

# Tribute System

## Cháogòng zhìdù 朝贡制度

**In premodern China foreign relations were both hierarchical, with all foreign rulers paying tribute to the Chinese emperor as their superior, and systematic, conducted through a single set of bureaucratic rules and institutions. The forms taken by these relations varied greatly over the centuries; only from about 1425 to 1550 were all foreign relations actually managed through a single set of rules and institutions.**

The premodern Chinese tended to conduct their foreign relations hierarchically, with all foreign rulers paying tribute to the Chinese Son of Heaven, the emperor considered to be the sole supreme ruler of the world, and to manage foreign relations systematically via a unilaterally developed set of bureaucratic rules and institutions. In the long span of China's history as an empire, only for a little more than a century during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), circa 1425–1550, did China's rulers seek to manage all of their foreign relations through a unified set of institutions centered on the tribute embassy, a tribute system in the full sense of the term.

The use of the tribute system idea as a master concept for all of China's premodern foreign relations has made it hard to keep in focus early Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) equal relations with the Xiongnu people, mid-Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) hazardous negotiations with neighboring great powers, the multistate involvements of the Song

dynasty (960–1279), or Qing dynasty (1644–1912) relations with Inner Asia and with maritime Europe, which were not centered on tribute embassies. The use of this misleading master concept owes something to European obsession with ceremonial equality from the time of the Macartney Embassy—sent by King George III of England from 1792 to 1794 under George Lord Macartney—on, and more to the scholarship of John King Fairbank and others reading Qing bureaucratic compendia and noting the hierarchic thinking of nineteenth-century Qing officials. The concept is little used but little questioned in English-language writing today. Interest in it in China, Taiwan, and Japan reflects a sense of east Asian superiority in the management of asymmetric relations as compared with European-U.S. delusions of absolute sovereign equality.

The concept of tribute (*gong*) appears in the classics, most importantly in the “Tribute of Yu” (*Yu gong*) section of the *Classic of Documents* (*Shu Jing*). There it refers to gifts of representative products of various areas to the central sovereign as symbolic acknowledgments of his sovereignty. Such tribute from areas of foreign or “barbarian” nature is a small part of this picture. In another section of the same classic it takes the form of gifts of exotic animals, a theme that would recur in the lore of tribute embassies down to the elephants sent by Siam (modern Thailand) and the lion sent by Portugal to Qing-ruled Beijing. In the centuries of political transformation and bureaucratic unification from the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) to the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) and Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), there was much discussion of the differences between civilized and barbarian peoples



but little focus on the ceremonial subjection of the latter; on the inland frontier it was all the Chinese rulers could do to keep the dangerous nomads at bay by building walls and buying peace with gifts and imperial princesses given in marriage. In the reign of Emperor Wu, 141–87 BCE, more assertive policies toward the Xiongnu had some success, especially when rival Xiongnu groups could be turned against each other, and the more submissive groups were required to leave hostage princes in the imperial capital. The mid-Han turn toward ceremonialism produced some disastrous attempts to give all foreign rulers titles inferior to the emperor's under Wang Mang and some spectacular collections of homage-paying foreigners at the New Year in the early years of later Han dynasty.

It is instructive to follow the thread of ceremonial practice through the dynastic records of foreign relations. It is not at all surprising that the most elaborate set of ceremonies for receiving foreign envoys is recorded for the Tang dynasty. Envoys were received and banqueted and their presents displayed before the emperor, all in one dazzling ceremony. For powerful and threatening Inner Asian rulers, extra layers of splendor could be added. All this was in the service of the survival of the Tang dynasty in a polycentric world of powerful empires—Tibetan, Uygur, Turkic. The Tang rulers were not as distant in culture from their Inner Asian challengers as the Song and Ming rulers were and were quite capable of facing down an invading nomad army in person or, in desperate straits, of granting equality to the Uygur ruler with an imperial *wansui* (ten thousand years). The immense impression that the splendors of court and capital made on Korean and Japanese envoys was an important facet of the spreading influence of Chinese culture in those countries. In south coast ports, beginnings can be seen of the use of tribute embassies as instruments of marginal advantage for foreign traders.

The even more dangerous Inner Asian world faced by the Song dynasty (960–1279) was reflected in the differentiation of ceremonies for contemporary embassies—the Liao dynasty was most favored, then Koryo and Xi Xia, then all the rest. The treatment of the Liao as near-equals may have been a realistic solution to a dangerous confrontation but was criticized by many officials. The various acknowledgments of equality or even inferiority to the Jurchen Jin dynasty from 1142 on were widely resented and contributed to unrealistic calls for reconquest

of the north; foreign relations were an important facet of the emergence of the moralistic Learning of the Way (Daoxue), or Neo-confucianism, in this period. Maritime trade to southern ports under the guise of tribute embassies flourished and became an important facet of the power and prosperity of such Southeast Asian states as Śrīvijaya on Sumatra and Champa in what is now southern Vietnam.

## Rulers Summoned

In the early Ming dynasty the example of wide conquests and lavish court ceremonies of the Mongol-ruled Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), resentment of the cultural alienness of the Mongol rule, and the mutual co-optation of an uncouth despot and some very able Daoxue literati produced visions of systematic institutional perfection in many aspects of government, not least foreign relations. Messages were sent to all known foreign rulers, ordering them to come and pay homage to the new dynasty. An early spectacular result was the parading through the streets of Nanjing, the first Ming capital, of elephants—forty in one year and forty-two two years later—from Champa. Fears of Japanese pirates and their Chinese allies, some left over from the rivals of the Ming founder, led to the prohibition of all maritime trade in Chinese shipping and the limitation of foreign shipping in Chinese ports to that in connection with tribute embassies. Maritime rulers, often advised by émigré Chinese, made the most of the loophole; the kingdom of the Ryukyu Islands was among the most successful.

The usurping Yongle emperor, a great warrior needing all the legitimation he could get, sent envoys and expeditions out in all directions to summon foreign rulers to present tribute; the maritime expeditions of Zheng He are the most famous of these expansionist efforts. The assembly of rulers and ministers paying homage at the new capital of Beijing in 1421 was without parallel since the early Tang dynasty. However, the elaborate ceremonies of the embassies of the founding reign already had been somewhat reduced, and after the Yongle reign there were many limitations on the size and frequency of embassies. Of course, there also was only one more maritime expedition. Efforts to control the Mongols by giving them titles and trade in connection with embassies were not

successful. Management of relations among Hami, Turfan, and more distant Muslim city-states in Inner Asia was incoherent. The Jurchen people became experts in manipulating the privileges of the tribute system, sending oversized embassies that threatened mayhem in the streets of Beijing if they did not like the terms of trade or the quantities of gifts they received.

The succession of the Jiajing emperor in 1524 was accompanied by intense discussions of many facets of the imperial ceremonial tradition, the publication in the *Da Ming huidian* (*Collected Statutes of Great Ming*) of 1530 of the most comprehensively idealized picture of a millennial tribute system ever produced, and a major effort to enforce all the rules and restrictions of the system, which

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**An early Qing dynasty illustration portrays nomadic representatives offering tribute to Chinese officials.**



often had been violated in the previous reigns. The results included an epidemic of sham ambassadors from Inner Asian kingdoms and the growth of out-of-control piracy and smuggling networks along the coast. There were no more embassies from Japan after 1548. The Ryukyu tribute window was decrepit long before the Satsuma conquest of those islands in 1609. The trade agreement with Altan Khan, de facto ruler of the Western tribes of the Mongols, in 1570 used tribute rhetoric but did not allow the Mongols to come to Beijing. The Portuguese were allowed to settle at Macao without establishing any kind of place in the tribute system. Tribute rhetoric would live on, and the precedents of the full-fledged system would remain in place for later statesmen and the Qing conquerors to consult, but never again was the tribute embassy the center of a system for the management of all foreign relations.

The Manchu rulers were descendants of one branch of the Jurchen people who had been the most adept and cynical exploiters of the Ming tribute system. They understood its rules very well and had the Ming precedents on hand to use as starting points in working out their policies, but, being themselves outsiders with their own language and culture, they could scarcely be expected to go along with the culturally sinocentric rhetoric of the tradition. The Dutch sent three embassies in the early Qing dynasty and the Portuguese two. They were treated as tribute embassies and conformed to all the ceremonial routines but accomplished little for those who sent them. Court literati wrote poems about a lion brought all the way from Mozambique by the Portuguese embassy of Bento Pereira de Faria in 1678, and it gave the Kangxi emperor a chance to show favor to his court Jesuits and to Macao. But in 1684 the Qing dynasty moved to open trade in its ports to all foreigners regardless of their relation to the tribute system. This was the origin of the famous Canton (Guangzhou) trade of the eighteenth century; despite occasional pictures of Europeans in compendia on tributaries, their trade was institutionally completely separated from the tribute embassy matrix.

## Unbending Resistance

Two more Portuguese embassies in the eighteenth century were received as tribute embassies and accomplished nothing for the beleaguered Catholic missions.





**Detail of a Dunhuang cave painting, most likely portraying the monk Xuanzang returning from India with the white elephant given to him by Emperor Harsha. Exotic animals were often given as tribute to the Chinese rulers.**

The famous embassy of Lord Macartney in 1793 was a British initiative, an effort to enlighten China concerning the wonders of open trade and European science. The ambassador's resistance to the required ceremonies, especially the three kneelings and nine prostrations of the *ketou* (kowitz), became iconic in European-U.S. perceptions of a China mired in tradition and self-regard. The Qing dynasty was glad to find more compliant Europeans in the Dutch embassy of Titsingh and Van Braam in the years from 1794 to 1796 and in dealing with several more British and Russian embassies was anxious not to give any openings for Macartney-style resistance to the accustomed ceremonies.

The amazing widening of Qing control in Inner Asia in the course of the eighteenth century was a result of

activist organization and leadership that owed much to the Manchus' Inner Asian heritage and very little to the institutions and attitudes of the tribute system. Garrisons and resident administrators, assignment of grazing territories, and management of legal cases reaching all the way up to Beijing were key mechanisms; Inner Asian subordinate rulers might pay symbolic tribute, often of fine horses, to the emperor, but this was not the focus of their relation to the Qing dynasty.

The tribute system continued to be central in management of relations with Korea, Ryukyu, Annam (modern Vietnam), Siam, and Burma (modern Myanmar). Korea sent several embassies every year; it, Ryukyu, and Annam all had genuine affinities with Chinese elite culture, and their ambassadors exchanged poems in

classical Chinese while they were in Beijing. No regular formal communication existed between Qing China and Tokugawa (1600/1603–1868) Japan. The Siamese connection, astutely managed by émigré Chinese, facilitated the import to south China of substantial quantities of Siamese rice, exempted from import duties. When both Siam and Annam experienced major collapses of order in the late eighteenth century, the tribute system provided a matrix for reestablishment of normal relations. This was especially striking in the Annam case, where the Qing dynasty launched an ill-advised intervention in support of the collapsing Lê dynasty in 1788 and then had to accept the victorious Tây Sơn rebels as the new kings of Annam and then their conquerors, the new Nguyễn dynasty. Émigré Chinese advisors again were important, especially in the later, Nguyễn phase of the transition. Thus, in these cases a tribute connection seemed to have been of real use and to have revived under the new dynasty of foreign rulers, but the difficulties of the Annam changes probably also contributed to the anxiety with which the Qing rulers confronted the resistance to traditional ceremonies by Macartney and those who came after him. The distant tribute relation with the rulers of Burma does not seem to have either hindered or helped the Qing dynasty in its inept and costly ventures across the Yunnan frontier.

In the nineteenth century the heritage of regional hegemony (influence) embodied in the tribute system led the Qing dynasty into unsuccessful resistance to French conquest in Vietnam and Japanese conquest in Korea. Siam made its own transition to modern diplomatic

standards and stopped sending embassies. The Ryukyus were fully incorporated into the Japanese state. European nations and the United States established resident diplomatic missions in Beijing after 1860 and were intensely opposed to any bit of language or protocol that might be a distant echo of the days when all foreign envoys reaching the capital would prostrate themselves in the great court before the Taihe Hall of the Palaces.

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