

Article

From the "Non-Chinese Other" to a Contested Civilization: Joseon Intellectuals' Encounter with Qing and the Transformation of the View of Civilization

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Abstract: This article examines how Joseon intellectuals rethought the concept of civilization during their encounter with the Qing Dynasty. Grounded in the Hua-Yi worldview and the *sadae* (serving the great) relationship with the Ming, Joseon had regarded the Manchu Qing as a culturally inferior "Non-Chinese Other"; after its submission in 1637 it nevertheless presented itself as the true heir of the Ming and claimed the title "Little China." Drawing on the Yeon Haeng Rok, especially Pak Chiwon's Jehol Diary, and on Jeong Yagyong's Gyeongse Yupso, the article argues that firsthand observation of Qing cities, commerce, communications and the imperial examination system confronted Joseon envoys with a reality that inherited Hua-Yi thought could not accommodate. Rather than abandoning the Hua-Yi framework altogether, Joseon intellectuals adopted a more differentiated standard of judgment that separated moral legitimacy from practical governance, and some moved from observation to concrete proposals for institutional change in Joseon. A comparison with the Goryeo-Yuan precedent shows that the lighter, largely ceremonial character of the Qing tributary order, together with the envoys' residence in Beijing and the circulation of their records at home, gave Joseon intellectuals a critical distance that Goryeo elites had never enjoyed. The article therefore reads the transformation of the view of civilization in late Joseon as a coexistence of conceptual continuity and pragmatic adaptation, and as a contested process in which civilization was redefined rather than simply rejected or accepted.

Keywords: Hua-Yi concept; Joseon-Qing relations; *sadae* diplomacy; Little China; Yeon Haeng Rok; view of civilization

1. Introduction

Compared to the enduring worship and respect of the Ming Dynasty, the attitude of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) toward the Qing Dynasty (1636-1911) is more complex. Deeply influenced by the Huayi concept and the history of the tribute system with the Ming Dynasty, Joseon was initially hostile to the Qing. Following the Ming Dynasty's decline, Joseon was conquered by the Qing and forced to establish diplomatic relations with the Qing. Joseon, however, continued to consider itself the final successor to the Ming Empire, believing its culture was superior to the Qing's and calling itself "little China". The records written by ministers who had been to the Qing, such as Yeon Haeng Rok, specifically showed the real society of the Qing. Joseon ministers found that the society was more prosperous and the administrative system was more efficient than they had previously thought. This encounter forced Joseon intellectuals to confront tensions between inherited Hua-Yi ideology and reality, transforming established understandings of civilization, legitimacy, and cultural identity. There exists a coexistence of ideological continuity (Hua-Yi) and pragmatic adaptation.

Earlier researchers usually focused on the diplomatic conflict between the Qing and Joseon through detailed analyses of wartime official records. Recent scholars have begun

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to move beyond viewing the Joseon-Qing relationship solely based on hostile and ideological orthodoxies, to the materialized aspects. Researchers, such as Myengsoo Seo, mainly focused on and analyzed how buildings in Joseon reflected Qing cultural influence in "Changing perceptions of the Qing Dynasty in the Late Joseon Dynasty and Chinese-style architecture that emerged in Joseon in the 18th century". Yet the ideological transformation of the Hua-Yi worldview in an intellectual way is still insufficient. The article focuses on this part to analyze the transformation in a broader perspective by citing the classics, such as Jehol Diary and Gyeongse Yupso. Beyond analyzing the Joseon-Qing relationship and the tension in thoughts, the article will also have a comparative analysis with the Goryeo-Yuan dynasty. The scenarios are similar; both Goryeo and Joseon faced the nomadic power that dominated China, but they had formed totally different reactions and perspectives.

1.1. The "Huayi" Concept and the Establishment of the "Sadae" (Serving the Great; in This Scenario, It Means Joseon Is Loyal to the Ming's Great Power) Diplomacy

The "Huayi" concept means that Han Chinese culture was superior to other cultures in East Asia, such as Mongolia. Chinese culture is called "Hua" in this scenario, and other cultures are called "Yi", which means culturally inferior. The formation of this concept was derived from the powerful national strength of China. China has influenced the surrounding countries in two aspects for a long time: system and ideology. That is, besides mimicking Ming's political system, the "HuaYi" ideology was also adopted by many countries. The establishment of this concept was considered for both benefits. For the Ming Dynasty itself, the formation of the concept could express its power as the strongest leader in East Asia. This laid the foundation for a series of actions to promote national prestige to surrounding nations, such as Zheng He's voyages to the West. Surrounding nations followed this concept and attempted to establish a sinocentric tributary relationship with China also bring a huge chance and benefits, which are different from the traditional "tribute relationships" as illustrated as a form of exploitation from the conquered nations: for the whole country, it can secure a significant economic benefit from the relationship, since the tribute nations can gain an approval to trade with China [1]. That is, Ming tried to block all illegal trade, but civil society organizations were still involved in smuggling [2]. The case implicitly reveals significant economic opportunities for these organizations to trade with the Ming, despite high risks. The approval enables the tribute nation to trade with the Ming and gain huge economic benefits legitimately. Besides the economic considerations, the ruling class can also consolidate its regime through the superpower's acknowledgement. Yi Song-gye, who is the king of Joseon, requested that the Ming Dynasty bestow upon him a title of nobility as the king of the country. Though the Ming Taizu criticized his behavior for rebellion, the emperor still gave the name "Joseon" to his new nation, overthrowing the previous name "Goryeo"[2]. The name means the legitimacy of the establishment of the Joseon Dynasty.

The Joseon-Ming tribute relationship was established through the sadae diplomacy introduced by Yi Song-gye after got the title bestowed by the Ming. After rebelling against the command to attack Ming and leading forces to attack the capital of the Goryeo, Yi established the Joseon empire in 1392[3]. Since the tribute nation must admit the cultural advance and superiority of China in the sadae system, Joseon followed the Ming court attire, and the ministers stationed in the Ming brought Confucian cultural classics instructed by the Ming emperor. Supreme Commander of the Imperial Guard and Court Emissary Jin Shiyu returned with the imperial edict given by the Ming emperor: "I issue you this decree to the King of Joseon: I bestow upon you the following books: Complete Works of the Four Books, Complete Works of Five Classics, and Complete Works of Cheng Li, totaling 120 volumes; as well as Essentials of Governing the Country Through a Comprehensive Mirror, totaling 14 volumes. When they arrive, please accept them"[4]. As the monarchy in the tribute relationship, Ming "issues" the Confucian books and classics to Joseon, and Joseon must accept these materials. The implementation of this diplomacy promoted the spread of Confucianism from the Ming to the Joseon. In fact,

back to the late Goryeo period, neo-Confucianism rose in popularity across the Joseon peninsula, and undoubtedly it spread widely in Joseon. The *sadae* system was not merely diplomatic subordination, but Joseon also employed the ideological framework through which it both externalized and internalized the Ming's Confucian culture. It used all five Confucian Constant Virtues (*Osang*) in the names of the key buildings, and three other gates reflected the same idea, as *Hongjimum* is the gate of wisdom, and *Sungnyemun* is the gate of exalted rituals [5]. These buildings, using Confucian names, are crucial material symbols to reflect the ideology of a nation. Not only in China, but Joseon also pursues these values, which are shared common values and beliefs between the two nations.

The tributary relationship strengthens the spread of Confucian culture to Joseon, and the Confucian culture strengthened their relationship in turn. Ming helped Joseon beat Japan's invasion. As recorded in the *Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty*, Ming's generals entered Pyongyang from all directions, killed the enemies, and regained Pyongyang [6]. Through the Confucian perspective, the King of Joseon praised this action as a "special favor that enabled us to rebuild the country"[7]. It not only reflects Joseon's great gratitude for Ming's just behavior, but also illustrates how Joseon tries to employ the Confucian perspective as a lens to view Ming's behavior. In Confucianism, being kind and protecting the weak from crisis is called benevolence, which should be respected and admired in Confucian thought. In this case, Joseon was impressed by Ming's benevolence and truly respected this behavior. Besides, Confucianism taught that juniors must respect seniors with loyalty, as a son with his father [8]. This is the basic etiquette in Confucian thought, and people in Confucianism must follow this rule. This strengthens the relationship between Ming and Joseon, as Joseon truly respects Ming as a senior in the tributary.

This marked the formation of a strong relationship between Joseon and Ming, one that went beyond a mere tributary relationship. The high status of Chinese culture and Joseon's strong cultural identity with the Ming explain why Joseon viewed the Qing as uncivilized non-Han regime when the Qing conquered it.

1.2. The Fall of the Ming Dynasty and the Formation of the "Little China."

The Qing began to attack Joseon in 1631[9]. Since the inequality between the military power of Joseon and the Qing and the lack of Ming's help, the Qing attacked Pyongyang and Seoul all the way, forcing the king and ministers of Joseon to *Namhansanseong*. The Qing had implemented a blockade there. In 1637, Joseon submitted to the Qing. Seven years later, in 1644, the Ming collapsed after the Qing army entered Beijing. Although the Ming collapsed and Joseon submitted to the Qing, Joseon still wished for the revival of the Ming Dynasty. *Song Si-yeol*, one of the major ministers in Joseon, proposed to King *Hyojong* (the king of Joseon) that Joseon should assist the southern Ming in combating the Qing, as Goryeo had done with Song [10]. He directly told the king that if Joseon had not helped the Ming, the country would lose the support of the people, and then the justice would also collapse, expressing his and even the Joseon society's rejection of the reign of the Qing and the strong loyalty toward the Ming. Joseon follows the traditional Ming Confucian thought: righteousness. After forming the "tribute" relationship with the Qing, Joseon still believed the Qing were non-Chinese state. The scholar-official *Yi* directly told the king that the nomadic people in the north are the "enemies of our nation", and they "cut off the 300-year-long reign of the Ming". The reason why Joseon formed the tribute relationship with Qing is just for "survival"[11]. Deeply influenced by the "Huayi" concept, the overthrow of the so-called orthodox dynasty made Joseon know that Qing is not only a military rival, but also the opposite of civilization. They believed that it was lacking Confucian rationality for a non-Chinese nation to overthrow the legitimate Han nation and rule China. Believing in its cultural superiority over the Qing people, Joseon still viewed it as culturally inferior and showed its alliance with the Ming in other implicit ways. The construction of the Altar of Great Gratitude (*Daebodan*) in 1704 was another evident case. It shows Joseon's great gratitude for the help of the Ming in helping them to combat Japan and commemorate the emperor of the Ming. Joseon continued to follow

Ming's tradition: the Chronicles of the Joseon Dynasty, one of the official historical records of the Joseon Dynasty, continued to use the reign title of the Ming Dynasty (Chongzhen) after the collapse of the Ming, and even some ministers still used this title until the 20th century.

In the cultural ideology, Joseon considered itself the legitimate successor of the Cheng-Zhu learning, and they thought that they were responsible for preserving the way (daotong). Specifically, one of the consensus among Joseon Confucian scholars is that Zhu Xi's study of the rituals is incomplete and insufficient [12]. As the legitimate successor of the way, they believed that they had rights and were responsible for continuing to explore the ritual studies and other aspects of this learning. This is just one of the many Confucian aspects that they think they are aligned with. "Though we inhabit the eastern seacoast and possess only a small territory, we are known to the world as 'Little China.' This reputation does not stem from wealth or military might, but from our steadfast adherence to ritual propriety and moral righteousness" [13]. Based on the strong alliance with the Confucian thought and believing in justice and righteousness, the "Little China" concept was formed. The "Little China" concept also persisted in civilian life. In Joseon, the daily restriction included that paper flowers were only permitted to be used in festivals and events, and the use of snuff was not permitted [14]. Since the paper flower is cheaper and inferior to snuff, this restriction enables the Joseon's frugal culture to correspond with Cheng-Zhu learning (a school founded by Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi of the Northern Song Dynasty and further developed by Zhu Xi of the Southern Song Dynasty; it emphasizes that the reason is the origin of all things, and things are all good), one crucial branch of Confucianism. Cheng-Zhu learning emphasizes that people should cultivate their moral characters, and they should not be confused and disturbed by the distractions and temptations from the outside world [15]. Hence, this restriction was not merely a moral regulation, but symbolized Joseon's alignment with the diligence emphasized by Confucianism, and, meanwhile, as a rejection of the Manchu courts' luxury.

2. Envoys and Yeon Haeng Rok

Although Joseon did not believe that Qing's reign was legitimate, it still followed the tributary rules and assigned ministers stationed in Beijing, who are called Yeonhaeng envoys. These envoys were responsible for the local diplomatic issues for Joseon and the Qing. Since these Yeonhaeng envoys lived in Beijing and had visited other parts of Qing, they had the opportunity to gain a more thorough view of Qing's society than other Joseon ministers who had never been to Qing. The Yeon Haeng Rok is the collection of records written by these Yeonhaeng envoys, which specifically and truly recorded what Qing's society looked like. Based on the experiences in Qing, many Yeonhaeng envoys began to rethink and compare with Joseon's scenarios. When the records go back to Joseon, it also triggered the local Joseon people to reconsider their current scenarios. Some ministers even imitated the recording in the book and made some practical improvements.

2.1. Urban Splendor, Commercial Vitality, and Commute Efficiency

Park was surprised by the bustling streets and crowded people in Shengjing. In the Jehol Diary, he exaggerated that the people in the city are "brushing shoulders with one another", creating a scene "as bustling as the sea". The city's prosperity reflected in its buildings, which are built with "colorful pavilions, carved windows, and gilded signboards" [16]. The luxury goods and commodities also filled the marketplaces. According to Huayi's view, Joseon associated it with the superior Ming culture for a long time. It is hard for Joseon ministers to associate such spending with the urban view and commercial vitality with the country they previously believed to be culturally inferior. However, the definition of cultural superiority is more complicated than the Huayi view. Huayi's view only focuses on whether a culture inherits traditional Confucian culture, neglecting the more practical aspects. In other words, the holding of the Huayi view forced Joseon ministers to concentrate more on ideological aspects rather than on people's

practical lives. Park and other Joseon ministers who had been to the Qing tried to leave this circle and view a civilization using more comprehensive lenses: the efficiency of administrative systems, the prosperity of cities, and the happiness of people. Their critical view also reflects on Park's criticism of Joseon's commuting system. Park introduces his experience of taking the carts to Yanjing and how he came to appreciate their convenience. He directly argues that the reason the Qing is so prosperous is the use of carts for commuting, making the goods and commodities in different places interconnected. If carts are not widely used in the commuting system, people in different places may be confined to using their local goods and live a low-quality life. Park criticized the reason why carts were not widely used in Joseon as being due to Joseon's conservative ministers, arguing that they stuck to the Huayi concept instead of opening up to accept advanced and practical civilization to improve the Joseon people's quality of life. Viewing the prosperous cities and the convenience of carts made Park and other Joseon ministers come to know that the Qing was more advanced than they had thought. More thoroughly, they began to think about the rationality of using the Huayi concept as the only lens to view the civilization and rule the country.

2.2. Imperial Examination System

Beyond the materialized aspects, as introduced above-the prosperous of the city and the convenience of the commuting system, the administrative system also makes Park ponder. Take the imperial examination system as an example. Park specifically introduced the examination hall, the test, and the grading process. The examination hall is a highly controlled, standardized, and isolated institutional space designed to ensure fairness in the test. In the book, Pak recorded that the walls surrounding the hall were "built of brick" and "thorny bushes were placed on the top of them." He believed that these "prison" sets maintained the orderly conditions and maximized the solemnity in the examination hall. Inside the wall, there is a complex building, which "forms thousands of rooms." Each student is in one of the rooms, and the walls are as solid as an "iron fortress," making cheating, such as boring a hole, almost impossible [16]. The supporting facilities in the examination hall are also complete, as recorded: "There was a heated ondol floor, and kitchens and bath facilities were fully provided." The book received widespread attention when it came back to Joseon. Contrary to Joseon's previous assumption of the Qing people's rudeness and barbarism, this more comprehensive and rigorous examination system in the Qing made people in Joseon ponder. They were surprised by the comprehensive and highly efficient imperial examination system held by the Qing. Some of the ministers even began to critique the current examination system in Joseon and decided to make improvements. In the Gyeongse Yupso, written by Jeong Yagyong, Jeong cites the description of the examination hall depicted in the Jehol diary to critique the current examination hall built in Joseon. He argued that there are only a few examination halls available in Joseon, and it is insufficient for the examination. After comparing the current situation in Joseon with that of the Qing, he decided to build a bigger examination hall, which had specific rooms for different functions. Jeong's behavior indicates that there was a change in the Joseon people. According to Hua-Yi and the Confucian perspective introduced in the previous chapters, Joseon should reject the Qing's social traditions. However, Jeong and other ministers with similar behavior shifted from completely rejecting Qing social traditions to critically accepting some of them. Park and Jeong's behaviors indicate that they are impressed not only by commercial prosperity and cities' prosperity, but also by the high efficiency of the Qing administrative system. The highly organized examination system reflected the Qing's administrative capacity.

3. Conclusion

The foundation of the Huayi concept made Joseon view civilization from an ideological perspective, neglecting any pragmatic aspects. The use of "Yi label" also reflects the unrealistic discrimination based on ethnicity-Hua people are superior to the surrounding nomadic people. Joseon advocated the Confucian and Ming cultures to an

extreme extent, as mentioned in the article. The firsthand observation of the prosperity, administrative efficiency, and institutional complexity of Qing cities impressed them. It does not mean that they totally abandoned the Huayi view and acknowledged the legitimacy of Qing culture, but it made them opt for another standard to view civilization, which is a more nuanced perspective to separate moral legitimacy and practical governance from civilization. A brief comparison with the Goryeo-Yuan precedent highlights the distinctiveness of the Joseon-Qing case. After Goryeo submitted to Yuan in the late 13th century, the Yuan court imposed an institutional mechanism far more intrusive than the Qing's later tributary system. The king of Goryeo must marry the Yuan imperial princesses, and the princes were required to reside at Dadu as hostages. All of these created a close but unequal relationship for the two nations. Joseon after 1637, by contrast, maintained a purely ceremonial tributary relationship with no royal intermarriage and no hostages. Joseon had envoys settled in Beijing, and their records were recorded in the Yeonhaengnok for Joseon readers. This institutional distance gave Joseon intellectuals the critical space that Goryeo elites never possessed. It explains why Joseon, unlike Goryeo, could produce the reflective writings that both acknowledged Qing effectiveness and preserved a distinct Joseon cultural identity. In conclusion, based on Joseon's rooted Confucianism and its chances to observe Qing's real society, the ministers experienced a change in perception and notion of civilization. They may continue to regard Qing as morally illegitimate, while simultaneously acknowledging its administrative effectiveness. The case shows that cultural identity is never static, but perpetually contested and redefined.

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