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To cite this article: Peter C. Perdue (2015) The Tenacious Tributary System, Journal of Contemporary China, 24:96, 1002-1014, DOI: [10.1080/10670564.2015.1030949](https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1030949)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1030949>



Published online: 07 May 2015.



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The Tenacious Tributary System

PETER C. PERDUE*

Recently, some writers on Chinese foreign relations have argued that the tributary system is a useful concept for describing imperial China's relations with its neighbors, and that it can even serve as a model for the future of international relations in East Asia. An examination of China's historical practice of foreign relations shows that there was no systematic tributary system, but instead multiple relationships of trade, military force, diplomacy and ritual. Furthermore, China's neighbors did not accept the imperial center's definition of hierarchy and subordination, but interpreted ritual relationships in their own way. Even in the 1930s, when scholars invoked Chinese history to advocate peaceful relations, they recognized the importance of military force, colonial settlement and domination in East Asian state relationships. The current myth of the tributary system ignores historical reality and misleads us about China's true position in East Asia and the world.

Introduction

The concept of a 'tributary system' regulating China's relationships with foreign countries has held a tenacious grip on analysts and critics. Even though no Chinese dynasty ever used this term to describe its own strategic thinking, and well-informed historians have repeatedly denied that such a system ever existed, it somehow still irresistibly attracts scholars and journalists seeking to explain the PRC's foreign policy today. For these analysts, the tributary system, because it expresses eternal values of Chinese civilization, continues to direct how PRC elites and citizens see the world. It is a basic component of 'Sinospeak', William Callahan's term for the current version of Orientalist ideology, positing an Asian civilization with radically different features from an equally essentialized West. Callahan shows that the popular books of Martin Jacques, David Kang and Liu Mingfu, alongside the best-selling ruminations of Henry Kissinger, continue to propagate this discourse, despite the best efforts of historians. Bruce Cumings similarly skewers the recent 'Orientalist

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craze' of commentary on the 'rise of China' as a metaphor which has little to do with reality.¹

The authors who invoke the tributary system metaphor argue that a peaceful system of international relations governed East Asia in the past, up to about 1800, because China dominated its neighbors by cultural superiority, not by military force. Suisheng Zhao's article in this issue summarizes these arguments. These authors claim that only the aggressive impact of foreign imperialism in the nineteenth century upset this enduring structure, inaugurating China's century and a half of humiliation. But now, they say, a new rising China will once again dominate East Asia by virtue of its economic attractions and cultural soft power.² In William Callahan's analysis, this vision of a specifically 'Chinese-style international relations theory' aims to revive a hierarchical world order based on the image of the tributary system.

Assertions of the PRC's resemblance to peacefully hegemonic early empires have run up against some inconvenient truths in the last five years. The PRC's current rhetoric on the South Sea island disputes expresses 'hard realism' much more forcefully than Confucian harmony. If it echoes any historical tradition, it follows the Legalists who believed only in coercion rather than cultural assimilation. Such realism, all too familiar to Western analysts, makes China look not so different from Western empires after all. Current Chinese statements seem to confirm all too easily John Mearsheimer and his disciples' theories of inevitable clashes between rising powers and the existing world order.³ Edward Luttwak likewise argues that, following the 'universal logic of strategy', China cannot become a dominant world power, because rival powers will inevitably create coalitions to balance against it,⁴ but this author is uncomfortable with using one current crisis to confirm a universal theory. The author agrees that we need to view China's relations with the world in a longer perspective, but which history is the most useful for this purpose?

Nearly all historians who have investigated the actual conduct of foreign relations by Chinese dynasties have rejected the validity of this concept. Odd Arne Westad, in his recent survey entitled *China's Restless Empire*, summarizes the scholarly consensus by stating flat out that 'there was no tributary system, unlike what some

1. William A. Callahan, 'Sino-speak: Chinese exceptionalism and the politics of history', *Journal of Asian Studies* 71(1), (2012), pp. 33–55; Bruce Cumings, 'The "rise of China"?', in Catherine Lynch, Robert Marks and Paul Pickowicz, eds, *Radicalism, Revolution, and Reform in Modern China: Essays in Honor of Maurice Meisner* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 185–207; Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009); David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2011); Liu Mingfu, *Zhongguo Meng: Hou Meiguo Shidai de Daguo Siwei Zhanlue Dingwei* [*The China Dream: The Great Power Thinking and Strategic Positioning of China in the Post-American Age*] (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubans gongs, 2010).

2. Suisheng Zhao, 'Rethinking the Chinese world order: the imperial cycle and rise of China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(96), (2015), DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1030913; William Callahan, 'History, tradition and the China dream: socialist modernization in the World of Great Harmony', *Journal of Contemporary China* 24 (96), (2015), DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1030915.

3. John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001); Yuan-Kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

4. Edward Luttwak, *The Rise of China vs. The Logic of Strategy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

historians have claimed'.⁵ And yet, despite the best efforts of academic historians, the concept, like the Chinese pop-up doll, the *budaoweng* 不倒翁, keeps coming back.

Clearly, writers who endorse and predict the coming hegemony of China in Asia, especially advocates of the 'peaceful rise' theory, find the tributary system concept useful. If the tribute system was the fundamental Chinese method of dealing with the outside world, and tribute relations were inherently harmonious and hierarchical, then China's efforts to subordinate Asian nations will look different from coercive and exploitative methods of Western imperialists.

A surprisingly heterogeneous collection of people agree upon this type of apologetics for the PRC. They include former Marxists, searching for an alternative to American neo-liberal capitalism, Chinese nationalists who support Beijing's foreign policy goals, and the American business community, once again lured by the attractions of the large Chinese market into the seductions of authoritarianism.

All of these prevalent delusions about China have historical precedents. Foreign observers have often claimed that the large cultural differences between China and the West rule out a liberal-democratic political system. The political scientist Frank Goodnow, President of Johns Hopkins University, looked to the Yuan Shikai dictatorship of the 1910s as the model government for China:

It is extremely doubtful whether real progress in the direction of constitutional government in China will be made by a too violent departure from past traditions, by the attempt . . . to establish a form of government, which, while suited to other countries, does not take into account the peculiar history of China and the social and economic conditions of the country.⁶

Hank Greenberg, the former chairman and chief executive of the insurance group AIG, echoed Goodnow's argument in 2005, when he stated, 'The histories and cultures of countries are vastly different, so it is unrealistic to expect China to have a political system that parallels any other'.⁷

American businessmen and German Nazi officials also saw Chiang Kai-shek's authoritarian rule of the 1930s as a very congenial environment for their own investments and arms sales. On the socialist side, Marxists in the 1920s, spanning Europe, Russia, Japan and India, expected a Chinese revolution to undermine global capitalism. Chiang Kai-shek's purges of 1927 destroyed this fantasy, until it was reborn in the hills of Yan'an.

But it is still surprising to see today's commentators reviving many of the same illusions about China. David Kang, for example, who thinks that tribute relations exerted benevolent pressures, makes truly ludicrous claims about warfare in Asia.⁸ He claims that East Asians in the early modern period conducted a relatively small number of wars compared to Europe, because they accepted the benevolent

5. Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), p. 10.

6. Frank J. Goodnow, 'The adaptations of a constitution to the needs of a people', *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York* 5(1), (October 1914), pp. 36–37, cited in Westad, *Restless Empire*, p. 143. Yong Zhao [in *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon?: Why China Has the Best (and Worst) Education System in the World* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2014), p. 13] also notes Goodnow's admiration for an authoritarian polity in China.

7. *National Interest* 2005–06, cited in Jim Mann, *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression* (New York: Viking, 2007), p. 62.

8. Kang, *China Rising*, p. 4.

hegemony of the Ming and Qing empires. The Chinese Academy of Military Science estimates that Chinese states fought 3,756 wars from 770 BC to 1912 AD, for an average of 1.4 wars per year.⁹ The Ming dynasty initiated at least one conflict with the Mongols alone every four years.¹⁰ Even these simple numbers reveal the absurdity of the claim of a peaceful East Asia. Yet we still need to explain how a serious academic publisher can accept such claims with a straight face. The power of Sinospeak apparently serves a cultural interest that overrides mere facts. As William Callahan and Christopher A. Ford remark, the advocates of a return to a peaceful tributary order modeled on Confucian norms in reality take as their model a powerful autocratic state, either an imperial bureaucratic regime or a Leninist party-state.¹¹ Where did this concept originate, and why has it proven so enduring?

The *locus classicus* for most writers is the volume edited by John K. Fairbank and published by Harvard University Press in 1968, entitled *The Chinese World Order*.¹² This is a conference volume including 14 essays by scholars of Chinese history and foreign relations, covering Vietnam, Korea, Inner Asia and Tibet, Southeast Asia and the Ryukyus, along with general interpretive essays describing Chinese views of the 'world order'.

Mark Mancall's essay in this volume, entitled 'The Ch'ing tribute system: an interpretive essay', outlines succinctly the tributary system concept.¹³ He argues that Chinese rulers always saw their relationships with the outside world in hierarchical terms. In this view, the emperor as the Son of Heaven served as the top member of a human hierarchy to which all others had to be subordinated. Other peoples who brought gifts to the emperor in exchange for his benevolent reciprocal gifts recognized the emperor and China's superiority as the center of a cosmologically ordered social structure.

But Mancall's own description of the concept is so obviously self-contradictory that it is difficult to see its analytical value. He states that 'the system cannot be explained in terms of Western usage and practice', but he admits that

the concept of the 'tribute system' is a Western invention for descriptive purposes ... The Confucian scholar-bureaucrat did not conceive of a tribute system (there is no Chinese word for it) as an institutional complex complete within itself or distinct from the other institutions of Confucian society.¹⁴

In other words, this term was not used by imperial rulers, it is not understandable in Western terms, and yet this English term coined for 'descriptive purposes' allows the

9. Fu Zhongxia *et al.*, eds, *Zhongguo Lidai Zhanzheng Nianbiao* [*Historical Chronology of Warfare in China*] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2002), cited in William A. Callahan, *Restless Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 48.

10. Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Ming China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 233.

11. Callahan, 'History, tradition and the China dream'; Christopher A. Ford, 'The party and the sage: Communist China's use of quasi-Confucian rationalizations for one-party dictatorship and imperial ambition', *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(96), (2015), DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1030954.

12. John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

13. Mark Mancall, 'The Ch'ing tribute system: an interpretive essay', in Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 63–89.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Western scholar to attain understanding of the imperial era that was not available to the Qing rulers themselves. So ‘tribute system’ is an English term, created by Western scholars, to describe a mystical, ineffable Oriental reality which is claimed to be inaccessible to Western or Eastern minds—except the mind of the Oriental scholar himself. This claim to superior knowledge of an ineffable entity is precisely Edward Said’s definition of Orientalist discourse.

Other essays in the book, in fact, do not make such grand claims. L. S. Yang’s very erudite chapter gives evidence of a variety of approaches taken by Chinese dynasties toward neighboring powers, some of which fit the tributary model and some of which do not. As June Teufel Dreyer notes in her article, Wang Gungwu’s contribution to this volume argued that the Ming and Qing dynasties learned from the Mongols the need to balance the ‘hard core of *wei* 威’ against the ‘soft pulp of *de* 德’. The writers in this volume also disagree over the extent to which subjects who participated in tributary rituals accepted the imperial elites’ definitions of its significance.¹⁵

Joseph Fletcher’s brilliant essay on Ming relations with Central Asia directly refutes the claims of the tributary system advocates, who argue that China always saw itself as the superior member of a hierarchical relationship. In its dealings with Timur and his successors in the fifteenth century, the Ming accepted in practice the principle of equal relationships between states.¹⁶ In 1418, the Yongle emperor stated in a letter to the son of Timur,

[In] the Western Regions, which are the place of Islam, of the wise men and good men of old, no one has been greater than the Sultan, and he is well able to give security and comfort to the men of that realm, which is in accordance with the will of God, may His Glory be exalted.

Fletcher later showed that Qing relations with Kokand in the early nineteenth century likewise tacitly admitted the autonomy of this Central Asian Khanate, where tribute was a convenient rubric for trade. The treaty negotiated with Kokand served as a model for later negotiations with the British in Canton.¹⁷

So, even Fairbank’s classic study of Chinese foreign relations carelessly cited by so many commentators does not really support the concept of an eternal hierarchical tribute system. The empirical studies refute its general claims. The conceptual outlines of the ‘tribute system’ view of the world do not refer to actual foreign policy events and practices, and they leave many questions unanswered. For example:

1. Was the tributary view, as expressed by policy making elites, an uncontested, openly expressed view of China’s position in the world, an unexpressed set of assumptions, or one of a variety of distinctly different positions?
2. Whatever the ideological claims for this tributary view of the world, did it actually affect the conduct of foreign relations in any serious way?

15. L. S. Yang, ‘Historical notes on the Chinese world order’, in Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 20–33; June Teufel Dreyer, ‘The “tianxia trope”: will China change the international system?’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 24(96), (2015), DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1030951.

16. Joseph Fletcher, ‘China and Central Asia, 1368–1884’, in Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 206–225, quotation from p. 213.

17. Joseph Fletcher, ‘Ch’ing Inner Asia c. 1800’, in John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 10 Part 1: Late Ch’ing, 1800–1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 35–106.

3. Even if Chinese rulers truly believed and acted on these principles, did their counterparts actually accept them?
4. Did the tributary structure constitute a distinct and unrecognizable system of foreign relations that was incompatible with 'Westphalian' state-to-state relations?

The answers to these questions, simply put, are that the 'tributary' view was only one of a number of rival perspectives; the 'vassal' states did not uncritically accept their subordinate positions; tributary views had only a limited effect on the conduct of foreign relations; and much of the history of Chinese foreign relations looks quite familiar to analysts of Western states. I will only briefly give evidence for these arguments here.

First, tributary views were only one of a variety of Chinese world views, which appeared at certain times more prominently than others. Most advocates of the tributary system concept, to the extent that they rely on any documents at all, cite edicts issued during the high Qing period, after the conclusion of the Central Eurasian conquests, including the extermination of the powerful rival state of the Zunghars. This openly dominant, hegemonic attitude endured only for about 50 years. Before the 1750s, Qing elites knew, quite well, that they were engaged in a long-term military struggle with rival Central Eurasian states which had equal claims to legitimacy. The Kangxi emperor, in appealing for Mongolian support, most frequently invoked the common heritage of the Manchus and Mongols as Central Eurasians, or he appealed to Buddhist conceptions of universal benevolence, rather than Confucian hierarchy. He knew that these appeals were more convincing than invoking his stature as the Son of Heaven. He also offered material support to Mongols who submitted to the Qing. Qing officials gave Mongols grain supplies, animals, heritable titles and supervision over legal disputes, preventing destructive internecine feuds. Mongols, for their part, interpreted the emperor's benevolence (*en* 恩) as 'grace' (*kesi*) delivered by a Khan, who established order and relieved his people of conflict. Many of them, especially the Buddhist clerics, revered him as an incarnation of the Maitreya Buddha. Neither of these traditions relied on understandings of the emperor as the linchpin of a cosmological Confucian order.¹⁸

After 1800, Qing officials learned more about other states beyond the expanded Qing frontiers who could contest their claims. Matthew Mosca shows, for example, that knowledge of the British presence in India gradually penetrated Qing ruling circles through a variety of means, including Tibetan travelers, geographers, military commanders and traders. These people, known as 'Pileng' (derived from the Persian word *farang* for 'foreigner'), the Qing knew, were a distinct people across the Himalayas, who did not pay tribute, but exerted a certain amount of influence on Indians, Tibetans and other Central Eurasians. British intervention in

18. Christopher Atwood, 'Worshipping grace: the language of loyalty in Qing Mongolia', *Late Imperial China* 21 (2), (2000), pp. 86–139; Johan Elverskog, *Our Great Qing: The Mongols, Buddhism and the State in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); David M. Farquhar, 'Emperor as Bodhisattva in the governance of the Ch'ing empire', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 38, (1978), pp. 5–34.

Nepal, where the Qing had sent armies in the 1790s, required pragmatic accommodation.¹⁹

Secondly, tributary system theories had, at best, only indirect effects on foreign policy. Tribute missions did arrive at Beijing regularly from many representatives, bearing gifts and practicing rituals, but it is hard to fit them into a consistent ‘system’, and the conduct of many other foreign relationships did not use tribute missions. The exchange of goods at border cities like Kiakhta, Suzhou (in Gansu), Hohhot or Canton, had more economic significance than trade in Beijing. Japan, which rejected the tributary status demanded by the Qing, still derived revenue and information from merchants traveling from the southern domains and the Ryukyus to the Jiangnan region, and the merchants on their return reported to the shogun about conditions in China.

Contemporary advocates of the tributary model of foreign relations seldom describe in detail any specific foreign policy debates or military campaigns. But it is clear that Chinese dynasties never shrank from the use of force. Ming and Qing rulers waged war constantly against rival powers, although they often masked their campaigns as defensive actions against ‘pirates’ or ‘rebels’. Wang Yuan-kang, in a book entitled *Harmony and War*, describes in detail strategic debates by Chinese dynasties and imperial interventions in Vietnam and other regions. He shows that orthodox Confucian thinking unequivocally justified the use of force to eliminate those who violated imperial views of proper behavior. Qing sources frequently use the term ‘*jiao*’ 剿, which means ‘righteous extermination’, to justify the elimination of rival states and rebels. In these internal debates, strategists seldom invoked ritual harmony.²⁰

Third, any serious discussion of the use of ‘tribute’ must look at both sides of the relationship. ‘Tribute’ is a translation of the Chinese term *gong* 貢, meaning the exchange of gifts in return for favors. Gift giving was a common practice throughout Chinese society, as it was in all early modern societies.²¹ The goals of the gift givers and receivers could vary widely depending on the relationship. Gift giving between the court and its outlying provinces and other powers adapted common practices of gift giving and ritual relations within the empire.²² There is no problem in itself with highlighting gift exchange as one mode of imperial relations with others. We should, however, keep in mind the continuum between internal and diplomatic practices, since the Qing did not sharply separate ‘Inner’ and ‘Outer’ tributaries. The single

19. Matthew W. Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Origins of Modern China's Geopolitics, 1644–1860* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Matthew W. Mosca, ‘Kashmiri merchants and Qing intelligence networks in the Himalayas: the Ahmed Ali case of 1830’, in Eric Tagliacozzo, Helen F. Siu and Peter C. Perdue, eds, *Asia Inside Out: Connected Places*, 3 vols, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 219–242.

20. Wang, *Harmony and War*.

21. The classic study is Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, translated by W. D. Halls (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000). See also David Cannadine and S. R. F. Price, eds, *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For China, see Yan Yunxiang, *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

22. James L. Hevia, ‘Tribute, asymmetry, and imperial formations: rethinking relations of power in East Asia’, in John E. Wills, ed., *Past and Present in China's Foreign Policy: From ‘Tribute System’ to ‘Peaceful Rise’* (Portland, ME: MerwinAsia, 2010).

most systematic list of tributary states, the late eighteenth-century compilation *Imperial Portraits of Tributaries* (*Huangqing Zhigongtu* 皇清職貢圖), brings together very disparate groups of peoples.²³ Some of them, like the Muslim chieftains of Turfan, held official appointments in the Qing administration; some were at best occasional visitors; some, like the Poles, had never visited the Qing at all. We could interpret the meaning of *gong* much more accurately if we see ‘tribute’ as a kind of pidgin language: an intercultural means of communication through words, objects and human relations. Like the pidgin of the south China coast, or the many intercultural trading languages of Central Eurasia, including Sogdian, Persian and Mongolian, the terminology and practices of *gong* adapted to local situations in order to facilitate trade and diplomacy. The use of this language in no way implied the unique superiority of China or a fixed understanding of the relationship between the emperor and Heaven. Whatever ‘cosmological bluster’ the emperor and his advisors engaged in, his counterparts attached their own meanings to it.²⁴

To give just one example of how China’s closest tributary neighbors managed the complexities of tribute relations, let us briefly examine the position of Korea. Koreans had sent tribute missions to China for hundreds of years, as they regarded themselves as integral parts of the neo-Confucian realm, and supporters of Ming dynasty orthodoxy.²⁵ The rise of the Manchus, however, seriously troubled Korean relations with their giant neighbor. Prudential calculations supported a policy of ‘serving the great [power]’ (*sadae* 仕大), but Koreans did not automatically submit to their giant northern neighbor. The Goguryeo state had occupied large parts of Manchuria for many centuries, and Koreans had fought vigorously against invasion by the Mongols of the Yuan. The Manchu state extracted heavy payments of gold and ginseng from the Korean king to finance its military regime, and Koreans, grateful for Ming intervention to drive out the Japanese general Hideyoshi in the 1590s, regarded the Ming as the truly Confucian state and the Manchus as barbarian interlopers. Yet they sent tribute missions to the Qing nevertheless, secretly expressing their contempt. They preserved the Ming imperial calendar for use in Korea, while accepting the use of Qing reign names in correspondence with the Manchu regime.

Pak Chi-wôn, for example, a leading Korean scholar who traveled to Beijing on a tribute mission in 1780, opened his diary with the date, ‘24th day of the sixth lunar month of the third sixty-year cycle of the Gengzi (K: Kyongja) year’.²⁶ This referred to a time 180 lunar years after the reign of the last emperor of the Ming dynasty. Pak also noted, ‘soon we will be crossing the Yalu River and we want to avoid that term’. The Manchus used Qing reign titles, but Korean scholars avoided this practice

23. Zhuang Jifa, ed., *Xiesui Zhigongtu Manwen Tushuo Jiaozhu* [Illustrated Manchu Description of Tributary Presentation] (Taipei: Guoli Gugong Bowuyuan, 1989).

24. The term ‘cosmological bluster’ comes from James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

25. Chun Hae-jong, ‘Sino-Korean tributary relations in the Ch’ing period’, in Fairbank, ed. *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 90–111; JaHyun Kim Haboush, ‘Contesting Chinese time, nationalizing temporal space: temporal inscription in late Choson Korea’, in Lynn A. Struve, ed., *Time, Temporality, and Imperial Transition: East Asia from Ming to Qing* (Honolulu, HI: Association for Asian Studies and University of Hawai’i Press, 2005).

26. Pak Chi-wôn, *The Jehol Diary: Yorha Ilgi of Pak Chiwôn (1737–1805)*, translated by Yang Hi Choe-Wall (Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, 2010), p. 1.

because they only recognized the Ming dynasty as legitimately Chinese. As Pak wrote,

The Manchus invaded China, displaced the Ming government, and enforced the Qing system, but this eastern land of ours, with its several thousand *li* extending at that time even across the Yalu River, preserved the Ming government's standards. This means that the Ming court still existed in the east, over the river.

Pak, during his travels in China, conducted 'brush talks' (*bitan* 筆談) with dissident intellectuals who cautiously displayed their disdainful attitude toward their barbarian rulers. As this example shows, even the Qing's apparently closest tributary neighbors by no means completely accepted the assumptions expressed by its imperial center.

Fourth, were tributary relations so different from those of other powers that they deserve to be put in a different category?

The author has argued elsewhere that the techniques used by the Ming and Qing to legitimize their rule over their subjects and to claim superiority over rival empires did not differ radically from those of other early modern empires.²⁷ Scholars of the comparative history of empires have now produced a considerable body of work that places the Ming and Qing alongside other imperial formations of their time. Naturally, the Chinese imperial formations were not exactly the same as others: each had its own distinctive characteristics, but the Chinese formation was not utterly alien to the others. It borrowed and adapted many Central Eurasian institutions, and it responded to similar needs for revenue extraction, legitimation, historical justification and 'cosmological bluster'. It is not difficult to point to substantial similarities of the Ming and Qing to the Russian, Mughal and Ottoman imperial formations, or even to early modern France.²⁸

The author has also argued that we can even usefully employ the concept of 'colonialism' to describe certain aspects of Qing practice. The term 'colonial', originally used to describe Roman settlers in frontier lands, more generally refers to the relationship between authorities at the center of an empire (the metropole) and the officials, settlers, traders and private agents who go out from the metropole to exert influence on the periphery. Imperial and modern Chinese writers often used terms like 'colonists' (*zhimin* 殖民) to describe analogous practices of settlers of Qing frontiers and the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. The pioneering journalist and political writer Liang Qichao cited, with approval, the activities of Chinese colonists beyond the bounds of the empire as a source of dynamism for creating the new Chinese nation.²⁹ Today, in common parlance, the Chinese pejorative word for colonialism (*zhiminzhuyi* 殖民主义) only describes the activities of Western and

27. Peter C. Perdue, 'China and other colonial empires', in Wills, ed., *Past and Present in China's Foreign Policy*, pp. 77–97.

28. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Huri Islamoglu and Peter C. Perdue, eds, *Shared Histories of Modernity in China, India and the Ottoman Empire* (Delhi: Routledge, 2008); Victor B. Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context c. 800–1830. Vol. 2: Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan and Peter C. Perdue, eds, *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, 2007).

29. Jing Tsu, *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature: The Making of Modern Chinese Identity, 1895–1937* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 53.

Japanese settlers; but viewed more objectively, the actions of Han Chinese who migrated to Taiwan, Mongolia, Southwest China, Xinjiang or Java show remarkable similarities to those of Western settlers. Like the imperial analogy, the colonial comparison helps us to place the modern Chinese empire more accurately in a global frame of reference, and it frees us from monotonous invocations of the victim narrative.

Deeper roots

But the tributary concept has deeper roots. The scholars writing with Fairbank in the 1960s, many of whom were émigrés from China, had received their academic training in China during the 1920s and 1930s. They wrote during the height of the Cold War, and they wrote in opposition to prevailing social science views of China as merely another totalitarian Communist state, a ‘Soviet Manchukuo’ in the words of Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Stressing China’s distinctive history as a long civilized society, they implied that the current Communist direction might be temporary, and that long-term historical trends would prevail. The roots of this conception of imperial China as a peaceful, civilized society whose culture would win out over contemporary imperialists lie in the 1930s and 1940s, the time of the Japanese invasion. Here, the author will mention only two examples: Chiang Kai-shek’s *China’s Destiny* and the new field of Chinese historical geography.

China’s Destiny: *the text and its message*

Chiang Kai-shek’s *China’s Destiny*, based on lectures given in Chungking in the 1940s, and published in two English editions in 1947, expressed a powerful ideological view of Chinese history.³⁰ As Chiang expressed it,

According to its historic development, our Chinese nation (*zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) was formed by the blending of numerous clans. These clans were originally branches of the same race, spreading to the East of the Pamir plateau, along the valleys of the Yellow, the Huai, the Yangtze, the Heilungkiang, and the Pearl rivers. . . . During the past five thousand years, with increasing contacts and migrations, they have been continuously blended into a nation. But the motive power of that blending was by assimilation rather than conquest.³¹

Within China’s territory, the customs of each clan, and the way of life in each locality were different. Yet the customs of each clan were unified to form China’s national culture, and the combination of the ways of life in each locality made possible the existence of the Chinese nation. This outstanding fact of China’s history is based on her geography, her economic structure, the requirements of national defense, and a common historical destiny (*mingyun* 命運) and is not merely the result of political necessity.³²

30. Peter C. Perdue, ‘The Chinese’, in Naomi Standen, ed., *Demystifying China: New Understandings of Chinese History* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), pp. 15–24.

31. Chiang Kai-shek, *China’s Destiny* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1947), p. 30; Jiang Jieshi [Chiang Kai-shek], *Zhongguo Zhi Mingyun* [*China’s Destiny*] (Shanghai: Shanghai Zhongguo Shudian, 1945), pp. 1–2.

32. Chiang, *China’s Destiny*, p. 35.

Chiang, like Sun Yat-sen, believed that China had been a united nation since the dawn of prehistory, and its expansion was a product of cultural influence, not military conquest. The Nationalists, in principle, claimed sovereignty over all the territory ruled by the Qing dynasty at its time of maximal expansion in the mid-eighteenth century, but they also believed that Qing conquests had only restored the deeply rooted unity of peoples that had lasted for several thousand years. Chiang claimed that of China's more than ten million square kilometers of territory, 'there was not a single district that was not essential to the survival of the Chinese nation, and none that was not permeated by our culture'. The Chinese people could not wipe out their 'national humiliation' until they had recovered all of the lost territories. Chiang Kai-shek of course, failed to reunite any of these territories, and since then both the Nationalists and Communists have failed to do so. Modern archaeologists, geneticists and cultural historians generally reject the idea of a single united Chinese community lasting from ancient times to the present. Yet the concept of humiliation, which drives the effort to recover 'lost territories', still arouses powerful emotions of *ressentiment* and irredentism. Stephen Thomas's article traces the continual efforts by Chinese leaders from the late Qing through the Republic and early PRC to overcome the economic and military backwardness inflicted on China by Western imperial powers. These Western concepts are much more powerful than distant memories of a purportedly harmonious tributary system in grounding Xi Jinping's current slogan of the 'China dream'.

Historical geography

Before Chiang and his ghostwriters, historical geography studies in the 1930s had laid the groundwork for this new territorial imagination of China. The journal *Yugong* 禹貢, published from 1934 to 1937 and edited by Gu Jiegang, Tan Qixiang and their disciples, drew on studies of ancient Chinese history to justify Chinese claims to imperial space against Japanese efforts to separate the border regions from the core of China.³³ The journal promoted territorial nationalism, a concept of the nation focused on historical claims to particular spaces, rather than the ethnic or civic nationalism of the earlier part of the twentieth century.³⁴

The historical geographers took as their primary subject the question of how to include border regions in a general history of China. *Yugong* published several special issues on Manchuria, Mongolia and Xinjiang, asserting that these regions had always been indissolubly joined to the nation in the past. At a time when all of these regions had fallen beyond Nationalist government control, the geographers tenaciously asserted their constant links to the Han Chinese core. Unlike other Chinese social scientists, who depended on Western paradigms, they could rely on imperial precedents to ground their discipline in native evidence. These writers, like their imperial predecessors, however, paid almost no attention to the indigenous views of non-Han peoples, and they relied only on Chinese sources. The Qing emperors had sponsored large-scale geographical works in the eighteenth century,

33. Yugong Xuehui, *Yugong* 禹貢 (1934–1937).

34. Sabine Dabringhaus, *Territorialer Nationalismus in China* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2006).

and Wei Yuan had relied on Qing primary sources to write his endorsement of Qing military conquests in his narrative entitled *Sacred Military Victories* (*Shengwuji* 聖武紀) in the mid-nineteenth century. From these imperial writers, the *Yugong* group derived historical claims to the maximal boundaries of Qing China.

The *Yugong* group regarded Chinese state boundaries as natural boundaries which had persisted for over two millennia. They had to recognize that imperial space included very diverse economic and ecological zones, but most of them asserted a form of geographic determinism, claiming that 'natural' forces led to the 'unification' (*tonghua* 同化) of these regions under a single imperial center. Even more important than geography, however, was culture (*wen* 文). The civilizing culture of the great empires of Han, Tang, Ming and Qing had been the primary force that overcame disparities of climate and terrain. Unlike Chiang Kai-shek or David Kang, they recognized that Chinese empires conquered territory by force, but they still preferred to focus on eternal forces of climate and culture rather than the contingencies of battle. They knew that foreign powers had repeatedly invaded China, but they insisted that its fundamental cultural values would endure unchanged.

The *Yugong* group developed their ideas in the 1930s, before the outbreak of the full-scale Japanese invasion. Even though they were concerned about the current fate of the Republic, they oriented themselves primarily toward historical scholarship. By the 1940s, their concepts of historical geography turned into a polarized and politicized ideology. Chiang Kai-shek and his ghostwriter Tao Xisheng held even more extreme views than the *Yugong* group. *China's Destiny* asserted that the natural borders and composition of China's peoples dated to ancient, even prehistoric times. While Gu Jiegang and others debated over exactly when a unitary culture emerged, dating it anywhere from ancient times to the eighteenth century, Chiang and Tao unequivocally asserted that this culture had emerged 5,000 years ago.

China's Destiny and the *Yugong* writers' views of China's historical position in the world share a great deal with the current wave of tribute system advocates. They all take for granted an underlying cultural unity of Chinese imperial space, dating back anywhere from several centuries to several millennia. They argue that civil effects of culture had more long-lasting effects than military conquest. But in a number of respects, the writers of the 1930s were more honest about China's imperial history than the writers of today. In the 1930s, they unapologetically used terms like 'expansion' (*kuozhang* 擴張) or 'colonization' (*kenzhi* 墾殖) to describe their approval of the aggressive developmentalism of imperial and modern China. Like their Qing predecessors, they argued for investment in agriculture, the extraction of mineral resources, railroad development and close commercial integration with the center in the interests of national strength. For them, development required Han immigration to the periphery under military protection. The geographers invoked strong parallels between Han dynasty military colonies, Tang dynasty protectorates and European colonial expansion. They openly endorsed Sinicization as the key process tying border peoples and tributary states to the imperial center.

The regimes they admired most were the expansionist Han and Tang dynasties, but they ignored the significant Central Eurasian components of the Tang elite. In contrast to Sun Yat-sen, few of them admired the defensive Ming dynasty, but the Qing earned their admiration to the extent that the Manchus had 'Sinicized'

themselves, carrying on the Chinese imperial tradition. On the other hand, Gu Jiegang criticized the Qing for separating ethnic groups from each other and for failing to develop the frontiers aggressively.

From this perspective, the current rage for the ‘tribute system’ concept is an emasculation of the vigorous defense of imperial expansionism waged by *Yugong* and Chiang Kai-shek. Both schools openly praised and promoted military conquest, economic expansion and cultural unification as mutually supporting forces for unity. They did not try to disguise national domination as cultural universalism. Their defensive programs maintained claims to frontier territories despite military weakness. The tribute system concept of the 1960s marked a turn from politics to culture. A product of the Cold War era, it masked the PRC’s obvious military strength in the guise of imperial universalism and peace. It was, to some degree, a useful counterpoise to simplistic theories of totalitarianism and a useful, if misguided, assertion of the relevance of history. But today, in a world of global interrelations, it rings with strange echoes.

Conclusion

Apologetics for imperial expansion have their own contexts: sometimes they help to fortify a community to resist foreign invasion; sometimes they simply fall in conveniently with the reigning ideology of an assertive nation-state. History loses its critical edge when it simply reaffirms official ideology. We can do better.

Our views of Chinese history, like all historical interpretation, respond to the contemporary world. Sometimes, we simply cherry-pick the events from the past that confirm our current prejudices, but history can also be a critical discipline, providing some distance from present concerns. It does not have to simply reassert the uniqueness of one civilization, its inaccessibility to understanding in foreign terminology or its superiority to its neighbors. In a global age, China needs a history that puts it in the world and makes its imperial past comparable to that of other long-lasting empires. In an age of pluralist democracy, we need to see the empires not simply from the point of view of the court, but the subjects it ruled—of all kinds of ethnic and religious perspectives—and especially from its closest neighbors. Historians of China should, like the *Yugong* geographers, focus attention on the historical evolution of borders, but transform their insights in the direction of comparative, global and genuinely intercultural understanding.