

## JOSEON DYNASTY MISSIONS TO THE MING DYNASTY FROM 1392 TO 1644

Nguyen Thi Thu Thuy

*Faculty of History, Hanoi National University of Education*

**Abstract.** The Joseon dynasty placed particular importance on diplomatic activities with the Ming dynasty. During the existence of the Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644), the Joseon dynasty dispatched a total of 1,072 missions, which were an average of 4.7 missions/year, to the Ming dynasty. This ratio surpassed all previous Joseon dynasties. The criteria for selecting envoys to the Ming dynasty were also standardized. The envoy's duties became more varied and diverse, covering many fields such as politics, economics, culture, etc. This proves that the Joseon dynasty was an essential period in the history of China and Joseon relations. The two countries' relationship in politics, economics, and culture surpassed all previous periods and dynasties.

**Keywords:** the Joseon dynasty, the Ming dynasty, mission.

### 1. Introduction

Since the establishment of the Joseon dynasty, the Joseon and Ming emperors regularly sent envoys representing their dynasties to carry out diplomatic work in foreign countries. Specifically for the Joseon dynasty, envoy activities played a significant role in maintaining stability and ensuring its position in its relationship with the Ming. In Vietnam, studies have been related to the activities of Joseon dynasty missions that were sent to the Ming dynasty, but they are still relatively modest. Some works can be mentioned, such as *China – Joseon relationship in the Ming dynasty in terms of exchanging diplomatic missions* (Do Tien Quan, 2015) [1], *Tributary system in diplomatic relations between China and Joseon under feudalism* (Nguyen Thu Hong, 2016) [2], *Diplomatic relations of Joseon and Dai Viet with the Ming dynasty in the early 15th century – a comparative perspective* (Nguyen Nhat Linh, 2017) [3], “*Shida*” Policy – *Reflection of Joseon's understanding on Ming – Dai Viet relations in the early 15th century* (Nguyen Nhat Linh, 2018) [4], etc. While presenting the relationship between Joseon and China, these articles initially mentioned the Joseon dynasty missions sent to the Ming dynasty. However, these presentations are still scattered, not systematic, and specialized. Inheriting previous research results based on source materials about Joseon and the Ming, this article focuses on introducing the system of the Joseon dynasty missions to the Ming dynasty in multiple aspects, such as the number of missions, duties, mission composition, standards, and preparation.

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Contact Nguyen Thi Thu Thuy, e-mail address: [thuyntt@hnue.edu.vn](mailto:thuyntt@hnue.edu.vn)

## 2. Content

### 2.1. Number of missions

Under the Ming dynasty, Joseon dynasty missions continuously came to China over an overlapping period without waiting for previous on-duty ones to return. According to statistics, from the first envoy trip in 1392 to the last one in 1621, 1,072 Joseon dynasty missions, an average of 4.7 missions each year, were sent to China. Details are:

**Table 1. Number of Joseon dynasty missions sent to the Ming [5], [6]**

Reign title under the Ming dynasty	Number of missions
Hongwu洪武 (1392 – 1398)	59
Jianwen建文 (1399 – 1402)	18
Yongle永乐 (1403 – 1424)	227
Hongxi洪熙 (1425)	10
Xuande宣德 (1426 – 1435)	86
Yingzong英宗 (1436 – 1449)	67
Jingtai景泰 (1450 – 1456)	44
Tianshun天順 (1457 – 1464)	60
Chenghua成化 (1465 – 1487)	105
Hongzhi弘治 (1488 – 1505)	55
Zhengde正德 (1506 – 1521)	47
Jiajing嘉靖 (1522 – 1566)	130
Longqing隆庆 (1567 – 1572)	20
Wanli 万历 (1573 – 1619)	144
Taichang泰昌 (1620)	2
Tianqi天啟 (1621)	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,072</b>

To the table above, Yongle (1403 – 1424), Chenghua (1465 – 1487), Jiajing (1522 – 1566), and Wanli (1573 – 1619) were phases when China welcomed the most Joseon dynasty missions, which was over 100 ones.

Comparing the Joseon dynasty missions sent to the Ming dynasty with other dynasties in China, the number of Joseon dynasty missions was recorded as an average of 4.7 missions/year. From the Western Han (206 BC) to the pre-establishment of the Ming dynasty (1368), within 1,574 years, 1,031 Joseon dynasty missions were going to China, on average 0.7 missions/year. Within 432 years, from the unification of the Korean Peninsula of the Goryeo dynasty to the end of the Yuan dynasty, there were 453 missions from Joseon sent to China [6], an average of more than one mission/year. As the Goryeo dynasty lasted 25 years in parallel with the Ming dynasty, 105 missions had been to China, with an average of 4.2 missions/year.

### 2.2. Mission preparation

After the Joseon dynasty envoys received their duties, they first had to identify the

personnel for the mission. Mission personnel were usually decided several months in advance. Before going to the Ming dynasty, Joseon dynasty envoys would also be summoned by the King to draft and present diplomatic documents such as proclamations to the Ming Emperor and Princes and prepare tributes. These activities should be prepared one to two months before carrying out the duty.

*First*, being convened by the King. At the beginning of the Joseon dynasty, the Joseon Kings often rewarded the envoys with clothes, hats, boots, crowns, medicine, and other items and held a banquet to entertain them before the trip to Beijing. By the time of King Jungjong of the Joseon dynasty, there was no longer a custom of rewarding envoys before going on missions. At the end of the Joseon dynasty, this custom was resumed. When envoys prepared to go on missions, they had to say goodbye to the King in the palace, and the King would give them some items.

*Second*, preparing diplomatic documents. The office in charge of diplomatic documents (承文院) relied on the duties to prepare diplomatic documents for the missions. There were two types of documents, which were “Biaowen” (表文) and “Jianwen” (箋文), submitted by Joseon dynasty envoys to the Emperor and Crown prince of the Ming dynasty. “Biaowen” was sent to the Emperor and “Jianwen” was sent to the Crown Prince. Documents given to the Ministry of Rites or Liaodong (辽东) Office of the Ming dynasty were called *tu văn*. Filing documents was an essential duty for Joseon dynasty envoys, and there were strict requirements regarding the format and compilation of these documents. According to Li Shanhong' (李善洪) statistics, during the periodic missions of Joseon dynasty envoys to the Ming dynasty, they had to submit at least 32 diplomatic documents to the Ming emperors each year [12; 172].

*Third*, the farewell ritual was held when the Joseon dynasty envoys left. The ritual was presided over by the Ministry of Rites with unfixed locations. It was at Geunjeongjeon (勤政) of the Gyeongbokgung Palace, sometimes at Taping wan (太平馆), but most often was at Mohwagwan (慕华馆).

*Fourth*, preparing local products. Whether it was a periodic or non-periodic mission, the Joseon dynasty missions had to bring many gifts and trading items, of which the gifts offered to the Emperor and the Ming court were called “local specialties”.

### 2.3. The mission duties

The Joseon dynasty missions sent to China can be divided into periodic and non-periodic missions. There are four types of periodic envoys, including Zhengchao envoy (正朝使), Winter Solstice envoy (冬至使), Holy Festival envoy (圣节使), Qianqiu envoy (千秋使). The envoy expatriated on January 1<sup>st</sup> was called the Zhengchao envoy. The envoy expatriated on the day of the winter solstice was called the Winter Solstice envoy. The envoy sent to congratulate the Emperor on his birthday was called the Holy Festival envoy. The envoy expatriated to congratulate the Crown prince was called Qianqiu envoy. Non-periodic envoys included Thanksgiving envoy (谢恩使), Petition envoy (奏请使) (Petition envoy), Offering gifts and congratulation envoy (进贺使), Thurifying envoy (进香使), Questioning envoy (奏闻使), etc. Missions sent for offering gifts and congratulations (637 missions) took up the most significant number of missions, followed by thanksgiving missions (223 missions), and then

missions with the task of paying tributes (155 missions) [7]. It was inevitable that no matter the primary mission, Joseon dynasty missions always carried tributes. In addition to Jinling (金陵) (present-day Nanjing (南京)) and Beijing (北京), there were also missions expatriating through Liaodong (辽东) Commander-in-chief's Office to address local diplomatic affairs [7].

## **2.4. Mission composition**

Based on duties, the organizational structure and number of envoys in Joseon dynasty missions to China were also different. Based on historical data, it can be seen that a mission usually contains a Chief Envoy (正使), Deputy Envoy (副使), Secretarial Officer (书状官), Interpreter (通事), Martial Officer, Director of Bureau and entourage. The Chief Envoy, Deputy Envoy, and Secretarial Officer are called the “Group of Three Envoys”. The entourage served the “Group of Three envoys” (三使), including doctors, painters, chefs, etc.

### *– The Group of Three Envoys (三使)*

The Group of Three envoys refers to the Chief Envoy (正使), Deputy Envoy (副使), and Secretarial Officer (书状官). The Chief Envoy and Deputy Envoy were Senior third-rank Shangquan or higher. If the rank was insufficient, the court could promote the rank before promulgating a mission to the envoy. The rank of the Secretarial Officer was usually lower than that of the Chief Envoy and Deputy Envoy. This position was responsible for supervising the bringing of prohibited items to the Ming dynasty for trading by the mission's participants.

Under normal circumstances, periodic missions need to dispatch the “Group of Three envoys” to show respect for the Ming dynasty. However, some missions only had a Chief Envoy and Secretarial Officer or only a Chief Envoy and Deputy Envoy. On non-periodic trips, obituary and welcoming envoys were sometimes dispatched without the presence of the Chief Envoy. This case was called “solitary envoy” (单使).

Depending on the forms of missions, the Chief Envoy and Deputy Envoy were sent differently. For instance, when sending envoys to congratulate the enthronement ceremony, the Chief Envoy was usually a first-rank officer (一品官). Periodic envoys usually were Senior second-rank officer Shangquan (正二品上官) or higher. In the case of appointing a Senior third-rank Shangquan, he should be temporarily promoted. This case was called “title borrowing” (借官出使). The Chief and Deputy Envoys were sometimes chosen from the royal Shangquan.

Secretarial Officers were usually a fifth-rank official (五品官) who were normally regarded as the Supervisor of Saheonbu (司宪府). They often carried along the Secretarial entourage of Saheonbu. These people were responsible for monitoring and inspecting goods to prevent trading in prohibited goods during the trips.

In addition, the Chief Envoy, Deputy Envoy, and Secretarial Officer also had the specific task of recording all events observed on the road and in the Ming court. They must report to the King verbally or in writing after returning home.

### *– Interpreter and Martial Officer (通事与军官)*

The Interpreter, mostly taken over by the Office of Interpretation (司译院), was in charge of the mission's interpretation. Normally, the Interpreter was mainly in charge of general merchandise trade or transportation and management of items (old money, items, etc.) and interpretation when entering China.

The number of martial officers ranged from three to more than a dozen people. They were primarily responsible for protecting and guiding the mission.

#### – *Number of missions*

Direct documents are needed to examine the composition and number of personnel of the Joseon dynasty missions sent to China. This can be roughly understood through records of the Joseon dynasty envoys' journeys to the Ming dynasty.

For example, in January 1407, the Joseon dynasty envoy went to China, including the Crown Prince, one Deputy envoy, six Secretarial Officers, 12 retinues, six Horse Escort officers, the Director of the Bureau, etc., a total of 110 people.

From the first year of Xuande (宣德) onwards (1426), Joseon dynasty missions usually consisted of about 30 people [8; 28].

During the reign of King Kwanghaegun (光海君) (1608 – 1623), Zheng Shixin (郑士信) (1558 – 1619) was appointed as Deputy Envoy to visit the Ming dynasty. The missions included the Chief Envoy, Deputy Envoy, Secretarial Officers and also one Secretary, seven martial officers, ten interpreters, two doctors, two people breaking the battle, Chollima, a Justice Commissioner, one horse guard, one horse breeder, two chefs, five escorts, in a total of 36 people [9; 385].

It can be assumed that if the mission went by road, its personnel ranged from 20 to 100 people. This did not include escort troops, as the Joseon dynasty would send troops to escort the missions from Yizhou (义州) to Liaodong (辽东) Office. When the missions returned home, there were also escort troops stationed there. If the missions went by sea, the personnel would be about 160 more people. The “Group of Three envoys” would each sit on their boat to prevent unforeseen events. Each boat could only seat from four to six people. When returning home, the Ming dynasty would send from three to four boats to escort the Joseon dynasty missions back home.

## 2.5. Standards of Envoys

The Joseon dynasty placed particular importance on diplomatic relations with the Ming dynasty. Therefore, it was necessary to select envoys with high status and prestige to go to China to show a sincere attitude towards the Ming dynasty. Early in the Joseon period, Joseon dynasty envoys sent to the Ming dynasty would concurrently be Shangquan (堂上官) or Senior Shangquan. The envoys were mainly directly appointed by the King, and they came to the Ming dynasty to submit forms and papers on their behalf. From the reign of King Taejong (太宗) onwards, as the dispatch of envoys to China was normalized, the scale of sending envoys expanded, the number of necessary envoys increased, and the procedure for appointing envoys also began to be standardized. *Gyeongguk Daejeon* (经国大典) stipulated that: “*The highest official of State Tribunal, Six Ministries and Sungchongwon shall be appointed as Chief Envoy and Deputy Envoy*” [10]. The candidates for this position were high-ranking officials of Six

Ministries (六曹) , Uijeongbu (议政府) , the royal family, etc. The King personally made the selection of envoys.

From 1392, the Joseon dynasty officially began periodically or non-periodically sending envoys to the Ming dynasty. Every year, in early January or on the Emperor's birthday, the Crown prince would periodically send envoys to the Ming dynasty. Regarding the background of envoys to the Ming dynasty, among the 685 envoys sent to the Ming dynasty, according to Kim Song Hee's statistics [11], it can be observed that:

*First*, there were a total of 30 first-rank officials (一品官) , of which contained 16 Senior first-rank officials (正一品) and 14 Junior first-rank (从一品) officials. Envoys who are second-rank officials were 365 people, of which contained 97 were Senior second-rank officials (正二品) and 268 Junior second-rank officials (从二品) . There were 41 High Senior third-rank Shangquan (三品堂上) , five Lower Senior third-rank Shangquan (正三品堂下) , 83 other people, 65 relatives and meritorious officials, and 96 people without titles in the Sanjun Palace (三军府) . It can be seen that, from the reign of King Taizu to King Yejong, all envoys sent on missions were people with high positions. Most of them were Tang Shangquan (堂上官) . In other cases, they would be appointed high before becoming envoys.

*Second*, the envoys dispatched to the Ming in the early period of the Joseon dynasty mostly came from important imperial agencies. Although some people were not officials in royal agencies, they were royal family members or meritorious officials. In particular, 53 people were from Uijeongbu (议政府) , 52 people were from Donnyeongbu (敦宁府) and other palaces. Royal relatives and meritorious officials had 65 people. The total number of envoys from the Six Ministers (六曹) was 143 people, in which The Ministry of Personnel (吏曹) had 24 people, The Ministry of Revenue (户曹) had 34 people, The Ministry of Rites (礼曹) had 24 people, The Ministry of Military (兵曹) had seven people, The Ministry of Justice (刑曹) had 21 people, The Ministry of Works (工曹) had 33 people. Zhongshu Palace (中枢府) occupied 131 people, and Sanjun Palace (三军府) dispatched 96 people. In addition, The Saheonbu (司宪府) had two people, Sungchongwon (承政院) had one person, Siping Palace (司平府) had ten people, Hancheng Palace (汉城府) had 12 people, Kaicheng Palace (开城府) had one person, Art and cultural hall (艺文馆) had 17 people.

*Third*, the Chief Envoy and Deputy Envoy were officials in Uijeongbu and the Six Ministries. Even though royal relatives and meritorious officials did not hold any positions, they had their royal origin and a high reputation.

*Fourth*, at the beginning of the Joseon dynasty, Six Ministries' Classic book was taken as Holy Festival envoy. This only happened twice during the reign of King Taejo (太祖) and three times during the reign of King Taejong (太宗) . It can be assumed that this situation only occurred during the period with the imperfect selection system at the beginning of the Joseon dynasty.

After determining the origin of the envoys, the selection was based on specific criteria. The standards of Joseon dynasty envoys were based on criteria such as Having extensive and erudite knowledge, being proficient in Chinese, and being a High Senior official.

### 3. Conclusion

The Joseon dynasty was assumed to be an essential period in the Joseon-China relationship. The Joseon dynasty especially valued its relationship with the Ming dynasty. This is evidenced by the number of missions sent to the Ming dynasty under this reign, which was more than any previous dynasty. The envoy selection was also standardized; the emperors personally selected them, and usually, they were from people holding high positions in the court. The preparations before expatriating Joseon dynasty envoys to the Ming dynasty were also carefully and thoughtfully conducted. This made the Joseon-China relationship closer in many aspects: politics, economics, culture, etc., making China's traditional culture and ideology increasingly have a profound impact on Joseon.

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