

The Traditional Chinese International System and its Implications for Contemporary International Relations

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Abstract Deutsch

Das traditionelle chinesische International System und seine Auswirkungen auf die zeitgenössischen internationalen Beziehungen. Das Tributsystem wurde bekanntlich als eine typisch östliche hierarchische Ordnung beschrieben, die von China bevorzugt wurde, als das chinesische Reich vor dem Opiumkrieg das asiatische Festland mit überwältigendem Einfluss beherrschte. Es verkörperte die chinesische imperiale Präferenz, Ideologie und Verhaltensweise. Das Tributsystem wird jedoch nicht nur von einer Reihe von Sinologen missverstanden, sondern auch von Politikern und Wissenschaftlern für internationale Beziehungen, die die Überlegenheit des Tributsystems überhöhen und dessen flexiblen, pragmatischen und defensiven Charakter übersehen. Im Gegensatz zum Kolonialismus war das chinesische Tributsystem ein Arrangement auf niedriger Ebene, das weder wirtschaftlichen Profit noch territoriale Besetzung anstrebte, sondern hauptsächlich darauf abzielte, den Frieden an den Grenzen Chinas aufrechtzuerhalten und die Herrschaft des Kaisers zu legitimieren. Es war in der Zeit des chinesischen Kaiserreichs in der Regel nicht nach einem identischen Muster vorgeschrieben worden. Heutzutage erregen Chinas Vorschlag, eine Schicksalsgemeinschaft aufzubauen und die „Gürtel und Straße“-Initiative zu verwirklichen ein starkes Gefühl der Skepsis, Besorgnis und sogar des Verdachts, man wolle unausgesprochen das politische Ziel erreichen, Chinas Tianxia-Welt mit dem Tributsystem wiederzubeleben, um die Welt zu beherrschen. In Wirklichkeit treiben Chinas koloniale Erfahrung, seine innere Instabilität, territoriale Integrität, Tradition der Selbstautonomie usw. das Land dazu, am Prinzip der Souveränität festzuhalten. Folglich hat China keine Absicht, das Tributsystem und die Tianxia-Ordnung in den internationalen Beziehungen wiederzubeleben.

Abstract English

As well-known, the tributary system was described as a typical eastern hierarchical order prevailed by China while Chinese Empire with overwhelming powers dominating in the Asiatic mainland before the Opium War. It embodies the Chinese imperial preference, ideology and behavior modality. However, it is misunderstood not only by a number of sinologists but also by politicians and international relations scholars who exaggerate the superiority of the tributary system and overlook the flexible, pragmatic and defensive natures of it. Unlike the colonialism, Chinese tributary system was a low-level arrangement which pursuit neither for economic profit nor for territorial occupation but mainly aimed to maintain peace in the China's frontiers and to legitimize the emperor's ruling. It had hardly been prescribed in one identical pattern in the period of Chinese imperial. Nowadays, China's proposal to build a community of common destiny and "the belt and road" initiative evoke a strong sense of skepticism, anxiety and even suspicion of an unspoken political agenda to revive China's Tianxia world with the tributary system to dominate order the world once more. Indeed, China's colonial experience, domestic instability, territorial integrity, self-autonomy tradition, and

etc., all of them drive China sticking to the principle of sovereignty. Consequently, China has no position to revive the tributary system and Tianxia order in international relations.

1. Introduction

“Chinese look backward but Westerns look forward when they try to solve problems.” It is an interesting comparison which teases Chinese obsession with their ancestors. Indeed, the tributary system marked as a unique traditional Chinese world order has constantly drawn attentions from both sinologists and scholars on international relations. Now it is becoming more highlighted with anxiety about China’s possibility to revive the traditional Sino-center system although China promises that it will never engage in hegemonism. For example, as early as 2002, Dr. Kenichi Ohmae predicted, China will be the regional dominant power in Asia under a name of the United States of Chunghwa (China).¹ Since 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping has used the notion of a “community of common destiny”. From the beginning, oversea analysts and commentators generally had scant interest in Chinese attempts to articulate this idea as a new international relations or strategic concepts and commented it nothing more than “high-flown rhetoric”.² However, the concept of a “community of common destiny” has been the central focus of China’s relationship with its neighbors and the international community at large. With the initiatives of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and “the Belt and Road,” it appears the notion of “a community of common destiny” is not a slogan but an actual move in China’s efforts of shaping a new world order.³ With China’s more aggressive policies in South China Sea, there are serious concerns associated with tianxia and “a community of common destiny”. The idea is increasingly popular that “China will rule the world as ‘Tianxia’ once again”.⁴ In the traditional Tianxia order, the tributary system was the transportation for China to connect with others. Although there is no statement to signal China’s aspirations of re-establishing a tributary system, given China’s historical relationship with its neighbors, speeches and articles of politician and scholars in its neighbor region demonstrate an understandable fear of such a system reemerging.⁵ It has evoked a strong sense of unease, skepticism, anxiety and even suspi-

1 See Kenichi Ohmae, *The Emergence of the United States of Chunghwa*, Shang Zhou Press: Taibei, 2003.

2 See Geremie R Barmé, *Bringing Order to All-under-Heaven*, in “Shared Destiny” (ed. by Geremie R Barmé, Linda Jaivin, Jeremy Goldkorn), ANU Press, 2015, pp. 326–329.

3 See Rakesh Gupta, ‘Community of Common Destiny’ Appeals to Many, *Global Times* of 26 May 2015.

4 See Dreyer, 2015, pp. 1015–1031.

5 For example, Martin writes, ‘If the calling card of the West has often been aggression and conquest, China’s will be its overweening sense of superiority and the hierarchical mentality’ and ‘China’s mass will oblige the rest of the world largely to acquiesce in China’s way of doing things’. See Martin Jacques, 2009, pp. 430–432; Also see Cheow,

cion of an unspoken political agenda to re-invent a modern version of *tianxia* and revive China's hegemonic ambition through the tributary system to dominate the world once more.⁶

As Wang Gungwu has argued, in understanding China as a dominant State power, one persistent theme is the re-establishment of the traditional tributary system in a more modern context, at least in some regions. These perspectives indicate a potential fear towards China, possibly due to a weak understanding of Chinese history. In correctly understanding the new trends and political economy of East Asia, we must therefore answer what inside the tributary system drives some to worry the revival of traditional tributary system as a Chinese world order, and to what extent China was truly a historically expansionist empire.⁷

In order to do this, this paper seeks to clarify the traditional Chinese tributary system in order to answer the possibility of its rebirth in current international relations.

2. The Concepts of Tributary system, Tianxia View and Wufu System

The tributary system is tightly linked with the *Tianxia* worldview and *Wufu* system. *Wufu* was a means to enforce *Tianxia*, and as such is often confused with the tributary system. It is necessary to clarify these three concepts for the purpose to understand the tributary system.

The *Tianxia* view was initiated by the western Zhou dynasty (ca. 1046–771 BCE) thousands years ago, and it has remained as the fundamental theory of other later dynasties and developed afterwards. This theory asserted that the ruler's power flowed from an impersonal deity (*Tian*) with the emperor being accountable to a supreme moral force that guides humanity. The intrinsic aspect of this is that the universe is dominated by an impersonal but omnipotent Heaven, regarded as an abstract force, which people simply had to obey. The emperor is therefore granted the "Mandate of Heaven," which entrusts him as "Heaven's son" to take responsibility for "all under heaven" (*Tianxia*), as one unitary country.⁸ Under this idea, China viewed itself as the center of the world. It is not surprising that Westerns often translated "*Tianxia*" with the word "empire".⁹ Like one sun in the sky, Confucians claimed that China was the only one empire and true civilization in the world.

Throughout its proliferation, Chinese elites certainly knew that the *Tianxia* as "all under heaven" as an imaginary concept. It was clearly impossible for China

8 June 2004; Carlson 2011, pp. 89–102; Kang, 2007; Callahan, 2008, pp. 749–761; Lee, 2014.

6 See William Callahan, 2008, pp. 749–761.

7 See Wang Gung Wu, 1999, pp. 30–31.

8 See Hucker, 1975, p. 55.

9 See Granet, 1930.

to rule all the world.¹⁰ It is not surprising that three different meanings of *Tianxia* have actually emerged and applied in different contexts. The first one is the *Tianxia* in the narrow sense, namely, *Zhongguo* (The Chinese name of China, meaning central country), where the central dynasties could directly control mainly after the unification of Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE).¹¹ The second conceptualization of *Tianxia* is applied to typify culture, geography and public security. This concept allowed for the typification of *Zhongguo* as opposed to its peripheral or bordering regions from which “*Zhongguo*” attempted to defend itself from foreign attacks, and through the proliferation of institutions such as the tributary system, cultural converting, trading, marriage, or punitive expeditions.¹² The third meaning of *Tianxia*, perhaps the broadest in scope, generally refers in the territorial sense to “all under heaven”, including *Zhongguo*, peripheral countries, and the outside world which ancient Chinese could not reach or out its limit. All three types of *Tianxia* functioned for various purposes. Although Chinese commonly understood that the scope of the third *Tianxia* as theoretical, the territorial concept of ‘all under heaven’ generally functioned to ideologically legitimize the Emperor’s rule. The other two concepts of *Tianxia* also proliferated in parallel throughout Chinese history, albeit in different spheres. The *Zhongguo* concept of *Tianxia* could be applied to both the domestic sphere, and in a larger sense to represent China’s foreign policy orientation with respect to the international community. While the three different meanings of *Tianxia* were frequently found in ancient literature, they were often intertwined with the consequence that opinions regarding China’s political status are rather disparate.¹³ Indeed, while the realistic geography of Chinese state authority was limited by the territorial extent of their effective control, the imaginary geography (“all under heaven”) remained in theory to legitimize imperial rule.¹⁴ This contradiction was perhaps embodied by Professor Ge, who wrote that “ancient China was a real limited state where the infinite ‘*Tianxia*’ remained imagination”.¹⁵

The basic framework of the Western Zhou *Tianxia* consisted of “five zones” which was, at the same time, both centrifugal and centripetal. China was the center in this world, which was viewed concentrically outward to other places and people. The Sino centric sphere of influence in theory radiated worldwide, with greater influence exerted toward its core and lesser influence on its periphery, with the effect of ensuring a harmonious world.¹⁶ Theoretically, Chinese international relations were conducted as an extension of Chinese domestic policy under the theory of *Tianxia*. Western Zhou promoted constantly a steady cultural assimilation based on efficacy of the Chinese way of the life and government; *Yi, Man,*

10 See Ge Zhaoguang, 2011, pp. 28–29.

11 *Zhongguo* or “*Jiuzhou*” was recognized as the world which Chinese early rulers could govern in the west Zhou dynasty, Spring and Autumn Period and Warring Period, etc., particularly during China is broken up. See Zhang Qixian, 2009, pp. 169–256.

12 *Tianxia* as a polity including China and its frontiers, See Granet, 1930, p. 12.

13 See Zhang, 2009, pp. 169–256.

14 See Wang Mingming, 2012, p. 343.

15 See Ge Zhaoguang, 2011, pp. 28–29.

16 See Fairbank, 1973, and Smith, 1996.

Rong, and *Di* were the generic names for “barbarian” from four wards of ‘central country’, all of whom were originally outsiders from Chinese culture. In political-geographic terms, these zones referred to the five levels of the Zhou’s mapping of their own world. Ideally, in the center was the king’s capital and region of its direct control, which was surrounded by a circle of provinces ruled by princes or governors appointed by the king, and these again were surrounded by more or less independent “tributary polities”. The five zones could be said to comprise a world system of outwardly spreading levels of cultural dissemination that were, at the same time, reflected by the extension of a civilizing influence radiating from the center and the degrees of closeness to it oriented toward civilization in a centripetal manner. Clearly, the five zones constituted a complex system of relationships, a catalogue of peoples, and a structure of hierarchy deployed to know, to describe, and to manage the *Tianxia*. They marked out the cultural boundaries between the son of heaven and the lords of principalities, and between the principalities and the semi-cultured others.¹⁷ For the purpose of expanding and maintaining its supremacy, the kings made use of ritual and art, enfeoffing, warfare, writing, and family connections. The ‘five zones’ system was understood as the actual tributary system to convert “barbarians” through ritual and culture.

Indeed, *Wufu* was dismantled in the East Zhou dynasty (ca. 770–221 BCE) and never revived afterwards. *Shi huangdi* of Qin later deployed a series of unifying measures to convert the whole of the Chinese world into a centralized state. The feudalism of Zhou was replaced, as a consequence, with an administrative hierarchy of prefectures, counties, townships, and villages. The unification of writing, transportation, money, and ways of measurement was forcefully and centrally imposed on the prefectures, counties and villages. The Qin also constructed the Great Wall on the foundations of ancient fortifications. Extending from Gansu to the Eastern part of Liaoning, the wall was intended to protect the empire against incursions from the Xiong Nu in the north.¹⁸ The *Wufu* system thereafter disappeared from the real world, but exists in the Confucian ideal world because Confucianism idealized Zhou as the perfect social order.¹⁹

Unsurprisingly, the *Wufu* system was confused with the tributary system through the Chinese history by a number of sinologists who emphasized China as bonded by ritual or culture and conceived of the conversion of barbarians as the primary

17 On the one hand, the concentric squares constituted a unity comprising diversity, a system of – rites and styles – defined in terms of hierarchy. In such a hierarchy, different from that of Shang, the institution of *gong* (or tribute-paying), essential to the later tributary mode of production, was merely applied to describe the interrelationship between the barbarians and princes. The other sorts of relationship were instead described as various levels of ceremony: the great sacrifice (*ji*), worship (*si*), and offerings (*xian*). Thus, on the other hand, the concentric squares were also positions within which the son of heaven was required to pay tributes, not only in the form of sacrifice – to heaven, earth, and other divinities – but also to his underlings.

18 The spheres of control of Zhou were restricted to the lower Yellow River valley. See Gu, Jiegang and Shi Nianhai (1938) 1999, p. 1.

19 Confucius said, “Zhou rite developed from Xia and Ying, it is complete and excellent, I obey it”. See Ba Yi (八佾) in Lunyu (论语), Liji zhongyong (礼记中庸).

objective of the tributary system.²⁰ Some argue the tributary system worked as an expansion of Chinese imperialism by disseminating Chinese civilization to the outside world. These perspectives incorrectly equate the tributary system with the *Wufu* system. The tributary system at a later point in history, under different context, certainly did suit the purpose of pacifying neighboring states that frequently intruded China. The tributary system, rather than the *Wufu* system, dealt with international relations instead of China's domestic sphere. It is elaborated in the next section.

3. The flexible and pragmatic tributary system

Ancient Chinese rulers understood *Zhongguo* as a truly limited nation state, where the world was out the reach of their capability. The tributary system was designed not to rule the world but to make friend relations with bordering countries meanwhile managing the intrinsic conflict between a real state and the imaginary *Tianxia*.

3.1. Tributary system is basically a defensive system

The tributary system was originally developed as a structure of foreign relations partly as a defense mechanism in the Han dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), which is widely accepted as a historical starting point for the tributary system. By the time of the Han dynasty, the nomad tribes to the north often raided Chinese territory. They were highly mobile warriors with superior war-fighting capability. After raiding the Chinese for resources, these groups often fled to the northern steppes where Chinese troops normally could not continue pursuit. Among them, the Xiong Nu Empire was the biggest threat to the Chinese empire in the Qin and Han dynasties. The first emperor of Qin tried to prevent raids from the Xiong Nu by building the Great Wall. In the early Han dynasty, the Xiong Nu became stronger, and even the Great Wall could not stop strong nomadic warriors from raiding. Chinese found itself in the very difficult situation to counter them. The tributary system therefore emerged rooted in defensive polity, aiming at the prevention of attack by foreigners rather than a policy of active domination over them – a tendency that would be strengthened by the threat of nomadic mounted archers on the steppes. From the time of its inception, “conciliation and blood ties” was a policy used with strong nomadic tribes.²¹ It actually had no hierarchy in this relation with Xiong Nu at that time, if there was any hierarchy at all, it was actually the Xiong Nu that carried higher status. The agreement between the Han dynasty and the Xiong Nu had four major terms: 1. That the Han dynasty give the Xiong Nu an amount of silk, alcohol, grain, etc.; 2. That the Han dynasty must send a princess to marry Chanyu; 3. That the Xiong Nu were to be seen equal to the Han, and;

20 See J. K. Fairbank, 1968, p. 2; Mark Mancall, 1963, pp. 17–19; Martin Jacques, 2009; Pye, 1990.

21 That means that China sent royal princesses to marry the rulers of nomadic tribes and states and large gifts of fine Chinese goods, in return for their promises not to raid the frontiers.

4. That the Great Wall would serve as the official boundary between the Han and the Xiong Nu.²² From its content, this treaty clearly served as a transaction for peace in which the Chinese emperor carried no nominal superiority over the Xiong Nu. However, after 60 BC, the Han dynasty took advantage of internal division of the Xiong Nu and reversed the position between them, finally forcing the ruler Huhhan Xie to submit to the Han dynasty in 53 BC.²³ Manifestly, the substantial power, rather than the superiority of the Chinese culture, was decisive in the relations between China and bordering nations, and the tributary system was designed to defend Chinese imperial against foreign forces. Chinese authorities understood that there was no way to rule the world where all under the governance of the emperor. The tributary system was recreated as a nominal enfeebling system but with the completely different nature through appeasing and binding measures, such as marriages, or hostages, trade or rewards, etc., to keep peace with these powerful and dangerous adversaries. The logic behind the tributary system is that China intended to have a peaceful relation with aggressive neighbors, meanwhile this relationship could not danger the legitimacy of emperors' governance as a son of heaven. Therefore, the tributary system is in the nature of a defense stratagem to secure China's borders while maintaining domestic order.

During the rule of Tang taizong, the tributary system was widely used with bordering states polities to expand the influence of the Tang dynasty.²⁴ The king of Tibet Songtsän Gampo sent the first ever ambassador to China, bringing an ultimatum demanding a marriage alliance in 634 CE in order to enhance Tibet's regional influence, though the demand was refused since Tibet had not received the attentions of Tang Taizhong. However, victorious military attacks launched by Tibet against Tang affiliates in 637 and 638 forced Tang Taizong to begin considering Tibet a potential threat. Ultimately, Tang taizong accepted the gifts of Songtsän Gampo, and sent the Princess Wencheng to marry Songtsän Gampo.²⁵ Both sides agreed to clarify territorial delimitations and resolved border disputes. Moreover, Tang Gaozong conferred Songtsän Gampo the title of "Westsea King" and later the higher rank title of "Guest King".²⁶ In this way, Tibet became a nominal tributary of the Tang dynasty. However, it later required an equal status, which was accepted and recognized as relations between uncle and nephew.²⁷ It is an interesting example that a neighboring state typically attempted to become a threat against the Chinese empire in order to seek diplomatic relations. More interestingly, it could become a tributary state when it intended to be one even though it itself was

22 See Ban Gu, 1962, p. 240; Si Maqian, 1959, p. 2895; Wang Qing, 2007.

23 See Ban Gu, in: 94 1962.

24 See Zhu Zhengyong, 2013, p. 229.

25 See The Old Book of Tang.

26 Ibid.

27 "The Letter of Asking to make Peace" emphasized Tibet and Tang dynasty as two states, recognized the relation between Tang and Tibet as a relation between uncle and nephew, and denied a relation between an emperor and minister. See The New Book of Tang, in: 196(1), p. 6083; The Old Book of Tang, in: 196(1), p. 5231; Cui Mingde, Ma Xiaoli, 2009, pp. 110–118.

powerful to the extent that it could very well seek equality with the Tang Dynasty. In this way, one might see that Chinese foreign relations were very flexible and actually depended on circumstances.

The two primary tenets of Chinese foreign policy were securing of the periphery and consolidation of internal control. Both expansionism and isolationism applied throughout the whole of Chinese history. The tributary system embraced these two tendencies. On the one hand, it could be exploited to extend their influence or direct control beyond the established periphery during strong Chinese imperial regimes. On the other hand, it could be an effective strategy to prevent foreign adversaries to invade China in either strong Chinese imperial regimes or weak Chinese imperial regimes. As a strategy of security, the tributary system had to be flexible to apply in various situations. There was no identical pattern that applied to all situations.

3.2. A Trade System

J. K. Fairbank and his collaborators present the tributary system in their discussion as a *quid pro quo* trade of interests, arguing that Chinese rulers established tributary relationships because external tributary states added prestige to their rule. Tributaries were willing to make tribute as by doing so they could gain access to trade with China.²⁸ This theory is very popular. However, this perspective is not accurate and misinterprets the nature of the tributary system. In fact, China's trading system in the past was under two different mechanisms; one was the tributary system, and another one was non-official trading.²⁹ Under the tributary system, China's foreign trade was just one of many political tools. Meanwhile, trade often served a simple economic function in the foreign relations of the Chinese empire as well. For example, the Silk Road initially connected China directly the Arabs, Persians, and Indians for land-based trade during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, and prospered in Tang dynasty.³⁰ The maritime Silk Route was also explored for trading directly with the West in the Tang dynasty.³¹ There is also clear evidence that the Chinese were trading directly with foreign trading partners outside the tributary relations during the Tang (618–906) and Song Dynasty (960–1271).³² Both were in an economically prosperous time, when Chinese governments applied open policies to overseas trade.³³ Zhang Bincun writes that tribute was tribute and trade was trade before the Ming dynasty prohibited private trades.³⁴ In fact, the evidence showed that international trade was quite prosperous in Tang dynasty. The office of *Shi Bo shi* was in charge of overseas trading. It inspected foreign business ships, levied taxes and managed the business of state monopolized products.

28 See J. K. Fairbank, S. Y. Teng, 1941, pp. 135–246, and Giovanni Andornino, 2006.

29 See Zhang Bincun, 2006.

30 See Jitsuzō Kuwabara, 1935, p. 124. and Li Jingming, 1994, pp. 50–57.

31 See Sun Guangqi, 1989, and Bowman, John, S. 2000.

32 See Michael Flecker, 2001, p. 350.

33 See Ge Zhaoguang, 2011.

34 See Zhang Bincun, 2006.

Guangzhou developed into a busy trading center for international trade in the Tang dynasty.³⁵ The Song dynasty's sea trade was even more active because of being pushed out of North China by nomads and therefore losing significant land tax revenue. To make up for those losses, Song dynasty turned to levying taxes on sea-borne trade.³⁶ However, the biggest change brought by Ming was the ban on non-tributary trade because of pirates from the south and robbery from the north. Therefore, some who wanted the economic profits but not tributaries of Ming had to find a way to adapt the rites. This policy of banning non-tributary trade resulted in the recession of overseas trade. The Qing dynasty fully succeeded the Ming's tributary system as written in Ming's documents. As a foreign inheritor of Chinese political system, it lost the pragmatic and flexible ability to handle tributary issues. The tributary trade was fixed as the only legal form of overseas trade until the Opium War. However, the idea that the tributary system is equal to the trade system focuses on the system of trade during the historical period when Western powers entered into China, but actually neglects the majority of tributaries neighboring China, which had much more interests than simply trade.³⁷

3.3. The multiple formality of the tributary system

In practice, the tributary system could not confer the actual supremacy of the emperor over others as the *Wufu* arrangement did. According to whether there were hierarchical relations between China and its "tributaries", we can see different relations between China and various countries, even with one country, the relations had not always maintained in a same hierarchical situation.

From the writing of Quan Haizong (Korea sinologist), the tributary relations between China and Korea took three forms. The first one was substantial tributary relations, which included economic relations involved in tributes and returns; ritual relations, involving receiving rites and title-giving rites; and military relations, involving mutual military assistance; and political relations, such as Korea adopting the Chinese dynasty's calendar, and sending princesses to Central dynasty as hostages. The second one was symbolic tributary relations, which concerned mainly trades, borders delimitation and frontiers managements, cultural communication. The third one was non-tributary relations, which was based on equal status.³⁸ It manifests that the tributary system is quite divergent even with Korea, widely recognized as a real tributary of China. From the complex of relations between China and Korea, flexibility of the tributary system is obvious.

3.3.1. *The tributary relationship in the true sense of "tributary"*

This relationship was not actually common, only existing with Korea, Vietnam, and Ryukyu. These tributary polities accepted subordination to the Chinese empire. They

35 See Wang Wengxiu, 1990.

36 See Michael Swain, Ashley Tellis 2000, p. 31.

37 See Zhou Fangyin, 2011, pp. 147–178.

38 See Quan Haizong, 1997, pp. 133–134.

regularly made appearances before the emperors, submitted tributes and received gifts, and performed all the relevant rites and rituals that accompanied these exchanges. Their titles were appointed by Chinese emperors. Generally, the central dynasties did not interfere their internal affairs. Only when coups occurred in Korea and Vietnam did China typically suspend tributary relations as a form of punishment.³⁹

3.3.2. *The symbolic tributary relationship*

Some states in Asia had once accepted the title appointed by Chinese emperors for their own reasons. For example, aiming to get supports from the central dynasty to compete against other lords, to enhance one's regional influence against other neighboring states, for its own security issues, for economic reasons. These nations irregularly submitted tributes to the central dynasty. The unequal relations were only embodied in ritual, without any real subordinating relations between China and those "tributaries". Japan, Siam, Java, and some nomadic states were sometimes in such a temporary arrangement with China. Xiong Nu, Tujue, and Tibet could also be seen as suitable.

3.3.3. *The Tributary trade relations*

Since Ming and Qing dynasty banned trade between non-tributaries and Chinese imperial, some business people and polities had no any intention to subordinate to the central dynasty, wanting only to trade with China. Moreover, although such a trade relationship was clarified under the category of tributary system by Chinese dynasties, it was another story in the documents from 'tributaries'. In 1615, a Dutch envoy sought to establish trade relations with Chinese imperial. The letter they submitted to Sunzhi, Emperor of the Qing dynasty, shows nothing implying a tributary relation.⁴⁰ However, Emperor Sunzhi wrote a letter to Netherlands phrased as an emperor to its subordinate, though interestingly, the Dutch translation of this letter simply lost the original attitude between a king and a minister.⁴¹ It indicates that the other side of tributary trade relations does not think its products as tribute although Chinese dynasty wants it to be. Clearly, there is no actual tributary relation in such a tributary trade. The misinterpretation of all international relations as tributary trade relations is simply a China-centered approach and as such one that does not take into account the responses of peripheral states.⁴²

3.3.4. *A pattern of equal relationship*

As discussed above, the Chinese tributary system did not remain unchanged in the two thousand years from the Han dynasty to the late Qing dynasty. More importantly, it is not as many sinologists assert that all of Chinese international rela-

39 See Li Yunquan, p. 39.

40 See The Historical Material of Ming and Qing, Bing 4th edition 1935, p. 377.

41 See Leonard Blussé, R. Falkenburg, 1982, pp. 61–92.

42 See Paul A. Cohen, 1986.

tions are tributary relations.⁴³ Actually, in Chinese history, there is some solid evidence to show equal relations existing over two thousand years. When China was powerful enough to make foreign states acceptant a subordinate or inferior status, the model with China's symbolic superiority might prevail. But when foreign states had equal or even stronger power and sophistication, such a model was replaced by flexible and realistic policies. Particularly, states that also carried their own state-centered conceptions of world order such as Japan, Liao (916 Ad–1125 Ad), Jin, etc., could not accept the superiority of China despite having become sophisticated in political, administrative, and technical skills mainly through close association with China, learning to employ the Chinese, participating in a protectorate government, and using the same rhetoric and methods of 'tributary' control.⁴⁴ The forms of Chinese superiority were dysfunctional in dealing with the realities of inter-state politics.⁴⁵

In the early Han dynasty, because the Xiong Nu's attacks frequently crossed the Chinese boundary demarcated by the Great Wall. Particularly after Xiong Nu heavily defeated the Han's army, China could do nothing but accept the demanding of the Xiong Nu, sending as tribute a large amount of Chinese wealth without any tribute in return.⁴⁶ In 1005 the Song negotiated with the Liao (established by Khitans) the Treaty of Chan-yuan by which the Song promised payment of 200,000 bolts of silk and 100,000 taels of silver in return for peace along the frontiers.⁴⁷ The two emperors would address one another as equals and would maintain friendly relations. Indeed, this treaty successfully avoided any further major wars between the two. Moreover, by the signing of the treaty, the Liao forced the Song to recognize Liao as peers with a supposed fraternal relationship. For the first time in Chinese history there were two Sons of Heaven, recognized by each other.⁴⁸

As a matter of fact, equal foreign relations prevailed in a weak Chinese regime even though it was definitely contradicted with the ideology of *Tianxia*. In some cases, the relationship even took a reverse form. In 1138, the founder of the Southern Sung dynasty, Gaozong, accepted the status of a "vassal" himself to the Jin state.⁴⁹ His successor improved the status to that of a nephew and addressed the Jin emperor as uncle. The Sung emperors sent to their powerful northern neighboring states annual presents of large amount and value, as tribute in reverse.⁵⁰

43 See J. Fairbank, 1968, p. 9.

44 See Wills, 1984, p. 12.

45 See J. Wills, 1984, p. 12.

46 See Ban Gu, 1962, p. 240 and Si Maqian, 1959, p. 2895.

47 See Li Tao, 1986, p. 1291.

48 See Jing-shen Tao, 1988.

49 Also known as the Jurchen dynasty (1115–1234 A.D.), it overthrew the Khitan Liao dynasty and conquered much of northern China but was defeated by Mongol Empire. The Treaty of Shaoxing ended the military conflicts between the Jin Dynasty and the Southern Song Dynasty, the Southern Song must pay tribute of 250,000 taels and 250,000 packs of silk to the Jin every year, the Southern Song was reduced into a tribute state of the Jin State. See The History of Song, Liao, Jing.

50 The treaty of the Longxing renewed the Shaoxing treaty, the main articles: the Southern Song pay tribute of 200,000 taels and 200,000 packs of silk to the Jin; the Southern

The history speaks for itself to show that Chinese dynasties enjoyed symbolic superiority at some time when it had overwhelming power in the region, but had to accept an equal relationship without any superiority title at other time.

3.3.5. *Non-application of tributary system for some states in distance from China*

To those remote and non-threatening states, it was wise for China not to take military actions to pursuit conquest or enforcement of the tributary system. Japan was far away and did not constitute a true threat during Chinese imperial era. Only the Yuan dynasty tried to conquer Japan, but other dynasties treated Japan as equal for most of history.⁵¹ In the history of the late Han dynasty, the Roman Empire was also highly regarded but never under Chinese consideration of the *Tianxia* order. Moreover, the Chinese regime had not tried to consider India and Russia as tributaries. The Treaty of Nerchinsk of 1689 was the first treaty between Russia and China, which established the equal relationship between the two states without any implication of tributary system. Qing dynasty did not show any intention to contain Russia into the tributary system as a part of *Tianxia*. It realized Russia as a total different empire, to be seen with equal status.

4. The influential misunderstanding of the Tributary system

A number of scholars represented by Fairbank and Teng view the tribute system as “the medium for Chinese international relations and diplomacy” and “a scheme of things entire ... the mechanism by which barbarous non-Chinese regions were given their place in the all-embracing Chinese political, and therefore ethical, scheme of things”.⁵² Fairbank and Teng continue, “The tributary relations were not organized by a division of territories among sovereigns of equal status but rather by the subordination of all local authorities to the central and awe-inspiring power of the emperor”.⁵³ The hierarchy of the relations was predicated on Chinese superiority and suzerainty *vis-a-vis* foreign states’ inferiority. Respect for this hierarchy and acknowledgment of Chinese superiority were absolute requirements for opening relations with China. Thus they conclude, “Outside countries, if they were to have contact with China at all, were expected and when possible obliged to do so as tributaries”. They claim that China’s scheme for ordering her relations with the external world clearly reflected her vision of internal order.⁵⁴ Those opinions stress that tributary relations were ubiquitous and important to an extent that

Song gave up the newly regained territory, the former border established by Shaoxing treaty remained; it was uncle and nephew relations between Jin and Southern Song. See Tuo Tuo et al, 1975, p. 466.

51 See Fairbank, 1968.

52 See J. K. Fairbank, S. Y. Teng, 1941, p. 137, 139.

53 See J. K. Fairbank, 1968, p. 9.

54 See J. K. Fairbank, 1968, p. 4.

deny all other aspects of foreign relations. They consider China more a civilization rather than a State seeking to use the tributary system to promote its own culture.⁵⁵

However, the theory of Fairbank and Teng was heavily influenced by Sino-centric perspectives of Confucians, who tends to portray historical East Asian politics from an idealized *Tianxia* view. In Confucianism, “all under heaven” prevailed even in the case when China was not in the position to prevail over foreign relations. They usually laud the perfection of the *Wufu* system established under the Zhou dynasty, though it had long disappeared after the rule of the first Qin emperor. Most historic documents and writing depict how the mission of any foreign envoy entered the Chinese capital for purposes of paying tribute to the emperor and how much they admired the Chinese civilization. They emphasized how the virtue of emperors is critical to Chinese governance, from the center outwards to the periphery. The opinion that the tribute model dominated Chinese foreign relation is heavily biased by a dependence on historical documents written with such undertones.

Moreover, scholars that heavily rely on Chinese documents, while obviously taking on a China-centered approach, may not take into account the responses of peripheral states. The disproportionate attention which it pays to the Chinese side of the story over that of other polities severely limits its interpretive power of their standpoint since Chinese bureaucrats definitely exaggerated, if not outright distorted China’s role in foreign relations in order to compliment the superiority of Chinese emperors. Scholarly work of this perspective therefore may fail to think of the tributary system as the outcome of an interactive game, which makes it difficult to consider seriously the strategic interaction among actors, thus greatly oversimplifying the analysis.

Furthermore, the wish of superiority of Chinese culture and the emperor could not inhibit them from treating powerful states as equals.⁵⁶ The model which Fairbank claims overlooks a large and important facet of the political dynamics of China’s foreign relations and the reality of international relations, because the tributary system was by no means the only medium or institution of interstate relations, much less “a scheme of things entire”.⁵⁷ As Wills puts it, “the tribute system was not all of traditional Chinese foreign relations, and may not be the best key to a comprehensive understanding of these relations”.⁵⁸ The Western literature represented by Fairbank on early Sino–Western relations may have given excessive emphasis to tribute embassies and the related concept of “all under heaven” as well.⁵⁹ Benjamin Schwartz pointed out that the decisive factor in foreign relations of Chinese empire was not the superiority of Chinese culture, but a contestation

55 “China, by the standards of every other country, is a most peculiar animal”. See Martin Jacques, 2009, p. 196.

56 See Chusei Suzuki, 1968, pp. 180–197.

57 See Zhang Feng, 2009, pp. 545–574.

58 See John E. Wills, 1984, p. 4.

59 Ibid.

of power. “When the empire was weak, the Chinese perception of the world had little effect on the course of events. The ultimate fact is the fact of power.”⁶⁰ Fairbank gave too many credits to Chinese culture and Confucianism. He failed to realize the fact that the post-Qin Chinese political system is actually dominated by legalism under the cover of Confucian theory.⁶¹

Fourthly, China was clearly aware of limits to its expansion, even at the peak of her power. Its foreign policies were not limited to the tributary system. Fairbank did not catch the fact that “ancient China was a real limited state where the infinite ‘Tianxia’ remained imagination”⁶² and the concept of *Tianxia* carried multiple meanings. They confuse the imagination of *Tianxia* with the real state of China and misunderstand the tributary system as the *Wufu* system⁶³ which was the particular means to enforce the imagination of *Tianxia*.

Fifthly, the equal relationship between Chinese empire and the neighboring countries normally prevailed during periods of weak Chinese rule. The Song with Khitans, the early Han with the Xiong Nu, the early Ming with Southeast Asia, definitely witnessed it even though Song and Ming rulers asserted themselves, or at least depicted themselves, as being divinely sanctioned by Heaven to rule China and by extension “all under Heaven”. This model existed not only in non-dominant dynasties, but also in actual fact during the powerful Tang and Han dynasties. In fact, no single, unchanging policy or pattern of foreign relations persisted throughout China’s long history and the complex realities of its foreign relations over millennia cannot be explained by a simple generalization of the tributary trading system.⁶⁴ Indeed, the tributary system was created as a strategy for maintaining border stability. Imperial China, like every other state, also had to deal with a variety of security problems that might be substantial for its survival. Therefore, pragmatism often superseded Sino centrism. China could not be expected to ensure security in frontier at all times while maintaining its self-assumed superiority without exhibiting flexibility and pragmatism in its foreign policy.⁶⁵ The foreign rulers paid tribute to China for multiple purposes beyond trade that ranged from support against internal and external adversaries, legitimacy, economic profit and military protection at one end of the scale to its use as a stepping stone to hegemony on the other. The Chinese rulers did not rely exclusively on Chinese culture or trade to expand influence, but used both “hard power” and “soft power” to obtain consent from other states. Foreign rulers, meanwhile, did not always meekly follow Chinese requirements, and at many times violated the consensus between

60 See Benjamin Schwartz, 1968, pp. 278, 288.

61 The various systems created by legalists in Qin dynasty were succeeded by later dynasties although they identified Confucian as the national theory. No dynasty actually recovered Zhou’s “Wufu” system.

62 See Ge Zhaoguang, 2011, pp. 28–29.

63 As Zhao Tingyang comments, unlike the tributary system, the Wufu system was the one with hierarchy. See Zhao Tingyang, 2005; Paul Evans, 2010, pp. 42–57; Wang Zhiqiang, 2012, pp. 74–78.

64 See Jing-shen Tao, 1988, p. 4.

65 See Zhang Feng, 2009, p. 561.

China and them in pursuit of self-interested objectives.⁶⁶ In many cases, the superiority of China was only one side of illusion, which was unreal for the “tributary” side. In some case, Chinese imperial was the one to submit tribute to the more powerful party. Therefore, a number of scholars underestimate the comprehensive scale of the imperial foreign policy, they are unable to grasp the flexibility and pragmatism of the foreign policies of Chinese empire. They misdefine the tributary system as ritual, trading system for superiority of Chinese culture and oversimplifies all Chinese international relations into one. Basically, they confuse the tributary system with the *Wufu* system and *Tianxia* theory, and miss the point that the tributary system was characterized by symbolism, particularly, by flexibility and pragmatism.

Interestingly, despite criticisms, Teng and Fairbank’s ideas remained quite popular and widely cited as the standard understanding of the tributary system.⁶⁷ Their descriptions that the Asia was in the Chinese-dominated international system⁶⁸ and “China was the superior center where its ruler had duties toward all other rulers as his inferiors”⁶⁹ are rather influential in both the political world and the academic field. The popularity of their ideas means that misunderstanding version of Chinese images might unduly affect accurate predictions of China’s current trajectory.

5. Nowadays are Tianxia Order and Tributary System resurrecting?

Following the collapse of China’s world order, China has been mainly a student and follower of the western international order, investing tremendous efforts to reconstruct its static system to adapt to the western dominant international order from as early as the middle of 19th century. The desire that China could be accepted and recognized as one part of the international community led by western States has not been recognized nor supported by western scholars until relatively recently.⁷⁰ With its formidable economic leverage and population of 1.3 billion, China has acquired enough capabilities to become a strong challenger to the existing international order where the US occupies a dominant position.⁷¹ Externally, China is becoming increasingly assertive in pursuit of its interests in Asia and around the world; internally, Chinese military strength is growing; China likewise tries to enhance its soft power by opening the oversea network of Confucian institutes,

66 See Zhang Feng, 2009, p. 563.

67 See. For example, Wikipedia defines the tributary system as the network of trade and foreign relations between China and its tributaries, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_Chinese_tributary_system.

68 See David C. Kang, 2003, pp. 165–180.

69 See John K. Fairbank, 1978, p. 30.

70 Lye wrote: “China seems impelled to reject the helping hand and to act in ways that seem perversely self-damaging in the eyes of those who believe they have that country’s interests at heart.” See Pye, 1990, p. 56.

71 See Husenicová, 2012.

organizing fellowships for foreigners in order to present its culture and the real version of China because it believes that western media has distorted the truth of China and smeared China as an evil power.⁷² Recently, Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea is accused as provocative and potentially dangerous. China's effort for the establishment of "Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank" is seen as a challenge to the existing international order dominated by the USA. The initiative of "the belt and road" is also considered a strategy against the USA's "pivot in Asia". The proposal to build a community of common destiny is suspected that China might grip the changing moment to impose the Tianxia order into the new world. Taking all these features into consideration, some assume that China will become an aggressive regional hegemon who might apply tributary system in the international sphere.⁷³ For instance, the paranoid politicians suspect the free-trade area project as a continuation of China's tributary system across Southeast Asia. China has conceded trade surpluses to its smaller Asian neighbors in line with the tributary principle of "give more, take less". These trade surpluses are funneling economic growth to the smaller countries, or weaker countries, the policy of "the belt and road," and the creation of the "Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank", thus establishing China as the heart of the Asian economic system today. These signs seemly imply the traditional tributary system just behind the current agenda of China.

Moreover, now it is not only the USA, Japan and India that doubt whether China's rising is threatening the current world order, but also China's neighboring countries. Following the USA's pivot to Asia, a number of Asian States turn to the USA because of conflicts with China. Those reactions deepen China's anxiety that the USA and its allies will interfere with China's rise. The resurrection of tributary system is considered as a possible means to establish China's sphere of influence against the containment of the USA and its allies. Meanwhile, China's invocation of its past in territorial disputes has led many to suspect that China intends to resurrect "a new face to China's ancient tributary system where China is the central power and Beijing is the global political pole".⁷⁴

Nonetheless, the tributary system was not a system of international relations in the modern sense, whose stability was maintained by the balance of power among more or less equal member states. Even though the tributary system concerns more about nominal hierarchy, sovereign independence is also often about a face or dignity of a state. It does not matter that the tributary system would bring peace or not. It matters that such a system will damage the peripheral states' dignity of sovereignty. Secondly, the fundamental disagreement between Western States and China keeps China sticking the independence of sovereignty. The Westerners are truly convinced that liberal democracy and a market economy can ensure peace, economical flourishing and human rights; by contrast, China maintains that liberal

72 Many in US, Canada view China as a threat, 11 June 2005, China Daily; China seen as biggest threat to stability, 15 April 2008, Finance Time.

73 See Peter C. Perdue, in: 24 Journal of Contemporary China, 2015, p. 96.

74 See Dana Dillon, 2011.

democracy is not a panacea, and that a one-size-fits-all model will not work. The desire from the West to serve as China's teachers in the ways of the modern world encounters resistance of Chinese government. Beijing argues that Chinese are free to choose their political and social systems, which only Chinese know the best for its national condition. The fact that the western States see China's rising with skepticism and hostility pushes China unwaveringly sticking on principle of sovereignty and non-interference as one best weapon to defend Chinese political system and human rights policies, etc.

Thirdly, China's internal instability and problems in the issues of Taiwan, Tibet, and Xingjiang also press Beijing continuing its defensive stance on sovereignty, which mean "strictly following the principle of sovereignty equality and non-intervention".⁷⁵ Indeed, with its colonial experience, China perceives that the interfering methods applied by western States, including economic sanctions and military intervention, are not the proper way to treat weak States. All the steps which China has undertaken are reasonable in comparison to what any other power does when pursuing its interests.⁷⁶ In actual fact, under the tributary system, China has had no traditions to meddle with the internal affairs of others States, an approach that strongly informs the current policy.

Beijing claims a community of common destiny for harmony but no sameness, for peace and sustainable development of the economy, for win-win. It has no any intention involving in political issues but mainly for economic cooperation. Neither "the belt and road" initiative nor Asia investment bank program tries to build a political community. It does not touch the "sovereignty" red line. Indeed, China seemingly attempts to explore economic globalization under the current sovereign-oriented international order and claims that other states can share the benefits of China's development if they want to. It shows that China is trying to take advantage of economic globalization to promote its own economy and expand its influence through economic cooperation with other states. As well-known, China has gained sovereignty through long-term and arduous struggle. China understands how important sovereignty is for those weak countries and that it needs their support to build a community of common destiny. The western states advocate human rights-oriented international order, China is not the fan of such an order, thus fully understands the ideological differences with these countries, thus, China conceives a community of common destiny as a society with "harmony but no sameness". It certainly conveys respect for sovereignty to other states, particularly, those small or weak states. Consequently, China's idea of a community of common destiny seeks only common development and common prosperity, even if China has become the leader of this community through economic influence. It is clear that the world today does not have the environment to revive the "world order" and "tribute system", and China is not powerful enough to revive it at all. In fact, even the ancient China was incapable of implementing the real sense of tribute system or Tianxia order upon the region. The Chinese government has always been known

75 See Nicholas Dynon, in: 14 China Brief Volume 2014, p. 4.

76 See Husenicová, Lucia, 2012.

for pragmatism, thus, it only utilizes some traditional Chinese ideas which can be accepted by all countries to support the idea of a community of common destiny. Clearly, the tribute system and the Tianxia order are not a part of those traditional thoughts.

Furthermore, Chinese leaders show no intention to revive it. Indeed, China has been perceived as a rising threat since the 1990s, and in the early 20th century the China threat theory has been created.⁷⁷ Political representatives of China as well as scholars retort this theory with an tremendous effort in many occasions. They argued, China has taken advantage of the current sovereignty-oriental system as a stakeholder following the Second World War.⁷⁸ At present, China has no motivation to overturn the current system, and it is looking for reform or supplement in the frame of today's international order.⁷⁹ Li Keqiang also confirms China's willing to replenish a new complementary mechanism on the base of current international order.⁸⁰ To counter-play "China's threat", Chinese leaders try to convince the world that China's peaceful rise benefits the world with an updating version of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence emerging in 1950s. The promise of respecting other's sovereignty and non-intervention is part of guarantee to never engage in hegemony. It is therefore unsurprisingly that China government unwavering denied the suggestion of reviving a *Tianxia* world order and the tributary system by repeating the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in the foreign relations and emphasizing the equal partnership with others in Chinese proposal.⁸¹ Xi continues to reiterate, "No one is superior or inferior to others ... all countries, regardless of their size, strength or level of development, are equal members of the international community, and they are entitled to equal participation in international affairs".⁸²

Indeed, the pragmatism and flexibility remain as elements to guide Chinese foreign policy for the long term. That means, some ideas or strategies back to thousands years ago are still alive in Chinese current foreign policies. The proposal to build "a community with a shared future for mankind" and "the belt and road" initiative certainly succeed in traditional Chinese thoughts, however, neither of them is a modern name for the Tianxia order or tributary system.

6. Conclusion

The tributary system embodies the historical preference, ideology, and mode of behavior of China's dynastic history. Unlike the colonialism, Chinese tributary system was a low-level arrangement which pursuit neither for economic profit nor

77 See John Mearsheimer, 2006, p. 162.

78 See Lionel Barber, 16 April 2015.

79 Ibid., Zheng Yongnian.

80 Ibid.

81 See Zhenglimin, Xi's world vision: a community of common destiny, a shared home for humanity, Xinhua, 15 January 2017.

82 Xi's speech at 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' anniversary.

for territorial occupation but mainly aimed to maintain peace in the China's frontiers and to legitimize the emperor's ruling. It was branded flexible and realistic since it was applied in term of various circumstances, each with differing characteristics. Today, China's colonial experience, domestic instability, territorial integrity, self-autonomy tradition, and etc., all of them drive China sticking to the principle of sovereignty. However, China is not satisfied with all aspects of current international order and its' role in it. China wants to make some changes but nothing redical or revolutionary. Neither a community with a shared future for mankind nor the belt and road initiative is a modern name of the Tianxia order or tributary system.

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