Conclusion

Descendants of the Japanese and Ming submitting-foreigners still live in Korea. Hardly to be distinguished from other Korean descent-groups, and certainly not in any way part of a diaspora, sites associated with them have nevertheless been enshrined as part of regional heritage administrations. Sites related to the Japanese defector Kim Ch’ungsŏn, the Ming deserter Du Shizhong, as well as the complex at Chojongam associated with the Chenam Wang and Imgu P’ung, have all been developed as locations for tourism, with those sites associated with the Chinese often targeted specifically at Chinese tourists. Although an embarrassing fact during much of the twentieth century, twentieth-first-century South Korea has increasingly celebrated these migrants as an aspect of Korea’s multiculturalism.1

While such narratives are valuable for bringing out aspects of the past that were largely ignored by earlier scholarship, they risk committing significant distortions, for ultimately, the submitting-foreigners and imperial subjects did not relate to the Chosŏn state in the same manner as the “ethnic minorities” of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The late nineteenth century brought migrants to Korea who were governed by the new concept of citizenship and were protected by both consulates and force of arms. They were thus substantially different from the submitting-foreigners and imperial subjects of the Chosŏn.2 At the same time, beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the twentieth, a Korean diaspora formed communities around the world that were governed by states that considered citizenship, race, and ethnicity to be primary and often absolute units of classification.3 Currently, for that matter, the multiculturalism of present-day South Korea, like the multiculturalism of other countries, does not escape the logic of national categories—like state-sponsored multiculturalism around the world, it further entrenches and essentializes nationalism, placing the emphasis on assimilation, and at best celebrating superficial markers of difference—“traditional” clothing, foods, and dance4—a phenomenon that would have made little sense in the late Chosŏn.

Ultimately, it is a distortion to use the language of multiculturalism with reference to the foreign communities of Chosŏn Korea. Submitting-foreigner status, as it developed during the early Chosŏn, was not concerned with “assimilation,”
but with submission to the civilizing power of the Chosŏn monarch. Emerging from the Koryŏ period, it had originally been used to govern the multiplicity of Koryŏ’s relationships with the outside world, while maintaining the broader centrality of the Koryŏ monarch. During the Chosŏn period, it was primarily used to govern Jurchens and Japanese on Chosŏn’s frontiers; it granted to its recipients important economic and military roles and conferred upon the Chosŏn monarch the status of civilizing center. Above all, submitting-foreigner status was a tool used to manage the culturally fluid world of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, creating zones of Chosŏn influence that extended beyond the regions the Chosŏn state could administer directly.

It would have been meaningless, whether during the early, mid-, or late Chosŏn, to speak in terms of Korean bloodlines or Korean race. In 2004, the football player Hines Ward, the child of a Korean mother and an African American soldier father, attracted a mix of guilt (on account of the discrimination experienced by his mother and by mixed-race people in South Korea) and pride (on account of his sports success as a Korean in the United States) in South Korea. During the Chosŏn period itself, however, it would be inconceivable to speak of somebody being half-Korean or of Korean blood. When, during the sixteenth century, Chosŏn officials worried about Jurchens who had been born in Korea taking a position in the royal guard, the worry was not determined by blood quotient but by the seeming success of certain Jurchen figures at gaming the system. The Chosŏn court was equally worried about Pŏnhos pursuing multiple relationships with submitting-Jurchen women in Hamgyŏng Province, even though all parties involved in these relationships were Jurchens. While the Chosŏn court did at times refer to matters such as clothing and marriage and funeral customs, as they had a clear relationship to Confucian rites and morality, issues that greatly concern the modern state—language, culture, and physical appearance—were not part of the conversation.

Indeed, the language of assimilation (tonghwad) requires an object: “Assimilation to what?” Chosŏn, as a society divided by distinctions of social status, did not seek to enforce homogeneity or similarity, for people were assumed to have different roles and orientations according to their social status. Within the hierarchical world of Chosŏn, all outsiders—Chinese, Jurchens, Japanese, and Koreans—to the close-knit circles of the sajok aristocracy were equally alien and unacceptable as marriage partners for sajok. Despite some attempts to match Jurchen hierarchies with Chosŏn hierarchies during the early Chosŏn, the wives given to submitting-foreigners were the descendants of commoners and slaves; the product, in other words, of illegal unions, whose lives could be mobilized
by the state with relative ease. When the Chosŏn court reformed the status of Ming migrants during the eighteenth century, it reorganized them according to patrilineal, with little interest in the origins of their female ancestors. In fact, if female ancestry were considered, most descendants claiming Jurchen, Japanese, or Ming origins would be considered overwhelmingly Korean according to modern racialized language. The reorganization of submitting-foreigners of Ming ancestry in the eighteenth century transformed a group of people of mixed but overwhelmingly Korean ancestry into descent-groups with a ritualized foreign identity; it neither created, nor responded to, a diaspora.

Nor do we improve matters by attempting to approach the subject via the Hua-Yi “Neo-Confucian” dynamic, because such an approach assumes enormous temporal homogeneity within the Chosŏn state and ignores the considerable changes, domestic and international, which occurred during the same period. As I discussed in chapter 1, one can find expressions of hostility toward Jurchens quite easily, but by the same token one can find much more positive references elsewhere. For that matter, it is a mistake to imagine that, during the wars of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Ming Chinese migrants were representatives of China and thus welcome, or that Jurchens were representatives of barbarity and thus unwelcome. As this book has shown, it was not until the reigns of Yŏngjo and Chŏngjo that it was considered at all problematic to classify the descendants of Ming Chinese as submitting-foreigners along with Jurchens, Japanese, and other groups such as the Dutch.

Ultimately, Chosŏn Korea was not a society driven by the rigid pursuit of Confucian ideals, but a society profoundly influenced by the social hierarchies according to which it was organized, with which these Confucian ideals were themselves often in significant tension. Chosŏn’s institution of hereditary slavery, for instance, fit awkwardly with Confucian understandings of human nature and was not present in China to the same extent. In the case of foreigners of Chinese origin, sajok officials and elites may have made their participation in the broader Confucian world a core part of their cultural identity but were certainly not going to submit to Chinese refugees from outside of their circles. During the early Chosŏn, Chinese and other Northeast Asian officials were clearly subordinated to the sajok aristocracy and placed in distinctly supplementary roles as interpreters or clerks, well outside of the ranks of the dominant civil sajok descent-groups. None of the Chinese refugees or their descendants who came during the Ming-Qing transition gained truly prominent social status in Chosŏn. Insofar as they did gain higher status during the reigns of Yŏngjo and Chŏngjo, they merely achieved an improved but subordinate and
supportive role, similar to what was granted to other members of intermediate status groups. Kang Shijue (discussed in chapter 4) made himself useful to the local administration in northern Hamgyŏng during the 1670s and 1680s, and his sons continued to play the role of prominent local elites and low-ranking military sajok. Prominent sajok aristocrats like Nam Kuman and Pak Sedang may have been willing to appeal to Kang Shijue’s claimed descent from Ming officialdom in order to allow him to play the role of intermediary in northern Hamgyŏng, but they were in no danger of actually allowing him to join the capital aristocracy in Hansŏng. “Hua and yi” was a logic that helped the Chosŏn court and elite make sense of the world around them, but it was imposed variably according to the needs—political, ideological, and economic—of the sajok elite.

In many ways, in fact, the transformation of the social status of Ming migrants represented a continuation of their earlier ritual role by bringing them into a ritual relationship with the Chosŏn monarchy. By participating in rituals in the Taebodan, Ming migrants were playing an almost identical role to Jurchen and Japanese leaders of the early Chosŏn court in Hansŏng, with the major difference being the changing conception of the Chosŏn state. A fifteenth-century Jurchen leader offering tribute in Hansŏng in exchange for a bureaucratic title in Hansŏng was confirming Chosŏn’s role as a lesser center in the context of overall Ming hegemony. Similarly, when the descendants of Ming migrants, who had received the ritualized status of imperial subjects, participated in the rituals at the Taebodan, they confirmed the Chosŏn monarch’s status as the one remaining representative of the Chunghwa order. Both the Jurchen envoy and the imperial subject acted clearly in subordination to the Chosŏn monarch and the sajok civil officials who dominated the court. Despite attempts by people like Wang Tŏgil to claim higher status (as a self-styled official of the original Ming central court), imperial subjects had considerably less power, influence, and autonomy than the Jurchen and Japanese potentates who submitted to the early Chosŏn court, but who maintained a base outside of Chosŏn’s effective administration.

To the extent that the language of assimilation is at all appropriate, it is not in the sense that it occurs in a modern nation-state, but in the manner of vernacularization as conceptualized by Victor Lieberman. Jurchens, Japanese, and others during the Chosŏn period operated in a world where boundaries were unclearly defined, and the regions that are now Japan, the Chinese northeast, and northern Hamgyŏng were under the control of small and fluid polities. Chosŏn, emerging from the chaos of the collapse of the Mongol empire, sought to establish control over this fluid and chaotic frontier by binding the leaders of these small polities into a relationship with the Chosŏn court, to make them
act as intermediaries on Chosŏn’s behalf. While during the early Chosŏn these groups had only been weakly controlled, and often attached to small polities on Chosŏn’s frontiers, geopolitical shifts during the seventeenth century eliminated these small polities and the borderland peoples who had operated out of them. Moreover, the growing centralization of the Chosŏn state during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gave Chosŏn’s central court far greater control over its subjects. As part of Chosŏn’s assertion of its own Ming loyalist identity, the Chosŏn refashioned some people of foreign origin into Ming loyalists. In contrast to the Chinese in Koryŏ and early Chosŏn, who had received Korean clan seats, during the eighteenth century, Ming migrant descent-groups used clan seats that referred to Chinese place-names. Yet, the entire identity of these Ming migrant descent-groups, including the shrines at which they practiced Ming loyalist rites, integrated them fully into a Chosŏn identity.

Imperial subject status confirmed its recipients as eternal subjects of the fallen Ming, and the Chosŏn court under Yŏngjo and Chŏngjo actively sought to entrench and clarify their foreign status, finding genealogies or evidence of their Ming origins, seeking to limit their residence to clearly defined imperial subject villages, and correcting their ritual activities to fit better with the Chosŏn court’s conception of a Ming loyalist remnant subject. However, ultimately, they were not foreigners at all. This is not to say that their genealogical claims were fraudulent, although many likely were. As was discussed in chapter 6, the historian Sŏng Haeŭng himself, though an active participant in creating the Ming loyalist histories, revealed that many of the genealogical claims of imperial subjects were simply impossible and based on weak or absent sources. I expect that most claimants to imperial subject status would have been from submitting-foreigner communities, where the Chosŏn court generally went looking for Ming remnants. The Chosŏn court did look for documentation and did reject inappropriate claimants such as Pak Sŭngbok. Yet as the very case of Pak Sŭngbok reveals, surnames and lines of descent among submitting-foreigners were often unstable, many submitting-foreigners lived outside of submitting-foreigner villages, and most submitting-foreigners married with Koreans. The eighteenth-century Chosŏn court created the ritualized imperial subject status out of submitting-foreigner communities that had lived for several generations in close association with low-status Koreans, with whom, in most respects, they would have been completely indistinguishable. The desire to have a ritualized foreign element on its soil was such that, even with the vanishing of actual borderland communities, the Chosŏn court subsidized and supported a permanent foreign community, often ignoring a complete lack of credible sources, overlooking
facile claims that all documentation had been burned, and even accepting, in the case of the descendants of Chen Fengyi, that someone might choose to hide an imperial edict in a well.

Dipesh Chakrabarty has cautioned against the tendency, within much historical scholarship, to treat regions outside of Europe primarily through their success or failure to achieve a normative European standard of historical development and to view them through the language of “lack” and inadequacy.” As I have argued in this book, the self-identity of Chosŏn during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can certainly be appropriated for the uses of modern nationalists and multiculturalists, but it was structured according to a logic of its own. The Chosŏn court and sajok aristocracy imagined themselves to be part of a historical entity based in the Korean peninsula that fully participated in a Chunghwa identity and believed that, after the fall of the Ming, they were the last representatives of the Chunghwa ideal. This ideal was certainly not identical to the narrow and exclusionary nationalism that developed in Korea post-1894, but it was also clearly oriented to the geographic, social, and political space of Chosŏn. For late Chosŏn elites, particularism based on Chosŏn was not in conflict with a cosmopolitan outlook that embraced China, nor did it require homogeneity and resistance to foreign influences and people. There was also no contradiction between admiring the Ming and accepting the submission of ordinary Ming Chinese, for the simple reason that identification with Chunghwa as a larger political and cultural project did not involve national identification, and individual subjects of China were not representatives of Chunghwa. Ming migrants had to be made representatives of the Ming—by discovering genealogies that gave them elite and loyal ancestors—a process that brought them into a hierarchical community centered on the Chosŏn court and dominated by aristocratic sajok descent-groups. They were not a heterogenous element but were people possessing a distinct status in a society where explicit status distinctions were normalized, and they were not so much foreigners as Chosŏn subjects transformed to support Chosŏn court’s own image of its role in the broader world.