SADAE (SERVING THE GREAT) IN KOREA–GREAT POWER(S) RELATIONS SINCE 1392

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Abstract

Sadae (‘serving the great’) was the core of Joseon Korea’s relations with Ming/Qing China for over five centuries, from 1392 until 1910. Since the end of the colonial period under the Japanese rule (1910–45), the legacies of Sadae have continued to influence the foreign policy of both Korean states towards the great powers. The Korean interpretation of Sadae diverges from that of the Chinese, so Sadae needs to be studied in more detail in order to comprehensively understand Korea’s relations with the great powers throughout history. Such an understanding is imperative to the analysis of contemporary international relations (IR) in Northeast Asia, because it can help us avoid over-generalised conclusions such as predictions that a Sinocentric order will inevitably re-emerge in the region.

This thesis adopts a constructivist-cum-realist approach to study both the ideational and material factors that are related to Sadae’s formation and practice. It uses a research methodology of historical inquiry in order to analyse historical evidence concerning Joseon–Ming/Qing relations. The primary source of data for the thesis is The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty.

The main policy implication of this study is that Sadae was a multi-faceted concept and it was implemented in different ways by Joseon political elites. The thesis thus suggests that the possibility for a re-emergence of the pre-modern Sinocentric order in the Asia–Pacific region is minimal because China is not able to offer an ideology that can appeal to others like Confucianism did in the past. The Korean experience of managing its relations with the great powers, however, is of significant value to those middle powers that are facing or will be facing a trilateral dilemma as a result of Sino–US competition.

Theoretically, the main implication is that the constructivist-cum-realist approach proposed in this thesis can provide scholars who specialise in the IR of Northeast Asia with a comprehensive and balanced analytical framework for examining events in the region. This approach will help them better analyse not only state security and international trade, but also historical complexity and cultural nuance in interstate relations.
# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Korea–Great Power(s) Relations in Historical and Cultural Context

1.1 History and Culture in Northeast Asian International Relations ......................................... 1

1.2 *Sadae*: the Core of Korea–Great Power(s) Relations in History ............................................. 9

1.3 Research Methodology and Thesis Structure ................................................................. 13

Chapter 2: Review of the Realist and Constructivist Literatures, and the Hybrid Approach to Studying *Sadae*

2.1 Realism ......................................................... 19

2.2 Constructivism .................................................. 26

2.3 The Constructivist-cum-Realist Approach to Studying *Sadae* ............................................. 35

Chapter 3: Background, Rationale and Practice of *Sadae*

3.1 Background of *Sadae* ............................................. 42

3.1.1 Confucian Sinocentrism ........................................ 43

3.1.2 Proliferation of Confucianism in Korea ......................... 47

3.2 Rationale of *Sadae* ................................................. 50

3.2.1 Ideational Aspect of *Sadae* .................................... 50

3.2.2 Material Aspect of *Sadae* ..................................... 54

3.3 *Sadae* in Practice .................................................... 58

3.3.1 Confucianisation of the Domestic Society .................... 59

3.3.2 Foreign Relations within the Tribute System ............... 63

3.4 Understanding the Different Faces of *Sadae* ......................................................... 67

Chapter 4: *Sadae* in the Era of Ming’s Unipolar Order (1392–1608)

4.1 The Reign of Taejo (1392–8) .................................... 73

4.2 The Reign of Taejong (1400–18) ................................ 77

4.3 The Reign of Sejong (1418–50) ................................ 82

4.4 The Reign of Sejo (1455–68) ................................. 91

4.5 The Reign of Sejong (1469–94) ................................. 94

4.6 The Reign of Yeonsangun (1494–1506) ...................... 100

4.7 The Reign of Jungjong (1506–44) .......................... 101

4.8 The Reign of Myeongjong (1545–67) ......................... 106

4.9 The Reign of Seonjo (1567–1608) ......................... 110

Chapter 5: *Sadae* in the Era of Changing Polarity (1608–1800): a Bipolar, an Imaginary Bipolar, and a Unipolar Order

5.1 Joseon between Ming and Manchu .................................. 121

5.1.1 The Reign of Gwanghaegun (1608–23) ..................... 122

5.1.2 The Reign of Injo (1623–49) .............................. 132

5.2 Joseon between the Fallen Ming and Qing .................... 144

5.2.1 The Reign of Hyojong (1649–59) ......................... 146

5.2.2 The Reign of Hyeonjong (1659–74) ..................... 150

5.2.3 The Reign of Sukjong (1674–1720) ..................... 153

5.2.4 The Reign of Yeongjo (1724–76) ..................... 159

5.3 Joseon: Accepting Qing as the Only Great (from 1776) .............. 164

Chapter 6: *Sadae* in the Modern Era (1800–1910): the End of Ideational *Sadae* and the Continuation of Material *Yongdae*

- 172
6.1 Joseon: Resisting the New ‘Barbarians’ – the Western Powers (1800–73) ........................................................................................................ 173
6.2 Decline of Joseon’s Ideational Sadae towards Qing (1874 – mid-1884)................................................................................................. 180
6.3 Yongdae: Joseon’s Strategy to Seek Independence in a Multipolar Order (mid-1884 – 1910)................................................................. 196
Chapter 7: ‘Anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae: the Legacies of Sadae in the Contemporary Era (1910 – Present)......................................................... 214
7.1 The Rationale of ‘Anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae................................. 215
7.2 The Combined Application of ‘Anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae..... 228
Chapter 8: Conclusion: Sadae, History and Culture, and Contemporary Northeast Asian International Relations........................................ 241
8.1 The Three Faces of Sadae............................................................. 242
8.2 Implications ................................................................................. 248
8.3 Contributions ............................................................................. 251
8.4 Suggestions for Further Research.............................................. 255
References .......................................................................................... 257
Appendix 1: Glossary of Key Terms .................................................. 283
Appendix 2: Monarchs of Joseon and China (Ming and Qing) ............ 285
Chapter 1

Korea–Great Power(s) Relations in Historical and Cultural Context

The Korean Peninsula has been strategically important to great powers’ rivalry since the pre-modern time. For over six centuries, Korea was and is deeply involved in every competition between the great powers in the region: Ming China and feudal Japan (late 16th century), Ming and Qing (early to mid 17th century), Qing China and modern Japan (mid to late 19th century), modern Japan and Tsar Russia (late 19th to early 20th century), the two ideologically different blocs of capitalism and communism (during the Cold War), and the United States and China (at present and at least in near future). Managing the relations with great powers thus has been dominating the working agenda of the country/countries on the peninsula. From the realists’ perspective, the goal of Korea’s foreign policy should focus on surviving in the ‘fights between the whales’, and to bandwagon with either the incumbent or the rising great may seem to be the only course of action that is left for Korea. However, a substantial amount of evidence in the Korean history indicated that material forces (i.e. military and economic power) were not the only factor that determined the making of Korea’s relations with the great powers; ideational concerns (i.e. historical and cultural influence) also contributed to the shaping of the Korea–great power(s) relations – and this has to be understood with a constructivist approach. In this thesis, it is therefore suggested that a better way to study the Korea–great power(s) relations is to employ a conceptual approach that combines realism and constructivism, whereby factors of either the material or the ideational aspect that contribute to the making of Korea’s foreign policy towards the great power(s) will not be neglected in the analysis of Northeast Asian interstate relations. This hybrid approach can help to avoid drawing over-generalised conclusions such as that of Kang (2003, p.67), who expected the re-emerging of a hierarchical Sinocentric order in modern East Asia and believed that ‘if the system is experiencing a return to a pattern of hierarchy, the result may be increased stability’ in the region.
To examine the Korea–great power(s) relations in history, one has to study the practice of *Sadae* (serving the great, 事大), because it remained as the core of Korea’s foreign relations towards the great powers for centuries. It was a policy formally initiated with the establishment of the Joseon Dynasty in 1392 that defined the Joseon–Ming relationship, and it was terminated officially with the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895 that proclaimed the independence of Korea. As a practice that is well known in China and Korea, however, *Sadae* is interpreted differently in these two countries. While *Sadae* is viewed in China as a spontaneous action of the Koreans driven by their admiration for China’s supremacy, *Sadae* in Korea is considered a pragmatic strategy employed by the Koreans to use China in order to serve Korea’s national interests.

Due to the competing interpretations of *Sadae*, the concept needs to be studied in more detail. How the practice of *Sadae* varied over time during the five centuries of the Joseon Dynasty is the research question of this thesis, and the central argument is that *Sadae* was not a single-dimensional concept; it was complex. By adopting a constructivist-cum-realist approach, this research analyses the rationale of *Sadae* and examines the historical records related to the implementation of *Sadae* in Joseon’s foreign relations, revealing the three different faces of *Sadae* and leading to the conclusion that in order to comprehensively understand the Korea–great power(s) relations, it is imperative to consider the impact of both ideational and material factors.

This introductory chapter is composed of three sections. The first section illustrates the impact of history and culture on the interstate relations in Northeast Asia, followed by the second section that outlines the concept of *Sadae* in Korea’s foreign relations with the great powers. The final section explains the methodology of this research and describes the thesis structure.

1.1 History and Culture in Northeast Asian International Relations

Northeast Asia is a region made of countries with millennium-old histories that

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*This thesis adopts the Revised Romanisation System approved by the Korean Government in 2000.*
have nurtured deeply rooted national cultures, for which its historical and cultural traditions are different from those of the West (Kang, 2003, p.84). Northeast Asian international relations are woven not only by the material threads of power politics but also by the ideational threads of historical and cultural influences. Studying the local history and culture therefore ‘can provide a way of distilling and making concrete and relevant the distinctive historical experiences of different nations and elites. In a region as culturally diverse as Asia, grasping this essence is a critical perspective’ (Pyle, 2007a, p.9). To study the international relations of Northeast Asia, the impact of history and culture should be considered as important as the material forces.

**History: the Past that is Inseparable from the Present in Northeast Asian IR**

Continuity is a prominent feature of Northeast Asian international relations because there are unfinished businesses in the region that connect the past with the present. Chun (2010, pp.69–87) described the close link between the present and the past in Northeast Asia, believing that transformations and continuities in history had complicated the present situation in the post-modern period. Such complexity can be observed in the rise of China, the country that has been making every endeavour to achieve national revitalisation so as to compensate its losses during the ‘century of humiliation’, and on the Korean Peninsula, where the goal of unification is still among the top priorities for both Korean states to establish a truly independent, autonomous sovereign state, which originally belonged to the Koreans but taken away first by the Japanese annexation in 1910, and again by the intervention of the USA and the USSR in 1945.

What has been reminding the Northeast Asian people of these unresolved issues is the sustaining of historical memory. Until this day, the Japanese government still maintains the pre-war nationalist narratives and never truly offered the apologies that are considered satisfactory to its neighbours, which had compounded the victims’ agony and fury, making the impacts of history even stronger in present time. In the keynote speech delivered at the United Nations on 28 September 2012, South Korean Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan said,
‘It requires a sound historical consciousness and heartfelt soul-searching on any past wrongdoings in order for solid peace and stability to be established between nations. A country's true valor is proven when it confronts the dark side of its history and endeavors to rectify past wrongdoings.’ (Yonhap News Agency, 2012)

While the Chinese and the Koreans tend to focus on Japan’s past for the war crimes it had committed, the Japanese, believing that everything was already settled on the battle ground, refuse to confront with its past – trust is therefore never genuinely established among Northeast Asian states (Kristof, 1998, pp.38–44). Since little hope is expected for reconciliation, exclusionist nationalism is nonetheless growing steadily in these countries, exacerbating the security dilemma in the region (Pyle, 2007b, pp.31–36).

Historical memory is also sustained via school education in Northeast Asian countries, offsetting the power of time that could have diluted the enmity among old-time adversaries. In China, both Korean states, and Japan, it is a common practice that the history study at school is used to perpetuate historical memory for future generations. Wang (2008, p.800) points to the fact that in China, it is compulsory for children to receive patriotic education since primary school, studying history with the official version that focuses on the ‘century of humiliation’ during which the glory of China was deprived by the imperial West and Japan. In Japan, however, the government downplays its militarist past by asking textbook publishers to remove the brutal war crimes committed by Japanese military personnel so that fewer people of the younger generations would know about the wrongdoings in the past (Kristof, 1998, p.41). This is also one of the sources that have produced discord between Japan and South Korea: in order to shape the view of future generations, each government insisted to incorporate the version of its own into the school textbooks that illustrates the role of Japan differently during the colonial period of 1910–1945 (i.e. the Koreans see the Japanese as invaders, while the Japanese consider themselves as modernizers of Korea) – and the goal of the state-sponsored Japan–ROK Joint History Research Committee to reconcile the diverging views on history between the two countries becomes literally unreachable (Shin, 2011, pp.4–5).
Without a master version to illustrate the region’s past, history is therefore turned into a political tool to serve contemporary purposes in Northeast Asia. ‘Whose side of the story gets told is often far more important than any objective facts or events’ (Kang, 2010b, p.165). As the legitimacy of the ruling regime in each Northeast Asian state and the formation of national identity are, to a certain extent, tied to its national history, no government can afford to compromise in this zero-sum game (Gries et al., 2009, p.455). As the nationalistic sentiment becomes intensified among the new-born generations who have not even experienced the wars in person (Fukuyama, 2007, p.38), future tensions derived from historical disputes seem inevitable.

In particular, historical factors constitute an indispensable part of Korea’s foreign relations in Northeast Asia. Although South Korea and Japan are both key allies to the United States in the Asia-Pacific, the relations between the two have not been unproblematic. In addition to the territory disputes over Dokdo/Takeshima, South Korea has been demanding compensations for the victims, including the vast number of civilians, prisoners of war, forced labours, and the ‘comfort women’, all of whom were treated inhumanely by the Japanese military personnel during the wars. However, the Japanese government has been refusing to make adequately apology, and the bilateral relations has exacerbated in recent years with the growing assertiveness of the hawkish nationalists in Japan, as seen in the policies of the Shinzo Abe administration. In return, South Korean President Park Geun-hye, who blamed the revisionist stance of the Abe administration for causing the ‘Asia’s paradox’ (The Wall Street Journal, 2012), chose to align her country with China against Japan: she refused to hold bilateral talks with Shinzo Abe over half of her tenure since she assumed office in February 2013 (Channel NewsAsia, 2015); she raised the request during her state visit to China in June 2013 that a memorial hall to be built in Harbin to honour Korean patriot Ahn Jung-geun (but considered a terrorist in Japan) who assassinated Japan’s first Prime Minister Ito Hirobumi on 26 October 1909 (The Wall Street Journal, 2014); and she attended the military parade in Beijing on 3 September 2015 despite the fact that all the heads of state from the West turned down China’s invitation (The Guardian, 2015).
However, this does not necessarily mean that South Korea is switching partner. Centuries of Sino–Korea relations in history actually provide sufficient evidence to prove that the Koreans may not be willing to follow the lead of China. Although Joseon Korea was frequently described (by the Chinese, mostly) as an exemplar tribute state to Ming/Qing China, a pattern of interstate relations that resembles the suzerain–vassal Sinocentric order, no matter how benign the hegemon’s motive is going to be, may not be re-emerging in spite of China’s rise – and to understand the reasons behind, one needs to study the intersubjective culture that was shared by these two countries in history.

**Culture: the Uniqueness of Northeast Asian Experience in IR**

Culture is closely related to history, as the formation of a culture is an evolving process that usually takes long period of time. When the people of two countries interact with each other peacefully, practices that are mutually accepted will become the foundation on which shared culture is to be nurtured. Accordingly, countries are given new identities within the framework of the shared culture, shaping new national interests and state behaviours. In other words, a state that is not self-isolated tends to have its identity socially constructed as a result of being culturally influenced during its interaction with other states – national identity is therefore a cultural product of international relations.

Nevertheless, culture used to be neglected in the study of IR. With cultural factors left out from analysis, states were deemed ‘irrational’ if they did not behave the way that rationalists commonly expected (Stuart-Fox, 2004, p.119–120). After being marginalised by mainstream theorists for decades, culture emerged in IR studies by the effort of post-colonialism that emphasised the uniqueness of endogenous culture in developing countries that were under colonial rule. In the development of post-colonial identity, culture was moved from periphery to the centre, challenging the mainstream schools of thoughts in IR studies that have deliberately ignored the impacts of culture (Darby & Paolini, 1994, p.384).

Evidently, the post-colonial world has witnessed the ascending importance of non-Western cultures in international relations accompanied by the return of Asia to the core of world politics in recent decades. In spite of the impact generated by
the force of globalisation, Asian and Western societies are not the same because of the different values people cherish (Zakaria & Lee, 1994, pp.113–4). However, although with potential cultural clashes, socialisation between Asia and the West is unavoidable for the reasons that countries in Asia have gained prominent political status in the international society with their rising material power, and the contemporary world issues tend to be transnational that need to be multilaterally discussed and collectively managed by countries from both Asia and the West (Jacquin, Oros & Verweij, 1993, p.377). It hence requires the mentality that is capable of understanding and accommodating cultural particularity to manage the international issues that go beyond the transatlantic boundary. As a result, foreign policy analysts started to recognise the effects of culture on the making of foreign policies in recent decades (Lapid, 1996, p.3).

In East Asia, although realists still insist that no international politics is determined by culture even in this culturally rich region (Ross, 2006, p.358), international actors are now taking cultural factors into consideration when defining security interests (Katzenstein, 1996, p.2). In cases that the rationalist models do not work well in explaining states’ behaviours in East Asia, these East Asian states ought not to be labelled as irrational actors; they simply play different games with different preferences (Bennett & Stam, cited in Kang, 2003/04, pp.176–7).

To understand the level of significance of cultural influence on interstate relations in Northeast Asia, socialisation between/among these states in history has to be studied in detail. As they inherited millennium-old civilisation, China, Korea and Japan have developed cultures of their own. These cultures, nevertheless, are not exactly the same as the Western culture. This adds complexities to those who opt to understand international relations with perspectives traditionally developed in the West. Simply comparing the situation in the region with that in Europe and then drawing conclusions on East Asia’s future merely based upon the understanding of Europe, or even assuming East Asia will invariably follow the European trajectory, is therefore considered oversimplification (Zakaria & Lee, 1994, p.121; Kang, 2003/04, p.169). On the topic of balancing for instance, it has been empirically tested and proved by Bennett & Stam (as cited in Kang, 2003/04,
p.176) that there is ‘no support for the argument that (Asian) behavior will converge on that of Europe. In fact, all of the regions outside of Europe appear to diverge from the European pattern (of classical balance of power)’.

Moreover, the culture of each Northeast Asian state may have shared a homogenous origin 2000 years ago; but after centuries of evolution, heterogeneity of cultural norms and practices does exist nowadays among these countries. This means that there are possibly a number of different types of Asian cultures in the region, which may seem confusing or even misleading to people in the West if they attempt to assess Northeast Asian states’ behaviours but without a thorough understanding of the different types of Northeast Asian cultures.

It is commonly believed that in ancient time, China was the hub of civilisation to countries in the region, and both Korea and Japan had been profoundly influenced by the Chinese culture. However, it would be oversimplifying the issue if one thinks that to study Northeast Asia is to study China, or simply by studying China one can understand Korea and Japan and the relations among the three. Those who predict the future of international relations in Northeast Asia by focusing solely on the development of China neglects the cultural differences (not just differences in economic and military capabilities) among the Northeast Asian states. Assuming the re-emergence of a Sinocentric order or the prevalence of Sinicised civilisation in the region fails to take the national cultures and identities of Japan and the two Korean states into consideration. Consequently, their preferences could be overlooked, their intentions could be misunderstood, their responses could be misread and their future actions could be wrongly forecasted. Such mistakes could be made not only by the policy-makers in the West who have limited knowledge about Northeast Asia; but also by those in China who choose to focus on the Chinese version of Northeast Asian history that overwhelmingly glorifies the greatness of ancient China. Therefore, how the intersubjective culture shared by China and its neighbouring states had influenced the interstate relations in the region since pre-modern time needs to be studied in the historical context – and it must be studied from not only the perspective of China, but also those of Korea and Japan.
1.2 *Sadae*: the Core of Korea–Great Power(s) Relations in History

From the Joseon Dynasty to the present, Korean foreign relations with great powers have been influenced by historical experiences and characterised with cultural features. There would be chances for misunderstanding and misinterpretation if historical and cultural factors are dismissed in the analysis of Korean foreign policies. Material factors that concern national security and commercial trade still account for the rationale of policy-making; but they are not everything. Located right next to the hegemon and for several times involved in the great power rivalries, Korea managed to master its fate with something other than its military and economic power.

Hence, if only the factors related to military and economic power are concerned, as claimed by the realists, Korea would be labelled as a minor country that signals little implication to world politics and be ignored. However, without the minor, there would not be the major. Without studying how the secondary powers such as Korea interact with the great power(s), understanding of international relations would unlikely be complete – to thoroughly understand international relations in Northeast Asia, therefore, Korean foreign relations with the great power(s) need to be studied with *all* factors, material and non-material, being taken into consideration.

*An Overview of Sadae*

*Sadae* was implemented as an official policy towards China throughout the Joseon Dynasty, during which the influence of Chinese culture on Korea became ‘dominant, direct, and pervasive’ (Kang, 2010, p.33). At that time, China was popularly deemed as the cultural centre of Asia, and many of the educated Koreans were drawn to the superiority of Chinese civilisation – with Confucianism in particular. In Constructivist term, Confucianism became the intersubjective culture that was commonly shared by the Chinese and the Koreans. Fundamentally, it was their faith in Confucianism that had made the Koreans accept the existence of a Sinic world and the identity of a vassal state accorded to Joseon in the hierarchical Sinocentric order.
To obtain a higher ranking of their national status, the Koreans were motivated to Sinicise themselves – they voluntarily and actively studied Chinese culture and emulated Chinese practices (Kang, 2010, pp.33–37). The study of Chinese language and philosophy was therefore placed at the core of education in Joseon: Chinese literatures and the philosophical canons of Confucianism became the textbooks in schools across the country. The Koreans not only absorbed the Confucian ideas and norms; they also developed political institutions by exactly copying those in China, including the design of civil service examination and bureaucratic governance. Consequently, the Joseon society was literally Confucianised, and Joseon achieved the highly regarded status of Sajunghwa (little China, 小中華), which was closest to that of the hegemonic China in the ‘civilisation–barbarian’ Sinocentric order.

A Confucianised Joseon society thus became the primary source to produce generations of Confucian political elites, who revered and accepted Confucianism as their state ideology. When they became the court officials responsible for making Joseon’s foreign policy, they chose to practice Sadae. They followed the principles of Confucian propriety and performed the duties a vassal state (as the junior) was required to towards the suzerain (as the senior).

The implementation of Sadae was justified by a mix of two themes in Confucianism. On one hand, based upon the Confucian virtue of loyalty and filial piety, a junior must respect and serve his senior with utmost sincerity as in the relationship of a son to his father. Within the structure of the Sinocentric order, this concept was expanded to the relationship between China and its vassals. China took up the role of the ‘father’ to be respected and served by the vassals that were ‘sons’ to China. Therefore in the Confucian world, it would be morally wrong if a vassal failed to serve its suzerain faithfully, for which it would be condemned and punished by the ‘Heaven’.

On the other hand, it was the pragmatic advocacy of Mencius about interstate relationship between the strong and the weak that had cultivated the idea of Sadae: he suggested that ‘it is wise for minor states to protect themselves by serving the
major states’ (Mencius, cited in Dobson, 1963, p.14). Serving the great hence was a rational decision based on a cost-benefit calculation that should be adopted by a minor state like Joseon, in view of its geographical proximity to China and the huge gap between the two countries in terms of military and economic power. Yi Seong-gye (Taejo, founder of Joseon) explicitly made Sadae the core of Joseon’s foreign relations with Ming, which effectively preserved the peace that Joseon enjoyed with China for five centuries (Kim, 2005, p.4).

Sadae was practiced within the framework of tribute system. In the system, with Ming (Qing from 1637) China being the suzerain, the Chinese emperor conferred investiture to legitimise the ruling status of the Joseon kings; with Joseon being the vassal state, the Joseon kings dispatched embassies that carried tributes to the Chinese court and kowtowed to the Chinese emperor, acknowledging China’s supreme position in the Sinic world – the ‘father–son’ relationship was therefore established. By such relationship, the ‘son’ (Joseon) would respect and serve the ‘father’ (China), and the ‘father’ would take care of the ‘son’. However, with researches at a deeper level, it is found that there were different motives to practice Sadae, which is to be illustrated in detail in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

**Reasons to Study Sadae**

In general, Sadae needs to be studied due to the importance of understanding how a middle power like Korea can manage to survive in the face of a great power. By manoeuvring both material and ideational factors in its relations with China for centuries, Korea has accumulated wealth of experience in dealing with the great powers. Learning the rationale and the application of Sadae can provide useful insights to middle powers with relatively shorter history on how to build and manage relations with great powers, especially the rising China. It helps to remind them, during the process of making foreign policies, of the importance not to make oversimplified assumptions and overlook subtleties, and the need to cautiously clarify ambiguities and avoid misinterpretations.

In particular, Sadae has to be researched in greater detail to demonstrate its variation in practice. It ought not to be denied that some rituals of Sadae were
carried out in the same way for 500 years, such as requesting investiture from the Chinese emperor to legitimise the enthronement of a Joseon king and sending tribute missions to China every year. However, simply asserting that Joseon practiced _Sadae_ towards China over a span of five centuries is oversimplifying the bilateral relations between the two countries. As discussed in Chapter 4, Chapter 5, and Chapter 6, there are numerous examples to prove that a substantial amount of Joseon political elites chose to serve the great power merely for the purpose of pursuing the national interests of Joseon. Their practice of _Sadae_ reflected little about the normative tenets of Confucianism; it was instead sustained by the pragmatic formula of cost-benefit calculation. When process-tracing the motives of the Joseon political elites under different domestic and international political contexts, one would notice that _Sadae_ was indeed practiced differently.

Nevertheless, _Sadae_ has been described as a one-dimensional concept by most of the contemporary Korean and Chinese scholars – ideational to the Chinese and pragmatic to the Koreans. Both of these two extreme views dismiss the details in the practice of _Sadae_, and they only produce partial explanations for a political phenomenon in the past (contemporary literatures on _Sadae_ written by Chinese and Korean scholars are reviewed in detail in Section 3 of Chapter 2). It may not be convincing when such explanations are invoked to analyse present interstate relations, needless to mention predicting the future situation. Political forecasts such as the re-emergence of a modern Sinocentric order in East Asia would hence appear to be a Chauvinistic thinking on the part of China, or a misunderstanding on the part of the West resulted from unfamiliarity with the East Asian history and culture. This is evident in David C. Kang’s prediction that the pre-modern Sinocentric order would return to East Asia, because it is based on an over-generalised description of Joseon’s relations with China in history. Such reasoning hinted that _Sadae_ as the core of Joseon–great power(s) relations was not thoroughly studied (and as a matter of fact, the term of _Sadae_ was not even mentioned in his 2010 book of _East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute_). If the different faces of _Sadae_ are fully unveiled, one would not be so sure about the resurgence of a regional order that is based on the _Pax Sinica_ model of ‘benign hegemon–faithful followers’ in East Asia. This makes it all the more important to study _Sadae_ in greater depth.
1.3 Research Methodology and Thesis Structure

Research Methodology

This thesis adopts the research methodology of historical inquiry. In spite of the problematic relationship between history and IR studies (Lawson, 2010, p.204; Smith, 1999, p.3; Quirk, 2008, p.519; Jervis, 1991/92, p.42), historical inquiry is important to IR studies because apart from changes in international politics there are continuities, which refer to ‘the gradual evolution of structures or processes such that the present retains key features of the past’, and IR scholars need to study history because what appears new may actually have its roots in the past (Mansbach & Taylor, 2012, p.XXV). If history is the base upon which future is predicted, historical evidence has to be carefully examined so that the credibility of such reasoning can be verified. This implies that historical complexity should not be dismissed in order to build parsimonious theoretical models. Instead, it must be scrutinized in detail so as to explore the root that may well explain the cause of state behaviour in present-time interstate relations.

To the constructivists, history is vital to understand the formation of national identity. History is made of interactions among people and countries in the past. Unlike future that is yet to take place with uncertainties, history is concrete because it has happened. To people who have learned about, needlessly to mention those who have experienced in person, the events in the past, it is difficult to deny the impacts generated from historical legacies. To states that have interacted in the past, what they have done to each other shapes the social structure (Wendt, 1995, p.77) and by reciprocal interaction, states’ identities are defined (Wendt, 1992, p.406). In other words, the identity of ‘self’ is created and reinforced by what happened between ‘self’ and ‘other’ in the past. The national identity of a state thus has to be studied within the historical context of the state (Katzenstein, 1996, pp.24–25). Historical experience is a process of repeated socialisations among people of different nations and countries; the more intensive, frequent and closer to present time these interactions are, the stronger the impacts there will be to shape the identities of states. This is the reason why ‘history matters’, as argued by Wendt (1995, p.77, emphasis in original).
In particular for the importance of history to the study of Asian international relations, Kang (2003/04, p.180) advocates that ‘scholars of Asian international relations need to pay more attention to the empirical record, both historical and modern’. He criticises the inconsistent thus problematic approach of those who are willing to explore the historical roots of European politics but reluctant to engage and study East Asian history, and he questions their biased conclusions for being Eurocentric by illustrating the failure of Western IR theories in explaining the non-balancing behaviours of states in East Asia (Kang, 2003/04, p.174). Fortunately, there are prominent scholars in the field of IR who have taken the time and efforts to study Asian history when undertaking their researches, to name a few for example: Alastair Iain Johnston and his Cultural Realism (1995), Roland Bleiker and his Divided Korea (2005), Brantly Womack and his China and Vietnam (2006), David C. Kang and his East Asia before the West (2010), along with others such as Peter J. Katzenstein, Gilbert Rozman, Peter Hays Gries and Jae Ho Chung who have attempted to explain international relations in East Asia by paying close attention to the local history. Rather than being dismissive of Asian history as unreliable and subjective materials, they freed themselves from Eurocentric prejudice and seriously looked into the narratives and evidence, traced the historical roots of Asian politics, and illustrated the rationale of foreign policies making in Asian countries.

In the spirit of these IR scholars, historical inquiry is adopted in this research. Generally speaking, this method is considered appropriate because it takes the study of detailed historical records to unveil the different faces of Sadae and to comprehensively understand the Korean experience of managing its relations with the great power(s) for centuries. Specifically, there are four reasons: 1) both Korea and China are countries of millennia of history, which provides researchers with abundant amount of historical evidence; 2) to study the historical and cultural imprints on Joseon’s interactions with the great power(s) will be instrumental to having a good grasp of the Korean foreign relations in contemporary time – as Samuel S. Kim emphasised that history matters in understanding the formation of Korea’s national identity when assessing the relations between the two Korean states and the great powers (Kim, 2006, p.24); 3) historical complexity and
cultural nuance are vital in searching for the truth about controversial issues (such as *Sadae*), thus to study historical materials in detail can avoid simplification and generalisation that will usually leap to unreliable conclusions; and 4) historical and cultural influences are intangible thus difficult to be quantified for hypothesis confirmation or falsification – as Pyle (2007a, p.9) commented, ‘the discernment and explanation of a national style is more art than science’.

To accurately capture the distinct features of Korea–great power(s) relations in the past, historical inquiry in this research is conducted based on primary instead of secondary sources – in order not to make over-simplified conclusions as David C. Kang did. Although being an advocate of historical study in IR, he ‘did not spend years in dusty archives in Hanoi, Tokyo, Beijing, and Seoul’ (Kang, 2010b, p.XI) and simply relied on secondary historical literature to illustrate the Sinocentric world order in pre-modern East Asia. This leaves some key questions unanswered: why did Joseon Korea accept the subordinate status and willingly serve Ming China at the first place? For a period of more than five centuries, did every Joseon king serve China invariably? With changes at the system level that altered the distribution of power in the region, did Joseon’s policy towards China remain the same? In other words, Kang’s analysis on the tribute system is problematic in the sense that he over-generalised the Sinocentric order, because he overlooked the historical complexities and cultural nuances in Joseon’s practice of *Sadae* towards China. Only when historical materials of primary sources are studied in detail can the question of how the practice of *Sadae* varied over time be adequately answered.

Hence in this thesis, the *Ri Dynasty Annals of Korea* (also known as ‘Annals of the Joseon Dynasty’, hereafter *RDAK* in all in-text references) are chosen to serve as the chief primary source for the reason that, the 1893-volume annals, listed in UNESCO’s Memory of the World register, are the original records written by Joseon royal historiographers who documented what happened in the Joseon court every day throughout the 518 years of the Joseon Dynasty. On a daily basis, the historiographers recorded information related to every aspect of both domestic affairs and foreign relations. It is the completeness (all records were kept intact, even during social upheaval such as the Japanese and the Manchu invasions) and
impartiality (Joseon historiographers were trained to faithfully record all
information without bias according to the Confucian principles of integrity, not
even the monarchs were allowed to interfere with their work) of the annals that
they are selected to be the key primary source of research materials for this study.
The annals used in this research is a reprint by the Research Institute for Oriental
Cultures of Gakushuin University in Tokyo, Japan, published during the period
from 1953 to 1967.

Materials of other primary sources, such as memoirs, letters and diaries written by
the Joseon policymakers and social elites, are also used to support the analyses of
Joseon foreign relations with the great powers. As for secondary information,
books and journal articles written by contemporary IR scholars are studied to
examine Korea’s foreign policies towards the great powers mainly for the period
from the early 1900s to the present.

Thesis Structure
The thesis consists of eight chapters. The first chapter is an introduction of the
research that delineates the Joseon policy of Sadae in historical and cultural
context, and Chapter 2 covers the literature review of the two mainstream
theoretical perspectives in IR study, that is, realism and constructivism, on Korean
foreign relations with the great powers. In consideration of the dual (i.e. ideational
and material) aspects of Sadae, a new approach to study Northeast Asian IR,
namely, the constructivist-cum-realist approach, is also introduced in the chapter.

Chapter 3 explores the origin of Sadae as a product of shared Confucian culture in
China and Korea during the pre-modern era. By explaining the background,
rationale and practice of Sadae, it is revealed that Sadae actually comprised both
ideational and material considerations. When Sadae was applied in the making of
government policy (especially foreign policy) at a particular time, the concern of
either righteousness or pragmatism would prevail, leading to different ways of
implementing the policy of Sadae. The historical evidence is then analysed in the
following three chapters according to the changing power polarity in Northeast
Asia: Chapter 4 focuses on the period from 1392 to 1608, during which a unipolar
order was sustained by Ming China’s preponderance, Chapter 5 looks into
Joseon’s implementation of *Sadae* during the period from 1608 to 1800 – the time when a bipolar order occurred and eventually a power transition took place from Ming to Qing, and Chapter 6 studies the decline of *Sadae* in the modern era from 1800 to 1910, during which an emerging multipolar order gradually appeared with the intrusion of Western powers and the rise of modernised Japan.

Chapter 7 turns to discuss the legacies of *Sadae* in the contemporary era from 1910 (when Korea was annexed by Japan) to the present time. The underpinned logic of ‘anti-*Sadae*’ and *Yongdae* (using the great, 用大) is examined, followed by the analysis of the combined application of these two legacies of *Sadae* in the two Korean states’ foreign relations with the great powers respectively from the onset of the Cold War to the Post-Cold War years.

The concluding chapter, Chapter 8, summarises the findings of *Sadae* in this research by reviewing its rise and fall, based on which the concept of *Sadae* is described in an impartial and elaborated fashion. It implies that both material and non-material factors matter in Northeast Asian international relations. As contributions of this research to the field of IR, it is suggested that apart from security and economy, history and culture can be developed as another arena for middle powers like the two Korean states to interact with the great powers such as America and China. Academically, this research proposes a constructivist-cum-realist approach to study Northeast Asian IR with a balanced perspective (that will not neglect the local experience) and a comprehensive analytical framework (that is supported by established IR theories with universal values of reference).
Chapter 2

Review of the Realist and Constructivist Literatures, and the Hybrid Approach to Studying Sadae

There have been significant amount of writings on the international relations of Northeast Asia in general and those related to the Korean Peninsula in particular. Against the backdrop of the wrestling between the two great powers, the United States and China, these writings illustrate how the middle powers respond to the American intention to sustain and enhance its dominance in the region by containing and engaging China simultaneously. Written with different perspectives, this body of works encompasses the intellectual diversity in which different issues are placed with emphasis, different problems are identified and different approaches for problem-solving are explored.

Among others, realism is favoured by many for its contentions that appear most fitting to the situation in Northeast Asia. In their view, 1) a power transition is in progress by which American primacy is challenged by the ascending China, 2) states in Northeast Asia remain the primary actors that prioritise national security and the development of material (i.e. military and economic) power in order to survive in a region that lacks effective mechanisms to resolve interstate conflicts, and 3) states’ behaviours (either balancing or bandwagoning) are mainly determined by the structural forces at the system level (i.e. distribution of power) in Northeast Asia.

Analyses with a constructivist approach to examine the interstate relations in Northeast Asia emerged in academia in the past two decades. With focuses that differed from those of rationalism, these studies assessed the behaviour of the Northeast Asian states by the non-material factors such as identity, psychology, and culture. Not confining themselves within the boundary of power politics, these scholars looked into the intersubjective ideas developed from interactions between/among states to explain how ideational forces influenced interstate relations just as powerful as material ones. Due to the fact that the Northeast Asian experience is not exactly the same as that of the West, constructivism is
able to offer refreshing and insightful opinions other than those provided by realism.

As for liberalism, the liberal views explain some of the phenomena in the region. However, their arguments do not sound as convincing as those of the realists – for applying the foundational principles of liberalism, i.e. the Kantian tripod for peace, in the Northeast Asian interstate relations, look problematic. First, democratic peace is questioned in the example of the ROK–Japan relations, and after all, not all states in the region adopt the Western political system of liberal democracy. Second, economic interdependence does not look promising enough to effectively prevent interstate conflicts in Northeast Asia, as shown in the example of the Sino–Japanese relations. Third, international institutions in Northeast Asia are not producing the level of pacifying influence as prominent as those in other regions of the world (such as EU and ASEAN), as seen in the example of APEC. Notwithstanding these problems, the liberal forces have been contributing to the preserving of peace and facilitating of progress in the region, for which the significance of liberalism ought to be acknowledged. However, in view of the impact of material power on interstate relations and the ideational forces (i.e. Confucianism) that constructed the institutional framework in which Sadae embedded in pre-modern Northeast Asia, this thesis chose to review the literatures written with realist and constructivist perspectives.

This chapter is composed with three sections. The first and the second sections of this chapter reviews the literatures written with the perspectives of realism and constructivism respectively on international relations in world politics and particularly those in Northeast Asia. The third section describes the necessity to employ a combined approach of constructivism and realism in the study of Northeast Asian IR.

2.1 Realism

To the realists, international relations are about power politics at the system level, where factors associated with the unit level are usually deemed irrelevant, and East Asia is of no exception. In spite of the cultural differences between East Asia
and Europe often claimed by some IR scholars of East Asian studies, when examining the responses of secondary states to China’s rise, Ross (2006, pp.357–8) concluded, based on the concept of balance-of-power, that the uniqueness of East Asian culture did not matter and realism was still the theory with universal applicability to explain interactions among the East Asian states. To summarise the positions of classical and structural realists, there are two main contentions of realism: first, states are the key actors in world politics and they struggle for survival within an anarchical international system, and second, it is the structural forces of international politics that exerts influence on states’ behaviour.

Anarchy, State, and Survival
Realists believe that states are the most important actors in international relations, especially the great powers (Waltz, 1979, p.73), and all of them struggle for power to survive and thrive in an international system characterised by anarchy. This commonly leads to two views: 1) pursuing national security becomes the top priority of states in the making of foreign policy; and 2) states have no choice but to be self-interested, making conflicts inevitable and cooperation difficult among states. In the absence of a world government to provide conditions for order, states will have to seek security on their own. Governments of all states will have to formulate policies to assure the safety of their people and to the realists, the measures include strengthening the military power to make it difficult for the state to be attacked by others (as advocated by defensive realists), and pursuing systemic dominance by maximising a state’s power so that other states will be deterred by its hegemonic primacy (as asserted by offensive realists).

Northeast Asia appears to be a convenient example for the realists to prove their points of view. While a supranational governing body is in place in the integrated Europe, Northeast Asia still lacks an overarching regional authority. Throughout the post-World War Two years, each of the states in the region had been consolidating its power and emphasising the importance of national security in its foreign policy (Betts, 1993/94, p.36). Facing the growing economic and military power of China, Japan adjusts its defence policy and seeks to enhance its military power. Since the mid 2000s, the Japanese government has been discussing the permission of its JSDF (Japan Self-Defence Forces) to participate in collective
defence and even the possession of nuclear weapons – as Ross (2006, pp.388–9) commented, Japan, justified by the rise of China, set itself on the path to re-emerge as a normal military power since the end of World War Two. The same applies to North Korea as well – the Kim regime has persistently pursued the development of nuclear weapons, even when faced with prolonged poverty in the country, for the goal of increasing its military power to counter any aggressive moves by America and South Korea – the core theme of its Songun (military-first, 先军) policy.

As for China, it has been rapidly and massively enhancing its military power supported by its economic gains in the past two decades. Although Beijing repeatedly claims that the purpose of such development is only for national defence, America and the neighbouring states of China suspect that the genuine and ultimate goal of China is to achieve regional dominance. When coupled with the realists’ zero-sum concept of relative gains, the aggrandisement of a state’s power unavoidably alerts other states as a threat to their security and therefore they find it imperative to build up their military – generating security dilemma (Herz, 1950, p.157; Jervis, 1978, pp.169–70). The resulting spiral of insecurity produced by security dilemma generally leads to conflicts among states. Therefore, in his analysis on the Asian interstate relations 20 years ago, Friedberg (1993/94, pp.15–27) asserted that the region was ready for states to compete for power among themselves.

States’ Behaviour and Structural Forces
Anarchy as the enduring feature of the international system makes the causes of war reside at the system level instead of that of human or state. To survive is the common goal of all states and there are no differentiations in their functions. In international relations, states first and foremost respond to changes occurred in the international system and therefore their behaviours are basically influenced by the structural forces of international politics (Waltz, 1959, p.160).

This understanding hence leads to the concept of power distribution (exhibited as polarity), and the realists believe that it is the distribution of power that shapes the
behaviour of states. It is important to them because it implies the level of stability in world politics and explains the rationale behind a state’s decision to balance against or to bandwagon with a great power. They believe that a multipolar order, without a dominant power to regulate states’ behaviour, tends to be unstable as all states will become less disciplined in their use of force to pursue their interests. Therefore, a bipolar order, in which states tend to be prudent when choosing sides in a world with equal distribution of power between two hegemons, allows clarity in analysis and prediction and hence generates stability (Waltz, 1964, pp.882–7).

As for a unipolar order, defensive realists believe that it tends to create conditions for an unchecked dominant power to indulge its unrestrained expansion of power and influence, by which the system will be changed to fit the national interests of its own (Jervis, 2006, pp.9–10). Therefore, unipolarity will breed resentment and resistance among other states towards the hegemon, leading to unstable situation in which balancing behaviours of other states against the hegemon will occur (Voeten, 2004, pp.730–3). However, offensive realists believe that an international order of unipolarity is more stable than that of bipolarity or multipolarity. Wohlforth (1999, pp.9–28) asserts that American power in all aspects is a hegemon of absolute preponderance, and because of this, no other states would miscalculate the probable costs and benefits and irrationally challenge America’s primacy – peace is therefore maintained. As in the case of East Asia, it is believed that the presence of the United States troops is a vital stabilizing force that has been maintaining peace in the region (Heisbourg, 1999/2000, pp.15–16).

However, China’s rise has caused wariness to its neighbours and the United States. Alliances forged in the past are being consolidated within the American ‘hub-and-spokes’ system, and new coalitions are formed between the United States and countries like Vietnam to balance against China. In particular, Japan’s China policy typically embodies the concept of balance of power. Facing the potential threats posed by a more assertive China backed by its growing material power, Japan calls for serious attention of the American government to the US–Japan alliance, which is considered of paramount importance to Japan to prevent China from dominating the region (Funabashi, 2008, pp.113–4). Apart
from North Korea and Myanmar that are commonly deemed *bandwagoners* by many East Asian IR scholars, most of the other East Asian states, out of economic concerns, choose to adopt the strategy of accommodation towards China – a policy option that locates closer to bandwagoning on the spectrum with its two ends represented by the strategies of *balancing against China* and *bandwagoning with China* respectively (Ross, 2006, pp.379–87; Tow & Rigby, 2011, p.160; McDougall, 2012, p.17).

*Power Transition in Northeast Asia*

Power distribution in Northeast Asia has been changing in the past three decades. The traditional setting after 1945 until the end of the 1970s in the region is an alliance system with the United States as the dominant power leading the middle powers of Japan and South Korea against countries of the Soviet bloc in Northeast Asia. During the 1980s, Japan once demonstrated its capacity as a great economic power; but it was not able to sustain its strength thus started to decline from the mid 1990s. South Korea’s economy grows much stronger in comparison with that of North Korea, yet the state remains a middle power sheltered under American primacy. The one that has caught worldwide attention is China; its economy has been growing steadily and rapidly in the past 30 years with its opening up to the global market. In 2010, China replaced Japan as the second largest economy in the world after the United States in terms of nominal GDP. Supported by its rapid economic growth, China is able to massively increase its Comprehensive National Power in various areas, notably in its military power. Sustained at a speed of double-digit increment continuously throughout the past 20 years, China’s military spending reaches US$145 billion in 2015 (Reuters, 2015), arousing concerns of its neighbours and the United States. The topic of power transition hence comes to the spotlight, hotly debated among policymakers and academic researchers as whether the transition is in process or is to occur in future (and how soon).

Although there are sceptical views about the occurrence of power transition in East Asia by questioning the ability of China (Goldstein, 1997/98, pp.42–54; Brooks & Wohlforth, 2002, pp.21–29; Beeson, 2009, pp.110–2) and the will of China (Johnston & Evans, 1999, pp.264–5; Van Ness, 2002, pp.141–2; Foot, 2006,
pp.83–90; Ikenberry, 2008, pp.28–33; Ikenberry, 2011, pp.63–65) to challenge America, the steady rise of China and its growing assertiveness keeps supporting the belief that at least a power transition in East Asia is inevitable. In line with the assertions made by Bernstein & Munro (1997, pp.18–19), a group of advocates of Power Transition Theory following the tradition of A.F.K. Organski believe that China is going to be a challenger to American primacy, and with the continuing economic growth and the consolidation of the central government’s power since the turn of the century, the advent of an ascending China to challenge American primacy seems unstoppable (Tammen et al., 2000, pp.155–6).

Mearsheimer (2001, p.402; 2005, p.50) also concludes that with its increasing economic power China would become revisionist and strive for the dominance in East Asia. It is further concurred by Kim (2002, pp.668–9), who draws the conclusion that power transition in East Asia is inevitable because of the stronger China that is not satisfied with the status quo and advocating the solution of strategic alignment or de-alignment. This is proved by Chan (2013) with empirical evidence in a number of international issue areas that China is initiating new rules, although the impact of such changes on the America-led international order remains limited and incremental so far. This is why Hoge Jr. (2004, pp.6–7) calls for changes in American policy priorities in order to well prepare for a new regional power arrangement in East Asia as a result of China’s rapid rise. In spite of the close economic link between China and the United States and the bilateral cooperation in the issue of anti-terrorism, realists tend to believe that the Sino–USA relations are still zero-summed and the gains of China actually come at the expense of the America’s (Lanteigne, 2009, p.94).

Such view is justified with the evidence that 1) the focus of American military forces is placed in the Middle East, and this overstretching of military power reduces the strength of US primacy in East Asia; 2) the war against terror drains the economic resources of America and exacerbates its recession, which weakened the economic ties between the USA and the East Asian nations; and 3) with its steadily growing economic power, China is actively involving itself in interstate affairs, particularly in the development-oriented East Asia, where the monopolistic influence of America is gradually waning.
In response to this process of power transition, the middle powers in the region have adjusted their foreign policies towards China and the United States. The geographical proximity between China and its Northeast Asian neighbours, the sheer size of China’s economy and its implications to the regional and global markets, and the growing power of the Chinese military forces that has elevated China to a great power only second to the United States in the region – all of these factors justify that it is reasonable, necessary and imperative for Japan, South Korea and North Korea to recalibrate their positions in the region from a setting of unipolarity to bipolarity. Yet adjustments have to be made with multi-dimensional instead of linear thinking, for the reason that Sino–USA relations are not at all short of complexities (Shambaugh, 2008, pp.301–3).

South Korea turns out to be a typical example. Kim (2004, pp.103–6) highlights the changing foreign policies of South Korea during the first decade since the normalisation of the Sino–ROK relations. Except for the aspect of security that Seoul still relies on its military alliance with the United States, the economy of South Korea has been deeply intertwined with that of China, both governments share similar stance on the approach of resolving North Korean nuclear crisis, and the exchange at the non-government level (including tourists, students, and scholars, etc.) becomes extraordinarily active – in sum, in the midst of declining US primacy in East Asia, the geopolitical and geoeconomic role of China on the Korean Peninsula has changed and become pivotal.

In the study of Sadae, if the concept were to be analysed completely from a realist perspective, the way of thinking of the Joseon political elites would appear rather straightforward: as a minor country located right next to the hegemon, Joseon should prioritise the task to ensure its survival by bandwagoning with Ming. When a bipolar order emerged with the rising Qing, Joseon should switch to serve Qing, especially when Ming’s decline became inevitable. After the completion of power transition from Ming to Qing, Joseon should not have any hesitation to serve Qing because Qing’s material power was second to no one in the region. However, in the historical evidence discussed in Chapter 4 and 5, none of these came out as simple as they should be – realism alone is therefore not sufficient to
explain Joseon’s Sadae.

2.2 Constructivism

Constructivism is developed in response to the limitations of the rationalist theories in analysing international politics after the end of the Cold War. Constructivists ground their theories in the belief that world politics is ‘socially constructed’ (Wendt, 1995, p.71). Refuting the neorealist view that political reality is purely made of and completely driven by material forces, constructivists assert that it is the ideas of actors that matter most, as how they perceive each other; the self-help international system is not exogenously determined by nature, and ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ (Wendt, 1992, p.395).

Non-Material Factors

By breaking the confinement of material concerns, constructivism opens up a new arena to study international relations. Ideational factors, ranging from social identity to religious culture, become new focuses to analyse states’ behaviour. For example, Lebow went as far as to examine human motives to study war and peace between/among states with a ‘first-image’ perspective. Supported by historical evidence from ancient Greece to the present world, Lebow (2008, pp.558–67) assessed the role of human motives in constructing state identity. He emphasised the human strive for esteem and looked into the psychological profile of the political elites in Western history, inducing that global order/disorder was determined by the combined human drives of appetite, spirit and reason, and the level of fear that resulted from the situation in which reason lost control over appetite and/or spirit (Lebow, 2008, pp.508–15). A further research by him (Lebow, 2010, p.268), supported by empirical data of wars from 1648 to present, elaborated his stress on standing and honour (Lebow, 2008, p.555) and reconfirmed his assertion that it was mostly the psychological pursuit of honour and standing that had caused military conflicts in Western history until the end of World War Two.

The non-material perspective to study interstate relations has enriched the intellectual value of the discipline of IR – more explanations have been offered
from non-traditional angles to understand the making of foreign policy. How such approach was justified in the first place can be seen in the analogy of British and Soviet missiles created by Wendt (1992, p.397): the constructivists believed that physical assets *per se* did not signal meaning; it was the subjective understanding and philosophical belief of actors that presupposed the relations among actors and imposed meaning on those objective entities (Tannenwald, 2005, p.19). Therefore, to the constructivists, it is fundamentally important to see the material world as interpreted by intersubjective knowledge that is commonly shared among people, which distinguish constructivist sociality from neorealist materiality (Wendt, 1995, p.73).

**Intersubjective Ideas**

To the constructivists, shared ideas are imperative to the understanding of actors’ behaviour because they shape the formation of actors’ identities. Hence all kinds of ideas, such as ideologies, systems of shared belief, and normative beliefs, must be taken into analyses to explain international relations (Tannenwald, 2005, p.15). Intersubjective understanding exists not only among actors but also between structure and actors, as reflected in the arguments of Wendt (1992, pp.403–7) to counter the neorealist assertion of taking self-help as a constitutive feature of anarchy. This entails a two-fold implication (Copeland, 2000, p.190): on one hand, the structure plays the additional role of defining/redefining the identities and interests of the actors through interaction, contrasting the neorealist view of the dominant role of structure in distributing material power; on the other hand, the interacting practices among the actors also affect the shared ideas that determine the structure, suggesting the mutual influence and constitution of structures and agents as ‘the constructivist emphasis on how agency and interaction produce and reproduce structures of shared knowledge over time’ (Wendt, 1995, p.76).

Unlike neorealist view that treats all states (the agent) functionally undifferentiated under anarchy (the structure), constructivists acknowledge the difficulties of making social change yet do not deny the possibility for change to occur: according to constructivism, identity is not given but is formed through interaction among states and therefore identities of states are not fixed and possibly subject to change. As long as the different identities of states and their
impacts on shaping states’ behaviours are recognised, change is not impossible (Hopf, 1998, pp.180–1). Studying identity, therefore, becomes a central theme of constructivism.

Identity in the Study of IR

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the United States got confused in defining its national interest due to the vanishing of its identity as a defender of freedom in the absence of the old adversary: the Soviet Union (Wendt, 1992, pp.398–9). National identity, to constructivists, provides the very source for a state to shape its preferences, whereby informing the state’s actions (Hopf, 1998, p.175). Two approaches to study identity are typically found among the constructivists: one focuses at the system level and the other at the unit level. Wendt (1992, p.423) acknowledges the influence exerted by domestic factors but chooses to explore identity-formation with a ‘third-image’ perspective. He illustrates three causal mechanisms to examine how states’ identities are shaped in the process of socialisation among states (Wendt, 1994, pp.389–91): structural contexts that may intersubjectively either prevent or promote the formation of identities; systemic processes through which identity formation is facilitated by increasing interdependence and the transnational convergence of domestic values; and strategic practice that includes both behavioural and rhetorical interaction.

Different from analyses of systemic constructivists, the works of other scholars such as Johnston (on China) and Hopf (on Russia) typically reveals the concerns of the unit-level constructivists. Among others, Peter J. Katzenstein is commonly deemed as a prominent figure of this stream. Instead of settling for the systemic view that portrays similar socialisation effects among states, Katzenstein emphasises the necessity to understand the distinctive domestic factors in local societies that have been constructing the national identity within cultural and historical contexts (Gourevitch et al., 2008, pp.893–4). He acknowledges the heterogeneity in norms across regions (Katzenstein, 1993, pp.76–77), and takes the efforts to explore and compare the historical background and cultural practice of different countries, as seen in his works on Germany and Japan (Katzenstein, 1993; Katzenstein & Okawara, 1993; Katzenstein, 2003), that have influenced the formation of state identity – for he believes that ‘international actors and their
changing identities are important causal factors that help shape the interests of political actors which inform the policies they pursue and the international outcomes these policies generate’ (Katzenstein, 1997, p.31). Katzenstein’s quest for tracing the origin of identity formation extends to fields such as race that have received less attention: he attributes the cause for different US foreign policies in Europe (multilateralism) and Asia (bilateralism) to racial discrimination, (i.e. same and superior community with European states, but different and inferior community with Asian countries) of US government officials in charge of foreign affairs (Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002, p.598).

*A Different Approach to Studying IR in Northeast Asia*
It is due to the knowledge of various fields the constructivists embrace in their research that makes constructivism look more like an approach instead of a theory (Hopf, 1998, p.196). It is an analytical tool; a tool to reveal problems that would be solved by other theories (Kratochwil, 1996, p.206). However, it is exactly because of the flexibility provided by constructivism that allows both scholars and practitioners to understand world politics with different and unconventional perspectives by employing knowledge of a diversified range of disciplines – and such spirit is evident in the intellectual stance of analytical eclecticism (Katzenstein & Okawara, 2001/02, p.154, pp.181–2, 184–5; Sil & Katzenstein, 2010, p.412) to address the complexities in world politics nowadays. There have been pervasive writings in the past decades that have adopted the constructivist approach in analysing international politics in Northeast Asia. For instance, Peter Hays Gries employed the knowledge of psychology, history and culture to examine how the ‘face nationalism’ shapes the formation of China’s national identity and influences China’s state behaviours in its foreign relations, and Alastair Iain Johnston studied the cultural factors associated with China’s foreign relations in pre-modern history to illustrate the application of China’s cultural realism in its contemporary policy on national security. In the rest of this section, the selected works on Korean foreign relations written with a constructivist perspective by Roland Bleiker and David C. Kang are to be reviewed respectively.
Roland Bleiker on Identity

Roland Bleiker looked into the security dilemma on the Korean Peninsula, not from the mainstream realist angle but with a constructivist perspective. He attempted to explain the hostile material reality in the Demilitarised Zone by focusing on the ideational dimension to look for the origin of the enmity. He attributed the enduring crises on the peninsula to the continuity of ‘either-or’ Cold War mentalities reflected on both sides – North Korea and the United States. The anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism mindset of North Korea is obvious, but those in Washington denouncing North Korea as ‘rogue state’ are also driven by the dualistic thinking of ‘either friend or foe’ (Bleiker, 2003, p.721). With the ‘Evil Empire’ fading away at the end of the Cold War, the United States has to redefine its identity. Labelling countries such as North Korea as ‘rogue states’ produces the effect of creating an evil ‘other’ and sustaining a good ‘self’ (Bleiker, 2005, pp.52–53). The structural pattern of the Cold War is a conflictual one that typically signals a zero-sum implication: the goal of A is to terminate the existence of B and vice versa. Consequently, the type of anarchy created by such intersubjective structure turns out to be, as Wendt (1994, p.389) described, a Hobbesian anarchy.

In such anarchy, security dilemma exacerbates not because of weapons (the material aspect) but as a result of how one interprets the intentions of others (Wendt, 1999, p.265). The core of the security dilemmas, therefore, resides in the antagonistic identities that have been socially constructed by both sides throughout the decades-long tensions on the peninsula (Bleiker, 2005, p.10). On one hand, both Korean states demonise each other though state-controlled education, mass media and public discourses, even linking ideological identification with freedom and imprisonment to build entrenched negative identity towards the other (Bleiker, 2005, pp.10–15). On the other hand, the United States has been projecting the evil image and constructing antagonistic identity of North Korea, generating no less fear to the North than the North has been doing to the South and America, and the worse is that policy-makers in Washington have not been fully aware of such effects (Bleiker, 2003, pp.728–9).
As a result, this repeated, negative socialisation reinforces the concepts of self and perceptions towards other through the process of reciprocal typification, creating the social structure that in turn leaves enduring imprints on identity-formation (Wendt, 1992, pp.405–6). It has taken decades to mould such antagonistic identities and the common understanding about the hostile other has become deeply and persistently implanted in people’s minds, and the implication of this is that swift change is unlikely to occur (Bleiker, 2005, p.23). Nevertheless, ‘changing the practices will change the intersubjective knowledge that constitutes the system’ (Wendt, 1992, p.407). To break such deadlock, as Bleiker (2005, pp.63–78) suggested, it is necessary for both sides to acknowledge and accept the differences at all levels between the two, thereby promoting a peaceful environment for positive engagement with non-state face-to-face contacts and dialogues. The key, highlighted by Bleiker (2005, pp.95–114), is the willingness of both sides to allow the co-existence of different worldviews for genuine reconciliation.

David C. Kang on Pax Sinica

David C. Kang is one of the prominent IR scholars on Northeast Asian affairs since the turn of the century. By examining the formation of identity in terms of status that defines the interstate relations between China, Korea and Japan within the Confucian Sinocentric order of hierarchy from 1300s to 1900s, Kang endeavoured to explain the pre-modern international relations in Northeast Asia and to illustrate their modern and post-modern implications. Kang (2001, p.123) started with the reality in Northeast Asia in the past 20 years and pointed to the absence of war in the region. In contrary to the neo-realist assertions, Kang (2003, pp.68–70; 2004, p.338) argued that China was a status quo power and few states in the region displayed balancing behaviour against China. With an alternative perspective to the Eurocentric view, he attributed the stability to the traditional regional order of hierarchy in East Asia (Kang, 2003, p.66).

Such type of hierarchy, as Kang described, ‘accords all states within the system a place and a means of interacting with each other… allows for substantial autonomy and freedom among the lesser states’ (Kang, 2001, p.129). He argued that hierarchy in the Sinocentric order was different from that in the Westphalian
order: in the West, states were formally equal in sovereignty but informally unequal due to the unequal distribution of material power (Kang, 2004, pp.339–40; Kang, 2005, p.75). In Northeast Asia on the contrary, Kang (2003, p.67) contended that, until the intrusion of Western powers in the 19th century, the peaceful international order within the region was maintained within a hierarchical structure based upon Confucian Sinocentrism, in which relationship between China and any one of the other states was formally unequal (as China resided at the apex of the hierarchy) but relationship among other states were informally equal. Consequently, the regional order yielded six centuries of stability in the region with the occurrence of only one war (i.e. the Imjin War) while the history of Europe at the time was recorded with numerous military conflicts (Kang, 2001, p.123).

Kang attempted to explain this phenomenon from a different angle in contrast with those of the neo-realists: culture. He deemed the peaceful Sinocentric order as a product of the Confucian culture (Kang, 2003, p.67) – pre-modern Northeast Asia was composed of Sinicised states (China, Korea, Japan and Ryukyu) that intersubjectively shared a Confucian worldview and accepted interstate relationship defined by hierarchy – together they formed and maintained an international society not merely based upon (material) power but also on culture (Kang, 2010a, p.593). The Sinocentric order was sustained within the operational framework of a tribute system, and Kang (2012, p.60) noticed that the core of the system was the norms that emphasised the Confucian understanding of relationship between a senior and a junior, as embodied in the hierarchical relationship between the dominant state (China) and the secondary states (Korea, Japan, and Ryukyu).

On one hand, the secondary states acknowledged the central and supreme position of the Chinese emperor and showed respect to the authoritative status of China by dispatching tribute embassies to the Chinese court and to kowtow to the Chinese emperor (Kang, 2005, p.61). On the other hand, the dominant state conferred investiture to legitimise the rulers of the secondary states (Kang, 2001, pp.136–7) and took care of these vassal states by means of protecting them from external threats (national security), permitting tribute and other forms of trades (economic
prosperity) and facilitating cultural exchanges (imports of superior philosophies, advanced technologies, sophisticated social practices and institutions for public administrations) – benefits that were far greater than the costs of balancing against China (Kang, 2001, p.138; Kang, 2004, pp.346–7; Kang, 2005, p.62).

Kang (2010c, pp.546–9) then turned to the pivotal role of status – he emphasised the social nature of status, and he believed that states treasured their status that were acknowledged by other states, which made the question of how the Northeast Asian states in the pre-modern time reached consensus on what constituted status become a crucial topic in his works. Eventually, it was the very essence of Confucian advocacies of senior/junior relationship from which Kang linked his explanation of stability in pre-modern Northeast Asia with the constructivist logic of ‘identity (defined by status) → interest (informed by identity) → behaviour (shaped by interest)’ reasoning. Based upon two of the fundamental virtues, filial piety and loyalty, advocated in Confucianism, the projection of the more knowledgeable senior versus the less experienced junior legitimised the authoritative status of the senior over the subordinative status of the junior, and this commonly shared hierarchical view of status also constituted the identities of the Northeast Asian states within the Sinocentric world (Gries, 2005, p.13; Kang, 2010a, pp.596–9, pp.616–7).

An important implication of this, as Kang (2010a, p.602; 2010b, pp.105–6) noted, was that within the Sinocentric order, the status of a state was determined not by its material (especially military) power; it was judged by the extent to which a state was Sinicised. This was why China viewed Korea (and Korea also believed itself) holding a higher rank of status than that of Japan, even though Japan was more militarily powerful than Korea (Kang, 2010a, p.605; Kang, 2010b, p.109). When such ranking of status was explicitly defined and commonly accepted, the identities of all states within the Sinocentric world were constructed and settled. To the dominant state, as long as its authoritative status is respected, it would have no need to pursue conquest towards its vassal states (Kang, 2005, p.57) or to interfere in their domestic affairs and foreign relations (Kang, 2007, p.214); to the secondary states, as long as they acknowledged China’s suzerainty and paid tribute to the Chinese emperor, they would enjoy high level of autonomy in their
state affairs (Kang, 2001, p.133; Kang, 2005, p.72) and ample benefits provided by China (Kang, 2001, p.131) and therefore they would have no desire to challenge and fight against China (Kang, 2003/04, p.176).

The logic behind this phenomenon, as Kang explained, was that the problem of asymmetric information about state preferences was solved – because: 1) the intersubjective norms cultivated by shared Confucian culture facilitated communication among states (Kang, 2001, p.132); and 2) the clearly defined ranking of status made states’ intentions no longer unknown to one another. When a state’s preference was understood, its behaviour could be predicted. Repeated interactions and frequent communication facilitated by intersubjective culture therefore would ameliorate the security dilemma between states – this explained how war was avoided and peace was maintained in pre-modern Northeast Asia (Kang, 2004, pp.342–3). However, the basic premise of all the reasoning was that China remained militarily powerful, materially wealthy and cultural superior. A strong China enabled the establishment and sustained the continuity of the Sinocentric system; a weak China jeopardised the vitality of the Sinocentric order, leading to its collapse and eventually instability of the region (Kang, 2001, pp.131–2; Kang, 2003, p.83; Kang, 2003/04, pp.175–6; Kang, 2005, pp.71–74).

Kang’s analysis also solved Johnston’s puzzle of the Chinese strategic culture. Johnston identified and explained the rationale of the two distinct cultures in China, the idealist culture of Confucian and the realist culture of *parabellum*. However, he did not explain why the *parabellum* strategy was applied to the nomads while the Confucian approach was adopted in the interstate relations with the East Asian nations (Kang, 2010b, p.92). To address this issue, Kang (2007, p.220; 2010b, p.112) captured the dichotomy of civilisation–barbarian in the Confucian worldview that defined the Sinocentric order, and linked culture with international relations: states were categorised into two segments according to their identities – Sinicised and not Sinicised. Those who shared the common culture of Confucianism were treated as ‘in-group’ members within the Sinic core, such as the Sinicised states of Korea and Ryukyu, and China peacefully incorporated these states into the tribute system (Kang, 2001, p.134); those who refused to be assimilated by Confucian civilisation were considered anomalies as
‘out-group’ savages, such as the nomads to the northern border of China, and China actively prepared for war with the nomadic tribes to defend its border, and sometimes even aggressively waged wars against them (Kang, 2010a, pp.617–9).

Therefore, with a constructivist approach to study East Asian IR from the angles of history, culture, and identity, Kang predicted the future order of the region in a way rather different from the realists. He suggested the resurgence of Pax Sinica, by which East Asian states are going to accommodate China and will lead to peace and stability in the region (Kang, 2001, p.126, p.142, pp.158–9). Kang’s opinion was echoed by Mansourov (2006, p.57), who asserted that ‘Korea is likely to go the way China will go’.

In the study of Sadae, if the concept were to be analysed with purely a constructivist approach, the Joseon political elites would emphasise more on the ideational factor, that is, the intersubjective idea of Confucianism that defined the identity of Joseon and its relations with the others within a world order that was institutionalised by Confucian Sinocentrism. The constructivist logic hence may lead to the reasoning of: to keep the national identity of Sojunghwa intact, Joseon would 1) unwaveringly serve Ming with utmost sincerity according to the Confucian principle of propriety during Ming’s unipolar order; 2) uphold the Confucian principle of righteousness and assist Ming in the rivalry between Ming and Qing; and 3) not learn from the Manchu, the inferior barbarians, and not serve Qing the way they used to serve Ming even after Qing became the hegemon. Nonetheless, there were plenty of Joseon political elites throughout the Joseon history who never ignored the existence of political reality thus the merits of pragmatism, and rationally steered Joseon along a path that was not exactly a Confucianised state should have experienced – the constructivist approach hence is able to explain some, but not all of Joseon’s relations with the great powers.

2.3 The Constructivist-cum-Realist Approach to Studying Sadae

Since the turn of the century, a good number of scholars and policymakers in China have been confidently talking about the return of the Sinocentric order in East Asia with remarks like ‘if the tribute system benefited everyone in the past,
this argument suggests, a 21st-century China-led East Asia will be in everyone’s interest as well’ (Gries, 2005, p.12). Such thinking, as Stuart-Fox (2004, pp.128–9) concluded, embodied ‘a preoccupation with status based on the hierarchy of power’ and ‘a conviction of the superiority of Chinese example’ that made many Chinese think China would become the leader in Northeast Asia again – as seen in the work of Yan Xuetong, who discussed the Chinese understanding of hegemony two millennia ago and made suggestion on how China could lead the world again in the 21st century (Yan, 2011, p.240, pp.244–6). This is why Chung (2012, p.228) called China ‘…a continental nation… with Sinocentric DNA’.

To the Chinese scholars, Joseon’s choice of Sadae was made simply based on an ideational reason: the Koreans’ admiration for China’s superior culture that was nurtured by the philosophy of Confucianism. Mohwa (admiring China, 奉華) was hence considered the motive that drove the Joseon political elites to serve a country of cultural greatness (Cui, 2003, p.47; Sun, 2007, pp.33–50; Jin, 2011, pp.73–74; Liu, 2011, p.64). Based on the intersubjective culture of Confucianism, Joseon endeavoured to emulate anything Chinese on a voluntary basis and strived to achieve the status of Sojunghwa with regard to all the domestic practices (Sang, 2003, p.52; Li & Hao, 2005, pp.91–93; Liu, 2006, pp.139–40; Gao, 2009, p.128; Wang, 2014, p.55; Zhang, 2014, p.69); in its relations with China, Joseon faithfully served its suzerain by strictly adhering to the Confucian principles of propriety (He, 1998, p.36; Chen, 2007, pp.430–3; Gu, 2008, p.54; Diao, 2009, p.84; Chen, 2015, p.6). In the eyes of the Chinese scholars, the Koreans were proud of their practice of Sadae because this was how Joseon became a civilised country only second to China (Miao, 2002, p.67; Wang, 2013, p.33). Moreover, the Chinese scholars tended to emphasise that Joseon was a beneficiary in its tributary relations with China: Joseon’s national security was guaranteed by China, Joseon’s economy was improved by trading with China, and Joseon’s culture and technology were fostered by importing and learning from China (Gao, 2005, pp.74–76; Jian, 2009, pp.139–40; Li, 2009, p.52).

Nonetheless, the Korean scholars expressed very different opinions about Sadae. There were basically two views: 1) Sadae was a pragmatic strategy employed by
Joseon; and 2) those practiced Sadae strictly according to Confucian code of ethics should be condemned for being servile to a foreign power and creating vassalism that had disgraced Korea. Sadae hence was described by some scholars as a means that practically secured the autonomy of Joseon in its making of domestic and foreign policies (Park, 2013, p.287) and assured Joseon’s national security and the monarchs’ ruling legitimacy (Jung, 2006, pp.80–87). To other scholars, Sadae was despised as ‘flunkeyism’ (Choe, 1980, p.7), ‘toadyism’ (Hwang, 2004, p.107), ‘yield to the big ones’ (Lee, 1997, p.95), and ‘subservience to big power’ (Nahm, 1988, p.120) – in sum, Sadae has become a ‘highly stigmatized label in Korean politics’ (Lee, 2007, p.477). Moreover, the Korean scholars were prone to stressing that Joseon was in fact a victim with its vassalage status towards China:

‘The past Korea–China relationship … was often regarded as that between a master and a servant … This tributary relationship with China was a shame to Korea … this humiliating relationship … Because of the requirement for tribute by China, Korea had to suffer economic losses … Confucianism and other Chinese thought hindered the development of Korea, especially the development of modern Korea.’ (Hwang, 1973, pp.10–11)

Chun (1997, pp.202–36) also falsified the notion that Joseon received significant economic gain via the tribute system by calculating in detail the economic loss Joseon had to suffer in its implementation of Sadae. He criticised the Chinese for using a deceptive means (i.e. asserting that Joseon benefited economically from serving China) to distort historical facts and to confuse the future generations. Sadae hence was severely condemned by the Korean scholars to the extent that, in the writings on anti-Americanism, those pro-America administrations in Seoul were also accused of being subservient to Washington the same as Joseon being a subordinate vassal to China (Han, 1980, pp.1082–3).

Fundamentally, to the Korean scholars, Joseon was not an exemplar tribute state to China. Sadae was merely an option for Joseon to obtain practical benefits (security and trade) from China and it had nothing to do with respect and admiration (Cha, 2011, pp.53–55). Among others, discussions of Sadae in the
book on Korean history written by Kang Man Gil (1993, p.62) probably best represented the Korean view on this concept: first of all, Sadae was supposed to be a pragmatic strategy that was adopted for the purposes of 1) protecting Joseon from being invaded by foreign powers, and 2) learning advance culture by peaceful means. Based on such premises, therefore, Sadae should never become associated with the sense of loyalty and righteousness as advocated in Confucianism; it ought to be implemented strictly out of functional concern. By invoking the example of Injo (the Joseon king who fought Qing to profess Joseon’s loyalty towards Ming), Kang criticised those who pledged their allegiance to the Chinese emperor in their practice of Sadae as ‘muddle-headed’, for which their failure was inevitable.

Alternatively, some Korean scholars simply chose not to mention Sadae at all in writing Korean history. When describing Joseon’s relations with Ming in his book *A Review of Korean History (Vol.2 Joseon Era)*, Han Young Woo (2010, pp.44–45) talked about the duties of Joseon in the tribute system but the Joseon policy of Sadae towards Ming was omitted. The reason why the Ming court treated the Joseon missions preferably compared with those from other vassal states was simply because Ming recognised Joseon as the Eastern Land of Propriety – however, why Joseon gained such reputation was not explained. Similar situation can be also found in other books, such as *The History of Korea* written by Han Woo-keun in 1970.

To comprehensively understand the Northeast Asian interstate relations in history, it is therefore proposed in this research that Sadae should be studied with a combined approach of constructivism and realism. It gives an equal weight to both the ideational and the material aspects thus factors of neither aspect will be over-emphasised or downplayed in the research: on one hand, the existence of an intersubjective understanding of Confucianism shared by the Chinese and the Koreans in history requires researches with a constructivist instead of a rationalist approach to assess the impact of ideational factors derived from the Confucian rule of propriety. The rationale behind the discussions in the writings of the constructivists is therefore relevant and supportive to the analysis of Sadae. For instance, amity between Ming and Joseon can be explained as the result of the
identities of ‘senior’ and ‘junior’ accorded to the two countries, while enmity between the Koreans and the Manchu was difficult to be resolved because the Koreans thought they enjoyed a more prestigious identity than that of the Manchu within the Sinocentric order – this matched the view of Bleiker that interstate relations are shaped by state identity. Another example can be found in the influence of Sadae on Korean nationalism: Sadae was refuted in the Korean society during the second half of the 19th century by those who strongly felt that their national pride had been hurt by practicing Sadae for centuries. Charged with modern nationalism, they turned ‘anti-Sadae’ into ‘anti-China’ and initiated de-Sinicisation in Korea – this is in line with the belief of Gries that nationalist sentiment derived from historical experience can become a crucial factor that determines the making of foreign policy at present time.

On the other hand, the strategic location of Korea, the gap in material power between China and Korea, the competition between/among countries in order to dominate the region were all key factors that determined Joseon’s relations with the great power(s), and these material factors must be examined within a realist analytical framework so as to understand how a middle power managed to survive right next to the hegemon and in the midst of great powers’ rivalry. The major contentions of realism hence are useful to ensure the completeness of studying Sadae. For example, during the five centuries of the Joseon dynasty, distribution of power did not remain the same: the polarity in Northeast Asia experienced a unipolar order (Ming), a bipolar order (Ming vs. Qing), another unipolar order (Qing), and an emerging multipolar order (Qing, Japan, Russia, and other Western powers). Such changes in the structural forces were important factors to the Joseon policymakers, the rationalists in particular – and survival had always been the sole criterion for them to justify their primary concern on national security. Reality was still reality; it might have allowed room for ideational forces to generate impact on the making of foreign policy in Northeast Asia, but it certainly preserved the opportunity for material forces to manoeuvre in the arena of interstate relations. Therefore, a combined approach of constructivism and realism can ensure that factors of either ideational (Confucianism, that is unique in East Asia) or material (power politics, that is universal around the world) aspect will
not be neglected in the study of Sadae, whereby an ‘Asian universalism’, termed by Acharya (2008, p.75), in the study of IR will be developed.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviews the realist and the constructivist literatures that illustrate the major contentions of these two schools of thoughts in the study of IR in general and their applications in the analyses of Northeast Asian interstate relations in particular. The relevance of both to the study of Korean foreign relations is acknowledged, yet adopting either one of them alone will not be sufficient to explain the rationale behind the making of Korean foreign policy towards the great powers.

This is the reason why researches on Sadae, the core of Korea–great power(s) relations in history, need a new perspective. By summarising the opinions of the contemporary Chinese and Korean scholars expressed in their writings on Sadae, the necessity of employing a combined approach of constructivism and realism is depicted. In the following chapter, the background, rationale and practice of Sadae will be analysed, whereby the concept of Sadae will be preliminarily defined. The definition will be further refined based on the discussions on the historical evidence to be illustrated in Chapter 4, Chapter 5, and Chapter 6.
Chapter 3

Background, Rationale and Practice of Sadae

The emergence of Sadae in Korean foreign policy can be traced back to the period of the Three Kingdoms (57 BC–668 AD) in Korean history, during which Tang China (618–907) was the great power that Silla chose to serve for the purpose of defeating the neighbouring Goguryeo and Baekje (Kim, 1964, p.112). The practice of Sadae was seen later in the foreign relations of Goryeo (918–1392) towards Song China (960–1279) (Toqto'a, 1977, p.14035) and Yuan China (1271–1368) (Song, 1976, p.71). However, it was in the interstate relations between Joseon (1392–1910) and Ming (1368–1644)/Qing (1644–1912) China that Sadae was officially announced as the core principle of Joseon’s foreign policies towards China and became institutionalised for diplomatic interactions between the two countries for five centuries.

In view of the power disparity and the geographical proximity between Ming/Qing China and Joseon Korea, plus the existence of an aggressive Japan in the region at the time, it would be an incomplete study of Sadae to exclude the analysis of power politics. Material factors such as military capabilities and economic gains were forces that drove the rational thinking of the Joseon elites to keep serving China, which makes the realist view relevant and logical in explaining Joseon’s behaviour. However, there was also the influence of ideational factors that differentiated the construction and operation of the interstate relations in the pre-modern Northeast Asia from those of the other countries in the world. The prominence and prevalence of Confucian influence in East Asia since the late 14th century was a key factor that conceptualised the idea of Sadae and turned it into an ethical norm in foreign relations between China and other countries in the region. This is the part that requires a constructivist approach to examine the impacts of intersubjective culture on the making of foreign policies in the region.

Sadae therefore is a concept composed of both ideational and material elements. The equal influence of both or stronger influence of one over the other depended
on specific social contexts (domestic and/or foreign situation) in which the Joseon political elites experienced. Solely highlighting the ideational aspect (and ignoring the material factors, i.e. Korea served China out of sheer admiration) to describe Sadae would exhibit Sinocentric biases, while over-emphasising the material aspect (and downplaying the ideational factors, i.e. Korea served China as a pragmatic strategy) to explain Sadae would reflect nationalistic irrationality. It is hence imperative to examine Sadae in historical contexts with a constructivist-cum-realist approach, so as to ensure a comprehensive and balanced understanding of the concept in the Joseon–great power(s) relations.

This chapter consists of four sections. The first section is to illustrate the background of Sadae that includes the logic of Confucian Sinocentrism and the proliferation of Confucianism in Korea. The second section is to explain the rationale of Sadae that includes both the ideational (moral) aspect and the material (strategic) aspect of the concept. The third section is to depict Sadae in practice that includes the Confucianisation of the Joseon society and the operation of the tribute system. The final section offers a definition of Sadae that is supported by the three different motives to serve the great.

3.1 Background of Sadae

Sadae is a product of Confucian worldview. The reason why Korea took a junior role to treat China as a senior was because of the Sinocentric world order Confucianism constructed. It was acknowledged as a fact that Korea was geographically smaller, militarily weaker, and technologically less advanced in comparison with China; but what truly distinguished China from Korea at that time was its cultural achievement. China was placed at the heart of the Sinocentric order as a result of its cultural superiority (in terms of Confucianism). Other countries, based on how much they developed their cultures according to the Confucian criteria, were ranked as ‘less civilised’ or ‘barbaric’ countries in the system. This order defined the identity of China as a senior to all other countries in the Sinocentric world, and Korea became one of the juniors that were required to respect and serve China according to Confucian propriety. With Korean Confucian scholars passionately promoting Confucianism since the 10th century,
the idea of a Sinocentric order became pervasively accepted in the Korean society in the late 14th century. At the time when Goryeo was replaced by Joseon, Confucianism was formally established as the national ideology in Korea and became the guiding principle that directed literally every aspect of government policy, including foreign relations.

3.1.1 Confucian Sinocentrism

The Sinocentric World Order

The phrase *Sadae* consists of two parts: ‘sa’ and ‘dae’, with ‘sa’ meaning ‘to serve’ and ‘dae’ meaning ‘the great’. It conveys a prescriptive message about how a ‘junior’ should think and behave towards a ‘senior’. Using the term *Sadae* hence implies an unequal relationship between a dyad of two countries. The reason why Joseon accepted the role of ‘junior’ in its relations with China actually went beyond the realist thinking in terms of geographical size, military capability and economic power. It was related to the rules of the Sinocentric world order that ranked cultural achievement in Confucianism on top of everything else.

One of the themes that constitute the core of Confucianism is propriety. Confucian philosopher Xunzi (312–230 BC) believed that ‘without the rule of propriety, men cannot exist, nothing can be achieved, and countries will be chaotic’. Propriety advocates that a man needs to cultivate himself with the sense of knowing what is proper and improper, and a country with its people that behave according to propriety is a country of civilised culture. To Confucius, the Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BC) was politically stable and economically prosperous because the people of Zhou strictly adhered to the codes of propriety and their conducts were highly civilised. By comparison, people of the ethnic groups living outside the territories of Zhou were considered less civilised because they knew little about propriety. These ethnic groups referred to nomads and tribes living to the north, west, south of China, and people inhabiting on the Korean Peninsula and the islands of Japan.

The distinction between ‘Hua’ (China, which represented civilisation) and ‘Yi’ (barbarian) therefore was measured by whether a country possessed the qualities
of Confucian culture, with propriety being the most important yardstick. According to the civilisation–barbarian categorisation, China was placed at the centre with its superior Confucian culture. Other countries formed by the ethnic groups, in spite of their military power or material wealth, were positioned below China by the level of their attainments of Confucian culture. This conception became the ideational base to establish the Sinocentric world order in East Asia for centuries to come.

*Benign Hierarchy*

With the implication of a superior China and the inferior barbarians in terms of culture, the Sinocentric order was typically characterised by the feature of hierarchy. In such world order, China was defined as a ‘senior’ and other countries were considered as ‘juniors’ as a result of China’s advanced culture. Being the home of Confucianism and the country that was most sophisticatedly developed in terms of Confucian civilisation, China’s superior status in the Sinocentric world order was existential, inevitable, and insurmountable. However, different from the modern concept of Westphalian equality that is deemed as a positive rule for the co-existence of states, hierarchy was nothing negative in the theories of Confucianism. To the contrary, hierarchy was viewed as a guarantee of social order.

In Confucian propriety, it was stressed that one ought to be aware of his role and rank so as to think and behave properly. Confucius believed in the importance to ‘let the prince be a prince, the minister a minister, the father a father and the son a son’, otherwise the society would be as chaotic as ‘one may have a dish of millet in front of one and yet not know if one will live to eat it’. As exemplified in the relations of prince–minister and father–son, they were not equal: the prince was the senior to the minister, and the father was the senior to the son. Although unequal, such hierarchical relation did not necessarily imply the senior oppressing or exploiting the junior. According to the Confucian codes of ethics, while the junior was required to respect and serve the senior, it was the senior’s responsibility to look after the junior.
In the Sinocentric world order, the relationship between the emperor of China and the king of the vassal state was defined as that between a prince and his minister. Officially between the two countries, the suzerain–vassal relationship was typically hierarchical. Yet morally, the relationship was supposed to be a cordial one. As Mencius advocated, ‘when a prince regards his ministers as his hands and feet, his ministers look upon him as their heart and belly’. Hence, the hierarchical Sinocentric world order was humanely projected as a benign framework to appeal to, rather than a coercive system imposed upon, the other barbaric countries around China.

**Transformability: from Barbarian to Civilisation**

A hierarchical order creates the issue of ranking. Confucian cultural achievement determined a country’s status yet the status could be changed – and this is another important feature of the Sinocentric world order: barbarians could become less barbaric and more civilised. The key to such transformation was Sinicisation. Mencius believed that Chinese culture could assimilate the barbarians, transforming them into civilised countries and upgrading their status in the ranking within the Sinocentric world order. In other words, the barbarians could be Sinicised if they were educated by Confucianism – which implied that the status of a barbaric country was not fixed.

This was an important message to those barbarians who desired to elevate their national identities to a more civilised level in the system, with Joseon being the most active country. Getting closer to the status of China gave those teachable (i.e. transformable) barbarians a sense of national pride and a hope of making their countries better (to be more civilised, then likely becoming more prosperous) – in sum, by Sinicising themselves, they could become as great as China. Such belief provided them with an incentive to study the Confucian culture and emulate Chinese practices. On interstate relations, such thinking implied that for less civilised countries to rise in the Sinocentric system, they would strive to increase their cultural instead of military power. While cultural power was supposed to be developed through intellectual learning rather than by crude force, the Sinocentric world order would be a peaceful one in which all states (except China, the one at the apex) competed for more prestigious status in a non-violent fashion.
Such idea appealed to both China and most of the vassal states, as military actions were costly and success was never guaranteed. To China, there had been lessons to learn from: the military campaign initiated by Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty against Goguryeo in 645 failed, so did Kublai Khan’s two invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281 (Holcombe, 2011, p.111, p.139) – and these were typical examples to prove the ineffectiveness of military conquering when dealing with countries located outside the Middle Kingdom. To the vassal states, it would be unwise and irrational for countries like Ryukyu or Annam to provoke China as well – except Japan and Manchu. Japan under Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Manchu under Nurhaci grew powerful and became dissatisfied with the Sinocentric order. In the words of the contemporary Power Transition Theory, they became revisionist powers, broke the conventional practice (i.e. peaceful contest for status), and challenged the system with military forces. However, other than these two exceptional examples, the regional peace in Northeast Asia was maintained for centuries within an interstate order that was sustained by not only military power but also cultural influence.

Pax Sinica: Rule by Propriety
Confucianism advocates humaneness, and the way to train oneself to become humane is to observe the principle of propriety. Confucius reminded people ‘not to look at, listen to, speak of, or act upon things that were not in conformity to the codes of propriety’. Applied in politics, propriety became the guiding principle for the princes: ‘a prince should employ his minister according to the rules of propriety; ministers should serve their prince with faithfulness’. Since the relationship between the suzerain and the vassals in the Sinocentric order was that between a prince and his ministers, the Chinese emperor ought to rule the barbarians by propriety, not force. As long as the ‘Son of Heaven’ could exercise virtuous rule over the vassals by propriety, their aggressiveness would be avoided and therefore order would be maintained.

Confucius believed that ‘if a prince governs his people by virtue and keeps order by propriety, people will have the sense of shame and will become morally good’. If the Chinese emperor was a sage monarch who treated the barbarians humanely,
his authority would be more easily accepted by the barbarians. Moreover, the barbarians would be encouraged to study Confucianism and to voluntarily emulate the Chinese practices so that admiration, instead of ambition, would provide them with the drive to ‘move up the ladder’ in the Sinocentric order, thereby making them obeying, instead of challenging, China. This was the reason why the pacifying approach of cultural assimilation was preferably adopted (although the military power was unquestionably needed as one of the essential guarantees to uphold China’s supremacy). *Pax Sinica* therefore was sustained by two pillars: for China, it had to demonstrate its will and ability to rule the vassals by propriety; for the vassals, they must willingly accept the Chinese rule and the status accorded to them within the system, and to respect and serve China faithfully.

3.1.2 Proliferation of Confucianism in Korea

*Introduction of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*

Confucianism was introduced to Korea during the 4th century BC (Yu, 1989, p.13), yet throughout the following centuries Korea was also influenced by Buddhism and Taoism. During the later years of the Goryeo dynasty, Buddhism overtook Confucianism and became the most prominent philosophy in the Korean society. A group of Korean Confucian scholars at that time wished to revive Confucianism as they noticed the social problems resulted from the inflation of Buddhism. They turned to Chinese philosophy for solutions – and the school of thoughts called Neo-Confucianism developed by the Southern Song Chinese philosopher Zhuxi (1130–1200) caught their attention.

Among the various doctrines advocated by Neo-Confucianism, this was particularly favoured by the Korean Confucian scholars: it criticised Buddhism for promoting abstract ideas that had encouraged retreat from reality on one hand, and celibacy that had broken the bonds between individual, family, and country on the other. To people who believed in Neo-Confucianism, nothing was more important than self-cultivation (by the moral principles of humaneness, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and integrity) in order to take care of their family and serve their country. In contrast to Buddhism that tended to make a man idle as a passive, self-centred thinker, Neo-Confucianism encouraged a man to
become an active, loyal (to king and father in particular) thinker–actor. To those Korean Confucian scholars who had been witnessing the corrupted and decadent Goryeo society inflated by Buddhist belief since the late 13th century, Neo-Confucianism convincingly appeared to be an effective solution (Lee, 1984, p.166).

During the century since 1289, Neo-Confucianism was introduced to the Korean Peninsula and widely promoted in Goryeo with the tireless efforts of An Hyang (1243–1306), Baik Yi-jeong (1260–1340), Yi Je-hyun (1287–1367), and Yi Saek (1328–1396), all of whom were renowned Confucian scholar-officials in Korea (Jeong, 1996, v.161, pp.628–30, p.637, pp.713–24; Jeong, 1996, v.162, pp.55–69). When Yi Saek served as the head of Sungkyunkwan (the highest educational institution, 成均館), the number of students admitted to study Neo-Confucianism was significantly increased and as a result, a lot more formally-trained Neo-Confucian scholars were produced (RDAK, vol. 2, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.275). Among others, two of the most important Neo-Confucian scholar-officials then ascended to the spotlight of the following dynastic change in Korea: Jeong Mongju (1337–1392) and Jeong Do-jeon (1342–1398).

Jeong Mongju was highly regarded as a master of Neo-Confucianism in Goryeo for his in-depth understanding of the philosophy (Jeong, 1996, v.162, pp.96–106). He was one of the professors teaching Neo-Confucianism in Sungkyunkwan and known for his dedication in promoting the philosophy nationwide. He was critical of what Buddhism had done to his country, but on the issue whether the Goryeo Dynasty should be replaced by a new one he chose to follow the Confucian code of ethics on loyalty and refused to collaborate with the followers of Yi Seong-gye (i.e. Taejo) on their plot to overthrow the Goryeo court (Kim, 2005, pp.71–72). His loyalty to the Goryeo monarch eventually led to his death: he was assassinated by the reformists only three months before the founding of the new Joseon Dynasty (RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, p.70). Jeong was later considered a martyr who loyally devoted himself to the Confucian principle of righteousness on the relationship between a prince and his minister (Kim, 2005, p.78). His idea on loyalty thus became the base on which the ideational aspect of
Sadae was later developed, being referred to the guiding principle for the loyalists.

Jeong Do-jeon was also a student of Yi Saek, and a Neo-Confucian scholar severely criticising Buddhism as well. However, his fate was much different from that of Jeong Mongju: he was the leading scholar-official who aided Yi Seong-gye to overthrow the Goryeo dynasty, and became the most powerful minister during the reign of Taejo.

Confucianism as National Ideology

As professed in his works, Jeong Do-jeon was famous for his firm stance and comprehensive approach in refuting Buddhism (Jeong, 1996, v.162, pp.138–52). Jeong strongly believed that it was both morally and practically right to replace Buddhism with Neo-Confucianism as Korea’s national ideology. His thoughts were highly appreciated by Yi Seong-gye, who was still a general of the Goryeo court at the time. Yet what truly impressed Yi was Jeong’s advocacy of radically reforming Goryeo by toppling the Goryeo royalty while at the same time, he believed that such an act of treason could still be justified by Confucian doctrines: it was the incompetent and evil prince that had desecrated the ‘Mandate of Heaven’ so that the truly loyal ministers ought to replace the wicked king with a virtuous ruler. To Yi Seong-gye, Jeong’s ideas would effectively legitimise his forthcoming coup against the Goryeo king.

As the top political adviser of Yi Seong-gye, Jeong teamed up with other reformists, including Jo Jun (1346–1405) and Gwon Geun (1352–1409), supported Yi Seong-gye in completing the dynasty change in 1392 (RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.72–73). As prime minister, Jeong started to build a Confucian state by establishing the political system and making policies according to the Confucian principles (Kim, 2005, pp.72–73). Since then, Confucianism officially became the national ideology of Joseon for the next five centuries. The philosophy indoctrinated the Koreans’ thinking and its ideas permeated to all walks of life in Joseon. Confucianism was revered as the essential source of social norm and the ethical base on which people’s behaviour was measured. Until the days of the two Neo-Confucian sages of Yi Hwang
(1501–1570) and Yi I (1536–1584), Confucianism was further refined and eventually internalised in the Joseon society (Lee, 1984, pp.217–8).

3.2 Rationale of Sadae

The two types of political orientation illustrated in the cases of Jeong Mongju and Jeong Do-jeon in the above section hence explain the dualistic nature of Sadae: the ideational and the material aspects. With the existence of a Sinocentric order in Northeast Asia and the prevalence of Confucianism in Joseon, Sadae emerged as a viable option of foreign policy for the Joseon political elites. The motive to adopt the policy however differed according to the policymakers who had different understanding and interpretation of Sadae. On one hand, the loyalists, who were motivated by their genuine admiration of China’s superior culture and their unwavering belief in Confucianism, insisted on the moral dimension of Sadae and served the great faithfully. On the other, the rationalists, who were driven by pragmatic calculations to gain material benefits, stressed the practical side of Sadae and used the great strategically. Hence, there were two different sets of rationale behind the concept of Sadae, and this is the reason why a constructivist-cum-realist approach is needed for the study of Sadae in the Korea–great power(s) relations.

3.2.1 Ideational Aspect of Sadae

Interstate Socialisation

The interaction of cultural exchange between China and Korea in the pre-modern era was the sort of socialisation that produced the intersubjective idea of Confucianism for people of both countries. Although Confucianism was a foreign philosophy to Korea, it was popularised in the Korean society because the Koreans were greatly appealed to the normative themes of Confucianism and they absorbed its doctrines and regarded them as the moral principles for self-cultivation. Confucianism hence was not forcefully imposed on the Koreans; it was voluntarily accepted. It not only established the norms of the Joseon society but also shaped the value of the Koreans, especially the intellectuals.
The intellectuals, many of whom would become scholar-officials in the government, were deeply drawn to Confucianism because they viewed it as a political ideology that could train them to become gentlemen of moral exemplar and realise their ambition to serve their country. In their view, it was Confucianism that turned China into the most civilised and powerful country in the world they knew of. They chose to accept the philosophy because this was also what they wanted for Korea – civilisation, power and prosperity. Therefore, they accepted, studied, perfected, honoured, applied, and upheld Confucianism – and becoming even more dedicated than the Chinese (Kang, 2010b, p.37).

Consequently, the Koreans saw the world through the lens of Confucianism, and the Sinocentric order became the model by which the Koreans understood the world. They accepted the gradation of status in the system and the hierarchical relationship between China and Korea, because Confucianism stated that a senior and a junior were bound together by mutual obligations and reciprocal duties. As they acknowledged the line drawn between a civilised and a barbaric country (i.e. achievement in Confucian culture), the Koreans came to accept their national identity: Dongyi (Barbarians in the East, 東夷).

National Identity
To the Koreans, accepting Confucianism meant accepting the Confucian explanation of how the world order should be organised, and accepting the Sinocentric order meant accepting the national identity assigned to Korea in the system. This was the logic that made even the pejorative term of Dongyi sound acceptable to the Koreans (Song, 2011). However, Korea was not the only one inferior to China: there were a number of other ‘barbarians’ in the system whose identity were ranked even lower than that of Korea – Japan, the Jurchens, the Mongols, Ryukyu, Annam, etc. – they came after Korea because the Confucian culture of Korea was more advanced than that of those countries.

Hence, within this hierarchical structure, it implied that as long as Korea was able to maintain its attainments in Confucian culture at a level higher than those of the other barbarians, Korea would become the centre of another (though smaller)
civilisation–barbarian order, only the mighty China would not be included in this Korea-centred sphere, which was the only difference from the greater Sinocentric order. From the Koreans’ perspective, Korea could take up the role of a senior and the other barbarians within the smaller Korea-centric order would become juniors to Korea: Korea as the suzerain would receive tributes from its vassals and their kings would kowtow to the Korean monarch, and the Korean court would look after the benefits of its vassals – a pattern that would be no different from the one seen in the Sinocentric order (*RDAK, vol. 13, Sejo Sillok, 1957, p.163*).

Therefore, Korea was granted the double identities in the Confucian world system: a junior to China, but a senior to all others. Yet the later role was contingent on the condition that Korea had to be the most Confucianised state only second to China. According to Mencius’ view, a barbaric country could be transformed into a civilised one as long as it was willing to be transformed. The identity of a teachable barbarian could be changed by the process of Confucianisation. *Dongyi* as it may be referred to, Korea had the potential and will to be transformed into a civilised country: Korea was next to China, Confucianism was imported from China to Korea long ago since the period of the Three Kingdoms, and above all, Confucianism had been popularly accepted in Joseon as the code of ethics (particularly, the literati adopted it as their personal philosophy). In other words, the national identity of Joseon could be changed from a barbaric to a civilised nation – and with dedicated efforts, Joseon could even become *Sojunghwa*.

**National Interest**

Accepting the national identity of Joseon in the Sinocentric order, the Confucian scholar-officials emphasised on enhancing ideational instead of material power. In their understanding of Confucianism, the national interest of Joseon was, as informed by its national identity, to become and remain as the one second only to China in the Sinocentric order. Based on the civilisation–barbarian dichotomy, Joseon must strive to be as close as possible to China in terms of cultural attainments in Confucianism. This was the only way to secure Joseon’s national identity as the only junior to China and at the same time, as a senior to all other barbarians within the Sinocentric order.
Such national interest of Joseon was not idealistic; it was ideational. Idealistic national interest is utopian because it runs against the political reality. To become and remain as *Sojunghwa* was not idealistic because it was highly attainable to the Koreans (especially with the strong will and remarkable capability of the intellectuals). It was simply ideational because it was defined within an ideational context: the Sinocentric world order that was ideational. This was an international order constructed on an ideational logic (i.e. the Confucian civilisation–barbarian dichotomy) and governed by an ideational principle (i.e. Confucian propriety). It was a country’s cultural attainments in Confucianism, instead of its military and/or economic power, that determined its status and identity. The non-violent nature of the Confucian Sinocentric order premised the ideational interaction among states, the ideational classification of state identity, and the ideational formation of national interest. In Joseon, such ideational national interest profoundly influenced the state behaviour in its foreign relations.

**State Behaviour**

Since becoming and remaining as *Sojunghwa* was defined as its national interest, correspondingly, Joseon’s state behaviour was to practice *Sadae* by way of Sinicising Joseon thoroughly and serving China faithfully (*RDAK*, vol. 9, *Sejong Sillok*, 1956, p.225). To fully Sinicise the country, the Joseon court adopted policies that facilitated the learning of anything Chinese in the Joseon society. Encouraged by the government and driven by the motive of *Mohwa*, lots of Joseon intellectuals travelled to China to study Confucian culture and Chinese experience so as to broaden their horizons. Many Joseon kings also actively promoted Chinese culture by way of importing books from China: they ordered to ask for (books to be conferred by the Chinese court) and to purchase (books from local booksellers) massive amount of Confucian classics so as to print and distribute the books in Joseon nationwide (*RDAK*, vol. 2, *Taejong Sillok*, 1954, p.341, p.369; *RDAK*, vol. 7, *Sejong Sillok*, 1956, pp.636–7; *RDAK*, vol. 8, *Sejong Sillok*, 1956, p.372; *RDAK*, vol. 12, *Munjong/Danjong Sillok*, 1957, p.200; *RDAK*, vol. 15, *Seongjong Sillok*, 1958, p.618). At the same time, the Joseon government endeavoured to emulate the practices of Chinese governance. The Joseon political elites (the monarch and the scholar-officials alike) implemented their plans of reform through restructuring the original bureaucratic departments and
establishment of some new administrative institutions – all by copying the practice of China (RDAQ, vol. 23, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, p.648). They were simply convinced that Joseon would become and remain as Sojunghwa as long as they emulated the successful practice of China.

In its foreign policy towards China, the Joseon court considered it of paramount importance to strictly adhere to the Confucian ethics when practicing Sadae (RDAQ, vol. 28, Seonjo Sillok, 1961, p.565). Different from other vassal states, in the case of Joseon, it was more than admiring and emulating China: as the Koreans fully accepted the doctrines of Confucianism, they believed that it was morally right to serve the China subserviently – particularly to the loyalists, Joseon must faithfully observe the Confucian code of ethics in its relations with China as a son to his father (RDAQ, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.3). Only by serving China devotedly in the most exemplary (Confucian) fashion could Joseon become and remain as Sojunghwa and a moral senior to all other barbarians (RDAQ, vol. 42, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.395). Hence, serving China was not a slavish act; it was an ethical act that demonstrated to other member states within the Sinocentric system that Joseon had been transformed from a barbaric to a civilised country, and all the kowtowing-sort of behaviours could be duly justified by the Confucian principle of propriety. In sum, Sadae was the ultimate state behaviour informed by the national interest and identity of Joseon, as a result of the intersubjective idea of Confucianism through cultural socialisation between Joseon and China.

3.2.2 Material Aspect of Sadae

Power disparity between China and Joseon

The material aspect of Sadae derived from the Joseon elites’ concerns of the political reality. Above all, the presence of a mighty China was an unarguable fact to Joseon. Except for a few periods in history that the central power of the dynastic rule weakened and China became fragmented, China basically remained as the most powerful country in East Asia until the 19th century. In terms of geographical size, number of population, reserve of natural resources, and national productivity, no country in the region was able to match with China.
During the early years of the Ming Dynasty, the military power of China, supported by its prosperous economy and advanced technology, surpassed that of any country in East Asia.

In the case of Joseon, the country shared the border on land with China, and the maritime distance between Joseon and China posed little challenge to the Ming’s fleets considering the Chinese technology of building seagoing vessels and marine navigation. Ming’s military capability was clear to Joseon: the defeat of the Mongols and Zhenghe’s expeditionary voyages unquestionably proved that the preeminent power of Ming’s army and navy was unsurmountable. As for the Joseon military forces, it had been weak in the later years of the Goryeo rule. They had not seen many actions in years even at the dynastic change: it was a bloodless coup instead of a civil war. Besides, though Taejo was a military general, he left much of the ruling power to the scholar-officials after establishing the new dynasty – all of these meant that the combat capability of the Joseon forces was rather low and not ready for battles against Ming of any scale.

There had been a number of wars between China and Korea before, but victories went to the Koreans only in a handful of them. The Joseon political elites perfectly understood that Joseon was not Goguryeo; for them to repeat the military triumph of Goguryeo over Sui and Tang China would be an illusion if Joseon clashed with Ming. Had wars broken out between the two, Joseon would be hopelessly defeated – and this would be a catastrophe to the newly founded dynasty. Therefore, for Joseon, a minor state located right next to the superpower, peace with the hegemon was the top priority on the agenda of national security – and the policy of Sadae would effectively please the Ming court and assure the Chinese emperor of Joseon’s loyalty and obedience to the hegemon (RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, p.44). Especially to the rationalists, Sadae was a means for a minor state to achieve the end of peace with the superpower.

**Distribution of Power in Northeast Asia**

The supremacy of Ming lasted until the Tumu Crisis in 1449, in which the Ming troops were defeated by the Mongolian tribe of Oirats (and the Zhengtong Emperor of Ming was captured). Ming started its gradual decline ever since.
During the century from 1521 to 1620, Ming had to frequently deal with the frontier conflicts with the Mongolian cavalry to the north and the seaside combats with the Japanese pirates to the east and southeast (*RDAK, vol. 26, Myeongjong Sillok, 1960, p.587*). Although the power of Ming was on the wane, the Ming troops were still capable of rescuing Joseon in the Imjin War (1592–8) and eventually defeated Japan, the first barbarian to challenge the Sinocentric order – yet the victory was costly to Ming.

In addition to Japan, Manchu also ascended to the status of great power in the two decades between the 1590s to the 1610s, during which Nurhaci defeated all the rival ethnic groups and unified the Jurchen tribes. In 1616, Nurhaci established the dynasty of Later Jin (which was renamed to ‘Qing’ by his son Hong Taiji in 1636) and crowned himself as king in Mukden. He then developed the administrative system of ‘Eight Banners’, based upon which the Manchurian military forces were formally organised and drilled. Later Jin soon became a militarily strong country driven by expansionist ambitions. In 1618, Nurhaci officially declared his intention to challenge Ming’s dominant status in the Sinocentric system and started to launch military attacks against the Ming troops in the following years, paving the way for his descendants to end the rule of Ming in 1644 (Holcombe, 2011, pp.167–70).

*Joseon in the Process of Power Transition: ‘Shrimp between Whales’*

A century after the founding of the Ming Dynasty, the certainty of China’s central position within the Sinocentric order became questionable. China’s supreme status appeared to be shaky; yet it was not because of its cultural attainments in Confucianism got surpassed by any of the barbarians in the system – some revisionist members just became militarily stronger and dissatisfied with the status quo. They did not wish to abolish the system; they just aimed to take the central place of Ming so that they would become the hegemon. Ming, though in decline, struggled to stay at the top and it took almost 200 years for Ming to step down from the apex since the Tumu Crisis in 1449.

Hence, Ming, Japan and Manchu strengthened their military forces and fought with each other, fiercely competing for the seat of supreme power in the system –
except Joseon. Joseon was not Japan: the political power in Japan was centralised in the hands of the shoguns and warriors, which was not as civilised as Joseon, with scholar-officials dominating the making of policies. Joseon was not Manchu either: the Jurchens were tribal barbarians who respected nothing but naked violence, which was not as civilised as Joseon at all, with everything handled according to the Confucian principle of propriety. Joseon was never China, or was never supposed to be China: (Han) China was the eternal senior to Joseon, and it would be a sin if Joseon had the idea to replace China. Hence, in the fight for hegemony in Northeast Asia, the role that Joseon was able to take up was not a belligerent; Joseon became a ‘shrimp’ between the fight of ‘whales’.

To the political elites who were responsible for making foreign policy, their cognition of international politics was built upon and limited to the Confucian explanation of the world order and its normative logic of propriety. Sadae therefore was the only policy option they knew of and adhered to. While Sadae was supposed to be ‘serving one great’ (because it was unethical to serve two great powers according to Confucian principles), Joseon had to decide which great to serve. Yet the situation was complicated and the result was unclear most of the time in the turbulent ages – hence the national interest of becoming and remaining as Sojunghwa would have to be put aside: the top priority was switched to state survival in an anarchical world (as it was unknown which country would become the hegemon). Especially to the rationalists, choosing which great to serve must be justified by the goal of ‘not getting crushed in the fight between whales’.

_Yongdae: for Balancing and Bandwagoning_

Rationalists in the Joseon court understood Sadae as a means to achieve the end of Joseon’s security. To them, serving a great that was not (Han) China could still be justified by the reason that the switch could save Joseon and the lives of its people (which was humane and proper). As advocated by Mencius that it was wise for a small country to serve a big one for the purpose of self-protection, it would be irrational for Joseon to align itself with a declining great in the fight against a rising great. In other words, no matter which great was to be served, it was simply because that selected great could be used for the purpose of ensuring Joseon’s survival – Sadae hence was interpreted as Yongdae. This was a functionalist
approach to interpret Sadae, and it was considered the material aspect of Sadae. Consequently, Sadae was reduced to pure rituals and formalities that were merely nominal, and a simple cost–benefit calculation became the policy-making process of Sadae that aimed to maximise Joseon’s gain.

The resulting state behaviour was very much in line with what is described by the realists. To deal with the revisionist Japan, the Joseon court finally decided to seek military assistance from China so that it could joined forces with Ming to balance against the rising Japan. The strategy worked and Joseon was saved, although the Korean Peninsula was devastatingly ruined (RDAK, vol. 28, Seonjo Sillok, 1961, p.120). As in the case of Manchu, the Joseon king Gwanghaegun opted for bandwagoning with the ascending Manchu. His strategy was severely condemned by the loyalists and eventually led to a coup that had him deposed (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, pp.823–5). However, the pro-Ming policies advocated by King Injo and the loyalists later brought two Manchu invasions of Joseon in 1627 and 1636–7. The consequences were devastating: Joseon had to bear the humiliation of forced surrender, signing unequal treaties with harsh terms, and recognising Qing as Joseon’s new suzerain (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.211–2).

Therefore, when examining the Sadae policy in the Korea–great power(s) relations, it is important to notice that the motives of adopting the policy could be different (either to serve or to use the great), although the diplomatic practice (such as paying tributes and kowtowing to the Chinese emperor) might appear similar or even identical. It depended on the thinking of the policymakers: unwaveringly abiding by the Confucian principle in Sadae or flexibly turning the moral Sadae into the pragmatic Yongdae determined whether the ideational or the material aspect would truly represent the act of Sadae.

3.3 Sadae in Practice

Sadae was highly regarded as a Confucian virtue and widely taught in Joseon. The indoctrination of Sadae was carried out as part of the process of Confucianisation of the Joseon society. Like other Confucian thoughts, Sadae became one of the
key moral principles in the Joseon society to illustrate the importance of propriety – a social norm was therefore established, and it helped to produce generations of intellectuals who would think and behave in a Confucian way. Like in China, most of these Confucian scholars would seek government employment by passing Gwageo (civil service examination, 科舉). While the major subjects to be tested in the examination were related to Confucianism, the Confucian classics became the compulsory texts that all candidates must study in great depth. Once passed, they would be appointed to bureaucratic positions and became scholar-officials. Those with strong language ability in Chinese usually would take up the positions in Yejo (Ministry of Rites, 禮曹) that was in charge of foreign affairs, ensuring that Sadae was adequately observed in every single practice within the framework of the tribute system when interacting with China.

3.3.1 Confucianisation of the Domestic Society

*Cultivating a Confucian Social Norm*

The Korean society in the later years of the Goryeo Dynasty was penetrated by Buddhism. When Yi Seong-gye and the scholar-officials headed by Jeong Do-jeon built the new dynasty of their own, they disconnected Buddhism from state politics and the Joseon society so that their revolution, though comparatively peaceful, would still appear revolutionary. More importantly, it could be justified – and Confucianism was chosen because of its opposite views to Buddhism on attitude of life and individual–society relation. On one hand, they mercilessly condemned Buddhism, accusing it as the cause that had led to the decadent rule of the Goryeo court and the poverty of the people. On the other, they decisively promoted Confucianism: for instance, the practice of *Gyeongyeon* (經筵) for Joseon kings to study the canonical works of Confucianism was initiated when the new dynasty was founded (*RDAK*, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.137–8); *Joseon Gyunggukjeon* (the Joseon Code of Government Administration, 朝鮮經國典) written by Jeong Do-jeon stipulated the strict compliance with regulations defined by Confucian propriety (*RDAK*, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, p.249); books at introductory level like *Iphaktoseol* (Diagrams and Explanations upon Entering Learning, 入學圖說) written by
Gwon Geun were published for beginners to study Confucianism as Joseon’s national ideology (RDAK, vol. 2, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.503); and Taejong ordered the printing of the Confucian classics and had them distributed in even remote areas to facilitate Confucianisation in Joseon (RDAK, vol. 4, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.282).

What they did served a crucial purpose: to construct a new social norm for the new dynasty. The Confucian social norm regulated people’s thinking and behaviour, and it provided an effective cognitive context in which people’s values were shaped. To the Joseon political elites, they needed the Confucian social norm to nurture Confucian literati so that they would have the Confucian scholar-officials to humanely govern the Confucian state and to faithfully manage its foreign relations with China, generation after generation.

Civil Service Examination

Gwageo in Korea was an emulation of the civil service examination system in Tang China, and the first official Gwageo was administered by the Goryeo court in 958 (Kim, 2005, p.55). During the Joseon Dynasty, Gwageo was comprehensively systemised. It consisted of three categories: mungwa (literature, 文科), mugwa (martial art and military strategy, 武科), and japgwa (miscellaneous subjects, 雜科). While mugwa was designed to identify potentials for military positions and japgwa was used to recruit general staff (such as medical personnel and translators) of the government, mungwa aimed to select the most talented for the policy-making positions at high level (Peterson & Margulies, 2010, p.80). The key subject of mungwa was Confucianism. Candidates would be shortlisted by three stages of assessment, during which they were tested on their knowledge of the Confucian classics, their mastery of the Chinese language in the forms of poetry and prose, and their application of Confucianism in political analysis (Seth, 2006, p.130). It was obvious that those who passed all these assessments must be highly well-versed in Confucianism.

Gwageo was the only channel of political advancement for literati in Joseon, and it was regularly scheduled once in every three years for the conventional
examinations (and numerous others on ad hoc basis such as the celebrations of the royal family). In the five centuries of the Joseon dynasty, a total of approximately 14,600 candidates passed the mungwa of Gwageo and became scholar-officials in the government (Seth, 2006, p.160). With their remarkable attainments in Confucianism, all the Confucian principles, including Sadae, were duly observed in the process of policy-making.

_Bureaucratic Administration_

Confucianisation was also implemented in the establishment of Joseon’s bureaucratic administration. By emulating most of the governance structure and functional features of those of the Ming Court, the political elites in Joseon effectively constructed an administrative _Sojunghwa._

In the central government, the top official was _Yeonguijeong_ (Chief State Councillor, 領議政) of _Uijeongbu_ (State Council, 議政府). Together with _Jwauijeong_ and _Uuijeong_ (First and Second Associate State Councillor, 左右議政), the three served as the most important political advisors to the king. _Uijeongbu_ supervised the operation of _Yukjo_ (the Six Ministries, 六曹) that oversaw the administration of six areas of public affairs: personnel, taxation, rites, defence, justice, and public construction (Seth, 2006, p.127). Such bureaucratic structure of the central government was simply a replica of that in China, and each position was moulded according to a corresponding one in the system operated in the Ming court: _Yeonguijeong_ was equivalent to _Chengxiang_ (the Prime Minister), and _Yukjo_ were exactly the same as _Liubu_ (the Six Ministries) – even the court dresses of the Joseon officials were also designed after those of their counterparts in China. The structure and operation of the local government were also similar to those of China (Kang, 2010b, p.37).

Such emulation unquestionably demonstrated that the Joseon court truly admired and believed in the superior Chinese efficiency in public administration. It helped to facilitate cordial relations between Joseon and China because in the interaction between the two governments, mismatching would be reduced thus communications became streamlined. After all, the Chinese emperors were much
pleased to see that the Chinese practice was popularly accepted in Joseon in the sense that the effectiveness of the Sinocentric system was proved: as long as it followed the footsteps of China, a barbaric nation like Joseon would be transformed into a civilised country.

The Language of Chinese
To the Koreans, since the founding of the Joseon dynasty, studying the language of Chinese had been crucial to civilise Joseon and to carry out the policy of Sadae towards China (RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.283–4). Chinese therefore became the most important foreign language in Joseon (RDAK, vol. 13, Sejo Sillok, 1957, p.200). Throughout the five-century rule of Joseon, Chinese had been the official language used in all official documents, and it had been popularly used by members of the aristocracy as a symbol of social status to distinguish themselves from the commoners (Seth, 2006, p.173).

The language of Chinese was taught and studied systematically in Joseon. Textbooks written for introductory and intermediate levels were printed and distributed nationwide (RDAK, vol. 7, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.298, p.453; RDAK, vol. 8, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.14, p.366; RDAK, vol. 15, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, p.301; RDAK, vol. 51, Sungjo Sillok, 1966, p.12). At an advanced level, students focused on the study of the canonical works of Confucianism to prepare for Gwageo. In 1407, Gwon Geun proposed an additional subject in Gwageo to Taejong to test the candidates on their proficiency in reading and writing Chinese official documents due to the important need of practicing Sadae with Ming – making it all the more imperative for the Korean literati to study Chinese (RDAK, vol. 3, Taejong Sillok, 1954, pp.26–29).

The concern of Gwon was not merely based on the Korean’s admiration for China: inadequate language ability of the Joseon diplomats in Chinese had brought serious troubles to the relations between Ming and Joseon. In the early years of the dynasty, there were not many Korean who could speak and write Chinese professionally (RDAK, vol. 7, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.625). The implementation of Sadae thus created an urgent need of government officials who were proficient in Chinese, and translation was deemed an important task in handling the
Joseon–China relations (*RDAK, vol. 7, Sejong Sillok*, 1956, p.665). Both *Sayogwon* (Bureau of Official Interpreters, 司譯院) and *Seungmunwon* (Bureau of Diplomatic Correspondence, 承文院) were established to teach the language of Chinese and to train professional interpreters and secretaries in translating and writing Chinese documents (Song, 1999). The study and use of Chinese soon became an indispensable element in Joseon’s practice of *Sadae* towards China.

3.3.2 Foreign Relations within the Tribute System

*Status of Joseon*

The practice of *Sadae* defined the role of Joseon in its relations with China: in the Sinocentric order, the Joseon king was a ‘minister’ to the Chinese emperor (*RDAK, vol. 2, Taejong Sillok*, 1954, p.61). In operation, the title of the Joseon monarch was limited to the level of ‘king’, which was lower than ‘emperor’, the title of the Chinese ruler. In the diplomatic documents prepared for the Ming court, the terms that the Joseon king was allowed to use (such as those for the title of the crown prince, the capital city, and the edict issued by the monarch, etc.) had to be lower in rank according to the Ming court (i.e. usually at the level equivalent to that of a royal prince in China). Moreover, the format of all the official documents sent from Joseon to China was determined by the Chinese Ministry of Rite (*RDAK, vol. 8, Sejong Sillok*, 1956, p.84, p.527).

At the interstate level, Joseon was a vassal to Ming. As Hongwu Emperor declared that Ming had no intention to rule Joseon directly (*RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok*, 1953, pp.141–2), Joseon enjoyed a high degree of autonomy in self-rule – yet despite such autonomy, the enthronement of a Joseon king would not be legitimate unless an investiture was received from the Chinese emperor. The establishment of the crown prince was of no exception either – his right to inherit the kingship was also subject to the approval of the Chinese emperor (Kang, 2010b, p.56). In addition, the subordinate status of Joseon was also reflected in the employment of *Yeonho* (era name, 年號), which was the regnal title of the monarch. By the Chinese culture, this title was a symbol of the legitimate rule of a newly enthroned monarch, and the historians would record
history with the era names as chronicle references. In Joseon however, no matter which king ascended to the throne, unlike the Chinese emperor who would typically adopt a new title for his reign, the Joseon king was not allowed to name the regnal title for himself – the Joseon monarch simply had to follow the Chinese imperial court and used the era name of the Chinese emperor for the Joseon calendar (RDAK, vol. 13, Sejo Sillok, 1957, p.135).

Therefore, it would not be unreasonable to say that the sovereign power of the Joseon king was partly, or at least nominally, discounted as a result of the Sadae policy towards China – yet to Joseon, it was accepted because this was how Confucian propriety should be practiced. As long as it was able to maintain the identity of Sojunghwa, Joseon would enjoy a ranking only second to China, which meant a more prestigious status than that of any other member state in the system.

Obligations of Joseon

Above all others, the most important obligation of a vassal state was to send tribute missions to the suzerain regularly. It was commonly perceived that among others, Joseon was the most faithful vassal to China as reflected in the remarkable number of tribute missions – over the course of 277 years of the Ming dynasty, the Joseon court dispatched a total of 1,252 tribute missions to China (Gao, 2005, p.69). When the Joseon dynasty was newly founded in the late 14th century, Hongwu Emperor of Ming set the number of tribute missions from Joseon at the frequency of once in every three years (RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, p.447). Before long the Joseon court voluntarily increased the number to once in a year and eventually three times in a year, including 1) Jeongjosa (正朝使) that was sent to pay respect to the Ming emperor on the New Year’s Day; 2) Seongjeolsa (聖節使) that was sent to congratulate the Ming emperor on his birthday, and Cheonchusa (千秋使) that was sent to celebrate the birthday of the crown prince (RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, p.452).

In fact, the Joseon court dispatched a lot more tribute missions on ad hoc occasions than on regular basis. For any occasion that the Joseon court considered it necessary and proper, a special tribute embassy would be dispatched to China,
bringing tributes such as ginseng, precious furs, and fine-quality paper (RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, pp.286–7; RDAK, vol. 17, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, pp.80–81). For example, a Jinhasa (進賀使) would be sent to congratulate the Chinese court whenever there was an event that made the whole nation rejoiced (such as the birth of a royal family member and a military victory over the nomadic tribes), and a Saunsa (謝恩使) would be sent to express the gratitude of the Joseon court to the generosity of the ‘Son of Heaven’ whenever the Chinese emperor sent the Joseon king any gifts (RDAK, vol. 2, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.340). Although there was a variety of reasons for Joseon to send tribute missions to China, in one occasion the Joseon court must dispatch a tribute mission: when a new Joseon king was enthroned – because his rule had to be recognised and legitimised by the Chinese emperor, who had to be informed of the enthronement as soon as possible (RDAK, vol. 26, Myeongjong Sillok, 1960, pp.193–5).

Other than paying tributes and kowtowing to the Chinese emperor, another obligation of Joseon as a vassal was to provide military support when required by China. It was considered proper because it was a moral duty for a ‘minister’ to assist his ‘prince’ when the ‘prince’ was fighting a war. It happened more frequently during Ming than Qing, and for a number of times when Ming launched military campaigns against the Jurchens, Joseon was instructed to supply Ming with soldiers, war horses, and cattle. In contrast to Ming, Qing seldom issued such order to Joseon (except during the final years of Ming, Qing instructed Joseon to send troops to join its military assaults against Ming).

Privileges of Joseon

As a vassal state, Joseon was granted a number of privileges from China, with some of which being uniquely conferred to Joseon as an exemplary obedient and loyal vassal. For instance, a copy of the Chinese royal calendar would be given to the Joseon tribute envoy (but not to those from other vassals) on the New Year’s Day, which was a special award to demonstrate how the Chinese emperor valued the sincerity of the Koreans and the efforts they took to understand and respect the culture of its suzerain (Cha, 2011, p.43).
Chaek bong (investiture of kingship from the suzerain to its vassals, 册封) received from the Chinese emperor was an important privilege to the Joseon monarch, especially to those who took the crown in abnormal situations (e.g. someone usurped the throne by staging a coup). In such cases, the investiture became crucial to the legitimacy of the newly enthroned king. Doubtful as the succession might appear in the eyes of the commoners, the power of the king would no longer be questioned and challenged as long as the investiture from the ‘Son of Heaven’ was secured – if the legitimate rule of the new king was recognised by the Chinese emperor, it implied that the enthronement, by all means, had been endorsed by the ‘Mandate of Heaven’ (Kang, 2010a, p.613).

Another privilege Joseon received in the tribute system was a guarantee of non-aggression from China. In the early decades after the Ming Dynasty was founded, the military capability of the Ming forces was much more powerful than that of the other East Asian countries. For Joseon, its geographical proximity with China and its weak military forces exposed it to the risk of being easily invaded by Ming. Therefore, by becoming a vassal state of Ming, Joseon (along with other 14 vassals) received the privilege of enjoying peace with the hegemon – it would not be invaded by Ming (as promised by Hongwu Emperor), so long as it behaved properly and served Ming wholeheartedly according to the Confucian ethics (Zhu, 1996, pp.167–8).

As professed in the Confucian doctrines, while it was the obligation of the junior to respect and serve the senior, it is also the responsibility of the senior to look after the junior. Within the framework of the tribute system, the well-being of Joseon was taken care of by Ming. In terms of national security, when Joseon was threatened and attacked by another state, China would protect Joseon by providing military support, which was typically evident in the Imjin War when Joseon was invaded by the Japanese (RDAK, vol. 27, Seonjo Sillok, 1961, pp.579–80). In terms of economic benefits, Joseon was granted the right to trade with China. While the Ming court held a negative view on foreign trade in general (as evident in its policy of ‘Sea Ban’ that forbade all types of trading activities with foreigners
except the officially approved tribute trades), Joseon was given the privilege to conduct official trades (by embassy officials privately) and private trades (by commoners) in addition to tribute trades (public trades between states by the order of the government) (Kang, 2010b, p.109). Besides, Joseon also received material aids from China in time of natural disasters – for instance, Joseon suffered a nationwide famine in 1697 and Kangxi Emperor of Qing immediately dispatched shipments of approximately 900 tons of rice as food relief to Joseon (RDAK, vol. 40, Sukjong Sillok, 1964, p.236, p.245, pp.252–3).

3.4 Understanding the Different Faces of Sadae

As mentioned in the previous sections, Sadae was a policy that had been implemented in different ways by the Joseon policymakers. Some of them unequivocally concerned the ideational aspect of Sadae: they took pride in upholding the Confucian ethics of righteousness and felt a bond of commitment, loyalty, and a moral obligation to obey China. To these loyalists, Sadae was a pure faith of morality influenced by the Confucian culture. However, some others chose to focus on the material aspect of Sadae by advocating pragmatism in their strategies to secure the national interest of Joseon. In the eyes of these rationalists, Sadae was a pragmatic strategy invented for the sole purpose of obtaining material benefits via serving the great. As for the rest, they vacillated between being loyal and being rational when practicing Sadae, and changed their stance from time to time on a case-by-case basis. Therefore, Sadae has to be examined by the different motives of the Joseon political elites and the different issues they had to deal with at the time. Simply defining Sadae as ‘serving the great’ only describes a policy adopted by a minor state towards a major power; it does not reveal the true motive behind or illustrate the impact of situational factors.

The Loyalists: ‘What Should Be’

Factors related to the policymakers, such as personal value and experience, appeared to be most important to motivate the loyalists to practice Sadae faithfully according to the Confucian morality. To this category of Joseon elites, external factors, such as the situation in China (e.g. behaviour of the emperor, decision of the imperial court) and in Joseon (e.g. livelihood of the Koreans,
social turmoil resulted from wars), or the change of power polarity in the region, generated little or even no impact on the level of their sincerity to serve the great. In a sense, they represented the ideational forces in Joseon politics.

The loyalists understood the relationship between the prince and his minister as the one between a father and his son. Although Confucius emphasised the normative implication for both parties, the loyalists focused on the obligation of the junior. As a son ought to practice filial piety towards his father no matter what, a minister should faithfully devote himself in serving his prince in any circumstances. Loyalty thus was praised as a highly important virtue, and to the loyalists, it became a moral obligation for Joseon to serve China faithfully. Manifestation of their loyal *Sadae* mainly can be seen in four situations: 1) continuing to serve the great with sincerity even when the Chinese emperor’s behaviour deviated from the Confucian norms, 2) upholding the suzerain–vassal relations even when the suzerain was losing its hegemonic power, 3) taking voluntary actions to serve China, and 4) demonstrating unwavering loyalty even when Joseon was in a disadvantaged position *vis-à-vis* a revisionist power that challenged China.

First, in the situation when a decision of the Chinese emperor was not made properly according to the Confucian ethics, even though it was deemed controversial in China, the loyalists would take action to support the Chinese emperor – as they believed that the vassal should not make comment on the emperor’s behaviour; whether it was right or wrong. Second, in the situation when the suzerain was defeated by an alien power to the extent that the security of the imperial court was gravely threatened, which implied that the very existence of the suzerain could be eliminated, the loyalists did not take advantage of such opportunity to terminate the suzerain–vassal relations, and chose to uphold the Confucian ethics and not to betray their suzerain.

Third, the loyalists would justify the implementation of some policies based on the Confucian principles of propriety, even though it was not compulsory as required by the Chinese court. On the occasion of some celebrating or mourning events in China, although Joseon was not required to do anything, the loyalists
would dispatch \textit{ad hoc} tribute missions to Beijing, or to suspend all trading and entertaining activities for a few days in Joseon nationwide. Fourth, at the time when Joseon was invaded by a rising power that aimed to replace the incumbent great and was forced to acknowledge the challenger as Joseon’s new suzerain, the loyalists refused to comply with such order, even at the expense of having themselves killed and their country eliminated.

\textit{The Rationalists: ‘What Works’}

The rationalists also acknowledged that the relationship between the prince and his minister resembled the one between a father and his son. They did not wish to challenge the Confucian understanding of the senior–junior relationship, yet they did not see the junior’s loyalty to the senior as absolute: \textit{Sadak} was not equal to blind loyalty to China. This reflected their belief in Xunzi’s idea: ‘one should do what is morally right instead of blindly following the prince and the father, if they act against humaneness and righteousness’. Hence they would examine the idea/behaviour of the senior first: whether the senior was humane and righteous determined whether the junior’s loyalty was required. Besides, they also embraced the view of Xunzi that people should be proactive in reality because it was the human efforts that were counted: ‘Rather than waiting for opportunity, we should create one and use it according to the circumstances’ – and this became the principle for the rationalists when dealing with uncertain situations. Hence, in the name of serving the great, the rationalists used the great.

In the process of policymaking, situational factors (such as the changing distribution of power in the region), instead of ideational doctrines, were often invoked to justify their ideas and actions that deviated from the norm of Confucian ethics. To secure Joseon’s national interest, to the rationalists, was far more important than protecting the well-being of China or safeguarding the reputation of Joseon. Their pragmatic view was most clearly seen during the power transition from Ming to Qing. In the fierce debates with the loyalists on whether Joseon should abandon the declining Ming and switch to serve the rising Qing, the rationalists strongly suggested to recognise Qing as the legitimate ruler of China and the new suzerain to Joseon. They believed that it was not proper to unwisely act against the trend: Joseon was not militarily strong enough to resist
Qing’s invasion and the Koreans would be brutally slaughtered. In their eyes, Joseon still would be playing the role of a vassal state; only the role of the suzerain would be taken up by Qing. The Ming regime lost the control of China simply because it failed to perform the duties of a humane ruler – it was thus not improper to be ousted.

The rationalists emphasised the practical use of the Confucian theories to solve real problems. When facing the reality that the survival of Joseon became questionable, to the rationalists, holding on to the idealistic thought of righteousness would not resolve the crisis; flexibly applying Confucianism would be an effective approach to minimise losses in reality. Their pragmatic thoughts, to a certain extent, also influenced those of the school of *Silhak* (practical learning, 實學), who accepted the fact that the barbaric Manchu had transformed to a group of civilised people that was no different from the Han-Chinese. Hence it was not necessary to resist Qing; Joseon should learn anything useful from Qing when serving the new great (Kim, 2012, pp.263–4).

*The In-betweens*

In addition to the loyalists and the rationalists, there were those who vacillated between serving and using the great. On every issue that the interests of the two countries appeared plainly incompatible, they had to cope with the dilemma of choosing side: to serve the great unconditionally (thus safeguard Joseon’s reputation as an exemplar vassal) or to use the great strategically (as to protect the interests of Joseon and the Koreans). In consequence, they had to painfully gauge the costs and benefits of both material and non-material nature, and made a decision that might not be consistent with their personal values. Joseon kings like Sejong, Seongjong, and Injo had personally experienced the struggle of trying to strike a balance between their conscience (that was shaped by Confucian ethics) and their duty (to effectively respond to the political reality as national leaders). Eventually, they had to choose one and sacrifice the other. Nonetheless, such kind of dilemma only strengthens the argument about the multi-faceted nature of *Sadae*: it was a concept that consisted of both ideational and material elements.
Chapter Summary

This chapter explored the cultural root of Sadae as a product of shared Confucian ideology in China and Joseon, explained the rationale of Sadae that comprised the ideational and material considerations, described the application of Sadae in Joseon’s relations with China, and illustrated the different motives of the Joseon policymakers in their practice of Sadae.

This chapter also serves as the conceptual basis for the next three chapters, in which Sadae in Joseon–great power(s) relations during the pre-modern and modern time is studied: Chapter 4 looks into Joseon’s Sadae in Ming’s unipolar era from 1392 to 1608, Chapter 5 illustrates Joseon’s Sadae during the power transition from Ming to Qing in Northeast Asia from 1608 to 1800, and Chapter 6 examines the decline of Sadae amidst an emerging order of multipolarity in the region from 1800 to 1910. Within the analytical framework of polarity in international relations, the different motives of the key political actors and the subsequent practice of Sadae are studied with a combined approach of constructivism and realism.
Chapter 4

_Sadae in the Era of Ming’s Unipolar Order (1392–1608)_

With the previous chapter having introduced the background of _Sadae_, examined its rationale, and described how the concept is applied in practice, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 are going to study the historical evidence pertaining to _Sadae_ in Joseon–China relations during the pre-modern era that covers the period from 1392 to 1800. The interplay of the ideational (moral) aspect and the material (strategic) aspect of _Sadae_ in the making of Joseon foreign policy towards the great power(s) is to be analysed within the framework of polarity that depicts the regional order of Northeast Asia during the four centuries since the founding of the Joseon Dynasty. While the material power was clearly centralised first in the hands of Ming China and later transferred to those of Qing China, not every political elite of the Joseon court simply chose to follow a linear pattern that bandwagoned the great power in the unipolar and bipolar order as described by the realists. Some (the rationalists) turned to the pragmatic implementation of _Sadae_ to resolve the interstate problems, yet some (the loyalists) adhered to the ethical principles of _Sadae_ to address the bilateral issues. A constructivist-cum-realist approach is therefore adopted to explain how the Joseon–great power(s) relations were established and maintained in the pre-modern time.

There were 22 kings in Joseon history, and six of them (i.e. Jeongjong, Munjong, Danjong, Yejong, Injong, and Gyeongjong) are excluded from the following analyses for the reason that none of them reigned over five years. Besides, little attention had been paid to the Joseon–Ming relations apart from the routine practice of _Sadae_ during the reigns of these six kings – most of the daily issues were related to domestic affairs.

Years of reign of the other 16 kings add up to 395 years in total, which represents 96.8% of the period to be discussed. These 16 kings and the major court officials, with a focus on their orientation in the making of foreign policies (i.e. pro-righteousness or pro-pragmatism), are analysed in time sequence. Based upon
the distribution of power (polarity) in Northeast Asia that emerged within these 408 years, the time period is broken down into two main parts: in this chapter, *Sadae* is examined within a unipolar order in which Ming was the sole great power in Northeast Asia from 1392 to 1608. In the next chapter, *Sadae* is analysed first in a transitional period characterised by a bipolar order in which Manchu rose to great-power status and challenged Ming from the early 17th century to the fall of Ming in 1644, followed by a unique period (an imaginary bipolar order over a century, with the fallen Ming vs. Qing) in which Joseon refused to accept (though not openly) Qing’s supremacy and chose to secretly serve the fallen Ming, and finally a unipolar period from the late 1770s to 1800 during which Joseon ceased to view the Manchu as barbarians and began to serve Qing faithfully.

This chapter, with historical evidence drawn from the ruling years of nine Joseon kings during the two centuries of Ming’s predominance, looks into the different motives of the Korean political elites when making Joseon’s foreign policy towards Ming, whereby the interplay of the moral and strategic forces in this unipolar period is revealed. Based upon the historical records, it is found that the reigns of these nine Joseon kings can be categorised into three segments according to the different ‘whys’ (thus different ‘hows’) to serve Ming: *the pro-righteousness* that includes Jungjong, *the pro-pragmatism* that includes Taejo, Taejong, Sejo, Yeonsangun, Myeongjong, and Seonjo, and *the in-between* that includes Sejong and Seongjong. It is therefore proved that, even in a unipolar order, *Sadae* was practiced based upon a mix of ideational and material concerns.

Analyses in this and the next chapter are conducted mainly based on the original records documented in *The Ri Dynasty Annals of Korea*. No groundless speculation is made and no anecdotal information is invoked; only solid evidence is used as the primary source of material in this research.

4.1 The Reign of Taejo (1392–8)

Since the time when he was still a general of the Goryeo court, Taejo’s motto had been the Mencius philosophy of ‘A minor state should never turn against a major state. By serving the major state, the minor state would be able to survive’ (*RDAK*,
Taejo became the first king of Joseon through a *coup d'état* that overthrew the Goryeo court and founded the new dynasty, thus his top priority was to legitimise his reign with the investiture to be granted by the Ming emperor. On the very next day (18 July 1392) after his enthronement, Taejo immediately dispatched an envoy to inform the Ming court of the dynastic change (*RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.77–79*). He was so anxious to receive the acknowledgement of Hongwu Emperor that he even sent an envoy to Nanjing and humbly asked the emperor to name the new dynasty on 29 November 1392 (*RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.142–3*). To further demonstrate his sincerity of *Sadae*, Taejo ordered to establish *Sayogwon* in the following year as an official institution for the Koreans to study the language of Chinese (*RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, p.200*).

However, things did not go well as Taejo wished. Around mid 1393, rumours that reached the Ming court made Hongwu Emperor believe that Taejo was in fact a dishonest and ungrateful person who usurped the throne of the Goryeo king – and on 23 May 1393, Taejo received an imperial edict issued by the emperor that reprimanded Taejo and threatened to use military force against Joseon. Taejo was outraged in court and criticised that Hongwu Emperor became Son of Heaven by way of nothing but crude violence, accusing Hongwu for threatening Joseon like an adult threatening a child. Nevertheless, Taejo swiftly calmed down and decided to remain humble and cautious to plan for the response. On 1 June 1393, Taejo dispatched an envoy to carry his memorial to the throne, defending himself by clarifying the rumours one by one in detail (*RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.171–6*). Unexpectedly, in July Hongwu Emperor issued an imperial order to forbid the entry of Joseon embassies to China. Taejo then sent another memorial to the throne on 2 August, modestly requesting the emperor’s...
permission to allow the resumption of Joseon embassies to Ming \(\textit{RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.188–90}\).

As little improvement was seen in the bilateral relations, Taejo sent a lengthy memorial to the throne on 19 February 1394, hoping that this would clarify the rumours against him \(\textit{RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.219–25}\), yet the reply of Hongwu Emperor was his imperial order on 25 April that instructed Taejo to send his oldest or second son as a political hostage to China \(\textit{RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, p.246}\). On 1 June 1394, Taejo, to his sadness, reluctantly sent his most capable son, Yi Bang-won (later King Taejong), to China. Fortunately, the detailed explanation provided by Yi Bang-won and his gracious manner pleased the emperor, and Yi Bang-won was allowed to return to Joseon on 19 November \(\textit{RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, p.252, p.283}\). However, Taejo still did not receive the imperial investiture that he had been desperately seeking from Ming.

A year later, recovery of the Joseon–Ming relations turned gloomy again: there came the crisis of the Joseon memorial to the throne to celebrate the New Year festival in 1396. Because of the Joseon official document that was written in poor Chinese, Hongwu Emperor detected a trace of blasphemy in the writing and thus felt insulted. In early February 1396, the emperor demanded apology from the Joseon king, and insisted that the Joseon officials responsible for writing the documents to be sent to China for punishment \(\textit{RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, p.355}\). Gwon Geun volunteered for the job of going to China and explaining the issue to Hongwu Emperor in person – he and three court officials left for China in July 1396 \(\textit{RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.374–6}\). With his superb knowledge of Chinese literature and Confucian philosophy, Gwon deeply impressed the emperor in their conversations and the exchange of composing poetries. In March 1397, Gwon was released by the emperor, but the other three Joseon officials were detained in China \(\textit{RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.402–9}\). Unfortunately, the three Joseon officials were later executed in November 1397 by the Ming court for their attempt to escape from detention \(\textit{RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.444–5}\).
Nonetheless, the Ming court signalled no intention to take this as the end of the crisis. It further ordered Taejo in May 1398 to turn in another three Joseon court officials, who were also suspected for involvement in the writing of the problematic memorial to the throne (RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.486–9). This summon enraged some of the Joseon court officials headed by Pyon Chung-rang. In the memorial they wrote to Taejo, they criticised the Ming court for having unreasonably and offensively treated Joseon, and advocated not to send the three officials as to demonstrate Joseon’s autonomous power (RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.492–4). However, Taejo obeyed Ming’s order and sent those three officials to China on 3 June 1398 (RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.505–6).

As noticed in the evidence illustrated above, Taejo served Ming, though sometimes even grudgingly, for the reasons of protecting Joseon from Ming’s invasion and legitimising his personal rule of the new regime. The level of sincerity demonstrated in Sadae implemented by Taejo and many of his ministers was low, as they dared to openly criticise Hongwu Emperor and the Ming court. Their behaviour was a violation of the Confucian principles of propriety – as the junior was supposed to respect the senior. What Ming was to them turned out to be, not an authoritative and a respectable senior for them to serve, but only the source of obtaining what they desired.

To ensure the attainment of the imperial investiture (although he never received it throughout his reign until his abdication in September 1398), Taejo had no choice but to pragmatically settle with the status of a vassal state for Joseon, behaving humbly and performing the duties as required in the Sinocentric system towards Ming. Albeit the Confucian culture was commonly shared in China and Korea, it was the political reality that determined the orientation of the Joseon policymakers at that time: personal and/or national pride would have to give way to the strategic use of the great power for securing personal and/or national interests – thus during the reign of Taejo, the true motive of Sadae was to use the great.
4.2 The Reign of Taejong (1400–18)

Taejong was the fifth son of Taejo, and he came to power by executing two *coup d'état*: in the first one (August 1398) Taejong killed his younger brother, the crown prince, forced Taejo to abdicate, and enthroned one of his elder brothers (the second son of Taejo) as Jeongjong, the second king of Joseon (*RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.520–33, pp.542–4*). Taejong launched the second coup in January 1400, in which he sent another of his elder brother (the fourth son of Taejo) into exile whereby he prompted Jeongjong to appoint him as the heir (*RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.647–54, pp.658–60*). Finally in November, he became the third king of Joseon after Jeongjong abdicated the throne (*RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.740–2*).

What Taejong did before his enthronement therefore indicated that he was a Machiavellian politician. His pragmatic thinking and behaviour towards Ming throughout his 18 years of reign was also a typical reflection of *Yongdae*: to serve Ming was the means to protect Joseon from being invaded by the hegemon that was at the time headed by the bellicose Yongle Emperor. Most notably, among all the Joseon monarchs in history, Taejong was the only king who explicitly explain his reason to practice *Sadae* as: he served the great power sincerely according to the Confucian principle of propriety because he was in awe of Heaven, *not* the great power itself (*RDAK, vol. 3, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.544; *RDAK, vol. 4, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.111, pp.309–11*).

On one hand, Taejong never disobeyed a single order of Yongle Emperor (most typically found in the case of sending horses to China) so that Joseon was never ‘punished’ by Ming; but on the other hand, he continuously took the precautionary measures in national defence against any possible military attack from Ming – just in case Yongle Emperor was not pleased with Joseon and decided to use military forces. Moreover, to reiterate his stance of serving the great for fear of Heaven (instead of the great), Taejong openly and repeatedly gave negative comments on the emperor’s personality and criticised his decisions in front of the Joseon court officials, an act that was basically not acceptable according to the Confucian ethics.
To the Ming court, Taejong performed all the duties as required in the tribute system. Three days after receiving the imperial decree about the enthronement of Yongle Emperor, Taejong dispatched a congratulatory envoy to China on 15 October, 1402 (RDAK, vol. 2, Taejong Sillok, 1954, pp.233–5). On 8 April 1403, Taejong received the investiture issued by the emperor, along with an imperial order that the Ming court would purchase 2,193 horses from Joseon – and Taejong immediately ordered his officials to process on the deal (RDAK, vol. 2, Taejong Sillok, 1954, pp.286–90), although Taejong once explicitly told the Ming envoy (that was sent by Jianwen Emperor in October 1401) less than two years ago that Joseon was not a country that produced horses (RDAK, vol. 2, Taejong Sillok, 1954, pp.101–2).

After having successfully conquered Vietnam, Yongle Emperor issued an imperial decree to Joseon on 1 May 1407 to explain the reason of Ming’s invasion. Taejong duly sent an envoy to China to congratulate the emperor’s victory on 9 May (RDAK, vol. 3, Taejong Sillok, 1954, pp.40–45, p.46). Later in August, Yongle Emperor once again mentioned the reason of Ming’s invasion to a Joseon special mission in person, and at the same time, ordered another purchase of 3,000 horses (RDAK, vol. 3, Taejong Sillok, 1954, pp.119–21). When another tribute mission of Cheonchusa returned to Joseon on 11 September, Taejong came to know that the Joseon envoy was repeatedly lectured by the emperor on the reason why Ming invaded Vietnam (RDAK, vol. 3, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.130). Taejong obeyed the imperial order and sent the 3,000 horses to Ming on 16 April 1408 (RDAK, vol. 3, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.219) – for he realized, as early as in April 1407 when the news of Ming’s military operation in Vietnam reached the Joseon court, that it was imperative to serve the great (Yongle Emperor in particular) faithfully; otherwise Joseon would be reprimanded and punished by Ming’s military forces (RDAK, vol. 3, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.32).

On 12 October 1409, Taejong received the news about Yongle Emperor’s military campaign against the Mongols and nine days later, the emperor’s order arrived and instructed Joseon to offer horses (and Ming would pay for them) as many as possible to support Ming’s military operation. Taejong’s response was to send
10,000 horses to Ming in the coming January before Yongle Emperor launched the campaign in February (RDAK, vol. 3, Taejong Sillok, 1954, pp.530–1, pp.533–4). However, Saganwon (Office of Censors, 司諫院) was strongly opposed to Taejong’s decision and asked the king to balance between Sadae and Joseon’s national interests of present and future – for horses were vital to national defence, and to send 10,000 horses within three months of time would exceed Joseon’s capacity. Nevertheless, after urged by the Ming court twice on 6 November 1409 and 6 February 1410, Taejong managed to send 10,000 horses to Ming on 7 March 1410 (RDAK, vol. 3, Taejong Sillok, 1954, pp.539–43, pp.586–7, p.603). Later Taejong gave further explanation to his decision, claiming that this was the correct way to practice Sadae (RDAK, vol. 4, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.331).

In March 1413, Taejong came to know about Yongle Emperor’s intention to invade Japan from the Jeongjosa who returned to Joseon (RDAK, vol. 4, Taejong Sillok, 1954, pp.378–9). While Joseon had been in official contact with Japan since the reign of Taejo (RDAK, vol.1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, pp.280–1, pp.321–2) and Joseon was later scolded by the Ming Ministry of Rite for being dishonest in reporting Joseon’s interaction with Japan back in January 1406 (RDAK, vol. 2, Taejong Sillok, 1954, pp.627–8), the Joseon court feared that Yongle Emperor might launch a military campaign against Joseon when passing by the Korean Peninsula thus suggested to elevate the alert state of defence. Some court officials even proposed to ally with Japan against the probable invasion of Ming. However, Taejong believed that Joseon should assist Ming in its military campaign against Japan because he did not dare to act against the will of Heaven (RDAK, vol. 4, Taejong Sillok, 1954, pp.428–9).

Taejong had been worried so much about the possibility of Ming’s invasion due to Joseon’s association with Japan ever since (RDAK, vol. 5, Taejong Sillok, 1955, p.114, pp.646–7) – this actually implied that Joseon, at least until his reign, did not serve Ming faithfully. Although he did not think that Joseon was in imminent danger of being invaded (according to his analysis, Ming’s forces were exhausted with the consecutive military campaigns against Vietnam and the Mongols),
Taejong nonetheless ordered to raise the level of readiness for military action against possible Ming invasions. While some of the court officials expressed their concern that Joseon’s manoeuvre of troops could arouse the emperor’s suspicion, Taejong affirmatively said that it was absolutely normal for a country to prepare for its national defence (*RDAK, vol. 4, Taejong Sillok*, 1954, pp.423–4, pp.428–9).

Taejong’s thinking was based upon a realistic factor: Yongle Emperor would not hesitate to use force anytime he was not satisfied with the vassal states’ Sadae, which had been clearly proven a number of times. In spite of the Joseon’s subservience, Yongle Emperor ordered to establish military commission in Manchuria a couple of years after his enthronement, which was deemed by the Joseon court as a measurement to check the power of Joseon (*RDAK, vol. 2, Taejong Sillok*, 1954, pp.734–9). To Taejong, even the emperor’s repeated explanations of the reason of invading Vietnam could be a warning message implicitly signalled by the emperor, and Yongle Emperor’s unusual act of showing the imperial letters to reprimand Japan and Ryukyu in November 1417 to the Joseon envoy members simply reconfirmed Taejong’s view (*RDAK, vol. 5, Taejong Sillok*, 1955, pp.591–3).

To deal with such an aggressive emperor in the supposedly non-aggressive Sinocentric system, Taejong’s strategy to ensure Joseon’s security was two-dimensional: serve Ming by obeying Yongle Emperor’s orders, but prepare for war with Ming at the same time – and Taejong openly explained this idea of his to the Joseon court officials twice: on 8 April 1407 (*RDAK, vol. 3, Taejong Sillok*, 1954, pp.32–33) and on 20 June 1414 (*RDAK, vol. 4, Taejong Sillok*, 1954, pp.610–1), which appeared to be a rather consistent realist policy in the Joseon–Ming relations throughout his reign.

Furthermore, a unique feature of the Joseon–Ming relations under Taejong’s rule was the king’s open remarks in the Joseon court that discussed negatively about the Yongle Emperor’s personality and criticised what the emperor had done – a phenomenon that could be hardly found in any other cases before the fall of Ming in 1644. As a matter of fact, Taejong and Yongle Emperor did meet cordially with each other in Beijing back in 1394, a time when both of them were still princes,
yet neither of them was crown prince (RDAK, vol. 1, Taejo/Jeongjong Sillok, 1953, p.283), which was the only time throughout the Joseon–Ming history that the (future) heads of the two countries ever saw each other in person and had such a detailed talk. However, the impact of this meeting was uncertain, as on how much the mysteriousness and sacredness of the future Son of Heaven was discounted by such a close encounter. What Taejong said in the following occasions was clear evidence to prove his ‘un-Confucian’ way of Sadae:

- On 11 September 1404, when discussing with some of the major court officials about the different styles of rule between Jianwen Emperor and Yongle Emperor, Taejong gave the bold comment that in his eyes, Jianwen was humane but Yongle was cruel and bloodthirsty – for Yongle killed thousands of Jianwen’s supporters after he took the throne from Jianwen (RDAK, vol. 2, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.463).
- On 8 April 1407, Taejong openly criticised Yongle Emperor for not being humble or prudent on Ming’s decision to invade Vietnam (RDAK, vol. 3, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.32), and on 20 June 1414, he further commented that it was a mistake that Yongle Emperor launched the invasion (RDAK, vol. 4, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.611).
- On 23 February 1410, Taejong explicitly expressed his view that the emperor was neither right nor wise to initiate military campaigns against the Mongols while the Mongols did not even attack Ming’s border, and it would become a laughingstock if the Ming troops were to be defeated (RDAK, vol. 3, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.591).
- On 26 July 1413, in front of his court officials, Taejong even directly pointed to the fact that Yongle Emperor enthroned himself without the imperial edict of his father, Hongwu Emperor (because Yongle, as the Prince of Yan, launched a civil war in 1399 against Jianwen Emperor, his own nephew. Yongle led his troops and defeated those of Jianwen, had the capital besieged, forced Jianwen to suicide, and eventually took over the throne in 1402), which implied the questionable succession of Yongle to the throne (RDAK, vol. 4, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.429).
Taejong therefore was considered one of those Joseon monarchs that exhibited the tendency of pro-pragmatism for the reason that he and his rationalist followers viewed *Sadae* as a means, instead of an end, to obtain the goal of assuring the national security of Joseon. The aggressive personality of Yongle Emperor was a crucial factor at the individual level, yet the distribution of power (with Ming being the unipole) in Northeast Asia at the time was also an indispensable factor at the system level that had determined Joseon’s subservience to Ming. To Taejong, power politics was cloaked in the Confucian ethics of senior–junior relationship simply in the name of rule of propriety advocated in a Sinicised world order. Hence the Joseon political elites had few choices but to serve Ming carefully so that Joseon would be able to avoid military conflicts with Ming, albeit Taejong kept referring to the additional layer in his logic of *Sadae*: it was Heaven that he feared, not Ming – a notion supported by the king’s recurrent remarks disrespectful to Yongle Emperor.

4.3 The Reign of Sejong (1418–50)

During his 32 years of rule, Sejong, from time to time, was caught in the dilemma of choosing between righteousness and pragmatism when managing the Joseon–Ming relations. To Sejong, serving Ming faithfully was undoubtedly a virtue (thus an obligation of the vassal state) according to Confucianism, which was the state ideology that prevailed in Joseon at the time. Sejong wanted to be recognised by the Ming court as a loyal vassal king, as he had been taught to abide by the Confucian ethics that it was morally right to serve the great whole-heartedly. However, when the consequence of *Sadae* was negative (sometimes even disastrous) to the people of Joseon (though the monarch might obtain a favourable name of an exemplar vassal king), *Sadae* stood opposite to the interests of Joseon. A king who ignored his people’s well-being was also not the sort of leader Sejong wanted to be – for he did care about his subjects. As a result, Sejong would give comments and take actions that were contradicting to what he had said and done earlier on the issues related to Joseon–Ming relations. Moreover, in the Joseon court, there were always court officials, either the loyalists or the rationalists, who supported Sejong’s decisions that were made in his pendulum-like fashion.
Only five months after Sejong’s enthronement, Jwauijeong Ho Cho (1369–1439) expressed his view against that of the loyalists in a court debate on 11 January 1419. He bluntly refuted the Sadae idea of emulating the political system of Ming because he thought the Ming emperor was autocratic thus inefficient in his rule, and he even criticised Yongle Emperor for believing in Buddhism. Hence, his suggestion to Sejong was that Joseon might emulate some of the Chinese practice, but definitely not all. The 22-year-old king agreed with Ho and rejected the loyalists’ idea (*RDAK, vol. 6, Sejong Sillok, 1955, p.177*). Ho Cho again on 3 July 1423 said to Sejong that Joseon should not follow all the principles of propriety practiced in China (*RDAK, vol. 7, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.301*). Ho later criticised Ming’s legal system on 3 November 1432 and persuaded Sejong not to emulate the Chinese practice – and the king agreed with his analysis (*RDAK, vol. 8, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.215*). Ho’s impact on Sejong was profound in the sense that years later, when the king explained his administration policy on personnel to the court officials on 7 July 1443, he said there were so many things of Ming that Joseon should never emulate (*RDAK, vol. 9, Sejong Sillok, 1956, pp.315–6*).

However, Sejong grew up on Confucian classics thus the formation of his worldview was heavily influenced by Confucian ethics. On the issue of Sadae, Sejong considered it imperative to serve the great simply because it would be unethical for the vassal not to serve its suzerain faithfully. Therefore, when Sejong had to respond to Yongle Emperor’s edict to purchase 10,000 horses for the first time on 21 September 1421, he immediately ordered the court officials to assemble this huge amount of horses from the capital area and all provinces of Joseon (*RDAK, vol. 6, Sejong Sillok, 1955, pp.798–9*). For a country that did not produce horses (in Taejong’s words), this was a task of great challenge – but in less than four months, 10,000 horses were sent to Ming on 13 January 1422 (*RDAK, vol. 7, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.222*).

Yet only a year later, Yongle Emperor ordered to purchase another 10,000 horses from Joseon on 1 August 1423 for his military campaign against the Mongols. While most of the court officials said Joseon had no choice but to obey the imperial order, Ho Cho openly criticised that the emperor had been bellicose and
most of what he had done was inhumane. Ho explained to Sejong about the immediate and future consequences to Joseon, which he believed to be serious, of sending Ming another huge amount of horses, and hence he proposed to cut the number by half if Joseon really had to obey the emperor’s order (RDAK, vol. 7, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.304). However, Sejong ordered to assemble horses from every household in Joseon and eventually sent 10,000 horses in 17 shipments to Ming as required by Yongle Emperor by 16 March 1424 (RDAK, vol. 7, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.341).

Sending large amount of horses to Ming had been a political hot potato that Sejong had to deal with during his reign. It caused great disturbance to the daily life of the Koreans and serious damage to Joseon’s military capability, for horses at the time were vital to agriculture and defence. Yet disobeying Ming’s order was deemed unethical by Sejong and he was truly reluctant to have his reputation tainted by not serving the great faithfully. Sejong later again obeyed the order of Xuande Emperor on 21 April 1427 and sent 5,000 horses in nine shipments to Ming within only three months by 20 July 1427 (RDAK, vol. 7, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.534, p.549). However, the imperial order later expanded to further include not just horses but also cattle. When the emperor ordered to purchase 10,000 cattle on 29 May 1432, the pro-righteousness court officials believed that although it would likely destroy the farming in Joseon, the court should not ask Ming for either exemption or deduction and ought to obey the imperial order simply because of the Sadae principles. In Sejong’s view as well, the emperor’s edict simply left no other choices to the Joseon court. He finally made the decision on 11 July 1432 to send 6,000 cattle first and deliver the rest later. By 5 August 1432, 6,000 cattle in six shipments were sent to Ming, and the other 4,000 were later exempted by Xuande Emperor (as the emperor was informed that Joseon was not a country to produce cattle) on 6 October 1432 (RDAK, vol. 8, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.182, pp.184–5, p.192, p.199, p.210).

Xuande Emperor might appear to be quite considerate in the case of cattle, but he was rather rigid on the issue of gerfalcon. The emperor had a special hobby of keeping this rare breed of falcon as his pet, and gerfalcon could be found in Korea but the number was fairly limited. Whether Joseon should comply with the
emperor’s order to send gerfalcons became the topic of debate between Sejong and the pro-pragmatism court officials beginning in 1426 and lasted for years until 1432. In September 1426, the rationalists presented a few reasons of why Joseon should not send tribute gerfalcon: first, it was difficult to hunt gerfalcons and many of them died after being captured. Second, gerfalcons were rare species and Joseon would not be able to keep sending them to China in the long run. Third, the emperor ordered the hunting of gerfalcons in China before and it disturbed people’s daily life in many Chinese provinces, and the Koreans would suffer in the same way if the court obeyed the order. Fourth, Joseon should not obey such an inhumane order of the emperor and make its people suffer from it. However, Sejong’s view was different: to him, the cardinal principle was to serve Ming with utmost sincerity. Since the fact that gerfalcon could be found in Korea was known to the emperor, it would be dishonest to deny it. The king said he was well aware of the serious consequences of obeying the order to the Koreans, but according to the principles of Confucian righteousness, their suffering was minor; serving the great faithfully was a lot more important by comparison. Moreover, it was not appropriate for a vassal state to comment whether the decision of the emperor was morally right or not (RDAK, vol. 7, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.509).

In July 1427, in his response to the proposal of Saheonbu (Office of Inspector General, 司憲府) that pledged to stop sending tribute gerfalcons, Sejong compared how much the Koreans had greatly suffered resulted from the sending of 25,000 horses in the previous years, and concluded that the burdens put on the Koreans this time was only a small fraction of it – they were merely sending some gerfalcons to the Ming court. Sadae was the most important task and hence the tribute gerfalcons must be sent (RDAK, vol. 7, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.550). Sejong even felt uneasy when the captured gerfalcons were not able to be delivered to Ming simply because the tribute route was blocked by the Jurchen tribes in November 1428 (RDAK, vol. 7, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.622). As a result, in April 1430, Xuande Emperor praised Sejong for serving the great with utmost sincerity, as the king never disobeyed a single imperial order (RDAK, vol. 8, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.21).
However, when the hunting of gerfalcons became a heavier burden to the Koreans in 1431 and 1432, the local government officials of Hamgyong Province, upset by witnessing the suffering of the Koreans on one hand and encouraged by the rationalists in the Joseon court on the other, deliberately released the captured gerfalcons. Such action soon led to the decline in number of the gerfalcons captured, which made the Ming envoy start to hunt gerfalcons by themselves in Hamgyong Province. Sejong scolded those local officials who made the decision on their own to release the captured gerfalcons, for he believed that their behaviour had led to two serious consequences: first, it provided the Ming court with an excuse to send hunting teams directly to Joseon since the Koreans were not able to catch gerfalcons, and the daily life of the Koreans and the administration of local governments would be greatly disturbed. Second, Sejong could not tolerate that his reputation of Sadae was tainted by such dishonest behaviour. The king emotionally said to his court officials that he could swear to Heaven that his allegiance to the Chinese emperor was always kept at the highest level, but now he was disgraced. Sejong then issued an order to the officials of Hamgyong Province that no captured gerfalcons could be released and they must be sent to Ming immediately. The king also intended to punish those local officials, only gave up the thought while being bombarded by the rationalists’ idea that pragmatism was imperative for a national leader to effectively rule his country. Though Sejong was terribly upset about his tainted reputation, he was also deeply troubled by the fact that his people were heavily burdened with Ming’s orders for livestock before and now gerfalcons. It became often that the king was not able to fall asleep well after midnight, still staying in the palace in which he worked in daytime (RDAK, vol. 8, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.127, pp.217–8).

Such dilemma was a proof to indicate that Sejong was also carrying pragmatic thoughts in dealing with Ming. In fact, the king did take actions to protect Joseon’s interests in some cases. One of them was about the tribute gold and silver. Since the reign of Taejong, the Koreans had been suffering from extracting gold and silver because no matter how hard they tried the search usually ended up with fruitless result – Joseon was actually not a country with rich mineral reserve of gold and silver (RDAK, vol. 4, Taejong Sillok, 1954, p.137, p.163, p.332). On
18 August 1429, Sejong wrote in his memorial to the throne to ask for the exemption of paying tribute gold and silver. Though the head of Ming Ministry of Personnel objected to Sejong’s request, Xuande Emperor agreed to exempt Joseon’s duty to send tribute gold and silver permanently. After receiving the edict on 13 December 1429, Sejong was glad but he reiterated his conviction of doing anything possible to serve the great wholeheartedly. He later asked the court officials whether Joseon should send horses instead as substitute tribute every year to Ming – only was refuted by Ho Cho again and the idea was abandoned (RDAK, vol. 7, Sejong Sillok, 1956, pp.663–4, pp.676–9).

Another example to prove Sejong’s willingness to employ pragmatism was the issue of dealing with the Ming envoy. It happened from time to time that some of the Ming embassy members would ask for gifts of different sorts from the Joseon court when they were staying in the country, and the Joseon officials would fulfil their requests most of the time in order to please them. Xuande Emperor considered it as an act of blackmail and in his December 1429 edict he forbade the Joseon court to give any gifts to the Ming envoy. However, in August 1430 when a Ming envoy was sent to Joseon, two of the senior embassy members demanded favours from the Joseon officials by threatening to smear the king and the court in front of the emperor after they returned to China. When the loyalists followed the emperor’s order and refused to bribe them, the Ming envoys were enraged. At first, Sejong thought it was right to refuse their requests – he believed that Joseon should not be dishonest and disobey the emperor’s order, even at the costs of being slandered by these corrupted Ming envoys. Yet a while later, Sejong gave the order to fulfil the demands of the Ming envoys with the reason that he had to think pragmatically to safeguard Joseon and its people’s interests; blindly adhering to the Confucian ethics of righteousness would not work in this case – as usual, he did not simply issue the order without repeatedly emphasising his firm belief in serving the great faithfully (RDAK, vol. 8, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.678, p.39, p.72, p.127).

A typical manifestation of Sejong’s pro-pragmatism tendency was his creation of the Joseon Hangul (韓字, Korean alphabet, which remained in use until today) in
late 1443 (RDAK, vol. 9, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.358). After years of observation, Sejong came to realise that the language of Chinese (written Chinese in particular) was too difficult for the Joseon commoners to read and write. The king believed that if the literacy level of the Koreans was to be increased, a simpler set of alphabets would be needed such that basic education would be popularised among the commoners. However, at a time when using the language of Chinese was a symbol to express loyalty to Ming, Sejong’s creation of Hangul was unthinkable to the loyalists. Headed by Choe Malli (a deputy minister responsible for education), the loyalists severely criticised Sejong’s creation as a regression of civilisation by which Joseon would be reduced to a state of barbarian. They were shocked by Sejong’s decision as they saw it as an act to defy Ming. Not using the language of the suzerain but a language the vassal created by itself was an outright violation of the Confucian principles of propriety thus it was morally wrong. Nonetheless, Sejong defended his decision with the reason that Hangul was designed for the benefits of the Koreans: every commoner would have the opportunity to be educated. He criticised the loyalists for their lack of in-depth understanding of Joseon’s state affairs and a long-term vision for the benefits of Joseon. The king even put Choe Malli and other court officials who were openly opposed to his decision in jail – although for one day only – simply as a warning to other loyalists (RDAK, vol. 9, Sejong Sillok, 1956, pp.368–9).

Sejong later officially introduced Hangul as the language to be used by Joseon commoners on 29 September 1446, and Donggukjeongun (東國正韻), a book of six volumes about the phonetic system of Hangul was compiled and sent for mass printing on 29 September 1447 (RDAK, vol. 9, Sejong Sillok, 1956, pp.529–30, pp.585–6). On 8 November 1446, Eonmuncheong (the Ministry of Hangul, 諸文廳), was also established for further researches of the newly created language (RDAK, vol. 9, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.539) – but it was later abolished by Jungjong, the pro-righteousness king who served Ming with extraordinary sincerity, on 4 September 1506 – only two days after his enthronement (RDAK, vol. 20, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, p.4).
In spite of his occasional pragmatic thoughts, Sejong did concern so much about his reputation about Sadae. He was delighted to hear the words of Ming envoy praising Joseon as a country of Confucian propriety and righteousness by emulating everything in China (RDAK, vol. 8, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.415). To a certain extent, Sejong deserved such praise because he had been actively involving himself in every issue related to Sadae (RDAK, vol. 8, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.188). However, Sejong found himself caught in the dilemma of choosing between pro-righteousness and pro-pragmatism again (and for the last time) during Ming’s Tumu Crisis in 1449 (a year before his death).

When the news of the Tumu Crisis reached the Joseon court, Sejong ordered to dispatch a special mission to Ming on 19 August 1449 for the purpose of showing Joseon’s allegiance to Ming: even when Ming was in such national crisis, Joseon pledged to serve Ming and would never serve the Oirat Mongols – and Sejong believed that this was why Joseon was popularly renowned for its sincerity in Sadae (RDAK, vol. 9, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.691), for which he lectured the court officials that a minister should not employ pragmatism when serving his prince; he should serve with pure honesty and sincerity. However, Sejong did something exactly opposite to what he said three weeks later: an edict of Zhengtong Emperor arrived in Joseon on 9 September, in which the emperor instructed Sejong to send more than 100,000 well-trained soldiers to support Ming’s military campaign against the Oirat Mongols. Considering the consequence of obeying this imperial order to Joseon, Sejong secretly kept the edict for himself and did not announce to the Joseon court – hence, no Joseon troops were sent to Ming (RDAK, vol. 9, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.695).

On 29 September, Sejong came to know that the Ming forces were completely defeated. The king then decided to dispatch two special missions to Ming immediately: one to console the Ming court for the capture of Zhengtong Emperor by the Oirat Mongols, and the other one to congratulate the enthronement of Jingtai Emperor (RDAK, vol. 9, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.696). Yet three weeks later, when they learned that the Oirat Mongols were planning to return Zhengtong Emperor to China, Sejong and the court officials became panic about what they should do next – with two living emperors there could be a fight between the two
to compete for the throne – but the first worry of Sejong and the court officials was the calendar era: they were not certain about which emperor’s regnal year should be adopted in the official documents to be sent to the Ming court. The final decision of Sejong was to instruct the Joseon envoy to pretend that they had no idea about the return of Zhengtong Emperor, and to leave the regnal year of Jingtai Emperor on the documents (RDAK, vol. 9, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.698).

However, the real problem came two months later. On 22 December 1449, the Joseon envoy returned with an imperial edict from Jingtai Emperor: the Joseon court was ordered to dispatch troops and 20,000 to 30,000 horses to support Ming’s military campaign against the Mongols. The rationalists proposed to send 5,000 horses, but Sejong thought that at this moment of Ming’s unprecedented crisis, the Ming court would question Joseon’s loyalty in Sadae if Joseon was not able to fully comply with the imperial order. The king then invoked two historical examples: the Silla court sent envoy to console Emperor Xuanzong of Tang when the emperor fled to Sichuan due to the An Lushan Rebellion, and the Goryeo court kept paying tribute to Southern Song even the envoy had to cross the sea (as the original tribute route on land was controlled by the Jurchens). Hence, this was exactly the moment to prove Joseon’s allegiance to Ming. Sejong nevertheless suggested the number of 10,000 instead, considering the negative consequences to Joseon and its people (RDAK, vol. 9, Sejong Sillok, 1956, p.701).

Situation then changed for both better and worse on 5 January 1450: the emperor exempted the dispatch of Joseon troops as the Ming forces had expelled the Mongol cavalry from China, but the emperor ordered the Joseon court to send Ming 30,000 horses or more. Moreover, Jingtai Emperor added a reminder: Sejong must obey the imperial order to show Joseon’s loyalty in serving Ming. Pressed by the rationalists and influenced by his own pragmatic thoughts, Sejong reluctantly decided to send only 5,000 horses to Ming on 11 January and a special envoy was sent to the Ming court to explain the reason. Yet two days later, Sejong felt intensively uneasy about failing to send horses to Ming with the amount required by the newly enthroned emperor. The king ordered his ministers to carefully choose the 5,000 horses, and the first shipment of 500 horses (the Joseon Ministry of Rite actually suggested 100 horses only, but was rejected by Sejong)
was sent on 21 January 1450 (*RDAK*, vol. 9, *Sejong Sillok*, 1956, pp.703–4). Anyway, the sending of 5,000 horses, together with tribute missions, had caused serious troubles to the Koreans who lived in the province of Pyongan that bordered Ming China (*RDAK*, vol. 9, *Sejong Sillok*, 1956, pp.707–9).

Throughout his reign, Sejong was frequently torn between the Confucian ethics of propriety and the pragmatic concerns of political reality. He viewed it as his obligation to serve the great in a world order ruled by Confucian propriety thus he must prioritise Ming’s interests, yet he also considered it his duty to protect the interests of Joseon and its people as the leader of the country. When these two interests diverged, Sejong had to choose one between the two; yet it always turned out to be a painful decision for the king to abandon the other – he was sometimes a loyalist, yet he was a rationalist some other times, for which he was segmented in the category of the ‘in-betweens’.

4.4 The Reign of Sejo (1455–68)


On the Joseon–Ming relations, Sejo adopted the ideas of Yang Song-ji (1415–82), his favourite court official, since the beginning of his reign. On 5 July 1455 (less than a month after Sejo took the throne), Yang suggested to Sejo that: first, if the king wished to take reference on the way of ruling, he should learn from the previous Joseon kings instead of the emperors of China. Second, except the dressing code of the court officials, Joseon did not have to emulate everything of China – and this also applied to the issue of language: except for the interpreters, people of Joseon should speak Korean instead of Chinese. Third, Joseon should reduce the number of tribute missions to Ming so that the Koreans’ life would not

Although he did not serve Ming whole-heartedly according to the Confucian principles of propriety, Sejo did not hesitate to apply the hierarchical concept of ‘senior–junior’ to Joseon’s relations with other less-civilised countries. On 29 July 1457, Sejo openly claimed that Japan and Jurchen were Joseon’s vassal states and the Japanese and the Jurchens were his subjects (*RDAK*, vol. 13, *Sejo Sillok*, 1957, p.163). On 13 April 1458, Sejo further announced that as long as the barbarians served Joseon sincerely (and he said they would because he believed that the barbarians deeply admired Joseon), he would look after their benefits as a senior ought to (*RDAK*, vol. 13, *Sejo Sillok*, 1957, p.217). To put his words in action, Sejo later met with the Jurchen missions, conferred titles to their tribal leaders, and bestowed gifts on them, even though a special envoy from Ming came to Joseon on 8 April 1459 at the order of Tianshun Emperor to warn Sejo for his unsanctioned association with the Jurchens. On one hand the king told the Jurchen missions that he wished to establish amicable relations with their tribes despite that Ming did not approve of his decision; on the other he explained to the Joseon court officials that he did it for the benefits of Joseon because by doing so the Jurchens would be more hostile to Ming but become deeply obliged to Joseon – thus maintaining peace with Joseon (*RDAK*, vol. 13, *Sejo Sillok*, 1957, pp.269–72). Furthermore, Sejo later issued an order that protected the Jurchens’ interests but violated Ming’s instruction: it had been the order of the Ming court to Joseon that if any Chinese, who were seized by the Jurchens and became their slaves, escaped from Jurchen and entered Joseon, the Joseon court should immediately send these Chinese back to Ming. However, Sejo boldly defied Ming’s instruction and ordered the return of those Chinese escapees to the Jurchens if their Jurchen masters approached the Joseon officials at the border to inquire their whereabouts within 10 days (*RDAK*, vol. 16, *Seongjong Sillok*, 1958, p.54).

Nonetheless, when the Jurchens later started to make harassing raids in the border territories of Joseon, Sejo was not reluctant to use military forces to punish the disobedient junior. In early August 1467, while also being annoyed by the Jurchens, the Ming court planned to launch a military campaign against the

It should be noted that even for an operation like this, in which the Joseon troops were supposed to collaborate with the Ming forces, Sejo instructed the Joseon commanding general before his departure: 1) if the Ming commander suggested the Joseon soldiers to be merged with the Ming troops, he should refuse with the reasons that Joseon soldiers did not understand Chinese language and by the order of Sejo, the Joseon army was responsible for providing assistance only after the main strike against the enemy; 2) if the Ming commander asked for more Joseon troops, he should refuse with the reason that Sejo believed an army of 10,000 soldiers was sufficient to defeat the Jurchens; 3) if the Ming forces were unable to crush the Jurchen cavalry, he should hold the Joseon regiment and avoid engaging the Jurchens directly. He must wait until the Ming troops were likely to win the battle and then attack – eventually, Sejo’s plan was not necessary to be carried out because the Ming–Joseon Joint Forces defeated the Jurchen within two weeks of time. On 10 October, Sejo was delighted to know that the Joseon troops successfully attacked the enemy stronghold on 26 September and killed the Jurchen leader and his son (*RDAK, vol. 14, Sejo Sillok*, 1957, p.236, pp.251–2).

During the 13 years of Sejo’s rule, *Sadae* was practiced basically as a ritual between Joseon and Ming. Joseon tribute missions, regular or *ad hoc*, were dispatched to China strictly according to the rules of the tribute system – no more, no less. The Ming court duly issued investitures to confirm the legitimacy of the key Joseon royal members that included even Sejo, who questionably enthroned himself. Sejo did not serve Ming enthusiastically because he did not think it was necessary for him to do so: in reality the Ming court focused more on its domestic issues under the rule of Tianshun Emperor thus barely interfered with the vassal states’ affairs and posed no threat to Joseon. After all, the king himself was a pragmatic ruler – in his logic, Joseon’s purpose to serve the great was to obtain what he or his country was entitled to out of this ideational system of the Sinocentric order. The way of Sejo’s *Sadae* indicated that in his view, his personal
interests or Joseon’s national interests were much more important than those of Ming – hence the great was indeed to be used, not merely to be served.

4.5 The Reign of Seongjong (1469–94)

During Seongjong’s reign, serving the great and safeguarding Joseon’s interests also appeared to be incompatible from time to time. Seongjong, with experience similar to that of Sejong, often faced the dilemma of making the choice between morality and strategy – and this again provided the loyalists and the rationalists with the opportunities to compete against each other over the making of Joseon’s policies towards Ming.

Seongjong also believed in the importance of Confucian propriety, and he was serious about serving Ming faithfully as well. In July 1484, he approved the proposal of Han Chi-hyeong (1434–1502), the pro-righteousness head of Saheonbu, that Joseon should voluntarily send Ming more tribute goods that could be collected easily. Since Joseon’s request to be exempted from paying tribute gold and silver was granted by the Ming emperor (interpreted by the loyalists as an example of how the senior kindly looked after the junior), Seongjong agreed that Joseon ought to be grateful hence they should send more of other tribute goods as compensation to Ming (RDAK, vol. 17, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, p.188). In general, Seongjong endeavoured to follow every practice of Ming, for which Joseon was highly regarded as Sojunghwa by the Ming envoy (RDAK, vol. 17, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, p.550).

In order to serve Ming sincerely, Seongjong even went to great lengths to correct the improper practice of his predecessor (i.e. Sejo) on the issue of returning the Chinese escapees from Jurchen who entered Joseon’s territory. On 12 February 1477, Seongjong received the report of an incident that a Chinese who got away from Jurchen arrived in a border city of Joseon. The Joseon officials at the border detained the Chinese escapee but then sent him back to Jurchen. Seongjong criticised the way those officials handled the case because they were supposed to send the Chinese escapee to China instead of Jurchen according to Ming’s instruction. Their decision thus violated Ming’s regulation and the principles of
propriety in the practice of Sadae, for which the king decided to punish those officials (RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, p.18). A month later, some rationalists explained to Seongjong that it was Sejo who issued the order to bend the rules (i.e. the Chinese escapees to be returned to Jurchen if their Jurchen masters came to inquire their whereabouts within 10 days): Sejo’s concern was border security – if Joseon did not return the escapees, the Jurchens would be enraged and then they would attack the Joseon border. However, Seongjong did not think so. In his view, the Joseon border being attacked by the Jurchens was only a minor issue; by comparison, the Joseon court being reprimanded by the emperor for disobeying imperial orders was a much more serious problem. Seongjong thus ordered that from then on, the Chinese escapees must not be returned to Jurchen (RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, pp.27–28).

Nevertheless, the rationalists did not give up. In early May, they debated against the loyalists on the ground that border security was an important issue sufficient to warrant Sejo’s decision to alter Ming’s regulation. The loyalists refuted the rationalists’ argument by stressing the importance of Confucian ethics: Joseon as a vassal state should unwaveringly obey any order issued by Ming without employing the insincere thoughts of pragmatism. Seongjong chose to support the loyalists, saying that Sejo’s practice must be corrected. At the time of the debate, reports from Joseon border arrived: more Chinese escapees had entered Joseon’s territory. The rationalists then made use of the situation and put greater pressure on Seongjong, but the king refused to change his mind. He said that even if Joseon and Jurchen went into war, Jurchen had nothing but fury; Joseon however, possessed righteousness thus Joseon’s action would be justified – yet Seongjong was not blind to the negative consequences to Joseon if war occurred between the two. He issued another order to the military commander at the border and instructed him to explain to the Jurchens that it was morally not right that the Jurchens captured the Chinese and enslaved them, and that Joseon returned the escapees to Ming was something Joseon had to do, according to the ethical principles of Sadae – such decision was indeed made against Joseon’s wish. At the same time, the king also gave the instruction to enhance border defence, in case the Jurchens could not understand Joseon’s situation (RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, p.54–55).
In spite of his adherence to the Confucian principles while practicing *Sadae*, it did not necessarily mean that Seongjong lacked the mentality of pragmatism. The pragmatic thoughts drew Seongjong’s attention to the well-being of Joseon and its people, which pushed the king into the dilemma of choosing *Sadae* or protecting Joseon’s interests. The most typical example was found in the late 1470s, when Chenghua Emperor launched a military campaign against Jurchen, and Joseon was ordered to dispatch troops to assist Ming. On 23 August 1478, the Joseon court received the information that Chenghua Emperor was planning a military campaign against Jurchen. During the first debate in the Joseon court about whether Joseon should obey Ming’s order to send troops to join the invasion, the rationalists presented their analysis: first, people living in the Pyongan Province (that bordered China) had been suffering from famine for years, and Joseon simply could not afford to have unrest in this region. Second, if Ming defeated Jurchen, benefits of victory would go to Ming instead of Joseon; if Ming was defeated by Jurchen, it would be inevitable for Joseon to share the losses. Third, winning or losing, Joseon would have a new enemy (*RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok*, 1958, p.245–7).

Seongjong also noticed that Joseon did not have the capability at the time to provide Ming with any military assistance, but he believed it was unethical to disobey Ming’s order. The loyalists, headed by *Yeonguijeong* Jeong Chang-son (1402–87, one of those who were opposed to Sejong’s creation of *Hangul*) and No Sa-sin (1427–98, one of the senior court officials), insisted that Joseon should not disobey Ming’s order because Ming had been very kind to Joseon. However, the rationalists, led by Yi Geuk-bae (1422–95, student of Ho Cho, and he was later promoted to *Yeonguijeong*), criticised that the loyalists’ blind obedience had made them ignorant about Joseon’s real situation. When Seongjong expressed his worry that Joseon’s disobedience might enrage the Ming court, Yi Geuk-bae responded that he did not think Ming would attack Joseon simply because Ming was upset. Seongjong then asked whether it was possible to give a positive reply to Ming but hold the troops within the Joseon border for the moment. Yi Geuk-bae believed that it was a feasible tactic and there was nothing wrong about it from a military strategic point of view (*RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok*, 1958, p.248).
The debate lasted for over a year, and in spite of the rationalists’ strong objection, Seongjong finally decided to go with the loyalists but the reason was that he could not find any convincing excuse to disobey Ming’s order. The king then suggested that Joseon should send 10,000 soldiers to join Ming’s campaign (RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, pp.373–4). Yet the rationalists kept writing to Seongjong that the fight between Ming and Jurchen was no different from a quarrel between one’s neighbours, and what one should wisely do was to close his door and stayed out of the fight. It hence would be an act of stupidity for Joseon to sacrifice the lives of its own people for the benefits of other country. Joining Ming’s campaign would destroy the non-antagonistic relations between Joseon and Jurchen, which would bring disasters to Joseon in the long run. The pragmatic thoughts gradually changed Seongjong’s mind, and the king began to incline to the option of postponing the date of Joseon troops’ departure for Ming (RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, pp.378–9).

On the 9th day of the intercalary October in 1479, Seongjong appointed General Eo Yu-so (1434–89, one of the rationalists who was opposed to sending Joseon troops to join Ming’s campaign) as the commander-in-chief of the Joseon regiment with 10,000 soldiers and granted him full authority to make decisions in the field (i.e. General Eo was allowed to act without having to ask for Seongjong’s approval). The appointment of a pro-pragmatism general was an unusual move of the king, and the explicitly mentioned remarks about leaving all decisions to be made by General Eo simply added to the suspicion that Seongjong might not wish the Joseon troops to engage the Jurchen cavalry in the battlefield (RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, p.380).

Two days later, Chenghua Emperor’s edict arrived in the Joseon court, in which the emperor’s order of requiring the dispatch of Joseon troops was announced. Seongjong then expressed his concern about the weather to the Ming envoy, saying that it would be a huge disadvantage for the Joseon troops to march in heavy snow. Besides, the logistics of supplying food and equipment would be extremely difficult in winter. Although the Ming envoy repeatedly explained the need of strategic deployment and insisted that the Joseon troops must meet with
the Ming forces on 25th of the month, Seongjong kept saying that it was too soon, especially with the poor weather. Eventually, the Ming envoy had to leave with frustration caused by Seongjong’s circumlocutory remarks (RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, pp.380–1). Seongjong later sent a message on 21st of the month to Eo Yu-so, expressing the king’s deep worry about the safety of the Joseon soldiers in such an adverse weather (heavy snow started on the 20th), and asked the general not to attack recklessly and to retreat if necessary. Seongjong reminded Eo to judge the situation cautiously and try to achieve the ultimate goal of minimising the loss of Joseon soldiers (RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, p.386).

On 13 November 1479, the Joseon court received Eo’s report that the general ordered a halt of the Joseon regiment’s march at the waterfront of the Yalu River on the Korean side. Eo’s reason was that the water had not completely frozen so it was difficult for the troops to cross the river. The loyalists soon gathered in the court to fiercely condemn Eo’s decision, saying that the Ming court would not accept such ‘ridiculous’ excuse and Eo had totally damaged Joseon’s reputation as a faithful vassal in the practice of Sadae. However, Seongjong silenced the loyalists by saying that his conscience would not allow him to send those Joseon soldiers to die, even though he was aware that Joseon would be reprimanded by Ming for violating Confucian ethics. Seongjong then sent a special mission to Ming to explain Eo’s decision by the difficulties of: first, crossing the river by boat was unlikely because there were blocks of ice floating in the river. Second, the Koreans did not know how to make floating bridges (RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, pp.392–3).

On 18 November, the loyalists called for punishing Eo Yu-so, pressed Seongjong to order the crossing of Yalu River, and reminded the king again of the serious consequences of cheating. Feeling uneasy about violating Confucian ethics, Seongjong finally agreed to order 3,000 instead of 10,000 soldiers, under the command of Jwauijeong Yun Pil-sang (1427–1504, one of the loyalists), to cross the Yalu River. Yet the pro-rationalist Saganwon tried again the next day, telling Seongjong about the negative consequences of sending Joseon soldiers to join Ming’s military campaign. The king refused to change his order, defending it with
the Confucian ethics of righteousness. However, Seongjong found himself deeply troubled by the dilemma. He expressed his painful thoughts openly in the court that he felt terribly sad about having to send Joseon soldiers to the battlefield because he could not defy Ming’s order (RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, pp.394–7).

On 20 December 1479, Seongjong received the report of Yun P'il-sang about a successful raid he orchestrated against the Jurchens. The king was deliriously happy to know that 1,000 Joseon soldiers participated in the raid and the total death toll was only three. While the loyalists kept pressing Seongjong to penalise Eo Yu-so, the king only suspended the general from active duty and refused to further punish him. At the end, the rationalists still kept criticising Sadae by such a way that risked people’s lives and drained the country’s resources (RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, pp.409–11); yet in the Ming court, Seongjong and the loyalists were highly praised and rewarded for serving Ming sincerely, as seen in Chenghua Emperor’s edict to Joseon on 1 May 1480 (RDAK, vol. 16, Seongjong Sillok, 1958, p.433).

Owing to Ming’s military power that had won its victory in the campaign against the Jurchen, Seongjong’s pragmatic ideas and actions were downplayed thus neglected by the Ming court; plus Seongjong’s past record of faithful Sadae, the king and the rationalists thus were able to escape from Ming’s chastisement. Nevertheless, Seongjong and the loyalists did plant another seed of hatred in the hearts of the Jurchens – it was therefore not unreasonable to say that Joseon’s long-term national interest to maintain peace with the ferocious Jurchens, to a certain extent, was jeopardised by its Sadae towards Ming. This could be viewed as an example to prove that the practice of Sadae did not necessarily ensure Joseon’s national security, which explained why some Joseon kings, such as Sejong and Seongjong, found it so difficult to choose between righteousness and pragmatism.
4.6 The Reign of Yeonsangun (1494–1506)

Yeonsangun’s reign was largely characterised by the domestic turmoils of political purges and his tyrannical rule. However, evidence could still be found to prove that sincerity of the Joseon court to serve Ming was reduced to the level of encouraging the act of deception – lying to the Ming court outright. The justification was simple: Joseon’s national interests outweighed those of Ming.

The most typical example took place in 1503, a time when Joseon became famous for its technique to produce strong bows and arrows. Hongzhi Emperor of Ming came to be aware of this reputation of Joseon and he ordered to purchase bows and arrows made in Joseon. When the Ming envoy arrived in Hanseong on 20 April 1503, Yeonguijeong Sung Jun (1436–1504) presented his analysis to Yeonsangun: strong bows and arrows were imperative to Joseon’s national security. If the technique was released to the Chinese, Joseon would lose the advantage of defending the country with such kind of secret weapons against probable invasion of Ming in future. Hence, he suggested that the king should order the Joseon manufacturers not to make the weapons as strong as they ought to be; to simply make them look nice would be good enough to mislead the Ming envoy. Yeonsangun approved Sung’s suggestion immediately, only having to withdraw his approval after being opposed by the loyalists who believed that it would be morally wrong to deceive the Ming emperor (RDAK, vol. 19, Yeonsangun Diaries, 1958, pp.634–5).

Two days later, Sung Jun and a couple of his supporters approached Yeonsangun again. This time he pointed to the concept of Sadae, saying that there was a difference between a minister serving his prince and a vassal serving its suzerain. They looked alike but in fact they were different: a minister should follow his prince even if the country perished. A vassal, however, should not perish together with the fall of its suzerain, and hence it would be absolutely reasonable for a vassal to keep some of its secrets and not to reveal everything to its suzerain. Convinced by Sung’s comparison of propriety and strategy, Yeonsangun issued the final order of not to make the bows and arrows as strong as they should be for the Chinese. Moreover, he seriously warned the Joseon interpreters that they
would be punished if they failed to keep his order from the Ming envoy (RDAK, vol. 19, Yeonsangun Diaries, 1958, p.635).

Therefore, it was evident that over a century after the founding of the Joseon dynasty, the Confucian concept of adaptability still had not been truly established in the mindset of the Joseon political elites. In spite of the prevalence of Confucianism in Joseon, to those such as Yeonsangun and Sung Jun, it was simply not necessary for a vassal like Joseon to serve its suzerain in the way a loyal minister served his prince. On the surface, they would strive to make the king’s memorial to the throne as exquisite as possible such that no other vassal states would be able to match with Joseon’s utmost sincerity in adaptability (RDAK, vol. 19, Yeonsangun Diaries, 1958, p.509); yet they would also disobey the imperial orders by lying and cheating with little hesitation. To those who opted for pragmatism, normative obligations were excluded from consideration when making foreign policy, and national interests remained as their primary concern. Prioritisation of pursuing national interests was the result of rationally and cautiously weighing the benefits againsts the costs, instead of invariably following the ethical principles of Confucian propriety.

4.7 The Reign of Jungjong (1506–44)

During Jungjong’s reign, the loyalists, championed by the king himself, had been instrumental to the successful implementation of ideational adaptability. Though met with persistent objections from the rationalists, Jungjong tirelessly defended the loyalists’ stance of pro-righteousness and served Ming faithfully.

To Jungjong and the loyalists, rule of propriety (adaptability in particular) was crucial to the survival and prosperity of Joseon (RDAK, vol. 21, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, p.283), for which the Joseon court issued order to print Confucianism classics for nationwide distribution and to facilitate the establishment of bookstores so that all of the Koreans would be able to learn Confucianism (RDAK, vol. 21, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, p.415). On the issue of dispatching tribute missions, the Joseon court always kept the schedule punctually such that the Joseon embassy would reach Beijing on time, or sometimes even earlier than the local (i.e. the provincial)
Chinese delegations (RDAK, vol. 24, Jungjong Sillok, 1960, p.204). As for Jungjong himself, in order to demonstrate his utmost sincerity towards the Ming emperor, he went to the extreme detail as to pick and check the tribute horses in person before they were sent to China (RDAK, vol. 20, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, p.548), and to ask people with outstanding skill of calligraphy to sign for him on his memorials to the throne (RDAK, vol. 20, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, pp.650–1) – for the king believed that a tribute horse with flaw or a signature with poor handwriting would show disrespect to the Son of Heaven.

During Jungjong’s reign, ideational Sadae was typically exhibited in two Joseon practices: first, taking voluntary actions. Without any imperial edicts or official notices from the Ming court, Joseon would take voluntary actions in any occasions that Jungjong and the loyalists considered necessary (as a result of which, many ad hoc tribute missions were dispatched to Ming in addition to the regular ones). Second, responding to controversial issues. Jungjong would send special tribute missions to Ming to support the emperor on issues that the Joseon court was not supposed to (in fact, other vassal states or even the Chinese governors of local provinces would choose to remain silent in those occasions).

On 2 October 1528, the Ming empress passed away. The Ming court did not inform Joseon of the empress’ death, but a Joseon tribute embassy that happened to be in Beijing at the moment sent a letter to Jungjong and reported the news. Upon receiving the letter on 26 November, although without precedent, Jungjong approved the proposal raised by Yejo that in memory of the deceased empress, Joseon should voluntarily cease all trading activities in the market, forbid all forms of entertainment and the slaughtering of animals, and suspend wedding ceremonies for three days (RDAK, vol. 22, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, p.581).

Another example took place in 1539. When the news of Jiajing Emperor’s tour to the southern province of Huguang (to bury the empress dowager) reached the Joseon court in February, Jungjong immediately suggested the despatch of a special mission to Huguang to inquire after the emperor’s health. In the following three months, the rationalists were strongly opposed to the king’s suggestion with the reasons of: 1) lack of precedent: a vassal state never sent tribute mission on
such occasion; 2) travelling expenditure: Huguang was located in the hinterland that was far from Beijing; and 3) potential problems in future: once started, Joseon would have to dispatch a special mission to Ming every time when the emperor travelled to places far away from Beijing (RDAK, vol. 24, Jungjong Sillok, 1960, pp.94–95, p.100, pp.106–7, pp.119–22, pp.127–9, pp.132–4).

However, Jungjong did not give in and kept debating with them on the ground that: 1) Sadae should be faithfully practiced according to the principles of propriety at all costs; 2) a vassal state should never comment on the behaviour of the Ming emperor (RDAK, vol. 24, Jungjong Sillok, 1960, p.95, pp.127–8). Eventually, Jungjong and the court officials compromised on the solution of sending a special mission, which was to be combined with another tribute mission for cost-saving, to Beijing (instead of Huguang) on 16 May to inquire after Jiajing Emperor’s health after his return to the capital city. As a result, this special mission greatly pleased Jiajing Emperor, which in turn reinforced Jungjong’s determination to practice Sadae wholeheartedly (RDAK, vol. 24, Jungjong Sillok, 1960, p.134, p.181, p.183). A similar incident happened in 1542. After receiving a letter on 17 November written by the Joseon Cheonchusa in Beijing and knowing that Jiajing Emperor survived in an attempted assassination, Jungjong, after a month-long debate with the rationalists, managed to dispatch a special envoy to inquire after the emperor’s health on 28 December (RDAK, vol. 24, Jungjong Sillok, 1960, pp.478–81, p.486).

Throughout his reign, Jungjong tried not to miss any opportunities to send special tribute missions to Ming, even on occasions that were highly controversial in China. When Jungjong became aware of the decade-long Great Rites Controversy in Ming (against his ministers who were orthodox Confucian scholar-officials, Jiajing Emperor elevated the status of his biological father posthumously from a prince to an emperor), he proposed to send a special mission to congratulate Jiajing Emperor, but only had to withdraw his proposal in December 1527 due to the objection raised by Yeonguijeong, his two associates, and the key officials of Yejo with the reason that a vassal should not involve in an ethically controversial domestic issue of Ming that split its court into two rivalry groups. However, when he came to know that Jiajing Emperor later purged most of the court officials who
were against him in the Great Rites Controversy a year later, Jungjong openly expressed his view to the court officials that Joseon should not discuss the morality of the Chinese affairs and it would have been proper to dispatch a congratulatory envoy to Ming (RDAK, vol. 22, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, p.425, pp.541–2, p.549).

In January 1537, Jungjong proposed again to send a special mission to congratulate Jiajing Emperor’s completion of building the Nine-Temple (in which the spirit tablets of nine previous emperors were enshrined) and the emperor’s decision to confer additional royal titles to his two empress dowagers. After debating with the rationalists for two months, Jungjong defended his proposal against repeated objections (mainly from the State Councillors and officials of Saganwon) and finally dispatched a special tribute mission, which was to be combined with another tribute mission, on 27 March (RDAK, vol. 23, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, p.535, p.541, pp.543–4, pp.553–4, p.578).

Jungjong succeeded again in November 1538 and February 1539 by sending special envoys to congratulate the further elevation of the status of Jiajing Emperor’s biological parents (RDAK, vol. 24, Jungjong Sillok, 1960, p.67, p.90), which extraordinarily delighted the emperor because, other than the Joseon envoys, the emperor received no congratulatory delegations at all from abroad; even within China, the emperor only received a memorial to the throne from the Zhejiang local authorities (RDAK, vol. 24, Jungjong Sillok, 1960, pp.126–7). In September 1541, though again strongly opposed by Saheonbu, Jungjong voluntarily sent a special mission to console Jiajing Emperor when he came to know that the Nine-Temple was destroyed by fire – and again none of the local feudal lords in China offered consolation to the emperor in this incident (RDAK, vol. 24, Jungjong Sillok, 1960, p.336). Controversial as those occasions might be, Jungjong unequivocally implemented the Sadae policy simply because he was convinced that it was morally right for Joseon to serve Ming faithfully and unconditionally.

Consequently, the frequency of tribute missions dispatched to Ming became so high that it caused tremendous financial burden to the Joseon court and serious
disturbance to the life of the Koreans living in the northwest province of Pyongan (RDAK, vol. 23, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, p.554, RDAK, vol. 24, Jungjong Sillok, 1960, p.331). It even annoyed those Chinese who lived adjacent to the tribute route; they started to speculate the motive of the Joseon court and thought that the Koreans actually travelled to China for trade benefits instead of paying tributes, and the situation exacerbated to the extent that in 1523 a question was asked in a Chinese imperial examination about the Joseon embassies coming to China for commercial purpose but in the name of propriety and in the disguise of tribute missions (RDAK, vol. 22, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, p.65).

Jungjong was criticised by the rationalists that too many tribute missions had been sent to Ming and Joseon’s reputation as a ‘kingdom of propriety and righteousness’ was severely damaged (RDAK, vol. 22, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, p.132, RDAK, vol. 23, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, pp.65–66, p.78). However, Jungjong insisted that, even at the expense of being sneered at and criticised by the Chinese, Sadae should be unwaveringly practiced against all odds (RDAK, vol. 22, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, p.537, pp. 585–6). He believed that as long as the Joseon court could ensure that the right officials (‘right’ in the sense that they faithfully abided by the Confucian principles of ethics) were selected and appointed as envoy to Ming, the excessive private trades accompanying the tribute missions would be curtailed, thus the frequent dispatch of Joseon tribute missions would not be resented by the Chinese (RDAK, vol. 23, Jungjong Sillok, 1959, p.205).

As seen in the above evidence, to Jungjong and the loyalists, Joseon should serve Ming in the way a son serving his father – as advocated in Confucianism. Such relationship based on the junior’s filial piety towards the senior was purely voluntary and unconditional, which was further reinforced by the belief that Joseon as a vassal state should never judge the morality of Ming’s affairs. Ming was materially powerful, yet they chose to focus on maintaining Joseon’s identity as a civilised and faithful vassal in the Confucian world of propriety – and such national interest determined Joseon’s behaviour of sincere Sadae. Taking the role of a loyal junior, Joseon under Jungjong’s rule constructed an exemplary model of Korea–great power relation that can be viewed as a manifestation of the
constructivists’ logic of socialisation → identity → interest → behaviour, instead of the realists’ concern of power politics.

4.8 The Reign of Myeongjong (1545–67)

Myeongjong ascended the throne at the age of 11, and he died at 33 in 1567 – hence many of the decisions about government policy during his reign were made by the key officials of the Joseon court. To these court officials, the legacies of nearly four decades’ rule of Jungjong had produced a rather negative perception of Sadae: they believed that Jungjong’s faithful Sadae actually brought more costs than benefits to Joseon – in terms of increasing financial burden, damage of Joseon’s reputation, and even harm to Joseon’s national pride. Consequently, they challenged and then changed many Sadae practices of Jungjong, favouring pragmatism over propriety, and prioritising the national interests of Joseon instead of those of Ming.

Only three years after Myeongjong’s enthronement, the rationalists began to criticise the practice of sending too many tribute missions to Ming. To solve the problems caused, they advocated a sharp reduction of tribute missions, because both the Koreans (especially those residing in the Pyongan Province that bordered Ming) and the Chinese (who worked in the relay stations along the tribute mission route) resented the non-stop tribute envoys (those dispatched on ad hoc basis in particular). They believed that unless for matters of absolute importance and urgency, special envoys should not be sent at all or to be combined with the regular missions. They emphasised that Joseon was not a local province of Ming; it was a vassal state and a vassal state did not have to perform that many duties for the emperor as the local Chinese authorities were required to (RDAK, vol. 25, Myeongjong Sillok, 1960, p.343).

As a result, Saheonbu was opposed to sending a special mission to console the emperor on the conflagration of the royal palace on 5 October 1557, insisting that the accident was different from that of the Nine-Temple (which was destroyed by fire in 1541). Besides, Saheonbu criticised that Jungjong’s decision 16 years ago to dispatch a special envoy to console Jiajing Emperor was in fact a joke –
because in the eyes of the Ming court officials, it only indicated that the Joseon court was ignorant about the Confucian propriety (*RDAK, vol. 26, Myeongjong Sillok*, 1960, p.193). *Yeonguijeong* Yun Won-hyung (1509–65) also voiced out his objection on the next day, and he was later joined by the rationalists headed by Yi Jun-gyeong (1499–1572, the next *Yeonguijeong* of Myeongjong) with the claim that if Joseon had its role confused with that of the Chinese local authorities when serving the great, the future problems would come endlessly to Joseon (*RDAK, vol. 26, Myeongjong Sillok*, 1960, pp.193–5).

To put a halt to those Sadae practices that were deemed unnecessary, the rationalists focused on blaming the numerous tribute missions for having stained Joseon’s reputation as a faithful Confucian state. On 20 April 1552, *Saganwon* raised the issue of private trades secretly conducted by interpreters who travelled with the tribute missions to China, which, in the view of *Saganwon*, was the reason that had jeopardised Joseon’s reputation as a nation of ‘propriety and righteousness’. *Saganwon* even proposed to suspend buying goods from China (except the purchase of materials used by the royal family members, medicines, and books), while pointing to the fruitless efforts of Jungjong who also attempted to save Joseon’s reputation: *Saganwon* criticised that the shameful activities of private trades continued for 40 years during Jungjong’s reign simply because there had been too many tribute missions, which provided ample opportunities for the interpreters to engage in the private trades (*RDAK, vol. 25, Myeongjong Sillok*, 1960, pp.549–50). The rationalists considered it an important task to abandon these blind acts of Sadae and switch the focus of policymaking back to securing Joseon’s benefits.

A typical example to prove the pragmatic thinking of these rationalists was the 1552–4 *Jeju Waelan* (the unrest in Jeju caused by the Japanese pirates, 济州倭乱). In May 1552, *Waegu* (Japanese pirates, 倭寇) raided the southern coastline of Joseon, and it was found out by Joseon officials that not all of these pirates were Japanese – a good number of them were actually Chinese, who partnered with the Japanese pirates in raids on not only Korean but also Chinese coastal areas (*RDAK, vol. 25, Myeongjong Sillok*, 1960, p.555, pp.562–3, pp.673–4).
After some of these pirates (with a mixture of Japanese and Chinese) were captured by the Joseon authorities, how to deal with the captured pirates became a dilemma for the Joseon court: for those of Chinese ethnicity, they would be sent to the Ming court for trial, but for those of Japanese ethnicity, it would be a duty for Joseon (as a vassal state) to send them to the Ming court as well for punishment. However, the Joseon court was worried that when such news reached Japan (which was highly possible due to the frequent exchange of personnel between Joseon and Japan), it would infuriate the Japan court and the Japanese might retaliate against Joseon; if the Joseon court simply returned the captured pirates of Japanese ethnicity to Japan, it would be an act of unfaithfulness that violated the ethical principles of Sadae (RDAK, vol. 25, Myeongjong Sillok, 1960, p.683).

On 18 July 1554, Saheonbu tried to persuade the king that Joseon should not simply abide by the Confucian principles of ethics on Sadae; a minor country chose to serve a major power simply for the purpose of protecting its people (Saheonbu articulated this logic by invoking Mencius’ words). If Sadae eventually brought disaster to its people, the minor country would gain nothing but only the name of a loyal vassal. Saheonbu even referred to the example of Goryeo’s foreign relations with Jurchen and Song China: while Goryeo served both countries simultaneously but lying to one about serving the other, such unethical behaviour indeed saved the Koreans from being invaded by either power and the dynasty sustained for five centuries – and this was the merit of pragmatism; a minor country could hardly survive if blindly following the ethical code of conduct. Therefore, Joseon should learn from Goryeo and return the captured Japanese pirates to Japan without reporting to the Ming court, thereby Japan would not be enraged and Joseon’s security would be assured. The 20-year-old king thought this was a good solution to resolve the dilemma, and Yeonguijeong Shim Yeon-won (1491–1558) and other key officials joined to support the proposal of Saheonbu on the next day, although they said they felt uneasy for choosing pragmatism over righteousness to secure Joseon’s national interests (RDAK, vol. 25, Myeongjong Sillok, 1960, pp.685–7).
The pragmatic way of thinking, as reflected in the Joseon court officials during Myeongjong’s reign, had reached an unprecedented height in the sense of distorting and abusing the Confucian principles of propriety regarding Sadae since the founding of the Joseon dynasty. Among others, Jwauijeong Jeong Yu-gil (1515–88) went to the extreme: he openly voiced out a nationalistic assertion to abandon the practice of Sadae.

Jeong Yu-gil was the son of Jeong Sa-ryong (1491–1570), who was also a prominent yet controversial political figure of the Joseon court – for he once set a question in the civil service examination that asked the examinees to discuss whether Joseon should serve Ming as a vassal state and pay tributes to Ming – and it shocked the Joseon court (RDAK, vol. 26, Myeongjong Sillok, 1960, pp.232–4).

With a political stance similar to his father’s, Jeong Yu-gil was even more explicit about his view of pragmatic politics. On the issue of whether Joseon should return the captured pirates with Japanese ethnicity in July 1554, Jeong advocated the return of these pirates to Japan without reporting to the Ming court (five days earlier than the proposal of Saheonbu). His points included: first, pragmatism was much more important than righteousness in interstate relations and good reputation should not be pursued at the costs of bringing disaster to the people. Second, there was difference between a vassal serving its suzerain and a minister serving his prince (echoing the view of Sung Jun during Yeonsangun’s reign 50 years ago). Third, Joseon might inform Ming only when Joseon could control Ming (i.e. when Joseon was stronger than Ming) – hence Joseon should not report its decision to the Ming court (RDAK, vol. 25, Myeongjong Sillok, 1960, p.683).

On 30 October 1554, Jeong Yu-gil openly expressed his view in the Joseon court that although Sadae was practiced for the purpose of self-protection, Joseon should not serve Ming at such great costs. He thought that Joseon had been serving Ming irrationally and slavishly: while Joseon had been serving Ming faithfully (even though with huge financial costs), the Ming court rudely treated Joseon as a ‘domestic servant’, giving orders to Joseon as it liked and punishing Joseon as it wished – the Koreans thus were deprived of their dignity. Therefore, Jeong concluded that Joseon ought to abandon the practice of Sadae towards Ming (RDAK, vol. 25, Myeongjong Sillok, 1960, p.708).
This was certainly an early, if not the first, articulation of Korean nationalism. Korea declared its independence and permanently severed its tribute relations with China 340 years later; yet back in 1554, Jeong Yu-gil’s remarks would have been condemned by the orthodox Confucian scholars and the loyalists in the Joseon court. However, Jeong Yu-gil was not punished by his words; he was promoted steadily all the way up to the key position of Jwauijeong. His father, Jeong Sa-ryong, had similar experience as well: he was demoted in August 1558 but was reinstated only after three months. On 6 May 1562, Jeong Sa-ryong was even promoted to become one of the court officials with the highest rank (RDAK, vol. 26, Myeongjong Sillok, 1960, p.234, p.243, p.373).

The 22 years of Myeongjong’s rule had witnessed another peak of pragmatism and its influence in making Joseon’s policy towards Ming. Sadae during Jungjong’s reign might have reached the extreme of pro-righteousness, and then like a pendulum, the thinking of the political elites swung to the other extreme of pro-pragmatism. The reasons could be: 1) the costs incurred to Joseon (of various sorts, e.g. social, economic, and psychological costs) had outweighed the benefits it received by Sadae; and 2) Ming had other concerns at the time: Jiajing Emperor ignored his official duties (because he was in an obsessive search for medicines to prolong his life) and the Ming court was tied up with the crises emerging to the south with the Japanese pirates and to the north with the Jurchen tribes (RDAK, vol. 26, Myeongjong Sillok, 1960, p.587), which made Ming too busy to discipline Joseon for its unfaithful Sadae, thus provided the opportunity for the rationalists to exercise control in policymaking. However, the loyalists did not vanish; the influence of Confucian principles of propriety continued to wield its ideational power in Joseon – and the loyalists rose again later during Seonjo’s reign to wrestle with the rationalists on the issue of Sadae.

4.9 The Reign of Seonjo (1567–1608)

During Seonjo’s reign, Joseon experienced the Imjin War (1592–8), in which Japan attempted to challenge the Sinocentric order by the first step to occupy Joseon and the second step to invade Ming. Seonjo, throughout the six years of
the war, always maintained Joseon’s identity as Ming’s vassal and never thought of surrendering to Japan. In his logic, as long as Joseon adhered to serving Ming, Ming would and should rescue Joseon – saving its vassal (a loyal one in particular) was supposed to be the duty of a suzerain.

The rationalists’ influence was again a factor. During the early years of Seonjo’s reign, the rationalists continued to criticise, as they did during Myeongjong’s rule, the practice of frequently sending tribute missions to Ming that had caused serious troubles to the Koreans and Joseon’s reputation (*RDAK*, vol. 27, *Seonjo Sillok*, 1961, p.23). As for the king, Seonjo himself was not enthusiastic about the Chinese practice as well. On 1 November 1574, when Jo Heon (1544–92), one of the most prominent loyalists at the time, presented an eight-point proposal to Seonjo after he came back from a trip to Ming and explained in great detail (with lots of information he collected in China for months) about why Joseon should emulate China’s advanced system and civilised practice, Seonjo simply rejected the idea and replied to Jo that the situation (such as customs) in Joseon was different from that in Ming; there would be unpleasant surprise and discord if Joseon was to copy everything Chinese (*RDAK*, vol. 31, *Revised Sillok of Seonjo*, 1961, pp.50–56).

Seonjo’s response thus discouraged Jo Heon and he gave up presenting another 16-point proposal with the similar theme (but in greater detail) – only years later, the king turned down Jo’s suggestion again. On 1 December 1587, Jo Heon wrote to Seonjo and asked the king to stop socialising with Japan on the ground that it was not morally right for Joseon to build a relationship with another vassal of Ming (especially a disobedient vassal like Japan) according to the Confucian principles of propriety. Seonjo fiercely criticised Jo’s idea and ordered Jo’s memorial to the throne to be burned (*RDAK*, vol. 31, *Revised Sillok of Seonjo*, 1961, pp.176–9).

On 1 March 1591, the Joseon court received a letter from Toyotomi Hideyoshi (the most powerful feudal lord in Japan at the time), in which Hideyoshi clearly stated his intention to invade and annex China. Upon knowing the contents of the letter, Jo Heon wrote to Seonjo again with an analysis of Hideyoshi’s strategy (the
Japanese would occupy Joseon first), an illustration of the Confucian ethics that determined Joseon’s action (to protect Ming and fight against Japan), and a proposal about taking precautions against the Japanese invasion (reporting to Ming immediately, strengthening national defence, etc.). To Jo’s disappointment, however, the king once again rejected his ideas outright (RDAK, vol. 31, Revised Sillok of Seonjo, 1961, pp.205–9).

Seonjo and the rationalists in fact had another concern: how Joseon could avoid enraging Hideyoshi (so that Japan would bypass Joseon on its way to invade Ming). Hence Seonjo focused on the questions of whether Joseon should report the letter to Ming and if yes, how Joseon should report to Ming about the letter’s contents (i.e. all or some of the contents). They feared that once Japan came to know about Joseon’s action (i.e. reporting the letter to Ming) the Japanese would turn to attack Joseon. As there were Japanese merchants travelling between ports in Japan and the Chinese province of Fujian, it was almost certain that Japan would learn about Joseon’s action.

Pressed by the loyalists, on 1 May 1591, Seonjo and the rationalists chose to report only some of the contents of the letter to the Ming court, but not about the letter – they planned to pretend that the Joseon court received such information from those Koreans who escaped from Japan, for they did not want the Ming court to know about the correspondence between Joseon and Japan. They even instructed the Joseon envoy not to mention anything about Hideyoshi’s plan if the Ming court was unaware of the news. In fact, the Ming court was already informed about it – from the sources of those Chinese who travelled to Japan, and the special mission dispatched by the Ryukyu court to Ming. Some of the Ming court officials began to suspect that Joseon might collaborate with Japan against Ming. After the Joseon envoy entered China and learned about the situation, he finally told the Ming court that he came to inform Ming of Japan’s plan to invade China – not by Hideyoshi’s letter but by words of a Korean escapee from Japan (RDAK, vol. 31, Revised Sillok of Seonjo, 1961, pp.209–10). Ming’s suspicion on Joseon grew nonetheless, and it was cleared only after more than a year later – on 2 July 1592, Seonjo showed Hideyoshi’s letter to Ming’s envoy and defended himself in tears that Japan invaded Joseon simply because he refused to

The rationalists’ influence remained significant even after the Japanese troops occupied the southern half of the Korean Peninsula that included the capital city of Hanseong. When Seonjo fled to Pyongyang in late May 1592, the loyalists made the suggestion of asking for military assistance from Ming but the rationalists were opposed to such idea. They believed that the Ming troops would also ruin Joseon and occupy the lands that were not yet taken by the Japanese. They even sent a Joseon court official to greet the Ming envoy and to describe how Joseon was badly destroyed by the Japanese intruders – for which Joseon was not able to accommodate Ming’s troops for long in the country (*RDAK, vol. 27, Seonjo Sillok*, 1961, p.332).

However, Seonjo was shocked by the swift advancing of the Japanese troops. After he ran to the city of Nyeongbyeon in the northern province of Pyongan, he decided to flee to China on 13 June 1592. He said that the Japanese would hunt him down wherever he fled to within Joseon. He would not die in the hands of the Japanese, and Ming would admit him and help him to regain the control of his country – because that was what a suzerain was supposed to do, as seen in the case of Vietnam in the early 1400s. A week later, Seonjo kept fleeing to the north and arriving in Uiju (located to the south of the Yalu River). The king agreed to stay there only because news from China arrived: the Ming court decided to rescue Joseon because Joseon was Ming’s vassal and it had been serving Ming faithfully in the past – although the Ming court was surprised and puzzled by the high velocity of Joseon’s defeat (*RDAK, vol. 27, Seonjo Sillok*, 1961, pp.335–6, p.341, pp.352–3).

On 2 September 1592, Wanli Emperor’s edict arrived in Uiju: the emperor dispatched an army of 100,000 soldiers to rescue Joseon, but he also instructed Seonjo and the court officials to actively participate in the restoration of Joseon. Seonjo felt relieved, but when the Ming envoy asked about purchasing Joseon rice for the Ming troops (since it was quite an impossible task to supply the Ming troops in Joseon with rice shipped from China), the king immediately answered
that Joseon was such a small and poor country that it was not able to supply the Ming troops with any rice even if the Ming court was to pay for it. Seonjo then went on to explain why the Joseon troops were rapidly defeated by the Japanese: Ming had been protecting Joseon for 200 years, and this had led to the result that the Koreans no longer knew how to fight (*RDAK*, vol. 27, *Seonjo Sillok*, 1961, p.376).

To Seonjo, if there were any responsibilities that some parties were accounted for in this war, Japan was the first one – as the trouble-maker, who was charged with all the wrongdoings. Ming was the second one, as the trouble-shooter, who was responsible for saving the innocent (Joseon) and punishing the culprit (Japan). As for Joseon, it was simply a victim. Seonjo’s logic was simple: in the hierarchical structure of the Sinocentric system, China was the ultimate senior thus the judge; Joseon and Japan were the junior and their behaviour was subject to the judgment of China the senior. Provided that Joseon served Ming sincerely as a junior, Ming as a senior should protect Joseon. In this case, Joseon had done its part: Joseon had been serving Ming for two centuries and Seonjo did not collaborate with Japan from the beginning, nor surrender to Japan after being invaded. He added that it was exactly because of his refusal to partner with Hideyoshi in attacking Ming that had led to Joseon being brutally destroyed by the Japanese intruders, and Joseon actually sacrificed itself to protect Ming by taking a devastating hit from Japan *for* Ming – which just made it all the more unquestionable for Ming to rescue Joseon.

However, the Ming court officials refuted Seonjo’s theory. They argued that Japan did not have to attack Joseon if it attempted to invade Ming; the Japanese could have crossed the sea and launched their attack in the Chinese coastal areas. It was out of Wanli Emperor’s humaneness and graciousness that Ming troops were sent to rescue Joseon, to which Joseon should be eternally obliged – so in early January 1593, they demanded that Seonjo and his court officials should immediately stop making such ungrateful claim. Seonjo had no choice but to accept the reprimand, but he was so upset that a week later, he announced his intention to abdicate and left the throne to his son (who had not yet received the investiture from Wanli Emperor), and he quietened down only when his court
officials begged him to give up the thought at such critical moment (RDAK, vol. 27, Seonjo Sillok, 1961, p.436, pp.445–6).

The Ming troops regained the control of a number of areas in the peninsula after a series of battles, but by early 1593 they came to a stand-off with the Japanese: both sides had their own logistical problems of supply. A truce was then negotiated between Ming and Japan, to which Seonjo was strongly opposed. The king criticised Ming’s decision with three reasons: first, he had not got his revenge for what the Japanese had done to Joseon; the Japanese must be crushed and expelled completely from the Korean Peninsula. Second, to him, negotiating with a bandit implied overlooking the crimes the bandit had committed. It would not be fair to the good child (Joseon) if the parents (Ming) were not to punish the bad child (Japan) after the bad had assaulted the good. Third, he believed that to China, Joseon was an important line of defence (‘the fence’ in Seonjo’s words) against any aggression from Japan hence it was Ming’s duty to safeguard Joseon. In other words, if Japan was to invade China, it would definitely annex Joseon first. For self-protection, China should defend Joseon from Japanese aggression (RDAK, vol. 27, Seonjo Sillok, 1961, p.513, pp.522–3, pp.578–81). While the first reason appeared to be rather emotional and the second one sounded a bit related to the Confucian value on family education, the third reason was certainly a strategic concern and a pragmatic proposition. This had been a consistent view of Seonjo and the rationalists, though not particularly welcomed by the Ming court (that usually placed an emphasis on Ming’s concern of righteousness to look after the benefits of its vassals).

While the Ming troops were about to withdraw from the Korean Peninsula after the agreement of ceasefire took effect, Song Yingchang, the Chief Administrator of Ming’s Military Campaign against Japanese Invasion of Joseon, wrote to Seonjo about three issues on 16 November 1593: first, Song proposed four measures to improve Joseon’s national defence. Second, Song asked the king to seriously reflect upon himself about how his incompetent rule had caused the failure in safeguarding his country and people. Third, it was the kindness of Wanli Emperor and the two centuries of Joseon’s faithful Sadae that had led to the rescue of Joseon. A reminder was added in the letter that if Seonjo failed to
review and correct what went wrong in his rule, the Japanese would soon invade Joseon again – but Ming would not help Joseon again. Seonjo was so upset that he emotionally talked about abdication again – and this time he was silenced by Wanli Emperor’s edict a month later: the emperor basically repeated what Song Yingchang had said, only with an emphasis placed on the duty of Seonjo, not of Wanli Emperor, to protect Joseon, because it was not realistic to make it a common and frequent practice for Ming troops to rescue Joseon anytime it got into trouble (*RDAK, vol. 27, Seonjo Sillok, 1961, p.682, pp.704–5*).

As the negotiation gone awry later in 1596, Seonjo came to be certain that Hideyoshi would not easily give up his ambition to conquer China. The king did not believe that the Japanese troops would withdraw from the Korean Peninsula simply because of a title the Ming court conferred to Hideyoshi. With the imminent peril of a second invasion coming from Japan and the future danger of being attacked by an increasingly powerful Jurchen to the north of Joseon’s border, Seonjo hence foresaw that, in the coming decade and beyond, Joseon would not be able to escape from wars. With the rational approach adopted in his analysis of interstate relations, plus his painful experience during the two-year Japanese invasion, Seonjo kept reminding the court officials of the paramount importance of strengthening national defence (*RDAK, vol. 28, Seonjo Sillok, 1961, pp.446–7, p.451*).

As Seonjo expected, Hideyoshi launched the second invasion in early 1597. In the Ming court, most of the officials were opposed to rescuing Joseon again, but Wanli Emperor and a couple of the senior court officials believed that Ming should help this loyal vassal one more time (*RDAK, vol. 29, Seonjo Sillok, 1961, pp.48–49*). On 24 October 1597, Wanli Emperor’s edict arrived in the Joseon court: the emperor was sending troops again to rescue Joseon. However, the emperor severely criticised the king and his officials for their extremely poor performance to strengthen national defence and to boost morale among the Koreans during the inter-war years. Seonjo found it difficult to accept the reprimand, and he raised the issue of abdication for the third time. Consoled by the court officials, he agreed to put it aside; there were more pressing issues to be dealt with such as manoeuvring the Joseon troops and coordinating the logistical
supply in order to cooperate with the Ming forces (RDAK, vol. 29, Seonjo Sillok, 1961, pp.186–7, pp.195–8).

In fighting off the Japanese second invasion, the Ming–Joseon relations experienced another up-and-down. On 1 July 1598, Seonjo sent a special envoy to the Ming court to defend Yang Hao, the head of Ming’s troops in Joseon and a military commander whom Seonjo felt comfortable to work with, was impeached by a Ming court official Ding Yingtai for misconduct. Seonjo offered Yang a helping hand because the king did not wish to manage another Ming commander with whom he might not be able to work harmoniously. However, Seonjo’s action enraged Ding Yingtai. Ding began to collect evidence about Joseon’s association with Japan. Among other information, Ding came to acquire a copy of Haedongchegukki, (Account of the Various Countries of the Eastern Sea, 海東諸國紀), a book written by Shin Suk-ju (1417–75, Yeonguijeong during Sejo’s reign) that documented the activities of interaction between Joseon and Japan. In September 1598, Ding wrote to the Ming court and accused Joseon for collaborating with Japan (RDAK, vol. 29, Seonjo Sillok, 1961, p.310, pp.321–2, pp.359–60).

Though the war was still going on, Seonjo had to handle the issue right away. He ordered to prepare a carefully written letter to defend Joseon, and presented the letter (signed in the name of all Joseon court officials) to the investigators dispatched by Wanli Emperor on 5 October 1598. Seonjo later sent a special mission to Ming on 21 October 1598 to defend Joseon. The accusation against Joseon was finally cleared on 29 October 1598 (RDAK, vol. 29, Seonjo Sillok, 1961, pp.380–1, pp.386–7, pp.390–1). Though the matter was resolved within four months, considering the critical moments during wartime, the impact on Joseon–Ming cooperation was significant. Moreover, the low level of trust between the two countries was clearly evident in the incident. This might be attributed to the pro-pragmatism orientation of Seonjo and the rationalists, which allowed the strategic concerns to frequently overpower the ethical principles of righteousness. When pragmatic thoughts championed, level of trust was discounted accordingly.
The above evidence, therefore, depicted the factor that Joseon would consider in a political reality: national interest, as reflected in the country’s survival. To the rationalists, ethical behaviour conforming to Confucianism did not necessarily bring material benefits that would genuinely address the country’s needs. ‘What worked’, to the rationalists, hence turned out to be much important than ‘what should be’. In the face of a superpower (i.e. Ming), Joseon had to act with prudence. Even though Joseon was supposed to be protected by Ming within the Sinocentric system, the national interest of Joseon would have to be secured with more than just an ideational faith for Sadae; it also required a pragmatic mentality of Yongdae.

In short, the practice of Sadae during the reigns of these nine Joseon kings, according to the different levels of thoroughness, is summarised in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Reign</th>
<th>High (as Filial Piety)</th>
<th>Medium (as Obligation)</th>
<th>Low (as Strategy)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1392-1398</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Taejo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1400-1418</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Taejong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1418-1450</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sejong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1455-1468</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sejo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1469-1494</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Seongjong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1494-1506</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yeonsan-gun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1506-1544</td>
<td>Jungjong</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1545-1567</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Myeongjong</td>
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<tr>
<td>1567-1608</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Seonjo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among the above nine Joseon kings, the reign of Jungjong was the only period that had witnessed the most obvious tendency of the key Joseon policymakers to serve the great considerably based on Confucian propriety instead of Ming’s material power. Apart from Jungjong’s era, no other kings’ reign during this period can be classified as the ‘pro-righteousness’. The majority of the other eight Joseon kings’ reign belonged to the category of the ‘pro-pragmatism’, which includes the ruling years of six Joseon kings, all of whom carried out the Sadae
policy towards Ming but merely using it as a means to achieve other ends. The political elites did not intend to challenge the Sinocentric order and its tribute system, only that they focused more on the benefits of themselves and/or those of Joseon and its people. *Sadae* thus appeared to them as a strategy rather than a duty in the interaction with Ming China.

As for the remaining two Joseon kings’ reign, they were segmented to the category labeled the ‘in-between (the pro-righteousness and the pro-pragmatism)’. These two Joseon kings had been struggling to achieve a balance between serving the great and securing Joseon’s benefits. Unfortunately, in many cases, the national interests of these two countries turned out to be divergent. Although it was rather clear that the gain of Ming meant the loss of Joseon in those cases, they found that they were trapped in the dilemma of whether they should adhere to the Confucian ethics of *Sadae* (but sacrificing Joseon’s interests) or they should discharge their duties as the national leader to safeguard Joseon’s interests (but violating the Confucian principles of righteousness). They wished to achieve both; however, they had to choose one between the two, painfully most of the time.

Chapter Summary

Distribution of power in Northeast Asia from the late 14\textsuperscript{th} to the early 17\textsuperscript{th} century undoubtedly indicated the hegemonic status of Ming with its superior material forces. Joseon, bordered Ming in the Northwest and profoundly influenced by the Chinese culture of Confucianism, adopted the *Sadae* policy and served Ming as its vassal. The historical evidence invoked in this chapter questioned the belief that Joseon had always served Ming devotedly in a Confucian way of filial piety between a son and his father. It also questioned the assertion that Joseon had served Ming purely out of strategic calculation in the sense that the wisdom of pragmatism always ruled. Significance of the ideational and material factors varied from time to time, from place to place, from actor to actor, and from issue to issue. The outcome therefore, was not to be pre-determined either by Confucian classics or realist theories alone. Even in a clear-cut case of Ming’s unipolar order, diversity could be found in the Joseon–great power relations.
The next chapter is to examine the complexity of Joseon’s *Sadae* during the period from 1608 to 1800 that experienced a genuine bipolar order, an imaginary bipolar order, and a new unipolar order. Compared with the Ming unipolar order studied in this chapter, results produced by circumstances interwoven with both the ideational and material factors in Northeast Asia during these two centuries appeared to be much more unexpected – if they were analysed solely from a constructivist or a realist perspective. To fully understand the rationale of Joseon’s *Sadae* towards the great power(s), a constructivist-cum-realist approach therefore would be needed again.
Chapter 5

Sadae in the Era of Changing Polarity (1608–1800):
a Bipolar, an Imaginary Bipolar, and a Unipolar Order

According to the realist theories, a clear distribution of power can be identified in Northeast Asia from 1608 to 1800. By applying the Power Transition Theory to this case, Ming was the existing dominant power while Manchu (Qing) was the revisionist power. The two conditions were also obvious to explain why Manchu challenged Ming: first, power disparity between Ming and Manchu was shrinking during the late 1500s and early 1600s. Second, Manchu was not satisfied with the status quo as Nurhaci aimed to overthrow Ming and establish his own empire. The result was also hardly out of one’s expectation: war broke out between the two and Manchu defeated Ming. Qing replaced Ming and became the hegemon in Northeast Asia, staying at the apex of the Sinocentric order until the end of the 18th century.

From the realist perspective, a minor power like Joseon would take either one of the two actions: 1) to assist Ming to balance against Manchu, if Joseon believed in Ming’s power to preserve its hegemonic status; 2) to ally with Manchu against
Ming, if Joseon believed in Manchu’s capability to replace Ming and become the dominant great power. After Ming was defeated and Qing became the only superpower, to the realists, Joseon should be left with simply one choice in such a clear-cut situation: to bandwagon with Qing. Alternatively, if the Joseon political elites strictly follow the Confucian principles of righteousness, the outcome would have been even simpler: Joseon would have stood by the side of Ming to fight off the aggressor, Manchu, even when Manchu appeared to be much more powerful than Ming. When Ming was eliminated by Qing, Joseon should die with Ming as a loyal minister ought to do for his prince. However, Joseon’s decisions were different from either the realists or the Confucian scholars would have expected. Joseon’s behaviour during these two centuries looked complicated: they were heavily influenced by the state ideology of Confucianism, yet they were also invariably restricted by the political reality at the time.

5.1 Joseon between Ming and Manchu

Joseon under the rules of Gwanghaegun and Injo was caught between the fight of two ‘whales’ in Northeast Asia: Ming and Manchu. In such a bipolar order that was unprecedented in Joseon’s history, competition between the ideational forces that valued righteousness and the material forces that advocated pragmatism also reached an intensive level that was never seen before. Wrestling with each other, the loyalists and the rationalists attempted to control the making of Joseon’s policy towards the great powers.

5.1.1 The Reign of Gwanghaegun (1608–23)

Gwanghaegun had been an unwavering rationalist throughout his reign, and his motto of not to infuriate either Ming or Manchu had been a consistent principle for him to fight off the loyalists, most of the time single-handedly, when managing the Joseon–Ming–Manchu relations. He prioritised the protection of Joseon’s interests, yet unlike the Ming’s unipolar order in which a pro-pragmatism Joseon court could simply perform its Sadae duties perfunctorily towards one great, the king would have to deal with two conflicting great powers. In order not to enrage Manchu, Joseon had to serve Ming half-heartedly, which
would in turn infuriate Ming (and vice versa). Gwanghaegun therefore had to handle the delicate issues in the trilateral relations cautiously and skillfully.

Gwanghaegun was the second son of Seonjo, and his father’s request of the imperial investiture to make him the crown prince was rejected by the Ming court four times: September 1595 (RDAK, vol. 28, Seonjo Sillok, 1961, pp.372–3), May 1603, the intercalary September of 1604, and November 1604 (RDAK, vol. 30, Seonjo Sillok, 1961, p.152, p.349, p.379–82). The reason was simple: Gwanghaegun was not the eldest son of Seonjo (Seonjo’s eldest son, Imhaegun, was alive and healthy at the time, but Gwanghaegun was favoured by Seonjo), thus to the Ming court appointing Gwanghaegun as the crown prince was a violation of Confucian propriety. In May 1608, the Ming court even refused to send investiture for Gwanghaegun’s enthronement (RDAK, vol. 32, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.54). There was no evidence in historical record to establish a direct link between this unpleasant experience of Gwanghaegun and his less enthusiastic attitude to serve Ming, but speculation on this was not completely unreasonable.

The pragmatic approach of Gwanghaegun could be typically found between 1618 and 1622, during which the Battle of Sarhu (1619), involving Joseon, Ming, and Manchu, took place. In this battle, the Ming–Joseon allied forces were totally defeated by Manchu and it became a turning point to confirm that Ming was no longer capable of keeping its hegemonic status from Manchu’s powerful military aggression. In fact, Gwanghaegun expressed his doubt on Ming’s ability to withstand Manchu’s attack even before the Battle of Sarhu. As early as in March 1618, Nurhaci wrote a letter to a Joseon court official, in which Nurhaci stated his grievance against Ming and announced his intention to attack Ming. He also hoped Joseon would understand his reasons to revolt against Ming (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.353). Until 27 April 1618, only at the request of Bibyeonsa (Council of Border Defence, 備邊司), Gwanghaegun agreed to report to the Ming court about Nurhaci’s letter (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.377).
Less than a month later, Li Weifan, Ming’s Grand Coordinator and Provincial Governor of Liaodong, informed the Joseon court that Ming had received information about Nurhaci’s plan to assault Fushun in Liaodong. Li thus specifically asked for 7,000 Joseon gunners to stand by for joining Ming’s military operation in due course (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.386). Two weeks later, news arrived in Joseon that the Ming troops in Liaodong were defeated and Fushun was captured by the Manchu. Wang Keshou, Deputy Minister of Ming’s Ministry of Defence, wrote to Gwanghaegun directly and asked for a Joseon force of at least 30,000 soldiers to collaborate with Ming’s regiments in the coming military campaign against Manchu. In the letter, Wang also reminded Gwanghaegun of the favour Joseon owed Ming in the Imjin War. However, based on his analysis on Manchu’s victory in Fushun, Gwanghaegun did not think that the Ming’s following campaign to attack Manchu would be successful. The king then ordered to gather more intelligence before making any decisions (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, pp.399–400).

In the following month, the Joseon court went through a debate between the loyalists and the rationalists. The loyalists insisted that Joseon should send the exact amount of soldiers required by Ming otherwise Joseon would be accused of being ungrateful to Ming’s efforts that saved Joseon during the Imjin War – Joseon could not afford to have its reputation as a faithful Confucian nation tainted by such accusation. The rationalists, headed by Gwanghaegun, argued with three points: 1) as a result of the Imjin War, millions of Koreans lost their lives and this had caused severe shortage of manpower in the military forces, for which it was impossible for Joseon to spare 30,000 soldiers to assist Ming; 2) Joseon had to deploy its limited number of military personnel in border defence against Japan and Manchu simultaneously; and 3) Joseon military forces were made of peasants who were only conscripted during wartime; they were not professional soldiers. They were poorly trained and would become a burden instead of assistance to the Ming forces when fighting the ferocious Manchu in battle.

The two sides kept debating almost every day for a month, and the rationalists compromised with the number of 7,000 soldiers as initially requested by Li
Weifan. Further pressed by the loyalists, Gwanghaegun eventually agreed to increase the number to 10,000, but he set the condition that he would send the troops only when he received Wanli Emperor’s edict. This decision was soon criticised by the commander of the Ming forces for being perfunctory because the king was thought to be deliberately vague about dispatching the troops – for there was no mentioning of the names of the senior commanding officers, the detailed breakdown of infantry and cavalry, the current location of the troops, and how the troops were drilled and prepared for combats on the battlefield (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, pp.402–18).

On 29 May 1618, the Joseon court received the report from the military governor of Pyongan Province: two weeks ago, Nurhaci sent a letter directly to Gwanghaegun, in which he openly announced his decision to rebel against Ming. More importantly to the Joseon court was that this time it was not Joseon’s understanding that Nurhaci asked for; he warned Joseon not to provide Ming with any military support, even if ordered by Ming. Otherwise, he would attack Joseon. The loyalists took this as a serious offence to Ming and pushed the king to assemble troops to be sent to Ming. However, Gwanghaegun forbade any official announcement of conscription with four reasons: 1) it would cause chaotic fear among the Koreans; 2) Joseon would be in grave danger if Manchu knew about Joseon’s intention to assist Ming; 3) he was sceptical about Ming’s chance to defeat Manchu; and 4) the emperor had not issued any edict yet to Joseon (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.414, pp.419–20, pp.422–4, pp.426–7, pp.429–30, pp.434–5, pp.438–9, p.442, p.466, pp.504–5).

On 19 June 1618, Yang Hao, commander of the Ming troops, wrote to Gwanghaegun and seriously criticised the king for sitting on the fence, being ungrateful to Ming and unfaithful in Sadae. Yang said that Ming’s military campaign against Manchu also aimed to help clear the danger that Manchu had been and would be bringing to Joseon, for which Gwanghaegun ought to send a regiment of 10,000 soldiers to assist Ming. Due to Yang’s efforts to rescue Joseon during the Imjin War, Gwanghaegun could not ignore Yang’s letter and on 4 July 1618, he replied to Yang with the usual excuses, but informed Yang the names of the commanding officers, the breakdown of gunner, archer, and commando of the

From early June 1618 to mid February 1619, the debate on conscription/dispatch of troops between the loyalists and the rationalists in the Joseon court continued without a pause. However, Gwanghaegun did not just immerse himself in the tug of war with the loyalists; he kept issuing detailed orders to strengthen national defence from mid May 1618. In fact, Gwanghaegun was deeply worried about Joseon’s security, and he had not been able to dine and rest properly for a long while. He even attempted to relay an appeasing message to Manchu indirectly by way of asking the governor of Hamgyong Province (Joseon’s province that bordered Manchu) to write a letter to Nurhaci in October 1618. In the letter, it was mentioned that Ming had been kind to Manchu for years, for which Manchu should not rebel against Ming simply because of some minor grievances. Joseon ought to condemn Manchu’s behaviour and refuse to collaborate with Manchu according to Confucian ethics, yet Joseon as a great country understood Manchu’s motive and decision. It would be fortunate to both Manchu and Joseon if Manchu was willing to abandon the idea of rebelling against Ming and to serve Ming faithfully, and amity between Manchu and Joseon would be preserved (*RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries*, 1962, pp.415–6, p.425, pp.433–4, pp.440–1, p.466, p.502, p.506).

Nevertheless, no matter how hard the Joseon rationalists had tried to stay as a by-stander, they had to give in when Wanli Emperor’s edict finally arrived on 13 February 1619, ordering the dispatch of at least 10,000 Joseon soldiers to assist Ming’s operation (*RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries*, 1962, p.535). Gwanghaegun had no choice but to follow the imperial order, and a regiment of 13,000 Joseon soldiers crossed the Yalu River on 21 February to meet with the Ming troops (*RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries*, 1962, p.536).

Before departure, Gwanghaegun said to General Gang Hong-rip (1560–1627), commander-in-chief of the Joseon regiment, that with Joseon troops joining the Ming force, appeasement with Manchu would no longer work. The king
instructed Gang that the general’s mission was to ensure the safety of the Joseon soldiers, for which he did not have to follow every order of the Ming commanders on the battlefield (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.532). Besides, the appointment of Gang was a questionable decision: Gang once begged Gwanghaegun for not to appoint him as commander-in-chief with the excuse that he had to take care of his sick mother (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.536). After departure, Gang kept sending reports to Gwanghaegun every day, but the king became increasingly worried by knowing the adverse situation of the Joseon troops, especially when he received no further reports from Gang as of 3 March (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.539). Eventually on 12 March 1619, as the king expected, news arrived that the Joseon expeditionary force, along with the Ming troops, were crushed by the Manchu forces. Many Joseon officers and soldiers fought to death, while Gang and his deputy surrendered to Manchu (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.542).

After the Battle of Sarhu, distribution of power in Northeast Asia was becoming clear: Ming turned much weaker in its competition with the increasingly stronger Manchu. In the Joseon court, Gwanghaegun and the rationalists became more convinced that Joseon should appease Manchu, while the loyalists continued to advocate fighting against Manchu and claimed they were ready to die for Ming. The wrestle between the two focused initially on whether or not Gang Hon-rip and other senior officers who surrendered to Manchu should be punished. In a letter sent from Manchu to the Joseon court on 2 April 1619, Gang’s confession was mentioned, which implied that his surrender was pre-arranged and he never intended to truly engage the Manchu troops. The loyalists thus repeatedly called for imprisoning the family members of Gang and the other senior officers, while Gwanghaegun firmly refused to do so and he also severely criticised the loyalists for being reckless, short-sighted, and good at merely talking nobly but without any effective actions to protect Joseon (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, pp.547–52).

However, the more pressing issue to the Joseon court at that moment was how to reply the Manchu letter. The loyalists insisted that Joseon should seriously condemn Manchu for rebelling against Ming according to Confucian ethics, but
Gwanghaegun called for everyone’s attention to the reality, saying that if Joseon was militarily capable to withstand Manchu’s assaults, he would adopt the loyalists’ ideas of burning the letter and denouncing Manchu. However, he did not think Joseon possessed any defensive capability against Manchu. The king invoked the example of the Imjin War – in his view, Joseon’s thoughtless rejection to Hideyoshi’s letter at the very beginning was exactly the cause that had led to the disastrous Japanese invasion. Joseon should not have turned down Japan because Joseon was incapable of defending itself against Japan – and the loyalists were about to repeat the same mistake. Gwanghaegun explained to them what Joseon needed at this critical moment was not the abstract principle of righteousness; Joseon needed time – time to postpone the coming of the greatest peril to Joseon (i.e. demise of the country) so that Joseon could urgently improve its military capability for national defence (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, pp.552–3).

The king finally gained the upper hand in the heated debate that lasted for nearly three weeks, and a reply letter was sent on 21 April 1619 to Manchu. In the letter, explanation was provided: Joseon dared not disobey Ming’s order because the Ming–Joseon relationship was one of father–son. Though bearing Confucian ethics in mind, Joseon always had the good will to befriend Manchu. Hence Joseon believed that as long as Manchu returned to the right track of serving Ming, Ming would forgive what Manchu had done. Joseon also truly wished that Manchu would not take any aggressive moves in future so that friendship between Joseon and Manchu could be maintained (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.555).

This was a typical reflection of Gwanghaegun’s principle of not to infuriate either Ming or Manchu. Even if the Ming court knew about this letter, Gwanghaegun might stand a good chance to escape Ming’s reprimand. However, Nurhaci simply had no intention to leave Gwanghaegun as he wished. On 14 July 1619, Nurhaci wrote to Gwanghaegun directly, saying that: 1) he hated those words about serving Ming in the letter, as Manchu would never serve Ming anymore; 2) in his view, Gwanghaegun was sitting on the fence; 3) Nurhaci suggested that Gwanghaegun should sign a pact with Manchu by swearing a blood oath if
Gwanghaegun truly wished to convince him of Joseon’s choice to ally with Manchu; and 4) he would leave Gwanghaegun to decide whether Joseon was to rebel against Ming as well (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.570).

Gwanghaegun believed that the letter must be answered as soon as possible in order to demonstrate Joseon’s good faith towards Manchu, but the king insisted that it was not necessary to sign any pact (he invoked the example of Japan, asserting that Joseon never asked Japan to sign any agreement after the Imjin War and messages were simply relayed by local officials in Busan). Gwanghaegun further explained his view to the state councillors that towards Ming, Joseon must practice Sadae cautiously; yet when handling Manchu, Joseon must act as pragmatically as possible – because Joseon was unable to defend itself against Manchu (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.571, p.580). As the loyalists were strongly opposed to communicating with Manchu for the fear that Gwanghaegun might gradually yield to Nurhaci’s demands, another month-long debate took place between the loyalists and the rationalists. This time Gwanghaegun gave in, though reluctantly: a decision was made on 14 August 1619 that the Joseon court was not to reply Nurhaci’s letter – but the king warned that Joseon would be eliminated by Manchu, and the loyalists would be responsible for the future demise of Joseon. Gwanghaegun said that he held no objection to righteousness, but he was convinced that it would not be wise to abandon pragmatism (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, pp.581–2).

Although Gwanghaegun did not reply Nurhaci’s letter, the Ming court learned about the previous communication between Joseon and Manchu. Plus the suspicious surrender of Gang Hon-rip in the Battle of Sarhu, some Ming court officials began to suspect that Joseon was collaborating with Manchu against Ming. Xu Guangqi proposed to Wanli Emperor that a senior court official of Ming should be appointed as the guardian of Joseon so as to monitor the Joseon court, ensuring that Joseon would not betray Ming and collaborate with Manchu. When the Joseon tribute missions reported this to Gwanghaegun on 3 October 1619, Xu’s suggestion indeed shocked everyone in the Joseon court: if implemented, it was to become an unprecedented practice by which China would directly interfere with Joseon’s policymaking. In order to safeguard Joseon’s reputation, the
loyalists anxiously urged Gwanghaegun to: 1) imprison the family members of the senior officers who surrendered to Manchu in the Battle of Sarhu; 2) cease correspondence with Manchu immediately; 3) execute the pro-Manchu Joseon interpreters who had been frequently travelling between Joseon and Manchu. However, Gwanghaegun refused to carry out any of these suggestions (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, pp.595–7) – and the king actually had his reasons.

By late 1619, Gwanghaegun became convinced that Ming was moving towards its end because it was worn out by years of fighting against Manchu. He foresaw that domestic unrest (i.e. peasant revolts) would speed up Ming’s decline, and Manchu would take over the rule of China soon. After expressing this view openly in the court on 22 December 1619, Gwanghaegun asserted that a long-term strategy to ensure Joseon’s security was a mix of appeasement with Manchu on one hand and at the same time, self-strengthening on the other (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.611). Gwanghaegun’s view in fact signaled the change of his equal focus on both Ming and Manchu in the past; now his focus was tilting towards Manchu – it became more important for Joseon not to infuriate Manchu. According to his analysis, the great that Joseon would have to serve in future was Manchu, not Ming. The king’s advocate of self-strengthening also indicated his waning confidence in Ming to rescue Joseon: he kept ordering his subordinates to enhance border defence and he even attempted to ‘separate soldiers from peasants’ for the goal of establishing a system to train professional servicemen (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.396, p.618).

On 4 February 1621, when Gwanghaegun heard about Manchu’s attack in Liaodong, he openly commented that Manchu’s military power was hundred times’ stronger than that of Japan, and he forecasted that Mukden would be soon captured by Manchu (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.690). The loyalists kept calling for people’s conscience to rescue Ming – they were aware of the difference in military power between the vulnerable Joseon and the mighty Manchu, yet they would not desert their ‘father’ (i.e. Ming) and they were willing to sacrifice Joseon for the sake of righteousness (RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.690). Before long, as Gwanghaegun expected, the Ming forces of
300,000 soldiers were defeated and Mukden fell into the hands of Manchu in June 1621. Gwanghaegun foresaw that Ming would collapse soon, and once again he warned the loyalists that the only strategy left for Joseon was his combination of appeasement and self-strengthening (*RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.705*).

In view of Manchu’s overwhelming power after its victory in Liaodong thus its possible intention to invade Joseon, on 10 September 1621, Gwanghaegun sent General Jeong Chung-sin to Manchu for peace negotiation. However, Nurhaci clearly understood that Gwanghaegun was not ready to openly rebel against Ming. To detach Joseon from Ming, Nurhaci demanded a written agreement to be signed by Gwanghaegun. Once again, Gwanghaegun refused to do so and insisted that correspondence between local officials in the border region or exchange of interpreters would be sufficient to maintain peaceful relations between Joseon and Manchu (*RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, pp.727–9, p.777, p.799*).

By this time, Gwanghaegun’s dual tactics were also known to some Ming officials. On 18 May 1622, Liang Zhiyuan, inspector-general of the Ming troops, wrote to the Joseon court with rather harsh words and severely criticised Joseon for frequently being ambiguous in its attitude and vague of its stance, like ‘a rat looking to both ways’. Due to its disregard of righteousness, Joseon would not be able to face people in the world, even those of generations to come in future (*RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, p.779*). The loyalists felt utterly shameful and thought that Gwanghaegun had completely disgraced Joseon. They could not tolerate the treasonable behaviour of Gwanghaegun anymore, and they eventually had him dethroned through a coup on 14 March 1623. The queen dowager announced a list of crimes Gwanghaegun committed during his reign – being unfaithful when serving Ming was a major one (*RDAK, vol. 33, Gwanghaegun Diaries, 1962, pp.823–5*).

Undoubtedly, Gwanghaegun was a rationalist who favoured pragmatic thinking. The year of 1618 was the start of a turbulent period in Northeast Asia due to the revisionist behaviour of the rising Manchu. Gwanghaegun’s insightful analyses were partly resulted from his experience in the Imjin War, through which he
gained first-hand knowledge about Ming’s military capability and combat strategy. Yet above all, it had been his pragmatic mentality that guided him to understand and foresee the interstate relations clearly and accurately, and to take the what-would-work actions based on his rational thus realistic cost–benefit calculations. His pragmatic strategy could have saved Joseon from being crushed in the fight of two ‘whales’ – his strategy could be a factor that helped to postpone the catastrophic Manchu invasions – had he been able to completely abandon the Confucian ethics of propriety. However, four years after the Battle of Sarhu by which power disparity between Ming and Manchu had become crystal clear, Gwanghaegun in 1622 was still attached to the Confucian ethics and hesitated to sign a pact with Nurhaci. The fact that he was deposed by the loyalists was simply a proof to confirm that the ideational forces did matter in Joseon–great power(s) relations, sometimes even to the extent of overpowering the material forces.

5.1.2 The Reign of Injo (1623–49)

The 28-year-old Injo ascended the throne in March 1623 as Gwanghaegun was deposed by the loyalists. During Injo’s reign, Joseon experienced two Manchu invasions: Jeongmyo Horan (1627, 丁卯胡亂) and Byeongja Horan (1636–7, 丙子胡亂). Both invasions brought Joseon devastating damages, and as a result of Byeongja Horan, Joseon was forced to submit to Hong Taiji (son of Nurhaci, emperor of Qing) in January 1637 and became a vassal state of Qing instead of Ming ever since. The ruling years of Injo witnessed the climax of the loyalist–rationalist struggle, which greatly influenced Injo’s thinking and made the king change his stance of Sadae from time to time by shifting between the two extremes of pro-righteousness and pro-pragmatism.

At the beginning of his rule, Injo appeared to be determined in Sadae faithfully. When meeting a lieutenant of Mao Wenlong (military leader of a Ming division to battle against Manchu from bases inside Joseon) on 22 March 1623 (i.e. one week after his enthronement), Injo apologised again for what Gwanghaegun did and pledged to assist Ming in the fight against Manchu (RDAK, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.12). On 8 April 1623, Injo apologised to a Ming envoy once more about
Gwanghaegun’s ungratefulness to Ming. The king promised that he would do his utmost to serve Ming and Joseon would fully cooperate with Ming in the military campaign against Manchu (RDAK, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.22). Before Jeongmyo Horan in 1627, Injo was perfectly clear about his pro-Ming, anti-Manchu stance. This was appreciated by the Ming court, and the Joseon–Ming relations turned cordial again. In October 1625, after the birth of his son, Tianqi Emperor issued an edict to the Joseon court, saying that he wished to share his joy with Injo because the king had been serving Ming sincerely. This was highly unusual because Joseon was merely a vassal to Ming, and the emperor should only inform heads of the local authorities within China of such matter (RDAK, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.303–4). What Tianqi Emperor did hence could be deemed as a proof that the poor Joseon–Ming relations resulted from Gwanghaegun’s pro-pragmatism behaviour basically had reached an end; the harmonious ‘senior–junior’ relationship between the two emerged again.

The turning point of Injo’s attitude was Jeongmyo Horan. While Nurhaci had been prudent in handling the Manchu–Joseon relations and mainly aimed to deter Joseon from supporting Ming in the fight between Manchu and Ming, his son, Hong Taiji appeared to be much more aggressive. He believed that the sequence for Manchu’s expansion should be: to conquer Joseon before attacking Ming – by eliminating the possibility of Joseon’s support to Ming, Manchu could concentrate on the assaults against Ming (RDAK, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.343–4). In January 1627, Manchu troops invaded Joseon without prior notice. Overrunning the weak resistance of the Joseon forces, the Manchu army besieged Uiju (near the border) on 13 January and captured Pyongyang on 24 January. Injo was shocked by the rapid advance of the Manchu troops and fled to Ganghwado on 1 February (RDAK, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.356, p.361, p.364). The next day, Amin (commander-in-chief of the Manchu forces) sent a letter to Injo, saying that if Joseon wished to have peace with Manchu, it would have to sever its relationship with Ming and to become a ‘younger brother’ of Manchu. Amin also mentioned that if Ming was enraged by Joseon’s alliance with Manchu, Joseon should have nothing to fear: because Manchu, as the ‘elder brother’, would protect Joseon (RDAK, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.364).
Injo did not forget the Confucian ethics, yet he did not abandon the use of pragmatic solution either. Two days after receiving Amin’s letter, the rationalists proposed the idea of peace-negotiation. The loyalists fiercely condemned such idea, considering it a great shame to appease Manchu for survival. They praised those officials who killed themselves instead of surrendering to Manchu and suggested that every Korean fight against Manchu until his last breath. However, Injo explained to the loyalists that negotiation was merely a tactic to stall off the enemy, and he even issued an edict to all Joseon subjects on 4 February to clarify his intention. The king then sent a letter to Amin on 5 February, saying that Joseon had been serving Ming for over two centuries, for which Joseon as a Confucian nation of propriety found it unethical to rebel against Ming. However, Injo did not see serving Ming and befriending Manchu as incompatible; serving Ming would not forbid Joseon to maintain amity with Manchu. Two days later, Amin replied, saying that he did not think Injo truly wished to negotiate. He asserted that there would not be any peace talk between the two if Joseon was not to end its relation with Ming. He threatened that the Manchu troops would occupy Hanseong for at least one year (RDAK, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.365–6, p.368).

From 7 February to 2 March, the debate between the loyalists and the rationalists did not pause for a single day. The loyalists, led by Yun Hwang (1571–1639) and Chang Yu (1587–1638), insisted that Joseon had a moral obligation towards Ming thus Joseon would commit the greatest sin if it ceased to serve Ming. Acceptance of Manchu’s condition would completely destroy Joseon’s reputation earned by their ancestors’ tireless efforts. They believed that negotiation was no different from surrender, and by Confucian ethics, the king and every Joseon subject should fight Manchu to death if necessary. They accused those who advocated negotiation with Manchu for having committed the crime of treason and asked Injo to have them executed.

However, the rationalists, headed by Choe Myung-kil (1586–1647) and Yi Kwi (1557–1633), considered negotiation as the only option to resolve the current crisis. They severely criticised the loyalists for producing nothing substantial to fight off the enemy but only empty rhetoric that sounded admirable. The standoff
between the two gradually changed to a situation in which the rationalists started to gain the upper hand – mainly due to Injo’s tilt towards pro-pragmatism. In view of the critical situation at the moment, Injo believed that Joseon could survive only if Amin was willing to withdraw the Manchu army. For such reason, Injo did not find it humiliating to accept the terms of: to send his brother as hostage to Manchu; to send tribute payment of gold and other precious goods to Manchu (but not as a vassal to Manchu); and to use the era name of Later Jin instead of Ming in the Joseon–Manchu correspondence (but not sever Joseon’s relationship with Ming). Though strongly opposed by the loyalists, Injo even chose to ignore the Confucian principles of propriety and met with the Manchu messenger in person (RDAK, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.368–78).

Eventually on 3 March 1627, a treaty of mutual non-aggression was signed between the two, by which Joseon would recognise Manchu as its ‘elder brother’ and agree to perform the duties required (hostage, tribute payment, and era name, etc.). Subsequently, the Manchu army withdrew, the rationalists felt relieved about the end of a national crisis, and the loyalists insisted to punish the rationalists but again denied by Injo (RDAK, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.378–9). On 1 April, Injo wrote a lengthy memorial to the throne and explained to Tianqi Emperor in detail about the Manchu invasion. The king said he was full of remorse for Joseon’s failure to resist subjugation by the powerful Manchu, and with great shame like a son who failed to perform his filial duties to the parents, Injo sincerely begged for Ming’s understanding, mercy, and forgiveness (RDAK, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.387–9).

Nevertheless, during the decade between the two Manchu invasions (1627–36), the influence of the loyalists grew again in the Joseon court. This was resulted from: 1) the Koreans in general (scholar officials in particular) who valued Confucian ethics found it difficult to accept the humiliation of negotiating peace with Manchu, the barbarian with a culture inferior to that of Joseon; 2) by the treaty signed at the end of Jeongmyo Horan, Manchu demanded more tribute payment year after year, adding tremendous burden on Joseon; and 3) Injo appeared to be indecisive in choosing his stance between pro-righteousness and pro-pragmatism.
After *Jeongmyo Horan*, Injo’s thinking was no longer confined to the Confucian ethics; he became open to pragmatic ideas, for he experienced the moment of life and death when pragmatic solutions proved to be the only guarantee for survival. Nevertheless, Injo did not forget the Confucian ethics, particularly about Joseon’s duty to serve Ming. Apart from the reason of being educated by Confucian classics, why he was crowned at the very beginning (Gwanghaegun was toppled exactly because of his failure in *Sadae*) and the persistent presence of the loyalists’ powerful influence were also factors that had been keeping Injo from joining the rationalists. Consequently, Injo exhibited a trace of shifting towards the stance of pro-righteousness during this period.

A week after Injo returned to the capital city from Ganghwado, the loyalists began to take action. Jeong Gyeong-se (1563–1633, a mild loyalist), persuaded Injo to reinstate Yun Hwang as the head of *Saganwon* on 19 April 1627 – for Injo told Jeong in the court that he regretted to have been too harsh in punishing Yun Hwang (during *Jeongmyo Horan* in February, Yun Hwang openly criticised that Injo’s plan to negotiate with Manchu was the same as surrendering to the enemy, for which he was charged of smearing the king and was removed from the position of head of *Saganwon*) (*RDAK*, vol. 34, *Injo Sillok*, 1962, p.392).

On 23 August 1629, Gim Sang-hon (1570–1652), one of the prominent loyalists, wrote to Injo and asked the king to reject the increasing Manchu demands. He reminded Injo that the peace treaty was signed as a temporary tactic to avoid more bloodshed; it was not a permanent solution. The more obedient Joseon was to Manchu, the more aggressive Manchu was to Joseon. In Gim’s view, Joseon should not keep yielding to Manchu because Manchu was a barbaric tribe that could not be reasoned with; Joseon must stop to fulfil Manchu’s endless greed. In addition, Gim pointed to the fact that Injo had been less open to the loyalists’ ideas in recent years, of which Gim believed to be the reason that had made people confused about right and wrong. He encouraged Injo to be determined when taking actions to reform and strengthen Joseon. Injo’s response to Gim’s words was rather positive: the king appreciated Gim’s advice and promised to keep it in mind (*RDAK*, vol. 34, *Injo Sillok*, 1962, pp.542–3).
On 13 November 1632, Yi Chun (1560–1635), a senior official of Yejo, wrote to Injo and asked the king not to be complacent about the brief period of peace resulted from appeasement with Manchu; appeasement would turn out to be merely an expedient solution to the present problems but it would bring a lot more troubles and dangers to Joseon in future. Yi believed that Joseon should say no to Manchu and Joseon would have nothing to fear – as long as Injo had the resolution to fight Manchu, morale among the Joseon soldiers would be effectively boosted. After all, the view that Manchu was invincible was just a fallacy. Again, Injo highly praised Yi’s opinion and agreed to adopt it in policymaking (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.42).

Another example of Injo’s changing attitude towards pro-righteousness was his response to the request of Bibyeonsa in 1633. On 29 January, Bibyeonsa asked Injo, for the sake of righteousness, to officially reject Manchu’s demands for more tribute payment. The reason was that Manchu threatened to increase its demands by more than ten times if they were not satisfied with Joseon’s tribute payment. In fact, what Joseon had sent to Manchu in the past years had placed enormous burden to the Koreans. Bibyeonsa argued that if the option of appeasement with Manchu in 1627 was adopted for the benefits of the Koreans, its effect at the moment had completely deviated from the original purpose.

Hence Bibyeonsa believed that, by upholding the Confucian principles of righteousness, all Koreans would support Injo in the fight against Manchu. To respond to Bibyeonsa’s request, Injo immediately issued an edict: the Joseon court was to condemn Manchu for breaching the 1627 agreement and to reject their unreasonable demands. Injo reiterated that the peace treaty was meant to appease the enemy such that the nation could be saved and the Koreans would not be slaughtered. However, the greedy and cunning Manchu took it as an opportunity to exploit the Koreans, for which the king was going to stop it. Injo then went on to warn that, as the barbarians had no knowledge about reason and sense of righteousness, border skirmishes would be inevitable and imminent. At the end of the edict, the king appealed to every Joseon subject to unite and to prepare for fighting the enemy (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.49). In general, the
inter-war period was charged with the pro-righteousness, anti-Manchu passion that ran high in Joseon.

What triggered the outbreak of *Byeongja Horan* happened in early 1636. Hong Taiji sent an envoy to Joseon in February 1636 and informed the Joseon court that the name of his kingdom was changed from ‘Later Jin’ to ‘Qing’, and his title was elevated from ‘Great Khan’ to ‘Emperor’. The loyalists were shocked and enraged by such changes, which in their eyes was an open defiance and blasphemy to Ming. Hong Ik-han (1586–1637) severely condemned Hong Taiji and he believed that Joseon would become an eternal sinner to the world if the Joseon court were to acknowledge Hong Taiji as an emperor. He was convinced that the evil purpose of Hong Taiji was to make Joseon the first country within the Sinic world to recognise his new status. If Joseon, a vassal that had been most faithfully serving Ming for over two centuries, acknowledged his emperorship, all other countries would follow suit. Hence Hong Ik-han proposed to execute the Qing envoy, send the Qing letter to the Ming court, and rebuke Hong Taiji – he insisted that this was the only way to prove Joseon’s allegiance to Ming and devotion to Confucian ethics.

Injo praised Hong Ik-han for his loyalty, but thought that it was not yet the right time to execute the Qing envoy. At the same time, scholars from the royal academy also wrote to Injo with a proposal similar to that of Hong Ik-han. They believed that the most important thing to Joseon at the moment was to announce to the world that Joseon had been and would always be a nation of Confucian ethics, and Joseon would never do anything against the Confucian principles of righteousness even at the cost of being eliminated by the barbarian. Injo also showed appreciation to their loyalty, and promised to bear their proposal in mind. At the request of *Bibyeonsa*, on 21 February 1636, Injo decided not to receive the Qing envoy (*RDAK*, vol. 35, *Injo Sillok*, 1962, pp.162–3).

When the Qing envoy arrived in Hanseong on 24 February, they were denied access to the royal palace; furthermore, they were chastised face-to-face by the loyalists. At the same time, Jeong On (1569–1641, then head of *Saganwon*) urged Injo to be determined when denouncing Qing. He insisted that the wording must
not be ambiguous, otherwise it would be misinterpreted and Joseon’s reputation would be ruined. Injo praised Jeong and agreed with his idea. The next day, 138 students of Taehak (the highest educational institution in Joseon, 太學) wrote to Injo collectively and asked the king to execute the Qing envoy and burn the Qing letter so as to manifest Joseon’s pro-righteousness stance. Although Choe Myung-kil, head of the rationalists, suggested Injo to meet with the Qing envoy for the sake of not to enrage Hong Taiji, the Qing envoy left Hanseong on 26 February due to the surging anti-Qing sentiment in the capital city. When they exited through the city gate, they were humiliated by surrounding Koreans, with children throwing roof tiles at them (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.163–4).

On 1 March, Injo issued an edict to inform all Joseon subjects of the rejection of Qing envoy and the burning of Qing letter, and such decision was made by the Joseon court for the purpose of upholding the Confucian principles of righteousness, in spite of Joseon’s weakness and the possible demise of the country. Injo then made an impassioned appeal to his people to prepare for defending the country against the coming Qing invasion. With Bibyeonsa deploying troops for defence in the following months, on 17 June 1636, the Joseon court sent a letter to Qing, accusing Qing for breaching the 1627 treaty. By invoking the example of Joseon’s rejection of Hideyoshi’s proposal five decades ago, Injo reiterated that Joseon had always revered and served Ming faithfully thus it was impossible for Joseon to rebel against Ming. In the letter, the king admitted that Joseon had neither powerful forces nor sufficient resources to resist Qing’s invasion; the only possession of Joseon was Confucian ethics, with which Joseon would not be intimidated and subjugated by Qing (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.164–71, pp.173–4).

Until the dispatch of this letter, Joseon had reached the point of no return: the decade-long peace with the Manchu came to an end. Yet from late August to early December, the Joseon court was once again stormed by vehement arguments between the loyalists and the rationalists (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.182–95). The focus of debate was firstly placed on whether Joseon should choose to fight or continue to appease Qing. Same as before, the loyalists insisted
that this was an issue of morality, while the rationalist believed that this was a matter of strategy. As war would much likely bring Joseon to its end (as expected and prepared for by the loyalists) but appeasement seemed more promising to assure Joseon’s survival (as repeatedly mentioned by the rationalists), Injo began to gradually shift from the camp of pro-righteousness to that of pro-pragmatism.

An obvious change of Injo’s attitude could be seen in the argument of whether Joseon should address Manchu as Qing. The loyalists were strongly opposed to using the word ‘Qing’ because it was the name of an empire, and the very existence of this empire was illegitimate according to the tenets of Confucianism. It thus would be immoral for Joseon to use the word of ‘Qing’ in its correspondence with Manchu; moreover, it would also imply Joseon’s willingness to submit to the barbarians. However, Injo, in support of Choe Myung-kil’s suggestion to permanently use the word of ‘Qing’ in all official documents, openly expressed his view on 19 September that he had no objection to addressing Manchu as Qing (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.187).

Consequently, the loyalists, most of whom were young court officials, turned to condemn the rationalists for betraying Joseon. They demanded that the rationalists, Choe Myung-kil in particular, to be punished. Yet in contrary to the loyalists’ appeal, Injo defended Choe, praising him as a man of action who had always been loyal to Joseon. The king punished those who openly criticised Choe, including Yun Jip (1606–37) and O Dal-jae (1609–37). With the change of Injo’s attitude, the rationalists started to gain the upper hand in the debate from mid November. The king endorsed Choe Myung-kil’s plan to appease Qing, and Gim Ryu (1571–1648, then Yeonguijeong) publicly said in court that he would ensure the implementation of the appeasement policy despite that it was deemed by the people an act that violated Confucian ethics. From mid November to early December, Injo simply rejected any idea/advice of the loyalists (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.188–95).

While the endless debate continued in the Joseon court, Hong Taiji launched another invasion and soon captured Anju (in Pyongan Province) on 13 December 1636 – Byeongja Horan began. On 14 December, knowing that Kaesong (in
Hwanghae Province) had fallen in Qing’s hands, Injo was astonished by the swift advance of the enemy and decided to take refuge in Ganghwado again. However, when Injo’s entourage was about to leave Hanseong in the evening, to their horror, they saw Qing’s vanguard troops already arriving at the gate of the capital city. Injo had no choice but to enter Namhansanseong (South Han Mountain Fortress, a bastion to the immediate southeast of Hanseong). After a failed attempt to leave Namhansanseong for Ganghwado on 15 December due to heavy snow, it became clear that the king and his court officials would be trapped in the fortress (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.196).

From 15 December 1636 to 29 January 1637, although besieged by the Qing troops and the reserves of food and ammunition gradually running out, the confrontation between the loyalists and the rationalists continued (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.196–211). For the loyalists, they kept condemning the rationalists, pled Injo not to surrender, asked the king to execute the leading figures of the rationalists (particularly Choe Myung-kil), led the remaining Joseon troops in the fortress to fight off the Qing attacks, and volunteered to be sent to Qing to be executed by Hong Taiji (as Hong Taiji ordered Injo to send those pro-Ming, anti-Qing loyalists to Qing such that he would feel less enraged by having them executed) – many loyalists even committed suicide as a manifestation of their loyalty to Ming.

As for the rationalists, they kept criticising the loyalists for being incapable of saving the country. They persuaded Injo to surrender with the claim that a vassal state should not die for its suzerain. Meanwhile, they travelled back and forth between the fortress and the Qing camp to negotiate the terms and coordinate the arrangement for Joseon’s surrender. They even prepared the documents of Joseon’s surrender to the satisfaction of the Qing emperor (the documents were revised several times to be as humble as possible to please Hong Taiji). Besides, they urged Injo to send the loyalists to the Qing camp to be executed by Hong Taiji as soon as possible in order to end the crisis.

At this critical moment, Injo turned into a leader of contradicting behaviour: sometimes he supported the loyalists with his determination to resist Qing, but
sometimes he agreed with the rationalists to submit to Qing so that Joseon could avoid the fate of being eliminated. For several times, Injo commented that both pro-righteousness and pro-pragmatism were right and he could not reject either one of them – the king was apparently trapped in the dilemma of not knowing which option to choose: he fully understood his moral obligation to uphold the Confucian principles of ethics, yet he also clearly saw the merits of pragmatism to assure Joseon’s survival. As a matter of fact, Injo often cried openly in front of the court officials during this period. Although he even kept performing the Sadae ritual in the fortress by bowing towards the direction of the imperial palace in Beijing on the Ming emperor’s birthday and the New Year’s Day (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.198, p.201), when he received report after report that the Joseon forces from other regions coming to their rescue were all defeated by the Qing troops, Injo realised that the situation became hopeless.

On 29 January, Injo, with painful grief, sent the three loyalists of Hong Ik-han, Yun Jip and O Dal-jae (later revered as ‘the three martyrs of Byeongja Horan’) to Qing to be executed. A letter in the name of the Joseon court was also sent to Hong Taiji, informing him of Joseon’s decision to surrender. On 30 January 1637, Injo and the Joseon court officials exited Namhansanseong and surrendered to Hong Taiji in the nearby Samjeondo. In the ceremony of submission, Injo kowtowed to Hong Taiji in the fashion of a vassal towards its suzerain to show reverence for Qing (i.e. Injo knelt down before Hong Taiji, bowed so low until his forehead touched the ground three times, and stood up. The king then repeated this set of ritual consecutively for two more times) – which was considered an extreme humiliation to the loyalists (and the king himself as well). By the agreement, Joseon would sever its relationship with Ming and acknowledge Qing as its suzerain with immediate effect. The first two sons of Injo were ordered to be sent to Qing as hostages, and Joseon began to pay tribute to Qing the same way it did for Ming (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.212).

Nonetheless, the rationalists considered the ending of Byeongja Horan as their victory over the loyalists, whom they called ‘stubborn and incompetent’, and credited themselves as Joseon’s saviour (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.228–30). From February 1637 to the end of Injo’s reign in 1649, the
rationalists controlled the making of Joseon’s foreign policy. With no objection from Injo, they even decided to assist Qing in its war against Ming, although it was fiercely opposed to by the loyalists (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.285–6, pp.318–9, p.329). In June 1646, after Qing returned General Im Gyeong Eop (a pro-Ming Joseon military commander who continued to fight Qing after Byeongja Horan and was later captured by Qing) to Joseon to be executed by the rationalists, Gim Ja-jeom (1588–1651, Yeonguijeong at the time, a leading rationalist) suggested to Injo that a special tribute mission should be sent to Qing in order to show Joseon’s gratitude to Qing, saying that this was the true way of faithful Sadae (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.535–7).

As for Injo, he found it difficult to accept the humiliation to submit to the barbaric Qing, and he also expressed sympathy when Saheonbu redressed the issue regarding those loyalists who died for upholding Confucian ethics during Byeongja Horan on 5 May 1638 (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.272–3). However, he realised it was now more important for Joseon to serve Qing cautiously because Qing’s military power was simply overwhelming. He then decided to show his allegiance to Qing:

- On 23 June 1641, Injo sent Qing a gift – the precious gold that had been preserved since the days of Silla. This voluntary act of Injo pleased Hong Taiji, who later issued an edict to praise Injo for his sincere Sadae towards Qing (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.372–3).
- When the shocking news that Chongzhen Emperor committed suicide in Beijing arrived at the Joseon court on 7 May 1644, many people in the royal palace (even the servants) wept for the demise of Ming; yet with Injo’s endorsement, a congratulatory mission was sent to Qing on 21 May (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.439–40).
- In October 1644, the loyalists proposed to organise mourning ceremonies for Chongzhen Emperor, saying that it was necessary according to Confucian ethics (to show that Joseon was not an
ungrateful nation to what Ming had done for it). Injo did not reject the idea, but he asked the court officials to discuss the proposal among them covertly. Eventually, the proposal was not materialised (*RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.451).

- When Choe Myung-kil, the leading rationalist who was despised and loathed by the loyalists, died on 17 May 1647, Injo sadly mourned for his death and highly praised him for his ability and loyalty to Joseon (*RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.558).

In sum, while the debates between the loyalists and the rationalists in the past were limited to rhetoric, the two camps confronted with each other in real actions during the reigns of Gwanghaegun and Injo, and in the end pragmatism triumphed over morality in the making of Joseon’s foreign policies. Had it not been for the powerful influence of ideational forces, the trajectory of Joseon history would have been much simpler: a straight line instead of a zigzag path as seen in the first half of the 17th century.

Power transition from Ming to Qing in Northeast Asia occurred and completed within three decades, however, the competition between the camps of pro-righteousness and pro-pragmatism persisted even after the collapse of Ming. This time it was the loyalists that gained the upper hand in its rivalry against the rationalists. For around 120 years, Joseon chose to serve the fallen Ming as the great, although Joseon was officially a vassal state of Qing and Qing’s military supremacy in the region was unquestionable. Therefore, a unique period of an imaginary bipolar order emerged.

5.2 Joseon between the Fallen Ming and Qing

After Ming’s collapse in 1644, distribution of power in Northeast Asia indicated that although there were sporadic unrests within China proper or along its periphery, no country in the region was in the same league of Qing in terms of military capability. A unipolar order re-emerged, only with Qing replacing Ming. However, to the Joseon loyalists who pledged their eternal allegiance to Ming according to Confucian ethics, the transition of power did not necessarily take
place. In their eyes, Qing has risen to become a pole of material power, but in no way it could replace Ming as the centre of the civilised Sinocentric world; the Manchu were nothing but a tribe of barbarians after all. Hence, an imaginary bipolar order came to exist in the mind of the loyalists. This might appear to be an illusion to the rationalists, but the loyalists, for a substantial amount of time, maintained the perception that the fallen Ming coexisted with Qing – and it was their moral obligation to keep revering Ming, whereby Joseon would be able to continuously serve the great they recognised. Furthermore, to those loyalists who were radical in their approach, the right way to serve Ming was Bukbeol (Northern Expedition, 北伐): to punish the Manchu by taking military actions against Qing.

This was a period that witnessed the loyalists’ domination in the making of Joseon foreign policy – either by the radical or the moderate loyalists. While the radical loyalists aimed to launch Bukbeol against Qing as vengeance on the Manchu for what they had done to Ming and Joseon, the moderate loyalists however opted for conservative tactics to implicitly express their reverence for Ming and disdain for Qing. Yet by either way, the overarching discourse at the time was Jonju Yangyi (respecting the Zhou Dynasty and resisting the barbarians, 尊周攘夷, with Zhou being referred to Ming and the barbarian being hinted as Qing), which was derived from the Confucian ethics of propriety.

The loyalists’ triumph over the rationalists was attributed to Joseon’s submission to Qing in 1637 and the rationalists’ unrestrained pro-Qing behaviour, which gradually generated the anti-Qing nationalistic sentiment among the Joseon intellectuals. They came to believe that the Koreans must regain their national pride, and this goal was to be achieved by enhancing Joseon’s identity, Sojunghwa, such that Joseon could become the sole legitimate heir to Chinese culture – for culture was the only aspect Joseon could overpower Qing, the formidable yet ignorant barbarian. Therefore, by highlighting Joseon’s allegiance to Ming and its faithful adherence to Confucian propriety (in other words, by practicing Sadae towards Ming sincerely), Joseon’s cultural superiority could be manifested, which would appear to be in stark contrast to the rebellious and savage behaviour of the Manchu.
5.2.1 The Reign of Hyojong (1649–59)

Hyojong was the second son of Injo. He was sent to Mukden together with his elder brother, Crown Prince Sohyeon, as hostages on 8 February 1637 according to the treaty signed between Joseon and Qing at the end of Byeongja Horan. Eight years later, Hyojong was released on 26 March 1645 by the order of Shunzhi Emperor of Qing. Crown Prince Sohyeon returned to Joseon on an earlier day, but he died on 26 April 1645 due to illness. Hyojong arrived in Joseon on 14 May, and he was made the crown prince on 27 September. Four years later, he ascended the throne on 8 May 1649 (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.213, pp.471–2, p.477, pp.496–7).

During their captive years in Mukden, the two brothers behaved quite differently. Crown Prince Sohyeon got along well with the Manchu and gradually blended in with them, soon abandoning the study of Confucian classics and joining the Qing military officers and soldiers in their daily entertainments such as hunting – and the Qing court officials scoffed at his weak will to be assimilated without any difficulties (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.472). However, Hyojong was a totally different case to the Manchu. After the princes arrived in Mukden, the Manchu sent them gold, jade, and precious clothing. While Crown Prince Sohyeon accepted the gifts, Hyojong rejected them. Instead of treasures, Hyojong told the Manchu that he would rather receive Joseon soldiers who were seized by Qing as prisoners of war (so that he could send them home). The Manchu came to respect Hyojong and released the captured Joseon soldiers according to his request (RDAK, vol. 36, Hyojong Sillok, 1963, p.1).

Throughout his reign, Hyojong had been a determined loyalist. He began to plan for Bukbeol right after his enthronement. Yet Hyojong was not a reckless loyalist; he had been very cautious in the process of planning Bukbeol: he never made any official announcement in the court about the expedition, but he frequently discussed with the loyalists about the planning and heavily involved himself in the improvement of Joseon’s military capability. In June 1649, Hyojong invited the 79-year-old Gim Sang-hon (the leading loyalist during Injo’s reign) to the royal
palace for a private meeting. Two months later, the loyalists proposed to the king that the era name of Qing should not be used in any internal official documents and records. Hyojong then issued a secret order to the court officials and instructed them to discuss the proposal at home instead of openly in the court. Consensus was reached and the proposal was approved for implementation (*RDAK, vol. 36, Hyojong Sillok, 1963, p.14, pp.21–22*).

Hyojong also actively involved himself in issues related to national defence. He kept reminding the military generals of the importance of training the soldiers on a daily basis, and he even offered the backyard of Changdeokgung (one of the major royal palaces) for military drilling exercise. Through observation, Hyojong detected a problem of the Joseon cavalry: the Koreans would not (and in fact they could not, due to lack of training) bend and stay close to the saddle when they were riding on the battleground, for which they were easily killed by the Manchu arrows. This had become a laughingstock to the Manchu, thus Hyojong helped the Joseon soldiers to solve this problem through military training. Moreover, Hyojong also improved the design of swords, bows and arrows, and military uniforms, making the equipment more functionally effective in combat on the battlefield.

As a matter of fact, Hyojong’s knowledge of weaponry and fighting-skill came from his experience during *Byeongja Horan* and his stay as hostage in Mukden, and he was probably one of the earliest proponents of *Silhak*, who advocated the learning of Qing’s superior combat tactics – the king said, as he witnessed in person, this was what the Manchu did and this was how they won. In order to have a better chance to defeat the Qing troops on the battleground, Hyojong was willing to put aside the prejudice against Qing that was commonly found among the Koreans and to emulate the military techniques of the Manchu – for he believed that Joseon could learn from the barbarian so as to fight the barbarian. In fact, it was recorded that every time when Hyojong worked on the issues related to military affairs, the king would tirelessly discuss the planning with court officials from the Ministry of Defence day and night. When alone, Hyojong would often lose himself in meditation and end up with many sleepless nights (*RDAK, vol. 36, Hyojong Sillok, 1963, pp.207–8, pp.334–5*).
Although Hyojong had been intentionally keeping a low profile on the issues related to Bukbeol, sometimes he simply could not help expressing his anti-Qing, pro-righteousness sentiment explicitly. The king once emotionally criticised Qing in October 1650 for ordering Joseon to send young girls to China to work as maid in the royal palace, condemning this as an act of ‘inhumanely seizing Joseon’s innocent subjects’ (*RDAK, vol. 36, Hyojong Sillok*, 1963, p.90). On 26 June 1652, Gim Sang-hon passed away. Before his death, Gim wrote to Hyojong and encouraged the king to pursue the goal of liberating Joseon from Qing’s control.


However, the radical loyalists were not satisfied with what Hyojong had done. They expected to see some concrete and explicit actions to be taken by the king. Song Si-yeol (1607–88) wrote to Hyojong on 16 August 1657 and criticised the king for not taking any encouraging actions in years. Song proposed to ally with the regime of Southern Ming such that a coalition force could be formed to fight against Qing; at the age of 50, he even volunteered to be the messenger (*RDAK, vol. 36, Hyojong Sillok*, 1963, pp.440–1). Song Jun-gil (1606–72), another radical loyalist, suggested to Hyojong that Jeju Island, due to its location (Chinese merchants who travelled to Japan would usually stop by the island), should be turned into a base from which the Joseon court was to contact Ming’s royal descendants for taking further anti-Qing actions. He also reminded the king of the importance of military preparation (*RDAK, vol. 36, Hyojong Sillok*, 1963, pp.454–5, p.473).

Hyojong gave positive replies to Song Si-yeol and Song Jun-gil, explaining to them that he had been working diligently to prepare for the expedition throughout the years because his determination to resist Qing and to revive Ming never changed. According to information he obtained from Uuijeong Sim Ji-won (1593–1662) who led the Joseon tribute mission to Beijing in early 1654, the omen of Qing’s demise could be seen by its lack of military preparation (*RDAK,
Hyojong thus was convinced that as long as the Joseon soldiers were trained to form a crack regiment, the military campaign against Qing would be successful. In his confident words, Joseon’s victory was not a matter of concern; what needed to be worried about was whether Joseon had the resolution to launch the military campaign. Hyojong asserted that by upholding the Confucian principles of righteousness he would have no regret even if the campaign were to fail. The king said that he was fully aware of his responsibility, and the target he set for himself was to complete the mission in 10 years of time (*RDAK, vol. 38, Revised Sillok of Hyeonjong, 1964, pp.26–27*).

However, Hyojong died on 4 May 1659 at the age of only 40, much to the loyalists’ sadness and regret (*RDAK, vol. 36, Hyojong Sillok, 1963, p.526*). What Hyojong had done was a result of his faithful belief in the Confucian principles of righteousness. He always viewed Joseon’s status as a vassal of Ming in the Sinocentric world, and his understanding of Joseon’s obligation to serve Ming whole-heartedly never changed even after its fall. Throughout his reign, the only national interest Hyojong perceived was to rebel against Qing for the restoration of Ming. Consequently, Hyojong had been unequivocally planning for *Bukbeol* since his enthronement, in spite of Qing’s supremacy. From his prudent planning, it indicated that the king was not blind to the power disparity between Joseon and Qing; yet he carried on with the mission for a full decade completely out of his faith in Confucian ethics.

His behaviour might go beyond the comprehension of the rationalists, who saw the interstate relations through the lens of power politics. However, *Sadae* as a powerful ideational force did motivate Hyojong to shoulder the challenging responsibility of avenging the demise of Ming. In general, with the influence exerted by the Confucian discourse of *Jonju Yangyi* (which actually referred to ‘respecting Ming and resisting Qing’), there emerged in the Joseon society the sort of fervour that Joseon should and could defy Qing, as advocated by the radical loyalists. In their understanding, Ming did not fall – and therefore they should continue to serve Ming (by restoring Ming) in this imaginary bipolar order – even at the risk of losing their lives and their country. In this sense, their
level of sincerity in the practice of Sadae was even higher than that of Jungjong during the era of Ming’s dominance.

5.2.2 The Reign of Hyeonjong (1659–74)

Hyeonjong was crowned when he was only 18, and he died in 1674 at the age of 33. During his 15 years of reign, Hyeonjong appeared to be a moderate loyalist, which was rather different from his father. Though he tried to make it clear to the loyalists that despite his youth, he dared not forget the humiliation his forefathers suffered, the loyalists were rather disappointed that Hyeonjong hardly accepted any of their suggestions (RDAK, vol. 38, Revised Sillok of Hyeonjong, 1964, p.290). As a result, the loyalists had to take a step back: instead of pushing Hyeonjong to take anti-Qing actions, they tried to change his mind first – and what they did next was to convince the young king that it was feasible to resist Qing because Qing, according to the information they had in hand, was ‘declining’.

Such information included: the bad omens of seeing comet and having earthquake in China, the Mongols’ rebellion against Qing, Kangxi Emperor at his early teens, the luxury life the Manchu had been leading, lack of military preparation, and the poor and harsh treatment of the Han-Chinese. This was the kind of intelligence the loyalists were able to gather from 1665 to 1669, mainly from those tribute mission members who stayed for a few months in China. The loyalists were rejoiced; they found these portents greatly encouraging, which indicated that Qing was doomed to collapse. They presented their analysis to Hyeonjong and reminded the king to learn a lesson from the ‘failure’ of Qing, and suggested that Hyeonjong, in order to make Joseon strong enough to defeat Qing, should do exactly the opposite of what the Manchu had been doing (RDAK, vol. 37, Hyeonjong Sillok, 1963, pp.253–4, p.394, p.419).

However, Hyeonjong’s response was less enthusiastic, and he often appeared to be ambiguous on anti-Qing issues. In general, his behaviour was hugely different from that of Hyojong, who was always clear in his pro-righteousness stance. The changing disposition from Hyojong to Hyeonjong thus provided the rationalists
with a chance to rise again. When the loyalists proposed to build a temple on 8 June 1667 in memory of Wanli Emperor, Yang Hao, and Li Rusong, for their good will and efforts to rescue Joseon during the Imjin War, the rationalists, supported by Hyeonjong, overruled the proposal with the reason that there was no precedent that a temple was ever built in a vassal state to honour the emperor (RDAK, vol. 37, Hyeonjong Sillok, 1963, p.355). Five years later, the loyalists raised the proposal again. Same as before, the rationalists were opposed to such idea; and this time they added another reason: with the presence of a powerful Qing, it would not be feasible for Joseon to carry out such plan (RDAK, vol. 37, Hyeonjong Sillok, 1963, pp.532–3).

Another example took place in June 1667. On 21 June, a ship carrying 95 Han-Chinese, who claimed to be merchants from the Fujian Province of China en route to Japan, wrecked by storm at sea and was found beached on Joseon’s coast. It became an issue that drew the attention of the Joseon court by the question of whether Joseon should send these Han-Chinese to Beijing – for they did not obey the Queue Order of Qing and still retained the hairstyle of Ming (as a gesture to show their anti-Qing stance, but they would be executed for treason if caught by the Manchu). Knowing for certain that these Han-Chinese would be killed when they reached Beijing, the loyalists pled with Hyeonjong not to send them back to China. However, the rationalists reminded the king of what Joseon had suffered during Byeongja Horan, and insisted that even though it looked cruel and inhumane, Joseon should safeguard its national interest by obeying Qing’s order – for Joseon was too weak to withstand any attack from Qing. The political reality emphasised by the rationalists eventually cleared Hyeonjong’s hesitation, and he decided to send all those Han-Chinese to Beijing on 23 June 1667 (RDAK, vol. 37, Hyeonjong Sillok, 1963, pp.355–6).

On 2 March 1674, Joseon embassy sent a report to Hyeonjong from Beijing to inform the king of the revolt of Wu Sangui (a Han-Chinese warlord) against Qing in China. To the radical loyalists, this was a long-awaited opportunity. They wrote to Hyeonjong on 16 May, saying that with Wu Sangui in the south and the Mongols in the north, the time for revenge had finally come and Joseon should immediately launch military attacks against Qing. However, Hyeonjong
responded coldly: the king felt so annoyed with their proposals that he simply did not bother to give any reply (RDAK, vol. 37, Hyeonjong Sillok, 1963, p.572, p.576).

On 1 July 1674, Yun Hyu (1617–80, the leading radical loyalist) wrote to Hyeonjong and urged the king to take immediate action at the time when Qing had to cope with the rebellion of Wu Sangui. After a detailed illustration of the Confucian ethics of righteousness, Yun further suggested that, in order to defeat Qing, Joseon should forge alliance with Zheng Jing (Head of the Kingdom of Formosa) in Taiwan such that the attacks could be launched from both land and sea. Yun’s words gave the rationalists uneasiness, for they feared that the king might be influenced by their opponents. As a result, they even attempted to intercept those memorials to the throne written by the radical loyalists so that the king would not have the chance to read about their suggestions (RDAK, vol. 37, Hyeonjong Sillok, 1963, pp.579–80).

What made Hyeongjong behave this differently from his father could be attributed to his physical condition. After being criticised by Song Si-yeol for his inaction on anti-Qing issues, Hyeongjong explained to Song on 30 October 1668 that he was not unwilling to carry on with the unfinished anti-Qing business left by Hyojong. The king said the reason was that he had been troubled with a disease, for which he became very depressed. Song Si-yeol was not pleased with the reason Hyeongjong provided, and he asked the king to do whatever that could be done at the moment such that his life would not be wasted – yet Hyeongjong only responded with silence (RDAK, vol. 37, Hyeonjong Sillok, 1963, pp.396–7). Anyway, Hyeongjong died on 18 August 1674 (RDAK, vol. 37, Hyeonjong Sillok, 1963, p.591). Whether his health was truly the cause that had made such difference, his ambiguity on the anti-Qing issues did lend support to the resurgence of the rationalists in Joseon politics. After a decade of domination by the loyalists with the Confucian discourse of Jonju Yangyi prevailing in the Joseon society, political reality and merits of prudence returned to the mindset of the Joseon elites, and prevented the loyalists (radical loyalists in particular) from making unrealistic decisions and taking thoughtless actions that would likely jeopardise Joseon’s survival.
5.2.3 The Reign of Sukjong (1674–1720)

Sukjong was enthroned at the age of 13. During his 46-year reign, the sentiment to revere the fallen Ming changed from being radically manifested to becoming cautiously expressed. With the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories (1673–81) going on in China, competition in the Joseon court was mainly found between the moderate and the radical loyalists during the first decade of Sukjong’s rule – for the event looked so promising to achieve the loyalists’ goal of defeating Qing and reviving Ming, which to some extent silenced the rationalists. However, the failure of the revolt in 1681 and the demise of the Kingdom of Formosa in 1683 ended Joseon’s plan of Bukbeol for good, and the radical loyalists gradually merged with the moderate loyalists. Meanwhile, with the Manchu triumphantly marching onto their zenith, the era of ‘High Qing’, their attitude towards Joseon transformed from being merciless and harsh to becoming understanding and accommodating. Such changes in the macro-situation reinforced the status of the moderate loyalists, who never abandoned the Confucian principles of righteousness but only dared to challenge Qing covertly. Headed by the king, the moderate loyalists adopted a special approach to honour Ming and resist Qing during the final two decades of Sukjong’s reign.

The quick rise of the radical loyalists in Joseon politics during the early years of Sukjong’s rule was the result of two factors: inaction of Hyeonjong on anti-Qing issue for 15 years, and the social unrest in China caused by the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories. While the loyalists’ anti-Qing enthusiasm was driven to its peak by Hyojong’s resolution and action to fight against the Manchu but then it had to be repressed throughout Hyeonjong’s reign, its comeback turned out to be a much stronger version of its previous form. The radical loyalists began to develop a belief that Joseon should take up a leading role in the region-wide anti-Qing campaign to restore the Sinocentric order that was destroyed by the Manchu. More importantly, they were convinced that the Joseon troops, especially the artillery forces, were powerful enough to defeat the Qing army (RDAK, vol. 39, Sukjong Sillok, 1964, p.28).
On 9 February 1675, Yun Hyu, the leading radical loyalist, asserted that there were only three issues to be concerned in Joseon’s foreign relations: 1) to launch *Bukbeol*; 2) to forge alliance with Zheng Jing’s Kingdom of Formosa; and 3) to sever Joseon’s relationship with Qing. On 9 November 1677, Yun Hyu said to Sukjong that Qing had become exhausted in suppressing the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories. On the contrary, Joseon was in its full strength – and Yun believed that by having righteousness on Joseon’s side, Qing would be defeated and eliminated. In fact, the pro-Ming, anti-Qing sentiment was running very high in the Joseon society at the time. Those who used Qing’s era name in their writings, as in the example of Gim Su-hong (1598–1681), were despised as traitors who betrayed Joseon and Ming (*RDAK*, vol. 39, *Sukjong Sillok*, 1964, pp.38–39, pp.56–57, p.168, p.344).

The 14-year-old Sukjong praised the integrity and courage of the radical loyalists, but the young king said although he also wished to avenge Ming’s demise, he was clearly aware of the power disparity between Joseon and Qing (*RDAK*, vol. 39, *Sukjong Sillok*, 1964, p.84). As the radical loyalists were not able to gain Sukjong’s support, the moderate loyalists took this opportunity to reinforce their influence in the Joseon court. Basically, they were not opposed to the discourse of *Jonju Yangyi* – as they claimed that Ming’s kindness to Joseon (particularly during the Imjin War) should never be forgotten. However, they did not concur with the radical loyalists on the issue of *Bukbeol*: they did not think it was the right time for vengeance, and they even questioned whether Joseon was up to the level of competing with Qing militarily.

As they criticised the radical loyalists for pursuing abstract reputation for their own by putting the country in grave danger, the moderate loyalists proposed to repeat the practice during Hyeonjong’s reign: to keep the memorials to the throne written by the radical loyalists from being read by Sukjong – and the king approved their suggestion. By having swung the king to their side, the moderate loyalists opted for methods to resist Qing covertly under the leadership of *Yeonguijeong* Heo Jeok (1610–80). For example, Heo proposed to Sukjong on 24 January 1676 that if any Han-Chinese from the Kingdom of Formosa were found in Joseon, they would not be sent to Beijing. Instead, the Joseon court would offer
them seagoing vessels (and made it appear to be stolen by the Han-Chinese). If questioned by Beijing, the Joseon court would simply pretend that it had no knowledge about the trace of these Han-Chinese. Basically, the moderate loyalists would count on the signal sent from Heaven: for instance, earthquake in China in 1679 was interpreted by them as a bad omen to indicate Qing’s decline. Hence Joseon, as they believed, should keep training itself to become an exemplar country of Confucian ethics; and meanwhile, except waiting, Joseon should not take any reckless actions (RDAK, vol. 39, Sukjong Sillok, 1964, p.112, p.115, p.222).

The final victory of the moderate loyalists over the radical loyalists came at the moment when the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories in China was crushed by Kangxi Emperor. On 29 April 1683, Uuijeong Gim Seog-ju (1634–84, one of the moderate loyalists), who just returned from China, reported to Sukjong the failure of the revolt. By describing his observation in China, he commented that China was well administered by the Manchu, Qing’s military power was not weak at all, and more importantly, the Han-Chinese seemed to have forgotten Ming (RDAK, vol. 39, Sukjong Sillok, 1964, p.437). This turned out to be a convincing message to Sukjong and everyone else in the Joseon court: the consolidation of Qing’s power through the suppression of the revolt had confirmed the impossibility for Joseon to take any military actions against Qing. The radical loyalists no longer raised any ideas of Bukbeol, and they gradually turned over to join the moderate loyalists. However, the disappearing of radical loyalists did not necessarily provide the rationalists with an opportunity to control Joseon’s relations with Qing. The loyalists, though being moderate in their approach, continued to dominate the Joseon court in the following years.

This was the result of Qing’s harsh attitude towards Joseon during the decade after Kangxi Emperor repressed the revolts in China, and the Qing–Joseon relations plummeted during the period from late 1685 to early 1686. In 1685, the practice of some Koreans crossing the Qing–Joseon border illegally to collect ginseng caught the attention of Kangxi Emperor, and he sent two court officials to Joseon in October to investigate such cases. With a number of Korean commoners apprehended, the trial was conducted on 1 December 1685. At the Qing officials’
insistence, Sukjong had to attend the tribunal in person. Those Koreans were sentenced guilty after the trial, and some local Joseon officials were also punished for their failure to prevent such crime from happening. In March 1686, the Qing Ministry of Rite even decided to penalise Sukjong with the charge of malpractice, and the king was eventually fined 20,000 taels of silver for having connived at such illegal activities (*RDAK, vol. 39, Sukjong Sillok*, 1964, p.553, pp.556–7, p.567).

This was the very first time in 300 years that a Joseon king was punished by its suzerain. The Joseon court officials, especially the loyalists, considered this as the greatest humiliation since Injo’s surrender to Qing in 1637. They were worried about the future fate of Joseon under the peremptory rule of Qing, and hence they urged Sukjong to think and act as a decisive leader like Hyojong such that Joseon could rise to get its revenge on Qing (*RDAK, vol. 39, Sukjong Sillok*, 1964, pp.573–4). Soon the anti-Qing sentiment in Joseon grew stronger: it reached the height that even the Joseon court’s decision to accept the rice provided by Qing as famine relief in 1697–8 was criticised by the loyalists as an act of self-humiliation. Although Sukjong explained that the decision was made for the purpose of saving the lives of the starving Koreans across the country, Jeong Ho (1648–1736, one of the leading loyalists and future *Yeonguijeong* during Yeongjo’s reign) fiercely condemned those who raised and supported the idea of asking Qing for help, and he lamented that by accepting the Qing’s rice, the Confucian ethics was totally abandoned and Joseon’s national identity was reduced to a barbaric state (*RDAK*, vol. 40, *Sukjong Sillok*, 1964, p.253, pp.258–9).

As for Sukjong, his attitude had been changing as well. With a personal experience of being humiliated in the ginseng case (1685–6), Sukjong began to openly express his anti-Qing feeling in the court – no affirmative statement about resisting Qing however, only some softly made remarks that he was deeply grateful to Wanli Emperor for saving Joseon during the Imjin War, for which he was much regretful about not being able to avenge Ming’s demise due to Joseon’s weak military capability (*RDAK, vol. 39, Sukjong Sillok*, 1964, p.590, p598). Meanwhile, the loyalists kept influencing Sukjong with the discourse of *Jonju Yangyi*. By describing to Sukjong how Hyojong had been unwaveringly and
bravely upholding the Confucian principles of righteousness even during his detention in Mukden as hostage (in Mukden, Hyojong wrote a letter to inform the Joseon court of the military assault Qing launched against Ming, calling Qing’s action as ‘unrighteous invasion’), the loyalists encouraged the king to carry on with the spirit of his grandfather so as to truly understand the meaning of righteousness and to resist Qing determinedly (RDAK, vol. 39, Sukjong Sillok, 1964, p.484). The loyalists’ efforts were not fruitless. With their influence and the king’s own experience, the ideational forces gained the upper hand in its wrestle with the material forces. Sukjong decided to take a bold yet cautious action in early 1704.

By his knowledge about the Imjin War, Sukjong came to believe that Wanli Emperor was instrumental in the making of the decision to dispatch Ming troops to rescue Joseon. Had it not been the emperor’s greatest humaneness, Joseon would have been eliminated by Japan. Moreover, according to Sukjong’s deduction, it must have cost Ming an enormous amount of resources. Hence, Ming’s rapid decline could be attributed, to a certain extent, to the exhaustion caused by Ming’s involvement in the Imjin War. In other words, Joseon was indirectly responsible for Ming’s collapse. Sukjong therefore concluded that Ming saved the life of Joseon at the expense of its own, for which Joseon was eternally in Ming’s debt.

In order to express Joseon’s deepest gratitude towards Ming, on 10 January 1704 (60 years after Ming’s collapse), Sukjong suggested that a temple be constructed in Joseon to honour Wanli Emperor. This was indeed a bold decision, as it would definitely be known by the Manchu when the temple was built. In the following discussions among the Joseon court officials, the risk was considered, but the fear was overcome – the loyalists were convinced that the most powerful weapon they possessed was the Confucian ethics of righteousness. However, at the advice of the rationalists, in order not to explicitly provoke the Manchu, on 7 March 1704, the original idea of building a temple was changed to erecting an altar. To be even more cautious, the king and the court officials finally decided the location for the altar: the backyard of the royal palace. On 19 March, the day Chongzhen Emperor committed suicide in Beijing six decades ago that marked the end of Ming,
Sukjong, with the presence of all court officials who dressed in black, held a memorial ceremony for Chongzhen Emperor at the highest level that was equivalent to worshipping Heaven. Throughout the entire process, Sukjong wept ceaselessly (RDAK, vol. 40, Sukjong Sillok, 1964, pp.540–2, pp.549–51).

On 21 December 1704, construction of the altar was completed. It was named Daebodan (Altar for Great Recompense, 大報壇). The memorial tablet of Wanli Emperor was placed at the centre of the altar. The annual memorial ceremony was set to be held in March, and the rituals were to be performed strictly according to the tradition of Ming China. In particular, Qing’s era name was not to be used in the elegiac address. On 9 March 1705, Sukjong arrived at Daebodan at midnight to hold the memorial ceremony for the first time. An elegiac address was read, with every sentence showing Joseon’s gratitude towards Ming. Afterwards Sukjong said regretfully that an altar instead of a temple was eventually built due to considerations based upon the political reality, which was against his wish. However, Sukjong believed that since the altar was erected, as long as Joseon existed, he and the future kings should hold the memorial ceremony every year (RDAK, vol. 40, Sukjong Sillok, 1964, pp.600–1, pp.621–2).

Building Daebodan and holding memorial ceremonies to enshrine and honour a departed emperor of Ming was as far as Sukjong and the loyalists could go at that time. In a bipolar order, though an imaginary one, this could be described as an eclectic way to balance the principles of morality and the concerns of reality. Consequently, Sukjong and the loyalists chose to serve both great powers at the same time: officially, the Joseon court continued to perform its duty of Sadae towards Qing routinely – not only the regular tribute missions but also the ad hoc missions were dispatched to Qing by the same pattern as during the Ming era. To the Joseon court, serving Qing was still an acceptable practice not only because of Qing’s supremacy but also due to the changing attitude of Qing towards Joseon from being offensive to becoming peaceful after the ginseng case – for instance, Kangxi Emperor ordered the reduction of Joseon’s tribute goods in November 1711 while the Joseon court never raised such request (RDAK, vol. 41, Sukjong Sillok, 1965, p.239).
Unofficially, Sukjong and the loyalists still secretly shouldered the responsibility of resisting Qing, and the reason for sustaining such enthusiasm was their understanding of and firm belief in Confucian ethics: Joseon was always a vassal of Ming, and because the senior performed its duty to take care of the junior until its final moment, the junior would continue to revere and serve the senior faithfully (even though the senior no longer existed). This explained why Sukjong and the loyalists felt that they were greatly encouraged whenever they obtained more evidence/information about Ming’s efforts to rescue Joseon during the Imjin War (RDAK, vol. 41, Sukjong Sillok, 1965, p.288). As a matter of fact, the duality of Joseon’s Sadae continued to exist during Yeongjo’s reign.

5.2.4 The Reign of Yeongjo (1724–76)

Yeongjo was crowned at the age of 30, and he stayed on the throne for 52 years, which was the longest reign among all Joseon kings. Yeongjo’s ruling years coincided with the period of ‘High Qing’ in China, when Qing’s power reached its peak and the distribution of power was never clearer in Northeast Asia since Qing replaced Ming in 1644. However, the rationalists were never able to decisively overpower the loyalists. A crucial factor was Yeongjo; he never clearly took the side of the rationalists – he was a loyalist at heart after all, for which he was frequently torn between the thoughts of pro-righteousness and pro-pragmatism throughout his reign. In addition, Qing’s Joseon policy during this period also became more pacifying, which to a great extent neutralised the anti-Qing sentiment of the loyalists.

In general, the prevailing idea at the time in Joseon was still Jonju Yangyi after Yeongjo ascended the throne in 1724. To the Koreans, Joseon’s national identity had always been Sojunghwa – especially after the fall of Ming, Joseon became the only and true heir to the Chinese civilisation. As Joseon had been emulating China for centuries, the Chinese way of doing things (i.e. political systems, social norms, cultural practices, etc.), as the Koreans claimed, could now be found only in Joseon. Moreover, they even proudly believed that the Manchu respected the

In particular, the loyalists continued with their anti-Qing mission, although passively and secretly. Their actions were basically confined to cheering for the bad omens (such as earthquake) happening in China, with which they concluded that the Manchu’s rule of China would not exceed a century, and forbidding the use of Qing’s era name in any internal official documents (RDAK, vol. 43, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.236, pp.389–90). As for Yeongjo, he actually did more to uphold the principle of Jonju Yangyi: throughout his reign, Yeongjo hosted the memorial ceremony at Daebodan every year in honour of Wanli Emperor (RDAK, vol. 46, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, pp.430–47) – except in 1736, he was not able to hold the ceremony due to the arrival of a Qing embassy on 4 March that coincided with the day of the ceremony, for which Yeongjo openly expressed his disappointment and sadness later in the court (RDAK, vol. 44, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.32).

Moreover, Yeongjo would often remind himself of Ming’s kindness to Joseon by writing poems, trying to contact the descendents of Ming General Li Rusong (who had allegedly settled down in Korea after Ming’s fall), and purchasing the writings of Ming General Yang Hao (RDAK, vol. 44, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.196). Particularly, Yeongjo rewarded the descendents of the loyalists who refuted appeasement with the Manchu during Injo’s reign (such as Gim Sang-yong, Gim Sang-hon, and the ‘three martyrs of Byeongja Horan’), and highly praised their loyalty that had safeguarded Joseon’s reputation (RDAK, vol. 46, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.299). Yet above all these, Yeongjo had made a significant contribution to the anti-Qing sentiment in Joseon: in 1749, Yeongjo ordered to expand Daebodan so as to accommodate the additional enshrinements of Hongwu Emperor and Chongzhen Emperor.

On 1 March 1749, Yeongjo came to know, from Ming’s historical record, that Chongzhen Emperor, upon receiving Joseon’s message to ask Ming for military assistance in January 1637, ordered the dispatch of Ming troops to rescue Joseon. Yet before departure, the Ming expedition forces received the information about
Joseon’s surrender and the rescue mission was halted. Chongzhen Emperor scolded the Ming commander for failing to save Joseon, but mentioning not a single word to reprimand Joseon for its submission to the Manchu. Considering Ming’s situation at the time (i.e. fighting Qing’s invasion in Northeast China and suppressing peasant revolts in the heartland), which was as difficult as that of Joseon, Yeongjo felt deeply touched by Chongzhen Emperor’s kindness to Joseon.

Two weeks later, the king proposed in the court to add the memorial tablet of Chongzhen Emperor to Daebodan. In spite of objections raised by the rationalists, Yeongjo decided on 23 March to carry on with his plan. He even added the tablet of Hongwu Emperor to the altar, justifying his decision by what Hongwu Emperor had done for Joseon: naming the country (RDAK, vol. 45, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, pp.57–58, pp.60–61).

On 10 and 11 April 1749, Yeongjo held the memorial ceremony for all three Ming emperors simultaneously for the first time, expressing Joseon’s profound gratitude towards Ming. Not only a ceremony with larger scale was organised annually in March ever since, Yeongjo also decided to hold memorial ceremonies on the birthdays of the three Ming emperors because Ming, in his words, still existed in Joseon (RDAK, vol. 45, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, pp.62–63, p.124). In 1763, the year before the 120th anniversary of Ming’s demise, Yeongjo lamented over Ming’s fate and ordered to suspend all ceremonial activities in Joseon (RDAK, vol. 46, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.22, p.34). On 19 March 1764, Yeongjo held the annual memorial ceremony for the three Ming emperors. Thinking of Ming’s collapse 120 years ago, the king wept so sadly that he was not able to eat anything – and he wrote down words to demonstrate his pledge to carry on with Ming’s spirit in Joseon (RDAK, vol. 46, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.43).

In spite of the aforementioned examples, however, it would not be appropriate to label Yeongjo as a loyalist. On many other issues, Yeongjo appeared to be more like a rationalist – because he was not blind to the political reality. According to the reports of the state councillors and embassy members who travelled to China in 1738 and 1748, it was observed that the Manchu actually behaved in a civilised manner no different from that of the Han-Chinese. China was well administered by the Manchu, and the Han-Chinese seemed to have few complaints about
Qing’s flexible rule. Hence, Yeongjo came to realise that Qing was not going to fall in the foreseeable future (*RDAK*, vol. 44, *Yeongjo Sillok*, 1965, pp.124–5; *RDAK*, vol. 45, *Yeongjo Sillok*, 1965, p.14).

Submitting to the reality in which the power disparity between Joseon and Qing was crystal clear, Yeongjo was being very cautious in the official interactions between Joseon and Qing. Every time when a Qing embassy arrived in Joseon, the king would host a welcoming banquet to receive the Qing officials. However, in order to show his pro-Ming conviction to the loyalists, Yeongjo defended his behaviour that he was merely following the Confucian principles of propriety to perform the duties of *Sadae* as a civilised head of state should do, even in the case of receiving the embassy of a barbaric country. The king invoked the example of Sukjong, who would personally meet with the Qing embassy in the suburbs of Hanseong even in poor weather (*RDAK*, vol. 44, *Yeongjo Sillok*, 1965, p.90). Besides, the budget allocated for the welcoming reception for Qing embassy was reduced by half, if compared with the amount assigned for receiving the Ming embassy in the past. Yeongjo emphasised that this was a way of self-strengthening: by faithfully practicing the Confucian propriety, Joseon would be able to maintain and enhance its cultural supremacy over Qing (*RDAK*, vol. 45, *Yeongjo Sillok*, 1965, p.68).

Another example was Joseon’s endeavour to clear Injo’s reputation. In the Joseon history written by Qing court officials, Injo’s enthronement was described as an illegal one through a coup. Hence for 13 years, the Joseon court spent so many efforts, tirelessly and humbly, in self-defence and clarification (even bribery) to have it corrected. When the rectified version of Injo’s history finally arrived in Joseon on 2 February 1739, Yeongjo held a grand ceremony to receive the volumes and ordered to celebrate their success in the temples of Injo, Hyojong, Hyeonjong, Sukjong, and Gyeongjong. However, the loyalists criticised that it was a humiliation to beg the barbarians to correct the mistake they made when writing the history of a civilised country, for which there was nothing worth being celebrated. Yeongjo responded angrily to the loyalists that unless they knew how to defeat the Manchu, otherwise their comments were simply nonsense (*RDAK*,...
Apart from Qing’s supremacy that had changed Yeongjo’s attitude, Qing’s pacifying attitude towards Joseon also exerted significant influence on the king’s view. Yeongjo once admitted openly in the court that Qing had not made any unreasonable demands on Joseon since his enthronement. Besides, Qing had been treating Joseon courteously: the Joseon embassy members were assigned to priority seats in the Chinese imperial palace, followed by embassy members from other vassals (*RDAK, vol. 45, Yeongjo Sillok*, 1965, p.321, p.397). Starting from the moment when Joseon was no longer bullied and exploited by Qing (and even being politely treated by Qing), Yeongjo realised that fewer reasons were left to resist Qing. Therefore, when being asked by the rationalists about when Joseon should abandon the idea of vengeance on 21 August 1764 (120 years after the fall of Ming), the king stated that he believed five generations would be the limit – meaning Joseon should wait until 1794 (i.e. 150 years after Ming’s fall) to normalise its relations with Qing, implying that although it was not happening during his lifetime (he was born in 1694), it would be inevitable for Joseon to admit and to serve Qing as the great eventually (*RDAK, vol. 46, Yeongjo Sillok*, 1965, p.58).

In fact, Yeongjo foresaw this inevitability three decades ago: on 17 November 1730, the king said to the loyalists (who were cheering in the court about the earthquake in China) that the reason why Joseon had been enjoying peace was because of Qing’s protection. He viewed the Joseon–Qing relationship as that of ‘teeth and lips’: teeth would be cold without the protection of lips (an ancient Chinese analogy). Hence he believed that if Qing collapsed, Joseon would soon become the prey of the Mongols and/or the Japanese (*RDAK, vol. 43, Yeongjo Sillok*, 1965, pp.237–8).

In sum, Yeongjo could be considered as an insightful strategist with long-term visions, yet he was also bound by the Confucian ethics that prevailed in East Asia at the time. Throughout his 52 years of reign, the imaginary bipolar order persisted – for which Joseon served Qing officially but kept serving the fallen
Ming secretly. Understandably, Joseon’s attitude to serve Qing and the fallen Ming was different: towards the fallen Ming, Joseon remained consistently faithful, as prescribed in the Confucian classics. As towards Qing, Yeongjo’s statement on 27 October 1772 to summarise his 48-year of experience in managing the Joseon–Qing relations was the best description: he said that there was no such thing called sincerity in Joseon’s Sadae towards Qing. However, (being an exemplar country of Confucianism), Joseon would never abandon the Confucian principle of propriety when serving Qing (RDAK, vol. 46, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.322). Consequently, Joseon did not serve Qing as sincerely as it did to Ming until the reign of the next king: Jeongjo.

5.3 Joseon: Accepting Qing as the Only Great (from 1776)

The turning point of Joseon–Qing relations occurred during Jeongjo’s reign. Joseon finally accepted Qing as the only true great because: 1) Qing changed its Joseon strategy: different from the earlier years, Qing started to implement pacifying policies towards Joseon. Coupled with Qianlong’s personal overtures, it successfully turned an imposed hierarchy into a benign hierarchy that appealed to Joseon and the Koreans’ hatred towards Qing gradually waned and faded; 2) in terms of material power, Qing’s economic prosperity and military capability proved to Joseon its unquestionable status of a hegemon; 3) in terms of ideational power, Qing inherited, instead of rejected, Confucianism by having the Manchu assimilated into the culture of the Han-Chinese, thereby reducing the conflicts between the two ethnic groups; and 4) time proved to be an effective solution: as the Manchu invasions and Ming’s collapse were history five generations ago, the passion for vengeance on Qing had lost its appeal and momentum. In addition, the emergence of Silhak in Joseon in the 18th century might have also contributed to the transformation of Joseon–Qing relations.

The Reign of Jeongjo (1776–1800)

Jeongjo became the king of Joseon at the time when Qianlong Emperor’s rule in China reached its zenith. Although Jeongjo did not tolerate anyone who criticised the staunch proponents of Confucian ethics such as Song Si-yeol, and he also held the memorial ceremony at Daebodan to honour the Ming emperors (though not
every year) (RDAK, vol. 47, Jeongjo Sillok, 1966, pp.11–12, p.304, p.366, pp.508–9; RDAK, vol. 49, Jeongjo Sillok, 1966, p.264), the king had been rational in the issue about revering the fallen Ming. Different from Yeongjo, on 5 November 1778 (only two years after his enthronement) Jeongjo publicly praised Choe Myung-kil (the leading rationalist during Injo’s reign) for his loyalty to Joseon at the time of the two Manchu invasions, giving credit to Choe Myung-kil for his efforts that saved Joseon from being eliminated by the Manchu (RDAK, vol. 47, Jeongjo Sillok, 1966, p.218).

During his reign, Jeongjo sent tribute missions to Qing a lot more frequently than his predecessors, for which on 16 October 1780 the king was criticised by Gim Ha-jae (1745–84, then head of Saheonbu). The huge amount of tribute goods, Gim said, would become a financial burden to Joseon in the long run. Besides, he reminded Jeongjo that paying tribute to Qing was merely for the purpose of ensuring Joseon’s survival; serving Qing with such passion would contradict the Confucian principles of propriety upheld by the king’s forefathers. However, Jeongjo simply did not agree with Gim’s opinions (RDAK, vol. 47, Jeongjo Sillok, 1966, p.339). He continued his Sadae practice sincerely towards Qing.

Jeongjo’s enthusiastic Sadae actually proved to be effective and gladly received by Qianlong Emperor, who also intended to normalise the Qing–Joseon relationship by turning it into a cordial one similar to that of Ming–Joseon. The approach Qianlong Emperor adopted was to make use of the state ideology shared by the two countries: Confucianism. To enhance the ideational elements in the senior–junior relationship between Qing and Joseon, as prescribed in Confucianism, Qianlong Emperor took up the role of a loving father that affectionately cared for the well-being of Jeongjo and his subjects. Among others, the emperor had been repeatedly treating the Joseon embassy members exceptionally well as distinguished guests from overseas.

In August 1778, Qianlong Emperor visited Mukden and unexpectedly, he was greeted by a special mission sent by Jeongjo. Delighted by Jeongjo’s sincerity, the emperor highly commended Jeongjo for his allegiance to Qing. To reward Joseon, the emperor approved special treatment for the Joseon embassy members during
their stay in China, kindly conversed with them in person, and even personally wrote words of blessing on a piece of precious silk as a gift for Joseon. When Jeongjo came to know about such unusual favour Qianlong Emperor offered to Joseon, the king immediately dispatched another special mission to China on 11 September 1778 to express his profound gratitude towards the emperor (RDAK, vol. 47, Jeongjo Sillok, 1966, p.211).

In January 1785, a golden Jubilee was held in Beijing to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the accession of Qianlong Emperor to the throne. Both Jeongjo and Qianlong Emperor made use of this event to enhance the Joseon–Qing relationship. In Beijing, members of the Joseon congratulatory mission sent by Jeongjo were warmly received by the emperor himself. In all occasions, they were arranged in seats that indicated more prestigious status than embassy members from any other vassals. Besides, the Joseon embassy members received many gifts from the emperor, and they were highly precious in value. As an unusual practice, Qianlong Emperor from time to time talked to the Joseon embassy members in person, inquiring after Jeongjo and even the health of the embassy members. Throughout their stay in Beijing, the Joseon embassy members received a lot more and far better treatments than those of the other vassals. On 24 February 1785, Qianlong Emperor issued an edict to the Joseon court to show his appreciation to Joseon’s enduring and faithful Sadae towards Qing. However, Jeongjo had sent too many tribute goods to Qing. Although the emperor was extraordinarily pleased by Jeongjo’s sincerity in Sadae, he would like to perform his duty as the senior to look after the well-being of Joseon, for which he decided that no more tribute goods would be brought to China by the ad hoc missions from Joseon in future (RDAK, vol. 48, Jeongjo Sillok, 1966, pp.8–9).

The year of 1790 marked the 80th birthday of Qianlong Emperor, and both Jeongjo and Qianlong Emperor took this opportunity to elevate the Joseon–Qing relationship from being cordial to becoming amicable. In December 1789, Jeongjo dispatched a Winter Solstice Embassy to Beijing and instructed the embassy members to congratulate the emperor’s birthday in advance. Qianlong Emperor was greatly delighted, and as before, the Joseon embassy members received exceptionally high level of treatment – only this time Qianlong Emperor went
even further: in addition to inquiring after Jeongjo’s health, he asked the Joseon envoy a personal question of Jeongjo about whether the king had a son yet. Knowing that Jeongjo and the Koreans had been praying for the birth of the crown prince, Qianlong Emperor, again most unusually, personally wrote the Chinese character of Fu (meaning blessing and happiness) and sent it to Jeongjo as a gift, wishing him to have a son as soon as possible (RDAK, vol. 48, Jeongjo Sillok, 1966, p.319). What Qianlong Emperor aimed to establish was a personal relationship with Jeongjo: a relationship not only between a suzerain emperor and a vassal king, but also between a father and a son (in fact Qianlong Emperor was 41 years older than Jeongjo). In front of the Joseon envoy, the emperor behaved so kindly like a caring father who expressed a paternal concern about the king’s personal life. As a result, Jeongjo and the Joseon court officials were overwhelmed by the emperor’s graciousness, taking this as an unprecedented example of Qing’s lavish kindness to Joseon (RDAK, vol. 48, Jeongjo Sillok, 1966, p.335).

Qianlong Emperor’s strategy was therefore an indispensible factor that turned Joseon’s Sadae back into a mode of filial piety that was seen in the case of Jungjong towards the Ming emperor. At the state banquet held in the imperial palace that celebrated his 80th birthday on 27 September 1790, Qianlong Emperor, again most unusually, asked the Joseon congratulatory envoy about Jeongjo and came to know that the crown prince was born on 18 June. He became deliriously happy, saying that this was such a piece of joyful news to him. The emperor then showed the memorial to the imperial throne prepared by the Joseon court to the king of Vietnam, openly praising Joseon as a nation that had long been faithfully practicing Confucian propriety, for which Joseon should be considered as an exemplar to all other vassals of Qing. Same as before, the Joseon embassy members were treated as the most distinguished guests among those from other vassals throughout their stay in Beijing. Upon receiving the report sent by the Joseon envoy, Jeongjo was so delighted and he immediately dispatch another special mission to Qing to show how gratified he was to Qianlong Emperor’s kindness and generosity. Besides, Jeongjo ordered to promote the study of Manchu in Joseon, as he believed that it had become more practical for the

Jeongjo continued his Sadae practice with great sincerity even after Qianlong Emperor’s abdication in 1795. The king openly expressed his deep admiration for Qianlong Emperor, whom he highly regarded as the greatest emperor in China’s history with his glorious reign of six decades. As for Qianlong Emperor, with his title changed to Taishang Huang (‘Retired Emperor’), he kept praising Jeongjo’s faithful Sadae in front of Jiaqing Emperor so as to maintain the harmonious Qing–Joseon relationship during his son’s reign (RDAK, vol. 49, Jeongjo Sillok, 1966, p.230, p.265). By this time, with Jeongjo’s efforts and the impact of Qing’s pacifying Joseon policy, the two countries had eventually normalised their vassal–suzerain relations.

Another factor that was associated with the normalisation of Joseon–Qing relations was Silhak in Joseon that emerged in the 18th century. This was a school of thought that placed an emphasis on the search of practical solutions to Joseon’s social problems instead of clinging to abstract discussions on Confucian principles that disconnected people from reality. Proponents of Silhak thus exhibited a trace of pragmatism similar to the rationalists. Hong Dae-yong (1731–83), one of the leading scholars of Silhak, criticised the senseless civilisation–barbarian dichotomy, for he believed that human beings were equal among each other, and so were countries – hence there was no such thing about a country being superior to another (Hong, 1999, p.99). Another prominent scholar of Silhak, Pak Ji-won (1737–83), described Qing’s prosperity based on his personal observation during his trip to China and appealed to the Koreans to learn whatever useful from Qing in order to strengthen Joseon’s national power, even though the Koreans despised the Manchu as barbarians (Pak, 2008, p.109, p.177).

However, although they had written books about Silhak, none of the Silhak scholars ever served as senior court officials and directly involved in the making of Joseon’s policy towards Qing. The closest case was Yu Su-won (1694–1755), an early Silhak scholar who was received by Yeongjo on 8 February 1741 to present his idea about reforming the Joseon bureaucratic structure. During the
meeting, Yu explained to Yeongjo that although the Manchu were barbarians, they learned from Ming and adopted the practice of the Han-Chinese. This was the reason why the Manchu were able to administer China for a full century without any problems. Yeongjo concurred with Yu and his proposal was implemented two months later (RDAK, vol. 44, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.235, p.242). Nevertheless, although a direct link between Silhak and the changing perception of the Koreans towards Qing may not be established according to the official historical records, it would still be reasonable to deduce that the Silhak scholars’ writings might have disseminated the pragmatic theme of Silhak and influenced the thinking of Joseon political elites to a certain extent.

In addition, an important factor that had changed the Koreans’ view towards Qing was the Manchu: evidently, had it not been their will and ability to assimilate themselves into the Confucian culture of the Han-Chinese, the line traditionally drawn between civilisation and barbarian would never have disappeared in the mind of the Koreans. While the Koreans perceived Joseon as the only legitimate heir to the Chinese culture, the Manchu also followed the Confucian principle of ‘transformation through Sinicisation’ to legitimise their succession to Ming’s rule of China and the Sinocentric world. Therefore, this strategy of culturally transforming the Manchu into the Han-Chinese (whereby an intersubjective culture between Qing and Joseon re-emerged), coupled with Qing’s material power (i.e. military capability and economic prosperity), convinced the Joseon policymakers (including Jeongjo and his court officials) that Qing was the only true great in the unipolar order. Since Qing was playing the role of a caring senior, it was Joseon’s obligation to take up the role of a faithful junior in its Sadae towards Qing.

In short, the practice of Sadae during the reigns of these seven Joseon kings, although complicated by issues derived from the change of polarity, is summarised in the following table according to the different levels of thoroughness:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Reign</th>
<th>High (as Filial Piety)</th>
<th>Medium (as Obligation)</th>
<th>Low (as Strategy)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1608-1623</td>
<td>Gwanghae-gun (to Ming)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1623-1627</td>
<td>Injo (to Ming)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1627-1637</td>
<td>Injo (to Ming)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1637-1649</td>
<td>Injo (to Qing)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1649-1659</td>
<td>Hyojong (to the Fallen Ming)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1659-1674</td>
<td>Hyeonjong (to the Fallen Ming)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1674-1720</td>
<td>Sukjong (to the Fallen Ming)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1724-1776</td>
<td>Yeongjo (to the Fallen Ming)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1776-1800</td>
<td>Jeongjo (to Qing)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors that had influenced the orientation and the degree of eagerness in Joseon’s Sadae came from all three aspects of system, unit, and individual simultaneously: the regional power structure was changing, Confucianism remained as the state ideology of the culturally strong (but militarily weak) Joseon, and the policymakers had their own sets of personal traits, experience, and value that determined their pro-righteousness or pro-pragmatism behaviour. When the combined effect of the system factor (i.e. national security) and the pro-pragmatism individual factors became stronger than the others, Sadae became a strategy to use the great; but when the joint influence of the unit factor (i.e. the state ideology of Confucianism) and the pro-righteousness individual factors overpowered the others, Sadae was faithfully implemented towards the great.

Chapter Summary

This chapter illustrates Joseon’s practice of Sadae in a period that witnessed the change of dominance from Ming to Qing in Northeast Asia. If based on realist assertions, Joseon’s behaviour ought to be determined by this clear transition of power and rational policy should be made to bandwagon with the new great of Qing. However, Joseon entangled itself in a much more complicated situation. For almost two centuries, Joseon political elites struggled between righteousness and pragmatism, putting the country between an imaginary great and a real great. Though eventually Joseon came to acknowledge Qing as the only hegemon in the Sinocentric world, Joseon’s Sadae during this period proved again that the
Joseon–great power(s) relations in the pre-modern era was driven by the interactions between the ideational and the material forces.

The next chapter moves on to the modern era (1800–1910). Firstly, it is to illustrate Joseon’s *Sadae* towards Qing during the first seven decades of the 19th century. As a result of the Western intrusion, the focus of Joseon’s *Sadae* was switched to resisting Western powers. Secondly, it is to examine the reasons that had caused the decline of ideational *Sadae* during the period from 1874 to mid-1884. Changes within the Sinocentric order and influences from the outside world that altered the rationale of *Sadae* would be analysed. Thirdly, it is to discuss the continuation of the pragmatic *Yongdae* that had provided Joseon with a strategy to deal with the great powers in a multipolar order from mid-1884 to 1910.
Chapter 6

_Sadae in the Modern Era (1800–1910):_  
_the End of Ideational Sadae and the Continuation of Material Yongdae_

As chapter 4 and 5 discussed Joseon’s _Sadae_ in the pre-modern period (1392–1800), this chapter moves on to the modern era (1800–1910), and it is composed of three parts: the first section is to illustrate Joseon’s _Sadae_ policy towards Qing from 1800 to 1873, a period that was characterised by a new feature of Joseon’s foreign relations – to resist the ‘barbarians’ from the West. The second section is to explain the decline of ideational _Sadae_ that took place in the period from 1874 to mid-1884. The third section is to examine _Yongdae_, the strategy adopted by the reformists who advocated enlightenment and modernisation in the Western way from mid-1884 to 1910, during which Joseon used one great against another, driving Qing and Russia out of the Korean Peninsula in tandem by 1905 – but in 1910, Joseon was annexed by Japan, the final great that was left in Northeast Asia.

The Western intrusion in the 19th century gave a new meaning to the ideational aspect of _Sadae_: while the original task for Joseon was to respect China and to resist the barbarians within the Sinocentric world, the new barbarians Joseon had to resist were coming from a world unknown to the Koreans. Like their loyal ancestors, the conservative Joseon political elites faithfully upheld the Confucian principle of propriety and righteousness: they served Qing with sincerity and fought off the Westerners with utmost determination. For seven decades, they kept the British, the French, the Russian, and the American out of Joseon, no matter the intruders came as merchant, missionary, or military personnel. However, by the time when the Japanese attempted to break into the ‘Hermit Kingdom’, the Koreans realised that they had been and very likely would be fighting off the foreigners alone – for Qing did not and was not going to protect Joseon as a suzerain ought to do.

Not only did Qing offer little assistance to Joseon, the Qing court even suggested Joseon to ally with the alien powers of France and America to balance against
Japan in 1874. Five years later, the Qing court gave Joseon the similar advice (to collaborate with Japan and America to resist Russian aggression) when Russia demonstrated territorial ambition in Northeast Asia and posed a threat to Joseon. To many Joseon political elites, Qing as the senior failed to perform its duty to look after Joseon’s well-being. The worse was, the Qing court changed the centuries-old tradition of non-interference towards Joseon during and after the military uprising in 1882 and started to meddle in the Joseon domestic politics. The ideational Sadae thus began to decline as the anti-Qing sentiment was brewing in Joseon.

Meanwhile, the European sovereign-state system that promoted equality and autonomy looked strongly appealing to those who considered it a shame for Joseon to be a vassal of China (no matter it was ruled by the Han-Chinese or the Manchu). They soon became the reformists who aimed to build a modern Korean state independent from China. After the ideational Sadae reached its end when Gojong proclaimed the termination of Joseon’s tribute relation with Qing in 1894, the pragmatic Yongdae remained a viable option for Joseon to survive in the fights among the great powers; the strategy of ‘using one great against another’ worked well in the sense that the Chinese and the Russians were driven off the Korean Peninsula in the following decade.

Historical evidence is mainly drawn from the original records documented in The Ri Dynasty Annals of Korea. In addition, diaries, letters, and memoirs written by the key policymakers of Joseon foreign relations are also used as the primary source of material in the following analyses.

6.1 Joseon: Resisting the New ‘Barbarians’ – the Western Powers (1800–73)

This section covers a period of 73 years from Sungjo’s enthronement to the first decade of Gojong’s reign during which Daewongun (Gojong’s biological father) ruled as Regent on behalf of the under-aged king. Throughout these seven decades, the Joseon court faithfully abided by the Confucian doctrine of Jonhwa Yangyi (respecting China and resisting the barbarians, 尊華攘夷) and determinedly
resisted the Western intrusion in all of its three forms of expansion: missionary, merchant, and military.

*From Sungjo to Cheoljong: 1800–63*

This period witnessed the continuation of Sadae towards Qing. All of the usual practices of Sadae were duly carried out, such as the annual dispatch of tribute missions to Beijing. In addition, special missions were also sent occasionally. For instance, knowing that Jiaqing Emperor was planning a trip of ancestral veneration to Mukden, Sungjo dispatched a special mission to inquire after the emperor in June 1818. When the emperor was greeted by the Joseon embassies in Mukden on 5 September, he was so delighted that he highly praised Joseon’s loyalty towards Qing (*RDAK, vol. 51, Sungjo Sillok, 1966, p.87, p.92, p.95*).

Another example took place in 1861, the year after the Second Opium War (1856–60). When Cheoljong came to know that Qing was dreadfully suffering from foreign invasions and domestic unrests simultaneously, he sent a special mission to China in January 1861 to inquire after Xianfeng Emperor, saying that it was Joseon’s moral obligation to do so according to Confucian ethics. Joseon’s allegiance to Qing was highly commended by the emperor – because no other vassals of Qing ever sent a mission to inquire after the emperor at this critical moment of their suzerain (*RDAK, vol. 52, Heonjong/Cheoljong Sillok, 1967, p.219, p.221*). Hence, although the level of enthusiasm in Joseon’s Sadae was not as high as what was seen during Jeongjo’s reign in the late 1700s, Joseon’s reverence for Qing during this period, generally speaking, was considered as matching up with the basic requirements of Sadae. However, Joseon’s persistence to resist the Western powers was truly commendable according to Confucian standards.

Only one year after Sungjo’s enthronement, *Sinyu Bakhae* (the Catholic Persecution of 1801, 光緒迫害) took place, during which many Korean Catholics were imprisoned, exiled, or executed by the Joseon court. In his memorial to the throne on 27 October, Sungjo reported the incident to Jiaqing Emperor and stated that Joseon, since its founding, had been faithfully upholding Confucian values,
for which the Joseon court would unwaveringly reject any ideas imported from the West. In his edict issued to all Joseon subjects on 22 December, Sungjo stressed that Confucianism had been and would be Joseon’s state ideology and Jonhwa Yangyi was the only way to safeguard Joseon’s reputation as a nation of Confucian propriety and righteousness. To accept heretical ideas from the West was to invite Western intrusion, for which Joseon’s security would be jeopardised. Thus an imperative task to keep Joseon intact as Sojunghwa was to prohibit the spread of Western religions in the country (RDAK, vol. 50, Sungjo Sillok, 1966, pp.51–52, p.87, pp.95–97).

In August 1839, another similar incident occurred: Gihae Bakhae (the Catholic Persecution of 1839, 乙亥迫害) – only this time those being executed included three French clergymen. In response to the persecution, the French government sent a letter to the Joseon court in July 1846, demanding an explanation to the incident and warning that Joseon would suffer catastrophic consequences if any innocent French citizens were killed on Korean soil again in future. The Joseon court considered this as an act of threatening, and a detailed report was sent to the Qing Ministry of Rites in August 1847 to explain the incident. In the report, the Joseon court also requested Qing to stop French penetration in its country (RDAK, vol. 52, Heonjong/Cheoljong Sillok, 1967, p.37, pp.87–88, p.95).

In addition, the Joseon court also strictly refused to open the country to trade with the Western powers. In June 1832, a British ship arrived in Joseon and the Englishmen on board requested to trade with the locals. However, the request was immediately rebuffed by the Joseon court. In its report to the Qing Ministry of Rites on 21 July, Sungjo explained that Joseon’s repudiation to the British request was based on Confucian ethics: a vassal state should not have relations with any foreign countries. Joseon was a vassal of Qing, thus it was improper for Joseon to interact directly with a foreign country like Britain (RDAK, vol. 51, Sungjo Sillok, 1966, pp.341–2). Nevertheless, two British vessels arrived in Jeju in December 1840, firing guns to intimidate the locals and looting livestock. In June 1845, the southern coastal area of Joseon was disturbed again by a British surveying vessel. The Joseon court kept refusing to discuss any matter with the Englishmen directly;
instead it reported the incidents to the Qing Ministry of Rites on 5 July, asking the Qing court to inform Britain that Joseon would not open itself to foreign trade (RDAK, vol. 52, Heonjong/Cheoljong Sillok, 1967, p.51, p.78). It should be noticed that at the end of the above incidents, the Joseon court reported what happened to Qing and raised a similar request: Joseon expected Qing, as its suzerain, to deal with the foreign powers directly so as to protect Joseon from their intrusions – and such expectation was absolutely reasonable based on the Confucian tenets and the usual practice in Joseon–Ming/Qing history.

Gojong (with Daewongun as Regent): 1863–73

Gojong was enthroned at the age of 11, and his biological father, Daewongun, was the de facto controller of the Joseon court. During the decade under Daewongun’s rule, the anti-foreigner sentiment in Joseon reached its peak. The making of foreign policy in the Joseon court was fully charged with ideational concerns, and resisting the barbarians was no longer confined to the policies of expelling missionaries and rejecting foreign trades: with resolution to drive the barbarians off the country, the Koreans prepared to confront the Western intruders militarily. It was not a reckless decision though; the military power of the West was known in the Joseon court – in March 1861, Joseon embassies returned from China and reported to Cheoljong that Qing was defeated by the Anglo-French coalition forces and was coerced into signing a treaty in favour of British and French interests (RDAK, vol. 52, Heonjong/Cheoljong Sillok, 1967, p.220). While Qing, with much stronger military forces than those of Joseon, was not able to withstand the Western aggression, the chance for Joseon to confront the West successfully would be minimal by any rational calculations. However, Daewongun and the loyalists still determinedly opted for fighting against the Western powers. This proved again that Joseon foreign relations were influenced not solely by material but also by ideational forces.

The decade of Daewongun’s rule witnessed a remarkable record of Joseon’s resistance against Russia, France, and America. In February 1864, some Russians crossed the Joseon border at Tumen River and asked for trade with Joseon – their demand was instantly rejected by the local Joseon officials. The Joseon court received the report and viewed it as a threat to border security, thus ordered to
strengthen the border defence by strictly prohibiting any trading activities with the Russians to prevent Russian aggression towards Joseon (RDAK, vol. 53, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.139).

As for the French, the Joseon–France relations remained less cordial due to the ongoing issue of missionaries, and tension between the two countries reached a new height in Byeongin Bakhae (Catholic Persecution of 1866, 丙寅迫害), during which four French missionaries were executed by the Joseon court in January 1866 for dissemination of heretical ideas. However this time, among those being executed, there were a number of Joseon court officials who advocated the forging of alliance with France in order to deter Russian aggression, for which they were charged with the crimes of subversion and treason (RDAK, vol. 53, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.205–6).

This became the cause of Byeongin Yangyo (Western Disturbance in the Byeongin Year, 丙寅洋擾): in September 1866, the French government sent an expedition force to Joseon in retaliation for what the Joseon court had done in Byeongin Bakhae. Although the French claimed that they would kill 9,000 Koreans for the nine Frenchmen killed in Joseon, Daewongun did not back off; he warned that appeasement with the Western powers would only encourage the barbarians to be more aggressive. On 11 September, Daewongun openly called for the unity of all Koreans to resist the French intruders. He vowed that he would never negotiate peace and sign treaty with the barbarians, and he would never abandon Hanseong for he intended to defend the capital city with his life (RDAK, vol. 53, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.234–5).

Daewongun was not alone in the Joseon court; he was strongly supported by the loyalists. Among others, Yi Hang-no (1792–1868), one of the leading Confucianists, wrote twice to Gojong on 12 September and 4 October with the appeals that: 1) negotiation for peace should never be considered an option because barbarians should be expelled by force; 2) heretical ideas from the West should be banned permanently such that Confucianism could be preserved in Joseon; and 3) Gojong should burn all the materials used in royal palaces that
were imported from the West and prohibit the use of Western products in Joseon, thereby the West would have nothing to trade with the Koreans (RDAK, vol. 53, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.235–6, pp.241–2).

For around six weeks of time, troops of the two nations engaged in several battles. The French seized Ganghwado, but its advancement towards Hanseong was checked by the Joseon army. With little hope of securing a decisive victory over Joseon, the French troops finally withdrew on 15 October. France later raised its demand to Qing (as Qing was Joseon’s suzerain), insisting that Qing should order the opening of Joseon to French trade and missionaries. However, the Qing court replied to the French that China never interfered with the policymaking process of its vassals. Meanwhile, it informed the Joseon court about the intention of France to sign treaty with Joseon, yet the Joseon court refused to negotiate with the French, declaring that it was impossible for Joseon to sign treaty with an alien power (RDAK, vol. 53, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.232–45, p.259).

In addition to the Russians and the French, the Americans were also rebuffed by the Koreans when they attempted to break into Joseon. The first encounter of the two countries was the General Sherman incident: in July 1866, an armed American merchant vessel, General Sherman, sailed along the Taedong River towards Pyongyang. After detaining a Joseon local official, General Sherman opened fire and killed some local Koreans. The Joseon troops and civilians then fought back, killed all on board, and burned the ship (RDAK, vol. 53, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.226) – this incident subsequently triggered Shinmi Yangyo (Western Disturbance in the Shinmi Year, 辛未洋擾)

In April 1871, the American government launched an expedition to punish Joseon for its refusal to apologise for attacking American vessels. In his letter to the American commander on 17 April, Daewongun stated that Joseon had not directly associated with any foreign countries for five centuries, and it was Joseon’s intention to preserve such tradition in future. He pointed to the different systems of belief between the East and the West, saying that the two should not interfere with each other, for which the American should not have come to Joseon.
Meanwhile, *Daewongun* ordered to have stelae erected in the major cities nationwide, with inscriptions of words that refuted the idea of negotiating peace with the barbarians and denounced it as an act of treason. Military conflicts broke out on 6 April and lasted for over 40 days. The American troops, in spite of gaining the upper hand in the battles, left the peninsula on 16 May because the Joseon court signalled no intention to comply with any American demands (*RDAK, vol. 53, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.360–6*).

Based on the historical evidence mentioned above, Joseon’s determination to resist the Western powers could be described as extraordinary. The Koreans therefore were generally depicted as a stubborn, conservative, and xenophobic people that advocated isolationism (Wright, 1958, p.364) or exclusionism (Kim, 2012, p.281). However, it is equally reasonable to understand the Koreans at that time as a nation of people who were devout believers of Confucianism fully committed to obeying the Confucian code of ethics. *Jonhwa Yangyi* derived from the core of Sinocentrism, and it was the application of the Confucian principle of propriety in international relations. Strict adherence to *Jonhwa Yangyi*, in spite of the commercial opportunities that looked tempting and the armed invasions that appeared intimidating, was undoubtedly a demonstration of the Koreans’ devotion to Confucianism that they chose to sustain their ideational world. Instead of projecting the Joseon political elites (such as *Daewongun*) as nationalists (Nahm, 1988, p.146), considering the Joseon society that had been Sinicised for nearly five centuries, it would be more appropriate to describe them as Confucian loyalists.

Like an earnest young son who would not associate with an outsider without the permission of his father, Joseon simply entrusted its foreign relations to its suzerain – not only that it did so according to the Confucian propriety, but also that it had faith in its senior to perform the duty of looking after its benefits. However, when Joseon began to sense the unwillingness and inability of Qing to take care of its most loyal vassal against the barbarians in the following decade, the very foundation of *Sadae* became shaky.
6.2 Decline of Joseon’s Ideational Sadae towards Qing (1874 – mid-1884)

The reasons that caused the decline of Joseon’s ideational Sadae towards Qing can be understood from the system, unit, and individual levels. At the system level, distribution of power in the world was not in favour of East Asia – the agriculture-based Sinocentric system in the region was no match for the European sovereign-state system supported by rapid industrialisation. At the unit level, Joseon was experiencing a transformation from a vassal of Qing that was not supposed to conduct foreign affairs to some sort of a pseudo-independent state (Joseon was still officially a vassal of Qing) that had to deal with the foreign powers on its own. Qing’s failure to perform its duties as a suzerain expected by its vassal led to the decline of Joseon’s faith in Sadae. At the individual level, after taking over the ruling power from Daewongun in 1874, Gojong exhibited interest in opening up Joseon to the West in general and desire to develop bilateral relations with Japan in particular. Factors of all these three levels can be found in the historical evidence discussed in the following sections.

Opening Up to Japan: Joseon’s First Experience of Modern Diplomacy (1874–8)

Gojong declared to exercise his rule directly in November 1873 when he reached 21 (RDAK, vol. 53, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.422–4). On 24 June 1874, Gojong received a classified dispatch from the Qing Ministry of Rite: the Qing court obtained the information that Japan, after its intrusion on Taiwan in May, planned to invade Joseon. While Joseon had not resolved its conflicts with France and America at the time, Qing forecasted that the two Western powers would ally with Japan in its assault on Joseon and Joseon would not be able to resist all three countries at the same time. The Qing court had reasons to believe the genuineness of the information because in 1867 a Hong Kong newspaper published similar information released by a Japanese named Hachinohe Hiromitsu about Japan’s intention to invade Joseon (RDAK, vol. 53, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p. 260).

Hence the Qing court suggested that Joseon should consider signing treaties with France and America to open the country to French and American trades, so that Japan’s aggression would be deterred by Joseon’s alliance with France and America. However, Yeonguijeong Yi Yu-won (1814–88) did not appreciate
Qing’s advice. On the contrary, he found it unpleasantly confusing. He thought that the Qing court should inform Joseon of Japan’s scheme without making such suggestion, for which he even suspected that Qing was using the situation to lure Joseon to sign treaties with the Western powers. Therefore, he tended to ignore Qing’s suggestion and focus on the strengthening of border defence. Moreover, Gojong and Yi Yu-won agreed to tighten up the prohibition on Western religion, for they were convinced that this was the most effective way to eliminate moles in Joseon (RDAK, vol. 53, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.464–5).

In fact, the Joseon–Japan relations had remained stagnant since 1868 as a result of disputes over letters that the newly reformed Japanese government sent to the Joseon court. The issue was controversial for three reasons in brief: 1) wording was deemed unacceptable as the Japanese monarch used those terms that were exclusively reserved for the Chinese emperor; 2) the letters were dispatched directly from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was different from the traditional practice by which correspondence was sent from the Tsushima Domain (which was a semi-autonomous region and not subject to the direct rule of the bakufu shogun); and 3) the traditional rituals were changed to those of the Western diplomacy.

Consequently, the court officials split into two groups with contrasting views: the rationalists believed that the letters should be duly accepted and politely answered because it helped to avoid war if Joseon could maintain a peaceful relationship with the militarily powerful Japan. While Yi Yu-won was open to the option of accepting the letters, the leading figure was indeed Uujeong Pak Gyu-su (1807–77), who was the grandson of Pak Ji-won, the renowned scholar of Silhak. Pak Gyu-su wrote to Daewongun five times and expressed his opinion that the changes were simply the result of Japan’s Meiji Restoration, which were beyond Joseon’s control. However, not accepting the Japanese letters was a breach of modern diplomatic protocol, which would provide Japan with an excuse to launch attack against Joseon – hence accepting the letters, in spite of the deceptive nature of the Japanese, would reduce an enemy that Joseon had to deal with. Moreover, he urged that the letters should be accepted as soon as possible – for it would be humiliating if Joseon had to accept them at gunpoint when the Japanese warships
arrived (Pak, 1999, pp.502–6). He also tried to convince Gojong with his pragmatic ideas in court on 29 June 1874, and Gojong appeared to be agreeable, even showing interest in learning more about Japan by communicating with the Japanese government (RDAK, vol. 53, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.466).

The loyalists, however, held the view that the letters should be straightly rejected. They were headed by Jwauijeong Yi Choe-eung (1815–82), the elder brother of Daewongun. They considered such dramatic changes as an act of disrespect to China and an attempt to raise Japan’s status to a level that was higher than that of Joseon. On 10 May 1875, when Pak Gyu-su attempted to persuade Gojong to accept the letters so as not to provoke Japan, Yi Choe-eung insisted that Joseon should not violate the Confucian principles of propriety and therefore the letters must not be accepted. As a result, Yi Yu-won gave in, and Gojong had no choice but to endorse his uncle’s decision (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.10).

Unyo-ho Sageon (the Unyo Incident, 雲揚號事件) took place in 1875. Without notifying the Joseon court, the Japanese warship Unyo sailed to Ganghwado on 22 August in the name of surveying coastal waters. Unyo then fired shells at Joseon local garrison and civilians, occupied towns on the island, and set fire on them. The Japanese troops withdrew on 29 August (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.16–17). Yi Choe-eung was furious about the incident, and on 15 November he reiterated in the Joseon court that simply rejecting the Japanese letters was not sufficient; Joseon should send the letters to the Qing court as evidence of Japan’s arrogance and audacity, with which China could punish Japan in due course. Gojong approved Yi’s proposal, but instructed to condemn only those points that the Joseon court disapproved of (meaning not everything about the letters). On 16 November, Japanese warships invaded Joseon again: in Busan, 58 Japanese marines wounded 12 Koreans with swords and firearms (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.20–21).

Until this point, Qing had not directly involved itself in the discord/conflict between Joseon and Japan to protect its vassal. As a matter of fact, the Sino-Japanese Friendship and Trade Treaty signed in 1871 elevated Japan’s status
to the level equivalent to that of China, whereby Joseon’s status was lowered compared with that of Japan. More importantly, in the article that stipulated mutual non-aggression between Qing and Japan, Joseon was not explicitly mentioned as Qing’s vassal that Japan should not attack; ‘nations and territories’ was the term used in the treaty – although Li Hongzhang (Northern Superintendent of Trade at the time in charge of Qing’s foreign affairs, plenipotentiary that represented Qing to sign the 1871 treaty) later verbally explained to Mori Yurei (Japanese special envoy) that the word ‘nations’ implied Qing’s vassals and that included Joseon (Lin, 1935/1936, pp.208–10). With Qing’s assistance nowhere in sight, the Joseon court would have to deal with Japan directly on its own – and it started with negotiations between the two countries in a modern diplomatic fashion in January 1876.

The Joseon–Japan negotiations began on 19 January, with topics including the disputes on the Japanese letters, Unyo-ho Sageon, and the information about Japan’s plan to invade Joseon provided by Hachinohe Hiromitsu in the Hong Kong newspaper. While General Shin Heon (1810–84), the Joseon plenipotentiary, accused Japan for violating the traditional practice of correspondence, Kuroda Kiyotaka, plenipotentiary of Japan, simply responded that it was because of the fact that Japan had undergone a transformation and become a modernised country, and Joseon’s refusal to accept the letters was the cause that had led to Unyo-ho Sageon. Moreover, Kiyotaka said that Hachinohe Hiromitsu was not a government official, thus the Japanese government did not have to be accounted for whatever Hiromitsu had said in the newspaper. On 21 January, Kiyotaka stated that Japan intended to sign treaty of amity and commerce with Joseon according to international law, and Joseon would regret if it refused Japan’s proposal – for war between Joseon and Japan would be inevitable. Shin Heon criticised Japan for lack of respect and sincerity, saying that the foundation of building Joseon–Japan relations should be propriety, not threatening by force (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.27–29).

Negotiations with Japan aroused rage among the loyalists in Joseon. Choi Ik-hyeon (1834–1906), one of the leading Confucian scholar-officials, wrote to Gojong on 23 January and asked the king to abandon the idea of negotiating with
Japan because Japan had been Westernised and it was Joseon’s moral obligation to resist the barbarians. Signing treaty with the barbaric Japanese was no different from inviting a greedy enemy to Joseon – soon the country would be reduced to chaos and eventually it would be eliminated by Japan. Choi said he was repeating what Jo Heon did in December 1587 (Jo Heon asked Seonjo to stop associating with Japan) – yet what happened to Choi was not the same as what Seonjo did to Jo Heon: Jo Heon was refuted by Seonjo but Choi was arrested by Gojong’s order. Gojong not only silenced the loyalists, in the reply the Joseon court sent to Kuroda Kiyotaka on 25 January regarding the next step of signing the treaty, the words chosen were quite modest and the tone appeared to be rather humble (which was different from those affirmative words Shin Heon used during the negotiations). More importantly, Gojong expressed his will to maintain peaceful and amicable relations with Japan permanently, in spite of whatever unpleasant happened before between the two countries (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.29–31).

On 3 February 1876, *Ganghwado Joyak* (Treaty of Ganghwa Island, 江華島條約) was signed and Joseon was opened up for the first time in centuries. Not only that several ports were opened for Japanese trade and extraterritoriality was granted to Japan, but also that Joseon’s status was altered in the treaty: in Article One, Joseon was mentioned as an autonomous state that enjoyed the rights equivalent to those of Japan (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.32–34). There might be terms in the treaty that were in favour of Japan, but what was mentioned in Article One did look encouraging to those who advocated enlightenment (although it appeared treacherous to the loyalists). As for Qing, even with Joseon being mentioned as an autonomous state in *Ganghwado Joyak*, the Qing court did not raise any objection to the clause – in fact it did not perceive it as anything new or special at all: the Qing court claimed that Joseon had been controlling and managing its own affairs for centuries and China never interfered – this was a fact known worldwide (Lin, 1935/1936, pp.216–8). Qing’s inaction on the issue thus seriously disappointed those in Joseon who had strong faith in Sadae.
Gojong nonetheless appeared to be very optimistic about the future Joseon–Japan relations. Two days after signing Ganghwado Joyak, Gojong calmed down the grumbling Yi Choe-eung (now Yeonguijeong, who was opposed to accepting the Japanese letters the year before) in court by saying that it was no longer necessary to argue about whether Joseon should associate with foreigners because Japan was merely resuming its friendship with Joseon. When Shin Heon reported to Gojong about the negotiation process on 6 February, the general mentioned that the Japanese noticed the weaknesses of Joseon troops and suggested that Joseon should enrich the country and strengthen the military. Gojong’s response was that he believed in Japan’s sincerity to establish friendly relationship with Joseon (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.34). On 22 February, Gojong appointed Kim Ki-su as Susinsa (Trust Cultivating Envoy) and sent him to Japan. Before his departure on 4 April, Kim was summoned to the royal palace and Gojong instructed him to record everything he was to observe in Japan. Two months later, Gojong met with Kim and anxiously inquired the development of modern technology in Japan (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.35, p.37, pp.39–40).

Qing’s Advice: ‘Using Barbarians to Control Barbarians’ (1879 – April 1882)

A crucial moment then came in 1879 that profoundly changed the Joseon’s faith in Sadae: the change of Qing’s Joseon policy. Qing had been staying away from Joseon’s conflicts with the Western powers and Japan, but after Japan annexed Ryukyu in the spring of 1879, Qing decided to change its role from being merely a bystander to become a string-puller, which was evident in the correspondence between two senior government officials in July 1879: Li Hongzhang of Qing and Yi Yu-won of Joseon.

In the letter, Li pointed out that Joseon should stay alert to the dangers posed by Japan and Russia because both countries had territorial ambition in Northeast Asia. The Qing court decided that, rather to rescue Joseon in future, it would be wise to plan for Joseon’s foreign policy at present in order to prevent future crises from occurring at all. Li proposed the strategy of ‘using the barbarians to control the barbarians’: Joseon should sign treaties of commerce with the Western powers
according to international laws, by which the Japanese and Russian aggressions would be checked and deterred. At the same time, Joseon should strengthen its military power secretly for national defence. Li attempted to persuade Joseon to take proactive actions to ally with the European powers and America by invoking China’s painful experience with the West, in which China was forced to sign unequal treaties with terms in favour of the West.

Nevertheless, in his reply to Li’s letter, Yi rejected to adopt the strategy Li proposed because: 1) Joseon had been a vassal state for centuries, for which the Joseon court knew nothing about foreign affairs; 2) Joseon had been a Confucianised country since its foundation, for which the Koreans feared thus resisted Western ideas; and 3) the Joseon court did not believe in international laws, as evident in the case of Ryukyu that no international laws could stop Japan from annexing Ryukyu. Yi said that the Japan’s aggression had already been checked by the 1876 treaty, and he was also convinced that with the link established between Joseon and Japan, the Russian would abandon the thought of encroaching upon the Korean Peninsula. It was worth noticing that Yi mentioned twice in the letter that Joseon would have nothing to fear as long as Qing protected Joseon against the barbarians (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.111–2). This could be a reiteration of the relationship between Joseon and Qing as vassal and suzerain; yet it could also be deemed as an expression of discontent on the Joseon side towards Qing – considering what Qing should have done for Joseon but did not do in such an unprecedented situation that Joseon was threatened by several barbarians.

The advice of the Qing court was therefore perceived by the Koreans as a proof to confirm Qing’s unwillingness to protect Joseon from foreign encroachment. It did not produce the impact as the Qing court expected; it only accelerated Gojong’s growing disbelief in Sadae and reinforced the king’s pragmatic stance in designing Joseon’s future. To improve Joseon’s military capability, Gojong sent apprentices to Tianjin, China in July 1880 to study the crafts of manufacturing modern weaponry and the knowledge of modern warfare (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.129). Meanwhile, to elevate Joseon’s international status, Gojong established a new ministry, Tongnigimuamun (Office for Extraordinary State
Affairs, 統理機務衙門), on 21 December 1880 to supervise the operation of a number of departments that included Sadaesa (department in charge of Sadae towards China, 事大司) and Kyorinsa (department responsible for supervising neighbourly relations, 交隣司). This on the one hand lowered the status of the Qing–Joseon relationships to the level that was equivalent to Joseon’s relationships with any other countries (Japan in particular, for it was Joseon’s immediate neighbour); on the other hand, Joseon’s days of ‘vassals should not have foreign relations’ came to an end – by Gojong’s order, the head of Tongnigimuamun was to co-work with Uijeongbu in making foreign policies (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.141). In less than a year, Sadaesa and Kyorinsa were combined on 9 November 1881 into a new department: Dongmunsa (Department of Diplomatic Affairs, 同文司) – the prestigious status of Qing was further undermined and Joseon’s autonomy to manage its foreign affairs was explicitly professed (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.170–1).

The other step Gojong took was to study modern interstate relations so that Joseon would be capable to handle its foreign relations, and he chose to learn about the Japanese experience of Westernisation and modernisation. On 23 March 1880, Gojong sent Kim Hong-jip (1842–96) as Susinsa to Japan (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.124). After Kim Hong-jip returned from Japan, he was summoned by the king and they had a long conversation on 28 August that covered four topics: 1) Gojong asked detailed questions about Japan’s reform in domestic rule and foreign relations, and Kim reported to the king with information he collected and his approving comments – because Kim was greatly stunned by the modernising progress the Japanese had achieved; 2) They talked about Russia, and they found it uncertain about Russia’s intention towards Joseon; 3) They discussed Qing’s concern. Kim believed that it was Russia that Qing was deeply worried about, for which Qing reminded Joseon of the imperative task of self-strengthening. However, Gojong disdained Qing’s advice – for he viewed such advice as Qing shirking its obligations to protect Joseon, concluding that Qing could not be trusted; and 4) Gojong asked about the possibility of reviving the kingdom of Ryukyu, and Kim reported that Ryukyu had already been downgraded to a prefecture of Japan (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.131).
It was obvious that these four topics reflected Gojong’s eagerness to learn about the greater world and his declining faith in Sadae and confidence in Qing. This conversation also signalled the emergence of the pro-Japan, moderate reformists like Kim Hong-jip (who believed in modernising Joseon through progressive reform by the Japanese model). In addition to the information he collected in Japan, Kim also brought back a booklet titled *Joseon Chaengnyak* (Joseon Strategy, 朝鮮策略) written by Huang Zunxian (1848–1905, a Qing diplomat famous for his vision in interstate affairs), which significantly enlightened some but also enraged many in the ‘Hermit Kingdom’.

In brief, the core strategy proposed for Joseon in Huang’s booklet was to guard against Russia, which was the top priority in Joseon’s foreign relations, by staying close to China, allying with Japan, and joining with America. In the Joseon court, Gojong and Yi Choe-eung (then Yeonguijeong) appeared rather positive towards Huang’s analyses and proposals – in their conversation on 8 September 1880, they agreed with Huang’s view on Russia’s territorial ambitions in Northeast Asia, for which there would be great power rivalries between Japan and Russia in the region, and Joseon must prepare for self-defence in order to survive in the fight between the ‘whales’. Yi Choe-eung even expressed his view that whatever mentioned in Huang’s booklet that could be trusted should be adopted.

Moreover, *Joseon Chaengnyak* also changed Gojong’s perception of the Western powers: the king came to believe that it was indeed unnecessary for Joseon to resist foreign countries like America, for China had already opened the country to foreign trade and missionary. He added that it was the Koreans’ total ignorance about the West thus groundless fear for the modern world that had caused the conflicts in 1866 with France and in 1871 with America. Nonetheless, the most important impact of Huang’s booklet on Gojong was: the king became convinced that Joseon should ally with Japan. On 26 November 1880, Gojong met with Hanabusa Yoshitada, the Japanese minister to Joseon who came to present the letter of credence. It was evident that Gojong displayed not even a trace of discontent although the Japanese emperor referred to himself as ‘I, the sovereign’
and addressed Gojong as ‘you, the king’ in the letter, which apparently placed Japan above Joseon. In mid January 1881, Gojong even secretly dispatched a special delegation to Japan to observe and study the Japanese experience in modernisation (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.132–3, p.140, p.174).

However, the loyalists in Joseon were shocked and furious about what was illustrated in Joseon Chaengnyak, and the first wave of Wijeong Cheoksā (Movement of Defending Orthodoxy and Rejecting Heterodoxy, 衛正斥邪) began in October 1880: on 1 October, a court official from Byeongjo wrote to Gojong and severely criticised Huang’s appeal to learn from the West. Two days later, Kim Hong-jip wrote to Gojong saying that he was willing to resign from his current position in the Ministry of Personnel as a punishment for having discussed interstate affairs with Huang Zunxian in Japan and brought his booklet back to Joseon. The king immediately defended Kim against the accusation and forbade him to resign (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.135–6).

Yet in February 1881, the second wave of the movement started. It began with a letter to Gojong written and signed by 10,000 Confucian scholars in Joseon. They basically condemned Kim Hong-jip and Huang Zunxian with three points: 1) learning from the West would disgrace Joseon’s reputation as a nation of Confucian propriety and righteousness, and the Joseon court should follow the successful practice of the Joseon kings in history instead of the West; 2) Russia, America, and Japan were all barbarians, and they all had evil intentions towards Joseon; and 3) if Joseon signed treaties with Japan and America according to international laws, other foreign countries would follow suit and the consequences would be unthinkable. By then, Joseon would either enrage the foreign governments if it was to refuse their demands, or be dismantled and annexed by the foreign powers if Joseon had to sign treaties with all of them – hence signing treaties was a trap to ‘invite bandits’. Gojong, however, refuted the opinions of the Confucian scholars and accused them for slandering the court (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.145).
In the following six months, more criticisms were raised against the idea of collaborating with Japan or any foreign powers. The loyalists, including court officials and civilian scholars, fiercely condemned Li Hongzhang’s letter and Huang Zunxian’s booklet for their violation of Confucian ethics. They proposed to charge Yi Yu-won and Kim Hong-jip with the crime of deceiving the public and destabilising the country, and to burn all the books about learning the West such as Joseon Chaengnyak and Manguk Gongbeop (International Law, 国公法). Determination and perseverance of the loyalists were expected, yet it was no match for Gojong’s toughness and resolution to open up the country and to socialise with foreign countries: the king ordered to arrest those who wrote to him about their assertion of Wijeong Cheoksa – they were eventually either imprisoned or expelled. On the contrary, Gojong highly praised the pragmatists, such as Gwak Gi-rak, who believed that it was unnecessary to reject everything from the West; anything that was beneficial to Joseon could be adopted (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.147–9, p.154, pp.156–9).

By early 1880s, it became rather obvious that Gojong was much enthusiastic about associating with Japan. Meanwhile, he was also developing positive views about the Western powers. Consequently, the United States, among others, was considered an acceptable option for Joseon’s experiment to socialise with the West – but negotiations with the American would have to be conducted by the Qing court. What led to such decision were the efforts of Pak Gyu-su (1807–77), one of the early pro-enlightenment reformists, and Kim Yun-sik (1835–1922), the leading figure of the pro-Qing faction. Kim Yun-sik was the student of Pak Gyu-su, and both of them shared the same belief that Joseon should open up and learn to survive in the international society. However, they differed in the approach: Pak viewed it necessary for Joseon to deal with foreign powers directly, but Kim considered it imperative for Joseon to stay close to Qing and follow Qing’s advice to deal with foreign powers – by Pak’s idea, Joseon was to embark on a journey to independence; by Kim’s idea however, Joseon would remain a vassal of Qing.
Back in 1871 after Shinmi Yangyo, Pak Gyu-su (then Uuijeong) told Kim Yun-sik that it was not wise for Joseon to turn down the Americans. He noticed the anarchical nature of the international system, in which the strong would prey on the weak, and he could sense the imminent danger that was looming on Joseon because of its strategic location in Northeast Asia. Pak strongly believed that Joseon was in urgent need of an ally such that it would not be isolated in world politics. Among the foreign powers, Pak was certain that the United States was an ideal partner for Joseon: America was immensely wealthy thus did not possess territorial ambitions, for which the country was famous for its principle of fairness in managing interstate affairs (Pak, 1999, pp.428–31).

As for Kim Yun-sik, he was also aware that states (Western powers in particular) in the modern international system were deterring each other by military force and checking each other by international laws (Kim, 1999, pp.365–6). Kim agreed with Pak’s view on forging alliance with America, for he was also convinced that America could play the role of an arbitrator if Joseon was bullied by other foreign powers. However, Kim also firmly believed that Qing would protect Joseon if Joseon could maintain a close relationship with Qing – by serving Qing faithfully. He described the Joseon–Qing relationship as one between ‘teeth and lips’, by which he stressed the paramount importance of sustaining the suzerain–vassal relationship between the two countries in the face of foreign encroachment (Kim, 1999, pp.488–9, pp.559–63). As the Qing court was suggesting Joseon to ‘use the barbarians to control the barbarians’, Kim was certain that following Qing’s instruction would be the best policy for Joseon. Since both Li Hongzhang’s letter and Huang Zunxian’s booklet mentioned the strategy of making alliance with America, coupled with his and Pak Gyu-su’s positive perception towards America, when the opportunity came for negotiations between Joseon and America, Kim Yun-sik became an ideal candidate to represent Joseon. In September 1881, Kim went to the Chinese city of Tianjin as a special emissary appointed by Gojong (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.160, p.165, p.170).

During his stay in China, Kim Yun-sik wrote diaries to record his close communications with Li Hongzhang, which included the points of: 1) he confirmed with Li that Gojong would no longer endorse the policy of resisting
foreigners, and Gojong was positive on the issue of negotiating with America because the fair treaty to be signed between the two countries could serve as a template for future treaties that Joseon would sign with other countries; 2) in spite of Gojong’s will, some court officials and many Joseon commoners were still antagonistic about the idea of collaborating with foreigners, for which Gojong would like to ask Li to negotiate on behalf of Joseon with the American government, thereby the domestic opponents would be silenced; and 3) Gojong would prefer Li to act as subtly as possible in front of the Americans – implying that Gojong intended to prevent the Americans from noticing that Joseon was indeed controlled by Qing – which reflected Gojong’s concern to project an autonomous image of Joseon in the international community (Kim, 1999, pp.432–4).

This, however, created a dilemma for the Qing court: while there were good reasons for Qing to involve in the Joseon–America negotiation (e.g. to remind Joseon of its vassalage to Qing, to assure that Joseon was not going to fall in the hands of the West such that China’s border defence could be secured), negotiating on behalf of Joseon might also lead to a future consequence that the West would hold Qing accountable for everything related to Joseon’s foreign policy. Eventually, the Qing court agreed to involve in the negotiations but merely as an advisor, a facilitator, and a coordinator – yet Qing’s suzerainty over Joseon was reiterated to both Joseon and America in supplementary documents, although it was not mentioned in the official treaty (Lin, 1935/1936, pp.222–5; RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.184). On 6 April 1882, Jomi Suho Tongsang Joyak (Korea–United States Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce and Navigation, 朝美修好通商條約) was officially signed between Joseon and the United States (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.187–9).

By this time, it became clear to Gojong and the Joseon reformists that what Qing was willing to do for Joseon was to play the role of a string-puller at best and that of a bystander at least – yet most certainly not the role of a protector, as Qing would not be willing to actively protect Joseon from any foreign encroachment. In dealing with foreign affairs, all that Joseon would receive from Qing was only
advice. However, to those who endeavoured to elevate Joseon’s status in the international society, Qing’s retreat was not totally negative after all; Joseon now enjoyed a higher degree of autonomy in managing its foreign relations. However, when the Qing court changed the century-old tradition of non-intervention in Joseon’s politics, it aroused discontent among the Joseon political elites and accelerated the declining process of Joseon’s ideational Sadae towards Qing.

*Change of Qing’s Korea Policy (June 1882 – mid-1884)*

*Imo Gullan* (Military Uprising in 1882, 壬午軍乱) could be considered the event that signalled Qing’s change of its *laissez-faire* policy regarding Joseon’s politics. To illustrate the incident in brief, Joseon soldiers stationing in Hanseong revolted on 9 June 1882 due to a 13-month delay of their wages. The outburst of their anger also ignited the Korean commoners’ anti-Japanese sentiments and their resentment towards those court officials who advocated collaboration with the Japanese: the Japanese legation was attacked, and some Japanese were killed. The rioting soldiers attacked the royal palace the next day and killed a number of court officials, including Yi Choe-eung (former Yeonguijeong). Queen Min also fled from the palace (*RDAK*, vol. 54, *Gojong Sillok*, 1967, pp.193–4).

On 12 June, *Yeonguijeong* Hong Sun-mok (1816–84) suggested that both Qing and Japan must be notified about the incident and Gojong approved his suggestion. Qing then sent a troop of soldiers to Hanseong in July to suppress the uprising. Since Daewongun was suspected to have instigated the riot, the Qing generals seized Daewongun on 13 July and took him to the Chinese city of Tianjin. Gojong then dispatched a special mission to China on 16 July to convey Joseon’s gratitude towards Qing’s assistance, yet the envoy also raised Gojong’s request to return Daewongun. However, Daewongun was not released until August 1885 (*RDAK*, vol. 54, *Gojong Sillok*, 1967, p.194, p.198, p.351).

As for Japan, the Japanese government demanded the Joseon court to apprehend those who were responsible for the killing of the Japanese personnel within 20 days (otherwise the Japanese authority would take over the case), to compensate the families of the victims and the Japanese government by paying 500,000 yen as
reparations (to be settled within five years), and to allow Japanese troops to station in Hanseong for the purpose of safeguarding the Japanese legation – and all of these demands were put in *Jemulpo Joyak* (Treaty of Jemulpo, 濟物浦條約) that was signed between Joseon and Japan on 17 July 1882. While many Koreans found it shocking to permit Japanese soldiers stationing in the capital city, Gojong openly commented on 1 August that it was absolutely normal because Joseon was simply honouring the provisions agreed in its treaty with Japan (*RDAK*, vol. 54, *Gojong Sillok*, 1967, pp.198–9, p.201).

On 5 August, Gojong issued an edict to all Joseon subjects, explaining that the power of Western countries had surmounted that of Qing thus resisting the West would not be a rational option for Joseon. Gojong advocated that Joseon should associate with foreign countries according to international practice and law. Although Western religions ought to be repudiated, Joseon should learn any Western technologies that would benefit Joseon. Moreover, he stressed that the Japanese were a nation of benevolent people thus it would be the Koreans’ fault to question their good faith. Considering that Joseon had opened to foreign countries, Gojong also ordered the removal of all the stelae erected in 1871 with inscribed words of refuting the idea of negotiating peace with the barbarians. In the following months, whenever there were pragmatic suggestions raised by the reformists to learn about the Western technologies (including those of Japan) for the purpose of Joseon’s self-strengthening, Gojong would highly praised and immediately endorsed the ideas (*RDAK*, vol. 54, *Gojong Sillok*, 1967, p.202, pp.205–6, p.214, p.223).

Joseon was therefore gradually drifting away from Qing, although the suzerain–vassal relationship still existed between the two countries – but this was not what the Qing court would like to see; Joseon was still strategically important to Qing: 1) as its vassal state to sustain the Sinocentric world with the Qing Empire at its core; and 2) as its defensive fence to resist possible Japanese and/or Russian intrusions towards Northeastern China. The Qing court thus made use of Gojong’s request to abandon the policy of ‘Sea Ban’ between Joseon and Qing in February 1882 (on the ground that Joseon was now opened to Japanese trades,
hence Joseon should also be opened to Chinese trades) and signed a treaty with Joseon on 17 October 1882. In *Jocheong Sangmin Suryuk Muyeok Jangjeong* (Regulations for Maritime and Overland Trade between Joseon and Qing, 中朝商民水陸貿易章程), provisions related to extraterritoriality were stipulated apparently in favour of Qing, and it was stressed that whatever Qing was to offer Joseon by this treaty was a special privilege Qing granted to its vassal, for which none of such privilege would be enjoyed by other foreign countries that had signed or would sign treaties with Joseon. Meanwhile, in order to control Joseon’s increasing diplomatic and commercial interactions with foreign powers, Li Hongzhang sent Paul Georg von Möllendorff (1847–1901, former German vice-consul based in China) and Ma Jianchang (1840–1939) to Joseon as advisors to assist Gojong in managing foreign affairs. The king met with both, and Möllendorff was assigned to the Office for General Control of Diplomatic and Commercial Matters, while Ma was assigned to *Uijeongbu* (*RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok*, 1967, p.182, pp.215–7, pp.222–3).

Qing’s intervention in *Imo Gullan* and its attempt to affect Joseon’s diplomatic interaction with foreign countries by the 1882 Qing–Joseon treaty actually caused discontent in the Joseon court. Joseon was not pulled back to the Sinocentric sphere; on the contrary, Joseon was pushed away from Qing with declining faith in *Sadae*. Meanwhile, Joseon was drawn to the modern sovereignty system, in which Gojong and the reformists found greater opportunities for Joseon to elevate its status in the international society. From 1883 to 1884, the Joseon court signed treaties respectively with Britain, Germany, Italy, and Russia (*RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok*, 1967, p.182, pp.258–67, pp.290–9).

As shown in the abovementioned historical evidence, Qing’s evasion on the issue of protecting Joseon from foreign encroachment left few choices to the Koreans; they had to be self-interested and rely on their own resources to assure Joseon’s survival. The world in which Joseon could seek protection from China no long existed; it was replaced by one that self-help was the only solution to any problems, for which Joseon, like other nation-states, would have to look ultimately to their material power for survival. In the eyes of the Koreans, the
situation was different from the one two centuries ago: Ming was still willing to rescue Joseon during Qing’s invasion in 1636–7 even though it no longer possessed the ability to protect Joseon. However, what Qing did this time proved to the Koreans that Qing was not willing to protect Joseon at all (and it was already clear that Qing did not have the ability, as evident in Qing’s experience with the West).

This generated profound impact on the Koreans’ understanding of Sadae. It was an intersubjective concept that was commonly shared between the suzerain and the vassal: it was like a bridge that needed two piers for support; collapse of either pier would bring down the entire bridge. As Qing failed to discharge its duties to look after Joseon’s well-being, the foundation of Sadae simply ceased to exist. While the emphasis was traditionally placed on the ‘pull factors’ (i.e. the liberal influence and the sovereignty system in the West) that looked so appealing to the Joseon political elites thus inspired their pursuit for enlightenment and eventually national independence (Lee, 1984, pp.267–99), the ‘push factors’ (i.e. Qing’s failure to perform the duties of a suzerain towards its vassals) were equally important in arousing Joseon’s desire to disconnect itself from the Sinocentric order. The ‘push factors’ also explained why the Koreans revered Ming for over a hundred years even after its fall, but Joseon wished to detach itself from Qing although the empire was still standing.

With the combined effects produced by both the ‘push’ and the ‘pull’ factors, the ideational Sadae was approaching its end – although the material Yongdae remained a strategy for Joseon in its following quest for independence among great power competitions on the Korean Peninsula.

6.3 Yongdae: Joseon’s Strategy to Seek Independence in a Multipolar Order (mid-1884 – 1910)

As explained in the previous section, ideational Sadae declined as the result of two reasons: 1) within the Sinocentric system, Joseon witnessed Qing’s failure to perform its duties as a suzerain towards its vassals, as evident in Qing’s evasive attitude to protect Joseon from foreign encroachment and its intervention in
Joseon’s politics; and 2) outside the Sinocentric world, the European sovereignty system overpowered the Confucian tributary system, as proved by its military supremacy and its advocacy of equality and rule-of-law that profoundly appealed to Joseon.

In this section, the historical evidence during the period from mid-1884 to August 1910 will be examined in order to illustrate the final decade of Joseon’s ideational Sadae towards China and how Joseon implemented the strategic Yongdae on its road to independence. The analysis is to focus on the impact of five pivotal events during the period: 1) Gapsin Jeongbyeon (Gapsin Coup, 甲申政變, 1884) that attempted to sever Joseon’s tributary relations with Qing by using the power of Japan; 2) Geomundo Sageon (Geomun Island Incident, 巨文島事件, 1885) by which Joseon learned to ‘use foreign powers to control foreign powers’; 3) Joseon–Russia covert diplomacy (1885–6) with the attempt of using Russia against Qing; 4) the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–5) by which Joseon used Japan to terminate its tie with Qing and gained independence; and 5) Eulmi Sabyeon (Eulmi Incident, 乙未事變, 1895) that led to the Russo–Japanese War and the withdrawal of Russian aggression from the Korean Peninsula (1904–5).

_Gapsin Jeongbyeon (1884)_

The radical reformists in the Joseon court, headed by Kim Ok-gyun (1851–94), Pak Yeong-hyo (1861–1939), Hong Yeong-sik (1855–84) and some other pro-Japanese court officials, launched _Gapsin Jeongbyeon_ in October 1884. By using Japan’s power, the coup was meant to seize control of the Joseon court and to eliminate the pro-Qing faction. This was the first attempt of the Joseon reformists to use a foreign power against Qing, although hastily and loosely organised.

On 17 October, the coup leaders first took hold of Gojong, and Kim Ok-gyun issued a royal order in the king’s name to seek military support from the Japanese legation. The Japanese troops soon marched into the royal palace late in the evening. On 18 October, Kim Ok-gyun ordered to kill a number of pro-Qing officials, and the coup leaders were then appointed to key positions in the court.
However, Gojong managed to escape to the military camp of the Qing garrison based in Hanseong on 19 October. The Qing troops, led by Yuan Shikai (1859–1916), then charged into the royal palace to attack the Japanese. In the battle, the Joseon palace guards also followed the Chinese to fight the Japanese. As a result, the Japanese troops were defeated and retreated from the royal palace; Hong Yeong-sik was killed by the Joseon soldiers, Kim Ok-gyun and Pak Yeong-hyo later fled to Japan, and a good number of Japanese were killed or wounded by raging Korean soldiers and civilians who deeply resented the Japanese.

On 23 October, Gojong, escorted by Yuan Shikai, returned to the royal palace and resumed his control of power. Nevertheless, the following actions Gojong took did warrant a special mention: 1) Gojong issued an order to arrest only the coup leaders, despite that many court officials asked the king to severely punish all of those who involved in plotting the revolt; 2) Gojong promoted Kim Hong-jip, the leading moderate reformist who shared a clear pro-Japan stance that was no different from that of the coup leaders, to Jwauijeong; 3) apart from the Qing court, Gojong also directly reported the incident to the Japanese government; and 4) Gojong agreed to sign Hanseong Joyak (Treaty of Hanseong, 漢城條約) with the Japanese government on 24 November 1884, by which the Joseon court was required to apologise to the Japanese government, and Joseon was held accountable for compensating the families of the victims and the Japanese government for the damages to the Japanese legation in Hanseong by paying 310,000 yen as reparations (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.316–20).

As a matter of fact, although the Japan-backed coup failed within three days, the Japanese did not lose much: first, Gojong’s pro-Japan stance did not change. Second, the Japanese secured an agreement with the Qing court – the Tientsin Convention on 4 March 1885, whereby both Qing and Japan would withdraw their troops from the Korean soil within four months, neither country would send military trainers to Joseon (and the Joseon court was to employ instructors from other foreign countries), and in future both countries should notify each other
before dispatching troops to Joseon once the country was in a state of unrest (*RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok*, 1967, pp.332–3).

The Qing court signed the convention based on the consideration of two factors: 1) Qing was not ready to confront Japan militarily at the time; yet 2) Qing was not willing to give up its suzerainty over Joseon and let it fall into the hands of the Japanese (Lin, 1935/1936, pp.228–32). However, the Tientsin Convention had unquestionably undermined Qing’s influence on Joseon, for Japan’s status was elevated to the level equivalent to that of Qing regarding the control of Joseon by the convention. In other words, by setting Qing and Japan in direct competition, Gojong and the moderate reformists had achieved, though partially, what the radical reformists failed to achieve: using one great against another (i.e. using Japan against Qing, which was a practice of Yongdae) – and Joseon was on its way to detach itself from Qing.

**Geomundo Sageon (1885–7)**

The mid 1880s was a period that witnessed the competition among great powers in the Far East, and Geomundo Sageon was a result of the rivalry between Britain and Russia for dominance in Afghanistan: in response to the deployment of Russian warships in Vladivostok, British navy occupied Geomundo of Joseon on 1 March 1885 without obtaining the consent of the Joseon court – this was an attempt of the British government to block Russia’ southbound expansion in East Asia whereby the growing influence of Russia in the Far East could be checked.

In brief, the reaction of the foreign powers could be summarised as: 1) Qing strongly suggested that Joseon should not lease or sell the island to the British, as Qing believed that if Joseon gave up an island with strategic importance this easily, other foreign powers would immediately follow suit and Joseon would be dismantled; 2) Japan was firmly opposed to the British occupation as the Japanese considered it a threat to their national interest in the region. Japan thus urged Joseon to confirm that the British occupation was not endorsed by Joseon so that all other foreign countries that had signed treaties with Joseon would jointly arbitrate on the issue; 3) Germany believed that the British occupation was a breach of the Joseon–Britain treaty, and it suggested that the Joseon court should
ask the British government to withdraw its troops from the island and notify other foreign powers about the incident so that they would not have the misunderstanding that the British occupation was approved by Joseon. As for the two competing powers, Britain vaguely explained its action with its intention to balance against Russia, and Russia asserted that it would occupy another important port of Joseon, such as Weonsan, as an act of retaliation to the British occupation of Geomundo.

During the following months, the Joseon court employed the strategy of *Yongdae*, using other great powers to back its demand on the British withdrawal when interacting with the British government according to the protocol of modern diplomacy. Kim Yun-sik was in charge of the negotiation from the capital city, while Paul Georg von Möllendorff took up the role of negotiator in the field. Over a year later, pressed by other foreign powers and having settled with Russia on the issue of Afghanistan, the British navy eventually withdrew from Geomundo on 17 April 1887 (*RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok*, 1967, pp.335–7, pp.340–1, p.408). The incident, therefore, provided Gojong and the reformists with an opportunity to experience the implementation of *Yongdae*; it proved itself as a viable strategy for Joseon to survive in the fights among ‘whales’. To a certain extent, the incident encouraged Gojong to be proactive in the management of foreign affairs: in the modern international society that was supported by diplomacy and treaty, Joseon did not have to be controlled by the barbarians; on the contrary, Joseon could use a barbarian to control another barbarian. More importantly, Joseon could even use a foreign barbarian to reduce or eliminate Qing’s influence on Joseon – by this time it was becoming obvious to Gojong that there was an alternative great power, in addition to Japan, that could be used against Qing: Russia.

*Joseon–Russia Covert Diplomacy (1885–6)*

By the mid-1880s, the emergence of a multipolar order in Northeast Asia became obvious. During the time when Qing and Japan competed with each other over the control of Joseon, Russia was also planning its expansion southwards, targeting areas including the Korean Peninsula (which triggered *Geomundo Sageon*). However, Russia did not encroach upon Joseon by force; it was indeed by invitation – which was a result of Gojong’s strategy of allying with Russia to
resist Qing. This was another attempt of Gojong to disconnect Joseon from Qing by the idea of Yongdae, and consequently two rounds of Joseon–Russia covert diplomacy took place during 1885–6.

The first attempt was initiated by Gojong and coordinated by Paul Georg von Möllendorff during the first half of 1885. As the Qing and the Japanese troops were to withdraw from Joseon according to the Tientsin Convention while the appointed American military instructor had not arrived in Joseon, Gojong secretly dispatched a special envoy to Russia, conveying his request for the Russian government to send 20 military instructors to Joseon. However, information of this covert mission later leaked out and Kim Yun-sik (who was in charge of Joseon foreign affairs at the time) took the liberty to notify both Qing and Japanese governments. Pressed by Qing and Japan to investigate the secret diplomacy between Joseon and Russia, Gojong chose to deny his involvement in the incident and put the blame on Möllendorff alone. Demanded by the Japanese government, Möllendorff, as a scapegoat, was later dismissed from his job in July by Li Hongzhang, who also believed that the German had disgraced and betrayed Qing (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.340–1; Yi, 1967, pp.301–8).

The incident hence reminded Qing of the necessity to enhance its control over Joseon, and the solution was to send someone who knew Joseon well and was much tougher in the approach to deal with Gojong and the court officials who supported Queen Min (who was revealed to be the one who advocated the idea of partnering with Russia). The Japanese government also shared similar view with the Qing court, and the candidate turned out to be Yuan Shikai, who was one of the leading commanders of the Qing troops in both Imo Gullan (1882) and Gapsin Jeongbyeon (1884). Appointed by Li Hongzhang, Yuan Shikai, with the title of ‘Director-General Resident in Korea of Diplomatic and Commercial Relations’, escorted Daewongun back to Joseon in August 1885. Since then, Yuan Shikai had been closely monitoring the policymaking process in the Joseon court.

Yuan Shikai’s active intervention in Joseon politics and his swaggering attitude towards Gojong was evident in his analysis on Joseon politics that he sent to the Joseon court on 29 July 1886. In sum, Yuan Shikai reminded Gojong of a few
points: 1) Joseon had always been a vassal of China; to abandon China would completely ruin Joseon’s reputation because this was no different from a son ungratefully abandoning his parents; 2) if Joseon was to seek protection from a great power, Qing was the only option to Gojong because no other countries would genuinely look after Joseon’s well-being – and he illustrated a cost–benefit calculation to support his view; 3) independence only looked nice on paper, but indeed Joseon would be bullied by foreign powers without Qing’s protection; and 4) if Joseon was determined to sever its tie with China, rather than letting other foreign powers to take over Joseon, Qing would immediately dispatch troops to the Korean Peninsula and occupy Joseon. Yuan Shikai further proposed ten policies for Gojong that covered basically every major aspect of Joseon politics. In particular, he stressed that there was no need to hunt down Kim Ok-gyun in Japan; it was much more important to prevent the emergence of other traitors like Kim Ok-gyun within Joseon (RDAK, vol. 54, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.385–8). What Yuan did in Joseon was clear evidence that effectively countered the view of Hae-jong Chun that the Qing court basically chose not to interfere with Joseon’s politics (Chun, 1997, p.237).

To Gojong, Yuan Shikai was practically lecturing, warning, and threatening the king. However, Gojong became more convinced that Joseon must achieve its independence, and seeking help from Russia was still a feasible option. This time he wrote a letter and had it secretly sent to the Russian government (but in the name of the head of Joseon government), expressing Joseon’s determination to become independent from China. The problem, however, would be that Qing would not accept the situation in which Joseon achieved an equal status as those of all other countries. Hence, the Joseon government wished that Russia would dispatch warships as military assistance to Joseon. Different from the previous secret mission that the king only asked for Russian military instructors, this time Gojong specifically raised his request for Russian military forces to resist Qing.

Nevertheless, the serious implication of this letter even alerted a member of the Queen’s faction, Min Yeong-ik (1860–1914), who was opposed to any reckless actions in the name of allying Russia to resist Qing: he reported the incident to Yuan Shikai with a copy of the letter. Yuan was then convinced that Gojong was
to rebel against Qing, thus he proposed to Li Hongzhang that Qing should dethrone Gojong and arrest all the members of the Queen’s faction. Li Hongzhang then sent some naval forces over to Joseon to stand by, but he instructed Yuan to refrain from taking aggressive actions. When Gojong was later questioned about the letter, he again denied his acknowledgement and claimed that the letter was forged. As Min Yeong-ik also fled to Hong Kong (which made investigation more difficult without human testimony), plus the Russian government also denied the receipt of such letter, the Qing court decided to close the case (Yi, 1967, pp.318–31).

In spite of these fruitless attempts, Gojong continued his efforts to invite Russian presence in Joseon. Following the previous practice of negotiating treaties with other foreign powers, the Joseon court signed *Joro Yungno Tongsang Joyak* (Overland Trade Agreement between Joseon and Russia, 朝俄陸路通商條約) with the Russian government on 13 July 1888, by which the Russians were offered the privileges such as ports for Russian trades and extraterritoriality (*RDAK*, vol. 54, *Gojong Sillok*, 1967, pp.438–41). By late 1880s, Joseon had basically secured its tie with Russia through the formal establishment of a modern diplomatic relationship.

*Using Japan against Qing to Pursue Independence (1894–5)*

In addition to Russia, the Joseon court kept on negotiating with other foreign powers as an autonomous country, signing treaties with the French government on 3 May 1886 (*RDAK*, vol. 54, *Gojong Sillok*, 1967, pp.376–80), and with the Austro-Hungarian Empire on 29 May 1892 (*RDAK*, vol. 55, *Gojong Sillok*, 1967, pp.103–8). Besides, Gojong enthusiastically acquired more information of foreign countries and more knowledge about the modern international relations, as evident in his detailed conversation with Park Jeong-yang (1841–1904, Joseon minister to the United States at the time) on 24 July 1889 after Park returned from America (*RDAK*, vol. 55, *Gojong Sillok*, 1967, pp.10–11). While Gojong’s desire for independence was growing strongly, an opportunity came in February 1894: the outbreak of *Donghak Nongmin Undong* (Donghak Peasant Movement, 東學農民運動) in Joseon (*RDAK*, vol. 55, *Gojong Sillok*, 1967, p.167).
The revolt appeared to be so overwhelming in its early phase that the government was simply not able to handle it. Upon Joseon’s request for help, Qing dispatched troops to the Korean Peninsula on 1 May 1894. The Qing garrison advanced to the Chungcheong Province of Joseon and stationed in Asan on 14 June (RDAK, vol. 55, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.179). As for the Japanese government, according to the Tientsin Convention (1885), it also sent troops to Joseon. However, different from the Qing garrison, the Japanese soldiers marched directly into the royal palace in Hanseong on 21 June. When the palace guards fired at the invading Japanese troops, Gojong ordered them to cease fire. The Japanese soldiers then took control of all the palace gates and disarmed all the palace guards (RDAK, vol. 55, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.180).

What happened next in the royal palace was the announcement of launching Gabo Gaehyeok (Gabo Reform, 甲午更張) (RDAK, vol. 55, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.182–6, pp.188–93):

- On 25 June, Gojong promoted Kim Hong-rip, the leading pro-Japan moderate reformist, to Yeonguijeong and set up Gunguk Gimucheo (Deliberative Council, 軍國機務處).

- In the following two weeks, Gojong approved a series of proposals raised by Gunguk Gimucheo, which included:
  - To adopt Western calendar in all official documents nationwide (28 June);
  - To make an announcement to all Joseon subjects that the stationing of Japanese troops in Joseon was to guard against the Qing garrison and they meant no harm to the Koreans (1 July);
  - To abolish the centuries-old system of Gwageo, the Chinese-styled system of national civil service examination (3 July);
  - To set the Korean language as Joseon’s official language, although still keeping the Chinese language in use (12 July);
➢ To select talented young Koreans and send them to study abroad (13 July).

- Gojong announced the detailed action plan that he had endorsed to reform all government departments (i.e. restructuring the Joseon government according to the principles of modern public administration adopted in the West) on 14 July.

- Gojong changed the titles of the major court officials to those popularly used in the West on 15 July. For instance, Kim Hong-jip was re-titled to Prime Minister, and Kim Yun-sik became the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Supported by the presence of Japanese troops, Gojong went even further to distance Joseon from Qing. On 22 July, the Joseon government openly signed a covenant with the Japanese government to establish a state-to-state alliance for two purposes in general: 1) Joseon would entrust Japan with the job to modernise the country in various aspects; and 2) in order to consolidate Joseon’s independence and autonomy, and to safeguard the shared interests of Joseon and Japan, the two partners would join hands to drive Qing forces out of Korean Peninsula. In less than a week, Gojong’s assertion to take side with Japan against Qing ignited the First Sino-Japanese War (RDAK, vol. 55, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.197, p.200, p.202).

In spite of the objections raised by the loyalists to question Japan’s true motive in its efforts to help Joseon against Qing, Gojong wasted no time in preparing for the declaration of Joseon’s independence – especially during November, when it was becoming clear that there was little hope for Qing to win the war. He gradually changed the terms that Joseon kings had been using (e.g. the words for addressing the king himself and the edicts the king issued) to those used by the Chinese emperor. He also announced to the Qing merchants in Joseon that the Joseon–Qing treaty signed in 1882 was nullified – but Gojong, out of his kindness, was still willing to look after their well-being in Joseon. Moreover, the king even issued edicts and laws in Korean instead of Chinese (RDAK, vol. 55, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.211, pp.215–8).
A month later, Gojong took the final steps to sever Joseon’s tie with Qing. On 12 December 1894, he went to the royal ancestral temple to pledge that, in front of the spirit tablets of the previous kings, he would make Joseon powerful and prosperous in the coming years – and this required the change of traditional thinking of serving a great power and relying on its protection. This was the reason that he was now declaring the independence of Joseon. Gojong then announced *Hongbeom Sibsajo* (Fourteen Articles of Legal Norms, 洪範十四條), with the first article of proclaiming the end of Korea’s millennium-old tribute relationship with China, which meant that Korea became an independent sovereign state. The king then issued an edict to all Joseon subjects regarding Korea’s independence (*RDAK*, vol. 55, *Gojong Sillok*, 1967, p.220).

Although Gojong declared Korea’s independence, his firm pro-Japan stance made Korea closely stand on the Japanese side in the Qing-Japan rivalry. This was evident in his decision to appoint some of the leaders of *Gapsin Jeongbyeon* in 1884 to key positions in the new government, such as Pak Yeong-hyo (becoming Minister of Internal Affairs) and Seo Gwang-beom (1859–97, appointed as Minister of Justice). Besides, Gojong also approved the suggestion raised by the pro-Japan government officials to enhance border defence against Qing – because Qing was now considered the enemy of Korea (*RDAK*, vol. 55, *Gojong Sillok*, 1967, p.221, p.225). When Japan finally defeated Qing in the First Sino-Japanese War in early 1895, Korea’s independence from Qing became officially recognised in the world – it was stated in the first clause of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which was signed between Japan and Qing on 23 March, 1895. When the Korean government received the news on 10 May, Gojong issued an edict to celebrate the event across the country (*RDAK*, vol. 55, *Gojong Sillok*, 1967, p.252).

What followed next was the acceleration of de-Sinicisation in Korea. Mandatory policies from the government (i.e. top-down) included *Danballyeong* (Order to Cut off Male Topknots, 斷髮令, issued on 15 November 1895) in order to change the traditional Chinese attire (*RDAK*, vol. 55, *Gojong Sillok*, 1967, p.264), while spontaneous actions from the society (i.e. bottom-up) could be found in the
building of Dongnipmun (Independence Gate, 獨立門) on 21 November 1896 in order to replace Yeongeunmun (Gate of Welcoming Imperial Grace from China, 迎恩門, built in 1539) – a project sponsored by Dongnip Hyophoe (Independence Club, 獨立協會), an organisation founded by the pro-enlightenment activists (RDAK, vol. 55, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.295).

However, Gojong was not completely satisfied with what Joseon had achieved up to this moment. He had been embarking on the journey of ‘anti-Serving Qing’, and he intended to defy Qing to the extreme: to elevate his own status from being a king to becoming an emperor, thereby Korea’s identity would be changed from a kingdom to an empire, which was equal to that of Qing. Gojong and his supporters on such idea then came up with the theory that Korea, instead of Qing, should be the true heir to the imperial dynasties of Han, Tang, Song, and Ming in China according to the Confucian civilisation–barbarian dichotomy. Hence, in view that Korea had declared independent from Qing and emperorship was popularly seen in foreign countries, Gojong’s title was therefore changed from king to emperor.

On 12 October 1897, Gojong ascended to the throne of Gwangmu Emperor, and the name of the country was subsequently changed to Daehan Jeguk (the Great Korean Empire, 大韓帝國) on 13 October (RDAK, vol. 55, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.324–31). By this time, the Qing court had no choice but to admit the legitimacy of the new empire: on 1 February 1899, Xu Shoupeng as the Qing Minister to Korea arrived in Hanseong and presented the letter of credence to Gwangmu Emperor, and Hancheong Tongsang Joyak (Treaty of Commerce between Korea and Qing, 韓清通商條約) was later signed between Korea and Qing as two sovereign states on 11 September 1899 (RDAK, vol. 55, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.409, pp.437–9).

The Futile Attempt to Use Russia against Japan (1895–1905)
With Japan’s victory in the First Sino-Japanese War, Qing’s control over Korea was ceased permanently as of 1895. However, Korea’s politics, domestic or foreign, had been heavily interfered by the Japanese government ever since. The
situation was becoming similar to that during the days when Yuan Shikai was posted in Joseon, which made Gojong realise the necessity to seek help from another great power to balance against Japan on issues related to Korea. Queen Min had been advocating pro-Russia policies since the Joseon–Russia covert diplomacy a decade ago, and the strategic idea of Yongdae was once again adopted by Gojong and the Queen’s faction to use Russia against Japan – and this became the cause that led to Eulmi Sabyeon in August, 1895, as the Japanese government came to view the queen as an obstacle for Japan to exercise full control over Korea.

On 19 August 1895, a team of Japanese soldier-assassins penetrated into the Korean royal palace and killed Queen Min. The Japanese then forced Gojong to issue an edict to announce the queen’s crimes – unsanctioned involvement in and vicious manipulation of policymaking, for which she was condemned and demoted to a commoner (RDAK, vol. 55, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.258–9, p.267). As for Gojong, he was practically put to house arrest in the royal palace guarded by the Japanese soldiers. Assisted by some pro-Russia government officials, Gojong and the crown prince later escaped from captivity and fled to the Russian Legation on 11 February 1896. The king then stayed in the legation for a year, and the incident, known as Agwan Pacheon (Gojong’s Refuge at the Russian Legation, 俄館播遷), brought Russia and Japan to the arena to compete with each other face-to-face over the control of Korea (RDAK, vol. 55, Gojong Sillok, 1967, p.266).

Before Gojong left the Russian Legation on 20 Feb 1897, the Japanese and the Russian governments engaged in a few rounds of negotiation and signed the Komura–Waeber Memorandum (14 May 1896) and the Yamagata–Lobanov Agreement (9 June 1896). Together with the Nishi–Rosen Agreement signed on 25 April 1898, all three pacts granted equal amount of rights to Japan and Russia in their control of Korea (RDAK, vol. 55, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.276–7, p.305, p.358). However, when Russian troops occupied Yongampo (a Korean city by the Yalu River) in April 1903 and refused to leave, tensions between Russia and Japan escalated: Russia ignored Japan’s protest, and more Russian soldiers were
sent over to Korea. The two countries then ceased diplomatic relations on 6 February 1904, and declared war against each other four days later.

On 23 February 1904, Hanil Uijeongseo (Korea–Japan Protocol, 韓日議定書) was signed, by which Korea was required to provide Japan with full support when Japan fought against any foreign encroachment aiming at Korea. The Russo-Japanese War lasted until 10 March 1905, reaching its end with Japan’s victory over Russia. Six months later, the Treaty of Portsmouth was signed on 5 September 1905, by which Russia admitted that Japan was entitled to exercise complete control over Korea and any Russian intervention would be prohibited (RDAK, vol. 56, Gojong/Sunjong Sillok, 1967, pp.177–8, p.238, p.257). This time, Gojong’s strategy of Yongdae did not maintain a balance of power in the Korean Peninsula: Japan’s power was not checked, and the Russians were driven off the Korean soil.

Although there was now only one great (i.e. Japan) left in the region, it turned out that this was the one great that Korea was not able to handle. Facilitated by the pro-Japan government officials, Korea signed Je-il-cha Han-il Hyeop-yak (Japan–Korea Agreement, 第一次韓日協約) with Japan on 22 August 1904, by which Korea could only appoint financial and diplomatic advisers recommended by Japan, and Korea was not allowed to make treaties with any foreign countries without consulting Japan (RDAK, vol. 56, Gojong/Sunjong Sillok, 1967, pp.203–4). After defeating Russia, Japan then forced Korea to sign Eulsa Joyak (Eulsa Treaty, 乙巳條約) on 17 November 1905, officially turning Korea into Japan’s protectorate (RDAK, vol. 56, Gojong/Sunjong Sillok, 1967, p.264).

1910, *Il-Han Byeonghap Joyak* (Japan–Korea Annexation Treaty, 日韓併合條約) was signed between the two governments, according to which Korea was officially annexed by Japan (*RDAK*, vol. 56, *Gojong/Sunjong Sillok*, 1967, p.419).

In short, the practice of *Sadae* during the final century of the Joseon Dynasty, with the emergence of a multipolar order, is summarised in the following table according to the different levels of thoroughness:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Reign</th>
<th>High (as Filial Piety)</th>
<th>Medium (as Obligation)</th>
<th>Low (as Strategy)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1800-1834</td>
<td>Sungjo</td>
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<td>1834-1849</td>
<td>Heonjong</td>
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<td>1849-1863</td>
<td>Cheoljong</td>
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<td>1863-1873</td>
<td>Gojong (Daewongun as Regent)</td>
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<td>1873-1907</td>
<td>Gojong (in Control of Policymaking)</td>
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During the reigns of Sungjo, Heonjong, Cheoljong, and Daewongun (as regent), the loyalists were able to practice *Sadae* with strict adherence to Confucian ethics (as manifested in Joseon’s resistance to the West) due to the reasons of: 1) the persistent influence of the Confucian principles of righteousness in the Joseon society; 2) it was still the general belief in Joseon that Qing would be able, or at least willing, to take care of Joseon; and 3) Western values that the Koreans came to be in contact with were still limited in the issues of free trade and religious belief. However, during Gojong’s reign from 1873, the monarch and the reformists employed the strategy of ‘using one great against the other’ to modernise Joseon and to pursue national independence as a result of: 1) Qing proved itself to be unable and unwilling to protect Joseon from foreign encroachment; 2) Qing, in order to protect its own interest, broke the precedent and interfered with Joseon’s politics; and 3) the liberal ideas of the West such as national autonomy, equality in interstate relations, and the sovereign right of self-determination began to permeate into the ‘Hermit Kingdom’, which had greatly facilitated the enlightenment movement in Korea.
Chapter Summary

When Qing was eventually defeated by the Westernised Japan in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–5), centuries of the Chinese hegemony was officially ended and Joseon detached itself from the Sinocentric system. Japan’s triumph over China not only signalled a transition of material power in Northeast Asia; it also indicated that the Sinocentric order was unable to withstand the impact of the European sovereign-state system: 1) in the ideational aspect, the Sinocentric order had been sustained by the rule of Confucian propriety that emphasised hierarchy, while the European sovereign-state system was supported by the liberal ideas of equality. The Western model was more appealing to China’s vassals (like Joseon), because autonomy could be obtained and national pride would be fostered; and 2) in the material aspect, the Sinocentric order was empowered by the ideational force of Confucian ethics, while the European sovereign-state system was charged by the material power derived from industrialisation. Failure of East Asia when colliding with the West was simply a proof of the social Darwinist doctrine of ‘survival the fittest’. Therefore, as Sadae after all was a product of the Sinocentric order that was constructed upon the Confucian understanding of a senior–junior hierarchical relationship, *when the Sinocentric order came to an end, ideational Sadae also came to an end.*

Based on the examples illustrated in this chapter, a comparison of the major differences between the pre-modern tributary system of China and the modern sovereign system in the West is depicted in the following table:
Although the pro-Confucianism loyalists, headed by Choi Ik-hyeon (1834–1906) and Yu In-seok (1842–1915), attempted to uphold the Confucian ethics during the final years of Korea, their influence, even with Uibyeong (Righteous Army, ကծ) to resist Japan, was no match for the power of the pro-Japan rationalists such as: Lee Wan-yong (1858–1926) and Kwon Jung-hyon (1854–1934) who controlled the Korean government according to Japan’s will, and Yi Yong-gu (1868–1912) and Song Byeong-jun (1858–1925) who founded Iljinhoe (一進會), a non-governmental pro-Japan organisation (with nearly a million members nationwide) that actively called for merging Korea with Japan (RDAK, vol. 55, Gojong Sillok, 1967, pp.269–70, pp.332–3, pp.398–400; RDAK, vol. 56, Gojong/Sunjong Sillok, 1967, p.209, pp.224–7, pp.230–1, pp.271–3, pp.409–11). In any event, since the inferior Qing failed to perform its duties as Joseon’s suzerain while at the same time the superior West (including Japan) had been stimulating Joseon’s desire for independence, decline of ideational Sadae was obviously unstoppable and its demise was only a matter of time.
If there was anything left from Sadae, it would be ‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae. ‘Serving the great’ became an ideational taboo to be condemned, but ‘using the great’ remained a pragmatic strategy to serve national interests. In the century after 1910, ‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae were still evident in Korea’s foreign relations with great powers – and the following chapter is to examine these legacies of Sadae, during the periods of Korean independence movement, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War years. The analyses of relevant events during these periods will be used to discuss how the legacies of Sadae continue to influence the contemporary Korea–great power(s) relations.
Chapter 7

‘Anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae: the Legacies of Sadae in the Contemporary Era (1910 – Present)

While the previous chapter examines the factors that had led to the end of Sadae, this chapter looks into the legacies of Sadae in the contemporary era from the time when Korea was annexed by Japan in 1910 to the present. As mentioned in Chapter 6, the political elites of Korea (including King Gojong), who believed in modernising their country through de-Sinicisation and Westernisation, advocated the cessation of the century-long tribute relation with China. ‘anti-Serving China’ was certainly an expression of ‘anti-Sadae’, one of the legacies of Sadae. However, it ought to be noticed that ‘anti-Serving China’ at that time was still not yet a mature manifestation of ‘anti-Sadae’. As a nationalistic sentiment, ‘anti-Sadae’ continued to grow in Korea throughout the 35 colonial years during which the Koreans were completely deprived of their nation, identity, and dignity by Japan, a ‘better great’ (than China) that the Korean political elites once revered and chose to serve.

Nonetheless, it was not until after the end of the Second World War that ‘anti-Sadae’ began to be transformed from a popular sentiment to a political ideology. As Korea was divided into two countries at the discretion of the USA and the USSR against the will of the Koreans between 1945 and 1948, serving the great powers that intended to manipulate the politics of Korea became an unacceptable behaviour that was to be condemned by the Koreans. To express their paramount concern of their right to determine the fate of their own countries, ‘anti-Sadae’ was then developed into Juche (self-reliance, 主體) of the Kimilsungism in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and into the South Korean version of anti-Americanism in the Republic of Korea respectively. Nevertheless, refusal to serve the great subserviently does not necessarily mean that they should totally cut off all the ties with the great powers; the strategic Yongdae, as another legacy of Sadae, continued to be practiced by both Korean governments during the Cold War and still remained a fundamentally important
foreign policy after the end of the Cold War. Yongdae has not been disapproved of by the Koreans because: 1) it exhibits their political wisdom by which their dignity is enhanced, and 2) it is of strategic necessity for smaller countries to survive and (even thrive) in the rivalry between the great powers.

This chapter consists of two sections: the first one is to reveal the underpinned logic of ‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae, and the second one is to discuss the combined application of these two legacies of Sadae in the two Korean states’ foreign relations with the great powers respectively during the Cold War and the post-Cold War years. While ‘anti-Sadae’ is an ideational concept that needs to be understood with a constructivist perspective, and Yongdae is a material concept that matches with the view of the realists, these two concepts are therefore analysed with the constructivist-cum-realist approach as proposed in this research. In general, materials from secondary sources written mainly by Korean scholars on contemporary Korean history are employed to support the analyses in this chapter.

7.1 The Rationale of ‘Anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae

In order to understand how the principles of ‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae have been co-shaping the two Korean states’ relations with the great powers, it is essential to examine the rationale of these two legacies of Sadae. The three stages through which ‘anti-Sadae’ evolved are explained in the first half of this section according to the background that stimulated its growth, the goal it intended to achieve, and the approach it adopted. As for Yongdae, the reasons it survived the demise of Sadae, its end and means, and the indispensable condition that sustains its vitality as an effective foreign policy are discussed in the second half of this section.

‘Anti-Sadae’
The notion of ‘anti-Sadae’ was closely associated with Korean nationalism. While it was commonly believed that 1) it was the Koreans’ resistance to the Japanese during the colonial period that cultivated nationalism in Korea, and 2) it was the division of Korea imposed by the USA and the USSR at the end of the Second World War that escalated Korean nationalism (Park, 1966, pp.41–42; Shin &
Chang, 2004, pp.121–4; Pyle, 2007, pp.33–35). This research, based on the Joseon–China (Ming and Qing) relations, suggests that the historical root of Korean nationalism could be further traced back to the modern era – for the reason that before ‘anti-Serving Japan’ and ‘anti-Serving Any Greats’, there was ‘anti-Serving China’.

The phenomenon of ‘anti-Serving China’ in Joseon Korea during the final decades of the 19th century may be considered as an early expression of ‘anti-Sadae’. It started in 1876, the year that witnessed the signing of the Treaty of Ganghwa between Joseon and Japan. King Gojong obviously supported the idea of changing the status of Joseon, as mentioned in Article One of the treaty, to an autonomous state that enjoyed the rights equivalent to those of Japan. Eight years later, the radical reformists in the Joseon court launched the Gapsin Coup in 1884 with an attempt to turn Joseon into an autonomous modern state by severing Korea’s tributary relation with China. A decade later, together with the moderate reformists, King Gojong initiated the Gabo Reform in July 1894, during which the Chinese lunar calendar was replaced by the Western calendar in all official documents nationwide, the centuries-old Chinese-styled system of national civil service examination was abolished, and the official language was changed from Chinese to Korean. Still three months before the end of the First Sino-Japanese War, King Gojong issued the Fourteen-point of Exemplary Rules in December 1894 to proclaim the end of Korea’s tributary relation with China. During the following two years, the de-Sinicisation process was carried out in the Korean society, including the changing of the traditional Chinese attire and the dismantling of the Gate of Welcoming Imperial Grace (from China) – in a sense, it was apparent that ‘anti-Sadae’ at the time was largely articulated as ‘anti-Serving China’. However, ‘anti-Serving China’ did not necessarily mean ‘anti-Sadae’.

‘Anti-Serving China’ during these two decades was merely the means adopted by the pro-enlightenment reformists to achieve the end of modernising Korea. They firmly believed that, with a suzerain like Qing China that was unwilling and unable to look after the well-being of its vassal states in the face of Western intrusion, Korea must be strengthened through modernisation, and the only way to
modernise Korea was to Westernise Korea, as proved highly effective in Japan. Chinese ideas and practices, in their eyes, symbolled backwardness and obstructed the progress of Korean modernisation. ‘Anti-Serving China’ was indeed opposed to the traditional way of thinking in East Asia, which happened to be represented by Confucianism, a philosophy produced in China. Those who advocated ‘anti-Serving China’ and de-Sinicisation at that time in Korea actually refused to serve a technically backward China – yet they did not signal their intention not to serve any other great powers. Their belief in Japan’s successful Westernisation, their call for Korea to emulate Japan, their willingness to accommodate Japan’s demands, and their obedience to follow the Japanese government’s instructions were simply undeniable pieces of evidence to prove that they actually did not reject the concept of Sadae: serving a technically advanced great power such as Japan was never a humiliating idea that should be criticised.

Nonetheless, if ‘anti-Serving China’ during this period is to be viewed as the embryonic stage of ‘anti-Sadae’, the focus needs to be placed on the pro-enlightenment reformists’ (in particular King Gojong’s) strive to elevate the national status of Korea in the international community. The tributary relation with China implied an unequal interstate relation between the two countries, thus it was the only obstacle in Korea’s way to become a genuine member of the international community where equality was claimed to be the fundamental principle of modern international relations – and this obstacle had to be removed if Korea was to become a sovereign state that was truly autonomous. Therefore, ‘anti-Serving China’ during this stage was still not a complete version of ‘anti-Sadae’: the Koreans at that time were opposed to serving one great power only, which was China, for the reasons that: 1) Korea’s opportunities to modernise itself was stifled by China’s influence, and 2) Korea’s aspiration to enjoy an equal status along with other countries in the world looked hopeless as Korea was locked in the Sinocentric tributary system.

The second stage that witnessed the growth of ‘anti-Sadae’ was around the colonial era, from the signing of the Japan–Korea Agreement in August 1904 by which Japan took over the supervision of Korea’s foreign relations, to the ending of Japanese occupation when Japan announced its surrender to the Allies in
August 1945. Before the official annexation in 1910, the three treaties signed between Korea and Japan (i.e. the Japan–Korea Agreement in August 1904, the Japan–Korea Protectorate Treaty in November 1905, and the Japan–Korea Treaty in July 1907) enabled Japan to control Korea’s internal and foreign affairs and to make Korea a protectorate of Japan. These treaties seriously violated the national sovereignty of Korea, and they immediately aroused the ‘anti-Sadae’ sentiment in Korea again – though it was expressed as ‘anti-Serving Japan’ this time.

Korea, albeit with several changes of dynasties, had never been entirely annexed by foreign countries throughout its history. In East Asian traditional thinking, a country being annexed is equivalent to being eliminated (mangguk in Korean). This is usually considered the greatest shame to the people who have lost their country to foreign invaders because consequently, they will lose their identity and be subjugated by the conquerors. To the Koreans at that time, this was a lot worse than dwarfing themselves to serve China within the Sinocentric tributary system – they never lost their country to China (even after being completely defeated by Qing in 1637, Joseon was preserved as an autonomous kingdom only paying tributes to a new suzerain), but they lost their country this time to Japan, an alien power – and this was utterly humiliating.

For Korea, according to the international order in modern time, the country lost its sovereignty. For the Koreans, they lost their homeland, by which they also lost their identity, as the Koreans were forced to adopt Japanese names, to speak Japanese instead of Korean, and to worship the Japanese religion of Shinto (Lee, 1997, pp.153–4). Yet the worst of all was their loss of dignity, both national and personal. Such unprecedented trauma was extremely unbearable to the Koreans because, unlike the Imjin War during the late 16th century, Japan this time did not invade Korea with military forces; it actually came by the invitation of the pro-Japanese Korean political elites.

Consequently, the depression and fury of the Korean populace was directed towards those who were responsible for selling out the country. Those Koreans who collaborated with the Imperial Japanese government were branded as traitors, such as I Wan-yong (1858–1926) and Bak Je-sun (1858–1916), who advocated
the signing of the Japan–Korea Protectorate Treaty in 1905 and the Japan–Korea Annexation Treaty in 1910, Song Byeong-jun (1858–1925) and Yi Yong-gu (1868–1912), who founded the Iljinhoe, a pro-Japanese organisation that promoted the merger of Korea and Japan (Kim, 2005, pp.120–3).

It should be noted that all these Korean pro-Japanese collaborators shared one common feature: their enthusiasm to serve the Japan government, as seen in their tireless efforts to facilitate the annexation. Their Chinil (pro-Japan, 奉日) political stance subsequently, together with the repressive policies of the Japanese colonial government that deprived the Koreans of their basic rights and exploited Korea’s resources in the later years, turned Japan into the target of ‘anti-Sadae’.

During this stage, ‘anti-Sadae’ was added another dimension on top of ‘anti-Serving China’ that was seen in the first stage: ‘anti-Serving Japan’.

However, neither ‘anti-Serving China’ nor ‘anti-Serving Japan’ aimed to reject serving just any great powers. While the goal of ‘anti-Serving China’ was to modernise Korea, the goal of ‘anti-Serving Japan’ was to restore Korea as a sovereign state. While the means to modernise Korea was de-Sinicisation, the means to restore Korea was nationalistic independence movement. During this stage, although ‘anti-Sadae’ was expressed mainly as ‘anti-Serving Japan’, the dimension of ‘anti-Serving China’ persisted – for the notion that it was China that made Korea weak and backward was still deeply implanted in the mindset of the Koreans. Moreover, the Japanese colonial government actively offered titles of nobility and pensions to Korean Confucian scholar officials in order to enlist the support of the intellectual leaders in the country (Han, 1971, pp.466–7), which also helped to sustain the ‘anti-Serving China’ sentiment in Korea.

Nevertheless, ‘anti-Serving Japan’ had become the core of ‘anti-Sadae’ this time, because it was Japan that took everything away from the Koreans. The March First Movement, most noticeably, and other resistant movements (such as student protests, worker strikes, campaigns to boycott Japanese products, and righteous armies that fought against the Japanese police and troops) were all fuelled with strong nationalistic sentiment, aiming to expel the Japanese from Korea and to
revive their country. Apart from resistance against the Japanese government personnel in Korea, the Korean independence movement also witnessed that Korean political elites, both the rightists and the leftists, actively sought help from the great powers to restore the sovereignty of Korea. With Syngman Rhee (1875–1965) soliciting support of the USA and Kim Il-sung (1948–94) turning to the USSR for assistance, it could be said that the idea of dependence on the great powers was still not rejected by the Koreans. ‘anti-Sadae’ during this stage was extended to Japan (in addition to China), but it was still limited at a ‘case-by-case’ instead of a conceptual level.

Since the free Korea was later divided by the USA and the USSR with not even a single Korean being consulted after the Japanese surrender in 1945 (Han, 1971, pp.498–500), ‘anti-Sadae’ began its third stage during which it evolved to a mature level. The goal of ‘anti-Sadae’ at this level was becoming clear: it was Jaju (self-determination, 自主), the right that the Koreans would never be able to secure by serving any great powers. To the Koreans, self-determination was different from independence: independence meant self-rule, but not necessarily with self-determination – because an independent state could still be manipulated by other state(s). Within the Sinocentric tribute system, Korea was a vassal state and it was not independent (although it was allowed a fair amount of autonomy in managing its domestic affairs). As a colony of Japan, Korea was not independent and its autonomy was completely deprived.

With Japan’s surrender in August 1945, Korea was no longer a colony and regained its nationhood as an independent sovereign state. However, although self-rule was achieved, the Koreans were not conferred the right of self-determination: a free Korea was calved into two political entities by alien powers against the will of the free Korean people. Therefore, having been unreasonably and disrespectfully treated by the great powers, the infuriated Korean people then joined the anti-trusteeship movement at the end of 1945, demanding not merely independence but also the right to determine the destiny of their country (Lee, 1984, pp.373–6).
Unquestionable historical evidence had proved that the two great powers at the time, the United States and the Soviet Union, were responsible for creating the Korean case of ‘one nation, two countries’. The political leaders of both Korean states had been firmly aligned themselves with these two great powers respectively starting as early as from the colonial period, yet neither of these two superpowers truly concerned about the hope of the Koreans to restore a sovereign Korean state in which they could exercise self-rule and self-determination. As the Koreans were not given the right to determine their own fate as other people of any sovereign states deserved, and the ones responsible for such tragic unfairness were the great powers their leaders chose to serve, not to serve any great powers thus became the very goal of ‘anti-Sadae’ during the third stage to obtain and secure the right of self-determination – ‘anti-Sadae’ had finally attained its complete meaning of ‘anti-Serving Any Greats’.

‘Anti-Sadae’ therefore implies Korea’s refusal to subserviently serve, at the expense of acquiescently yielding the right of self-determination, all great powers, irrespective of their material capability (both economic and military strength) and the ideational orientation (Left or Right). It is not about rejecting the great power per se; it is about denouncing those who slavishly obey the will of the great power – hence when Park (2013, p.299) equated ‘anti-Sadae’ with ‘anti-Great Powerism’, the complete meaning of ‘anti-Sadae’ might not be correctly interpreted. By the same token, ‘anti-Sadae’ is not to be confused with ‘anti-Imperialism’ as well, since ‘anti-Sadae’ is not ‘anti-Dae’. No matter such ‘dae’ (i.e. great power) is a benign non-expansionist great power or a vicious expansionist great power, ‘anti-Sadae’ thus advocated that Korea should not blindly serve any great powers.

To ensure that the Koreans were able to determine the making of their national policies, both domestic and foreign, ‘anti-Sadae’ was carried out by way of projecting the image of their country (both Korean states) as one with equal status to other member states of the international community. Especially for the great powers, Korea was to interact with them on an equal basis, although the feature of asymmetry in reality could be obviously seen in the bilateral relationship (Kim, 1993, pp.323–4). In North Korea, to further safeguard the right of
self-determination, Kim Il-sung developed the ideology of Juche in the mid-1950s to serve as a guiding principle for making foreign policy (Koh, 1965/1966, p.294; Park, 1987, pp.30–39), with which North Korea stood against the Soviet Union or China on various issues during the Cold War – even though it received tremendous amounts of assistance provided by these two great powers who eagerly solicited the support of North Korea to compete with each other. After the end of the Cold War when China became the only powerful ally to North Korea, Pyongyang did not dance to the tune of Beijing all the time – most noticeably on the issue of nuclear weapon development (Scobell, 2003, pp.276–7).

As in South Korea, although there had been no systematically developed ideology to conceptualise ‘anti-Sadae’, anti-Americanism gained significant momentum from time to time in spite of the American aids that South Korea had been heavily relying on since the Korean War (Kim, Parker & Choi, 2006, p.427). Even after the economic ties between South Korea and China had been so closely established during the first decade after normalisation between the two countries in 1992, ‘anti-Serving China’ sentiment was aroused when the Korean populace sensed China’s chauvinistic attitude towards South Korea through its Northeast Project from 2002 to 2007 (Song, 2004, pp.118–20).

‘Anti-Sadae’, as a maturely developed concept through an evolving process of more than a century, has become a cornerstone principle of both Korean states’ foreign policy – for this was a lesson the Koreans had learned in a painfully hard way. Although ‘anti-Sadae’ is not explicitly used as an official term in either Korean state, Sadae as a stigmatised label has been closely associated with the behaviour of those politicians who ingratiate themselves with the great powers by submissively sacrificing the national interest of Korea. Sadae has become such a political taboo that it turns ‘anti-Sadae’ into an effective tool to monitor and check the foreign relations of Korea with the great powers.

Essentially, ‘anti-Sadae’ consists of some elements of nationalism, such as its emphasis on the right of national self-determination (as promulgated in liberal nationalism), and its opposition to hegemonic powers (as advocated in anti-colonial nationalism). Yet ‘anti-Sadae’ is more than nationalism: it harbours
strong resistance to hierarchical and unequal relations with the great powers, in spite of power disparity in reality and deep distrust of the great powers. This is resulted from Korea’s past experience with China, Japan, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

However, ‘anti-Sadae’ is not as xenophobic as the insular conservative nationalism – for it does not reject the idea of socialising with the great powers. Therefore, ‘anti-Sadae’ is not used alone (if so, both Korean states would have been reduced to the situation of ‘Hermit kingdom’ again); it is employed in combination with Yongdae. The modus operandi of these two legacies of Sadae in the two Korean states’ foreign relations with the great powers is to be discussed in the second section of this chapter.

To summarise what has been explained in the first half of this section, the evolutionary process of ‘anti-Sadae’ is summarised in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>End</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>Nature</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>Since the mid 19th century, Qing China was unwilling and unable to look after the well-being of Joseon Korea, and Korea was attracted to the Western interstate relations that were constructed on equal basis.</td>
<td>To modernise Korea and to make Korea a sovereign state in the international community</td>
<td>To de-Sinicise Korea and to sever the tributary relation with China</td>
<td>Anti-Serving China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>Since the early 20th century, Japan had been planning to annex Korea, and Korea was made a colony of Japan from 1910 to 1945.</td>
<td>To restore Korea as a sovereign state</td>
<td>To expel the Japanese from Korea</td>
<td>Anti-Serving Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3</td>
<td>Korea was divided into two countries by the USA and the USSR against the will of the Korean people after Japanese surrender in August 1945.</td>
<td>To achieve and protect the right of self-determination</td>
<td>To reject subserviently following the great powers, and to interact with all countries on equal basis</td>
<td>Anti-Serving Any Greats</td>
</tr>
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Yongdae

As evident in the five-century long history of Joseon’s tributary relation with China, *Yongdae* had been one of the three dimensions of *Sadae* that was practiced by a number of Joseon kings and court officials. While the other two dimensions of *Sadae* (i.e. *Sadae* as filial piety and as obligation to the suzerain) ceased to exist as *Sadae* reached its end in May 1895 when Korea’s tributary relation with China was officially severed by the Treaty of Shimonoseki, the concept of *Yongdae* continued to be a viable option frequently adopted by the Korean political elites. There are three reasons to explain the continuation of *Yongdae*: first, *Yongdae* had always been a pragmatic strategy that was free from the moral principles of Confucianism. It was different from the other two dimensions: Joseon as a junior was allowed to serve one senior only (i.e. Ming, and later Qing China); serving more than one senior was considered an unethical behaviour – disloyalty was strictly prohibited in Confucianism thus serving more than one great was simply not an option to be considered by a vassal state like Joseon. However, with the decline of Qing China and the rise of a number of Western powers (including Japan), as discussed in the previous chapter, Korea might have to serve several great powers to achieve its policy goals in a multipolar world order. After detaching itself from the Chinese tribute system, Korea was free to interact with more than one great – ‘serving several great powers’ used to be unthinkable in the Sinocentric order, yet ‘using several great powers’ was not unacceptable in the modern world. The amoral and pragmatic strategy of *Yongdae* simply outlived the East Asian traditional principle of ‘rule by propriety’ in the modern interstate system that was ruled by treaties. To a great extent, *Yongdae* was a concept heavily characterised by realist thinking. According to the doctrines of realism, in the contemporary world order that claimed equality as the fabric that bound all the sovereign states together, using others (including the great powers) to pursue one’s national interest was basically a common practice that would be endorsed by any countries.

Second, as Korea was situated in an area where more than one great usually competed for regional domination, *Yongdae* appeared to be an effective strategy for Korea to use one great against another for the purposes of not to become a victim (‘the shrimp that got crushed’) of the fights between great powers (‘the
whales’), and hopefully to obtain as many gains as possible for itself. Due to the strategically important location of the Korean Peninsula, it was very unlikely that Korea would be able to keep itself clear from the rivalries between and among the great powers. This has been the situation since the late 19th century until present time. Rather than passively taking whatever it is given, Yongdae would place Korea in a proactive position, enabling it to seek and secure its national interest. By using the United States (in the form of obtaining American aids), South Korea was able to recover from the devastating Korean War, and four decades later it thrived to become one of the OECD members. By using one great against another, North Korea was able to maximise its gain in the rivalry between the Soviet Union and China during the Cold War – these are merely two of the numerous examples to illustrate the necessity of Yongdae in Korea’s relations with the great powers.

Third, successful or not, Yongdae was practiced so many times before. In the history of Joseon, a good number of examples can be found during the reigns of Taejo, Taejong, Sejo, Yeonsangun, Myeongjong, and Seonjo for reference of using one great. For examples of using more than one great in Joseon history, the reigns of Gwanghaegun and Gojong certainly can provide ample references. In a sense, Korea did not lack the experience of Yongdae. Exactly because some of them succeeded while others failed, there are plenty of lessons to learn from. In fact, comparing the examples during the pre-modern, modern, and contemporary eras, it is noticed that the Korean political elites are becoming more thoughtful and skillful to practice Yongdae, particularly in the case of ‘using more than one great simultaneously’. The trilateral relations that South Korea (ROK, USA, and PRC) and North Korea (DPRK, PRC, and USA) have been managing respectively are convincing examples to prove that Yongdae has become another indispensible pillar to Korea’s relations with the great powers nowadays.

Nevertheless, to make the strategy of Yongdae work, an imperative condition must be available: reciprocity. Yongdae will not work if it is to be adopted according to a one-sided wish or calculation of Korea; Korea has to offer something with value in the eyes of the great powers to their policy goals – there have to be some incentives for the great powers to engage in such quid pro quo
exchanges with Korea. *Yongdae* works best when both sides achieve what they desire, for instance, North Korea received handsome amount of material aids from the Soviet Union and China while these two great powers gained North Korea’s support when they were at odds with each other during the Cold War. South Korea survived the Korean War with the military support provided by the United States, and in return the United States was able to halt the advance of the communist camp in Northeast Asia by having South Korea posted at the front against North Korea, securing a balance of power in the region.

Hence, according to the condition of reciprocity, it should be noted that *Yongdae* would not work well in three types of situations: first, one-sidedness – referring to the cases that Korea employed the strategy based on its own will and failed to see the fact that the great power would indeed gain very little in the exchange. For example, after the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, Syngman Rhee attempted to gain Washington’s support to recognise the legitimacy of the Korean Provisional Government, yet his lobbying efforts turned out to be in vain as the American government did not anticipate any substantial gain that would be useful to its Far East policy by granting recognition to a government in exile at the time when America was unexpectedly dragged into the war with Japan (Nahm, 1993, p.205). To ensure a successful *Yongdae*, ‘to use the great’ and ‘to be used by the great’ basically have to go hand-in-hand together.

The second situation is caused by a mismatching reciprocal exchange: the great agreed to engage in the exchange, but Korea’s goal to use the great did not converge with the intended outcome of the great as to be used by Korea. For instance, after the Korean War, Syngman Rhee planned to unify the Korean Peninsula by using military forces that was to be supported by the American government. However, although it was the policy of Washington to provide South Korea with any assistance it could to help the war-torn country, the United States wished to maintain a stable relationship with the Soviet Union thus any move that would disturb the *status quo* of the divided Korea was not preferred – and Rhee suffered the consequence of making such mistake: he was not rescued by the American government when the April Revolution broke out in 1960 with nationwide protests to demand his resignation. Washington decided to give up
Rhee exactly because his administration was not using America for the purpose America wished to be used, and this was proved later by the official documents declassified by the American government (Ma, 2009, pp.32–33). Due to the power parity between Korea and the great, the result of wrongly using the great is usually not in favour of the weaker Korea.

The third situation is resulted from failure or inability to foresee the variables that would change the goal of the great power – the original ‘give and take’ that was mutually accepted by both parties could be changed later on, making Yongdae less or even not effective. An example to illustrate this type of situation is North Korea’s strategy to use China during the era of Kim Jong-il. His goal to secure China’s support (material aids in particular) was set initially on the basis that in the face of Sino-American rivalry China had no choice but to keep its only ideological ally, North Korea, safe and strong as a buffer zone against the America-led coalition. As a result, he repeatedly adopted his brinkmanship tactics to maintain the tension on the peninsula during the second half of the 2000s. However, some variables were not anticipated: 1) while China and America competed against each other and their views and policy goals diverged on a number of issues, both governments had chosen to avoid military conflict so far; 2) while Sino-ROK relation experienced ups and downs since 1992, restraint, accommodation, and communication still prevailed between Beijing and Seoul; and 3) considering the paramount importance of economic development, Beijing might not feel insecure if a pro-China South Korea led the unification of the peninsula – as Beijing has grown frustrated with the behaviour of the Kim Jong-il regime that acted like a ‘spoiled child’ (The Guardian, 2010). In consequence, the warmth in Sino-DPRK relation remained unseen ever since. While changes may be inevitable, strategic insight is indispensable. Changes may affect the loss-gain balance that used to be optimal, and the reciprocal relation has to be reassessed and probably even reconstructed. In other words, Korea’s Yongdae, if not constantly evaluated and modified in response to changes occurring in the region/world, is unlikely to produce the outcome as it is planned for.

Nonetheless, compared with how Yongdae was immaturity practiced during the final decades of the Joseon Dynasty (i.e. using Japan against China and Russia,
but eventually annexed by Japan), both Korean states have been using the strategy of *Yongdae* much more successfully in the contemporary time. Among others, a key to such success is the combined application of *Yongdae* and ‘anti-*Sadae*’.

7.2 The Combined Application of ‘Anti-*Sadae*’ and *Yongdae*

Articles have been written about the strategy of both Korean states adopted in their relations with the great powers. In the case of ROK-US relations, many scholars found it confusing about why the country has been depending so much on the United States for half a century, yet anti-Americanism remained such a significant social phenomenon in South Korea. They criticised the South Korea’s American policy as ‘inconsistent’ (Hyon, 2014, pp.91–97), attributing the reasons to ambivalence in human nature that had caused the dilemma in policymaking (Shin & Izatt, 2011, p.1116), or believing it to be a kind of new nationalism resulted from South Korea’s growing economic power (Shin, 1996, p.802; Kim & Lim, 2007, pp.72–73), or blaming the changing American policies (particularly those of the Bush Administration, 2001–8) that had placed South Korea at risk instead of in peace (Kim, 2002/2003, pp.109–10). As for North Korea, Kim Il-sung’s decision to swing tactically between Moscow and Beijing was described as ‘Pyongyang walked on a tight rope between the two Communist masters, adroitly preserving a precarious balance’ (Kim, 1993, p.490). This research, however, intends to offer another explanation: it was the combined application of ‘anti-*Sadae*’ and *Yongdae* that had been guiding the formation of both Korean states’ relations with the great powers in the contemporary era.

These two legacies of *Sadae* are not contradicting to each other because ‘anti-*Sadae*’ after all is not ‘anti-*Yongdae*’. In practice, they have been applied organically together because: 1) ‘anti-*Sadae*’ without *Yongdae* would isolate Korea from interaction with the great powers, which is not practical or desirable – even Kim Il-sung interpreted the *Juche* economy as the one that should be ‘opposed to the economic domination and subordination by other countries, but does not reject international economic cooperation’, and North Korea was in active search for foreign capital from France, Italy, Canada, and even Japan in the mid-1980s (Park, 1987, p.32); and 2) *Yongdae* without ‘anti-*Sadae*’ would place
Korea at a position so close to the great powers that eventually Korean politics (both domestic and foreign) would be shadowed under the influence of the great powers – Korea’s right of self-determination would be jeopardised and ultimately sacrificed.

Therefore, *Yongdae*, understood as a realist concept to pursue national interest, is employed to seek and maximise gain from the interaction with the great powers. The strategy is implemented based on a rational cost–benefit calculation: when the benefits Korea receives exceed the costs it has to bear, *Yongdae* will continue – and a close relationship with the great powers will be accepted. However, when the benefits Korea receives cannot cover the costs it has to bear, ‘anti-Sadae’, like an alarm, will go off – *Yongdae* will stop and Korea will distance itself from the great powers. Until the cost–benefit balance return to an optimal level that is accepted by both Korea and the great powers, ‘anti-Sadae’ will abate and *Yongdae* will be adopted again.

In other words, the nationalistic ‘anti-Sadae’ on one hand will basically give way to the material needs (including both economic and military) that is to be achieved via *Yongdae*; on the other hand, this ideational element never disappears from Korea’s foreign relations – it served as the bulwark to safeguard Korean people’s dignity that had been hurt for centuries – and ‘anti-Sadae’ keeps reminding the Korean political elites of the important need to protect the nation’s right of self-determination in contemporary time. This logic, which is necessary to be understood from a constructivist-cum-realist perspective, helps to explain the ‘very complex, a mixture of national pride and realism’ (Kim, 1994, p.43) in the Korean behaviour towards the great powers during and after the Cold War.

*During the Cold War*

The ROK-US relations during the Cold War can be depicted as a typical example of the combined application of ‘anti-Sadae’ and *Yongdae*. By using the assistance provided by the United States, South Korea survived the Korean War, rebuilt the country from debris, developed its economy and accelerated the pace of industrialisation with American financial aids and trade policies, protected South Korea from being invaded by North Korea again with the American military
support – South Korea had gained so many benefits that these had made the costs looked negligible thus fairly acceptable – and those costs, to name a few, included the financial burden and the social costs incurred from the American troops stationing in South Korea, violation of national sovereignty due to extraterritoriality, sacrifice of South Korean’s lives and resources for American’s wars in Vietnam and Iraq, obstacles to the development of democratisation in South Korea.

Among others, President Park Chung-hee (1917–79) was a South Korean political leader who was very well verse in managing the operation of ‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae in South Korea’s relations with the United States. To make Yongdae look effective, Park Chung-hee launched nationwide propaganda as a form of thought-control to demonstrate the tremendous amount of gain South Korea had received from the United States, thus it was the country’s indebtedness owed to America that South Korea was obliged to assist the great power in its time of need. Meanwhile, he flew to Washington in November 1961 and initiated the offer to President Kennedy of dispatching South Korean troops to Vietnam – subsequently, 320,000 South Korean military personnel were sent to Vietnam, and the total casualty by March 1973 amounted to 5,000 dead and 10,000 wounded (Han, 2003, pp.248–52). However, the alarm of ‘anti-Sadae’ did not go off, as American aids were urgently needed to support the economy of South Korea in the 1960s – it even made his coup d’état in May 1961 and the subsequent rule of his junta appear tolerable to the South Korean populace, and their dissatisfaction with the American endorsement on Park Chung-hee’s authoritarian rule did not surface until the late 1970s.

Nevertheless, the Koreans demonstrated a very different attitude towards General Chun Doo-hwan (1931– ) when he launched a coup d’état to seize the government power in December 1979 and became an unelected president in September 1980. The Gwangju Democratization Movement in May 1980 witnessed the rising demand of the Korean populace to democratise the country and the growing hostility towards the American government (as they believed that Chun’s decision to brutally suppress the movement was endorsed by Washington). Both Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan came to power via illegitimate means and both
stayed in power by utilising the support of the American government, for which they closely followed the will of Washington – the two administrations’ relationships with the United States could literally be described as a modern version of Sadae – yet Chun’s regime was severely criticised for its close link with America.

By a cost–benefit calculation, while the economy of South Korea had grown substantially during the 1960s and the 1970s, the importance of American aids gradually waned. In other words, the benefits that South Korea gained from the United States began to fall short of the costs South Korea had to bear resulted from its dependence on America. All the costs as mentioned earlier started to surface and became the primary concern of the populace, and ‘anti-Sadae’ soon ascended to the centre stage of South Korea’s foreign relations with the superpower in the form of ‘anti-Americanism’. No matter it was viewed as a well developed ideology (Park, 2007, p.179) or merely an emotional sentiment (Kim, 1994, pp.38–39), the goal of ‘anti-Americanism’ was about not to depend on America and not to follow the will of the American government, whether the United States was an imperialist hegemor or simply a great power that had done something unpopular to its junior ally, such that South Korea’s right to determine its own fate would not be infringed upon.

As for North Korea, the combined application of ‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae was skilfully managed by Kim Il-sung with a style of pendulum in the DPRK-USSR and DPRK-PRC relations. As early as in 1949, Kim approached Stalin first regarding his intention to invade South Korea, planning to use the USSR to accomplish his version of peninsular unification. It was due to Stalin’s rejection (which is an early case of North Korea’s failure in Yongdae, as the Soviet Union refused to be used by North Korea at the time to confront the United States militarily) and his suggestion that Kim eventually turned to China in early October 1950 after United Nation forces drove the North Korean troops towards the DPRK-PRC border at the Yalu River in September that year. However, although China came to North Korea’s rescue with tremendous costs during the Korean War, Kim Il-sung did not enthusiastically welcome the Chinese, as seen in the discord between the two during the war (Shen, 2012, p.4), and the political
purge Kim undertook against members of the pro-China Yan’an Faction in the Korean Workers’ Party that included the high-ranking party members such as Mu Jong, Pak Il-u, and Bang Ho-san (Shen, 2010, p.34).

Kim Il-sung would not have come to power without Moscow’s support after the mid-1940s, and staying too close to China would not benefit North Korea in its relations with the Soviet Union – the leading power of the communist bloc that North Korea depended upon at the time. However, when Khrushchev succeeded Stalin and launched the campaign against the cultivation of personal cult in party leadership at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956, a new interstate relation emerged in the region. By a cost–benefit calculation, Kim Il-sung realised that his regime would lose more than gain from the USSR if it continued to stay close to Moscow. Subsequently, with the nationalism-charged doctrine of Juche, Kim Il-sung distanced North Korea from the Soviet Union based on the reason that it was not necessary for his country to blindly follow the lead of the USSR (Kim, 1993, p.488) – to the North Korean populace, Kim’s decision to halt his Yongdae on the Soviet Union was backed by the alarm of ‘anti-Sadae’ that Kim set off by himself.

Kim Il-sung later chose to applied Yongdae on China for the benefits of enlisting Beijing’s staunch support to Pyongyang’s hardline policy towards South Korea (while Moscow opted for peaceful co-existence with the West under Khrushchev) and extending North Korea’s diplomatic relations with other Third World countries via the network of China (Kim, 1993, pp.491–2). However, when Khrushchev was ousted in October 1964 and China started to descend into the catastrophic Cultural Revolution in May 1966, Kim Il-sung adjusted his foreign policy with the same approach again – only this time aiming at China: an editorial titled ‘Let Us Defend Our Independence’ was published in Nodong Sinmun (the organ of the Korean Workers’ Party) on 12 August 1966, asserting that the North Korean people should rely on their own by embracing the spirit of Juche and reject the policies of other big communist parties that were imposed upon North Korea (Koh, 1969, pp.955–6). Once again, ‘anti-Sadae’ was invoked to provide the rationale for Kim Il-sung to cease the Yongdae policy towards the great power.
With a number of other examples that had caused a series of re-adjustments in North Korea’s relations with the two great powers (such as responding to détente between America and the Soviet Union in 1969, China’s pragmatic switch to the focus on reform and opening up to the West that was preceded by the Sino-American rapprochement in 1972 and the Sino-Japanese normalisation in 1978), the combined application of ‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae was repeated whenever Kim Il-sung deemed strategically necessary such that North Korea was able to gain maximum amount of material benefits from the competition between China and the Soviet Union – while at the same time, having successfully preserved North Korea’s right of self-determination and effectively enhanced the national dignity.

*After the Cold War*

South Korea began to manage two sets of Korea–great power relations in the aftermath of the Cold War, which was much more challenging compared with what Seoul had to deal with during the previous decades. The end of the Cold War might have caused structural changes in the regional interstate relations that compelled Northeast Asian states to adjust their foreign policies, yet it was worth noticing that it was South Korean president Roh Tae-woo who initiated the foreign policy of *Bukbang Jeongchaek* (Northern Policy, 北方政策) during the period of 1983–88. This was a move of vision and ambition, and it also demonstrated that the South Korean political elites were confident in their skill to apply the combined strategy of Yongdae and ‘anti-Sadae’ in managing more than one great in the new era.

Looking back at South Korea’s relations with the great powers during the fifteen years between 1993 and 2008 under Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung, and Roh Moo-hyun, it could be found that the ROK-US relation was gradually cooling off in spite of the continuation of the ROK-US alliance that both sides claimed to be as important as ever before. With the previous authoritarian pro-America regimes that suppressed the Koreans’ demand to democratise the country leaving the Blue House, those political activists who used to be political dissidents and survived the Gwangju Democratization Movement in 1980 and the June Democracy
Movement in 1987 were now in control of the government power. They aroused the nationalistic sentiment of ‘anti-Sadae’ in the Korean society, criticised the attitude of Chinmi (pro-America, 親美), and played down the importance of Yongmi (using America, 用美) with reasons also based on a cost–benefit calculation:

- The economic tie between the two countries did not provide the significant amount of help to South Korea since its economy had grown to a level commensurate with that of a developed country. Besides, South Korean began to gain less in its trades with the United States;

- Both the material and the social costs associated with the presence of the American forces in South Korea became prominent (and the Yangju highway incident on 13 June 2002 pushed the anti-Americanism sentiment to its climax). This was resulted from the decreasing strategic value of the American forces in the country to deter North Korea – as the inter-Korean tension was substantially eased with the effect of the ‘Sunshine Policy’ implemented by the progressive administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun towards Pyongyang;

- The policy goal of Seoul did not match with that of Washington after the September 11 Attack on the United States in 2001: the Bush Administration publicly labelled North Korea as one of the rogue states of the ‘evil axis’ that would put the Free World in grave danger; but the progressive government of South Korea endeavoured to project North Korea as a brother sharing the same ancestry with the South to be embraced and reunited with.

In other words, while Seoul was avoiding conflicts in its plan to unify the peninsula peacefully, Washington was focusing on counter-terrorism in the Middle East yet inconsiderately bringing instability to the region (and putting South Korea at risk). In sum, the losses that South Korea suffered obviously outweighed the gains it received from using America, and further aligning itself
with the United States would only belittle South Korea, as it kept serving the great but in fact for not much in return – self-determination would be discounted and the national dignity of South Korea would be damaged in such an unequal partnership.

Hence Yongdae was checked by ‘anti-Sadae’, and one of the examples was the South Korean public’s strong objection to Seoul’s decision to deploy troops to join American forces in the war on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 (Hyon, 2014, p.95). By the end of the Roh Moo-hyun administration, the ROK-US relations reached a fairly low point that had made South Korea a ‘runaway ally’ in the eyes of the Americans (Kim & Lim, 2007, p.78). In fact, South Korea was not suffering from ‘historical amnesia’ in the words of Hillary Clinton (Kim & Lim, 2007, p.71); American policymakers simply were not aware of the logic that the distance between Seoul and Washington, to the South Korean, was determined by the operation of Yongdae and ‘anti-Sadae’.

With the perception that America simply replaced Ming/Qing China and became the contemporary ‘senior’ to Korea after the Korean War (albeit in the absence of an official hierarchical structure, i.e. the tribute system) still prevailed in the South Korean society, pro-Americanism was simply considered a modern version of Sadae with South Korea serving the United States and in return, expecting the great to look after the well-being of the ‘junior’ (Kim, 1989, pp.751–2). When such expectations were not adequately met, pro-Americanism would be condemned and the bilateral relations would cool down.

This situation remained until the mid 2000s, when Kim Jong-il’s brinkmanship strategy sharply increased the level of tension via a series of aggressive moves that threatened the national security of South Korea (such as the two nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009, the sinking of ROKS Cheonan and the bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010), making the presence of American forces in South Korea more valuable again as a crucial deterrent. While Washington at the time also perceived that it was necessary to safeguard America’s strategic interest in the region against North Korea’s assertiveness, the converging objective of the two countries helped to rejuvenate the ROK–US alliance (Kim, 2015). By a new
cost–benefit calculation in the post-Cold War era, using America became important again when the need to ensure national security outweighed all other concerns. Correspondingly, ‘anti-Sadae’ backed down and the anti-Americanism sentiment became silent in the South Korean society. However, Mo (2007, p.52) believed that in response to the demand of the younger Koreans who were prone to nationalistic political assertion, the government would have to adopt a realist nationalist approach again to make South Korea more independent from the United States and reshape the U.S.–Korean alliance into a more equal relationship.

On the other hand, the fifteen years from 1993 to 2008 also witnessed the ups and downs in the ROK-PRC relations. Whereas the two countries did enjoy nearly a decade of honeymoon relationship after their normalisation in 1992, during which the former ideological opponents turned close economic partners, South Korea had been using China for obtaining more business opportunities but without giving up the alarm of ‘anti-Sadae’ in case the mentality of the old-time ‘suzerain–vassal’ relation re-emerged in the bilateral relation. This explained why the South Korean reaction was so unusually strong when the issue of the Goguryeo controversies resulted from China’s ‘Northeast Project’ (2002–7) occurred during the early 2000s that seriously affected the amity between the two countries (Jang, Song & Hwang, 2009, pp.121–2). To the surprise of many Chinese policymakers who were accustomed to the Chinese view that Korea had always been a loyal follower to China the ‘senior’ for centuries in history, the South Korean reacted explosively with the nationalistic ‘anti-Sadae’ spirit, condemning the Chinese chauvinistic attitude towards South Korea (Gries, 2005, pp.8–14). In the following years, Beijing expressed its dissatisfaction about the discourse in the South Korean society that emphasised Joseon’s unequal relation with Ming/Qing, denied cultural affinity with the Chinese, and facilitated the growth of nationalism, and even demanded Seoul to contain the nationalistic discourse in the South Korean mass media (Guo & Liu, 2014, p.35; Cai, 2015, pp.2–4; Xu & Qi, 2013, pp.29–30; Han, 2015, pp.64–67) – it generated little effect; and to make matters worse, it amplified the differences in political value between the two countries. Over a decade, through its efforts in non-material issue areas, Seoul successfully retained its control in steering the development of the
bilateral relation for the benefits of South Korea. China was not able to decisively influence South Korea’s foreign policy even though with its tremendous economic power.

Towards the end of Lee Myung-bak’s term in the early 2010s, economic development and national security co-emerged as the dominant issues on South Korea’s foreign relations with the great power – as a result of the 2008–9 Global Financial Crisis and the succession of power in North Korea due to Kim Jong-il’s sudden death in December 2011. Different from Kim Il-sung’s juggling during the Cold War, Seoul had to use both great powers – the USA (for security) and China (for commerce) simultaneously. ‘Anti-Sadae’ thus served to ensure the independence of South Korea by avoiding over-reliance on either great power, protecting its right of self-determination.

Consequently, South Korea has been projecting itself as a middle power playing an important role in regional and even global affairs, particularly as a balancer of power to mediate the rivalry between America and China, to build trust among the Northeast Asian states, and to bring peace and development to the region and the rest of the world (Bae, 2007, pp.460–2). In a sense, South Korea has been trying very hard to elevate its national status even in front of the obvious great powers in Northeast Asia – and this is effectively helpful to the ruling government to escape the accusation of Sadae by the South Korean populace – although the benefits South Korea received from these two countries are more than sufficient to justify Seoul’s Yongdae strategy towards both great powers.

As for North Korea, the end of the Cold War also ended the four-decade long scenario that Pyongyang gained benefits by swinging between the two competing great powers of the Soviet Union and China. Unlike the setting in the old days that the two great powers actually belonged to the same ideological bloc that North Korea also sworn its allegiance to, the two great powers that Pyongyang had to deal with after the Cold War included one that was the leader of the long-time antagonistic opposite camp (i.e. America) and the other one that was a ‘revisionist member’ (in the eyes of the North Korea) of the communist bloc (i.e. China).
More challenging to the political wisdom of Pyongyang was the relationship of these two great powers: competing but also cooperating with each other.

North Korea hence tried to orchestrate a trilateral relation with the two great powers but still applying the *Yongdae*-cum-‘anti-Sadae’ strategy: provoking America to threaten the peace in the Korean Peninsula, by which China would have to support North Korea to deter any aggressive move from the ROK-US alliance. This was how North Korea used China – *indirectly*, because North Korea would not simply follow the will of Beijing and remain a junior partner of China: serving China was no different from yielding North Korea’s right of self-determination to China, for it was so obvious that North Korea would have no choice but to depend on China for its survival. This would fatally jeopardise the regime security of the Kims – North Korea would become a puppet state of China, and following the China’s approach to reform the country was equivalent to denying Kimilsungism and subsequently the legitimacy of the Kims’ rule.

Pyongyang had also tried to use America by seeking benefits via direct interaction with Washington during the post-Cold War years; yet either the ‘hard’ (military threat) or the ‘soft’ (diplomatic negotiation) approach worked only temporarily – because fighting against the ‘Imperialist America’ was part of the foundation of *Juche* that had been propagated by the Kims in North Korea for decades. Basically, it perpetuates the hostility between the two countries irrespective of how *Yongdae* is implemented; a breakthrough therefore is very unlikely as long as the Kims stay in power. This helps to explain why to Pyongyang, using China is a more feasible option.

However, no matter how North Korea uses China to gain benefits, Pyongyang would not simply dance to the tune of Beijing – and this is the same in the case of South Korea: Seoul would not blindly follow the will of Washington or Beijing when South Korea uses them to serve its national interests. To explain such behaviour of both Korean states, simply employing the terms such as ‘soft balancing’ (Pape, 2005, pp.9–10; Paul, 2005, pp.58–59), ‘hedging’ (Kuik, 2008, pp.163–5), and ‘accommodating’ (Kang, 2009, p.7) would not be sufficient. These terms, largely based on the influence of material factors, are good to indicate the
different positions adopted by the middle countries towards a great power along the spectrum with its two ends representing balancing against and bandwagoning with the great. The rationale behind the interplay of ‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae, however, is able to offer understanding at a deeper level as to reveal why and how these two ‘hands’ of ‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae are moving Korea along this spectrum under the influence of both material and non-material factors. Apart from pointing to a certain position Korea chooses in its relations with the great power (as the terms of ‘soft balancing’, ‘hedging’, and ‘accommodating’ have indicated), the mechanism of ‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae explains and predicts why the position will change, when the position will change, towards which direction the position is moving, and until which point the moving will cease. Comprehension of the combined application of ‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae therefore would be able to offer useful insights for both academic research and policy making to better understand the Korea–great power(s) relations at present and in future.

Chapter Summary

This chapter examines the two legacies of Sadae (i.e. ‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae) in Korea’s relations with the great powers during the contemporary era. While all the events mentioned in this chapter have been made publicly known to those IR scholars who specialise in Northeast Asian interstate affairs, it is not the intention of this research to simply repeat what happened or to argue against the views of those who studied both Korean states’ contemporary relations with the great powers. This research, based on the examination of Joseon Korea’s 500 years of Sadae towards Ming/Qing China, aims to provide another analytical tool, that is, a combined application of ‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae, to explain the policies of Seoul and Pyongyang from a different perspective, whereby offering answers in addition to ‘ambivalence’ and ‘opportunism’.

Although Yongdae as a pragmatic strategy appears to be easily comprehensible according to the realist view (such as bandwagoning), the logic that Yongdae is checked by a nationalistic concept of ‘anti-Sadae’ makes the case rather unique for a middle power such as either North or South Korea to deal with the great
powers. After all, what Korea has experienced is nothing short of uniqueness for over six centuries since the late 14th century, and what happened in history still persistently generates profound impacts on both Korean states’ relations with the great powers in present time.
Chapter 8

Conclusion: *Sadae, History and Culture, and Contemporary Northeast Asian International Relations*

This concluding chapter summarises the findings of this thesis by briefly reviewing the rise and fall of *Sadae*. On this basis, it presents a framework to understand the three dimensions of *Sadae*. The implications of studying *Sadae* are then discussed with the emphasis placed on the future order in Northeast Asia. It is suggested that a pre-modern Sinocentric order is not returning to the region due to the lack of an objective condition (i.e. hierarchy has been substituted by equality in contemporary interstate relations) and a subjective condition (i.e. no intersubjective ideology that is commonly shared between China and other countries). Although it implies that *Sadae* as an official policy no longer exists, the Koreans’ diplomatic skills and insights resulted from centuries of practicing *Sadae* are still relevant to the understanding of Korean foreign policy towards America and China in the contemporary world. During the process of a power transition in a region with abundantly rich historical and cultural legacies, both the non-material and material factors, which share equal importance, should not be ignored.

In respect to the contribution of this research, it is anticipated that this study can inspire the policymakers of the middle powers in the sense that, by referring to the Korean experience in dealing with great powers, they may consider developing new arenas other than those of the material concerns to interact with the great powers. While the material concerns tend to lock the middle powers in a fixed position (i.e. secondary to the great powers), the non-material arenas will free the middle powers from the constraint of material capabilities and broaden the scope of their policy options, thereby enabling them to deal with the great powers at least on a closer-to-equality basis. Theoretically, it is hoped that the constructivist-cum-realist approach proposed can provide scholars who specialise in the IR of Northeast Asia with a comprehensive and a balanced analytical framework for future studies.
At the end of this chapter, some suggestions are made for future studies, with the hope that this research can become one of the building blocks to develop a school of thought for the study of Northeast Asian IR, whereby the general discipline of IR study can be enriched.

8.1 The Three Faces of Sadae

A Recap of the Rise and Fall of Sadae

Sadae, a word of political taboo in either Korean state nowadays, was a strategy adopted by ancient Korea in managing its relations with China, the only great power in Northeast Asia. It was in the year of 1392, when the Joseon Dynasty was founded, that Sadae, a concept of Confucianism, was set to be the official policy of Joseon towards Ming by Taejo Yi Seong-gye, and became institutionalised by the Sinocentric tribute system in which the Joseon court chose to participate.

In the five-century history of Joseon, Sadae was practiced during the reign of every Joseon king – although with different motives: a few served the Chinese emperor with utmost respect, sincerity, and even affection of a son to his father, some performed the duties as a vassal state ought to do according to the Confucian principles of propriety – but not in the cases that the national interests of Joseon were to be sacrificed. As for the rest, they simply made use of the tribute system to obtain various sorts of material benefits from China – yet without a trace of faithfulness in serving the great. Whether it was out of admiration of things advanced (culture, technology, etc.) of the great, or due to fear of being invaded by the great, or aiming to pursue gains from a quid pro quo relationship with the great, the practice of Sadae was not forcefully imposed on Joseon – it was Joseon who made the choice of Sadae.

In spite of the changing power polarity in Northeast Asia in history, Joseon’s Sadae never stopped: Joseon served Ming from 1392 to 1608 in a unipolar order with Ming as the hegemon, served both the declining Ming and the rising Manchu from 1608 to 1644 in a bipolar order, served Qing in name only (and served the fallen Ming in reality) from 1644 to 1776 in an imaginary bipolar order, served Qing from 1776 to 1873 in a unipolar order with Qing as the new hegemon that
was truly accepted by Joseon, and served Qing in name only again (and served Japan, Russia, and Japan again in reality) from 1873 to 1910 in a multipolar order. However, Sadae was carried out differently during the above mentioned periods.

Even when Ming was the dominant power, the Joseon political elites served the great in different ways. Some had ‘done more than one should’, as they viewed Ming as a paternal figure to Joseon and served Ming wholeheartedly by enthusiastically practicing the Confucian doctrines of propriety (e.g. Jungjong). However, some had ‘done no more but sometimes less than one should’, as they served Ming by performing their duties according to the requirement put forth to a vassal state, but struggled in dilemma when they found that in some cases Joseon’s national interests would be compromised if serving Ming inflexibly – and they eventually bent the rules to protect the well-being of Joseon (e.g. Sejong and Seongjong). As for the rest, they had ‘done less than one should’, as they served Ming as a pragmatic strategy to use the great, and they never concealed their purpose to serve Ming: to gain and to secure the national interests of Joseon – in their eyes, the tribute system was merely an exchange of a favour for a favour with the great (e.g. Taejo, Taejong, Sejo, Yeonsangun, Myeongjong, and Seonjo).

During the period of power transition when Ming was challenged and eventually replaced by Qing, the multi-dimensional nature of Sadae revealed itself again. Some chose to pragmatically serve (in fact, use) two great powers at the same time with tactics of deception in order to protect Joseon (e.g. Gwanghaegun), while some served the great with exceptionally high level of loyalty: Injo (before 1637) served Ming at the expense of having Joseon be conquered by Qing, Hyojong actively planned for the Northern Expedition to revive the fallen Ming, Sukjong and Yeongjo built and expanded the Altar for Great Recompense to honour the departed Ming emperors. After Qing became the indisputable hegemon in the region, Jeongjo served Qing faithfully due to his admiration of and affection for Qianlong Emperor.

Sadae came to its final decades after Qing was repeatedly defeated by the West during the 19th century. Joseon’s decision to stay close to Japan and Russia and to
use them against China was a result of a pair of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors: within
the Sinocentric world, it was the unwillingness and inability of Qing to look after
the national interests of Joseon that ‘pushed’ Joseon out of the tribute system.
Outside of the Sinocentric world, Joseon was exposed to the advent of the
sovereign-state system that was introduced by the West. Its principles of equality
and autonomy became so appealing to Joseon when compared with the Confucian
tribute system of hierarchy that Joseon was ‘pulled’ away from the Sinic sphere.
This eventually led to the official end of Sadae.

Reviewing the history of Joseon from 1392 to 1910, it can be found that no matter
how many benefits Joseon had received from implementing the policy of Sadae,
the role of Joseon in its relations with the great powers had always been the
‘junior’ with various costs to bear. Within the hierarchy-based Sinocentric world,
Joseon was assigned the role of a vassal state (i.e. a ‘junior’) by Imperial China
before 1895; after 1895, within the equality-based Westphalian system, Joseon
was still treated as a junior by the great powers. Even after Korea’s sovereignty
was restored with the Japanese surrender in 1945, Korea as a free nation-state and
the will of the free Korean people were still not respected by the great powers as it
was supposed to be.

While independence, representing only self-rule, was achieved with the founding
of both Korean states in 1948, the quest for self-determination began in South
Korea and North Korea with the combined application of the principles of
‘anti-Sadae’ and Yongdae in their relations with the great powers throughout the
Cold War and well into the post-Cold War era. The unpleasant (and sometimes
even painful) experience in the past and the unresolved issue at present (i.e. the
nation-state of Korea remains divided) that was left from the past eventually turn
both Korean states into a pair of middle powers that have been interacting with the
great powers in ways that are not seen elsewhere in the world.

Different Dimensions of Sadae
Sadae can be considered as a mentality or an attitude, which actually exhibits the
nationalistic emotion of the perceiver instead of the perceived – the sentiment of
‘anti-Sadae’ is a proof. However, in the study of International Relations, Sadae
should be understood as a policy without bias. In the historical context, it is an undeniable fact that Sadae as a policy was adopted by the Joseon court towards China, the dominant power of the world the Koreans knew of at the time. Joseon did not create the concept of Sadae; it was a Confucian idea brought up by Mencius, the Chinese philosopher. Joseon did not create the Sinocentric tribute system; it was an international system constructed by the Chinese based on the Confucian rule of propriety. The policy of ‘serving the great’ was simply an option, among others, for any countries smaller than China in pre-modern East Asia to consider when building relationship with China. Some chose to implement the policy, such as Joseon, Ryukyu and Annam, while some refused, as seen in the case of Japan.

Therefore, as a product of Korean history, Sadae at least deserves a descriptive, ‘what is’ definition that is free of the ‘why’ and the ‘how’. Sadae thus refers to:

Within the Sinocentric order during the era of Ming and Qing China, the policy adopted by Joseon Korea that accepted the role of a vassal state in a hierarchical relationship with China that entailed a set of political, economic, military, diplomatic, and cultural duties for Joseon Korea to perform within the tribute system, thereby serving China as its suzerain.

Nevertheless, by omitting the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ related to the concept, Sadae tends to be vaguely generalised either by some Chinese scholars as serving the great enthusiastically, or by some Korean scholars as using the great strategically. Hence Sadae needs to be understood at a deeper level according to the different motives of the Joseon policymaker(s) when he/they chose to adopt the policy – and these were determined by the interplay among the factors of the three levels of system (i.e. distribution of power in Northeast Asia that affected Joseon’s national security), unit (i.e. the state ideology of Confucianism that made Joseon a culturally strong but militarily weak nation), and individual (i.e. personal value and experience that nurtured the pro-righteousness or pro-pragmatism orientation). These were the causes that had led to the effects as seen in the different ways of practicing Sadae.
Therefore, based on the findings of this research, Sadae is further described as:

1) *Sadae* with filial piety, by which Joseon served Ming/Qing loyally in the way resembling a son respected and loved his father wholeheartedly and unconditionally. This was the result brought by the powerful effect of a combination of the pro-righteousness policymakers and the state ideology of Confucianism that excluded the influence of the rationalists and the concern of Joseon’s national security (see Figure 8.1).

(Figure 8.1)

2) *Sadae* as an obligation, by which Joseon performed the duties as required for a vassal state, but not at the expense of the national interests of Joseon. This could be considered a point of equilibrium that had balanced the influence of all factors – although not without a painful decision-making process in many cases (see Figure 8.2).

(Figure 8.2)
3) *Sadae* as a disguise of the pragmatic *Yongdae* (using the great), by which Joseon strategically used China to serve its national interests. This was caused by the effect of a combination of the pro-pragmatism policymakers and the national security that overpowered the influence of the loyalists and the principles of Confucian ethics – mainly in response to a changing power distribution in the region strategically (see Figure 8.3).

These three different ways of practicing *Sadae* indicate that *Sadae* is not a homogeneous concept. As a dependent variable, *Sadae* was practiced in a certain way that corresponded to the result of the competition among the independent variables derived from the system, unit, and individual levels: 1) when the pro-righteousness loyalists controlled the making of foreign policy in a strongly Confucianised Joseon, as seen in the ruling years of Injo before the first Manchu invasion in 1627 for instance, the fact that Manchu had overpowered Ming and the clout the pro-pragmatism rationalists at the time were able to wield in the making of foreign policy were no match for the ideational forces of Confucian ethics. *Sadae* thus was practiced in the way that a son with filial piety served his father; 2) When the impact generated by the factors of all three levels reached an equilibrium, as during the reign of Sejong (Ming’s dominant power in reality had drawn the Koreans’ attention to the security of Joseon, but Confucianism was at its peak to shape the ethical norms in the Korean society. Moreover, the rationalists and the loyalists were well-matched in strength at the Joseon court), *Sadae* became an obligation for Joseon to serve the great power but not at the cost of Joseon’s benefits, demonstrating the intention of the Joseon elites to achieve a
balance in projecting the interests of both Joseon and the great power; and 3) When the rationalists gained the upper hand at the Joseon court in a time when the power of the great was unquestionable, as in the example of Yeonsangun’s rule, Confucian ethics and the loyalists simply could not bring sufficient impact to uphold the moral principle of righteousness in the making of foreign policy, and Sadae became a pragmatic strategy for Joseon to pursue its national interest.

Therefore, Sadae could be subjectively interpreted at the will of the interpreter if the heterogeneous manifestations of the concept were not fully revealed, and the chance to understand the true nature of the bilateral relations between the two countries would be unfortunately reduced. To avoid the situation in which history is presented for the purpose of serving the political needs at present time, historical concepts like Sadae have to be studied via in-depth analysis based on detailed historical evidence.

8.2 Implications

The study of Sadae has two implications: 1) the possibility for a re-emergence of Sinocentric order in Asia-Pacific in the coming future is minimal, and middle powers such as the two Korean states will consider China as a great power instead of a regional leader; and 2) the Korean experience of managing its relations with the great power(s) is relevant to the middle powers that face a trilateral quandary as a result of the Sino-US competition.

China is on its way to become a regional superpower, yet a Sinocentric order is unlikely to re-surface for two reasons: first, the suzerain–vassal relationship is a historical phenomenon. Today there is a rising China with its centrality no less significant than what it used to be in pre-modern time, but China is now a member of the international community that is sustained by the modern sovereign-state system based on equality. Unofficially, there may be unequal relationship between two states due to their power disparity; yet officially there is no more hierarchical relationship between any two states – because in terms of status, all nation-states are independent and equal to each other. After all, it is a social progress for a liberal international order to replace a hierarchical one, and history is rather
unlikely to regress to its distant past. In consequence, *Sadae* as an official policy no longer exists in the contemporary world – because the very element that presupposes the existence of *Sadae*, that is, the Sinocentric tribute system based on hierarchy, has gone.

Second, the Sinocentric order is unlikely to re-emerge even in the face of a rapidly rising China because there is a lack of ideational foundation commonly shared between China and other countries in the region. Centuries ago there was Confucianism, an intersubjective philosophy that was willingly shared by the Chinese and the Koreans and eventually produced the Korean policy of *Sadae*. However, at the moment and in near future, what China can offer is only material benefits; there is no ideational ‘magnet’, as Confucianism in history, that will look appealing to the middle powers and turn them into followers of China. Multi-billion-dollar commercial contracts merely indicate the establishment of a *quid pro quo* relationship between China and a middle power. This is why China, on the way to revive its ancient glories, will become a great power again – but not necessarily a leader, for no countries will serve China as a leader the way Joseon served Ming/Qing in history.

Whether a leader–follower relationship exists between China and a middle power therefore has to be justified from the perspective of the middle power rather than that of China. A leader will be recognised only when followers are identified. China may have the ability to wield its economic influence on the traditional followers of America, but China is not able to swing them over to its side: they would rather entrust their national security in the hands of America because there is lack of common ground to build confidence and cultivate mutual trust between them and China. Hence, it is difficult for China to become a leader in the region – not because of insufficient material power, but simply due to the lack of followers.

In regards to the second implication of studying *Sadae*, it needs to be emphasised that although *Sadae* was a foreign policy that resided in the distant past, it still has its diplomatic value at the present-day interstate relations. For over 500 years until the early 1900s, the Koreans implemented the policy of *Sadae* in different ways
towards Ming/Qing China, and they came to develop, from their successes and failures, a fine set of skills to deal with the great power(s). It is true that neither Korean state chooses to practice *Sadae* officially in contemporary time, yet its legacies still heavily characterise their foreign relations with the great power(s). While the idea of serving the great subserviently was labelled a political taboo, using the great pragmatically remained a viable strategy to pursue national interests – as evident in the Korea–great power(s) relations since the end of the Second World War. ‘Anti-*Sadae*’ and *Yongdae* were combined to form a mechanism that have ensured both Korean states’ survival and even brought them substantial gains when being involved in the fights between great powers. The Korean foreign policy in the past seven decades towards the great powers may be described as ambivalent or opportunistic, but it can also be commended as sophisticated and effective – for it demonstrates the wisdom of a middle power in the practice of contemporary diplomacy when interacting with one great or more than one great at the same time.

Briefly speaking, the Korean experience is about creating more controllable variables in the non-material aspects to increase strategic flexibilities in its relations with the great powers. It can serve as a source of inspiration for other middle powers in Asia–Pacific to resolve their dilemma of making a difficult choice between America and China at present and in future. Since the turn of the century, the economies of many traditional allies of America in the region have become highly dependent on China. They cannot afford to choose the clear-cut option of siding with America as Australia does – as Australia’s economic relation with China is one-dimensional and substitutable, for which Canberra does not think China can exercise economic pressure on Australia (Bisley, 2014, pp.310–311). Nonetheless, the decision of simply allying with America in the Sino-US rivalry, as in the case of Australia, appears over-optimistic in the belief that the growing aggressiveness of China will be neutralised by perpetual American supremacy, and it contributes little to maintaining stability in the region via multilateral institutions in the long run (Bisley, 2014, pp.317–318; Bisley, 2015, p.259). This makes the Korean experience all the more valuable to other middle powers in Asia–Pacific when they deal with the great powers, especially within a bipolar regional order.
8.3 Contributions

*Political Contribution*

With the example of the Korean experience of managing relations with great powers, it is hopeful that the detailed study of history and culture conducted in this research can provide the foreign policymakers in middle powers with some insightful ideas to interact with the great powers. That is, the middle powers may consider opening up new arenas to deal with the great powers on non-material issues. By such strategy, the middle powers will be able to gain two advantages: 1) greater possibility to interact with the great powers on an equal or nearly equal basis; and 2) greater flexibility to deal with the great powers with more policy options.

First, in the arena of non-material issues, the middle powers do not have to appear weaker in front of the great powers – because the great powers may not have the superiority over others on issues irrelevant to military and economic capabilities. On material concerns, the middle powers can hardly place themselves in a position that is equal to that of the great powers. Unless the middle powers can offer something useful to the great powers, their dignity may not be respected, their voices may not be heard, and their interests may not be protected. On the contrary, issues related to history and culture can settle the asymmetry to ensure the middle powers not be disadvantaged in their relations with the great powers.

As in the case of the ROK–US relations, South Korea has been trying to beneficially interact with the superpower not only in the material arena but also in the non-material arena of history and culture (in spite of the relatively short history of the United States that is slightly over 200 years): South Korea can choose to stay close to America by praising its impartiality and generosity during early 1880s, America’s military support that rescued South Korea in the Korean War and deterred further aggressions from the North ever since, and America’s economic aid that transformed South Korea into an industrialised country.
Alternatively, South Korea can also choose to keep a greater distance between itself and America by amplifying the Taft–Katsura agreement in 1905 (America recognised Japan's dominance in Korea for the return of Japan’s recognition of America’s control of the Philippines, by which America was viewed as unethically sacrificing Korea’s sovereignty for its self-interest), America’s decision to split the country in halves without considering the will of the Koreans, and Washington’s support for the authoritarian regimes that suppressed the South Koreans’ demand for democracy. While the fact that the national security and economic benefits South Korea has been receiving by bandwagoning with America is crystal clear, South Korea has in fact not been a weak and passive junior partner at all in its alliance with the world superpower. In a non-material arena, South Korea is able to manage the bilateral relations with America on an fairly equal basis, producing the result that America has never been able to place the alliance under its total control – while South Korea has been continuously obtaining both material benefits and non-material gains (i.e. self-determination, international status, and national dignity) from the ROK–US alliance.

Second, by opening up arenas other than those concerning only military and economic issues, the middle powers will be able to increase their policy options to interact with the great powers. In other words, if the middle powers constrain themselves in the material arena, they will be left with two choices only: to bandwagon with the great powers, or to prepare for being bullied by the great powers. To draw an analogy, military and economic issues are like the two rails that make the track. The great powers tend to build such track with the two rails of military and economic issues in which their greatest capabilities reside, and if the middle powers can only act like a train with wheels that fit on nothing but the two rails of security and trade, then they will have to run in either of the two directions (forwards or backwards) on the rail-track built by the great powers – and the outcome is obvious: the middle powers are left with the minimum amount of autonomy in controlling their foreign relations with the great powers, and their behaviours are highly predictable thus it will become much easier for the great powers to manipulate the middle powers.
This is evident in the PRC–ROK relations: by highlighting the importance of the economic value of China to South Korea, Beijing repeatedly hints to Seoul that South Korea should free itself from the ROK–US alliance and turn to lean on China, as China can manage and control North Korea and provide South Korea with abundant commercial opportunities (Men & Liu, 2013, p.72). However, South Korea responded to China in a non-material arena of history and culture, without which South Korea would not have been able to: 1) maintain equidistance with China and with America, in the face of China’s valid claim about providing South Korea with both security and prosperity on one hand and South Korea’s long-time (thus more reliable) alliance with America on the other; and 2) protect its right of self-determination, international status, and national dignity by not always saying ‘yes’ to either the incumbent or the rising great. Compared with people from other nations, the Koreans have been able to subtly yet more effectively deal with the great powers because with their centuries of experience dealing with the great powers, they have acquired and refined their knowledge and skill to handle the great powers with a ‘lever’: by using a fulcrum made of non-material factors, a middle power enables itself with the capability to manage a beneficial relationship with the great powers. Rather than entangling itself in the material arena with an ‘either-or’ mentality, the Koreans freed themselves from the intellectually limited strategies of balancing and bandwagoning, and proactively employed the mechanism of Yongdae-plus-‘anti-Sadae’ when juggling both material and non-material factors, thus having achieved the optimal outcome from their relations with the great powers.

Academic Contribution

With the study of Sadae in this research, it is found that there has been more than power politics in Northeast Asian interstate relations: factors related to history and culture can influence the making of foreign policy to the extent that the material concerns may have to give way to accommodate the non-material demands (at least for a certain period of time). To better understand the logic that determines the interplay of the material and non-material forces in Northeast Asia, a region that is rather different from the others due to its unique historical background but at the same time is strategically important for the current rivalry between the top two great powers, it is necessary for the IR scholars to adopt a combined method
of a realist view with a constructivist approach to analyse the relations between and among the Northeast Asian states.

While realism and Constructivism are usually considered IR theories belonging to two different schools of thought, the two indeed can be applied together. Realism is the theory about the view that international relations are basically dominated by rivalries for material power between and among states that pursue their national interests in an anarchical world, while constructivism is the theory about the approach to study world politics by way of examining the non-material factors that can generate impacts on states’ behaviour and the system structure. Realism and constructivism are not opposite to each other: the opposite of realism is idealism, and the opposite of constructivism is rationalism – hence realism and constructivism is not a pair of incompatible theories. As discussed in the study of Barkin (2003, p.326), ‘a realist constructivism (or, for that matter, a constructivist realism) is epistemologically, methodologically, and paradigmatically viable’.

Secondly, they should be applied together in the study of Northeast Asian interstate relations. Employing the realist view alone is not sufficient for policy analysis. As in the case of the American strategy of ‘hub-and-spokes’ in East Asia, the discord between South Korea and Japan will look incomprehensible if the impacts generated from the non-material factors (historical disputes and cultural frictions) are underestimated. Similar situation can be found in the example of ROK–PRC relations during the 2000s. The dramatic ‘cooling down’ in the bilateral relationship cannot be explained if the focus is placed only on economic and military concerns. At the same time, a constructivist approach is needed to identify the non-material factors that function as a key variable to such changes, for which the IR scholars would have to search deeper for the reasons behind within the historical and cultural contexts – areas where the realists tend to overlook. These two examples, along with others mentioned in the previous chapters, illustrate the reason why IR scholars cannot afford to ignore the need to study the non-material factors that make the interstate relations in Northeast Asia much more complex than the realists have anticipated.
8.4 Suggestions for Further Research

The analyses of historical records in this research related to the Joseon–Ming/Qing relations were mainly based on the *Ri Dynasty Annals of Korea* (also known as *Joseon Wangjo Sillok*). As the annals are generally considered the most comprehensive historical records of the Joseon Dynasty, it took a tremendous amount of time to search and study every single entry pertinent to the Korea–China relations in the nearly 2,000 volumes of the annals. However, the study of Northeast Asia in the past, which still influences Northeast Asia at present, requires a complete and correct understanding of the interstate relations centuries ago. In order to examine the historical complexity and cultural nuance, more historical materials of primary source should have been studied. Hence, it would have been complementary to the study of the annals if information of these primary materials were also analysed: 1) *Seungjeongwon Ilgi* (Journal of the Royal Secretariat), the daily record of the Royal Secretariat that documented the monarch’s public activities and his interactions with the court officials on a daily basis from 1623 to 1910; 2) *Ilseongnok* (Diary of Self-examination), the daily record of the kings’ reflection upon the events at court for better governance, which covered the period from 1760 to 1910; and 3) *Bibyeonsa Deungnok* (Records of the Border Defense Council), the minutes of the meetings held between 1617 and 1892 by the Border Defense Council, the supreme administrative organ responsible for national security since the Japanese invasions during the final decade of the 16th century. All of these materials contain information that is of great help to the study of Sadae and other topics related to Korea–China relations in pre-modern and modern history.

Since most of these historical materials were written in vast number of volumes, to study all of these historical records requires a lot of time and research manpower. That is why it is suggested that the future study of Northeast Asian IR should be carried out as series of research projects by teams of IR scholars from China, both Korea states, and Japan, preferably supported by historians and linguists (as the majority of the historical records were written in ancient Chinese). Although it looks challenging, it can serve as a starting point to give a positive answer to the question of ‘Why is there no non-Western international relations
theory? (Acharya & Buzan, 2007, p.287)’ if concerted scholarly efforts can be made. Hopefully, this research on Sadae can inspire current and future IR scholars (and also practitioners) for the development of a school of thoughts tailored for the study of Northeast Asian (and probably East Asian or Asian) interstate relations – so as to achieve the ultimate goal of enriching the discipline of International Relations Studies.
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Mass Media


### Appendix 1

#### Glossary of Key Terms

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<th><strong>Romanised Korean</strong></th>
<th><strong>Chinese</strong></th>
<th><strong>English Explanation</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bibyeonsa</td>
<td>備邊司</td>
<td>Council of Border Defence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bukbeol</td>
<td>北伐</td>
<td>Northern Expedition</td>
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<td>Byeongja Horan</td>
<td>丙子胡亂</td>
<td>Manchu Invasion</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>(1636-37)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cheonchusa</td>
<td>千秋使</td>
<td>Joseon Tribute Mission (to celebrate the birthday of China’s crown prince)</td>
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<td>Daebodan</td>
<td>大報壇</td>
<td>Altar for Great Recompense</td>
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<td>Dongyi</td>
<td>東夷</td>
<td>Barbarians in the East</td>
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<td>Ganghwhado Joyak</td>
<td>江華島條約</td>
<td>Treaty of Ganghwa Island</td>
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<td>Gwageo</td>
<td>科舉</td>
<td>Civil Service Examination</td>
</tr>
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<td>韓字</td>
<td>Korean Alphabet</td>
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<tr>
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<td>壬午軍亂</td>
<td>Military Uprising (1882)</td>
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<td>Manchu Invasion (1627)</td>
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<td>尊華攘夷</td>
<td>Respecting China and Resisting the barbarians</td>
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<td>Jonju Yangyi</td>
<td>尊周攘夷</td>
<td>Respecting the Zhou Dynasty and Resisting the barbarians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseon Chaengnyak</td>
<td>朝鮮策略</td>
<td>Joseon Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juche</td>
<td>主體</td>
<td>Self-reliance</td>
</tr>
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<td>Jwauijeong</td>
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<td>Mohwa</td>
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<td>司憲府</td>
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<td>Sojunghwa</td>
<td>小中華</td>
<td>Little China</td>
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<td>State Council</td>
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<td>Unyo-ho Sageon</td>
<td>雲揚號事件</td>
<td>Unyo Incident</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Yejo</td>
<td>禮曹</td>
<td>Joseon Ministry of Rites</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yeonguijeong</td>
<td>領議政</td>
<td>Chief State Councillor</td>
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</table>
Yongdae  
Yukjo  

Using the Great Yukjo  
The Six Ministries of Joseon
## Appendix 2

**Monarchs of Joseon and China (Ming and Qing)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Joseon King (Reign)</th>
<th>Ming Emperor (Reign)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taejo, 太祖 (1392-98)</td>
<td>Hongwu, 洪武 (1368-98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeongjong, 定宗 (1398-1400)</td>
<td>Jianwen, 建文 (1398-1402)</td>
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<td>Taejong, 太宗 (1400-18)</td>
<td>Yongle, 永樂 (1402-24)</td>
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<td>Zhengtong, 正統 (1435-49)</td>
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<td>Yeonsangun, 燕山君 (1494-1506)</td>
<td>Tianshun, 天順 (1457-64)</td>
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<td>Chenghua, 成化 (1464-87)</td>
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<td>Zhengde, 正德 (1505-21)</td>
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<td>Longqing, 隆慶 (1567-72)</td>
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<td>Wanli, 萬曆 (1572-1620)</td>
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<td>Taichang, 泰昌 (Aug-Sep 1620)</td>
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<td>Chongzhen, 崇禎 (1627-44)</td>
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<td>Joseon King (Reign)</td>
<td>Qing Emperor (Reign)</td>
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<td>Qianlong, 乾隆 (1735-96)</td>
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<td>Tongzhi, 同治 (1861-75)</td>
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<td>Gojong, 高宗 (1863-1907)</td>
<td>Guangxu, 光緒 (1875-1908)</td>
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<td>Sunjong, 純宗 (1907-10)</td>
<td>Xuantong, 宣統 (1908-12)</td>
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Source:
