
Rethinking the ‘Tribute System’: Broadening the Conceptual Horizon of Historical East Asian Politics[†]

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A notable feature of the study of historical East Asian politics is its absence of rigorous systemic theories explaining relationships between imperial China and its neighbours and how they worked. Long pre-eminent in this field is the idea of the ‘tribute system’ and its central importance to organizing our thinking about historical East Asian politics. But what is the ‘tribute system’ as it is used by these various scholars? How useful are their tribute-system perspectives and models in shedding light on historical East Asian politics? In this article I critically evaluate the venerable literature on the ‘tribute system’ in an attempt to clarify the concepts and broaden the main themes of traditional China’s foreign relations and the larger political dynamics between China and its neighbours. I write from a political-science perspective, but engage extensively in predominantly historical scholarship on the subject.

Except for a few notable exceptions in recent years, the ‘international relations’ of historical East Asia has been almost exclusively an historian’s domain. East Asian diplomatic history saw a remarkable period of intellectual creativity from the 1930s to the 1960s, thanks chiefly to the pioneering

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work of John King Fairbank,¹ after which historians' interest waned, to the extent that the area became 'unfashionable and underpopulated'.² Research during the 30-year 'classic era' on China's foreign relations produced important insights and laid foundations for understanding historical East Asian politics. But analytical confusion and empirical omissions are evident in this body of research. In the 1980s, historians started re-examining Fairbank's 'tribute system' and 'Chinese world order' frameworks, exposing hidden assumptions and bringing to light new historical evidence that contradicts existing interpretations. But although this research critiques Fairbank, it does not in general try to replace his tribute system model with any new explanatory frameworks.

Political scientists, and particularly international relations (IR) scholars, should take a keen interest in historical East Asian politics. It is just as fertile a field for theoretical innovations as European history has been for developing modern IR theories. But although its theory-building potential is recognized, relatively few scholars have entered the field armed with in-depth historical and theoretical research. Any research that has been carried out on the subject often relies on secondary sources, which impedes analytical and theoretical innovations in the first place.³ The few works that have consciously tried to exploit historical Asia for theory development have produced fresh approaches and insights. Two of the most innovative are Iain Johnston's *Cultural Realism* and Victoria Hui's *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*.⁴ But although both books have engendered important perspectives on China's strategic culture and the state formation process in ancient China, neither says much about the tribute system itself. And apart from Brantly Womack's recent work,⁵

¹ These include J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng, 'On the Ch'ing Tributary System', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1941, pp. 135–246; J. K. Fairbank, 'Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West', *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1942, pp. 129–49; J. K. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842–1854* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), esp. chapter 2; and J. K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), esp. chapter 1.

² John E. Wills, Jr., 'Tribute, Defensiveness, and Dependency: Uses and Limits of Some Basic Ideas About Mid-Qing Dynasty Foreign Relations', *American Neptune*, Vol. 48, 1988, pp. 225–9, at p. 229. Holding a similar view is Michael Hunt, who wrote in the early 1980s that 'little fresh work [on historical Chinese foreign relations] is appearing and... the pool of specialists in the field has not been sustained.' Michael H. Hunt, 'Chinese Foreign Relations in Historical Perspective,' in Harry Harding, ed., *China's Foreign Relations in the 1980s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 1–42, at p. 37, fn. 14.

³ See, for example, Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2000).

⁴ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵ Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: the Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

virtually no IR scholarship systematically examines the tribute system either. The widespread ‘sinocentric’ bias in both the existing historical and IR scholarship—evident in the tendency to focus on China’s foreign relations to the exclusion of its dealings with other polities in the region—compounds this lack of attention.

Many Chinese IR scholars, on the other hand, find the ‘tribute system’ fascinating. Some think of it as a wellspring for developing a ‘Chinese school of international relations’.⁶ This could be true, but we need first to know the origins and evolution of the idea of the ‘tribute system’, its main characteristics as an historical institution, and the strengths and weaknesses of its existing models before we can use the ‘tribute system’ in Chinese theories. Certain scholars take the ‘tribute system’ as a given, even unchanging, historical entity, and regard as unproblematic Fairbank’s interpretations of it. I argue that Fairbank’s thesis is not an adequate basis for developing new theories. More important, rather than using the ‘tribute system’ as a concept through which to develop Chinese theories, we might first think about how to develop theories of whatever kind that can explain the ‘tribute system’ as an historical institution.

The aim of this article is more modest. It does not try to produce a new theoretical framework to explain historical East Asian politics. New theories are, after all, the product of cumulative research over time. But I do raise an alternative framework towards the end of the article that explains certain puzzles in the tributary politics between China and its neighbours. My main purpose, however, is to focus on the ‘tribute system’ concept itself, and to assess the analytical utility of the models and perspectives that this concept has generated for understanding of certain features of historical East Asian politics.

There are three interrelated ways in which the ‘tribute system’ concept has been used in the relevant literature. I discuss each in turn, but focus on Fairbank’s interpretive model as that is the most influential in establishing the tribute system paradigm in the study of East Asian diplomatic history.⁷

⁶ Qin Yaqing, ‘Quanqiu shiye zhong de guoji zhixu’ (‘International Order in a Global View’) in Qin Yaqing, ed., *Zhongguo xuezhe kan shijie: guoji zhixu juan* (*World Politics—Views from China: International Order*) (Beijing: Xin shijie chubanshe, 2007), pp. 11–25; and Qin Yaqing, ‘A Chinese School of International Relations Theory: Possibility and Inevitability’, *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (*World Economics and Politics*), No. 3, 2006, pp. 7–13.

⁷ By the ‘tribute system paradigm’ I mean a research tradition that has the ‘tribute system’ as the central organizing concept for conceptual and empirical analysis.

I build on the criticism this model has incurred over the years⁸ and present a systematic evaluation. That many inadequacies have been found should not be surprising, as Fairbank was writing under the political and social contexts of the 1930s.⁹ But criticism should have positive payoffs. I use this evaluation of Fairbank's foundational research on the tribute system as an heuristic device through which to shed light on possible new conceptualizations of historical East Asian politics. Fairbank believed that 'every major subject has to be redone for each generation',¹⁰ and was disappointed that nobody had consciously tried to refine or even dismantle his research program.¹¹ Fifty years after the publication of his major works, the time seems ripe for evaluation.

My general argument is that each of the three views of the tribute system this article discusses has limitations in explaining historical East Asian politics. It therefore makes sense to propose alternative theoretical frameworks that might produce greater explanatory power. The 'tribute system' is, of course, a concept before it is a fact; it is first of all 'a Western invention for descriptive purposes'.¹² As such one can legitimately ask how useful the invention has been. Although the concept obviously captures a prominent feature of historical East Asian politics—that of tributary relations as ostensibly symbolized by ritual practices between China and its neighbours—overemphasis on it over the years has created biases in conceptual and

⁸ These include Joseph F. Fletcher, 'China and Central Asia, 1368–1884' in J. K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 206–24; Morris Rossabi, ed., *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th–14th Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); John E. Wills, Jr., *Pepper, Guns, and Parleys: The Dutch East India Company and China, 1662–1681* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1974); John E. Wills, Jr., *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K'ang-hsi, 1666–1687* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984); John E. Wills, Jr., 'Tribute, Defensiveness, and Dependency', pp. 225–9; Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 31; James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the McCartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995); James A. Millward, 'Qing Silk-Horse Trade with the Qazaqs in Yili and Tarbaghatai, 1758–1853,' *Central and Inner Asian Studies*, Vol. 7, 1992, pp. 1–42; James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759–1864* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Peter C. Perdue, 'A Frontier View of Chineseness,' in Giovanni Arrighi et al., eds., *The Resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 Year Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 51–77; Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Nicola Di Cosmo, 'Kirghiz Nomads on the Qing Frontier: Tribute, Trade, or Gift-Exchange?' in Nicola Di Cosmo and Don J. Wyatt, eds., *Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries, and Human Geographies in Chinese History* (London: Curzon Press, 2003), pp. 351–72.

⁹ Paul M. Evans, *John Fairbank and the American Understanding of Modern China* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹¹ I am grateful to Paul Evans for this information during a conversation in June 2009, Singapore.

¹² Mark Mancall, 'The Ch'ing Tribute System: An Interpretive Essay' in J. K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 63–89, at p. 63.

empirical enquiries. An exclusively tribute-system perspective, therefore, however well developed, is ultimately inadequate because historical East Asian politics was not confined to 'tribute' and its associated practices.

The Tribute System: Three Views

Associating the 'tribute system' with traditional China's foreign relations has become standard practice since the 19th century, when it was first proposed that China's peculiar notions of foreign relations constituted one of the underlying causes of its failure to deal adequately with the Western challenge. The unique institutional and textual complex of which traditional Chinese foreign policy was composed was hence lumped together and referred to as the 'tribute system'. But it was not until Fairbank's immensely influential elaboration on it, from the 1940s through the 1960s, that the 'tribute system' became the main organizing concept of the study of East Asian diplomatic history. But although Fairbank's model is the most well known, it is not the only conceptualization of the tribute system. There are broadly three different but interrelated views of the tribute system in the relevant scholarly literature.

The First View

It is appropriate to begin with Fairbank's interpretive model, since it has influenced a generation of scholars and still serves as a basic reference point for discussion of traditional China's foreign relations. Although after years of criticisms its influence has waned, any scholar writing about the tribute system would still find it necessary to grapple with Fairbank's arguments. A thorough evaluation of the model is therefore essential to assess the utility of the tribute-system perspective towards understanding historical East Asian politics. This I do in the two main sections after a brief outline of the model's main features.

Fairbank and Teng viewed 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'.¹³ Having set out this definition, Fairbank developed a model in later writings that conceived of an East Asian order of tributary relations that centred on China—the 'Chinese world order' as it has been called.

¹³ J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng, 'On the Ch'ing Tributary System', pp. 137, 139.

The model is built on the assumption of sinocentrism—the notion of supposed Chinese centrality and superiority.¹⁴ Sinocentrism led the Chinese to devise a scheme that demanded foreign acknowledgment of their superiority. From this assumption, it is argued that China's relations with other states were 'hierarchic and nonegalitarian, like the Chinese society itself'.¹⁵ The historical East Asian order 'was unified and centralized in theory by the universal preeminence of the Son of Heaven. It was 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'.¹⁶ The hierarchy of the relations was predicated on Chinese superiority and suzerainty vis-à-vis foreign states' inferiority and submission. Respect for this hierarchy and acknowledgment of Chinese superiority were absolute requirements for opening relations with China. Thus, 'Outside countries, if they were to have contact with China at all, were expected and when possible obliged to do so as tributaries'.¹⁷

When analysing respective motivations, the model posits that Chinese rulers initiated tributary relations because they valued the prestige that foreign tribute would bring to their rule; foreign rulers participated in tributary politics because they valued the benefits of trade with China. Thus, 'trade and tribute were cognate aspects of a single system of foreign relations, the moral value of tribute being the more important in the minds of the rulers of China, and the material value of trade in the minds of the barbarians'.¹⁸ The 'moral value of tribute' implies that to Chinese rulers, the function of tribute was to endorse the legitimacy of their rule. To foreign rulers, on the other hand, trade was the most important motive, 'so much so that the whole institution [the tribute system], viewed from abroad, appears to have been an ingenious vehicle for commerce'¹⁹ and 'tribute missions functioned chiefly as a vehicle for trade'.²⁰

Cultural attraction and 'rule by virtue', moreover, were main means through which China exercised its influence, and 'Non-Chinese rulers participated in the Chinese world order by observing the appropriate forms and ceremonies (*li*) in their contact with the Son of Heaven'.²¹ The 'Chinese world order', then, was a preeminently cultural system, sustained on both

¹⁴ See J. K. Fairbank, 'A preliminary Framework', pp. 1–2. Also see C. P. Fitzgerald, *The Chinese View of Their Place in the World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964); and John Cranmer-Byng, 'The Chinese View of Their Place in the World: An Historical Perspective', *The China Quarterly*, No. 53, 1973, pp. 67–79, at p. 68.

¹⁵ J. K. Fairbank, 'A preliminary Framework', p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁸ J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng, 'On the Ch'ing Tributary System', pp. 140–1.

¹⁹ J. K. Fairbank, 'Tributary Trade', p. 137.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²¹ J. K. Fairbank, 'A preliminary Framework', p. 10.

sides primarily through cultural precepts and practices, most important of which was ritual observance.

It is clear that this model sets out to describe and interpret the official relations between China and its neighbours, and over a period covering East Asian history from the dawn of the Chinese civilization until the 19th century. But it should be remembered that Fairbank, as an historian, did not mean to apply his 'tribute system' notion to the 'international politics' of East Asia, in the same way as a political scientist might do. Fairbank 'has made no pretence of establishing a general theory of Chinese history and has stated his distaste for abstract theorizing in many places'.²² The main question for him was that of how to understand and define the 'Chinese world order' and its essence; it was for this reason that he highlighted the sinocentric vision held by Chinese rulers and elites. Fairbank probably never assigned to himself the task of providing a comprehensive framework through which to interpret East Asian international relations.²³ His approach was rather to set out certain main ideas as organizing concepts that further research might refine and develop. His model, therefore, is properly evaluated according to how accurately the 'tribute system' notion and the 'Chinese world order' scheme capture the essence of the historical East Asian order. Its shortcomings might then pinpoint the areas that need to be improved to advance our understanding of historical East Asian politics.

The Second View

The second view, commonly found among Chinese historians with a distinguished background in Chinese scholarly discourse, sees the tribute system as China's bureaucratic management of foreign relations.²⁴ It focuses on the organizational and functional development of a complex set of principles, rules and procedures that China's scholar-officials devised for dealing with foreigners. This research tradition is mainly concerned with the historical development of ritual practices and the bureaucratic institutions and cultural assumptions behind ritualistic expressions of foreign relations. In a study of the Ming tribute system, for example, this approach would be likely to include the organization of Ming dynasty bureaucracies handling foreign relations, the elaborate set of ritual practices foreign envoys were required to observe while in the Chinese capital, details of the compilation of foreign tributes and Chinese reciprocal gifts, tribute frequency and routes, and so on.

²² Evans, *John Fairbank*, p. 5.

²³ I am grateful to Chen Jian for this point.

²⁴ This is the clearest in Li Yunquan, *Chaogong zhidu shilun: Zhongguo gudai duiwai guanxi tizhi yanjiu (A History of the Tribute System: Research on China's Premodern Foreign Relation Institution)* (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 2004).

But because the tribute system is conceived of as China's bureaucratic innovation for dealing with foreign affairs from the Chinese standpoint, it sheds no light on the dynamics of China's interaction with its neighbours. The tribute system is presented as strictly Chinese and from the Chinese perspective. Confined to the bureaucratic aspects of Chinese foreign policy and not the larger East Asian order, it does not serve as an adequate basis for understanding the comprehensive relations between China and its neighbours. Scholars writing about Chinese foreign policy from this perspective tend to focus on the ritualistic and symbolic elements associated with tributary relations. For example, in his thorough examination of the bureaucratic development of the tribute system in Chinese history, Li Yunquan argues that Chinese rulers valued not so much the substance of tributary relations as their appearance and function in demonstrating the superiority of Chinese rule.²⁵ Although this was often true of the tributary aspect of China's foreign relations, it is not a valid generalization for traditional Chinese foreign policy as a whole.

This view of the tribute system as Chinese bureaucratic management of foreign relations is obviously important for understanding the historical development of Chinese foreign policy, and especially its bureaucratization throughout successive dynasties, but it does not account for the larger political dynamics between China and its neighbours. Moreover, its focus on the bureaucratic aspects of the tribute system places undue emphasis on symbolism, thus overlooking an important part of Chinese foreign policy that is characterized by flexibility and pragmatism.

The Third View

The third view, found among IR scholars writing from an English School perspective, sees the tribute system as an institution of historical East Asian international society. The classic English School defines an institution as 'a set of habits and practices shaped towards the realization of common goals'.²⁶ Neoliberal institutionalists define institutions as 'persistent and connected sets of rules (formal and informal) that prescribe behavioural roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations'.²⁷ These definitions hence overlap; both view institutions as coherent sets of principles and practices that structure and organize relations.²⁸

²⁵ Li Yunquan, *A History of the Tribute System*.

²⁶ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 74.

²⁷ Robert O. Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power* (Boulder: Westview, 1989), p. 3.

²⁸ English School theorists claim that their definition is 'deeper' than that of the neoliberalists. Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p. 79.

Yongjin Zhang argues, according to this perspective, that the tribute system is the fundamental institution of the historical East Asian order. In his words, ‘the tribute system is the fundamental institution that embodies both philosophical assumptions and institutional practices within the Chinese world order and that structures relations and ensures co-operation between China and other participants in *Pax Sinica*’.²⁹ It was through the tribute system that China and other countries conducted meaningful relations with one another. The tribute system in this sense embodies cultural assumptions, such as sinocentrism, and describes rules and practices, such as foreigners’ paying tributes to the Chinese court and the latter’s reciprocal bestowal of gifts and investiture.

Conceived of as an institution in this sense, the tribute system becomes a central interpretive factor for historical East Asian politics. Seeing the tribute system as an institution, however, although apparently appropriate from a theoretical standpoint, also entails certain analytical problems. The first is that the tribute system is only one—though perhaps the most prominent—among several institutions in the historical East Asian system. It cannot alone capture the whole sphere of China’s foreign relations because they were only partly expressed in the institutional practices of the tribute system. Other institutions identified by the English School, such as war and even the balance of power, can also be found in East Asian history. Many analysts tend to overemphasize the significance of the tribute system at the expense of due attention to other institutions that also played important roles.

The second problem with taking an institutionalist perspective is that institutions themselves often require explanation.³⁰ If, therefore, we are to understand the motives, strategies and interests behind China’s construction of, and other countries’ participation in, the tribute system, we need to deconstruct and explain the tribute system in the first place. The question is not whether the tribute system can be seen as an institution, as it surely can be, but how much interpretive or explanatory power such a perspective can generate.

Third, seeing the tribute system as an institution without paying adequate attention to its historical evolution gives the misleading impression that it was somehow static and unchanging throughout history. In practice, however, the characteristics and essence of the tribute system varied considerably in different historical periods. We should therefore speak about different tribute systems rather than a single one in history. Not examining the

²⁹ Yongjin Zhang, ‘System, Empire and State in Chinese International Relations,’ in Michael Cox et al., eds., *Empires, Systems and States: Great Transformation in International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 43–63, at p. 57.

³⁰ For an attempt in the European context, see Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

characteristics of tribute systems as they changed over time means overlooking the changing nature of historical East Asian politics, even though the tribute system was far from the totality of international politics in the region. This point suggests the inadequacy of an institutionalist perspective of the tribute system for an understanding of historical East Asian politics.

These three views of the tribute system are obviously interrelated in interesting ways, by virtue of their substantive arguments and intellectual evolution. For example, Fairbank's view of the tribute system as the medium for Chinese diplomacy is only one step from the third, English School, view of the tribute system as an institution. Having questioned the utility of the second and third views for understanding historical East Asian politics, I now make a focused evaluation of the Fairbank model while at the same time developing these criticisms.

The Inherent Weakness of the Model

This section evaluates Fairbank's model on its own terms. The question asked is not how well it stands against historical evidence—the task for the next section—but how logically consistent is the model itself. Three questions are asked when evaluating its interpretive power. The first: how useful are the assumptions underlying the model? Interpretive propositions often arise from assumptions, and the more useful the assumptions, the better the propositions are likely to be. Second, how clear and coherent is its internal logic? Ambiguous models with inconsistent logic obfuscate more than they clarify. Third, how much interpretive power does it seem to offer?

Assumptions

As discussed in the preceding section, the model's underlying assumption is that of sinocentrism, the idea that Chinese rulers believed themselves to be central and superior to other peoples in the known world. It follows from this assumption that they would induce foreign rulers to acknowledge their superiority by presenting tributes and accepting vassal status.

It should be noted, however, that the Chinese claim of being 'rulers of the *tianxia*' does not imply their intent to rule the known world.³¹ The *tianxia* referred to was limited to the areas surrounding the Chinese empire, which roughly correspond to what we call today Northeast and Southeast Asia and parts of Central Asia. Gao Mingshi recently proposed that, according to the ancient Chinese conception, the world might be divided into three areas of

³¹ Gan Huaizhen, *Huangquan, liyi yu jingdian quanshi: Zhongguo gudai zhengzhishi yanjiu* (*Imperial Power, Etiquette and Interpretation of Classics: the Study on the History of Politics in Ancient China*) (Taipei: Himalaya Foundation, 2003), p. 508.

diminishing Chinese influence: inner vassal area, outer vassal area, and temporary non-vassal area.³² The Chinese did not expect to extend their authority over states of the last category, and often treated them as equals. For example, the Sui and Tang dynasties maintained ‘brotherly’ relations with the Turkic, Uighur, and Tibetan states before the Chinese eventually subjected them, as did the Han with the Xiongnu. When these tribal states grew powerful and posed security threats they were treated as enemies rather than tributaries, as the sinocentric assumption would suggest.

The first problem arising from the sinocentric assumption is that its usefulness varies according to the historical periods examined.³³ Chinese rulers, according to the rhetoric as recorded in Chinese historical sources, indeed appear to have held the notion of superiority since pre-Qin times. But the apparent constancy of their self-perceived superiority is deceptive, especially when taking into account the ‘respectable tradition of dealing with reality separately so that there was no need to change the rhetoric’³⁴ that Chinese scholar-officials developed as they contemplated their imperial foreign relations policies. Did the rulers of China actually make foreign policy decisions solely on the grounds of Chinese superiority throughout the country’s two-thousand-year dynastic history? A distinction should at least be made between the periods when China was unified and strong and divided and weak; material power and external environment often decisively shape rulers’ perceptions and decision making. As Wang Gungwu points out, the rhetoric of superiority ‘was based on strength and was meaningless during periods of weakness and disorder’.³⁵ He goes on: ‘At times it [the idea of superiority] was clearly myth, a sustaining and comforting myth, but equally clearly at other times it was reality, a reality that nurtured cultural pride but also called for moral restraint.’³⁶ The effect of the sinocentric assumption on actual policymaking was thus conditioned by power realities. Chinese rulers’ ‘actions and policies may have been shaped more by the logic of the situation than by the distinctive world-views and values of the Sinocentric tribute ideology’.³⁷ The founder of the Southern Song dynasty, for example, found himself compelled to accept the status as vassal of the Jin dynasty—his powerful northern rival—in 1138.³⁸ Less dramatically, rulers

³² Gao Mingshi, *Dongya gudai de zhengzhi yu jiaoyu (The Politics and Education in Ancient East Asia)* (Taipei: Himalaya Foundation, 2003).

³³ For a masterful discussion on the evolution of the Chinese idea of superiority, see Wang Gungwu, ‘Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia: A Background Essay’, in J. K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 34–62.

³⁴ Wang Gungwu, ‘The Rhetoric of a Lesser Empire: Early Sung relations with Its Neighbors’, in Morris Rossabi, ed., *China among Equals*, pp. 47–65, at p. 62.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³⁶ Wang Gungwu, ‘Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia’, p. 36.

³⁷ John E. Wills, ‘Tribute, Defensiveness, and Dependency’, p. 226.

³⁸ Lien-sheng Yang, ‘Historical Notes on the Chinese World Order’, in J. K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 20–33, at p. 20. See also Morris Rossabi, ed., *China among Equals*.

of various Chinese dynasties such as the Han, Sui, and Tang had to enact 'brotherly' or equal relations with their powerful northern and western nomadic neighbours.

Sinocentrism can be a useful assumption at times of Chinese strength, when reality more or less matched belief in superiority. But even here one has to examine its exact effect on policymaking. Many believe that sinocentrism had led to a foreign policy of rigidity and inflexibility. But this is not necessarily the case. The Han, Tang, Ming, and Qing all in different periods displayed a flexible and extroverted pattern of foreign relations.³⁹ Moreover, sinocentrism did not always demand foreign rulers' submission to China as vassals, even during periods of Chinese strength. The Tang, for example, did not insist on Japan's declaration of vassalage.⁴⁰ From another perspective, if sinocentrism was indeed such an important motivational force, 'its relatively weak translation into impulses to conquer and physically dominate "inferior" peoples'⁴¹ is puzzling. It is clear that sinocentrism alone sheds little light on Chinese attempts at domination or the lack thereof. Although these examples demonstrate that the importance of sinocentrism in Chinese foreign policy making cannot be overstated, they also show that the effect of sinocentrism on policy varies in different cases and needs to be empirically determined.

Sinocentrism's dubious utility in times of Chinese weakness suggests that the assumption of Chinese superiority alone is insufficient and bound to be misleading, because a weak China must also worry about its survival. This, at least, was what the Song experienced with its powerful northern rivals. For those periods we need an assumption of Chinese rulers' motivation for the security of their regime. John E. Wills, Jr. reflected this thinking when he emphasized the concept of 'defensiveness'.⁴² Fairbank recognized that for Chinese rulers 'the chief political problem was how to maintain Chinese superiority in situations of military weakness'. He then outlined the 'aims and means in China's foreign relations'.⁴³ He did not, however, fuse these thoughts into his model. Consequently the model mirrored the ideal pattern of the official Chinese view, even though Fairbank was aware of the historical exceptions to sinocentrism as demonstrated by Chinese rulers.⁴⁴ The model seems to give an essentialized view of Chinese culture

³⁹ Michael H. Hunt, 'Chinese Foreign Relations in Historical Perspective', pp. 1–42, at pp. 6–7.

⁴⁰ Song Chengyou, *Dongbeiyi chuantong guoji tixi de bianqian: chuantong Zhongguo yu zhoubian guojia ji minzu de hudong guanxi lunshu* (*The Evolution of the Traditional Northeast Asian International System: Interactions between Traditional China and Its Neighboring Countries and Ethnicities*) (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 2002), p. 41.

⁴¹ John E. Wills, 'Tribute, Defensiveness, and Dependency', p. 226.

⁴² John E. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*; John E. Wills, 'Tribute, Defensiveness, and Dependency'.

⁴³ J. K. Fairbank, 'A preliminary Framework', p. 11.

⁴⁴ John K. Fairbank, 'China's Foreign Policy in Historical Perspective', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 1969, pp. 449–63, at p. 459.

and its approach to foreign relations, leaving the impression that the Chinese could not see beyond their superiority.

Assumptions are only useful to the extent that they can facilitate model building. Although sinocentrism seems a useful, even indispensable aspect of these assumptions, it cannot be the only, or even the primary one. Wills believes that sinocentrism might be the 'wrong place to begin' the analysis of Chinese foreign policy because it 'short-circuits the necessity of paying attention to all the evidence, to all institutions and patterns of action' and 'cut[s] short an interpretive process that ought to begin by assuming broad similarities of human needs and motives'.⁴⁵

The second flaw in the assumption of Chinese superiority is its one-sidedness, or incompleteness. Recall that although the model is highly biased towards the Chinese side of the story, it also supposed to include foreign rulers' motivations for accepting tributary relations. But the assumption is made entirely on behalf of the Chinese, apparently taking as read that foreign nations would be content to be passive respondents to Chinese initiatives. Are we to understand, then, that the rulers of other polities believed in Chinese superiority in their conduct of foreign relations as implicitly as Chinese rulers themselves? How are we to know what their own perceptions were of China and of foreign relations generally? All that can be conferred from the model is that they conformed to the Chinese view.⁴⁶

Finally, sinocentrism is fundamentally a cultural assumption. This is reflected in the tendency in American historical scholarship of the 1950s and 1960s to invest enormous explanatory power in China's 'traditional' society and culture.⁴⁷ But as earlier pointed out, cultural assumptions alone cannot be adequate, even for Chinese foreign policy during periods of Chinese strength. Socio-cultural explanations are not problematic in themselves; they just need to be supplemented with explanations that draw on other factors and at other levels.

Another implicit assumption sometimes found in cultural analysis is that 'traditional China's foreign relations' are somehow radically different from the foreign policies of other great powers in history, and that a unique set of languages and tools is therefore needed to interpret them. This need not be the case. How, for example, can considerations of power and interest, in addition to culture, not be important in any state's foreign policy making? Admittedly, concepts such as 'power', 'security' and 'interest' might need to be defined and applied differently across time and space, but they are not

⁴⁵ John E. Wills, 'Tribute, Defensiveness, and Dependency', p. 226.

⁴⁶ As Fairbank says, drawing again on sinocentrism, that 'the uncultivated alien, however crass and stupid, could not but appreciate the superiority of Chinese civilization and would naturally seek to 'come and be transformed' (lai-hua) and so participate in its benefits.' J. K. Fairbank, 'Tributary Trade', p. 132.

⁴⁷ Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 189.

always reducible to culture. Progress in theorizing historical East Asian politics requires turning away from the assumption of Chinese or Asian uniqueness and looking instead for patterns of similarities as well as differences in political dynamics across different regions.

Logic aside, these three problems to do with the assumptions behind the model—the failure to deconstruct sinocentrism, to deal squarely with other countries' foreign policy assumptions, and to move beyond cultural stereotypes—compromise the value of its interpretive propositions.

Logic

The logic of the model is not clear-cut. Fairbank emphasizes that Chinese rulers used tributary relations mainly for purposes of self-defence. But he also said that they could be used for aggression as well. 'Broadly speaking under the Sung [Song] it [tribute] appears to have been used mainly on the defensive, while under the Mongols it served for expansion and under the Ch'ing [Qing] it promoted stability in foreign affairs.'⁴⁸ What accounts for these dramatic differences? Moreover, how is the assumption of Chinese superiority related with Chinese rulers' use of tribute for defence, aggression and stability? These puzzles expose a key problem in Fairbank's thinking about the tribute system. It was perhaps believed that the model could be generalized across Chinese history, but its power fell short of this ambitious goal. Fairbank could have dealt with each tribute system separately in its own right, according to the regime to which it applied in specific periods (e.g. the mid-late Qing).

The model says that the relationships between China and other states were hierarchic. Although this hierarchy is easy to understand from the Chinese point of view, since Chinese rulers believed in their superiority, one still wonders how foreign rulers came to submit to such a hierarchy. Was Confucian cultural attraction as emphasized by the model sufficient? Was the motivation for trade with China that the model identifies powerful enough to make foreign states acceptant of inferior status? It must be borne in mind that the rulers of China's close neighbours, from Vietnam to Japan, all had self-centred conceptions of world order; different self-centred views of superiority thus existed side by side.⁴⁹ It is not clear whether, when or how sinocentrism successfully overcame the self-centredness of other rulers. We have no analytical mechanism to explain how sinocentrism might have created a genuine hierarchy between China and its neighbours. Also puzzling is that Fairbank does mention the variant aims and means in Chinese foreign policy in his 'Aims and Means' table.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ J. K. Fairbank, 'Tributary Trade', p. 137.

⁴⁹ Wang Gungwu, 'Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia', p. 60.

⁵⁰ J. K. Fairbank, 'A preliminary Framework', p. 13.

But how do they fit within the model? That the model is underdeveloped is thus apparent.

Power

On the surface, the model claims to explain everything about China's foreign relations, as it defines the tribute system as 'a scheme of things entire'. In substance, it speaks mostly of the ceremonial aspects of tributary relations between China and its neighbours. The model also appears to focus primarily on relationships within the so-called sinic zone, that is, those among China, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, and Liuqiu. Knowing as we do that China's relations with its northern neighbours more or less constituted the core of its political history, we know also that although these relations were frequently violent, peaceful tributary intercourse was not absent. Moreover, discussions of tributary relations have seldom moved beyond the significance of 'tribute' and the relationship between 'tribute' and trade. But tribute and trade are neither all nor the most important of interactions between China and other states. The model fails to take into account the multiplicity of these relationships. The motivations behind policies, the means and strategies employed and the patterns of interaction among China and its neighbours are important questions that are at best inadequately addressed. The model presents the tribute system as a world order in itself, but its central questions are limited to a narrow scope of tributary relation issues.

The model is also heavily biased. The disproportionate attention it pays to the Chinese side of the story over that of other polities severely limits its interpretive power of their standpoint.⁵¹ Moreover, as it is heavily influenced by sinocentric perspectives, the model tends to portray historical East Asian politics from an idealized Chinese view. This undoubtedly has to do with Fairbank's heavy reliance on Chinese sources, which facilitate the reification of the tribute system, because they almost universally describe the mission of any foreign envoy coming to the Chinese capital as one of paying tribute to the emperor.

Considered as a whole, the model's biggest problem is that of being 'a static framework which lacks any sense of change and reflects mainly the world order the Chinese court preferred to perceive'.⁵² Within this rigid construct it gives foremost importance to the ritualistic aspects of tributary relations, manifest in the granting of patents of appointment and official seals, presentation of tribute memorials and local products, performance of the *koutou*, receipt of reciprocal imperial gifts, and trade privileges

⁵¹ This 'China bias', however, is a common problem in the literature.

⁵² Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian, eds., *Sino-Japanese Relations: Interaction, Logic, and Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 15. See also Peter C. Perdue, 'A Frontier View of Chineseness', p. 66.

at the frontier and in the capital. The emphasis the model lays on these issues makes one wonder if the Chinese and their neighbours were capable of anything in their foreign interactions other than routinely performing these formalities. It takes no account of the flexibility of relations, change in attitudes and policies towards one another, or variances in their underlying motivations and strategies. Historians' criticisms of the model as 'monochromatic',⁵³ 'monolithic', and 'unchanging'⁵⁴ are thus wholly justified.

The Model and the Early Ming

The tribute system, whether viewed as China's bureaucratic management of foreign relations or as an institution for interstate relations, reached its acme of sophistication and expansion during the Ming dynasty, particularly under the Hongwu (1368–1398) and Yongle (1403–1424) emperors.⁵⁵ It therefore makes good sense to see how Fairbank's model works against events in the early Ming period. From a political-science standpoint, this period is an 'easy test' for Fairbanks' model. Failure here throws its general validity into question. In this section I use examples from Sino–Korean, Sino–Japanese, and Sino–Mongol relations during the Hongwu and Yongle reigns to evaluate the model's empirical validity. I ask three questions: How useful is the Sinocentric assumption when matched with this period of Chinese primacy? How closely does the model capture the modes of interaction among China and its neighbours? And how well does it capture their underlying motivations, strategies and aims implicit in policies towards one another, and which constitute the essence of East Asian politics during this period?

Sinocentric Assumption

Sinocentrism is a useful assumption for periods when China was unified and strong, such as the early Ming. Early Ming emperors generally enacted a superior role when receiving foreign rulers which they expected them to acknowledge by accepting tributary status.⁵⁶ There are, however, notable exceptions. Joseph Fletcher long ago cited the example of the Yongle emperor's letter in 1418 to the ruler of the Timurid Empire in which he

⁵³ Nicola Di Cosmo, 'Kirghiz Nomads on the Qing Frontier'.

⁵⁴ James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass*, p. 158.

⁵⁵ J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng, 'On the Ch'ing Tributary System', p. 137; Mark Mancall, *China at the Center: 300 Years of Foreign Policy* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), p. 13; John E. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, p. 14.

⁵⁶ For official statements of the period, see Li Guoxiang et al., eds, *Ming Shilu Leizuan: Shewai Shiliao Juan* (MSLLZ) (*A Compilation of Materials on Foreign Affairs from the Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty*) (Wuhan: Wuhan chubanshe, 1991).

addressed him as a fellow monarch, in effect renouncing his claim to superiority.⁵⁷

The example shows that sinocentrism did not inhibit Chinese rulers from adopting pragmatic policies for practical objectives. Even under conditions of Chinese primacy, therefore, it is not necessarily true to say that 'Outside countries, if they were to have contact with China at all, were expected and when possible obliged to do so as tributaries'. The rigid set of Chinese attitudes toward foreigners that the model stipulates makes no allowance for this pragmatism. Implicit in this flaw is the failure to take into account that imperial China, like every other state, also had to deal with a variety of security problems that might affect its survival. Under certain circumstances, therefore, pragmatism superseded sinocentrism. China could not be expected to ensure security at all times while maintaining its self-assumed superiority without exhibiting flexibility and pragmatism in its foreign policy, as did the early Ming.⁵⁸

Descriptive Accuracy

The model posits that foreign rulers who wanted to establish relations with China could only do so as China's tributaries, and describes in detail the ritual practices it claims were integral to tributary relations. But is this an accurate description of East Asian politics in the early Ming?

This description might apply to Sino-Korean relations, but takes no account of major aspects of Sino-Japanese and Sino-Mongol relations. There were long periods during which neither the Japanese nor the Mongols agreed to pay tribute to the Ming. The shogun Yoshimochi isolated Japan from China from 1411 to 1424. Four decades earlier Prince Kanenaga had executed Chinese envoys, and challenged sinocentrism in a letter to the Hongwu emperor. During the Hongwu period the Mongolian royal house rejected Ming tributary offers, and in the Yongle reign Mahmud, chieftain of the Oirat Mongols and Arughtai, chieftain of the Eastern Mongols conformed intermittently and for opportunistic reasons to tributary status.⁵⁹ Neither the Japanese nor the Mongols were participant in the early Ming tribute system for any length of time.

It might be said that this discrepancy in the Ming tribute system as described in the model does it no great harm, the logic being that the rejection of tributary status by the Japanese and the Mongols signifies that they

⁵⁷ Joseph F. Fletcher, 'China and Central Asia, 1368–1884'.

⁵⁸ In various periods of its history China had 'an utterly pragmatic and flexible approach toward foreign countries'. Wang Gungwu, 'Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia', p. 43.

⁵⁹ For these events, see Wang Yi-T'ung, *Official Relations Between China and Japan, 1368–1549* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953); and Edward L. Dreyer, *Early Ming China: A Political History, 1355–1435* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982).

had no relations with China. Such a defence might be justified on the premise that all foreign relations were 'official' and sanctioned by Chinese rulers.⁶⁰ But this explanation strips the model of much of its interpretive value, bearing in mind that even at the times when the Japanese and the Mongols stayed away from the early Ming tribute system, they nonetheless maintained—often the more interesting—aspects of interactions with Ming China. Can we not say, for example, that Yoshimochi's letter to Yongle in 1418, denying responsibility for Japanese piracy,⁶¹ is an example of interaction between Japan and China, or that Kanenaga's execution of Chinese envoys and his defiant letters to the Ming court⁶² do not imply larger Sino-Japanese relations, or indeed that Mongol resistance against and challenging of Ming China, often characterized by wars,⁶³ are emblematic of Sino-Mongol relations during the early Ming?

The relations between China and other countries must be conceived of as broadly beyond those of a tributary nature, because not all international relations in historical East Asia were tributary. Fairbank would certainly not deny this fact, but his, and many others', focus on 'tribute' gives the impression that tributary relations were ubiquitous and important to an extent that excluded all other aspects of foreign relations. As such, the model overlooks a large and important facet of the political dynamics of China's foreign relations, because the tribute system was by no means the only medium or institution of interstate relations, much less 'a scheme of things entire'. 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. The Western literature on early Sino-Western relations may have given excessive emphasis to tribute embassies.'⁶⁴

The early Ming tribute system, from the standpoint of China's foreign relations mechanism or institution, encompassed only Sino-Korean relations and a small part of Sino-Japanese and Sino-Mongol relations. Much of the interesting interaction between China and its neighbours occurred outside of it. How then can one claim that between 1368 and 1842 'China's foreign political, economic, and cultural relations were conducted in a world ordered by, and experienced through, the tribute system'?⁶⁵

⁶⁰ It needs to be noted, however, that there are important exceptions to the assertion that all *official* relations must be tribute-based. Tribute, for example, was not the only way for the Manchu Qing court to arrange official relationships with the nomadic peoples in Inner Asia. Ning Chia, 'The Lifanyuan and the Inner Asian Rituals in the Early Qing (1644-1795)', *Late Imperial China*, Vol. 14, No. 1, June 1993, pp. 60-92, at p. 80.

⁶¹ Wang Yi-T'ung, *Official Relations Between China and Japan*, pp. 52-3.

⁶² Zhang Peiheng and Yu Suisheng, eds., *Ershisishi quanyi: Ming Shi (The Full Translation of the Twenty-Four Histories—History of Ming)* (Shanghai: Hanyu dacidian chubanshe, 2004), p. 6727.

⁶³ Edward L. Dreyer, *Early Ming China*.

⁶⁴ John E. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Mark Mancall, *China at the Center*, p. 13.

Interpretive Power

It is the model's interpretive power that is most open to question. It proposes that Chinese rulers constructed hierarchic relations with foreign countries for reasons of prestige and political defence, and foreign rulers paid tribute to China because they desired trade and profit. Ideology constituting a main component of their foreign relationships, Chinese rulers relied chiefly on Confucian culture and the rule of virtue to win foreigners over. Foreign rulers, meanwhile, acceded to Chinese demands and observed prescribed rituals, presumably because of their desire for trade.

But this article is about to show that early Ming rulers frequently demanded tributary relations for reasons other than but as important as prestige and legitimation, namely those of security on the frontier. Also, that foreign rulers paid tribute to China for purposes beyond trade that ranged from survival, legitimacy, economic profit and military protection at one end of the scale to its use as a stepping stone to hegemony on the other, and moreover that Chinese rulers did not rely exclusively on Confucianism to expand influence, but used both 'hard power' and 'soft power' to obtain compliance from other states. Foreign rulers, meanwhile, did not always meekly observe Chinese regulations, and at times violated these norms in pursuit of self-interested objectives. The model is thus incapable of capturing the multiplicity of the relations between China and its neighbours.

To understand historical East Asian politics, one must have an idea of the motives, aims, and strategies underlying the relations between China and other polities. The model cites Chinese motives as mainly comprising prestige, Chinese aims as mainly those of defence, and persuasion as the main Chinese strategy. But there have been variances in all three. Consider the example of Ming China's relations with Korea, the country usually regarded as China's 'model tributary'.

In January 1369, the Hongwu emperor dispatched an envoy to Korea to initiate tributary relations. Having just forcibly seized power from the Yuan, his most urgent task was to establish the legitimacy of his ascendancy.⁶⁶ Hongwu's main concern, therefore, was to exact overt symbolic acknowledgment from foreign rulers of China's cosmological centrality and affirmation of the legitimacy of his succession to the dynastic authority.⁶⁷ Tributary relations of this kind imposed no control over Korea's internal affairs but did signify China's intent to have the upper hand in deciding Korea's China policies.

⁶⁶ Huang Chih Lien, *Dongya de liyi shijie: Zhongguo fengjian wangchao yu Chaoxian bandao guanxi xingtai lun* (*The Ritual and Justice World in East Asia: the Relations between Chinese Feudal Dynasties and Korea Pennsular*) (Beijing: Renmin daxue chubanshe, 1994), p. 185.

⁶⁷ Wang Gungwu, *China and the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1991), p. 112.

Although legitimation was the main motivation behind his first mission, Hongwu also had security concerns in Manchuria. Not pacified until 1387, it was a strategic region where, due to the presence of the Mongols and the Jurchens on its borders, Korea also had substantial security concerns. Between 1369 and 1371, Hongwu tried to persuade the Koreans—by dispatching envoys, evoking historical precedents, and bestowing gifts—to submit to his authority. After the Korean campaigns between 1370 and 1371 in Liaodong, however, the Ming emperor began to perceive its neighbour as a security threat and to adopt more decisive measures to compel Koryŏ court compliance, including blackmail. In 1374, for example, Hongwu reduced the frequency of Korean missions to China to once every three years, perhaps in an attempt to gain Korean concession and cooperation in maintaining its security in the northeast.⁶⁸ He also withheld the investiture of Yi Sŏng-gye (King T'aejo, r. 1392–98), founder of the new Chosŏn Dynasty in Korea in an attempt to exact his guarantee of Ming security on the northeast border. He in effect demanded proof of total fealty from Korea.⁶⁹

The Hongwu emperor thus employed the strategies of persuasion and blackmail in his dealings with Korea. Almost three decades later, the Yongle emperor tried similar inducements. He allowed Korean envoys detained in Nanjing during the Hongwu reign to return, bestowed lavish gifts and even proposed intermarriage between the two dynastic houses.⁷⁰ As regards relations with the Mongols, both Ming emperors waged frequent military campaigns against them, notably Yongle, who personally led five expeditions on the Mongolian steppe.⁷¹ The variety of strategies that early Ming emperors employed, therefore, contrasts sharply with the rigidity and unitary nature of Chinese foreign policy implied in Fairbank's model.

The model talks of foreign rulers' motives as being mainly those of trade and of their strategies as mainly accommodation. But the motives of Korean, Japanese, and Mongol rulers during the early Ming actually ranged from survival, autonomy and economic profit to hegemony on the steppe; and their strategic responses to China alternated between accommodation (when they paid tribute) and resistance (when they refused to establish official tributary relations).

Accommodation was by no means Korea's sole response to early Ming China overtures. Korean rulers resisted Chinese demands when they

⁶⁸ John D. Langlois, Jr., 'The Hung-wu Reign, 1368–1398', in Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 7: The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, Part I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 166.

⁶⁹ Donald Neil Clark, *Autonomy, Legitimacy, and Tributary Politics: Sino-Korean Relations in the Fall of Koryŏ and the Founding of the Yi*, Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1978, p. 136.

⁷⁰ Huang Chih Lien, *The Ritual and Justice World in East Asia*, p. 280.

⁷¹ Edward L. Dreyer, *Early Ming China*.

perceived them as excessive or as potentially undermining their core interests, particularly those of security. For example, Korean rulers balked at Hongwu's repeated requests to sell horses to the Ming army, perhaps for reasons of preserving their own horse supply for use in possible future conflicts with the Ming in Manchuria.⁷² Korea also challenged Ming China when it perceived the latter's demands as impinging on its crucial interests of survival and independence. One example is the preemptive strike that Korea launched against the Ming in 1388, in the belief that Emperor Hongwu had designs on Korean territory and was planning an invasion.⁷³ During the Yongle reign Korea also waged a spirited challenge against Chinese penetration into Jurchen lands, which was a sphere of Korean influence vital to its security interests.⁷⁴

The Mongols, on the other hand, exploited their intermittent tributary relations with the Ming to the hilt, motivated by economic profit, political prestige and military protection. They did their utmost to take advantage of the Ming in efforts to enrich, strengthen and protect themselves while at the same time pursuing the self-interested goals of destroying rival tribes and establishing hegemony on the steppe. Profit was thus the decisive motivation behind Mongol missions to the Ming court. It is notable that after their defeat in wars with the Ming during the Yongle reign, the Mongols came directly to the Ming court to present tribute. A better explanation for this than the desire for political and economic benefits in addition to ensuring survival after defeat is hard to find.

The Mongols directly challenged the Ming by competing with it politically and militarily. Strengthened after exploiting the benefits of paying tribute to the Ming, the Mongols tried to expand their power at Ming expense. Mahmud began to challenge the Ming in 1413⁷⁵ and Arughtai allowed raids on the Ming frontier from 1422 to 1424.⁷⁶ These leaders thus challenged Ming dominance of the region because it presented an obstacle to their intended Mongol hegemony over the steppe.

Fairbank's model does not capture these various motives and strategies in the relations between China and its neighbours because its focus is on the ritualistic aspects of tributary relations. But Fairbank of course recognized the complexity of these relations. As Millward points out, Fairbank indirectly acknowledged in various places, especially in his 'Aims and

⁷² Huang Chih Lien, *The Ritual and Justice World in East Asia*, pp. 373–5.

⁷³ L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography: 1368–1644* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 1600–1.

⁷⁴ Henry Serruys, *Sino-Jurchen Relations during the Yong-lo Period (1403–1424)* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrssowitz, 1955).

⁷⁵ Li Guoxiang et al., *A Compilation of Materials on Foreign Affairs from the Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty*, p. 19; and Zhang Peiheng and Yu Suisheng, eds., *The Full Translation of the Twenty-Four Histories—History of Ming*, p. 6862.

⁷⁶ Zhang Peiheng and Yu Suisheng, eds., *The Full Translation of the Twenty-Four Histories—History of Ming*, pp. 6836–7.

Means' table, that Qing relations with Inner Asia involved something other than the tribute system.⁷⁷ But although he identified among the various types of relations, including military conquest, administrative control, diplomatic manipulation and cultural-ideological attraction, only the latter fits within his model. Fairbank did not take the next step of reformulating the model on the basis of these complexities. And although he pointed out that 'the Chinese world order was a unified concept only at the Chinese end and only on the normative level, as an ideal pattern',⁷⁸ he did not explore the implication of his own caveat.

Mancall also remarks on 'the extraordinary variety of Chinese political strategies'. But he attributes these variations to the 'genius' of the tribute system.⁷⁹ One must ask, however, where the 'genius' came from in the first place. The 'genius' of specific tribute systems in history is indeed something to be explained. The tendency to attribute each variant in relations between China and other countries to a monolithic and omnipotent tribute system impedes, rather than facilitates, further enquiry into historical East Asian politics.

'Tribute' and the accompanying rituals are almost the exclusive focus of Fairbank's model. But does it capture the variant meanings of tribute? If the 'moral value of tribute' and the 'material value of trade' are all that the model has to say on this question, then it will again fail this critical test. Chinese rulers demanded tributary relations for the purpose of domestic political legitimation⁸⁰ as well as security on the frontier. The type of tribute varied with the tribute-bearer. Tribute embassies did not always imply submission to the Chinese emperor and neither can they all be explained by the trade motive. A number of scholars have recently argued, generally when speaking of the Qing, that 'tribute' encompassed many kinds of trading and power relationships.⁸¹ Peter Perdue points out that Qing relations with the Dutch, Russians, Kazakhs, Mongols, Koreans, Ryukyus, and later British all fit into the tribute system, although each had a separate political and commercial relationship with the Qing empire.⁸² The model as it stands cannot incorporate these varied relationships. Its utility is limited even in areas where it is meant best to apply.

The inadequacy of the model in the early Ming casts serious doubt on its usefulness for the larger East Asian history. That the model is incapable of interpreting major events in the early Ming, when China was unified

⁷⁷ James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass*, p. 9.

⁷⁸ J. K. Fairbank, 'A Preliminary Framework', p. 12.

⁷⁹ Mark Mancall, *China at the Center*, p. 30.

⁸⁰ On this also see John E. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, pp. 177–8, in which Wills notes the 'primacy of domestic audience'.

⁸¹ Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West*; James A. Millward, 'Qing Silk-Horse Trade'; James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass*; Nicola Di Cosmo, 'Kirghiz Nomads on the Qing Frontier'.

⁸² Peter C. Perdue, 'A Frontier View of Chineseness', p. 66.

and powerful and when sinocentrism found a strong expression, makes one wonder how well it can perform in periods when China was divided and weak. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Rossabi and his collaborators found that the 'Chinese world order' did not persist for the entire period from the 2nd century BC to the first Opium War. During the weak Song dynasty (960–1279), Chinese foreign policy displayed a great deal of flexibility and pragmatism, because Chinese rulers were in no position to demand that foreigners adhere to the 'tribute system' scheme of conducting foreign relations. The Song's military weakness compelled its officials to treat China's neighbours as equals, and a true multi-state system operated during this time.⁸³ As Wang Gungwu nicely puts it, 'When all you could do was to try to hold the line, there was obviously no Chinese world order.'⁸⁴

The difficulty the model encounters in interpreting major events in East Asian history has a simple explanation; it is mainly based on the experiences of the late Qing, and believed capable of accounting for the Qing failure to meet the Western challenge. But there are assumptions unique to the late Qing period behind the model which might not apply to other periods of Chinese history. As Wills observes,

Ch'ing [Qing] policy toward maritime Europeans drifted toward the great confrontation of the 19th century isolationist, preoccupied with issues of ceremonial and documentary precedence, seemingly unable to focus on the realities of the intrusion into its world of great powers that did not accept or even tolerate Chinese practices in foreign relations. Isolationism, ceremonialism, and a focus on appearances rather than on realities outside China also were characteristic of the institutions and regulations of the tribute system. The ceremonial core of that system assaulted by McCartney in the kowtow controversy and the request for a resident minister were even more vehemently defended after 1842. Thus it is not hard to see why, especially when looking back from the 19th century, it has seemed to make such good sense to refer to the whole pattern of isolationist, appearance-obsessed, Sinocentric foreign policy as a 'tribute system'.⁸⁵

But not all of 'traditional China's foreign relations' were isolationist, appearance-obsessed, or sinocentric.⁸⁶ That part of the model, which may make good sense when applied to the late Qing policies towards Europeans, might not give a true picture of Chinese foreign policies in other periods. It is consequently not surprising that the model encounters difficulties when applied to other periods.

⁸³ Morris Rossabi, ed., *China among Equals*.

⁸⁴ Wang Gungwu, 'The Rhetoric of a Lesser Empire', p. 62.

⁸⁵ John E. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, p. 187.

⁸⁶ Such a characterization may not be accurate even for the mid-late Qing period. Qing policies during this period were not always rigid and sinocentric. Michael H. Hunt, for example, characterizes Qing policymaking as flexible and even opportunistic. See Michael Hunt, *The Genesis of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 31.

Beyond the Tribute System

The many problems discussed above suggest the need at least to move beyond the original framework established by Fairbank. Although many scholars have been doing this for some time, their critiques, although insightful about the inadequacies of the model, do not suggest abandoning the 'tribute system' as an analytical category. Only James Hevia has set out to bypass it and construct his own analysis from a postmodern perspective.⁸⁷ But recent writings on the tribute system do suggest the need to deconstruct the tribute system as a monolithic entity. Perdue, for example, observes that 'This "system" was constantly under challenge, breaking down, being reconfigured and rebuilt. It was never stable, fixed, nor uniform. In regard to some regions, like Korea, relations were fairly stable; elsewhere, particularly in the northwest, wide fluctuations occurred.'⁸⁸ This clearly implies the need to deconstruct the tribute system and explain the varied degrees of stability in China's foreign relations.

Every tribute system has its own content and specificity. Taking the Han as the first historical period in which the tribute system began to take shape,⁸⁹ the system can only have evolved according to the dynasty's changing characteristics, and reflect the changes in China's relations with other countries. There cannot have been one single, unchanging tribute system throughout Chinese history. The ritual practices accompanying tribute missions themselves indeed changed, because different dynasties each had their specific tributary regulations. One thus needs to recognize the evolutionary aspect of the tribute system as an historical institution, one that 'was determined by past traditions as well as by contemporary conditions' that Chinese rulers perceived and confronted.⁹⁰ The Han tribute system, for example, must be acknowledged as different from that of the Ming or Qing. These tribute systems should be differentiated according to historical realities, bearing in mind the changing power realities, motives, and aims underlying the relations between China and other countries at different periods of time.

The institution of the tribute system, therefore, is the dependent variable to be explained. Using it as an independent variable in an institutionalist explanation entails showing how China and its neighbours responded to the constraints and incentives such an institution created, and how the dynamics

⁸⁷ James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*.

⁸⁸ Peter C. Perdue, 'A Frontier View of Chineseness', p. 67.

⁸⁹ Ying-shih Yü, *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967).

⁹⁰ Wang Gungwu, 'Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia', p. 62.

of path dependence carried their interactions along.⁹¹ But if in the final analysis it was China's material and cultural resources that created these constraints and incentives, an institutionalist account based on the tribute system seems superfluous. If Chinese rulers constructed the tribute system and if foreign rulers participated in such a system because of respective preexisting interests, then there is no need to use the tribute system to explain why their interactions followed an 'institutionalized' pattern. We need only to explain the origins of their interests and how they gave rise to patterns of interaction. The tribute system then appears as a by-product of these interests and actions, that is, something explainable by them. If the underlying interests and strategies of China and its neighbours change, so also do the content and characteristics of the tribute system, as by-products of strategic interaction. This is indeed apparent in East Asian history and is what this article partly tries to show.

But there is a deeper problem when discussing the tribute system and its influence on historical East Asian politics. Explaining the tribute system in a particular historical period hardly explains the entire sphere of East Asian politics of that period. As earlier pointed out, the tribute system, if viewed as an institution, is one among several in East Asian history. An analysis framed around the tribute system, therefore, is necessarily incomplete when taking into account the larger political dynamics between China and its neighbours. This is obvious from the early Ming examples already discussed. Although certain strategies used by Ming China and its neighbours, such as persuasion, can be seen from a tribute-system perspective, others, such as war, blackmail, balking, and challenging do not fall so neatly into the tribute-system framework. Of course, no scholar has ever claimed that the tribute system is everything in East Asian international relations. But overemphasis on it has nevertheless slighted the importance of other institutions and political dynamics.

These two points raise the need to develop concepts and frameworks that explain both the tributary and non-tributary aspects of historical East Asian politics. For example, we need to move beyond traditional concepts such as 'hierarchy' to understand China's foreign relations. As Wang Gungwu pointed out a long time ago:

Traditional Chinese dealings with non-Chinese peoples are often described as having been based on hierarchical principles. This I believe to be inadequate for an understanding of the tributary system. More important is the principle of superiority together with that of security or inviolability. From this, it should become clear that Chinese institutions were not as inflexible as they have often been made out to be by students of 19th century history.⁹²

⁹¹ For a recent work that explicates the logic of institutional explanation, see Craig Parsons, *How to Map Arguments in Political Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chapter 3.

⁹² Wang Gungwu, 'Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia', p. 61.

Moving beyond the tribute system paradigm, one can raise a number of questions derived from the preceding discussions. How useful is sinocentrism as an analytical assumption for foreign policy-making in imperial China? What were the precise effects of sinocentrism on traditional China's foreign relations? What other assumptions do we need? Why was Chinese foreign policy characterized by rigidity at certain times and by pragmatism and flexibility at others? How can one explain the extraordinary range of variants in motives, strategies and degrees of stability in China's foreign relations? What were the motives and strategies underlying other countries' relations with China? In what sense can one say that a hierarchy between China and these countries was established? What was the significance of tribute presentation and its associated ritual practices? What lay behind tribute and ritual? Finally, and more generally, what were the patterns of interaction between China and its neighbours?

Satisfactory answers to these questions constitutes a big step forward towards identifying the multiplicity of relations between China and its neighbours, and to broadening our conceptual horizon of historical East Asian politics. Once this multiplicity is shown, the inadequacy of tribute-system-centred models will become apparent.

From a political-science perspective, we need more enduring concepts about international politics than the supposedly omnipotent 'tribute system'. As earlier emphasized, the tribute system itself needs to be explained through more fundamental concepts that lead to deeper levels of explanations of historical East Asian politics. These concepts, whether time-honoured ones such as power, security and culture, or entirely new ones not yet developed, should be relevant to the understanding of both tributary and non-tributary politics between China and its neighbours, and able to cross the analytical divide created by the tribute system paradigm. From a tribute-system perspective, we need also to construct a complementary framework of non-tributary relations that explains the comprehensive relations between China and its neighbours. A model that is able to account for both the tributary and non-tributary aspects of China's foreign relations is obviously superior to one that can only account for one.

Based upon the preceding discussions, I shall suggest the rudiments of one such framework as the starting point of a major tributary politics puzzle. The tribute system might simultaneously be seen at two levels.⁹³ At one level it was a discourse or rhetoric on Chinese centrality and superiority. Such sinocentric discourse remained a near constant throughout all imperial Chinese dynasties. Chinese rulers used the language of sinocentrism, even at times when other polities physically challenged the empire, to conceal altered power relations. Prasenjit Duara characterizes the Chinese

⁹³ This way of seeing the tribute system was suggested to me by Brantly Womack, though elements of it have already been mentioned in the preceding sections of this article.

attempts to cover alternative views of world order with the rhetoric of universalism as China's defensive strategy.⁹⁴ The analytical task here is to explain the constancy of the sinocentric rhetoric.

At another level, the tribute system might be seen as a pattern of interaction in the relations between China and its neighbours. But in contrast to the tribute system as an imperial discourse, that as a pattern of foreign relations displays great historical variances. They are apparent in the contrast in foreign relation approaches during the strong Tang dynasty and in the succeeding, weaker Song Dynasty. Variances are also conspicuous in the foreign relations patterns during the equally strong early Ming and early Qing periods. The analytical task here is to explain variances in the tribute system on the level of its function as a pattern of foreign relations. The tribute system puzzle, therefore, consists of explaining why the discourse remained a constant but its behavioural manifestations displayed variances. It presents the analytical challenge of devising a framework that can account for both rhetorical constancy and behavioural change.

One way to begin constructing such a framework is to posit two motivations for Chinese rulers: legitimacy and security. The legitimacy motive derives from Chinese rulers' self-prescribed identity as the Son of Heaven, which was further informed by the Chinese conception of *tianxia* (literally, 'all under heaven') and the historical tradition of perceiving China as the universal empire encompassing this *tianxia*. The need for legitimation compelled Chinese rulers to seek tribute from foreign rulers to demonstrate their status as the Son of Heaven. This explains why the sinocentric rhetoric remained a constant historically, varying in emphasis across time periods according to the need to affirm legitimacy. The legitimacy motive also explains the rhetorical constancy irrespective of the power realities at a given moment, because the need for legitimacy was constant whether China was weak or strong.

But the legitimacy motive tells us little about how a sinocentric China might behave, other than that it would promote a Chinese superiority discourse. Would the legitimacy need based on sinocentrism lead to an offensive strategy of conquest to subdue all those unwilling to acknowledge Chinese superiority, or instead to a mentality of self-delusion and gratification, indifference, or even isolation? By itself, sinocentric legitimacy is indeterminate on these issues; we need at least the security motive as an additional motivational assumption, and to combine these two assumptions with situational variables to obtain more behavioural implications. The security motive is based on the assumption that the Chinese empire, just like any other state, must worry about its physical security, be it the threat

⁹⁴ Prasenjit Duara, *The Global and Regional in China's Nation-Formation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 99.

throughout its history of nomadic invasions from the north or Japanese piracy during the Ming period.

Behavioural implications can be deduced when the security motive is coupled with China's material conditions at any given moment. A strong China (such as the early Ming) made a response to security threats different from that of a weak China (such as the Song). In addition to promoting the normal tributary discourse, the early Ming also expected tributes from foreign rulers, and resorted to blackmail if the request was rejected. It had strategies at its disposal, ranging from outright conquest to subtle persuasion, with which to challenge security threats in Manchuria, Mongolia, and the east coast. The Southern Song, in contrast, could do little in addition to clinging to tributary discourse as face-saving rhetoric other than to offer its tribute to the Jin to ensure survival. The different material conditions—or 'structures' of international politics—thus help to explain the varied strategies that China employed toward its neighbours in the interests of guaranteeing security.

By positing two motivations for Chinese rulers and deducing their behavioural implications under the material conditions of a given period, the framework can help to explain both the constancy of and change in tributary politics on the Chinese side. Similar reasoning and positing of appropriate motivations can be applied to deducing the behavioural patterns of the rulers of China's neighbours. A systemic framework showing the patterns of interaction between China and its neighbours and their underlying motivations and strategies can then be developed. Moreover, such a framework, by taking into account the security as well as the legitimacy motive, can explain aspects of historical East Asian politics that were not 'tributary'. This is both one way of conceptualizing historical East Asian politics and an alternative to the tribute system paradigm, which I have given no more than a sketchy outline. Other frameworks must surely be possible when major analytical puzzles are tackled and rigorous analysis applied.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to examine the extant scholarly research on the tribute system and ask how much light tribute-system-centred perspectives can shed on historical East Asian politics. Three ways in which the term 'tribute system' has been used in the relevant literature—as the bureaucratic management of foreign relations on the Chinese side; as an international society institution from the English School perspective; and as the medium for China's foreign relations as developed in Fairbank's interpretive model—have been identified. I have focused on Fairbank's model and evaluated it as an heuristic device for further thinking about

a number of conceptual and empirical issues relevant to our understanding of historical East Asian politics.

The Fairbank model is problematic for a number of reasons. It is internally flawed and also incapable of interpreting major events in East Asian history. It tries to account for certain long continuities in the relations between China and its neighbours, but does not consider equally impressive variations and changes in these relations. The utility of the model is limited, and we have to agree with Wills that ‘we could not keep in focus all aspects of the Chinese diplomatic tradition, all sources of conflict, if we began by calling all of the Chinese diplomatic tradition the “tribute system”’.⁹⁵ One might add that the model is even less useful when dealing with regional politics as a whole, since it is heavily biased towards China.

Fairbank, it must be emphasized, recognized various anomalies and offered caveats regarding his framework. He did not, however, systematically refine his model according to these anomalies. It is clear that the model, as Fairbank puts it, is a ‘preliminary framework’, laying out certain central ideas and themes for possible further development. It is not my intention to oversimplify or caricature it, but rather to identify its inadequacies and suggest ways of moving beyond this ‘preliminary’ stage of conceptualizing historical East Asian politics. My central concern is that of how IR scholars can produce better theoretical and empirical work on historical East Asian politics by critically drawing on the foundation so prominently laid by Fairbank and others. We need, at least in the field of historical East Asian politics, a fruitful dialogue between political scientists and historians.

What of the idea of the ‘tribute system’ then? Wills suggests that, ‘It would be conceptually clearer if the term “tribute system” were used only for this systematic complex of bureaucratic regulation developed around AD 1400.’⁹⁶ This conception of the tribute system might be too restrictive. But scholars need at least to make clear *which* tribute system is being discussed. It makes little sense even to speak of the whole Ming tribute system or whole Qing tribute system, since we know that early Ming foreign policy differed from that of the mid-late Ming, as did early Qing foreign policy from that of the mid-late Qing. The term ‘tribute system’ can still be useful descriptive shorthand, so long as we make clear what is meant by it. To avoid essentialization, however, we must take the tribute system of a historical period as the object, rather than the unit, of analysis. The most important task is to explain the various historical manifestations of the tribute system by developing another set of conceptual frameworks. Enquiry into historical East Asian politics cannot stop at the tribute system.

⁹⁵ John E. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, p. 172.

⁹⁶ John E. Wills, ‘Tribute, Defensiveness, and Dependency’, p. 225.

But taking a historical tribute system as the object of analysis for understanding the relations between China and other countries during a specific period is also inadequate, because it ignores the relations outside of normal tributary politics. It is possible to describe and analyse the relations between China and its neighbours without adhering to 'tribute system' language. The term 'tribute system' is a western invention devised no later than the nineteenth century and translated back into Chinese as *chaogong tixi* (朝贡体系). The terms *chao* and *gong* do appear in Chinese historical sources, but the Chinese had no conception of it as a system as such. The tribute system is a modern intellectual construct that we refine or abandon, depending on the intellectual payoffs that can be generated. The important point is that one can talk about tributary *relations* without feeling simultaneously obliged to stick to the tribute *system*. The analytical task is to understand what actually lay behind these *relations*. It also functions as an important reminder that the actual 'international system' of historical East Asian politics is much broader than the 'tribute system'. Since Fairbank's tribute system paradigm is problematic, and since the tribute system, however conceived, is only a part of the whole picture of historical East Asian politics, we should work on developing new conceptualizations that can remedy some of the problems discussed in this article. Ultimately, we may ask a question similar to that Hevia has posed: If the 'tribute system' is removed, what do the relations between China and other countries look like?⁹⁷ Discussions about East Asian international relations have too long and too often come down to discussions about the tribute system. It is time to think about ways to move beyond this paradigm.

⁹⁷ James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, p. xi.