
History as a Mirror: What Does the Demise of Ryukyu Mean for the Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Dispute?¹

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Abstract

The on-going dispute over the ownership of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands between China and Japan has often been ridiculed by observers as an unwise struggle for rocks. One must question, however, why so much significance has been attached to those “trivial specks” in the first place. This paper maintains that the seed of contemporary Sino-Japanese rivalry cannot be separated from the “expansion” of European international society, after which China and Japan came to be obsessed with sovereign independence and territorial integrity. Following the demise of the Ryukyu Kingdom, Qing Chinese officials realised that Meiji Japan was no longer within the borders of a once-shared civilisation, which prepared the ground for a series of violent conflicts between them, unusual in their millennium-old, largely peaceful interactions. A sustainable resolution of the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue, then, should

move from calls for putting aside sovereignty differences towards a more inclusive, post-Westphalian bordering practice in East Asia.

Key Words

Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, international society, non-Western international relations, Ryukyu, Sino-Japanese relations, territorial dispute.

Introduction

A clutch of eight tiny, uninhabited islets in the Western Pacific, named the Senkaku Islands by Japan and the Diaoyu Islands by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), recently became one of the most headline-making flashpoints in East Asia. Administrated by Japan but also claimed by China, the ownership dispute further involves competition for fishery resources, potential oil deposits and, indeed, a “reputation for resolve”.² In September 2010, a Chinese trawler collided with a Japan Coast Guard patrol boat in waters near the contested islands; to press for the release of the detained

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captain, Beijing allegedly delayed the export of rare earth metals to Japan.³ Tensions continued to build up during 2012, which, ironically, marked the 40th anniversary of the normalisation of the diplomatic relationship between these two nations. Following Tokyo's naming of some islets early that year, Beijing countered with its own naming amid then-Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro's statement indicating his intention to purchase the three larger islets. To prevent the Senkakus from entering the hands of conservative nationalists such as Ishihara, the Japanese government proceeded to buy the islands from their private landlord in September. This move, in turn, set in motion a series of large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations in major Chinese cities, a slump in Japanese exports to China and in Chinese tourists to Japan, and frequent appearance of Chinese petrol vessels and aircraft in the surrounding waters and airspace. With the increasing number of aerial and maritime near-misses, and without hotline-like conflict-prevention mechanisms between them, in January 2013, Chinese warships were said to have pointed their fire-control radar at a Japanese helicopter and a destroyer in close proximity in the East China

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Sea.⁴ The Chinese foreign ministry in April referred to the Diaoyus as a part of China's "core interests", a term normally associated with Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan, for the first time.⁵

The on-going standoff between the world's second and third largest economies has been a cause of great concern for stakeholders of the region's peace and prosperity.⁶ The United States, in particular, is caught in an unwanted situation where it is obliged by treaty to defend territory under Japanese administration (which includes the Senkakus, despite Washington's avoidance of taking a stand on their sovereignty), while needing China's cooperation on a wide range of issues from cyber security to North Korea's nuclear programmes. On the other hand, many wonder why Beijing and Tokyo have been so obsessed with those "trivial specks", which are of limited strategic and economic values. After all, any occupied islet is easy to invade and virtually impossible to defend in war. Moreover, possession of the Diaoyus/Senkakus does not represent a key to controlling the sea; the strategic advantage is at best marginal and can be easily offset by increasing military capabilities and/or building closer alliances. Likewise,

the size of the Diaoyus/Senkakus means that, even though the islands are used as legitimate baselines, they are deemed too small to have any significant impact on the Sino-Japanese maritime delimitation under the existing international law.⁷ Since there will be few real interests to gain but a lot to lose in solving the dispute by force, calls for “cooler heads to prevail” in Asia so as not to go to war “over a rock” have abounded.⁸

But why has so much significance been attached to the supposedly negligible Diaoyus/Senkakus in the first place? Beijing’s apparent belligerence over the islands is puzzling, because China did not resort to coercive diplomacy to prevent the Ryukyu Kingdom from falling under Japan’s full control during the 1870s. In a retrospective thought experiment, a more proactive Chinese intervention at that particular juncture might have altered the island kingdom’s fate as well as prevented the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue from becoming an issue today. To be sure, Ryukyu had been under the strict control of the Satsuma clan since 1609, but it maintained an ambiguous status as a “double tributary state” (*ryozoku no kuni*) to both Japan and China in East Asian international society; it was not until the kingdom being formally annexed and turned into Okinawa Prefecture in the late 1870s that the first border dispute between China and Japan broke out. Systematic inquiries into this old dispute will help

to illuminate why the present Senkaku/Diaoyu issue has often been handled by hotter heads.

To make sense of China’s underactive response to Japan’s gradual incorporation of Ryukyu in the 1870s, one cannot overlook the absence of compellence in Chinese strategic behaviour. In International Relations (IR) jargon, compellence refers to a specific type of coercion that threatens to use force to make another actor do (or undo) some action. The Qing dynasty did not resort to any military threat to get the Meiji government to change course at several junctures when the Ryukyu Kingdom was first reduced to a clan in 1872, then prohibited from sending tribute embassies to the Qing in 1875, and eventually abolished in 1879. Three possible explanations stand out. First, from the perspective of the coercion literature,⁹ compellence was simply not a credible policy for the declining Qing to adopt in its dealings with a modernising Japan. This materialist view and the mainstream scholarly works on Chinese strategic culture are complementary, for both maintain that the pacifist rhetoric and the principle of minimal use of force was no more than a temporary measure to compensate for China’s material inferiority.¹⁰ Third, in contemporary Chinese nationalist discourse, the “failure to act” is attributable to the corruption and incompetence of late Qing leaders who were unable to comprehend the

perils China was facing in the age of imperialism.¹¹ While China's lack of hard power at that time did limit the Qing court's ability to effectively respond to the *fait accompli* in Okinawa, material constraints (military capabilities) or strategic ignorance (having no knowledge of "realism") alone are not strong explanations and together do not make the puzzle more intelligible to us.

Careful inquiry into Sino-Japanese diplomatic history suggests that top Chinese officials such as Li Hongzhang (1823-1901) were not unaware of the consequences of their passive approach to the dispute, which included not exploiting Japan's weakness during the Satsuma Rebellion (1877) and not acquiring the southern parts of Okinawa as offered by Japanese negotiators following the US mediation (1879-80). Rather than following the logic of consequences that attributes action to the anticipated costs and benefits, various memorials to the throne by Qing officials reveal that opponents of the partition of Ryukyu (hence "losing" it to Japan altogether) were mostly informed by a logic of appropriateness, concerning whether their actions were considered legitimate in the tribute system. As a foundational institution of East Asian international society, the tribute system emphasised a formal hierarchy among its members. Within this hierarchical order, China sat highest and subordinate states were ranked by their proficiency

with Confucian norms, values and practices, not by their relative power (including territorial possessions). As such, the legitimacy of this hierarchy entailed a credible commitment on the part of the dominant state not to exploit the secondary states.¹² Employing compellence against Japan over Ryukyu or dividing up the islands with Japan, however, would violate this key aspect of status hierarchy and call into question China's position as the centre within Confucian cosmology and the assumed moral superiority of its leadership. China's difficulty in establishing clearly defined, exclusive borders enshrined in international legal treaties (instead of the Confucian influence of ritual protocol) at the expense of the secondary states, then, illustrates more about the extent to which it had been socialised into East Asian international society over centuries than how "misguided" or "incompetent" Qing leaders were in failing to turn China into a modern, sovereign state.

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The remainder of this paper is divided into three sections. To advance an explanation that does not force China and other regional actors into a

Eurocentric straitjacket, the first section revisits the constitutional structures and institutions of East Asian international society before the arrival of the Western powers, examining how they informed the members' identities and interests. Using primary Chinese sources, the second section retraces how Qing officials had debated various options and how Li Hongzhang's argument that China's reaction should not "start with a just cause but end up with satisfying self-interest" (*yishi lizhong*) prevailed. The concluding section discusses the implications of this study for the notion of international society and for understanding contemporary territorial disputes in East Asia.

International Society Outside Europe: The Case of East Asia

Unlike Martin Wight's famous categorisation of the Sinocentric world order as the product of a "suzerain system" rather than of an international society,¹³ the term "East Asian international society" has been consciously employed throughout this research to avoid the implication that only Europeans were capable of addressing the anarchy problem but East Asians were not. Given that there were only two major wars in this part of the world from the founding of the Ming dynasty (1368) to the Opium War (1839-42), it is not

convincing that East Asian countries managed to maintain their "long peace" without resorting to any sophisticated institutions but chance, or that the impressive stability simply reflected the power asymmetry between China and its neighbours.¹⁴

As Suzuki Shogo has indicated, the constitutional structures of East Asian international society involved three normative dimensions: the "moral purpose of the state" (the reasons for establishing a political entity to serve the common good), the "organising principle of sovereignty" (which legitimises the entity's possession of sovereignty) and the "norm of procedural justice" (the implementation of the above principles must also follow certain procedures).¹⁵ In the case of European international society, a legitimate state was expected to enable its citizens to pursue their individual happiness and achieve their potential. As a result, the state's internal affairs were to be free from foreign intervention so long as it commanded popular support. The principle of sovereign equality, in turn, was safeguarded through legislation (i.e. legislative justice) and embodied in institutions such as positive international law and diplomacy. By contrast, the "moral purpose of the state" in East Asian international society was to promote social and cosmic harmony. Such harmony was maintained when member states could conform to their "rightful" positions within this hierarchical society.

The principle of sovereign hierarchy meant that states (both suzerains and vassals) had to perform appropriate Confucian rituals to acknowledge their relative positions (i.e. ritual justice) if their legitimacy was to be respected, which led to the creation of the tribute system as the fundamental institution. Paying tribute to the suzerain, then, was more than a bribe to “buy” security; the participating states’ identities (and hence their interests) were inevitably shaped by their entering into tributary relations.¹⁶ Three interrelated points follow the above discussion. First, in principle, it was possible for a foreign people (*yi* or “barbarians”) to become a member of East Asian international society or even part of the “middle kingdom” or virtuous state (*hwa*), provided that they participated in the totality of Confucian civilisation- food, dress, language, rituals and so on- beyond their symbolic participation in tributary protocol. Second, while member states competed for the highest possible positions in the society, a state would run the risk of being “downgraded” or even losing its membership should it fail to perform the necessary rituals pertinent to its place in the hierarchical order. Third, although China normally took on the role of the “middle kingdom” at the apex of that order, it was also possible for other states to assert their “superior” moral status and demonstrate their ability to promote social harmony by constructing their

own alternative, non-Sinocentric tribute system.¹⁷

The extinguishment of the Ryukyu Kingdom can be seen as a first step of such internal change that prepared the ground for the region-wide adoption of norms and institutions originated in European international society.

What was the underlying logic that informed the functioning of East Asian international society? “Civilisation” seems to be a useful keyword here.¹⁸ According to D.R. Howland, Chinese conceptions of civilisation consisted of three elements.¹⁹ First, *wenming* literally meant a desired state of human society made luminous (*ming*) through writing or “patterning” (*wen*); when all was in harmony in the world, there was no need to resort to military subjugation (*wugong*) and the world was *wenming*. This ideal stage was possible because of the highest virtue exhibited by the emperor (“Son of Heaven”, who was supposed to have direct access to the will of the heavenly bodies) following the examples provided by history and the classics. Second, to the extent that a man could pattern his behaviour in accordance with the expectations of the Confucian texts, submitting to his rightful lord (*jun*) in particular (e.g. ruler-servant, father-son, etc.) he too was *wenming* or “civilising”.

Civilisation, then, ultimately signified a “spatially expansive and ideologically infinite” process of Chinese imperial lordship.²⁰ Third, based on the idea of proximity (*jin*) that connects space to morality, humankind would approximate moral behaviour in proportion to their proximity to the emperor, whose benevolent rule could bring the people close and cherish them. Accordingly, a concentric and hierarchical world order emerged with the emperor at the centre; the civilisational realm was instantiated by various regional bureaucratic offices, by the voyages of imperial envoys to and from the capital, and by those outside peoples who responded to the imperial virtue by sending tribute missions to the court. Tributary relations thus represented an act of reciprocity through which outsiders accepted the *nominal* lordship of the Son of Heaven and his calendar; on the other hand, the foreign lord received Chinese investiture as legitimate ruler of his domain.

China’s response to Japan’s incorporation of Ryukyu during the 1870s cannot be adequately analysed without understanding the aforementioned norms and institutions. As Hamashita Takeshi has noted, it would be remiss if one too readily assumes that East Asian international society collapsed completely soon after the intrusion of the Western powers:²¹

Considering the fact that the history of East Asian international relations

was founded upon the principle of a tributary relationship sustainable for over a thousand years, it is difficult to assume that its demise could be brought about by a single event, such as the Opium War... Rather, it is conceivably more acceptable to view it as a demise that was caused by internal change within the tribute system itself.

In this regard, the extinguishment of the Ryukyu Kingdom can be seen as a first step of such internal change that prepared the ground for the region-wide adoption of norms and institutions originated in European international society. The next section will illustrate this change, a change which led to rising Sino-Japanese rivalry in the following decades.

Extinguishment of the Ryukyu Kingdom and China’s Response

With the expansion of European international society in the 19th century and Japan’s decision to be recognised as a qualified member of that society for the sake of its survival, the existence of tributary states in East Asia following ritualistic, hierarchical Confucian norms also became increasingly hard to tolerate in the eyes of the Meiji leaders and intellectuals alike. Now ritualistic procedural norms of the East were to be replaced by legal procedural norms of the West. As a result, tributary states had to either turn themselves into sovereign

independent states or be absorbed by such sovereign entities.

The Ryukyu Kingdom's ambiguous status as a part of Japan *and* China's tributary state, then, looked rather embarrassing and even dangerous for the Meiji government. As Suzuki puts it:²²

The Ryukyu Kingdom's participation in the Tribute System could potentially highlight Japan's inability to conform [to] international law, and consequently its lack of commitment to fully join the international order as defined by European International Society. This would, in turn, jeopardize Japan's quest to attain the status of a "civilized" power as defined by the members of European International Society.

Japan's move to abolish the kingdom was therefore as much a realist act of securing its southern periphery as a political demonstration of underscoring its commitment to attaining international recognition as a qualified member of the European society of states.²³ The move was an incremental one. In 1872, the Ryukyu king Sho Tai received investiture as "lord of the Ryukyu fief", and the kingdom's treaty and diplomatic matters were henceforth taken over by Japan's foreign ministry. This was followed by Japan's success in getting China to admit that the former's 1874 expedition to punish "Taiwanese savages" was a "just act" to redress the murdering of *Japanese citizens*.²⁴ Then, in 1875, the kingdom was prohibited from sending tributary envoys to, and receiving investiture from, China, its trading mission in

Fuzhou was abolished, and the islands came under the administration of Japan's home ministry.

The crisis escalated into a Sino-Japanese diplomatic dispute after Chinese officials received petitions from Ryukyuan secret envoys in 1877. Seen from their memorials to the court, it is hard to sustain the charge that these officials were completely ignorant of the geopolitical/geostrategic implications of the demise of this tributary state or incapable of formulating feasible policy options. Viceroy of Fujian-Zhejiang and Fuzhou general He Jing, for instance, did not consider Ryukyu in itself crucial to the defence of China's periphery, but he was aware of the consequences of failing to protect the islands from foreign intrusions. He thus suggested that the Qing court should take advantage of the Satsuma Rebellion and apply diplomatic pressure on the Meiji government to deal with the dispute in accordance with international law.²⁵ Diplomat Huang Zunxian warned in "On the Liuqiu [Ryukyu] Affairs" (*Lun liu shi shu*) that tolerating Japan at that time amounted to "feeding a tiger which China can no longer rein in": "given Liuqiu's proximity to Taiwan, it would not be possible to maintain even one peaceful night in Taiwan and Penghu should Japan establish exclusive control over Liuqiu, turn it into a prefecture, train its soldiers and arm them to harass China's periphery".²⁶

The Chinese minister to Japan He Ruzhang predicted that the Japanese would not only prevent Ryukyu from sending tribute but also seek to eliminate the kingdom, and after that they would turn to Korea. To pre-empt Japan's expansion, He presented three options to the court: his first and best solution was to dispatch warships to demand Ryukyu's resumption of tribute missions while negotiating with Japan. The second was that, when persuasion failed, China could support Ryukyu's armed resistance with auxiliary troops should Japan use force against the Ryukyuan. The third resorted to international law, inviting Western diplomats to condemn the Japanese government.²⁷ He Ruzhang admitted that China was not in good shape to use force, but he still recommended the first two options as "Japan's recent situation [the Satsuma Rebellion] was even worse than ours".²⁸ Although the *Zongli yamen's* (International Office) subsequent decision not to engage in coercive diplomacy against Japan could not be separated from China's concurrent dispute with Russia in Xinjiang, concerns over the northwestern border were not the only reason for the Qing's forgoing of this rare "window of opportunity"; indeed, they might not even have been the strongest one. Viceroy of Zhili and minister of Beiyang Li Hongzhang, one of the most influential officials in charge of Qing diplomacy, would not have felt the need to offer the embattled

Meiji government 100,000 rifle bullets made by the Tianjin Arsenal had his purpose been simply to appease Tokyo or to prevent Japan from leaning towards Russia. Despite the Qing officials' increasing realisation that Meiji leaders would only yield to international law (a hallmark of European international society) or superior military might (a necessary instrument for any "civilised" state in the age of imperialism), Li apparently believed that the offer was what "ought to be done" for China's harmonious intercourse with Japan (*jiaoji zhong yinyozhiyi*).²⁹

The article that gave Japan preferential treatment was *not* the same as that which had allowed China's unequal treaties with the Western powers in the 19th century- it required Japan to give China *equivalent* treatment as well.

That Chinese leaders started using the language of Western international law yet continued to embrace the constitutional structures of East Asian international society cannot be overlooked in a letter of understanding to Shishido Tamaki, then Japanese minister to China, by Prince Gong (who headed the *Zongli yamen*) in 1879, which emphasised the significance of Sino-Ryukyuan tributary

relations and Chinese investiture while acknowledging the Ryukyu Kingdom's status as a "double tributary state".³⁰ The letter repeatedly stressed that Ryukyu was a part of China *and* recognised as an independent state by all countries (*Liuqiu jiwei Zhongguo bin geguo renqi ziwei yiguo*); the abolishment of the kingdom might have thus breached Article 1 of the Sino-Japanese friendship treaty (which stipulated that their respective territories should be "treated with propriety") and international law.³¹ Moreover, as a "weak and small" double

tributary state, Prince Gong lamented, the Ryukyu Kingdom should have been protected rather than swallowed up by Japan (which went against the "moral purpose of the state", i.e.

promoting cosmic harmony, in East Asian international society). Shishido countered that it was not possible for the islanders to be subjects of Japan and China at the same time. Furthermore, the islands could only be an independent state *or* part of such a state; the two possibilities were mutually exclusive. By rebuffing the relevance of Chinese investiture and declaring the abolition of the "fief" as a domestic issue based on Japan's effective control over the islands, Shishido thus rejected ritual justice as the

"systemic norm of procedural justice" in favour of legislative justice grounded in positive international law.

The turning point for this dialogue of the deaf came when former US President Ulysses Simpson Grant was visiting China and Japan in mid-1879. Grant agreed to mediate the dispute at the request of Li Hongzhang and Prince Gong, and offered a proposal with American diplomats in Japan as a basis for negotiation. The proposal suggested dividing the Ryukyu Islands into three

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parts:³² the central part would belong to the residual Ryukyu Kingdom protected by Chinese and Japanese consuls, the southern part would belong to China, being close to Taiwan, and the northern part would

belong to Japan, being close to Satsuma (Kagoshima). The Japanese government agreed to come to the negotiating table, but demanded that China recognise that the Okinawa main island and the above belonged to Japan (Miyako and Yaeyama Islands would belong to China, as proposed by Grant) and that the 1871 Treaty of Trade and Friendship be revised to allow Japan to enjoy the privileges granted to the Western powers, especially inland trade. Considering that this compromise could help preserve

the kingdom and avoid pushing Japan to the Russian side (with which Beijing was also trying to conclude a border dispute in Xinjiang), the *Zongli yamen* signed an agreement with Shishido Tamaki in October 1880. However, due to Li Hongzhang's objection at the last minute, the agreement was never ratified and was forfeited in January 1881. Whether the legal status of Ryukyu was settled or not remains a contentious issue between China and Japan today, but one thing is certain: the familiar dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands that has plagued Sino-Japanese relations for decades would not have become an issue as it is now had the 1880 agreement been ratified.

Why did Li oppose (and effectively block) the deal? Contemporary Chinese historians have indicated that the progress in the concurrent negotiation with Russia led him to conclude that China should not make such a big concession to Japan over the Ryukyu question.³³ Some suspect that “inter-agency rivalry” had also played a part, for Li was in charge of the signing of the 1871 treaty but was not involved in the *Zongli yamen's* negotiation with the Japanese delegation over revision of the treaty.³⁴ This personal issue aside, Li still needed to make his case compelling enough for the Qing court. The question, then, is what kind of concession was too big to make for the Chinese leaders? In his memorial to the emperor, Li made two

main points to support his claim that the conclusion of the Ryukyu question should be “postponed” (*yandang*):³⁵ First, the Ryukyuan elite would not be willing to re-establish the kingdom in Miyako and Yaeyama, which were relatively impoverished (and historically peripheral). If so, it would be too expensive for China to administer and station troops on these remote islands. In addition to this, he argued, granting Japan rights to inland trade would not be in China's interest.

On the surface, Li seemed to have based his case on the costs and benefits of not ratifying the agreement. Under scrutiny, however, his calculation was not driven by pure material interests. In fact, the article that gave Japan preferential treatment was *not* the same as that which had allowed China's unequal treaties with the Western powers in the 19th century- it required Japan to give China *equivalent* treatment as well.³⁶ Like He Jing and Huang Zunxian, Li was also keenly aware that abandoning those “impoverished” islands to the Japanese or Westerners would lead them to control China's Pacific choke points (*e wo taipingyang yanhou, yifei Zhongguo zhili*); the consequences of doing nothing clearly outweighed the costs of administering the islands. Furthermore, Li must have recognised that time was running out for China as the Japanese *fait accompli* had continued to take root in Okinawa ever since He Ruzhang's call

for coercive diplomacy. A wise statesman would have reaped what was left on the negotiating table. To make sense of Li's puzzling (in)action, one must understand that his inclination against *yishi lizhong* (i.e. China's response to the annexation of Ryukyu should not "start with a just cause but end up with satisfying self-interest") was more a result of China's century-old socialisation into East Asian international society than a Confucian pretence. Likewise, his reluctance to allow Japan to enjoy the same benefits granted to the Western powers (*liyi junzhan*) was not so much that he was worried about Japanese economic penetration into China's inland (after all, it would have been hard, in 1880, to foresee Japan's emergence as a world economic powerhouse) but rather that treating Japan like a Western country would not reflect its supposed place in East Asian international society (hence disrupting the society's organising principle). Indeed, as Howland has noted, the Treaty of Trade and Friendship itself revealed how Japan was placed in an ambivalent position in the eyes of Chinese leaders during the 1870s, which was "neither as distant and different as the Westerners, nor as close and commensurate as China's dependencies".³⁷

Imagine China assuming the role of father in the East Asian family. Ryukyu, like Korea, was highly regarded within the family for his filial behaviour and resemblance to the father. Under the

surface, however, Ryukyu had been forced by Japan, an "outlier" of the family who had not come back to see China for a long time, to pay a "protection fee". With his newly developed muscles trained in Europe, one day Japan broke into Ryukyu's house and threatened to take Ryukyu's property and life. Astonished, China tried to stop Japan but found that there was little he could do, not necessarily because he was not able to fight Japan but more because the use of force would expose his failure to keep the family in harmony. China had almost agreed with his American neighbour's suggestion to divide Ryukyu's property with Japan in order to keep Ryukyu alive; in the end, China chose to accept Ryukyu's death, for the proposed solution would inevitably undermine his moral authority as the father at home. This shocking experience does not mean that Chinese strategic behaviour would remain largely shaped by the rules and norms of East Asian international society when facing further challenges from Japan. Rather, Qing officials learned from the Ryukyu fiasco that the normative restraints that had sustained the order of East Asian international society for centuries should no longer be applied to "treacherous" Japan, now an *outsider*. This was evident in diplomat Yao Wendong's assignment to compile a study of the geography of Japan upon the arrival of the second Chinese minister to Japan

in 1882. Despite his popularity among the major poetry societies in Tokyo and his ability to communicate with his hosts outside of “brushtalking” (writing classical Chinese or *Kanbun*, which was understandable to educated Japanese), Yao never referred to Japan as a country sharing a common civilisation (*tong wen zhi guo*) and completed *The Military Essentials of Japanese Geography* (*Riben dili bingyao*) with the express purpose to enable China’s military preparations “in case of some unexpected emergency”.³⁸ In this sense, the path leading to the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) over Korea had already been paved at the time when China “lost” Ryukyu as a member of East Asian international society.

Theoretical and Policy Implications

The theoretical and policy implications of this analysis are four-fold. First of all, it shows that the failure to “get China right” often has to do with the taken-for-granted assumptions that concepts and theories derived from the European states-system and Western experiences are valid across time and space and can be readily applied to East Asia. However, inquiry into the “loss” of Ryukyu indicates that China’s strategic behaviour was constrained as much by its limited military capabilities as by its normative self-expectation as the paternal figure of the concentric East Asian “family”

that was not supposed to abuse those in the lower ranks. On the other hand, criticising Qing leaders for failing to defend China’s “national interest” as seen through a modern, nationalist lens is both anachronistic and complicit in justifying the “expansion” of European international society that subjected millions of colonial peoples in Asia and elsewhere to misery.³⁹

Second, against an old myth in IR that treats the Peace of Westphalia (1648) as *the* emergence of an international society that removed the problem of religious conflict and affirmed a commitment to peaceful coexistence among sovereign states, this study adds to recent challenges to the “Westphalian narrative” which naturalises the Eurocentric conception of international society while equating other forms of arrangement outside of Europe with political disorder and religious intolerance.⁴⁰ Considering that East Asian states had maintained largely peaceful relations among themselves for centuries until they were forced to enter into European international society, intellectual production in IR needs to re-imagine the notion of international society that has thus far been too narrowly defined by mainstream theories, in order to accommodate diverse needs and voices in a globalising world.⁴¹ This should not lead us to a nativist intervention boasting that East Asian international society was superior than the European one (power relations still existed between China and

its neighbours, for instance); rather, the point is that it is imperative for Asians and other Third World peoples to recognise and reclaim their role as co-inventors of international society.

It is time to reconsider Asian territorial disputes such as this as a structural problem of human history wherein no victor can emerge without addressing the consequences of imposing one particular type of international society on another.

Third, if the arrival of Western powers only added the Westphalian states-system onto the tribute system rather than replacing the latter altogether as Hamashita has indicated,⁴² it is of academic interest and policy importance to explore the conditions under which contemporary East Asian states' behaviour may be shaped by the residual rules and norms of the century-old tribute system alongside the Westphalian states-system.⁴³ For example, the conclusion of an FTA-like economic agreement between the PRC and Taiwan in June 2010 can be understood as the island's increasing incorporation into the Sinocentric cosmology. Hierarchical relations were confirmed when Taiwan (a "vassal state") submitted to the paternal Chinese state (a "suzerain") by upholding the so-called "1992 consensus" (i.e.

presenting "tribute");⁴⁴ in return, the Taiwanese were granted generous trade privileges as gifts from Beijing (the "son of heaven"). Since secondary political entities historically enjoyed immense latitude within the tributary order regarding their economic, cultural and even military affairs, this perspective helps to understand why Chinese leaders formulated the "one country, two systems" proposal in dealing with Taiwan in the way they did (which precludes Beijing from exerting domestic control over the island), and why they have been willing to entertain issues pertaining to Taiwan's "international space" so long as Taipei adheres to the "1992 consensus".

Finally, since the members of East Asian international society were informed by a worldview different from that of the West, as well as what counts as valid representations of their world, the diplomatic problems Asian countries experienced in their dealings with the Western powers and between themselves in the second half of the 19th century were not simply outcomes of a "power transition" as described in the realist literature; indeed, they were inherently problems of knowledge and representations. As Howland points out, the earliest Chinese diplomats to Japan had hoped to mingle with like-minded Confucian gentry upon their arrival; far from being a *tong wen zhi guo* (a country sharing common civilisation), by the 1880s their perception was that

Japan had deeply inundated itself with Western ideas and things, hence turning itself into a rival more on the side of the Western powers than on the side of Confucian civilisation.⁴⁵ While the current IR literature on Sino-Japanese relations tends to focus on either “power” or “interest”, this study has illustrated how the Ryukyu debacle paved the way for transforming Chinese perceptions of Japan, or, to put it another way, the borders of a once-shared civilisation. In the early 21st century, it is no easy task to conceive an alternative, more inclusive bordering practice (another “1992 consensus” may be neither feasible nor

desirable for China and Japan) that can help reconcile the two countries without identifying a common enemy (e.g. pre-1945 pan-Asianism that treated the West as an evil, and ultimately inferior, Other). Nevertheless, it seems fair to conclude that the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue is not a uniquely Chinese or Japanese problem. Rather, it is time to reconsider Asian territorial disputes such as this as a structural problem of human history wherein no victor can emerge without addressing the consequences of imposing one particular type of international society on another.

Endnotes

- 1 Surnames precede given names for all East Asian individuals in the main text. Portions of this research had appeared in a 2011 symposium proceedings edited by the Afrasian Research Centre, Ryukoku University, Japan. Special thanks go to Pinar Bilgin and L.H.M. Ling for their warm invitation to the SAM conference in Ankara, and to Hitomi Koyama, L.H.M. Ling and Ming Wan for their valuable comments on an earlier draft. The author also would like to acknowledge generous financial support from Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University Academic Research Subsidy.
- 2 Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1966, p. 124.
- 3 For an alternative interpretation of the incident as Japan's strategic outmanoeuvring over China, see, Linus Hagström, "Power Shift' in East Asia? A Critical Reappraisal of Narratives on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Incident in 2010", *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Autumn 2012), pp. 267-297.
- 4 The Sino-Japanese relationship was so tense that some media described the two countries as being on the brink of war. "Dangerous Shoal", *Economist*, 19 January 2013.
- 5 Taiwan itself is a claimant of the Diaoyus, but it has refused to form a united front with the PRC against Japan and its approach to the island dispute has been much less confrontational. The Chinese foreign ministry later modified the record of its press conference, broadly defining China's "core interests" as anything concerning state sovereignty, national security and territorial integrity, and that "the Diaoyu issue is related to the Chinese sovereignty". *Mainichi Shimbun*, 26 April 2013. Beijing proceeded to include the islands into its self-declared East Sea Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in November 2013.
- 6 At present China is Japan's largest export destination, whereas Japan is China's second largest trading partner and a major foreign investor.
- 7 Given the discrepancy in the length of the relevant parts of China's mainland coasts and the much shorter coasts around the disputed islands, an equitable boundary between Chinese coasts and the islands would not be equidistant. That is to say, the boundary between the disputed zones around the Senkakus and China's costal zones would have to be drawn much closer to the islands. In the Sino-Vietnamese Boundary Delimitation Agreement in the Gulf of Tonkin (2000), for instance, the Vietnamese-held Cat Long Vi Island is larger than the Senkakus and has several hundred inhabitants, but it only possesses an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 15 nautical miles (including 12 nautical miles of territorial sea).
- 8 The remarks come from Kurt Campbell, then-assistant secretary of state in the Obama administration, and an unnamed senior US military official, respectively. "Political Climates in Japan and China Ratchet Up Island Dispute", *Washington Post*, 25 January 2013; "Protesting Too Much", *Economist*, 22 September 2012.

- 9 Schelling's *Arms and Influence* remains a classic. See also, Thomas J. Christensen, *Worse than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011.
- 10 See, for example, Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995; Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 186-188.
- 11 Qifu Guo, *Wuwang guochi: Zaichuang huihaung (Never Forget National Humiliation: Recreating the Glory)*, Wuhan, Wuhan University Press, 1996, p. 126.
- 12 David C. Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010.
- 13 Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, 2nd edition, Harmondsworth, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1979.
- 14 Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 234.
- 15 Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society*, London, Routledge, 2009, pp. 34-35.
- 16 Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*, p. 234.
- 17 Takeshi Hamashita, *Choko sisutemu to kindai Ajia (The Tribute System and Modern Asia)*, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1997; Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire*, pp. 43-49.
- 18 Recall Wight's argument that all known states-systems emerged among peoples who considered themselves belonging to the same civilisation, which, in turn, differentiated them from other less "advanced" peoples. See, Martin Wight, *Systems of States*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1977, chapter 1.
- 19 Douglas R. Howland, *Borders of Chinese Civilization: Geography and History at Empire's End*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1996, pp. 13-15.
- 20 Ibid, p. 14. This seems to echo the Eliasian theme that civilisation is a process rather than a condition. See, Andrew Linklater, "Violence and Civilisation in the Western States-Systems", paper presented at the symposium on, *The English School Today: Order, Justice, and Multiculturalism*, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan, 26 March 2012.
- 21 Hamashita, *Choko sisutemu to kindai Ajia*, pp. 8-9.
- 22 Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire*, p. 155.
- 23 Ibid, p. 156.

- 24 In 1871, 54 Ryukyuan were murdered by a native tribe (*Mudanshe* in Chinese or *Botansha* in Japanese) following their shipwreck on southern Taiwan. The survivors were rescued by local Chinese officials and escorted to the Ryukyuan trading mission in Fuzhou in 1872. From the perspective of international law, it was a misstep indeed for China to admit that the Ryukyuan were Japanese citizens; nevertheless, admitting Japan's effective governance over Ryukyu did not necessarily imply that China henceforth had lost Ryukyu as a vassal as far as their tributary relations were concerned. Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire*, pp. 158-159.
- 25 *Qing guangxuchao zhongri jiaoshe shiliao*, Vol. 1, p. 21.
- 26 *Li Wenzhong gong (Hongzhang) quan ji, yishu hangao*, Vol. 8, pp. 3-4.
- 27 Chia-bin Liang, "Liuqiu wangguo zhongri zhengchi kaoshi (*An Inquiry of the Sino-Japanese Dispute over the Extinguishment of the Ryukyu Kingdom*)", in Executive Committee for the Promotion of Chinese Culture Renaissance, *Zhongguo jindai xiandai lunji*, Vol. 15, Taipei, Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1986, pp. 115-117.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 *Li Wenzhong gong (Hongzhang) quan ji, yishu hangao*, Vol. 7, pp. 3-4.
- 30 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Nippon gaiko bunsho*, Vol. 12, pp. 178-179.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 *Qingji waijiao shiliao*, Vol. 16, p. 21.
- 33 Yuanhua Shi, *Jindai Zhongguo zhoubian waijiao shilun*, Shanghai, Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2006, p. 272.
- 34 Liang, "Liuqiu wangguo zhongri zhengchi kaoshi," pp. 143, 145-146.
- 35 *Qing guangxuchao zhongri jiaoshe shiliao*, Vol. 2, pp. 15-17.
- 36 Ibid, pp. 9-10.
- 37 Howland, *Borders of Chinese Civilization*, p. 35.
- 38 Ibid, p. 233.
- 39 Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, *The Expansion of International Society*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1984.
- 40 For a penetrating critique, see, Turan Kayaoglu, "Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations Theory", *International Studies Review*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (June 2010), pp. 193-217.
- 41 Pinar Bilgin, "Thinking Past 'Western' IR?", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (January 2008), pp. 5-23; Anna M. Agathangelou and L.H.M. Ling, *Transforming World Politics: From Empire To Multiple Worlds*, London, Routledge, 2009; Ching-Chang Chen, "The Absence of Non-Western IR Theory in Asia Reconsidered", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol.

11, No. 1 (January 2011), pp. 1-23; and L.H.M. Ling, *The Dao of World Politics: Towards a Post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations*, London, Routledge, 2013.

42 Hamashita, *Choko sisutemu to kindai Ajia*.

43 Regarding the consequences of institutional isomorphism and the internationalisation of norms, even conventional constructivists would agree that if states look alike it does not necessarily mean that they act alike. See, Michael Barnett, “Social Constructivism”, in John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 170.

44 The “1992 consensus” refers to a *modus operandi* under which Taipei neither openly challenges Beijing’s “One China Principle” (there is only one China and Taiwan is a part of it) nor accepts the latter’s definition of China (PRC). As such, Chinese leaders would not have demanded the “1992 consensus” as *the* foundation of cross-Strait exchanges had their mindset been fully and only under the influence of Westphalian norms.

45 Howland, *Borders of Chinese Civilization*, chapter 6.