

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **A New Discussion of Sino-Korean Relations during the Chosŏn Period**

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Pae Usŏng 배우성, *Chosŏn kwa Chunghwa: Chosŏn i kkumkkugo sangsanghan segye wa munmyŏng* 조선과 중화: 조선이 꿈꾸고 상상한 세계와 문명 [Chosŏn and Chunghwa: The world and civilization that Chosŏn dreamt and imagined]. Kyŏnggi-do P'aju-si: Tolbegae, 2014. ISBN: 978-89-7199-597-6.

In this book, Pae Usŏng, a historian at the University of Seoul, takes a fresh look at the relationship of Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910) with China and that of Chosŏn's *yangban* (scholar-officials) with Sinitic civilization as a whole. None of Chosŏn's relationships were more important, or more complicated, than that with China. On the one hand, Chosŏn was in nearly all respects independent from both Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) China. On the other hand, under both the Ming and the Qing, the Chosŏn court sent envoys regularly to Beijing, thereby acknowledging its subservience to China. After the Manchu Qing supplanted the Ming in the mid-eighteenth century, most Chosŏn officials, privately at least, rejected the Qing as an empire controlled by barbarians. Following the Qing conquest, most Chosŏn scholar-officials also asserted that China's cultural and political traditions had been irreparably lost within China proper, and that Chosŏn was the only remaining heir of the Sinitic tradition. Even so, no Chosŏn person of significance before the late nineteenth century actually called for the removal of Chosŏn from the Sinitic world, no matter how much the legitimacy of the Qing was doubted.

To some scholars in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Korea, this "Sinocentrism" has seemed to represent a Korea that was embarrassingly dependent on China and lacking in a sense of self-pride. Other scholars, such as Chŏng Okcha (1998), have defended this Sinocentrism by arguing that, especially after the fall of the Ming, Chosŏn scholar-officials identified Chosŏn with Chunghwa (as I will refer to the partly deterritorialized Chinese civilization imagined by Chosŏn scholar-officials), and so admiration of Chunghwa was admiration not of China but of

Chosŏn's own political and cultural traditions. Both critics and supporters of Chosŏn's Chunghwa consciousness, in other words, have tended to frame the subject according to the ideals of modern nationalism. Pae, however, argues that it is anachronistic to evaluate Chosŏn people and institutions according to whether they asserted Korean *chaju* (autonomy) and *chajon* (self-admiration), on the one hand, or dependence on or admiration for China, on the other. As he ably demonstrates, Chosŏn people generally did not understand matters in these terms, or even see membership in the Sinitic cultural and political sphere to be in contradiction to Chosŏn difference.

The book is divided into seven sections, each of which comprises several chapters. It is a long and intricate book, and it is not possible here to give more than a taste of the dominant themes. The discussion begins with an exploration of a key symbol of Qing domination in Chosŏn—the inscribed stele at Samjŏndo in the present-day Songp'a district in Seoul near the Han River, which was raised to commemorate and honor the Qing victory over Chosŏn and the submission of the Chosŏn king to the Qing emperor. Later sections explore such themes as Chosŏn-era debates about local customs and the status of the Korean vernacular (section 2); Chosŏn attitudes toward Manchuria, which many Chosŏn scholar-officials considered to be part of historical Korean territory (sections 3 and 4); Chosŏn responses to the wider world, especially as they related to the new understanding of geography that spread to Chosŏn via Jesuit missionaries based in China (sections 5 and 6); and the continuation of Chunghwa consciousness into the twentieth century by Kim Chŏnggyu (1881–1953) and Yu Insŏk (1842–1915), both Confucians who participated in the anti-Japanese military struggle (section 7).

Pae's approach may be well observed in the section 2, where he explores Chosŏn views concerning Chosŏn local character (*p'ungt'o*) and the relationship it was assumed to have with geography. Chosŏn scholars, in accord with Sinitic traditions of geography, saw the character of a region to be formed by interaction with the geography of a region. China was China in part because of its geographic position at the center of the world. One could be fully devoted to participation in a broader Chunghwa cultural sphere, as indeed were nearly all Chosŏn officials, but still consider nothing wrong with the existence of linguistic or cultural differences between one region and another. For instance, Pae discusses Chosŏn debates concerning the two legendary founding rulers of Korea—Tan'gun and Kija. Tan'gun, the reputed first ruler of the state of Old Chosŏn (traditionally founded in 2333 B.C.), is often contrasted in modern

scholarship with Kija (Ch. Jizi, lit. “Viscount of Ji”), a Shang official who purportedly established a later state in Old Chosŏn in the eleventh century B.C., to which he brought rites and civilization. Twentieth-century nationalists such as Sin Ch’aeho (1880–1936) have tended to exalt Tan’gun as the symbol of a separate national Korean tradition as opposed to Kija, whom they have seen as a shameful sign of Chosŏn’s dependence on China. However, some scholars, such as Han Young-woo (1985), have argued that, for many Chosŏn scholars, Kija was a symbol not of subservience but of Chosŏn’s autonomous Confucian civilization. But as Pae points out, early Chosŏn debates concerning Tan’gun and Kija were largely unconcerned with questions of independence and subservience (104). Chŏng Ch’ŏk (1390–1475), for example, argued for the need to establish separate shrines for Tan’gun and Kija, because if the two founders were honored in the same shrine, one would have to be treated as subordinate to the other. However, because Tan’gun had established the state before Kija it would be unacceptable for him to be placed in a subordinate position to Kija, and because Kija had brought rites, laws, and morals to Chosŏn, it would be unacceptable for him to be placed in a subordinate position to Tan’gun. The question of Korean autonomy or dependence on China did not even occur to Chŏng.

Similarly, Pae (109–123) discusses debates concerning sacrifices to heaven by the Chosŏn king. These sacrifices were defended by some during the early Chosŏn but were eventually abandoned because of their assumed violation of Confucian strictures against a feudal lord arrogating to himself the ritual privileges of the Chinese emperor. While some scholars, notably Sohn Pokee (2000, 4–69), have seen this debate as occurring between defenders of Chosŏn’s autonomy/independence and advocates of Sinocentrism, Pae points out that the debate was actually between those who argued that established rituals should not be cast aside lightly and those who considered it vital to conform to the Confucian classics. The former could even cite the Ming’s Hongwu emperor (r. 1368–1398) in defence of their position. In other words, the dispute had nothing to do with either rejection of, or subordination to, China, since all sides fully accepted that Chosŏn belonged to the Chunghwa cultural and political sphere.

Much the same can be said about Chosŏn debates concerning the relative claims of Chinese and Korean languages. The Korean vernacular script, now known as Hangul but developed under the name *hunmin chŏng’ŭm* by the court of King Sejong (r. 1418–1450), is now celebrated as one of the defining features of Korean national culture. However, as has been discussed in English by Korea historian Gari K. Ledyard (1998), at the time of its inception it

was not seen as a sign of cultural separation from China. On the contrary, one of Hangeul's earliest uses was as a tool of language reform to establish a standard pronunciation of Chinese characters used in Korea. Moreover, as Pae explains, early Chosŏn scholar-officials considered it entirely unexceptional for languages to differ, as language, like local rites, were a product of local character, which in turn was a product of geography. It was natural that Chosŏn, as an exterior country (*oeguk*), should differ from the central country of China, and it could do so without departing from a broader Chunghwa sphere. In fact, despite their cultural affiliation with Chunghwa, Chosŏn scholar-officials were generally uninterested in learning either official spoken Chinese or the Chinese bureaucratic vernacular writing known in Korean as *imun*. Because of the immense importance of both for diplomacy, the Chosŏn court made various attempts to encourage a wider knowledge of both among Chosŏn civil officials. During the early Chosŏn, the Chosŏn court had some success in encouraging a number of civil officials to learn spoken Chinese and *imun*, but knowledge and interest in both declined enormously during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in part because spoken Chinese was considered merely a technical skill, and in part because it was not key for advancement in the bureaucratic hierarchy. Thus the subject was largely passed over to a separate class of specialists.

Of course, also influencing the status of vernacular Chinese was the conquest of China by the despised Qing. During the seventeenth century, civil officials became aware of significant changes in the Chinese language of the capital, and by the eighteenth century, changes in the Chinese language were significant enough that it was deemed necessary to rework the Chinese-language textbooks used in Chosŏn. However, even then, the low status of spoken Chinese bedevilled progress. Yŏngjo (r. 1724–1776), the monarch who ordered the production of new Chinese-language textbooks, also asserted that spoken Chinese was a simple skill that could be mastered with ease. Other civil officials objected on ideological grounds to reworking language textbooks to reflect the spoken Chinese language of the Qing court, since that was seen as a corruption of the standard language of the Ming represented in *The Correct Sounds of the Hongwu Reign* (*Hongmu chŏng'ŭm*). To be sure, spoken Chinese, like Manchu, had undeniable practical value for maintaining diplomatic communication with the Qing court. However, whether during the Ming or the Qing, Chunghwa culture was ultimately related to, but not identical with, the real China. Whatever the practical value of spoken Chinese, the civilizational value of *The Correct Sounds of the Hongwu Reign* and literary Chinese was even greater.

Of course, by no means were Chosŏn intellectuals uniform in their views on the subject of local customs. As Pae points out (155–160), the immensely influential Song Siyŏl (1607–1689), one of the most prominent seventeenth-century advocates of the view that Chosŏn was the last remnant of the Chunghwa tradition, agreed that the differences between Chosŏn and China could also be explained through geography. At the same time, he thought that it was both possible and desirable to transform the local character of a region. As an example, he pointed to Fujian, which had been a barbarous land originally but was later transformed to the point of producing Zhu Xi (1130–1200), the supreme Song dynasty Neo-Confucianist. Although Song believed that Chosŏn had had its local character transformed to accord with Chunghwa, geography still mattered to him. Chosŏn could maintain the orthodox tradition in the same manner that the state of Lu during China’s Spring and Autumn period (771–476 B.C.) maintained the rites of the Zhou dynasty. However, Chosŏn’s role was not, in Song’s mind, to replace China, but rather to preserve the orthodox rites until the fall of the Qing and the rise once more of a legitimate dynasty in China. By contrast, Pae (160–165) discusses such scholars of the so-called Northern Learning school as Hong Taeyong (1731–1783) and Pak Chega (1750–1815), who, under the influence of European maps introduced by the Jesuits to China, understood the world to be without a geographic center. As Pae points out, these Northern Learning scholars responded to this realization not with greater nationalism, but with shame that Koreans did not speak Chinese, the language of the cultural center. Pak Chega even called for Koreans to use Chinese as their standard spoken language.

A major theme in much historiography concerning Sino-Korean relations, and perhaps one of the most contentious matters in Sino-Korean relations today, is the question of Korea’s historical relationship to Manchuria. As discussed by Koreanist Andre Schmid (2002, 224–252), an important feature of Korean nationalism during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been revanchist claims for Korea’s supposed ancient territory in Manchuria (or Dongbei, as it is now called in China). Twentieth-century nationalist intellectuals considered this region to be historical Korean territory that had once been ruled by the medieval kingdoms of Parhae and Koguryŏ, and indeed perhaps by Old Chosŏn itself, and they considered it the goal of the Korean nation to restore its lost territory. As Pae points out in chapter 4.2, modern revanchists have predecessors in late Chosŏn scholars, although modern revanchism differs significantly from that of the twentieth century. Some Chosŏn-era scholars, such as Yi Ik (1681–1763) and An

Chŏngbok (1712–1791) sought out Korea's past in Qing maps of Manchuria but did not desire the restoration of Korean rule over this territory. Another historian, Yi Chonghwi (1731–1797) did hope for Chosŏn to regain authority over what he considered to be its old Manchurian lands, but his revanchism was distinctly different from the nationalist revanchism of the twentieth century. Yi Chonghwi believed that Chosŏn should regain its Manchurian territory not only because it was ancient Korean territory but also because he considered Chosŏn to be a legitimate representative of Chunghwa and the Qing to be an illegitimate usurper. When the Han, the Tang, or the Ming had been in control over Liaodong, he did not consider the territory to be alienated from Chosŏn, as those dynasties were also representatives of Chunghwa. Only now that the territory was under the control of the usurping Qing, Yi argued, should Chosŏn reassert its claims. Should a legitimate Chinese dynasty replace the Qing, Chosŏn should attempt to convince the new dynasty of its legitimate rights to Manchurian territory, but it would not be in a position to make demands. Yi, in other words, was a revanchist, not on behalf of a Korean nation *per se*, but on behalf of a wider Chunghwa sphere in which Chosŏn also participated.

In his conclusion, Pae argues that he is not writing an apology for Chosŏn Chunghwa consciousness but merely seeking to make the concerns of Chosŏn history comprehensible to the present day (595–596). Indeed, a great merit of this book is that Pae rarely attempts to push his sources neatly into his argument. He is very much concerned with analyzing the process by which Chosŏn scholars obtained their knowledge. In his discussion of Chosŏn explorations of Manchurian geography in section 4, for instance, he directs much attention to the challenge faced by Chosŏn scholars in merely making sense of the place names themselves. Although frequently both Chosŏn and Qing names for places in Manchuria originated from the same Jurchen original, because Chosŏn used Korean pronunciations and the Qing used Chinese pronunciations when transcribing these names into Chinese characters, the Chinese character versions of the place names used in Chosŏn and the Qing were often so different as to be entirely unrecognizable. At the same time, because Chosŏn scholars could not actually visit the Manchurian territories that interested them, they depended on maps and geographic sources, which frequently disagreed with one another. The Qing geographic sources that they obtained contradicted one another, and also contradicted early Chosŏn geographic sources that often contained places absent in Qing materials. Chosŏn's officials needed to understand Qing place names for numerous reasons, an

important one being understanding Qing diplomatic correspondence, and Pae is right to avoid reducing the process to grand ideological disputes or questions of national identity.

By tracking closely the process by which Chosŏn scholars made sense of this material, Pae preserves the messiness and complexity of Chosŏn's engagement with China. He reveals Chŭnghwa consciousness to be neither identical to, nor in contradiction with, modern nationalism, but instead a different ideology (or set of ideologies) following a logic of its own.

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