


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Informal diplomacy in Chosŏn Korea and new engagement with the West and Westernized Japan, 1873–1876

Sean S. Han 

Division of East Asian Studies, Yonsei University, Wonju, Korea
Email: syhan0512@yonsei.ac.kr

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Abstract

This article focuses on Chosŏn's informal diplomacy with the Qing dynasty that guided Chosŏn Korea's diplomatic engagement with Japan in the 1870s. The Chosŏn–Qing literary correspondence in Kang Wi's (姜埜, 1820–1884) brush talk records has been viewed as historical evidence of Chosŏn's intelligence-gathering activities which formed the basis of a new diplomatic enterprise for dealing with modern imperial powers. What has received less attention, however, is the implementation and implications of the informal diplomacy reflected in Kang's diplomatic activities and his discursive practice. Based on a personal and unofficial account by an intellectual on the margins of the established social and international order, this study revisits the political and intelligence-gathering processes that led up to the 1876 peace agreement, which was the culmination of the Qing and Chosŏn dynasties' concerted efforts as they transitioned to a changing world order in East Asia. In addition, this article further illuminates Kang's agency, despite his secondary social status, in Chosŏn's changing attitude towards Westerners and Westernized Japan. I argue that as both interviewer and transcriber, and from his position on the periphery of the Confucian ruling elites in the late Chosŏn period, Kang provided a new framework through which to formulate policies by reconfiguring his brush talk records to implement his own agenda as a member of the *chungin* (middle people) literary elite.

Keywords: Nineteenth-century Korea; envoy mission; envoy brush talk; informal diplomacy; 1876 Chosŏn–Japan Agreement; *chungin* (middle people)

China is the window to foreign countries: if one enters China and spies on them, one can learn about foreign countries.

Yi Kŏnch'ang (1852–1898)

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Informal diplomacy and brush talk in early modern East Asia

The gunboat diplomacy and economic penetration by Euro-American industrial powers required East Asian states to gather intelligence on changing geopolitical conditions and to formulate diplomatic counterstrategies. This article focuses on how Kang Wi (姜瑋, 1820–1884) created great potential for Chosŏn Korea to engage in a new level of diplomacy in the late 1870s. Kang visited China and Japan multiple times and observed the negotiations leading to the 1876 Kanghwa Agreement of Amity between Korea and Japan. He was exposed to both China and Japan at a time when both states and individuals were heavily invested in strategic thinking. Despite his intelligence and literary talent, the aristocratic ruling elites failed to properly integrate Kang's 'name and status' into their established social and inter-dynastic order due to his non-aristocratic status and his non-bureaucratic position in Chosŏn Korea.

To date, the scope of research on early modern diplomatic history has broadened beyond a state-centric and bureaucratic focus.¹ Although the term 'early modern' may be applied differently depending on context, in the case of East Asia, the period ranging from the seventeenth through to the late nineteenth century is generally considered early modern in a comparative sense. The rise of a new society was accompanied by the re-establishment of its relationship, through diversified agency, with state powers, including sovereign rulers, bureaucrats, clergymen, interpreters, merchants, and scholars, who served as both actors and indicators of informal diplomacy in the early modern period.² Crucial elements of informal diplomacy include personal interactions and shared cultural and intellectual values, which often determine the sustainability and efficacy of diplomatic relations between states. Over the past two decades, studies have utilized the terms 'foreign policy' and 'diplomacy' expansively and have highlighted aspects of diplomatic culture, including diplomatic gifts, ceremonies, and hospitality, that were requisite and integral to diplomatic development in the early modern period. Interstate relations in early modern East Asia were not limited to the case of intra-East Asian diplomacy nor to its increasing encounter with non-East Asian polities.³

¹ The emergence of new modes of state power and the evolution of interstate relations in East Asia were triggered by the development of new societies characterized by a high level of literacy, wealth accumulation, and urbanization—like the strand of changes that appeared in Europe from the beginning in the seventeenth century. See E. A. Rawski, *Early modern China and Northeast Asia: Cross-border perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 62–102.

² Tracey A. Sowerby, 'Early modern diplomatic history', *History Compass*, vol. 14, 2016, p. 445.

³ For a comprehensive overview of diplomatic engagements via Chosŏn envoy missions to China during the Qing dynasty in Korean scholarship, see Son Sŏng'uk 손성옥, *Sasin ūl ttara ch'ŏngnara e kada: Chosŏnin dŭllŭi pukkyŏng ch'aehŏm* 사신을 따라 청나라에 가다: 조선인들의 북경 체험 (Following envoys to Qing: Chosŏn people's Beijing experience) (Seoul: P'urŭnyŏksa, 2020), pp. 176–185. The guest rituals and ceremonies during Sino-British encounters are examined lucidly in J. L. Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar: Qing guest ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). Tokugawa Japan's diplomatic engagement with the United States is studied in M. Auslin, *Negotiating with imperialism: The unequal treaties and the culture of Japanese diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Informal diplomacy in early modern East Asia and, particularly, within Qing–Chosŏn tributary relations was conducted mainly, but not only, via Chosŏn’s despatch of regular envoy missions to the Qing. While the economic and cultural exchanges guaranteed the efficacy and sustainability of bilateral relations, their ideological orientations and geopolitical needs accounted for the unprecedented frequency and scale of tributary missions in Sino–Korean history.⁴ Ruling elites in both the Qing and Chosŏn dynasties actively used their bilateral relations to establish the legitimacy of their regimes and as a means of control over internal and external challenges. However, by the late nineteenth century, both dynasties were forced to reconfigure their formed bilateral relations to deal with the multilateral dynamics that emerged during the rise of the ‘new others’: the Western imperial powers and Westernized Japan.⁵

Unlike earlier scholars who depicted this transition merely as passive responses to Western and Japanese imperialism, more recently researchers have focused on how the established diplomatic traditions and pre-existing normative practices shaped the trajectory of the changes that led to the modern form of these relations.⁶ Instead of relying on the term ‘tributary system’, with an etymology rooted in historical examples exclusively from European experiences of premodern and modern international relations, Yuanchong Wang and Nianshen Song used ‘*zongfan*’ (宗藩), not only to refer to the indigenous hierarchical relations involved in Qing–Chosŏn interactions, but also as a key analytic tool with which to examine the transition from the premodern world view, which remained a vibrant ideological and philosophical foundation for imagining the modern nation-state in twentieth-century East Asia. Their seminal work highlights the innovative adoption of tributary protocols for managing interstate rituals, war, trade, and border control in practice by the Manchu and Chosŏn dynasties.

However, an underlying problem with using a dominant politico-cultural structure as an analytic tool in this context is its prioritization of the views of Chinese ruling elites and their cultural bias.⁷ Manchu and Chosŏn elites neither challenged nor ignored but, rather, internalized *zongfan* as the correct way to sustain the integrity between ‘name and status’ (名分 Ch., *mingfen*, K. *myŏngbun*), the key concept in Confucian orthodoxy applied to inter-dynastic order. The same Confucian hierarchy was also connected seamlessly to the rationale used to explain why the elites should maintain their socio-economic privilege over the rest of the populace.⁸ The Sinocentric bias

⁴ D. Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five centuries of trade and tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

⁵ K. Larsen, *Tradition, treaties and trade: Qing imperialism and Chosŏn Korea, 1850–1910* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008).

⁶ Y. Wang, *Remaking the Chinese empire: Manchu–Korean relations, 1616–1911* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); N. Song, *Making borders in modern East Asia: The Tumen River demarcation, 1881–1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁷ Evelyn Rawski, ‘Presidential address: Reenvisioning the Qing: The significance of the Qing period in Chinese history’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 55, no. 4, 1996, pp. 829–850.

⁸ C. Chung, *A Korean Confucian encounter with the modern world: Yi Hang-no and the West* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1995).

embedded in the term ‘*zongfan*’ entails the risk of downplaying the Chosŏn dynasty so that it is seen as merely a passive victim or benefactor of Qing foreign policy and fails to acknowledge that Qing foreign policy occasionally violated its own politico-cultural discourse to maintain Qing superiority and dominance over Korea.⁹ Another problem is the invisibility in envoy missions of various diplomatic agents, especially non-elite and non-official members, who stood between the imaginary familial ties between the *zong* (Qing dynasty) and *fan* (Chosŏn dynasty).

Brush talk records¹⁰ written by non-elites such as Kang reveal informal diplomacy that, although not aligned with the elite’s standpoint, was integral to Qing–Chosŏn relations. A comparison of Kang’s personal account with official diplomatic accounts produced, circulated, and archived by aristocratic court historians provides a unique window into the geopolitical uncertainties and anxieties that shaped intelligence-gathering activities in both the Qing and Chosŏn dynasties in the 1870s from the viewpoint of a marginalized intellectual. On the other hand, Kang’s role in Chosŏn’s changing attitudes towards the outside world illuminates the long history of social status in Chosŏn society shaping its interstate relations. Although aristocratic civil elites had the highest position within the envoy group and took essential roles in tributary rituals as representatives of the Chosŏn monarch and his court officials, they were ideologically hostile to the Manchu dynasty and reluctant to become involved in what they considered less important business, including commercial trade. The *chungin* (middle people), or the lower-ranked members of society, took part in most of the envoys’ diplomatic negotiations as experts, whether as interpreters, transcribers, medical practitioners, astronomers, or court painters.¹¹ Kang’s discursive practice in Chosŏn–Qing diplomacy, as well as in Chosŏn–Japan diplomacy, allows us to reconstruct the life and thought of a

⁹ Joshua Van Lieu, ‘The tributary system and the persistence of late Victorian knowledge’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 77, no. 1, 2017, pp. 73–92.

¹⁰ Brush talk was a method of communication in diplomatic engagements and other cross-border encounters in premodern East Asia. The Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese could directly access texts written in Sinitic characters and Sinitic syntax. Non-Chinese ambassadors would directly ‘converse’ with Chinese officials via brush talk, and crucial diplomatic interactions were often not negotiated by interpreters. See Sixiang Wang, ‘Co-constructing empire in early Chosŏn Korea: Knowledge production and the culture of diplomacy, 1392–1592’, PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2019; Rebekah Clements, ‘Brush talk as the “lingua franca” of East Asian diplomacy in Japanese–Korean encounters, c. 1600–1868’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2019, pp. 289–309; Wiebke Denecke, ‘Worlds without translation: Premodern East Asia and the power of character scripts’, in *A companion to translation studies*, (eds) S. Bermann and C. Porter (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), pp. 204–216; D. R. Howland, ‘Civilization as universal practice: The context of writing and poetry’, in *Borders of Chinese civilization: Geography and history at empire’s end* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 43–68; Murai Shōsuke, ‘Poetry in Chinese as a diplomatic art in premodern East Asia’, in *Tools of culture: Japan’s cultural, intellectual, medical, and technological contacts in East Asia, 1000s–1500s*, (eds) A. E. Goble, K. R. Robinson and H. Wakabayashi (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 2009), pp. 491–542.

¹¹ Lim Jongtae, ‘Tributary relations between the Chosŏn and Ch’ing courts to 1800’, in *The Cambridge history of China. Vol. 9: The Ch’ing dynasty to 1800, Part 2*, (ed.) Willard J. Peterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 174–177.

non-aristocratic individual who lived through a time of geopolitical crisis.¹² As a descendant of a low-ranking military official, Kang experienced constant institutional and cultural discrimination by the ruling elites, as did other *chun-gin* in the late Chosŏn period (1592–1895).¹³

Rather than rejecting or separating himself from the dominant ideology, Kang was called upon to serve his dynasty, which was encountering challenges from both within and outside. Kang actively played a role he had not anticipated and seized the opportunity to address his cultural agenda. He served as an informal diplomat and strategic thinker, and made himself a central figure in the transcultural network of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese diplomats. His pragmatic approach resembles the existing patterns of the premodern social mindset and the intellectual heritage of the Chosŏn society of which he was part. This he continued to expand in order to moderate the necessary diplomatic changes, rather than rejecting the established social and inter-dynastic order.

The Chosŏn–Qing tributary relationship and its influence on ideology, politics, and social status in late Chosŏn Korea

Chŏng Kŏnjo (1823–1882), the Minister of Public Works, was selected as the chief envoy (*chŏngsa*) for the 1873–1874 envoy mission to Beijing,¹⁴ and he personally chose Kang as his attendant to help him fulfil this mission. Although Kang had no official title, he was well-qualified for his assigned intelligence-gathering task. Outside their official schedules, Chosŏn envoys engaged in personal interactions with their hosts. Those intellectual and cultural exchanges were often perceived as battlegrounds where the country's dignity was displayed. Cultural and social events were 'unofficial', but the exchange of Sinitic poetry in poetry gatherings (詩會 *shihui*) was vital to the self-manifestation and mutual recognition of shared claims of civilization in diplomatic engagements.¹⁵ The envoys' interpersonal and linguistic skills, and their ability to adapt to the social world of their host country were crucial for success in diplomacy. Kang had extraordinary literary talents and knowledge of statecraft and maintained a wide intellectual network composed of ruling

¹² Yi Hŏnju, *Kang Wi ūi kaehwa sasang yŏn'gu* 강위의 개화사상 연구 (Kang Wi's enlightenment thought) (Seoul: Sŏn'in, 2018).

¹³ For a comprehensive study of the social history of secondary status in late Chosŏn Korea, see K. Hwang, *Beyond birth: Social status in the emergence of modern Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004); E. Y. Park, *A family of no prominence: The descendants of Pak Tŏkhwa and the birth of modern Korea* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ The Chosŏn government appointed a chief envoy, deputy envoy, and secretary from among high officials as well as functionaries with practical specialities from various government offices for each mission. For information on the purpose, personal organization, and procedures of the envoy missions to Qing China, see Lim, 'Tributary relations', pp. 157–164.

¹⁵ Howland gives an account of Sinitic poetry as a discourse of civilization between Chinese and Japanese scholars in the 1870s and 1880s. See Howland, 'Civilization as universal practice', pp. 43–68.



Figure 1. Kang Wi. The photo was supposedly taken during the Chosŏn mission to Japan in 1880 after the 1876 Agreement was signed. Source: Kyujanggak Institute of Korean Studies.

elite family members, which strongly motivated Chosŏn's Chinese informants to trust his capability and to share intelligence on the changing geopolitical situation in East Asia. Kang proved to be a convenient mediator who could help the Chosŏn monarch acquire information sources with which to reinforce his political authority.

Kojong was a child when he was selected as the successor to King Chŏljong in 1864. The Grand Prince (*Taewŏn'gun*), the father and the guardian of the young king, acted as a de factor regent until Kojong reached the age of adulthood. Upon Kojong's appointment as king, the crucial matter for the royal

house was to re-establish royal authority and monarchical power.¹⁶ By the time Kojong reached adulthood and became the fully fledged ruler in 1873, his father and his father's legacy had become challenges to the monarch's claim to absolute power. Moreover, King Kojong shared his father's mission but in a very different geopolitical context. Therefore, he tried to modify the policies his father had implemented to better cope with the newly emerging changes, both within and outside his political domain, as he worked to claim his absolute power. While there was no direct connection between King Kojong and Kang, the content of Kang's brush talk records can help us to gauge Chosŏn's awareness of the changing geopolitics, which was essential for it to formulate applicable strategies for dealing with Westerners and Japan, the development of which was driven by the monarch's efforts to claim his sovereign power via diplomatic means.

As a countermeasure to offset the Grand Prince's influence on the Chosŏn court, one of Kojong's initial goals was to accelerate the negotiations to restore suspended interstate relations between Chosŏn and Japan. Thus, after proclaiming his direct rule in the autumn of 1873, King Kojong immediately took action to restore Chosŏn's relations with Japan.¹⁷ When the Grand Prince was still in power, the newly established Meiji government in Japan had sent its credential letter to Chosŏn. Its peremptory tone implied that the Korean ruler was a subordinate of the Japanese emperor, which prompted the local authorities to reject it, a response orchestrated by the Grand Prince. This so-called 'Credential Letter Incident' (書契問題 *K. Sŏkye munjae*) turned the peaceful Chosŏn–Japan relationship into one of mutual antagonism.¹⁸ To justify the radical shift from his father's policy, Kojong, as the protector of his realm, had to develop a better understand of the changing geopolitics.

Kojong was aware of the interconnectedness between his domestic and foreign policies in reinforcing his position as an absolute monarch. In 1875, Kojong sent envoys to Qing, led by the Chief State Councillor Yi Yuwŏn, to request an imperial investiture of his one-year-old son. An investiture for a child so young was a rare occasion;¹⁹ nevertheless, in most cases, the Qing court granted the investiture to avoid the impression of exerting its power to influence what the court considered to be a Chosŏn domestic matter.²⁰

¹⁶ For the Grand Prince's role in restoring monarchical power in the Chosŏn dynasty, see J. Palais, *Politics and policy in traditional Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 36–42; Yŏn Kapsu 연갑수, *Taewŏn'gun chipkwŏn'gi puguk kangbyŏng chŏngch'aek yŏn'gu* 대원군 집권기 부국강병정책 (Rich country and strong army policy under the Grand Prince regime) (Seoul: Sŏul taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 2001).

¹⁷ Mori Mayuko 森万祐子, 'Chŏsen sŏifu no mēiji shoki gaiko eno shisēi tenka 朝鮮政府の明治初期外交への姿勢転化' (Chosŏn Korea's diplomatic theory during the early years of Meiji restoration), *Tōqija kindaiishi* 東アジア近代史, vol. 23, 2019, pp. 65–84.

¹⁸ K. Kim, *The last phase of the East Asian world order: Korea, Japan, and the Chinese Empire, 1860–1882* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 110–123.

¹⁹ J. Haboush, *Confucian kingship in Korea: Yŏngjo and the politics of sagacity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 32; 170; 278, note 9; 2012.

²⁰ The usual practice of imperial investiture was to wait until the heir apparent reached the age of eight. However, there were exceptional cases in the late Chosŏn period. One was the investiture of Kojong's heir, and the other was the investiture of Yŏngjo's (r. 1724–1776) crown prince. Yŏngjo had rather weak credentials because his mother was a low-born secondary consort, and rumours

Kojong had ascended to the throne from a collateral line with a weak political basis, so the assumption that he may have paid attention to kings who had struggled to defend their legitimacy is a valid one.²¹ As Yǒngjo had done, Kojong placed great emphasis on diplomatic measures and external support to offset the ongoing domestic challenges to his power.

Kojong's interest in envoy missions to Beijing resulted in dramatic increases in both the quality and quantity of questions he asked of both departing and returning envoys.²² To measure their capacity for intelligence-gathering tasks, he asked envoys about their experience and reasserted the importance of collecting information.²³ Martina Deuchler addressed Kojong's unusual interest in envoys:

If Kojong were setting the stage for a more realistic foreign policy, it is pertinent to look for the roots of his concern with the world outside Korea. One of the most important channels through which he received information about events in China and, to some degree in Japan and even the West, was the reports brought back by the Korean missions which were sent to Peking on various occasions.²⁴

Usually, only the chief envoy answered to the king, but after 1872, Kojong called on all high-ranking appointees—the chief envoy, deputy envoy, and envoy secretary—to determine their qualifications for gathering intelligence. When King Kojong had audiences with the envoys heading to Beijing in 1874, he ordered them to 'obtain any valuable information in detail and report back'. He directed the envoy secretary (*sǒjanggwǎn*) to search and investigate widely as part of his duties. In response, Yi Kǒnch'ang, the appointed envoy secretary of the 1874–1875 mission, assured Kojong that he would do his best to obtain information beyond his official role. Kojong replied, 'Seeing cannot surpass the details of hearing.'²⁵ Kojong ordered the court to grant additional diplomatic gifts to the envoys to enhance their capacity to win the favour of their intelligence sources in Beijing.²⁶

implicating Yǒngjo in regicide haunted him during his early reign. Haboush, *Confucian kingship in Korea*, pp. 32, 170, 278; Son, *Sasin ūl ttara ch'ōngnara e kada*, pp. 176–185.

²¹ During his kingship training period (1864–1873), Kojong extensively studied Chinese dynastic histories, the chronology of Chosŏn kings, and Confucian classics. Kim Seŭn 김세은, 'Kojong ch'ogi kukwangkwon ui hoebok kwa wangsil haengsa 高宗初期 (1863–1876) 국왕권의 회복과 왕실행사' (Restoration of royal power and royal events during early Kojong period [1863–1876]), PhD thesis, Seoul National University, 2003, pp. 79–86.

²² Kim, *The last phase of the East Asian world order*, p. 210; Songyeol Han, 'Bond beyond nation: Sinographic network and Korean nationhood, 1860–1932', PhD thesis, Princeton University, 2018, pp. 53–66.

²³ *Sŭngjǒngwǒn Ilgi* ('SI' in subsequent footnotes) 1871.10.22, 1872.07.02, 1872.11.10, 1873.03.11, 1873.10.24, and 1874.10.28. *Sŭngjǒngwǒn Ilgi* (daily records of royal secretariats) cited in this article are available at <http://sjw.history.go.kr/main.do>, [accessed 25 February 2022].

²⁴ M. Deuchler, *Confucian gentlemen and Barbarian envoys: The opening of Korea, 1875–1885* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977), pp. 14–15.

²⁵ SI 1874.11.10.

²⁶ SI 1868.11.02, 1870.10.25, 1871.10.22, 1873.03.11, 1873.10.24, and 1874.10.28.

Kojong's hopeful pressure on envoys reflected a dramatic change from how the Chosŏn court viewed information-gathering from previous envoy missions and perhaps explains why envoys in the early 1870s aggressively collected extensive amounts of information. What has not been sufficiently examined, however, is the historical significance of Kang and the brush talk records from his tributary mission to Beijing, as compared with records of earlier envoy missions. For instance, the Chosŏn envoys' investigations into the First Opium War (1839–1842) and the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), which were remarkable events, must have alarmed the Chosŏn court. Informal meetings with Qing officials and brush talks were not uncommon during envoy missions in the nineteenth century, so the envoys must have witnessed the actual circumstances of the Qing imperial order's disruption. In the 1860s, the Qing established the Zongli Yamen (Foreign Office), of which Aisin Gioro Yixin (Prince Gong, 1833–1898) was the senior minister. Yixin managed a series of military and economic reform policies by introducing Western science and technology. The Qing government hired several Westerners to assist in its efforts to reform its military power and increase its revenue to buttress those reform policies, and progress continued until the 1890s.²⁷ The Zongli Yamen's initial position as a temporary institution gradually changed as the Yamen accrued more institutional responsibilities and its importance and implications became central to contemporary Qing officials.²⁸

Due to their fear of catalysing existing factional struggles within the Chosŏn court, Chosŏn envoys neither reported back on nor left accounts of their brush conversations with Chinese informants. Key individuals, such as Pak Kyusu and the head interpreter O Kyŏngsŏk, played significant roles in establishing Chosŏn's new diplomacy in the 1860s and 1870s. Nonetheless, both Pak and O apparently made cautious decisions to keep brush talk on political matters off the record,²⁹ based on the public opinion among the *yangban* elites who rejected Western culture, values, and practices, which they regarded as threats to their monopoly on social and political dominance.³⁰ Most likely, their representative positions and high ranks in the bureaucracy made them even more politically sensitive. Despite the opportunity for envoys to gain insights into the implications of the Qing government's implementation of new institutional

²⁷ T. Kuo and K. Liu, 'Self-strengthening: The pursuit of Western technology', in *The Cambridge history of China. Vol. 10: Late Ch'ing 1800-1911, Part 1* (ed.) John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 491–542.

²⁸ Larsen, *Tradition, treaties and trade*, pp. 51–52; Son Sŏng'uk 손성욱, 'Oegyo ui kyunyŏl kwa mosaek: 1860–1870 nyŏndae ch'ŏng cho kwankye 외교의 균열과 모색: 1860–1870 년대 청조관계' (The change of 'insimwoeogyo' [the subject cannot establish diplomatic relations] in the relationship between Qing and Chosŏn in the 1860–1870s), *Yŏksa hakpo 역사학보*, vol. 240, 2018, pp. 544–551. Recent studies of Zongli Yamen in English scholarship can be found in J. Rudolph, *Negotiated power in late Imperial China: The Zongli Yamen and the politics of reform* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

²⁹ Yi, *Kang Wi ūi kaehwa sasang*, p. 162.

³⁰ Chung, *A Korean Confucian encounter*.

reforms, Chosŏn envoys reportedly failed to do so for fear of sparking trouble among the public and of being labelled as accomplices of foreign powers.³¹

For the Chosŏn envoys, Kang—a figure who was neither a civil bureaucrat nor an interpreter—was a convenient instrument they could employ to help them acquire the information their monarch desired. Indeed, the fact that Kang was a representative poet in the late nineteenth century could not be ignored. As a brilliant thinker and writer, his reputation as a poet became known throughout Chosŏn.³² Most Korean literary history textbooks to date have recognized Kang as one of the four great poets of late nineteenth-century Chosŏn. Kang's desire to progress as a civil officer was frustrated because of his familial background as a *chungin* with a lower-ranked *muban* (military officer) lineage.³³ Originally one of the two pillars strengthening the bureaucratic state along with civilian officers, descendants of *muban* lineage in the late Chosŏn period faced a precipitous decline in prestige and became one of the various groups categorized as *chungin*—those between aristocrats and commoners—in Chosŏn society.³⁴ One of Kang's ancestors, who was originally a *yangban*, became involved in a literary purge and was ousted from civil bureaucracy in the sixteenth century, resulting in the decline in the social position of Kang's lineage.³⁵

Despite the institutional and cultural discrimination among the *muban* descendants and their marginalization from central politics, they enjoyed a favourable social and economic life, which helped them to maintain their exclusive status above commoners and other lower elements within the *chungin* class. Rather than directly challenging the established social hierarchy, which positioned them below the civil aristocrats, in general, *muban* descendants struggled to gain acceptance from the existing order and the aristocratic civil elite.³⁶ Kang's family was no exception. His father had passed the military examination and had achieved the bureaucratic rank of magistrate of a county in the northern frontier. Kang's son also reached the level of magistrate after he passed the military examination. Their service to the dynasty was acknowledged, but their appointment, located in the north, still reflected their peripheral status in Chosŏn's state bureaucracy, as, like other *chungin*, they were only able to gain recognition by taking on unpopular administrative duties.³⁷

³¹ Ha Chŏngsik 하정식, 'Yŏnhaeng chŏngbo wa Chosŏn wangjo ūi t'aep'yŏng ch'ŏn'guk insik ūi chŏngch'ijŏk paegyŏng 연행정보와 조선 왕조의 태평천국 인식의 정치적 배경' (The envoy reports from missions to China and the political background on which Chosŏn dynasty interpreted Taiping tianguo), *Yŏksa hakpo* 역사학보, vol. 145, 1995, pp. 147–194.

³² Chu Sŭngtaek 주승택, 'Chosŏn malyŏp hanmunhak kwa Kang Wi ūi wisang 조선말엽 한문학과 강위의 위상' (Sinitic literature at the end of the Chosŏn period and the stature of Kang Wi), *Han'guk hansi hakhoe* 한국한시학회, vol. 13, 2005, pp. 13–44.

³³ The narrow definition of *chungin* only includes professionals who lived near and adjacent to the capital area, but the term was widely used as an ascriptive status for those whose upward social mobility was often obstructed by the ruling elites and the state in the nineteenth century, including those who passed military examinations and their descendants. See Park, *A family of no prominence*, pp. 14–18.

³⁴ Hwang, *Beyond birth*, pp. 303–306.

³⁵ Yi, *Kang Wi ūi kaehwa sasang*, p. 35.

³⁶ Hwang, *Beyond birth*, pp. 326–327.

³⁷ Yi, *Kang Wi ūi kaehwa sasang*, pp. 35–38.

Upon realizing the existence of this hierarchal glass ceiling, Kang chose not to follow the family career and, instead, decided to live as a wandering vagabond, betraying his proper 'name and status' in the Confucian social order. However, his noncompliance with the existing social order did not entirely dampen his keen interest in state affairs. When massive uprisings broke out in the southern provinces in 1862, Kang drafted a reform bill titled 'Measures to Remedy the Abuse of Three Tax Levies' (*Ŭsamjŏng kup'yech'aek* 擬三政掇幣策) at the request of his friend Chŏng Kŏnjo. In this, Kang urged the government to protect the peasants from heavy tax burdens and not to condemn the agitated peasants as rebels.³⁸ In 1866, the Chosŏn government became alarmed about the foreign ships that were frequently showing up along the Korean coastline. At the request of Sin Hŏn, Kang wrote a memorial draft on a defence strategy for the mouth of the Han River. In it, he proposed a hybrid method that amalgamated traditional scorched-earth tactics with new waterway defence strategies introduced by Wei Yuan's *Haiguo tuzhi* (Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms 海國圖志, 1844). Although Kang's voice never fully materialized in these two drafts, they illustrate his early awareness of new types of challenges both inside and outside the Chosŏn dynasty³⁹ and his desire to be recognized as an intelligent strategist.

Kang's readiness to formulate pragmatic solutions applicable to changing social and geopolitical conditions was derived from his *chungin* social background and the intellectual legacy of Northern Learning (*pukhak*), a new cultural trend that emerged in the late Chosŏn period. The social and economic restoration in post-war Chosŏn posed new sets of problems and intellectual changes in late Chosŏn society. Scholars of Northern Learning addressed the necessity of statecraft reform based on pragmatic values and new scientific knowledge and technologies, and they favoured the study of the Qing administration and technology as well as evidential studies. The scholars of Northern Learning included Pak Chiwŏn (1737–1805), Pak Chega (1750–1805), and Kim Chŏnghŭi (1786–1856), all of whom visited China as members of tributary missions. Kang Wi became a pupil of Kim Chŏnghŭi.⁴⁰ As Lim Jongtae explained, 'the cultural movement called Northern Learning borrowed its concrete examples, its methodologies, and even its cultural sensitivity from what the *chungin* officials had been doing in their Peking missions for more than a century'.⁴¹ Pak Chega himself was a *soŭl*, a son of a concubine, another category of people who were also classified as *chungin*. The envoy mission to China during the Qing dynasty offered a person like Kang, who had neither a formal title nor an official role, an opportunity to join the Qing intellectual community with which his teacher was associated and a chance for social recognition by the ruling elites.

³⁸ Kim Hyŏn'gi 김현기, 'Kang Wi ũi kaehwa sasang yŏn'gu 강위의 개화사상 연구' (A study of Kang Wi's enlightenment thought), MA thesis, Kyŏngchi University, 1984.

³⁹ Yi, *Kang Wi ũi kaehwa sasang*, pp. 103–155.

⁴⁰ Yi Kwanglin 이광린, 'Kang Wi ũi inmul kwa sasang: Silhak esŏ kaehwa sasang ũroŭi chŏnhwan ũi ildanmyŏn 강위의 인물과 사상: 실학에서 개화사상으로의 전환의 일단면' (Kang Wi's biography and his thought: A transition from Northern Learning to Enlightenment thought), *Tongbang hakji* 동방학지, vol. 17, pp. 6–7.

⁴¹ Lim, 'Tributary relations', p. 195.

Overall, Kang's role as an unofficial assistant to Chosŏn's intelligence-gathering mission was nothing new, considering the centuries-old tradition of informal diplomatic encounters by Chosŏn envoy missions within the framework of Qing–Chosŏn diplomacy. Kojong's sudden ascendance into the role of direct ruler in the early 1870s triggered significant changes to intelligence-gathering activities in regular envoy missions to Beijing. However, being aware of the dominant discourse clamouring for an unyielding stance against foreign powers, official members in envoy missions had to be very cautious in choosing what information they collected and reported back to the court. While the opportunity given to Kang as a key figure of Chosŏn's informal diplomacy shows the institutional limits that bound envoy missions to the interests of the Chosŏn state and its ruling elites, it also illuminates the Chosŏn state's efforts and capacity to incorporate non-elites and non-officials, and to achieve its goals behind the formal diplomatic scene.

1873–1874 envoy mission: Old and new perspectives on Westernized Japan

Kang's envoy brush talk records from the 1873–1874 and 1874–1875 envoy missions offer a unique window through which to see the interplay between political circles and the ideological strife that encompassed ruling elites in the Qing and Chosŏn dynasties. Kang's initial role as a transcriber for intelligence-gathering activities during the 1873–1874 envoy mission was minimal,⁴² partly due to his lack of experience as a first-time visitor to Beijing, but mostly related to his inferior status. Taking a leading role over civil aristocrats was not encouraged, and such expectations significantly restricted his social behaviour. When Kang's curiosity was not satisfied by the Qing officials' answers, he had to visit again independently because he could not address them in front of his accompanying fellow Chosŏn envoys, who held higher ranks.⁴³

Kang's first brush talk records preserved interviews with two Han Chinese civil officers: Wan Qingli (萬青藜, 1821–1883) and Zhang Shizun (張世準, 1823–1891). Wan was Minister of the Board of Rites, the highest Han Chinese official that oversaw the Sino–Korean relationship. Wan was most likely to

⁴² Yi Hŏnju and No Taehwan argued that the author of the brush talk records from the 1873–1874 envoy mission was Chŏng Kŏnjo, while acknowledging Kang Wi's contribution. While I agree that Chŏng Kŏnjo was the most important person making a substantial, direct, intellectual contribution to the work as the chief envoy, Yi Hŏnju and No Taehwan's limited definition of authorship impedes the analysis of Kang Wi's personal agenda of presenting himself at the centre of Chosŏn's informal diplomacy. See Yi, *Kang Wi ūi kaehwa sasang*, pp. 162–163; No Taehwan 노태환, '1870 nyŏndae chŏnban ūi Chungguk sahaeng kwa taeoe chŏngse insik 1870 년대 초반의 중국 사행과 대외 정세 인식' (Envoys dispatched to Qing and their perspective on international affairs in the first half of the 1870s), *Taedong munhwa yŏn'gu* 대동문화연구, vol. 104, 2018, pp. 43–70.

⁴³ 'Pugyu tamch'o 北遊談草' (Brush talk from travel to the north), in *Jindai Zhong Han guanxishi ziliao huibian* 近代中韓關係史資料彙編 (Collection of historical sources on modern Sino–Korean relations), (eds) Z. Zhao, C. Zhang and C. Hu (Taipei: Guoshiguan, 1987), Vol. 10, pp. 59–60.

have been the person who held sensitive information that may have been useful to the Chosŏn envoys.⁴⁴ Zhang was a Board of Punishment (刑部主事) civil official. Although he was not a high-ranking official like Wan Qingli, Kang had already heard about his reputation from people who had previously visited Beijing.⁴⁵ All the questions Chosŏn envoys asked were prompted by their desire to enhance their understanding of the changing geopolitics around the Korean peninsula so they could generate suitable diplomatic scenarios. These envoys tried to forecast Chosŏn's future based on what had already happened in the Qing China and in Meiji Japan over the past decades.

The Qing officials and Chosŏn envoys both unanimously pointed out the changed attire of their Japanese counterparts as salient evidence of their changed behaviour and their connections with Westerners.⁴⁶ In 1873, the Meiji government despatched envoys to China, led by Soejima Taneomi (1828–1905). Being aware of Japan's most recent diplomatic mission to the Qing, Chŏng Kŏnjo, the chief Chosŏn envoy, asked the Qing officials whether the Japanese had an audience with the Qing emperor and insolently informed him of Japan's plan to launch a punitive campaign against Chosŏn. Chŏng wanted to address his concerns on the potential implication of Japan's mission on Chosŏn's future.⁴⁷ As Japan's intentions were quite clear, the envoys were curious as to whether the Qing dynasty would defend Chosŏn from Japan's aggression, as its predecessor, the Ming dynasty, had done during the Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea (1592–1598). Despite the Qing's official claim that it would protect Chosŏn from external threats, the envoys wanted to know if the Qing had the actual desire and power to do so.

The Chosŏn envoys also questioned their Chinese informants about the Saga Rebellion in 1874.⁴⁸ More specifically, they enquired about the rumours that Japanese citizens were disobeying their government because the Japanese ruler had abolished the old customs and replaced them with Western practices. The news of rebellion in Japan drew the envoys' attention for two reasons. First, if the rebellion reflected an intense backlash to the central government's sudden friendly relations with Western countries, then the Chosŏn government could not help but expect a similar fate once it opened relations with Westerners. Chosŏn's envoys assumed that the Meiji regime significantly lacked the legitimacy to maintain its power over its own people because of its rapid Westernization policy. Secondly, the envoys were not sure which

⁴⁴ The Chosŏn envoys requested meetings with Wan many times but were refused due to his busy schedule. When Wan finally had time, the envoys postponed their previous engagement with Zhang and rushed to meet Wan instead. 'Pugyu ilgi 北游日記' (Diary of the northern journey), in *Jindai Zhong Han guanxishi ziliao huibian*, Vol. 10, p. 37; Yi, *Kang Wi ūi kaehwa sasang*, p. 165.

⁴⁵ 'Pugyu tamch'o', p. 44.

⁴⁶ Edwin P. Leung, 'The quasi-war in East Asia: Japan's expedition to Taiwan and the Ryūkyū controversy', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1983, pp. 257–281.

⁴⁷ 'Puksa tamch'o 北渣談草' (Brush talk from the mission to north), in *Yŏnhaengnok ch'onggan chūngbop'an 연행록총간증보판* (Complete collection of Korean envoys travelogue to China, enlarged edition), (ed.) Im Kijung 임기중 (Seoul: Nuri Midiŏ, 2016), p. 47, digitized by KRPIA, available at <http://www.krpia.co.kr/>, [accessed 25 February 2022].

⁴⁸ 'Puksa tamch'o', p. 7.

party—the rebels or the Meiji government army—would win the civil war. If the current Meiji government were to be overthrown, the restored regime would possibly try to revoke their previous discourteous demands of Chosŏn, a potential scenario the envoys may have desired. Overall, the envoys' enquiries about Westerners, Japan, and the Qing's attitude towards them were crucial to better formulating Chosŏn's own strategies for dealing with Westerners and Westernized Japan. Hence, those strategies depended on the favour of Chinese informants and their willingness to share information.

However, Chosŏn envoys were disappointed with the answers they received from the Chinese informants. Neither Wan Qingli nor Zhang Shizun provided assurance of the Qing's ideological or military support. Instead, both advised Chosŏn to rely on diplomatic measures and avoid military confrontation. While Wan's answer to the Chosŏn envoys focused on reassuring them about the validity of the Grand Prince's anti-Western policy, Zhang emphasized that the world had changed and that Chosŏn could no longer maintain its rigid foreign policy. Wan Qingli's and Zhang Shizun's voices in Kang's brush talks clearly reflect the polarized opinion among Chinese officials in the early 1870s.

On the one hand, Wan's perspective represented the Qing's belief in its supremacy over Westerners and Westernized Japan, while at the same time showing the Qing's inability to translate such confidence into a promise of guaranteed substantial support and protection to its loyal tributary state. In Wan's view, the potential for military conflict with Westerners seemed to be dwindling. Wan said Westerners feared Chosŏn because of the Grand Prince's defence strategy and firm rejection of heterodoxy.⁴⁹ Chŏng and Wan quickly formed a bond of sympathy through their conversation. Wan responded with a sense of confidence in cultural superiority and said that 'the literati [in the Qing] are without one little speck, and those people who are tainted with evil learning will eventually go to ruin on their own accord'.⁵⁰ The consensus that Chŏng and Wan reached throughout the conversation left them little room to tell the Chosŏn envoys anything beyond the official standard message that had been communicated to the Chosŏn court and left the underlying logic of the Qing's tolerant policy towards Westerners unexplained.

Zhang Shizun's advice to the Chosŏn envoys was in direct contrast to that of the Qing court. Zhang cited examples of technological advancements made in the Western world: the speed of the steamboat and telegram communication, the convenience of the railroad and paved roads, and the precision of firearms and cannons. Zhang opined that those advanced technologies were unrivalled by anything that had come before and stated that Westerners had made their source of superior military power and technology overtly open to the public. He then emphasised that Westerners allowed the Qing government to purchase their advanced firearms and did not hesitate to send advisers to teach the government new technologies. In Zhang's view, Westerners' real intention towards China was not to dominate the country by using those technologies but to sell their goods to China via trade, thus promoting mutual interests. He added that

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

the relationship with Westerners had stabilized after the Second Opium War (1856–1860), and the threat of invasion and war no longer existed, which also reaffirmed the view that Westerners' primary focus was on trade and missionary works. In Zhang's opinion, Westerners enjoyed goodness and preferred justice, and they seemed to admire Chinese civilization (*Zhonghua* 中華), as they vigorously studied Chinese law and the political system, and thoroughly analysed Chinese books and translated them into their language.⁵¹ While Zhang's message could better explain the logic behind the Qing's seemingly welcoming attitude towards Westerners, such a message could also face the criticism that it ignored the invasive and humiliating nature of the Qing's recent interaction with Westerners and Westernized Japan.

The 1873–1874 envoy mission collected intelligence from various sources beyond having brush talks with Qing officials. The Chosŏn envoys gathered and read published materials, such as the *Beijing Gazetteer* (Jingbao 京報) and the *Peking Magazine*.⁵² They went even further. To fulfil their desire to enhance the precision of the information they collected, they secretly met with Westerners. William F. Mayers, the secretary of the British consulate in Beijing, reported that Koreans surreptitiously approached him and asked many questions. According to a recent study, O Kyōngsŏk and Kang were most likely the Korean personnel who contacted the British consulate.⁵³ The remarkable intelligence-gathering activities through informal diplomacy made this mission unique, but the intelligence gathered did not deliver well into Chosŏn's political context. When Chŏng Kŏnjo reported to King Kojong after returning from the envoy mission, his answers to Kojong's questions were based on information he had exchanged with Wan Qingli. Policy suggestions made by Zhang Shizun were never mentioned.⁵⁴ Even the envoys' report (*mun'gyŏn sagŏn* 聞見事件) contained no mention of the news on the rebellion in Japan or the possibilities of foreign invasion.⁵⁵ The invisibility of Zhang Shizun's voice in the envoys' official oral and written reports to the Chosŏn court indicates that the envoys made thoughtful decisions not to report any news that had the potential to stir up trouble with the public.⁵⁶ Even Kang

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵² With the Chinese title *Zhongxi wenjianlu* (中西聞見錄), *Peking Magazine* was published by Westerners residing in Beijing. It first appeared in 1872 as a monthly magazine and discontinued publication in 1875. The magazine delivered various domestic and foreign content and knowledge related to astronomy, geography, and general science from the West. See B. A. Elman, *On their own terms: Science in China, 1550–1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 310–312.

⁵³ Kim Chonghak 김중학, 'Kaehwadang ūi kiwŏn kwa pimil oegyo 개화당의 기원과 비밀외교, 1879–1884' (The origin of Kaehwa party and its backdoor diplomacy, 1879–1884), PhD thesis, Seoul National University, 2015, pp. 1–4.

⁵⁴ SI 1874.03.30.

⁵⁵ O Kyōngsŏk 吳慶錫, 'Saun kyŏm tongji haeng suyŏk O Kyōngsŏk mun'gyŏn sagŏn 謝恩兼冬至行首譯吳慶錫聞見事件' (Head interpreter O Kyōngsŏk's report from the tributary mission for the appreciation solstice celebration), in *Tongmun hwigo pop'yŏnsok sasin pyŏldan* 同文彙考 補編續 使臣別單 (Addendum to the enlarged documents on foreign relations: Envoy reports, Vol. 2), (ed.) Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe (Seoul: Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe, 1978), pp. 89–90, available at <http://contents.nahf.or.kr/>, [accessed 25 February 2022].

⁵⁶ Yi, *Kang Wi ūi kaehwa sasang*, pp. 172–173.

turned out to be highly selective in his choice of what information to report, as demonstrated by a comparison of his daily travelogue and his brush records. In his daily travelogue, Kang had recorded the Chosŏn envoys' informal meetings communicated in brush talk with non-Han Chinese officials, such as Manchu bannermen and Mongol princes.⁵⁷ While it is difficult to identify the reasons behind Kang's decisions on what brush talk to keep and what to delete, comparing the information he obtained to the information that he reported shows Kang tried to keep his writings within the boundaries of the Chosŏn ruling elite's ideological hostility towards non-Han ethnic groups—Manchus, Mongols, and Westerners.

Nevertheless, Kang's personal account illustrates his strenuous efforts to gather as much information as possible. After the meeting between the chief envoy and Zhang Shizun ended, Kang visited Zhang again to confirm what they had left out during previous brush conversations. Zhang acknowledged that the brush talk Kang had in his possession was incomplete, as it only conveyed half of Zhang's words. However, Zhang politely declined Kang's request to fill in the blanks because sharing too much information that was based on speculation and assumptions would result in the mismanagement of the whole affair.⁵⁸ Even though Kang could not hear what Zhang might have said, this incident can be characterized as Kang's first attempt to take a leading role, regardless of his minor status, in the intelligence-gathering mission and his willingness to get involved and even risk exposing himself to sensitive and dangerous matters between the two states.

Unlike other members of the envoy mission, the returning Kang acted differently, as his friend Yi Kŏnch'ang recalled. Kang did make an impact by showing the brush talk to his acquaintances, a clear indicator of his change of mind.

In time, he [Kang Wi] went to Beijing along with Minister Chŏng [Kŏnjo]. When he returned, he wrote down the conversations he had with Chinese people and showed them to me. Back then, all those topics were prohibited, and people knew to avoid them; they were startled and terrified. Reading [brush talk] little by little, he repeatedly paused, then laughed, or sighed, swung between lighthearted and melancholy. I had no choice but to remain silent and speculate.⁵⁹

Reading the brush talk records over and over again, Kang was able to understand urgent matters regarding the changing geopolitics, indicated by the differing opinions of the Qing court concerning Westerners in China. Kang's audacious behaviour after returning from the envoy mission demonstrated his awareness of the value of the brush talk records with Qing officials—a

⁵⁷ 'Pugyu ilgi', pp. 36–37.

⁵⁸ 'Pugyu tamch'o', pp. 59–60.

⁵⁹ Yi Kŏnch'ang 李建昌, 'Kang Kohwan myoji myŏng 姜古權墓誌銘' (Memorial inscription of Kang Wi), in *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan 한국문집총간* (A compendium for the comprehensive publication of Korean literary collections in classical Chinese), (ed.) Han'guk kojŏn pŏnyŏgwŏn, Vol. 349, pp. 278–279, available at <http://db.itkc.or.kr/>, [accessed 25 February 2022]. Cited in Yi, *Kang Wi ūi kaehwa sasang*, p. 188.

new informative authority that could bring a new level of consensus to Chosŏn. In addition, the brush talk records in his hand attested to his involvement in formulating Chosŏn's new diplomatic strategies, as well as to him being a well-informed thinker and writer.

1874–1875 envoy mission: Translating Qing foreign policy into Chosŏn foreign policy

Purely coincidental or not, another opportunity soon came to Kang that further strengthened his role in establishing a new consensus in foreign policy-making. Immediately after his return from Beijing, Kang received another call to join the 1874–1875 envoy mission. Yi Kŏnch'ang (1852–1898) was selected as the envoy secretary (*sŏjanggalwan*) for the tributary mission. King Kojong personally requested that Yi Kŏnch'ang gather intelligence by any means, which left a strong impression on him, as he later recalled: 'China was the window to foreign countries: if one enters China and spies on them, one can learn about foreign countries.'⁶⁰ Young Yi Kŏnch'ang was also Kang's acquaintance, and he could think of no one better than Kang, who had the necessary experience and passion, with whom to continue the special intelligence-gathering mission.

In contrast to the first mission, Kang was able to take a more active role in gathering intelligence during his second visit to Beijing as part of the 1874–1875 envoy mission. Qing officials, who remembered Kang as a talented poet from the previous year, welcomed him with unexpected levels of hospitality. When Kang returned to Beijing in 1874, some Qing officials wrote a poem dedicated to him with a warm welcome message. One Qing official even put Kang in an awkward position when he hosted a poetry gathering and invited Kang but not other senior Chosŏn officials—including the chief envoy and deputy envoy.⁶¹ Kang's presence enabled the Sino-Korean conversation on statecraft to go deeper. The unexpected level of hospitality Kang received from Qing officials attests to the successful informal contacts he had made during the previous year's mission and how his literary talent for writing in Chinese facilitated intellectual and cultural bonds between the visitors and their hosts. Even aristocratic civil elites in the envoy group could not downplay the value of his presence during their interactions with Qing officials, even though they may have felt offended by his celebrity.

Unlike the previous year, when he had a minor role in interviewing Chinese informants, Kang became more proactive, utilizing his fame to shape the brush conversations to support both his and the Chosŏn state's agenda. This time, he was the main inquisitor, while his friend Yi Kŏnch'ang, who had passed the civil examination and had been appointed by the Chosŏn government as the

⁶⁰ Yi Kŏnch'ang, 'Kang Kohwan myoji myŏng', p. 188.

⁶¹ Chu Sŭngtaek 주승택, 'Kang Wi ūi yŏnhaengnok e nat'anan Han Chung chishigin ūi kyoryu yangsang 강위의 연행록에 나타난 한중 지식인의 교류 양상' (Intellectual exchange between Chosŏn and Qing scholars in Kang Wi's envoy travelogues), *Han'guk munhwa yŏn'gu 한국문화연구*, vol. 11, pp. 27–29.

official envoy, stood aside as an auxiliary figure, thus reversing what would have been perceived as the correct 'name and status'. Considering the social hierarchy in Chosŏn society, which discouraged treating *chungin* as equals to *yangban*, Kang's leading role in the 1874–1875 intelligence-gathering mission was, indeed, unusual. Of course, this might have been the result of the age difference between Kang (1820–1884) and Yi Konch'ang (1852–1898), but in general, superior status overrode the privilege of age in late Chosŏn society.

The number of Chinese informants who appeared in *Pugyu sok tam ch'o* (Notes from Follow-up Journey to the North 北游續談草), the envoy brush talk records of the 1874–1875 tributary mission, doubled in Kang's second mission. Zhang Shizun, Huang Yu (黃鈺, 1817–1881), Xu Fu (徐馮, 1838–1907), and Chen Fushou (陳福綬, ?–?) appeared in the brush talks as the four voices representing the Qing government. Both Huang Yu and Xu Fu were members of the Southern Study (Nanshufang 南書房), an imperial institution of highly selected scholars who discussed art and literature, and who informed and educated the Qing emperor and participated in drafting imperial edicts.⁶² Due to Huang's and Xu's prestigious positions in the Qing court, they were well-qualified sources from which Chosŏn envoys could obtain policy advice that closely reflected the will of the Manchu ruling house, bypassing even the administrative line of officials in the Board of Rite that existed between the Qing court and Chosŏn. Surprisingly, personnel from the Qing Board of Rite were absent in that year's envoy brush talk records, unlike the records from the previous year, which perhaps indicated the Chosŏn envoys' awareness of the limits of the Board of Rite's contributions to Chosŏn's informal diplomacy.⁶³ Zhang Shizun and Huang Yu represented the voice of the *yangwu* (Western affairs) faction, continuing the Qing's appeasement policy towards Westerners, while Xu Fu and Chen Fushou⁶⁴ regarded the peaceful coexistence between Qing and Westerners as nothing but a temporary humiliation, thus reflecting the *qingyi* (pure discussion) faction.⁶⁵ The four informants represented in Kang's brush talk records reveal the Chosŏn envoy's effort to collect and present the most valuable, reliable, comprehensive, and fairly grounded intelligence.

For the second mission, Kang, having gained experience during the prior year's mission, generated a list of questions for envoy brush talks, which he used to extract data more efficiently from his informants.⁶⁶ He believed that gathering multiple opinions on the same issue facilitated the development of deeper insights into the nature of Japanese and Western activities. He also switched interviewees with Yi Kŏnch'ang so that informants were interviewed a second time by another envoy, after which the two envoys could cross-check the records of the initial interviews, acknowledging the different dynamics between interviewer and interviewee. This represented a

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶³ Son, 'Oegyo ui kyun'yŏl kwa mosaek', pp. 551–561.

⁶⁴ No biographical information about Chen Fushou was available.

⁶⁵ For discussion on the dispute within the Qing court, see Larsen, *Tradition, treaties and trade*, pp. 56–59.

⁶⁶ Yi, *Kang Wi ūi kaehwa sasang*, pp. 173–175.

significant departure from the previous year's brush talks, in which Kang had played only a passive role as transcriber of the conversation between high-ranking envoys and Qing officials. These cross-interviews helped the Chosŏn envoys to move beyond safe and simple answers, which flattened the complexity. The intricate web of interviews Yi Kŏnch'ang and Kang wove helped the envoys to gather valid and trustworthy information. Overall, more interviews, structured questions, and cross-checking information were the result of Kang's methodological approach to reaching his goals: transforming the brush talk records into an instrument of informational changes and positioning himself as the key strategist of this geopolitical shift.

From the brush talk with conservatives, the envoys could gain deeper insights, especially from the Qing scholar-officials who were bold enough to be critical of the Qing government's appeasement policy towards Westerners and Westernized Japan. Unlike Wan Qingli, Xu Fu was more willing to openly express his opinion on the Qing government's failure to recognize the cunning strategies undertaken by Western powers. Xu critically pointed out that the Western powers had treacherously broken the very peace treaty they had forced the Qing government to sign decades earlier and kept extending their privilege over China by continuing to revise the treaty in ways unfavourable to Qing China.⁶⁷ To Xu Fu, Westerners provided a pretext for agitation to disrupt the integrity of the Qing state and to take advantage of it. As the foreigners did benefit from the increased trade, Chosŏn's envoys asked Xu if the Qing dynasty also profited from it. Xu's answer was no. In Xu's view, the increased volume of trade extracted the country's wealth and damaged the national economy.⁶⁸ Thus, the opinion attributed to Xu in records on his brush talk with Chosŏn envoys not only reaffirmed the viewpoints of conservatives in the Qing court but also served to correct factual errors in the moderate opinions.⁶⁹

Huang Yu and Zhang Shizun also answered the Chosŏn envoys' questions on the Qing's appeasement policy towards Westerners and Westernized Japan, but their opinions contrasted with Xu's. Japan's Taiwan Expedition was launched right before the 1874 tributary mission. This was a punitive military action against Taiwan in response to the purported responsibility of the native Taiwanese for the Japanese and Ryukyu victims of shipwreck incidents that occurred near Taiwanese waters.⁷⁰ The Chosŏn envoys asked if the Qing government had, indeed, agreed to pay Japan 500,000 taels of silver instead of 'punishing' Japan for border violation, as they had been told. Huang explained that the compensation was less expensive for the Qing than engaging in full-scale war. Nonetheless, Japan had had to borrow 800,000 taels of silver from Western countries to fund its expensive military enterprise, yet, according

⁶⁷ 'Pugyu sok tamch'o 北遊續談草' (Sequel to brush talk from a travel to north), in *Jindai Zhong Han guanxishi ziliao huibian*, Vol. 10, pp. 71–72.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶⁹ For an analysis of brush talks with Huang Yu and Zhang Shizun and their viewpoints on Westerners and Japan, see Yi, *Kang Wi ūi kaehwa sasang*, pp. 173–186.

⁷⁰ Robert Eskildsen, 'Of civilization and savages: The mimetic imperialism of Japan's 1874 expedition to Taiwan', *American Historical Review*, vol. 107, no. 2, 2002, pp. 388–418.

to Huang, Japan feared losing the new military force it had created for another battle with the Qing.⁷¹ When Yi Kōnch'ang asked how Westerners could obtain such immense wealth and formidable military power, Huang replied that their prosperity resulted from the profits they made from international trade but that this wealth was now returning to China. Huang further stated that the quantity of inflow of silver to Shanghai was larger than that of the outflow.⁷² He noted that what Japan had established in Beijing was merely a trading post,⁷³ unlike the Western consulates, which manifested Western power's coercive attitude. While Huang Yu's evaluation of trade benefits contradicted that of Xu Fu, both had confidence in the Qing's capacity and will to protect its interests.

After his participation in the second envoy mission, Kang experienced a meaningful change in attitude and confidence. While he had been outspoken before the mission, as Yi Kōnch'ang recalled, he became more confident in discussing world affairs and the ineffectiveness of existing defence mechanisms after he returned.⁷⁴ This time, the change was even noticeable in the envoys' official reports. Despite the fierce charges made by anti-Western officials and scholars back in Korea, after this mission, the envoys' reports did not shy away from boldly asserting the advantages of the appeasement policy that both the Qing dynasty and Japan had put forward. Also related to what information was reported was the fact that the Grand Prince was no longer in power,⁷⁵ and Kojong and his cabinet were resuming negotiations with Japan to restore relations. Kang's critical observation of the changing geopolitics, in fact, reflected a broader consensus among the Chosŏn envoys, who could not deny the necessity of pragmatic approaches and peaceful negotiations.

In Yi Kōnch'ang's envoy report to the court, the story told about Japan's Taiwan Expedition of 1874 was, indeed, more complicated than a simple story about a winner and a loser. It described the negotiation process between China and Japan in great detail: the Qing dynasty presented relief money to Japan and asked that the army vacate Taiwan, so the Japanese army left the island. The Qing Minister of Shipbuilding at Fujian Province submitted a request to patrol Taiwan in the first month after Japan's exit and to lift the ban on mainlanders so that they could resume trade with the native peoples.⁷⁶ The report mentioned the Qing state's monetary loss, but it also included a nuanced explanation for that loss, presenting it as the result of the Qing's appropriate posterior measures that had prevented further losses. This explanation indicated that the

⁷¹ 'Pugyu sok tamch'o', pp. 74–75.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁷⁴ Yi Kōnch'ang, 'Kang Kohwan', pp. 278–279.

⁷⁵ As James Palais has analysed, Kojong's decision to exert his rule independently was the foremost cause of the Grand Prince's forced retirement at the end of 1873. See Palais, *Politics and policy*, pp. 176–201.

⁷⁶ Yi Kōnch'ang, 'Tongji kyŏm saūn haeng sŏjjangwan Yi Kōnch'ang mun'gyŏn sagŏn 冬至兼謝恩行書狀官李建昌聞見事件' (Envoy secretary Yi Kōnch'ang's report from the tributary mission for solstice celebration and appreciation), in *Tongmun hwiŏgo pop'yŏnsok sasin pyŏldan*, Vol. 2, pp. 90–91.

Qing state chose a pathway that deliberately avoided further military confrontation with Japan and successfully reclaimed its territory. Moreover, Yi's envoy report provided an example of diplomatic negotiation that could be applied to Chosŏn's diplomatic efforts in dealing with its own external threats.

Kang was responsible for transitioning the incidental opportunities of envoy missions into intellectual transformative experiences that could significantly enhance the potential of strategic planning among the decision-makers in Chosŏn. Nevertheless, despite the significant intellectual changes that Kang and his writings may have triggered, the official historical accounts provide no mention of Kang or his brush talk records. Rather than considering the lack of recognition as evidence of their non-existence at an ontological level, this lack of acknowledgement must be deciphered as a product of the invisibility and trivialization of non-elites in the context of the social hierarchy and ruling ideology in Chosŏn. Many diplomatic accounts lacked recognition of *chungin* agency and contributions, despite the significant role they played as go-betweens in Chosŏn–Qing relations.⁷⁷ Kang's invisibility in official historical accounts is an emblematic case of Chosŏn's informal diplomacy that reflected a discriminative discourse on social status in Chosŏn society.

Kang was not involved in the following year's envoy mission, but another level of informal diplomacy had been formulated between the Chosŏn and Qing dynasties during the 1875 envoy mission. When Yi Yuwŏn was sent to Beijing as the chief envoy in 1875, Yi communicated with Li Hongzhang (1823–1901), the governor-general of Zhili and superintendent of the northern treaty ports.⁷⁸ Although they did not meet in person, letters exchanged between the two via Yu Zhikai, one of Li's confidantes who met Yu in person, were enough to coordinate their opinions while avoiding the scrutiny of their political opponents in their respective countries.⁷⁹ This new informal communication method allowed the Qing to influence Kojong and his court without disgracing either the Qing or the Chosŏn court. Some scholars view the personal connection between Li and Yi as having enabled the *zongfan* system to continue functioning smoothly, while other scholars argue that the interference of the Zongli Yamen in the Qing Board of Rites' business with Chosŏn signalled the demise of traditional Qing–Chosŏn relations.⁸⁰ The 'personal

⁷⁷ Son, *Sasin ūl ttara ch'ŏngnara e kada*, pp. 102–108, 117–125; Lim, 'Tributary relations', pp. 173–177.

⁷⁸ Because of the northern superintendent's jurisdiction over treaty ports, Li played a large role in diplomatic and commercial affairs. For a detailed discussion of Li's relationship with the Zongli Yamen on foreign affairs, see Rudolph, *Negotiated power*, pp. 101–125.

⁷⁹ Kim, *The last phase of the East Asian world order*, pp. 240–241, 250–252; Son, 'Oegyo ui kyunyŏl kwa mosaek', pp. 551–557.

⁸⁰ Kim argued that 'Yi was to remain an "unofficial" channel of communication between Li and the Korean government' and that 'it did not set an institutional precedent that might enable China to intervene in Korea's affairs' (*ibid.*, p. 251). Yuanchong Wang also noted that the latter half of the 1870s saw the limits of established diplomatic channels and opened informal contacts to keep the integrity of the Qing–Chosŏn hierarchy and protect it against the challenges from modern imperialism in East Asia. However, Son Sŏng'uk argued that such provisional measures for relaying informal communication represented a symbolic moment, as both the Qing and Chosŏn realized the ineffectiveness of the ritual formality of the traditional channel and searched for an alternative. See Son, 'Oegyo ui kyunyŏl kwa mosaek', pp. 525–570.

connection' between Qing and Chosŏn among both high- and low-level officials reveals that such concerted efforts were intentional rather than incidental and were aimed at seeking measures of informal communication outside the formal diplomatic channels managed by the Board of Rites.

Formulating the rationale behind the 1876 Kanghwa peace settlement

The experience and intelligence gained through the envoy missions gave Kang a new level of agency in enhancing Chosŏn's diplomatic flexibility during a new crisis that emerged as a result of Japan's aggressive approach. In September 1875, a Japanese gunboat, *Unyō*, approached the strategic Kanghwa Island, positioned within 30 miles of Hansŏng, the capital city. The hostility quickly evolved into battles that resulted in severe casualties for Korea. Japan provoked the *Unyō* Incident (or Kanghwa Incident) as a pretext for treaty negotiations with the Chosŏn dynasty. The incident in many ways emulated the American gunboat diplomacy in 1854 that 'opened' Japan. Japan executed the scheme to represent itself, particularly to its Western audience, as a skilful translator and enforcer of international law over 'uncivilised' states, as Alexis Dudden cogently explained.⁸¹ However, this one-sided view, which highlights Japan's tactics and their similarities with Euro-American imperialism, reinforces an imaginary line between the aggressive imperial forces on one side and their passive victims on the other. This false dichotomy between imperial Japan and Chosŏn victims fails to notice non-Japanese diplomatic actors—both Qing and Chosŏn—who played equally significant roles pursuing their own interests against those of Japan. Earlier studies that underline Japan's adept emulation of Western gunboat diplomacy to open trade under Western international law often emphasize the Qing's and Chosŏn's relative unpreparedness and their lack of agency in the 1876 Chosŏn–Japan Agreement negotiations. However, comparing the initial Japanese draft of the treaty with the final version reveals that the Chosŏn delegates made significant revisions, indicating that Japan had to retract some of its demands and accommodate its counterparts.⁸² The contested aspect of the agreement shows Chosŏn's pre-existing awareness of interstate protocols in new international law and its deeper awareness of what those protocols denoted. Harry S. Parkes, the British Minister in Japan, conversed with a member of the Japanese delegation sent to Korea in 1876 and left the following record describing his amazement at Chosŏn's unexpected level of preparedness:

⁸¹ A. Dudden, *Japan's colonization of Korea: Discourse and power* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), pp. 45–55.

⁸² Kim Hŭngsu 김홍수, *Hanil kwangye ūi kŭndaejok chaep'yŏn kwajŏng* 한일관계의 근대적 재편 과정 (The restructuring of modern relations between Korea and Japan) (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2009); Han-Il Kwan'gye Yŏn'guso 한일관계연구소 (ed.), *Cho-Il suho chogyu: kŭndae ūi ūimi rŭl mutta* 조일수호조규: 근대의 의미를 묻다 (The 1876 Chosŏn–Japan Agreement: Rethinking the meaning of modern) (P'aju: Ch'ŏngga Ch'ulp'ansa, 2017).

The possibility of other nations coming to Korea and making similar demands to those made by Japan is fully foreseen by them, and they are in some measure prepared for it. They have copies of all the Treaties concluded between China and foreign powers, and possess the Peking translation of Wheaton's *International Law* ... so that they are not uninformed as to the different nationalities of Europe and America.⁸³

It is highly possible that envoys in Beijing acquired copies of treaties that the Qing had made with foreign powers and obtained *Wanguo gongfa* (The public law of all states 萬國公法, 1864), the Chinese translation of Wheaton's *International Law* (1836) which the Japanese delegates mentioned, as part of their intelligence-gathering mission. Although exactly when the Western notion of international law was introduced to Korea remains unclear, the peace negotiations at Kanghwa in 1876 eventually revealed that Chosŏn's pre-existing understanding of diplomatic grammar was relatively new to them.

As for the Chosŏn and the Qing dynasties, Japan's proactive move for negotiations constituted a moment of crisis as well as an opportunity. After ousting his father from power, Kojong took aggressive measures to consolidate his authority and weaken his father's political base. However, these measures were ineffective, as they did not eradicate his father's political influence. The Grand Prince was an experienced politician, and many Chosŏn elites stood behind his policy of resistance against Westerners and a Westernized Japan.⁸⁴ The Grand Prince continued to manoeuvre behind the scenes within the court and was open to any opportunity to regain his political power. In addition to the duty of a Confucian ruler to keep the order, peace, and prosperity of his subjects, Kojong was also committed to preserving the Confucian principles of statecraft by respecting his court officials' advice and maintaining his filial piety to the Grand Prince. Although Kojong's initial efforts to resume negotiations with Japan in early 1875 failed, the 1876 Kuroda mission to Kanghwa offered a new opportunity for Kojong to make another attempt.

For the Qing dynasty, Japan's initiative also created an opportunity to consolidate the opinions of its divided court on the solution to challenges to the security and legitimacy of the Qing's hegemonic role and influence over the Korean Peninsula. Although such negotiations had the potential to compromise the established order, they still offered a preferable solution. In the 1870s, the Qing court decided to concentrate its military capacity on controlling the northwest frontier, which slowed progress on building its naval power to protect itself against enemies from the sea.⁸⁵ Choosing a peaceful approach as the only option left to him, Li Hongzhang, the mastermind of the new Chosŏn policy, decided to open an informal communication channel with Yi Yuwŏn,

⁸³ Il-keun Park (ed.), *Anglo-American diplomatic materials relating to Korea, 1866-1886* (Seoul: Shin Mun Dang, 1982), p. 47.

⁸⁴ Palais, *Politics and policy*, pp. 264-267.

⁸⁵ See Immanuel Chung-Yueh Hsü, 'The great policy debate in China, 1874: Maritime defense vs. frontier defense', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 25 (1964-1965), p. 220, cited in Larsen, *Tradition, treaties and trade*, p. 60.

Kojong's chief state councillor, to persuade the seemingly militant Chosŏn court to change course. Li conveyed to Yi his concerns regarding Japan's impending plan to send envoys to Korea and its intention to use military force if its request to negotiate was rejected.⁸⁶

Kang was not in a position to make policy decisions, like higher officials, such as Li Hongzhang or Yi Yuwŏn, were. Even so, the presumption can be made that the Chosŏn state undoubtedly needed Kang's skill and experience to further the state's agenda against domestic objections, as he had in Chosŏn's previous diplomatic missions to Beijing. It was not a mere coincidence that Sin Hŏn, the Minister of Reception of the Japanese delegates in 1876, chose Kang as his personal attendant. While court histories, such as those of *Sillok* and *Sŭngjŏngwŏn ilgi*, do not mention Kang, his name appears in the *Daily Record of the Kanghwa Mission* (*Simhaeng ilgi* 沁行日記), the official account of diplomatic negotiations that Sin Hŏn submitted to the court in Hansŏng. When the Japanese delegates asked for a list of the Chosŏn delegates, Kang was listed as 'Gentleman of Comprehensive Virtue' (*T'ongdŏngnang* 通德郎), a collective title given to upper-fifth-rank civil officials.⁸⁷ In recognition of Kang's role, the Japanese delegates sent gifts of gratitude to each member of the Chosŏn delegation after the treaty negotiations were completed.⁸⁸ Kang was listed as sixth among the recipients, followed by Sin, his deputy, the magistrate of Kanghwa Island, his military adjutants, and secretary. As Sin Hŏn's personal adviser, Kang helped him by preparing written communications between Hansŏng and Kanghwa Island.⁸⁹ Other than that, the nature of his role can only be a matter of conjecture. Unlike in the envoy missions to Beijing, he did not participate in the brush talk, and to maintain the formality of interstate diplomacy, the entire negotiation process was mediated via interpreters from each party.

Even though no evidence has been uncovered that clearly indicates Kang's direct influence on the treaty negotiations, he was an astute and perceptive observer, and he left a memoir that helps to locate an internal change that fermented in Chosŏn's intellectual and political landscape on the eve of the signing of the Chosŏn–Japan Agreement. Kang documented the Chosŏn–Japan negotiation process, in which he also played a significant role. *Simhaeng chapki* (Miscellaneous Records of the Kanghwa Mission 沁行雜記, hereinafter *Chapki*) was the collection of Kang's writings on his observations and opinions on the Chosŏn–Japan negotiations that were held on Kanghwa Island. A comparative reading of *Chapki* and *Simhaeng ilgi* confirms the accuracy of the information

⁸⁶ Wang, *Remaking the Chinese Empire*, pp. 134–143; Son, *Sasin ūl ttara ch'ŏngnara e kada*, pp. 205–207.

⁸⁷ Kim Chonghak, *Simhaeng ilgi: Chosŏn i kirok han kanghwado choyak* 심행일기: 조선이 기록한 강화도조약 (Daily record of the Kanghwa mission: The treaty of Kanghwa documented by Chosŏn) (Paju: Purūn yŏksa, 2010), p. 408.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 490.

⁸⁹ *Kang Wi chŏnjip* contains a letter from Sin Hŏn to Pak Kyusu. There is no doubt that Kang Wi was involved in preparing the letter—or even actually wrote it on behalf of Sin. Kang Wi, 'Tae Sin Taegwan sang Hwanjae Pak Sangguk 代申大官上桓齋朴相國' (On behalf of minister Sin, letter to Second State Councillor Pak), in *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan*, Vol. 318, pp. 515–516.

Kang wrote in *Chapki* and his activities and contributions throughout the negotiations to bring internal consensus, regardless of his unofficial position. Like his envoy brush talk records, Kang's memoir provided a space in which he could position himself as an active participant and observer beyond the constraints of the dominant ruling ideology.

Considering that the dominant voices in Chosŏn opposed the negotiations, both the Qing and Chosŏn, not surprisingly, refrained from discussing the Kanghwa negotiations publicly. For the Qing, communicating its apparent advice informally could prevent the appearance of breaking its policy of non-interference in the affairs of a tributary state, and for the Chosŏn, it did not set a precedent at an institutional level that may have enabled China to intervene in Korea's affairs in the future.⁹⁰ Through this connection, the unusual but legitimate investiture of Kojong's infant son in February 1876 and Chosŏn's negotiations with Japan represented opportunities for both the ruling houses in the Qing and Chosŏn dynasties to reaffirm their mutual trust in each other.

As JaHyun Haboush explained, Chosŏn's tributary status 'carried unmistakably compromising implications for the sovereignty of the Yi Korean state, [but] it also affirmed Yi membership in Confucian civilization'.⁹¹ Chosŏn elites, while openly denouncing the Qing as barbarians and usurpers who had toppled the Ming dynasty, at the same time gradually began to accept the Qing as the successor to the Mandate of Heaven as an irreversible reality. Most importantly, the ritual ceremony of receiving investiture from the Qing was essential in establishing the Chosŏn monarch's political legitimacy. Hence, it is likely that the Qing court was clearly aware of its overwhelming ideological power over its neighbouring country and the significance of imperial investiture in Chosŏn's ongoing domestic politics. As such, the Qing could send its support to the Chosŏn monarch, who was desperately seeking measures to protect his political authority from both internal and external challenges; by welcoming the Japanese delegate with courtesy and negotiating in good faith, Kojong and his cabinet could show their compliance with the Qing advice on Chosŏn's new foreign policy as an expression of their gratitude to the Qing's ideological support of the young monarch. When welcoming the imperial envoy from Beijing in 1876, Kojong expressed his gratitude towards the Zongli Yamen for informing Chosŏn about Japan's activities in Beijing.⁹² The Qing foreign policy towards Chosŏn was, thus, transformed from traditional bilateral tributary relations to multilateral informal imperialism during this period.⁹³ Kojong also acknowledged the role of this relatively new institution over the waning institutional power of the Board of Rites in the Qing court.

Even during Chosŏn's negotiations with Japan, the Grand Prince stood steadfast at the top of the vociferous voices of the domestic opponents. Without consulting with the court, he continued to demonstrate his influence by sending letters to the Chosŏn delegates and receiving reports directly from

⁹⁰ Kim, *The last phase of the East Asian world order*, pp. 250–251.

⁹¹ Haboush, *Confucian kingship in Korea*, p. 21.

⁹² SI 1876.01.23.

⁹³ Song, *Making borders in modern East Asia*, pp. 46–53.

them.⁹⁴ Therefore, the delegates' mission was to negotiate to end the long-standing conflict between the two political views within Chosŏn and formulate a rationale that could be acceptable to hardliners, such as the Grand Prince and his followers. *Chapki* summarized Kang's intellectual response to the need among the Chosŏn delegates to make the negotiations justifiable for both sides with opposite political views.

Kang's justification of the Chosŏn–Japan Agreement was based on three factors: 1) Sinitic literary tradition and history, 2) a close reading of his brush talk records, and 3) careful analysis of changing diplomatic norms and practices. Kang amalgamated these seemingly different intellectual streams to buttress his thesis on the appeasement policy. Kang demanded his readers abandon their naive, idealistic view on international relations and accept that international politics is always a field of conflict among state actors. The concept of a pluralistic world order was, in fact, neither a 'foreign' nor a 'modern' idea to Kang. In response to Confucian fundamentalists who demanded punitive action against Japan's immorality, Kang borrowed Mencius's words, noting that 'in the Spring and Autumn, there are no righteous wars'.⁹⁵ The words of the ancient sage provided Kang with an intellectual basis for historicizing the changing geopolitics within the literary tradition familiar to him and Chosŏn elites. He hoped that the wisdom of Confucius would enlighten his readers to recognize the necessity for diplomatic actions to avoid war.

Along with historical precedents from Sinitic literary tradition, Kang's second rationale for the Kanghwa Agreement came from advice from Qing officials he documented in his brush talk records. He realized that he was at a moment of historical change that his Chinese friends had encountered in their country decades earlier. For example, he wrote in *Chapki* that 'once Zhang Shizun said barbarians don't keep their secret but enjoy informing others: [such behaviour] nearly coincides with [that of the Japanese]. How strange that is!'⁹⁶ This moment of rediscovery came after Kang was told by one of the Japanese interpreters that the Japanese government would welcome Koreans who wanted to visit their country to learn the sources and secrets of Japan's wealth and power once the relationship between the two countries was restored. Kang realized that Japan had been Westernized not only by adopting Westerners' technology, but also by emulating them wholeheartedly, even imitating their mindset. The Japanese he met at Kanghwa were fully Westernized. While such a new perception of 'Westernized Japan' contradicted the Chosŏn government's rationale for treating Japan as its old neighbour and naming the peace settlement between them as 'restoration', Kang, who had witnessed the Japanese military power and recognized that Chosŏn would have been

⁹⁴ Kim, 'Haejae 해제' (Introduction of the source), in *Simhaeng ilgi*, p. 30.

⁹⁵ R. Eno, *Mencius: Translation, commentary, and notes* (2016), available at <http://hdl.handle.net/2022/23421>, [accessed 25 February 2022]; Kang Wi, 'Simhaeng chapki 실행잡기' (Miscellaneous records of the Kanghwa Mission), in *Simhaeng ilgi*, p. 503.

⁹⁶ Kang, 'Simhaeng chapki', p. 507; 'Pugyu tamch'o', p. 49. Cited in Yi Hŏnju, *Kang Wi ūi kaehwa sasang*, p. 215.

unlikely to be able to match it, could be convinced to keep the peace with this new type of enemy and learn from them, which the Qing government was already doing.

Kang utilized his knowledge of the transformation of Qing foreign policy, reflected in its interstate treaties with Western countries and Westernized Japan, to defend Chosŏn's interests against Japan's demands. To position itself favourably during the negotiations, Japan pressured Chosŏn to accept international law as a new standard based on universal norms and practices for diplomacy. Instead of rejecting those new terms, Kang used the Qing–Japan Treaty of 1871⁹⁷ to reinterpret the *Unyō* Incident to Chosŏn's own advantage. Although the Chosŏn coastguard had made the first strike, the Japanese warship *Unyō* had broken into the waters of Chosŏn, a tributary state of the Qing. According to the bilateral agreement that Japan and the Qing had signed in 1871, this was an apparent intrusion without prior notice.⁹⁸ In 1875, the Japanese government tried to clarify Chosŏn's independent status under international law, but this effort failed, as the Qing insisted that Chosŏn was an outer subordinate and thus part of the Chinese empire (C. *waishu*, K. *oesok* 外屬).⁹⁹ Considering the trilateral implications of the 1871 Qing–Japan Treaty, it was, therefore, Japan that had violated its own first treaty with China and owed apologies to the Qing and Chosŏn.¹⁰⁰ Because the Chosŏn delegates pressed hard on the illegality of *Unyō*'s trespassing, the Japanese delegates had no choice but to delete the statement from the original draft

⁹⁷ This agreement indicates that '[i]n all that regards territorial possessions of either country, the two governments (*liangguo suoshu bangtu* 兩國所屬邦土) shall treat each other with proper courtesy, without the slightest infringement or encroachment on either side'. In the 1875 Qing–Japan Treaty, the Qing and Japan defined each of their exclusive territorial claims for the first time. 'Da Qingguo Da Riben xiuhao digui 大清國大日本國修好條規' (The Sino-Japanese Agreement of Amity and Friendship), in *Senzen nihon sēiji gaiko bunsho* 戰前日本政治外交文書 (Political and diplomatic documents in prewar Japan), (ed.) Sēisaku kenkyū daigakuin daigaku 政策研究大学院大学 (2020), available at <https://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/pw/18710913.T1C.html>, [accessed 25 February 2022].

⁹⁸ Kang Wi was, in fact, not the first to use the 1871 Sino-Japanese Agreement to protect the Chosŏn state from foreign intrusion. In a letter that Pak Kyusu sent to the Qing Minister of Rites in 1874, Pak noted that the 1871 agreement should prevent Japan from invading Chosŏn, as Japan promised 'not to invade China and its affiliated states' (不侵中國屬國). Pak Kyusu, 'Yō Man Yongsu Ch'ōngryō 與萬庸叟青藜' (Letter to Wan Qingli), in *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan*, Vol. 312, p. 498. Cited in No Taehwan, '1870 nyōndae chōnban', pp. 60–61.

⁹⁹ For details on the 1876 Qing–Japan debate about Chosŏn's independence, see Wang, *Remaking the Chinese Empire*, pp. 138–140.

¹⁰⁰ When Moriyama Shigeru met with Sin Hōn, he demanded Chosŏn's apology for discharging canons against *Unyō* in 1875. According to a Chosŏn historical source, Sin replied that the ship, which carried no national flag, approached without any advance notice, and the guard post in Kanghwa suffered severe damage due to the counteroffensive and looting by the landing force. In contrast, the Japanese source, *Dai nippon gaikō bunsho* (Diplomatic document of the Great Japan), documented the same encounter very differently. According to the Japanese source, Sin replied that both the king and his officials were embarrassed by the *Unyō* incident and were willing to offer a full account of that. For the analysis of these conflicting reports, see Kim Chonghak, 'Haejae 해제' (Introduction of the source), in *Simhaeng ilgi*, pp. 18–21.

of the treaty calling to account the *Unyō* Incident. Chosŏn was not the subject of new international law; it was the enforcer of new international law.

In *Chapki*, Kang made an important intellectual departure from his earlier brush talk records. Even if he was merely a listener and transcriber of information during the envoy missions, he provided bold policy suggestions with justification. During the treaty negotiations at Kanghai Island, Japan presented the opening of Chosŏn's markets to Japanese merchants as a must-have item to be included in the treaty. Once the draft of Japan's treaty demands reached the Chosŏn court, the officials were divided on the issue of trade. Kang explained that continuing to insist on restoring regulated trade via the Japan House in Pusan reflected an ignorance regarding the true benefits of trade. In *Chapki*, Kang wrote, 'According to the news from the Chinese court, the outflow of silver was fifty thousand in silver while the inflow was eighty thousand in silver, so the Chinese court acquired the surplus of thirty thousand and used it to supplement expenses, hence making profit without harm.'¹⁰¹ Kang's brush talk records also recorded the divided opinion in the Qing court. On one hand, officials asserted that the increase in trade was draining the silver from and undermining the current treaty port regime of Prince Gong and the Zongli Yamen officials.¹⁰² On the other hand, other Qing officials rebuffed this by noting that the inflow of silver was greater than the outflow to Western countries.¹⁰³ This is not to say that Kang had executive power, but, notably, he provided enough rationale to persuade the opponents of open trade, thus pushing the negotiations closer to an acceptable compromise. Still uncertain is whether Sin or the Chosŏn court wholeheartedly relied on Kang's word to rationalize the decision to complete the negotiations as the best outcome for Chosŏn's interests. However, the very close correlation between some of his ideas and observations and the subsequent treaty negotiations strongly implies his deep involvement, on behalf of the Chosŏn delegates, in the decision-making process.

Conclusion

Although Kojong was not engaged directly with Kang Wi, people without their own power bases were more open to this sort of manoeuvring. The emergence of non-elite figures such as Kang in Chosŏn history was often associated with monarchs who tried to construct their own power independent of the ruling elites and expand their agency.¹⁰⁴ With his powerful desire to seek redress for institutional and cultural bias, Kang finally found a viable outlet by representing himself as a critical strategist who produced solutions applicable to changing social and geopolitical conditions.¹⁰⁵ The rationale he formulated

¹⁰¹ Kang, 'Simhaeng chapki', p. 507.

¹⁰² 'Pugyu sok tamch'o', p. 67.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁰⁴ For example, people with humble backgrounds such as Chang Yŏngsil during the reign of King Sejong (r. 1418–1450), and Pak Chega and Yi Tŏkmu (1741–1793) during the Chŏngjo era (r. 1776–1800) rose through the ranks of the bureaucracy through the king's favour.

¹⁰⁵ Hwang, *Beyond birth*, p. 347.

was based on Qing officials' guidance, which was accessible through the existing Qing–Chosŏn literati network and the intellectual legacy of Northern Learning, which was closely associated with his ascriptive secondary status as *chungin*. As Hwang Kyung Moon wrote, 'Exposure to the advances being made in China, and to the general stimuli that foreign experiences provided, undoubtedly contributed to the *chungin* prominence among the activist of the Korean enlightenment.'¹⁰⁶ Kang's two brush talk records and his memoir of the 1876 Chosŏn–Japan negotiations present him as an astute and perceptive observer of the changes occurring around him. In addition, he aimed to gain broader recognition and popularity as a strategic thinker and writer in a changing world. Chosŏn's proactive informal diplomacy enabled a dually marginalized figure such as Kang to introduce innovative methods to communicate and deliver new information to facilitate new consensus-building efforts in Chosŏn Korea.

Kojong and his close cabinet members engaged proactively in informal diplomacy, and their peace settlement with Japan was inspired by a vision of a powerful Confucian monarchy. The peaceful negotiations were indeed a success for Kojong, whereas such despotic measures contradicted the vision among many scholar-officials of their political and moral authority as superior to that of the monarch. In fact, in the end, Kojong was unsuccessful in persuading the conservative elites who were frustrated by the peace settlement with Westernized Japan.¹⁰⁷ The growing dissatisfaction in Chosŏn eventually erupted into a soldiers' riot known as the Imo Mutiny, which led to the Grand Prince's short-lived return to power in 1882. Kang's role in Chosŏn's informal diplomacy continued after the 1876 peace settlement. After Chosŏn restored relations with Japan, a team of envoys, including Kang, was sent to Japan in 1880 and 1882. His contribution to Chosŏn's diplomatic development did not go unrecognized during this time. After returning from another successful mission in 1882, Kang was appointed as a ninth-rank state official.¹⁰⁸ In 1884, he travelled to Shanghai and met Shao Youlian (邵友濂, 1840–1901), one of Li Hongzhang's right-hand men. There is not much evidence to support the claim that he played a diplomatic role during this trip, but he certainly continued to show others his writings to impress them and exert his influence.¹⁰⁹ After Chosŏn signed a treaty with Japan in 1876, efforts to institutionalize new diplomatic practices were not completed immediately. The establishment of the Office for the Management of State Affairs (*T'ongni amun* 統理衙門) in 1880 significantly enhanced the government's adaptability in terms of overseeing foreign relations and recruiting skilled personnel beyond a small group with interpreter lineages.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 343.

¹⁰⁷ Palais, *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea*, p. 271.

¹⁰⁸ SI 1882.01.12.

¹⁰⁹ Shao Youlin, 'Kohwandang such'o sigo sŏ 古歡堂收艸詩稿序' (Preface to Kohwandang's poetry collections), in *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan*, Vol. 318, p. 474.

¹¹⁰ Hwang, *Beyond birth*, pp. 52–55.

As Kang's earlier diplomatic journeys remind us, the radical shift in Chosŏn diplomacy was catalysed by changes that had already occurred in Qing China. Without the information provided by Qing officials such as Zhang Shizun and Huang Yu, and their active willingness to openly expose the 'weakness' of the Qing empire, both Kang's intellectual transformation and his efforts to induce a new consensus among decision-makers in Chosŏn would have been difficult. However, the growth of the Qing empire's new economic and military power in the 1880s brought a new dynamic to Qing–Chosŏn relations and left little space for Chosŏn's informal diplomacy.¹¹¹ Chinese compradors, who urged government sponsorship of their commercial ventures in Chosŏn, pressured the Qing government to implement a more interventionist policy in Chosŏn, envisioning economic gains from Chosŏn as a new source of revenue for reinventing the Qing as a powerful empire. In addition, the Beiyang Force, a Western-style imperial Chinese fleet initiated during the 1870s, was nearing completion, enabling the Qing to employ military coercion rather than diplomatic persuasion in the following decades.

Kang Wi constitutes a medium through which we can investigate those diverse agents that played a role in Chosŏn's informal diplomacy, shaping its interstate relations. Instead of being passive mediators, they did not hesitate to use their skills, wealth, and power against their social and political opponents, albeit on a limited scale, when they judged it to be in their own interests and those of the nation to do so. However, no apparent evidence clearly demonstrates that Kang's direct influence led Chosŏn's decision-makers to sign a treaty with Japan, regardless of his activities as a personal attendant of the head of the Chosŏn negotiators. Considering the long history of how the activities and thoughts of *chungin* were trivialized and silenced in official historical accounts, it is not difficult to understand why there are few records of Kang's direct influence on Chosŏn's changing foreign policy and why his contributions to unofficial diplomatic activities were treated lightly.¹¹² Kang and his informal diplomacy transformed the voice of the Qing into an authoritative source, justifying his bold policy against the conservative mainstream, and facilitated the process of reaching a new consensus on embracing external challenges. Identifying this meaningful process of change enables us to see Kang's agency, which informed his decisions and inspired him to engage actively in discourse.

Kang's ideas and observations, documented in his brush talk records and personal memoir, strongly indicate the existence of Chosŏn's proactive intelligence-gathering activities, challenging the old contrast between Japan as an adept imperial power and Chosŏn as an unenlightened victim. I have presented a revisionist view of the diplomatic history of East Asia. Chosŏn Korea's method of engagement with the West and Westernized Japan was hardly new. Rather, it was a demonstration of Chosŏn's political system of exploiting the inherent flexibility of traditional tributary relations to engage in new diplomatic enterprises. This approach grew out of the century-old

¹¹¹ Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties and Trade*, pp. 59–61, 74–87.

¹¹² Park, *A family of no prominence*, pp. 135–137.

formal and informal diplomatic networks that existed as part of Qing–Chosŏn tributary relations.

However, this does not mean that there was nothing new about the 1876 agreement, nor does it mean that Chosŏn Korea insisted on strictly observing traditional diplomatic protocols with no change. Awareness of the Qing and Japan's recent changes enabled decision-makers in Chosŏn to devise strategies with foreseeable outcomes. The divided opinion regarding the Self-Strengthening Movement in the Qing court and the new reactionary rebellion in Meiji Japan mirrored the anxiety behind the dominant discourse in Chosŏn opposing the peace settlement with Japan. Chosŏn's court recognized the emerging influence of the Zongli Yamen and its increasing role in shaping Chosŏn's interstate relations, which already exceeded the jurisdiction of the Qing Board of Rites. Chosŏn continued to monitor the whereabouts of the backlash of Japan's modernization drive and even witnessed the new power of Meiji state, now equipped with modern tools, to bring such dissent under control. Finally, instead of being forced to accept a world order under the terms of new international law, Chosŏn utilized its understanding of these laws and recent treaties with Japan to identify Japan's violation of Qing and Chosŏn's sovereignty.

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