The Treaty of Shanyuan from the Perspectives of Western Scholars

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Abstract
In marking the 1000th anniversary of the Treaty of Shanyuan between the Song dynasty and the Khitan Liao dynasty in January 1005, the author surveys Western scholarship on the treaty and how it reflects the overall development of Chinese studies in the West, especially in North America. After using the work of John K. Fairbank as a backdrop for mid-twentieth century views of Imperial China's world order, the author discusses the research findings of Karl A. Wittfogel, Christian Schwarz-Schilling, Morris Rossabi, Wang Ginggo, Tao Jihshen, Herbert Franke, Dennis Tertseberr, Klaus-Peter Tietz, and Friedrich Mote. Professors Wang and Tao are Chinese, but they earned their graduate degrees in the West, and their publications in English have exercised considerable influence in the West. Thus, this is a case study of changing Western perspectives on China's foreign relations.

Keywords: China's foreign relations, Song dynasty, Liao dynasty, American Sinology, Tribute System

Introduction
The aspect of Imperial China's foreign relations that attracted Western scholars' attention for decades was the Tribute System and Chinese assumptions about "barbarians," i.e., peoples living in areas not directly under the cultural influence and political administration of China's Son of Heaven (tianzi). Since Chinese regarded barbarian states as inferiors, Chinese permitted and controlled trade, but only in order to ensure barbarian submission. China was portrayed as being in a hegemonic position vis-a-vis its neighbors; China's Son of Heaven was unique, and China thus conducted foreign relations on its own terms, a Tribute System in which others kowtowed and offered gifts to China's emperors from the Han dynasty until the Opium Wars during the Qing dynasty. Only if China stopped bestowing gifts and allowing trade under the Tribute System, would Central Asian tribes be forced to use their troops to challenge Chinese hegemony. Thus, until forced by treaties ending the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century, China did not recognize others as equals or even as real nation states.¹
These traditional Western assumptions were slightly modified, but still reinforced, in a famous scholarly volume, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, edited by John K. Fairbank and published in 1968. On the one hand, taking into account Wang Gengwu’s essay on Southeast Asia and Joseph Fletcher’s essay on Inner Asia, which demonstrated how the Ming and Qing had to be somewhat flexible in dealing with those distant states, Professor Fairbank acknowledged the gap between the ideal of the tribute system and actual practice: “All these non-Chinese states and peoples were expected in theory to be properly tributary to the Son of Heaven in the Central Country, but the theory frequently was not observed in fact. Indeed, the chief problem of China’s foreign relations was how to square theory with fact, the ideological claim with the actual practice.” Indeed, in the one essay dealing with the period before the Ming, Professor Yang Liansheng even briefly portrayed the Song dynasty’s annual payments to the Liao and the Jin as “tribute in reverse.” However, on the other hand, Professor Fairbank’s dominant voice in the volume reiterated and reinforced some old assumptions about Chinese foreign relations: “The relations of the Chinese with surrounding areas, and with non-Chinese peoples generally, were colored by this concept of Sinocentrism and an assumption of Chinese superiority — China’s foreign relations were accordingly hierarchic and nonegalitarian, like Chinese society itself.” Furthermore, as evident in another of his book titles, *China: The People’s Middle Kingdom and the U.S.A.*, Professor Fairbank regarded New China as essentially a continuation of Imperial China: Although the impact of the West had destroyed the Tribute System, Fairbank apparently expected China’s leaders not only to enhance China’s position in world affairs but also to strive toward a position of uniqueness or superiority whenever and wherever possible. Against this general background about American scholarship, my essay will illustrate how research on Song-Liao relations, and particularly the Treaty of Shanyuan, has gradually challenged and modified traditional Western assumptions about Imperial China’s foreign relations and American expectations for the PRC’s foreign relations.

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2 For an overview of this conventional view, see Rossabi, 1983: Introduction, 1-4.


Views of the Shanyuan Treaty

Knowledge of the Treaty of Shanyuan has slowly developed, along with an increasingly broad understanding of Chinese history, in the West since the 1940s. I have chosen to provide some sense of this development by discussing the most important publications in a roughly chronological order. It will become apparent that early accounts in English provided relatively little details about the treaty and the larger context or events leading up to the treaty; however, by the early 1990s, a quite thorough account became available. Accounts in the early 1990s were also more balanced in their discussions of the treaty in particular, as well as Song-Liao foreign relations in general, than earlier accounts had been. My survey will include important studies done by Professor Wang Gengwu and Tao Jinheng. Although ethnically and culturally Chinese, these two scholars earned their graduate degrees from British and American universities respectively; moreover, the studies discussed below were written in English and directed to Western audiences. Furthermore, these two scholars have provided English readers with the most thorough accounts and interpretations of the Treaty of Shanyuan. In the West, the treaty is referred to as “Shanyuan,” instead of “Chanyuan,” so I have maintained that spelling throughout. Although Chinese date the treaty from the last month of 1004, almost all Western scholars use the year of 1005 because the Chinese dates for the conclusion of the treaty correspond to January 13-18, 1005 in the modern Western calendar.

Even before Professor Fairbank published *The Chinese World Order* in 1968, there were already some studies of Song-Liao relations and the Treaty of Shanyuan that suggested some of the complexity of Imperial China’s foreign relations; however, the issue of the Tribute System dominated these early studies almost as much as it did Fairbank’s thinking. Most importantly, Karl A. Wittfogel and Feng Jiaosheng’s landmark 1949 study, *History of Chinese Society: The Liao*, had provided an important beginning point of reference for Western understanding of Liao relations with the Song. Professor Wittfogel characterized Song-Liao relations as “balanced hostility” because neither state was strong enough to subjugate the other. He also emphasized Song loss of prestige when unable to respond in 991 to an appeal from the Jurchens for help against the Liao. Although noting that Song sources do not speak of the annual payments to the Liao as “tribute” (*gong*), he pointed to Liao sources (the *Liaoshi* and also a 1031 inscription) that do claim the payments were tribute.” Thus, Professor