Abstract

The Chosŏn court kept meticulous records of its interactions with their Ming, and later, their Qing neighbors. These materials, especially those which predate the nineteenth century do not survive in the form of original materials, but rather as entries in court sponsored compilations. For instance, the monumental Tongmun hwigo, published in 1788, categorizes diplomatic activity according to areas of policy concern. Its organizational scheme, handy for a Chosŏn official searching for relevant precedents, has also provided ready material for historical case studies. What has been less appreciated, however, are how such records came into being in the first place. By interrogating the status of these compilations as “archives,” this paper follows how diplomatic documents were produced, used, and compiled as both products and instruments of diplomatic practice. In reading these materials as instruments of knowledge, rather than mere sources of historical documentation, this essay also makes the case for going beyond diplomatic history as interstate relations and towards a cultural and epistemic history of Korean diplomatic practice.

Keywords: Tongmun hwigo, Sino-Korean relations, tŭngnok, tribute system, diplomatic ritual