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Diplomatic Ritual as a Power Resource: The Politics of Asymmetry in Early Modern Chinese-Korean Relations

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What explains Korea's success in surviving as an independent state for over 2,000 years, not annexed to China, when it shares a border with this powerful imperial neighbor? I argue that diplomatic ritual can be conducive to managing asymmetric power relations and that the Korean state and the Chinese state prior to the nineteenth century used the diplomatic ritual of investiture in a strategic manner as a signaling mechanism to manage the expectations of each side. Drawing insights from ritual studies, I offer three specific mechanisms: (1) regularity and precision, (2) strategic ambiguity, and (3) the manipulation of symbols, through which the ritualization of power relations reduces the tension arising from the disparity in power. The empirical evidence comes from an investigation of a total of sixteen investiture cases between Chosŏn Korea and Ming China between 1392 and 1644. It shows that the granting and seeking of investiture on both sides was not only a way of signaling their commitment to the status quo, but also a medium of negative soft power through which the stronger side could change the status quo relations to its favor using the symbolic power embedded in the investiture ritual. **Keywords:** diplomatic ritual, asymmetry, power relations, investiture, tribute system, Confucian rites, Chinese-Korean relations, stability, signaling, symbolic power

> *In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turns out to be the same world.*
>
> —*Clifford Geertz (1973, 112)*

Anyone who is interested in the long history of Korea and the equally long history of its relations with China may wonder at one simple fact: How did the Korean state manage and continue to sur-

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vive as an independent state for over two thousand years, not annexed to the Chinese state? After all, it shared a border with this powerful, much larger, and often expansionist imperial neighbor, and history tells us that many previously independent polities experienced annexation by "China." Despite the asymmetry of power between Korea and China throughout history, however, it is undisputed that the norm in the pre-nineteenth-century Chinese-Korean relationship is that the two countries dealt with each other as independent states and maintained foreign relations on the basis of noninterference. If there is one thing that the longevity of this relationship suggests, it is that some kind of diplomatic mechanism that worked for both sides must have existed.

My purpose in this article is to explore the politics of asymmetry in the pre-nineteenth-century Sino-Korean relationship. In international relations theory, asymmetry in power relations is typically associated with instability, therefore, a short-lived state of disequilibrium. Realists, for example, would be quick to invoke Thucydides's famous axiom, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (Thucydides 1996, 352), and may predict the domination of the weak at the whim of the powerful. As Brantly Womack aptly put it, however, "there exist many long-term asymmetric relationships" (Womack 2006, 2).

Then, the question of this article is, *how* did the Korean state and the Chinese state mitigate the tension arising from the asymmetry in power when managing their relations prior to the nineteenth century? My answer is that they *ritualized* their interactions in ways that helped turn the condition of power disparity into the state of taken-for-granted routine. I argue that they used the diplomatic ritual of investiture in a strategic manner to manage expectations of each side by signaling their commitment to the status quo asymmetric relationship. Like many other asymmetric relationships between neighbors in international politics, the fundamental expectations of the Korean state for the Chinese state focused on autonomy and security, while the Chinese expectations had more to do with a show of respect for their greater power and core interests (Womack 2006; Clark 1998). Investiture worked as a remarkably effective tool in managing these expectations, thereby contributing to achieve and reproduce stability despite the asymmetry in power relations.

Embedded in what is known as the "tribute system,"[1] investiture (K. *ch'aekpong*; C. *cefeng*) literally means "a public and symbolic act by which a person conferred a property, office, or right on

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another person by means of a material symbol" (Parisse 2001). In the historical East Asian context, the Chinese rulers' granting of titles to the newly enthroned rulers in neighboring countries symbolized that the latter were given an official rank in the hierarchy of what Fairbank called the "Chinese world order" (1968). Once the ruling elites of Chosŏn Korea internalized neo-Confucianism, the granting and seeking of investiture on both sides was not only a way of signaling their commitment to the status quo, but also a medium of *negative soft power* through which the stronger side was able to change the status quo to its favor using the symbolic power of Confucian morality.[2]

More broadly, my point in this article is that diplomatic ritual matters in international politics as a power resource by helping to stabilize relations between unequal partners. From a functionalist view, diplomatic ritual institutionalizes and regularizes interactions between participants, thereby generating the stability of expectations in bilateral relations in general. Due to its requirements to be repetitive, precise, and appropriate (Kertzer 1988; 8–12; Rosen 1980, 454–455), diplomatic ritual can play the role of a "litmus test" of the bilateral ties. Second, because ritual is "an action wrapped in a web of symbolism" (Kertzer 1988, 9), communicating power relations by way of ritual allows room for both sides to employ strategic ambiguity in pursuing their own national interests. Third, the symbolic power embedded in diplomatic ritual can over time develop into a cost-effective means of coercive diplomacy compared to taking military action.

My argument, therefore, speaks directly to the ongoing debates on whether the tribute system existed in reality aside from ritual and rhetoric, and whether the Chinese empire formed hierarchy in historical East Asia. It is perhaps no wonder that there is a strong argument that we should separate "reality" from "mere ritual" or the "empty rhetoric" of the tribute system, given that the "Chinese world order" itself was a Chinese ideological construct, rhetorically augmented by their historical records over time.[3] When viewed in this binary manner, the logic follows that ritual is ritual, and therefore does not reflect the "reality" of Asian hierarchy.

However, the field of ritual studies has long noted that political reality is created through symbolic means (Bell 1992, 1997; Edelman 1985; Hevia 1995; Kertzer 1988; Muir 2005). A better question to ask is how the symbolic, ritual dimension of the tribute system was interrelated with the material bases of Chinese power. For example, why did China's neighboring states continue to comply with rituals

such as investiture, the gift exchange, or the kowtow? Did the compliance have to do with the threat of Chinese military power or the moral persuasion of Confucian culture? These questions are perhaps nowhere better answered than by exploring the politics of asymmetry between Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910) and Ming China (1368–1644) surrounding the investiture ritual at those times when their national security interests collided against each other. Of their long diplomatic history as neighboring states, I focus on Chosŏn Korea's relations with Ming China, because not only are they regarded as presenting a prototype of the tribute system stability argument (Arrighi 2008; Arrighi, Hamashita, and Selden 2003; Kang 2003, 2010a, 2010b), but it was also a rare historical moment when Ming China considered annexing Chosŏn Korea after Japan invaded Korea in the late sixteenth century (1592–1598).

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. I first discuss my approach to the relationship between ritual and power in international relations. In the second section, I critically examine the concept of *sadae* (serving the great) (K. *sadae*; C. *shida*) as Chosŏn Korea's central foreign policy principle with Ming, and note that investiture was a mechanism adopted to reduce the tension arising from the bilateral asymmetry of power. In the third section, I shed light on the ways the symbolism behind the investiture ritual could be used as a medium of negative soft power for Chinese coercive diplomacy. It is here that I examine the four out of a total of sixteen investiture cases of Chosŏn kings where Ming raised a question regarding the recommendation of the Chosŏn throne. I conclude by discussing the argument's implications for today's bilateral relations between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Diplomatic Ritual and Power

Diplomatic rituals are ubiquitous in international relations. Even a casual observer of the world of diplomacy is likely to notice that states have always interacted with their counterparts through highly structured and standardized sequences carried out at certain places and times that are themselves of special symbolic meaning (Kertzer 1988, 9). Even in today's rapidly changing globalized world, it is an unchanging element of training for career diplomats, agents of diplomacy, to learn how to conduct etiquette and procedure properly. In extant international relations theory, however, the diplo-

matic rituals seem to be disregarded as "mere symbolic," having little to do with international outcomes. The relation between diplomatic ritual and power is viewed as minimal at best, and as such, remains understudied.[4]

I challenge this view and argue that diplomatic rituals are inherently political, that is, relating to the question of power in international politics. Ritual studies scholars have long argued for the significance of symbols in power politics (Bell 1992, 1997; Edelman 1985; Grimes 1996; Kertzer 1988; Muir 2005). According to Catherine Bell (1992, 197), "ritualization is first and foremost a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations." David Kertzer (1988) notes not just the powerful but the weak manipulate symbols to influence the political process to their favor. Simply put, I argue that diplomatic ritual is often employed strategically as a tool to manage the asymmetry in power relations between unequal partners, and that it was employed as such in the pre-nineteenth-century Sino-Korean relationship.

While most theorizing in international relations typically focuses on the relations only among great powers, some in recent years have sought to show that we should not treat an asymmetric relationship as abnormal. It is perhaps no coincidence that these scholars have acknowledged a possible impact that ritual, symbols, and rhetoric can have on managing asymmetric power relations. Womack (2006), for example, argues that asymmetry creates systemic differences in the fundamental expectations of each side in the relationship, which can lead to robust but often problematic relations between the stronger and weaker states. The diplomatic rituals help manage the asymmetry by "pay[ing] homage to the importance of the relationship and the importance of shared interests" and can "keep the tensions of the relations within the bounds of normalcy" (Womack 2006, 90–91).

Another literature relevant to the present study is on international hierarchy (Hobson and Sharman 2005; Kang 2010a, 2010b; Lake 2009; Wendt and Friedheim 1995), which views the asymmetry in power as a source of *authority*, which, in the words of Robert Dahl, is defined as "the right to command, and the correlative obligation to obey the person who issues the command" (Dahl 1989, 42). David Lake (2009) shows that unequal powers can enter into a social contract of authority relations in which both sides are deemed to benefit mutually, if not equitably. Here "acts of symbolic obeisance both

affirm individual deference to authority and signal the community of subordinates that others respect that authority" (Lake 2009, 12).

Underlying these arguments is that diplomatic ritual helps manage asymmetric relations as a *signaling* mechanism for unequal partners to affirm their commitment to the status quo of their relations. Drawing insights from the broader ritual studies literature, my analysis on the pre-nineteenth-century Sino-Korean relationship expands on these theories and offers three specific mechanisms in which the diplomatic ritual is conducive to managing the asymmetry in power relations: (1) regularity and precision, (2) strategic ambiguity, and (3) the manipulation of symbols.

Regularity and Precision

The diplomatic rituals can signal or communicate the participants' commitment to the status quo, because they are "an act regularly repeated in a set precise manner" (Merriam-Webster 2010). The participating states are able to expect the developments and outcomes of their interactions with counterparts, and tend not to attempt to alter the results under normal circumstances. The diplomatic rituals assert something about the state of affairs but do not necessarily try to change it (Roosen 1980, 454–455). Due to this status quo–prone nature of diplomatic rituals, they not only help to stabilize the expectations of the participating states about the state of their relations, but can work as a litmus test, signaling when the relations are out of equilibrium. When the diplomatic ritual that has been taken for granted by both sides is breached, it is likely to send the message that the fundamental expectations of either or both sides are not met, requiring attention from the participating states.

In the context of the Chinese-Korean relations in early modern East Asia, Confucian rites mandated highly institutionalized diplomatic protocol and procedure when it came to matters such as when and how to dispatch and receive an embassy requesting/granting investiture and how to write state letters in a set, precise manner.[5] For example, by the Chosŏn-Ming period, in addition to the embassy requesting investiture (K. *chuch'ŏngsa*), Korea's three-times-a-year regular embassies included (1) New Year celebrations (K. *chŏngjosa*), (2) the Ming emperor's birthday (K. *sŏngjŏlsa*), and (3) the Ming imperial princes' birthdays (K. *ch'ŏnch'usa*) (Chŏng et al. 2007, 23–24). According to the Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty (*Mingshi*) accounts on Korea (2004),[6] the standardized and repetitive procedure of investiture required the Chosŏn throne to

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inform the Ming emperor of the passing of the king with a request for investiture of the crown prince as the new king. The Ming emperor then granted the posthumous title to the deceased king and the title of king to the former crown prince.

The Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty, *Sillok,* illustrates that Chosŏn officials often referred to the *Collected Statutes of the Great Ming*, the *Collected Rituals of the Great Ming*, and the *Five Rituals* to perform investiture correctly. The observance of these rites helped Chosŏn Korea and Ming China "know what to expect." When investiture was performed properly, Chosŏn Korea and Ming China knew that their relations were generally on good terms and met the expectations of the other side. On the other hand, Ming suspicion and distrust of Korean commitment to the status quo was similarly expressed over matters of granting investiture as in the case of the Ming founder Hongwu's refusal to invest the Chosŏn king T'aejo with an imperial seal and edict (Park 2002).

Strategic Ambiguity

Symbols do not stand for one thing only. Since diplomatic ritual conveys messages through symbolism, it leaves critical room for strategic ambiguity and flexibility for domestic actors to interpret them in a manner that suits their political needs. At the same time, ritual brings the quality of "what is appropriate," or "what is morally right" into power relations, which contributes to the reduction of tension in asymmetry by legitimizing differences and by removing arbitrariness. J. G. A. Pocock (1973, 43–44) characterizes Confucian rituals as follows:

> Society is governed by a comprehensive code of rituals (*li*). Men in a given situation, by following the ritual prescribed as appropriate to it, manifest both actually and symbolically the ways in which men in that situation ought to behave, the relations between men in that situation which ought to exist. In theory, there is a ritual for every conceivable situation and a complete code of ritual behavior for persons in every grade of society to whom the rituals apply. . . . The performance of *li* is the maintenance of order.

To put it differently, the tension arising from the reality of asymmetric power is mitigated, because the weak as well as the powerful can justify their subordinate position on the basis of their own interpretation rather than the one imposed upon them by the powerful. Ming China's superior position vis-à-vis Chosŏn Korea was justified

in *universal* ritual in terms of Confucian cosmology, and Chosŏn Korea had little reason to conceive of its bilateral relations with China in terms of "submission" or "dependence" as we think of these terms today.[7]

The symbolism behind the investiture ritual was such that the titles were granted not necessarily by *the person* acting on behalf of Ming China's national interest, but more *the office*, "midway between the mass of mankind and the universal power of Heaven" (Fairbank 1942, 131). While the kowtow is viewed as an act of submission today in its most visual form, in the political universe of Ming and its neighbor Chosŏn, the Chinese emperor himself performed his own ceremonial part representing mankind in the cosmos (Fairbank 1942, 131–132; Hevia 1995, 9–25). In other words, as a Confucianized society Chosŏn Korea's interpretation and construction of the meaning of investiture did not hurt or threaten its identity, which at least partly explains its more accommodating behavior vis-à-vis China compared with its predecessor Korean states such as Koryŏ or Silla.

The Manipulation of Symbols

Refuting the dichotomy between the symbolic and the real, ritual studies scholars have argued that ritual is not simply a mask for power, but is itself power (Bell 1992, 194–195). Power is not just about having more material capacity to make decisions over others. As David Lockwood (quoted in Marshall 1998, 520) notes, "in one sense power is most powerful if the actor can, by manipulation, prevent issues from coming to the point of decision at all." Political actors can manipulate popular symbols to enhance their authority, and in the process what is signified by those symbols can become a part of people's sense of reality over time. S. R. F. Price (1984) shows that "the Roman emperor" was *constructed* through the endless embassies from cities to emperors. In such an imperial cult, "the religious language used in diplomatic contexts further weakens the conventional distinction between politics and the imperial cult" (Price 1984, 243).

The Chinese empire formed a hierarchy in early modern East Asia to the extent that China's neighbors took for granted the Chinese view of reality as the legitimate vision about how the world *ought to* work and followed Confucian practices embodying such symbolism (Lee, 2013). The diplomatic ritual of investiture between Chosŏn Korea and Ming China provides strong evidence of how

"mere symbolic acts" designed to express China's superior material power came to constitute *part of the reality* of the China-centered hierarchy. Chinese *power* in the context of early modern Sino-Korean relations tended to come in a more nuanced form of negative soft power, because after the mid-Chosŏn period, in Korea investiture came to symbolize universal Confucian moral authority, without which Korean kings were made vulnerable to attacks from their own political opponents from within Korea.

When embedded in repetitive diplomatic rituals over a long period of time, the symbols of Chinese superiority came to define the social, cultural contexts of Chosŏn Korea through the process known as the Confucianization of Korean society (Deuchler 1992; Haboush 2001). Therefore, Chosŏn Korea's participation in the Ming-centered hierarchy should not be measured solely by the degree to which China effectively controlled Korean behavior at the expense of its autonomy. Rather, a better approach is to ask in what ways Korea would have handled its China policy differently in the absence of such diplomatic ritual.

Historical Background: "Lips and Teeth"

To illuminate the arguments presented above, we should first examine Chosŏn Korea's *sadae* (serving the great) policy vis-à-vis Ming, which laid the foundation of Korea's endorsement of a Ming-centered hierarchy. Under this policy of "serving the great," with the exception of the first king, T'aejo (r. 1392–1398),[8] all of the Chosŏn kings from the second king, Chŏngjong, through the seventeenth king, Injo (r. 1623–1649), between 1398 and 1644 received investiture from Ming China,[9] and used the title *king* (K. *kugwang*; C. *guowang*) to signify their status as a tributary state of the Ming empire. By the time Chosŏn Korea was founded in 1392, investiture had already been at the heart of Korea's bilateral exchanges with the Chinese state for some 1,000 years (Bang et al. 2005; Kim 1999, 167–208, 298–317, 400–409; Sim 2002). This is intriguing, because over the course of the early modern period, Japan accepted investiture only once, when the retired third shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu received the title *king of Japan* from the Ming empire in 1404.

To explore why successive Chosŏn Korean kings received investiture from the Ming emperors, it is worth considering briefly the historical background against which this policy was born, going back to the harsh subjection of Koryŏ Korea (918–1392) to the Mon-

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gol empire (1271–1368) in the thirteenth century. Amid the Mongol conquest of China and the building of an empire twice the size of the Roman empire, the Mongols invaded Koryŏ Korea in 1231. After a brief period of suing for peace, Korea decided to fight and embarked on an armed resistance against the Mongols, which lasted for three decades. After a total of six invasions from the Mongols, Korea submitted in 1259 on condition that the Mongols withdraw their army from Korean soil.

In light of a bird's-eye survey of pre-nineteenth-century Sino-Korean relations, these relatively brief Koryŏ-Mongol relations represented unprecedented "out-of-equilibrium" periods during which outright imperial practices breached the traditional boundaries of autonomy and deference of the tribute system. One such example of this aberration was Kubilai Khan's order to get Korea involved in his Japan campaigns in 1274 and 1281. The Mongols' interference in Korea's domestic political affairs was such that they took advantage of the investiture to replace the incumbent king of Korea with a new one to their liking; other Mongol demands involved sending hostages, submitting population registers, establishing post stations, providing provisions, and supporting the Mongol army (Herthorn 1963; Kim 1999, 507–521).

When the late fourteenth century witnessed a sea change in the security landscape of East Asia with the founding of the Ming empire in 1368 that replaced the previous Mongol empire, newly rising neo-Confucian forces in Koryŏ Korea welcomed Chinese resurgence under Ming. However, Koryŏ-Ming relations were not without problems. Ming demanded the northeastern frontier of Korea that had been seized back from the Mongols by Koryŏ in 1356. Upon Ming's ultimatum in 1388, Koryŏ Korea decided to wage a military campaign against Ming. In a dramatic turn of events, however, Yi Sŏng-kye (later the Chosŏn founder T'aejo), who was on his way to mount an invasion into Manchuria, turned his army around, declared the futility of attacking Ming, and instead overthrew the Koryŏ government.

It was against this backdrop that the new Chosŏn Korean state's foreign policy was to be built upon the Confucian principles of *sadae* with Ming China and *kyorin* ("neighborly relations") with Japan and the Jurchens in the north. Even those who are critical of the Fairbankian tribute system model have noted that Chosŏn Korea's relations with Ming were something of an ideal tributary relationship (Clark 1998, 272; Toby 1984, 172). While it is true that Chosŏn-Ming relations enjoyed a *longue durée* stability under the frame-

work of the tribute system, it is also important to recognize that they went through periods of conflict as well as stability. Roughly speaking, throughout most of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, we find some two hundred years of relative stability and peace in bilateral relations. However, there were two periods of serious diplomatic crisis and tension, which came at the very beginning and at the end of Chosŏn-Ming relations. They included the reigns of the first king, T'aejo (r. 1392–1398), in the late fourteenth century, and of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth kings, Sŏnjo (r. 1567–1608), Kwanghae (r. 1608–1623), and Injo (r. 1623–1649), in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Before looking at these specific cases of bilateral stability and conflict in conjunction with investiture, I turn to an in-depth look at the *sadae* policy, which guided Korea's policy toward Ming throughout 250 years of their shared diplomatic history.

The *Sadae* Policy: Serving Korean Interests by Serving the Great

According to the prevailing view of "*sadaejuŭi* (*sadae*-ism) Korea," Chosŏn Korea recognized the superior moral position of Ming, and the Confucian cultural belief in the Ming emperor's Mandate of Heaven, to such a degree that those beliefs dictated Chosŏn Korea's foreign policy behavior. For example, just before the fall of Ming, a scene from the 1636 Manchu invasion of Korea depicts Chosŏn's "loyalty" to Ming in a most dramatic way. The rising Manchu forces (or the Jurchens, later the Qing empire) had demanded that Korea sever its tributary relations with Ming in the early 1630s under the threat of invasion. Korea's refusal to switch and receive the investiture from the "barbarian" Manchus, which resulted in the second Manchu invasion in 1636, apparently hardened the image of Korea as a loyal "vassal" of the Ming.

However, quite contrary to this widely held culturalist image, many historians of Chosŏn politics and diplomacy have demonstrated that such ideologue-type *sadaejuŭi* behavior was an exception rather than the norm in Chosŏn-Ming relations; interpreting "serving the great" so rigidly to such an extent to compromise its national security was found only after the mid-Chosŏn period and the Imjin War (Kye 2009, chap. 2; Yi 2005, 198–214; Yu 2004; Yun 1998). The concept of *sadae kyorin* ("serving the great, neighborly relations") in fact had historically been adopted by the Chinese states as well as the Korean

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states, including Koryŏ Korea, to deal with the situation of power disparity vis-à-vis their neighboring states. The term first appeared in Mencius when the fourth-century B.C.E. Chinese Confucian thinker taught the following: "A man who serves a small state as the great power is one that enjoys Heaven's Reason; A man who serves a great power as the small state is one who shows deference to Heaven's Reason. He who enjoys Heaven's Reason will protect the world under Heaven; He who shows deference to Heaven's Reason will protect his state" (Mencius quoted in Yi 2005, 198). According to Sim Jae-sŏk (2002), Koryŏ Korea's longevity as a state (918–1392) was in part attributed to its astute use of the investiture ritual to regulate power relations, "serving" different actors depending on the distribution of power among them. Until the Mongol conquest of China put an end to the multistate system in Northeast Asia, Koryŏ Korea had changed the object of the *sadae* several times, and received the titles from the Sung, the Liao, and the Jin, corresponding to the shifting balance of power in the region.

Chosŏn Korea's *sadae* policy, therefore, was hardly a new invention of Yi Sŏng-kye, and had its philosophical and historical roots in universal Confucian statecraft as a guiding logic of playing power politics skillfully to protect the state. Fused with the cultural rhetoric and ritual of Confucianism, the *sadae* policy was a nuanced, practical strategy of addressing the condition of the superior Ming's material power from the weaker side of the asymmetric relationship. To Chosŏn Korea, requesting and receiving investiture wrapped the reality of power disparity with Ming in the Confucian moral hierarchy, thereby creating room for strategic ambiguity for Korea to pursue its own national interests of autonomy while expressing deference to Ming in a manner that was natural to their Confucian identity.

A close examination of one of the earliest interactions between the Chosŏn founder T'aejo Yi Sŏng-kye and the Ming founder Hongwu in the 1390s shows that the *sadae* policy was a mechanism of managing relations between the two sides of unequal power, signaling Korea's acceptance and respect for the greater power of Ming, and Ming's assurance of noninterference in Korea. According to Yu Keun-ho (2004, 25),

> Korea's *li* conduct of *sadae* toward China, which was expressed as East Asian diplomatic protocols of tribute and investiture, was neither the heart-felt willingness toward the China-centered ideology (K. *hwa-i*; C. *hua-i*) on the part of Korea, nor the binding treaty

> forcefully imposed by China. Rather, it came as a convergence of interests between the two countries as China expected Korea to be friendly and to abide by Chinese diplomatic protocol while Korea utilized this mechanism to deal with a more powerful neighbor based on its own judgment of the strategic environment in the region.[10]

Therefore, investiture was a medium through which mutually beneficial arrangements of what Clark called "the rules of reciprocity" were carried out (Clark 1998, 272–300). The Korean side "bought security and autonomy by forestalling Chinese intervention," while the Chinese side expected Korea "to act like a loyal vassal state, posing no threat and supporting Chinese security objectives in the area" (Clark 1998, 273).

Therefore, when T'aejo Yi Sŏng-kye founded the Chosŏn in 1392, he immediately declared the *sadae* policy to Ming and spared no efforts to tighten bilateral ties to receive investiture from the Ming emperor. Yi founded Chosŏn Korea through a military coup in the midst of intense power struggles against the previous Koryŏ government's anti-Yi factions (Kim 2006). Under such circumstances, the *sadae* policy toward the Ming was not only a result of the strength of neo-Confucianism during the late Koryŏ period, but also was an instrument to consolidate a newly founded state through external validation of autonomy and noninterference by the most powerful state in its political universe (Kang 1997, 49–54; Kim 1999, 581). The Ming investiture also had a domestic politics dimension, whose logic is nothing new to those of us who study politics: in a power struggle situation where multiple actors vie for office or rulership, an external validation given to one single actor from someone in a position of higher authority can be of great political value. Thus, the Ming emperor Hongwu's refusal to invest the Chosŏn king T'aejo with an imperial seal (K. *insin*; C. *yinxin*) and an imperial edict (K. *komyŏng*; C. *gaoming*) created a sense of crisis within the new government, because they were regarded as symbols of Ming's commitment to its side of the bargain.

Although early Chosŏn-Ming relations during the reign of the Ming founder Hongwu turned out to be rocky over the protocol of state letter writing, his initial response to T'aejo Yi Sŏng-kye's request for an endorsement of the founding of Chosŏn Korea indicated that the Korean expectations of autonomy were by and large met. He affirmed the time-honored Chinese tradition of a "hands-off" policy of noninterference toward the Korean states. Upon T'aejo's request for an endorsement of his new state, Hongwu wrote in

response that "Korea is located remote in the eastern area away from China, therefore not a land where China can rule" (*Mingshi* 2004, 34–35).[11]

On the Chinese side, from as early as the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), the origin of investiture ritual had to do with its own practical judgment on the limitations and costs of projecting material power beyond its border. The Han emperors' granting of position titles of its own government to rulers in the neighboring independent polities was a way of filling the gap between the reality of possessing insufficient power for centralized, direct control over them, and the theory of ruling the known world from the position of the Son of Heaven (Bang et al. 2005, 15–65). Each time Korea requested the title king from the Chinese emperor, it affirmed that Korea would not pose a military threat from its northeast border near Manchuria. The strategic importance of Korean embassies' seeking investiture became salient, especially during power transitions in China as in the Ming-Qing transition during the early seventeenth century when multiple actors competed for dominance in the Manchuria area. The symbolic act of Korea's acknowledging one actor as the Son of Heaven over the others in such circumstances could have significant strategic implications: the reassurance on the part of Korea that it would not form an alliance with the adversaries of the country of the Son of Heaven (Han 2000; Yun 1998).

The arrival of the Korean embassy in the capital also had a domestic politics dimension on the Chinese side. As in the case of the third Ming emperor Yongle, it was used as a valuable political asset to enhance the domestic authority of the emperor vis-à-vis his rivals and the wider audiences (Park 2002, 117–166). Therefore, the strategic ambiguity of investiture for the Chinese side was such that ensuring Korea's symbolic acknowledgment of their superior position as the Son of Heaven meant Korean reassurance that they were committed to the status quo and would not pose security challenges on their border. These expectations were managed by the reiteration of investiture ritual between the two sides.

The Manipulation of Symbols and Negative Soft Power

To evaluate the actual workings of investiture when their national interests collided with each other, I now investigate the cases where the investiture ritual did not follow the usual pattern of Ming's grant-

ing of the titles as requested by the Chosŏn throne in a "business as usual" way. Of the sixteen investiture cases of Chosŏn kings, there were four cases where Ming raised a question about granting the title of king.[12] They include the ascendancies of the first king, T'aejo (r. 1392–1398); the eleventh king, Chungjong (r. 1506–1544); the fifteenth king, Kwanghae (r. 1608–1623); and the sixteenth king, Injo (r. 1623–1649).[13] Looking into the circumstances of exactly why and when these delays or initial rejections were made enables us to examine whether and in what ways ritual was used strategically as a power resource.

Looking at these investiture cases, it becomes apparent that there are two general trends when it comes to the role of investiture in Chosŏn-Ming relations. First, as shown in Table 1, Ming did not seek to control Korean behavior through investiture every time it wanted some concession from its smaller partner, which means that the boundaries of deference and autonomy were generally respected. Throughout the Ming period, China granted the investiture to the successive Chosŏn kings mostly as requested, and the practice remained as "ritual" mandated by Confucian rites, as it tended not to arbitrarily intervene to manipulate the succession of Chosŏn kings at its whim (Kim 1999, 587). For example, throughout the Ming period, there were a total of thirteen instances where Ming demanded troops from Korea for its own purposes to have them engage in military campaigns against either the Jurchens or the Mongols (Kye 2009). There is little evidence, however, that Ming took advantage of the investiture ritual, such as making the granting of the titles conditional upon the dispatch of troops. When Ming requested the fourth king, Sejong (r. 1418–1450), to dispatch some 100,000 Korean troops to the Liaodong area of Manchuria in 1449, Korea declined by replying that it would fulfill its obligation as a tributary state by defending its own territory against the Jurchens and the pirates (Kye 2009, 95). The only exceptions were during the reigns of kings T'aejo and Injo at the beginning and at the end of their bilateral relations, which I will discuss below.

Second, as summarized in Table 2, for all of these four cases, Ming's explanations for initial rejection or delay were justified on the basis of Confucian rites or precedents from the past. In the case of the eleventh king, Chungjong, it is difficult to view this as Ming's attempt at manipulating investiture to influence the behavior of the Korean government (*Chunjong sillok,* vol. 6, September 21, 1506; *Mingshi* 2004, 44).[14] The politics behind the investiture of the fif-

Table 1 Choson Kings and Ming Investiture

Kings (reign)	Ming's Investiture re: Chosŏn's Request	Ming's Explanation for Delay or Rejection	Sources of Chosŏn-Ming Conflict
1st T'aejo (r. 1392–1398)	Rejected; no imperial seal edict	Derogatory puns in diplomatic letters	Control over the Liaodong area
2nd Chŏngjong (r. 1398–1400)	Yes		
3rd T'aejong (r. 1400–1418)	Yes		
4th Sejong (r. 1418–1450)	Yes		
5th Munjong (r. 1450–1452)	Yes		
6th Tanjong (r. 1452–1455)	Yes		
7th Sejo (r. 1455–1468)	Yes		
8th Yejong (r. 1468–1469)	Yes		
9th Sŏngjong (r. 1469–1494)	Yes		
10th Yŏnsan'gun (r. 1494–1506)	Yes		
11th Chungjong (r. 1506–1544)	Delayed	"Wait until the former king passes away"	
12th Injong (r. 1544–1545)	Yes		
13th Myŏngjong (r. 1545–1567)	Yes		
14th Sŏnjo (r. 1567–1608)	Yes		Ming participation in the Imjin War (1592–1598); increasing Ming demands
15th Kwanghae (r. 1608–1623)	Delayed	Prince Kwanghae is not the eldest son (re: request for the title *crown prince*); diplomatic letter requesting investiture unclear (re: request for the title *king*)	The rise of the Manchus; Ming request for troops
16th Injo (r. 1623–1649)	Delayed	Injo deposed the former king	The rise of the Manchus; Ming request for troops

Notes: Clark (1998, 290) states that the Ming withheld investiture twice on the occasions of Sejo and Chungjong. However, I do not include the ascendance of Sejo, because Ming accepted and granted investiture to Sejo based on his claim that the sixth king, Tanjong, had been too ill to handle government affairs.

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Table 2 Cases of Ming's Rejection or Delay in Chosŏn-Ming Investiture

Ascendances	Accounts from Mingshi: Confucian Rites	Reality Behind the Situation
1st king T'aejo (r. 1392–1398)	There are derogatory puns in diplomatic letters.	Ming suspicion— T'aejo's government sought to control the Liaodong area
11th king Chungjong (r. 1506–1544)	The investiture of a new king should happen after the former king passes away.	Korea had deposed the former king.
15th prince Kwanghae (r. 1608–1623)	The title of king should go to the eldest son.	Ming's internal politics including the imperial succession issue made it reluctant to invest Kwanghae with the title *crown prince* and later the title *king*
16th king Injo (r. 1623–1649)	The former king was deposed.	Ming granted investiture to facilitate Korea's dispatch of troops for its fight against the Manchu Qing.

teenth king, Kwanghae, is more complicated. The decision not to invest Kwanghae with the title crown prince (which he never received) and the delays in granting him with the title king had to do with Ming's own internal politics surrounding the imperial succession. Ming's rejection was not necessarily arbitrary, but Kwanghae was able to receive the title only by paying handsome bribes to the Ming envoys, which had become chronic problems in post–Imjin War Chosŏn-Ming relations (Han 1999, 187–195).

When Confucian Rites and National Interests Collided

What happened when their national interests directly collided? The remaining two cases of the first king, T'aejo, and the sixteenth king, Injo, hold the key to understanding how investiture was used as a medium of negative soft power and as a tool for coercive diplomacy through the manipulation of symbols. These two cases show that China's hands-off approach to Korea lasted as long as Korea did not threaten its interests in the Liaodong area in Manchuria. Historians have noted the logic of "lips and teeth" or *sunmang ch'ihan* (if you lose your lips, your teeth will catch cold) as a central notion guiding China's strategic interest toward the Korean state. The notion refers to the geostrategic situation in which China's security interest vis-à-

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vis the Korean peninsula lies in the defense of Liaodong near its Korean border in Manchuria as a gateway to Beijing, to keep it safe from any hostile forces. Thus, *Mingshi* describes Chosŏn as "a vassal that makes a fence to China" (*Mingshi* 2004, 49).[15]

The First King, T'aejo: Korea's Liaodong Campaign and the Ming "Derogatory Puns"

It was in this context of competition over Liaodong that the Ming emperor Hongwu declined to invest the first king, T'aejo, with an imperial seal and edict despite repeated requests from the new state of Chosŏn. Between 1393 and 1398, the Ming emperor Hongwu complained on three occasions over derogatory puns in the diplomatic letters from Chosŏn, thereby triggering diplomatic crises. He held the Korean embassies hostage in Nanking and ordered the letter writers to be sent to him (Park 2002). The rejection letter from the Ming government stated that although Chosŏn appeared polite and sincere as it sent embassies on celebratory occasions, it was indeed rude as shown in the letters requesting investiture, which contained derogatory puns (Park 2002, 10; *T'aejo sillok*, vol. 9, March 29, 1396; *Mingshi* 2004, 34–35).[16]

The Ming rejections were masked under the appropriateness of Confucian rites, but the Ming emperor Hongwu's intention was to remove Chŏng To-jŏn, who was one of the letter writers and the leading figure in Korea's preparations for the Liaodong expedition campaign (Park 2002, 33–63). Hongwu complained in one of his letters to Chosŏn that Chŏng To-jŏn was no good to the Chosŏn king, and warned that unless the king heeded his warning, Chŏng would be a source of disaster or misfortune in the future (*T'aejo sillok*, vol. 11, April 17, 1397). According to Park Wŏn-ho (2002, 33–63), the Ming emperor was primarily concerned about Korea's close relationship with the Jurchens in Liaodong when the Ming government itself could not afford to pay attention to them. Having learned about Korea's plan for Liaodong, he used the derogatory puns as a reason not to grant investiture and demanded instead that Chŏng To-jŏn be sent to him.

The Sixteenth King, Injo: Ming's Decline and the Manipulation of Symbols

The next big diplomatic crises in Chosŏn-Ming relations came with Japanese general Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasions of Korea (1592–

1598) in the late sixteenth century. The Hideyoshi invasions of Korea, known as the Imjin War, posed direct security challenges to Ming from its northeastern border in the defense of Beijing. In response to Hideyoshi's mobilization of the entire country of Japan with 158,800 expeditionary men (Elisonas 1991, 272), by the time the war ended, the Ming government ended up sending some 100,000 Chinese troops to fight in an alliance of 50,000 to 60,000 Korean men (Osa 1969, 233, quoted in Kang 1997, 107).

As noted earlier, the investiture ritual had taken on a coercive nature by the fifteenth king Kwanghae's reign, as the declining Ming increasingly resorted to coercion toward Korea to extract resources (Han 1999, 31–186). It is important to note the reign of Kwanghae and the ascendance of the sixteenth king, Injo, coincided with a growing voice within the Ming to place Korea under Ming China's direct control. In 1608, Ming official Li Chengliang, after learning that the emperor decided against the granting of the title for Kwanghae, recommended "launching an attack on Chosŏn Korea to annex it as a part of China, now that the country [was divided] fighting against each other amongst brothers" (*Kwanghaegun ilgi*, vol. 6, July 29, 1608). The recommendation did not materialize, but as Ming's war-fighting capacity was being further challenged by the Manchus in 1619, a similar proposal advocating "protecting and taking care of Chosŏn" was put forward by Ming officials, which stated that it "would be a mistake not to receive help [from Chosŏn Korea] and Ming should prevent the country from becoming a stepping stone of the enemy after rescuing it from the hands of a strong Japan with all of Ming resources and energy" (*Kwanghaegun ilgi*, vol. 145, October 3, 1619).

After a short delay and investigation, Ming made a final decision to *grant* the investiture to Injo, *despite knowing* that he ascended to the throne by forcefully deposing Kwanghae, who had been previously invested by the Ming emperor. In fact, there was a strong argument within the Ming government criticizing Injo's act of deposing the former king on the basis of Confucian morality. Some even claimed that Ming should take action to suppress "the rebels" who took the throne away from Kwanghae to establish a code of morals (*Mingshi* 2004, 69).[17] However, Ming's final decision was to take advantage of Injo's need for the Ming investiture and to make Injo's investiture *conditional upon* his promise of greater support for Ming's war efforts against the Manchus (later the Qing empire) (*Mingshi* 2004, 69–70).[18]

Before and After: Why Did Korea Respond Differently to Ming Coercion?

If Ming used the ritual of investiture as a tool of coercive diplomacy vis-à-vis Korea when facing the prospect of its inability to protect the Liaodong area, what is most interesting are Chosŏn Korea's strikingly different responses in the two cases of the first king, T'aejo, and the sixteenth king, Injo, to the Ming's rejection of requested investiture. Why did Ming's coercive manner toward T'aejo strengthen Korea's resolve to fight for the Liaodong expedition campaign (Park 2002, 96–111), while for Injo, it went in a different direction of concession and a promise to support Ming's war efforts knowing it would risk invasion from the Manchus? The comparison is significant, because both kings came into power by way of revolution and by force, both on the basis of the *sadae* policy.

By Injo's reign in the early seventeenth century, the symbolism of receiving the title king from the Ming emperor had greater implications for Korean kings' domestic political authority as the society itself had become more Confucianized. More Korean ruling elites deepened internally their identification with neo-Confucianism and the *sadae*. Just prior to the outbreak of the Imjin War during the reign of the fourteenth king, Sŏnjo, a great number of neo-Confucian scholar-bureaucrats called the *sarim* scholars were brought in to fill important government posts. Most of them were pro-Ming Confucian scholar-bureaucrats whose worldview tended to be less tolerant toward other religions or schools of thought while rigorously applying neo-Confucian doctrine in the realm of political life. Against the backdrop of factional strife and the ideological rigidity of Korean politics from the late sixteenth century (Kang 1997, 131), one distinctive feature of factional strife was to use the moral standards of neo-Confucian thought against the Korean kings and other factions.

In that ideologically charged environment, political actors in Chosŏn's internal power struggle used Confucian symbolism as a weapon to attack the incumbent fifteenth king Kwanghae. Therefore, the symbolism of receiving investiture from the Ming emperor was a form of soft power in a negative sense, because Ming's use of investiture as a tool for coercive diplomacy was in part made possible because of Korea's ideological domestic politics environment.

After the Imjin War, the Confucian idea of *jaejojiŭn*, literally meaning "repaying the debt of gratitude to the Ming Empire for res-

cuing Korea from Japan," became the theme of bilateral relations. According to Han Myŏng-ki (1999), despite negative views on Ming behavior within the Chosŏn government during and after the war, the fourteenth king, Sŏnjo, took advantage of the symbolism of the Ming emperor to restore his debilitated domestic legitimacy as a king during the war. Just as Sŏnjo used the *jaejojiŭn* in an attempt to enhance his domestic position, Injo's deposing of Kwanghae and his ascendance to the throne were justified on the same basis that Kwanghae did not follow the *jaejojiŭn*.

In the face of a shifting balance of power between Ming and the rising Manchus, Kwanghae had in fact struck a balancing act between them, making sure not to anger either of them.[19] However, Kwanghae's diplomatic skill in not siding with the weakening Ming empire against the rising "barbarian" Manchus made him vulnerable to attacks from his political opponents within Korea, including the Sŏin faction in alliance with Prince Nŭngyanggun (later the sixteenth king, Injo) and the Queen Dowager. They blamed Kwanghae for being "ungrateful, not fearing the Mandate of Heaven," and for "granting the barbarians (the Manchus) a favor" (*Injo sillok*, vol. 1, March 14, 1623). To receive investiture from Ming, Injo reconfirmed that if Ming requested the troops, he would willingly work together with Ming to fight off the barbarians (*Injo sillok*, vol. 1, April 8, 1623). As such, the ability of Ming to use investiture as a medium of coercive diplomacy derived not necessarily from Ming's superior military power but from the symbolic power the ritual had in the mid-Chosŏn Confucianized society.

Conclusion

Today the past history of the tribute system or investiture in China-Korea relations seems to have become a source of bilateral discord, laden with stereotypes, images, and nationalism. The chilling effect of the dispute over historical tributary relations of Koguryŏ (37 B.C.E.–668 C.E.) on bilateral relations in 2004 is one good example of how much weight this aspect of their shared history carries even today. My argument here is that the diplomatic ritual of investiture was used strategically by the pre-nineteenth-century states in China and Korea as part of a mutually beneficial mechanism, given the condition of power disparity, to signal their commitment to respect the core interests of the other side. In essence, investiture was the ritual-

ization of power relations through which the symbolism of Confucian morality worked to reduce the tension arising from the power disparity between the two countries.

While my present study is by no means an exhaustive treatment of how investiture varied in its functions and forms throughout the pre-nineteenth-century Chinese-Korean relationship, it does help clarify some existing misconceptions about investiture by offering a more nuanced understanding of the topic. First, I caution that we should see those bilateral exchanges in *their own* political universe of a Confucian worldview and morality specific to their time and space, not ours. Despite the popular misconception that associates investiture with "submission," or "interference," expressing asymmetry in ways that were natural to their Confucian conception of how relations ought to work did not necessarily mean that the weaker side did not have autonomy or that the stronger side dominated or controlled the other.

Second, with regard to the debate over how much Chinese power versus Confucian culture mattered in the international relations of the Chinese empire (Kang 2010a, 2010b; Wang 2011), I show that both logics are relevant. An investigation of the cases where Confucian rites collided with national security interests reveals that Ming Chinese power tended to come in the form of *negative soft power*, which means that the internalization of Confucian moral authority within Chosŏn Korea was the reason Ming was able to use investiture as a means for coercion.

Lastly, I do *not* make a claim that a strong and powerful twenty-first-century China will restore tributary relations with its neighbors in Asia. Having said that, I argue that based on historical patterns of bilateral tensions between the states in China and Korea, one aspect of the fundamental expectations of each side remains largely the same. That is, China expects the two Koreas not to pose security challenges in the historical region of Manchuria. The two Koreas expect China to respect their independence and autonomy in foreign and domestic affairs.

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Notes

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1. For the tribute system, see Fairbank 1942, 1968; Mancall 1984. For "new Qing history," see Crossley 2002; Hevia 1995; Larsen 2008; Millward et al. 2004; Perdue 2005.

2. For a good general discussion on moral authority as a power resource, see Hall 1997. For the use of rhetoric for coercion, see Krebs and Jackson 2007.

3. Not only advocates of the Fairbankian model but its critics tend to use this distinction. See Fairbank 1942, 1968; Mancall 1984; Wills 1974. Hevia 1995 criticizes this dualistic approach.

4. Understanding the relationship between ritual and power can potentially be a fruitful realist-constructivist research agenda.

5. For broader discussion on Confucian rituals, see Wang 2005 and Hevia 1995.

6. For all citations of *Mingshi* accounts in this article, I use Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe's 2004 Korean edition of *Mingshi Chaoxian Liezhuan* [K. Myŏngsa Chosŏn Yŏljŏn; Records on Chosŏn in the Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty] in Chungguk Chŏngsa Chosŏnchŏn vol. 4 [Records of Chosŏn in Official Chinese History, vol. 4]. This edition has both original classical Chinese texts and the Korean translation. In-text page numbers of this article follow the Korean translation while the page numbers of the original Chinese texts are provided in endnotes.

7. For a good discussion on this question, see Kelley 2005, introduction and chap. 1; and Hevia 1995, 20–25.

8. Although the Ming founder Hongwu recognized the founding of Chosŏn by Yi, the Chosŏn founder requested but did not receive the imperial seal and patent. I wish to thank Park Wŏn-ho for clarifying this point.

9. From a reading of *Mingshi* 2004.

10. Author's translation from Korean.

11. See p. 6 of the same book for the original text.

12. I focus on the grant of the title of king only and do not include other titles such as queen or crown prince here.

13. I compare the accounts in *Mingshi* (2004) with *Sillok*, made available online by Kuksa P'yŏnch'an Wiwŏnhoe.

14. According to the *Mingshi* account, Chosŏn requested investiture of a new king on the grounds that the king was too ill for government affairs,

hiding the deposition of the king from Ming. Not knowing details of the internal situation, Ming reversed the initial decision and granted investiture for the new king. For the original Chinese text, see *Mingshi* 2004, 11.

15. For the original Chinese text, see *Mingshi* 2004, 14.

16. For the original Chinese text, see ibid., 7.

17. For the original Chinese text, see ibid., 23.

18. For the original Chinese text, see ibid., 23–24.

19. For example, see Kwanghae's instructions to General Kang in *Kwanghaegun ilgi,* vol. 137, February 3, 1619.

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