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CONCEPTS  
AND CONTEXTS  
IN EAST ASIA

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# Revisiting the East Asian Origin of the Concept “Empire”:

## The Imperial Country and the Heavenly Court, the Awesome Heavenly Emperor and the Empire

Samsung LEE\*

### Abstract

This article attempts a critical review of the existing understanding of the East Asian origins of the concept of “empire,” by addressing two major issues. First, it has long been known that the term “empire” appears in *The Nihon Shoki*, the official historical record of ancient Japan, in a diplomatic petition that King Seong of Baekje sent to Japan. If the record was not a fabrication by Japanese historiographers, this makes it the source of the concept of “empire” in East Asia. Nevertheless, “empire” was not established as a mutually intercommunicable political-diplomatic concept because neither China nor Japan adopted it at this time. The terms which were actually used for this purpose were *Tienxia*, and the “Heavenly Court.” The expression “Imperial Country” also only rarely appeared in Chinese literature during the traditional period, and likewise was not recorded in Japan, at least during the ancient period covered by *The Nihon Shoki*. The second issue discussed is that the concept of “empire,” as found in *The Nihon Shoki*, is hard to elucidate by itself, and in practice can only be understood in relation to the concept of “Awesome Heavenly Emperor,” which is also found in this book. Indeed, “Awesome Heavenly Emperor” is the term used by Baekje, and the other countries of the Korean Peninsula at this time, to designate the Japanese ruler. In addition, since the Japanese ruler was styling himself as the “Heavenly Emperor” or the “Heavenly Son” in Japanese diplomatic correspondence with China about one century before the formal and unequivocal adoption of the title

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“Heavenly Emperor,” the international use of such titles is identified as an intermediate step occurring between the initial introduction of the concept “Awesome Heavenly Emperor,” from Baekje, and the ultimate explicit assumption, domestically, of the title “Heavenly Emperor” by the Japanese ruler. The historical context surrounding the concepts of “Awesome Heavenly Emperor” and “empire” is also examined, and since the Korean people served as an intermediary in transmitting advanced civilization based on Chinese characters to Japan, it is considered very possible that “Heavenly Emperor” and “empire” are among the political-diplomatic concepts which were introduced to Japan from the Korean peninsula. Lastly, this article also investigates why ancient Japanese rulers did not adopt the concept of “Imperial Country.”

### Keywords

empire, Imperial Country (皇國), Heavenly Court (天朝), Awesome Heavenly Emperor (可畏天皇), *The Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀, The Chronicles of Japan)

## Introduction

In the mid-nineteenth century, Japan adopted “empire” as the concept to represent its state identity. For the following century, until the “Empire of Japan” was destroyed in 1945, “empire” was actively utilized as a critical political concept representing both the East Asian international order, as envisaged by Japan, and Japan’s status within that order. At first, “empire” was used by Japan mostly to express its state identity, emphasizing the country’s independence and sovereignty despite the pressure from Western empires. At some point, however, around the time of the the First Sino-Japanese War, the concept “empire” began to imply extensive expansionism, just like the Western version of this concept. In the traditional Chinese world order, *Tienxia* (天下) serves as the basic concept representing world order, but toward the end of the nineteenth century, Japan’s attempt to build a Japan-centered regional order in East Asia and made use of “empire” to replace *Tienxia*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Lee (2011c).

Inspired by the Japanese "Empire," Korea, in its turn, strove to appropriate the concept to highlight its independence and sovereignty, which were threatened by Great Powers, not least by Japan itself, resulting in the creation of the "Korean Empire." As the Japanese Empire expanded, however, Korea was incorporated into Japan as a colony, which led to the concept of empire being deconstructed in Korea and absorbed into the discourse of "one big empire," viz. that of Japan.<sup>2</sup> In the so-called "age of empire," when all the societies of the world, not only those of East Asia, were divided into empires and colonies, the concept of "empire" enjoyed considerable moral authority: it represented the central pillar of social, political and cultural order, and was essentially synonymous with civilization.<sup>3</sup> However, in the Cold War era, immediately following the age of empire, the concept was radically degraded until it came to represent savagery instead of civilization. During the Cold War, "empire" served as a tool of international relations to denigrate and denounce the opposing camp as savage and imperialistic hegemons.

During the anti-war movements of the Vietnam War, however, and the conservative reactions prompted by these in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the concept of "empire" experienced another reversal. Among American intellectuals, a neoconservative trend led by Irving Kristol attempted a moral vindication of the "imperial role" of the United States. Thus, the "empire" is simultaneously considered both as the center of order which is desperately needed at a time of chaos and perilous revolutions, and also as the main agent responsible for the world avoiding or escaping violent and exploitative rule. This "moral reinstatement" of "empire" originated with the notion of "empire as invitation," which was aggressively promoted by the fundamentalist diplomatic historiography of John Lewis Gaddis in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup>

Encouraged by the disintegration of the Communist bloc, globalization seemed to validate the hegemonic expansion of the "American Empire" and the historical victory of "democratic capitalism"; and in this process, the moral reinstatement of "empire" also found its completion. In these scholarly circles, therefore, "empire" has recovered the conceptual authority it enjoyed during the first half of the twentieth century, and has become

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<sup>2</sup> See Lee (2011b).

<sup>3</sup> See Lee (2012).

<sup>4</sup> See Lee (2006).

an honorable emblem granted to those states which lead the world in creating order and civilization. Subsequently, “empire” has been propagated everywhere: in America, for the maintenance of its “imperial” status; in Japan, in the form of a supposedly “objective” retrospection of the East Asian order; and in China, as part of the process of conceptualizing a new Sinocentric order.

The discourse of empire, as grounded on this reinstated concept, has had a great impact upon political and academic discussions regarding optimal and suboptimal world order; and it has also had a great effect upon the way in which the international order is envisaged, academically, politically and socially, and upon perceived status within that order. For this reason, it is essential to have a proper understanding of the origins and history of “empire” as a fundamental political concept in East Asia. To acquire an appropriate understanding of any important political concept it is necessary to understand its origins, and also to recognize how the meaning and implications of the concept are influenced by temporal and spatial context. How then, did the concept of “empire” originate: in what era, society, and conditions?

Previous research on the East Asian origin of the concept “empire” can be summarized as follows: first, in traditional East Asia, “empire” existed only in Korea, whereas in China and Japan *Tienxia* and “Imperial Country” (皇國) were equivalent terms; second, the origin of the concept “empire” can be located in a diplomatic document sent by King Seong (聖王 or 聖明王) of Baekje to Japan, which was compiled in *The Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀, The Chronicles of Japan), the official historical record of ancient Japan.<sup>5</sup>

Two other factors need to be considered, however. First, the most important substitute for “empire” in traditional China and Japan was not “Imperial Country” but “Heavenly Court” (天朝). Although Japan extensively adopted “Imperial Country” at the beginning of early modern times, China rarely used it throughout the traditional period. Second, in the mid-sixth century, when “empire” first appeared in *The Nihon Shoki*, Japanese rulers were not yet styling themselves as “emperor,” which rather undermines the argument that the “empire” used in King Seong’s document signifies the “country of the emperor.”

In investigating these two factors, I will focus on the following issues.

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<sup>5</sup> See Lee (2001a); (2014).



First, "Imperial Country," just like "empire," very rarely appeared in traditional Chinese documents. Second, instead of "empire" or "Imperial Country," concepts like "Heavenly Court" and "Imperial Court" (皇朝), along with *Tienxia*, were the most important substitutes for "empire." Third, a concept-historical explanation is needed about why, in China, emperor (皇/帝) was not united with "country" (國). Fourth, why did the Baekje document in *The Nihon Shoki* call the Japanese ruler "Awesome Heavenly Emperor" (可畏天皇) at a time when Japan had as yet no "emperor" as such. Thus, a logical connection needs to be established between the concept "Awesome Heavenly Emperor," as adopted by Baekje, and the term "empire" in the petition to Japan by King Seong of Baekje. Fifth, by referring to discussions in Japanese academia, I will also examine the possible concept-historical links between "Awesome Heavenly Emperor" in *The Nihon Shoki* and the term "Heavenly Emperor" (天皇) which appears in Japanese diplomatic correspondence with China just a little later, in the early seventh century. Sixth, I will review the concept-historical significance of "Awesome Heavenly Emperor" in terms of different historical interpretations. Seventh, why did Baekje apply the terms "Heavenly Emperor" and "empire" to Japan, and how did Japan respond to this.<sup>6</sup>

## “Empire” in Traditional China: Wang Tong and *Taiping Yulan*

The Western origin of the concept "empire" is found in the Roman word *imperium* from before the Christian era. From *imperium* the English word "empire," French *empir*, and so on were derived. *Imperator* (皇帝), which had a deep conceptual tie with the *imperium*, was identified with Caesar, the adoptive family name of Augustus Octavianus, as an embodiment of *imperator*. Caesar, became a synonym of *imperator*, and was combined with *Reich* (realm), denoting a larger sphere than *Staat* (state), to give *Kaiserreich* in Germany, again with the same meaning as *imperium*. In the Netherlands

<sup>6</sup> This article was made possible by two scholars who helped me to get hold of the relevant literature. Choi Jaeyoung (History Department, Hallym University) helped me to find literature related to Wang Tong (王通), *Taiping Yulan* (太平御覽), and *Xinshu* (新書); and the works of Abe Takeo and Yamada Moone, discussed in relation to the concept *Tienxia*, were provided by Park Choongsuk in Spring 2011. I am deeply grateful to both of them.

too, Caesar was linked with the cognate term *rijk* to yield the equivalent *keizerrijk*.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, during the later part of the early modern period, Japanese *Rankaku* (Study of Western knowledge) scholars translated the Dutch word *keizerrijk* into 帝國 [empire]. Contemporary Japanese academia therefore argues that the Eastern origin of the concept “empire” traces back to the West, and that empire is a “translated word originating from Japan” (日本發譯語). Thus, in modern Japan, the Japanese translation of “empire” is regarded as a synonym not only of the Dutch term *keizerrijk* but also of the English term “empire,”<sup>7</sup> hence the widespread idea that this concept of “empire” originates with the ancient Roman *imperium*.

This implies, then, that there should be no equivalent concept of “empire” in the immense corpus of traditional literature from China. According to Yoshimura Tadasuke, only once did he encounter “empire” as an individual word, which appeared in page 12829 of the *Draft History of Qing* (清史稿), while he was searching through digitized Chinese literature of the pre-modern era in a database constructed by the Taiwan Central Research Institute.<sup>8</sup> Yoshimura seems to be referring to the phrase “the constitutional monarchy of the Great Qing Empire” (大清帝國君主立憲政體) in the biography of Zhang Xun (張勳, 1854-1923), which is part of the *Draft History of Qing: Biographies*.<sup>9</sup> This passage belongs to the mid- or late-1910s, after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, for it discusses some of Zhang Xun’s activities as the head of the Qing loyalists, beginning with the Xinhai Revolution and the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911.

Moreover, according to Yoshimura and other Japanese scholars, “empire” was used only once in traditional China: it was mentioned by Wang Tong, (王通, 580-617) a scholar of the Sui Dynasty, and quoted in Japan’s *Grand Chinese-Japanese Dictionary* (大漢和辭典). Yoshimura denies that this usage has any concept-historical significance, however, saying that

<sup>7</sup> Yoshimura (2003); Yamamoto (2003); Lee (2011b), pp.66-8.

<sup>8</sup> Yoshimura (2003), p.70.

<sup>9</sup> *Draft History of Qing: Biographies* Vol. 473, Biography No. 260 “Zhang Xun,” para. 21519, p.12829, Han Ji Electronic Document Repository (漢籍電子文獻資料庫), Taiwan Central Research Institute, Research Institute for Historical Language (中央研究院 歷史語言研究所); <http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw>.

"the original passage written by Wang Tong differs in meaning from today's."<sup>10</sup>

Wang Tong is known as "the Great Confucianist of the late Sui Dynasty,"<sup>11</sup> and the "empire" Yoshimura mentioned appears in *The Words of Wenzhongzi* (文中子中說), a book of his words and deeds compiled by his disciples after his death.<sup>12</sup> The passage in question is as follows: "強國戰兵, 霸國戰智, 王國戰義, 帝國戰德, 皇國戰無爲. 天子而戰兵, 則王霸之道不行矣, 又焉取帝名乎,"<sup>13</sup> which roughly translates as "a powerful country fights with its army, a warlord country fights with its strategy, a kingdom fights with its righteousness, an empire fights with its virtue, and an Imperial Country fights with its non-action (無爲). If the Heavenly Son fights with his army, it proves that he does not even follow the King's Way (王道). Then, how could he deserve the title "emperor"?"

So what does Yoshimura mean when he argues that the meaning of "empire" in the passage is different from today's understanding of "empire"? Certainly, Wang Tong used the term "empire," but his usage was unique in that his moral hierarchy distinguishes between "empire" and "Imperial Country." Therefore, his "empire" differs in meaning from the "country whose ruler is an emperor," that is, the "country of an emperor." Thus, his usage was intended, rather, to convey a deeper philosophical meaning. Even though the term "empire" was used, it was not a generalized representation of a country whose ruler had declared himself to be an emperor. It was neither a political concept, through which a ruler assumes the title of emperor, nor a diplomatic concept, through which a country describes itself as an "empire" because its ruler has adopted such a title.

It is striking that the term "empire" was never used as a political-

<sup>10</sup> Yoshimura (2003), p.70.

<sup>11</sup> Kim Sun-min (2000), p.69.

<sup>12</sup> According to Kim Sun-min, this literature "has a lot of questionable content, and thus since the Song Dynasty, endless doubts have been raised over its validity." According to Kim, Wang Tong greatly influenced "the neo-Confucianists after the latter part of the Tang Dynasty, particularly after the Song Dynasty (宋朝)." Kim Sun-min (2000), p.70. If so, then it is possible that Wang Tong's concept of empire had an impact on Japanese historiographers when they compiled *The Nihon Shoki* in the early eighth century, and it is even more likely to have influenced the Baekje people in the mid-sixth century.

<sup>13</sup> Yang Seung-duk interprets this sentence as "A powerful country depends on its military soldiers, a warlord country depends on its strategy, a kingdom depends on its righteousness, an empire depends on its virtue, and an Imperial Country depends on its inaction." Yang (2007), p.567.

diplomatic concept in the historical literature of traditional China. In fact, since there is no evidence from China that “empire” has ever served as a concept representative either of order or of the country as such, then by and large, we cannot but agree with Yoshimura’s conclusion.

There is also, *Taiping Yulan* (太平御覽), a Song Dynasty (宋朝) literary work, which has the sentence, “Han is an empire” (漢, 帝國也).<sup>14</sup> This is a book of compiled excerpts and summaries of existing literature, and the sentence in question is included in a passage quoted from *Xinshu* (新書, New Book), written by Jia Yi (賈誼), a politician of the early Former Han period. The “empire” in *Taiping Yulan* can surely be interpreted as denoting the “country of an emperor,” but the original passage in *Xinshu* is “漢帝中國也,”<sup>15</sup> which translates as, “since the country of Han has become the center of *Tienxia*.”<sup>16</sup> This instance therefore constitutes no evidence that the concept of “empire,” meaning the “country of an emperor,” existed in traditional Chinese literature.

In addition, it has often been argued that “empire” appears in *The Biography of Zhang Qian Li Guangli* (張騫李廣利傳) in the *Book of Han* (漢書), and indeed, a scholar did find a sentence containing “empire” while searching through the Han Ji Electronic Document Repository (漢籍電子文獻資料庫), a digital reference collection, but in fact this turned out to be a

14 *Taiping Yulan* 7, Shijiazhuang: Henan Education P (2000). This passage is included in Vol. 800, “Shii Section, Beidi 2 (四夷部 北狄 2).”

15 *Annotated Xinshu* (新書校注) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company P, 2000).

16 Jia (2007), p.181. The translation of the part of *Xinshu*, which contains this particular sentence, is as follows: “those who are concerned about state affairs petitioned to the emperor: “The Xiongnu are disobedient to the Han Royal Family, their words and deeds are disrespectful, they steal frequently with the safety of their numbers, disturb borderlands, often conduct injustice, and act slyly toward us, and so what should we do?” To this, I would like to respond: “To the knowledge of my loyal subject, a powerful country fights with its intelligence and scheme, the one who follows the King’s Way (王道) fights with his morality and righteousness, and an emperor fights with his grace and virtue. Therefore, as King Tang removed the nets from the three sides and blessed (and bestowed favors even on birds and animals), the southern part of the Han River capitulated, and as Emperor Shun danced, holding a sphere and a feather in his hands, southern barbarians submitted to him. Since Han has become the center of *Tienxia* (漢帝中國也), it will be only proper that Your Majesty should embrace the barbarians all over the place with your abundant virtue, and show your splendid righteousness far away even to remote places, then anyone in places where ships and carts could arrive at or human power could reach should be the subject fostered by [Your Majesty], and hence who dare not to follow the will of Your Highness?””

typo for “neighboring country” (旁國) which was the term occurring in the original source material.<sup>17</sup>

## The Absence of “Imperial Country” and the Ubiquity of “Heavenly Court” in the Records of Traditional China and Ancient Japan

Chinese rulers already had attractive concepts available to denote their governing sphere. First, there was *Tienxia*. Rulers who had declared themselves emperors were especially likely to claim to be the lords of *Tienxia*. Indeed, emperors of China saw themselves not just as the ruler of China but also the lord of *Tienxia*, which included the surrounding societies.

Chinese emperors, and other rulers assuming the title of emperor, also tended to represent themselves as ruling the “Heavenly Court.” In the Song Dynasty, the term “Center Court” (中朝) was also used,<sup>18</sup> and “Imperial Court” or “Sacred Court” (聖朝) also occasionally occur.<sup>19</sup> When the concept “country” was employed, it was mainly in expressions such as “Great Country” (大國), “High Country” (上國), “Central Country” (中國), and “House of Country” (國家),<sup>20</sup> and sometimes in “Country Court”

<sup>17</sup> In Spring 2013, a Korean researcher searched for “empire (帝國)” in the Han Ji Electronic Document Repository, the *Book of Han* Vol. 61, “The Biography of Zhang Qian Li Guangli,” para. 31 “Li Guangli” (pp.2703-4) as follows: “天子爲萬里而伐，不錄其過，乃下詔曰：‘匈奴爲害久矣，今雖徙幕北，與帝國謀共要絕大月氏使，遮殺中郎將江，故雁門守攘。危須以西及大宛皆合約殺期門車令’〔三〕服虔曰：‘危須，國名也。’文穎曰：‘漢使期門郎也，車令，姓名也。’中郎將朝及身毒國使，隔東西道。貳師將軍廣利征討厥罪，伐勝大宛。賴天之靈，從沂河山，涉流沙，通西海，山雪不積。” I asked this researcher to confirm the original text. After examining the particular passage in the *Book of Han* (published by Zhonghua Book Company P) (p.2703), they informed me that the “empire” in the digitized materials was a typo for “neighboring country.” The researcher asked the institute to correct the error in 2013, and as of November 2014, “empire” no longer occurs in the Han Ji Electronic Document Repository. Apparently the Taiwan Central Research Institute has admitted to the error and corrected it. Due to the researcher’s modesty, I cannot reveal their name, but I deeply appreciate their help.

<sup>18</sup> Xu (2012), p.115; p.116; p.248.

<sup>19</sup> For an example of “Sacred Court,” see Xu (2012), p.175; p.322.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, *History of Song: Treatises* (宋史志, total 162 Vols.) Vol. 132, Treatise No. 85, Piece 7, Movement 1, 感生帝 元符祀感生帝五首: “元符祀感生帝五首 降神, 大安六變, 二儀交泰, 七政順行. 四序資始, 萬物含生. 皇朝創業, 盛德致平. 爲民祈福, 潔此精誠.” <http://hanchi.ihp>.

(國朝).<sup>21</sup> Of course, concepts like “Central Kingdom” (中華) or “Cathay” (華夏) were also used.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, “empire” was never used, “Imperial Country” (皇國) only rarely, and “Emperor’s Country” (皇帝國) hardly ever. In short, the concepts of “emperor” and “country” were not combined. A plausible suggestion to account for this may be that the two components of the Chinese word for emperor, 皇 and 帝, in fact denote the ruler of the whole *Tienxia*, as well as of China. Although the concept of “Imperial Country” later came into widespread use in Japan,

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sinica.edu.tw. Also, there is a document which records the conversation between Yang Yuan (楊元), the commander of the Ming army deployed in 1593 to confront the Japanese invasion of Joseon, and King Seonjo of Joseon. This record is in the *Annals of Seonjo* and is titled “Meets Commander Yang and Discusses the Restoration-Plan on Gyeonseong and Others.” It nicely demonstrates the concepts through which the Chinese court and the vassal state of Joseon communicated with each another, illustrating their representations of order and self in the Sinocentric system of *Tienxia*. *Annals of the Dynasty of Joseon* Vol. 35, *Seonjo*, February 18th, 26th year (1593), 2nd article (<http://sillok.history.go.kr>). In this conversation, Yang Yuan uses “Great Country” and “High Country” to represent his country, and he also calls the court of his king the “Imperial Court.” In contrast, he humbles Joseon by calling it “Small Country” or by using the adjective “small.” Seonjo refers to the Chinese court as the “Heavenly Court” twice, and also employs the expression “high” in the meaning of “High Country.” The original text is as follows: 見摠兵楊元于嘉平館西軒。上曰：“小邦存亡，專在大人。”元曰：“劉綎率南方砲手五千，將出來。朝廷命將出歸，整理沙船千艘，一萬水兵，直向對馬島，想已下海，而時未聞報耳。賊不足畏，只恨本國糧草不給。俺等之來，本國以為非為本國也，為大國也。若然，則當防鴨綠而已，豈有與師來此之理乎。”上曰：“天朝字小之恩，雖三尺童子，孰不知之？倭之情狀，前日黃應揚所齎咨文，已盡言之矣。”元曰：“應揚如鼠子，不足信也。大概戰馬三萬匹，死者強半。俺今者將發七萬匹來，芻糧及戰備，則大國當措備。但願貴國，及時耕種，使不失時可也。大兵之後，必有凶年，惟在務農而已。”上曰：“劉員外欲聞小邦被兵之由，答云：“彼賊至欲犯上，多發不道之言，故小邦斥絕不許，以至被兵。”云，則員外怒曰：“犯上之說，是何言也。”摠兵曰：“員外玄鷹生事之人，不足數也。且倭子雖有此言，皇朝不可犯也... 千萬里外，轉糧而擊之，猶能勝之，豈有至門庭而不能掃蕩之理乎。”上曰：“王京之賊，不可不先擊。以砲手三千，合我軍攻之如何。”元曰：“王京之賊，所宜先擊，但道路多險且泥，馬不得馳，車不得行。若時十日糧於開城，則可以往擊也。”上曰：“萬餘石，則可以支給。前日事急，未及措置，今當盡力焉。須與提督相議處之。”元曰：“俺豈欲久留此地？如坐針氈，殆無安日。上國之人，必以鹽醬為餽，而一千軍，給與一斗，把摠等僅喫一匙。須備鹽醬，周遍給之。”上曰：“以小邦之故，天朝將官士卒，如是困若，此則小邦之罪也。”摠兵曰：“生祠立碑之說，是何言耶。”上曰：“諸大人豐功偉烈，小邦之人，欲報無所，用是揭揚爾。”元曰：“此皆皇上威靈，俺等有何可紀之功乎。”

For a case in which a Chinese envoy adopted the term “Central Country” in diplomatic records, see Xu Jing (2012), p.208; p.297; p.321. Xu Jing also referred to the Song Dynasty as “House of Country (國家)”: for example, “The “House of Country” greatly unifies and reigns over all countries.” Xu Jing (2012), p.319.

- <sup>21</sup> Xu Jing (2012), p.93; p.120; p.212; p.226. The state envoys in the Song Dynasty and the Yuan Dynasty were called the “country’s messenger” (國信使). Xu Jing (2012), p.228; p.235; p.238; p.288. Also, refer to the translator’s footnote 1032 on p.228.
- <sup>22</sup> Xu (2012), p.160. For an example in which a Chinese envoy called China “華夏,” see Xu (2012), p.319.



this is almost unknown in China.<sup>23</sup>

## Why Was “Emperor” (皇/帝) Not United with “Country” (國) in China?: The Difference between *Tienxia* and *Country*

Since “emperor” was not combined with “country” in traditional China, the question is why not? The answer is surely connected with the notion that the governing sphere of the “emperor” goes far beyond the boundary of a “country” and extends to the whole *Tienxia*, and this leads on to the issue of whether *Tienxia* was a broad concept, which also included the outer territories inhabited by *Manyi* (蠻夷, Barbarians), as well as China.

This problem has been much debated, including in the field of Chinese conceptual history. According to Abe Takeo, for the Confucians and Mohists of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, *Tienxia* was understood as only comprising China, and until about the early- or mid-Warring States period, *Tienxia* was identified with no more or less than the ruling territory of China.<sup>24</sup> Only after Zou Yan, the most prominent thinker of the Yin and Yang School, who worked in the late Warring States period, did *Tienxia* begin to be perceived as a larger sphere that embraced even the world of the barbarians. “The Biography of Mencius and Xun Qing (孟子荀卿)” in *Shiji* (史記, The Records of the Grand Historian), quotes Zou Yan’s statement that “The China of the Confucians is no larger than one eighty-first part of *Tienxia*.” Thus arose a new conceptual meaning that the real *Tienxia* is eighty-one times larger than the Confucians’ and Mohists’ *Tienxia*, that is, China.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, in the early Han period, *Tienxia* seems to have begun to denote “the world,” including both China and *Manyi*. Abe Takeo also quotes from “The Biography of the Xiongnu” in

<sup>23</sup> A search of the Han Ji Electronic Document Repository gives several hits for “Imperial Country” (皇國), but in most cases it denotes the countryside “婆皇國” in the context of indigenous products being supplied, as recorded in *the Book of Song* (宋書) and *the History of the Southern Dynasties* (南史). The following record in *the Book of Song: Annals* (total 10 Vols.) Vol. 5, Annal No. 5 “Emperor Wen,” is a representative example: “是歲, 婆皇國遣使獻方物.” <http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw>.

<sup>24</sup> Abe (1956), p.83.

<sup>25</sup> Abe (1956), pp.83-4; p.103.

*Shiji*. In a letter sent to Chanyu (單于), the supreme ruler of the Xiongnu, Emperor Xiaowen of Han (孝文帝, reigned 179-157 BCE) wrote, “Today, *Tienxia* is peaceful, and the people are all happy. Chanyu and I are the parents of them, and people of both countries are like one family.” Abe takes this passage to clearly indicate that Han and Xiongnu shared *Tienxia*.<sup>26</sup>

Based on this evidence, Abe believes that the notion of “Wide Sphere *Tienxia*” (廣域天下), a concept incorporating barbarians into the sphere, emerged in China during the early Han period. But this notion was then firmly established by the political and diplomatic practices of Emperor Wu of Han (reigned 140-87 BCE), in particular, by the imperialism and commercialism of his era.<sup>27</sup> Abe argues that although the two concepts, of a “Narrow Sphere *Tienxia*” (狹域天下), specifically meaning China, and a “Wide Sphere *Tienxia*,” effectively signifying the entire world, had coexisted in China since the Former Han Dynasty, the prevalent public understanding has generally been the Narrow Sphere *Tienxia*. In Abe’s view, then, throughout the two thousand years of Chinese history, *Tienxia* has been conceived of and understood primarily as China rather than as the wider world. He also asserts that the broader concept, in which *Tienxia* is directly identified with the world as a whole, was nothing but a “cosmetic veneer” (化粧顏料) for the Chinese people, and that the concept of Wide Sphere *Tienxia* was essentially a vain notion used to embellish Confucian commentaries, literary rhetoric, and diplomatic courtesies. He does, however, acknowledge that interpretations varied from period to period. Thus, when China was militarily dominant, as in the Former Han and early Tang periods, the idea of “Wide Sphere *Tienxia*,” indicating that “China and *Manyi* are one family,” was widespread; whereas when the Han (漢) nation was oppressed, as in the Song and Ming periods, the concept of *Tienxia* tended to take on a more nationalistic character and was therefore confined to China.<sup>28</sup>

Toyota Hisashi and others also offer similar interpretations. According to Toyota, with Qin Shi Huang’s first unification of the areas understood at that time as being *Tienxia*, the region then ruled by the Qin Dynasty became

<sup>26</sup> Abe (1956), p.87. In the same context, Abe refers to the passage in *Annals of Emperor Xiaowen*, where it is written that, “There are eight splendid mountains in *Tienxia*, three of which belong to *Manyi* (barbarians) and five of which belong to China” (*Ibid.*, p.88).

<sup>27</sup> Abe (1956), pp.88-9.

<sup>28</sup> Abe (1956), pp.98-101.



simultaneously identified as a single country and as *Tienxia*, and therefore *Tienxia* came to mean China. Then with the start of the Han era, the installation system was established to formalize relations with the barbarians outside China, and the notion of a larger *Tienxia* arose, and thus *Tienxia* became "the world in the contemporary sense." Between the Three Kingdoms period and the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the territory described by *Tienxia* was sundered into multiple polities, but there was no change in the received wisdom that the head of the entire *Tienxia* is the Heavenly Son. Even during the Tang Dynasty, almost until its ultimate decline, the idea persisted that the emperor of the country Tang, who stands at the center of the installation system, dominates *Tienxia*. Beginning with the Song Dynasty, however, *Tienxia* was repeatedly divided in two, between China and the barbarians, and this situation generated contradictions between the reality on the ground and ideology of the concept *Tienxia*. *Tienxia* was the usual term for the territory of China, but only "in ideology did it take on the scale of the world."<sup>29</sup> Thus, from the Song period, the contradictions between the physical *Tienxia*, meaning China, and *Tienxia* as a political ideology, denoting the whole world including *Manyi*, became acute.<sup>30</sup>

Certainly, Abe Takeo's narrative is convincing: that the Chinese rulers' idea of *Tienxia* as the world was, in reality, a vain exaggeration; but this neglects the importance of the idea of *Tienxia* in morally legitimizing those rulers who assumed the title of emperor, that is, the role of *Tienxia* as a political ideology. This is an issue requiring a perspective different from the fact that the notion of Narrow Sphere *Tienxia* more often prevailed historically, and for this purpose it will be useful to summarize the relations among *Tienxia*, China, and "country" in general usage, according to the definition offered by Yamada Moone to explain the moral significance of *Tienxia*. By his account, *Tienxia* was not simply the notion of an identical, commonly ruled political domain fairly governed by a single Heavenly

<sup>29</sup> Toyota (2011), pp.281-2.

<sup>30</sup> According to Xu Jilin (許紀霖), in the Han Dynasty *Tienxia* had both spatial and value significations, but in the Qing Dynasty, the value aspect was lost, and only the spatial signification remained; hence Qing emphasized the "Great One Unity" (大一統). This phenomenon suggests that the attributes of the concept *Tienxia* have continued to change with the times. From his conversation with the author at "A Conceptual History of "Empire": From an East Asian Perspective," an international conference hosted by Hallym Academy of Sciences in Korea (June 13, 2014).

Son; rather, it was the “notion of an international and identical, commonly ruled political domain, namely, a nation of all countries (萬國) under the Heavenly Son. The so-called Heavenly Son was the figure regarded as the governing head of the political domain, and the Heavenly Son’s own kingdom, called the Capital (京師), was the place regarded as located in the center of *Tienxia*, which was China. Other than that, all that remained were countries of *Zhu Xia* (諸夏), that is, vassal states.”<sup>31</sup>

Jin Guantao, who is generally recognized as a pioneering scholar of the history of ideas in China, says that *Tienxia* and the country are the same in size, and differ only in their moral connotations,<sup>32</sup> but he also explains that

<sup>31</sup> Yamada (1949), pp.92-3.

<sup>32</sup> Jin Guantao, and others, have argued that in traditional China, *Tienxia* and “country” did not differ in the physical spheres which they designated, but only in their moral connotations. He proposes that “in traditional China, both *Tienxia* and “country” were commonly used words, and their meanings were similar to each other.” Borrowing from some remarks by Gu Yanwu (顧炎武, 1613-1682), Jin explains the differences between “country” and *Tienxia* in his argument about the “fall of the country (亡國)” and the “fall of *Tienxia* (亡天下),” when referring to the transitional period between the Ming Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty. There is the fall of the country and the fall of *Tienxia*. How are the two distinguished from one another? The fall of the country is like changing the surname and thereby altering the address, whereas the situation in which humanity is completely choked up and thus beasts are goaded to devour humans or humans eat up one another, this we call the fall of *Tienxia*. Thus, the fall of country suggests the collapse of a dynasty having a certain family name, but the fall of *Tienxia* connotes the total destruction of moral order, and hence *Tienxia*, as a relatively abstract concept, gives much more emphasis to moral order.” Jin (2008); Jin (2010), p.228; Lee (2011a), p.21.

The general interpretation of Gu Yanwu’s intention inherent in his distinction between the fall of the country and the fall of *Tienxia*, in the same context as Jin Guantao’s, is that the fall of the country represents the “rise and fall at the level of the polity” and the fall of *Tienxia* signifies the “collapse of the entire social and cultural system.” Toyota (2011), p.282. But, Abe Takeo has a different interpretation, which is also noteworthy. Gu Yanwu lived in the late Ming to early Qing period and claimed to be a surviving retainer of the Ming Dynasty. He fought to the end against the Qing and rejected service to the Qing court, which he considered the dynasty of a foreign nation. On the surface, Gu Yanwu’s distinction between the country and *Tienxia* seems to be a moral one, but Abe identifies a hidden meaning in his argument that the change of dynasties within the Chinese Han nation is nothing but the rise and fall of countries, whereas the fall of *Tienxia* is the replacement of the dynasty by a foreign nation regarded as beasts. Abe suggests that rather than being a question of morality, this was actually an expression of his nationalism, and represents his hostility toward a foreign nation. Abe (1956), pp.104-5. In this light, Gu Yanwu’s “fall of *Tienxia*” can be understood either as China being conquered by a foreign nation, or as the “Wide Sphere *Tienxia*” in a situation where order collapses because of subversion of China by barbarians, leading to an exchange of the original places at the center and the margin.

the two concepts are radically different in their respective spheres. He makes three points about the characteristics of the concept of *Tienxia*, the first of which is that “*Tienxia* meant the whole world.”<sup>33</sup>

To summarize: *Tienxia* designated the entire world, whereas the country was characterized by the specific geographical and territorial boundary. It is suggestive, in this regard, that the Chinese letter denoting “country” (國) itself takes a form that demarcates a certain spatial boundary.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, in a symbolic system where political concepts play a role in morally legitimizing rulers who assume the title of emperor, the “Wide Sphere *Tienxia*,” one of the two *Tienxia* concepts which Abe Takeo proposed, is most useful when it transcends the geographical and territorial boundary. This difference, I think, provides an explanation of why “emperor,” designating the supreme ruler of *Tienxia*, was not united with “country” in the traditional Chinese system of political concepts.

## The Origination of the Concept “Empire” in Ancient Korea

Discussions among Korean academics on the usage of “empire” as a diplomatic concept to denote the “country of an emperor” or a “country where the ruler has assumed the title of emperor” have established the following. First, a diplomatic document designated China as an “empire,” meaning the country of an emperor, in the late ninth or early tenth century,

<sup>33</sup> The second characteristic he mentions for *Tienxia* is that this concept included a hierarchical order expressing a moral level. The third characteristic was that since *Tienxia* was a term designating a single moral community, it did not encompass the concept of state sovereignty, and that the sovereignty of *Tienxia* was therefore inseparable from the power exercised by the emperor as the supreme ruler of the moral community. Jin (2008), pp.208-30. Jin Guantao’s concept of *Tienxia* contains an implicit contradiction, however: although he states that *Tienxia* signified the world, he also argued that it meant a huge “moral community.” Since a moral community is a set of people sharing specific values, this implies that people who do not share these values should be excluded; but this cannot be reconciled with the understanding of *Tienxia* as somehow signifying the whole world: *Tienxia* cannot signify both a specific moral community and the whole world at the same time.

<sup>34</sup> In the Zhou Dynasty, the conceptual difference between the country and *Tienxia* was clearer, with “many provincial countries which had tribute-installation relations with Zhou” described as “neighboring countries” (邦國). Xu (2012), p.334. Also see the translator’s footnote No. 1510.

toward the end of the Unified Silla period, and this example appears so far unremarked by Japanese scholars. Second, although “empire” does not appear in the historical records of the Joseon Dynasty, it does appear in the poetry and prose written by Joseon literati, as a term denoting China, with at least two such cases known.<sup>35</sup> It seems then, that “empire” as a political-diplomatic concept arose in ancient Korea and continued to be used up to the Joseon period.

In addition, the fact that the term “empire” appeared just once in *The Nihon Shoki* should also be remembered, as already mentioned: in a diplomatic document sent to Japan in the mid-sixth century, Baekje’s King Seong described Japan as an “empire.” It has recently been suggested that *The Nihon Shoki* records King Seong of Baekje introducing Buddhism to Japan by dispatching an envoy to the country.<sup>36</sup> The evidence includes a diplomatic petition, supposedly submitted by King Seong to the ruler of Japan along with other Buddhist materials, such as statues and scriptures, which states: “由是, 百濟王臣明, 謹遣陪臣怒又喇斯致契, 奉傳帝國, 流通畿內.”<sup>37</sup> This translates as “the loyal subject, Myeong of Baekje,” by sending his vassal Norisachigye, wishes to transmit [Buddhist materials] to “the empire” and let [them] circulate in Japan.<sup>38</sup>

Jeon Yong-shin regards “empire” here as a term designating the Japanese court,<sup>39</sup> and the Korean History Database of the National Institute of Korean History translates the word as the “country of the emperor.”<sup>40</sup> The English translation of *The Nihon Shoki* by W. G. Aston translates this word as the “Imperial Country,”<sup>41</sup> interpreting it literally as the “country of the emperor.” A Japanese translated and annotated version of *The Nihon Shoki* gives *mikado* (みかど),<sup>42</sup> which, according to *The Grand Japanese*

<sup>35</sup> For this discussion, see Lee (2014), pp.39-76.

<sup>36</sup> Lee (2011a), pp.21-2.

<sup>37</sup> Taro (1965), p.101.

<sup>38</sup> Jeon (1989), p.336. Sung Eun-goo’s translation of the same book did not include Vols 15-21, from which this part is taken. Also, scholars like Kim Hyun-goo have put huge efforts into researching Korea-related content found in *The Nihon Shoki*, but this part, from the era of Heavenly Emperor Kinmei, was not the object of his analysis. Kim Hyun-goo (2003).

<sup>39</sup> Jeon (1989), P.336.

<sup>40</sup> National Institute of Korean History, “Korean History Database.” <http://db.history.go.kr>.

<sup>41</sup> Aston (1972), p.66.

<sup>42</sup> Taro (1965), p.101.

*Dictionary*, means "the country ruled by the Heavenly Emperor, the empire, or the Imperial Country."<sup>43</sup>

Japanese academics are aware of the examples found in *The Nihon Shoki* and that of Wang Tong in China, and they regard these as records of historical facts, but they do not grant them any conceptual significance. This asserts that Wang Tong's example means something very different from the "country of the emperor," and that the Baekje document example quoted in *The Nihon Shoki*, despite clearly meaning as the "country of the emperor," did not serve as the origin of the concept "empire" as used in modern Japan. The orthodox position in Japanese academia is thus that the Chinese word "empire" (帝國) is a translated word originating from Japan.

If the historical authenticity of the document in *Nihon Shoki* can be proved, this would confirm the case as the first example of "empire" as a political-diplomatic concept and also show that the concept "empire" originated in ancient Korea. The problem is that the records and terms of *The Nihon Shoki* are controversial, with some probably embellished or even fabricated to establish the view that history was centered on the Heavenly Emperor in the early eighth century when this history book was compiled.

Nevertheless, even if the example in question was faked by Japanese historiographers to support their preferred interpretation of history, it does not change the fact that the example evidences the origin in traditional East Asia of "empire" in the sense of the "country of an emperor." It merely changes the creators of the concept, substituting a Japanese writer for one from Baekje. And besides the possibility that the "empire" in *The Nihon Shoki* fabricated, it is suspicious in other ways as well. Firstly, except for this one single instance, supposedly used by King Seong of Baekje, it never

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43 In 701 (The First Year of Taihō), under the reign of Heavenly Emperor Monmu (文武天皇), ancient Japanese laws were compiled into a great corpus named the Taihō Code (大寶令), the statutes from which have been passed down to today's Japan, after being slightly extended and revised as the Yōrō Code (養老令) in 718. Min (1976), p.28. This code classified the titles of the Heavenly Emperor used in Japan into four categories: "designated respectively, in the worship service as "Heavenly Son," in the rescript as "Heavenly Emperor," to the barbarians as "the emperor," and in the memorial as "His Majesty"." Inoue (1976), p.343. Thus, Japan designated the Heavenly Emperor as the "emperor" in diplomatic documents sent to China and other barbarian countries. The original sentence from the code is "皇帝. 華夷所レ稱," and the commentator (凡武拾陸條) interpreted it as "皇帝. 華夷に稱する所." Inoue (1976), p.343. It seems then, that in the Chinese world order, "Heavenly Emperor" may have appeared strange or crude, and this explains why ancient Japan instead used the title of "emperor" in its international relations.

occurs again in the literature of ancient Japan. This means that “empire” was an unfamiliar term on the conceptual horizon of Japanese intellectuals, including historiographers. Also, it is hard to believe that instead of the “Heavenly Court,” generally used in *The Nihon Shoki* to designate the Japanese court, or the “Imperial Country” used later in Japan, they deliberately chose the strange word “empire.” Putting these doubts aside, however, and assuming that *The Nihon Shoki* does indeed record a historical fact, that Baekje’s King Seong called Japan the “empire,” let us proceed to investigate the historical context and significance of this record.

If the record is accepted as authentic, then, the concept of “empire” can be regarded as a part of the system of political concepts in traditional Korea. Taken together with the example from the Silla diplomatic document sent to China and the usage of “empire” in the poetry and prose of the Joseon period, it is possible to argue that “empire” has existed in Korea since ancient times as part of the conceptual system for the representation of order and the relations between Korea and surrounding societies.

However, in order to accept that “empire” in *The Nihon Shoki* signifies the “country of the emperor,” and, as such, it is the first example of the concept of “empire” to emerge in traditional East Asia, at least two more issues need to be settled: first, why, and in what political-diplomatic context, did Baekje designate Japan as an “empire”; second, how should we understand Baekje’s application of the concept “empire” to Japan, when that country’s ruler had not, in fact, officially declared himself emperor. The first issue, concerning the political-diplomatic context, has already been discussed in some detail,<sup>44</sup> but the second issue, though no less important, has received little attention so far.

## The Formation of the Concept of “Empire” in Ancient Korea and the Use of “Awesome Heavenly Emperor”

In 552 when Baekje called Japan an “empire,” Japan had yet to officially proclaim its ruler as “emperor.” In this context, we need to consider a document in *The Nihon Shoki*, dated April 548 (the ninth year of the reign of

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<sup>44</sup> Lec (2014), pp.44-68.

Heavenly Emperor Kinmei, who was contemporaneous with King Seong in Baekje). According to this record, the envoy of Baekje referred to the king of Japan as the “Awesome Heavenly Emperor.”<sup>45</sup> Similar records from 552 and 554 also have Baekje and other powers on the Korean Peninsula calling the Japanese king the “Awesome Heavenly Emperor.”<sup>46</sup>

According to Hara Hidesaburo, Japanese scholars generally believe that only after the late seventh-century Tenmu era (天武朝) did Japanese rulers officially use the title of Heavenly Emperor.<sup>47</sup> Kurihara Tomonobu (栗原朋信) gives an earlier date, with the complex title “Great King Heavenly Emperor (大王天皇)” used officially by the Suiko era (推古朝, 593-628).<sup>48</sup> But in any case, even before such titles were used in Japan itself, the Baekje people of King Seong bestowed the title of “Awesome Heavenly Emperor” upon the Japanese ruler and besides, called Japan an “empire.”

The ancient Heavenly Emperor system may be defined as despotism supported by the legal institutions of a state, in which context Hara Hidesaburo argues that the Heavenly Emperor was only backed up by such systems after the Tenmu era, but he also points out that the actual title of

45 *The Nihon Shoki* Vol. 19 Amekuni Oshiharaki Hironiwa-tennō Emperor Kinmei (天國排開廣庭天皇 欽明天皇) the ninth year, summer, April, “A report on the secret communication” (April 3, 548 [lunar calendar]). It states that Baekje sent an envoy to request the Japanese king to reserve the deployment of reinforcements, and also to report that Ara Gaya (安羅) was secretly communicating with Goguryeo: “夏四月壬戌朔甲子 百濟遣中部杆率掠葉禮等奏曰 德率宣文等 奉勅至臣蕃曰 所乞救兵 應時遣送 祇承恩詔 嘉慶無限 然馬津城之役正月辛丑 高麗率衆圍馬津城 虜謂之曰 由安羅國與日本府 招來勸罰 以事準況 寔當相似 然三廻欲審其言 遣召而竝不來 故深勢念 伏願 可畏天皇 (原註 西蕃皆稱日本天皇 爲可畏天皇) 先爲勸當 暫停所乞救兵 待臣遣報 詔曰 式聞早奏 爰觀所憂 日本府與安羅 不救隣難 亦朕所疾也 又復密使于高麗者 不可信也 朕命即自遣之 不命何容可得 願王 開襟緩帶 恬然自安 勿深疑懼 宜共任那 依前勅 戮力俱防北敵 各守所封 朕當遣送若干人 充實安羅逃亡空地。” Taro (1994), p.292; p.490.

46 One of them registers the fact that Goguryeo made peace with Silla in May 552. *The Nihon Shoki* Vol. 19 Amekuni Oshiharaki Hironiwa-tennō Emperor Kinmei the 13th year May (May 8, 552 [lunar calendar]). “十三年 五月 戊辰朔乙亥 百濟·加羅·安羅 遣中部德率木州今敦河內部阿斯比多等奏曰 高麗與新羅 通和并勢 謀滅臣國與任那 故謹求請救兵 先攻不意 軍之多少 隨天皇勅 詔曰 今百濟王 安羅王 加羅王 與日本府 臣等 俱遣使奏狀聞 亦宜共任那 并心一力 猶尚若茲 必蒙上天擁護之福 亦賴可畏天皇之靈也。”

The other concerns Baekje’s request to be rescued in January 554. *The Nihon Shoki* Vol. 19 Amekuni Oshiharaki Hironiwa-tennō Emperor Kinmei the 15th year, spring, January (January 9, 554 [lunar calendar]): “十五年 春正月 丙申 百濟遣中部木州施德文次 前部施德曰 佐分屋等於筑紫 諮內臣 佐伯連等曰 德率次酒 杆率塞敦等 以去年閏月四日到來云 臣等者謂內臣也 以來年正月到 如此猶而未審 來不也 又軍數幾何 願聞若干 預治營壁 別諮 方聞 奉可畏天皇之詔 來詣筑紫 看送賜軍 聞之歡喜 無能比者 此年之役 甚危於前 願遣賜軍 使逮正月 於是 內臣奉勅而答 報曰 即令遣助軍數一千·馬一百匹·船冊隻。”

47 Hara (1984), pp.26-7

48 See Kurihara (1978); Hara (1984), p.27.



Heavenly Emperor could have emerged much earlier. And indeed, a Japanese ruler did use the title of “Heavenly Son” or “Heavenly Emperor” in a letter sent to the Sui Dynasty in the early seventh century, a century earlier than the Tenmu era. This suggests the possibility that long before the formal establishment of the Heavenly Emperor system, Japanese rulers had tried to avoid appearing as the vassals of Chinese emperors by professing themselves emperors, at least, in their international relations.

Granting the authenticity of the mention of “Awesome Heavenly Emperor” in *The Nihon Shoki*, Hara Hidesaburo gives three possible theories to explain the origin of the Japanese title “Heavenly Emperor.” The first is Kurihara Tomonobu’s, who accepts the mention of “Awesome Heavenly Emperor” as “the first credible historical record,” and argues that though in the form of a complex title, “Great King Heavenly Emperor,” “Heavenly Emperor” became the official title during the Suiko era, having been initially used in diplomatic language.<sup>49</sup> Hara himself agrees with Kurihara, and he therefore makes clear his acknowledgement of the record’s authenticity.<sup>50</sup>

The second theory Hara proposes is Miyazaki Ichisada’s argument that the title of Heavenly Emperor is derived from Taoism.<sup>51</sup> And the third is Hara’s own suggestion: he accepts Kurihara Tomonobu’s ideas, but adds his own Buddhist interpretation of why Baekje called the Japanese ruler the Awesome Heavenly Emperor. He believes that the terms “emperor” and “king” were interchangeable, since sometimes in *The Nihon Shoki*, the Heavenly Emperor is referred to as the “Heavenly King” (天王), and he also claims evidence from the historical documents prior to the *Kojiki* (古事記, Records of Ancient Matters) and *The Nihon Shoki*, in which the expression “Temple for Four Heavenly Kings” (四天王寺) occurs as the “Temple for Four Heavenly Emperors” (四天皇寺). Based upon this observation, Hara suggests that when Baekje, a Buddhist country at the time, named the “the Great King (大王) of the military power in the East the “Awesome Heavenly Emperor,” [they were] comparing him to the Four Heavenly Kings who protect converts to Buddhism.” He also adduces circumstantial evidence from a record in the *Book of Sui: Records of Japan* (隋書倭國傳)

<sup>49</sup> Hara (1984), pp.26-7. For Kurihara’s opinion, see Kurihara (1978).

<sup>50</sup> Hara (1984), p.27.

<sup>51</sup> See Miyazaki (1978).



which states that “Silla and Baekje are revering Japan as a “great power”,” to support the authenticity of the article about the “Awesome Heavenly Emperor.”<sup>52</sup>

## Japanese Diplomatic Correspondence with China in the Early Seventh Century and the Proclamation of Japan’s King as “Emperor”

Nishijima Sadao, an authority on relations between China and Japan in ancient times, argues that Japan claimed the title of emperor and its ruler styled himself the “Heavenly Son” or “Heavenly Emperor” for the first time in 607, (the fifteenth year of the reign of Empress Suiko, and the third year of Emperor Yang of Sui), in its diplomatic correspondence with China.<sup>53</sup> *The Book of Sui: Records of Japan* contains a letter delivered to Emperor Yang by Ono no Imoko (小野臣妹子), the second Japanese envoy dispatched to Sui China, which records that “the Heavenly Son in the place of the rising sun sends a letter to the Heavenly Son in the place of the setting sun” (日出處天子致書日沒處天), and also that Emperor Yang was outraged at this.<sup>54</sup> This letter, the so-called “Diplomatic Document from the Place of the Rising Sun,” was eventually rejected by the Sui Dynasty.<sup>55</sup> In contrast, *The Nihon Shoki* does

52 Hara (1984), p.27. The content included in the volume of *The Book of Sui: Biographies* is as follows: “新羅, 百濟 皆以倭爲大國, 多珍物, 並敬仰之, 恒通使往來。” [ *The Book of Sui: Biographies* Vol. 81, Biography No. 46, “Dongyi (東夷) and Japan (倭國),” para. 4032. <http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw>].

53 Nishijima (1983), pp.435-6.

54 Nishijima (1983), p.435. The entire article from *The Book of Sui, Records of Japan* follows: “大業三年 (607), 其王多利思比孤遣使朝貢. 使者曰: “聞海西菩薩天子重興佛法, 故遣朝拜, 兼沙門數十人來學佛法.” 其國書曰 “日出處天子致書日沒處天子無恙” 云云. 帝覽之不悅. 謂馮驩曰: “蠻夷書有無禮者. 勿復以聞.” 明年, 上遣文林郎裴清使於倭國. [一四裴清應作 “裴世清,” 唐人避諱省 “世” 字. 度百濟, 行至竹島, 南望身冉羅國, 經都斯麻國, 迥在大海中. 又東至一支國, 又至竹斯國, 又東至秦王國, 其人同於華夏, 以爲夷洲, 疑不能明也. 又經十餘國, 達於海岸. 自竹斯國以東, 皆附庸於倭. 倭王遣小德阿鞞臺, 從數百人, 設儀仗, 鳴鼓角來迎. 後十日, 又遣大禮哥多毗, 從二百餘騎郊勞. 既至彼都, 其王與清相見, 大悅, 曰: “我聞海西有大隋, 禮義之國, 故遣朝貢. 我夷人, 僻在海隅, 不聞禮義, 是以稽留境內, 不即相見. 今故清道飾館, 以待大使, 冀聞大國惟新之化.” 清答曰: “皇帝德並二儀, 澤流四海, 以王教化, 故遣行人來此宣諭.” 既而引清就館. 其後清遣人謂其王曰: “朝命既達, 請即戒塗.” 於是設宴享以遣清, 復令使者隨清來貢方物. 此後遂絕.” *The Book of Sui: Biographies* Vol. 81, Biography no. 46, “The Dongyi/Japan,” para. 4033. Chinese Classic Full Text Database (漢典全文檢索系統) 2.0. <http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw>. pp.1827-8.

55 Hirose (2011), p.94.

not record the specific content of the event, but only registers the fact that Japan had sent an envoy to the Sui Dynasty, perhaps because the request had been rejected by the Sui court. Despite this incident, however, Sui did not sever diplomatic relations, delegating Pei Shiqing (裴世清) as envoy to Japan the following year. *The Nihon Shoki* records that the Sui document delivered by Pei Shiqing designated the Japanese king as “Japanese Emperor” (皇帝問倭皇),<sup>56</sup> but an inscription in the *Book of Sui* states that the Japanese ruler was simply called “king” (皇帝德並二儀, 澤流四海, 以王慕化, 故遣行人來此宣諭).<sup>57</sup> Hirose Norio interprets this passage as Sui China reasserting its superiority over Japan, and in effect proposing a lord and vassal relationship.<sup>58</sup>

As a response, Japan again sent Sui an envoy with a letter, the well-known so-called “Eastern Heavenly Emperor’s Diplomatic Document,” a title derived from a sentence in the letter: “The Eastern Heavenly Emperor respectfully speaks to the Western Emperor” (東天皇敬白西皇帝).<sup>59</sup> Curiously, however, no record remains of this letter in the *Book of Sui*.

Nishijima Sadao explains the Japanese ruler being given the title of “emperor” in this diplomatic document in the context of international relations at the time. He argues that although Emperor Yang of Sui was upset with the Japanese ruler styling himself an emperor, he did not go so far as to sever diplomatic relations with Japan, even according to the *Book of Sui*. The Chinese understanding at the time considered Japan “outside of the world of courtesy, the order system of the Chinese court, and perceived it as a country of barbarians which was offering tribute in admiration of China’s courtesy world.” Hence, according to Nishijima, for Sui China, Japan belonged to an external sphere not expected to show loyalty and thus “the title of its ruler, whatever it might be, remained beneath the recognition of the Chinese court hierarchy.”<sup>60</sup> Nishijima provides a similar example from a letter sent to Emperor Wen of Sui by the Turkic ruler Ishbara Qaghan who “styled himself as the Wise and Sacred Heavenly Son of the Great Turkic Tienxia, born in heaven,” in response to which Emperor

<sup>56</sup> Jeon (1989), p.390.

<sup>57</sup> *The Book of Sui: Biographies* Vol. 81, Biography No. 46, “Dongyi / Japan,” para. 4033. Chinese Classic Full Text Database 2.0. p.1828. <http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw>.

<sup>58</sup> Hirose (2011), p.94.

<sup>59</sup> Jeon (1989), p.390.

<sup>60</sup> Nishijima (1983), p.437.

Wen's reply described him as "Heavenly Son of the Great Sui." From these cases, Nishijima concludes that the emperors of the Sui Dynasty apparently sanctioned such titles for barbarian rulers, allowing them to style themselves "Heavenly Sons" like the Sui emperors.<sup>61</sup>

No general agreement has yet been reached on the interpretation of the "Eastern Heavenly Emperor's Diplomatic Document," and Nishijima Sadao offers several ideas which differ from Nishijima Sadao's view: as an expression of respect and obedience to the other party, as a fabrication undertaken in the compiling of *The Nihon Shoki*, and as an attempt to relativize the lord and vassal relationship through the logic of Buddhism.<sup>62</sup>

Hirose himself thinks that if Japan really did send such a document to the Sui Dynasty, then it must have been a gesture by Japan to claim a relationship of equals with Sui, which had earlier demanded a lord and vassal relation by rejecting the "Diplomatic Document from the Place of the Rising Sun." Hirose's pinnacle preferred view, however, is that the document was made up by the compilers of *The Nihon Shoki*. His argument

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61 Nishijima (1983), p.436. Sakaue Yasutoshi also points out the gap between Japan's inward and outward representations of its international relations, a phenomenon that occurred even in the Nara period (奈良時代, 710-784), which was Japan's zenith during ancient times. In those days, Japanese law defined even the Tang Dynasty, the Chinese Empire, as a "vassal state" (外蕃, just like Silla. Japan had imitated Tang China's attitude, as illustrated in its law that "Tang is China, and the surrounding countries are all vassal states," by compiling the Taihō Code and the Yōrō Code. Hirano (1985); Sakaue (2001), p.90. In reality, however, Japan was a tributary state of Tang China, which had a distinctly higher status. In greeting Tang's envoy, for example, the Japanese king was obliged to come down from his throne and face the north to welcome the envoy. This is because traditionally, in China, the Heavenly Son greeted his subjects by facing the south. When this happened on May 3, 779 it led to a controversy in the Japanese court, which eventually concluded that "It was inevitable for the Heavenly Emperor to have come down from his throne." Tajima (1985); Moriko (1998); Sakaue (2001), p.94. Sakaue Yasutoshi notes that in *Ancient Records* (古記), a commentary on the Taihō Code, unlike in the code itself, Great Tang was interpreted not as a vassal state but as a "neighboring state." Both the Japanese king and his high officials in the Japanese government were well aware of this gap, which Sakaue sees as a discrepancy between "the legal description as the orthodox" and "the real situation as the esoteric." He perceives this irony as consistent with the situation whereby in Japan before World War II, the Japanese king as Heavenly Emperor was exalted as a god to the military and the common people, but the government and judiciary tended to consider him just as a member of a state institution. In this context, he quotes the argument of Miyazawa Toshiyoshi, who describes the doctrine of the divine nature of the Heavenly Emperor as corresponding to the orthodox, and the doctrine of the Heavenly Emperor being an institution as corresponding to the esoteric. Miyazawa (1970); Sakaue (2001), p.92.

62 Hirose (2011), p.88.

is that diplomatic relations between East Asian states could not continue when there was a mismatch of moral codes. Moreover, he also rejects the theory that Sui China treated Japan preferentially, and thus forbore to sever diplomatic relations. In fact it was the nomadic Turkish forces who enjoyed the most preferential treatment from Sui China in those days. The official rank of the Sui envoys dispatched to Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla was normally 5 or 6, whereas Pei Shiqing, who was sent during this diplomatic row ranked no higher than 8 or 9. Hence, Hirose considers this a case of Sui China's "aggressive diplomacy towards extremely remote places," according to which envoys of rank 9 were sent to the Sasanian Empire (Iran), the Kingdom of Chitu (赤土國, either on the Malay peninsula or in Southern Thailand), and to the Kingdom of Liuqiu (琉求國, Taiwan).<sup>63</sup>

Hirose's argument appears convincing, but, although it is highly likely that the "Eastern Heavenly Emperor's Diplomatic Document" in *The Nihon Shoki* was fabricated, it seems obvious that the Japanese king was seeking a relationship with China on equal terms when he styled himself "Heavenly Son" in the "Diplomatic Document from the Place of the Rising Sun" sent to Sui China in 607.<sup>64</sup> It is not clear, however, whether the title actually claimed by the Japanese king was the "Heavenly Son in the Place of the Rising Sun," as written in the *Book of Sui*, or the "Eastern Heavenly Emperor," as recorded in *The Nihon Shoki*. Indeed, one cannot exclude the possibility that "Heavenly Son" of the *Book of Sui* is simply a Chinese translation of "Eastern Heavenly Emperor." This would still be true, even if the two documents were actually one and the same, as Takahashi Yoshitaro argues.

It is important, then, to decide when the ruler of Japan began to adopt

<sup>63</sup> Hirose (2011), pp.94-6; p.100.

<sup>64</sup> *The Book of Sui: Records of Japan* records a Japanese envoy being dispatched to Sui China on three occasions, in 600, 607, and 608, and *The Nihon Shoki* also counts three in 607, 608, and 614. In *the Book of Sui: Annals* (隋書帝紀), however, only two envoys are mentioned, in 608 and 610. Takahashi Yoshitaro, writing in 1950, in the early post-War period, holds that Japan's dispatch of the envoy to Sui in 600, as recorded in *the Book of Sui: Records of Japan*, and in 608 and 610, as recorded in *the Book of Sui: Annals*, were all factually accurate. He speculates that the first envoy in 600 was sent for an initial survey of the state of affairs, the second in 608 to convey the king's letter, and also some students who were to study in Sui China, and the third in 610, he argues, was necessary to send back Pei Shiqing, who had come to Japan in a return courtesy visit. He thinks that the "Diplomatic Document from the Place of the Rising Sun" and the "Eastern Heavenly Emperor's Diplomatic Document" are actually the same document. Takahashi (1950). Hara Hidesaburo finds Takahashi's theory persuasive, though it is not widely credited by Japanese scholars. Hara (1984), pp.28-9.

the style of “emperor,” in any form. According to Nishijima, during the era of Empress Suiko, Japan moved from the *Kabane* (カバネ) order to a bureaucratic system under the Heavenly Emperor.<sup>65</sup> Whereas *Ōkimi* (オオキミ, Great King), the ruler of the *Kabane* state system, was merely a superior figure among others with the *Kabane* title, *Sumeramikoto* (スメラミコト) was elevated to the position of an “absolute being” who transcended the *Kabane* order, becoming the very first Heavenly Emperor. By analyzing ancient tombs, Nishijima argues that in practice the transition happened in the Suiko era: under the *Kabane* order, the *Ōkimi* tombs were rectangular at the front and rounded at the rear (前方後円墳) and thus similar in form to those of others of the *Kabane* rank; but with the Suiko era, the tombs of the Heavenly Emperor and of high officials became fully rectangular (方墳), following the Chinese style. Nishijima interprets this as a reflection of the change in Japan’s state system, which therefore occurred in the Suiko era. Nishijima also considers that the event recorded in *The Nihon Shoki*, when Baekje referred to the Japanese *Ōkimi* as the “Awesome Heavenly Emperor” in a diplomatic document sent to Japan in the Kinmei era, may imply that the shift in Japan’s international relations with Korea prompted the Japanese ruler to change title from *Ōkimi* to *Sumeramikoto*, which means Heavenly Emperor.<sup>66</sup>

65 Nishijima (1983), p.438. Nishijima defines the “*kabane* order” as a confederate regime of powerful clans. Nishijima (1983), p.439.

66 Nishijima (1983), pp.438-9. Nishijima bases his opinion on the ideas of Ishimoda Shō (石母田正), who is well known for the hypothesis that “Wai/Japan was a small empire in Dongyi [literally Eastern Barbarians].” Ishimoda asserts that between the fourth and early tenth centuries, Japan offered tribute to China while simultaneously receiving tribute from several countries in the Korean Peninsula. Hence his contention that Japan dominated the region of Imna (任那) in the Korean peninsula, directly controlling it in the late fourth century. Nishijima’s interpretation of the relationship between ancient Korea and Japan presupposes Ishimoda’s theory of Imna as a Japanese Prefecture. See especially Nishijima (1983), pp.438-9. Nishijima argues that Japan’s dispatch of the envoy to Sui China in the early seventh century, this envoy carrying the diplomatic document in which the Japanese ruler styled himself as the “Eastern Heavenly Emperor,” was an attempt to seek a change in its relationship to China, in line with Japan’s moving to the bureaucratic system under the Heavenly Emperor in the Suiko era. He also proposes that when Japan sent an envoy and offered tribute to the Song Dynasty during the Southern and Northern Dynasties period, it was trying “to secure military control over the Korean Peninsula” by entering into the Chinese regional order and requesting the appointment of offices and ranks from the Chinese court. In contrast, the envoy sent to Sui China during the Suiko era, rather than seeking appointments and installations from the Chinese court, was intended to build up Japan’s own order and authority, independently of the Chinese court system. Nishijima

At any rate, as Hirose Norio points out, it might well be true that in 607, or at least in the early seventh century, Japan claimed the title of “Heavenly Emperor” (or Heavenly Son) in the diplomatic correspondence it sent to China; and this is a century earlier than the era in which Japanese rulers began to openly style themselves “Heavenly Emperor,” according to the generally accepted view among Japanese scholars. Since it has also been proposed that this formal proclamation might originate from Baekje’s use of the title “Awesome Heavenly Emperor” for the Japanese ruler in the mid-sixth century, the use of “Heavenly Emperor” in the early seventh-century Japanese diplomatic correspondence with China can be seen as an intermediate step toward the eventual official adoption of the title “Heavenly Emperor” in the late seventh century.

## The Role of Baekje as an Intermediary in Transmitting Civilization Based on Chinese Characters

Following current scholarly discourse in Japan on the interpretation of the concept of “Awesome Heavenly Emperor,” there are essentially three options available.

The first is the interpretation proposed by Ishimoda Shō,<sup>67</sup> revived by Nishijima Sadao, and still current as the mainstream view in Japan. It acknowledges the veracity of the records in *The Nihon Shoki* which mention the “Awesome Heavenly Emperor” and the “empire,” and also accepts the theory of Imna as a Japanese Prefecture, in which the Yamato regime is

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thus relates the “change in domestic politics from a confederate regime of powerful clans, based on the *Kabane* order, to a Heavenly Emperor state” with the Suiko era envoy sent to Sui China. As he says: “internationally, this concerned the issue of maintaining the Japan-centered “small installation system” in which Japan sought to reign over Silla and Baekje as tributary states,” and “the dispatch might have been the result of a double strategy on Japan’s part, that is, on the one hand, trying to construct its own system outside the ordering system of the Chinese court and, on the other, approaching to the system of the Chinese court, as part of its effort to formulate a new order.” Nishijima (1983), p.439.

<sup>67</sup> Ishimoda Shō, “Regarding International Consciousness in Ancient Japan — The Case of Ancient Aristocrats” (1962); “The Heavenly Emperor and *The Vassals* — In relation to the Consciousness behind Legislation of the Taihō Code” (1963), included in Ishimoda Shō (1989). Quoted from Hirose (2011), pp.9-16.

believed to have held military control over a portion of the Korean Peninsula in the mid-sixth century. This theoretical framework has long served as the predominant Japanese interpretation of the historical relationship between ancient Korea and Japan.

The second interpretation assumes that the records mentioning the "Awesome Heavenly Emperor" and the "empire" in *The Nihon Shoki* were fabricated by Japanese historiographers when they compiled this text in the early eighth century.<sup>68</sup>

The third interpretation acknowledges the veracity of *The Nihon Shoki* records, but rejects the theory of Imna as a Japanese Prefecture on the Korean peninsula. This perspective has arisen as a result of renewed efforts in critical reading of *The Nihon Shoki*, which was the subject of significant research, both in Korea and Japan, during the 1980s.

Taking into account the arguments already presented in this paper, I think that the first position is unsustainable, so that only the second and third remain as feasible options. It seems impossible, however, to choose between these two alternatives with perfect objectivity, there being no way to definitively prove or disprove the thesis that the articles in *The Nihon Shoki* are fabrications or falsifications.<sup>69</sup>

Since the first half of the twentieth century, during the period of the Japanese Empire, the historical validity of *The Nihon Shoki* has been critically disputed, even within Japanese academic circles: the pioneering critical study was by Tsuda Sokichi.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, it is surely reasonable to raise questions of possible fabrication or revision of these records, the purpose being to retrospectively project a historical view centered on the "Heavenly Emperor" onto international relations, in order to validate the establishment of the ancient state with its Heavenly Emperor system. It is also true, how-

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<sup>68</sup> This interpretation also includes the possibility that the real expression written by the Baekje people was the Awesome Heavenly King, but later Japanese historiographers changed it into the "Awesome Heavenly Emperor." For example, in the diplomatic document delivered by Pei Shiqing on his trip to Japan as an envoy in the early seventh century, Sui designated the Japanese ruler as "King," but *The Nihon Shoki* registered it as the "Japanese Emperor." In this vein, the case of the "Awesome Heavenly Emperor" can be questionable too.

<sup>69</sup> Even the work by scholars, including Kim Hyun-goo, who have been very committed to critical reading of the records about the relation between Korea and Japan in *The Nihon Shoki*, does not mention whether the articles of the "Awesome Heavenly Emperor" and the "Empire" in the literature were falsified or not. Kim Hyun-goo (2003).

<sup>70</sup> See Tsuda (1924); Yeon (1998), pp.15-6.



ever, that there are no good grounds for denying the view that Japan began to use “*Sumeramikoto*,” the word which evolved into the term “Heavenly Emperor,” as the title of its ruler in the late sixth- to early seventh-century Suiko era, and that the change was apparently prompted by developments on, and/or the influence of, the Korean Peninsula, or at least by the relations between countries in the Korean Peninsula and Japan, in the mid-sixth century. Of course, both Korean and Japanese researchers are well aware that, in the mid-sixth century, Baekje was waging a life-or-death struggle for local hegemony with Goguryeo and Silla. Under these circumstances, it was natural for Baekje to maintain the closest friendship with the Japanese regime, and military reinforcements from Japan were often requested.

In addition, Baekje had an important role in transmitting advanced civilization to Japan, as exemplified by the diplomatic document sent to Japan, which supposedly conveyed the concept of empire. Thus, Baekje was in the position of transmitting and teaching Buddhist or Confucian conceptual systems, the expression of which relied upon Chinese characters, to Japan. It seems not unreasonable, therefore, to presume that Baekje’s ruling class, out of strategic and diplomatic necessity, took the initiative in proposing political concepts which they believed would be appealing to the Japanese powerful elite. Seen in this light, it follows that the Japanese ruler was apparently not attracted to the concept of “empire,” but he was happy to embrace the concept of “Heavenly Emperor.” Thus, for Baekje to provide Japan with political concepts appropriate for a big country, namely “Heavenly Emperor” and “empire,” can be readily conceived of as an aspect of Baekje’s wider role in furnishing Japan with the principles of civilization, as expressed by texts written in Chinese characters.

Still, it is not obvious why the Baekje people proposed the particular concepts of “Heavenly Emperor” and “empire.” The Japanese ruler had not assumed the title of emperor yet, and there existed a Sinocentric installation system in China, although the country was divided into Southern and Northern Dynasties. Under these circumstances, the Baekje people were apparently suggesting an alternative honorific concept for their own diplomacy purposes. Indeed, it would have been unrealistic within the Sinocentric international order at the time for the Baekje people to elevate the Japanese ruler into an emperor, no matter how much they “revered” him, hence the use of “Heavenly Emperor” and “empire.”

According to Sima Qian’s *Shiji*, Qin Shi Huang commanded his men to create a new title to represent his new status as the ruler who had unified



*Tienxia* and established the system of counties and prefectures. His subjects recommended the title "Giant Emperor" (秦皇) because "In ancient times, there was the "Heavenly Emperor," the "Earthly Emperor" (地皇), and the "Giant Emperor," and among these the Giant Emperor was the highest and noblest." Qin Shi Huang in fact decided to call himself "Emperor" (皇帝), a title invented by removing the letter 泰 (giant) from the original suggestion while keeping 皇 and combining it with 帝 originally the title of a ruler from remote antiquity.<sup>71</sup> Thus, according to this account, the concept of "emperor" was derived from the Giant Emperor, since he was regarded as the highest and noblest among the "Three Emperors." It follows, then, that the "Heavenly Emperor" is similarly high and noble, though to a lesser degree. As mentioned earlier, Hara Hidesaburo has proposed that Baekje, as a Buddhist country, took the concept "Heavenly Emperor" from the "Four Heavenly Kings" of Buddhism, but this hypothesis does not rule out the connection with one of the "Three Emperors" from ancient Chinese tradition, which would surely have helped to make the concept attractive to the Japanese ruler.

Of course, the initiative leading to the adoption of this title may have come from either side. Japan may have demanded that Baekje call the Japanese ruler the "(Awesome) Heavenly Emperor" and thereby accept the status of a vassal, since Baekje was requesting military aid from Japan. Since the Japanese king had internationally styled himself as "Heavenly Emperor" in diplomatic correspondence with China in 607, a year before officially adopting the title of emperor in the domestic government system, it does not seem unlikely that he had required Baekje to show this courtesy in the mid-sixth century. Or perhaps the Baekje people themselves invented the concept of "Awesome Heavenly Emperor," and also the concept of "empire," and applied these to Japan, which is not implausible, given Baekje's role as the intermediary of Chinese civilization and literature between China and Japan.

It is logically consistent for Baekje's ruling class to call the Japanese ruler the "Awesome Heavenly Emperor" in 548, and four years later, in 552, to refer to Japan as an "empire." If the record was fabricated by Japanese historiographers, then it was done coherently, and if the record is authentic, then since Baekje had elevated the Japanese *Ōkimi* to "Heavenly Emperor"

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<sup>71</sup> Sima (2005), pp.208-9.

a few years before, it seems sensible that the necessity arose to develop the corresponding political concept for the Japanese ruler's governing sphere, that is, "empire."

As discussed earlier, the account in *Wenzhongzi* (文中子) has Wang Tong placing "empire" one level lower than "Imperial Country," but the Baekje people of the mid-sixth century cannot have been exposed to the literature of Wang Tong, who had not yet been born. Even they had been familiar with the kind of logic employed by Wang Tong, the distinction between "Imperial Country" and "empire" would have been meaningless to them, especially when they had already presented the Japanese ruler with the title of "Heavenly Emperor." Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the possibility that Wang Tong's logic may have influenced the process by which Japan subsequently selected "Imperial Country" as the primary concept for its self-representation, while rejecting the concept of "empire" which had been suggested by Baekje.

From the records of *The Nihon Shoki*, we find no examples of ancient Japanese rulers using "empire" or "Imperial Country," and by the early eighth century, when this history was compiled, the Japanese governing system had already completed appropriating the Chinese legal system for its own use. The rulers were also imitating China in their conceptual systems for order-representation and self-representation. Thus, the Heavenly Emperor described his governing sphere as *Tienxia*,<sup>72</sup> and also mimicked

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<sup>72</sup> It is much evidence from ancient Japanese history books that in thinking about the governing sphere of the Heavenly Emperor, Japan relied upon the concept of *Tienxia*. *The Nihon Shoki*, *The Shoku Nihongi* (続日本紀), *Nihon Koki* (日本後紀) and other ancient history books make frequent mention of *Tienxia*. For example, the records of *The Nihon Shoki* for 583 include the advice of Illa (日羅), a figure affiliated with Baekje, to the Heavenly Emperor: "Politics, as the meaning of the Heavenly Emperor governing *Tienxia*, absolutely requires the protection and nurture of the people" (天皇所以治天下政 要須護養黎民) [*The Nihon Shoki* Vol. 20, 淳中倉太珠敷天皇 敏達天皇, 12th year (583): "The Dispatch of Illa, The Death of Illa"]. Also, according to a record dated 674 from the same source, the Japanese Heavenly Emperor granted a rescript to the envoy of Tamra, saying that "The Heavenly Emperor has just been inaugurated after newly pacifying *Tienxia*" (天皇新平天下 初之即位). As you see, however, we have not invited anyone else except for envoys offering us congratulations. Besides, the weather is getting cold and the waves are getting rougher and higher. So this will become a problem for you if you stay longer. You should therefore return home quickly ... He bestowed titles upon the country's king, the envoy Gumaye (久麻藝), and others for the first time" (*The Nihon Shoki* Vol. 9, 天淳中原瀛真人天皇 下天武天皇 2nd year, Fall, August 25, 674 [lunar calendar]). In addition, a record dated 650 from the same source reports that the Heavenly Emperor asked Buddhist monks (沙門) for advice, and they responded as follows: "Please make people happy by granting an order of amnesty

China by often referring to himself as the "Heavenly Court."<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, he even described Japan as the "Central Country" (中國).<sup>74</sup> Although

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to Tienxia" (宣赦天下 使悅民心) (*The Nihon Shoki* Vol. 5, 天萬豐日天皇 天萬豐日天皇 孝德天皇 白雉元年 February 9, 650 [Lunar Calendar]).

**73** A record in *The Nihon Shoki*, written in October of the 40th year of the reign of Emperor Keikō (景行天皇), describes Yamato Takeru no Mikoto (日本武尊) reporting to the Heavenly Emperor Keiko, who spoke as follows: "Receiving the command from the Heavenly Court, my loyal subject has conquered the eastern barbarians in a remote place. Covered with divine grace and depending on imperial authority, my loyal subject has punished the traitors. Like a harsh god, he handled the situation by himself. So, my loyal subject has returned home after crushing the enemy army, taking off his armor, and returning to this sphere. My loyal subject has been ready to obey the commands of the Heavenly Court at any day, at any hour, but the heaven-given life is almost done and not much life remains" (臣受命天朝, 遠征東夷, 則被神恩, 賴皇威, 而叛者伏罪, 荒神自調, 是以, 卷甲戢戈, 愷悌還之, 冀曷日曷時, 復命天朝, 然天命忽至). Jeon (1989), pp.136-7. The original text was confirmed in Taro (1994), p.482. Also, a *Nihon Shoki* record from April of the 47th year of the regency of Empress Jingu (神功皇后), reveals that the envoys of Baekje called the court of the Japanese Heavenly Emperor the "Heavenly Court." While bringing tribute to Japan, they reported, "The Silla people ... took away our country's tribute. By exchanging their crude things with ours, they forced us to offer shoddy stuff as tribute. They said, "if you do not allow this, we will kill you on the day come back." Hence, people like Gujeo (久氏) had to submit out of fear. Thus, your loyal subjects were barely able to reach the Heavenly Court" (是以, 僅得達于天朝). Jeon (1989), pp.164-5. Again, the original text was confirmed in Taro (1994), p.504. A record in *The Nihon Shoki* of February, 8th year under the reign of Emperor Yūryaku (雄略天皇), reads as follows: "Kasiwadenoomi and others told Silla that you, as an extremely weak country, had defeated the extremely strong country. If the government army had not helped you, you must have been crushed. In that war, you could almost have become the other's territory. After that, how could you dare to betray the Heavenly Court?" (隣臣等謂新羅曰, 汝以至弱, 當至強. 官軍不救, 必爲所乘. 將成人地, 殆於此役. 自今以後, 豈背天朝也). Jeon (1989), pp.242-3. Confirmation of the Original Text: Taro (1994), p.54; p.423.

**74** A record in *The Nihon Shoki* from August of the 51st year of the reign of Emperor Keiko (景行天皇) explains the circumstances under which the Japanese came to expel the Ainu (蝦夷) tribe from their country. The Heavenly Emperor, who was informed of the commotion created by the Ainu, commanded like this: "It's hard to let the Ainu, still remaining near Mount Kinabalu (神山), live in China (中國) because, by nature, their minds are like animals. Just put them outside of the country (畿外)" (其置神山傍之蝦夷, 是自有獸心, 難住中國). Jeon (1989), pp.138-9. Here, "畿內" means "Japan," and "畿外" means "outside of Japan." Confirmation of the Original Text: Taro (1994), p.483. Also, a *Nihon Shoki* record from the 7th year of the reign of Emperor Yuryaku (雄略天皇) reads: "Tasa no omi (田狹臣) married Wakahime (稚媛), who gave birth to an elder and a younger son. When 田狹 heard, while serving in his assigned post, that the Heavenly Emperor had stolen his wife, he tried to invade by requesting reinforcements from Silla. At that time, Silla did not serve Japan" (于時, 新羅不事中國). Jeon (1989), pp.240-1. Here, Jeon Yong-shin has given a free translation of Chinese into Japanese. Confirmation of the Original Text: Taro (1994), p.421. And a *Nihon Shoki* record from February of the 8th year of the reign of Emperor Yuryaku (雄略天皇), says: "It has been eight years since the Heavenly Emperor was inaugurated and the country of Silla betrayed us by neglecting to pay tribute. Thereafter, afraid of the mind of

in *The Nihon Shoki* the concept of “Imperial Country” was yet to appear, Japan later came to fully embrace it: “Imperial Country” (皇國) combines the concepts “emperor” and “country,” and was adopted by Japan despite the connotations of a *Tienxia* bigger than Japan’s own, namely, the *Tienxia* whose center was China.

Therefore, when the Japanese people of the ancient state period copied the Chinese conceptual formula of “the country of an emperor = *Tienxia*,” they reformulated the logic of *Tienxia* in a way that confined the Chinese *Tienxia* to China and their own *Tienxia* to the country of Japan (日本國). In so doing, Japan, unlike China, was able to unite *Tienxia*, the ideology of a ruler, with the concept of “country,” which led on to extensive utilization of the concept “Imperial Country” later in the traditional period. This historical context made it relatively easy for modern Japan to translate the Western term “empire” into 帝國, and thus to represent its own national identity as the “Empire of Japan.” In the ancient state period, however, when the Heavenly Emperor system was being constructed, Japan was apparently focused on imitating Chinese conceptual systems, and thus created its own versions centered on *Tienxia* and the Heavenly Court. Perhaps this explains why, when these concepts were provided by Baekje, Japan did not accept “empire” throughout the traditional period, nor even “Imperial Country,” at least initially.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted a critical review of the existing understanding of the East Asian origins of the concept of “empire,” by addressing two major issues. First, it has long been known that the term “empire” appears in *The Nihon Shoki*, the official historical record of ancient Japan, in a diplomatic petition that King Seong of Baekje sent to Japan. If the record was not a fabrication by Japanese historiographers, this makes it the source of the concept of “empire” in East Asia. Nevertheless, “empire” was not established as a mutually intercommunicable political-diplomatic concept because

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the Heavenly Emperor, they formed an alliance with Goguryeo” (自天皇即位, 至于是歲 新羅國背誕, 苞苴不入, 於今八年, 而大懼中國之心, 脩好於高麗). Jeon (1989), pp.242-3. Here, Jeon Yong-shin has translated “the mind of 中國” into “the mind of the Heavenly Emperor.” Confirmation of the Original Text: Taro (1994), p.422.

neither China nor Japan adopted it at this time. The terms which were actually used for this purpose were *Tienxia*, and the "Heavenly Court." The expression "Imperial Country" also only rarely appeared in Chinese literature during the traditional period, and likewise was not recorded in Japan, at least during the ancient period covered by *The Nihon Shoki*. Why then, was neither "empire" nor "Imperial Country" adopted by the rulers in China as a political-diplomatic concept prior to the premodern era? The main reason appears to be that "emperor," which was used to represent the person of the Chinese rulers, in fact signified the ruler of *Tienxia*, which actually transcended the specific boundaries of the "country," at least at the level of political ideology, and this presented a conceptual obstacle which made it difficult for either of the 皇 or 帝 concepts to be united with a country (國).

Second, this article has tried to demonstrate that the concept of "empire," as found in *The Nihon Shoki*, is hard to elucidate by itself, and in practice can only be understood in relation to the concept of "Awesome Heavenly Emperor," which is also found in this book. Indeed, "Awesome Heavenly Emperor" is the term used by Baekje, and the other countries of the Korean Peninsula at this time, to designate the Japanese ruler. As has been shown by Nishijima Sadao, among others, Japanese scholars generally agree that, during the Suiko era, the Japanese state system switched over from the *Kabane* order to a bureaucratic system under the Heavenly Emperor. In this process, the *Ōkimi*, the ruler of the *Kabane* order, was elevated in status, becoming exalted as an absolute being who transcended the mundane order: *Sumeramikoto*, or the Heavenly Emperor. The reign of Empress Suiko spanned the turn of the seventh century, and it seems very plausible that this conceptualization of *Sumeramikoto* in the Chinese words of "Heavenly Emperor" may well have been prompted by Baekje referring to the Japanese ruler as "Awesome Heavenly Emperor" about a half century earlier. Also, the possibility cannot be excluded that the Japanese ruler was styling himself as "Heavenly Emperor" in international relations, in effect demanding that other countries do Japan the courtesy of defining themselves as vassals, even while his domestic title was simply the Great King of the *Kabane* order.

As Hara Hidesaburo points out, the received wisdom among Japanese academics is that only after the Tenmu era, at the end of the seventh century, did the Japanese ruler officially use the title of "Heavenly Emperor," but there is also some support for the theory proposed by

Kurihara Tomonobu and Hara Hidesaburo, which highlights the adoption of the complex title “Great King Heavenly Emperor” during the Suiko era. Moreover, as Hirose Norio has recently argued, in 607 the Japanese ruler was already styling himself as the “Heavenly Emperor” or the “Heavenly Son” in diplomatic correspondence of ancient China and Japan, as compiled in the *Book of Sui* and *The Nihon Shoki*. This indicates that a Japanese political system in which the ruler styled himself as the “Heavenly Emperor” already existed approximately one century before the formal and unequivocal adoption of the title “Heavenly Emperor.” Again, this is also consonant with the role of the Korean Peninsula people, who were responsible for spreading concepts based on Chinese characters to Japan, and had designated the Japanese ruler as the “Awesome Heavenly Emperor” about a half century earlier.

In conclusion then, it is worth reconsidering the conceptual context in which we understand the concepts of “Awesome Heavenly Emperor” and “empire” as found in *The Nihon Shoki*, at least so long as we allow that these concepts were not fabricated by Japanese historiographers. In light of the fact that the people of the Korean Peninsula had served as an intermediary in transmitting civilization based on Chinese characters, it is very possible that “Heavenly Emperor” and “empire” are among the political-diplomatic concepts which were introduced to Japan from the Korean Peninsula. Finally, with regard to the question of why Japanese rulers rejected the concept of “empire” but accepted that of “Heavenly Emperor,” this likely results from the fact that in early eighth century, when *The Nihon Shoki* was being compiled, Japan was focused upon imitating the Chinese conceptual system for self-representation and order-representation .

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