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Global History and Circulation Studies in a Korean Context: A Historiographical Approach

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In the last decades, global history has progressively gained more and more adepts in academic circles, echoing the larger public sensitivity to the globalisation process. Long new narratives describing how each part of the world has got into contact with the others have already been published, and more are in progress. Such narratives obviously cannot include all countries, and Korea is indeed absent in most of them despite its enthusiast self-promotion of its so-called four thousand years history. That is not because North-East Asia do not appear in these works. On the contrary, it is commonly conceived as the main counter-example of European model, and both China and Japan usually come to the forefront in these narratives¹.

My own research about the circulation of scholarly and scientific objects between Korea, Japan, and China, in the seventeenth century, definitely belongs to this current, and tries to investigate and partly remedy this absence. But there, in order to reflect the historiographical questions of the Leiden project according to the letter, I merely would like to assess the state of the art of the few works which share my interest in cross-border analysis for Korean history, as a first step to a more thorough article dealing with methodological issues of regional and global contacts in a Korean context.

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¹ See for example: Darwin John, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405*, Bloomsbury Press, 2010.
Wills John E. Jr., *The World from 1450 to 1700*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

Korea and global history

Many works of the new global history deal prominently with the early modern period. It stresses the idea that the period that runs from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century was the period when all continents came into contact for the first time: as such is sometimes called the “first globalisation”². It is not surprising that most of the historical paradigms occurring in global history do somehow extend the previous European historiography, and this first globalisation idea resonates with the great discoveries period of European history.

The first globalisation thesis is of course highly questionable. The consequences of its spread in academic circles are even more problematic, as this globalisation process focuses mainly on European expansion and often ignores other parts of the world that were not in contact with the West at the time. I agree it is easy to denounce eurocentrism, but to recognize its legacy is a *sine qua non* that leads to a larger overview of the historical field.

I would like to suggest that this is precisely because the Korean peninsula has not developed direct and long-term contacts with Europe before the late nineteenth century, contrary to Ming Qing China and Edo Japan, that it is not visible in today's narratives of global history. Although no one can deny the importance of Korea in North-East Asia, and the essential role it played in the triangular relation with China and Japan, it seems easier to remain silent about Korea as long as it had no direct impact on the world order, if the latter is equated with European expansion.

This is true both for global historical narratives produced predominantly in the West, and for the Korean works dealing with cross-border contacts. A significant example of this failure proves to be the way Korean scholars and Western specialists of Korean studies analyse the story of the seventeenth century Dutch shipwreck of Hendrik Hamel. It is almost always considered as an “absorbing story” which “had no significant historical results”³. Most of the works written in English or Korean dealing with the subject limit their analysis to a step by step description of Hamel's journey⁴, and very few of them take seriously Hamel related documents as a historical source that sheds light on broader topics of Korean history, like the history of science⁵, of

2 Gunn Geoffrey C., *First Globalisation: The Eurasian Exchange, 1500-1800*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Oxford, 2003.

3 Ledyard Gari, *The Dutch Come to Korea. An Account of the Life of the First Westerners in Korea (1653-1666)*, Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1971, p. 11.

4 See for example: 김영원, *항해와 표류의 역사*, 솔, 2003. 김패진, *하멜표류기*, 서해문집, 2003. 유동익, *하멜 보고서*, 중앙 M&B, 2003.

5 Laroulandie Aurélien, “The 1653 Calendar Reform and the Dutch Castaways: Circulation of Knowledge and

diplomacy between Korea and Japan, and even of the integration mechanisms of foreign residents in Chosŏn Korea. One may conclude that Korea and the West share unconscious difficulties to consider a past together.

In Korea, governmental self-promotion of the peninsula history is recognised to be sometimes over-enthusiastic, blindly emphasising the unique character of the Korean people and its achievements, in the scientific field for example. On the other hand, the same self-promotion movement tries to stress the Korean implication in East Asian development over the last five hundred years at least⁶. These contradictory motives enlighten the tensions in the new identity Korea tries to create at the dawn of a new globalisation. To change the public understanding of Korean history is obviously a long-term process that will require decades, but works relying on different trends of Global history seem to push in this direction, and will be the focus of this paper hereafter.

Regionalism, Centres and Peripheries in North-East Asia

To consider East Asia as a region of the same kind as Europe remains difficult because of the historical and historiographical tensions between its different parts, the two Koreas, Japan, the People's Republic of China, and Taiwan. The Japanese Empire period and World War II left behind heavy legacies that are difficult to transcend. Some historians choose to tackle the problem head-on, while others, many of them actually, look for different patterns of relations between East Asian countries in the earlier periods, including in the early modern.

The latter discuss models and case studies that obviously diverge from the idea of the first globalisation. More than the global scale, they underline the importance of the regional East Asian scale as a closed system where the responses to globalisation, usually limited to the impact of Europe in this part of the world, were discussed, shared, or confronted. Korea, China, and Japan, all are looking for their respective place in this regional pattern, and describe their participation in a regional dynamics which may live up to European standards and challenges Europe's modernity.

The topics investigated include the geographical mobility of individuals, the trade of

Involuntary Go-Betweeners", in Cuc Codruta (ed.), *Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Korean Studies: Proceedings of the 7th Korean Studies Graduate Students Convention in Europe*, Casa Cartii de Stiinta, 2010, pp. 15-21.

⁶ For example of this self-promotion movement, see the numerous publications of the Northeast Asian History Foundation.

material objects, the transmission of books and ideas, the translation activities from a language to another, practices, beliefs, etc. Nevertheless, many of these objects are today associated with the concept of circulation, which in the last ten years has become one of the most frequent words, constantly occurring in books, chapters and papers' titles. The idea of circulation does itself provide a link between global, regional, and local scales, as it refers to the movements of all these objects and actors from a geographical, social or even linguistic point of view. In what follows, I will call these works as a whole, "circulation studies"⁷.

An overview of the literature referring to the idea of circulation leads to an unfortunate assessment: in spite of its wide spread in the academic circle, it proves to be very poorly defined and conceptualised. It may even be suggested that its success relies mainly of the ambiguity of the concept. As far as I know, no clear definition of the concept of circulation has ever been commonly recognised as standard, and actually very few studies intend to define it.

It is almost impossible to find an origin to a concept as ambiguous as the circulation. Yet, it has regularly come back in the last ten years, first and foremost in works dealing with scientific knowledge and religion, which are cross-bording by nature, and have emerged as privileged objects in the historiography of global history and of cultural history, the latter having gaining more visibility at the same time.

One may convincingly argue that the focus on circulation was first a simple reaction to an historiography built previously on the centre and periphery paradigm, when such objects were described as moving one-sidedly from a clearly identified centre, first of all Europe, to a so-called periphery, that is to say the rest of the world, which was considered as a mere recipient. This kind of model was discussed and criticised by the "Science and Empire" studies mainly in the field of the history of science, as it became common to recognise different centres with each their own peripheries. Hence, China naturally holds a vantage point in the works following the "Science and Empire" paradigm, both as the best challenger of Europe and as the centre of a large zone of influence putting together East and South-East Asia. Accordingly, Korea soon became a periphery of Ming Qing China in the historiography of the 80s and 90s.

⁷ Drawing a "circulation studies" paradigm is probably pushing too far. This term, used only in these paper as far as I know, was invented because it proved to be very convenient to designate together all the works using this term, wether they define it or not.

Circulation studies: A New Way to Conceive Korea in North-East Asia

Circulation studies can be seen as a reaction to the “Science and Empire” paradigm because the accumulation of case studies of objects circulating in North-East Asia, if not broadly around the world, made the big picture of empires' peripheries more complex. The idea of circulation provides a new way to describe the cross-border diffusion of objects, now at the forefront of the historical debate, stressing a multi-directional pattern of mobility.

Following the circulation paradigm, Western scientific knowledge for example is no longer described as solely coming from Europe and blindly accepted or rejected by China and its own peripheries. The knowledge that made its way from China to Europe is also rightfully considered, as are the multiple transformations in the process of its circulation from Europe to China and all over Asia, including Korea. In a similar way, Korea may be then conceived as its own centre, importing and exporting items from and to its own peripheries, China and Japan being considered as such from the subjective point of view of Korean sources.

The idea of circulation, as poorly as it is defined today, still offers a way to work on those many objects that made Korea and North-East Asia a modern counterpart of Europe, and answers the motives of contemporary Korean scholars aiming to catch up with global history, in spite of Korea's “irrelevance” to the European expansion. This is still work in progress, and if the books and papers dealing with circulation are omnipresent in Chinese and Japanese studies, only a few have been published in Korean studies. Besides, most of the studies in progress are written in English, and the introduction of the concept of circulation in Korean works are still to be encouraged⁸.

Conclusion

One may ask what is the economy of the concept of circulation, in comparison with the previous works dealing with geographical mobility, translation, and so on. The importance of cross-border objects has acquired at the end of the twentieth century, called for a more complex model of description, taking into account in particular the multiple forms they adopt, written and non-written, in the process of their geographical mobility. The economy of the concept of circulation, making good use of its ambiguity, is precisely to bring together all these mechanisms in the study of non-

⁸ As far as I know, there is not yet any formal translation in the Korean historical field for circulation. *Kyoryu* 交流 or *yut'ong* 流通 are sometimes used, but never as a concept that may correspond to the English word.

material historical objects, including scientific knowledge and religion, which can hardly be limited to one single process.

As such, from a mere reaction to the centre and periphery paradigm, the concept of circulation is progressively rising as a very powerful tool to analyse various historical objects and to challenge the usual narrative of global history. To transform circulation from a reaction to a conceptually and methodologically well established paradigm will take years of painstaking historical reflections. This brief paper has attempted to explain and support the reasons why such a concept emerged, and to argue why it needs to be developed further.