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CHINESE TRIBUTARY SYSTEM RECONSIDERED: THEORY, HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE PROBLEM OF EXCEPTIONALISM

Abstract: This article argues that the Chinese traditional tributary system's apparent exceptionalism and modern applicability are by no means undisputed historical facts or intrinsic historical realities, but the product of a selective historiographical construction, consolidated through classicist and romantic scholarship and increasingly contested by realist, comparative, and relational research. Crucially, this construction emerged within a Western analytical horizon: the "tributary system" itself originated as a semantic borrowing that imposed familiar Western political vocabulary, accompanying order, system, hierarchy, and sovereignty, onto heterogeneous practices surrounding chaogong phenomenon that predated Westphalian international relations. Only later was this concept partially retro-translated into Chinese academic and political discourse, where it acquired the appearance of an indigenous, internally coherent tradition. Instead of offering an alternative model of international order, chaogong concept thus more reveals how civilizational narratives crystallize around academic cherry-picking practices, which are subsequently mobilized to legitimize contemporary political and theoretical claims.

Keywords: Chaogong, Chinese tributary system, romanticism, realism, historiography.

1. Introduction: From Political Claim to Historical Exceptionalism and Back

In contemporary debates on China's rise and the contribution to the global governance, history is no longer invoked merely as analytical background,

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but increasingly as normative authorization. Chinese officials, state-affiliated intellectuals, and sympathetic international relations (IR) scholars frequently argue that China's historical mode of external relations demonstrates a preference for hierarchy without domination, moral authority over coercion, and relational governance over legalistic sovereignty. Such claims surface prominently in discussions of, for example *Tianxia* discourse (see: Zhao, 2009: pp.5–18; 2006:pp.29–41), critiques of “Western universalism” (Chakrabarty, 2000; Wallerstein, 2006; for Sino-critical, see: Callahan, 2008:pp.749–61), and analyses of initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), where arguments usually tend to evangelize on pre-Westphalian IR historical models, which in the most idealistic sense are framed as a revival of pre-modern connectivity without involving power projections.

The political relevance of these narratives becomes particularly visible in concrete, asymmetric encounters between China and smaller states, where these historical analogies tend to provide relevant argumentations in contemporary policy interpretation. A telling and close-to-home example is Montenegro's public debate during 2020–2022 concerning its debt obligations toward a Chinese state-owned bank for the construction of the Bar–Boljare highway (in, for example, Bakota, 2021). As Montenegro faced mounting fiscal pressure and the risk of default, domestic and international observers raised concerns that the loan could function as a form of political leverage, whether through informal influence over decision-making within the political elite or, in more alarmist versions, through the collateralization of strategically valuable “main parts of Montenegro's coastline” (Kajosevic, 2021).

Attempts to refute such claims of “predatory lending” encountered a recurring difficulty: the absence of a clear, contractually codified *quid pro quo* did not in itself dispel anxieties regarding asymmetric dependence of Montenegro. Precisely at this juncture, arguments grounded in a long history and *civitas plus ultra* (civilizational-state) thinking began to surface, often implicitly.² Commentators and sympathetic IR scholars suggested that Chinese overseas engagement could not be understood through the transactional logic associated with Western financial capitalism, emphasizing instead China's purported historical preference for long-term relationality, non-interference, and hierarchy without coercion. The Belt and

² *Civitas plus ultra* is our moniker for a cluster of arguments related to civilizational-state debate that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. At the intersection of post–Cold War identity politics, critiques of liberal universalism, and renewed interest in *longue-durée* cultural foundations of statehood, partly also in response to modernization theory and the perceived exhaustion of the “end of history” paradigm, appeared arguments on historical equation of the Chinese state and civilization that merely turned upside down European Enlightenment thought which based state legitimacy and international hierarchy on grounds of civilizational maturity rather than institutional history.

Road Initiative, under which the Sino-Montenegrin financial arrangement has been carried, was thus framed not as an instrument of leverage, but as an extension of a historically rooted mode of connectivity that privileges mutual development over political conditionality.

In such arguments, the absence of explicit or reciprocal demands was taken not as ambiguity, but as evidence of a fundamentally different civilizational logic. Yet this interpretive move relied less on transactional clarity than on historical exceptionalism. Insistence on all-weathered argument of “preferential” loan while quoting Confucius (as seen, for example in Liu, 2021), sometimes only exacerbates epistemic or transparency gap in trying to figure out “what is really behind China’s strategic intentions”. When critics asked what, concretely, default would entail, the response often drifted from contractual details to invocations of China’s historical conduct: China, it was implied, does not operate through crude enforcement mechanisms, but through patient, relational forms of hierarchy.

At the conceptual core of these claims lies also understanding of the Chinese tributary system (*chaogong* 朝贡), portrayed as historical evidence that China functioned as a civilizational state (norm giving or sharing function) rather than an empire (power projecting or enforcing function).³ *Chaogong* tributary system (CTS) operates here as an anchoring argument and a foundational myth of benevolent hierarchy in international relations. In both cases it is a symbolic repository invoked to reassure contemporary partners that asymmetry need not entail domination, and that dependence can coexist with autonomy. In this sense, such “Made in China” authentic tributary system no longer belongs solely to historical scholarship, but offers metaphoric *clavis sinica*, i.e. implicit “grammar” of interpretation through which China’s international and global role is rendered intelligible and, crucially, politically acceptable.

Montenegro is by no means an isolated case. It is maybe geographically farthest and thus historically one of “cleanest” examples of similar interpretive framings that surfaced in debates across Southeast Asia (e.g. Laos, see Sayalath, 2024:pp.110–18), Central Asia, Africa (Mombasa port, see Taylor, 2020:pp.29–52), and Eastern Europe, where Chinese infrastructure finance, bilateralism, and preference for informal understandings are increasingly read through the lens of historical precedence or continuity rather than direct strategic calculations. Needless to say, these historicist tropes tend to be politically employed. As China’s global presence

³To distinguish between *chaogong* as a historical set of practices and the later analytical constructions built upon it, this text consistently differentiates between *chaogong* and the “Chaogong tributary system” throughout.

expands, historical narratives travel alongside capital and infrastructure, shaping how asymmetry is justified and contested.

This article advances a revisionist thesis that directly challenges such uses of history. It argues that the Chinese traditional tributary system's apparent exceptionalism and modern applicability are by no means undisputed historical facts or intrinsic historical realities, but the product of a selective historiographical construction, consolidated through classicist and romantic scholarship and increasingly contested by realist, comparative, and relational research. Crucially, this construction emerged within a Western analytical horizon: the "tributary system" itself originated as a semantic borrowing that imposed familiar Western political vocabulary, accompanying order, system, hierarchy, and sovereignty, onto heterogeneous practices surrounding *chaogong* phenomenon that predated Westphalian international relations. Only later was this concept partially retro-translated into Chinese academic and political discourse, where it acquired the appearance of an indigenous, internally coherent tradition. Instead of offering an alternative model of international order, *chaogong* concept thus more reveals how civilizational narratives crystallize around academic cherry-picking practices, which are subsequently mobilized to legitimize contemporary political and theoretical claims.

2. Proto-classicist Foundations of *Chaogong*

Before it became an object of systematic historical analysis, the Chinese *chaogong* diplomatic relationship (not yet a "system") was, from Western perspective, notwithstanding early lost-in-translation misunderstandings (see Hevia, 1995:pp.134-168), was primarily understood as a Chinese diplomatic idiom cynically masking imperial ambitions or civilizational arrogance. Early European encounters with Qing China, most famously the Macartney Embassy to the Qianlong emperor in 1793, shaped an enduring interpretive frame in which the *chaogong* relationship appeared less as a ritualized diplomatic procedure institutionalizing a primarily East Asian regional order that mimicked an international system. Instead, it was read as a stubborn obstacle to inter-state reciprocity and sovereign equality grounded in a Westphalian conception of the international that claimed to transcend regional, cross-cultural, or civilizational difference (1995:pp.19-55).

Early British observers thus proved incapable of accepting ritualized and performed signs of submission as a mutually intelligible diplomatic language, reading them instead as evidence of civilizational closure and despotic pretension (Pritchard, 1936:pp.449-57). In political and commercial discourse after the Macartney Em-

bassy, the *chaogong* ritual was increasingly reduced to symbolical affirmation of kowtow 叩头 (1936:pp.453–57) practices, which was interpreted as proof of a rigid and exclusionary worldview incompatible with the norms of modern diplomacy (Hevia, 1995:pp.57–83). Official correspondence and East India Company memoranda framed Qing ritual demands as a refusal of reciprocity rather than as participation in an alternative diplomatic setting, reinforcing the perception that China's external relations were governed by ceremonial fixation rather than strategic calculation (1995:pp.210–25).

This “proto-classicist” reading, grounded in mercantilist worldviews and informed by contemporary liberal internationalist thought, cast the *chaogong* relationship simply as an anachronistic practice destined to collapse upon contact with modern international society. Yet these early interpretations already involved decisive semantic imposition. Anchored primarily in Western diplomatic categories on sovereignty, treaty-based transactions and juridical equality among states, this proto-classicist understanding classified Chinese practices according to alien normative logics. *Chaogong* thus became “tribute”, a concept devoid of “indigenous” conceptual flavor and translated into the European historical idiom that at the time primarily connoted archaic or residual practices associated with imperial domination in Roman and Ottoman contexts.⁴ Such semantic borrowing predated systematic scholarship and established the conceptual terrain within which historians would operate well into the mid-twentieth century.

Interpretative pattern “established” with the Macartney mission extended to the Amherst Embassy of 1816, which similarly “failed” to acknowledge symbolism of “excessive” ritual exchanges with the Jiaqing emperor. As a matter of fact, entrenched in the belief that *chaogong* amounted fundamentally to tribute, British commentators portrayed it as an ideological obstacle to normal interstate relations, treating insistence on ritual submission (kowtow) as proof that China recognized no equal sovereigns and therefore could not be integrated into international society except through coercive means (Pritchard, 1936:pp.449–57). Following the Opium Wars (1839–42; 1856–60) and Britain's pragmatic “circumvention” of the Qing court in advancing its China policy, this ritual-heavy, tribute-based understanding of *chaogong* had been only further banalized as a stagnant relic whose inevitable collapse appeared confirmed by unilateral imposition of treaty-port diplomacy and extraterritoriality.

⁴By that time “tribute” carried an anachronistic and largely negative connotation, shaped by early Orientalist perceptions of the Ottoman *harac*, which framed this “exchange” less as a mutual diplomatic convention but more as coerced extraction stripped of all “consensual” aspects. On Ottoman vassal relations, see: Inalçik, 1973:pp.153–84.

While this early Western reading treated *chaogong* simultaneously as ritual and institution, it denied the concept any genuine autonomy. In such way, the term was semantically frankensteinized as the conceptual body entailing highly-ordered ritual practices was “sawn onto” a conceptual head that assumed “tribute” necessarily functioned as a claim to universal supremacy, rather than as a situational, negotiable framework varying substantially across frontiers and interlocutors. It is not therefore surprising, as James Hevia has shown, that British actors consistently mistook Qing ritual performance for outright political irrationality, evaluating it through the prism of inherent asymmetry embedded in the European concept of tribute and assuming that performative displays of hierarchy should “logically” more favor their own side (Hevia, 1995:pp.9–18). These assumptions would later be revised, but not fully abandoned, by twentieth-century scholars who sought to rehabilitate *chaogong* as a tributary order, while retaining many of the same Western analytic categories that had shaped its earliest interpretations, ultimately reframing it as a “system” rather than as a historically contingent form of relational ordering with its own internal coherence.

3. Fairbankian “Classicist” Intervention: The Birth of CTS

It was not until the mid-twentieth century that the *chaogong* relationship, long interpreted through the proto-classicist lens of diplomatic incompatibility and ethnographic or civilizational oddity, was rearticulated as a coherent historical order. The decisive move was made by John K. Fairbank, whose principal contribution to this debate—and arguably one of his central legacies to the Cold War—era American sinology (see Cohen, 2010:pp.54–79)—lay not so much in abandoning inherited Western analytical categories as in historically stabilizing them. Through his reconstruction of disparate practices of court ritual, tributary embassies, and regulated foreign exchange, Fairbank transformed what had previously been treated as diplomatic misrecognition into what he famously conceptualized as the “Chinese world order.” *Chaogong* as a tribute was rearticulated and substantialized in a sense that it ceased to function primarily as a point of cultural misunderstanding between China and the West and instead emerged as the organizing principle of a regionally bounded international order structured by hierarchy, ritual, and moral authority rather than by sovereign equality (Fairbank, 1968:pp.1–19, 257–75).

As the opening of *The Chinese World Order* canonically asserts, “the Chinese world order, (...) was unified and centralized in theory by the universal preeminence of the Son of Heaven. (...) The Sinocentric relationship was evidently the archetype of a whole set of often interlocking relations that developed in the East Asian area.”

(1968:p.9). This, as we argue, classicist intervention was such in a double sense. Analytically, it systematized China's external relations into a stable and intelligible structure, implicitly analogous to balance-of-power or institutional models familiar to contemporary English School and realist IR theory. Ritual excess and diplomatic theatricality were thus reinterpreted as phenomenal misperceptions obscuring a deeper yet power-structured order, one that required specialized sinological expertise to decode beneath the surface of ceremonial form.

Normatively, however, Fairbank's intervention recast the ingrained hierarchy of the system in terms that transcended realist assumptions. Hierarchy was presented as compatible with order and stability precisely because it was legitimated by culture and ritual rather than by coercion. In this reading, China appeared not as an empire in the European sense, where power ultimately rested on enforceable domination, but as a civilizational center presiding over a ritualized and "miraculously" consensual periphery. This interpretation which, one may argue, amounts to Nye's "soft power" argument *ante statu nascendi*, served both political and theoretical purposes. It countered earlier British and European depictions of tribute as irrational arrogance or civilizational pathology, while simultaneously elevating Western-trained sinologists as the indispensable interpreters of Chinese international order, i.e. positioning exceptionalism of China's external relations and area expertise as superior to conventional diplomatic or legalist scholarship.

Yet the problem with Fairbank's conception of a non-coercive hierarchy and a "consensually" accepted international order lay in the empirical accounts of area studies from which he claimed it was derived. His reconstruction relied far more heavily on Beijing-based court records than on Vietnamese, Korean, Mongolian, or other peripheral sources, a reliance that arguably distorted *chaogong* into an instrument of imperial self-representation—if not outright state propaganda. Fairbank himself acknowledged this limitation, noting that the tributary framework reflected "Chinese official ideology" more than diplomatic reality on the ground (Fairbank, 1968:p.10). In practice, this recognition implied that systematic empirical and frontier-focused research would inevitably challenge this otherwise elegant classicist "system theory." Indeed, subsequent scholarship — much of it inspired by the provocation of Fairbank's thesis itself — demonstrated that Qing China's external and frontier relations varied dramatically across regions and historical moments, encompassing warfare, coercion, trade, alliance-making, and pragmatic coexistence.⁵

⁵ It would be fair to say that in his later Cold War writings on method and area studies he quietly rejoins realist IR, defending historically thick, culturally literate inquiry against the flattening tendencies of "grand" theories, see: Fairbank, 1983:p.xiii.

Clear-cut examples of a uniformly non-coercive hierarchy prove difficult to identify. Rather than a stable and consensual order, *chaogong* appears in these accounts as a flexible and uneven repertoire of practices whose meaning and function depended heavily on context and power asymmetries.

Nevertheless, Fairbank's intellectual imprint led subsequent scholarship to fixate on the tributary system as an institutional fact rather than to treat it as a normative aspiration, i.e. one that functioned most clearly at the imperial center and became increasingly elusive, fragmented, and unevenly realized as analysis shifted toward the periphery. From a conceptual-historical standpoint, Fairbank thus completed a process of semantic consolidation that had begun with earlier Western encounters (see Liu, 2025:pp.716–9). A Western-derived analytical category (“the tribute system”) now displaced the polyvalence of *chaogong* itself, rendering the original phenomenon subsumed into a distinct conceptual framework. When this stabilized concept was later reintroduced into Chinese academic discourse as *chaogong tixi* (朝贡体系), it acquired the appearance of an indigenous and internally coherent systemic tradition (Zhang Feng, 2009:pp.545–574; Liu, 2025:pp.714–19). This act of retro-translation obscured the extent to which the very idea of a unified “system” was a product of modern historiography rather than a self-conscious pre-modern ordering principle (Liu, 2025).

The significance of this classicist phase therefore extends well beyond historiographical reclassification. By endowing *chaogong* with systemic coherence — à la German classical idealism — and by demonstrating that hierarchy could be non-imperial and normatively ordered, Fairbank's formulation laid crucial intellectual groundwork for contemporary civilizational-state arguments in IR theory. If China's pre-modern order was hierarchical yet stable, proponents could plausibly contend that hierarchy need not imply domination, and that China's contemporary rise might revive a relational mode of international governance rather than reproduce Western imperial trajectories.

At this point, it becomes possible to trace the subsequent debate on CTS along a trajectory that broadly mirrors the successive phases in the development of scholarly thinking on China's foreign policy itself (as seen, for example, in Bakota & Stopic, 2025:pp.4–18). Following the Fairbankian “Hegelian intervention”, the literature diversified in ways that loosely correspond to shifting intellectual contexts. In the post–Cold War period, particularly during the 1990s, a series of, heuristically called, “romantic” interventions emerged that reinterpreted and “revamped” CTS as an authentic benevolent cosmology or alternative world order. These were followed, especially in the 2000s, by more explicitly “realist” contributions that

“returned into game” coercion, power asymmetries, and imperial domination. Most recently, a modernist or relational phase has taken shape, one that increasingly dismantles claims of Chinese exceptionalism through comparative, multi-sited and contextualized analysis.

4. The Great Romantic turn

Building on the Fairbankian stabilization of *chaogong* as a coherent and normatively ordered system, a second phase of scholarship emerged from the late Cold War period onward that reinterpreted the tributary order in explicitly moral and civilizational terms. This transition coincided with broader constructivist and post-positivist turns in IR theory, as well as with renewed interest in non-Western traditions of international order following the decline of bipolarity. In this romanticized phase, “indigenous theoretical alternatives” were increasingly mobilized as correctives to what were framed as the conceptual exhaustion and normative limits of Western IR theory. CTS likewise ceased to function primarily as an institution embedded in contingent imperial governance and instead became a sort of pre-Westphalian arcadia, one that could be mobilized to challenge realist assumptions about anarchy, balance, and coercion.

Where Fairbank had emphasized hierarchy as a stabilizing structural principle grounded in ritual legitimacy – essentially making transcendental shift from “kingdom” of theoretical realism wired by anarchy and coercion - romantic reinterpretations moved further by treating this newly discovered, utopian hierarchy itself as normatively desirable. CTS was no longer presented merely as a historically bounded regional order, but as evidence of an alternative international logic, one premised on harmony, ethical authority, and relational hierarchy rather than formal equality or legal sovereignty. Transcendental shift thus also mobilized an important conceptual reorientation from (arbitrary) historical reconstructions to normative (and cherry-picking) extrapolations.

David C. Kang’s influential work exemplifies this turn. Departing from realist expectations that hierarchy should generate resistance and balancing, Kang employs “Copernican turn” in claiming that pre-modern East Asia experienced long-term stability precisely because China did not pursue systematic territorial expansion and because regional actors (again, “miraculously”) accepted hierarchical relations as legitimate (Kang, 2010). Hierarchy as a term was sanitized from realist underpinnings, as in East Asia in order to preserve peaceful co-existence, “it [hierarchy] was normal, expected, and even desired” (Kang, 2010:p.4). Likewise,

CTS was also romanticized by putting theoretical emphasis on a demand-side (Sino-periphery) to appear less as an instrument of imperial management but more as “shared” normative framework of harmonious regional order, as well as contrasting it with conflict-prone tributary relations in Europe.

About (somewhere) here CTS acquires its theoretical afterlife, operating less as an empirical historical model than as a small yet pivotal cog in a much larger machine of civilizational and relational theorizing in contemporary IR. In this sense, more explicitly civilizational move is made in *Tianxia* theory, most prominently articulated by Zhao Tingyang. Zhao abstracts the historical tributary order into a philosophical model of global governance, arguing that *Tianxia* represented “a world system based on inclusion rather than exclusion,” capable of transcending the violence inherent in Westphalian sovereignty (Zhao, 2006:pp.29–46). Here, CTS ceases to be an object of historical inquiry altogether and instead becomes a normative resource for reimagining global order in the present. Hierarchy is reframed as ethical responsibility, and asymmetry as moral care.

The analytical move common to these romantic-civilizational reinterpretations is decisive. Tribute is no longer examined as coercive, not even treated as historical, but elevated into a civilizational principle with trans-historical relevance. Conflict, resistance, and violence recede from view, while harmony, stability, and moral attraction are taken for granted, just like what previously Fairbank doubted to be “official ideology” is now elevated into undisputed evidence of a normative order.

This interpretive shift dovetailed neatly with *millennial* Chinese political and academic discourse, which in its “global return” started to frame the country’s rise as historically continuous and normatively insulated from Western imperial trajectories (for relevant analysis, see Wang, 2008). Within this optic, CTS fit as an important screw in legitimating genealogy for claims that China constitutes an alternative civilizational state, capable of exercising leadership without domination. Its international academic traction was also augmented with the post–Cold War “opening” of IR scholarship beyond its Euro-Atlantic core. Yet within Chinese IR debates, such civilizational and normatively saturated readings stood in persistent tension with realist (for example Yan Xuetong, 2006:pp.5–33) insistence on a hierarchy, leadership, and power grounded in material capability and strategic credibility rather than moral attraction. While the romantic–civilizational turn did provoke a wide inter-disciplinary scholarship, from historical point of view it intensified rather than resolved the methodological problems embedded in the classicist paradigm. By abstracting tributary relations into ethical models as imperial self-representations it might have gained fame in some IR and civilizational debates, but it furtherly distanced analysis from empirical context and historical research.

5. Realist Iconoclasts and Modernist Reconstructionists

It would be too simplified to claim that the realist reaction didn't immediately try to rein in classicist and romantic tides. Beginning in the late 1970s, historians and historically minded IR scholars were diligently rejecting assumptions that mushroomed with both classicist system-builders and later romantic interpreters, denying to *chaogong* features of a stable, supra-China legitimate, or normatively integrated international order. This realist rebounds emerged in periods when the primacy of geopolitics again appeared difficult to deny, most notably in the disillusionment following the Vietnam War, yet such voices initially remained marginal against the persistence of order-centered and normatively optimistic paradigms. It was only through the cumulative effect of growing skepticism regarding the "end of history" and Huntingtonian civilizational divide debates, and certain fatigue with discoveries of "non-Western traditions" in the immediate post-Cold War period that ushered realist "counter-reformation" phase. Culminating after 9/11 historically informed realism openly dismissed artificially constructed harmonies and hierarchies with no stable historical footing, while also retroactively legitimizing earlier power-sensitive critiques.

John E. Wills Jr. was among the first post-Fairbankian "cries in the wilderness" who tried to articulate a systematic caution against substantializing the Chinese world order as an operational system. Rather than dismissing CTS outright, Wills reframed the Qing representations of tributary relations as aspirational and ideational, warning that it "was not all of traditional Chinese foreign relations, and may not be the best key to a comprehensive understanding of these relations" (Wills, 1974:p.4). This intervention subtly but decisively shifted the analytical locus from systemic order to ideological projection, opening floor for empirical and historically informed "attacks".

Decisive rift between *chaogong* as diplomatic "reality" and ideological "construct" was struck by James L. Hevia. Departing from inter-disciplinary perspective that drew on anthropological, poststructuralist and scholarship on critical historiography he emphasized theatricality of *chaogong* "performance" and thus set Sino-peripheral actors, presumed compliant vassals of the Qing court as a mere spectators and *bona fide* participants displaying suspended disbelief in theatrical power performed by the court officials. In his seminal study of Qing diplomacy, Hevia rejected the interpretive move, central to both classicist and romantic readings, that compliance with ritual implied normative consent, let alone shared value system and pre-established hierarchy. He went even further by

denying presumed equivalence between ritual performance and shared belief among the “home base”, i.e. Beijing-based court and scholar elite. As a matter of fact, they might even be considered as the “target audience”, given the *Game of Thrones* style of power contestation behind the Qing court and the fact that these rituals essentially function as “strategic modes of practices (...) producing nuanced relations of power, relationships characterized by acceptance and resistance and redemptive interpretation of hegemonic order” (Bell, 1992:p.193, 196 in Hevia, 1995:p.21).

From the perspective of Sino-peripheral foreign envoy paying annual or (more often) bi-, triannual audiences to the Qing court (*chaojin* 朝覲), these tributary encounters emerge as asymmetrical and strategic performances, in which s/he often complies tactically, conforms to reinterpreted gestures of submission, but knows to compartmentalize these ritual acts from substantive political relations. CTS, in this sense, functioned less as an international order than as a theater of imperial representation. Therefore, just like the Dutch Van Hoorn embassy to the Kangxi emperor (1666-68, in Willis, 1974:p.4), all that early British envoys had to do is to politely “endure” theatrical displays of hierarchy while waiting to find proper time and venue for negotiations.

More “peripheral” focus on CTS understanding with political-economic research reorientation is critical contribution by Takeshi Hamashita. Discarding the importance of ideological aspects of CTS, at least from the peripheral perspective, Hamashita primarily regarded tributary exchanges with China within framework of regional trade and commercial networks. Instead of CTS embedded hierarchy, the tribute from non-Chinese perspective functioned primarily as a *gift* through which regional actors negotiated access to markets and currency flows (Hamashita, 2008:pp.12–57). More conforming to realist and mercantile logics of East Asia regional relations during the Late Qing period, this reading provides more familiar, and somewhat cynical, perspective on proto-capitalistic transformation *chaogong* underwent: becoming a mere exchange value with pitiful performative decorum being maintained only for opportunistic purposes.

Going back to historical research—especially to the question of how *chaogong* retained political relevance at the apex of Qing power (1644–1796)—it becomes indispensable to engage the new generation of historians emerging from the 1980s onward and clustered around what came to be known as the *New Qing History*. This imperial-focused and Sinocentrism-critical school decisively consolidated the realist–critical turn by provincializing Confucian universalism, treating it not as the organizing principle of Qing rule or foreign relations, but as one among several ideological registers mobilized within a plural, strategically adaptive

imperial repertoire. According to this line of interpretation, “China” was just one (yellow) stripe on five-striped Qing banner, so by emphasizing Empire’s Inner Asian (Mongolian, Turkic) dimensions, Manchu institutional plurality, and multi-frontier governance, NQH scholars argued against singular civilizational heritage of CTS, regarding it instead as a product of “Manchu ability to adapt to Chinese political traditions *and* on their ability to maintain a separate entity” (Elliott, 2001:p.3, italics in original).

This NQH shift, however, generated a new problem for more “archaeological” strands of scholarship: how to disentangle what, if anything, constituted a distinctively Qing “added value” to *chaogong* from practices that persisted largely as inherited cultural and political relics of earlier (and more “Chinese”) dynastic orders (for Han legacies, see Buljan, 2024:pp.353–92) rather than as functionally renewed instruments of imperial governance. However, taken in general, they decisively weaken claims that *chaogong* constituted a coherent alternative international order, preparing the ground for contemporary relational and comparative approaches that question not only the system’s harmony, but its very exceptionalism.

Cumulative effect of anthropological, polit-economic and NQH scholarship has been to destabilize the very object that earlier generations took for granted: a coherent, exceptional and normatively integrated CTS that could serve as a “cog” in civilizational narratives or provide a gateway to alternative models for IR theory. Building on this critical groundwork, more recent modernist, relational, and comparative approaches push the argument one step further. They suggest that CTS apparent uniqueness is not merely overstated, but actively produced by a particular historiographical abstractions and methodological reductions treating CTS *in vitro* as isolated from broader imperial, regional and relational contexts.

Relational and comparative aspect has been especially forceful in dismantling theoretical “island” of Chinese exceptionalism and abridging it with Eurasian continent. Subaltern, peripheral and underclass perspectives helped in bringing research from Beijing down to Qing frontier (as seen in, for example Lhamsuren, 2023:pp.1–28). Minorities, underprivileged along with frontiersmen became an object of historical research, whose perspective reflected strong structural parallels of the Qing Empire with the Ottoman, Russian, and Mughal empires in their combination of symbolic hierarchy, fiscal extraction, and calibrated violence (Perdue, 2005:pp.518–45). From this angle, *chaogong* ceases to be Chinese, Qing or East Asian singularity and instead appears as one variant within a wider repertoire of imperial ordering practices. Tribute scholarship, on the other hand, made a full circle back to “(pre)-pre-classicist” understanding.

Nevertheless, relational historians extend this critique by emphasizing that CTS was never a stable or internally coherent order, but rather a retrospective synthesis assembled through later historiographical consolidation. Approaches attentive to social and geographical stratification have proven especially productive, as they distinguish between the official narratives constructed in metropolitan court chronicles and the ways tributary relations were bargained, resisted, reinterpreted, or coercively enforced across frontier zones. Such work has begun to recover a *longue durée* of anti-imperial practices and memories - most recently demonstrated in micro-historical and regional studies - that fills the analytical gaps left by conceptually tidy yet historically thin system-building accounts.

At this point, the historical reconstruction of the scholarly debate on CTS reaches ending point. From today's perspective, claims of CTS' exceptionalism or non-exceptionalism emerge less as discoveries about the past than as effects of successive analytical framings that all veiled multifaceted historical dimension of *chaogong*. Three such frames are especially consequential. The first, romantic, although abstracting Qing diplomacy from comparative Eurasian imperial history, continues to reverberate in civilizational narratives. The second, realist frame challenged romantic exceptionalism by reasserting the centrality of coercion, material asymmetry, and strategic calculation in tributary encounters. However, in doing so it often treated *chaogong* as hastily "de-historicized" entity, especially by applying late-capitalist power logic and focusing on "*la différence Mandchoue*" (Elliot, 2001:p.xv), thus reproducing a Qing-centric critique that continued to ignore ideational aspects arriving from Ming legacies. The third, relational frame departs more decisively from both earlier approaches by refusing to treat ritual, trade, and coercion as analytically separable domains. Instead, it traces how authority was co-produced through interaction, contingency, and local mediation, revealing tribute not as an imposed hierarchy nor a consensual order, but as a fragile and situational arrangement whose apparent coherence emerged only through later historiographical abstraction. In (still short) retrospect, however, relational "refusal" to go beyond microhistories might impact their relevance in contending or conciliating romanticists and realists in this enduring debate.

6. Conclusion

The intellectual career of *chaogong* started from a misunderstood diplomatic idiom and by the time China assumed global stage became a civilizational template mobilized in contemporary IR debates. Early Western encounters with Qing China,

shaped by Westphalian and mercantilist assumptions, interpreted tribute less as an alternative mode of international ordering than as an anachronistic obstacle to reciprocity and sovereign equality. This pre-classicist reading imposed European political vocabularies onto Chinese practice, translating heterogeneous and situational interactions into the familiar but distorting category of “tribute,” long before systematic historical scholarship emerged.

The mid-twentieth-century classicist intervention, most influentially articulated by John K. Fairbank, recast these fragmented practices as a coherent “Chinese tributary system,” stabilizing hierarchy as a normatively legitimate, non-coercive system grounded in ritual and moral authority. While analytically innovative and politically corrective vis-à-vis earlier European caricatures, this formulation consolidated a metropolitan, ideology-centered perspective and completed a semantic process that transformed *chaogong* into CTS. Later romantic reinterpretations, particularly from the 1990s onward, extended this move by elevating tribute into a moral archetype and positioning it as an indigenous alternative to Western international society, thereby aligning historical interpretation with contemporary civilizational-state discourse.

Realist and critical scholarship, alongside the New Qing History, forcefully destabilized this narrative by reintroducing coercion, contingency, and imperial pluralism into the analysis. Yet even as realist critiques challenged harmony-centric readings, they often reproduced Qing state-centric assumptions that left the conceptual structure of the CTS *qua* system intact. As a result, realist demystification paradoxically enabled the system’s later civilizational reuse by treating power politics as historically present but analytically separable from ideology. More recent relational and comparative approaches move further by dissolving the system itself, revealing tributary order as a retrospective synthesis assembled through selective historicization and analytic abstraction.

These historiographical dynamics extend beyond academic debate into the geopolitical uses of history. Appeals to China’s alleged tradition of hierarchy without domination, as it was invoked and employed in cases such as Montenegro’s debt exposure, draw on the tributary system’s civilizational afterlife to recode asymmetrical relations as benign and historically distinctive. Once *chaogong* is stripped of its manufactured exceptionalism, such narratives lose much of their justificatory force, revealing familiar patterns of leverage, bargaining, and contingency articulated in a historically authorized vocabulary. It is here that historical research (still awaiting fuller archaeological and micro-historical excavation) diverges from the geopolitical mechanics through which great powers construct exceptionalism, and where China’s

historically-conversant, civilizationally-dense reworking of its own narrative of exceptionalism appears less dissimilar to the Monroe doctrine or the European normative power discourse. Until some future equivalent of “Donroe” displaces Chinese-style “Monroe”, these recurring afterlives of historical exceptionalism will continue to generate disproportionate political attention, periodically unsettling an otherwise methodical and self-reflexive field of historical inquiry.

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PREISPITIVANJE KINESKOG TRIBUTARNOG SISTEMA: TEORIJA, ISTORIOGRAFIJA I PROBLEM IZUZETNOSTI

Rezime

Autor tvrdi da prividna izuzetnost i moderna primjenljivost tradicionalnog kineskog tributarnog sistema nikako nisu nesporne istorijske činjenice ili suštinske istorijske realnosti, već proizvod selektivne istoriografske konstrukcije, konsolidovane preko klasicističke i romantičarske nauke, a sve više osporene realističkim, komparativnim i relacionim istraživanjima. Ključno je da se ova konstrukcija pojavila unutar zapadnog analitičkog horizonta: sam „tributarni sistem” nastao je kao semantička pozajmljenica koju je nametnuo poznati zapadni politički rječnik, prateći poredak, sistem, hijerarhiju i suverenitet, heterogenim praksama koje okružuju fenomen „chaogonga”, a koje su prethodile vestfalskim međunarodnim odnosima. Tek kasnije je ovaj koncept djelimično preveden ponovo u kineski akademski i politički diskurs, gdje se konstituisao kao autohtona, interno koherentna tradicija. Umjesto da ponudi alternativni model međunarodnog poretka, koncept „chaogonga” stoga više otkriva kako se civilizacijski narativi kristališu oko akademskih praksi biranja, koje se potom mobilisu da legitimišu savremene političke i teorijske tvrdnje.

► *Ključne riječi:* Chaogong, kineski tributarni sistem, romantizam, realizam, istoriografija.