
FORUM

Mainland Chinese Historiography in Search of New National and Global Narratives: Analyzing Recent Historiography on the Tributary System of Interstate Relations under the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1912 CE)

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ABSTRACTS

Der vorliegende Artikel ist eine Diskursanalyse der neueren festlandchinesischen Geschichtsschreibung (seit 2000) über das sinozentrische Tributsystem der ostasiatischen zwischenstaatlichen Beziehungen während Chinas Ming- (1368–1644 n. Chr.) und Qing-Dynastie (1644–1912 n. Chr.). Der Artikel konzentriert sich auf verschiedene Stränge des chinesischen Nationalismus im Diskurs, die als „starr“/exklusivistisch, „weich“/kulturell und liberal klassifiziert werden. Der Artikel diskutiert die unterschiedliche Rolle, die diese Stränge des Nationalismus im Diskurs spielen, und die möglichen zukünftigen Einflüsse der Historiographie des Tributsystems auf Chinas sich entwickelnde Selbstwahrnehmung als Nationalstaat sowie als regionaler und globaler Akteur. Der Artikel argumentiert, dass der „weiche“/kulturelle Nationalismus den Diskurs dominiert, wobei viele Autoren Chinas vermeintlich vormoderne Kultur der pazifistischen Großmachtpolitik betonen und implizit oder explizit für den Referenzwert des Themas für Chinas gegenwärtige und zukünftige internationale Beziehungen plädieren.

The present article is a discourse analysis of recent (since 2000) mainland Chinese historiography on the Sinocentric tributary system of East Asian interstate relations during China's Ming (1368–1644 CE) and Qing (1644–1912 CE) dynasties. The article focuses on various strands of

Chinese nationalism in the discourse, classified as “rigid”/exclusionist, “soft”/cultural, and liberal. The article discusses the various roles played by these strands of nationalism in the discourse, and the possible future influences of tributary system historiography on China’s evolving self-perception as a nation-state, as well as a regional and global actor. The article argues that “soft”/cultural nationalism dominates the discourse with many authors emphasizing China’s supposed pre-modern culture of pacifist great power politics, implicitly or explicitly advocating the reference value of the topic for China’s present and future international relations.

1. Introduction

Pre-modern China’s so-called “tributary system” of interstate relations is a term originally coined by U.S. American Sinologist and historian John King Fairbank (1907–1991).¹ The term generally refers to the ritual exchange of tributes and pledges of allegiance presented by non-Chinese rulers in exchange for return gifts and symbolic titles granted by the emperor of the respective dynasty ruling over China’s territory. Tributary exchanges, as already noted by Fairbank, also served as occasions to conduct trade and reach trade agreements. During China’s last two dynasties, the Ming (1368–1644) and the Qing (1644–1912), the regular tributaries of China were located in East, Southeast and Inner/Central Asia, with Korea being the most frequent among them. Occasional tributaries included polities as far as the Middle East, East Africa, and Europe.²

The tributary system was initially framed as a culturally-based Sinocentric “world order” of pre-modern Asia, an extension of China’s domestic social norms based on the significance attached to hierarchy, reciprocity, and rites in Confucianism.³ Since the 1990s, its relevance for regional economic history, namely its interconnection with regional flows of silver, has been emphasized as well.⁴ More recently it has received attention especially as a regional political order of East Asia⁵, based on a shared set of norms of interstate relations with cultural roots in Confucianism. It has been argued by a number of authors that the tributary system facilitated a hierarchical and stable interstate order for most of the Ming and Qing dynasties. According to these authors, this interstate order was

1 J. K. Fairbank/S. Y. Têng, On The Ch’ing Tributary System, in: *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6 (1941) 2, pp. 135–246; J. K. Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, 2nd edition, Cambridge, MA 1968.

2 The number and frequency of Ming-Qing-era tributary missions, based on Chinese official records, is summarized in Fairbank/Têng, *On The Ch’ing Tributary System*, pp. 151–154, 193–197.

3 See Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order*.

4 T. Hamashita, *Kindai Chūgoku no kokusai-teki keiki – Chōkō bōeki shisutemu to kindai Ajia* [The international moment of early modern China – the tribute-trade system and early modern Asia], Tokyo 1990; T. Hamashita, *China, East Asia and the Global Economy*, Abingdon, UK 2008.

5 ‘East Asia’ in the paper will refer to the five Confucian states existing for most of China’s Ming and Qing periods (1368–1912): China, Japan, Korea, Ryukyu (modern Okinawa Prefecture of Japan), and Vietnam, and their successor states today. ‘Eastern Asia’ will be used to refer to the broader geographical space encompassing Southeast and Inner Asia as well.

disrupted by the introduction of Western-originated nationalism and colonialism in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁶

Nevertheless, the conceptualization of a tributary *system* or tributary *order* has also been criticized by certain authors. They argue that tributary exchanges did not constitute the defining element of pre-modern China's foreign relations, which was a mixture of tribute, trade, power politics, and warfare.⁷ US American historian Peter Perdue denies the existence of a tributary system and argues that the recent interest in this concept is simply a tool for propagating the Chinese leadership's "peaceful rise" (officially "peaceful development") narrative. According to Perdue, scholars advocating the idea of a tributary system as a form of peaceful interstate relations turn a blind eye to China's past and present expansionism, especially in the context of the Chinese government's current promotion of its global development strategy known as the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). Other authors argue that the term reproduces a one-sided framing of the regional order shared only among Han Chinese elites, ignoring the perspective of other actors.⁸

Despite doubts and criticism, interest in the topic has been growing worldwide, with the academic discussion of the tributary system clearly becoming a significant part of broader discourses on China's past, present, and future role in the East/Eastern Asian regional order, as well as the global order. As publication data from China's largest scientific database, the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure, *Zhōngguó Zhīwǎng* 中国知网⁹) shows (see figure 1), the Chinese translations of the term „tributary system“ entered the academic discourse in the late 1980s. The number of academic publications discussing the topic went through a significant increase during the 2000s and reached its peak in 2014, in the aftermath of the 2013 inauguration of the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI).

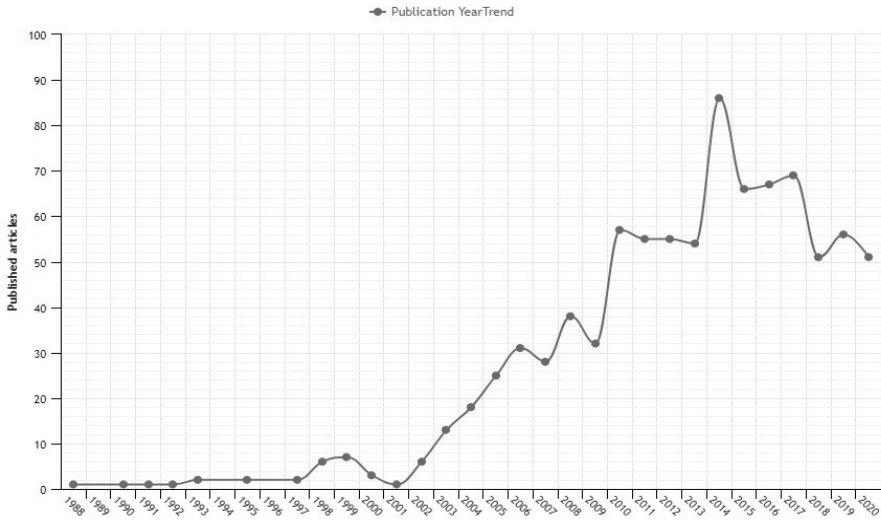
6 See, e.g., D. C. Kang, *East Asia Before the West—Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute*, New York 2012; Li Baojun/Liu Bo, "Chaogong – cefeng" zhixu lunxi [Analysis of the "tributary-feudal" order], in: *Waijiao Pinglun* (2011) 2, pp. 109–121; Yu Changsen, *Shilun chaogong zhidu de yanbian* [On the evolution of the tributary system], in: *Nanyang Wenti Yanjiu* (2000) 1, pp. 55–65e

7 P. C. Perdue, *The Tenacious Tributary System*, in: *Journal of Contemporary China* 24 (2015) 96, pp. 1002–1014; Zhang Feng, *Rethinking the 'Tribute System': Broadening the Conceptual Horizon of Historical East Asian Politics*, in: *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2 (2009) 4, pp. 597–626.

8 Mi Cui, *Gudai Dongnanya guojia dui Zhongguo chaogong yuanyin tansuo* [On the reasons of pre-modern Southeast Asian states' tributary missions to China], in: *Dongnanya Nanya Yanjiu* (2014) 1, pp. 73–78; Zhuang Guotu, *Lüelun chaogong zhidu de xuhuan: Yi gudai Zhongguo yu Dongnanya de chaogong guanxi wei li* [On the illusiveness of the tributary system: The case of tributary relations between pre-modern China and Southeast Asia], in: *Nanyang Wenti Yanjiu* 3 (2005), 1–9.

9 <https://www.cnki.net/> (accessed 11 November 2020).

Figure 1: Number of academic works on the tributary system by year (altogether 835 items)¹⁰



2. Theoretical and Methodological Approach

2.1 Neo-Tianxiaism

The theoretical approach of the paper is based on on-going deliberations of the so-called Neo-Tianxiaism (*Xin Tiānxiàzhǔyì* 新天下主义), incorporating various authors and strands with a focus on the relation between present-day China’s development as a global actor, and pre-modern China’s dominant Tianxia worldview.¹¹ In the historical context, the “Tianxia worldview” (天下观) mostly refers to the Sinocentric Confucian world-making ideology of pre-modern ruling elites, revolving around the centrality of the emperors ruling the territory we call China today. Meanwhile, present-day authors describing themselves as Neo-Tianxiaists emphasize the universalistic aspects of pre-modern Chinese thought and hence criticize the current state-promoted form of nationalism based on the dichotomy of “we” vs. “they” (i.e., of China vs. other nation-states).¹²

While Ban Wang, Zhao Tingyang, and other authors all have normative approaches to Neo-Tianxiaism, the Neo-Tianxiaism of Shanghai-based historian Xu Jilin 许纪霖 (sin-

10 The search was conducted on journal articles, conference papers, and M.A./Ph.D. theses, with the search term “tributary system” (朝贡体系 OR 朝贡制度) in the “topic” field (title, abstract, keywords). Source: <http://new.oversea.cnki.net/index/>, generated on 20 March 2020.

11 The Classical Chinese term *Tiānxià* 天下 literally means “(all) under Heaven”, hence refers to “the entire world”.

12 For a collection of English-language works on the subject see Ban Wang (ed.), *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics*, Durham 2017.

ce 1957) can also be used as an analytical framework. Xu Jilin can be characterized as a liberal public intellectual whose theory of Neo-Tianxiaism openly criticizes the current state-promoted nationalist propaganda on China's rise. Instead, Xu develops a universalist approach to define China's position in the global order.¹³ Xu Jilin's works are unique in Chinese scholarship for his effort to develop a typology of the multiple forms of nationalism which can be observed in China today, for which reason his theory was chosen as the basis of the present paper.

While the authors are well aware of the on-going discussions of Chinese nationalisms among observers from outside China, we explicitly refrain from including these valuable contributions into our typology, as this article is aimed at positioning the discourse on the tributary system within the larger discourse on China's position in the world as to be observed among academics from mainland China.

2.2 Xu Jilin's categorization of Chinese nationalisms

Xu Jilin distinguishes between three major strands of nationalism in present-day China. He identifies one of them as "rigid" (*gāngxìng* 刚性) or exclusionist/anti-foreign (*páiwài* 排外) nationalism. This strand of nationalism is based on genetically-bound framings of Chinese nationhood and a general suspicion of or hostility towards "they" groups. The second form of nationalism is "soft" (*róuxìng* 柔性) or cultural nationalism, based on culturally-bound framings of nationhood and a relative openness towards interaction with the outside world. As a third variety of nationalism, Xu Jilin advocates the idea of Neo-Tianxiaism as an ideal way to define a national and global identity for China in the twenty-first century. Xu refers to the Tianxia-worldview which was advocated by traditional elites in China and which, according to his understanding, needs to be adapted and refined under present-day conditions. He argues that by adopting a Neo-Tianxiaist national identity, China's "civilizational rise" (*wénmíng de juéqǐ* 文明的崛起) can match its ongoing economic rise (*jīngjì de juéqǐ* 经济的崛起), and a future global order based on shared human progress instead.¹⁴

According to Xu Jilin, the "soft" and "rigid" strands of nationalism share an important feature: they both juxtapose of "we" vs. "they" groups (of China vis-à-vis other countries, most frequently the West) and stress the particularity of the historical development instead of prioritizing the idea of a shared global progress of human civilization. As Xu Jilin argues, this sort of nation-based particularism has in fact no tradition in pre-modern Chinese thought. The idea of nation and nationalism was only introduced through Japanese translations of Western works in the second half of the nineteenth century. While he does not debate that China's pre-modern Tianxia-worldview was Sinocentric and

13 See his recent English-language work: Xu Jilin, *Rethinking China's Rise: A Liberal Critique*, Cambridge 2018.

14 Xu Jilin, *Xin-Tianxiazhuyi: Weilai shijie zhong de Zhongguo*, 7 December 2014, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/81012.html> (accessed 21 January 2021); Xu Jilin, *Shenme shi Xin-Tianxiazhuyi?*, 27 April 2015, <https://cul.qq.com/a/20150427/020813.htm> (accessed 21 January 2021).

included the so-called “Sino-‘barbarian’ distinction”¹⁵ he, nevertheless, argues that the universalism of the *Tianxia*-worldview was never constrained by conceptual boundaries of nationality and ethnicity. As evidence to this, he points to the considerable degree of flexibility in ethnic boundaries throughout China’s pre-modern history which did not allow for a strict juxtaposition of “we” vs. “they”. Xu Jilin’s Neo-Tianxiaism can be summarized as a liberal strand of national thought challenging the “we” vs. “they” framings of the global order, as well as stressing the importance of shared human progress to which China should continue contributing and from which China should benefit in the future.¹⁶

2.3 Discourse analytical perspectives and methodology

The methodology of discourse analysis is aimed at understanding the struggle for narrative dominance within a given community of discourse participants.¹⁷ Historiography on the tributary system is regarded here as a case in point, the analysis of which reveals a discursive struggle for dominance over the process of inventing an adequate narrative for China’s new and self-acclaimed role in the global order. By deconstructing the analyzed texts and pointing out their key arguments, discursive strategies, and lines of argumentation, the authors of the paper intend to investigate to which extent the various forms of Chinese nationalism manifest themselves in the discourse. It is expected to see the authors of the analyzed works directly or indirectly struggling amongst themselves and with the prevalent state-promoted form of nationalism. Their contributions are expected to fall into the categories developed by Xu Jilin, however, the authors of the present paper are fully aware of the fact that – as Xu Jilin also notes¹⁸ – categories of nationalism need to be seen as “ideal types” intended to facilitate research while in practice hybrid cases frequently occur.

2.4 Formation of the corpus

The present paper is based on the qualitative discourse analysis of 30 Chinese-language journal articles published in mainland China between 2000 and 2019 on the Ming-Qing-era (1368–1912) tributary system, available in CNKI. The selection of the articles is based on the bibliometric analysis of download and citation frequencies as provided

15 The term Sino-‘barbarian’ distinction (*huá-yí zhī biàn* 华夷之辩) is frequently used in modern Chinese historiography to refer to the persistence of notions of Chinese cultural superiority towards outsiders attested in pre-modern Chinese literary culture, on this see e.g. Li Baojun/Liu Bo, “Chaogong - cefeng”; H. Wang, *China from Empire to Nation-State*, M. G. Hill (trans.), Cambridge, MA 2014, pp. 101–145; Yu Changsen, *Shilun chaogong zhidu*.

16 Xu Jilin, *Shenme shi Xin Tianxia-zhuyi?*

17 S. Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse: Eine Einführung*, 6th edn, Münster 2015; R. Keller, *Diskursforschung: Eine Einführung für SozialwissenschaftlerInnen*, 4th edn, Münster 2011; M. Reisigl and R. Wodak, *The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)*, in: R. Wodak/M. Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, 3rd ed., Los Angeles 2016, pp. 23–61.

18 Xu Jilin, “Shenme shi Xin Tianxia-zhuyi?”

by the CNKI database.¹⁹ In addition, the selection involved several other criteria, one of which was the temporal and spatial diversity of the topics discussed in the articles (Ming vs. Qing dynasties, reference to Korea, Japan, other East Asian states, as well as certain Southeast Asian polities).²⁰ The criterion of temporal diversity with relation to the publication year within the 2000 to 2020 period was included as well. Furthermore, the formation of the corpus was also based on the criterion of disciplinary diversity, for the reason that the discourse brings together experts both from the field of history, as well as political science/international relations theory (including authors with an academic background in both).

Historians focus on analyzing primary sources in order to assess the nature of the Ming and Qing dynasties' tributary interactions. Their contributions to the discourse often include implicit or explicit judgements on the referential value of the tributary system for today's international relations. In contrast, political scientists openly discuss the idea of a Chinese theory of international relations mentioning the tributary system only in passing and reducing it to a historical reference to China's past as a peaceful hegemon in the region. In short, by looking at both discourse communities, the historians' and the political scientists', we can understand implicit arguments in the historiography more clearly and refer to the political implications of the historiography on the tributary system with less speculation about implicit meanings.

3. Nationalisms in Recent Historiography on the Ming-Qing Tributary System

3.1 "Rigid" or exclusionist nationalism

"Rigid" or exclusionist nationalism as a form of argumentation is only marginally represented in the discourse on the tributary system. It can be found mainly in those contributions which discuss present-day political conflicts in the region, such as the South China Sea issue and China's relations with Japan. While there are no instances of explicitly ethnically-based exclusionist lines of argumentation, there are certain arguments which involve one-sided Sinocentric interpretations lacking possible non-Chinese perspectives, and at times implicitly advocating unilateral political or military action. The argumen-

19 As of 18 May 2020, among the 30 articles consulted for the paper, the following seven are among the ten most cited articles in CNKI (search term '朝贡体系OR 朝贡制度'; target: "subject" [title, abstract, keywords] of journal articles, M.A./Ph.D. theses, conference papers; publication period: 2000-01-01 to 2020-05-18): Li Xiao – Li Junjiu (2006) [#1, 354 citations], Qin Yaqing (2006) [#2, 123], Yu Changsen (2000) [#3, 122], Jung Yong-hwa (2006) [#4, 116], Zhuang Guotu (2005a) [#5, 98], Li Yunquan (2006) [#7, 73], Jian Junbo (2009) [#8, 70].

20 The paper discusses the tributary system as an interstate order, primarily focusing on East Asia, and to a lesser extent on the Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic sedentary polities of Southeast Asia. The definition of 'state' in the present paper is primarily based on the characteristics of Ming-Qing-era East Asian/Confucian sedentary polities, most notably characterized by their centralized bureaucracies, see also see Kang, *East Asia Before the West*; D. Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories And Approaches In A Connected World*, Reissue edition, Cambridge, UK 2011. The Chinese discourse on tributary exchanges with Inner Asia (Manchuria, Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang) will not be included, due to the controversy on whether or not state structures existed in these regions populated by primarily nomadic and semi-nomadic ethnicities at the time.

tation developed by authors related to exclusionist nationalism stresses the legitimacy of China's domination of the area once covered by the tributary system.

In her article on the early Ming dynasty's maritime strategy, historian and expert of ideological education Ren Nianwen discusses the early Ming tributary system as an interstate security system dominated by the Ming dynasty, aimed at upholding regional stability and prosperity.²¹ Ren defends the Ming occupation of Vietnam (1407–1427) as a responsible step to maintain regional stability following the violent dethronement of the former Trần dynasty by the Hồ dynasty. The military actions taken during the Zheng He missions (1405–1433) are presented in a similar manner, being described as defensive moves tackling foreign aggression.²² Implicitly referring to the ongoing South China Sea territorial dispute, Ren argues that

*the Ming dynasty accomplished its strategic aims in the South China Sea and even in the Indian Ocean, and as a pre-modern feudal empire played an active and leading role in maintaining international order around the South China Sea, setting an example for present-day Chinese maritime strategy.*²³

Japan is in fact rarely discussed in detail in the articles on the tributary system. This is due to Japan's ambiguous historical attitudes towards the Sinocentric tributary system of the Ming and Qing eras. Academic research shows that Japan was an occasional tributary of Ming China until the Imjin War (1592–1598), with economic gain likely to be the main motivation of Japanese elites to participate in tributary exchanges. During the Meiji period (1868–1912), as Japan's regional influence rose, Japan pressurized Ryukyu (1877) and Korea (1894) to terminate their tributary relations with the Qing court, leading to the dissolution of the East Asian tributary order by the end of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895).²⁴

The discussions of Japan's role in the tributary system revolve around the long-standing Sino-Japanese rivalry for regional dominance and are usually aimed at connecting the subversive attitudes of pre-modern Japanese elites to the country's modern-era imperialism, as well as to recent supposedly expansionist tendencies. These articles use the “we” vs. “they” dichotomy and memories of the struggles against Japan's expansionism to claim legitimacy for China's rise to dominance in the region. Among articles available in CNKI which deal exclusively with Japan's role in the tributary system, political scientist

21 Ren Nianwen, Mingchu Nanhai chaogong zhidu yu fengjian guojia haiyang zhanlüe shulun, in: Taipingyang Xuebao 22 (2014) 8, pp. 94–105.

22 Three military confrontations involving foreign leaders refusing to present tribute to the Ming (on Sumatra and Sri Lanka) are recorded in the main Chinese sources, most notably the *Ming Shilu* 明实录 court chronicles.

23 Ren Nianwen, Mingchu Nanhai chaogong zhidu, p. 94. All translations from Chinese-language sources were made by the authors.

24 Fairbank and Teng, On The Ch'ing Tributary System, pp. 151–154, 193–197; Fu Baichen, Lüelun Riben zai Dongya chaogong tixi zhong de jue-se yu zuoyong, in: Shehui Kexue Zhanxian (2007) 6, pp. 150–55; Kang, East Asia Before the West, pp. 55–81; S. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, Zentrum und Peripherie in China und Ostasien, in: S. Linhart/S. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (eds.), Ostasien 1600–1900, Vienna 2004, pp. 81–98; S. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, Ist Ostasien eine europäische Erfindung? Anmerkungen zu einem Artikel von Wang Hui, in: S. Linhart/S. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, Ostasien im 20. Jahrhundert. Geschichte und Gesellschaft, Vienna 2007, pp. 9–21.

Wu Xinbo's work has the highest number of citations and downloads (43 citations, 2119 downloads, CNKI, 19 October 2020).²⁵ Wu's work revolves around demonstrating that throughout history, Japan's elites continuously held expansionist and subversive attitudes towards China under different "garbs" or "disguises" (*wàiyī* 外衣): under the tributary system, under nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism, or more recently as part of the U.S.-led regional alliance. The bottom line of Wu's argumentation is that Japan did not learn anything from history and its leadership has not adjusted its attitudes as of the early twenty-first century. In a similar vein, political scientist Zheng Hailin compares Japanese prime minister Abe Shinzō's (since 2012) foreign policy to that of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (the shogun leading the Imjin War against Korea and China between 1592 and 1598).²⁶

In summary, the authors writing on Japan's role in the tributary system juxtapose China's role of preserving peace and stability with Japan's aggressive expansionism, neglecting the fact that their arguments relate to different historical periods. They use analogy as the tool by which to make their arguments plausible, a method frequently employed in traditional Chinese historiography. This approach, often related to the Chinese-language phrase *gǔ wéi jīn yòng* 古为今用 ("using the past to serve the present"), intentionally makes the writing of history an instrument of current politics. In this sense, the tributary system is only a reference to make China's claim to be a peaceful great power plausible to the reader. The complexity of Japan's dealing with the tributary system is rarely mentioned and never taken into consideration. As we see from Ren Nianwen's contribution, the conflict-ridden issue of China's claims in the South China Sea also leads historians to implicit political statements. However, in this and similar articles, the past is the focus of attention, the political implications are only mentioned in passing. This is a sign of the professionalization of the different disciplines which has been going on since the late nineteen seventies with history and political science developing divergent modes of analysis, interpretation, and argumentation. Our analysis shows that there is rigid nationalism in the discussion of the tributary system. But it is clearer and more prevalent in political science than in history.

3.2 "Soft" or cultural nationalism

The majority of articles analyzed for this paper can primarily be connected to the strand of nationalism described by Xu Jilin as "soft" or cultural nationalism. Most of these articles are contributions of historians and tend to avoid relating to contemporary issues directly. They typically tend to emphasize the dichotomy between the "we"-group (China, Chinese culture, and the tributary system based on it) and the "they"-group(s) (primarily the West and its colonial order). China under the Ming-Qing tributary order is generally depicted as self-centred, inward-looking, non-expansionist, emphasizing symbolic

25 Wu Xinbo, Riben yu Dongya "chaogong tixi", *Guoji GuanCha* (2003) 6, pp. 60–66.

26 Zheng Hailin, Jiangou "haishang sichou zhi lu" de lishi jingyan yu zhanlue sikao, *Taipingyang Xuebao* 22 (2014) 1, pp. 1–6.

hierarchy instead of political and economic coercion and exploitation. In contrast, the West under the colonial order is described as outward-looking, expansionist, advocating nominal equality but pursuing political control and economic exploitation. As a result, polarization and self-victimization are frequent discursive strategies in these works.

The supposedly inherent pacifism of the tributary system and its role as a facilitator of interstate stability in East and Southeast Asia is frequently mentioned in this context. Compared to the number of concurrent armed conflicts in Europe, it is indeed arguable that interstate stability characterized most of the Ming and Qing eras in East Asia.²⁷ China's armed conflicts with its continental Southeast Asian neighbours were limited to the Qing-Burmese border wars (1765–1769).²⁸ It is also widely acknowledged by scholars inside and outside China that during the large-scale Zheng He maritime missions (1405–1433) which reached as far as East Africa, China achieved maritime military hegemony all over Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, but unlike European colonizing powers in the subsequent centuries, refrained from the armed conquest and economic exploitation of subordinate polities. While the myth of the missions as entirely peaceful and void of political intervention needs to be deconstructed, the Ming dynasty's maritime ambitions apparently did not go beyond the supervision of key trade nodes and networks throughout the Indo-Pacific maritime space, especially of the strategically important Strait of Malacca.²⁹ During the missions, tributary exchanges served as ritualized acts of securing the allegiance of foreign rulers, as well as of declaring the Chinese court's recognition of their legitimacy (for primary sources see esp. the *Ming Shilù* 明实录 court records).

Referring to historical evidence on the limited number of armed conflicts with East and Southeast Asian polities, authors who argue in favour of the inherent pacifism and stability of the tributary system include historian Chen Zhiping, according to whom the “Ming-era tributary system was established with the principal aim of maintaining peaceful co-existence”.³⁰ Political scientists Li Baojun and Liu Bo argue that China's tributary system and the Western colonial order represent two essentially different models of “centre-periphery” power structures, the tributary system being “based on stability and friendship among countries”, while the Western model was aimed at expansion by military force.³¹ Historian He Aiguo describes a clash between the tributary and colonial

27 The Ming Chinese conquest of Vietnam (1407–1428) and the Imjin War (1592–1598, fought between Japan and an alliance of Korea and China) are generally seen as the only examples of East Asian interstate armed conflicts between the foundation of China's Ming dynasty (1368) and the First Opium War of 1839–1842, see Kang, *East Asia Before the West*, pp. 1–16.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

29 More on this in A. Schottenhammer, *China's Rise and Retreat as a Maritime Power*, in: R. J. Antony/A. Schottenhammer, *Beyond the Silk Roads: New Discourses on China's Role in East Asian Maritime History*, Wiesbaden 2018, pp. 189–212; T. Sen, *The Impact of Zheng He's Expeditions on Indian Ocean Interactions*, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 79 (2016) 3, pp. 609–636.

30 Chen Zhiping, *Mingdai “Haishang Sichou zhi Lu” fazhan moshi de lishi fansi*, *Zhongguo Shiyuan* (2019) 1, p. 192; for a similar line of argument regarding the Qing-era tributary system see Shen Chunying, *Lüelun Qingchao chaogong tixi*, *Qiqiha'er Shifan Gaodeng Zhuanke Xuexiao Xuexiao* (2006) 3, pp. 76–77.

31 Li Baojun and Liu Bo, *Chaogong – cefeng*, p. 110.

orders in Southeast Asia, whereby the “friendly neighbourly relations” among Ming China and its tributaries were disrupted by Western encroachment. He Aiguo is also among the few authors openly referring to Marxist historical theory when he juxtaposes China’s foreign policy model based on feudal socio-economic relations with that of the West, belonging to the primitive accumulation phase of capitalism.³² Historian Song Xiaoqin is especially assertive about the supposed pacifism of Confucianism, Chinese culture, and the Chinese nation as a whole, which she sees as the sources of the pacifism and stability of the tributary order. According to Song,

*The Chinese nation is a peace-loving nation which has always advocated the maintenance of good relations with neighbours and the harmonization of relations among all peoples. Chinese rulers developed their relations with neighbouring countries and ethnicities through the tributary system, whose purpose was clearly not conquest and expansion.*³³

Many authors cite passages from pre-modern sources supporting the pacifism narrative. The most frequently quoted pre-modern source is the *Huáng Míng zǔxùn* 皇明祖訓 [Ancestral Injunctions of the August Ming] attributed to the founder of the Ming dynasty, Taizu (r. 1368–1398).³⁴ In certain passages of this text, as well as in certain edicts recorded in the *Míng Tàizǔ Shílu* 明太祖實錄 [Veritable Records of Ming Taizu]³⁵, Taizu warns against invading foreign countries without clear reasons. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of “enjoying the shared fortune of peace and tranquillity” (“共享太平之福”).

Regarding the evaluation of the Ming-Qing tributary system from an economic perspective, many authors argue that it was detrimental to China economically, as excessive return gifts were bestowed in exchange for the tribute of foreign rulers (in Chinese usually described with the phrase *hòu wǎng báo lái* 厚往薄來 [giving generously, receiving little]). The restrictions on foreign trade, including the major “maritime bans” (*bǎijìn* 海禁) of the early to middle Ming and early Qing, are usually discussed together with the tributary system as a proof of the ineffective economic policy of the Ming and Qing dynasties. This is usually embedded into the overall contrasting of the pacifist/symbolic/ineffective tributary system vs. the expansionist/exploitative Western colonial system.³⁶ However, this line of argumentation overlooks a number of research results in the field of economic history questioning the centrality of *hòu wǎng báo lái* to the tributary system.

32 He Aiguo, *Lüelun shiliu-shiqi shiji Zhongguo yu Ouzhou lieqiang guanyu Dongnanya shiwu de chongtu*, Kunming Ligong Daxue Xuebao (She Ke Ban) 1 (2001) 4, pp. 41–42; see also Chen Zhiping, *Mingdai “Haishang Sichou zhi Lu”*, pp. 192–95; Xu Bo, *Dui gudai Dongya chaogong tixi de zaisikao*, *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu* (2017) 3, p. 102.

33 Song Xiaoqin, *Shilun Zhongguo zai Dongya chaogong tixi zhong de diwei he zuoyong*, *Dalian Daxue Xuebao* 38 (2017) 4, p. 10.

34 Chen Zhiping, *Mingdai “Haishang Sichou zhi Lu”*, p. 192; Jian Junbo, *Zhonghua chaogong tixi: guannian jiegou yu gongneng*, *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu* 30 (2009) 1, p. 140; Ren Nianwen, *Mingchu Nanhai chaogong zhidu*, p. 99; Zheng Hailin, *Jiangou “haishang sichou zhi lu”*, p. 2.

35 Chen Zhiping, *Mingdai “Haishang Sichou zhi Lu”*, p. 202.

36 *Ibid.*; He Aiguo, *Lüelun shiliu-shiqi shiji Zhongguo yu Ouzhou*; Ren Nianwen, *Mingchu Nanhai chaogong zhidu*; Song Xiaoqin, *Shilun Zhongguo zai Dongya*; Yu Changsen, *Shilun chaogong zhidu*. demonstrative for today?

Articles criticizing the deficit policy behind the tributary system point to the importance of the so-called ‘tribute trade’ (*cháogòng mào yì* 朝贡贸易).³⁷ They also discuss the role of tributary exchanges as facilitators of reaching agreements on “frontier trade” (*hùshì* 互市) in port cities, in times when no “maritime ban” was in effect.³⁸

Emphasizing the detrimental effect of the tributary system on economic exchange can have two different meanings. On the one hand, authors implicitly argue that one of the reasons Ming China lagged behind when entering the competition with European colonialism was its negligence of economic factors and its overemphasis of symbolic meanings and ritual. They criticize China’s insistence on traditional values which depowered the empire over time. On the other hand, the discussion of the economic implications of the tributary system stresses that China benefitted less than the secondary states and creates an image of pure altruism of the Ming and Qing dynasties. It underlines the difference between China and European colonialism in a way which makes China look positive and altruistic since it was not focused on its own benefits. Both argumentations contribute to creating the image of Chinese pacifism deeply rooted in Chinese culture, implying that as this attitude had persisted over many centuries, it could still be valid today.

The majority of articles which can be related to the “soft” or cultural strand of nationalism thus builds on “we” vs. “they” groupings but remains descriptive, without challenging the established narratives on how the “we” and the “they” is defined. These articles are based on mainstream Eurocentric conceptual frameworks and teleologies, in the sense that their main aim is to show how China and the tributary system differed from the West and its colonial/treaty system. They rarely go beyond self-victimization and the insistence on supposed pacifist characteristics of China’s traditional culture of foreign relations. Thus they implicitly refer to the country’s present-day foreign policy. Meanwhile, a smaller number of authors, while remaining focused on the “we” vs. “they” view of world history and international relations, also intends to use the historical experience of the tributary system in order to create new, Sinocentric conceptual frameworks for the explanation of China’s past, present, and future role in the global order.

With 391 citations and 49,882 downloads recorded in CNKI as of 19 October 2020, the article of economists Li Xiao and Li Junjiu was by far more cited and downloaded than any other article returned for the “tributary system” search term in the “topic” field

37 The so-called “tribute-trade” (i.e. commercial exchanges conducted as part of the tributary exchanges) usually involved a more significant amount of goods than the rather symbolically important exchange of tributes for gifts. They were furthermore usually taxed by the Chinese authorities. Under the early to middle Ming and early Qing “maritime bans”, “tribute-trade” was the main avenue of legal trade between China and the outside world, see He Hongyong, *Ming qianqi Zhongguo yu Dongnanya guojia de chaogong maoyi*, Yunnan Shehui Kexue (2003) 1, pp. 86–90; Kang, *East Asia Before the West*, 107–138; Li Jinming, *Lun Mingchu de haijin yu chaogong maoyi*, Fujian Luntan (Renwen Shehui Kexue Ban) (2006) 7, pp. 73–77.

38 For more on the institution of ‘frontier trade’ in port cities, see Qi Meiqin, *Dui Qingdai chaogong tizhi diwei de zairenshi*, *Zhongguo Bianjiang Shidi Yanjiu*, (2006) 1, pp. 47–55+147; Li Yunqian, *Zailun Qingdai chaogong tizhi*, *Shandong Shifan Daxue Xuebao* (Renwen Shehuikexue Ban) 56 (2011) 5, pp. 93–100.

(see also footnote in 2.4) during the formation of the corpus.³⁹ The article in fact discusses the tributary system only to a minor extent, primarily focusing on the economic, political, and military aspects of the Belt & Road Initiative, including the importance of China's establishment as a twenty-first-century maritime power. In their article Li & Li intend to explain the maritime tributary system as part of a larger narrative of Chinese history based on the strategic thinking of ruling elites, in their presentation a constant conflict between *sàifáng* 塞防 (“fortification defence”, ref. to the defence of continental borders) and *hǎifáng* 海防 (“maritime defence”). Li & Li argue that throughout China's pre-modern history, continental defence was at the core of the ruling elites' strategic thinking, since the threat to their authority posed by northern and western nomads and semi-nomads by far outweighed the threats from the sea. Li & Li present the maritime tributary system as a mostly ceremonial and economically detrimental (*hòu wǎng báo lái*) institution to boost the domestic legitimacy of the ruling elites by gathering symbolic recognitions from foreign rulers of the maritime world. The bottom line of their argumentation is that up until the modern era the construction of maritime power was not at the centre of Chinese strategic thinking, for which reason the country faces a novel challenge in the construction of the “twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Roads” as part of the Belt & Road Initiative. Their article is based on historical analysis and seems to use history as the often-cited “mirror” for political decision-makers to take into account when it comes to defining current policies.

Some political scientists use the example of the Sinocentric pre-modern order in their attempt to define a theory of international relations with “Chinese characteristics” as juxtaposed to the Western system which they regard as self-centred and hegemonistic. In his highly-cited article (126 citations, CNKI, 19 October 2020), political scientist Qin Yaqing 秦亚青 argues that China has experienced an identity crisis throughout the last 150 years, and needs to establish its own theory of international relations drawing inspiration from its own historical experiences.⁴⁰ According to Qin, pre-modern China had no concept of an “international order” in the way it developed through the continuous competition and conflicts among European nation-states. Instead, it had a self-centred and hierarchical understanding of the world order (the Tianxia-order and the tributary system) in which its ideal was to maintain harmony and stability. In his view, the key to promote the emergence of China's identity as a responsible global actor is to combine the positive aspects of the modern Western-originated international order based on equality and sovereignty with the Tianxia-order and its appreciation of harmony, stability, as well as avoidance of hegemonistic foreign policy as practised by the US. Qin advocates the establishment of a “Chinese School” of international relations theory based on China's particular historical experiences (incl. the tributary system), as a counterpart to the We-

39 Li Xiao/Li Junjiu, *Yidai yilu yu Zhongguo diyuwan zhengzhi jingji zhanlüe de chonggou*, *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (2015) 10, pp. 30–59, 156–157.

40 Qin Yaqing, *Guoji guanxi lilun Zhongguo xuepai shengcheng de keneng he biran*, *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (2006) 3, pp. 7–13, at 4.

stern schools of international relations theory rooted in Western historical experiences (e.g. the so-called “English School” of Martin Wight, Hedley Bull, et al.). Qin develops his visions of the future by seeing the Western and Chinese traditions complementing each other and avoid their respective deficiencies by way of bringing their strengths together. In this regard, Qin relies on the “we” vs. “they” dichotomy in order to eventually overcome it.⁴¹

Political scientist and historian Shang Huipeng 尚会鹏 also relates the tributary system to Chinese particularity, but he does not see the possibility of making the two different traditions merge.⁴² Shang explains the tributary system with the help of the anthropological theory of “roles” instead of applying modern Western theories of international relations, based on the notions of national sovereignty non-existent in pre-modern China. He relies primarily on the *chāxù* 差序 [“order based on difference”] theory of Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong 费孝通 (1910–2005) dividing traditional Chinese social relations into the categories of *qīnrén* 亲人 [relatives, close acquaintances], *shúrén* 熟人 [acquaintances], *shēngrén* 生人 [strangers]. According to Shang, the tributary system was based on the self-perception of the ruling dynasties as the centre of a hierarchical world order, and hence as guarantors of stability and financial well-being for “relatives” (i.e. close tributaries like Korea and Vietnam) and to a lesser extent for “acquaintances” (other regular tributaries), as well as on keeping a respectful distance to “strangers” (polities only marginally involved in the tributary system, or not at all). Shang argues that China’s self-perception under the tributary order differed fundamentally from the exploitative nature of Western colonialism. In contrast to the *chāxù* understanding of inter-state-relations, the self-perception of Western powers was formed through constant interstate conflicts which eventually generated the idea of diplomatic equality and national sovereignty.

Political scientist Su Changhe 苏长和 argues that the term “tributary system” and the focus on hierarchy misrepresents the real nature of pre-modern China’s approach to interstate relations.⁴³ According to his understanding, the tributary system was, indeed, primarily based on the symbiosis (*gòngshēng* 共生) of actors with different capabilities. In contrast, the hegemonic foreign policy of the U.S., the universalistic claims of U.S.-promoted “liberalism” including its “Western ‘barbarian’ distinction” (*Xī-yí zhī biàn* 西夷之辨)⁴⁴ do not guarantee a stable future international order. For this reason, Su opines that China should rediscover and promote the “symbiosis” element of its pre-modern culture of foreign relations. Su’s article resembles the rigid nationalist argument in so far as it is based on an antagonistic “we” vs. “they” dichotomy. However, his argument is different

41 For more on the topic incl. on Qin Yaqing’s works see N. Noesselt, *Alternative Weltordnungsmodelle? IB-Diskurse in China*, Wiesbaden 2010.

42 Shang Huipeng, *Lunren yu Tianxia – Jiedu yi chaogong tixi wei hexin de gudai Dongya guoji zhixu*, *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu* 30 (2009) 2, pp. 29–43, 191–192.

43 Su Changhe, *Cong guanxi dao gongsheng – Zhongguo daguo wajiao lilun de wenhua he zhidu chanshi*, *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (2016) 1, pp. 5–25, 156.

44 A reference to pre-modern China’s “Sino-‘barbarian’ distinction”, see footnote in 2.2.

from the advocates of China's claim for dominance in the region as he underlines the shared benefit for all nation-states.

Political scientist and historian Zheng Hailin's 郑海麟 article starts by praising the Belt & Road Initiative (2013) and quoting from its inaugurating speech by President Xi Jinping.⁴⁵ The article is structured by a tripartite comparison looking at China's tributary system under the Yongle-era (1403–1424, incl. six of the seven Zheng He missions), Japanese imperialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and US. foreign policy of the post-WWII period. Zheng contrasts Japan's nineteenth- to twentieth-century foreign policy solely relying on military force with that of Ming China during the Yongle-era and the post-WW II US., both of whose foreign policy strategies, according to Zheng, were based on the attractiveness of their value systems. In the case of Yongle-era China, Zheng points to the Confucian concepts of *rénzhèng* 仁政 [benevolent governance] and *wángdào* 王道 [‘kingly way’/rule by righteousness] as basic governance principles guiding both the internal and foreign politics of the time. These are compared to the current U.S. values of democracy, equality, and human rights. The bottom line of the article is that China should establish and promote an attractive and consistent “system of core values” in international relations based on its positive historical experiences, incl. the early Ming-era tributary system.

While articles belonging to the category of “rigid” nationalism openly use the past to propel the legitimacy of China's present-day territorial claims, the contributions from the category of soft nationalism refrain from propagandistically “using the past to serve the present”. Instead, they applaud the pacifism and altruism of the past as if to indirectly criticize belligerent tendencies. By their style, their choice of arguments and their suggestions for the future, be they implicit or explicit, they keep a distance to those who openly legitimize China's strive for regional hegemony. Nevertheless, as in the case of the articles belonging to the rigid nationalism strand, they rely on dichotomizing China vis-à-vis the “other”. This “other”, in most cases, is the West, in contrast with “rigid” nationalist articles which prefer to focus on China's tributary system vis-à-vis Japan's expansionist traditions of foreign policy.

3.3 Liberal nationalism

The main difference between articles belonging to the categories of either “rigid” or “soft” nationalisms and those which can be classified as liberal nationalist or Neo-Tianxiaist consists of the absence of dichotomization. Neo-Tianxiaist articles refrain from essentialising the difference between China and the “other”, be it China vis-à-vis Japan or China vis-à-vis the West. They focus on the nation-state as the principal unit of world history, but at the same time, their primary concern is a shared progress of all nation-states by drawing on the experiences of various past and present political orders. They often intend to “demythologize” the tributary system, by problematizing the one-sided

45 Zheng Hailin, Jiangou, ‘haishang sichou zhi lu’.

worldview of the primary sources, as well as the selective and biased use of historical sources by present-day authors.

Several authors argue that modern scholarship on the tributary system mostly reproduces a one-sided worldview only existing in the minds of pre-modern Han Chinese elites.⁴⁶ They emphasize that many authors neglect that other states participated in tributary exchanges mostly for economic gains and at times in order to seek political support in their conflicts among each other. The secondary states in the tributary systems are not seen as believers in a Sinocentric world order, but as pragmatically joining and using the system for their respective benefits. Xu Bo and Wang Qing criticize the re-/de-contextualization of primary sources on the tributary system by modern authors who interpret them with the aim to propel the narrative on China's traditions of pacifist foreign policy.⁴⁷ Xu Bo furthermore argues that despite the negative experiences of Western colonialism in China, the referential value of the tributary system "permeated with [the hierarchical worldview of] Confucianism" should not be exaggerated in a world order based on equality among nation-states and national sovereignty.⁴⁸ Li Yunquan and Wang Hui criticize the framing of world history based on the binaries of China vs. the West and the tributary system vs. the colonial/treaty system. As they point out, pre-modern China had an advanced system of treaties parallel to the tributary system which regulated "frontier trade" with its neighbours, including its maritime exchanges with Southeast Asia and the European colonial powers active in the region.⁴⁹

Authors writing within the framework of liberal nationalism are limited in their numbers in comparison to those that can be linked to "soft" or cultural nationalism. They go against the mainstream in so far as they clearly deconstruct the "greatness" of the tributary system. They implicitly reject the narrative on China's glorious past and its allegedly positive impact on peace and stability in Asia, by explicitly pointing at shortcomings, lack of sources, and the tendency of oversimplification in the discourse on the tributary system. This way, they undermine the argumentative strategies of the "rigid" and "soft" nationalists.

4. Conclusion

The mainstream of historical writing belongs to the strain of nationalism which was labelled as "soft" or cultural nationalism and uses the tributary system primarily to construct the cultural "self" and "other". This strain juxtaposes either the altruist China

46 Lü Zhengang, *Mantuoluwo tixi: Gudai Dongnanya de diqu zhixu yanjiu*, Taipingyang Xuebao 25 (2017) 8, pp. 27–39; Mi Cui, *Gudai Dongnanya guojia*; Zhuang Guotu, *Lüelun chaogong zhidu de xuhuan*; Zhuang Guotu, *Lun Zheng He xia Xiyang dui Zhongguo haiwai kaituo shiye de pouhuai - jian lun chaogong zhidu de xujixing*, Xiamen Daxue Xuebao (Zhaxue Shehui Kexue Ban) (2005) 3, pp. 70–77.

47 Xu Bo, *Dui gudai Dongya chaogong tixi*; Wang Qing, *Zhongguo chuantong duiwai guanxi de liang zhong moshi - Liyi renzhi yu tixi jiegou fenxi*, Ph.D. dissertation, Tsinghua University, 2007, pp. 2–24, 96–100.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

49 Li Yunquan, *Zailun Qingdai chaogong tizhi*; Wang, *China from Empire to Nation-State*, p. 129.

with the colonialist West or the pacifism of China with the aggression and subversiveness of Japan. The limited number of texts belonging to the strain of nationalism which was labelled as “rigid” or exclusionist seems to be more explicit about using the past to claim the creation of a new Sinocentric hegemonic order in the present. A similarly small group of articles belongs to the liberal form of nationalism which seems to be the most interested in deconstructing the glorification of the tributary system for its alleged pacifism and altruism. Either explicitly or implicitly, these articles also criticize the state-promoted “peaceful rise” or “peaceful development” narrative based on “we” vs. “they” dichotomies of world history and the present-day global order.

The state narrative of China’s “peaceful rise” constitutes the folio against which all of the above-analysed articles are written. Authors either want to show their support for, alternative ideas about, or criticism of the state narrative and therefore refrain from debating openly with each other. The state narrative which has given momentum to this outpour of articles on the tributary system are the “peaceful rise” and “Belt and Road” narratives in which China suggests a new world order, supposedly not for its own benefit, but for the good of all nations around the world. For the readers in China to be convinced that China’s stretching out to the world at large can be designed in a way that Mao Zedong’s policy of “not seeking hegemony” (*bù chēngbà* 不称霸) will not be forgotten, the tributary system is used as an example of how to develop peaceful relations with other countries. This is also well attested by the publication numbers (see figure 1): prior to publicly announcing China’s “peaceful rise” (2003), the tributary system was hardly mentioned, and it has never received as much scholarly attention as in the follow-up of the inauguration of the Belt & Road Initiative (2013).

The characteristic “soft” or cultural nationalism of the discourse in most works is not only in line with the state-promoted grand narratives but also has an either implicit or explicit didactic function. It is closely connected to China’s self-perception as a (re)emerging regional and global power and to the question of how based on historical experiences China should act as a “responsible great power” in the present and the future. The tributary system is seen by many authors as a Chinese-made and China-centred model for regional stability and hence as having referential value for current policies. The historical experiences of Western colonialism, on the other hand, are juxtaposed to the Chinese experience and sometimes serve as the warning against engaging in hegemonic and economically exploitative foreign policy.

“Rigid” or exclusionist nationalism in the sense of outright xenophobia or militarism is not detectable, which is likely to be related to the normative influence of the Chinese party-state, interested both in generating nationalism to uphold its legitimacy and in keeping nationalist sentiments under control for the sake of securing its economic interests.⁵⁰ The exclusionist form of nationalism, however, is noticeable in cases where territorial disputes enter the discourse, and especially in discussions of Japan’s role in

50 Lü Zhengang, *Mantuoluo tixi: Gudai Dongnanya de diqu zhixu yanjiu*, Taipingyang Xuebao 25 (2017) 8, pp. 27–39; Mi Cui, *Gudai Dongnanya guojia*; Zhuang Guotu, *Lüelun chaogong zhidu de xuhuan*; Zhuang Guotu,

the region. The exclusionist form of nationalism does not criticize or repudiate the state narrative but is more outspoken when it comes to addressing possible conflicts as well as the legitimacy of China's claim for dominance in the region.

The role of liberal nationalism vis-a-vis state-promoted grand narratives and the other strands of nationalism can be characterized as twofold. It is hardly surprising that the Chinese leadership is moving beyond the constraints of nationalism while envisioning China as a future world power. It is in this context that the concept *rénlèi mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ* 人类命运共同体 [“community of (shared) destiny of humankind”] was first propagated during the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012. Thus the state promoted narrative on China's future has created an overlap with liberal nationalism and its belief in a shared progress of all nation-states. For this reason, it can be said that even the liberal nationalist articles are not totally out of line with official state-promoted narratives. While their motivations for this shared vision might be different from those of the state, this similarity is striking.

On the other hand, the present paper also demonstrates that most of the collected articles reveal a certain fixation on thinking in “we” vs. “they” terms and the glorification of China's pacifist traditions in comparison to exploitative or belligerent outsiders also mentioned in state-promoted narratives. It is thus the intention to deconstruct “we” vs. “they” dichotomies and to demythologize the “glorious past” which makes liberal nationalist authors stand out from the mainstream of the discourse. Nevertheless, the articles belonging to the category of liberal nationalism do not differ from those belonging to the other varieties of nationalisms as, from an epistemological point of view, they do not challenge the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis and in this sense do not show any difference from the mainstream articles. Finally, the critical reflection on the constructedness of national identities, borders, etc. prevalent in today's Western academia is apparently non-existent in the analyzed discourse.⁵¹

The analyzed articles indicate that the majority of mainland Chinese historians is increasingly keen on rediscovering the country's past imperial traditions for their present and future relevance. The past is increasingly seen as a resource which can and should be used in order to provide current political strategies with a special blessing. Implicitly, most authors argue on the basis that the present is not altogether different from the past and that continuity of past and present is of positive value. The uncertainty of the future is thus contained by knowing about the past. Much in contrast to Maoist times when the past had to be overcome to build a formidable future, now the bright future is said to be the continuation of a glorious past.

Lun Zheng He xia Xiyang dui Zhongguo haiwai kaituo shiye de pohuai - jian lun chaogong zhidu de xujiaxing, Xiamen Daxue Xuebao (Zhaxue Shehui Kexue Ban) (2005) 3, pp. 70–77; no. 8 (2017)

51 Xu Bo, Dui gudai Dongya chaogong tixi; Wang Qing, Zhongguo chuantong duiwai guanxi de liang zhong moshi – Liji renzhi yu tixi jigou fenxi, Ph.D. dissertation, Tsinghua University, 2007, pp. 2–24, 96–100.