



## Was Korea Ever a Part of China?: A Historical Review

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### I. Introduction

*[Xi] then went into the history of China and Korea. Not North Korea, Korea. And you know, you're talking about thousands of years ... and many wars. And Korea actually used to be a part of China. (President Trump, Interview with Wall Street Journal, April 17, 2017)*

In April 2017, after holding a summit meeting with the Chinese president Xi Jinping at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida, the U.S. President Donald Trump said in an interview with Wall Street Journal that Korea “actually used to be a part of China.” The comment was evidently based on Xi Jinping’s account of the historical relationship between Korea and China. It was a great shock to Koreans, because the comment, irrespective of its veracity, revealed how the leaders of U.S. and China viewed the relationship between Korea and China. The Korean foreign minister was compelled to promptly issue a statement saying “It is a fact recognized by the international community that Korea was not a part of China during the thousands of years of historical relations between the two.”

Had Korea, in fact, historically been a part of China? Several historical facts have been regarded as evidence supporting this age-old myth. For instance, after the Chinese Emperor Wu of Han Dynasty conquered the ancient Korean kingdom of Wiman Joseon in B.C.103, he installed Four Commanderies including the Lelang Commandery in Korea. These Han Commanderies remained in place for approximately 400 years until A.D.313. Other facts include the military occupation by the Yuan Dynasty(1271-1368) which lasted over a century from the mid-13th century, the invasion by the Qing Dynasty(1644-1910) in the 17th century and the subsequent suzerain-vassal style rituals imposed on Korea. The dispatch of reinforcement troops by the Ming Dynasty(1368-1644) during Japan’s massive invasion of Korea(1592-1598) - albeit motivated by its own security interest - or even the Chinese military’s entry into the Korean War(1950-1953) are frequently cited as historical examples of China's commitment to Korea and/or the inseparable, essential ties between the two countries.

However, throughout world history, there are countless examples of war and diplomacy demonstrating that temporary subjugation or the establishment of tributary relations as a result of military threats or defeat could never fundamentally affect the sovereign integrity of the small, weaker country. Instead, the East Asian concept that described the nature of

Korea-China relations in the past has been '屬國' (Korean pronunciation: *sok-guk*, Chinese: *shuguo*, Japanese: *zokugoku*). Even now, there are widespread concerns that China might look down on Korea, because Korea used to be China's '屬國' in the past, or that Korea might be relegated once again to China's '屬國' as its influence expands.

What is the meaning of '屬國'? The equivalent term in English is generally thought to be 'dependent state', but this is an incorrect translation. This is because a dependent state in international law refers to a semi-sovereign state or a protectorate which is limited in exercising sovereignty, especially external sovereignty, but receives in return protection from another sovereign state, whereas '屬國' in the traditional sense had been acknowledged the authority to govern its own internal and external affairs.

The meaning denoted by the character '屬'(*sok*) is 'to belong to something' and the character '國'(*guk*) means 'state'. However, in the context of international relations, when a state is said to 'belong to' another state, it refers to a wide spectrum of relations, starting from a loose but friendly relationship to a strong military alliance, and the rights and obligations between the concerned states are defined differently according to the circumstances. If taken literally, confederations like the U.S. or Switzerland, EU member countries, as well as Korea or Japan under the ROK-U.S-Japan trilateral security arrangement, can all be seen as '屬國(belonged state)'.

In the pre-Modern East Asia, '屬國' was generally synonymous with 'tributary state.' This means that if we want to understand the nature of the Korean-Chinese historical relations, we have to first inquire into the tributary system. In this regard, I will be putting forth in this paper the following arguments.

First, the essential nature of the tributary system was that of political rituals which developed in the framework of East Asian international structure characterized by the asymmetry between China and neighboring countries in terms of territory, population, economic scale, military power and culture. Neighboring countries would regularly pay tributes to China, and the Chinese emperors awarded the rulers official titles in return. Through these rituals, the former demonstrated its intention to comply with the Sino-centric regional order while the latter gave assurance not to interfere in domestic affairs and to provide assistance in times of contingencies. As such, dynasties of the Korean peninsula maintained peaceful coexistence with Chinese dynasties for a long period of time and retained *de facto* sovereignty in domestic and diplomatic affairs.

Second, after mid-19th century, the traditional meaning of '屬國 = tributary state' was changed drastically as 'dependent state' or 'protectorate' with the expansion of Western imperialism, the break-down of the traditional China-centric order, and the acceptance of international law as a new norm governing international relations. As has been already mentioned, the crucial difference between 'tributary state' and 'dependent state' was the presence (or absence) of the authority to manage its internal/external affairs independently of foreign interferences. Especially in the 1880s, the meaning of '屬國' was appropriated by China in its persistent attempt to prevent Korea, the last tributary state, from leaving its sphere of power.

## II. Reality of the Tributary System

Strictly speaking, the term 'tributary system' in itself is a Western invention. In the 1940s, the American historians John King Fairbank and Têng Ssu-yü coined the term which took root in the international academia. The term, however, is subject to much criticism today due to the fact that. Despite being initially created to theorize China's international relations in late Qing Dynasty, it has been retroactively and indiscriminately applied to earlier periods. Another reason is the fact that the Eurasia region had multiple systems of substructures existing in parallel to the tributary system. Even the institutional practice or meaning of the tributary system varied widely according to times. Thus, it is questionable whether we can justifiably group such a wide spectrum of arrangements into a single institution or system. Therefore, I will use the to refer to the unique attributes of Korea-China relations which maintained relatively stable for 1,500 years through the medium of a political ritual called 'tribute' and the ideas embodied in it – namely the outlook on international politics or the world.

The tributary system is known to have originated from the feudal system of the Chinese ancient kingdom Western Zhou (B.C.1045-B.C.771). Medieval feudalism in Europe was a type of contractual relationship in a warrior nobility society between lords and vassals with fiefs working as the medium. On the other hand, feudalism in Western Zhou was an extension of the family system based on lineage by the eldest son and his primogeniture. In order to rule the peripheral regions, the king of Western Zhou invested members of the royal family with feudal lordships and fiefs. As such, the feudal lords were obligated to present tributes and conduct royal audiences in person regularly to confirm the blood ties. This ancestral ceremony became the origin of the tributary system.

It was during the Han Dynasty (B.C.221-A.D.220) that the tributary system developed into a diplomatic ritual between China and other nations. In B.C.200, Emperor Gaozu was defeated and besieged in a war against the Xiongnu, a confederation of nomadic tribes from Central Asia. The next year, Han entered into a humiliating treaty, agreeing to offer annual gifts and royal women to Xiongnu, to acknowledge it as the 'older brother' and to open border area markets to start trade. But as its power weakened and ties divided, Xiongnu voluntarily wanted to pay tributes to the Han Dynasty in order to pacify their relations. In A.D. 53, the Han Dynasty approved Huhanye, the leader of the Xiongnu, as its official ruler and bestowed upon him a nominal governmental position of Han. Since then, the succeeding dynasties of China sought to stabilize its peripheral regions through such rituals.

The evolutionary process of the tributary system clearly demonstrates that it was a by-product of East Asian history, rather than a Chinese invention created to control foreign nations. Although the origins of the tributary system was the feudalism of Western Zhou, it was the Xiongnu who first used it as a ritual signifying inter-state hierarchy and a diplomatic instrument. China, on its part, participated in this arrangement initially as a tributary state. As the tributary system came to take on the characteristics of diplomatic rituals between states, the procedures were simplified and associated financial costs reduced. This had the effect of inducing neighboring nations to voluntarily participate in the system to enjoy stable relations with China and to domestically consolidate the status

of the ruling class. For the nations in the neighboring regions of China, the tributary system was more of an international arrangement jointly developed with China to ensure coexistence and stable regional order rather than the consequence of succumbing to Chinese intimidation. The system was essentially a mutual and pragmatic recognition of the difference in power between a larger and a smaller state. It also represented the former's clear intention not to interfere in the domestic affairs of the latter and latter's pledge not to challenge the existing regional order based on the hegemony of the larger state.

It was in the middle of the 4th century that the Korean dynasties established a tributary relationship with China. For more than 1,500 years afterwards, the relationship remained in place until it was officially terminated with the Treaty of Shimonoseki concluded at the end of the first Sino-Japanese War(1894-1895). There were several distinct features of this relationship worth further noting.

First is the tension between the centrality of China and the autonomy of Korea. China preferred to have a stable, China-centric order with the neighboring countries arranged in a hierarchy. On the other hand, dynasties in the Korean peninsula sought to secure as much autonomy as possible. The relative superiority of China's centrality and Korea's autonomy always changed according to the power dynamics of the time. And there was a general tendency whenever a unified dynasty emerged in the Chinese continent, the political pressure toward Korea also increasing.

Secondly, the Korean dynasties while conforming to the China-centric 'Tianxia'(天下) order also successfully maintained its own view of the world. Interestingly, while maintaining tributary relations with China, Korean dynasties often regarded itself as the 'larger state' in relationship with the ethnic minorities settled within or in the surrounding areas of the peninsula and received tributes from them. This means that the tributary system was not simply an institution symbolizing the Chinese hegemony but a sophisticated diplomatic instrument designed to maintain peace and stability between larger and smaller states in East Asia.

States and nations around China accepted the institutions and political language of China as a sort of a module used to determine how they perceived themselves and how they expressed themselves to the outside world. In other words, the tributary states accepted the Sino-centric 'Tianxia' by performing tributary rituals, but they also used political symbols that differed from China, such as their own regnal year or title for the emperor in order to build their own 'Tianxia' outside China's sphere of power. Such multipolarism and pluralism were the prominent features characterizing the traditional international order in East Asia. The Korean dynasties were no exception. This was one of the factors that enabled Korea to maintain its national and cultural identity over several thousands of years despite the overwhelming asymmetry of power with China.

### III. Appropriation of 屬國's Meaning

After its defeat in the Opium Wars of the mid-19th century, China was forced to accept Western international law as the new norm governing international relations. This is well

evidenced in the fact that at the very first Western book translated into Chinese by the School of Combined Learning, or the Tongwen Guan (同文館), a government school for teaching Western languages in China, was one of the most famous book on international law authored by Henry Wheaton titled *Elements of International Law* (translated into *Wanguo Gongfa* (萬國公法 [Public Law for Ten Thousand Nations]) in 1864).

The problem, however, was that nowhere in the international law shaped by the West nor in its history can they find a concept equivalent to '屬國'. Originally '屬國' referred to states performed tributary rituals but retained political authority over its own internal and external affairs. According to *Elements of International Law* such a country must be regarded as an independent sovereign state.

*Tributary States, and States having a feudal relation to each other, are still considered as sovereign, so far as their sovereignty is not affected by this relation.*  
(*Elements of International law, 6th edition, 1855, p.51*)

In 1888, the American lawyer Owen N. Denny, who served as a Foreign Advisor to the King of Korea and Inspector of Customs, published a legal monograph that demonstrated unequivocally, based on international legal principles, how a '屬國', unlike dependent or semi-sovereign state, was a completely independent sovereign country. The writing received international attention at the time of its publication, as it was the first literature written in English that discussed the international status of Korea. On August 22nd of the same year, U.S. Senator from Oregon, John H. Mitchell submitted a resolution in the U.S Senate on the issue of Korea based on this very monograph, which influenced considerably on the U.S. policies toward it afterwards.

According to the publication, the most definite criterion for determining a sovereign state is the authority and ability to independently trade, enter into amity or commerce treaties, exchange diplomats and declare war and peace with other sovereign states. Korea at the time had already entered into the family of nations by the conclusions of treaties with Japan(1876), United States(1882), United Kingdom(1883, 1884), Germany(1883, 1884), Italy(1884), Russia(1884), France(1885) and sending Ministers plenipotentiary to Japan and the U.S.

By the 1880s, China had lost almost all of its major tributary states. The Kingdom of Ryukyu was officially annexed and dissolved by Japan to form the Prefecture of Okinawa in 1879. Vietnam became a protectorate of France as a result of the Treaty of Tientsin(1885) that ended the Sino-French War. Thailand had already stopped paying tributes to China since the 1850s. Korea was the only remaining tributary state and in a desperate attempt to preserve the last vestiges of dignity as an empire, China abandoned its existing stance of endorsing the political autonomy of Korea and shifted toward the direction of aggressive domestic interference.

In July 1882, upon the outbreak of a mutiny in Seoul, China quickly dispatched large-scale troops and men-of-war to suppress it. They captured the regent father of the king who came under suspicions of inciting the revolt and took him to Tientsin. It was the first time in about 250 years that the Chinese military were stationed on Korean land and their military leader illegally interfered in domestic affairs except the massive invasion

happened in the early 17th century. Soon afterwards, China appointed Yuan Shih-K'ai to Korea under the pretext of managing Korea's trade and diplomatic affairs, but in reality, he overtly worked to serve the national interests of its own and obstructed the Korean government's diplomatic efforts to be recognized as an independent state and open up to the outside world. Yuan Shih-K'ai took up the title Resident-General and even attempted to dethrone Korean king several times.

If it is true that '屬國' was much similar to independent sovereign state in the perspective of international law, how was China able to disregard the law and treat Korea as if it was a protectorate? The answer can be found in the international circumstances of the time. As is well known, the 19th century was an era when the 'Great Game' - the political and diplomatic confrontation between Great Britain and Russia - took place on a global level. In March 1885, the Panjdeh Incident took place, where Russia seized the northwestern region of what is now a part of Afghanistan. Greatly concerned about the security of its most important colony India, Britain proceeded to illegally occupy the Geomun islands (Port Hamilton) located on the southern tip of Korea. It was a calculated strategic move that can be described as 'forcing a pit bull to spit out the bone by striking its behind with a club.' However, instead of giving notification of its occupation to the Korean government, the directly concerned party in this case, Britain gave notified the Chinese legation in London. Furthermore, it negotiated the withdrawal of forces with the authorities of the Chinese government. This was a *de facto* recognition of China's rightful authority to control Korea's diplomacy.

Prior to this event, the Korean royal court had secretly requested protection from Russia as a counterbalancing force to China and Japan. Japan, which was extremely apprehensive of Russia's southward expansion, revised its existing policy of recognizing Korea as an independent state and followed Britain's attitude toward Korea. Russia also took the stance of not intervening in Sino-Korean relations as long as the status quo was maintained on the Korean peninsula. Hence, Korea was virtually in a state of diplomatic isolation from 1885.

In the process, the meaning of '屬國' also changed. Now it was reinterpreted to mean 'dependent state' or 'semi-sovereign state' instead of the previous 'tributary state = independent state.' At the same time, the distorted historical myth started to be created, saying that Korea had been a part of China for thousands of years, that it was never able to exercise full sovereignty, and that it had always been under China's guidance and management. However, this myth is only a reflection of China's nostalgia for the past glory of its empire now lost and the harsh reality of 19th century imperialism which totally disregarded the independence of a small, powerless state like Korea.

Finally, I would add two more two points regarding the appropriation of the meaning of '屬國' that occurred in the 1880s.

First, with defining '屬國' as a 'dependent state', actual protection must be provided in order to justify the interference in internal and external affairs. In early 1894, a large-scale peasant uprising called the 'Donghak Peasant Revolution' broke out in the southern part of the Korean peninsula. The already impoverished Korean government was

incapable of suppressing it, and China had to once again send 2,000 troops to fulfill its obligations as a patron state. However, the dispatch of the troops only provided Japan, which had been planning a war with China for decades, with the excuse they needed to send their own forces into Korea. As a result of the Sino-Japanese War, regional hegemony in East Asia shifted to Japan, and China was tragically reduced to a semi-colony of Japan and Western great powers.

Second, as Korea was determined as a '屬國' in the sense of a 'dependent state,' China's status vis-à-vis Korea was defined as '宗主國' (K: *Jongjukuk*, C: *Zongzuoguo*, J: *Soshukoku*). In today's linguistic conventions of East Asia, this word is generally used as the translation of English word 'suzerain state'. But '宗主' originally refers to the legitimate firstborn male of a family, who is responsible for performing ancestral rites. Before the 19th century, the word was never once used in the international context or compounded with political concepts like state(國) or right(權).

The term '宗主國' is based on the analogy of international relations to family relations. It implies that larger state must guide, empathize with and be responsible for smaller states just like a father or elder brother who looks after his children or younger siblings. Meanwhile, the term 'suzerainty' was originally put into use in international relations in the 19th century by the European powers, in particular by Russia, taking the Balkan territory away from the Ottoman Empire. At that time, 'suzerainty' meant nothing more than a recognition of the Sultan's nominal and religious authority. In that there was no implication of family relations here, the translation 'suzerain state=宗主國' was a by-product of East Asian modern history.

Likewise, the authority and right vested in '宗主國' was defined as '宗主權'. But just as the former is not a mere translation of 'suzerain state,' the latter should not be simply equated with 'suzerain right.' In short, it was a peculiar compound of the historical memory of the tributary relationship in the East, the suzerainty concept developed in the West, and patriarchal family ethics of Confucianism. It became a monstrous concept that justified the exercise of unlimited and transcending interventions of '宗主國' over '屬國'. However, you can hardly find any examples other than the Sino-Korean relations in the 1880s where '宗主權' in this sense was actually exercised in international relations.

#### IV. Another Historical Dispute?

On April 17, 1895, the Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed as a peace treaty ending the Sino-Japanese War. Article 1 of the said treaty stipulates as follows.

*China recognises definitively the full and complete independence and autonomy of Korea, and, in consequence, the payment of tribute and the performance of ceremonies and formalities by Korea to China, in derogation of such independence and autonomy, shall wholly cease for the future.*

And with that came an official end to the term '屬國' in the context of Sino-Korean relations. However, regardless of legal language, historical memories persisted. The Beiyang government, which was established after Qing Dynasty was overthrown by the

1911 Xinhai Revolution, compiled the *The Manuscript of the History of Qing Dynasty* (清史稿) and placed Korea in the 'Sok-guk Section (屬國傳).'

It was a long held Chinese tradition for an incoming dynasty to write the chronological narrative of the preceding one. The Beiyang government, however, had its hands full trying to unify the country while warding off Japanese invasion and was unable to complete *The History of the Qing Dynasty* (清史). Its work stopped at collecting and organizing the vast amount of government documents to use as basic material. The thing is, in *The History of Ming Dynasty*, the dynasty immediately before the Qing Dynasty, Korea was included in the 'Foreign State Section (外國傳).'

In other words, *The Manuscript of the History of Qing Dynasty* classified Korea in line with the same historical perception previously held at the end of the 19th century when Korea was regarded as a '屬國=dependent state'. At present, the Chinese government is working on the National History Compilation Project (國家清史編纂工程) which will officially complete *The History of the Qing Dynasty*. This government-led large-scale project is about to be completed soon. At the time *The History of Ming Dynasty* is published, it is highly likely that another historical disputes be sparked between Korea and China, especially over the meaning of '屬國'.

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