

Archives, Archival Practices, and the Writing of History in Premodern Korea: An Introduction

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On the twenty-eighth day of the tenth month in 1760, a magistrate of Yesan Lesser Prefecture (*hyŏn* 縣) submitted a report to the Provincial Governor's Office (*sunyŏng* 巡營) about a text titled *Comprehensive Summary of Burial Days* (*Changil t'ongyo* 葬日通要). The office forwarded an order from the Bureau of Astronomy (Kwansanggam 觀象監) to locate the text, and the Yesan magistrate replied as follows: "[Though we] thoroughly searched Buddhist temples, [local] Confucian academies, and some private houses within the area [under my supervision] by all means, it was not found."¹ *Comprehensive Summary of Burial Days* had been compiled at the order of King T'aejong (r. 1400–18), who wished to rectify existing misbelief and malpractice concerning the selection of auspicious funeral dates on the part of the Chosŏn populace. The project had been completed in the first year of King Sejong's reign (r. 1418–50), but it seems that the text was lost or forgotten for many years. Scarcely any information is available on this text in existing sources, save for a few entries in the *Veritable Records of King Sejong* (*Sejong sillok* 世宗實錄): neither the context in which the government reached out to the local magistrate's office to look for the text nor whether it was eventually retrieved from one of the other local repositories is known. Nevertheless, this short episode reveals various sites where records were kept in Chosŏn Korea outside of official repositories—such as Buddhist monasteries, Confucian and local academies, and private homes. It also prompts us to consider a number of intriguing points concerning both the perceptions about and practices of record-keeping in premodern Korea: how documents were produced

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and processed, where they were housed and preserved, and how they arrived in the current archives for scholarly access—the fundamental questions that are, in turn, intimately linked to the nature and use of primary sources in historical research.

As several authors of this special issue aptly note, the term *archive* as it was understood in nineteenth-century Europe does not fully describe the record-keeping practices in premodern Korea—either in the sense of lacking an organized state institute² or in the sense of the differing or divergent documents stored at central, local, or private sites. Although a sophisticated practice for preserving documents existed in premodern Korea, there were no archives that qualified as “the conceptual and procedural framework of what is considered to be ‘true’ archives” in modern construction, fulfilling instrumental principles such as provenance and the original order of the materials contained.³ As elucidated in the articles by Sem Vermeersch and Sixiang Wang in this issue, the vast collections of documents that have survived in contemporary libraries, institutions, and other repositories in Korea, such as the Kyujanggak and Jangseogak, are “processed records” rather than intact original ones, and hence are in a strict sense “secondary” documents—that is, products crafted through the rigorous processes of sorting, copying, editing, and compiling of original documents into a bound collection. In this sense, documents inherited and preserved in such locations are not always impartial and can hardly be recognized as “legitimate archival sources,” which thus sets the premodern Korean practice of record-keeping apart from Western archival practice.

This nonexistence of European standards for “archives” in premodern Korea, however, does not mean that there was no “archival practice” prior to the emergence of national archives in modern Korea, precisely because “the history of archiving can be studied as early as the written record itself.”⁴ Thus, despite the fact that archives as the institutions in Ranke’s definition never existed, compelling evidence testifies to a range of activities involving certain techniques, forms, rules, and regulations for managing and preserving records formally legislated during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910)⁵—the set of record-keeping procedures distinctively developed and deeply embedded in both existing and changing sociopolitical contexts of Chosŏn rule. Notwithstanding the elaborate steps involved in compiling official histories such as the *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* (*Chosŏn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄)⁶ examined in several articles here, production of huge numbers of *tŭngnok* 謄錄 (the transcribing of original documents into a form of bound book) for various governing and diplomatic purposes in fact reveals a very different perception of records and attitudes toward record-keeping in Chosŏn Korea that developed along with historical contingency.

Moreover, the relationship between the categories of records and archives was not always lucid but “complex and fluid in the early modern period.”⁷ While archive theorists distinguish *records* (documents created and maintained by institutions for immediate utility) from *archives* (collections preserved for posterity by

scholars in the field), as Alexandra Walsham notes, “both were used in a more expansive sense [in early modern culture]: they were deployed interchangeably with other types of depository and document in which information, knowledge and memory were stored, including libraries and museums and the collections of manuscripts, books, maps and objects that comprise them.”⁸ Walsham further points out that what was contained in some archives could be materials unrelated to bureaucratic purposes or unworthy of permanent preservation, whereas libraries often housed materials “obtained for the purpose of preserving the past” for historical research.⁹ Therefore, if we take what Walsham frames inclusively, rather than confining ourselves to the restrictive notions of “archive” and “record,” then the patterns that can be broadly captured as “archival practice”¹⁰ are clearly seen in premodern Korean record-keeping—namely, the recurring activities of creating, organizing, reproducing, and preserving records.

While the essays contributed here cover multifarious record-keeping practices on the state, family, and literary textual levels, the production and preservation of records at the local level is hardly discussed, except briefly in Vermeersch’s essay. As Antoinette Burton contends, archives are “by no means limited to official spaces or state repositories.”¹¹ In fact, the Chosŏn state witnessed burgeoning record production at the local level, primarily for administrative and judicial use.¹² Instead of retaining the original documents, record-keeping was done mostly by copying the originals (as in *tŭngnok*), despite the fact that a number of repositories were built to house a variety of materials.¹³ For example, the report of the magistrate of Yesan Lesser Prefecture to the Provincial Governor’s Office mentioned previously was also preserved in the form of a handwritten transcription of the original report (*tŭngnok*) included in the bound collection in which all sort of documents were exchanged among magistrates, provincial governors, and kings and officials of the central government—after being assembled, mostly in chronological order, during a given magistrate’s tenure in Yesan. As occurred at the state level, the decision over what was to be saved, inventoried, copied, and retained was a crucial component of record-keeping at the local offices.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the rationale behind the Chosŏn’s preference for copied documents over original documents remains shadowy, possibly pertaining to the preciousness of paper or, alternatively, to what Ann Blair sees as a strategy for coping with “information overload.”¹⁵

The articles collected in this special issue explore a range of premodern Korean cultures of documentation and assess record-keeping in various different contexts, from institutional and official to private and informal. Underlining process over product, all authors carefully consider inquiries rarely posed among scholars of premodern Korea: why records were created, copied, edited, and preserved, as well as how and by whom they were organized and used. Examining the political, ideological, religious, and social and cultural circumstances in which record-keeping occurred, these scholars complicate the linear tradition associated with archives as static institutions and investigate the impulses that fostered the spread

of specific premodern Korean record-keeping practices, which were in turn ultimately connected to the formation of modern archives that have critically affected the course of existing historical scholarship.

The first set of three articles in this issue considers archives and archival practice as both the nature of knowledge and the practice of history making. Starting with demystifying the notion of “archives” in the premodern Korean context, Vermeersch’s essay confirms the nonexistence of premodern Korean archives while adeptly sketching the cluster of historiographical frameworks on archives. However, since perceiving the presence or absence of “archives” is very much an exigency of history, Vermeersch urges us to rethink an existing approach to the premodern record-keeping culture beyond the frameworks of either Eurocentric or Sinocentric. The vast collections of “processed” records, or what he calls “meta-archives,” used in history writing and administration invite us to contemplate fundamental questions about the employment of such methods, as well as to understand premodern Korean perceptions of and attitudes toward documents, preservation, and historical memory.

Using the concept of “culling,” Graeme R. Reynolds’s essay investigates the political nature of archives and archival practices that was systematized in the first few decades of the Chosŏn dynasty. The historic event of dynastic transition from the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392) to the Chosŏn compelled the newly established state to include the inheritance, recreation, and utilization of inherited repositories and documents from the previous state as part of restructuring the government. Besides practical pressures for governing and legislating, Reynolds underscores the intimate relation between writing official history and political power in the formation of early Chosŏn record-keeping. Just as the political ambition to consolidate power could be facilitated through the active collection, control, and use of documents, so the early Chosŏn rulers curated the collections of records to meet their own needs, which had a lingering impact not only on the shaping of knowledge, but also on memory-making through history writing. The intervention of record-keeping by destroying and preserving, Reynolds argues, also broke with the past, which was “the necessity for legitimation of the new regime.”

Picking up the thread of the previous two articles, Sixang Wang interrogates the status of compiling diplomatic documents as archives within the logics and practices of record-keeping at the Chosŏn court. Wang pays close attention to the definition and creation of the Chosŏn diplomatic document, explicating different genres of documents used in the practice of diplomacy. The manifest Chosŏn practice of record-keeping—tŭngnok—also applied to its administration of diplomacy, along with a series of ritual protocols associated with the envoy reception ceremonies, resulting in extensive diplomatic records. The creation of the *Assembled Reference of Unified Writing* (*Tongmun hwigo* 同文集考) occurred in this context, Wang shows, because it was a reorganization of the various tŭngnok stored at the Office of Diplomatic Correspondence and became an authoritative reference. Wang further asserts that diplomatic documents were produced,

used, and compiled both as products and instruments of diplomacy, and that reading them as instruments of knowledge intimately connects to a cultural and epistemic history of premodern Korean diplomatic practice.

The next two articles, by Sung-Eun Thomas Kim and Franklin Rausch, focus on the interrelated issues of archival power and its influence on forming contemporary historiographical knowledge of Buddhism and Catholicism—both of which were largely regarded as heterodoxies threatening the orthodox Confucian ideology during the Chosŏn dynasty. These two articles exactly echo the question of how histories *of* the archive shaped histories written *from* the archive. Kim’s article describes how Chosŏn archival culture has continued to imperatively mold the intellectual path in the scholarship on Korean Buddhism. Kim takes the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*—which are overridingly utilized and cited both to account for and to validate the repressive history of Buddhism under the Chosŏn state—as being far from “neutral repositories of sources” but rather “an ideologized historical product crafted by the Chosŏn royal historians.” Kim notes that the Chosŏn state produced and archived records in accordance with the neo-Confucian ideology, pursuing historical ideals in Confucian society.¹⁶ Kim thus questions how far the officially compiled collections upon which scholars rely bear the imprints of ideological priorities and the prejudices of those individuals who created them. In thus problematizing heavy reliance on official sources such as the *sillok* in depicting the marginalized status of Chosŏn Buddhism, Kim calls for incorporating a wide range of unofficial records so as to offer nuanced narratives of Chosŏn Buddhist historiography.

Delving into the history of Catholic archives, Rauch starts with the powerful example of the *Silk Letter* and its transcontinental travels from a Chosŏn repository to the Catholic missionary archive in Europe, where it became the source for Father Charles Dallet’s writing of Korean Catholic church history. Emphasizing the shift in the center of authority of Korean Catholic records from Europe to Korea following the postwar establishment of the premier Catholic archives known as the Research Foundation of Korean Church History, Rauch sheds fresh light on “the collaborative and international nature” of the Catholic records preserved in the late Chosŏn Korean Catholic archives. Such distinct characteristics of documents do not apply exclusively to their physical transmission but extend to the production of their narratives, since patterns of archival selection and collection were also shaped by tumultuous events such as a series of violent Catholic persecutions in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Korea. Furthermore, changes in the center of gravity of governing records affected the narratives of the history of Korean Catholicism: whereas the European missionaries highlighted heroic martyrdom in the face of state-sponsored persecution, their Korean counterparts tried to fit the martyrs into Korean national history, revealing the Korean Catholic archives as historically constructed sites that encompass complex relations between knowledge production and power.

Unlike other studies presented in this issue, the two articles by Ksenia Chizhova and Yuan Ye trace the trajectory and transmission of records that were *not* kept in so-called official, recognized repositories until they were incorporated into modern archives. Treating handwritten vernacular Korean letters as an alternative archive by casting light on women's centrality in epistolary vernacular space and familial memories, Chizhova moves the record-keeping practice of Chosŏn Korea beyond the realm of literary Chinese and male dominance. While these women-centered letters, inscribed in Korean vernacular, may not be accepted as legitimately historical materials, the activities of vernacular Korean album-making, which were integral to the Chosŏn elite family culture, constitute a kind of archival work that was carried on out of filial devotion and piety. Collections of letters archived as albums therefore emerge as critical sites for memory-making, as reflected in their survival in large numbers that have been transmitted, augmented, and preserved by later family members through the collaborative efforts of men and women alike. "Both as archival sites and as history-in-the-making,"¹⁷ epistolary familial archives embodied collections of letters, and anthologizing them therefore rendered them historical materials in their own right. When they entered the modern era, however, their eligibility to be registered in public archives was disputed under the dominant view that marginalized vernacular Korean scriptural culture. As Chizhova aptly illuminates, the complex contours of "vernacular Korean archives" have nonetheless been modulated, along with changing political and cultural formations, throughout Korean history.

Finally, Yuan Ye's study focuses on the late Ming (1388–1644) Chinese vernacular short-story anthology *Exemplary Words for the World* (*Xingshi yan* 形世言, ca. 1632). The original text was lost in China but was discovered in the Kyujanggak Archives in Korea hundreds of years later, along with its Chosŏn rendition in Korean script (titled *Hyŏngse ōn*) housed in the Jangseogak Archives in Korea. One might wonder what accounts for tracing the cross-border trajectory of the literary text *Xingshi yan* as a trope of record-keeping practice: on the surface, the subject seems to be most distant from the overall theme of this special issue of the journal. Nevertheless, Ye meticulously demonstrates how the study of the forming of this particular text and its transcultural transformation were closely interwoven not only with solving the textual origins of several Chinese vernacular anthologies, but also with the text's divergent reception and use.¹⁸ The revised order, edited content, and particular styles of writing detected among various editions of this text uncover the ways readers appropriated texts within the contexts of their own cultural backgrounds. Often subverting the intention of the original compilers, the cross-culturally shared text, transmitted through various repositories and archives, therefore came to be a cultural site for archiving the preferred knowledge in the early modern record-keeping practice of Chosŏn Korea.

Indeed, as a whole, this special issue of the journal delineates a vibrant and multidimensional archival landscape of premodern Korea that certainly had no "archives," yet firmly anchored record-keeping as an integral part of social, political,

diplomatic, intellectual, and cultural practice and life in Korean society. Given the convenience of collections in modern archives, scholars have tended to use them without attending much to how they were formed or how the documents housed there were transformed by the processes of selection, presentation, and reproduction that were involved in collecting them. In the present era of modern digital technologies, in which virtual “archives without walls” store innumerable records online,¹⁹ the same questions must be continually asked as digitized archives of various premodern materials provide scholars with a new, alternative approach to writing the history of premodern Korea.²⁰

NOTES

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1. *Osan munch’ŏp* 烏山文牒, 248.

2. Scholars have demarcated the use of *archives* (plural) and *archive* (singular): the former are engaged by scholars in a wide range of disciplines as an extended metaphorical notion pertinent to “representation of collective identity or memory,” whereas the latter “connotes an engagement with the physical presence of the archives . . . that transform the original archive into archives.” Cook, “Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country,” 601–2; Gilliland, “Afterword,” 334–35. On this point, see also Sixiang Wang’s article in this issue.

3. As Sem Vermeersch discusses in his article in this issue, it was Leopold von Ranke whose new model for historical research transformed the archive into neutral reservoirs of historical fact, and thus into the most important site for the production of historical knowledge. It is beyond the scope of this introductory essay to discuss a compelling body of massive literature that is devoted to explicating the concept of archives across disciplines over the last two decades. However, Vermeersch’s essay devotes a section to reviewing major scholarship on archives and archival practice, including Jacques Derrida’s famous *Archive Fever*. For an overview of archival discourse, see Manoff, “Theories of the Archive.”

4. Blair and Milligan, “Introduction.” On the historical trajectory of archival practice in Korean history, see Youn, “Archival Traditions in Korean History,” 23–44; Palais, “Records and Record-Keeping.”

5. The Chosŏn state codified records management policy at both the central and local level in *The Great Code of Administration* (*Kyŏngguk taejŏn* 經國大典). See Paek Sŏnhye, “*Kyŏngguk taejŏn* ūi kirok kwalli kyujŏng,” 95–140.

6. The historian Oh, Hang Nyeong (O Hangnyōng) juxtaposes the compiling process of the *sillok* with the extent of ritual practice. See Oh, “Meaning of Ritual Practices.” For a comprehensive study of *sillok* from various angles of record-keeping practice in Chosŏn Korea, also see Oh, *Sillok iran muöt in’ga*.

7. Walsham, “Social History,” 13–14.

8. *Ibid.*, 14. Eric Ketelaar also challenges the distinction between “active records” and “permanent archives” in a premodern context. See Ketelaar, “Records Out,” 203–4.

9. Walsham, “Social History,” 14.

10. Friedrich, *Birth of the Archive*, 7.

11. Burton, *Archive Stories*, 3.

12. Kim, “Chosŏn sidae chibang kwana esöü kirok üi saengsan kwa pojon,” 25–37. Along with local magistrates’ offices, Buddhist temples and Confucian academies actively engaged in the production of documents and reproduction of various books. Ledgers of these locations, known as *chunggi* 重記, present a wide range of inventories of the archival holdings housed in their repositories.

13. These materials encompass both raw documents, such as household registers, as well as books.

14. For a detailed study of *tüngnok*, see Yi, “Chosŏn *tüngnok* kirok üi yuhyōng kwa kü kwalli ch’egye.”

15. Blair, *Too Much to Know*.

16. Palais, “Records and Record-Keeping.”

17. Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*, 26.

18. Walsham, “Social History,” 29.

19. Cook, “Archival Science,” 23.

20. Cha, “Digital Korean Studies,” 227–44.

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