



AN ASSESSMENT OF 'TRIBUTE SYSTEM' STUDIES: THEORIES AND CRITIQUES

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The contemporary dynamics of International Relations (IR), particularly the rise of China, peaceful or otherwise, have drawn the attention of IR scholars as well as those of historians towards the historical politics of East Asian region. The 'Rise of China' has compelled the academics to further their research in order to understand the so called 'Chinese World Order'. Questions are being raised about the purpose of such a World Order, if it comes into being, as well as efforts are being made to look into past for clues as to what this World Order might look like in terms of political, ideological and strategic aspects. This has caused 'a cauldron of anxiety'¹ within both academic and policy communities worldwide, and provoked fierce debate about power transition and/or hegemonic succession between the United States and China and the implications for the future global order.²

Keywords: *China, Tribute System, World Order, Game Theory, international society*

Introduction

The research into the field has come up with a historical East Asian Order, what is known as the 'Tribute System', though there is disagreement among the scholars regarding the very usage of this term itself. Nonetheless, a number of significant works, starting from J.K. Fairbank, have been carried out to analyse this tributary system using different theories and approaches. These theories and their criticisms provide some extremely valuable insights about the mutually reinforcing cause and effect relationship between the Tributary System and the East Asian World Order.

The problem with such approaches is their attempt to explain every historical instance through a single prism of analysis and ultimately falling short of achieving their goal. My aim through this paper is to develop an insight that involves the usage of multiple approaches to explain the complexities of understanding the Tributary System. Clearly, it does not follow the idea of 'one

¹ Robert Zoellick, 'Whither China: from Membership to Responsibility: Remarks to National Committee on US-China Relations', http://www.ncuscr.org/files/2005Gala_RobertZoellick_Whither_China1.pdf as cited in Zhang Yongjin & Barry Buzan, "The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5(1), pp. 3-36 (2012). Retrieved July 25, 2021, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48615861>

² John Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise." *Current History*, vol. 105, no. 690, 2006, pp. 160-62. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45318719>. Accessed 22 Aug. 2022; John G. Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?" *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 1, 2008, pp. 23-37. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20020265>. Accessed 22 Aug. 2022.

size fits all' and oftentimes we find these models overlapping in their applicability to explain this historical regional order.

In this paper, I attempt to review some of these prominent theories while critically analysing them based on their interpretive power and their applicability in explaining a multitude of situations varying along spatial and temporal dimensions. The first section discusses the theoretical nature of these approaches, their assumptions and key points followed by second section that deals with their critiques and possible improvements that can better justify the Tributary System as an international order. The last section of the paper tries to come up with possible lessons that can be drawn from historical East Asian Order to throw some light on contemporary problems concerning the (not so) peaceful rise of China.

Multiplicity of Approaches

The study of historical East Asian politics became an area of interest after the pioneering work done by J.K. Fairbank in the field. Fairbank's theories and frameworks, though heavily criticised later on, became the basis on which further studies were conducted leading to more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the system under consideration. Fairbank, for his part, tried to interpret the tribute system as a form of diplomatic relations between Imperial China and its neighbours, based on Chinese centrality and superiority³ in terms of cultural, economic and power relations.

Fairbank's assumption of Chinese superiority was premised upon the universal pre-eminence accorded to the Son of Heaven as propounded by Confucianism, the leading ideology in China and later in the entire region. According to Fairbank and his collaborators, Chinese rulers established the tributary system since external tributary states added prestige to their rule and the tributaries in turn agreed to this arrangement as it gave them access to trade with China.⁴ This supposed trade off, however, falls short of explaining the continuity of the system as well as it being the primary motivation of the actors in this relationship.

³ J. K. Fairbank, 'A preliminary Framework', pp. 1-2. Also see C. P. Fitzgerald, *The Chinese View of Their Place in the World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964)

⁴ Fairbank, J. K., and S. Y. Têng. "On The Ch'ing Tributary System." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1941, pp. 135-246. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2718006>. Accessed 22 Aug. 2022.

Fairbank's interpretation of the tribute system essentially highlights the hierarchical order in the relationship, wherein the Chinese rulers were magnanimous enough to grant the smaller states a tributary status and these states were benefitting from trade with China. Acknowledgment from the Chinese Emperor also provided legitimacy to their rule and a sense of security, though not very reliable, from other rival states. The heavy focus on ritualistic aspects of the tributary system in Fairbank's model is also one of the reasons for its lack of applicability in the domain of IR.

Another prominent and rather interesting work on tributary studies was done by Zhou Fangyin from the standpoint of a game-theoretic equilibrium. He argues that his equilibrium model considers the tributary system from a vantage of interests and not just assumed superiority of Chinese values.⁵ Zhou's basis of analysis is more suitable for the model's application in contemporary East Asian order since its primary framework of 'interests' is in accordance with modern day nation states. The model makes two basic assumptions: firstly, China is in a position of power advantage with respect to countries in the periphery; and secondly, as long as the Chinese regime is stable, the overall objective of its foreign policy will be defensive in nature, or it will at least be very cautious about making aggressions.⁶

Zhou's model constructs a game set where both the players, China and the periphery state under asymmetric distribution of power, have two strategic choices each. For China, it can use a conciliatory strategy or a punitive expedition, as Zhou puts it, representing peace or war respectively. The periphery too has two options: namely resorting to border harassments or submitting to Chinese rule. Based on the choices of these two players, Zhou proposes four decision sets namely A, B, C and D representing either stable or unstable equilibria.

In the game, we at times observe cycles in decision sets. For example, first we observe the decision set A {China conciliatory, Periphery State engages in border harassment}. Next, China painfully works up resolve to engage in a punitive expedition, and we obtain decision set C. In the face of suppression from China, the periphery state submits, and we obtain decision set D; now that the periphery state is once again paying patronage, China resumes its strategy of conciliation, resulting in decision set B. Once in B, it is possible for the two players to play these strategies for a number of rounds of the game—this being a stable period in the tributary system. It is also possible, though,

⁵ Zhou Fangyin, "Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 4(2), 147-178 (2011). Retrieved July 25, 2021, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48615800>

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 151

that the players once again enter into A, at which point the cycle above repeats itself⁷. This is illustrated using the following fig. 1.

		Peripheral State	
		Harassment	Submission
China	Conciliatory Policy	A	B
	Punitive Expedition	C	D

Fig. 1 Strategic Interaction between China and a Peripheral State under Asymmetric Distribution of Power.

Source: Zhou Fangyin, 'Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System', p. 162.

To support his theory, Zhou provides three detailed case studies that show the applicability of equilibrium model. The first being the Qing relations with Burma under Qianlong Emperor, second Sui-Tang relations with Korean Peninsula and the third case was of Gwanhaegun, second son of King Seonjo and 15th king of Joseon dynasty. All the three case studies described by Zhou explain the relationship between China and its peripheries as a result of rational choice and strategic interaction. Zhou's theory seems to suggest that this equilibrium was a path dependent outcome, and that the Chinese objective was to maintain stability in the border regions with minimal cost even if they had to compromise on certain areas.

The third approach that I take into consideration is that of Zhang Yongjin and Barry Buzan's view of tributary system as an international society. This model is heavily influenced by the English School of International Relations and uses the constructivist idea of constitutive nature of international society. The authors' primary argument is that the tributary system is not just a structure of strategic interaction and economic exchange, as claimed by Zhou and Fairbank, between Imperial China and other participants in the system, but an articulation of the existence of international society in East Asia, with its own social structure which embodies complex social relations among participating and constituent states, and which has a particular set of institutions that help to define norms of acceptable and legitimate state behaviour.⁸

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Zhang Yongjin & Barry Buzan, "The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5(1), 3-36 (2012). Retrieved July 26, 2021, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48615861>

The model is based on a ‘Constitutional Structure’ which according to it, forms the basic foundation of an international society. This constitutional structure defines the moral purpose of the state, its organizing principle of sovereignty and the systemic norms of procedural justice. In case of historical East Asia, where the fundamental institution is tributary system, these constitutional structures manifest in the form of promoting cosmic and social harmony, ordered (sovereign) inequality and ritual justice respectively.⁹

Another argument made by the authors to legitimize the idea of constitutional structures is the fact that the tributary system was replicated by the some of the periphery states to manage bilateral relations between them such as the Japan centred tributary system or Annam centred tributary system, essentially suggesting that paying tribute was an institutional practice not unique to China. The tributary relationship of Imperial China was always bilateral, and never multilateral. Also, since the Chinese perception of the world was civilizational, the tributary system was open to anyone who wished to participate as long as they followed the conditions defined largely by Imperial China.

To explain any behavioural deviations or anomalies from prescribed norms, the model uses Stephen Krasner’s idea of ‘organized hypocrisy’ which basically says that the longstanding norms and rules defining appropriate behaviour are frequently violated by the actors, but who do not however, at the same time necessarily challenge the legitimacy of that society.¹⁰ A contemporary example of such behaviour would be that of the United States of America. This justifies why Chinese ruling elites ‘were able to move back and forth between the assertion of myth and the acceptance of reality so frequently and for so long a time without abandoning this superior view of themselves’.¹¹

Another approach that is worth mentioning is the Multilateral and Multilayered perspective proposed by Song Nianshen. He bases his arguments on the criticisms of Zhou’s equilibrium model which I will be dealing with in the next section. Song’s idea is to establish a state-to-state relationship which is a complex, multilevel power nexus composed of interconnections among

⁹ ZHANG, YONGJIN. “System, Empire and State in Chinese International Relations.” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 27, 2001, pp. 43-63. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45299504>. Accessed 22 Aug. 2022.

¹⁰ Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). As cited in Zhang Yongjin & Barry Buzan, no. 8

¹¹ Wang Gungwu, ‘Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia’, p. 62.

multiple political, economic, ideological and technical cores and peripheries.¹² An interesting feature of Song's work is his preference of the term 'Zongfan hierarchy' over 'tributary system'. His insistence on this distinction arises out of historical origins of the two systems. He argues that Zongfan is an indigenous expression that expresses the sociological, philosophical and cosmological roots of the political arrangement whereas 'tributary' is borrowed from the historical setting of the Roman empire, having its roots in the exchange of wealth.¹³

Song's article builds on Zhou's shortcomings but frankly speaking does not offer much in terms of a concrete theory that explains the tributary system. He too, like many others, mentions various anecdotal instances in history that can be seen through a multilateral and multilevel perspective. Nevertheless, a prism of understanding intersecting history and IR certainly develops from his insights.

Criticisms and Further Developments Proposed

Almost every theory/model accounting for an explanation of tributary system has faced some criticism specially Fairbank's model. The attempts made to explain the entire gamut of tributary relations along with justifying all the events in the historical analysis of the region have not been fully successful but nonetheless an amazing progress has been made in this direction. These critiques have encouraged further research in the field and thus enriching it with more nuanced and fresh points of views coming from an interdisciplinary approach.

Fairbank's model has been accused by various scholars of being extremely Sinocentric and rigid in its approach. Zhang Feng observes that the model is "a static framework which lacks any sense of change and reflects mainly the world order the Chinese court preferred to perceive"¹⁴. Feng decries the assumptions of Chinese superiority made by Fairbank, stating that at least a distinction

¹² Song Nianshen, "Tributary' from a Multilateral and Multilayered Perspective", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5(2), 155-182 (2012). Retrieved July 26, 2021, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48615766>

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian, eds., *Sino-Japanese Relations: Interaction, Logic, and Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 15. As cited in Feng, Zhang. "Rethinking the 'Tribute System': Broadening the Conceptual Horizon of Historical East Asian Politics." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2009, pp. 545-74. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48615737>. Accessed 22 Aug. 2022.

should be made between the periods of Chinese strength and that of periods of weaknesses citing the example of Song dynasty that actually paid tributes to its Liao and Jin neighbours.

Other criticisms of Fairbank include its focus primarily on so called Sinic states such as Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Liuqiu etc. while leaving out, for the most part, non Sinic zones such as Burma or northern areas inhabited by Barbarians. An unbalanced focus on ritualistic aspects of the tributary relations also prevents its significance in IR domain.

Zhou's approach, though unique, too suffers from some inadequacies. He himself, towards the end of his article, points out the basic flaw in his conclusion, which is that the idea of conciliatory strategy guiding the Chinese Foreign Policy is a gross oversimplification that leads to another problem essentially suggesting that China's neighbours do not dare wage war against China and that since China is defensive in nature, therefore, its interaction with peripheries ultimately results in a stable equilibrium.¹⁵

Brantly Womack argues that Zhou's equilibrium theory is borne out of negative outcomes resulting from the exceptions and that his analysis is restricted not only to China but to China's perspectives on its relationships.¹⁶ Song points out four problems in Zhou's approach notably (i) the game model problems; (ii) a bilateral perspective; (iii) (Sino)centralism and (iv) (mis)use of historical materials. A detailed discussion of each of these issues is out of scope for this paper but an important point about the game model is noteworthy. As per Song, though the equilibrium model claims to analyse the stability in the region, it seems to be more interested in conflict, or at least, the transition between the two statuses.

Zhang Yongjin and Barry Buzan's model of tributary system as international society calls Zhou's game model, a tributary system without a soul. They adequately recognize the vital contribution made by the equilibrium model but accuse Zhou of failing to recognize the social analysis of the construction and constitution of the tributary system as a particular historical social structure in East Asia, or as a particular set of institutional and discursive practices that define, govern and regulate the so-called Pax Sinica.¹⁷

¹⁵ Zhou Fangyin, no. 5

¹⁶ Brantly Womack, "Asymmetry and China's Tributary System", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5(1), 37-54 (2012). Retrieved July 26, 2021, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48615862>

¹⁷ Zhang Yongjin & Barry Buzan, no. 8

The international society model presents a social and institutional basis of the tributary system with a constitutional structure at its core. Its relentless effort to prove the existence of tributary system as an international society undermines the Chinese influence in the region and its ability to mould such a society through various hard and soft measures as per its requirements. Another issue that can be raised is, unlike many others, Zhang and Buzan do not provide any case studies to substantiate the idea of an international society.

For further research, Zhou offers three areas where more light can be shed upon. First, he notes that his work only considers an asymmetrical distribution of power between players, thus, effectively ruling out the impact of any changes in power distribution. Second, in most situations status B i.e., China conciliatory and the periphery submits, is not a classical equilibrium. In that case, what maintained the continued existence of the tribute system? Lastly, he accepts that his case studies are neither comprehensive nor exhaustive and hence there is a lot of scope for more research on this theme.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, the studies in Chinese Tributary System are getting more refined with each passing day. The vital contribution made by the aforementioned scholars in the field is only the tip of the iceberg in studying the historical East Asian politics. The motivation behind such studies, apart from general interest of historical analysis and theory building, is also to draw lessons from the past experiences and try to find out any hints of resemblances that can explain the present-day phenomenon or at least puts the modern situations into perspective.

So, are there lessons to be learned from the analysis of tributary system studies? Does it have any bearing on contemporary politics of this region or the modern technological, political and ideological changes overshadow any such impact? With the reemergence of China as a regional and global power, such questions have become pertinent. The present-day Chinese behaviour towards other smaller countries in the region does not seem to be defensive in nature, as described by Zhou during Imperial era, in fact quite the opposite. The best example here is that of South China Sea dispute.

Anything resembling the tributary system is definitely out of question in modern era, as observed by Womack in his article. He also gives a somewhat idea of relevance of tributary experience in managing the asymmetric relationships in East Asia today. He predicts that both the outcome and

the character of US–China competition will be determined by China’s relationships with its neighbours. If China enforces its interests on its neighbours or appears likely to, they will hedge their interests against China.¹⁸ Womack suggests that it would be in China’s strategic interests to refrain from any activities that increase global alienation and resistance. Though, with recent developments after the Coronavirus Pandemic along with border standoff with India, Hong Kong issue, human rights issues in Xinjiang, the aggression against Taiwan etc. suggest that Beijing has chosen a completely different path.

In the era of nation states with sovereign equality, there does not seem to be much to draw from the tributary system experience. But as a regional power, in fact a global power, China can definitely use some lessons from its imperial history with regards to maintaining stability in the region and acting with benevolence towards smaller nations to maintain its status, even if that means giving concessions.

As far as the question of how a Chinese led World Order will look like is still a matter of debate and remains to be seen. To my mind, any resemblances to tributary order would be hard to find but the possibility cannot be ruled out. Even if such parallels are drawn, they would mostly be negative than positive from a non-Chinese perspective.

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Cover image source: The Wanguo laichao tu (c. 1760), [The Palace Museum](#), Beijing.

¹⁸ Brantly Womack, no. 16