

# A Review of Studies on Sino-Vietnam Relations Under Tributary System (AD 968-1885)\*

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For a long time, the concept “Nei Wai (内外—center-periphery)” has been used to construct the narrative of the backwarded pre-modern East Asian history. While over emphasizing the effect of the center (Nei), it just simply ignored the reactions from the marginal entities (Wai), as ancient China and its neighboring countries’ tributary relations could offer us the classic paradigm. In the knowledge world and historical writing records before the establishment of the national states, the period after Vietnam politically independent to China, the most intricate relations between the two countries, or dynasties, we could still find so many similarities of politics and culture in China and Vietnam, which is far beyond the summarized conditions as tributary relations. On the basis of the previous academic construction of Zong Fan relations and applying the research path of decentralization in the view of global history, we can explore and interpret such tributary and diplomatic relations from various perspectives and thus a multi-dimensional, high definition and colorful past of communications between countries is projected to us by the voiceless, motionless, and monotone historical materials.

*Keywords:* Zong Fan model, East Asia World, Sino-Vietnam relations, academic history

## Different Constructions of the East Asian Zong Fan Model

When discussing the traditional relations between China and its neighboring countries in the pre-modern period, dazzled words both appearing in Chinese ancient books and scholars’ narratives, like Zong Fan/Fan Shu/Shu Guo/Shi Da/Hua Yi (宗藩/藩属/属国/事大/华夷关系) tributary system relations and the Zhong Hua/Tian Chao (中华世界秩序/天朝礼治体系) Chinese world order<sup>1</sup> often lead us to a confused situation. These academic topics share one common premise that there are no modern international relations in East Asia area during the middle ancient times. From the Chinese official historical records to the “two-way interpretations” preferred by the modern scholars working on the Sino-foreign historical relations, all of their narratives start from China and China as the center, leaving the rest as suboptimal. *Han Shu* 汉书 recorded the countries in the Western regions as “Xiu Feng Chao Gong, Ge Yi Qi Zhi” (修奉朝贡, 各以其职—cultivating tributes and performing each other’s obligation)” and this is the start as officials using “Chao Gong” describing the essence of Chinese and foreign dynasties’ center-periphery relations.

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<sup>1</sup> Since scholars have been applying the word “tributary” (Chao Gong 朝贡) to define China and foreign relations for a long time, and there are corresponding contents in the Chinese official documents and classics, we have also used this accepted “tributary” relations in the following discussions of this article.

The awakening of the “Chinese consciousness” in the Song Dynasty (AD 960-1279) and the highlighting of the frontier issues illustrated the fact that the literati gradually accepted the fact that China’s former counties had become foreign countries. In the Ming (AD 1368-1644) and Qing (AD 1644-1911) Dynasties, the empire officially extended the tributary relations to the nation-to nation relations. In the Ming books and records, the phrase “tribute” or “tribute practice” (朝贡/朝贡通例) refers to both foreign relations and the practice system. Following the word of double meaning, the documents and classics of Qing Dynasty added “Ti Zhi” (体制—institution) to define the laws and regulations related to tributes, and occasionally used the words “Feng Gong” (封贡—canonization and tributary) and “Tian Chao system”, but in English writings, scholars use “tributary system” (aka “tribute system”) which in Chinese scholars’ writings, the latter could widely refer to the traditional China-foreign relations.

In retrospect, the earliest discussions about this problem came from the Western scholars, when they touched the contradictions and disputes existing in the realm of East Asia, they had to confront the historically self-contained East Asian World, and thus the tributary system has been used to explain the China-centered foreign relations in this region. Hosea Ballou Morse was probably the first one defining the pre-modern Chinese foreign relations as “Tributary Mode” in his three volumes book, *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire*. In the ontological sense, his book did not go deeper into this notion. His student, John King Fairbank inherited his idea and in 1941, Fairbank and Têng Ssu-yü jointly completed the article “On the Ch’ing Tributary System”. In this article, the authors pointed out that the tributary system is “the medium for Chinese international relations and diplomacy”, “a scheme of things entire” and laid the foundation for the early interpretation of the pre-modern foreign relations in East Asia (Fairbank & Têng, 1941).

Up to now, there are three paths applying to interpret the East Asian regional order of the tributary relations in the pre-modern period:

The first path comes from the political perspective. Fairbank and Têng (1941) examined the tributary system in Qing Dynasty under the circumstances of the conflict between China and Western countries. Fairbank interpreted the tributary system at the political level and probably a prelude for emphasizing the “Impact-Response Mode” (Fairbank & Têng, 1941). Later, quite a few following scholars generally interpreted the China-centered tributary system in East Asian world from the perspectives of politics and international relations. They made the modern international relations system asserting sovereign equality which originated from the Westphalian system as a reference and extended the tributary system as the basic framework of ancient China’s foreign relations and conducted a series of discussions on the illusion and effectiveness of the system. In 1968, Fairbank and Ch’en edited the groundbreaking essays on the tributary system, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, and scholars from different academic backgrounds contributed pioneering research on the tributary system from various perspectives. It could be a model for the study of the tributary system. Fairbank had applied the Chinese historical materials extensively to restore the tributary system, “Ji Mi” (羈縻—loose rein)<sup>2</sup>, “Huai Rou” (怀柔—be nice and get respect through conciliation), and other words from the classic literature were often used to establish the tributary relationship. But there are people who consider Fairbank’s related Sinology studies as a powerful annotation of his “Impact-Response Theory”, which some scholars in the international academic communities have found it leaning to the tendency

<sup>2</sup> In Fairbank’s book, it was written as chi-mi, probably from some kind of Chinese dialect. In this article, we use Putonghua pin-yin spelling instead to avoid lost in further multi-lingual translations or retrospect.

of the “Western centralism”, and thus causing great controversy in the choice of methodology. Re-examining the ancient tributary relationship from a new perspective had once become a consensus in both the Eastern and Western academic circles. Among them, Fairbank’s prized pupil, Paul Cohen, advocated the China-centered Chinese history study but does not exclude the impact of Western shocks on social changes towards China (Cohen, 1984). American scholar Mark Mancall (1968) once pointed out that:

the system cannot be explained in terms of Western usage and practice. It is misleading to find modern Western equivalents for traditional Chinese institutions or concepts: they may resemble each other in structure or function, but they may have quite different significance when examined within the contexts of the traditional Confucian and modern Western Societies. Rather, the tribute system must be understood, in all its ramifications, in terms of the vocabulary and institutions of traditional China. (Mancall, 1968, p. 63)

The second path starts from the cultural perspective. The related discussion sometimes involves the traditional concept of “Hua Yi (华夷—Chinese and foreign)”. Representative scholars include Xing Yitian, Huang Zhilian, He Fangchuan, and Sadao Nishijima. The theoretical premise of this view is that the neighboring countries and people had acknowledged the superiority of Chinese culture and in order to absorb and assimilate this advantageous culture, they accepted the imbalanced political order and initially offered tributes to China. The Japanese scholar Sadao Nishijima proposed the East Asian world theory (aka the canonization system theory). The foundation of his theory came from the geographical and cultural concept of the “East Asia world” by Naitō Konan, and had it developed in breadth and depth. Nishijima (2002) believed that this is a self-accomplished cultural circle, in which cultures had their own independent and interconnected historical structures. Specifically, the “East Asia world” is centered on China’s Central Plains region, including its neighboring regions, like Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and the eastern area of the Hexi Corridor in the middle of the Mongolian Plateau and the Tibetan Plateau. He advocated that the international order of ancient East Asia was formed by the system of the canonization, and the Han culture, Confucianism, the Law system and Buddhism were four typical signs. In his interpretation, the canonization system reflected the traditional “China-centered” ideology and an extension of Chinese domestic identity institution. He further traced the system of canonization came from the feudal system of the Zhou Dynasty (BC 1046-256). The enshrined system formed among the Qin Han Dynasties and the surrounding countries was an empire-centered international order (Nishijima, 2002). Kan Huaichen (2004) considered, after “Nishijima Model”, East Asia as a historical world had become the premise of a research. However, he defined the relationship between ancient China and the extraterritorial regimes as a dominating relations, and the link of this power structure was the idea of “Li” (礼—ritual and etiquette), the common political knowledge in East Asia area (Kan, 2004). Nishijima’s East Asian world discussion had become the coordinate of his exploration of the ancient Japan history in the perspective of global history. With the disintegration of the East Asian world, its cultural commonality had also changed, but the East Asian world had not disappeared, instead it formed the East Asian world of the international trading circle (Tian, 1995). Another Japanese scholar, Shinichiro Watanabe’s view is deeply influenced by Nishijima’s canonization system and he believes that the characteristic of the Chinese Empire is that the emperor as the center, while the Chinese society and the wider international society combining the so-called “empire family”. In his research, he pointed out that the most important purpose of the ancient Chinese political order in East Asia was to establish the order of the relationship between the monarch and the courtiers through Li (Watanabe, 1996).

Chinese scholars' study of the tributary system under the cultural perspective started later. Xing Yitian has set the "cultural view of the world" as the origination of the tributary system. This view is interweaved by the not so close relevant geographic view, hierarchy, and Yi Xia (夷夏—foreign and Chinese) in cultural perspective, and eventually formed a worldscape of "combining the nations into one family and entering the ideal world" (Xing, 1981). He Fangchuan's "Hua Yi order theory" seems to use the cultural unity to construct the ancient Chinese ruling order and its legitimacy which the tributary system acted as a natural extension of cultural influence (He, 1998). "Tian chao li zhi ti xi" (天朝礼治体系—the Chinese system of etiquette) raised by Huang Chih-Lien is another expression of the tributary system from the China-centered perspective. A set of rituals and etiquettes had been implemented in the Far East International relations system before the 19th century (Huang, 1994).

The third path is from an economic point of view, skipping the problems enquiring Western Center or the Chinese Center, and focusing on economic and trade. This idea's representative is Takeshi Hamashita, and its core system is focused on the "Tribute-Trade System Theory", which summarizing China and its neighboring countries relations as a diffused concentric pattern and the connections are maintained by the China-centered tributary-trade relations (Hamashita, 1990). In his research, Hamashita was influenced by some wording from Fairbank, like "Hua Yi" order, Concentric Mode, and "tributary system", but he denied the tributary system as the obstacle for China's entry into the modern world system and considered it as the basis for the concept of East Asia. He then interpreted its generation and re-established a tributary system of China centered East Asian world in the field of economic history. This model was different from the previous Western scholars' research about the "Theory of Western impact" in the process of Chinese modernization. Hamashita explored the inherent economic ties between China and other Asian countries. His "tributary trade system" theory, on the one hand, pays attention to the economic function of the tributary system, and on the other hand, also strongly demonstrates that the East Asia is a historical world with inner integrity.

In recent years, many Chinese scholars have tried to respond to these standpoints from different perspectives. Li Yunquan (2014a) had worked on various paths, such as politics and culture, and illustrated the China centered tribute system's overall perspective from the History of Chinese Political System. His work could be a direct dialogue towards the Western scholars' narratives. He believes that the geographical China's location and the cultural centered awareness are the prototype of the tributary system, and the system had evolved through dynasties into a basic form of ancient Chinese foreign relations. However, he advocates that there is a mapping relationship between the ancient tributary system and the modern international relations, such as "the tributary system is the refraction of the diplomatic system from the concept of great unity", "the tribute had become the symbol for the acknowledgement of the Chinese emperor as the world owner from the foreign countries"; but he made an amendment in the postscript of his book and deemed that both the West centered theory and the China centered view could lead to the blurring and distortion of the historical truth and only the center-periphery interactive perspective can reveal the multiple aspects of the historical image for the tributary system and the traditional Chinese foreign relations attempt (Li, 1994b). From a variety of routes, Chen Tingxiang regards the tributary system as an evolution of China's foreign cognitive concept (Chen & Zhou, 2008). Although in late Qing, the barely survived tribute institution among the surrounding countries and Western powers inherited the previous guidelines for foreign relations, but the trade function remained. Chen believes that the tribute is also a disguised trade relation. The word "tribute" contains both political, diplomatic meaning, and the trade intentions (Chen & Zhou, 2008, pp. 3-4).

Wang Hui (2004) launched a complementary discussion on the tributary trade system theory in his article “The Genealogy of Asian Imagination”. He pointed out that “the tributary relationship is more than economic relations, it also contains etiquette and political relations among groups of different cultures and beliefs, so it is necessary to further explain the multiple implications of the tributary relations” (Wang, 2004, pp. 1531-1608). Qi Meiqin (2006) doubted about Hamashita’s tribute-trade theory since the Qing government had established the formal tributary relations with only seven countries and the effective ones were fewer, Korea, An Nam, and Ryukyu. She also pointed out that the essence of the tributary relations in the Qing Dynasty was politics. The relationship of tribute does not constitute a practical trade relation. Not all monarchs of the Qing Dynasty had adopted the policy of “Hou Wang Bo Lai” (厚往薄来—generously give and slightly take) or granted the tributary states some equivalent gift back. So, there was no typical tributary trade in Qing Dynasty (Qi, 2006). Ge Zhaoguang (2011) considered that

the tributary system was mainly based on political relations, a system established by culture, etiquette and symbolic meaning, rather than an entirely in economic relations. The tributes and awards didn’t reflect a trade-reciprocal relation: when the neighboring countries presented tributes, like the local products, and the Chinese emperor would reward a gift with more value. This is the practice of *Huai Rou Yuan Ren* (怀柔远人—Be nice to people who come from far places). This international order was quite fragile, out of China’s own arrogance and pride existed in the illusions, the system’s practice by the neighboring countries and nations were nothing more than strategies and perfunctory tribute after Song Dynasty. (Ge Zhaoguang talks about the formation and recognition of “China”, which is contained in the Shanghai Book Review section of the Oriental Morning Post, November 19, 2011)

Since then, the symbolic international order was decaying with other countries’ self-centered awareness growing stronger and stronger (Ge, 2011). Huang Chunyan (2014) revised the tributary system as “a world merely existed in unilateral records” (Huang, 2014, pp. 1-13), which was realized through the canonized titles, the records, and the tribute etiquettes, thus the actual political relations were bound to be different. Geographical environment, cultural traditions, and political and economic demands of these neighboring countries were different from Song Dynasty and that led the understanding and obeying degree varied. To some extent, Huang’s study had attempted to establish a new paradigm while deconstructing the tributary system in East Asia (Huang, 2014).

In addition, scholars of international politics and relations tried to interpret the tributary system from both cultural and political perspectives that distinguishes the system from the modern nation-state. They defined the traditional relationship between China and its neighboring countries by tributary system before the establishment of the modern system of treaties. About the tributary order, scholars focused on the cultural level. For example, Sun Xuefeng and Huang Yuxing absorbed the view in the modernization of China, edited by American scholar Gilbert Rozman, that in the tributary order, usually there should be a centered state with both extraordinary soft and hard power. For the super-centered country, the tributary order can provide ideological and cultural resources for the region and from the tributary countries, the centered state can provide the external protection as political legitimacy for the country’s domestic administration.

Under the tributary order, the main driving force for regional countries to follow the centered state is not from external coercive or reciprocal mechanisms, but as the act of consciously. With the passage of time and the demonstration role of the center, other countries in the region would gradually form a high degree of recognition of the centered state and regard the regional order as a cultural concept that defines their own identity (Sun & Huang, 2011). Chen Zhigang (2010) advocated to use “Feng Gong Ti Xi” (封贡体

系—canonization and tribute system) to define the traditional Chinese foreign relations, reviewing the various related notions thus pointed out their flaws from the political, cultural, and trade perspectives. From the path of geopolitics and cultural identity, Chen (2010) pointed out that the “world view” was not the basis for the construction of the tributary system. Instead, “Hua Yi” and the related debates had supported the existence of tributary system for more than 2,000 years. He supports to apply a combination of research methods and pay attention to the tiny differences among each dynasty. In addition, he has also proposed an interpretation model of the interaction between the changing policies and the eternal practical interests of the dynasty and believes that the interaction is the driving mechanism for the maintenance of the tributary system (Chen, 2010). Zhang Feng (2010) also gave dialectical response to the analysis mode of Fairbank’s tributary system. He has pointed out that the model is too stylized and symbolized. The tributary system had been acting as a stable empire discourse, but also a variable interaction form. Zhang also criticized the rigidification of the present tributary system’s research paradigm: It mainly focused on China’s institutional construction of foreign relations but ignored the interaction between China and the foreign countries. The tributary system has become a unilateral institution of China. Such a system can only be considered as a manifestation of the Chinese bureaucratic system on foreign relations but cannot be functioning as the basis of mutual relations between China and the foreign countries. Scholars who applying this research method sometimes have an overemphasis on the courtesy and symbolic compositions in the tributary relations (Zhang, 2010).

Korean scholar Quan Haizong (1997) advocated the trichotomy as typical, quasi-, and non-tributary relationship based on the degree of the political, economic, military, and cultural relations between the bilateral subjects. Jeong Yong Hwa (Zheng Ronghe) also conducted a thorough critique on the three research paths. He attributed the three paths to three theoretical paradigms, namely, the Western (European) centralism, Chinese centralism, and Economic (Japanese) centralism, and proposed the limitations of these models: Western centralism has made a groundbreaking exposition of the tributary system according to the model of modern international relations, embodying the hindsight and emphasizing the inequality and pre-modernity of the tributary system, but it neglected the tendency of historical development diversity, that is, it overlooked the viewpoint of the surrounding countries and overemphasized the logic of the “center”; Chinese centralism emphasizes the “Hua Yi” order and the center-periphery relations; and Economic centralism emphasizes the trade function, the formality and fictionality of the tributary system, criticizing Chinese centralism and Eurocentrism, but it also contains the defects of economic centralism and Japanese centralism (Zheng, 2006).

In fact, regardless of whether the three theoretical paradigms have their own rationality, we believe that the three perspectives have presented to us the various methodologies, but they share the common interpretations on center-periphery or Zong Fan Mode. All the scholars must use Chinese documents and literatures as a template for the study of the tributary relationship. Although the problem orientation is not consistent, they all agree that there is an East Asian historical world, which offers a field for the politics, culture, economics, and cross-disciplinary research. We believe that the ideal interpretation of the tributary model is that it is a system of the world institution nominally, or East Asian international order concretely, derived from the Chinese “Hua Yi” concept and the ritual order. The essence includes the inter-state relations under the cover of emperor-courtiers’ relationships. The “centered state of the tributary system”<sup>3</sup> has the obligation to protect the vassal countries; as a vassal country, it is internally autonomous and has the obligation to do tribute

<sup>3</sup> In Chinese, it is called “Chao Gong Shi Dai De Zhong Yang Guo Jia” (朝贡时代的中央国家).

regularly and voluntarily. Under specific circumstances, such as civil strife, the intervention of the centered state also has a certain degree of legitimacy, which often becomes the source of contradictions and conflicts between the two sides. However, it should be noted that the above interpretations of the model ignored the reactions of the neighboring countries and led to a research dimension flatness.

In the previous studies, the tributary relationship was divided into a narrow and a broad sense. The tributary relationship in the broad sense is not only a simple political relationship, a cultural relationship, or an economic relationship, but more importantly, it also includes multiple meanings, such as ceremonial symbols and regional order between countries. However, the outcomes and priorities of the East Asian tributary system may vary in different fields or perspectives. For example, from the perspective of the tributary system imagined by the Chinese Hua Yi Order, it emphasizes the meaning of the order and the symbol of etiquette. It is a policy concept of “Huai Rou Yuan Ren”. In a certain sense, under the background of the “tribute-canonization” order, the concept of the “Tian Xia” (天下—world) is in line with the boundless imagination of world governance in the perspective of Chinese emperors, and its meaning contains the source of legitimacy and the measure by which it conducts the governance. On the surface, China maintained the relationship with the neighboring countries as “Jun Chen” (君臣—monarch and courtiers), but by large it was an imagination. Actually, there are various types of relationships behind it. Some were kind of treaty relations after the war; some were to maintain the bilateral relationship nominally. Some were external manifestations for the purpose of trade. To examine the tributary system from the standpoint of the vassal states, we could find different answers. Korea, for example, had showed a diplomatic relation with a neighboring big power; Vietnam had showed a combination of tribute relations and state-to-state relations of equivalence. In recent years, some scholars have revised the traditional canonization system and the tributary system from the perspectives of relations between Southeast Asian countries and China. They believe that the so-called canonical relationship and tributary system were not binding political relations and owned some fictional characteristics, thus the so-called “tributary country” was only used as a cover for trade purposes (Zhuang, 2005). Ge Zhaoguang (2012) proposed an interesting notion about the reaction of neighboring countries to the tributary system. That is, the countries that fulfilled their tribute obligations surrounding China had an “intercultural competition” complex, which means these countries were under cultural contest towards each other. Especially in the modern period, all the countries, including Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and China had a growing self-consciousness and for the sake of national self-esteem, they tried to exaggerate themselves in culture. Ge (2011) likened the tributary relationship to a very interesting game about face and benefit between the self-fancied centered country and the well-calculated tributary countries.

It is true that the tributary system which has been shaped by many scholars from different views had been a part of the area order in East Asia for a long time. The system had established a China centered tribute era. The tributary relations of neighboring countries and China have their own different forms of expressions. The relations between East Asian countries other than Korea, Vietnam, and Ryukyu with China are not the international custody in the modern sense. It is a seemingly inequitable relation, but an independent relation to both sides at the operational level. The validity and illusory nature of the tributary system was not always consistent or unchanging. Since Vietnam had established Đinh Dynasty in 968, the “Bei Shu” (北属—belonging to China, in Vietnamese it is called “Bac thuoc”) era came to an end and entered the tributary era. If the China-centered interpretation is the only method, the historical truth of the bilateral relations shall be incomplete. As the effectiveness of the system is not always stable in history, sometimes it worked but

sometimes it failed; sometimes it is tacit and enjoys the win-win situation but sometimes it is unconditionally China centered. There are no fixed procedures and rules about this system. Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond the fixed model mainly based on the existing Chinese official documents and to explore the neighboring countries' materials both in Chinese and the local languages. We can apply the multi-faceted literatures and multiple dimensions and adopt two-way interactive construction model for the further study on the "center-periphery" tributary system.

### **Academic History About the Study on Sino-Vietnam Relations Under Tributary System**

Most scholars apply the paradigm of the tributary system and the Hua Yi order and they define the Sino-Vietnamese relations from Song Dynasty to Qing Dynasty as the tributary relations. Chinese scholar who had an earlier start on this topic was Lü Shipeng. He had completed his first monograph at Harvard, "Vietnam in the Northern Period", and had it published at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1964. Later, Lü returned to Taiwan and published a series of influential articles on the history of Sino-Vietnam relations (Ma, 2005). Zhang Xiumin (1992) had contributed to the study of the Sino-Vietnamese relations history with his books *Zhong Yue Guan Xi Shi Lun Wen Ji* 中越关系史论文集 and *Zhong Yue Guan Xi Shi Shu Mu Ti Yao* 中越关系史书目提要, covering almost all the historical figures, events, and works related to the ancient history China-Vietnam relations. One of his considerable achievements is that his systematic revision work on the historical documents related to the Sino-Vietnamese tributary system and the Chinese envoys in Vietnam (Zhang, 1992). Xu Wentang's long essay "The Evolution of Qing Dynasty's Diplomatic Relations with Vietnam in the 19th Century 十九世纪清越外交关系之演变" studied the foreign relations between the Qing dynasty and Vietnam before and after the establishment of the Nguyễn Dynasty. He believes that the two sides had maintained the tribute and diplomatic relations for a long time, and it did not weaken Vietnam's independence reality. The tributary relationship between China and Vietnam is regarded as a "moral norm" by Xu. Liu Yuewu (2009) attempted to analyze how the "internal and external" relations of ancient China occurred, developed, and evolved from the perspective of institutional history and territory history. He focuses on how the Qing Empire, specifically during the "Kang Qian" (AD 1681-1796) period, handled the relationship between "Nei Fan" (内藩—domestic border area) and "Wai Fan" (外藩—foreign area). Concretely, Liu conducted his research on the relationship between Qing Dynasty with Korea, Ryukyu, An Nam, and other border areas. His book was mainly on political history and did not touch the later period when the Sino-Vietnamese relations would come to an end.

Sun Hongnian (2006) discussed the issue of China and Vietnam relations on the tributary and canonization aspects, but the foreign envoys views were not included. Yu Yan firstly (2007) discussed the relationship between China and Vietnam about the bilateral envoys. The highlight of her thesis is she had made a relative complete generalization and summarization about the envoys of China and Vietnam. Later, the systematic editing work about *Yue Nan Han Wen Yan Xing Wen Xian Ji Cheng* (越南汉文燕行集成—Collections about Vietnamese envoys' Chinese literatures) began and the publications have offered us details about the communications between the bilateral envoys. Niu Junkai (2012) explored the relationship between China and Vietnam, not only from the perspective of the traditional Chinese center, but also paid special attention to Vietnamese views and attitudes toward China; he has discussed both the Vietnamese acceptance and protests or even rejections related to the tribute etiquettes. Sun Laichen commented Niu's (2012) work as breaking the stereotype about the China centered tributary system and having the "China world order" founded by Fairbank

with the characteristics as overemphasizing center, ritual and continuity revised to make the tributary institution alive.

With the discovery of new historical materials, more and more researches have been conducted about the envoys' activities. Zhan Zhihe (2011) carefully examined the marching route of Vietnam's envoy delegation in Hunan Province during Qing Dynasty and discussed the literature communications between China and Vietnam.

Zhou Liang have made the full use of *Yue Nan Han Wen Yan Xing Wen Xian Ji Cheng* published by Fudan University in 2010 and analyzed the tribute etiquette and the Qing Dynasty's social situation in the eyes of the Vietnamese envoys (Zhou, 2012). Also based on this publication, Liu Xiaocong (2013) discussed and analyzed the birth and development of "Diplomacy by Poetry" invented by the Vietnamese missions in the Qing Dynasty. Liu has found that the Vietnamese Nguyễn dynasty carefully selected the envoys to show their own Chinese intellectual level to the Qing Dynasty, and to prove Vietnam's qualification for entering the Chinese culture system, thereby to achieve their own orthodox identity (Liu, 2013).

On the Sino-Vietnamese tributary relationship in Qing Dynasty, scholars from Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. have presented their achievements internationally: Yamamoto Tatsuro as the excellent Japanese scholar who worked on Southeast Asia history, had made the chronology on Sino-Vietnam relations based on the relevant historical materials of the Vietnamese envoys' North trip in China and offered the later researchers a clear guide (Yamamoto & Kawahara, 1975). Yoshiharu Tsuboi worked on the period in which Sino-Vietnam tributary relations were about to end and the colonized era between Vietnam and France was to begin. The triangle relations between Vietnam, France, and Qing China had witnessed the switch for Vietnam's protecting power. His work had been translated into Vietnamese and reprinted many times (Tsuboi, 1990). The South Korean scholar Yu Insun had explored the essence of the tributary relationship between the Nguyễn Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty in the 19th century from the Vietnamese perspective. In his article, "Vietnam-China Relations in the 19th Century: Myth and Reality of the Tributary System", he believed that the Nguyễn Dynasty, established in 1802, was included in the tributary system by the Qing court and in the eyes of the Nguyễn Dynasty; this was a reasonable choice for political, economic, and cultural interests. American scholar Alexander Woodside made a comparative study on the bureaucratic system and the imperial examination system of the Nguyễn Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty and concluded that the Nguyễn Dynasty's imitation of China had surpassed all previous dynasties. He pointed out that on the one hand, the spread of the Chinese code system in Vietnam caused conflicts between the upper elite and the civil society, and on the other hand, helped to maintain the stability of Vietnamese society (Woodside, 1971). Liam C. Kelley (2005) explored the Vietnamese envoys' poetry and discussed the evolution of Sino-Vietnamese political and cultural relations from the 16th to 19th century in a new perspective.

Since 1940s, Vietnamese scholars have also made their own progress in the study of Sino-Vietnamese relations. They also interpreted the relationship between China and Vietnam as a "canonization-tribute" relation and cultivated the political documents, envoys' diaries and anthologies preserved in Vietnam and contributed a perspective of Vietnam. Earlier study on the historical Sino-Vietnamese diplomatic relations had been carried by Bé Lang Ngoạn. His book published in 1943, *Viet Hoa Thong Su Su Luoc (General history on Vietnam-China relations)*, outlined the history of Vietnamese independent dynasties' diplomatic relations with Chinese dynasties after the year 968, in which Vietnam finally got its absolute and substantial independency. Huyền Quang with his/her colleagues published *Viet Hoa Bang Giao Su (The History of Diplomatic Relations*

*Between Vietnam and China*) in 1952 is a bilingual pamphlet. It is a brief history book but with some details on the Vietnamese ambassadors technically doing their missions during the visit in China. Nguyễn Thế Long specializes in the history of Sino-Vietnamese relations in the Middle Ages. He had carefully described the rituals of both China and Vietnam, and the history of the bilateral diplomatic relations through analyzing the existing Vietnamese documents, archives, and Western missionaries' diaries. Nguyễn Thị Mỹ Hạnh's article recalled the tribute activities in the relations between Nguyen and Qing dynasties from 1802-1885 (Nguyễn, 2009)<sup>4</sup>.

Hoàng Phương Mai (2012) made a comparative study on different Vietnamese official documents in Nguyễn Dynasty and accomplished a systematic textual research on the size, composition, and mission about all previous Vietnamese envoys to China. Trần Nam Tiến re-examined the ancient relations between Vietnam and China, he used "the modern nations" concept, did grafting to the ancient Vietnam and pointed out that Vietnam, as a small nation had to maintain the stable development in the relations with big powers, like China, but its priority about dealing with the bilateral relations has always been national independence. Thus, the monarchs of Vietnam had showed a tough standpoint for the concept of diplomatic relations. Nguyễn Duy Chính is a Vietnamese American scholar; he translated *Kham Định An Nam Ky Luoc* and wrote a series of articles about China-Vietnam relations during Qian Long era.

### **The Essence of the Relations Between China and Vietnam in the Tributary Era in East Asia**

As a country with deep historical roots and complicated relations with China, Vietnam had often been naturally described as a tributary country centered on China since its departure from the Northern Ages. This article still follows the thinking paradigm that has been set off from China in the past. We presuppose the concept of the political order and the imaginary community in East Asia. Through a multi-faceted mirror, it looks at the gradual development of the tributary system, from the perspective of macro narrative to the micro level. The fact could be traced and find its basis in the general literature in China, it also proceeds from the surrounding historical materials, being reorganized as a case of the "tributary system" that may not be exactly the same as before. To take a survey on the evolution of China-Vietnam relations, we should re-examine this tributary system by exploring Vietnam's *Ru Hua Shi Tuan* (如华使团—envoys' delegation to China), a Vietnamese diplomatic system that maintained in the tributary system, and even from more various perspectives on history. Pondering about these relations, it may be a useful attempt to restore the original appearance of the tributary system at the very beginning.

The concept of "Chao Gong system" we are using here refers to the special relationship and regional order in which the countries of East Asia in the pre-modern period recognized China as the center. Behind the appearance of the "tribute-canonization" order, there are also relations similar to the modern nation-to-nation relations. In the inter-state relations, there are political relations, economic relations, and multiple meanings of culture, etiquette and symbolism, rather than simply the relationship between the upper and lower levels in the traditional sense, nor in the full political sense or an economic relation that is simply trade-linked.

Firstly, in the official historical documents of the Vietnamese dynasties, which were defined by the Vietnamese perspective as the "narrative subject", most of them were wearing the title, like "Ru Song", "Ru Yuan", "Ru Ming", and "Ru Qing". In the private collections, there are more "Trip to the North" and "RuYan"

<sup>4</sup> Nguyễn, Thị Mỹ Hạnh: Hoạt động triều cống trong quan hệ bang giao giữa triều Nguyễn (Việt Nam) với triều Thanh (Trung Quốc). Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Trung Quốc số 7, 2009 (05/09/2009).

referrals, but there are no sayings about “Chao Tian” which the Korean diplomatic delegations applied on the “Shi Da principle”. It reflects the strong self-consciousness on nation from the official or the elites of Vietnam’s dynasties when related with China. Secondly, the way to maintain the relationship between China and Vietnam<sup>5</sup> in the tributary era is conducted by many batches of “Ru Song”, “Ru Yuan”, “Ru Ming”, and [Ru Qing] ambassadors. They traveled to the capital city and tribute for canonization. These special missions had been lasted for hundreds of years among countries in the East Asian region. Vietnam’s diplomatic delegations to Qing Dynasty crossed the border at Zhen Nan Guan (Later it is renamed as You Yi Guan), and then go north through various provinces in China, like Guang Xi, Hu Nan, Hu Bei, He Nan, and He Bei (or in another route from Hubei heading to Jiangsu, Shandong, and Hebei), it is a long and tough journey<sup>6</sup>, and the envoys had traveled through provinces of China for the capital and fulfilled the tasks, like canonizing, celebrating, reporting the royal funerals, when a new dynasty replaced the previous one or the new emperor ascending the throne, the tributary countries were requested to ask the “Tian Chao” to canonize them and thus obtain their own nominal political legitimacy. While performing the tribute mission, the tributary envoys’ contact with the Qing Dynasty’ literati through talking in pens and poetry is also an important part in the cultural aspects. They had also assumed the tax-free trade mission for the Vietnamese court purchasing goods in China. The content of the relationship between Vietnam and China had shown the diversity of political, cultural, and economic combined relations.

The Song Dynasty was the starting point<sup>7</sup> for establishing the China-Vietnam relations in the name of two parallel dynasties. However, in the classic’s narrative of Song Dynasty, despite the use of the word “tributary”, the concept of the phrase had actually broken in the meaning attached by the previous generation. This is closely related to the fact that An Nam’s gradually departure from the loose administration. During this period, there was no fixed tributary order between An Nam and Song Dynasty, thus a unique discourse system under this tributary canonization relationship appeared. On the one hand, the forced to split Song dynasties and An Nam had followed the principle of relations between countries. On the other hand, the two Song dynasties still maintained an asymmetrical relationship with Giao Chi (Later it was given the new name “An Nam”), as “monarch and courtier”. But in domestic Vietnam, they used separated year name following their Vietnamese emperor. According to the textual research of Zhang Jingxin in Ming Dynasty, during this period, Vietnam manipulated with chapters and words, claiming to be “An Nam Dao” (道—orientation), which obviously was not a state<sup>8</sup>. After the independence of Vietnam, the weakening Northern Song Dynasty only gave the title of “Nanping Wang” or “Duke of Giao Chi”, which equals to a county governor, and did not confer the Vietnamese status of an independent country through the title. In the political relationship between An Nam and Song Dynasty, the sense of independence of the various dynasties in Vietnam has been further consolidated and strengthened. The sense of national reciprocity has sprouted, and even “Jian Shi Fan Chen Li” (渐失藩臣礼—abandoned the etiquettes as a foreign courtier ) and repeatedly provoked incidents that invaded across the border with the Song Dynasty. Although the Song emperor occupied a moral higher place, due to internal and

<sup>5</sup> Here we simply use China and Vietnam to represent China’s and Vietnam’s following separated but paralleled historical dynasties. Vietnam firstly named itself as Da Qu Yue, and later as Dai Viet, Dai Nam, the name “Vietnam” appeared much later, as a canonized title from Jia Qing Emperor of Qing Dynasty in 1803.

<sup>6</sup> According to our statistic result, eight Vietnamese envoys died on their way to China.

<sup>7</sup> Before the Song dynasty, Vietnam’s tribute was equal to the domestic county’s offering to the central regime; but started from the early Song Dynasty, the relations had become typical tributary connection.

<sup>8</sup> See Zhang Jingxin, *Yu Jiao Ji*, volume 2.

external difficulties, like threats from Liao Jin in the north and Xi Xia from the west, the foreign relations had to gradually become defensive, and the military did not work as well. In the eyes of the emperors and literati of the Northern Song Dynasty, Giao Chi (An Nam) was not a veritable barbarian state, but the nominally belonging was still lingering. The official documents still called it “Giao Chi” as the canonized title given to Vietnam since it used to be a real county of China in the past. After suffering from internal and external problems, the Southern Song Dynasty had finally decided to give up the entangled feeling: Instead of cherishing the traditional tributary system order, they enshrined the Vietnamese Ly Dynasty emperor as “An Nam Guo Wang” (安南国王—king of An Nam).

### **Interpret the Relations Between China and Vietnam From the Perspective of Global History**

In recent years, under the framework of the global history writing, the research paradigm of decentralization has increasingly become one of the focuses for the international academic circles. However, it is not easy to update the theory on the Sino-foreign relations’ studies, or to get rid of the old monist paradigm and adopt the “decentralization” and “breaking through the narrative framework of the nation-state”. In the past, the works on the Sino-Vietnamese relations in the Qing Dynasty were mostly limited to the framework of the traditional Zong Fan model. The essence of the Zong Fan relations was an unequal relation between countries. The relationship between the Sino-Vietnamese tributary and the diplomatic relations in the Qing Dynasty we are trying to illustrate in this article is a notion inherited and developed on the basis of the academic discourse related to the tributary relations. We want to narrow the connotation of the Zong Fan as Chao Gong (tribute) or go further to replace the notion “Zong Fan” with “Chao Gong” as a summarization and conclusion for the future research. And the Bang Jiao relations (邦交关系—nation to nation diplomatic relations) are interpreted from the Vietnamese perspective. Sun Hongnian’s summary of the working mechanism and content of Zong Fan relations is a classic narrative sample.

In addition to the faint unequal appearance of the Sino-Vietnamese relations, the tributary country also considered the nominal monarch and courtier relations as reciprocal diplomatic relationships and thus the two sides had persisted their own narratives separately. The tribute itself is the embodiment of the ceremonial system. However, the deductions of the researchers have assigned functions, like material exchanges, private trades, and cultural exchanges to the system. In the past, the study of Sino-Vietnamese relations was mostly divided into three parts by time division as ancient, modern, and contemporary period. To discuss the evolution of bilateral relations, scholars have taken figures and events as research clues and political relations and economic relations as the main research method. Previous studies sometimes neglected the historical materials related to the foreign envoys’ literature as a reference and the radical activities that the Vietnamese envoys’ breaking the rule. Discussions related to the Sino-Vietnamese cultural relations present researches have overemphasized the sharing roots and origination of China and Vietnam’s cultures. The complexity of Chinese culture integration with newly involved Qing Dynasty has led the neighboring countries’ dissatisfaction. It had led to the questioning of the cultural orthodoxy from the neighboring countries to Qing Dynasty. For example, An Nam was an independent country that is both politically and culturally independent from the Northern Dynasty in the eyes of the An Nam King. It showed the strong tendency for decentralism of China.

According to *Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu*, in 1370, An Nam Tran Nghe Tong tried to clarify his independency from the Song and Ming system, and he even wanted to split the historical cultural relationship

with the dynasties of the northern “centered country”. He once said: “The founding of our previous dynasty had its own law, and it was not compliance with the Song system, the reason for that is both the north and the south are independent empires” (Ngô & Chen, 1984, p. 439). In Binh Ngo Dai Cao, as the second declaration of independence in Vietnamese history written by the general Nguyễn Trai in the Le Dynasty, he firmly considered his Dai Viet was also a civilized country (Ngô & Chen, 1984). The author of Viet Su commented: “Vietnam had done tribute to China in the past every three years. The two countries were relying each other, they fought, they negotiated and then they embraced the peaceful tributary relations. What they had done is truly painstaking work”.<sup>9</sup> The Vietnamese literatus considered the Sino-Vietnam relations in the Song and Yuan Dynasties were relatively equal but in Ming and Qing Dynasties, it had become tributary relations.

As Collingwood said, “All history is the history of thought”. Many things that happened in the era of the Zong Fan relations cannot be understood under the contemporary concept. In the context written by historians from various circumstances and with different languages, the standpoint of egocentrism is quite obvious. Therefore, the historians had to rely on their limited historical materials to “imagine” the past. Nations have emerged from the tributary system have the intrinsic motivation to construct their own history fighting for independence. In the pursuit of one’s own “national origin”, it is likely to fall into the embarrassment of deconstructing the East Asian tributary system by backward induction: The past is evaluated by the contemporary standard, and the uniqueness of a history for nation-building is constructed with ulterior motives. For that reason, sometimes we select historical materials and interpret them with hindsight, thus the subjective research can offer a perspective, but fail to present the panorama image of the past. Under the decentralized writing framework, scholars want to describe the evolution of traditional Sino-Vietnamese relations and interpret it from the perspectives of both sides. Niu Junkai (2012) had applied this way to illustrate the complexity of China-Vietnam relations in Ming Dynasty. Ye Shaofei’s (2016) commentary on Niu’s book, using the phrase “Tian Xian Nan Bei”, “Ge Di Yi Fang” briefly summarized the Vietnam’s pursuit of independency. He keenly grasped the key issue of the canonized title changes between Ming Dynasty and the Trinh, Nguyễn Lords from An Nam Mac, Le Dynasty and he had added analysis about the historical documents reflecting the causes and consequences during this period of political chaos. In the “international” exchanges under the tributary system, Chinese dynasties had a high opinion of themselves and only applied one set of appellation system for the system covered area. They claimed to be “Tian Chao” (天朝—dynasty as the chosen one), and canonized the neighboring countries including Vietnam accordingly. But on the other side, the dynasties of Vietnam had applied two sets of title systems to construct the situation of “Nei Di Wai Chen” (内帝外臣—a domestic emperor but a nominal courtier under the tributary system), so the Vietnamese historical documents had also applied two “Nian Hao” (年号—time systems using the emperors’ names). In a certain sense, these practices had confirmed the dual process of the tributary country’s understanding and practice in the tributary era, thus the history writers had constructed the respective contexts of their own history and foreign relations.

The tribute and canonization order constructed by China had shaped the relationship between the Chinese dynasties and its neighboring countries. This political relationship is very vague in defining “Nei Wai” (内外—domestic and foreign, or near and far). The word “Zong Fan” first appeared in Shi Ji, referring to the imperial lords separated and distributed to different places by the emperor. “Zong” as the center and “Fan” is

<sup>9</sup> Ji Xian Yuan. *Yue Si*, Vol.3. Serial Number in National Library of Vietnam: NLVNPF-0119-01R.278, p. 1.

the fence defending for the center. All the lords were called Fan lords, and these Fan lords with their military together guarded the royal family and the whole empire. Similar system had existed in China since Zhou dynasty (BC 1046-256). The nearer ones were called “Nei Fan” and the ones remote to the central administration were called “Wai Fan”. Both “Wai Fan” and “Nei Fan” had the obligations to come to the capital for worshipping the emperor when needed, but most of the time they stayed in their separated “Fan” areas and acted as the barriers for the centered emperor. In history, the Chinese dynasties’ administration to the Fan areas were under loose rein (Lu, 2015).

During the Qing Dynasty, the Zong Fan institution had changed greatly. The Fan courtiers were not only the previous ones, but also added new Fan lords covering wider areas. Zong Fan relations remained to be a principal and subordinate relation, but the Qing Dynasty did not interfere the domestic Fan areas’ issues directly. The contradictive involvement of Vietnam’s dynasties in the constructions of the Chinese world order was also independent and worked as a spontaneous choice. But in the writings of the Vietnamese historians, the demand for constructing the “national” history had made them interpret their very early history selectively and fictitiously<sup>10</sup>.

After Nguyễn Phúc Anh established his Nguyễn Dynasty, he sent envoys to the Qing Dynasty to request a canonization in order to gain the political legitimacy. Most of the envoys from Vietnam to Qing Dynasty were important court officials. They were deeply influenced by the Han culture, and narrowed it into an extraterritorial maternal culture. The descriptions in the “Yan Xing” (燕行—envoys’ trips) literature, their admirations for the Chinese culture were beyond words: They felt pride of being an envoy because the selection of the envoys to travelling to China was an important work to the court and the literati. Their recognition of Chinese Han culture and Vietnam’s national identity had developed a special cultural confidence and a complex mentality reflected by their poetry and diaries. This dual recognition had become the basis for their maintenance of the consciousness of diplomatic relations. Therefore, in their writings, we could find they were trying to distinguish themselves from the cultural relations between China and Vietnam while they were personally immersing in it.

The Nguyễn Dynasty continued to inherit and promote the Han culture, which is based in “Hua Xia” (华夏—China in a broad meaning, which can be traced from Xia Dynasty to the present moment) and substantiated through the rituals in Ming Dynasty. The Nguyễn Vietnam was self-considered as one of the orthodox Chinese culture branches and had its own understanding of Chinese cultural identity, which was different from the centered subject under the tributary system. In Qing Dynasty, Chinese Confucianism was absorbed by the Qing emperor for governing the country. The Emperor Qian Long claimed to be the successor of the Chinese orthodoxy. He emphasized that owning the united multi-ethnic nation’s power had made him another emperor that could be called as the “Lord of China”. But in the eyes of the Nguyễn Dynasty, the Qing Dynasty was just “Yi Yi Bian Xia” (以夷变夏—turning into Chinese from foreigners) and Qing had just gained the regime by conquest of force. In 1812, as the eleventh year of Gia Long emperor’s regime, Vietnam had its pride national name “Da Yue” (大越—the great Viet) recovered. The Emperor Gia Long had also built the Vietnamese sub-tributary system on the Indochina peninsula and claiming to be the “Nation in the center”

<sup>10</sup> For example, emperors and literati of the Vietnamese dynasties did not have a common opinion about many Vietnamese historical events. As “Nam Viet” established by Zhao Tuo, some considered it as the beginning of An Nam’s independency while some did not; rebellions figures in one Vietnamese narrative could become national heroes and heroines in another Vietnamese history book.

of this area. Dai Nam's neighboring countries, Vientiane and Khmer had been involved into this system as Vietnam's tributary countries. If we observe this process from the outside world, the mutual inspecting between the Qing Dynasty and Vietnam is only a frame of the dynamic full-motion video recording the subtle relationship between the Qing China and the Nguyễn Viet. Every dynasty of Vietnam owned a growing idea of "Nei Di Wai Chen" and the Nguyễn had reached the peak. The Minh Mang Emperor had renamed his country as Great Viet and built up the sub-tributary system, compelling its neighboring countries to offer tribute. Therefore, Vietnam had developed two individual discourse systems: the masters of the Vietnamese dynasties called themselves as "King of Annam" in the context with China, but as "Emperor" in their own domestic regime. They only applied the Qing Dynasty's reign title for the years in the diplomatic documents but employing their own in more cases. When the Vietnamese envoys offered tribute in the Qing court, they called it "Tian Chao" (天朝—celestial empire) and posed as "Xia Guo" (下国—tributary country). But in the domestic narrative, the "celestial Qing empire" had turned to just Northern Dynasty or Qing.

### Conclusion

We believe that in the pre-modern period, although the study of the history of Sino-Vietnamese relations recognizes the time and space category of the East Asian world and avoids the single research paradigm of Chinese centralism, it should also take into account the need for the nation-state to observe the past history of the country in the future. In the contrast of the historical materials of multilingual literature, we can find out the more authentic details in the history of communication. After Vietnam's departure from the northern genus, The Sino-Vietnam relationship established by the corresponding dynasty of two countries is actually a tribute and diplomatic relationship.

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