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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Comments on Ge Zhaoguang's Reading of the *Yŏnhaeng-nok* (Journeys to Beijing)

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Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光. *Xiangxiang yiyu: Du Lichao Chaoxian hanwen Yanxing wenxian zhaji* 葛兆光, 想象异域：读李朝朝鲜韩文燕行文献札记 [Imagining a foreign place: Notes on Korean Yi-dynasty Beijing journals in classical Chinese]. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014. 302 pp., including three appendices and a reference bibliography. ISBN: 978-7101099430.

In this collection of ten chapters and three appendices published previously as individual articles in Chinese scholarly journals, Professor Ge Zhaoguang¹—a leading Chinese scholar based at Fudan University and director of a major historical project titled “China in the Eyes of Her Neighbors”—performs a series of themed readings of a collection of Korean travelogues known as the *Yŏnhaeng-nok* (Ch. *Yanxinglu*, Journeys to Beijing).²

As a type of text, *yŏnhaeng-nok* have been well known to specialists in Korea, Japan, and China. Hu Shi (1891–1962), a leader of the May Fourth Movement in China, for example, noted their historical value in a 1938 letter to the historian Fu Sinian (1896–1950). Since then, scholars have extensively studied Korean-authored texts including Ch’oe Pu’s (1454–1504) *Pyohaerok* (Record of drifting across the sea) and Pak Chi-wŏn’s (1737–1805) *Yŏrhailgi* (Jehol diary).³ *Yŏnhaeng-nok* refers to writings produced after the founding of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). These writings are to be differentiated, despite their close affinity, from those that bear the collective title *Choch’ollok* (Ch. *Chaotianlu*, Pilgrimage to the celestial court), written by Chosŏn luminaries contemporaneous with the Ming dynasty (1368–1644).⁴

What is the *Yŏnhaeng-nok*? And what was the significance of the name change from *Choch’ollok* to *Yŏnhaeng-nok* across the 1644 Ming-Qing divide? To put it simply, *Yŏnhaeng-nok* stands for a body of texts that involved hundreds of individuals authoring just as many volumes, each of which consisted of a collection of notes, diaries, poems, memoirs, and other assorted writings in various forms and lengths, which had been produced over a span of centuries.

It constitutes a textual “genre” only in a loose sense of the term. It is, instead, a product of the institution of tribute between Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910) and Qing China. The Sino-Korean tributary relationship had begun under the Ming and ended formally with the signing of the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, in which China gave up its special claims over Korea as a protectorate. This is not to say that by accepting the tributary arrangement Chosŏn had lost its independence under the Qing. The kingdom had maintained its internal autonomy and integrity as a culture, society, and polity while its kings accepted Qing investiture and presented tributary gifts in Beijing. *Yŏnhaeng-nok*, along with its predecessor the *Choch’ollok*, were by-products of this Sino-Korean relationship, which gave witness to a long-standing arrangement that anchored an East Asian state-to-state order for well over five centuries. These texts are interesting precisely because the Korean emissaries, though conforming to Qing ritual requirements, nonetheless retained their critical reflections from the perspectives of men from a foreign place.

As a tributary state to the Qing, the Chosŏn court dispatched missions annually to the imperial court in Beijing. Each mission consisted of roughly three hundred individuals performing a range of functions (for example, translators, physicians, painters, military officers, servants, gift bearers, and so forth) under the command of a chief envoy, a deputy, and a secretary. The missions took months to make the routinized journey overland from Hanyang (present-day Seoul) to Beijing and back. In Beijing, the Qing recognized Chosŏn envoys as the “model” tributary emissaries and honored them with a first place at the head among all tributary missions. Chosŏn envoys earned admiration for their mastery of the rules and rituals carefully laid out in the Qing code and received high compliments for their mastery of the idiom of Confucian learning. Back in Chosŏn, these same envoys enjoyed high honors for their service as the king’s emissaries.

Chosŏn envoys, quite apart from writing court memorials, routinely kept a kind of travelogue or journal—the *Yŏnhaeng-nok*—about their missions to Beijing. The writings characteristically made room for individual observations and reflections. They were also performative textual demonstrations of an official’s superior literary command, evidenced both by his learned familiarity with the Chinese sites on the journey and the writings of a long line of Chosŏn predecessors who had visited those same sites on earlier missions.

One way to think of the *Yŏnhaeng-nok* is to see it as conventionalized writing that had been occasioned, in most cases, by the highly ritualized aspects of Chosŏn's tributary relationship with the Qing. As symbols of status and markers of classical literacy, these writings were tastefully crafted, privately held, and carefully preserved as heirlooms to distinguish the family. They were intended neither as manuscripts for general publication nor as the "must-note" for later scholars writing about the literary breakthroughs of any given moment in the Korean Yi dynasty.

Therefore, it is a challenge, given the nature of the texts and the circumstances of their production, to produce a comprehensive list of the centuries of various titles under the rubric of the *Yŏnhaeng-nok*. Furthermore, the *Yŏnhaeng-nok* has been of dubious value in a postcolonial Korea characterized by heightened nationalistic pride, as its texts inevitably draw attention to the hierarchy between emperors and kings in the premodern tributary world centered on the Qing. Nonetheless, China scholars in Japan and Korea have greatly valued the *Yŏnhaeng-nok*, precisely because it places foreign missions on the scene and opens up a window that permits a non-Chinese perspective of China. As a source of historical research, the *Yŏnhaeng-nok* received a major boost in 2001, when Im Kijung (임기중 편), a Seoul-based scholar of classical Chinese, released a hundred-volume compilation inclusive of maps and illustrations. This first compilation was followed by a second collection in fifty volumes and a third one in three volumes. These compilations, especially the hundred-volume set, provide the foundation for Ge Zhaoguang's themed readings.⁵

In his methodical reading of the *Yŏnhaeng-nok*, Ge addresses, first, the significance of the name change from the *Choch'ollok* contemporaneous with the Ming to the *Yŏnhaeng-nok* of the Qing. When Korean emissaries initiated their presence in the Ming court, Ge suggests, the kingdom had approached the empire out of a shared sense of espousal of the value of Confucian norms. It was culture rather than coercion that built a pre-seventeenth-century East Asian world. When Japan invaded Korea with the intent to conquer China in the Imjin War (1592–1598), the Ming responded by dispatching troops to Korea's aid. The long-reigning Emperor Wanli (r. 1573–1620)—the same ruler featured in Chinese historian Ray Huang's (1981) *1587, A Year of No Significance* and receiving damning reviews for his refusal to attend to state business—enjoyed far greater appreciation in Korea for having authorized Ming military intervention that

shored up the Yi dynasty. Wanli's projection of Ming presence across the border did little, however, to help the fortune of his own empire. When the Ming collapsed in 1644 and the Manchus ascended the throne in Beijing, the Chosŏn court received the news with a heavy heart. Chosŏn tribute to the new dynasty in Beijing continued, because the Manchus, to protect their rear in an advance against the Ming, had, well before 1644, coerced the Koreans into submission with a dramatic show of force. Unable to cut the established norms with the new imperial masters, whom they disparaged as barbarians, Chosŏn envoys embarked on their journeys thereafter with a changed heart. Their missions had become mere journeys to Beijing (Yanjing)—thus the *Yŏnhaeng-nok*—that had been deprived of the aura of a “pilgrimage” to the center of Confucian civilization as in the best days under the Ming.

After 1644, Chosŏn elite saw themselves as the upholders of a proven set of civilized norms. They maintained, for example, the hairstyles and the sartorial norms of the Ming. They dated their writings by the reign of Chongzhen (r. 1627–1644), the last emperor of the Ming. Nineteenth-century Korean literary works used dates such as “the 200th year post-Chongzhen.” Ge argues, in short, that the fall of the Ming marked a critical juncture in Sino-Korean relations (chapter 2). The shift from *Choch'ollok* to *Yŏnhaeng-nok* marked the end of a common East Asian aspiration toward a civilizing order predicated upon Confucian ideals of ritual, learning, and moral teaching.

Chosŏn emissaries crossing the Yalu River into the Qing empire after 1644 were thus setting foot in an “alien” territory that was “barbaric” and hostile to the envoys schooled in the civilized norms from Hanyang (chapter 3). Before the final crossing from Chosŏn into Manchuria, for purposes of self-protection, the envoys routinely subjected themselves as well as their entire retinue to strict searches for contraband forbidden by Qing rules. Violators received, from time to time, punishments such as decapitation. Meanwhile, on the Qing side, corruption acted powerfully to undermine both the integrity of Qing rules and Chosŏn norms.

All missions went through Shanhaiguan, the mountain pass separating Manchuria from North China. After the fall of the Ming, hardly anyone could have passed this military stronghold without reflecting upon the actions of General Wu Sangui (1612–1678), the Ming turncoat who opened its gate in 1644 for the Manchus to enter the Great Wall. The Ming defender joined the Manchus in their march on Beijing, which by then had fallen into the hands of the rebel forces of Li Zizheng. Three decades later, in 1673, Wu rose from his fiefdom in Yunnan to rebel against

the Qing. The Korean emissaries followed these events with keen interest (chapter 4). They pursued the topic of Manchu-Han ethnic tension, recording silent face-to-face exchanges, which were written out on paper that their Han interlocutors were quick to destroy. They collected and preserved the only surviving texts of Wu's anti-Qing proclamations and offered their condemnation of the last defender of the Ming who had also betrayed the Qing.

For punishment, some of Wu's Yunnan followers were exiled to Manchuria, an arrangement that conveniently placed them on the paths of the traveling Koreans. Such contacts, real or imagined, gave rise to tales like the one about Ji Wenlan, a displaced Jiangnan native who arrived in Manchuria from a literary household in bondage to become a shopkeeper's wife. The Ji story, to be sure, conformed to clichés about Han women and Inner Asian men upon the fall of Chinese dynasties to conquering armies. The *Yŏnhaeng-nok* recorded poems written on walls that lamented Ji's fallen state (chapter 5). Other oddities catching the eye of Chosŏn envoys included a Jizhou temple dedicated to a man and a woman, to which the Koreans ascribed certain significance that might have stemmed from a misunderstanding, Ge suggests (chapter 6).

In Beijing, the Chosŏn emissaries, capped and gowned in Ming style, stood out as foreigners in a Manchu country. They scanned the landscape and turned a critical gaze on the Han subjects who had shaved foreheads, donned Manchu garb, allowed men and women to mix in public, and hired street performers to dilute the solemnity of their funeral processions (chapter 7). The Chosŏn envoys were equally critical of Qing rulers, who were rumored to have secretly worshipped ghosts on major ceremonial dates (chapter 8), presumably to assuage the Manchus' guilt for their cruel murder of a Ming general. The *Yŏnhaeng-nok*, in contrast to Chinese sources constrained by ritual decorum, passed down detailed and realistic depictions of the looks of Qing emperors at imperial audiences. When not performing their ceremonial duties at court, Chosŏn envoys shopped around for books and curios and sauntered about in theaters and teahouses (chapter 9). These forays in the streets of Beijing resulted in valuable notes about trends, fashions, and political intelligence. Envoys shopping in Liulichang, the book quarters in Beijing, in the mid-eighteenth century were quick to discern that mainstream Confucian texts in Korea such as the moral philosophy of Zhu Xi had been banished to high shelves, their shop space taken over by works of philology. There were lists of banned books, the titles of which the envoys collected with diligence. It was also in Beijing that they came upon another set of

foreigners: the Jesuits in the South Church, who had been forbidden to make contact with other foreigners (chapter 10 and appendix 2).

Mainland Chinese scholarship centering on the *Yŏnhaeng-nok* (appendix 3) is just emerging. Japanese scholars meanwhile have accomplished much by pioneering research projects that mine the *Yŏnhaeng-nok* for information about Sino-Korean interactions as well as Sino-Japanese-Korean connections (Hong 2010, Zhang B. 2016, Piao 1956, Ch'oe 1962). Korean scholars, for their part, have pointed to the rise of the Chosŏn School of Northern Studies and Korean access to Qing philological studies. Beijing under the Qing was a source of Western science and geography. In other words, as a hub of East Asian learning, Beijing was not entirely sterile.

An intellectual historian, Ge Zhaoguang approaches the *Yŏnhaeng-nok* with a different set of questions. He asks: Did an East Asian cultural community inclusive of modern-day China, Japan, and Korea ever exist? To what extent might it be productive for East Asia to be conceptualized as a unit with some degree of internal coherence? And, in what way might the *Yŏnhaeng-nok* contribute to research and reflections along these lines?

As the chapters unfold, Ge argues that East Asia as a conceptual unit holds very little value for modern historians of culture and thought. For a while, roughly around the Tang dynasty (618–907), East Asia might once have had a border-crossing network notable for the active sharing of linguistic, textual, and symbolic resources powered by the dissemination of Buddhism. By the end of the sixteenth century, however, such a community had long ceased to exist. Whatever the residue value of any shared historical memories, the Imjin War and the Ming-Qing transition ushered in new patterns of cultural dynamics across East Asia.

Ge argues that the seventeenth century, which witnessed the rise of the Tokugawa shogunate and the Manchu conquest of Ming China, was both a watershed and a defining moment in subsequent modern East Asian history. In the world that took shape thereafter, there emerged “profound and unbridgeable cultural gulfs [*honggou* 鸿沟] separating one nation from another” (25). These gulfs began as minute differences in cultural sensitivities: differences that the Chosŏn envoys, doubling as *yŏnhaeng-nok* authors, had done their best to articulate and amplify. Much had to do, Ge emphasizes, with China’s loss of its normative persuasiveness as the home of Confucian teaching and practice of authenticity. Korean envoys to Qing China did

not hesitate to portray the Manchus as barbarians and the Han ministers as their compromised collaborators. Eventually they became impressed, along with the rest of the East Asian states, with the power and the territorial reach of the Qing in the eighteenth century. The might of the Qing did not prevent Chosŏn emissaries from expressing their shock, dismay, and disdain, however, at how the new king of Annam, seeking investiture, in 1790 appeared personally at Emperor Qianlong's eightieth birthday party decked out in Manchu garb.

Hard power alone, Ge concludes, was not enough to generate for the Qing court the soft power of normative persuasion. Ge's reading of the *Yŏnhaeng-nok* is about how the tributary system, despite its prescribed and ritualized uniformity, eventually gave way to an order of contesting state interests. Despite Qing efforts to control and restrict the activities of foreign missions in China, Chosŏn envoys succeeded in collecting intelligence and constructing an alternative description of the happenings on the ground beneath the formality of court communications. Their efforts were helped by Qing handlers of foreign missions that were often corruptible, and by the attending clerks and soldiers, who were inferior in their literary command in comparison with the foreigners. Chosŏn envoys, in short, were both well-equipped and well-motivated to capture intelligence against Qing restrictions. Not unlike their Catholic contemporaries, they talked up marginalized individuals and obtained forbidden records. A journey through the pages of the *Yŏnhaeng-nok*, Professor Ge shows, was like a veritable tour through images of China reflected in a critical mirror held up by a well-informed neighbor.

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Notes

- 1 Ge Zhaoguang, a scholar of Chinese religion, ideology, and literature, received his BA and MA degrees in Chinese classics at Peking University and began his career at Yangzhou Normal College and Tsinghua University. He has been a visiting professor at Hong Kong Baptist University, Kyoto University, City University of Hong Kong, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, and National Taiwan University. He was the first Global Scholar at Princeton University, where he was a visiting professor from 2010 to 2013. Ge is the author of more than fifteen books, many of which have been translated into English. These include the two-volume *Chinese Intellectual History* (1998 and 2000, published in

- Chinese), *Chan (Zen) Buddhism and Chinese Culture* (1986, published in Chinese), and *Taoism and Chinese Culture* (1987).
- 2 Ge Zhaoguang's "China in the Eyes of Her Neighbors" project at the National Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Fudan University focuses on (a) research on materials (especially in Chinese) stored or written abroad (mainly, but not limited to, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam, and other bordering countries) regarding the history, culture, thought, and religion of China; and (b) patterns and shifts in the imagery, rumors, and information about China in Western literature. Since 2007, this research project has organized the collections "Yuenan Hanwen Yan xing wenxian jicheng" 越南汉文燕行文献集成 (Collection of Yan travel literature in classical Chinese in Vietnam), "Chaoxian Hanwen Yan xing wenxian xuanbian" 朝鲜汉文燕行文献选编 (Selected volume of Yan travel literature in classical Chinese in Korea), and "Chaoxian tong xin shi wen xian xuan bian" 朝鲜通信使文献选编 (Selected volume of historical documents of Korean correspondence). Under this project, Professor Ge has also published two prestigious books, including *Here in "China" I Dwell: Reconstructing Historical Discourses of China for Our Time* (2017, translated from *Zhaizi Zhongguo: Chongjian youguan "Zhongguo" de lishi lunshu* 宅兹中国: 重建有关“中国”的历史论述) and *Xiangxiang yiyu* 想象异域, the book under review here.
- 3 See, for example, Ch'oe (2010), Pak and Ch'oe (2016), Ge Zhenjia (2002), Pak WH (2006), Arakawa (1964), Seida (1795), Kim (1990), Pak CW (1956, 1973), and Zhang L. (2015).
- 4 Xu (2010); *Zhongguo Fudan daxue* (2011); Kwön, Pae, and Yi (2010); Chen (1999).
- 5 See, for example, in the University of California, Berkeley library online, [http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.berkeley.edu/eds/results?vid=0&sid=93fd366c-0943-4c48-b46d-3644147d3fec%40sessionmgr4008&bquery=\(Im%2c+AND+Kijung+AND+Y%2c%5%8fnhaengnok\)&bdata=JnR5cGU9MCZzaXRIPWVkey1saXZl](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.berkeley.edu/eds/results?vid=0&sid=93fd366c-0943-4c48-b46d-3644147d3fec%40sessionmgr4008&bquery=(Im%2c+AND+Kijung+AND+Y%2c%5%8fnhaengnok)&bdata=JnR5cGU9MCZzaXRIPWVkey1saXZl).

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