



History Matters: The Relations Between China and Korea

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Executive Summary

- * Xi Jinping pays very close attention to Chinese history and heritage, particularly of the Imperial era, for his policy formulation.
- * The current Chinese policy toward the Korean Peninsula is based on reviving and adapting heritage-based modalities in order to attain future objectives - the system of tributary states. North Korea is the clearest case of China's evolving tributary-style relations.
- * The historical evolution of the Chinese tributary system regarding Korea has been key to the formulation of the Chinese historic quest for regional and global hegemony.

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Analysis

In assessing the Chinese attachment to Korea, one must remember that the relationship between China and neighboring Korea is the first recorded international contacts of the Chinese state. As noted before, Xi Jinping pays very close attention to Chinese history and heritage, particularly of the Imperial era, for his policy formulation. He is a firm believer in the Legalism school that promotes the powers of the central paramount leader, as well as the importance of “realism” - that is, “realpolitik”.¹ Indeed, the current Chinese policy toward the Korean Peninsula is based on reviving and adapting heritage-based modalities in order to attain future objectives - the system of tributary states. North Korea is the clearest case of China’s evolving tributary-style relations.²

Chinese records go back to the 24th Century BC. Building tributary relations between China and Korean tribes is chronicled among the first achievements of the legendary Emperor Yao (r. 2356-2255). Ernst Oppert notes in his 1880 book *A Forbidden Land: Voyages to the Corea* that “The first mention of the inhabitants of Corea we find in old Chinese chronicles about 2350 B.C., at which period some of the northern tribes are reported to have entered, after many conflicts, into a tributary connexion with China.” The Rev. J. Macgowan cited in his 1906 book *The Imperial History of China: Being a History of the Empire as Compiled by the Chinese Historians* (the first history of China on the basis of indigenous sources) contemporary source about Emperor Yao’s achievements. Emperor Yao, according to the chronicle, “was able to make the clever and virtuous distinguished ... who all became harmonious. He regulated and refined his people, who all became bright and intelligent. He united in perfect harmony the myriad states (i.e., the feudal tribes beyond the royal domain), and the black-haired people (the Chinese people) were transformed, and the result was concord.” This development laid the foundations for the millennia of Sino-Korean relations.

Tributary relations were institutionalized during the early Ming Dynasty (1368-1424), and particularly the reigns of the founding Hongwu Emperor (r. 1368-1398) and his son the Yongle Emperor (r. 1403-1424). Professor Feng Zhang of the Australian National University stresses the singular importance of the rise of the tributary system during the Ming era in his 2015 book *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History*. He explains that the overall consolidation of the tributary states was a distinct facet of Chinese regional and international relations that constitutes the foundation of China’s institutionalized quest for regional and global hegemony.

According to Chinese chronicles from the late-1370's attributed to the Hongwu Emperor, as cited by Feng Zhang, the initial reach out to Beijing was largely at the initiative of the Korean king. “At the time of ascending the throne, [I] followed the way of the Sage Kings of antiquity and informed the rulers of foreign kingdoms of the fact that China had a [new] emperor. At the time it was just communicating the intention of opening friendly relations. Unexpectedly Wang Zhuan [i.e., King Kongmin], King of the Koryo, swiftly submitted as a vassal and sent tribute. This was not a result of force, but of the pleasure of mind-and-heart.” However, both key emperors would keep defining the subsequent tributary relations they established as acts of Chinese benevolence even when they were not. For example, the Yongle Emperor stressed the point in a 1411 message to a defeated Mongolian king who sent him tribute. “I inherited the Mandate of Heaven to become ruler of the world, only wish to let people in the Ten Thousand Directions all have their proper places. Whoever comes [to

¹ For details see: Yossef Bodansky, *The Forthcoming Struggles and Wars According to Xi Jinping*, ISPSW Issue No. 595, January 2019

² For details see: Yossef Bodansky, *Korea and the Return of China’s Tributary States*, ISPSW Issue No. 602, February 2019



submit], I will nurture them generously, there being no gulf between those who are near and far, Chinese and non-Chinese.”

Richard Simpson Gundry recognized, in his 1893 book *China and Her Neighbours: France in Indo-China, Russia and China, India and Thibet*, the centrality of the Ming Dynasty to the emergence of both modern China and modern Korea as a neighboring state of China. “The vassalage of Corea appears to date almost from the dawn of its history as a homogeneous kingdom. The first monarch who established an ascendancy over the whole country recognized the overlordship of the Chinese Emperor, to whose help he had been largely indebted; and his successors have clung faithfully to the fortunes of their suzerains. Each change of dynasty in China has found the Korean ruler involved in the defeat of the falling house. When the Mings succeeded, at the close of the fourteenth century, in overthrowing the Mongol power, the reigning dynasty in Corea shared its down fall; and, similarly, we find Corea siding with the Mings in the war which resulted in the overthrow and supersession of the latter by the Manchus. A Manchu army then invaded the country, and dictated at the capital, in 1637, the treaty which continues to the present day to govern its relations with Peking. Under it, the king has to ask and accept investiture at the hands of a Chinese mandarin specially delegated for the purpose, whom he goes out of the city to meet on his arrival, and whom he receives and lodges with every mark of respect. He has to send a yearly embassy to Peking, with certain specified articles of tribute, and receives certain customary presents in return.”

Thus, tributary relationship as codified during the early Ming Dynasty is but one aspect of a set of instruments well-defined by the Chinese Legalism school. The ultimate objective was, and still is, to consolidate a world order dominated by China. “The constitutional structure of Chinese hegemony - characterized by the moral purpose of promoting a universal ethical world order, the relational rationality of serving the great by the small, and the procedural appropriateness of emulative submission - shaped distinct institutional practices. The most significant of these was the fundamental institution of tributary diplomacy,” Professor Feng Zhang writes. “In all, then, the international society of Chinese hegemony was characterized by at least four distinct institutional practices informed by its constitutional structure: tributary diplomacy, communicative diplomacy, war, and trade... Tributary diplomacy was the most significant and fundamental - though not the only noteworthy - institution.” The underlining logic behind tributary relationship has long remained the imperative for dominating countries without having to fight and occupy them.

The first European analyses of China, written in the 17th and 18th Centuries, recognized the uniqueness and importance of China’s tributary system. As a predominantly land power, China sought to create dominated buffers around the Chinese heartlands. In his 1688 tome *A New History of China, Containing a Description of the Most Considerable Particulars of that Vast Empire*, Gabriel Magaillans identified the adjacent Four Kingdoms as historically most important for China. “In short, they represent the Neighbouring Kingdoms, such as are those of the Tartars, the Japanners, of the Peninsula of Corea, and those other that borderground about upon China, under the Title of the Four Barbarous Nations.” Louis Daniel Le Comte stressed in his 1739 book *A Compleat History of the Empire of China: Being the Observations of Above Ten Years Travels Through that Country* that the tributary system facilitated Chinese regional influence. Addressing China’s hegemonic posture, Le Comte observed that “for tho’ all Tartary does not belong to China, yet most is tributary to it.”

William Winterbotham, in his 1795 book *An Historical, Geographical, and Philosophical View of the Chinese Empire*, described “Corea” as the leading tributary state to China. He defined the delicate balance between the Korean monarch’s absolute power over his subjects and his complete dependence on the Chinese emperor for



all major state affairs including king-making. "This kingdom is governed by a sovereign, who exercises absolute authority over his subjects, though he himself is a vassal and tributary of the emperor of China. As soon as this prince dies, the emperor deposes to his son two mandarins, to confer upon him the title of koue-vang; or king. When the king of Corea has no immediate heir, or is afraid that the succession may occasion disturbance after his death, he appoints his heir, and solicits the emperor to confirm his nomination. The prince receives on his knees the Investiture of his states, and pays the emperor's envoys the sum of eight hundred taels, besides distributing other customary presents. The minister of Corea then repairs to Peking, to prostrate himself before the emperor, and present him the tribute; and such is the strictness of the Chinese court, that the princess who has espoused the king, cannot assume the title of queen until she has received it from the emperor."

Throughout their millennia, Sino-Korean relations have been dominated primarily by a delicate balance between the defiant quest for independence by the people of the Hermit Kingdom and the grim geographic, economic and military reality of a small Korean Peninsula surrounded by significantly stronger great powers - China, Japan and Russia. (The arrival, in the late-19th Century, of the Western imperial powers led by the UK and the US did not alter this grand scheme of things even though the US tried hard from the very beginning to evict China from the Korean Peninsula.)

The ongoing weakening of the Chinese state as of the mid-19th Century - part of the century of humiliation - had a major impact on the Sino-Korean relations and especially the crumbling of the tributary relationship. Ernst Oppert stressed the point. "With regard to the relative position between this country [Corea] and China, the view pretty generally held hitherto, of a still existing state of supremacy or suzerainty of the latter over the former, has to be set aside once for all as obsolete and wrong. Centuries ago, indeed, the Chinese emperors have exercised suzerain powers over the Korean kings; but even in those remote times these powers were very limited and confined to certain stipulated rights, and there is no question that this mild form of vassalage has also long since ceased to exist. The China of olden times, mighty within and without, which by the mere influence of her magnitude had been enabled to exercise any amount of pressure on her weaker neighbours, the China of Dschingis-khan, Octai and Kublai-khan has long ago been reduced from her rank of a first-rate power to a much lower standard."

Even a China besieged by the Western great powers and Japan was still more powerful than her immediate neighbors, Richard Simpson Gundry reminded, and the outside powers, most notably the US and Japan, could not eradicate completely the Chinese influence. Hence, irrespective of the decline of China - the tributary relationship persevered. "It would be a mistake, therefore, to ridicule the pretensions of China to suzerainty in Eastern Asia because she made the mistake, at first, of including Western nations in the same category as her neighbours." When the tributary system was established, "China was the 'middle kingdom,' surrounded by barbarian States permitted to exist by Imperial favour and to bask occasionally, in the persons of their envoys, in the sunshine of the Imperial presence." Even as China declined under Western and Japanese pressure, the crux of the regional relations endured.

Gundry explained that the tributary relationships between China and Korea were more comprehensive and multi-faceted than mere political interaction. Geography and relative economic might remained intangibles that no political decline could eradicate. "Recognition of the tributary status is shown by the payment of tribute, by the form of address (as from an inferior to a superior) and by acceptance of the Chinese Calendar; the more intimate dependents also receive investiture and a seal of office at the hands of a Chinese delegate; while in the case of the less intimate the ceremony is performed under the authority of letters patent. The



nature of the tribute is fixed, as well as the times of despatch, and the route by which it shall be sent. The envoys of Corea [still] come direct to Peking;" Gundry observed, and "Corea sends tribute every year."

In the late-19th Century, Lord George Nathaniel Curzon, the clairvoyant pragmatist, recognized and endorsed the reality of Chinese hegemony over Korea. Curzon analyzed the situation on the Korean Peninsula in his 1894 book *Problems of the Far East* that was written after two recent visits to East Asia. Curzon recognized the enduring significance and comprehensive character of the tributary relations between China and Korea. At the core were traditions of mutual interaction. "In addition to the Imperial investiture, and to the annual despatch of the Tribute Mission from Soul, which is still maintained ... the name of the reigning monarch of Korea is also given to him by China, and the era specified in Korean Treaties is that of the accession, not of the King, but of his Suzerain the Emperor. ... When any notable events occur in the Court at Peking they are communicated to the vassal Court, and are the cause of a respectful message either of condolence or of congratulation from the latter. Similarly if any death occurs among the leading members of the Royal Family at Soul, an official intimation of the fact must be sent to Peking."

The contemporary decline of China due to Western and Japanese pressure must not obscure the enduring geo-strategic and geo-economic realities of the region, Curzon stressed. "Such is the technical and official expression of the suzerainty of China which is observed to this day; and such are the evidences of the indisputable reality of that relationship. Of even greater importance is it to trace the extent to which in recent years it has been accompanied by practical domination of Korean statecraft - a subject which brings us into immediate acquaintance with the diplomatic indecision of China, as well as with her enormous latent strength." Therefore, Curzon advised the UK, then at peak Imperial Power and in alliance with Japan, against attempting to challenge reality on the Korean Peninsula. "My own conviction is that the only hope of continued national existence for Korea lies in the maintenance of her connection with China, which history, policy, and nature combine to recommend, and which offers, in addition, the sole guarantee for the recovery and preservation of peace. China has kept her alive for 500 years, and the shadow of China in the background has been the one stable element in the dissolving view of her Lilliputian politics."

Curzon particularly railed against the call for an independent Korea not beholden to China or Japan that was then being advocated by the US. He was convinced that the overall geo-strategic and geo-economic regional realities made such an option impractical and counter-productive to British (or Western) interests. The objective realities of, and correlations of power in, East Asia assure that "that petty kingdom cannot expect for long to retain any real independence," Curzon warned. "A palace intrigue, the death of a king or a queen, an internal rebellion, may at any moment produce an emeute or imbroglio, such as has already invited outside interference, and can only end in a diminution or abrogation of the national claims to autonomy. The friends of Korea do wrongly, in my opinion, in encouraging the latter pretensions. A country that is too weak to stand alone gains nothing by an affected indifference to external support. If Korea is not to collapse irretrievably, she must lean upon a stronger Power; and every consideration of policy points towards maintaining China in the position of protector which she has hitherto filled. After all, Japan would sooner see Korea a recognised vassal of the Middle Kingdom than she would see her under the heel of Russia, or gaze upon St. Andrew's Cross fluttering in the harbour of Fusan."

The Forbidden City hopes that even if they ignore the advice and analysis of China, American leaders still pay attention to the analysis of the clairvoyant Curzon.



Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

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