Archival Practice in Premodern Korea: Recordkeeping as Archive and as Historiography

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Abstract

Historians of pre-modern Korea struggle with the apparent absence of any genuine archives. Although documents that are traditionally seen to belong in an archive have been transmitted, they are nearly all unique samples. In other words, they do not form part of an organic collection, they are random examples that somehow have been preserved. The term “archive” has become the staple of European history writing since the nineteenth century, when Leopold von Ranke turned to archives as the prime hunting ground for historical research. Yet he only discovered and used systematically what was there—vast collections of documents hoarded by institutions. By contrast, in Korea history writing had always been monopolized by the state, and while a vast amount of written documents must have been produced to keep the bureaucracy running, barely any of them have survived. Rather than being kept, they were simply reflected in the vast collections of what I call “processed” records or “meta-archives,” of which the most well-known is the sillok (veritable records). Thus we are dealing with a different “recording culture,” one that obviated the need for “archives” in the sense of (more or less) organized collections of primary documents.

Keywords: archives, historiography, records and record-keeping, pre-modern Korea, Koryŏ, Chosŏn