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The Emperor's Words and Letters – The Two Levels of Early 15th century Ming – Joseon Relations

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1. Golden Age or Foolish Ruler?

The 17th century Qing dynasty scholar Gu Yingtai 谷應太 called the period from 1425 to 1435 “the rule of Ren and Xuan 仁宣之治,” a golden age of the height of the Ming dynasty. With the assistance of notable officials like the Three Yangs 三楊, a good emperor opened an age of peace. But King Sejong of Chosŏn, who lived at that same time, called the Xuande 宣德 Emperor a “foolish, greedy ruler.” Why are these assessments so clearly divergent? It is a key point to clarify which aspect of the emperor those two figures focus on.

For a long time, historians have described the Ming dynasty as autocracy. With the emperor holding the power of the final decision, it was an era in which the emperor's words directly became law. Various ministers and officials acted as intermediaries in various ways. There has been much vibrant, active research on this political system and structure. But, how exactly were the emperor's words transformed into documents? How were the emperor's words conveyed to the officials who wrote them down? Many aspects of the emperor's words remain unclear.



Figure 1. A portrait of the Xuande Emperor (r. 1425-1435)

2. Documents that only exist in Korea

Generally, the emperor's words were conveyed to receivers in the following ways:

- 1) The emperor spoke directly with the person receiving his words.
- 2) A messenger traveled to the person receiving the words.
- 3) The emperor's words were quickly written down into a memo.
- 4) A document was created in a formal and deliberate manner based on the emperor's words.
- 5) Ghostwriters expert at history and literature drafted and promulgated documents based on the gist of the emperor's desires or intentions.

Most documents surviving today fall into category 3, 4, and 5. Category 1 and 2 survive insofar due to someone writing down the emperor's oral order as a memo

or record. Of course, there are few other ways that such oral communications could be handed down to the present down to the present. Indeed such records are scarcely seen amongst Chinese historical records. However, on the Korean side, which had to receive and then execute imperial orders, a great many examples of these were recorded and passed down. In the official History of Koryŏ (Goryŏsa), and the Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty (Chosŏn Wangjo Sillok), an incredible number of instances of imperial messages, communicated orally, are recorded in colloquial/vernacular Chinese. Through these instances, we can taste the true feelings of the emperor's words not recorded in more formal documents.

3. Imperial Edicts and official diplomacy

The Yongle Emperor 永樂 (r. 1402-1424) and the Xuande Emperor (r. 1425-1435) sent edicts to Chosŏn over and over again to express their desire to develop friendly relations between the two countries. Sometimes the emperor sent gifts such as silks, very fine ceramics or porcelains, or belts or swords he had worn himself, praising and rewarding Korea's loyal devotion to its superior (China). Reassuring words can be seen in these documents such as that China would grant Korea its longstanding desire of having jurisdiction over the Jurchens, will lessen the amount of tribute demanded, or will reprimand and punish Ming officials who committed violence in Korea. The Ming-Chosŏn relationship described in these documents is one of protecting and maintaining the ideal relationships between the Son of Heaven and the vassal lords, within the traditional Hua-Yi (Civilization and Barbarian) order.

4. Emperor's words and private diplomacy

The emperor's own words often are different from what appears in official documents. After strict ceremonies related by formal imperial edicts were over, the Ming envoy would sit down with the Korean king alone and convey the emperor's oral messages. Elements not contained in the formal documents were conveyed to the king at this time. Often, these elements included requests for Korea to send young beautiful women, women who excelled at dance and song, or women who were good at cooking; to send various kinds of falcons or hawks, or hunting dogs; or to send salted caviar, salted shellfish, or other things. Requests for Korea to send Buddhist relics were especially problematic for the Chosŏn court, which prided itself on being a Confucian country.

Also difficult for Chosŏn were imperial requests for hawks or falcons. Mobilizing people to engage in efforts to capture hawks forced the court to temporarily suspend taxation in certain areas. This was one of the reasons that King Sejong called the Xuande Emperor a foolish, greedy ruler.

The reason the emperor deliberately used oral messages was in order to avoid his own "noisy" (i.e. critical, interfering) officials to know about these requests, or about other things. Though the envoys had been sent to the Chosŏn court to collect and bring back girls, the imperial edict recorded that certain medicinal products were being bestowed upon the king "in accordance with the king's wishes." In fact, the king never requested medicinal goods. This envoy, with the Korean women as tribute goods, entered the Forbidden City in the dark night, in order to avoid other officials seeing them.



Figure 2. Amusements of Emperor Xuanzong of the Ming dynasty
明宣宗行樂圖 (商喜, 15C)

* When the emperor enjoys games, he is accompanied only by eunuchs.

5. Imperial Messengers

Written documents are a medium which can speak to anyone. But the emperor's own words were different. To an imperial messenger charged with conveying the emperor's own words to, for example, a Korean king, the emperor could not hide his true feelings, and had to lay them out clearly. The messenger had to convey the words and nuance truly to the king of Chosŏn. The most appropriate people for this job were eunuchs originally from Chosŏn who actively served in the Ming court.

Of the 49 missions dispatched from Beijing to Seoul by the Yongle and Xuande Emperors, all but three included eunuchs. And most of these were people originally from Korea. In earlier centuries, the Mongol Empire, too, had requisitioned younger eunuchs from Koryo (Korea), and used them as eunuchs in the court. The Ming dynasty also used eunuchs from Chosŏn in the same way. During the reign of the Hongwu 洪武 Emperor (first emperor of Ming, r. 1368-1398), Korean eunuchs were often sent as envoys, and that practice was continued into the 15th century. During the Yongle reign, the eunuchs such as Huang Yan 黃儼 and Hai Shou 海壽, and during the Xuande reign individuals such as Chang Sheng 昌盛 and Yin Feng 尹鳳, went back and forth between Beijing and Seoul a number of times, acting in service to the emperor.

These individuals, who were familiar with the matters within Korea and internal secrets of the Forbidden City, were the chief agents of relations between the two countries in the early 15th century. They were charged with solving sensitive problems between the two countries behind the scenes, conveying Chosŏn's requests to the emperors and otherwise ensuring that relations were smooth and peaceful.

Chosŏn also utilized these eunuchs well. When Chosŏn envoys visited Beijing and submitted formal documents to the Board of Rites, they necessarily visited these eunuchs and explained the intimate circumstances that were not expressed in those formal documents. The eunuchs did not provide this intermediation for free, however; they expressly demanded large fees or bribes from the Korean court to solve sensitive problems in a quiet way, and the Korean court gladly paid them.



Figure 3. Emperor Xuanzong of the Ming dynasty 明宣宗出獵圖 (商喜, 15C) hunting.



Figure 4. A Beautiful Falcon 佳鷹圖 (李巖, 16C)

6. A Shift: The Accession of the Zhengtong 正統 Emperor (1435), and Changes this brought

On the 3rd day of the First Month of the 10th year of his reign (1435), the Xuande Emperor died suddenly. Succeeding him, a young emperor who had just had his 7th birthday, acceded to the throne. He was the Zhengtong Emperor, often considered the least enlightened emperor during the entire Ming dynasty. The Empress Dowager and the Three Yangs (high-ranking, prominent advisors to the Xuande Emperor) employed their influence within the court, exerting some power during the early years of the reign of this underage monarch. In the 3rd month of that same year, the young emperor ordered that “all the requests for people and things made by my imperial father be halted.” Thus, the following month, nine female servants, seven singers, and 37 kitchen workers originally from Korea were sent back to their home country. The Empress Dowager reportedly said “I did not know they were here in the palace,” expressing regret at her son’s actions.

The young emperor expressed little interest in Korea – or, that is, in Korean people and goods. The eunuch messengers associated with his father grew more distant from him. King Sejong, realizing the change, gave a strong order that Korean officials visiting Beijing should not meet with the eunuchs.

And so the relations between the two countries suddenly subsided. During the 32 years of the Yongle and Xuande reigns, Ming envoys were recorded as having visited Seoul 57 times, or roughly 1.8 times per year. But during the 14 years of the Zhengtong reign, the number dropped to four visits. With the exception of the two embassies which took place during the year of Zhengtong’s accession, over the rest of his reign, a period of more than 10 years, only two further Ming envoys visited Seoul. Reportedly worrying that the Ming envoys would cause trouble, when the Zhengtong Emperor had something to convey to the king, he sent formal edicts via a

Korean official who was to return home.

The eunuchs who had managed relations during the Yongle and Xuande reigns disappeared from the stage, and the Board of Rites came to serve as the chief party responsible for doing so, both in name and reality. Hu Ying 胡濙, the minister of the Board of Rites during the Xuande, Zhengtong, and Jingtai 景泰 reigns, complained to Korean envoys during the Xuande reign that “the emperor doesn’t listen to his officials’ advice.” However, during the Zhengtong reign, Chosŏn thanked him and expressed that the emperor “always very warmly welcomed our country, and tried to meet our requirements.”



Figure 5. The Zhengtong Emperor (r.1435-49)

7. The Two Levels of Ming-Chosŏn Relations

In the first half of the 15th century, there were mainly two groups of people within the Ming court who handled relations with Chosŏn.

One was the court officials of the outer court, who were entrusted with imperial documents. They handled problems related to the costs and benefits of the state such as the horse trade and matters of national security pertaining to relations with the Jurchens and the people of the Liaodong peninsula. The other group were the eunuchs of the inner court who conveyed the words of the emperor. For them, it was important to bring beautiful women, good food, excellent hawks hunting dogs, and so forth that the emperor would like. For the officials, Chosŏn was a formal diplomatic partner, within the world of Sinic, Confucian civilization. For the eunuchs, Chosŏn was a never-ending source of wealth to feed the emperor's tastes or preferences. If we take the court officials' activities as official diplomacy operating on a state-to-state level, the chief area of activity of the eunuchs was one of personal/private actions.

Absolute majority of the envoys who came to Korea as envoys in the Yongle and Xuande reigns and conveyed the emperor's will were eunuchs from this latter group; many were eunuchs originally from Korea. This tendency was contrary to Chosŏn's expectations. When the young Zhengtong Emperor came to the throne, he expressed little interest in Korea, and so the influencing area of the officials of the outer court became larger, or more powerful.

8. The creation and rhetorical flourishes in Official Histories

The section on Chosŏn in the *History of the Ming* (Ming shi) indicates that the Xuande Emperor ended the practice of Chosŏn presenting hawks and hunting dogs to the emperor. The *Annals of Ming Xuanzong* (Ming xuānzōng shílù), in an entry for 1428/9/28, records that:

The king dispatched envoys every year. Presented with hawks and hunting dogs, the king's loyal devotion could be sufficiently seen. Now the envoys

return. I [the emperor] bestowed upon the king 15 pieces of porcelain. It is said that the kingdom has many rare creatures, but I do not have a desire for such things, so from now on, do not offer them to me.

However, the Korean record indicates the exact opposite. An entry in the *Annals of Sejong* (Sejong Sillok), dated 1428/11/2, records that

Until now, you [the king] dispatched envoys every year, and presented [me, the emperor] with hawks and hunting dogs; the king's loyal devotion could be sufficiently seen, and I [the emperor] was very happy. And I sent a eunuch Kim Man, who went to the king with an imperial edict, and specially bestowed [upon the king] 15 pieces of porcelain. If there are good hawks or large dogs in the kingdom, search them out and present them immediately [to me, the emperor], and by doing so show the king's beautiful intentions.

One or the other of these texts would seem to be misrepresenting the situation. It is difficult to imagine any motive on the Korean side to do so. Ming chroniclers may have had motivation to misrepresent the exchanges, however. Indeed, immediately after the above document was conveyed, King Sejong issued an order to the entire kingdom to hunt and capture hawks, expressing that "there is no falcon in our kingdom, but the emperor's demands are endless."

The famous Three Yangs were the compilers and editors of the *Annals of Ming Xuanzong*. Gu Yantai wrote about the Xuande Emperor that "the loyal assistance of the Three Yangs made him a sage ruler," but it may in fact be more accurate to say that "the methodical manipulation of the Three Yangs described him as a sage ruler."



Figure 6. From left, Yang Rong 楊榮, Yang Shiqi 楊士奇, Wang Zhi 王直, as depicted in the 1437 painting “Elegant Gathering the Apricot Garden” (杏園雅集圖(謝環). They all played key roles in the compilation of the *Annals of Ming Xuanzong*.

9. History, Memory, and Records

The matters discussed in this paper thus far cannot be perceived in the official histories compiled by the Ming court. For example, the Xuande Emperor who indulged in people and products from Korea, in a poem he composed himself, writes of Korea that “its culture and clothing surpass those of the Barbarians of the Four Directions. It is a place which treasures the lasting traces of Jizi 箕子,” and therefore he writes that he puts efforts into “warmly cherishing guests from afar.” Hearing this, King Sejong was probably amazed.

This probably has something to do with the idea that the final version of official records usually convey only positive impressions. In the final entries of the 127 volumes of the *Annals of Sejong*, the condolatory address of King Sejong indicates that “every year, he ‘served the great’ [i.e. engaged in ritual diplomacy with China] and the Son of Heaven recognized the efforts. The emperor graced him with very kind praise, and heaped many bestowals upon him.” The second to last entry records an obituary to the Ming court, quoting nine imperial edicts from the Xuande Emperor praising Sejong for his loyal devotion in ‘serving the great.’ Looking only

at this, Chosŏn-Ming relations during Sejong's reign would seem to leave no room for doubt that it was an exemplary model of ideal 'serving the great' style relations.

Recently an epitaph of Ming eunuch Chang Sheng, who visited Chosŏn seven times, and received criticism from Sejong as the greediest person in history, was excavated. The epitaph indicates:

He traveled to Chosŏn many times, promulgated sage edicts, and made the barbarians happy. So the tribute goods trail behind him.

Hu Dan 胡丹, who introduces this epitaph, quotes the above text and comments "it is ridiculous." One can see why. The one who wrote this was the minister of Board of Rites, who was dissatisfied that the emperor listened only to the eunuchs and not to his officials.