

Qing-Chosŏn relations during the period 1882-1895 as seen through the lens of 'Public Law of All Nations(萬國公法¹)' and the Collapse of Interpolity Order of 'Serving the Great'(事大秩序)

Research Background

Qing-Chosŏn relations have so far been largely described in terms of suzerain-vassal relationship or tributary relations with much emphasis on trade. This line of understanding focusing either on domination/subordination or on economic aspects might not capture the whole picture or miss other crucial aspects. The traditional overarching notion of 'serving the great, caring for the small'(事大字小) takes precedence over a mere set of tribute system formalities or any other performative facets of the regional order involving the Qing and Chosŏn for more than two and half centuries.

As Mencius was quoted as saying, it takes a wise and virtuous ruler for a great polity to serve a small one and vice versa, which would deservedly lead to ensuring the security of each polity as well as of 'all under heaven.'² This quotation seems to imply the overriding importance of 'mutually guaranteeing collective security and peaceful coexistence' in conducting interpolity affairs. In a similar vein, Liang Qichao used the terms "tributary"(藩屬) and "protectorate"(保護國) as if interchangeably, opining that Li Hongzhang should not have encouraged Chosŏn to enter into treaties with foreign countries and should have claimed it as a "dependency"(附庸).³

"Tributary" redefined by Liang as "protectorate" and his implication on narrower definition of tributary relations in the eyes of international law seems to be linked in spirit with Mencius' observation on the benefit and grace of a great polity protecting a small one within the common

¹ This is the title of W. A. P. Martin's Chinese translation of Henry Wheaton's *Elements of International Law*(1863). Martin visited Zongli Yamen in September 1863 with a first version of his translation of it. Since this visit, there emerged an unprecedented era of clashes between Western and East Asian civilizations – conflicts of two incompatible notions of interpolity order.

² 《孟子》 梁惠王 下：惟仁者爲能以大事小，是故湯事葛，文王事昆夷，惟智者爲能以小事大，故大王事獯鬻，句踐事吳。以大事小者，樂天者也，以小事大者，畏天者也。樂天者保天下，畏天者保其國。

³ Gwen Raymond Guo, "CHINA'S KOREA? CHINESE VIEWS OF NATION AND REGION, 1882-1952", Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 2003, pp. 68-69.

order. This interpretation may open a new avenue for a corrective understanding of Chosŏn-Qing relations during the period of ambivalence where East Asian traditional order and European international law went in parallel functioning as a façade for each other.

Objective of Research

The Qing ruling elites asserted around the time when the 'Empire of Japan' and 'Kingdom of Korea' entered into treaty relations in 1876 that Chosŏn was a Qing dependency(屬邦土), autonomous in domestic government affairs[政教禁令] but sending tributes to the Qing court and receiving investiture and calendar with reign name.⁴ Later from 1885 on, however, Yuan Shikai, as Imperial Resident in Chosŏn, interfered in internal matters as well. This altered inertia was certainly predicated on both polities' mutual recognition and interests of each other. There should then be adequate explanation of why and how the representation of suzerain-vassal or tributary relations between the Qing and Chosŏn, despite their declining relevance since the early 1880s, persisted, however nominal it might have been, until the conclusion of the Treaty of Shimonoseki.

This very point has not yet been sufficiently addressed, leaving some gap in existing related literature. In order to duly interpret the peculiarity where traditional regional order and European international system were juxtaposed to and seemingly coexisted with each other, we need to investigate how the ruling elites in both dynasties looked upon one another either in their politically vertical hierarchy or in rather horizontal symbiosis, particularly in the light of the millennia-old undercurrent notion of "serving the great and caring for the small", with their perceptions driven by their sense of political survival.

Research Questions

If it can be said that Qing-Chosŏn relations constituted the only legitimate example of a Sinocentric tributary relationship⁵ and that the notion of "serving the great" had performed a

⁴ Deuchler, Martina, *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys: The Opening of Korea, 1875-1885*, University of Washington Press, 1977, pp. 27-28.

⁵ Larsen, Kirk W. *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade – Qing Imperialism and Chosŏn Korea 1850-1910*, Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 38.

function of maintaining and justifying an overarching structure, albeit with diminishing importance, in which their bilateral relations yielded different tangible payoffs at different times for either, then the following questions would have to be addressed:

1. How could the interpolity relations between the Qing and Chosŏn dynasties during the period 1882-1895 be understood in terms of ‘serving the great, caring for the small’(事大字小), particularly as “mutual security guarantee and external diplomatic representation”? What was the function of the tribute system(朝貢體制) with regard to Chosŏn-Qing transnational political identities and survival?

2. How were such relations based on ‘serving the great’ expressed in official documents concerning treaty negotiations with Western powers, negotiations over agreements between government offices of the two polities, and related writings of individual scholar-officials and reformers, among other sources?

3. How was the ‘Public Law of All Nations(萬國公法, *Wan guo gong fa*)’ initially greeted in each of the two polities and how did the attitude of ruling elites’ of each polity toward the international law change over the same period?

Methodology

This research project utilizes methodologies of comparative historical analysis, macroconfigurational and partly case-based. Historical events and occurrences in different temporal and spatial contexts in the Qing and Chosŏn dynasties during the period 1882-1895 will be examined to consider causal configurations and compare political or social processes that were centered around ruling elites of the two polities. As an overarching methodology, the comparative sequential method will be used to analyze and compare events in different yet related contexts involving the ‘imperial structure’ with tributary relations and political dependencies and a ‘new structure’ that came with the introduction of ‘Public Law of All Nations’(萬國公法) during the time span.

In sequencing, the following two questions may need to be addressed: Under which conditions did the tributary relations between the Qing and Chosŏn weaken or bolster either party in such relations over the said period; under which circumstances did the adaptation to the new order nominally based on European international law come to the forefront, if ever, among policy circles in either party? Here a critical question is not whether tributary relations

or such an adaptation mattered but when and to whom and how.

Two conceptual variables in addressing the first question could be 1) rituals and formalities along with the notions thereof resulting from the institutional inertia and legacies of the order of 'serving the great' and 2) the existence of strong opposition to the old order to put forward the new structure both in foreign affairs with Western states and in bilateral relations. For the second question, similarly, two variables could be set as 1) political platforms to bring about institutional innovation both in external affairs and nationalistic modernization projects and in Chosŏn-Qing relations and 2) elements in Chosŏn favoring the vested interests sustained by dependence on the Qing and those in the Qing trying to capitalize on the status quo by purporting suzerain status over Chosŏn.

Cases to be analyzed in terms of both dynasties' elites' perceptions of bilateral relations amidst the new order imposing on them include, among others, 1) the negotiation process for the treaty of amity and commerce between Chosŏn and the United States(May 22, 1882); 2) the Imo Incident(壬午軍變, July 23, 1882); 3) three trade regulations between the Qing and Chosŏn(商民水陸貿易章程(1882), 奉天與朝鮮邊民交易章程(1883), 吉林朝鮮商民隨時貿易章程(1883)); 4) the Kapsin Coup(甲申事變, December 4, 1884); 5) Port Hamilton(巨文島) Incident(April 1885 – February 1887).

As one auxiliary method to search across documents, keywords in two categories of major concepts can be traced for text analysis. The first category concerns the traditional East Asian regional order to include '事大', '字小', '朝貢', '藩封', '屬邦', '附庸' and the second is about accommodation with the new order represented by *Wan guo gong fa*(萬國公法), such as '公法', '(平等)立約', '通商', '主權', '自主', '獨立'. After tracing these keywords, the texts with such concepts should be closely examined to sequence the policy deliberations and accompanying events and policy measures implemented by analyzing and comparing entries in primary sources most relevant for each sequence.

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