



Readings from Asia

The Suzerainty Concept in the East and West

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A groundbreaking study edited by Okamoto Takashi of Kyoto Prefectural University, *Sōshuken no sekaishi: Tōzai Ajia no kindai to hon'yaku gainen* (A world history of suzerainty: A modern history of East and West Asia and translated concepts; hereafter, *A World History of Suzerainty*) moves beyond the prevailing perspective on the history of international relations in modern East Asia. Ever since the Treaty of Nanjing was signed in 1842, the scholarship has been dominated by the conventional narrative that the system of Western international law was introduced to the East Asian world and collided with the existing Chinese world order. However, this book's attempt to understand both Western international law and the Chinese world order through a single concept of suzerainty (*zongzhuquan* 宗主権) shakes that notion. It is a common perception that Western international law is based on equality whereas the Chinese world order assumes hierarchical order. Nevertheless, *A World History of Suzerainty* reveals that hierarchical relationships also existed between the suzerain state and the dependent state governed by the suzerainty concept under Western international law, which calls for the need to rethink and begin anew in describing the modern history of East Asian international relations.

Okamoto Takashi, who led this research, is a scholar of modern Chinese history who has written a number of books, including *Kindai Chūgoku to kaikan* (Modern China and maritime customs, 1999). While researching the topic of Chinese maritime customs, Okamoto came across the question of Chosŏn 朝鮮 (Korea), over which China attempted to expand its influence. He then began to take an interest in Korea. He subsequently wrote such books

as *Zokkoku to jishu no aida: Kindai Shin-Kan kankei to Higashi Ajia no meiun* (Between a tributary and an autonomous state: Modern Qing-Korea relations and the fate of East Asia, 2004) and *Ba Kenchu no Chūgoku kindai* (Ma Jianzhong's modern China, 2007) and became an influential scholar of Korea-China relations. In *Zokkoku to jishu no aida*, in particular, he explains the delicate status of Chosŏn using the framework of *shuguo zizhu* 屬國自主 (a dependent state that retains its sovereignty), in which Chosŏn is a dependent state of the Qing while trying to maintain its sovereignty in relation to Western nations. With this accomplishment, Okamoto has come to be viewed as the researcher who took the historical study of international relations in modern East Asia—China, Japan, and Korea—to the next level.

The terms *shuguo* 屬國 and *zizhu* 自主 employed by Okamoto are East Asian concepts, but they correspond, respectively, to the concepts of the dependent or vassal state and the sovereign or independent state under Western international law. The Korea question—more specifically, the question of Chosŏn's status—seemed to blur the boundaries of these categories. The idea that Chosŏn was a *shuguo* (dependent state) of the Qing but simultaneously retained and exercised *zizhu* (sovereignty) caused great confusion among the Western powers, including the United Kingdom and the United States. Within the logic of Western international law, one could not be both a dependent and an independent or sovereign state.

In making this point, Okamoto delves into the concepts of international law pertaining to dependency and sovereignty. He examines the usage of *shuguo* and *zizhu* as defined in Henry Wheaton's *Elements of International Law* (1855)—translated into Chinese under the title *Wanguo gongfa* 萬國公法 (Public law for ten thousand nations, 1864)—an international legal text circulated during the late nineteenth century, the target period of his research. Okamoto discovered that he could understand the international relations of modern East Asia—and, furthermore, world history—using a new framework of suzerainty that could be applied to both the East and the West. To provide a better understanding, here is a passage on suzerainty, which may very likely have provided Okamoto with inspiration:

Besides the free city of Cracow and the United States of the Ionian Islands, several other semi-sovereign or dependent States are recognized by the existing public law of Europe. These [include]: The Principalities of Moldavia, Wallachia, and Servia [*sic*], under the *suzeraineté* of the Ottoman Porte and the protectorate of Russia as defined by the successive treaties between these two powers, confirmed by the treaty of Adrianople, 1829. (Wheaton 1855, 48–49)

A hierarchical order similar to that of the Chinese world order, in which suzerainty served as a mediating concept, also existed in the Western world. Okamoto tried to understand China's interference with Chosŏn in the East Asian world within the framework of suzerainty. I have compiled the following table comparing the East and the West in Okamoto's view of the framework of suzerainty that existed in both worlds:

Eastern States	Eastern Concepts	Western States	Western Concepts
Qing 清	<i>Shangguo</i> 上國 (<i>Zongzhuguo</i> 宗主國) (upper state, suzerain state)	Ottoman Porte (Ottoman Empire)	Suzerain state (suzerainty)
Chosŏn 朝鮮 (Korea), Annam 安南 (Vietnam), Ryukyu 琉球 (Okinawa), Mongolia, Tibet	<i>Shuguo</i> 屬國 (dependent state)	Wallachia, Moldavia, Serbia, Egypt	Dependent state

According to this framework, the delicate, contradictory, and incomprehensible status of Chosŏn as *shuguo zizhu* becomes comprehensible. Pressure and interference that the Qing imposed on Chosŏn could be understood along the lines of the exercise of suzerainty that the Ottoman Empire applied to its dependent states. This comparative perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of international relations using the framework of "suzerainty" that existed in both the East and the West, allowing us to move beyond the existing view that perceives the international relations of East Asia through the limited perspective of "dependent state with sovereignty."

As a specialist in modern Chinese history, Okamoto would have had difficulty constructing the entire world history within the framework of suzerainty on his own. Thus, he collaborated with scholars from various fields from Western history to Middle Eastern, Chinese, and Japanese history to conduct joint research pertaining to the question of suzerainty. The product of that effort is *A World History of Suzerainty*.

The contributions of two experts in Romanian and Ottoman history make up part 1 of *A World History of Suzerainty*, "*Osuman chitsujo taikai no tenkan*

to *seiyō*" (Transformation of Ottoman world order and the West).¹ Mayuzumi Akitsu of the University of Tokyo is a rare Japanese historian who majored in Romanian history. His book *Mittsuno sekaino hazamade: Seiō, Roshia, Osuman to Warakia, Morudovua mondai* (The land among the three worlds: The Ottoman, Russian, and Western European empires and the questions of Wallachia and Moldavia, 2013) deals with the cases of Moldavia and Wallachia, which were caught between three worlds—Western European, Orthodox, and Islamic—represented by Austria, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire, respectively. Mayuzumi was the perfect candidate to address the questions of Moldavia and Wallachia under the suzerainty of Ottoman Empire, which Okamoto came across in Wheaton's *Elements of International Law*. The result is the first chapter of Okamoto's book, titled "*Osuman teikoku ni okeru fuyōkoku to "sōshuken" no shutsugen: Warakia to Morudovua wo rei toshite*" (The appearance of vassal states and "suzerainty" in the Ottoman Empire: The case of Wallachia and Moldavia).

As Wallachia and Moldavia were dependent states within the Ottoman Empire, the insights of an expert in Ottoman history was needed for this volume. Fujinami Nobuyoshi of Tsuda University, who authored *Osuman Teikoku to rikkensei: Seinen Toruko Kakumei ni okeru seiji, shūkyō, kyōdōtai* (The Ottomans and constitutionalism: Politics, religion, and communities in the Young Turk Revolution, 2011) contributed chapter 2, "*Shuken to sōshuken no aida: Kindai Osuman no kokusei to gaikō*" (Between sovereignty and suzerainty: History of the Ottoman privileged provinces).

Part 2—"Seihō kara Higashi Asia e" (From the West to East Asia)—deals with the process through which the concept of suzerainty was transmitted from the Western world to the East Asian world. Here, Okamoto sheds light on how the discussion of suzerainty pertaining to the Ottoman Empire, introduced in the first two chapters, could be extended to the suzerainty question between Qing and Chosŏn by drawing on international law texts such as the *Elements of International Law*. Okamoto himself wrote chapter 3, "*Sōshuken to kokusaihō to honyaku: tōhō mondai kara Chōsen mondai e*" (Suzerainty, international law, and translation: From the Eastern question to the Korean question). Yamazoe Hiroshi, a specialist in Russian history and a researcher for National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), contributed chapter 4, "*Roshia no tōhō shinshutsu to Higashi Ajia: Tai Ro kyōkai mondai o meguru Shinchō to Nihon*" (Russia's eastward approach to East Asia: The Qing, Japan, and boundary issues with Russia). Part 3—"Kindai Nihon to honyaku gainen" (Modern Japan and translated concepts)—includes chapter 5 by Morita Yoshihiko of Osaka University of Tourism, "*Diplomacy kara gaikō:*

¹ All English translations of part and chapter titles are taken from the English version of the book under review (Okamoto 2019).

Meiji Nihon no “gaikō”kan (From diplomacy to *gaikō* 外交: Meiji Japan and its perceptions of “diplomacy”), which deals with the process by which “diplomacy” as a translated concept was accepted in Japan. Koketsu Satoko, a specialist in modern Japanese history at Osaka University, contributed chapter 6, “*Nisshin kaisen zengo no Nihon gaikō to Shin-Chō sōzoku kankei*” (Japanese diplomacy and the Sino-Korean suzerain-vassal relationship before and after the First Sino-Japanese War). This chapter provides a window into how the Western concepts of diplomacy and suzerainty were accepted in Japan. Based on this study, Koketsu went on to publish the book *Ni-Shin Sensō ni okeru Nihon gaikō: Higashi Ajia wo meguru kokusai kankei no hen’yō* (Japanese diplomacy during the First Sino-Japanese War: The evolution of international relations regarding East Asia, 2016).

Parts 4—“*Honyaku gainen to Higashi Ajia no henbō*” (Translated concepts and transformation of East Asia)—and 5—“*Tōzai shin chitsujo no yukue*” (Orientation of New International Order in the East and the West)—deal with the question of China with regard to suzerainty. Tachibana Makoto, a professor at Shimonoseki City University and specialist in Mongolian history who authored *Bogudo Haan seiken no kenkyū: Mongoru kenkokushi josetsu 1911–1921* (A study on the Bogd Khaan government: The history of nation-building in Mongolia, 1911–1921; Tachibana 2011), contributed Chapter 7, “*Mongoru “dokuritsu” wo meguru honyaku gainen: jichi ka, dokuritsu*” (Somewhere between “independence” and “autonomy”: Translating concepts in modern Mongolian). Chapter 8, “*Chibetto no seidjiteki chii to Shimura kaigi: honyaku gainen no kentō wo chūshin ni*” (The political status of Tibet and the Simla conference (1913–14): Translated concepts in modern Tibet” was written by Kobayashi Ryosuke, a research fellow at the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) at the time. Mongolia and Tibet were *fanbu* (feudatory regions) of the Qing, and the question of suzerainty was raised when these two states tried to attain autonomy, or independence. At this time the Qing, which had thus far imposed the Chinese world order, became a “nation-state” called “China” with defined territory and borders.

It was on this foundation that Okamoto himself authored chapter 9, “*Chūgoku ni okeru “ryōdo” gainen no keisei*” (Internalizing “territory”: How the “territory” concept became part of China’s contemporary conceptual apparatus). This chapter deals with the process by which China became a “sovereign nation” called the People’s Republic of China and defines what constitutes Chinese territory as a modern nation. The questions raised in this chapter served as the driving force behind Okamoto’s later book, *Chugoku no tanjo: Higashi Ajia no kindai kaikō to kokka keisei* (The birth of China: Diplomacy and formation of a nation in modern East Asia, 2017).

The joint study under review here shows the strength of the suzerainty concept by shedding light on the parallels between the East and the West by

comparing the process by which the Chinese world order collapsed in East Asia to that of the Ottoman Empire being dissolved in the West. However, as a specialist in Korean history, I did find a few problematic issues in *A World History of Suzerainty*, which I will discuss, moving from the larger issues to the smaller ones.

First, it seems that the comparison between the East and the West is not as direct as Okamoto claims, in that the suzerainty concept is applied only to the post-Mongolian period of the Ottoman Empire and the Qing Empire in the East, whereas he says that the nation-state system is at work in the Western world as a whole. This treatment shows that the text distinguishes between the two worlds in a rather uneven manner.

Suzerainty is not limited to the Eastern question—in particular, the cases of the Ottoman and Qing empires. When the Holy Roman Empire collapsed in 1806, the German, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian empires all claimed to be its legitimate successor. Until these empires collapsed after World War I ended in 1918, their suzerainty and the sovereignty of their dependent states (which emerged as sovereign states) still remained critical questions in the West. In that respect, the question of suzerainty cannot be limited merely to the Ottoman and Qing empires, but must be considered in the Western context as well.

Next, I believe that the question of sovereignty in dependent states under the suzerainty of empires should be examined in more detail. Dependent states of the Ottoman Empire included Wallachia, Moldavia, and Serbia, as well as the in North African states of Egypt, Tripoli (Libya), Tunisia, and Algeria, whose degrees of sovereignty varied. They all paid tribute, but the suzerain-vassal relation was emphasized more with Egypt, whereas Tripoli, Tunisia, and Algeria were practically recognized as independent states. Likewise, among the vassal states of the Qing Empire, Chosŏn, Vietnam, and Ryukyu displayed more aspects of a sovereign state, which enabled them to sign separate treaties with Western powers. On the other hand, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet were *fanbu* under the jurisdiction of the *Lifan Yuan* (Office of Feudatory Regional Affairs) and did not constitute independent states. Thus it is insufficient to treat all of these states uniformly using the general concept of “suzerainty” without acknowledging such differences.

Finally, whereas the universal concept of suzerainty provides clues to understanding the Qing’s interference in Chosŏn, it does not fully resolve the oxymoron of Chosŏn’s position as *shuguo zizhu*. Okamoto also states in the book that it is logically incomprehensible for a dependent state to accept interference by another state and yet maintain independence and sovereignty. If this is the case, we must go back to the beginning of our study of history and closely review international law and examine the meaning of “sovereign state” and “dependent state” in the Western world. Only then can

we reach a proper understanding of the status of Chosŏn as a dependent state that retained sovereignty.

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