How Many Asymmetries?
Continuities, Transformations, and Puzzles in the Study of
Chinese Foreign Relations

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This conference has been conceived as an effort to bring together multiple perspectives on the ways in which American scholarship has shaped and perhaps mis-shaped American discussions of policy toward China in the last fifty years. We need two kinds of history, the history of Chinese foreign relations and the history of American scholarship. Let me begin with the latter, about which I hope all of us will have something to say. I will only briefly cast myself as a relic, telling stories about the old days and how I was there when. I began my graduate studies at Harvard fifty years ago this summer. In the summer and fall of 1959 I started groping for ways to think about China in the seventeenth century, discovered that there had been some very interesting European eyewitnesses of the Ming-Qing wars, and wrote my first seminar paper for John King Fairbank on the first Dutch embassy, 1655-1657. The rest, shall we say, is history. I missed the “China-centered turn” in the profession, didn’t have many people to talk to until Jim Hevia came along, tried from time to time to deflate the master concept of the tribute system, and found hardly anyone listening. It has been the recent work of
people gathered for this conference that has convinced me that we at last have critical mass and diversity of approach that will make fruitful discussion of these questions possible. Peter Perdue’s multi-dimensional account of some of the most crucial inner/outer political shifts in Qing China is exemplary of the kind of books we of which we need about a dozen. Brantly Womack has shown the use of long historical perspectives on perhaps the most complex and instructive case of China’s pre-modern foreign relations, and in the process has opened up a discussion of “asymmetry” in foreign relations, with consequences in this and perhaps other papers that he may find bizarre.  

In the post-World War II era, one of the great success stories of American academic life was the growth of studies of China past and present. Fairbank was a key shaper of that trend. Fairbank’s own research focused on China’s foreign relations in the nineteenth century, and for some years many of his students had similar interests. Themes Fairbank found in the Chinese documents resonated with the state of US-China relations in the 1950s. China was in minimal contact with the US and western Europe, mutual hostility was the norm, and China seemed determined to go its own way, a way in which some saw echoes of its pre-modern history and culture. Thus it was quite understandable that Fairbank and many of his students would see China’s past as an “empire without neighbors” dealing with foreigners only through a “tribute system”. Fairbank,

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quintessentially American in his drive to get things done and be useful, spent a lot of time talking to people in Washington, mentoring scholars of contemporary affairs, and writing books for the general public. The quotes in Evans’ biography remind me once again of the stunning cryptic insights that were a Fairbank specialty. Hear him for example, writing to Chester Bowles in 1955:

“I urge your avoiding much expression of guilt over our past imperialism. I would settle for the idea that while the Chinese got the short end of imperialism, they were at that time a comparatively low, mean, vicious, and muddle-headed crowd in leadership, and the usual narrow-minded, self-centered, ignorant, and admirable peasant types in the mass.”

Fairbank kept up all this writing and pursued his immense scholarly development projects while the Communists were winning the civil war, Chinese and American soldiers were killing each other in large numbers in Korea, and many American politicians – John F. Kennedy as well as many Republicans – were accusing Fairbank and others who knew China of pro-Communist bias. His writings, public and private, about the contemporary situation are sometimes cryptic and not altogether consistent. He continued to call for the U.S. to keep the door open to contacts with China, and finally was much gratified by the post- ping pong turn. From 1950 to 1976 he was unable to visit China and very short on reliable information from within it, as we all were in those days. In his historical work his best insights emerged out of an immense wealth of detailed

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4 The various editions of The United States and China sold over 300,000 copies. Evans counts up “57 books and monographs; more than 140 articles, essays, introductions and forewords; a slightly larger number of reviews and review articles, scores of letters to editors, radio and television transcripts.” Evans, pp. xiv-xv, 107. Via Evans’ index we can trace some of his contributions to the leading print media of various periods, including the Atlantic Monthly, the New Republic, Newsweek, the New York Times, and the New York Review of Books.

5 Evans, p. 52.

6 Evans, pp. 123, 125.
reading and exposition, and still often were rather cryptically expressed. He was uneasy with theory; I seem to remember a few baffled remarks about his eminent colleague Talcott Parsons. It seems to me simply a matter of the best use of his energies and talents that in the 1960s he wrote little about contemporary China for the general public, and pushed ahead with field development and with the writing of enormously influential textbooks.

Fairbank was indefatigable in his efforts to get the right people in the same room talking to each other; for traditional foreign relations that effort came to its fullest fruition in the conference volume The Chinese World Order. I was the youngest and least secure contributor to that effort. I recall considerable frustration at the unwillingness of quite a number of participants to move beyond their demanding research in multiple languages and histories and compare their case with others that were being represented; on the other hand, Mancall and Schwartz and in other ways Wang Gungwu and Fairbank himself seemed to be moving at a level of generalization that was hard to connect to specific cases, or sliding from century to century in pursuit of a text that would support a point.

Fairbank also was very supportive of research on aspects of Chinese history other than foreign relations. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, he made a real contribution to the intellectual ferment in the field that found China’s foreign relations less interesting than aspects of its internal history – a “China-centered turn” that marginalized discussion of foreign relations for several decades. Partly as a result of that turn and that marginalization, themes of China as an “All Under Heaven”, an “empire without neighbors” with a “tribute system”, continued to haunt our undergraduate lectures and to

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affect our understanding of contemporary realities for much too long. Criticisms and revisions that attracted only fitful interest and did little to affect discussion of contemporary realities included my study of European tribute embassies,9 Hevia’s cultural studies re-reading of the Macartney embassy,10 and Johnston’s rigorous re-examination of China’s traditional grand strategy.11 Rossabi and his collaborators gave us a rich set of studies of “China among equals” from Tang through Song, but raised few theoretical flags.12 Smith, Von Glahn, and their collaborators advanced hugely our understanding of a very long transition, but had remarkably little to say about warfare or diplomacy among states.13 The “new Qing history” has been very much interested in the Qing state’s management of its ethnic and cultural diversity,14 and for example we know a lot more about Guangxi and Yunnan than we used to, but not much of this work has dealt with the trans-border and inter-state dimensions of ethnic diversity.15

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shining exception here.) Finally, we have had a number of very rich and interesting books that have shown us a pre-modern China far more interactive with the outside world than we used to think, but have not gone on to show us that the “tribute system” emperor has no clothes or to try to give him some new robes.\footnote{16}

But the most important reason why our picture of the empire without neighbors no longer would suffice is that China now has a great deal to do with its neighbors, and with such distant significant others as the United States, the European Union, and countries from Australia to Angola that have stocks of raw materials to feed the booming Chinese economy. China seems in many ways open and eager to learn, but proud, “rising”, a truculent nationalism visible especially among its websites and its defense intellectuals. I have been trying to survey recent writing about China’s contemporary foreign relations, and the broader “rise of China” literature, to see if any of them argue in any way that the heritage of the tribute system offers important clues to China’s present and future behavior in a multi-national world. I haven’t found very much, but there may well be important things I’ve missed in this literature.\footnote{17}


Asymmetry #1. Negative Consequences of an Excess of Information and Interpretation.

In this paper I’m going to be repeatedly tempted by more or less metaphoric uses of “asymmetry”, and sometimes I’m just going to give in and run with it. There is a profound and worrisome asymmetry between the growth of the quantity and sophistication of our knowledge of China and the still very limited ability of historians, political scientists, and policy analysts to shape public discussion and policy formation. Things could be worse; Middle Eastern studies are not as well developed as Chinese in this country, and even if they were I’m not sure that academics and policy wonks would have known how to get the voting public and the policy makers to listen sufficiently to avert the recent disasters of policy and administration. I would be delighted and relieved to be proved wrong. Fairbank opposed the Vietnam War, regretted that he and others had managed to do so little to build American knowledge of Vietnam, and implied that if the academics had not let down their side the disastrous intervention might have been

I never believed it, and I still don’t know how people like us can improve our leverage over public discussion and policy making and have a better chance of averting our country’s next foreign policy disaster; that’s one of the core agendas of this conference.

China is open to visitors and reporters in a way not imaginable even thirty years ago. There is a great deal of semi-open discussion, even with foreigners. The fundamental anarchism of the internet seems to defeat government efforts at control. This more interactive China elicits more and more varied foreign reporting and interpretation, again vastly facilitated by the internet. In my experience this information glut makes it harder to keep track of the most important facts and interpretations. Are my policy wonk colleagues in this meeting sure that they’re reading the same things and the most important ones? I’m sure I don’t know how to make the best use of the time I can allot after my harmless historian’s drudgery to follow the literature that may build the bridges we’re trying to build in this conference.

The idea of a “tribute system” may be more alive among East Asian intellectuals than among North American, as they try to confront the puzzles of their relations among themselves, especially the China-Japan relation. Wang Hui, a very influential Beijing intellectual and editor of Dushu, talks about a “tributary system”. Hamashita Takeshi, well-know and influential on both sides of the Pacific, has been combining ingenious source investigations with big-picture accounts of the various concentric or overlapping

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18 Evans, pp. 227, 247, 263-264.
spheres of asymmetric relations in maritime relations among the peoples of East Asia. There is a good deal of this kind of writing, and it’s not easy to get at the core issues in it. One historian’s way of framing them would be that the Westphalian nation-state system imposes a framework of abstract legal equality of nation-states. East Asian intellectuals suspect, or hope, that their own rulers have been less in the thrall of these delusions of equality and thus have been able to focus more realistically and skillfully on the management of the consequences of inequality, of asymmetrical relations. That doesn’t get us very far in understanding the origins and evolution of the particular Chinese and East Asian modes of management of asymmetry. Here I offer a few signposts through the centuries, and then show the shaping of modern East Asia by the proliferation of asymmetries and contradictions among them.

**Asymmetry #2. Writing and Record-keeping.**

The early centers of Bronze Age China appear as islands of sophisticated use of writing and of kinds of organization it makes possible: Recording who is responsible for what taxes on what lands, sending detailed and binding instructions to subordinates at some distance, and so on. Consequences for relations with neighboring peoples who may not have started using writing include the keeping of reference records about them and making uniform exchanges with them all along a contact zone and the ceremonies of their reception at a royal court. These are reflected in early texts identifying and categorizing foreign peoples and listing the “tribute” of local products which they bring to court.

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Further consequences flow from the non-alphabetic script of early China. It was available as a means of communication among peoples who spoke differently within what ultimately became “China”. But of course variant scripts developed; their standardization was a result of political unification; and the standardization in turn became a vital asset of bureaucratic unification among people who had no common speech; more on this in Asymmetry #3. The standardized script also became available for the use of people who spoke languages unrelated to the Chinese group: in modern terms, Vietnamese, Koreans, and Japanese. (The uses of fragments of characters as quasi-alphabets for Khitan and Jurchen were important for a time and then disappeared.) Thus we have a thousand years of Japanese literati writing *kanshi* 漢詩, Korean, Vietnamese, and Ryukyuan ambassadors exchanging poets with capital officials, and so on, reinforcing Chinese thoughts of their “civilizing influence”. The canonicity of the great Chinese texts was preserved, but the reach of common writing was quite narrow, compared to what could be done in the transcriptions of different sounds and the borrowing of words from a canonical language in the spheres of the Greek, Latin, and Arabic scripts. (Never mind South and Southeast Asia, where some people think a language isn’t real unless it has its own idiosyncratic alphabet.)

**Asymmetry #3. China Is Big.**

Bronze Age China had a lot of little state centers. Their having writing before their neighbors did not necessarily lead to the emergence of a single very large polity. So we need to ask a question that seems silly, and the answer obvious to modern Chinese nationalists and many others, but that needs to be problematized and made explicit; “Why
is China so big?” Many historians and social scientists have noticed the persistent bias of China toward political unity, and a surprising degree of commonality in elite and even popular culture, over a very wide area. In 2007 I was privileged to read a draft chapter for the second volume of Victor Lieberman’s *Strange Parallels*, in which he finds interestingly parallel trends of unity and crisis in China and other places and notes some important factors that help to explain China’s large size. Patricia Ebrey in a recent think-piece has laid out a number of important factors, and notes the importance not only of China’s great territorial extent but of its very large and dense population. My modest addition to this discussion rises out of the teaching and thinking that led to my *Mountain of Fame*.  

Continental strategic and ecological factors – the need for unity against the threat of the northern nomads and for coordinated efforts to keep the Yellow River in check -- go only part way even toward explaining the persistent unity of north China, and do nothing at all to explain the long and successful incorporation of the center, south, and eventually southwest, where water control problems usually could be worked out at local levels, and where local cultures were quite different from those of north China. Here we have to look at some peculiarities of north Chinese culture that opened the way toward incorporation of southern elites and peoples. In many parts of the world, there is a strong tendency to divide people into “us” and “them”. When you meet one of them you are always on your guard, or perhaps you just shoot first. Serbs and Croats are a good example. You would never want your daughter to marry one of them; in fact, in such a

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24 I have tried to develop some of these ideas in lectures at Mesa State College, Colorado, in 2005 and at the University of British Columbia in 2006.
“tribal” system, cross-cousin marriage often is a preferred option. By contrast, as far back as we can trace Chinese constructions of kinship, they have been exogamous and patrilineal. People in the same patriline, later those bearing the same surname even if no genetic relation was clear, did not marry. Thus every marriage involved making a connection with someone “outside”, not predetermined by blood. In many parts of the world today, and throughout the world until about 1850, it has been understood that a marriage is an alliance between two families, to be based on more reliable criteria than raging young hormones. A potential son-in-law might have to prove himself, or continue to show his qualities even after the wedding.

This family and kinship background can be seen nourishing a political culture in the very important legends of three sage emperors, Yao, Shun, and Yu, traditionally a bit before 2000 BCE. Each succeeded the one before not by heredity but after proving himself the best man for the position. Shun passed the ultimate test when Yao gave him his two daughters in marriage, and Shun kept harmony in the household. We have here in kinship, I think, an important root of a political culture that produced not competitive corporate solidarities like the Greek city states but open-ended networks of one-to-one human connections, many of them hierarchical. Such connections are important in all societies and all complex organizations, but the Chinese have been unusually adept at them and self-conscious about them. None of us can function or talk about functioning in a Chinese society without thinking a lot about guanxi.

A particular form of guanxi that was of special importance in traditional Chinese political culture was “the Way of the Ruler and the Minister”, 君臣之道. A great many of
the most heroic figures in the very rich Chinese stories of their own past are not rulers but selfless ministers, defending the realm against invaders, protesting against corruption and abuse of the common people, risking their own lives to give unwanted advice to unworthy rulers. Confucius himself was a would-be minister and teacher of other would-be ministers. Not even Confucius had a very strong sense of commitment to his home state in a multi-state world; when politics went sour there, he and his disciples moved around, looking for a ruler who would listen to the Master’s Way.

The importance of this theme in political culture for the enduring Chinese tendency to unity of a very large continental area is immense. A powerful ruler could count on having a large number of able men from a very wide area present themselves as candidates for ministerial positions, and could appoint them to govern local areas. Members of local elites, even hereditary rulers on the fringes of the Chinese realm, might be attracted by the moral glamour and material rewards of ministerial status. In Warring States, Qin, and early Han times, c. 400-100 BCE, we can see a long arc of transformation, culminating in the dramatic new measures of bureaucratic recruitment at the beginning of the reign of Emperor Wu in 141 BCE, as grandees of a northern culture zone with much herding, and the elite of the Yangzi valley state of Chu, with a distinctive shamanic culture, were drawn into the central political order. (This looks obvious to me now, and I used to show this arc to my freshmen every time I taught the survey, but it’s not clear in Chapters 3 and 4 of Mountain of Fame, nor in Mark Edward Lewis’ excellent new survey;[25] the tyranny of the Great Change in 221 BCE is with us yet.) As noted

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above, there was a mutually reinforcing loop of bureaucratic centralization and script standardization.

The Way of the Ruler and the Minister was protean in the changing circumstances to which it adjusted, as protean as the idioms of citizenship and solidarity in the European tradition. 26 A crucial reshaping of this tradition will be much more accessible to us, we can hope, with the appearance any day now of the Five Dynasties-Song volume of the Cambridge History of China.27 Later, quite different inter-dynastic re-shapings can be followed in the rich volume edited by Smith and Von Glahn and in the abundant literature on the Ming-Qing transition. (One could get the impression from Smith and Von Glahn and their collaborators of disappointment at the failure of early Ming projects of systematic transformation; I, on the other hand, think mid-Ming mess and muddle worked pretty well to keep the peace in such a vast and varied area, as it does in the PRC today.28) Around 1800 China showed signs of the kinds of centrifugal growth that afflicted the Ottoman, Persian, and Mughal empires,29 but avoided dismemberment to join the “family of nations” as a single state. Today, the great area and population of China are important shapers of global interaction. Among the benefits of this deep divergence to China’s people at many periods, not matched in polycentric Europe or in the Ottoman, Persian, and Mughal empires of many cultures, languages, and religions, were long periods without full-scale war over this large area, a nearly complete absence of ethnic cleansings and bonfires of heretics, and the economic stimulus of a huge

26 I tried to highlight some of the more important changes in Mountain of Fame: Portraits in Chinese History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
27 January 30, 2008 according to Amazon; September 2008 according to the Cambridge University Press website.
29 C. A. Bayly, Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830 (London and New York: Longman, 1989, Ch. 1, 2.)
internal market. The Chinese people today have good reason, it seems to me, to cherish their rather fragile unity and internal peace.

The consequences of China’s bigness for its foreign relations were manifold. The Chinese state could draw on great wealth and a dense population in mobilizing military power against a challenging neighbor, but was wary of the ways in which military strength assembled to dominate a neighbor might destabilize politics within the empire. The rewards of foreign aggression could not compare with the abundance of trade and of tax revenues within the huge empire. The marvelous silks and other consumer goods produced for the vast domestic market were attractive to foreigners as well, and could be obtained either through trade or through gifts from the imperial court. But big was fragile. The Chinese tradition offered nothing equal to the deterrents to contact with foreigners of the Hindu caste system or Muslim wariness of associating with non-believers. The Chinese itch for *guanxi* easily reached across the boundaries of imperial rule. In Chinese thinking and writing the figure of the “Chinese traitor” 漢奸 is omnipresent. Foreigners wandering around China and building *guanxi* with Chinese might open the way to subversion and invasion. Chinese sources form Han times on are full of stories of Chinese traitors advising foreign rulers on strategies of invasion. Qing documents on disorders in the mountains of northern Annam/Vietnam sometimes seem to assume that the foreigners couldn’t produce their own scams and thieveries without the instigation of *Hanjian*.

If big was fragile and *Hanjian* were everywhere, defensive limitation of foreign contacts made sense; trade was confined to a border point or two or to strictly

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30 I have work in progress drawing on the Beijing Archives documents on these relations., have presented papers at the International Association of Historians of Asia in 2004 and at a conference at the National University of Singapore in 2006.
controlled trade in the capital or another major city. Defense is the category under which foreign relations are discussed in the Qing statecraft collections. It is far more useful as a master concept for our historical long perspectives that the tribute system. Unilateral and bureaucratic management of foreign relations were indeed persistent aspects of China’s defensive foreign policies, but only from about 1425 to 1550 did the tribute system provide the matrix within which all of the empire’s legal foreign relations were managed.

**Asymmetry #4. The Great Divergence in Technology.**

Ken Pomeranz’ classic account of *The Great Divergence* has elicited a great deal of comment and controversy, and I’m not sure I’m up on the latest developments.\(^{31}\) Peer Vries in an astute review noted the importance of the difference between machines replacing horses and oxen in Europe and machines (eventually) replacing human muscle in China.\(^{32}\) Mark Elvin’s picture of the “high level equilibrium trap” still ought to be part of a multi-causal account.\(^{33}\) I would add that the abundant uses of print in Ming and Qing China included quite a lot about best practices in agriculture but surprisingly little about machines; note that the great *Tiangong kaiwu* was not reprinted *in toto* in the Qing.\(^{34}\) Roots for a positive evaluation of the potential of technology were much stronger than in South Asia or the world of Islam, which ought to lessen any remaining surprise at modern China’s exuberant embrace of technology. But technological superiority was an immensely important source of western asymmetric power between 1830 and 1960.

**Asymmetry #5. Asymmetries in “National” Mobilization.**

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Among the great polities of the “early modern” world, Europe was radically polycentric, not an empire. We might see this political pluralism building on idioms of citizenship and competitive corporate solidarity reaching back to the Greeks and crucially consolidated in the late Middle Ages when the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire checked each other’s projects of unified rule over Western Christendom. Competition among these powers in commerce, in war, in territorial expansion and consolidation, including empires in the Americas, Africa, and the Indian Ocean stimulated their efforts to mobilize resources. The climax of Anglo-French competition in the wars of the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic era interacted with the beginnings of modern technology and new technologies of power – censuses, conscription, policing – and the new rhetorics and practices of nation and citizen to set European state mobilization on a course of unprecedented intensification. Japan was primed by its idiosyncratic early modern formation of competitive demilitarized domains and landless salaried samurai to respond with the huge transformations of the Meiji era. Russia competed in Europe, conquered Central Asia, and built the Trans-Siberian Railroad. The consequences of these massive asymmetries, and the technological one, were the whole dismal sequence of China’s subjection from 1839 to 1902.

After 1898 the Chinese understood what had hit them. Liang Qichao and many like him called for new citizenship and national mobilization, and in the process showed that the protean Way of the Ruler and the Minister no longer could guide political life.\(^{35}\) Mobilization efforts, from arsenals to new armies and schools to assemblies, were most effective at the level of the great viceregal units of two or three provinces, and thus had centrifugal consequences for the whole of China. \textit{Guanxi} with foreigners were fraught

\(^{35}\) Wills, \textit{Mountain of Fame}, Ch. 17.
with contradiction, both necessary for new ideas and techniques and likely to give the foreigners greater leverage within China; the contradictions were especially monstrous for relations with the Japanese.\textsuperscript{36} The occasionally successful experiments in mobilization of people and resources by warlords like Yan Xishan and Feng Yuxiang were centrifugal. The Nanjing Republic faced the Japanese threat, Communist resistance, and a new combination of anti-Nanjing politicians and warlords every year, and had very little foreign aid or advice, except for a bit from Germany.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{Asymmetry \#6. But Still Too Big to Conquer.}

The British and the Americans had shown, as far back as the Open Door Notes, a preference for keeping China intact. The Japanese and perhaps the Russians had other ideas. Manchuria was lost, Xinjiang and Tibet nearly so. But China was too big; Japan might well have conquered a coastal province or two and found enough would-be ministers to staff a subservient administration – they hadn’t done too badly in Manchuria – but they were tempted by the vast potential of inland China and wary of the counter-attack that surely would be launched by Chinese patriots if they didn’t control the whole country. They were defeated, of course, primarily in the Pacific. But they could not stop the local resistance and guerrilla war efforts that were based at a village level that Ming, Qing, or Nanjing Republic never had controlled.

\textbf{Asymmetry \#7. And Too Big and Fragile for Political Experiment or Clarity.}

The achievements of political transformation and control of the People’s Republic in the 1950s are remarkable; notice, for example, the stabilized currency and the successful roundup of guns.\textsuperscript{38} But even some of these apparently bureaucratic achievements drew on “mass line” or instigated movement from below strategies. These of course became pathological in the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution. Today most people who lived through some of these wrenching reversals want stability above all. But what is the state of the Party? Of the Army? People have reason, it seems to me, to be wary of political changes that might have destabilizing consequences. The status of the most sensitive minority regions, Xinjiang and Tibet, legacies of the Qing expansion, is another big worry. China is going to continue to be far from transparent to its own people, or to those of us who try to understand it from outside. If prosperity is the main source of legitimation and popular acceptance of the regime, it can’t afford to cut off the web of trans-border \textit{guanxi} that contribute so much. But are there still worries that those contacts will be subversive and de-stabilizing? It will not be surprising to find among the many voices seeking to shape China’s foreign relations some who remind us of past epochs of defensive policy.

China’s “peaceful rise” is a great hope for China’s people and all the world, as well as a somewhat politically problematic phrase,\textsuperscript{39} but we must not expect it to be a straightforward or transparent process. Muddle, contradiction, and cross-currents of \textit{guanxi} are common features of many periods of flourishing, human, political, and


economic, in Chinese history, such as mid-Ming. Conceptual clarity and uniformity often have been disastrous, from the Qin to Wang Anshi to the Great Leap.

**By Way of Summary: Empire, Nation, Frontier, Network.**

The Chinese from Han times on built and often maintained a very large single-centered polity, an empire, partly on a basis of military power, demographic weight, prosperity, and sophistication of written culture, but also on a basis of their ability to foster and adjust networks among individuals, especially those between rulers and ministers and between patrons and clients of various kinds. Such a network-built empire rarely was totally controlling of the activities of its subjects, and did not elicit all-consuming devotion and identification in the way a pseudo-kin "we group" or a religion can. It could easily generate centrifugal forces or conflicts if it tried to control or tax its subjects too heavily. Thus expensive conquests often were suspect, and too much contact with foreigners might lead to de-stabilizing connections with them. But this very large empire also had proportionately long and deep frontier zones, into which it was drawn by real and perceived threats, by conflicts between emigrants from the empire and local peoples, and, more rarely than for Europe and some other great civilizations, by the lures of loot and glory. When the western powers kicked down the door of a very defensive Qing empire, China had to become a mobilizing state if it was to survive as one nation among many. The heritages and logics of the self-limiting empire had to be overcome. In the longer run, the heritages of empire and network offer many strengths to the Chinese in an interactive modern world. But there are baffling contradictions between the heritages of a nation in quest of unity and strength, an empire that acknowledges no equals, frontier zones largely within the borders of the modern nation-state, and the energetic network-building that links Chinese in the PRC, in
Taiwan, and in the diaspora, and a host of foreign significant others, perhaps even including foreign would-be experts on China.