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The Hopes and Imaginations of the People of Joseon: A Review of Ge Zhaoguang's *Imagining a Foreign Place*

Introduction

For a long time, I have read and learned much from the research of Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光.[1] After recently encountering Here in "*China*" *I Dwell* (*Zhaizi Zhongguo* 宅兹中国), which sets out in earnest to ask what China is, or Imagining a Foreign Place (*Xiangxiang yiyu* 想象异域), which studies the travelogues of Joseon envoys headed for Beijing (*Journeys to Beijing* [*Yeonhaengnok* 燕行錄]), I have realized that the depth of his work has been further increasing.

Nevertheless, a certain sense of doubt has kept me from writing a review of his work. As the British historian E. H. Carr also said, in order to properly read a book written by someone, you should also know the author's academic background, personal point of view, and political stance in depth. The more you become familiar with these aspects, the more you can read from the book's outside as well deep into its inside (Carr 2015).

Reviewing a book such as *Imagining a Foreign Place* requires more than expertise in Korean history. Because I believed that only a scholar who was far more knowledgeable in both the intellectual landscape and academic trends of contemporary China could write a review that did justice to *Imagining a Foreign Place*, I did not dare write a full-fledged review.

Opportunities come by chance but also because they are forced upon you. Finding myself participating in the review of Korean research trends in China at the request of the *Review of Korean Studies* of the Academy of Korean Studies, I had no choice but to cover the recent research on *Yeonhaengnok* (*Journeys to Beijing*, hereafter) done in China, particularly Ge Zhaoguang's book, which has been the most distinctive among them.

Recent interest in *Journeys to Beijing* has been increasing in China as well

1. The various research of Ge Zhaoguang introduced in Korea range from Chinese intellectual history and culture to discussions about China.

as in Korea, along with an explosive surge of related research accomplishments. Since several excellent articles have already reviewed China's research on these *Journeys to Beijing*, this review will focus on Ge Zhaoguang's argument and envision how Chinese and Korean scholars can engage in a deeper discussion of his theory of the Eastern Sea (*donghai lun*).[2]

To make a long story short, Ge Zhaoguang's argument, which hopes for the creation of the foundations of a peaceful cultural community among Korea, China, and Japan, is not, as some worry, a political gesture to smoothen the friction and conflict with neighboring countries that China's rise inevitably brings, or an academic lip service paid to the intellectuals of those countries. Nor is it a soft-power strategy to reestablish a Sinocentric international order.[3] In my opinion, Ge Zhaoguang is one of the very intellectuals most wary of the rise of the nationalism of China.[4] I am fully supportive of Ge Zhaoguang's open-mindedness and his self-reflective attitude. After all, why else would I write a review of his work?

Ge Zhaoguang once emphasized, "I particularly hope that Korean scholars will be able to understand that I, as a Chinese scholar, am self-critical of the research done on East Asian history or Chinese history. There should be a doubtful, critical, and separated stance regarding the encompassing status as well as enormous influence China has had historically over the politics, culture, and economies of East Asia. This is to demand to ourselves that we must be on guard not only of Sino-centrism (*Jungguk jungsim juui*) as well as attitudes that regard China as the celestial empire (*cheonjo jeok ipjang*) or that all under heaven exists under China (*cheonha juui*) but also against overly exaggerating the central role played by the Chinese Empire and Huaxia culture in the analyses of historical events" (Ge 2020, 510).

As the literati of Qing and the scholars of Joseon have done, scholarly conversation can only take place where there is underlying trust. If any discussion or argument is equated to political strategy, scholars on either side cannot avoid a situation of crying wine and selling vinegar, and any genuine conversation would be impossible. How can Korea, China, and Japan recover trust in one another? What will they learn by sincerely looking at themselves through the mirror of one another? How will the three countries build a structure of mutual cooperation and reciprocity? An earnest endeavor to ponder these questions is the theme running through Ge Zhaoguang's books. Raising such problems is in itself extremely meaningful and worth giving serious thought.

We should not make the mistake of jumping to conclusions and quickly reconfirming the long-standing prejudices and suspicions against each other from fear, thereby closing off all discussion from the start. For this reason, despite my own shortcomings as a reviewer, I aim to reexamine the stubborn voices of the people of Joseon that emerge in the work of Ge Zhaoguang and look at why they were so preoccupied with the culture of the Middle Kingdom (*junghwa munhwa*) and why they continued to criticize the literati of Qing.

Although Ge Zhaoguang argued that the three countries each went their own way beginning from the seventeenth century, my opinion is a little different. Ultimately, I argue that it was none other than the intellectuals of Joseon who worked extremely hard to create a common foundation. I will also investigate whether we can draw the intellectual groundwork of the Yellow Sea theory from the arguments and voices of the sometimes stubborn intellectuals of Joseon. Thus, this review will reexamine why the three countries of Korea, China, and Japan inevitably went separate ways after the mid-seventeenth century and critically assess Ge Zhaoguang's Yellow Sea theory, which hopes to reestablish the foundations of a cultural community today.

Peripheries as Methodology

In *Here in* "*China*" *I Dwell*, Ge Zhaoguang emphasizes that the both the connotation and the denotation of the term China (*Zhongguo*) is not that simple. He points out that it is wrong for his Chinese readers to regard the

2. Ge Zhaoguang's theory of the Eastern Sea refers to the southeastern coast of China and spans the East Asian maritime space including Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. The Korean translation of Ge's book translates this term as the Yellow Sea theory, which I also use in this review (Ge 2012, chap. 8).
3. See O 2020 for the perspective that sees Ge Zhaoguang's argument as a discourse of cultural imperialism. O defines Ge's argument as a theory of cultural imperialism and criticizes him as "although Ge attempts to interpret the relationship between China and its surroundings through the ambiguous and tolerant nature in the stance of the 'empire' regarding its borders, he explains it as a relation between a politically, culturally, and institutionally superior Chinese empire and other countries. This idea of a relationship could cause much misunderstanding when conceptualized as a suzerain-vassal system. In particular, if China is configured as a mediator presiding over issues in the region (Northeast Asia), the conflicts over history among its neighboring countries may develop into a completely new phase."
4. See Ge 2017 for his criticism of recent New Confucian schools in China.

identity of China as natural or self-evident and asks whether there has actually been a self-identical China (Ge 2012, 15). The question he asks itself is provocative and self-reflective (S. Kim 2019).

Ge reflects on how a Chinese scholar can think beyond the limits of China and narrate Chinese history within the context of East Asia or the world. During the process of asking what China is, he criticizes ahistorical discussions, which imagine China's past based on its borders of today or apply China's past to the present times without any modification, and any political agenda based on them (Ge 2012, 7).

Ge (2012, 26-27) himself highlighted the influences of postcolonialism and postmodernism, which is related to his desire to overcome historical narratives centered on the nation-state. As I have mentioned before, he is strongly critical of recent nationalism in China. By the same token, he is also critical of the Sinocentric worldview as well as the attempt to rearrange the international order according to a tribute system, which all have accompanied the economic rise of China (Ge 2017).

As someone who emphasizes the fluidity of China in history rather than a constant China, he strongly criticizes the Sinocentric worldview. According to him, the all-under-heaven theory (*tianxia tixi*), represented by Zhao Tingyang 趙汀陽, derives from the desire of Chinese academic circles to rearrange the world order based on the economic development of recent-day China. A group of scholars within China recently influenced by the empire theory of Michael Hardt (Hardt and Negri 2001) reinterpreted Chinese Confucian Classics and presented a utopian daydream that the Chinese world order could replace Western imperialism (Ge 2019a, 210).

Therefore, there is no need to conclude that Ge Zhaoguang's argument is yet another Sinocentric world view, dreaming to return to the Chinese world order or the tribute system, or that it is the reemergence of a Chinese imperialism (S. Kim 2019, 446). That would be nothing but an excessively political interpretation of the argument of an individual scholar or a refusal to recognize the academic conscience of a scholar.

Simply put, the critical awareness of Ge Zhaoguang (2019a, 9) resides in "providing a multilayered perspective and position, by changing the habit of only saying what one sets out to say, in conducting research on China's history and culture." As a methodological tool to contemplate China, Ge chooses to look at it from its peripheries. Although the East (*dongyang*) has habitually

observed itself against the backdrop or with criteria of the West, especially Europe—China, Japan, and Korea are all unfree from this accusation—Ge Zhaoguang urges to go beyond this approach. He argues that we should not continue "looking at China through the eyes of the West" or "interpret China through China's eyes," and instead draws our attention to its peripheries in order to relativize China. Not only is this methodological reflection extremely valid, it is also an approach that well shows Ge's self-reflective attitude. The end result of this approach is *Imagining a Foreign Place*, which looks at China through the *Journeys to Beijing* of the people of Joseon who visited China. *Imagining a Foreign Place* literally means to understand and imagine China through the eyes of the people of Joseon.

As for the reason we should look at the peripheries of China, which would be East Asia, Ge Zhaoguang has said that it was not just because East Asia has been emerging as an extremely important research topic for the past few decades. He expresses a far grander aspiration: to investigate whether the current East Asia, or Northeast Asia, can develop into a common space or community that recognizes one another as being politically, historically, and culturally one, as Europe, or the Mediterranean, does. The theory of an East Asian Mediterranean, which he has proposed ever since *Here in* "*China*" *I Dwell* and corresponds to the East Sea from China's standpoint and the Yellow Sea from Korea's, is a suggestion to restore the China or Chinese culture that allowed Korea, China, and Japan to share a common historical world from the Han and Tang period to the Song era and lay it out as the groundwork of peace today.

Ge Zhaoguang criticizes nationalists within China who go too far in imagining a self-identical China on the one hand, while on the other, denies the argument to disintegrate China itself, which has been asserted by the research on the new Qing history in the United States and by the discourse on East Asia in Japan. Although there is no such identical China that transcends time and space, he argues, there clearly existed a China that served as the common foundations of China, Korea, and Japan.

Did Korea, China, and Japan really ever experience a common historical world? Ge argues that there was some common ground from the Han and Tang dynasties to the Song dynasty. During the Han and Tang era, he argues, the three countries were close enough to be regarded as part of the so-called East Asian cultural sphere (*hanzi wenhua quan* 汉字文化圈). Confucianism was also part of what constituted that common ground. The reason why this is not the

case today is because after the Ming-Qing transition in the mid-seventeenth century, China's peripheries, Joseon and Japan, each went their own way.

In fact, the reason I have focused on Ge Zhaoguang's research from early on is because of the future-oriented value of his Yellow Sea theory. The rise of China has also brought frequent friction with its neighboring countries, such as the conflict over the histories of China and Korea regarding Goguryeo (Sun 2004; Wang 2004). In response to such various forms of conflict around history, territory, and culture, Ge not only relativizes China, thereby proposing a transnational perspective, but also distances himself from the argument seeking to disintegrate China. Instead, he pursues the possibility of a common historical world through his Yellow Sea theory.[5]

Some criticize his Yellow Sea theory for being a strategic move to sweep away the neighboring countries' concern of China's neo-Sinocentrism (*sin junghwa juui*) and expansionist policies or for being a new culturally imperialistic discourse (S. Kim 2019; O 2020, 250-51). That is not my conclusion, though. The common East Asian historical world that Ge Zhaoguang proposes, although only a possibility, can be realized depending on how much effort each country puts in.

Creating a common ground of coexistence that goes beyond each of the inflammatory nationalistic trends of Korea, China, and Japan is essential for the peace of East Asia. It is my hope that Ge Zhaoguang's Yellow Sea theory will become an important agenda for these three countries. Of course, the reality we live in is not that bright. As I have mentioned before, Ge's arguments are still being misunderstood as an ambition (?) to restore a Sinocentric worldview by the scholars of neighboring countries such as Korea and Japan. What can the reason possibly be (Yi 2014; Ikegami 2019; Nam 2019; Gye 2020)?

Merely Imagination?

Imagining a Foreign Place is as intriguing as expected. At the same time, it is provocative and not just a fun read. Reading the book, which no doubt an enjoyable experience, fills your head with a number of issues to think about.

5. I also consider this position of Ge Zhaoguang as the most balanced perspective Korea, China, and Japan should maintain today.

In that sense, it is a good book. By making good use of the material left by the people of Joseon who visited Qing, namely, the *Journeys to Beijing*, Ge Zhaoguang probably set out with a light heart to write about the China not seen in Chinese historical documents, particularly of Qing's various culture, customs, performances, and clothes. It is likely that he initially intended to write a fresh account about the culture of Qing, or China, which the Chinese could not write or had passed by indifferently.

However, Ge Zhaoguang recalls that the more he read the *Journeys to Beijing*, the more difficult it became to dismiss Qing's customs, which the writers criticized, and the undergoing cultural separation between Qing and Joseon, which Ge read from the fastidious attitude of the writers, as simply a source of interest. *Imagining a Foreign Place* deftly sketches the stubborn attitude of Joseon's intellectuals who visited Qing. The reason I use the term sketch is because Ge accurately portrays the key arguments made by these intellectuals. But a more detailed picture will show that the people of Joseon were more diverse and complex than Ge's sketch.

Ge writes that the people of Joseon criticized the culture of Qing they observed for many reasons: playing music during funerary rites that should be sad, lacking distinction between men and women, and especially the way scholars earned money by engaging in commerce. He argues that they negatively recorded what was nothing but unremarkable, everyday life for the people of Qing as the decline of the civilization of the Middle Kingdom.

According to Ge, Qing's customs during then can also be seen as a kind of progressive phenomenon from a different point of view. For example, the music played during funerary rites can be interpreted as a sign that they were able to logically think about death; the lack of distinction between men and women can be interpreted as a progressive attitude acknowledging equality between men and women; and the commerce scholars engaged in can be seen as mercantilism, but the people of Joseon obstinately viewed Qing's customs in a negative light. As per Ge Zhaoguang's expression, their criticism is at times so excessive and seems rather close to imagination or daydreams instead of reality (Gye 2020).[6] Furthermore, while Qing's customs were already naturally transforming into forms the scholars of Joseon did not approve of, Joseon may

6. Gye (2020) disparages the attitude of the people of Joseon as beyond imaginative and being judgmental soaked in prejudice.

have been too preoccupied in the learning of Zhu Xi, or the study of principle, to acknowledge the changes occurring in Qing.[7] This was the extent to how different the paths the two countries were going down were.

While I partly agree with Ge Zhaoguang's argument, I also think it requires a little more deliberation. There needs to be an answer as to why the people of Joseon felt that the decline of the civilization of the Middle Kingdom was so unfortunate and stubbornly persisted to harass the intellectuals of Qing, when they could have just acknowledged that Qing and Joseon had grown apart and simply went their own way. The reason should be investigated particularly before we belittle them for insulting the other for their own pleasure or for lacking respect towards different cultures or even for having a historically distorted memory (Ge 2019b, 30-31).

Although it is true that the people of Joseon who visited Qing defined Ming as the emblem of the civilization of the Middle Kingdom and Qing as the emblem of barbarians, not everything of Ming was lauded. When the eunuchs of Ming monopolized power and endlessly demanded bribes from foreign envoys, they criticized this depravity and even went as far as to worry about Ming's downfall when the high officials of the court made their avarice for money obvious (Ge 2019b, 32). From this we can conjecture that what the people of Joseon expected was a desirable version of Ming, not Ming itself. A desirable version of Ming was, unlike Ming's reality as witnessed by Joseon, an uncorrupt country of virtuous people. In other words, they expected the virtue of gentlemen, where virtue meant practicing the learning of Confucius and Mencius, thereby treating humans with benevolence 仁 and being outraged at injustice. In essence, it was none other than the cultural basis of the Confucian Way 斯文.

After Ming disappeared and Qing was founded, the Ming remaining in the memories of Joseon's intellectuals became beautified. Ge Zhaoguang writes that the people of Joseon guarded the learning of Zhu Xi more than its Chinese scholars and looked down on Qing using Ming as a pretext, which was more of an imagination in their minds than true history. Ge repeatedly uses the term "imagination" to write that the Qing the Joseon people experienced was nothing but a result of the latter's one-sided hope. The title of the book, *Imagining a Foreign Place*, reflects his interpretation that the people of Joseon, instead of looking at the reality of Qing, only revealed their hopes and resentment in their observations (Ge 2019b, 33). One could almost go as far as to say that they were dreaming of a foreign place. Were all those Journeys to Beijing, as written by numerous Joseon's intellectuals who frequently visited Qing, merely products of their own imagination?

Contrary to the general belief that the conflict between the Manchurians of Qing and the Han lessened over the period continuing from the Kangxi, Yongzheng, to Qianlong Emperor, Ge argues that the *Journeys to Beijing* show how that was not necessarily the case. Although it is commonly known that the memories of the Ming-Qing transitional period were lost over time and the old culture of China was forgotten when Qing became a multiethnic community as well as the ruler of a large nation, the *Journeys to Beijing* show that the fierce nationalistic sentiments of the Han were still alive. Ge, however, doubts whether these records can be trusted as is. In other words, he wonders whether they were touched up by the excessive imagination and hidden intentions of the people of Joseon (Ge 2019b, 37). Of course, the *Journeys to Beijing* cannot be said to be completely imaginary, for the scenes and their descriptions are exceptionally vivid and realistic (Ge 2019b, 38-39).[8] Sometimes, what one wants to believe as imaginary turns out to be reality, and what was thought to be reality ends up being imagination.

At any rate, Ge Zhaoguang uses the records of foreigners that observed China, whether they were only imagination or the uncomfortable truth, as an opportunity to reflect upon the history and culture of China. He did not regard the *Journeys to Beijing* merely as misunderstanding or imagination, nor did he flatly dismiss them by saying that the truth cannot be seen simply by brief observation. Instead, he attempts to listen to them and their voices.

By reading the *Journeys to Beijing*, the difference between China and Joseon becomes clear. Ge concludes that Joseon and China gradually drifted away from each other culturally since the mid-seventeenth century. Strange arrogance in face of and prejudices against each other sprouted up, causing them to boast about their own selves while belittling what they saw in the other.

7. Indirectly criticizing the stubborn arguments of the people of Joseon who visited Qing, Ge Zhaoguang urges Koreans of today to maintain an open mind towards neighboring countries.

8. For example, the written conversations between the envoys of Qing and Joseon (Jeong Geonjo and Kim Yunsik), who were being harassed by Western and Japanese powers during the late-nineteenth century, are extremely vivid and true.

Joseon particularly remained stuck in its own imagination without being able to accurately grasp the reality of Qing. Hearing music being played during Qing's funerary rites, they bragged that it was no other than themselves who maintained the traditional rituals of ancient China; seeing how Qing's customs lacked any distinction between men and women, they boasted of their own Neo-Confucian moralism; after seeing the shrines of Guan Yu and temple buildings, they insisted almost religiously on Confucian teachings; and upon observing the commercial activities of the government officials of Qing, they rebuked them for being profiteers 何必曰利 (Ge 2019b, 51-52). After the mid-seventeenth century, Qing and Joseon had become completely different, but the people of Joseon, who were loyal to the learning of Zhu Xi, did nothing but regard Qing simply as barbaric through the lens of their imagination.

What Defines Barbaric 夷?

Why did the people of Joseon, who were themselves the Eastern Barbarians 東夷, look down upon other barbarians so much? Joseon idealized and pursued the civilization of the Middle Kingdom because they wanted to break free from being barbarians. Han Wonjin, the eighteenth-century intellectual of Joseon, argued that "Even if a person lives in the land of barbarians, if he discards barbaric behavior and pursues the Way of the Middle Kingdom, wears the clothes of the Middle Kingdom, speaks as is spoken in the Middle Kingdom, and does as is done in the Middle Kingdom, then he belongs to the Middle Kingdom, and people will also treat him as being of the Middle Kingdom. That he initially belonged to barbarians should not be an issue" (Ge 2019b, 90).

The Middle Kingdom Han Wonjin speaks of is Confucian civilization and institutions as well as the philosophy (the way 道) that sustains it. Ethnically speaking, Eastern Barbarians could not become Han Chinese. The people of Joseon did not live on Chinese territory. They could not change their ethnicity and territory and become Chinese. They also had no reason to invade China. The only way the people of Joseon could become the Middle Kingdom was to embody the civilization of the Middle Kingdom and the culture forming its background, thereby breaking free from being barbaric. For the people of Joseon, the criteria of the Sino-barbaric distinction was not ethnicity or territory but culture. Therefore, despite living on the territory of Joseon, the land of

Eastern Barbarians, and not being of Han ethnicity, as long as they preserved the institutions and values of the civilization of the Middle Kingdom in Joseon, they could claim that they themselves were of the Middle Kingdom.

If the civilization of the Middle Kingdom took root in the land of barbarians, then that place would become part of China; if the culture of barbarians flooded the land of China, then China would no longer be the Middle Kingdom. To the people of Joseon, China was already trans-territorial and trans-ethnic. Although the people of Qing were also barbarians, they could be the Middle Kingdom as long as they occupied Chinese territory and maintained the culture and teachings of the Middle Kingdom. The relativistic understanding of the moral principle of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*yeogoe Chunchuron* 域外春秋論) of Joseon argued that if China—in this case, Qing—could not maintain the appearances of the Middle Kingdom, they could no longer claim to be the Middle Kingdom (H. Kim2013).

Those from Joseon who visited Qing in the eighteenth century saw how the Qing empire manipulated its academic circles and culture through appeasement and oppression, that is, the carrot-and-stick scheme (Ge 2019b, 90). Bak Jiwon criticized Qing for revering Zhu Xi only in order to sit atop the necks of scholar-officials and rub their backs while strangling them at the same time. To Bak, the literati of Qing, under threats and obscurantist policies, were unable to escape from their preoccupation with less essential studies like evidential learning and verifying the validities of particular ritual procedures.[9] The scholarly trend of Qing shifted to evidential learning, and the critical tradition of the study of principle (Yihak 理學) had long become hollow and irrelevant. Even those who continued to study the teaching of Zhu Xi, or the study of principle, had no concept of the practice of self-cultivation and therefore remained at the piteous level of believing that all that was required was to speak ill of Buddhism and Daoism (Ge 2019b, 91).

What the people of Joseon expected from Qing was the Way of the Confucian king 王道, but Qing suppressed academic activities with the Way of the hegemon 霸道 and did not allow any criticism. Joseon's intellectuals could barely find any trace of the culture of the Middle Kingdom or its learnings in the reality of Qing. As a result, these intellectuals did not hesitate to regard Joseon as the Middle Kingdom and Qing as barbarians.

9. See Yang 2015 for a summary of how the Qing empire tamed its intellectuals south of the Yangtze River.

Regarding Bak Jiwon, who sharply discerned the decline of academic freedom in Qing, Ge Zhaoguang acknowledges that Bak demonstrated the high level of Joseon's intellectuals, but at the same time criticizes Bak for being unable to discard the stubborn belief that only by adhering to the learning of Zhu Xi could they preserve the civilization of the Middle Kingdom. The majority of Joseon's intellectuals thought that it was the teaching of Zhu Xi that had inherited the moral principle of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* from Confucius and Mencius. Thus when the literary men of Qing discussed the *Spring and Autumn Annals* but did not distinguish the civilization of the Middle Kingdom from that of barbarians, Joseon's intellectuals criticized them for having lost the original meaning of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* despite their beautiful writing (Ge 2019b, 95).[10]

Actually, the eighteenth-century intellectuals of Joseon did not insist only on the learning of Zhu Xi. A group of scholars called the School of Northern Learning argued that Joseon should proactively learn from Qing.[11] For example, Hong Daeyong criticized the mediocre scholars 俗儒 of Joseon for revering only the teaching of Zhu Xi while being unable to interpret the meanings of the Confucian Classics by using the philological method. Many intellectuals of Joseon including King Jeongjo, Hong Daeyong, and Jeong Yakyong were well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the Confucian studies of the Han and Song eras (Ge 2019b, 97; Kim 1996; Jeong 2015).

Joseon hoped more than anyone for Qing to rule by the Way of the Confucian king and not by the Way of the hegemon. Since Joseon would have

10. Reading the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is an act of accurately judging what is right and wrong. In order to do so, there must be a standard 極. The changes of the world cannot simply be understood and judged by the rise and fall of Yin and Yang or by its variations. The Supreme Ultimate is important for this reason. Blindly following the state of things and changes made by the two forces of Yin and Yang, like Daoism and Buddhism, makes it difficult to tell right from wrong. What is right then can become wrong and what is wrong can become right. Although this might be regarded as an extremely flexible and open-minded way of seeing the world, it can also be seen in a negative light as providing an excuse for those who merely go with the flow and adapt to the changes of the world as if nothing mattered whatsoever. So-called relativism is meaningful in the way it demands a critical and open-minded attitude for the resolution of fundamentalism and absolutism. However, if it falls into historical relativism, in which nothing is right or wrong and everything has value in its own way, then this gives birth to nihilism. If the world reaches a point at which nothing can be assessed as right or wrong, then that in itself would be a catastrophe. This is exactly what the problem of Postmodernism, which was proposed as a critique of modernity, is (Boudon 2007).

11. Gye has argued that *Discourse on Northern Learning* should be included in research on the *Journeys to Beijing*.

no choice but to succumb if Qing gathered its military forces together and came interfering again, the desire for the restoration of a common cultural identity was not simply for strategic reasons but also in genuine hopes of peace.

Thus, the people of Joseon wanted to confirm that the spirit of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, which pursued benevolence and righteousness 仁義, was still alive deep inside the hearts of the literati of Qing even when they were kneeling before force. In other words, on the flipside of the criticism directed towards the literati of Qing lay the desire to find a common cultural basis between the literati of Joseon and Qing. We therefore cannot simply conclude that the learned men of Joseon visited Qing and left behind travel records that amounted to nothing but imagination.

How to read the *Journeys to Beijing*? I argue that the criticism of Qing by Joseon's intellectuals who visited Qing should not simply be interpreted as nothing but imagination or evidence confirming the difference between the two countries. Instead, I propose to read it as the will of Joseon to find a common cultural basis of the Middle Kingdom. Although imagination literally refers to something unrealistic, it can also motivate change in reality precisely because it is unrealistic.

Did They Indeed Go Different Ways?

Qing also acknowledged that Joseon was a country of culture. The *Illustrations of Tribute Missions to Imperial Qing* (*Huang Qing zhi gong tu* 皇清職貢圖) shows Joseon ahead of Ryūkyū, Vietnam, and Myanmar. The reason was simple: even the common folk of Joseon were literate, loved to read, and knew proprieties. In short, Joseon was not that different from the culture of the Middle Kingdom. Culture here referred to none other than reading Confucian Classics and practicing benevolence and righteousness.

Choe Bu (2004), who found himself adrift and washing up along the shores of China during the fifteenth century, was grateful to the emperor of Ming for his "courteous treatment and loving and compassionate support" of Joseon. As Ge Zhaoguang (2019b, 64; 2020) argues, Joseon's worship of Ming, although strategic to some extent, was basically built upon the common cultural identity of benevolence and righteousness. Even without mentioning Confucius and Mencius, Joseon's intellectuals believed that Ming treated human beings as

human beings, thus practicing benevolence, and shared the idea that injustice should be criticized, thus practicing righteousness. The basis of the common cultural identity ranged from Sinograph, Buddhism, Confucianism, and the system of statutory law, but the intellectuals of Joseon particularly valued the shared culture of the learning of Confucius and Mencius.

The gratitude Joseon harbored towards the Wanli Emperor of Ming for rebuilding their country 再造之恩 after the Hideyoshi's invasion also had a clear reason. Although Ming's military forces avidly plundered and abused the people of Joseon, Ming had nevertheless risen to the occasion in the spirit of benevolence and righteousness and avenged Joseon on Japan, whose invasion of a neighboring country and killing of innocent people had in turn proved the absence of benevolence and righteousness. Ming's participation in the war clearly was not from strategic concerns only. To Joseon, Ming was the symbol of a civilized Middle Kingdom that possessed the virtue of benevolence and righteousness. Joseon firmly believed that they shared a common cultural basis.

When civilization seemed to disappear from the land of China with the collapse of Ming, the people of Joseon deeply regretted the loss of the cultural identity they had previously shared (Ge 2019b, 68). Although Joseon had succumbed to Qing's forces, deep inside they did not want to acknowledge this fact. In time, nationalistic sentiments weakened among the intellectuals of Qing, and even the memory of Ming grew faint. Joseon's will to seek revenge on Qing, however, did not weaken. In 1686, regarding Qing's arrogant reprimand, King Sukjong lamented that "Joseon, being weak and bound to the situation with the stronger Qing, has endured shame and reached today. There is no way to fully describe my bitter grief." Looking at the inscription on the Samjeondo stela, An Myeongha said bitterly in 1712 that the human imperatives 大經, which should be kept across all times and places, had collapsed.

Those who visited Qing from Joseon saw it merely as a business trip to Beijing rather than being granted an audience to the emperor of China. The title of the travelogues changed from *Records of Paying Tribute to the Celestial Kingdom* (*jocheon*) to *Journeys to Beijing* (*yeonhaeng*). In 1713, Han Taedong said, "I am ashamed to prostrate myself in gratitude in the courts of barbarians for what these dog-and-pig-like people give us." From the mid-seventeenth century onward, the intellectuals of Joseon were consistent in their refusal to acknowledge Qing as civilized in spite of the fact that Qing had taken over the land of China.

Clearly, the perception that viewed China as equal to the Middle Kingdom had disappeared from the minds of the people of Joseon after the Ming-Qing transition. China was no longer the Middle Kingdom. As Kim Jonghu points out, the high esteem in which Joseon held China was not because of China's land (Ge 2019b, 57). Numerous barbarians such as Wuchu 吳楚 and Manrong 蠻戎 could always take over the land of China. For the people of Joseon, China was synonymous with the Confucian Way that practiced benevolence and righteousness. China was the gestalt of civilization beyond just the country or its land or the way they dressed. Most of the people of late Joseon saw that Qing had taken over the land of China but had not been able to inherit and pass on the Confucian civilization (Ge 2019b, 58).

People on the outside could see China's situation more accurately. Qing feared the Confucian teachings on the one hand while preempting the learning of Zhu Xi to keep the righteous literati quiet. This only led to mediocre, pseudo scholars taking advantage of the situation and pursuing their own gains. Qing carried out inquisitions on the literary, threatened the learned men, and forced the literati to tread the times carefully in trepidation. Although Joseon's intellectuals saw just how extraordinary and efficient Qing's ruling strategy was, they regarded Qing and its rule by force as barbaric and a far cry from being the guardian of civilization (Ge 2019b, 102).

The intellectuals of Joseon could not help but heave a long, heavy sigh after seeing how the Chinese literati did not regret the disappearance of Chinese culture at all. They did feel relieved, however, after secretly meeting with some Chinese intellectuals, conversing with them by writing, and seeing their tears and shame regarding their shorn heads. The relief felt on the part of Joseon was not simply pride for being the only one who had preserved the civilization and institutions of the Middle Kingdom. On the contrary, it was an expression of joy that the common cultural identity still remained between the literati of the two countries. Ge Zhaoguang interpreted this phenomenon as proof that the two countries went two different ways, but I see this as Joseon's will to restore the common culture the two countries had shared.

Of course, as Ge Zhaoguang points out, the excessive pride of the people of Joseon added imagination onto imagination, distorted the past, and fabricated memories. They negatively evaluated Wu Sangui when all hope of Ming being restored was dashed. Jie Wenlan not only stood in for the tragedy of the Ming-Qing transition; her failure to commit suicide led to the denigration

of her as a woman without fidelity. Arguably, the imagination of the people of Joseon did have a tendency to be excessive. Ge (2019b, 199) wrote that the people of Joseon continued to stubbornly console themselves 自慰 by believing in only one truth—the learning of Zhu Xi—without looking around at other things.

This, however, is a little different from the truth. As I have mentioned before, a more detailed portrait of Joseon's intellectuals of the eighteenth century will reveal differences among them. Let us take a look at Yeonam Bak Jiwon's *Jehol Diary* (*Yeolha ilgi*), which Ge Zhaoguang quotes frequently. Yeonam condemned the people of Joseon who picked fights with Chinese literati over their clothes or hairstyle as being petty scholars 下士,[12] for clothes and hairstyle were not what was important. When Joseon's men boasted of the fidelity of the women of Joseon, he pointed out how unhappy it made countless women of Joseon. Although Yeonam was a scholar of the learning of Zhu Xi, he fumed that claiming to be a filial son after stabbing oneself in the thigh to feed one's parents, as if cutting off their fingers to draw blood to save their parents was not enough, or calling a hasty suicide the act of a chaste woman, were blind infatuations of those miserable petty scholars who did not even know what a truly cultured man would be like. Bak Jega, the author of the *Discourse on Northern Learning* (*Bukhagui*), Hong Daeyong, and Jeong Yakyong also voiced opinions similar to Yeonam.

Some of the intellectuals of late Joseon distinguished noble scholars 上士 from petty scholars 下士 and disparaged the reckless opinions of the latter. They tried to restore the cultural foundation of benevolence and righteousness—a term commonly used then—trans-ethnically and trans-territorially across the truly civilized in China, Joseon, Japan, and Vietnam.[13]

These intellectuals criticized petty scholars for immaturely picking fights over the clothes or shorn heads of Qing's literati. They not only acknowledged the changes occurring in Qing—for example, the outcome of evidential learning such as the publication of the *Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries* (*Siku quanshu* 四庫全書) and the *Complete Collection of Illustrations and Writings from the Earliest to Current Times* (*Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成), but also learned from Qing and investigated the common cultural foundation shared between Qing and Joseon. Yeonam's severe rebuke against the petty scholars who laughed at Qing's literati proved what an extremely open-minded scholar and well-balanced, civilized person he was. Bak Jiwon, Hong Daeyong, Bak Jega, and Jeong Yakyong, who were open-minded towards Qing's culture,[14] should not be equated with whom they called immature, petty scholars.

Of course, as most of the intellectuals of Joseon who joined the trip to Beijing fit Ge's sketches, the sketches can be described as being largely without fault. However, if the arguments of Bak Jega, Bak Jiwon, and Hong Daeyong are mixed together with those of most of the other envoys who went to Beijing, we not only fail to understand the diverse scholarly discourses of eighteenth-century intellectuals of Joseon but also lose the chance to understand why they simultaneously criticized Qing 北伐 and sought to learn from Qing 北學.[15]

While reading Ge Zhaoguang's many books, I was most moved by how he discards any dogmatic attitude or narrow-minded perspective and tries to see history through a flexible and open-minded view. Had not Ge even perused the records of Joseon's envoys to Beijing in order to think differently and gain a diverse view? Unfortunately, though, Ge concludes that Joseon's missions to Beijing comprised only those who reconstructed a foreign place 異域—Qing—within their imagination without understanding its reality. As a result, Ge fails to provide a detailed picture of the intellectual landscape of late Joseon and instead only gives us a flat sketch of the intellectuals during then.

Actually, being unable to discern the diversity among the intellectuals of eighteenth-century Joseon is a regretful one at best. The more major issue for me is the investigation of why most of the intellectuals of Joseon were unable to break free from their stubborn imagination. What is for Ge Zhaoguang merely a phenomenon of Joseon's stubborn imagination that failed to grasp Qing's

12. Bak Jiwon, "Ilsin supil," *Jehol Diary* (*Yeolha ilgi*). Although Bak Jiwon described No Ijeom 盧以漸 (1720-1788), who raised issue with the shorn heads of the Chinese, as a noble scholar 上士, he was actually being sarcastic about what a miserable petty scholar 下士 No was. No also left behind a travelogue of his journeys to Beijing titled *Susarok* 隨槎錄.
13. See Kim Jiyeong 2020, chap. 5 for diplomacy based on mutual trust between countries during late Joseon.
14. Ge Zhaoguang's open-minded attitude is also along the same lines. In this sense, I agree with Ge's Yellow Sea theory.
15. As Ge Zhaoguang also acknowledges, this stems from the wholesale acceptance of the previous perspective of Japanese scholars—that Joseon was filled with nothing but fundamentalists following the learning of Zhu Xi—without taking into account the research achievements of Korean scholars after Korea's liberation from Japanese occupation. I hope to see more heart-to-heart conversation with Korean scholars.

reality is, for me, Joseon's reality during then. Consequently, before I conclude that the three countries of Korea, China, and Japan simply went their own ways and criticize Joseon's obstinacy, I first try to further understand why most of the intellectuals of Joseon, including Hong Daeyong and Bak Jiwon, were so stubborn in the first place.

What Were Their Hopes and Desires?

I will now take a close look at Ge Zhaoguang's key arguments, which are, first of all, that Qing, Joseon, and Japan each went their own ways after the mid-seventeenth century, and second, that this process was the so-called division that occurred within the same civilization, during which a common cultural identity was lost.[16]

First, Ge Zhaoguang argues that the three countries of Korea, China, and Japan each started to go down different paths as they experienced the Japanese invasion of 1592 and the Ming-Qing transition, that the ensuing cultural difference brought upon changes in the sentiment toward one another, and that the dissimilarities in values gave birth to enormous differences. As a result, each country more clearly perceived their own culture, and this miniscule cultural difference became the cause of the seemingly unbridgeable cultural gap dividing the three countries at the present (Ge 2019b, 53). Did Qing and Japan really go their own ways, as Ge argues? Also, what does he mean by the argument that each more clearly perceived their own culture?

Second, asking which country really was the Middle Kingdom, Ge argues that since the three countries of Korea, China, and Japan discarded the common identity and went their own ways from the mid-seventeenth century onward, the *Journeys to Beijing* of Joseon and the *Reversal of China and the Barbarian* (*Ka-i hentai* 華夷變態) of Japan are documents proving the increasing distance between the three East Asian countries. Joseon, Japan, and Qing, abandoning the shared cultural identity, each claimed to be the Middle Kingdom and looked down upon one another for 300 years without actually knowing each

16. Ge Zhaoguang argues that this division led to different historical views being formed among the three countries during their respective modernization which was brought on by the shock of the West, an argument I also deeply agree with.

other. What is the nature of this huge division Ge argues that occurred within the same civilization?

First of all, let us look at the argument that Joseon and Japan, critical of Qing's reality, came to harbor a changed idea of China and barbarians (*hwa-i byeontae*) and claimed that each was the Middle Kingdom. This is to examine the contents of Joseon's Small Central Efflorescence (*so Junghwa*) theory, which argued that the moral principle of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* moved outside of Chinese territory (*yeogoe Chunchu*), and Japan's own theory of the Sino-barbarian dichotomy, which reversed the existing position of China and barbarians (*Ka-i hentai*). In my opinion, these two positions, although similar at a glance, were completely different inside.

Ge Zhaoguang argues that after the mid-seventeenth century, Joseon and Japan both had a higher opinion of themselves since they believed they had become the Middle Kingdom from being barbarians. Proud of becoming civilized and now refusing to see China as the only civilized country, the two countries each claimed that they were the Middle Kingdom. In this sense, Ge's argument that each country went their own way accurately grasps the changes happening on the ground. But as I have written earlier, a closer look shows how Joseon and Japan's intellectuals had completely different reasons for the high regard in which they held their own countries.

The Small Central Efflorescence theory of Joseon was the belief that Joseon had preserved the value of the Huaxia civilization, which China, or Qing, had lost. Accordingly, Joseon was the only heir of the culture of the Middle Kingdom. Japan's self-pride, however, did not come from the sense that they had inherited and were passing on the culture of China. Instead, Japan's own Sino-barbarian distinction came from an ethnocentrism that emphasized the unique culture of Japan, not the culture of China.

The emphasis Japan placed on its own culture has long roots. The envoys Joseon sent to Japan in 1763 met the Japanese scholar Taki Kakudai from the present-day Yamaguchi-ken and stressed the imperatives of Confucianism. In response, Taki criticized how Joseon's intellectuals imitated China and argued that it was enough that each country is ruled by its own ways. He also advised them to abandon the idea that only China was noble, and stressed how India followed Indian culture, China followed Chinese culture, and Japan followed its own Japanese culture (H. Kim 2019, 113).

According to Watanabe Hiroshi (2017), ever since the Edo period Japan

never once actually accepted Confucianism, or more specifically, the learning of Zhu Xi, deep into their society. Even if it had, the main trend was to value its own culture, such as National Learning 國學 and Shintō 神道. The resulting ethnocentrism was what served as the source of high regard Japan held itself in after the seventeenth century. To put it succinctly, although Joseon's pride in inheriting and passing on Chinese culture and Japan's emphasis on its own culture appear similar as a sort of cultural pride, they were fundamentally different. If Joseon's sense of pride lay in pursuing the culture of the Middle Kingdom, Japan sustained its self-pride by excluding China. Thus the description that each country proclaimed to be the Middle Kingdom and went their own way only grazes the surface and does not touch upon the differences below.

After the seventeenth century, Joseon hoped for the restoration of the Huaxia civilization, which was the common basis of the civilization of Korea, China, and Japan, but ended up witnessing Qing's desertion and Japan's ethnocentrism. Valuing one's own culture primarily entails an exclusionary quality towards the culture of others. What appears to be a defensive, nationalistic, and protective attitude in face of another country's stronger culture will in the end bare its imperialistic teeth and suppress the culture of others when its own cultural influence becomes stronger.[17]

The Small Central Efflorescence theory of Joseon was different from an ethnocentrism that emphasized the unique culture of Joseon. For example, in order to equip itself with both the outward appearance and inner qualities 文質 of the Middle Kingdom, Joseon imitated Qing's national projects to produce the *Complete Collection of Illustrations and Writings from the Earliest to Current Times and the Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries*. Following plans to collect all books remaining in Joseon such as the project to compile the *Complete Works of the Three Han* (*Sam-Han chongseo* 三韓叢書) or the *Complete Works of Small Efflorescence* (*Sohwa chongseo* 小華叢書), a comprehensive survey was done of the books and cultural heritage of Joseon, during which Joseon's unique cultural identity was confirmed (Kim 2005). As part of the natural process of learning about oneself while learning about the other—that is, China—

17. It should be kept in mind that the National Learning and ethnocentrism of Japan during the Edo period served as the spiritual basis of the argument for conquering Korea (*seikanron* 征韓論) and the invasions by Japanese imperialism beginning from the nineteenth century (B. Kim 2019).

it differed from Japan's way of emphasizing its own culture's superiority while excluding the other, or China. Consequently, a sentiment that may well be called nationalistic pride did appear in Joseon during the eighteenth century, but it was fundamentally different from the Japanese version of the Sino-barbarian distinction that exclusively emphasized the uniqueness of Japan.

Therefore, equating the Small Central Efflorescence theory of Joseon with the Japan's own theory of the Sino-barbarian dichotomy and arguing that each country gradually lost the common cultural identity after the mid-seventeenth century is not true. Unlike Japan, Joseon did not give up efforts to restore a common cultural identity even after the seventeenth century. The way the intellectuals of Joseon that appear in *Imagining a Foreign Place* almost excessively seem to want to confirm the tears of the Qing literati proves that.

Instead of going the way of exclusively emphasizing its own culture, Joseon pursued a common cultural identity, or the culture of the Middle Kingdom—to use the term back then—that extended beyond countries, just as Ge Zhaoguang hopes for today. After witnessing how the literati of Qing became more and more powerless as a result of the Qing court's carrot-and-stick strategy, Joseon's intellectuals had referred to clothing practices and hairstyles to express their concern of the loss of the civilization of the Middle Kingdom.

Joseon believed that Vietnam also shared the common cultural identity. In Beijing, the people of Joseon were able to meet envoys sent from Vietnam. Jibong Yi Sugwang (1563-1628) met Phùng Khắc Khoan 馮克寬 (1528-1613) in the late sixteenth century and learned that Vietnam was a civilized country with institutions pursuing the Way of the Confucian king ("王道車書共皇朝志紀編" from Phùng Khắc Khoan's poem). The intellectuals of Joseon felt a sense of cultural homogeneity rooted in Confucianism after reading the poem sent by Vũ Huy Tấn 武輝瑨 (1749-1800), another envoy from Vietnam. In other words, they believed that the two countries shared a cultural identity centered on Confucianism.[18] In 1790, Seo Hosu learned through the writings of Phan Huy Ích 潘輝益 (1751-1822) that although the sea separated the two distant countries, one lying far towards the east while the other lay towards the south, the transmission of the Way and the ancient attire were still abided by

18. Vũ Huy Tấn's poem contains the line, "Although a short encounter during one morning, the unchangeable energy and voice of the Confucian Way was the same" 雅契一朝萍水合 斯文千古氣聲同.

(居邦分界海東南...文獻夙徵吾道在...同風千古衣冠制).[19]

However, all trust from sharing a cultural identity broke the instant the envoys from Vietnam changed into the attire bestowed upon them by the emperor of Qing. Watching how they responded—for political reasons—to the request placed by the Qing court, Joseon's intellectuals were deeply disappointed and concerned. As per Ge Zhaoguang's question, why did the people from Joseon stubbornly raise issue with how the literati of Qing and even the envoys from Vietnam were dressed?

Tying Qing, Japan, and Vietnam together, Joseon's intellectuals aspired to a trans-national common cultural identity that extended beyond individual countries. This hope of theirs cannot be simply dismissed as excessive imagination. Furthermore, an argument that they claimed to be the Middle Kingdom themselves and proceeded to ethnocentrism is not logical, and could not possibly be made.

The people of Joseon who visited Japan after the seventeenth century marveled at the increase in devoted young students of Confucianism (H. Kim 2008a, 2008b). As the two countries developed deeper relations, Jeong Yakyong wrote an article in the late eighteenth century saying that there was no more need to worry about another invasion by Japan. Jeong's article shows that he had read the writings of Itō Jinsai and Ogyū Sorai and had judged that although Japanese did not solely devote themselves to the learning of Zhu Xi, their study of archaic words and phrases (*kobunjigaku*) was quite sophisticated and shared the imperatives of the Confucian Way. Having experienced the invasion of Japan, the intellectuals of Joseon believed that Japan would seek the Way of the Confucian king, not rule by power or force.

> There is nothing to worry about regarding Japan right now. I have read the works of Itō Jinsai and the explication of the Classics by Ogyū Sorai and Dazai Shundai. They were all brilliantly written. I have realized that there is nothing to worry about regarding Japan right now. Although some of their arguments are at times inaccurate, the beauty of their writings in some aspects is better than the content. The reason it is hard to defend against barbarians is because they lack culture. Without culture, it is impossible to use propriety and humility to make them ashamed of their violent minds …If the writing is better than the content, they tend not to use force or invade foolishly in pursuit of gains. Because the explication of the Classics and the discussion of propriety and righteousness of the abovementioned people are as such, there must be people in Japan that revere propriety and righteousness and consider the grand future of their country. Therefore, there is no need to worry about Japan right now.[20]

19. See Kim 2013 for the *Call-and-Response* poems (*changhwa si*) composed by and exchanged between the envoys of Joseon and Vietnam.

Intellectuals of Joseon during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries including Jeong Yakyong hoped more than anyone for the restoration of the sense of unity among those sharing Confucian culture including the Qing empire, Japan, and Vietnam. The "propriety and humility" that Jeong Yakyong hoped for was nothing special: if intellectuals devoted themselves to promoting benevolence and righteousness and if more Confucian scholars pursued the Way of the Confucian king, not the way of force, than Joseon, Qing, and Japan would be able to restore their sense of cultural unity. Only then would it be possible to prevent the breakout of another war in East Asia.

Conclusion

Over 200 years ago, Jeong Yakyong did not realize that Japan's Sino-barbarian dichotomy and Japan's exclusivist ethnocentrism would bare an imperialistic character later on. Because Japan, having apparently acquiring propriety and humility, seemed to have now become part of the Confucian community that valued benevolence and righteousness, Jeong reasoned somewhat optimistically that Japan would have no reason to use force in the future. As if to put such hopeful expectations to shame, however, Japan during the early twentieth century invaded and forcefully occupied Korea, and did not stop in its ambitions to dominate its surrounding countries including China. The

20. Jeong Yakyong, "Ilbon'ron 1," *Collected Poems of Dasan Jeong Yakyong* (*Dasan simun jip*), *gwon* 12: "日本今無憂也 余讀其所謂古學先生伊藤氏所爲文 及荻先生太宰純等所論經義 皆燦然以文 由是知日本今無憂也 雖其議論間有迂曲 其文勝則已甚矣 夫夷狄之所以難禦者 以無文也 無文則無禮義廉恥以愧其奮發鷙悍之心者也 無長慮遠計以格其貪婪擢取之慾者也. 如虎豹豺狼 怒則齧之 饜則啗之 復安有商度可否於其間哉 斯其所以爲難禦也 斯其所以可畏也…此皆文勝之效也 文勝者 武事不競 不妄動以規利 彼數子者 其談經說禮如此 其國必有崇禮義而慮久遠者 故曰日本今無憂也."

common cultural foundation Joseon wanted for hundreds of years was revealed to be nothing but empty hope.

When the Japanese empire, which had seized Korea, started the Pacific War, the wartime mobilization of Koreans as well as the oppression against them became more blatant and more violent. One day in 1942, Yi Taehyeon, a local Confucian scholar (*hyangyu*) living in Namwon of Jeolla Province in Korea, admonished the atrocities of the Japanese and took his own life at the young age of 33 years old. Before he died, he wrote in his journal that if a human being loses benevolence, righteousness, and fidelity, he was no longer human.[21] He scathingly pointed out that Japanese imperialism, armed with wealth and power, was not only invading many countries and killing countless innocent lives but also annihilating the Korean race.[22] He criticized Japan's rule by force (*paedo*) and emphasized benevolence and righteousness, which were in essence the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, that is, that all men cannot bear to see the sufferings of others 不忍人之心, and those that cross this line were barbarians.

The sense of Confucian culture the twentieth-century Confucian scholar Yi Taehyeon had inherited—the yearning Joseon's intellectuals had had towards the culture of the Middle Kingdom—was not of clothes or hairstyle. The cultural unity they shared were the imperatives of Confucius and Mencius, namely to treat people as people 仁 and to rise up against injustice 義. Confucius and Mencius here were not Chinese, Korean, or Japanese, and their learnings were not limited to the culture of only one country.

The hopes for the Way of the Confucian king, not rule by force, transcended nation and time and became the symbol of humane politics. The 33-year-old young Confucian scholar conjured up the words of Confucius and Mencius from ancient times—benevolence and righteousness—into the twentieth century as a common language of East Asia and scolded the Japanese police. Dismissing this as the imagination or delusion of some rural Confucian scholar who knew nothing of how the world worked would leave me with nothing more to say. Is it not true that he at least hoped for a common cultural identity shared among Korea, China, and Japan, in which humans were treated as humans and injustice brought to indignation?

21. Yi Taehyeon, "Isan ilgi," *Personal Manuscripts of Jeongam Yi Taehyeon* (*Jeongam sago* 精菴私稿).
22. Yi Taehyeon, "Su Wae sipjoe," *Personal Manuscripts*: "爾國徒恃富强 侵伐中國及西洋諸國 魚肉無罪億萬生靈 暴殄無限…我邦人 將至靡有子遺 此罪至大也."

The envoys from Joseon described in *Imagining a Foreign Place* also harbored such expectations. Of course, hope that is too intense can trap reality inside the box of imagination. From Qing's point of view, which no longer based judgment on antiquated standards, the Joseon's envoys may have seemed cliché and obstinate. But from a more universal perspective looking toward higher value, we can gain a better understanding of the "imagination" of the envoys to Beijing.[23]

To those who think only they are right, relativism's open-mindedness could be educational; to those who believe that the standards of justice are interchangeable over time and space, relativism only serves to breed nihilism, which denies the existence of truth. Even if Korea, China, and Japan share a Sinographic culture, without a shared appreciation of the basic treatment of humans and the value of truth, restoring cultural unity as Ge wishes is still a far way off.

Peace is impossible without trust, whether it is between states or individuals. As Ge acutely points out, mutual trust among China, Joseon, and Japan collapsed from the seventeenth century onward. Trust is only possible when the involved parties are reliable, or culturally recognizable, to one another. The noble man differs from the petty man or any semblance of nobility. The noble men Confucius and Mencius stressed were individuals who devoted themselves to embodying and realizing the ideal that all under heaven existed for everyone 天下爲公. This was why noble men were reliable and unwelcomed by profit-chasing petty men.

Joseon's intellectuals tried to meet reliable noble men among the literati of Qing and among the Japanese through written conversations. Ge Zhaoguang belittled these intellectuals as being excessively stubborn; Japan disparaged them as blindly cherishing Chinese culture without any sense of identity. However, I would like to believe that it was none other than these intellectuals of Joseon who persistently tried to recover the shared cultural unity of the three countries. Some, like Jeong Yakyong, were relieved after seeing the Confucian culture in Japan, while others, such as Bak Jega, argued that they learn from Qing. Of course, all these efforts turned out to be misjudgments and hopes dreamt in

23. Yang Nianqun 楊念群 (2005, 113) actively voiced the opinion that Korea's conformity to the propriety and norms espoused by the learning of Zhu Xi may serve as the spiritual foothold as well as institutional foundation in building an East Asian cultural community.

vain. Reality in history is thus always more rigid and bitter.

Today, it is the task of intellectuals to penetrate political mistrust and build mutual solidarity. Hiding mistrust behind smiling faces at academic arenas is hardly the attitude of Confucian noble men. I accept Ge Zhaoguang's argument literally and actively support his Yellow Sea theory. Although his Yellow Sea theory still remains a remote possibility to be realized, his discourse fills me with great hope. It is my wish that the intellectuals of Korea, China, and Japan can have frank conversations and discussions, like Ge Zhaoguang. Concern, doubt, and mistrust cannot change reality, let alone bring the ideal state of peace.[24]

While reading the books of Ge Zhaoguang, I found myself feeling glad, but not rejoicing either. I was happy to encounter the discourse of a conscientious Chinese scholar such as Ge Zhaoguang, and was sad that he seemed to dismiss the records left by Joseon's intellectuals as daydreams or imagination instead of considering them as representations of reality. In a sense, their records were indeed yearnings for cultural unity, where humans were treated as humans and injustice resulted in indignation.

Consequently, I felt a sense of déjà-vu in Ge Zhaoguang's Yellow Sea theory, which seeks the peaceful coexistence of Korea, China, and Japan today. Endlessly reflecting upon what China is while striving to communicate with neighboring countries: would it be too much of an exaggeration to consider Ge Zhaoguang the Confucian noble man of today? I entreat Ge Zhaoguang once more to look at the obstinacy of Joseon's envoys in a more optimistic light and understand why they tried so hard to seek the possibility of benevolence and righteousness in Qing and Japan.

If my memory is correct, I recall that the following comment by President Xi Jinping was published in the December 7, 2019 article of the *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*). Xi said China was responsible for proving how not all countries that grew strong proceeded to hegemonic rule. To me, it seemed like he was trying to say that China had never spread the genes of invasion, and that the

24. I do not dismiss the Way of the Confucian king merely as an ideology of Confucianism, nor do I see Zhao Tingyang's all-under-heaven theory as simply a daydream hoping to rearrange the Sino-centric world order. Furthermore, I do not regard Wang Hui's trans-systemic society (*kua tixi shehui*) as the revival of an imperialistic ideology. As much as I hope that Ge Zhaoguang's Yellow Sea theory is discussed as a productive discourse for the future of East Asia, I also hope that ideas such as Zhao Tingyang's (2016) all-under-heaven theory, especially its all-inclusiveness (*wu wai*), and Wang Hui's (2011) trans-systemic society continue to be discussed as a new discourse of peace in East Asia.

Chinese people did not believe in the zero-sum game of killing and being killed, as shown by the 5,000-year tradition of Chinese history and culture, which followed the ideas of "great harmony under heaven" and "all under heaven exists for everyone" 天下大同 天下爲公.

I do not necessarily regard such statement as being politically strategic. Some may say I am naïve or caught up in a fantasy. I will continue to be relieved, however, as long as fellow scholars such as Ge Zhaoguang who share the Confucian Way are around. So continues on my imagination

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