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The problem of understanding of the political status of Bohai state

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Abstract: *The problem of understanding of the political status of Bohai state.* Bohai (698 – 926) was a medieval state in East Asia. Tang Empire in 713 recognized Bohai as dukedom and considered this state as kingdom from the 760s. However, status of Bohai was unclear. Although Bohai was a formal vassal of the Tang Empire, it followed its own independent path, not only in its internal policies, but also in its foreign relations. Furthermore, it regarded itself as an empire.

The aim of this article is to consider and analyze specifics, changes of political status of the Bohai state and its influence to international relation and position of Bohai population in East Asia at medieval period.

Keywords - Bohai, East Asia, history, Korean peninsula, political status, international relations.

The state of Bohai (in Russian: Бокхай, in Korean: Parhae 발해, in Chinese: Bohai 渤海, in Japanese - Bokkai) existed in what is now the Russian Maritime Region (Primorskiy kraj/ Приморский край), North Korea and Northeastern China from the late seventh to the early tenth centuries AD (*Istoriia stran zarubezhnoj Azii v srednie veka*, 1970; A. P. Okladnikov, 1959; A. P. Okladnikov, A. P. Derevianko, 1973). According to the Japanese annals “Ruiju-kokushi” (類聚国史), Bohai state was founded in 698 AD (*Gosudarstvo Bohaj (698-926) i plemena Dal'nego Vostoka Rossii*, 1994).

In spite of some records about Bohai in Chinese, Silla and Japanese annals are few; we believe that the studies of this question can give important information about problem of Bohai status and specific of his foreign policy. Usually, almost all scholars in the world, excluding Chinese specialists, considered Bohai as a kingdom, but situation with status of this state was complicated.

As is known, Bohai was not established as kingdom. In spite of father of first Bohai ruler (Qiqi Zhongxiang, 乞乞仲象, in Korean reading - 걸걸중상) received rank of Zhen-go gun (according European medieval system this rank was similar with dukedom; so we can use dukedom for indication of position of the Bohai state at this period) from China in period of Khitan rebellion 696-697 (A. L. Ivliev, 2005), Tang Empire did not recognize this status for his son, Da Zourong (大祚榮, in Korean reading – Dae Jojun, 대조영). Therefore Da Zourong declared himself as duke of new state – Zhen (D. Twitichett, 1979, p. 440).

Moreover, according information from “Xin Tan shu” and other Chinese materials, he established diplomatic contacts with Silla and Turkic Khaganate (A. L. Ivliev, 2005). However we can guess that he was not familiar with status system at that time. As is known, Silla officials sent to him 5th rank “Dae Achan” (A. A. Kim, 2011). It was recognition, but not for ruler of the

independent state. This position was high-level rank in the Silla official hierarchy, but only for Silla aristocracy. This rank had dual significance – on one hand, it was rank for Silla official, but from other hand, “Dae Achan” can receive only aristocracy of “jingol” (진골) – like, members of king family or their relatives¹. But what was a mean of this rank for Da Zourong?

As is known, Koguryo and Pekchae officials, who had 1-2nd ranks in their states, after immigration in the south part of Korean Peninsula received only 11-12th ranks in Silla official system (S. V. Volkov, 1987)². However, they were officials of former kingdoms, but Da Zourong wanted to establish independent state. So, we can conclude that this rank was good for official, but it was not recognition for establisher of new independent state. We can consider investiture of “Dae Achan” for Da Zourong as attempt by Silla king establish vassal position for Bohai in relations with Silla. We believe that in this case Silla officials tried to consider Bohai as their provincial power. Recently, almost all Chinese scholars consider Bohai as provincial power, but Tang Empire (S. Hong, 2001, p. 80-89; Y. Feng, 2001, p. 90-97; W. Guozhong, G. Sumei, 2002, p. 229-234). However, Bohai was independent state. But Bohai people did not know specifics of this system; therefore Bohai ruler received this rank.

As we can see, in spite of relation between Silla and Tang Empire was antagonistic, Silla continued to use Chinese hierarchic system of states in foreign policy. According this system, Zhen (later called as Bohai) doesn't have status of the independent state. Moreover, Tang Empire did not recognize Zhen as dukedom. Therefore Silla officials considered Bohai as low-level state and Silla vassal. So, as we can see, Silla used Chinese hierarchic system for Bohai, but Da Zourong very quickly reconsidered position about this.

Certainly, after several years after accept “Dae Achan” Bohai leaders understood this situation. Clearly, Bohai and Silla, at earliest period of coexisting in Korean peninsula, had intensive diplomatic contacts and Silla demonstrated that considered Bohai only as vassal. Of course, Bohai people did not like this situation and always tried to change position of their state. However, it was not easy, because only Tang Empire can regulate state hierarchic system in the East Asia. But changes in

the imperial court in China at 705 were very positive for Da Zourong – Chinese Emperor reconsidered foreign policy of state and decided to establish pace relation with many states and tribes (D. Twitchett, 1979). Therefore Bohai from 705 had peace contacts with Tang Empire. And only from 714 (according another information, this event was in 713) China recognized Bohai as dukedom (*Gosudarstvo Bohaj (698-926) i plemena Dal'nego Vostoka Rossii*, 1994). It was start for antagonistic relation with Silla, because this Korean kingdom doesn't want to consider Bohai as dukedom and vassal of China. The main reason for this activity was fact, that first Bohai ruler received investiture from Silla as high-ranked official. Clearly, investiture from China for Bohai was better, than investiture from Silla. However we must note that so called “vassal” Bohai relations with Tang Empire and Silla were formally.

In spite of conflict with Silla, situation with new rank from Tang Empire was important experience for Bohai officials, who were not familiar with state hierarchic system in the East Asia. Clearly, Bohai rulers wanted to receive high-level rank for their state. It was very important for Bohai policy in international relations. But it was not easy, because Tang Empire and Silla did not want to give to Bohai another position. So, Tang Empire considered Bohai as dukedom, but Silla – as his provincial power or vassal at this time.

In this situation, Bohai tried to receive high-level rank from another state, which had high-level status. As is known, Chinese hierarchic system based in the ancient traditions and Bohai used it. In 727 Bohai sent ambassadorial mission to Japan (Z. N. Matveev, 1929). This diplomatic group arrived in Japanese islands with several goals, but one from them was recognition high-level status of state. As we can see, first Bohai ruler tried to recognize himself as dukedom from other states, but unsuccessfully – Silla did not consider his status, recognition of dukedom from Tang Empire arrived in Bohai only at 714. But now Bohai officials received important experience about state hierarchic system in the East Asia and used another method for receive new state status. Therefore Bohai ambassadors presented for Japanese officials Bohai as Koguryo hereditary state.

As is known, China and Silla did not recognize Bohai as heir of Koguryo (S. Park, 1995; G. Han, 1994; Y. Zheng, D. Li, X. Yin, 2011), because, in

our opinion, this recognition can change Bohai status in Tang hierarchic system: Koguryo was kingdom, not dukedom, like Bohai. Moreover, this change can establish complicated situation for Tang Empire. But Japan did not have regular contacts with other states and Japanese nobles cannot confirm political situation with Bohai status. Therefore they can only receive official letter from Bohai ruler and consider him as person with status, like Koguryo - king. Clearly Japanese nobles could not give rank of Koguryo king for Bohai ruler, but it was recognition of king status for second Bohai ruler Da Wuyi.

So, as we can see, Bohai combined two political statuses in international relations – Bohai presented himself as dukedom in relations with Tang Empire and as kingdom - with Japan. This dual system was very important for Bohai – its can give support for power of Bohai ruler - he can consider himself as king inside of his country because he received recognition of this from empire - Japan.

We can't see detail information about regular political contacts between Bohai and Silla. In our opinion, both states did not have regular diplomatic relations between each other because they cannot make one decision about state status of Bohai. Certainly, Silla considered northern neighboring state as vassal, but Bohai did not agree with this opinion, because Bohai ruler already received investiture from Tang Empire as head of dukedom and formally was vassal of China, like Silla. Moreover, Bohai can pretend to recognition of his status of kingdom from Silla because Japanese Empire already recognized it. Certainly, Silla cannot accept it – this act was diplomatic insult for Silla kingdom. Silla king cannot recognize as kingdom state, which was vassal of his country.

However, this situation with Bohai status cannot be stabile in international relations. Bohai provided expansionistic activity and occupied areas of many Mohe tribes (A. L. Ivliev, 2005). Clearly, during this period Bohai population, army, economic and political possibilities were increased. However it was not reflected to political status of Bohai ruler – he remained as ruler of dukedom in Chinese hierarchic system. Certainly, Bohai officials tried to change status of their state and used for these different political events. However, until 760s. their attempts in foreign policy were unsuccessfully. But political situation in East Asian region was changed

in period of the 750 -760s, because Japan wanted to start war against Silla and asked Bohai about help.

The conflict between Silla and Japan had same origin, like antagonistic relation between Bohai and Silla - from problem of status of states. I believe that we must consider this situation, because it had dealing with the problem of Bohai political status. As is known, after discussion with Tang officials Japanese ambassador Fudjiwara Kawasumi (according other information - Hujiwara Kyokawa) received in Chinese imperial court higher place than Silla representative (A. L. Ivliev, 2005). From positions by Tang and Japanese sides this situation was correct - Japan had imperial status, but Silla received recognition from China only as kingdom. However Silla very negatively considered all changes of his status in the Tang imperial court. Moreover, Silla and Japan had antagonistic relations before this incident and this Korean kingdom did not want recognize highest position of Japan. For example, Japanese and Silla ambassadors discussed about their places in the Tang imperial court.

As is known, Japanese missions could not arrive in China every year. Moreover, Japan ambassadors arrived in Tang Empire very seldom. Therefore arrival of this mission changed hierarchy of places of ambassadors from other states in the Tang imperial court. Silla was ally of China, however, Tang Empire recognized demand of Japanese ambassador and give him place higher than Silla. Clearly, Silla considered this situation as diplomatic insult from Japan. Therefore Silla king demonstrated his position when Japanese ambassadorial missions arrived in the south part of Korean Peninsula. Silla ruler refused to give audience for Japanese ambassador in 753 and 756 (G. Han, 1994).

Certainly, Japan considered this position by Silla as political insult. Japan wanted to start war against Silla, but did not have possibility for this. Clearly, Japan had other reasons for war in the south part of Korean peninsula. But problem of status was one from main reasons of this activity. However, at this time Japanese Empire had problem with political and economic crisis (G. Han, 1994). Therefore Japan cannot support war against Korean state. Probably, Silla king received current information about inner problems in Japanese Empire; otherwise he did not take negative position

for Japanese diplomatic groups.

However, Japan wanted to revenge for political insult, used political contacts with Bohai and asked him about military support. Bohai ruler Da Jinmao was agrees with Japan plan - he wanted revenge too, because Bohai people remembered participation of Silla army in the Chinese side against Bohai in the war of 732-735. During the war against Silla Bohai can receive new areas and prove his political status. And we must note that Silla did not recognize Bohai state.

Moreover, political situation in East Asia was very comfortable for this - Tang Empire had problem with rebellion by An Lushan (D. Twitchett, 1979) and cannot give military support to Silla.

Silla understood position of Bohai and built new six castles in the north border (Sanguksagi, 1959). At this time Japanese leaders were prepared army for invasion in south part of Korean peninsula and 300 military ships for war (G. Han, 1994).

As we can see, this war can be started because Bohai and Japan did not agree with position by Silla about political status of both states – this Korean kingdom did not want to consider Japan as high-level state in Chinese Imperial court and did not recognize Bohai status, in spite of Bohai ruler received this rank from Tang Empire – suzerain of Silla.

However, China took part in this complicated political situation by diplomatic method. Certainly, Tang Empire could not send army for military support of Silla, but China used another method for stoop this war. Probably, Tang Empire received correct information about situation in Korean peninsula, military preparations from both sides etc. and understood that Bohai army can be main power in war in this region. Moreover, Tang nobles noted that Bohai did not support rebelled provincial powers in the China against central government. Of course, Bohai army did not help to Tang imperial court during civil war, but position of Bohai ruler in this situation can be estimated by Tang officials as passive loyalty - Bohai sometimes sent ambassadorial missions in China, when it was comfortable. Tang Empire wanted to stop this conflict because war in Korean Peninsula can be not positive for China.

Therefore Chinese leaders gave new status to Bohai – Tang Empire recognized Bohai ruler as Wang-go (in Western medieval system it was similar with king) in 762 (D. Twitchett, 1979). It

was big diplomatic victory of Bohai. Wang-go was a highest position in Chinese hierarchic system for other states (of course, excluding imperial status). Usually it was diplomatic recognition of independence of state from China. In this case Bohai did not have reason for start war against Silla for status of state because Bohai state already received kingdom investiture. Moreover, Bohai ruler must note position by Tang Empire in the question about Silla, because he can lose new status. And Japan cannot fight against Silla without military support from Bohai.

As we wrote before, until 762 Bohai ruler used king status in relation with Japan and duke status – with China. But from 760s. Bohai ruler reconsidered his diplomatic positions for both empires. Clearly, Bohai can only support his kingdom status in the political contacts with Tang Empire and cannot demand imperial status from China. However, Bohai had other relations with Japan, because from first ambassadorial mission Bohai presented himself as kingdom and Japanese officials accepted it. Therefore Bohai ruler tried to change his status in relations with Japan after 762. Probably, Bohai considered current situation from new perspective – if Bohai ruler in relations with China was presented as duke and as king – with Japan, now he received king status from Tang Empire and wanted to prove his status with Japan to emperor.

Therefore from 770s. some Bohai ambassadors arrived in Japan with new official letters. The first Bohai diplomatic mission with new official paper arrived in 771. In these letters Bohai ruler named himself as descendant of Heaven (Z. N. Matveev, 1929). But it was prerogative only for Emperors. As is known, in East Asian region only Chinese and Japanese rulers used this title. In spite of Japanese officials criticized these Bohai letters, revised it, limited activity by Bohai ambassadors etc., sometimes Bohai ambassadors arrived in Japan with similar letters.

So, as we can see, after recognition kingdom status from Tang Empire Bohai tried to establish imperial status in foreign relations. It was unsuccessfully in the relation with Japan, but we believe that Bohai established imperial relations with some dependent or independent tribes, like, Mohe.

We must note that most important evidence of the putative imperial status of Bohai rulers to be a

record in a Buddhist sculpture from 834. This artifact is now kept in Japan. According to this record, ranks of *wangs* (kings) and *da wang* (great king) existed in the Bohai state. Bohai ruler named himself as *da wang* (K. Song, 1995). The great king could be considered to be an emperor.

And we must note that in the epitaph of fourth daughter of Da Jinmao (in Chinese – Zhenxiao, 貞孝公主, in Korean – Jeonghyo, 정효) her father mentioned as *da wang* (K. Song, 1995), its evidence that from period of reign of Da Jinmao Bohai rulers considered himself as Emperor.

Moreover, the Chinese archaeologists found in the Bohai cemetery one artifact which can give important information about Bohai status - epitaph of one wife of Bohai ruler. According to this record, she named as wife of Emperor³. However, other results of this excavation are unknown.

So, as we can see, Bohai rulers used imperial status inside of country. In spite of Da Wuyi began to use independent device for his reign (*Gosudarstvo Bohaj (698-926) i plemena Dal'nego Vostoka Rossii*, 1994; *Parhaesa*, 1996), probably, only from Da Jinmao period Bohai started to use imperial status inside of country.

After reign of Da Jinmao, who received the status of king, some officers, who held ranks in the provincial administration of Bohai, started to go in Japan as members of ambassadorial missions. It was evidence that Bohai reconsidered ranks of people, who took part in international relations. Before 762 Bohai rulers cannot send provincial officials in Japan as members of the diplomatic missions – its can be considered by Japanese nobles as insult. But Bohai received kingdom status, in this case Bohai rulers changed political rules.

So, we consider 762 as very important year for political status of Bohai not only for foreign relations, but for inner policy too. Tang Empire sent new investiture to Bohai ruler and recognized him as king – in our opinion; this act by Chinese Emperor can be considered as a base for establishment of the imperial status by Bohai kings. At first, Bohai ruler used this status for independent tribes and domestic population, but after several years Bohai tried to use imperial status with Japan. Clearly, Bohai can use this status only at periods, when state had political and economic stability. Probably, this activity had connection with king status, which Bohai rulers received from Tang Empire. As is known, new Bohai king after Da

Jinmao, Da Yuanyi, could not receive king status from China at first year of the his reign.

As we can see, the problem of political status was very important for Bohai. For support of state status Bohai changed international activity and used each diplomatic and military possibilities for establishment of the new high position of his status.

This system of using imperial status and an independent political institution in the realm of the domestic politics did not disappear after the destruction of Bohai. After 926 Bohai people formed part of the population of the new established states – of Dangan, in 10th C. - Sin Liao; rulers of these states used independent structures through which to reign. In 1116, Bohai general Gao Yunchan (in Korean reading – Go Yeong Chan, 고용찬), who served as official in the Khitan state, rebelled against the Liao Empire and announced the formation of a new state – the Great Bohai state. He used the same independent political institution of reigning in his own right and considered himself to be an Emperor (G. M. Rozov, 1998). Moreover, Gao Yunchan declared his new status in international relations, it was a base for antagonistic relations with Koryo and destruction of Great Bohai state by Jurchen army (K. A. Wittfogel, C. Feng, 1949; *Istoriia Zheleznoj imperii*, 2008). This shows that the Bohai people after the destruction of their state still remembered imperial status of Bohai. It was possible only in one case - if the Bohai rulers used this system during a long time.

Moreover, Bohai remain population tried to imitate high political status of his former state. For example in Koksharovskoe - 1 site (Anuchinskoe district, Primorye region, south part of Russian Far East) the Russian archaeologists found traces of palace buildings (N. A. Klyuev, S. S. Malkov, M. A. Yakupov, 2011). As is known, Koksharovskoe site existed after Bohai destruction. However, Bohai remain population tried to build palaces. Probably, they wanted to use it as a symbol of the imperial power of the domestic ruler. We can guess, that local ruler of the Bohai remained population had interest to establishment of the regional empire. But population in the areas of modern Primorye region did not have experience, traditions and possibility for palace buildings in this area and their attempts were unsuccessful.

And we must note that Jurchen leaders started

war against Liao Empire in 1115, but they did not have understanding about imperial system and could not establish imperial status for their state. However, Bohai officials, who served in Liao administrative system, changed their political positions and came to the side of Jurchen. These Bohai people received new official positions in Jin and taught to Jurchen aristocracy knowledge about political system and imperial status. As is known, Bohai official Yan Pu was advisor of Aguda - first Jurchen Emperor (M. V. Vorob`ev, 1975; G. M. Rozov, 1998). Yan Pu established conditions for base of Emperors status for Aguda. Another Bohai leader Gao Qinyi was first advisor of Nianhang – famous and powerful Jurchen general, who was close friend of Aguda (S. N. Goncharov, 1986). As we can see, Bohai officials had information about imperial status and can used it - on example, in the Jurchen state.

So, we can conclude that at any periods Bohai rulers used different political statuses. In spite of after establishment of Bohai (Zhen) state the Tang Empire and Silla did not recognize new state, Bohai rulers used different methods for political recognition. After establishment of peace relations with China Bohai rulers received Go-gun (Bohai gunwang) rank and tried to use independent devise of reign.

Conclusions

Thus, we can consider that Bohai rulers used imperial status not only inside of country, but in international relations too.

So, we can consider some periods of the changes of the political status of Bohai state and states of the remained Bohai population. Therefore we established classification of the period of the Bohai history on the base of political status of state.

First period covers 698 - 714. At this period first Bohai ruler Da Zuorong declared new state, named as Zhen and considered himself as duke. However, Tang Empire and other states did not recognize it. Therefore Silla gave him only 5th rang "Dae Achan".

Second period was from 714 to 727. At this period Bohai received recognition about dukedom status from Tang Empire and changed name of state from Zhen (in opinion by Chinese scholars, this state had name as Mohe) to Bohai. However, Silla doesn't recognize it because, in my opinion, wanted to consider Bohai as his vassal. It was a

base of the diplomatic and military conflicts between both states during a long time.

Third period was from 727 to 762. In spite of Silla doesn't recognize new status of Bohai state, which has been given from China, the second ruler Da Wuyi found new way for change of political status of his state. He sent ambassadorial mission in Japan and presented his state as hereditary state of Koguryo. As is known, Koguryo was kingdom therefore Japanese officials started to consider Bohai as kingdom. So, in this period Tang Empire considered Bohai as dukedom, Silla – as his vassal, but Japan - as kingdom.

Fourth period covered 762 - 926. In this period Bohai began to use king status, because China gave this rank to Da Jinmao. But Tang Empire did not recognize it for all Bohai rulers. For example, after death of Da Jinmao China did not send investiture at first year of reign of new ruler. So, in this period Bohai used status of kingdom, however, sometimes it was problem from recognition from Tang Empire. Clearly, it was depend from political stability in Bohai. However, Bohai rulers always tried to consider himself as empire in relation with Japan and used imperial status inside of country. But Silla did not recognized Bohai as independent state and probably continued to consider Bohai as rebelled vassal. We can guess that it was one of important reasons of Silla support for Khitan army in destruction of the Bohai state in 926.

Fifth period included times of existing of states of remained Bohai population. For example Bohai people after destruction of Bohai kingdom in 926 by Khitan army established several states – like, Dingan, Sin Liao and Great Bohai state. These states existed in different periods. And we don't have exact information about first state, because Chinese chroniclers did not write a big number of records about Dingan. As is known, Khitan called this state as Ujae tribes (Ye Longli, 1979) therefore we can guess that Dingan doesn't have political status, like kingdom or empire. But this state supported diplomatic relation with Song Empire.

However, Sin Liao and Great Bohai state tried to use imperial status. Certainly, this experience was unsuccessful for Bohai remained population, because Liao Empire and other states did not recognize their status. But we can conclude that Bohai people used imperial status because Bohai state supported imperial system during a long time

inside of country. Therefore Bohai population remembered this fact during a many years after destruction of Bohai kingdom. However, Bohai people cannot remember of specifics of using of the imperial status and considered it from their subjective positions.

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Notes

¹ Only members of “jingol” can receive ranks from 5th to 1st in the Silla official’s hierarchy.

² However, S.V. Volkov considered possibility that 5th rank “Dae Achan” can be 6th. Clearly, in this case Silla nobles did not consider first ruler of Bohai state as a member of high-level aristocracy.

³ But this research is not popular in China.

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