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Sino-Korean Relations and the Ming-Qing Transition

China and Korea have long had a close relationship. However, during the early Qing dynasty, the relations between China and Korea were not as warm as usual. Following the Chinese Ming dynasty, one of the more intimate periods in Sino-Korean relations, influences of the hostile history with the Manchu reasserted themselves in Korea.

During the Joseon dynasty, Korea was profoundly influenced by China. One of the most influential imports from China, Confucianism, had spread throughout Korea during the preceding centuries. This philosophy had a profound impact on Korea, especially during the Joseon dynasty; this period is sometimes referred to as the Neo-Confucian Revolution because of the extent of the Confucian influence.¹ The Joseon experienced a cultural transition toward a Sino-centric, Neo-Confucian society. In the early Joseon period, Korean culture began moving towards the Chinese Neo-Confucian model of proper social and familial relationships within the Confucian hierarchy. The founder of the Joseon dynasty, Taejo, who revolted against the previous Koryo dynasty to side with the Ming, cited the great Confucian Mencius, asserting that “the way to protect the country is for the smaller to serve the larger.”² Confucian-style ancestor worship, subservience of women, a high priority of intellectual pursuits all were introduced with Confucian influence. In addition to the deep impact of Confucianism, Chinese painting and

¹ Michael J. Seth, *A History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 131.

² Philip de Heer, “Three Embassies to Seoul: Sino-Korean Relations in the 15th Century,” in *Conflict & Accommodation in Early Modern East Asia*, eds. Leonard Blussé, Harriet T. Zurndorfer, and E. Zürcher (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 1997), 242.

architectural styles were admired and emulated by the elite of Joseon.³ Similarly, Joseon Korea modeled its institutions after China; it, like China, established six ministries, a censorate, and a bureaucratic examination system based upon the Confucian classics. The early Ming legal code was used as the basis of that of the Joseon dynasty.⁴ Of course, Korea retained unique aspects amidst this sinicization: uniquely Korean animistic shamanism, hereditary class divisions, slavery and a non-Chinese poetic tradition.⁵

In addition to the cultural similarities, Korea and China shared a common enemy throughout the Ming period. For China, Korea was a useful defense, a buffer between China and the northern tribes, the Jurchen. There were numerous joint Ming-Joseon military ventures against the Jurchen. Jurchen raids on China and Korea continued sporadically throughout the Ming dynasty despite the efforts Chinese and Korean forces. Mutual cooperation against the Jurchen helped strengthen the bond between the Ming and Joseon dynasties.⁶

During the Joseon dynasty Korea established consistent tributary and cultural relationship with Ming China.⁷ In the Confucian worldview, through this tributary agreement the loyal vassal state Korea demonstrated its support of its patron, the Chinese state. For Korea, this tributary relationship ensured that it could rely upon its more powerful neighbor for military support as well as a legitimating factor for domestic rule. By paying tribute, Korean kings ensured investiture by the Chinese Emperor, providing a basis for royal authority within Korea.

³ Seth, *A History of Korea*, 180–182.

⁴ Clark, “Sino-Korean Tributary Relations under the Ming,” in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 8 - The Ming Dynasty: Part Two*, eds. Denis Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 278.

⁵ Seth, *A History of Korea*, 135–137, 172

⁶ Clark, “Sino-Korean Tributary Relations,” 286–289.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 273.

As for the details of the tributary relationship during the Ming, the Koreans regularly sent three “congratulatory embassies” each year, sending more depending upon special circumstances such as official state funerals or requests for horses. The items sent as tribute were most often luxury items: gold, silver, animal skins, paper, and ginseng are items that typified Korean tribute.⁸ For Korean emissaries, these tribute missions were a discreet mercantile endeavor; excess tribute was sold to Chinese merchants. In exchange, Korea received Chinese cultural products: ceremonial accoutrement, musical instruments, and Chinese books. The tributary missions were a valuable medium for disseminating Chinese culture to Korea during the Ming.

For China, the relationship achieved more than a simple extraction of tribute from a subordinate state. Strategically, Korea supplied a friendly military force near China’s northern border. Notably, a 1466-67 military campaign composed of “50,000 Ming troops and 10,000 Korean” delivered a temporarily effective blow against the growing power of the Jurchen tribes.⁹ This campaign came after rumors of an invasion of Korea by Chien-chou tribe. Not only did China benefit from an ally, it prevented the creation of an enemy. A potential alliance between Jurchens and Korea would have been a difficult problem to solve. This fear was not unfounded; in the 1390s Jurchen leaders were sending tribute to the Korean court and a Jurchen leader was given titles by the Koreans.¹⁰ Eventually China outbid Korea in terms of gifts to Jurchen leaders, prompting them to enter into tributary relationship with the Ming rather than the Joseon.

⁸ Ibid., 280

⁹ Ibid., 289

¹⁰ Ibid., 284, 286

These tributary missions were another part of the Chinese concept of *tianxia*, “all under heaven,” by which China envisioned itself as the political and cultural center of the world. The parallelism in this concept plays out between the China’s rule under an Emperor with the Mandate of Heaven and the external “barbarians ... governed indirectly through a tributary relationship with China,” in the words of contemporary historian Kim Yongsop.¹¹ Originating in the Han period, this Sino-centric concept persisted through successive dynasties and informed how the Chinese state conducted foreign relations. Korea’s relationship with China during the Ming dynasty exemplified this type of relationship. Korea had entered into their “all under heaven” system, integrating itself into the larger Chinese cultural sphere. By not only sending tribute, but adopting Chinese culture, Korea helped validate for China its view of the Chinese culture as the preeminent in the world and of a Chinese Emperor as having domain of the world. Imperial enfeoffment of foreign kings, such as those of Korea, was an acknowledgment of China’s privileged position. Korea was just one of many groups that participated in this system of culture and ritual.¹²

For most of the Ming dynasty, Sino-Korean relations were stable and beneficial to both parties. The Ming dynasty experienced an era of trade growth, commercialization, and technological advancement along with a gradual decline in central governmental power.¹³ Developments during the Ming allowed for an explosion in printing of both technical

¹¹ Kim Yong-sop, *The Transformations of Korean Civilization in East Asian History*, trans. Northeast Asian History Foundation (Seoul: Northeast Asian History Foundation, 2010), 27.

¹² Zhang Feng, “Rethinking the ‘Tribute System’: Broadening the Conceptual Horizon of Historical East Asian Politics,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2, no. 3 (2009), 550–551.

¹³ Charles Holcombe, *A History of East Asia: From the Origins of Civilization to the 21st Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 162.

documents and literature. Korea sent tribute, observed the rituals associated with a tributary relationship and therefore received gifts and commitment of protection

However, near the end of the Ming dynasty, the Japanese invasions of Korea by Toyotomi Hideyoshi strained this relationship. Hideyoshi, the de facto ruler of Japan, was planning an invasion of China through Korea. He asked Korea's complicity in this endeavor, "if Korea leaves us but a clear road to China we will ask nothing else. No troops need be given."¹⁴ In response to this request, King Seonjo responded that such treachery would not be possible as, "China is our Mother Country and we cannot desert her."¹⁵ He further elaborated Korea's relationship to China in a letter to Hideyoshi, stating that "When we have been fortunate China has rejoiced and when we have been unfortunate she has helped us. The relations which subsist between us are those of parent and child."¹⁶ Uncertainty about the extent of Hideyoshi's ambition combined with a divided royal court meant that Korea was ill-prepared to defend against a large, organized invasion.¹⁷

The better-prepared and more musket-armed Japanese forces had marched through Korea and captured Seoul three weeks after the start of the invasion, the Korean royal court having fled north.¹⁸ The situation was dire for Korea. However, Korea was able to leverage the military aspect of Korea's relationship with the Ming. As a father should defend his child, China came to Korea's aid. The situation was not that simple, though. The Ming only became serious about the defense of Korea when it became clear that the Japanese had become a serious

¹⁴ Homer B. Hulbert, *History of Korea*, (Richmond, United Kingdom: Curzon Press 1999), 1:348.

¹⁵ Hulbert, *History of Korea* 1:348.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:349.

¹⁷ Seth, *A History of Korea*, 294.

¹⁸ Kenneth Swope, "Beyond Turtleboats: Siege Accounts from Hideyoshi's Second Invasion of Korea, 1597–1598," *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, no. 2 (2006): 178.

threat on China's border. Additionally, some Ming court officials, looking at the rapid progress of the Japanese army through Korea, suspected Korean complicity.¹⁹ Eventually, the Sino-Korean force was able to partially beat back the Japanese force and a truce was declared between the two sides. Over the next few years, mutual misunderstandings about the nature of agreements between the Ming and the Japanese caused a breakdown in negotiations, resulting in a second invasion of Korea by Hideyoshi in 1597.²⁰ Far better prepared this time around, the Sino-Korean forces under Ming command were more successful in defending the peninsula, forcing a complete withdrawal of the Japanese by 1599.²¹ The war was devastating for Korea, not only in terms of material destruction and loss of human life, but in bringing shame for the handy victories of the Japanese over the Korean forces. One gruesome example of this was the collection of severed noses taken as war trophies which were "pickled in brine and shipped back to Japan where they were inspected by Hideyoshi and later interred in a mound in Kyoto."²² For the Chinese, the war was no small endeavor; the Ming government sent 200,000 troops and spent an estimated 10 million taels of silver during the first invasion, with similar numbers for the second.²³ Korea would have been conquered were it not for the tributary relationship the Joseon dynasty had with the Ming. This military aid from the Ming dynasty was crucial to the defense of the Korean peninsula, the continuation of the Joseon dynasty and its tributary relationship to the Ming. The Joseon dynasty had the Ming dynasty to thank for its continued existence.

¹⁹ Seth, *A History of Korea*, 295.

²⁰ Swope, "Beyond Turtleboats," 180.

²¹ Seth, *A History of Korea*, 298.

²² Swope, "Beyond Turtleboats," 180.

²³ Seth, *A History of Korea*, 298.

Gratitude for the help which the Ming rendered Korea during the Japanese invasions influenced Sino-Korean relations during the Manchu conquest. The chieftain Nurchaci had united the various northern tribes to form the Later Jin dynasty in Manchuria, creating a Manchu cultural identity. In the early 17th century, the Manchus gathered regional power while the Ming dynasty declined. The Chongzhen Emperor was so afraid of factionalism and plots against imperial power that he eventually “ordered the Minister of Punishments to speed up court trials because too many people were dying in prison” because of the glut of political prisoners.²⁴ This fear also handicapped the Ming military; during the six years of the Chongzhen Emperor’s reign, seven regional commanders, fourteen ministers of war, and dozens of field commanders were “executed, died in jail, or were forced to commit suicide.”²⁵ On top of this, the end of the Ming dynasty was riddled with rebellions, crippled by plagues and devastated by natural disasters. The Ming government was in no position to adequately defend its borders from a well-trained and organized fighting force, and it certainly could not lend any aid to another invasion of Korea while fending off Manchu forces. In their war with the Manchus, the Ming government requested military aid from Korea and “many Koreans ... felt they had a moral as well as strategic obligation to honor Ming requests” because the Ming had “saved Korea from destruction.”²⁶ However, explicitly siding with the Ming would attract Manchu reprisal, against which a still weak Korea would have difficulty defending itself. King Gwanghaegun of Korea attempted to avoid risk by not choosing between the Ming and the ascendant Manchu. Pro-Ming forces in the Korean court overthrew King Gwanghaegun and

²⁴ Frederic Wakeman Jr., . *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985), 89.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁶ James B. Palais, *Confucian and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyŏngwŏn and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 93.

placed a more anti-Manchu, pro-Ming king on the throne, King Injo. Gwanhaegun was denounced by Dowager Queen Inmok, stating that Korea had “submitted to the Heavenly Court (Ming China) for close to 200 years; this relationship is that of ruler and vassal in terms of loyalty, and a father and son in terms of grace.”²⁷ The Ming dynasty’s defense of Korea during the Japanese invasion helped foster good sentiment toward the Ming, a feeling strong enough to warrant overthrowing a king.

This new king was aggressive in his denunciation of the Manchu in favor the Ming, bringing about the first Manchu invasion of Korea in 1627. The Koreans quickly surrendered, agreeing to a send tribute to the Manchus and acknowledging them as “elder brothers”.²⁸ During this time, the Manchus were gaining ground against the ailing Ming. In 1636, Hong Taiji, the son of Nurhaci, declared his dynasty the Qing and claimed its own Mandate of Heaven.²⁹ Amidst a bankrupt and disintegrating Ming, it became clear that the power now lay with the Qing dynasty. Despite this, the Pro-Ming faction still held power in Korea and continued to antagonize the Qing, prompting another invasion in 1637. This second Manchu invasion ended with another acknowledgment of Korea’s vassalage to the Qing and an agreement to send annual tribute.³⁰ However, not long after this, the Joseon dynasty still supported the remnants of the Ming dynasty by delaying tribute and military assistance to the Qing, and passing along intelligence to the Ming.³¹ Joseon Korea remained loyal to the Ming in spite of two Manchu invasions.

²⁷ Kang, *Land of Scholars*, 319.

²⁸ Seth, *A History of Korea*, 149.

²⁹ Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise*, 208.

³⁰ Kang, *The Land of Scholars*, 328.

³¹ Palais, *Confucian Statecraft*

The Joseon dynasty's relationship with the new Qing dynasty was not nearly as close as it was to the Ming. In private, Joseon court continued to use the Ming calendar, a secret affront to Qing authority.³² Koreans in the Joseon dynasty continued to wear Ming-style clothing and hairstyles. Ming-influenced institutions continued to be influential.

An obvious reason for this anti-Qing sentiment was the disgrace of being forced into tributary relations by military invasion. The embarrassment of King Injo's bowing to the Manchu emperor is an event that is still remembered to this day in Korea, resonant in contemporary Korean popular culture.³³ The long history of border skirmishes and conflict with the Jurchen tribes did not endear the Koreans to the Manchu-ruled Qing dynasty. The shame of conquest was made all the harder to bear for having been at the hands of "barbarians."

Anti-Qing sentiment had a prominently ethnic aspect. Manchus were disliked because they were not like the Han Chinese; they were apart from the Chinese cultural heritage which Korea had adopted and developed. King Yeonjo, who ruled from 1724 to 1776, stated that "the Central Plains [China] exude the stench of barbarians and our Green Hills [Korea] are alone."³⁴ This led to the development of the concept that Korea was the "last proper bastion of Neo-Confucianism orthodoxy."³⁵ In the eyes of the staunchly Neo-Confucian elite of Korea, the distinctly non-Han Chinese Manchu had allowed the venerable Chinese culture to decay. It was up to the Joseon dynasty to maintain that Confucian legacy.

The cultural differences which the Koreans so distrusted about the Manchus were exactly what the Manchus wished to preserve about their culture. Looking at the earlier Jin and

³² Clark, "Sino-Korean Tributary Relations," 273.

³³ "[ENG] SNL Korea - Counter Strike 2: 2nd Manchu Invasion (카스2 병자호란)," YouTube video, 7:40, March 22, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0s0COMPC3jM>.

³⁴ Holcombe, *A History of East Asia*, 177.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Yuan dynasty as precedent, the first Qing emperor Hong Taiji feared that sinification would transform his subjects into people who would “forget ... horseback riding and archery in order to copy Han customs,” people who would “hang around the marketplaces and simply amuse themselves.”³⁶ Sinification would lead to decay and decadence. Maintaining that vigorous and martial Manchu spirit which helped conquer China would be vital to maintaining control over that conquest. This distinctly antagonistic view of sinification certainly did not help relations with Korea, a highly sinified, Confucian culture. The Han culture of which the Manchus were so dismissive was what Korea had adopted and incorporated into their own.

Despite internal resentment, Korea performed the obligations of a tributary state. Tributary missions continued to serve as a means of trade and profit. The amount of tribute requested by China, initially punishing at the beginning of the Qing, was gradually lowered during the early period of the dynasty.³⁷ However, these tribute missions, once given a title which translated as “visiting the court of the Son of Heaven,” were given the far less grand title of “mission to Beijing” during the Qing dynasty.³⁸ Korea outwardly performed the duties expected of it as a tributary state, but subtly expressed disapproval of the Qing dynasty. Despite this disdain, Korea still benefitted from the trade, protection and intellectual interaction which the tributary relationship guaranteed.³⁹

Unable to militarily resist, Korea accepted Qing suzerainty. The Qing accepted this relationship despite Korea’s disdain for the Qing. Much as during the Ming, Korea served as a buffer state for China. However, for the Qing, Korea was a buffer from seaward invasions, Japan

³⁶ Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise*, 206.

³⁷ William Woodville Rockhill, *China’s Intercourse with Korea From the XVth Century to 1895* (London: Luzac & Co., 1905), 26.

³⁸ Seth, *A History of Korea*, 192.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

in particular. Tribute and trade from Korea continued to profit merchants and officials in both Korea and China. For the ruling Manchus, serving as the benevolent, Confucian paternal figure in the relationship with Korea helped strengthen the Manchu claim to the Mandate of Heaven.⁴⁰ Although Korea may have resented serving under the Manchus, the tributary relationship was still beneficial for China.

The pre-modern relationship between China and Korea offers a revealing look into the nature of the Chinese tribute system and regional conflict. The transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasties adversely affected Sino-Korean relations. The Manchus, a non-Chinese group which had a history of conflict with Korea, overthrew the Ming dynasty, a dynasty with which Korea had a very close relationship, causing a deterioration in Sino-Korean relations during the early Qing period.

⁴⁰ Kirk W. Larsen, "Traditions, Treaties, and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Chosŏn Korea, 1850 – 1910," (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 39 – 40.

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