

Readings from Asia

The Qing Challenge in Chosŏn Korea

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Sun Weiguo 孫衛國. *Cong "zun Ming" dao "feng Qing": Chaoxian wangchao dui Qing yishi de shanbian, 1627–1910* 從“尊明”到“奉清”：朝鮮王朝對清意識的嬗變，1627–1910 [From “honoring the Ming” to “submitting to the Qing”: The transformation of Chosŏn Korea’s attitude toward Qing China, 1627–1910]. Taipei: Taida chuban zhongxin, 2018. 580 pp. ISBN: 9789863503088.

In 1637, the Manchu-ruled Great Qing Country (Manchu *Daicing gurun*, Ch. *Da Qing guo* 大清國), founded in 1636, invaded and conquered its neighboring country, the Chosŏn kingdom of Korea. After Chosŏn then changed from being a tributary state of the Ming dynasty of China (1368–1644), a bilateral relationship officially established in 1401, to a tributary state of the Great Qing. The relationship between the Qing and Chosŏn lasted for 258 years until it was terminated by the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895. Within the hierarchical Sinocentric framework, to which scholars generally refer in English as the “tributary system,” Koreans had regarded Chosŏn as “Little China” (*Xiao Zhonghua* 小中華) since the Ming period and treated the Jurchens (who changed their name to “Manchu” in the early 1630s) in Manchuria as barbarians. The Sinocentric framework determined that the political legitimacy of Chosŏn, in particular the kingship, came from the imperial acknowledgment by the Chinese court conspicuously represented by the Chinese emperor’s investiture of the Korean king. After the Great Qing evolved into the Qing dynasty of China in 1644 and became a legitimate successor to the demised Ming dynasty, Chosŏn was pushed into a very awkward situation in the traditional “civilized versus barbarian” dichotomy in the Confucian world: on the one hand, the country was reluctant to identify the Manchu-ruled Qing as the civilized “China”; on the other hand, it had to justify its political legitimacy through the Qing’s imperial investiture and endorsement. Chosŏn thus entered an unprecedented period of consolidating and highlighting its identity as “Little China” with the aim of honoring the Ming and resisting the Manchu “barbarians” on an intellectual level. The Koreans faced the great challenge of how to deal with the Qing in Chosŏn’s world, in particular a steadily rising and economically prosperous Qing in the long seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Addressing what I call “the Qing challenge in Chosŏn,” Dr. Sun Weiguo (Nankai University) argues that although the Korean intellectuals never fully abandoned the mentality of depreciating the Qing, Chosŏn’s official attitude toward the Qing changed from “honoring the Ming and depreciating the Qing” (*zun Ming bian Qing* 尊明貶清) to “honoring the Ming and submitting to the Qing” (*zun Ming feng Qing* 尊明奉清) over the course of nearly three centuries. Sun’s book *Cong “zun Ming” dao “feng Qing”: Chaoxian wangchao dui Qing yishi de shanbian, 1627–1910* (From “honoring the Ming” to “submitting to the Qing”: The transformation of Chosŏn Korea’s attitude toward Qing China, 1627–1910) thus makes a substantial contribution to the literature of studies on Sino-Korean relations.

Cong “zun Ming” dao “feng Qing” has two sections. The first part includes eight chapters that depict the history of Chosŏn’s attitude toward the Qing from the late Ming period to the late Qing period through several cases of Korean-Qing contact. The second part, consisting of six chapters, presents six examples of communications between a group of Korean and Chinese intellectuals in order to show that Koreans gradually accepted and embraced the Qing. Whereas the first part of the book mainly deals with the issue of “honoring the Ming,” the second part highlights “submitting to the Qing.”

The first part of the book focuses on Chosŏn’s efforts to maintain its identity as “Little China” during the Qing period. Chapter 1 engages the concept and connotations of “Little China.” It points out that the concept might come from Buddhist texts during the Unified Silla period of Korea (668–935) and that the term had been adopted by secular regimes and intellectuals at least since the Song period of China (960–1276). The core of being “Little China” was “honoring China” (*muhua* 慕華), as shown by the actions of Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910) after its establishment and its consequent contacts with the Ming dynasty for importing neo-Confucianism and Chinese statecraft. After the Ming-Qing transition, “honoring the Ming” (*zun Ming* 尊明), “honoring the Zhou and commemorating the Qing” (*zun Zhou si Ming* 尊周思明), and “expelling the Qing” (*rang Qing* 攘清) became the key elements of the presentation of the “Little China” identity in Chosŏn.

Chapter 2 discusses the rise and fall of the history of Jizi (*Kija* 箕子), the founding father of ancient Chosŏn 古朝鮮 according to Chinese records, and the rise of Tan’gun 檀君, the legendary founding father of Korea in the Korean historiography during the Chosŏn period. It points out that during almost the entire Chosŏn period from 1392, when Yi ŏngge founded the regime, to 1910, when Japan annexed Korea, Jizi had been dominant in Koreans’ mind and his position had been higher than that of Tan’gun. Ironically, when Chosŏn declared itself the Great Han Empire 大韓帝國 in 1897, two years after it became fully independent from its centuries-long hierarchical relationship with China, Jizi’s position reached the acme in Korean history when he was invested by the Korean court as “Founding Father, the Duke of Wenxuan” (*Taizu wenxuan wang* 太祖文宣王). Only after 1910, when Japanese colonial discourse embarked on the process of decentralizing China and the Korean independence movements required a

great native historical figure, did Tan'gun emerge as the exclusive ancestor to the Koreans, when the narration of Jizi was suppressed by Japanese as well as Koreans.

Chapter 3 shows the popularity of Shrine for Lord Guan (*Guanwang miao* 關王廟) in Chosŏn and its relationship to Chosŏn's efforts to consolidate its "Little China" identity. Koreans were introduced to the Chinese native religion of Lord Guan during the Imjin War in the 1590s, when Chinese troops of the Ming dynasty took Lord Guan, revered by the Chinese as legendary God of War, to Korea and built several shrines in his honor. At first, the Koreans were not interested in the imported cult, but in the post-Ming period the Koreans considered Lord Guan a good tool for propagating the message of loyalty. They viewed the shrines established by the Ming Chinese as perfect places and vehicles for commemorating the Ming and depreciating the Qing temporally, culturally, and psychologically. Those shrines to Lord Guan were thus closely connected with Chosŏn's domestic activities honoring the Ming. From 1597 to the early twentieth century, Korea established twelve shrines to Lord Guan; in the eighteenth century, the image of Lord Guan was assimilated into Korean culture, or was Koreanized, indicating full acceptance of this Chinese native religion into Korean society. The chapter furnishes the literature of Sino-Korean studies with an excellent review of the history of shrines to Lord Guan in Chosŏn Korea and reveals the critical cultural and political messages behind Chosŏn's endorsement of the shrines during the Qing period. In my opinion, it stands out as the best of the fourteen chapters. The chapter does not explain what happened to the shrines after the Japanese colonial period, but the postcolonial period is beyond the book's scope.

Chapters 4 and 5 review the establishment of the Qing-Korean tributary relationship in the late 1630s and the change in Qing policy toward Chosŏn during the next two centuries, in particular after 1644, when the Qing occupied Beijing and became more benevolent toward Chosŏn. It is worth discussing the Chinese term *Zongfan* 宗藩, which Sun uses to describe the nature of the hierarchical relationship between the two sides. *Zongfan* is widely used in Chinese academia, though some scholars prefer to use other terms, such as *zongshu* 宗屬, *cefeng* 冊封, and *chaogong* 朝貢. Korean and Japanese scholars—such as Koo Bum-jin (2012), Seonmin Kim (2017), and Okamoto Takeshi (2014)—have their own preferences. English-speaking scholars have tended to use "tributary system" or "tribute system" to refer to this cross-border order in the Chinese world, though in recent years some scholars have made an effort to introduce the term *Zongfan* into the English-language literature. Such efforts appear in books like Nianshen Song's *Making Borders in Modern East Asia* (2018) and my own *Remaking the Chinese Empire* (2018).

Chapter 6 reviews the evolution of the Korean ambition, after the humiliating Korean history of the Qing conquest in the 1630s, to "take revenge [on the Qing] to get rid of humiliation" in the seventeenth century. It also reveals the critical role of dramatic political struggles among different sects in producing and changing the Korean discourse toward the Ming and the Qing within the Korean borders. By end of the eighteenth century, the Korean plan to attack the Qing in order to restore the Ming was clearly

unrealistic, as shown by the case study of Korean-Qing contact in 1667 presented in chapter 7. In that case, ninety-five Chinese traders from Zheng-occupied Taiwan landed on the Korean shore after a shipwreck en route to Japan for trade and were soon sent to Seoul by local officials. The Korean court was greatly shocked by these Chinese, because they wore Ming-style clothing and carried with them a Southern Ming calendar published in Taiwan. Rather than repatriating them back to Taiwan, the Korean court eventually decided to take the Chinese traders to Beijing. There, the Manchu court executed all of them. The Koreans regretted their pragmatic decision, which made their gesture of honoring the Ming quite hypocritical, and started to commemorate those victims in 1797, the 130th anniversary of the event. This case highlights the inner conflict of Chosŏn's discourse of honoring the Ming when the country was in the process of changing its long-established perception of the Qing. Chapter 8 further examines the change in Korean terms referring to the Qing from the 1620s to the 1910s, pointing out that in the modern period (namely, the nineteenth century) Koreans did not hesitate to use *Zhongguo* 中國 and "the Great Qing" to describe the Qing, a country Koreans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries called "barbarian."

The second part of the book examines Chosŏn's attitude toward the Qing through six specific cases involving contacts between Korean intellectuals and their Chinese counterparts when the Koreans visited Beijing for tributary matters. All Korean historical figures in this part of the book are famous scholars who left abundant travel journals and publications collectively known as the *Yŏnhaengnok* 燕行錄 (Records of Chosŏn's emissaries to Beijing). Readers can find familiar names in a group of scholars known as Northern Learning (K. *Pukhak p'ae* 北學派) focusing on "Practical Knowledge" (K. *Sirhak* 實學), such as Hong Tae-yong 洪大容 (1731–1783), Pak Che-ka 朴齊家 (1750–1805), Yu Tŭk-kong 柳得恭 (1748–1807), Pak Kyu-su 朴桂壽 (1807–1877), and Kim Yun-sik 金允植 (1835–1922). These active Korean scholars made many friends in China, such as Yan Cheng 嚴誠 (1732–1767), Pan Tingyun 潘庭筠 (1742–?), and Li Diaoyuan 李調元 (1734–1802), whose names appear frequently in the *Yŏnhaengnok*. By presenting the six cases, Sun shows the shift in the Korean attitude toward the Qing—from depreciation to submission—since the second half of the eighteenth century, though some intellectuals never abandoned the mentality of honoring the Ming. The book's conclusion further highlights this point.

A leading scholar in the field of Sino-Korean relations, Sun already published another book about the Qing challenge in Chosŏn in 2007, *Da Ming qihao yu Xiao Zhonghua yishi: Chaoxian wangchao zun Zhou si Ming wenti yanjiu, 1637–1800* 大明旗號與小中華意識: 朝鮮王朝尊周思明問題研究 (The Great Ming and the ideology of Little China: A study of the issue of revering the Zhou and honoring the Ming in Chosŏn Korea, 1637–1800). In that book, Sun presented a long history of Korean intellectuals' mentality of honoring the Ming and efforts to consolidate Chosŏn's "Little China" identity between 1637 and 1800. The argument he makes in the 2018 book under review seems to conflict with that in his earlier book. *Cong "zun Ming" dao "feng Qing"*— states that Chosŏn's attitude toward the Qing changed, but the 2007 book uses

more cases to show that it did not. The author is fully aware of this contradiction and has briefly argued that the 2018 book should be regarded as a complementary volume (*zimei pian* 姊妹篇) to the 2007 book.

It appears to me, however, that Sun has given too much weight in *Cong “zun Ming” dao “feng Qing”* to the Northern Learning scholars; in many senses, they do not represent the mainstream attitude toward the Qing in Chosŏn. The six cases examined in the second part of the book have very different political and social contexts, and it is difficult to use them to define Chosŏn’s overall transformation in its tradition of honoring the Ming and depreciating the Qing. The analysis of this small group of scholars in these case studies could well reflect a critical change in some Koreans’ perceptions about the Qing, in particular in terms of cultural communications between the two countries. However, drawing the conclusion that Chosŏn’s overall attitude toward the Qing changed through those Koreans’ behaviors requires further consideration. For example, Pak Che-ka, made it very clear that Chosŏn needed to learn about advanced technology from the Qing before it would be able to defeat the Qing, a point that bore a striking resemblance to the Chinese strategy of “learning the superior techniques of the barbarians to constrain the barbarians” (*shiyi changji yi zhiyi* 師夷長技以制夷; Wang 2018, 93). The Northern Learning scholars helped Chosŏn rethink its preconceived and very biased perception of a “barbarous” Qing by introducing their domestic counterparts to the Qing’s prosperity and civilization, but none of them publicly argued for honoring the Qing as they did for the demised Ming within their own country. Sun’s 2007 book provides excellent cases on this point. We must keep in mind that the leading Northern Learning scholars who visited Beijing were neither emissaries of the Korean tributary missions nor official representatives of the Chosŏn court; rather, they were associated members of the missions, and their writings did not therefore represent Chosŏn’s official tone toward the Qing.

The question regarding Chosŏn’s overall attitude toward the Qing, therefore, lies in the so-called *feng Qing* that the second part of *Cong “zun Ming” dao “feng Qing”* is aimed at addressing. The English for the book’s title translates *feng Qing* into “submitting to the Qing,” but, given what the author tries to convey in the book, a translation such as “embracing the Qing” might be more fitting. It occurs to me that the argument about *feng Qing* in the book is no more than an informed fallacy. I say this because since 1637, when the bilateral hierarchical relationship was established, Chosŏn always showed its subordination to the Manchu court and the Qing state and never challenged the Qing’s preponderant position within the bilateral framework. The norms that had been established during the Ming period regulated the mechanics of the Qing-Chosŏn interstate order, according to which Chosŏn Korea as a subordinate country had to strictly follow the norms in submitting to Qing China. Only through this kind of subordination to Qing China could Chosŏn Korea justify its legitimacy and status in this Sinocentric world informed by neo-Confucianism. In short, since 1637, *feng Qing* was an embedded obligation on the Chosŏn side, regardless of what Korean intellectuals thought about the Jurchens/Manchus or the Qing itself in the civilized versus barbarian

dichotomy. Scholars in this field should not blur the distinction between political discourse adopted by the Chosŏn court and individual comments made by a handful of Korean intellectuals.

The best documents supporting my point are the palace memorials (*biao* 表) and other official documents that Korean kings submitted to Qing emperors over the course of more than two and a half centuries, which—for unknown reasons—*Cong “zun Ming” dao “feng Qing”* does not cite and use. Sun does use abundant Korean books written by the Korean intellectuals during the late Chosŏn period, a decision that apparently aims to depict the domestic transformation of Chosŏn’s attitude toward the Qing. But none of the Korean books published in the late Chosŏn period that are cited and listed in the 2018 bibliography ever publicly praise the Qing in the way they applaud the Ming. Rather, as Sun’s 2007 book demonstrated, the domestic mainstream in Chosŏn Korea had always honored the Great Ming, a position that evolved into a convention among scholars and was deeply associated with their own identity. In a broader context, a similar cultural phenomenon following the Ming-Qing transition can be found in Vietnam, where Vietnamese intellectuals also depreciated the Manchu-ruled dynasty in the same civilized versus barbarian context, but the Vietnam court did not challenge the authority of the Manchu court in their shared world order.

It is thus worth pointing out that *zun Ming* and *feng Qing* in Chosŏn’s political discourse were not two exclusive choices; rather, they co-existed following the Manchu conquest in 1637. This point is well illustrated by the 1867 case of Pak Kyu-su discussed in chapter 13. Pak asked his Chinese friend Dong Wenhuan 董文煥 in Beijing to repair a painting of a bodhisattva (*Jiulian pusa xiang* 九蓮菩薩像). The bodhisattva’s image was after the Ming dynasty’s Empress Dowager Xiaoding 孝定, the mother of Emperor Wanli, the emperor who dispatched troops in the 1590s to Chosŏn to save the country from the Japanese invasion. For Pak, showing his nostalgia toward the Great Ming did not conflict with his close friendship with his Chinese colleagues living in the Great Qing in the 1860s and did not prevent him from becoming the pioneer of Korea’s enlightenment movement by imitating what the Qing court was carrying out in China toward modernization. In another case, presented in chapter 14, Kim Yun-sik went to Tianjin, China, in the early 1880s as the superintendent of a group of Korean students studying modern military technology and skills, though his true but secret mission received from the king was to negotiate with the Chinese official Li Hongzhang about concluding a treaty with the United States. Later, it was Kim who provided the Chinese side with misleading information about the Korean mutiny of 1882 and guided Chinese troops to Seoul to suppress the uprising. Having extensively examined Kim’s mission to China based on Korean, Chinese, and English materials for my MA thesis, part of which is included in chapter 5 of my 2018 book, I have difficulty seeing how Kim’s case in a modern diplomatic context could efficiently support Sun’s argument about *feng Qing*. Rather, Kim’s case provides a convincing explanation of Chosŏn’s geopolitical concerns.

Research on the Qing challenge in Chosŏn has resulted in a rich literature in the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese academies since the early twentieth century, a point

clearly shown in the literature review given in the introduction to Sun's 2018 book. The exploration of this issue advanced remarkably in a 2013 book by Wang Yuanzhou, *Xiao Zhonghua yishi de shanbian: Jindai Zhong-Han guanxi de sixiangshi yanjiu* 小中華意識的嬗變：近代中韓關係的思想史研究 (Transformations of the ideology of Little China: A study of modern Sino-Korean relations from the perspective of intellectual history). Wang extensively uses various Korean and Chinese first-hand materials and the abundant Korean literature to examine the issue of the "Little China" mentality in the late Chosŏn period and describes the transformation of that mentality in modern Korea. In the same way, Sun's *Cong "zun Ming" dao "feng Qing"* has brought the literature on the "Little China" identity to new heights, at least in the Chinese academy. As Chinese scholars have the privilege of reading and analyzing classical Chinese documents, Dr. Sun's and Dr. Wang's books will surely stay on the list of must-read books in the East Asian academia for many years to come.

By the same token, *Cong "zun Ming" dao "feng Qing"* is proof that the field of Sino-Korean studies in China desperately needs more fresh perspectives. Hundreds of articles and dozens of books have repeated, are still repeating, and might continuously repeat the same stories without innovative and thought-provoking interpretations. In particular, many books and articles on the *Yŏnhaengnok* published during the past twenty years since Lim Key-zung's edited collection was published in Seoul in 2001 do not differ from booklets of notes, and the arguments in those works are incredibly superficial due to the dreadfully narrow understanding of the Qing dynasty of China on the one hand, and the appalling absence of historical events on the Korean side, on the other. Although *Cong "zun Ming" dao "feng Qing"* does not necessarily fall into this category, the book leaves much room for future groundbreaking contributions to the literature. As beneficiaries of modern online databases and global academic exchanges, the younger generation of scholars is able to collect and use more materials, but their historical narration has not fundamentally challenged what the previous generation of historians has expressed since the early twentieth century. A gloomier phenomenon is that the conventional historiographical approach centered on "textual research" (Ch. *kaozheng* 考證) still dominates so many minds in East Asian academia, forming a powerful barrier preventing historians from examining historical events in broader contexts. My own experiences with the Chinese academy suggests that it is a common impression among scholars who master Chinese or other East Asian languages that the more extensive a scholar's reading of materials, the better academic product he or she can automatically produce. I will not claim that this is an illusion or even a mistake, as that view has great merits and perfectly fits native conventions in its own cultural context, but I do propose that my fellow colleagues in the field of Sino-Korean studies use different perspectives in the future to shed light on some overdone topics like the Qing challenge in Chosŏn. Some recent publications, such as Fuma (2015), Rawski (2015), Kim (2017), and Song (2018) provide hopeful examples.

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