Korea in the Western Studies on East Asian Interstate Relations during the Khitan and Jin Periods

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The Journal of Northeast Asian History
Volume 17 Number 2 (Summer 2021), 243-258

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Tribute System and Treaty Relations during the Khitan and Jin Periods

Scholars have claimed that by the Han period the tribute system was firmly established "as a continuous quest on the part of the Chinese empire for a proper form in which Sino-foreign relations could be regulated in keeping with the general imperial order,"[1] and that "the Chinese had begun to believe that the tributary relationship was the only normal one which did not conflict with their view of the known world."[2] The size, culture, power, and wealth of Han Chinese states would induce foreign states to seek recognition as "tributaries" in the hierarchical "Chinese World Order." Chinese historians often portrayed the "tribute system" as the "proof" that foreign states and peoples were "subjects" of China. Recently, a number of Chinese scholars such as Yan Xuetong 阎学通, Qin Yaqing 秦亚青, Zhang

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* Parts of this article was published in Korean in "서구학계의 10~14세기 "정복왕조사" 연구 - 「케임브리지 중국사」 제 6권 (The Cambridge History of China, volume 6, Alien Regimes and Border States, 907-1368)을 중심으로," 만주연구 30 (October, 2020): 281-306.

1 Yü Ying-shih, *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structures of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 39.

2 Wang Gungwu, "Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia," in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, John K. Fairbanks, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 41.

Dingyang 赵汀阳 also turned to the "tribute system" model in their formulation and application of the China-centered "Tianxia system" to premodern East Asian interstate relations.[3] However, the tribute system based on the cultural and ideological notion of Chinese superiority was sustainable only when China dominated its neighboring states politically and militarily. Indeed, interstate relations were determined first and foremost by the relative military strength of each player, and they encompassed a wide range of political relations that ranged from total subjugation to equality and even to the "barbarian" superiority.[4]

The Chinese assertions of superiority and concomitant stereotyping of "barbarians" in predominantly Chinese sources often hindered our efforts to properly assess premodern East Asian interstate relations. It is true that the conduct of regular interstate exchanges in premodern East Asia were mostly Han Chinese or Confucian in concept, ritual, and rhetoric. However, nominal recognition of the formalities of the tribute system never signified actual exercise of Chinese suzerainty or even an acceptance of the Chinese claims of cultural superiority. In fact, the China-centered ideology failed to convince even the ethnic Han Chinese who lived in the frontier region far from the political center.[5] Tributes were not always a sign of submission, but of mutual recognition and accommodation.

Northeast Asian interstate relations during the Khitan and Jin periods

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[3] William A. Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony?" *International Studies Review* 10 (2008): 749-61; William A. Callahan, "History, Tradition and the China Dream: Socialist Modernization in the World of Great Harmony," *Journal of Contemporary China* 24 (2015): 893-1001; Emilian Kavalski, "Conclusion: Recognizing Chinese International Relations Theory," in *Asian Thought on China's Changing International Relations*, N. Horesh and E. Kavalski, ed. (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 230-47.

[4] Franke and Twitchett, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 6, Alien Regimes and Border States*, Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 38. See also the description of diplomatic exchanges between the Timurid monarch and the Ming emperor on the basis of equality in the early 15th century (Joseph Fletcher, "China and Central Asia, 1368-884," in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, John K. Fairbanks, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 209-16).

[5] Jonathan Skaff, "Survival in the Frontier Zone: Comparative Perspectives on Identity and Political Allegiance in China's Inner Asian Borderlands during the Sui-Tang Dynastic Transition (617-30)," *Journal of World History* 15 (2004): 122.

were governed by a treaty system based on the principle of reciprocity. Song China and the Khitan Empire preserved the peace based on the Treaty of Shanyuan that provided for "friendly relations" on the condition that the Song would submit annual payments to the Khitan state.[6] In the 11th century, Song China had to offer an annual "subsidy" of silk and silver to Khitan Liao and Tangut Xia states to ensure peace. Later the Southern Song emperor Gaozong even addressed himself humbly using his personal name as "Your Servant [Zhao] Gou" of an "insignificant state 弊邑" and was invested by the Jurchen emperor of a "superior state 上國."[7] In this multistate system, nominal investitures meant little to the legitimacy of rulers of "tributary" states such as Goryeo.

The tribute system model has shown its limitations and inadequacy as an analytical framework for a comprehensive understanding of pre-modern Northeast Asian interstate relations.[8] We must inquire closely the internal structure of politics, economy, and culture of the non-Chinese societies to explore further the dynamics of pre-modern East Asian interstate relations. Only with inclusion of "outside" or "non-Chinese" perspectives can we overcome the bias of the "tribute system." To gain insights into the reality of East Asian interstate relations, we must widen our view to include Korean perspective and strategy.

Korea, A Tributary State?

While the so-called Chinese world order was "a unified concept only at the Chinese end and only on the nor-mative level, as an ideal pattern," many continue to insist that the more "Sinic" states such as Korea accepted moral validity of the China-centered world order due to a high level of

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6 Tuotuo 脫脫 et al., *Songshi* 宋史, 7.126-27; Tuotuo et al., *Liaoshi* 遼史, 14.160; Li Tao 李燾, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 續資治通鑑長編, 58.1299.

7 Tuotuo et al., *Jinshi* 金史, 77.1755-56.

8 Peter Yun, "Rethinking the Tribute System: Korean States and Northeast Asian Interstate Relations, 600-1600" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1988), 6-11.

"Sinicization."[9] This claim is based on rather naive assumption that Korean states always had a "tradition of admiring China"[10] and even more uncritical assumption that such alleged cultural admiration then influenced Korean policy toward Chinese states. It simply ignores the reality of geopolitical balance of power in pre-modern East Asian interstate relations.

The volume 6 of The *Cambridge History of China*, published more than two decades ago has been regarded as the most comprehensive and representative western work on the conquest dynasties. In chapter 1, Denis Twitchett wrote that by the 10th century "the Koreans were thoroughly imbued with Chinese cultural influence at all levels and hated, despised, and feared the Khitan," and that such Korean "intransigence" toward the Khitan would persist until the early 11th century.[11] However, Twitchett then provides a completely different description of Goryeo-Khitan relations in the 1020s.

> "The tributary relationship was resumed, and envoys were regularly exchanged. When in 1031 Hyŏnjong died, his son and successor Wang Hŭm (Tŏkchong; r. 1031-1034) was invested as king by the Liao court. From this date until almost the end of the Liao, Koryŏ remained a loyal vassal, and peace prevailed between the two states."[12]

How did Goryeo go from the hatred of the Khitan to became a "loyal vassal" in a decade? *The Cambridge History of China* does not offer an explanation. Perhaps the author was following the assertions of Michael Rogers

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[9] John K. Fairbank, "A Preliminary Framework," in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, John K. Fairbanks, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 11-12, 16.

[10] Kawachi Yoshihiro 河内良弘, *Mindai Joshin shi no kenkyu* 明代女眞史の研究 [A Study of Jurchen History during the Ming Period] (Tokyo: Dohosha, 1992), 11.

[11] Denis Twitchett and Klaus-Peter Tietze, "The Liao," in *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 6, Alien Regimes and Border States*, Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 103, 111.

[12] Denis Twitchett and Klaus-Peter Tietze, "The Liao," in *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 6, Alien Regimes and Border States*, Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 112.

that Goryeo was dedicated to "Chinese Universalism," and that the political status of Goryeo elites was based on "their acknowledged role as custodians of (Confucian) virtue and wisdom within the framework of the Chinese world order."[13]

Goryeo did send "tributes" to the Khitans, but it was a vassal state only in name. Goryeo, along with the Tangut Xia, projected their own worldview in the Northeast Asian multi-state system and functioned as balancers in the military balance of power by forcing the stronger Manchurian and Chinese dynasties to divide their military resources. The Khitan never gained any military or other advantage from its suzerain status vis-à-vis Goryeo or Xia.

As the Khitan power declined in the early 12th century, the Song state actively sought a military alliance with Goryeo. However, Goryeo refused to get involved in continental conflicts, and King Sukjong (1095-1105) refused Song's offer of formal investiture.[14] During the Zhenghe 政和 reign (1111-1117), the Song court accorded Goryeo embassies the status of the State Letters Embassy 國信使 that had heretofore been reserved only for the Khitan embassies.[15] Song's lavish gifts and friendly gestures from the Song were undoubtedly intended to induce the Korean state to join the Song-Jurchen alliance against the Khitan. Goryeo once again refused the Song Chinese overture of investiture in 1123, when the final fall of the Khitan state was all but a foregone conclusion.[16] The Song Chinese court must have assumed that Goryeo would welcome the official recognition from the "Central Kingdom," the "real" legitimacy in the Song court's point of view. However, Goryeo understood that the Song investiture would be followed by requests for military assistance in the impending struggle against the Jurchens. In the end, the Song investitures, just like those from the Khitan court, were all token gestures inconsequential to the

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[13] Michael C. Rogers, "The Chinese World Order in Its Transmural Extension," *Korean Studies Forum* 4 (1978): 9.

[14] Jeong Inji 鄭麟趾 et al., *Goryeosa* 高麗史, 13: 16a2-4.

[15] *Songshi*, 21.395, 397, 487.14049.

[16] *Goryeosa*, 15: 5b2-6a7.

legitimacy of the Goryeo king.

Korean sources show that Goryeo was clearly aware of its place and role in the triangular balance of power in Northeast Asian interstate relations. It was inevitable that Goryeo's pragmatic and realistic foreign policy disappointed and angered the Song, and the Chinese sentiments can be seen in Song Chinzong's edict of 1126.

> We were hoping that you would have the [same] hatred for the enemy (Jurchens) [in times of] difficulty and that was all. [Your] kingdom and the Jin are no more than several hundred li apart from each other, but you have not repaid the "Central Kingdom" by wiping out their lair. How could we have expected this [kind of ingratitude from you] after the special treatment [we have accorded to you] for several reigns?[17]

Later, the Southern Song would express its disappointment and displeasure by suspending official relation in 1130 on a rather clumsy pretext that it could no longer guarantee the safety of envoys.[18]

Korean sources provide numerous examples that betray the misconception that Goryeo was a "loyal tributary." King Taejo, the founder of the dynasty, adopted the Later Jin 後晉 (936-946) regnal title of Tianfu 天福 in 938,[19] and he was formally invested in the following year by Shi Jingtang 石敬瑭, the first ruler of the Later Jin.[20] However, Shi Jingtang, the "Emperor of the Great Jin," invested a few years earlier in 936 by the Khitan Taizong Yelu Deguang,[21] is often regarded as "nothing more than a puppet of the Khitan."[22] The Khitans had provided crucial military assistance, and

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17 *Goryeosa*, 15: 15a3-7.

18 *Goryeosa*, 16: 8b9-10a1.

19 *Goryeosa*, 2: 13b2-3.

20 *Goryeosa*, 2: 13b6-8.

21 Xue Juzheng 薛居正, *Jiu Wudaishi* 舊五代史, 75.985; *Liaoshi*, 3.38-39.

22 Denis Twitchett and Klaus-Peter Tietze, "The Liao," in *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 6, Alien Regimes and Border States*, Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 70.

Shi ceded the so-called Sixteen Prefectures of Yen 燕 and Yun 雲 (around modern Beijing) in addition to substantial amounts of annual tributes.[23] Here we have a case in which the Goryeo king was invested by the puppet "emperor" of the Later Jin, who was in turn invested by the Khitan emperor. Does this mean that Goryeo was a vassal state of a vassal state of the Khitan? That was hardly the case. Until 942, there were only two missions between Goryeo and the Khitan, the Khitan embassy of 922 and the Goryeo embassy a month after the Khitan conquest of Balhae in 926.[24]

When the next Khitan embassy came twenty years later in 942, the Goryeo court took a drastic action of ban-ishing the thirty members of the Khitan embassy and had the Khitan gift of fifty camels to starve to death under a bridge in the capital city.[25] King Jeongjong (945-949) formed the Resplendent Army 光軍 supposedly numbering 300,000, and King Gwangjong (949-975) established several garrison forts across the Cheongcheon River in northward expansion toward the Amnok (Yalu) River.[26] During the mid-10th century, relations between the Khitan and Goryeo were sparse and certainly less than friendly, and certainly not what one would expect between the "suzerain" and "tributary" states. While the "emperor" of the Later Jin was a "puppet" invested by the Khitan emperor, the king of Goryeo was not yet invested by the Khitan ruler. The titles of "emperor" and "king" did not often reflect the hierarchical suzerain-tributary relations during this period, and we can find other examples of the similarly empty rhetoric of the titles of "emperor" in the puppet regimes set up by the Jurchen Jin in North China in early 12th century.[27]

Goryeo's foreign policy sought to exploit continental conflicts and ri-

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[23] *Liaoshi*, 4.55-56.

[24] *Goryeosa*, 1: 16b2; *Liaoshi*, 2.21-22.

[25] *Goryeosa*, 2: 14a9-b1.

[26] *Goryeosa*, 94: 2b8.

[27] The Jin invested Zhang Bangchang 張邦昌 as the "emperor" of the Great Chu 大楚 in 1127, but Zhang died a couple of months later. The Jurchens then set up Liu Yu as the "emperor" of the Great Qi 大齊 in 1129, but Liu Yu's "Empire of Great Chi" was abolished in less than a decade in 1137 (see *Da Jin diaofa lu* 大金弔伐錄, 434-36, 539-41).

valry between bigger neighbors. It cannot be overemphasized that the Khitan, Song or Jin "investitures" did not make Goryeo a "loyal vassal."[28] Goryeo always pursued a pragmatic foreign policy designed to enhance its security and autonomy. Goryeo's adoption of the regnal titles of the "suzerain" state was not a passive gesture of submission but an active diplomatic strategy.[29] Just as an investiture by the "suzerain" state may offer symbolic political legitimacy to the "tributary" state, an adoption or refusal of regnal titles could also recognize or deny the legitimacy of the "suzerain" state. Korean sources and modern Korean scholarship clearly show that the system of "tribute-investiture" of the time did not reflect the relationship of superiority and submission but represented reciprocity in which two sides recognized the other's political legitimacy.

Inclusion of Korea in the Study of the Interstate Relations during the Khitan and Jin Periods.

Few Western graduate students, majoring in the conquest dynasties, attain Korean fluency, and they pay little attention to Korean sources and works published in Korean language. Their treatment and discussion of Goryeo history remain surprisingly superficial as their outlook and knowledge have been gained indirectly through the works by Chinese and Japanese scholarship. While the absence or under-utilization of Korean scholarship can be attributed to the apparent lack of Korean fluency, it is truly unfortunate that specialists in the West also ignore the important Korean primary sources written in Classical Chinese such as the Goryeosa. We are fortunate that records of premodern East Asian interstate relations can be checked against other independent sources. In particular, Korean sources

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[28] Denis Twitchett and Klaus-Peter Tietze, "The Liao," in *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 6, Alien Regimes and Border States*, Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 112.

[29] Yun Yeongin, "10-13 segi Dongbuk Asia dawonjeok gukje jilseo eseo eui chaekbong kwa maengyak" 10-13세기 동북아시아 다원적 국제질서에서의 책봉과 맹약 [Investitures and Covenants in the Multistate Northeast Asian International Order from 10th to the 13th Century], *Dongyang sahak yeon'gu* 101 (2007): 126-30.

often corroborate, contradict, and supplement the Chinese records, and most importantly, they provide rare non-Chinese perspectives. It is not the case that Western scholars were not aware of the importance of Korean sources. Indeed, the "Bibliographical Essays" in volume 6 of *The Cambridge History of China*, twice mentioned importance of the Goryeosa stating that it was a "completely independent source of great importance for the relations between the Jurchen and the Korean state of Koryŏ" and "an indispensable record of the Yüan's relations with a land that had frequent and extended contacts with China.[30] Yet, the Goryeosa was cited only once in a cursorily manner in the entire volume.

Western scholars continued to regard Korea as a highly Sinicized state that subscribed to the Han Chinese world view. In their study of Khitan-Song relations, Jing-shen Tao and David C. Wright merely assume that Goryeo was a tributary state "permanently incorporated into the Chinese cultural sphere" without any reference to Korean sources.[31] These simplistic assertions are results of one-sided interpretations that failed to account for many works by Korean scholars who have shown realist and pragmatic strategies and the many factors such as internal politics, economic considerations, cultural exchanges, and most important, the border security. Studies on the traditional East Asian interstate relations also tended to separate the subject into a series of bilateral contacts.[32] Such bilateral approach to the multistate geopolitical configuration not only misleads but also ignores the complex international political context. Goryeo's role in east Asian multistate system has often been overlooked or under-appreciated. Western

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[30] Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 6, Alien Regimes and Border States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 437, 682, 704.

[31] Jing-shen Tao, *Two Sons of Heaven: Studies in Sung-Liao Relations* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 79-85; David C. Wright, *From War to Diplomatic Parity in 11th-Century China: Sung's Foreign Relations with Kitan Liao* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 33.

[32] One exception is Gari Ledyard's study that recognized the importance of Korea in East Asian balance of power and proposed the triangular balance between China-Manchuria-Korea (Gari K. Ledyard, "Yin and Yang in the China-Manchuria-Korea Triangle," China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th-14th Centuries, Morris Rossabi, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 313-53.

scholars specializing in the conquest dynasties could benefit from many detailed works by Korean scholars.[33]

During the period of "China among Equals," the most obvious features of Northeast Asian interstate relations were pragmatism and flexibility. Studies on East Asian interstate relations must pay proper attention to the history of the region's smaller, individual parts. The mistaken notion of the Korean states as the model tributary is a gross oversimplification and takes the historically unique mid-Joseon attitude toward the Ming as the norm for two thousand years of premodern Northeast Asian interstate relations. A few western scholars perceived significant differences in foreign policies of Joseon and the earlier dynasties. Hugh Walker saw the establishment of the Confucian state of Joseon as a major turning point in Korea-China relations that made "Confucian internationalism a reality rather than mere theory," and the so-called sadae 事大 policy of the Chosŏn dynasty represented "the depth of Confucian learning at the Korean court and the dogmatic devotion to Confucian practice."[34] Walker's observation and interpretation were "puzzling" to a Chinese scholar who perceived no real difference between the policy of "merely following the ritual of tribute relations" [during Goryeo] and that of "doing the same and giving that same process a label" [during Joseon] (italic and brackets mine).[35] In fact, the kingdom of Goryeo was not "doing the same." However, many specialists continue to rely exclusively on the Chinese sources written in formulaic terminology of the tribute system that gives a false impression of Goryeo as a "model tributary."[36]

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[33] See Yi Miji, *Taepyeonghan byeonbang: Goryoe eui dae Georan oegyo wa geu sosan* 태평한 변경: 고려의 대거란 외교와 그 소산 [Peaceful Frontier: Goryeo's Diplomacy with the Khitan and Its Consequences] (Seoul: Gyeongin munhwasa, 2018), 5-23.

[34] Hugh D. Walker, "The Yi-Ming Rapprochement: Sino-Korean Foreign Relations, 1392-1592" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1971), 55, 204.

[35] Melvin T. Ang, "Sung-Liao Diplomacy in 11th- and 12th-Century China: A Study of the Social and Political Determinants of Foreign Policy" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1983), 23-24.

[36] Peter Yun, "Rethinking the Tribute System: Korean States and Northeast Asian Interstate Relations, 600-1600" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1998), 107-29.

Even as modern Korea, China, and Mongolia make exclusive claims over all or parts of the Khitan and Jurchen history, we must approach history of the conquest dynasties on their own terms, not merely periods within Chinese history. There is a tendency to see China as the center of everything in East Asian history and to ignore the reverse flow and contributions of ideas and innovations from the "periphery." The study of East Asian interstate relations is more than a simple inquiry into the Chinese viewpoints, and it should be perceived from a bigger, wider angle, and in a global context. Historians of pre-modern Asia need to move beyond the Han China-centered ideological and culturalistic framework of the tribute system couched in such ambiguous terms as "Chinese suzerain" and "barbarian tributaries." A more inclusive study of East Asian history incorporating Korean sources and perspectives will enable us to transcend the anachronistic historical boundary of "China" and provide a more comprehensive and complete story of the Khitan and Jin in East Asian interstate relations.

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