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.” One year later, John Fairbank elaborated on the subject in the much shorter paper “Tributary Trade and China’s Relations with the West.” Although only the second work touches briefly upon China’s early dealings with foreign entities, both studies proved to be highly influential for Yu Ying-shih’s Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations published twenty-six years later. In particular the phrasing of the latter two titles suffices to demonstrate the three authors’ main points: foreigners were primarily motivated by economic interests.

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2 J. K. Fairbank in FEQ 1.2 (1942), pp. 129–49.
3 Yu 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 Yu 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 Yu can hardly be overstated. This is best visible when Yu 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); Yu 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 Yu 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. 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. In 2008, John E. Wills organized a conference with the explicit goal to gauge the merit of Womack’s approach. 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

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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).


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.” 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.”

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

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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 賢) 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.\(^{13}\)


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,” \textit{JAOS} 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, \textit{Trade and Expansion}, pp. 39, 189, 194; also see n. 10, above, and my discussion, below.

\(^{12}\) Yü, \textit{Trade and Expansion}, p. 9. On the issue of the Xiongnu’s putative aggressiveness, see Nicola di Cosmo, \textit{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,” \textit{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],” \textit{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 \textit{Dong Zhongsu: 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* (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. 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, always at increasing costs to the Chinese. 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), 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.

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  

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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 *Hanshu*, 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. 150–57, and n. 12, above.


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. 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.”

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.

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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. B.C. 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.

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.\(^\text{22}\)

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.\(^\text{23}\)

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 聖秋). See, for instance, Yuri Pines, “The One that Pervades the All” in Ancient Chinese Political Thought: The Origins of ‘The Great Unity’ Paradigm,” \textit{TP} 86.4–5 (2000), pp. 280–324; “Changing Views of tianxia in Imperial Discourse,” \textit{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, \textit{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 葉海燕, “Lun liang han ‘da yitong’ guanxian 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, \textit{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,” \textit{AMS} 15.2 (1970), pp. 159–96, esp. 160, 168; Loewe, “The Cosmological Context of Sovereignty in Han Times,” \textit{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.\(^\text{24}\)

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.\(^\text{25}\)

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.\(^\text{26}\)


\(^{25}\) 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\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{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 Tang 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 Zhongsu, 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 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 (shì 使; xìngrén 行人) were employed by the end of the eighth century BC;29 ambassadors and specialized diplomats were unknown


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 Zuozhuan 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

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

Although acknowledging interstate marriages as initiated by conferences, missions or mediations, 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. Presumably owing to his focus on Zuozhuan records covering the years 722 to 700 BC, he failed to recognize that tribute relations (in the sources denoted by the term gong 贡) are accounted for a bit later, in fact as early as 697 BC. 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 Zuozhuan 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. 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 zhengzi, pp. 160–244.


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.

to tributary obligations. If we adhere to its interpretation, three differ-
ent 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 per-
sonally from such arrangements. The scene thus adopts a strong didac-
tic tone that fits in well with many other Zuozhuan narratives: he who
rules by proper behavior (li) will eventually succeed.\textsuperscript{41}

\textit{Marriage Alliances, Hostages, and Early Tribute Relations}

Luckily, the early sources are not entirely blurred by later ideol-
yogy and therefore can provide valuable historical information. Most
pertinent to this discussion are the records concerned with marriage
alliances, hostages, and tribute;\textsuperscript{42} this is because they were strategies
that remained in practice during both the Western and Eastern Han
dynasties (and beyond). Selected passages from Zuozhuan 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”),\textsuperscript{43} and consequently demonstrat-
ing how we need to consider them as genuine precursors of strategies
subsumed under such catchphrases as heqin and tributary system.


\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Bamboo Annals}, see Maria Khayutina, “Host-guest Opposition as a Model of Geo-political Relations in Pre-imperial China,” \textit{OE} 43.1–2 (2002), pp. 77–100, esp. 96–98.

\textsuperscript{43} According to a fairly widespread opinion, the states of Lu 鲁, Zheng 郑, Song 宋 and Wei 卫 were considered “Chinese” during the Zhou period, whereas powers emerging along the periphery, such as Chu 楚, Yan 燕, Qi 齐, 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., \textit{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; 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). 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. The records found in Zuozhuan are, by contrast, a little more revealing, as the following episode dated to 578 BC shows:

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. ...” 齊侯使呂相絕秦，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. The strategy worked because not just any women were sent...
abroad: they had to be members of ruling families. 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. 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, 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. Qi, as the inferior party, further pledged to deliver hostages, presents (explicitly not identified as tribute, gōng), and women to a superior power on a regular basis. 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.

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

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


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 Ṭ or Di <fieldset>fieldset</fieldset> 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, Tso Chuen, p. 114; also Zuo zhuan, Xi 4 (656 BC), p. 295; cf. Legge, Tso Chuen, pp. 141–2; and Zuo zhuan, Xi 23 (637 BC), p. 187; cf. Legge, Tso 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 郑 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.

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-


hiliated a Red Di clan called the Lu 督師滅赤狄潞氏, 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.\footnote{See Thatcher, “Marriages of the Ruling Elite,” p. 45.}

Precisely because the mistreatment of one’s own kin was unacceptable, marriage alliances had diplomatic value.\footnote{Liu Aimin 劉愛敏 reached a similar conclusion in his analysis of political marriages between Lu and Qi; see his “Zuozhuan” 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.} 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.\footnote{Also see Thatcher, “Marriages of the Ruling Elite,” p. 44.}

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 晉惠公 (r. 650–637 BC) captive,\footnote{The Zuozhuan, Xi 15 (645 BC), p. 359 (cf. Legge, Tso Chuen, pp. 168–69), generically speaks of the “Marquis of Jin” 晉侯 or the “Lord of Jin” 晉君. On the other hand, Guoyu 史語 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 史語 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), pp. 328–29, and Alan Imber, "Kuo Yu: 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.} 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.\footnote{Zuozhuan, Xi 15 (645 BC), p. 359; cf. Legge, Tso Chuen, pp. 168–69.} Evidently, the pawn ought to ensure the endur-
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”.

Bowing to the will of a superior force was also the theme of the following episode from 572 BC.\(^{62}\)

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.

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.\(^{65}\)

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-

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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. 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 史記 and Hanshu 汉書 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, 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). 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 BC – 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; then


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? In addition, the statesman’s rather universal way of arguing his discontent suggests that the...
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

76 Ibid., p. 319.
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 Basin\(^{81}\) – 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

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\(^{78}\) 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 T’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 T’ê*, pp. 553, 559.


\(^{81}\) 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.

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,” 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. Accordingly, the emperor gained actual power over the whole world by replicating it. 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.

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
architectural elements and very few artifacts. 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

 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!

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 中国社會科學院考古研究所阿房宫考古工作队, “Xi’an shi Shanglin yuan yizhi yihao, erhao jianzhu fa jue 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 fa jue” 西安市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 S J 117, pp. 3002-15; HS 57A, pp. 2534-45 (Zixu fu); S J 117, pp. 3016-43; HS 57A, pp. 2547-75 (Shanglin fu). Shi ji and Hanshu use the collective title “Tianzi youlie fu” (S J 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., 1997), pp. 53-72, here pp. 54-55. In addition, “Zixu fu” and “Shanglin fu” have been translated by Burton Watson, Chinese Rhyme 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.
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 諸侯之禮.”

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. As the subjective panegyric of one single poet to his master, 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.”

This kind of hyperbolic use of authentic as well as fictional imagery adds to the adulatory character of the poem. 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).

During Wudi’s reign, the latter, along...
with some other auspicious omens, even occasioned the composition of official hymns that were intended for recital at state sacrifices. 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, had sent down marvelous horses as tribute, then the emperor must have done everything right.

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 Heavenly Horses. 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” (shàn mǎ 善馬), as well as “blood sweating horses” (hàn xué mǎ 汗血馬). 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. 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.


98 HS 22, p. 1160.

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


101 HS 61, p. 2702; SJ 123, p. 3177; also see Martin Kern, Die Hymnen der chinesischen Staatsopfer. 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 Hulswé, 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, 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. It cannot be stressed enough that the most important change in wording, as far as our purposes are concerned, was substituting kuang for gong. 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,” or “Nineteen Chants for the Sacrifices at the Suburban Altars”). 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. 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), an idealized record of a court debate held

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 im-
portant insight: At least this kind of tribute could not have been of in-
significant 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

where, 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

107 Wang Liqi 王利器, comp., Yantie lun jiaozhu 盐鐵論校注 (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue
1958), p. 171 (Ch. 13, “Parks and Ponds”); also see Eason M. Gale, Discourses on Salt and Iron: A
Debate on State Control of Commerce and Industry in Ancient China, Chapters I–XXVIII, Trans-
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
low Michael Loewe’s interpretation of said Yantie lun passage (p. 524).


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 Chi-
na, Vol. I, pp. 105–222. 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 17, p. 803.

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

90
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. 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 had “started to send envoys with tribute and offerings.” Since he held the rank of General-in-Chief of Hexi (Hexi da jiangjun) 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 (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. Gladly accepting the loyalty of the powerful warlord, the emperor reciprocated with a gift of 200 pounds (jin) of gold; he also named him Regional Commissioner of Liangzhou (Liangzhou mu).

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

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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. 143, esp. n. 244. According to a Hou Hanshu passage (Fan Ye 范囉 [398–445], Hou Hanshu 後漢書 [Beijing: Zhonghua, 1905; 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”; 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 貢) 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 zu 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 amiable, 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. 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. A few years later, offended by empress Lü 吕后 (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，為書謝，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

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117 Shiji 113, pp. 2969–70; Hanshu 95, p. 3851. Zhao Tuo declared himself emperor in 184 BC (Hanshu 3, p. 99). For his attack on Changsha in 182 BC and Han’s retaliation, see Hanshu 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” 论西汉王朝与南越国的关系, Nanfang wenwu 南方文物 2003.3, pp. 72–78.

118 Shiji 113, p. 2970; Hanshu 95, p. 3853.
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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 趙眜, 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’ji Nanbei chao zhengshi Xiyu zhuan yaozhu 南北朝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. 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. 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:

When the Ershi general (i.e., Li Guangli) 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，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 BC – convinced minor states along the way of China’s superior...
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.  

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. Hence, tribute was, to both Han

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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. 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. 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.\footnote{Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, p. 144.}

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.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 40. It remained unspoken how alien entities on the southern Chinese periphery fitted into this neatly developed picture.}

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.\footnote{Marcel Mauss, “Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques,” *L’Année sociologique, nouvelle série* 1 (1925–1926), pp. 39–186 (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: Vandehoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), pp. 141–71.}

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.\footnote{See, for instance, Mauss, “Essai sur le don,” and Maurice Godelier, *L’énigme du don* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1996).}

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.\footnote{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).} It is effective purely on a social level and devoid of any religious or quasi-religious meaning.
Alvin Gouldner, however, warned that “it cannot be merely hyposta-
tized that reciprocity will operate in every case; its occurrence must, instead, be documented empirically.” 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 (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 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 BCE), Kashmir once again sent offerings 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:

Now [Kashmir] regrets [its former actions] and comes [to us], but among those who make the offerings, 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. 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” (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, identified by Anthony Hulsewé with present-day Samarkand. Again we listen to a Chinese official, who was complaining about the audacity of foreigners:

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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.

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. 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 “Memoir on the Western Regions” suggests otherwise:

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].

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]. 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

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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 Arsacid 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 Hegin 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. 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 reciprocation for the tribute he had submitted, but need to be understood as presents occasioned by Xian’s inauguration into office.

Slightly different reasons motivated king Fangqian of Yutian (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.

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 tells us about the Wuhuan’s rendering of tribute to the Han court was when one 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{145} HHS \textsuperscript{1B}, pp. 75, 77; 90, p. 2982.
\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{147} For more examples of Chinese gifts to Tarim Basin polities, see Selbitschka, *Prestigegüter*, pp. 29–30.
\textsuperscript{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).
\textsuperscript{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，以單于太子為質於漢.” 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! 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. 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 吾為遣其太子入質於漢，以求和親.” 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, 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 楼兰, or Korainan) 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.
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.” 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, the local heir-apparent, to serve as hostage at Qiuci (Kuqa). 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?” 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.

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. 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.

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:
lations. Because both states feared Chinese retribution for their ever-shifting loyalties, the two statelets were submitting tribute and hostage sons.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{160} HHS 88, pp. 2929–30.
\item \textsuperscript{161} HHS 88, p. 2916.
\item \textsuperscript{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.
\item \textsuperscript{163} HS 70, p. 3008.
\end{itemize}
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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{165}

Moving away from the Xiongnu, the \textit{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 雁 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.\textsuperscript{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-

\textsuperscript{164} \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{165} \textit{HHS} 89, p. 2944. In later periods, hostages came to be known as “wild geese subjects” (雁臣) because of their regular “migratory” schedule; see Yang, “Hostages in Chinese History,” p. 512.

\textsuperscript{166} \textit{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.\footnote{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.}

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 \emph{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 \emph{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 relations\footnote{\textit{Yu}, \textit{Trade and Expansion}, p. 141.} – 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 \emph{heqin} policy is also misleading because one more key element of \emph{heqin} arrangements in the form of marriage alliances actually was still part of the tributary system.\footnote{Pan Yihong has analyzed marriage alliances that were forged during both Han periods. Accordingly, a marriage alliance was a constituting element of \emph{heqin} policy even after it had supposedly been suspended; see his “Marriage Alliances and Chinese Princesses,” p. 96.} 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\footnote{Also see Kroll, “Han-Xiongnu \textit{Heqin Treaty},” pp. 115–17.}, albeit for slightly different reasons. Liu Jing 刘敬 famously advised emperor...
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 廖敬; see Loewe, Biographical Dictionary, pp. 320, 412–13.


173 SJ 110, p. 2894.

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

175 SJ 123, p. 3172; HS 96B, pp. 3902–3; Hulswé, China in Central Asia, pp. 146–48. A.F.P. Hulswé has argued that the respective Shih-chü passage is corrupt; he considered HS 96B more likely to be authentic; see his “The Problem of the Authenticity of Shih-chü, 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 and Wolfgang Schemoni, 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.\(^\text{176}\) In 60 BC, another royal daughter betrothed to a Wusun renewed the alliance a third time.\(^\text{177}\)

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. 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. 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. 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*


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).

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). 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

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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 heqin policy and tributary system, and simply call it for what it was: early Chinese diplomacy.

\textit{LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{SJ} & Sima Qian 司馬遷, \textit{Shiji} 史記 \\
\textit{HHS} & Fan Ye 范曄, \textit{Hou Hanshu} 後漢書 \\
\textit{HS} & Ban Gu 班固, \textit{Hanshu} 漢書 \\
\end{tabular}

\textsuperscript{183} In assessing the heqin policy, Nicola Di Cosmo reached a similar conclusion; see his \textit{Ancient China and Its Enemies}, pp. 215–27.

\textsuperscript{184} See, for instance, Yu, \textit{Trade and Expansion}, pp. 141–42, and my introductory remarks, above.)