The Chinese Journal of International Politics, Vol. 5, 2012, 155–182
doi:10.1093/cjip/pos005
Advance Access publication 23 April 2012

'Tributary' from a Multilateral and Multilayered Perspective

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Dr. Zhou Fangyin's 'Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System' enriches the increasingly salient debate among Chinese International Relations (IR) students on the so-called 'tributary system'[1] in three ways. First, it correctly points out that China did not unilaterally create the mode of interstate connections in pre-modern East Asia. Rather, the 'system', if there was indeed such a thing, was an institutional mechanism mutually constructed by both the central and peripheral regimes. This, in my opinion, is a crucial clarification that revises the views of some of the Fairbankian School of scholars, who insist that the tributary system was an institution enforced by China on surrounding states that only passively accepted it.[2] Second, the article differentiates between tributary discourse and practice, and emphasizes the system's internal logic in practical policy making. In another words, by observing the tributary system as policy-oriented behaviour, the article rejects the explanation of it as a (partially self-deceived) cultural phenomenon, instead emphasizing its realist significance as a rational political arrangement. In so doing, it opens the way to further research on the topic along the political science line. Third, the article regards the traditional

† The author would like to thank Wang Yuanchong and Victor Seow for their kind help on the subject. Meanwhile the author is solely responsible for all mistakes and errors.
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1 Zhou Fangyin, 'Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2011), pp. 147–78.

2 For example, Mark Mancall points out that 'the tribute relationship was always bilateral, never multilateral: one partner was always the ruler of China', See Mark Mancall, 'The Ch'ing Tribute System: An Interpretive Essay', in John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 65. Although John King Fairbank and many of his followers were not the inventors of the term 'tributary', their understanding of 'tributary system' had, and still has, great influence in social science studies on explaining the difference between 'Chinese world order' and modern international order. About the origin of the 'tributary system' theory and its critics, see James Hevia, *Cherishing Men From Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1963), pp. 9–15.

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interstate order in East Asia as a dynamic process under constant change and development. Although not altogether convinced by the author's model of alternation of cycles, I do agree with Zhou's denunciation of the 'stagnation' theory, and firmly believe such a direction foreshadows exciting insights in the search for a 'Chinese school' of international relations.

That said, as Dr. Zhou himself admits, the article is just 'a starting point' for more comprehensive and diverse research into the topic. It does expose several important issues which invite questions and challenges from different perspectives. The problems, ranging from theoretic presumption to the historiographic approach, are by no means unique to this article, but common in Chinese, as well as Western, IR scholarship. It is quite likely that my critique of Dr. Zhou's article will be read as a challenge from one discipline (history) to another (IR), but I hope that such an impression would reflect only the fact that there is a growing cross-disciplinary consensus on the importance of the subject under discussion, and that it is drawing attention from a widening range of academic fields. With this clarification out of the way, I hope the current article will make a contribution, no matter how trivial, to our understanding of history and the present East Asian world.

My article is composed of three parts. The first section addresses questions and problems arising from Dr. Zhou's article. The second part raises an alternative approach—what I call a 'multilateral and multilayered perspective'—to understanding the interstate relationship in pre-modern East Asia, with a focus on Sino–Korean relations from the 14th to 19th centuries. The last section tries to bring together recent historical scholarship on the post-1500 world order and the IR discussion on East Asian history, arguing that the latter would benefit from attention to the former. The conclusion suggests that we relocate the interstate relations in pre-modern East Asia into the wider frame of global history.

A few words about terminology: I prefer the term '*zongfan* (宗藩) hierarchy' to 'tributary system' in signifying the world order in pre-modern East Asia. Although often regarded as interchangeable in many instances, I insist on calling attention to the distinct historical origins of the two terms. The term *zongfan* is an indigenous expression which reveals the sociological, philosophical and cosmological roots of the political arrangement,[3] whereas 'tributary', a term borrowed from the historical setting of the Roman

[3] According to Ci Yuan, *zongfan* refers to 'the imperial clans who were bestowed'. Put in a simplified way, *zong* implies a hierarchic arrangement based on family genealogy wherein the ranking of authority is in order of seniority and proximity to the direct descendent. Such a relationship was extended metaphysically to the political realm in which the central regime (*zong*) bestowed subordinate regimes, and was, at the same time, supported and protected (*fan*) by them. See the term '*zongfan*', and the related terms '*zong*', '*zongshi*', and '*fan*' in Lu Erkui, ed., *Ci yuan* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1915).

Empire, has its roots in the exchange of wealth.[4] Equating 'tributary' with *zongfan* or *chaogong* (朝贡), as scholars tend to do, overlooks the fundamental difference of sociopolitical background—to say nothing of whether or not various 'tributary' behaviours actually constituted a 'system'.[5]

Problems

I would like to raise four issues in Zhou's article which, I think, merit re-examination in greater depth. They are: (i) the game model problems; (ii) a bilateral perspective; (iii)(Sino)centralism and (iv)(mis)use of historical materials. These problems are not isolated from each other, but rather tightly intertwined and mutually amplified. As already mentioned, they are not unique to the article under discussion, but prevalent in many studies on similar subjects.

The Game Model Problem

Although its claimed goal is to analyse the 'stability' of the regional order, Dr. Zhou's game model nevertheless gives me the opposite impression: that it is more interested in 'conflict' or, at least, the transition between these dualist statuses. Focusing on the rise and resolution of tension—be it harassment, expedition, submission or conciliation—the model identifies (and, indeed, relies on the identification) of a discernible equilibrium point towards which the system moves. In an article of apparent realist theoretical orientation, such a choice is quite understandable. It is based on several presumptions rarely questioned in IR scholarship. They are: of the (sovereign or nation-) state as agent/actor; of the absence of superior authority; competition between powers; rational choice in the maximization of interest . . . etc. I am not, as historians usually do, going to criticize those presumptions directly for assuming a social vacuum and tending to ignore the concrete historical context, nor will I question here the hypothesis that the 'tributary system' is a 'spontaneous order'—a notion borrowed from a certain school of economics which is itself controversial.[6] Rather, I suggest we go back to the notion of 'stability' and ask, from the standpoint of history,

4 The term *tribute* is derived from the Latin word *tributum*, which originally refers to a tax imposed by the Roman state on its citizens. See William Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London: John Murray, 1875), pp. 1156–57.

5 For example, in his critique of the tribute system, Zhang Feng demonstrates the need to 'deconstruct' the subject as a 'monolithic entity' and legitimately questions the necessity to institutionalize such a 'system'. Zhang Feng, 'Rethinking the "Tribute System": Broadening the Conceptual Horizon of Historical East Asian Politics', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (2009), pp. 545–74.

6 See, for example, Viktor Vanberg, 'Spontaneous Market Order and Social Rules', *Economics and Philosophy*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1986), pp. 75–100; and Naeem Inayatullah, 'Theories of Spontaneous Disorder', *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1997), pp. 319–48.

to what extent can we understand, through the perspective of this game model, the stability of the pre-modern world order in East Asia.

Zhou premises his analysis of stability upon the presumption of Chinese hegemony in the region.[7] But, under such circumstances, cases of conflict—especially military confrontations viewed as harassments and expeditions—were generally rare.[8] Were there conflicts, they usually signified that a rising power was challenging the regional security structure. In other words, conflict is not a normal path towards stability. Instead, it should be regarded just as the end point of a previous balance and the starting point of a new one. My questions are: What was there in-between? What made stability, subsequently maintained, emerge out of conflict? Or, to borrow David Kang's phrase—Why was stability 'the norm of East Asian international relations'?[9]

It is a common consensus in studies on this subject that hard power, especially military power, was, at its best, a necessary—rather than sufficient—condition of the *zongfan* hierarchy. A compound network of economic, technological, institutional, cultural, religious and ritual connections strengthened and maintained interstate relationships in pre-modern East Asia. It is true that military conflict often paved the way for material and technological exchange, but it was far from the most important, and not to say the only, type of connection constituting the entire network. Certain scholars, notably Andre Gunder Frank and Hamashita Takeshi, believe that economic intercommunication was a more persistent and essential mechanism in the construction of the East Asian regional order.[10] Others, like David Kang, emphasize the role of a hierarchical order and ideology generated by Confucian culture.[11]Combining the two approaches, I would suggest that the issue of stability can be so understood: within the East Asian hierarchic structure, central powers—including the regional centre of China and local sub-centres of Japan, Vietnam and Siam—provided platforms for the circulation and exchange of material public goods, like silver and copper, and the non-material public goods, like Buddhism and Confucianism.

7 His two assumptions are: '(i) that China is in a position of power advantage with respect to countries in the periphery; and (ii) as long as the Chinese regime is stable, the overall objective of its foreign policy will be defensive in nature . . . .'

8 David Kang notes that there were only two major wars among China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam from 1368 to1841. But, his scope of observation is too limited as he does not count the many 'internal' wars within these four countries, or wars beyond the four. See David Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 2.

9 *Ibid*., p. 1.

10 Unlike Fairbank, they place their emphasis less on bilateral trade than on the circulation of certain goods—silver, for example—on the regional level. See Andre Gunder Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Hamashita Takeshi, *China, East Asia and the Global Economy: Regional and Historical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2008).

11 David Kang, *East Asia Before the West*.

The stability of the regional order relied on the central powers' capacity to provide and absorb public goods and to ensure their sustained circulation. This explains why a unified China, which topped the region in terms of territory, population, market demand, and productivity, had, for the longest period in regional history, been a core political, economic and cultural realm, albeit at times dominated by different peoples with different ideological backgrounds. Without downplaying the role of military might, I would suggest that constant material and cultural exchanges that nourished both central powers and peripheral powers were of equal importance in cohering one society with another and stabilizing the regional order.

I use two examples to illustrate my theory on stability. First, border trade between the Ming and the Mongol regimes played a critical role in constructing a stable bilateral relationship[12]. It significantly eased longstanding military tension between the two mutually dependant societies—the agricultural society on the plains and the nomad society of the steppes—in continental East Asia.[13] Another example is the relationship between mainland China and the Japanese archipelago from the mid-16th to the mid-19th centuries. Official trade (*kangōbōeki*) under the 'tributary' umbrella had curtailed during the period, signifying that China had 'tributary relations' with neither Bankufu regimes nor local clans. In other words, this bilateral relationship falls beyond Dr. Zhou's game model. It was, nevertheless, an inseparable part of, and one of the most energetic connections in, the regional order. Intercommunication between the two sides—conducted not by states but unofficial agents, including merchants, monks, pirates and intellectuals—had remained active and relatively stable. Maritime trade, in which the Chinese exported silk, books and fabrics in exchange for Japanese copper and silver, enhanced mutual sociopolitical development. It also played a crucial part in integrating regional political and economic order. Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion (1592–1598), which presented itself not so much as opportunistic harassment but as a demonstration of the ambition of a unified Japan to replace China's core status in the region, was a relatively

[12] Henry Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming, III: Trade Relations: the Horse Fairs (1400-1600)*(Brussels: Institut belge des hautes études chinoises, 1975).

[13] The conflict-ridden, yet dependent, relationship between these two zones is best expressed in works by Owen Lattimore. According to him, China's history developed along the lines of conflict/communication between two societies across the Great Wall. His later scholarship especially emphasizes the intercommunication, hybridity and symbiosis of the two. See Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1940); Owen Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers, 1928–1958* (London: Mouton & Co., 1962) and Owen Lattimore and Eleanor Lattimore, *China: a Short History* (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1975).

short-term military confrontation that did not alter the long-term format of this bilateral relationship as one without tribute.[14]

Bilateral Perspective

Zhou's article attributes the interactions between a centre state (China) and its peripheral states almost entirely to the realist bilateral game. The presumption of the historical setting—that China was in an advantage power position and its foreign policy generally defensive in nature—makes the game theory he applies quite persuasive. The problem is that such a presumption takes no account of the abundant domestic and multilateral elements embedded in the bilateral relations. First, different foreign policies were not always formulated according to the two countries' relative statuses in their power relations, but often the product of changes in domestic politics. For example, one of Dr Zhou's case studies shows that the government under Qing Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735–1769) reacted far more aggressively to Burma's constant 'harassments' on its southwest borderland than did those under the Ming and the earlier Qing. To answer the question of why Emperor Qianlong reacted more decisively than his predecessors, we must take into account that, unlike during the Ming and early Qing periods, the southwest frontier was now gradually integrating into the empire's civil administrative system and under the direct control of the central court. This was thanks to the reform launched by preceding Emperor Yongzheng (r. 1722–1735), Qianlong's father, of 'abolishing the native chieftain institution and establishing a system of rotated officials' (*gaituguiliu*).[15] This was, hence, the first time in Chinese history since the Ming that the southwest frontier had been administratively integrated into the central kingdom and governed like any other province in China proper. The consequently different perspective, from a domestic standpoint, of this realm explains why Emperor Qianlong almost completely overturned the previous policy in his decision to no longer tolerate Burma's aggression.

Second, the middle kingdom was indeed located in a relative advantaged power position for most of the written history of the region. This does not mean, however, that it faced no serious strategic threats. In addition to those arising at the high points of the Tang, Yuan and Qing—each of which was brief—the middle kingdom was also under constant security pressures from one or more competing regimes in the area. The interactions between China (a) and a neighbouring state disadvantaged in power (b) were inevitably and

[14] About the Hideyoshi's invasion and how the two countries viewed each other during and after the war, see Kenneth M. Swope, 'Deceit, Disguise, and Dependence: China, Japan, and the Future of the Tributary System, 1592–1596', *The International History Review*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2002), pp. 757–82.

[15] Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

profoundly influenced by relations between China and other great (even greater) powers (c, d...). Therefore, the bilateral relationship (a *vis-à-vis* b) cannot be interpreted through a closed 'equilibrium' composed of just China and one peripheral state. In the next section, I will use historical Sino–Korean relations further to demonstrate this point.

The restrictions of the bilateral perspective of Zhou's article results in its overestimation of the antithesis between the core and the periphery while, at the same time, underestimating the multi-layered conditions determining bilateral interactions. This defect is to be found in all three of the article's case studies but goes to an extreme in the narrative on the fate of Kwanghaegun, king of Chosŏn Korea from 1608 to 1623.

Zhou implies that tributary relations with China had a direct impact on Chosŏn's domestic politics, to the extent that they determined the fate of one Korean king. He attributes the dethronement of Kwanghaegun in 1623 to the latter's reluctance to fulfil Chosŏn's tributary obligation to support the Ming during the Ming–Jurchen war. '[K]wanghaegun's shift away from the equilibrium placed his throne in danger – a threat that would undoubtedly act as a constant deterrent to future kings to repeat such mistakes'. To prove this argument, the author quotes Queen Dowager Inmok's criticism of Kwanghaegun's policy towards the Ming. The quotation, however, is a fragment extracted out of context and, as such, a severe distortion of what had been originally recorded.[16] In this way, the author's argument, thus, exaggerates the influence of external relations on internal affairs.

Just as Ming China was unable to prevent Kwanghaegun from ascending the throne, so the Sino–Korean *zongfan* hierarchy, which was to be obeyed in principle, had no part in overthrowing his reign. Rather, Kwanghaegun's dethronement has to be understood in light of the dominant theme, consistently apparent in the mid-to-late-Chosŏn dynasty, of factionalist politics. From the 16th century onward, the yangban bureaucrats, who, over a period of three hundred or more years, had split into several opposing factions, significantly weakened the authority of the Chosŏn king. Each faction pursued its own power and interests by supporting certain members of the royal family. By the same token, members of the royal family, even kings

[16] The quotation is extracted from Queen Dowager Inmok's public edict to announce the dethronement of Kwanghaegun. In this edict, she listed several crimes, including imprisoning the Queen Dowager, murdering brothers, building palaces at commoners' cost, expelling senior ministers, trusting treacherous officials, and imposing heavy taxes. Betraying the *sadae* principle was indeed mentioned as one of the crimes, but the real condemnation lay in it having led Korean troops to total surrender, when the Korean state behaved like 'barbarians'. See *Chosŏnwangjo-sillok*, *InjoSillok* (*Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty, Annals of the Injo*), the 14th day of the 3rd month of the first year. But, the real motivation for this coup was more vividly revealed in the record of the coup itself, on the 13th day of the same month. In that record, nothing in relation to the Ming is mentioned, showing that the coup was due solely to domestic reasons. The source can be accessed online at: http://sillok.history.go.kr.

themselves, relied on powerful factions to access political resources and implement policies.[17] The fate of Kwanghaegun is but one example of this recurrent theme. Born to a concubine in a society that embraced nothing outside Neo-Confucian ideology, Kwanghaegun was not, in the first place, regarded as a proper heir. After attaining supreme power over the country, his legitimacy was constantly challenged.

Kwanghaegun's enthronement came after a bloody factional struggle in which the party supporting him brutally suppressed its opponents, who propped up Kwanghaegun's brothers and Queen Dowager Inmok. His dethronement, likewise, was the result of a coup in which the opponent faction got the upper hand. Like many Chosŏn kings before and after him, therefore, Kwanghaegun's fate was determined, first and foremost, by domestic struggles and not his relationship with China. Functioning under factionalist conditions, his policy of balancing the Ming and the Jurchens, which led to the total defeat of the Chosŏn troops, was seized upon, employed and exaggerated by his opponents, notably Queen Dowager Inmok, as an excuse both to legitimize the coup against him and gain sympathy from Ming China.[18]

That said, it should be noted that Kwanghaegun was neither the first nor the last Chosŏn king that sought to balance China against another external power. His 'fate', hence, did not function at all as a 'deterrent to future kings to repeat such mistakes'. As a matter of fact, as I will show in the second section, Korean leaders through history constantly employed such pragmatic strategies at times when the state was embroiled in multilateral competition, in pursuit of better outcomes. Kwanghaegun is known to have been a realistic politician. His attitude as regards the Ming–Jurchen war revealed not so much a personal grudge against the Ming, or a divergence from the orthodox ideology, but perhaps the existence of another principle—one parallel to the bilateral *sadae* (serving the great) policy, and which is not easily explained from the standpoint of a bilateral equilibrium.

(Sino)centrism

Centralism denies the multiple mechanisms of historical development and tends to impose a local standpoint, view, perspective, framework, and standard on the whole community. Eurocentrism, the most prominent form of centralism among the social sciences, has been constantly and thoroughly criticized during the last three decades. Replacing it with Sinocentrism or

[17] See James B. Palais, 'A Search for Korean Uniqueness', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies,* Vol. 55, No. 2 (1995), pp. 409–25.

[18] Kim Song-kyun, 'Chosŏn chung kiŭitaeman kwankye' ('Korean Jurchen Relation on the Middle Period of Yi Dynasty'), *The Paek-san Hakpo,* No. 24 (1978), pp. 3–44.

another kind of centralism, however, is not an effective alternative to extricating oneself from the fallacy of the centralist way of thought.[19] In his article, Zhou tries to see 'tributary relations' as 'an outcome of continuous strategic interaction among actors within the region'. Nevertheless, the interaction is not understood from the standpoint of all actors; rather, it is presented solely from the Chinese point of view. The action and reaction between a domain called 'China' and its surrounding regimes, according to Zhou, fall under the four one-sided categories of harassment, expedition, submission and conciliation. In implementing the category without pointing out the moralist and ideological implications embedded in these discourses, however, Zhou's article eliminates the possibility of examining historical interactions from the standpoint of other actors and, hence, fails to account for actual motivations behind historical incidents.

Seeing the challenges from surrounding countries as 'harassment' is particularly worrisome, as it implies that those countries strategically stirred up conflicts with China only for the opportunistic purpose of maximizing their interests within the China-centred 'system'. Such an understanding, hazy as it is, is ahistorical and barely supported by any of the countries' historical documents and records. There were countless aggressions and resistances, as well as insurgences and suppressions, throughout the history of regional conflict and integration. Their causations varied, but few could be explained as opportunistic strategy. There were also innumerable arguments, debates, negotiations, and compromises over various disputes between the Middle Kingdom and its neighbouring polities. More often than not, the latter profited from the bargaining process. But, not all of these bargains were defined, even in the Chinese documents, as harassment. What is often referred to as harassment, on the level of state-to-state interaction, means a kind of constant military collision in frontier areas reflecting disputes over the jurisdiction over a certain territory or population. But, border changes, people-flow and territorial disputes were hardly one-way actions. For instance, the Qing–Burma war, as mentioned above, has to be understood under the background of penetration of state power into a frontier region in which the states attempted to eliminate an administrative 'grey zone' among themselves.[20] From the Qing perspective, it was Burma who

[19] Many studies mentioned Paul Cohen's remarkable criticism of the modernist school (*Discovering History in China*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) as a sign of a Sino-centric turn in China studies in the United States. However, Sino-centric historiography appeared long before that and is not necessarily a revision of the modernist or even colonialist view. Consider, for example, the subtle connection between the Kyoto School of Sinology and Japan's China policy in the early 20th century.

[20] According to James Scott, the expansion of state power into the Southeast Asian mountain region known as 'Zomia', which includes the Yunnan frontier between the Qing and Burma, was a constant trend conducted by all powers, not just the Qing. See James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

harassed, but Burma's point of view might be just the opposite. In these circumstances, the term 'harassment' says little about what had actually happened on the ground.

Applying terminologies with self-centred implication falls into the realm of discursive politics. In East Asia, especially in China, Japan and Korea, histories were narrated in accordance with the moral teachings of Confucianism—an endogenous perspective of the *zongfan* ideology—and often vague and contradictory on the factual level. 'One history with different interpretations', therefore, is quite a common phenomenon.[21] Peter Perdue suggests that we see the tribute discourse as an 'intercultural language', which was employed by each participant 'for its own purpose'.[22] Such language, he argues, allows each participant 'in different degrees, a measure of autonomy'. Ironically, when we take the discourse of one participant for granted as historical fact, such autonomy, equally important for all participants, disappears. A crucial feature of the *zongfan* hierarchy is, hence, dismissed for the convenience of 'scientific' research. The 'scientific' analysis based on the monologue of history, however, reveals itself as more biased than scientific.

The (Mis)use of Historical Materials

It is said—and I agree wholeheartedly—that the social sciences, history included, should emphasize the induction of general principles of human behaviour and avoid drowning in endless 'factual' details. But, being aware of the distinction between 'fact' and 'history' is never tantamount to simplifying or even inventing historical logic.[23] A general principle based on flawed understanding of history will eventually end our seemingly 'scientific' efforts in vain. By the same token, innovations in social science theory usually go hand-in-hand with epistemological breakthroughs in historical studies. Historical materials could, and should, be generalized and analysed by social science, provided that such generalizations and analyses are grounded in solid comprehension of these sources. For students of the pre-modern interstate order in East Asia, mastering historical materials means not just relying on documents from China's side but cross-examining the narrative through evidence from other states and societies. More importantly, mastering materials also means understanding them within their

[21] Even the same actor, e.g. Qing China, would record a historical incident inconsistently when addressing it to different audiences in different languages. For more detail, see Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 462–70.

[22] Peter Perdue, 'A Frontier View of Chineseness', in Giovanni Arrighi, Takeshi Hamashita and Mark Selden, eds., *The Resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 Year Perspectives* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 51–77.

[23] Edward Hallet Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1967).

socio-historical context, rather than taking for granted as 'facts' whatever has been written in texts.

I would like to exemplify my point by examining two places in Zhou's article where history is misinterpreted. The two errors, both of them in the section on the Sino–Korean relationship, are not irrelevant to the author's main argument. First, seeing the Sino–Korean relation as an unbroken trajectory, starting from the mid-Tang/unified Silla period through to the late-Qing/Chosŏn period,[24] makes the false assumption that, after the Silla accepted the Tang as a superior ruler, 'tributary' relations between the Middle Kingdom and the Korean peninsula had been fixed as 'court-vassal'.

The problem here is that the article ignores what happened between the Tang Dynasty and Yuan Dynasty (particularly between 907 and 1279), when the realm of the Tang split into several rival states before the Mongols eventually reunified it. From the 10th to 12th century, the Chinese Song Dynasty had constantly competed for dominion over northern China, first with the Khitan Liao Dynasty and, later, the Jurchen Jin Dynasty. During the period, the Korean Koryŏ Dynasty (918–1392) had established bilateral 'tributary' relations with all three domains, but none had been consistent. The Koryŏ, arguably the very regime in which the Korean nation's modern name and identity originated, either paid tribute to multiple states or allied with one against another. After the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty conquered the Koryŏ and made a large part of the peninsula a province of Yuan, the two developed a relationship, unprecedented in history, in which the Middle Kingdom strictly controlled and harshly dominated the Korean Peninsula.[25] The relatively 'stable equilibrium' to which Zhou's article refers did not appear until the early 15th century, when the Ming Dynasty replaced the Mongols.

Second, since—as mentioned above—the name 'Korea' had not existed before the Koryŏ period, it is odd to see expressions like 'the Koreans' or 'Korea' quoted directly from ancient records of the Sui-Tang period (589–907).[26] After checking the Chinese version of the article, however, I realized what was happening here. The kingdom of Koguryŏ (37BC–668AD) was recorded in Chinese historical works as either Gaogouli or its abbreviation

[24] The first paragraph of the section 'Sui-Tang Relations with the Korean Peninsula' states: 'The Korean Peninsula was an important part of the ancient Chinese World System, and China's most critical vassal state during the Tang and succeeding Song, Ming, and Qing Dynasties. It was during the Tang Dynasty that court–vassal relations between the Korean Peninsula and China normalized after a decade of instability and frequent outbreaks of war.'

[25] Recent scholars even argue that Koryŏ was part of the Mongol empire. See David Robinson, *Empire's Twilight: Northeast Asia under the Mongols* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009). Also see Fu Baichen, eds., *Zhong Chao lidai chaogong zhidu yanjiu* (*The Studies on the Sino-Korean Tributary Institution in all Dynasties*) (Changchun: Jilin remin chubanshe, 2008).

[26] For example, the quotations marked with footnotes 63 and 69 in Zhou's article. Both texts are from *Zi zhi tongjian*, a Chinese historical reference compiled in the 11th century.

Gaoli.[27] The two terms are interchangeable in Chinese official historical volumes compiled before the Song Dynasty. In 918 AD, Wang Kŏn founded a new regime and eventually unified the Korean peninsula, which had been divided since the fall of the Silla. Although the Silla aristocracy remained the country's ruling class, Wang Kŏn named his regime 'Koryŏ' (written in Chinese characters the same way as Gaoli), a name derived from that of the Koguryŏ. Chinese official historians after the Song Dynasty (960–1279) failed to distinguish the two regimes and misunderstood the 'Koryŏ/Gaoli' regime as the successor to the Koguryŏ/Gaoli.[28] Gaoli has since become a common Chinese term in reference to Korea. It is now appropriate, especially within the contemporary context, to translate Gaoli directly as 'Korea' in Western languages. Historical Tang Dynasty figures, however, had no knowledge of Koryŏ, let alone the name 'Korea', as the kingdom did not come into being until the succeeding Song Dynasty. Zhou's article, thus, makes an anachronistic mistake when translating the word Gaoli into English, as it is unaware that the term used in the Sui-Tang era could only refer to the Koguryŏ, not 'Korea', a term which came much later and bore different significances.

Why does such a 'trivial' mistake matter? Put simply, we are living in a world dominated by nation–state discourses in which histories are twisted and reorganized along superficial national lineages.[29] As social scientists, we should be aware that these narratives are ahistorical—even anti-historical—and be cautious of using any general signifiers without strict definition. Regimes that formerly existed in present-day China and the Korean peninsula were so diverse in every aspect that they cannot be reduced simply to those of Chinese *vis-à-vis* Korean. By the same token, relations between those regimes at different times are extremely varied and hard to be concluded as a single mode. Just as there was never a systemic, homogeneous, unchanged 'tributary' relationship that lasted thousands of years, neither were there homogeneous entities called 'China' or 'Korea'. Failing to realize this would lead our studies in a dangerous direction. A direction to provoke, instead of easing, conflicts in a nation–state world.[30]

27 Sometimes the abbreviation is 'gouli'. The characters were 高句丽, 高丽 and 句丽, sometimes the character 丽 was also written as 骊. See Ma Dazheng, Yang Baolong, Li Dalong, Quan Hexiu and Hua Li, eds., *Gudai Zhongguo Gaogouli lishi conglun* (*On the History of Gaogouli of Ancient China*) (Ha'erbin: Heilongjiang jiaoyu chubanbshe, 2001), pp. 1–30.

28 Ma Dazheng, Li Dalong, Geng Tiehua and Quan Hexiu, eds., *Gudai Zhongguo Gaogouli lishi xulun* (*On the History of Gaogouli of Ancient China 2*)(Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005), pp. 365–79.

29 Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

30 The conflict between the PRC and South Korea over Koguryŏ history, which stimulated fierce debate between the two societies, illustrates my point best. See, for example, Ahn Yonson, 'The Contested Heritage of Koguryŏ/Gaogouli and China-Korea Conflict', *Japan Focus*, January 11, 2008, http://japanfocus.org/-Yonson-Ahn/2631.

A Possible Alternative: a Multilateral and Multilayered Perspective

Discourses on the 'tributary system' or 'Chinese world order', as the first users of the concepts themselves have acknowledged, are conceptualizations too broad truly to encapsulate the diversity of the world order in pre-modern East Asia.[31] Even if we limit our scope to an examination of the relations between the Middle Kingdom and its surroundings, we should be aware that such a relationship never presents itself as an unchangeable mode, persistent through different times, at different locations, or towards different subjects. For example, Tang-Koguryŏ relations little resembled Yuan-Koryŏ relations, and the mode of communication that the Qing used in the 18th century to communicate with the Chosŏn bore no parallels as to how it dealt with the regimes in inner Asia around the same period. Those relations have to be studied case by case. To put everything in a large but impractical conceptual basket will impede our efforts to find the true mechanism—or to use a social science term, variable—of historical development. Instead of framing our intent with stark and abstract notions like the 'tributary system', we should start our research with East Asian peoples' relation-making practices to determine how a relatively stable interstate relationship was created out of its various local, regional, trans-regional—even global—contexts.

I hereby propose an alternative way to examine the interstate relationship in pre-modern East Asia—a perspective that switches from a China-centred, bilateral-oriented focus to allow a multilateral and multilayered view. From this perspective, a specific state-to-state relationship is woven into a complex, multi-level power nexus composed of interconnections among multiple political, economic, ideological, and science and technological cores and peripheries. To understand this relationship, we need to consider its position within the larger nexus, keeping in mind that it was concurrently affected by different powers organically linked with one another. More importantly, we need to examine actions, reactions, counteractions, and mutual transformations that transcend local, state, and regional boundaries and see relation-making as a process in constant motion.

I would like to use the relationship between Ming–Qing China and Chosŏn Korea, known to be the most typical case of 'tributary relations', to exemplify the aforementioned perspective. Similar to Zhou in his article, I also want to examine how the two sides formed relative stable relations and how this stability transformed throughout history. There is, undoubtedly, a major theme in their 500-year interconnection, that is, the continuation and consolidation of the *zongfan* hierarchy. But, what I want to emphasize is

[31] The introduction of *The Chinese World Order* reveals this. See John King Fairbank, 'A Preliminary Framework', in John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 1–20.

how security issues stimulated and transformed the bilateral *zongfan* relationship. I suggest there were two key trends inseparable from the general development of bilateral relations and they deserve to be examined in depth. One is the constant security pressure from a third or more parties upon the two states, especially the threat to their northern frontiers. The other is the consolidation of the northern territories of both states, including China's gradual control over Manchuria and Korea's continued extension northward. I argue that the Sino–Korea *zongfan* hierarchy was established and sustained under the background of these two trends. The establishment and development of the bilateral hierarchy was, hence, first and foremost, a strategy to counter common geopolitical threats. Frequent political, economic, intellectual, and ritual communications at the same time tightened and secured such a relationship.

In 1362, the Chinese Ming Dynasty expelled the Mongol Yuan regime from its capital, Dadu. But, the Mongols still governed the vast realm outside the Great Wall, including present-day Northeast China, known in the West as Manchuria, until 1388. As a long-term ally and subordinate of the Yuan, Koryŏ/Korea hesitated at first to recognize the legitimacy of the Ming and maintained close relations with the Mongols.[32] Both the Yuan and Ming regimes made efforts during this period to win the Koryŏ to their side and, so, gain an ally against the other. The Koreans took this opportunity to enact a dual policy, accepting the official title bestowed by the Ming, on the one hand, while maintaining tight cooperation with the Yuan, on the other.[33] The Koryŏ, moreover, took advantage of the weak influence of both the Yuan and Ming over the northern peninsula and established its own dominion in the region.

As early as 1368, the Koreans had expanded their influence to the southern banks of the Yalu River.[34] By the time King Woo (U-wang) took the throne, the gradual consolidation of the Ming regime had split the Koryŏ court into two opposing groups. They were: the pro-Yuan group, represented by KingWoo himself and the pro-Ming group, led by General Yi Sŏngkye. In 1387, after successive military victories in Manchuria against the Yuan, the Ming set out to take over the Yuan administration of the northern part of the peninsula and to establish a garrison (*wei*) in the Tieling (Kr. Ch'ŏllyŏng) region. Feeling pressure from the Ming, King Woo submitted a memorial opposing the plan and also ordered his troops to invade

[32] Dalizhabu, 'Beiyuan chuqi shishi lueshu' ('A Brief Narration of History in the Early North Yuan Dynasty'), *Neimenggu shehui kexue* (*Inner Mongolian Social Science*), No. 5 (1990), p. 55.

[33] Zhao Xianhai, 'Hongwu chu nian Ming, Beiyuan, Gaoli de diyuan zhengzhi geju' ('The Relations among the Ming, Northern Yuan and Gaoli Dynasties during the Early Hongwu Period of the Ming Dynasty: A Geopolitical Perspective'), *Gudai wenming* (*Journal of Ancient Civilization*), No. 1 (2010), pp. 90–7.

[34] Yang Zhaoquan and Sun Yumei, *Zhong Chao bianjie shi* (*The History of Sino-Korean Borders*)(Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 1993), p. 128.

the Ming's Liaodong peninsula.[35] The commander of the Korean troops, General Yi Sŏngkye, however, was against attacking the Ming and instead redirected troops to the capital to depose King Woo. Yi Sŏngkye, thus, weakened Mongol influence on the Ming's northeast frontier and in 1392, founded the Chosŏn Dynasty, adopting a policy of close alliance with the Ming. Upon Yi Sŏngkye's request, the Ming allowed the Chosŏn to extend its governance to the northwestern part of the peninsula.[36]

The next 200 years witnessed the stabilization and institutionalization of the Ming–Chosŏn *zongfan* relationship. Cultural, economic, and political exchanges in the name of *chaogong* tightened the bilateral connection, thanks to the relative stability of regional security, especially in the border area. Both states applied the conciliatory policy to the Jurchen tribes inhabiting the borderland to ensure the territory remained under control. On the Chosŏn side, Yi Sŏngkye maintained good relations with the Jurchens, who played a decisive role in the process of regime change. Kings in the early Chosŏn steadily recruited and assigned Jurchen immigrants to the northern frontier, where they settled and assimilated into Korean agricultural society.[37] At the same time other Jurchen tribes who rejected Chosŏn rule were conquered and subjugated. In the 15th century, six garrisons were founded along the southern bank of the Tumen (Kr. Tuman) River, where the state resettled many Koreans from the southern provinces in efforts to secure the new frontier.[38] This was the first time in history that the Chosŏn expanded its rule to the Tumen River region.[39]

On the Ming side, the establishment of government institutions in charge of the northeast territory—in 1375 of the Liaodong Command Post and in

35 *Chŭngpŏmunhŏnpikŏ* (*Supplemented Documents for Consultants*), in Wang Chongshi, eds., *Chaoxian wenxian zhong de Zhongguo dongbei shiliao* (*Korean Historical Materials about Northeast China*)(Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 1991), pp. 348–52.

36 Zhang Jie and Wang Hong, 'Mingchu Zhu Yuanzhang jingying Tieling yi bei Yuanchao jiujiang shimo' ('The History of Zhu Yuanzhang's Management of the Yuan Dynasty's Previous Territory Located North of Tieling in the Early Ming Period), in Ma Dazheng, ed., *Zhongguo dongbei bianjiang yanjiu* (*Studies on Chinese Northeast Frontier*)(Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2003), pp. 87–102.

37 Kim No-gyu, 'Pugyŏyosŏn' ('Selected Works on the North Realm'), in Yuk Nak-hyon, eds., *Kandoyo ngyukwo nkwan gyecharyojip(2)* (*Materials about Kanto's Sovereignty 2*) (Seoul: Paeksan Munhwa, 1993), pp. 343–44.

38 Hwang Kyung Moon, 'From the Dirt to Heaven: Northern Koreans in the Chosŏn and Early Modern Eras', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies,* Vol. 62, No. 1 (2002), pp. 135–78.

39 *Pungnokiryak*, a geographical book about the northeast frontier compiled around the early 19th century, records that the northeast region '. . . later belonged to Koguryŏ. When Silla unified [the peninsula] its power was not sufficient to reach the northeast region, so the land was conquered by Jurchen. Although King Taejo of the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392) unified the peninsula, he only pushed the border to the Ch'ŏllyŏng Garrison (south of present-day Wŏnsan in North Korea). After that, [we] tried to eliminate [the enemy] several times but each time the region was recovered, it was soon lost again. It was not until our Dynasty that the [Tumen] river was determined as border, and hence our territory was integrated', *Pungno Kiryak* (*Record on the Northern Realm*)(Seoul: Asea Munhwasa, 1974), p. 271.

1409 of the Nurgal Command Post—marked the region's official integration into the Ming administrative system. The Ming Leaders later appointed separate Jurchen leaders to deal with local civil and military affairs in Liaodong and Nurgal.[40] The Ming and Chosŏn struck jurisdiction bargains over certain land and Jurchen tribes in border areas, but any disputes were solved peacefully under the *zongfan* framework. The Ming generally yielded land and peoples under dispute to the Chosŏn along the line of 'cherishing the inferior'. Such an attitude was best expressed by Ming Emperor Yongle in 1402 when judging a territorial dispute with the Chosŏn: 'land of Chosŏn is also in our realm. We do not bother to fight with them'.[41]

But, this bilateral relationship became subject to severe impacts during the 1590s, beginning with the Japanese invasion from 1592 to 1598. After unifying Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi ordered an attack on the Korean peninsula as the first step in his ambition to conquer China. The Ming finally decided to send armies to support the Korean resistance force as Japanese troops approached the Sino–Korean border region. The six years of warfare took considerable toll on all three states and brought critical consequences to each. The Toyotomi regime fell after military defeat, the Ming suffered serious financial crises and domestic turbulence, and the Chosŏn throne grew more vulnerable, both internally and externally. Ideologically, the Ming–Chosŏn alliance was strengthened, to the extent that after the fall of the Ming, Korean literati maintained informal use of the Ming calendar for more than 200 years.

But, militarily, the Middle Kingdom in the early 17th century had lost its capacity to assure the peninsula's security. More serious still than this low military capacity were the fatal weaknesses in the domestic politics of both states that the war, in which the Ming–Chosŏn coalition forces scraped a victory, exposed. Internal political struggles significantly constrained the coalition's military mobilization and organization.

The decline of these three traditional powers in Northeast Asia provided the space for the rise of a new power: the Jianzhou Jurchen tribe, which later unified most Jurchen tribes and other peoples of the steppe, and took on the new identity called Manchu. This constituted the second impact on Sino–Korean relations in the era. Led by Nurhaci and his followers, the Manchus rebelled against the Ming in 1618 and defeated the Ming–Chosŏn–Yehe Jurchen coalition forces in the decisive Battle of Sarhu. They thereafter occupied most of Manchuria. To remove the potential threat from the rear, the Manchus twice invaded Chosŏn Korea, forcing the latter to

[40] Yang Yang et al., eds., *Mingdai Nuergandu si jiqi weisuo yanjiu* (*Studies on Ming Dynasty's Nurgal Command Post and its Garrisons*)(Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou shuhua chubanshe, 1982).

[41] *Chosŏn Wangjo Sillo Taejong Sillok* (*Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty, Annals of the Taejong*), Vol. 35. The fifth month of the 18th year of the Taejong reign. Quoted from Yang Zhaoquan and Sun Yumei, *The History of Sino–Korean Borders*, p. 139.

renounce the Ming–Chosŏn alliance and pay tribute to the Manchus instead. In 1644, the Manchu regime re-titled itself 'the Great Qing'. Taking advantage of the Ming's domestic crisis, namely, the Li Zicheng rebellion, the Qing conquered China proper and became new rulers of the Middle Kingdom.

During the early Qing period the Korean attitude towards the new regime in China was complicated, controversial and inconsistent.[42] The Chosŏn regarded itself as the most advanced polity next to China in the civilization hierarchy, but, at the same time, acknowledged that it was a weak player—if not the weakest—in terms of economic and military ability. Such acknowledgement led its leaders to the conclusion that pragmatism was the best policy for survival.[43] During the decades-long conflict between the Ming and the Manchus, the Chosŏn first joined the Ming forces in fighting against the Manchus and was then compelled to ally with the Qing in attacking Ming troops. In both battles, the Chosŏn employed the wait-and-see strategy to the fullest extent in efforts to avoid direct confrontation with either of the greater powers.

Although the Qing inherited most of the Sino–Korean tributary institutions from the Ming, it took the Chosŏn almost a century to embrace wholeheartedly Qing superiority within the *zongfan* hierarchy. It was the Qing's proof of itself during that period as the greatest provider of regional security that made the Chosŏn gradually change its attitude. 17th and 18th century Chosŏn witnessed the Qing's greatest military successes, including conquering China proper, expelling Ming loyalists in south China, suppressing the revolt of three feudatories, taking over Taiwan, expediting Xinjiang, pacifying Tibet, subduing the native chieftains (tusi) in southwest China and stabilizing the surrounding states, to say nothing of the Qing's remarkable economic and cultural achievements during the period. As in the Ming era, commercial and cultural communications in the form of tributary exchanges and border trade strengthened the bilateral connection, the scale and quantity of such interactions far greater than in the previous dynasty.[44] Along with the reconstruction and re-stabilization of the Sino–Korean *zongfan* relations, the Qing also eased its earlier cohesive policy towards the Chosŏn, reducing the quantity and frequency of Chosŏn tributes and also granting the Chosŏn almost complete autonomy in its internal affairs.[45] Tension on the borderland was, thus, largely released, the attention of

[42] Diao Shuren, 'Lun Sa'erhu zhi zhan qian hou Houjin yu Chaoxian de guanxi' ('Relations between the Later Jin State and Korea before and after the Battle of Sarhu'), *Qingshi yanjiu* (*Studies in Qing History*), No. 4 (2001), pp. 43–50.

[43] Such an attitude could be observed from the Kwanghaegun's political considerations during the Battle of Sarhu. See *Chosŏn Wangjo Sillok*, *KwanghaegunIlki*, the fourth month of the 10th year.

[44] Zhang Cunwu, *Qing Han zongfan maoyi* 1637–1894 (*The Qing-Korean Tributary Trade, 1637-1894*)(Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1978).

[45] Li Huazi, *Qingchao yu Chaoxian guanxishi yanjiu* (*Studies on the Qing—Chosŏn Relationship*)(Yanji: Yanbian daxue chubanshe, 2006)

border security personnel on both sides drawn only occasionally to minor cross-boundary crimes.

But, external pressure still had impact on Sino–Korean relations, even at the apogee of Qing power. From the mid-17th century onward, the Russian Empire expanded to the Amur River region, putting the Manchus, who saw the vast land of Manchuria as the dynasty's sacred birthplace, on red alert. After years of battle and negotiation, the two empires signed the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689 to define the boundary. Although Russian expansion halted north of the Amur River region, the Qing had long regarded the Russian advance as a potential danger to its northern frontier. In preparation for a possible future confrontation, Emperor Kangxi launched a geographical survey of Manchuria to gain better knowledge of the region and to clarify the Qing–Chosŏn boundary, especially the area between the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. When the Qing government requested Chosŏn cooperation, the latter misunderstood the real target of the mission.

At that time, the king and ministers of the Chosŏn court still believed that the Qing could not control China and that it would eventually retreat to Manchuria. The border survey, the Chosŏn believed, was a preparation for this pulling back, and would be harmful to Korean interests.[46] Consequently, from 1691 to 1711, Chosŏn officials found various excuses to impede and so sabotage the Qing survey mission. In 1712, an instance of illegal border crossing involving fatal crimes pushed Emperor Kangxi to figure out the Sino–Korean border. A survey mission was assigned once again. This time, the Chosŏn reluctantly received the commissioner but strategically induced him to believe in the incorrect points of origin of the two boundary rivers. A stele was erected on the south side of Mt. Changbai (Kr. Paektu), so yielding territory in that area that had never belonged to Korea to the Chosŏn.[47] Such territorial compromise by the superior state to an inferior state was, under the *zongfan* structure, both understandable and tolerable. The Qing–Chosŏn border remained tranquil for another 170 years until the late 19th century, when the *zongfan* hierarchy gradually collapsed.

The rise of capitalist imperialism in the 19th century accelerated the transformation of the conventional world order in East Asia—as it did throughout rest of the globe. Government reactions in both Qing China and Chosŏn Korea to foreign pressures were constrained by divisions in domestic politics.[48] Although they tried to refashion the bilateral relationship according to the changed external environment, through measures such as adding treaty-diplomacy forms to the traditional *zongfan* hierarchy, their efforts

46 Yang Zhaoquan and Sun Yumei, *The History of Sino–Korean Borders*, p. 178.
47 *Ibid*., pp. 181–93.
48 Mary C. Wright, 'The Adaptability of Ch'ing Diplomacy: The Case of Korea', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1958), pp. 363–81.

generally failed. This was because the Qing, under great pressure from foreign colonization and domestic rebellions, was like the Ming regime after Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion, fundamentally weakened and no longer able to maintain its guarantee of security on the Korean peninsula.

The conventional Sino–Korean *zongfan* relationship in the mid-and late 19th century faced threats from two directions: Russia to the north and Japan to the east. In the 1860s, Russia, defeated in the Crimean War, turned its strategic focus on the eastern part the Eurasia continent. Russia seized from the Qing all of outer Manchuria and extended its boundaries through to the Tumen River. For the first time in history, Korea now bordered two great powers on land. To counter Russian influence and augment the north eastern frontier, the Qing encouraged immigration to the former royal reserve, where exploration had hitherto been prohibited.[49] This prompted a flood of poor peasants from northern Korea into both China's Jilin and Russia's Maritime Region, causing a trilateral boundary conflict.[50]

Around the same time, Japan in the early Meiji period overcame its domestic divisions and rapidly rose to become a new regional power. After taking Hokkaido and annexing Ryukyu, Japan targeted the Korean peninsula as its next step of expansion. In 1876, Japan forced Korea to sign the Treaty of Kanghwa and began its political and economic penetration of the peninsula. The two coups in 1880s Korea, both of which reveal the critical consequences of such expansion, gave Japan the excuse to intervene more aggressively in Korean affairs. Qing China, meanwhile, realizing that the Chosŏn was geopolitically too important to lose, did what it could to retain its most loyal tributary state.[51] Since the Qing was too vulnerable to face alone the encroachments of both Japan and Russia, it decided to borrow Western influence to balance the two powerful neighbours. For that reason, the Qing altered its conventional non-interference policy and directly hosted Korean diplomacy for the Chosŏn court.[52] Diplomacy, however, did not guarantee security. Japan defeated Qing China in the Sino–Japanese competition for Korea. The *zongfan* institution between China and Korea, which had lasted over 500 years, thus ended in the 1890s.

But, the new world order in East Asia, in which Japan replaced China as the leading figure, did not fully take shape until the First World War. Japan

[49] Fan Lijun, *Jindai Dongbei yimin yu shehui bianqian (Immigration and Social Changes in Modern Northeast China*) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2007).

[50] Tsurushima Setsurei, *Chugoku Chosenzoku no kenkyu* (*Studies on the Chinese Koreans*) (Suita: Kansai Daigaku Press), pp. 65–71.

[51] Zhang Hongnian, 'Qingdaifanshuguannian de bianhuayuzhongguojiangtu de bianqian' ('The Evolution of the Idea on Vassal States and the Changes of Chinese Territory in the Qing Dynasty'), *QingshiYanjiu* (*Studies in Qing History*), No. 4, 2006, 17–27.

[52] Okamoto Takashi, *Zokkoku to jishu no aida: kindai Shin-Kankankei to Higashi Ajia no meiun* (*Between Vassal and Autonomy: Modern Qing-Korean Relations and the Fate of East Asia*)(Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 2004).

first expelled Russia in 1905 and annexed Korea in 1910. Through Korea, it further monopolized most of its interests in Manchuria and seized significant privileges in Mongolia as well as China proper. As Japan marched towards the centre of the East Asian power structure, in their struggle for survival, the Koreans employed the pragmatic strategy of seeking support from both Russia and China to counter Japanese colonization.[53] By the same token, when disputes arose with China—such as those concerning boundaries and immigrants—Korea would then skilfully seek out help from Russia and Japan.[54]

In general, we can say that the Sino–Korean relationship of the past 500 years has been flexible and dynamic rather than fixed and stagnant. Defined by mutual security concerns, it has been influenced by domestic politics and adjusted according to changes in the external power structure. The most typical 'tributary' relationship in East Asia was more a product of pragmatism than of opportunism. Perhaps rather than finding an abstract equilibrium that develops from 'harassment' to 'submission', we could pinpoint the rationality that served the relative stability of the Sino–Korean *zongfan* hierarchy.

Several points might be concluded here:

(i) Determined by bilateral power contrast, the Sino–Korean *zongfan* relationship was, first and foremost, a security alliance under the multilateral power structure in the region. Strengthened by economic reciprocity, cultural intimacy as well as ideological commitment between the two states, it became institutionalized as the political, philosophical, and ritual basis of bilateral communications.

(ii) Security was mutually assured in practice, wherein the Middle Kingdom, which played the part of the centre (*zong*), provided protection for the peninsula while the latter played the role of barrier (*fan*) at the former's northeast frontier. Once the Middle Kingdom failed to provide security, bilateral relations were at risk and Korea sought an alternative ally. Moreover, as can be seen in the Ming and Qing cases, the vulnerable Sino–Korean alliance eventually put China itself in danger.

(iii) As a hierarchical order, the Sino–Korean *zongfan* relationship was regulated by the mutual obligations, respectively, of an inferior and superior. That is to say, those under which the inferior should respect the superior (Kr. sadae) and the superior should cherish the inferior (Ch. zixiao). When disputes arose between the two, both tended to solve the problem by reaffirming, rather than challenging, mutual

[53] M. Frederick Nelson, *Korea and the Old Orders in Eastern Asia* (Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1945). See especially Part III of the book.

[54] Yang Zhaoquan and Sun Yumei, *The History of Sino–Korean Borders*, pp. 408–23, 481–88.

obligations. The superior mostly yielded practical interests to the inferior in exchange for stability of the hierarchical order in general.

(iv) The security alliance was not necessarily defensive; it could be aggressive as well. From the late 14th century onward, the Sino–Korean *zongfan* alliance had allowed China gradually to consolidate its rule over Manchuria, while at the same time tolerating, if not encouraging, Korea's constant expansion northward—to the detriment of the Mongols and Jurchens.

It should be emphasized once again that the Sino–Korean *zongfan* relationship was the result of a process of centuries-long mutual construction in a specific geopolitical environment. Some of its features appear in other *zongfan* relations, e.g. Sino–Vietnam relations during the Qing-Le Dynasty period. But, we should not attempt to apply these features to other relations within the *zongfan* hierarchy, not to say the whole pre-modern East Asian world order in general. Meanwhile, although I focus mainly on the state actors, it is worth mentioning that non-state actors, such as *wokou* pirates and smugglers, also profoundly affected the East Asian world in many ways. But, due to limited space I will not explore explicitly here the function of non-state agencies.

'Tributary': as History and as IR

If interstate relations were so diverse, can we say anything general about the pre-modern world order in East Asia? I think that the answer is 'yes', granted that we first need to disenchant some discursive myths that surround the idea of 'tributary' and to reconsider the dichotomies of the East *vis-à-vis* the West and tradition *vis-à-vis* modern. Recent historical studies provide many useful insights that may benefit our IR studies.

For example, in the IR literature, so called 'tributary' is more or less essentialized as the traditional Chinese diplomatic system, as opposed to the modern international system which, according to common belief, was generated by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Such recognition is based on the belief that modern international principles, e.g., the equal relationship among sovereign states regulated by international law, was invented by the Europeans and spread throughout the world through capitalist and colonial expansion.

The decline of China from the 18th century onward, according to this understanding, is partially attributed to China's ignorance of the nation–state system and unwillingness to give up its 'backward' tributary diplomacy. The basic assumption, however, that 'tributary' constituted the traditional 'Chinese diplomatic system' needs to be questioned and challenged.

First of all, 'tributary'/*zongfan* was not just another style of 'diplomacy', rather, it was deeply rooted in pre-modern social organization, and reflected

not only in a state's arrangement of its external affairs, but in its internal affairs too. Fairbank was right on this point; the boundary between the domestic and the foreign in pre-modern political practices was generally very vague.[55] The *zongfan* hierarchical principle, especially in Confucian societies like Ming China and Chosŏn Korea, should be seen as an extension of a domestic/family institution to all of society and the outside world.[56] As James Hevia argues in his case study on the 1793 British Embassy to China, the Guest Ritual of the Qing, which portrayed the Qing emperor as the superior lord of the world and regulated ritual relations between the Qing and its surrounding domains, was embedded in the Qing's cosmological structure as a multi-ethnic empire. It must, hence, be understood within the context of Qing governmentality over its vast and multi-ethnic frontier regions.[57] Moreover, we should overcome the rigid, functionalist explanation of tributary behaviour and transcend the modern divisions of economy, politics, culture, ritual and religion. Activities under the title of 'tributary' were multiple tasks that could simultaneously be economic, political, intellectual, ritual or religious, but cannot be perceived as just any one of them.

Second, practices of the *zongfan* principle are by no means exclusively 'Chinese'. It is true that the pre-modern East Asian world, for the most of part, was centred on the regimes governing China. But, also true is that the *zongfan* principle was accepted and utilized by almost all countries in the region. Many sub-centres applied the *zongfan* order to their surroundings to maintain local stability. These sub-centres included, but were not limited to, Japan, Vietnam and Siam.[58] Economic historians, such as Hamashita Takeshi, would particularly emphasize the role of sub-centres or peripheries in constructing the whole trade nexus and connecting the regional network within the global network.[59] Competition and conflict over military, economic and political leadership regularly occurred between the core centre and sub-centres, between different sub-centres, and between centres and peripheries. Precisely because the tributary discourse was not only employed and imposed by the centre regime but also, if not more so, enshrined by some of the 'peripheral' states as well, we, therefore, cannot limit our considerations concerning the 'tributary system' to a dualist structure with China on one side and its surroundings on the other. Instead, a regional perspective should be employed to observe the multiplicity of the pre-modern interstate relationships prevailing in East Asia. Realizing the

55 John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, p. 2.

56 M. Frederick Nelson, *Korea and the Old Orders in Eastern Asia*.

57 James Hevia, *Cherishing Men From Afar*, pp. 30–50.

58 Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

59 Hamashita Takeshi, *Higashi Ajiasekai no chiikinettowaku* (*Regional Network of the East Asian World*)(Tokyo: Kokusai Bunka Koryu SuishinKyokai, 1999).

multilateral facet of tributary behaviour helps us to rebuild our concept of the so-called 'Chinese world order' from a perspective beyond China.

Third, the *zongfan*/tributary network was a structure that different actors constructed. Acknowledgement of this fact implies that multiple perceptions and expressions of the very same structure were both tolerated and necessary for purposes of maintaining normal exchanges. For example, some actors openly acknowledged their subordinate status, as did Chosŏn Korea to the Ming and Qing China. Some gave only part acknowledgement. The Ryukyu Kingdom hid from Qing China that it also paid tribute to Japan's Satsuma clan, who also helped keep the Qing in the dark about this arrangement.[60] Some denied their dependency on the Middle Kingdom as a form of subordination. The Dalai Lamas of Tibet, regarded by Tibetan Buddhism as manifestations of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, claimed themselves religiously equal—if not superior—to the Qing emperors, who were believed to be the manifestation of bodhisattva Manjusri.[61]

The Middle Kingdom both acquiesced to and tolerated all such multiple recognitions. In many cases, the central regime itself would acknowledge equal status with another regime. As Joseph Fletcher points out, for example, the Ming Yongle emperor in correspondence with the Timur Khan officially addressed him as an equal.[62] The Qing–Russian Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689, judged by present-day standards, was a pioneer document of modern diplomacy between two states with equivalent sovereign rights,[63] albeit wherein relations with Russia were the responsibility of the Qing *lifanyuan*, a government institute mainly in charge of Mongol and Tibetan affairs. In another words, the *zongfan* order was often ambiguous and elastic. Meaning different things to different actors, it also conveyed multiple meanings to the same actor. Unlike modern international law, the *zongfan* order was one of unwritten regulations that each could practice and explain from within its own socio-political context.

Last, but not least, given that addressed above, it is almost impossible to see the pre-modern world order in East Asia as a system, either in terms of discourse or level of practice. This argument is not new; similar questions on the validity of the systemic view of tributary behaviours have been raised since the framework was first implemented.[64] The trans-systemic character of the *zongfan* practices could be safely regarded as one aspect of what Wang Hui argues is the trans-systemic character of the East Asian world.[65] But, I

[60] Ch'en Ta-tuan, 'Investiture of Liu Ch'iu Kings in the Ch'ing Period', in John King Fairbank, eds., *The Chinese World Order*.

[61] James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, pp. 38–42.

[62] Joseph F. Fletcher, 'China and Central Asia, 1368–1884', in John King Fairbank, eds., *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 206–17.

[63] Wang Hui, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi* (*The Rise of Chinese Modern Thoughts*) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2008), p. 684.

[64] John. E Wills Jr., 'Ch'ing Relations with the Dutch, 1662–1690', in John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*.

would like to make my interrogation from a different angle, one that considers the questions of who initiated the systematized idea of tributary or 'Chinese world order', for what purpose and what its assumptions were, in so doing.

The theory of 'tributary system' or 'Chinese world order' started to prevail in the Cold War era US, where 'area studies' dominated most fields of research on the non-Western world. Alienating the subject under observation, in this case, was both the basic method and fundamental task of the area studies school.[66] The implication being one of contemporary ideological struggle,[67] the 'tributary system' or 'Chinese world order' framework was, thus, created to explain China's generally antagonistic attitude since the 1840s towards 'the rest of the world'.[68]

Several basic hypotheses were embedded in it in efforts to systemize the 'world order' around pre-modern China. First, there existed a traditional East Asia civilization that was essentially alien to modern civilization, but which was also self-sufficient and willingly isolated itself from the rest of the world. Second, every traditional society has to experience a teleological transformation towards the modern through external impact and stimulation. Such a change was, hence, natural as well as inevitable. Third, Western powers initiated the transformation in East Asia by forcing China to abandon its self-claimed superiority in the region. Based on these hypotheses, the indigenous logics and internal mechanisms of transition were either denied or distorted by a set of standard, universalized and 'scientific' modes. More importantly, since diverse behaviours have to be explained through a heterogeneous 'system', world order in pre-modern East Asia was inevitably pictured as a closed and stationary entity with fixed boundaries. As a result, the frequent connections between East Asia and the rest of world in history were ignored or underestimated; the constant self-adjustments by East Asians in accordance with such connections were overlooked.[69]

[65] Wang Hui, *Dong Xi zhijian de 'Xizang wenti'* (*The 'Tibetan Issue' between East and West*) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2011), pp. 147–204.

[66] About the relation between the area studies and the political needs of cold war, see Bruce Cumings, 'Boundary Displacement: the State, the Foundations, and International and Area Studies during and after the Cold War', in *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American–East Asian Relations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 173–204. See also David L. Szanton, ed., *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[67] This was best expressed by Benjiamin Schwartz, 'The Chinese Perception of World Order, Past and Present', in John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 276–88.

[68] James Hevia, *Cherishing Men From Afar*.

[69] The most salient example of this is that both China and Japan have long been criticized for their 'closed country' (*Souguo* or *Sakoku*) policy, which oversimplified the interconnections both within East Asia trade circles and between East Asia and Europe. See China Institute of Navigation, eds., *Zhongguo hanghaishi: jindai hanghaishi* (*Navigation History of China: Modern Time*)(Beijing: Renmin jiaotong chubanshe, 1989), p. 2; Ronald P. Toby, 'Reopening the Question of Sakoku: Diplomacy in the Legitimation of the Tokugawa Bakufu', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1977), pp. 323–63.

What was invented and imagined was not solely the 'traditional' East Asia, but the so-called modern world as well. When the *zongfan*/'tributary' relation was essentialized, so was the sovereign state system. The latter has also become rigid and inflexible due to the dichotomy between tradition and the modern, regardless of the fact that it has seldom been substantially implemented.[70]

Recent studies show that, contrary to general belief, the boundary dividing the two was far from clear-cut, and that the development of the modern international system was not a linear transformation from one to the other. For example, late 19th century Sino–Korean relations developed simultaneously along the two trails of *zongfan* hierarchy and treaty–port diplomacy.[71] Interestingly, the two trails, although conflicted in principle, did not entirely oppose each other, but were, on many occasions, mutually dependent, to the extent of one promoting the other.[72] It was the Qing that instructed the Chosŏn government to establish diplomatic ties with Western states, and which tried to weave the bilateral relationship into the Western-oriented system of international law. At the same time, when Qing troops were sent to Chosŏn to suppress domestic disturbances, the *raison d'être* could be found in both the *zongfan* principle of protecting the inferior and the Western colonial principle of the suzerain intervening a 'vassal'.[73] Perhaps it is not entirely wrong to say that the 'tributary' relationship and sovereign state system were by no means mutually exclusive.[74]

New studies on empire building and sovereignty formation in Europe also challenge the conventional notion that the nation–state system was purely a European creation. They question the idea that elements which laid the foundations of modern world order originated in Western Europe and spread to the rest of the world. Instead, they see the building of that order as a process in which Europe, Africa, Asia, and America not only all participated but also mutually shaped. Frederick Cook, for example, emphasizes that modern notions of citizenship should be largely attributed

70 Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

71 Cui Lan-ying, 'KindaiChōsen no Gaikōseisaku no Issokumen: 'Chōkōkankei' to 'Jōyakukankei'' ('One Side of Joseon's Foreign Policy: Its "Tributary Relationship" vs. "Treaty Relationship"'), *Chōsen Gakuho* (*Journal of the Academic Association of Koreanology in Japan*), No. 184 (2002), pp. 77–116.

72 Quan Hexiu,'Wanqing duiwai guanxi zhong de 'yige waijiao liangzhong tizhi' xianxiang chuyi' ('A Study on the "One Diplomacy Two Systems" in the Late Qing Dynasty's Foreign Relations'), *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* (*China's Borderland History and Geography Studies*), No. 4 (2009), pp. 70–83.

73 About the Chosŏn's vague international status in late 19th century discourse, see Okamoto Takashi, *Zokkoku to jishu no aida: kindai Shin-Kankankei to Higashi Ajia no meiun*. About how the Qing reshaped the Sino–Korean relation in accordance with the colonial principle, see Kirk W. Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Choson Korea, 1850–1910* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

74 Hamashita Takeshi, *Choko shisutemu to kindaiajia* (*Tributary System and Modern Asia*) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten,1997).

to revolution in colonial America.[75] The argument echoes Benedict Anderson's description of nationalism that first appeared in the colonies and bound back to metropolises.[76] Neither was international law a system that independently emerged, according to Lauren Benton, but one that gradually developed through constant contacts and exchanges with indigenous juridical practices in extra-European domains during the long history of colonial and capitalist expansion.[77]

Returning to East Asia, it is true that there was severe conflict between a China-centred world order and Europe-oriented world order in the 19th century. But, compared to the hundreds of years of intercommunication between East Asia and Europe, the duration of conflict was relatively short. Most of the time, Asians and Europeans had learned, accepted and absorbed one another's principles of communication and, through conflicts and compromises, mutually reformed and internalized the differences.[78] The influence was never unidirectional or one dimensional. In other words, the nation–state system did not replace the *zongfan*/'tributary' institution; they rather merged with one another. The key transformation here was not about institution or system, but the shift of global power structure from the 19th century onward.

From that perspective, nothing is really unique about the interstate relationship in East Asia. Scholars start to focus on the power transition, as opposed to the institutional shift, in the studies of regional history. Mark Selden, for example, divides 16th century onward East Asian history into three stages, each of which developed around a core power. They are: (1) a Pax Sinica (16th to 19th century); (2) a Pax Japonica (1914–1945); and (3) a Pax Americana (1945–present). Although 'only the Pax Sinica offered a model of regional harmony in a period of protracted peace', all three models are unexceptionally hegemonic and hierarchical.[79] In many ways, the consolidation of 'tributary' relations—especially in the Qing era—did bear many similarities to the rise of European hegemonies. And historically they were certainly connected to each other through economic, intelligent, technological and military channels. It is based on this recognition that Peter Perdue emphasizes the theory that there was no big difference between the Qing Empire and European empires, in the sense of state building.[80] The

[75] Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

[76] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

[77] Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[78] See Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe, Volume I & II*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 1998).

[79] Mark Selden, 'Center and Periphery in East Asia in Three Epochs', *Journal of Northeast Asia History*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2008), pp. 5–20.

[80] Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West*, pp. 518–46.

eastern and western ends of the Eurasia continent were aware of, and learned from, each other. It is certainly arguable as to what extent the 'Eurasia similarity thesis' is valid. But, by eliminating the ideological barrier which isolates a traditional Asia from the rest of the world, recent historical studies do provide a new way of thinking for other social sciences disciplines, including IR; a way to re-value the 'uniqueness' of East Asian history and relocate this history in a broad global context.

Conclusion

I would like to end this essay by addressing why it is important to 'relocate East Asian history in a global context'. The one point on which I absolutely agree with Dr. Zhou is in better understanding the 'tributary' system, we try to gain a more comprehensive understanding of 'China's contemporary foreign relations'. Yet we, perhaps, fundamentally differ on two points. First, I believe that relations between China and its surroundings grew out of their centuries of interactions and have to be understood within the social and historical contexts. Powerful analytical tools as they sometimes are, certain social science models—e.g. game theory—nevertheless wrench these relations from their context and see all participants as 'rational' and abstract agencies who have no organic connections to each other. Such a perspective does not always provide an insightful lens on what is happening on the ground. (For instance, could we imply the 'harassment-conciliation' model to understand North Korea's insistence on the nuclear program? What about the territorial dispute in the East and South China Seas?) Reality is always more complicated and full of change; the perfect 'game' environment would be hard to find anywhere.

Second, studying China—its historical experience and contemporary practices—is not in itself for explaining just China. Rather, the target is to explain China as well as the extra-Chinese world. The 'Chinese school'—no matter what academic discipline in which it finds itself—could be hardly seen as established if it can only interpret the entity known as 'China'. Put another way, the reason why many scholars feel that current US-oriented IR theories are insufficient is not because the theories are weak in explaining China, but because they are based on a limited understanding of the world as a whole. Scholars on China need to be ambitious enough to overcome the East/West dichotomy, yet not to be satisfied at creating a Chinese theory specifically to interpret China. China and East Asia are active actors in almost all steps of global integration. As China's role becomes growingly important in current international society, the 'Chinese school'—if ever there is one—has to be proven more applicable in both theory and experience. That is why, by understanding 'tributary' from a multilateral and multi-layered perspective, it is importance to realize that there was almost

nothing essentially 'Chinese', just as there was little essentially 'European' in the nation–state system.

The regional history of East Asia is an organic part of global history, and should be treated that way, no more and no less. For dozens of decades, scholars have tended either to take one part of the earth as the whole, or draw strict boundaries between different parts of it. It was not until recently, partially inspired by the rise of China and other countries in the Pan-Asia region, that more and more studies began revealing how frequent and profound interregional influences had been in human history. Based on this ground, a new generation of scholars has made respectable contributions to revaluating the role of East Asia in the world through a transnational, more materialized, and more inclusive perspective.[81] Perhaps, on the very same grounds, a 'Chinese school' could be sincerely expected.

[81] For example, works by Andre Gunder Frank, Kenneth Pomeranz, R. Bin Wong, Mark Selden, Giovanni Arrighi, Timothy Brook, James Hevia, Hamashita Takeshi, Kaoru Sugihara and Wang Hui, just to name a few.

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