East Asian Order and China’s Role: 
A Historical Perspective

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China’s re-emergence onto the world stage poses a number of questions of interest to scholars, centering on China’s relations with the outside world. In this context, it has become all the more important to understand and grasp the Chinese way of thinking about the world. Increasingly, researchers realize that unless they dig deep into the infrastructure of China’s international behavior, they cannot fully understand the issue. Looking back is an essential means to look forward and hence there is a growing research interest and related literature in traditional Chinese thoughts on interstate relationships.  

This paper will attempt to reappraise traditional Chinese thinking in terms of China’s handling of external affairs by trying to find some common threads.

East Asian vs. European Order

Before the arrival of the Europeans in the sixteenth century, East Asia had for centuries maintained its own world order. In the English-speaking world, this order has been characterized as a ‘tributary system’. However, this term can be misleading as it leaves out some important aspects. For instance, the relationship was actually a two-way street, involving both feng 封 and gong 贡, and therefore is better called a feng-gong system rather than just one side paying tribute to the other, as the English term indicates.

Feng or ce feng was top down. The Chinese emperor conferred titles on the rulers of various Asian kingdoms or entities, who respected or accepted his authority. Gong or chao gong referred to the tribute those rulers sent, regularly or irregularly, via envoys to China. Usually the Chinese court would accept and react to this kind of visit by giving these envoys substantial gifts in return.

This formed a relational pattern of interactions. During its heyday, the rulers of those countries sent to China their entrusted officials (gong shi) bringing local products as national gifts (gong wu). They often followed specified routes (gong dao) to visit the Chinese court at regular intervals (gong qi). In turn, the Chinese emperor promulgated royal documents or offered titles to those foreign rulers when they established relationships with China or when they were about to enter office.

The concrete situation varied from time to time and from one dynasty to another, and the detailed arrangements might differ. However, generally speaking, this was the basic pattern of a series of bilateral relationships between China and its neighboring countries. The status of individual states as seen through China’s eyes differed to varying degrees depending on the degree of closeness of its relationship with the Chinese court. Those relationships formed a seemingly China-centric state system.

The question is how real those relationships were. As John King Fairbank has pointed out, ‘Tribute, which had originally meant tax payments, generally came to consist of ceremonial presents, typically of local products (fang wu).’  

Therefore, the term ‘tribute system’ is itself misleading as it implies a superior–subordinate relationship according to which the latter had to...
‘pay tribute’ based on China’s dominance. In fact, foreign countries were generally seeking contacts and engagement with China, but they were regarded and recorded in Chinese official records as tributaries. In the Chinese external order, the rulers of those countries were subjects of the Chinese monarch. Those outer ‘subjects’ who had accepted titles and seals, in one way or another, were obliged to pay tribute, be presented at court, send troops for fighting when necessary, and/or defend his own country—and therefore China’s security. In the meantime, they enjoyed the benefits of favorable trade with China, received rewards, and were protected.

In this East Asian model of world order, the status of foreign countries appeared lower. They might genuinely have a heartfelt admiration of Chinese civilization and culture, and some of them might therefore have been completely willing to accept the higher authority of the Chinese emperor. For many years, Korea seemed to belong to this category. However, more often these countries tended just to be nominal vassals and the ‘tributary’ relationships were simply ceremonialized in nature. For the foreign countries, the relations were maintained largely for the sake of economic benefit, through the so-called ‘tributary trade’. The importance of this trade could vary for different countries and the issue remains to be further researched.

Irrespective of whether there was such a thing as ‘tributary trade’, Fairbank has insightfully touched upon the nature of the ‘tribute system’ by pointing out that:

One well-marked feature of this tradition was its preservation of the theory of Sino-centrism by the constant use of Sino-centric terminology, as was evidenced in all aspects of the tribute system, which indeed by Ming and Ch’ing times was partly preserved by means of terminology. Outside countries, if they were to have contact with China at all, were expected and when possible obliged to do so as tributaries. Thus their trade must be regarded as a boon granted their ruler by the emperor and must be accompanied by the formalities of presenting tribute through missions to Peking. Economic relations could be formally permitted only within this political framework. In the last resort, even if the foreigner did not actually comply with the forms of tribute, the terminology of tribute would be applied to him in the Chinese record nevertheless. The case of Lord Macartney in 1793, who only bent the knee before the Ch’ien-lung Emperor but was recorded as prostrating himself in the kotow, was not unique.3)

Undoubtedly, conferring titles of nobility or paying tribute, whether regularly or irregularly, contained within it apparent unequal elements. The practice of the Chinese court conferring titles on foreign rulers was a top-down relationship, i.e. a superior to inferior relationship, while paying tribute was bottom-up, from inferior to superior. The characterization of the relationship, at least in China, also revealed inequality. For example, during the Qing dynasty, China was above Vietnam (shang guo) in status, and the latter was the subordinate country (xia guo).

However, those inequalities did not hamper the independence of each Asian country. Imperial China and the other Asian states all enjoyed their autonomy. Each of them had its own people, territory, and government, and thus had essential sovereignty, although the idea of ‘sovereignty’ had yet to travel from Europe. In the relationship between traditional China and a neighboring country within the ‘tributary system’, China respected the independence of the ‘countries below’ and thus did not impose upon what the other party was reluctant to do or what was not acceptable to it. However, while they turned to China for assistance, China did not treat them with indifference, but rather tried to offer what it was capable of supplying. This was based on the element of responsibility inherent in the relationship, namely the responsibility that China bore to offer assistance and protection when it was so approached.

The degree of strength of China’s relations varied over time and between different dynasties. The tie was stronger when the Chinese rulers governed a prosperous and powerful country. It
became weaker when China fortunes waned and the balance of power was not in the Chinese emperor’s favor. Throughout a long history, except for the unsuccessful direct conquest of Korea and Vietnam during the Yuan dynasty when the Mongols ruled a vast piece of land on the Eurasian continent, the Chinese emperor usually adopted a formula of ‘reigning but not ruling’ when dealing with other Asian countries who were maintaining a ‘tributary’ relationship with China. China mostly sought a more symbolic ‘reigning’ rather than a genuine ‘ruling’. Of much significance if one is to grasp the essence of the relationship are the Chinese expressions of ‘subordinating but not governing’ (chen er bu zhi) and ‘neither subordinating nor governing’ (bu chen bu zhi), much in the sense of famous ji mi or ‘loose rein’ policy.

In fact, paying tribute used to be a widespread practice in Asian interstate relations, not only between China and other Asian countries, but also between and among other Asian states, to promote trade and manage ties with stronger states. Examples include, but are not limited to, kingdoms on Malacca and the Malay Peninsula. Malacca’s Parameswara in the early 1400s paid tribute to both Siam and Majapahit to appease them. And to prevent his immediate neighbors from attacking Malacca, Parameswara also paid tribute to the Ming empire in China. Moreover, according to Anthony Reid, ‘almost all of the rulers of small rivers in the (Malay) peninsula sent the “golden flowers” (bunga mas) of tribute to Siam intermittently from the 15th century to the 19th’.

The various tributary connections in Asia formed a number of webs, big and small. The real picture was not just one big web, as has often been mistakenly described or understood, but rather multiple webs. Another good example is that while the Vietnamese ruler claimed himself a subject vis-à-vis the Chinese emperor, he also proclaimed himself to be an emperor vis-à-vis the rulers of several smaller kingdoms in the region.

This kind of relationship and the explicit or implicit rules that helped maintain the East Asian order over a long period of time profoundly differed from the European order after the Peace of Westphalia. By the time the Qing dynasty was founded in 1644, in Europe the Thirty Years War was nearing its end and the Peace of Westphalia was established in 1648. In the case of early modern Europe, the kings, based on their earlier victories over the Church, further consolidated their power base and established secular authority over religious forces. They regarded each other as equals, and equality became a crucial principle in the handling of their relations. Wars were waged and these, in turn, consolidated the European states. In East Asia, however, there was a Chinese empire, as well as a number of smaller Asian states. For the Chinese court, things worked as normal when the foreign envoys practiced the rituals as they were expected to do. The Chinese emperor might be satisfied with the relationship and enjoy the arrangements. For him, China was at the center and things were operating in their orbit accordingly. It was not a bad situation, so long as the parties were satisfied with the status quo and the pattern of interactions.

However, Lord Macartney’s encounter with China in 1793 was an important harbinger of change. During the visit, the Qing officials insisted that the visiting envoy from afar should kneel down before the Qianlong emperor, just as other foreign envoys did. When that was rejected, a compromise was reached: Macartney was only required to bend one knee before the emperor. However, it was still recorded by the Chinese as Macartney prostrating himself in the kotow. Unfortunately, that episode of China’s encounter with the West did not awaken the Chinese rulers, who were totally ignorant of the Industrial Revolution and of capitalist development in Western Europe. The existing order continued in East Asia, until the European powers’ gunboats brought about a collapse of the previously self-sustaining order of East Asia.

The Rationales for the East Asian Order

For a certain kind of order to operate for many centuries, there must be some cohesive glue
or working principles to organize relationships. This had much to do with the ideas governing ancient China’s domestic political order.

The Chinese emperor, self-identified as the Son of Heaven, exercised his rule in accordance with the degree of geographical and political closeness. For historian Gao Mingshi, that was a concentric arc structure, comprising three circles, with the Son of Heaven at the very center. The inner circle included the areas directly under rule, where the elements of zheng (governance), xing (punishment), li (rites), and de (virtue) all could reach. Through education and transformation, those areas were fully civilized and administratively integrated. The outer subject (wai chen) areas included ji mi (‘loose rein’) regions. Interactions in the outer areas consisted of both feng and gong, and involved zheng, li, and de. In the ‘loose rein’ regions, there was gong but without feng, and involved li and de. The Chinese court employed zheng, li, and de as the tools to constrain and induce the ‘barbarian’ areas, but did not rule those regions and their people directly. These areas, in turn, had no obligations to pay land tax and other levies.7

The more distant areas did not claim to be subjects at all. They were without question ‘foreign’ countries in the modern sense. Taken together, the three circles were an expanded concentric arc structure. The nature of the relationship depended on how close the ‘foreign’ areas were to the Son of Heaven, both geographically and politically. The relationship was in fact extended from that between the prince and the subject domestically. Its degree relied on whether or to what extent the foreign ruler submitted himself to the Chinese emperor. The further they were from the center, the weaker the political link between them. For those remote areas, what was left often was simply an empty shell that only existed in theory. However, as long as those countries continued to send missions which brought tribute, it was understood that they recognized the noble emperor as the ‘common ruler under the heaven’ as well as their identification with the Chinese culture. This kind of thought and practice actually put more emphasis on name rather than on substance.

The question that has to be addressed is: why did China and the other countries in the region want to establish and keep this kind of relationship? The rationales came from both sides. From the Chinese perspective, at least two factors can be identified. First, once the feng-gong relationship gradually took shape, it became a tradition as well as something that a new Chinese ruler liked to inherit. This system played to the vanity of the Chinese emperors: foreign countries claiming an inferior status and sending envoys to pay tribute greatly pleased and satisfied the psychology and consciousness of being the ‘Son of Heaven’ and the ‘common ruler under the heaven’, irrespective of how much substance was actually involved in the relationship.

Second, and probably more important, was the particular security conception of ‘defense through barbarians’ (si yi). According to this concept, China’s security had much to do with si yi on the borders, and it needed to be maintained by keeping a proper relationship with the barbarians, often at arm’s length. Drawing on the experience of previous dynasties, a Ming dynasty senior official summarized this thought in a cool-minded manner. For him, a great Son of Heaven would defend the country via si yi. Mollifying the barbarians with de, convincing them with strength, and making them defend their own territories are the best options for China. The official cited historical precedent. Emperor Han Wu Di waged wars frequently, which only exhausted the country without bringing any real benefit. Emperor Sui Yang Di invaded Korea but that, in turn, resulted in uprisings at home. Even an emperor as wise as Tang Tai Zong regretted invading Korea and regarded this as a mistake. Those were all enlightening lessons; the key was achieving defense through si yi.8

We can thus sum up the crucial points of ‘defense through si yi’. First, distinguishing the internal and the external based on geography, and more importantly, based on the degree of cultural sinicization and advancement. The central court and the barbarians were required to
maintain order in their respective territories and thus keep an equilibrium. Second, a wise and effective way to deal with barbarians was using *li* and *ji mi* rather than resorting to the use of force. Third, conquering barbarians is not worth the effort. The Chinese court should not try to subjugate barbarians at the expense of its own people.

Therefore, attracting the surrounding neighbors and establishing a dependent state system was a practice of the security doctrine of ‘defense through *si yi*’. This practice shares some similarities with establishing a ‘buffer state’ in modern international relations. In China’s case, however, much more emphasis was put on resorting to more advanced civilization, moral authority, and wholehearted recognition of other parties. We will further elaborate those points below.

There are additional reasons why the outer or neighboring states were willing to form such a *feng-gong* relationship. First, for many centuries, China had been economically more developed and culturally more civilized. History suggests that the less developed and civilized people were naturally more inclined to turn to and learn from China. This mode of *feng-gong* practice was not imposed upon other countries. Rather, the other countries usually benefited from it. Secondly, having titles conferred by the Chinese emperor was a recognition and confirmation of the rulers’ domestic status as the supreme leader of their own lands, which was favorable to enhancing their prestige at home as well as strengthening their authority at home. Thirdly, the necessity for security, since conferring a title contained within it an element of promise. In doing so, the Chinese emperor bore some responsibility to support and protect the rulers upon whom he had conferred a title when they asked for assistance.

Another example of the system in action is maritime Southeast Asia. As Goh Sui Noi writes, to maritime Southeast Asia, China was a distant if powerful empire which was unthreatening. Indeed, Malacca paid tribute to Ming China to protect itself from its close neighbors. Various states also paid tribute to China to facilitate trade with the wealthy empire. Maritime Southeast Asia was shielded from the Chinese by states which shared borders with it, by forbidding mountains and by the ‘Imperial aversion to the sea’. For Vietnam and Myanmar, which shared a long border with China, paying tribute was a means to keep China at bay. For example, the Vietnamese, after each showdown with China, would restore formal relations through tribute.9

On the Chinese part, the formation of this kind of relationship had deep roots in Chinese thought with regard to dealing with neighbors. The Confucian classic text, *The Works of Mencius*, has an important statement on the proper way of handling foreign relations and proper corresponding mutual behavior between big and small states:

> The King Seuen of Tse asked, ‘Is there any way to regulate one’s maintenance of intercourse with neighboring kingdoms?’ Mencius replied, ‘There is. But it requires a perfectly virtuous prince to be able, with a great country, to serve a small one, —as, for instance, Tang served Ko, and King Wan served the Kwan barbarians. And it requires a wise prince to be able, with a small country, to serve a large one, —as the King Tae served the Heun-yuh, and Kow-tseen served Woo. He who with a great state serves a small one, delights in Heaven. He who with a small state serves a large one, stands in awe of Heaven. He who delights in Heaven, will affect with his love and protection the whole empire. He who stands in awe of Heaven, will affect with his love and protection his own kingdom.’

This can be further traced back to at least *Zuoizhuan* which states, ‘The reason small serves big is *xin* 信 (trustworthyness), while the reason big serves small is *ren* 仁 (humane). It’s not *xin* to betray big; it’s not *ren* to attack small.’ In other words, a smaller country should treat a bigger country with honesty, while a bigger country should treat a smaller one on the basis of *ren*. This, in fact, was an extension of the Confucian principles governing China’s internal social and political order. Anthony Reid came to a similar conclusion:
The history of Asia provides the richest examples of how to manage unequal relationships—essentially by giving face, in the sense of dignity and centrality, to the bigger power, and reassuring the smaller one that its autonomy and independence will be respected.\(^{11}\)

That being said, one question inevitably emerges: what explains China’s historical interventionist behavior? Addressing that issue, Wang Gungwu has pointed out two kinds of situations. First, he reminds us of ‘the traditional pattern of Chinese relations with the region whereby China often offered to protect small states against bigger ones in the vicinity. We can cite many such examples along the Chinese border from earliest times.’ \(^{12}\) Second, he gained some insight by studying China’s overseas world during the reign of Yongle (1402–1424) of the Ming dynasty. In his imperial injunctions, Yongle’s father, the first Ming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang, had explicitly laid down that the Chinese were never to invade certain countries. There was a long list of these countries and it included Vietnam. Yet Yongle went against these injunctions and invaded Vietnam. For Wang,

This seemed not to have been for territorial purposes but was, in a way, an intervention to protect a royal family, royal prerogatives or royal rights, … In the invasion into Vietnam, Yongle intervened to place the legitimate ruler of Vietnam on the throne against a usurper.\(^{13}\)

In other words, one reason was protecting the small state, and the other reason was safeguarding what the Chinese court thought was the legitimate order.

**A Transformed ‘Tianxia’ Theory Debated**

Now we come to the ‘tianxia’ (literally, ‘under heaven’) concept that has re-emerged recently and is the subject of debate both inside and outside China. In April 2005, a Chinese philosopher, Zhao Tingyang, published a short but important book, *Tianxia Tixi*.\(^{14}\) It soon aroused lively discussions and drew considerable attention from the Chinese international relations community. The next year, Wang Gungwu chose ‘Tianxia and Empire: External Chinese Perspectives’ as the topic for his inaugural Tsai Lecture at Harvard, bringing this concept to the wider English-speaking world.

By reviving the idea of tianxia, Zhao attempted to rediscover and emphasize the usefulness and significance of China’s intellectual legacy, i.e. the tianxia idea. For Zhao, the tianxia idea is a highly significant conception not only for China, but also for the whole world. Through his rediscovery and reinterpretation, Zhao has promoted tianxia as ‘a philosophy for the world institution’. Zhao’s supporters warmly embraced his reinterpretation and development, while his opponents offered sharp criticisms.\(^{15}\) In any case, the exchange provides researchers with an excellent opportunity to re-examine the traditional Chinese concept of tianxia to see how useful it can be for the world’s future.

Like other key Chinese concepts, tianxia has multiple meanings. Having examined its connotation in different contexts, I argue that we can distinguish four of its subtle meanings as follows.

First is geographical tianxia. This is its original and basic meaning, and is obvious. During the Zhou dynasty, people had already begun to understand the world they lived in according to position. Their perception of the center and the four directions later became a fundamental element in the tianxia view of China. From the very beginning, tianxia seemed to have narrower and broader meanings. While the broader one meant all places under the sun, the
narrower usage simply referred to zhongguo (China) within the four seas.

Second is tianxia in the political sense, meaning the regime and sometimes referring to the nation. ‘Tianxia’ has been widely used in this sense in Chinese discourse. Phrases include ‘de (gaining) tianxia’, ‘zhi (governing) tianxia’, and ‘da (fighting for) tianxia’. Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Chinese republic, put forward a famous motto ‘tianxia weigong’ (‘tianxia for the public’). For Zhao, that means tianxia is the people’s tianxia and people work for their common tianxia. The opposite is ‘jia tianxia’, meaning regarding tianxia as one’s private property.

The third is cultural tianxia. This is a profound use of tianxia. The important contributions that the Zhou dynasty made to the tianxia idea went far beyond merely inheriting a rather mechanical view of position from the preceding Shang dynasty. The Zhou dynasty gave birth to a cultural view of tianxia. The Zhou people made an important distinction between themselves who were culturally more advanced, called huaxi (华夏), and the surrounding regions that were thought of as culturally more backward. This indicates that early on, the Chinese already saw their country as a cultural entity, rather than a political entity. The surrounding ‘barbarians’ had better accept the influence of huaxia’s cultural, ethical, and legal systems. However, what is important here is that no imposition of huaxia culture was advocated because the way to exert that influence was by way of example.

This also highlighted China’s cultural confidence, long held by Chinese rulers and scholar-officials alike. Long before the term ‘soft power’ was coined, using China’s cultural attractiveness in dealing with foreigners had already been advocated and practiced. There was one thing that distinguished China’s behavior from that of the Christian states. While the latter were inclined to spread religious belief and impose Christianity upon other parts of the world, even by resorting to the use of force, in order to achieve security through converting non-Christians to Christianity, China chose to show itself as an example for others to choose for themselves. Such a tradition in foreign relations is a crucial thread that can be traced to early Chinese history and can lead us to understand China’s future trajectory.

Fourth is moral tianxia, by and large referring to the common aspiration of the people. There is a difference between a regime that possesses certain territory and one that also satisfies ordinary people’s needs and makes it possible for them to know about honor or disgrace and to have propriety. Only when both demands are met can it be called ‘safeguarding tianxia’. Thus, ‘losing the regime’ is different from ‘losing tianxia’. For example, when it was overthrown in 1644, the Ming dynasty not only lost its regime, but also lost the popular will of its people.

Therefore, tianxia is both an idea and an ideal. As an idea, it is a framework that incorporates geographical, political, and cultural elements. As an ideal, it aims at eventually heading for tianxia yijia (literally, one family under the sun) which is an all-inclusive (wuwai) order. Within the framework, no distinction is made between the internal and external, but rather simply a process of extending the same principles and ideals from inner to outer as a continuum, which ends up with a whole that combines the near and the distant, namely a tianxia order.

We have demonstrated that the Chinese view of tianxia has a long history and a rich tradition. The idea originated in the Zhou period and matured in the Qin and Han periods. As an intellectual framework in which position, level, and cultural perspectives converge into one concept, it lasted for over 2,000 years and maintained an amazing continuity. Its prominent feature has been that the Chinese always keep with them an ideal beyond reality. Given that there is indeed a rich Chinese tradition of tianxia, the question now becomes: building on the historical tianxia idea, what should be inherited and further developed? In that regard, Zhao’s efforts of reinterpreting the tianxia idea and adapting it to today’s world should therefore be given credit. William A. Callahan has criticized Zhao by stating that proposals for a ‘post-hegemonic’ system often contain the seeds of a new (and often violent)
system of inclusion and exclusion: Tianxia presents a popular example of a new hegemony where imperial China’s hierarchical governance is up-dated for the twenty-first century.\(^{19}\)

However, this criticism is mistaken because the *tianxia* idea is unquestionably inclusive rather than exclusive. Also, Callahan wrongly takes it for granted, without the necessary supporting evidence, that a reinvigorated *tianxia* concept is politically related to, if not geared toward, a ‘new hegemony’. In fact, the transformed *tianxia* idea has intellectual and theoretical value exactly because it is a scholarly rather than a political enterprise.

Now we come to an assessment of Zhao’s efforts. As his point of departure, Zhao argues,

Because China is increasingly an integral part of the world, we must discuss the implications of Chinese culture and thought for the whole world. ... What needs to be studied are the contributions China can possibly make to and the responsibilities China should bear for the world.\(^{20}\)

For Zhao, if the serious self-criticisms and even severe self-attacks over the past one and a half centuries were a movement to ‘examine China’, then ‘rethinking China’ has been the most important intellectual movement since the 1990s, and is intellectually more deep-seated and scholarly as well as much more profound. Moreover, in today’s China there is no shortage of all kinds of Western ideas. What is lacking is China’s own overall thinking and holistic thought. The historical implications of ‘rethinking China’ lie at the efforts to revive China’s own capability of thinking and to rethink China’s place in the world. In other words, this is to think about China’s road ahead, as well as China’s role and responsibility in the world.\(^{21}\)

Zhao argues that China’s world view is the *tianxia* theory. China’s world view of *tianxia* is above and beyond the level of the ‘state’. While Western thought thinks of conflict, Chinese thought is capable of thinking of harmony. Distinct ideas do exist and they can serve as an important and constructive anchor for the world’s future. They cannot be expressed within the Western intellectual framework, and thus they need to be displayed in a new framework and to be developed into a new theory.\(^{22}\) Again, for Zhao, the option is the *tianxia* theory. Especially important in this theory is the principle of ‘all-inclusive’ (*wuwai*) which can help eliminate a stubborn flaw in Western thought, i.e. the ‘enemy assumption’ or the ‘politics of separation’, developed from the ‘pagan awareness’ which is based on religious irrationality. On the contrary, *tianxia* is a theory of converting enemy to friend. It advocates conversion (*hua*) which is a way to attract others rather than to conquer them.\(^{23}\)

Zhao’s reinterpretation of *tianxia* is stimulating and thought provoking. Two of his main points can be stressed: (i) *tianxia* is a larger and a more desirable unit of analysis for us to look at the world as it goes beyond the state; and (ii) *tianxia* is a philosophy and a world view that can hopefully lead to the ideal of *tianxia*, one home.

In the world of today, humankind is faced with enormous challenges and problems in different parts of the globe, including those concerning conflict and development. The Western model has encountered various frustrations in that regard. Very often, the West tends to apply elections, as reduced from Western-style democracy, to everywhere in the world, as if this is a panacea. Practice over the past years has suggested that this does not work well, and in some cases this has even given rise to more problems, such as intensifying ethnic strife. There is an increasing demand in the world for new ways to redress the balance. Against this backdrop, an emerging school of thought argues that the *tianxia* idea may provide for an alternative way of thinking about various kinds of relationships in the world and of finding a new and more constructive way forward. In this sense, *tianxia* theory has a potential to make a difference in tomorrow’s intellectual world.
Conclusion

For many centuries, when different parts of the world were ignorant of each other, East Asia operated on its own track and formed a distinct regional order. Thus East Asia and Europe had two contrasting types of regional systems. China, because of the advancement of its civilization as well as its economic prosperity and technological development, emerged as a leading state in Asia and was often attractive to the surrounding countries, who, for whatever motive, wanted to seek a relationship and connection with China. However, to characterize the traditional East Asian order as a ‘tributary system’ is misleading. This is because the foreign countries usually sought connections with the Chinese court in order to gain economic and material benefits, especially when they were offered favorable tax waiver status. In fact, ‘paying tribute’ mostly involved presenting local products as presents. Moreover, the way foreign countries perceived this relationship with China might differ significantly from the way China recorded it. The Chinese rulers did confer titles to the new kings of the foreign countries when there was a change of leadership, and they might be complacent as this made them feel good. On the other hand, foreign envoys were sent to China, bringing ‘tribute’ to the Chinese emperor. Very often, China made efforts to maintain this relationship by offering more and taking less. At times it could afford to do this, and at other times it could not. In the latter case, China had to limit or reduce the frequency of the ‘tributary’ visits. In fact, this kind of relationship was more symbolic than substantive.

To understand the traditional Chinese theory of foreign relations, which took shape over centuries, it is essential for us to understand the traditional order in East Asia and its organizing principles, particularly that of de and li. By and large, they are an expansion of China’s domestic political principles. To understand traditional Chinese theory is also of great importance to understanding contemporary China’s international behavior. There are many puzzling questions in that regard. In 1962, when invading Indian troops who were encroaching Chinese territory were defeated, why did the Chinese leadership order its army to withdraw to 20 kilometers further inside China than the original control line? In 1979, why did China decide to wage a war against Vietnam to teach it a ‘lesson’? Besides alleviating the heavy pressure on Kampuchea and counterbalancing a ‘regional hegemonism’, what was behind the thinking of ‘teaching somebody a lesson’? Those puzzles have answers in part once we have understood that one key factor that traditionally drove China’s foreign behavior was ‘righting the order’. Probably in the eyes of China, both India’s and Vietnam’s behavior violated the right principle that constituted a normal order, and therefore they had to be dealt with. This may be a new hypothesis for future research. In the meantime, China did not want to grab any land from foreign countries, another interesting state of mind, because no ‘barbarian land’ was desirable since it was often more a liability rather than an asset.

In the 21st century, it is out of the question to restore the so-called ‘tributary system’ in Asia in any form. However, it is useful to grasp and remold traditional Chinese theory of foreign relations, eliminate its component of inequality, and carry on with its positive elements. Here is the key: countries, big or small, who have different but equal values, should find their own appropriate places in their relationships and they should treat each other in line with li, which includes both norm and respect, to achieve harmony between and among them. Although no order is perfect in social and political life, countries can in this way expect a reasonably just order.

Notes
1) One recent example is Yan Xuetong and Xu Jin, eds., Zhongguo xianqin guojia jian zhengzhi sixiang xuandu [Pre-Qin Chinese Thoughts on Foreign Relations]. Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2008.
3) Ibid., p. 4.
6) For Spence, ‘the tributary system sputtered to its end in the late 1820s and 1830s’. See Jonathan D. Spence, Chinese Roundabout: Essays in History and Culture. New York and London: Norton, 1992, p. 84. By making this statement, Spence uses the Opium War of 1840 as a demarcation line. In fact, elements of the ‘tributary system’ lingered in one way or another until late in the 19th century.
7) Gao Mingshi, Tianxia zhiyu yu wenhuaquan de tansuo [Exploring the Tianxia Order and Cultural Areas]. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2008, pp. 22–23. Note the foreign relations Gao describes were that during the Sui and Tang dynasties.
9) Goh Sui Noi, above n. 4.
11) Quoted in Goh Sui Noi, above n. 4.
13) Ibid., p. 302.
16) Zhao Tingyang, above n. 14, p. 30.
20) Zhao Tingyang, above n. 14, pp. 2–3.
21) Ibid., pp. 6–7.
22) Ibid., pp. 15–16.
23) Ibid., p. 33.