

RETHINKING TRIBUTE SYSTEM AND CHINESE FOREIGN AID FROM A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE¹

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INTRODUCTION

Will China use its foreign aid to reframe the international political order into one dominated by Pax Sinica? As a result of its rapid economic growth and social transformation, China has significantly enlarged the amount of its foreign aid in recent two decades to become a major player in the international aid system. Beijing's role as an emerging donor with distinct aid principles, policies and practices that differ from those of traditional donors has attracted widespread attention. In today's international political context, when China and the U.S. compete fiercely with one another for strategic power, foreign aid is undoubtedly an indispensable tool in each's "policy kit" to make allies, and to secure their support².

In an effort to understand the motive and impact of Chinese foreign aid, previous studies were mostly empirical studies that relied on the direct experience and indirect observations of researchers. The most representative work of this kind is Brautigam's book "The dragon's gift: the real story of China in Africa". On multiple occasions, she undertook fieldwork in warring African countries, visited the sites of Chinese aid projects, and interviewed both Chinese and African officials involved in aid management³. It was in this way that she managed to explain how Chinese aid agencies planned and managed their aid programs in African countries. There are other studies utilizing the same analytical methods used by Brautigam to investigate other contentions concerning China's aid program, for example, its size, geographical distribution, and popularity among local people⁴.

ABSTRACT

Did China provide what can be termed foreign aid to neighboring countries in ancient times? This is a fascinating but largely neglected question. Previous studies on China's foreign aid generally didn't pay significant attention to the many centuries when diplomatic relations in East Asia were regulated by the tribute system. In this article, we argue that this omission lies in the substantialist metaphysics on which the concepts of foreign aid and the tribute system are grounded. Modern research has paid too much attention to their substantial components, like norms and managing institutions, with the result that the psychological experience agents invested in the process have been neglected. By taking a relational perspective, we test the view that the Chinese tribute system and foreign aid are of one and the same fundamental nature, characterized by voluntary participation, reciprocity and relation-orientation.

Keywords: China; Foreign aid; Tribute system; Relational Theory.

RESUMO

REPENSAR O SISTEMA TRIBUTÁRIO E A AJUDA EXTERNA DA CHINA: UMA PERSPETIVA RELACIONAL



Será que a China antiga prestava o que poderia ser chamado de ajuda externa aos países da sua vizinhança? É uma questão fascinante, mas largamente negligenciada. Em geral, os estudos sobre a ajuda externa da China não dão suficiente atenção aos vários séculos em que as relações diplomáticas na Ásia Oriental eram reguladas pelo sistema tributário. Neste artigo, defendemos que esta omissão está relacionada com a metafísica substancialista na qual os conceitos de ajuda externa e sistema tributário estão radicados. Adotando uma perspectiva relacional, testamos a ideia de que o sistema tributário e a ajuda externa da China têm a mesma natureza, baseada na participação voluntária, na reciprocidade e na orientação para as relações.

Palavras-chave: China, ajuda externa, sistema tributário, teoria relacional.

In sum, previous studies generally revolved around the discovery of basic facts about China's aid, but this research approach entails several problems. The first is that information about China's foreign aid operation is rarely accessible and doing fieldwork across Africa, as Brautigam did, is not always possible either. Besides, Beijing is commonly regarded as an "emerging donor", which means that its foreign aid is not as highly normalized and institutionalized as the Official Development Assistance (ODA) of the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). Aid policy varies a lot over time and in different places. Furthermore, China's foreign aid has been experiencing profound changes since the establishment of the China International Cooperation Agency — the first ministerial-level department especially created for coordinating foreign aid issues. Taken together, these developments have raised new challenges to the study of China's foreign aid and indicated that the research focus

should be shifted from the registration of facts towards discovering behavioral patterns of aid-giving and the underlying thought beneath them. In other words, setting aside questioning what assistance China gives and how it helps beneficiaries, we should also question why China has provided assistance in the specific manner that it has.

When defining the object of study, previous research has had its limitations. For example, researchers have struggled with the problem of how to distinguish China's foreign aid from its foreign investment, a challenging task that every researcher encounters at the beginning of their study in the field. As will be further discussed in the following section, the Chinese government has never announced any official definition regarding its foreign aid. Consequently, researchers have turned to indicators of different natures and dimensions when choosing their research objects. This inconsistency has not only created statistical confusion, but also undermined the general credibility of Chinese foreign aid studies because research without an agreed common basis can lead to widely diverging findings.

In this article, we argue that the origin of this problem lies in the metaphysical basis of the analytical approach, which is ontologically substantialist and empirically individualist. It is this metaphysical basis that leads us to simplify foreign aid as a unidirectional action of giving that can be defined by a series of indicators, such as the ODA's requirement for concessional elements. To surpass these limitations, it is necessary to change the metaphysical basis of the research methodology from substantialism and individualism to one characterized by relationism. When considering the topic from a relational perspective, we can ascertain the extent to which Chinese foreign aid is

underpinned by reciprocity and consideration for relational improvement. In other words, the relational experiences nations undergo during the interchange of aid is of more value than the created economic benefits. When foreign aid is viewed independently of its outer form of officially supported financial support, and regarded as a means for relation management, it becomes possible to enlarge the scope of the research field to history before the Opium War, when the countries of East Asian interacted under the Chinese dominated tribute system. This article proposes that, driven by the profound relational thinking embedded in the Chinese culture, the interchange between China and what have been termed ‘vassal countries’ during the tribute process, presented the same behavioral pattern of reciprocity, and a preference for relational improvement rather than economic benefit.

This article is composed by four sections, including the introduction. The second section expands our knowledge of foreign aid beyond the common perception that it consists of one country providing resources to another. By revealing the substantialist metaphysical basis of previous studies, we argue that it is necessary to adopt a relational perspective towards Chinese foreign aid because, in fact, it was not a matter of one-way giving, but reciprocal exchange aimed at improving mutual relations. In the third section, we investigate the common opinion that the tribute system only served China’s hegemonic dominance in East Asia. We find that the system was, to a definite degree, reciprocal and driven by a relational thinking, in the same way as foreign aid. Therefore, we argue that they are actions of a similar nature. This article ends with a brief conclusion in the fourth section.

LITERATURE REVIEW: A SUBSTANTIALIST AND INDIVIDUALIST INTERPRETATION OF FOREIGN AID

Before explaining why China’s contemporary foreign aid and pre-modern tribute system, two seemingly disparate things, are in fact related, we need to clarify what we know about them. A literature review reveals to us the metaphysical basis of previous studies. After discussing the problematic substantialist approach to Chinese foreign aid, we move on to take a constructive perspective towards tribute and aid to illustrate their reciprocal and relational nature.

Previous studies on Chinese foreign aid are, in essence, based on a substantialist approach. One proof of this is that researchers, without exception, are troubled by the problem of defining foreign aid in a Chinese context. On the one hand, the Chinese government has not announced an operational definition for its aid. On the other hand, China is currently establishing a foreign aid management system under the leadership of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA). The content of foreign aid will naturally vary considerably during the formation of the system⁵.

Despite the complexity of the task, defining foreign aid has been considered as an inevitably necessary task by researchers who want to proceed further in Chinese aid

studies. Without an understanding of its principles, there appeared to be no way to explore the Chinese aid system and measure the scale of the officially supported financial grants. That is to say, defining foreign aid was not an end in itself. It has been seen as only the first step for researchers in their quest to evaluate Chinese aid effectiveness and social impact.

There are some scholars, such as Dreher et al.⁶, Kitano and Harada⁷, Brautigam⁸ and Strange et al.⁹ who have attempted to resolve the problem by proposing a definition with proxies for an “ODA-like aid”. But this reconciliation between Chinese foreign aid and the OECD’s ODA is problematic. On the one hand, different researchers have included indicators of different natures and dimensions in their definitions, creating an inconsistency in what can be counted as aid. For example, military aid with any related development intent is not regarded as foreign aid by most researchers, except Austin Strange¹⁰ who established the data collection standards for the famous database AidData. On the other hand, as Sears¹¹ critically noted in an article, “dependence on one proxy over another could introduce bias”. Reconciliation could obscure the peculiarities of Chinese foreign aid from our vision so that, in the end, what would be counted as foreign aid would only be that which was in accord with our expectations for ODA.

Chinese scholars have attempted to view the problem from a Chinese perspective. As Huang Meibo and Hu Jianmei¹² have noted, Chinese scholars, based in China, have a deeper understanding of the speeches of Chinese leaders, government policies and aid projects, such that their understanding complements western studies on Chinese foreign aid. For example, Ren Xiao and Liu Huihua, Zhang Caisheng and Chen Yougeng¹³ have attempted to redefine “foreign aid” through an analysis of its nature and characteristics. Many scholars have brought new perspectives to research on how aid programs are designed and managed¹⁴. Some have pointed out that China’s foreign aid is carried out,

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to a great extent, within the framework of South-South cooperation¹⁵. However, it is difficult for them to distance themselves from official Chinese policy framing, a challenge commonly faced by Chinese political academics¹⁶, and experience difficulties in reaching a worldwide audience. The reality is that neither the Chinese government, nor

Chinese scholars, have been able to promote a definition that has been sufficiently influential to challenge the hegemonic position of the OECD definition to ODA.

Compared to western researchers, Chinese scholars attach more importance to ideological factors in aid policy formulation. Firstly, some researchers have reviewed China’s foreign aid system and its evolution since the foundation of the country until today¹⁷. The developmental pattern that China emphasizes in its aid projects is another topic addressed by many Chinese researchers¹⁸. Others have noticed the impact of the incum-

bent political leader's personal style of government on Chinese aid policy¹⁹, but their study interest is restricted to a review of the aid policy pursued during the mandate of one specific leader. Changes in the mode, regulation and scale of aid remain at the center of such studies. In contrast, which policies remain unchanged and why they remain unchanged over decades are questions that have largely been neglected. In other words, both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars have attached too much attention to the substantial aspect of foreign aid, to the extent that its mode and scale have almost become the whole story of foreign aid studies.

The question is how this came to pass. In the opinion of most researchers, it is a necessity rather than an option to spend considerable effort to qualify and quantify foreign aid, because substantialist metaphysics requires that before one starts research, one should first define what the research object actually is. The research object must be ontologically true, which means that it is necessary to draw a line between the research object and other issues. This dividing line should be stable and objective, and independent of one's will. For a project to be recognized as foreign aid, it is not enough that the Chinese government simply affirms that it is, but the project must contain some elements that determine its nature as foreign aid. To identify these elements, researchers have no alternative but to dig in established norms, written policies, assigned contracts and statistics of aid finance, even though there is relatively little access to such information.

This requirement for a stable and objective definition of foreign aid leads Chinese foreign aid studies in general to value substantial factors and devalue ideational factors. Furthermore, this substantialist approach will lead us into a paradox. If foreign aid is a particular way of transferring resources from one country to another under established norms, then it is not essentially different from international investment, because what makes a project recognizable as foreign aid comes from man-made standards instead of any objective quality. Taking turnkey projects as an example, they are excluded from the category of development assistance according to OECD's definition but included in China's foreign aid lists simply because China's understanding of foreign aid does not require a grant element of at least 25% of the total.

An associated problem of substantialist thinking is that researchers unconsciously run into a thinking set that equates foreign aid as unilateral giving, because the existent regulations on foreign aid are all drafted for its implementation. There is no special arrangement prepared for after-aid relationships. People tend to think of foreign aid as a contract between the donor country and the recipient country, which ends as soon as the donor country fulfills its obligation of providing support. However, Marcel Mauss²⁰ and Emma Mawdsley²¹ indicate that although foreign aid is discursively constructed as a free gift, even the most generous humanitarian aid "extracts a price from its recipients". Unlike loans, the recipient country is explicitly exempt from any obligation to repay but implicitly bears a moral deficit, or moral imperative, to return the favor in multiple ways.

Liu Yi²² has demonstrated that foreign aid is a special form of global public goods, seen through the lens of social exchange theory. No public good is absolutely free of charge, including the seemingly most altruistic foreign aid, which is a combination of two opposite aspects, namely altruism and self-interest. The altruistic aspect attracts countries to consume the public goods (i.e., by accepting aid projects), while the self-interested aspect helps goods-providers to recover their costs and secure profits. Both donor country and recipient country are aware that a repayment for consumption will come sooner or later. But unlike other public goods, altruism and self-interest become more interdependent with each other in the case of foreign aid, which in practice encourage donors and recipient countries to manage their relationship from a long-term relational viewpoint.

Liu adds that implementing an aid project with better performance in the economic development of a recipient country helps the donor country to consolidate mutual confidence and improve the purchasing power and the business environment of recipient country. The repayment comes in the form of a larger market share in the recipient country. Funding aid projects as a gift to developing countries is also a gesture of goodwill, in exchange for the recipient country's friendship and public support in international affairs. As for security cooperation, strategic patience is more necessary because the repayment usually comes over a longer period of time. Foreign aid, through reciprocity, continues to exist as a social bond which relationally unites donor country and recipient country after the transaction is completed²³. The donor country is obviously conscious of the repayment, to the extent of regarding it as a potential profit derived from delivering aid²⁴. It is this expectation for reciprocity that consolidates the relationship in the after-aid period and encourages the two nations to enter another round of cooperation.

Thus far, there must be a certain amount of skepticism about the more generalized definition of foreign aid this article proposes. People will possibly have two doubts. Firstly, reciprocity and moral deficit cannot be tested. Therefore, the definition cannot be proven to be either true or false. Secondly, will taking reciprocity as a

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fundamental element once again confuse foreign aid with international investment? Our answer to the first question is that this article has no intention of offering another operational definition of foreign aid, but we try to redefine it by its nature.

It is not our interest to fabricate a new “ruler” with a special unit of measurement for people to quantify aid, but a “prism” that reflects and differentiates for us the various aspects of foreign aid. In relation to the second question, we note that foreign investment differs from foreign aid because, in the first case, the investor country has a very clear idea of what it expects to gain from the transaction. The profit is guaranteed by the contract and by laws.

But a donor country doesn't know when and how the reciprocation will occur because the recipient country only bears a moral imperative, instead of one in a legal sense. As Mauss and Maudsley indicate, foreign aid "must be conducted as voluntary and disinterested"²⁵. To sum up, donor countries agree to give aid not just for altruistic reasons, but anticipate repayment from the recipient country, even though the return may come indirectly and not immediately. In the recipient country's point of view, it gains more than financial support, but also a psychological experience with the donor, which may in turn result in more cooperative opportunities with the donor country. When a resource transference between two countries is not unidirectional but a reciprocal exchange, not purely for economic benefits but aimed at creating opportunities for future cooperation, without a guarantee of profit but with an unspecified expectation of reciprocity, we argue that this resource transference can be named foreign aid. It is also the adoption of this relational perspective towards foreign aid that paves the way for us to rediscover "aid-like" elements in the ancient tribute system.

TRIBUTE AND AID: TWO SIDES OF A COIN

According to the white paper on China's foreign aid issued by the State Council in 2011, Beijing began to provide development and technical assistance to other countries in the 1950s²⁶. This is an assertion on which the academic circle has reached a consensus²⁷. However, we must note that the term "China's foreign aid" used here, in fact, refers specifically to the aid provided by the People's Republic of China. For a country with a long history of upholding a Sino-centric regional system, the 1950s is certainly not the date of the origin of its foreign aid. However, ancient China's assistance to other countries remains a relatively unexplored issue in Chinese foreign aid studies. The reason for this blank space has two causes. First, China itself did not recognize providing resources to another nation as foreign aid; consequently, there was no specific institution or norms for foreign aid prepared for its management. Even records about "aid-like" behavior were relatively rare and integrated in the records of Chinese emperors receiving and sending back envoys. This has significantly increased the difficulty for researchers to notice "aid-like" behavior. The second is associated with the nature of the international context in which China's intercourse with other countries took place.

The regional order in East Asia before the eruption of Opium war in 1839 was sustained by the Sino-centric tribute system. Unlike today's world order where countries see themselves as being in an equal position with other countries, the tribute system was

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characterized by a profound asymmetry between China and other countries. China, at a superior level, dominated the entire mechanism and received tributes from so-called vassal countries²⁸, while such countries were ranked differently in the system depending on their relational intimacy with China²⁹. The fundamental hierarchical nature of the system basically neglects the idea of all kinds of intercourse between China and other countries being voluntary and disinterested. It is this idea of the tribute system being oppressive and exploitative that hinders researchers from finding parallels to “foreign aid” in the history of East Asia.

Whether the tribute system was exploitative or reciprocal is the first puzzle we must examine. To this question, Fairbank³⁰ answered that the tribute system was explicitly hierarchical, but implicitly a trade mechanism, bringing economic benefits for the vassal countries. By giving tribute and observing rituals, the vassal country showed respect for China’s superiority and acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the Chinese emperor as the Son of Heaven. In turn, the Chinese emperor bestowed investiture in the form of an official seal or imperial edict, as a signal that the vassal country was permitted to enjoy prosperity and security under China’s protection. Therefore, Fairbank concluded that vassal countries accepted the tribute system as a “cloak for trade”. By performing tribute rituals, they were permitted to trade goods, and acquire products otherwise unavailable to them, in China.

For realists, the tribute system served China’s regional hegemony. For example, Taylor³¹ and Wills³², suggest that vassal countries were reluctantly involved in the tribute system out of fear of Chinese military hegemony. They accepted the humiliating tribute rituals, like the kowtow since they were not powerful enough to protect themselves from China’s military invasion. Their proof was that whenever there was a change of dynasty, or China’s military hegemony was challenged by an external power, vassal countries would quickly suspend their tribute relations with Beijing. As we have seen, Pax Sinica quickly crumbled after western countries pushed their way into East Asia with advanced weaponry in the 19th century.

However, both the functionalist and realist interpretations are incomplete since they are applying ideas based on western (mostly European) socio-economic experiences to explain the East Asian reality. In Western stereotypes, tribute was a policy tool for governments to collect resources from the societies under their control. After studying tributary relations in Mongolia, Athens and England, Tarschys³³ defined tribute as “levies exacted at irregular intervals [...] common in primitive and belligerent states”. In transfers of this kind, there is normally a combination of two opposite elements, “On the one hand an expression of friendship, devotion and submission, and on the other, a sense of fear and insecurity”. Of the two opposite elements, the repressive machinery was the fundamental impulse for vassal countries to provide tribute. There may have been voluntary gifts conveyed in the hope of obtaining favors from the recipient country, but submission was the defining feature of tribute. Previous accounts of the Chinese

tribute system were more or less affected by this perspective from the western hemisphere. It was regarded as unidirectional giving — but in a different direction to that of foreign aid — being from vassal countries to China.

Post-modernists, like Hevia³⁴ and Kelly³⁵, critiqued academic works that took the tribute system as a concept a priori without detailed examination of its content. This article is also opposed to the view that the tribute system was uniquely oppressive and exploitative. On the one hand, power relations in East Asia were distinct from those in the west. The relationship between European nations after the Westphalian Peace was marked by a universal recognition of equality and the absence of a superior authority. As Krasner observed, “every international system or society has a set of rules or norms that define actors and appropriate behavior”³⁶. There being no country with an absolute advantage in material resources and military strength, the behavioral logic of each country was to extract all accessible resources in order to defend itself from potential attacks. The European continent, as a result, witnessed balance-of-power politics and incessant armed conflicts among its states. In East Asia, however, the influence of anarchy was diminished as China assumed the role of authority in the region. China was to a high degree self-sustaining, and consequently felt no need to expand its territory by incorporating neighboring countries that had fewer natural resources than itself. It was the regional hegemonic power but, in practice, China “did not seek to translate its dominant position into a systemwide empire by force of arms”³⁷. The tribute system effectively safeguarded peace in East Asia. According to David Kang, between 1368 and 1841, there were only two wars of conquest between China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam³⁸. China did not dispatch troops to force a country to present tribute to the court. Japan, for example, was regarded as a notoriously stubborn country that did not present tribute routinely, sometimes suspended dispatching envoys to China for decades, and even attempted to disrupt the tribute system by invading Korea. But even toward this recalcitrant country China did not resort to the threat of force to compel it to participate in the system. Other vassal countries, similarly to Japan, enjoyed substantial latitude in their behavior.

On the other hand, no tributary voyage returned home empty-handed, even though China had no obligation to provide return gifts. If submission was the defining feature of the western tribute relationship, the Chinese tribute system was characterized by reciprocity. The Ming Dynasty stipulated that “whenever there comes a tribute envoy, the envoy should be properly taken care of; whenever a tribute envoy brings goods to sell, their goods should be bought at a double price”³⁹. Besides, presenting tribute to the court brought more profits to the tributary countries than to China, even if we only count the value of imperial gifts bestowed by the Chinese emperor. Korea sent falcons and white cranes three times in one year to congratulate the Chinese emperor on ascending to the throne, but their gift was rejected on the last occasion because the Chinese court understood that their Korean counterparts only wanted to obtain generous rewards⁴⁰. Not only the Koreans but even the Japanese realized that giving tribute to

China was profitable. In 1532, two Japanese tributary envoys from different provinces arrived at the port of Ningbo at the same time. They argued with each other about who was the real tributary envoy, and the argument ultimately escalated into an armed clash. This history vividly illustrates that vassal countries sought participation in the tribute system. In his analysis of the costs incurred by the Ming Dynasty in sustaining the tribute system, David Kang argues that China spent more than 25 million taels of silver in receiving tributary envoys, a sum equivalent to seven years of the national income⁴¹.

A number of scholars have explored the role of tribute system in providing public goods. For example, Gao Cheng⁴² and Shang Huipeng⁴³ have argued that China was the leading force in ancient East Asia and the only country capable of providing public goods for the entire region. The Chinese writing system, Confucianism, laws, religion, and production techniques were all transported to vassal countries by their tributary voyages back from China. Apart from cultural public goods, China also undertook the responsibility for safeguarding regional order. Ming and Qing dynasty emperors sent armies to keep the tributary sea routes and land roads safe and unimpeded, helped Vietnam and Korea to suppress revolts and resist invasion, and even set up norms and institutions for marine salvage⁴⁴.

Fairbank also noted that the tribute system was a net loss for China. But since his research was concerned with the use of tribute rituals, he did not pay attention to the significance of reciprocity⁴⁵. We should remember that China, as the only superpower in the hierarchical system, could exempt itself from the obligation of returning gifts.

WE SHOULD REMEMBER THAT CHINA, AS THE ONLY SUPERPOWER IN THE HIERARCHICAL SYSTEM, COULD EXEMPT ITSELF FROM THE OBLIGATION OF RETURNING GIFTS. ADHERING TO THE PRINCIPLE OF STRICT RECIPROCITY IN MANAGING ITS TRIBUTE RELATIONS WAS NOT IN LINE WITH CHINA'S NATIONAL INTERESTS.

Adhering to the principle of strict reciprocity in managing its tribute relations was not in line with China's national interests. Even when providing assistance to vassal countries, China still insisted on the principle of reciprocity, as it does today when offering foreign aid. One example occurred when the king of Korea wrote a letter asking for help to the emperor of the Qing dynasty after a severe famine affected his kingdom

in 1696. In his reply to the Korean king, the Chinese emperor expressed his sympathy with emotional words, writing that he considered the sufferings of the Korean people as his too⁴⁶. He also ordered that thirty thousand dan⁴⁷, of rice be transported to Korea, of which ten thousand were a gift, and that the remaining twenty thousand were to be sold at the market price. People will immediately perceive that the ten thousand dan of rice were very close to what we consider today as humanitarian aid, but the most interesting part of this history is that the remaining twenty thousand dan of rice were sold at the market price. The profit from selling the rice, in fact, can be regarded as Korea returning the favor to China. This indeed looks very similar to the way China provides foreign aid today, often in the form of a mixture of assistance and trade.

Adherence to reciprocity is a result of the relational thinking rooted in Chinese culture. Zhai Xuewei⁴⁸ has analyzed how reciprocity works in Chinese society. He argues that the psychological experience is more valuable than the exchanged resource itself because maintaining a relationship means potential chances of profits for both the giver and the receiver. The “residual value” and the “sense of deficit” constitute the driving force towards more material and relational interchange. Rewarding the giver with resources of the same value does not advance their relationship. On the contrary, countries will make sure the deficit is not exactly paid so as to create a firmly knotted emotional bond between them. This is why we saw, in the tribute system, that no matter how small the vassal country was, its envoys always presented a specially prepared gift to the court, and the Chinese emperor returned the favor with a gift of much larger value. It is also the embedded reason that China stridently advocates mutual benefits, even when lending a helping hand to other developing countries.

There was also a direct correlation between the frequency of tribute missions and the country’s position in Chinese relational web of stratified proximity⁴⁹. Vassal countries with a closer relation with China were allowed to present tribute to the court with higher frequency. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, Korea and the Ryukyu kingdom sent envoys to China rather frequently, usually once a year, or once every two years. But for countries like Siam and Holland, the regulation was that tribute submission was allowed once every three years, and even as infrequently as once every eight years⁵⁰.

However, this does not mean that China’s return gift to countries with which it had a closer relationship was of greater value. Instead, the reward could be of more long-term strategic importance than any immediate economic benefit. In 1369, a group of Korean envoys came to the Ming court for an audience. The Chinese emperor asked: Has your King regulated customs? Has he constructed city walls? Has he produced armaments? Has he constructed residences? The envoys replied that city walls had not been constructed, that there were weapons but that the imperial guard was not combat-ready, and that although there were residences, there was no place for the king to hold court. The king solely enjoyed the company of Buddhist monks. The Chinese emperor expressed his worry and rewarded the envoys with nothing but books on governance, the Confucian Classics, and ancient Chinese history for the Korean king to study⁵¹. Similarly, China’s foreign aid to a country with which it is not familiar usually commences from small-sized grants. As their relationship deepens, the assistance begins to transit from areas of low politics to areas of high politics, such as technology transference, training courses for government officials, and even military assistance (for example, to Pakistan).

CONCLUSION

This article was inspired by the world-wide concern that exists about China’s expanding influence in developing countries through its foreign aid. Its emergence has set off an intense discussion among researchers on whether Beijing will use aid programs to

accelerate the transition from *Pax Americana* to *Pax Sinica*. However, it is not easy to answer this question because our knowledge about China's foreign aid is limited to the time period after the foundation of the People's Republic of China. In other words, when we refer to "China's foreign aid", we are in fact talking about "foreign aid granted by the People's Republic of China". This article has considered China's aid, and its behavior regarding aid, during the time when East Asian order was dominated by the tribute system.

Before going into the tribute system, we first analyzed why previous researchers did not achieve insights from the use of history. We found the occurrence of a blank space related to the definition of foreign aid, which is conceived in modern terms and with strict standards on the aid's financial component, form, and grant elements. The emphasis on the substantial aspect of foreign aid has caused a problem since the psychological experience that the donor country and the recipient country gain through the implementation of aid programs has been largely neglected and, consequently, this has obscured the relevance of China's aid-like behavior before 1949.

Therefore, we have rethought foreign aid and the tribute system from a relational perspective. In doing so, we found that they are, in essence, a special type of public goods. Resource transference within both the foreign aid and tribute system was not, and is not a unidirectional donation but a reciprocal exchange. China, holding the dominant position, could exempt itself (in the case of tribute system) and the recipient countries (in the case of foreign aid) from the obligation of repayment, but on the contrary, it has insisted on reciprocity, even though the resource that was repaid did not come to the same value as the resource provided. What to reciprocate and how to reciprocate were and are both oriented by a relational thinking. On the one hand, the exchange process consolidates the emotional bond between the giver and the receiver. They both always make sure that there is a residual value after the repayment so that the sense of deficit will drive the counterpart into another round of exchange. On the other hand, China reciprocates to countries of different relational closeness to itself with different gifts. To countries that occupy a central place in the Chinese relational web, rewards are given more frequently. They may not be as valuable as gifts to other countries, but they are, in fact, of strategic importance.

As for the question raised at the very beginning of the article, we must first emphasize that reframing the world order into *Pax Sinica* does not mean the revival of ancient tribute system. Even though the tribute system may not have been as oppressive or exploitative as many people think that it was, its hierarchical form of organization renders it inadequate for a world where equality has been accepted as a general principle. Consequently, our answer to the question is that foreign aid can be a policy tool for China to make and retain allies, but that it does not constitute any direct challenge to the present international system. The relational and reciprocal nature of Chinese foreign aid determines that it scarcely brings any immediate and predictable benefits

to Beijing. Establishing a solid relationship with a single recipient country is only possible after many rounds of reciprocal exchange. In other words, it is not a rational choice for a country to attempt to build a new world order on the basis of the unpredictable moral obligation of favor-returning. ^{RI}

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ENDNOTES

¹ A Portuguese version of this paper was first published in *Relações Internacionais*, No. 71, September 2021

² The U.S. Secretary of State criticized China's aid to African countries as "empty promises and tired platitudes". As a counter-attack to the U.S.'s accusation, China said that "the U.S. has no right to point a finger at China-Africa friendship" and "slandering China-Africa relations won't make the U.S. great again". Such fierce confrontations, which were rarely seen in the past, are becoming the new normality of the bilateral relations between the two powers.

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⁴ See, for example, KITANO, Naohiro; HARADA, Yukinori – «Estimating China's foreign aid 2001-2013». In *Journal of International Development*. Wiley. Vol. 28, No. 7, 2016, pp. 1050-1074. DOI: 10.1002/jid.3081. DONG, Yan; FAN, Cijun. – «The role of China's aid and ODI in the economic

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⁵ Before the establishment of CIDAC in 2018, China's foreign aid was mainly coordinated by the Ministry of Commerce. In 2011 and 2014, the Chinese government released two white papers in which it introduced China's foreign aid policy, financial resources, forms, distributions and management of foreign aid. In Aug. 2021, CIDAC published a new Administrative Measures for Foreign Aid. It not only clarified the goals of China's foreign aid, but also the duties of each department during project implementation. Moreover, it enlarged the forms of aid from five items to eight items.

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28 I am reluctant to use "vassal country" to refer to nations that established tribute relation with China because it discursively fixes these countries at an inferior position. However, this term has been used by many western researchers. And it is a better choice when compared to Fairbanks's choice of "barbarian countries", since the latter contains the notion of being uncivilized. Therefore, we argue for the necessity of creating a more neutral term.

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