

Editor's Introduction

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In 1941, the American sinologist John K. Fairbank [1907-1991] and the Chinese American Ssu-yu Teng [Deng Siyu 鄧嗣禹, 1906-1988] collaborated on an article in which they introduced the concept of the “tributary system” for the first time.¹ In 1968, Fairbank edited a volume titled *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Harvard University Press), in which the tributary system was used as a basic model for analyzing interstate relations in premodern East Asia and traditional Chinese visions of world order.

According to Fairbank, the tributary model, which originated in the Shang dynasty [1600-1046 BCE], became the foundation for relations between China and other states and was understood as an all-inclusive system. An important assumption guiding Fairbank's understanding of the tributary system is the idea of “Sino-centrism,” that is, a Chinese sense of centrality and superiority. In Fairbank's view, this sense of being at the center of a world in which one occupies a superior position expressed itself in China's relations with its neighbors as well as with its own “non-Chinese” peoples in a more general sense. The Chinese conceived of diplomatic relations with other states as an external manifestation and extension of China's internal sociopolitical order. This China-centered and hierarchically structured system of diplomatic relations is what Fairbank refers to as the “Chinese world order.”

The notion of the tributary system has provided scholars with a highly suitable conceptual tool and perspective for understanding premodern East Asian politics. As such, it gradually became the dominant mode of analysis for research into diplomatic relations in ancient China. For a long time, it held sway over European, American, Japanese, and Korean scholarship and had considerable influence in Chinese academia. Even today, scholars continue to engage with, reflect upon, and critically think through the idea of the tributary system. In the present issue of JOCH, we have compiled four relevant articles to offer Chinese perspective and research on this topic.

In “Imagining a Universal Empire: a Study of the Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions attributed to Li Gonglin,” Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光 approaches the recorded diplomatic relations as well as visual representations of the tributary system during the Northern Song dynasty [960-1127] as a way to investigate how the Song maintained the historical memory of the “golden age” of the Han [202 BCE-220] and Tang [618-907] dynasties and continued to imagine itself as a glorious “universal empire [tianxia diguo 天下帝國].” In Ge's view, the *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions* [Wanfang zhi Gongtu 萬方職貢圖] traditionally attributed to Li Gonglin 李公麟 [ca. 1049-1106] can be seen as symbolizing a continued attempt by China to represent itself as a glorious empire during a time when its power had gradually declined. This gave rise to a tradition that continued all through the Song dynasty [960-1279] (and even beyond), namely that of preserving the imaginary vision of a boundless “empire” within the finite boundaries of the “state.” Even though the birth of the

modern Chinese nation-state was accompanied by a rupture with the traditional view of China as being at the center of the world, the notion of China as a universal empire has persisted.

Also focusing on the Song period, Huang Chunyan 黃純豔, in “China’s Tributary System and National Security in the Song Dynasty,” argues that the traditional tributary system not only was a vision intended to satisfy the vanity of the imperial court but played an important role in maintaining the security of the Chinese state as a systematic and complex mechanism for preserving international stability. The Song observed a security policy of “keeping the four barbarians in check” [shou zai siyi 守在四夷] focused on preserving internal order while fending off external threats and adopting a defensive stance. The Song dynasty and the various states that were part of its tributary system had both common interests and conflicts of interest, thus leading to confrontation as well as mutual cooperation. The stability and eventual breakdown of the tributary system was tied up with the Song court’s concern for domestic security just as much as it was with the security conditions in China’s different tributary states, which together made up a dynamic and closely intertwined security zone.

In “The Chinese Tributary System and Traditional International Order in East Asia during the Ming and Qing Dynasties from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Century,” Chen Shangsheng 陳尚勝 believes that a study of the Ming [1368-1644] and Qing [1644-1911] dynasties’ relations to vassal states such as Korea, the Ryukyu kingdom, and Vietnam makes it clear that the tributary system was an essential mechanism for engaging in bilateral trade, cultural exchange, border control, and cooperation in law enforcement. When their vassals encountered a security crisis, the Ming and Qing courts assumed responsibility as “suzerain states” and became actively engaged both diplomatically and militarily to aid their tributaries. That being said, the tributary system was aimed primarily at institutionalizing the hierarchical power relations between “suzerain” and “vassal,” and no alliance between different vassal states that revolved around China as the suzerain was ever established. As a result, the tributary system proved unable to compete with the Western powers and their treaty-based system of international relations and with the growing influence of Japan in East Asia in modern times.

Han Dongyu’s 韓東育 study, “The Rise and Fall of the Hua-Yi System in East Asia,” focuses on the changes in the early modern East Asian international order. Han identifies a long transition from an order grounded in the distinction between “Chinese” and “barbarian,” as expressed in the tributary system that spread across East Asia, to a form of racial nationalism [guozu zhuyi 國族主義] based on the difference between the “civilized” and “uncivilized.” Accordingly, the network of relations tied up with the tributary system gradually weakened before finally disintegrating altogether. Ethnocentrism as well as pragmatic considerations played an important role in the establishment and eventual downfall of the tributary order.

These incisive articles cover a time period stretching from the eleventh to the nineteenth century and deal with various states in the East Asian and Southeast

Asian region. They not only help to improve our understanding of the tributary system but also provide theoretical critiques and challenges to the very concept of the tributary system. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that Chinese scholars continue to reflect upon and develop new approaches to the theory of the tributary system and the premodern East Asian international order.

Imagining a Universal Empire: a Study of the Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions Attributed to Li Gonglin

Author: Zhaoguang (葛兆光) Ge

Abstract: This article is not concerned with the history of aesthetics but, rather, is an exercise in intellectual history. “Illustrations of Tributary States” [Zhigong tu 職貢圖] as a type of art reveals a Chinese tradition of artistic representations of foreign emissaries paying tribute at the imperial court. This tradition is usually seen as going back to the “Illustrations of Tributary States,” painted by Emperor Yuan in the Liang dynasty 梁元帝 [r. 552-554] in the first half of the sixth century. This series of paintings not only had a lasting influence on aesthetic history but also gave rise to a highly distinctive intellectual tradition in the development of Chinese thought: images of foreign emissaries were used to convey the Celestial Empire’s sense of pride and self-confidence, with representations of strange customs from foreign countries serving as a foil for the image of China as a radiant universal empire at the center of the world. The tradition of “Illustrations of Tributary States” was still very much alive during the time of the Song dynasty [960-1279], when China had to compete with equally powerful neighboring states, the empire’s territory had been significantly diminished, and the Chinese population had become ethnically more homogeneous. In this article, the “Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions” [Wanfang zhigong tu 萬方職貢圖] attributed to Li Gonglin 李公麟 [ca. 1049-1106] and created during the period between the Xining 熙寧 [1068-1077] and Yuanfeng 元豐 [1078-1085] reigns of the Shenzong emperor 神宗 [r. 1067-1085] of the Song dynasty, is used as a case study for investigating the actual tributary relations between the Northern Song [960-1127] state and its neighboring countries. In doing so, I demonstrate that while certain parts of the “Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions” are historically accurate, a considerable portion of the content is the combined product of historical remembrance and the imagination of empire. In the international environment of the Song empire, China was captivated by the dream of being a universal empire envied by its “barbarian” neighbors. Particularly worth emphasizing is the fact that the artistic tradition of painting “Illustrations of Tributary States” as well as the accompanying idea of China as a universal empire continued well into the Qing [1644-1911] period, reflecting the historical longevity and lasting influence of the traditional conception of the relationship between China and the world.

China's Tributary System and National Security in the Song Dynasty

Author: Chunyan (黃純豔) Huang

Abstract: China's ancient tributary system not only served the vanity of the dynasty but had multiple political implications, closely tied to the dynasty's national security. The Song dynasty's [960-1279] notion of security followed an overall policy of guarding the dynasty against external threats, surrounding barbarian nations, and maintaining domestic order. The stability and eventual collapse of the tributary system were closely tied to the domestic security of the Song dynasty and to the security of all the countries that participated in the system. The system constituted a dynamic and interactive security community.

The Chinese Tributary System and Traditional International Order in East Asia during the Ming and Qing Dynasties from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Century

Author: Shangsheng (陳尚勝) Chen

Abstract: Throughout the history of East Asia, various polities in modern-day Korea, Japan, and Vietnam accepted investitures bestowed by the Chinese royal court. Many of these states also established their own vassal structures based on this tributary system. In light of this, it would be more accurate to describe the traditional international order of East Asia as a system of investitures and tributes, an "investiture-tribute system." The significance of this system is the royal court being revered by its tributaries, which acknowledge it as the superior power. Looking at the vassal relationship between the Ming [1368-1644] and Qing [1644-1911] courts and the states of Joseon 朝鮮, Ryukyu 琉球, and Vietnam under various names, it is clear that the tributary system was a basic mechanism that facilitated bilateral trade, cultural exchange, border control, and judicial cooperation. Moreover, when vassal states encountered threats to their national security, the Chinese government assisted them with diplomatic and military resources befitting its position as the imperial court. Yet, although the tributary system enabled a relationship in which the royal court enjoyed a position of superiority and its vassal states an inferior one, none of the vassal states formed an alliance that revolved around the Chinese empire. Hence, in the near-modern period, the system struggled to contend with both the great world powers that made use of the treaty system and the expansion of Japan in East Asia.

The Rise and Fall of the Hua-Yi System in East Asia

Author: Dongyu (韓東育) Han

Abstract: The Hua-Yi 華夷 system that spread in East Asia in the form of tribute relationships during the Ming dynasty [1368-1644] began as a system based on China's perceived cultural superiority, but slowly evolved into a system centered on nationalism. Accordingly, the kinship networks embedded in the Hua-Yi

system were also continually evolving, breaking down, and reforming in a cycle that repeated itself multiple times. Amid this process, ethnocentrism [zi minzu zhongxin zhuyi 自民族中心主義] and “interest centralism” [liyi zhongxin zhuyi 利益中心主義] played key roles in the formation and eventual dissolution of the Hua-Yi system.

Self-Canonization in Zuo Si’s “Poems on History”

Author: Yue (張月) Zhang

Abstract: Zuo Si’s 左思 [ca. 250-305] “Poems on History” [yongshi 詠史] have often been regarded as a milestone in the development of the poetic subgenre “poems on history.” Scholars have noted Zuo’s use of historical allusion and description to articulate his personal emotions and ambitions and to criticize the political hierarchy of the Western Jin [265-316]. In addition, they have recognized Zuo’s “Poems on History” as representing an alternative to the ornamental style of poetry popular in his time.

This article addresses the way in which Zuo’s poems contributed to the “poems on history” subgenre, as well as how they reflected the broader context of Six Dynasties [220-589] society. At the same time, it investigates another purpose for his use of historical figures in his poetry: self-canonization. This paper argues that Zuo used historical figures not only to express his emotions but also to skillfully place himself into the larger context and lineage of exemplary historical figures. Zuo is thus telling later generations that they should remember him with the same reverence—he is invoking history as a force of self-canonization. This self-canonization perspective reveals the complexity of Zuo’s appropriation of earlier historical sources. It also deepens our understanding of the purpose of Zuo’s “Poems on History” and of the ways in which history is disseminated through poetry in the Six Dynasties period.

Book Review

Shang shu zhushu huijiao 尚書注疏彙校 [Collected Collation on Annotations of Shang Shu], edited by Du Zexun 杜澤遜

Shang shu zhushu jiaoyi 尚書注疏校議 [Notes on the Collation Work of Annotations of Shang Shu], edited by Du Zexun 杜澤遜

Author: Ed Shaughnessy

Qingtong qi yu Songdai wenhua shi 青銅器與宋代文化史 [Bronze Vessels and Song Dynasty Cultural History], written by Chen Fangmei 陳芳妹

Author: Ronald Egan and Xueyi Zhao