

Chosŏn Korea as *Sojunghwa*, the Small Central Civilization: *Sadae kyorin* Policy and Relations with Ming/Qing China and Tokugawa Japan in the Seventeenth Century

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Introduction

The Chosŏn Korea court (1392–1910) adopted the diplomatic policy of *sadae kyorin* for relations with Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868). “*Sadae kyorin*” was a combination of the two words *sadae* (serving the great) and *kyorin* (equal standing with the neighboring countries). The policy lasted for almost five hundred years, until the end of the Chosŏn period in the late nineteenth century, as the philosophical foundation of the diplomatic relations. Under the diplomatic principle of *sadae kyorin*, which was based on Confucian doctrine, Sino–Korean relations are often interpreted as a superior–inferior relationship, and the Japanese–Korean relations are seen as one of equal standing throughout the Chosŏn period.

Most scholars suggest that the Korean position in East Asia strongly reflected the tribute system concept of Korea’s subjugation to a politically and militarily more powerful superior, China.¹ And in the relationship with Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868), Chosŏn would have seen its neighboring state as a threat to peace after the Japanese invasions of 1592–1598 by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598). Rather than seeing Korea’s subsequent acts as an exemplary display of the tributary relationship in pursuing an “appeasement policy” to the two neighboring countries, the Chosŏn court’s desperate tactics that sought peaceful resolutions with the two states, China and Japan, are not difficult to comprehend.

The Chosŏn court sought to avoid conflicts with Qing China (1644–1911), which followed Ming China (1368–1644), and Tokugawa Japan in the seventeenth century. The Chosŏn court did not possess sufficient military strength after the destruction of the battles fought against the Japanese invasions between 1592 and 1598 and the Manchus in 1627 and 1637. In such a situation, making a deferential gesture would have seemed a strategy of survival for Chosŏn. Subservience was indeed an initiative to bring about domestic safety, peace, and order.² The promises of the two “barbarian states”—Qing China for tribute system relations and Tokugawa Japan for the rehabilitation of diplomatic relations—also caused no physical harm. The “submissive” posture was always a better outcome for Korean security at that time.

In the relationships with the Ming and Qing governments, the Chosŏn court engaged *sadae*, or serving the great, as its diplomatic practice. This relationship with the Chinese governments required a few main premises. These included sending periodic tribute missions, receiving investiture, and acceptance and use of the Chinese calendar in the diplomatic protocol displayed to those governments. Failure or refusal of any

of these was regarded as a violation in maintaining an official relationship with the suzerain state. Hence, throughout the Chosŏn period, the court sent tribute envoys to the Ming and Qing governments and received imperial sanction when there was a succession to the throne at the Chosŏn court.

To further understand Chosŏn as *sojunghwa*, or the small central civilization,³ it is vital to search for the common recognition which existed in East Asia. For centuries the East Asian sphere was physically and mentally constructed within the Chinese-centered view. The area where the Chinese emperor ruled was often described as *zhonghua*,⁴ literally the “central civilization.” In this perspective, the emperor was the one who ruled the world, reigned over the people with benevolence, and enlightened them with the virtues of heaven. Outside of his enlightened states was *yi*, the uncivilized area, in contrast to *hua*, the civilized area. By constructing this *hua-yi* (civilized center–barbarian) view, the countries of *yi* could obtain the virtues of the center if they became tributaries to the great empire.⁵ In respect for the Chinese emperor, the tributary countries were able to receive benefits and rewards when their tribute missions visited the Chinese capital to show their gratitude and respect.

In this historical context of *zhonghua*, accounts would have led to the Chinese dynasties’ sole supremacy over East Asia, and the other surrounding states were accommodated with the dominant reign. Nonetheless, Chosŏn could also be an “empire” or a “center” of the world. I do not intend to deny the origin of the *hua-yi* worldview in China; Chosŏn certainly accepted the Chinese model as center. But I would like to emphasize that self-centered views existed in the “barbarian” “eastern” state; Chosŏn had its own sense of *zhonghua*, or *chunghwa* in Korean. This “world-centeredness” perspective implies that exclusive values of Chosŏn society were focused solely on itself as a single political entity. Chosŏn kings and officials composed criteria for looking at their state as the center and seeing the counterpart from the “center.” Based upon those perceptions, different values and cultures were measured and evaluated with biased perspectives.

How Korean kings and officials acknowledged their country beyond the Ming and Qing tribute systems is an important question. Given Chosŏn’s geographical proximity to China, challenging the Chinese dynasties would result in immediate ruin. In other words, Chosŏn found an effective way to survive with the *sadae* policy. In relations with the Ming and Qing governments, the Chosŏn court accepted suzerain–subordinate relations. Nonetheless, after the demise of Ming China, scholars, especially, raised about Chosŏn’s status vis-à-vis Qing China. In particular, they asked, was Ming China Chosŏn’s suzerain? Was not Ming China’s culture the culture to respect? In addition to such a view toward Qing China, the Tokugawa bakufu was established in 1603 while Chosŏn still possessed deep resentment over the Japanese invasions. This self-esteem presented the Koreans with the Korean-centered world vision, which originated from the Chinese *hua-yi* order, by claiming itself as the sole remaining civilized country, represented as *sojunghwa*, or the small central civilization. Korean scholars believed that Chosŏn was not a duplicate of China.⁶ Although their country was not large, they proudly acclaimed their country as the central civilization.

Within the shifting relations between the Ming and Qing governments, as well as the new relations with Tokugawa Japan, Chosŏn’s cultural self-esteem to protect itself

took the form of *sojunghwa*. Chosŏn's *chunghwa* awareness did not always accompany the political reality of the tribute and vassalage in the history of East Asia. In Chosŏn's case, political realism, such as tributary engagement with the Ming and Qing governments, did not interfere with the development of *chunghwa* thought, since the Chinese governments did not participate in internal political affairs of subordinate states.⁷⁾

The Koreans' visions were firmly constrained within the traditional values of Chosŏn society. How did the members of the Korean embassies form such a biased view towards the Japanese? Their perspective seems to have been constructed in the changes in East Asia in the seventeenth century, and remained constant into the eighteenth century and later. The different feelings of the Korean to their Japanese counterpart, for instance, were exclusively based on what they were familiar with in their culture. In this regard, Koreans possessed their own standpoints regarding the rigid Confucian discipline by which to behave and to see the Japanese counterpart, and without doubt, Japanese officials evaluated Korea from within their own cultural contexts.⁸⁾

The Relationship between Chosŏn and Tsushima

The views of Koreans towards Japan and Japanese culture frequently exhibited prejudice, in contrast to their views towards China, which were expressed as *mohwa*, or emulation of China, that arose at the end of the Koryŏ period (918–1392).⁹⁾ The Koreans' perspective towards the Japanese was explicitly illustrated in the use of the term "uncivilized people." In the various records of the Chosŏn court and travelogues written by members of the Korean embassies to Japan, diarists used the term "*waeguk*" or "*waein*," to indicate Japan or Japanese. "*Waeguk*" meant "outlandish country" and "*waein*" stood for "strange, peculiar people."¹⁰⁾ Another possible reason for Koreans to call Japan "*waeguk*" was Japan's sporadic recognition of the tributary relationship with the Chinese governments in an unusual manner, as the Muromachi bakufu had been a member of the tribute system, but the Tokugawa bakufu was not. For the Koreans, Japan's flexible position was unimaginable, and Japan seemed outside the "universal" East Asian order.

The diplomatic and commercial exchanges between Tokugawa Japan and Chosŏn were conducted through Tsushima as the intermediary. The Tokugawa bakufu could not manage Korean issues without the island domain. There seem to have been smooth interactions between Chosŏn and Tsushima, but there were several facts, promises, and protocols needed for Tsushima to adjust to Korean culture and customs. In those circumstances, Tsushima played the key role to bridge the gap between the two countries. What did the Tsushima domain do to maintain the neighborly relations, and what types of views did Chosŏn hold regarding Tsushima?

The Chosŏn court regarded the Tsushima domain as its tributary island, and the attendance of Tsushima officials at the ceremonies in Tongnae that honored the King of Chosŏn was mandatory. Those rites were conducted in Ch'oryang, in Tongnae County, where the Japan House (K. *Waegwan*, J. *Wakan*), the area for official trade with the Korean government and the residential quarters for the Japanese,¹¹⁾ was located, and those rites strictly followed Korean ritual procedure. The Tsushima officials had to show their respect to the wooden figure that symbolized the king. On these occasions,

the Tsushima officials were sitting in the garden kneeling and bending down toward the front, but the Korean officials and interpreters were standing close to the wooden figure. The Tsushima officials seemed to be paying obeisance to a group of Korean officials. Tsushima officials appealed to the Koreans that “our ritual submission is aimed only for the Korean king, not the Korean officials. So do not stand by the figure.” But the Chosŏn court never accepted this request.¹²⁾ Tsushima clearly was regarded as subordinate to Chosŏn.

The relationship between the Korean and Tsushima officials was that of a “superior–inferior” relationship. The members of the Korean embassies also demonstrated the belief that Tsushima belonged to Kyōngsang Province.¹³⁾ When the daimyo of Tsushima invited members of the 1719 embassy to a banquet, Sin Yuhan (1681–1752), the embassy’s Scribe, stated that they were not bound to follow Japanese procedures for the engagement.¹⁴⁾ Tsushima’s dual position between Chosŏn and Tokugawa Japan provided for awkward situations, for Tsushima was one of more than 200 domains (*J. han*) under the shogun. Although a domain of Tokugawa Japan, the Korean government required that Tsushima officials, that is, Japanese officials, to attend the ceremonies conducted by the Chosŏn government. With some reluctance, Tsushima attended these ritual ceremonies in accordance with the praxis in Korean convention.

To further develop diplomatic and commercial practices, Tsushima was forced to adjust to the Korean customs and traditions, as the islanders depended upon the Korean trade for their livelihood. The island needed to defend its exclusive privilege in managing interactions with Chosŏn, which had been assigned by Tokugawa Ieyasu. By the bakufu founder’s strong wish, no other domain could interfere or challenge the privileges of the island. However, the bakufu could exert very little control over Tsushima in the elaborate negotiations between the island and Chosŏn.¹⁵⁾ In this sense, the bakufu could not censor Tsushima’s acceptance of the Korean ceremonial rites, as the island was the only domain that knew how to maintain the neighborly relationship and to handle Korean issues.

Tsushima continued its “efforts” to maintain friendly interactions with Chosŏn, for termination of participation in the ceremony for the Korean king would result in breakdown of diplomatic and commercial relations.¹⁶⁾ For the bakufu, Tsushima’s attendance at this Korean state rite did not directly weaken the influence of the Tokugawa polity.¹⁷⁾ Each domain was administered autonomously by the local daimyo and his officials, and Tsushima, too, had to control internal issues for its own sake. The central government officials in Edo did not intervene in what the Tsushima officials did as long as the practical issues with the neighboring state were smoothly managed.¹⁸⁾ In this situation, the presence of Tsushima officials at the rites in Tongnae may have provided the Koreans with a sense of superiority over the Japanese. How was the awareness of Chosŏn’s superiority constructed? To answer this question and to comprehend the tangled threads of the interactions, an understanding of the historical background of the Korean side is vital.

***Sadae kyōrin* Based on Confucian Principle**

Chosŏn’s adoption of Confucianism began in the fourteenth century. The founder of Chosŏn, Yi Sŏnggye (r. 1392–1398) who overthrew Koryŏ, sought sanction from

Ming China as the new and legitimate ruler. He also asked the Ming court to decide between “Chosŏn” or “Hwanyŏng.” as the name for the new country. The Ming court preferred “Chosŏn,” based on the story of Kija Chosŏn.¹⁹⁾ The third king, T’aejong, achieved recognition by the third Ming emperor as the King of Chosŏn, and the tributary relationship with the Ming government began.

The endeavours of the Neo-Confucian infiltration into the newly-established Chosŏn society were vigorous. The advisor of the first king, Chŏng Tojŏn (1342–1398), attempted to establish Neo-Confucianism as the social doctrine. After Chong was killed by his political opponent, Kwŏn Kŭn (1353–1409) inherited Chŏng’s aim and devoted himself to the further introduction of Neo-Confucian principles into society. Through this process, Neo-Confucianism as the unyielding moral conduct was consolidated in Chosŏn society. Buddhism, the state religion of the former government, was disdained as heterodoxy by the proponents of Neo-Confucianism among officials and scholars.²⁰⁾ The transmission of Neo-Confucian doctrine was strongly connected to the respect for Ming China, which had adopted Neo-Confucianism. In addition, the Ming military alliance during the late-sixteenth century invasions against the Japanese armies impressed Koreans as the action of a savior, represented as *chaejo chiŭn*, or the benevolence of the saver of the state, which was also deeply rooted in society.

From the unbending perspective of the Confucian manner in viewing the East Asian sphere, how did Chosŏn see the tributary relationship? To answer the question, the definition of tributary relationship should be considered. William Rockhill gives a brief explanation of the tribute system between Ming China and Chosŏn as follows:

As to the custom of Korean kings submitting to the Emperor of China for his approval the name of the heirs to their throne, of their consorts, of informing him of deaths in the Royal Family these again are strictly ceremonial relations bearing with them no idea of subordination, other than that of respect and deference on the part of a younger member of a family to its recognized head.... During Ming dynasty of China, the people of Korea chose their sovereign without consulting China, and the latter power only entered a mild protest.... There is no case recorded in which the Emperor of China disapproved of the choice the King of Korea has made of his successor or his consort.²¹⁾

Engaging tributary relations may give us a notion of the stringent hierarchical order and the Chinese coercive dominance over the Chosŏn court. As seen in Rockhill’s account, Ming China provided Chosŏn with political autonomy. Under this system, China was discouraged from intervening in both the internal and the external affairs of Chosŏn as long as the premises of the tributary relationship with the Chinese court were guaranteed.²²⁾ After the establishment of the Qing government in 1644, most institutions and cultural manners were transferred from the Ming government to the Qing government. Accordingly, the Qing government adopted the tribute system for relations with Chosŏn.²³⁾

Sadae kyorin should also be analyzed with the tributary relationship. The concept of *sadae* initially came from the Chinese text *Chunqiu zuozhuan*. There it is stated, “The

great nourishes the lesser, and the lesser serves the great.”²⁴⁾ *Sadae* as a diplomatic concept emerged in the Warring States period (770 B.C.E.–443 B.C.E.) when Confucius encountered domestic turmoil in his country. In the chaotic conditions, his emphasis lay in the view that morality should be the basis of the representation of solid order between human beings and society, and this would disallow the forcible dominance of the smaller states by the greater states. To establish peaceful political institutions, retaining propriety was highlighted. And to avoid further meaningless wars, the relationship between the greater and the smaller countries had to be articulated by propriety, much like that between the sovereign and subject. This perspective became the core of the tributary relationship.

In accepting Neo-Confucian doctrine, the Chosŏn government firmly established *sadae kyorin* as its diplomatic principle. For Korean kings and officials in the seventeenth century, *sadae* indicated their country’s relations with the Ming and Qing governments. The Korean court constituted the diplomatic relationship with the Tokugawa bakufu based upon *kyorin*.²⁵⁾ Unlike *sadae*, the principle of *kyorin* meant friendship based on equal standing. By the coexistence of the policies of *sadae* and *kyorin*, Chosŏn was able to ease militaristic tension with the greater and smaller states that surrounded it.²⁶⁾

Chosŏn’s Dilemma: Between Two Neighboring States

Chosŏn experienced significant transformations in the seventeenth century. The Chosŏn court no longer ignored the presence of the “two lesser civilized,” yet newly-risen neighboring states of Qing China and Tokugawa Japan. Those states were regarded as uncivilized and barbarian by Chosŏn, but their influence on the East Asian environment was not minor or trivial. The Chosŏn court had to adapt to the emergences of these two states. Though the people in the two states were vulgar to Koreans, those uncivilized people already seemed to seize more military power and to begin threatening the security of the Korean peninsula.

How did Chosŏn react to these conditions? In Chosŏn’s diplomatic strategy, the Chosŏn court maintained *sadae* with Qing China and *kyorin* with Tokugawa Japan. The Manchu’s Qing government became Chosŏn’s new suzerain state, and the Chosŏn court showed the Qing emperor its acceptance of the tribute system after defeat in the two wars known in Korea as the *Chŏngyu horan*, in 1627, and the *Pyŏngja horan*, in 1636.²⁷⁾ After the second invasion, in 1637, the Manchus demanded that Chosŏn become a vassal state. This use of force enormously increased negative sentiments among the Koreans. Chosŏn’s only suzerain state was Ming China, and the Chosŏn court’s refusal to submit to the Manchus showed its loyalty to the still viable but greatly weakened Ming government. The Manchus’ military power threatened the Korean peninsula. Consequently, King Injo (r. 1623–1649) was forced to renounce allegiance to the Ming court in 1637.

The two wars with the Manchus brought great damage to the Korean peninsula. Chosŏn could not ignore the rise of the “northern barbarians,” and those people were an object of contempt after Chosŏn’s defeat. However, Chosŏn’s feelings of cultural superiority over the Manchus emerged at the same time, as they were the northern barbarians who were not civilized. In other words, the Koreans had to follow the

civilized Ming culture. Such Korean attachments to Ming China were unyielding, and this strong sentiment continued even after the demise of the Ming court. Among the Korean scholars who continued to greatly admire Ming China, the *pukpöllon*, or retribution against the northern barbarians, had prevailed in support of the Ming court. Nevertheless, paying tribute to an “antagonist” was more rational for Chosŏn, as the three wars, one against the Japanese and two against the Manchus, had inflicted great damage upon Korea.²⁸⁾

Qing China’s prosperity provided Chosŏn with complex problems. Tributary relations with the Qing government was often linked with Chosŏn’s economic growth, nevertheless, the Chosŏn court suffered financial difficulties in maintaining the tributary relationship.²⁹⁾ In contrast to decreasing commodities from Qing China to Chosŏn, the Chosŏn court had to ready supplies and tribute gifts for each tribute mission to Beijing.³⁰⁾

In addition, the Manchus overthrew Ming China, but the Chosŏn court confirmed its promise of tribute to the Qing government. Despite this engagement, for Chosŏn, Ming China was the only state to admire in the cultural context. The Chosŏn court was obligated to use the Qing calendar. However, resistance among Korean scholars who disliked the submission to the northern barbarians came into view. Some of their private documents were dated with the last reign title of Ming China, and this dating pattern held favor among scholars until the end of the nineteenth century.³¹⁾ And several ritual sites to worship Ming emperors were established in Hansŏng (contemporary Seoul) under the protection of the Chosŏn court.³²⁾

From the political context, Chosŏn’s diplomatic principle of *sadae kyorin* fitted into the Chosŏn court’s realistic strategy. Justification for the tributary engagement with Qing China was based on the Confucian discipline for the smaller state to submit to the greater. As long as the premise was kept, Chosŏn could preserve itself and the people at peace, and avoid war.³³⁾ *Sadae kyorin* appears a passive action, but for the Chosŏn court the diplomatic principle followed the Confucian doctrine that brought Chosŏn domestic peace and order.

What did the *kyorin* relations with Tokugawa Japan mean for Chosŏn? Retaining the friendly relationship with Tokugawa Japan was a significant part of Korean diplomacy to keep Korean territory secure. The Chosŏn court always seemed to select the best possible way for its own survival; reengagement of neighborly relations, now with the Tokugawa bakufu, was one facet of the court’s strategy to maintain peace with the outside world. Yet the Japanese invasions of Chosŏn were still a vivid memory at the time of the Manchus’ invasions and later. Hideyoshi’s aggressions provided a sufficient rationale for the Koreans to become alarmed about the possibility of reinvasion from Japan. Indeed, Chosŏn’s pursuit of “friendly relations while remaining cautious” continued until the last embassy in 1811, though the worries about Japanese political conditions gradually lessened.³⁴⁾ The Japanese invasions left a stronger resentment in Chosŏn society than bakufu officials imagined. The Tokugawa bakufu, however, showed Chosŏn friendly gestures and seemed harmless. To sustain the *kyorin* policy, Chosŏn restored neighborly relations with Japan, and the relationship guaranteed the peace between the two countries. The diplomatic policy of the Chosŏn court in the seventeenth century was always aimed at how to survive

between the new powers.

In any circumstances, the newly rising states across the northern border and across the eastern sea were a great risk to Korean security. The Chosŏn court was required to convert its attitude regarding the relations with the Qing court and Tokugawa Japan, from antagonism to the Manchus and the Japanese to a positive attitude. Through the diplomatic engagements with those new governments, Chosŏn was able to peacefully maintain relations with the “two barbarians,” and to keep the state and the people at peace, which was the most vital endeavor in protecting Chosŏn.³⁵⁾

Chosŏn as *Sojunghwa*

Chosŏn, having encountered the demise and rise of its neighboring states in the seventeenth century, had to consolidate and confirm its own standing in East Asia. These conditions surrounding the Korean peninsula led the Chosŏn society to confirm its distinctiveness and its distance from the “unusual,” “uncivilized,” and “barbarian” cultures of Qing China or Tokugawa Japan.

“Serving the great” became “serving the Ming government,” and strengthened into an inflexible value in Chosŏn society for more than a century. Under the Korean *hua-yi* construct, the relationship between Ming China and Chosŏn never became one of equals, but was comparable to the relationship between sovereign and subject, father and son, or elder brother and younger brother.³⁶⁾ The *sadae* relations towards Ming China were regarded as an absolute criterion for Chosŏn. However, after the demise of the Ming government, engaging in tributary relations with both the Ming government and the Qing government gave Chosŏn great anxiety, as “serving the two dynasties” meant violation of Confucian principle. This apprehension contributed to a consciousness of “what is Korea,” especially among scholars. Although Qing China was the suzerain state, cultural veneration of Ming China among scholars was unchanging. How could Chosŏn bridge the transition from Ming to Qing governments? In this situation, Chosŏn elites found a way to resolve the issue: Chosŏn was the only state to succeed to Ming civilization. This self-respect of Chosŏn led to claiming their country as the *sojunghwa*, or the small central civilization.³⁷⁾

In the climate of Chosŏn’s presenting tribute to Qing China, the search by Korean scholars for “who we were” resulted in an enhanced sense of their country as a center. This sense of Korea’s cultural expression was represented as *sojunghwa*, which provided those scholars with a strong sense of their cultural superiority over Qing China and Tokugawa Japan. *Chunghwa* had long signified China, a place of flourishing civilization and culture, as well as a center of the world. Such a view of *sojunghwa* treated Chosŏn as the last bastion for protecting and preserving the Ming culture. Chosŏn’s consciousness as *sojunghwa* developed in Chosŏn society and came from a search for self-awareness amid the external turmoil in the first half of the seventeenth century. Consequently, Korean scholars possessed a feeling that the highly-civilized culture only flourished in Chosŏn, for the Manchus, as barbarians, did not succeed to the Ming culture.

Between the barbarian states of Qing China and Tokugawa Japan, Chosŏn was the only country that preserved the appropriate and highly civilized culture. How could one determine whether the state was highly civilized or not? The answer was simple:

how deeply had Confucianism developed and spread throughout society?³⁸⁾ Chosŏn also claimed itself to be the “last place to protect Confucianism” after the rise of Qing China. In this perspective, some scholars speculated on Chosŏn as being a model of the “perfected Chinese pattern,”³⁹⁾ and the circumstance surrounding Chosŏn has been focused on the tribute system with the Chinese governments. However, Chosŏn was not without interactions with other states in East Asia, though the tributary relationship significantly influenced Chosŏn society. Andre Schmid criticizes the scholarship on Korea for often tending to look at a sino-centered relationship in regard to Korea’s diplomatic policy until the modern period.⁴⁰⁾ In seeing a different direction, Chosŏn’s own “proclamation” was expressed as, as Schmid writes, “Now the center was in the east.”⁴¹⁾ This view would also provide more extensive discussions on Korea’s cultural awareness as the center of civilization.

Before the establishment of Chosŏn, there already existed a concept of Korea’s existence as a distinguished and unique state. When officials from Southern Song China (1127–1279) were impressed by Koryŏ’s political system, which had a more advanced administrative organization than their own state, they named a lodge for the Koryŏ envoys in the capital city, Pinin (current Hangzhou),⁴²⁾ as the “house of a small civilization.”⁴³⁾ In a similar period, two envoys from Song China were struck by the literary works of two Koryŏ bureaucrats, and after their return to China, they published an anthology of the Koreans’ works as *Sohwa chip*, or “Collected Writings of the Small Civilization.”⁴⁴⁾ The background of *sojunghwa*, the breadth and depth of Chinese civilization in Koryŏ society, was widely acknowledged. From the Koryŏ period, a perception of *sojunghwa* seems already to have emerged. However, Koryŏ did not distinguish itself as a unique entity, as the state was “civilized” next to the Chinese culture.⁴⁵⁾

To further analyze Chosŏn’s perspective on the “center,” Chosŏn scholars seemed to have a contradictory sentiment towards Ming China, as well. By possessing a cultural reverence to Ming China, accepting it as the middle kingdom, some scholars found a more appropriate and ideal model of a middle kingdom in Chosŏn, as they saw that Ming China had failed to become the ideal model. Korean scholars and officials who visited Ming China recognized that the superlative model of a middle kingdom did not exist in Ming society due to the spread of immoral manners. For example, bribery grew to be an evil practice. If the *yŏnhaengsa*⁴⁶⁾ envoys did not give enticements to the Chinese officials in order to pass through the gate to Beijing, they were denied entrance.⁴⁷⁾ The old and ruined institutions for Confucian study were not comparable to those in Chosŏn. Cho Hŏn showed his disappointment at the lack of scholastic depth in Ming China in 1574. At the Guoziguan, the most prominent Confucian institution in Beijing, he saw that the wall of the building had collapsed and not been repaired, and the valuable collections of books in the library had been buried in dust.⁴⁸⁾ Teachers did not lecture in the classroom, as most of the students had abandoned their studies and left the school to return to their home villages. The people in Ming China, who were living in the central civilization, did not actually respect or advocate Confucianism. By looking at the facts, Korean scholars realized that they had a much more enthusiastic attitude in learning the Confucian discipline that was embedded as the principle of social conduct in their country. In other words,

Chosŏn excelled over the “originator.” Although Chosŏn was an eastern barbarian state, there was something in that country which could be acclaimed.

On a different aspect of Ming loyalism, Han Myŏnggi questions *chaejo chiŭn*, which was seen as an important concept during and after the Japanese invasions. He argues that Chosŏn was seen as a different state, and Chosŏn was born as the will of heaven, not as a duplication of China.⁴⁹⁾ Although the relations between Chosŏn and Ming China were relatively friendly until the late sixteenth century, Chinese interference in domestic politics at the Chosŏn court appeared during the invasions. The local people suffered from having to furnish enormous military provisions to Ming soldiers, and the illegal dealings in food flourished.⁵⁰⁾ Those supplies to Ming China caused Korean soldiers to lose their fighting strength from lack of food.⁵¹⁾ In the historical context, relations with Ming China were often seen through the *chaejo chiŭn* concept. In fact, Koreans also suffered from the frequent vandalism of Ming soldiers, and their acts brought consequential damage to the local residents.⁵²⁾

After the establishment of Qing China, Korean scholars questioned the definition of a middle kingdom. Hwang Kyŏngwŏn (1709–1787) examined the characterization of the center as: “What is the middle kingdom? It is only shown by propriety. If propriety exists, barbarians can be the central civilization, and China could be a barbarian state [if propriety does not exist]. In [the case of] individuals, as well, whether or not one possesses propriety determines [whether one is] a savage or not.”⁵³⁾ Another Korean scholar, Hong Taeyong (1731–1783), who was an envoy in the *yŏnhaengnsa* embassy to Qing China in 1765, came to a view similar to that of Hwang. Hong believed that the distinction of *hua* and *yi* depended on the “possession of civilization.” He continued, “If Confucius were born in Korea, an ideal middle kingdom would have been established outside of his country [China], namely in the Korean peninsula.”⁵⁴⁾ He wrote further, “Korea indeed is an eastern barbarian. It is certainly so in seeing [us] from the geographical location. But why should we conceal the truth [that Korea is a barbarian]?”⁵⁵⁾

Regarding the relations with Tokugawa Japan, members of the Korean embassies to Japan frequently saw the Japanese with a somewhat biased view, as they measured the Japanese and their culture based solely on their own long-standing Confucian traditions and self-esteem as people of a “highly civilized” state.⁵⁶⁾ While conversing with Japanese scholars, Sŏng Taejung, the second diarist of the 1763 embassy, described his country as follows: “Our state [Korea] is indeed a home of civilization.”⁵⁷⁾

The Korean officials’ sense of cultural superiority over the Japanese was often revealed in their travelogues. Chosŏn’s own expression of distinctiveness as a “small central civilization” functioned as the solid standard by which the members of the Korean embassy could measure difference and foreignness, and the consciousness may have somewhat shifted to the superior-inferior view towards the Japanese counterpart. On this point, Nam-lin Hur writes, “... civilization should be gauged by the yardstick of poetry, (Chinese poems), calligraphy, social etiquette, paintings, and music—the means through which the feeble human mind could be cultivated toward the Neo-Confucian ideals. In terms of achieving authentic (i.e., Confucian) civilization, Tokugawa Japan was placed far behind the society of Chosŏn Korea.”⁵⁸⁾ Korean

officials in the embassies saw the Japanese culture as far inferior to the Korean culture. In these circumstances, *kyorin* relations with Japan were not greatly emphasized at the Chosŏn court.⁵⁹⁾ Chang Yŏnsŏng reveals the nature of the *kyorin* policy as one that “included certain prejudice, self-supremacy, and an attempt to place the [Japanese] counterpart in a lower position.”⁶⁰⁾

Sadae kyorin was the diplomatic framework for Chosŏn towards the two Chinese governments and the new Japanese state. Although this framework was an effective tool for a small country’s survival, the attitude of superiority also cast a negative aspect. The critical decisions of the Chosŏn government were reliant on the greater. During the Japanese invasion, the Chinese emperor’s envoy went to Chosŏn and then to Japan to negotiate an armistice with Japan. Chosŏn did not seem to influence the negotiations between Ming China and Hideyoshi, and was treated as a mere onlooker.

Through the rise of the barbarian states of Qing China and Tokugawa Japan, Chosŏn scholars seemed to consolidate a solid sense of self-esteem based upon Chosŏn as the only country where the highly civilized culture flourished. Although they had long encountered the quandary that as an eastern barbarian state their country could never become a middle kingdom, they began to describe their country as *sojunghwa*, as a small center of civilized culture. In embracing the ironic belief of being barbarian but culturally civilized, Korean scholars pursued an “ideal” posture of middle kingdom, and depicted their country as the perfect model to become the true central civilization.⁶¹⁾

This perception of the esteem of *sojunghwa*, however, was limited to a small segment of the population, to scholars and some government officials. The commoners who were in the majority likely did not know of such a perception. *Sojunghwa* did not develop as a driving force to help change the rigid Chosŏn society towards the modern period, as the belief that Chosŏn was the *sojunghwa* functioned to maintain Chosŏn as a “highly civilized state,” and to protect the Korean peninsula from the turmoil of the outside world in the seventeenth century. This kind of closed view in Chosŏn society, of not accepting new ideas, seemed to increase over time.

Conclusion

Chosŏn Korea faced a series of difficulties from the end of the sixteenth century into the seventeenth century: the invasions by the Japanese and the two wars with the Manchus. When each war occurred, the Korean peninsula turned into a battlefield and suffered much then and later from the severe fighting. After facing the rise of the new regimes in China and Japan, Chosŏn elites fostered a sense of *sojunghwa*, a view of Korea as a civilized center, distinguishing itself from the two “barbarian” states. Chosŏn’s pursuit of the diplomatic principle of *sadae kyorin*, which was based on Confucian discipline, was confirmed, and the policy provided Chosŏn with domestic peace and order. Also, *sadae kyorin* was Chosŏn’s best possible effort to protect the country from the two barbarian countries north and south of the Korean peninsula.

Under neighborly relations, Tokugawa Japan and Chosŏn were able to enjoy diplomatic and commercial exchange for more than two centuries. The Korean embassy was seen as the symbol of the mutual friendship between the Japanese and the Koreans, and the bakufu welcomed the Korean delegations. Through the diaries

and other records of the embassies, the Chosŏn court was able to directly observe Japan's political and economic conditions and to closely examine Japanese society. The visits of embassies in the first half of the seventeenth century also enabled the Tokugawa bakufu to enhance its domestic legitimacy and demonstrate its authority. In this sense, the Korean embassies were necessary for the two countries.

Notes

- 1) Park Choong-Seok, "Concept of International Order in the History of Korea," *Korea Journal* vol. 18 no. 7 (1978:7), 16.
- 2) Son Sŭngch'ŏl, "Chōsen kōki jitsugaku shisō to taigai ninshiki," *Chōsen gaku* no. 122 (1987:1), 119.
- 3) "Small" is a reference to the size of the country.
- 4) As a representative English text, John Fairbank's edited volume *The Chinese World Order* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968) introduces diplomacy from the Chinese perspective, as well as the tributary relationship between China and Korea, as a functional system. I will not join the debate on this issue, but Fairbank's adoption of the western "empire" perspective in Chinese history has long been a center of criticism.
- 5) Kimura Kan, *Chōsen/Kankoku nashonarizumu to shōkoku ishiki*, (Kyoto: Mineruba Shobō, 2000), 24–25.
- 6) "Small" indicates the size of the country.
- 7) Park, "Concept of International Order in the History of Korea," 16.
- 8) Nam-lin Hur, "A Korean Envoy Encounters Tokugawa Japan: Shin Yuhan and the Korean Embassy of 1719," *Bunmei* 21 no. 4 (2000:3), 61.
- 9) Etsuko Hae-Jin Kang, *Diplomacy and Ideology in Japanese-Korean Relations: From the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, (Houndmills, U.K.: Macmillan, 1997), 171. Also see Ha Ubong, *Chōsen jitsugakusha no mita kinsei Nihon*, trans. Inoue Atsushi, (Tokyo: Perikansha, 2001), and Inoue Atsushi, "Nitchō kankei ni okeru besshikan no henyō," in Ha Ubong, *Chōsen jitsugakusha no mita kinsei Nihon*, 385.
- 10) In *Haeyurok*, a travelogue of the 1719 Korean embassy to Japan, is a discussion of terms of recognition by the Japanese and the Koreans. During the Korean embassy's journey, the Tsushima official Amenomori Hōshū (1668–1755) asked Sin Yuhan, the Korean embassy's Scribe, why the Koreans kept writing Japan's name as "Wā" (K. *Wae*), and calling Japanese as "waein." While Sin was perplexed by Hōshū's query, he answered that it was his country's traditional practice. Hōshū suggested to Sin that the Koreans should use "Nihon" and "Nihonjin" instead of "wae" and "waein." Sin then asked Hōshū why the Japanese called the Koreans *Tōjin*, or Chinese. He also claimed that the Japanese referred to Korean writings as "Chinese pieces." Hōshū replied that the Korean writings were equivalent to the valuable Chinese texts, thus the Japanese referred to the Korean writings in this way, implying the respectful manner of Japanese towards the Koreans and Korean culture.
- 11) The Japan House at Pusan was constructed in the early fifteenth century.
- 12) Tashiro Kazui, *Wakan: Sakoku jidai no Nihonjinmachi*, (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2002), 129.
- 13) Sin Yuhan, *Haeyurok* (J. Kaiyūroku), trans. Kang Chaeŏn, (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1974), entry dated 1719.6.30 [August 15, 1719], 45–46.
- 14) *Ibid.*, 46.
- 15) Tsushima domain managed practical matters in the relations with Chosŏn. However, the Tokugawa bakufu held decisive authority over Tsushima when it was necessary to intervene. For further details, see Tashiro Kazui, *Kakikaerareta kokusho: Tokugawa Chōsen gaikō no butaiura*, (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1983), 158–160.
- 16) Tashiro, *Wakan*, 126–127.
- 17) Tashiro, *Kakikaerareta kokusho*, 178–179.
- 18) *Ibid.*, 178.
- 19) Kija was the name of a Chinese official and prince of the In dynasty (1600 B.C.E.–1046 B.C.E.). He fled to the Korean peninsula after the end of In, and is said to have established Kija Chosŏn, which was seen as the first state in the Korean peninsula.
- 20) Kojima Tsuyoshi, *Higashi Ajia no jukyō to rei*, (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 2004), 73.
- 21) William Woodville Rockhill, *China's Intercourse with Korean from the XVth Century to 1895*, (New York:

- Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1905), 4.
- 22) Kim Bong-jin, "Rethinking of the Pre-Modern East Asian Region Order," *Journal of East Asian Studies* vol. 2 no. 2 (2002:8), 71. However, at any critical moment in the vassal state, such as the Japanese invasions of Chosŏn, the greater state sent reinforcements to save the subject.
 - 23) Chŏn Haejong, "Horan hu ūi tae-Ch'ŏng kwangye," in *Hanguksa 12: Yangban sahoe ūi mosun kwa tae-wae chŏngjaeng*, (Kwach'ŏn, Republic of Korea: Kuksa P'yonch'an Wiwŏnhoe, 1978), 347.
 - 24) *Chunqiu zuozhuan*, trans. Takeuchi Teruo, in *Chūgoku koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 2, (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1968), 299–300. This text was written sometime between 770 B.C.E. and 443 B.C.E., during the Warring States period.
 - 25) The Korean scholar Kim Bong-jin sees the *kyorin* relationship as based on the *saso* of *kyorin*. *Saso* contains the opposite meaning from *sadae*, that is, voluntary submission to the smaller state and people. Kim's argument comes from the historical fact that Tsushima had long been treated as a semi-tributary of Chosŏn. Since every matter in Korean diplomacy was exercised through the Tsushima officials, the bakufu did not directly touch on the issues between the two states. He writes, "In this aspect, the relationship between the Chosŏn government and the bakufu was limited in scope and mostly ceremonial in nature and practice." (Kim, "Rethinking of the Pre-Modern East Asian Region Order," 88). His claim is accurate. However, Tsushima functioned as an agent of the Tokugawa bakufu, the most powerful political authority. The bakufu had ultimate power to influence Tsushima's acts. For criticism and punishment of Tsushima by the bakufu regarding Korean affairs, the Yanagawa Affair in 1635 must be considered.
 - 26) Son Sŭngch'ŏl, "Chōsen kōki jitsugaku shisō to taigai ninshiki," 118.
 - 27) *Chōngyū* and *pyōngja* are names of zodiac years.
 - 28) Manchus were often disdained as "*orange*," or barbarians.
 - 29) Chŏn, "Horan hu ūi tae-Ch'ŏng kwangye," 350.
 - 30) *Ibid.*, 350–352.
 - 31) Yamauchi Kōichi, *Chōsen kara mita kai shisō*, (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 2003), 42.
 - 32) *Ibid.*, 44.
 - 33) Watanabe Manabu, "Richō kōki 'jidai kōrin' shishō no henbō katei shōkō," *Jinbun gakkai zasshi* vol. 9 (1978:3), 420.
 - 34) Yi Chin-Hŭi, "Korean Envoys and Japan: Korean-Japanese Relations in the 17th to 19th Centuries," *Korea Journal* vol. 25 no. 12 (1985:12), 28.
 - 35) Watanabe, "Richō kōki 'jidai kōrin' shishō no henbō katei shōkō," 420.
 - 36) Son Sŭngch'ŏl, "Chōsen kōki jitsugaku shisō to taigai ninshiki," 122–123.
 - 37) In Korean monographs, *sojunghwa* is expressed as "*Chosŏn chunghwa*." However, this paper uses *sojunghwa* in accordance with the usage in historical sources.
 - 38) Yamauchi, *Chōsen kara mita kai shisō*, 13.
 - 39) *Ibid.*, 12.
 - 40) Andre Schmid, "What's in a kuk?," unpublished manuscript, 12–13 (cited with the author's permission).
 - 41) *Ibid.*, 12.
 - 42) Hangzhou is located in Zhejiang Province in southern China, near Shanghai.
 - 43) Yamauchi, *Chōsen kara mita kai shisō*, 25.
 - 44) *Ibid.*, 25.
 - 45) Ha Ubong, *Chōsen jitsugakusha no mita kinsei Nihon*, 357.
 - 46) The *yŏnhaengsa* (the embassy to Beijing) was the tribute mission from Chosŏn to Beijing, the capital of Qing China. "*Yŏn*," which literally means swallows, indicated the Beijing area. The Chosŏn court dispatched embassies to Qing China 494 times, in contrast to 12 times to Japan.
 - 47) Yamauchi, *Chōsen kara mita kai shisō*, 57–58.
 - 48) *Ibid.*, 57–58.
 - 49) Han Myōnggi, *Imjin waeran kwa Han-Chung kwangye*, (Seoul: Yoksa Pip'yōngsa, 1999), 14–15.
 - 50) *Ibid.*, 136–137.
 - 51) *Ibid.*, 141.
 - 52) *Ibid.*, 131–132.

- 53) *Ibid.*, 66–67.
- 54) Hong Taeyong, “Tamönsö,” in *Hanguk sasang taejông chip*, (Seoul: Yangudang, 1988), 127.
- 55) *Ibid.*, 127–128.
- 56) Hur, “A Korean Envoy Encounters Tokugawa Japan,” 61–72.
- 57) Yamauchi, *Chōsen kara mita kai shisō*, 72. Sōng Taejung’s work was entitled *Ch’ōngsōng chip*, or “Collected Writings of the Blue Castle.”
- 58) Hur, “A Korean Envoy Encounters Tokugawa Japan,” 70.
- 59) Chang Yōnsōng, “Kindai Chōsen no Nihonkan no kōzō to seikaku,” in Miyajima Hiroshi and Kim Yongdök, eds., *Kindai kōryūshi to sōgo ninshiki*, (Tokyo: Keiō Gijuku Daigaku Shuppankai, 2001), 161.
- 60) *Ibid.*, 161.
- 61) Yamauchi, *Chōsen kara mita kai shisō*, 58.