

Isabelle Sancho, *The Master from Mountains and Fields: Prose Writings of Hwadam, Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023), 262 pp., ISBN: 9780824893637.

Martin Gehlmann
Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Hwadam Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk 花潭 徐敬德 (1489–1546) is often regarded as a symbol of eremitism and one of the more enigmatic figures in Korean Confucianism. However, in her excellent translation *The Master from Mountains and Fields: Prose Writings of Hwadam, Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk*, Isabelle Sancho demonstrates how deeply Hwadam was integrated into the Confucian discourse of his time and how thoroughly he was versed in intellectual traditions imported from China.

The translation includes not only Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk's prose writings from his *munjip* 文集 (collected writings) published in 1787 but also features prefaces and postscripts written by his disciples and their descendants. By incorporating these additional texts, the translation goes beyond just a study of Hwadam's philosophical writings, revealing how his followers sought to frame their master's work to elevate their own reputations through the creation of such a collected edition. Sancho makes this clear in her introduction to the translation, as she discusses the compilation and publication history of the *Hwadam chip* 花潭集 (Collected Writings of Hwadam) and highlights the significance this publication held for the legacy of Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk (pp. 12–16).

In her introductory discussion of Hwadam's thought, Sancho emphasizes that, although his disciples attempted to downplay his focus on the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) and the numerological and cosmological writings of Song dynasty scholar Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011–1077) to present him as more “orthodox,” these texts reveal how central these theories were to his thinking and how profoundly they influenced his writings on ritual and metaphysics (pp.

17–18). Nonetheless, Hwadam's four texts on “Patterning Principle (*yi* 理)” and “Vital Energy (*ki* 氣)” (pp. 81–113) remain central in this translation. This is due less to the arrangement of the *Hwadam chip* by Hwadam's disciples to emphasize these texts and more because of Isabelle Sancho's excellent and consistent translation, along with her thorough explanations provided in the notes to the respective texts. These texts, together with Sancho's annotations, can be viewed as an introduction to the fundamental Neo-Confucian metaphysical beliefs of 16th-century Chosŏn Korea, including references to the debates that would later arise over the relationship between the two concepts. Although some prior knowledge of Confucian philosophical concepts is certainly helpful for the reader, the coherent translation of terminology and the extensive explanations in the notes provide a clear and vivid understanding of how Hwadam perceived the formation of the universe and everything within it. The practical application of this theoretical framework then becomes evident in the text “On the Distinctive Characteristics of Hot Springs” (pp. 122–125), where Hwadam addresses the conundrum of warm water emerging from the ground. Here, his ‘Confucian’ epistemology and logic become more graspable by offering the reader a real-life application of his ideas.

Not all of Hwadam's writings were related to metaphysical speculations; his social and political convictions become apparent in the longer memorial addressed to King Injong 仁宗 (r. 1544–1545), which was never submitted due to the king's premature death (pp. 52–72). In this memorial, Hwadam criticizes what he perceives as the court's misguided choices

regarding clothing and ritual behavior during the mourning process for the deceased King Chungjong 中宗 (r. 1506–1544). By heavily referencing ritual texts from antiquity, he emphasizes the importance of rituals for maintaining social order. For the modern reader, the text reveals the potential for disputes over appropriate headgear, clothing, and the proper duration of mourning—issues that would later dominate Korean Confucian discourse in the 17th and 18th centuries. Additionally, the memorial challenges later portrayals of Hwadam as a world-weary hermit, casting doubt on the notion that he was detached from the Confucian discourse of his time. The text reveals that, despite his reputation as an eccentric scholar, Hwadam was regarded by his contemporaries as an authority on politically significant, albeit dry, issues.

Hwadam's historical status as an enigmatic hermit or mystical figure stems from his engagement with numerology, cosmology, and, prognostication. Texts dealing with these fields, as well as phonology, comprise the latter part of his *munjip*. Works on the relationships and movements between hexagrams (pp. 144–157) and the “Analysis of the Numbers of the Supreme Ultimate Across the Ages” (pp. 137–143) reveal this layer of thought and present a challenge for readers unfamiliar with the core ideas of the educational tradition of Shao Yong. Once again, it is Isabelle Sancho's exceptional translations and insightful explanations that make these texts accessible, dispelling their arcane reputation. One can only imagine the immense effort and research required not only to grasp these texts in their original, but to also render them comprehensible in English.

Up to this point in the translation, the decision to place notes directly after the respective texts is a sensible one, as footnotes would have cluttered the pages and leave only a sentence of translation alongside numerous notes. Pure endnotes, on the other hand, would require tedious flipping back and forth of the whole book. However, in this section, the limitations of the chosen format become evident. Illustrations and diagrams would have been helpful in clarifying the shifts between hexagrams, as well as the tools and practices of divination, making these complex concepts more accessible to the reader. In her preface,

Sancho notes that illustrations and other references had to be omitted for editorial reasons (p. XIV). These materials would have been especially helpful in this section of the book. Without them, the text remains only accessible for experts, or demands further research from the reader. Thankfully, Sancho offers a wealth of starting points for such inquiry through her references. The practical implications of the ideas on hexagrams and divination discussed in the texts become evident in the sections on the courtesy names of two of Hwadam's disciples included in the translation. The last few texts round out the translation with the chronological biography of Hwadam and several post-faces by his disciples and later editors of his collected writings.

In my opinion, it would have been beneficial to include at least one or two of Hwadam's poems in the translation. Sancho explains that she focused on the prose, believing her translations would not do justice to Hwadam's poetic works (p. XI). However, poetry holds such a central role in the collected writings of Confucian scholars that including even a few of his poems—no matter how formal or allusive—would have provided a more complete picture of Hwadam's thought and intellectual legacy. In particular, many of Hwadam's poems are closely tied to his philosophical ideas or offer valuable insights into his literary world.

Isabelle Sancho's translation of the collected writings of Hwadam is a masterful demonstration of how significant academic translations are to the field pre-modern Korean studies. It also serves as a reminder that translation work deserves greater respect and recognition. The book offers both a window into the world of a 16th-century Confucian scholar in Chosŏn Korea through his own words, and an in-depth study of the ideas and concepts he articulated. While the texts included in the book vary in difficulty, the explanatory notes make the translated text comprehensible for both experts and newcomers with a keen interest in the history of Confucianism.

Martin Gehlmann

Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Note by the editors of *Korean Histories*: Isabelle Sancho's *The Master from Mountains and Fields*:

Isabelle Sancho, *The Master from Mountains and Fields: Prose Writings of Hwadam, Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023), 262 pp., ISBN: 9780824893637.

Prose Writings of Hwadam, Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk was awarded the AKSE Book Prize on June 20, 2025 at the AKSE conference in Edinburgh.