

**A New Perspective on the Korean Embassy
(Chōsen Tsūshinshi):
The View from the Intellectuals in Tokugawa
Japan**

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Hanegawa Tōei's *Chōsen tsūshinshi raichōzu* (Painting of the Korean Embassy's Visit to Our Country, 1748) is one of the most widely known paintings which depicted the Korean embassy's visit to Tokugawa Japan.¹ It contrasts the grand-scale parade of the embassy with even a greater number of Japanese spectators. As Figure 1 shows, the size of the Korean embassy was quite large, which consists of four to five hundred people, including the ambassador, vice ambassador, their assistants, translators, scholars, musicians, entertainers, physicians, guards, among others. At first glance, this picture seems to be a mere depiction of the embassy's parade in Japan. However, Koreans and Japanese have interpreted what the painting depicted in quite different ways over time.

¹ Throughout the paper, Japanese and Korean names appear in the order of family name followed by first name unless their names appeared in English language publications.



Figure 1. *Chōsen Tsūshinshi Raichōzu* (Painting of the Korean Embassy's Visit to Our Country) by Hanegawa Tōei (1748)

Specifically, while the Japanese side often emphasized the grand scale of the Korean embassy, the Korean side focused on the great number of the Japanese crowd gathering around the Korean visitors. By doing so, some scholars in Japan have argued that the Korean embassy was the Korean monarch's tribute paid to the Tokugawa shogun. They also interpreted that the huge size of the embassy revealed the importance of Japan's initiative to resume the diplomatic relations with Korea since the stoppage of such relations following the invasion of Korea by Hideyoshi in the late sixteenth century. On the other hand, many Korean scholars have argued that such a great number of Japanese spectators—from intellectuals to

commoners—gathered around the embassy seeking an opportunity to see and learn from Koreans to improve their culture.

For example, Yi Chinhŭi argued that the impact of the Korean embassy can be found even in some Japanese popular culture such as *karako odori* (*Tōjin odori*) which is a folk dance as well as in some aspects of *kabuki* theatre of Japan.² Also, many visual records concerning the Korean embassy produced by Japanese artists deal with *masangje* which refers to the Korean horseback-riding acrobats included in the Korean embassy, as in the case of the following print depicting the scene of acrobat held in the garden of a daimyo's manor (Figure 2). According to Yim Chae myŏng, Chosŏn Korea first sent the horseback riding acrobat unit as part of the embassy in response to the request from the lord of Tsushima. He argues that this implies that Tokugawa Japan was impressed with Koreans' skills to handle horses which also urged Japanese to respect Korean military capacity as horses were critical in warfare during the era.³

² Yi Chinhŭi, *Han'gyuk kwa llbon munhwa* (Seoul: Ulyu Munhwasa, 1982), 193-95.

³ Yim Chaemyŏng, "Choil simun e natanan t'ongsinsa haengdan ŭi masangje kongyŏn e tehayŏ," *Hanmunhak boejŭ* 31 (2010), 1.



Figure 2. *Bajōsaijū* (Scene of the Horse-Back Riding Acrobat). Courtesy of Kōrai Bijutsukan.

These two examples provide a glimpse of the prevalent image of the Korean embassy among Koreans: It was an occasion where Koreans disseminate and transmit their “high” culture to Japanese rather than a two-way cultural exchange between Japanese and Koreans. There are a number of dynamic factors behind the creation and persistence of these particular images of the Embassy, including the memories of Japanese colonialism in Korea in the modern era and Korean sentiment of cultural superiority over Japan. Koreans are, in general, quite proud of the Korean embassy and many of them tend to take it as a source of their national pride over Japan, one of their biggest rivals in its history.

The Embassy as the Symbol of National Pride

While Koreans in general seem to view the Korean embassy to Japan as a representative example of friendly exchange between the two countries, it is also true that many of them regard the embassy as a symbol of Korean cultural superiority over Japan. In 2009, the local government of Busan, the second largest city of Korea launched a

plan to build an amusement park with the theme of Korean embassy to Japan. It was here at the Busan port where the embassy left for Japan, and the plan's committee labeled the embassy as the prototype *Hanryu* (Korean Wave) which refers to the relatively recent boom of Korean popular culture in Japan and other parts of the world. This remark reveals that, in Korea, one of the most prevalent images of Korean embassy is that it is a symbol of cultural superiority of Korea over its neighboring country.

Indeed, when one looks at the records of the Korean embassy group's experiences in Japan, most of them had a busy time responding to various requests that came from Japanese, including those for meetings with and teaching Japanese as in the case with a Japanese intellectual Kojima Atsuo. And, it is also apparent that the Korean embassy did make a big impact both on commoners as well as intellectuals in Japanese society.⁴ Soon after they landed Western Japan by sea, they traveled to Edo through inland route which often took about eight months as they stopped by several important domains on their way to the capital. Whenever they arrived at their official lodging locations, they were expected to attend big receptions which daimyo had prepared, and many Japanese people rushed to the embassy's lodging to ask for something that they wanted. Among them, Japanese intellectuals visited those Koreans to converse on academic subject matters while some commoners just came to ask for Koreans' calligraphies. In this way, the embassy members had no time to rest during their long trip.

Since many Japanese intellectuals wanted to discuss on Chinese classics, including Confucian texts, the Korean government included *chesulgwan*, an official who specialized in classical Chinese literature and writing as part of the embassy group. The essay written

⁴ Kojima Atsuo, *Chōsen tsūshinshi no umi e* (Tokyo: Maruzen Kabushiki Kaisha, 1997), 10.

by Shin Yuhan who visited Japan as *chesulgwan* in 1719, for example, describes the situation that the embassy had to encounter as following:

The garden of the lodge was crowded with Japanese people gathering like a group of fish. All of them came here to ask us to write poems for them. Although many rolls of paper were prepared, all of them ran out so quickly because they picked up the paper as soon as I finished writing one after another. I don't even remember how many poems I had to write.⁵

Many Japanese intellectuals took the Korean embassy as a precious opportunity for them to enhance their scholarly quality and training. So, the writings that Japanese people received from Korean embassy members were sold quite expensively in the market. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Korean embassy looked down upon the quality of Japanese scholars and took great pride in the 'civilized' culture that they just transmitted to the less civilized—or even "barbarous"—Japanese people.⁶ Shin Yuhan continued to comment on his experience in Japan:

The people who gathered in my lodge made several poems each night. At times, I had to read and go over their poems one by one by holding them in each of my two hands so I could respond to their requests for my evaluation of their pieces. This situation prevented me from taking time to revise and their writings accurately. On the following day, dozens of people visited my place again and showed their poems. And I had to do the same thing all over again. It was quite

⁵ Shin Yuhan, "Haeyurok." *Korean Classics Database* (http://db.itkc.or.kr/index.jsp?bizName=MK&url=/itkcdb/text/bookListIframe.jsp?bizName=MK&seojiId=kc_mk_m022&gunchaId=&NodeId=&setid=2488320; accessed on January 3, 2013).

⁶ Ha Ubong, *Chosŏn hugi silbakja ūi Ilbongwan yŏngu* (Seoul: Iljisa, 1989), 196.

hard to evaluate their poems because the quality of their writing was so bad that it looked just like what they vomited on a kitchen table.⁷

The embassy members' low marks on the intellectual quality that they encountered in Japan was not limited to those nameless anonymous literati in town. The scholars of the Tokugawa shogunate government, too, appeared to fall short of the Korean embassy's standard of scholarship. For example, when the Korean embassy group arrived at Edo they had meetings with the members of *Rinke*, the official scholars of the shogunate which include Hayashi Razan (1583-1657) and his sons. The impression these Koreans got from the *Rinke* scholars in their intellectual quality as scholars was not positive. Nam Yongik (1628-1692) who visited Japan in 1655 as the secretary of the embassy depicted Razan as following: "Razan seemed to have some trivial knowledge of Chinese history and culture, but his writing was crude and he did not seem to understand the real meaning of the scholarship."⁸ Although Korean scholars in the embassy appreciated Razan's ability as a document drafter for the shogunate office, they did not regard him as a descent Confucian scholar. Even worse, Nam Yongik harshly criticized the other members of *Rinke*:

The writing ability of the sons of Razan is quite terrible. I do not understand how these poor scholars are able to work for the government. This problem is caused by the Japanese officialdom system which allows hereditary succession of the position.⁹

⁷ Shin Yuhan, *ibid.*

⁸ Nam Yongik, "Mungyŏn pyŏllok." *Korean Classics Database* (http://db.itkc.or.kr/itkcdb/text/textViewPopup.jsp?seojiId=kc_mk_e008&gunchald=av001&finId=036&startOrgnText=kc_ko_e008_av001_036&endOrgnText=kc_ko_e008_av001_036; accessed on August 23, 2010)

⁹ *Ibid.*

Aforementioned records indicate how the Korean embassy members evaluated the quality and level of Japanese intellectuals at the time of their visit to Japan. And many scholars have accepted these anecdotal records as an indicator of Japanese people's eagerness to meet the Korean embassy as well as their hunger for "advanced" civilization and culture that the Koreans brought from their country. In particular, such a perspective concerning the relationship between the Korean embassy members and Japanese intellectuals has been particularly obvious when it comes to the issue of Confucian scholarship in Tokugawa Japan. Many scholars in the field have maintained the view that Japan imported Confucian scholarship from Korea. As Abe Yoshio argues, they tend to believe that Japanese intellectual society was able to develop their understanding of Neo-Confucianism only after they received Neo-Confucian texts from the members of the Korean embassy.

For instance, Fujiwara Seika, a Neo-Confucian scholar who is regarded as the founding father of Japanese Neo-Confucianism, met the Korean embassy members at Daitokuji in Kyoto in 1590. Prior to this time, Korea had sent its ambassador to Japan for the purpose of requesting Japanese government to suppress Japanese pirates who increasingly became a source of headache for the Korean government as they plundered the Korean coastal area close to Japan. But, in this particular year, the Korean embassy had a special mission to investigate if Toyotomi Hideyoshi had intention of invading Korea. Scholars, including Abe Yoshio, have assumed that the Korean government dispatched a group of quality intellectual leaders who had superior knowledge and insight to accomplish this mission in their trip to Japan. And, the Japanese officials encounter with these fine scholarly figures from Korea proved to be most fruitful for a Japanese intellectual of that time such as Fujiwara Seika. His encounter with the Korean scholars indeed opened his eyes to Neo-

Confucian philosophy that he could not learn at the monastery in Japan.¹⁰

In fact, both Ambassador Hwang Yungil and Vice Ambassador Kim Sŏngil were prominent Neo-Confucian scholars in the Korean scholarly circle during those days. Kim Sŏngil, in particular, was a well-known disciple of Yi Hwang, the most famous Neo-Confucian scholar in the history of Korea. Abe believes that these Korean scholars, especially Hŏ Sanjŏn, who was one of the assistants of the Korean embassy gave Seika several key texts of Neo-Confucianism in 1590, thus providing him with inspiration to deep his scholarship in Neo-Confucian philosophy.

Different Perspective from the Japanese Side

Then, what was the Japanese scholars' perspective upon their encounter with the Korean embassy members during their visit to Japan? How was it similar or different from that of the Korean side of the story? Did they treat the Korean embassy members as evangelists of the "advanced" culture? Of course, there were Japanese scholars who were eager to learn about Korean culture and what the Korean embassy had to offer culturally and intellectually. However, Japanese intellectuals' sentiment toward the Korean embassy was much more diverse than what Koreans—then and now—expected.

While some of the Japanese intellectuals showed great respect for the quality scholarship of the Korean embassy, others criticized the embassy and even exhibited their academic confidence over and beyond the Koreans that they encountered. For instance, Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725), Confucian politician who worked for Shogun Ienobu (1662-1712) wrote that the Korean embassy was ignorant about the information around the world. He asked a question to the

¹⁰ Abe Yoshio, *Nihon shushigaku to Chōsen* (Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 1978), 44.

Korean embassy members if they knew about the countries and cultures of Europe. But the Koreans had no clue. He asked another question if the embassy members were familiar with Evidential Research on Confucian classics in Qing China. Again, the Koreans did not know anything about it either. Therefore, Arai Hakuseki criticized the embassy that the only thing that the Koreans knew was that of Ming China which had collapsed long ago.¹¹

Hakuseki argued that Confucian scholarship in late Chosŏn Korea was obsolete and isolated. Although Chosŏn Korea had an image of being a great disciple of Confucianism, the development of Korean scholarship was stagnant. Fuma Susumu introduces an episode of Shin Chesik, a Korean scholar who visited Beijing in 1826. According to Fuma, Shin had a discussion with Chinese scholars, but could not recall any name of Confucian scholars who lived after the 1600s.¹² Hakuseki were already aware of this problem of Korean scholarship even in the seventeenth century. The visit of the Korean embassy was a significant event for the Tokugawa shogunate and it inspired further cultural exchange between the intellectuals of Korea and Japan. However, the Korean embassy seemed to have ceased to be an evangelist of the “advanced” culture to Japan.

Then, why did Tokugawa Japan welcome the Korean embassy and willingly spend the enormous amount of money to treat them? Arai Hakuseki was extremely critical of the Japanese governmental policy in spending such big money for the Korean embassy. So he proposed that Shogun Ienobu simplify the rituals and receptions for the Korean embassy. However, his reform ideas were soon abolished by the time of the next shogun Yoshimune (1684-

¹¹ Arai Hakuseki and Cho T'aeŏk, "Kōkan hitsudan," (Tokyo: Waseda University Library, 1711).

¹² Fuma Susumu, *Chōsen Engyōshi to Chōsen Tsūshinshi*, Towards a Center of Excellence for the Study of Humanities in the Age of Globalization, <http://www.hmn.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/sympo02-01/01.html>

1751). Yoshimune was famous for his financial reform for the shogunate government, Kyōho reform. Nevertheless, Yoshimune was willing to spend money for the Korean embassy because their visit was very important for the sake of his shogunal authority. As Ronald P. Toby argued, the visit of the Korean embassy was considered as one of the most important diplomatic matters which led Japanese people to believe that the authority of the shogun was not only domestically but internationally appreciated.¹³ That is to say, Japan welcomed the Korean embassy because of its importance in domestic politics, not necessarily because of the Japanese shogunate government's respect for Korea.

Tensions behind the Embassy

According to Son Sūngchōl, it is hard to believe that the Korean embassy was an example of cultural exchange between Japan and Korea during that time; there had been constant political tension between the countries which was caused by their respective nationalism.¹⁴ Kojima Yasunori also suggested that the Tokugawa shogunate attempted to create the image of Korean embassy as a tributary group while Chosŏn Korea considered the embassy to be a sort of reconnaissance party for the purpose of collecting information about Japan.¹⁵ Nakao Hiroshi also argued that the image of the Korean embassy as the evangelist of the advanced culture in its cultural exchange with Japan became prevalent because some *zainichi*

¹³ Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 273.

¹⁴ Son Seungcheol, *Chosŏn side hanil kwankyesa yŏnku* (Seoul: Jiseong Ui Sem, 1994), 261.

¹⁵ Kojima Yasunori, "Edo jidai ni okeru Chōsen-zō no suii," in *Kagami no naka no Nihon to Kankoku*, ed. Kojima Yasunori and M. William Steele (Tokyo: Perikansha, 2000), 27.

(Korean residences in Japan) scholars have focused on this cultural exchange aspect of the embassy to foster national pride of *zainichi* Koreans who constantly suffered from various forms of discrimination in Japan.¹⁶ In this sense, it is hard to accept that the Korean embassy to Tokugawa Japan simply as a symbol of friendly cultural exchange between the two countries.

The relationship between the intellectuals of the Korean embassy and Japan can be best understood in the contemporary political context that the aforementioned scholars have pointed out. The visit of the Korean embassy to Japan was significant for Japanese scholars because it provided an excellent opportunity for them to legitimize and make their name known to the reading public in Japan. Unlike China and Korea, Japan did not have the tradition of civil service examination based on the government official post candidates' knowledge of Confucian texts. Therefore, the association with Korean Confucian scholars offered a chance for ambitious Japanese intellectuals to get "endorsed" by the outsider scholars from the neighboring country. At the same time, however, civil service examination tradition in Korea seemed to have led its Confucian scholars to get used to certain standardized criteria to evaluate the quality of intellectuals. That is to say, the orthodox understanding of Confucian texts was regarded as the best response to the examination questions, and therefore those applicants who could master those "orthodox" responses to the classics were considered high quality scholars.

Japan without the tradition of civil service examination was free from the monopoly of Confucian orthodoxy, and, in a way, such a condition facilitated the development of more unique and creative responses to Confucianism than in Korea or China. However, still, the fact that the scholars in Japan did not have an officially

¹⁶ Nakao Hiroshi, *Chosŏn tongshinsa iyagi*, trans. Yu Jonghyeon (Seoul: Hanul, 2007). 6.

acknowledged way to display their scholarly quality remained. For this reason, Japanese intellectuals were drawn to the opportunities in which they could elevate their scholarly reputation in public. And, the visit of the Korean embassy provided exactly that for these Japanese intellectuals.

First of all, many Japanese were aware of the fact that Korean officials were high quality Confucian scholars. Regardless of Japanese intellectuals' opinion, the Korean embassy held the image of being faithful disciples of Confucianism. Thus, Japanese Confucian scholars would want to earn some recognition from these embassy members. For example, in 1748, Andō Yōshū (1718-1783) had a chance to meet Yi Tōkmu (1741-1793), one of the members of the Korean embassy, and introduced to Yi several prominent Japanese Confucianists in Japan of that time. At first, Yōshū seemed to be explaining the historiography of Japanese Confucian scholarship. But his concluding remark in his conversation with Yi was that, above all, his master Miyake Shōsai (1662-1741) was one of the three most prominent scholars in Japan of that time.¹⁷ Yi wrote that Yōshū recorded the content of his communication with Yi in his journal with almost no personal comment of his own. However, these kinds of written records of the conversation between Japanese and Korean intellectuals were quite significant for the purpose of marketing themselves among Japanese Confucian scholars since they were usually published as their written correspondence with the Korean embassy members.

Interestingly, since the late 1700s, Korean scholars' attitude toward Japanese Confucian scholarship seemed to have changed.

¹⁷ Yi Tōkmu, “Chōngjangkwan jōnsō ” *Korean Classics Database* (http://db.itkc.or.kr/index.jsp?bizName=MM&url=/itkcdb/text/nodeViewIframe.jsp?bizName=MM&seojiId=kc_mm_a577&gunchaId=av058&munchelId=01&finId=047&NodeId=&setid=2399292&Pos=0&TotalCount=11&searchUrl=ok; accessed on September 1, 2011)

They began to appreciate the quality of Japanese scholarship, and mostly they applauded that of Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728). Yi Tōkmu, for example, complemented the level of Japanese Confucian scholarship after his reading of Sorai's work: "I happened to read Sorai's essays on Confucianism and was surprised that barbarous Japanese now understand the sage's scholarship."¹⁸

Chōng Yakyong was another Korean Confucian scholar who was impressed by the quality of Sorai's scholarship. Chōng argued that Chosŏn did not need to worry about the possibility of Japanese invasion any longer because Japan finally became a civilized country as it understood the teaching of Confucius. He added that Sorai's splendid scholarship was a good example that exhibits this change now in "civilized" Japan.¹⁹ Although both Yi and Chōng still seemed to maintain an arrogant attitude toward Japanese intellectuals it was certain that they were surprised at the quality of Sorai's scholarship.

Sorai was a great Confucian scholar in Japanese history, but it took time for him to be so successful. Although he opened his own academy in Edo, he had to suffer from serious financial problems. His poverty was later dramatized as a *rakugo* story entitled "Sorai Tofu." In 1696, Sorai got hired by Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu (1658-1714), the daimyo of Kawagoe, but was not known throughout the country yet. He even had to lose his job after Yoshiyasu's loss of power for othe shogunate, which led Sorai to make a living by running a small private academy in 1709. The most significant moment in establishing Sorai's fame in Japan came with the visit of the Korean embassy in 1711. It is said that Yamagata Shūnan (1687-

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Chōng Yakyong , "Tasan Simunjip." *Korean Classics Database* (http://db.itkc.or.kr/itkcdb/text/nodeViewIframe.jsp?bizName=MK&seojiId=kc_mk_c001&gunchalId=av012&munchelId=01&finId=005&NodeId=&setid=276378&Pos=0&TotalCount=5&searchUrl=ok) (August 23 2010).

1752), one of Sorai's disciples met the embassy and received their recognition of his scholarship at Akagamaseki. And this event made him and the Sorai School that he belonged to nationally known in Japan.

It is interesting to see the ways that Yamagata Shūnan chose in order to associate himself with the Korean embassy. As mentioned above, there had been multiple Japanese intellectuals who wanted to meet with the Korean embassy as it provided them with an opportunity for self-marketing. However, unlike the case of Andō Yōshū's encounter with the Korean scholars, those who followed Sorai's teaching had to deal with a problem before seeking to earn the Korean scholars' recognition of their scholarship: The Sorai school had fundamentally different stance toward Zhu Xi's teaching from that of the dominant Korean academy. Sorai denied Zhu Xi's interpretations of the Confucian classics. This meant that Shūnan had a debate with the Korean scholars rather than discussion in agreement. The Korean scholars, of course, did not appreciate Shūnan nor Sorai's scholarship. According to Ku Jihyōn, the Korean scholars had access to the works by Japanese scholars only after 1743 which was over thirty years later than the time of Shūnan's visit to the Korean embassy in Japan. In 1748, the Korean embassy had meeting with a scholar of Sorai school, but the Koreans did not pay attention to the scholarship of the Sorai school at that time.²⁰

In this sense, it is reasonable to assume that the Korean embassy members did not appreciate Shūnan's as well as Sorai's scholarship yet. However, Shūnan was able to advertise the Sorai School as an equally qualified or superior to the foreign scholars as "demonstrated" by this debate he had with them. Other Japanese scholars also used the Korean embassy's recognition of their scholarship as a source for their scholarly authority within Japan. At

²⁰ Ku Chihyōn, "Communication between Scholars in Korea and Japan through Written Conversations: Focusing on Akamagaseki," *Tongbanghakji* 138(2007). 276.

any rate, this encounter Shūnan had with the Korean scholars gave Sorai's scholarship national fame, and Sorai stepped into the limelight by 1722 as Yoshimune, the eighth shogun of Japan hired him as the government scholar. And, the later members of the Sorai School continued to challenge the Korean embassy. For example, in 1763, Taki Kakudai (1709-1773) debated concerning Zhu Xi's ideas and Neo-Confucianism with Wōn Chungkō (1719-1790). In this debate, Kakudai argued that there were several great teachings other than Confucianism. That is to say, he argued that scholars should be free from the traditional belief that stems from Sino-centrism. However, Wōn Chungkō criticized this argument as a heresy against Zhu Xi's teaching.²¹ The series of debate that the Sorai School and the Korean embassy members had did not bring these two parties to agreement. However, the obvious winner of this debate was the Sorai School in a sense that they were able to secure much practical benefit by making connection with the Korean scholars, and thus winning respect from their domestic patrons as well as Korean Confucians of the next generation.

Conclusion

While the visit of the Korean embassy to Japan has been considered as a symbol of friendly cultural exchange between the two countries, the historical records reveal that there was too much political tension between Korea and Japan to keep this kind of embassy just for the sake of maintaining their "friendship." To the contrary, both of the parties were, in fact, trying to take advantage of the visit for their own advantage. While the Japanese shogunate wanted to show its domestic authority using the Korean embassy as Korean "tribute" to Japan, Japanese intellectuals took advantage of their association with the Korean scholars in the embassy to gain their name and fame within Japanese scholarly community and in public. In this sense,

²¹ Ibid., 298.

perhaps the dominant Korean view of the embassy as the advocates and transmitters of “superior” scholarship and culture to Japan is too simplistic and naïve. Both sides tried to capitalize on the embassy as a source for their own convenience and political purposes. Can we still simply label the embassy as the ambassador of mutual friendship and messenger of cultural exchange? It is my contentment that it is necessary for us to reconsider the nature and function of the Korean embassy to Tokugawa Japan, and take a new, more nuanced perspective in order to uncover the underlying political tension between Japan and Korea and move beyond the oversimplified interpretation of Tongshinsa/Tsūshinshi as the embodiment of “peaceful” and “cultural” exchange between the two.

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