FAKULTÄT FÜR OSTASIENWISSENSCHAFTEN

SEKTION SPRACHE UND KULTUR KOREAS
lädt ein zu folgendem Gastvortrag

»Contentious Pasts: Empire and History in Korean and Chinese Envoy Poetry«

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Abstract

This talk will examine relations between Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910) and the Ming (1368–1644) empire through the envoy poetry of the 15th and 16th centuries, a period of sustained peace between the two states. Their envoys, who shared a common Confucian heritage and literary tradition, celebrated this time of tranquility with verse paeans to imperial rule. Compiled in the Anthology of Brilliant Flowers (Hwanghwa chip 皇華集), these poems, often written at elegant gatherings during diplomatic functions, portrayed a world where imperial power, virtuous governance, literary efflorescence, and natural beauty resonated harmoniously. Chosŏn poet-officials, in particular, envisioned an idealized imperial order in which Chosŏn occupied a pivotal place.

A considerable number of the Brilliant Flowers poems dealt with Korea and imperial China’s shared history. Even as Ming and Chosŏn envoys celebrated the grand peace they enjoyed, they also had to contend with their fractious history. Attitudes towards the past were often ambivalent. Nor did Ming and Chosŏn envoys always invest past events with the same significance. Controversial historical figures, such as the Sui and Tang emperors who invaded Korea in the 7th century, or those laden with symbolism, such as the classical culture hero Kjia (Jizi 箕子 fl. 8th c. BCE), often elicited divergent opinions. On the one hand, the contending historical visions in these poems expose underlying fractures in what appears to be a coherent Chosŏn–Ming imperial ideology; on the other, how these fractures then came to be smoothed over in these exchanges illustrates how poetry functioned in diplomacy, resolving political difference and mitigating potential conflict. In this manner, poetic practice played an integral role not only in the construction of imperial ideology but also in the Chosŏn court’s own diplomatic strategy vis-à-vis the Ming imperium.