

Yiming (1:32):

Welcome to another episode of the Chinese History Podcast, I'm Yiming Ha. In our previous episodes, you might have noticed the term "tributary system" being mentioned, yet this term was never properly explained, and, as I noted in our previous episode, the concept of the tributary system is very complex and controversial, and is the subject of many debates and disagreements. Yet what exactly is the tributary system? How did it emerge as a historiographical concept? How was it used to view and study China's diplomatic and commercial interactions with the outside world? Is it still relevant as a concept today? To help answer these questions, I spoke to Professor Sixiang Wang, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures at UCLA. According to his bio, he is a historian of Chosŏn Korea and early modern East Asia, and his research interests also include comparative perspectives on early modern empire, the history of science and knowledge, and issues of language and writing in Korea's cultural and political history. His current book project aims to reconstruct the cultural strategies that the Korean court deployed in its interactions with Ming China through an examination of poetry-writing, gift-giving, diplomatic ceremony, and historiography, and it underscores the centrality of ritual and literary practices in producing diplomatic norms, political concepts, and ideals of sovereignty in the construction of a shared, regional interstate order. In this episode, Professor Wang will first briefly discuss the tributary system as a historiographical concept in the study of Chinese diplomacy, before talking about some of the intricacies of Ming-Chosŏn diplomatic and cultural exchanges. So without further ado, let's get started.

Yiming (3:16):

Welcome, Professor Wang, thank you for coming to the show.

Prof. Wang (3:18):

Thank you for having me.

Yiming (3:20):

So today I want to talk a little bit about your research on diplomacy between Chosŏn and Ming China, and many general history books or history textbooks have tended to portray Ming China's diplomatic engagements with other states, most notably Korea, through what is known as the "tributary system." So can you start off by explaining where this idea of a tributary system came from, and what have been some of the more traditional approaches towards studying it?

Prof. Wang (3:47):

So where does the tributary system come from? I think if we want to think historically, it's a construct that I would say emerges from the late 19th century experience of imperialist powers in East Asia in their dealings with Qing China, but I think that is maybe going a bit further than what you were thinking because if we think historiographically, the term really gets, I wouldn't say set in stone, but really popularized and made into this iconic historiographical tool, really, with the work of John King Fairbank in one of his articles published with S.Y. Teng in, I think 1941 was where a lot of this is outlined, and it was meant to be a generalized idea of how the emperors of China or the imperial rulers of China, however conceived, thought about, managed,

and idealized their interactions with the outside world. And during the Cold War, this idea of thinking about China was also a way to think about the People's Republic of China and its relations with the outside world. So there was a bit of this implicit parallelism between what was happening in Imperial China and what is happening in China today. And I think in the 21st century, we also have this doubling going on, and more recently since David Kang's book, David Kang is a professor of political science and international relations at USC, his book *East Asia before the West* revisits the Fairbankian idea of the tributary system and posits it as an alternative international system in contrast to the Western Westphalian model. So in a way, 1940s, 1960s, and now in the 2010s, when China, the question of China on the international stage becomes more prevalent, this concept also... it becomes a popular tool in... in both historiography and how not just scholars, but teachers and politicians even talk about East Asia. So when we trace the roots of the tributary system as a concept to John King Fairbank, we're kind of ignoring the fact that in Japanese language scholarship, Chinese language scholarship and Korean language scholarship, there are, I would say, parallel terms that don't quite translate the same way but are quite aligned, actually, with John King Fairbank in thinking about the history of international relations in East Asia. You know, we can go over what some of these terms are. So in Chinese some people have used *zongfan guanxi* or *chaogong guanxi* and in Japanese, the Japanese readings of these terms also exist. And in Korean, there's a tendency to lump tributary with the investiture system, which is a different institution. So all of these terms are really I think, conceptually in the same paradigm because what they focus on is this empire-centered, imperial system-centered view of international relations with the basic idea that the tributary system is, or whatever you want to call it, provides an overarching set of rules and symbols and norms that put China at the center, thus creating a "Chinese World Order," and neighboring powers, whether they be states or trade organizations or nomadic tribes, in order to access Chinese markets or Chinese culture, they have to participate and buy into these rules. And so the idea, at least how Fairbank conceived it, was all of these norms and rules and symbols are occurring at the ideational level, that it's part of the imperial ideology, and many groups that might want to trade with China pay lip service to these sets of ideas. And so that includes recognizing China as the center, affirming Chinese cultural superiority, and paying allegiance to the Chinese emperor as their sovereign. And what scholars have over the years pointed out is that different groups, different kingdoms, different polities engaged with this ideological level on different terms, but what the tributary system model emphasizes is the ideological expectations from the imperial end. So a lot of the traditional approaches to understanding the tributary system has, in some sense, actually been to challenge it. So we have these parameters that are in theory set up by the imperial center, but the scholars at least in the West have tried to show how these rules are broken or challenged or subverted by those who interact with Imperial China. In some of the Chinese language scholarship, the tendency is more about how these rules and systems were enacted, utilized either well or not well to achieve the policy goals of the rulers of Imperial China. So in many ways, the tributary system is not just an idea of how things worked, but it's also a historiographical paradigm that lets us view the history of diplomacy from its lens.

Yiming (8:33):

So how does Korea, Chosŏn Korea fit into this tributary system?

Prof. Wang (8:38):

So Korea is an interesting case. So if you go back to John King Fairbank's, I think, 1968 *The Chinese World Order*, he has this chart about which countries buy into the ideology and participate in the system, and Chosŏn Korea is listed as the only country that is both ideologically aligned with the Chinese World Order, or the tributary system, and participates in its institutions. And this is really critical because in some ways, the Korean case is the one that shows or demonstrates that the values of the tributary system are not just ones that are imagined by China's imperial rulers but are shared, at least by one other entity in East Asia. And there are debates about to what degree the Ryukyus, Japan, Vietnam are also ideologically aligned with it. And more recently in David Kang's book, *East Asia before the West*, he makes the case that these Sinitic policies, or these countries that use Classical Chinese in earnest, to some degree buy into the shared value systems that undergird the tributary system. The issue here is Korea becomes the exception that not proves the rule but makes this a valid conceptual framework. And if we look historically, it's true that when you look at the iconic practices of the tributary system, such as how often do envoys from this country come to pay respects to the emperor? Does the ruler of this country want investiture, which is an institution that offers political recognition from the emperor by investing the ruler, calling him, dubbing him the King of Korea? To what degree does [sic] the rulers of Korea participate in this? And they do to a great deal. And so from this level, it seems that the paradigm is quite good at talking about Korea. But the problem is, and one of the problems that I've been engaging with over the past, I would say since I started doing my PhD actually, is once you have Chosŏn Korea as the paradigmatic example of the tributary system, we have a problem of historicization, because we don't need to explain Korean diplomacy with China anymore, because you know, once you understand the tributary system it seems like everything that Korea does falls into place. But then if we step back and think if Chosŏn Korea is the *only* example of the tributary system as it is imagined, how can something be the only example of itself, right? And maybe in sociology, we might think of this as somewhat of an ideal type, where Chosŏn Korea and especially its relations with Ming China just fit the bill so well, and I think what hasn't been done and what my forthcoming book wants to explain is how this is actually constructed. How it comes to be that our idea, our scholarly idea of the tributary system and even the imperial idea of how international relations work map so well to Chosŏn-Ming practices. And my argument, to put it quite simply, is that there is no preexisting idea of how tributary relations should be and a lot of these elements that we now consider to be emblematic of the system of international relations in premodern East Asia, or iconic to what we call the tributary system, were created over time during Chosŏn's 200 year engagement with the Ming. So the very idea of the tributary system and the very origin of its paradigm, I am in one sense tracing to the history of Chosŏn-Ming engagement. And of course, to explain this history, we cannot then go back and say, "okay, let's use a tributary to explain itself." The tributary system cannot explain itself, we need to look for alternative perspectives, and that's the aim of the forthcoming book.

Yiming (12:08):

And we hope to have you come back here in the future to share some of your perspectives after your book is published.

Prof. Wang (12:14):

Yeah, hopefully sooner rather than later. But yeah, I'll be happy to come back then.

Yiming (12:19):

But before we get into some of the deeper aspects of Chosŏn's diplomacy with the Ming, I think it's worth talking about why engage in this diplomacy in the first place. And in our previous episode with King Kwong, we talked briefly about Koryŏ's attempt at attacking the Ming, and Yi Sŏnggye, who was the commander, one of the commanders in this force, decided to mutiny and abandon the campaign. So why did Yi Sŏnggye abandon the invasion and why did he adopt, once he was in power, a more conciliatory policy towards the Ming?

Prof. Wang (12:52):

So this is actually a more complicated issue than it looks. If you go over the standard reading, it's often described as ideological, that Yi Sŏnggye had a pro-Ming inclination, that he was advised by Neo-Confucians who believed that for a tributary state to fight the suzerain state of the Ming would be against Confucian norms. And I don't think that actually makes a lot of sense for a couple of reasons. One, a lot of the textual evidence for this position comes from the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, and if you know anything about the *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* is that it's written after the king's death. And to me, it's actually more likely that this was a retrospective retcon by Yi Sŏnggye's successors to explain why he mutinied, to say he mutinied because he wanted to affirm some sort of Confucian value that the illicit rulers of Koryŏ at the time, who the Chosŏn portray as illegitimate, were violating. So that's the first point. The second thing is if Yi Sŏnggye was really a really good Neo-Confucian, he wouldn't have murdered the... the previous ruling family, right? It's a... it's just ideologically it's a little inconsistent. So I'm not very convinced that Yi Sŏnggye was necessarily motivated by ideology. On a more practical level, I think Yi Sŏnggye being a career military man, might have felt that the invasion of the Liaodong and to fight with the Ming head on might have just been a fool's errand. The other sources, or actually the same sources also say that provisions were running low, there were heavy rains that made it difficult for the army to ford. The army might have mutinied on its own with or without Yi Sŏnggye. And Yi Sŏnggye was also a very ambitious courtier who had rival factions at court and this may have presented an opportunity for him to seize power, which he did. And so he tied up the... the other two commanding generals and had them executed when they went back to...to Kaesong. And once he took over Chosŏn, or rather once he took over Koryŏ and established his new dynasty, he had no legitimacy locally. And he's an upstart - what is less known about his background is his father Yi Cha-ch'un, they claimed descent from a southern Korean aristocratic family, but for about four generations I think, they were actually officials under the Mongol Empire ruling what is now northeastern Korea/southern Manchuria. And his father had a Mongolian name, slips my mind at the moment, but I think it was something Bukha [note - it's Ulus Bukha]. And the reason the Yi family became so powerful was they had military men who were loyal to them personally as a result of their family background in Manchuria/northeast Korea, as well as having fought several successful battles against Japanese marauders and Chinese rebels on behalf of the Koryŏ monarch. One of the earlier Koryŏ kings, King Kongmin, relied on Yi Sŏnggye and his father for this reason. But his

background, I think, was a little bit inadequate, and there were Koryŏ loyalists at court who would have thought to overthrow him and even undo his coup d'etat by reporting the matter to Ming. So internationally, the Ming was now a different kind of threat, one which could be used by his political opponents to overthrow because they could use the slogan of restoration to bring in Ming support, and we see this several times in East Asian history in the 13th-14th centuries when Mongol armies were brought in by contenders for the Koryŏ throne, for instance in the 1260s. This also happened a few decades later with Vietnam and the Ming. So this was, I think, a real possibility that Yi Sŏnggye wanted to avert and trying to get the Ming to affirm him as King of Chosŏn or King of Korea, and later they adopted the title of Chosŏn, would have secured him at least on one front and he could have used Ming authority, imperial authority, to browbeat his own opponents and to prevent them from taking over. So I think there is a three dimensional political game going on that isn't simply ideological. There is of course an ideology of monarchy, an ideology of loyalty, an ideology of dynastic change that is part of the East Asian Confucian repertoire of statecraft, but I think all these actors are using it to achieve something. And what I don't think they were doing was thinking tributary system itself is what we're going after, but they were operating in a context where there were expectations from both sides and Yi Sŏnggye was trying to use this as best as he can, as he could. What we do know of course, is the Ming didn't recognize Yi Sŏnggye as the King of Chosŏn, it never did. And the first Ming emperor died without issuing a patent of investiture to Yi Sŏnggye, and when Yi Sŏnggye abdicated the throne 1398, he abdicated in theory without the proper title.

Yiming (17:34):

Yeah, and I was going to ask you just as a quick follow up question, why wasn't the Hongwu Emperor, the founder of the Ming, enthusiastic about Yi Sŏnggye?

Prof. Wang (17:42):

Right, you'd think that because he stopped a potential invasion of Ming, the Ming emperor would have applauded him. As far as I can tell in the diplomatic documents, this is not a point that Yi Sŏnggye tried to harp on, and I think Yi Sŏnggye once said the Hongwu Emperor is only emperor because he's so cruel and tyrannical and has many armies, but the best I can do is try to appease him. And I think there was a recognition at the Chosŏn court and after all, the Koryŏ court before them had been engaging with the Hongwu Emperor for decades and they had a hard time with him as well. So I don't think Yi Sŏnggye would have...would...would probably not have been a good idea to try to make the Ming emperor feel like he owed Chosŏn something. That's me speaking sort of, well, I'm on the record, but off the record about this. But I think from the Hongwu Emperor's perspective, Korea was a source of trouble. As we know the Koryŏ Dynasty was one of the son-in-law dynasties of the Mongol royal family, they were intermarrying with the Chinggisids for generations. King Kongmin, for example, had a Mongol name. And while the Hongwu Emperor was still contending with the remnants of the Mongol Empire north of Beijing, the Mongols were also trying to get Koryŏ to switch sides to recognize them instead of the Ming as emperor. And the other problem is from the Hongwu Emperor's perspective, Korea, one its not only tainted by the Mongols, but there's also this sense that Korea was this unreliable place. One of the kings that he enfeoffed or invested was King Kongmin who was then assassinated. And then there was another coup d'etat by Yi Sŏnggye and several other

kings abdicated, and you know, the Hongwu Emperor was born yesterday, and he's also getting messages from Koryŏ officials saying that there's been a coup d'etat, the guy who took over, Yi Sŏnggye, is a dangerous, horrible person. He isn't inclined to think that things are going well in Chosŏn, or in Korea. So I think for him, he's very cautious about how to deal with Korea. And I think also when you compound the fact that after the 1390s, it's well known that the Hongwu Emperor, he's killed off many of his original supporters including the military nobility as well as some of his high ministers. He's also someone who's very, I think, skeptical of the intentions of those who want something from him.

Yiming (19:56):

So as you said, the Hongwu Emperor died without investing Yi Sŏnggye and then Yi Sŏnggye died without receiving investiture, but Hongwu's successor, the Yongle Emperor does invest King Taejong, who was the successor to Yi Sŏnggye. What changed?

Prof. Wang (20:09):

One thing is, let's correct the record. The Hongwu Emperor was not succeeded by the Yongle emperor. This is important because he was succeeded by his grandson the Jianwen Emperor and then there was a civil war where, because the Jianwen Emperor wanted to consolidate power he tried to get all his uncles fired from their military commanderships, right? This is... I'm simplifying a bit.

Yiming (20:30):

I mean he more than fired them, right? He straight off killed some of them, or forced them to commit suicide.

Prof. Wang (20:33):

Right, that's firing you from the...

Yiming (20:35):

I mean one of them was literally burned to death. So I guess you could...

Prof. Wang (20:37):

Yeah, yeah, he was "fired." Um, so the Yongle Emperor, or the Prince of Yan, led "a rebellion" or there was a Ming civil war where the Yongle Emperor took over. In Chosŏn, Yi Sŏnggye didn't... he abdicated because one of his sons, Yi Pang-wŏn, saw that Yi Sŏnggye was going to pass over his line and give one of his younger brothers the throne, so there was a coup d'etat in Chosŏn. Yi Pang-wŏn launched the coup d'etat under the auspices of defending the right of primogeniture, so he kills two of his younger brothers and has one of his older brothers take over and that's the basically obscure Chosŏn King, the second Chosŏn King, Chŏngjong. And Chŏngjong has no interest in staying in power or is smart enough to know that if he does have interest staying in power, Yi Pang-wŏn is going to off him, so he abdicates in favor of Yi Pang-wŏn who we know as King Taejong. So by then it's 1400. The Jianwen Emperor is locked in civil war with his uncle, and he's desperately trying to get Chosŏn to actually support him and in the form of tribute warhorses, actually. And so King Taejong sees this as an opportunity and I

think complies with these demands and summons actually quite a large number of warhorses to Ming, not enough to help the Jianwen Emperor win his war, but [the] Jianwen Emperor actually invests King Taejong. *He* invests King Taejong, not the Yongle Emperor. But when Yongle takes over, when his nephew “disappears” and he becomes emperor, then invests the Chosŏn king and has the King of Chosŏn, they replace the previous patents of investiture. So here, I think, is another element of what is classically understood to be part of the tributary system, is how these documents of investiture granted from the emperor to the king, as well as tribute missions are ways for both sides to affirm their legitimacy. It's asymmetrical and uneven, but when the Yongle Emperor receives tribute missions from Chosŏn, it makes him look like a better emperor. When the Chosŏn king can have a document of investiture from the emperor, it also makes him more legitimate. I think the problem with this explanation is it doesn't explain why that works, right? Why does it work? Whose audiences it worked for? And I think this is a much bigger question, a sociological question that I think hasn't been fully explored, and it's somewhat also beyond the scope of my work. But why these things have political meaning to the elites of both states is a question that I think the tributary system paradigm actually does a poor job of explaining.

Yiming (23:06):

Okay, so now that the Yongle Emperor invests the Chosŏn king, what are some of the characteristics of Yongle's relationship with Chosŏn Korea?

Prof. Wang (23:16):

So I think the Yongle Emperor provides an opportunity for us to think about what we call, what scholars tend to call the tributary system from a perspective that is not Chinese. The tributary system and the Chinese World Order often go hand in hand, but as many scholars have shown, one being, for example, David Robinson, is how many of the practices we associate with the tributary system have proximate origins, not in classical Chinese texts or in Confucian ideals but really in precedent set by previous regimes. And the Yongle Emperor is very interested in inheriting the mantle of the Mongols. He fights the Mongols on many occasions, and this is not just a question of having the Chinese defeat the Mongols but he wants to also pose himself as a universal emperor that has the allegiance of the Mongols on its frontier. So it's not just a security issue, it's also an ideological one. And the Yongle Emperor, actually like his father the Hongwu Emperor, made use of eunuchs as extensions of their authority, Yongle more so than his father. And both of them employed Korean-born eunuchs in their palaces and extracted tribute from Korea in the form of human beings. And these eunuchs at first came into the imperial court during the Mongol-Yuan period accompanying the women who were presented as tribute, who were essentially trafficked, to be concubines or servants of Mongol elites, including the emperor, or the Great Khan. And so this continued albeit as... at a smaller scale during Yongle's reign, and Yongle had quite a few Korean concubines and from what we can tell based on surviving records, which are very scant although very juicy, all these concubines died by the time Yongle died I think, what 1424?

Yiming (25:05):

Yes, 1424.

Prof. Wang (25:06):

Yeah. His favorite was his concubine named Kwon, who supposedly he doted upon, but she died during one of his campaigns in Mongolia, and when he came back, he heard rumors that she was poisoned by another Korean concubine. In a fit of rage she [*sic*] had her and everyone associated with her tortured and killed. And there were a few Korean concubines who survived this purge or massacre, but when the Yongle Emperor died, the expectation, from surviving Korean sources, was that the women who were married to the emperor but did not bear him sons were expected to commit suicide to join him in death. And so this is graphically recounted to us by a Korean palace women... woman who wasn't sent as a concubine but as a servant who was allowed to return to Chosŏn to retire. And so she relates the fates of these women, and some of this information is [*sic*] also passed along by the Korean eunuchs who were sent to the Ming palace. And in a book chapter I published in the *Ming World* on the use of Korean eunuchs as envoys, I discussed some of their roles in this system, and I think a few things to point out is these eunuchs were used as diplomats by the imperial palace for two reasons. One is presumably they had some sort of local knowledge of Korea, and two they were as palace eunuchs, they answered directly to the emperor, so they were often sent as vehicles for fulfilling imperial desires, whether that was for hunting animals, or more eunuchs or... or women for his harem or other forms of treasure. These eunuchs performed an important role in securing what we would call tribute. The other thing to note about these Korean-born eunuchs is from the Chosŏn perspective, it was really burdensome to deal with them because these eunuchs answered to the whims of the emperor so there was very little for the Chosŏn court to... to do except maybe drag their feet or bribe the eunuch or give him rewards or something to get around them. So this was a perennial headache for the Chosŏn court, and so they're often quite maligned in Korean historical records. But what we also see in the 15th century, and this is going beyond the Yongle reign, is that even though this is inconvenient to have the emperor have this direct channel of communication with Chosŏn, it could also work in Korea's favor or work in the favor of Chosŏn's rulers because now you also have direct access to the emperor's ear. And so if there's something that Chosŏn needed to deal with, to circumvent the official Ming bureaucracy, this would be the way to do it. So it's a two way street. It's not necessarily a symmetrical two way street, but these eunuchs perform this key role in mediating these relations. And as we know, from I think, just mediators throughout world history is that a good mediator also knows how to take their cut from the relationship they're negotiating.

Yiming (28:00):

But these embassies led by eunuchs ultimately stop, and I think by the 16th century, almost all the embassies are [*sic*] now led by literati, members of the scholar aristocracy. Why do they stop?

Prof. Wang (28:13):

Okay, so I think I'll just correct your point a little bit. The envoy missions led by Korean-born eunuchs stop. Envoy missions led by eunuchs do not, they never stopped. The simple reason for why the Korean-born eunuchs stopped coming is because all the Korean eunuchs die. Eunuchs don't have children, or biological children, and so they can only be sent as human tribute. And so there was a one last attempt by the Zhengde Emperor to secure palace women

for his palace, as well as boys to serve them as eunuchs right before his death, but that mission was aborted. And so the last group of Korean eunuchs who were in charge of this mission returned to Korea and they never came back. And so they had no successor, so after the 16th century, or the 1520s, there's [sic] just literally no more eunuchs from Korea. And this I think you can see as a part of the Zhengde-Jiajing transition that is often used in Ming history to talk about differences between the Early Ming versus the Late Ming and how the literati ascendancy in the Jiajing period shifted how court politics were, partly because the Jiajing Emperor was an outsider to Beijing and so there's a reconstitution of how imperial politics works in the Ming. So I think that's part of it. Eunuchs remain [sic] a part of the diplomatic scene, and the fact that they were not Korean-born did not necessarily make them less able to manipulate the relationship for their own...own gain, and the general rule of thumb for the 16th century is if the envoy mission from Ming concerned Ming imperial matters, it was almost always a literati envoy. So, new emperor, new crown prince, new...new empress, change of, I guess new emperor implies the death of the emperor, right? These kinds of matters needed to be announced by a Ming literati, usually someone from the Hanlin Academy, accompanied by someone from the Xingren si [note: 行人司, the Messenger Office, in charge of delivering formal, non-routine documents to imperial princes and foreign rulers], sometimes. It varies the ranks and whatnot. But when it came to investing the King of Korea, the chief envoy was always a palace eunuch and his assistants may include literati. So that became the norm in the 16th century. So eunuchs were always in charge of delivering the investiture of a Korean king or Korean queen or prince.

Yiming (30:27):

That's a very interesting distinction. So it's really because the Ming stop taking Korean eunuchs that Korean-born eunuchs no longer led these missions

Prof. Wang (30:34):

Yeah, I mean, that's the...the simplest answer. And why Korean-born eunuchs are not preferred, I think also have to do with broader shifts at the culture of the Ming court. You could interpret this as a shift away from the Inner Asian Mongol influenced style of the Early Ming to something else. But I think this is, I don't think it's a stretch, but I just think it's, it's, you can make the link but I think it's not necessarily the whole picture. And I think as with some things, I actually think in many ways, it was an accident of history. If the Zhengde Emperor had lived a few months longer that envoy mission probably would have returned to Ming with concubines for the Zhengde Emperor and new Korean eunuchs. Then what would have happened, I don't know.

Yiming (31:16):

Had the Zhengde Emperor lived, I think it would have been very different.

Prof. Wang (31:19):

So in some ways, it's accidental, or contingent as historians like to say.

Yiming (31:24):

I do want to go back to something you mentioned earlier, is [sic] that the Korean kings also had access then to the Ming emperor, the Ming imperial family through these Korean-born eunuchs.

And this is going back to something you said even earlier, was that there was really no system in place and that this idea of a tributary system was always constructed as it went along. And so how did Chosŏn rulers and statesmen use their relationship with the Ming or borrow the Ming for their own purposes back in Chosŏn?

Prof. Wang (31:51):

So I already mentioned how having a patent of investiture from the Ming emperor was integrated into Korean practices of political legitimacy. And this could be weaponized, right? So in the 15th century, there is a succession issue in Chosŏn where King Sejo overthrows his nephew, who's known to history as King Tanjong, and he presents this as an abdication and he uses Ming authority to sanction his ascendance and he manages to convince the Ming, or at least convince the Ming enough for them to issue patents of investiture for himself. But then, when there was an attempted coup d'etat against King Sejo that tried to put King Tanjong in power, and he manages to stop it. He issues... his officials, his supporters issue a memorandum that say, trying to replace King Sejo is not just a violation of Chosŏn's state order or a violation of the law, but it's also violating the orders of the emperor because King Sejo is imperially sanctioned. So it creates these other technologies or mechanisms of making claims of legitimacy that I think are not superficial. So Ming authority can be called upon to do one thing or another. And interestingly, those who tried to overthrow King Sejo tried to time their coup d'etat in the presence of a Ming embassy so that this would occur when the Ming embassy happened, so that they wouldn't have to deal with the issue of investiture. So I think it's interesting to see how the idea of Ming authority is integrated into Chosŏn constitutional thinking, if you will. It's...it's something that isn't that you can just dispense with, and we see this several times later in Chosŏn history where Ming withholding of investiture presents challenges, weakens the authority of the Korean king. The other side is for Chosŏn officials - one way to, let's say, advance an agenda is to say, "I have classical sanction for it. I can quote *Mencius*, I can quote the *Shujing* [Book of Documents] or the *Liji* [Book of Rites]." And I can also quote Zhu Xi, right, and the Neo-Confucian corpus. But I can also refer to Ming cases, I can say, "in the Ming, which is supposed to be where... this is where the highest political authority is, they don't do things this way. So maybe we should change things." So I see that as similar to how, let's say, in South Korea today, someone who wants to, let's say, reform the university and to say, "we have too much bureaucracy. Well in America, that's not how universities are run. It's run like this." What's interesting about these statements is sometimes it's not true. It almost doesn't matter how it actually works in Ming or the United States, but the idea that there is something to the idea of these far off places as being somehow the source of some kind of cultural, if not political authority, can be borrowed rhetorically to advance a certain position. So I think you... you see that all the time in Chosŏn political discourse.

Yiming (34:38):

So the act of borrowing Chinese institutions or classical corpus or even Ming authority has, I think, generally been interpreted as Koreans just borrowing Chinese culture and institutions, you know, wholesale - just taking you know, Chinese stuff. And I know this is always joked about by Chinese netizens. But to what extent was this true, that the Koreans are just taking things from China? Were there any instances where Korean practices diverged from that of Ming China's?

Prof. Wang (35:04):

The thing with culture is that there's no copyright, there's no password. You can take whatever you want, whenever you want, what's the Ming gonna do, sue you? Is Confucius gonna want royalties? I think that's the reality of culture in East Asia. Chosŏn is in a position because of a deeper history of being engaged and we can think of it as assimilation or adoption. But it's people in Korea who find something useful or valuable about...about the...the corpus at work. And it's always a selective appropriation, because it's never wholesale. So there are things that obviously have parallels with what is going on in Ming China but there's a reflection of whether, or not just Ming China but Tang China or classical China or just simply things that exist in the text. But it's never just a question of, okay let's just do everything exactly the way it is. And even if one tried to, word for word or case for case, the result would always result in some kind of negotiation with the reality of...on the ground. I think there are just too many things that could go on, but maybe I could just come up with a few obvious ones and a few subtle ones. And then ones that might actually be surprising to somebody who knows, let's say, Chinese history but doesn't know Korean history. So I think one obvious difference, if you just use Chosŏn and Ming, is the degree to which the monarch has authority. And one thing that is very clear from the Chosŏn case is that the Chosŏn monarch, if you just read the *Chosŏn wanjo sillok*, the kinds of things his officials can say to the Korean king, would be a no-go in the Ming or Qing context. It's just the extent of the criticism, the willingness of Chosŏn officials to say, "King, you are not virtuous." And the degree to which the Chosŏn officials and the Chosŏn king can actually use this idea of the Korean king as being a Confucian exemplar, I think works in such a different way from the Chinese one. One argument for this is that, well as king, he doesn't have access to divine authority from the Heavens as an emperor would, and so he needs to find a different path to...to sagehood. So a lot of the sagehood is performed, actually, through you might call a faint humility, and one great example is King Yŏngjo, who's always telling his officials how inadequate he is and because he's inadequate, we have to do the rituals over and over again until we get the perfect. And I think the tricky thing is, of course, you can find a Chinese monarch, Qianlong might have said it once, Kangxi might have said it once, and you see this rhetoric also in Chinese history, but I think the difference is the degree to which these things occur. The degree to which a Chosŏn official can subject his king to quite direct criticism, and along with that the expectation of how much the king should be allowed to tolerate and whatnot. In general, in the Chosŏn as opposed to Ming and Qing, the Censorate, the organ in the state that's responsible for criticizing the ruler or for censuring officials, it's just a much more powerful institution in the Chosŏn court. And part of it may be because the King of Korea is in a permanent state of power sharing with the *yangban* elite, and some scholars have interpreted the Censorate as a avenue for which the kingship can be challenged, whereas in China, the emperor aggregates power at such a high level that there is no group of people, a coherent group of people whose power can challenge the emperor in any meaningful way. And that's the case of the Ming and also the Qing where it's just, there isn't this entrenched national aristocracy that is well connected, and that can be counterposed to royal power. And so part of that has to do with the structure of China versus Korea, how these societies are organized. Another case where one could say the copying is quite deliberate is Chosŏn elites' adoption of Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals*, and we can look at the marriage ritual. The thing is, Zhu Xi's *Family*

*Rituals* is, Zhu Xi as you know, the Song philosopher, Confucian philosopher, based on his reading of classical texts comes up with this practical guide for how to do good rituals in your own household, in your own, of course, landowning elite household, but nonetheless, adapting classical ideas to *shidafu*, a gentry family. And he has these marriage rites. And as far as I can tell, most Chinese elites who use the Zhu Xi *Family Rituals* take bits and pieces. It's very rare that it's taken wholesale, right? It's something to consult, it's a point of reference. It provides a framework but it's not taken wholesale. In Chosŏn, there's an attempt to integrate, for example, the marriage rituals in very profound ways. And the Korean traditional wedding ceremony and the Zhu Xi *Family Rituals*, you can, there's a clear relationship between that. Over the course of the Chosŏn Dynasty, the attempt to reform existing Korean marriage patterns according to Zhu Xi lines, this is something that is very well known. Okay, but here's the catch. It's not just that, okay, there's this Chinese ideal that people in China are not following, but in Korea they're following, which if you think about Zhu Xi as a philosopher and not a Chinese person, this isn't strange. Karl Marx is German and Germany is no longer communist, but there are other communist countries that are not German. Is China German now, is Vietnam German? It doesn't make sense if you think about Zhu Xi as a philosopher and not a Chinese person. But here's the other thing. If you pay close attention to the Korean marriage ceremony, one thing that is critical to Zhu Xi is the centrality of the patriline. And I think I can ask Yiming this - where do you get married, at the groom's family's house, or the bride's family's house in China?

Yiming (40:18):

At the groom's house.

Prof. Wang (40:19):

At the groom's house. From a Chinese perspective, that's common sense. And so there's this idea of *yingjia*, right? How do you *yingjia*, welcoming the bride?

Yiming (40:26):

You're supposed to go to the bride's house and take her and then bring her...

Prof. Wang (40:29):

Right, the groom goes to the bride, brings her and then you go back to your father's family and then you get married there. And so what Yiming just said, it follows the...the Zhu Xi family rites. In the Korean case, the groom goes to the bride's family, gets married there at the bride's family's house without his parents, and then he takes her back to his family where the parents see the bride.

Yiming (40:57):

How do they explain this, then? I mean, if Zhu Xi does it one way and they're doing it another way and they're trying to conform to Zhu Xi, how would they explain that?

Prof. Wang (41:04):

Martina Deuchler says this is the persistence of a vestige of the matrilocal wedding as practiced in Koryŏ period, or even in the early Chosŏn. So I think this is a very clear example of where

you have integration between existing Korean practices, Confucian idealism, and a social project. And the result is... it's something that... it diverges drastically from Chinese norms. But there's this movie that I show in one of my classes called *The Happy Day of Scholar Maeng*, which is this play actually written in, I believe, the late 40s, early 50s, and then there are various movie versions of it. And I've shown it to students and many students, especially those of Chinese background, see, this is like, "Oh, this is clearly a Confucian marriage ceremony." And it is from a Korean perspective, but they all miss this detail that wait, they're getting married at the bride's house, and this is something that is just so taken for granted.

Yiming (41:55):

Yeah, that's so interesting. But just to summarize, perhaps if you really look deeper, the Chosŏn is really taking bits and pieces and then trying to adapt it. It's not just a wholesale adoption, and to view it that way is just too simplistic and misses a lot of the intricacies of diplomatic relations and cultural construction.

Prof. Wang (41:12):

I think given the history of cultural interchange, there is no such thing, I think, as a pure national culture and this applies to Korea, this applies to China. You will find there are many practices that are absolutely iconic or completely associated as this is native to this place, but really have some kind of external origin. So if you look at Chinese musical instruments, the *pipa*, for example, comes from Central Asia. We can think of *baijiu* [note - Chinese liquor], iconically Chinese - this is an Arabic technology. If you look at rice cultivation, the varieties of rice that are ancestral to the ones in China come from Champa, which is Southeast Asia. We can go on. The folding fan is from Japan. I will make the case that it may be originally from Japan, the folding fan as documented in... in Song sources, but its popularity among the *shidafu* in China is a Ming period phenomenon and those fans came from Korea, and this is documented in lots of Ming *biji*. So the origin of the fan, yeah, it goes back to Japan. You can't have literati style *hanfu* without a folding fan. Sorry, it's not a Han invention.

Yiming (43:13):

Yeah. And I don't think a lot of people realize that. So you've just talked about all these, kind of, nuts and bolts of Chosŏn-Ming diplomacy, things underneath the surface that really challenges the traditional view of this simple tributary system. So as a final concluding question, in your opinion, what do you think the relationship, the diplomatic relationship between Chosŏn and the Ming have to offer in our study of diplomacy? In our study of history?

Prof. Wang (43:41):

Yeah, I think that's a great question. And I think it's one that is always worth thinking about when embarking on a project or thinking about how to present this topic or to make conversations with colleagues, for example, working in other area fields. And I think for me, if you think about the long history of diplomacy, there's a couple of patterns. People are very interested in diplomatic history when it concerns conflict, open conflict. What were the diplomatic events that caused World War One? Could something have been done differently? What was the diplomacy around the Sino-Japanese War? World War Two? The Cold War, right? Conflict gets people going. I

think that the Chosŏn-Ming relationship, it had tensions and there were some wars but not between Chosŏn-Ming, right? There is violence. There are some pretty despicable things that do happen. But we can say that for about 200 years it was a peaceful relationship, and I think one thing we can do and what is useful is thinking about how peace can be maintained, what lets peace be maintained, how tensions get managed? And in some ways, it's a very successful example of that. And I think it's so successful that scholars sort of take it for granted and I think the textbook version of Chosŏn-Ming relations is that well, because these two countries were Confucian, they were never going to fight each other anyway. Or because the Ming had no intention of ever attacking Korea once Chosŏn entered tributary relations, of course this was a peaceful relationship. Is that really true? When we think contingently about history, isn't this kind of a *post facto* fallacy? Where we are seeing the result and assuming that this was automatically going to be the case, and I think taking and historicizing a complex relationship and looking at points of tension and looking how they are sidestepped, resolved, or shunted away actually, I think, tells us a lot about how things are maintained, how peace keeps going. And frankly, I think, from my perspective, it's not actually a very optimistic result, because what we see actually in the Chosŏn-Ming relationship is how difficult that is, and it's not a simple matter of just performing to existing cultural scripts. Oh, I'll just keep paying tribute and ignore everything that's going on, you have to... when you look at the nitty gritty is that there are all these moments where something could have gone wrong, and there are people especially on the Chosŏn side, who are actively managing this relationship, to make sure that it stays within certain bounds. And I think we can't take diplomacy for granted and in periods of peace and prosperity, it's very easy to do so. That would be one big takeaway.

Yiming (46:11):

Yeah, yeah, I absolutely agree. And I think I've taken up enough of your time today. Thank you so much, professor, for coming to the show and sharing all these *[sic]* wonderful information about Ming-Chosŏn diplomacy, and we really look forward to having you back sometime in the future to talk a little deeper about the exact type of negotiation or constructions between the Ming and the Chosŏn. I think it's all very fascinating, and I'm sure our listeners find it very interesting as well. So thank you once again.

Prof. Wang (46:37):

Yeah, thank you, Yiming.

Yiming (46:38):

So that concludes our interview today. Thank you so much for listening to the Chinese History Podcast.

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