

# Was Joseon a Model or an Exception? *Reconsidering the Tributary Relations during Ming China*

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## Abstract

*The Joseon dynasty is recognized as being the most exemplary tributary state to the Ming dynasty of China. In particular, it is considered an ideal member of the tribute system, which is believed to have been established in its most orthodox form during the era of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). However, the historical facts demonstrate that Joseon Korea, though it fully observed the tributary rites, was an exceptional case. The evidence points to the fact that Ming China and most of its tributary states simply intended to maintain the status quo through the formation of superficial tributary relationships, while concealing any conflicts or opposing interests that may have existed. Thus, tributary relations were easily changeable and were based on the economic, cultural, and political benefits they represented. As the logic of the “tribute system” has emerged as a prominent topic of discussion, it has become necessary to take a cautious approach when it comes to regarding Joseon as a typical example of this system.*

**Keywords:** tribute relations/system, Joseon, Liuqiu, Annan, Japan, Ming China, vassal state, investiture-tribute, maritime trade prohibition, rite

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## Introduction

In its relations with China in the Joseon era (1392-1897), Korea is known to have been the most influential factor in the formation of the Confucian ritualized world order of the tribute (*chaogong* 朝貢) system.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the diplomatic relations between Joseon Korea and Ming China (1368-1644), which ruled the Chinese continent from the fourteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century, are understood to embody the exemplary investiture-tribute (*cefeng chaogong* 冊封朝貢) system.<sup>2</sup> Such an understanding has made it difficult to discuss the history of Korean-Sino relations beyond the bounds of the tribute system (Hamashita 1990, 31-34), and as a result, research topics and prominent issues have long been confined to it. Yet, there have been various interpretations of the nature and degree of Joseon's subordination to the Ming. In general, Korean researchers tend to emphasize the relatively disconnected nature of the tribute system in that it did not intervene in the internal politics of the tributary states. However, some studies from China and Japan have often described the status of Joseon as that of a "vassal state," which has been interpreted as Joseon being politically and economically subordinate to Ming and then Qing 清 China (1644-1911), much like a colonial territory.<sup>3</sup>

Before discussing the level of dependence of Joseon and other tributary states to Ming China, this paper begins with an exploration of the literature on the tributary relation or system that defined the relationships between the principal actors. Investiture and tributes, which contributed to connecting each Chinese dynasty with its surrounding states, have been understood as a fundamental framework

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1. For representative works, see Huang (1994), Naquin and Rawski (1987, 28), and Chun (1970, 50-54).

2. It basically can be defined as a form of diplomatic intercourse, formalized by the Chinese emperor's investiture of a neighboring king, who in return sends envoys to pay tribute to the emperor. Regardless of differences in definition, it has been regarded that political, cultural, as well as economical ties between China and tributary states were established as a system in the Ming era.

3. For details, see Sun (2007), Y. Li (2004, 2006), and Harata (1997).

that explains the regional history of East Asia in which mutual negotiations, exchanges, and conflicts are cyclic. Such views stemmed from the Japanese historian Sadao Nishijima, who argued in the early 1960s that there existed an investiture-tribute system, basing his findings on a few tributary cases in the period of the Han 漢 dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) (Nishijima 1983, 5-7).<sup>4</sup> This logic explains relations among individual East Asian countries within the Sino-Barbarian dichotomy. Such a world order equates China as having generously practiced virtue based on its ideological and moral superiority, thereby greatly influencing the surrounding barbarians to obedience. Historically, it has been regarded that such a hierarchical relationship has been maintained between China and some of its neighboring countries.

Later, from the end of the 1960s to the early 1970s, John K. Fairbank explained the modern diplomatic history of East Asia by defining two conflicting systems: the “treaty system” and the traditional “tribute system” (1968, 257-275).<sup>5</sup> The tribute system is considered to be an instrument not simply for international negotiations or exchanges but as a major cornerstone for a “Chinese”-style or, furthermore, “Asian”-style international order. In other words, every region that has had a historical relationship with China helped to form the Chinese world order centering on the tribute system. It was this order that prevailed until Western powers stormed into Asia at the end of the nineteenth century. As a result, the Qing government, for which the tribute system had become a way of life, helplessly and inappropriately responded to the impact of the West. Driven by Western powers that demanded a modern treaty system, the then outdated tribute system, based on China-oriented hierarchical relationships, was forced

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4. Nishijima pointed out four main characteristics of the East Asian culture, including Confucianism, Chinese characters, system of imperial laws and orders, and Buddhism. According to him, East Asia was one of “self-contained complete historical world.” Regarding Nishijima’s historical approach, see Yi (2001, 138-164).

5. According to Fairbank, the treaty system was set up in 1842-1854, when the Qing government signed unequal treaties opening its ports to Western countries after the defeats of war. He sees the treaty port system as an alternative form of foreign domination under the old dynastic system.

to be abandoned.

As such, Fairbank regarded tribute payments by neighboring states as forming a systemic framework rather than viewing them as suzerain-vassal relationship. This view still has substantial influence. Hamashita formulated a series of new theories that expanded the scope of the tribute system to the entirety of Asia (Hamashita 1990, 31-34). In his theories, Ming China laid out the foundation for the tribute system. As noted, Ming China established the maritime prohibition policy that recognized only investiture and tributes as acceptable external relationships, thereby limiting its existing trade relations to tributary trade. Hamashita's theory of the tribute system explains the practice of monopolistic tributary trade during the Ming period as becoming the key element of the modern economic exchange system.

In addition, based on trade activities, Hamashita defined the tribute system as a network that connected regions, such as Inner Asia, Japan, and Southeast Asia, which had no tributary relationship or diplomatic relation, to the Ming and the following Qing dynasty. However, Hamashita's theory is questionable as it fails to address the nature of the tributary states, whether or not tributary relations were actually established, and the different policies implemented by the Ming and Qing governments.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, as the need to create an economic network connecting East Asia and Southeast Asia has recently emerged, his theories have begun to receive much attention. That is, the tribute system is being welcomed as historical evidence that legitimizes the economical integration of these regions. Some Chinese historians are also enthusiastically accepting the tribute system as the "Chinese external relationship system" or the "East Asian international cooperation system."<sup>7</sup> Under these circumstances, this theory has become the most prominent academic discourse as it penetrates both the present and past of East Asia.

Still, the question remains: can the tribute system be defined as having contributed to the long-term stability in East Asia? I have

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6. For details, see Qi (2006) and Iwai (2005).

7. For representative works, see Y. Li (2004) and Wan (2003).

always questioned the existence of such a solid system and relations among neighboring dynastic states, such as the Ming and Joseon. Usually, the tribute system used to be visually represented by a series of concentric rings wherein states orbit the more wealthy and powerful China. If such an order that chained East Asia, Southeast Asia, and most of inner Asia together had existed for so long, a certain level of durability and sustainability should be observable in the economies, politics, or cultures of the regions involved. However, historical realities contradict such a premise.

During the Ming period, many countries acceded to the empire's demand and became tributary states, but those powers that were most threatening to the Ming empire remained "free." In addition, the Ming continuously faced military tensions and conflicts with the peoples beyond the Great Wall, such as those of Mongolia, Xinjiang, Uyghur, and Tibet. Even though some of these regions may have had tributary relations with China for a short period, the impact of such relations was minimal. Nomadic tribes with languages and cultures that differed from China's could not be included in the Ming tribute system, and this remained the case throughout the history of China (Cha 2007, 107-110). This fact raises questions of not only the stability of the tribute system, but also of the legitimacy of the concept.

Full verification has yet to be made of the existence of any kind of tribute system or the universality of such a system between China and its neighboring states. For this reason, some researchers have recently concluded that the traditional notions of international relations in East Asia have been excessively forced to fit into the dominant theory of a tribute system,<sup>8</sup> from which academic interpretations of such relations were drawn. My research begins with this issue and intends to shed new light on the relations between China and its tributary states by adopting the term "tributary relations" instead of "tribute system," since "relations" can be a more comprehensive term, considering the diverse, inconsistent aspects of tributary diplomacy.

It is expected that the characteristics of the tributary relations

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8. For representative works, see Fuma (2007b), Qi (2006), and Zhuang (2005).

between the Ming and Joseon will be further clarified while comparing them with those relations between other tributary states and the Ming. For this purpose, I will examine some major issues regarding how the relations between the Ming and its tributary states, including Joseon, Annan 安南 (present-day Vietnam), and Liuqiu 琉球 (also known as Ryukyu; present-day Okinawa), unfolded. I will then discuss some of the concrete details of the tributary relations that have been ideologically defined thus far. In fact, Joseon, Annan, and Liuqiu were completely different states that shared little common ground in terms of economy, culture, and the nature of regime. Then, the most obvious question is why and how these states maintained tributary relations with the Ming. Unless due consideration is given to each player's internal demands and the changes each has undergone, the tribute system serves as the wrong framework for constructing historical truths. Thus, it would be reasonable to adopt a more flexible approach to Joseon-Ming relations that go beyond the boundary of the tribute system.

### **Preconditions for the Formation of Tributary Relations**

In the early seventeenth century, a prominent writer, Xie Zhaozhi 謝肇淛 (1567-1624), described the countless tributary states of the Ming empire as follows: "When Emperor Hongwu 洪武 (temple name: Taizu 太祖) ruled the country during the early years of its foundation, kings from 1,800 barbarian states flocked to China. . . . During the reign of Emperor Yongle 永樂 (temple name: Shengzu 聖祖), sixteen more countries, accompanied by interpreters, visited China. Among these, about twenty countries, such as Sulu, Sumatra, Luzon, and Pahang cannot be found in the historical records. Even during the splendid periods of the Han and Tang empires, China did not rule so many subordinate states" (Xie [1618] 1994, 420). However, he soon added that not all of these tributary states had formed actual tributary relations with the Ming. He went on to say, "Only Joseon, Liuqiu, Annan, and Duoyuan Sanwei 朵顏三衛 were like lieges on the frontiers and were prudent and careful in investiture and tributes, while other states were not reprimanded if

they missed paying their tributes as China accepted them as being paid” (Xie [1618] 1955, vol. 4).

During the early period of the Ming dynasty, the number of tributary states did not reach 1,800,<sup>9</sup> but it is obvious that the number was the highest in Chinese history. Most countries only sent a few tributary missions, so it is difficult to accurately assess their tributary relations with Ming China. In addition, out of the exemplary four countries in terms of tribute payment, Duoyan Sanwei was but one of the Mongol tribes that enjoyed amicable relations with the Ming. Therefore, it would not be reasonable to consider them as tributary states. Xie Zhaozhi also categorized several non-tributary states of “*beilu nanwo* 北虜南倭” (Mongols in the north and Japanese pirates in the south) that were a continuous threat to the Ming empire.

Except those states that did not belong to the tributary group, I will examine the relationships between the Ming and other more typical tributary states. As quoted above, the states that were in a sustained relationship with the Ming and wished to maintain peace and investiture relations numbered only a few. This was mainly attributed to the unique cultural and ideological nature of the ritualized order that formed the basis for the tributary relations. The Ming government promulgated a Sinocentric ideology that promoted the performance of rites and recognized no other relationship but tributary ones.<sup>10</sup> The basic idea consisted of two key simplest terms originating from Confucian classics: *zunbei* 尊卑, meaning distinction between the high and the lowly, and *zhangyou* 長幼, referring to a hierarchy by age. In other words, the rites defined the superior-subordinate relationships among people based on two sets of hierarchy, namely, generation and age, in accordance with the precedents set in the Confucian classics, such as the *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites). Most of the Chinese dynasties throughout history wanted to organize their society based on this hierarchy and

9. According to the Ming’s official records, the number of tributary states except *tuguan* 土官—the system of appointing minority hereditary headman in inner land of the Ming’s Shenxi 陝西 and Huguang 湖廣—amounts to 144 countries. See *Wanli daming huidian*, vols. 105-108.

10. For further studies, see Iwai (2005).

tried to adopt its principles in its relations with neighboring states. But most of them failed due to the difficulties associated with doing so.

Ming's tributary policy is known as being the only case that legally institutionalized the clan law (*zongfa* 宗法). During the early period of its founding, the Ming empire prohibited all trade and exchange other than investiture-tribute relations. It justified its trade prohibition through the notion that it was expanding the ritualized order to the world, ousting the Mongol barbarians and unifying China (Wang 1968, 34-35). Any state that wished to exchange or coexist in peace with the Ming must adore the emperor's virtue, participate in the rites of the court, and present tributes. The kings of the tributary states also must recognize their superior-subordinate relationship with the Chinese emperor and accept a title and status bestowed upon them by the emperor.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, the Board of Rites (Libu 禮部) was responsible for tributary affairs during the Ming period.

The investiture and tributes organized by the Ming were a type of diplomatic event conducted through the exchange of documents and the participation in rituals prescribed in the courtesies rules. Rites were a diplomatic language that enabled peaceful communication between the Ming and its neighboring states, and only those states that learned and practiced the rites were considered to be true members of the community. Therefore, administrations that had the cultural and political foundations to enable them to send periodic tributary missions, complete with official documents written in classic Chinese were able to maintain tributary relations with the Ming. However, this was not an easy proposition for many of the foreign states, due to their different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and required much voluntary effort on their part. Moreover, there were only two states, Joseon and Liuqiu, which were able to receive a diplomatic delegation from the Ming empire and hold investiture rituals continuously. In most tributary states, the safety of the Ming mission could not be ensured, and there were some preposterous cases of the emperor's envoys being killed. For example, a Ming envoy that was sent to Srivijaya, in the

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11. On the Ming empire's system of rites, see Iwai (2005).

Strait of Malacca, was kidnapped and killed by the Majapahit Kingdom of eastern Java. However, the Ming government could not respond to this event properly, due to the lack of information and human resources.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that most of the exemplary tributary states classified by Xie Zhaozhi also failed to comply with the rites and tributary provisions. The Kingdom of Annan, located north of Vietnam on today's maps, is a good example. As Annan is ranked right after Joseon in the volume 320 of *Mingshi waiguochuan* 明史外國傳 (Profiles of Foreign Countries in the Ming History), Annan was classified into the highest hierarchical group of tributary states. The relationship between Annan and the Ming, however, was one fraught with hostile tensions. During the early years of Annan's foundation, as it transformed itself into a Chinese-style state equipped with a Confucian bureaucracy, the king of Annan obtained investiture from the Ming emperor. However, due to military coups and the usurping of a Ming appointed king, internal chaos reigned and the canonized king was forced to abdicate the throne and was killed. Emperor Hongwu was fully aware of the situation at the time, but he lacked the means to bring the responsible parties to justice and thus could only express his dissatisfaction by rejecting tributes from the state on several occasions (Yu 1987).

After the enthronement of Emperor Yongle, a political upheaval occurred in Annan. Moreover, Annan's rebel forces invaded the Guangxi 廣西 and Yunnan 雲南 regions that bordered the Ming and killed the members of the royal family that had been invested by the Ming emperor. Emperor Yongle sent forces to the state in 1406, conquered the region, and consolidated it into a single territory under the direct control of the empire by renaming it Jiaozhi 交趾. However, due to the strong resistance of Annan, the military forces soon withdrew.<sup>13</sup> Following this withdrawal, the king of Annan called himself "Dayue emperor" and used an independent era name, Nianhao 年號, distinct

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12. See Zhuang (2005).

13. See Yu (1987) and Fuma (2007b, 3-5).

from the Chinese era names. As such, Annan continued to ignore its tributary relations with Ming China. Nevertheless, the Ming government defamed the overthrown king as being one who had been deserted by heaven, stating, “he shall be held responsible for running away after deserting the royal letter of investiture and the seal bestowed by the Emperor of China,” which meant that the Ming dynasty approved of the usurpation.

In 1482, the Ming emperor even punished an official for pointing out some false reports that had been submitted by Annan and requesting the region be reprimanded. The emperor interpreted the official’s actions as being those of a man who sought promotions by causing conflicts with border regions (Fuma 2007a). In short, the Ming dynasty adopted a conciliatory policy and extended the superficial tributary relations. Thus, the reason why Annan was included in the exemplary tributary states was simply because the Ming government wished to maintain the status quo.

In contrast to Annan, Joseon and Liuqiu maintained an attitude befitting their status as a subordinate state to China. Until the collapse of the Ming dynasty, they received preferential treatment from Ming China by observing the tribute rites. Indeed, other tributary states demonstrated a poor understanding of Chinese culture. On many occasions, during the course of certain rites where proper courteous etiquette was required, many envoys displayed inappropriate manners by failing to comply with the rites. For example, only Joseon and Liuqiu delegates were permitted to attend the official banquets continuously, which was held by the Minister of the Board of Rites of the Ming. The reason was that they were the only envoys that dressed properly and practiced proper etiquette. The records of Ming China testified many incredible anecdotes about ill-mannered barbarian envoys that violated the rites by leaving their seats rudely or by being gluttonous. Indeed, the Ming court felt degraded and stripped of their dignity and class in the presence of such barbarian delegations and their inappropriate expressions, who stood up when they pleased and had their sleeves off, or who would clap their hands and shake their legs (Shen [n.d.] 1959, vol. 30, 778-779).

When comparing these two model tributary states to the Ming, Joseon, which had early on established a Confucian system and culture, displayed an outstanding understanding of Chinese rites. The Ming valued such behavior highly and began to give preferential treatment to Joseon. At the annual rite for the distribution of the calendar for the coming year, only Joseon received a copy of the King's Calendar and 100 copies of the People's Calendar. Receiving a calendar was a great privilege in Chinese society at that time. When the government conferred calendars at the grand congregation held on the first day of the new year, nobles and commoners alike created quite a fuss as they sought to get a calendar first. For example, in 1543, students of the Directorate of Education (國子監 Guozijian), which was a national university at the time, staged a demonstration due to the unfair distribution of calendars, thus resulting in the punishment of various related supervisors (Shen [n.d.] 1959, vol. 20, 525). In the case of Joseon, the Ming dynasty highly regarded its envoys' gentle manners. The kingdoms of Liuqiu and Champa joined the tributary rites in the same hierarchy as Joseon, but they were excluded from the benefit of receiving calendars. Tributary states that were fully conversant with the rites were viewed as indispensable elements that endowed China with much of her grandeur.

As Joseon began to be recognized as a country of rites, the characteristics of the delegation that the Ming dynasty sent to Joseon also started to change. During the early years of its foundation, the Ming dynasty's mission to Joseon had consisted mainly of eunuchs, the emperor's aides, or low-level officials.<sup>14</sup> Since the investiture was under the emperor's authority, the emperor's personal aides were dispatched in the mission. In addition, as the early Ming government did not have many civilian servants, the number of civil officials sent as envoys was very limited, and thus a civil servant envoy was considered a great privilege to tributary states. As a matter of fact, there were many cases in which eunuchs dispatched to tributary states caused unpleasing incidents, such as publicly demanding bribes and often

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14. See Gao (2005, 193-200).

violating rites.

In 1450, instead of eunuchs, Ni Qian 倪謙, a famous literary elite, was dispatched to Joseon as an envoy. Joseon gave its best writers of the time the responsibility of receiving the Chinese delegations. Such encounters led to pseudo-writing contests that gave birth to a new form of diplomacy called “Poetry Diplomacy.”<sup>15</sup> Joseon’s tributary envoys to the Ming were also comprised of literati-elites who rivaled the Ming intellectuals in terms of writing skills and academic learning.

In the case of Liuqiu, listed as an exemplary state along with Joseon, the purpose and nature of tribute payments were completely different. Liuqiu was a unique kingdom that first appeared in historical records through the establishment of a tributary relationship with the Ming empire.<sup>16</sup> In the *Suishu* 隋書 (The Book of the Sui Dynasty), the official dynastic history of the Sui 隋 dynasty (581-618), the record of Xiao Liuqiu 小琉球 is found, but it is still unclear whether the record refers to the precedent of the Liuqiu Kingdom being founded at the end of the fourteenth century or of the current island of Taiwan, which was called “Xiao Liuqiu” in the early writings of the Ming dynasty.<sup>17</sup> Around the founding of the Ming empire, a kingdom under a Ming-style regime was established on the Liuqiu archipelago that entered into an investiture-tribute relationship with the Ming dynasty.

Various Ming dynasty records show the high regard with which Liuqiu was held by describing it as a special example that yearned for Chinese civilization even though it was a barbarian state with a different culture. In particular, the fact that Liuqiu sent students to the Directorate of Education of the Ming empire raised their status as cultured individuals. What is noteworthy here is that women were once among such students in the early days. This illustrates that Liuqiu had some different aspects, which contrasted with the typical Confucian order. Chinese, however, viewed Liuqiu and its cultural idiosyncrasies as an interesting foreign case (Shen [n.d.] 1959, vol. 30, 770-771).

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15. See X. Li (2003).

16. See Takara (2008, 100-110).

17. See Cao (1988, 287-293).

The records kept by Liuqiu show that Emperor Taizu of the Ming sent his people from Fujian 福建 to help establish the Liuqiu Kingdom as well as the dispatch of a tributary delegation to the Ming. However, there are no corresponding historical records of this in the Ming dynasty. Though their origin was unclear, a group of Chinese people from Fujian, the coastal areas of China, had created a community called Kumemura 久米村 (also known as Kuninda) in the vicinity of Port Naha 那霸. And they were comprised of engineers in maritime navigation and shipbuilding and, at the same time, were in charge of writing diplomatic documents, interpreting, and conducting commercial trade. Without them, a tributary relationship between Liuqiu and the Ming would have been impossible from the outset. Therefore, it could be understood that those Chinese people engaged in maritime trade served as the driving force for building the Liuqiu Kingdom as a tributary state. Recognized by the Ming empire as a model tributary state, Liuqiu enjoyed monopolistic privileges of maritime intermediate trade for almost 200 years (Okamoto 2008, 94-95).

In order to facilitate international trade that centered on the Chinese network established in every corner of Southeast Asia, Chinese was used as the primary vernacular and literary language (Takakura 2008, 110-111). In this sense, it seems obvious that several states in Southeast Asia and some coastal states near the Indian Ocean would have formed a single trade area with Liuqiu, even though they did not engage in tributary relations with China. This, however, has no direct or inevitable correlation with the ideological base of the tribute system. To put it in simple terms, the demand for trade and trade activities has always existed regardless of the system. In order to make trade and trade activities easier, countries simply adopted tributary relations by accepting the request of the Ming empire. Likewise, in the tributary relations that were initiated and maintained by Liuqiu, it is hard to identify the rules of domination and subordination as they were very vaguely defined. If we have to use the term “subordination” in this context, it would be appropriate to describe Liuqiu as an active and voluntary subordinate state. The tributary relations of the Ming period are characterized by such variety.

In this sense, Joseon was able to consistently maintain its position as an exemplary tributary state because it had sustained a stable political regime for hundreds of years since its founding. At the time in question, it was hard to find any powers other than Joseon that had been able to realize the ideology of investiture and tribute payment, while maintaining a Confucian political system similar to Ming China. However, such a fact should not lead to the conclusion that Joseon was the typical model of tributary relations. In fact, the exemplary behavior displayed by a nation of rites, Joseon, can be viewed as being the most exceptional case in Ming tributary relations. If Joseon's case can be used as a barometer to evaluate such relations, it can be concluded that the remaining 99 percent of the tributary states had practiced tributary relations that were rife with "violations of rites" and "unlawfulness."

### **The Essence of Tributary Relations**

When barbarians pay tributes, we must impose appropriate restrictions. Otherwise, we (our government) will only pursue empty glory and in reality end up receiving substantial damage. We cannot say that those barbarians, who climb high mountains and cross the ocean only to visit us, have no admiration for China or no desire to learn righteous manners. However, we must know that in many cases they covet tributary trade items from China and intend to make high profits by selling the items to other countries. The emperor should pursue practical substance rather than an empty name. The secret strategy to deal with them is to not be deceived. We must weigh the importance of a matter while making sure we observe our rites (Qiu [1487] 1987, vol. 145, 681).

The above statement made by Qiu Jun 邱濬 (1420-1495), prominent scholar and politician during the early years of the Ming, clearly shows that tributary relations were based on the different interests of the individual parties. Through its tributary relations, the Ming government intended to achieve justification and order based on rites,

while the tributary states sought monopolistic gains from tributary trade. In short, most countries responded to the calling of the Ming empire for practical concerns, chiefly economic profit. The Ming accepted tributes presented only by those countries that demonstrated sincerity together with the proper tributary items and official documents, and it provided various benefits in exchange. In particular, traders on tributary ships enjoyed duty-free treatment, and this remained a bigger preferential treatment than any offered by the Office of Overseas Trade up until the Yuan dynasty. The maritime environment of East Asia and Southeast Asia, which had been thriving due to Islamic merchants trading freely, underwent a great transformation due to the maritime sea blockade policy and tributary trade system of the Ming empire.

Most coastal countries wanted to curry the favor of China out of a necessity for trade, but as previously stated, it was hard to build a close relationship with China due to their poor understanding of Chinese rites and customs. In breach of domestic law, some Chinese people disguised their real identity and advanced to the maritime world, only to return to China as foreign envoys. “Vessels from foreign states rush to the southeastern coast of China where they appropriate Chinese products in the name of tributes” (Qiu [1487] 1987, vol. 145, 681-682). This uncomfortable truth was common sense among the intellectuals of the time. This is why the Ming government restricted the number of tributary visits and personnel.

Ming China, from its early days, had banned tributary states from sending frequent delegations and had laid down specific laws detailing the frequency of tribute payments. In particular, the Ming court sent instructions to such states as Champa, Annam, and Ayuta 暹羅 to comply with the regulations by which a tributary delegation was to visit China only once every three years and the number of envoys was to be minimized between three to five so that the original purpose for paying the tribute—the practicing of rites—could be realized.<sup>18</sup> Yet,

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18. “Liuqiu 琉球,” in *Mingshi* (History of the Ming Dynasty), vol. 323, *Waiguochuan* (Records of Foreign Countries) 4.

these countries actually sent a tributary delegation almost every year for all kinds of reasons. This was because the practice brought huge monetary profits to such states when they exchanged their tributes for the royal gifts. It was a traditional custom that the Ming empire showcased its virtue by conferring gifts to the “barbarians” that were several times more valuable than their tributes.

Accordingly, frequent tribute payments imposed a great financial burden on the Ming. It should not come as a surprise then that Korea’s Goryeo dynasty, which was the first state to enter into a tributary relationship with the Ming, also wanted to increase the number of tributary visits. As a result, the number of tributary visits by Goryeo increased from three visits during the second year of Emperor Hongwu (1369), the same during the following and fourth years, and five during the fifth year. Emperor Taizu’s discomfort is understandable when he responded to the increasing number of visits by saying, “in light of common sense and the original purpose of tributes, the number of tributary visits has become excessive.”<sup>19</sup>

Japan experienced the unfortunate situation where its tributary relations with China were cut off due to unstable internal politics and competition between various powers vying to make tribute payments. As early as China’s Han and Tang empires, the Japan archipelago had established its tributary relationship with China and had even accepted a Chinese character-based culture at an earlier date. Therefore, they did not have many problems in writing official documents and exchanging delegations. Once the divided countries of the Period of Northern and Southern Courts (1336-1392) were unified, tributary relations were built with the Muromachi *bakufu* 室町幕府 in 1401 and trade commenced in the form of tributes. Ashikaga Yoshimitsu 足利義満, the third general of the *bakufu* who pushed forward with tributary relations with China, referred to himself as a Japanese king when his country signed diplomatic ties with the Ming and Joseon, respectively (Park 2002, 256-259). Even though he was not a legitimate ruler, and

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19. *Daming taizu gaohuangdi shilu*, vol. 76, Hongwu 5, entry of the 9th day of the ninth lunar month, Renxu 壬戌 year (1382).

technically could not be included in the tributary relations, it was necessary to formalize a similar system in order to initiate exchange with China.

However, such a move had obvious limitations. Japan lacked consistent political power to push forward with tributary relations, and the feudal powers from various regions on the Japanese archipelago were competing for gains from the tributary trade. Finally in 1523, Sakai 堺 merchants from the Hosokawa 細川 clan and Hakata 博多 merchants from the Ouchi 大内 clan violently collided at Ningbo 寧波, Zhejiang 浙江 province, where the Japanese delegates were staying. The Ming government thereupon severed tributary relations with Japan. Later, as smuggling became prevalent, the invasion by Japan's Wako drove the Ming into crisis and was an unexpected consequence resulting from the Ming's adherence to the principles of its tributary policy. From the mid-fifteenth century, similar problems were more often observed, testifying to the limitations of the Ming empire's external policy.

Though an exemplary tributary state, Liuqiu was no exception in this regard. In 1372, tribute payment by Liuqiu began in the form of accepting the request from the Ming emperor, and payments were made once a year until 1474, after which they occurred once every two years.<sup>20</sup> The Ming empire's official reason for reducing the frequency of tribute payments was that the emperor had extended his virtue in order to alleviate the hard work and lessen the burden of his vassal state located far from China. Despite an earnest request from Liuqiu, the frequency of tribute payments was decreased. This was because the Ming dynasty was wary of their explicit commercial activities.

From the early days of the Ming dynasty, the people of Kumemura 久米村 had been a constant problem by introducing private trade items from the Fujian region. In addition, in the event that Liuqiu's commercial vessels strayed from their sanctioned paths and reached the Chinese coastal area of Guangdong 廣東, often known as the Can-

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20. "Liuqiu 琉球," in *Mingshi* (History of the Ming Dynasty), vol. 323, *Waiguochuan* (Records of Foreign Countries) 4.

ton region, they cleverly took advantage of the preferential treatment given to tributary ships by impersonating a tributary delegation. In this manner, they received help and were exempted from any punishment of private trade. In 1475, in particular, tributary delegates from Liuqiu were reported to have caused conflicts with Chinese locals engaged in private trade in the Fujian region by committing robbery and even murder (Chen [1630] 1965, vol. 80, 297). After this incident, the number of tributary visits accorded to Liuqiu was reduced to one every two years, with no more than 150 delegates.<sup>21</sup> When a similar incident occurred, Ming China began to hold extreme views on Liuqiu, the biggest beneficiary of tributary trade with China. Chinese people were also well aware that Liuqiu had not sent a tributary mission out of veneration for the Chinese emperor and suspected the tributary delegates of repeatedly breaking the law in pursuit of profit.<sup>22</sup>

Given all of these conditions, it can be assumed that the attitude and acceptance of both the Ming empire, a leading player in investiture, and its neighboring powers were decisive factors in creating stable tributary relations. In its relationships with northern nomadic tribes, whose military forces overpowered those of China, the Ming was forced to maintain peace by offering them a massive number of gifts in the guise of a tributary relationship. Hence, it would be reasonable to conclude that such variability was the true characteristic of the tributary relations during the Ming period. In particular, it is out of question that Ming China, which had struggled with one crisis after another since the sixteenth century, did not treat its tributary states in accordance with the principles of “regarding all with equal benevolence” (*yishi tongren* 一視同仁).

Most of all, Ming China was never complacent about the careful and obedient Joseon. One of the reasons for this was that Joseon directly bordered Ming China. The Kingdom of Annan, which was fac-

21. “Liuqiuguo 琉球國,” in *Wanli daming huidian* (Collected Statues of the Great Ming), vol. 105, 禮部 *Libu* 63.

22. As such, it was common for tributary delegations from Liuqiu and other coastal regions that reached the southern part of China via the seaways to cause conflicts and trouble by using tributary visits as an opportunity for trades.

ing military action by the Ming, also shared a border with the empire. Joseon's exemplary attitude was based on concern for its national security by avoiding possible conflict with China by any means necessary. It is a well-known fact that Joseon Korea and Ming China, both of which were established in a similar period, had built tributary relations while closely monitoring each other. During this time, Ming China often pressured Joseon Korea in a show of authority by taking issue with trivial diplomatic mistakes (Park 2002, 271-273, 291-292).

For example, in the early years of their relationship, the Ming often found fault with a diplomatic document sent by Joseon simply because the document included a wrong letter or was written in an inappropriate manner according to the rites. For such an offence, the Ming demanded an apology or the punishment of the writer or even detained Joseon's tributary delegates. Such an act, however, was an intentional reprimand aimed at restraining Joseon from conquering the Liaodong region (Park 2002, 38-53). In other words, such restrictions were not decided in accordance with the principle of realizing rites but were usually imposed in a manner dictated by the prevailing political and military situations and practical necessity.

Even after such initial conflicts had been resolved, the Ming government remained closely observant of the development of Joseon. During the stay of Joseon's tributary delegates, their contact with civilians, book purchasing, and collection of information were subject to strict regulations. The outflow of history books to overseas countries, including Joseon, was prohibited by law and entailed much vigilance and control.<sup>23</sup> On the pretext of ensuring their safety, tributary delegations were not allowed to leave the designated routes and accommodations. In addition, the Huitongguan 會同館, lodging for foreign delegates in Beijing, was under strict control. Except for only a few officials from the Board of Rites, any type of visit to this facility was completely banned. The people of Joseon were basically prohibited from contacting any Chinese individuals for personal business,

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23. "Liuqiuguo 琉球國," in *Wanli daming huidian* (Collected Statues of the Great Ming), vol. 108, *Chaogong* 朝貢 4.

except for some officials with the permission of interpreters.

An interesting example that illustrates the level of control the Ming government held over the Joseon delegates comes from the summer of 1569 when an official named Heo Bong 許筭 (1551-1588) was staying in Beijing as part of a tributary delegation. He was given special permission to pay his respects at the Temple of Heaven (Tiantan 天壇) and made an appointment to meet with a Chinese individual named Teng Da 滕達. About two years prior to this meeting, Teng Da was dispatched to Joseon as a member of a mission to announce the enthronement of the new emperor, and it was during this time that he befriended Heo Bong. However, the two men were unable to keep their appointment. A low-level Huitongguan official tailed Heo Bong and spied on him in order to ascertain the identity of the people he was meeting. After much subterfuge, Heo Bong managed to meet Teng Da, but they had to part almost immediately after making a hurried appointment to meet in a suburban area of Beijing on another day.<sup>24</sup> This case shows that the Ming empire, which was facing a military crisis, announced the ideology of “cherishing barbarians from afar” (*huairou yuaner* 懷柔遠邇) to the tributary delegates, yet it was nothing but a lip service.

Meanwhile, the records that show Joseon delegates freely walking around downtown Beijing during the eighteenth century require scrutiny. These records tell of Joseon intellectuals, such as Bak Ji-won, Hong Dae-yong, and Bak Je-ga, who formed friendships with their Chinese counterparts during the era of the Qing dynasty, corresponding in writing and attending parties together. The events in Bak Ji-won’s *Yeolha ilgi* 熱河日記 (The Jehol Diary), which is based on his experience of travelling around China, were impossible during the Ming period. In general, the Ming empire openly claimed itself as the legitimate successor to the Han Chinese civilization. And Joseon, sharing the same belief and worldview, was regarded as being wholeheartedly subordinate to Ming China. On its part, it had been continuously pro-

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24. Heo Bong, *Jocheongi*, vol. 2, entry of the 25th day of the eighth lunar month, 1574. Also see Fuma (2008, 35-37).

claimed that a solid bond of trust had been built between the two countries.

However, it was the Qing empire, which was ruled by the Manchu, that allowed the Joseon people to have personal exchanges with the Chinese. The Qing government invaded Joseon as part of its wars of conquest during the early years of its founding. However, as the Qing reached its golden age in the eighteenth century, the so-called “Pax Qing Era,” it maintained generous policies of noninterference with its neighboring states. During the Ming period, Joseon’s delegations were allowed only 40 days in Beijing, but the Qing government did not impose any such time limit (Chun 1970, 69). The Joseon government and intellectuals felt a deep sense of humiliation for succumbing to the Manchu, founders of the Qing dynasty, who were considered culturally inferior to Joseon, but the era of Qing allowed for free cultural exchanges between Joseon Korea and Qing China. As an exemplary tributary state, Joseon was welcomed by both the Ming and Qing empires, while Joseon’s internal conflicts or the veracity of its conviction towards honoring China did not matter to those dynasties. In foreign relations, where explicit interests and neglect of rites were rampant, the dominant Chinese states of the time left records that described the exemplary tributary states as a favorable model. However, the Chinese perspective and logic found in such records may not necessarily reflect the actual realities of the time.

## **Conclusion**

The relations between the Ming and Joseon have come to be understood under the premise of an investiture-tribute relationship. Such a relationship was based on the acceptance of the cultural and moral superiority of the Chinese emperor—comparatively different to modern diplomacy that is based on the practices of observing international law and pursuing national interests. Did the traditional tributary relations in East Asia embrace an ideology radically different from modern diplomacy? This issue can have great impact on the history of

Joseon, due to its most exemplary tributary relationship with the Ming and Qing empires of China.

As discussed thus far, the main reason why many states, including Joseon, Liuqiu, and Annan agreed to pay tributes to Chinese empires lies in the economic, cultural, and political benefits they received in return. In turn, this speaks to the fragile nature of such tributary relations and how they could easily become strained, and even severed, due to seemingly insignificant factors that affected these relationships. That is, if there are no practical benefits, such as peace or economic profit, to be gained by a tributary state through such a diplomatic relationship, the ideology of the investiture-tribute system alone would not be sufficient to make it tenable.

If too much importance is placed on “Sinocentrism,” as the basis for tributary relations, and on the subordination of China’s neighboring countries, important historical implications or events of significance may be overlooked or misinterpreted. Nevertheless, the tributary relations between the Joseon and the Ming have typically been explained based on Joseon’s obedience to “Sinocentrism,” its conviction in honoring China, and its self-perception as a “Small China” (Sun 2007). In the case of Joseon, which had a similar level of understanding of Confucianism as China, it would have been possible to form a common cultural ground with China by means of rites and language, and Joseon was highly likely to share the same worldview. Yet, it is evident that such a worldview, which was often regarded to have dominated the realities like the pursuit of profit, balance of power, and the protection of one’s home country, hardly existed in the premodern period. Thus, the overt and outwardly ingratiating displays of affection that Joseon employed to honor China may not necessarily align with its true feelings towards the country. Based solely on the exaggerated expressions that Joseon employed to honor China, it is hasty to interpret that Joseon actually respected and admired China. Such issues had been previously raised (Yun 1998; 2002a, 275-278), but these interpretations fail to receive attention in light of the popular discussion that centers on the Sinocentric “tribute system.”

As previously stated in this paper, the Ming empire and its tribu-

tary states attempted to maintain the *status quo* by continuing superficial tributary relations, while concealing any conflicts and opposing interests that may have existed between them. For this reason, the content and formality of tributary relations at the junction of interests and powers inevitably continued to change. The tensions and balance of power seen between nations in today's international relations also existed in the mutual relations of traditional East Asia. As such, if the historical relations surrounding the tribute system fail to concur with the traditional Sinocentric theory, the existing perception of its nature and the roles of its principal actors, which have long been taken for granted, should be reconsidered.

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