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As if it matters: the past in the present in Korean and elsewhere

Breuker, R.E.

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Prof.dr. R. Breuker

*As if it matters: the past in the present
in Korea and elsewhere.*



Universiteit Leiden

As if it matters: the past in the present
in Korea and elsewhere.

Inaugural lecture by

Prof.dr. R. Breuker

on the acceptance of his position of professor of

Korean Studies

at the Universiteit Leiden

on Friday September 21 2012.



Universiteit Leiden

Honourable Rector Magnificus, Your Excellency the Ambassador of the Republic of Korea, esteemed members of the audience....,

Exactly 850 years ago in 1162 the Korean (or I should say Koryŏan) Son of Heaven attended a royal lecture. The royal lecture was an enormously prestigious, popular and influential institution. In these lectures, the best and the brightest minds of the state lectured the ruler or the crown prince on Chinese (or Koryŏan) classics in the presence of many other scholars and officials. Once a person was elected to give a royal lecture, his place in history was secure. Why? Because the lecturer was the one who wrote history. History would be kind to him, for he intended to write it. He wrote and edited the official materials we now regard as the most important historical sources on the Koryŏ state, a state that existed for five centuries between 918 and 1392 on the Korean peninsula. Everyone who counted intellectually wanted to be given the opportunity to speak to a distinguished captive audience (not unlike right now) that included the Son of Heaven, the crown prince and the entire fine fleur of the Koryŏ state. Everyone who mattered politically wanted to be present at such a lecture, which discussed, criticized and proposed Koryŏ policy in all fields, from foreign affairs and the minting of coins to the proper uses of the astronomical calendar and seemingly mundane (but ontologically significant) subjects such as the colour of the clothes of the ruler.¹ These lectures served as an arena in which ideological and political battles were fought. Especially in Koryŏ, which as a pluralist society was forced to maintain a fragile equilibrium between competing and often antithetical systems of belief and thought (which they managed to do for centuries). These discussions laid the foundations for Koryŏ's practical policies, that drew from the diverse sources of Confucian statecraft, Buddhist notions, geomantic articles of faith, shared historical memories and so on: how to levy taxes, how to run the country, how to deal with those pesky barbarians at the northern frontier, what to do with the arrogant and smug Chinese of the Song state. Of one of

Koryŏ's most brilliant rulers (Yejong 睿宗, 1079-1105-1122), it was written that "[Yejong] often received the scholars who attended him. He took pleasure in always having them lecture, providing a structure to govern the country and giving it a firm basis"²

The royal lecturers were not only the best and brightest scholarly minds Koryŏ had to offer; they were also its most powerful politicians and bureaucrats. These men, for they were all men, ruled the country, devised its policies, set its course and decided its fate. They were men who were firmly rooted in the real world of politics and problems. These men, also, were historians. Without exception, the men who gave the royal lectures, who had the ear of the ruler, who ruled the state, were historians. They read 'mouldy and moth-eaten' books. They got enthused over arcane references. They spent time, money and energy on understanding what happened a long time ago in faraway places. They got excited when they uncovered the vague traces of an old document, barely legible and smelly with age, from a pile of scrap paper. They were the kind of persons who would have known what had happened exactly 850 years ago. Moreover, they could tell you why it was important to know what had happened exactly 850 years ago. The one thing these men did not do was to live in the past. Rather, they lived with the past. As we all do. Let me give you a concrete illustration of how these royal lectures dealt with the past - and the present. This quotation is from Kim Puŏi, a scion from one of Korea's most illustrious lineages, a scholar, diplomat, statesman and poet praised by the Chinese emperor himself and during his lifetime one of Koryŏ's most powerful figures. He lectured about one of Koryŏ's perennial headaches, the northern frontier (still a headache for that matter). The quotation is rather lengthy, so please bear with me:

The king asked [Puŏi] about the border defence policy and he answered him as follows: When Du Mu 杜牧 of the Tang answered an inquiry about current affairs, he wrote that there is no better policy than self-government and when emperor Zhenzong of the Song discussed the

border defence policy with Wen Yanfu 文彦博, [Wen] answered that the first priority is to govern oneself, not to invade other countries and not to help distant countries. Wang Anshi 王安石 evaluated this opinion as proper and further said that if one governs oneself well, even in a small country of only seventy *li* one can be ruler of a realm 天下. Mencius said that a country of thousand *li* does not have to be afraid of other countries, but the reason that we, while our realm covers a thousand *li*, are afraid of others, is because we do not govern ourselves. At present, Koryō occupies the old territories of the Three Han and how could that be no more than seventy *li*? Nonetheless, we fear other countries and this must be undoubtedly so because we do not make it our priority to govern ourselves. [...] Using one's strong points and observing the changes in the situation of the enemy is precisely what Liang Shang 梁商 suggested and this is extremely appropriate for our present situation. We should have the walls of the capital and of the garrisons of each province made higher and the moats dug deeper. We should keep in stock powerful arrows, poisoned arrows, cannon and flare rockets and we should dispatch people to supervise and manage this by meting out appropriate rewards and punishments.³

This is a representative example of the contents of a royal lecture. It illustrates the way historical memories were used in daily policy-making in Koryō. It concludes with concrete measures to be taken by the state, but it gets there by referring to a coterie of long dead Chinese poets, rulers, statesmen and scholars. By using ancient history as raw material Kim Puñi constructs the argument that in order to survive Koryō needs to be ideologically and militarily self-sufficient. The outcome had a direct bearing on Koryō's present of practical engagement. Let me read to you this explanation of what the present of practical engagement is by Michael Oakeshott, Margaret Thatcher's favourite philosopher, but otherwise a fine person:

[...B]esides our own recalled past experiences (and, of course, those of other living persons whom we may

consult) our practical present contains an ever-increasing deposit of what are reputed to be fragments of a past which have survived, not as a wound survives in a scar but on account of their never having perished, which are now available to be listened to and consulted and which may be related to our current conduct. They may be artefacts (perhaps recognized as models to be copied), recorded anecdotes or episodes of bygone human fortune, alleged reports of persons and their encounters with their own *Lebenswelten*, more elaborate stories of past human circumstance, exemplars of human character and images of human conduct. [...] We may attribute authority to them or merely sagacity. They may be listened to, consulted, used, neglected or ignored. [...] What they mean to us is whatever they may be made to mean [...] In short, they are *legenda*, what is "read" and what may be read with advantage to ourselves in our current engagements. These survivals, then, are constituents of a present, and here where it is a present of practical engagements, they are objects (like all others) accepted, understood in terms of their qualities and attended to in terms of their meaning and worth (if any) to ourselves in pursuing our current purposes, distinguished only in purporting to be voices from the past. [...] Every society has an inheritance, rich or exiguous, of such survivals from the past and to know one's way about it is a condition of articulate practical activity.⁴

The past is not exactly past. It is here with us and it is useful. Looking back at the Koryō royal lecture 850 years later, it may perhaps be clear that to us history writing and policy-making are two distinctly different activities, only joined together in an odd anecdote from a distant past of a state largely forgotten outside the Korean peninsula. But I think we would be wrong to think that. In the 850 years since that royal lecture in what is now Kaesŏng in North Korea (at present a huge South Korean industrial complex, but then the capital of the Koryō dynasty) we have lost something. We lost the ability to see the connection between history and policy, between past events

and present actions. Of course, there are exceptions. Churchill, after all, was both a statesman, war chief and a historian. And indeed, history has been kind to him. Other than that, nowadays the pursuit of history finds itself often being equated with the stuffy leisure pursuit of antiquarians, a pastime hardly fit for funding, a profession emblematic for the difficulties humanities graduates supposedly face finding a job. Looking upon history as antiquarianism, as an excessive obsession with factual historical trivia is tantamount to failing to see the past in the present. It is presentism at its worst. Practical applications are thought to necessarily come from the social sciences, in the case of Korea often from political science. I beg to differ.

During the five centuries of the Koryŏ dynasty and during the five centuries of the succeeding Chosŏn dynasty a sharp distinction between history writing and policy making would have been artificial. History was alive in Koryŏ in a literal sense; it fulfilled an indispensable function in dealing with the present. It was connected to the present. The past was present in the sense that its traces, its vestiges were present in the present and were perceived as such. Historians were important, both intellectually and politically. It is no coincidence that a large number of Koryŏ's most influential statesmen were also capable historians in their own right. Using the recorded past to cope with the present was as much a part of politics as using the present to compile the past was (and is) a part of historiography. And both were entirely legitimate, indeed intimately connected actions. Did we lose this connection and if so, is this important or merely history? Did we lose the ability to see the past in the present? That is the question that I will try to answer during this lecture.

In constructing this answer, I hope to make both question and answer rather more widely applicable than the field of medieval Korean history, fond as I am of it though. We will embark on a rather too short journey that will take us from medieval Korean history to the philosophy of science, the cultured critique of contemporary culture, and Argentine

literature, with short stops along the way in 16th-century Napoli, Sherlock Holmes, medieval Manchuria, Cambridge and Oxford in the sixties and seventies and contemporary North Korea, ending our journey of course in the axis mundi, right here in the Academieggebouw in Leiden. Weaving together these diverse strands will be what I hope is a convincing plea, an argument, for restoring lost connections and simultaneously for the absolute indispensability of the humanities in the field of human endeavour.

Lost connections do not, of course, sum up the net total of the 850 years of human activity between that royal lecture and this rather less regal lecture. And, though perhaps regrettably for a historian such as myself, it is also not the loss of status and influence of the profession of the historian over this period of time that I would like to talk to you about. Although we did lose the fluency of our predecessors in reading texts and intuitively placing them within their contemporary discursive context and have had to let go of their certainty with regard to the status of truth and fact, we also gained much, enough to at least partially offset those losses. History certainly has not been the same since the twentieth century laid bare most of its vices and respected few of its virtues (although some would argue it has remained exactly the same despite all this). Without going into this bottomless pit too deeply, I feel I should make my own position in this clear. The historical discipline may have lost its unassailability, seemingly iron-clad in the epistemology of Descartes, in the twentieth century, but it had already been challenged, and perhaps successfully so, during the lifetime of Descartes by an underpaid and overworked professor of law and rhetoric in Napoli. According to Giambattista Vico, for that was his name, man could only attain total or absolute knowledge in the historical and mathematical sciences. The reason for this was that “verum et factum convertuntur” or “the true and the made are convertible”.⁵ Or as Sherlock Holmes put it in *The Adventure of the Dancing Man*: “What one man can invent, another can discover”.⁶ Precisely because both of these sciences were made by man (as opposed to for

example physics or chemistry which Vico saw as descriptive sciences and as such always epistemologically limited with regard to human inquiry), they could be fully known by its creator (like only God could fully know those sciences which were descriptive for man but constructed for God). In a clear dig to Descartes, Vico pronounced that:

“The rule and criterion of truth is to have made it. Hence the clear and distinct idea of the mind not only cannot be a criterion of other truths, but it cannot be the criterion of the mind itself; for while the mind apprehends itself, it does not make itself”⁷

Now, I can hear you think, what on earth has this to do with Korean history? My answer would be: rather much. And not only with medieval Korean history, but also with the contemporary situation in North Korea. Bear with me.

I do not possess the competence to judge whether Vico was right with regard to mathematics as a constructed and thus knowable science. I do know that he lost the PR battle with Descartes. His notions on history, contained in almost unreadable, disjointed, verbose prose (which is rather ironic for a professor of legal rhetoric), however, I do think make sense. Both the past (that which has happened) and the production of history (the more or less structured stories that we concoct about what happened in the past) are of human construction. And hence knowable. Not absolutely perhaps, since historical Truth with a capital T has had to give way to a multitude of more modest truths - without the capital T (which by the way was already known in Koryō). This is not merely because all historical accounts have lacunae, inconsistencies, errors, contradictions, and areas of uncertainty. Or because we tend to write history from our own position in space and time, with all the biases and present needs that that entails. It is mainly because historical facts, those granite building blocks of the nineteenth-century grand narratives, have eroded to the extent that they too are seen as liable to deconstruction. Indeed, as Sherlock Holmes taught us: “there is nothing more deceptive than an obvious

fact”⁸. Rightly so, but this has made the task of the historian certainly not easier. Without the solidity of the historical fact to weigh him down, the historian finds himself adrift. Absolute knowledge à la Vico is out of the question, but intuitive knowledge, limited but reasonable and reasonably verifiable knowledge is perhaps possible. I do not doubt that in the past certain events took place. Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo. MacArthur landed in Inch’ōn. To establish that these events took place on the basis of the available sources is, to me, not the same as enshrining them as historical facts. Facts tend to be immutable. The implications and the ramifications of these events remain largely unknown and ultimately inaccessible. Hence for us, it is impossible to dress them up as immutable fact. This is true for Napoleon’s time as much as it is true for the sixties. We are left with guessing too much to dare to speak about incontrovertible facts. Events, yes. Facts, no. We do not know enough and we generally fail to see the ramifications and context, so we guess. Making educated, informed guesses is part and parcel of the historian’s craft after all. While we are trying to get it right, we usually get it wrong - at least to some extent. It is the degree of wrongness, the degree to which avoidable wrongness has been avoided, the degree of adherence to what is available as evidence and the degree to which the historian’s story is plausible, imaginable that determines whether the historian is doing his or her job properly. I am not being defensive when I say that minimalizing wrongness is central to the historical profession. It is what we should do in order to produce ‘usable’ knowledge. Absolute knowledge has never benefitted anyone. Man needs knowledge in context. In his wonderful essay *The Sense of Reality*, Isaiah Berlin wrote about the distinction between a historian and a social scientist, by comparing the latter to a psychologist and the former to a friend of a patient, the patient being the historical problem under research. While the psychologist will rely on his extensive training in analysis and his vast knowledge of similar cases to analyze the patient, the friend will rely on his/her intimate and intuitive knowledge of the friend, on the context and knowledge unique to that relationship. Whereas the tools

of the psychologist are his formal disciplinary training and professional experience (and ought to be replicated by any other psychologist facing the same patient), the friend will mobilize his imagination and empathy, guided by intuitive knowledge resulting from the time spent together to approach the same problem. And, as Berlin rightly concludes, to reach quite different conclusions.⁹

Imagination and empathy are indispensable tools of the historian. There are more of course, such as the critical skills needed to work with the sources and so on, but let me concentrate on the less tangible and less easily taught (or talked about) skills here. To me, a direct consequence of Vico's notion that history is knowable because it is manmade is that imagination and empathy are absolutely necessary for studying history. Without these two, Vico's notion would be empty. History is knowable because it was produced by fellow human beings who, despite the different times and cultures they lived in, shared the fundamental traits of humanity with us. We may know them, in other words, even if we did not know them. Imagination and empathy attain methodological significance; they are of "the immensity of the commonplace", to steal George Steiner's expression.¹⁰ And to borrow Vico's own words:

"There must be in the nature of human things a mental language common to all nations, which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life, and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects".¹¹

Of course, relying on imagination and empathy is not a free-for-all. It certainly goes beyond a simple reimagining of past lives. Imagination and empathy as tools of the historian are rather more formal than their uses in everyday conversation. They are bound by rules, delimited by evidence, shored up by sources, held together by plausibility. They are demonstrable if perhaps not verifiable in the strict sense of the word. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, "History is the most exact art of all". The historian's imagination and empathy are by necessity guided by the professional rules of the field of history, which in turn take their cue from the availability and the quality of the

evidence. There is a problem, though, in applying imagination and empathy to historical sources, a problem in doing anything with those sources at all in fact. Even if we assume the presence of a shared and thus intelligible humanity across all periods and places, even if we admit that imagination and empathy are unfailingly required, there is no guarantee whatsoever that we are in a position to process the information in a fashion even remotely correct. One extreme of this problem is perhaps best illustrated by a metaphor Jose Luis Borges used in his story *The Library of Babel*. In this wonderfully conceptualized and crafted story, Borges describes a library containing all possible books in the universe, the pages of which contain all possible permutations of the alphabet. The library's shelves

'register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols [...]: in other words, all that it is given to express, in all languages. Everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangels' autobiographies, the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books'.¹²

A similar problem is described, rather less elegantly, by the infinite monkey theorem which holds that a monkey hitting keys on a typewriter at random for an eternity will produce any given text in existence (*Madame Bovary*, *A Farewell To Arms*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicles*) as well as an almost infinite amount of random, meaningless texts.¹³ The implications of the notion of the infinite library and the typing monkeys for our purposes here are direct. Meaning becomes empty: what meaning, what significance does *Hamlet* retain when it also has been typed by a monkey whose strokes at the typewriter were nothing but an (admittedly utterly improbable) random sequence? What mode of communication is left intact in the

absolute absence of intent? The monkeys (or if you prefer Borges' more elegant library) point to the problematic nature of intent in producing texts and to the absolute impossibility of truly knowing whether the signifier and the signified share a mutual relationship of significance. This, incidentally, is not a modern concern:

Auspicious and inauspicious signs are not permanent: people merely identify them as such. That is why King Zhou 紂王 perished even though a red phoenix appeared, why Lu 魯 fell in spite of obtaining giraffes, why Gaozong 高宗 [of the Shang] flourished despite the crying of a female pheasant and why the duke of Zheng 鄭公 prospered even though two dragons were fighting.¹⁴

This was written by Kim Pushik in the beginning of the twelfth century in the Korean peninsula, noting that the relationship between signifier (auspicious or inauspicious signs) and signified (what the signs were supposed to predict) was unstable and completely dependent on the mind of the viewing subject. It remains the question whether communication is at all possible or whether what seems to be communication and mutual understanding is merely (incredibly) a coincidence, an infinitesimal, close-to-zero success of the monkeys having typed something which seems consistently intelligible to all parties involved. Authorial intent, *auctoritas*, mutual intelligibility, communication across culture, time and space; these concepts have all been questioned. And with good reason. Postmodernism asked all the right questions, but alas it failed to provide us with the answers. Little good it does the historian. He still plods on in the face of the deconstructionist challenge, meaninglessness, the absolute relativity that radical eclecticism brings with it. The only solution is to plod on, to read texts *as if*, as George Steiner put it:

We must read *as if*.

We must read as if the text before us had meaning. [...]

We must read as if the temporal and executive setting of a text does matter.¹⁵

To read a text *as if* it has meaning, to approach a text, to approach any manmade vestige of the past, with faith that

there is a 'real presence' to it, that we may not understand, but must concede that it is fundamentally and principally intelligible: this kind of reading is perhaps a secular form of religious transcendence. Steiner's *as if* presupposes, no, it demands the ascription of transcendental meaning to the text, because I fail to see how deconstructionist language games (into which deconstruction inevitably lapses) can be refuted epistemologically or logically.

Steiner's *as if* also applies to the writing of history. As historians, we must indeed read sources *as if* they had meaning; *as if* the temporal and executive setting does matter. We must in other words have faith that what we have before us means something that we might relate to, that it is intelligible, if also perhaps wrong or reprehensible, that it might matter. At the same time, this moral imperative (inevitably this imperative does not emerge from logical or analytical considerations, but belongs to the category of 'ought to') forces the historian be faithful to the text in other ways too. If one is to read *as if* the temporal and executive setting of a text matter, one must possess the skills and knowledge to access the temporal and executive settings of the text (or picture or any other manmade vestige of the past). In other words, (s)he knows the language, knows the area, knows the context, knows the context of the context. Even reading a newspaper from the sixties in context should demand the kind of specialized knowledge of a historian, no matter how familiar this era may seem.

If history is knowable because it is manmade, it inevitably follows that it is something else as well: contingent. This means that everything could have happened in a quite different way as well. There is no world spirit to guide us to the inevitable end of history, no ultimate principle to give meaning to what happens, no one pattern of human (inter)action that has principled precedence over any other observable pattern. This also was observed in Koryō, where Kim Pushik, in opposition to the then common notion that history was the physical emanation (*ki*) of the transcendental and universal principle (*li*), wrote a history that viewed history as made by man, as

contingent. To drive home this point, he included three basic annals instead of the customary one, each devoted to one of the three states that would later make up the Koryŏ state. And the stories told in these annals did not necessarily agree with one another, wreaking immediate ontological havoc. Later Chosŏn authors called him “boring” and “vulgar” and his history “blasphemous”, “unsubstantiated, bizarre and fallacious”.¹⁶ But the discrepancies in his book were not mistakes or oversights. They were put there knowingly.¹⁷ Kim Pushik recognized that ideology (the proper way to write a history in this case) came second to historical contingency (historical events, even if they were contradictory). History shapes the human world, in which ideology (such as Confucianism) is a mere tool to try and govern it. Both before and after Kim, but especially after him, historians would look at the world with their ideology (Neo-Confucianism) as the tool to shape and remediate their world, cure it of its ills and return it to its original pristine state. Kim Pushik approached the world through (his understanding) of historical experiences instead of through the ideals of ideology. Contingency in history leads us also to something that has been foreshadowed in a triumph of self-referential serendipity in the work of Jose Luis Borges. Borges wrote several times about precursors to certain famous literary works (such as the works of Kafka for example). In itself this is not very remarkable. What is remarkable about Borges’ argument (and at the same time impeccably logical), however, is his insistence that these precursors become precursors only retroactively. There is not necessarily the kind of (linear) historical development historians like to see in which a related string of precursors develop into a (until then) something that was perhaps not predestined but at least made plausible by the precursors (each of which contributed something). Borges shows his readers that such predecessors may be identified as precursors to a certain writer, book or literary notion *after the fact*. This identification may be the only link between precursor and the later writer, book or notion. It also seems completely ahistorical. Or is it? If we assume that history is contingent, it

follows that nothing is preordained or predestined to happen. What remains is probability, plausibility. Events took place because it was plausible; a particular nation emerged because its emergence was favoured by the contingent circumstances. Nations are contingently formed. Not organically, not linearly and certainly not predestined to become a nation, national rhetoric notwithstanding. To put it simply, probability was on the side of a distinct community forming on the Korean peninsula (geographical location, early adoption of administrative tools, persistence of political and cultural patterns over the *longue durée* et cetera), but the Korean nation that is in existence today, just like any other, the Dutch certainly included, could also not have come into existence. Essentialism, the notion that essence is prior to existence, does not work historically. How does this tie in with Borges’ notion of precursors after the fact? Interestingly, Koryŏ history helps us out here. When Koryŏ came into being in the early tenth century, it unified the entire Korean peninsula for the first time. Although it might have seen itself as the successor of the previous unified Shilla state (which it did at times), it chose a different way to conceptualize its genealogy as a community. Let me read this to you:

In this month [Hyŏnjong] decreed: “The tombs of the kings of Koguryŏ, Paekche and Shilla shall be repaired by the concerned prefectures or counties. We forbid dry grass [for fuel] to be gathered [around the tombs]. Passers-by shall dismount from their horses when they pass a tomb.”¹⁸

In the eleventh year, [Munjong] decreed the following: “[...] We forbid the ploughing of fields in the neighbourhood of the tombs of the kings of Shilla, Koguryŏ and Paekche and of the ancestral shrines of the sages of old, as well as their invasion or destruction.”¹⁹

Royal tombs were sacred in Koryŏ. Whenever an invasion threatened almost the first thing that the rulers did was taking the royal coffin of the dynastic founder out of its tomb. They then buried it temporarily at a safe location. The care shown here for the royal tombs of previous dynasties, shows that

Koryŏ recognized these three earlier states on the peninsula as its precursors (there is a wealth of other evidence supporting this conclusion).²⁰ Koryŏ looked post factum upon this states as the elements which gave the Koryŏ state now its historical genealogy and legitimacy. It recognized these three as its charter states. Historian Victor Lieberman described a charter state as a state that “in varying degrees, provided a religious, political, and administrative charter for subsequent empires”.²¹ The most interesting thing about the charter state is that it is superbly historical: it is decided in retrospect, by looking back in other words, what state functions as a charter state. In that sense Borges’ notion that a book can have a post factum precursor, against appearances, would seem to be historical, because historians produce history backwards the way Borges retroactively looked for precursors to his classics. They work from the present to the past (and back again), although their (our) narratives suggest otherwise. Recognizing this explicitly successfully challenges the notion of for example the organically grown state. It accurately reflects what historians do, not what history is supposed to be by e.g. the state. Now this is not a very earthshattering thing to say, but there is a bonus here.

If, like Koryŏ, we get to choose our own precursors (conditioned of course by our historical experiences and present circumstances, restricted by what is historically or mythologically or psychologically available and desirable) lost connections may yet be restored. What is to stop us to look at Koryŏ, if only as a thought experiment, as a charter state and consider some of the notions that made it a hugely successful pluralist society? Although one thousand years ago and located on the other side of the planet, it would be misleading to suggest that Koryŏ had an unrecognizably different society from ours.

The keyword here is success. Koryŏ society turned out to be impressively successful in surviving and prospering for almost five centuries (again I ask you to compare this to e.g. China or Europe) amidst invasions, natural disasters, aggressive neighbours and invading barbarians. Apparently, and speaking

empirically, they did something right. Its approaches to the present of practical engagement (I prefer this term to ‘reality’), its behavioural patterns, its criteria for judgment yielded success. I will not go into what it was that Koryŏ did, but merely note that whatever they did right, they also did it quite differently from other cultures.²² Nonetheless, it should be noted (as it has been many times before)²³ that cultures, societies, are fluid. They are not closed, not well-defined and do not possess definitive borders. They change according to the pressure exerted upon them, the problems they are faced with, the needs they experience. Some fail, some succeed. They may laterally morph into one another. This characteristic, the opposite of essentialism, led Paul Feyerabend to state that ‘any culture is potentially any other culture’. And I agree. There are no fundamental differences between societies. All are permutations of the human potential. This does not mean that all are good. Evil is as much part of the human make-up as good is. Death camps are unfortunately as much part of that make-up as social welfare systems. Any difference that looks fundamental is a post factum rationalization or legitimization. And in this sense, elements that make up a culture freely travel and may be freely borrowed. If we wish to do so, we may borrow the Koryŏ notion of the royal lecture and restore the explicit connection between the past and the present. I have a very specific place in mind where I want this lecture to finish. I have tried to show you what elements, influences, notions went into the making of me as a scholar of the humanities. I did so by explicitly referring to Korea’s history, Koryŏ in particular. Now let me move my argument to the present. I hope I have shown that the practice of history was and thus can be an act that takes place smack in the middle of society. Koryŏ’s historians were Koryŏ’s policymakers, administrators, rulers, military commanders even. Now, I am not sure whether it would be a good idea to put me or my colleagues in charge of the Dutch army tomorrow, but I would like you to note that the study of history is not an activity pursued in splendid isolation. History is at the heart of who and what we are and what we do. History is not important

because of what we can learn from it or because it repeats itself, but because the past is not past. It is here with us and always will be. The future of the past is the present. If we add imagination, empathy, faith, methodological rigor and a rejection of essentialism to the mix, we end up with a powerful concoction that may well be labelled as *Geisteswissenschaft*, the humanities.

There is one more ingredient to add. I have talked as a historian until now, but I should add another voice. That of the area specialist. As you will undoubtedly have noticed I have talked about Korea from beginning to end. I am a historian *and* an area specialist. I start my study from a place, the Korean peninsula and in principle from antiquity to the present. The demands of the historical profession closely coincide with those of the area studies. In particular the need, the imperative to know the context, to know the relevant source languages. Area Studies brings an imperative of its own, woven into the notion of positionality that defines it. It demands an on-going reciprocated, thoughtful and scholastic engagement with the area from antiquity to present. In that sense, Area Studies brings us very close to those Koryŏ historians cum statesmen of old whose past was always in the present. They dealt with their world in all its complexity, as we as area scholars must. Hence, I find myself proposing a project in which Oakeshott's past is still very much present and that is imbued with the values of Area Studies, Vico's imagination and empathy, Steiner's faith, Kim Pushik's historical contingency. It shows with desperate and painful acuteness how any culture is potentially any other culture and how history matters, how different histories matter. The Korean peninsula is a living example of how histories can split (in this case under foreign pressure) and diverge. How extremities of permutations of human potential can sprout from the same tree: prosperity and democracy in the south, destitution and human rights abuses in the north. We have to be careful though not to let our gaze be led by essentialism or determinism. Hence this initiative, which will bring to bear the notions I have outlined in this lecture on the pasts and presents of the Korean peninsula.

The Leiden Initiative on Northern Korea (Leiden, inK.), launched yesterday, proposes to present a spatial, historical and analytical framework for northern Korea which will suitably contextualize North Korea instead of treating it as the reified symbol of unintelligible oddness it often understood to be. It seeks new avenues of understanding northern Korea across accepted political, historical and theoretical boundaries. Paraphrasing Geremie Barmé, it calls for a robust engagement with Korea and the Koreaphone world in all its complexity, be it local, regional or global.²⁴ And in particular with the north by promoting a deeper, more textured understanding of the Korean peninsula in combination with open dialogues with scholars and practitioners of different backgrounds and expertise. Ultimately it seeks to establish academic and human relationships with northern Korea as we engage in intellectual, academic, cultural and personal conversations with North Koreans: academically, but also culturally, politically, economically. Like the Koryŏ historians of old, Leiden, inK. stands firmly rooted in the present of practical engagement. Why do we need this? Let me briefly explain by using the example of Leiden, inK. The humanities, in which history and area studies occupy central positions, ask questions fundamental to the human condition. History is but a formalized version of the existential necessity to understand who we are, how we got here and where we are going. By knowing the foreign, the other, one's own circumstances are put into context. As such the humanities are crucial in making understandable that which to us seems foreign, dangerous or even inhuman. Understandable, but not necessary condonable; understanding North Korea is not equal to condoning its practices. Today, as in the past, as in Koryŏ, humanizing foreign countries, cultures is of the greatest importance. This may be achieved through the study of novels, poems, movies, epics, history, food. Or through comic books, blogs, and pop music. Before we send out an army to the Muslim extremists in Teheran or launch a pre-emptive strike on Pyongyang, we need to know what it is the other wants, what the other represents, what would be the consequences of such an action. This is

what Koryŏ historians excelled in. To produce historically, culturally informed knowledge and use it practically. To see the past in the present.

In the case of North Korea, we need more knowledge than the number of missiles it possesses. We need to know, to understand how the North Korean regime clings to power by deftly recycling history into reified mythology to instil a sense of real dread in its citizens with regard to the outside world despite atrocious domestic circumstances. We need to know why hundreds of millions are spent in China and South Korea to determine whose version of North Korean and North Chinese ancient history is right. We have to understand how important the historical narratives of Kim Il Sung's day as a Manchurian guerrilla still are. We also need to know how different perceptions of what happened brought us to this place and how these are aiding or obstructing possible solutions.

12 'Any culture is potentially any other culture,' said Paul Feyerabend. The human condition has not changed from Koryŏ unto now. The humanities, whether through history or area studies, investigate the glories and the embarrassments of the human condition. Then and now, here and there. If we refuse to employ imagination, empathy and faith harnessed by rigorous methodology in order to look at the other, this will lead to fear and dehumanization. Which will inevitably lead to conflict. While the humanities offer no panacea to stop this, they give us insight in the underlying mechanisms, they recognize the past in the present, which is indispensable. The connection is there, we just need to recognize it. Korean Studies in Leiden is as steadily footed in the 'real world' as the above initiative (and previous activities) suggests. In order to achieve the goals of the initiative, in order to keep doing what we have been doing and to remain true to what I think the humanities are about, Korean Studies in Leiden will keep positioning itself amidst the humanities and the social sciences, while actively engaging the world outside the gates of the academy, nationally and internationally. Although I think

I could properly be described as an academic fundamentalist with regard to the academic duties of a scholar, I also think that it is crucial to reach out (and be reached out to, this is a two-way street). In that sense, I more than welcome cooperation, exchange and interaction with the media, with museums, with NGO's, with corporations, in short, the private and public sector. We cannot stand alone and do not wish to do so.

I have been warned to keep my expressions of thanks short. I will try to do so, without any promises.

Honourable Rector Magnificus, highly esteemed Executive Board of Leiden University. I thank you for appointing me and for the importance you attach to Korean Studies in Leiden.

Highly esteemed van Crevel, dear Maghiel. Just when I knew for certain the wind would blow me in a different direction, you offered me an alternative. For this I am very grateful.

Highly esteemed Walraven, dear Boudewijn. A long time ago, I dropped in at one of your classes as a student merely taking an elective in Korean Studies. Now I am here. This journey was undertaken from beginning to end under your tutelage. For this I am very grateful to you.

Highly esteemed De Ceuster, highly esteemed Chi, dear Koen and dear Myŏngsuk. After years of investing and hard work from your sides, Korean Studies is now experiencing rapid growth. I know I am fortunate to be able to step on board now to become even faster, higher, stronger with you.

Your Excellency, the Ambassador of the Republic of Korea.
먼저 한국 정부에 대한 제 개인적인 감사의 말씀을
드리고자 합니다. 한국 정부는 저에게 수년간 먹고,
자고, 교육 받을 수 있는 장학금의 은혜를 베풀어
주셨습니다. 또 제가 교수로 임명된 이래 한국 대사관은
저희 대학의 한국학 성장을 도모하여 온갖 노력을

아끼지 않으셨습니다. 이 같은 협조가 지속되기를 간절히 바랍과 동시에, 저 역시도 의당당한 한국의 국위 선양을 한국에 대한 홍보를 위해 온 힘을 기울일 것을 삼가 약속드리겠습니다.

Highly esteemed Maliangkay, highly esteemed Penny, dear Roald, dear Ben, dear colleagues at the Australian National University and at East Asian History. Had I not been able to go to Canberra after my Ph.D., I would not have stood here today. More importantly, I would have missed out on what has turned out to be a defining experience for me, intellectually, professionally and personally.

Dear colleagues. I whistle on my way to work each day. This is largely due to you. I am looking forward to more and more intensive cooperation with you in teaching, research and other activities. Borders are there to be crossed.

Ladies and gentlemen students. You are the icing on the cake. I am honoured to find myself in front of you (in ever larger and fuller rooms, it seems). It is by the way true that the person in front of the class learns most.

Dearest family and friends. I have seen too little of you during the last few years and for this I blame myself. That is why I appreciate your presence here today all the more. 이윤선, 김대길, 김규태, 차송희, 김경필, 임수희. 저는 한국에 대해서 생각하면 머리에 高麗의 歷史像이 떠오르는 것보다도 당신들의 얼굴과 웃음소리가 떠오릅니다.

Dear Emiel, Pepijn en Vincent. After all these years, you are still my intellectual sounding board and conscience. I hope I am not causing too many pangs. I also thank you for helping me with this lecture today.

Dear Mam, Rik, Lennert and Asni. Your love and support have made this possible. Because you know who you are, I know who I am.

Dear Viktor and Arthur. You are probably watching cartoons now instead of listening to your father's words of wisdom, but without you this day would not be complete.

Dear Imke. I am standing here just because of you. You stood at the beginning of my love for Korea, now you are here. If I say that that makes me very glad and grateful, it would be the understatement of the century.

Dixi

Notes

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- ¹ Apparently, the ruler took pleasure in having scholars who were critical of one another's work and politics oppose one another during these lectures, one as lecturer, the other as the lecturer's formal opponent. The names of the opponents have often been recorded in the sources, showing how important their role was thought to be. See Remco Breuker, "Writing history in Koryŏ: Some early Koryŏ historical works reconsidered", *Korean histories* 2.1 (2010), pp. 57-84.
- ² *Yewang shich'aek mun* 睿王謚冊文 in *Tong munsŏn* 東文選 [hereafter *TMS*] 28: 18a-19a.
- ³ *Koryŏsa* 高麗史 [hereafter *KS*] 97: 3b-4b.
- ⁴ Michael Oakeshott, *On history and other essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), pp. 18-19.
- ⁵ *De antiquissima Itolorum Sapientia ex Lingua Latinae Originibus Eruenda* (1770). Quoted in Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 35.
- ⁶ Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Adventure of the Dancing Man", in *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes, Volume II*, edited by William S. Baring-Gould (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc, 1967), p. 543.
- ⁷ *De Antiquissima*, op cit. I, p. 136. Quoted in Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, pp. 29-40.
- ⁸ Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Boscombe Valley Mystery", in *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes, Volume II*, p. 137.
- ⁹ Isaiah Berlin, "The Sense of Reality", in *The Sense of Reality* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1997), pp. 22-23.
- ¹⁰ George Steiner, "Real Presences", in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), pp. 35.
- ¹¹ Giambattista Vico, *New Science* (London: Penguin, 2000), translated by David Marsh, p. 60.
- ¹² Jose Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel", in *Labyrinths* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 81-82.
- ¹³ Borges mentioned this theorem in the prose precursor of *The Library of Babel*. See his 1939 essay *The Total Library*: "[A] half-dozen monkeys provided with typewriters would, in a few eternities, produce all the books in the British Museum".
- ¹⁴ *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 41, 407-408.
- ¹⁵ Steiner, "Real presences", p. 34.
- ¹⁶ Kwŏn Kūn, *Chin Samguk saryak chŏn* 進三國史略箋 in *TMS* 44, 18a-19a. Also in Kwŏn Kūn, *Yangch'onjip* 陽村集 24, 11a-12b; *Ŭich'ŏng kanhaeng Tongguk saryak chŏn* 擬請刊行東國史略箋 in *TMS* 41, 21a-22a.
- ¹⁷ Breuker, *Establishing a Pluralist Society in Medieval Korea, 918-1170: History, Ideology and Identity in the Koryŏ Dynasty* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), Chapter 9; Yi Kangnae, 李康來. *Samguk sagi chŏn'goron* 三國史記典據論 (Seoul: Minjoksa 民族社, 1996), pp. 41-50.
- ¹⁸ *KS* 4, 24b.
- ¹⁹ *KS* 84, 19a-b.
- ²⁰ Breuker, *Establishing a Pluralist Society*, chapters 1-4.
- ²¹ Victor Lieberman, *Strange parallels: Southeast Asia in Global context, c. 800-1800: volume 1: Integration on the mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2003), p. 23.
- ²² Paul Feyerabend attests that 'it is an empirical fact supported by the multiplicity of approaches and results within and outside the sciences' that different (not all!) approaches to what we customarily call reality are successful. See Paul Feyerabend, *Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction Versus the Richness of Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 215.
- ²² See Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969).
- ²³ Geremie Barmé, "On New Sinology", *Chinese Studies Association of Australia Newsletter* 3 (2005). Online also accessible at http://ciw.anu.edu.au/new_sinology/index.php (accessed 10 September, 2012).

PROF.DR. R. BREUKER



Remco Breuker studied Japanese and Korean language and cultures at Leiden University. After his graduation he studied Korean history at the Graduate School of the Department of Korean History at Seoul National University. His Ph.D. (2006) was on the formation of plural identities in medieval Korea, while his present research seeks to reconceptualize medieval Northeast Asian history. He was a Research Fellow at the Australian National University (Research School for Pacific and Asian Studies) and worked on a government-funded three-year research project on Northeast Asian medieval history at Leiden University. In 2010, he was awarded the Heineken Young Scientists Award for History by the Dutch Academy of Royal Sciences. Currently, he is Professor of Korean Studies at Leiden University. Although a pre-modern historian of Korea by training, his interests also include Northeast Asian and Manchurian history, (contemporary) historiography, representations of identity, the question of modernity in pre-modern periods, landscape and history, cultures of forgery and contemporary Korean cinema. He is author of *Establishing a Pluralist Society in Medieval Korea, 918-1170: History, Ideology, and Identity in the Koryŏ Dynasty* (Brill, April 2010) and *Forging the Truth: Creative Deception and National Identity in Medieval Korea* (*East Asian History* 35, 2009). He is managing editor of *Korean Histories* and co-editor of *East Asian History*.



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