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Editor's Introduction

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

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

1 John K. Fairbank and Ssu-yu Teng, “On the Ch'ing Tributary System,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6, no. 2 (1941): 135-246.

China-centered and hierarchically structured system of diplomatic relations is what Fairbank refers to as the “Chinese world order.”

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

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

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

domestic security just as much as it was with the security conditions in China's different tributary states, which together made up a dynamic and closely intertwined security zone.

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

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

These incisive articles cover a time period stretching from the eleventh to the nineteenth century and deal with various states in the East Asian and Southeast Asian region. They not only help to improve our understanding of the tributary system but also provide theoretical critiques and challenges to the very concept of the tributary system. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that Chinese scholars continue to reflect upon and develop new approaches to the theory of the tributary system and the premodern East Asian international order.

Translated by Ady Van den Stock