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Abstract

This article focuses on the historical meaning of the Injo Restoration of 1623 in light of both Sino-Korean relations and the Ming-Qing transition of the early seventeenth century. The author first looks at the “hidden influence of the Ming” on a series of events that eventually led to the Injo Restoration, and at the special relationship that developed between the Joseon and Ming dynasties over the course of the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries and especially during the Imjin War. The article goes on to consider the Injo Restoration not just as internal Joseon political change, or a “power transfer from northerners to westerners,” but as an “international event” that stemmed from different responses to external factors, such as the Imjin War and the Ming-Qing transition. Lastly, the article examines the strong dependence of the new Joseon regime on the Ming dynasty’s authority for survival after the coup, the resulting increase in Ming influence over Joseon, and the historical meaning of these developments in the broader context of East Asian politics, specifically, the Ming-Qing transition.

Over the course of the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, and especially the Imjin War, a special relationship began to take shape between the Joseon and Ming dynasties. The intellectuals of fifteenth-century Joseon considered the Yuan-Ming transition to be a great accomplishment that finally returned the world to what they thought was a normal and rational state. In addition, they regarded the Ming as the only legitimate ruler of China and revered the

emperor as the “Son of Heaven.” While they considered subservience to the Ming to be only natural, they also took great pride in their own heritage. They believed that Joseon, founded by Dangun, was an independent country that was completely different and separate from China, and stressed the importance of studying their own history.

The Joseon intellectuals’ respect for the Ming was further intensified over the sixteenth century, fueled by the spread of Neo-Confucianism and Sinocentrism, along with popular self-development and history books that described the Ming as an absolute entity of eternal existence, such as the *Dongmong seonseup*. Some Joseon scholars went so far as to hope that they could become more “Chinese” than the Chinese themselves. They believed that Joseon had the same roots as the Ming and prided themselves on the fact that Joseon was the Ming’s closest feudal state, and thus better than Japan.

When the Imjin War broke out, this understanding of the world led to an interpretation of the war as “Joseon being attacked by Japan in place of Ming, Joseon’s parent country.” In addition, the Ming’s participation in the war in the name of “helping Joseon” promoted the status of the Ming among Joseon intellectuals from “ruler” or “parent” country to “savior.” King Seonjo, who had to flee and as a result lost his authority in the early days of the war, considered the Ming a “savior to protect him from a rebellion.” With regard to upholding Seonjo’s sovereign authority, the Ming was indeed the “savior” and “greatest contributor during the Imjin War.” This interpretation was clearly visible in the conferment of honors after the war. Seonjo declared at the start of the conferment that “Ming was by far the greatest contributor to Joseon’s triumph over the Japanese army.” King Seonjo also honored those officials who had accompanied him on his flight to Uiju, rewarding them as “Merit Subjects Who Accompanied the Monarch.” Those military officials who actually fought against the Japanese army in the battlefield were honored much less highly under the category of “Merit Subjects Who Excelled in Battle.” Thus Seonjo honored his own feat of traveling to Uiju and requesting the Ming’s help over the military successes of the still famous admiral Yi Sunsin.

Meanwhile, the Gwanhaegun regime that the Injo Restoration brought down shared the spirit of “Merit Subjects Who Excelled in Battle.” As prince, Gwanhaegun himself led the provisional government during the Imjin War, and the key figures of his administration, including Jeong Inhong and Yi Icheom, raised loyal armies and made great contributions during

the war. In fact, while Gwanhaegun was in power, officials argued that Joseon's triumph in the Imjin War was not so much attributable to Seonjo's request for help from the Ming as to Gwanhaegun's feat in raising armies against the Japanese. Gwanhaegun was well known for rejecting the Ming's request for reinforcement after the Battle of Sarhu in 1619 and for adopting shrewd diplomatic tactics so as not to aggravate the Later Jin dynasty. When overthrowing the Gwanhaegun regime, the rebel leaders of the Injo Restoration justified their action by claiming that "Gwanhaegun betrayed Ming and kept friendly relations with barbarians."

Therefore, from the perspective of the history of East Asian international relations, the Injo Restoration can be interpreted as a political rebellion led by Merit Subjects Who Accompanied the Monarch (members of the Seoin and Namin factions) to bring down the Merit Subjects Who Excelled in Battle (members of the northerners or Bugin faction) from power. It is interesting that most of the rebellion leaders were followers of Yi Hangbok, who was a member of the Seoin faction and was awarded the highest order of merit as the first rank of "Merit Subject Who Accompanied the Monarch."

The Ming's take on the Injo Restoration was double-sided. On one hand, the legitimist group criticized the coup as an unjustifiable usurpation done without the Ming's approval. On the other hand, the practical point of view was that the Ming needed to approve Joseon's new regime as soon as possible and have Joseon fight against the Later Jin. The former group, mostly made up of the Donglin faction, urged that the Ming should punish Injo, the traitor, and bring Gwanhaegun back to power. In the end, the Ming followed the recommendations of the latter group, which was led by powerful eunuchs. Condoning the "illegal usurpation" of Joseon's new regime and approving King Injo's legitimacy was an inevitable choice for the Ming due to the threat of the Later Jin. As the Ming had already lost most of the Liaodong Peninsula to the Later Jin, it desperately needed to lure Joseon's new regime into fighting against the enemy in Manchu. It is interesting that Mao Wenlong, the Ming general who organized guerilla raids against the Later Jin from his base on an island off Joseon's Pyeongan Province worked closely with Wei Zhongxian, the leader of the eunuch group that urged Ming's central government to approve the Injo Restoration and install Injo as a legitimate king of Joseon.

After the Battle of Sarhu in 1619, Gwanhaegun refused to participate in the Ming's tactic of "using barbarians to control barbarians." He focused on not being dragged into the

conflict between the Ming and the Later Jin. Therefore, the breakout of the Injo Restoration actually proved favorable to the Ming. Injo desperately needed the Ming's approval to confirm the legitimacy of his regime and thus pledged eternal allegiance to the Ming. This naturally made relations between Joseon and the Later Jin more hostile than before. With the Ming holding the right to approve and install the new regime, its influence over Joseon increased dramatically. Seeking favor with the Ming, Joseon's new regime became increasingly submissive to it and had to bear various socioeconomic burdens, such as supporting Mao Wenlong's army with rations. More importantly, as the Ming overlooked the illegal aspect of the coup when approving the new regime, the Joseon dynasty found it more difficult to challenge the Ming's authority.

As such, Mao Wenlong's camp in Joseon's territory served as the Ming's military base to keep an eye on not just the Later Jin but also Joseon. Soon, it became the source of the Ming's absolute authority, which swayed the domestic politics of Joseon. When the rebellion of Yi Gwal broke out in 1624, King Injo, who had to cede Seoul to the rebels, was extremely concerned that Mao Wenlong might approve Yi Gwal's regime. The Ming made good use of the rebellion of Yi Gwal to threaten the Injo regime to be more submissive than before. During King Injo's reign, the Ming army stationed in Joseon had huge political influence, which was further intensified by the outbreak of internal rebellions like that of Yi Gwal. This increased the power of Mao Wenlong himself as well Ming control over Joseon. The Ming not only saved Joseon from the Japanese invasion but also became the source of authority and legitimacy for the Injo regime. This is why the Injo regime revered the Ming as an absolute being and claimed that Joseon should serve the Ming's interest whatever the outcome might be. In the end, Joseon's diplomatic policy aggravated the Later Jin, which led to the first and second Manchu invasions of Korea in 1627 and 1636.

Joseon's political history, from the Imjin War of 1592 to the completion of the Ming-Qing transition of 1644, was greatly affected by various external factors. Furthermore, the political upheaval within Joseon also affected the progress of the Ming-Qing transition. The very inception of the Injo Restoration itself was intertwined with the underlying trend towards the Ming-Qing transition, which was set in motion after the Imjin War. The outbreak of the Injo Restoration had a significant impact on both the Ming and Later Jin, which were then in a violent struggle over Liaodong Peninsula. The Ming-Later Jin conflict had a decisive impact on the

outbreak of the first and second Manchu invasions of Korea. In addition, Joseon's surrender to Qing in 1637 allowed the Qing to launch its invasion of China proper. For these reasons, the Injo Restoration should be understood not just as a domestic political change in Korea but as an international event in the broader context of East Asian international relations.