

The Identity of Joseon Interpreters in the Qing Empire

Runze LIU

Joseon interpreters in the Qing Empire were chosen from Korean bannermen and their descendants, who took the initiative to join the Qing Empire or were captured by Qing armies during war. They were a group of “transfrontiersmen” who were able to greatly influence the Qing-Joseon relationship. They maintained extensive interpersonal relationships in Korea and especially kept a good relationship with the Korean interpreters at the Bureau of Interpreters. Joseon interpreters in the early Qing even had family members in Korea. Joseon interpreters were Koreans by ethnicity but were significantly Manchurized, so they maintained a dual identity of both Koreans and Qing bannermen at least until the Qinglong era. The Joseon court was also well aware of this. It always utilized the Joseon interpreters’ interpersonal relationships and identity to gather Qing intelligence and request their assistance in various matters. Still, it could never fully trust these “Koreans” who were serving another country, especially when confidential matters were involved.

Keywords: Joseon interpreters, Qing-Joseon relationship, the Bureau of Interpreters, Korean bannermen, Korean identity

Introduction

Joseon interpreters (Manchu *solho tungse* or *solho hafumbukū*, K. *Joseon tongsa*, Ch. *Chaoxian tongshi* 朝鮮通事) in the service of the Manchu Qing Empire straddled the worlds of Manchuria, China proper, and Joseon Korea,

*This work was supported by the Qiushi Academy Project of Renmin University of China: “Study on Ethnic Interactions and State Governance in Qing Northeast China” (清代东北族群互动与国家治理研究, RUC24QSDL106).

Runze Liu (francislio@ruc.edu.cn) is a master’s student at the Institute of Qing History, Renmin University of China

Seoul Journal of Korean Studies 37, no. 1 (June 2024): 1–25.

© 2024 Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies