Asymmetry and China’s Tributary System

Brantly Womack*

In his article, ‘Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System’, Zhou Fangyin presents an important and stimulating application of the game theory of patterns of interaction to China’s traditional diplomacy with its neighbors.1 His analysis contradicts the realist expectation that the larger power would simply dominate smaller powers in the context of international anarchy. However, his explanation of the tributary system does not rely on a cultural explanation based on Confucian morality, but rather on processes of conflictual interaction that lead to mutual accommodation between China and its neighbors.

Zhou rightly emphasizes the two-way character of the tributary system and the centrality of its basic idea for Chinese diplomacy. In contrast to John Fairbank, he argues that it is more than a diplomatic cover for a trade relationship. In contrast to the general assumption that tribute is a form of booty that a larger power requires from a smaller power, he emphasizes China’s primary interest in stabilizing its relationships with neighbors through concessions. Indeed, it appears from Zhou’s narration that China is at the disadvantaged side of tributary relationships: frustrated in conflicts and conceding to neighbors in order to pacify its borders. By providing a clear and plausible model for interaction and interesting, complex cases of processes through which to arrive at equilibrium, Zhou has, indeed, made a contribution to both theory and history.

Perhaps, further progress can be made by separating the necessarily unique case of China from the general theory of relationships between large and small neighbors. It is certainly useful to view China’s diplomatic history from the perspective of an analytic model, but the necessary simplification may lose features of the Chinese situation that are unique but no less

* Corresponding author: Email: bwomack@virginia.edu

† Brantly Womack is Professor of Foreign Affairs at Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics, University of Virginia.


© The Author 2012. Published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com
real than generalized features. By the same token, the application of a general model to one case, and to the most compatible features of that case, cannot answer questions about the universality and robustness of the model.

In this article, I will separate the historical consideration of China’s tributary system from the more general questions posed by the model. I will argue that China’s situation as the central kingdom of Asia is more basic to its external relationships than its power asymmetry, and that there were dynasties and emperors who pursued policies contrary to the mainstream of the tributary system. However, Zhou’s basic argument concerning equilibrium is borne out by the negative outcomes resulting from the exceptions. I will add the case of China’s relationship with Vietnam to Zhou’s cases in order to argue that the capacity of resistance by smaller neighbors was key to the emergence of an equilibrium that was not based on domination. Going a step further than Zhou’s historical analysis, I address the question of the relationship of China’s traditional diplomacy to its contemporary return as Asia’s major power.

The second part of the article attempts to put Zhou’s argument concerning equilibrium into a more general model of asymmetric international relationships. His emphases on interaction and on the possibility of a stable outcome other than domination are important contributions. However, his analysis is restricted not only to China but to China’s perspectives on its relationships. I present a more general model of asymmetric international relationships that begins with a structural analysis of the perspectives, misperceptions, and processes of adjustment between large and small states.

The article concludes by arguing that the lessons learned by imperial China in managing relationships with smaller neighbors are more applicable to China’s current situation than the alliances of the Warring States or the bipolarity of the Cold War.

**China’s Centrality**

There has been considerable ambivalence in the historical judgment of China’s tributary system. Not only are questions raised about its content, but some scholars also question its existence. Not least among these questioners is the great historian who raised the question of the tributary system, John Fairbank. In the introduction of his volume on China’s diplomacy, Fairbank called the tributary system ‘a hoary myth’.² Many have viewed the tributary system as a rhetorical cover for China’s cynical pursuit of its self-interest.³ Other historians point out that, for much of its history,
China dealt with powers to the north that it could not dominate,\(^4\) and moreover, there were occasions when China paid tribute to others.\(^5\) It is also difficult to reconcile the tributary model with the incursion of ‘conquest dynasties’ (Yuan and Qing) and, more generally, with the origins of the strength of many dynasties in the northern periphery. Lastly, the conduct of some dynasties, especially the Yuan, and of some emperors, Ming Yongle, for example, did not follow the pattern suggested by Zhou.

How can we reconcile these deviations with Zhou’s argument and his examples? I argue that China’s problematic centrality in Asia is even more basic to its external relations than is its preponderance of power.\(^6\) In contrast to the traditional West that had a ‘liquid center’—the Mediterranean—around and through which regimes swirled, China’s has been Asia’s ‘solid center’ of greatest productivity and population. Its centrality has been the source of its preponderant power in times of unity, and the temptation of its neighbors in times of weakness and disunity. China’s centrality of resources also explains Zhou’s observation that China’s diplomacy tended to be defensive.\(^7\) Expansion beyond a rich center offered diminishing returns and increasing costs. In contrast, while neighbors benefitted from peaceful interaction with China, they also could envy and desire its wealth and territories.

As David Kang has argued, there were major differences between China’s relationships with settled kingdoms, most notably, Korea and Vietnam, and those with nomadic groups on its northern and western borders.\(^8\) There are several reasons for the differences. The grasslands provided nomads with mobility and a cavalry-based military and, at the same time, the lack of a comparable base of agricultural production turned their envy of China into a necessity of raiding. In contrast, the settled kingdoms had more to lose in conflicts with China and proportionally less to gain from raiding. Hence, the great majority of China’s premodern military conflicts were with nomads, and the best examples of stable tributary relationships can be drawn from those with settled kingdoms.


These exceptions and differences do not invalidate Zhou’s argument, but they do put it into perspective. From the Qin Dynasty onwards, China was working from a central position and, usually, defensively. It could manage its borders, but it could not solve problems with neighboring countries. The texts quoted by Zhou suggest that the urge to eliminate a troublesome neighbor was tempered by logistical problems. As China’s military might moved farther from the center, the challenge of provisioning became greater and the risk of disease grew. Owing to China’s centrality, therefore, ‘imperial overreach’ had a different pattern from that of the West. As Paul Kennedy argues, the over-extension of Western empires led to their general weakness and their vulnerability to external challengers.9 In China’s case, overreach led to an ebb and flow of peripheral control and, occasionally, to the collapse of an overstrained central order, but the new order that eventually emerged would necessarily have to hold the same central location because of its population and productivity. In the West, empires and their capitals displaced one another. Rome replaced Athens. In China, it was one dynasty after another.

One could argue that because the center of Asia could not be displaced, China’s capacity for learning from one dynasty to the next was greater than that of the more disjunctive situation in the West from one empire to the next. Zhou gives some excellent and explicit examples of history influencing policy.10 The content of imperial Confucianism was only part of China’s cultural heritage; another part, perhaps equally valuable, was supplied by the dynastic histories. Confucianism determined the values that must be studied, but the historical patterns of previous dynasties provided the lessons to be learned. Because the vicissitudes of Chinese history occurred in roughly the same place and under similar conditions, the equilibra Zhou observes operated as latent laws and became part of China’s diplomatic culture.11 The tributary system evolved from being a pattern of interaction to becoming a self-conscious and institutionalized form of diplomacy in the Ming dynasty.

The Case of Sino–Vietnamese Relations

The relationship between China and Vietnam from the Song to the Qing can be added to Zhou’s Burmese and Korean cases to illustrate both the reality underlying China’s equilibrium with neighbors and the learning process on both sides of the relationship.12 The Song’s troubles with the northern

---

nomads encouraged a cautious foreign policy, which led in the south to recognition, in 971, of Vietnam’s autonomy. Although there were major border skirmishes, the boundary was eventually fixed and has since remained substantially the same. The Song consolidated its control of Guangxi, and it received tribute from both Vietnam and Champa, Vietnam’s rival located in what is now central Vietnam. Neither Vietnam nor Champa wanted to risk China’s involvement in the other side of their competitive struggle.

The Mongols despised the weakness of the Song, their own strength being based on a ceaseless pushing of the margin of military superiority—on conquest rather than defense. Vietnam’s formal deference to the Song was not sufficient for the Yuan. Kublai Khan demanded submission. The Yuan then became not only a mortal threat to the security of Vietnam but also a threat to its identity as a kingdom separate from China. Part of Vietnam’s response was to define itself as the Southern Kingdom, with a history and autonomy comparable to those of China. Another was to repulse repeated Yuan invasions. When deference was insufficient to preserve autonomy, defiance became necessary. Like an overreaching Western empire, the Yuan reached the limit of its capacity for military domination in its failed attempts to conquer Japan and South East Asia. It, thus, weakened the entire structure of its East Asian rule. However, unlike the Western pattern of imperial displacement, the Yuan was followed by another dynasty rather than by an outside challenger.

Ming Taizu definitely learned the lessons of the Yuan over-extension. In his ‘Ancestral Injunction’, he advises his successors as follows:

The overseas foreign countries like Annan [Vietnam], Champa, Korea, Siam, Liuqiu [Ryukyu Islands], [the countries of the] Western Oceans [South India] and Eastern Oceans [Japan], and the various small countries of the southern man [barbarians] are separated from us by mountains and seas and far away in a corner. Their lands would not produce enough for us to maintain them; their peoples would not usefully serve us if incorporated [into the empire]. If they were so unrealistic as to disturb our borders, it would be unfortunate for them. If they gave us no trouble and we moved troops to fight them unnecessarily, it would be unfortunate for us. I am concerned that future generations might

abuse China’s wealth and power and covet the military glories of the moment to send armies into the field without reason and cause a loss of life. May they be sharply reminded that this is forbidden.18

This text shows a sober realization of the limits of China’s capacity to dominate. The realization of limits is the intellectual precondition for the institutionalization of the tributary system. The key to a peaceful frontier did not lie in dominating neighbors, but rather in managing a mutually acceptable relationship. Zhou’s descriptions of the equilibrium reached with Burma19 and Silla20 also fit this pattern.

Ming Taizu’s successor, Yongle, did not obey his father’s injunction. In 1407, he occupied Vietnam and attempted to re-attach it to China. To be sure, he had his reasons. In Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly had overthrown the Tran Dynasty recognized by China and massacred the Chinese guard accompanying the Tran claimant on his return from Nanjing. Of course, from Ho’s perspective, there was little reason to be deferential to China. The Yuan had been defeated and Champa had again become Vietnam’s proximate rival and threat.21 But Ho Quy Ly’s affront to China prompted Yongle to attempt to re-annex Vietnam to the empire.

The re-conquest of Vietnam in 1407 was rather easily accomplished, but by 1427, it became clear that the re-annexation was a failure. The presence of a foreign administration prompted the Vietnamese to unite behind Le Loi in a protracted patriotic struggle. What was, for the Ming, a frustrating task of pacifying a new and not very desirable part of the empire was, from the Vietnamese perspective, a mortal struggle that helped define its political community. In his ‘Binh Ngo Dai Cao’ [Ping Wu dagao—Proclamation of victory over Wu (China)], the scholar–patriot, Nguyen Trai, flourishes the claim of historical equality with China as articulated by 14th century historians.22 Fresh from defeating an occupation by means of guerilla warfare, Nguyen Trai also lays an emphasis on the people—their sufferings and their support for resistance. The strength and greatness of Le Loi was grounded in his concern for the people and, thus, he prevailed over the forces of the Ming. Nguyen Trai says, in the voice of Le Loi:

Around our standard on a fragile bamboo pole
I mustered forces from a scattered populace.

18 Ming Taizu, as quoted in Wang Gungwu, ‘Ming Foreign Relations’, pp. 311–12.
20 Ibid., p. 172.
As they drank my wine so I drank their water
   And we became like son and father,
Soldiers of one heart.23

While the threat of the Yuan induced Vietnam to articulate a separate
national identity, the Ming occupation led to popular mobilization. The
mind of Vietnam now had a political body in the space determined during
the Song.

Even though the Ming army was decisively defeated in 1427, Vietnam did
not achieve independence in the modern sense of formal sovereign equality.
Deferential autonomy was a relationship that both sides could live with. Le
Loi was careful to send the generals and their horses back to Beijing and to
apologize for the inconveniences the Ming had suffered in Vietnam. After a
decent interval, Beijing recognized the Le Dynasty as the legitimate rulers of
Vietnam. Regular tribute missions resumed, and the golden age of
Vietnamese Confucianism began with Le Loi’s successor, Le Thanh
Ton.24 With its northern border secure, Vietnam destroyed Champa and
launched its historic drive to the south. For China, the defeat in Vietnam
confirmed its southern boundary.25 Vietnam was never again seen as a lost
part of China. Equilibrium had been attained.

Relationships are, thus, not problems to be solved, but rather situations
that require management. Even though the post-1427 relationship between
China and Vietnam remained relatively peaceful for more than four centu-
ries, it was, by no means, an exception. The tributary system provided a
routinization of mutual assurances, and when it failed, as in 1407 or 1788, it
was in the interests of both sides to restore it. Nevertheless, the system did
not solve the problem of inequality, it merely provided a framework for
managing it. The Chinese were still tempted to trespass, and Vietnam still
pretended to equality. Vietnamese emperors tried to evade the dilemma of
being supreme at home but subordinate in Beijing. Before the Ming inva-
sion, the Tran ruse of appointing a child as titular emperor and letting the
‘senior emperor’ continue to rule both solved succession problems and also
meant that it was officially the child who dealt with Beijing. Moreover,
beginning with the Tran dynasty, Vietnamese emperors used false names
in their diplomatic correspondence with China.26 In Beijing and toward

24 John Whitmore, ‘Northern Relations for Dai Viet: China Policy in the Age of Le
Thanh-tong (r. 1460–1497)’, in John Whitmore and James Anderson, Forging the Fiery
Frontier: Two Millennia of China’s Encounters in the Borderlands of the South and
Southwest (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).
25 A Qing army did invade Vietnam in 1788 at the request of the Vietnamese emperor, but it
had been ordered to return before its defeat by Nguyen Hue of the Tay Son rebels. Truong
26 Nguyen The Anh, ‘Attraction and Repulsion as the Two Contrasting Aspects of the
Relations between China and Vietnam’, paper presented in the International
Beijing, Vietnam was a vassal, but away from Beijing and to itself, Vietnam was China’s equal. Vietnam provided a show of deference while closely guarding its own interests and autonomy, and China maintained its attitude of official serenity by accepting deferential ritual as reality and by turning inward to avoid conflict. The tributary system was one of mutual recognition, but not one of sovereign equality.

There are two fundamental reasons why the tributary relationship could not continue in the modern era. The most obvious one is the intrusion of the West, but the Western presence should not simply be reduced to the firepower of its gunboats and the greed of its imperialists. If China had won the Opium War, Asia still would have entered a larger world of increasing global interaction. The domestic struggles of Vietnam were triangulated through France even before colonialism, and the work of Western missionaries in Asia had important cultural effects before they acquired military protection. Even without the century of humiliation, Asia would have experienced a century of decentralization. Asia’s horizons expanding and the productivity and global reach of the Industrial Revolution made China’s capacities proportionally less significant. The attention of its neighbors, hence, turned elsewhere.27 China gradually became the largest country on a global periphery and finally the largest victim of an alien world system.

The second fatal flaw in the tributary system was that it could not manage strengthening relationships. Essentially, the purpose of the tributary system was to maintain the appearance of harmony among unequal partners. Since differences of interest were denied, they could not be openly negotiated. The presumption of harmony was most easily maintained through a thin and distant official relationship. Commerce grew on the unacknowledged periphery of intergovernmental relations, creating the space that Western imperialism would fill. When difficulties did arise, it was easier to reduce contact than to manage differences openly. At most, the Ming and Qing could turn a blind eye toward growing private commerce and a suspicious eye toward the migration of Chinese beyond China’s borders.28 Western governments and adventurers certainly did not see their Asian targets as equals, but did regard them as opportunities. Thus, the great flotilla of Admiral Zheng He was abandoned and the small ships of Western commerce multiplied.

The two flaws of the tributary system were intrinsically related. Because China was central, it perceived little opportunity in dealing with its periphery and, moreover, a great deal of trouble in so doing. Hence, there was a great temptation to turn inward as difficulties mounted. But, the success of

27 John Wills, ‘Qing Relations with Annam And Siam’.
isolation as a coping strategy depended on more than China’s self-sufficiency. Its presumption that there was no significant world beyond itself had to be correct, or else China could be blindsided by a distant power. And so it happened. As its neighbors were attracted and forced to become part of a world political economy, China gradually became the center only of itself, not of Asia. And when the gunboats reached China’s shores, even its domestic centrality was threatened and, eventually, overwhelmed.

Asymmetry and Equilibrium

The Sino–Vietnamese relationship provides additional evidence for Zhou’s argument that the unequal relationships of the tributary system could achieve an equilibrium that was mutually beneficial. Indeed, the ‘long peace’ after 1427 could be called a mature traditional relationship, one in which both sides understood the utility of the tributary system and the limits of their respective positions. But the limitations of the tributary system in the pre-modern Asian context suggests that more than an equilibrium with unequal neighbors is involved, because the neighbors remained unequal even as the tributary system fell apart. Part of the answer lies in the re-grounding of the tributary system in China’s centrality in Asia, as described earlier. As Asia’s horizons expanded in the modern era, China’s neighbors began to have other, more important relationships and China itself became weaker and disorganized.

There is, however, also a theoretical limitation of the equilibrium model. While it constitutes a plausible fit to China’s tributary relationships, it is more of an analytic approach than a general theory. Moreover, the story is told from China’s perspective, and China is always the larger partner in these relationships. A more general theory of asymmetric relationships is necessary in order to go beyond the case of the tributary system and also to analyse the perspective of smaller partners. A sketch of asymmetry theory can be useful to position the analytic approach of equilibrium within a broader framework.29

The most basic fact of any asymmetric relationship is that the smaller side is proportionally more exposed than the larger side—a difference that affects every dimension of the bilateral relationship. Asymmetry is not solely a security relation. Even if an interaction is equal and unforced, such as an exchange of goods, it will represent a larger percentage of the smaller side’s

interactions. The smaller side sees greater risk and benefits, while the larger side possibly will have other, more important relationships and, in any case, will have a larger arena of domestic concerns. It should be emphasized that the difference in perspective in an asymmetric relationship is not simply a question of government attitudes, but of those of the entire political communities. Hence, Le Loi could mobilize Vietnamese patriotism because all felt threatened.

The structural difference of interests implicit in asymmetry leads to differences in perception and, consequently, to differences in behavior. The smaller side will be more attentive to the relationship because it has more to gain or lose. As everyone on the smaller side is watching the larger side, its behavior is, therefore, likely to be more coordinated and quicker to respond. In contrast, as the population and leadership of the larger side have more important concerns, it is likely to be less attentive and coordinated.

Attentiveness, however, can be misleading. The greater attentiveness of the smaller side does not mean that it has a better understanding of the relationship. On the one hand, because it feels at risk, the smaller side is likely to misinterpret the less coordinated actions of the larger side as a deeper (and possibly malevolent) plan. On the other hand, as the more alert and coordinated partner, the smaller side can be quicker to exploit opportunities. This fits Zhou’s assertion that if the larger side is conciliatory, the smaller side will try to push its interests.

Meanwhile, the larger side has a different pattern of action and misinterpretation. In normal times, the effort required to counter harassment from the smaller side exceeds the gain. The larger side is magnanimous because the alternative of pursuing every small matter would be more troublesome. Of course, crises are a different issue. As the larger side’s coordinated attention is drawn only at times of a crisis, the problem is seen as that of resolving the crisis rather than of understanding the situation of the smaller side. The larger side is then tempted to use its greater capacity to bully the smaller side into behaving properly, thus resolving the crisis. The smaller side, meanwhile, alarmed by the larger side’s show of force, has an exaggerated sense of danger. When the larger side pushes with a finger, the smaller one fears that the whole hand will follow, even though the former merely wants to push the latter back into line. The smaller side is, hence, likely to see a mortal threat when the larger side wants only to solve the crisis and return to more important concerns.

This is where equilibrium analysis fits into asymmetry theory. As Zhou’s descriptions of the onset of war with Burma and Korea demonstrate, the larger side wants to punish the smaller side, and because of the difference in capacities, it imagines that the effort will be minimal and that the action can be quickly completed. The punishment appears to the larger side as only a ‘punitive expedition’, a ‘small war’, a ‘police action’, a ‘pacification’, or a
‘lesson’. From the point of view of the smaller side, however, the hostility of a big neighbor is a mortal threat. It has no choice but to resist, and the whole population is intensely aware of the risk. The unexpected successes of the armies of Burma,\textsuperscript{30} of Koguryo,\textsuperscript{31} of Silla,\textsuperscript{32} and of Le Loi in Vietnam were due not to better armies, but rather to desperate circumstances. China could withdraw; they could not. While the hawks on the larger side succeed in launching the war on the premise that the cost will be small and the victory quick, the smaller side is fighting for its life. Even though the smaller side has fewer resources, it will fight harder and longer; it has no quitting point, even though it is suffering more from the conflict. For the larger side, the mounting cost and the lengthening conflict undermine the credibility of the hawks and exceed what the leadership is willing to pay. The cases of Burma and Silla well illustrate this point. But this narrative of small wars is valid not only for the tributary system. It also fits modern asymmetric conflicts such as the United States in Afghanistan.

Both sides want to end the conflict as long as their basic interests can be protected. Those of the larger side are that peace with the smaller side will not harm its security. It wants the smaller side to acknowledge the real power relationship that exists and to behave deferentially. Deference is not obedience—after all, the larger side has failed in its attempt to dominate. Rather, it is the implicit promise of the smaller side not to challenge the overall power relationship. The smaller side, meanwhile, requires recognition of its identity and interests. It needs assurance that the larger side will not again attempt to intrude and dominate. A mature asymmetric relationship can result from an exchange of deference for autonomy. The tributary system is, thus, a ritualized version of an exchange of deference (coming to Beijing with tribute) for autonomy (granting seals of office and titles).

The foolishness of small wars is a lesson that can be learned without appreciating the perspective of the other side. It is hardly surprising that both sides would view peace differently, given the structural difference in perspective. The approach to equilibrium, as seen from the Chinese side, is that of a process of making unilateral accommodations to smaller powers simply to avoid becoming entangled in conflict. As Zhou puts it, it is a process of conciliation and was officially presented as imperial magnanimity. But, from the smaller side’s perspective, equilibrium is the patriotic assertion of identity and the pragmatic pursuit of opportunity. Although the narratives of each side differ, from a disengaged, third-party perspective, the approach to equilibrium can be understood as the result of a stalemate. As neither side can unilaterally achieve its aims, both, therefore, share an

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p.168.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p.172.

interest in peace. With neither victory nor defeat possible, a *modus vivendi* can, thus, be achieved.

This sketch of asymmetry theory differs significantly from the four-fold table presented by Zhou.

![Fig. 1 Strategic Interaction between China and a Peripheral State under Asymmetric Distribution of Power. Source: Zhou Fangyin, ‘Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System’, p. 162.](image)

If we look closely at the punitive expeditions Zhou describes, we can see that they did not result in submission, but rather in a stalemate between China and the neighbor that led to a mutually agreed arrangement. To call the neighbor ‘submissive’ is an exaggeration; each neighbor was in a position of tactical strength but strategic vulnerability. Each was, hence, content to exchange ritual deference to China for China’s assurance of autonomy. In addition, peace on the China border enabled neighbors to pursue other conflicts. Deference is not submission; indeed, it is premised on autonomy. Similarly, ‘harassment’ by the neighbor is a rather one-sided description of a conflict of interest. Non-Han groups straddled most of China’s borders, and demographic changes as well as fluctuating central control determined in which direction either side might push. After all, the Burmese originally came from Yunnan, while the Han did not. Similarly, Yongle’s attempt to re-annex Vietnam had its excuses, but the main purpose was not to quell Vietnamese harassment. Lastly, the term ‘conciliatory’ is a bit narrow for non-war alternatives. Negotiation in the tributary system could not be overt, but the accommodation implicit in the Song attitude to the Nanzhao kingdom in Yunnan and to Vietnam displayed recognition of the limits of its power, not conciliation. The Yuan reversed both policies and succeeded in Yunnan while it failed in Vietnam.

Perhaps the most important contribution of asymmetry theory to Zhou’s analysis is its explanation of why some relationships remain at B, conciliation/submission. As Zhou indicates, the neighbor would gain more by pushing to A even though that might start another cycle of B ⇒ A ⇒ C ⇒ D ⇒ B. In the A box, the neighbor adds the gains of harassment to the A/B advantage of no punishment. As Zhou indicates in Figure 4, however,

---


---
and as his examples illustrate, there are important cases of stable relationships of the B type. If a tributary relationship remains stable for hundreds of years, then stability must be a shared value for China and the neighbor. Asymmetry theory attributes stability to an acceptable exchange of deference and acknowledgment based on the premise shared by both sides that conflict would put their interests at risk. The relationship can change if the neighbor is willing to risk hostility or if China considers punishment to be cheap and effective. Most stable asymmetric relationships, however, are the result of stalemate, not successful harassment or successful punishment. A mature asymmetric relationship is, therefore, likely to be stable.

The tributary system provides a ‘best case’ example for asymmetry theory because it involves dyadic relationships between neighbors over long periods. The effect of asymmetry can be attenuated by distance, although the ‘small wars’ of the United States show that even a superpower can be frustrated by the resistance of a small, distant adversary. And asymmetry is certainly not the only cause of misperception and hostility. Similar systems are less likely to come into conflict; leaders and ideologies can be expansive; and there can be conflicts over resources. Even more complex for asymmetry theory are situations involving asymmetric triangles and other multilateral interactions. Nevertheless, asymmetric exposure in a relationship adds a distinctive source of differences of perception and behavior that can be useful in interpreting complex interactions and that can be the dominant heuristic in some bilateral relationships between neighbors.

All mature asymmetric relationships share some characteristics of the tributary system. First, the relationships may last a long time, but they are not simply solved and locked. They remain a problem of management. This is particularly clear in Zhou’s second Korea case, that of Gwanghaegun. The knotty problem of whom to recognize as the legitimate successor to the Korean throne and the unfortunate choice made by the Ming helped to alienate Gwanghaegun who, in turn, aided the emergence of the Manchu challenge. More generally, within any exchange of deference and autonomy there are still differences of interest that must be worked out. While security is no longer a problem between neighbors such as the United States and Canada, conflicts of interest nonetheless remain, and Canada will tend to be hyper-sensitive to American gestures in those interactions while the United States will tend to pay less attention to Canada.

Second, ritual is important in successful management. Both sides need the regular, high-level acknowledgment of the stability of the relationship and its underlying deference and autonomy. There are many superficial differences between Peking court pageantry and contemporary photo-ops at summit meetings, but the same serious purpose underlies both. Since the

relationship looks quite different from either perspective, public demonstrations of its importance to both sides provide necessary reassurance. In the West, and especially in the United States, the phrase ‘empty ritual’ is seen as a tautology, but the major contribution of ritual is formal affirmation of normalcy.

Third, the management of asymmetric relationships works best when both sides neutralize disputes. Given the propensity to mutual misinterpretation in an asymmetric relationship, a hot and loud dispute is likely to create a gap between the two states that will be difficult to bridge. In the tributary system, neutralization was accomplished by officially ignoring problems and by China’s self-isolation. In modern asymmetries, it is best achieved by creating expert commissions to discuss disputes and by agreements on codes of conduct in disputed areas. Disputes must be articulated in terms of principles acceptable to both sides so that they can be moved from the realm of hot public politics to that of cold discussions among experts. If a problem itself cannot be neutralized, for example, the sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea, then the common interest in avoiding crises should lead to discussions of codes of conduct in disputed areas.

Fourth, perhaps the most important factor in stabilizing a long-running asymmetric relationship, is simply habit. Habit is a perceptual byproduct of equilibrium that sets the horizons of expectation in a relationship. The longer the peace, the less likely war appears to everyone, and the greater the network of cross-border interests that rely on a stable relationship. Even though misinterpretations and conflicts of interest continue, the common sense of both sides will hold that war is unlikely and unprofitable. Despite the tensions and excitement of a current crisis, the experience of past crises provides reassurance that this one will also be resolved. Moreover, crisis and conflict threaten the intertwined interests that grow within an established asymmetric relationship. Ultimately, habit is the foundation of common cultures of international relationships, and, thus, of the East Asian culture of hierarchy as described by Kang, Wendt’s Kantian ethos, or the society of states of the British School.

Fifth, if habit provides the ballast for stable asymmetry, then novelty is the greatest danger to an asymmetric relationship. In the case of Vietnam in 1407, the combination of a new Chinese emperor eager for glory and a brutal usurper in Vietnam provided the flashpoint for invasion. When a relationship is new, or for whatever reason must be recast, then the meaning of today’s transaction can be magnified and distorted by historical lenses.

38 Alexander Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
shaped not by yesterday’s prevailing common sense, but by different historical memories on the one hand, and by broad spans of speculative hopes and fears about the future on the other. Novelty is neither necessary nor sufficient for misperception and conflict. Some novel situations are handled smoothly, and some long-standing relationships descend into chaos due to the mismanagement of crises. Novelty, however, is the most fertile ground for problems in asymmetric relationships.

**Conclusion: Beyond Tribute, Beyond Warring States, and Beyond the Post-Cold War**

China’s re-emergence as the central power in Asia has rightly raised the question of the possible relevance of its pre-modern patterns of external diplomacy to the country’s current situation. Although Zhou does not address this problem in his article, the greater contemporary attention to the tributary system and more generally to ‘Tianxia’ is rooted in China’s peaceful rise.

Clearly, the re-establishment of anything like the tributary system, by China or by any other state, is out of question in contemporary world politics. The experience of managing asymmetric relationships implicit in the tributary system, however, may be more relevant to contemporary China than lessons drawn from the Warring States period or from the Cold War.

The Warring States is a tempting source of ideas because of its quality of moral and military thought. Certainly, there is much in Sun Zi, Lao Zi, Mencius, and their contemporaries of a depth that makes them relevant to all times and to all international circumstances. The Warring States, however, was a time when the survival of any state was at risk by virtue of its neighbors and, therefore, alliances, most famously the vertical and horizontal alliances, were necessary for security. In today’s world, despite the vast differences among states, state survival is rarely at issue. Even current borders are usually stable unless a pre-existing dispute prolongs conflicting claims. The differences of national interest and public opinion of any country can become inflamed, but even the most aggressive actions of the superpower are usually not aimed at the existence or identity of other states. Iraq and Afghanistan have not become colonies.

Why are there no Genghis Khans or Napoleons reshaping today’s world? Not because leaders are more moral. The two most important factors are that nuclear weapons have made threats to the core interests of major states self-destructive and that the interdependence accentuated by globalization has greatly increased the collateral damage of aggression. The more modern the state, the less self-sufficient it is, and the more concerned it must be about the unintended consequences of its actions. States and their citizens still worry about mortal threats, but, in fact, the global matrix of states is
likely to remain more or less fixed, and changes of sovereignty that do occur are more likely to result from domestic politics than from external conquest. Former Yugoslavia is a good example. It fell apart into its constituent units, and the ensuing brutal wars among the new units were not successful in changing the inherited boundaries.

In fundamental contrast to the Warring States situation, therefore, contemporary world politics is composed of a stable set of actors. They have conflicting interests, changing governments, and nationalist sentiments, but do not gang up to destroy one another. The most they attempt is regime change, and that is rarely successful. In a stable, interrelated environment, inclusive friendship is a more appropriate policy than exclusive alliances. China’s good neighbor policy has been remarkably successful because it has reassured smaller countries that it does not threaten their vital interests or restrict their other international relationships. To give a counter-historical example, if China had entered into an ideological alliance with Vietnam in 1991, as some feared, then the relations of both China and Vietnam with South East Asia would have been more tense. Similarly, if China had attempted, in 1995, to prevent Vietnam’s entry into ASEAN, then relations with Vietnam and with South East Asia would have been permanently damaged. Multilateral initiatives such as ASEAN plus 3 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have been triumphs of China’s inclusive diplomacy.

Inclusive friendly relationships are better than exclusive alliances precisely because the globalized world remains one of states with conflicting interests and with concerns about their partners and about the future. Greater global participation is desirable to all, but it necessarily includes greater exposure to external risk. If a state sides with one partner against another, or even if a state leans to one side and neglects another, it suffers a decrease in its potential global participation. If, on the other hand, a state commits to mutual reassurance but does not require an exclusive or privileged relationship, then it strengthens the partnership but does not discourage other relationships. If conquest is neither an option nor a risk in the 21st century, then the most rational international posture is that of mutual reassurance within an open structure of relationships. As Robert Axelrod argued in his classic work on game theory, in an indefinitely long series of interactions, the most rational first move is to cooperate.40

Like the model of the Warring States, the Cold War is a tempting, but misleading, analogy for China’s current situation. It is tempting because clearly the relationship between China and the United States will be the most important bilateral relationship in the foreseeable future, and no one expects it to be one of mutual trust and close friendship. The Cold War

provides a recent and vivid model of a bilateral confrontational relationship between two global powers.

China, however, is not the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union engaged in protective self-isolation. It militarized its economy, dominated Eastern Europe, and frightened Western Europe along with much of the rest of the world. Its foreign relations were dictated by its hostility to the United States. The United States also made many mistakes, but it was not as exclusively military in its economy, and its international relations were more open. It was relatively easy for the United States to contain the Soviet Union because the Soviet Union isolated itself. The United States did not build the Berlin Wall. Ultimately, the Soviet Union collapsed from within, from a dry rot that was fed by isolation.

Until 1979, China was self-isolated and at risk internationally, but in the reform era, China’s path has been the opposite of that of the Soviet Union. It has emphasized mutual benefit, and made friends rather than allies. China’s neighbors welcomed its growing prosperity because they also benefitted from it. The international environment of China’s foreign policy began to change in 2008 with the onset of global economic uncertainty. China’s absolute growth did not increase and neither did its basic policies change, but its relative growth and stability were, nonetheless, in stark contrast to the problems other countries have experienced. As a result, China’s smaller partners became more concerned about its intentions, and the United States began to see China as a global competitor. Meanwhile, China’s concerns about potential American hostility are becoming more intense. It is, therefore, more sensitive to President Obama’s attempts to strengthen American presence in Asia. There are those in both China and the United States who see bipolarity as inevitable.

If, however,—as in the Cold War—direct bipolar war is ruled out because of the danger of mutual nuclear destruction, where, then, will the bipolar competition be decided? The indirect wars in Korea, Indochina, and Afghanistan did not go well for the initiating superpower. The same is true of smaller attempts to force alliances or to prevent defections, as the examples of Iran, Horn of Africa, Angola, and Cuba illustrate. The most successful policy of the United States was its economic support of Europe in the Marshall Plan and, more generally, the interaction between its open political economy and the rest of the world.

Both the outcome and the character of US–China competition will be determined by China’s relationships with its neighbors. If China enforces its interests on its neighbors or appears likely to, they will hedge their interests against China. Even in a confident asymmetric relationship, smaller states will buffer their bilateral exposure, but if they are unsure about the intentions of their big partner, then they will prepare by hedging for the possibility of hostility. Should they become convinced that their identities
are under threat and their interests will suffer, they will move from hedging to balancing against China. As other states fear an alienation of interests between themselves and China, they will also move to protect their interests.

Likewise, if developed countries see China’s rise as the emergence of a new and hostile hegemon, they will behave defensively. If their perception of a ‘China threat’ is mistaken and China’s external relations are, in fact, positive, they will find little global support for a suspicious or hostile attitude. If, however, other states are also worried about China’s rise, they could then unite to protect the existing world order from a new, more threatening one. It would certainly be against China’s strategic interests to behave in ways that increase global alienation and resistance.

Global competition is not necessarily hostile. In 2002, China became the first non-South East Asian state to sign ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity. India quickly became the second, and Japan followed. Finally, in 2009, the US signed. Part of the motivation for signing was competitive—to catch up with China in South East Asia—but the mode of competition benefitted both South East Asia and China. Similarly, the American success in international disaster relief probably spurred China’s launching of the hospital ship Daishan Dao in 2007. Most soft-power competition presents recipients with a beneficial both/and situation rather than a painful either/or choice.

Clearly, there are fundamental differences between the international context of imperial China and the multi-nodal global environment of the 21st century. Unlike the Warring States, however, imperial China had to establish stable relationships with a variety of neighbors and avoid involvement in their disputes. And, unlike the bilateral hostility of the Cold War, imperial China led with reassurance and soft power rather than through domination and arms. Imperial China endured a long learning process through its management of asymmetric relationships, and, as Zhou Fangyin describes, there were exceptions that proved the wisdom of the asymmetric equilibrium institutionalized in the tributary system. The current era presents the situation of a robust set of sovereign actors in a system of intense, globalized contact. Again, recognition of the limits of preponderant capacity and the necessity of mutually reassuring asymmetric relationships is required.