

Limits to Sinocentrism: Persistence of Nativist Discourses of Identity in Joseon Korea*

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Over the past decades, scholars have examined the far-reaching legacy of the Mongol empire in transforming the cultures of the countries it ruled. Aiming to recreate the Mongol world-empire, the early Ming rulers sought to incorporate neighboring polities into a reinvigorated Sinocentric system. In Korea, elites no longer saw themselves occupying an independent imperial sphere, as they did before the Mongol subjugation. They reportedly internalized the Sinocentric worldview and Korea's predetermined second-rate position. But internalizing the Sinocentric worldview did not mean that the Koreans of Joseon imagined or governed their country only as a vassal of the Chinese empire or entirely forgot about the nativist identity that existed before the Mongol subjugation. This article aims to reveal some of the nativist discourses of identity from Goryeo that survived into Joseon. Positioning Korea as a "rival" of China, these nativist discourses argued that the Korean Peninsula in some ways paralleled China as a geographical entity and that the Joseon people's ancestors "defeated" the unified empires of Sui and Tang China on the battlefields. This article argues that the Joseon acceptance of Sinocentrism was far from total, and a sense of Korea as an independent geopolitical entity survived Korea's formal subservience to Beijing.

Keywords: Sinocentrism, China, Goryeo, Joseon, Goguryeo

*An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the fourteenth International Symposium on Korean Studies organized by the Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies in November 2021.

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