

A Study on the Nature of Tributary System and “Shih-ta”:

Essentials of International Politics in “Ch’un-ch’iu Chan-kuo” Period*

조공과 사대: 춘추전국 시대의 국제정치

Choon S. Lee _Professor Emeritus of Chines History, Korea University

이춘식 _고려대학교 명예교수

Down to modern times, China’s educated elites always looked to the Western Chou Dynasty(about 1121-771 B. C.) as the classical age par excellence, an era in which the norms of all higher civilizations were developed and put into effect by the sage rulers who lived early in that period. An integral part of the political order instituted by the sage kings and regents of the early Chou was a combination of devices that permitted that dynasty to control efficiently and for a long time the vast landscape of northern and central China, which they conquered from the Yin-Shang Dynasty late in the second millennium B. C. The ruling devices and methods of the Dynasty on the backbone of the Feng-chien System consisted of the Mandate of Heaven(天命), the Idea of one world “All under Heavens”(天下), a ruler as Son of Heaven(天子), the development of a proto-bureaucracy, strategically placed royal garrisons, and the so-called “Tributary system(朝貢)”, which is the topic under consideration here.

After conquering the Yin-Shang Dynasty, the Chou royal house, having no means to rule its vast possessions centrally, parcelled the conquered territory out to kinsmen, meritorious retainers, and other parties, there by maintaining control

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over all these dependencies. Under the tributary system, all of the Chou-hou made court visit to the King of the Dynasty. In this regard, the tributary system became one of solutions to the problems of controlling numerous holders of dependencies who were enfeoffed into a very big and recently conquered territory. Then it has been said that the tributes of the holders of dependencies to the king of the Western Chou had been regarded as a propriety of retainers to the King of Chou, meaning political submission to the King of Chou.

This tributary system in later times gradually developed into a regular international diplomatic order among the states of East Asia. The system continued in use until the nineteenth century, when it was superseded by the British treaty system, after the defeat of China in the Opium War of 1839-1842.

The tributary system in its later history characterized China's relationships with foreign states or tribal groups, making clear-cut distinctions between superior and inferior, senior and junior, and suzerain and dependent in a geographical and religio-political framework, with China as the suzerain state and every other state attached to it in various degrees of subordination. Until the nineteenth century, the system persisted despite great changes over the centuries in the economies and societies of East Asia.

Many scholars have studied the institutional development, and the political, commercial, cultural aspects of this system. The study of Dr. Ying-shih Yü focuses on the institutional development of the tributary system in the Han period(202 B. C.-220 A. D.), when China was centralized and began to expand its influence abroad. Ise Shintaro has analyzed the tributary system during the T'ang(618-907) as it affected China's relationships with such states as Po-hai, Japan, and Korea. According to his study, the tributaries were linked closely or distantly to the T'ang in accordance with their perceived degree of support for that beacon-light of civilized culture. Dr. T. F. Tsiang stresses the input of the Neo-Confucian philosophy into the tributary system in Sung times(960-1276). His study shows that, in this era, any possibility of international relationships on terms of equality between China and other states was in theory denied by the confucian dogma, which automatically imposed an inferior status upon any state that wished to enter into relations with China. According to the studies of J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. T'eng, the Ch'ing tributary system, which was inherited from the Ming, consisted of two

parts, the Board of Ceremonies and the Li-fan yüan. The Board of Ceremonies controlled tribute-bearers from the east and south including some European countries, while the Li-fan yüan dealt with the tributaries from the north and west. Their study shows in great detail the complexity of the tributary system as it had evolved on the eve of modern times.

As far as tributary system of the classical period is concerned, the studies on the subject are few, and little has been done on the origin and nature of the system in its formative period. As to the origin of the tributary system, it is commonly said that it grew out of the political relationship of the early Chou kings with their feudal lords. Dr. H. G. Creel deals with the Western Chou tributary system as one of the secondary techniques by which the royal house of Chou controlled its feudal lords. Richard L. Walker and Roswell S. Briton regard the tributary system as it worked of interstate intercourse. Neither study, however, investigates closely enough the nature and function of the tributary system during the Ch'un-ch'iu Chan-kuo(春秋戰國) period, or the question of its evolution from the earlier system as practiced in the Western Chou. The lack of such an investigation makes it impossible to understand the real historical foundation of the tributary system of later imperial times. The present work attempts to fill that gap. It essays a study of the origins, nature, function and changes of the tributary system in the Pre-Ch'in period.

I. The City-States and P'ang(邦), Yi(邑), kuo(國) in the Ancient China

At the end of neolithic period, agricultural revolution took place in the area of northern China, the region around the confluence of the three great rivers, Huangho, Fenho, and Weishui, or the joining place of the three provinces Honan, Shansi, and Shensi. Then, Chinese neolithic culture includes the cultivation of millet, rice, and kaoliang, the domestication of pig, sheep, dog, chicken, Hang-t'u structure, pottery with cord-matt-basket designs, pottery tripods, the great development of ceremonial vessels, and so on. The cultural style was that of the Yang-shao.

Resulting from this cultural state, two immediate consequences were the growth of population and the reserved energy of economy released by the agricultural surplus. These then must have caused the transition from the Yang-shao stage to the Lung-shan stage somewhere in the unclear area. Population pressure, among other factors, must have prompted the northern Chinese farmers to spread into the unexplored or under-explored riverine, wooded and hilly regions in the east, built earth mounds on which village sites were located. To the north, agricultural settlements began to appear in the southern fringes of the Jehol mountains, the Liao-Sungari plains, and the southeastern Manchurian uplands. It can be said that the Lung-shanoid were spread over most of China proper, carrying out their farming and urban life style. It is not wrong to say that China proper was dotted with the numerous Lung-shanoid settlements called later P'ang, Yi or Kuo in the end of neolithic or the Pre-Shang times. This fact can be traced on the Chinese literatures too.

When looking into the ancient Chinese texts pertaining to the so-called Three Royal Dynasties, Hsia, Shang, and Chou, we can find the terminology of P'ang(邦), Yi(邑), Kuo(國) or P'ang Kuo(邦國) referring to a town or city. Some of the books indicates that there were about 2,000 P'ang or P'ang Kuo in the Yin-Shang times and about 800 P'ang in the Western Chou times. It is hard to believe that there were so numerous cities as numerous in the Pre-Shang times as mentioned in ancient Chinese texts. However, it can be sure from historical and archaeological sources that there were a large number of cities called P'ang, Yi, or Kuo in China proper.

As for the internal structure and the characteristics of the cities of P'ang, Yi, Kuo, today none of the Pre-Shang cities leaves any significant visible trace above ground. But we could see emerging the foundation ruins of clusters of buildings of various sorts. This cluster of buildings are characterized by the palaces, ancestral halls, ceremonial areas of the royal houses, and so on. The physical feature of the cities are more clearer in the writings of the texts. Looking into the original meaning of the Yi(邑), P'ang(邦), and Kuo(國), Yi was a nuclear settlement, P'ang consisted of farming lands, hunting and grazing rounds and forests with Yi at its center while Kuo was an area surrounded with wall and armed men. Although the original meanings of Yi, P'ang and Kuo were different from each other, they became

interchangeable with long passing of time, meaning a city. According to archaeological remains and historical records, it seems that each of P'ang, Yi, or Kuo was composed of a group of settlement at the center, with farming lands, hunting and grazing grounds, forests, and the land at the very border.

With respect to the internal structure of the city of P'ang, Yi or Kuo, the entire community was under the control of the ruling clans. Beneath them and within each city were skilled craftsmen and farmers, but most were farmers. The ruling clans were united with the consciousness of the same blood, of the common destiny, and of a long clannish tradition. They hold farming land and military power of the cities and exercised their political power over the commoners of the city, while protecting and defending against invasion from outside. They were virtually holders and rulers of the city and its surrounding farming land. In this regard, the city of P'ang, Yi or Kuo was a territorial and independent unit in politics, a self-sufficient community in economy and an armed organization in a military respect. According to the conditions and functions of the city, it can be said that P'ang, Yi or Kuo was city-state, like the Polis in Ancient Greek.

However, the cities of P'ang, Yi or Kuo were basically of military nature. The tall and thick earth wall of the Long-shanoid settlements were discovered at Hou-kang in northern Honan and at Ch'eng-tsu-yai in central Shantung. Many skeletons were found at a site near Han-tan, Hopei with the offensive weapons of arrowheads, daggers, spears, halberds, and clubs. These archaeological discoveries suggest that there were wide spread and frequent wars among the Long-shanoid settlements. It is supposed that the frequency and prevalence of wars might have been caused by the shortage farming land, the lack of necessities for life, internal power struggles, and so on.

By raising wars, a strong tribe demanded material goods from weak tribes as a way of obtaining the necessities by military pressure. Weak tribes had to submit to a strong tribe, paying tribute as a token of submission, while maintaining their own tribal organization and coherence as before. In parallel with this phenomenon, tribal leagues began to form gradually among tribes under the leadership of a strong tribe for their mutual protection and self-defense from the invasions of other tribes or for their mutual cooperation for irrigation works and other economic interests. In the tribal league organization, weak tribes had to pay tributes to the leader

of the tribal league as a sign of recognizing his suzerainty, while maintaining their own tribal organization and coherence. It has been said that this was the origin of tributes.

II. The State Structure of Yin-Shang and Western Chou and P'ang, Yi, Kuo

According to the oracle bones of the Yin-Shang time, the holder of dependency(諸侯) of the Yin-Shang made their court visit to the king of Yin-Shang, paying their tributes of grain, slaves, and tortoise shells. However, as mentioned above, Yin-Shang dynasty consisted of numerous P'ang, Yi or Kuo on the backbone of the league of P'ang, Yi, and Kuo(邦國聯盟), which were independent city-states in terms of politics, economy, and military affairs. Therefore, even though the king of Yin-Shang was the supreme ruler of the kingdom, he held sovereign power only over the Yin tribes and the immediate areas occupied by them without expanding his dependencies of P'ang, Yi or Kuo. The holders of dependencies of the Yin-Shang held their power over their territory and people, while paying tribute to the king of Yin-Shang as a sign of political submission. In this regard, the political relationship between the king of Yin-Shang and the holders of dependencies based on a tributary system was the same in nature as that relationship between a strong tribe and weak tribes in the tribal society or tribal league, for weak tribes also paid tribute to the strong one.

After conquering Yin-Shang Dynasty, and then to rule its vast conquered territory, the Chou royal house established dependencies at strategic points throughout the territory along the banks on both sides of the Yellow River, and from southern Manchuria to the middle and lower valley of the Yang-tzu River. In each of the territories granted from the Chou royal house, the dependencies built local settlements, the walled cities and towns. These cities and towns, which were referred to as P'ang, Yi, or Kuo, consisted of a walled urban area and a surrounding agriculture area. The walled urban area included religious and ceremonial centers, granaries, garrisons, and residencies for the elite. Outside the urban area there were farming lands, hunting and grazing grounds, forests, and the land at the very border.

Each dependency was under control of ruling clans. Ruling clans were united with consciousness of the same blood, of the common destiny, and of a long clannish tradition under the rule of Chu-hou. Beneath them were skilled craftsmen and farmers, but mostly farmers. Ruling clans held the farming lands and military powers and exercised their power over the commoners, while protecting and defending against invasions from outsiders. They were virtually holders and rulers of the city and farming lands around the city.

To control numerous and heterogeneous dependencies, the Chou royal house developed various practical and ideological techniques. These included techniques of enforcing the tributary system, proclaiming the Mandate of Heaven(天命) and a ruler as Son of Heaven(天子), developing of a proto-bureaucracy or the clannish system on the base of the common blood relationship. Among them, the most important one was the tributary system. According to classical texts and bronze inscriptions, the tributary system required each holder of a dependency to pay a court visit(朝貢) to the king of Chou. It was likely that the holders of dependencies were supposed to make court visits in person to the royal house of Chou at certain fixed times. During the court visit, the holders made administrative reports to the king Chou and received instruction from him. Then all holders of dependencies, whether or not kinsmen of the royal house of Chou, expressed their filial duty to the king by offering sacrifice at the Chou royal ancestral temple. In this regard, the court visits of the holders were an expression of their vassalage in the framework of the Feng-chien System.

III. The Tributary System and Its Nature In the Yin-Shang and the Western Chou Times

Even though these controlling devices and techniques played important roles in consolidating and maintaining Chou royal power, they were not aimed at the direct control of internal affairs in each dependency. Each dependency was composed of a group of settlements called P'ang(邦) or Yi(邑) at the center, with farming lands, hunting and grazing grounds, forests, and the land at the borders; Under the rule of the holders and his clans, the community of each dependency consisted

of skilled craftsmen and farmers, but mostly farmers. The holders of dependencies hold farming land and military power of the city, while protecting and defending against any invasion from outside. They were virtually holder and ruler of the city and the farming land around the city, even though they were enfeoffed by the king of Chou in the formative period of Chou kingdom. In this regard, each dependency were an independent city-state in terms of politics, economy, and military affairs, like P'ang, Yi, Kuo in Yin-shang times or Polis in ancient Greece. It can be said that the organization and the characteristics of Chou kingdom in the framework of the Feng-chien system were very similar to those of Yin-Shang which also consisted of numerous independent city-states on the backbone of the league of the cities of P'ang, Yi, or Kuo under the leadership of the king of Yin-Shang. Therefore, the political relation of the holders of dependencies with the king of Yin-Shang whose political connections consisted chiefly of paying tributes. Looking into their structures and characteristics, it can be said that the court visit of the holder of a dependency to the king of Chou was the same in nature as that of the holder of dependency to the king of Yin-Shang. In other words, the structures of the city-states of P'ang, Yi, Kuo in the P'ang-yi society and those of the kingdoms of Yin-Shang and Chou consisted of city-states which were not much different in nature. Accordingly, comparing the practice of tributes of the Western Chou with that of Yin-Shang, it can be found that the same terminology not only persisted in use but also its characters were the same in essence, and the nature and meaning of tribute of the holders to the king of Chou and Yin-Shang were the same as those of tributes of the weak tribes to the strong tribes in P'ang-yi society.

IV. The Formation of International Society and Shih-ta(事大) with Tributes in the Ch'un-ch'iu Chan-kuo Times

After the breakdown of the Feng-chien system, fully independent and sovereign states emerged. They had their own bureaucratic system, practiced diplomatic activities, possessed strong standing army, and contracted treaties among themselves on a basis of equality. In reality, they were new states which were completely different

from the dependencies of the Western Chou, even though they emerged out of the Feng-chien system.

With the gradual increasing interstate activities, there began to appear interstate activities and contacts: the outdoor conference, or hui(會): the friendly mission, or p'ing(聘); and the court visit, the ch'ao(朝). The outdoor conference, or hui, was a pre-arranged meeting of rulers of different states. It was a special face-to-face meeting. The mission, p'ing, was a friendly inquiry sent by the ruler of one state to another. It was a kind of deputized communication among the states. The court visit, paying tributes, involved the visit of one ruler to another. In this case, in contrast to the outdoor conference, the visiting ruler went into the capital of the host state, and the meeting was held in the ancestral temple or the palace of the host ruler. In the ceremony, courtesy was paramount and any discourtesy was taken seriously. The court visit was a supreme expression of friendly relations and good will among the states.

On the other hand, at the beginning of the Ch'un-Ch'iu period, the Chou royal house continued to have some weight with these new states because it continued a ritual center and because it could still exercise some political authority when necessary. There still remained an old rule of propriety and moral value of Western Chou times, stressing coexistence and coprosperity and among the states of the Chu-hsia world(諸夏世界), despite of the breakdown of the Feng-chien system. Therefore, in the Book of the Tso-chuan, the interstate activities and contacts including the outdoor conference, the friendly mission, and the court visit were beatified as the practice for promoting friendly relations and for striving for good will among the states. Therefore, the rulers of the states were bound in their actions by the old rulers of propriety and moral law and value of the Western Chou times, which were stressing coexistence and coprosperity among the states of the Chu-hsia world. The Tso-chuan also stylizes the practice of the friendly mission and the court visit among the states with the terms of hsiao shih ta(小事大) and ta tzu hsiao(大字小), which meant the serving of the great by the small, and the cherishing of the small by the great. The book praised the practice of old rules and moral laws of the Western Chou by the rulers of new states as one of devices and methods for carrying out the realization of the coexistence and coprosperity of the Chu-hsia world.

However, in the process of increasing confrontation and struggle among the states, international relationship gradually became hierarchical, with the relative status of the great powers, secondary powers and small states based on national wealth and military force. In this multi-state system, war was frequent and prevailing among the states with the passing of time. In the law of jungle, the great power began to assume hegemony in the absence of the central power of the Chou royal house. War was the final arbiter of survival. The survival of small states depended upon their ability to find allies or to pick the winning side and join it. State security and protection were the exclusive concerns of the day, and this led to the formation of leagues or alliances of states.

The formation of a league or alliance consisted mostly of the small states lined up behind a leading power for their protection and security. The small states acknowledged the supremacy and followed the commands of the leading power. In return for protection and security, the allied small states were responsible for making certain contributions, paying tribute to the allied leading power. Consequently, the small states were supposed to carry out a mission in every three years and to make court visit in person, paying tribute in every five years at the court of the great power. However, the great power did not practiced tribute of the great power to the small state but sending a mission as a return courtesy for the tribute of the ruler of the small state. From this point of view, the political relationship of the leading power with its smaller allies was clearly one between the superior and inferior, meaning a political submission to the greater power.

However, in this multi-state system, the court visits by the small states to the great one followed a principle of national interests, even though the visit was a ritual expression of political submission, and acceptance of certain political obligations and duties to the great power. The court visit ended whenever the small states' national interests were jeopardized thereby, even though their relationship was remained ritually permanent as one of the superior and the inferior.

V. The Nature of Tributes and Shih-ta in the Pre-Ch'in Period

The tributary system or the court visit paying tribute originated in the society of P'ang-yi. The society of P'ang-yi consisted of numerous cities of P'ang, Yi or Kuo, which were politically autonomous units, self-sufficient in economy, and self-armed units in military aspect. In the prevailing of war among the city-states or tribes, the strong tribes demanded tribute to the small ones by threat of military power. For the survival, the small tribes had to pay tribute to the strong one as a sign of political submission, there by maintaining their own tribal organization, tradition, and coherence under the leadership of their tribal leaders. Then, the frequency and pre-valence of war led to the formation of tribal league or alliance among the tribes or the city-states. In the tribal league or alliance, the weak tribes or the city-states were forced to pay tribute to the strong one. It seems that this was the origin of tributary system in ancient China. Since then, the same terminology of paying tributes or court visit(朝貢) continued in use throughout the time of Yin-Shang, Chou, the Ch'un-Cu'i Chan-kuo period and thereafter. However, the function and nature of the ceremony of the court visit paying tributes in each period were different in nuance.

As mentioned above, Yin-Shang dynasty was based on the league of the cities of P'ang, Yi or Kuo under the leadership of the king of Yin-Shang. The league of the cities of P'ang and Yi, consisted of the cities of P'ang Yi or Kuo. The cities of P'ang, Yi, Kuo or dependencies of Yin-Shang, were politically autonomous units, self-sufficient bodies in economy, and self-militant units in military affairs just like the cities of P'ang, Yi or Kuo in the P'ang-yi society. Therefore, it can be said that, in the framework of the league of P'ang-yi, tributes by the holders of dependencies to the king of Yin-Shang were the same in nature as those of the weak tribes or cities to the strong one in the P'ang-yi society.

Also, in comparison with the ceremony of the tributes during the Western Chou times, it can be said that the ceremony of the tributes continued in the Western Chou times. As indicated above, the Feng-chien system of the Western Chou consisted of numerous dependencies which were mostly established by the royal house of Chou, just like the dependencies of Yin-Shang and the cities of

P'ang, Yi or Kuo in the society of P'ang-yi. To control these numerous dependencies, the king of Chou developed a number of control methods and devices such as the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven(天命), the proto-bureaucratic system, the title of Son of Heaven(天子), and the vision of and world, the T'ien-hsia(天下). Among these control devices and methods, the ceremonial court visit of the holders of the dependencies to the royal house of Chou was the important one. The practice of the court visit by the holders of the dependencies to the royal house of Chou was also an expression of their subordinate place in the framework of the Feng-chien system. In this regard, the ceremonial court visit by the holders of dependencies to the king of Chou was the same in nature as the court visit by the holders of dependencies to the king of Yin-Shang and the tributes by the weak tribes or the cities to the strong one in the P'ang-yi society.

The Ch'un-cu'in period consisted of numerous independent, territorial, and sovereign states loosely associated with each other in a multi-state system. In the multi-state system, the small states practiced the ceremonial court visit to the great power to express their political submission. But their political submission in a ritual relationship of the superior and the inferior was only temporary and contingent upon short-term shifts in the larger interstate power balance. The ceremonial court visit by the small state to the great power ended whenever the small national interests were jeopardized or the power balance of interstate was unfavorable to themselves.

On the other hand, the great powers in the Ch'un-Ch'iu period were satisfied with the practice of the ceremony of court visit paying tributes by the small states. In practice, the practice of the ceremonial court visit was a ceremonial or ritual expression only of their subordinate place to the great power. Then, what were the reasons why the great power had to be satisfied with the ceremonial practice of court visits by the small states without annexing the small states by force. As explained above, the small states were independent, territorial, and sovereign ones based on the consciousness of the same destiny, of the common blood relationship among the ruling clans, and of the strong traditions built on a long period of time. Therefore, when the great power tried to annex a small state, the great power had to face with death-defying resistance from the small one. The small state also made a counterattack whenever it got a chance in taking of advantage of the in-

creasing confrontations and struggles among the states. In this regard, the great power, despite of its great military strength, had a limitation of power to exercise over the small state in international power balance.

In this regard, it can be said that there was a balance of military and political power between the great and the small, even though there was a big difference in military power between the both sides. In this critical point of balance of both military and political power, the great power could not help accepting the court visits by small states acknowledging the hegemony of the great and expressing their subordinate place in the international world. With this price, the small countries could keep their own protection and security, while ensuring their independence.

Conclusions

The tributary system originated from among the P'ang, Yi or Kuo which consisted mostly of politically autonomous units, self-sufficient bodies in economy, and militant units in military affairs in the P'ang-yi society. Then the terminology of tributary system persisted in use throughout the period of Yin-Shang Dynasty, of the Western Chou, and of Ch'un-Ch'iu Chan-kuo period. The function, meaning, and nuance of the tributary system were quite different in each period. The tributary system was one of the means ritually expressing the military subordination of weak tribes or city-states to the strong one in the P'ang-Yi society, the political relationship between the superior and the inferior, between the king of Yin-Shang and the holders of the dependencies within the league or alliance of P'ang-yi (邦國聯盟), and the ceremonial practice of their vassalage to the king of Western Chou in the frame of the Feng-chien system. Even though a tribute or a court visit was an expression of ceremonial relation between the superior and the inferior, between the strong and weak, its essential nature, which was based on the critical point of power balance among the political, economic, and military units, was never changed.