

The Particularity of Ancient China as an Empire

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Empire is a Western discourse, but it is also used to analyze ancient China. However, ancient China is different from the empires of the Western world as they are commonly understood, and has its particularity. This is reflected not only in the internal organizational framework of ancient China but also in its relations with the outside world.

ANCIENT CHINA AS AN EMPIRE?

After the second half of the seventeenth century, in descriptions of China by Western scholars, it has gradually become a common phenomenon for them to call China an “empire.” On the other hand, it was not until the late Qing Dynasty that the Chinese began to use the word “empire,” and later on, the term “empire” was used by Chinese to address the Manchu Dynasty itself, resulting in the designator “Qing Empire.”¹ On this basis, the use of “empire” has been accepted by more and more Chinese, resulting in the emergence of references to the Qin Empire, the Han Empire, the Tang Empire, and so on. There is a famous TV series called *The Great Qin Empire*, with a first season and three sequel seasons, totaling 126 episodes by 2019.

On the whole, empire is a rather vague concept that originated in the West. To a large extent, it is based on the practice of the Roman Empire. Although ancient China was a very powerful country in the Eastern world for a long period, the concept of empire was not very appropriate for analyzing the dynasties of ancient China. It is easy to mislead outsiders who do not have a comprehensive understanding of the history of ancient China. In the analysis of ancient Chinese history, it is not that the concept of “empire” cannot be used, but that great care should be taken, especially to distinguish the situation in ancient China, to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

When some people use the term “Chinese empire,” they may simply use the term “empire” to refer to a huge and powerful country; that is, to some extent equating an empire with a great power or a regional hegemony. But empires are conceptually different from great powers and regional hegemonies. A great power mainly refers to the state of strength of a country. A country does not automatically become an empire just because its strength grows so that it surpasses other countries around it.

Doyle defines empire as “relationships of political control imposed by some political societies over the effective sovereignty of other political societies.”² Of course, empires do not just mean high-handed political control over other political societies; they often can be grounded in legitimacy.³ There are two basic important elements comprising the concept of empire. One element is the absorption of and rule over different nationalities and different political entities. This is true of the Roman Empire and the Mongolian Yuan Empire, among others. During the transition of the Ming and Qing dynasties, Westerners began to use empire to describe Manchu, an important factor being that the Qing Dynasty was established on the basis of Manchu rule over a large number of Han people.⁴ A second basic element is the hierarchical relationship between the center and the periphery, where the center is not the geographical center but the political center. Empires involve the control of dominant political entities (often the center state) over other political entities (colonies, autonomous or semi-autonomous regions, other countries, etc.) and the formation of a hierarchical order between the two sides. The empire can interfere with the political entities under its rule in military, economic, foreign relations, and other aspects, and such interference is often accepted by the latter.

The establishment and maintenance of hierarchical order is an important part of imperial governance. Now, people gradually realize that hierarchy is a quite common phenomenon in international relations,⁵ which has led some scholars today to believe that the United States is also an empire.⁶ There is no doubt that ancient China established and maintained a hierarchical order in East Asia, and itself was also a very complex political entity. When people use the concept of empire in a broad sense, it is more or less acceptable to call ancient China an empire. But there is no doubt that China has some distinctive features.

THE CONCEPT OF GREAT UNIFICATION HAS LED TO THE FORMATION OF A POLICY ORIENTATION IN CHINA THAT EMPHASIZES THE INTERIOR OVER THE EXTERIOR

A rather unique aspect of the Chinese Empire, compared to many other empires in world history, is its continuity over the course of its long history. From the unification of China by the Qin Dynasty in 221 BC and the establishment of the Qin Empire until the late Qing Dynasty, the Chinese Empire has undergone several

processes of disintegration and reconstruction. On a territory roughly comparable in size to Europe, China has not experienced an irreversible breakup and has always been able to reunify after a period of division. In this process, the concept of great unification played an important role.

In Chinese history, there has been a rich practice of realizing the great unification, which began in the Qin and Han periods, but the ideology of the great unification predates the political practice of the Qin and Han dynasties. The thinkers of the pre-Qin period used spatial concepts such as *Wufu* (five dresses) and *Sifang* (four directions) in an attempt to construct an ideal model of an inclusive, hierarchical, unified state.⁷

At the ideological level, the most important feature of the “Great Unification” is the “veneration of unification” and the pursuit of the political unification of the country and the stability of the political order. Since the Qin and Han dynasties, the completion of the task of unification has been an important quest of every ruler of a dynasty that considers itself orthodox in China, and it is also his responsibility to do so. Even during the period of great division between the Three Kingdoms and the North and South Dynasties, the separate regimes did not give up their quest for national unity. It can be said that the pursuit of great unification became an important “logic of appropriateness” for the rulers of the ancient Chinese dynasty,⁸ which also constituted a basis for their legitimacy in maintaining domestic rule. “Great unification” is a political ideology that has had an important influence on political practice, but it has also influenced many aspects of political governance and political culture in ancient China.

Ancient China was a vast country with a diverse range of people living within its territorial boundaries and with a diverse culture. Such cultural differences often result in centrifugal forces within the state, a challenge that needs to be overcome in order to sustain a grand unified state. After gaining power, all the Chinese dynasties transcended cultural differences to a certain extent in order to achieve a greater level of homogeneous cultural identity, to consolidate the political identity of the people within their territory toward the state, and to maintain the stability of the dynasty. From this, we can see the “order complex” that has existed in traditional Chinese culture since the reign of the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty.⁹

The recurring practice of the great unification reinforced the idea of “Great Unification” in ancient Chinese society, making it a universal collective social consciousness, and even the Chinese minority regimes, once they were deeply influenced by Confucianism, and formed the Chinese identity, also developed a strong consciousness to maintain the unified regime. Since ancient China developed the strong ability of imperial governance based on the county system during the Qin and Han dynasties, it led to a number of great unification regimes in Chinese history to achieve national strength, social stability, economic prosperity, and popular tranquility. In other words, the well-being of the people is often associated with a stable unified regime and is rarely achieved through a separatist regime. In this

way, the Chinese people's pursuit of great unification becomes a strong social consciousness. This was further reinforced by the promotion of the concept by the central government in Chinese history.

Wang Gengwu, a famous scholar, emphasized the uniqueness of the central empire of China, arguing that it was characterized by "historical unity," which is not applicable in other countries. Although China has been divided, the driving force behind all regimes has been to reunite the empire.¹⁰

For ancient China, the concept of great unification did not mean that a unified China would be bigger and better, and it did not translate into a highly expansionary foreign policy. What it actually pursued was the unification of the core area of Chinese civilization. In this light it is interesting that the Northern Song rulers, although they were aware of some relatively weak regimes in the southwest of the country that offered them room for expansion, did not show any obvious interest in absorbing them, but never forgot the Yanyun Sixteen Prefecture (*Yanyun shiliu zhou*) under the rule of Liao Dynasty and tried to reclaim the region through force, economic redemption, and so on. Because the Yanyun Sixteen Prefecture had both important national defense significance and very important cultural significance for the Central Plains dynasty, it was traditionally a very important part of the Central Plains region.

The existence of the great unification consciousness, to some extent, shaped the "logic of appropriateness" of the rulers of the Chinese Empire, which led them to be quite obsessed with the unification of the country. As a result, in ancient China, there was a situation in which emphasis was placed much more on the interior than the exterior.¹¹ It was considered more important to achieve the "cultivation of morality and peace" and maintain harmony, stability, and prosperity in the central part of the country than to annex foreign territory. As long as the Central Plains, as the main body of the empire, was stable, the fluctuation of borders did not hinder the integrity of the concept of "Tianxia" (All-Under-Heaven). In contrast, active border expansion was often not a matter of any urgency.¹²

Such a concept has also influenced the basic features of the Chinese-dominated international order in East Asia in what is known as the tribute system. On the whole, the tribute system is a kind of regional order arrangement with a low degree of compulsion, which is manifested in that, on the one hand, the degree of coercion within the scope of this order arrangement is very low, and there is not much substantive content.¹³ On the other hand, China does not forcefully promote this order arrangement to the outside world. The extending logic of this order has two main aspects. The first is that "if remoter people are not submissive, all the influences of civil culture and virtue are to be cultivated to attract them to be so";¹⁴ that is, to bring other countries into the order arrangement by increasing China's own attractiveness rather than by coercion. The second is based on the idea that "the king does not rule the barbarians, those who come do not reject, those who go do not pursue."¹⁵ The international order established in East Asia under the leadership

of China is also an order with a relatively low level of institutionalization. In the tribute order, there are not many specific mechanisms and arrangements in the political, economic, security, and other aspects, apart from very detailed rules on rituals and ceremonies. This is a very loose regional order in general.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANCIENT CHINA AND ITS NEIGHBORS

Ancient China did establish a hierarchical order in East Asia, which was called the tribute system by some scholars.¹⁶ But this hierarchical order is different from many of the hierarchical orders that people see elsewhere. David Kang claims that East Asian international relations emphasized formal hierarchy among nations while allowing considerable informal equality, which contrasts with the Western tradition of international relations, which has consisted of formal equality between nation-states, but with substantial informal hierarchy.¹⁷

The hierarchical order in East Asia is more obvious in nominal inequality, but the exchange of material interests is more equal, and even there is often a clear preference for the interests of neighboring countries, that is, the so-called “giving more and getting less (*Houwang bolai*).” In particular, China usually does not exercise effective administrative control over its neighboring countries, does not collect taxes, does not control their armed forces, and has limited impact on their foreign relations. As a result, there was a phenomenon that Korea and Ryukyu paid tribute to both China and Japan. China’s moderate foreign policy has been accompanied by a relatively low frequency of wars in the history of this region.

1. China is a strong force but is cautious in its use of force abroad

The ancient East Asian international system was a typical unipolar system in which China had a significant power advantage over its neighbors over the long term. In such a system, such opportunities were often present if ancient China attempted to expand into the periphery. But ancient China, without facing strong external constraints, was generally quite cautious in its use of external force.¹⁸ For realists, this is to some extent a self-contradictory phenomenon. Because it is costly to maintain a large army, it seems wasteful not to use it for external conquest and colonization.

In its long historical process, ancient China did not show a strong tendency to colonize other places, and such an opportunity, at least in the process of Zheng He leading his huge fleet to sail the world, presented itself to China many times. If China had shown a colonial tendency in ancient times and exercised effective control over countries other than China, it would be more in line with the normal understanding of empire. This situation cannot be said to be completely absent in Chinese history—for example, the Mongolian Yuan Empire—but it is generally an exception rather than a norm.

Even when it was quite powerful, ancient China showed moderation or reluctance to focus on the operation of overseas territories. Its foreign relations have long been managed by the etiquette department. Relations between foreign countries and China are mainly reflected in regular tributes rather than in the search for treaties in favor of China's interests, or in efforts to strengthen control over the outside world.

Historically, the regional order in East Asia under the leadership of China is an order arrangement with great freedom and flexibility for neighboring countries. It is not a regional order arrangement that forcibly brings these countries together on the basis of China's power primacy. The interests, considerations, and behavioral logic behind this arrangement were clearly stated by Ban Gu:

We should keep them outside not inside, to alienate them so as not to be close with them; we cannot administrate over the barbarians, and the edicts, decrees and our calendar cannot be applied to the barbarians; if the barbarian invades, we shall defend ourselves and punish them; if they leave away, we shall be prepared and defensive. If the barbarians desire to pay tribute to China and follow the customary rituals, their tribute shall be received properly, and we shall give unto them in return. We shall appease and bind them for the long time, and never lose our propriety. This is the customary way that has prevailed since ancient times, and the accepted way of handling the barbarian peoples.¹⁹

Zhu Yuanzhang, the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty, expounded his basic idea of dealing with foreign relations in his *ancestral discipline* (*Zuxun lu*), to which he attached great importance and asked future emperors to follow strictly:

All overseas countries, such as Annan, Zhancheng, Koryo, Siam, Ryukyu, the West, Dongyang and small southern countries, are confined to mountains and seas and are located in a remote place; the land is not enough to supply, and the people are not easy to govern. If they do not speculate to disturb our border, then they will be ominous. It will also be ominous for us if they do not cause trouble to China, and we easily send troops to crusade. I am afraid that future generations will rely on the prosperity and strength of China, be greedy for a moment's military merit, sent troops for no reason, and injure people's lives, we must bear in mind not to do that. But the northern barbarian tribes approach the northwest of China, which has always been a frontier problem in China. We must train our troops and be prepared for them.²⁰

Zhu Yuanzhang, who participated in many wars as the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty, was generally a realist rather than a pacifist. The basic idea of his foreign policy for the Ming Dynasty was to adopt a policy of military vigilance against the northwest Mongolian forces, which posed a great threat to China's security. However, for countries that did not threaten China's national security, he stressed the adoption of a pacifist policy and the inadmissibility of "easily sending troops to attack," let alone "sending troops to attack for no reason but to gain war credits."

Ban Gu's logic and Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang's admonition do not represent the whole of ancient China's foreign policy. Since the foreign policy of a great power must adapt to the international environment it faces, it requires inherent complexity, and can't be completely pacifist. However, the ideas and propositions put forward by them did exert great influence on ancient China, and similar policy thinking was rare, or at least not dominant, in the foreign policy of other major empires in the western world.

Although ancient China had obvious advantages in East Asia over a long period, it did not exist as an expansionary country for most of that time. China's territorial boundaries were far from being limited by external restrictions on its ability to expand abroad. In this respect, China's self-restraint (which, of course, has its rational basis) has played a significant role. Similar to Zhu Yuanzhang, many emperors in ancient China were alert to the drawbacks of the expansionist behavior of an empire. In this respect, Zhu Di, the Yongle emperor of the Ming Dynasty, was a rare exception.

Corresponding to ancient China's restraint in the use of force abroad is the perception of the low-level threat from neighboring countries, which is particularly reflected in the building up of military power in neighboring countries. Even with a powerful empire as a neighbor, the Joseon Dynasty during the Ming Dynasty maintained a military force that was only sufficient to maintain domestic security. According to Parker's statistics, the Joseon Dynasty maintained a force of only 10,000 combat-capable soldiers, the minimum required for internal security and policing.²¹ Such a military commitment undoubtedly reflected the sense of security that the Joseon Dynasty had when it was a neighbor of Ming Dynasty China.

Although China has been generally moderate in its external relations (relative to its strength and the limited external constraints it faced), strength is undoubtedly an important and indispensable material basis that enables China to play a leading role in East Asia and to better realize its political intention.

2. The boundaries of China's great unification dynasty were largely defined by culture rather than by the capacity of its armed forces

For most of its history since the Qin and Han dynasties, China was more of a cultural empire than an empire based on military conquest. The relatively short-lived Mongolian Yuan Empire (which ruled the Central Plains for 98 years) may have been a notable exception in this regard. The Mongolian Yuan Empire also underwent a gradual process of Sinicization, and its external expansion declined rapidly as it established a stable regime in the Central Plains.

The Ming Dynasty was a powerful dynasty in ancient China, with a very strong army during the reign of Taiju Zhu Yuanzhang (1368–1398), the founder of the Ming Dynasty. Zhu Di, emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty (reigned from 1402 to 1424), made five northern expeditions to Mongolian Yuan. Zhu Di also built up a navy that was the most powerful in the world at the time, led by Zheng He.

But such a powerful dynasty, with no rival in its vicinity, was far less in size than the Han and Tang dynasties in past history. Nor did the Ming Dynasty make an aggressive effort to regain such a vast territory. An important reason is that the Ming Dynasty considered its territory to be sufficient to support its need for legitimacy as a grand unified regime. The founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty also deliberately cautioned his descendants not to use his country's power advantage easily for foreign military purposes. This, to some extent, reflects the identity of the ancient Chinese Empire as a cultural empire rather than an empire of force, although military power is essential to the maintenance of any huge empire.

Another typical example is the Northern Song Dynasty. The Northern Song Dynasty fought several wars with Liao in its early years and maintained peace with Liao for a hundred years after the Chanyuan Treaty (*Chanyuan zhi meng*). In the unified dynasties of China, the military strength of the Northern Song Dynasty was relatively weak in general, and it faced great military pressure from the Liao Dynasty to the north. But the centennial peace of Northern Song and Liao actually greatly relieved the pressure faced by the Northern Song.

The Northern Song had relatively good opportunities for expansion in the southwest at the beginning of the founding and for quite some time thereafter. In 960 AD, Zhao Kuangyin founded the Song Dynasty and then launched a unification war, and in 965, the Northern Song Dynasty sent its general, Wang Quanbin, to attack Later Shu state and unified Sichuan.²² This also brought the Northern Song to the border with the Dali State in the southwest. As to how to deal with the relationship between the Northern Song and Dali, Wang Quanbin, the Northern Song general, hoped to take advantage of the victory to attack it. Zhao Kuangyin, the Northern Song Emperor, decided to adopt a policy of peaceful coexistence with the Dali regime in Yunnan in view of the military mutiny caused by the military difficulties in the border areas at the end of the Tang Dynasty,²³ and he used a jade axe (a paperweight) to draw a line along the area west of the Dadu River on the map, saying, "Beyond this line, it's not mine."²⁴ From this, the boundaries of the southwestern border of the Northern Song Dynasty were established. This decision of the Northern Song Dynasty was undoubtedly made out of political rationality, but strategic prudence and self-restraint were fully demonstrated in such rationality.

Song Gaozong (reigned 1127–1162) once commented on Zhao Kuangyin's policy:

The barbarians are wild and cunning, this is their nature from ancient times. Because of being harassed by the southwest forces, the Tang Dynasty entered Sichuan several times to fight back. After Zhao Kuangyin, the founding emperor of Song Dynasty, sent troops to settle down, Song and Dali state took the Dadu River as the boundary. Since then, Dali state did not dare to harass the border areas. However, defensive officers and soldiers on the border need to have appropriate personnel.²⁵

From here we can see that from the founding emperor of the Northern Song Dynasty and the emperors of the Song Dynasty adopted the policy of peaceful coexistence, especially not taking the initiative to attack neighboring countries in the southwest direction, which reflected a consistent strategic restraint. The Northern Song Dynasty did not hold a positive attitude toward establishing a closer hierarchical order with Dali state even in a peaceful way. From 965 AD to 1115 AD, the Northern Song Dynasty rejected Dali state's request for canonization as many as eleven times.²⁶ It was not until 1115 AD that the Song Dynasty finally agreed to the request of the State of Dali and formally established vassal relations. Even so, the relationship between the two sides remained very loose.

Judging from the long process of Chinese history, China has adopted a series of practices such as a policy of loose reins; the chieftain system; replacing local chiefdoms by the central government branches in some border areas; and setting up corresponding officials and institutions, which gradually formed a strong sense of belonging in these areas, and established effective governance of some border areas in the late dynasty of China.

It is worth noting that the practices of ancient Chinese dynasties differed significantly from the colonialism of Western countries. China's effective governance of frontier areas has evolved over a period of nearly a thousand years or more. Such a long period of time in itself shows that it was not a policy rationally designed by a particular government, and it shows that ancient China did not give high priority to external expansion and land annexation. China was not in a hurry to integrate the frontier regions with insufficient cultural centripetal force into its territory, but rather took a highly cautious and even somewhat rejectionist approach to the integration.

Another aspect of this is reflected in the fact that the Great Unification dynasties of ancient China (with the possible exception of the Mongolian Yuan) were often unwilling to bear the costs of ruling heterogeneous regions and cultures. In this regard, even the Manchu, which had a strong force, had been very cautious about using troops in the southeast.

3. Ancient China did not develop the idea of external colonization, nor did it act systematically

While Western scholars tend to describe ancient China as an empire, it is easy to find the reverse—that ancient China has long had a significant power advantage in East Asia, and even in the broader geography, but has basically shown no tendency to colonize abroad. Otherwise, one would see an important colonial power in the east of the world. For the Ming Dynasty, which occupies an important position in Chinese history, it had a quite obvious military advantage over the surrounding countries most of the time. Such a dynasty, which lasted 276 years, did not carry out colonial acts in Asia.

One notable figure among the Ming emperors was Zhu Di or Emperor Yongle, known as the “Emperor on Horseback,” who has also been cited by some scholars as an example of how ancient China was in fact a realist state.²⁷ However, Zhu Di was an obvious anomaly rather than a convention among the emperors of ancient China. In addition to several northern expeditions to Mongolian Yuan, Zhu Di also waged a war against Annan (part of today’s Vietnam). Scholars engaged in international relations theory tend to subconsciously view this as a typical act of realism. However, there are quite a few inexplicable aspects of realism in Emperor Yongle’s military operations toward Annan. The use of military force against Annan was the first large-scale military operation of Emperor Yongle’s reign. It seems somewhat difficult to understand Emperor Yongle’s large-scale military action against Annan without taking into account factors such as the ritual order, cultural perceptions, and so on, but mainly the realist concerns about the power distribution and sources of threat. The military advantage of the Ming Dynasty over Annan was unquestionable, but neither the previous Ming emperors nor the subsequent Ming emperors had shown any enthusiasm for using military force toward Annan, which was still true in the Qing Dynasty.

An important reason for Emperor Yongle to send his troops to attack Annan is that the state minister, Li, had arrogated power in Annan and abolished King Chen and installed his son as King of Annan. In the first year of Yongle, Annan sent a tribute envoy to the Ming Dynasty claiming that there was no one in the clan of the former king of Annan, and the current king of Annan was the grandson of the former king. Emperor Yongle suspected that there was deceit, and sent officers to investigate, but did not find out the truth, so under such circumstances, he crowned Hu Han Cang as King of Annan. But in the second year of Yongle, Chen Tianping, the younger brother of the former king of Annan, Chen Rifu, came to the capital of China and pleaded with Emperor Yongle to send troops to punish Li. In the fourth year of Yongle, Annan lured and killed Chen Tianping in the name of welcoming him back as king. This made Emperor Yongle so angry that he decided to use his army against Annan. This fact shows that Emperor Yongle had a strong motivation to maintain the stability of the tributary order through his military operation against Annan, and this military operation would not have taken place without the abolition of Annan’s legitimate king. Moreover, if the Ming government was motivated by realism, then the Ming could have continued to fight south toward Champa Kingdom because Yongle’s military operations had been very successful and Annan had quickly calmed down, but the Ming Dynasty did not do so.²⁸

In addition, as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a large number of Chinese from Fujian, Guangdong, Zhejiang, and other southeast coastal provinces went to Southeast Asia to do business and live there. By 1586, the Chinese population in Manila, Philippines, had reached 10,000. Despite repeated massacres by the Spaniards, the number of Chinese in the area continued to

increase, and by 1750, the Chinese population had risen to 40,000.²⁹ During the Ming and Qing dynasties, a large number of Chinese went to Southeast Asia and gained influence there, but their behavior had little to do with the central government of the Ming and Qing dynasties. This would have been an ideal resource to exploit if ancient China had the colonial consciousness of modern Western countries.

In fact, for most of ancient China's history, China did not understand what colonization was, and it was not until after the Opium War, when China was reduced to a semi-colony, that some Chinese gradually gained a basic understanding of colonial policy. The earliest work by Chinese scholars on the phenomenon of colonization is *The Colonial Policy* (*Zhimin Zengce*, 1905) by Zhou Zhongzeng. The book begins by pointing out that colonial policy is the latest thinking in the West.³⁰ And at this point, 400 years after Columbus discovered the new continent, colonial policy was far from being the latest wave of thought in the West.

Knowledge of the colonial practices of Western countries led some Chinese intellectuals at the end of the Qing Dynasty and for some time afterwards to hope that China would also become a colonial power, such as can be found in a high school history textbook in the 1930s which argued that the failure of the previous dynasty to run the Nanyang Islands as a colony had been a great mistake. "In the past, we thought that we should not care about things in the distance, so that although there was such a good foundation, the state did not make efforts to help people to move forward; this is really a big mistake."³¹ This aspiration of the intellectuals was somewhat anachronistic at the time, but their views reflected in another way the fact that China had not carried out effective colonial action in the past, despite its great power advantage and many opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Several dynasties in ancient China were considered by some scholars as "empires" because of their huge land area, great strength, internal ethnic diversity, and other factors. The historical Chinese Empire, however, was far different from empire in the Western sense. We should avoid using the concept of empire in the Western world to simply correspond to the dynasties of ancient China. A considerable number of Chinese do not see ancient China as an empire, but more as a great power in East Asia. While the fact that China once dominated the East Asian region as a great power for a long time may be analyzed as a model of empire, this model cannot simply be compared to the West.

Historically, China has long held primacy in East Asia, but it has not constructed a strict regional order in which it is the center and has a strong binding force on other countries in the system. China has generally shown restraint in its foreign policy, pursuing only limited foreign policy objectives in the region and, on that basis, has developed a mutually acceptable and stable relationship with

neighboring countries in the course of interaction, which has given rise to the particularities of the historical East Asian order.

Ancient China was not an empire in the sense of maximizing power or maximizing security. An important feature of the Chinese Empire has been that when the security pressure of the international system was at a relatively low level, its special political culture, especially Confucianism, had a significant influence on its foreign policy: (1) compared with external expansion, the maintenance of the stability of internal order was obviously given higher priority; (2) foreign affairs were often in a secondary position in ancient China's unified dynasty, and in many cases they were not highly valued; (3) in terms of foreign policy, ancient China tended to be less proactive and more often responded to the problems and challenges posed by its neighbors, without adequate institutional design and arrangements, and without establishing treaty-based obligation relations with its neighbors; (4) although ancient China had a power advantage in East Asia or even across a larger region for a long time, it did not pursue a colonial policy in the periphery; and (5) while ancient China had had ample time to construct an institutionalized regional order in its favor, what does exist in the region is a rather loose order in which China has only very limited influence over other countries, an influence far less than would be expected of an empire in the Western sense.

From the perspective of comparing China and India, if we treat both ancient China and ancient India as empires, they not only have some similarities but also great differences. Their commonality is demonstrated by the fact that both China and India have a long history, occupy large geographical areas, have internal ethnic diversity, and have very complex cultural compositions. Moreover, there has been a clear opposition to war in the dominant culture of both, which contrasts sharply with the prevalence of force in some Western empires.³² In addition, neither ancient China nor ancient India carried out a systematic colonization of foreign countries and neither showed a strong expansionary nature. On the whole, they all have the characteristics of cultural empires.

There are also some important differences between ancient China and ancient India, one important difference being that the recurring great unification dynasties were an important feature of ancient China, and although it went through some periods of division, ancient China was always able to achieve reunification under new dynasties. After the first great unification of Qin, there were several famous great unification regimes, such as Han, Tang, Yuan, Ming and Qing, among which, except for the Mongolian Yuan, all lasted more than 200 years. Ancient India, on the other hand, was divided for a much longer period of time, and did not exhibit the obvious historical cycle of "division—unification—division—unification" as China did. Such a state of unity and division also influenced the political culture of both sides—in ancient China, the idea of "great unification" had an important influence on dynastic politics, while in ancient India, similar ideas with important influence were not formed, and thus cannot play an important role in

the political aggregation of ideas. In addition, China has played a greater role in shaping the regional order, not only establishing a tribute order in East Asia but also forming a Confucian cultural circle around China that has profoundly influenced regional order and behavior pattern in East Asia by providing institutional templates and exerting cultural appeal. In contrast, ancient India seems to have had much less influence on the regional order.

NOTES

1. Mark C. Elliott, "When We Talk about the 'Empire', What Do We Talk About: Discourse, Method and the Archaeology of an Idea (Dang women tan diguo shi, women tan xie shenme—huayu, fangfa yu gainian kaogu)," *Exploration and Free Views (Tansuo yu zhengmin)*, no. 6 (2018): 49–57.
2. Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 19.
3. Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 176.
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23. At the end of the Tang Dynasty, Xuzhou troops were transferred to Guilin to defend the Nanzhao (Dali), which was scheduled for a three-year period, and was delayed for three years, triggering a mutiny. This mutiny was suppressed, but five years later, there was an uprising led by Huang Chao that eventually destroyed the Tang Dynasty. Thus, *The New Tang Book—The Southern Barbarians (Xin Tang Shu, Nanman zhuan)* commented: “The Tang was destroyed by Huang Chao, and the disaster was based on Guilin.”
24. *Continuation of Zizhi Tongjian* (Xu Zizhi Tongjian), vol. 4, Song Ji IV. See also Taiwan Armed Forces University, *History of War in China (Zhongguo lidai zhanzheng shi)*, vol. 11, Song, Liao, Jin, Xia (I) (Beijing: Citic Press, 2013), 139.
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28. For the background of Emperor Yongle's military operation toward Annan, see Chao Zhongchen, *The Legend of Ming Chengzu (Ming Chengzu zuan)* (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2008), 342–54.

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31. Lv Simian, “National History of Senior Middle School Textbooks (Gaoji zhongxue jiaokeshu: Benguo shi),” in Lv Simian, *Five Kinds of Primary and Middle School Textbooks by Lv Simian(I) (Lv zhu zhongxiaoxue jiaokeshu wu zhong)* (Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2011), 543, quoted in Li Yongdong, “Colonized ‘Empire’ and the Colonial Will of Semi-Colony.”

32. About the features of the Indian Empire, see Upinder Singh, chapter 8, this volume.