A Discourse Analysis of Recent Mainland Chinese Historiography on the Sinocentric Tributary System of the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1912)

Sebestyén Hompot

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3372-2547>

Abstract

The article investigates the recent (2000–2019) mainland Chinese historiography on the Sinocentric tributary system of the Ming and Qing periods (1368–1912). The theoretical approach of the article is based on Foucauldian discourse theory, as well as Chinese theoretical scholarship on the evolution of Chinese thought. Its methodology is primarily based on Reiner Keller’s sociological discourse research method. The main body of the article is structured upon the major fields of argumentation of the discourse, identified by the author as “the validity of the term ‘tributary system,’” “the tributary system and pre-modern Chinese culture,” “the tributary system and Ming–Qing Chinese socio-economic history,” and “the tributary system and the regional political order.” The article argues that the ‘discursive struggle’ in recent historiography on the tributary system is primarily a result of its contested interpretation and evaluation under current dominant framings of an ideal international order—one centred around the principles of national sovereignty and “win-win” economic cooperation.

Keywords: tributary system, discourse analysis, Ming China, Qing China, East Asian history

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Introduction

The “tributary system” (also known as the “tribute system”) is a term coined and used by American Sinologist and historian John King Fairbank (1907–1991) (see Fairbank and Têng 1941; Fairbank 1968) to describe the inter-state relations of East Asia in pre-modern times. Fairbank envisioned the tributary system as a Sinocentric “world order” based on the presentation of tributary goods (*gòng* 贡) and ritual pledges of loyalty (*chēngchén* 称臣) by non-Chinese rulers in exchange for gifts in return (*cì* 赐) and largely symbolic titles of nobility (*fēng* 封) granted by the Chinese emperor. The term has been translated into Chinese as *cháogòng tǐxì* 朝贡体系 or *cháogòng zhìdù* 朝贡制度 and has become widely used among Chinese historians in recent decades.¹

While Fairbank primarily focused on Chinese social norms derived from the importance of rituals (*lǐ* 礼) in Confucianism as the roots of the tributary system, several other interpretations have emerged and gained prominence in subsequent decades. Japanese economic historian Hamashita Takeshi 浜下武志 (b. 1943) introduced the concept of a “tribute-trade system” (*chōkō bōeki shisutemu* 朝貢貿易システム) of Ming-Qing-era East and Southeast Asia, focusing on the interrelated nature of tributary exchanges and commercial trade, as well as their relation to the global flows of silver (Hamashita 1990; 2008). In this respect, Hamashita also contributed to the application of Andre Gunder Frank and Kenneth Pomeranz’s theories of a silver-based global economy between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries in the East Asian context (Frank 1998; Pomeranz 2001).

The framing of the tributary system as a regional political order of pre-modern East Asia² has been widely discussed both within and beyond China, especially since the publication of *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* by American political scientist David C. Kang (b. 1965) (Kang 2012), and its translation into Chinese (Kang 2016). Kang’s work is primarily based on a constructivist approach to international relations theory, focusing on the investigation of “hierarchy,”

¹ In CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure, *Zhōngguó Zhīwǎng* 中国知网, accessed: April 16, 2020), China’s largest scientific database, the number of Chinese-language academic journal articles containing the terms *cháogòng tǐxì* 朝贡体系 or *cháogòng zhìdù* 朝贡制度 in the “subject” line (title, abstract, or keywords) developed as follows over recent decades: zero (before 1980), one (1980–1989, in 1988), twenty-one (1990–1999), 190 (2000–2009), 560 (2010–2019) (CNKI 2020).

² Like other geographical categorisations, “East Asia” is a contested term in academia (see, e.g., Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2007). In a historical context, it is generally understood as a geo-cultural category referring to the Confucian/Sinicised polities of Eastern Asia, which for most of the Ming and Qing periods included the states of China, Japan, Korea, Ryūkyū (modern Okinawa Prefecture in Japan), and Vietnam (Kang 2012; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2007). Throughout the article, “East Asia” will be used according to this understanding, while “Eastern Asia” will refer to the broader geographical space including East, Southeast, and Inner Asia, especially while discussing transregional economic processes.

“status,” and “hegemony” in the East Asian context. Kang argues that for most of the Míng and Qīng eras (1368–1912), the hierarchical, Sinocentric system constituted a set of norms among the Confucian East Asian *states*³ which contributed to long-lasting periods of regional stability. He claims that this set of diplomatic rules, rooted in Confucian notions of harmony through hierarchy, was shared throughout the region and led to an extremely low number of interstate wars fought among the East Asian states between the establishment of the Míng dynasty (1368) and the late nineteenth century.⁴ He contrasts these 500 years of interstate stability with the lack of comparably long stable periods and the constancy of interstate warfare in Europe in the same era, despite the emergence of the so-called Westphalian norms of territorial sovereignty and nominal equality in European diplomatic relations. Kang also argues that in East Asia, the introduction of Westphalian norms, accompanied by the emergence of Western-style nationalisms and colonialism, were the reasons behind the major disruption of the regional order in the late nineteenth century, starting with the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and culminating in World War II in East Asia (1937–1945).

The ongoing re-emergence of China as the power centre of East Asia has generated an increasing amount of attention towards the tributary system as a pre-modern regional political order of East Asia (and, to some extent, adjacent regions) among Chinese and non-Chinese scholars. The relevance of related research is often seen in the potential its findings hold for a better understanding of the formation of the present and future regional order. However, the framing of the tributary system as a pre-modern regional order of East Asia has also been criticised for various reasons. The most common point of criticism is that tributary exchanges among Chinese emperors and non-Chinese rulers did not constitute a *system*, the term “tributary system” being a modern Western invention and therefore having little analytical validity for historical research (Perdue 2015; Feng 2009; Zhuāng Guótǔ 2005a).

While a small number of critical articles of shorter length focused on certain aspects of the historiography on the tributary system have been published (Perdue 2015;

³ Regarding the definitions of “state” and applications in the premodern East Asian context, Kang (2012: 25–53), Sachsenmaier (2011: 206–212), and Wang Hui (2014: 3–29) criticise the exclusively Eurocentric notions of modernity and nation/state-building, and argue for framing the Míng–Qīng-era East Asian states (in the Chinese case, starting from the Sòng dynasty, 960–1279) as proto-modern (nation-)states. They base their claims on the emergence of Neo-Confucianism (*lǐxué* 理学—literally “study of reason/logic”) as dominant state ideology, the existence of a relatively uniform written language (Classical Chinese), and the formation of centralised bureaucracies. Following their line of argument, premodern East Asian polities will be described as “states.”

⁴ Kang (2012: 1–16) mentions the Míng Chinese conquest of Vietnam (1407–1428) and the Imjin War (1592–98 fought between Japan and an alliance of Korea and China) as the only examples of interstate armed conflicts between the foundation of China’s Míng dynasty (1368) and the First Opium War of 1839–1842.

Feng 2009; Zhuāng Guótǔ 2005a, 2005b), the research presented herein fills an academic niche by approaching Chinese academic discussions as a discursive formation and providing a detailed and comprehensive analysis. The research question of the present article is thus how the recent Chinese academic discourse on the tributary system can be characterised: what are its main channels or fields of argumentation, its characteristic phenomenal and narrative structures, and its place in the broader cultural and socio-political context. The theoretical and methodological approach taken by the author to investigate these issues is elaborated in the following section.

Theory and Methodology

The research project presented in this article is centered on the qualitative analysis of thirty Chinese-language academic journal articles published in mainland China in the last twenty years selected from the CNKI database (CNKI 2020). The selection criteria included citation numbers recorded in CNKI,⁵ publication year (the inclusion of articles from recent years), as well as temporal and spatial diversity. The final criterion was chosen due to expected differences in the discourse related to temporal (Míng vis-à-vis Qīng) and spatial (East, Southeast, Inner Asian) distinctions. While the article focuses on scholarship produced in China, the contents of certain important recent non-Chinese works on the tributary system are also discussed here.

The selected corpus was analysed and structured with reference to Reiner Keller's (2011) approach to discourse analysis with a focus on the identification of "discourse fields" (*Diskursfelder*), interpreted by him as an "arena in which discourses compete in order to constitute or define a phenomenon" (2011: 68).⁶ According to Keller, discourse fields are composed of "discourse fragments" (*Diskursfragmente*), consisting of so called "informative events" (*Aussageereignisse*) (e.g., texts) that are the basic units of analysis (2011: 68). Keller's analytical approach focuses on various aspects of these discourse fragments, including their position in broader historical-social, as well as the narrower institutional-organisational levels, their characteristic linguistic and rhetorical tools, their phenomenal structure (e.g., "we"/"they"-groups, notions of "civilisation"), and the resulting "patterns of interpretation" (*Deutungsmuster*) (i.e. how certain types of events or phenomena are systematically understood and evaluated), as well as their narrative structures (Keller 2011: 68, 97–110). Based on his methodology of describing phenomenal, interpretative, and narrative structures, as

⁵ Among the articles analysed, Qín Yǎqīng (2006), Yù Chángsēn (2000), Chǒng Yǒng-hwa (Zhèng 2006), Zhuāng Guótǔ (2005a), and Jiān Jūnbō (2009) are among the ten most-cited articles returned for the search term *cháogòng tǐxì* 朝贡体系 or *cháogòng zhìdù* 朝贡制度 in the "topic" field (title, abstract, keywords) as of April 16, 2020 (123, 122, 116, ninety-eight, and seventy citations respectively).

⁶ All quotes from non-English-language sources are translations by the author of the article.

well as his strategy of “minimal versus maximal contrasting” (Keller 2011: 91–93), which aims to identify mainstream and divergent views, I intend to establish a frame for the interpretation and evaluation of the tributary system found in mainstream Chinese historiography.

At the theoretical level, my investigation of the tributary system discourse relied on Foucault’s conceptualisation of “power-knowledge-complexes” of given historical periods. The dialectical relationships between power and discourses, as well as between power and knowledge underlying this conceptualisation, were adapted with reference to KDA (*Kritische Diskursanalyse*), the critical discourse analytical approach of Siegfried Jäger, Jürgen Link, and other authors related to the Duisburg Institute of Linguistic and Social Studies (DISS). Based on two assumptions—first, that discourses are both maintainers and potential challengers of power in a given society, playing not merely a reflective but also a formative role vis-à-vis power relations; and second, the interdependency of “knowledge” deconstruction and power relations—KDA focuses on discourse as “struggle.” Participants engage to defend or challenge certain “truths” in an interconnected way with the extant relations of power and orders of knowledge (Jäger 2015: 8–55; Jäger and Jäger 2007: 9–38).

The theoretical setting of my research is complemented by works by Wāng Huī 汪晖 (b. 1959) and Xǔ Jílín 许纪霖 (b. 1957) which focus upon the historical evolution of Chinese thought. Explaining the shift from native epistemological traditions to the formation of Western-influenced modern-era knowledge systems, the writings of these two prominent Chinese historians and public intellectuals allow for and facilitate the translation of Foucault’s theoretical concept of “power-knowledge-complexes” to the context of recent Chinese historiography on China’s pre-modern history. Their conceptualisation of a *tiānxià*-天下 or *tiānlǐ* 天理 worldview as characteristic of pre-modern Chinese thought, as well as its contrast with modern China’s dominant ideologies, is especially relevant in the current context (Wang 2014; Xǔ Jílín 2017).⁷

⁷ The term *tiānxià*-worldview (天下观) is based on the Classical Chinese term *tiānxià* 天下 (literally “[all] under Heaven,” i.e., the entire world), describing a Sinocentric worldview based on the centrality of the emperor (“Son of Heaven,” *tiānzǐ* 天子) and the territory ruled by him (commonly known as the “Middle Country” or China), and the peripheral position of foreigners/“barbarians” (*yí* 夷). The term also implies Confucian notions of an idealised reciprocity between a “virtuous” (*dé* 德) and “benevolent” (*rén* 仁) emperor spreading “civility” (*wén* 文) and subordinate foreign rulers showing filial piety (*xiào* 孝) in return (see Wang 2013: 6–9, 135; Xú Bō 2017: 87–90; Xǔ Jílín 2015). Wang Hui (2014) uses the Confucian term *tiānlǐ* 天理 (“Heavenly law/principle,” the natural order of things) to frame a pre-modern Chinese worldview with similar ideological characteristics.

Mainland Chinese Academic Discourse on the Tributary System

The structure of the article is based on four major discourse fields and various sub-fields identified by the author. According to Keller's definition of "discourse fields" introduced in the previous section, these are the "arenas" in which the discourse on the tributary system represents itself in order to constitute or define the related phenomenon. The first deals with constituting and defining terms for the analysis of Míng-Qīng China's handling of foreign relations. The discussion here mostly revolves around the question of whether the framing of a "tributary system" of Míng-Qīng China is valid for historical analysis. The principal critical point of various authors is that Míng-Qīng China's tributary exchanges did not constitute a defining *system* of the country's foreign relations. For this reason, some critics argue that the term should be abandoned altogether, while others hold that it should only be used for China's relations with certain countries or should only be seen as a secondary element of Míng-Qīng China's foreign policy. The second section investigates the discourse field related to pre-modern Chinese culture, worldview(s), and value system(s). The sub-sections follow the subfields involving Confucianism, the *tiānxià*-worldview, the Sino-"barbarian" distinction (*huá-yí zhī biàn* 华夷之辩), as well as the supposed pro-agricultural/anti-trade (*zhòng nóng yì shāng* 重农抑商) attitude of pre-modern Chinese elites. The third section focuses on the discourse field on Míng-Qīng China's social and economic history, including the supposed wastefulness and isolationism of China's foreign economic policy. Finally, the fourth section investigates the discourse field on past, present and future political orders of East Asia. Discussions within this field mostly revolve around Míng-Qīng-era East Asian regional stability which, according to a number of authors, was facilitated by the tributary system, as well as the possible relevance of the tributary system for the construction of present and future regional stability.

The Validity of the Term "Tributary System" for Historical Analysis

When discussing the tributary system, various non-Chinese and Chinese authors are concerned with whether the term of twentieth-century Western origin is of analytical validity for the investigation of pre-modern Chinese history. U.S. historian Peter Perdue rejects the conceptualisation of a tributary *system* as a whole, arguing that pre-modern China's practice of foreign relations was made up of "multiple relations of trade, military force, diplomacy and ritual" instead (2015: 1003). Perdue also argues that recent historiography on the tributary system is primarily motivated by ideological factors instead of critical inquiry of historical sources, comparing the works of David C. Kang and like-minded authors to Kuomintang dictator Chiang Kai-shek's *Zhōngguó zhī mìngyùn* 中国之命运 (*China's Destiny*, 1947) (2015: 1013). According

to Perdue (2015: 1004), “the current myth of the tributary system” disguises past imperial expansionism as cultural universalism and is primarily based on the current Chinese elite’s promotion of its “peaceful rise” foreign relations narrative instead of critical historical analysis.

Political scientist Zhang Feng argues that tributary exchanges were only one of the ways pre-modern China handled its foreign relations and not even the most important (Feng 2009: 570). Another line of criticism proposed by historian Zhuāng Guótǔ 庄国土 is that modern scholarship relying on the concept of the “tributary system” reproduces a one-sided worldview and rhetoric among pre-modern Chinese elites, having little to do with real practices of foreign diplomacy or with how the tributaries of China saw themselves and their relations with China (Zhuāng Guótǔ 2005a; 2005b).

Reactions to the criticism have also been formulated by proponents of the concept. David C. Kang argues against the functionalist view regarding the tributary system as “a substance-free set of acts masking ‘real’ international politics based on military power and commerce” or as “a cloak for trade” (Kang 2012: 12–14). He emphasises the importance of culture (in this case Confucianism) and shared norms in interstate/international relations, referring his theoretical influences to authors such as Richard N. Lebow (2009) and William C. Wohlforth (1999). Various Chinese authors who primarily follow an institutionalist approach point out the importance of institutions, regulations, and official insignia such as certificates and official seals used in tributary correspondences as tangible elements constituting the tributary system. However, they still tend to regard the tributary system as a partly one-sided rhetoric among Chinese elites (Lǐ Yúnquán 2014; Lǚ Zhèngāng 2017).⁸

A conclusion drawn by various authors is that based on the frequency and regulation of tributary missions, as well as the existence of a shared literary language (Classical Chinese) and cultural reference base (Confucianism), a substantial tributary *system* only existed between China and the three states of Korea, Ryūkyū, and Vietnam. According to this view, other political entities—located primarily in Southeast, Inner, Central, and South Asia, and at certain times as far as the Middle East, East Africa,

⁸ Institutions dealing with tributary exchanges during the Míng and Qīng dynasties included the *Lǐbù* 礼部 (Board of Rites) as main coordinator, the *Hónglú Sì* 鸿胪寺 (Ministry of Great Display) which organised tributary ceremonies, as well as the *Huìtóngguǎn* 会同馆 (Bureau of Interpreters) which trained interpreters and accommodated members of foreign tributary missions. From the Míng period onwards, regulations concerned the frequency, number of participants, and routes of the tributary missions. Official certificates included those for legitimate tributary missions, as well as official seals to be used in tributary correspondence—all issued by the Chinese institutions in charge. Upon coming to power, the Qīng ordered all its tributaries to return Míng-era certificates and seals and viewed hesitation as a challenge to its legitimacy, indicating the importance attached to these official tributary insignia on the Chinese side (Lǚ Zhèngāng 2017; Yù Chángsēn 2000).

and Europe⁹—were only irregular, “nominal” or “ritual” tributaries of China (Lǐ Yúnquán 2011; Liú Xīnjūn 2011; Lǚ Zhèngāng 2017; Xú Bō 2017). Since the recorded number of Korean missions and their level of institutionalisation on the Korean side by far exceeded even what is attested from Ryūkyū and Vietnam, some authors single out Sino-Korean relations as the only example of a tributary *system* (Feng 2009; Zhuāng Guótǔ 2005a).¹⁰ Furthermore, the East Asian tributary system has also been framed as a regional order with two centres of shared norms: China and Japan.

The Tributary System and Pre-Modern Chinese Culture

The Tributary System and Confucianism

Ever since Fairbank’s initial works on the tributary system, it has been interpreted by a number of authors as a primarily cultural phenomenon based on the importance of rites (*lǐ* 礼) in Confucianism and the related concept of *lǐzhì* 礼治 (rule by rites). It is widely accepted that the tributary system can be seen as an extension of pre-modern China’s domestic social norms, primarily influenced by Confucian moral philosophy since the Hàn dynasty (206 BCE–220). In pre-modern Chinese society, the appropriate observation of rites was seen as the cornerstone of maintaining harmonious relationships based on hierarchy and reciprocity between a righteous (*yì* 义) and benevolent (*rén* 仁) ruler (as well as father, husband, elder brother) and the obedient subject (as well as son, wife, younger brother). According to various authors, in the context of foreign relations, this emphasis on hierarchy and reciprocity manifested in the ritualised exchanges of tribute and pledge of allegiance in return for gifts and largely symbolic titles of nobility, constituting the tributary system (Sòng Xiǎoqín 2017: 9–

⁹ Tributary contacts were established with various cities in the Middle East (Aden, Hormuz, Mecca, Medina etc.) as well as East Africa (Barawa, Malindi, Mogadishu etc.), primarily as a result of the large-scale maritime missions led by the imperial eunuch and admiral Zhèng Hé 郑和 on the orders of the Yǒnglè 永乐 (r. 1402–1424) and Xuāndé 宣德 (r. 1434–1435) emperors. During the Qīng period, several European states (Great Britain, the Netherlands, the Papacy, Portugal, and Russia) also sent occasional tributary missions to China (Fairbank and Têng 1941: 193–197).

¹⁰ The number and frequency of tributary missions, based on records in Míng- and Qīng-era official documents, is summarised by Fairbank and Têng (1941: 151–154, 193–97). Based on these sources, Korea was by far China’s most frequent tributary throughout the Míng and Qīng eras, sending tributary missions nearly annually. The second most frequent tributary during the Míng and Qīng eras was Ryūkyū (ca. every two to three years), followed by Vietnam (ca. every three years), and various Indianised Southeast Asian polities (Champa, Siam, Java, Burma, Laos), in certain periods overtaking Vietnam. During the Míng era, certain Central and Inner Asian polities and oasis cities (such as the Chagatai Khanate, Hami, Samarkand, Turfan) were regular tributaries as well. Tributes from other political entities were mostly occasional and of highly varying frequency based on historical period. On the institutionalisation and recording of tributary exchanges in the East Asian states see Lǚ Zhèngāng (2017), primarily based on a major collection of tributary documents by Hé Xīnhuá (2016).

10; Yù Chángsēn 2000). Xú Bō 徐波 (2017: 90) argues that rites played such a prominent role in the Sinocentric tributary system, usually in the absence of real political or economic dependency, that it would be more accurate to talk about a “ritual tributary system” (*lǐyíxìng de cháogòng tǐxì* 礼仪性的朝贡体系) instead of a “substantial tributary system” (*shízhìxìng de cháogòng tǐxì* 实质性的朝贡体系) as found in other parts of the world. Other authors relate the supposed overall pacifism of China’s tributary order to the supposed pacifism (*guì hé* 贵和 “appreciation of harmony/peace”) of Confucian philosophy (Chén Zhīpíng 2019; Rén Niànwén 2014; Sòng Xiǎoqín 2017).

The Tributary System, *Tiānxià* Worldview, and the Sino-“Barbarian” Distinction (*huá-yí zhī biàn*)

The tributary system is connected by a number of authors to the so-called *Tiānxià*-worldview of pre-modern China (see footnote five) and the distinction between China (*Huá* 华) and the “barbarians” (*yí* 夷) attested in pre-modern literary sources—the so-called “Sino-‘barbarian’ distinction” (*huá-yí zhī biàn* 华夷之辩) of pre-modern Chinese thought. They argue that the tributary system was structured along the concentric circles of the *tiānxià*-worldview, with the emperor in the very centre, extending to the capital (Nánjīng or Běijīng in the Míng and Qīng eras), the whole of China and the outer circles of foreign lands. Pre-modern Chinese thought was based on the idea of *wén* 文—meaning “civility” (of the emperor), as well as Chinese script and “civilisation”—spreading from the centre towards the periphery (see Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2004). In the realm of the outer circles, countries with a Confucian cultural background that sent a larger number of tributary missions, most notably Korea as well as Ryūkyū and Vietnam, were admitted to a circle of “civilised” (*wénhuà* 文化) foreigners. These were followed by “barbarians” (*yí* 夷)—polities and tribes outside the Chinese cultural sphere, as well as Japan, with less frequent tributary missions (Lǐ Yúnquán 2014; Sòng Xiǎoqín 2017; Xú Bō 2017).

In today’s Chinese scholarship, the persistent sense of cultural superiority towards outsiders, attested in Chinese literary culture from antiquity until the latter half of the nineteenth century (Xú Bō 2017: 93–95), is generally framed as a negative phenomenon creating obstacles for the advancement of national unity and interaction with the outside world. Lǐ Bǎojùn 李宝俊 and Liú Bō 刘波 (2011: 118) argue that this sense of cultural superiority “created obstacles in the national psyche” (*ibid.*). Xú Bō (2017: 87–95) considers the Sino-“barbarian” distinction to be a factor behind China’s failure to engage and keep pace with the West during the Míng and Qīng eras. Meanwhile, some authors rather focus on praising pre-modern China’s advanced level of development vis-à-vis its neighbours and emphasise the necessary role of China as a disseminator of culture and technology when discussing the Sino-“barbarian” distinction (Huáng Chúnǎn 2018: 13; Sòng Xiǎoqín 2017: 130).

Some claim that prior to the introduction of “nationality” and “ethnicity” concepts from Western languages in the late nineteenth century, the distinction between *huá* (Chinese) and *yí* (“barbarian”/foreigner) was primarily based on cultural instead of ethnolinguistic aspects, with a considerable degree of fluidity and assimilation (Zhuāng Guótǔ 2005a: 2). Another important point discussed is that during the latter half of China’s imperial history, two of its major dynasties that unified the entirety of China’s present-day territory (and even areas beyond) were of ethnic minority origin. The ruling periods of the Mongol Yuán dynasty (1279–1368) and the Manchu Qīng dynasty (1644–1912) are regarded by a number of authors as examples of successful coexistence of ethnic minority ruling elites with the majority Hàn Chinese population and as important steps towards a unified multi-ethnic nation-state (Sūn Hóngméi 2009; Yīn Qiǎoruǐ 2017). There are authors who point out that during the Qīng dynasty, the practice of vernacular customary law was permitted in the ethnic minority regions outside of the Hàn Chinese-majority areas, and that tributary exchanges between local leaders and the central court were practised in a similar manner to that with foreign countries (Wang 2014: 114–124; Yīn Qiǎoruǐ 2017).

The Tributary System and the Supposed Pro-agricultural/Anti-trade Value System (*zhòng nóng yì shāng*) of Pre-modern Chinese Elites

Another point frequently made in the discussion on the cultural roots of the tributary system is that the economic wastefulness (*hòu wǎng báo lái* 厚往薄来) of the system was rooted in a persistent disdain among Chinese elites for foreign trade and patronisation of agriculture instead—the so-called *zhòng nóng yì shāng* 重农抑商 (supporting agriculture, repressing trade) value system. The phenomenon is also frequently pointed out as the reason behind the ‘maritime bans’ (*hǎijìn* 海禁) of the early to middle Míng (1370s–1560s) and early Qīng (ca. 1640s–1680s) periods. During these periods, commercial trade was outlawed or heavily restricted and tributary trade was made the only or principal legitimate channel of foreign trade. This assumed pro-agricultural/anti-trade attitude is often contrasted with the outwardly open economic policy of early modern Western powers and blamed as a cultural factor behind China’s failure to keep pace with the West (Hé Àiguó 2001: 42; Rén Niǎnwén 2014: 102; Xú Bō 2017). Meanwhile, the reasons behind the assumed pro-agricultural/anti-trade attitude of Chinese elites are disputed. The common narrative holds that it was rooted in Confucian philosophy which regards agriculture as the “root/foundation” (*běn* 本) of society, while dismissing trade as “incidental” (*mò* 末). This point of view is criticised by Wáng Qīng 王青 who points out that Christian religious literature is in no way less anti-materialistic than its Confucian counterpart; in his view, blaming Confucianism for the relative isolationism of China vis-à-vis the West during the Míng and Qīng dynasties thus has little argumentative strength. Wáng Qīng argues that China’s position as a major continental empire vis-à-vis the position of Western states

with limited land and resources and hence keenness for maritime expansion resulted in divergent traditions of “interest perception” (*lìyì rènzhi* 利益认知). Hence, Wáng Qīng (2007: 83–111) emphasises that these geographical and economic factors instead of differences in religious-philosophical literary traditions were the major reasons behind the divergence of Chinese and Western maritime foreign policy during the Míng and Qīng dynasties.

It is worth mentioning that Western research challenging the notion of an economically isolated Míng-Qīng-era China was largely ignored by the mainland Chinese discourse on the tributary system. Comparisons between Western openness for commercial trade and Chinese self-isolation and restrictions on trade remain common, despite the works of quite a number of non-Chinese authors who argue against thinking in such binaries. Through the presentation of quantitative data on Míng-Qīng-era Chinese trade, such authors have demonstrated that despite tributary regulations and maritime bans, Chinese merchants dominated the Eastern Asian maritime space well until the mid-nineteenth century (Deng 1997; Schottenhammer 2012), and made China the centre of the global economy (Pomeranz 2001) or the “sink” of the world’s silver” (Frank 1998: 115; also cf. Hamashita 2008) until roughly the same period.

The Tributary System and Míng-Qīng China’s Socio-Economic History

The Supposed Economic Wastefulness (*hòu wǎng báo lái*) of the Tributary System

No phrase probably appears more frequently in the Chinese academic discourse on the tributary system than *hòu wǎng báo lái* 厚往薄来 (giving generously, receiving little)¹¹ (Chén Zhīpíng 2019; Hé Àiguó 2001; Rén Niǎnwén 2014; Sòng Xiǎoqín 2017; Wáng Qīng 2007; Yáng Línkūn 2014: 72-76; Yù Chángsēn 2000; Zhāng Xiàngyào 2011: 54–57). Based on records of the amount and value of tributes versus return gifts, the phrase denotes excessive rewards for foreign tributary envoys by Chinese rulers, supposedly leading to economic damage for China and economic opportunism among foreign elites.

Chén Zhīpíng 陈支平 quotes passages attributed to the Míng dynasty’s founder Tàizǔ 太祖 (r. 1368–1398) in the *Míngshǐ* 明史¹² to demonstrate the *hòu wǎng báo lái* attitude of Chinese elites:

¹¹ The phrase appears thirty-two times in the thirty journal articles analysed for the article, making it the most frequently used four-character set expression (*chéngyǔ* 成语) of the corpus (results obtained through SegmentAnt word segmentation tool based on Jieba Chinese Word Segmentation 结巴中文分词 engine and AntConc text processing tool).

¹² “Official history” (*zhèngshǐ* 正史) of the Míng dynasty, compiled during the mid-eighteenth century (under the subsequent Qīng dynasty).

They [the foreign tributary envoys] cross the sea to come here, the length of their journey being difficult to measure. No matter if the amount of their tribute is small, giving generously and receiving little [*hòu wǎng báo lái*] is acceptable.¹³

Most authors, while discussing the detrimental impact of the tributary system on China's imperial treasury, base their arguments exclusively on official Chinese sources such as the *Míng Shílù* 明实录, *Míngshǐ*, *Qīng Shílù* 清实录¹⁴ and *Dà Qīng Huìdiǎn* 大清会典 (*Collected Statutes of the Great Qīng*). In a study on Míng-Tibetan tributary exchanges, based on the *Míng Shílù* and *Míngshǐ*, Zhāng Xiàngyào 张向耀 (2011) argues that the *hòu wǎng báo lái* attitude of Chinese elites led to oversized tributary missions and the presentation of poor quality and counterfeit tribute goods by Tibetan tributary envoys. Zhāng Xiàngyào (2011: 57) also praises the importance of the Míng-era tributary system in facilitating “Hàn-Tibetan cultural interaction” in “the advancement of inter-ethnic relations” and in “preserving national unity.”¹⁵ Yáng Línkūn 杨林坤 (2014) is among the few authors who use non-Chinese sources in order to demonstrate the excessive rewards for foreign tributary missions and the opportunism of members, referring to the Chinese translations of the travelogues of Míng-era Central Asian/Middle Eastern travellers ‘Ali Akbar Khata’i (1988) and Ghiyāth al-Dīn Naqqāsh (2002).

Other authors argue against the general characterisation of the Míng-Qīng-era tributary system as *hòu wǎng báo lái*. Discussing maritime tributary exchanges during the early Míng period and based primarily on the *Míng Shílù*, Lǐ Jīnmíng 李金明 (2006) argues that *hòu wǎng báo lái* was only the case in the exchange of official tribute goods making up a small portion of the goods exchanged in total. Meanwhile, commercial trade conducted as part of tributary exchanges (the so-called “tribute-trade” *cháogòng mào yì* 朝贡贸易) involved a much more significant volume of goods, was heavily taxed by Chinese officials, and meant considerable profit for the imperial treasury (Lǐ Jīnmíng 2006: 73–75). Regarding the Míng dynasty's relations with the militarily powerful Mongols and Jurchens on its northern border and based mostly on the *Míng Shílù* and *Míngshǐ*, Chéng Nínà 程尼娜 (2015; 2016) argues that *hòu wǎng báo lái* often served as payment for peace instead of a paternalistic demonstration of superior status. Based on the *Qīng Shílù* and *Dà Qīng Huìdiǎn*, as well as on secondary literature on Míng-Qīng-era Sino-Korean and Sino-Vietnamese tributary exchange

¹³ “涉海而来，难计岁月。其朝贡无论疏数，厚往薄来可也。” (*Míngshǐ*: Wàiguó 外国 6: 43), quoted in Chén Zhīpíng (2019: 193).

¹⁴ *Míng Shílù* and *Qīng Shílù* [“Veritable Records” of the Míng and Qīng dynasties] refer to the collections of court diaries compiled during the respective periods.

¹⁵ Regarding unity, it is questionable that the tributes and titles of nobility exchanged between the Míng Chinese and Tibetan rulers made Tibet's position different to other foreign polities, and that China's imperial court had *de facto* control over Tibet prior to the Qīng conquest of 1720 (see, e.g., Larsen 2011).

(Quán Hǎizōng 1997; Niǔ Jūnkǎi 2003), Lǐ Yúnquán points out that the Qīng dynasty demanded tributes surpassing the value of return gifts from the “model tributary countries” of Korea, Ryūkyū, and Vietnam. Hesitation to present the demanded tribute amount was seen as a challenge to the legitimacy of the newly established Qīng dynasty, especially in the context of the ongoing conflict with Míng loyalists (Lǐ Yúnquán 2011: 96). Chōng Yōng-hwa’s 鄭容和 (Zhèng Rónghé 2006) detailed study of the Míng-Qīng-era tributary system from a Korean perspective also notes the significant tributes paid by the Chosŏn dynasty to the early Qīng in the face of the latter’s overwhelming military power.

The Tributary System and the Míng-Qīng-Era “Maritime Bans” (*hǎijìn*)

In recent Chinese historiography, the “maritime bans” are often described as the domestic extensions of China’s unprofitable tributary system (Chén Zhīpíng 2019; Sòng Xiǎoqín 2017; Xú Bō 2017; Zhuāng Guótǔ 2005a, 2005b). Xú Bō (2017) and Zhuāng Guótǔ (2005a, 2005b) argue that tributary exchanges were primarily intended to showcase the power and wealth of the ruling dynasties for both domestic and foreign audiences, while the maritime bans were further attempts to control all non-state-initiated economic and political activity along the coasts. Their claim that this policy also aimed to resist overseas Yuán and Míng loyalists corresponds with the findings of non-Chinese researchers, demonstrating that in addition to the restrictions on private trade, the “maritime bans” also included the destruction of coastal trade facilities, the repatriation of coastal populations to the hinterland, as well as the prohibition of emigration and demand of overseas Chinese emigrants to return to China (Schottenhammer 2012). Both Xú Bō (2017: 85, 96–101) and Zhuāng Guótǔ (2005b: 70–71) discuss the Zhèng Hé missions (1405–1433)¹⁶ of the early Míng dynasty as symbolic of the detrimental nature of Chinese economic policy under the tributary order. They criticise mainstream modern historiography on the Zhèng Hé missions, framing them as the apex of pre-modern China’s openness to the outside world, and point to the detrimental impact of the parallel “maritime bans” on China’s coastal economy.

¹⁶ Seven large-scale diplomatic missions led by the court eunuch and admiral Zhèng Hé 鄭和 (c. 1371–1433) at the order of the Yǒnglè 永樂 (r. 1403–1424) and Xuāndé 宣德 (r. 1426–1435) emperors, which established tributary relationships with foreign countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa.

The Tributary System and the Regional Political Order

China's Supposed Pacifism, Non-expansionism, and Non-interference under the Tributary Order

The view that China conducted a pacifist foreign policy and refrained from expansion and interference in other countries' affairs under the Míng-Qīng tributary order is widespread among Chinese authors writing on the subject (Chén Zhīpíng 2019; Huáng Chúnǎn 2018; Rén Niǎnwén 2014; Sòng Xiǎoqín 2017). According to Sòng Xiǎoqín 宋晓芹 (2017: 10):

Chinese rulers developed their relations with neighbouring countries and ethnicities through the tributary system, whose purpose was clearly not conquest or expansion. Therefore, while the East Asian tributary system might look like an unequal, hierarchical system, its essential purpose was to establish peace and order between China and its neighbouring countries and ethnicities.

The pacifism and non-expansionism narrative almost always relies on exclusive attention to tributary exchanges in East Asia and Southeast Asia, and ignores Inner Asia (Manchuria, Mongolia, Tibet, Xīnjiāng). In fact, during the Míng dynasty these areas were not part of the Chinese empire and engaged in tributary relations with the Míng court in a similar manner to other foreign polities, as well as in frequent armed conflicts (Perdue 2015: 1005). It can be argued that they need not be discussed since the tributary system was a mechanism among what can be considered "states" in the Míng-Qīng-era East Asian context (see footnote three), hence excluding loosely structured political entities such as nomad or semi-nomad confederacies. It is questionable, however, to what extent many of the Indianised Southeast Asian entities can be qualified as states, or rather as loose coalitions of local chiefs in a sedentary context (Kang 2012: 51; ref. Lieberman 2003: 393). The choice of many authors to refrain from discussing Inner Asia and focus on East and Southeast Asia apparently has much to do with present-day norms of political correctness, current national borders, and current ideas of the 'self' and the 'other'.

Another critical point relates to intertextuality, the selective quotation and de-/re-contextualisation of pre-modern sources on the Míng-Qīng tributary system. There are certain popular passages from pre-modern accounts that are frequently quoted by proponents of this supposed pacifism and non-expansionism to advance their argument. These include Emperor Tàizǔ's warning against expansive military expeditions

into foreign lands in the *Huáng Míng Zǔxùn* 皇明祖训 (August Míng Ancestral Injunction),¹⁷ as well as his emphasis on “enjoying the shared fortune of peace and prosperity” (“以共享太平之福”) in diplomatic correspondence recorded in the *Míngshǐ* (Chén Zhǐpíng 2019: 192; Rén Niànwén 2014: 99). Meanwhile, more critical authors contrast this with the highly paternalistic style of the Míng-Qīng-era texts on tributary exchange, the lack of modern notions of territorial sovereignty, as well as the celebration of the military defeat of those refusing to present tribute (Xú Bō 2017; Zhuāng Guótǔ 2005a, 2005b). As Xú Bō notes, three major military conflicts are recorded in the *Míng Shǐlù* and *Míngshǐ* between the imperial envoy Zhèng Hé and foreign/overseas Chinese leaders refusing to present tribute. The defeat and capture of these dissident foreign leaders is celebrated with highly militaristic and paternalistic rhetoric (Xú Bō 2017: 97–98).¹⁸

Based on Chinese and Korean pre-modern sources, Liú Xìnjūn 刘信君 (2011) compares China’s relations with Southeast Asian countries vis-à-vis its relations with its closest tributary, Korea. Liú argues that while the tributary relationship was largely symbolic in the case of Southeast Asian countries, China regularly interfered in Korean domestic affairs from the Táng era (618–907) until its defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 and the loss of influence over the Korean Peninsula. Based on pre-modern official sources, interference included armed invasion (Táng, Yuán, and Qīng eras); the appointment of Korean officials; demands for excessive tributes (early Qīng); and regulating the route, frequency, and participants of Korean tributary missions throughout the Míng and Qīng eras (Liú Xìnjūn 2011: 125).

Wáng Qīng (2007) compares the relatively small size of fleets which established the first colonies for the Spanish and Portuguese empires in the Americas and Southeast Asia¹⁹ with that of the early Míng Zhèng Hé fleet, which at its height was recorded to include as many as 260 armed ships and 27,000 personnel (2007: 98; citing Luó Róngqú 2004: 235). Wáng Qīng argues that during the early Míng era, China would have been capable of establishing a colonial empire in the Indo-Pacific maritime space, but refrained from doing so and established the tributary order of symbolic suzerainty instead. According to him, the reason for this refrainment from maritime

¹⁷ A writing attributed to the founder of the Míng dynasty Tàizǔ (r. 1368–1398), detailing his advice on governance, and an important source of reference in pre-modern historiography (*Míng Shǐlù*, *Míngshǐ* etc.).

¹⁸ These three leaders were Chén Zǔyì 陈祖义 (d. 1407), a native of Guǎngdōng based in Palembang (Sumatra) accused of piracy in official sources; a throne-pretending Sumatran prince named Sūgānlá 苏干刺; and the king of Sri Lanka, Vira Alakesvara (in Míng-era Chinese sources known as Yàlièkǔnǎi’ér 亚烈苦奈儿, from the dynasty name Alagakkonara).

¹⁹ Between three and seventeen ships in the case of Columbus, and four and twenty ships in the case of Magellan (Luó Róngqú 2004: 235; cited in Wáng Qīng 2007: 98).

colonisation lies in the interest perception of Chinese elites, shaped by China's background as a major agricultural empire and the ongoing armed conflicts with the western and northern nomadic and semi-nomadic neighbours (2007: 96–100).

The Tributary System and Regional Stability in Míng-Qīng-Era East Asia

Similarly to David C. Kang (2012) in *East Asia Before the West*, a number of Chinese authors argue that the tributary system constituted a shared set of norms in pre-modern East Asia's interstate politics and was a facilitator of long periods of interstate stability in the region. With a general focus on pre-modern tributary exchanges, Lǐ and Liú frame a "tribute-investiture order" (*cháogòng-cēfēng zhìxù* 朝贡册封秩序)²⁰ that "was a foreign policy philosophy with Chinese characteristics, an institutionalised arrangement of the East Asian regional order with a clear moral philosophical quality" (2011: 110). According to Lǐ and Liú, the tributary system facilitated "the long-term stability of the East Asian international order, [and was a result of] the active participation of the surrounding countries in this order, the internalisation and absorption of the advanced cultural system of the time" (2011: 119). Regarding the Míng-era tributary system, Rén Niànwén 任念文 argues that it was a "handling mechanism of international relations centred on China [...] maintaining social stability and economic prosperity" (2014: 99).

Meanwhile, both non-Chinese and Chinese scholarship on tributary exchanges during the Sòng era (960–1279) challenge the notion that tributary exchanges were necessarily the reason behind regional stability in East Asian history. During that era, East Asia was not unipolar but was a bipolar system centred around the rivalry and armed conflicts between the Hàn-Chinese Sòng dynasty in the south and the dynasties of non-Hàn ethnic origin in the north. Interstate wars were frequent and tributary exchanges had flexible hierarchies based on the power relations of the time, primarily serving as mediating platforms after armed conflicts and declaring the state of affairs in power relations among the ruling dynasties of the region (Huáng Chúnghàn 2018; Wang 2013).

Regarding the tributary system as a facilitator of interstate stability in the Míng-Qīng era, Japan's peculiar role needs some special consideration. In fact, most articles with a general focus on the topic discuss the three "model" tributaries (Korea, Ryūkyū, and Vietnam) and the "nominal" tributaries from Southeast Asia and other regions outside of East Asia (except for Inner Asia). This most likely is related to the fact that Japan can hardly be put into any of the above-mentioned categories. According to studies focused on Japan (Fù Bǎichén 2007; Wǔ Xīnbō 2003), Japan's role in the

²⁰ Lǐ and Liú propose the alternative term to emphasise reciprocity in China's tributary relations, referring to the investiture of noble titles upon foreign rulers by the Chinese emperor (Lǐ Bǎojùn and Liú Bō 2011: 109).

tributary system during the Míng period shifted several times between refusal and economically motivated participation, while during the Qīng period and under Japan's Tokugawa Shogunate (1600–1868), refusal to submit and demands for tributes from other states (Korea, Ryūkyū) became the defining characteristic. The studies of Fù Bǎichén 付百臣 (2007) and Wǔ Xīnbō 武心波 (2003) are apparently oriented towards demonstrating the expansionist and subversive attitudes of Japanese elites in pre-modern times and towards finding precedents for Japan's modern-era expansionism. Kang's (2012: 79) view on Japan's role is that it constituted an “alternative centre” within the East Asian tributary system, based on Japan's cultural background of Confucianism and Classical Chinese literacy shared with other states in the region, as well as the shared norms of tribute-based diplomacy.

The Tributary System and the Westphalian Colonial Order

Analysing the tributary system in comparison to the Eurocentric Westphalian/colonial order is a major underlying motive of the Chinese discourse as a whole. Moreover, the question of why China failed to keep pace with the West during the Míng and Qīng dynasties and how the tributary system was accountable motivates a number of authors to make explicit comparative judgements on the tributary system vis-à-vis the Westphalian/colonial order. In these comparative judgements, the tributary system is usually described as a largely symbolic order rooted in China's pre-modern, self-centred *Tiānxià*-worldview, the “Sino-‘barbarian’ distinction” (*huá-yí zhī biàn*), as well as the pro-agricultural/anti-trade (*zhòng nóng yì shāng*) and “giving generously, receiving little” (*hòu wǎng báo lái*) attitudes of Chinese elites. The tributary system is thus framed as detrimental to China's own economic interests, constituting a regional/global order based on nominal hierarchy but with little real economic/political dependency at the same time. This contrasts with the Eurocentric world order based, on the one hand, on the Westphalian principles of nominal equality and treaty- (instead of tribute-) based diplomacy, as well as on the expansionist and profit-oriented attitudes of the European colonial system, involving real economic and political control over colonised territories. The tributary system is thus praised for its pacifism/non-expansionism, but also blamed for failing to benefit China economically, and leading to China's failure to keep pace with the West under the Míng and Qīng dynasties (Hé Àiguó 2001: 41–42; Lǐ and Liú 2011: 110–15; Rén Niànwén 2014; Sòng Xiǎoqín 2017; Wáng Qīng 2007: 77–80).

Meanwhile, it is worth mentioning that the common way of writing world history in China, in terms of binaries between Sinocentric tributary vs. Eurocentric treaty-based/Westphalian/colonial world orders has been criticised by Wang Hui. In his general critique of applying Western development paradigms, most notably the binary of “empire” versus “nation-state” to the study of Chinese history, Wang Hui criticises the division of Chinese and Asian history into the binary categories of “treaty system”

versus “tributary system.” (Wang 2014: 30–60, 124–132). He points out that China had an extensive system of treaties in pre-modern times already, and argues that:

if we look briefly at a number of bilateral treaties [of China with other countries: the Netherlands, Siam etc.] from before 1840, we will see that the tribute system [...] worked in ways that were parallel (and not opposed) to the treaty system (Wang 2014: 129).

The Debate on the Relevance of the Tributary System for the Present and Future Regional Order

In addition to assessing how the tributary system affected China’s development in the past, especially in comparison with the West, the discourse is apparently increasingly oriented towards the question of whether the tributary system can be seen as a model for the present and future East Asian regional order. The positions taken on this question are especially diverse, ranging from seeing the tributary system as having a great referential value for creating and upholding peaceful international relations and stability in East Asia and beyond, to dismissing it as an anachronistic hierarchical constellation having little to offer present-day foreign policy based on the principles of equality and sovereignty.

Qin Yàqīng 秦亚青 (2006) argues that China’s experience of the tributary system, along with the revolutionary movements of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the Reform and Opening-up (1978–), should form the basis of a Chinese School of international relations theory. Jiān Jūnbō 简军波 (2009), as well as Lǐ and Liú (2011) emphasise the importance of the tributary system as a model for creating shared values in interstate relations (which in the present and future should be based on sovereignty and nominal equality), maintaining regional stability, and supporting China’s quest to become a “responsible great power.” According to Lǐ and Liú’s articulation, “the tributary system provided suitable guidance for the emergence of present-day East Asian regional consciousness and regional community” (2011: 109). According to Chén Zhīpíng, it “clearly has referential value [借鉴意义] for the construction of the ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative” (2019: 191). Rén Niànwén argues that “[due to its tributary system and maritime strategy] the Míng dynasty accomplished its strategic aims in the South China Sea and even in the Indian Ocean, [...] setting an example for the present-day Chinese maritime strategy” (2014: 94). In the same article, Rén Niànwén (2014) defends the invasion of Vietnam (1406–1427) and the punitive military actions during the Zhèng Hé missions as serving the purpose of maintaining regional stability (2014: 99–104).

Xú Bō (2017) mentions the “Neo-*Tiānxià*ist” (*xīn tiānxiàzhǔyì* 新天下主义) school of thought emerging in present-day China (cf. Xǔ Jílín 2015), seeing the pre-modern *Tiānxià*-worldview as possessing referential value for the present and future East Asian regional order, emphasising its universalism and cosmopolitanism vis-à-

vis modern nationalism imported from the West in the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, Xú Bō opposes the idea that the hierarchical tributary system “permeated with Confucian thought” (2017: 102) has too much referential value for present-day foreign policy theory and practice, which in his view is and should be oriented towards the principles of equality and sovereignty.

Conclusion

China’s millennia-old history as a literary civilisation and—at least for a significant part of it—centralised state with a sophisticated bureaucracy provides an abundance of primary sources for today’s historians, as well as certain pre-modern ‘worldviews’ or ‘ideologies’ attestable in these sources. “Battles of interpretation” (cf. Jäger and Jäger 2007) among present-day scholars are the expected outcome of engagement with pre-modern sources written in widely different historical contexts and ideological environments. This article investigated the historiography on Míng-Qīng China’s tributary system with a focus on publications from the last two decades. This period is marked by China’s accelerating economic opening-up and pursuit of a leading global position with regard to its economic, political, and military capacities. It found that in spite of seeming parallels, domestic and global power relations, dominant ideologies, and knowledge systems—in other words, the characteristic “power-knowledge-complex”—of the Míng and Qīng eras are in many ways at odds with those of today. I argue that it is this discrepancy between the pre-modern *tiānxià*-worldview and today’s ‘Belt and Road worldview’ which constitutes the main reason behind the observable discursive struggle in recent historiography on the tributary system.

Based on Keller’s (2011) methodology of describing phenomenal, interpretative, and narrative structures, as well as his “minimal vs. maximal contrasting” (2011: 91–93) which aims to identify mainstream and divergent views, I will now proceed to establish a frame for the interpretation and evaluation of the tributary system found in mainstream historiography. This mainstream approach is (clearly) heavily influenced by the Chinese state’s current official framing of an ideal international order based on territorial sovereignty, non-interference, and “win-win” economic cooperation, widely promoted since the 2013 inauguration of the global development strategy known as the “Belt and Road Initiative” (see, e.g., Wang 2016). In the various discourse fields described in the article, the influence of the ‘Belt and Road worldview’ manifests in various ways. In the cultural and political fields, supposed traditions of pacifist and non-expansionist foreign policy are usually emphasised. They are tied to the nature of the Sinocentric tributary order based on symbolic hierarchies, and contrasted with the subsequent colonial order. This line of argumentation usually takes China’s history of foreign tributary relations in East and Southeast Asia into exclusive

consideration, while Inner Asia is usually ignored and treated as a constituent part of China in all historical eras. In the economic field, the evaluation of the tributary system is usually negative due to an emphasis on its economically detrimental (*hòu wǎng báo lái*) nature rooted in the paternalistic *tiānxià*-worldview of pre-modern Chinese elites, which contrasts with the economically exploitative character of Western colonialism. The narrative that the economic wastefulness of China's tributary system was one of the reasons for China's failure to keep pace with the West during the Míng and Qīng dynasties is common. This is usually coupled with explicitly or implicitly suggesting that out of the self-damaging economic practices of the tributary system and the experiences of Western colonial exploitation, China has learned the importance of "win-win" economic cooperation, and will contribute to a new world order based on this principle. Thus, polarisation of global and regional history into a pacifist/unprofitable Sinocentric tributary order and an expansionist/exploitative Eurocentric colonial order, as well as the resulting self-victimisation, become visible as frequent discursive strategies of the mainstream approach.

Meanwhile, there are also several critical articles which dare to challenge the mainstream framing of the tributary system described above. Regarding cultural and political aspects, they usually point out that pre-modern China's ideals of foreign relations based on the *tiānxià*-worldview are hardly compatible with those of today. They claim that instead of territorial sovereignty and non-interference, these ideals were based on notions of the Chinese emperor's universal authority. Military action against dissident foreign elements that refused to acknowledge the superior position of the "Son of Heaven" was thus seen as a legitimate and righteous deed to uphold the "law of Heaven" (*tiāndào* 天道) (Xú Bō 2017; Zhuāng Guótǔ 2005a). While China's history of tributary relations in Inner Asia is mostly ignored in general discussions of the topic due to its political sensitivity, certain critical authors discuss the "realist" foreign policy of Míng-Qīng China in the region. They observe a combination of tributary exchange with warfare (Chéng Nínà 2015, 2016), while criticising the selective focus on East and Southeast Asia by authors arguing for the inherent pacifism and stability of the tributary order (Wáng Qīng 2007: 12-13). In addition, some authors challenge the widespread framing of economic relations as detrimental to China. The main point of criticism here is that *hòu wǎng báo lái* should not be seen as a general characteristic of the Míng-Qīng tributary order. As pointed out by certain authors, in pre-modern official sources influenced by the *tiānxià*-worldview, disproportionate attention is paid to the ceremonial exchange of tribute goods and return gifts in order to emphasise the wealth and superior position of the Míng and Qīng courts. It is shown that "tribute-trade" (commercial trade as part of tributary missions), and "frontier trade" (*hùshì* 互市) facilitated by tributary diplomacy involved a much higher volume of goods than the official exchange of tributes and gifts, and were heavily taxed by Chinese officials (Lǐ Jīnmíng 2006; Lǐ Yúnquán 2011).

As demonstrated, the Míng-Qīng-era tributary system has become widely discussed as a cultural, political, and economic order of potential relevance for the present and future East Asian and global order in recent Chinese historiography. Its interpretation and evaluation remains contested, on the one hand due to the differences between today's value and knowledge systems including ideals of foreign relations vis-à-vis their pre-modern counterparts. On the other hand, this contestation also results from divergent views within the current "power-knowledge-complex" referring to these issues. The author believes that research on Chinese historiography on the tributary system can contribute to understanding how the perception of China's past can be used to legitimise China's present and future role in the regional and global order.

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GLOSSARY

<i>běn</i>	本	root (lit.); basis, foundation (philosophy, in contrast with <i>mò</i> 末)
<i>cháogòng mào yì</i>	朝贡贸易	tribute-trade (commercial trade conducted as part of tributary exchanges)
<i>cháogòng tǐxì</i>	朝贡体系	tributary system
<i>cháogòng zhìdù</i>	朝贡制度	tributary system

<i>chēngchén</i>	称臣	pledge of loyalty (lit. “declaration of being a subject” performed by foreign rulers or their envoys during tributary exchanges)
<i>cì</i>	赐	gift (here: return gifts bestowed upon foreign rulers by the Chinese emperor in return for their tribute)
<i>chōkō bōeki shisutemu</i> (Jap.) <i>Dà Qīng Huìdiǎn</i>	朝貢貿易システム 大清会典	tribute-trade system “Collected Statutes of the Qīng Dynasty”
<i>dé</i> <i>fēng</i>	德 封	virtue (philosophy) title of nobility (here: symbolic titles bestowed upon foreign rulers by the Chinese emperor)
<i>gòng</i> <i>guì hé</i>	贡 贵和	tribute appreciation of harmony/peace (philosophy)
<i>hǎijìn</i> <i>Hónglú Sì</i>	海禁 鸿胪寺	maritime ban Ministry of Great Display (Míng-Qīng era institution in charge of conducting tributary ceremonies)
<i>hòu wǎng báo lái</i>	厚往薄来	giving generously, receiving little (phrase in this context referring to excessive rewards for tributary envoys)
<i>Huà</i>	华	splendid, prosperous, China (literary)
<i>Huáng Míng Zǔxùn</i>	皇明祖训	<i>August Míng Ancestral Injunction</i> , text attributed to the founding emperor of the Míng dynasty, Tàizǔ/the Hóngwǔ emperor (r. 1368–1398), including warnings against expansive military campaigns to foreign states
<i>huà-yí zhī biàn</i>	华夷之辩	Sino-“barbarian” distinction (in pre-modern Chinese thought)
<i>Huìtóngguǎn</i>	会同馆	Bureau of Interpreters (Yuán- to Qīng-era institution responsible for interpreting for tributary envoys, as well as for their accommodation)
<i>hùshì</i>	互市	frontier trade (legal commercial trade along continental borders and in port cities in pre-modern times)
<i>lǐ</i> <i>Lǐbù</i>	礼 礼部	rites, propriety (Confucianism) Board of Rites (one of the six main boards/ministries of imperial Chinese administration)

<i>lǐxué</i>	理学	“Study of Reason/Logic,” Confucian philosophical movement emerging in the Sòng period (960–1279 CE), dominant state ideology of East Asia during the Míng and Qīng dynasties, in foreign languages translated as “Neo-Confucianism”
<i>lìyì rènzhī</i>	利益认知	interest perception
<i>lǐyíxìng de cháogòng tǐxì</i>	礼仪性的朝贡体系	ritual tributary system
<i>lǐzhì</i>	礼治	rule by rites (Confucianism)
<i>Míngshǐ</i>	明史	<i>History of the Míng</i> , official history of the Míng dynasty compiled by court historians of the subsequent Qīng dynasty (first published in 1739)
<i>Míng Shílù</i>	明实录	“Veritable Records of the Míng Dynasty,” referring to the collection of court diaries from the Míng court
<i>mò</i>	末	tip, end (lit.); inessential, incidental (philosophy, in contrast with <i>běn</i> 本)
<i>Qīng Shílù</i>	清实录	“Veritable Records of the Qīng Dynasty,” referring to the collec- tion of court diaries from the Qīng court
<i>rén</i>	仁	benevolence (philosophy)
<i>shízhìxìng de cháogòng tǐxì</i>	实质性的朝贡体系	substantial tributary system
<i>Tiāndào</i>	天道	heavenly law, natural law (phi- losophy)
<i>Tiānlǐ</i>	天理	heavenly law/principle, natural order of things (Confucianism)
<i>Tiānxià</i>	天下	“(all) under Heaven” (pre-mod- ern concept referring to the entire world or the realm of the em- peror)
<i>Tiānzǐ</i>	天子	“Son of Heaven,” the Chinese emperor
<i>wén</i>	文	Chinese script, civility, culture
<i>wénhuà</i>	文化	civilised (classical), culture (mo- dern)
<i>xiào</i>	孝	filial piety, obedience (Confucia- nism)
<i>Xīn-Tiānxiàzhǔyì</i>	新天下主义	Neo- <i>Tiānxià</i> ism (contemporary school of thought)
<i>yì</i>	义	righteousness (philosophy)
<i>yí</i>	夷	barbarian, foreigner

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中国知网

China National Knowledge Infra-
structure (CNKI)

zhòng nóng yì shāng

重农抑商

supporting agriculture, repressing
trade (phrase)