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Early Chinese Diplomacy: *Realpolitik* versus the So-called Tributary System

SETTING THE STAGE: THE TRIBUTARY SYSTEM AND EARLY CHINESE DIPLOMACY

When dealing with early-imperial diplomacy in China, it is still next to impossible to escape the concept of the so-called “tributary system,” a term coined in 1941 by John K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng in their article “On the Ch’ing Tributary System.”¹ One year later, John Fairbank elaborated on the subject in the much shorter paper “Tributary Trade and China’s Relations with the West.”² Although only the second work touches briefly upon China’s early dealings with foreign entities, both studies proved to be highly influential for Yü Ying-shih’s *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations* published twenty-six years later.³ In particular the phrasing of the latter two titles suffices to demonstrate the three authors’ main points: foreigners were primarily motivated by economic

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¹ J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng, “On the Ch’ing Tributary System,” *HJAS* 6.2 (1941), pp. 135–246.

² J. K. Fairbank in *FEQ* 1.2 (1942), pp. 129–49.

³ Yü Ying-shih, *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-barbarian Economic Relations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U. of California P., 1967). Although Yü cited Fairbank and Teng’s “On the Ch’ing Tributary System” only on two occasions (p. 36, n. 1; p. 160, n. 103), the latter’s influence on Yü can hardly be overstated. This is best visible when Yü described the attitude of foreigners toward their obligation to render tribute to the Han Chinese court: “From the economic point of view, it is well known that the barbarians always took the tribute as a cloak for trade.” (p. 59). His choice of words (also see p. 144) immediately evokes the headline “Tribute as a Cloak for Trade” of John Fairbank’s “Tributary Trade and China’s Relations with the West” (pp. 138–39); Yü obviously considered Fairbank’s arguments to be common knowledge, otherwise he would have pointed his readers to Fairbank’s article, which is absent in his bibliography. At this point it is also worth noting that Yü did not alter his view of the tributary system in later works; for references, see n. 16, below.

interests to engage with China in diplomatic exchange, whether it was as late as the Qing dynasty (1644–1911 AD) or as early as the Western, or Former, Han period (206 BC–9 AD).

The impact of Fairbank's initial arguments on subsequent generations of scholars of various fields of study was so strong that the validity of the tributary system as an analytical concept is still being vigorously debated today.⁴ Especially scholars of Ming (1368–1644 AD) and Qing international relations are not only trying to come to terms with Fairbank's legacy, but are searching for ways to understand what the future of Chinese foreign policy might look like. For instance, stimulated by the work of Brantly Womack, the idea of "asymmetric relationships" has recently come into focus.⁵ In 2008, John E. Wills organized a conference with the explicit goal to gauge the merit of Womack's approach.⁶ The participants unanimously agreed that the notion of a tributary system in the sense pursued by Fairbank is certainly outdated. Yet, there was no consensus as to whether the "asymmetry model" is better suited to explain late-imperial foreign relations. James Hevia, for example, argued that "modernist models of behavior and institutional forms such as the state are projected onto the past." Instead he wished to apply so-called "scales of forms." These are "complex entities made up of overlapping classes" that could either engage in "dialectical" or "eristical relationships." The former term describes situations in which parties progress from disagreement to agreement, while the latter refers to situations in which parties disagree from the very beginning and eventually try to

⁴ John King Fairbank revisited the subject of Chinese diplomacy more than twenty years later by editing and contributing to the widely cited *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1968); there, in "A Preliminary Framework" (pp. 1–19), Fairbank maintained his initial stance on the late imperial tributary system by asserting "the informal interplay of economic interests still went on" (p. 12).

⁵ See, for instance the following several works of Brantly Womack: *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (N.Y.C.: Cambridge U.P., 2006); "Asymmetry Theory and China's Concept of Multipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary China* 13 (2004), pp. 351–66; "Recognition, Deference, and Respect: Generalizing the Lessons of an Asymmetric Asian Order," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 16.1–2 (2009), pp. 105–18 (reprinted in *Past and Present in China's Foreign Policy: From "Tribute System" to "Peaceful Rise,"* ed. John E. Wills, Jr. [Portland, Maine: Merwin Asia, 2010], pp. 97–110); and "Asymmetry and China's Tributary System," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5.2 (2012), pp. 37–54. The latter is a response to Zhou Fangyin, "Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4.2 (2011), pp. 147–78.

⁶ The proceedings were first published in *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 16.1–2 (2009) and shortly after revised and republished in Wills, ed., *Past and Present in China's Foreign Policy*. For the goals of the conference, see Wills, "Introduction," in *ibid.*, p. xiv. For Wills's earlier stance on the tributary system, see his *Pepper, Guns and Parleys: The Dutch East India Company and China, 1622–1681* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1974) and *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K'ang-shi, 1666–1687* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1984).

defeat one another. In Hevia's words, the "exchange of gifts between and among such entities was a rational practice through which complex polities constituted dialectical rather than eristical relations ... and attempted to organize each other into their own scale of forms, their own hierarchies of metaphysically meaningful orders."⁷ Peter Perdue favored colonialism over asymmetry. Asymmetry, he opined, does not accurately describe the Chinese case. An understanding of colonialism, on the other hand, that emphasizes the political and psychological aspects of bilateral relationships and deemphasizes economic factors (in other words, the exploited colony was but one of several possible types of colony), is, he suggested, a much better method to examine late-imperial foreign policy. Similar to European colonial powers, the Qing were an invading minority that felt morally superior to, and distanced itself from, the native population once they had expanded their rule to Central Eurasia, modern-day Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Taiwan. Although the newly acquired territories were centrally governed, it was the variety of local administrative units often run by indigenous personnel that kept the empire operative. In addition, the Qing encouraged frontier settlements. Despite the fact that resources were skimmed from the peripheries, exploitation was never a primary concern. With this in mind, Perdue was keen to remind his readers that the "colonial" structure ... was not static. This is a defect of all definitions that impose a fixed structure on a complex, dynamic system"; eventually, the Qing "did integrate its border regions fairly successfully."⁸

Any number of critical stances toward the-late imperial tributary system could be added here.⁹ None of the arguments, however, has resonated with scholars of *early* Chinese diplomacy. In interpreting the

⁷ James L. Hevia, "Tribute, Asymmetry, and Imperial Formations: Rethinking Relations of Power in East Asia," in Wills, ed., *Past and Present in China's Foreign Policy*, pp. 61–76, here pp. 67, 69–70, 72–73. In this essay, Hevia elaborates on ideas already developed in his *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke U.P., 1995).

⁸ Peter C. Perdue, "China and other Colonial Empires," in Wills, ed., *Past and Present in China's Foreign Policy*, pp. 77–96, here pp. 81–85, 88.

⁹ See, for instance, Nicola di Cosmo, "Kirghiz Nomads on the Qing Frontier: Tribute, Trade, or Gift-exchange?," in Nicola di Cosmo and Don J. Wyatt, eds., *Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries and Human Geographies in Chinese History* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp. 351–72, here 354–55; Zhang Feng, "Rethinking the 'Tribute System': Broadening the Conceptual Horizon of Historical East Asian Politics," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2 (2009), pp. 545–74, esp. p. 548, n. 8; John E. Wills, Jr., "How Many Asymmetries?: Continuities, Transformations, and Puzzles in the Study of Chinese Foreign Relations," in Wills, ed., *Past and Present in China's Foreign Policy*, pp. 13–30; and William A. Callahan, "Sino-speak: Chinese Exceptionalism and the Politics of History," *JAS* 71.1 (2012), pp. 33–56, who is especially critical of David C. Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (N.Y.C.: Columbia U.P., 2010).

tributary system, the more powerful role was and is still ascribed to so-called “barbarians” without much degree of differentiation, as we shall see in the following discussion. In general, the argument is that tribute (*gong* 貢) was rendered to the Han court because the emperors, in turn, lavishly reciprocated with gifts of gold, silk, and grain.¹⁰ This interpretation has reduced Han authorities to passive (re)actors who accepted immense costs – sometimes even abuse and humiliation – purely on the grounds of a *sentiment* of superiority. By delivering tribute, foreigners formally recognized Han suzerainty and consequently the emperor’s claim to universal rule.¹¹ Such arguments were based on the presumption that an analysis of the dealings of the Western Han with the constantly aggressive Xiongnu 匈奴 “would be sufficient to reveal its [that is, the Han dynasty’s] basic attitude toward the barbarians in general.”¹² Thus, the court’s crucial shift from a *heqin* 和親 policy (“harmony [through a familial notion of] relations”) to the tributary system determined not only Han diplomacy, but also the way it was perceived since *Trade and Expansion* appeared in 1967.¹³

¹⁰ See, for instance, Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, pp. 39; 59; Zhang Yongjin, “System, Empire and State in Chinese International Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 27.5 (2001), pp. 43–63, esp. 52–53; Zhang Yongjin and Barry Buzan, “The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5 (2012), pp. 3–36, esp. 20; Martin Stuart-Fox, *A Short History of China and Southeast Asia: Tribute, Trade and Influence* (Crow’s Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003), esp. 19–22; Stuart-Fox, “Southeast Asia and China: The Role of History and Culture in Shaping Future Relations,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 26.1 (2004), pp. 116–39, esp. 124–27; Li Yunquan 李雲泉, *Chaogong zhidu shilun: Zhongguo gudai dui wai guanxi tizhi yanjiu* 朝貢制度史論，中國古代對外關係研究 (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 2004), esp. pp. 14–25.

One notable exception is Nicola di Cosmo, who has analyzed the various ways the Western Han dealt with its border regions; see his “Han Frontiers: Toward an Integrated View,” *JAO* 129.2 (2009), pp. 199–214. Although Peter Perdue’s paper (see n. 8, above) was not yet available to di Cosmo, one can see several parallels in the approaches of both authors. Also see nn. 110 and 113, below.

¹¹ Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, pp. 39, 189, 194; also see n. 10, above, and my discussion, below.

¹² Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, p. 9. On the issue of the Xiongnu’s putative aggressiveness, see Nicola di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2002), pp. 161–205. Occasional raids and infringements on pastures occupied by Chinese people were the main reasons for the Xiongnu’s violent reputation in Chinese historiography and, by extension, most western and eastern scholarship. Di Cosmo has explained that the nomads were not inherently bad, but were forced to resort to drastic measures simply to survive (esp. pp. 178–90). Also see n. 15, below.

¹³ The so-called *heqin* arrangements have been studied in great detail. For a brief bibliography of research in Chinese, Japanese, and English, see Pan Yihong, “Marriage Alliances and Chinese Princesses in International Politics from Han through T’ang,” *AM* 3d ser. 10.1–2 (1997), pp. 95–131, esp. 96, n. 4; for a list of Western Han *heqin* treaties, see Sophia-Karin Psarras, “Han and Xiongnu: A Reexamination of Cultural and Political Relations (I),” *MS* 51 (2003), pp. 55–236, esp. 132–43. Michael Loewe has offered a brief account of the various coping strategies that were discussed at court before settling on the *heqin* policy; see his *Dong Zhongshu: A ‘Confucian’ Heritage and the Chunqiu fanlu* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 106–9.

The first *heqin* treaty between the Western Han and the Xiongnu was effected in 198 BC. It aimed to pacify the bellicose – if we choose to believe ancient Chinese texts our only, and thus inevitably biased, sources of written information – nomad confederacy by marrying a Chinese princess to their leader, the *shanyu* 單于 (sometimes also read *chanyu*). It also required the Han to extend annual provisions of silk and various kinds of foodstuff as well as to acknowledge the Xiongnu as a brotherly state.¹⁴ The measures obviously did not prevent the latter from raiding (newly established) Chinese borders every once in a while, causing the arrangements to be renegotiated on several occasions,¹⁵ always at increasing costs to the Chinese.¹⁶ Nevertheless, more than thirty years later the Xiongnu agreed to stay on their side of the Great Wall (“*chang cheng* 長城,” as termed in the Han sources),¹⁷ only to renege on their promise repeatedly. A new *heqin* treaty, for instance, was arranged following the intrusion of roughly 60,000 Xiongnu horsemen into Chinese territory in 160 BC.¹⁸

The forces at work were clearly identified. As Yü describes: “Under the *ho-ch'in* policy, economic intercourse between the Han court and the Hsiung-nu was rather a one-way traffic. The annual imperial

¹⁴ Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, p. 41; Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959; hereafter, *SJ*) 110, p. 2895; Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1962; hereafter, *HS*) 94A, p. 3756. Our main sources of information on the Xiongnu are two chapters entirely devoted to them; one is transmitted in *SJ* 110, the other in *HS* 94. The fact that both narratives are almost identical caused some doubts about authenticity; David B. Honey, for instance, has considered the received text of *HS* 94 to be the older version; see his “The Han-shu, Manuscript Evidence, and the Textual Criticism of the Shih-chi: The Case of the ‘Hsiung-nu lieh-chuan’,” *CLEAR* 21 (1999), pp. 67–97.

¹⁵ Nicola di Cosmo has demonstrated that the Chinese northern Warring States had increasingly penetrated the northern steppes by the fourth through third centuries BC, thus appropriating nomad *Lebensraum*; see his *Ancient China and Its Enemies*, esp. pp. 156–57, and n. 12, above.

¹⁶ Given present limitations, a comprehensive survey of Xiongnu-related scholarship cannot be provided here. However, the following titles introduce the most influential arguments. Yü Ying-shih mostly reiterated the arguments developed in *Trade and Expansion* in two subsequent articles: “Han Foreign Relations,” in Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, eds., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 1: The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C.–220 A.D.* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1986), pp. 377–462; and “The Hsiung-nu,” in Denis Sinor, ed., *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1987), pp. 118–49; Thomas J. Barfield, “The Hsiung-nu Federal Confederacy: Organization and Foreign Policy,” *JAS* 41.1 (1981), pp. 45–61; idem, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 32–84; di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies*, esp. pp. 161–317; Sophia-Karin Psarras, “Han and Xiongnu: A Reexamination of Cultural and Political Relations (I),” and idem, “Han and Xiongnu: A Reexamination of Cultural and Political Relations (II),” *MS* 52 (2004), pp. 37–93.

¹⁷ Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, p. 42; *SJ* 110, p. 2902; *HS* 94A, p. 3762. The exact year was 162 BC.

¹⁸ *HS* 94A, p. 3764; *SJ* 110, pp. 2903–4. Several further *heqin* arrangements were made in subsequent years.

gifts were normally not matched by barbarian tribute. Only occasionally did the Hsiung-nu present to the Chinese emperor one or two camels or horses.” The Han were bleeding valuable resources without any meaningful compensation. Consequently, “[t]he most important concern of the Han court was, therefore, how to put an end to the *ho-ch'in* relations, and to bring the Hsiung-nu into the framework of a Chinese dominated tributary system.” This involved the Xiongnu’s sending hostage princes and tribute to the emperor as well as regularly paying homage at court. As already implied by the citation above, the yielding of tribute was understood as reciprocation for huge amounts of Chinese gifts to the Xiongnu.¹⁹ Yet, things had changed drastically: “[T]he way in which ‘gifts’ were now sent to the Hsiung-nu differed considerably from the former *ho-ch'in* policy. Two obvious points may be made. First, Chinese ‘gifts’ were given, at least in theory, on a reciprocal basis. ... Second, unlike the *ho-ch'in* system, Chinese ‘gifts’ were not sent to the Hsiung-nu annually at a fixed amount agreed upon by both sides but only on request or when the *Shan-yü* attended the court.”²⁰ Ideological differences were considered responsible for the changes in concepts:

The superiority of the tributary system over its *ho-ch'in* predecessor, from the point of view of the Han court, lay primarily in the fact that the former, and only the former, could *politically* fit the various neighboring barbarians into the Chinese imperial order. Thus considered, the tributary system, as was applied to the barbarians in Han times, may be legitimately understood as no less than a logical extension of the Han imperial system to the realm of foreign relations. This dominant political feature of the system, it must be emphatically pointed out, is of vital importance to our understanding of Sino-barbarian economic relations in Han China. It explains, for example, why the ever-increasing demand for Chinese gifts on the part of the Hsiung-nu was considered unbearable by the court under the earlier *ho-ch'in* system, but acceptable, undesirable notwithstanding, under the later tributary system.²¹

¹⁹ Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, pp. 42–43. Earlier in his book (p. 39), the reciprocal exchange of “tributary products” and “imperial gifts” was even identified as a form of trade.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 46. Costs for gifts, nevertheless, increased steadily during the last half of the 1st c. BC. Yü (p. 47) presented an overview of silk given to the Xiongnu; he (pp. 61–64), moreover, estimated that by the time of Eastern Han, overall expenditures for the tributary system including military and administrative expenses reached a total of 32 billion bronze cash. Also see Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, p. 65.

²¹ Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, p. 39 (*italics* in the original).

What exactly this more suitable political framework of the tributary system entailed, becomes much clearer in a refined version of the same argument:

In a sense, the political principle behind the system may be understood as the acceptance of the Han imperial rule by the barbarians. The exchange of tribute and gift, the essential part of the system, was but a ritualistic expression of such political relations between the imperial government and the barbarians in economic terms.²²

Both statements highlight the capability of the tributary system to incorporate foreign entities into the Han Chinese *political* realm. By rendering tribute, alien parties recognized the legitimate right of the Chinese emperor to rule over them. Furthermore, the foreigners consented to become part of the Chinese *oikumene*; a point that has been decidedly emphasized by Yuri Pines over the past decade.²³

If, however, political submission truly was at the root of the tributary system, how could the Han court possibly have been willing to continuously extend more and more presents? If actual political power

²² Ibid., p. 189.

²³ On several occasions, Yuri Pines has emphasized that the “Great Unity” (*da yitong* 大一統) paradigm weighed heavily on the minds of preimperial thinkers and early-imperial statesmen. Ultimately, actual unity was achieved by the Qin conquest of the six remaining Warring States. Subsequently, the notion of Han rule over “All under Heaven” (*tianxia* 天下) came to dominate imperial ideology due to the impact of political figures such as Dong Zhongshu and his preference for the *Gongyang Tradition* (*Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳), the important commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋). See, for instance, Yuri Pines, “The One that Pervades the All’ in Ancient Chinese Political Thought: The Origins of ‘The Great Unity’ Paradigm,” *TP* 86.4–5 (2000), pp. 280–324; “Changing Views of *tianxia* in Imperial Discourse,” *OE* 43.1–2 (2002), pp. 101–16; “Beasts or Humans: Pre-imperial Origins of the ‘Sino-barbarian’ Dichotomy,” in Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran, eds., *Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2005), pp. 50–102, esp. 79–91; *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2012), pp. 11–43. Furthermore, see Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscription of Ch’in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2000), and Ye Haiyan 葉海煙, “Lun liang Han ‘da yitong’ guannian de zhixuexing: yi Dong Zhongshu de xin ruxue wei li” 論兩漢大一統觀念的哲學性, 以董仲舒的新儒學為例, *Zhexue yu wenhua* 哲學與文化 2003.9, pp. 5–17, esp. pp. 13–16. Pines’, Kern’s, and Ye’s main arguments on the ideological foundation of the Chinese empire are certainly very convincing. As stated below, it is, however, the explicit goal of this essay to raise awareness of the fact that we have to distinguish imperial ideology from actual policy (that is to say the little snippets of which we can glean from extant written sources). Political or philosophical arguments raised at the Han court, therefore, will only marginally be touched upon. A similar stance was recently taken by Hsieh Meiyu in her compelling dissertation “Viewing the Han Empire from the Edge,” unpub. Ph.D. diss. (Stanford University, 2011), esp. pp. 3–5; I am grateful to her for graciously presenting me with a copy. Moreover, see Michael Loewe, “The Case of Witchcraft in 91 B.C.: Its Historical Settings and Effect on Han Dynastic History,” *AMNS* 15.2 (1970), pp. 159–96, esp. 160, 168; Loewe, “The Cosmological Context of Sovereignty in Han Times,” *BSOAS* 65.2 (2002), pp. 342–49, esp. 345, 348.

was to be had over some foreign partners, raising expenditures would have been unnecessary to maintain peaceful relations. That there must have been another reason is all the more apparent in the way in which the tribute and gift exchanges were reduced to mere ritual cliché. Ritual certainly was a key component of Chinese politics. Yet, it did in no way equal political order. The exchanges were, rather, physical manifestations of a certain ideology. Thus, the preceding two quotations explain that an ideological perspective on tribute relations was indeed promoted. The Western Han court regarded nominal subordination expressed through the offering of tribute as more vital than actual political submission.

Although not stated explicitly, it is safe to assume that John Fairbank's work shaped the mindset visible in the statements of Yü Ying-shih, cited above. To Fairbank, the presentation of tribute, that is, formal subordination, first and foremost was a prerequisite to engage with foreign entities.²⁴

This, in principle, ideological foundation of the tributary system – as regarded from the perspective of the Han dynasty – is even more obvious when we consider that,

... rare products as tributary articles from the barbarians also had prestige value for the emperor. Tribute symbolized submission. Therefore, the extent to which the Chinese imperial rule was accepted by the barbarians was often judged by the variety of exotic curiosities in the emperor's possession. This explains why in Han fu, or "rhyme-prose" writings, which often have a political purport, the Han rule is praised among other things, for the possession of precious tributary articles including both jewelry and animals.²⁵

Tributary products arriving from all corners of the world were considered hard evidence of how far the rule of the mighty emperor extended. The fact that some people were stimulated to explicitly extol his exceptional achievements in flattering poems also implies a high degree of approval; a monarch in possession of such extraordinary objects surely had every heavenly ordained right to rule the empire.²⁶

²⁴ See, for instance, Fairbank and Teng, "Ch'ing Tributary System," pp. 138–39.

²⁵ Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, p. 194.

²⁶ In this line of reasoning, Fairbank's implicit influence on Yü Ying-shih is strongly felt; for comparison, see particularly Fairbank's "Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West," pp. 131–32. Subsequent scholarship obviously concurred; see for instance, Max Kaltenmark, "Religion and Politics in the China of the Ts'in and the Han," *Diogenes* 34 (1961), pp. 16–43, esp. 42–43, and more recently, Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: SUNY P., 1999), pp. 78, 289, 320, n. 94; also see the section of the present article titled "Pure Ideology?," below.

On closer inspection, everything is not as clear-cut as past scholarship would have us believe. This paper demonstrates how the prevalent understanding of the early stages of the tributary system is misleading, since it boils diplomatic interaction down to ideological motives on the part of the Chinese and economic interests on behalf of the so-called barbarians. A close reading of bilateral exchanges recorded in mainly historiographical sources concerned with the Spring and Autumn through Han periods will reveal that no explicit concept of a tributary system vested in some kind of ideology was developed during Han times. It will also show that no matter what political tendencies may have prevailed at both Han courts, early Chinese diplomacy clearly was guided by *Realpolitik*.²⁷ Nor was tribute exclusively rendered on the prospect of material profit. Brief theoretical reflections reveal that underlying presumptions of reciprocal tribute and gift exchanges are not visible in the sources at hand. Instead, it will be demonstrated that several methods of dealing with foreign entities were applied, usually in accordance with actual political needs. Besides “barbarian” hostages and audiences at the imperial court, marriage alliances – generally accepted to have constituted an elemental part of the *heqin* agreements – still fulfilled an important function. These different *modi operandi* were by no means inventions of the Han court or scholars, as the notion of the sudden substitution of the *heqin* treaties by the tributary system implies; these methods largely had been an integral part of Chinese foreign or interstate policy since at least the Spring and Autumn (722–481 BC) period. Whenever dealing with Han foreign policy, it is necessary to distinguish between imperial discourse and actual policy. Naturally, the latter also entailed warfare and various administrative measures to

²⁷ It is, for instance, well-documented that Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (ca. 197–104 BC), a fervent advocate of the *Gongyang zhuan*, was highly influential on court policy during the reign of emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BC). For this assessment, see, e.g., Sarah A. Queen, *From Chronicle to Canon: The Hermeneutics of the Spring and Autumn, according to Tung Chung-shu* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996), pp. 31–37. Yet, by proposing that the Xiongnu should send a hostage son to court even he adopted a pragmatic solution to the threat posed by the pastoral people. He clearly did not argue from a morally superior point of view (p. 35). Michael Loewe reached a rather similar conclusion, although he argued that connecting the Xiongnu “with heaven” was Dong’s ultimate goal; see his *Dong Zhongshu*, pp. 107–8. Moreover, for all the ritual prescriptions and “Sino-barbarian dichotomy” communicated in *Gongyang zhuan*, the subject of actual diplomacy is conspicuously absent; see Joachim Gentz, *Das Gongyang zhuan: Auslegung und Kanonisierung der Frühlings- und Herbstannalen (Chunqiu)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001), p. 264. Of course, all of this closely relates to what has been stated in n. 23, above. Imperial discourse on marriage alliances has recently been analyzed by Tamara T. Chin, “Defamiliarizing the Foreigner: Sima Qian’s Ethnography and Han-Xiongnu Marriage Diplomacy,” *HJAS* 70.2 (2010), pp. 311–54.

integrate foreign entities into the Chinese empire; regrettably, neither of which can be discussed in more detail here.²⁸

By including attitudes toward foreigners other than the Xiongnu, this study will moreover show that it is insufficient to limit one's analysis to the intercourse between the Western Han and the Xiongnu in order to develop a blueprint for all foreign relations, especially as far as their economic implications are concerned. While during periods of military superiority the Xiongnu may have been sufficiently powerful to enforce the giving of copious gifts, other parties were not. Yet, all non-Chinese remained in contact with China anyway. Historical works such as the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* record gifts extended to alien entities other than the Xiongnu or adversaries of equal military prowess only on comparably few occasions. As the general assumption goes, these were intended to reciprocate tribute offerings. Indeed, such imperial presents never directly related to presentation of tribute. As the following discussion will highlight, motives beyond economic gain inspired at least some foreigners to engage China in diplomatic exchange.

BEFORE THE TRIBUTARY SYSTEM: AN OUTLINE OF DIPLOMATIC STRATEGIES IN THE PRE-HAN PERIOD

Before delving into early Chinese foreign policy in earnest, some general reflections on how I understand and use the term "diplomacy" are in order. The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains diplomacy as "the management of international relations by negotiation: the method by which these relations are adjusted and managed by ambassadors and envoys; the business or art of the diplomatist." Whereas bilateral exchanges involving tribute, hostages, and the like might be construed as processes of negotiation, the second part of this definition is harder to conform to early China's reality (as portrayed in the written sources). Envoys (*shi* 使; *xingren* 行人) were employed by the end of the eighth century BC;²⁹ ambassadors and specialized diplomats were unknown

²⁸ See, for instance, Michael Loewe, "The Campaigns of Han Wu-ti," in Frank A. Kierman, Jr. and John K. Fairbank, eds., *Chinese Ways in Warfare* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1974), pp. 67–122; Victoria Tin-bor Hui "Toward a Dynamic Theory of International Politics: Insights from Comparing Ancient China and Early Modern Europe," *International Organization* 58.1 (2004), pp. 175–205; and idem, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2005), pp. 54–108; di Cosmo, "Han Frontiers."

²⁹ See Roswell S. Britton, "Chinese Interstate Intercourse before 700 B.C.," *The American Journal of International Law* 29.4 (1935), pp. 616–35, here pp. 624–25. Although outdated by now, the study deserves to be mentioned, as it was the first to introduce various ways of diplomatic interaction (see discussion below). For aspects of early Chinese international re-

until late in the nineteenth century AD.³⁰ Following John Joyce Broderick, early-twentieth-century explications conceived diplomacy “as the art of conducting relations between civilized nations.” Reluctant to judge diplomatic transactions that had occurred several hundred years ago by contemporary values, Broderick chose to eliminate the word “civilized” and regarded diplomacy “simply as the art of conducting international affairs between States.”³¹ It is mostly impossible to identify states in early China, let alone nations in the modern senses of the words. This constraint notwithstanding, we can appreciate the underlying sentiment of the notion. Thus, I perceive diplomacy as any kind of interaction between two or more politically independent entities that are intended to foster amicable relations. As far as diplomacy during the Spring and Autumn period is concerned, some scholars reject the idea of interstate relations having been international,³² a problem easily resolved by considering my explanation. The early “feudal” or regional states cannot possibly be regarded as nations, yet they have been political entities largely pursuing independent agendas.³³

In the past, the specific patterns of Spring and Autumn era interaction have rarely been analyzed and are still often only mentioned in passing. In a pioneering study, Roswell S. Britton nonetheless identified eight different modes by relying on *Zuo zhuan* records.³⁴ Between 722 and 703 BC, he counted fifteen conferences (*hui* 會) that served to decide upon matters of peace and war, to reaffirm friendly relations, and to arrange marriages between ruling houses. Court visits or audiences

lations (656–221 BC) that cannot be discussed in detail here, see Hui’s work cited in the preceding note.

³⁰ See Owen Wong Hong-hin, “Kuo Sung-tao and the Establishment of Chinese Consulates Abroad,” *Chinese Culture* 26.3 (1985), pp. 41–57.

³¹ John Joyce Broderick, “Diplomacy,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 10.1 (1924), pp. 68–84, here p. 68.

³² Xu Jieliang 徐杰令, “Lun Chunqiu bang jiao de shidai tedian” 論春秋邦交的時代特點, *Guanzi xuekan* 管子學刊 2005.4, pp. 77–82, here p. 79. For a contrasting position relating to Western Zhou times, see He Maochun 何茂春, *Zhongguo waijiao tongshi* 中國外交通史 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1996), p. 19.

³³ For a critical position towards feudalism during the Western Zhou (ca. 1045–771 BC), see Li Feng, “‘Feudalism’ in Western Zhou China: A Criticism,” *HJAS* 63.1 (2003), pp. 115–44. Accordingly, feudal ties between Zhou and the factually independent regional states during the Eastern Zhou (722–256 BC) are even more doubtful. On the major regional states of the Eastern Zhou period, see Cho-yun Hsu, “The Spring and Autumn Period,” in Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy, eds., *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.E.* (Cambridge U.P., 1999), pp. 545–86.

³⁴ Britton, “Interstate Intercourse,” pp. 616–35; also see Richard Louis Walker, *The Multistate System of Ancient China* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1953), pp. 73–95; Liu Boji 劉伯驥, *Chunqiu huimeng zhengzhi* 春秋會盟政治 (Taipei: Zhonghua congshu, 1962).

(*chao* 朝), missions (*pin* 聘), envoys, treaties/covenants (*meng* 盟),³⁵ transfer of territory, asylum and mediation were also fairly typical ways of peacefully dealing with others. Moreover, hostages (*zhi* 質) might have played a role even before 700 BC, but certainly were common practice by the seventh century BC.³⁶

Although acknowledging interstate marriages as initiated by conferences, missions or mediations,³⁷ Britton curiously did not consider marital bonds a diplomatic strategy in their own right, when, in fact, they were an essential method of maintaining power balances early on.³⁸ Presumably owing to his focus on *Zuo* records covering the years 722 to 700 BC, he failed to recognize that tribute relations (in the sources denoted by the term *gong* 貢) are accounted for a bit later, in fact as early as 697 BC.³⁹ In this particular year, the *Chunqiu* informs us, the king of Zhou sent an envoy to Lu in order to demand carriages. The author(s) of the *Zuo* did not hesitate to reprimand the king's conduct on grounds of improper behavior (*fei li ye* 非禮也): neither were regional lords expected to present carriages as tribute, nor was it proper for the Son of Heaven to seek private riches 諸侯不貢車服. 天子不私求財.⁴⁰ Hence, only the commentary relates the incident directly

³⁵ Mark Edward Lewis has demonstrated how the covenants fitted in the general political ideology of the Chunqiu period and has explained the respective procedure; see his *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: SUNY P., 1990), esp. pp. 43–50. More recently, Poo Mu-chou also offered a general discussion of covenants; see his “Ritual and Ritual Texts in Early China,” in *Early Chinese Religion, Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC–220 AD)*, ed. John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 281–313, esp. 290–95 (and p. 290, n. 22, for further references on interstate relations). Moreover, Liu Boji made a comprehensive analysis of interstate covenants in *Chunqiu huimeng zhengzhi*, pp. 160–244.

³⁶ Britton, “Interstate Intercourse,” p. 634, who refers to an exchange of hostages between Zhou and Zheng in 720 transmitted in *Zuo*. Yang Lien-sheng also cites the same incident as the first record of the practice; see his “Hostages in Chinese History,” *HJAS* 15.3–4 (1952), pp. 507–21, here p. 507.

³⁷ Britton, “Interstate Intercourse,” pp. 620; 622; 633.

³⁸ Melvin Thatcher, “Marriages of the Ruling Elite in the Spring and Autumn Period,” in Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, eds., *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1991), pp. 25–57. Newell Ann van Auken has analyzed marriage alliances involving the state Lu 魯; see her “A Formal Analysis of the *Chuenchiou* (Spring and Autumn Classic),” unpub. Ph.D. diss. (Seattle: University of Washington, 2006), esp. pp. 110–23; also see Kai Vogelsang, “Mit den Waffen der Frauen... Alliancen und Mesalliancen in der Chun qiu-Zeit,” in Dennis Schilling und Jianfei Kralle, eds., *Die Frau im alten China-Bild und Wirklichkeit: Studien zu den Quellen der Zhou- und Han-Zeit* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2001), pp. 1–23.

³⁹ Contrary to Britton, Richard Walker was aware of the fact that tribute played a role in Spring and Autumn diplomacy; see his *Multi-state System*, p. 87.

⁴⁰ *Zuo*, Huan 15 (697 BC), p. 141, citing Yang Bojun's 楊伯峻 *Chunqiu Zuo* 春秋左傳注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981); also see James Legge, *The Chinese Classics, Vol. V: Tso Chuen* (rpt. Hong Kong: Hong Kong U.P., 1960), p. 64. For a brief outline of arguments concerning the authorship of *Zuo*, see Anne Cheng, “Ch'un-ch'iu, Kung yang, Ku liang and Tso chuan,” in *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Michael Loewe (Berkeley:

to tributary obligations. If we adhere to its interpretation, three different perspectives on the nature of the relation emerge. On the one hand, there is the house of Zhou that, as (nominal) rulers of the realm, required tribute from their vassals. Whether this was supposed to occur on a regular basis, we are not told. On the other hand we have vassals confirming their loyalty by sending tribute; so far, so conventional. The most interesting aspect is the view of the commentator. He obviously was convinced that an ideal ruler had no intentions of benefiting personally from such arrangements. The scene thus adopts a strong didactic tone that fits in well with many other *Zuo* narratives: he who rules by proper behavior (*li* 禮) will eventually succeed.⁴¹

Marriage Alliances, Hostages, and Early Tribute Relations

Luckily, the early sources are not entirely blurred by later ideology and therefore can provide valuable historical information. Most pertinent to this discussion are the records concerned with marriage alliances, hostages, and tribute;⁴² this is because they were strategies that remained in practice during both the Western and Eastern Han dynasties (and beyond). Selected passages from *Zuo* and *Guoyu* will assist in revealing the mechanisms at work, disclosing that the same rules applied for the Chinese (regional) states and culturally different entities (the so-called “barbarians”),⁴³ and consequently demonstrating how we need to consider them as genuine precursors of strategies subsumed under such catchphrases as *heqin* and tributary system.

The Society for the Study of Early China, 1993), pp. 67–76, here pp. 69–71. More recently, it has been argued that *Zuo* was a product of the fourth century BC; see A. Taeko Brooks, “Heaven, *Li*, and the Formation of the *Zuo*,” *OE* 44 (2003–2004), pp. 51–100.

⁴¹ Ronald C. Egan, “Narratives in Tso Chuan,” *HJAS* 37.2 (1977), pp. 323–52, here pp. 331–32. David Schaberg has described *Zuo*’s method as “compensatory judgment”; see his *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), p. 170.

⁴² It has already been pointed out in the introductory remarks that audiences at court were an integral part of the *heqin* agreements and this consequently continued into the Han. However, audiences will not be discussed in detail because they were the most formalized or ceremonial of the diplomatic strategies. On the court relationship between hosts and guests as depicted in the *Bamboo Annals*, see Maria Khayutina, “Host-guest Opposition as a Model of Geo-political Relations in Pre-imperial China,” *OE* 43.1–2 (2002), pp. 77–100, esp. 69–98.

⁴³ According to a fairly widespread opinion, the states of Lu 魯, Zheng 鄭, Song 宋 and Wei 衛 were considered “Chinese” during the Zhou period, whereas powers emerging along the periphery, such as Chu 楚, Yan 燕, Qi 齊, and Qin 秦 were stigmatized as “barbarian”; see, for instance, Claudius Müller, “Die Herausbildung der Gegensätze: Chinesen und Barbaren in der frühen Zeit (1. Jahrtausend v. Chr. bis 220 n. Chr.),” in Wolfgang Bauer, ed., *China und die Fremden: 3000 Jahre Auseinandersetzung in Krieg und Frieden* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1980), pp. 43–76. More recently, Yuri Pines has developed a more differentiated understanding in his “Beasts or Humans,” pp. 88–9 by showing that the notion of Chu or Qin as “barbarian”

Many premodern societies relied on marital alliances in their foreign policies;⁴⁴ my initial remarks on *heqin* clarified that China is no exception in this respect. Arranging marriages to meet political ends even across long distances was already customary during the Western Zhou (1045–771 BC).⁴⁵ Today, the data – for the most part only discernible by matching clan names in bronze inscriptions – do not permit conclusions other than that a relation once must have existed and that even then clan exogamy was paramount.⁴⁶ The records found in *Zuozhuan* are, by contrast, a little more revealing, as the following episode dated to 578 BC shows:⁴⁷

The marquis of Jin ordered Lü Xiang to abort [friendly relations with] Qin and said: “Formerly, our duke Xian (676–651 BC) and [your] duke Mu (659–621 BC) achieved friendly relations. They united their powers and aligned their hearts (i.e. minds); they gave the relations more weight by covenants and oaths and strengthened them by marital bonds. ...” 晉侯使呂相絕秦，曰：“昔逮我獻公及穆公相好，戮力同心，申之以盟誓，重之以昏姻。...”

The marquis of Jin commenced his indirect speech by defining how amicable ties between two ruling houses were sustained; negotiated terms fixed by covenants and oaths were reinforced by marriage. Marital alliances therefore were simply another implement to ensure loyalty.⁴⁸ The strategy worked because not just any women were sent

states only emanated from later Zhanguo and Han period texts; also see Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies*, pp. 93–126.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Alan R. Schulman, “Diplomatic Marriages in the Egyptian New Kingdom,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 38.3 (1979), pp. 177–93; Wolfgang Röllig, “Politische Heiraten im Alten Orient,” *Saeculum* 25 (1974), pp. 11–23; Christopher N. L. Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1989).

⁴⁵ Maria Khayutina, “Marital Alliances and Affinal Relatives (*sheng* 甥 and *hungou* 婚媾) in the Society and Politics of Zhou China in the Light of Bronze Inscriptions,” *EC* 37 (2014), pp. 39–99.

⁴⁶ Although the rule of clan exogamy was by no means always observed, at least during the Chunqiu period, as Thatcher has demonstrated in “Marriages of the Ruling Elite,” pp. 37–38.

⁴⁷ *Zuozhuan*, Cheng 13 (578 BC), p. 861; cf. Legge, *Tso Chuen*, p. 382; Thatcher, “Marriages of the Ruling Elite,” p. 42.

⁴⁸ Whether speeches recorded in *Zuozhuan* are authentic representations of actual ones remains a matter of debate. Pines regarded them written records of actual speeches, whereas Schaberg is convinced “that much of the material currently included in the *Zuozhuan* and *Guoyu* changed and developed in the course of oral transmission”; see Schaberg, *A Patterned Past*, p. 320 (also consider pp. 26–28 and 438–39, n. 39), and Yuri Pines, “Intellectual Change in the Chunqiu Period: The Reliability of the Speeches of the *Zuo zhuan* as Sources of Chunqiu Intellectual History,” *EC* 22 (1997), pp. 77–132, esp. 94–95. Also idem, *Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period, 722–453 BCE* (Honolulu: U. of Hawai’i P., 2002), esp. 14–39, and Schaberg’s review thereof in *JAS* 63.3 (2004), pp. 775–77. Even if one is inclined to subscribe to Schaberg’s more skeptical appraisal, the *Zuozhuan* speech-

abroad: they had to be members of ruling families.⁴⁹ The daughters of rulers served the double purpose of assuring peaceful relations on account of their close bonds to their birth families and because they assumed a role comparable to hostages. If anything went wrong between the participating parties, the lives of the women could have been used for leverage.⁵⁰ The practice, however, did not stop with daughters. In a plea to ascend the throne of his own polity, in 539 BC the marquis of Qi 齊, for instance, offered women of different degrees of kinship to Jin. Instead of volunteering members of his own immediate family, he promised the daughters, sisters, or aunts of his predecessor.⁵¹ Qi, as the inferior party, further pledged to deliver hostages, presents (explicitly not identified as tribute, *gong*), and women to a superior power on a regular basis.⁵² It seems the diplomatic strategies employed should initially “buy” the good will of the more powerful entity and help to secure its support later on.⁵³

Although on a smaller scale, foreign entities were also engaged in diplomatic marriages.⁵⁴ In the summer of 636 BC, for instance, the

es would remain pertinent to the present discussion because they represent the view of their Zhanguo- or Western Han-era compiler(s); see Schaberg, *A Patterned Past*, pp. 322–23. As such they still manifest perceptions of early Chinese diplomacy.

⁴⁹ *Zuo zhuan*, Cheng 8 (583 BC), pp. 840–41; cf. Legge, *ISO Chuen*, p. 368, and Thatcher, “Marriages of the Ruling Elite,” p. 31.

⁵⁰ Vogelsang, “Mit den Waffen der Frauen,” pp. 10–13; A.F.P. Hulswé, with an Introduction by M.A.N. Loewe, *China in Central Asia, the Early Stage, 125 B.C.–A.D. 23: An Annotated Translation of Chapters 61 and 96 of the History of the Former Han Dynasty* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979), p. 60.

⁵¹ *Zuo zhuan*, Zhao 3 (539 BC), pp. 1233–34; cf. Legge, *ISO Chuen*, p. 588.

⁵² Thatcher has concluded that “bilateral marriage ties between the states ... were contracted between ruling houses of equal status”; “Marriages of the Ruling Elite,” p. 41. He might very well be right, as far as the actual ranks of the rulers are concerned. The roughly fifty cases I have reviewed, however, suggest that the parties offering women to marriage in most cases were, in fact, politically and militarily inferior to the receiving party, although they often were of equal rank.

⁵³ Thatcher has listed several reasons for marital bonds between rulers: sealing agreements, signaling favorable intentions, extending recognition, and, most importantly, securing “the support and protection of affines in the interstate, and sometimes domestic, struggle for power and survival;” see his “Marriages of the Ruling Elite,” pp. 40, 42.

⁵⁴ Thatcher has analyzed a total of 150 marriages recorded in *Zuo zhuan*; “Marriages of the Ruling Elite,” p. 25. Throughout *Zuo zhuan*, I was able to gather seven instances in which foreigners, such as Rong 戎 or Di 狄 people, were rather clearly connected to Chinese states by marriage; five of these alliances were connected to people involved in the life of Chong’er, later duke Wen of Jin (r. 638–626 BC). See *Zuo zhuan*, Zhuang 28 (666 BC), pp. 238–40; cf. Legge, *ISO Chuen*, p. 114; also *Zuo zhuan*, Xi 4 (656 BC), p. 295; cf. Legge, *ISO Chuen*, pp. 141–2; and *Zuo zhuan*, Xi 23 (637 BC), p. 187; cf. Legge, *ISO Chuen*, pp. 186–87. Burton Watson has translated Chong’er’s “Years of Wandering,” in *Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translations: Vol. I, From Antiquity to the Tang dynasty*, ed. John Minford and Joseph S. M. Lau (N.Y.C.: Columbia U.P.; Hong Kong: The Chinese U.P., 2000), pp. 166–70. Khayutina has doubted the historicity of the journeys of Chong’er; see her, “Die Geschichte der Irrfahrt

king of Zhou 周襄王 (r. 651–619 BC) relied on the assistance of the Di 狄 people in conquering Zheng 鄭 and subsequently married one of the Di ruler's daughters. By doing so, he clearly desired to strengthen ties with an ally.⁵⁵ Yet, foreign women were not the only ones migrating to Chinese states as an episode from 594 BC demonstrates:⁵⁶

The wife of Ying Er, ruler of Lu [i.e. a Di polity], was the older sister of duke Jing of Jin. When Feng Shu took care of governmental affairs [of the Red Di], he killed her and injured the eye of the ruler of Lu. Thereupon the Marquis of Jin intended to attack Feng Shu but all the dignitaries said, "It cannot be done. Feng Shu has three valiant talents. It is better to wait for further developments." Bo Zong said, "It is mandatory to attack the Di (that is, Feng Shu's tribe). The Di's faults are fivefold; even if valiant talents are many, how could they redress their malfeasances? First, they do not sacrifice; second, they desire alcohol; third, they abandoned Zhongzhang and annexed the territory of the Li clan; fourth, they mistreated our older sister Ji [i.e. Yin Er's wife]; fifth, they injured the eyes of their ruler. ..." Xun Linfu of Jin defeated the Red Di at Quliang. ... He extinguished Lu and Feng Shu fled to Wei, but Wei returned him to Jin. The people of Jin killed him.

潞子嬰兒之夫人，晉景公之姊也。酆舒爲政而殺之，又傷潞子之目。晉侯將伐之。諸大夫皆曰：“不可。酆舒有三雋才不如待後之人。”伯宗曰：“必伐之。狄有五罪，雋才雖多，何補焉？不祀，一也。嗜酒，二也。棄仲章而奪黎氏地，三也。虐我伯姬，四也。傷其君目，五也。...”晉荀林父敗赤狄于曲梁。... 滅潞，酆舒奔衛，衛人歸諸晉，晉人殺之。

The *Chunqiu* entry upon which this passage comments reveals that Ying Er, the ruler of Lu, was brought back to Jin after their armies anni-

des Prinzen Chong'er und ihre Botschaft," in Heiner Roetz, ed., *Kritik im alten und modernen China* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), pp. 20–47. Yuri Pines, however, has reminded us "that neither Wu nor, particularly, Yue belonged to the Zhou ritual system prior to the late sixth century AD; in all likelihood they were culturally and ethnically distinct from the Zhou world;" see his "The One that Pervades the All," p. 294, n. 36. In this regard, at least four more marriage alliances can be added to the seven cases mentioned above. For marital ties involving the Wu or Yue polities, see, for instance, *Zuozhuan*, Xiang 23 (549 BC), p. 1073; cf. Legge, *ISO Chuen*, pp. 500–1; *Zuozhuan*, Zhao 23 (518 BC), p. 1447; cf. Legge, *ISO Chuen*, p. 698; *Zuozhuan*, Ai 6 (490 BC), pp. 1634–35; cf. Legge, *ISO Chuen*, p. 810; *Zuozhuan*, Ai 12 (484 BC), p. 1670; cf. Legge, *ISO Chuen*, p. 828. When considering clan names that point to non-Chinese origins of certain of the respective women, the total number of marriage alliances increases; see Edwin G. Pulleyblank, "Ji 姬 and Jiang 姜: The Role of Exogamic Clans in the Organization of the Zhou Polity," *EC* 25 (2000), pp. 1–27, esp. 17–22.

⁵⁵ *Zuozhuan*, Xi 24 (636 BC), p. 425; cf. Legge, *ISO Chuen*, p. 192. For additional information on the Di people, see Edwin G. Pulleyblank, "The Chinese and Their Neighbors in Prehistoric and Early Historic Times," in David N. Keightley, ed. *The Origins of Chinese Civilization* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1983), pp. 411–66, esp. 446–48.

⁵⁶ *Zuozhuan*, Xuan 15 (594 BC), pp. 762–763; cf. Legge, *ISO Chuen*, p. 328.

hilated a Red Di clan called the Lu 晉師滅赤狄潞氏，以潞子嬰兒歸。Thus, duke Jing of Jin's older sister was married to the head of an alien clan. Her forceful demise presumably had stronger impact on the marquis of Jin's decision to retaliate than the injury of the ruler's eye, despite the fact that his advisor's choice of words downplays the severity of her fate. The murder of the duke's sister, a descendant of the ruling Jin lineage, surely outweighed the physical harm inflicted upon her alien husband. Thus we can safely assume that Chinese regional states did not only bestow women on foreign leaders, but that these brides remained connected to their birth families.⁵⁷

Precisely because the mistreatment of one's own kin was unacceptable, marriage alliances had diplomatic value.⁵⁸ As long as the hosting parties treated guest-wives with respect, peaceful relations were guaranteed. Daughters, sisters, and aunts of occasionally even deceased rulers were deemed suitable to strengthen newly established and already existing bonds. In theory, it did not matter whether Chinese regional states dealt with other Chinese regional states or with alien regimes; available records, in turn, suggest that political marriages were overwhelmingly more common among Chinese polities; if they should happen to spawn loyal male offspring, all the better.⁵⁹

The exchange of hostages was another way to personalize diplomatic relations and, once more, a *Zuozhuan* passage provides a glimpse into the contemporary state of mind. It tells us of duke Mu of Qin 秦穆公 (r. 659–621 BC), who in 645 BC held duke Hui of Jin 惠晉公 (r. 650–637 BC) captive,⁶⁰ and who was now wondering how to proceed. One of his sons advised him to kill the prisoner in order to prevent future conflicts. An opposing view wished to see duke Hui reinstated in his native state; in exchange, the duke's heir apparent should have been taken hostage.⁶¹ Evidently, the pawn ought to ensure the endur-

⁵⁷ Also see Thatcher, "Marriages of the Ruling Elite," p. 45.

⁵⁸ Liu Aimin 劉愛敏 reached a similar conclusion in his analysis of political marriages between Lu and Qi; see his "Zuozhuan's suojian Chunqiu chuqi Qi Lu guanxi" 左傳所見春秋初期齊魯關係, *Guanzi xuekan* 管子學刊 2002.3, pp. 51–55, esp. 54.

⁵⁹ Also see Thatcher, "Marriages of the Ruling Elite," p. 44.

⁶⁰ The *Zuozhuan*, Xi 15 (645 BC), p. 359 (cf. Legge, *Tso Chuen*, pp. 168–69), generically speaks of the "Marquis of Jin" (*Jin hou* 晉侯) or the "Lord of Jin" (*Jin jun* 晉君). On the other hand, *Guoyu* 9 provides information that it was indeed duke Hui of Jin who was captured by Qin; see Shanghai Shifan daxue guji zhenglizu 上海師範大學古籍整理組, ed., *Guoyu* 國語 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), pp. 328–29, and Alan Imber, "Kuo Yü: An Early Chinese Text and Its Relationship with the Tso Chuan," unpub. Ph.D. diss. (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 1975), pp. 68–69. For arguments and additional reference regarding the compilation of the *Guoyu* sometime during the fourth through third centuries BC and its reliability as a historical source, see Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought*, pp. 41–45.

⁶¹ *Zuozhuan*, Xi 15 (645 BC), p. 359; cf. Legge, *Tso Chuen*, pp. 168–69.

ing loyalty of Jin and eliminate Jin as a potential threat. *Guoyu* reports that duke Mu indeed favored the second alternative: “Thus [Qin] returned Duke Hui and [received] his son Yu as hostage 是故歸惠公而質子圉.”⁶²

Bowing to the will of a superior force was also the theme of the following episode from 572 BC:⁶³

The people of Qi did not convene [at a conference held] at the city of Peng. [Consequently], the people of Jin punished them [for this offense]. In the second month (of the year 572 BC), Guang, the heir-apparent of Qi, went as hostage to Jin. 齊人不會彭城, 晉人以爲討。二月, 齊大子光爲質於晉。

In the capacity of hegemonic power of the realm, Jin had organized a multilateral meeting that representatives of Qi obviously were required to attend yet had failed to comply. Affronted by its misconduct, Jin held Qi accountable by military means. Eventually, Qi had no choice but to send the heir-apparent as hostage to Jin in order to acknowledge its insubordinate behavior and to assure more obedient conduct in the future.

Despite their brevity, both incidents perfectly highlight the fundamental dynamics at work in early hostage diplomacy. Sending off sons was an obligation reserved for politically inferior parties. Their superior partners dictated the terms of such relationships by the underlying threat to the physical integrity of the former’s heir apparent. Occasional abuses or even killings may have happened, but probably were not the rule. At least we do not read about it in the sources. The long-term whereabouts of the hostages remains questionable as well. Some captives, among them the above mentioned prince Yu of Jin,⁶⁴ were able to flee, a few plainly “returned” home (*gui* 歸).⁶⁵

The last of the early diplomatic strategies to discuss before moving on to the so-called tributary system of the Han, are early tributary relations. Several pre-Han texts offer quite abstract explanations of how tribute ideally functioned,⁶⁶ along with practical cases that al-

⁶² *Guoyu* 9, p. 329; Imber, *Kuo Yü*, pp. 68–69. According to *Zuozhuan*, Xi 17 (643 BC), p. 372; cf. Legge, *Tso Chuen*, p. 172, the ducal prince Yu went as hostage to Qin in the summer of 642 BC.

⁶³ *Zuozhuan*, Xiang 1 (572 BC), p. 917; cf. Legge, *Tso Chuen*, p. 413.

⁶⁴ *Zuozhuan*, Xi 22 (638 BC), p. 394; cf. Legge, *Tso Chuen*, pp. 182–83.

⁶⁵ See *Zuozhuan*, Cheng 5 (586 BC), p. 824; cf. Legge, *Tso Chuen*, p. 357.

⁶⁶ See, for instance, *Guoyu* 1, p. 4 (repeated almost verbatim in *SJ* 4, p. 136); *Zuozhuan*, Zhao 13 (529 BC), pp. 1358–59; cf. Legge, *Tso Chuen*, p. 652; and the prescriptive “Tribute of Yu” (*Yu gong* 禹貢) chapter transmitted in *Shangshu*, i.e. Sun Xingyan 孫星衍, ed., *Shangshu jingwen zhushu* 尚書今古文注疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986), pp. 136–207. More-

low for more realistic conclusions. When we examine how duke Huan of Qi 齊桓公 (r. 685–643 BC) dealt with the southern state of Chu 楚, the aspect of submission again stands out. By attacking the latter in 656 BC, duke Huan forced Chu's leader to render silk as tribute to the royal house of Zhou.⁶⁷ Although practically powerless, the supremacy of Zhou still had to be formally recognized. This much is clear by the fact that duke Huan, who actually ruled the realm as hegemon (*ba* 霸), enforced factually outdated hierarchical structures. The Zhou's reaction to such incidents only becomes visible in later sources. *Shiji* and *Hanshu* briefly recount the biggest success of king Goujian of Yue 越王句踐 (r. 496–465 BC). After crossing the Huai River and defeating Wu in 473 BC,⁶⁸ he conferred (*hui* 會) with the lords of Qi and Jin. All participants agreed upon Goujian's sending tribute to Zhou, thus implicitly consenting to his being the new hegemon. The house of Zhou, in turn, honored his gesture of (nominal) subordination by bestowing presents upon him and pronouncing him hegemon (*bo* 伯).⁶⁹ During the Spring and Autumn period, tribute clearly was a physical expression of one's actual or purely nominal submission to Zhou kingship.

On the other hand, tributary offerings were by no means restricted to the house of Zhou, since rulers of the regional states relied on them too. If we trust Zi Chan's words – the famed chief minister of Zheng who served from 543 to 522 BC⁷⁰ – interstate relations below the royal domain usually were anything but balanced. After having been improperly treated while staying in Chu in 545 BC, he complained by laying out protocol parameters for small state–large state interactions. At first, Zi Chan listed five good things that transpired when large states visited small ones; then⁷¹

over see, for example, David Schaberg, "Travel, Geography, and the Imperial Imagination in Fifth-Century Athens and Han China," *Comparative Literature* 51.2 (1999), pp. 152–91, and Wang Aihe, *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2000), pp. 23–74.

⁶⁷ *Guoyu* 6, p. 242; *SJ* 5, pp. 185–86; *SJ* 14, pp. 583–84. The incident is also reiterated in *Guanzi* VIII.20; see Yan Changyao 顏昌嶠, *Guanzi jiaoshi* 管子校釋 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe chubanshe, 1996), pp. 199–200, and Allyn W. Rickett, *Guanzi: Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China; A Study and Translation, Vol. I* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1985), p. 300.

⁶⁸ *SJ* 25, p. 689; for a detailed discussion of King Goujian, see Paul A. Cohen, *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-century China* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 2009), pp. 1–35.

⁶⁹ *SJ* 41, p. 1746; *HS* 28B, p. 1669. The so-called "Five Hegemons" (*wu ba* 五霸) were also referred to as *wu bo* 五伯; see Khayutina, "Die Geschichte der Irrfahrt des Prinzen Chong'er und ihre Botschaft," pp. 20–21.

⁷⁰ For Zi Chan's role in Zheng policy, see Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought*, p. 313.

⁷¹ *Zuozhuan*, Xiang 28 (545 BC), pp. 1144–45; cf. Legge, *Tso Chuen*, p. 541. Tribute obliga-

Zi Chan said, "... There are five abominations when a small [state] visits a large one: [First, the small state is expected] to report its faults and crimes; [second, it has] to ask [forgiveness] for its deficiencies; [third, it has] to perform its governmental services; [fourth, it has] to present duties and tribute; [fifth, it has] to follow its seasonal commands. If they do not act accordingly, gifts and silk [presented to the large state] will be doubled..." 子產曰: "... 小適大有五惡: 說其罪戾, 請其不足, 行其政事, 共其職貢, 從其時命. 不然, 則重其幣帛..."

In this portrayal, the larger entities clearly had the upper hand. Smaller polities unwilling to meet the extensive and largely demeaning requirements had to suffer at least economic consequences, since the minister reported fines for negligence. On a different occasion, Zi Chan argued similarly: "Formerly, the Son of Heaven allocated tributary obligations. In doing so he relied on importance (*qing zhong* 輕重), which means that sequence of rank determined the amount of tribute. These were the stipulations of Zhou 昔天子班貢, 輕重以列, 列尊貢重, 周之制也." Such was the situation in the good old days, he argued, before exhorting his listener that today, "there is no rule for tribute 貢之無藝."⁷² Even though actual instances of military enforcement of tributary obligations among states below the royal Zhou sphere are absent from the received texts, Zi Chan's latter comment proposes harsher consequences for transgressions. Apparently, larger states abused actual power held over inferior parties and coerced them to deliver more tribute than they were willing or able to give. The threat of fines alone is fairly unlikely to have ensured compliance on all occasions.

Zi Chan's critique furthermore discloses a hitherto unknown meaning of early tribute. By his time it had acquired an economic significance as well. If it had not been for increasing or disproportional demands on the part of the larger polities, why would the minister have felt compelled to complain about missing regulations?⁷³ In addition, the statesman's rather universal way of arguing his discontent suggests that the

tions of small states towards larger polities are also expressed in *Zuozhuan*, Zhao 30 (512 BC), p. 1506; cf. Legge, *Iso Chuen*, p. 734.

⁷² *Zuozhuan*, Zhao 13 (529 BC), pp. 1358–59; cf. Legge, *Iso Chuen*, p. 652.

⁷³ Yuri Pines has suggested that increasing tributary demands, among other things, were but an expression of how badly "established norms," i.e. morally appropriate behavior, in interstate relations had deteriorated by the 6th and 5th cc. BC; see his "The One that Pervades the All," p. 294. Since historical processes rarely, if ever, warrant monocausal explanations, I would argue that moral as well as economic issues contributed to the development. The authors of texts such as *Zuozhuan* and *Guoyu* certainly did frown upon the improper conduct of political upstarts. At the same time, it is hard to imagine that they would not have attempted to gain material profit from their newly found power.

problem was relatively widespread and that tribute indeed also carried economic connotations.

One way or another, Spring and Autumn tribute relations always entailed implications of submission, especially since actual subordination to royal sovereignty had lost most of its original meaning. To deliver tribute to Zhou authority, or to force contenders to do so, had become one of the tasks of the actual hegemon. As such, it was not an empty gesture, because the king of Zhou still had to be acknowledged as the nominal head of the realm. The ability to compel others to fulfill ritual obligations (see duke Huan of Qi), or being chosen by fellow lords to be the one to do so (see king Goujian of Yue) now determined the new factual suzerains. By then, leaders of larger, militarily potent polities had appropriated the right to demand tribute themselves. It was still mainly a symbol of subordination, but on occasion economic connotations could hardly be denied.

MORE THAN JUST TRIBUTE: DIPLOMACY DURING THE HAN PERIOD

So far, diplomacy during the Warring States period has not been made an explicit issue. In general, one would not expect an era famously defined by raging warfare to have left much room for peaceful interaction in the first place. But this is not entirely true. One of the few texts concerned with all of the competing states of the eponymous period, namely, *Intrigues of the Warring States* (*Zhanguo ce*), proposes various kinds of diplomatic arguments.⁷⁴ The drawback, however, is that the events portrayed by the book are believed to be mostly fictional.⁷⁵ Nevertheless “it is more than probable that the *Intrigues* as we know it today captures quite faithfully the essential tenor of those times,” as James Crump has noted.⁷⁶ If we follow his assessment, it does not really matter whether incidents once happened just as described, or were figments of the imagination of an unknown author, since we assume that the latter’s creativity did not wander too far from historical conditions. His records still contain useful information, especially if one is concerned with historical processes rather than actual events. For instance, if potential readers of the third century BC, or at least of the time of writing in the first century BC,⁷⁷ would no longer have known

⁷⁴ Tsuen-hsuei Tsien, “Chan kuo ts’e,” in Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts*, p. 1.

⁷⁵ J. I. Crump, *Chan-Kuo Ts’e* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 11–15; and idem, “The ‘Chan-kuo Ts’e’ and Its Fiction,” *TP* 48.4–5 (1960), pp. 305–75.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 319.

⁷⁷ Tsien, “Chan kuo ts’e,” p. 4.

about hostage exchanges, then *Zhanguo ce*'s anecdotes would not have made sense. Browsing through the text thus demonstrates that hostages, marriage alliances, and tribute were still part of diplomatic interaction at the time of its genesis. Respective evidence, however, remains tentative at best.⁷⁸ Because *Zhanguo ce* offers no new insights on how the strategies worked and eligible references in other texts are missing, the issue shall not be pursued further.

Instead, we advance to a time after China's unification in 221 BC. Before that point, Chinese states were forced to interact with other Chinese polities as well as with alien entities. Once the empire was unified, diplomatic engagement could be applied only to foreigners.⁷⁹ As discussed, above, Yü Ying-shih's *Trade and Expansion in Han China*, the most influential analysis of the subject, treated the Xiongnu as principal foes; and several pages were devoted as well to Chinese interactions with the Qiang 羌, Wuhuan 烏桓, and Xianbei 鮮卑.⁸⁰ These were all nomad confederacies situated along the northern and northwestern borders of China that had gradually filled the power vacuum left by the declining might of the Xiongnu. Unsurprisingly, subsequent generations of scholars have usually perceived the global-political newcomers in comparison with the Xiongnu.

In reality, however, the situation was much more complex. Starting from the Western Han, China also dealt with far less aggressive entities located west and northwest of the Han borders – in particular several small oasis statelets situated in the Central Asian Tarim Basin⁸¹ – and expanded its influence over areas in the northeast as well as the south.⁸² Realizing that the Chinese empire did indeed interact with polities that posed varying degrees of threat, or in some cases none at

⁷⁸ For instance, two marriage alliances are recorded in *Zhanguo ce* 8, p. 343, and 29, p. 1044, cited after Liu Xiang 劉向, comp., *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1978); cf. Crump, *Chan-Kuo Ts'ê*, pp. 175 and 508; for a passages related to a hostage and tribute, see *Zhanguo ce* 31, pp. 1128, 1138; cf. Crump, *Chan-Kuo Ts'ê*, pp. 553, 559.

⁷⁹ For emerging views of an inner-outer or Chinese-foreign dichotomy, see, for instance, Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, "Mapping a 'Spiritual' Landscape: Representation of Terrestrial Space in the *Shanhaijing*," in di Cosmo and Don J. Wyatt, eds., *Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries*, pp. 35–79, esp. 38–43, and Pines, "Beasts or Humans," pp. 50–102.

⁸⁰ Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, pp. 51–64. Rafe de Crespigny delivered an in-depth discussion of the military relations of the Eastern Han to the Qiang, Wuhuan, and Xianbei confederacies in his *Northern Frontier: The Politics and Strategy of the Later Han Empire* (Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies, ANU, 1984).

⁸¹ Hulsewé has presented a comprehensive outline of all those Western and Central Asian polities with which the Western Han had relations; see *China in Central Asia*.

⁸² For an outline of Han expansion to Korea and Southern China, see Yü, "Han Foreign Relations," pp. 446–57; also see Mark E. Byington, ed., *The Han Commanderies in Early Korean History* (Cambridge: Early Korea Project, Korea Institute, Harvard U., 2013).

all, one inevitably has to wonder: were methods of diplomatic engagement necessarily based on those established for coping with the Xiongnu (and their almost equally powerful successors)? More importantly, was this rationale really solely rooted in imperial ideology, as consistently thought? Answering these questions only provides a Chinese perspective on the subject. In order to reach a more balanced understanding of Han-period diplomacy (even though we are lacking sources other than Chinese), one of its main underlying assumptions needs to be taken into consideration: Did foreign entities really primarily participate in the tributary system on the promise of receiving counter-gifts in return? However, concentrating on matters of ideology versus economic gain alone would mean to once more neglect the fact that other strategies were at play as well. Did hostages or marriage alliances actually neatly fit into the frame of purely ideological or economic explanations? These are the problems that are addressed in what follows.

Pure Ideology? The Chinese Perspective on Tributary Practices

Ever since *Trade and Expansion in Han China* became available, understanding the tributary system as the only way to incorporate foreign forces into early Chinese imperial order never really lost its appeal. To this day, it remains widely cited across various disciplines. By yielding tribute, aliens accepted and symbolically submitted to the suzerainty of the emperor; by receiving tribute from distant places the Chinese regents, in turn, were able to demonstrate how far their power extended. Peoples from every corner of the known world succumbed to China's glorious might. Similar to other auspicious omens, tribute has been considered to represent a distinctive sign of Heaven acknowledging that the emperor legitimately possessed the Heavenly Mandate (*tian ming* 天命).⁸³ These are the main pillars of the ideological framework of the so-called tributary system as we find them in secondary sources. Sometimes it is quite unclear what primary sources this apparently universal notion is based on. Retracing and reevaluating the individual arguments will help to clarify the problem.

⁸³ Chang Chun-shu, *The Rise of the Chinese Empire, Vol. I: Nation, State, & Imperialism in Early China, ca. 1600 B.C.-A.D. 8* (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan P., 2006), p. 260. Auspicious omens were discussed by Martin Kern, "Religious Anxiety and Political Interest in Western Han Omen Interpretation: The Case of the Han Wudi Period (141–87 B.C.)," *Chūgoku shigaku* 中國史學 10 (2000), pp. 1–31 (also see n. 96, below). Michael Loewe has explained the content and development of the *tian ming* concept in the following articles: "The Authority of the Emperors Ch'in and Han," in Dieter Eikemeier and Herbert Franke, eds., *State and Law in East Asia: Festschrift Karl Büniger* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981), pp. 81–111; "The Concept of Sovereignty," in Twitchett and Loewe, eds., *Cambridge History of China, Vol. 1*, pp. 726–46. Moreover, see Wang, *Cosmology and Political Culture*, pp. 174–80, and nn. 23 and 27, above.

Time and again, Western Han imperial hunting parks have been understood to epitomize the entire world on a smaller scale. In calling emperor Wu's (that is, Wudi; r. 141–87 BC) Supreme Forest (Shanglin 上林) a “vast preserve [that] had indeed become a cosmic mandala – a replica of ‘Under Heaven’, the holy domain of the Son of Heaven,”⁸⁴ Edward Schafer obviously set the tone for subsequent studies. Lothar Ledderose again conceived complex buildings, artificial landmarks, and multitudes of exotic places symbolized by plants and animals as constituting parts of such enormous enclosures. By declaring that “with these tangible specimens of every kind of thing in the universe, the park was not merely an image of the cosmos, but its replica: a *microcosmos*. The symbolic quality of the park as a mandala of the universe was also apparent in the orderly arrangement of its opponents,” Ledderose did not just paraphrase Schafer's initial statement; he refined it. Simply including foreign plants and animals into the design of such oversized gardens was insufficient; they had to be positioned in relation to the location of their places of origin. This way the universe was recreated in terms of content as well as geography.⁸⁵ Accordingly, the emperor gained actual power over the whole world by replicating it.⁸⁶ Within the layout of the Han imperial park, tribute objects from distant places assumed an integral meaning. Once received and integrated into the park, they physically epitomized how far imperial power truly reached.⁸⁷

In order to appreciate the development of this ideological interpretation, it is necessary to scout for its sources. Archaeological evidence of the Supreme Forest has become available over the last decade or so. Unfortunately, it has very limited explanatory power as far as our issues are concerned, because excavations have almost exclusively yielded

⁸⁴ Edward H. Schafer, “Hunting Parks and Animal Enclosures in Ancient China,” *JESHO* 11.3 (1968), pp. 318–43, here pp. 328–29.

⁸⁵ Lothar Ledderose, “The Earthly Paradise: Religious Elements in Chinese Landscape Art,” in Susan Bush and Christian Murck, eds., *Theories of the Arts in China* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1983), pp. 165–83, here p. 166. The same view was shared, for instance, by Martin Kern, “Western Han Aesthetics and the Genesis of the ‘fu’,” *HJAS* 63.2 (2003), pp. 383–437, here pp. 423–24; Lewis, *Writing and Authority*, pp. 289; 320; and Wu Hung, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1995), pp. 170–76.

⁸⁶ Ledderose, “Earthly Paradise,” p. 166. On several occasions, Jessica Rawson has put forth a comparable argument. She understands “images” (*xiang* 象, i.e. replicas) of actual things found in tombs, such as the First Emperor's terracotta army, not in the sense of functionless portraits, but as objects possessing the same faculties as their real counterparts; see her “Thinking in Pictures: Tomb Figures in the Chinese View of the Afterlife,” *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 61 (1996–1997), pp. 19–37; “The Eternal Palaces of the Western Han: A New View of the Universe,” *Artibus Asiae* 59.1–2 (1999), pp. 5–58; and “The Power of Images: The Model of the First Emperor and Its Legacy,” *Historical Research* 75.188 (2002), pp. 123–54.

⁸⁷ See my introductory remarks, above, and Lewis, *Writing and Authority*, pp. 289, 320.

architectural elements and very few artifacts.⁸⁸ Scholars interested in the diversity of flora and fauna as it was displayed in the famous hunting parks are forced to resort to “rhapsodies,” or *fu* 賦 poems. In this respect, Sima Xiangru’s 司馬相如 (179–117 BC) “Tianzi youlie fu” 天子游獵賦 (“Fu on the Excursions and Hunts of the Son of Heaven”) – it actually combines “Zixu fu” 子虛賦 (“Fu on Sir Vacuous”) with “Shanglin fu” 上林賦 (“Fu on the Supreme Forest”) – figures most prominently. Its main narrative revolves around three characters:

1. Sir Vacuous, who is portrayed as an official of Qi;
2. Master Improbable, who came to Qi as an envoy from Chu; and
3. Lord No-Such, who is described as a representative of the Son of Heaven.

Immersed in a heated argument about whose native state conjured the most magnificent hunting park, Sir Vacuous and Master Improbable eventually suffered admonition from Lord No-Such. Both of them were preoccupied with surpassing one another by extravagance and excess! This did not, however, prevent Lord No-Such from launching into an exuberant description of the royal park himself in order to prove his point: Only the Supreme Forest of the Son of Heaven is truly remarkable!⁸⁹

As the general assumption goes, all the miraculous things enumerated in the poem had found their way to court as tribute offerings regardless of the fact that Sima Xiangru uttered the actual term “tribute

⁸⁸ Since 2005, the remains of primarily the buildings that were part of the Supreme Forest (*Shanglin yuan* 上林苑) of Qin have been excavated near modern-day Xi'an. Chinese archaeologists have dated the sites largely to the late Warring States period, building no. 3 (*san hao jianzhu* 三號建築) possibly to early Western Han. A drainage system underneath building no. 5 (*wu hao jianzhu* 五號建築) is one of the most remarkable discoveries, which mainly comprise of rammed earth foundations, post holes, and roof tiles. For the most comprehensive excavation reports currently available, see Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo Epang gong kaogu gongzuodui 中國社會科學院考古研究所阿房宮 et al., “Xi'an shi Shanglin yuan yizhi yihao, erhao jianzhu fajue jianbao” 西安市上林苑遺址一號、二號建築發掘簡報, *KG* 2006.2, pp. 26–34; idem, “Xi'an shi Shanglin yuan yizhi sanhao jianzhu ji wuhao jianzhu paishui guandao yiji de fajue” 西安上林苑遺址三號建築及五號建築排水管道遺跡的發掘, *KG* 2007.3, pp. 3–14; and idem, “Xi'an shi Shanglin yuan yizhi liuhao jianzhu de kantan he shijue” 西安市上林苑遺址六號建築的勘探和試掘, *KG* 2007.11 pp. 94–96.

⁸⁹ Both parts are recorded in *SJ* 117, pp. 3002–15; *HS* 57A, pp. 2534–45 (*Zixu fu*); *SJ* 117, pp. 3016–43; *HS* 57A, pp. 2547–75 (*Shanglin fu*). *Shiji* and *Hanshu* use the collective title “Tianzi youlie fu” (*SJ* 117, p. 3002; *HS* 57A, p. 2533); *Wenxuan* distinguishes between “Zixu fu” and “Shanglin fu”; also see Kern, “Western Han Aesthetics,” p. 396, n. 36. In his richly annotated translation of “Zixu fu,” David Knechtges has further discussed its transmission and commentarial tradition; see his *Wen xuan, or Selection of Refined Literature, Vol. II: Rhapsodies on Sacrifices, Hunting, Travel, Sightseeing, Palaces and Halls, Rivers and Seas* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1987), pp. 53–72, here pp. 54–55. In addition, “Zixu fu” and “Shanglin fu” have been translated by Burton Watson, *Chinese Rhymer Prose: Poems in the Fu Form from the Han and Six Dynasties Periods* (N.Y.C.: Columbia U.P., 1971), pp. 30–37, and 37–51.

貢” just once. He had Lord No-Such issue a universal explanation right at the beginning of the *Shanglin fu*:

[After listening to the competing descriptions of Sir Vacuous and Master Improbable] Lord No-Such smilingly said: “... [The Son of Heaven] orders the regional lords to offer tribute not on account of [gaining] property and presents; [by doing so the regional lords] are following their duties...” 無是公听然而笑曰: “... 夫使諸侯納貢者, 非爲財幣, 所以述職也. ...”

Why Lord No-Such defines tribute as the explicit duties of the regional lords has nothing to do with Sir Vacuous and Master Improbable trying to outdo one another by ostentatious descriptions of curiosities in the preceding “Zixu fu” section of “Tianzi youlie fu”; neither is there any relation of tribute to his own portrayal of exotic objects and places discernible. A few sentences later Lord No-Such criticizes Qi for several violations of vassal duties. He continues to reprimand both of his listeners, who, in his opinion, wallowed in vain disputes over splendors of hunting parks instead of “striving to clarify appropriate behavior between lord and vassal in order to rectify the ritual obligations of the regional lords 務明君臣之義而正諸侯之禮.”⁹⁰ No-Such invokes tribute simply to remind both brawlers that it is imperative for the lords of Sir Vacuous and Master Improbable to respect proper relations with the Son of Heaven. As the representative of the latter, Lord No-Such clearly spoke from a position of moral-political superiority.

If we keep in mind that Sima Xiangru actually wrote “Fu on Sir Vacuous” during the reign of emperor Wu – “Fu on the Supreme Forest” even directly at his court – the whole poem is easier to understand. By substituting Wudi for an anonymous Son of Heaven and transferring events back in time, Sima Xiangru’s flamboyant account of the imperial park was intended to praise the countless achievements of his own ruler.⁹¹ As the subjective panegyric of one single poet to his master,⁹²

⁹⁰ *SJ* 117, p. 3016; *HS* 57A, p. 2547; cf. Watson, *Chinese Rhyme Prose*, p. 37.

⁹¹ David Knechtges, “The Emperor and Literature: Emperor Wu of the Han,” in Frederick P. Brandauer and Chun-chieh Huang, eds., *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China* (Seattle: U. of Washington P., 1994), pp. 51–76, here pp. 56–57; and Knechtges, *The Han Rhapsody: A Study of the Fu of Yang Hsiung (53 B.C.-A.D. 18)* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976), pp. 36–37. Moreover, see Kern, “Western Han Aesthetics,” p. 422, who has also opposed a political interpretation of the *fu* in the sense that the poem was indirectly indicting the wasteful ways of the emperor. Elsewhere, Kern has doubted *Shiji*’s description of the young Wudi’s joyfully discovering Sima Xiangru’s “Fu on Sir Vacuous” and subsequently inviting the poet to compose “Fu on the Supreme Forest” at his court; see his “The ‘Biography of Sima Xiangru’ and the Question of the Fu in Sima Qian’s *Shiji*,” *JAS* 123.2 (2003), pp. 303–16, here p. 308.

⁹² It is worth noting that Sima Xiangru was sent as an envoy to Ba-Shu 巴蜀 (in modern-

“Tianzi youlie fu” can hardly be regarded as a manifestation of some overriding ideology.

Some readers might still recognize tribute offerings from distant subjects in those lists of exotic items. David Knechtges, however, has convincingly argued that Sima Xiangru’s lavish depictions primarily served rhetorical purposes. Either the actual existence of many of the enumerated places is not verifiable, or the author – contrary to the notion of hunting parks as “mandalas” – did not locate them in accordance with the direction of their real counterparts. Moreover, a great deal of trees, beasts, gemstones and so forth “are either legendary or quasi-imaginary, and are now impossible to identify.”⁹³ This kind of hyperbolic use of authentic as well as fictional imagery adds to the adulatory character of the poem.⁹⁴ Under such circumstances, tribute cannot possibly be perceived as a divinely sanctioned expression of universal imperial rule.

The importance of omens in maintaining dynastic legitimacy during the Western Han period is indisputable. Interpreting natural phenomena as well as unusual events was an essential political tool. Inauspicious occurrences such as solar eclipses, sightings of comets, floods, droughts, locust plagues and so forth were considered warnings dispensed by the celestial realm to prove a point: the Son of Heaven needed to change his (wrongful) ways if he wished to remain leader of the empire. On the other hand, the capture of a white unicorn or a rare deer posed no threat to the imperial order as these kinds of phenomena were regarded favorable signs from above, as were the celebrated Heavenly Horses (*tian ma* 天馬).⁹⁵ During Wudi’s reign, the latter, along

day Sichuan); see *SJ* 117, p. 3044; *HS* 57B, p. 2577; for a brief biographical outline, see Michael Loewe, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han and Xin Periods (221 BC–AD 24)* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2000), pp. 487–88.

⁹³ Knechtges, *Han Rhapsody*, pp. 36–38.

⁹⁴ Sima Xiangru’s “Essay on Feng and Shan [sacrifices]” 封禪書, transmitted in his biographies in both *Shiji* (*SJ* 117, pp. 3063–72) and *Hanshu* (*HS* 57B, pp. 2600–09), is yet another example of his praise for emperor Wu. Dorothee Schaab-Hanke has brought to our attention some earlier criticism of this view, which had been voiced by several Chinese scholars. Accordingly, Sima Xiangru reprimanded Wudi by way of ironic hyperbole instead of flattering him; see her “The Power of an Alleged Tradition: A Prophecy of Flattering Han Emperor Wu and Its Relation to the Sima Clan,” *BMFEA* 74 (2002), pp. 243–91, here p. 276. Contrary to Schaab-Hanke, who is clearly sympathetic to these arguments, I find this interpretation less convincing. The present article has already hinted at the fact that “Tianzi youlie fu” used to be viewed as admonition rather than praise (for respective arguments, see Kern, “Western Han Aesthetics,” pp. 395–96, 421–22). The evidence presented *supra*, however, suggests otherwise. Assuming Sima Xiangru was indeed author of both texts, it is unlikely that the “Essay on Feng and Shan” expressed a different state of mind.

⁹⁵ For an outline of the discussion concerning the nature of the Heavenly Horses, see Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, pp. 132–34, n. 332.

with some other auspicious omens, even occasioned the composition of official hymns that were intended for recital at state sacrifices.⁹⁶ *Shiji* offers a version of one such hymn that relates the arrival of these extraordinary animals at court to the notion of tribute. In line with the general modern interpretation of omens, this has been regarded as yet another piece of evidence of the ideological, but specifically the moralizing, function of tribute offerings. If heaven, or more precisely Great Unity (*Taiyi* 太一), had sent down marvelous horses as *tribute* 貢, then the emperor must have done everything right.⁹⁷

This argument is clearly flawed since it neglects significant textual differences found in the counterpart of the same exact hymn transmitted in *Hanshu*; it states that Great Unity only *bestowed* 況 Heavenly Horses.⁹⁸ The fact that the arrival of some kind of horses indeed was considered a propitious omen that warranted the immediate creation of the hymn is corroborated in several chapters of the two histories *Hanshu* and *Shiji*. The respective passages, though, relegate the beasts to mere “good horses” (*shan ma* 善馬),⁹⁹ as well as “blood sweating horses” (*han xue ma* 汗血馬).¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, both works explicitly describe several tens of these horses as spoils of China’s final victory over Ferghana in 101 BC rather than tribute or presents 漢軍取其善馬數十匹.¹⁰¹ In the process of converting actual events into hymns, the authors obviously took some creative liberties. Fairly mundane animals had suddenly

⁹⁶ Michael Loewe has briefly discussed omens in the context of imperial legitimacy; see his “Concept of Sovereignty,” p. 726. Earlier, Hans Bielenstein concentrated mainly on inauspicious omens in his “An Interpretation of the Portents in the Ts’ien-Han-Shu,” *BMFEA* 22 (1950), pp. 127–43. Subsequently, Kern noted that Bielenstein was oversimplifying the issue by arguing that officials commonly inserted or erased certain omens in order to criticize the emperor. Instead, Kern was able to demonstrate that negative interpretations often were *later* manipulations of the records; see his, “Religious Anxiety,” pp. 2–4.

⁹⁷ *SJ* 24, p. 1178; Lewis, “Writing and Authority,” p. 320. Lewis has stated that “revised versions of the poems appear in *Han shu* 22, pp. 1060–61.” For contrasting views on *SJ* 24, see Kern, “A Note on the Authenticity and Ideology of *Shih-chi* 24, ‘The Book on Music,’” *JAO* 119.4 (1999), pp. 673–77, who contested its authenticity and favored the parallel *HS* 22. Hans van Ess, in turn, argued that *HS* 22 was written in reaction to *SJ* 24; see his “Some Preliminary Notes on the Authenticity of the Treatise on Music in *Shiji* 24,” *OE* 45 (2005–2006), pp. 48–67, here p. 62. For notions of the metaphysical entity *Taiyi* as expressed in traditional literature and excavated manuscripts, see Li Ling, “An Archaeological Study of *Taiyi* 太一 (Grand One) Worship,” *Early Medieval China* 2 (1995–1996), pp. 1–39, and Sarah Allan, “The Great One, Water, and the Laozi: New Light from Guodian,” *TP* 89.4–5 (2003), pp. 237–85.

⁹⁸ *HS* 22, p. 1160.

⁹⁹ *HS* 61, p. 2702; *SJ* 123, p. 3177.

¹⁰⁰ *HS* 6, p. 202.

¹⁰¹ *HS* 61, p. 2702; *SJ* 123, p. 3177; also see Martin Kern, *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsoffer. Literatur und Ritual in der politischen Repräsentation von der Han-Zeit bis zu den Sechs Dynastien* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997), p. 231, who has dated the hymn to 101 BC (p. 180; also see *HS* 6, p. 202). For the identification of Dawan 大宛 with Ferghana, see Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 131, n. 325.

morphed into heavenly creatures that were presented by a supernatural entity instead of having been forcefully taken. Their respective motives vary considerably: Whereas the author of the *Shiji* version subtly scolded the emperor for his arrogance and wastefulness,¹⁰² the writer of the *Hanshu* version intended to mark the Ferghana horses as an omen expressing Wudi's legitimate rule, by carefully choosing expressions different from the *Shiji* account.¹⁰³ It cannot be stressed enough that the most important change in wording, as far as our purposes are concerned, was substituting *kuang* 況 for *gong* 貢. It is therefore highly unlikely that Sima Qian really promoted a universal ideology of legitimate imperial rule based on tribute. As has just been noted, legitimating Wudi's rule was precisely the purpose of the hymns (titled "Jiaosi ge shijiu zhang" 郊祀歌十九章, or "Nineteen Chants for the Sacrifices at the Suburban Altars").¹⁰⁴ Tribute, however, played no part whatsoever. Besides, incidents such as the capture of a white unicorn and the acquisition of the Heavenly Horses, which were earlier eulogized and had been regarded as auspicious, later attained negative connotations. Quite a few subsequent officials did not look too kindly on emperor Wu's aggressive and expensive endeavors and made their discontent known.¹⁰⁵ Thus, even if tribute at some point really should have been considered an affirmative sign of heaven (although it is invisible in the sources), it would only have been a single temporary aspect of general policy rather than a determining factor of a continuous ideology. Only during Wudi's reign was tribute – that is, Heavenly Horses – considered a positive omen.

Refuting any Han ideological theory of tributary relations without offering an alternative explanation would indeed be unsatisfying. Therefore, the following discussion will illustrate how Han-period sources reveal a dualistic character of tribute offered to both Western and Eastern Han courts. Comparable to the Spring and Autumn era, such tribute was, on the one hand, a source of state revenue, and, on the other hand, served as a symbol of subordination.

We find the first marginal inclination of the financial aspect of tribute, for instance, outlined in a statement transmitted in *Discourses on Salt and Iron* (*Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論), an idealized record of a court debate held

¹⁰² Van Ess, "Preliminary Notes on *Shiji* 24," p. 62.

¹⁰³ Kern, *Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer*, p. 232; idem, "Religious Anxiety," p. 21; idem, "In Praise of Political Legitimacy: The *miao* and *jiao* Hymns of the Western Han," *OE* 39.1 (1996), pp. 29–67, here pp. 58–59.

¹⁰⁴ Kern, *Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer*, pp. 174–303.

¹⁰⁵ Kern, "Religious Anxiety," pp. 21; 31.

in 81 BC.¹⁰⁶ In one of the dialogues between proponents and critics of government policy, the former explained how “the central government profited from opening parks and ponds, connecting mountains and seas in order to supplement tribute and poll-taxes 是以縣官開園池，總山海，致利以助貢賦。”¹⁰⁷ Establishing infrastructure obviously fostered official revenues, thereby enabling more remote regions to extend tribute and taxes to the central government. The latter counted on these kinds of revenues. This much can be gleaned from the words of yet another governmental spokesman (participating in the discussion):¹⁰⁸

The secretary to the imperial counselor said, “Today, the wealth of All-under-Heaven, the assets of Within-the-Sea, and the tribute of the One Hundred Commanderies are not merely the livestock of Qi and Chu, or the granaries of Zhao and Wei.” 御史曰：“今以天下之富，海內之財，百郡之貢，非特齊、楚之畜，趙、魏之庫也。”

The statement of the secretary to the imperial counselor offers an important insight: At least this kind of tribute could not have been of insignificant value, because the overall argument of the official emerged from the fact that the inexhaustible wealth of the Western Han was, among other sources, generated by these types of duty-offering. The generic phrase “One Hundred Commanderies” should not be taken too literally, as the actual number was constantly changing.¹⁰⁹ In addition, several *Shiji* passages indicate that marquises (*zhuhou* 諸侯) were obliged to render tribute,¹¹⁰ and at the beginning of the Eastern Han period, *gong* even appeared as a tax levied on individuals.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Michael Loewe, “Yen t’ieh lun,” in Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts*, pp. 477–82. Elsewhere, Loewe has argued extensively that our received text is, in fact, an idealized version of the actual debate; see his *Crisis and Conflict in Han China, 104 B.C. to A.D. 9* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974), pp. 91–112.

¹⁰⁷ Wang Liqi 王利器, comp., *Yantie lun jiaozhu* 鹽鐵論校注 (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue 1958), p. 171 (Ch. 13, “Parks and Ponds”); also see Esson M. Gale, *Discourses on Salt and Iron: A Debate on State Control of Commerce and Industry in Ancient China, Chapters I–XXVIII, Translated from the Chinese of Huan K’uan with Introduction and Notes* (Leyden: E.J. Brill, 1931), p. 81. On the many meanings of the term *xianguan* 縣官, see Michael Loewe, “The Organs of Han Imperial Government: *zhongdu guan*, *duguan*, *xianguan* and *xiandao guan*,” *BSOAS* 71.3 (2008), pp. 509–28, esp. pp. 519–27. By translating *xianguan* as “central government,” I follow Michael Loewe’s interpretation of said *Yantie lun* passage (p. 524).

¹⁰⁸ Wang, *Yantie lun jiaozhu*, p. 180 (chap. 14, “Qing zhong” 輕重); cf. Gale, *Discourses on Salt and Iron*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁹ For a general assessment of commanderies during the Western Han, see Michael Loewe, “The Former Han Dynasty,” in Twitchett and Michael Loewe, eds., *Cambridge History of China, Vol. 1*, pp. 103–222. In 108 BC, i.e. near the time when the actual collegium recorded in *Discourse on Salt and Iron* took place (81 BC), there was a total of eighty-four commanderies (p. 157).

¹¹⁰ See, for instance, *SJ* 10, p. 432 (slightly different wording in *HS* 4, p. 131); *SJ* 10, p. 803.

¹¹¹ *HS* 24B, pp. 1180–81, and Nancy Lee Swann, *Food and Money in Ancient China: The Earliest Economic History of China to 25 A.D. Han Shu 24 with Related Texts, Han Shu 91 and Shih-*

In all instances of tribute we have a common feature: it was a binding obligation for domestic institutions (or domesticated in the case of some colonized commanderies), as well as individual subjects.¹¹² The Han-period use of the term *gong*, which we today usually translate as “tribute,” and the respective policy, were not restricted to subjugated foreign entities. Hierarchical sentiments were only of secondary importance. It is safe to say that tribute was simply a tax imposed on fully incorporated parts of the empire.

At first glance, the following example is not so different from the ones just discussed. In 29 AD, the *Book of Later Han* (*Hou Hanshu*) reports that Dou Rong 竇融 had “started to send envoys with tribute and offerings 始遣使貢獻.” Since he held the rank of General-in-Chief of Hexi (*Hexi da jiangjun* 河西大將軍) at the time, one might assume he was just another individual subject paying tribute/taxes. Yet, the remaining parts of his biography reveal Dou Rong as an independent power, a so-called warlord, in the Gansu corridor. We have to remember, emperor Guangwu 光武 (r. 25–57 AD) had ascended the throne only five years prior and was still struggling in some areas to consolidate Eastern Han supremacy. Dou Rong realized the new emperor’s potential as well as his own career opportunity and thus decided to join forces with Guangwu. Dou Rong expressly submitted to imperial rule by sending a letter of intent as well as horses as tribute.¹¹³ Gladly accepting the loyalty of the powerful warlord, the emperor reciprocated with a gift of 200 pounds (*jin* 斤) of gold; he also named him Regional Commissioner of Liangzhou (*Liangzhou mu* 涼州牧).¹¹⁴ This incident is perfectly suited to illustrate the actual diplomatic-pragmatic function of tributary relations. The interaction surely was no ideological lip-service or an

chi 129 (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1950), pp. 338–41.

¹¹² For instance, as a consequence of conquests in modern-day Guangdong, Guangxi, and Northern Vietnam in 111 BC, nine commanderies were established; see Yü, “Han Foreign Relations,” p. 453, esp. n. 244. According to a *Hou Hanshu* passage (Fan Ye 范曄 [398–445], *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 [Beijing: Zhonghua, 1965; hereafter, *HHS*] 1A, p. 41), the governors of seven of these commanderies delivered tribute to the Eastern Han court in 29 AD.

¹¹³ *HHS* 1A, p. 38. In addition, Dou Rong’s biography tells us the name and rank of the envoy that eventually “presented a letter and offered horses 奉書獻馬”; see *HHS* 23, p. 798. The different wording used to express the rendering of tribute – “tribute and offerings” (*gong xian* 貢獻) in the imperial chronicle (*HHS* 1A) and “offering, presentation” (*xian* 獻) in the biography (*HHS* 23) – points to a linguistic development already visible in *Hanshu*. Both texts commonly use *gong* and *xian* interchangeably. See also the distinction between “Tribut” (*gong*) and “Darbringung” (*xian*) in Armin Selbitschka, *Prestigegüter entlang der Seidenstraße? Archäologische und historische Untersuchungen zu Chinas Beziehungen des Tarimbeckens vom zweiten bis frühen fünften Jahrhundert nach Christus. Teil 2: Abbildungen, Tabellen, Tafeln* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), pp. 572–92. Unless indicated otherwise, only incidents involving *gong* are taken into account here.

¹¹⁴ *HHS* 23, p. 799.

economic enterprise, but served to ensure amicable conditions between both parties. Dou Rong, an independent force, distinctly signaled his readiness to exercise reasonable imperial directives by rendering tribute; the emperor, in turn, recognized the presented horses as tokens of sincerity and emphasized his consent by conferring gifts and a title. Judging from the imperial perspective, tribute was essential to initiate contact in the first place; it furthermore fostered peaceful relations at least in the immediate future, as the historiographer distinctly emphasized the fact that Dou Rong had *started* to send tribute. With contacts subsequently remaining affable, we may safely assume that he continued to follow his obligation, though we do not learn of additional offerings. Considering the exchange from Dou Rong's point of view, greed was not a primary concern. With the blessings of the Eastern Han, he simply envisioned a better future for himself.

Not unlike Spring and Autumn period interactions, the preceding episode involved two native "Chinese" parties. Similar cases of efficacious tributary relations may also be made for engaging foreign entities. At first, Zhao Tuo's 趙佗 (d. 137 BC) dealings with the Western Han might seem irrelevant to the discussion, as the king of Southern Yue (*Nanyue* 南越) was born in northern China and we do not know how long he stayed there until moving south.¹¹⁵ In fact, it is of minor importance after all, if we take into account that he either emigrated early in his life, and can thus be viewed as an "alien" by socialization, or remained north for most of his adult existence, and can therefore be perceived to have been familiar with Chinese customs. The latter alternative in particular would further support the argument. If he had intimate knowledge of how the system functioned, he surely would have known how best to exploit it. One way or another, Zhao Tuo was fully aware of his actions when he "declared himself vassal and offered tribute 趙佗稱臣奉貢" to Han in 192 BC.¹¹⁶ A few years later, offended by empress Lü 呂后 (r. 188–180 BC), who prohibited him from buying iron implements and livestock, he dared to proclaim himself emperor (*di* 帝). Suspecting the king of Changsha had influenced empress Lü's decision, Zhao Tuo dispatched troops to attack Changsha. Such aggression did not go unpunished, and the Western Han empire immediately retaliated. Some more time passed until Han Wendi 文帝 (r. 179–157 BC) attempted to finally gain the upper hand in the relation

¹¹⁵ *SJ* 113, p. 2967; *HS* 95, p. 3847.

¹¹⁶ *HS* 2, p. 89.

by sending Lu Jia 陸賈 (ca. 228–ca. 140 BC) on a mission to Southern Yue in 179 BC.¹¹⁷

When Lu Jia arrived at Nanyue, the king was very frightened. He drafted a letter of gratitude, saying, “[Your] servant Tuo [i.e. I] is an old man and the great supervisor of the Man and Yi. In former days, the widow of emperor Gaozu [i.e. empress Lü] turned away from Nanyue ... Your old servant illegitimately dared to proclaim himself emperor and was even pleased with himself [for doing so]. How dare he to let the Heavenly King hear [such atrocities]?!” He then bowed his head to the floor in gratitude and pledged to serve for a long time as vassal of the borders and to offer tribute and duties. ...”

陸賈至南越，王甚恐，爲書謝，稱曰：“蠻夷大長老夫臣佗，前日高后隔異南越...老臣妄竊帝號，聊以自娛，豈敢以聞天王哉！”乃頓首謝，願長爲藩臣，奉貢職。...”

Faced with an official representative of imperial power, the king renounced his illegitimate ways and underscored his intention to become a model subject by assuring regular tributary payments. *Shiji* as well as *Hanshu* confirm that he indeed kept the latter part of his promise for over thirty years until his death in 137 BC. More importantly, Zhao Tuo ceased to threaten political stability in the South from the moment he pledged his allegiance for the second time. These circumstances were not lost on the Western Han authorities: in fact they did not actively pursue the issue any longer. Immediate as well as lasting peace resulting from the tributary arrangement obviously took precedence over ideological dogma. It was at best considered a minor nuisance that Zhao Tuo internally still called himself emperor and issued edicts, since no repercussions whatsoever ensued.¹¹⁸

In both instances, imperial officials clearly conceived tribute offerings as symbolic consent to the *status quo*. At these particular stages, the Han were *in fact* militarily and politically superior to their respective rivals. Thus, receiving tribute on a more or less regular basis served two main purposes. First, it constantly reconfirmed Han superiority. This might be misunderstood as an exclusively Chinese state of mind. One would be wrong, though, to interpret this observation primarily

¹¹⁷ *SJ* 113, pp. 2969–70; *HS* 95, p. 3851. Zhao Tuo declared himself emperor in 184 BC (*HS* 3, p. 99). For his attack on Changsha in 182 BC and Han’s retaliation, see *HS* 3, pp. 99–100; for a general discussion of Western Han relations to Nanyue, see, for instance, Huang Qingchang 黃慶昌, “Lun Xi Han wangchao yu Nanyue guo de guanxi” 論西漢王朝與南越國的關係, *Nanfang wenwu* 南方文物 2003.3, pp. 72–78.

¹¹⁸ *SJ* 113, p. 2970; *HS* 95, p. 3853.

in terms of ideology, as the second point demonstrates: Such tribute obligations were first and foremost regarded truly diplomatic arrangements in order to procure lasting peace between two partners of unequal strength. As long as an inferior party did not actively threaten Han interests, tribute, or more precisely, acknowledgement of one's own inferiority, was almost never insisted on.¹¹⁹ Zhao Tuo's case illustrates the issue very well. Once he stopped causing problems outside of his own realm after having committed to the court for a second time, his internal transgressions did not really matter. They were no danger to actual Han authority in the area.¹²⁰

The same dynamics are visible, for instance, in the imperial court's relation to Gushi 姑師, a statelet located close to modern-day Turfan that was later renamed Jushi 車師 and that first appears in the "Memoir on the Western Regions" ("Xiyu zhuan" 西域傳), a chapter of *Hanshu*.¹²¹ Throughout the Western Han, its rulers allied mostly with the Xiongnu until the Han started to establish military colonies (*tun tian* 屯田) in the area some time after 62 BC. This did not prevent the locals from

¹¹⁹ Only one case of military enforcement is recorded. It is, however, highly unlikely that king Xian of Suoju 莎車賢王, the executive enforcer, indeed was acting on imperial orders. At the beginning of the Eastern Han, emperor Guangwu was reluctant to engage with the Western Regions and Xian emerged as the most powerful leader of several statelets in the Tarim Basin. In 41 AD, he was named protector-general of the Western Regions (*Xiyu duhu* 西域都護), the most influential Chinese post in the area at the time, but was demoted shortly thereafter. Apparently, a high Eastern Han official doubted the ability of a "barbarian" to uphold Chinese law; see *HHS* 88, pp. 2923–24. For Xian's attack on Dawan (Ferghana) on account of insufficient tribute offerings, see *HHS* 88, p. 2925. Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 139, n. 361, has identified Suoju with present-day Suoju (Yarkand).

¹²⁰ Zhao Tuo's pragmatic approach to the arrangement is ample testament of how well the system worked. Similar to the Chinese, who were not bothered by his internal doings so long as he fulfilled his tribute duties, i.e. formally accepted Han rule, he conducted his own affairs the way he saw fit; the same holds true for his successor, Zhao Hu 趙胡/Zhao Mo 趙昧, who also referred to himself as "emperor" (*di*) in internal matters, while being on good terms with the Chinese court. See Erica Brindley, "Representations and Uses of Identity along the Southern Frontier of the Han, ca. 200–111 B.C.E.," *EC* 33–34 (2010–2011), pp. 1–35, esp. 15–27.

¹²¹ The primary work on the Western Regions still is Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*. More recently, Yu Taishan has presented extensively annotated accounts of the Western Regions as recorded in the *Shiji*, *Hanshu*, and *Hou Hanshu*; see his *Liang Han Wei Jin Nanbei chao zhengshi Xiyu zhuan yaozhu* 兩漢魏晉南北朝正史西域傳要注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), pp. 1–326. A second analysis in English was intended to complement the Chinese study; see Yu Taishan, "A Study of the History of the Relationship between the Western and Eastern Han, Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties and the Western Regions," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 173 (2006), pp. 1–166; also idem, "A History of the Relationship between the Western and Eastern Han, Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties and the Western Regions," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 131 (2004 / 2013), pp. 1–378. An annotated translation of the *Hou Hanshu* chapter concerned with the "Western Regions" was provided by John E. Hill, *Through the Jade Gate: A Study of the Silk Routes during the Later Han Dynasty, 1st to 2nd Centuries CE* (Charleston, S.C.: BookSurge, 2009). For the name change and the location of Gushi/Jushi near modern-day Turfan, see Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, pp. 76–77, n. 49.

further siding with the Xiongnu.¹²² Once the Eastern Han conquered this strategically important territory in 73 AD, Jushi submitted to the empire. As soon as the Xiongnu learned of their shift, a military strike followed. Convinced by such a forceful response, Jushi returned into the welcoming arms of the Xiongnu. Only when Eastern Han forces defeated the northern branch of the now divided Xiongnu confederacy in 90 AD did the two kings of Jushi – by then the statelet had split into what the Chinese historians called Nearer (*qian* 前) and Farther (*hou* 後) Jushi – send tribute and hostage sons. The emperor rewarded each ruler with gold, silks, and an imperial seal for finally accepting an inferior role.¹²³ The fact that Jushi's having switched loyalties time and again necessitated military interventions further attests to what has been exemplified by Zhao Tuo's case. The Chinese side regarded each tribute offering as a momentary confirmation of its own superiority. If imperial interests had been threatened afterwards, military actions were inevitable.

Whether or not events described by the following quotation really happened or are just a figment of the historian's imagination may be open to discussion. Indisputable, however, is its worth for the current discussion:¹²⁴

When the Ershi general (i.e., Li Guangli¹²⁵) marched east, all the small states he passed by had heard of his victory over [Da] Wan (i.e., Ferghana). They all sent their sons and younger brothers to follow him with tribute as well as offerings in order to see (i.e. to be received by) the Son of Heaven and to serve him as hostages. 貳師將軍之東，諸所過小國聞宛破，皆使其子弟從入貢獻，見天子，因為質焉。

Either way the passage is interpreted, it demonstrates the Western Han's view on tribute as well as hostage practices. Here, a massive victory over a distant opponent – Li Guangli finally defeated Dawan (Dayuan) in 101 BC¹²⁶ – convinced minor states along the way of China's superior

¹²² HS 96B, pp. 3921–24; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, pp. 184–91.

¹²³ HHS 88, pp. 2929–30.

¹²⁴ HS 61, p. 2703; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 234.

¹²⁵ See Loewe, *Biographical Dictionary*, pp. 221–23.

¹²⁶ Scholarship usually follows Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 131, n. 325, in reading the characters 大宛 as “Dayuan” (Ferghana); Hans van Ess, however, pointed out (personal communication) that Dawan would be a more appropriate rendering. For 101 BC as the date of the final victory of Li Guangli over Ferghana, see HS 6, p. 202. That he was indeed the “Ershi Ggneral” the citation refers to is visible in SJ 123, pp. 3174–75. There we learn that Ershi, i.e. Sutrishna (Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 76, n. 41), was a city in Dawan, and Li Guangli was named the eponymous general after having obtained “good horses” (*shan ma* 善馬) at this location (see discussion of the “heavenly horses,” above); moreover, see HS 61, pp. 2697–98.

military capabilities. Even without having been individually affected, some decided to emphasize their desire for peaceful relations by providing tribute and hostages.

The Tarim Basin oasis Yanqi 焉耆 was yet another reluctant convert. By killing the incumbent protector-general of the Western Regions (*Xiyu duhu* 西域都護), one additional high-level official, and more than 2,000 imperial employees in 75 AD, the fate of Yanqi was sealed. While it took Eastern Han almost twenty years to come to terms with the situation, the final result was nothing short of devastating for the local ruler. Ban Chao 班超, the newly appointed protector-general and brother of the historian Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 AD), led an army to Yanqi, decapitated its king, and sent his head to the Chinese capital. He then installed Yuanmeng 元孟, the son of the deceased king and former hostage at the imperial court, on the local throne. Yuanmeng, in turn, proved less loyal than Ban Chao had hoped. At first, he did not think of submitting to Eastern Han power. Having been crushed by imperial forces in 127 AD, Yuanmeng eventually had no choice but to send tribute as well as a hostage.¹²⁷

In sum, the notion of tribute during both Han dynasties was far less dogmatic than general perception would have us believe. At this early stage in Chinese imperial history, an ideological view of tribute, in the sense of a heavenly sign of legitimate rule over the whole universe, certainly was neither widespread nor continuously held. Contrary arguments put forth in the past were disclosed as having merely been personal opinions of prominent historical individuals. The hyperbolic views of emperor Wu and Sima Xiangru certainly are not representative of actual political practice. Tribute could also have been a fiscal duty of fully-fledged members of the imperial realm, native or incorporated. On the other hand, not all foreign entities engaged in tributary relations with China were intended to become integral parts of the empire. Those that actively opposed Han authority or interests, especially the rather small polities in the Central Asian Tarim Basin, were pursued until they finally committed to an inferior position that was acknowledged by offering tribute (often among other things as we shall see); those who did not cause any trouble were either left alone or voluntarily sent tribute to court.¹²⁸ Hence, tribute was, to both Han

¹²⁷ *HHS* 6, p. 254; 47, p. 1590; 88, p. 2928. For Yuanmeng as a former Han hostage, see 47, p. 1581. Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 177, n. 588, identified Yanqi with present-day Karashahr. For events surrounding Yuanmeng's establishment in 94 AD, see the discussion of hostages below.

¹²⁸ The latter's motives shall be discussed, below, in the section titled "Just a Business Venture?"

dynasties, a way to generate revenues in internal affairs and to accomplish peaceful contacts with alien polities. Considering the fact that it has been equated with acceptance of Chinese superiority, a certain amount of ideology can hardly be denied; yet, its pragmatic function to procure amicable relations strongly prevailed. In all of its various aspects, the understanding of tribute during both Han dynasties very much reminds us of how tribute relations worked during the Spring and Autumn period. In earlier times it was likewise considered a form of taxation as well as a physical confirmation of actual superiority that secured, at least for a while, the *status quo*. To understand Han tribute practice as a new, contemporaneous, and, more importantly, imperial ideological development misses the point. It was, in essence, a continuation of a long established strategy.

Just a Business Venture? Fathoming the Motives behind Foreign Tribute

The fact that an analysis of Han relations with the Xiongnu was believed to be sufficient to explain early-imperial foreign policy has already been addressed, above, in the introductory remarks. One of the most influential aspects of Yü's assumption proved to be his strong emphasis on economic motives for aliens to participate in the tributary system. The "five baits" (*wu er* 五餌) suggested by Jia Yi 賈誼 (201–169 BC) as an alternative to the inefficient *heqin* arrangements lay at the heart of the argument. The statesman famously proposed in effect to bribe the Xiongnu by showering them with Chinese clothes, carriages, exquisite food, and so forth. Jia Yi reasoned that these incentives would be desired by greedy barbarians.¹²⁹ A similar approach had been taken to engage the succeeding nomadic powers like the Qiang, Wuhuan, and Xianbei; peaceful relations were mainly bought by Chinese gifts.¹³⁰ By the same token, the prospect of financial gain even motivated the Central Asian statelets of the Tarim Basin to establish contact:

From the economic point of view there were many reasons for most states of the area to join the Chinese tributary system. In the first place, as tributary states they normally received, at least at the beginning, generous gifts from the Han court. ... In the sec-

¹²⁹ In fact, the Xiongnu were not at all corrupted by the opulence of Chinese products, as Jia Yi assumed they would be. Instead, the magnitude of goods extorted from the Western Han was essential to the internal stability of the nomad confederacy. See Barfield, "Hsiung-nu Federal Confederacy," esp. pp. 52–56. For a brief overview of other arguments voiced at court at the time, see Loewe, *Dong Zhongshu*, pp. 106–9.

¹³⁰ For arguments concerning the Qiang, Wuhuan, and Xianbei, see Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, pp. 51–64; for a translation of Jia Yi's proposal, *ibid.*, pp. 36–37. Rafe de Crespigny's work allows a more comprehensive understanding of the Eastern Han's dealings with Qiang, Wuhuan, and Xianbei; see his *Northern Frontier*.

ond place, trade was no less an attraction to these tributary states. In fact, not a few of them used tribute as a cloak for trade. For instance, in spite of the cold reception of the Han court, Chi-pin sent envoys to China every several years because of the gains from both imperial gifts and trade.¹³¹

The above passage shows the historian's belief that the Han court rewarded tribute offerings with lucrative presents on a regular basis, a process for which he coined the term "tribute-gift exchange."¹³²

It would seem, then, that an underlying notion of reciprocity must have guided tribute relations. To explicitly speak of "tribute-gift exchange" evokes associations with the anthropological discussions of "gift exchange," which are usually believed to have been initiated by Marcel Mauss' seminal essay "Essai sur le don" ("The Gift") that became available since 1925.¹³³ Searching for analytical tools in the respective literatures that rose from Mauss' study and related works turns out to be a fairly fruitless endeavor. The sparse data offered by Chinese sources provide no real overlaps that would allow for any meaningful application of these exchange theories, which were rooted in empirical field studies. The relevant discussions mainly revolve around the question of whether or not a magic quality was inherent in gifts that forced the receiving party to reciprocate.¹³⁴ Arguments put forth in the preceding section have already indicated that tribute, if understood in the sense of a gift, very much had secular functions in early China. On a more abstract level, reciprocity as a concept has long been a subject of sociological discourse. Scholars unanimously agree that it stabilizes the relation between two social actors.¹³⁵ It is effective purely on a social level and devoid of any religious or quasi-religious meaning.

¹³¹ Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, p. 144.

¹³² Ibid., p. 40. It remained unspoken how alien entities on the southern Chinese periphery fitted into this neatly developed picture.

¹³³ Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques," *L'Année sociologique, nouvelle série* 1 (1923-1924), pp. 30-186 (first published 1925). In an excellent study, Beate Wagner-Hasel pointed out that Marcel Mauss was, in fact, not the first scholar to reflect on gift exchange in premodern societies; see her "Egoistic Exchange and Altruistic Gift: On the Roots of Marcel Mauss's Theory of the Gift," in Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner, and Bernhard Jussen, eds., *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-modern Figurations of Exchange* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), pp. 141-71.

¹³⁴ See, for instance, Mauss, "Essai sur le don," and Maurice Godelier, *L'énigme du don* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1996).

¹³⁵ The main arguments of the most prominent scholars discussing the subject (i.e. Marcel Mauss, Marshall D. Sahlins, Georg Simmel, Alvin W. Gouldner, Peter M. Blau, Pierre Bourdieu, and Alain Caillé) have been collected and brilliantly interpreted by Frank Adloff and Steffen Mau, *Vom Geben und Nehmen: Zur Soziologie der Reziprozität* (Frankfurt, New York: Campus Verlag, 2005).

Alvin Gouldner, however, warned that “it cannot be merely hypostatized that reciprocity will operate in every case; its occurrence must, instead, be documented empirically.”¹³⁶ Keeping this premise in mind when scrutinizing Chinese records, it becomes painfully obvious that there is in fact little proof to support customary material reciprocation of tributary offerings.

Yet, the above quoted example of Jibin 罽賓 (that is, Chi-pin; present-day Kashmir) seems to be a fitting piece of evidence to the contrary. In the wake of Wudi’s expansion of the empire, the Western Han initiated contacts with this polity. Subsequently, the king of Kashmir repeatedly killed Han envoys, assuming Chinese troops would be stationed too far away to retaliate. His successor made offerings (*xian* 獻) to the Chinese court and soon after schemed against the protector-general. The latter killed the king and established a new ruler. By Chengdi’s reign (r. 32–7 BC), Kashmir once again sent offerings (*xian*) to compensate for its transgressions. When Han authorities gave the order to accompany the returning mission with their own envoys, a higher-ranking member of the troops issued a rather long warning of which the following statement is only a short excerpt:¹³⁷

Now [Kashmir] regrets [its former actions] and comes [to us], but among those who make the offerings (*xian*), there are neither members of the royal family nor nobility; they all are traveling merchants and men of low status who wish to trade in the markets under the pretext of making offerings (*xian*). ... 今悔過來，而無親屬貴人，奉獻者皆行賈賤人，欲通貨市買，以獻爲名，...

Nothing in this passage indicates imperial reciprocation for offerings made by Kashmir. All the text says is that the members of the mission submitted “tribute” (*xian*, literally, “offer up”) in order to be granted access to Chinese markets; their economic interests are barely deniable. Moreover, the relevant *Hanshu* records do not point to regular tribute missions “every several years” as the previous citation suggested.

A similar observation may be made with regard to Kangju 康居, identified by Anthony Hulsewé with present-day Samarkand. Again we listen to a Chinese official, who was complaining about the audacity of foreigners:¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Alvin W. Gouldner, “The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement,” *American Sociological Review* 25.2 (1960), pp. 161–68, here p. 164.

¹³⁷ *HS* 94A, p. 3886; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 109 (identification of Jibin with Kashmir on p. 104, n. 203).

¹³⁸ *HS* 96A, p. 3892; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, pp. 126–28 (identification of Kangju with Samarkand on p. 123, n. 298).

At the time of emperor Cheng, [the ruler of] Kangju sent a son to attend at the [court] of Han and to present tribute and offerings. Since Kangju regarded itself as cut off and distant [from the Han realm], it alone remained arrogant and insulting. It was not willing to see eye to eye with [other] subordinate states (i.e. on the same level as the other states). Guo Shun, protector-general [of the Western Regions] submitted several petitions, saying: “Originally, while the Xiongnu prospered, it was not because they possessed [the areas associated with] the Wusun and with Kangju; once they called themselves [our] servants and maids, it was not because they had lost those two states. Although Han received hostage sons from all of them, communications amongst these three states remained [intact] and mutual contacts existed as previously. ... Now, Kangju is behaving arrogantly and cunningly and is still unwilling to bow before [Han] envoys. When officials of the Protectorate General reach their state, they sit below envoys of the Wusun and other states; its king and noblemen first serve themselves beverages and food, only then are beverages and food served to the officials of the Protectorate General. Thus, Kangju is demonstrating abundance in order to show off in front of neighboring states. Considering such [behavior, I ask] why is it sending a son to attend [court]? Their desire and love for trade in the markets is [shrouded] in cunning words! ... [Hence] it is appropriate to send the attending son back, to sever relations, and to discontinue sending any further envoys, thereby clarifying that the Han dynasty does not deal with states that lack proper behavior.” Since the Han had only recently established contact and took reaching people from far away (i.e. to bring them to court) seriously, they fastened the halter and did not yet sever relations.

至成帝時，康居遣子侍漢，貢獻，然自以絕遠，獨驕慢，不肯與諸國相望。都護郭舜數上言：“本匈奴盛時，非以兼有烏孫、康居故也；及其稱臣妾，非以失二國也。漢雖皆受其質子，然三國內相輸遺，交通如故 ... 而康居驕黠，訖不肯拜使者。都護吏至其國，坐之烏孫諸使下，王及貴人先飲食已，乃飲啗都護吏，故爲無所省以夸旁國。以此度之，何故遣子入侍？其欲賈市爲好，辭之詐也。 ... 宜歸其侍子，絕勿復使，以章漢家不通無禮之國。 ... ”漢爲其新通，重致遠人，終羈縻而未絕。

It is clear from the opening sequence of this episode that Kangju facilitated two diplomatic strategies to establish contact with China: a) they sent a hostage son, and b) they rendered tribute. The protector-general's opinion on Kangju's conduct would certainly not have been

out of place in the previous section as it clearly highlights a Chinese perspective on such practices. Primarily these were considered tokens of loyalty to the Han and symbols of acceptance of its superiority.¹³⁹ Naturally, both aspects required the foreign party to treat representatives of the empire with due respect; a courtesy which Kangju's nobility willfully failed to extend. The Han official's assessment of Kangju's underlying intentions is even more pertinent to the present discussion. He disclosed their actions to be charades that should grant Kangju merchants access to Chinese markets. Seemingly, expectations of economic gain are hard to deny, at least if we follow the official's interpretation of the exchange. On the other hand, nothing that is portrayed in the incident attests to tribute having been reciprocated with counter gifts.

A third passage taken from the *Hanshu* chapter titled "M memoir of the Western Regions" suggests otherwise:¹⁴⁰

At its peak, there were fifty states [in the Western Regions]. Therein, a total of 376 people ranging from interpreters-in-chief, chiefs of towns, lords, inspectors, officials ... chancellors to marquises and kings, had Han seals and ribbons hanging [from their belts]. Because Kangju, Great Yuezhi, Anxi, Jibin, and Wuyi were severed and distant [from Han], they are excluded from this number. When [those states] came [to hand over] tribute and offerings [the court] reciprocated, but did not check on, register, or control [their affairs].

最凡國五十。自譯長、城長、君、監、吏 ... 相至侯、王，皆佩漢印綬，凡三百七十六人。而康居、大月氏、安息、罽賓、烏弋之屬，皆以絕遠不在數中，其來貢獻則相與報，不督錄總領也。

By drawing our attention to "Han seals and ribbons," that is to say, to titles of nobility conferred by the imperial court, the historiographical record first alludes to a diplomatic strategy of both Han dynasties (one that we shall not deal with in detail).¹⁴¹ It then proceeds to alien polities including Jibin and Kangju that were too far removed from China to effectively have had any real political significance for the empire. If

¹³⁹ For a similar reading of this passage, see Hsieh, "Viewing the Han Empire," pp. 248–51.

¹⁴⁰ *HS* 96B, p. 3928; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 197. Hulsewé located Great Yuezhi in Bactria (p. 119, n. 276; and p. 272), identified Anxi with the Arsacide empire in Persia (p. 115, n. 267), and shown Wuyi to be the (partial) transliteration of Alexandria, which Edouard Chavannes had equaled with Herat (p. 112, n. 250).

¹⁴¹ For a discussion of titles of nobility as a diplomatic strategy, see Selbitschka, *Prestigegüter*, pp. 26–29. It is also worth mentioning that covenants (*meng*) common in diplomacy of the Chunqiu period, albeit on a much smaller scale, also played a role in Han-Xiongnu relations; see Jurij L. Kroll, "The Han-Xiongnu *Heqin* Treaty (200–135 B.C.) in the Light of Political and Diplomatic Traditions," *BMFEA* 78 (2006), pp. 109–24, esp. pp. 119–21.

such distant states did come to the capital to deliver tribute, they were indeed economically recompensed.

Contrarily, the following examples will show that this small piece of evidence does not suffice to postulate economic incentives as the sole reason for foreign entities to approach China with tribute (other than having been forced to do so, as has been illustrated in the previous section). Once weakened mostly by internal power struggles, even the Xiongnu had to resort to diplomatic ways of interaction. In 28 BC, a Xiongnu leader had sent several negotiators laden with offerings (*xian*) to Chang'an. One of the envoys reportedly wished to defect and threatened to kill himself unless his people were taken in. Again, the main reason to make offerings was not to obtain lavish gifts in return, but to support the request itself. In order to succeed, the envoy knew he first had to acknowledge Chinese superiority.¹⁴² A similar rationale certainly inspired king Xian of Suoju (Yarkand) when he accompanied his appeal to be named protector-general of the Western Regions with tribute in 41 AD. Apparently convinced by this token of loyalty, emperor Guangwu briefly assigned him to the post. Thus, the chariot, gold, silks of variegated color, and embroideries that he simultaneously bestowed upon the king must not be interpreted in the sense of reciprocity for the tribute he had submitted, but need to be understood as presents occasioned by Xian's inauguration into office.¹⁴³

Slightly different reasons motivated king Fangqian 放前 of Yutian 于阗 (Khotan) to render tribute to the Eastern Han in 129 AD. After having staged a *coup d'état* in one of the neighboring Tarim Basin oases by killing its king and establishing his own son as the new ruler, Fangqian apparently felt the need to justify this expansionist move. Making his son deliver tribute immediately after the coup was intended to convince the authorities of Fangqian's continued loyalty – a sign that he would not dare to infringe on Chinese interests. Although we may rightfully question his sincerity, his own understanding of the exchange is beyond doubt. Smoothing things over with the court was the only priority, whereas economic considerations played no role whatsoever. Yet, the emperor recognized the tributary offerings for what they were, a ruse, and ordered Fangqian to return the conquered polity to its people. After refusing to comply, his troops were crushed by Central Asian forces under Han command.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² HS 94B, p. 3808.

¹⁴³ HHS 1A, p. 69, 88, p. 2923; also see n. 119, above, and Hsieh, "Viewing the Han Empire," p. 252.

¹⁴⁴ HHS 6, p. 257; 88, p. 2915.

Moving back about eighty years, we read how the Wuhuan, one of the nomad confederacies that filled the power vacuum left by the Xiongnu, had been rewarded by the emperor with silk for their defeat of the latter in 46 AD, having chased them over a thousand miles to the north. Especially in view of economic profits gained from previous exchanges, one might expect greed to have motivated tributary offerings as well. This was not, however, the case. The only time the respective records tell us about the Wuhuan's rendering of tribute to the Han court was when one of its nobles wished to settle 922 of his followers on Chinese territory. The nobleman expressed his yielding to Han authority by sending cattle, horses, bows, as well as tiger and panther skins in 49 AD.¹⁴⁵

Finally, an incident involving Korea (Gaogouli 高句麗) once again demonstrates that foreign entities appreciated the diplomatic aspect of tribute. Starting in 105 AD, king Gong 宮 repeatedly raided Chinese territory and conquered several counties. Subsequently, he was beaten by Han forces and chose a more peaceful approach to enlarge his realm in 111 AD. By offering tribute he supported his plea to incorporate an area occupied by the Eastern Han into his empire. Apparently it had been a fruitless proposition, because he unsuccessfully tried to take it by force seven years later. Once more, the interaction involved no economic interests; the foreign party only employed tribute to meet political ends.¹⁴⁶

Presumably, if alien polities really did treat early Chinese tribute relations primarily as lucrative business ventures, one might expect it to be visible in the sources. This is clearly not the case. While the previous discussion has demonstrated that peoples farther removed from the Chinese empire might indeed have subscribed to such views and were even rewarded for sending tribute, we have also seen that entities geographically closer to the political interests of the court often had distinctly different reasons to do so. Moreover, an interpretation of tributary contacts in the sense of reciprocal economic exchanges, the so-called "tribute-gift exchange," would not only require that we know of tribute that was actually sent, but also of "gifts" having been conferred in return. With the exception of explicit reciprocation in the context of distant states like Jibin and Kangju, no respective records exist. Of course, this is not to say that ancient (that is, Han- and early-medieval-era) historians completely failed to document such Han-court gifts. But

¹⁴⁵ *HHS* 1B, pp. 75, 77; 90, p. 2982.

¹⁴⁶ *HHS* 85, p. 2814.

when they did document them, the presents were never directly related to tributary offerings. King Xian of Yutian's (Khotan) appointment as protector-general of the Western Regions is a case in point.¹⁴⁷

Even the lavish gifts conferred upon the Xiongnu were never directly occasioned by tribute submissions. In general, whenever we read of presents made after the so-called *heqin* policy, the abundance of gifts largely had been prompted by the fact that Xiongnu leaders personally came to the capital, or by the inauguration of a new *shanyu*. In 51 BC, *shanyu* Huhanye had reached the Western Han court for an audience (*chao*); he was showered in ceremonial clothes, gold, a chariot, horses, saddles, exquisite silks, and various other luxuries. It was only during the following year that he in fact presented tribute.¹⁴⁸ Six years later, he made offerings (*xian*) with the distinct goal of receiving something in return. Rather than acquiring riches, he sought to have his hostage son back and to be allowed to submit to Chinese superiority.¹⁴⁹

In short, extant evidence does not support a prevailing, uniform notion among foreign entities concerning tributary relations with both Han dynasties. There certainly were polities that recognized its economic advantages, but even in such cases the value of reciprocated merchandise was generally of little importance. China was primarily contacted to open new markets for regular commerce. In addition, many of the foreign parties fully understood the political implications of sending tribute and were using it as a diplomatic tool.

More Than Just Tribute: Different Strategies of Diplomatic Interaction

How unsuitable, then, for the expression "tributary system" to be used in explaining Han-period diplomacy. It becomes apparent if we keep in mind that strategies other than tribute were commonly utilized to foster peaceful dealings with alien polities. Similar to Spring and Autumn period diplomacy, hostages were one such strategy. Unlike earlier times, hostages during both Han periods were mostly, although not exclusively, employed in Chinese interactions with foreigners. In those cases, hostages served several different purposes.

¹⁴⁷ For more examples of Chinese gifts to Tarim Basin polities, see Selbitschka, *Prestigegüter*, pp. 29–30.

¹⁴⁸ *HS* 94B, p. 3798. In 27 BC, the Xiongnu defector mentioned above attended the Western Han court and was richly (although not quite as lavishly as Huhanye) rewarded; see *HS* 94B, p. 3808. For further audiences that were reciprocated with gifts, see *HS* 94B, p. 3817 (1 BC); *HHS* 89, p. 2954 (91 AD); for inaugural presents, see *HHS* 89, p. 2948 (54 AD); 89, p. 2962 (143 AD).

¹⁴⁹ *HS* 70, p. 3008.

First, hostages were actively deployed to meet a specific end – a feature the Chinese side was keenly aware of, as a conversation between a Han envoy and a Xiongnu leader suggests. Sometime between 121 and 104 BC, the emissary demanded of the *shanyu*, “if [you] desire *heqin* relations, you have to send your heir-apparent as hostage to Han 即欲和親，以單于太子爲質於漢。” Note the choice of words: negotiations still were held in *heqin* terms at a time when that policy supposedly had been supplanted with the tributary system!¹⁵⁰ The *shanyu* then lamented the fact that the Chinese representative held no aristocratic rank and that the Western Han were disposing of spinster princesses; consequently, he refused to comply.¹⁵¹ The Chinese position could not have been clearer: the Xiongnu needed to demonstrate their willingness to cooperate by sending their designated successor to the capital before the Han would even think of reciprocation. Earlier, the same *shanyu* did not seem to have been quite as fastidious. Ardent with the acquaintance of another Chinese envoy with Xiongnu customs, he enthused: “I will send the heir-apparent as hostage to Han in order to ask for *heqin* relations 吾爲遣其太子入質於漢，以求和親。”¹⁵² Considering his subsequent actions, we might justifiably doubt how serious he could have been in his intentions (or how objective the historiographer who recorded the episode was). Nevertheless, the incident shows that both parties fully understood, at least in theory, the rules of the game: *Do ut des*, “I give so that you may give” is, of course, reciprocity in its purest form. It did, however, not operate on an economic, but on a political level.

The same rationale had driven several states of the Western Regions to send their sons to China during the Western Han,¹⁵³ as well as the Eastern Han. They intended to move both dynasties to reestablish the post of protector-general of the Western Regions. In addition, eighteen oases acting in 45 AD emphasized their request by accompanying the hostage heirs with tribute only to be turned down by Guangwu. Since his administration was preoccupied with consolidating the realm, the monarch immediately returned the sons. Reluctant to accept the rejection, the king of Shanshan 鄯善 (formerly Loulan 樓蘭, or Kroraina) petitioned to send a son so that the post would be reassigned one year later; otherwise, so the king threatened, he would defect to the Xiongnu. When Guangwu denied his wish, Shanshan indeed turned to

¹⁵⁰ See my introductory remarks, above, under “Setting the Stage.”

¹⁵¹ *HS* 96A, p. 2773; *SJ* 110, p. 2913.

¹⁵² *HS* 96A, p. 2772; *SJ* 110, p. 2913.

¹⁵³ *HS* 96B, p. 3930; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 203.

the Xiongnu.¹⁵⁴ Because reciprocal expectations were not met, interactions did not materialize.

Other bilateral exchanges involving hostages do not appear to have been nearly as liberal. In the same way that certain foreign entities were compelled to render tribute only after demonstrations of imperial might, some alien states were forced to express their loyalty by sending hostages. For example, Li Guangli's victory over Dawan in 101 BC evidently sufficed to convince the small states that he had passed on his way back east "to order sons and younger brothers to accompany [him in order to] enter court and make tribute offerings, to see the emperor, and to serve him as hostages 皆使其子弟從入貢獻, 見天子, 因為質焉."¹⁵⁵ To present-day readers, such a generalizing statement might sound a little suspicious. If we follow Li Guangli's footsteps, though, we realize that he exerted actual power along the way of his journey. Stopping at the Tarim Basin oasis Wumi, he learned that its king had ordered Laidan 賴丹, the local heir-apparent, to serve as hostage at Qiuci 龜茲 (Kuqa).¹⁵⁶ The general's wrath was inevitable: "The foreign states all are vassals submitting to Han, where does Qiuci take the right to receive a hostage from Wumi 外國皆臣屬於漢, 龜茲何以得受杆彌質"? By transferring Laidan to Chang'an, Li Guangli assigned both entities their rightful place within the newly established order. Wumi now lodged a hostage in the Chinese capital and Qiuci had to bow to the will of the Han, the most powerful actor in the region at the time.¹⁵⁷ A similar situation occurred when protector-general Ban Chao defeated Yanqi in 94 AD, reportedly killing 5,000, taking 15,000 prisoners, capturing a total of 30,000 livestock, and establishing the former hostage Yuanmeng as the new king. Seemingly impressed by this demonstration of power, more than fifty polities of the Western Regions decided to send hostages to court.¹⁵⁸ Nineteen years prior, Ban Chao himself had left the king of Shanshan no choice but to acknowledge Eastern Han superiority by dispatching a hostage son; Ban felt he had not been properly received at Shanshan.¹⁵⁹ How Eastern Han's victory over the Northern Xiongnu in 90 AD affected Nearer (*qian*) and Farther (*hou*) Jushi has been mentioned in the context of tributary re-

¹⁵⁴ HHS 88, p. 2924.

¹⁵⁵ HS 61, p. 2703 (slightly different wording in S7 123, p. 3178); also see Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 234.

¹⁵⁶ For a discussion of Wumi and Qiuci's historical identification, see Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, pp. 94, n. 138; 163, n. 106.

¹⁵⁷ HS 96B, p. 3916; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 174.

¹⁵⁸ HHS 4, p. 179; 47, p. 1582; 88, p. 2910.

¹⁵⁹ HHS 47, p. 1572.

lations. Because both states feared Chinese retribution for their ever-shifting loyalties, the two statelets were submitting tribute and hostage sons.¹⁶⁰ Combining two diplomatic strategies surely was intended to augment the earnestness of their intentions. To modern historians it emphasizes the fact that both tactics often attained the same function: they were tokens of acceptance of Han superiority.

However, as the actions of king Fangqian of Yutian have already shown, diplomatic strategies could be employed retroactively. We already know that he tried to justify a coup staged in 129 AD; sending, two years later, a hostage son once again to deliver tribute was aimed unmistakably at convincing the court of his loyal disposition.¹⁶¹ The same is true of events that occurred more than two hundred years previously. After Western Han had eventually defeated Dawan in 101 BC, it appointed a new king and left its realm. Later on, local nobility killed the Chinese-supported ruler on account of abhorrent behavior and established his younger brother as king. More importantly, they immediately ordered the latter's son to serve as hostage at the imperial court, thus assuring Han of their peaceful intentions. Emperor Wu, in turn, not only used the opportunity to express his appreciation by conferring presents on the Dawan elite, but also to demonstrate the presence of imperial power by commanding several missions to the region. This way, he coerced the new king to agree to present two of the coveted Heavenly Horses each year.¹⁶²

Sometimes, Han-period historiographical records also reveal the fate of hostages in captivity. In general, foreign sons and brothers were not harmed by their "hosts" so as to extort compliance with Han directives; this was because they were supposed to return to their native states. That there was not necessarily a regular schedule of hostageship is indicated by *shanyu* Huhanye's way of contacting Western Han in 45 BC. He had been generously welcomed at court a few years earlier, but now, in the spirit of diplomatic reassurance, he made offerings (*xian*) in order to ask for the return of his hostage son; he also expressed the wish that his realm become part of the empire.¹⁶³ Considering the circumstances of this incident – relations between Han and one of the two Xiongnu factions were only beginning to become less volatile – it is not unlikely that the term of captivity in this case was not set. From

¹⁶⁰ *HHS* 88, pp. 2929–30.

¹⁶¹ *HHS* 88, p. 2916.

¹⁶² *SJ* 123, p. 3179; *HS* 96A, p. 3895; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 135. For a discussion of the Heavenly Horses, see the section "Pure Ideology?" above.

¹⁶³ *HS* 70, p. 3008.

this we might infer, at least as far as Xiongnu pawns were concerned, they had to stay with Han authorities as long as they had political or diplomatic value. Hostages were meant to foster persistent relations to a higher degree than did tribute offerings; this can be gleaned from the next example. In 7 BC, a Xiongnu hostage died while serving in China. His body was returned to his family to receive a proper burial; the *shanyu* was left no choice but to reconfirm his loyalty by sending a second son.¹⁶⁴ Only by the year 50 AD do hostage exchanges with the southern branch of the Xiongnu seem to have entered a more regularized stage. A new batch of sons was dispatched on an annual basis while the established ones were allowed to return.¹⁶⁵

Moving away from the Xiongnu, the *Hanshu* "Memoir of the Western Regions" offers insight into China's equally complex relations to some of the Tarim Basin oases. In theory, foreign pawns carried the capacity to ensure enduring amicable relations. The rationale behind the practice of establishing former hostages as new local rulers especially in the states of the Western Regions is obvious: the court reckoned that they had bonded with their hosts and would prove loyal supporters in the future. If Ban Gu's accounts are trustworthy, Chinese hopes were not far-fetched. The historian tells us about king Yan 延 of Suoju, who indeed distinguished himself as a faithful servant after his return from China. During the turmoil of Wang Mang's usurpation (9–23 AD), the Xiongnu again tried to control the Western Regions. King Yan, at the time one of the more powerful rulers in the Tarim Basin, bravely resisted their attacks. Ban Gu furthermore portrayed Yan as deeply influenced by Chinese culture. So much so that he fashioned the laws of his realm around the prevalent Han code, and that he raised his many sons to grow up loyal to the Han.¹⁶⁶

Probably more often than not, political considerations rather than sentimental affinity to Han governed local decisions. Seeing that only brute military force in 127 AD had moved Yuanmeng (the former hostage whom Ban Chao established on the throne of Yanqi in 94 AD) to deliver tribute and a hostage son, it is safe to say that he did not at all live up to Chinese expectations. Conversely, former hostages must have proven trustworthy cooperators for longer periods of time. Oth-

¹⁶⁴ HS 94B, p. 3810. Moreover, Yang Lien-sheng has argued that hostage princes "were often made attendants at the court or guards at the imperial palaces"; see his "Hostages in Chinese History," p. 509.

¹⁶⁵ HHS 89, p. 2944. In later periods, hostages came to be known as "wild geese subjects" (*yan chen* 鴈臣) because of their regular "migratory" schedule; see Yang, "Hostages in Chinese History," p. 512.

¹⁶⁶ HHS 88, p. 2923.

erwise the fact that both Han dynasties continued to actively utilize their previous guests even after disappointing experiences would have made little sense.¹⁶⁷

To sum up, hostages were very much an essential feature of Han diplomacy – just as they were during the Spring and Autumn period – even after *heqin* arrangements presumably ceased to be brokered. Past scholarship has never denied that both Han dynasties kept on demanding hostages under what has been coined the tributary system. Nevertheless, scholars' insistence on distinguishing *heqin* policy, of which hostages were an integral part, from the tributary system, along with a general neglect for the actual diplomatic function of hostages – hostage sons and brothers dispatched from the Western Regions were merely regarded to support tributary relations¹⁶⁸ – caused them to overlook the hostages' diplomatic value. Foreign rulers mostly of the northern and northwestern areas were still compelled to send sons (less frequently younger brothers) to serve as hostages if they wished to interact peacefully with the courts of both Han dynasties. The instances represented in the historiographical works clearly reveal that these exchanges were not devoid of meaning, but were effective political tools. Whenever the Han had actual power over one of the more fluid alien entities, the former insisted on tangible confirmation in the form of hostages and/or tribute. The fact that foreign parties actively employed the strategy to attain specific ends abundantly illustrates that they fully understood its political implications.

A strict distinction between or, more accurately, a chronological succession from tributary system to *heqin* policy is also misleading because one more key element of *heqin* arrangements in the form of marriage alliances actually was still part of the tributary system.¹⁶⁹ The section "Before the Tributary System," above, illustrated how political marriages played an important role in Spring and Autumn diplomacy. In ancient times, creating personal, ideally longer lasting ties between two households was the main motive to engage in strategic marriages. Realizing that the Western Han were facing Xiongnu hostilities right from the outset, an official quickly revived the old custom,¹⁷⁰ albeit for slightly different reasons. Liu Jing 劉敬 famously advised emperor

¹⁶⁷ For additional instances in which the Western or Eastern Han established former hostages in the Western Regions, see *HS* 70, p. 3002; *HHS* 47, p. 2915; and 88, p. 2931.

¹⁶⁸ Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, p. 141.

¹⁶⁹ Pan Yihong has analyzed marriage alliances that were forged during both Han periods. Accordingly, a marriage alliance was a constituting element of *heqin* policy even after it had supposedly been suspended; see his "Marriage Alliances and Chinese Princesses," p. 96.

¹⁷⁰ Also see Kroll, "Han-Xiongnu *Heqin* Treaty," pp. 115–17.

Gaozu (r. 206–195 BC) to marry his eldest daughter to *shanyu* Maodun not so they could forge a closer bond, but because he believed it was inevitable that a son emanating from the union would turn out to be a filial and loyal grandson once he became *shanyu*. Moreover, Liu Jing opposed the idea of sending any random girl instead of a real princess. The Xiongnu surely were bound to notice, so he contended, and not honor any agreements.¹⁷¹ The emperor eventually went against Liu's recommendation. He elevated a woman of lower status to the rank of princess (*gongzhu* 公主) and ordered Liu to accompany her.¹⁷² Adhering to Gaozu's template, Wendi (r. 179–157 BC) declared a distant female family member a princess before marrying her to a Xiongnu *shanyu*.¹⁷³

By heeding the advice of Zhang Qian 張騫, who had proposed to marry a Chinese princess to the Wusun leader in order to weaken the Xiongnu, Wudi took an equally pragmatic approach.¹⁷⁴ Fond of the idea, the emperor dispatched Zhang laden with presents to approach the Wusun. Reluctant to enter relations with relative strangers, the Wusun initially declined the offer. As soon as the Xiongnu got wind of the Han's advances, they planned to attack the Wusun. Faced with the prospect of a Xiongnu assault, the Wusun had a change of heart and delivered horses to the Chinese court to substantiate an actual request for a princess. This time, however, court officials were hesitant to interact. Wudi's advisors demanded that the Wusun first needed to submit to Han authority before a woman could be forwarded; they complied by offering (*xian*) 1,000 horses. Eventually, between 110 and 103 BC none of the emperor's biological daughters was given to the Wusun leader (*kunmi* 昆彌). Instead, a daughter of one of the vassal Han kings of imperial descent received the official title "princess" and was, along with a generous dowry, dispatched to the west.¹⁷⁵ It would be utterly wrong to assume that because Wudi was not the girl's father it was a trivial

¹⁷¹ *SJ* 99, p. 2719; *HS* 47, p. 2122. Liu Jing also went by the name of Lou Jing 婁敬; see Loewe, *Biographical Dictionary*, pp. 320, 412–13.

¹⁷² *HS* 94B, p. 3754; *SJ* 110, p. 2895. On Liu Jing's counsel, also see Pan, "Marriage Alliances and Chinese Princesses," p. 97; Loewe, *Dong Zhongshu*, p. 106; and Chin, "Defamiliarizing the Foreigner," pp. 340–41.

¹⁷³ *SJ* 110, p. 2894.

¹⁷⁴ *HS* 61, p. 2692; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 217.

¹⁷⁵ *SJ* 123, p. 3172; *HS* 96B, pp. 3902–3; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, pp. 146–48. A.F.P. Hulsewé has argued that the respective *Shiji* passage is corrupt; he considered *HS* 96B more likely to be authentic; see his "The Problem of the Authenticity of *Shih-chi*, Ch. 123, The Memoir on Ta-yüan," *TP* 61.1–3 (1975), pp. 83–147, here pp. 111–12. Hans van Ess (and others) proposed convincing arguments to the contrary; see his "Sima Qian und die Anfänge der chinesischen Biographik," in Walter Berschin und Wolfgang Schamoni, eds., *Biographie: 'So der Westen wie der Osten?'* (Heidelberg: Mattes Verlag, 2003), pp. 15–32, here pp. 24–25.

exchange. That the court still honored the initial agreement becomes apparent if we consider that once the princess had passed away, another royal daughter took her place. It did not even matter that the *kunmi* to whom the first princess originally was married had predeceased her, since the then widowed princess was remarried to the *kunmi*'s son, with Han imperial blessing.¹⁷⁶ In 60 BC, another royal daughter betrothed to a Wusun renewed the alliance a third time.¹⁷⁷

We are told of a marriage involving a member of the imperial family and an ethnic foreigner only one more time. Qiuci (Kuqa) had asked the second Han princess who was wedded into the Wusun permission to marry her daughter, but she refused it. Later, on the return journey from a visit to Chang'an, the daughter was passing through Qiuci, where the king seized and detained her. Subsequently, the appeal of the Qiuci king to marry her was successful. The mother hardly had any other choice but to consent if she wanted her daughter to remain alive. At first glance, this does not appear to be a marital alliance between Han and an alien party. This makes the mother's next step and, more importantly, the reaction of the imperial court all the more interesting. After allowing the king of Qiuci to wed the daughter, the mother officially requested at the Han court for this daughter to be treated as a fully-fledged member of the imperial family and for her to be allowed an audience (*chao*). Simultaneously, the king of Qiuci submitted a petition of his own. Emphasizing that he now was married to a granddaughter of the Han, he wished to accompany her to court. Curiously, both of them were received in 65 BC. It is even more peculiar to learn that they, in fact, were richly rewarded and the granddaughter was officially named as a princess (*gongzhu*). Why this generosity, one might ask? There are two answers to this question. First, family ties, if not to the mixed-blood granddaughter, then at least to her mother (a genuine member of the imperial family), still carried some weight with the authorities. Her wishes could not simply be disregarded. Second, previous relations between Qiuci and the Han were an important factor. It has already been mentioned that Qiuci wrongfully greeted Wumi's heir-apparent Laidan as a hostage, who then was forwarded to Chang'an by Li Guangli. Upon arrival at the capital, Laidan was made colonel and ordered to cultivate land north of Qiuci. As soon as he returned to the lands of his father, Laidan was murdered. Local officials had feared he

¹⁷⁶ HS 96B, pp. 3903–4; also see Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, pp. 146–48.

¹⁷⁷ HS 78, p. 3279; HS 96B, p. 3905; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, p. 152. On Western Han-Wusun marriage alliances, also see Pan, "Marriage Alliances and Chinese Princesses," pp. 97–100.

might act on behalf of the Chinese. At the time, the Han were either unable or unwilling to retaliate. It was only shortly before the court sanctioned the audience of the newlywed couple that the king of Qiuci was moved to renounce his wrongful ways by the presence of 50,000 troops under Chinese command.¹⁷⁸ Granting him access to the court and officially recognizing his marriage an imperial bond surely was intended to strengthen the newly established amicable connection.

In general, the scarcity of respective records indicates that marriage alliances with alien entities were uncommon. Contrary to the Spring and Autumn period when such arrangements among Chinese, and occasionally between Chinese and non-Chinese, states were a fairly regular method of bilateral interaction (although not as often with foreign entities), both Han dynasties reluctantly forged marital bonds. Probably on account of their ambivalent nature they appear to have been some sort of a diplomatic last resort.¹⁷⁹ The possible advantage of achieving more peaceful relations with the Xiongnu – in some way or another, all alliances presented above were related to the attempts of both Han courts to come to terms with this particular steppe confederacy – stood in stark contrast to certain responsibilities shown towards the Chinese princesses and the in-law families. Besides dowries and presents occasioned by court audiences, the empire once even campaigned against the Xiongnu after one of the Han princesses married to the Wusun *kunmi* had asked for assistance.¹⁸⁰ And, most importantly, the bilateral relation did not end with the death of either one of the spouses.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion of Spring and Autumn as well as Han-era diplomatic strategies has illustrated that the notion of the tributary system introduced by Yü Ying-shih's *Trade and Expansion in Han China*

¹⁷⁸ HS 96B, p. 3916; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, pp. 174–76.

¹⁷⁹ Jennifer Holmgren has argued that Chinese princesses were only given to alien leaders in times when China's military capabilities did not suffice to subdue a particularly powerful opponent; see her "A Question of Strength: Military Capability and Princess-bestowal in Imperial China's Foreign Relations (Han-Ch'ing)," *MS* 39 (1990–1991), pp. 31–85, here pp. 48–49. The marriage of the daughter of a Chinese princess and a Wusun *kunmi* to the king of Qiuci discussed above, however, illustrates that things could be considerably more complicated. The strong familial ties between the Chinese ruling house and its fairly distant offspring could obviously not be neglected. In this vein, Holmgren did alert her readers to the ideally enduring bonds forged by marriages involving at least one Chinese party a little later in her analysis (pp. 77–78).

¹⁸⁰ HS 94A, p. 2785; HS 70, p. 3003; HS 96B, p. 3905; Hulsewé, *China in Central Asia*, pp. 150–51.

to describe early-China's diplomacy that subsequently gained almost universal currency does not withstand close scrutiny. At the root of the misconception lies the assumption that an analysis of Chinese relations with the Xiongnu suffices to explain a general shift in Han-dynasty "foreign policy" from *heqin* tactics to the tributary system. Admittedly, Chinese encounters with alien regimes especially to the north and northwest were mostly informed by the necessity to deal with the, at least from the biased perspective of Chinese historiography, ever aggressive Xiongnu. Yet, the way both Han dynasties conducted these and all other foreign contacts was not systematically fashioned around the question of how to cope with the threat posed by that confederacy. Neither a *heqin* "policy" (in contrast to the actual *heqin* treaties), nor the so-called "tributary system" were rigid policies consciously developed at court. Instead the two terms encompass and inadequately describe several, often parallel, practices that had already been employed for centuries.

Marriage alliances were formed in attempts to establish more durable friendly relations in situations where Chinese authorities saw no other option but to give something. Hostages and tribute offerings were temporary methods of ensuring peaceful dealings. Because allegiances could swiftly change, the imperial court expected hostages and tribute on a regular basis. In this respect, foreign tribute was no different from the domestic form of tax also called "tribute" (*gong*), but it was not tantamount to actual incorporation into the empire, nor was it considered a confirmation of the emperor's legitimate right to rule. Alien regimes "volunteering" tribute were simply accepting China's current factual supremacy.

The fact that the tributary system in no way replaced *heqin* policy, as has been maintained in the past, becomes all the more obvious if we consider an event dating from the late second century AD. The Eastern Han court actively offered *heqin* arrangements to the then mighty Xianbei leader Tanshihuai 檀石槐 (136–180 AD).¹⁸¹ The incident also clarifies that the main objective of *heqin* agreements was in fact fairly literal: a marriage between two ruling houses should have fostered harmonious (or at least peaceful) relations.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ HHS 90, p. 2989. Additional information on Tanshihuai's life and career was offered by K. H. J. Gardiner and R. R. C. de Crespigny, "T'an-shih-huai and the Hsien-pi Tribes of the Second Century A.D.," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 15 (1977), pp. 1–44.

¹⁸² Also see Yan Mingshu 閻明恕, ed., *Zhongguo gudai heqin shi* 中國古代和親史 (Guiyang: Guizhou minzu chubanshe, 2003); Pan, "Marriage Alliances and Chinese Princesses," p. 103.

The actual political efficacy of tributary relations is, furthermore, evidence that the economic aspect of the tributary system has long been overestimated.¹⁸³ In general, historiographical data do not support generous reciprocation of tribute offerings. Only the most distant polities submitting tribute were rewarded for doing so. Episodes involving two of those foreign states, Jibin and Kangju, have demonstrated that commercial intentions sometimes were at play, but these incidents have also shown that the (potential for) profit is only indirectly relatable to tribute rendered to the Han court. Actual business was scheduled for private Chinese markets.

All of this is not to say that past scholarship denied that tribute, hostages, and court audiences were part of the early tributary system.¹⁸⁴ However, by disregarding the actual political-diplomatic efficacy of the various strategies in all foreign relations *not* involving the Xiongnu at the height of their military powers, by overemphasizing barely existing ideological motives on the part of both Han dynasties to engage alien polities as well as by generalizing economic motives on the part of foreign entities to approach China, an overly simplified notion of early-China's foreign relations has been widely accepted. Thus it seems only appropriate to dispense with the rather arbitrary and highly ideologized distinction between *hegin* policy and tributary system, and simply call it for what it was: early Chinese diplomacy.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>SJ</i>	Sima Qian 司馬遷, <i>Shiji</i> 史記
<i>HHS</i>	Fan Ye 范曄, <i>Hou Hanshu</i> 後漢書
<i>HS</i>	Ban Gu 班固, <i>Hanshu</i> 漢書

¹⁸³ In assessing the *hegin* policy, Nicola Di Cosmo reached a similar conclusion; see his *Ancient China and Its Enemies*, pp. 215–27.

¹⁸⁴ See, for instance, Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, pp. 141–42, and my introductory remarks, above.)