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# Tribute, trade and the demise of the 'Chinese world order' in Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) China

Harriet T. Zurndorfer

Among the most beautiful and distinctive paintings created by the gifted Jesuit artist and architect Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766) during his sojourn in China was 'Kazath Tribute Horses' (*Hasake gongma*), which portrays a kowtowing Kazak leading tribute horses to the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-96) amid rustic furnishings at the Chengde imperial summer retreat.<sup>1</sup> For several generations of students and scholars of Chinese history, this picture represented the essence of China's foreign relations during the imperial era: woolen-robed nomads offering horses and other pastoral products as 'tribute' (*gong*) to the Chinese court in return for lavish gifts. The image of 'barbarians' expressing their recognition of 'the supreme virtue of the Chinese Son of Heaven' in kneeling and prostrated postures, or in Chinese terms, performing the *koutou* consisting of three kneels and nine bows (*sangui jiu kou*), has been enduring. Western language accounts of embassies written by eighteenth century visitors to China such as Lord Macartney, reinforced earlier Jesuit-authored and Dutch VOC representatives' descriptions of court ritual and ceremony cast in regimental distances and timing.<sup>2</sup> By the nineteenth century the tribute system began its

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<sup>1</sup> Painted in 1757. The original is in the Musée Guimet. There are partial reproductions in Cécile Beurdeley and Michel Beurdeley, *Giuseppe Castiglione: A Jesuit Painter at the Court of the Chinese Emperors* (London: Lund Humphries 1972) 104-105.

<sup>2</sup> The significance of Macartney's visit to China for European history is the focus of the volume by Alain Peyrefitte, *L'empire immobile ou le choc des mondes* (Paris 1989). See also my critique of this work, H. Zurndorfer, 'La sinologie immobile', *Études chinoises* 8 (1989) 99-120. Another important study of the Macartney embassy is James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC 1995). John Wills' book, *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K'ang-hsi, 1666-1687* (Cambridge, MA 1984) opens with an account of Pieter van Hoorn's embassy to China in 1666.



'Kazaks presenting horses in tribute' (cat. 23. Musée Guimet, Paris): Continues next page. Bron: Cécile and Michel Beurdeley, *Giuseppe Castiglione, A Jesuit painter at the court of the Chinese Emperors* (London: Lund Humphries 1971) 104-105.

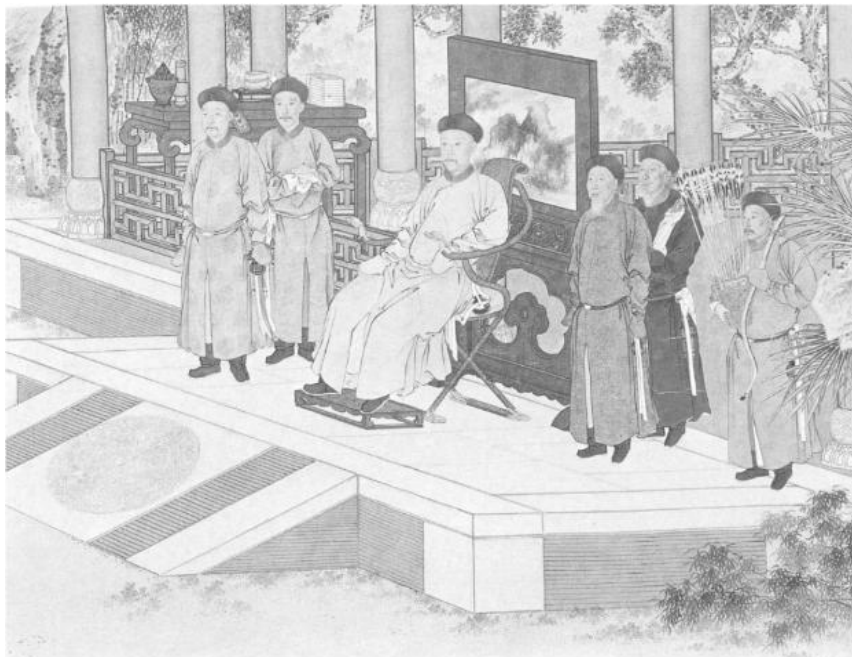
downhill phase which the late eminent American scholar of modern Chinese history, John K. Fairbank (1907-91), called its 'long twilight'.<sup>3</sup>

As is well-known, Fairbank was the first Western scholar to conceptualize about the diplomatic and strategic practices known as the 'tribute system', first in an article written with Ssu-yü Teng (1941),<sup>4</sup> then in a

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<sup>3</sup> John K. Fairbank, 'The Early Treaty System in the Chinese World Order' in: J. Fairbank ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA 1968) 263.

<sup>4</sup> J.K.Fairbank and Ssu-yü Teng, 'On the Ch'ing Tribute System', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6 (1941) 135-246.



chapter in his book *Trade and Diplomacy on the Chinese Coast* (1953),<sup>5</sup> and finally, in his introduction to the volume *The Chinese World Order* (1968).<sup>6</sup> Fairbank's model of the tribute system specified:

In order to deal with the Chinese, foreign rulers were required to send tribute embassies periodically to the Chinese emperor. When an embassy reached the Chinese border, Chinese officials immediately took charge and accompanied the foreign envoys to the capital. The Chinese government bore all the expenses of the embassy during its stay in China. Its officials taught the envoys the proper etiquette for their appearance at court. After the envoys had been properly coached, they had an audience with the emperor. They performed the rituals, including the kowtow, a symbolic recognition of their inferiority and, more important, of their acknowledgment of their status as envoys of a 'vassal' state or tribe. Their conduct at court

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<sup>5</sup> John K. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1852-1854* (Cambridge, MA 1953).

<sup>6</sup> J.K. Fairbank, 'A Preliminary Framework' in: idem *The Chinese World Order*, 1-19.

implied that their ruler was subordinate to the emperor. Once they concluded this ritual, the emperor summoned them closer to the throne for a brief conversation. Then they offered their tribute of native goods to him, and he, in turn, bestowed valuable gifts upon them and their ruler. The audience ended, and the envoys then had three to five days to trade with Chinese merchants.<sup>7</sup>

According to Fairbank, the tribute system was a kind of ‘diplomatic medium’ by which the Chinese court enshrined its cultural superiority over surrounding peoples and mythologized the Chinese emperor’s sovereignty over all humankind. ‘In theory, they (i.e. the vassals) were irresistibly drawn into this relationship, they “came and were transformed” (*laibua*), by the superior blessings of (Chinese) civilization’.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the hierarchy which bound Chinese society within its walls also extended to include foreign lands; just as the Son of Heaven categorized his subjects according to social and political rank, he classified foreign lands.<sup>9</sup> As the cover illustration of *The Chinese World Order* shows, Fairbank visualized China’s relationship with its neighbours as a series of concentric rings, with China at the center. And nearest to this ‘Sinic’ center were those countries like Vietnam and Korea which had institutionalized the Chinese language and philosophy into their governments, while peripheral peoples, i.e. nomadic steppe groups,<sup>10</sup> ‘on the fringe of the Chinese cultural area’, formed the second zone away from the center. Finally, at the outer zones were far away *waiyi* (outer barbarians) located either over land or sea, and which included Japan and states of Southeast and South Asia, and eventually, European nations.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, Fairbank stressed, one should not downplay the trade factor in all this: there were commercial interests at stake under all this ritualistic coating. In fact, what sustained the tribute system over periods of

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<sup>7</sup> Morris Rossabi, ‘Introduction’ in: M.Rossabi ed., *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and its Neighbors, 10th–14th Centuries* (Berkeley 1983) 2. See also, Fairbank, ‘A Preliminary Framework’, 1-4.

<sup>8</sup> Fairbank, ‘Preliminary Framework’, 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Nomadic steppe groups’ refer to non-Chinese peoples inhabiting the regions stretching from Manchuria through Mongolia and Turkestan to Tibet. Throughout most of their history, they depended on the rearing of horses and sheep for their livelihood, and regularly migrated in search of pasture lands according to climatic conditions.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 2.

Chinese history was that it had become an 'ingenious vehicle' for trade.<sup>12</sup> China needed horses, pastoral products and the steppe peoples regularly bartered these for tea and silk. China also used the trade factor to buy loyalty and military allies. For example, when the Qing court mustered Dutch naval support in the campaign against Ming loyalist foes in Taiwan in the 1670s, it announced special trading privileges to the VOC.<sup>13</sup> The tribute system did have a pragmatic side, but its rhetoric forbid any notion of 'private trade' outside the basic framework of suzerain-vassal.

While Fairbank may have been the first foreign scholar to theorize the underpinnings of the tribute system, he was by no means the first Western expert to interest himself in Sino-foreign relations. The earliest European sinologists such as the French scholars Jean Pierre Abel-Rémusat and Stanislaus Julien, had studied the Chinese documentary record on non-Sinitic peoples. Along with Edouard Chavannes, they translated sources on Chinese travellers, Uighurs, Turks, and others. N. Ya Bičurin did the same in Russian with translations of Chinese materials on several Central Asian peoples. Other well-known China scholars who committed such translations include the German August Pfizmaier on Korean-Chinese contacts. English translations by Friedrich Hirth on the Roman East, Emil Bretschneider on Central and West Asia, E.H. Parker on the Turks, and S.W. Bushell on Tibet were also published.

So engaging was the matter of Sino-foreign relations for European scholars during the nineteenth century that by the time Henri Cordier compiled the *Bibliotheca sinica: dictionnaire bibliographique des ouvrages relatifs à l'empire chine* (Paris, 1893-95), it was clear that this subject was a major attraction to the budding academic community of sinologists: more than half of the 70,000 entries in this bibliography were about Chinese foreign relations. Many of these publications were annotated translations. As one modern scholar has remarked, these translations were valuable in that they made 'Chinese history a part of world history'.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the same writer pointed out, the problem of the annotated translation was its

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<sup>12</sup> Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> But when the Dutch forces did not materialize after the emperor had petitioned their services, the Qing government withdrew these privileges. See John Wills, 'Ch'ing Relations with the Dutch' in: Fairbank ed., *The Chinese World Order*, 236-42.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy Connor, 'Review Article: Translating the "Barbarians": A New Book in an Old Tradition', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 32 (1972) 241.

role as an ‘extension of the Chinese exegetical tradition’.<sup>15</sup> These nineteenth century sinologists accepted the Chinese ‘predigested’ accounts of foreign peoples, thereby perpetuating traditional Chinese myths and assumptions about foreign relations, and China’s position vis-a-vis other regions. In other words, these scholars adopted a Sino-centric orientation that rejected features of international relations not consonant with Chinese theoretical conditions. They did not challenge the frequent narrative lacunae nor did they attempt to fill in these gaps with information in other sections of the dynastic histories or other sources.

### New Views on the ‘Tribute System’

According to Frederick Mote, when the first Europeans encountered the rigidities of the tribute system, ‘they were made to believe that...[it] represented the pattern of all earlier Chinese history’.<sup>16</sup> He writes:

The founders of the Ming dynasty after 1368, following their expulsion of the Mongols, then reconstructed a much earlier tribute system and vigorously reimposed a sinocentric world order. Their restoration was so successful that by the time the European maritime powers began to enter the East Asian shipping lanes in the sixteenth century, they had little reason not to believe what they were told about it. Both they and the Chinese with whom they dealt believed that it had ‘always’ been so; in proof, ancient writings in abundance were cited.<sup>17</sup>

Mote has built his argument, i.e. the tribute system was not really what European foreigners came to take for granted, upon other modern scholarship. Recent analyses of the interstate relations between China during the Song dynasty (960-1279) with its neighbouring regimes, the Liao (*Qidan* or Khitan, 916-1125), Xia (*Dangxiang* or Tangut, 1038-1227), and Jin (*Nüzhen* or Jurchen, 1115-1234) dynasties from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries were anything but Sinocentric. It was an era of ‘China among equals’, as the title of one collection of studies on this period calls this phase

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<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, Connor refers here to the argumentation of Arthur F. Wright, ‘The Study of Chinese Civilization’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21 (1960) 233-255.

<sup>16</sup> F.W. Mote, *Imperial China 900-1800* (Cambridge, MA 1999) 376.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, 376-77.

of China's foreign relations.<sup>18</sup> During this time, China faced formidable nomadic steppe peoples who had the military means to destroy the country. Song officials, recognizing the military and political weaknesses of their government, adopted a realistic and pragmatic foreign policy, thereby accepting these foreign states as equals. Diplomatic parity defined the relations between Song China and the Liao, Xia, and Jin governments. Interestingly, even the official history of the Song dynasty, the *Songshi*, and other contemporary semi-official written records acknowledged the evidence of this interlude in Sino-foreign relations—'Chinese culture demanded that [China's statesmen and historians] be responsible historians, in recording if not always in interpreting. The facts are there.'<sup>19</sup> One compilation, for example, the *Cefu yuangui* (Outstanding Models from the Storehouse of Literature; completed in 1013) acknowledged that for some time Korea, one of China's tribute vassals, was paying tribute to the Liao dynasty.<sup>20</sup>

Another modern scholar, Takeshi Hamashita reminds us that the tribute system 'did not function in a single dimension only'.<sup>21</sup> A country paid tribute to China while it expected tribute from its neighbors. In this way, the tribute system acted as a loose system of political integration embracing maritime Asia, from Northeast Asia to East Asia, and then from Southeast Asia to Oceania. So, as written records confirm, Vietnam demanded tribute from Laos, and Korea while a tributary to the Middle Kingdom, also sent tribute missions to Japan.<sup>22</sup> This network of relationships also had an important economic side. Reviewing Asia's trade history since the sixteenth century, Hamashita notes:

It can be shown that the foundation for the whole complex tribute-trade formation was determined by the price structure of China and

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<sup>18</sup> Rossabi, *China among Equals*. See note 7.

<sup>19</sup> Mote, *Imperial China*, 377.

<sup>20</sup> Wang Qinruo et al., *Cefu yuangui* (completed in 1013; photo-reprint of 1642 edition), chapter 956:11237.

<sup>21</sup> Takeshi Hamashita, 'The Tribute System and Modern Asia' in: A.J.H. Latham and Heita Kawakatsu eds., *Japanese Industrialization and the Asian Economy* (London and New York 1994) 92.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem. See also Takeshi Hamashita, 'The Intra-regional System in East Asia in Modern Times' in: Peter J. Katzenstein and Takashi Shiraiishi eds., *Network Power: Japan and Asia* (Ithaca 1997) 113-35.



that the tribute-trade zone formed an integrated 'silver zone' in which silver was used as the medium of trade settlement. The key to the functioning of the tribute system as a system was the huge 'demand' for commodities outside China and the difference between prices inside and outside China.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, in this conceptualization, China's tribute system was part of a wider series of political and economic networks that encompassed those individuals and groups who were not necessarily part of the official 'tribute system'.<sup>24</sup>

One should also not underestimate the 'irregular trade' factor, i.e. the role of traders or 'pirates' who aimed to gain wealth and riches from the rising commerce along the China coast and beyond since the mid-sixteenth century. The commercial ambitions of both Chinese and foreign merchants could never, and more importantly, were never satisfied by the official rhetoric banning 'private trade'.<sup>25</sup> And there is sufficient material evidence to prove the success of their enterprise: one need only regard the Chinese influences on the architecture, ceramics, and furniture of Java which was an important entrepôt for Chinese traders for centuries.<sup>26</sup> In sum, these new views of the tribute system which link the important role of private trade to wider networks of Chinese contact have correctly redirected attention away from the Sinocentric vision as the chief focal point of imperial China's foreign relations.

### Unravelling the 'Tribute System' Model

How then did the mythology of an ever unchanging Sinocentric 'tribute system' take hold? There are at least three factors which need to be considered here. First, the way historical study developed in Europe and the United States during the first half of the twentieth century obliterated, or simply ignored, the contributions of regions outside northwest Europe to

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<sup>23</sup> Hamashita, 'The Tribute Trade', 96-7.

<sup>24</sup> These series of Asian networks are described and analysed in K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe* (Cambridge 1990).

<sup>25</sup> A good introduction to the role of seafarers and merchants in maritime China is Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China* (Berkeley 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Denys Lombard, *Le Carrefour javanais* II (Paris 1990) 266-76.

the making of the modern world. Although writers and historians long ago recognized the 'near eastern' or 'Oriental' origins of the West, and eventually the significance of Asian trade routes and the voyages of discovery, the general presentation in prewar textbooks was that of a largely autonomous West in contrast to an 'undifferentiated Orient'.<sup>27</sup> These standard guides themselves were a product of a long trend in the development of the discipline of history when nationalism and Western European/American ascendancy on a global scale assumed the primacy of 'the West'.<sup>28</sup> Even after the publication in 1949 of Fernand Braudel's masterpiece *Le Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen* which told readers of the diversity of forces that created the Mediterranean world, and provided an intellectual frame of reference to counter narratives of the 'grand transition' from tradition to modernity, it would still take several decades before scholars would admit that European 'modernization' was not necessarily a product of European uniqueness.<sup>29</sup> Given China's geographical distance from West Europe and the formidable challenges in learning Chinese, it is not surprising that Westerners accepted without question what they read about China's foreign relations in diplomatic and missionary accounts and press reports. Moreover, as mentioned above, those Western scholars who were able to read and translate Chinese sources were the foremost contributors to the myth of the centrality of the tribute system to China's foreign relations.

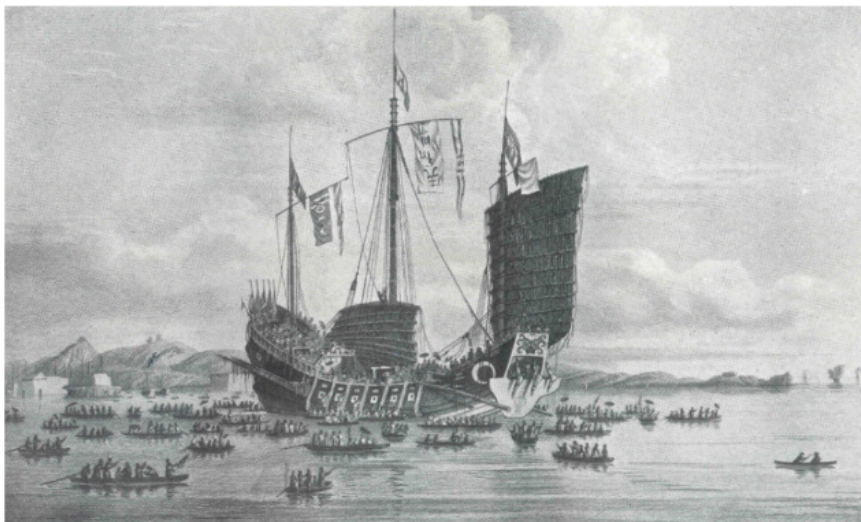
A second reason for the widespread acceptance of the tribute system mythology was Fairbank's influence on the development of the study of Chinese history. His impact, both as a scholar and a teacher of generations of scholars at Harvard University, should not be underrated. In the many editions of his book *The United States and China* (Cambridge MA, 1948; 1958;

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<sup>27</sup> This is the theme of the influential work by Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York 1978).

<sup>28</sup> For further information on how this tendency affected the study of Chinese history, see H. Zurndorfer, 'What the Concept of "The Rise of the West" Teaches Us about the Writing of Chinese History', *Theoretische Geschichte* 25 (1998) 350-369.

<sup>29</sup> There are scholars who continue to write that there is something distinctive in the European past that explains its special economic development and power. See, for example, David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (New York 1998).



'Departure of a loo choo junk with tribute to Pekin' c. 1830. Drawn by W. Smyth, engraved by E. Finden. 'Shews a large junk in harbour with many native boats surrounding her. Luchu Island is on the horizon. In the fifteenth century, the Ming Dynasty of China laid claim to the Archipelago of Luchu, and at the beginning of the seventeenth century it was conquered by the Japanese. (...) a tribute vessel was sent annually to China, which was regarded more as their suzerain than Japan, although tribute was also paid to the latter.' Bron: Orange, *The Chater Collection*, 464, 476.

1971; 1979) as well as in the prestigious textbook he wrote with Edwin O. Reischauer and Albert M. Craig, *A History of East Asian Civilization* (Boston 1960; 1965), Fairbank presented the tribute system as one of the key institutions curbing China's development into the modern world. According to him, the first Opium War (1839-41) was the result of a 'clash of cultures'. On the one hand, there was Britain, determined to insist upon commercial free exchange and, on the other hand, there was the Qing court which was just as determined to refuse diplomatic relations with the West outside the framework of the tributary system. In this presentation of China's situation in the early nineteenth century, Fairbank was arguing that cultural factors constrained the country's leaders from overcoming traditional 'Confucian' biases toward the value of trade as well as technology, and confirming Chinese history's traditional periodization according to the dynastic cycle. In the dynastic cycle framework, the nineteenth century was the final phase of a process of formation, maturation, and decay, and in Fairbank's view,

China's 'mismanagement' of these Western 'barbarians' was further proof of the downhill phase of the cycle.

Fairbank's own formative influences are also relevant here. As a graduate student, first at Oxford where he prepared a doctoral thesis on China in the nineteenth century, and later in Beijing under the tutelage of the famed historian, diplomat/politician, Jiang Tingfu (also known as T.F. Tsiang, 1895-1965) in the early 1930s, he came to perceive the limitations of contemporary knowledge of China's history in the West. Jiang, who himself had gained a Ph.D. degree in British political history awarded by Columbia University in 1923, realized the extent to which Westerners had reconstructed China's diplomatic history from a Western perspective, and that the Chinese side of the story had never received adequate attention.<sup>30</sup> Jiang attempted to overcome these limitations first by studying documents originating from some Qing archives that had just been made available, and then promoting the advantages of their examination to students and scholars, including Fairbank. Jiang introduced him to the Palace Museum collection *Chouban yinshu shimo* (The Management of Barbarian Affairs from A to Z) which chronicled China's foreign contacts. Jiang's own reading of this archive and other compilations led him to conclude that since the Ming dynasty, China had linked trade and diplomacy into one system, i.e. tribute. In a lecture he gave at the London School of Economics in 1936, he explained how imperial China's ideas on international relations were rooted in a deep sense of superiority and a belief that 'national security could only be found in isolation'.<sup>31</sup> For Jiang, the Opium War was the very first incident in the history of Sino-foreign relations that threatened China's 'traditionalism'.

Finally, a third factor which helped to contribute to the mythology of the 'tribute system' was simply lack of information. Until the early 1980s when a series of archives were first opened in the People's Republic of China, and also in Taiwan, researchers could not access the bulk of materials, including those in the Manchu language, that would lend a new perspective to understanding the history of imperial China's approach to

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<sup>30</sup> Fairbank devoted an entire chapter in his autobiography, *Chinabound: A Fifty-year Memoir* (New York 1982) 85-93 to his relationship with Jiang. For more on the life and career of Jiang Tingfu, see the entry 'Chiang T'ing-fu' in: Howard L. Boorman and Richard C. Howard eds., *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China* I (New York 1971) 354-358.

<sup>31</sup> T'ing-fu Tsiang, 'China and European Expansion', *Politica* 2 (1936) 3-4.

foreign relations. While Fairbank's work concentrated on British and Chinese interactions in the coastal areas of China during the mid-nineteenth century and was based on relatively limited primary documentation in Chinese, more recent scholarship examining hitherto unexplored archives, has probed China's relations with other regions during earlier centuries. The result is a stunning historiographical shift in the entire conceptualization of China's foreign relations during the Qing dynasty.

### **The Death of the 'Chinese World Order' and the Birth of the Qing Empire.**

Among the most important findings to challenge the old view that the Manchus were assimilated into the 'Chinese world order' is the discovery of the Qing dynasty as a multi-ethnic empire built upon cultural links with non-Han peoples and administered through a medley of practical statecraft policies.<sup>32</sup> The Qing government did not just take over Chinese ways, or assimilate with Chinese culture (i.e. sinicize). On the contrary, it instituted strategies to protect the Manchu language of the imperial clan as well as to preserve the prestige of Mongol culture and Tibetan religion. These practices were manifested in the restriction of particular kinds of government documents to the Manchu language only, and the recognition of Chinese, Mongol, Tibetan, and Uighur as official languages. When the

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<sup>32</sup> Lack of space prevents me from listing all these new important publications contributing to the reformulation of Qing history, but just to name some: Beatrice Bartlett, *Monarchs and Ministers: The Grand Council in Mid-Ch'ing China, 1723-1820* (Berkeley 1991); Evelyn S. Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley 1998); Pamela K. Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley 1999); Edward J.M. Rhoads, *Manchus and Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861-1928* (Seattle 2000); Mark C. Elliot, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford 2001). Also helpful for understanding the implications of this new scholarship are a number of review articles. See Evelyn Rawski, 'Presidential Address--Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History', *Journal of Asian Studies* 55 (1996) 829-50; R. Kent Guy, 'Who Were the Manchus?: A Review Essay', *Journal of Asian Studies* 61 (2002) 151-64; and Sudipta Sen, 'The New Frontiers of Manchu China and the Historiography of Asian Empires: A Review Essay', *Journal of Asian Studies* 61 (2002) 165-77.

Qing government created a system of three capital cities – one in Inner Mongolia (Chengde), one in China (Beijing), and one in Manchuria (Mukden) – the Manchus expressed to Chinese and non-Chinese groups, most visibly, their double intention: to perpetuate regional heritage, and to permit diverse cultures to co-exist within their empire.<sup>33</sup> The architecture of the three capitals also reflected Manchu aims to separate religious ostentation (as in Chengde) from ceremonial monumentality (as in Beijing), and from political power (as in Mukden [Shenyang]). To run their empire, the Manchus maintained both 'cosmopolitan' and 'ethnic' modes of rulership that incorporated 'the heavenly mandate, Confucian universal culturalism, the concept of Buddhist monarch or *chakravartin*, the *bhikshu-dānapati* or priest-patron relationship with Tibetan and Mongol lamas, patronage of Islamic religious institutions, and genealogical links to the Chinggisid line and other significant Inner Asian pedigrees'.<sup>34</sup>

While the Qing dynasty reclaimed the 'tribute system' from their Ming predecessors as a tool for foreign relations, it was never the exclusive means by which this regime pursued security and stability. In fact, one may argue it was the very success of Qing government flexibility in the long-term management of its foreign relations that prevented its leaders from eliciting a major overhaul of its diplomatic and strategic policies in the wake of the Opium War's decisive military defeat.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Tribute System and the East Asian World Order**

All this revisionism may lead one to ask: what is the place of the 'tribute system' concept in future historical studies of China? No doubt scholars and students will continue to find the idea integral toward understanding the history of Sino-foreign contact during the Ming and Qing era, but they may also discover new facets and unexpected details about its utilization, all of which confirm the general complexity of Sino-foreign relations. For example, in my own recent investigation of China's involvement in the

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<sup>33</sup> On this point, see Philippe Forêt, *Mapping Chengde: The Qing Landscape Enterprise* (Honolulu 2000).

<sup>34</sup> James A. Millward, 'A Uighur Muslim in Qianlong's Court: The Meaning of the Fragrant Concubine', *Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (1994) 445.

<sup>35</sup> James A. Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, MA 1992) provides a wealth of material to support this point of view.

defence of its ally Korea in 1592 when Japan sent a force of more than 100,000 men to invade the country, I encountered a number of ‘anomalies’.<sup>36</sup> Even though Korea was the prototype vassal tributary state, the reaction of the Ming government to the Korean king’s cry for help in summer 1592 was anything but forthcoming. It would take several weeks of debate at court, with the Chinese Emperor Wanli overruling his ministers, before the Chinese government would send a rescue army to help the Koreans.

Although China and Korea had had close cultural ties since the beginning of the imperial era, the political relations between the two countries were far from ideal. The first Ming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (reigned 1368-98) saw Korea as a security problem because its ruling elite, through marriage affiliations, continued to maintain close contacts with Mongolian chiefs who had formerly ruled China. It was only after this emperor’s death, and some decades of negotiations, that the Ming government came to accept Korea as a regular tributary state. But even after a systematic exchange of embassies between the two countries began in the fifteenth century, tensions persisted. Aside from the official tribute items China requested, i.e. gold, silver, a number of local products such as ginseng, and a fixed supply of stud horses as listed in the *Da Ming huidian* (Collected Statutes of the Great Ming; 1587), the Ming court also demanded human tribute: female virgins and male eunuchs to serve the emperor and his household were a regular requisition. Korea resented this practice, and China objected to Korea’s mismanagement of their mutual military security problem, the waves of sea-faring pirates who wrecked havoc along the littoral of both countries in the second half of the sixteenth century. China claimed that these corsairs, known as *wakō*, originated in Japan, and blamed Korea for not doing enough to curb their predations which eventually extended to the coast of southern China in the 1550s and 1560s. Ultimately, China solved this problem militarily but became increasingly suspicious of Korea’s true loyalty after this episode. During the 1580s Korea also sent a number of ‘tributary’ missions to Japan, supposedly in order to prevent further conflicts caused by pirates.

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<sup>36</sup>Information concerning this episode can be found in my essay ‘Wanli China versus the Dragon’s Head and the Snake’s Tail: Rethinking China’s Involvement in the Imjin Waeran’ in: James Lewis, ed. *The Imjin Waeran – Hideyoshi’s Invasion of Korea: Problems and Perspectives* (Honolulu) (forthcoming).

Thus, by the time of Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea, the Chinese were not entirely at ease with the idea of investing large sums of money for Korea's defense. In the end, the Ming court did so, but entirely for pragmatic reasons. Emperor Wanli convinced his ministers that Japan's encroachment had to be thwarted; otherwise, China could expect another surge of *wakō* attacks. Moreover, China needed Korea's support against another mutual enemy, i.e. Jurchen steppe people who raided their shared northern borders. Jurchen chieftains often played the Chinese and Koreans off against one another with pledges of loyalty to both sides in order to gain 'tribute' gifts, and then used leverage to exact more gifts from the other. Chinese-Korean cooperation here was essential.

The 1592 Japanese invasion became a seven year war fought exclusively on Korean territory, and ended as a series of stalemates for all the belligerents. In the conflict's first phase, China learned that it could not employ cavalry forces on Korea's mountainous terrain, as inclement weather made the manoeuvring of men and supply lines near impossible. A second major Chinese offensive with strong Korean support in spring 1593 resulted in a deadlock which lasted some four years. During that time, negotiators representing China and Japan tried to come to a *modus vivendi*, but the Koreans were excluded from all the discussions, and their wishes clearly ignored. It would seem that China focused on a mediated peace with Japan, and neglected the interests of its tributary vassal. By 1597, war resumed because Hideyoshi could not accept China's peace terms, and Korea once again became a bloody battlefield, with huge civilian casualties. The three combatants all fought hard and bravely, and the confrontation was headed for yet another impasse when Hideyoshi suddenly died in 1598, and there was no Japanese successor to continue the assault.

This war devastated Korea, which still after 400 years considers it the most cataclysmic event in its history. The Chinese alliance is commemorated in countless Korean shrines and temples, but the greatest praise is reserved for its own heroes who overcame incredible odds. Interestingly, Korea and Japan quickly resumed 'tributary trade' after 1598, and China recognized the new Tokugawa regime, but as before, did not allow Japan the privilege of tribute. It would seem that the East Asian world order, with its tributary rhetoric countered by political and commercial realities, was once again in operation. There is much to learn from this episode that helps us to comprehend the wider world of Sino-foreign relations in the past, present, and future.