Introduction

At the time of the Tan’o festival, men gathered in the outskirts of cities and in the countryside surrounding the cities and villages of Chosŏn (1392-1910). They formed parties, gathered sticks and stones and fought out bloody battles, often leaving some dead or mangled. This was called “stone fighting” (sŏkchŏn) and was an important feature of life in Chosŏn. The practice of sŏkchŏn was remarkably persistent and only ended in the 20th century.

There has been little research on the subject of stone fighting. An article by Ch’oe Tongyŏl, which was published in 1991, discusses some aspects of sŏkchŏn. Even though Ch’oe’s article provides an impressive overview on the sources, it was mostly ignored. Its publication in the journal of a provincial university in Wŏnju, where Ch’oe was an assistant professor at the time, might have been a factor. Another noteworthy exception is the excellent article on the development of stone fighting by

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Kim Ch'angsŏk, published more than a decade later, in 2003. There is next to nothing on sŏkchŏn in Western language scholarship.

What is Sŏkchŏn?

Sŏkchŏn was a formalized fight in which two parties fought each other, hurling stones as weapons. While other forms of violence could be included, stones were the primary weapon, thus the name sŏkchŏn, which means “stone fighting.” Even though less than deadly force was supposed to be used, stone fighting was extremely violent and led to serious injuries, sometimes even death. Elaborate tactics were sometimes employed, but most of it was a brawl involving the throwing of stones, which Ch'oe Namsŏn termed a “slightly cruel game.”

The usual time for stone fighting seems to have been around the time of the Tano festival (fifth day of the fifth month of the Chinese calendar), a festival that is celebrated all over East Asia. In China for example, martial games such as polo and archery were usual pastimes during this time.

While the stone battles might have reached a degree of intensity on the Korean peninsula that is missing elsewhere, they are by no means unique to Korea. Stone fighting traditions can be found in China and Japan as well and similar phenomena, though mostly sans rocks, are spread all over the globe. As far as I know, this is the first study to compare different forms of stone fighting and similar traditions in Korea and beyond.

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4 David M. Robinson, Martial Spectacles of the Ming Court (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), 155-192; 208; 241.

5 For Japan and China, see Kim, “Sŏkchŏn-ŭi Kiwŏn-gwa Kŭ Sŏnggkŏk Pyŏnhwa,” 2f. Also see Ch’oe Namsŏn, “Sŏkchŏn,” 237.
The Term **Sŏkchŏn**

The tradition translated as “stone fighting” in this article historically has had many names. The translation “stone fighting” is not without problems, thus it is useful to compare the different names for stone fighting in Korean language records.

The Korean translation of the Chinese term *chŏn* used in translations of *sŏkchŏn* is *ssaum*, which is a nominalized form derived from a verb (*ssauda* “to fight”) and literally means “fight.” All the Korean translations are quite late, being from the latter half of the Chosŏn era, so they are not much use at improving our understanding of how the earlier uses of the term *sŏkchŏn* should be interpreted.

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The beginning of **Sŏkchŏn** (antiquity and Three Kingdoms)

The earliest mention of stone fighting practices is found in an ethnological treatise on the Koguryŏ (abbreviated to “Koryŏ”) branch of the Eastern barbarians (東夷 tong’i in Korean, dongyi in Chinese) in the *Suishu* (隋書), the history of the Chinese Sui dynasty (581-618), published in

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“At the beginning of every year, [the people] gather at the border of the Fei river. The king mounts a litter and the banners are arranged for the king to inspect them. When this is over, the king walks into the water in his garments and divides [the people] to the left and the right so as to form two teams. They splash water at each other and throw stones at each other and they run to and fro shouting. They do this a second and then a third time, and then stop.”

Yagi Sosaburo believes that this ritual might have been derived from the annual practice of collecting water from the still frozen river. To make this laborious task easier, it was turned into a festival-like game. There are, to my knowledge, no further sources on Koguryŏ stone fighting. It is only some 900 years later that the next sources appear the Koryŏsa, the history of the Koryŏ dynasty, written during the early Chosŏn dynasty. According to these records, Sŏkchŏn was a popular part of Koryŏ culture.

What is interesting about this early record is the reference to water splashing games, which only appear in the Koryŏsa and are not mentioned in any of the later sources that I have seen. Water splashing is a

8 It is not clear which river it is. From its prominent position in the Koguryŏ area, it could very likely be the Yalu river or the Tumen river.
9 Hoŭi (羽儀) could also be a pars pro toto refer to the king’s bodyguard or even to other military units present at the ceremony.
prominent feature of some South Asian and South East Asian New Year festivals and rituals. One is tempted to speculate that there might be a link between these traditions and the water splashing and stone throwing festival of Koguryō.

Sŏkchŏn in the Koryŏ state

Koryŏ King Sin U (r. 1374-1388), the only Koryŏ king who did not receive a posthumous title, is described in the Koryŏsa as a notoriously bad king. Obviously, this is a justification for the overthrow of the Koryŏ ruling house and the installation of the Chosŏn dynasty by general Yi Sŏng-gye (1335-1408), who then ruled as King T'aejo (r. 1392-1398) of Chosŏn. Since the Koryŏsa was written during the Chosŏn dynasty during the reign of King Sejong (r. 1418-1450), we can expect nothing but a pro-Chosŏn perspective. One of the events betraying the wickedness of King Sin U happened in the 6th year of his reign (1379), when he wanted to watch the stone fighting, but one of the counselors remonstrated against this and the king had him beaten.

“In the fifth month [of the sixth year of the reign of King Sin U (1379)], U demanded to see a stone fighting game. Chisinsa Yi Chonsŏng remonstrated: “This is not something that is appropriate for you, the King, to see.” The king was unhappy about this and he ordered a eunuch to beat Chonsŏng. Chonsŏng fled. The king grabbed a pellet bow and shot at him. It is the custom of the country that on the day of the Tan'o festival, the rabble and riff-

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14 A kind of bow that shoots small balls, pellets, instead of arrows.
raff band together in groups and roam the streets. They split into a left and a right team. They grab tiles and gravel and attack each other – sometimes they even use clubs – to decide victory and defeat. This is called ‘stone fighting.’”  

The king’s love for stone fighting is associated with his lack of moral conduct. The event is set in the fifth month, so it seems to have occurred at the time of the Tan’o festival.

The Late Koryŏ era poet Yi Saek (1328-1396) wrote a poem on stone fighting, in which he vividly describes the activity in his poem, “Stone Fighting During the Tan’o Festival”.

<Stone Fighting During the Tan’o Festival>
Year after year at the time of the Tan’o festival, groups band together and play,
With thrown stones they attack each other, forming two lines of battle.
At the horse market and at the river banks, they already gather at dawn,
In the north of the Buddhist temple, they only return by dusk.
Suddenly they are pushed forward, nimble like dry leaves,
With resolve they crush ahead, solid as a mountain.
Only because of the court, recruiting for brave soldiers,
They get mangled with disfigured faces and eyes, this truly is a disgrace.

15 “五月 禍欲觀石戰戲 知申事李存性 諫曰 此非上所當觀 禍不悅 使小豎歐存性 存性趨出 禍取彈丸射之 國俗於端午時 市井無賴之徒 群聚通衢 分左右隊 手瓦礫相搏 或雜以短梃以決勝負 謂之石戰.” Koryŏsa (高麗史), juan 31 (5th Month, 6th Year of King Sin U). Also see Cho Chunho, “Sŏkchŏn-ŭi Sūp’och’usoksŏng-e Kwan-han Sa-jŏk Haesŏk (Historical analysis on the characteristics of rock fighting as a sport),” Han’guk Ch’eyuk Hakhoeji 48, no. 6 (November 2009): 5.
16 Also see Kim Ch’angnok “Sŏkchŏn-ŭi Kiwŏn-gwa Kŭ Sŏnggkŏk Pyŏnhwa,” 19.
17 Yi Saek (李穡), “＜端午石戦＞ 年年端午聚群頑 飛石相攻兩陣間 马市川邊朝已集 僧
The description is very vivid and lively. There is little doubt that this is intended to give the reader an exciting portrait of stone fighting to enjoy. Most of his readers can be assumed to have been familiar with sŏkchŏn. The last double line, in which he harshly criticizes the dangers of stone fighting is in contrast to this positive description. His critique can be read as being directed against the court, who should find less oppressive ways of government.

Yi Saek also wrote another, more positive poem on stone fighting:

Stone fighting is vigorous, in martial stances they play,
Even though I look down upon it from a high tower, it is still distressing.
Now that my hair is greying, I am ever more fond of it,
And as I remember that time, the ale makes my cheeks flush.

Here, stone fighting is a symbol of youth gone by, which the lyrical self fondly remembers. Instead of partaking in the stone fighting himself, he projects his desire for youthful energy onto the spectators’ joy of watching sŏkchŏn. There is no critique of stone fighting to be found in this poem at all, only a slight smirk at the folly of youth.

**Sŏkchŏn in Chosŏn Korea**

There are plenty of sources on stone fighting in Chosŏn times, where

齋寺北暮方還 忽然被逐輕如藥 屹爾當衝重似山 只為朝廷求勇士 殘傷面目亦胡顏,”
*Mog'ún Siyŏp* (牧隱詩藁), 417b f, [http://db.itkc.or.kr](http://db.itkc.or.kr). (Korean Classics Database).

18 Even though the standard translation for *chu* 酒 is “wine”, “ale” is a much better translation since the drink in question is most likely a grain-based fermented alcoholic beverage.

Sŏkchŏn was a popular, widely known activity involving complex social implications. As with other Chosŏn sources, most surviving materials are from the Late Chosŏn period, that is from the 17th century onwards.

The Late Chosŏn scholar Yi Hakkyu (1770-1835) fell out of favor with the court multiple times and spent much of his time in banishment pursuing folklore studies. In those, he included a text titled “Stone Fighting”:

“Stone fighting. It is practiced with great fervor in the capital [Hansŏng] and in Kaesŏng.

[From here on the record is a citation out of the *Koryŏsa*]

Koryŏsa, Monograph on Justice, In the fifth month of the first year of the reign of King Ch’ungmok [1337], the stone throwing game at the time of the Tan’o festival was banned. In the 23rd year of the reign of King Kongmin [1373], the game of polo and the stone fighting game were banned. In the fifth month of the sixth year of the reign of King Sin U [1379], the king demanded to see a stone fighting game. Chisinsa Yi Chonsŏng remonstrated: “This is not something that is appropriate for you, the King, to see.” The king was unhappy about this and he ordered a eunuch to beat Chonsŏng. It is the custom of the country that on the day of the Tan’o festival, the rabble and riff-raff bands together in groups and roams the streets. They split into a left and a right team. They grab tiles and gravel and attack each other – sometimes they even use clubs – to decide victory and defeat. This is called ‘stone fighting.’ [End of citation from Koryŏsa]

These customs are exactly like what we see today. Only in the old days it was on Tan’o and now it is on the day of the Sangwŏn festival. I do not know why this is so. During the Kŏllyŏng era (the reign of King Chŏngjo, 1776-1800), multiple attempts were made to ban this custom, but it did not stop. They enter the field full of wild courage, so that they do not look after their own bodies. So much that they smash their heads and pierce their breasts,
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without even feeling remorse at this. It is most ridiculous.”

Yi Hakkyu obviously does not approve of stone fighting. His citing of the Koryŏsa to prove that attempts to ban stone fighting go back as far as the Koryŏ period should be understood as an indictment of the rulers of his contemporary Chosŏn state, who were incapable of enforcing a ban on stone fighting even after such a long time.

The fact that people are willing to “smash their heads and pierce their breasts” should be enough to explain why stone fighting is detrimental to public order. Confucianism calls for preserving one’s body, since it is a gift from one’s parents. It can be assumed that Yi Hakkyu is referring to this. Far from neutral terminology, he calls those who participate in stone fighting “the rabble and riff-raff.” Further, the notorious King U is cited as a proponent of stone fighting.

Yi Hakkyu is not the only one to cite sŏkchŏn as occurring on the Sangwŏn day. Yu Tŭkkong (1748-1807) also describes stone fights as taking place on the Sangwŏn day:

“Popular customs; The Sangwŏn festival.

Outside of the three city gates, the people of Ahyŏn [in Hansŏng] battled each other at Mallihyoŏn using thrown rocks. Popular belief has it that whoever wins [that battle] outside of the three city gates will enjoy prosperity in his district. If [the district] of Ahyŏn wins, then the streets of Ahyŏn will prosper. [Therefore, the districts of] Yongsan, Maho and Akso band together to save Ahyŏn. When they then fight excitedly, the sound of their yelling

shakes the ground. Shattered foreheads and broken limbs they do not fear at all. The offices in charge have tried to ban this again and again, but the youth of the town keep doing it. People passing by on the street are afraid of the rocks and turn the other way to avoid them.

(Commentary: The Gaolizhuan in the Tangshu reports that at the beginning of each year the people gathered at the banks of the Fei river and splashed each other with water and with stones. This developed further and further and then came to be the beginning of the custom of the Eastern [country] that it is now).”

Another report on sŏkchŏn can be found in Kim Ryŏ’s (1766-1821) self-commentary on his Song About Folk Customs on the Sangwŏn Day (上元俚曲, Sangwŏn I’gok):

“The young men of the village split themselves into groups and fight each other with thrown stones. This is called a ‘side fight (便戰).’ It is also called a ‘stone fight (石戰).’ District Jailer Kim O'gŭp persecuted them and banned this.”

Kim Ryŏ does not only mention stone fighting as an important part of the Sangwŏn festival, but he also emphasizes the intervention of state power trying to put an end to it. The text leaves open whether the ban of sŏkchŏn was effective, but the other materials seem to suggest that it was effective.


The End of Sŏkchŏn

Ch’oe Tongyŏl claims that sŏkchŏn ended in the early 20th century, but without giving further information on this. Korean nationalists have suggested that Japanese colonialism oppressed sŏkchŏn because of the important role that stone fighting played for the identity and the fitness of the Korean people. Stone fighting might then have been perceived as a threat to colonial rule, sŏkchŏn being in conflict with modernity and expressing the very essence of Korean backwardness and lack of adaption to the modern world. But this description is somewhat speculative. On an interesting side-note, Homer Hulbert assumed in his article from 1905, that “In former times there was less danger attached to the game than there is to-day.”

The colonial period saw some interest in Korean stone fighting by Japanese anthropologists, who studied sŏkchŏn as an expression of Korean folklore. Stone fighting was a very popular event, drawing “thousands of spectators.” It is thus not astounding that it attracted the attention of scholars of Korean culture. These studies, which were ground-breaking at their time, had a political agenda: sŏkchŏn was linked to other phenomena of ritualistic fighting and festivals in East Asia, thus embedding stone fighting into a hegemonic and unified cultural sphere.
edly filtered by imperialist ideas of their time, these early studies make an honest attempt to come to grips with the complexity of stone fighting.

According to Bruce Cumings, the mid-20th century still saw a form of sŏkchŏn, this time being used to resolve political differences between villages:

“Korea has also many two-clan villages, in which one group may be dominant and the other disadvantaged for centuries (...) By 1947 traditional clan dominance in two-clan villages had solidified or been restored; thus, one got a pock-marked pattern of "leftist" villages here, "rightist" villages there - sometimes just next door, as the CIA noted. And "class conflict" often took the traditional Korean form of neighboring villages gathering to fling rocks at one another, the Kims against the Paks instead of the Hatfields and the McCoys.”

Song Kiho dates the end of stone fighting in Korea as late as the 1960s. And Cho Chunho, relying on Hŏ In'ok, claims that stone fighting existed up to the 1970s in some areas of South Korea. Stone fighting also existed among the Korean minority in China, but the only Chinese source that I could find on the subject claims that the tradition of stone fighting is discontinued today. The article on sŏkchŏn in the Chinese Dictionary of Korean Literature and Art (Chaoxian wenxue yishu da

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Omoi Izuru Manimani,” Jinruigaku Zasshi 32, no. 3 (March 1917): 77-80.
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states that stone fighting is nearly non-existent today because people get hurt so easily. Currently, there are no reports on sŏkchŏn in either Korea, nor in the Chaoxianzu population of China, so that it can be assumed that sŏkchŏn is effectively dead now.

It is also claimed that sŏkchŏn lives on in the form of a dance derived from stone fighting, as mentioned in the North Korean encyclopedia Chosŏn tae paekkwa sajŏn. According to that encyclopedia, the stone fighting dance (sŏkchŏnmu) is a phenomenon found in both Southern and Northern P’yŏng’an province. It is said to still carry the “martial spirit” of stone fighting and mixes fighting moves by men with more gentle dancing moves by women. Since the article is rather short, it seems unlikely that sŏkchŏnmu is considered an important cultural heritage in North Korea.

Ironically, only after its end as a cultural practice, stone fighting became a part of official Korean culture. While the tradition lived on for centuries and might have been a part of proto-Korean culture, it could only become “Culture” (with a capital “C”) once it entered the museum. One of the earliest accounts that explains sŏkchŏn as a legitimate aspect of Korean culture is Ch’oe Namsŏn’s (1890-1957) explanation of stone fighting. Ch’oe Tongyŏl states that sŏkchŏn was proof of the martial spirit of the Korean people. From then on, stone fighting has been researched and explained as a part of legitimate Korean Culture and, like everything in Korean Culture, has been integrated into the nationalist discourse.

As a side-note, sŏkchŏn, as Ch’oe Tongyŏl and Kim Ch’angsŏk both stress, was exclusively a male activity. Women seem to have taken part

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34 Ch’oe Namsŏn, “Sŏkchŏn.”
in it by encouraging participants to fight on and by sending back to the place of the stone battle those who attempted to flee and to shame them by calling them cowards.\textsuperscript{37} Thus, even though there was no direct participation of women in stone fighting, there was a place for women in the sŏkchŏn system. One could speculate that participation in stone fighting was an indicator of manliness and increased the desirability of a man to women.

### Similar Phenomena in Other Cultures

Violent clashes between clearly delineated groups and within distinctly demarcated spatial and chronological boundaries are nearly universal in world history. The feature that sets apart stone fighting in East Asia (not only in Korea) is the usage of stones.

There are arguments for the existence of such phenomena in Japan and Korea, which would benefit from further comparative study.\textsuperscript{38} Japanese historian Sōda Hiroshi has written a remarkable study of stone fighting as an East Asian phenomenon, which lists numerous examples from Japan, China and Korea.\textsuperscript{39} From his account, it is clear that East Asia has a number of stone fighting traditions.

Outside of East Asia, one striking example lends itself to comparison. This is the \textit{guerra di canne}, the “war of the sticks,” as fought in renais-

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\textsuperscript{38} Inō, “Sekisen Fūshū ni Tsukite Omoi Izuru Manimani,” 77f.

sance Venice. What makes this particular case a good subject of comparison is that it was fought with non-lethal weapons, obeyed a very rough but nevertheless clear set of rules, and that it was held between two clearly demarcated groups. Another Italian example is the “sport” of calcio, an early and extremely violent form of football, which is still played in Florence, but with a bit more regulation than the historical forms. The Italian examples serve as a reminder that should save us from exoticizing such forms of blood sports. They are native to Europe as well and they survive to some degree in violent “sports” such as boxing, rugby, American football, ice hockey, the “male” form of modern lacrosse etc.

\section*{Sŏkchŏn as a Sport?}

It is necessary to differentiate between at least two different types of stone fights: stone fights as actual battles or as training for battle, and stone fights as a (ritual) game. Sŏkchŏn seems to always fall into one or these two categories, but it does not seem as if competitive sŏkchŏn was ever fought as an end in itself. Spectators might have enjoyed watching the stone fights, but that was not the reason that the stone fights were fought. At least some of the participants might have enjoyed sŏkchŏn, but enjoyment of stone fighting was not so much its purpose as was another end - rituals for agricultural success, military training, or the settling (or inciting) of groups.

Stone fighting as a form of sports seems to be the prevailing interpretation of sŏkchŏn in the South Korean academia. As early as 1905, Hul-

\begin{itemize}
  \item[40] The guerra di canne has been described in detail by Robert Davis, \textit{The War of the Fists: Popular Culture and Popular Violence in Late Renaissance Venice} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
  \item[41] Even though it must be noted that this is mostly due to a certain bias in Korean (as well as Western?) academic discussion, which tends to relegate such “peripheral” topics as sports and pastimes to disciplines outside of the canon of pure history.
\end{itemize}
Hulbert drew some parallels between stone fighting and American baseball, both of which created coveted star players.\textsuperscript{42} Especially in the area of P'yŏngyang, stone fighting developed into a spectacle very similar to a sports event.\textsuperscript{43}

Most recently, Cho Chunho has summed up the analysis of sŏkchŏn as a sport. According to him, from the 15th century on, maybe earlier, sŏkchŏn developed into a sport-like activity, having more or less fixed rules and following a more or less fixed procedure.\textsuperscript{44} Further development then led to a sport that was secular, emphasized equality among the players, encouraged specialization, followed a set of rules, and even safety regulations. This, Cho Chunho claims, is enough to satisfy most characteristics that Allen Guttmann declared essential for modern sports.\textsuperscript{45} There even was considerable specialization in the specific roles inside the “team” that individual sŏkchŏn participants would prepare for.\textsuperscript{46} This points to a high amount of sophistication of stone fighters and also to a high degree of preparation that led up to sŏkchŏn battles.

But what is the effect of such a sport on society? Donald Fisher writes about Native American ball games that:

“Ball games also ensured the survival of a nation by reinforcing communalism, chieftain authority, and gender roles. From the beginning of an encounter, men paired off with opponents and pursued the ball in large clusters. The character of play allowed for significant latitude in individual performance. With little specialization of playing roles on the field aside from general attacking or defending responsibilities, the games encouraged conformity and

\textsuperscript{42} Hulbert, “The Stone-fight,” 52.
\textsuperscript{44} Cho, “Sŏkchŏn-ŭi Sŭp’ŏch’ŭsoksŏng-e Kwan-han Sa-jŏk Haesŏk,” 7.
an egalitarian social order.”

While Chosŏn was anything but an egalitarian society, the strengthening of a sense of communalism and the reinforcement of roles are surely ideas that fit in with the social ethics of Chosŏn society. They are also highly useful for the effective application of rules, which is so much easier when the subjects conform to proper behavior. Thus, there is in fact a benefit for the (proto-) nation which needs to be taken into account. Korean historian of sports Cho Chunho has also mentioned this aspect. He suggests that the participants of stone fighting would be in a state of relative equality during the fight. This is, of course, the form of equality in the struggle for winning the “battle,” but still this might be more equality than Chosŏn society could allow.

Fisher also notes that lacrosse is helpful for the building of stable communities. Lacrosse, and other American ball games “encouraged conformity and an egalitarian social order.” Social conformity is often noted as one of the key features of Korean society and it seems safe to say that Chosŏn elites did encourage and enforce a high degree of social conformity. Ch’oe Tongyŏl too believes that sŏkchŏn, as a form of inter-village fighting, was also an important factor in forming a sense of community in village societies. Why then did the moral elites not seek to actively employ sŏkchŏn for this end, if sŏkchŏn was so popular?

The answer can be found in the second part of Fisher’s summary of the social effects of American community games: since these games were egalitarian in nature, they were disruptive to the formation of social differences. Elites in a highly stratified society such as Chosŏn could not

47 Fisher, Lacrosse, 15.
48 The term “nation” is of course used differently by Fisher, who employs it to refer to Native American tribes, federations etc. by convention.
50 Fisher, Lacrosse, 15.
accept such notions, which they would have found threatening to their privileged position in society. Cho Chunho's analysis seems to support this assumption: for the duration of the stone fighting event, participants faced each other as equals, not unlike modern sport events.\(^{52}\) It needs to be added that this equality was of a very limited quality, since retribution after the end of the event always loomed over the less privileged participants. But still, there seems to exist a link between the social effects of stone fighting in Korea and the violent ball games of the Americas.

The aspect of relative equality for the duration of the game is one that seems even more striking when we keep in mind the extremely restrictive social ideology of the (late) Chosŏn era. In this context, the potentially subversive nature of stone fighting also becomes visible. \(Sŏkchŏn\) is worth being investigated more closely because it might be one of the few meeting places of equality in Chosŏn society.

In the end, of course, the question of what \(sŏkchŏn\) is, whether it is a sport or not, depends on the definition of what sport is. Depending on the focus, there surely can be enough common points with other activities that are usually accepted to be “sports” so that a comparative perspective on \(sŏkchŏn\) and other sports could yield fruitful results in the future. There also is something problematic with putting the label “sport” on something as violent as \(sŏkchŏn\), since this inevitably carries a certain apologetic and affirmative air. We should also not forget that much of the Korean language research on stone fighting was in fact done under the label of “sports.” The Korean word “\(nori\)” (“play”, “game”, maybe also “sport”) does not emphasize this difference, which might explain why Korean authors tend to apply these labels more liberally.

\underline{\textbf{\(Sŏkchŏn\) as Ritual}}

As we have seen, the early sources put stone fighting in the context of a

\(^{52}\) Cho, “\(Sŏkchŏn-ŭi Sůp’och’ŭsoksŏng-e Kwan-han Sa-jŏk Haesŏk,\)” 9.
state ritual over which the king watched. Chang Sŏngsu argues that sŏkchŏn – like other traditional games – started as a ritual in pre-historic times and then developed into a recreational activity.\(^{53}\) Inō Kanori gives examples for divination rituals in China, which also involve stone throwing.\(^{54}\) While this is not conclusive evidence, it points towards a frequency of regional occurrences of stone rituals, of which the various forms of sŏkchŏn might be one strain.

Later, sŏkchŏn was held on days of great significance for agriculture. Stone fighting was understood as a means to secure a good harvest and to ward off bad events in the coming year.\(^{55}\) The account by Hong Sŏngmin, which is quoted later in this article, describes the assumption in popular belief that the outcome of a stone fighting match would influence the well-being of the community.\(^{56}\) Such a connotation with mantic practices is very common in accounts of sŏkchŏn.\(^{57}\) Sōda Hiroshi presents more evidence for an East Asian tradition of stone fighting, which usually is connected to mantic practices deciding the turnout of the harvest.\(^{58}\)

Stone fighting might have been a form of fertility ritual, which would be believed to influence the harvest, agricultural matters in general, and even the health of the people of the village or district. Kim Ch'angsŏk and Song Kiho have convincingly argued that stone fighting could be understood as a sort of fertility ritual, even though it seems difficult to find out exactly what kind of function stone fighting had.\(^{59}\)


\(^{54}\) Inō, “Sekisen Fushū ni Tsukite Omoi Izuru Manimani,” 78.

\(^{55}\) Yagi, “Chŏsen no Sekisen Fushū,” 3f.

\(^{56}\) Hong Sŏngmin (洪聖民), Chorongiip (拙翁集), 511d-512c. http://db.itkc.or.kr (Korean Classics Database).

\(^{57}\) Inō, “Sekisen Fushū ni Tsukite Omoi Izuru Manimani,” 79.

\(^{58}\) Sōda, Ijin to Ishi Kyōkai no Chūgoku Kodaishi, 205.

Sŏkchŏn as Carnival

Sŏkchŏn was not just a leisure time activity. Such a concept of “leisure time” is a product of modern society and not applicable to the feudal structures of earlier societies. In fact, they were part of a regulated and well-structured social life. Different from the modern concept of “leisure time” and “hobbies,” sŏkchŏn and similar activities were much more “public” than “private.” They were not work, nor was everyone involved. But the individual would not have been free to decide whether to take part in the stone fights or not. Far from being an individual choice, sŏkchŏn were a tradition that one was placed into by being part of a group.

What I would like to suggest here is that sŏkchŏn can be understood as a phenomenon of “carnival,” as coined by Michail Bakhtin. According to Bakhtin, carnival is the half-conscious use of aesthetic elements of humor and of the grotesque to temporarily overcome the oppressive nature of (feudal) class society. Simply put, to Bakhtin carnival is a means of subversion, used by the oppressed class to revert social order for a limited period of time.

However, not every free time activity is subversive. According to Bakhtin, a “holiday” can even have the opposite effect of stabilizing society by celebrating and thus reinforcing the existing order. The dynamics of carnival are totally different, since the concept of it is completely opposed to any form of stagnation or conservation of a status quo. Carnival was the time, in which people could enact the “unofficial truth,” the “truth of the people.” This truth forms an alternative to official culture. Thus, carnival is, by nature, a subversive state, in which social order is

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62 Bachtin, Rabelais und seine Welt, 140-206.
reversed or at least broken up and in which official culture does not hold sufficient power to rule people’s lives. It could thus be said, that in Bakhtin's view, carnival is an early glimpse at future societies and at the inevitable collapse of (feudal) class society. Carnival, in Bakhtin's understanding, is progressive and potentially revolutionary.

In stone fighting, we surely can find a reversal of social order and a form of revolt against social norms: attacking police forces, battling and brawling without much thought for rank and prestige during the sŏkchŏn, and unruly and rude behavior. But is there really a progressive element? Is there anything that opens up a vision of an alternative to the oppressive present? Such a thing is hard to find in sŏkchŏn. Instead, we find the joy of martial competition, of lively activity, and of male machismo. Chosŏn period Confucian dogma – which is, of course, not to be taken at face-value – would want everyone to use their energy towards the building of a functioning, if oppressive, society. So, it seems that what remains as the element that sets stone fighting apart is its playful nature.

In the end, the notion of sŏkchŏn as a phenomenon of carnival in the strict Bakhtinian sense must be rejected. There was no real intermingling of participants, or any form of overturning social order, nor was there an element of voicing critique or taking (symbolic) revenge on socially superior wrong-doers. In fact, class distinctions were upheld in sŏkchŏn and efforts were made to prevent fighters of different class-background to face one another. While noye (“slaves”63) could take part in sŏkchŏn and were even instructed by their yangban masters to do so, they would not normally fight against those of yangban status background. Fear of punishment if a slave would injure a yangban status participant also was a factor in

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the decision to keep yangban and noye apart in sŏkchŏn. Ch’oe Tongyŏl believes that this was to both protect the noye from punishment if they injured yangban – but also because yangban thought it below them to fight against noye.

Valves for Public Anger

Another aspect of understanding sŏkchŏn is its possible cathartic effect. Stone fighting makes violence public and leads it into controlled channels. This is a much more general interpretation than Bakhtinian carnival, since it does not assume that there is anything subversive or otherwise progressive about socially channeled forms of violence. Instead, stone fighting can be seen as an outlet, as a valve for anger, frustration, and other symptoms of social discontent. Instead of leading to instability, the controlled escalation of aggression might have had a stabilizing effect on society.

The question remains whether sŏkchŏn has a cathartic element, and whether there is a factor of social stabilization in sŏkchŏn. The sources do not indicate that it was seen that way by the state. Whether the people involved might have felt so remains speculative.

Bakhtin's carnival explanation of sŏkchŏn and the social valve explanation of sŏkchŏn do not need to be mutually exclusive. While they are separate interpretations of social dynamics that must be clearly distinguished from each other, both forms could exist simultaneously, even in the same place. After all, stone fighting must be understood as a local phenomenon and thus differs from place to place. It would be misleading to assume that all forms of stone fighting were the same.

Sŏkchŏn as Rebellion

There is also the question of who sŏkchŏn belonged to. Sŏkchŏn itself is without meaning; only the social dynamics of it and the social relations that manifest in it that give it any meaning besides its obvious physical impact.

This can be explained by referring to the concept of “hegemony,” as laid out by Antonio Gramsci. Every practice in a society begs the question of who rules it. Social practice can be understood as being a continuum of “spaces” which can be ruled by classes (or possibly other social formations). Ruling a given space is to have “hegemony” over it. Sŏkchŏn then is one such space and everything that it could mean is determined by who rules it and by who exercises hegemony over it.

Hegemony over sŏkchŏn decides whether it can play a progressive historical role, which can be used by the oppressed class(es) to put forth their interests, or whether it will serve to preserve the status quo and thus become, historically, a force of reaction. Both modes can be seen in sŏkchŏn, which either can be subversive towards the state and challenge its power or can help to keep the elites in charge by misleading rebellious energy into channels that are harmless to the state. Sŏkchŏn could also be employed in support of the ruling elites through its use as a means of military training for the royal army. How common this use of stone fighting in military training was is difficult to establish. The Kunyŏng tŭngnok materials, which include a wealth of information on everyday life of Chosŏn soldiers could probably provide an answer.

Military Uses of Stone Fighting

At the beginning of this article, I have dated the start of stone fighting in historical records to the Bronze Age. Historian Park Dae-Jae goes back in history much further. In his view, stone fighting began in the late Neo-
lithic era, when stone weapons were used in war. He also refers to the use of stones in the early history of warfare and states that “seokjeon [=sŏkchôn] originated from the primitive war strategy of throwing stones.” Similarly, Cho Chunho too compares the early beginnings of sŏkchôn in North East Asia to “biblical” records of stone fighting, presumably referring to the use of stones in warfare and in other forms of combat, such as the slings used by shepherds etc., and possibly even to the biblical story of David slaying Goliath with a stone from his sling. The point seems to be that the use of stones as weapons can be assumed to play some role in very early (if not the earliest) forms of combat. While this is acceptable for itself, the descriptions of stone fighting in the East Asian sources seem very different from such use of stones in actual combat. Both the usage of stones in battles and the usage of stones in sŏkchôn did occur, but that does not mean that there is a direct connection between the two.

Both Park Dae-Jae and Cho Chunho claim that there was a military use of stone fighting in the early Three Kingdoms period (ca. 1. cent. BCE by traditional dating, probably much later). The text they refer to is the following.

69 This story is also referenced by Yagi Sosaburo, who cites it as evidence of a European stone fighting tradition. Yagi, “Chōsen no Sekisen Fūshū,” 3f.
70 The dating of the early phase of the Three Kingdoms in the records, which were compiled a long time after, is problematic and probably too early. Jonathan Best, A History of the Early Korean Kingdom of Paekche together with an annotated translation of the Paekche Annals of the Samguk sagi (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 7-11.
“Eleventh year [of the reign of king Namhae Ch’ach’aung (南解次次雄), r. 4-24?]. The Wae people\textsuperscript{72} sent more than a hundred warboats to plunder the households near the seaside. [The king] sent out elite soldiers from the Six Capital Districts to stop them. The [commandery] of Lelang had told [the Wae] that the country was undefended. So, they came to attack Kūmsŏng,\textsuperscript{73} which was then in great danger.\textsuperscript{74} In the night, a comet appeared. It fell down into the camp of the [Wae] bandits. They were all very afraid and retreated to fortify at the Alch’ŏn river. There they built twenty stone mounds and then departed. The soldiers of the Six Capital Districts pursued them from T’ohamsan up to the Alch’ŏn river. They saw the stone mounds and thought that the number of the bandits must have been huge, so they stopped.”\textsuperscript{75}

The interpretation of this quotation from the \textit{Samguksagi} as a reference to stones as weapons is highly speculative. The text mentions stone mounds (sŏktae), but does not clarify what their purpose is. Park's theory

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\textsuperscript{72} The Wae (倭) are usually identified as proto-Japanese.

\textsuperscript{73} Kūmsŏng (金城) was the capital of the Silla state. It was in the same location as the present day city of Kyŏngju (慶州).

\textsuperscript{74} The translation of the part starting with “The [commandery]...” until “...great danger” is not entirely clear. It is not clear whom the commandery of Lelang gave information to. It is also not clear whether the plan to attack Kūmsŏng was made by the Lelang commandery or by the Wae. It is also not clear what exactly was “undefended”. It could be the country of Silla, or only the capital. Other readings are also possible, but less plausible. The crucial point, which cannot be answered from the text, seems to be whether the text implies cooperation of the Lelang commandery and the Wae against Silla.

\textsuperscript{75} “十一年 倭人遣兵船百餘艘 掠海邊民戶 發六部勁兵以禦之 樂浪謂內虛來攻金城甚急 夜有流星 墜於賊營 衆懼而退 屯於闕川之上 造石堆二十而去 六部兵一千人追之 自吐含山東至闕川 見石堆知賊衆 乃止.” \textit{Samguksagi} (三國史記), Juan 1, Silla-bon’gi 1, 11th year of the reign of King Namhae Ch’ach’aung [Kim Pusik, \textit{Sin-wanyŏk Samguksagi}, trans. by Kim Chonggwŏn (Seoul: Myŏngmundang, 1988), 42]
“Such stone mounds were used as indicators of the scale of a military force. In the early first century, the use of iron weapons was not yet widespread, meaning that stones were used as the primary weapons of war. As such, seoktae served as armories or military bases in times of war.”

However, the Samguk sagi text seems to say that the building of stone mounds does not seem to have been a normal procedure at all, but rather an exception, which made it worth mentioning in the first place. The idea that the stone mounds might have served as armories goes back to an interpretation by Yagi Sosaburo in 1917, who stated that stones might have been used as cheap disposable weapons in the skirmishes between the ancient Japanese and Koreans. Cho Chunho is much more cautious with his interpretation, merely stating that the stone mounds seem to have been used as “supply bases” and that they might be somehow linked to stone fighting tactics, especially as they are found on a hilltop.

Claims to a military value of stone fighting in Korean history have also been voiced by other Korean scholars. Song Kiho mentions the existence of a Stone Throwing Force (ch’ŏksŏkkun) in Koryŏ times and that this was carried over into the Chosŏn era. The poem by Yi Saek which I have quoted above seems to suggest that stone fighting was used as a...

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76 Park, “War and Ritual in Ancient Korea,” 131.
77 Park Dae-Jae also suggests stone mounds at village entrances should be interpreted as military structures, due to their use as armories. This too seems highly speculative. Park, “War and Ritual in Ancient Korea,” 133.
80 Cho, “Sŏkchŏn-ŭi Sŭp’och’ŭsoksŏng-e Kwan-han Sa-jŏk Haesŏk,” 2. Ch’oe Namsŏn has been very careful about this point, mentioning the possibility but giving no judgement. Ch’oe Namsŏn, “Sŏkchŏn,” 236.
81 Song, “Kyŏkku-wa Sŏkchŏn,” 102.
means of recruiting soldiers, or as a form of military training during the Koryŏ dynasty.\textsuperscript{82}

Park Dae-Jae is certainly right to point out that sŏkchŏn played a role in the Chosŏn military.\textsuperscript{83} However, this role was a rather obscure one: Records from the early Chosŏn period suggest that there was a specialized sort of troops that employed stone fighting techniques on the battlefield. King Sejong formed a band of stone fighting troops in 1418.\textsuperscript{84} There are, however, no records on their effective use in battle. But while stone fighting proved unsuccessful in actual warfare, it remained in use as a method of training. Stone fighting matches were held between groups of soldiers as part of military training.

\textit{Sŏkchŏn and the Chosŏn state}

It is widely accepted that the Chosŏn dynasty was an authoritarian Confucian state highly intolerant of other teachings. How could a phenomenon such as sŏkchŏn fit in within the ideological framework of a state that based itself on Confucian principles?

Stone fighting flourished at the same time as the immense interest in Neo-Confucian philosophy. Elites were expected to be well-versed in Confucian teachings and to preach these to everyone who did not have the education to understand these teachings by themselves. Elites were thus supposed to contribute their share to the formation of a truly Confucian society. On the other hand, these same elite persons (almost exclusively men) seem to have been drawn towards some aspects of popular culture, vulgar culture even. Stone fighting is just one of these phenomena (other

\textsuperscript{82} Mog'ŭn siyŏp, 417b f.
\textsuperscript{83} Park, “War and Ritual in Ancient Korea,” 131.
\textsuperscript{84} Sejong sillok (世宗實錄), 1st year (1419), 4th month, 4th day. http://db.itkc.or.kr (Korean Classics Database). Also see Kim Ch’angsŏk “Sŏkchŏn-ui Kiwŏn-gwa Kū Sŏnggkŏk Pyŏnhwa,” 23f.
examples are gambling, prostitution, illicit literature etc.), but it seems to stand out because of its violent nature. The harm done to society seems so obvious that it is really quite astounding that stone fighting was allowed to go on – even when it was officially banned.

Whether Neo-Confucian elites were generally opposed to all kinds of play (nori) culture is open to debate. Song Kiho claims that the whole of Chosŏn society was, generally speaking, against nori, because of Neo-Confucianism. He also blames the demise of polo in Korea on Neo-Confucian ideology. While this seems too general, little appreciation for violent play should be expected from Chosŏn literati in their true habitus. But reality, as so often, contradicts this picture.

King T'aejong had a well-documented habit of watching sŏkchŏn during the Tan’o festival. Perhaps uncomfortably so for those depicting him as a sage king, even in the reign of King Sejong, stone fighting was an activity at the royal court. King Sejong's father, King T'aejong (r. 1400-1418) enjoyed watching the sŏkchŏn spectacle and insisted on watching it, which is well-recorded in the sillok:

The Former King was suffering from diarrhea and [thus] the Former King went to Pungyang palace. The Former King wished to enter the capital to see a stone fighting event. Pak ŭn said: “I fear that this would overly fatigue the royal physique.” The Former King said: “Stone fighting is something that I like to watch. How do you know that I will not in fact get better if I watch this event?”

86 For example, in 1402. T’aejongsillok (太宗實錄), 2nd year (1402), 5th month, 5th day. http://db.itkc.or.kr (Korean Classics Database).
87 Pungyang palace was located outside the capital. The place was famous for its hot springs and its excellent hunting grounds. It was thus seen as an ideal location for royal reconvalescence.
88 “上王患痢 上詣豐壤宮 上王欲入京觀石戰戲 朴葺曰 恐勞聖體 上王曰 石戰 予之所 樂觀也 若觀此戲 安知疾之愈也.” Sejongsillok, 3rd year (1421), 5th month, 2nd day.
Obviously, King T'aejong was rather fond of stone fighting and defended his right to watch stone fighting events against his officials.\textsuperscript{89} It is remarkable how the Kings T'aejong and Sejong, especially the latter being styled as a Confucian figure by later writers, see no problem with stone fighting as a royal pastime in general. And this is not the only recorded occasion where King T'aejong watched stone fighting. In fact, the next record on stone fighting is for the very next day:

The King ordered the Second Minister of the Ministry of War, Yi Myŏngdŏk to summon a few hundred stone fighters and to organize them into a left and right team.\textsuperscript{90}

It is not clear whether T'aejong went to see the stone fighting on the 2nd day, but whether he did or not, he organized his own stone fighting event on the 3rd. It is worth noting that he ordered a rather high official (Second Minister, rank 2B) with this task. It is also not clear, whether this event was held on the 3rd. It likely was not, as there is an entry two days later, which refers to a big stone fighting event as part of a military maneuver. In context, this seems to be the event that King T'aejong told Yi Myŏngdŏk to prepare for on the 3rd.

The account of that even is as follows:

At the *pyŏng'in* day, the Former King let the horns be blown from the Royal Bell Tower. The soldiers responded quickly to the orders and formed up as ordered. At Ch'angdŏk Palace, the Former King answered them with horn sounds. The Former King ordered Second Minister of War Yi Wŏn and Third Minister of War Yun Hoe to move to Ch'angdŏk Palace and wait there. After this,

\textsuperscript{89} Song Kiho mentions king Sejong’s involvement with stone fighting. Song, “Kyŏk-ku-wa Sŏkchŏn,” 102f.

\textsuperscript{90} “上王遣兵曹參判李明德 募石戰人數百 分為左右隊.” *Sejongsillok*, 3rd year (1421), 5th month, 3rd day.
the Former King led the soldiers in parade formation into Ch'angdŏk Palace and had them form up in black military dress with feather hats behind the Right Army. The Former King ordered Second Minister of the Ministry of War, Yi Myŏngdŏk, to bring the ivory tablets and to lead the soldiers in through the Military Gate. The Former King then dismounted from his horse and gave the orders. He then remounted and entered the Military Gate. He watched from the Royal Bell Tower. The Former King himself ordered Yi Wŏn, Cho Yŏn, and Yi Hwayŏng to act as commanders of the three divisions and presented them with embroidered banners.

The soldiers took their orders and no one dared to lose cohesion with their units or to move out of place.

[The Former King] then ordered to end the formal part and to show the stone fighting. The stone throwers unit was split into a right and a left group and good [additional] stone fighters were called up to fill up the ranks. At the left, a white banner was erected, while at the right a dark banner was used as a field sign. [The two parties] were separated by a bit more than 200 feet. [The Former King] ordered: 'No one shall dare to withdraw or pursue beyond the banners. Those who take the [enemy] flag win. The winner will be rewarded handsomely.' Even though the right side was stronger than the left side, they were not victorious on a number of attempts. Kwŏn Hŭidal and Ha Kyŏngpok attacked together with the cavalry troops, but the left army strongly held their ground and showered them with stones like rain. Hŭidal was struck by a stone, fell from his horse and fled. The cavalry troopers were angry at that and they pursued him while yelling. The left army broke and the white banner was captured as a trophy. The Former King called for the leader of the left army, Pang Poksaeng, and said to him: ‘To have the banner captured is a great disgrace. You need to put more effort into this.’ Poksaeng and the others then attacked vigorously and struck at the enemy and won a great
victory.

An alcoholic beverage was then served and music was played at the foot of the tower. Members of the Royal family, the State Council, and the Ministers of the Six Ministries all attended. The stone fighters were presented with alcoholic beverages and meat. Additionally, they were awarded 100 bolts of cotton, 200 bolts of fine cotton and 4000 pieces of paper money.\(^\text{91}\)

Former King T'aejong was allowed to use military units for his entertainment and King Sejong did not intervene with this. I have also not found any discussion that would indicate that the King or anyone else took offense with this event. It seems, that sŏkchŏn is one of those phenomena, whose existence does not fit in with the official ideology, but existed nevertheless. Literati wrote about stone fighting, mostly with a critical perspective and scolding the dangerous and disrupting effects of sŏkchŏn.

Attempts to ban stone fighting were unsuccessful. As early as 1473, King Sŏngjong banned stone fighting in parts of the capital.\(^\text{92}\) But even some 250 years later, in 1725, King Yŏngjo complained that the local officials would join in or watch the stone fighting in P’yŏngyang instead of putting an end to it as ordered. Various court officials then confess to

\(^91\) “丙寅 上王御鍾樓吹角 軍士登時趨令 結陣如此 上在昌德宮應之以角 上王命兵曹判事李原 兵曹參議尹淮如昌德宮迎待 上乃率昌德宮入直軍士 以黑衣 烏帶 諭右軍之後 上王預令兵曹參判李明德齎牙牌 出軍門迎入 上即下馬承命 還上馬入軍門 同御鍾樓 観之 上王親命李原 趙涓 李和英為三軍帥 賜織紋旗 軍士既聽令 無敢失伍亂行者 既而命解嚴 仍觀石戰 以擲石軍 分為左右隊 募善戰者充之 左立白旗 右立青旗為標 相去二百餘步 令曰 毋敢越旗窮逐 以奪旗為勝 勝者厚賞 左強右弱 毎不勝 權湖達 河敬復與騎士撃之 左軍固拒 石如雨 希達中石墜馬而走 騎士憤之 呼叫逐之 左軍潰 乃奪白旗以獻 上王召左軍牌頭方復生曰 奪旗 辱也 宜更勤力 復生等奮擊大勝 置酒樓下奏樂 宗親 議政 六曹判書等侍 賜擲石軍軍肉 賞緜布百匹 正布二百匹 楃貨四千張。”

\(^92\) Sŏngjongsillok (成宗實錄), 4th year (1473), 5th month, 6th day. http://db.itkc.or.kr (Korean Classics Database).
the king that they know about other places (Kaesŏng, Kyŏngju) which suffer from the same problem. The discussion ends with a renewed order to end stone fighting.⁹³ This proved to be futile, as a discussion in 1781 (Chŏngjo 5), which is recorded in the Ilsŏngnok, shows. Stone fighting had not yet vanished even in the capital and the ban was renewed.⁹⁴ In 1887 King Kojong tried again to ban stone fighting.⁹⁵ There might have been more cases of bans on sŏkchŏn at various levels of the administration.

The desire of at least some officials to end stone fighting is clear. Even in early accounts, it is made clear that sŏkchŏn should be incompatible with official Chosŏn ideology. An example for this is Hong Sŏngmin’s essay “On Stonefighting (石戰說).” Hong Sŏngmin held high office as Minister of Rites, and as Minister of Revenue, and he had been part of the 1575 embassy to Ming China, so he can be said to have been an important person of his time.

Last year, I was on inspection duty in Kyŏngsang province. My tour came to the district of Kyerim. It was the time around the 15th of the month. At night there was the sound of shouting and turmoil on the streets, as if a fight was going on. Even at dawn it did not stop. I asked someone about this.⁹⁶

He said: Since a long time ago, this village has the custom of stone fighting. Each time at the 15th of the first month [上元, text says 月元], the people of this village split in two groups who act

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⁹⁴ Ilsŏngnok (日省錄, Records of Daily Reflections), 5 year of the reign of King Chŏngjo (1781), 1st month, 17th day.
⁹⁵ Sŭngjongwŏn Il’gi, 24th year of the reign of King Kojong (1887), 2nd month, 17th day.
⁹⁶ “去年 按嶺南 巡到鷄林府 在月正旬望 夜有聲喧聒街巷 若闘若戰 達曙猶不止 問之人.”
as opposing teams. They gather stones with their hands and fight with the stones. Masses of stones are thrown at each other, so that they come down like rain and cover the ground like sleet. Winning and losing is decided by this. When the month is over, they stop. When they win, that means good luck for the year. If not, it means bad luck. It is because the thought of good and bad luck moves their heart-minds, that they put all their energy into this battle and that they do not think of stopping it.

At the time of battle, they take heaps of stones and keep them in their fists, then they grab these heaps of stones and throw them. They exert their force and they are most vigorous and sharp. They shout, and their faces are covered in sweat and they run around and attack wildly, as if they are mad. One must throw before the others and in battle everyone fears to fall behind the others. Sons throw stones at their fathers; younger brothers throw stones at elder brothers. Relatives throw stones at their relatives, neighbors throw stones at their neighbors.

When both sides are forming up, when the foes are already clear, one then absolutely wishes to overcome them and to be vig-

97 “曰 邑俗之有石戰 古也 此邑之人 每於月元 隊左右 角彼此 手以石 石以戰 衆石交 投 雨下霰集 惟雌雄是決 限月盡乃已 捷則辧一年之吉 否則凶 其所以力于戰而不知 止者 一年之吉凶 動其心也.”

98 It is not quite clear how the verbal use of 手 and 石 in “塊其石而手之 手其塊而石之” is to be understood. Of course, the grammatical and semantical chaos is intentional: The muddled text gives an impression of the helter skelter nature of stone fighting. Also, the parallel structure of the two sentences is aesthetically pleasing in Literary Chinese so much that it apparently overrules clarity.

99 “方其戰也 塊其石而手之 手其塊而石之 出氣力 賈勇銳 喉喘顛汗 橫奔直突 有若狂 者然 投必人先 戰恐人後子而石其父 弟而石其兄 戚屬而石其戚屬 隣里而石其隣里.”

100 This is also a reference to Zhu Xi's commentary on Mengzi, where he uses 物我 and 相形 to explain the origin of the (immoral) striving for profit (i 利) from conflict. Zhu Xi (朱熹), Sishu Zhangju (四書章句) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974), 202.
rous, to overcome them so that our own side wins. Thus, one
dares to bloody their heads and foreheads, to wound their flesh
and to cause them head injuries and broken legs. When they are
disheartened, and their souls are broken, when they hide up to
their heads in the ditch and do not dare to breathe, then one is
happy and contently one says: “We have truly won, and they have
truly fled! So, we will have good luck this year and there will be
no sorrow, there will be no diseases!”

The sons who threw stones say: “I would not dare to throw
stones at my father. It was in battle that I threw stones.” The
younger brothers who threw stones say: “I would not dare to
throw stones at my elder brother. It was in battle that I threw
stones.” The relatives who threw stones say: “I would not dare to
throw stones at my relatives. It was in battle that I threw stones.”
The neighbors who threw stones say: “I would not dare to throw
stones at my neighbors. It was in battle that I threw stones.”

The fathers and elder brothers also say: “They would not dare to
throw stones at me. It was only in battle. I myself have thrown
stones at my father and at my elder brother.” The relatives and
neighbors also say: “They would not dare to throw stones at us. It
was only in battle. We ourselves have thrown stones at our rela-
tives and at our neighbors.” This is because it has been practiced
for a long time and it has become a tradition since long ago. So,
they all consider this the normal state of things. The correct social
order is destroyed, public morale is violated, and they do not con-

101 “物我相形 仇敵己分 必欲抗彼而我壯 克彼而我乘 乃敢血頭顱 肉肌膚 使之裹頭裂
足 喪氣褫魄 顚縮於溝壑而不敢喘 然後快於心 揚揚然曰 吾其勝矣 彼其奔矣 吾可
以辦今年之吉 而無憂患矣 無疾病矣.”

102 “子而石之者曰 非敢石吾父也 石于戰也 弟而石之者曰 非敢石吾兄也 石于戰也 戚
屬而石之者曰 非敢石吾戚屬也 石于戰也 隣里而石之者曰 非敢石吾隣里也 石于戰
也.”
sider this abnormal. Alas!¹⁰³

The good and bad luck of one year does not depend on factors as narrow as this. The explanation of good and bad luck is also not sure to be like that at all. Once the thought of weal and woe exists, it pullulates in them. The wrongness of these customs infects their heart-minds. When they throw stones at their fathers and when they throw stones at their elder brothers, when they throw stones at their relatives and when they throw stones at their neighbors, and when they treat them as their enemies, they do not think to themselves “I am their son and younger brother.” or “I am their relative and neighbor.”¹⁰⁴

Then at the end of the first month, these matters of fighting are all ended. Those who have thrown stones at each other during the days before are now father and son, they are now elder brother and younger brother, they are now relatives, and they are neighbors. Moreover, they keep to the social morals in pleasant harmony. They do not think about others that have thrown stones at them during the days before, and that they have thrown stones at them.¹⁰⁵

Now as for the beginnings of stone fighting, it has its origins: The capital of the Silla state was near the sea. When the island barbarians made trouble, the slaves fought with stones to prepare for coming emergencies.¹⁰⁶ Then the tradition became faulty and the saying of good and bad luck was made up. After a thousand

¹⁰³ “父兄亦曰 彼非敢石我也 戰也 吾亦曾石吾父石吾兄矣 戚隣亦曰 彼非敢石我也 戰也 吾亦曾石吾戚石吾隣矣所以然者 習熟慣而流傳久 自以爲當然 廢倫理傷風敎而不知怪矣 嗟呼.”

¹⁰⁴ “一年之吉凶 非騒也 吉凶之說 亦非固也 利害一念 萌于中 習俗之誤 瘢其心 石其父石其兄 石其戚屬石其隣里 而仇敵之 不暇念其我是子弟也 我是戚隣也.”

¹⁰⁵ “及其元月 畢戰事已 向日之石之者 爲父子爲兄弟 爲戚屬爲隣里 而倫理之融融然 怡怡然 不暇念其向日彼之石我也 我之石彼也.”

¹⁰⁶ This part is unclear. Unfortunately, I have not found any other reference to this in other texts.
and a hundred years, they came to violate their correct social order and they themselves do not even know it. The saying of weal and woe moves their heart-minds only once, but father and son, elder brother and younger brother, relatives and neighbors will treat each other as enemies.\footnote{107}

Once the thought of weal and woe is exonerated among them, those who were enemies in the days before will naturally be acting according to the correct distinctions of father and son, elder brother and younger brother, relative and neighbor. Oh, it is indeed extreme how weal and woe accumulate in their heart-mind, and how those customs spoil these people! Only because of the thought of weal and woe, the principles of father and son, of elder brother and younger brother, of relatives and neighbors are treated as if there were no distinctions! This can be used to warn the ordinary people and to support their public morals. This is why I dared to lay this out in explanation.\footnote{108}

Confucian beliefs demand that the human body, given to a person by its parents is to be kept intact and free from bodily harm. Of course, this cult of the immaculate body is not so much an end to itself or the expression of some religious doctrine but arises from the concept of respect for one’s parents and everything that comes from them. Risking injury just for fun should be totally out of the question. Possibly Hong Sŏngmin’s explanation of sŏkchŏn as being important for the well-being of the village (and thus one’s clan and parents) by protecting it from weather calamities is part of an attempt to find a rationale for this problem.

\footnote{107}“夫石戰之作 有自來矣 羅都近海 島夷作梗 隸戰于石 以為陰雨之備 而流傳一誤 吉凶之說作 歷千百年 至傷其倫理而不自知也 利害之說 一動其心 而父子兄弟戚隣而仇敵焉.”

\footnote{108}“利害之念 一釋于中 而向日之仇敵者 父子兄弟戚隣之分自若焉 甚矣 利害之累此心也 習俗之誤此人也 噫 微利害一念 父子兄弟戚屬親黨之理 庶乎其不差矣 此有可以警俗人而扶風化者 故敢為之說.” Hitherto, Chorongjip, 511d-512c.
What is even more unsettling is the devastating effect that stone fighting would have on the good order of public morals. Confucianism has a very strict system for how people are supposed to interact. Sŏkchŏn is necessarily subverting this system by pitting people against each other who stand in a clearly demarcated social relationship to each other. Having a social inferior throw stones at his superior is unthinkable in Confucian morals (it is fair to note that most Confucians would also oppose the opposite and less critical case of superiors throwing stones at their inferiors).

Since all these problems were not grave enough to motivate the government to effectively ban stone fighting and since stone fighting persisted as a folk tradition, it seems that sŏkchŏn must have been necessary in some way for the functioning of Chosŏn society – oscillating between being a valve for public anger or a carnivalesque event.

**Conclusion: The Meaning of Sŏkchŏn**

Above all, sŏkchŏn in the Chosŏn period seems to have played two important roles: Sŏkchŏn was a form of recreation, incorporating some aspects of older ritual traditions, and it was also employed as a form of military training. The bloody nature of sŏkchŏn did not contradict its recreational function. Indeed, there is most likely a direct link between violence and recreation, e.g. fun. For historical analogies, we only need to look at the Roman appetite for gladiator games and other blood thirsty entertainment, or at the history of the Native American game Lacrosse.\(^\text{109}\) Apparently, danger, even the danger of death, has a place in recreation. To Ch’oe Tongyŏl, who follows an earlier judgement by Son Chint’ae, sŏkchŏn was a form of amusement “or sport“ unique to the Korean people, which was enigmatic and impossible for (Western) foreigners to under-

stand. This is obviously not true, as can easily be seen by a comparison to Venetian stick fighting as described by Robert Davis:

“(…) the _battagliole_ were neither exactly sport nor all-out war: they were little battles held on a stage, a drama put on by ordinary artisans who were at the same time both warriors and actors, common rioters and sports heroes.”

Similarities between stone fighting and other traditions of violent sports seem to outweigh the differences by far.

The reason that the state did accept _sŏkchŏn_ seems to have been both an active interest in its qualities as a form of military training and the acceptance of its importance as a form of recreation. The fact that people would get injured was seen as a problem, but not as a reason to effectively stop _sŏkchŏn_ altogether. While this was at odds with Confucian morals, this contradiction was mostly ignored. Enough material is known that proves that the incompatibility of _sŏkchŏn_ and official state morals was realized by at least parts of the elites. As usual, this was ignored as long as no actual harm came to the state and the elites that needed it. In fact, the mildly subversive spectacle of _sŏkchŏn_ could be seen as a useful stabilizing factor.

On the other hand, _sŏkchŏn_ also could turn into real subversion. If (local) hegemony shifted towards the oppressed, stone fights could turn into temporary rebellions, which could violently oppose state power. The question of what the ideological meaning of _sŏkchŏn_ was is the question of who appropriated it. There is no abstract meaning to the dynamics of _sŏkchŏn_, but only manifestations – or, so to speak, reflections – of physical social reality. It is clear, that stone fighting was not an exclusively

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111 Davis, _The War of the Fists_, 47.
elite event, but a truly popular event; popular violence in both meanings of the word.

Glossary

Chaoxianzu 朝鮮族  
Gaolizhuan 高麗傳  
Kaesŏng 開城  
Koguryŏ 高句麗  
Kŭmsŏng 金城  
Kyŏngju 慶州  
sŏkchŏn 石戰  
Suishu 隋書  
T'aejo 太祖  
tong'i 東夷  
yangban 兩班  
Yi Sŏnggye 李成桂  
Yu Tŭkkong 柳得恭  

ch’ŏksŏkkun 擲石軍  
Hoŭi 羽儀  
Kim Ryŏ 金鏵  
Koryŏ 高麗  
Kunyŏng tŭngnok 軍營瞻錄  
noye 奴隸  
Sŏngjong 成宗  
Tangshu 唐書  
T'aejong 太宗  
Wŏnju 原州  
Yi Hakkyu 李學逵  
Yi Wŏn 李原  
Yun Hoe 尹淮

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Popular Violence in a Confucian World:
A Short History of Stone Fighting and its Meaning

Felix Siegmund

Research literature has explained stone fighting (sŏkchŏn) in different ways: As a ritual, a form of military training, a sport, and a popular past-time. Sŏkchŏn shares key characteristics with other violent past-times of the pre-modern era, but whether it should be classified as a sport seems doubtful. The function of stone fighting as a ritual had become obscure by the Chosŏn dynasty.

This article gives an overview on the history of stone fighting by reviewing the sources and by examining existing interpretations in scholarly literature. It adds two new perspectives: Stone fighting subverts the image of a Confucian society in Chosŏn and could be understood as part of a counter culture. It could also be understood as “carnival” in the Bakhtinian sense. Stone fighting was criticized by Confucian literati and was outlawed on multiple occasions. At the same time, it also received royal patronage and was effectively allowed to continue. Stone fighting is a contradictory phenomenon that should be explained as a symptom of the inherent contradictions of Chosŏn society.

Keywords: stone fighting, folklore, Chosŏn society, Confucianism, carnival
유교세계의 대중폭력: 석전(石戰)에 대한 역사적 접근

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석전에 대한 그간의 연구들은 의례, 군사훈련, 스포츠, 그리고 인기있는 여가활동 등 석전의 의미를 다양하게 설명하였다. 석전은 전근대 시기의 다른 폭력 형태들과 공통성을 가지지만, 이것이 과연 스포츠로 분류될 수 있는지는 의문스럽다. 석전을 의례로 보는 것은 조선시대에 와서 희미해졌다.

이 논문은 1차 자료 및 선행연구의 해석들을 재해석하면서, 석전의 역사를 돌이켜보고자 하였다. 새롭게 부여하고자 하는 2가지의 의미는 다음과 같다. 석전은 조선의 유교왕국 이미지를 전복하며, 또한 그에 대한 저항 문화의 일부였다. 바흐친의 용어를 빌리면, “축제”이기도 했다. 유교지식인들은 석전을 비난했고, 몇차례나 불법으로 간주되었다. 그와 동시에 석전은 왕가의 후원을 받기도 하는 등, 계속 유지되었다. 석전은 조선사회에 내재한 모순을 증명하는 이중적 풍습이었다.

주제어: 석전, 민속, 조선사회, 유학, 카니발
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