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DEPARTMENT: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY

COURSE: IRD 106 (INTRODUCTION TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY III)

QUESTION: IN NOT MORE THAN 5 PAGES, DISCUSS ANCIENT CHINESE DIPLOMACY.

Summary:

In the diplomacy canon, where the field has been demarcated by a central distinction drawn between suzerain and parity-based state relations, Imperial China has squarely been designated to former category, and thereby as inherently alien to the diplomatic tradition. However, this image of a monolithic 2000-year long rigid, hierarchical system betrays a too shallow assessment of Chinese history, and fails to acknowledge a noteworthy strain of party-based relations running through Imperial Chinese foreign policy. This strain was at its most pronounced during the four centuries of the song Dynasty, where China’s relation with a set of important neighboring states were handled on egalitarian terms that were far more reminiscent of a full-fledged diplomatic multi-state system than what is popularly acknowledged. Based on a case study of the diplomatic relations of the song Dynasty, this article argues that Imperial Chinese foreign policy on set of occasions showed itself to adhere to principles immanent to classical diplomacy, and that these eras thus should naturally, and beneficially, belong to the historical canon of diplomacy.

Keyword:

Foreign relations of the Song Dynasty, diplomatic parity, Imperial China, tianxia, Jin, Liao, Xi Xia, traditional Chinese diplomatic practices

 As the fish come and the birds go, so will be transmitted the sounds of our neighboring states; as the earth is old and Heaven spacious, so long will I subdue disturbance along the border.

Letter from Xia Emperor Weiming Yuanhoo to Song Emperor Renzhong

Introduction:

The hierarchical foreign policy tradition of the Imperial China has often been presented in the academic literature as the conceptual antithesis to the egalitarian system of formal parity that defines diplomacy. This is on many accounts a justifiable approach, as the longevity and ideological consistency of the imperial world order centered on the Chinese emperor makes for a rather unique feature in world history. However, this article takes the view that much 0fthe literature on diplomatic relations has taken on a too-shallow character in its assessment of the diplomatic history of Imperial China. The popular image of a monolithic 2000-years-long traditional recognizing no neighbors, only vassals- a system only abolished when the aggressive entrance of Western powers forced a begrudging China to partake in a parity-based diplomacy of which the country had no earlier acquaintance- misses out significant aspects of Chinese history.

This article sums up some of the main points of the predominant view of Dynastic China’s foreign relations, as well as defining certain relevant core concepts.

Empire without Neighbors?

In the scholarly literature on diplomacy, a defining conceptual pair is that of the imperial suzerain system of sovereign states. While the diplomacy of the modern state system, sprung from its European roots to cover the globe, is held as the pivotal specimen of the latter form of political organization, Imperial China formed a convenient example of the former, hegemonic mode of international relations. The very concept of diplomacy; inter-state communication between formally equal parties- would seem to constitute a perfect contrast to the manner in which Imperial China regulated its relations with the outside world.

In essence, the dominant mode of traditional Chinese thinking of foreign relations was not to acknowledge the existence of any ‘‘outside’’ at all. In what was later termed ‘the Chinese World Order’, the Chinese Emperor was the ruler of tianxia, ‘all under heaven’, his authority acknowledge as much by the civilized core of the Chinese heartland as by the barbarian polities surrounding the heartland’s frontiers. The world was coherent hierarchical whole, with the emperor’s universal kingship symbolized through the rituals of the tribute system, where the less civilized nations would visit the apex of civilization at the emperor’s court to declare their submission, pay tribute and receive imperial blessing and gifts in return.

The proclaimed political ideal of China as ‘an empire without neighbors’ did apparently take firm root among the Western public. As such, while the pre-imperial multi-state system of the warring states period is readily acknowledged as showcasing a rich diplomatic tradition, from the historical atlas of diplomatic tradition, from the moment of China’s unification in 221 BCE, the country disappears from the historical atlas of diplomatic relation. The contrast with the European diplomatic system that was growing forth from the ruins of the Roman Empire would seem glaring, a contrast to be underlined further in the prevalent narrative of China’s re-entrance on the diplomatic stage – forced literally at gunpoint to participate in a system alien to it. Turning to Watson’s account, ‘China first consented to a regular diplomatic dialogue and exchanges of envoys [with other States…] when European powers, with superior military and maritime technology progressively involved her in international politics. Rendered as a true ‘’collision of two civilizations’’ this incompatible encounter between the China of the late Qing Dynasty and the rising powers of the West, which was embodied at its most iconic in the dismissal of the Macartney Mission, is often viewed as symptomatic of a Chinese culture too rooted in a two-thousand-year-old continuous tradition of hegemony to be able to respond rationally and creatively to rapid changing international environment.

In short, the dominant view held in the diplomatic literature of Imperial China’s foreign relations has been of hierarchical suzerain- vassal system that was established in theory and practice two millennia ago, and that has constituted ever since a monolithic ideology dominating China’s relation with the outside world without significant change, until the system was brought violently down in the wake of Western imperialism. This deeply rooted unitary pattern of relations with the outside world was, according to most diplomatic investigations, by its nature too rigid to change, and in being the only mode of foreign relations practices made available by historic experience, crucially inhibited the emperors of the Late Qing in meeting their responses to foreign pressure.

Diplomatic Precedence’s; the foreign relations of the Song Dynasty can hardly be sufficiently understood without acknowledging a border strain of equality-based diplomacy running through Chinese imperial history. As will be illustrated, the scope and degree of institutionalization of a parity-based diplomacy under the Song emperors is certainly a particular trait of that era. However, a rise in the argument that clear precedents of these policies are to be found in earlier Chinese history, and the relations founded on treaties between equally recognized partners are not a singular event in Chinese history, as contended by, for example, Smith. The role played by the periods of Chinese political fragmentation- such as the Five Dynasties’ era preceding the establishment of the Song Dynasty- in establishing a legacy of diplomatic patterns and practices to form a model for Song diplomacy are both acknowledged and relatively obvious. In particular, the multi-state system of the late Zhou period was central in establishing a model for the rites and ceremonies surrounding the reception of embassies at the Song and Liao courts. Of more interest is the fact that a diplomatic strain of parity-based relations also runs through the imperial unity of earlier dynasties. Although certainly regarded as unwanted exceptions to the ideal situations, they nevertheless signify a long history of pragmatic adjustment to the realities of foreign policy that is often forgotten in the focus upon the ideological particularities of the Chinese tribute system.

Already the Han Dynasty practiced a policy of appeasement towards the northern tribal federation of the Xiongnu, through gifts and marital alliances, which was conducted on a basis of equality between the parties. An agreement that was reached in 198 BCE stipulated clearly as one of the items that the Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu were to be equal, “brotherly” states. More significantly, the late Tang Dynasty was an active user of diplomacy on the international scene, evolving stable treaty relationship with foreign powers that were often marked by a sense of equality. A case involving an explicit statement of diplomatic parity between the parties is to be found in the Sino- Tibetan treaty of 821/822 CE. As stated in the text of the treaty, peace was being established by two equal parties, each designating the other as Great Emperor, and the practical outlines for further diplomatic contract were drawn.

1) Patricia B. Ebrey, Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook (New York: The Free Press, 2nd edition, 1993), p, 141

2) See, for example, Hedley Bull, ‘Diplomacy and International Order’, in Christer Jönsson and Richard

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and Adam Watson, The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis (London:

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3) William I. Zartman, ‘Diplomacy’, in Karin Aggestam and Magnus Jerneck (eds.), Diplomacy in Theory

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States (London: Routledge, 1982), p. 19.

3) Keith R. Schoppa, Revolution and Its Past: Identities and Change in Modern Chinese History (Boston

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PWatson, Diplomacy, p. 18.

4) Watson, Diplomacy, p. 19.

5) Alain Peyrefitte, The Collision of Two Civilisations: The British Expedition to China in 1792-1794

(London: Harvill Press, 1993).

6) David Scott, China and the International System, 1840-1949: Power, Presence, and Perceptions in a

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Wang, ‘Changing Chinese Views of Western Relations, 1840-1895’, p. 153olicy (New York: The Free Press, 1984), pp. 23-26; Hao Yen-p’ing and Wang Erh-min, ‘Changing