The historical roots of the dispute between China and Japan over control of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands reveal a great deal about the two countries’ current global standing, says Joyman Lee.
On September 7th, 2010 a Chinese fishing craft collided with two Japanese coastguard patrol boats near the oil-rich, uninhabited islands in the East China Sea known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu, meaning ‘fishing platform’, in China. Following the collision, coastguards boarded the trawler and arrested its crew and captain Zhan Qixiong who, as subsequent video footage revealed, had rammed his boat into the coastguard vessels. Following the incident, anti-Japanese protests were held in Chinese cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Shenyang. Chinese tour groups visiting Japan were recalled, four expatriate employees of Fujita, the Japanese car component manufacturers, were arrested in the northern Chinese province of Hebei and, more critically, a decision was made to suspend the export of rare earths to Japan. Chinese premier Wen Jiabao turned down requests to meet with his Japanese counterpart, Naoto Kan, and on November 1st Dmitri Medvedev, the Russian president, in a provocative move, visited the disputed southern Kuril Islands, which the Soviet Union annexed from Japan in 1945.

These events marked a low point in foreign relations for Japan, already mired in controversy over its plan to relocate the Futenma military base used for decades by US forces in Okinawa. Japan seemed to be under siege from all sides, while a rising China appeared increasingly powerful and assertive, capable of undermining Japan’s vital interests and infringing her territorial sovereignty.

It is important to look at the current dispute between China and Japan in the light of the history of Chinese foreign policy. Chang Chi-hsiung of Taiwan’s Academia Sinica has argued that the pre-modern Chinese world order was based on status and stability (mingfen zhixu). Legitimacy rested not on physical control but on the recognition and enactment of the proper roles and duties appropriate to one’s status. Under the logic of this system, emperors extended their power beyond China’s borders not by force, but by their ‘benevolence’ or ‘virtuous’ rule, which Confucian thinkers believed would lead foreign states to acknowledge the emperor’s moral suzerainty. Thus, outside China proper, it was possible to rule even where there was no mechanism of physical governance in place. Practical benefits accompanied acceptance of China’s nominal status at the head of this universal structure: tributary trade with China was not only extremely profitable but also provided many goods that could not be easily accessed elsewhere. On the other hand, gifts and titles from the Chinese emperor allowed rulers to strengthen their own position vis-à-vis their subjects. Although Japan stayed out of the system during its Tokugawa period (1603-1868) the vast majority of states in east, inner and south-east Asia, including the Ryukyus (modern-day Okinawa), accepted a tributary relationship with China.

This Sinocentric international order was much weakened during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). Defeat by Britain in the Opium Wars (1839-42) and the resultant Treaty of Nanjing (1842), as well as the Treaty of Wangxia with the United States in 1854, allowed western powers to impose European-derived international law on their relations with east Asia. The British institutionalised legally a system of treaty ports and control of Chinese maritime customs, which combined to reduce China to semi-colonial status (see ‘China’s Age of Fragility’ by Robert Bickers, History Today March 2011). Although some revisionist historians argue that the Qing responded swiftly and that by 1862 scholars at the government-run language school Tongwen Guan were reading key texts such as Henry Wheaton’s Elements of International Law (1836) there was considerable confusion as to how the Qing should apply this understanding to relations with China’s neighbours. Meanwhile during its Meiji period (1868-1912) Japan launched an aggressive programme of modernisation and industrialisation, which included adoption of the western lexicon into its diplomatic language. In 1876 Japan forced China’s closest ally Korea into signing the Kanghwa Treaty, copying the methods employed by US Admiral Perry to open up Japan to overseas trade 22 years previously. Conflict over Chinese and Japanese relations with Korea came to a head at a meeting
at Tianjin in 1885 in which China rebuffed Japanese demands for the Japan-Korea relationship to be recognised under western international law. Rather than pleading ignorance of western norms as Korean negotiators had done, the Chinese viceroy Li Hongzhang told the Japanese statesman Ito Hirobumi that there was a ‘striking difference’ between Korea’s tributary relations with China and the mere treaty obligations that she had towards Japan.

In her study *Japan’s Colonisation of Korea: Discourse and Power* (2005) Alexis Dudden argues that Japan was able to undermine China’s central position in Asia during the late 19th century by using the language and force of western international law to replace Chinese legal terms hitherto widely accepted in east Asia, introducing a new Sino-Japanese lexicon translated from English. At Tianjin Ito refused to communicate with Li Hongzhang either in Chinese or Japanese but instead spoke in English, catching the Chinese viceroy by surprise. The conflict between the Chinese and Japanese visions for east Asia would be decided on the battlefield. Despite basic naval parity Japan took advantage of a series of disastrous political and strategic errors by Li to defeat China decisively in 1894-95, establishing control over both the Senkaku/ Diaoyu islands and Korea in addition to seizing Taiwan. At a later meeting in 1905 the Chinese viceroy Yuan Shikai complained that there was a Chinese word in the text that he had not seen before, only to be humoured by the Japanese representative, who replied that the word *kogi* was translated from ‘protest’ in English. Japan, not China, was to be the new source of the modern vocabulary in *kanji* (Chinese characters) both legally and in other fields, from botany to economics.

How does this relate to the present dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands? Since 1970 the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan and Japan have all put forward bold sovereignty claims over the islands, which are equidistant from Taiwan and the southwestern tip of the Ryukyus. According to Chinese sources the first mention of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is in a 15th-century document now held at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Early sources tended to mention only the islands’ location on the voyage to the Ryukyus from China, but by the 17th century Chinese sources clearly named the maritime boundary between the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and the Ryukyus as the Heishugou (‘Black Water Trench’), an area of high turbulence which we now know marks the edge of the continental shelf. In 1720 Xu Baoguang, the deputy Chinese ambassador sent to confer the royal title upon the Ryukyuan king, collaborated with the local literati to compile the travelogue *Zhongshan Chuanxin lu* (Record of the Mission to Chusan), which demarcated the westernmost border of the Ryukyuan kingdom at Kume-jima south of the Heishuigou Trench. Deputy ambassador Zhou Huang likewise identified Heishuigou as the boundary in 1756 and later the envoy Li Dingyuan noted the practice of sacrificing a live goat or pig when convoys crossed the trench. In the late 19th century the reformer Wang Tao, who had had experience of travelling in Europe, responded to the Japanese annexation of the Ryukyus by referring to Japanese sources which listed the Ryukyus as a separate country in 1670. He argued that even though the islands were vassals of both China and the Japanese state of Satsuma, the former relationship was more formal; the conquest of an inner tributary (Ryukyus) by an outer tributary (Japan) of China was a cause for outrage.

In contrast Japan’s argument largely ignored the historical position put forward in Chinese accounts. Claiming that the uninhabited islands were not occupied by any power, or *terra nullius*, Japan annexed the islands in 1895 shortly after its victory in the Sino-Japanese War. Japan claimed that the islands were ‘discovered’ in 1884 by Fukuoka merchant Koga Tatsushiro, who then applied to lease the land from the Japanese state. At the time, however, the interior ministry noted that it was still unclear as to whether the islands belonged to Japan, especially as there was detailed knowledge of the islands in Chinese and Ryukyuan writings, making Koga’s claims of ‘discovery’ difficult to substantiate. Nonetheless a Cabinet decision in 1895 ruled that the islands
should become part of Japan, which provided the basis for their inclusion in Japan’s territories under the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1952 that concluded the Second World War in Asia, but at which neither China nor Taiwan were present.

From the Chinese perspective there is little substance to Japan’s claims that the islands were not ‘occupied’, given that a fine distinction exists between ‘uninhabited’ and ‘unoccupied’. Sources suggest that there are graves of Taiwanese fishermen on the island. Although US occupation authorities in Okinawa administered the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands from 1945 until 1972 and used them as a training base, the US government did not see the transfer to Japan of the right of administration over the islands as equivalent to the transfer of sovereignty, which it insisted was a matter to be resolved by the relevant parties. Realising that such an ambiguity existed, the Okinawa Legislative Assembly, still under US control at the time, passed a resolution in August 1970 which declared the islands to be part of Japan and its claims were backed up by the then foreign minister Aichi Kiichi in the National Diet. In the meantime Taiwan issued an official protest, followed before the end of the year by similar complaints voiced by official Chinese media.

The dispute over the islands is a time bomb, given the enormity of the stakes involved. Despite Japanese claims that Chinese and Taiwanese interests in the islands are guided primarily by the possibility of major oil deposits, there has been little constructive dialogue between the countries involved in the question of the recent disputes over ownership of the islands. This remains at the very centre of broader tension between China and Japan, with the Nanjing Massacre of 1937 a focal point. Japan’s intransigent position on atrocities committed during the Second World War helps to fuel Chinese popular sentiment against it and makes the country an easy scapegoat for domestic discontent. Yet these days it is also easy to forget that China was the underdog for much of the 20th century; even today China is less articulate on the global scene than Japan.

The Chinese stance over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands is comparable with the situation in the 1930s when Nationalist China refused to accept or acknowledge Japan’s control over Manchuria (Manchukuo in Japanese) despite widespread concern that militarily China would not be able to withstand Japanese aggression. By refusing to recognise Japanese control over the lost territories China sought to destabilise the foreign presence there even though the Chinese Nationalist government then based in Nanjing was unable to exert physical control. At the same time the government’s defiance of Japan helped to consolidate its claim to be China’s sole and legitimate rulers. China’s insistence on its sovereignty over Manchuria during the 1930s and over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands now is overwhelmingly more important in driving its foreign policy than the stress on physical control that is common to the West. The tussle between the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan is another such example. Despite Taiwan’s physical separation from the mainland, it would be unthinkable for any Beijing government to consider it culturally or politically separate. Any attempt by Taiwan to declare formal independence is likely to end in armed conflict.

The situation viewed from Tokyo today sees a more assertive China flexing its muscles and imposing an arbitrary or at least un-western and unfamiliar logic on the world, infringing Japan’s control over territories that so far as it is concerned were acquired legally in the 19th century under the prevailing norms of the time.

However the dispute between China and Japan cannot be understood without grasping the complexities of nation state formation in Asia in the late 19th century. Despite the economic rise of East Asia since the Second World War border disputes remain an enduring legacy of the late 19th century when sharp differences of power existed between countries that understood the ways of the West, such as Russia and Japan, and those, such as
China, which were less swift to respond. The fact that Japan had temporarily triumphed over the islands did not necessarily mean that an alternative worldview based on a different vision of legitimacy was completely wiped out. Tensions have subsided, probably briefly, in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami that devastated parts of Japan's north-east coast in March. Yet Japan has ongoing border disputes not only with China but also with Russia and Korea. While these were marginal issues during the peak of its postwar economic expansion, since the 1990s gradual shifts in the balance of power in the region have highlighted Japan’s vulnerabilities in acute ways. As the discrepancy between the territorial status quo and the political and economic balance of power becomes more glaring in East Asia, the potential for conflict will only increase.

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