The Kyorin Diplomacy of Early Chosŏn

Since the foundation of Chosŏn in 1392, Korea adhered to its sadae (serving the great) diplomacy as regards Ming China and kyorin (neighbourly relations) diplomacy as regards Japan and the Jurchens. However, the Ming emperor did not allow Chosŏn immediately to become a tributary state due to his suspicion of the insubordination of the former Koryŏ King Kongmin Wang (thirty-first king of the Koryŏ dynasty, r. 1351–1374). Moreover, the complex reasons for the demise of Koryŏ Korea and the confusion about the legitimacy of the Yi dynasty line caused the delay for granting a full tributary status on the part of the Ming. Finally in 1401, at the time of the third king T’aejong (r. 1400–1418), Korea was allowed to become a tributary state by the Ming and in the fourth month of 1403 T’aejong was granted a gold seal and patent by the third emperor Yung-lo.1

Korea’s acceptance of Chinese suzerainty is portrayed as, “Korea was perhaps the most enthusiastic participant in this Chinese world order, while Japan was certainly among the most reluctant.”2 However, Korea’s participation in the Chinese world order was not as ardent as it has usually been thought. In fact, in the past there were some Korean kings such as Kongmin Wang who carried out an unrelenting anti-Yüan foreign policy and Korea later demonstrated strong antagonism against the establishment of the Manchus’ Ch’ing dynasty (1616–1912). Rather, Korea used sadae-kyorin diplomacy in order to preserve its state and people between the imposing and powerful China and the small but bellicose Japan. Both Japan and Korea became tributary states to China in the early fifteenth century. However, China did not interfere in their domestic affairs and diplomacy, and their autonomy was preserved throughout the premodern period. The diplomatic intercourse between Japan and Korea attests to their autonomy from Chinese suzerainty.

The nature of Korea’s relations with the Ming has been considered to be political and cultural dependence due to Korea’s closeness and loyalty to China, as distinct from other periods. However, this view needs a careful re-examination. Hugh D. Walker maintains that the nature of Chosŏn–Ming relations was essentially culturally based on a Confucian principle of a “family of nations” and the founder of the Chosŏn dynasty adopted a “policy of deference” but not “toadyism” towards the Ming. Therefore, in his view, the relations between Chosŏn Korea and Ming China were the only “genuine rapprochement” in Korea’s history.3 Yamauchi Hirokazu rectifies traditional
interpretations of early Choson’s foreign relations with the Ming by arguing that early Choson preserved a certain autonomy and self-respect and that the establishment of Choson was not a time of Korea’s subordination to China, but a time of the establishment of an independent state. Their arguments raise questions about the traditional view of Korean dependency in tributary relations with China.

First of all, the view of Choson Korea–Ming China foreign relations has been oversimplified when examining Korea’s close ties with suzerain China. Their relations were culturally based, but politically and diplomatically sustained. Korea’s sadae principle was a subtle diplomacy which the Korean yangban bureaucrats chose in the difficult international situations which Korea was experiencing. Politically, sadae diplomacy helped to stabilise Choson, and avoided military invasions and political intervention by the Ming. In particular, at the beginning of the Ming dynasty the Ming was suspicious of the relationship between Choson and Mongols. Moreover, Donald N. Clark has shown that Ming T’ai Tsu was preoccupied with the danger that Korea might ally with the Manchurian military, causing security problems along the northern border. Sino-Korean relations involved the complex issues of diplomacy, security and domestic policy as well as cultural concerns. The nature of Korea’s sadae principle and in particular its essence when Korea experienced a great diplomatic crisis at the demise of the Ming and the rise of the “barbaric” Ch’ing dynasty will be further elaborated in Chapter 6.

This chapter deals with early Choson’s foreign relations with Muromachi Japan. It can be argued that at this juncture diplomacy played a significant role in constituting and maturing a new Korean state. With the state ideology established from the Buddhism of the Koryo period to Neo-Confucianism, early Choson endorsed kyorin (neighbourly) relations with Japan based on Confucian concepts and ethics. What was the nature of the kyorin diplomacy of early Choson? How did Korea react to Muromachi foreign policy? Did these neighbourly relations serve diplomatically and politically to create the new dynasty as they did in relations with the Ming? This chapter will examine firstly the historical and theoretical framework in which kyorin diplomacy originated. Secondly, the ideological current in which Korea’s so-hwa (the small civilised centre) consciousness towards Japan evolved by King Sejong’s diplomacy and its ideological assertion into actual practice of diplomacy will be discussed. In fact, Korea’s so-hwa consciousness towards other peripheral states was already exhibited when the first king of Choson T’aegyo ascended to the throne in 1392. The Choson wangjo sillok recorded:

Envoys from Ryukyu and Orangkae [Jurchens] came to pay tribute. Ryukyu’s rank is East fifth rank lower grade. Orangkae’s rank is West