

Explaining the Tribute System: Power, Confucianism, and War in Medieval East Asia

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*In this article I remedy the popular misconception that the East Asian international system was hierarchical and non-egalitarian in history. I argue that the tribute system is mainly a function of power. Backed by power, Confucian norms and rules became the rules of the game in the system. Power asymmetry gave rise to hierarchy in foreign relations while power symmetry led to diplomatic equality between great powers. East Asia during the tenth to the thirteenth centuries was a multistate system without a regional hegemon. In the Song-Liao international system (960–1125), due to power symmetry, the two great powers conducted their foreign policy on the basis of formal equality. In the Song-Jin international system (1127–1234), the weaker Song China became a Jin vassal state and acknowledged its inferior status in the Jin-derived hierarchy. In studying historical East Asia, Confucian rhetoric needs to be examined against power reality. Only by taking power seriously can we get a better understanding of the East Asian international system. **KEYWORDS:** tribute system, hierarchy, Confucianism, power asymmetry, historical China*

THERE IS A WIDESPREAD BELIEF THAT, COMPARED TO AN EGALITARIAN but war-prone West, the East Asian international system was historically hierarchic and relatively peaceful. China, by virtue of its superior power and size, maintained order and kept the peace through the tribute system. During those times, China stood at the center of “all under Heaven”; neighboring polities sent tributary missions to China to symbolize their submission to the Chinese emperor. Unlike the Westphalian system of sovereign equality and autonomy, the tribute system was based on inequality and deference. This popular idea of a hierarchical East Asia derives from the region’s history from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, when the polity that we know

today as China was the regional hegemon. But China was not always dominant in history and the East Asian system was not always hierarchical. To remedy this misconception in the literature, I examine the medieval period in East Asian history when formal equality, not hierarchy, characterized great power relations.

East Asia from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries was a multi-state system without a regional hegemon. Several centralized, independent states interacted with each other through economic, cultural, and military means. Song China (960–1279) coexisted with a succession of powerful nomadic polities in the north, first the Liao empire (907–1125) and then the Jin empire (1115–1234). No single state was powerful enough to dominate the system. Despite the rhetoric of being the superior civilization, Song China conducted foreign policy on a basis of formal equality with the Liao empire, but it interacted with the more powerful Jin empire on a basis of formal inequality. This variation in how China treated its northern neighbors, as we shall see later, has a lot to do with fluctuations of relative power. In addition to the states named above, the system comprised several centralized, independent states including Xi Xia, Korea, Vietnam, the Dali kingdom, and Japan.

I argue here that material power is the foundation of the tribute system. Power asymmetry explains the hierarchical tribute system, while power symmetry accounts for diplomatic equality between political actors. To understand international relations in historical East Asia, one needs to go beyond the facade of the tribute system and examine the raw reality of power masked by the benign Confucian rhetoric that political actors used. The strong built up a tribute system to govern interactions among political units in a way that disproportionately served its interests. Underlying the seemingly benign tribute system was a crude relationship of power between the strong and the weak. Historical East Asia's hierarchy grew out of a power asymmetry between China and its neighbors. Hierarchy aside, East Asia also witnessed a long period of states' conducting diplomacy on an equal footing. When power symmetry existed between political actors, diplomatic parity became possible. Hence, the tribute system, instead of being an overarching framework to study historical East Asia, is better treated as something to be explained.

In the first section I provide a theoretical explanation of the tribute system and highlight the primacy of power in the East Asian international system. Next, I discuss how Confucian thinking, backed by power, gave shape to the rules and rituals of the tribute system. I

then examine the Song-Liao international system (960–1125), in which diplomatic equality characterized great power relations, followed by a discussion of the Song-Jin international system (1127–1234), in which bilateral relations were based on formal inequality. I conclude that power relations hold the key to explaining variations in tributary arrangements.

Power as the Foundation of the Tribute System

Was the tribute system in historical East Asia an international system? An international system emerges from the interaction between political units equipped with different capabilities under the structure of anarchy. According to Kenneth Waltz, “A system is composed of a structure and of interacting units” (Waltz 1979, 79). Interaction between units gives the system a set of properties that are different from the sum of its parts. This definition does not require the unit of analysis to be states. As Waltz notes, “The logic of anarchy obtains whether the system is composed of tribes, nations, oligopolistic firms, or street gangs” (Waltz 1990, 37).¹ Although states are certainly the main units of an international system, other less centralized polities can have consequential effects on the system. In historical East Asia, pastoral and nomadic polities (Xiongnu, Uighurs, Tibetans, Khitans, Jurchens, Mongols, and Manchus, among others) had their distinct political structure and ways of governance. They were consequential actors that functioned in many ways like a state.² That most of the warfare in East Asian history took place between China and these actors speaks volumes about their crucial role in the system. These polities were militarily powerful and had a significant amount of interaction with China as well as with other political actors. The Mongols, and the Manchus, even conquered all of China and established a vast empire on the Asian continent. In contrast, the states of Korea, Vietnam, and Japan did not have such far-reaching effects on the system. Ruling the nomadic polities out of a definition of system simply because they were not centrally organized would be misleading and anachronistic.

Based on the definition outlined above, the tribute system in historical East Asia was clearly an international system. Political actors, equipped with various capabilities, interacted with each other in political, economic, and cultural domains, without a central authority sitting above them to enforce order. The basic structure of anarchy still obtained when the system was dominated by a single power,

which by no means assumed the function of a central government in the domestic sense. History has witnessed many hierarchical arrangements of foreign relations within an anarchical system.

Power is central to the functioning of an international system. As there is no central authority above states, an international system is a competitive one in which states vie for power and attempt to dominate others. Power is the key to security. In general, a strong state has a better chance of getting its way in the international system than a weak one does. How a system operates is ultimately a function of the material capabilities possessed by its actors. When power is evenly distributed between two great powers, we are likely to see real equality in bilateral relations. Some form of inequality is possible, however, if one state holds more power than the other but is unable to prevail in a hegemonic war. As part of its effort to balance the other's power, each state may attempt to form a separate bloc of power with lesser polities in its vicinity (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001).

When one state holds a preponderance of power over the others, the system will become hierarchical. In power asymmetry, weak actors tend to defer to the strongest on foreign policy issues. The preponderant state enjoys so much security and privilege that it will seek to maintain its top position and prevent others from challenging its dominance (Mearsheimer 2001). An important way to prolong dominance is to make, or at least shape, rules of the game that govern the interaction between states, disproportionately serving the interests of the powerful (Gilpin 1981). The governance of the international system is a function of the distribution of power among political actors. Weak states and polities, to make the most of a situation in which they do not have much sway, accept or adapt to these rules to forestall hegemonic intervention and preserve autonomy. Since the rules of the game derive from the underlying power relations among states, a state wishing to change these rules must accumulate sufficient power so that it has the capabilities to make revisions.

Hence, fluctuations of relative power profoundly influence interstate relations. Power asymmetry gives rise to hierarchy in the system, whereas power symmetry leads to equality in great power relations. In power asymmetry, the strong get to make the rules of the game, rewriting or bypassing them if doing so serves their interests. Importantly, these rules and norms are subsidiary to power. The primacy of power over norms holds across regions. Power asymmetries between states frequently turned the Westphalian norms of sovereignty, and the East Asian tributary rules and norms, into what

Stephen Krasner calls “organized hypocrisy.” As Krasner notes, “Every international system or society has a set of rules or norms that define actors and appropriate behaviors. These norms are, however, never obeyed in an automatic or rote fashion” (Krasner 2001, 173; 1999; Larsen 2013). In practice, material interests are usually more consequential than normative considerations. In historical East Asia, China, by virtue of its overwhelming power and resources, developed a set of rules and institutions to govern interactions between itself and other political actors. China conducted foreign relations on its own terms. Backed by power, Confucian norms and vocabularies became the rules of the game.

Confucianism and the Tribute System

Although various forms of tributary relations existed in historical East Asia before Confucianism became dominant, the tribute system has roots in Confucian thinking. As John Fairbank notes, Confucianism envisions a hierarchic political and social order within the state, governed by a virtuous sage-ruler. This domestic order was projected onto foreign relations in the form of a tribute system with China at the center (Fairbank 1968). For the Confucians, hierarchy is the natural order of things, like Heaven and Earth. When there is hierarchy, there will be peace and order. Xunzi, a key Confucian thinker, describes the negative consequences of a society without hierarchy: “Where the classes of society are equally ranked, there is no proper arrangement of society; where authority is evenly distributed, there is no unity; and where everyone is of like status, none would be willing to serve the other” (Xunzi 1988, 9: 4). As hierarchy is the way of nature, foreign relations should be rank-ordered as well.

Confucius believed in the power of moral virtue rather than in the power of military force. A virtuous ruler received the Mandate of Heaven and would naturally attract the submission of the people as well as other states; military coercion was unnecessary and counter-productive. As *The Analects* by Confucius notes, “The rule of virtue can be compared to the North Star which commands the homage of the multitude of stars simply by remaining in its place” (Confucius 1979, 2: 1). States formed a concentric hierarchy in a world ruled by a sage-ruler. Under this hierarchical system, foreign states, attracted by the splendor of Chinese civilization, voluntarily submitted to the Chinese court and became vassals. New rulers of a tributary state had to obtain an imperial patent of appointment from the Chinese

emperor in a process known as “investiture.” Tributary leaders could address themselves only as “king”; the term “emperor” was reserved exclusively for China. Vassals periodically sent embassies to pay tribute to the Chinese emperor. In Confucian thinking, the influx of tribute-paying foreign envoys strengthened the legitimacy of the Chinese throne, because the tribute symbolized his status as the accepted ruler of all-under-Heaven (*tianxia*). Upon assuming the throne, the first foreign policy task for founders of Chinese dynasties was to get neighboring states to send a tributary mission to China. Chinese emperors used the coming of tribute-paying embassies to justify their rule and to strengthen their legitimacy. For tributaries, Chinese recognition and investiture had the effect of enhancing the legitimacy of the local rulers, a process similar to diplomatic recognition of states today (Fairbank 1953, 30).

In court meetings, tributary envoys performed certain rituals, including the full kowtow (kneeling three times, each time tapping their head to the ground for another three times, for a total of nine taps) to symbolize their submission to the Chinese emperor and to accept their inferior status. For the Chinese, performance of tributary rituals was considered crucial to the tribute system. Confucius believed that rituals and ceremonies were vehicles by which virtue was manifested. Observance of proper rites and music was meant to achieve moral perfection and as such was crucial to preventing chaos and disorder. Performance of rites and music expresses the harmony and order of the universe. *The Analects* notes, “Of all the things brought about by the rites, harmony is the most valuable” (Confucius 1979, 1: 12). Ritual in the Chinese world order was performed through tribute to the emperor. The Confucian emphasis on rites as an outward manifestation of virtue explained the obsessive insistence by Chinese bureaucrats on the accurate performance of tributary rituals at the court (Mancall 1968, 64). Tributary envoys’ performance of rituals, notably the kowtow, confirmed the authority of the Chinese emperor and signified their submission.

Because Confucianism emphasized peace, harmony, and stability in sociopolitical relations, some believe that absence of warfare characterized China’s relations with neighbors throughout most of history. According to this view, although the tribute system was hierarchic and non-egalitarian, interactions among political units were, in the words of Qin Yaqing, “unequal but benign,” just like the relationship between fathers and sons (Qin 2007, 330).³ Underlying this notion is a belief that culture influences international outcomes as

well as state behaviors. The shared culture of Confucianism, along with its hierarchic worldview, facilitated mutual understanding and helped resolve differences between China and tributary states. Vassals accepted and internalized the rules and norms of the tribute system and recognized the legitimacy of China's preeminence in regional affairs. Sinic states (Korea, Vietnam, and, to a lesser extent, Japan) even imitated Chinese institutions and used the Chinese language in official communications. China, as the economic, military, and cultural leader, was responsible for maintaining the political and security order in the region. As vassals had accepted Chinese supremacy in East Asian affairs, there was little need for China to attack them. This bargain—tributary compliance in exchange for security—contributed to the absence of warfare in the East Asian system. As long as hierarchy was preserved, peace and stability prevailed. Conflict broke out when Chinese power disintegrated.⁴

When we study the tribute system, it behooves us to carefully compare rhetoric with reality (Wang 1983; Wade 2011). What was said publicly might not be consistent with what was said privately. Splendid rhetoric is frequently used to mask the raw reality of power. The tributary framework is highly elastic and can be reinterpreted for self-serving purposes. Confucianism is also highly malleable when it comes to both war-making and peacemaking. Although war is generally frowned upon, Confucianism allows punitive war if it serves a just cause. Confucius holds that only a sage-ruler has the right to launch punitive expeditions: “When the Way prevails in all-under-Heaven, the rites and music and punitive expeditions are initiated by the Son of Heaven” (Confucius 1979, 16: 2). Mencius suggests that when the ruler of a state is morally depraved, a punitive expedition is permissible to “rescue the people from the torments of water and fire” (Mencius 1.B.11). Conversely, since fighting a war will put strains on the people, a ruler's strategic restraint can be justified on the grounds of showing benevolence and caring for the people. Hence, Confucian rhetoric can be adapted to justify both attack and retreat. As Victoria Hui points out, the Confucian-Mencian conception of righteous war (*yizhan*) can be used to justify military attacks as punishments of those who lack virtue, or to justify peacemaking by dismissing the utility of force and emphasizing the need to let the war-torn people rest (Hui 2011).

It is tempting to think that the tribute system characterized Imperial China's foreign relations throughout history. However, treating the tribute system as an all-encompassing framework can be misleading. Not all of China's foreign relations can be generalized under

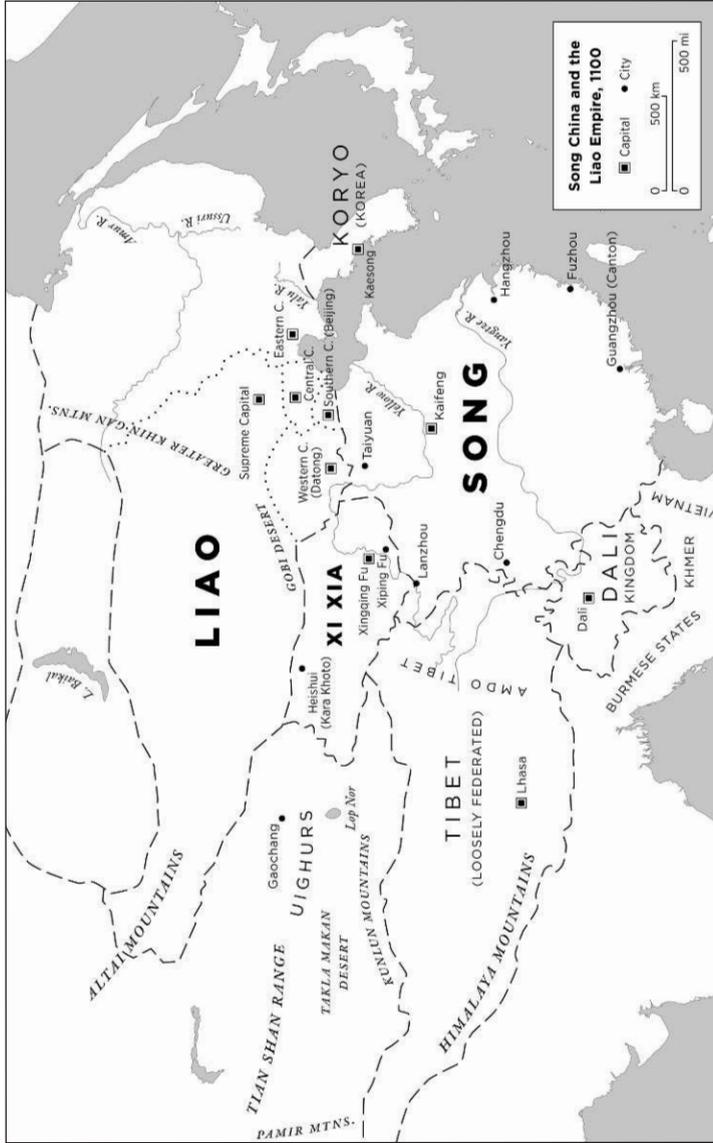
the tributary framework (Tao 1988, 4; Wills 1984, 4; Zhang 2009). Relying exclusively on the tribute system as an interpretive framework could easily lead to the dubious conclusion that the East Asian state system has historically been peaceful and stable or that the “Chinese world order” has been benign. Although periods of peace existed in East Asian history, the region has witnessed its share of war and alliance-making in human history. The polity known as China today has fought numerous wars against neighbors and engaged in power politics in its history (Wang 2011). Rather than seeing the tribute system as a paradigm to explain China’s interactions with East Asian polities, it is better treated as something to be explained (Zhang 2009, 568–569), and I would argue that power relations hold the key to explaining the tribute system.

In *East Asia Before the West*, David Kang challenges scholars of international relations (IR) to take the tribute system as a set of rules and institutions in the same way they examine the Westphalian system. He argues that a “Confucian society” of peace existed among China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan because they accepted the tribute system as legitimate. For the nomadic peoples who did not share these ideas and rules of the game, conflicts with China tended to erupt (Kang 2010). While I share Kang’s call that IR scholars broaden both theoretical and empirical scope to historical East Asia, I would like to highlight the underlying power asymmetry of the tribute system. When power is taken into consideration, the apparent peace among the Confucianized states can be explained by Chinese power domination over lesser states—there was no need for war because the weaker states had already submitted to China. On the other hand, the nomads’ refusal to accept Chinese superiority, buttressed by the nomads’ military advantages in cavalry warfare, was a major cause of conflict. Like most of the literature on the tribute system, Kang focuses on the Ming-Qing period during the last five centuries when the international order was largely a hierarchical one with China at the top. What was the international system like in historical East Asia when diplomatic equality, not hierarchy, characterized great power relations? To answer this question, we need to go further back in history.

The Song-Liao International System, 960–1125

Medieval China during the Song Dynasty coexisted with several states, forming a multistate system (see Map 1). The power structure

Map 1 Song-Liao International System



Source: Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 35. Copyright © 2011 Columbia University Press. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

was largely bipolar, shaped by the rivalry between the sedentary Song China and the nomadic Liao empire. Both were centralized, independent states. China was a “lesser empire” in the interstate system, facing the more powerful Liao empire to the north (Wang 1983). Chinese history tends to see the Song Dynasty as a weak state, but Song China was able to stand on its feet for three hundred years in the face of a stronger adversary and accomplish splendid cultural achievements. This fact alone refutes the myth of Song weakness (Bol 2008, 10; Ledyard 1983, 337). It says more about nomadic strength than Chinese weakness. The Song army was a formidable force that decisionmakers of the Liao empire had to contend with. Neither the Song nor the Liao was strong enough to subjugate the other. As a result of rough power parity, both countries conducted diplomacy on an equal basis (Tao 1983).

Interactions between Song China and the Liao empire included war, peacemaking, trade, and personnel exchanges (Shiba 1983; Standen 2007). Between 960 and 1005, both countries engaged in military conflicts with each other. The Liao controlled key strategic territories, notably the Sixteen Prefectures region that includes today’s Beijing area, and used them to put military pressure on the Song. Northern Han, a Liao tributary ruled by Shatuo Turks, occupied the highlands in Shanxi and threatened the flank of the Song offensive against the Liao. The Song attempted to rectify this strategic disadvantage by conquering Northern Han in 979. Upon victory, the Song immediately turned its offensive against the Liao but it failed to capture the Sixteen Prefectures. In 986, the Song, taking advantage of disarray in Liao domestic politics, launched a second major strike, deploying nearly 200,000 men, but it failed to conquer the strategic territories. Fearing that the Song might attack again, the Liao launched a major preventive war in 1004 (Lau 2000; Lorge 2008). Military stalemates led both countries to conclude a peace treaty in 1005. A fearful Song court decided to offer money to the Liao for peace. In the historic Treaty of Shanyuan (Chanyuan), the Song government agreed to pay the Liao an annual payment of 200,000 bolts of silk and 100,000 taels of silver. Both sides agreed to demarcate and respect each other’s borders. The weaker Song bought off the Liao again in 1042 by increasing payments when the latter threatened war.

The Treaty of Shanyuan was a landmark peace agreement in East Asian history, ushering in a century of peace between the two most powerful states in the region. The treaty, born out of the inability of

either side to subjugate the other, demonstrated Chinese pragmatism in adapting the tributary framework to foreign relations. In the aftermath of peacemaking efforts, both countries constructed a fictitious kinship relationship between the two imperial houses and recognized one another's status as equal actors in the international arena. Song emperor Zhenzong (968–1023) became the “elder brother” of the Liao emperor Shengzong (971–1031) as Zhenzong was three years his senior. Seniority, not status, determined how each emperor was addressed. Song emperor Renzong (1010–1063) was at first the “nephew” of Liao emperor Shengzong, but after the latter's death he became the “elder brother” of the next Liao emperor, Xingzong (1016–1055). At one time, Song emperor Zhezong (1076–1100) addressed the Liao emperor Daozong (1032–1101) as “junior grandfather, emperor of the great Liao” but became the “elder brother” of the next Liao emperor, Tianzuo (1085–1128) (Tao 1988, 17).

More striking still is Song China's flexibility regarding the tribute system. Although both countries scrupulously avoided using the word “tribute” (*gong*) to describe the annual payments (the exact wording was “to assist with [Khitan] military expenditures” [*zhu jun lu zhi fei*]), the treaty was tantamount to China's paying tribute to placate its powerful adversary—a “tribute in reverse,” in the words of historian Lien-sheng Yang (Yang 1968, 21). The payments were delivered in a way that avoided the appearance of tribute. A local Song official bearing no formal state letters would deliver the payments to the border near Xiongzhou to be picked up by a local Liao official. Although the Liao court was savvy enough not to call these transactions “tribute” in official communications with the Song, internal Liao records do indicate that within their own country they considered those payments as actual tribute. For instance, the imperial obituary of Liao Shengzong described the Song's peace offering as “sincere submission,” adding that “Gold and silver were submitted as tribute to support our army” (Tao 1988, 16, 29).

Throughout history China was known for treating the nomadic people in subhuman terms. Compromise in foreign policy was especially difficult because of the distinction between the Chinese (*hua*) and barbarians (*yi*) and the insistence on a hierarchy with China at the top. Han Dynasty official Jia Yi opposed the accommodationist *heqin* (peace and kinship) policy toward the nomadic Xiongnu empire on the grounds that it violated Confucian norms of hierarchy—it was too humiliating. Jia Yi famously commented on the Han Dynasty's accommodationist policy:

The situation of the empire may be described as like that of a person hanging upside down. The Son of Heaven is the head of the empire. . . . The barbarians are the feet of the empire. . . . Yet each year Han provides them with money, silk floss and fabrics. To command the barbarian is the power vested in the Emperor on the top, and to present tribute to the Son of Heaven is a ritual to be performed by the vassals at the bottom. Hanging upside down like this is something beyond comprehension. (Quoted in Waldron 1990, 41)

Hence, according to Jia Yi, China's standing at the top of the hierarchy was the natural order of things. The great Han historian Sima Qian (145–87 B.C.E.) wrote in *Shiji* (*Historical Records*) that the Xiongnu empire was a warlike people by nature: "It is their custom to herd their flocks in times of peace and make their living by hunting, but in periods of crisis they take up arms and go off on plundering and marauding expeditions. This seems to be their inborn nature. . . . Their only concern is self-advantage, and they know nothing of propriety or righteousness" (Wright 2002, 60). Ban Gu's (32–92 C.E.) *Hanshu* (*Standard History of the Han*) described the same nomads as "covetous for gain, human-faced but animal-hearted," a phrase frequently cited by later generations (Waldron 1990, 35). Early Song records described the Khitans of the Liao as "barbarians," behaving like "dogs and goats" (Wang 1983, 52–53). Song Confucian scholar-official Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) described the nomads as "insects, reptiles, snakes, and lizards," adding, "How could we receive them with courtesy and deference?" (Wright 2002, 57).

The Treaty of Shanyuan changed this racially tinged view of the nomads, at least on the surface. In accordance with the principle of diplomatic parity, the Song changed the names of border places with derogatory overtones. For instance, Polu ("Breaking Up the Caitiffs") was changed to Xin'an ("Faith and Peace"), Weilu ("Inspiring the Caitiffs with Awe") to Guangxin ("Extending Faith"), and Pingrong ("Pacifying the Barbarians") became Baoding ("Protecting the Peace"). Official documents began to address the Liao as the "Great Khitan state" (*da qidan guo*) or the "Northern Court" (*beichao*) rather than the "Northern Barbarians" (*beilu*) (Wright 1998, 32–33). These changes, however, did not imply a fundamental shift in the Chinese view of the nomads. Official Chinese records not intended to be read by foreigners continued to use disparaging language to describe the nomads. Song imperial edicts continued to use terms such as "barbarians" and "caitiffs" to describe the Khitans. Private

writings of Song officials sometimes referred to the Khitans as “ugly caitiffs,” “wolves,” “owls,” or plainly “animals.” As Jing-shen Tao points out, these derogatory terms helped maintain the myth of Chinese superiority (Tao 1983, 72, 80).

Although the tribute system was predicated on the notion of Chinese superiority, the Treaty of Shanyuan presumed at least a relationship of equality between the two countries. Such equality with neighbors was not uncommon throughout Chinese history, and it was mostly a result of power symmetry between China and its rivals. The Tang Dynasty (618–907) established a marriage alliance with the powerful Tibet on an equal footing. The Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) also experienced a period of equality with the Xiongnu empire, marrying Han princesses to the Xiongnu leaders, and even made a yearly tribute (which the Han court called “gifts”) of gold, silk, and grain to its powerful adversary. But when Chinese power rose, Han emperor Wu used force to eradicate the Xiongnu threat and established a hierarchic order in East Asia (di Cosmo 2002). Historian Yu Ying-shih notes that it was in the Han Dynasty that what would later be known as the tribute system “fully took shape” (Yu 1967, 36). Writing on the Han victory over Xiongnu, *History of the Later Han (Hou Han shu)* had this comment: “Overawed by our military strength and attracted by our wealth, all the rulers presented exotic local products as tribute and their beloved sons as hostages. They bared their heads and kneeled down toward the east to pay homage to the Son of Heaven” (Lewis 2007, 145–146). This statement might be self-serving, but it underscored the central role of material power in causing foreign rulers to pay tribute.

Diplomatic equality took place mainly because China lacked the military power to subjugate its adversaries into participating in the Sino-centric tribute system. Geopolitical reality forced the Song to acknowledge its lesser status, however humiliating or distasteful it might have seemed to the Chinese. As a matter of fact, countries like Korea, the Xi Xia, and other Inner Asian states all paid tribute at various times to the Liao empire.

No hierarchy emerged during this Song-Liao period. Diplomacy between the two great powers was conducted on the principle of formal equality. The Song, however, did not give up offensive ambitions and attempted an internal balancing strategy. Chief Councilor Wang Anshi’s self-strengthening New Policies (1069–1073) were designed to enrich the country and strengthen the military, hoping to “deliver the benefit to the battleground in north China” (Huang 1997, 134; see

also Forage 1991; Tao 1988, 68). As its power grew, the Song went on an offensive in 1081 against Xi Xia, its secondary adversary, hoping next to finish off the Liao, the primary adversary. The objectives of these military expeditions were not simply to repulse or deter enemies, but rather to destroy them, thus eliminating the threats to Chinese security. The Song, however, met fierce Xi Xia resistance and failed to achieve their military objectives.

Importantly, diplomatic equality was restricted only to Song-Liao relations but not to others. Speaking of the international relations during this period as one of “China among equals” appears to be a misnomer (Rossabi 1983). As David Wright notes, “The concept of an entire international community of equally sovereign and independent states did not exist in East Asia in Sung [Song] times. Northern Sung China did not see itself as one state among many equals but as a state with only one equal: Liao” (Wright 2005, 2). In diplomatic correspondence, the Song reserved the equal term “state letters” (*guoshu*) for the Liao only, but it used unequal terms such as “edicts” (*zhao*), “decrees” (*chishu*), or “documents of investiture” (*zhi*) for lesser states such as Korea and Xi Xia (Franke 1983, 121). Equality was feasible when two states were roughly equal in power. In cases of power asymmetry, tributary inequality became dominant. As it turned out, both the Liao and the Song attempted to fashion their separate tribute systems.

The Liao founders learned from the Chinese way of governance and established an empire of dual administration, combining both nomadic and sedentary elements. The Northern Chancellery governed the Khitan nation and other nomadic tribes, whereas the Southern Chancellery ruled over conquered farming people (mostly Chinese). The Liao state was a truly multiethnic empire. Many of the high officials in the Southern Chancellery were Chinese, Bohai, and Korean (Mote 1999, 39–42). The Liao founder Abaoji honored Confucius and claimed in an edict of 924 that he had received the Mandate of Heaven. Like their Chinese counterpart, Liao emperors adopted the tribute system in their foreign relations. In 1024, for instance, the Liao court requested that the court of Mahmud of Ghazni in Central Asia dispatch a tributary mission (Tao 1988, 29). A Liao-centered world order competed with a Song-centered world order for vassals, notably in Korea and Xi Xia.

The Koryo Dynasty (918–1392) of Korea shared a border with the Liao and viewed the latter as the primary security threat. Koryo founder Wang Kon (r. 918–943) rejected a Liao request to pay tribute

in 942, banishing the Khitan envoys to an island. When the Song Dynasty was founded in 960, Korea quickly sent envoys to pay tribute and accepted Song investiture as a vassal state in 963. Balancing Liao power was a major consideration. Korea had also hoped to regain the territory, well south of the Yalu River, once ruled by the ancient kingdom of Koguryo but then occupied by the Liao. Korea tried a balancing strategy with Song China against its powerful neighbor of Liao, but was eventually forced to bandwagon with the Liao (Tao 1988, 79–80). When Chinese help was not forthcoming during the Liao attack in 993, the Korean court “shifted tributary allegiance to the Khitan [Liao] emperor,” but it still maintained diplomatic communications with the Song (Cohen 2000, 115; Mote 1999, 61–62; Rogers 1983, 154). Even after its formal submission to the Liao, the Koryo Dynasty attempted a balancing strategy by sending envoys to the Song court in 994, requesting joint military actions against the Liao. The Song court, having lost a disastrous battle to the Liao in 986, had no stomach for another war and rejected the Korean overtures (*Xu Zi Zhi Tong Jian Chang Bian*, 36: 789–790). The Song court turned down another Korean request for assistance in 1003 (*Xu Zi Zhi Tong Jian Chang Bian*, 55: 1211). The Liao, within years of concluding a peace with the Song in the Treaty of Shanyuan in 1005 and now free of a possible Song attack, launched a series of invasions into Koryo territory. The Song, having just made peace with the Liao, turned down Koryo’s repeated pleas for help. In 1022, at the Liao’s insistence, Koryo severed relations with the Song and adopted the Khitan calendar, signaling its vassal status (Ledyard 1983, 323; Rogers 1983, 156–157; Tao 1988, 81). But Koryo secretly paid tribute to the Song during the period of 1071–1100, and the Liao “tried to prevent the formation of a Song-Koryo alliance” (Tao 1988, 85–86). As a weak state bordering the Liao empire and without an alliance partner, Korea had little choice but to accept the Liao demand of becoming a tributary state.

To the northwest of the Song was the kingdom of Xi Xia, which was established by the Tangut people, ethnically related to the Tibetans. Before gaining independence, the Tanguts paid tribute to both the Liao and the Song while simultaneously attempting to build up its own power base. Once Xi Xia was able to stand on its feet, it actively resisted the two great powers. After the declaration of the Xi Xia kingdom in 1038, the independent Xi Xia chose not to accept tributary relations with either the Liao or the Song. Rather, the self-proclaimed Xi Xia emperor Yuanhao proceeded to strengthen its mil-

itary capabilities, adapted to cavalry warfare, and expanded westward into the Gansu Corridor. The Song, considering the Tanguts as its vassals, rejected the legitimacy of the Xi Xia Dynasty—there had already been two “Sons of Heaven” and there was no room for a third—and the Song “attacked almost every year” (Mote 1999, 183). The Song, however, were not able to subdue the Tanguts, whose superiority in cavalry warfare inflicted heavy casualties on the Song infantry. In 1042, the Liao took advantage of Song–Xi Xia conflict and threatened to invade the Song. Fearing a Liao–Xi Xia alliance, Song China adopted a wedge strategy of “using barbarians against barbarians” (*yi yi zhi yi*). The Chinese bought off the Liao by increasing annual payments; in return, the Liao agreed to rein in Xi Xia. The Xi Xia emperor Yuanhao, feeling exploited by the Liao, was “furious” and started to cause trouble on the Liao borders. In 1044, the Liao emperor launched a punitive campaign against Xi Xia, relieving Song China of its strategic nightmare of a Liao–Xi Xia alliance (Mote 1999, 182–186). The Song quickly concluded a peace agreement with Xi Xia, hoping that both adversaries would be weakened by the war. Xi Xia agreed to be a Song vassal, but only on paper. As the nominal suzerain, the Song “bestowed” a large annual payment of 255,000 units to the Tanguts. Although the rhetoric of the tribute system was maintained, in essence it was a situation of the Song’s buying off the Tanguts for peace.

During the Song period, Japan kept cultural and economic ties with China, but maintained “no diplomatic relations” with the states on the Asian continent (Cohen 2000, 118–121). Vietnam, which had been a Chinese-administered territory for centuries, declared independence and in 968 established the empire of Dai Co Viet (renamed Đại Việt after 1054). The Song invaded in 981, but failed to regain control. The Vietnamese eventually established the Ly Dynasty (1010–1225) and maintained tributary relations with Song China. Except for a series of raids on the Chinese border in 1059, Vietnam was preoccupied with events in Southeast Asia and had little interest in the Song–Liao rivalry north of its border.

Toward the end of this period, the Jurchens, a Tungusic people in northeastern Manchuria and direct forebears of the Manchus, rose in power and established the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234). In 1116, the Jurchens conquered the Liao Eastern Capital and continued to grow stronger by military successes. The Song saw the Jurchens’ rise as an alliance opportunity to balance Liao power, secretly concluding a pact with the Jurchens on joint attack. The East Asian continent was

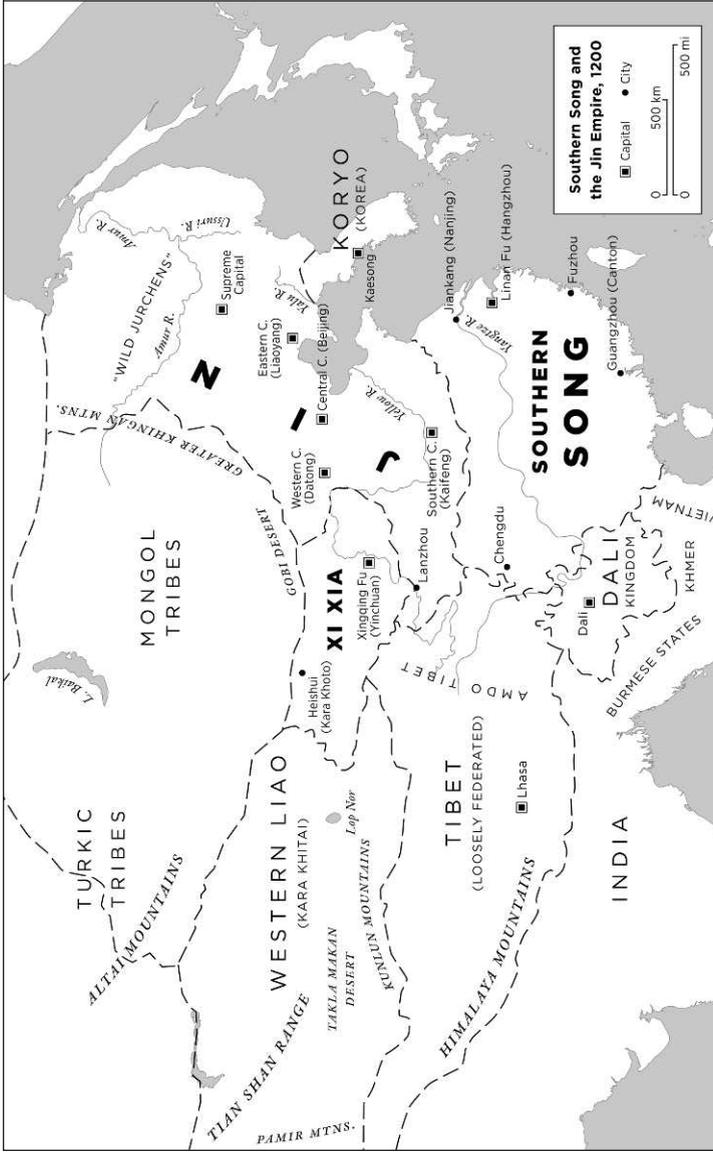
soon engulfed in war. The Liao empire fell to the Jin's onslaught in 1125. For its part, the Song performed poorly on the battlefield. The ineptitude of Song military and material wealth made it a tempting target for the Jin. To tilt the distribution of power in its favor, the Jin launched an all-out invasion of Song China in 1125. The logic was one of preventive war: "If we do not strike first," explained a famed Jin general, Wolibu, "[the Song] might become a future problem" (Ke, Zhang, and Yu 1992, 97). In 1127, the Jin captured the Chinese emperor Qinzong, ending the Northern Song Dynasty.

To sum up, the East Asian system during the Northern Song Dynasty was not hierarchic but bipolar, lasting for more than a century. The two great powers, Song China and the Liao empire, attempted to subjugate each other through war during 960–1005, but neither was able to prevail. Both shifted to a pattern of "indemnified peace" in 1005, with the weaker Song paying the Liao for peace. The power structure of the system affected the alignment options of lesser states, forcing them to choose sides mainly based on geographic proximity. Sharing a common border, Korea was forced into the Liao-defined hierarchy and became a vassal. Xi Xia accepted tributary status at first, but when its power grew, pursued a more or less independent foreign policy. When the Jin state rose to the international scene, Song China sought to balance Liao power by forming an alliance with the Jin, which eventually destroyed the Liao empire but also led to Jin conquest of northern China.

The Song-Jin International System, 1127–1234

As Song power declined further, diplomatic equality would soon descend into formal inequality in this period. During the course of the Jurchen invasion, the Song Dynasty was reconstituted in the south. The Southern Song inherited what was left of the Northern Song state, about two-thirds of its original territory, with the area north of the Yangtze River lost to the Jin (see Map 2). The Jin empire was the most powerful state in the system, with an estimated population of 44 million.⁵ As a relatively weaker power, the Southern Song was frequently forced to accommodate many Jurchen demands, including becoming a Jin tributary state. The formidable external threat and the Song's inability to restore the country's preeminence in East Asia would become an important factor for China's "turning inward," setting the stage for the rise of neo-Confucianism (Liu 1988).

Map 2 Song-Jin International System



Source: Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 78. Copyright © 2011 Columbia University Press. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

Since its inception in 1127, the Southern Song government had wanted to make peace with its dangerous opponent and repeatedly sent envoys to the Jin court requesting a ceasefire. The Jin, so far victorious on the battlefield, was more interested in conquering the Song than making peace. The Jurchens rejected the Song overture, arrested its envoys, and continued the offensive. Yet a decade later it became increasingly clear that the Song was a tough target to conquer. The Southern Song had proven its ability both to withstand attacks and to launch successful counteroffensives. The number of Song soldiers had steadily grown. In 1127, the Southern Song had approximately 100,000 soldiers. By 1135, that number had doubled to 200,000 (Huang 1990, 109; Han 1998, 203). Quantity aside, the quality of Song armies had also improved. As the military balance shifted toward a stalemate, the Jin finally recognized that continuing the war would be too costly. A political solution was necessary. In 1137, an internal power struggle in the Jin court prompted the Jurchens to send an envoy to the Song asking for a peace treaty (Ke, Zhang, and Yu 1992, 178). The Jin emperor needed a peaceful external environment to consolidate domestic rule.

A peace treaty was concluded in 1138. It was a humiliating deal for the Song. Throughout East Asian history, China was accustomed to being the suzerain of neighboring states. This lofty position would be reversed in Southern Song times because of Chinese military weakness. During the peace negotiations, the Jin delegate acted as if he were an imperial envoy sent by the Jin emperor to a vassal state, bearing the official title of Investiture Envoy to South of the [Yangtze] River (*Jiangnan zhaoyu shi*); the word “Song state” was not even used (*Jian Yan Yi Lai Xi Nian Yao Lu*, 123: 1979). The Southern Song accepted its inferior status as a vassal (*cheng chen*) and agreed to make an annual payment of 250,000 taels of silver and 250,000 bolts of silk to the Jin. In return, the Song would obtain the territories in Henan and Shaanxi formerly ruled by the puppet Qi state. The Jin would return the coffins of both the deceased emperor and empresses as well as the living Empress Dowager Wei (Han 1998, 345).

Thus, the formula of the peace treaty of 1138—money for peace—was similar to that of the Treaty of Shanyuan concluded by the Northern Song with the Liao empire in 1005. There is one crucial difference, however. As a result of the Southern Song’s weakening power, formal equality was replaced with formal inequality. Unlike the Northern Song’s equal diplomatic status with the Liao, Song-Jin

diplomacy would henceforth be conducted as that between a vassal state and an overlord. In effect, the Southern Song government was forced to bribe its powerful adversary for peace and accept an inferior status. Nevertheless, the treaty of 1138 was short-lived. A number of Jin officials considered the cession of Henan and Shaanxi unnecessary and wanted them back. War soon broke out.

The Song army was able to resist the Jurchen onslaught and scored a few battlefield victories. Both countries eventually agreed to a ceasefire. The Shaoxing Peace Accord (named after Song emperor Gaozong's reign period) was concluded in late 1141. The terms were extremely humiliating for Song China. Song-Jin relations were defined in terms of political subordination and fictive kinship. The text preserved in *Jin Shi* [*Jin History*] (but not in Song texts) stated that "future generations of [Song] children will solemnly obey the rules of vassal." The Southern Song accepted its inferior status as a vassal state of the Jin empire and agreed to pay an annual "tribute" (*gong*) of 250,000 taels of silver and a similar number of bolts of silk. The text of the Song oath exhibited extreme humility. The Jin was addressed as the "superior state" (*shang guo*), and the Song referred to itself as the "insignificant fiefdom" (*bi yi*). The border of both countries would be the middle course of the Huai River. Two strategic prefectures, Tang and Deng, along with a vast tract of land were ceded to the Jin. In return, the Jin would send back the coffins of the deceased captured emperor Huizong and empresses, and the living empress dowager.⁶ Since the Song had become a Jin vassal, the seating arrangements for Song envoys at the Jin court were equivalent to those reserved for third-rank officials (Franke 1983, 129–130).

Importantly, the peace process by no means implied an absence of offensive motivations. In court discussions and memorials, Song civil and military officials recurrently proposed warfare as the best solution to the Song security problem. In their eyes, the Jurchens were treacherous and untrustworthy, as proven by the Jin's breach of the alliance with the Northern Song.⁷ They argued that only by recovering the lost territory and destroying the Jin could China's security be guaranteed. For many officials, military forces were highly efficacious for attaining Song security objectives. Song military weakness, however, constrained the preference for offense, resulting in the accommodation of Jin demands.

Despite the peace treaty, both states still harbored hopes of destroying each other. In 1161, the Jin launched an offensive campaign aimed at destroying the Southern Song, but Song naval power

prevented Jin troops from crossing the Yangtze River. Peace negotiations ensued. In the Longxing Peace Accord of 1165, the Song ceded six prefectures. The Song-Jin border remained on the Huai River. In return, Song status was upgraded from that of a vassal state to that of a fictitious “uncle-nephew” relationship; the Song leader was allowed to use the title of “emperor.” However, as had been required by the 1141 Shaoxing Peace Accord, the Song emperor would still have to descend from his elevated throne when receiving state letters from Jin envoys (Gong 2009, 735). Song “annual tribute” (*sui gong*) was renamed to “annual payment” (*sui bi*) and was reduced from 250,000 units of silver and silk to 200,000, respectively (*Jin Shi*, 6: 735). Thus, the terms seemed to be an improvement over the Shaoxing Peace Accord. This change mainly reflected the shifting balance of power between the two states (Lorge 2005, 66; Mote 1999, 308).

In 1206, the Southern Song launched a major offensive, taking advantage of a debilitating natural disaster and Mongol raids on the Jin state. In the end, neither was able to subjugate the other. In the early 1200s, the Mongols under Chinggis Khan grew in power and attacked the Jin. In 1232, his successor Ögödei dispatched an envoy to the Song court to propose a military alliance against the Jin. The Song agreed to the proposal. The Mongols, with Song assistance, destroyed the Jin state in 1234. However, history would repeat itself. Just as the Jurchens turned against the Northern Song after the fall of the Liao empire, the victorious Mongols turned their eyes on the Southern Song. After having consolidated territorial gains, the Mongols conquered China in 1279 and successfully established a hierarchic order in East Asia.

Lesser states, without an alliance partner and being geographically contiguous with the powerful Jin empire, chose to accept the Jin-defined hierarchy. A weakened Xi Xia lost its independence and became a Jin vassal throughout this period. The Jin court bluntly instructed, “Today Xia is simply a subject state of the Great Jin; therefore rituals appropriate to lord and servitor are to be observed” (Mote 1999, 251). Korea, geographically adjacent to the Jin, also accepted hierarchy and “pledged their loyalty to their new suzerain” (Rogers 1983, 161). Separated by the ocean, Japan “had little political relations with the continent” and remained mostly outside the multistate system of medieval China (Cohen 2000, 118). Southeast Asian states were embroiled in constant warfare among themselves and maintained mostly trade relations with China (Cohen 2000, 121–126).

Conclusion

East Asia during the tenth–thirteenth centuries was a multistate system. The distribution of power profoundly affected how states interacted with each other. In the first half of the period, the two great powers, the Song and the Liao, treated each other as equal partners in international affairs. Both had attempted to subjugate each other by war and to establish a hierarchic order in East Asia, but neither was able to prevail. A “long peace” lasting a century broke out between Song China and the Liao after the Treaty of Shanyuan of 1005. In the second half of the period, formal equality was replaced by formal inequality in Song-Jin relations, mainly because of the Song’s relative weakness vis-à-vis the Jin empire. The Southern Song emperors accepted their inferior status as a Jin vassal. Decades of peace also marked Song China’s relations with the Jin, albeit shorter than the Northern Song period.

The tribute system should not be taken for granted when we study historical East Asia. Besides hierarchy, diplomatic parity also constituted a significant part of the region’s history. Power symmetry led to formal equality between the Northern Song and the Liao, whereas power asymmetry led to formal inequality between the Southern Song and the Jin. The tributary framework was a vehicle through which power was exercised, enabling the strong power to define legitimacy and to shape the strategic choice of lesser political actors. We therefore need to go beyond Confucian rhetoric to uncover the underlying power reality in the tribute system. Only by taking power seriously can we get a better understanding of the East Asian international system.

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Notes

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1. Gilpin (1996) prefers to use the term “conflict group” as the unit of analysis for neorealism. Conflict groups include city-states, tribes, empires, and nation-states.

2. David Sneath (2007) argues that it is misleading to call the nomadic polities in Inner Asia “clans” and “tribes.” Instead, these political actors had decentralized power structures that made them “headless states.”

3. For a critical review of the *tianxia* worldview, see Callahan (2008).

4. As David Kang (2003, 66) observes, “Historically, it has been Chinese weakness that has led to chaos in Asia. When China has been strong and stable, order has been preserved.” See also Kang (2007, 37).

5. *Jin Shi*, 46: 1035 records that in 1187, the Jin’s population was 44,705,086. The population of Southern Song was estimated at well over 70 million. Mote (1999, 353).

6. For a translation of the oath letter, see Franke (1970, 78–79). The abbreviated versions of the text are preserved in *Jian Yan Yi Lai Xi Nian Yao Lu*, 142: 2292–2293 and *Jin Shi*, 77: 1755–1756.

7. For instance, Wang Shu memorialized that “The enemy has been capricious since the breach of the alliance conducted at sea [with the Northern Song].” *Jian Yan Yi Lai Xi Nian Yao Lu*, 120: 1942. Yue Fei also stated (in Huang [1990]), “The barbarians cannot be trusted. We cannot depend on making peace with them.”

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