

Etiquette and Order: the Tributary System in the Qing Dynasty

Peng Gao

Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, Gansu, 730070, China

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Abstract: Following the traditions of the Ming Dynasty, the Qing Dynasty built a tributary system to seek its own security and border stability. This system of maintaining the traditional order in East Asia and linking various vassals gradually became normalization during its operation, which established a special agency responsible for the ministry of minority affairs and the Ministry of Rites to manage the northwest vassals and the southeast vassals and their tributary activities. The Qing tributary system had distinctive features, and established clear rights and obligations and hierarchical order between the Central Dynasty and the vassals around the Qing Dynasty. With the decline of power in the late Qing Dynasty, the tributary system gradually disintegrated, but its historical practice still has implications for the present.

1. Introduction

The Qing Dynasty established by the Manchus was the last dynasty of China's feudal society. It established a vast territory by conquering it by force. As a centralized state with many nationalities, which adhered to the traditional Chinese Tianxia worldview, that is, as the central state of the world, all countries that wished to develop relations with it must accept the status of vassals. This kind of interactive relationship between the heavenly kingdom and many vassals maintained by conferring the title and tributary activities is called the tributary system. From the content point of view, it included the pilgrimage to the central dynasty, the tribute to the central dynasty, and the central dynasty's entitlement to the vassals; from the scope, it was an important means for the central dynasty to handle national relations and foreign relations. The theory and practice of the tributary system reflected the Tianxia worldview of traditional China and the regional order of East Asia were centred and dominated by China.

2. Etiquette and Order of the Tributary System in the Qing Dynasty

2.1 Etiquette of the Qing Tributary System

The tributary system in the Qing Dynasty took traditional Confucianism as the core, which embodied the rich colour of etiquette, and had strict etiquette norms. In the tributary system, the vassals were countries that remained independent, but they paid tributary to the Qing Dynasty, and admitted that the emperors of the Qing Dynasty were also their emperors, they also expressed respect and obedience to the Qing Dynasty, and the Qing Dynasty allowed them to trade with them. The etiquette embodied in the tributary system was also relatively complicated.

It was customary that the king of the vassal would send a special envoy to Beijing to ask for conferring the title after the enthronement, and then the Qing Dynasty would send envoys, but only to the three important countries of North Korea, Ryukyu and Annan. For other unimportant seigniors just got the title conferring edicts which were brought by envoys. The feudal king must kneel at least seven times during the title conferring ceremony, that was, one kneel to greet the imperial edict, one kneel to greet the emperor inscription which was set in a float, one kneel to worship the emperor far away, one kneel to receive the imperial gift, one kneel to thank Lord Long, and so on. Before all the ceremonies were over, he had to pay thrice kneeling and nine times bowing to the Qing Dynasty's envoys again, and the envoys also had to return their salutes.

The size, frequency and route of tributary missions were often specified by the Qing Dynasty, and the closer the vassal missions were, the larger the scale and the higher the frequency of

exchanges. North Korea paid tribute four times a year and paid tribute all together at the end of the year; Ryukyu paid tribute twice for every three years; Annan paid tribute once for every two years; Siam paid tribute for every three years; Myanmar and Nanzhang paid tribute for every ten years. Tributary vassal missions were often accompanied by a large number of businessmen, and their goods entered the territory of the Qing Dynasty without customs duties. All expenses of the vassal corps were borne by the Qing Dynasty. After arriving in Beijing, the vassal crops would be boarded at the “Huitong Inn”. On the auspicious day, the tributary envoys would pay tribute and objects to the emperor. From three to five days thereafter, the tributary envoys and merchants would be allowed to open the market to sell goods in their residences, which would bring great benefits. In addition, the Qing emperors usually rewarded the tributary lords and tributary members with considerable gifts. It was by this complex etiquette, the order of the monarchs and their ranks between the Qing Dynasty and the vassals was established.

2.2 The Order of the Tributary System in the Qing Dynasty

The theoretical basis for the establishment and implementation of the tribute system and relationship in the Qing Dynasty was the concept of the Tianxia worldview that was inherited from successive dynasties. The so-called Tianxia worldview concept, that is traditionally believed that the world was composed of Zhu Xia and Barbarians *Jonqdia*. China was Zhu Xia, which was a land of poetry, books, etiquettes and music. When it came to level, Zhu Xia was within the territory, in the centre of azimuth. The Barbarians *Jonqdia* was like bird and beast. When it came to level, Barbarians *Jonqdia* was out of the territory, at the boundary of azimuth. Considering the azimuth and level, Zhu Xia was on centred and was infinitely extended; the Chinese culture of poetry, books, etiquettes and music could also be spread indefinitely. The ancient concept of the Tianxia worldview was also reflected in the assumption and construction of the Jifu system. The so-called Jifu was the pre-Qin period scholars' idea of a subinfeudation relationship between the central government and the locality, also between the emperor and the princes. That was, with Wang Ji that controlled by the emperor as the centre, it extended outwards layer by layer. The closer to Wang Ji, the stronger the political affiliation and the higher the similarity of civilizations; the further away from the Wang Ji, the lower the degree of civilization, and the less the obligation to pay tribute to the emperor, the outermost layer was the remote wild land.

The Qing Dynasty's tributary system was structurally centred on the regional international order which centred on the central dynasty, the radiation relationship centred on the central dynasty, and was also a vertical international relations system in which the central dynasty ruled the world. In this order, the relationship of all the vassals to the central dynasty was the relationship between the ministers and the minors. From a practical point of view, the central dynasty resided at the core of order and dominates the operation of order. If other countries wanted to join this order, they must pay tribute and accept the registration according to the conditions of the central dynasty. The central dynasty was responsible for formulating international systems and code of conduct, namely the tributary system and tributary etiquette, and the tributary states were responsible for complying with and implementing these systems and standards. This kind of hierarchical structure was not the domination and oppression of the periphery by the centre. This order was often conservative and cohesive, although the central dynasty looked forward to “the common masters of the world” and “the kingdom of all nations” and incorporated the surrounding regime into the feud as much as possible. In the system, they rarely used coercion and did not seek to control them. The central dynasty also did not pay attention to its internal affairs and foreign affairs, but it had the right to punish and reward their kings, because their kings must be conferred by the Qing Dynasty. Only through this conferring the kings were legal. The vassal kings also regarded the conferring by the Qing Dynasty as a glory and guarantee to show hostile neighbours that the central dynasty had relied on them. The feuding system in the Qing Dynasty was mainly for defensive purposes, seeking stability, order, and harmony between the central dynasty and the vassals.

3. Characteristics of the Qing Tributary System

Although the tributary system in the Qing Dynasty followed the Ming Dynasty, it had very different characteristics from the Ming Dynasty. The first feature was the purpose of clarifying the defence system of national defence security. It was different from the Ming Dynasty's promotion of the national power and the pursuit of nations. The rulers of the Qing Dynasty hoped to establish its own barriers and block through the tributary relationship with neighbouring countries, the constructed tributary system was actually its own security defence system, and once the tributary system was disintegrated, the border crisis would erupt. The second feature was that the scope of the feudal tributary countries in the Qing Dynasty was limited to the neighbouring areas around the Qing Dynasty. That was, the Qing Dynasty abandoned the idea of playing a high-profile "lord of the world" in the overseas world in the early Ming Dynasty, but more pragmatically in the neighbouring countries. To build its platform for tributary affairs, to establish corresponding links with the regime around the Qing Dynasty, effectively resolved disputes and disputes in the region, and maintained regional stability. The third feature was the Qing Dynasty's two different tributary systems of the Northwest and Southeast vassals governed by ministry of minority affairs and the ministry of rites respectively. Unlike the Ming Dynasty, which had a special ritual department to manage the feudal affairs, the Qing dynasty established the ministry of minority affairs to govern non-Confucianism and nomadic people and implemented the tea-horse trade. It was north-western vassal; the ministry of rites governed Confucian and agricultural governments, which was south-eastern vassal. The fourth feature was that the Qing Dynasty sent missions to the vassals only in regimes using Chinese characters, namely, North Korea, Annan, and Ryukyu. The other vassals only accepted their tribute without sending missions. The fifth characteristic was to attach importance to the feudal trade. Unlike the Ming Dynasty who merely promoted the national prestige without cost, the rulers of the Qing Dynasty attached importance to the trade activities between the capital and the trade along the way. The purpose of promoting material exchange, so that the feudal relationship could be better maintained.

4. Conclusion

The Qing tributary system was an open and comprehensive order. In theory, the world was a world without borders, and the tributary system was also a borderless order. Although its actual area of influence was limited to East Asia, and any regime that recognized the authority of the central dynasty and fulfilled its tribute obligations could be included in the tributary system, which existence was based on the strength and willing of the central dynasty. After 1840, under the attack of Western ships and guns, the Qing Dynasty declined, and the tributary system gradually tended to disintegrate. It was no longer able to maintain the order of honour and orderliness of the "Heavenly Kingdom", and gradually gave up the tribute. Tributary system and etiquette; similarly, the former vassals were gradually included in the colonial scope by the West and Japan, and finally broke away from the tributary system. Although the feudal system had ended, the diplomatic concepts and traditions that emphasizes such as harmonious coexistence, openness and tolerance, and emphasis on justice and profit have provided practical guidance in the current diplomatic practice of relations between China and neighbouring countries. Solving the territorial and maritime disputes with neighbouring countries has brought a wealth of inspiration.

5. Overview of the Qing Tributary System

The so-called tributary system, which was a general term for a series of etiquettes and systems that regulated tribute and conferring title activities, was expressed in the regulations on tributary periods, tribute roads, tribute items, staff size, captivity rewards, etiquette procedures, organizations and management agencies. Since the early Ming Dynasty, a set of hierarchical international orders had been established in East and Southeast Asia, and the Ming Dynasty had a leadership position. The Qing tributary system basically followed the Ming Dynasty, but its enthusiasm for soliciting

foreign tribute was obviously not as good as the Ming Dynasty. With the passage of time, the number of tributary states in the Qing Dynasty gradually decreased. There were still other countries around North Korea, Ryukyu, Annam, Siam, Myanmar and other countries in Southeast Asia and Central Asia that accepted the status of vassals, which constituted the Qing Dynasty as the centre of international relations. In the Qing Dynasty, the emperor conferred the title to domestic and foreign vassals and accepted them as tributes for rewards. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the tributary relationship had been shaped as a highly ceremonial behaviour, and both parties involved clearly assumed specific rights and obligations. The Qing Dynasty was often given the responsibility of maintaining proper order between East and Southeast Asian countries. It recognized the legal status of these kings by sending messengers to the vassal kings to preside over the conferring title ceremony and issuing the emperor's conferring title edict. When these vassals encountered foreign invasions, the Qing Dynasty would provide assistance; when they encountered disasters, the Qing Dynasty would send reassure envoys and imperial edicts. The vassal party should respect the Qing Dynasty as the suzerain by paying tributes on time, requesting conferring the title, and pursuing the calendar. The Qing tributary system was of great significance to the stability of the regional order.

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