

Reconsidering the Concept of *Sadae* in China-Korea Tributary Relations

In-Sung Jang*

Abstract

This essay attempts a structured political interpretation of the Sino-Korean *sadae* relationship, which was formed within the Sinocentric system. *Sadae* encompasses three categories: the ideological (*Sadaejui*), the institutional (tributes and installations), and the practical (*sadae* policy). The specific modes and characteristics of *sadae* in the Sino-Korean relationship can be understood by investigating the interrelated operations of the ideological notions, the institutional norms, and the power relations and interests associated with *sadae*. This essay attempts a dynamic analysis of *sadae* by focusing on power as the driving force behind the interrelated operations of the three elements, and by understanding *sadae* and the balance-of-power as correlated rather than contradictory concepts. It also considers the ways in which political language related to *sadae* captures the interrelated operations of idea, institution, and power.

The interplay of the three elements which comprise *sadae* varied in two dimensions: according to the modes of existence characterizing the types of *tianxia* (天下) that arose in East Asia, and also according to the types of power distribution between the states in China and the states on the Korean Peninsula. Four types of '*tianxia*' are identified: the 'feudal *tianxia*,' the 'warring states *tianxia*,' the 'plural *tianxia*,' and the 'single unified *tianxia*.' Also, there are four types of power distribution, which determine how the tributary system is implemented: there may be one or many Chinese states, and one or many Korean Peninsula states. Thus, the type of geopolitical framework prevailing in East Asia and also the type of power distribution within China and the Korean Peninsula both impacted the interrelated operations of the institutional, ideological, and power aspects of *sadae*. This analysis also offers some insights into how the mode of *sadae* was manifest, and how the Korean peninsular states made efforts to achieve or maintain their independence.

* 장인성, Seoul National University

Keywords

Sinocentrism, tributary system, tributes and installations, idea institution and power, types of *sadae*, types of *tianxia*, power distribution, *sadae* and the balance-of-power

Prologue: ‘Idea’ and ‘Power Relations’

The First Sino-Japanese War brought the abolition of the tributary system in 1895, so that the long-lasting Sino-Korean tributary relationship finally came to an end. Subsequently, through the activities of the People’s Association (萬民會) and *Independence News* (獨立新聞) led by the Independence Club, the notion of sovereignty and the spirit of independence spread widely throughout Joseon society, and Sinocentrism and the notion of *sadae* (事大) [serving the great] began to decline rapidly. The turn of the 20th century even brought the new coinage of *Sadaejuui* (事大主義) [‘serving the great’ understood as a pejorative principle, implying humiliating subservience]. Thus arose a social milieu which, being based on the notion of sovereignty, totally contradicted the Sinocentrism of the Joseon Dynasty and the practice of *sadae*. For example, Lee Gi (李沂, 1848-1909), a Confucian reformer, proposed reforming Korean society by abolishing harmful practices such as the habitual use of Chinese letters, the classification of people based on family lineage, and the adherence to *Sadaejuui*:

Nobody born in this world, unless one is a very stupid and inferior person, would like to submit to others. Being subservient to others occurs only because one’s power is not as great. Our Korean nation has been an *independent state* since the ancient era of Dangun-Gija (Gojoseon). Though conquered by the Mongols later, the land was not incorporated into their territory as provinces and prefectures; instead we just had to receive the Chinese almanac at New Year’s celebrations and pay tribute. Then Taejo seized the power to govern the country, but people did not accept his kingship. Also, he was afraid of the criticism of Ming China, and so he sent a delegation, thereby designating himself as one of its subjects. Indeed, this was something inevitable. Two hundred years afterwards, in the year of *Imjin* (1592) under the reign of King Seonjo, Ming China helped to save Joseon from disaster and to rebuild the

nation, which the Korean people did not forget for a long time. For this reason, the Three Scholar-Officials, who insisted upon rejecting peace (with the barbarian state of Qing), and Song Si-yeol, who advocated the northern expedition, when composing their memorials to the throne, made sure to place the two words ‘Great Ming’ at the top of the list of petitioners’ names. It was their intention to ensure the recovery of the power of the state by inspiring people through these two words. It was not a question of choosing between Ming and Qing. ... Originally, the ancestral sages’ intention lay in a different place. Thus, it is pathetic for their descendants and disciples to arbitrarily invent the discourse of loyalty to Ming and establish it as the doctrine of their faction, solely to benefit their group. Even Mencius’s dictum that “the small state should serve the big state” was simply meant to illustrate that King Tai served Xun Yu (獯鬻) and Goujian served the kingdom of Wu. Though I am not sure whether we can believe that King Tai and Goujian liked this arrangement. Alas, how sad it is! Once the idea of *sadae* emerged, there was no one, whether in or out of office, who did not chant this *Sadaejuui*, and they became conditioned to be subservient to other countries. If this had not been so, their absurd and cowardly behavior would have been unimaginable.¹

Lee Gi criticizes the fact that there was no one, in and out of office, who did not chant *Sadaejuui* after the rise of the notion, and that this established subservience as a firm habit. He also laments the discourse of ‘loyalty to China’ as being the outcome of factionist politics. The salient point here is that Lee Gi grasped the phenomenon of *sadae* as the inevitable result of the superior-inferior power relations. The Sino-Korean tributary system encompassed an economic infrastructure based on trading preferences in which peerages and offices were bestowed upon Koreans; it was also the prerogative of China to confirm the Korean succession: this is sometimes referred to as the ‘installation’ of the king. This relationship was, for Lee Gi, the product of power relations between the two states, but it was also proof that the Joseon Dynasty retained its independent status, not being included in China’s provincial territory. By criticizing *Sadaejuui*, Lee Gi was not entirely rejecting the idea; he was

¹ “Ilbubyokparon” (一斧壁破論) [Breaking an Argument with One Stroke of the Ax] in Lee (1955), pp.74-75.

demonstrating that *sadae* was not an idea, but an inevitable result of power disparities. He reinterprets Mencius's dictum that 'the small state should serve the big state' which was considered to absolutely establish the ideological status of *sadae* in Confucian society. Although Mencius had invoked the fact that King Tai served Xun Yu and Goujian served the kingdom of Wu as the theoretical grounds for *sadae*, according to Lee Gi they had no other choice because of the inequality of power. Lee Gi uses this argument, that *sadae* originates not from idea but from power relations, to argue that Korea had been an independent state since the Dangun-Gija era, since he fervently believes in preserving the independence of Korea. He emphasizes the need to end the harmful practices of using Chinese instead of Korean, of adhering to family lineage instead of promoting equality, and of obsessively respecting *sadae* instead of being independent. Thus, he argues for the reformation of the cultural practices which ruled the linguistic, social, and international orders, and in effect for the reformation of the prevailing intellectual and ideological system, *i.e.* Confucianism.

As Korea entered the colonial period, thereby losing its sovereignty, *Sadaejuui* came in for even stronger criticism. Moon Il-pyeong (文一平, 1888-1939), an historical journalist, distinguished between *Sadaejuui* as it existed before and during the Joseon Dynasty, harshly condemning the latter. He argues that before the Joseon Dynasty *Sadaejuui* was nothing but the "expedient diplomatic language" through which Korea "communicated with China respectfully by using a soft voice." On important matters, however, Korea maintained its own position, and sometimes even risked war when a peaceful solution was difficult to reach. During the Joseon Dynasty, however, *Sadaejuui* "was worshipped as an eccentric ideology in which the so-called respect of China was a golden rule," displaying a "slave mindset" in that China was consistently followed and absolutely obeyed. Moon Il-pyeong argues that "the principle of respecting China led to the confusion between self and other" and that "factional conflicts caused Korea to neglect enemy nations and foreign invasions." He suggests that Neo-Confucianism was the source of both these problems, resulting in a paralysis of "international vision" or "international insight."²

Lee Gi and Moon Il-pyeong both saw *sadae* during the Joseon Dynasty

2 "Joseonjwa Gukjean" (조선인파 국제안) [The Joseon People and Their International Vision] in Moon (2001), pp.282-288.

in terms of *Sadaejjuui* in a historical context including the notion of sovereignty and the struggle for a sovereign state. This suggests that their thoughts should be understood as reflecting a modernity which was othering the language and phenomenon of *sadae*. Such a negative perception of the notion and diplomacy of *sadae* indicates that both the state and intellectual system were undergoing change. While Moon Il-pyeong conceived of *sadae* just as an ideology and attacked it as the cause of slavish servitude, Lee Gi tried to recall the political tensions which had been forgotten because of the Joseon Dynasty's *Sadaejjuui*. Lee Gi saw a dynamic aspect in *sadae*, by distinguishing the ancestral sages' intention to recover state power by inspiring people, as when the Three Scholar-Officials and Song Si-yeol used the words 'Great Ming,' from the absurd fabrication of the descendants and disciples who invented the discourse of loyalty to Ming to serve the interests of their own political factions.

Note that *sadae* is apprehended here both in terms of 'idea' and 'power relations': in the context of the decline of the Chinese Empire and the shifting intellectual frame, the dual nature of idea and power relations immanent in the practice of *sadae* in the Joseon Dynasty is revealed, being seen as an othered form of *Sadaejjuui*. These questions of idea and power relations surrounding the practice of *sadae*, are essentially questions about Sinocentrism (specifically, the principle of respecting China) and the *sadae* relationship (comprising the tributary system). In what ways, then, were 'idea' and 'power relations' expressed before Korea became part of the sovereign state system? Kim Yun-shik (金允植, 1835-1922) provides some useful examples of the ways in which these concepts were presented during the transitional period in the mid-19th century when Western forces were gradually influencing the East.

Kim Yun-shik, a literary stylist and bureaucrat, revealed his views on *sadae* in his essay on "An Argument Regarding Goryeo's Interest in Buying Books" (論高麗買書利害劄子), written by Su Shi (蘇軾, 1037-1101), a scholar-official of the Song Dynasty. Su Shi had argued that the courtesy of *sadae* which Goryeo expressed to Song China was not a 'righteous' act but a 'self-interested' one motivated by the expectation of reward, so that Song China should ban Goryeo's delegates from taking books out of the country, to prevent this drain of information. Kim Yun-shik retorted that Song China ignored Goryeo's '*sadae* with integrity' (事大之誠) and the 'wishes of the people living far way' (遠人之望). The Eastern Kingdom, he continued, is 'the land of men of honor' where people are naturally inclined to admire

China; he mentioned that they made every effort to help when Song China was in crisis, even when Goryeo itself was being hard pressed by Khitan. Hence, when the Goryeo delegates purchased books, it was not because they were seeking to further their private interests, but because they admired ‘literary elegance,’ ‘renowned names,’ and ‘ancient things.’ His point is that the Goryeo people’s act of *sadae* was driven by a sense of justice and integrity.³ His criticism of Su Shi uses expressions such as ‘*sadae* with integrity’ and the ‘wishes of the people living far away’ which are central to Kim’s view of *sadae* and Sinocentrism, and he expressed a similar idea of *sadae* during the fall of Beijing (1860).

We and Qing China are different in size—one is big and the other small—but the relation is truly as close as the gums and the teeth. The misfortune of Qing is not a blessing for our kingdom. ... In general, the small state operates through justice, and the big state through power. This is their way of helping one another. Since we are located close to the land of essence, the Qing people have constantly treated us with generosity over the last two hundred years. By appeasing the barbarians near the border, Qing prevented them from undertaking a bold invasion of our kingdom. Indeed, we have enjoyed the blessing of peaceful cohabitation and received abundant reward. Though they are in a temporary crisis, if the will of Heaven has not changed yet and they can manage to return to the capital and reinstate political power, we will cherish our trusting relationship and never betray the Qing people. Since we did not turn our backs on them in this critical time, their trust in us will become deeper, presenting a chance for us to increase our power, if we wisely adjust ourselves to the situation.⁴

Thus, Kim Yun-shik characterizes the relationship between the Joseon Dynasty and Qing Dynasty as being as close as the gums and the teeth, and reveals his idea of *sadae*: a small state operates through justice, and a big

3 “Non Goryeo Maeseo Rihae Chaja” (論高麗買書利害筭子) [An Argument Regarding Goryeo’s Interest in Buying Books], Kim (1980), p.570. For the following argument about Kim Yun-shik, see Jang (2002), pp.264-265. Su Shi’s opinion reveals the practical aspects of the Goryeo-Song tributary relations.

4 “Bongsong Hwanjae Parkseonsaeng Buycolhaseo” (奉送驥齋朴先生赴熱河序) [Preface to Seeing Off Sir Hwanjae Pak Ku-su for His Travel to China] in Kim (1930), pp.4-5.

one through power. This idea is based on Mencius's notion of *sadae*, but also takes account of practical considerations: the superior political and cultural power of the big state, Qing, and the enduring friendship between the two kingdoms. In this regard, the ideal *sadae* is aligned with the pragmatic one, so that *Sadaejuui* here represents idea and power relations simultaneously.

When Korean society joined the international order, however, the international legal system conflicted with the tributary system, and the ideological nature of *sadae* began to differ from the practical one. Kim Yun-shik wrote, "it is a well-known fact that our kingdom is a vassal state to China. I am always concerned that China may lose interest in being constantly in charge. Our kingdom is weak and isolated, and can hardly stand alone if a big state does not protect us."⁵ Nevertheless, he also argued that if Joseon did not obey the international law, it would fall into a position of total isolation with little or no assistance from the outside world, a situation which would invite invasion by the great powers.⁶ He thought that it would be a 'double benefit' for Joseon to hold rights equivalent to other states, but under the 'charge' of China, as this would preserve Joseon's autonomy without violating the 'justice of *sadae*' (事大之義). He considered that the international status of Joseon should be as a tributary state to Qing and as a sovereign state to other powers, which would be a 'double strategy serving two reasonable and practical ends.'⁷ This shows that a realistic way of thinking had emerged which sought autonomy between international law and the tributary system based on a 'double benefit' and 'double strategy,' and that the ideal and practical *sadae* were beginning to diverge with the shifting geopolitical order.

Lee Gi's and Moon Il-pyeong's criticisms of *Sadaejuui* arose in the context of the abolition of the tributary system, and Kim Yun-shik's notion of *sadae* assumed the coexistence of the tributary system and the sovereign state system. With the continuing changes to the international system, when issues of national security erupted, *sadae* became politicized. Indeed, the phenomenon of *sadae* and its underlying idea cannot be separated

⁵ Kim (1955), p.57.

⁶ "Cheonjin Bongsu Yeongi" (天津奉使緣起) [A Journal of Serving as a Delegate in Tientsin] and "Hyoyu Kuknaedaesominin" (曉諭國內大小民人) [For the Enlightenment and Admonition of All the People in the Nation] in Kim (1980), p.512; pp.80-81.

⁷ Kim (1955), pp.52-53; pp.57-58.

from the prevailing international system and order.

Analytical Concepts and Perspectives

Although Lee Gi and Moon Il-pyeong had tried to separate idea from power relations, this is not possible, as Kim Yun-shik understood. The idea of *Sadaejjuui* and power relations are linked to one another. The idea and power relations are entwined into the ‘courtesy of *sadae*’ (事大之禮) and the tributary system gives rise to the institution of *sadae* as a norm. *Sadae* therefore has three aspects: *sadae* as an idea (the ideal or philosophical *sadae*), *sadae* as an institution (the institutional *sadae*) and *sadae* as power relations (the practical *sadae*). These three aspects correspond to the idea of *Sadaejjuui*, the institutions of tributes and installations, and the policy of *sadae*, respectively. The Sino-Korean relationship within the Sinocentric order was an expression of the interrelated operations of the idea (notions), institution (norms) and power relations (interests) of *sadae*.⁸ The nature of *sadae* can be only be grasped properly by recognizing these complex interactions.⁹

From the idea of *sadae* arises the belief in ‘*sadae* with integrity,’ or Sinocentric values. This Sinocentric idea, grounded on the Confucian view of order, regulated the practical (strategic) *sadae* by guiding the norms of international manners and the institutional conduct of *sadae*. In addition, the idea of *sadae* provided a cultural identity for the Confucians of the Joseon Dynasty, since they saw themselves as sharing the Sinocentric civilization and were proud of being members of the Sinocentric *tianxia* (天下).¹⁰ The archetype of *sadae* as an idea was often represented by

⁸ Distinguishing *sadae* from Sinocentrism, Park Chung-seok defined *sadae* as a political act derived from power relations whereas Sinocentrism is a cultural idea, and considered that each functions differently in a specific context. See Park Chung-seok (2010), p.285. However, *sadae* and Sinocentrism should be regarded as interrelated. Instead of presenting discretely, their interrelationship shows different forms in different contexts.

⁹ Lee Yong-hui was also conscious of the interrelated operations of idea, institution, and power. He divided *sadae* into three aspects: the reality of the *sadae* relationship, the institution of *sadae*, and the philosophy and idea which justify the *sadae* relationship, *i.e.* the value system designated as *Sadaejjuui*. Lee Yong-hui (1977), p.140

¹⁰ These notions of *tianxia* and Sinocentrism were embraced by other states under the influence of Confucianism. Small worlds were established around China, with the surrounding kingdoms becoming small centers validated by a Sinocentric system.

Mencius' remarks:

Only the benevolent can serve the small state even when their state is big. This is why Tang served Go, and King Wen served the Kun barbarians. Only the wise can serve the big state when their state is small. Hence, King Tai served Xun Yu and Goujian served the kingdom of Wu. Those who serve the small state as members of a big state are the ones who enjoy Heaven, and those who serve the big state as members of a small state are the ones who are afraid of Heaven. Those who enjoy Heaven preserve *tianxia*, and those who fear Heaven preserve their own kingdom.¹¹

Mencius's dictum that 'the small state should serve the big state,' along with his philosophy of benevolent rule, was a normative idea in which power relations were regulated by means of morality. The idea of *sadae* was the foundation for an international ethical framework which legitimized the tributary system and the institutions concomitant upon superior and inferior power relations.

No matter how much it was gilded with idea, *sadae* was fundamentally the expression of power relations resting upon the superiority and inferiority of force. The aforementioned criticism by Lee Gi and Moon Il-pyeong, and also Kim Yun-shik's vindication of *sadae*, clearly demonstrate that *sadae* is primarily concerned with power relations. The system of *sadae* was the foundation of the tributary system which was a device for assuring the security of both states that also allowed fine-tuning of the power relationship between the big and the small state. It was a cost-effective device for the state located in China to build international security, whereas for the kingdom on the Korean Peninsula, it ensured the security of the state and the regime as well. *Sadae* was the organizing principle for maintaining the Sinocentric empire and, simultaneously, the survival principle for safeguarding the autonomy of the small state. The tributary system was the core institution which enabled *sadae* to alleviate the power struggles among China's surrounding states and secure international peace. The courtesy rituals for *sadae* such as submitting

¹¹ King Hui of Liang II in *Mencius*. “惟仁者爲能以大事小 是故湯事葛 文王事昆夷 惟智者爲能以小事大 故王事獯鬻 句踐事吳 以大事小者 樂天者也 以小事大者 畏天者也 樂天者保天下 畏天者保其國。”

memorials and sending delegations also were the normal practices responsible for regulating power relations. The tributary system originally developed out of feudalism, by its expansion beyond national borders to include international relationships. It was a means to establish formal relations with vassal or subject states through the practice of granting office to the rulers of marginal lands beyond the administrative reach of China's power for which the system of counties and prefectures was impractical.

Nonetheless, the tributary system was not imposed unilaterally by China through force, but by a mutual consensus of the two states.¹² Moreover, unlike feudalism, which relied on blood relations, the vassal relationships of the tributary system were purely power-based. Thus, the institutional *sadae* that underpinned the tributary system maintained a balance between the strategic and philosophical factors.

How can we then comprehend *sadae*'s interrelated functions of idea, institution and power? Above all, we need to attend to the correlation between the normative rituals, which form the principles of order embedded in the civilization, and the prevailing distribution of power. The strategic aspect of *sadae* and the philosophical one are associated with power and norm, respectively, and the actual operation of *sadae* is linked to the international system which, in turn, relies upon power and norm. However, if we focus only on idea or institution, it is easy to overlook the dynamic aspect of *sadae*, in which power plays the central role. The interactions of the three factors varied, according to the power distribution between the state(s) in China and the state(s) on the Korean Peninsula. Thus, we can formulate four types of power distributions, depending on whether there was one or many states at each location, which decided the operating mode of *sadae*. This will be discussed in detail in the fourth section.

It is also important to consider the different types of '*tianxia*' in which the Sinocentric system and the various power distributions existed. In East Asian history, four types of '*tianxia*' can be identified: the 'feudal *tianxia*,' the 'warring states *tianxia*,' the 'single unified *tianxia*,' and the 'plural *tianxia*.' The 'feudal *tianxia*' designates the *tianxia* realized by Zhou feudalism, the system in which Heaven's Son, the emperor, rules the core China, and the vassal states in the surrounding areas submit to the

¹² Lee Seong-gyu (1992), p.48.

authority of the emperor. The ‘warring states *tianxia*’ signifies the period when warlords became dominant in a fragmented China; following the decline of the emperor’s authority and the decay of feudalism these warlords fought fiercely with one another. The ‘single unified *tianxia*’ describes a situation in which the emperor’s writ extends far beyond China to the wider East Asian world, controlling the surrounding kingdoms either through the institutions of the tributary system or by incorporating them as counties and prefectures of China proper. The eras of *Daming Yitongzhi* [The Unified Geography of Great Ming] and *Daqing Yitongzhi* [The Unified Geography of Great Qing] represent the ‘single unified *tianxia*.’ Finally, in the ‘plural *tianxia*’ there are power struggles among a number of powerful kingdoms, and their rulers each proclaim themselves to be the Sons of Heaven, establishing ‘small *tianxias*’ centered on their kingdoms.

These four types of *tianxia* occurred in different historical periods and in each the idea and institutions of *sadae* made use of different forms of power. *Sadae* based on the tributary system was the legacy of the ‘feudal *tianxia*,’ and this functioned dynamically in the ‘plural *tianxia*,’ but operated rather stagnantly in the ‘single unified *tianxia*.’ The international relationships of East Asia were formed mainly during the ‘plural *tianxia*’ and the ‘single unified *tianxia*.’ The idea and institutions of *sadae* functioned most powerfully and stably in the ‘single unified *tianxia*.’ The four types of *tianxia* do, in fact, represent the historical reality, but by abstracting them from their specific temporal and historical contexts they become imaginative resources for an ideal world, which is seen most clearly in the ‘feudal *tianxia*.’¹³

Considering these four types of *tianxia* creates space to discuss the balance-of-power as the prevailing form of the state power competition in East Asia prior to modern times, excepting the ‘single unified *tianxia*.’ But in such discussions, *sadae* and the balance-of-power should be conceived not as opposites but as correlated concepts. In the Sino-Korean relationship of the ‘plural *tianxia*,’ *sadae* (tributes and installations) served as the

13 When East Asia encountered the Western world, these traditional ‘*tianxia*’ models were revived to provide a conceptual framework for imagining the international order. As will be discussed later, during the period when East Asia was opening up its ports, political leaders in Joseon and Japan drew an analogy between the power struggles among nations and the ‘warring states *tianxia*.’ In modern China there arose a view of the international order which represented the newly expanded world through the image of ‘the single unified *tianxia*,’ as can be seen from Kang Yuwei’s *Datongshu* [The Book of Great Unity].

means of effecting the balance-of-power. In the Sino-Korean relationship of the 'single unified *tianxia*,' however, *sadae* was institutionalized and ideologized, because the dominant power of the Chinese state did not allow any room for the balance-of-power.

Moreover, to correctly understand the interrelated operations of the idea, institution, and power relations of *sadae*, we must be sensitive to the way in which political terminology is used. Stereotypical phrases such as 'sadae with integrity' and 'the mercy of taking care of the small' (字小之仁) could be signifiers of the *sadae* mentality or political rhetoric conveying the tension in power relations. This also explains why the small state on the Korean Peninsula employed the language and rituals of *sadae*—it was a political act to check the exercise of power by the big state in China. Thus, in the case of the Joseon Dynasty, the expressions *sadae* and 'taking care of the small' were found mainly in the Joseon documents concerning *sadae* but rarely in Chinese documents, which suggests that Joseon utilized the language as political rhetoric to restrain Chinese power. In short, one requires a keen sense of discrimination to comprehend the issues of power relations immanent in the political language pertaining to *sadae*, and to determine whether it really represents the attitude of *sadae* or is just political rhetoric.

'*Sadae* with Integrity' and Power Relations

1) Sinocentrism and 'Sadae with Integrity'

The idea of '*sadae* with integrity'—that the small state should serve the big state with integrity and reverence—represents the emotional and psychological aspects of *sadae*; it is the *sadae* mentality internalized by the small state's politicians and intellectuals living within the Sinocentric system. These proponents of '*Sadae* with integrity' were trying to maintain the security of the kingdom by preserving a peaceful relationship between bigger and smaller states, and this idea therefore includes a sense of tension regarding the power relationship with the big state. The '*Sadae* with integrity' concept was sometimes directed toward a single dynasty of China, being articulated as the veneration of Chinese civilization during periods of stability, but in times of change it was also expressed itself as a means to alleviate political tensions between the smaller and bigger states. '*Sadae*

with integrity' was most conspicuous during periods of power imbalance in which a single Chinese dynasty overwhelmed the kingdom on the Korean Peninsula. In the 13th and 14th centuries during the Mongol (Yuan) Empire, the kings of Goryeo from Wonjong to Gongmin were installed by the Yuan and, beginning with the era of King Chungnyeol, the installations were widened to include even the king's son-in-law. The extensive scope of such installations across the higher ranks of the nobility was in contrast to the perfunctory procedures of earlier eras in which Chinese control had been limited to the confirmation of each new king of Goryeo. The intellectuals of Goryeo had used hostile language such as "the beast-like Tartars" and "the devilish band of Tartars" to describe the Mongolians during the period of political and military conflict with the Yuan, but once they came under Yuan rule they treated the Yuan as equivalent to other Chinese dynasties, referring to Goryeo as "the Eastern vassal," or "the vassal as a fence (of the empire)" with "the role of a vassal."¹⁴ They clearly considered the Yuan Empire to be the center of civilization, and tried to play their role as part of that empire. A typical example of this consciousness of *sadae* is represented by the *Jewangungi* [Songs of Emperors and Kings] of Lee Seung-hyu (李承休, 1224-1300). He was proud that Goryeo, despite its *sadae* relationship with the Chinese kingdoms, had managed to remain an autonomous state, and that its kings were descended from the ruling dynasties of the Korean Peninsula; but he also embraced a civilizational world order centered on the Yuan Empire, in which Goryeo aspired to be a small China.¹⁵ Lee Seung-hyu's notion of *sadae* involves the internalization of Confucian idea.

King Sejong's implementation of 'sadae with integrity' emerged as the Joseon Dynasty entered a stable relationship with Ming China. In September of his eighth year (1426), in response to Kwon-jin's proposal to stop capturing falcons to be offered to China, King Sejong said, "In *sadae* we ought to be sincere of heart, and since the emperor knows that we have [falcons] in our land, we cannot deceive him. I know, too, that this is detrimental to the people. In consideration of the cause, however, such damage is a relatively light matter, compared with the seriousness of insincerely fulfilling *sadae*. It is not my duty to encourage people to do hard

14 "Segyejilseowa Goryeo-Mongol Gwangye" (세계질서와 고려-몽골 관계) [The World Order and Goryeo-Mongol Relations] in Lee Ik-ju (2010), pp.173-182.

15 See Chae (2012).

things or to deliver nice words to the throne, because a foreign vassal king has no right to petition the emperor.”¹⁶ By prioritizing the cause of *sadae* over the detriment of the people, he was emphasizing integrity in the practice of *sadae*. Sejong’s relationship to the emperor was defined by *sadae*; this was understood as a vassal relationship between king and subject based on the Confucian notion of courtesy. Sejong’s idea of *sadae* with integrity was established during the political struggles with Ming China during the early period of Joseon Dynasty. *Sadae*, then, was used to build a stable interrelationship with Ming China, adhering to the Confucian view of order. This is apparent in a memorial to the throne, written by Byeon Gye-ryang (卞季良, 1369-1430) and delivered to King Taejong:

Your Highness has such a prominent disposition by nature, and is a learned man who is so well versed in the propriety of the sovereign and subject and the forces of the big and small that you have served China with a pure heart, and there were never any objections. ... Ah, how great your highness is! Through the harmony between the sovereign and subject which you have established, China and this border state became one, and through the sympathy between the high and low, the world became peaceful; indeed, such a harmonious encounter happens hardly once in a thousand years. Ah, Your Highness’s sincerity in serving China has been extremely admirable. If I may humbly express a wish as your loyal subject, may Your Highness be as firm in this attitude as iron and stone, and as faithful as the four seasons, never being indolent or delinquent; and, by obeying the will of Heaven, may you establish the fundamental principles which satisfy the hearts and minds of the people. If you do so, this will be a blessing for the regime, for the people, and for tens of thousands of generations to come.¹⁷

Here, *sadae* is described as the ‘propriety of the sovereign and subject’ and ‘the forces of the big and small.’ Under the rule of Taejo the *sadae* relation between Joseon and Ming China was characterized by ‘the forces of the big and small,’ whereas during the era of Taejong officials tried to apply a

¹⁶ *Annals of Joseon King Sejong*, 29 September, the 8th year of Sejong’s reign.

¹⁷ “Bongsa” (封事) [A Memorial to the Throne] in Byeon (1998).

philosophical gloss over ‘the forces of the big and small’ by using the Confucian ethic of ‘the propriety of the sovereign and subject.’¹⁸

With the replacement of Ming China by Qing China, the expression of *sadae* changed from a psychological attitude of admiring the ‘Sinocentric’ Ming Dynasty to a pragmatic one directed toward the ‘barbarian’ Qing Dynasty. ‘*Sadae* with integrity’ in the Ming era was strengthened by Ming China’s help in saving Joseon from a Japanese invasion that began in 1592. Underpinned by a Neo-Confucian moral justification, it was transformed into a fundamental principle of ‘respecting China,’ very different from the pragmatic *sadae* directed to the ‘barbarian’ Qing. The internalization of this principle of ‘respecting China’ views Joseon as a small China, in a kind of Joseon Sinocentrism. This can be seen from the remarks of Song Si-yeol (宋時烈, 1607-1689):

Having been born in a remote province, and having had no chance to look around the world, we are sitting down in a well and lamenting endlessly. Now, we can see the world through *Hwangyeogosil* [The Real Map of China] compiled by Jeong Seon-suk (鄭善叔), the experience of which is as vivid as if one were there to witness it in person, a great accomplishment which is, indeed, epochal. This book relies mainly upon *Yitongzhi* but also refers to many different related works, and thus, because of its immense scale and meticulous reasoning, it will be very helpful to historians. Ah, how was it possible for the imperial dynasty (Ming China), having such a vast territory, to suffer from the rebellion that occurred during March in the year of *Gapsin* (The Rebellion of Li Tze-chung, 1644)? ... Since our kingdom is so remote, and is isolated in the East, we could become the only remaining civilized nation. This situation is exactly like the saying that “the courtesy for the Zhou kingdom lies in the Lu kingdom.” Even if the sage (Confucius) were born again, he would certainly come to the East riding on a raft. Therefore, we are fortunate to be born in this remote province. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the borders between nations, with their boundaries marked by mountains and rivers, and indeed, this should be the first step of our introspection. How many times did Chu Hsi bemoan his lack of knowledge which led him to doubt, even while he was growing up and living in China? Thus, how is it possible for people like us to preserve

18 See Ahn (1997).

perfection, who were born thousands of miles away, with our imaginations dependent upon a handful of worm-eaten books and the paintbrush of Li Gong-lin (李公麟, a painter of Song China):¹⁹

Notice how the idea of Joseon being remote and isolated, relegated to a corner of the world in the geographical depiction by *Daming Yitongzhi*, is utterly transfigured so that Joseon proclaims itself as a part of China, indeed as China in microcosm. The banal expression that the sage “would certainly come to the East riding on a raft” indicates Joseon’s pride in being the only successor to the Sinocentric civilization.

There is also the case of Noh In (魯認, 1566-1622), a Confucian scholar, who was captured in the Battle of Namwon Castle during the second Japanese invasion of the Imjin Wars and held in Japan as a prisoner of war for two years. He escaped to China on board a ship belonging to a Ming delegation and then returned to Korea, which suggests that Sinocentrism had been internalized as an ethos prior to Song Si-yeol’s observations:

Daming Yitongzhi is an ancient history of foreign cultures and customs which covers a wide area in a rough-and-ready manner, but mainstream Confucian thought arrived in the East a very long time ago. Though our kingdom is a vassal state, Dangun was inaugurated at almost at the same time as King Yao, standing side by side with the Chinese king in a position of honor. Thus, King Wu of the Zhou Dynasty installed Gija, since which time the kingdoms of the Korean Peninsula have consistently respected Chinese values and institutions, including attire, cultural products, rituals and music, and laws and manners. Under the Qin Dynasty, our kingdom belonged to Liaotung, and during the period of Han China it was incorporated as a county and prefecture, but since the Chin Dynasty a border has divided the states, and each has tried to realize the emperor’s teachings by itself, but our kingdom, faithful to its duty, served the great with integrity, and in this regard, it was not different from mainland China. Therefore, beginning with the Goryeo Dynasty, the crown prince entered the Confucian Academy (太學館) in China, at the age of ten, together with an entourage of ten accompanying subjects who also attended the classes. In addition, sometimes our royalty has

19 “Hwangyeogosilseo” (皇輿攷實序) [Preface to the Real Map of China] in Song (1988).

been linked through marriage with the imperial royal family, for example Princess Noguk came to Goryeo after her wedding. In most cases, intelligent kings and holy sovereigns have seized the power generation after generation, revering Confucianism, cherishing the *tao* (道), and governing by law and scholarship, so that there was never a period which lacked renowned Confucians and eminent scholars. ... In our kingdom the Three Bonds and Five Moral Rules (三綱五倫) which apply in human relations and our understanding of courtesy and shame can be compared with that of the Three Kingdoms in China. This is why our kingdom was called the small China.²⁰

Thus, it can be seen that underneath the notion of *sadae* there was a pride in being a civilized kingdom which is aware of the Three Bonds and Five Moral Rules and has a sense of courtesy and shame. As a courteous state then, capable of standing independently of China and proud to be a Confucian country, there is a sense of self-esteem: this is a civilized country ruling over 'barbarians' and 'beasts.' The notion of 'cherishing China' was therefore an expression of *sadae* directed toward the civilized (Sinocentric) world and also of pride in Joseon's own cultural status. Joseon Sinocentrism arose from the perception that Joseon had come to succeed China, replacing it as the center of Sinocentric civilization, because China had become a barbarous country. In the same way that Chu Hsi of the Southern Song abhorred the 'barbarian' Chin Dynasty, the Joseon Sinocentrism of Song Si-yeol despised the 'barbarian' Qing Dynasty. Despite the fact that in reality the Qing held the political power, he still cherished the emotional *sadae* he felt toward 'Chinese' Ming as an abstract force of civilization.

2) Political Rhetoric and Power Relations

'*Sadae* with integrity' is not always a simple expression of Sinocentrism, but can also be a form of political rhetoric in response to unequal power. During periods in which the geopolitical order is shifting, the philosophically-based moral justification for *sadae* competes with the pragmatic usage, but when the big state articulates its international power through violence, the pragmatic *sadae* prevails. This ambiguity of *sadae* allows it to function as rhetoric to conceal political motivation, and to thus

²⁰ Noh In's *Geumgye's Journal*, 13 May, the 32nd year of Seonjo's reign.

become a form of action for coping with difficult political circumstances. ‘*Sadae* with integrity’ was used more often in Joseon than in China, and the expression ‘taking care of the small’ was used unilaterally by Joseon—almost never by China—in the context of expecting grace and virtue from the Son of Heaven, the emperor. So this gesture conveyed the political intention to secure the stability of the socio-political order by promoting ‘justice’ between the big and small states.

The rhetorical characteristics of *sadae* can be found even in the thought of Choi Seung-no (崔承老, 927-989), a scholar-official of the early Goryeo kingdom. In a memorial written in 982, Choi states:

For the eight years since the unification, Your Highness has worked tirelessly on behalf of governmental affairs, promoting *sadae* with courtesy and having a proper, friendly relationship with neighboring states, never being idle even during times of peace and comfort, and always being respectful to inferiors. Your Highness has esteemed morality and revered thrift. ... Our founder, Taejo (Wang Geon), cherished *sadae* deep in his heart and mind, but paid courtesy visits only once every few years by sending a delegation. These days, there have been many delegates dispatched, for courtesy visits as well as for trade, a practice which I am afraid might displease China. Besides, many people have lost their lives in shipwrecks that happen during these journeys. I wish, with a humble heart, that Your Highness will let the courtesy delegates take over responsibility for trade as well, and ban all of the remaining, unnecessary transactions from now on.

Though his statement conveys his idea of how to serve the great with integrity, as reflected in his anxiety about how trade interests can damage the act of *sadae* with courtesy, it also reveals a desire to ease political tensions with the Southern Song and the Liao Dynasty of Khitan by idealizing Taejo Wang Geon’s policy as a model of integrity in *sadae*.

In 1232, during a discussion about relocating the capital from Gaegyeong (modern Gaeseong) to Ganghwa Island to protect it against attack by the Yuan, Yu Seung-dan (兪升旦, 1168-1232) argued:

It is reasonable for the small state to serve the great. If we serve with courtesy and get along with trust, what reason would they have to trouble us all the time? It is surely not a good idea for the state to abandon its

fortifications, give up governmental affairs, and go hide somewhere on an island, idling away the time and letting young men be killed by swords while the old and the feeble are dragged away to become slaves or prisoners of war in the border areas.²¹

Sadae, here, is used as strategic rhetoric to prevent the destruction of the royal family and the kingdom, and the suffering of the people.

The idea of ‘*sadae* with integrity’ was extremely politicized, especially in the period of political change during the founding of the Joseon Dynasty. Taejo, born Lee Seong-gye, experienced some difficulties when Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder and first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, tried to control the terms used in diplomatic interchanges as a way of regulating ‘*sadae* with integrity’ in the process of forming their tributary relationship. These are now known as the three “Memorial (表箋文) Incidents,” and occurred during courtesy visits by Joseon delegates intended to express the integrity of their *sadae*. The First Memorial Incident was triggered by Zhu Yuanzhang in 1395 (the fourth year of Taejo’s reign), who accused Joseon of dividing the two kingdoms by using ‘frivolous and mocking’ language in the memorial of *sadae*. He threatened: “In the courtesy of *sadae*, rhetoric is important. Several times previously, Lee Dan (Lee Seong-gye), the king of Joseon, has caused trouble, and thus I have had to issue a reproach; but immediately after the delegates left, who had come to apologize, another insulting and arrogant piece of writing arrived. So, we have no choice but to conquer these people. However, according to the advice of our ancestors, it is better not send an army to a faraway province, so we will not mobilize the army right now.”²² The following year, the Second Memorial Incident took place when the delegates of the Joseon Dynasty were detained, and Zhu Yuanzhang demanded that Jeong Do-jeon, the drafter of the memorial, be sent to China on the grounds that the memorial requesting the emperor’s commands and seals contained ‘frivolous and disparaging words.’ Zhu emphasized that rhetoric was of the utmost significance in the “extreme courtesy and reverence by which the small state should serve the great,” and that conflict between the states would

²¹ Lee Ik-ju (2010), p.169.

²² *Annals of Ming Taejo* vol. 243, December, the 28th Year of Hongmu (1395). Quoted from Park Won-ho (2002), p.10. My analysis of the Memorial Incidents makes use of Pak Won-ho’s study.

result from the small state's failure to use "refined thoughts, responses, and terms."²³ Furthermore, despite Zhu's command "not to send the memorial anymore since [Joseon] uses unknown characters frequently," the Joseon delegates resubmitted the memorial on New Year's Day of 1396, believing that "it is the only way of delivering even the smallest portion of sincerity in the act of *sadae*"; but Ming China criticized the 'frivolous and mocking' tone of the memorial, yet again.

The Memorial Incidents were caused by Zhu's policy of taming the way in which Joseon practiced '*sadae* with integrity' by controlling the rhetoric of the documents used for *sadae*. Similarly in his domestic politics, Zhu attempted to stabilize his regime by standardizing Chinese through the compilation of *Hongmujeongun* [Dictionary of Proper Chinese Pronunciation] and by controlling speech and writing through 'the indictment of writing' (文字獄). Thus, by controlling the rhetoric of memorials submitted by Joseon, he was striving to ritualize the *sadae* relationship, and to discipline the kingdom, in order to reinforce his imperial dominance. This scrutiny of rhetoric was a political act that forced the Joseon Dynasty to comply with China's imperial power, for it was obliged to accept the system of the *hanimun* [official Chinese writing] and the hierarchical order of *sadae*.²⁴ Furthermore, Zhu, having found fault with Jeong Do-jeon's "disparaging words," demanded that he be sent to China which was done to restrain Jeong Do-jeon, who had tried to conquer the Liaotung Peninsula (part of modern-day Manchuria), whilst ostensibly championing *sadae*. Joseon's strategy, in response, was to dispatch a series of delegations, to convince Zhu that there was no intentional disparagement and to express its desire to serve the great with integrity, while rejecting his demand. Eventually, Joseon had to request that it be informed of the "the mode of writing to avoid" that had offended the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty.²⁵

Although Joseon's act of *sadae* with integrity was undertaken with the intention of resolving its political conflicts with Ming China, it had the potential to evolve into the emotional and psychological form of *sadae*. For example, consider the attitude reflected in Joseon's statement that: "our little kingdom is in a province that is so far away and so remote that we are neither familiar with the language nor well-informed, but barely aware of

²³ *Annals of Choseon King Taejo*, 29 March, the 5th year of Taejo's reign (1396).

²⁴ For this discussion, see Jeong (2009).

²⁵ *Annals of Joseon King Taejo*, 28 December, the 6th year of Taejo (1397).

the situation through the limited knowledge of written expression. Being yet unfamiliar with the structure [of the memorial], we made errors — we were not deliberately disparaging or arrogant.”²⁶ Joseon also used the excuse that because the writer was a ‘foreigner’ he lacked proper knowledge of the form, style, and tone of the memorial, and his education was not sophisticated enough.²⁷ And again, in 1396, when Joseon was unable to present a memorial to celebrate the emperor’s birthday: “though our little kingdom’s integrity in *sadae* had not changed at all, since we are foreigners whose learning was crude and superficial and we are unfamiliar with the constitution of the memorial, we made mistakes in selecting characters, a situation so embarrassing that it made us nervous and fearful.”²⁸ Hence, these excuses that Joseon offered — the psychological distance from Sino-centric civilization and the unfamiliarity with the diplomatic protocols required — suggests that ‘*sadae* with integrity’ already had the potential to move beyond the issue of power relations to ultimately affect the nature of Joseon civilization.

The idea of ‘*sadae* with integrity’ was also used strategically to resolve conflicts with Ming China during King Taejong’s reign. Taejong considered ‘*sadae* with courtesy’ as a reciprocal principle that both the Ming and Joseon Dynasties should obey. ‘*Sadae* with courtesy’ signified, for Joseon, an invitation to participate in the Sinocentric system centered on the Ming Dynasty. Taejong remarked that *sadae* does not arise from fear but from courtesy, and he emphasized that *sadae* did not mean being afraid of China but was a means of maintaining the international order, based on courtesy. Taejong believed that Joseon should show courtesy and integrity in *sadae* but should also consider its own concerns. Thus, if Ming China were to destroy the order created by courtesy in a manner that goes against Joseon’s national security or other interests, then Joseon should confront Ming.²⁹ For Taejong, *sadae* was intertwined with national security, and perhaps this is why Byeon Gye-ryang praised him so highly, particularly for his keen insight into ‘the propriety of the sovereign and subject’ and ‘the forces of big and small,’ and for fulfilling his duty of *sadae* with a pure heart. Here he is attempting to dissolve the psychological

²⁶ *Annals of Joseon King Taejo*, 19 February, the 3rd year of Taejo (1394).

²⁷ *Annals of Joseon King Taejo*, 19 July, the 5th year of Taejo (1396).

²⁸ *Annals of Joseon King Taejo*, 14 June, the 5th year of Taejo (1396).

²⁹ Ahn (1997), pp.13-22.

distance from China, which a ‘foreigner’ must feel, by internalizing Confucian idea and sharing the sentiment of Sinocentrism, and thus escaping the sense of political tension which Taejong had encountered.

By King Sejong’s era, the sense of tension between ‘the forces of big and small’ and ‘the propriety of the sovereign and subject’ had vanished. Sejong managed to secure the security of both the state and his regime by participating in the international security system centered on Ming China, enacting *sadae* as the relationship between the sovereign and subject. King Sejong founded a language institute to promote standard Chinese speech and official Chinese writing. His goal was to implement Ming China’s standardized protocols for speech and writing, thereby establishing standards for spoken and written Korean in Joseon. This institute established the standards for composing the documents for *sadae*, and also devised and promulgated the *hunminjeongeum* (訓民正音) [Proper Sounds to Instruct the People]. The compilation of *Hongmujeongun Yeokhun* (洪武正韻譯訓) [Translation of and Commentary on Honwuzhengyun (洪武正韻)] and *Dongguk-jeongun* (東國正韻) [Dictionary of Proper Korean Pronunciations] was done so that the standard Chinese language and sounds could be phonetically transcribed into *hunminjeongeum* (later to be known as Hangeul). This standardization of speech and writing was undertaken for the purpose of accepting Chinese communication standards, but it also implies embracing the Chinese Empire’s values as part of a process to establish Joseon as a tributary state and guarantee the security of the Joseon royal family’s regime.³⁰

Insofar as *sadae* is an expression of power relations, ‘*sadae* with integrity’ is sure to include political tensions, as demonstrated by the Memorial Incidents at the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty. When there was tension between powers, the ideal aspect of *sadae* (*sadae* with integrity) functioned as political language which could be used to ease the relationship. In such circumstances, ‘*Sadae* with integrity’ was essentially political rhetoric which acted as a mere wrapping for the practical function of *sadae*. However, Joseon’s form of *sadae* with integrity gradually became normative as the Sinocentric world order and the Sino-Korean power relationship stabilized: as the standards for *sadae* defined by Ming China took hold, the Joseon Dynasty managed to adjust to these criteria. Joseon

30 Jeong (2009).

was seeking to reduce political tensions, but it was also much influenced by Neo-Confucian thought, so that the approach to *sadae* with integrity was internalized, ultimately taking the psychological forms of ‘cherishing China’ or Sinocentrism. Subsequently, this ethos of cherishing China became politicized in ways quite different from the Memorial Incidents; the presence of ‘barbarian’ Qing forced Joseon to adopt the pragmatic form of *sadae*. In the early Joseon period, in relation to the Ming Dynasty, the ideal aspect of *sadae* (*sadae* with integrity) overwhelmed the practical one (power relations). In the later Joseon period, however, these ideological and pragmatic aspects were pulling in opposite directions, due to the increasing pressure to serve the great pragmatically which was felt during the Qing Dynasty.

‘*Sadae* with Courtesy’ and Power Relations

1) *Sadae* and the Balance-of-Power

The closer the correlation among idea, institution and power, the more stable the socio-political order tends to be. Once power relations begin to fluctuate, the tributary system and the idea of *sadae* becomes tense, which makes the order unstable. During times when the geopolitical order is shifting, through power struggles or wars, *sadae* is affected by the power relations among the kingdoms which constitute the Sinocentric world. When multiple kingdoms confront one another, power struggles are likely to unfold, but when one state comes to dominate another state or a big state overwhelms a small state, the *sadae* structure tends to be reestablished. The typical practice of ‘*sadae* with courtesy’ was the institution of tributes and installations. It is theoretically possible that the ritual practice of *sadae* could be an expression of ‘*sadae* with integrity’ during a period of stability in which the idea of *sadae* deeply permeated political thought, but in reality, most of the ‘courtesy’ of the tributary system was a consequence of an imbalance-of-power. The element of courtesy in the tributary system is inherently political, and this political nature is sure to be revealed in periods when power is shifting. Thus, ‘*sadae* with courtesy’ reflects a political reality in which a balance-of-power has not been achieved, so that ‘courtesy’ can be discussed in terms of the balance-of-power despite its normative character in the socio-political order.

Sadae and the balance-of-power are often regarded as separate principles of order, with *sadae* as the ordering principle of Sinocentrism and the balance-of-power as that of the sovereign-state system. Thus, Lee Yong-hui makes a sharp distinction between the two orders; he uses 'the *sadae* system' and 'the balance-of-power system' to designate the Sinocentric system and the modern state system, treating them as opposing concepts. In his view, the *sadae* system, in which small states are within the zone of influence of a central power, assumes *tianxia* governed by one big suzerain state. In this system, the fragmentation of the superior power, and also power struggles among states, are seen as exceptional. Here, the monadic worldview prevails, with the relations among the states being based on order and hierarchy and being inclined to courtesy and harmony. In contrast, the power-balance system is an international system in which big competing states of 'equal power' coexist, and small states are scattered amidst them. In this system where the pluralistic view of the state prevails, the assumption of sovereign equality leads the states to pursue military power. For Lee Yong-hui, the two systems were related in a more complex way than simple binary opposition, since *sadae* was also found as part of the power-balance system of the medieval Christian and Byzantine societies, and a few balance-of-power systems existed in East Asia. Nevertheless, he saw the *sadae* system as the dominant type of East Asian international system, though his search to determine whether balance-of-power systems existed within East Asia was limited to the examination of military struggles in the Warring States Period.³¹

The typical *sadae* system in East Asia, however, operated only in the 'single unified *tianxia*.' In other cases, even when the *sadae* system was implemented in technical terms, in practice, the balance-of-power was observed. When several big states were competing with one another, power struggles were commonplace, and in East Asian history the fragmentation of superior powers was not a rare exception. Feudalism, from which the tributary system evolved, contains something like a balance-of-power system within it. East Asian feudalism regulated the relationship between the state ruled by the Son of Heaven and states governed by the feudal lords through the installation of such governors based on blood ties, but then those vassal states were allowed to maintain a

³¹ Lee Yong-hui (1977), pp.155-172.

balance-of-power among themselves. In short, it was a hybrid system combining the practice of tributes and installations with the balance-of-power. Kim Yun-shik discusses feudalism as a mixture of *sadae* and the balance-of-power, saying that in the feudal system the aristocrats of the imperial state and the vassal states were tied by blood, so that the vassal states had very limited freedom to rebel against the emperor's state. But the vassal states were in a "worrisome and fearful situation all around the kingdom" so they had to be constantly on guard against one another.³² In a sense, this 'feudal *tianxia*' was considered to be an ideal world order because of its combination of *sadae* and the balance-of-power.

Systems of power balance are most compatible with the 'warring states *tianxia*.' In a warring-states order the authority of the Son of Heaven Son has fallen, and numerous heroes arise, conquering their territories and competing to control the entire empire, so that *sadae* with courtesy fades and power struggles erupt everywhere. People also fight for the survival of the individual kingdoms, resulting in a new kind of alliance known as 'the vertical association and horizontal union' (合縱連衡). The vertical association and horizontal union was generally a tentative strategy, so from this perspective it is not exactly the same as the more structured form of the balance-of-power found in Europe, but similarities can be seen in the power struggles which occurred. Thus, when the Western forces of a power-balance system gradually advanced into the East, while simultaneously engaging in power struggles with one another, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese intellectuals tended to compare this international order with the warring states order of ancient China or early modern Japan, an analogy which indicates that the 'warring states *tianxia*' is closely related to the balance-of-power. Hence, strategies such as 'controlling the barbarian through other barbarians' (以夷制夷) and 'controlling the enemy through other enemies' (以敵制敵),³³ which appeared during the period in which ports in China were opening up, may also be relevant to the warring states order.

Wanguogongfa (萬國公法), the Chinese translation of Henry Wheaton's *Elements of International Law*, was very influential, with its concept of

³² Kim (1955), pp.536-537.

³³ The idea of 'controlling the barbarian through other barbarians' and 'controlling the enemy through other enemies' was found in *Haiquotuozhi* (海國圖志) and also in Li Hongzhang's letter to Lee Yu-won. The idea was also connected with the theory of the balance-of-power represented in *Joseon Chaeknyak* (朝鮮策略).

'*junshi*' (均勢, the balance-of-power) leading the intellectuals of the region to understand the principle of the balance-of-power as a natural law. The history of the fighting which had occurred during the Warring States Period made it easier for them to grasp the elements operating in a balance-of-power situation, and they readily applied this to the East Asian balance-of-power of modern times. The shift in the world order initiated by the movement of Western forces into the East triggered a process of othering the policy and idea of *sadae*, and simultaneously awoke some aspects of power latent in the practice of *sadae*. In short, East Asia's encounter with the wider geopolitical balance-of-power redefined its international relations in terms of power relations, because this encounter exposed the nature of the power politics inherent in *sadae*. *Joseon Chaeknyak* (朝鮮策略) [Joseon's Foreign Policy] explores the simultaneous expression of the *sadae* and power-balance systems in the historical context in which Western forces were moving to the East and Eastern societies were opening their ports. Its logic of 'union with China,' 'alliance with Japan,' and 'association with America' was based on an East Asian adaptation designed to project the principle of *sadae* into the balance-of-power system. This renewed emphasis on a 'union with China' paradoxically proves that the system of *sadae* was being othered as a consequence of the way in which power was beginning to change international relationships.

2) Power Distribution and *Sadae*

The balance-of-power in East Asia has a practical meaning in the 'plural *tianxia*.' In the 'single unified *tianxia*' in which a single kingdom exercises stable power in China, there is a strong tendency for a *sadae* relationship to form between the state in China and the state on the Korean Peninsula, but in the 'plural *tianxia*' in which many kingdoms coexist in China, there is more room for the balance-of-power to function between China and the state on the Korean Peninsula. The tributary system, the courtesy ritual of *sadae*, serves as a powerful institution for regulating relations between the states in the 'single unified *tianxia*,' but in the 'plural *tianxia*' it functions as a tool which, through power struggles, is used to guarantee the legitimacy and authority of a specific kingdom.

The interplay between *sadae* and balance-of-power systems depends on the power distribution among the kingdoms that constitute *tianxia*. Four types of power distribution can be recognized during the historical period in which the tributary system operated: Type A, a single state on the

continent and a single state on the Korean Peninsula; Type B, multiple states on the continent and a single state on the Korean Peninsula; Type C, a single state on the continent and multiple states on the Korean Peninsula; and, Type D, multiple states on the continent and multiple states on the Korean Peninsula. The pattern of operation of the institutions of the tributary system and the idea of *sadae* varied in accordance with these four types. The Type A power distribution represented the most typical form of the institutions and idea of *sadae*. In the Type D power distribution, however, the balance-of-power was prioritized, and *sadae* functioned as a tool for maintaining the balance-of-power.

The Type A power distribution, which was based on the interplay between one stable Chinese kingdom and a single Korean kingdom, is represented by the relations that existed between Unified Shilla and Tang China, Goryeo and Yuan China, Joseon and Ming China, and Joseon and Qing China. In these circumstances, Sinocentrism and the idea of *sadae* were internalized into a worldview which generated extremely ritualized practice of tributes and installations designed to facilitate a stable power relation with China. There was a marked admiration of and veneration for the Chinese kingdom as the fount of civilization, and the ideological *sadae* conspicuously prevailed. The tributary system was the method by which the Chinese kingdom assured the stable management of international security, and also an efficient mechanism by which the Korean kingdom ensured the security of both its state and regime. The relationship between the Chinese kingdom and Korean kingdom was considered analogous to the one between sovereign and subject or father and son, an analogy which required both to adhere to a code of international behavior which corresponded to the Confucian ethics of such relationships. The relationship between Joseon Korea and Ming China was the most typical example of the tributary system: it defined the reciprocal relationship between the two states but also served as a mechanism to maintain the international order of East Asia by checking the security threats posed by the Jurchen and the Japanese.

The Type B power distribution, involving the interplay of multiple continental states and a lone state on the Korean Peninsula, is exemplified by the relationship of China and Goryeo During the military confrontations between the Southern Song Dynasty and the Liao Dynasty of Khitan, the relationship of China and Goryeo in the transitional period between the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, and the relationship of China and

Joseon in the transitional period between the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The best example concerns the international relationships among Song China, Khitan, and Goryeo. In 916, Khitan invaded China, annexing sixteen prefectures which were ceded by the Later Chin Dynasty. This resulted briefly in a three-tiered tributary system in which Goryeo was a vassal of the Later Chin, who were themselves vassals of Khitan. By the late 10th century, however, the Song dynasty had unified the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms and were pressing Khitan to restore the lost sixteen prefectures, a situation which led to the creation of the Khitan / Song China / Goryeo triad. Song China and Goryeo maintained friendly relations in their mutual opposition to Khitan, but never responded to each other's requests for military support. During the reign of Seongjong, Goryeo was invaded by Khitan, but skillful negotiations by Seo Hui led to the withdrawal of the Khitan forces, with Goryeo agreeing to become a vassal of Khitan in return for six of the disputed prefectures. Goryeo now embraced a world order in which both Song China and Khitan were states ruled by Sons of Heaven and Goryeo was a vassal to each of them. Another interpretation of this situation presented a pluralistic worldview in which Goryeo was also elevated to become another state ruled by a Son of Heaven.³⁴ In the context of a tripartite power distribution and pluralistic worldview, Goryeo's form of *sadae* (tributes and installations) functioned as an instrument of power balance. Goryeo's *sadae* policy and Seo Hui's diplomacy should be understood as a strategic choice which took account of the prevailing circumstances, rather than as an ideological conflict in domestic politics which entailed 'Chinese customs' versus 'Korean customs.'

The other triads of Chinese and Korean peninsular states, formed during transitional periods when Chinese dynasties were changing (from Yuan to Ming and from Ming to Qing), had the potential to create the balance-of-power, but the Korean peninsular states (Goryeo and Joseon) lacked the strategic will to establish it. They were torn between the ideological *sadae*

³⁴ Those who had a Sinocentric worldview considered Goryeo a vassal state that was obliged to serve Song China, but some placed their own kingdom in the center of the world, regarding Goryeo's king as the only Son of Heaven. Yet others, with a pluralistic worldview, thought of Goryeo, Song China, and Khitan each as the centers of their own respective worlds, believing that Goryeo's king ('Heaven's Son of the East') should bestow offices and peerages on the heads of surrounding states and receive tribute from them. Noh Myeong-ho (2009), p.178.

toward the existing Chinese kingdom and the practical *sadae* toward the emerging state. In the case of Joseon, during the transition period from the Ming to the Qing, the ideological *sadae* (i.e., cherishing China and revering the Ming) actually deepened after the Qing replaced the Ming. There was thus a tug-of-war between the ideological *sadae* rooted in Sinocentric moral justification and the practical *sadae* based on Joseon's awareness of its weakness which in reality meant it had to offer tribute to the barbarian Qing. The realists managed to reduce the gap between the practical and ideological *sadae* by confirming Qing as an advanced civilization over a prolonged period in which many *sadae* rituals were performed by Joseon for Qing, but the Sinocentrists insisted on maintaining the ideological *sadae* toward the Ming Dynasty, and denied the need for a practical *sadae* toward the Qing.

The Type C power distribution, involving the interplay between a single continental state and multiple states on the Korean Peninsula, only occurred in ancient times. When the Tang destroyed the Sui in 618, power was balanced between the 'Three Kingdoms' on the Korean Peninsula, Goguryeo, Baekje, and Shilla, and these all approached the Tang as fierce competitors. The Tang simultaneously established tributary relations with all three states in 624, which, from the perspective of Goguryeo, Baekje and Shilla, was a strategy to secure the political authority and power of the Tang Dynasty. Thus, *sadae*, with its tributes and installations, was not so much demanded by the Tang but selected by the three states to manage their mutual power relations, each of them cherishing their own 'small *tianxia*' (小天下).

Ultimately, Shilla institutionalized the tributary system with Tang after unifying the Three Kingdoms, and this strategic *sadae*, realized through a pluralistic worldview and in a political climate of power distribution, faded. Shilla sent various types of delegations to the Tang: for the celebration of New Year, for the appreciation of the Emperor's grace, for petitioning the throne, and for offering condolences, as many as 170 times. Starting in 624 during the reign of King Jinpyeong and continuing until the fall of the Tang Dynasty, the Tang installed not just kings, but also queens and kings' mothers, and bestowed its peerages and positions on the officials of Shilla.³⁵

³⁵ Kwon (2006), p.273.

As Shilla actively accepted the culture of the Tang Empire, along with the ritualized practice of *sadae*, it entered into the Type A power distribution and *sadae* relationship.

The world order existing prior to the formation of Unified Shilla provides a typical example of the Type D power distribution in which multiple continental states and multiple Korean states on the peninsula coexist and interact with one another. This power distribution facilitated the ritualization of the tributary system, which could then be mobilized as a strategic device in complex power struggles, the first priority in the prevailing international relations. More often than not, the kings of the Korean Peninsula tried to persuade Chinese emperors to confirm their position, so as to legitimize their regime and provide international support in their competition with the other Korean kingdoms. It also sometimes happened that a continental state used the confirmation of a Korean king as a means to control such power struggles. The system of tributes and installations was strategic, and the idea of *sadae* was responsive to the fluctuating power relations.

Let us examine the cases of Goguryeo and Baekje during the Sixteen Kingdoms of Chinese history. Goguryeo vied fiercely with the Former and Later Yan kingdoms for Liaotung, but King Gogukweon established a tributary relationship with the Former Yan, and King Gwanggaeto did the same with the Later Yan. The motive was to expand Goguryeo's sphere of influence to the East based on this stable relationship. In fact, the Later Yan had installed King Gwanggaeto as a preemptive measure to defuse aggression from either side, but Goguryeo took advantage of the Later Yan's crisis by occupying Liaotung and attempting to advance into Liaohsi. The tributary relations Goguryeo established with the Northern Wei and the Song in the 430s were intended to augment Goguryeo's power, but the diplomatic relationship between Goguryeo and Northern Wei was repeatedly severed and resumed it because of the influence the Northern Yan.

From 472, Baekje sought to form ties with the Northern Wei, which was threatening Goguryeo, while Goguryeo strove to get closer to the Southern Dynasties or to Rouran. Goguryeo and Northern Wei, though their interests conflicted, were able to maintain peace for a long time through the tributary system: ceremonial rituals allowed Goguryeo to acknowledge the Northern Wei's superiority while simultaneously gaining approval for each kingdom's power base, and hence the peace was

preserved.³⁶ Baekje also endeavored to make alliances with Chinese kingdoms to support its struggle against Goguryeo and Shilla. King Gaero wanted to form a relationship with the Song Dynasty, and also requested that the Northern Wei dispatch troops. But instead of accepting Baekje's request, the Northern Wei provoked King Jangsu, and this threat caused Baekje to sever the relationship with the Northern Wei and begin to pay tributes to the Southern Dynasties instead.

In all these power struggles, between the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties, between the Northern Wei and Rouran, among Goguryeo, Baekje and Shilla, and also among continental states and Korean Peninsula states, *sadae* comprising tributes and installations was a strategic choice for achieving the balance-of-power. The international relationships of ancient East Asia relied upon a multiple balance-of-power model that took the subtle form of the tributary system. *Sadae* was not a norm or an idea that regulated the vertical relationship between the high and low, but rather a strategic instrument constructed to maintain the balance between power expansion and security.

This strategic instrument often employed political rhetoric, and even though such *sadae* rhetoric conveys political intentions, the psychological attitude expressed by it has the potential to be internalized, to be formalized and normativized. In the memorial submitted to request the Northern Wei emperor to send an army, the Baekje king states:

My loyal subject had built a kingdom at the far end of the East, but due to the wolf and coyote (Goguryeo) standing in the way, I could not serve as a protective fence for your majesty, despite receiving spiritual edification generation after generation. Seeing the imperial palace a long way off, my humble desire to rush to the palace was boundless, but I could not hear your majesty's answer carried on the cool breeze. As I think, while in a prostrate position, my pure heart cannot resist admiring Your Majesty's harmonious disposition and heavenly blessings.³⁷

These remarks clearly hint at the possibility of turning the sentiment of *sadae*, uttered as political rhetoric, into an internalized psychological

³⁶ For the relationship between Goguryeo's view of the world and the ancient East Asian balance-of-power, see Noh Taedon (1988); (2006).

³⁷ "History of Baekje" Part 3 in *Samguk sagi* [History of Three Kingdoms] Vol. 25.

attitude as the *sadae* relationship of the two states becomes crystallized.

Epilogue: *Sadae* and *Jaju*

Considering the reality of the international society where big states dominate international relations, it is extremely hard for small states to fully maintain their independence and sovereignty. It is a harsh truth that they can only enjoy (relative) autonomy by compromising the perfection of their sovereignty to some degree. In the Sinocentric world, *sadae* and *jaju* (自主) [self-reliance] were not contradictory but interrelated concepts. The political and practical *sadae* was the means, determined by power relations that enabled small states to survive and remain self-reliant. Whenever multiple states competed with one another and the mechanisms of the Sinocentric system functioned strategically, *jaju* was the product of power dynamics and *sadae* was a strategic choice made to maintain *jaju*. This *jaju* depended on the ordering principle and power distribution prevailing in the international system, and was mediated by the interrelated operations of idea, power, and institutions. In periods when the order was shifting, a state could secure its autonomy only by sensing and conforming to the fluctuations in these three elements, of which power is the driving force; and in periods of stability, it could secure its *jaju* by practicing the courtesy of *sadae* through institutions and norms. In short, *jaju* was realized through *sadae*.

Independence was not just a matter of political consciousness but also of cultural consciousness. Thus, the self-reliance of Korean states on the peninsula is expressed by their distinct cultural consciousness and their *sadae* consciousness directed toward China, the 'universal' civilization. Choe Seung-no of Goryeo, whilst admiring 'Chinese customs,' also emphasizes the importance of 'indigenous customs':

We should observe Chinese institutions but, since the cultural customs of each province follow distinct indigenous traits, it will be difficult to change them all. We ought to correct our vulgar behavior by studying and emulating China's lessons on manners, music, poetry, and handwriting; as well as the on the proprieties of the ruler and ruled, and the father and son. But on other matters such as transportation and attire we should follow 'indigenous customs,' trying to balance luxury with

thrift, as here there is no need for blind imitation.³⁸

Song Si-yeol of Joseon was responsible for sublimating his society's cultural individuality into Joseon Sinocentrism—the typical *Sadaejui* which Lee Gi criticized—by subsuming Joseon society into the 'universal' Chinese civilization. He was trying to reconcile a split between the psychological *sadae* directed toward the 'civilized' Ming and the pragmatic *sadae* directed toward the 'barbarian' Qing. But he also appeared to acknowledge the individual unit as defined by geographical and territorial borders: "We cannot ignore the borders between nations and the boundaries marked by mountains and rivers." Scholars of Practical Learning (*Shilhak*) in the later Joseon era, such as Hong Dae-yong (洪大容) and Jeong Yak-yong (丁若鏞), stressed Joseon's individuality by highlighting its geographical distinctiveness together with its sharing of Chinese civilization. Historians of the same period also sought to establish the origins of Joseon civilization by linking its history with Gija, but they simultaneously relied on the cultural identity of the 'Eastern State' whose founding father was Dangun.³⁹

Whenever ancient East Asia was experiencing a 'plural *tianxia*,' *jaju* was pursued through power struggles, in which *sadae* played a critical role. When the Sino-Korean power distribution became unstable, a tension developed between the ideological and pragmatic *sadae*. Conversely, when the Sino-Korean power distribution stabilized and the ritualized *sadae* became an everyday practice, this tension weakened or dissolved. Thus, for the intellectuals living near the end of the Goryeo Dynasty, the division between the psychological *sadae* devoted to Chinese civilization and the pragmatic *sadae* directed toward the Yuan Empire was resolved when they accepted the Yuan Empire as being China. Similarly, the Joseon scholars who had internalized Sinocentric values rejected the idea of taking a pragmatic approach to *sadae* by paying tribute to the 'barbarian' Qing Dynasty, but the bureaucrats and the scholars of Practical Learning were able to overcome the division between the ideological and practical forms of *sadae* by recognizing the Qing Dynasty as 'China.' Kim Yun-shik's notion of *sadae* exemplifies the realization of this process.

³⁸ "Biography 6: Chei Seung-no" in *Goryeosa* [History of Goryeo] Vol.93.

³⁹ For this argument, see Heo (2009).

When, in the 19th-century, many Western powers began to interact with China and Japan, with Western forces moving into the East, and Eastern societies opening their ports, these new circumstances for East Asian international relations can be regarded as the rise of a new balance-of-power, analogous to the situation of the 'warring states' in an extended form and context. Park Gyu-su (朴珪壽, 1807-1877) criticized Joseon's perception of itself as a 'small China,' an attitude which is best represented by the so-called 'state of courtesy,' and proposed that Joseon should pursue its *jaju* by adapting to the new international balance-of-power. This was based on his understanding of the geopolitical shifts being caused by the incursions of Western forces into the East, and of the ongoing international power struggles.⁴⁰ His remarks provide evidence for the way that political independence had been coordinated with power relations. Once incorporated into the international legal system, *sadae* in its ideological and institutional forms was becoming less functional, and *jaju* could only be pursued through the practical forms of *sadae* aligned with the concept of sovereignty. The opening of the Eastern ports resulted in the international legal system existing side-by-side with the tributary system. The Qing Dynasty, mindful of the power relations among the Great Powers, attempted to make Joseon its tributary state within the balance-of-power system. Thus, the ritualistic form of *sadae* grew weaker and the power-relational one was revived; in fact, *sadae* had ceased to exist in its traditional form. Kim Yun-shik was promoting Joseon independence under the aegis of China, and Yu Gil-jun (兪吉濬, 1856-1914) regarded the tribute system as "the law mutually consented to by the big and small states in which the former agrees to receive our tributes, and not to violate our rights." He was therefore discussing a treaty between the big and small states made under a specific set of circumstances and state of affairs, and he devalued the meaning of *sadae* by proposing to use international law, as 'the common justice of the world,' to impose sanctions for the violation of such a treaty. He also viewed *jaju* as intertwined with sovereignty, by arguing that a state offering tributes (Joseon) should be considered a sovereign state by other states not involved in the tributary relations.⁴¹ In short, he proposed a relativistic perspective which balanced *sadae* and

⁴⁰ Jang (2002), p.117; pp.269-270.

⁴¹ Yu (1895), pp.94-95.

power relations by converting state power relations into a question of rights and sovereignty.

Immediately before the Joseon-Qing tributary system was abolished, Min Yeong-hwan (閔泳煥, 1861-1905) remarked that “as the Eastern vassal state of China, we must not undermine the *sadae* which has been so important for our nation, and especially now, when we have concerns about Russia and Japan and thus need to strengthen our mutual trust more than ever, withdrawing from the status of a vassal state is not a way of empowering ourselves.” Nonetheless, he also suggested manufacturing ships, guns, and firearms, and urged Joseon not to “borrow them from China and use them when we are in trouble, while remaining completely devoted to China at normal times.” Although he referred to “the integrity and reverence in *sadae*,” he also emphasized “self-discipline and the control of others and strenuous effort.”⁴² Thus, he appeared to cherish the tradition of *sadae*, but he also suggested relying upon the trust between China and Joseon as the best strategy to confront Russia and Japan. As the power politics of East Asia grew more complex, *sadae* was subsumed within the logic of the balance-of-power. In this context, the existing ideological form of *sadae* became redundant, and the Qing Dynasty had no choice but to transform the institutions of *sadae*. Eventually, the institutional approach to *sadae* was abandoned, when the First Sino-Japanese War resulted in the abolition of the tributary system. Ultimately, the concept of *dokrib* (獨立) [independence] came to be newly added as the aspiration to be a totally sovereign entity, and *sadae* was overwhelmed by the birth of the pejorative term *Sadaejjuui*.

(Translated by Jong-Im Lee)

⁴² Min (1958), p.47.

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