Views of the Neighbor: Japanese and Korean Intellectuals in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the views held by Japanese and Korean intellectuals towards each other’s countries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Focusing primarily on Korean scholars, it discusses various perspectives of the neighboring society gained through direct interaction and written texts, and sheds light on how Japanese and Koreans perceived their neighbor’s state, culture, and people. These intellectuals offered affirming visions of the other which progressed beyond the complicated historical background following the Imjin War of 1592-1598. As seen in the writings of such scholars as Yi Ik, Yi Tongmu, An Chongbok, Fujiwara Seika, and Yamazaki Ansai, mutual perceptions of Tokugawa Japan and Chosŏn Korea changed significantly throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Keywords: Views of Tokugawa Japan and Chosŏn Korea, Korean embassy, Neo-Confucian scholars, scholastic and cultural exchange, Sirhak, Practical Learning scholars

Introduction

The admiration among Japanese elites for Korean scholars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contributed to the further development of Neo-Confucian studies in Edo Japan. These Japanese regarded Chosŏn Korea as a country where scholars exhibited sophisticated Neo-Confucian principles and they considered Korean interpretations of Neo-Confucianism as more distinguished than those of contemporary Chinese scholars. Amidst the social and political stability established by the Tokugawa shogunate in 1603, an increasing number of Japanese Neo-Confucian scholars became active in scholarship and education. When the embassies of the King of Chosŏn (K. Chosŏn tongsinsa, J. Chosen tsushinshi) came to Japan, a broad range of scholars and commoners enthusiastically sought samples of calligraphy, paintings, autographs, and comments on their own writings from members of the delegations. Through these visits Japanese experienced an infrequent but enticing opportunity—encounters with foreigners, foreign culture, and foreign scholarship. Japanese scholars were strongly attracted to Chosŏn culture during the first half of the Edo period in particular. Conversely, as seen in the fact that the Korean embassy of 1764 was the last to travel to Edo, with the final embassy of 1811 failing to proceed beyond Tsushima, both the Chosŏn court and the Tokugawa shogunate seem to have regarded neighborly relations as of diminishing importance.
Although the Korean government restored diplomatic relations with the Tokugawa shogunate in 1607, Korean scholars of that time typically perceived Japan as an inferior country with an inferior culture. Many Korean elites believed that the Japanese did not pose a challenge as far as culture, including scholarship, was concerned, and each embassy to Japan only reconfirmed their sense of supremacy. Such Chosŏn views likely stemmed in part from earlier encounters with the Japanese, and certainly from the Imjin War of 1592-1598. Given this environment, many Korean intellectuals expressed derogatory attitudes toward their Japanese counterparts, though they typically concealed such views while engaging in diplomatic and cultural exchanges. However, some Korean scholars began to focus on Japanese culture and history in the eighteenth century, much as participants in earlier embassies had concentrated on understanding Japanese politics and military matters in the decades after the Japanese invasion. Later in the Chosŏn period, Korean intellectuals also took a more positive approach toward Japan. Some who learned about Japanese politics, society, and culture treated the country as an equal of their own.

Previous English-language scholarship on Japanese-Korean/Korean-Japanese relations after the Japanese invasion has focused on the Korean embassies and the Waegwan (J. Wakkan). This institution, referred to in English as the Japan House, was an enclosed area in Pusan, Tongnae County, designated by the Chosŏn court for Japanese residence and sanctioned trade. Ronald P. Toby, James B. Lewis, and Nam-lin Hur, examining movement in the other direction, have discussed visits to Japan by Korean embassies. They treat images of Japan derived from a small number of select Korean elites who were able to visit Japan. In Japan and South Korea, too, there are numerous publications focusing primarily on the Korean embassies and interactions with the Japanese. The lives of the Japanese residents at the Japan House are another topic treated by many historians. Miyake Hidetoshi, Ikeuchi Satoshi, Nakao Hiroshi, Ueda Masaaki, Yi Chinhŭi, Yi Wŏnsik, and Son Sŏnghŏl, among others, have explored the interactions between Japanese and the Korean embassies. Tashiro Kazui has examined the Japan House, site of the Korea-