

Muslims in Medieval Korea: Personal Encounters with Connected World

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Introduction

In his approach to world history, Patrick Manning illustrates migratory paths of people from 500 to 1400 CE, ‘on horseback, on foot, and by boat’.¹ His broad and wide net does not cover the easternmost part of the Old World, as Korea, along with Japan, slips through the international network and un-touched by any of the interregional crisscross movements. And this is not at all an exceptional view of Korea and of its history. It reflects an enduring effect of the image of ‘Hermit Kingdom’ or ‘the Land of the Morning Calm’ on public imagination.² Even the Goryeo dynasty, although it took the dynamic part of the Mongol Empire of the 13th and 14th centuries, has not been properly included in the general survey of world history.

Despite these images, all the kingdoms on the Korean peninsula, until the Joseon dynasty in the 15th century, had been actively involved in international trades and communication with others beyond East Asian cultural sphere, whether out of their own choice or not. They openly embraced foreign immigrants, who must have played significant roles in shaping Korean history and culture. Muslims came into this historical context with their cultures. They gave an impact and influences on Korean art, culture and life, making each of them richer and diverse. Many documentary evidences have been brought to light to confirm their presence and roles in Korean history.

The immediate aim of the present article is to reconstruct a more complex Korean history by looking at literary and non-literary evidences of Korean-Muslim encounters until the early Joseon period in the fifteenth century. With this study, one minority group, with their hitherto untold story, shall regain their voice, thus expanding the circumference of the Korean medieval history. Based on literary accounts and material evidence, I will show the case studies of Muslims in Korea, with particular focus on their material-cultural presence and cultural assimilation.

I. Terminology and scope

As a starting point, I take the term ‘Islamic’ in the widest possible sense to include objects, forms and decorations used in the extensive regions that came under Islamic rule from the first year of the Islamic era, 622, and will narrow it down to highlight a certain local Islamic culture in communication with the Korean peninsula. Having established itself as a new religion in 622, Islam began to rise as strong political and military power under the Arabs. It swiftly conquered West Asia, followed by dominance over Central Asia, North Africa, and Southern Europe, creating the religious and cultural unity known as *ummah* (the community of the Muslims). Unlike medieval East Asia, where a powerful dynasty maintained considerable political and cultural unity in the region, Islam was a multi-centred, multi-regional, and multi-dynastic civilisation. As Said poignantly discussed in *Orientalism* (1978), there is a danger in bringing together diverse local cultures of such a vast geography under a

¹ Patrick Manning (2005) *Migration in World History* (Themes in World History) Routledge. 93-94

² These two names have been most popular sobriquets to denote Korea since the late 19th century, when Joseon (1392 – 1897/1910), the last hereditary kingdom in the peninsula, took a rigid closed-door policy when contacted and forced by the Western nations. The earliest examples of these appellations can be found in William Elliot Griffis (1882), *Corea, the Hermit Nation*, New York: Scribner’s Sons, and Percival Lowell (1886), *Chosön: the Land of the Morning Calm. A Sketch of Korea*, Boston: Tickner.

blanket term, ‘Islam’ or ‘the Islamic world’.³ This awareness also led Marshall Hodgson to coin the term of ‘Islamicate’ referring to ‘not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims’.⁴

Nonetheless, I will continue to use the term ‘Islamic’ as a descriptive term referring to both a religious and a cultural entity. This choice is due to the recognition that ‘the shared sources of the Islamic experience’ led to easy migration of co-religionists and rapid cross-fertilisation of ‘common discourse’ within the Islamic world.⁵ Amidst their diverse local traditions, Islamic artisans and craftsmen shared a distinctive set of cultural requirements for their arts and objects, among which include the special position was given to writing and arabesque.⁶ Another reason that led me to adopt a broader definition of Islam is that the material evidences found are mainly related to portable objects, not static monuments. The portability meant that these objects could travel from any part of the Islamic world to the Korean peninsula as gifts, personal belongings, souvenirs and others. I have, therefore, duly focused on Pan-Islamic occurrences and then defined a regional or periodic specification from such an umbrella concept.

It is not clear when Muslims and Koreans made the first contact with each other, and how it was made. However, *Silla* and the relevant information of the kingdom appears in the writings of medieval Muslim geographers from the 9th century. It is at least more than one century earlier than Muslims were mentioned as *daesik* in Korean historical records. No less than twenty Muslim scholars from Ibn Khurdadhbih (c. 820 – 912) to Al-Idrisi (1099–1165 or 1166) have made mentions of Silla kingdom.⁷ Some of them repeated a certain amount of the earlier information. They praised Silla for its pleasant weather and landscape, noble people and their incredibly high standard of life. Above all, its abundant gold was repeatedly mentioned. Some of these accounts must have been part of rhetorical trope of the period, as they seem to have been passed down from earlier records and shared widely among Muslim writers. Nevertheless, their descriptions provide considerable insights into the kingdoms of the Korean peninsula and their international relationship with the Islamic world.⁸

Two centuries later from the Islamic historical records, clear remarks on maritime connections with Muslim traders appear in Korean written sources. While Korean historical documents of the medieval period do not contain a generic term for Muslims or for Islam, a local term, *daesik* (*dashi* in Chinese), was used to denote Muslims when they first came to their territory.

According to *Goryeo-sa*, Muslim merchants made at least three visits in the earlier period of Goryeo during the 11th century. The first written record of Muslim visits to the Korean peninsula is found in the tenth month of lunar calendar in 1024. In the entry, *Yeol-la-ja* came to Goryeo with one hundred merchants from the country of *daesik* to pay their tribute. In the same month of the following year, *Ha-seon*, *Laja* and another one hundred people came from ‘the sea of *daesikguk*’ to pay tributes again (Book 5, *Goryeo-sa*). These records suggest that Muslim merchants visited Goryeo with a flotilla of ships. The next entry for the visit of Muslim traders is recorded in 1040, and the size of

³ For further anthropological debates on this issue, see L Abu-Lughod (1989), “Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab World”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 18: 267-306.

⁴ Marshall Hodgson (1974), *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization. Vol. 1*, Chicago. 59.

⁵ J. O. Voll (1994), “Islam as a Special World System”, *Journal of World History*, 5:213-226, 219.

⁶ R Ettinghausen, O Grabar, and M Jenkins-Madina (2001), *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250*, New Haven, 79.

⁷ Kei Won Chung and G. F. Hourani (1938), “Arab Geographers on Korea”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 58(4), 658-661; Lee Hee-Soo (2011), [*The Survey of New Discovery, Analysis and Interpretation of Ancient Manuscripts and Literary Materials on Korean Studies in the Middle East*], Seoul

⁸ For a closer reading of the medieval Muslim writings on Korean kingdoms, refer to the ft. 7

Muslim trading delegations seemed to have been consistently large, judging from a variety of goods they brought for trade – ‘mercury, dragon’s teeth (ivory), sandalwood, myrrh, sappan and other valuables’ (Book 6, *Goryeo-sa*). These goods were highly prized for their exotic nature and medicinal effects, and their diverse origins testify to the extensive and dynamic maritime networks of the period.

During the late Goryeo period when Goryeo became a tributary state of the Mongol Empire, the denomination of Muslim identity was changed from someone from *daesik* to *hoehoe* (*huihui* in Chinese),⁹ a term commonly used for Chinese Muslims or Muslims naturalised in China. Epitomising the change of mode of contacts between Koreans and Muslims over a long period of time, the term indicates the stability and importance of the Muslim status in Yuan China and the Mongol Empire in general. It reflects the intensity of Muslims’ involvement in local life over time. If the early stage of cultural encounters between Muslims and Koreans started in the guise of trade and commerce as epitomised in the term *daesik*, then the presence of Muslims in the late medieval Korean society was intensified by the use of *hoehoe*, meaning that they were sharing a common geographical space, co-existing and competing with locals for personal advancement.

In Korean historical documents, the term *hoehoe* was first used in the second half of the 13th century during the late Goryeo period when the dynasty was in the Mongol-Yuan political sphere. With no mention of their ethnicity or place of their ancestral origin, *hoehoe* in this article means Muslims of any origin settled in Korea. The degree of their settlement and the extent of their acculturation would depend on each individual case. In cases of completely voluntary integration, some *hoehoe* were allowed to take local surnames, marrying Korean women, and eventually being progenitors of certain clans, which survive to this day. It is apparent, however, that most *hoehoe* in Korea kept their religious conventions that were noticeably different from local rites in their own religious place, called *Yedang* (Ceremonial Hall).

Despite the dynastic change, this type of ‘co-existence’ continued to the final stage of Muslim-Korean encounters which includes the end of the Goryeo dynasty in the 14th century to King Sejong’s edict in the early Joseon period. The decree to prohibit Islamic cultural expressions in 1427 forced Muslim residents to find ways of assimilation and integration, which will be a main topic in the following discussion.¹⁰

II. Muslims in medieval Korea

During the period of its confrontation with the Mongol army, Korea suffered several devastating invasions of the Mongol army from 1231 to 1270, before finally becoming one of their tributary states. Goryeo became part of the 13th-century world system of the first ever globalised empire, otherwise known as the *Pax Mongolica*. The transcontinental trade that took place under the various branches of the Mongols is readily evident from reports by the wave of travellers who crisscrossed Eurasia during

⁹ There are many opinions regarding the origin of *huihui*. The term itself first appeared in Tang dynasty annals as a Chinese transcription of the Turkic runic inscription *uygur*. Colin MacKerras (1972), *The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynasty Histories*, Canberra, 224; The most widely accepted theory is that the term ‘*Huihui*’ first appeared in *Mengxi bitan*, [夢溪筆談, *The Dream Pool Essays*, 1088] by Shen Kuo (沈括 1031-1095) during the Northern Song period. In the Article ‘*Yuelu* [樂律 Musical law]’ of the book 5, the phrase ‘attack *huihui* 打回回’ is found in the lyric to celebrate victory in the battle of the Northern Song against Western Xia. Quoted in Jeong Soo-il (1994), 435.

¹⁰ For a discussion of interactions of and inspiration from Islamic material culture during this period, refer to In-Sung Kim Han (2013), ‘Objects as History: Islamic Material Culture in Medieval Korea’ *Orientalia*, 44 (3), 62-70.

this period. A recent study calculated that between 1242 and 1448, over 126 individuals or embassies, all from Eastern and Western Christendom, undertook journeys to central or East Asia.¹¹

Against this historical background, Rashid al-Din (1247-1318) had a fair understanding of geography of even the farthest part of the Empire, Korea. Unlike hasty repetitions made by earlier Muslim geographers, his knowledge of the Korean kingdom is accurate and up-to-date, as shown in his usage of the name of ‘Kaoli’, the Sinicised name of Goryeo, unlike previous Muslim writers, who kept using the name of the previous dynasty, Silla. In his account of the Yuan Empire, Rashid al-Din writes that the kingdom of Yuan consists of 12 provinces, to one of which ‘Kaoli’ belongs. And he also shows his clear understanding of the political situation at the time of his writing.

The third shire (*Shink*) is Kao Kau-li. It locates at the border of the Empire, having its own system of kingdom. The king is called ‘wang (*Wank*)’ in there. Kublai Khan married one of his daughters away to the King. Their son, Ingir Buka, although having a close family relationship with the Khan, couldn’t inherit the throne.¹²

The spread and share of local knowledge reveals how deeply and widely cultural and intellectual diffusion occurred in the Mongolian empire. During this time, Muslims came to the peninsula, and not only played important parts in imperial affairs and politics, but settled on a permanent basis.

- **Muslims in Goryeo**

Hoehoe

The presence of Muslims during the Mongol suzerainty over Goryeo was thus incomparably more powerful, pervasive and coercive than the one in the previous era. Besides their traditional way of trading, Muslims came to the kingdom of Goryeo as envoys and entourage of Mongol princesses when they wed Goryeo kings. Some Muslims became *Darugachi*, officials in the Mongol Empire in charge of a certain province, since Goryeo became one of the tributary states of the Mongol Yuan dynasty.

As in Yuan China, Muslims in the Korean peninsula were no longer guests or visiting merchants but had become residents. The record that ‘the *hoehoe* people held a banquet for the King’ in 1279 (Book 29/29, *Goryeo-sa*) indicates a Muslim presence at the Goryeo royal court and their closeness to Goryeo kings. The Muslim community was set up in and around the capital in Goryeo, with many Muslim people mixing with the local population through business or marriage. Some of them naturalised to Koreans and adopted Korean names. Samga is such a case. He was originally a *hoehoe*, and came to Goryeo as private assistant (*geop’ryong’gu*) to the Great Princess Jeguk (or Khutugh beki, 1259-97, r. 1274-97), a daughter of Kubilai Khan, when she married the Goryeo King Chungryeol in 1274. Samga had various appointments in Goryeo, made frequent diplomatic visits to the Yuan China with powerful connections to both the Yuan and Goryeo royal courts, who was often accused of vainglory and avarice. The text states that in 1297 ‘he had his house built in a conspicuous style. Its exterior walls were constructed using tiles and pebbles and decorated with floral motifs. It was called ‘Jang’s Wall’ (Biographies, *Goryeo-sa*). It is safe to assume that the motif on the wall was sufficiently different from the visual representations of contemporary Goryeo to earn the sobriquet. Considering that the foliate motifs were already common in 12th century Goryeo artefacts, the reason behind the sudden fame of ‘Jang’s Wall’ was the presence of foreign pattern or the more intricate and

¹¹ Thomas T. Allsen (2001), *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*, Cambridge, 113-114.

¹² Rashid al-Din (c. 1307), *Jami al-Tawarikh Volume II*, Kim Ho-Dong (2005)(trans.)[*The Successors of Genghis Khan*], Seoul. 421.

complex way of rendering the floral motifs, suggesting they may include Islamic visual vocabularies such as elaborate arabesque. He eventually became naturalised, and changed his name to Jang Sun-ryong. Awarded with the title and land from the court, he became the primogenitor of the Deoksu Jang clan. Though not Muslims themselves, they still commemorate their Muslim roots in their ancestral worship rite.¹³ His ethnicity is yet to be identified, with different suggestions of Arabic or Uyghur (or Central Asian) Turkic origin.¹⁴

Other Muslims were also recorded to be appointed as high-level government officials. Min-Bo, a Muslim, served as the governor of Pyongyang, the second capital of Goryeo, in 1310 (Book 33/33, *Goryeo-sa*). Although his surname could be a Koreanised transcription of a syllable ‘Min’ of his Muslim name as shown in Chinese Muslims, more probable is that he changed his name in the Korean style to the surname ‘Min’ followed by a single syllable ‘Bo’ for his given name. The matter-of-fact tone of this entry suggests there many more Muslims served as high-ranking officials for Goryeo court.

Korean Muslims

A recent discovery of a Goryeo Muslim tombstone shed further light into relation between Koreans and Muslims of the period. The tombstone was found in 1985 when construction work was being done on Islamic grave sites *qingzhenxianxian gumu* in Guangzhou.¹⁵ It is in the form of common shape and structure of traditional East Asian tombstone, a rectangular stone filled with inscriptions. But the inscriptions of this stone are made in two different languages, Arabic and Chinese. In fact, having nearly the whole of the tombstone covered with passages from Qu’ran Chapter 2, Verse 255 in the Arabic language, the language and his Islamic background look more relevant and significant to the deceased than the Chinese side. The Chinese language, in comparison, was used just for the border strips around the edges, from which inscriptions, the deceased has been identified as ‘Ramadan (刺馬丹)’, a Korean Muslim in the Goryeo period. He held the position of ‘Darugachi of Guangxi province.’ When he passed away ‘at the age of 38 in the 9th year of the Zhizheng reign (1349)’, ‘his funeral was held on the 18th day of the 8th month at the North of Guangzhou Castle.’ Arabic inscriptions further state that he was born ‘as the son of Allah Uddin on 1312 (the 4th Year of Goryeo King Chungseon’s reign).’ It also informs us that the Arabic inscription was written by someone called ‘Arsa, who had travelled to Halab (present-day Aleppo).’

Although it is impossible to state with any degree of certainty how and when Ramadan’s family could be Muslim, this tombstone enlightens us in many ways. Above all, it confirms the existence of Korean Muslims in Goryeo. Allah Uddin, Ramadan’s father, could be either one of incoming Muslims from foreign lands or local Korean converted to this newly introduced faith. If we take the former case, striking is that Ramadan was treated as an impeccable member of Goryeo even if the family originated from afar with non-local religion. On the other hand, if he was from a Korean family converted to Islam, the tombstone suggests the Islamic heritage spread deeply and continuously among the local Korean population of Goryeo. Considering the well-known open policy of the Mongol Empire and the lack of missionary zeal in the traditional attitude of ordinary Muslims, their conversion must have been voluntary (following Bentley’s ‘conversion by voluntary association’

¹³ Jeong Soo-il (2005), *Hankuksok ui segye* [World in Korea], Vol. 2, Seoul. 244

¹⁴ Lee, Hee-soo (1991), *Han-iseullam gyoryu-sa* [The History of Exchange between Korea and Islam], Seoul. 129-137.

¹⁵ The first identification of the tombstone was made by the Korean scholar, Park Hyun-Gyu during his research visit to southern China in 2003. An earlier comment on the tombstone was made by another Korean scholar Choi In-hak, but only the copy had been available, not the authentic object, at the time.

model).¹⁶ Whatever the reason for their conversion, Islamisation occurs most profoundly among the succeeding generation, since the children were raised within the father's new community, and not his original one.¹⁷ In either case, Ramadan came from a Muslim family of at least two generations.

The strong network and power of the Muslims within the Mongol Empire may have been of help for Ramadan in attaining a higher social position in Yuan China. His extensive travels in the southern part of China, including his official residence and final resting place, confirms the presence of longstanding Muslim communities in the areas, and suggests the possibility that other Korean Muslims may have settled there. Finally, a remark on 'Arsa,' albeit in passing, is noteworthy. Specific mention of his travelling to Aleppo may have been related to his origin, his travel to the city at a crossroad of continental trade route, or even his experience of the Hajj, as Aleppo, along with Damascus, was a common passage leading to Mecca from regions of Inner Asia. Whichever it was, the mention attests to the sheer extent of the network of Muslims settled in East Asia, who covered the vast landmass from Syria to Korea.

This cosmopolitan social atmosphere is well-versed in a Goryeo folksong entitled *Ssanghwa-jeom* from the 13th century.¹⁸ The title is generally interpreted as *Hoehoe Bakery*, although the meaning of *Ssanghwa* is a point of continuous debate. The most recent theory convincingly interprets it as accessories worn and used by *hoehoe*.¹⁹ In any discussion, the title invariably refers to something related Muslims having lived in the Korean peninsula. Here, Muslim presence in Goryeo society was noted as not only visible, but closely inter-related with other –mainly disreputable- groups of Goryeo. The song consists of four stanzas with refrains and similar contents. Its first stanza reads:

I go to the Huihui shop, buy a dumpling.
 An old Hui holds me by the hand
 If the story spreads out of the shop
 (Meaningless musical refrain: *daroreo geodireo*)
 I'll blame you, little clown!
 (Refrain)

The remaining three stanzas consist of similar libretto regarding a monk, a dragon and an innkeeper. The bawdy content of this folksong provides the picture of social circumstance in medieval Korea, in which the Muslim population and their dynamic, sometimes boisterous, presence was involved.

The song was known to have been created for a stage performance at a royal banquet of King Chungnyeol (r.1274-1308). The king, like many other Goryeo princes during the Yuan dynasty, spent his young age as royal hostage in the Yuan capital, as arranged by the peace treaty of Goryeo and Yuan in 1257. The song is known to have been moderated by the subsequent dynasty of Joseon to accommodate the high moral standards demanded by Confucian philosophy, and was cited as evidence of corruption and decadence of later Goryeo society under Mongol suzerainty. Apart from

¹⁶ Jerry H. Bentley (1996), "Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History" *The American Historical Review*, 101 (3) : 749-770, 759.

¹⁷ Richard Bulliet (1979), "Conversion to Islam and the Emergence of a Muslim Society in Iran", Nehemia Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam*, New York. 30-51.

¹⁸ It is not known when exactly the song was composed. Ironically, the song has survived only through Joseon Confucian scholars' comment on its seedy contents and their distaste in the mid-Joseon period. From the records of the Joseon period, the composition date of the song is attributed to the 21st to 25th year of the reign of King Chungryeol (1274-1308), Cha Ju-hwan (trans.)(1972), *Goryeo-sa ak-ji* [Music, *Goryeo-sa*], Seoul. 5, 246.

¹⁹ Park, Deok-yu (2001), "'<Ssanghwajeom> ui ullyul mit tongsagujo yeongu [Study on the Rhythm and Syntactical Structure of Ssanghwajeom]", *Hanguk eomun gyoyug yeongu*, 29(2), 21-42, 36-37.

the moralistic approach to the song, the content unveils the social circumstances of Muslim integration happening at the most humble strata, running parallel to the assimilation on the highest level. Like Jang Sun-ryong, Muslims at higher status were allowed even to compile their own genealogy, a habit that is kept even today. The mention of *hoehoe* alongside lower levels of social strata in *Ssanghwa-jeom* suggests that there is much to be learned about the mutual influences and historical connectedness between these two traditions among ordinary people. Such co-existence continued to the early period of the Joseon dynasty, with Muslim identities even more prominent.

- **Muslims in Early Joseon**

In the year of 1427, King Sejong (1397-1450, r. 1418-1450) proclaimed a royal edict, as entreated by the Ministry of Rites (*Yejo*). It reads;

Since the *hoehoe* has worn different costume (with clothing and headgear), people watch them as not belonging to our people and avoid marrying them. Having become this kingdom's subject, our way of clothing must be followed in order to remove difference of the *hoehoe*. This would naturally lead to intermarriage. Furthermore, the *hoehoe* should be forbidden to do their way of 'rites' during Great Assembly of the Court. Decree Allowed. (the 9th year of King Sejong, *Joseon Wangjo Sillok*)

This decree, in the early reign of King Sejong, targeted a single minority group on Joseon territory, the *hoehoe*. It officially prohibited any sign of Muslim identity, including Islamic cultural and religious expressions and customs, within the Korean peninsula. Ironically, this powerful policy to attempt to eradicate Muslim identity is also an equally powerful endorsement of Muslim presence and of their influence, to compensating the meagre notes on Muslims in Korean historical records.

We can surmise from the edict that there was a substantial number, or influence, of Muslims in the Korean peninsula. While some of them probably mixed with locals in the early Joseon society, the majority of them seemed to be content to live in their own community. A mention of 'intermarriage' further indicates that their stay on the peninsula was not on a temporary basis but had become a permanent residence. They were allowed to practice Islam ('their way of rites') not just within their own community but even in court ceremonies of Joseon until the year of the edict. And Muslims still managed to keep their own cultural identity, wearing different clothing and headgear. The presence of a number of high-profile Muslims must have been the result of certain length of continuous participation in the local high society. Some of them held governing offices and status high enough to participate in the royal assemblies of the Joseon court. In summary, these Muslims were not upstarts. They were sufficiently powerful and visible to attract the attention of Joseon Confucian officials, who did not want to share the court assembly and power with them.

Other articles from the *Joseon Wangjo Sillok* corroborate that Muslims before the edict attended royal ceremonies and official audiences. They appeared quite regularly at the royal attendance, especially during the reign of King Sejong. In 1418, when the new King held his coronation ceremony, Muslims, along with Buddhist monks, paid homage to the King standing at the end of the long procession of Joseon Confucian officials. Several further cases record the presence and the role of Muslim subjects, such as the New Year ceremonies in 1419, 1425, and 1426, the winter solstice ceremony of 1426 and a regular court assembly in 1427. In 1422 when the royal funeral of the previous king was held, Muslim dignitaries were standing alongside 'many officials who were left in the capital, 'respectable officials in retirement (*kiro*)', Buddhist monks' to bid farewell to the funerary procession. The order of the procession seems to be a formal procedure in

official gatherings and court audience, as Muslim subjects are recorded to have accompanied ‘respectable officials in retirement’, Buddhist monks, and the Japanese envoy most of the time.

Until they were ultimately forced to assimilate into local culture, Muslims in medieval Korea were able to have their own religious leader, the *hoehoe-samun* (Muslim *imam*). Some of these *hoehoe-samun* were recorded and their names were identified; a Muslim leader, named *Dara*, appeared at the New Year ceremony of 1412. The name may have been used for an individual imam, but equally possible is that it could have covered a general term of a certain functionary amongst Muslim clerics. ‘*Doro*’ is such a case. The Muslim cleric whose name was *Doro* appeared in 1407 when he was introduced by a Japanese high-ranking envoy to the court of King Taejong and asked for permission to stay on the peninsula with his wife and children (the 12th year of King Taejong). The same name occurred in 1422 when King Sejong ordered to grant him ‘five *seok* of rice.’²⁰ Although it is possible that this particular *hoehoe-samun* could have appeared in the Joseon court with an interval of almost two decades, in all likelihood the name of *Doro* was a generic title accorded to the *hoehoe-samun*. More importantly, this story records the presence of the religious leader, *hoehoe-samun*. It confirms the fact that the number of Muslim believers populating on the peninsula at that time was substantial enough to warrant *hoehoe-samuns*. Some of these imams even received a royal stipend, indicating that their religion and their role were acknowledged by Joseon royal circles of the early period.

- **Muslims in Later Joseon**

From the year 1427, the existence of Korean Muslims was brought to an abrupt end and any mention of them virtually disappeared from historical records. This silence could have been explained as mass exodus of Korean Muslims to China or to Islamic lands in order to escape the enforcement of the 1427 edict. It is highly unlikely, however. First of all, no record of mass migrations of Muslims were found in Korean historical documents, nor was any mention of Muslims emigrated from the Korean peninsula made in Chinese or Islamic records. It was extremely difficult to move across the border during the period when both nascent dynasties of Ming China and Joseon Korea were vigilant of their people’s movements, and heavily regulated them. Under this historical circumstance, it is fair to suggest that Muslim residents stayed in the peninsula and assimilated themselves into Joseon customs in the face of the sudden enforcement policy eradicating their cultural identity.

Further mention of Muslims or *hoehoe* is rarely found in the later period of Joseon after King Sejong’s reign. On a few occasions when Muslims were mentioned in Korean written documents until the end of the dynasty, they were only casually referred to and always extraneous to main events. It shows how gradually but firmly the memory of Korean local Muslims, *hoehoe*, faded away to a level of complete oblivion.

In 1443 and 1445, still in Sejong’s reign, Islamic culture, particularly its astrological contributions were drawn from when regulating the new calendric system. In the *Annals of King Sejong*, Joseon literati appeared acquainted with Islamic calendric system and kept the relevant documents in the court library for reference. It was not only at scholarly level that the memory of Islamic culture was retained. Ordinary people’s cultural memory of Muslims in Joseon was still relatively certain and vivid until the mid-fifteenth century. In 1453 during his grandson’s brief reign (Danjong 1452-1455), Joseon seamen reported their experience in the Ryukyu kingdom (present-day Okinawa) after having been rescued from shipwreck. Among their thorough observations of Ryukyu customs, the men’s way of covering their head with white cloth was compared with the typical way of Muslim dress. The white headscarf was apparently an obvious sign of Muslim sartorial custom. A

²⁰ *Seok*: traditional unit for measuring grains. 1 *seok* is approximately equivalent to present-day 1000 litres

Muslim attendant wears a white head scarf, in a manner described by Joseon seamen in one of Dunhuang murals in cave 158, datable to mid-Tang period.²¹ For a contemporary image of the same attire, a Muslim woman wearing a white scarf is recognized in one of the murals of *Yongle Gong* (the Palace of Eternal Joy), in northern China's Shanxi Province.²² The Joseon seamen's remark on the headscarf as a common reference point attests to their accurate understanding and vivid memory of the Muslim way of life among Joseon people.

The precipitous decline of local knowledge of Muslim lifestyle is found in a later remark of Muslims in the *Annals*. In 1508, eighty years after the proclamation of the 1427 edict, Joseon envoys reported to the court of their official visit to the Ming court in Beijing and described Muslims in China:

I [one of the envoys] heard *hoehoe* people do not eat meat killed by other people and always eat what they butchered. They also are of good disposition and read scriptures, and have been accepted within the palace as learned men (the 3rd year of King Jungjong, *Joseon Wangjo Sillok*)

Their report is notable especially on account of two points - the accurate reflection of the sudden popularity of Muslims in the contemporary Ming court of Emperor Zhengde (1491-1521) and the manner of his report on Muslims. Both the envoys and the Joseon court audience did not show any preliminary knowledge of the way of life Muslims led. The envoy started the report on the Muslims in China with the word, 'heard', an indication of their absence of personal experience or observation. Their elaboration on the very fundamental difference of dietary habits further supports this argument. No hint of familiarity with Muslims and their religion transpires from the report.

As shown above, far as Muslim residents in their territory were concerned, Ming China and Joseon Korea took a markedly different approach. The Ming dynasty, as usual in China, adopted a *laissez-faire* policy on foreign religions and cultures as long as certain boundaries were respected. Compared to it, Joseon created a fairly uniform society by forcing foreigners to accommodate themselves into its tradition and culture. In the later Joseon historical records, there are no more mentions of Muslim population or their idiosyncrasy at all in the Korean peninsula. Having no record of mass emigration of any ethnic or religious group in the Joseon dynasty, we can deduce that, within less than 100 years since the proclamation of the royal edict in 1427, any Muslim identity would have been fully assimilated with that of the local population of the Korean peninsula.

III. The Assimilation of Muslims in Joseon Korea

- **The Confucianisation of Muslims**

As for the possible mode of assimilation of Muslims into Joseon society, the case of Chinese Muslims gives a relevant point of comparison that allows us to figure out how Muslims in Joseon Korea may have responded to the abrupt policy of 1427. Throughout Chinese history since their arrival, Chinese Muslims adapted well to their new environment. During the Mongol-Yuan period, Muslims served the court and society in a variety of roles, particularly as *darugachi*, a court-appointed local governor, and *ortog*, a contracted merchant. Acting as agents in Mongol-Yuan dynasty, Muslim officials and rich merchants were mostly targets of hate from Han-Chinese.

²¹ Roderick Whitfield (1995), *Dunhuang: Caves of the Singing Sands : Buddhist Art from the Silk Road, vol.1*, with photographs by Ōtsuka Seigo, London. 182.

²² Xiao Jun (2008), *Yongle gong bi hua* [The Murals in Yongle Palace], *Wenwu*, 205

Like Sayyid Ajall in Yuan China, Muslim acculturation to Chinese culture, particularly to the Confucian system, was inevitable as they became part of the Chinese population under the Yuan dynasty. Many of Muslims became well-versed in Confucian scholarship and served the dynasty following the tradition of Confucian literati, while keeping their religious identity intact. Sadula (c.1300-c.1350), a Central Asian Muslim, is well-known for such an example.²³ Although his family originally belonged to the Danishmand (men of letters and experts of rational sciences) in the Western regions, he was born in present-day Daixian, Shanxi Province of China, as a consequence of his family's relocation owing to the Mongol's western campaigns. Sadula became an accomplished Confucian scholar, passing the imperial examination with *jinshi* (equivalent to a doctorate) degree in 1327. He was renowned for his poetry and calligraphy. Such familiarization of Confucian learning by the Muslims became even more pervasive during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), when the contacts with other Islamic lands outside China declined.

During the same period when the Joseon court ordered acculturation to local Muslims, Ming China underwent an anti-climax of international trade and communication. China imposed isolation upon itself after the powerful support of the Yongle Emperor (1402-1424), who had encouraged the daring maritime expeditions of Zheng He (1371-1434). And defensive reactions and nativist policy of Ming reduced travel beyond China to a minimum. Increasingly separated from the Islamic world, Wang Daiyu (c.1570-c.1660), the most influential Muslim scholar of the period,²⁴ presented a system of Islamic thought interpreted through Confucian ideas and anecdotes.²⁵

An identical phenomenon of adaptation of Confucian Muslim took place in the Muslim community in Korea during the period between late Goryeo and Joseon periods. Seol Son (?-1360, *Xie Boliaoxun*, aka *Xie Xun* in Chinese) epitomizes such a type of cultural synthesis. He was a Muslim from a highly cultured Uyghur family in the Mongol-Yuan Empire. The family was renowned for their Neo-Confucian scholarship, whose members had taught the Mongol imperial princes. They were also noted for 'their competence in multiple languages, a skill that they inherited from their Uyghur ancestors, as Michael C Brose wrote.²⁶ Following his family tradition, Seol Son passed the *jinshi* examination in 1345 and was eventually promoted to become part of staff in the Imperial Crown Prince's Study (*Duanbentang zhengzi*) in Dadu. During his tenure, he made a close friendship with the future Goryeo King Kongmin (1351-1374), who was also placed in the same office as a royal hostage from Goryeo.²⁷ In 1358 when the Red Turban Rebellion swept through most of China, Seol Son fled to Goryeo with his family (Biographies, Book 25, *Goryeo-sa*). King Gongmin welcomed his old acquaintance and endowed him with a honorary title and land. His Confucian scholarship and teachings were highly esteemed among Goryeo officials, who became increasingly attracted to Neo-Confucianism. Some of Seol Son's sons and grandsons became proficient Confucian scholars, took several high-ranking offices at the Joseon court, sometimes assuming the successful role of envoys to

²³ Ch'en Yüan (1925 [1966]), *Western and Central Asians in China under the Mongols: Their Transformation into Chinese*, Ch'ien Hsing-hai and L.Carrington Goodrich(trans. & annotated), Los Angeles.151.

²⁴ Michael Dillon (1999), *China's Muslim Hui Community: Migration, Settlement and Sects*, Richmond, 36-38.

²⁵ Sachiko Murata et al. (2000), *Chinese Gleams of Sufi light: Wang Tai-yü's Great Learning of the Pure and Real and Liu Chih's Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm*, New York. 4-22.

²⁶ Michael C Brose (2013), "Neo-Confucian Uyghur Semuren in Goryeo and Joseon Korean Society and Politics", Morris Rossabi (ed), *Eurasian Influences on Yuan China*, Singapore, 178-199, 187.

²⁷ It was the usual custom of the Mongol-Yuan dynasty to demand that certain members of the royal family from its tributary countries were held as political hostages (*doklohwa* 禿魯花) and as partakers in the culture of the Mongol empire. Goryeo sent their crown princes and other members of royal family to the Yuan court after the treaty with the Mongols in 1259.

Ming China.²⁸ As shown by the example of the Seol family, Muslim community, or at least its upper echelons, had already mastered a refined accomplishment of Confucian learning and higher knowledge of local culture even before their full assimilation was enforced by the Joseon Confucian literati.

Through adapting Confucian learning and local knowledge, Muslims came to be immaculate members of society. In the process of complete acculturation and assimilation, it became virtually impossible to distinguish the Muslim immigrants from the local Koreans once they had adopted the Joseon way of life and changed their names to Korean ones. Many descendants of Seol Son, for example, are commemorated for the high level of their Confucian scholarship and their role as efficient court officials. None were remembered for their Islamic devotion. When Muslim families with renowned ancestors went through such intense cultural transformation, severing themselves from their original roots, ordinary Muslims living in the peninsula could hardly have left any cultural traces to their original religion. Over the course of the time, they lost their Islamic identity and completely blended into Korean culture.

- **Cases of Islamic cultural legacy**

It is the traditional view that the religious acculturation was regarded as the cause of the disappearance of the Korean Muslims. The truth might be different, however. The acculturation of the Muslims in medieval Korea, both gradual and abrupt, made local people in the peninsula become aware of the commensurability of both cultures of Islam and Korea, and contributed to enrich local tradition by compromising, negotiating, and synthesizing these two different cultures. This is the basic tenet of an influential cultural theorist, Eric M Kramer, and his approach to acculturation. Kramer states that acculturation is not just ‘mere quantitative combinations’ implying one-way assimilation of a minority group to a larger society, but ‘co-evolution’ and ‘pan-evolution’, an integral way to understand how all species are constantly adjusting to each other through complex patterns and chain reactions.²⁹ One minority, however small, affects and changes the whole society. The assimilation of Muslims leaves no Islamic art with visibly different cultural markers, but at the same time it releases other -more neutral- elements of Islamic culture affecting the status quo of Korean culture. The loss of Muslim’ cultural identity and their acculturation have led to reinvent their culture, adjusting it to local taste and convention, thus making it more acceptable to local Koreans.

Once Muslims became absorbed into Joseon society, the Islamic culture they had brought and produced at the beginning was assimilated into the local one, and thereby recognized as Korean. The point in case is the formation of a new calendric system under rule of King Sejong in the early 15th century. To produce an accurate calendar, the King appointed the best minds of the kingdom regardless of their rank in an exceptional attempt to take charge of the project. In order to produce a Korean calendar, they studied the Xuanming calendar from Tang China and compared it with the Shoushi calendar from Yuan China, known as *hoehoe* calendrical system due to its foundation in the Islamic astronomical system.³⁰ After 12 years of labour and research to develop a calendrical method

²⁸ Baek Ok-kyoung (2008), “*Yeo-mal Seon-cho Seol Jang-su ui jeongchi hwaldong gwa hyeonsil-insik* [The Political Thinking and View of Reality of Seol Jang-su from the Late Goryeo to Early Joseon], *Joseon Sidae-sahakbo*, 46 : 5-40

²⁹ Eric Mark Kramer (2013), “Dimensional accrual and dissociation: An introduction”, J. Grace and E. M. Kramer (eds.), *Communication, Comparative Cultures, and Civilizations*, New York. 3,123-184 ,129-133.

³⁰ Nathan Sivin (1990), “Science and Medicine in Chinese History”, Paul S Ropp (ed), *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, Berkeley, 164-196, 192; Park Seong-rae (2002), “Susiryeog suyonggwa chiljeongsan wanseong: jung-gug wonhyeong-ui hangukjeok byeonhyeong [Institutional Borrowings from China and their Korean Recreations: Calendrical Sciences]”, *Hanguk gwahak sahakhoe-ji*, 24 (2): 166-199.

that would facilitate accurate calculation of the movements of the heavenly bodies, a work entitled *A Calculation of the Movements of the Seven Celestial Determinants* was proclaimed in 1442. Regarded as one of the most remarkable astronomical achievements of its day, the calendar fully incorporated the calendrical theories of China and the Islamic world, adjusting them with reference to the latitude of Seoul.³¹ It shows that what we come to regard as a high achievement of Korean culture is not the product of a closed society, but of continuous adaptation and integration of foreign cultures, most prominent amongst them the Islamic one, into a local reservoir of accumulated knowledge.

Likewise, the integration of Islamic art into the Korean cultural repertoire did not require a particularly difficult process of adjustment, in view of the relatively easy cultural communications between Confucian and Islam. A factor supporting the likelihood of survival of Islamic artistic production in Joseon Korea is the existence of Muslim artisans among *hoehoes*. Apart from royals, aristocrats, high-ranking scholars, most of Muslims, just like any other immigrant population, tended to be involved in some kind of manual work, technique or crafts for their livelihood in Goryeo and Joseon society. As in early Joseon, some Imams served as carvers of crystal, jade, or other precious stones, even being offered the right of monopoly to mining (the 12th year of King Taejong, *Joseon Wanjo Sillok*). Imams as skilled craftsmen are in tune with Islamic cultural tradition, as Islamic countries have rarely looked down on manual craftsmen in medieval period at least. Craftsmen and other commoners succeeded in reaching higher positions in the Mamluk establishment, for example, and even Sultans took some craft as their hobby showing their highly developed skill.³² During the Goryeo period, Buddhist monks at lower position of the monastery or religious order were also reputed for their refined craftsmanship, but this combination of religious devotion with skilled work virtually disappeared when manual work started to be looked down upon in the Joseon period.

Against the easy 'blend-in' of certain Islamic artistic elements to Korean culture, other elements displaying explicitly their Islamic culture have not survived well. Such unwelcomed cases could be artistic products with Islamic religious themes, non-local figural representations, and inscriptions in Arabic or Persian. The inscriptions in Arabic and Persian are certainly reminiscent of the religion of Islam, whether from Quran or not. But more importantly, Joseon Korea did simply not have the cultural context to require or consume such foreign, unintelligible scripts.

From the historical archives of the Japanese Colonial period, I discovered evidence bearing Arabic or Persian inscription in the material remains of the Joseon dynasty.³³ It is on a roof-end tile, known to have been found at the site of Buseok-sa in the North Gyeongsang province. As the present location has not been found, the photo image of Ogawa Keikichi's collection is the only available source to locate this culturally composite object. It shows Persian script in a medallion on either side of the tile, and the centre is filled with Chinese characters. The meaning of the scripts cannot be defined without further knowledge of the context in which this particular roof tile was used. Also possible is that the script was originally used as a non-verbal design pattern to decorate the roof

³¹ Jeong, Seong-hui (2005), *Joseonsidae ujugwangwa yeokbeob-ui ihae* [Understanding of the Concept of Universe and Calendar during Joseon dynasty], Seoul.124-131.

³² Doris Behrens-Abouseif (2011), "Craftsmen, upstarts and Sufis in the Late Mamluk period", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 74 (03): 375-395.

³³ It is impossible to identify either Arabic or Persian only by looking at fragmentary letters, as these two languages share the Arabic script for their alphabet. The language can be identified only when it is contextualised. Historical records and material cultural evidence in China support the fact that Persianate Islam was the most powerful presence in East Asia. The continuous use of the Persian language in official documents of Ming China is confirmed in the long scroll depicting the event that the Yongle emperor commemorated his parent with the aid of the Tibetan lama, Halima. Roderick Whitefield (2014), "Ming Pyrotechnics: the Xiaoling and the Linggusi in the 1407 Scroll", *Arts of Asia*, 44 (6) : 71-81.

surface, visually appealing, exactly the same way as some Sanskrit words in roundels were adopted in medieval Korean architecture including non-Buddhist buildings, mainly as auspicious symbols.

Our present knowledge, or the lack of it, do not provide any firm ground to determine whether the tilemaker was originally from Islamic lands or a local craftsmen with visual acquaintance of Islamic culture. It is also not certain whether the tile was used in a building used by Muslims or whether it was part of a local building such as a Buddhist or Confucian one. This photo image nevertheless corroborates not only the existence of Muslims in medieval Korea but also suggests their involvement in the local material culture and the cultural synthesis Islamic culture brought to the Joseon society.

Conclusion

The article started with a definition of ‘Islam’, ‘Muslims’ or ‘Islamic art’ as covering the whole range of the medieval Islamic world. Of the whole regions of the medieval Islamic world, I argued that the Turkic-Iranian cultural zone held most of the cultural contacts and interaction with the Korean kingdoms. Nearly all the identifiable Muslim residents had some sort of geographical tie with this region. This observation agrees with existing scholarship. Most of the mosques in China, a significant example of Islamic architectural expression in the East Asian cultural region, reveal a strong visual affinity to the ones in Persianate Islam, with their iwans and arches.

In the early 20th century, Berthold Laufer pointed out the trouble of distinguishing acculturated Muslims from local Chinese, ‘save that they abstain from pork and do not eat together with infidels or anything cooked by them’³⁴ Laufer proposed two reasons for the difficulty in researching Islamic art in China; one is the scarcity of the material at our disposal and the other is distinctive effort by Muslims to being invisible in China. To compensate for their absence in official records, the research into cultural products, particularly material culture, could serve as a silent witness to any possible connection to Islamic sources.

³⁴ Berthold Laufer (1934), “Chinese Muḥammedan Bronzes: With a Study of the Arabic Inscriptions by Martin Sprengling”, *Ars Islamica*, 1 (2): 133-147, Freer Gallery of Art.