

China as “Empire”: Perceptions of the Tributary System* and the Boundaries of China in the Twentieth Century

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1. Memories of “Empire” and the Recovery of National Sovereignty

This chapter is a case-based discussion of how Chinese memories of “empire” were formed in the early modern period, as well as how those memories were projected into their worldviews and policies of that same period. I have already published a number of research findings on this topic.¹ Building on previous research by other scholars, I discussed the following points in my earlier works. First, in early modern China, historical records were compiled with references to China’s history as an invaded country, and this depiction as an invaded country was included in school textbooks. These descriptions touched upon the national sovereignty that China had lost, and assumed that the sovereignty would be recovered. Moreover, these instances of “invasion” were described in a way that very much envisioned a continuity between the process by which former tributary states were colonized or conquered by the great powers and the process by which China itself lost its national sovereignty. That is, the process by which tributary countries were “invaded” by the great powers and ceased to pay tribute was described not as the history of foreign countries, but as part of Chinese history. Furthermore, this process of losing tributaries was included in works

* Translator’s Note: Under the traditional Chinese world order characterized by a distinction between the Chinese and the non-Chinese (often called the Hua-Yi distinction), the Chinese emperor would recognize the leader of a country as its king and would provide the king’s country with an official seal and a calendar system. This recognition process is often referred to as “investiture,” and was usually carried out when a new ruler was enthroned, or a new country was formed. The country that had its ruler “invested” by the Chinese emperor would be required to periodically send envoys to China. The envoys would recognize the superior status of the Chinese sovereign by performing certain rituals and providing goods known as “tribute.” The Chinese emperor customarily gave gifts in exchange for the tribute. Merchants who accompanied the envoys were allowed to carry out trade during the envoys’ stay in China.

In the original article, the term “冊封 (saku-hou)” appears alongside the term “朝貢 (chou-kou),” so I used the translations “investiture” for the former and “tribute (tributary)” for the latter to distinguish between them.

When deciding which of the terms to use in translation, or whether to use both, I considered the context to make the text easy to read.

¹ Shin Kawashima, *Kindai Chūgoku no Ajia kan to Nihon: “Dentōteki” taigai kankei to no kanren de* (Modern China’s View on Asia and Japan: In Relation to Their Traditional Foreign Relations), Akio Takahara, Keiko Tamura, Yukihito Satō, eds., *Ekkyō (Gendai Ajia 1)* (Border Crossings [Modern Asia 1]) (Keio University Press, 2008), pp. 415–441; Kawashima, “*Ryōiki to kioku: Sokai, soshakuchi, seiryoku han’i o meguru gensetsu to seido*” (Territory and Memory: Discourse and Institutions Relating to Concessions, Leased Territories, and Spheres of Influence), Toshihiko Kishi, Mariko Tanigaki, Hideo Fukamachi, eds., *Mosaku suru kindai Nicchū kankei: Taiwa to kyōzon no jidai* (Uncertain Modern Japan–China Relations: An Age of Dialogue and Coexistence) (University of Tokyo Press, 2009), pp. 159–183; Kawashima, “*Kindai Chūgoku ni okeru kokkyō no kioku: ‘Honrai no Chūgoku no ryōiki’ o meguru*” (Memories of National Borders in Modern China: “China’s Original Territories”), *Kyōkai kenkyū* (Japan Border Review), 1 (2010), pp. 1–17; etc.

describing the loss of national sovereignty, such as diplomatic historical records and other general historical materials.

Second, in the first half of the twentieth century, there existed several perspectives or historical descriptions in China with regard to former tributary countries. For example, as seen in Sun Yat-sen’s speech on pan-Asianism, tributary relations were seen by some as superior to Western imperialism. Such an interpretation did not necessarily imply that former tributary states were part of Chinese territory, but it did regard the concept of tributary relations as a type of international relations that was superior to imperialism. Moreover, although a minority viewpoint, there were also some who regarded the former tributaries as vassal states that were part of China. This viewpoint can be considered to be a perspective that has links with Chinese nationalism, rather than international relations. There was also another perspective that did not discuss whether tributary relations were superior or whether the states in question had been vassals, and which instead emphasized that China was an Asian country that shared a common history with other Asian countries on the account of having been invaded by the great powers. People espousing this viewpoint did not deny that China possessed a certain degree of superiority. For example, while they expected that China should assist other Asian countries’ colonial independence movements from their suzerains, they did not assume that other Asian countries should assist China.

Third, for China, the recovery of national sovereignty was very much a righteous mission for the state, and the debate surrounding the recovery of national sovereignty was deeply entwined with the “loss” of former tributary countries. This story of the recovery of national sovereignty then became deeply connected with nationalism and turned into a pillar of China’s worldview. Because of the vagueness of national borders in the nineteenth century, the amount of territory that needed to be recovered for this mission to be completed was unclear. As such, the national borders of China are mutable, and even when territorial issues have been settled with neighboring countries, the countries cannot dispel misgivings that China might raise the issues again. This possibility was pointed out in the concept of “historical China” that was proposed in the 1960s.

However, there are matters yet to be discussed with regard to points one and two, and point three has yet to be examined in a concrete way. I will thus try to shed more light on the first two subjects, based on previous research, before going on to discuss the third subject by focusing on the case of the Ryukyus. I hope this will help our discussion of how memories of “empire” were formed in the early modern period, as well as how these memories were perceived and developed after the Second World War.

2. Nationalism and Memories of the Past

(1) From Investiture to “Great Power Rivalries”

In the second half of the nineteenth century, as the Qing was maintaining both treaty-based relations and traditional tributary relations, they essentially chose the latter as their official approach to international politics. However, as a result of negotiations over the Korean peninsula, a new relationship between the Qing and Korea that incorporated the Western order was already in place in the 1880s, even though it still revolved around a policy axis of investiture.²

² See Takashi Okamoto, “*Zokkoku to jishu no aida: Kindai Shin-Kan kankei to higashi Ajia no meibun* (Between Vassalage and Autonomy: Modern Qing–Korea Relations and the Fate of East Asia)” (University of Nagoya Press,

However, with the Qing’s defeat in the First Sino–Japanese War, their de facto last tributary state of Korea was recognized as a state with “full and complete independence” in Article 1 of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, thus putting an end to the tributary relations as the Qing’s primary framework for foreign relations. It cannot be claimed that all aspects of tributary relations completely disappeared with Korean independence, but the loss of Korea caused major changes in the worldview and foreign-relations framework of the Qing. In the (second) Gongche Shangshu movement of 1895, Kang Youwei and his colleagues stated that “The realm must be governed in the fashion of great power rivalries; it must not be governed in the fashion of peace under one sovereign.”³ That is, when governing the country, the Qing has to assume a world of great power rivalries and not think that they are the center of the world. This is an illustration of this changed outlook on the world. Even so, China did not really make any essential changes to its foreign-relations framework until the launch of the New Policies during the final years of the Qing Dynasty and the birth of the Republic, including the creation of a Foreign Office, after the signing of the Boxer Protocol in 1901.

(2)The Worldview of “Great Power Rivalries” and “Chinese History”

A likely symbolic turning point for the Qing, who had a tradition of emphasizing ceremonies, was Annex 19 of the Boxer Protocol concluded on September 7, 1901. It regulated audiences between the emperor and foreign delegates by setting the location of these meetings at the main hall of the Qianqing Palace, removing the need for three kneelings and nine kowtows, and allowing delegates to directly hand state letters to the emperor. Article 7 of the Annex states, “In brief, the ceremonial adopted by China as regards Foreign Representatives shall in no case be different from that which results from perfect equality between the Countries concerned and China, and without any loss of prestige on one side or the other.”⁴ William Woodville Rockhill, a US diplomat involved in the Boxer Protocol negotiations, recalled that the provisions of the annex were applied and implemented starting with the ceremonies on January 1, 1902.⁵ This can be seen as an institutionalization of the “great power rivalries.” However, we must note that with the exception of Korea, China did not redefine its relationship with neighboring tributary states, the embodiment of “peace under one sovereign,” in terms of “great power rivalries.” Most of those tributary states had already been colonized or annexed during the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. It was in a situation where tributary relations were all but a thing of the past that Korea achieved “independence and autonomy” in 1895, and a shift occurred to a worldview based on “great power rivalries.” By the arrival of the age of “great power rivalries,” China’s definition of its relations with states that had been tributaries remained uncertain.

The start of the twentieth century gave new form to relations between Qing and the world. Likewise, a new state identity was forming in China.⁶ This was an awareness of “China” and

2004); Shin Kawashima, “*Chūgoku kindai gaikō no keisei* (The Formation of China’s Modern Diplomacy)” (University of Nagoya Press, 2004).

³ Kang Youwei, “*Shang Qing di dier shu*” (Second Memorandum to the Qing Emperor), Tang Zhidiao, ed., *Kang Youwei zhenglun ji* (The Collected Political Theory of Kang Youwei), vol. 1 (Zhonghua Book Company, 1981), p. 122.

⁴ *Hokushin jihen ni kansuru giteisho* (Protocol on the Boxer Rebellion), November 28, 1901, *Shin-Kan ryōkoku ni kansuru rekkoku kan no kyōshō zakken* (Miscellaneous Matters Relating to International Negotiations Involving the Qing and Korea), archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, B.2.1.2-06.

⁵ William Woodville Rockhill, *Diplomatic Audiences at the Court of China* (London: Luzac & Co., 1905), p. 51.

⁶ Seiichirō Yoshizawa, “*Aikoku shugi no sōsei: Nashonarizumu kara kindai Chūgoku o miru* (The Creation of Patriotism: Modern China as Viewed from Nationalism)” (Iwanami shoten, 2003); Shin Kawashima, “*Kindai kokka e*

“Chinese” in the wake of a series of incidents in the first decade of that century, including the anti-Russia movement, the Jinruikan Incident, the anti-US movement, and the Tatsumaru Incident. A useful reference here is Liang Qichao’s *Introduction to Chinese History (Zhongguoshi xulun)*.⁷ This famous work starts with “The greatest shame of our people is that our country has no name” and goes on to say, “The Han and the Tang are just names of dynasties, and the name Shina that foreigners use was not created by ourselves” and then adds, “Calling our history using dynastic names goes against the aim of respecting the people. Calling our history with reference to Shina goes against the axiom of naming oneself.” It concludes that “There is definitely a sense of self-importance to names such as *Zhongguo* (central state) and *Zhonghua* (central civilization), which might draw criticism from other countries, but considering the flaws of each of the three choices [dynastic names, foreign names, *Zhongguo/Zhonghua*], our choice ought to be to follow our oral custom and call it the ‘history of *Zhongguo* (the Chinese name for China).’” It is thought that Liang Qichao sought to avoid calling the country using dynastic names, thereby redefining the separate histories of more than 20 dynasties as the history of one “Chinese” state.

(3)The Space of “Chinese History”

This kind of historical description can also be seen in school textbooks published under the Qing’s New Policies in the beginning of the twentieth century. For example, even a primary-school history textbook published by the Commercial Press company contains passages that rearrange the dynastic histories as “Chinese history.”

There were nothing but hamlets in early antiquity (*shanggu*), yet since the middle antiquity (*zhonggu*), there have been 14 dynasties that unified China: Tang, Yu, Xia, Shang, Zhou, Qin, Han, Jin, Sui, Tang, Song, Ming, and the current Qing.⁸

Today, *shanggu* refers to the period after the Later Han, but here it seems to point to a period further back. In any case, it is clear that the dynastic histories were considered “Chinese” history. This description is followed by an introduction of the eras of disunity, such as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period and the Three Kingdoms. The narrative emphasized that it was all part of “Chinese” history, regardless of dynasty. Moreover, as seen in the following passage, these dynasties were seen as components of “Chinese” history and an attempt was made to trace the ups and downs of that history.

The dynasties that possessed the greatest territory were the Han, the Tang, and the Yuan, and of these, the Yuan was the peak. The Han and the Tang conquered and developed territories everywhere, displaying their power in distant lands. Even today, foreigners call us using the words Han and Tang. The Yuan was the fiercest and most ferocious as they appeared from the deserts of the north and went on to control all of Asia and even pillage Eastern Europe. To this day, Europeans will be astonished and tremble when hearing about the Yuan.⁹

no mosaku: 1894–1925 (sirizu Chūgoku kindai shi 2) (Exploring the Modern State: 1894–1925 [Series on China’s Modern History 2]) (Iwanami shoten, 2010).

⁷ Liang Qichao, *Zhongguoshi xulun* (Introduction to Chinese History) (“*Qing yibao* (The China Discussion)”, vols. 90–91, September 3 and 13, 1901), “*Yinbingshi heji* (The Well-Selected Works of Yinbingshi)”, vol. 1, pp. 61–62.

⁸ Yao Zuyi, ed., “*Gaodeng xiaoxue yong zuixin Zhongguo shi jiaokeshu* (Newest Textbook in Chinese History for Upper Primary School)”, vol. 1, (Commercial Press, first edition in the twelfth month of Guangxu 30 [edition from the 17th day of the ninth month, Guangxu 34]), fol. 1a.

⁹ Yao Zuyi, ed., “*Gaodeng xiaoxue yong zuixin Zhongguo shi jiaokeshu* (Newest Textbook in Chinese History for

“Chinese” history was not perceived as happening in a fixed space, but its historical space expanded and shrank according to the territory of each dynasty.

The narrative of the loss and recovery of China’s territory and sovereignty could be seen in late-Qing textbooks. The loss of territory and national sovereignty following the Opium War as well as the colonization of tributary states is described together with China’s defeats in the Arrow War, the Sino–French War, and the First Sino–Japanese War. At the same time, the following kind of recovery of national sovereignty narrative was embedded in texts as well.

Lesson 31. The Recovery of Ili. During the reign of the Xianfeng Emperor, the Russians advanced south to steal land by taking advantage of the on-going rebellions in China. They defeated all the barbarian tribes in the northwest and Russia came to border Chinese Xinjiang. With the outbreak of the Dungan Revolt, the Russians once again took the chance to occupy Chinese Ili, after which they declared they would return it to us. After the revolt, they tried to occupy Ili permanently and bided their time. At the time, our government was still strong, so they demanded the return of Ili. In Guangxu 4 (1878), the government dispatched Chonghou to Russia to negotiate the return. However, Chonghou was intimidated by the Russians and failed to take a hardline approach. The result was a treaty with Russia that violated our national sovereignty and deprived us of territory. Thus, the ministers caused a massive uproar. The court ordered Zeng Jize to go to Russia to renegotiate the treaty. There were times when these negotiations almost broke down, so that Zuo Zongtang even volunteered to personally head out and fend off the Russians. The Russians also mobilized their troops. Fortunately, Ceng Jize made enormous efforts to persuade the Russians and they finally made some compromises, revising the 19-article treaty. In this way, Ili was returned to us and we finally established a province in Xinjiang.¹⁰

The beginning of the twentieth century, when this textbook was written, was a period when China sought to recover their national sovereignty.¹¹ It was also a time when a new national consciousness of “China” developed, as well as when the national sovereignty recovery movement was emerged to take back the original “China.” That “China” was not a multipolar space such as that depicted in foreigner-made maps showing the color-coded 18 provinces of China proper and the Dependencies of Qing (even when in the same color, the 18 provinces of China proper were usually in a darker hue and the Dependencies in a lighter one). Rather, all territories were in the same color and hue—the representation of a state that was uniformly administered by the Qing government. Even so, the question of how far that original territory extended and where that “original China” ended remained unanswered.

3. Imperialism and Asianism (1) Memories of “Empire”

On the one hand, as discussed in Section 2, China’s memories of “empire” were appropriated by nationalist discourse in the context of recovering national sovereignty. On the other hand, the

Upper Primary School)”, vol. 3, (Commercial Press, first edition in the twelfth month of Guangxu 30 [edition from the 17th day of the ninth month, Guangxu 34]), fols. 29b–30a.

¹⁰ Yao Zuyi, ed., “*Zuixin chudeng xiaoxue Zhongguo shi jiaokeshu* (Newest Textbook in Chinese History for Lower Primary School)”, vol. 2, (Commercial Press, first edition in the twelfth month of Guangxu 30 [1904] [7th edition from Guangxu 32]), fol. 42.

¹¹ On the occasion of the renewal of the Treaty of Ili in 1911, the Qing tried to have the treaty revised. For more on this, see Kawashima, *Chūgoku kindai gaikō no keisei*, pp. 401–403; Tang Qihua, Bei “paichu bupingdeng tiaoyao”: Zhebi de Beiyang xiuyao shi (1912-1928) (Eliminating the “Unequal Treaties”: The Hidden History of Beiyang Treaty Revisions) (Social Sciences Academic Press [China], 2010).

memories were directed toward an international awareness and worldview that were stimulated by Japan’s Asianism and “imperialism.” This section examines the debate of the Republican period. This was when Japan’s discourse on Asia started influencing the discourse in China anew.

Firstly, we have to point out the influence Japanese Asianism had on China. A famous Chinese response to the Japanese discourse on Asianism is Li Dazhao’s rebuttal to Wakamiya Yūnosuke’s *What Is Greater Asianism?* (Chūōkōron, February 1917) in his *Greater Asianism and Neo-Asianism* published in February 1919. There, Li criticized Japanese Greater Asianism for being “China annexationism” and a different name for “Greater Japanism.” Moreover, Li advocated “Neo-Asianism” on the basis of Asian ethnic self-determination and the eventual formation of a global federation through an alliance with the West.¹²

This opposition to Japanese Asianism could be seen all over China, but Sun Yat-sen and others argued from a different standpoint. For example, Sun Yat-sen made the following argument for “Nationalism” as one of the Three Principles of the People.

In the present world, there are only the five great powers of Britain, the US, Japan, France, and Italy, ... but if China can learn from Japan, then other countries will join in and there may be ten great powers. At that point, China will be able to regain its first-rank position. However, once China regains that position, how will it be able to maintain it? An old Chinese saying goes “save the weak and help the frail” (*jiruo fuqing*). It was because China had this good policy that the neighboring states of Vietnam, Burma, Korea, Siam, and others could remain independent despite China’s status as a great power over thousands of years. At present, the European powers are advancing east, and Vietnam has been overthrown by the French, Burma by the British, and Korea by the Japanese. That is precisely why Chinese strength will not only allow China itself to recover its ethnic status, but will surely allow China to take on great responsibility on the world stage. If China is unable to take on that responsibility, even if China becomes strong, that will do great harm to the world, instead of greatly benefitting it. What kind of global responsibility will China take on? ... We shall help the weak peoples and oppose the great powers of the world. If our entire people can have such a resolution, then the Chinese people will develop, and if we fail to have such a resolution, there is surely no hope for the Chinese people.¹³

Sun Yat-sen proposed the concept of *jiruo fuqing* as a means to resist imperialism and advocated international relations with neighboring states on that basis. Moreover, he clearly referred to tributary relations during his speech on Greater Asianism in Kobe on November 28, 1924.

From more than 2,000 years ago until 500 years ago, there was a period of more than a thousand years when China was the most powerful country in the world. ... China’s former strength was pre-eminent; it was that of a lone strongman. What were the circumstances of each weak people and each weak country when China alone was strong? Moreover, what attitude did the weak peoples and countries adopt vis-à-vis China? Back then, all the weak peoples and states respected China as a superior country. They paid tribute to China and wished to be recognized as vassals. Here, it was an honor to be able to pay tribute to China and a disgrace not to be able to. ... How was China able to receive tribute from so many countries and peoples and from so far away? Did China use the brute force of its army and navy to force them to pay tribute? That was not the case. China was able to ‘influence’ them purely by the force of just kingship. They

¹² Li Dazhao, *Da Yaxiya zhuyi yu sin Yaxiya zhuyi* (Greater Asianism and Neo-Asianism) (“*Kokumin zasshi* [People’s Journal]”, 1[2], 1919), Renmin chubanshe, ed., “*Li Dazhao quanji* (The Complete Works of Li Dazhao)” (Renmin chubanshe, 1959), p. 127. Japanese translation in Shinji Kojima, Akio Itō, and Gen Mitsuoka, “*Chūgokujin no Nihon kan hyakunen* (100 Years of Chinese People’s Perceptions of Japan)” (Jiyū kokuminsha, 1974).

¹³ Sun Yat-sen, *Minzu zhuyi diliu jiang, sanmin zhuyi* (Sixth Lecture on Democracy: Three Principles of the People) (March 2, 1924), “*Sun Zhongshan quanji* (The Complete Works of Sun Yat-sen)”, vol. 9 (Chung Hwa Book Co., 1986).

were impressed and persuaded by China’s virtue and either petitioned to pay tribute or visited directly to do so.¹⁴

(2)The Debate on Tributary Relations

Sun Yat-sen’s argument interpreted tributary relations in a positive way. Yet this was consistently part of an argument opposed to imperialism, and not necessarily directly connected to China’s relations with neighboring countries. At the same time, it seems that there existed an even more extreme debate on tributary relations. It can be seen in the dispute between Ma Hetian and Zeng Qi in the National Salvation Daily (*Jiuguo Ribao*) in Shanghai in 1918, which also appears in Ma’s 1930 memoirs. Zeng would go on to become the leader of the Chinese Youth Party, and was also a conservative commentator. Ma was one of the ideologues behind the Kuomintang’s policies for Mongolia and other border regions, and commented on his argument with Zeng.

In the 7th year of the Republic (1918, author’s note), when the National Salvation Corps of Chinese Students in Japan founded the National Salvation Daily in Shanghai, I was nominated as executive editor and came to be in charge of articles written by fellow members of the National Salvation Corps. It was then that Master Zeng Qi, who is such a famous nationalist today, wrote a rather long text in the National Salvation Daily. There, he firstly wrote that China at its mightiest dominated Korea, Annam, and other states, before describing China’s loss of national sovereignty and territory as well as its precarious position toward the end of the Qing period. Finally, he advocated Greater Asianism. He argued that China should make strenuous efforts to become the strongest country in Asia, upon which it would not only recover Korea, Annam, Siam, Burma, and other states, but also make them part of China’s territory. Moreover, since Japan and the South Seas were in investiture relationships with China, he stated that they were all Chinese territories. I felt something was amiss when reading his manuscript, so before printing it, I did not hesitate to replace the “Greater Asianism” in his manuscript with “Neo-Asianism,” revising the main text as well. As a result of the changes, the main point had become for China to become strong and then assist Korean, Annamese, and Indian independence, so that the peoples can unite in opposition to ironfisted states. I also made additions to the text. For example, the section on “Greater ... -ism” is, as a rule, nothing more than an excuse employed when a despot wants to invade a weaker people or unite the world. The next day, Master Zeng saw this and was greatly enraged, called on the newspaper company, and sat down with me. As a result, he decided to separately publish his original text in the name of the National Salvation Corps. Because of my ideological disagreement with the National Salvation Corps, I left Shanghai after this incident and went north.¹⁵

Zeng’s argument differed from those of Sun Yat-sen and Li Dazhao. He saw all neighboring countries like Annam, Burma, Korea, and even Japan as former territories and argued that

¹⁴ Research Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ed., “*Son Bun zenshū (jō)* (The Complete Works of Sun Yat-sen [Vol. 1])” (Hara shobō, 1967), pp. 1134–1135. Chinese original in *Da Yaxiya zhuyi* (Greater Asianism), “*Guofu quanji* (The Complete Works of the Nation’s Father)” (Zhongyang wenwu gongyin she, 1957), pp. 507–519.

¹⁵ Ma Hetian, *Guanyu “Da Yaxiya” yu “Xin Yaxiya” timing de huiyi* (Remembering the Titles “Greater Asia” and “New Asia”), *Xin Yaxiya* (New Asia), 1(1) (October, 1930), pp. 139–140. From Shen Yunlong, ed., “*Zeng Muhan (Qi) xiansheng riji xuan* (Selected Diaries of Master Zeng Muhan [Qi])” (Shen Yunlong, main ed., *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan* [Sources of Modern Chinese History], vol. 2 [Wenhai chubanshe, 1971]), which is a source on Zeng Qi, we can see that Zeng visited Ma Hetian at the National Salvation Daily in Shanghai on August 17, 1918 and that he had a text initially titled “*Zhongguo zhi qingnian yu gonghe zhi qiantu*” (Prospects of Cooperation with China’s Youth), which he revised into “*Guoti yu qingnian* (The National Polity and the Youth)” while being influenced by people like Tokutomi Sohō, but we cannot confirm any signs of conflict with Ma. Zhen Zhengmao et al., eds., “*Zeng Qi xiansheng wenji*” (The Collected Works of Master Zeng Qi) (vols. 1–3, Modern History Institute, Academia Sinica, 1993) lists *Guoti yu qingnian* in the beginning, but there is no mention of any interactions with Ma in the commentary or elsewhere.

China should recover and incorporate them into its territory. This is going one step further from acknowledging the process by which former vassal countries were turning into colonies of the great powers, which is what the Chinese discourse on the loss of national sovereignty argued.

However, it would appear that Zeng’s argument changed after this. For example, in a 1925 record of one of his speeches titled *The Mission of the Chinese People and the Responsibility of the Chinese Youth: Responding to the Shanghai Sun Yat-sen-ism Society*, he stated that China had previously conquered its neighbors during the Han and Tang periods, and “Those countries remained vassals into the mid-Qing period, but China never thought of occupying their territories, enslaving their populations, stealing their livelihoods, or annihilating ethnic groups.” Instead, the superiority of the “great Chinese people” lay in their emphasis on culture and non-use of military force. This seems closer to Sun Yat-sen’s argument. Zeng also said that the Chinese people, who were pursuing peace and practicing republicanism (*gonghe*, or literally “peaceful harmony”), should ally themselves with their neighbors and create a “Greater Asian Republic.” China “must enjoy that peace together with them, never allow the rampant oppression of ironfisted states, and never accept despotic empires obstructing our progress.”¹⁶ Zeng’s thinking has similarities not just with Sun Yat-sen’s argument, but with Li’s thoughts as well.

(3) The Formation of Public Discourse

However, the tenor of Zeng’s argument, or the positive discourse on tributary relations as seen in Sun Yat-sen’s Greater Asianism speech, never became mainstream in the Kuomintang’s discourse. After Sun Yat-sen’s death, his Three Principles of the People were revised and reorganized.

In particular, a magazine called *New Asia (Xin Yaxiya)* fulfilled the function of a public relations magazine when it came to China’s relations with its neighbors.¹⁷ *New Asia*, first published by the New Asia Company in Nanjing in 1930, was edited by Zhang Zhenzhi and others associated with the Kuomintang, while the titles were written in calligraphy by Yu Youren; principal contributors included Hu Hanmin, Dai Jitao, and Ma Hetian. They regarded *New Asia* as a PR magazine for “Asia According to the Three Principles of the People,” and founded the New Asia Society in Nanjing in May 1931. “Asia According to the Three Principles of the People” meant “Researching issues pertaining to the liberation of the peoples of Asia based on the Three Principles of the People. Moreover, China should not only pursue its own independence, but support the liberation movements of all Asian peoples and gain freedom and equality together.”¹⁸ They also reoriented Sun Yat-sen’s Greater Asianism within the context of the Three Principles of the People as follows.

The Three Principles of the People truly are independent and singular principles, while Greater Asianism is nothing more than an explanation for the operation of those Principles. There are many who advocate Greater Asianism. In particular, there is an oriental state that has already established a position of might and that works to realize its delusion of unifying Asia by championing Greater Asianism, while a considerable number of military men and politicians are

¹⁶ Zeng Qi, *Zhonghua minzu zhi shiming yu Zhonggup zhi zeren: Da Shanghai Sun Wen zhuyi xuehui* (The Mission of the Chinese People and the Responsibility of Chinese Youth: Responding to the Shanghai Sun Yat-sen-ism Society), Editorial Committee for the Posthumous Works of Master Muhan, “Zeng Muhan xiansheng yizhu (The Posthumous Works of Master Zeng Muhan)” (Central Executive Committee, Chinese Youth Party, 1954).

¹⁷ See Juntarō Kubo, “Zasshi ‘Shin Ajia’ ronsetsu kiji mokuroku” (Index of Editorials in the Journal “New Asia”), *Kōbe daigaku shigaku nenpō* (Kobe University History Yearbook), 17 (2002).

¹⁸ *Benkan zhenggao neirong* (Introducing This Issue), “Xin Yaxiya (New Asia)”, 1(1) (October 1930), no page.

encouraging Greater Asianism to curry favor with imperialism. The Premier [Sun Yat-sen] does not tell us to shirk from using the word Greater Asianism simply because members of the general public are spreading evil doctrines. The Premier resolutely affirms the Three Principles of the People, so what he is speaking of is Greater Asianism in accordance with the Three Principles of the People.¹⁹

After this, Ma Hetian rejects the earlier argument made by Zeng Qi.

The Greater Asianism proposed by Zeng Qi is getting ahead of itself and goes against the Three Principles of the People. By contrast, Hetian’s Neo-Asianism is in agreement with the Premier’s Three Principles of the People. Moreover, it unexpectedly agreed with the ideas of our colleagues at the New Asia Company. As seen from this brief explanation, there are actually two conflicting interpretations of Greater Asianism. This magazine was named *New Asia* in reference to the Premier’s Three Principles of the People in order to defend against such perversions by people opposed to the Three Principles of the People, as well as to avoid misinterpretations by the general public.²⁰

This reorientation of the debate on Asia can also be seen in *New Orient (Xin dongfang)*, first published in 1930, and elsewhere as well. Even so, this argument was not completely shared by all members of the Kuomintang and intellectuals of the time, and even within *New Asia*, there were those who emphasized Chinese leadership over Asian countries.²¹ At the same time, there were Chinese publications such as primary-school textbooks that identified former tributary countries as “vassals” that were territories to be recovered by China.²² While the direction of the Kuomintang’s public discourse was already set, the “two conflicting interpretations” described by Ma remained somewhat in place in informal spaces as well as, at times, in formal spaces. Especially during the Second Sino–Japanese War, we can see the appearance of extreme arguments similar to Zeng’s discourse, stimulated by, and in opposition to, the Japanese discourse on the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere.

4. Memories of “Empire” in Post-WWII China: With a Focus on the Ryukyus and the Senkaku Islands

(1) Public Discourse and Realpolitik

Now, what significance did this debate on Asian countries or the logic of recovering national sovereignty have in wartime and post-war realpolitik? Let us look at the case of Okinawa.

China’s victory in the Second World War served to facilitate the spread of public discourse by the Kuomintang and others. Post-World War II Taiwanese textbooks based on the Three Principles of the People emphasized *jiruo fuqing*, giving examples such as Chiang Kai-shek’s support for Indian

¹⁹ *Yaxiya zhi jianglái: Chuangkan xuanyan* (Asia’s Future: First-Issue Declaration), “*Xin Yaxiya* (New Asia)”, 1(1) (October 1930), pp. 12–13.

²⁰ Ma Hetian, *Guanyu “Da Yaxiya” yu “Xin Yaxiya” timing de huiyi* (Remembering the Titles “Greater Asia” and “New Asia”), “*Xin Yaxiya* (New Asia)”, 1(1) (October, 1930), pp. 139–140.

²¹ Yin Weilian, *Yaxiya minzu yundong zhi jinzhān* (Development of the Asian People’s Movements), “*Xin Yaxiya* (New Asia)”, 1(1) (October 1930), p. 97.

²² Huang Donglan, *Shin-matsu, Minkoku ki chiri kyōkasho no kūkan hyōshō: Ryōdo, kyōiki, kokuchi* (Spatial Expression in Geography Textbooks from the Late Qing and Republican Periods: Territory, Borders, National Disgrace), *Chūgoku kenkyū geppō* (Monthly Journal of Chinese Affairs), 59(3) (2005); editor unknown, “*Shaoxue shiyong benguo xin detu* (New Maps of China Adapted for Primary School)” (Shijie yudexue she, 1939).

independence and support for Korean independence at the Cairo Conference.²³ The texts stress that China supports the independence of other Asian countries, but by avoiding the image of China as supported by other Asian countries, they acknowledge a level of Chinese superiority. Yet, they never touch on either investiture or tribute, always emphasizing the united front of China and other Asian countries against imperialism.

However, Chinese diplomacy in international politics was not quite so simple, but was accompanied by quite a lot of indecision. This was most apparent with the Ryukyu issue. It saw the logic of united resistance against imperialism intersect with the desire to exercise influence over former tributary countries (including the desire to oppose Japan). This was apparent also at the Cairo Conference. The following is from a record of talks between Chiang Kai-shek and Roosevelt.

(5) Territorial Issues: Chairman Chiang and President Roosevelt agreed that Japan must return the Four Northeastern Provinces, Taiwan, and Penghu, which were taken from China, to China after the war. They also agreed that the Liaodong Peninsula, Lüshun, and Dalian must be included as well. President Roosevelt asked how to solve the Ryukyu issue (he also asked more than once if China did not want the Ryukyus), to which Chairman Chiang responded that he wished for the Ryukyus to be under joint occupation by the US and China, for this to be entrusted to an international agency in the future, and for the islands to be under joint management by the US and China. President Roosevelt brought up the Hong Kong issue again, to which Chairman Chiang responded that they should discuss the issue again after first referring it to the British.²⁴

However, Chiang Kai-shek’s policy on the Ryukyus had continued to waver during the lead-up to the Cairo Conference. An examination of the *Chiang Kai-shek Diaries* (archives of the Hoover Institution, Stanford University) reveals that Chiang Kai-shek requested the return of the Ryukyus to China on November 3, 1942,²⁵ but that he later stopped mentioning the islands, even when discussing territorial issues. He had decided to not consider the Ryukyus to be Chinese territory.

In fact, Chiang Kai-shek’s request for the joint occupation and management of the Ryukyus had not been accepted by the Americans. Nevertheless, the Republic of China’s indecisive Ryukyu policy was to continue into the post-war period as well. For example, in *Opinions on a Solution for the*

²³ National Institute for Compilation and Translation, main ed., “*Sanmin zhuyi keben* (Textbook on the Three Principles of the People)”, Youth Cultural (Zhengzhong zhujū, first edition in 1986), pp. 84–87.

²⁴ *Kailuo huidan Jiang-Luo tanhua jieyao jilu* (Summary Record of the Chiang-Roosevelt Talks at the Cairo Conference), November 23, 1943, (*Kailuo huiyi huidan neirong* [Contents from the Cairo Conference Meetings], Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China, held by the Modern History Institute, Academia Sinica, no. 417/0087, image no. 11-NAA-05395). Furthermore, this summary record was created based on notes by one of the conference’s participants, Wang Chonghui, the existence of which were finally confirmed after it was discovered that neither the Ministry of Foreign Affairs nor any other relevant agency had any definite conference records, following the US’s decision to publish documents related to the Cairo Conference as part of FRUS and show these to the Republic of China in 1956. While writing a response to the US, this was incorporated into the official record after Chiang Kai-shek personally requested the addition of “more than once” and a change of the part in brackets. This emphasizes that the US had acknowledged the Republic of China’s claim to possessing Okinawa, as well as the decision not to accept the claim. However, rather than a record from 1943, this is more of a statement made by Chiang Kai-shek in 1956.

²⁵ That same day, Minister of Foreign Affairs T. V. Soong referred to the recovery of the Ryukyus at a press conference. *Song weichang danhua* (Speaking with Foreign Minister Soong), “*Chongqing Dagongbao* (Chongqing Ta Kung Pao)”, November 9, 1942.

Ryukyu Issue formulated by Zhang Tingzheng at the Republic’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs in June 1947, the following two suggestions were made on the assumption that the US had rejected joint management of the islands.²⁶

(1) Request Miyako and Yaeyama as Chinese territories.

(2) Senkaku Islands: These are currently included in the area under Allied occupation, but it is disputable whether they belong to the Ryukyus. Care needs to be taken with respect to the return of these and Chiwei Island.

This was an argument that stemmed from the three-island partition negotiations of the 1880s, yet there is no trace of this being adopted as policy.

Moreover, a document formulated by the Department of North American Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 1948 once again proposed joint management of the Ryukyus to Chiang Kai-shek. This document was also written with the involvement of Zhang Tingzheng.

As regards the Ryukyu Islands, the US is paying attention to them and has asked us about our stance on several occasions. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has carefully considered the matter. The Ryukyus were formerly in a tributary relationship with us, and we do not share the same ethnicity and culture. Moreover, the Allied countries stated during the war that we might be warring not for the sake of territorial expansion, so we likely have insufficient grounds to ask for the annexation of the Ryukyus now. However, the Ryukyus was our vassal and we have a historical bond. Japan forcefully annexed them in the past, but we never recognized the annexation. They used to be located on the periphery of our East China Sea, close to Taiwan, and are very important for our national defense. That is why we should argue for their administration to be entrusted to us, so that the people of the Ryukyus can be guided toward self-government and independence under our influence. If necessary, the Okinawan main island should be for joint use and can be provided to the US as a military base. This is the first option we have with regard to the Ryukyus.²⁷

It goes on to argue for joint management of the islands with the US as a second option. These options were stated as being necessary to prepare for the proposal to be made to the Americans, again. The proposal would call for the conclusion of a peace treaty that included either the already rejected Chinese management of the Ryukyus, or joint management of the islands with the US. However, the Republic of China was defeated by the Communists in the Chinese Civil War and fled to Taiwan in December 1949. The Republic of China became geographically closer to Okinawa but was deprived of the right to participate in the San Francisco Peace Conference, so these suggestions never materialized.

At the same time, various matters were debated by the People’s Republic of China, founded on October 1, 1949, in preparation for the San Francisco Peace Conference. For example, in May 1950, the People’s Republic concluded that, “Considering that the Senkaku Islands, at 25°30’–26° N, 123°–124° E, as well as Chiwei Island, at 25°30’–26° N, 124°–125° E, are extremely close to Taiwan, there

²⁶ June 1947, Zhang Tingzheng, *Guanyu jiejie Liuqiu wenti zhi yijian* (Opinions on a Solution for the Ryukyu Issue) (*Liuqiu wenti* [The Ryukyu Issue], Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China, held by the Modern History Institute, Academia Sinica, 11-07-02-11-06-004).

²⁷ March 3, 1948, Untitled (*Guanyu jiejie Liuqiu wenti zhi yijian* [Opinions on a Solution for the Ryukyu Issue], Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China, held by the Modern History Institute, Academia Sinica, no. 419/0011, image no. 11-NAA-05515).

is surely a need to investigate whether they are part of Taiwan.”²⁸ This was a memorandum that was never turned into policy, but we can sense that both the Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China sought to maintain a position vis-à-vis Okinawa that demonstrated that they had not fought the war to expand their territory and that China was not imperialist, while they also planned to expand their influence or territorial reach over the Ryukyus. We can see this as an example of ideals intersecting with reality over a former tributary country.

(2)The Expanding “Original National Borders”

Subsequently, neither the government in Beijing nor that in Taipei showed any signs of opposing or even having doubts about the American administration of Okinawa. The question did not develop into the Senkaku issue until the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) conducted an offshore resource survey in the late 1960s. The report of rich offshore resources around the Senkaku Islands prompted Taiwan and then China to proclaim possession of the islands. Chiang Kai-shek said Taiwan’s proclamation was for oil resources,²⁹ but a domestic territorial preservation movement called the Baodiao movement arose instead, which made it difficult to use the territorial issue as leverage for acquiring resources, and turned it into a more general issue of sovereignty. Moreover, the Republic of China did not acknowledge the return of Okinawa to Japan in 1972, and the ROC regards the international status of Okinawa as being undecided to this day.

On February 25, 1992, the so-called Territorial Sea Law (Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone) was promulgated by the People’s Republic of China. Article 2 of the law includes a passage which says, “The land territory of the People’s Republic of China includes ... Taiwan and all islands appertaining thereto including the Diaoyu Islands; the Penghu Islands; the Dongsha Islands; the Xisha Islands; the Zhongsha Islands and the Nansha Islands; as well as all the other islands belonging to the People’s Republic of China.” Unlike the ROC, the People’s Republic of China has recognized the return of Okinawa to Japan, but there have been recent indications that the tone of the debate in the PRC is shifting to a more critical view of Okinawa’s return. An example is “The Status of the Ryukyus in International Law” by Luo Huanxin, published in the inaugural issue (January 2014) of *Guojifa Yanjiu*.

It has not necessarily become mainstream to argue that the Ryukyus are Chinese territory on the basis of their former tributary relationship. Moreover, the debate concerned with the scope of territorial sovereignty has emphasized the Senkaku Islands and other spaces where the basis for Japanese sovereignty has been regarded as weak from the Chinese perspective, with movements to make those spaces Chinese territory. The emphasis in the debate has been not on tributary relations, but on China’s territory itself, that is, sovereignty on the basis of historical background. In other words, the debate on territorial sovereignty and the logic of tributary relations will not immediately overlap. Even so, the spaces over which China claims territorial sovereignty are variable and tend to expand. While those arguing that the Ryukyus are part of China are a minority, at the very least, we can see a tendency to express doubts about the Ryukyus being part of Japan.

²⁸ Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Duri heyue zhong youguan yu lingtu wenti buling wenti yu zhuzhang tigang caoan [Outline of draft concerning some issues and claims on territorial issues in the Peace Treaty with Japan], May 15, 1950, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China, no. 105-0090-05 (1).

²⁹ Chiang Kai-shek Diaries, entry for April 7, 1971, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

Recently, research on former tributary relations has become popular in China. This is likely a sign of China’s efforts to learn from “historical experience” outside of the modern sovereign state system, as China looks for a new international order.³⁰

Chinese foreign relations in the modern period could be seen as a rope that weaves together memories pertaining to the tributary relations of the past and policies emphasizing sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs. While work to revise unequal treaties and movements to recover national sovereignty have an extremely modern tinge, they also contain the logic of vassal countries, and appear to be expanding the range of rights to be “recovered.” As with the case of the Senkaku Islands, the logic of sovereignty is used to enlarge the spaces considered Chinese territory, but at the same time, there are also those in China who view former vassal countries as within their sphere of influence or who call for the elimination of other nations’ influence in former vassal countries.

³⁰ Shin Kawashima, “Chugoku ni okeru kokusai seiji kenkyu no tenkai” [The development of research into international relations in China], *Kokusai seiji* 175 (2014).