Becoming a Great Power, but Not Necessarily a Leader:

Understanding the Transformation of China’s Status in the Early 21st Century

East Asia with a Historical Perspective

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Abstract

One’s leadership is recognized only when one’s followers are identified. A changing distribution of power in East Asia during recent decades is hardly disputable, yet it is premature to conclude that China will soon replace America as the regional leader. Employing a constructivist approach, this paper discusses the history of China-Korea relationship with a focus on the key events between 1623 and 1776, the period during which a power transition occurred from Ming to Qing. With historical evidence drawn from the primary source of the *Ri Dynasty Annals of Korea* (also known as the ‘Annals of the Joseon Dynasty’) that illustrated Korea’s allegiance toward the declining/fallen Ming even in the face of Qing’s supremacy, it proved that it was China’s ideational power, in addition to its material power, that made it a leader to other countries within the Sinocentric order. This paper argues that, although with rising economic and military power, China at the moment is still not considered a leader by countries in the region because China is not able to offer an ideology that can appeal to others as what it did with Confucianism in the pre-modern time, hence the re-emergence of a leader-follower relationship between China and other East Asian states is rather uncertain in coming future.
Introduction

The topic about the rivalry between China and the United States to compete for the leadership in East Asia has been discussed for quite some time. Some claimed that China is a revisionist power and it has taken over the leading role with its growing economic and military capabilities (Bernstein & Munro, 1997, pp.18–19; Tammen et al., 2000, pp.155–6; Mearsheimer, 2001, p.402; Kim, 2002, pp.668–9; Lanteigne, 2009, p.94), while others believed that China is a status quo power and it has neither the intention nor the ability to challenge America’s supremacy in the region (Goldstein, 1997/98, pp.42–54; Brooks & Wohlfirth, 2002, pp.21–29; Foot, 2006, pp.83–90; Ikenberry, 2008, pp.28–33; Beeson, 2009, pp.110–2). This author hold the view that China, by what the Chinese government has been doing so far, is not going to become a leader that will be recognized by other East Asian states. Different the realist perspective that focuses on the material factors regarding China’s intention and capability, the view of this author derived from the study of the ideational factors that are related to China’s rise – yet not necessarily denying the impacts of material factors. In other words, this paper intends to offer another reason, with a constructivist approach, to explain why a powerful and assertive China nowadays is not going to become a leader in East Asia.

With abundant of studies providing analyses from realist, neo-realist, neo-liberal institutionalist perspectives, why a constructivist approach, apart from a rationalist approach, needs to be adopted to study the international relations in East Asia? First of all, Wendt (1995, pp.71–72) believed that ‘the fundamental structures of international politics are social rather than strictly material …… and that these structures shape actors' identities and interests, rather than just their behavior’. Hence,
‘leader’ is a social rather than a born identity (so is ‘follower’). The identity of a leader, by the constructivist logic, is shaped by an intersubjective idea that is commonly shared by at least two parties – if works, eventually one will become a leader and the other a follower. To find out what shapes a state’s identity requires the study of the cultural and historical contexts in which these states interact with each other, as Hopf (1998, pp.194–6) pointed out that states’ identities are culturally characterised and historically constructed. For a region like East Asia, which is made of states with millennium-old history and has been continuously influenced by cultural traditions for ages, the ideational factors of culture and history are equally important as the material ones when examining the interstate relations. This is why a constructivist approach, due to its openness to the study of culture and history, is helpful for better understanding the possibility of China to take the leading role in East Asia.

Therefore, to examine whether China is on its way to become a leader, regional or even global, one needs to understand how leadership is defined in Chinese culture – and to find out in the thinking of the Chinese about what kind of people/country can be regarded as a genuine leader, one will have to look into the evidence in China’s history that depicts China’s leadership in East Asia. Hence, the research method of historical inquiry is adopted in this study, for ‘the national identities of states are crucial for understanding politics …… they must be investigated empirically in concrete historical settings’ (Katzenstein, 1996, pp.24-25). In view of the profound impact of Confucianism on China’s society that had nurtured the thinking of Chinese people for generations, the Confucian classics will be taken as a point of departure to trace the origin of the Chinese theory of leadership.
The next section discusses the Chinese concept of leadership in Confucianism, and the following section illustrates the evidence found in the historical records of China-Korea relations during the period of 1623–1776 that proved the vital role of the ideational force, that is, Confucianism, in making China a leader that was accepted and respected by its neighbouring states.

**The Chinese Concept of Leadership**

In *the Analects*, Confucius repeatedly emphasized the importance of humaneness, considering it the very foundation of becoming a true leader. Mencius further explained the difference between a powerful ruler and a humane king by pointing to the fact that people followed a powerful ruler because they were forced to, while they followed a humane king because they admired the king’s kindness so that they willingly submitted themselves to his leadership. As to apply such reasoning to interstate relations in the real world, Xunzi probably was the one that best described the difference between a powerful state and a state that was qualified to lead the other states.

In his elaborated explanation, Xunzi believed that the best a powerful state could do was to turn other states into its allies – and this was a result of its material strength, the only quality a powerful state possessed. However, a leading state would be able to turn other states into its followers – because it was in possession of three qualities simultaneously: humaneness, righteousness, and might. Consequently, other states voluntarily followed its leadership because they respected its kindness, admired its integrity, and feared its power.
Xunzi’s logic can be illustrated in the following diagram:

Compared with Mencius’ view, Xunzi’s version to explain the qualities of being a leader stays closer to reality – fundamentally, a leading state has to be materially strong. However, the key factor to become a leader is the ideational power. A leader does not coerce others; it wins their heart. ‘To use economic means to get other countries to do what it wants or to prevent them from forcing it to do what it does not want’ (Subramanian, 2011, p.67) is not the sort of leader that the Chinese people wish to become. Therefore, if China has taken the leading role in East Asia (or even the world), there ought to be states that willingly follow China because they are drawn to China’s benevolence and are deterred by China’s power.

Nonetheless, reviewing what China has been doing in the past decades, one can easily notice that the only tool employed by the Chinese government is buying power for
China and control of others with money (Shambaugh, 2015, p.100). Its investments around the world successfully bought China almost everything the country needs for economic development, yet the control of others, needlessly to mention winning the heart of people in other countries, is comparatively less effective. It has to be pointed out that many countries, if not all, engage in activities with China for probably one purpose: to gain material benefits from the rising economy of China. This is an exchange of *quid pro quo* by nature; it is not a leader-follower relationship. By the Chinese standard, China at the moment is merely a powerful state at best, yet it is still not a leader.

One may think that the Chinese concept of leadership is rather ideal, thus questioning whether China had ever achieved such utopian goal. *History says yes.* China was indeed a regional leader during the Ming Dynasty as a result of its material and ideational power. This is not merely a statement made by the Chinese people who are proud of their country’s glorious past; this is a statement that can be verified with evidence of what the Joseon Koreans did in history. To the Koreans living in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, Ming was a true leader to Joseon.

It is known that China established a Sinocentric order in pre-modern East Asia that was sustained by the tributary system, although it has been challenged by some non-Chinese scholars on the actual functionality of such institutional framework. The tributary system might be nominal to some of China’s vassal states, yet historical evidence demonstrated that at least in the China-Korea relations during the period from 1623 to 1766, Ming was faithfully revered as a leader to Joseon by the Koreans – and the core element that supported such relationship, apart from the material power of Ming (typically according to the realist view), was Confucianism, the idea that was
jointly shared by the people in both countries.

Confucianism defined a leader-follower relationship in a way similar to that between a senior and a junior. It was not an unequal relationship between the strong and the weak; in contrary, it was a benign hierarchy that designated rights and privileges to both parties. The junior is to serve the senior, while at the same time, the senior is to look after the junior. Ming was accepted as the suzerain to the Koreans when the Joseon dynasty was founded in 1392. However, Ming was revered as a leader of father-figure by the Koreans in the early 17th century – for the reason of what Ming did for Joseon during the Imjin War (1592–98). By the standard of Xunzi about leadership, Ming fulfilled the three criteria: 1) by expelling the Japanese forces from the Korean Peninsula, Ming demonstrated its unsurmountable military power (might); 2) Ming sent troops to rescue Joseon from the Japanese invasions (righteousness); and 3) Ming saved Joseon at the expense of exhausting its own resources (humaneness).

As a result, the Koreans chose to fight with Ming against the Manchu in the early 17th century, although Ming was in obvious decline at that time. Moreover, the Koreans even prepared to revive the fallen Ming in spite of the fact that East Asia was dominated by the powerful Qing. Some Koreans nowadays may deny what their ancestors did, criticizing those who pledged their allegiance to China for being ‘muddle-headed’ (Kang, 1993, p.62). However, nationalistic sentiments cannot wipe away what happened in history. Korea’s allegiance toward the declining/fallen Ming even in the face of Qing’s supremacy was recorded in full detail in the Ri Dynasty Annals of Korea (also known as the ‘Annals of the Joseon Dynasty’), with the process of every decision made in the Joseon royal court clearly documented. What the Koreans did then may appeared to be incomprehensible to the people of present time, rationalists in particular; yet from another angle, it did prove that China had achieved
the status of a leader in East Asia – not merely by military power to deter others, but also by ideational force that appealed to others.

The *Ri Dynasty Annals of Korea* (hereafter *RDAK* in all in-text references) are chosen to serve as the primary source of this study for the reason that they are the original records written by the Joseon royal historiographers who documented what happened in the Joseon court every day throughout the 518 years of the Joseon Dynasty. On a daily basis, the historiographers recorded information related to every aspect of both domestic affairs and foreign relations. Its completeness (all records were kept intact, even during social upheaval such as the Japanese and the Manchu invasions) and impartiality (Joseon historiographers were trained to faithfully record all information without bias according to the Confucian principles of ethics, not even the monarchs were allowed to interfere with their work) guarantees the truthfulness of the materials for academic researches. The version used in this study is a reprint by the Research Institute for Oriental Cultures of Gakushuin University in Tokyo, Japan, published during the period from 1953 to 1967.

**Evidence of China’s Leadership in Pre-modern History**

To begin with, Ming China established the Sinocentric world order based on the doctrines of Confucianism. It was a hierarchical structure, and China was placed at the top as a result of its cultural superiority (in terms of Confucianism). Being the home of Confucianism and the country that was most sophisticatedly developed in terms of Confucian civilization, China’s superior status in the Sinocentric world order was existential, inevitable, and insurmountable. Other countries, based on how much they developed their cultures according to the Confucian criteria, were ranked as ‘less
civilized’ or ‘barbaric’ countries in the system. This order defined the identity of China as a senior to all other countries in the Sinocentric world, and Korea became one of the juniors that were required to respect and serve China according to Confucian ethics. However, different from the modern concept of Westphalian equality that is deemed as a positive rule for the co-existence of states, hierarchy was nothing negative in the theories of Confucianism. To the contrary, hierarchy was viewed as an assurance of social order.

In Confucian ethics, it was stressed that, while the junior was required to respect and serve the senior, it was the senior’s responsibility to look after the junior. In the Sinocentric world order, the relationship between China and its vassal state was defined as that between a prince and his minister. Officially between the two countries, the suzerain–vassal relationship was typically hierarchical. Yet morally, the relationship was supposed to be a cordial one. As Mencius advocated, ‘when a prince regards his ministers as his hands and feet, his ministers look upon him as their heart and belly’. Hence, the hierarchical Sinocentric world order was humanely projected as a benign framework to appeal to, rather than a coercive system imposed upon, the other barbaric countries around China.

In the case of Korea, although it was a foreign philosophy to Korea, Confucianism was popularized in the Korean society because the Koreans were greatly appealed to the normative themes of Confucianism and they absorbed its tenets and regarded them as the moral principles for self-cultivation. Confucianism hence not only established the norms of the Joseon society but also shaped the view of the Joseon political elites in their making of foreign policy toward China. In 1392 when Goryeo was replaced by Joseon, Confucianism was formally announced as the national ideology in Korea.
and it became the guiding principle that directed literally every aspect of government policy, including foreign relations. Basically, Joseon Korea voluntarily took the role of a ‘junior’ to follow the lead of Ming China, the ‘senior’, in the Sinocentric world order.

The 17th century in East Asia witnessed the process of a power transition, and Joseon was caught between the fight of two ‘whales’ in the region: Ming and Qing. In such a bipolar order that was unprecedented in Joseon’s history, the Koreans exhibited an equally unprecedented passion to uphold the ethical principles of Confucianism and loyalty to serve Ming China: at the risk of having their lives taken and their country eliminated by Qing, the Koreans fought against the Manchu while the power of Ming China was waning, and even defied the authority of Qing after Ming’s collapse in 1644. For around 120 years, Joseon chose to serve the fallen Ming as its leader, although Joseon was officially a vassal state of Qing and Qing’s military supremacy in the region was unquestionable.

This paper examines the Ming/Qing-Joseon relations from 1623 to 1776, with a focus on the key events that took place during the reigning years of four Joseon kings. The Koreans’ loyalty to Ming China, during these periods, effectively proved that it was China’s ideational power (or ‘soft power’ in contemporary term) that made China achieved the status of a leader in the region. The following four sub-sections describe the historical evidence found in the ruling years of Injo (1623–49), Hyojong (1649–59), Sukjong (1674–1720), and Yeongjo (1724–76).

**Injo: Resisting Qing**

During the reign of Injo (1623–49), the rivalry between Ming and Qing reached its
final stage. Joseon suffered two devastating Manchu invasions in 1627 and 1636–7 – for choosing to side with Ming. Injo and his court officials made such decision simply because they were faithful believers of Confucianism. At the beginning of his rule, Injo was determined in serving Ming faithfully with his perfectly clear pro-Ming, anti-Manchu stance. When meeting a Ming military officer on 22 March 1623 and a Ming envoy on 8 April 1623, Injo pledged that he would do his utmost to serve Ming as usual and that Joseon would fully cooperate with Ming in the fight against Manchu (RDAK, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.12, p.22).

Meanwhile, Hong Taiji (son of Nurhaci, emperor of Qing) was planning Manchu’s expansion: to eliminate the possibility of Joseon’s support to Ming, he ordered to launch a sudden invasion to Joseon in January 1627. Overrunning the weak resistance of the Joseon forces, the Manchu army besieged Uiju (near the border) on 13 January and captured Pyongyang on 24 January (RDAK, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, pp.343–4, p.356, p.361). During the Manchu invasion, the local officials, soldiers, and even civilians fought against the invaders although they were no match for the enemy, and many of the Koreans eventually took their own lives instead of surrendering to the Manchu.

For the entire month of February, Injo was trapped in the island of Ganghwa, with supply cut off by the surrounding Manchu troops. In view of the critical situation, Injo came to believe that Joseon could survive only if the Manchu army was willing to withdraw. The king thus agreed to send tribute payment of gold and other precious goods to Manchu – but not as a vassal to Manchu, and to use the era name of Later Jin instead of Ming in the Joseon–Manchu correspondence – but not to sever Joseon’s relationship with Ming (RDAK, vol. 34, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.364, pp.368–78). On 3
March 1627, a treaty of mutual non-aggression was signed, and subsequently the Manchu army withdrew (*RDAK*, vol. 34, *Injo Sillok*, 1962, pp.378–9).

On 1 April, Injo wrote a lengthy memorial to the throne and explained to Tianqi Emperor of Ming China in detail about the Manchu invasion. The king said he was full of remorse for Joseon’s failure to resist subjugation by the powerful Manchu, and with great shame like a son who failed to perform his filial duties to the parents, Injo sincerely begged for Ming’s understanding, mercy, and forgiveness (*RDAK*, vol. 34, *Injo Sillok*, 1962, pp.387–9).

During the decade between the two Manchu invasions (1627–36), the pro-Ming, anti-Manchu sentiment grew strong in Joseon. On one hand, the Koreans (scholar officials in particular) found it difficult to accept the humiliation of negotiating peace with Manchu, the barbarian with a culture inferior to that of Joseon. On the other, by the treaty signed at the end of the invasion, Manchu demanded more tribute payment year after year, adding tremendous burden on Joseon.

During the following years, the Joseon court officials repeatedly persuaded Injo to stop yielding to the Manchu. They argued that if the option of appeasement with Manchu in 1627 was adopted for the benefits of the Koreans, its effect at the moment had completely deviated from the original purpose. Hence they believed that, by upholding the Confucian principles of righteousness, Joseon should say no to Manchu and Joseon would have nothing to fear; all Koreans would support Injo in the fight against Manchu. Injo highly praised and concurred with such idea (*RDAK*, vol. 34, *Injo Sillok*, 1962, pp.542–3; *RDAK*, vol. 35, *Injo Sillok*, 1962, p.42)
On 29 January 1633, Injo issued an edict: the Joseon court was to condemn Manchu for breaching the 1627 agreement and to reject their unreasonable demands. Injo reiterated that the peace treaty was meant to appease the enemy such that the nation could be saved and the Koreans would not be slaughtered. However, the greedy and cunning Manchu took it as an opportunity to exploit the Koreans, for which the king was going to stop it. At the end of the edict, the king appealed to every Joseon subject to unite and to prepare for fighting the enemy (RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.49). Until this moment, the pro-righteousness, anti-Manchu passion ran rather high in Joseon.

What triggered the outbreak of the second Manchu invasion happened in early 1636. Hong Taiji sent an envoy to Joseon in February 1636 and informed the Joseon court that the name of his kingdom was changed from ‘Later Jin’ to ‘Qing’, and his title was elevated from ‘Great Khan’ to ‘Emperor’. The Joseon court officials were shocked and enraged by such actions, which in their eyes was an open defiance and blasphemy to Ming. They severely condemned Hong Taiji and firmly believed that Joseon would become an eternal sinner to the world if Joseon were to acknowledge Hong Taiji as an emperor. If Joseon, a vassal that had been most faithfully serving Ming for over two centuries, acknowledged his emperorship, all other states would follow suit. Hence they proposed to execute the Qing envoy, send the Qing letter to the Ming court, and rebuke Hong Taiji – asserting that this was the only way to prove Joseon’s allegiance to Ming and devotion to Confucian ethics. At the same time, scholars from the royal academy also wrote to Injo with a similar proposal, insisting that the most important thing to Joseon at the moment was to announce to the world that Joseon had been and would always be a nation of Confucian ethics, and Joseon would never do anything against the Confucian principles of righteousness even at the cost of being eliminated
by the barbarians. Injo appreciated their loyalty to Ming, and on 21 February 1636, the king decided not to receive the Qing envoy (*RDAK*, vol. 35, *Injo Sillok*, 1962, pp.162–3).

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

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

Until the dispatch of this letter, the Koreans’ decade-long peace with the Manchu came to an end. Six months later, Hong Taiji launched the second invasion. The Qing troops advanced swiftly and captured Anju (in Pyongan Province) on 13 December 1636. The next day, Injo and his court officials were trapped in Namhansanseong, a fortress to the immediate southeast of Hanseong. From 15 December 1636 to 29 January 1637, the Joseon court officials pled Injo not to surrender and led the remaining Joseon troops in the fortress to fight off the Qing attacks – and some of them even committed suicide as a manifestation of their loyalty to Ming. As for Injo, he chose to uphold the Confucian principles of ethics: considering it as a moral obligation, the king even kept performing the annual ritual in the fortress by bowing toward the direction of the imperial palace in Beijing on the Ming emperor’s birthday and the New Year’s Day (*RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok*, 1962, pp.196–211).

However, when the king received report after report that the Joseon forces from other regions coming to their rescue were all defeated by the Qing troops, Injo realised that the situation became hopeless. On 29 January, Injo sent a letter to Hong Taiji, informing him of Joseon’s decision to surrender. On 30 January 1637, Injo exited the fortress and surrendered to Hong Taiji. The king and the court officials felt deeply humiliated at the ceremony of submission to Qing, yet they had to sign a treaty with Qing, by which Joseon would sever its relationship with Ming and acknowledge Qing as its suzerain with immediate effect. Two sons of Injo were ordered to be sent to
Qing as hostages, and Joseon began to pay tribute to Qing the same way it did for Ming (*RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.212*).

Joseon’s allegiance to Ming hence was not empty rhetoric; the Koreans proved their loyalty to Ming with actions. Had there been only one Manchu invasion, one may argue that it was an impulsive, thoughtless decision of the Koreans to fight against the Manchu. Yet for twice in 10 years, their faith in Confucianism to revere Ming was unquestionable. They were aware of the serious consequences; they knew they would have to sacrifice their lives and their nation. To the Koreans, Ming was a leader to Joseon.

**Hyojong: Bukbeol (Northern Expedition)**

Hyojong (reign: 1649–59) was sent to Mukden as hostages on 8 February 1637 according to the treaty signed between Joseon and Qing at the end of the second Manchu invasion. Eight years later, Hyojong was released on 26 March 1645 by the order of Shunzhi Emperor of Qing, and he ascended the throne on 8 May 1649 (*RDAK, vol. 35, Injo Sillok, 1962, p.213, pp.471–2, pp.496–7*).

During his captive years in Mukden, Hyojong insisted on abiding by the rules of Confucian propriety and refused to be assimilated by the Manchu. He rejected the gold, jade, and precious clothing the Manchu sent him, and he told the Manchu that instead of treasures, he would rather receive Joseon soldiers who were seized by Qing as prisoners of war so that he could send them home. The Manchu came to respect Hyojong and released the captured Joseon soldiers according to his request (*RDAK, vol. 36, Hyojong Sillok, 1963, p.1*). Hyojong later even wrote a letter to inform the Joseon court of the military assault Qing launched against Ming, calling Qing’s action
Throughout his reign, Hyojong had been determined in resisting Qing to revive Ming. He began to plan for Bukbeol right after his enthronement. Yet Hyojong was not reckless; he had been very cautious in the process of planning Bukbeol: he never made any official announcement in the court about the expedition, but he frequently discussed with his court officials about the planning and heavily involved himself in the improvement of Joseon’s military capability. In June 1649, Hyojong invited the 79-year-old Gim Sang-hon (the leading minister during Injo’s reign who advocated anti-Qing ideas) to the royal palace for a private meeting. Two months later, the court officials proposed to the king that the era name of Qing should not be used in any internal official documents and records. Hyojong then issued a secret order to the court officials and instructed them to discuss the proposal at home instead of openly in the court. Consensus was reached and the proposal was approved for implementation (RDAK, vol. 36, Hyojong Sillok, 1963, p.14, pp.21–22).

Hyojong also actively involved himself in issues related to national defence. He kept reminding the military generals of the importance of training the soldiers on a daily basis, and he even offered the backyard of a major royal palace for military drilling exercise. Hyojong involved himself in strengthening the military training for the Joseon soldiers, and he also went into details of re-designing swords, bows and arrows, and military uniforms, making the equipment more functionally effective in combat on the battlefield. It was recorded that every time when Hyojong worked on the issues related to military affairs, the king would tirelessly discuss the planning with court officials from the Ministry of Defence day and night. When alone, Hyojong would often lose himself in meditation and end up with many sleepless nights (RDAK,
However, some court officials expected the king to take some bolder actions against Qing. Song Si-yeol (1607–88) wrote to Hyojong on 16 August 1657 and proposed to ally with the regime of Southern Ming such that a coalition force could be formed to fight against Qing; at the age of 50, he even volunteered to be the messenger (RDAK, vol. 36, Hyojong Sillok, 1963, pp.440–1). Song Jun-gil (1606–72) also suggested to Hyojong that Jeju Island, due to its location (Chinese merchants who travelled to Japan would usually stop by the island), should be turned into a base from which the Joseon court was to contact Ming’s royal descendants for taking further anti-Qing actions. He also reminded the king of the importance of military preparation (RDAK, vol. 36, Hyojong Sillok, 1963, pp.454–5, p.473).

Hyojong gave positive replies to Song Si-yeol and Song Jun-gil, explaining to them that he had been working diligently to prepare for the expedition throughout the years because his determination to resist Qing and to revive Ming never changed. Hyojong was convinced that as long as the Joseon soldiers were trained to form a crack regiment, the military campaign against Qing would be successful. In his words of confidence, Joseon’s victory was not a matter of concern; what needed to be worried about was whether Joseon had the resolution to launch the military campaign. Hyojong asserted that by upholding the Confucian principles of righteousness he would have no regret even if the campaign were to fail. The king said that he was fully aware of his responsibility, and the target he set for himself was to complete the mission with a decade (RDAK, vol. 38, Revised Sillok of Hyeonjong, 1964, pp.26–27).

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

His behaviour might go beyond the comprehension of the realists, who saw the interstate relations through the lens of power politics. However, Confucianism as a powerful ideational force did motivate Hyojong to shoulder the challenging responsibility of avenging the demise of Ming. In general, with the influence exerted by the Confucian discourse of ‘respecting China and resisting the barbarians’, there emerged in the Joseon society at the time the sort of fervour that Joseon should and could defy Qing, even at the risk of losing everything.

**Sukjong: Building Daebodan (Altar for Great Recompense)**

During the 46-year reign of Sukjong (1674–1720), the sentiment to revere the fallen Ming changed from being radically manifested to becoming cautiously expressed. This was mainly due to the military power of Qing that was exhibited in Qing’s successful crushing of the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories (1673–81) and the demise of the Kingdom of Formosa in 1683. In consequence, Joseon’s plan of
Bukbeol was ended for good (RDAK, vol. 39, Sukjong Sillok, 1964, p.437). However, the Joseon political elites never abandoned the Confucian principles of righteousness; they planned to challenge Qing covertly. Headed by the king, they adopted a special approach to honour Ming and to resist Qing.

In early 1704, Sukjong began to openly express his anti-Qing feeling in the court – but cautiously. No affirmative statement about resisting Qing was made explicitly, only some softly made remarks that he was deeply grateful to Wanli Emperor for saving Joseon during the Imjin War, for which he was much regretful about not being able to avenge Ming’s demise due to Joseon’s weak military capability (RDAK, vol. 39, Sukjong Sillok, 1964, p.590, p.598). Sukjong believed that Wanli Emperor was instrumental in the making of the decision to dispatch Ming troops to rescue Joseon. Had it not been the emperor’s greatest humaneness, Joseon would have been eliminated by Japan. Moreover, according to Sukjong’s deduction, it must have cost Ming an enormous amount of resources. Hence, Ming’s rapid decline could be attributed, to a certain extent, to the exhaustion caused by Ming’s involvement in the Imjin War. In other words, Joseon was indirectly responsible for Ming’s collapse. Sukjong therefore concluded that Ming saved the life of Joseon at the expense of its own, for which Joseon was eternally in Ming’s debt.

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

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

Although building the altar and holding memorial ceremonies to enshrine and honour a departed emperor of Ming was as far as Sukjong and his court officials could go at
that time, it was evident that the Joseon political elites still secretly shouldered the responsibility of resisting Qing, and the reason for sustaining such enthusiasm was their understanding of and firm belief in Confucian ethics: Joseon was always a vassal of Ming, and because the senior performed its duty to take care of the junior until its final moment, the junior would continue to revere and serve the senior faithfully (even though the senior no longer existed).

Yeongjo: Expanding Daebodan (Altar for Great Recompense)

Yeongjo stayed on the throne for 52 years (1724–76), and his ruling years coincided with the period of ‘High Qing’ in China, when Qing’s power reached its peak and the distribution of power was never clearer in Northeast Asia since Qing replaced Ming in 1644. However, to the Koreans in general, Joseon’s national identity had always been ‘Little China’ – especially after the fall of Ming, Joseon became the only and true heir to the Chinese civilization. Since Joseon had been emulating China for centuries, the Chinese way of doing things (i.e. political systems, social norms, cultural practices, etc.), as the Koreans claimed, could now be found only in Joseon. Moreover, they even proudly believed that the Manchu respected the Koreans because of the Chinese traditions that Joseon loyally preserved (RDAK, vol. 42, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.395).

In particular, the Joseon political elites continued with their anti-Qing mission secretly. They cheered for the bad omens happening in China (such as earthquake), with which they concluded that the Manchu’s rule of China would not exceed a century, and they forbade the use of Qing’s era name in any internal official documents (RDAK, vol. 43, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.236, pp.389–90). As for Yeongjo, he continued to uphold the principle of ‘respecting China (i.e. Ming) and resisting the barbarians (i.e. Qing)’: throughout his reign, Yeongjo hosted the memorial ceremony at Daebodan every year
in honour of Wanli Emperor (RDAK, vol. 46, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, pp.430–47) – except in 1736, he was not able to hold the ceremony due to the arrival of a Qing embassy on 4 March that coincided with the day of the ceremony, for which Yeongjo openly expressed his disappointment and sadness later in the court (RDAK, vol. 44, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.32).

Moreover, Yeongjo would often remind himself of Ming’s kindness to Joseon by writing poems and purchasing the writings of Ming General Yang Hao, inspector-general of the Ming troops in the Imjin War (RDAK, vol. 44, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.196). Particularly, Yeongjo rewarded the descendents of the court officials who refuted appeasement with the Manchu during Injo’s reign, and highly praised their loyalty that had safeguarded Joseon’s reputation (RDAK, vol. 46, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, p.299). Yet above all these, Yeongjo had made a significant contribution to the anti-Qing sentiment in Joseon: in 1749, Yeongjo ordered to expand Daebodan so as to accommodate the additional enshrinements of Hongwu Emperor and Chongzhen Emperor.

On 1 March 1749, Yeongjo came to know, from Ming’s historical record, that Chongzhen Emperor, upon receiving Joseon’s message to ask Ming for military assistance in January 1637, ordered the dispatch of Ming troops to rescue Joseon. Yet before departure, the Ming expedition forces received the information about Joseon’s surrender and the rescue mission was halted. Chongzhen Emperor scolded the Ming commander for failing to save Joseon, but mentioning not a single word to reprimand Joseon for its submission to the Manchu. Considering Ming’s situation at the time (i.e. fighting Qing’s invasion in Northeast China and suppressing peasant revolts in the heartland), which was as difficult as that of Joseon, Yeongjo felt deeply touched by
Chongzhen Emperor’s kindness to Joseon. Two weeks later, the king proposed in the court to add the memorial tablet of Chongzhen Emperor to the altar. On 23 March, Yeongjo decided to add the tablet of Hongwu Emperor to the altar, justifying his decision by what Hongwu Emperor had done for Joseon: naming the country when the new dynasty was founded in 1392 (*RDAK, vol. 45, Yeongjo Sillok, 1965, pp.57–58, pp.60–61*).

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

In spite of the reality in which the power disparity between Joseon and Qing was crystal clear, Yeongjo chose to follow the principles of Confucian ethics that prevailed in East Asia at the time. Throughout his 52 years of reign, Joseon served Qing officially but kept serving the fallen Ming secretly. Understandably, Joseon’s attitude to serve Qing and the fallen Ming was different: toward the fallen Ming, Joseon
remained consistently faithful, as prescribed in the Confucian classics. As toward Qing, Yeongjo’s statement on 27 October 1772 to summarise his 48-year of experience in managing the Joseon–Qing relations was the best description: he said that there was no such thing called sincerity in Joseon’s relations with Qing. However, (being an exemplar country of Confucianism), Joseon would never abandon the Confucian principle of propriety when serving Qing (*RDAK, vol. 46, Yeongjo Sillok*, 1965, p.322).

**Conclusion**

Was China once a leader in pre-modern East Asia? Yes. The Sinocentric order was not a nominal framework to tickle the vanity of the Chinese people. The Ming–Joseon relationship is evidence to prove that China did achieve the status of a leader in the region – by its standard of leadership. What was the standard of leadership to the Chinese people? A materially strong state that was able to perform its duty to look after the others with humaneness and righteousness. What defined the standard of leadership in China? The Chinese culture that is shaped by the formation and reinforcement of philosophic tradition that has been continuously indoctrinated the Chinese people for over two millennia.

Chinese culture is largely a Confucian culture. In Confucianism, a country can become a leader only when other countries are spontaneously willing to follow its lead – and what makes them willing followers is the leader’s material *and* ideational power: for material power, either they are deterred by or they attempt to seek benefits from the leader (in contemporary terms, not to challenge the dominant position of the leading state, or to bandwagon with the leading state for security protection and/or
economic gain). For ideational power, they are drawn to the idea advocated by the leading state, accept and internalize it as their state ideology (i.e. ‘submission by heart’). Reasoning of the former can be explained by the tenets of realism, yet the latter needs to be examined with a constructivist approach.

The constructivist logic is that an intersubjective idea that is commonly shared by two parties will construct the identities for both. Such identities will then shape the interest of both, whereby their behaviors will be determined. In pre-modern East Asia, China had its own philosophical invention – Confucianism, and it became so popular that the neighboring states of China were attracted to its doctrines. Scholars in these countries went to study Confucianism in China and introduced the philosophy to their fellow countrymen. They voluntarily chose the identity of a junior to serve China, the senior, establishing the vassal-suzerain relationship. Some of these countries, such as Korea, Ryukyu, and Vietnam, began to carry out reform, either moderately or radically, to rebuild their society by changing the social norm and value according to Confucianism. In particular, they remodeled their ruling system by replicating the Chinese practice. Having these followers, a prosperous and powerful China ascent to the leading position within the Sinocentric order that was constructed based on Confucian principles.

Because of China’s glorious past, coupled with the experience during ‘the century of humiliation’, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the Chinese people would have the wish/desire/ambition to become a leader in the region (or even the world) again. As the two components of China’s traditional foreign relations culture described by Stuart-Fox (2004, pp.128–9), the Chinese people tend to believe that China should always be outstanding in the hierarchical power structure of the world,
and China should and can provide other states with an excellent model for them to follow. Deng Xiaoping’s strategy of ‘hiding strength, biding time’ does not necessarily mean that the Chinese people are not interested in becoming a leader again; China during the early 1990s did not have the material foundation to compete for even regional leadership. Yet by accumulating wealth and developing ‘comprehensive national power’ for three decades, how likely is it going to be for a Sinocentric order to re-emerge in East Asia in coming future?

According to the Chinese concept of leadership, it is quite unlikely – unless China is able to offer an ideology that addresses and solves the problems derived from the existing world order of liberal-capitalism. However, the ruling party of China sticks to the doctrines of authoritarianism – for it has to deal with the on-going issue of regime security. To the government, providing the Chinese people with material benefits is vital to eliminate the people’s desire to challenge its rule. Economic development thus has to be prioritized, yet the most effective way to sustain China’s economic growth is to enmesh itself in the system invented and maintained by the U.S.-led West. Hence, be it ‘Going Out’ or ‘One-Belt, One-Road’, China has been engaging in activities of quid pro quo nature that are not new to other countries in the world. On the other hand, the aggressiveness that the Chinese government has been displaying is more related to the regime’s concern to secure its rule via boosting nationalism, rather than professing its ambition to take the leading role in East Asia. Fundamentally, what China offers is opportunity for economic co-development with other countries, not an ideology that can appeal to others – this is why China’s rise has been popularly viewed by other East Asian states as an opportunity to economy but a threat to security.

History has its inspirational value. The conceptual framework of Xunzi can be
invoked to understand the possible path of China’s quest to re-gain its leadership status. If the leadership of East Asia is set to be a dependent variable and the ideology offered by a state with abundant material power as independent variable, borrowing Xunzi’s logic, three types of outcome will occur: 1) if such state offers no ideology to others and simply intimidates them by force, it will become a strong state but besieged by enemies; 2) if such state shares an existing ideology with others and interacts with them on a *quid pro quo* basis, it will become a strong state surrounded by allies; and 3) if such state offers an appealing ideology to others to the extent that they are willing to absorb it as their state ideology, it will become a strong state revered by followers. The diagram below is a summary of such reasoning:
China is a country rich with civilizational resources. However, whether a powerful China can transform itself into a leader to be accepted and followed by other states in East Asia, to a certain extent, depends on the wisdom and the will of the Chinese people to be inspired by these resources in the long run. Unfortunately, for the moment and the near future, the status of China is more likely to remain as a great power, but not necessarily a leader.
References


