

The Biggest Encyclopedia of Joseon Meets Modern Readers^{*}

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SEO Yu-gu, translated by JEONG Myeong-hyeon et al., *Imwon gyeongje ji – Joseon choedaewi shiryong baekgwa sajeon* [*Imwon gyeongje ji – Joseon's Most Voluminous Encyclopedia for Practical Use*]. Seoul: Ssiasseul Ppurineun Saram, 2012.

1

I heard that a draft of the Korean translation of the *Imwon gyeongje ji* 林園經濟志 (Treatises for Rural Lives), the entire sixteen treatises, had recently been completed and that each treatise will soon be published in succession. Written over a period of almost forty years by Seo Yu-gu (徐有榘, 1764-1846) in classical Chinese, the *Imwon gyeongje ji* is the most voluminous encyclopedic work ever compiled during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910). Covering sixteen different topics, it provides essential knowledge for daily living, and for this reason, the author entitled it the *Imwon shibyuk ji* 林園十六志 (Sixteen Treatises for Rural Lives). As an introduction to the full-scale publication of each translated treatise, a book shedding light on the processes undertaken during the nine arduous years of translation, and describing the massive content of the encyclopedia has been published in advance, and it is this book that this article serves to review.

The message that the translators and publisher want to deliver is well expressed in the front and back covers, as well as in the book band. The authors chose *Imwon gyeongje ji – Joseon's Most Voluminous Encyclopedia for Practical Use* as the title. I assume that the book earned its name, "*Imwon gyeongje ji*", because it is considered encyclopedic from today's perspective for encompassing all kinds of knowledge and various details, which are organized and explained in a structured manner [hence the name "baekgwa" 百科 (encyclopedia)], and also because the content is for the purpose of practical applications [hence the expression "shiryong" 實用 (practical use)]. This intention can also be easily confirmed by the wording on the back cover of the book, "The *Imwon gyeongje ji* consists of 113 volumes, 16 fields, some 28,000 entries and 2.52 million characters in total!" This reflects that the original book was voluminous, with 113 volumes and 2.52 million characters,

^{*} Translated from Korean by KIM Kyuri.

and dealt with subject in such diversity as to have 28,000 entries in sixteen fields.

It is evident from the words in the title—*imwon* (林園) and *gyeongje* (經濟)—that the books contain practical knowledge. While the term *imwon* translates into forests and hills, it actually refers to the rural area as opposed to the city, whereas the term *gyeongje* has a more modest meaning of “to manage and to rule,” rather than “economy,” which is the more commonly used meaning of the word today. In other words, “*imwon gyeongje*” can be loosely translated as “management of rural living.” As Joseon was mainly an agrarian society, one can assume that the expression “practical knowledge” would mean those that rural lifestyle required, even though the word “rural” was never specifically mentioned.

Also notable from the back cover of the book is the line, “the *Imwon gyeongje ji* – a massive source to lead traditional cultural industries and globalization of the *Hallyu* 韓流, or the Korean Wave.” The authors say, “The *Imwon gyeongje ji* is the most practically applicable publication with the greatest amount of traditional and cultural content. Once all 113 volumes are translated and published, the collection will undoubtedly enrich not only academia but also related traditional and cultural industries, as well as the *Hallyu*.” As stated, the authors believe that the content of the *Imwon gyeongje ji*, published in nineteenth-century Joseon, will not stop at being mere vestiges of the years long passed, but will form the main traditional and cultural content of modern day Korea. With this in mind, they believe that the content should be industrialized and further on, shared with the rest of the international community. Moreover, the book band reveals that the *Imwon gyeongje ji* is so valuable that it has been listed as a UNESCO Memory of the World.

“Has the voluminous and complex *Imwon gyeongje ji* really been translated?” This is another phrase shown on the book band, and the word “really” implies that it is unbelievable. A draft translation of the book is amazing not only because the book is voluminous, but also because no one has ever attempted to translate the book in its entirety due to the difficulty in understanding its details. The authors cited two reasons for this in the foreword. First, “Korean academia has yet to possess the level of academic capabilities needed to sufficiently absorb our traditional knowledge.” Second, “the literary work of the *Imwon gyeongje ji* has established an unprecedented intellectual world with a high entry barrier” (p. 12). Despite such challenges, this difficult book was successfully translated thanks somewhat ironically to the hard work of some 40 young scholars at the Imwon Gyeongje Institute who embarked on the task rather recklessly without fully understanding what difficulties would lie ahead. These scholars formerly studied together at Dohol Academy and the Taedong Center for Eastern Classics, Korea’s top two learning centers for traditional Chinese classics. Also, the translators brought various academic backgrounds to the team such as literature, philosophy, history, agriculture, traditional medicine, and mathematics, and this diversity worked as an advantage in completing the translation of the *Imwon gyeongje ji*.

In this review, I am not able to evaluate the translation itself as the actual books are yet to be published. I thus attempt only to illuminate the world of the *Imwon gyeongje ji* as discovered by the authors and their perception of its nature based on

this thick introductory book, and also to express my own ideas.

2

This book consists of five main parts – the Introduction, Part I (examination of Seo Yu-gu as the author), Part II (introduction to the *Imwon gyeongje ji*), Part III (introduction to the contents of the sixteen treatises in the *Imwon gyeongje ji*), and the Appendix. In the Introduction, the authors explain the principles, the process and the difficulties encountered during their translation. In Part I, they examine the life of Seo Yu-gu, and his process and motives of writing the book. In Part II, the authors not only provide an overview of the content of the *Imwon gyeongje ji*, consisting of sixteen different treatises, but also investigate the bibliographical aspects of the book in relation to its several different editions. Part III, which is the most voluminous, summarizes each of the sixteen treatises that comprise the *Imwon gyeongje ji*. Bibliographical notes are provided for each treatise, and the introduction to and table of contents for each treatise, also translated in Korean, are presented. With this outline, the authors kindly provide the modern day reader with a full picture of the *Imwon gyeongje ji*. In other words, the authors reveal the nature of each treatise through the bibliographical notes, help readers understand the detailed subjects contained in each treatise by presenting the tables of contents, and by translating the original introduction written by the author of the *Imwon gyeongje ji*, they convey the author's motives behind writing each treatise.

Before introducing the content of the book, I would like to briefly comment on the approach taken by the authors of this book in their translation endeavor. First of all, they emphasize the importance of comparison and correction. This is actually a natural approach considering that there exists no printed copy of the *Imwon gyeongje ji* remaining today except for only a number of manuscripts. However, almost all researchers thus far have been studying the version housed at Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies at the Seoul National University, which is written in the clearest handwriting, and referred to it as if it were the standard edition. The authors report that they came to realize, during the translation process, that this copy was actually replete with problems such as omissions and errors. Unable to translate a large portion of the copy at Kyujanggak, the authors turned to other versions such as the copies preserved in Osaka, the Korea University, and the Yonsei University for cross-comparison, and in doing so, corrected serious problems in the one at Kyujanggak. Secondly, their translation work was based on the spirit that “to translate is to transfer a civilization.” The authors believe that translation of the *Imwon gyeongje ji* will enable restoration of practical knowledge and culture of nineteenth-century Joseon, to which there has been a large gap since the Japanese colonial period and the modernization of the country.

3

The biggest contribution that the *Imwon gyeongje ji – Joseon's Most Voluminous Encyclopedia for Practical Use* will make to the Korean academic community, in

my opinion, is that it allows ordinary scholars, including those without a deep interest in the field, to grasp a good idea of this voluminous work. For instance, and although it is to the shame of our academia, I have never seen a publication that has accurately translated the titles of all the sixteen treatises that make up the *Imwon gyeongje ji*. This is attributable partly to the low level of overall interest in the *Imwon gyeongje ji*, but also to the fact that some of the introductions to each of the treatise were missing in the aforementioned Kyujanggak copy that had been considered as the standard edition. In this book, the exact meanings and contents of each chapter, as revealed by the authors, are as follows (p. 258):

1. *Bonri ji* 本利志: Records on crop-growing, from how to plow a field in the spring to harvesting in the autumn. General farming, crop-growing.
2. *Gwanhyu ji* 灌畦志: Records on how to grow crops at ridges, and their irrigation. Vegetable and herb farming.
3. *Yewon ji* 藝畹志: Records on how to cultivate flowers, such as orchids. Floriculture.
4. *Manhak ji* 晩學志: Records on tree-farming learned at an old age. Fruit and tree farming.
5. *Jeongong ji* 展功志: Records on weaving by women. Fabrics production and fabric weaving.
6. *Wiseon ji* 魏鮮志: Records on predicting the future by Wei Xian 魏鮮 based on astrological phenomena. Prediction of good and poor harvests based on weather conditions and astrological phenomena.
7. *Jeoneo ji* 佃漁志: Records on livestock, hunting, and fishing. Breeding livestock, beekeeping, pisciculture, and fishing.
8. *Jeongjo ji* 鼎俎志: Records on cooking using pots and chopping boards. Cooking.
9. *Seomyong ji* 贍用志: Records of everyday items to be used generously. House-building and making everyday items.
10. *Boyang ji* 葆養志: Records on how to strengthen one's body. Health.
11. *Inje ji* 仁濟志: Records on saving people with a compassionate heart. Medical Treatments.
12. *Hyangrye ji* 鄉禮志: Records on village rituals. Village ceremonial details and ethics of village community.
13. *Yuye ji* 游藝志: Records on arts to be read and learned everyday. Cultural knowledge for enriching ones' body and mind.
14. *Yiwun ji* 怡雲志: Records on how to enjoy clouds in solitude. Refined cultural life.
15. *Sangtaek ji* 相宅志: Records on how to examine sites for a house. Finding a good site for building a home.
16. *Yegyu ji* 倪圭志: Records of commerce and trade, looking at the methods by Bai Gui 白圭, an expert trader. Economic activities to make a living.

Among these, *Wiseon ji* and *Yegyu ji* are particularly difficult to understand if one tries to decipher them directly by translating the Chinese characters alone; one must comprehend the stories behind them. Seo Yu-gu tended to avoid using common terms in entitling the treatises, and *Wiseon ji* and *Yegyu ji* are extreme examples of this tendency. *Bonri ji*, *Gwanhyu ji*, *Jeoneo ji*, *Jeongjo ji*, and *Yiwun ji* are also titles that cannot be easily found in other books.

The *Minjok munhwa dae baekgwa sajeon* 民族文化大百科事典 (Encyclopedia of Korean Culture) and the Korean edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, too, provide a good overview of the sixteen treatises, albeit without accurate titles. However, *Imwon gyeongjeji – Joseon's Most Voluminous Encyclopedia for Practical Use* goes beyond the aforementioned encyclopedias and offers detailed introductions for each treatise and their contents in a manner that can be well understood by even lay readers. Explaining every single detail of the chapters in this review is impossible due to limited space, so I will only cite examples from the beginning, the middle, and the end as a preview.

Jeong Myeong-hyeon, who wrote the bibliographical notes on *Bonri ji*, learned the exact method of *daejeon beop* 代田法, or “the method to sow seeds in furrows” in detail and presented an illustration of the method in order to show that it is different from the existing interpretation made by historians. Also, by meticulously comparing the method with the *daejeon beop* of China, Jeong demonstrated that Seo Yu-gu had improved on the method he had acquired from Chinese literature in his own way (pp. 430-432). Through this demonstration, Jeong argues that Seo Yu-gu's knowledge was more than the result of simply piecing information together, but a result of actual and rich farming experience (p. 431).

The bibliographical notes on *Inje ji*, written by Jeon Jong-uk and the longest of all the bibliographies of the sixteen treatises, are made up of 200 pages (pp. 1011-1233). Jeon first introduces all prescriptions and drugs mentioned in *Inje ji*, and then demonstrates the relations between all the medical ingredients in all the prescriptions and symptoms mentioned in the book through a computer program, thereby revealing statistical significance between the symptoms and the ingredients. In doing so, Jeon seeks a way to utilize the medical information in *Inje ji* as a database that can be applied in today's day and age when searching for the right medical ingredients to treat a disease. This is in line with the aforementioned modernization of traditional knowledge pursued by the authors.

Jeong Myeong-hyeon, who also wrote bibliographical notes on *Yegyu ji*, made a special mention of the information on markets nationwide and tables listing the distance between different places across the country that were introduced in the treatise. Jeong reports that *Yegyu ji* provides records of 1,046 marketplaces opening in 311 prefectures all over the eight provinces of Joseon, as well as the major goods produced at each of the locations, and expressed his amazement by saying, “I cannot fathom how he could have detailed so much information on the entire country” (p. 1459). The distance tables in *Yegyu ji* are a total of 14 tables; one that tabulates the distances from Seoul to different cities, and the rest tabulating the distances between cities of different regions. Jeong says, “These tables were

structured so systematically that a reader would be able to predict the travel time to any marketplace in the country (except for those taking place on islands far-off from the mainland) regardless of which of the eight provinces the reader was in,” and this is a clear reflection of Seo Yu-gu’s intention to “help those who wish to acquire goods to make transactions on time and travel with a planned itinerary (p. 1460).”

Although it is regretful that this review can introduce only a few examples, the authors enjoyed taking advantage of their roles in completing the translation, and examined every corner and detail of the book to uncover its meanings and values. Before moving onto the next discussion, it would be unjust to not mention the authors’ attempt in building the *jaseung cha* 自升車, a piece of equipment that draws water up, based on the design introduced in the original book (pp. 53-56), or their attempt at brewing liquor using the method introduced in *Jeongjo ji* (pp. 841-843). Determining if the equipment actually worked and tasting the brewed liquor not only confirmed the validity of their translation, but also serves to judge its historical function, while even presenting possibility for modern applications.

4

Another contribution of the *Imwon gyeongje ji* – *Joseon’s Most Voluminous Encyclopedia for Practical Use* to the academic community is that the authors made a detailed analysis of the references cited in the *Imwon gyeongje ji*. The authors examined the nature of the 853 kinds of literature cited in the book (1,827 if recited literature is also included) (p. 285). As the original contents of the *Imwon gyeongje ji* were converted into digital text, it was possible to analyze the frequency of citations. For each treatise, the authors offer metadata such as the main title, subtitle, the numbers of entries, articles and reference books, and the number of Chinese characters in the original version. For references, the authors categorized the metadata into Chinese literature, Joseon literature and Seo Yu-gu’s own writings, and lastly provide detailed explanations of the books that were cited most frequently. In this manner, the authors have revealed the origins of the knowledge constituting the *Imwon gyeongje ji*. As for the type of works cited in the encyclopedia, the majority originates from Chinese literature, and one Japanese book, *Wakan sansei zue* 和漢三才圖會, was used as a reference.

Bearing in mind that the *Imwon gyeongje ji* may face criticism for having merely “pieced together Chinese literature,” the authors suggested that the number of characters quoted should be seen as an indicator, rather than the number of books referenced. Using this figure, it was found that Chinese and Japanese literature account for 72.35% and 0.51%, respectively, while Joseon books took up 27.14%. In addition, 70% of the Joseon literature that is cited in the *Imwon gyeongje ji* is from Seo Yu-gu’s own writing, which is equivalent to 18.6% of the entire content. Based on these statistics, the authors argue that the book “reflects Koreans interests, not those of the Chinese,” and especially Seo Yu-gu’s own cultural interests (pp. 318-323). Particularly in the cases of *Yegyu ji*, *Seomyong ji*, and *Jeongoe ji*, Seo

Yu-gu's writing accounts for more than 40% (p.319). This is because the topics of the treatises, such as commerce, tools and devices used in the rural areas, and knowledge needed of hunting and fishery, were those that had strong locality. The authors evaluate this to be a huge proportion, especially when compared to Xu Guangqi's 徐光啓 *Nongzheng quanshu* 農政全書 of the late Ming dynasty, in which Xu's own writing took up only 8.7% of the work (p. 323).

5

The authors clarify the knowledge system of the *Imwon gyeongje ji* by comparing it with a large-scale Chinese encyclopedia, previous Korean publications, and *Wakan sansei zue* of Japan. The authors wrote:

Until then, there was no book that precisely met Seo Yu-gu's expectations. While one may have referred to books such as *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽, *Zunsheng bajian* 遵生八牋, *Sancai tuhui* 三才圖會, *Jujia biyong* 居家必用, *Nongzheng quanshu* 農政全書, and *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成 of China, neither they were sufficient in delivering the information needed for people to "survive in rural areas," nor were the subject appropriate. With that said, it would be wrong to recommend Joseon literature such as *Hanjeong rok* 閑情錄, *Sanrim gyeongje* 山林經濟, *Gosa shinseo* 攷事新書, *Saek gyeong* 穡經, and *Gwanong socho* 課農小抄. *Wakan sansei zue* was a reference book from Japan, but this was also based on *Sancai tuhui* of China, and thus failed to meet the Seo Yu-gu's expectations and motives (pp. 296-297).

The authors' point is that while Seo's *Imwon gyeongje ji* is a collection of knowledge, it differs from the voluminous encyclopedia of China or Japan in that the former offers selective knowledge of things needed "to survive in rural areas." It also differs from similar books previously published in Joseon, as the knowledge contained in it is not only extensive but also systematic. As it deals only with knowledge needed for a rural life, it does not include other knowledge such as Chinese classics, history, astronomy, and geography. In a narrower sense, while the book does include information on birds, fish, and insects, those species that had no relevance to everyday life were excluded from the book regardless of their size and frequency of sighting.

The authors also compare Seo Yu-gu's work with that of Jeong Yak-yong (丁若鏞 1762-1836), a renowned scholar of the late Joseon period who left a voluminous literary work titled *Yeoyudang jeonse* 與猶堂全書 (pp. 160-168) around the same time as the compilation of the *Imwon gyeongje ji*. The authors believe that exchange between the two figures, although having lived in the same period, would have been limited as they were under different political circumstances. Other than

the fact that both books by Seo Yu-gu and Jeong Yak-yong are extensive, there is no significant overlap between the two. Jeong's publications focused on studies of statecraft, including subjects such as local administration, duties of government officials, establishment of legal systems and systemization of rituals, studies of the six Chinese classics, and historical geography. Seo Yu-gu, on the contrary, had no interest in studies of Chinese classics, for such work, he thought, had been covered by his predecessors. He had ceased to pay attention to the studies of statecraft for it seemed to be nothing but empty talk with no real use (pp. 211-214). Seo devoted himself instead to collecting and organizing knowledge that could directly improve the lives of the people in rural areas. Whereas Jeong believed that a well-established national system would bring about good governance and thereby enrich the people in a "top-down" approach, Seo believed that a country should employ a "bottom-up" approach in which the nation would become wealthier and more powerful through improving the quality of everyday life. In other words, Seo was convinced that by applying the right knowledge and technology in all facets of everyday life, from farming, making clothes, sauces, ropes, and wells, to installing floor-heating systems, people's lives would become bountiful, eventually leading to the country becoming wealthier and more powerful.

6

Imwon gyeongje ji – *Joseon's Most Voluminous Encyclopedia for Practical Use* itself is a voluminous work with as many as 1,631 pages, and it deals with a number of issues other than the aforementioned. Why did Seo Yu-gu write the *Imwon gyeongje ji*? Through which process did Seo Yu-gu write the book? How was the book utilized and evaluated at that time? How did Seo Yu-gu obtain and use references? How were the ideas of the Northern Learning (*Bukhak* 北學) School, which stressed the need to learn from Qing, reflected in writing the book? Which one of the two titles – *Imwon gyeongjeji* or *Imwon shibyuk ji* – is more appropriate? Why sixteen treatises? What are the anticipated effects of the translated version of the *Imwon gyeongje ji* once it is completed in entirety?

Unfortunately, I cannot respond to all the issues in this review, but I do want to point out one thing. I would like to compare the *Imwon gyeongje ji* with the *Encyclopédie* compiled by Diderot (1713-1784), a prominent intellectual during the Enlightenment in eighteenth century France. As we know, the *Encyclopédie* enjoyed huge success as it went beyond simply organizing existing knowledge; it created and spread a new knowledge system. From this perspective, it seems that the innovative value of reconstituting knowledge in the *Imwon gyeongje ji* was not so great as to bring about a huge transformation in nineteenth-century Joseon society. Nevertheless, Seo Yu-gu put together and combined practical knowledge of the time in a single work, a feat that had never been achieved previously by any scholar in Joseon. It includes advanced knowledge from Qing, the West and Japan, as well as many of Seo's own experiences and original ideas.

It is hard to find evidence of the *Imwon gyeongje ji* enjoying wide readership

and resulting in changes in rural living. Moreover, in 1876, only several decades after the book was compiled, Joseon opened its door to foreign countries and subsequently became incorporated into the modern capitalistic and imperialistic order. Since then, Seo's studies were no longer pursued, as the paradigm of knowledge that dominated the Korean society changed completely. In this new and transformed world, a book containing information on rural living to the smallest details could only have been too difficult to understand. No one bothered to pay attention to such knowledge. As a result, this amazing knowledge system of nineteenth-century Joseon was basically buried into the ground.

And this very ground was unearthed by some forty brave young scholars. They are now reporting the overall outline of the *Imwon gyeongje ji* through their book – *Imwon gyeongje ji – Joseon's Most Voluminous Encyclopedia for Practical Use*. Once the entire translated volume is published, the full picture of the *Imwon gyeongje ji* will be clearly known to the world.

In his latter years, Seo Yu-gu said:

Recently, I barely and painstakingly completed editing the 100 or so books of the *Imwon shibyuk ji*, and my only regret is that I have neither wife nor children who will look after this collection after my death. How long it took me to realize I was shedding tears of sadness as I went through the book by chance. (p.9)

Wouldn't he wipe his tears and start laughing out if only he could read in his grave the soon-to-be-published, complete Korean translation of his book?