Tribute, Asymmetry and Imperial Formations:
Rethinking relations of power in East Asia

James L. Hevia
University of Chicago

In organizing this conference, John Wills set two difficult tasks for the participants. First, he asked us to think about the role of the academy in US policy-making toward China and surmise whether academics were more influential in John Fairbank’s day than today. Second, he would like us to consider the models we use for characterizing China’s relations with other countries. In the first instance, I don’t feel especially qualified to address the relations between China area studies and the state past or present, and will defer to my colleagues. I do, however, have a few things to say about the models generated from our social science disciplines to characterize historic Chinese foreign relations. As many of you know, I have been critical of one of them in particular, the tribute system model of John K. Fairbank, and have suggested other ways of looking at such relations, at least for the Qing period. I shall return at the end of the paper to my own sense of how to think about these relations. But first, let me turn to the contributions of others.

In giving us our charge, John Wills proclaimed the tribute system a wreck, and asked us to address what he feels is a more fruitful approach to Chinese foreign relations, an asymmetrical systems approach proposed by one of the participants, Brantley Womack. Womack develops a framework for understanding asymmetrical relations of
power in his recent book *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*.\(^1\) Wills also wonders if there is anything that can be salvaged from the tribute system. In order to evaluate Womack’s theoretical contribution and determine if there is anything salvageable from the tribute system hypothesis, I think that it might be useful to remind ourselves of the content of the tribute system and to perhaps note at the outset that I do not think it quite the wreck Wills suggests. In textbook history, it remains the major form in which pre-modern Chinese foreign relations are presented, and Professor Womack himself hardly abandons the model in his recent book.\(^2\) Indeed, although I haven’t had an opportunity to look widely through recent literature, I doubt if political scientists in China studies have completely abandoned the tribute system for something better. Matters have, however, been quite different among historians. I will return to disciplinary differences shortly. First, however, let us recall the particulars of “the tribute system.”

### The Tribute System and Its Critics

Beginning as early as the 1930s, historians in the United States and China identified the causes of nineteenth-century Sino-Western conflict as more than simply a result of Western imperialism and expansive capitalism. They began to see it as a product of the peculiar nature of traditional Chinese foreign relations. According to this view, isolated from other great centers of civilization and complacent in its own cultural superiority, China developed early in its history a unique method of dealing with foreign powers, one that required the acknowledgement of the supremacy of China's "Son of Heaven" as superior to all other rulers in the world.

---


\(^2\) Womack, *China and Vietnam*, 135, 139-141.
Foreign princes expressed their acceptance of this proposition in two "symbolic" ways, by presenting ritual tribute (gong) to the emperor and performing the "full" koutou (kneeling three times, each time bowing their head to the ground thrice). Over the course of the last two thousand years, these symbolic elements of the system were buttressed by ever more sophisticated bureaucratic institutions and regulations. Modern scholars call this institutional and textual complex the "tribute system." As elaborated by John K. Fairbank, the system defined Chinese attitudes and practices in foreign relations from virtually the dawn of Chinese civilization until the confrontation with the West in the nineteenth-century.

But why, we might ask, would Chinese imperial courts or foreign princes see the necessity of constructing or participating in such elaborate symbolism? In 1942, Fairbank took up this question by observing that tribute was "not exactly what it seemed." On the one hand, the value of the items presented by foreign rulers added little to the imperial treasury. On the other, the value of the items given by the Chinese court to foreign missions balanced or outweighed the value of the tribute gifts. What then did the court gain from this clearly unequal transaction? According to Fairbank, the motivation of a succession of dynasties was quite clear when one considered that the emperor claimed the Mandate of Heaven to rule all mankind. As he put it, "if the rest of mankind did not acknowledge his rule, how long could he expect China to do so? Tribute had prestige value in the government of China, where prestige was an all-important tool of government." Tribute presented by foreign rulers performed, therefore,
the useful function of legitimizing the ruling house by showing Chinese imperial subjects that foreign lords also accepted the dominion of their emperor.³

For their part, foreign rulers gladly participated because they desired the valuable imperial objects bestowed by Chinese courts, as well as the opportunity to trade for other kinds of Chinese goods such as tea and silk. In this sense, what sustained the tribute system over long stretches of Chinese history, as Fairbank later elaborated, was that it had become an "ingenious vehicle" for trade.⁴ In this way, Fairbank balanced the imperial books, with prestige on the China side of the ledger and Chinese products to foreigners on the other side of the ledger. In so doing, he placed a dualism at the core of the system: the Chinese were committed to the tribute system for ideological reasons, and the foreigners for practical reasons. Parenthetically, I think that the trade aspects of the tribute system are what interest contemporary East and Southeast Asian scholars. They see a regional commercial order emerging with the rise of post-socialist China and argue that this order has deep and, one might even say, organic roots in a world that existed prior to Western hegemony.

For Fairbank, as we have seen, that older system combined "diplomacy" and "trade," presumably inappropriately, while never overtly acknowledging that it was fulfilling either of these quasi-natural functions. This was because within the terms of Chinese culture there could be no true diplomacy (based as it must be on natural equality

⁴ Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1953: 32. Also see Fairbank's discussion of the tribute system in the many editions of The United States and China (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press); there is very little variation, except for a subtle shift from tributary to tribute system, see 1948: 130-135; 1958: 115-118; 1971: 137-140; and 1979: 158-161.
between sovereign states) and because commerce was not as highly valued as, say, farming. The remainder of Fairbank’s argument was that as a result of only having interactions with inferior entities, a sinocentric and isolated China developed an entrenched culturalism, as opposed to a more modern nationalism, and was, as a result, ill-prepared to deal with the Western powers when they arrived in force at China's door in the nineteenth-century.⁵

As I suggested above, historians who followed in the wake of Fairbank have questioned a number of the assertions that make up the tribute system model. For example, Fairbank placed the origin of the system in the Zhou period. Others have questioned this. Using institutional organization as a criterion, John Wills, for instance, dates it no earlier than the Ming dynasty.⁶ Other scholars have questioned the notion that material benefits flowed only in one direction, from Chinese courts to foreign kingdoms. Scholars of Chinese relations with Central Asia have argued that China needed horses,

---


raw materials, and possibly even foodstuffs from the outside, and could provide finished products as well as commodities unique to it, such as tea.7

Still others doubted the rigidity and unitary nature of China's traditional foreign relations implied by the tribute system model.8 Among them, Joseph Fletcher9 and more recently, James Millward,10 found a high degree of flexibility in Qing Central Asian policy at almost the same moment that the European presence in China had become more pronounced. In noting "an embarrassment of traditions," rather than a single one defining Chinese foreign relations, Michael Hunt juxtaposed the "unshakable sinocentrism" of the tribute system to "more extroverted" and open policies of the Han and Tang eras.11 Following upon Hunt, James Polachek took issue with transhistorical models in general


8 M. Rossabi, ed., China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th-14th Centuries (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).


to argue that one must look closely at specificities and contexts in order to understand policy-making in the Qing period.  

Both Hunt and Polachek benefited from the revisionism of Wills, who from the time of his contribution to Fairbank's *The Chinese World Order* cautioned against over-generalizing from the tribute system model. In a number of subsequent writings, he has added that the system as such was primarily relevant in the Qing period to relations with Korea, Vietnam and Liuqiu. Moreover, he has highlighted a number of differences between Ming and Qing policies on the Central Asian and coastal frontiers, drawing attention to what might be called a pragmatic approach on the part of Chinese bureaucrats to specific historical challenges.

At the same time, however, Wills retained a critical feature of the tribute system when, for example, he drew attention to the fact that tribute missions preserved "the appearances of the ceremonial supremacy of the Son of Heaven in the capital". Put another way, what Wills, and virtually all of those who followed Fairbank, faithfully

---


14 Wills, *Embassies & Illusions*, 188.

15 In his recent study of the Qing conquest of Central Asia, Peter Perdue argues that the language of tribute masked different self-conceptions with “formal expressions” allowing parties a measure of autonomy and the ability to trade. This is somewhat akin to saying...
reproduce is the dualism at the core of the tribute system, the opposition between ideology or culturalism and practical reason. This duality generates, in turn, a host of others, tribute vs. trade, ritual vs. diplomacy, ideology vs. pragmatism, culture vs. reason, and, perhaps most importantly, symbolism vs. political and economic realities.

Among other things, such oppositions provide a way to separate the ritual or cultural functions of the tribute system from the statecraft tradition of historic China, the latter of which made Chinese officials into rational actors capable of responding creatively to historical contingencies. 

Interestingly enough, it is in those "creative" instances where their purported cultural values get sidetracked that Chinese bureaucrats look rational and capable of dealing adaptively to changing conditions. Clearly there are questions that could be raised about these conclusions, particularly for the Qing period. It is difficult to understand, for instance, why Qing bureaucrats were rational with some foreigners at certain times and not others; why they were able to deal pragmatically with the Dutch, Russians, the Kokandi emirate, and as Womack has it, the Vietnamese, yet with the British were bound by ideology?

It should be clear from this very brief review that criticism of the tribute system model has primarily arisen from the fact that its totalizing claims could not be substantiated either by the entire Chinese historical record or by individual case studies. The kind of criticism reviewed above often results when any sort of theoretical explanation driving research projects generates facts and factual anomalies that do not fit the theory. Thomas Kuhn observed some time ago that when anomalies resulting from that tribute was a way to get the formalities out of the way so that the parties could get on with business. See China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Asia (Cambridge and London: Belknap, 2005).

Wills, Embassies & Illusions, 187.
the practice of normal science reach a sufficient density, a paradigm shift results. So, perhaps what we are seeing with respect to the tribute system is that proliferation of anomalies that leads to the questioning and discrediting of an established theory. But has there been a paradigm shift? Wills seems to be suggesting that there might be one looming on the horizon in the form of Brantley Womack’s recent work on asymmetry. So, let me turn to this new work.

**Asymmetry and International Relations**

In his book *China and Vietnam*, Womack is disturbed by a set of assumptions built into international relations theory that effectively exclude those that he is interested in for both historical as well as theoretical reasons. The problem with IR theory is two-fold. In its many articulations, IR theory seldom deals with relative power as anything other than a destabilizing factor in the international system. Asymmetric relations of power are understood as fundamentally destabilizing to a balanced system of relations, creating either "subordination or a competition for domination." The second problem Womack identifies is that virtually all of IR theory focuses its attention on the interactions of great powers; what would be the point, as Kenneth Waltz observed, in developing a theory of international relations ‘based on Malaysia and Costa Rica’. What indeed? Womack might have added that this view is not only Eurocentric, but that Eurocentrism is foundational to IR theory. It is a Eurocentrism, however, concerned essentially with the ‘modern’ international system. China and Vietnam are disqualified on at least two counts, therefore. They are not European states and thus need not be

---

taken all that seriously. Second, they have either never been modern or the nature of their modernity is suspect.

Womack’s contribution is to insist on starting someplace else; that is outside of the Eurocentric comparative framework. Mainstream IR theory, he observes, seldom comes to terms with the fact that weak states do not disappear and strong states do not always get their way. This is a quite useful caution and from it he is able to develop an alternative way of looking at relations between the more and the less powerful, with a focus on China and Vietnam. The results are summarized in a table entitled the “Varieties of Sino-Vietnamese asymmetry” wherein nine types are identified, defined, and examples of which are listed. These range from amorphous, internal, subjugated, role and disjunctive to distracted, dependent, hostile, and normalized. I will not evaluate the types here. Rather, I want to address the question of whether the tribute system has been displaced and better theoretical model substituted for it; a model, in other words, that can find accommodation with the many anomalies noted by previous scholars?

There is no question, I think, that the typology Womack produces can accommodate most if not all of the anomalous cases produced by the critics of the tribute system without resort to the logic of tribute itself, although it should be pointed out that Womack doesn’t actually abandon the system – he continues to use it as an overarching category for characterizing the Chinese empire as “an international political order” prior to 1840.18 This would seem to be a problem; there are others as well.

First of all, the state remains the primary actor in the relations posited. This state, since there is so little said to the contrary seems to be a state that few of the models in

---

18 Womack, China and Vietnam, 139.
conventional IR theory would have difficulty recognizing. It is a territorial entity defined by its borders and with a sovereignty based upon its monopoly of power within its borders. It is also a state that can ground its sovereign legitimacy on the recognition of other states, even if there is an asymmetric power differential.

The second problem is that the actions of those who act in the name of the state are presented as examples of the operation of practical reason, situated now within a system of relative power or within a system of a recognized mutually recognized power differential. While it is a step in the right direction to grant reason to actors whose rationality has been questioned and who have been accused of clinging to illusions rather than the realities of power, the reason in question – partly because no other form of reason is entertained – appears to be the same sort of reason that animates the many brands of IR theory; that is, instrumental reason. This is reason as efficiency, calculability, standardization, and disenchantment, the form of reason, as I understand it, that IR theory seems most comfortable with. Third, the typology or taxonomy of Sino-Vietnamese relations Womack generates from the historical record is a product of this sort of reason, which gives me pause. The result, I would argue, is a series of displacements: first, a rational set of categories defined by the observer is overlaid onto the historical sources, reworking or occluding whatever local categories might be present; and second, a Euroamerican notion of instrumental reason is universalized and replaces any form of reasoning that might be found in the indigenous record.

The net result is that modernist models of behavior and institutional forms such as the state are projected onto the past. Having said that, there is no question that Womack provides a more complex typology than Fairbank ever did, but his types are generated out
of modern discourses, a 19th and 20th century “Western” not those of the past in Asia. Nowhere in Womack’s account does something like cosmology, competing cosmologies, competing worldviews, or metaphysics enter the picture. Nowhere is the proposition entertained that these past worlds might be incommensurable with our own. This is not unusual within an IR framework – the cosmologies and metaphysics of others, because they are unverifiable, are usually displaced onto a fixed human nature or dismissed as a product of an exotic social structure. This is what happened in the tribute system and I would argue that it is what happens in Womack’s typology as well.

Now, I think I understand the impulse here. It is different from the inclinations of historians. From the outside, political science seems to be involved with having the tools at hand to predict or make educated guesses about future behavior. So, for example, given these objective facts in the world – a history of asymmetry, for example – how will the Chinese act now that they are once again a great power? Practitioners of the discipline of international relations use their theoretical models to make such assessments and projections every day. Historians, in contrast, are not engaged in a project designed to predict future behavior. The knowledge historians produce is perspectival and seeks to understand how the world we live in came into being or what we might learn from the past that would be an aid in the present. Few historians, I think, would venture to predict future behavior. On the other hand, historians might have no qualms about telling policy-makers that their bright idea is not so original as it seems and might offer a caution.

At the same time, however, historians are not immune to projecting into the past theories derived from current ways of thinking about or organizing the world (what John Wills once referred to as theory driven history). Whether it is a stable human nature,
naturalized practices like trade or diplomacy, rational choices, or universalized categories like society, culture, states, foreign relations, it is not uncommon to see the projection of such entities onto other times and other places that are very different from our own, if only for comparative purposes. Historians know that this is risky – the history of historiography tells us that – but they also seem to believe – and here I will make a very big generalization – that these naturalized categories are close enough approximations to things in the past or that they describe things that are actually there even if, like the tribute system, there is no comparable indigenous word or expression. I’m not sure we can easily avoid treating the past in these ways, but I do think that there are ways we can do better than the usual social science models and categories permit. There must be ways, in other words, both to keep the metaphysics of others in our accounts and not displace a formulation like the “Son of Heaven” onto social structure as Fairbank had done in the tribute system.

What I would like to turn to now is something that I found useful for dealing with the otherness in the Qing sources that became part of my book *Cherishing Men from Afar*. In that study I used a language of imperial formations as a conceptual terrain on which to compare the aims and actions of the British empire and the Qing imperium. The notion draws heavily from a critical European philosophical tradition that was not content with instrumental reason, to propose another way of addressing the issue of relations between different political formations or polities. Here I would like to give fuller expression to what informed various notions in that study, particularly where I was attempting to provide an alternative to the tribute system model, an alternative that did not necessarily have to project onto the Qianlong emperor and members of his court the
same form of reason that was supposed to have animated Europeans. My source for the
notion of imperial formation was taken from Ronald Inden’s *Imagining India*. In contrast
to empire, which he sees as limiting because of its emphasis on a dominant center and
dominated periphery, Inden uses the term imperial formation to draw attention to the
contingent, variegated, and intentionally constructed aspects of complex entities such as
the Qing dynasty. In the process, he wants to question interpretations that reduce
kingship in Asia to autocracy or despotism.

*Imagining India* is devoted to the deconstruction of Indology and is very much in
the spirit of Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism, with one important addition. Inden
provides a reconstruction of an eight-century Indian kingdom constituted by a group
referred to as the Rashtrakutas. At one point in this reconstruction, Inden observes that
the imperial formation of the Rashtrakutas “was constituted as a scale of divine and
human wills and not as a dichotomy between a divine and absolute ruler on the one hand
and a secular and powerless officialdom or populace on the other.”¹⁹ Before we are
distracted by the fact that Inden might just as well have been revising our understanding
of a Chinese dynasty, I want to address how he arrived at this unusual formulation, one
that ought to be recognizable as cutting to the very heart of characterizations of the
Orient.

**Imperial Formations and Scales of Form**

Inden’s theoretical inspiration comes from the British philosopher R.G.
Collingwood, whom historians might best know for his book *The Idea of History*, which
was assembled and published posthumously in 1946. The text Inden draws from is *Essay*

on Philosophical Method. In this book, first published in 1933, Collingwood was concerned with distinguishing philosophy from natural science.\textsuperscript{20} His basic argument is that natural science organizes the objects of its investigations into classification schema, the fundamental feature of which is to arrange phenomena into like categories of genus and sub-categories of difference, or species. Each class or category describes an essence that is not shared by other classes or categories. There is, in other words, no overlap between genuses or between species within a genus.

Insofar as the nomothetic social sciences, by which I mean sociology, political science and economics, attempt to mimic the practices of the natural sciences and construct their objects of investigation in similar terms, they are involved in identifying the essences of those objects much as the natural sciences do. And like the natural sciences, the goal or purpose of such an exercise is to “purify” the object for objective analysis, which, ideally, will then allow for the discovery of laws and the prediction of future behavior. The interpretive social sciences, by which I mean anthropology and history, flirt with the nomothetic social sciences, trying at times to make themselves more scientific, either methodologically or theoretically, but in the end, produce what I would call a variegated text in which people make their own worlds, but not under conditions they choose. In many cases, this non-choice involves one or another kind of determinism, or what Collingwood identified as the activity of substantialized agents. That is, an agent that stands outside and prior to history, moving humans toward their natural or spiritual destiny.\textsuperscript{21} The substantialized agents suggested by Collingwood and


Working paper --- please do not quote or cite without the author's permission.
USC U.S.-China Institute
http://china.usc.edu
Inden are ones like God or gods, reason, liberty, modernity, and the free market. In the case of historical entities in Asia, we have had these and other substances – Oriental despotism, Asiatic modes of production, tribute systems and cultural systems – each of which has served to identify the content of a particular formation at a given time. That form, in turn, has generally been understood to constitute a self-contained and self-regulating totality of discrete and identifiable parts, the functions of which are to reproduce things like China as if it were an organism.

There have, of course, been numerous criticisms of teleological history, but like the tribute system, it never quite seems to disappear. Most recently criticism has focused on the question of human agency – substantialized agents and their implicit determinism do not seem to leave a lot of room for human agency. A single trajectory and telos for history renders people’s choices, rational or not, rather more pointless than historians usually think they are. Space prevents an exploration of how human agency has come into the foreground as a problem that needs addressing, but I do not think it too much of an exaggeration to say that Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism had a good deal to do with it. Here, however, I want to make another point, and that is that while agency has indeed come to the foreground, there has not been much discussion within area studies about what we mean by agency beyond the fact that its not good to turn Asians into passive objects of European actions. We do not, in other words, talk much about or theorize what sort of agents or what kinds of agency might be presumed in the worlds we study.

I would like to do a bit of that now, drawing again from Inden, who has taken up elements of Collingwood’s philosophy to suggest ways we might think about agency in
complex historical situations and in the complexities he has dubbed imperial formations. In his essay on philosophical method, Collingwood noted that unlike the natural science’s categories that purified essences, philosophical categories are beset everywhere by overlapping classes. Collingwood draws two inferences from this. First the methods of formal logic, while applicable to the natural sciences do not work very well in philosophy, and second, given the overlaps to be found in philosophical categories, it would be better to think in terms of a scale of forms as opposed to the taxonomies preferred by the natural sciences. Later, Collingwood would apply this notion of a scale of forms to a discussion of communities and societies, and argue that that is how all of them are organized. In the process of making these observations, Collingwood refigured agency, replacing free-standing individuals and institutions with complex entities made up of overlapping classes.

People do not only act as authors of their own actions. They also have the capacity to act as the instruments of other agents and as the recipients of the acts of others (what Inden calls patients). The same could be said for collective agents such as public institutions, fraternal organizations, clubs, or political parties. Moreover, even when acting as an instrument or patient, entities – be they individual or collective – are more or less complicit in the process, more or less willing to participate. In the case of agency, the overlapping of classes suggests two things. First, the subject can be authoring agent, instrument or patient, depending upon the circumstances. Second, the same can be said for more complex agents; collectivities of many kinds also can be authors, instruments.

---


and patients. In any of these cases, individual or complex agents may be understood as overlapping entities; and more importantly, the world they operate in may be understood in similar terms. Collingwood calls an order composed of overlapping entities a “scale of forms,” and the relationship between these entities “dialectical” and “eristical.” In the case of the dialectical, he means a situation in which parties move from a position of non-agreement to one of agreement; while the eristical described a situation where parties begin in disagreement and attempt to triumph over one another. As Inden notes, in this double process of interaction, simple and complex agents attempt to alter their positions. But as they do so, as they converge and diverge, or even “extrude a rival,” they alter the content of the order in which action occurs. The Qing imperial formation that comes to include George III is not the same formation as it was before 1793, and ought to be understood as transformed in some sense, rather than as the same China that now has relations with Great Britain, as an outside power.

The formations that are produced in dialectical and eristical processes are, thus, different from the classical entities familiar in our social sciences – empires, nation-states, societies, clans, tribes and so on. Compound agents, or polities, as Inden refers to them, are neither the “enlarged persons” to be found in legal discourses (e.g., the corporation), nor the mechanical leviathan of Hobbes, nor the homeostatic organism of social evolutionism and functionalism. In contrast to the wholeness assumed by most of our models and metaphors of social organization, the complex agents proposed here are “more or less dispersed … less or more unified, in their constitution and practices,” and I would add, subject to continual change and reordering. They have, in other words, a mixed nature rather than an essence, and as such tend to be always in a process of
formation. Their very existence is an accomplishment. Agency as a realized capacity is thus neither given nor assumed.

To put this another way, producing a unity of purpose or action, actually constituting the world as a scale of forms, even momentarily, is no small task. Hence, as Inden explains, “routines, initiations, courses of study and apprenticeship, meetings, assemblies, courts, parades, and processions,” by which compound entities are fashioned are extremely important in the making and sustaining of an imperial formation. Or, to bring this discussion closer to our subject here, all those activities outlined in a text like the *Comprehensive Rites of the Great Qing* (*Da Qing tongli*) are not just window dressing, are not just things to be set aside so that we can get on with the study of *real politik* or the economic functions of the tribute system. Texts like *Comprehensive Rites* are, in fact, guides for making complex agents, because it is only through such agents that the world can be formed and reformed, and most importantly, linked to the Cosmos. But I get ahead of myself a bit.

In the latter portions of *Imagining India*, Inden demonstrates how thinking in terms of a scale of forms and complex agency makes a different kind of sense out of a South Asian notion of rulership referred to as the circle of kings. The idea here is not unlike the one I have developed in thinking about Qing kingship, a multitude of lords. In these notions, sovereignty is constituted through processes by which the powers of other kings are incorporated into the rulership of the Qing overlord. We might think about that process as constituting a scale of forms from the Cosmos (*tian*) down through the supreme lord and on to various positions of inferiors. We might also understand the process of tribute presentation as one of those kinds of routines, like procession and court
assembly, that do the work of constituting an imperial formation. The presentation of tribute, by which I mean local products, by an identifiable and named subject who himself was involved in constitution of a scale of forms within his own domain and who appeared to be seeking a relation as a patient of someone acknowledged as overlord, shifts our focus away from China and Great Britain or Vietnam. Instead, we are drawn to the contingency of the formation that might be achieved in such an encounter – kings die, dynastic houses like the Rashtrakutas are overwhelmed by the forces of other powerful agents. We are also drawn to the situatedness and specificity of an imperial formation, historical qualities that make it difficult to move to the levels of abstraction common in the nomothetic social sciences as theories are built and discarded. But we can also see, by thinking through the various kinds of agency proposed here, that the kind of relations constituted in an encounter between lords is some sort of achievement. At the very least, participants in practices involving gift exchange are attentive to the ways in which such exchanges might serve to extend their rulership or kingship into the future. If this is the case, we can see asymmetric relations of power involving more or less powerful agents as an opportunity to reconfigure an already existing order and make it more efficacious, more able to handle the challenges of reproduction and extension in time.

There is, however, something unusual about these kinds of activities in the Qing. There is an historical dynamic present that requires, I believe, special attention. Qing leaders had contact not only with the kings of Vietnam, Korea, and Liuqiu, that is kings who might share certain affinities with the succession of imperial formations that had existed in East Asia at least since the one which called itself the Han, they had contact with other kingships organized through other metaphysical principles. These included
polities that were organized around the Buddhist principles related to Cakravartin rulership, Mongol-Turkic notions of khans and great khans or kaghans, and Muslim notions of emirs and sultans, all of which involved scales of greater and lesser rulership, of degrees in a lord’s capacity to order the world and link it to the transcendent. What is of particular interest about the Qing is that they engaged these different forms of power, and rather than attempting to eradicate them, recognized the overlap and embraced them. The polities that resulted from these processes of inclusion remain, I think, the most challenging to understand in what we like to call Chinese history.

It is here perhaps that we might salvage something out of the tribute system, for it is primarily the records of the Qing from which Fairbank drew his sources. On these records he imposed a stark contrast between tradition and modernity and then reworked them as elements of a homeostatic, timeless system in perpetual oscillation. We may reject the system part of this equation, but it is certainly possible to retain the notion that tribute was at the heart of the relationship between the Qing overlords and other kings. Such relationships involving the exchange of local products also found purchase in the other forms of rulership mentioned here, including the Indian circle of kings, Cakravartin rulers, Mongol-Turkic khans, and Central Asian emirs. There is, in other words, overlap between these differing visions of kingly authority. The exchange of gifts between and among such entities was a rational practice through which complex polities constituted dialectical rather than eristical relations (in Collingwood’s sense), and attempted to organize each other into their own scale of forms, their own hierarchies of metaphysically meaningful orders. This was a world before international relations theory and before nation-states. But this does not mean there is nothing for us to learn. We live in a time in
which the discrete sovereignty of the nation-state is daily reconfigured through processes we call globalization. Those processes are producing a world of overlapping classes, rather than one of bounded essences. Collingwood’s thoughts on philosophical method and better understanding of historical imperial formations provide ways for thinking about the change that is so evident all around us.