

All Are the Ruler's Domain, but All Are Different: Mongol-Yuan Rule and Koryŏ Sovereignty in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*

King Kwong WONG

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Mongols incorporated Koryŏ through a myriad of interstate relations. Either approaching from the Tributary-Investiture practice or from the thesis of Koryŏ as a part of the Mongol empire, scholars have previously focused on only one of the many aspects of Koryŏ-Yuan relations to provide a clear picture. By examining the institution of the Branch Secretariat for the Eastern Campaign and Koryŏ graduates of the Yuan civil service examination and their concepts of sovereignty, this paper suggests a new direction to consider Koryŏ-Yuan relations, in which sovereignty and allegiance were not so clear-cut. The Mongols originally established the Branch Secretariat in Koryŏ to facilitate their invasions of Japan. But the Branch Secretariat continued to evolve and became a political institution that symbolized the Mongols' sovereignty over Koryŏ and conferred on Koryŏ literati political and legal statuses to partake in the Yuan civil service examination and to attain offices in the empire after graduation. This, by no means, suggests that these Koryŏ literati shifted their allegiance. Rather, one example, Yi Kok (1298–1351), defended Koryŏ's autonomy by appealing to the Mongols' Confucian rhetoric and emphasizing the difference between Koryŏ and Yuan. The Mongols' use of a Confucian legitimization strategy—the concept of All-under-Heaven—ironically became a means for Koryŏ

*An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the thirteenth International Symposium on Korean Studies organized by the Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies in November 2020. It was subsequently developed with the support of the AKS Graduate Fellowship provided by the Academy of Korean Studies. I would like to express my gratitude to Professors Koo Doyoung of Ewha Womans University and Lee Kang Hahn of the Academy of Korean Studies and the two anonymous readers for their comments, suggestions, and thought-provoking questions. I alone, however, bear the responsibility for any flaws and errors in this paper.

King Kwong Wong (kk.wong@alumni.usc.edu) is an independent scholar based in Hong Kong

Seoul Journal of Korean Studies 34, no. 1 (June 2021): 1–30.
© 2021 Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies

literati to subvert certain elements of the Mongols' sovereignty. At the same time, their appeals also acknowledged the Mongols' right to rule All-under-Heaven. This paper thus reveals the ambiguity of Koryŏ-Yuan relations and concepts of sovereignty.

Keywords: Koryŏ-Yuan relations, sovereignty, pluralism, worldviews, political and cultural boundaries, legitimization strategies, All-under-Heaven, diplomatic rhetoric

Introduction

Koryŏ Korea (918–1392) saw a period when multiple states competed for dominance in East Asia. Koryŏ in Korea, the Song Dynasty (960–1279) in China, and the Khitan-Liao (916–1125) and then the Jurchen-Jin (1115–1234) empires in Manchuria all claimed themselves legitimate rulers of the world. The Mongol conquest during the thirteenth century, however, broke the equilibrium. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Mongols established a vast empire on the Eurasian continent stretching from Eastern Europe in the west to the Korean Peninsula in the east. The empire facilitated trade, mobility of peoples, and cultural exchanges in Eurasia, of which Koryŏ was a part.¹ Ruling an empire consisting of different peoples challenged the Mongols to claim sovereignty through different cultural resources, including proclaiming a Han-Chinese-style dynasty, the Yuan (1271–1368), adopting Buddhist ideology, continuing the Mongol tradition, and so forth.²

In this paper, “sovereignty” refers to the ultimate authority in and the right to rule over a territory, group of people, or polity. Concepts of sovereignty are often expressed in a structure of hierarchy: rulers and ruled. Any discussion of sovereignty, moreover, entails a consideration of several related concepts, such as autonomy, independence, and allegiance. A ruler or a polity enjoys autonomy or independence when exercising sovereignty without the external influence of another ruler or polity. In this paper, I define allegiance as the situation in which rulers, peoples, or polities adhere to the structure of sovereignty.

In different contexts, concepts of sovereignty manifest in different forms. In modern times, with the nation-state as the dominant form of governance, sovereignty is expressed in absolute terms, including but not limited to a clear

1. Yi Kanghai (2013) discusses how Koryŏ was well connected to the rest of the Eurasian continent through trade by examining favorable circumstances in the Mongol empire.

2. For a discussion of how the Mongols utilized different cultural resources to bolster their claims as universal rulers, see Franke (1978).