

Chosŏn's understanding of Ming-Đại Việt relations

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Another reason to suspect an unofficial gathering of evidence was the fact that the subject of a civil service exam for court officials, which took place only 10 days after the court convened at the beginning of April, was 'Congratulations on the conquest of Annam'.² These occurrences reflect the significance of the Ming-Đại Việt war for Chosŏn, and the leaders' wish to stay ahead of and to understand the political developments. *The Annals of the Chosŏn Kingdom* reveal that the number of Chosŏn missions to China suddenly tripled in 1407.

Chosŏn believed they could and should learn from the failure of Đại Việt to maintain peaceful diplomatic relations with China. This was repeated in Taejong's speeches in 1407, and even in 1414. The war between the Ming and Đại Việt was considered to be a cautionary tale for Chosŏn, especially because the histories of Chosŏn and Đại Việt had a lot in common: the newly founded dynasties in both Chosŏn and Đại Việt underwent reformations that led to the development of the two countries, which were the earliest to establish relationships with the Ming. Chosŏn's understanding of the Ming-Đại Việt war was reflected in its subsequent political and military strategies with regard to China, in order to maintain its relations with the Ming Dynasty.

Ming-Đại Việt relations (1403-1406)

The turning point for Ming-Đại Việt relations took place in Nanjing on 3 April 1403, when the Ming Emperor Yongle and his court met with envoys from the Hồ Dynasty from Đại Việt (then Đại Ngu). The envoys claimed that after the death of King Trần Nhật Khuê, the line of the Trần family had been broken and that Hồ Đê was now responsible for ruling Đại Việt. They also asked Emperor Yongle to officially install Hồ Quý Ly as the King of Annam (Đại Việt). Coincidentally, as is evident from the records by *Ming Shilu*,³ Yi Kyu-ryeong (an official from the Chosŏn Kingdom) was also in attendance that day to conduct business with the Ming court; it is clear he would have been able to gather much information from the meeting he witnessed between the Annam envoys and the Emperor. Thus, the Chosŏn Kingdom likely already learned of the Ming's investiture of Hồ Quý Ly as the King of Annam in early 1404.

In August 1404, however, Trần Thiêm Bình attended the Ming court and pronounced himself the son of the old Annam King Trần Nghệ Tông. Trần Thiêm Bình accused the Hồ family of murdering the King to usurp the throne in Annam. He pleaded with Emperor Yongle to engage his army to help him get revenge for the Trần family. Some months later, on 16 December 1404,⁴ a Chosŏn delegation led by Yi Nae made a tributary visit to Emperor Yongle, alongside envoys from Đại Việt and other native officials. Right after the ceremony, the Emperor introduced everyone present to Trần Thiêm Bình; the Đại Việt envoys were said to have recognized "the grandson of their old king", to have been amazed and confused, to have bowed down, and some were moved to tears.⁵ At this point another banquet was conferred upon the envoys from Chosŏn and Annam, to take place on 2 January 1405.⁶ On all these occasions at the Ming court in Nanjing, the Chosŏn Kingdom came to learn of the struggle for power taking place in Đại Việt.

The Ming-Đại Việt (or Đại Ngu under the Hồ Dynasty) war (1406-1407) was mentioned for the first time by the Chosŏn Royal Court when it convened on 8 April 1407. During a discussion on state defense and military policies, King Taejong (1400-1418) brought up the war: "(I) heard that when the Emperor conquered Annam, the people of Annam were shiftless, died, no one could resist".¹ Notably, the court must have become aware of the Ming-Đại Việt conflict through an alternative (non-official) source, since the official royal message from Ming Emperor Yongle didn't arrive in Chosŏn until a month later, on 1 May 1407. One suggestion for the source of information was the Chosŏn missions to China and to its Ming Imperial Court.



King Taejong (1400-1418). Image Wikimedia Commons.

The Chosŏn reaction to the Ming-Đại Việt war

On 11 April 1406 the Ming court received notice of Trần Thiêm Bình's death; subsequently, on 23 April 1406, Ming Emperor Yongle ordered General Huang-Zhong to enter Đại Việt.⁷ A Chosŏn tributary mission, led by Seol Mi-su, was at the Ming court on the day that Ming Emperor Yongle ordered the invasion of Đại Việt, at the previous request of Trần Thiêm Bình.

The official royal message sent to Chosŏn from Yongle stated that the usurpation by Hồ Quý Ly and his son was the main reason for the Ming to 'punish' Annam; but Chosŏn knew that Hồ Quý Ly had previously already been recognized by the Ming as the King of Annam. On 8 April 1407 at the Chosŏn court, King Taejong used the phrase 'King of Annam' to refer to Hồ Quý Ly, the ruler of Đại Việt who had been dealing with the Ming Emperor right up until the conflict erupted between the two countries. He said: "The King of Annam had come to inform him respectfully, but the Emperor could not approve of those kinds of behaviors. If our Emperor likes, it is our good work, but if our country was careless in its rites of *sadae*, surely the Emperor would raise the army to punish".⁸ (*sadae*: 'serving the great', a word which, at the time, stood

for 'foreign relations with the Ming'). This discussion revealed two important truths. Firstly, Chosŏn already knew what steps the Hồ family had been taking to maintain their relationship with China after they had claimed the Annam throne. Secondly, Chosŏn now understood that the Ming invasion was not only about rectifying a diplomatic wrong, but that the turmoil caused by the changing dynasties in Đại Việt was being used by the Emperor as an excuse for punishment.

To avoid similar treatment by the Ming, Chosŏn showed compliance with the Ming actions, so as to stabilize their own relationship. At the beginning of the 15th century, Chosŏn and Đại Việt were in very similar positions with regard to the Ming.⁹ Taejong explained to his court that Chosŏn was now, just like Đại Việt, in danger of receiving the same treatment by the Ming if they did not maintain good diplomatic relations. This is why the 18 April 1407 civil service

exam was so significant; by focusing on the theme 'Congratulations on the conquest of Annam' they were able to have a response ready within a week after they received Ming Emperor Yongle's royal letter.

Ham Pu-rim was appointed the Chosŏn envoy to visit Nanjing on 9 May 1407 to congratulate the Ming Emperor on the Annam conquest. Chosŏn received a positive response to the visit on 11 September; apparently, Chosŏn's letter had been correctly presented to the Emperor and "The Emperor talked again about the non-compliance of Annam and his righteous chivalrous spirit".¹⁰ The message reveals that Yongle must have discussed the events in Annam with the Chosŏn envoys, and that he compared the crimes of Annam to the morality of Ming.

Taejong knew that the doubts over leadership in Đại Việt had occasioned Ming Emperor Yongle to attack, and so, in addition to maintaining good *sadae*, Taejong understood that he had to remind Yongle of the legitimate Chosŏn lineage, which the Ming Jianwen Emperor himself had recognized only a few years before (in 1401), and which Yongle had repeated in 1403 after Jianwen's dethronement. The next envoy to the Ming court was subsequently planned for 25 September 1407,¹¹ and significantly,

it was led by the Chosŏn Crown Prince Yi Che (Yi Je, 1394-1462), who had been instated by Ming Emperor Yongle in 1404.¹² Compared to previous Chosŏn envoys, this was a particularly large party of officials. In the eyes of the Ming, foreign countries had no meaningful existence unless their rulers could maintain relations with the Emperor;¹³ besides showing compliance and submitting to the Ming, Chosŏn reestablished relations by memorializing the Ming proclamation of the Yi family as rulers of Chosŏn, and the investiture of the crown prince as successor of the ruling family.

Taejo Yi Sŏng-gye (the first King of the Yi dynasty, founder of the Chosŏn Kingdom) failed to acquire investiture from the Ming court in 1392. In fact, the Ming Emperor Hongwu regarded Taejo Yi Sŏng-gye an usurper, and dangerous to the people of what was then still the Koryŏ Kingdom, led by King Kongyang. Emperor Hongwu even threatened to punish the Yi family for its actions. However, less than a decade later Taejo's son, Taejong, did succeed at being invested as King of Chosŏn by the Ming Emperor. Three years later, in 1404, the Chosŏn Crown Prince Yi Che (Yi Je) was invested as well. But then the Ming-Đại Việt war erupted. In short, where Taejo's efforts had gone toward gaining approval from the Ming as a legitimate ruler, Taejong's main focus of his *sadae* diplomacy towards the Ming was to strengthen and stabilize the legitimation. Taejong's *sadae* was, moreover, geared to avoid a repeat of the Đại Việt situation. Chosŏn held Đại Việt up like a mirror, as a cautionary tale. Chosŏn's main goal was to ensure the Ming recognition of the Yi family, so as to avoid being considered usurpers like the Hồ family in Đại Việt had been. And eventually, their diplomacies did indeed successfully protect Chosŏn; King Taejong led Chosŏn to a relatively peaceful and stable relationship with the Ming.¹⁴

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Notes

- 1 *Chosŏn Taejong Sillok*, (*The Annals of Chosŏn King Taejong*), National Institute of Korean History, Seoul, 1973, 13:16b-17a.
- 2 *Chosŏn Wangjo Sillok*, 13:27b-28a.
- 3 *Ming Taizong Shilu* (*The Veritable Records of the Ming Taizong*), Institute of History and Philology, Taipei, 1966, 19:1a.
- 4 *Chosŏn Taejong Sillok*, 8:12b.
- 5 *Ming Taizong Shilu*, 37:3a.
- 6 *Ming Taizong Shilu*, 37:3a-b and 38:1a.
- 7 *Ming Taizong Shilu*, 53:4b-5a.
- 8 *Chosŏn Taejong Sillok*, 13:16b-17a.
- 9 Taejo (first king of the Chosŏn Kingdom, r.1392-1398, after overthrowing the Koryŏ Kingdom) had never been able to obtain an investiture from the Ming. Emperor Hongwu (founder of the Ming Dynasty) did not recognize or agree with the new Kingdom. It was only the third king of Chosŏn, Taejong, who in June 1401 was finally granted Ming recognition by the second Ming Emperor (Jianwen), which was reconfirmed by Ming Emperor Yongle in 1403.
- 10 *Chosŏn Taejong Sillok*, 14:24b
- 11 *Chosŏn Taejong Sillok*, 14:24b and 14:29a-30a.
- 12 Yi Che (Yi Je) was the first son of Taejong. He was invested as Crown Prince in 1404. However, Yi-Je and Yi Po (Yi Bo, the second in line) behaved badly, and both had their titles withdrawn. As a result, the third son, Yi-Do (1397-1450) was invested as Crown Prince in 1409 and became King Sejong (1418-1450) of Chosŏn.
- 13 Wang Gungwu, *China and the Chinese overseas*, The Academic Press, 1991, p.40.
- 14 朴元煥, 明初朝鮮關係史研究, 一潮閣, 2002, pp.6-8; 285-286 and 161-163.