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**The Ming Connection: Notes on Korea’s Experience In the Chinese Tributary System**

**by Donald N. Clark**

**INTRODUCTION**

The position of Korea vis-a-vis more powerful neighbors has colored many aspects of her history. The unfortunate effects of modern rivalry among Korea’s neighbors are well known. Most people also are aware that prior to Korea’s modern century (i.e., the century since the treaties with Japan and the Western powers), Korean leaders had to deal constantly with the threat of foreign interference. It seems ironic, in view of the recent militarization of the Korean peninsula, that for centuries prior to 1900 the Korean government maintained autonomy and independence without resort to arms, or at least a large standing army. There were several reasons for this: perhaps the most important was the Yi dynasty’s Confucian disdain for military men. But another reason is that the very existence of a major standing army would have invited various kinds of trouble, including Chinese attempts to disarm Korea, perhaps even by conquest.

Much is made of Korea’s lack of military preparedness in the Hideyoshi invasions of the 1590’s. At that time the king was obliged to beg the Ming court for military support and direct intervention. One may argue that the capacity for self-defense, had it been present, would have discouraged Hideyoshi. At least a capable effort at self-defense would have been better than what happened: a major war between China and Japan on Korean soil, with the Korean people as chief victims. Many of the same questions might be raised concerning the Manchu invasions of the 1630’s. Why wasn’t Korea better prepared to ward off the enemy? The answer lies in the nature of Korean relations with China, and in the elements of what we call the Chinese tributary system, of which Korea was an integral part.1

**THE CHINESE TRIBUTARY SYSTEM**

The Chinese tributary system has been described many times as a system of vassalage and personal loyalty between the emperor of China, whoever it happened to be, and the kings and princes of neighboring states and tribes. The [page 78] primary purpose of the tributary system was Chinese security; the primary tools of the tribute system were rewards and punishments. The rewards took the form of Chinese support for local rulers such as the Korean king. Punishments took the form of revocation of the support, public humiliation, interruption of the tribute trade (about which more below), and outright intervention. It behooved local rulers, therefore, to keep on the good side of the Chinese regime. As long as they did so, they were safe and largely autonomous. If they failed to do so, trouble of many kinds was sure to follow. It might even be argued, in fact, that if the Koreans had been militarily strong enough to resist Hideyoshi alone, the Chinese empire would have intervened first. It was the purpose of the tributary system to keep China’s neighbors in humble compliance, and hopefully, though not always, at peace with each other.2

The Chinese tributary system was not merely a strategic structure. It was based on an assumption of Chinese superiority, in terms both of power and of cultural—even moral—influence. The relationship between the Chinese emperor and the Korean king, for example, can be stated in Confucian terms as an older brother/younger brother relationship, involving obligations of loyalty and obedience on the part of Korea, and obligations of magnanimity and protection on the part of China. Reciprocity was everything in the tributary system, and it was symbolized by the willing payment of tribute by Korea in exchange for gifts and symbolic acts and declarations of support by China. The tribute trade symbolized Korea’s loyalty and obedience to the Chinese emperor and the reciprocal magnanimity of the Chinese emperor toward his junior, the Korean king. The mutual profit which came as a by-product of the tribute trade confirmed the rightness of the system: it was the kind of blessing to be expected when people interact with propriety.

Many peoples participated in the tributary system—what has been called “The Chinese World Order.” The court at Peking regularly received tribute delegations form Champa and Annam (Vietnam), Tibet, the Ryukyus, and many neighboring tribal states along the borders. Korea, however, is probably the best case study since it was closest and adhered to the system most regularly and over the longest period of time. Korea’s tributary relations with China were not well understood at the end of the nineteenth century. The Korean habit of thinking in terms of the tributary pattern also had a lot to do with its failure to perceive the changing nature of power relationships in East Asia between 1860 and 1910, when Korea succumbed to Japanese imperialism. One central fact was hard for Koreans to grasp at that time, however easy it may be to see in retrospect: the tribute system assumed that China was the preeminent world power. When that [page 79] ceased to be the case, China’s inability to offer elder-brotherly protection after 1895 left Korea on her own with no significant military experience or leadership, and subjugation to another power occured before Korea could develop an autonomous defense. It is hard to exaggerate the importance of the tributary system in Korean thinking up until that time, and equally hard to exaggerate the consequences when it broke down.

**SINO-KOREAN TRIBUTARY RELATIONS IN THE EARLY MING, 1368-1400**

It is a fact that the Korean tributary relationship with China was acceptable, even desirable, to the Koreans. One might expect that the Koreans would have resented having to load up valuable commodities for transmission and presentation to the Chinese emperor every year, but such was not the case. Despite Korea’s poverty through much of the Yi dynasty, the benefits of the tributary system in symbolic, if not in material, terms outweighed the costs. To understand why this was so, we must take a closer look at how the tributary system operated. The late fourteenth century―the period of the fall of Koryo and the founding of the Yi dynasty—provides much material for understanding how the system worked.3

In the late fourteenth century, the Sino-Korean strategic situation was as follows: The Mongols ruled in China and held sway over Korea. Invasions in 1227 and 1235 had subjugated Korea even before the Khans descended on China and overthrew the Southern Sung. Mongol power over Korea was maintained consistently from that time forward by various means in addition to the threat of force. Koryo princes were raised in China under Yuan (Mongol) tutelage and intermarried with the Yuan imperial family. Mongol advisory officers resided in Korea to supervise the Koryo administration. The Mongols divided the royal Koryo lineage and maintained a collateral line of potential Koryo kings under their direct control in the Manchurian city of Shenyang. And the Mongols exacted heavy tribute from the Koreans as a constant inducement to compliant behavior. Each time the Korean throne changed hands, the Mongols produced the new ruler and in-vested him as their agent in Korea, compelling his dependence upon them for authority and, indeed, survival. The Mongols succeeded in this pattern of control because of the widespread awe of their military power, and as long as their rule appeared inviolable they maintained control over Korea.

In the mid 1300’s, however, Mongol control over China began to unravel. Rebellions gathered force in South China. Some rebel leaders avowed [page 80] the aim of restoring the former Sung dynasty; all shared the aim of expelling the Mongols. By 1350,the power of the Mongols, while still awesome, was in a steep decline.

King Kongmin, a Koryo prince who had been tutored in Peking succeeded to the Korean throne in 1352. The Mongols no doubt expected him to continue the pattern of acting like a Yuan viceroy in the capital of Kaegyong. In 1354,for example, he dutifully answered a Yuan levy for troops to aid in the defense of the Kao-yu fortress against Chinese rebels. This defense failed, proving to the Koreans that the Mongols could be beaten after all, and suggesting to some in Kaegyong that the Yuan regime was nearing its end. Kongmin began his reign as a reformer, employing Confucian officials to revitalize his state. With the defeat of the Yuan forces at Kao-yu, this reformist mentality soon took on an anti-Mongol cast. Once the Koreans thought they could get away with it, they began to shake off the more oppressive aspects of Yuan overlordship. Kongmin began a purge of Mongol favorites in his capital, even going so far as to attack the powerful relatives of the Yuan Empress Ch’i (Korean: Ki) who was a native Korean. He decreed an end to the wearing of Yuan court costumes and hair styles, ended use of the Yuan calendar, and began laying plans to recapture Korean territory in the northeast which the Mongols had allowed to fall into the hands of the Manchurian peoples known as the Jurchen. As calculated, the Mongols were unable to arrest this movement toward Korean independence.

The early years of Kongmin’s reign showed hopeful signs of improvement in conditions in Korea and the establishment of a new degree of autonomy on the peninsula. Unfortunately, during the remainder of his time on the throne, until his death in 1374, Korea was plagued by an unending state of crisis. Japanese pirates wasted Korea’s coastal villages year after year; repeated droughts parched Korea’s farmland; many of the king’s officials, being beneficiaries of Mongol favor, opposed his reforms and there was considerable infighting; and in 1359 and 1360, as the rebellions in China spread northward, bands of Chinese called Red Turbans invaded Korea, seized the capital, and forced Kongmin into a costly war to recover his own realm. By 1365, his kingdom was in serious fiscal and administrative frouble. In that year, Kongmin’s queen died, leaving him without an heir. It appears then that he suffered a collapse of will, and his reform program lost its momentum. While he mourned and looked for diversions, the business of government passed into the hands of his officials, who quarreled over many points. The Koryo kingdom, therefore, was in a sorry state in 1368, the year the Chinese rebellions finally succeeded in ousting the Mongols [page 81] from China and Chu Yuan-chang founded the Ming dynasty.

The rise of a new dynasty in China required nimble adjustments in Korea. The Ming victory was decisive as far as China proper was concerned, and the restoration of Chinese rule should have elicited from Korea a timely expression of submission to the new regime. Koryo officials communicated their willingness to shift tributary allegiance to the Ming, but they were in an awkward position. The Mongols, in fleeing China, had repositioned themselves in southern Manchuria, whence they were capable of inflicting heavy damage on Koryo. The survival of the Korean kingdom required the maintenance of friendly relations with both the Ming and the leftover Mongols, at least until the Ming armies could assert control over Manchuria. This, however, the Ming government would not tolerate. When it became known at the Ming court that Korea was keeping up contact with the Mongols in Manchuria, the honeymoon ended and the Ming emperor T’ai Tsu upped the cost of Korean tribute by demanding impossible numbers of key items, such as horses, and he embarrassed Kongmin by sending letters accusing him of bad faith and unfitness to rule. Since Chinese approval―which took the form of a document “investing,” or “appointing” Kongmin to rule in Korea—was essential to the Korean monarchy, the Ming emperor’s constant criticism was a blow to Kongmin’s legitimacy as king. In 1374,Kongmin was murdered by a court eunuch. Almost simultaneously a Ming ambassador was assassinated enroute home by a Korean official. These two events plunged Ming-Korean relations into conflict. T’ai Tsu refused to invest the new ruler of Koryo, King U, putting him at the mercy of his own court factions. King U, meanwhile, tried to balance the need for Ming investiture against the need for protection against the nearby Mongols. This, of course, was impracticable. Korean peace delegations to China were turned back at the border at times; at other times the ambassadors were arrested. For ten years King U drifted in a state of uninvested limbo until finally, in 1385,the Ming emperor allowed a tentative restoration of contact through the payment of a decade’s overdue tribute. But there was little forgiveness in the settlement; it was rather an arrangement designed to gain Korean support for the final push to eliminate the Mongol remnants in Manchuria, something which was accomplished in 1387 with the surrender of the Mongol chieftain Naghachu.

Throughout the period 1375-1385,while the Koreans struggled to recover Chinese friendship, they chafed under the abuse heaped upon King U by the Ming government. They resented the overbearing attitude of the emperor and his officials and saw no justice in it. Certain officials at Kae- gyong came to believe that Chinese support could never be regained, and [page 82] they urged an aggressive military posture. Where Kongmin had begun the recovery of lost northern territory and had actually sent forces to reclaim parts of Liaotung, beyond the Yalu, in 1370, these officials urged that further campaigns be launched to take some of the territory being vacated by the retreating Mongols. This, of course, was in direct conflict with Ming policy, which sought to establish Chinese border commanderies in the same territory. In 1388, when the Ming government notified Korea of its claim to Manchuria as far as T’ieh-ling, the Korean court responded with a military campaign to preempt the Ming claim in Liaotung. In a direct challenge to the Ming, King U ordered his army across the Yalu to the northwest. In the midst of the advance, as the Korean army reached the Yalu, the commanding general, Yi Song-gye, revolted, returned to the capital, and overthrew the king and his court. Four years later, after appropriate hesitations, Yi Song-gye usurped the throne himself and founded the Yi dynasty.

One might expect that the abolition of the faithless Koryo royal lineage would have pleased the Ming and led to a relaxation of Sino-Korean tensions. Indeed, fealty to the Ming was a cardinal point of Yi Song-gye’s political program and he sent an embassy to Nanking immediately to make this point and to request investiture and approval of the new government. The Ming emperor, however, was not so easily swayed. He had his reasons. Who could guarantee that Korea would remain loyal for long? What about the troublesome Korean claims to Manchurian territory? Who was this new Korean king, and what was the significance of the fact that he had many Manchurian (Jurchen) friends and a background of experience on the border? Wouldn’t it be better to withhold approval for the time being and make General Yi struggle for the all-important Chinese charter? Besides, would not investiture signify the emperor’s approval of the act of usurpation? Being a usurper himself T’ai Tsu well understood the danger of being overthrown from within, and his thirty-year reign was characterized by unceasing vigilance against rebellion, bordering on paranoia. Thus there were many good reasons for holding Yi Song-gye (Yi T’aejo) at arms, length, whether or not the emperor believed in his good intentions. Accordingly the emperor lost no opportunity to criticize and humiliate King T’aejo— whether over his ancestry, his policies, the quality of the tribute he offered up, the literary quality of his petitions, or the honesty of his ambassadors. T’aejo’s six-year reign witnessed a continuous struggle to obtain Chinese investiture, to no avail, and when he abdicated in 1398 he was still very much on the defensive, spurned by his Ming suzerain, guilty of the crime of usurpation and the failure to secure Korea’s place within the world order of Chinese civilization.  [page 83]

The year 1398 brought Ming T’ai Tsu’s death as well as Yi T’aejo’s ab-dication, and there was a marked shift in Ming-Korean relations. Where T’ai Tsu had gotten along perfectly well without Korea, feeling free to use and abuse the Koreans however he pleased, his successors were locked in power struggles which required support from every available source. Thus Chu Yun-wen, who succeeded T’ai Tsu, readily patched things up with Korea, and both of T’aejo’s successors, Chongjong (r. 1398-1400) and T’ae- jong (r. 1400-1418), received investiture from the Ming emperors who followed T’ai Tsu. Cultural and political links to the Ming were very important in the years which followed, as T’aejong and Sejong (r. 1418-1450) constructed a model Confucian state based on the value of Korean tradition within the broader scheme of the Chinese cultural sphere. No better piece of evidence for this exists than the epic Yongbi Och’on Ga (Songs of Flying Dragons), which legitimized the Korean ruling house in Chinese literary terms, using the Sino-Korean literary language to construct comparisons of Chinese culture heroes and the ancestors of the Yi roval house.4

**SINO-KOREAN EMBASSIES**

Several scholarly works in English offer detailed accounts of what it was like to participate in the tribute system as an ambassador.5 It is no surprise that throughout the Yi dynasty there were many more embassies to China than from China to Korea. The reason is simple: Korea had to send tribute embassies three times a year, on the occasion of the New Year, the emperor’s birthday, and the birthday of the heir apparent, while the Chinese only sent embassies to Korea to make investigations, to give special reports on major events in China, and to present investiture documents to new Korean kings. Koreans also went to China on special missions, to offer thanks (for example, following a Ming investiture embassy), condolences, and special communications or petitions.

Korean embassies typically consisted of around 40 people, including the envoy, his deputy, secretary, translator, physician, calligrapher, brush- keeper, grooms, valets, porters, and slaves. Their pack animals carried tribute cargoes specified in the Ming administrative code: gold, silver, mats, furs, silk, linen, hemp, paper, brushes, and ginseng, among other things.6 Along the way the travelers engaged in a lively private trade as well, bartering for items to sell at a profit when they got back home. Indeed, so lucrative were the trade opportunities on the tribute road that officials struggled to be named to the delegations despite the rigors of travel. Neither [page 84] did the trading stop in the Chinese capital. The Peking market had specialists in the Korea trade who descended on arriving Korean envoys to buy up their extra commodities. There were even times when the Chinese government complained that members of the Korean entourages were dipping, into the stocks of tribute designated for presentation to the emperor, which was a serious offense. This charge was a favorite of the first Ming emperor, T’ai Tsu, when he was looking for excuses to criticize Korea.

When the Koreans returned from China they brought back the treasures conferred upon them by the emperor at the audience which was the main object of their trip. The visiting Koreans got gifts themselves, but far more elaborate were the items sent back with them to the Korean king. Returning embassies brought back court costumes, musical instruments, jewelry, jade, silks, drugs, and, of course, books, which were the source of continuing vitality in the intellectual life of the Korean upper class. Korean embassies always carried home new editions of the classic, with commentaries, along with treatises, histories, and literature of all kinds which could be reprinted and disseminated in Korea.

The tribute route could be by land or sea. The land route went from Seoul via Pyongyang to Uiju,crossed the Yalu, proceeded to Shenyang, and then to Peking through Shanhaikuan, taking about thirty days. The sea route left the Korean coast at Ch’olsan, near the Yalu, crossed the Yellow Sea to Tengchou, and then overland to Peking. At Peking the envoys stayed at a special hostelry, the Yu Ho Kuan (Jade River Hall), in the southeastern part of the city. All their expenses were borne by their Chinese hosts while they were in China, and both sides provided interpreters to compensate for the fact that the ambassadors themselves could write, but not necessarily speak, Chinese.

The atmosphere of Ming embassies to Korea was somewhat unlike that of Korean embassies to China. Exciting opportunities and experiences awaited Korean envoys in the Chinese capital, and prestige and wealth awaited them on their return. Ming envoys to Korea, on the other hand, were not the cream of Chinese officialdom and they often displayed such arrogance and disdain for their Korean hosts and their comparatively meager hospitality that the coming of Ming ambassadors to Korea was as often as not an occasion for dread. Chinese delegations at the Yalu sent word ahead to Pyongyang and Seoul, so there would be sufficient time to prepare an appropriate welcome. In the later Yi dynasty period there was a special portal outside West Gate (the pillars are still standing next to Independence Gate) called the Gate of Welcoming Grace (Yong’un-mun) [page 85] where Korean courtiers would meet incoming Chinese delegations before conveying them to their special residence, the T’ae P’yong Gwan, inside South Gate.

The first Ming envoy to Korea was Hsieh Ssu,7 in 1369, who brought T’ai Tsu’s edict announcing his new dynasty and requesting Korea’s submission in return. Hsieh’s second mission, in 1370, was to invest Kongmin on behalf of the Ming emperor, presenting him with a golden seal, a writ of investiture, copies of the classics, the Ming calendar, ritual objects including musical instruments, and ceremonial costumes to be worn at court.8

The cordial atmosphere of Hsieh Ssu’s visits to Korea contrasts with the mood of many subsequent Ming embassies. Ming envoys were often not imperial officials at all but eunuchs, usually Korean eunuchs who had been part of the late Yuan/early Ming traffic in human beings. Their deportment in Korea often caused problems. At times they were overbearing and offensive to their hosts and they stayed longer than ordinary Chinese officials, incurring higher costs for entertainment. The visit of Sin Kwi-saeng in 1398 provides but one example of a Korean eunuch from the Ming who insulted his countrymen repeatedly, alternately demanding and refusing hospitality, refusing to speak Korean, humiliating senior officials, and at one point getting drunk and brandishing a knife at a dinner in the presence of the king.9 Such incidents were not uncommon, and they heightened the fears which surrounded Ming-Korean relations. Native Chinese eunuchs were not much better as ambassadors. Between 1403 and 1411 the Ming eunuch Huang Yen made no fewer than six visits to Korea, and he came to be thoroughly disliked.10 He made myriad demands in the name of the emperor, notably for Buddhist artifacts for which he traveled widely in Korea raiding temples and (in 1408-09) for virgins to be presented for acceptance in the imperial harem.

**The Problem of Human Tribute**

Without doubt, the problem of human tribute was the most demoralizing issue ever to arise in Sino-Korean relations. It began under the Yuan, but the Ming continued it on an irregular basis. The requisitions were for girls for the imperial harem, and also for boys, to be eunuchs. The number of persons thus requisitioned at any one time was usually small, but the trade itself is what mattered and Korean records attest to the bitterness with which the Koreans looked upon it. No other aspect of the tributary relationship so clearly demonstrated the contempt in which the Chinese held their loyal neighbor.

Some of the young people who went to China as human tribute even- [page 86] tually did well there. Eunuchs, for example, often were given important responsibilities, including diplomatic assignments which took them back to their homeland. The trouble was the way they lorded it over their hosts. And despite their power, because they were eunuchs, they were not welcomed back by their families, nor were they useful to them. Whereas a Korean official in the regular Chinese bureaucracy might well find positions for his relatives, such was not the case with eunuchs, whose role lay entirely within the palace, in the emperor’s personal keep, out of touch with the business of finding positions in either government.

Young women had a different future if they were chosen for the imperial harem. To begin with, their families were better treated back in Korea, and male relatives received privileges at Ming behest. Once in China, some of the young women became important as consorts: Toghon Temur, the last Yuan emperor, had a Korean concubine, Lady Ch’i, who bore him an heir and was herself promoted to Second Empress. Ming T’ai Tsu’s Korean concubine Lady Han bore him at least one daughter, and there has long been a controversy over whether Chu Ti, who became the Yung-lo emperor, was not the issue of another Korean concubine, Lady Kung.11 The occasional distinction of Korean women in Chinese court circles may have contributed indirectly,to closer relations between the two governments, but on the whole the Koreans were outraged by the idea of human tribute and con-sidered it a violation of the most basic Confucian principles, the more so because the women who were sent usually had to be selected from respectable families.

Requisitions for Korean tribute women were most frequent in the period 1408-1433,12 during the reign of the Yung-lo emperor. Prior to 1424 the Chinese sent for young girls exclusively, as harem candidates. After 1424, they diversified their demands to include entertainers, cooks, and servants. Selection of the women was an elaborate process. In 1408, for example, the Ming court dispatched a special embassy under the Chinese eunuch Huang Yen to Seoul to organize a country-wide search for suitable maidens between the ages of thirteen and fifteen. More than two hundred girls were gathered at the Kyongbok Palace for a first round of inspection. Of these, Huang Yen chose 44 for a second round. In the final round he chose five, all daughters of low-to-middle grade officials. In a special palace ceremony they were given Chinese costumes and court titles. Their male relatives received titles also. The Veritable Records of the Yi dynasty, recording the process in detail, recounts that when Huang Yen set off for China with the girls, their brothers were allowed along as tribute escorts. Lamentations were composed and the sound of their families, wailing is said to have [page 87] filled the streets of the city.13 Most of the tribute women never saw Korea again, and some were reported to have committed suicide when the Yung-lo emperor died, to follow him into the next life.14

Other requisitions for Korean women followed from time to time. Yun Pong, a Korean eunuch who frequently served as a Ming envoy to Korea, took away eleven women in 1426 and returned for 33 more in 1427. The women taken to China after that were exclusively entertainers and kitchen servants. The importation of Korean women was suspended in 1433. The Ming shih records Ying-tsung’s repatriation of 53 surviving Korean women in 1436 (Korean sources say 1435),15 and the practice appears thereafter to have stopped altogether.

**Tung Yueh’s Friendly Embassy**

One of the best-documented Ming embassies to Korea was that of Tung Yueh, chancellor of the Hanlin Academy, who went to Korea in 1488 to announce the ascension of Hsiao-tsung to the Ming throne. Tung Yueh recorded his observations of Korea in the reign of King Songjong in a fu, Ch’ao-hsien fu, a diary, Shih-tung jih-lu, and personal memoranda, Ch’ao- hsien tsa-chih. Tung Yueh reported that Korea was well governed and that her leaders were mindful of their duty and the niceties of diplomacy.16 Of course, Songjong’s reign (1467-1495) was a particularly harmonious period in Ming-Korean relations, and Tung Yueh’s writings suggested that in the absence of suspicion, when neither side wanted anything more than to maintain the basic suzerain relationship, Sino-Korean relations could be well-meant and cordial. But Songjong’s reign was the exception rather than the rule. Suspicion was rarely absent. Because of the constant tension arising from short-term conflicts, and also because of Korea’s need to conduct her internal affairs without interference by Chinese officials, the Yi government seems to have preferred to keep Ming embassies to a minimum, arranging instead to conduct most diplomatic business with China in Peking.

**CONCLUSION**

The foregoing demonstrates the intimate political and cultural relationship between Korea and China in traditional times and may help to explain the singleminded Korean foreign policy encountered by the early Westerners who tried to interest Korea in wider contacts. Many centuries of concentration on the benefits of Chinese contact, together with the pain and [page 88] struggle involved in maintaining that precious relationship, help explain the reluctance of Korea to be untrue to China by entering into treaties with others in the first place, and also the subsequent tendency that some scholars see in modern Korea to attach Korea to one or another great power in China’s place when it became clear that the Ch’ing government had lost its power.

Yi T’aejo, founder of the Yi dynasty, framed a foreign policy called sadae/kyorin. Sadae means “serve the great,” or, more precisely, “acknowledge the manifest superiority of China.” Kyorin means “friendly contact with neighbors (i.e., with Japan and Manchuria) on an equal basis within the Chinese tributary system.” The main emphasis was always on sadae, which is now interpreted by many Koreans as “flunkeyism” or “toadyism” and carries a pejorative connotation degrading to Korea which never was intended by its inventors. Indeed, while the Koreans did put up with abuse and maltreatment through the years in their position of subservience to China, they succeeded admirably in the main purpose of the tribute system as seen from the Korean side, namely the preservation of the kingdom’s autonomy. For as long as they practiced sadae they posed no threat to China and the Chinese left them alone. A feistier spirit of independence or denial of Chinese superiority might have succeeded in preparing Korea better for the dawn of modern times, but it could also have provoked a much more repressive Chinese response which would have been more destructive to Korean life and culture in the long run. However distasteful it may be to look back on the centuries of the sadae policy, the function of *sadae* as a preserver of Korean autonomy makes the pill a little easier to swallow. If there was an error, it was in the expectation that other Chinese neighbors would do as well, maintaining a similiar attitude toward Chinese supremacy in the region. The fatal weakness of the sadae stance was exposed whenever someone else got out of line, when Hideyoshi dreamed of eclipsing the Ming as the center of the world, when the Manchus swept down to overthrow the Ming in the seventeenth century, and when Japan and Russia eliminated China’s power over Korea at the end of the 1800’s. At such times Korea was a victim of its own faith in China’s good intentions and capa-bilities. The better course might have been to heed the example of the much-maligned King Kongmin, in the 1350’s, when he discerned the shifting balance, abandoned his faith in a decaying power, and tried to make adjustments to protect his country before it was too late.

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**NOTES**

1. A fundamental English-language study is Chun Hae-jong, “Sino-Korean Tributary Relations in the Ch’ing Period,” in John K. Fairbank (ed.), The Chinese World Order (Cambridge: harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 90-111.

2. John K. Fairbank, “A Preliminary Framework,” and Lien-sheng Yang, 1-19 and 20-33.

3. Much of what follows is based on the author’s “Autonomy, Legitimacy, and Tributary Politics: Sino-Korean Relations in the Fall of Koryo and the Founding of the Yi,” unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1978.

4.. English translations include James A. Hoyt, Songs of the Dragons Flying to Drugons (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

5. See John Meskill, Ch’oe Pu’s Diary: a Record of Drifting A cross the Seu (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1965); Richard Rutt, “James Gale’s Translation of the Yonhaeng-nok: an Account of the Korean Embassy to Peking, 1712-1713, revised by Richard Rutt,” Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, XLIX (1974), pp. 55-144; Gari K. Ledyard, “Korean Travelers in China over Four Hundred Years,” Occasional Papers on Korea, II (March 1974), pp. 1-42; and James S. Gale, “Hanyang,” Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, II (1902), pp. 35-43.

6. Ta Ming hui tien (Collected Statues of the Great Ming), chuan 105:4.

7. L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang (eds.), Dictionary of Ming Biography (New York, Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 559-560.

8. Koryo-sa, kwon 29:5b.

9. Taejo sillok, kwon 14:156-16; 16b-17.

10.Goodrich and Fang (eds.), op. cit., pp. 1596-1597.

11. Li Chin-hua, “Ming Ch’eng-isu sheng-mu wen-t’i hui-cheng” (On the problem of the mother of the Ming emperor Ch’eng-tsu), A cade mi a Sinca Bulletin of History and Philology, VI, 1 (1936), pp. 55-77; and Fu Ssu-nien, “Pa ‘Ming Ch’ewng-tsu sheng-mu wen-t’i hui-cheng,” (Critique of the same article), Ibid., pp. 79-86.

12. Wang Ch’ung-wu, “Ming Ch’eng-tsu Ch’ao-hsien fei k’ao”(On Korean women in the court of the Ming emperor Ch’eng-tsu), Academia Sinica Bulletin of History and Philology, XVII (1948), pp. 165-176.

13. T’aejong sillok, kwon 16:38-39.

14. Sejong sillok, kwon 26:15b.

15. Ming shih, chuan 320-7b; Sejong sillok, kwon 68:8b-9b contains a full report of their life in Chinese service.

16. Gale, ‘‘Hanyang,” pp. 35-43.