



The Zhonghua Community Strategy in the Early Joseon Dynasty: *The Establishment of Rituals and the Change in Ming's Attitude toward Joseon*

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Abstract

This article will explain the Zhonghua community strategy and its impact on the formation of the self-identity of Joseon's political elites, and the resulting change in the Ming court's attitude toward the Joseon dynasty. The architect of the institutions of the early Joseon dynasty, Jeong Dojeon, insisted the Joseon dynasty should internalize Confucian moral values and become the model tributary in this world order. His plan was materialized by kings of the early Joseon dynasty. Among various policies, the establishment of new rituals was the key project of the Zhonghua community strategy. The political elites of the early Joseon dynasty prided themselves on representing the country of courtesy. In the mid-Ming period, the Ming court accepted Joseon's claim, and began treating it as a civilized country distinctive from other barbarian nations. Far from being a purely anachronistic policy of a distant period, this "Zhonghua community strategy" of the early Joseon dynasty can be taken as a reference point for understanding the policy-making of modern Korea.

Keywords: Zhonghua community strategy, country of courtesy, *Sadae* diplomacy, early Joseon dynasty, Jeong Dojeon

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The Joseon dynasty and the other states surrounding imperial China (Annam and Liuqiu) acceded to the China-centered world order. These states willingly revered the Ming dynasty as their suzerain, satisfying themselves with a subordinate position vis-à-vis the Ming. In addition, these states eagerly adopted ideologies and institutional arrangements of imperial China. This unique relationship cannot be adequately captured using the language of modern international relations. Even though there is a huge gap between *de jure* and *de facto* international law, the Westphalian system is widely seen as predicated upon an equal relationship between sovereign states. Thus, to those accustomed to modern international relations, Joseon's attitude toward the Ming has sometimes appeared slavish.

John Fairbank attempted to explain this asymmetry in the foreign relations of pre-modern East Asia. He pointed to the "the moral value of tribute being more important in the minds of the rulers of China, and the material value of trade in the minds of the barbarians" (Fairbank and Têng 1941, 140–141). A number of Korean scholars agree with Fairbank's account. They insist that the Joseon-Ming relationship was one of "give and take," or *quid pro quo*,¹ and that the Joseon dynasty subordinated itself to the Ming dynasty as its suzerain state in order to obtain security and economic benefits.²

However, though this "give and take" explanation may be a valid explanatory framework for the foreign policy of Mongolian tribes and Japan, it does not plausibly explain Joseon's case. Joseon's political elites firmly believed that the Joseon-Ming relationship was no mere alliance whose purpose was to ensure security and mutual interest, but a quasi-familial relationship based on Confucian moral values. This ideologically driven perspective was a fundamental difference between the Joseon dynasty and other vassal states of China.

Fairbank and Mancall have pointed out that China's superior

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1. Korean history textbooks emphasize that most of early Joseon's foreign policies were based on pragmatic considerations. See Guksa pyeonchan wiwonhoe (2003, 281).
 2. Being a vassal state did not mean that a country relinquished its sovereignty. A vassal state still had the political authority to select its rulers, levy taxes, and train its army.

intellectual and material culture attracted Joseon, Annam, and Liuqiu (Okinawa) into the tribute system (Fairbank 2013, 13; Mancall 1984, 10). From this perspective, the *soft power* of imperial China was sufficient to exercise primacy over its surrounding countries. Despite the undeniable fact that Joseon acknowledged the superiority of imperial China and eagerly adopted its culture and ideology, the Joseon dynasty also had its own internal motivations. The political elites of the Joseon dynasty strove to elevate the status of their country by making it a “model tributary.” The adoption of Chinese ideology was an essential part of this national strategy.

As Fairbank acknowledged, his theory was intrinsically “sinocentric.”³ For proponents of Fairbank’s view, Joseon’s aspiration to assimilate Chinese culture was key proof of the superiority of imperial China. They took note of Joseon’s eagerness to adopt Chinese civilization, while overlooking the motivation behind it. The sinocentric model has the advantage of describing imperial China’s foreign policy. The problem is that it cannot fully explain the intentions behind surrounding countries’ diplomacy. To overcome this gap, it is necessary to analyze the historical records of these countries and to understand their views on the East Asian political order. In doing so, another facet of the tribute system will be revealed.

While American scholars have overlooked the anti-pragmatic character of Joseon’s diplomacy, Korean scholarship has tried to discover why the Joseon dynasty was satisfied with its status as a vassal state of the Ming, and why it devoted itself to sinicizing its customs and institutions. One compelling argument in this respect is that power games among Joseon political elites intensified the dogmatism of *sadae* 事大 (submission to the great) diplomacy. Peter Yun and Seungbum Kye have both contended that submission to the Ming dynasty was a pragmatic diplomatic strategy—a *give and take*—at the beginning of the Joseon dynasty, but that in the mid-Joseon period, the king and the literati emphasized “fidelity to the Ming” in order to

3. Many scholars have criticized Fairbank’s sinocentric model. Among these, the most typical argument is that the China-centric East Asian order did not persist for the entire period from the Qin dynasty’s unification to the Opium War. See Rossabi, et al. (1983) and Wang (2013).

reinforce their political standing.⁴ As a consequence, Joseon's submission to the Ming dynasty became an absolute imperative.

However, this explanation does not account for the fact that the Joseon court from the beginning emphasized the sincerity of its relationship with the Ming⁵ and tried to avoid being seen as an opportunist. Most of the political elites of the dynasty had already agreed to the necessity of submission to the Ming dynasty and firmly believed that the Joseon-Ming relationship was not a mere coalition to ensure security and financial profit, but an alliance to further Confucian moral values.⁶ To them, it was indisputable that the Joseon dynasty be subsumed into the Ming-centric world order, and so they internalized the ideology of imperial China. The only subject of debate was who would first take the initiative in practicing *sadae* diplomacy.

This article will provide another viewpoint on understanding Joseon's

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4. Seungbum Kye pointed to the Joseon monarch (King Jungjong) as the culprit behind the dogmatism of Joseon's submissiveness, writing, "Jungjong's foreign policy in relation to the Ming dynasty was effective in consolidating his political authority. On the other hand, it more or less deepened Joseon's dependence on the Ming dynasty" (2014, 110). Peter Yun (2002) emphasized the will to power of aristocrats (the so-called *yangban*). He argued, "because the tribute system lowered the political standing of the Joseon king while affecting the yangban only slightly, the yangban elite could dominate the monarch by 'taking advantage of the Korea-China relationship'" (Yun 2002, 78).
 5. The phrase "submission with sincerity" (事大之誠) is found 22 times in the *Veritable Records of King Sejong* (r. 1418–1450), and 21 times in the *Veritable Records of King Jungjong* (r. 1506–1544). The term "sincere submission" (至誠事大) is mentioned 20 times in relation to King Sejong's reign, and 21 times in relation to King Jungjong's. "Sincere submission" was completely distinct from the concept of pragmatic diplomacy. This proves that the dogmatism of *sadae* diplomacy had already been consolidated in the early Joseon period.
 6. Yeonsik Choi (2007) pointed out that members of the political elite in the Goryeo-Joseon transition period, such as Jeong Mongju 鄭夢周 and Jeong Dojeon 鄭道傳 were profoundly pro-Ming. According to Choi, they chose submission to the Ming dynasty not because it was beneficial, but because it was right (2007, 106–108). Some scholars of Korean history hold the same view. Jongseok Choi has argued, "From King Taejo [the first king of the Joseon dynasty], the Joseon court had a worldview that regarded Chinese culture as the universal standard and had the motivation to realize the ideal Chinese culture. So it remained faithful to the duty of a vassal state, and showed utmost courtesy to the Ming dynasty" (J. Choi 2019, 242).

diplomacy. *Sadae* diplomacy was not the swallowing of pride for the sake of security and prosperity. The political elites of the Joseon dynasty tried to elevate the status of their country, and the adoption of the Chinese ideology was a part of their national strategy.⁷ They believed that the Ming-centric world order was based on Confucian moral principles, and so Joseon could be a model country by obeying these moral principles faithfully. For this reason, Joseon's diplomacy was ideologically driven from that dynasty's inception. In order to be a model tributary state, the Joseon dynasty needed to refrain from violating Confucian moral values.

The term "Zhonghua community strategy" denotes the national strategy of the early Joseon dynasty. In this context, "strategy" refers to a comprehensive and integrated plan devised in response to an international situation. A national strategy is first established, and subsequently policies are enacted to carry it out. Strategy is a long-term plan, and when it is put into practice, it is vital to assess the circumstances and reach judgments keeping in mind the national interest at stake. Nation-states try to carry out their strategies in their interactions with opponents. In some cases, a nation's strategy conflicts with others. In such a case, a country can adopt tactics to avert diplomatic confrontation. International relation is a complicated process where the strategies and tactics of numerous nations are intertwined.

The grand strategy of the Ming dynasty involved maintaining its regional hegemony, and policies concerning diplomacy, trade, the military, culture, and education were implemented under this grand strategy. As a vassal state, the Joseon dynasty could not establish a grand strategy, as the Ming dynasty had done. Nevertheless, the Joseon dynasty had a strategy aimed at helping it survive and thrive (including the strengthening of national self-esteem and self-actualization) in the Ming-centric world order, which amounted to the Zhonghua community strategy. The diplomatic, military, administrative, and cultural policies of early Joseon were mostly conducted in concert with this strategy.

7. David Kang has pointed out that both Joseon and Vietnam tried to acquire a high rank in the Chinese world order by establishing close relationships with imperial China and by thoroughly adapting to Chinese ideas (Kang 2010, 57).

Among the various policies in early Joseon, this article will concentrate on the establishment of new rituals. For the political elites of this period, rituals were not only the protocols for events and ceremonies, as they also represented standards of civility. The Joseon court attempted to propagate the notion of the dynasty as the *country of courtesy*, and positioned itself as the most civilized barbarian state—"primus inter pares," or first among equals. This ideal was prioritized by the early Joseon rulers, and in the mid-Joseon period, the political elites of the dynasty believed that their country had become the country of courtesy. The Ming court during the reign of Jiajing 嘉靖 (r. 1521–1567) acknowledged that civilized Joseon was distinct from other barbarian states, demonstrating that the Zhonghua community strategy of the early Joseon dynasty effectively changed the official attitude of the Ming court toward Joseon.

Jeong Dojeon's Zhonghua Community Strategy

Jeong Dojeon 鄭道傳 (1337–1398) was the principal architect of the Joseon dynasty's institutions and policies. His magnum opus, *Joseon gyeonggukjeon* 朝鮮經國典 (Administrative Code of Joseon), contains his worldview and national strategy. His plan was, in a phrase, the creation of the "Zhou dynasty of the East in the Zhonghua community." This article refers to Jeong Dojeon's vision as the "Zhonghua community strategy." The Zhonghua community (the sinic cultural world) was the world order as perceived by the political elites of the Joseon dynasty.

Yi Saek 李穡 and Jeong Mongju 鄭夢周 were leading Neo-Confucian figures of early Joseon, but they could not participate in the establishment of the Joseon dynasty. Gwon Geun 權近 and Ha Ryun 河崙 were also key figures of the early Joseon, but they did not declare the overall concept of domestic and foreign policy. Only Jeong Dojeon possessed a distinct understanding of statecraft, and also impacted how the Joseon court was administered. Jeong's *Joseon gyeonggukjeon* demonstrates a clear and compelling policy direction. King Taejo (r. 1392–1398) ordered the book be kept in a golden chest, indicating that he saw Jeong's plan as a steadfast guide

for posterity. The kings of early Joseon carried out the directives in *Joseon gyeonggukjeon* although Jeong's political influence diminished after his passing. Therefore, Jeong Dojeon's perspective on national strategy as manifested in his *Joseon gyeonggukjeon* will be examined here.

Just as many modern states implement their foreign policy based on a national strategy, the Joseon dynasty also established a strategy to enable it to survive and thrive in the Ming-centric world order. As well as ensuring security and prosperity, the Joseon dynasty also strove to acquire and maintain dignity and respect as a civilized country.⁸

In this context, Jeong Dojeon's Zhonghua community strategy attempted to solve the knotty problem of how a vassal state might secure a meaningful position in the Ming-centric world order. In this article, the three steps of this strategy will be explained. Although Jeong Dojeon did not directly employ the term "Zhonghua community," nor explicitly delineate the three steps of this strategy, the following explanation is based on the writings of Jeong, and it will be conducive to understanding his thinking and the foreign policies of early Joseon.

The first step of the Zhonghua community strategy was to stand on the side of global justice. From the viewpoint of Jeong Dojeon and his contemporaries, the Ming-centric world order operated on the basis of moral principles, and it was crucial that the Joseon dynasty be a member of this order. Political elites of the early Joseon such as Jeong Dojeon were faithful followers of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200). In Zhu Xi's cosmology, principle precedes the material universe. Zhu Xi argued that "Heaven's reason for being is principle. If Heaven did not have its principle, it could not be Heaven." Zhu Xi's proposition is often termed, "principle precedes the material universe" (理先氣後). Every phenomenon of the universe has its cause, therefore principle logically preexists phenomena.

As the phenomena of nature have their principle, and thus international

8. The political elites of the Joseon dynasty had already admitted the superiority of the Ming dynasty (Da Zhonghua 大中華, the great Zhonghua), while also insisting that Joseon was not one of the savage barbarian states but a civilized country that shared the moral values of imperial China (Xiao Zhonghua 小中華, the minor Zhonghua). Joseon's strategy was aimed at reconciling these ideas of great Zhonghua and minor Zhonghua.

relations has its own. The principle of international relations is often neglected, whereas the principle of nature is basically unchanging. If the principle of international relations is ignored, “a world without moral principles” (天下無道) emerges. In this world order, the powerful nation has contempt for the weaker nation, and incessantly engages in war in order to maintain its hegemony. Conversely, the “world order based on moral principles” (天下有道) is one in which the Son of Heaven is bestowed the Mandate of Heaven, and he allocates the power and wealth of the world. The Son of Heaven has sufficient power to subdue insurgents, but he still strives to rule the world on the basis of his virtue.

For Jeong Dojeon, the Ming-centric East Asian order was a world that was operated in accordance with moral principles. In “A letter to several officers of Liaodong” (上遼東諸位大人書), Jeong asserted that Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋, the founder of the Ming dynasty, was bestowed the Mandate of Heaven, vanquished rival warlords, and restored Chinese rites and music. He was undeniably the inheritor of the traditions of imperial China, and his contribution was comparable with that of Yu the Great 禹王 and the Duke of Zhou 周公 (Jeong 1997, 16).⁹

After seizing control of China proper, Emperor Hongwu 洪武 (r. 1368–1398) ceased undertaking extensive military campaigns, and designated Joseon, Japan, Annam, Champa, and Srivijaya as “countries that shall not be conquered [by the Ming]” (不征之國). This non-aggression stance became a primary aspect of Ming’s foreign policy (Nan and Tang 2003, 186). The Mongol Yuan dynasty had invaded Goryeo more than nine times and frequently interfered in Goryeo’s domestic affairs. In contrast, Emperor Hongwu refrained from using military force against Joseon even when a territorial conflict over Liaodong escalated tensions between Ming and Joseon.

Ming Emperor Yongle 永樂 (r. 1402–1424) undertook the northern expedition and the conquest of Vietnam, which contravened his father Hongwu’s instructions. Despite Yongle’s bellicosity, the political elites of the

9. “欽惟聖天子乘運而起，受天明命，芟群雄，削僭偽，驅逐異類，出之塞外。革氈裘爲衣冠，化刑殺爲禮樂，以紹中國皇王之統。其功比之神禹治洪水，周公攘夷狄，不足侔也。”

Joseon dynasty still believed Ming to be a benevolent superpower. The Joseon-Ming relationship was dramatically promoted in the Yongle era. Emperor Yongle accepted Joseon's request for a certificate of investiture and an official seal for the king of Joseon. Moreover, the Ming tried to eradicate what it viewed as the cruel savagery of Yuan practices and revived Chinese culture. Joseon political elites intently observed Ming's cultural reformation. As the newly established Joseon dynasty also needed to create a new culture, the Ming case provided a useful reference.

The literati of the Joseon dynasty shared the worldview of imperial China. For Jeong Dojeon, Zhu Yuanzhang's rise was the result of his being bestowed the Mandate of Heaven. It could not be true that all of the speeches and actions of the emperor of the Ming were in accord with Confucian moral principles. Nonetheless, the Ming emperor deserved to rule the world as the guardian of the heavenly principle. It is noteworthy that the Ming-dominated East Asian order was close to the ideal of Joseon elites. For this reason, Jeong Dojeon tried to incorporate Joseon into the Ming-centric world order and insisted on an anti-Yuan pro-Ming diplomacy.

Being a member of the Ming-centric world order definitely did not mean the completion of the Zhonghua community strategy; the subsequent steps were even more important to Jeong Dojeon and the early Joseon rulers. The second step of the strategy was to internalize the moral values of imperial China. The Eastern Barbarians (*dongi* 東夷) could run their governments by abiding by moral principles. The doctrine of Confucius was universal. In principle, it was open to every nation, including Joseon.

"Jeongbowi" 正寶位 ('Legitimizing the Throne') is a chapter in *Joseon gyeonggukjeon* in which Jeong Dojeon explains the main principle of governance. Like the Ming, the Joseon state was based on the moral principles described in the *Book of Changes* (*Juyeok* 周易) and *Mencius* (*Maengja* 孟子) (Jeong 1997, 82).¹⁰ A vassal state is much smaller than imperial China, but the principle of their governance is identical. Regardless

10. “易曰聖人之大寶曰位，天地之大德曰生，何以守位，曰仁。天子享天下之奉，諸侯享境內之奉，皆富貴之至也。賢能效其智，豪傑效其力，民庶奔走，各服其役。惟人君之命是從焉，以其得乎位也。非大寶而何。”

of geographical position or nation, political authority must be based on benevolence.

In “Jeongbowi,” Jeong Dojeon contends that Yi Seonggye 李成桂 (King Taejo) was bestowed the Mandate of Heaven, so he was able to establish the Joseon dynasty. Jeong wrote as follows:

My Lord Your Highness [King Taejo] accepted the Mandate of Heaven and followed the will of the people, so he could legitimize his kingship. He knew benevolence to be the integral whole of mind and virtue, and love to be the expression of benevolence. Thus he could embody benevolence by rectifying his thinking, and his fraternity extends to the common people. The essence of benevolence is to stand up straight, and then the application of benevolence is achieved. Oh! Who can doubt that he was enthroned and the throne shall be handed down for generations to come! (Jeong 1997, 82)¹¹

In this passage, Jeong Dojeon insists that the foundation of the Joseon dynasty was the result of King Taejo's benevolence, and that his heirs would maintain this governance based on benevolence.

In Jeong's view, the principle agent of the fulfillment of the Mandate of Heaven was the king of Joseon. In his jurisdiction, the king had the responsibility to engage in good governance, and the evaluation of this governance was carried out by the people of Joseon. The fulfillment of the Mandate of Heaven in Joseon's territory did not essentially require the supervision of the Ming emperor. This is because the heavenly principle was superior even to the dictates of the Ming emperor and court, who could not therefore monopolize the interpretation of the principle.

Joseon had to become a member of the Chinese ideological world order, and to internalize Confucian moral values. Ultimately, Joseon could be the “Zhou dynasty of the East” and gain the status of model tributary. This was the final step of Jeong Dojeon's Zhonghua community strategy. In the second chapter of *Joseon gyeongukjeon*, “Gukho” 國號 (‘Name of the

11. “恭惟主上殿下，順天應人，驟正寶位。知仁爲心德之全，愛乃仁之所發。於是正其心以體乎仁，推其愛以及於人，仁之體立而仁之用行矣。嗚呼。保有其位，以延千萬世之傳，詎不信歟。”

Country'), Jeong Dojeon explains the historical basis of the Joseon dynasty, and the authorization of the state's name by Emperor Hongwu.

Before explaining the name of the dynasty, Jeong mentions the former dynasties on the Korean Peninsula. He argues that these dynasties did not try to adopt a global moral framework in the form of Confucian moral values, and were complacent about their own narrow and self-centered world. The only exception was the case of the ancient Joseon dynasty, or Gija Joseon. Gija 箕子 was understood to have been a member of the Shang royal family. After the collapse of the Shang, King Wu of Zhou (周武王) invested Gija as Duke of Joseon, and in this way, Gija's Joseon dynasty gained political legitimacy. Jeong Dojeon insists that the nascent Joseon dynasty should be heir to the traditions of ancient Gija Joseon, and should not repeat the superciliousness and shortsightedness of former dynasties on the Korean Peninsula.

After explaining the historical basis of the name of Joseon, Jeong proclaims the dynasty's national goals, which he argues should be modeled on those of Gija Joseon, in order to become the "Zhou dynasty of East." Jeong writes:

From now on we can use the beautiful name of Joseon. Thus, we should seek to emulate the good governance of Gija. Oh! The virtue of the Ming emperor is not inferior to that of King Wu of Zhou. Is the virtue of our king inferior to that of Gija? We shall witness the revival of the learning of Hongfan 洪範 and the edification of the eight-article law (八條). Confucius said "I shall make the Eastern Zhou dynasty." How did he deceive us? (Jeong 1997, 82)¹²

Jeong Dojeon's "Zhou dynasty of the East" was an audacious idea. The Joseon dynasty would not be satisfied with the narrow self-centered world that characterized former dynasties on the Korean Peninsula. The new Joseon dynasty wanted to be a civilized eastern country and to internalize Confucian moral values. By consequence, foreign countries (especially the

12. "今既襲朝鮮之美號, 則箕子之善政亦在所當講焉。嗚呼。天子之德無愧於周武, 殿下之德亦豈有愧於箕子哉。將見洪範之學, 八條之教, 復行於今日也。孔子曰吾其爲東周乎。豈欺我哉。"

Ming) would treat the Joseon dynasty as a civilized state. This was the final phase of the Zhonghua community strategy.

This Zhou dynasty of the East differed from the Zhou dynasty of Chinese history. Mencius argued that a small country could become a hegemon by winning the hearts of the people. In the beginning, the Shang and Zhou dynasties were small states that territories of only 100 square *li* (1 *li*=500m). But the sage kings of these dynasties engaged in good governance and were faithful to moral principles, so they were able to bring the whole world under their rule. Political theorists of ancient China, including Mencius, believed that a country that became civilized was no longer small, and would ultimately become a hegemon.

By contrast, the Zhou dynasty of the East was not a *revisionist* state that would try to change the international order. The Zhou dynasty and Gija in Joseon pursued the same moral values (Hongfan 洪範), and the cultural level of Gija's Joseon was on a par with that of the Zhou dynasty. Gija's Joseon was not completely assimilated into the Zhou, which still had jurisdiction over its territory. The Zhou dynasty was the center of the world, and Gija's Joseon was one of its vassal states. Through the stable relationship between them, East Asia enjoyed its most prosperous era. Likewise, Jeong Dojeon proposed that the civilized Joseon (the minor Zhonghua 小中華) could co-exist with the Ming (the great Zhonghua 大中華), while remaining one of the Ming's vassal states (Park 2019b, 91).

In sum, the political elites of the Joseon dynasty, including Jeong Dojeon, decided to assimilate into the Ming-centric world order, which they perceived as contrary to both an anarchic and an egalitarian world order. The Ming-centric world order was a predictable and virtuous one. Under this peaceful regime, political elites were certain that Joseon ought to be a tributary of the Ming, which meant that the dynasty would no longer adhere to self-centeredness. Furthermore, Jeong Dojeon wanted Joseon to become the most civilized of the barbarian vassal states. The Joseon dynasty would internalize the global moral framework of that time and be the "Zhou dynasty of the East" in the Zhonghua community.

The Establishment of Rituals in the Reigns of King Taejong and King Sejong

In the beginning, the Zhonghua community strategy was merely a minister's wishful thinking. Before his plan could be realized, Jeong Dojeon was assassinated by Yi Bangwon (King Taejong). However, paradoxically, it was King Taejong and his son King Sejong who brought Jeong's plan to realization. Taejong and Sejong both made efforts to realize the moral values of courtesy and rightness among the various Confucian moral values. Following Mencius' mention of the Four Beginnings (四端)—benevolence (仁), righteousness (義), courtesy (禮) and wisdom (智)—these four moral principles became the core of Confucian thought. Among these, benevolence was often regarded as the comprehensive moral value that could encompass the other Four Beginnings. It was therefore too broad a concept for its specific meaning to be grasped. Wisdom was interpreted as an auxiliary moral value that enabled one to understand the other moral values. In comparison with these two moral values, righteousness and courtesy had clearer denotations and were more closely related to real life.

For the political elites of the Joseon dynasty, righteousness and courtesy were not merely matters of private morality; the ruler and political elites also attempted to embody these moral values in their political activities. King Taejong and King Sejong both made efforts to establish new rituals aimed at the materialization of the value of courtesy. In addition, the policies of the early Joseon dynasty were closely related to the Zhonghua community strategy. Policies concerning the military, administration, education, and culture were implemented in order to elevate Joseon as the country of courtesy and righteousness.

When King Taejong and King Sejong attempted to develop new rituals, they requested information and materials concerning the rituals of the Ming royal family and court, although the Ming court was skeptical regarding these requests. Immediately after the establishment of the Joseon dynasty, Emperor Hongwu (Zhu Yuanzhang) issued an imperial edict. He said that "Goryeo [at that time, the name of Joseon had yet to be authorized by the Ming emperor] is separated from us by mountains and seas. Heaven has

segregated the eastern barbarians from China, so sovereignty [of the Ming] cannot extend to them [Joseon].” Hongwu also communicated to the Joseon monarch that, “Laws and edification [of Joseon] are your own spheres of authority.”¹³ The point is that Joseon was an eastern barbarian state, so it could not be treated as a province of China proper, and its customs and institutions were to be maintained at Joseon’s own discretion. Five years later, Emperor Hongwu rejected the Joseon dynasty’s request for a certificate of investiture and an official seal of the king of Joseon. Hongwu said, “A few years ago, I issued the following edict. ‘Let your country follow your own customs, maintain your traditional rules, and independently maintain order in your territory.’”¹⁴ By this response, Emperor Hongwu was obviously expressing his indifference toward the customs and rituals of Joseon.

Emperor Hongwu’s successors, Emperors Jianwen 建文 and Yongle 永樂, were also seemingly indifferent toward the rituals of Joseon. When King Taejong was intent on establishing new rituals, he asked for books concerning the rituals of the Ming court. But Emperor Jianwen rejected his request, noted “the rituals of China cannot apply to vassal states.”¹⁵ Ten years later, Emperor Yongle replied equally abruptly to such a request, saying “Simply follow your own customs.”¹⁶ Even though later Ming emperors offered the texts that the Joseon dynasty requested, they were still reluctant to cooperate with Joseon’s project of establishing new rituals.

As a matter of fact, Joseon’s requests were unexpected and indeed unfathomable to the Ming dynasty. For the Ming court, the intention of establishing new rituals was suspicious, suggesting that Joseon might imitate the rituals of the Chinese court and internally proclaim the parity of the king of Joseon with the Chinese emperor, like several barbarian dynasties had done. Therefore, the Ming court could not easily accede to the Joseon court’s requests. In addition, the publication of books about rituals in the early Ming was not intended to establish a worldwide system of rituals. Books

13. *Taejoillok*, gwon 2, 27th day of the 11th lunar month, 1392.

14. *Taejoillok*, gwon 9, 29th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1396.

15. *Taejongillok*, gwon 2, 9th day of the 12th lunar month, 1401.

16. *Taejongillok*, gwon 23, 3rd day of the 5th lunar month, 1412.

about the rituals of the Ming dynasty, such as *Rituals of Emperor Hongwu* (*Hongwu lizhi* 洪武禮制) and *Rituals of the Great Ming* (*Daming jili* 大明集禮), stipulated rituals that were applied to the emperor, princes, and governors of the Ming dynasty, and were all under the jurisdiction of the Ming court. Beyond the border, there were few regulations regarding the reception afforded to visiting rulers of barbarian vassal states. In addition, there were no detailed stipulations about how barbarian vassal states should establish their own system of rituals (Park 2019a, 38).

The rituals of barbarian states were not a significant issue for the early Ming emperors. The urgent matter facing the new Ming dynasty was the eradication of the savagery of the Yuan dynasty and the restoration of a system of rituals that could properly represent the essence of Han culture. In these circumstances, the Ming court placed no priority on stipulating the rituals of vassal states with any detail. They simply hoped that barbarian vassal states would follow the basic rules of the tributary system and maintain peace on and within their borders. Beyond that, they were free to determine their political arrangements, especially their laws and rituals, on the basis of their own customs. There was no reason for barbarian vassal states to abandon their own customs or to establish new rituals based on the values of Han culture (Park 2019a, 38–40).

However, the ruling elites of early Joseon reconsidered their own customs and tried to assimilate into their rituals the ways of imperial China. This was the typical “admiration for Chinese culture” (*mohwa* 慕華) of early Joseon. However, due to the indifference of the Ming court and a lack of contemporary references, this admiration did not amount to the imitation of Ming rituals. In this situation, Joseon’s admiration for Chinese culture needed a more fundamental approach. Despite the amount of time and effort required, the Joseon court had to identify in the Confucian classics and in the heritage of the saintly kings of Chinese history a theoretical basis for new rituals. For this, it was also necessary to draw on the system of rituals of the Tang and Song dynasties.

During King Taejong’s reign, the political elites of Joseon shared the viewpoint that the rituals of the Goryeo dynasty were outdated, and that the new dynasty required novel rituals based on the Confucian classics and the

heritage of the saint-kings. In addition, during the reign of King Sejong, the level of understanding of Neo-Confucianism increased, and as a result the reform of Joseon rituals had a theoretical basis.

The process of establishing rituals in the reigns of King Taejong and King Sejong is briefly described in the preface to the *Sejong sillok orye* 世宗實錄五禮 (Five Rites in the Veritable Records of Sejong). In this preface, there are explanations of why Taejong initiated the reform of Joseon's rituals. Immediately after establishing the new dynasty, the Joseon court was occupied with setting up new administrative systems, and therefore had no leisure to consider the issue of rituals in detail. However, King Taejong was aware of the lack of coherence in the dynasty's rituals, and he began to address this issue. He ordered Heojo 許稠 to reform auspicious ceremonies (*gillye* 吉禮), in order to bring their protocols in accord with Confucian values and commensurate with the status of a barbarian vassal state. Save for auspicious ceremonies, the remaining ceremonies—inauspicious ceremonies (*hyungnye* 凶禮), reception ceremonies (*billye* 賓禮), military ceremonies (*gullye* 軍禮), and marriage ceremonies (*garye* 嘉禮)—were left untouched. Officers of the Board of Rites had to improvise the protocols for these four types of ceremonies.¹⁷

King Sejong tried to complete the unfinished work of his father, the previous king. He ordered Jeong Cheok 鄭陟 (1390–1475) and Byeon Hyomun 卞孝文 (1396–?) to reform the four types of ceremony mentioned above. References to these reforms are found in the *Dushi tongdian* 杜氏通典 (Du's Encyclopedic History of Institutions) of Du You 杜佑 (735–812), a scholar-official of the Tang dynasty, and the aforementioned *Rituals of Emperor Hongwu*. Although King Sejong devoted much energy to the reform of rituals, the work could not be completed during his reign. His work in this regard is included in the appendix of the *Sejong sillok* (Veritable Records of King Sejong).

Despite King Taejong and King Sejong devoting themselves to the project of civilizing Joseon, the Ming court at that time was skeptical about

17. “國初，草創多事，禮文不備，太宗命許稠，撰吉禮序例及儀式，其他則未及，每遇大事，輒取辦於禮官一時所擬” (*Sejong sillok*, *gwon* 128, 1A3–5).

treating Joseon as the *country of courtesy*. According to the *Sejong sillok*, King Sejong complained that “Minister Zhao was a covetous and insidious person. So he regarded our country as a far-flung barbarian land (外夷), and rejected all requests. With respect to our country, the minister who replaced him, Lu, was just the same.”¹⁸ In this statement, “Minister Zhao” refers to Zhao Gong 趙珙 (1364–1436), who was the minister of the Ming Board of Rites from 1407 to 1411, and “Minister Lu” refers to Lu Zhen 呂震 (1365–1426), minister of the Board of Rites from 1411 to 1426 (Jeong 2020, 120).

The minister of the Board of Rites dealt with foreign policy and could determine whether or not to accept Joseon’s requests concerning rituals. Therefore, the Joseon court was always concerned about the personality of the minister of the day. Ministers Zhao and Lu did not consider Joseon to be either the *Zhou dynasty of the East* or the *country of courtesy*, but just another barbarian state. They could not understand why the Joseon dynasty was attempting to establish rituals that would be based on Confucian moral values. At that time, the ruling elites of the Ming dynasty still shared Emperor Hongwu’s sarcasm about the Joseon dynasty.

Ming’s Recognition of the Country of Courtesy

Based on the work of King Sejong, the reform of the five ceremonies was finally completed in 1474. The publication of the book *Gukjo oryeyui* 國朝五禮儀 (Five Ceremonies of the Joseon Dynasty) meant that the reform of rituals in early Joseon had been achieved. The author of the work’s preface was Kang Huimaeng 姜希孟 (1424–1483). At the start of the preface, Kang explains the brief story of the establishment of the five ceremonies, and the narrative is highly consistent with that found in the *Sejong sillok*. The most important part of the preface is the conclusion, which elucidates the meaning of the establishment of rituals.

Kang emphasizes the meaning of the book by comparing the rituals of

18. *Sejong sillok*, gwon 113, 29th day of the 7th lunar month, 1446.

the Joseon dynasty with those of the Zhou dynasty. He contends that the establishment of rituals took a significant length of time. The model of good governance, the Zhou dynasty, in fact spent more than a century establishing its institutions and rituals. He says that the edification of the sage kings of the Zhou dynasty culminated in the publication of the *Book of Rites*. Likewise, the *Five Ceremonies of the Joseon Dynasty* was the fruition of early Joseon's civilizing project. Kang Huimaeng extolled that "the practicing of edification [the publication of the book] shall be an eternal honor equal to the Zhou dynasty's *Book of Rites* (*Yili* 儀禮, *Uirye* in Korean)" (Kang 1999, 119).¹⁹

In 1474, the political elites of the Joseon dynasty believed that the *Five Ceremonies of the Joseon Dynasty* was no ordinary book of rituals like the *Rituals of Emperor Hongwu* or *Rituals of the Great Ming*. Joseon's Confucian rites could be even more authentic than those of the Ming. They ventured to say that the achievement of early Joseon were comparable to those of the Zhou, which was revered above all other dynasties for its good governance. Kang Huimaeng's reference to the Zhou dynasty recalled Jeong Dojeon's proclamation. Jeong wanted to make his dynasty the Zhou dynasty of the East. The political elites of Joseon recognized that the ideal of the *Zhou dynasty of the East* had become a reality in the mid-Joseon period. They took a sort of pride in Joseon as a *primus inter pares*, or first among equals, in other words the most civilized country among the barbarians.

Was Joseon as the *country of courtesy* a unilateral claim on the part of Joseon, or was it an appellation approved by foreign countries (especially the Ming)? According to the records of the Joseon dynasty, Ming's attitude toward Joseon changed over time. As mentioned above, kings of early Joseon devoted themselves to the internalization of Confucian moral values. They also represented their country as the country of courtesy and righteousness (禮義之邦).

In the *Sejongillok*, the term "the country of courtesy and righteousness" (禮義之邦) appears 21 times, and if one includes equivalent terms, such as

19. "則我朝自太祖開創以來，列聖相承，深仁厚澤，積累也既久，豈非亨嘉之會，正在今日，而經世制作之盛，有待於聖上歟。然則是化之行，當與周家禮儀一書，並傳不朽也無疑矣。"

the “country of literature” (文獻之邦) and “country that grasps courtesy” (秉禮之邦), that number totals 24. In King Jungjong’s reign, the term “country of courtesy and righteousness” is used even more. In the *Jungjong sillok* (Veritable Records of King Jungjong), “country of courtesy and righteousness” appears 47 times, and if one includes equivalent terms, such as “country of the observation of courtesy” (守禮之國) and so forth, that number rises to 70. The lengths of Sejong’s and Jungjong’s reigns were similar (King Sejong: 32 years, King Jungjong: 38 years). However, the term “country of courtesy and righteousness” is mentioned twice as often in relation to Jungjong’s reign than Sejong’s.

In the *Sejong sillok* and *Jungjong sillok*, mentions of the “country of courtesy and righteousness” appear mostly in the comments of subjects of Joseon, while only a few Ming officials mention it. Despite there being only a few cases, Ming figures mentioning “the country of courtesy and righteousness” is important in understanding Ming’s attitude toward Joseon, as these cases show the difference between Sejong’s reign and Jungjong’s reign.

In the *Sejong sillok*, five people from the Ming refer to Joseon as the “country of courtesy and righteousness.”²⁰ Among these five cases, three are Ming envoys who use this phrase as part of their diplomatic rhetoric. On the other hand, in two cases the term is used sarcastically. Here, some Ming envoys, discontented with the Joseon court’s treatment of them, complain that Joseon calls itself a country of courtesy and righteousness, but fails to live up to that name.

During Jungjong’s reign, high-ranking Ming officials began to acknowledge the accuracy of Joseon’s claim. For example, in the *Jungjong sillok*, eight people from the Ming call Joseon the “country of courtesy and righteousness.”²¹ Relative to the comments during Sejong’s reign this was not

20. *Sejong sillok*, gwon 26, 21st day of the 10th lunar month, 1424; *Sejong sillok*, gwon 48, 25th day of the 5th lunar month, 1430; *Sejong sillok*, gwon 50, 3rd day of the 10th lunar month, 1430; *Sejong sillok*, gwon 61, 12th day of the 8th (leap) lunar month, 1433; *Sejong sillok*, gwon 68, 3rd day of the 4th lunar month, 1435.

21. *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 60, 4th day of the 12th lunar month, 1527; *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 67, 22nd day of the 3rd lunar month, 1530; *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 80, 16th day of the 11th lunar

a significant increase (6 versus 8). Nevertheless, there was an important difference in relation to who made these comments. In Sejong's reign, all cases were envoys from the Ming court who were dispatched to Joseon. In contrast, most of the speakers during Jungjong's reign (six of the eight) were political elites of the Ming court who met Joseon envoys at the Ming court in Beijing.

These political elites included a eunuch,²² staff of the Board of Rites,²³ and ministers, including Xia Yan 夏言 (1482–1548) and Yan Song 嚴嵩 (1480–1567), who dominated the Ming court for decades as grand secretary during the reign of Emperor Jiajing.²⁴ Although these comments were conveyed by Joseon envoys, they are sufficient to indicate that the Ming court's attitude toward Joseon had changed from the time of Sejong. These completely different from the viewpoints of Ming ministers during Emperor Yongle's reign. As mentioned above, in that earlier period the Joseon was regarded as just one of the far-flung barbarian states.

Over this period, there was also a change in the tone of the Ming emperor's edicts. The Ming court invested King Jungjong's wife (Queen Consort Munjeong 文定王后). In this edict, the Ming emperor announced that the investiture was normally only for the ruler of vassal states and not for their consorts, but that Joseon was the only exception. This was because Joseon was the "country of courtesy."²⁵

Moreover, the records of the Ming dynasty also bear witness to the change in the Ming court's attitude. The Ming court dispatched envoys to the Joseon court to notify it of the birth of the imperial crown prince in 1537. Gong Yongqing 龔用卿 was the chief of the envoys, while Wu Ximeng

month, 1535; *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 83, 8th day of the 2nd lunar month, 1537; *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 84, 17th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1537; *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 84, 3rd day of the 4th lunar month, 1537; *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 86, 12th day of the 11th lunar month, 1537; *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 89, 25th day of the 11th lunar month, 1538.

22. *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 60, 4th day of the 12th lunar month, 1527.

23. *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 67, 22nd day of the 3rd lunar month, 1530; *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 89, 25th day of the 11th lunar month, 1538.

24. *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 86, 12th day of the 11th lunar month, 1537; *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 84, 17th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1537.

25. *Jungjong sillok*, gwon 32, 21st day of the 4th lunar month, 1518.

吳希孟 was the deputy chief. The Joseon court treated them very kindly, offering them trips, with some of Joseon's top scholars accompanying the Ming envoys. Gong and Wu had good impressions of their reception by Joseon. According to the *Shizong shilu* 明世宗實錄 (Veritable Records of Shizong of the Ming Dynasty), Wu Ximeng reported to Emperor Jiajing as follows:

Joseon has usually been regarded as a docile country, which distinguishes it from other barbarian states, and our treatment of this country has not involved the protocols reserved for barbarians. When I recently brought the imperial edict to this country, I witnessed the king of Joseon observing ritual protocols. He handled a matter with respectful attention, and never violated the rules. It was truly praiseworthy. (*Shizong shilu*, *juan* 204, 14th day of the 9th lunar month, 1537)²⁶

After praising Joseon, Wu Ximeng proposed that the Ming court inform that country of the issuance of imperial edicts and decisions concerning rituals. Wu Ximeng's words inform us that the political elites of the Ming court also recognized the Joseon dynasty as the "country of courtesy," and that they distinguished this country from other barbarian vassal states. The Joseon court was informed of the complimentary remarks made by Gong Yongqing and Wu Ximeng. Jo Hyeonbeom (the chief Joseon envoy for celebrating the imperial birthday) later reported, "Envoys [Gong and Wu] returned to the Ming court and praised our country as the 'country of courtesy,' so the Board of Rites treated us with unprecedented hospitality and permitted us to go sightseeing as we wished."²⁷ The Ming official's positive feedback bolstered Joseon's self-esteem, while also accelerating the Confucian transformation of Joseon dynasty.

From its foundation, the political elites of Joseon regarded their country as the *primus inter pares*. They acknowledged that the Ming dynasty was the

26. "朝鮮素稱恭順, 較之諸夷不同而國家禮遇其國, 亦未嘗以夷禮待之. 邇者齎詔至彼, 其王李懌又能恪遵典禮, 敬事不違, 良可嘉尚. 請自今凡詔告勅諭, 事關禮制者, 宜使之一體知悉, 不必遣官. 但因其朝貢陪臣, 即令齎回, 庶以見朝廷植有禮懷遠人之意."

27. *Jungjong sillok*, *gwon* 86, 8th day of the 12th lunar month, 1537.

center of the world and the Joseon state occupied the periphery. The cultural level of the two dynasties was incommensurable. But these elites still maintained that Joseon's level of civilization was superior to that of other barbarian vassal states.

In the era of kings Taejong and Sejong, the exchange of envoys between Joseon and Ming increased, and mutual understanding also deepened (Lee 2023, 181). The strengthening cooperation between Joseon and Ming impacted the shift in the Ming's perception of Joseon. Nevertheless, the strengthening of cooperation was not the only factor in the Ming's change of attitude. In the early Ming, Joseon was a reliable country, but not yet a civilized one.

After elevating the level of understanding Neo-Confucianism and establishing rituals that were based on Confucian moral values, Joseon's claims to being the country of courtesy had reasonable foundations. In the reign of King Seongjong 成宗 (r. 1469–1494), Joseon's administration and ritual systems were institutionalized. At that time, the political elites of the dynasty ensured that Joseon became the Zhou dynasty of the East and the country of courtesy.

By the mid-Ming period, the Ming court had started to refer to Joseon as the "country of courtesy (and righteousness)." Joseon's long-term commitment to Confucian values changed perceptions of it. For the political elites of mid-Ming, although Joseon's cultural level could not compare with that of the Ming, Joseon could communicate with the Ming via the same cultural norms, and this distinguished it from other barbarian vassal states. This shows that Joseon had indeed become *primus inter pares*, and that this was no longer merely a unilateral claim on the part of Joseon.

Joseon's Special Position in the Ming-Centered World Order

In modern society, democracy and human rights are regarded as the global standard. Likewise, benevolence, righteousness, and courtesy were the universal values in traditional East Asian society. The political elites of early Joseon shared the perception that Joseon should follow the international

standards of their times and enhance national prestige by becoming *primus inter pares* among the peripheral tributary states of Ming China. Even though this national strategy was not officially codified in any bill or white paper, it evidently shaped the diplomatic and cultural policies of the early Joseon.

By carrying out the Zhonghua community strategy, Joseon endeavored to elevate its position in the Ming-centered world order. But the political elites of the early Ming were at first reluctant to accept Joseon's claim. The ideal state in the Ming-centered world order was of the Son of Heaven acting fairly to all of the world, and the world in turn becoming peaceful by virtue of the emperor. The Ming emperor often emphasized "treating all with the same benevolence" (一視同仁), to mean that there was no discriminative treatment of barbarians based on their cultural level. The political elites of the early Ming did not accept Joseon as "primus inter pares," something which would contravene the policy of "treating all with the same benevolence."

However, a huge gap separated the ideal and the reality. The states surrounding the Ming coveted the wealth of China proper or sought to challenge Ming supremacy. In order to satisfy their own needs, these states often violated the norms prescribed by the Ming court. When emperor Yongle conducted his northern expedition, Mongol tribes were submissive to the Ming court. But after the death of Yongle, powerful Mongol tribes rejected submission to Ming and posed a military threat to it.

Japan maintained diplomatic relations with the Ming court in order to obtain the profit of the trade. However, the political instability of the Japanese islands led to diplomatic conflicts with the Ming court, finally culminating in the Ningbo 寧波 Incident of 1523. After being banned from official trade with the Ming, Japanese warlords raided Zhejiang 浙江, Jiangsu 江蘇, and Fujian 福建 provinces, threatening the tax-grain shipments from the breadbasket of southern China. These *wakou* 倭寇 (Japanese pirates) colluded with illegal smugglers of mainland China to carry on private trade. Japanese pirates became the arch-enemies of the Ming. Annam (Vietnam) in this period suffered from political instability, deterring it from maintaining a stable relationship with the Ming. The Liuqiu kingdom was

cooperative with the Ming, but it was too weak to contribute to peace-keeping in East Asia.

By contrast, Joseon was powerful enough to control domestic political stability and confront the *rogue states* confronting the Ming. Moreover, Joseon had no ambitions to expand its political influence over Manchuria or the Yellow Sea region. In international trade, Joseon did not try to maximize the profit of trade. The political elites of Joseon determined to regulate private trade when it was in conflict with the self-image of the country of courtesy and righteousness (Koo 2015, 190).

The Ming dynasty's international standard was often ignored by surrounding countries. In this situation, Joseon became more important to the Ming grand strategy. Although emperors of the early Ming were at first skeptical of this self-proclaimed Zhou dynasty of the East, by the mid-Ming, that dynasty's political elites acknowledged that the existence of the civilized Joseon was conducive to the maintenance of the Ming-centered world order. The Ming court eventually accepted Joseon's *primus inter pares* status as a *fait accompli*. For the Ming, it was more reasonable to accept Joseon's claims and utilize that state's power in order to maintain the Ming-centered world order. As a result, the Zhonghua community strategy led to a change in the Ming's policy of treating all with the same benevolence.

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