


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ruminations on the meaning and nature of ritual in the historical context of China—A theoretical attempt to understand the tribute system as a ritual in East Asia

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Abstract

The mainstream studies of the East Asian tributary system have been exhibiting a stance that tends to stress the importance of Confucianism in forming and sustaining the tributary system throughout its long history. However, there are still several questions (especially those of a theoretical nature) that historians have yet to answer: How could Confucianism have contributed to the formation and sustenance of this tributary system? Why could this Confucian-based tributary system be recognized and employed in relations with non-Confucian frontier tribes? Why could this system have worked with both the nomadic tribes on the northern frontier and the South-East Asian countries that were neither Confucian nor nomadic? Drawing on the results of ritual studies in anthropology, Chinese historiography and Chinese philosophy, this author seeks a broader methodology that can be used to conceptualize the tributary ritual and its constitutive power structure, which forms the foundation of the central part of the East Asian world order. This paper is a theoretical attempt to find a non-Sinocentric way to interpret the formally Sinocentric tribute system in premodern East Asia.

Key words: Constitutive power of rituals; nature of ritual; non-Confucian perspective of Confucian ritual; premodern “international” ritual vs. modern international law; tribute ritual

An anthropological perspective

The mainstream studies of the tributary system have been exhibiting a stance that tends to stress the importance of Confucianism in forming and sustaining the tributary system throughout its long history. Undoubtedly, Korea, Ryukyu, Vietnam, and, to a varying degree, Japan shared the Confucian understanding of the world order based on the tribute ritual with China. However, there are still several questions (especially those of a theoretical nature) that historians have yet to answer: How could Confucianism have contributed to the formation and sustenance of this tributary system? Why could this Confucian-based tributary system be recognized and employed in relations with non-Confucian frontier tribes? Why could this system have worked with both the nomadic tribes on the northern frontier and the South-East Asian countries that were neither Confucian nor nomadic?¹ This tributary relationship can be seen in China’s dealings with both South-East Asian countries like Siam and Luzon and European countries like Holland and Portugal.² Aside from the reason for trade, security is

¹In this regard, see Watanabe 1975.

²For an example of the importance of the tributary trade between Siam (Thailand) and Qing China, see Viraphol 1977, and Cushman 1933. Both two authors maintain that the Sino-Siamese tribute trade gradually declined, and Siam reacted to this decay keenly, eventually seceded from trade in the early 1830s. However, Masuda Erika 增田艾莉卡 rejected this argument and opined that the Siamese documents show commodities imported from Guangzhou continued without stop and that gift given to the Siamese mission continued till the middle of nineteenth century when the latter cut off the tributary

generally one of the most important reasons for both China and, not all, but most of its tributary counterparts.³ But what about Sino-Indian relations before the Western expansion in the early modern time in this tribute trade system? Did Buddhism play a similar cultural role as Confucianism did in this tribute system? All these questions remain insufficiently answered. Drawing on the results of ritual studies in anthropology, this author seeks a broader methodology that can be used to conceptualize the long-lasting tributary system and its hegemonic structure, which forms the foundation of the central part of the East Asian world order.

Considering the role of Buddhism, the case of Sino-Indian relations in history is worth noting. A Sino-centric view, i.e. a view of Hua-Yi Distinction (華夷之辯) in historical China before the Western advent in Asia in early modern time, had been seeing its own culture as the best in the world, thus located itself at the center of civilization. According to this view, India should be and had been classified as a barbarian existence. However, the fact was quite complicated because the imagination of India by Chinese elites had been inseparable from Buddhism, and as a result, India had been a privileged and spiritualized land in the long history of China.⁴ This remained unchanged even in the twelfth century Buddhism lost its position in India due to the invasion of Islamic forces, and China in its Song dynasty (960–1279) concomitantly became the central Buddhism realm (Sen 2003, p. 53). This spiritualized imagination of India remained unchanged till the time of late Qing China. For example, this idealization of historical and contemporary India can be seen in the three articles on India by Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (i.e., Zhang Binglin 章炳麟, 1868–1836) published in April 1908, *The People's Journal*, the organ journal of the anti-Manchurian revolutionary society Tongmenghui of China (Chinese Revolutionary Alliance).⁵ Zhang was a late Qing revolutionary who fused Yogācāra Buddhism and Chinese Philosophy to construct his political philosophy and advocate for revolutionary Pan-Asianism. Tansen Sen's systematic studies of Sino-Indian relations in 600 to 1400 show that Buddhism had been an essential cultural medium for Sino-Indian diplomacy and trade, just like Confucianism functioned in historical East Asian diplomacy and trade. Another empirical evidence to exemplify the insufficiency of a Confucian-centric interpretation of tribute ritual is the tribute relationship between Tang China (618–907) and its nomadic counterparts. Even before An Lushan's (703–757) rebellion and continually Shi Siming (703–761)'s rebellion from 755 to 763., Tang's international relations also had been depicted by historians as a multipolar Asia full of war and peace, threatened by the militarily strong Turks, Uighurs and Tibet empires in the west and northwest of China.⁶ Having realized that Tibet is a rising military force, the Tang emperor of Taizong (r.628–649) agreed to devote the imperial princess Wencheng (623–680) to Khri Sroñ Brtsan (Chinese: *Qizong Nongzan* 棄宗弄贊, i.e., Sroñ Btsan Sgam, known as Songzän Gambo in English, reigned 629–650) in 641. Hence, peacefulness between Tang China and Tibet returned, and Tibet

relations with China. See Erika 2011. Concerning the change of the indigenous Siamese diplomatic view of China after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, also see Erika 2007. As for the Siamese inter-state relations since the mid-nineteenth century from the perspective of the wider regional contexts of East Asia, see Junko 2008. Regarding Thailand's premodern Sino-Siamese relations, see Koizumi 2006. Regarding the establishment of the tributary relationship between Burma and the Qing court and, in particular, the Qing court's vigilance towards Burmese military presence and Burma's strong desire to trade, see: Daqing Gaozong chun (Qianlong) Huangdi shilu, Vol. 850 (1964 [1771], p. 850/pp. 12163–66). See also Cao 2010, pp. 39–52. Cao's analysis of Qing China's own calculations of how to take advantage of trade to take a leading role in Sino-Burmese relations and its consciousness of containing Burma in terms of security during Emperor Qianlong's reign (1736–1795). The security concern that is inherent in the issue of tributary relations can be seen here.

³As for European countries' "tributary" trade, see Wills 1974, 1984, and Ptak 2004, etc.

⁴Tansen Sen pointed out that, although India had classified as China's 'outer feudatory' (*waiyi* 外夷) or 'civilized' barbarian (*shufan* 熟番) in a Sino-centric tribute system, India still held an exceptional position in the idealized view of the Indic world as a spiritual land, see Sen 2003.

⁵Zhang (1908b), pp. 31–39, the organ journal of the anti-Manchurian revolutionary society Tongmenghui of China (Chinese Revolutionary Alliance), in Tokyo, then overseas revolutionary base.

⁶Wang's book systematically demonstrates the multipolar situations surrounding Tang. Since he regards the term of *chaogong* (朝貢, 'tribute') as the expression of centrality of China in Tang dynasty, i.e. in a Fairbankian sense, he criticized this oversimplification. See Wang 2013.

became China's ally. Elisabeth Benard's (2000) paper examined how Princess Wen Cheng was transformed from a Tang princess to a Tibetan queen and finally to an emanation of the goddess Tara and she clarified why these transformations are important for our understanding of the political relationship between the Tibet and China. Benard argues that these matrimonial alliances reinforced both Taizong of Tang's sovereignty of entire China and Srong Tsen Gampo's sovereignty of Tibet, further enhancing their power and prestige vis-à-vis other powers like the Turks and Tuyuhuns empires. These non-Confucian tributary relations, and even the Tibetan elites of this era were not Buddhist yet, can also be seen in Tang's relations with other nomadic powers. As Benard pointed out that, having devoted an imperial princess to those nomadic powers shows that Tibetans and other countries were (militarily) in a (more) powerful position (ibid.).

This kind of diplomatic marriage (*heqin* 和親), just like *chaogong* 朝貢, "tribute ritual," is reciprocal. It binds two states as one to a certain extent. This kind of marriage alliance should be understood as part of a soft way to deal with foreign relations, and more importantly, it should be understood in inter-state multipolar ties, particularly in Asia, Northeast Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia, where nomad empires and Tang compete for each other.

This kind of policy of political marriage (*heqin*), or young women, particularly a powerful political family's young women as a gift, probably can be viewed universally through all cultures. For example, it echoes the opinions in *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949) by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss (1969) argues that young women are, in essence, gifts of one community to another, thus expanding each related community's alliance and reducing the hostility. This is precisely where the core of the idea of the incest taboo and exogamy lie. He regards the law of exogamy, which is supported by the rule of incest, as the most important and "omnipresent, acting permanently and continuously" form of exchange; and argues that "exogamy is the archetype of all other manifestation based upon reciprocity" (ibid. p. 481). Reciprocity is the very essence of the marriage alliance and tributary ritual per se. As Lévi-Strauss argues that "exogamy represents a continuous pull towards a greater cohesion, a more efficacious solidarity, and a more supple articulation" (ibid. p. 480). He concludes that "Marriage is thus a dramatic encounter between nature and culture, alliance and kinship" (ibid. p. 489). In other words, exogamy has expanded a community in a soft way, connecting different communities with marriage, and it leads to a relatively peaceful relationship through reducing hostility. This reciprocity lies at the core of marriage alliance (*heqin*) and the tribute (*chaogong*) even before tribute was developed into a system.

On most of the occasions, it is self-evident that the tributary system is highly Sinocentric, especially in form and on a discursive level. This means that tribute is intrinsically a form of ritual and that the tribute system itself should be realized through ritual. This ritual is performed through the presentation of ritual tribute by the subjunctive "vassal" to his "Son of Heaven" (on most of the cases, the Chinese emperor) and the return of ritual gifts of much higher value by the Chinese emperor to his "vassal," based on the so-called principle of "*houwangbolai*" 厚往薄來 (literally meaning "getting less and returning more") from the *Liji* 禮記 or *Book of Rites*, a Confucian classic which records the administrative system and ceremonial rites of the Zhou dynasty. All these practices are based on the Confucian idea of *li* 禮, which is usually translated as ritual, ceremony, or etiquette. While the Confucian countries of East Asia interpreted these activities in terms of the Confucian ideal of *li*, this was not so for the non-Confucian actors in the tributary system. Thus my question here is this: Is it possible to find a non-Sinocentric way to interpret this formally Sinocentric tribute system? Might this be found through viewing tribute as both a ritual system and an arena where communication via compulsory gift-circulation unfolded, and hegemony based on gifting was established? Though *li* cannot solely be understood as ritual, the two concepts overlap with each other to a great degree.

Either way, these reflections remind us that it may be possible to review the tributary system through a broader approach (i.e., an anthropological perspective). I do not mean to downplay Confucianism's important role as the basis on which the East Asian order has formed. Rather, I emphasize that it is precisely the anthropological perspective that can provide us with new

interpretations of the Confucian practices within the tributary system. More importantly, it can enable us to understand why the tribute rituals were recognized and accepted by the non-Confucian actors. The word “anthropology” is derived from Ancient Greek, anthropology (*Anthropos* = man) being any systematic study of humanity as a whole (Hann and Hart 2011, p. 9). If we hereafter view the Confucian-based tribute system in the light of anthropology, it also means that we may gain fresh insights that can be used to reconsider Confucianism itself, thus distancing ourselves from Confucian-centric thinking.

Before my detailed discussions, I would like to define my term “tribute” in this paper, as “gifting,”⁷ and the “tribute system” as a “gifting network.”⁸ This interpretation reminds us of Marcel Mauss’s masterpiece, *Gift* (1925). In this book, Mauss (1990) views the compulsory gifting circulation as the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies and that it is this compulsive gifting that forms the very foundation of law, religion, economy, politics, and their “foreign” relations. I also take a “tribute” and “tribute system” in a broad sense that also includes foreign marriage alliance (*heqin*), and *Jimi* 羈縻, which means loose rein policy, being an autonomous administrative and political system of organization used in relation to China’s nomadic ethnic groups by the central court from the Han Dynasty onwards. Gifting should be an essential methodological perspective for historians to understand the tribute system in East, Southeast, and middle Asia, on most of occasions, with China at the center in form. However, I am not going to discuss in depth the issue of gift in this paper. Instead, I will focus on the power structure of tribute rituals from a theoretical perspective.

Anthropology and historiography: The case of studies of the “East Asian world order”

Nevertheless, there have also been some suspicions regarding the applicability of an anthropological approach to studies of the tributary system as a world order of East Asia.⁹ For example, John E. Wills, Jr., who researches tributary trade between China and European countries like Holland and Portugal, is skeptical of the applicability of an anthropological approach derived from “small-scale nonliterate societies.” His reason is that “in large-scale literate societies like the Chinese there are many kinds of activities forming institutions, semiautonomous patterns of behaviour that can and must be studied in their own terms” and that the influence of basic social structure and world view is “far less totally determining than in small-scale nonliterate societies” (Wills 1974, pp. 205–06). It is worth mentioning that, although John E. Wills, Jr. argued in his 2012 paper that the tribute system was not a “fossil” of Qing pretensions and meaningless ceremonies, not a fossil of past realities inhibiting understanding of the new situation and instead, it was a functional matrix for adjustment to changing realities. (Wills 2012, pp. 439–78) However, in Wills, Jr.’s 1984 book, he undervalued the role of rituals and concludes that Song, Ming and Qing dynasties focused on ceremony and thus on appearance, insured that a dangerous reliance on illusion became a persistent failing of Chinese foreign policies. (Wills 1984, p. 179) This view also stems from John E. Wills, Jr.’s doubt toward his rejection of anthropological methodology. Benjamin Schwartz, expressed similar doubts in an interview concerning the question of whether Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropological approach could apply to studies on C John E. Wills, Jr. Chinese history (Schwartz 1987). On another occasion, Benjamin Schwartz questioned Western scholars’ tendency to “easily slip into the vulgar cultural anthropological mode” when dealing with non-Western societies (Schwartz 1987).

Indeed, the skeptical attitude of Schwartz and Wills, Jr. does make some sense. Geertz (1980, p. 4), for example, applies his cultural interpretive methodology to the social organization and the structure of political power in nineteenth-century Bali, concluding that drama mainly constituted the *negara*,

⁷Millward also put the translation of *gong* into question because “tribute” implies a subservient and extractive relationship that did not exist. Instead, he simply called them “gifts.” See Millward 2007, p. 73.

⁸Hansen also takes James Millward’s way to term *gong* as ‘gifts,’ thus to view the tribute system as “a network of gifting.” See Hansen 2013.

⁹I borrow the term “East Asian world order” from Nishijima Sadao 西嶋定生, a Japanese historian who has theorized the tribute system in East Asia. See Nishijima 1962. Also see: Lin 2020.

the Balinese “theater state”.¹⁰ However, using the example of the Tang Chinese ritual code, *Datang Kaiyuan Li* (大唐開元禮), which was completed in 732 and which gives an exact set of directives for the entire Confucian-sanctioned imperial ritual program, David McMullen demonstrates that, at least initially, Tang China indeed seems close to the Balinese case, which was quite different from nineteenth-century Britain where monarchy in its ceremonial role was strictly demarcated from political activity and was held to be a secondary and dignified rather than efficient aspect of the state (McMullen 1987, p. 185). However, despite similarities between the theater states of nineteenth-century Bali and Tang China, McMullen concludes that Tang is not a theater state due to the following two reasons: In the first place, the Tang bureaucracy had many functions in addition to imperial rites and ritual offices formed only one-sixth of the central bureaucratic administration (ibid.). (According to the *Datang Liudian* 大唐六典, “an official administrative code detailing the central administrative system of the Tang court,” there were at least twenty-four government civic bureaucratic units, among which the Ministry of Rites or *libu* 吏部 formed one of the so-called Six Main Central Offices or *liubu* 六部 together with the Ministry of Official Personnel Affairs, the Ministry of Revenue, the Ministry of Official Personnel Affairs or the Ministry of War, the Ministry of Punishment and the Ministry of Works (Sun 2009, p. 1). Besides, the Ministry of Rites not only takes charge of rituals, but also takes charge of education and civic examination); secondly, the Confucian-sanctioned ritual code did not represent the totality of the emperor’s religious or ritual commitments (McMullen 1987, pp. 185–86). The examples mentioned above tell us that while the anthropological perspective is an essential means of viewing Chinese history, we still cannot equate a vast traditional state like China and a state like a theater state of Bali.

However, McMullen’s research must show that an anthropological approach should not be excluded from studies of Chinese history while also demonstrating the necessity of caution in applying this approach to Chinese history. Peter Burke even notes in a slightly exaggerated manner that there was a “(cultural or symbolic) anthropological turn” in French historiography from the 1960s onwards, especially prominent in the 1970s and 1980s. He sees this trend as the “marriage” of history and anthropology during the 1970s and 1980s in France (Burke 1990, p. 80). Concerning the should-be relationship between history and anthropology, as Sahlins (1987, p. xvii.) remarks, “the problem now is to explode the concept of history by the anthropological experience of culture,” and “a historical experience will as surely explode the anthropological concept of culture – structure included.”

Judging the effectiveness of an anthropological approach depends on the choice of research objects. For instance, when one studies the premodern Chinese popular folk culture, an anthropological approach is essential because the research topic at least pertains to folk religion and folk customs. Studies on the drama in Ming and Qing China are another example in which an anthropological approach fits. The anthropological approach can also make unique contributions to studies of local history and social history in the broader field of traditional Chinese history. In this paper, I argue that an anthropological approach is necessary to understand why and how a relatively long-lasting world order was based on tributary rituals.

Ritual as “international” politics – The traditional “international” ritual in contrast with modern international law

As mentioned previously, tributary studies conducted from a broader perspective based on an anthropological approach do not exclude the cultural approach, i.e., a Confucian-centric perspective. They only seek to avoid a particularistic East Asian view of tributary history. In terms of the role of culture, Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown, who is typically regarded as one of the leading theorists of functionalism together with Bronislaw Malinowski (Bell 2009, p. 23), represents one pole that emphasizes the social function of ritual while overtly rejecting of the importance of culture

¹⁰“*Negara*” is a Sanskrit original term meaning ‘town’ and more or less simultaneously and interchangeably, ‘palace,’ ‘capital,’ ‘state,’ ‘realm’ and again ‘town’ in Indonesian language. See Geertz 1980, p. 4.

(Seligman *et al.* 2008, p. 20). Social functionalists explore ritual actions and values to analyze “society” and the nature of social phenomena, in contrast to symbolic or interpretative anthropologists who found ritual to be fundamental to the dynamics of “culture” (Bell 2017, p. 14). In terms of the latter perspective, Clifford Geertz is regarded as representative of another pole that emphasizes the worldview that is perceived to underlie the actions of ritual participants (Seligman *et al.* 2008, p. 19). A co-authored book by four authors, Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (2008), is close to Geertz in the sense that they attach importance to culture, but also that they are not like Geertz in a sense that they do not read such a system of meanings (culture) as an overriding set of assumptions concerning the world without looking at its actual workings (*ibid.*, pp. 19–20). Though this paper is not an example of anthropological research, I take a similar stance to Geertz in this regard by drawing on this co-authored text.

For example, Sino-Joseon relations during the Ming and Qing dynasties give us a glimpse of how tribute as ritual led to the creation of international order. Using the case of Joseon Korea’s tribute to the Qing Court as a convincing example, Korean historian Hae-jong Chun (1968) argues that even though the receipt of tribute was based on the principle of “*houwang bolai*” (“giving more in return than receiving, or getting less and returning more”) from the *Book of Rites*, the significant role played by tributary relations between Joseon and China was not commercial and that there was no sound economic reason for tribute because both Korea and China would hardly have gained financial benefit from tributary relations due to the high financial cost of maintaining these relations on both sides.

Here I would like to ask the following question: despite the enormous economic cost for both Qing and Joseon, why did they keep performing these tributary rites regularly and frequently? In this regard, Ji-Young Lee’s (2016, pp. 56–78) persuasive explanations of the tributary system in relation to domestic politics (i.e., her view of tributary practice as a part of the East Asian powers’ domestic legitimation strategies) have a point. Furthermore, I will argue that the tributary rite itself has important meaning for both domestic and international politics because of its constitutive power of the tributary ritual itself. In my opinion, we can gain new insights if we apply the achievements of anthropologists and sociologists in recent decades to the task of reconsidering the long-lasting tributary system as an international ritual that formed an international order in East Asia before 1840. As Bell (2017, p. 15) points out, since the pioneering work of scholars like Max Müller and James Frazer, ritual has been reinforced as both a central sociological concept and a universal category of social life, and, since James Frazer and Arthur M. Hocart’s early twentieth century analysis of the nature of sacred kingship, historians and sociologists have found the notions of ritual, political power, and the legitimation of that power to be closely interdependent (*ibid.*, p. 193).

To give a specific example, Geertz’s (1980, pp. 122–23) study of Balinese kinship specifically attacks the traditional perspective that ritual functions to legitimate the exercise of political power. He argues that such a view casts ritual as mere “artifice” designed to disguise the brute use of “real” power. His attempt to break down the distinction between ritual and politics suggests a provocative challenge to the notions of legitimation and power (Bell 2017, p. 193). Catherine Bell also argues that ritual is not outside of politics nor within it. It is not a question of whether the ritual is outside or inside of politics. Rather, a ritual is not “artificial” politics, but politics itself. This is precisely as You Shujun argued in her book on the issue of diplomatic ritual in the Qing dynasty, “Historians (of Chinese history) take for granted that ritual is nothing but a means for the ruling class or power. Rather than that, I argue that it is the power that serves ritual, which makes the ruling class, like the emperor, the officials, the foreign princes and dukes, and the tribute emissaries, be nothing but performers” (You 2013, p. 19). Her argument is from the perspective of the autonomy of ritual/*li* in traditional Chinese political culture.

The concept of *li* has been regarded as a ritual in a broad sense, which includes both acts of worship and interpersonal rituals of courtesy and diplomacy (You 2013, p. 19).¹¹ In my opinion, the concept of

¹¹See, for example, Seligman *et al.* 2008, p. 3.

Confucian *li* is more general than a ritual; however, the idea of *li* is realized through ritual. Diplomacy, especially in contemporary international relations, does not necessarily rely on interpersonal relationships. However, the tributary system of premodern East Asia was, to a certain degree, based on an interpersonal relation, at least in form, on “fictitious” personalized feelings and a system of ethics shared between the “the Son of Heaven” and his “vassals” (i.e. tribute bearers). The tributary rituals are based on a subjunctive “family.”

This personalization of “international” relations is significant in terms of the anthropological approach. Because “international” relations have here been personalized, a feeling of indebtedness arises during the process of compulsory gift circulation, i.e., the commitment of tribute, especially on the side of the tribute bearers as they receive gifts of a much higher value in return. This is undoubtedly relevant to the Maussian concept of gift. Punishment toward non-*li* (*feili* 非禮) behavior or toward discourteous actions of defiance that destroy the tributary order is, needless to say, quite different from the modern international law that underlies the nation-state system.¹² The concept of *li* is related to ethics; however, it is also related to norms and “laws” (As such, it matters to punishment). Punishment via military means was seldom conducted in the tributary system, instead usually occurring through a reduction of the frequency of tribute. Nevertheless, the concept of *li* is always very closely related to norms and codes, so punishment is inherent to *li*.

Here, I dare to use the term “international ritual” for the system of tributary rituals, in contrast with the phrase “international law.” One of the different characteristics of these two concepts is that the actor in modern international law is impersonal. In contrast, the “international ritual” of tribute is personal, or an “as-if” form of personal relations. In the latter system, “international relations” between the impersonal states or tribes and China are represented and expressed through subjunctive, personalized ties between “the Son of Heaven” and his “vassals.” More importantly, the tribute system directly matters to nearly all the relevant actors’ interests of trade, domestic legitimacy, and security. In this sense, the tributary ritual is a sort of mixture of impersonal elements and personalized elements.

Tributary ritual as an “international” social contract: The constitutive power of artifice

The Chinese secret society’s blood covenant ceremony be a convincing example to explain the constitutive power in rituals. The ritual of covenants (*huimeng* 會盟) is common in the Spring and Autumn period (770 BC–403 BC) to solve the conflicts as the results of the collapsing ritual order. We still can see similar rituals in the Chinese secret societies (the Triad, or the Hong Family, and so on) in premodern and modern southern China.¹³ The ceremony in the Chinese secret societies focused more on formatting the sense of belonging as a member of the Triad and thus to create a community. As Barend J. ter Haar suggested in his insightful research on the ritual of Chinese Triads, the blood covenant ceremony, which is the concluding ceremony of the Triad initiation ritual, serves to seal the results of the proceeding ritual utilizing an irrevocable and powerful ceremony. It also laid down an elaborate normative framework and defined the Triads in ethical terms as a moral community as any other social group (such as kinship groups or villages) (ter Haar 1998, p. 217). The name “secret society” per se is a Western one,¹⁴ which has been suppressed by the Chinese modernity and seen as “superstitious,” “anti-modern,” “backward”, and the ilk in China (Sun 2007, p. 58). However, the new

¹²Kwashima Shin depicted the gradual but complicated process in which the late Qing China gradually shifted from the weakening tribute system to the nation-state system/treaty system and eventually fully became aware of itself as one member of this nation-state system. See Kawashima 2012. Kawashima’s paper also serves as a concise but good introduction for better understanding premodern East Asia world order based on tribute ritual. In this regard, also see Yanagihara 2012. In Chinese, see Lin 2009; Svarverud 2007.

¹³Quite recently, Di Wang’s research on the ritual in *Paoge* 袍哥 (‘the Gowned Brothers’), or *Gelaohui* 哥老會 (‘Sworn Brotherhood Society’), the most influential local secret organization in Sichuan province, China before 1949, is worth emphasizing. See Wang 2018.

¹⁴See for example, ter Haar 1993, pp. 259–83. ter Haar differentiates “secret societies” and “sects,” and calls the latter as “new religious groups”. See ter Haar 1998, p. 460.

tendency of studies of secret societies is to regard the secret societies in premodern China as the mutual aiding societies based on brotherhood fraternity among the non-elite communities, which provide the language of social identity to link and unite the separate individuals (Ownby 1993a, p. 16; Ownby 1993b, pp. 34–67).

We also can see the similar “socially constitutive power” in the ceremonies of the secret society (ter Haar 1998, p. 217), from the rituals in the tribute system in Inner Asia and East Asia, to a varying extent. Roy Rappaport’s work is essential in understanding the constitutive power inherent in rituals in the field of anthropology and religious studies. To borrow Segal’s (2009, p. 68) positioning of Roy Rappaport’s theory within the genealogy of ritual studies: “Classical theorists of Religion like E. B. Tylor and James. G. Frazer viewed ritual as the *application* of belief. Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, and Mary Douglas viewed ritual as the *expression* or, at best, the *instilment* of belief. Rappaport credits ritual with actually *creating* belief.” Bell (2017, p. 72) sees Rappaport as an anthropologist who views ritual as an aspect of all activity, which contrasts with the older perspective of ritual as a distinctive category of behavior.

Rappaport (1999, p. 24; 1979, p. 175) succinctly defines the term “ritual” as “*the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers.*” One of the characteristics of Roy Rappaport’s ritual studies is his emphasis on the formality of ritual. He thus remarks in a 1974 essay, “Two points are to be noted. First, invariance emerges out of or is an aspect of increasing formality. Second, it may be useful to make a distinction between *ritual*, the formal, stereotyped *aspect* of all events, and *rituals*, relatively invariant events dominated by formality” (Rappaport 1979, p. 176).¹⁵

Rappaport (1979, p. 180) further argues that one of the ritual’s most salient characteristics is that it is not entirely symbolic in Peirce’s sense of symbol as based on a tripartite classification of signs into symbols, icons, and indices. A map is an icon of the area to which it corresponds, with sensible, formal characteristics, but it is not a symbol; for indices, a rash is an index of measles, a dark cloud an index of rain (ibid.). According to Rappaport, canonical messages can only be found in symbols (ibid.). Rappaport insists that rituals communicate by their formal features, rather than their symbolic and expressive features, although these are the features he finds least distinctive about rituals (Bell 2017, p. 72; Rappaport 1979, p. 138).

Rappaport (1999, p. 138), therefore, sees that ritual contains within itself not simply a symbolic representation of the social contract, but that it is a tacit social contract in itself, saying that “As such, ritual, which also establishes, guards, and bridges boundaries between public systems and private processes, is *the* basic social act.” Here Rappaport gives ritual a pivotal position as the social contract, just as Mauss gives gift circulation central and fundamental status as the foundation of a social contract (incidentally, Sahlins (1987, pp. 152–53) sees Marcel Mauss’s *Gift* (1925) as demonstrating a social contract for primitives). For Rappaport, a ritual is the basic social act, as gift circulation is for Mauss. More importantly, gift circulation not only needs ritual but is, in a broad sense, a ritual itself.

Recent studies of ritual have significantly broadened the concept of ritual beyond its relation to religion. Similarly, in the book mentioned above *Ritual and Its Consequences*, the authors also maintain that ritual is not restricted to the realm we define as “religious,” or even to “secular ritual” (Seligman *et al.* 2008, p. 7). They broadly reject the Christian separation of religious and secular realms that we are all so accustomed to and thus caution against the tendency to see the working of ritual as something that exists apart from everyday affairs (ibid., pp. 6–7). This is similar to Rappaport’s critique of Durkheim’s dualistic conception of religious life as a bridge between separate worlds, i.e., the sacred and the profane, the collective and the individual (Hart 1999, p. ix).

This tendency of ritual studies runs counter to the previous authors who fill rituals with meaning. For example, Bell (2017, p. 168) also sees ritual as “the simple imperative to do something in such a way that the doing itself gives the act a special or privileged status.” Similarly, A. Seligman, R. Weller,

¹⁵As Rappaport admits, the distinction between ritual and rituals comes from Leach. Ibid., p. 177. See Leach 1954 12ff.

M. Puett, and B. Simon argue that most of the meanings one can read into ritual, after all, come into play outside the frame of the ritual itself and that ritual is more about *doing* than about saying something since ritual can also take place with no concern for meaning (ibid., p. 4). They see ritual as one possible orientation to action, rather than as a set of meanings (Seligman *et al.* 2008, p. 6). This opinion gives ritual an autonomous position that avoids producing a dualist conception of ritual, which regards ritual as a representation of some beliefs or ideology. This theory of ritual studies provides us a non-Confucian view to further understand the role of the tribute rituals in the tribute relations.

These new explanations of ritual remind us of classical explanations of the word *li* 禮. According to the *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 (literally “Explaining Graphs and Analysing Characters”), a Chinese character dictionary edited by Xu Shen 許慎 (30–124) during the Han dynasty, “禮，履也，所以事神致福也。從示從豐。” Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815), a famous Qing dynasty scholar who gave systematic explanatory notes for this dictionary, explains the word “履” as “the feet rely on, the steps put” (足之所依), noting that, “The word “履” can be metaphorically explained as “踐,” which metaphorically means praxis (*shijian* 實踐, in Chinese)”. This note on *li* (禮) is quite close to the interpretations found in ritual studies in recent years, which regard ritual as a type of norm or regulating actions.¹⁶

Duan Yucai continues his annotation: “There are five categories in ritual, but no other categories can compare with the importance of the ritual of offering sacrifice. Thus the word *li* (禮) is based on the meaning of “示” as the component on the right side of this character, while “豐” is the vessel used when offering sacrifice.” The mention of five categories of rituals comes from the *Book of Rites* (Ruan Yuan 阮元 1974 [1815], p. 3476), in which it is written that “Generally, nothing is more important than ritual as the way of governing people. There are five categories for rituals, among which nothing can be more important than the ritual of offering sacrifice.” Based on his studies of Shang Dynasty (c. sixteenth to eleventh century BC) inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells, the famous scholar Wang 王國維 (1877–1927, 1997, pp. 99–100) pointed out that Xu Shen failed to recognize that, one of the components of “豐”, corresponds precisely with another character “玨,” meaning two pieces of jade that are offered as a sacrifice to both humans and deities. This is what *li* or ritual means. This explanation is consistent with the account found in the *Book of Rites*.

The above meaning of *li* or ritual explained by Xu Shen, Duan Yucai, and Wang Guowei, is more relevant to the ritual offering of sacrifice. This explanation suggests that Chinese “*li*” does not limit to religious rituals, but matters more to bureaucracy. In the genealogy of the theorization of *li* by Guanzi (?–645BC), Confucius (552–479BC), and later Xunzi (313–238BC), Guanzi and the Guanzi-influenced Xunzi stated that ritual or *li* is the governance of the people, i.e., it is politics in itself.¹⁷ Obviously, rituals in ancient China were not limited to religious rituals. It is thus clear that the ancient explanation of the word *li* discussed above is similar to recent trends in ritual studies. This theorization of *li* has been further broadened by Guangzi, Confucius, and Xunzi.

One significant contribution to this new tendency in ritual studies comes from Michael Puett, one of the co-authors of *Ritual and Its Consequences*. He develops an insightful explanation of Confucian *li* and, in particular, of Xunzi’s idea of *li* or ritual, and further elaborates on Confucius’ attitude toward religion. Confucius’ attitude toward things like god, spirit, and the afterworld is well-known. “We sacrifice to them,” he writes in *The Analects*, “as if they are there.” [祭(祖)如(祖)在，祭神如神在]. According to Puett, Confucius claims that ritual creates a subjunctive, “as if” or “could be,” universe (Seligman *et al.* 2008, p. 6), a concept that he derives from Confucius in another book.¹⁸ Puett notes that it is this very creative act of ritual that makes our shared social world possible and that the constraints of ritual are all necessary aspects of this shared creation (Seligman *et al.* 2008).

¹⁶Sato Masayuki interprets “履” as “蹠”, thus to view it as the praxis (*shijian*) of Confucian moral values. See Sato 2016, p. 183.

¹⁷Concerning Guanzi’s influence on Xunzi, see Sato 2013, pp. 147–76.

¹⁸As Puett says, rituals – in the Confucian sense – are transformative because they allow us to become a different person for a moment. They create a short-lived alternate reality that returns us to our regular life as slightly altered. For a brief moment, we are living in an “as-if” world. See Puett and Gross-loh 2017, p. 39.

With this in mind, Puett expands on Xunzi's concept of *wei* 偽 (i.e. 為¹⁹) or artifice, the opposite of "natural." According to Puett, Xunzi argued that we should never complacently accept what we think is natural to us (Puett and Gross-loh 2017, p. 163). In opposition to Mengzi, Xunzi argues that human nature is bad with a fondness for profit and that its goodness comes from artifice. All scholars from the Confucian school agree that goodness comes from learning and cultivation, while Xunzi, in particular, emphasizes the notion that goodness and social order come from the ritual. Puett remarks that "In other words, human beings are the ones who give pattern to the world. Xunzi reminds us that we were born into this world, but the patterns we have seen in it were created by us" (ibid., p. 166). From Puett's anthropological viewpoint, it is artifice or the subjunctive in rituals that have the essential meaning because it is this artifice or subjunctive that forms order.

One of the most substantive points found in *Ritual and Its Consequences* is that the ritual modes of behavior can be usefully contrasted with what the authors refer to as sincere forms of approaching the world or an antiritualistic mode (Seligman *et al.* 2008, p. 8). According to these authors, sincere views are not focused on the creation of an "as if" or a shared subjunctive universe of human beings in the world. Instead, sincere forms project an "as is" version of what often becomes a totalizing, unambiguous vision of reality "as it really is." They argue that the presentation of ritual's "as if" universe, the subjunctive, requires neither a prior act of understanding nor a way of clearing conceptual ambiguity (ibid., pp. 114–15). They see sincerity and ritual as perennial aspects of the human condition, with both ritual and sincerity interacting in our approach to the world (ibid., p. 128). However, in their opinion, the modernist or Enlightenment project has particularly privileged sincerity (ibid., p. 122). These four authors see ritual as an essential apparatus that turns the fragmentary world into an "as-if," co-existing shared cosmos.

Borrowing their discussions to view tribute in East Asia, we can see that the points mentioned above about ritual can and should also be applied to tribute in the history of East Asian premodern diplomacy. In contrast, the concept of sincerity can be applied to modern international law. Viewed in this way, we can say that modern international law is close to sincerity, in the sense that the authors mentioned above use the term, and that it is the ambiguity inherent in the tributary ceremony as a ritual that international law attempts to overcome.

The tributary system and ritual from the perspective of speech act theory

The new trend in ritual studies represented by scholars such as Puett is inspired by Rappaport's *Ritual, and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999), who applies the speech act theory of J. F. Austin and J. Searle to ritual studies. As Bell (2009, p. 69) points out, Rapaport is not the first to use Austin and Searle's work in the field of anthropology, with Ruth Finnegan and Benjamin Ray being early adopters of speech act theory. Generally speaking, Rappaport's approach has been regarded as that of a cultural materialist (ibid., pp. 30, 33). My use here of the phrase "new tendency (or school) of ritual studies" is therefore not strict. Most of the time, it merely refers to the group of anthropologists represented by Rappaport. One characteristic of scholars working in this new trend in ritual studies, is that they have adopted, to a certain degree, Austin's "performative utterance" theory and Searle's speech act theory. At the same time, this group takes approaches close to that of a culture-focused perspective while also revising the culture-focused perspective.

Austin and Searle's (1975, p. 3) concepts of speech acts emphasize the performative functions (e.g., promising, comforting, encouraging, warning, threatening, etc.) of utterances. Austin argues that all the statements can be divided into two categories: constative and performative. "Statements (constative), we had it, were to be true or false; performative utterances on the other hand were to be felicitous or infelicitous" (Austin 1979, p. 247). According to Austin, the term "performative," derived from "perform," is used in a variety of cognate ways and constructions, much as the term "imperative"

¹⁹According to Liu Taigong 劉台拱, a Qing Chinese scholar, all the word "偽" in Xunzi should be understood as "為." See Wang 2010.

is, and the term “perform,” as the verb usually coupled with the noun “action,” indicates that the issuing of the utterance is much more than just saying something because the utterance itself indicates precisely the performance of an action (ibid., p. 6). To put it simply, to say something is also to do something, or by saying something we do something. Austin further explains that “To perform a locutionary act is in general, we may say, also and *eo ipso* to perform an *illocutionary* act” (ibid., p. 98). Austin remarks, “Thus we distinguished the locutionary act (and within it the phonetic, the phatic, and the retic acts) which has a *meaning*; the illocutionary act which has certain *force* in saying something; the perlocutionary act which is *the achieving of certain effects* by saying something” (ibid., p. 121).

To explain these three types of acts, take, for example, the statement “(I promise that) I will come tomorrow.” Firstly, the locutionary act which has meaning has occurred; secondly, by saying this, the illocutionary act of promising has also occurred; thirdly, by saying this the speaker may try to achieve an effect such as comforting the audience or making the audience happy. This is precisely what Austin says, “There is yet a further sense (C) in which to perform a locutionary act, and therein an illocutionary act, may also be to perform an act of another kind” (ibid., p. 101). Austin’s initial distinction between performatives and constatives is only a convenient starting point for his discussions. His fundamental criterion lies in the concepts of felicitous or infelicitous. Eventually, he intentionally blurred this dichotomy and came to see all utterances from the perspective of performatives (ibid., pp. 131–47 (Lecture XI))²⁰. Searle (2011, p. 25), further explains Austin’s notion of perlocution, in which “Correlated with the notion of illocutionary acts is the notion of the consequences or *effects* such acts have on the actions, thoughts, or beliefs, etc. of hearers.”

Suggested by speech act theory, Rappaport (1999, p. 114) argues that ritual can broadly be regarded as a kind of speech or communication with performativeness. Rappaport maintains that ritual is a particular form of orientation to act. The very nature of framing or orienting action is precisely the core of speech act theory. Drawing on speech acts, Rappaport sees ritual just like performative speech in that it has the capacity to regulate act. Using the example of dubbing a youth in Medieval Europe, Rappaport reminds us that dubbing here does not tell a youth to be a knight, nor does it tell him how to be a knight. Rather, it *makes* him a knight. Though performativeness is not confined to ritual, he further argues that there is a special relationship between ritual and performativeness because the formal characteristics of ritual enhance the chances of success of the performatives that they include (ibid., 115–116). In other words, “clear definition, which is intrinsic to the formality of ritual, itself possesses perlocutionary force, and so do the gravity, solemnity and decorum characteristic of many rituals. Reflexively, the perlocutionary force inhering in the formality of a ritual supports whatever performatives are enacted in that ritual” (ibid., p. 116). Rappaport argues that the act of acceptance is the first of ritual’s fundamental offices; and that by performing liturgical orders the participants accept and indicate to themselves and to others that they accept whatever is encoded in the canon of the order (ibid., p. 119). According to Rappaport, acceptance is not belief and nor is it a private state, but a public act, visible both to witnesses and to performers themselves. He further argues that acceptance can be unconvinced and “insincere,” but insincerity does not nullify acceptance (ibid., pp. 120–21).

Illocutionary acts, as Austin (1975, pp. 121–22) emphasizes, are conventional acts; perlocutionary acts are *not* conventional, and even a nonverbal warning, as an illocutionary act, must be a conventional nonverbal act. Searle expanded Austin’s concept of convention more broadly to mean “rule-governed.” Searle (2011, pp. 36–37, 41) remarks that “(S)peaking a language is performing acts according to rules” and that “(S)peaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed form of behaviour.” He also remarks that “(S)ome system of rule governed elements is necessary for those to be certain *types* of speech acts, such as promising or asserting” (ibid., pp. 38–39). In summation, convention and rule are, for Searle, synonymous with each other. This can be seen in his remark that conventions are “realization of rules” (ibid., p. 40).

²⁰Ibid., pp. 131–47 (Lecture XI).

Obligation matters deeply to the recognition of conventions or rules. With regard to the overlapping relations between accepting linguistic rules and institutional activity like promising and obligation, Searle says,

The point is merely that when one enters an institutional activity by invoking the rules of the institution one necessarily commits oneself in such and such ways, regardless of whether one approves or disapproves of the institution. In the case of linguistic institutions like promising (or statement making), the serious utterance of the words commit one in ways which are determined by the meaning of the words. In certain first person utterances, the utterance is the undertaking of an obligation. (ibid., p. 189)

Searle further argues that there is no obligation without acceptance and that the notion of obligation is closely related to notions like accepting, recognizing, acknowledging and undertaking (ibid.). Drawing on Searle's argument, Rappaport (1999, p. 124) concludes that "*In sum, it is not ritual's office to ensure compliance but to establish obligation.*" Similar interpretation also can be applied to the stakeholders of the tribute rituals, in particular to those non-Confucian actors. Viewing in this line, we can say that, it is the tribute rituals that made all the stakeholders – including the tribute receiver, on most of the occasions, the emperors of China – be accepters of the "international" rule and obligation bearers in the "international" society, regardless they believed in Confucian ideology on the discursive level in tribute rituals or not.

Acceptance of the rule or obligation in the "international" society, on most of the occasions, is reciprocal, but it also strongly matters to hegemony. For example, in 1568, a Korean official complained in the court, that the stipulated route for all the trade between China and Korea, which was decided by Ming China, is humiliating for Korea because it had to take a long way to Beijing instead of to the nearby destination of Liaodong in China. The ground for this official's criticism is that compared to the route between China and Ryūkū, the latter was simple, while China's way toward Korea was complicated. This was recorded in *The Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty*, the official records of the Joseon Dynasty of Korea. As part of the convention of tribute trade ritual, the route itself was nothing but part of the ceremony of the tribute trade. In other words, the route itself is part of the hierarchical power politics itself between the hegemonic Ming and its most important tribute-bearer, Korea. As quite an exception, this official questioned this convention.

It, therefore, seems that it is not so difficult to understand the relationship between ritual and convention. Concerning this, Herbert Fingarette (1972, p. 12) writes that "There is no power of *li* if there is no learned and accepted convention."²¹ Rappaport (1999, p. 114) argues that ritual is full of conventional utterances and acts which achieve conventional effects. Rappaport further argues that liturgical performance not only recognizes the authority of the conventions that it presents but also gives these conventions their very existence and that if performatives are to be understood as conventional procedures for achieving conventional effects, rituals are, by this account, more than just simple performatives (ibid., p. 125).

The discussion above concerning the acceptance of rule is helpful for us in terms of understanding the role of non-Confucian actors in premodern East Asia's tributary system. For these non-Confucian participants, participating in the rituals of tribute does not necessarily mean that they have belief in or an understanding of the Confucian view of the world. Instead, it represents the non-Confucian participants' acceptance of the rules and of obligations concerning the "international" society that is intrinsic to the tribute rituals. This also means that participation in the ritual of tribute was a public act for the East Asian international community.

Performativeness in tribute ritual and Chinese history

Rappaport applied the speech act theory of Austin and Searle to the analysis of ritual as early as 1974 in his paper "The Obvious Aspect of Ritual." Here, Rappaport points out that there is a special

²¹Thanks for Masayuki Sato for having taught me Fingarette's research.

relationship between ritual and performatives. He argues that certain rituals are not themselves performative but may make performatives possible (1979, pp. 189–94). Rappaport's discussion of rituals from the perspective of speech act theory will be further discussed later, since his masterpiece *Ritual, and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999) is a systematic development of the ideas found in this early paper and his "On Cognized Model" in his *Ecology, Meaning and Religion* (1979).

Before Rappaport's paper in 1974, Herbert Fingarette had used Austin's speech act theory to develop highly perceptive and fresh interpretations of Confucius' thoughts, concentrating on the phenomenon of rituals in his 1972 book *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*. Confucius sees ritual as the criteria that differentiate man from animals. Developing this Confucian thesis further through Austin's theory, Fingarette remarks as follows,

Indeed, the central lesson of these philosophical insights is not so much a lesson about language as it is about ceremony. What we have come to see, in our own way, is how vast is the area of human existence in which the substance of that existence *is* ceremony. Promises, commitments, excuses, pleas, compliments, pacts – these and so much more are ceremonies or they are nothing. It is thus in the medium of ceremony that the peculiarly human part of our life is lived. The ceremonial act is the primary, irreducible event; language cannot be understood in isolation from the conventional practice in which it is rooted; conventional practice cannot be understood in isolation from the language that defines and it is part of it. No purely physical motion is a promise; no word alone, independent of ceremonial context, circumstances and roles can be a promise. Word and motion are only abstractions from the concrete ceremonial act. (Fingarette 1972, p. 14)

Fingarette here interpreted Confucius' philosophy in a perspective of *li* or ceremony appropriated the theory from Austin. Fingarette's approach notably is the same as the trend of ritual studies in the field of anthropology and sociology in recent decades. He holds a *li*-centric interpretation of Confucius and maintains that human beings are realized through rituals. This is precisely Roy Rappaport's viewpoint that can be viewed from the title of the above-mentioned book, *Ritual, and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. On the other hand, Fingarette maintains that physical movement is part of the ceremony as language. This precisely matters to the issue of ritual cultural difference in Lord George Macartney embassy's visit to Qing Court in 1793, in which Lord Macartney refused to perform the humiliating "genuflexions and prostrations" (*Kowtow*) demanded by the Qing Court. Instead, he knelt one knee, bowed his head.²² As emphasized repeatedly, British acceptance of the rituals performatively means accepting the legitimacy of the rules behind the ritual. Historians have frequently used this conflict of a diplomatic protocol of Marcatney embassy as a symbol for China to reject the order of equal nation-states through insisting on the China-centric tribute system.²³ However, the historical fact is quite different from the well-known interpretation that Qing emperor's insisting on the ceremony of *kowtow* stems from his ignorance and arrogance. Henrietta Harrison's paper convinced that the central issue of Marcatney embassy was not the issue of protocol between an equal thus "advanced" nation-state system and the hierarchical hence "backward" tribute system. Rather than that, the central issue is the issue of Qianlong emperor's strong concern of the possible British military acts because the emperor had rejected British demands of keeping a permanent ambassador in Beijing to bypass the provincial government in Guangdong, receiving tax reductions, and asking for giving an island off the coast near the port of Ningbo as well as a base near Guangzhou (Harrison 2017). More importantly, as Christian Windler and Henrietta Harrison pointed out, although the Westphalia Treaty was signed in 1648 as the symbol of the diplomatic equality of sovereign states, in fact, as late as the

²²For Lord George Macartney embassy's visit to Qing Court in 1793, in Chinese, see Zhu 1989. This is a typical book in the framework of modernization. In English, see Peyrefitte 1993; Also see Hevia 1995.

²³For example, John E. Wills, Jr. pointed out, "The Macartney embassy marks the beginning of an irreconcilable confrontation between the order of equal nation- states and the tribute system, culminating in the two Opium Wars and the imposition of the Western multi-state order on the Qing." See Wills 2012, p. 441.

eighteenth century were still within the older hierarchical system of relations between princely courts in Europe.²⁴ As Harrison's investigation shows, the issue of protocol had been used as an excuse to justify British expansion in China (*ibid.*).

Either way, this offers us a reasonable explanation of why the Confucian based tribute ritual can also be acceptable for the non-Confucian frontier tribes and non-Confucian countries. John E. Wills, Jr. has demonstrated the outlines of Qing's relations with its two neighbors, Dai Viet (Vietnam) and Siam (Thailand) from 1700 to 1820 through his studies on five cases based on primary sources and he concludes that these five case studies contribute to three important themes: (1) the functionality of the tribute system, and especially of its focus on ceremony; (2) the crisis and re-consolidation of the Siamese and Vietnamese polities, and (3) the roles of émigré Chinese as shapers of ceremonial transition and as advisors and agents of state consolidation (Wills 2012, p. 476). Here we can see the essentiality of the relations between the ceremony and the tribute system.

Ritual is a language in which the medium is very much the message (Seligman *et al.* 2008, p. 113). A tributary ritual is both a material representation (i.e., the ritual of gift-giving) and linguistic representation. As regards the latter, Rappaport (1999, p. 151) argues that words themselves may become ritualized and that ritualized words may also be clear and carry conviction. Words themselves are ritualized formulae as stylized as a curtsy or the act of genuflecting and often are themselves constituents of the display (*ibid.*, p. 151). According to Searle, as quoted by Rappaport, "In the case of linguistic institutions like promising [and accepting] the serious utterance of words commits one in ways which are determined by the meaning of the words. In certain first person utterances the utterance is undertaking the obligation" (Searle 2011, p. 189; Rappaport 1999, p. 123). The tributary ritual, including its linguistic part, thus directs obligatory bindings for both sides.

The fact that ritual has the power of obligatory bindings for participants reminds us the ritual of blood oath (歃血為盟) as an old practice in Chinese secret society, in which the participant smears his lips with blood mixed with wine as a token for an oath. Under certain circumstances, the ritual possibly means a life-threatening obligation. An oath of the alliance through the ritual of smearing the blood as a sign of fidelity stems from an old Chinese tradition dated back to the Period of Spring and Autumn (770–476 BC). In the Period of Spring and Autumn, the feudal lords smeared the blood of the sacrifice on a large plate as a sign of oath treaty to each other. Sun (2018, pp. 3–24), a Chinese scholar who makes research on China's secret society, called the relationship between members of a secret society formed through rituals as fictive brotherhood bounded by "imagined blood." The participation of a ritual means not only accepting the rules and obligations of a particular secret society but also building a sense of identity in this society. The ritual of tribute shares a similar structure in terms of its imbedded obligation and duty.

Fingarette and Rappaport's application of Austin and Searle's speech act theory to the interpretation of the essence of ritual can similarly be applied to an analysis of tributary ritual within the pre-modern East Asian world order. This international ritual *makes* both the relations between "the Son of Heaven" and their "vassals," a subjunctive relation that truly enables the establishment of the historical East Asian world order.

The ritual of tribute is therefore not only a medium that represents a set of meanings between "a Son of the Heaven" and his "vassals," but also a frame for all of the actors' actions within the anarchic setting of international society – including the acts of "the Son of Heaven" himself – which gives an order to this anarchic international society through *doing* or *making* the tributary ritual.

Lastly, let me come back to Confucianism's role in tribute rituals. Chang (1983, pp. 33–43) has shed light on the function of ritual as moral authority during the Shang (sixteenth century BC to eleventh century BC) and Zhou (twelfth century BC to 256 BC or 249 BC) dynasties. Similarly, the discourses of Confucianism and its associated rituals also generated strong moral and cultural capital for the power at the center, which was China on most occasions. To varying degrees, these discourses and

²⁴*Ibid.* Christian Windler, *La diplomatie comme expérience de l'autre: Consuls français au Maghreb (1700–1840)* (Geneva, 2002), pp. 86–91. Cited from Harrison's paper mentioned above.

rituals attracted all actors in the international system [of East Asia?], including those who were non-Confucian. In other words, Confucian rituals and discourses, together with China's economic capital, functioned as moral and cultural capital that contributed to Chinese hegemony in tribute rituals.

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