

International Lecture of the Eurasia Foundation, Fall Semester 2022
Series Lectures (5): “Asian Community: The Construction and
Transformation of East Asiaology”

Topic: The Dissemination of Chinese Books in East Asian in Pre-Modern Era:
On Book Purchases by Korean and Vietnamese Envoys

In the 5th Eurasia Foundation International Lecture in the 2022 academic year of the Chinese Culture University, Professor Hsu Yi Ling from the Department of Korean Language and Literature of the Chinese Culture University was invited to give a lecture entitled “The Dissemination of Chinese Books in East Asian in Pre-Modern Era: On Book Purchases by Korean and Vietnamese Envoys.” In the field of East Asian studies, the academic community is used to focusing on China, Japan, and Korea in Northeast Asia, and pays less attention to Southeast Asia. Professor Hsu is one of the few outstanding scholars in our country who are engaged in the study of Korea and Vietnam. In the speech, Professor Hsu first introduced the background of Korean and Vietnamese envoys’ purchase of books, and then respectively introduced their different characteristics that Vietnamese envoys purchased books in multiple places, while Korean envoys only purchased books in capital city. Professor Hsu concluded this speech with the fundamental differences in book purchases between Korean and Vietnamese Envoys.

The book-purchasing channel of Korean and Vietnamese envoys

North Korea, Vietnam, and Japan are all countries in the Chinese character sphere. Even though Chinese characters were introduced to these countries in the early stage, it does not mean that books were also passed on at the same time. In addition to shared Chinese characters as the background, the dissemination of books in East Asia also depends on practical factors such as economic capacity. There were various channels for the dissemination of books in East Asia. Professor Hsu introduced the particular dissemination channel, “envoy (diplomat).” The time was about the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

There were three main channels for Korea and Vietnam to obtain Chinese books through their envoys, namely (1) Books given by China: mainly to obtain books such as the *Four Books and Five Classics*, *Great Compendium on Human Nature and Principle* (Xing li da quan 性理大全), and the *Undisclosed arrangements for Doing good Deeds* (Weishan yinzhi 為善陰鸞). (2) Purchase books on the occasion of the tribute: ① Korea pays 3 tributes per year (499 times); the time required for a round trip was about 6 months; the route of the tribute went from east to west. ② Vietnam

was 2 tributes in 6 years (77 times); the time required for a round trip was about 2 years; the route of tribute went from south to north. (3) International trade channels: Korea has no international trade. In addition to voluntarily ordering books, Vietnam also adopted other channel via Qing ships from Guangzhou to carry out international trade.

The Book Purchase Features of Korean and Vietnamese Envoys

First of all, Korean and Vietnamese Envoys bought books in different places. Qiu, Jun (邱浚), a politician in Ming Dynasty, recorded in the book *Da xue yan yi* (大學衍義) that the Korean embassy group's book purchases in "only at the capital" because their tributary route passed through "few prefectures and counties." The Vietnamese embassy's route was thousands of miles long and thus, "they bought books anywhere along the way." The same book also recorded that the Ming government clearly gave orders to the envoys that not to buy books at will, especially prohibit envoys to purchase books on astronomy, calendars, and the art of war. In addition, Yuan Mei, writer and poet of in Qing Dynasty, also wrote in his book *Supplement to Discussions of Poetry from the Garden of Accommodation* (Suíyuán Shīhuà Bǔyí 隨園詩話·補遺) that people from Korea, Ryukyu, Annan and other countries in Yanjing (now Beijing), "everyone who encounters new poetry and novels in bookstores in "Liulichang" (a cultural district in Beijing) would buy them back."

It can be seen that although the government forbid envoys from buying books on astronomy, calendars, and the art of war that had national security concerns at that time, there were no restrictions on poetry and novels.

Second, Korean and Vietnamese Envoys also pay in different way as buying books. Korean official Yi Eui-hyeon wrote in his book *Gyeongja Yeonhaeng Japji* (庚子燕行雜識) that some Korean officials who specialize in translation and intermediaries colluded to drive up book prices because envoys could not purchase book freely in bookstores. On the other hand, according to Vietnamese official Phan Thanh Giản's *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên 2nd Volume* (Second Chronicle of the Veritable Records of the Great South 大南實錄正編第二紀), in addition to buying books with "silver taels," envoys used Vietnamese products such as "cinnamon, cardamom, edible bird's-nest" to exchange for "precious items such as ginseng, medicinal materials, books, etc."

Fundamental Differences in Purchasing Books between Korean and Vietnamese Envoys

Books are the representative of knowledge. Professor Hsu emphasized the significance of book dissemination in promoting knowledge sharing and exchange of

ideas with foreign cultures. Finally, Professor Hsu summed up the fundamental differences in the purchase of books between Korean and Vietnamese Envoys with the following three points.

(1) The proportions of books purchase by envoys were different: the purchase of books by envoys was almost the only channel for Korean to import books. In Vietnam, there were both “book purchase by envoys” and trade with Qing merchants.

(2) Envoys bought books in different places: Korean envoys only bought books in Beijing’s bookstores (mainly Liulichang), which was relatively difficult and relatively lacking choice. In addition to the bookstores in Beijing, Vietnamese envoys could purchase book in the routes for the tributaries from Beijing to Vietnam, and there were more choices in terms of books purchasing.

(3) Differences in the presence or absence of intermediaries: when purchasing books, Korean envoys could not buy books freely in bookstores. When Korean translator officials and Chinese officials “Xù bān” (special class of China experts) drive up the price of books when buying books, it caused a tense relationship between translator officials and envoys. Vietnamese envoys were of Chinese descent, so they could freely buy books in bookstores.

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