly Westphalian ideals of territorial sovereignty and sovereign equality.<sup>13</sup> Having interacted for centuries with the Ottomans, Europeans were also no strangers to a diplomatic regime dependent on ad hoc embassies and revolving around claims to universal sovereignty.<sup>14</sup>

What once lent credence to these East-West binaries were the wholesale institutional changes in East Asian diplomacy in the late nineteenth century. In 1894, the Chosŏn dynasty abolished the centuries-old Office of Interpreters in order to adapt to a nascent global system of international relations. With the arrival in East Asia of novel “Westphalian” institutions, older practices were understood, both in politics and in scholarship, as a dead end, with at most tangential relevance to how diplomacy is practiced today.<sup>15</sup> When such stark lines are drawn between modern diplomacy and that of the “premodern” *ancien regime*, the only significance reserved for the latter is as the obsolescent antecedent of the former. In this positivist temporality where history is organized in successive stages, the reorganization of diplomacy in late nineteenth century East Asia works to make up for lost time by “catching up” to the West—that is, by “modernizing.”<sup>16</sup>

The notion of bureaucracy plays a critical, if implicit role, in reinforcing this positivist narrative. Invoking Weber, one recent account of Korea’s late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century reforms understands Korea’s embrace of the new diplomacy through institutional reform as part of the “instrumental rationalization” (*zweckrational*) of a modern state, with its goal driven “objectification, differentiation, and specialization.” In contrast, Chosŏn-period institutions operated according to a value rationality (*wertrational*) where their “systematic, ideologically grounded, and textually based bureaucratization” worked “toward definitively ancient ideals ... in conformity to the neo-Confucian social ethos.”<sup>17</sup> Behind these distinctions are the battle-lines for a long-standing debate in the historiography of Chosŏn-period state practice that revolve around another set of Weberian typologies. Whether these practices can be properly “bureaucratic,” and not patrimonial-bureaucratic or aristocratic, determines the relationship Korea’s traditional past has with

<sup>9</sup> Woodside, *Lost Modernities*, 7–8, 108–9.

<sup>10</sup> As described in Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*; Spruyt, *Sovereign State*, 20–22, 151–80; and reiterated in Hamilton and Langhorne, *Practice of Diplomacy*, 37–90; Frigo, *Politics and Diplomacy*.

<sup>11</sup> Larsen, “Comforting Fictions”; Kang, “International Relations”; Brook et al., *Sacred Mandates*, 12–24; Osiander, “Sovereignty.”

<sup>12</sup> Kang, *East Asia*, 1–16, 160–65, 167–71.

<sup>13</sup> Stollberg-Rilinger, *Emperor’s Old Clothes*, 2–5, 8–12.

<sup>14</sup> Yurdusev, *Ottoman Diplomacy*, 17–25. That is, a diplomatic regime with institutional traits and structure similar to Korean relations with Ming and Qing China, which owes to the convergent features of “tributary empires,” where inner Asian political practices are grafted onto a preexisting imperial tradition, whether Byzantine or Sinitic. Bang and Bayly, *Tributary Empires*; Robinson, “Ming Court”; “Rethinking the Late Koryŏ”; “Controlling Memory and Movement.”

<sup>15</sup> Ravina, *Stand With the Nations*, 30–37, 54–55; Kim, *Last Phase*.

<sup>16</sup> For geography, see Lewis and Wigen, *Myth of Continents*, 82–91; For temporality, see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 73–77.

<sup>17</sup> Hwang, *Rationalizing Korea*, 2–6, 25–26; Weber, *Economy and Society*, 24–27.

modernity—a desire to redeem that past by retrieving its “modern” characteristics or, at least, their “sprouts.” An obvious casualty of these preoccupations with “modernity,” however defined, is an understanding of Chosŏn-period state practices on their own terms.<sup>18</sup>

To place the Korean Office of Interpreters in its proper perspective means moving beyond Weber's classic typologies. One useful way forward is to consider instrumental rationality and value rationality as mutually constitutive rather than as antithetical, ideal types fit for one stage of history or another. After all, as D. L. Avray has suggested, instrumental techniques proceed from, and later inform, the convictions held by the user.<sup>19</sup> From this frame of reference, what the lens of bureaucratic knowledge allows us to answer is not only what ends bureaucracy was designed to serve but also what values of knowing it engendered.

### Translator as Traitor: The Principal-Agent Problem

Bureaucracy, not a timeless feature of statecraft, was a strategy deployed in response to specific circumstances. Before the thirteenth century, the Koryŏ dynasty already employed interpreters of spoken Chinese as well as the Khitan and Jurchen languages. Although occasionally recruited through exams, these interpreters were not trained by the state.<sup>20</sup> They were ready-made talent, such as political refugees of foreign origin or exceptional individuals, like one Kim T'aesŏ (?–1257), who were competent in both Chinese and the so-called “barbarian” languages.<sup>21</sup>

The training of language experts by the Korean state only began with the establishment of the Translation Bureau (*Tongmungwan*) in 1276. The new institute was designed to counteract the “harm brought to the court and dynasty” by “tongue-people who, hailing from obscure and lowly origins, transmit words without regard to their truth, often harboring evil designs to seek profit for their persons.”<sup>22</sup> It was, then, the classic principal-agent problem of *traduttore, traditore*, the “translator as traitor,” that bureaucratization promised to solve, a problem the Koryŏ Court felt keenly in the decades prior to the cataclysms of the Mongol invasions.

The Mongols swept away much of the existing diplomatic order in northeast Asia. They sacked Zhongdu (now Beijing), the capital of the Jurchen Jin empire, in 1211, even killing a Korean envoy to the Jin in the process. After a long, bitter war of attrition, Koryŏ eventually acquiesced to Mongol domination in 1259.<sup>23</sup> In the following period, the Koryŏ Court came to rely on an interpreter named Cho Ingyu (1237–1308) who hailed from an “obscure” background to enter the ranks of the court's official interpreters. His skill in Mongolian even impressed the Mongol ruler, Khubilai Khan, who praised his linguistic skills. Cho's critical role as mediator catapulted him to the highest rungs of Koryŏ's government, a meteoric rise unprecedented in Koryŏ's aristocratic society.<sup>24</sup>

The Koryŏ royal family eventually sealed a marriage alliance with the Mongol imperial house. Koryŏ's kings now married Mongol princesses, which transformed them into bona fide members of Great Khan's household. These ties also embroiled Koryŏ in Mongol dynastic intrigue, raising the stakes of the principal-agent problem. The indispensable linguistic skills of the interpreter now enabled him to subvert the will of his erstwhile masters. The lowly social background of interpreters only compounded their ignominy, for their political influence threatened the social privileges of Koryŏ's traditional elite.<sup>25</sup> Among speakers of “tongues” (*sŏrin*), to be celebrated like Cho Ingyu was rare, for they usually only appeared in the official histories for having exceeded their station. Epithets such as “panderers” or “betrayers” highlighted how they exploited their position as a mediator for personal advantage. One, for instance, curried favor with the Mongol nobility by offering his knowledge of the Korean conditions for identifying opportunities for extracting new tribute from Koryŏ.<sup>26</sup> Another used his “beak” to slander the Koryŏ king at the Mongol court. In retaliation, the Koryŏ king wanted to torture the interpreter to death, but his cries for mercy in Mongolian convinced the king to relent, sparing him because he was “skilled at interpreting.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For instance, the tension between birthright and meritocracy in Palais, “Confucianism”; Duncan, *Origins*, 59–98.

<sup>19</sup> For a critical discussion of rationality in Weberian typologies, see D'Avray, *Rationalities*, 117–37.

<sup>20</sup> Chŏng Inji et al., *Koryŏ sa*, 21:13b; Pak, “Yŏmal Sŏnch'o t'ongsa,” 252–55.

<sup>21</sup> Chŏng Inji et al., *Koryŏ sa*, 101:71a; Yi, “Koryŏ sidae ūi yŏkkwan,” 220–31.

<sup>22</sup> Chŏng Inji et al., *Koryŏ sa*, 106:12a–14a, 76:46b–47a.

<sup>23</sup> Henthorn, *Korea*, 4–5, 14, 17–18; The Mongols also cultivated their own interpreters of Korean, see Henthorn, *Korea*, 21–22.

<sup>24</sup> Chŏng Inji et al., *Koryŏ sa*, 105:36b–38a; Yi, *Kajŏng sŏnsaeng munjip*, in HMC 3:118b–20b; Min, “Cho Ingyu (sang);” “Cho Ingyu (chung).”

<sup>25</sup> The traditional elite being the *sajok* or *yangban*. For a comprehensive discussion on this subject, see Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*.

<sup>26</sup> Chŏng Inji et al., *Koryŏ sa*, 130:27a–b, 123:7a–8a, 130:32b–33a.

<sup>27</sup> Chŏng Inji et al., *Koryŏ sa*, 125:12b–13a.

The need for translation and the problem of reliability remained after the late fourteenth-century dynastic transitions. By 1368, Mongol rule had collapsed and been replaced by the Ming dynasty in China. Later, in 1392, Koryŏ was overthrown by Yi Sŏnggye, who established the new Chosŏn dynasty in Korea. Having come to power in a coup d'état, Yi tried desperately to control the narrative of his rise. His own interpreters and diplomats, with lingering loyalty to Koryŏ, subverted communication with Ming. They even implored the Ming emperor to intercede and overthrow the new regime.<sup>28</sup> As Yi struggled to find personnel that could serve it effectively and loyally, in 1394 he recalled from exile a former Koryŏ official, Sŏl Changsu (1341–1399). A scion of an elite Uighur family who had served the Mongol empire for generations, he was entrusted with reforming the Translation Bureau, now renamed the Office of Interpreters.<sup>29</sup>

Once appointed director, Sŏl Changsu outlined his policies for training future interpreters in the new agency. There were to be three instructors, two in Chinese and one in Mongolian. An exam was to be held every three years, open to cadets of the agency as well as any low-ranking government functionaries who had mastered the core Confucian classics and either the Chinese or Mongolian language (including its writing in the Uighur script). Depending on their performance, those who passed were given official ranks ranging from 7a down to 9a and their associated titles and salaries.<sup>30</sup> Sŏl also proposed levying boys under age fifteen from commoner families who displayed “natural gifts of intelligence” as candidates for language training in the Office. Those who later passed the recruitment examinations were rewarded with a salaried position, though the cost of failure was high. Anyone who studied for three years but failed to understand Chinese or Mongolian was impressed into the army.<sup>31</sup>

The anxieties surrounding linguistic knowledge in Sŏl Changsu's proposal departed from its Koryŏ predecessors—they were less about the reliability of knowledge than its precarity. What Sŏl confronted was the dearth of suitable talent. In the multi-lingual, cosmopolitan Mongol empire, linguistic mediators generally played active roles even in local government administration, not just diplomacy.<sup>32</sup> The intertwining of the Koryŏ-Mongol royal houses also spawned many overlapping institutional, political, social, and economic ties, but Pax Mongolica's disintegration severed many of them.<sup>33</sup> Ming proved reluctant to restore these ties, even rebuffing Korean entreaties to allow students to come to China to learn spoken Chinese. Sŏl Changsu, as an émigré, was one of the last in a fading generation of multilingual and transregional Korean elites.<sup>34</sup>

Over the next few centuries, the organization of the Office of Interpreters underwent certain incremental changes. Mongolian declined in importance, while the Japanese and Jurchen (later Manchu) languages were added on, but the organization's mechanisms remained faithful to its bureaucratic form. An exam system governed recruitment and promotion. Recruits filled quotas, while performance in the regular exams that occurred once every two or three years determined eligibility for certain roles. There were positions in the Office reserved for the scions of high officials, but once employed, they were not eligible for further advancement or appointment to embassies without passing the exams.<sup>35</sup> Salaries, ranks, and means of advancement were governed by such regulations, while much of an interpreter's work surrounded the management of paperwork and diplomatic routines. The outline of these rules was formally codified into the Chosŏn dynasty's constitution, the *Great Administrative Code* (*Kyŏngguk taejŏn*) in the late fifteenth century.<sup>36</sup>

## Codification of Knowledge and the Dignity of the Bureaucrat

In an era of narrowed opportunity, Chosŏn interpreters attempted sporadically to recreate the political environment that once empowered their Koryŏ predecessors. In 1407, an interpreter named Yi Hyŏn, a fourth-generation descendant of a Mongol émigré to Korea, was involved in a conspiracy with several high officials to orchestrate a marriage between a Ming princess and the Korean heir apparent. They hoped to secure a Ming imperial edict ordering the marriage so that it could be presented as a *fait accompli* to the hesitant Korean king. New dynastic ties could have reproduced the dynamics of Koryŏ-Mongol relations, thereby assuring this cabal of outsized influence. The plan failed when the king discovered the plan. He had

<sup>28</sup> *T'aejo sillok*, 1:29a [Ch'ongsŏ no. 111], in *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*.

<sup>29</sup> Wang, “Sounds,” 64–68; *T'aejo sillok*, 4:10b [1393/9/19 no.1]; Brose, *Subjects and Masters*, 205–57.

<sup>30</sup> The Chosŏn Korea's bureaucratic rank system ranged from 1a (highest) to 9b (lowest).

<sup>31</sup> *T'aejo sillok*, 6:17a [1394/11/19 no.3]. Wang, “Sounds,” 68–71.

<sup>32</sup> *Da Yuan shengzheng* 12 (Libu 6), 462.

<sup>33</sup> Robinson, *Empire's Twilight*, 46–60, 98–111, 118–29.

<sup>34</sup> Pak, “Yŏmal Sŏnch'o t'ongsa,” 256–57.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of examination and promotion eligibility, see Pak, “Yŏmal Sŏnch'o t'ongsa,” 258–62; Yi, “16–17 segi chapkwa ipgyŏkcha,” 248–66; Paek, “Chosŏn chŏn'gi yŏkkwan,” 91–109.

<sup>36</sup> For a Koryŏ-period overview, see Song, *Study of Foreign Languages*; Yi, “Chosŏn hugi chapkwa kyoyuk,” 37, 42–48; *Kojong sillok*, 32:21a [1894/7/18 no.5], in *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*.

the participants interrogated and punished, though Yi, valued for his diplomatic skills, retained his official position, despite calls for his impeachment.<sup>37</sup> Another interpreter, Im Kullye (?–1418), fared less well. After being accused of using his access to the Ming Court to interfere with Chosŏn's dynastic succession, he was executed by dismemberment, his property was confiscated, and his wife and children enslaved.<sup>38</sup>

For the Chosŏn court, bureaucratic mechanisms aided in monopolizing channels of foreign contact. All links to the world beyond Chosŏn's borders, including commerce, were ideally funneled through institutions it controlled. An illicit cross-border trade nonetheless developed, hidden in plain sight, carried out by high official and lowly porter alike traveling under the auspices of an official embassy.<sup>39</sup> Interpreters, as regular travelers, were in a position to profit handsomely from this arrangement, smuggling books and porcelains on behalf of the kingdom's well-to-do.<sup>40</sup>

The effect of bureaucratic control, then, was to direct the interpreter's realm of agency away from the political sphere to a specific economic niche. As cross-border trade expanded, court interpreters were counted among the kingdom's most wealthy denizens and influential cultural patrons by the nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup> Despite their prominence, interpreters remained subordinate to their social and administrative superiors. Social exclusion worked alongside bureaucratic safeguards to temper the principal-agent problem and limit the potential for political influence. The directors (*tochejo*) overseeing the Office of Interpreters usually hailed from aristocratic lines and were passers of the vaunted literary state exams (*munkwa*). The rank and file claimed humbler pedigrees. As commoners or even scions of aristocratic families born to non-noble mothers, they were barred from the literary exams but could take the less prestigious interpretation exams, a doorway to an alternate official career focused on diplomatic work, but one whose path of advancement was limited.<sup>42</sup> In rare instances, royal favor or exceptional service propelled a career interpreter into holding high office, but even bureaucratic rank did not translate into social acceptance among the aristocracy.<sup>43</sup> As a result, by the eighteenth century, professional interpreters, along with doctors, painters, geomancers, and other specialists in the Chosŏn government comprised an endogamous semi-elite social group.<sup>44</sup>

With neither wealth nor official rank a substitute for social esteem, individual interpreters chafed against this sense of discrimination, manifested in part by a denigration of their craft—spoken language. The anecdote notebook kept by the interpreter Ŏ Sukkwŏn (fl. 1530–1540) tells of a military officer who was mocked for his passion for learning spoken Chinese. He was ultimately vindicated when his translation skills saved the lives of two hundred innocent Chinese survivors of a shipwreck who had been mistaken for pirates. By contrast, Ŏ emphasized that linguistic ignorance could lead even venerable high officials astray when they exchanged poems with their Chinese counterparts.<sup>45</sup>

A sense of one-upmanship suffuses Ŏ's writing. Ŏ, an interpreter and illegitimate son of an aristocratic high official, arrogated the cultural authority of his social superiors to defend the dignity of both his person and his profession against the usual social contumely. In his *Selected Investigations of Critical Matters* (*Kosa ch'waryo*), one of Korea's oldest surviving encyclopedias, Ŏ treated diplomacy as a codified area of knowledge. The *Selected Investigations* opened with a thorough chronicle of Chosŏn's diplomatic relations with Ming, while later sections were devoted to the bureaucratic work of diplomacy: templates for documents, descriptions of protocols, and even a list of tribute items.<sup>46</sup> There was one section devoted to Ming institutions and ranks as well as a summary of Korea's own dynastic succession and Chosŏn's state institutions.<sup>47</sup> Its thoroughness notwithstanding, diplomacy was ultimately integrated into a more generalist conception of knowledge. Adopting a statesman's circumspection, Ŏ wrote in its preface:

Whoever lives in this world will deal with thousands of different matters with every move. Though he may be perspicacious, there will be matters that exceed his capacity. This is because the danger of

<sup>37</sup> *Taejong sillok*, 12:36b [1406/12/9 no.1], 13:32b [1407/6/8 no.1], 13:34b [1407/6/13 no.1], in *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*.

<sup>38</sup> Kim, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi ūi yŏkkwan (sang)," 59–64.

<sup>39</sup> Kim, *Ginseng and Borderland*, 111–28.

<sup>40</sup> The reputed source of wealth for the famous sixteenth-century scholar-interpreter Ch'oe Sejin (1465–1542). *Sŏngjong sillok*, 46:15a [1474/08/26], in *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*.

<sup>41</sup> Kim, *Flowering Plums*, 11–29.

<sup>42</sup> Paek, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi yŏkkwan," 102–3; Kim, *T'ongmun'gwan chi*, 1:1a.

<sup>43</sup> Kim, "Chungin kwa ŏnŏ saenghwal."

<sup>44</sup> That is, the so-called "middle people" (*chungin*). Hwang, "Chungin," 229–43; Park, *Family*, 47–49; Park, "Old Status Trappings," 171–80.

<sup>45</sup> Ŏ, *Korean Storyteller's Miscellany*, 33, 39–40, 92, 150–54.

<sup>46</sup> Ŏ, *Kosa Ch'waryo*, 1–2, 3:2a–7b, 8a–9a.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:9b, 22a–32b.

forgetfulness cannot be avoided... . Though the East [i.e. Korea] is in one corner of the world, it nonetheless serves the Greater State [i.e. the Ming] above and it has relations with its neighbors below. Whether public or private, there are many matters that should be known by the highest official to the lowest functionary, or even the gentleman living in leisure. And these matters can only be managed without consternation if he consults references and investigates precedents.<sup>48</sup>

The imagined audience for this text was a generic member of the court elite rather than other interpreters.<sup>49</sup> Remedies for common ailments and animal bites, methods for removing splinters or ridding fleas and mites, and a laundry detergent recipe were certainly useful for a frequent traveler, whether a sojourner to Beijing or an official on the road.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, penal law, conversions of weights and measures, mourning grades, statutes of limitations for slave and land disputes, a multiplication table, and a formula for making ink had far wider relevance.<sup>51</sup> Yet, for all its eclecticism, this versatile almanac devoted no space to the interpreter's work with language. Ō imagined his erudition to befit a scholar-statesman, authoritative for its universal relevance rather than the narrow quarry of a specialist.

Ō's approach to knowledge may be contrasted with that of another interpreter's compilation written over a century later, the *Compendium of the Translation Bureau* (*T'ongmun'gwan chi*), whose title harkens back to the Koryŏ-period name of the Office of Interpreters. If its extensive bibliography is any indication, it too was a product of towering erudition.<sup>52</sup> Its compilers, Kim Chinam (1654–1718) and his son Kim Kyŏngmun (1673–1737), consulted sixty-six different titles, "collecting widely from what is written in the chronicles and statutes of the dynasty, along with the writings and records of various scholars," including Ō's encyclopedia. In the preface, Kim Kyŏngmun explained they had undertaken this project because:

I know humbly that interpreters are indispensable to the state. Although their person is insignificant, their duties are important. In serving the Great State and communicating with neighbors, these men have their way; when it comes to exercising it, their tools are regulations, protocols, and templates. If we do not record these matters for preservation, from where can models be sought?<sup>53</sup>

Like Ō's work, it included chronicles and templates, but it spoke to the ethos of the profession, which validated the specialist's knowledge for its own sake. The *Compendium* straddled as well the social boundaries between interpreter and aristocrat. Kim Kyŏngmun thus defended the value and urgency of the interpreter and his expertise, even as he acknowledged the "insignificance" of his person.<sup>54</sup>

Kim's appeal points to a more fundamental epistemic difference between the two texts. The *Selected Investigations* revealed little of the institution behind the interpreter, but the *Compendium* attempted to make the institution itself legible:

Our office of six hundred individuals has been established for over three hundred years, but someone has yet to record its affairs in words. We have relied on mouth and ear, transmitting information to one another haphazardly without a system for verification. Our office was established in different times. When differing rules and regulations are assembled, many scattered odds and uncertain ends remain.<sup>55</sup>

The shift away from "mouth and ear" was to favor a codified standard over tacit norms. A tangle of rules and practices only proliferated over the centuries as the agency outgrew both its modest design outlined by its first director Sŏl Changsu and its statutory size legislated in the *Great Administrative Code*. For example, whereas the agency still maintained its mandated student enrollment of 80, quotas for an additional 124

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 1: preface.

<sup>49</sup> The *Selected Investigations*' circulation as a commercial woodcut print edition as early as 1576 bears out this point. U, "16 segi ūi panggakpon," 77, esp. n33.

<sup>50</sup> Ō, *Kosa ch'waryo*, 5:1a–20b, 21a, 21b, 22b, 56b.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 3:48a–49b, 5:35b–36b, 37a.

<sup>52</sup> The first version (1720) was printed with metallic movable type. It was later updated under the auspices of the court every few decades until the nineteenth century. The Kims were representatives of what became a prominent family of interpreters and specialist officials. Kim, "Chosŏn hugi Ubong Kim ssi," 21–46.

<sup>53</sup> Kim, *T'ongmun'gwan chi*, sŏ 1b; inyong sŏmok.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., sŏ 2a; inyong sŏmok.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., sŏ 1a–b.

“students-in-waiting” (*yech'a saengdo*) were introduced in 1699.<sup>56</sup> Paring away the paper tendrils resulted in a synthetic overview of Korean diplomacy covering the inner workings of the agency's organization, personnel quotas, standards of promotion, recruitment, and examination procedures. But for whom was this overview intended? And who would have found it most useful?

Any officer of the interpretation agency could certainly benefit from a systematic and authoritative overview of the Office. But an asset in the confines of a government office became an unwieldy burden in the field. Interpreters on the road more likely relied on their own jottings of procedures, protocols, and regulations. A rare manuscript dating from 1857, which belonged to an interpreter named Yi Sangjok (1804–1865), the *Example Precedents for the Journey to Beijing* (*Yŏnhaeng sarye*) was one such booklet. Its vantage was not the top-down gaze of an administrator but followed a roughly chronological progression of the entire *process* of an embassy as it unfolded, beginning with the first meeting of the Office's officials and ending with the embassy's departure from Beijing. It, however, lacked the systematicity of the *Compendium* and offered little explanation or context for its entries, likely because its audience was presumed to be a fellow interpreter already in the know. Its mere fifty-five folios delved into far more detail than what could be accommodated in the more voluminous *Compendium*—for instance, the protocol for delivering candles and wine at way stations, or what to do with the fish and chickens received at the hostel in Beijing.<sup>57</sup>

The great detail of Yi Sangjok's notebook suggests that even a thorough official compilation such as the *Compendium* could only cover a fraction of diplomacy's procedures and protocols, providing a holistic, rather than a comprehensive overview. The greatest beneficiaries were likely the high officials appointed to oversee the bureau. Like Chosŏn's ambassadors, these administrators were aristocrats drawn from the civil officialdom and appointed for terms as short as only several months, not career interpreters. With the *Compendium* as a reference, such an administrator could draw upon a common body of explicit knowledge rather than the tacit institutional memory of the very individuals he was charged with overseeing. The *Compendium* was therefore also a medium of translation that made the bureaucrat's knowledge legible to an external audience.

It is hard to say to what degree codification transformed everyday practice at the Office. What is certain is that the *Compendium*, even with its regular reprintings and updates, could not satisfy the court's desire for legibility. Chosŏn state agencies maintained administrative ledgers of their activities with the diplomatic record scattered across them. The late eighteenth century saw an effort to consolidate these records into a monumental compilation, the *Assembled Reference of Unified Writing* (*Tongmun hwigo*). Mobilizing a team of interpreters, this project organized past diplomatic cases according to arenas of policy, thereby satisfying a different administrative desire: to create legibility by compartmentalizing policy into discrete, self-contained chains of precedents and models.<sup>58</sup> In a sense, bureaucracy has a tendency to spawn more bureaucracy—the impulse to organize, compile, and codify ostensibly makes administration more manageable, but producing and organizing knowledge often requires another layer of administration.

What, then, did this production of knowledge achieve? If, as in Weber, bureaucracy routinized charisma to produce legitimate authority, we may ask instead: what of the *knowledge* this routinization produced? A way out is to turn Weber on his head. The routines of Chosŏn's Office of Interpreters were themselves employed in the service of producing a sense of routine that possessed its own charismatic authority. The consistency of ritual performance, protocols, diplomatic terminology, and even informal rituals of gift-giving endowed the vicissitudes of diplomatic practice with the force of precedent (*sŏllye*). Korean diplomats could appeal to such precedents to argue against unfavorable imperial policy. But, as will be discussed in the next section, this codification comes with a certain irony, for the work of the interpreter often resisted this kind of containment. And it is in light of this dilemma that the interpreter's social rank plays an unexpected role.

## The Place of the Apt Response

The importance of social ascription in shaping the interpreter's professional identity appears antithetical to the meritocratic rationales of bureaucracy. Indeed, interpreters often protested their discrimination through appeals to meritocracy.<sup>59</sup> Unfavorable pedigrees limited an interpreter's prospects, but it also enabled a few patrilineal, for instance that of Kim Chinam, to dominate the profession. By the late nineteenth century, a mere nine patrilineal produced around one-fifth of all seven thousand or so known passers of the specialist

<sup>56</sup> Ch'oe Hang et al., *Kyŏngguk taejŏn* 3:17b–18b; Kim, *T'ongmun'gwan chŭ*, 1:9b–10a; Yi, “Chosŏn hugi chapkwa kyoyuk,” 37–42.

<sup>57</sup> Yi, *Yŏnhaeng sarye*, 39a, 40a. Documentary templates appended from 48a onward.

<sup>58</sup> See Wang, “Compiling Diplomacy,” 256, 271–73.

<sup>59</sup> Hwang, *Chungin*, 225–43; Kim, *Flowering Plums*, 27–29.



exams (a group dominated in numbers by interpreters). Though described as tantamount to birthright, parentage alone could not ensure employment, for the exams drew from a relatively wide social pool—458 patriline, with one-fifth of recruits hailing from 350 different patriline. A few families possessed an obvious advantage that compounded over time, but they never truly monopolized these privileges.<sup>60</sup>

Social ascription and bureaucracy have a more ambivalent relationship than might at first be apparent. Social reproduction contributed to the long-term maintenance of the tacit knowledge the bureaucracy desired.<sup>61</sup> The interpreter's social debasement vis-à-vis the aristocracy paralleled a division of labor and knowledge. In the design of a Chosŏn embassy to Beijing, as in the management of the bureau, the professional interpreter was rarely charged with a role of leadership. The highest ranks of the embassy—the chief envoy (*chŏngsa*), deputy envoy (*pusa*), and the secretary (*sŏjanggwan*)—were usually reserved for men of aristocratic background. The aristocrat-cum-envoy led the Korean entourage in highly orchestrated ceremonies—diplomatic banquets, brief audiences with the emperor, and the presentation of tribute—where solemn decorum was necessary to protect the dignity of the Chosŏn state.

A stark illustration of this distinction is an incident described in the travelog of Hŏ Pong (1551–1588), the secretary of the 1574 embassy to Ming China. As the embassy approached the Ming border, the chief interpreter was blamed for misplacing a diplomatic document for delivery to the Ming Ministry of Rites; though it was soon found, the chief envoy had him flogged with a heavy staff as punishment.<sup>62</sup> The interpreter in question, named Song Taech'un, a son of a minor official, had passed first in his class of candidates in the 1564 interpretation exams, but even this stellar achievement could not spare him personal humiliation.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, in moments of duress, the interpreter served as a ready scapegoat for larger diplomatic failures.<sup>64</sup>

On the other hand, under the interpreter's purview were virtually all the procedures of diplomacy. The rituals that punctuated each envoy mission could only take place if someone properly handled the quotidian matters of logistics, provisions, lodging, and pathfinding that were beneath the dignity and beyond the ken of an aristocrat-envoy. It was the interpreter who provided him the answers about recent developments in Ming politics and maintained institutional memories of past embassies.<sup>65</sup> After all, while the journey to Beijing was a once-in-a-lifetime affair for the envoy, the professional interpreter, figuratively, "spends his mornings in Seoul and the evenings in Beijing, until he ends his in old age in travel."<sup>66</sup> As the ears and mouth of his mute and deaf superiors, he assumed the burden of informal diplomacy—with the right cajoling (or bribe), an imperial official might turn a blind eye to transgressions. It was here, in the informal realm, that lower social status became an asset.

The 1574 embassy had begun inauspiciously for interpreter Song, but he proved indispensable once the embassy reached Ming Liaodong, where it encountered a recalcitrant Ming official named Chen Yan. The embassy, delayed by heavy rains in Korea, hoped Chen would speed them along to Beijing. Song brought the embassy's gifts to Chen, but the offering disappointed him. Chen, irate, had requested of the last passing Korean embassy a number of items, of which five copies of an envoy poetry anthology, sixty sheets of smooth paper, and three silk hats had yet to be delivered. Song tried to calm Chen by explaining the anthology was out of print, the paper was reserved only for diplomatic documents, and the silk hats would be delivered by the next embassy, which would pass in advance of the winter solstice. Chen, scoffing at the interpreter's "clever words," offered two rolls of hat-silk, one roll of silk gauze, and twenty rolls of damask to the Koreans in exchange for otter skins, patterned mats, cotton bolts, patterned ink slabs, multi-colored cloth, and ginseng. To Chen's chagrin, Song declined the offer. Otter skins were not a product of Korea, and the embassy was short on the other items, which were designated as tribute items to the emperor. Even more livid, Chen forced Song to take his silks, demanding that the Korean embassy reciprocate with commensurate favors.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>60</sup> The pool was certainly wider than the one which produced the Ottoman dragomans in the same period. See Rothman, "Interpreting Dragomans," 777–82. In Korea, illegitimate scions of high officials also were allowed positions in the Interpreter's Office, but promotion still depended on examination success. See Paek "Chosŏn chŏn'gi yŏkkwan," 89–91. Data is drawn from Kim, "Sŏngwŏnnok," 44–45, but my interpretation differs from that of the author. See also Kim, "Kisul chik chungin," 143–46; Park, *Family*, 49n18.

<sup>61</sup> As was the case for artisanal kin groups elsewhere. See Eyferth, "Craft Knowledge."

<sup>62</sup> Hŏ, *Hagok chip*, in HMC, 58:413d.

<sup>63</sup> "Kachŏng."

<sup>64</sup> The interpreter Pyŏn Iryang, for instance, was beaten to death after an incident with a Qing mission in 1666. See Kim, "Chosŏn hugi yŏkkwan," 46–47.

<sup>65</sup> Hŏ, *Hagok chip*, in HMC, 58:410c–1d, 148d.

<sup>66</sup> Kang, *Sasukjae chip*, in HMC, 12:118a.

<sup>67</sup> Hŏ, *Hagok chip*, in HMC, 58:418a–c.

The next day, Song returned with some of the items Chen Yan had requested as well as bows, arrows, quivers, fans, and inksticks euphemistically called “special personal favors” by the embassy’s diarist. Declaring his “sincerity” in presenting such “meager gifts,” Song prostrated on the ground, kowtowing repeatedly, telling Chen that he “dared not receive” the silks. Chen received these gifts with pleasure and professed he would “keep those silks aside” until the embassy’s return journey. The diarist believed Chen was delighted only because he was now assured he did not need to give up the silks in the exchange after all.<sup>68</sup> In this manner, a one-way bribe was disguised as a gift exchange, made possible by Song’s self-abnegation. Over the course of the journey, Song’s words and gifts allowed the embassy to borrow porters and carriages, assuaged another disgruntled Ming officer, and convinced a miffed Jurchen homesteader to lodge the Korean travelers.<sup>69</sup> At each of these junctures, Song performed abjection and suffered humiliation so that the embassy’s leading officials did not.

Delicate, if huffish, exchanges, such as those at this frontier way station, made possible not only Korean diplomacy but also the conceit of the Ming dynasty’s moral claims to universal empire. While Song negotiated the terms of graft, the diarist noticed a bulletin in the government office which stated: “Chosŏn is a country that has long observed ritual and righteousness... . [O]fficials at way stations who impose arbitrary exactions, deceive, extort, or force commerce have failed in observing China’s [duty] to cherish men from afar ... and shall be apprehended and interrogated without mercy.” The bulletin placed Chen Yan in charge of enforcing the very prohibitions he was guilty of flouting. For the diarist Hŏ Pong, an occasional traveler to China, these two realities could not be more incoherent, but the interpreter’s task was to translate from the quotidian domain of petty profiteering and tit-for-tat exchanges to the highfalutin idiom of benevolent empire. It was precisely at the interstices of these domains that an interpreter like Song Taech’un thrived.<sup>70</sup>

Working at these interstices demanded discretion and flexibility, but the diplomatic strategy of the Chosŏn state relied on consistency. Refrains presenting Chosŏn Korea as an ever-loyal vassal, a civilized country beholden to Confucian norms, and ruled by a wise king were key to binding Ming, and later Qing, to reciprocal political commitments.<sup>71</sup> The bureaucratic impulse to formalize this representation through documentary templates, lists of tributary gifts, sample diplomatic letters, records of diplomatic protocols, and chronicles of past relations in institutional handbooks all favored consistency and regularity over individual discretion. But if formalization by definition limits discretion, where does that leave the on-the-ground flexibility displayed by Song Taech’un that was so necessary to diplomatic activity?

An interesting attempt to integrate a sense of flexibility with formal knowledge is the sixteenth-century *Phrasebook of the Interpreter’s Bureau* (*Sangwŏn cheŏ*). The passages it collected were at once linguistic samples of colloquial Chinese and expositions of what an interpreter ought to know. The passages in colloquial Chinese described the organization of the Ming bureaucracy, the titles and functions of officials, as well as the protocols, ceremonies, and banquets expected in Beijing. It also included canned responses to potential questions from interlocutors, which consisted of stock professions of the Korean king’s loyalty to Ming and descriptions of the high level of civilization in Chosŏn. Most remarkable was a formulaic protest against an inconvenient Ming policy, the curfew preventing Korean envoys from traveling freely in Beijing:

I just want to report one matter. Our country, even though it is beyond the seas, has always observed rituals and laws, and always served the imperial court with respect and sincerity. The court has always treated us just like it was a principedom within the empire. When we come here, it’s just like returning home to one’s parents, free to come and go. Since ancient times, we have always observed the rituals and rules, and not once violated any prohibitions. But for some reason in the Zhengde period (1505–1521), a certain Director Sun was angry at us, and without reporting the matter to his superiors, arbitrarily curtailed our movement... . [Doing this] is like putting us in the same category as the Tatars ... —all in spite of the rules set by the former emperors. So I hope you, sir, will follow the old rules and, cherishing us men from afar, allow us to come and go freely.<sup>72</sup>

This protest modeled a rhetorical strategy where an imperial regulation could be challenged without undermining the idea of imperial authority. The interpreter’s ability to align exigency with imperial metanarratives sustained the “sleeve of negotiation” essential for managing a relationship characterized by

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 420c–d.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 421a–d, 431b–d.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 418c–9a.

<sup>71</sup> For analysis of such rhetoric, see Wang, “Empire,” 59–65; “Emotions”; Van Lieu, “Chosŏn-Qing Tributary Discourse,” 79–112.

<sup>72</sup> Sayŏgwŏn, *Sangwŏn cheŏ*, 16a–17a.

such extreme asymmetries of power.<sup>73</sup> While its phrasing could be learned and an interpreter's memory of such passages tested by exams, its judicious application was another matter.

The interpreter translated the guidelines and directives of diplomacy into a performance that fit the moment. This translation relied on a tacit, procedural knowledge of "know-how," which unlike the "know-what" of imperial institutions and diplomatic protocols, resisted formalization. Interpreter's manuals could list standard rates for customary "gifts" to cultivate good "personal feeling" (*injŏng*), but they could not impart the savvy of reacting to circumstance, one embodied by the person of the interpreter.

Such "know-how" resisted codification through regulation but could nevertheless be inferred from narratives in historical records. These narratives modeled this tacit knowledge, one captured in the notion of the "apt response" (*sŏndae*), proficiency in which qualified a good interpreter. Consider the quick-thinking of an interpreter named P'yo Hŏn (fl. 1590s), who by "adjusting flexibly to circumstances," rescued the Korean king from certain embarrassment at a banquet in honor of a Ming envoy:

The king feted a Celestial Envoy who claimed to be a good drinker. The king, worried he could not keep up with his cups, ordered that sweet water be presented to him instead. The envoy became drunk, but the king did not. The envoy discovered this and asked that his cup be exchanged with the king's. There was nothing that could be done in the spur of the moment. P'yo Hŏn asked for permission to bring the royal cup to the envoy, but pretended to stumble, spilling the cup. The king ordered that P'yo be removed and punished for his failure to observe decorum. Only then did the envoy desist. When he returned [to China], the king promoted P'yo one rank. Such was P'yo Hŏn's ability to adapt flexibly to circumstances.<sup>74</sup>

In this anecdote, drawn from the biographies (*inmul*) section of the *Compendium of the Translation Bureau*, the interpreter, by dint of his quick-thinking, moved seamlessly between two coexisting realities. One was the shared diplomatic reality between the Chinese envoy and the Korean Court, where the king punished the interpreter for his clumsiness that harmed the dignity of the Korean Court and offended the Chinese envoy. The other was the local reality, where the interpreter's quick thinking saved the king from personal embarrassment, a praiseworthy act earning him his promotion. The exemplary interpreters honored in the *Compendium* modeled virtuous, loyal, and self-sacrificing conduct but also demonstrated their ability to effect an "apt response" capable of negotiating the competing demands of a tricky diplomatic encounter.

Recognizing the value of repeated experience with diplomatic exigencies was likely why, according to one 1589 statute, one "young and intelligent" student of the academy was selected to accompany every envoy mission to Beijing. The reason offered was improving language ability, but it also pointed to the value of experience for the cultivation of the interpreter's craft.<sup>75</sup> The value of "know-how" also puts into perspective the compilers' regret that though "envoy missions came and went without cease for thousands of years," the name and deeds of those who staffed them "have been buried in obscurity." What the compilers of the *Compendium* desired was the preservation of an institution's memory, as well as its ethos.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

In the case of the Korean Office of Interpreters, bureaucracy emerged as a solution to classic principal-agent problems of control, reliability, predictability. These problems were arguably inherent to the position of the interpreter; not only did he possess a dangerous knowledge of foreign tongues, he also occupied the interstitial zones of diplomacy, spaces where individual agency needed to be preserved for his effective deployment. Bureaucratic formalization therefore needed to constrain just as much as it needed to enable. This intersection of diplomacy and bureaucracy, with its specialized demands of linguistic, textual, and procedural knowledge, enabled interpreters to construct a socio-economic niche for themselves and their descendants.<sup>77</sup>

What, then, is the significance of the Office of Interpreters for the broader discussion of bureaucratic knowledge? To return to Alexander Woodside's contention, "the rationalization processes we think of as 'modern' are more manifold than is often assumed" and can occur "independently" from "capitalism or

<sup>73</sup> Womack, *China*, 88–94.

<sup>74</sup> Kim, *Tongmun'gwan chi*, 7:10a–b.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:6a.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, sŏ 2a.

<sup>77</sup> On how expertise relates to socio-economic niches, see Klein, "Hybrid Experts," 288–97.

industrialization.”<sup>78</sup> While there is little to gainsay the momentous expansion of state as well as corporate bureaucracies in Korea and across the world since the nineteenth century, bureaucracy (and its problems) were birthed long before the age of Weber. It is also less clear that the *epistemic* questions of bureaucracy—namely its relationship to the production of knowledge, its ability to develop holistic self-knowledge through the proliferation of protocols governing mechanisms of operation, and its tendency to accumulate, whether rules or documents—are fundamentally different across a putative modern-premodern (or East-West) divide.<sup>79</sup> A reminder of this divide's artificiality is the Korean Office of Interpreters, with its protocols, attention to precedent, mechanisms of recruitment, and distinct knowledge culture.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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<sup>78</sup> Woodside, *Lost Modernities*, 1, 7–9.

<sup>79</sup> Crooks and Parsons, *Empires and Bureaucracy*.

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