Sino-Korean Relations in the Qing Period:
From the Tributary System to Direct Intervention

Mid-Term-Paper (Option One) for Hist 362, Chinese History
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1. Introduction

The historical relations of China and Korea have long been marked by Korea’s formally accepting a tributary dependency on China, while in reality enjoying independence as a sovereign state. This tributary system was not abolished until 1894, but it was in fact some time before that when China, having to give up the notion of being the "central flower", was forced to rethink its foreign policy.

In the process of that, she also started to develop a deeper interest in Korea and eventually even began to get involved in Korean internal affairs.

The present short paper seeks to give a brief overview over both the old tributary relationship of Korea to China as well as China’s growing interest in Korea and finally China’s actual handling of foreign policy in regard to Korea in the late 19th century. It is hoped that the presentation will shed some light on the evolvement of a new system of foreign relations in East Asia at the end of the 19th century, of which the Sino-Korean relations were, of course, only a part.

2. The Tributary Relations

The system of tributary relations between China and Korea had already been set up in early Ming times, but it was not stabilized until after the end of the Manchu occupation of Korea in 1639. After that it basically remained the same up to almost the end of the Qing dynasty. "Tributary relations" in theory meant that Korea acknowledged the superiority of China and derived the legitimization of the exercising of her sovereignty from the latter. In practice, it meant little more than frequently sending back and forth
tribute missions.

The number of these missions amounted to a total of c. 700 going from Korea to China and c. 170 going from China to Korea in the years from 1637 to 1894.¹ One mission usually consisted of about 200 to 300 people, among whom the officials numbered about 30 people in the case of the annual winter solstice tribute mission and no more than about two or three when only a memorial was to be presented. The travel from Seoul to Beijing took roughly two months of time; upon arrival in Beijing the Korean mission stayed there for another 40 to 60 days until they began their return home.

In most cases, the tribute missions had virtually no practical purpose at all:² Their character was purely ritualistic: While in Beijing, the mission showed their deference before the Board of Rites which was the Chinese government office in charge of Korean affairs. The emissaries of the regular year-end mission also performed the kowtow before the Chinese emperor. Occasionally, a discussion of political or commercial matters would be conducted through the exchange of the missions, which was true especially in the case of those messages carried by the Chinese missions to Seoul. They were concerned with foreign affairs involving third parties, border matters, and the correct conduct of rituals or astronomical or calendar matters.

While the missions also conducted some degree of trade, this did not at all match the costs that the regular exchange created; especially the reception of the Chinese embassies bore heavily on the Korean budget: The annual expenses for sending and receiving missions took up almost one sixth of the yearly total budget of the Korean central government.³

Nevertheless, it can be argued that both sides profited from the way in which they established their foreign relations. Korea, for one, was "the only area in the sphere of China's immediate influence which managed to maintain independence of state."⁴ China, on the other hand, benefitted by having the guarantee of political stability, at least in the field of foreign politics. Since the Confucian concept of the just ruler also included stability in outward relations as a criterion of the Heavenly Mandate, this sense of security was rather important for the Qing emperors.⁵ Also, it may be justified to state that the tributary

¹ These and the following figures are taken from the tables in Chun 1968, pp. 95 and 99.
² The following information on the contents of the missions is derived from the list in Chun 1968, pp. 92-94.
⁴ Osterhammel 1989, p. 97.
relationship, as expensive as it may have been, was still less costly than the military expenditures with which China chose to pacify the Northwestern and the Western borders of her empire.  

### 3. Changes Between 1842 and 1882

After the Opium War in 1842, and especially after the Treaty of Tianjing (1858) and its enforcement through military means in 1859 and 1860, the Chinese self-perception as the Central Kingdom surrounded by inferior states became less and less plausible. In a way, China "had to learn how to behave as a weak power." One sign of China's acknowledgement of this new need was the creation of a separate government office for the handling of foreign affairs, namely the Zongli Yamen, in 1861.

With regard to the treatment of Korea, however, almost nothing changed until the late 1870's. In fact, the tributary missions continued to travel from Seoul to Beijing as they had done before until the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894. The Zongli Yamen had declared the following in 1869: "Korea, though a dependency of China, is completely autonomous in her politics, religion, prohibitions, and orders. China has never interfered into it." As late as 1876, when the Japanese emissary Mori Arinori questioned the Zongli Yamen about its Korea policy, it remained evasive, its answer staying within the boundaries of the statement given above.

It had, however, also been the Japanese, namely their annexation of the Ryukyu Islands, who had provided the first instance for the Chinese to rethink their foreign relations to the close tributary states. Together with the fear of Russian interference and a desire for the expansion of trade in Korea in order to be able to compete with the Japanese there, this led to a series of memos and proposals to the Zongli Yamen in 1879 and 1880, advising it to take a more positive stand in Korea. The leadership in Beijing came to agree with these proposals at about the same time that the Koreans also began to seek a deepening of the bilateral relations. The former can be seen by the fact that the Chinese

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7 Osterhammel 1989, p. 394.
9 A description of Mori's visit at the Zongli Yamen can be found in Chien 1967, pp. 29-31.
emperor in 1879 ordered Li Hongzhang, the governor general of three northern provinces, to correspond with the Korean government in order to establish foreign relations,\textsuperscript{11} while the latter is witnessed by the Korean government's requesting cooperation in military education from the Board of Rites in 1880.\textsuperscript{12}

The first major result of this shift of Beijing's attitude was the U.S.-Korean Treaty of 1882.\textsuperscript{13} The American Robert W. Shufeldt had come to East Asia in 1880 to sign a treaty with Korea, which had heretofore been closed to foreign powers. He first attempted to enlist the mediating services of Japan which did, however, fail to find Korean support for a treaty. This is why he then turned to China for assistance. For some time he negotiated with Li in Tientsin, without any Koreans' being involved; they only joined in at the actual signing of the treaty in May 1882. Thus, the process of negotiating and drafting already revealed Korea's dependency on China, although explicitly stating so was avoided in the text of the treaty itself. The Chinese had tried to include a paragraph to that effect, but in the end were content with the Korean king's sending a letter to the American president declaring that Korea was a dependent state of China.

\textbf{4. Implementation of the New Korea Policy: Yuan in Seoul}

In 1882, the Tai Won Kun, the father of the Korean boy emperor, who had dominated Korean politics in the 1870's, but whose influence had recently waned, staged a coup d'état to overthrow the Min family whose political party was in control at the time. The coup d'état soon involved violence against foreigners, especially Japanese, as well. The riots only ended when the Chinese sent in troops under the leadership of General Wu Chang-ching, seized the Tai Won Kun, and escorted him off to detention in China.

Yuan Shi-kai, who took part in the Chinese action, was promoted as a result of the successful maneuver and appointed to train and modernize the Korean army. A second coup d'état took place in December 1884, this time staged by Kim Ok Kyun and his followers with the help of the Japanese. The attempt was again quickly quelled by the

\textsuperscript{11} An English translation of the Imperial edict is given in Chien 1967, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{12} Q.v. Chien 1967, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{13} A detailed treatment of the negotiations leading to the treaty, its implementation, and international reactions to it is provided in Chien 1967, pp. 72-93.
Chinese, but they now realized the need of containing Japan's ambitions and accordingly entered into treaty negotiations, resulting in the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Tientsin (1885). The treaty essentially consisted of the provision that both powers would withdraw all their troops from Korea and on the whole established equal rights for both powers in Korea.

While this formally looked like a loss of power for China on the surface, Li "knew that he must send an able man (...) to regain the influence China had lost through the Tientsin Treaty." Accordingly, in October 1885, Yuan Shi-kai was appointed as "Commissioner of the third rank stationed in Korea to Superintend Diplomatic and Commercial Affairs", but came soon to be known as the Chinese resident in Seoul, in fact exercising the power of a viceroy.

Indeed, under Yuan the radical departure from the old policy of non-interference other than on a ritual and formal level soon became apparent. His official functions in Seoul included control over the customs, tramways, steamship companies, commerce, and coinage (as a result of his influence, Chinese currency was used in Korea at that time). He also clarified how he perceived his own position by his behavior towards the diplomats of the other countries residing in Seoul: He did not attend diplomatic meetings conducted at the ambassadorial level, but rather chose to send a subordinate. Furthermore, in contrast to the other foreign representatives, he rode into the palace on his sedan chair to royal audiences, which raised a big issue among the diplomatic corps of Seoul in the late 1880's.

The power he held was consolidated by his "police troops" which were so assigned because of the prohibition of outright military presence in the Treaty of Tientsin. These police troops numbered several hundreds, and they were also well equipped, so that they in effect constituted a military force. Yuan also made actual use of his influence, in 1887 e.g. he successfully managed to prevent the establishment of Korean embassies abroad by demanding that any Korean delegate to a foreign country would have to consult with the Chinese representative there first before undertaking any steps. This so much intimated the Koreans that they finally chose not to dispatch anyone to Europe although the ambassador to be had already been appointed.

While the situation in Korea between 1885 and 1894 has been likened to a "co-protectorate", it seems that during that period the Chinese clearly were in the

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14 Ch'en 1972, p. 18.
15 So judge Kim/Kim 1967, p. 64 who also gives Yuans full title.
16 Kim/Kim 1967, pp. 65f.
stronger position. Their involvement did, however, not end happily for them. When the Tonghak rebellion broke out in 1894, it was the Chinese, for whom the Korean king called. And the Chinese felt compelled to send in their troops, although the Japanese were also sending large numbers of theirs. China had gone too far with its commitment to be able to withdraw at this stage: "A withdrawal at this point would mean the surrender of China's suzerainty over Korea, thus exposing China's frontier to Japanese penetration." 18 Therefore, Li and Yuan finally saw no other option than to confront the Japanese with military means - the result was, as we know, disastrous for China.

5. Appendix

A. Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Names and Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Korean</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kim Ok Kyun</td>
<td>金玉均</td>
<td>Wu Chang-ching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Li Hong-zhang</td>
<td>李洪章</td>
<td>Yuan Shi-kai</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mori Arinori</td>
<td>森有禮</td>
<td>Zongli Yamen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tai Won Kun</td>
<td>大院君</td>
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B. Bibliography

Ch’en, Jerome, Yuan Shih-k’ai, Stanford 1972.
Osterhammel, Jürgen, China und die Weltgesellschaft, München 1989.

18 Ch’en 1972, pp. 26f.