



Joseon: Not a Model Tributary State but a Canny Tributary State?

Boundless Winds of Empire: Rhetoric and Ritual in Early Chosŏn Diplomacy with Ming China. By Sixiang Wang. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. 424 pages. ISBN: 9780231205474.

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The international order of pre-modern East Asia is often described in terms of the concept of the tributary system proposed by John K. Fairbank and others, which can be summarized as follows. The tributary system was the “Chinese World Order,” designed to implement in areas outside of China the ideal of the all-under-heaven (天下) ruled by the Son of Heaven (天子), who had received the Mandate of Heaven (天命). Neighboring countries participated in the tributary system by enduring rituals that symbolized the unequal hierarchical relations because they could gain practical benefits from it, such as relief in security issues, the pursuit of trade interests, and the establishment of political authority. Korean-Chinese relations in the early Joseon (Chosŏn) period were also established and operated by such a tributary system, and under a condition of shared Confucian culture, they achieved long-term peace and stability. Therefore, Joseon has been cited as almost the ideal model of the tributary system or a model tributary state.

Boundless Winds of Empire questions this prevailing view and reconstructs Joseon-Ming diplomacy in the early Joseon period from new perspectives and with new sources. According to this book, the long-term stability of Joseon-Ming bilateral relations was not an inevitable consequence

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of the tributary system. Moreover, as the case of Vietnam shows, *serving the great* (*sadae* 事大) and investiture (冊封) was no safe harbor from capricious imperial aggression or irredentist ambitions. The book's author, Sixiang Wang, argues that the impetus for stabilizing the volatile Joseon-Ming relationship during the reign of the Hongwu Emperor (r. 1368–1398) derived from Joseon's diplomatic strategy, which sought to make Ming a *moral empire* through the appropriation of traditional East Asian imperial knowledge. In other words, the conventional image of Ming as a moral empire was not due to the nature of the empire itself, as the tributary system theory explains, but rather, was an outcome molded by Joseon's consistent and repeated diplomatic practices. Seen in this light, the *servicing the great* of the weak state Joseon is not simply an index to the constraints of sovereignty or the inequality of the hierarchical order, but rather to the essential condition wherein Joseon chose to persuade and cajole the Chinese empire. Wang attempts to substantiate his thesis by drawing attention to the previously overlooked literary rhetoric and rituals that accompanied Joseon-Ming diplomacy. To summarize his central argument, Joseon was able to prevent Ming aggression and interference into its internal affairs by actively utilizing rhetoric and rituals that symbolized imperial China's universal rule and superior status to its advantage.

Professor Wang is a leading historian of Korean studies in the United States, with a long-standing research interest in pre-modern Korean-Chinese diplomacy and the intellectual and cultural interactions and exchanges that occurred in early modern East Asia. This book is a revised and expanded version of his doctoral dissertation (titled 'Co-constructing Empire in Early Chosŏn Korea: Knowledge Production and the Culture of Diplomacy, 1392–1592') submitted to Columbia University in 2015, and consists of four parts and ten chapters in addition to the Introduction and Conclusion.

The book's Introduction, titled "Korea and the Imperial Tradition," explains the author's problematics and perspectives. Wang's main concern is to investigate the successful diplomatic strategy of Joseon in dealing with the Ming Empire, which was dozens of times more powerful than itself. The

author argues that Joseon, rather than resisting that empire, adopted a strategy of cajoling and persuading Ming in the imperial language shared by both countries. Pointing out that such a diplomatic strategy by Joseon was implemented through literary rhetoric and rituals that were repeatedly performed on the stage of bilateral diplomacy, Wang stresses that these two should therefore be the central objects of analysis. This is because while rhetoric and ritual were ostensibly tools to legitimize and formalize the Ming's universal dominance, they also functioned, through appropriation on the part of Joseon, as devices for perpetuating Joseon's autonomy and sense of belonging within the civilized sphere of the empire. In Wang's view, the plethora of material related to *servicing the great* left behind by the Joseon people of the period are reconceptualized not as evidence of assimilation and submission, but as traces of utterances and gestures carefully designed to induce changes in Ming policy.

The "boundless winds" in the book's title is a symbolic phrase that the author derived from verses by the Joseon courtier Kwon Keun 權近 (1352–1409). Kwon's poem, quoted at the opening of the Introduction, seems at first glance to symbolize the boundless influence of empire, which operates beyond national and natural boundaries, but in the composer's inner intentions, the phrase was chosen to assert Joseon's civilized and autonomous status. The true meaning implied in Kwon's poem was not that of Joseon's subjugation, but rather a message of exhortation addressed to Ming that the civilized country of Joseon should not be treated like any other barbarian.

In Part I, "The Shared Past," Wang examines Korean-Chinese relations prior to the founding of Joseon and the unstable Joseon-Ming relationship in the decades following the Joseon's founding. The author begins by illustrating with several examples that *servicing the great* carried out within the tributary system was not a mechanism that automatically guaranteed the independence and security of Korean dynasties. He then goes on to explain the rhetoric of the Korean diplomatic memorials that dealt with the pressure from Chinese dynasties. Joseon's diplomatic strategy was established by studying the precedent of Goryeo-Yuan relations. The point was to exhort

the Chinese emperor to inherit the proper imperial tradition and recognize the rightful status of the vassal state. The author then examines how Joseon people at the time perceived and attempted to resolve the difficulties arising from impingements on the political authority of the Joseon king that would arise once they officially recognize the universal rule of the Ming emperor, such as ritual infringement (*chamwol* 僭越) and sovereignty (*seonggyo* 聲教). Wang also highlights that the problems of sky rituals, the invention of the Korean alphabet (*hunmin jeongeum* 訓民正音), and the use of female musicians (*yeoak* 女樂) at court were handled not in accordance with a nationalistic program, but in a carefully orchestrated manner that avoided conflict between Ming and Joseon over legitimacy.

In Part 2, “The Practice of Diplomacy,” Wang examines the activities of Joseon envoys dispatched to Ming. Despite the imperial prohibition wherein “subjects of others do not have outside relations” (人臣無外交), Joseon envoys facilitated the fulfillment of their assigned tasks by establishing their own networks in different ways. And frequent envoy dispatches enabled the Joseon court to garner information and in turn gain time to deal with contingent and urgent diplomatic issues. Great Prince Suyang 首陽大君 (Yi Yu 李瑄, 1417–1468) is presented as a more blatant example of utilizing imperial resources. Not only did he utilize diplomacy with Ming to succeed in usurping the throne, but once he became king (King Sejo), he utilized the Ming envoy and Ming rhetoric to achieve his own political goals that conflicted with Ming authority.

In Part 3, “Ecumenical Boundaries,” Wang discusses the anxieties and tensions created by the Ming Empire’s varying views of Joseon. Ming perception of Joseon was not fixed in terms of inside and outside, or civilized (*hwa* 華) and barbarian (*i* 夷). The people of Ming of varying status ascribed different positions for Joseon by making contingent choices. Thus, Joseon repeated a consistent set of rhetoric and rituals to convey this to the Ming, defining its identity as a “country of propriety and righteousness” and a “loyal Ming vassal.” This was because they believed that the accumulation of these practices of diplomacy would make Ming a generous country that would conform to imperial ideals. This is evidenced by territorial disputes,

the abolition of gold and silver tribute, the resumption of trade in water buffalo horns (which were a military item), the lifting of the gate restriction policy (*mungeum* 門禁) on Joseon envoys in Beijing, the accounts of the shipwrecked Choe Bu 崔溥 (1454–1504), the disputing slander campaign (宗系辨誣), and ritual contestations between the two countries.

In Part 4, “An Empire of Letters,” the author examines such topics as the compilation of the *Brilliant Flower Anthologies* (*Hwanghwajip* 皇華集), the fabricated Ming envoy’s virtues, and the forged evidence of Gija’s coming to the Korean Peninsula (箕子東來). The poems of Joseon officials and Ming envoys in *Brilliant Flower Anthologies* equally extolled imperial authority as well as civilization and transformation (教化), but the poems of Joseon officials invoked the origins of Joseon civilization in ancient Chinese literature, placing it on an equal footing with Ming. The records of Ming emissaries to Joseon were also often glorified. This again contributed to creating the mythology of moral empire. This mythology, shared by both Joseon and Ming, formed a kind of diplomatic convention that kept the deviations and indulgences of Ming emissaries in check. Furthermore, the identification of Joseon with Gija was not a predetermined conclusion, but rather the result of cultural and diplomatic strategies employed by Joseon. From Joseon’s founding, inquiries for evidence of Gija’s coming to the Korean Peninsula were made but turned up nothing. But Joseon monarchs and officials, rather than giving up, went on to produce one piece of evidence after another to back up the idea of Gija’s coming to Korea. The relics and remains of Gija in Pyeongyang were designed to be shown to Ming envoys and served as a device to symbolize the shared culture and equality of the two civilizations. In doing so, Joseon hoped to establish a Korean identity that was independent and distinct from China.

In the book’s Conclusion, “The Myth of Moral Empire,” Wang reconstructs from his own perspective the Ming military aid during the Imjin War (1592–1598) and Joseon’s surrender at the termination of hostilities in the *byeongja horan* 丙子胡亂 (Manchu invasion of 1636). He also emphasizes that Joseon’s diplomacy was heavily invested in building the image of China as moral empire. In doing so, he explains, Joseon sought to

tame the emperor and his agents into thinking that acting in accordance with Korean expectations was the best way to become an empire in the true sense of the word.

As discussed above, this book argues that the rituals and rhetoric witnessed in the diplomatic scenes of the early Joseon period do not represent a simple affirmation of Ming dominance, but embody the sophisticated diplomatic and cultural negotiation strategies in Joseon relations with Ming China. According to the author, Joseon's rhetoric and rituals that voluntarily affirm the universal imperium or the discourse of *serving the great*, are products of a long-term diplomatic strategy to persuade Ming to act in Joseon's best interests. In other words, this account explains how Joseon, rather than negating imperial claims, sought to shift imperial policy in its favor by employing imperial traditions and language. Wang also points out that such a diplomatic strategy was a key factor in Joseon's ability to ensure long-term peace and survival vis-à-vis the Ming, a state that far surpassed Joseon in power and with only a border between them. Furthermore, the author unveils a new assertion that it was not Joseon ideology recognizing the superior status of Ming that produced rituals and rhetoric, but rather rituals and rhetoric based on Joseon's diplomatic strategy that formed the tributary system.

The book not only makes a close survey of new historical sources, such as diplomatic rituals and literary rhetoric, but also, through a careful reading of a wide range of Korean-Chinese sources, such as the *Brilliant Flower Anthologies* or *Record of an Embassy to Joseon (Shi Chaoxian lu 使朝鮮錄)*, sheds new light on Korea-China relations in the early Joseon period, which had customarily been explained in terms of the tributary system theory. While the literary rhetoric and rituals of diplomacy in the Joseon period has often been regarded as a measure of Confucianization or the cultural homogeneity of the two countries, as epitomized in the notion of *shared culture and institutions* (同文同軌), Wang reductively interprets these as being part of Joseon's long-term diplomatic and cultural strategy. In doing so, he succeeds in explicating the agency and assertiveness of Joseon diplomacy in a manner different from existing theories. By examining

hitherto overlooked sources related to *servicing the great* and *admiring China* (慕華) head-on, the author attempts to move beyond the conventional interpretation that *servicing the great* was the unavoidable cost of pursuing the national interest. This is a clear departure from a long-standing orthodoxy in Korean studies.

From the author's standpoint, the use of imperial China's traditions and knowledge is not evidence of Joseon's Confucianization, or a deepening of *servicing the great* or *admiring China*, but rather part of the repertoire of Joseon's diplomatic strategies for persuading and cajoling Ming. Thus, Joseon's *servicing the great* is reinterpreted not as a cause of subjugation and national ruining, but as the reason for long-term peace and national survival. After reading this book, one perceives Joseon no longer as the Ming's most loyal and deferent model tributary state, but as a canny and persistent tributary state. The sources and conclusions of this book share some similarities with the work of Jeong Daham, Choe Jongseok, Doyeong Gu, and others, who have recently advocated revisionist theories in Korean academia. In particular, one gets the impression that the book is in agreement regarding the big picture with Gu Doyeong's (2018), "country of propriety and righteousness" (*yewi ji guk* 禮義之國) discourse, although there are numerous differences in the specifics of their respective approaches and the time periods they study.

Having presented a brief summary of the book's contents and contributions, I would like now to present my opinions and questions about the book. The central theme of *Boundless Winds of Empire* is the assertive survival of Joseon, a small state bordering a giant empire, Ming. While Wang analyzes various resources and strategies mobilized in Joseon's diplomacy with Ming, I came away with the impression that the historicity and specificity of Joseon-Ming diplomacy is rather obscured by this approach. In other words, I have doubts as to regarding the sufficiency of the author's understanding and consideration of the historical contexts and choices made by Joseon and Ming. The book's attempt to interpret Joseon rituals and rhetoric as a diplomatic strategy succeeds in breaking away from the Sino-centric model of the tributary system, but it seems to have

regressed to a case study of history of international relations, that is, of diplomatic relations between a large state and a small state. As a result, even though the author's interpretive framework for looking at Joseon's diplomacy with Ming has succeeded in escaping the autonomy-subjugation dichotomy, it has fallen back into the dichotomy between obedient submission and clever utilization. In short, I am doubtful as to whether the author's interpretation fundamentally overcomes Fairbank's tributary system theory.

Another limitation I find in this book is the fact that almost no comparisons were made with countries that had sustained diplomatic relations with Ming within the framework of the tributary system, such as Vietnam or Ryukyu. It would have been nice to see the author's answers more clearly presented to the questions of whether Joseon's diplomatic rituals, rhetoric, and strategies were unique to this period; whether they differed in qualitative terms from those of Ming's other tributary states or merely in quantitative terms; and if they were unique in both qualitative and quantitative terms, why these phenomena occurred in Joseon during this period. However, I could not find answers to such questions anywhere in the book.

How can we explain diplomatic rituals and rhetoric such as *servicing the great* and *admiring China* in early Joseon if we understand them in terms other than as diplomatic stratagems? Choe's studies (2016, 2017, 2019), which examine the reorganization of diplomatic rituals and the overhaul of institutions of civilization in the late Goryeo-early Joseon following the period of Yuan interference, suggests that "zeal for the pursuit of *junghwa* 中華 as universal civilization" on the part of the Joseon people at the time was the driving force behind such a transformation. According to Choe's research, the qualitatively transformed self-identity and perception of *junghwa* during the Yuan interference led the founding leaders of Joseon to voluntarily promote based on their own beliefs the reorganization of the ritual system and other institutions of civilization in line with adherence to the status (分義) of the vassal state. Choe Jongseok interprets the reorganization of the palace gazing rite (*manggwollye* 望闕禮) with the addition of the *yoha* 遙賀 ritual for the Ming emperor, the abolition of the round altar ritual

(*wongujae*), and the establishment of the “Sega pyeonmok” 世家篇目 (Noble Family History Section) in the *Goryeosa* 高麗史 (History of Goryeo), as part of the attempt to establish the imperative of idealized *junghwa* civilization within the vassal state Joseon, rather than the result of Ming pressure or a consciousness of Ming perceptions. However, Choe explains that the voluntary adherence to the status of a vassal state did not mean that Joseon’s uniqueness as distinct from China in terms of ethnicity and space was neglected or denied. In other words, his argument is that the contemporary Joseon people’s worldview, which voluntarily sought, in its pursuit of *junghwa* as universal civilization, to preserve Joseon’s rightful status of vassal state within all-under-heaven to realize *ye* 禮, which was at the core of *junghwa*, was able to co-exist on a different level with the pragmatics of diplomacy with Ming, which was directly linked to the pursuit of interests set in a space distinctly separated from China, except for some special periods such as the *byeongja horan*.

Based on such a perspective, it is difficult to see the Joseon diplomatic rituals and rhetoric, which Wang takes special note of, as the product of a long-term diplomatic strategy or as a repertoire deliberately adopted to deal with the superpower Ming. Rather, they were the natural outgrowth of the Joseon people’s worldview. Even if the rituals and rhetoric did have a positive impact on Joseon diplomacy, this should not be seen as an intended outcome. Only in this way will we be able to understand without contradiction the unique historical phenomena of early Joseon, in which the institutional reorganization that took into account the status of the vassal state was thoroughly carried out even outside the gaze of Ming, and the discourse that absolutized adherence to the status of the vassal state as immutable was produced. This is in contrast to Vietnam’s thorough implementation of the ideological and institutional practice of the feudal exterior/imperial interior (外王內帝) doctrine regarding the Ming during this same period.

In short, I would like to comment that Sixiang Wang’s study falls a little short of fully restoring the historicity of Joseon-Ming relations, which unfolded under the unprecedented conditions of Joseon’s voluntary pursuit

of the imperative of *junghwa* as universal civilization. However, this reviewer's minor reservations should not detract from the book's outstanding value. Wang's efforts to open a new horizon on to early Joseon diplomatic history and intellectual history with new sources and perspectives should be highly commended. As the latest contribution in English-language studies of early Joseon, the book's value remains uncontested, and it is a must-read for readers in many fields of Korean studies.

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