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The Problem of Studying East Asia from the Perspective of One Nation: A Critical Examination of Fuma Susumu's *Chōsen enkōshi to Chōsen tsūshinshi*

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Fuma Susumu 夫馬進. *Chōsen enkōshi to Chōsen tsūshinshi* 朝鮮燕行使と朝鮮通信使 [Korean embassies to Beijing and Korean embassies to Japan]. Nagoya-shi: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 2015. 744 pp. ISBN: 978-4815808006.

Introduction

It has been a while since a particular type of East Asian discourse—one that presents a perspective of regional history that goes beyond national history—has begun to take form in Korea and Japan. As a result, a number of such studies on the topic have been published. In Korea, extensive research and organization of materials has been conducted on accounts of journeys during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) to both China—specifically, Beijing—and Japan by the Korean envoys, whose official titles were *yŏnhaengsa* 燕行使 (J. *enkōshi*, Korean embassies to Beijing) and *t'ongshinsa* 通信使 (J. *tsūshinshi*, Korean embassies to Japan), respectively. Their travelogues, both official and unofficial, were separately categorized as *yŏnhaeng-nok* 燕行錄 (accounts of journeys to Beijing written by Korean envoys) and *t'ongshinsaehaeng-nok* 通信使行錄 (accounts of journeys to Japan written by Korean envoys). From early on, Japanese scholars have consistently conducted research on Korean envoys to Japan in the interest of studying Chosŏn-Japan relations, but they have taken hardly any notice of the travel accounts of Korean envoys to China. In that respect, Fuma Susumu's *Chōsen enkōshi to Chōsen tsūshinshi* (Korean embassies to Beijing and Korean embassies to Japan, hereafter *Korean Embassies*) deserves attention. It proposes a fresh method based on research using extensive historical materials on Vietnam and Okinawa, as well as travel accounts to China and Japan, and it poses a broad and challenging question that subverts existing theories.

Fuma Susumu is an expert in the social history of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), but for this project he expanded the horizon of his research to include the history of foreign

relations in East Asia by studying Korean embassies to China and Japan. *Korean Embassies* is a collection of his more than twenty-five years of research in East Asian studies. The collection encompasses his papers on *yŏnhaengsa* and *t'ongshinsa* and on the political geography of premodern East Asia, as well as his research on Chosŏn-dynasty intellectuals of practical learning (*sirhak*), represented by Hong Taeyong, and other research related to today's Okinawa area and Vietnam. Fuma utilizes historical materials on Chosŏn's diplomatic relations that have often been overlooked by scholars outside Korea—including those of the United States and Europe, as well as China and Japan—and presents a fresh perspective on East Asian political geography by putting Chosŏn at the center. For this reason, the significance of *Korean Embassies* should not be underrated. Discussions about viewing Korea, China, and Japan more comprehensively as East Asia have long existed in Korea, but although a considerable number of individual works are presented in specific disciplines, only a few discussions unify those separate efforts. Fuma Susumu's work is worthy of attention in that it takes the lead in that direction. Three points set his work apart from the existing studies.

First, as the title suggests, the book attempts to understand the relationship between *yŏnhaengsa* and *t'ongshinsa* in an integrated manner. This endeavor to find and explicate from the viewpoint of intellectual history the relationship between these two types of diplomatic journey, which have thus far been treated as two separate matters, is a methodology worthy of note. Second, the author not only uses *yŏnhaeng-nok* and *t'ongshinsahaeng-nok* as source material but also draws on a vast body of literature pertaining to foreign relations and exchanges between East Asian countries. This literature includes collections of written conversations, poetry, and drawings that the Korean envoys exchanged with the local intellectuals, public figures, or monks (*P'ildam ch'anghwa-jip*); official transcripts submitted to the Korean royal court after returning from diplomatic missions to Japan (*T'ongshinsa tŭng-nok*); annals of Korea and China; local chronicles; the records of the imperial envoys' visits to Ryukyu (*Sa Yugu-rok*); anthologies of individual scholars; and the like. Studies on Korean envoys to China and Japan have mostly analyzed individual accounts of diplomatic journeys or focused on the diplomatic missions conducted during a particular period. Fuma Susumu presents a new method for approaching records of international East Asian exchanges in a more comprehensive manner, thereby suggesting new possibilities for future research in the field of Korean studies. Lastly, this book also embraces a wider perspective that goes beyond the boundaries of academic disciplines by discussing

politics, diplomacy, scholarship, literature, and philosophy comprehensively.

Despite all of the virtues that set *Korean Embassies* apart from the existing studies, the book displays some limitations, in particular, by making logical leaps or arbitrary interpretations that may have derived from preconceived notions in Japanese academia about the scholarship and philosophy of Chosŏn. Because it is not possible to discuss the vast entirety of the book, I will concentrate on its primary arguments and examine them critically.

Main Arguments of the Book: Their Distance (or Lack Thereof) from the Colonial View of History

Three main arguments wind through this book. First, Fuma Susumu argues that there was no equal-exchange relationship between the emperor-state and the tributary states. The so-called ideal international relationship—that is, the order of tribute and investiture founded on Confucian propriety (K. *ye* 禮)—existed only as an ideology and not in practice. Fuma claims that after the transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Japan had moved away from the sphere of Chinese influence and formed an independent sphere in which it practically had control over Ryukyu. Second, during this time, Korea remained dependent as Chosŏn was still tied down by the Sinocentric order of tribute and investiture and was a vassal to China mentally and politically. Third, whereas Japan relativized Sinocentric Confucianism and achieved political and intellectual freedom, Korea internalized Confucianism and reinforced the so-called Sino-Barbarian dichotomy, which left it in a state of stasis both philosophically and intellectually. Hence, since the eighteenth century, the intellectual capacity of Japan outstripped that of Korea, which turned the tide of intellectual flow from Japan to Korea.

The Fictiveness of the Sinocentric Order of Tribute and Investiture

The tribute-investiture system has long been accepted as the model that explains historical international relations in East Asia. According to Fuma, however, this so-called ideal system of foreign relations—the tributary system founded on Confucian propriety—was something of an ideology rather than reality. To prove this thesis, Fuma discusses Chosŏn and Vietnam. In chapter 2, the author says that although “propriety” has been viewed as an important element in maintaining the tributary order, only the *ideology* of ruling by propriety (K. *yechi* 禮治) has been mentioned, and the actual *condition* of ruling by propriety—in other words, the questioning of the misdeed (K. *munjoe* 問罪), an act that is inseparable from

enforcing propriety—did not enter the discussion. Fuma contrasts the case of Vietnam with that of Korea: China sent its emissaries to intervene in Korea's domestic politics, but it tolerated Vietnam's impropriety. He points out this difference to highlight Korea's dependency on China.

In Fuma's view, it was Korea's voluntary internalization of propriety that enabled China to put restrictions on Korea in the name of propriety.¹ These restrictions brought about political disputes over ceremonial propriety or protocol (K. *yesong* 禮訟) within Korea's domestic politics. Although China only used the logic of propriety as an excuse to put Korea on a leash by raising issues with irrelevant diplomatic documents, tributary items, or the question of investiture, China was in fact acting in its own military and diplomatic interest. Fuma argues that Korea learned this method from China and involved propriety in its domestic political struggles. However, we must take caution with a logic that resembles the colonial view of history reemerging in contemporary discussions of East Asian foreign relations.

Korea's Dependence and Japan's Independence

The logic of the colonial historical view underlies Fuma's book and is applied to analyze the records written by Korean envoys. Using various kinds of historical materials, Fuma tries to prove that whereas Japan succeeded in forming an independent sphere of power after the Ming-Qing transition, Korea remained politically and mentally dependent on China, whose dependency was strained by the Sinocentric order of tribute and investiture. Although Japan has been considered somewhat of a peripheral state in the Sinocentric world order, Fuma tries to argue that this lack of dependence was in fact proof that Japan was actually an independent power that equaled China.

As a backdrop to highlight the independence and military superiority of Japan, Fuma underscores Korea's dependency and stasis by drawing selectively on records of Korean envoys' journeys to Japan and China as the basis for his reasoning. This tendency is quite pronounced in his analysis of the records written by the Korean envoys who visited Beijing during the late Ming dynasty. For instance, in the records written by Cho Hŏn and Hŏ Pong, these envoys criticized late-Ming signs of decadence, including the corruption of government officials, unfair taxation, decline of the imperial academy (*Guozijian*), and the like. However, in submitting the official return report, Cho Hŏn left out any description of the Ming's negative condition and portrayed only its utopian ideals. Fuma maintains that Cho

romanticized the Ming dynasty in order to promote the traditional Chinese ideal in Chosŏn, although this ideal did not actually exist in China at the time (chapter 6). Fuma draws a similar conclusion from *Wang Sujae mundap* (Conversations with Wang Xiucan), a record that the chief envoy Min Chŏng-jung wrote when he encountered and explored the situation of the Qing dynasty during his diplomatic mission to China in 1669. In his account, Min chose to eliminate information about the Qing becoming stabilized under Emperor Kangxi's rule and, instead, selectively described the unsettled political condition of the Qing caused by corruption. In other words, he provided only the information that supported the hope of subverting the Qing and restoring the Ming. Fuma concludes that such narrative twists occurred for either of two reasons—Chosŏn intellectuals were unable to properly recognize the reality of China due to their deeply ingrained Sinocentrism (the so-called Sino-Barbarian dichotomy), or there was a prevailing atmosphere that practically prohibited the envoys from speaking of the true situation even if they recognized it (chapter 7).

Fuma's descriptions imply that Korean Confucian scholars were unaware of their sociopolitical reality and were buried in idealism and ideological rigidity. However, the descriptions are also the product of overgeneralizing. Chŏng Tuwon (1581–1642), an envoy who visited China, met and formed an association with a Jesuit missionary, João Rodriguez (1561–1688), and brought back guns, artillery, an alarm clock, a world map, and so forth. Another envoy, Kim Yuk (1580–1658), had a clear understanding of the political crisis the Ming dynasty was facing and left an account of his diplomatic mission describing and reporting the situation from an objective perspective. An objective, realistic perception of China that would later be seen in the eighteenth-century literature, such as *Tamhŏn yŏngi* (Tamhŏn's account of journey to Beijing) or *Yŏrhailgi* (Jehol diary), had already appeared during this earlier period as well (see Lim 2014). As such, *yŏnhaeng-nok* contained entirely different sets of information or displayed different tendencies, even if they appeared during the same period, depending on the knowledge, interest, and ideological orientation of the author. Hence, generalizing the specific content of travel accounts to China without taking into consideration the historical context in which they were written may risk misrepresenting the reality of the situation.

Undermining the Intellectual Hierarchy

The ideological rigidity and stasis of thought prevailing in Chosŏn that Fuma uses as a premise becomes more pronounced in the latter part of the book, where he compares the

academic interactions that took place between local intellectuals and the Korean diplomatic envoys to China and Japan. He writes, in a somewhat exaggerated manner, that the Korean envoys felt a sense of crisis and desperation that neo-Confucianism was no longer viable in Japan after they encountered the school of ancient learning (*kogaku*) developed by Ito Jinsai and Ogyu Sorai. Ancient learning rejected neo-Confucianism and took on the Qing methodology and trend of Han learning or classical Chinese studies, which valued text and language. Korean diplomatic envoys who visited Japan in 1763 displayed an ambiguous position of praising the Sorai school of ancient learning while also criticizing it as heresy. They did not make much mention of ancient learning after they returned to Korea. Fuma defines this as the “state of mental seclusion” in which Chosŏn, as the proclaimed Little China (*So chunghwa*), was unable to accept a philosophy that sprang from Japan, the so-called land of savages. The logic of this analysis resembles the logic Fuma uses to claim that Korean envoys took a passive stance on their academic exchange with Qing literati and intellectuals. This state of seclusion, he says, was not broken until Korean intellectual Hong Taeyong (pen name Tamhŏn) made an intellectual exchange with Qing literati in 1765. He attributes this change of stance to the impact of ancient learning that *t’ongshinsa* had brought back from Japan in 1763. Fuma argues that during the period when neo-Confucianism, a form of Confucian philosophy that originated in the Ming dynasty, was a respected philosophy in Japan, the intellectual hierarchy between the East Asian countries allowed the ideas to move only from China to Korea and then to Japan (never in the other direction). However, after the transition to the Qing dynasty, this was no longer the case. Fuma even goes on to argue that since 1748, when Korean diplomatic envoys encountered ancient learning (as a new form of philosophy) in Japan, the trend actually reversed, with philosophical ideas from Japan flowing into Korea.

Fuma’s argument regarding this shift may seem like a thoroughly demonstrated conclusion that overturns the existing theory. However, when we take a closer look, we find an arbitrary interpretation that contradicts reality. The author reports that Hong Taeyong went to China after he had been inspired by ancient learning, to which he had been exposed by diplomatic scribe Won Chunggŏ, who had been to Japan. However, according to recent research, Won and Hong became acquainted a few years after Hong had been to China, and Won’s writings on Japan, *Sŭngsa-rok* (Notes of a ride on a raft) and *Hwaguk-ji* (Romance of the Japanese kingdom), were also written after that time (HB Park 2013, 102–104). Hence, it

was *after* Hong's journey to China that he learned about Japanese scholarship from Won, which means that Fuma's argument cannot be substantiated by empirical proof.

Chapter 12 deals with "emotional expression," in which Fuma compares the relation of intellectual thoughts with the expression of emotions in Korean and Japanese literati. The perspective of dealing with *yŏnhaengsa* and *t'ongshinsa* in a comprehensive manner, and the method of treating intellectual history alongside political and diplomatic history, is a fresh approach and, indeed, the most interesting aspect of *Korean Embassies*. It is Fuma's overgeneralization and misreading of Korean intellectual history, due to certain preconceived notions, that causes a collapse in the book's logic.

Fuma describes and analyzes the situation in which Won Chunggŏ visited Japan in 1764 and Hong Taeyong visited China soon thereafter, and had written exchanges with local literati. He says they had the similar experience of witnessing the other party shedding tears and expressing "emotions," and they both admonished those crying to restrain their emotions. Hong, in particular, told the Chinese literati Pan Tingyun and Yan Cheng to refrain from excessive emotional expression. The author uses this incident as the basis for his argument that Hong failed to break away from the neo-Confucian rigorism. On the contrary, he argues that in Japan there was a prevailing trend of underscoring one's emotions, influenced by Sorai's school of ancient learning, which he reads as a sign of the rejection of neo-Confucianism. According to Fuma, it was thanks to his encounter with and the influence of ancient learning that Hong, a typical neo-Confucian scholar, could take a journey to Beijing and ultimately achieve a philosophical transformation by moving away from neo-Confucianism (chapter 14).

Fuma considers evidential learning (*kaozheng xue*) and ancient learning to be more advanced philosophies than neo-Confucianism. However, in East Asia, neo-Confucianism persisted as a mainstream philosophy and competed with evidential learning and ancient learning until East Asia transitioned to the modern period. As is well known, the idea that East Asian philosophy made progress from neo-Confucianism to ancient learning was proposed by Maruyama Masao in his *Nihon seiji shisōshi kenkyū* (Studies in the history of Japanese political thought) in 1952.² Fuma is thus unquestioningly quoting an argument that was proposed more than half a century ago, and extensively cites Maruyama's studies in chapters 10 and 12. Surely, it is true that neo-Confucianism enjoyed the utmost status in the intellectual history of Chosŏn. However, since the eighteenth century, neo-Confucian scholars constantly challenged it to be innovative lest it should become dogmatic and

speculative. They accepted Western learning (*sōhak*), which primarily comprises Western science and Christianity, and the post-eighteenth century neo-Confucianism served as the philosophical basis for adopting the modern culture and products of the West (Kim 2011a, 2011b).³ Without taking into consideration the different philosophical climates of Korea and Japan, Fuma assumes that Korea was in a state of mental seclusion, a world in which emotions had to be restrained.

Then why was it that Pan Tingyun and Yan Cheng shed tears in front of Hong Taeyong when it was only the second time they had met? They met in Kanjōng (Ch. Ganjing), in the Liulichang district of Beijing. In the account of his journey to Beijing, *Tamhōn Yōngi* (1766), Hong mentions that when Pan and Yan saw the Koreans' attire, which was unlike that of the Chinese following Qing custom, they could not hold back their tears. Pan and Yan were Han Chinese who had pent-up frustrations about being ruled by the savage Qing dynasty. In Hong's *Kanjōng p'ildam* (Conversations at Kanjōng), which contains the written conversation between himself and the Chinese literati, the Chinese often lamented the fall of the Ming dynasty and showed strong resentment toward the current Qing dynasty. It is probably a remnant of Ming tradition that still lived on in Korean custom and in the Korean envoys' attitude of upholding the cause of the Ming that impressed the Chinese literati to the extent that they could not hold back their tears and overwhelming emotions.

The Japanese literati also shed tears. The reason that they cried when they parted company with the Chosōn envoys should be considered within Japan's sociohistorical context. Premodern Japan was a society ruled by hereditary military officials (samurai) in which Confucian scholars were very few in number and held the position of petty clan officials whose responsibilities were limited to handling paperwork or other practical administrative affairs. As there was no civil service examination in Japan, these scholars had no chance of raising their social status. When they met with the Korean literati and Confucian scholars who were taking an active part at the front lines of diplomatic affairs, they lamented their situation or rejoiced to find themselves as part of the world of classical Chinese civilization, and they exchanged poetry with Korean envoys.⁴ Disregarding these situations, one can easily misunderstand the different sociohistorical situations in which Korean and Japanese Confucian scholars were placed and overlook or twist the facts. This is where one is reminded that local, historical, and social contexts are extremely important in the study of East Asia.

Empire, Imperialism, and East Asian Studies

Political theorist Hannah Arendt distinguished between empires and imperialism (1973, 125–129). During the Middle Ages, empires were granted the autonomy of language, religion, political structure, and economic activities for the price of tribute and subjection. On the one hand, this was the principle upon which empires could operate. On the other hand, modern imperialism was an expansion of the nation-state in that it forced assimilation with other people and nations, which inevitably raised resistance from the conquered. Chinese empires and their peripheral states were sustained by the “imperial empire,” with which the independence of its various ethnic groups was maintained, as it “permitted them to preserve their own distinct folk cultures, religions, languages, and at times even their own political structures and forms of economic activity” (Karatani 2014, 118, 225).⁵ However, Fuma may have neglected this point. It seems that he understands the premodern international order of East Asia from the perspective of modern sovereign states. From that perspective, stepping into the domain of the Chinese empire may seem no different from losing sovereignty. That is why he often tries to affirm the independence and exceptionality of Japan within East Asian studies.

Studies that focus on Chosŏn embassies to Beijing and Japan have also recently appeared in Chinese scholarship. In particular, Ge Zhaoguang (2011, 2014) has presented the task of understanding China from the periphery through the writings of Chosŏn ambassadors who visited Beijing. He emphasizes that after the Ming-Qing transition, the sense of unity among China, Japan, and Korea weakened and a sense of national identity was strengthened in each country. This idea poses a critical challenge to the argument that Sinocentrism meant that these countries had little to no consideration for each other.

Fuma Susumu and Ge Zhaoguang approach their studies of East Asia from opposite directions, in that the former’s scholarship is aimed at reinforcing Japan-centrism whereas the latter’s research focuses on *yŏnhaeng-nok* as an expedient to keep Sinocentrism in check. However, the two authors are alike in that they both lack an understanding of the principle of empire. Both consider the movement from empire to nation-state as a self-evident path. Yet, today each country tends to retain the appearance of a modern nation-state while the world seems to be becoming a unified cosmopolitan community in which each nation is able to preserve its own culture, religion, language, political structure, and economic activity. This order, in turn, resonates with the principle of empire during the Middle Ages. A prerequisite for true unification is that all members can agree upon a universal principle. In other words,

the key to creating a new world order that goes beyond the nation-state lies with how the world can approach, create, or reconstruct the principle of empire from a new perspective in this globalizing era.

This is where engaging in East Asian studies from a perspective that does not center on one nation or state suggests new possibilities. For instance, the questions arise: How one can understand and explain the actions and thoughts of Chosŏn literati who had strong aspirations toward Chinese civilization and, at the same time, maintained their sense of identity as Korean, or more literally, people of the East (東人)? Furthermore, what did it mean to be Korean in their contemporary world order, where China was ruling the neighboring world with the principle of empire? How did their identity and consciousness transform as the modern world emerged? Providing explanations in response to these questions would lead to a better understanding of the principle of empire, which ultimately would provide clues to imagining a global community in which each nation-state retains its identity. The study of *yŏnhaengsa* and *t'ongshinsa*, which has, until now, been conducted from the perspective of each separate nation, depending on its interests and needs, can finally contribute to laying the foundation for a common ground.

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Notes

- 1 Quoting the seventeenth-century Japanese neo-Confucian philosopher Asami Keisai, “If Confucius had been born in Japan he would have written the *Spring and Autumn Annals* with Japan as the center,” Fuma argues that Japan did not accept the conception of China as the center and Japan as the uncivilized people unconditionally, but interpreted Confucius’s theory of civilized and uncivilized in a different manner, thus rendering powerless this theory, on which the *Annals* is based. However, as Hee-byoung Park points out, although Keisei seemed to defy the conventional notion of China as the civilized nation and the others as barbarians, and “say that each and every nation in the world was its own master... when the relationship shifts to Japan/Korea, he suddenly changed his position.” According to Park, this change “offers a glimpse of the internal contradictions of Keisai’s criticism of the theory of civilized and uncivilized” (HB Park 2004, 74–76).
- 2 Presented in the 1950s, Maruyama’s argument faced criticism by many scholars thereafter. Watanabe Hiroshi (1985), in particular, demonstrated that neo-Confucianism in Japan did not hold social or political importance in Japanese society until the nineteenth century only to face collapse, basically rejecting the premise upon which Maruyama based his argument.

- 3 On the roles of neo-Confucian scholars during the late Edo and Meiji Restoration periods, see Makabe (2007), H. Park (2015), and Miyazima and Bae (2015).
- 4 Sin Yuhan mentions this as the reason for Amenomori Hoshu's tears in *Haeyu-rok* (Record of sea travel).
- 5 See Karatani (2014) for further explanation of the "imperial principle" (*teikoku no genri*).

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