

Appropriating the Center: Discursive Strategies and the *Zhonghua* 中華 Legacy in Late Chosŏn Korea¹

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This paper explores the discursive strategies adopted by Chosŏn Korea to claim the legacy of Chinese civilization following the fall of the Ming dynasty. Facing the challenge of being a marginal state outside China, Chosŏn intellectuals constructed various narratives to substantiate their inheritance of the orthodoxy of *Chunghwa* (Central Efflorescence). Historical narratives, reformulated by influential figures like Song Si-yŏl, aimed to establish a direct bond of Confucian loyalty between the Chosŏn people and the Ming emperors. Simultaneously, geographic and historiographical discourses sought to validate the continuity between Chosŏn and the Ming, emphasizing their shared civilizational terrain. However, the introduction of Western geographical knowledge destabilized the notion of China's centrality, posing a threat to the legitimacy of *Chosŏn-Chunghwa*. This challenge precipitated a shift toward a cultural-universalist approach, prioritizing the individual's capacity to practice Confucian ethics over the strict adherence to external rituals and customs. By examining these evolving strategies and debates, this paper sheds light on Chosŏn's struggle to negotiate its marginality while asserting itself as the rightful successor to Chinese civilization.

Keywords: Chosŏn Korea, *Zhonghua*, *Chunghwa*, Central Efflorescence, Hong Tae-yong, Song Si-yŏl

Introduction

The concept of Confucian civilization in East Asia is encapsulated by the term *Zhonghua* 中華 (K. *Chunghwa*; Central Efflorescence). This term denotes not the historical political entities or culture of China proper, but more significantly, the ideal archetype of Confucian civilization tracing its origins to the legendary sage kings. This idealized conception bore particular resonance for Chosŏn Korea, which was situated on the periphery of the continent yet had remained an integral part of the Ming-centered international order since its inception. Chosŏn had anchored its state identity in its status as a *fan* 藩 state of the Ming—a dynasty viewed as the authentic bearer of Chinese civilization prior to the Qing conquest. Consequently, participating in this civilization transcended practical diplomatic relations for Chosŏn; it was emblematic of its membership in the civilized world and foundational to its state identity. Indeed,

¹ The author acknowledges the assistance of Gemini in refining the English expressions of this paper. All ideas, the conceptual framework, arguments, and the primary composition remain the original work of the author.

early on, Chosŏn had proudly self-identified as “Little China” (*So-Chunghwa* 小中華), asserting its close affinity with Sinitic civilization.²

However, the concept of Chosŏn’s identity as a civilized state had become precarious since the seventeenth century following its devastating defeat at the hands of the Manchus, whom they derogatorily regarded as barbarians. This trauma compelled Chosŏn intellectuals to formulate a narrative wherein Chinese civilization itself was imperiled by the “barbarian” conquest of the mainland and the collapse of the Ming. Consequently, they positioned Chosŏn as the sole remaining bastion of Central Efflorescence (*Chunghwa*), a conviction that rapidly evolved into the dynasty’s ideological zeitgeist. Yet, despite pervasive anti-Qing sentiment, the Chosŏn government pragmatically opted to forge stable relations with the new empire to ensure state survival. This dualistic stance engendered a profound dilemma.

As Wang observes, within the Qing-led international order, Chosŏn outwardly performed the role of an exemplary *fan* (vassal) state, thereby facilitating the consolidation of the late imperial Chinese world order.³ Conversely, in domestic political discourse prior to the introduction of the Westphalian order, the Qing were persistently vilified as barbaric enemies. Faced with a world where the hierarchy of civilization and barbarism had been inverted, Chosŏn intellectuals sought to symbolically transcend this reality and reclaim cultural dignity by reaffirming their status as the sole custodians of Chinese civilization.⁴

Recent scholarship regarding Chosŏn’s claim to the *Zhonghua* legacy—namely, *Chosŏn-Chunghwa* 朝鮮中華—has served as a critical rebuttal to the “Tribute System” framework proposed by Fairbank to explain the early modern East Asian international order.⁵ Sun contends that an exclusive focus on the diplomatic tributary relationship between Chosŏn and the Qing overlooks the profound anti-Qing sentiments within Chosŏn, which were predicated on loyalty to the Ming as the sole source of state legitimacy. He argues that neglecting this ideological dimension precludes a

² For example, a record in 1472 from *Sŏngjongshillok* says: 吾東方, 自箕子以來, 教化大行, 男有烈士之風, 女有貞正之俗, 史稱小中華. See the 4th clause of July 10 of the 3rd year of King Sŏngjong. All the citations from *the Annals* hereafter are from the online edition powered by National Institute of Korean History. (<https://sillok.history.go.kr/>)

³ Yuanchong Wang, *Remaking the Chinese Empire: Manchu-Korean Relations, 1616–1911* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 41–49.

⁴ JaHyun Kim Haboush, “Constructing the Center: The Ritual Controversy and the Search for a New Identity in Seventeenth-Century Korea,” in *Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea*, ed. Martina Deuchler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), 46–90; Sun Weiguo, *Da Ming qibao yu xiao zhonghua yishi: Chaoxian wangchao zunzhou siming wenti yanjiu, 1637–1800* 大明旗號與小中華意識: 朝鮮王朝尊周思明問題研究, 1637–1800 (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2007); Chang Kun-chiang, “The Self-Identification Factors inside Chosŏn Confucians’ ‘Small-China’ Consciousness” 朝鮮儒者「小中華」意識中的自我情感因素, *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* 20 (2013).

⁵ John King Fairbank and S. Y. Teng, “On the Ch’ing Tributary System,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6, no. 2 (1941): 135–246.

comprehensive understanding of the East Asian order.⁶ Meanwhile, Wang advocates for the term *Zhongfan* as an alternative to the tribute system. By reconceptualizing the international order of Qing China and its neighbors, Wang aims to delineate a new East Asian civilizational hierarchy centered on the Manchu Qing. This framework draws renewed attention to Chosŏn's status, underscoring the pivotal role of the "civilized" versus "barbarian" dichotomy in defining these relations.⁷

This paper seeks to expand the scholarly scope regarding the discursive strategies employed by a marginal state to lay claim to central civilization through the concept of *Chosŏn-Chunghwa* in eighteenth-century Korea. Haboush has elucidated that the discourse on civilization in the late Chosŏn period—including the notion of "Little China"—was predicated on a "culturalist" perspective.⁸ This view posits that the realization of Confucian civilization on the peninsula was defined by moral and cultural adherence rather than by geography or ethnicity. Yet, what precisely constitutes this "culturalist" view? It is often broadly characterized as a belief system wherein membership in the imagined community of Chinese civilization is open to anyone who embodies its ideals, echoing Mencius: "Wear the clothes of Yao, repeat the words of Yao, and do the actions of Yao, and you will just be a Yao."⁹ While this dictum might suggest a facile path for Chosŏn to assert itself as the bearer of the Sinitic tradition, such a claim risked devolving into a vacuous slogan if devoid of historical, cultural, or institutional substantiation. Indeed, the cultural disparities between Chosŏn and the various historical iterations of China—be it antiquity, the era of Zhu Xi, or the Ming—were simply too conspicuous to disregard.

For Chosŏn, situated on the periphery of the Chinese mainland, the assertion of its status as the successor to Ming civilization necessitated the construction of sophisticated discursive justifications—a task of inherent complexity. This study explores the strategies through which Chosŏn, despite its marginal position, sought to substantiate its inheritance of the *Chunghwa* orthodoxy. It first examines the historical narratives reconfigured in the seventeenth century by the influential scholar-official Song Si-yŏl 宋時烈 (1607–1689). These efforts aimed to forge a direct bond of Confucian loyalty between the Chosŏn populace and the Ming emperors, thereby transcending the conventional perception of the two as separate entities. Subsequently, the paper reviews the geographic and historiographical discourses, alongside arguments based on cultural universals, that were employed to validate the civilizational continuity between Chosŏn and the Ming.

⁶ Sun, *Da Ming qibao yu xiao zhonghua yishi*, 2–5.

⁷ Wang, *Remaking the Chinese Empire*, 6–9.

⁸ Haboush, "Constructing the Center."

⁹ Mencius. "Gaozi II," *Mengzi*: "子服堯之服，誦堯之言，行堯之行，是堯而已矣。"

From Outer Feudatory to Civilizational Custodian: Redefining Loyalty in the Post-Ming Era

Following the Imjin War in the sixteenth century, the Ming's military intervention fostered a pervasive sense of gratitude among Chosŏn intellectuals, encapsulated in the concept of "*chaejochiŭn* 再造之恩 (the grace of recreating the state)." However, notwithstanding the frequent designation of Chosŏn as a *fan* state 藩國, it is crucial to recognize that the Ming and Chosŏn remained distinct political entities. Within the Sinocentric hierarchical order, political entities on the Korean peninsula were classified as "outer *fan* 外藩." Unlike "inner *fan* 內藩," who were typically blood relatives of the Chinese emperor, outer *fan* maintained independent political systems external to China proper. Consequently, prior to the collapse of the Ming, Chosŏn's engagement with the empire was primarily circumscribed by the institutional and diplomatic mandates inherent to this external status. This principled stance is well exemplified by the scholar-official Yi I 李珥 (1536–1584). While espousing the principle of "serving the great with utmost sincerity" (*chisŏng sadae* 至誠事大), Yi I unreservedly prioritized Chosŏn's state interests whenever they diverged from those of the Ming. For him, the praxis of *sadae* 事大 entailed the fulfillment of tributary duties, the defense of territory, and the preservation of the people's welfare.¹⁰

As the Qing expanded its influence across the mainland and ultimately invaded Chosŏn under the leadership of Hong Taiji, pro-Ming and anti-Qing sentiments within the peninsula were sharply intensified. The court was deeply divided between pragmatic officials (often retrospectively termed the Chuwhapa or Reconciliationists 主和派) advocating for a peace treaty with the "barbaric" Qing to ensure state survival, and ideological hardliners (Ch'ŏkhwapa 斥和派) who remained steadfast in their refusal to compromise. Equating the Ming with civilization itself, the hardliners asserted that they would sooner face ruin than blur the distinction between civilization and barbarism.

Against this moral absolutism, the proponents of reconciliation grounded their justification in a primary loyalty to the Chosŏn state. They argued that as an outer *fan*, Chosŏn was under no obligation to share the Ming's fate of destruction. Furthermore, they emphasized that Chosŏn officials were subjects of the Chosŏn sovereign, not the Ming emperor; thus, their paramount duty was the preservation of their own monarch.¹¹ For instance, Pak Se-dang 朴世堂 (1629–1703), in his defense of Choi

¹⁰ Tae-koo Huh, *Pyŏngja horan kwa ye, kŭrigo Chunghwa* 병자호란과 예, 그리고 중화 (Seoul: Somyŏng Ch'ulp'an, 2019), 317–318.

¹¹ Kim demonstrates that during his efforts to commemorate his grandfather, Choi Sŏk-chŏng 崔錫鼎 (1646 – 1715) —the grandson of the leading reconciliationist Choi Myŏng-gil—framed the peace with the Qing as an act stemming from a loyalty that prioritized the survival of Chosŏn as an outer *fan*. Min-hyeok Kim, "Political Writing following the Political Situation: Focused on the Praise and Censure on Choi Myeong-gil" 숙종조 정치 상황에 따른 정치적 글쓰기, *Journal of Korean Literature in Classical Chinese* [한국한문학연구] 66 (2017). 156-167.

Myŏng-gil 崔鳴吉 (1586–1647)—the leading figure of these pragmatic officials—invoked Choi’s own contention that establishing ties with the Qing was not an act contrary to righteousness, arguing that the preservation of the state (社稷) took precedence over the blind adherence to Ming.¹²

In stark contrast to this state-centric narrative, the hardliners (Ch’ŏkhwapa) championed an absolute moral obligation (*ŭiri*) to the Ming, venerating it as the embodiment of Chunghwa civilization itself. With the eventual collapse of the Ming Empire and the subsequent political ascendancy of these hardliners, Chosŏn was compelled to consolidate its cultural identity by positioning itself as the legitimate custodian of Ming civilization. Jung terms this phenomenon the “Chosŏn-Chunghwa” ideology, a framework wherein Chosŏn perceived itself as the sole inheritor of civilization.¹³ Refining this periodization, Huh distinguishes between two phases: the late seventeenth-century restorationist aspiration to “restore the Ming,” anticipating a dynastic revival; and the eighteenth-century consciousness of “succeeding Chunghwa civilization,” which acknowledged the irrevocability of the Ming’s fall.¹⁴ This ideological shift was crystallized at the Taebodan (Altar of Great Gratitude 大報壇), where Chosŏn kings enshrined the Ming emperors and sought to ritualistically validate their succession.¹⁵ Yet, a fundamental dilemma remained: how could a peripheral *fan* state lay claim to the imperial legacy? To resolve this, Chosŏn was compelled to undertake a series of ideological tasks to substantiate its assumption of the Chunghwa mantle.

A salient trend in seventeenth-century historiography was the systematic reconfiguration of Chosŏn’s past through the lens of unwavering loyalty to the Ming. This narrative sought to establish that while Chosŏn remained politically distinct from the mainland, its relationship with the Ming transcended mere diplomatic formality, resembling the familial bond between father and son. By foregrounding the sacrificial devotion Chosŏn had willingly rendered to the suzerain, this discourse posited that Chosŏn possessed the moral qualification to inherit the imperial legacy following the Ming’s collapse. Spearheading this ideological project was Song Si-yŏl, the

¹² “Yŏngŭijŏng-wŏnsŏngbuwŏn’gun-Ch’oegong-shindobimyŏng 領議政完城府院君崔公神道碑銘,” *Sŏkgyejip* 西溪集 vol.11: “夫人臣謀國，不存遠慮以致亡，其事雖正，罪不可逃也。... 宣祖時，天朝諸將倦用兵有和計，令我請於天朝，成渾謂可許。李廷龜繼發，將被罪。渾憐其忠，於上前救解，宣祖大怒，自是論者攻渾益急。渾言韓冑伐金，先儒罪之以危社稷。張南軒亦言金不可伐，此以宗社爲重，而相時度力爲義耳。今日既無石晉兵力，又非祖宗之讎，是非得失，不難定矣。議者謂丁卯和固不害，今虜已僭號，不可通使。彼之僭號，非我所當問也。” Emphasis added by the author. All the Korean sources cited hereafter except *the Annals* are from the database powered by Institute for Translation of Korean Classics (<https://db.itkc.or.kr>).

¹³ Ok-ja Jung, *Chosŏn hugi Chosŏn chunghwa sasang yŏn’gu* 조선 후기 조선 중화사상 연구 (Seoul: Iljisa, 1988).

¹⁴ Tae-yong Huh, *Chosŏn hugi chunghwaron kwa yŏksa insik* 조선 후기 중화론과 역사인식 (Seoul: Acanet, 2009), 113.

¹⁵ SeungBum Kye, *Chŏngjidoen sigan: Chosŏn ŭi Taebodan kwa kŭndae ŭi munttŏk* 정지된 시간: 조선의 대보단과 근대의 문턱 (Seoul: Sŏgang Taehakkyo Chulpanbu, 2011).

preeminent scholar-official of the era. Notably, Song reinterpreted the Wihwado Retreat 威化島回軍 (Turning back from Wihwa Island) by the dynastic founder Taejo 太祖 Yi Sŏng-gye 李成桂 (1335–1408) as a supreme demonstration of loyalty to the Ming, rather than a mere political coup.¹⁶ Positing this reverence for the Ming as the true foundational legitimacy of the dynasty, he further advocated for the elevation of Taejo's posthumous temple name (*myoho* 廟號) on the grounds of this merit.¹⁷

In a similar vein, Song reframed the Imjin War as a struggle in defense of the Ming. He depicted the legendary admiral Yi Sun-sin 李舜臣 (1545–1598) not merely as a national hero, but as a stalwart loyalist who had firmly rejected the reconciliationists (Chuwropa) advocating for peace.¹⁸ Woo argues that by grounding both the dynastic founding and the imperative for revenge against the Qing in the Neo-Confucian hierarchical order, Song Si-yŏl sought to establish a crucial premise: that following the Ming's collapse, the orthodoxy of Confucian civilization had migrated to Chosŏn.¹⁹ Building upon these premises, Song posited that Chosŏn literati—though subjects of the Chosŏn king—possessed the moral authority to offer sacrifices directly to the Ming emperor, which culminated in the construction of the Mandongmyo (Shrine to Honor Ming Emperors 萬東廟) by his disciple Kwŏn Sang-ha 權尙夏 (1641–1721), and later, the establishment of the Taebodan by the state.²⁰

¹⁶ The Wihwado Retreat (Wihwado hoegun) marked a decisive turning point leading to the founding of Chosŏn. Occurring during the turbulent Yuan-Ming transition, when the Koryŏ court maintained a pro-Yuan stance, General Yi Sŏng-gye defied a royal command to attack the Liaodong—a territory then claimed by the rising Ming dynasty. Instead, he marched his troops back from Wihwado Island to the capital, Kaesŏng, initiating a coup d'état. This event paved the way for his eventual enthronement as King Taejo, the founder of the Chosŏn dynasty.

¹⁷ *Sukchongshillok* 肅宗實錄 vol.14. June 12, 9th year of King Sukchong. For detailed information on the specific process regarding the posthumous title of Taejo, see Jeong Yoon, "Government Perceptions on the Posthumous Bequeathal of an Honorary Title to King Taejo during the reign of King Sukjong" 숙종대 태조 시호의 추상과 정계의 인식: 조선 창업과 위화도회군에 대한 재평가, *Tongbang hakchi* 동방학지 134 (2006), 233–234.

¹⁸ "Namhaenoryang-Ch'ungmuigong-myobi 南海露梁忠武李公廟碑," *Songja-daejŏn* 宋子大全 vol.171: "至其舉大義斥倭使, 使中賂者顏駢, 主和者賴沘, 則張忠獻·岳武穆蔑以加矣。以故當積衰諱兵之餘, 遇天下莫強之敵, 大小數十戰, 俱以全取勝, 蔽遮東南, 以基中興之偉烈, 至蒙皇上寵命, 錫以印符, 則一國之人, 雖家尸而戶侑, 不爲過矣。" For an analysis of the discursive evolution in the late Chosŏn period that framed Yi Sun-sin as a defender of Chunghwa against the "barbaric" Japanese, see Ok-ja Jung 정옥자, "Chosŏn hugi hyangsa kwan'gye munhŏn charyŏ ūi kŏmt'o" 조선 후기 향사관계 문헌자료의 검토, *Gyujanggak* 규장각 16 (1994), 18–19.

¹⁹ Kyungsup Woo, "Zunwang Ideology and the Noron-Soron Divergence in the 17th Century (II)" 17 세기 조선 학자들의 존왕론과 노소분기 2, *Taedong kojŏn yongu* 태동고전연구 36 (2016), 20–22.

²⁰ Confucian ritual propriety (*ye* 禮) dictates that sacrifices must be performed only by those with the proper hierarchical standing. Since no direct ruler-subject relationship existed between the Ming emperor and Chosŏn subjects, Korean literati were theoretically ineligible to officiate such rites. While private observances by Song Si-yŏl's school were tolerated, the elevation of these rites to the state level by the Chosŏn king introduced profound complications. Because performing imperial rituals implied a

Crucially, these narratives were inextricably linked to the factional dynamics of the era. By elevating loyalty to the Ming as the central tenet of political discourse, Song Si-yŏl sought to consolidate the legitimacy of his faction, the Noron 老論. Consequently, political opponents frequently accused him of instrumentally exploiting state rituals to advance partisan agendas.²¹ However, as the Noron solidified their dominance in the eighteenth century, these narratives came to permeate the prevailing intellectual landscape.

This trend is exemplified by Hwang Kyŏng-wŏn 黃景源 (1709–1787), a prominent Noron scholar who authored the “Myŏngbaeshin-jŏn 明陪臣傳 (Biographies of Ming Rear Vassals).” As the title implies, Hwang designated Chosŏn martyrs of the Qing invasions as “rear vassals” (*paeshin* 陪臣) of the Ming.²² This terminology effectively perpetuated Song Si-yŏl’s ideological project: transposing the primary locus of loyalty from the Chosŏn sovereign to the Ming emperor.

In *the Book of Rites*, it is stated: “A Great Officer (*daebu*) dies for the multitudes, and a Scholar (*sa*) dies for the command.” However, it is crucial to distinguish between the multitudes of a feudal lord and those of the Emperor, as well as between the command of a feudal lord and that of the Emperor. If a Great Officer sacrifices his life for the multitudes of his own state, it cannot be equated to sacrificing for the multitudes of the Emperor. Likewise, if a Scholar sacrifices his life for the command of his own state, it is distinct from sacrificing for the Emperor’s command.

However, in the case where a feudal state undergoes great tribulation for the sake of the Emperor, sacrificing one’s life for the multitudes of one’s own country is no different from sacrificing for the multitudes of the Emperor. Similarly, sacrificing for the command of one’s own state becomes equivalent to sacrificing for the Emperor’s command. ...

When the Qing proclaimed a new era name, they sent an envoy to our state demanding that we honor the Manchu ruler as Emperor. The Royal Court refused this demand, which incited their wrath and eventually led to the siege of Namhan Fortress. Therefore, the fortress faced immense tribulation for the sake of the Ming

claim to dynastic succession, it carried grave diplomatic risks, potentially being construed by the Qing as a challenge to their legitimacy. Furthermore, the lack of ritual precedents for a *fan* state worshipping an emperor created significant procedural hurdles. Consequently, the initiative faced staunch opposition from the bureaucracy; nevertheless, the rituals were ultimately institutionalized through the unwavering determination of King Sukjong.

²¹ *Sukchongshillok-pogwŏlchŏngŏ* 肅宗實錄補闕正誤 vol. 14, Jun 12, 9th year of King Sukchong: “議者謂孝廟世室，固出於闡揚志事，而猶疑其不在甲寅以前，而在於以貶薄被讒誣萬死歸來之後也。若太祖追隆其所托，雖在大義，而實欲圖蓋孝廟世室之微跡。”

²² Technically, the term *paeshin* (陪臣) denotes a “rear vassal” or a “subject of a vassal.” In the Sinocentric hierarchy, the Chosŏn king was a subject of the Ming emperor; therefore, the officials of Chosŏn were considered subjects of the king, and thus “rear vassals” to the emperor. By adopting this specific designation, late Chosŏn intellectuals sought to emphasize their direct ideological affiliation with the Ming imperial order, prioritizing their universal connection to Chunghwa civilization over their specific, local allegiance to the Chosŏn sovereign.

Emperor. In this context, sacrificing one's life for one's own country is synonymous with sacrificing for the Emperor.²³

禮, '大夫死衆, 士死制.' 然所謂衆者, 有諸侯之衆, 有天子之衆, 所謂制者, 有諸侯之制, 有天子之制. 諸侯之大夫, 苟爲其國死於衆, 則不可謂爲天子死於衆也. 諸侯之士, 苟爲其國死於制, 則不可謂爲天子死於制也. 然自古諸侯之國, 爲天子罹大難, 則其大夫雖爲其國死於衆, 與死於天子之衆, 無以異也. 其士雖爲其國死於制, 與死於天子之制, 無以異也. ... 清人改元, 遣使者, 移書王朝, 請尊其主爲皇帝. 王朝不受, 清人怒, 遂圍南漢. 是南漢爲明天子, 罹大難也. 故其大夫死於衆者, 猶死於天子之衆也, 其士死於制者, 猶死於天子之制也. ... 然則爲本國而死者, 實爲天子死之也.

Invoking this logic, Hwang asserted that the humiliation endured at Namhan Fortress—culminating in Chosŏn's capitulation to the Qing—was the direct consequence of the state undergoing “immense tribulation for the sake of the Ming emperor.” Within this discursive framework, the act of dying for Chosŏn was rendered tantamount to dying for the emperor himself. Extending this reasoning to the sixteenth century, Hwang reinterpreted the Imjin War not merely as an assault on the peninsula, but as a strategic offensive directed against the Ming. He posited that Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion was predicated on Chosŏn's status as a loyal feudatory of the empire; the ultimate objective was not the subjugation of Chosŏn per se, but the destabilization of the Ming by dismantling its eastern bulwark. According to Hwang, therefore, the fall of Namhan Fortress marked the precipitating event of the Ming's own decline, rather than merely a defeat for Chosŏn. He argued that had Chosŏn resisted to the end—as it had successfully done during the Imjin War—it could have served as a shield preventing the Ming's collapse. Through this narrative, the reconciliationists (Chuw_hapa), who had prioritized state survival by surrendering to the Qing, were recast not as pragmatists, but as culpable agents who had abandoned their loyalty to the emperor and precipitated the fall of the civilized world.²⁴

Collectively, these historical reinterpretations and ideological narratives were instrumental in crystallizing Chosŏn's self-conception as the legitimate heir to Ming civilization. By framing the defense of the suzerain as the primary motive driving Chosŏn's historical agency and sacrifices, late Chosŏn intellectuals sought to

²³ “Preface to Myŏngbaeshin-jŏn,” *Kanghanjip* 江漢集 vol. 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.* “平秀吉將犯遼東, 先屠屬國者, 非貪其土地而欲并之也, 非利其婦女玉帛而欲取之也, 直惡其藩輔大明也. 屬國安, 則大明亦安, 屬國危, 則大明亦危. 秀吉悉引精兵, 出釜山, 踰鳥嶺關, 留屯於江漢之間, 壁壘相屬, 西亘涇水, 北抵鬼門, 必欲夷東藩之國, 以弱大明. 嗚呼. 清人圍南漢, 其亦有秀吉之意歟? ... 嗚呼. 南漢之守與不守, 豈獨一國之安危哉? 明年, 清人入密雲, 遂圍京師十餘日, 進陷高陽, 大戰于蒿水橋下, 大學士孫承宗, 兵部尙書盧象昇, 皆不能拒. 蓋中國之衰, 非一日也. 自南漢破敗以後, 京師喪其左臂. 故清人歌舞而入關, 直逼皇城, 而天下莫之能禦也. 屬國之力, 雖不足以上救京師, 然南漢不破, 則大明尙倚屬國而爲之屏矣.” For more details, see Songhee Lee, “Formation and Secularization of Neo-Confucian Self of the School of Nolon-Nakron in Late Chŏson Korea” 老論-洛論系 倫理主體의 形成과 展開 (PhD diss., Korea University, 2021), 91–94.

substantiate an indissoluble bond between their state and the imperial legacy of the Ming.

Negotiating the Geographies of Civilization: Harmonizing Locality with Universal Orthodoxy²⁵

Mere political loyalty to the Ming, however, was insufficient for Chosŏn to substantiate its claim as the legitimate successor to the Ming empire. As Bae notes, Chosŏn intellectuals faced the imperative to demonstrate that *Chunghwa* civilization could be fully realized on the Korean peninsula, while simultaneously confronting the geographical and climatic disparities that inevitably engendered cultural divergence.²⁶ One strategy employed to resolve this tension was the advocacy of cultural universalism. Proponents argued that if individuals strictly adhered to Chinese rituals and emulated the Confucian sages, they merited recognition as “civilized,” irrespective of their local context. Yet, the Chosŏn literati were acutely aware of the undeniable material differences—ranging from language and social systems to customs—that separated Chosŏn from China. The pressing question, then, was how this “universal culture” could be authentically embodied within the specific conditions of the Korean peninsula.

This problematic traces its roots to the pluralistic worldview of the Koryŏ dynasty, which posited that distinct geographies and climates naturally produced unique regional temperaments and cultures. Although Chosŏn eventually adopted the Sinocentric universalist model, effectively discarding this earlier pluralism, intellectuals remained sensitive to the deterministic role of geography.²⁷ Consequently, defining the relationship between Chosŏn’s locality and the universality of Confucian culture became a central intellectual undertaking. Especially following the fall of the Ming, the discourse focused intensely on mitigating, or even outright denying, the geographical otherness of Chosŏn vis-à-vis China.

A pivotal solution to this dilemma was the neutralization of geographical difference, a factor traditionally seen as the fundamental barrier between China and the barbarian periphery. By reconfiguring Chosŏn as an extension of the Chinese territorial sphere, intellectuals argued that the peninsula fulfilled the spatial prerequisites necessary for the realization of Chinese civilization. Under this logic, minor discrepancies in customs could be dismissed as trivial. This argument was bolstered by the historical recognition that the Chinese center itself was not monolithic; regions such as Wu 吳, Chu 楚, and Yue 越, once considered marginal peripheries in antiquity, had been

²⁵ This chapter and the following one are revised English adaptations of the arguments originally presented in Songhee Lee, “Can Joseon Achieve Chunghwa (中華)?: The Clash of Chunghwa Ideologies in 18th Century Joseon Korea” *조선 후기 화이론(華夷論)의 전개와 중화관의 충돌, Critical Review of History* 역사비평 142 (2023).

²⁶ WooSung Bae, *Chosŏn kwa Chunghwa* 조선과 중화 (Seoul: Tolbaegae, 2014), 175.

²⁷ Bae, *Chosŏn kwa Chunghwa*, 100–102.

successfully assimilated into the civilizational center over time. This precedent opened the possibility for the Korean peninsula to be similarly incorporated into the mainland's cultural geography.

This discursive shift is clearly evidenced in late seventeenth-century cartography, such as the “Ch’ŏnha-gogŭm-daech’ong-p’yŏllamdo” 天下古今大總便覽圖 (Map of the World: Past and Present) and the “Chosŏn-p’alto-gogŭm-ch’ongnamdo” 朝鮮八道古今總攬 (Map of the Eight Provinces of Chosŏn: Past and Present). These maps situated Chosŏn within the Ki-Mi 箕尾 coordinate, the stellar field corresponding to the Chinese cultural sphere in traditional astronomy. This alignment paralleled the historical identification of Koguryŏ's territory with the Liaodong region, emphasizing the geographical, natural, and linguistic continuities between Liaodong and the Korean Peninsula. In traditional field allocation (C. *fenye*, K. *punya* 分野), the Ki-Mi constellation governed the You 幽 and Yue 燕 regions of China, with Liaodong falling under the jurisdiction of Yue 燕.²⁸ Thus, the effort to establish a historical-geographical continuity between Liaodong and the Korean peninsula was inextricably linked to the ideological project of reimagining Chosŏn as an integral part of the Chinese terrestrial and celestial domain.²⁹

Beyond astronomical mappings, a plethora of discourses emerged to substantiate the historical and geographical continuity between Chosŏn and the Chinese sphere. Han Wŏn-jin 韓元震 (1682–1751), a prominent Neo-Confucian scholar, posited that Chosŏn functioned as a microcosm of China; he argued that while smaller in scale, Chosŏn's climate and geography mirrored those of the mainland, thereby engendering parallel historical developments in both regions.³⁰ Similarly, An Chŏng-bok 安鼎福 (1712–1791), renowned for his historiographical works, interpreted the topographical configuration of the Korean Peninsula as resembling an elder bowing in reverence toward China, citing this geomantic feature as innate evidence of the state's destined loyalty.³¹ Furthermore, some scholars sought to establish a direct genealogical bond by suggesting that the descendants of ancient Chinese sages, such as Jizi 箕子 (K. Kija), had migrated to and taken root in Korea.³² Others went so far as to hypothesize

²⁸ Yi Kyu-kyŏng 李圭景, “Samhan yu i pyŏnjŭngsŏl 三韓有二辨證說,” *Ojuyŏnmunjangjŏnsan’go* 五洲衍文長箋散稿: “遼東即燕之幅員也.”

²⁹ Huh, *Chosŏn hugi chungghwaron kwa yŏksa insik*, 68.

³⁰ “Oep’yŏn Ha 外篇 下,” *Namdangjip* 南塘集 vol.38: “我國僻在東隅, 地方僅比中國一州之大, 而風氣之寒熱, 土地之所產, 皆兼有四方之異, 比之中國, 具體而微. 王業之興, 自北而南, 亦與中國同.”

³¹ “Manmuryuch’wi 萬物類聚,” *Sunamjŏnjip* 順菴全集 vol.4: “古人謂我國爲老人形, 而坐亥向己, 向西開面, 有拱揖中國之狀, 故自昔忠順於中國.”

³² Huh, *Chosŏn hugi chungghwaron kwa yŏksa insik*, 148–149; 179.

that Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊, the legendary paragons of loyalty from the Shang dynasty, might have sought refuge on the peninsula.³³

However, the introduction of Western cartography and the dissemination of new geographical knowledge presented a formidable challenge to this worldview. The revelation of the Earth's sphericity dealt a significant blow to the axiom of China as the physical center of the world. Of course, the acceptance of the globe did not immediately dismantle the Sinocentric framework; as no, Chosŏn intellectuals were adept at incorporating and reinterpreting foreign knowledge within their existing axiological systems.³⁴ Nevertheless, the influx of this new epistemology undeniably complicated the discursive landscape. The unwavering belief in China's centrality now required a more sophisticated defense against anticipated counterarguments. In his postscript to *Zhifang waiji* 職方外紀 (Record of Foreign Lands), Yi Ik 李穡 (1681 – 1763) conceded that China could no longer be regarded as the geometric center of the globe. Yet, he argued that China retained its status as the center *in quality*. He developed an intricate narrative to position China as the “south” in the *feng shui* 風水 sense—a privileged location corresponding to the heart of a human.³⁵ Acknowledging the impossibility of objectively demarcating east, west, north, and south on a sphere, he devised a “global *feng shui*” theory to sustain the rationale of Sinocentrism. His endeavor to designate China as the “center of the world of *yang*” demonstrates a desperate necessity to empirically validate China's centrality even within the new spherical paradigm.³⁶

Yi Ik's arguments reflect the acute sense of discursive situation in the late Chosŏn intellectual climate, where reliance on ancient historiography or traditional cosmology was no longer sufficient to uphold the premise of China's centrality. It became

³³ Yoong-Chang Kim, “The Cognitive Change of Baek-Yi (伯夷) & Suk-Je (叔齊) and the Implications of the Establishment of Cheongseong-Shrine (淸聖廟) in the Late Joseon Period” 조선 후기 백이·숙제에 대한 인식과 청성묘 건립의 함의: 청성묘비와 청성묘중수비를 중심으로 살펴본 소중화 의식과 화이론, *Journal of Korean Literature in Chinese* 한문학 논집 61 (2022).

³⁴ Jongtae Lim, “Introduction of Western Science and Rationalization of Traditional Astrology: Reevaluating Yi Ik's On the Field Allocation” 17, 18 세기 서양 과학의 유입과 분야설의 변화: 『星湖僊說』 「分野」의 사상사적 위치를 중심으로, *The Study of Korean History of Thought* 한국사상사학 21 (2003); “Locating a Center on the Surface of a Globe: Negotiating China's Position on the Spherical Earth in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-century China and Korea.” *Historia Scientiarum* 17, no.3 (2008).

³⁵ “Palchikpangoegi 跋職方外紀,” *Sŏnghojŏnjip* 星湖全集 vol.55: “但西國測天, 以三百六十度爲式, 歷地二百五十里, 星文差一度, 則地之周爲九萬里, 自歐羅巴之西福島, 至中國之東亞泥俺峽, 恰爲一百八十度, 則實四萬五千里而地之半周也。以地勢求之, 福島與中國上下正當, 從東從西, 道里略相近也。然而此必謂之中, 彼必謂之西者, 何也。據其說, 亞細亞實爲天下第一大州, 人類肇生之地, 聖賢首出之鄉, 而中國又當其正心。故如堪輿家落穴相似。自此以西至地底一半皆爲西, 以東至地底一半皆爲東, 而大西洋一邊, 卽大東洋也。何以明之? 孔子曰天地設位, 易行于其中, 易者不特爲中國設地, 以中國方六千里之地, 而水皆東趨, 以是取象曰天水違行, 有訟之卦焉。其佗百十邦域, 水各異道, 而象則不變, 可見其爲正中也。”

³⁶ Lim, “Introduction of Western Science and Rationalization of Traditional Astrology,” 406.

imperative to master Western geography and astronomy to effectively synthesize this new knowledge with orthodox beliefs. For these intellectuals, the destabilization of China's geographical centrality was not merely a scientific correction; it was a potential threat to the legitimacy of the *Chosŏn-Chunghwa* ideology itself, which was predicated on that very centrality. While modern researchers often assume that the breakdown of geocentrism inaugurated a relativist view of civilization, for eighteenth-century Korean intellectuals—who had spent a century constructing the rationale for Chosŏn's succession of the Ming—the de-centering of China was perceived as an existential risk that could unravel the very foundations of their ideological legitimacy.

Geography, Ethnicity, and the Locus of Civilization

Concomitant with the destabilization of China's geocentric supremacy—precipitated by the influx of Western scientific epistemology and the consequent relativization of spatial centrality—advocates of culture-centric *Chunghwa* newly emerged. As noted by Huh, these proponents sought to resolve the inherent logical contradiction obstructing Chosŏn's claim to the imperial mantle.³⁷ They achieved this by fundamentally redefining the criteria of civilization: prioritizing the universality of Confucian cultural praxis over the deterministic particularities of ethnicity or geography.

Hwang Kyŏng-wŏn, a leading proponent of this culture-centric discourse, posited ritual propriety (禮) and moral righteousness (義) as the definitive criteria for *Chunghwa* civilization.³⁸ However, by the time Hwang formulated this argument, the rigorous implementation of Zhu Xi's *Zhuzi Jiali* 朱子家禮 (Master Zhu's Family Rituals)—the liturgical cornerstone of the Neo-Confucian lifestyle—had already proven practically unfeasible in the Chosŏn context. Although literati of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had endeavored to embody the orthodox ideals of these rituals, inherent socio-cultural discrepancies between Song China and Korea necessitated that the Chosŏn iteration remain a localized adaptation. Consequently, by the seventeenth century, intellectual discourse was dominated by debates over these “ritual variants” (*pyŏllye* 變禮), and ritual manuals produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were predominantly compilations of such modifications.³⁹ Nevertheless, an alternative

³⁷ Huh, *Chosŏn hugi chunghwaron kwa yŏksa insik*, 180.

³⁸ “Yŏgimwŏnbu (Mut'aek) sŏ 與金元博(茂澤)書,” *Kanghanjip* 江漢集 vol.5: “然足下之於文也, 似有所希慕中國而爲者, 可謂惑矣. 夫所謂中國者, 何也. 禮義而已矣. 禮義明則戎狄可以爲中國, 禮義不明則中國可以爲戎狄, 一人之身, 有時乎中國, 有時乎戎狄, 固在於禮義之明與不明也. ... 詩曰, ‘天生烝民, 有物有則. 民之秉彝, 好是懿德.’ 中國之謂也. 故中國者, 人皆有之. 惟君子, 能修其身而章其物, 以全其明德之懿. 足下如能求諸身, 則中國亦不遠矣.”

³⁹ Bong-kyoo Lee, “Features in Study of Family Rituals in Joseon Compared to Ming-Qing and Future Research Direction” 명청조와의 비교를 통해 본 조선시대 『家禮』 연구의 특색과 연구방향, *The Study of Korean History of Thought* 한국사상사학 44 (2013).

avenue remained to substantiate the state's civilized status: the embodied practice of fundamental Confucian virtues, specifically loyalty, filial piety, and chastity.⁴⁰

If moral praxis takes precedence, variations in ritual form become secondary, as Neo-Confucian orthodoxy prioritizes internal ethical motivation over rigid adherence to external regulations. The analytical focus thus shifts to the capacity of moral agents to embody universal ethics; in doing so, temporal and spatial disparities are effectively neutralized. This perspective did not necessarily contradict the historical-geographical discourse of inheriting Chinese civilization. Indeed, works such as Chang Hyŏnkwang's 張顯光 (1554–1637) “Ch'ŏnggu-dosŏl 青邱圖說” (Map of Korean Peninsula with Commentary) and Yi Chong-hwi's 李種徽 (1731–1797) “Hyŏk-kusŏp 革舊俗” (Renovating the Old Customs) synthesized these perspectives, arguing that while Chosŏn already possessed the requisite geographic conditions for civilization, it required further cultural cultivation to fully realize them. By the late eighteenth century, however, the latent tension between the cultural and historical-geographical interpretations of *Chunghwa* intensified into an open intellectual conflict. This schism is best exemplified by the 1776 debate between Hong Tae-yong 洪大容 (1731–1783) and the brothers Kim Chong-hu 金鍾厚 (?–1780) and Kim I-an 金履安 (1722–1791). Centering on the appropriate stance Chosŏn literati should adopt toward their Qing counterparts, this debate exposed the rupture between two diverging viewpoints within the *Chunghwa* discourse that had previously coexisted in uneasy tension.

Hong Tae-yong, renowned for his intellectual receptivity to novel epistemologies including Western learning, faced vehement criticism from Kim Chong-hu upon his return from trip to Beijing as a member of envoy. The controversy centered on Hong's close association with Qing literati, an act deemed transgressive by his contemporaries. Although the complete epistolary record of this debate is no longer extant, surviving letters indicate that Kim Chong-hu, Kim I-an, and even anonymous kinsmen of Hong severely censured his fraternization with the Qing scholars. They went so far as to equate his actions with moral betrayal, drawing damning parallels to historical figures lacking in integrity, such as the Han general Yi Ling 李陵.⁴¹

In response to these criticisms, Hong Tae-Yong articulated the following perspective:

Your assertion that “Barbarians are *yin*” is well founded. However, while it is permissible to judge that their conduct resembles that of beasts, to directly assert that they are “beast” is excessive. Even if such a statement originated from China, it would be considered immoderate in tone. How much more so when people like us make such claims? Would we not be ridiculed by the ancients of China? ... That our

⁴⁰ “Yŏgimwŏnbu (Mut'aek) sŏ 與金元博(茂澤)書,” “夫君子本之以義, 文之以禮, 爲人臣能盡其忠, 爲人子能盡其孝, 爲人弟能盡其弟, 而中國在其中矣. 至於小人則不然, 不本之以義, 不文之以禮, 臣不知其所以爲忠.”

⁴¹ *Tamhŏnsŏ Naejip* 湛軒書 內集 vol.3: “答直齋書”; “直齋答書”; “又答直齋書”; “答金內兄 卞氏書.”

East (Chosŏn) is Yi is a reality dictated by geography; why must we treat it as taboo? [As *the Doctrine of the Mean* says], “One in the position of the barbarian acts according to the barbarian.” Since there is truly great work to be done in striving to become a sage or a worthy, what is there for me to regret? Our East has admired and emulated China for so long that it has forgotten its Yi origins. Nevertheless, when compared with China, the inherent distinction remains. Only those who are complacent and confined to petty wisdom react with anger and shame upon suddenly hearing such words, unwilling to accept them. This is merely the bias of our Eastern customs. I did not expect that a scholar of your high discernment would also hold such a view.⁴²

“夷狄之爲陰,” 來教甚當. 但斷之以行類禽獸, 可矣, 直謂之非人則亦過矣. 此言雖出於中國, 亦爲辭氣之過當, 況以我輩而爲此言, 豈不見笑於中國之古人乎?... 我東之爲夷, 地界然矣, 亦何必諱哉? 素夷狄行乎夷狄, 爲聖爲賢, 固大有事在, 吾何慊乎? 我東之慕效中國, 忘其爲夷也久矣. 雖然, 比中國而方之, 其分自在也. 惟其沾沾自喜, 局於小知者, 驟聞此等語, 類多怫然包羞, 不欲以甘心焉, 則乃東俗之偏也, 不意執事之高明亦爲此見也.

In this context, Hong Tae-yong adopted a distinct rhetorical strategy. Rather than offering an apologetic defense for his association with Qing literati, he subverted the very premise of the accusation. Hong posited that Chosŏn, by virtue of its peripheral geography, was inextricably categorized as “barbarian” in origin; therefore, he argued, it would be hypocritical for Chosŏn subjects to denounce another ethnic group as “beasts.” Employing irony, Hong contended that while “barbarian” status is a predetermined geographical condition, the potential for sagehood is universal. He caustically noted that only parochial minds take offense at this geographical reality, failing to recognize their own marginal origins. This rhetoric reflects a radical cultural universalism, suggesting that the realization of *Chunghwa* civilization is an open endeavor accessible to all, transcending ethnic or geographical constraints.

However, this assertion of Chosŏn’s inherent marginality stood in stark contradiction to the prevailing intellectual project of his contemporaries. Whether intentional or not, Hong’s remarks deeply offended those who had painstakingly constructed the narrative that Chosŏn possessed an innate *Chunghwa* essence derived from its unique geography. The backlash was immediate; Kim I-an, a key interlocutor in the debate, authored the “Hwaibyŏn I•II 華夷辨” (Treatise on the Distinction Between the Civilized and Barbarian), a polemic explicitly aimed at dismantling Hong’s relativistic arguments.

A guest recounting Mr. Hong’s words posed a hypothetical question to me: “If a barbarian were to forsake their uncouth topknots, adopt our caps and girdles, practice ritual and righteousness, uphold human moral relations, and follow the teachings of the ancient kings, and thereby proceed to become the master of China—would you grant them approval? I replied, “Mr. Hong is merely raising a doubtful point. If a

⁴² “Udapchikchesŏ 又答直齋書,” Ibid.

barbarian were to truly eliminate their barbaric nature, they would become a worthy. A worthy would certainly not dare to usurp China. If they were to usurp it, their worthiness would vanish; so what approval would there be to grant?" ... To the best of my knowledge, the primary purpose of Confucius' writing *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋) was to denounce barbarians, not solely due to their beast-like behaviors but also because of their ethnicity. Among all living beings, there are two types of species close to humans: beasts and barbarians. While barbarians share some similarities with humans, northern barbarians are of the seed of dogs and wolves, while southern barbarians are of the seed of Panhu (a mythical dog kept by Gao Xin during the Shang dynasty). Thus, in their appearance, temperament, behavior, diet, and desires, the differences separating them from beasts are few. They are all not of our lineage.⁴³

客有稱洪子之言者曰,“有夷於此,棄其魑結,襲我冠帶,服禮義,崇人倫,順先王之教,而進主乎中國,君子其予之哉。”余曰,“洪子爲設疑耳也。夫夷而去其夷則賢也,賢必不敢奸中國,苟其奸焉,其賢則亡矣,又何予焉。”...且吾聞聖人作春秋,其義莫大於攘夷,非惡夫行之醜而已也,乃所以辨族類也。凡生有血氣而附於人者,其類有二,夷狄也禽獸也。夷雖近於人哉,北方之夷,有犬若狼而種者,南方之夷,有槃瓠而種者,其形貌性行飲食嗜欲,異於禽獸者幾希,皆非族也。

The opening of “Hwaibyŏn I” cites a premise attributed to Hong Tae-yong: that if a “barbarian” successfully assimilates into Chinese civilization, they merit recognition as civilized. Kim I-an vehemently rejects this proposition, asserting that Confucius’s exclusion of barbarians was predicated not on their malleable conduct, but on their immutable ethnicity. In Kim’s essentialist view, barbarians occupy an ontological status distinct from humanity, rendering them akin to beasts.

While “Hwaibyŏn I” articulates this extreme, albeit predictable, hostility toward the Qing, “Hwaibyŏn II” introduces a more complex dialectic that directly engages with the counterpoints raised in Hong Tae-yong’s debate. When Kim I-an reiterates the equation of barbarians with beasts, his interlocutor retorts by pointing out that Koreans themselves fall under the category of “barbarians.” This rebuttal serves as a sharp invocation of Hong’s earlier irony: if barbarians are beasts, and Koreans are historically “Eastern Barbarians” (*dong-i* 東夷), then Kim’s logic inevitably condemns his own people to bestiality.⁴⁴

Someone challenged me, saying, “Your distinction between the Civilized and the Barbarian is rigorous indeed. But how, then, do you categorize our Eastern State?” I replied: “In ancient times, we were indeed called barbarians. However, the East is the direction of generation, and its geomantic climate is distinct [from other barbaric lands]. Moreover, we are close to China, and the ancients even placed our land in the same zodiac section as Yue (燕). Thus, our spirit and fortune have always been correlated with China. Our mountains and rivers, seasons, and local products are, for

⁴³ “Hwaibyŏn Sang 華夷辨 上,” *Samsanjaejip* 三山齋集 vol.10.

⁴⁴ “Udapchikchesŏ”: “‘夷狄之爲陰,’來教甚當。但斷之以行類禽獸,可矣,直謂之非人則亦過矣。此言雖出於中國,亦爲辭氣之過當,況以我輩而爲此言,豈不見笑於中國之古人乎?”

the most part, the same; from this, the nature of the people born here can be deduced. ... In ancient times, the distinction between the Civilized and the Barbarian was made based on geography. The region to the east of a certain boundary was called the Eastern Barbarians, to the west the Western Barbarians, to the south and north the Southern and Northern Barbarians, and the center was called the Middle Kingdom. Each had its own fixed boundaries and did not encroach upon one another; thus, we could [rightfully] be classified as ‘barbarian.’ But now, the Northern Barbarians have entered the Central Kingdom. The people of China serve the barbarian ruler as their own, adopt barbarian customs as their own, intermarry, and their lineages have become intermixed. Consequently, geography is no longer sufficient to make distinctions; one must now evaluate the people themselves. If so, in the present age, to whom should [the legitimacy of civilization] return if not to our *Chunghwa*? This is what is meant by the difference [between the past and present]. Yet, we now servilely designate ourselves as barbarians while naming them [the Qing] as the Central Kingdom. Alas, is my assertion wrong?”⁴⁵

或曰, “子之辨華夷, 其說覈矣. 抑何以處東國也.” 曰, “古者, 謂夷也. 然東者, 生之方也, 風氣殊焉. 我又近中國, 說者謂與燕, 同析木之次. 故其運氣, 常與中國相關, 而其山川節候土物, 大較皆同, 即其生人, 可知也. ... 古者以地辨華夷, 其某地之東曰東夷, 某地之西曰西夷, 某地之南北曰南北夷, 中曰中國. 各有界限, 無相踰也, 故我得爲夷也. 今也戎狄入中國, 中國之民, 君其君, 俗其俗, 婚嫁相媾, 種類相化. 於是地不足辨之而論其人也. 然則當今之世, 不歸我中華而誰也, 此所謂異者也. 然吾方僕僕然自以爲夷, 而名彼中國, 嗚呼, 吾言非邪.”

Kim I-an’s counterargument posits that although Chosŏn is geographically peripheral to the Middle Kingdom 中國, it shares a fundamental geomantic and environmental affinity with China. Consequently, its climate, customs, and local products—including the quality of its human talent—closely mirror those of the civilized center. This assertion underscores the subversive nature of Hong Tae-yong’s claim regarding Chosŏn’s inherent geographical distinctness. For Kim, geographic determinism and ethnicity remain the immutable criteria distinguishing civilization from barbarism. From this essentialist standpoint, he categorically rejects Hong’s relativistic inversion that “designate ourselves as barbarians while naming them [the Qing] as the Central Kingdom.” Thus, Kim’s discourse transcends mere animosity toward the Qing; it constitutes a strategic defense of Chosŏn’s identity, explicitly refuting the label of “Eastern Barbarians” to secure the ontological preconditions for *Chosŏn-Chunghwa*.

Although the direct textual record of the specific debate concludes there, Hong Tae-yong’s intellectual evolution culminated approximately fifteen years later in his seminal work, “Ŭisan mundap 鰲山問答.” (Dialogues at Mt. Ŭi) This treatise presents a radical critique of traditional anthropocentrism, challenging the assumed hierarchical privilege of humans over animals. Central to his argument is the assertion that the Earth is a rotating sphere—a postulate that negates the very possibility of an absolute

⁴⁵ “Hwaibyŏn Ha 華夷辨 下,” *Samsanjaejip* 三山齋集 vol.10.

geographical center. Furthermore, Hong rejects the notion of Earth's unique cosmic status, reducing it to a mere speck amongst myriad stars in an infinite universe. Crucially, the text decouples astronomical and meteorological phenomena—such as celestial events and natural disasters—from the moral realm of human history, thereby dismantling the traditional theory of Heaven-Man Correspondence. In doing so, Hong effectively deconstructs the cosmological foundations that had long underpinned Chinese geographical centrality.

Through this thorough relativization of China's position, Hong Tae-yong appears to aim not merely to redefine the boundary between civilization and barbarism, but to ontologically level them. In his view, the “center” of civilization is not an inherent metaphysical privilege, but an arbitrary coordinate determined by the mechanics of the Earth's rotation. If geography is relative and nature is indifferent to moral hierarchies, the ultimate question remains: What, then, truly distinguishes civilization from barbarism?

Since heaven bestows life, and Earth nurtures it, all individuals with vitality are the same people, and those who excel in governing are sovereigns. As far as one builds the gates of the castle and digs moats deeply to carefully guard the territory, then it can be considered as a state. Whether one is adorned with decorations or tattoos, it is all part of their own customs. From the perspective of Heaven, how can there be a distinction between inside and outside? Therefore, there is no distinction between Chinese and Barbarians in treating one's own countrymen kindly, esteeming one's own ruler, protecting one's own homeland, and valuing one's own customs.⁴⁶

天之所生,地之所養,凡有血氣,均是人也,出類拔華,制治一方,均是君王也,重門深濠,謹守封疆,均是邦國也,章甫委貌,文身雕題,均是習俗也,自天視之,豈有內外之分哉.是以各親其人,各尊其君,各守其國,各安其俗,華夷一也.

Once the metaphysical mystique surrounding geography is dismantled, what remains is the naked reality of humanity itself. Hong posits that if individuals faithfully adhere to the moral imperatives of their own context—cherishing their own kin, revering their own sovereign, defending their homeland, and valuing their indigenous customs—then the hierarchical distinction between “China” and the others loses its normative significance. As Hong articulated in his earlier debate with Kim Chong-hu, the ultimate aspiration is the attainment of Sagehood; the accidental circumstance of birth in Korea, a land traditionally labeled “barbaric,” poses no ontological barrier to this pursuit. In this framework, Hong challenges the inherent privilege ascribed to geographical boundaries, shifting the locus of civilization from the land to the moral agent. Geography, in his view, imposes no limit on the realization of the Way; thus, had Confucius chosen to reside among the “Nine Barbarians,” he would have embodied the perfection of civilization just as fully as he did in China.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ “Ŭisanmundap 醫山問答,” *Tamhŏnsŏ Naejip* 湛軒書 內集 vol.4.

⁴⁷ Ibid. “使孔子浮于海,居九夷,用夏變夷,興周道於域外,則內外之分,尊攘之義,自當有域外春秋,此孔子之所以爲聖人也.”

Conclusion

We can see from the above discussion that the 18th-century task of establishing Chosŏn Chunghwa did not unfold smoothly due to its inherent impossibility. While it is generally believed that Chosŏn's pursuit of *Chunghwa* civilization was based on cultural universality, it was actually very difficult to prove the embodiment of the civilization in Chosŏn. Seeking more tangible evidence of *Chosŏn-Chunghwa*, Korean intellectuals from the late 17th century onward sought to prove that Chosŏn was geographically and historically part of the Chinese terrain. They coveted the characteristics of the Chinese continent as the land of civilization and wanted to claim it as their own. However, this geopolitical legitimation faced an existential crisis with the influx of Western geographical knowledge, specifically the revelation of the Earth's sphericity. For intellectuals who had meticulously constructed Chosŏn's identity through its geomantic affinity with China, the geometric de-centering of the Middle Kingdom was tantamount to an ontological denial of *Chunghwa* itself.

Amidst this epistemological impasse, an alternative paradigm emerged. Acknowledging that the perfect replication of Chinese ritual orthodoxy was materially unfeasible on Korean soil, the locus of civilization was shifted to the individual's capacity for moral praxis. This theoretical pivot gained critical weight when applied to the "barbarian" Qing. As evidenced by the vehement criticism directed at Hong Tae-yong, the radical pursuit of a purely cultural *Chunghwa* carried subversive implications; it threatened to dismantle the entrenched boundaries of geography and ethnicity that the conservative orthodoxy had so painstakingly defended. Ultimately, the discourse of *Chosŏn-Chunghwa* was not a monolithic consensus, but a site of intense contestation where the definition of civilization was continuously renegotiated between the rigid constraints of geographic determinism and the fluid possibilities of moral universalism.

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