

Japan-China-Korea Relationship in the Context of the World: Neighbor States and Tributary States, Sovereignty and Independence

『世界のなかの日清韓関係史—交隣と属国、自主と独立』

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Okamoto Takashi, Professor of Kyoto Prefectural University, made his name by writing masterpieces in succession during his junior professional career. His first book entitled *Modern China and Trade Relations* (published by Nagoya University in 1999) was reputed for an in-depth analysis of the transition of modern Chinese trade relations and the financial implications that earned him the 16th Masayoshi Ohira Memorial Prize. Within five years after the first publication, he won the 27th Santory Academic Award for his second book *Between Subject and Independent State: Modern China-Korea Relationship and the Fate of Modern East Asia* (published by Nagoya University in 2004). This book focuses on the keyword “subject state” to reinterpret its meaning in the context of China-Korea relations from the late 19th century to the Sino-Japanese War. Joseon was singled out as the stage where the new world order (represented by a treaty system) clashed with the Sinocentric world in the process of forming a new world order. The author reinterprets the China-Korea relations in the vortex of hegemonic struggles among Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia. Drawing on

rich language sources of Chinese, Japanese, English, and Korean, the author provides a vivid account of the power contest over Joseon between foreign protagonists. The third book by Okamoto was published in 2007 under the heading of *Ma Chieng Chung and Chinese modernization* (Kyoto University Press). This book highlights Ma Chieng Chung as a person who set the conceptual tone for the modernization of China and brought into focus the status of Joseon in particular. The conclusion of the author was that Joseon was neither a subject state nor an independent state but somewhere between the two.

The book reviewed (see the title) is the fourth published book. This book reflects the spatial and temporal expansion of the second book that dealt with the transition of East Asian order through the prism of Korea. The main text consists of 195 pages, leaving little room for doing justice to the changing East Asian order. What is included exceeds the scope of the book as implicated by the given space. An analysis of the events begins with the 16th century and ends with the Russo-Japanese War. The relationship between Japan and Korea is given the same weight as that of China and Korea. The book consists of four chapters with the exclusion of the epilogue and prologue.

The first chapter begins with the 16th century and describes the process of establishment of relations among China, Korea, and Japan. Joseon upheld Ming China as a titular master, while lowering itself as a subject state. In relation to a stronger neighboring country, Joseon was a faithful observer of all ritualistic obligations to pay respect for Ming China (the Sadae Policy). In relation to Japan and the Chin dynasty (Jurchens), Joseon was on par with them and adopted a good neighborhood policy. The relationship of Joseon with China was unrelated to Japan. China and Japan constituted two separate domains of inter-country relationship with Joseon, because there was no common frame of relationship that covered East Asia in its entirety, as Japan had no relationship with China.

The Sinocentric world faced a new challenge in the 16th century. It

was a period when trans-oceanic navigation was proceeding along with the burgeoning silver trade. The ripples of oceanic trade began to reach the shores of East Asia. As a result, new powers emerged in this region; one was Japan and the other was the Jin Dynasty, founded by the Jurchens in the Eastern Manchuria. As they indulged in their a new appetite for trade, they ignored the established Sinocentric world. New power dynamics were manifested in the Japanese invasion and the Jurchen invasion that were directed at Joseon. These two invasions are viewed as a challenge by these emerging powers to the dominant position held by China in East Asia.

As Japan went through the warring stages, it was active in developing silver mines and imported rifle manufacturing technology that strengthened the economic and military power of Japan. Having pacified the warring states, Toyotomi Hideyoshi flouted the Sinocentric world and enjoined Joseon to break loose from Chinese influence. On the part of Joseon, which had enjoyed a brotherly bond for centuries, it was inconceivable to break the relation with China. The Japanese invasion into Joseon aimed at shattering the China-dominant world and invited China to dispatch troops to rescue Joseon. The dispatching of troops to Joseon was not so much for helping Joseon as to preserve the China-dominant world.

The invasion by Jurchen into Joseon thirty years after the Japanese invasion was another challenge to the China-dominant world. Jurchen tribes were brought into a cohesive continental power under Nurhachi. The first invasion into Joseon took place in 1583 and was ten years prior to the Japanese invasion. While the war between Japan and Ming China was being fought, the Liatung region was flush with silver and iron, and the Jurchens benefited from the easy access to the materials, which were used to manufacture weapons. In the 17th century, the Jurchens established a state called the “Late Jin” named after the Chin Dynasty that had been a headache for the Goryeo Dynasty. Soured by the brotherly bond of Ming China and Joseon, the Late Jin launched a

massive invasion in 1627 and Joseon suffered a shameful defeat. The forthcoming master-subject relationship with the Late Jin was more grueling than with Ming China. Many anti-Jurchen officials and royal families were taken as hostages to Shenyang the capital of Late Jin. Late Jin struck Ming China in 1644 and became the ruler of China. Civilized Chinese were brought under the barbarian Jurchens. The new rulers of China styled themselves as the emperors of Qing China. Ironically, they caused the downfall of the Chinese dynasty but restored a Chinese dynasty by becoming Chinese. Qing China restored the master-subject relationship with the surrounding states. Korean captives were released, and Qing China became generous with neighboring countries, acting on a new role proportionate to a heightened status. Under the reign of Tokugawa, Joseon and Japan restored good neighbor relations on an equal footing. Both China and Japan were accountable for hostile acts that were disruptive of the China-dominant world. Japan had been isolated from China for centuries after China became the ruler of China. East Asia restored a static order reminiscent of the past under the titular master of Qing China, but it turned out to be a lull before a storm.

The East Asian order was once again shaken 200 years later by the incursions of the Western imperialistic powers. The second chapter describes how Western powers were on a mad search for ports to drive an opening wedge into East Asian countries that had remained closed. Treaty diplomacy was a substitute for the traditional tribute relations. The new diplomacy was noted by the blurred status of the surrounding states; in referring to the surrounding state, a subject state alternated with an independent state. Defeated in the Opium War, Qing China was forced to open its ports, followed by the period of trade treaties. On the part of China, trade treaties were limited to the relationship with Western powers. It was desperate to maintain the traditional tribute relationship with other countries. As some of these countries concluded trade treaties with Western powers, the international relationship of East Asia inevitably underwent a radical change. Japan opened the doors to the

United States in 1854, while the borders of Joseon were sealed off under the reign of Daewongun who was the regent for the young king, Gojong. The foreign powers were the symbol of all evils, while Joseon espoused righteousness. The appeal for “Defend righteousness and reject evil” stirred Koreans into xenophobic nationalism. The Joseon policy of extreme isolation courted disastrous events in succession. The suppression of Catholic converts in Korea invited the French fleet to attack the seashore in 1866. The burning of the USS General Sherman in 1866 invited a revenge attack by American marines in 1871 that resulted in over 350 Korean casualties. France and the United States held China responsible for the tragic incidents, since the bold confrontations were committed by the subject state of Joseon. In response, China argued that Joseon was a subject state in terms of the tribute relation to China but an independent state since it had national monarch that governed national policy. Following the Chinese arguments, France and the United States dispatched military contingents to teach Joseon to be responsible for international actions as an independent country. However, Joseon rejected the Western overtures for trade treaties, stating that it could not conclude any treaty with a foreign country without permission from China. In fact, Joseon appealed to China to protect it from Western pressure. Behind the argument by China that Joseon was an independent state was the intended refusal to take a protective role for the latter.

The Meiji Reformation of 1868 brought a dramatic transformation of Japan from an agrarian to a modern society. Twenty years after the Meiji Reformation, Japan became a world power and a modern military power. Japan forced Joseon to conclude a trade treaty by a display of military power and Korean ports were opened for the Japanese to reside and engage in trade. Article 1 of the Trade Treaty declares Joseon as an independent state put on par with Japan. Behind the declaration of Joseon as an independent state was the Japanese intention to have Joseon discontinue the traditional tribute relations with China. Joseon thought of the Treaty as a continuation of the traditional good neighborhood

relationship, allowing it to continue a tribute relationship with China. In 1879, Japan incorporated Ryuku (a tribute state to China) and established a new prefecture of Okinawa. Fearing that Joseon might be grounds for a dominant Japan, China urged Joseon to conclude similar treaties with Western powers. Li Hung Chang, a seasoned diplomat of China, mediated between Joseon and the United States to conclude a trade treaty. Li tried to include dubious words in the treaty indicating that Joseon was a subject state of China but independent in the way it conducted internal affairs. China was not able to bring a double-edged policy into reality due to the refusal of the United States. It was later arranged that the King of Joseon should send a memorial to the President of the United States to the effect that the dubious status of Joseon should be included in the clause. When it came to signing the treaty, Li Hung Chang dispatched Ma Chien Chung to be a witness at the scene of the signature. There was a dispute between Chinese and Joseon representatives over the status of Joseon: Ma was trying to have the subject state written into the treaty, whereas Joseon endeavored to have “an independent state” written into it. Ma complained that Joseon was becoming increasingly untrustworthy; he thought that Korea was abetted by Japan. In 1882, a military mutiny broke out in Joseon, and this provided an excuse for China to intervene by dispatching combat forces. They abducted the father of Daewongun, who had restored the *de facto* ruler of Joseon on behalf of the king, and brought Consort Min and her faction to power while Daewongun was forcibly kept in Tianjin, China. Ma initiated a diplomatic maneuver to keep Joseon in a subject state with an outward semblance of an independent state.

The third chapter describes a rebellious streak of Koreans against Chinese interference into the internal affairs of Korea. The *coup de'tat* in 1884 by a faction of reform-minded officials was the manifestation of the Korean opposition to the Chinese policy toward Joseon. They organized an independent party against the pro-Chinese Sadae Party and called for a radical reform in favor of autonomy in the governing of internal affairs,

though they acquiesced to the tribute relation that held China as a master deserving of respect. The autonomous position of the independent party is reflected in *China and Joseon* authored by Owen N. Denny, then the American advisor to the Joseon court. Denny did not regard the ritualized contribution of Joseon to China as going against international law. His view of Joseon alternated between “a subject state in relation to China” and state with “a full sovereignty.” The Chinese scheme to reduce Joseon into a subject state is disclosed by Yuan Shi Kai. When he was commissioned to head Chinese troops stationed in Korea, his title was not higher than a Cabinet-Minister. In actuality, Yuan Shi Kai played a role that exceeded his status and acted equivalent to that of a Resident General. This title was equivalent to that bestowed upon the English Governor General in charge of India. His actions showed he must have thought that Joseon was nothing more than a protectorate state of China that he could manipulate as he saw fit.

In the memorials exchanged with the Korean king, he used a Chinese reference to Joseon, which was translated into “a vassal state.” Denny opposed the use of such a term by Yuan Shi Kai and urged him to use “a tribute state” only to be rejected. Great Britain supported Chinese suzerainty in Joseon to form a united front against the Russian southward thrust. In order to contain China, Japan demanded that Joseon be made a neutral state.

The fourth chapter does justice to the process of China losing suzerainty of Korea after the Sino-Japanese War and the transition of the Korean status from a subject state to an independent, autonomous state. Okamoto declared the international status of Joseon in the 19th century falling somewhere “between a subject state and independent state.” According to his assessment, Joseon was not in a position to be categorized either as a subject state or an independent state. Joseon was to maintain a middle position through the evolving international situation. The first event to break this balance was the Sino-Japanese War. Donghak Peasant Revolution, which shook the waning Joseon,

provided an excuse for China to dispatch troops and to maintain suzerainty over Korea. Japan responded by dispatching troops to block the Chinese scheme in order to redress the balance that had tilted in favor of China.

China was driven out of Korea by Japan as a result of the Sino-Japanese War. The state-initiated reform at the urging of Japan was aimed to strengthen the subjectivity of Joseon to Japan. In defiance of the Japanese scheme, King Gojong went to the residence of the Russian Minister and the Japanese maneuver to reduce Joseon into a protectorate state met an unexpected obstacle. Japan thought the escape of the King to the Russian legation, marked the termination of the cabinet of Kim Hongjip that had been cooperative with Japan in the state-initiated regime. The Russian protection of Joseon provided a motive for the transformation of a subject state to an independent state. Simultaneously, there emerged a balance of power between Russia and Japan. On the part of Joseon, it provided an opportunity to declare an independent state equal to China. On returning from the Russian legation, King Gojong concluded a new treaty with China in 1899 that formally declared Joseon independent from China. The independence of Joseon was not what it obtained outright, but was made possible by the balance of power maintained provisionally between the foreign powers intent on the hegemonic control of Korea. The Russian occupation of Manchuria in 1900 was a bad sign for the fate of East Asia. Joseon endeavored to seek the neutrality between the two predatory powers, but it was impossible since neither Russia nor Japan considered Korea separate from Manchuria. Fearful of the Russian encroachment, Japan allied itself with Great Britain in 1902 and heightened the possibility of reducing Joseon to the status of a protectorate state of Japan.

The main text traces all historical events down to the Russo-Japan War that was not dealt with. The exclusion of the Russo-Japan War was presumably due to the fact that the status of Joseon in the form of state autonomy or independence was totally denied from this point on.

There are many reasons for a specialist in Chinese studies to have a scholarly interest in Korea. The Korean peninsula is located where the geopolitical interests of continental and maritime powers clash. The geopolitical location of Korea has been of crucial importance in the studies of 16th-19th East Asia and continues to deserve attention. In the prologue, the author makes important remarks about the division of the Korean Peninsula. He asserts that the issue of autonomy which confronted Joseon in the 19th century East Asia has not been resolved. The issue of nuclear proliferation that now involves the six party talks, is as complicated to the Joseon that had to negotiate between the rival powers that strutted 19th East Asia. His suggestion is that drawing on historical experiences offers a way out of the contemporary problem.

The international perspective of the author on history opened a new window for understanding history within a national horizon. When it comes to dealing with modern Chinese history or Korean history, a perspective that cuts across borders is of crucial importance. A comparative perspective may lose sight of the peculiarity of history within the cultural context by focusing on an objective fact that equally applies to other countries. This concern is reflected in the way the author deals with the issues that might have resulted in different interpretations if limited to the domestic horizon. The descriptions of foreign intervention in internal affairs or predatory ambitions against Joseon are moderated into mild or euphemistic expressions. It also mirrors a degree of the nationalistic inclinations of the author. The description has a touch of harshness in describing the Chinese abuse of power in relation to Joseon. The Japanese predatory ambition against Joseon might have been realistically described, had author been from another country.

The fact that Japan colonized Korea gets little attention together with the oppressive Japanese policies toward Korea that led to colonial rule. On the part of the Japanese historian, the seamy side of Chinese policies against Joseon is dealt with at greater length. There is a feeling that the author justifies the Japanese intrusion into Joseon as a

counterweight to Chinese maneuvers to dominate Korea. For example, the Japanese dispatch of combat forces to Korea is described as a reactionary attempt to redress the balance of power that had tilted in the favor of China. If this is accepted as a fact, Japan should not have gone the length of subjugating Korea to a colonized state. As historical hindsight proved, Japan was not content with the balance of power in Korea. The dispatch of Chinese combat forces to Korea was not the first time; it was preceded by Ming China, which sent troops to rescue Joseon against Japan. Both were responses of China to the request of Joseon for military help and their presence in Korea was not so much repellent as Japanese troops were to Koreans. The dispatching of Japanese troops was in accordance with the Treaty of Tianjin and not pursuant to the request of Joseon. The request of Joseon for military support was made despite the fact that it would reinforce the Chinese dominance over Korea. Despite the plea of Great Britain for reducing Joseon into a protectorate state, China did not go the length, since the two countries had not marred the traditional ties of trust. It is hard to believe that Japan had maintained a diplomatic stance according to a set of principles to redress the shattered balance of power if what happened after the Sino-Japanese War is considered. Japan contrived a plan to make Joseon a neutral state prior to the Sino-Japanese War. The author admits that after the triumphant victory of Japan, that Japan hastened the plan to reduce Korea into a protectorate state. The Japanese policy toward Korea followed the unique changes of the situation. Seigan-ron (military expedition against Joseon) after the Meiji Reformation has never been submerged in Japan. Those calling for neutrality did not constitute the dominant voice in Japanese policy making. Japanese policies alternated between the low key policy of neutrality and the extremity of colonialism. By contrast, Chinese policy was geared to maintain a dominant status in the Sinocentric world and it had never gone the length of harboring a colonized Joseon.

There were two attempts by Japan to challenge a Sinocentric world in the 16th and 19th century. Japanese encroachments on Joseon were

devastating to Koreans. The acceptance by Joseon of Chinese suzerainty was the best choice of limited optional policies inherent in the hierarchical order of countries characteristic of the Confucian-dominant world. The 19th century saw China seeking ways to torment Joseon with an outright intervention. With unjustifiable obtrusiveness, Joseon was shaken with disquiet rallies. Threatened by Western powers, Joseon along with other countries resorted to the protective role of China while claiming to be an independent sovereignty. In relation to China, Joseon argued that the tribute relationship with China is one thing and the autonomy in dealing with internal affairs was another. In regards to internal politics, Joseon was independent.

Okamoto made an in-depth analysis of the conceptual implications of subject and independent status and made personal interpretations of suzerainty dependent on situational spurs. Kirk Wayne Larsen detected imperialistic intents in the policies of Qing China against Joseon. He terms it “informal imperialism,” intended to maximize the economic benefits of China, distinguishing it from Japan’s formal imperialism. The informal imperialism he coined was spearheaded by Li Hung Chang. He suggested that China should open its ports, seize commercial and financial control, and maximize commercial exploitation of other countries, patterned after the British model.

Larsen’s dichotomized imperialism over power balance theory is favorable in explaining the power dynamics of the last phase of East Asia. Yuan Shi Kai resorting to power politics after the coup d’etat of 1884 was beyond the bounds of trust which had been honored between the master and tribute states. The autonomy of a tribute state in national affairs had been honored. Anti-China rallies in late Joseon were an emotional rebellion against the unjustified interventions of China. Torn between China and Japan, Koreans were unable to create a pro-Japan climate until the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. Was it because Koreans were caught in the Sinocentric world?

As Larsen stated, China promoted informal imperialism, while

Japan promoted formal imperialism, both aimed to exploit Joseon. Given the economic exploitations by the two powers, what were Joseon's options? might have stood for autonomy and sovereignty even though economic exploitation in either case was a reality.