Abstract

For more than a century, scholarly writings and political commentaries have cast the Chosŏn-Qing relationship of the 1880s and 1890s in terms of pre-modern tributary relations, modern treaty relations, or some amalgam of the two, all the while assuming a readily definably tributary relationship of ancient usage. In the late 1970s and early 1880s, however, Russian and Japanese expansionism and Euro-American commercial interest in Chosŏn induced rapid transformations in the calculi of state security that led Chosŏn and Qing policy makers to re-conceptualize tributary relations in light of contemporary geopolitics. While the significance of these proposals is to be found partly in the fact that they sought broad transformations in the internal dynamics of Chosŏn-Wing relations, it is the distinctly modern politics of international representation at their core that is of greater interest. Using primarily Qing and Chosŏn intra- and inter-governmental communications, this paper examines the negotiations and re-imaginings of tributary relations as part of the efforts of the Chosŏn and Qing states to create representations of themselves and their relationship to advance their interests and establish their positions in the gyre of competing imperia in Northeast Asia at the close of the nineteenth century.

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