

The Shape of the Cosmopolis: Korea and East Asia in Late Imperial Chinese Vernacular Literary Imagination

The coherence of “East Asia” in the early modern period (1500—1800s) relies on the intersection of three distinct imaginaries: imperial, ecumenical, and cosmopolitan. Projections of universal empire through networks of tribute and trade connected imperial China with Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. These connections, however, were formed across contested ecumenical boundaries, where notions of what constituted “civilization” and “barbarity” created divergent regimes of inclusion and exclusion. For states on the imperial periphery, such as Chosŏn Korea (1392—1910), securing inclusion in a civilized order depended on cultivating practices of literary and textual exchange. Envoy poetry, popular fiction, and epistles in literary Chinese helped build what scholars have called a “Sinoscript cosmopolis,” a shared culture of text that promised to transcend political division and overcome ecumenical exclusion. While Chosŏn Korean elites largely espoused the above views, considering themselves bona fide members of broader imperial, ecumenical, and cosmopolitan imaginaries, to what degree did their imperial Chinese counterparts view them in the same manner? Previous scholarship has endeavored to answer this question by understanding Korea’s place in high imperial ideology. On the other hand, the portrayal of “Korea” in late imperial Chinese vernacular “fiction” offers a different opportunity of approach. Although mentions of “Korea” are few and far between, scattered across a variety of genres ranging from a smattering of *baihua* novels, to short anecdotal stories, and the occasional appearance in a performance script, Korea’s appearance in this vernacular register nonetheless illustrates how these three imaginaries—imperial, ecumenical, and cosmopolitan—interface with one another in ways that are difficult to ascertain in authoritative historical and state-centered sources. These imaginaries, hardly envisioning coterminous or coextensive phenomena, articulate multiple vernacular “theories” of how the East Asian cultural-political universe operated.