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Imagining a Universal Empire: a Study of the *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions* Attributed to Li Gonglin

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Abstract

This article is not concerned with the history of aesthetics but, rather, is an exercise in intellectual history. “Illustrations of Tributary States” [*Zhigong tu* 職貢圖] as a type of art reveals a Chinese tradition of artistic representations of foreign emissaries paying tribute at the imperial court. This tradition is usually seen as going back to the “Illustrations of Tributary States,” painted by Emperor Yuan in the Liang dynasty 梁元帝 [r. 552-554] in the first half of the sixth century. This series of paintings not only had a lasting influence on aesthetic history but also gave rise to a highly distinctive intellectual tradition in the development of Chinese thought: images of foreign emissaries were used to convey the Celestial Empire’s sense of pride and self-confidence, with representations of strange customs from foreign countries serving as a foil for the image of China as a radiant universal empire at the center of the world. The tradition of “Illustrations of Tributary States” was still very much alive during the time of the Song dynasty [960-1279], when China had to compete with equally powerful neighboring states, the empire’s territory had been significantly diminished, and the Chinese population had become ethnically more homogeneous. In this article, the “Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions” [*Wanfang zhigong tu* 萬方職貢圖] attributed to Li Gonglin 李公麟 [ca. 1049-1106] and created during the period between the Xining 熙寧 [1068-1077] and Yuanfeng 元豐 [1078-1085] reigns of the Shenzong emperor 神宗 [r. 1067-1085] of the Song dynasty, is used as a case study for investigating the actual tributary relations between the Northern Song [960-1127] state and its neighboring countries. In doing so, I demonstrate that while certain parts of the “Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions” are historically accurate, a considerable portion of the content is the combined product of historical remembrance and the imagination of empire. In the international environment of the Song empire, China was captivated by the dream of being a universal empire envied

by its “barbarian” neighbors. Particularly worth emphasizing is the fact that the artistic tradition of painting “Illustrations of Tributary States” as well as the accompanying idea of China as a universal empire continued well into the Qing [1644-1911] period, reflecting the historical longevity and lasting influence of the traditional conception of the relationship between China and the world.

Keywords

Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions – Li Gonglin – tribute system – universal empire

1 Introduction: the International Environment, Historical Memory, and Self-Image of the Song Dynasty

The period from the An Lushan Rebellion 安史之亂 [755] in the mid-eighth century to the Chanyuan treaty 澶淵之盟 [1005] between the Northern Song [960-1127] and Liao [907-1125] dynasties at the beginning of the eleventh century stretches over 250 years. After a phase of chaos and division, China became a relatively stable and unified empire again.

However, compared to the Tang dynasty [618-907], which had reached its peak two and a half centuries earlier, the renewed unity of the Song empire [960-1279] was accompanied by far-reaching changes. First, the Chinese territory was reduced to less than half its previous size. Second, little by little, the empire became ethnically and culturally more homogeneous. Lastly, its unique political system also showed growing signs of uniformity. Of particular importance here is the fact that the problem of the relationship between the northern barbarians [*hu* 胡] and Chinese [*han* 漢] within the boundaries of the Tang empire gradually changed into that of the relationship between the China [*hua* 華] of the Song state, on the one hand, and the eastern barbarians [*yi* 夷] outside its borders, on the other.¹ Surrounded by powerful neighbors, such as the Khitan [*Qidan* 契丹] in the north (as well as the Jurchen [*Nüzhen* 女真] and Mongols [*Menggu* 蒙古] who rose to power later), the Korean kingdom [*Gaoli* 高麗] in the east, the Tangut [*Dangxiang* 黨項] (later the Western Xia 西夏) in the west, the Tibetan kingdom [*Tubo* 吐蕃] and Dali 大理 in the southwest, and Annam [*Annan* 安南] in the south, the Song territory shrank

1 Deng Xiaonan 鄧小南, *Zuzong zhi fa: Beisong qianqi zhengzhi shulüe* 祖宗之法: 北宋前期政治述略 [*Ancestral Regulations: Outline of the Politics of the Early Northern Song Dynasty*] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2006), 81.

considerably, to the point that some lamented that “outside this little lodging of ours, there are only other people’s homes.”² Over time, the Song dynasty turned into just one of many countries within an international constellation. The kind of boundless empire of the Han [202 BCE–220] and Tang periods had already become a distant memory.³

That being said, the historical memory of the “universal empire” [*tianxia diguo* 天下帝國] of the Han and Tang had a deep impact during the Song period. Within the shrinking boundaries of the empire, this historical memory slowly turned into an imaginary space, into the dream of an empire that could still encapsulate the entire world within a limited territory. During this period, the task of filling the space of such an “imaginary universal empire” fell to the tradition of the “Illustrations of Tributary States [*Zhigong tu* 職貢圖],” images in which emissaries of foreign states are depicted paying tribute at the imperial court. Let us begin by taking a closer look at this tradition.

2 The Long Tradition of “Illustrations of Tributary States” That Dates Back to Emperor Yuan in the Liang Dynasty

According to the famous saying “the greatest affairs of the state consist in offering sacrifices and conducting warfare,”⁴ meaning that in ancient China, sacrifices and war were seen as the most important responsibilities of the state. These “sacrifices” often came in the form of ritual ceremonies. In ancient China, rulers attached particular importance to the following three types of rituals: commemorative days, inspecting the troops, and receiving their vassals. According to the records contained in ancient canonical texts, in each of the four seasons, the son of heaven [*tianzi* 天子] received his vassals to bring him tribute, a procedure called *chao* 朝 in springtime, *zong* 宗 in summer, *jin* 覲 in autumn, and *yu* 遇 in winter.⁵ In more general terms, the act of paying tribute was referred to as presenting oneself at the court [*chaojin* 朝覲]. The surrounding states went to pay homage to the Chinese ruler according to a specific

2 Shao Bowen 邵伯溫, *Shaoshi wenjian lu* 邵氏聞見錄 [*Record of Shao Bowen's Observations*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 4.

3 Tao Jinsheng 陶晉生, *Song Liao guanxi shi yanjiu* 宋遼關係史研究 [*An Investigation into the Relations between the Song and Liao Dynasties*] (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshiye gongsi, 1983), 5–10.

4 Ruan Yuan 阮元, ed., *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義 [*Proper Annotation on the Zuo Commentary*], in *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏 [*Commentary and Annotation on the Thirteen Classics*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 1911.

5 Ruan Yuan 阮元, ed., *Zhouli* 周禮 [Rites of Zhou], in *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏 [*Commentary and Annotation on the Thirteen Classics*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 758.

system of ritual and ceremonial regulations and offer various kinds of produce and gifts from their countries, with the latter called “tribute” [*chaogong* 朝貢].

Some now believe that an ancient tribute system with China at its center, that is, an international order grounded in a Chinese system of rituals, had already been established by the time of the Qin [221-207 BCE] and Han periods. The Chinese historical records have many traces of the tradition of neighboring countries going to the imperial court to pay tribute to the emperor. In this respect, three classical texts are of crucial importance, namely the chapter “Tribute of Yu [*Yugong* 禹貢]” in the *Book of Documents* [*Shangshu* 尚書], the chapter on the “King’s Meetings [*Wanghui pian* 王會篇]” in the *Remaining Documents of Zhou* [*Yi Zhoushu* 逸周書], and the first part of the chapter “Discourses of Zhou [*Zhouyu* 周語]” in the *Discourses of the States* [*Guoyu* 國語]. Although these texts are a mixture of legend and fiction, they give us a sense of how relations between states were perceived in ancient China. Moreover, they also attest to the fact that the ancient Chinese saw themselves as occupying the center of “all under heaven” [*tianxia* 天下] and looked down on their neighboring countries. According to this understanding, inhabitants from the farthest corners of the world went to pay tribute at the imperial court because they were in awe of China.⁶

Only a handful of written documents concerning the ancient tributary system have survived. Although very few pictorial representations of the early stages of this system have been preserved, the earliest example, the “Illustrations of Tributary States,” dates back to the time of Xiao Yi 蕭繹 [508-555], who would later become emperor Yuan of the Liang dynasty 梁元帝 [r. 552-554]. Needless to say, the original edition of the “Illustrations of Tributary States” no longer exists.⁷ What we currently have are three later copies, the

6 For a detailed discussion of the tributary system, see Li Yunquan 李雲泉, *Chaogong zhidu shi lun: Zhongguo gudai duiwai guanxi tizhi yanjiu* 朝貢制度史論:中國古代對外關係體制研究 [*A Historical Study of the Tribute System: on Ancient Chinese Foreign Policy*] (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 2004). For a concise introduction, see Hamashita Takeshi 濱下武志, “Chaogong de gainian he xingtai 朝貢的概念和形態 [Concepts and Features of the Tributary System],” in *Jindai Zhongguo de guoji qiji* 近代中國的國際契機 [*The International Turning Point for Modern China*], trans. Zhu Yingui 朱蔭貴 et al. (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1999), 33-37.

7 When it comes to studies of the *Illustrations of Tributary States*, the pioneering efforts of the Chinese scholar Jin Weinuo 金維諾 and the Japanese scholar Kazuo Enoki 榎一雄 are particularly worth mentioning. See Jin Weinuo 金維諾, “Zhigong tu de shidai yu zuozhe 職貢圖的時代與作者 [The Dating and Authorship of the *Illustrations of Tributary States*],” *Wenwu* 文物, no. 7 (1960); Kazuo Enoki 榎一雄, “Ryō shokukō zu no kigen 職貢圖の起源 [The Origin of the *Illustrations of Tributary States*],” “Ryō shokukō zu ni tsuite 梁職貢圖について [On the Liang Dynasty *Illustrations of Tributary States*],” “Ryō shokukō zu no ryūden ni tsuite 梁職貢圖の流傳について [On the Influence of the Liang Dynasty *Illustrations*

most famous of which is traditionally seen as a product of the Northern Song period. This copy was originally stored at the Nanjing Museum but has since been moved to the National Museum of China in Beijing. The copy in question contains a total of twelve portraits of emissaries from different countries, with thirteen paragraphs of explanatory text. This edition is the one with which most people are familiar and is usually considered closest to the original version from the time of emperor Yuan of the Liang dynasty.

Let us start by considering the content of the “Illustrations of Tributary States”. The thirteen surviving paragraphs of text describe the following thirteen different countries: Hua 滑 (the Jushi 車師 Kingdom in present-day Xinjiang), Bosi 波斯 (Persia, present-day Iran), Baiji 百濟 (Baekje, the Korean Peninsula), Qiuci 龜茲 (Kuche 庫車 in present-day Xinjiang), Wo 倭 (Kyushu island in contemporary Japan), Dangchang 宕昌 (southern Gansu), Langyaxiu 狼牙修 (Langkasuka, west coast of the Malay Peninsula), Dengzhi 鄧至 (southern Gansu and northern Sichuan), Zhouguke 周古柯 (in present-day Xinjiang), Hebatan 呵拔檀 (in present-day Tajikistan), Humidan 胡蜜丹 (supposedly located in the border region between Afghanistan and Tajikistan), Baiti 白題 (in contemporary Afghanistan, bordering Persia), and Mo 末 (present-day Turkmenistan).

On the basis of the preface by emperor Yuan of the Liang dynasty in the *Collection of Literature Arranged by Category* [*Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚], we know that the Illustrations date from the time when the future emperor Xiao Yi served as commanding official in Jingzhou 荊州 (present-day Hubei) between 526 and 539. During this period, he painted the images that make up this work on the basis of reports and personal observations. The complete Illustrations of Tributary States also contained the portraits of emissaries from a number of other countries. On the basis of textual research, scholars now believe the Illustrations originally included accounts of the following countries: Gaojuli 高句麗 (the northern part of the Korean Peninsula), Yutian 於闐 (the Hotan 和田 region in Xinjiang), Xinluo 新羅 (Silla, the southern part of the Korean Peninsula), Kepantuo 渴盤陀 (Tashkent 塔什干 in present-day Xinjiang), Wuxing fan 武興藩 (the Lüeyang 略陽 region in Shanxi), Gaochang 高昌 (the Turpan 吐魯番 area in Xinjiang), Tianmen man 天門蠻 (at the intersection of present-day Henan, Hubei, and Guizhou), Jianping man 建平蠻 (between present-day Hubei and Sichuan), and Linjiang man 臨江蠻 (the eastern part of Sichuan). Additionally, the text probably included descriptions of Zhong tianzhu 中天竺, Bei tianzhu 北天竺 (both in present-day India), and Shiziguo

of *Tributary States*]” and other texts collected in “Chūgokushi 中國史 [Chinese History],” in *Kazuo Enoki chosakushū* 榎一雄著作集 [*Writings of Kazuo Enoki*] (Tokyo: Kyūko shoin, 1992).

獅子國 (Simhalauipa, in present-day Sri Lanka), totaling twenty-five countries.⁸ Although most of these countries are mentioned neither in the *History of the Song Dynasty* [*Songshi* 宋史] nor in the *History of the Southern Qi* [*Nanqi shu* 南齊書], some scholars have pointed out the general overlap with the names of the countries mentioned in the “Biographies of the Barbarians [*Zhuyi zhuan* 諸夷傳]” sections in the *History of the Liang Dynasty* [*Liangshu* 梁書] and the *History of the Southern Qi*. This goes to show that at the time when Emperor Yuan of Liang designed the “Illustrations of Tributary States,” he was essentially still providing a more or less faithful record of events.⁹

Emperor Yuan of the Liang dynasty’s “Illustrations of Tributary States” were highly influential. According to the available records, painters such as Yan Liben 閻立本 [ca. 601-673], Wu Daozi 吳道子 [ca. 680-759], and even a figure from the mid-Tang period such as Li Deyu 李德裕 [787-850] either made copies of emperor Yuan of the Liang dynasty’s work or created similar scenes celebrating the glories of China as a universal empire. Such works were meant to demonstrate how

the virtue of the sagely and enlightened ruler sways the frontier peoples, elevated high above all other kings. The minds of those in distant lands come to admire our righteousness, which will be transmitted for ages to come.¹⁰

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- 8 For a long time, it was considered impossible to verify the existence of any other illustrations or written passages apart from the materials dealing with the above-mentioned twelve countries. However, in two articles published in 1992 and 2011 respectively, Wang Su 王素 and Zhao Canpeng 趙燦鵬 attest to the existence of a no longer extant ancient copy of the *Illustrations*, which both authors discovered on the basis of textual evidence dating from the Qing dynasty. This copy not only contained the twelve sections of text we still have today, but also a number of other passages that have gone lost. See Wang Su 王素, “Liang Yuandi zhigong tu xintan 梁元帝職貢圖新探 [A New Study of Emperor Yuan of the Liang Dynasty’s *Illustrations of Tributary States*],” *Wenwu* 文物, no. 2 (1992); Zhao Canpeng 趙燦鵬, “Nanchao Liang Yuandi zhigong tu tiji yiwen de xin faxian 南朝梁元帝職貢圖題記佚文的新發現 [The Newly Discovered Lost Inscriptions of the *Illustrations of the Tributary States* by Emperor Yuan of the Liang Dynasty of the Southern Dynasties Period],” *Wenshi* 文史, no. 1 (2011).
- 9 In an article from 1987, Chen Lianqing 陳連慶 already pointed out that the text of the *Illustrations* matches that of the *Biographies of the Barbarians* [*Zhuyi zhuan* 諸夷傳] in the *History of the Liang Dynasty* [*Liangshu* 梁書] and even proposed that the *Illustrations* served as the source text for this section. See Chen Lianqing 陳連慶, “Jiben Liang Yuandi Zhigong tu xu 輯本梁元帝〈職貢圖〉序 [Preface to the Reconstructed Edition of Emperor Yuan of the Liang Dynasty’s *Illustrations of the Tributary States*],” *Guji zhengli yanjiu xuekan* 古籍整理研究學刊, no. 3 (1987).
- 10 See Li Deyu 李德裕, “Jin xiajiasi chaogong tuzhuang 進點嘎斯朝貢圖狀 [Illustrated Account of the Xiajiasi Tributary People],” in *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 [Complete Prose of

Moreover, these works are the reason that portraits of foreign emissaries gradually became a major topic in the aesthetic history extending from the Tang period to the Song, Yuan [1271-1368], Ming [1368-1644], and Qing [1644-1911] dynasties, when numerous pictorial representations of this type can be found in contexts as diverse as paintings and tomb murals.¹¹

In the next section, we turn to the main topic of this paper, namely the *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions* [*Wanfang zhigong tu* 萬方職貢圖], attributed to Li Gonglin 李公麟 [ca. 1049-1106].

3 Imagining Foreign Countries in the Song Dynasty: Li Gonglin's *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions*

As stated at the beginning of this article, because the Song empire was kept in check by the looming presence of its powerful neighbors, a relatively balanced international order emerged in East Asia. As such, the Song dynasty could no longer act as a universal empire that looks down on its neighboring countries, as had been the custom during the Han and Tang periods. On the contrary, surrounded on all sides, it had no choice but to reduce its territory in order to preserve a Han-dominated dynasty. Even though the Song ruling elites as well as many literati never abandoned the ambition to restore the “old territory of the Han and Tang” and continued to pose as superior to the regions outside the center of imperial power, this was simply a matter of wishful thinking and deceptive posturing. In fact, during this period, the old tributary system of the Han and Tang increasingly became a shadow of its former self. Although the wealthy and populous Song empire could boast considerable economic power and preserved the tributary system for a number of surrounding states,

the Tang Dynasty], ed. Dong Gao 董誥 et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), 703-3198.

- 11 Some of the numerous examples we could give include *Bunian tu* 步輦圖 [*Emperor Taizong Receiving the Tibetan Envoy*], (attrib.) Yan Liben; a mural of the *Illustrations on the tomb of crown prince Zhanghuai* 章懷 [655-684] (anonymous, held at the Shanxi Provincial Museum); *Manyi zhigong tu* 蠻夷執貢圖 [*Portrait of a Barbarian Bearing Tribute*], (attrib.) Zhou Fang 周昉 [ca. 730-800] (Taipei: National Palace Museum); *Zhigong tu* 職貢圖 [*Illustrations of Tributary States*], (attrib.) Ren Bowen 任伯溫 (Legion of Honor museum, San Francisco); Qiu Ying's 仇英 [ca. 1494-1552], *Zhuyi zhigong tu* 諸夷職貢圖 [*Illustrations of the Various Barbarians Bringing Tribute*] (Ming dynasty, National Palace Museum); the anonymous *Jingong tujian* 進貢圖卷 [*Scroll Illustrating the Bringing of Tribute*] (tracing copy, Qing dynasty, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston); and Su Liupeng's 蘇六朋 [1791-1862] *Zhuyi zhigong tu* 諸夷職貢圖 [*Illustrations of the Various Barbarians Bringing Tribute*] (Qing dynasty, Art Institute of Chicago).

this system only managed to control and attract China's less powerful neighbors. These tribute-bearing states usually went along only to engage in trade with China and to profit from the bountiful gifts they received in return. Hence, the idea of the "myriad regions coming to pay tribute" for the most part had become a historical memory and a dreamy vision of the glorious days of a bygone era. However, in this period, a considerable number of pictorial representations of tribute missions from foreign countries appeared. The Song imperial court even put a number of regulations in place for painting tributary states. It is possible that the most famous example of such a painting, Li Gonglin's *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions* was closely related to the official system requiring artists to "paint their headwear and clothes and record their customs."¹²

The *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions* are currently stored in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. The question of its provenance, preservation, and authenticity is complicated and is not addressed here. As is well known, Li Gonglin was the most celebrated painter in the entire Song period. In the *Xuanhe huapu* 宣和畫譜 [*Catalogue of Paintings from the Xuanhe Period*], it is recorded that Li composed two "Illustrations of Tributary States,"¹³ one of which was called "Images of Ten States [*Shi guo tu* 十國圖]" that has not survived.¹⁴ The *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions* we have today depicts ten different countries. According to the inscription at the end of the painting, it was completed in "the second year of Yuanfeng 元豐 [1078-1085] reign." On the basis of the inscriptions beside each painting by Zeng Yu 曾紆 [1073-1135], which date from the first year of the Shaoxing 紹興 [1131-1162] reign of the Southern Song emperor Gaozong 高宗 [r. 1127-1187], we know that the ten countries in question are Champa [*Zhancheng* 占城], Burni [*Boni* 淳泥], Korea [*Chaoxian* 朝鮮], Jurchen [*Nüzhi* 女直], Byzantine [*Fulin* 拂菻], Samboja [*Sanfoqi* 三佛齊], the Kingdom of

12 Xu Song 徐松, ed., "Zhiguan 職官 [Officials]," in *Songhuiyao jigao* 宋會要輯稿 [*Draft Compilation of the Records of the Institutions of the Song Dynasty*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1957), 73.2914.

13 In Pan Yungao's 潘運告 *Xuanhe huapu* 宣和畫譜 [*Catalogue of Paintings from the Xuanhe Period*] (part 3 of the "Personalities [*Renwu* 人物]" section), it is recorded that Li Gonglin's works included two *Illustrations of Tributary States*. See Pan Yungao 潘運告, ed., *Xuanhe huapu* 宣和畫譜 [*Catalogue of Paintings from the Xuanhe Period*] (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 1999), 158.

14 It is only mentioned in the entry "Li Boshi's *Illustrations of Ten Countries* [*Li Boshi hua Shi guo tu* 李伯時畫〈十國圖〉]" in Liu Kezhuang 劉克莊, *Houcun xiansheng da quanji* 後村先生大全集 [*Complete Works of Master Houcun*] (Beijing: Beijing shangwu yinshuguan) (photographic reproduction of the handwritten text in the Ciyantang 賜硯堂 *Collectanea in Four Divisions* [*Sibu congkan* 四部叢刊] from the Hanfenlou 涵芬樓 Collection), vol. 102.

Women [*Nürenquo* 女人國], Handong 罕東, Western Regions [*Xiyu* 西域], and Tubo. Zeng Yu's inscriptions give an account of the conditions and customs of each of the countries portrayed by Li Gonglin.

A word of clarification is in order here. Zeng Yu, whose courtesy name was Gongjuan 公卷 and who styled himself “the old man of emptiness and youth” [*Kongqing laoren* 空青老人] in his later years, was a native of Nanfeng 南豐 in the Jianchang 建昌 military prefecture. He lived in the era between the Northern and Southern Song dynasties and was the fourth son of the famous late Northern Song official Zeng Bu 曾布 [1036-1107]. Judging by the available records, Zeng Yu was quite knowledgeable about calligraphy and painting. Moreover, on the basis of his “Inscription to Li Boshi's [Li Gonglin] Painting of a Horse [*Ti Li Boshi ma tu* 題李伯時馬圖],”¹⁵ we can establish that he personally met with Li Gonglin on occasion. Supposing that the inscriptions added to the *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions* were in fact written by Zeng, it is thus safe to assume that the painting is from Li's own hand.

4 Recorded, Imagined, and Remembered: an Analysis of the Notion of “Tributary States” during the Reign of Emperor Shenzong

Although the descriptions of the various countries in the explanatory text signed “Zeng Yu, the old man of emptiness and youth” are quite brief, the question of their provenance is rather complicated. The origin of some parts of the text are unclear, while other parts closely resemble passages in the *Draft Compilation of the Records of the Institutions of the Song Dynasty* [*Song huiyao jigao* 宋會要輯稿], the “Investigation of Distant Lands [*Siyi kao* 四裔考]” section in the *Comprehensive Examination of Literature* [*Wenxian tongkao* 文獻通考], and the “Biographies of Foreigners [*Waiguo zhuan* 外國傳]” in the *Songshi*, which raises the likelihood that the passages in questions are later interpolations. However, if we assume that the extant text was written by Zeng himself, the information concerning foreign countries it contains was in all likelihood taken from the *National History* [*Guoshi* 國史] of the Five Dynasties compiled by Song officials.¹⁶ The descriptions provided in the official history

15 Zeng Zaozhuang 曾棗莊 and Liu Lin 劉琳, eds., *Quan Songwen* 全宋文 [Complete Prose of the Song Dynasty] (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe; Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2006), 3084.209.

16 On the Song compilation of the *National History* 國史 of the Five Dynasties, see Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, “Song guanxiu guoshi kao 宋官修國史考 [An Investigation into the Official Histories Compiled during the Song Dynasty],” *Shixueshi yanjiu* 史學史研究, no. 1 (1982): 47-54.

of the Five Dynasties by and large match the general state of literati knowledge concerning foreign countries during Li Gonglin's lifetime.

In the third year of the Xining 熙寧 [1068-1077] reign of emperor Shenzong 神宗 [r. 1067-1085], when he was around twenty-two years old, Li Gonglin obtained a *jinshi* 進士 degree. Li occupied an official position until the third year of the Yuanfu 元符 [1098-1100] reign of emperor Zhezong 哲宗 [r. 1085-1100], at which point he was forced to resign from his post at the age of fifty-two due to illness. For thirty years, he was at the center of political power, the two most important periods in his career being the reigns of Shenzong and Zhezong. If it is true that the *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions* date from the second year of the Yuanfeng era, we would do well to try to establish the diplomatic conditions during the Xining and Yuanfeng periods that Li may have witnessed at first hand on the basis of the available historical documents. This in turn enables us to ascertain whether the *Illustrations* are accurate representations or merely products of the imagination. Moreover, doing so also allows us to approach both the factual history of diplomatic relations during the Song period as well as the artist's imagination and representation of the tributary system as a means to investigate to what extent the Song dynasty preserved the historical memory of the glory days of the Han and Tang periods and continued to imagine itself as an illustrious universal empire.

So what did the international climate and the diplomatic conditions during the Northern Song period look like? In fact, in the period between the Xining and Yuanfeng reigns, when Li Gonglin created the *Illustrations*, only a few foreign states paid tribute at the Song court. Let us proceed by providing a rough overview of the situation at the time. On the basis of textual evidence in the *Songshi*, *Song huiyao jigao*, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 續資治通鑑長編 [*Extended Continuation to the Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*], and the *Wenxian tongkao*, we can surmise that the period in question was a crucial phase in the history of the Song dynasty. During this period, the governance of the state experienced a transition from a defensive to a more assertive stance. The Shenzong emperor took a highly proactive stance in attempting to expand foreign relations and restore the tributary system. Following the advice of Li Ping 李評 [1032-1083], Shenzong established a "Bureau for Managing the Institutions of the Guest Provinces [*Guangou kesheng guanzhiju* 管勾客省官置局]," an office responsible for studying the language of tributary states, and commissioned Song Minqiu 宋敏求 [1019-1079] to compile the *Record on the Tributes of the Border Barbarians* [*Fanyi chaogong lu* 蕃夷朝貢錄], a work in twenty *juan*. This gives us at least some sense of the historical background of Li Gonglin's *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions*.

From our present perspective, the expansion of international relations in the period between the Xining and Yuanfeng reigns of emperor Shenzong was an important accomplishment and a great step forward. The Korean kingdom, which had been reduced to a vassal state of the Khitan empire, reestablished relations with the Northern Song via the southern maritime route after an interruption of forty-three years.¹⁷ In the fourth year of the Xining reign, “envoys, civil officials, and assistant ministers from Korea came to bring a tribute of gold in the district of Haimen 海門.” During the Yuanfeng era, emperor Shenzong dispatched couriers such as An Tao 安燾 [1034-1108] to serve as envoys in Korea, especially commissioned Zhang Chengyi 張誠一 [fl. 1085] to compile the *Ceremonial Prescriptions for Tribute from Korea* [*Gaoli rugong yishi* 高麗入貢儀式] for the occasion,¹⁸ and ordered the construction of a building to accommodate the tributaries and “entertain them as guests” [*lebin* 樂賓] as well as a pavilion to “bring relief to the ships” [*hangji* 航濟] in Mingzhou 明州 (Dinghai 定海 district) at the spot where the Korean emissaries came ashore. He even arranged for the construction of ships especially intended for travel between the two countries.¹⁹ It seems that when Li Gonglin painted his *Illustrations*, Korea sent a tribute mission to Kaifeng 開封, the capital of the Northern Song, which means that its inclusion in the *Illustrations* could very well be an authentic record with a basis in history.

However, Korea paid tribute to both the Song empire and the Khitan of the Liao dynasty. Additionally, the portrayal of the kingdom of the Jurchen in the *Illustrations* is far from reliable. In the period between the Xining and Yuanfeng reigns, the Jurchen had yet to become a formidable power, partly aligning themselves with the Khitan while also relying on Korea for support. Before the mid-eleventh century, the Jurchen remained a tribal people, and although the Wanyan 完顏 clan had united some of the Jurchen tribes, they continued to be dominated by the Khitan and were forced to helplessly suffer and groan under the weight of exorbitant taxes. This lasted until the Zhenghe 政和 [1111-1117] and Chonghe 重和 [1118-1119] reigns of emperor Huizong 徽宗 [r. 1100-1126], that is, around thirty to forty years after Li Gonglin painted the *Illustrations*, for Wanyan Aguda 完顏阿骨打 [1068-1123] to turn the tide with the establishment of the Jin dynasty [1115-1234] as the first proper Jurchen

17 Toqto'a 脫脫 et al., “Waiguo 外國 [Foreign States],” in *Songshi* 宋史 [*History of the Song Dynasty*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 487.14045.

18 Li Tao 李燾, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 續資治通鑑長編 [*Extended Continuation to the Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*], ce 21 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 298.7259.

19 Li Tao 李燾, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 續資治通鑑長編 [*Extended Continuation to the Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*], ce 20 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 288.7052.

state.²⁰ Moreover, it was only in the second year of the Chonghe reign that the Jin dynasty dispatched Li Shanqing 李善慶 [fl. 1119] as an emissary to Kaifeng, where he met with figures such as Cai Liang 蔡京 [1047-1126] and Tong Guan 童貫 [1054-1126]. As such, it was only at this time that the Northern Song court could have gained a more complete understanding of the Jurchen. However, when Li painted the *Illustrations* in the second year of the Yuanfeng reign, the Jurchen had not yet sent a diplomatic mission to pay tribute to the Northern Song. Indeed, the Song court seemed to have considerable trouble understanding the specifics of the Jurchen situation.²¹ Obviously, then, if we are correct in assuming that the *Illustrations* date from 1079, the image of the Jurchen bringing tribute in them can only be regarded as a figment of the imagination of its painter Li Gongli or its commentator Zeng Yu.

An even smaller number of tributary states was located on the western and the eastern borders of the Song empire. Just as Shenzong's trusted minister, the famous official Fu Bi 富弼 [1004-1083], argued upon being asked by the emperor,²² the Khitan remained very powerful, the Western Xia, Gusiluo 唃廝囉 (997-1065, the remnants of the Tubo Kingdom), Korea, the Jurchen, and Tatar [*Dada* 韃靼] were all held in the grip of the Khitan, and the Song empire was powerless to do anything about it. As such, the portrayal of the Tubo paying tribute to the Song should not be taken at face value. At the end of the ninth century, the Tubo kingdom had already disintegrated and during the reign of emperor Shenzong, independent Tubo state could no longer be said to exist. The tribe ruled by Gusiluo, which had come to pay tribute in the Mingdao 明道 [1032-1033] reign of the Renzong 仁宗 [r. 1022-1063] emperor, was already divided into different factions at the time of emperor Shenzong. Additionally, Gusiluo's son Dongzhan 董氈 [d. 1086] was not a vassal of the Northern Song but, rather, a "son-in-law of the Khitan" [*Qidan zhi xu* 契丹之婿].²³ Although Dongzhan received an official title in the first year of the Yuanfeng reign, when he offered tribute to the court and allied with the Song against the Western Xia, he no longer called himself Tubo.

This brings us to the problem of the "western regions" depicted in Li Gonglin's *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions*. We should

20 Toqto'a 脫脫 et al., *Jinshi* 金史 [*History of the Jin Dynasty*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 2.23-24.

21 Xu Mengshen 徐夢莘, *Sanchao beimeng huibian* 三朝北盟彙編 [*Collected Documents Concerning Alliances with the North during the Three Reigns*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2008), 3.16-23.

22 Li Tao 李燾, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 續資治通鑑長編 [*Extended Continuation to the Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*], ce 19 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 262.6392.

23 On these two points, see *Ibid.*, 262.6393, 6387.

point out that the term “western regions” does not refer to a single state. In the vague and general concept employed by scholar-officials of the Northern Song, “western regions” could refer in a traditional sense to present-day Xinjiang and Central Asia, as well as to much more remote regions in southwest Asia, such as the Arab empire [*dashi* 大食]. However, in the century after the first year of the Yongxi 雍熙 [984-987] reign of emperor Taizong 太宗 [r. 976-997], when the envoy of the Northern Song emperor Wang Yande 王延德 [939-1006] returned from an arduous journey to Gaochang, contacts between the Song empire and the “western regions” became increasingly rare. During the Yuanfeng reign of emperor Shenzong, the only visits of foreign emissaries from “the West” were in all likelihood those from Yutian, who came to the Song empire four times (in the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth years of the Yuanfeng reign). Apart from this, there were also sporadic visits from various parts of the Arabian Peninsula to places such as Guangzhou via maritime routes. But the various states from the “western regions” that went to China during this period did not necessarily have a sense of “going to pay tribute.” Some of the people who journeyed to Song China over land were from places such as Kucha, while others who came by sea were Arab merchants. Although it is possible that they used the tribute system as a pretext for establishing trade relations, it is highly doubtful that they were part of official tribute missions.

Nonetheless, among the tributary states portrayed by Li Gonglin, the inclusion of southeast Asian countries and maritime kingdoms such as Zhancheng, Sanfoqi, and Boni appears to be reliable. Whereas the Northern Song’s corridor to the northwest had gradually been closed off as far back as the mid-Tang period, contact was increasing between Song China, on the one hand, and southern as well as maritime states, on the other. This trend had been developing since the beginning of the Song period and did not simply start with the rule of emperor Shenzong. During his reign the Song emperor Zhenzong 真宗 [r. 997-1022] had ordered the various regions of the empire to provide a warm welcome to foreign envoys. As a result, both merchants and government officials were very keen to visit China. In the period between the Xining and Yuanfeng reigns, for example, people from Sanfoqi often paid tribute or engaged in commerce through the customs offices in Guangdong and were lavished with gifts from the Song court as a sign of gratitude. At times, the number of visitors from Sanfoqi was too great for local government officials to handle, which shows that considerable numbers arrived bearing tribute via southern land or maritime routes, including people from Cochin [*Jiaozhi* 交趾] (northern Vietnam) and Zhancheng as well as Boni, Chola [*Zhunian* 注輦], and Jambi [*Zhanbei* 詹卑], possibly even including seafarers from even more distant places, such as Seljuq [*Cengtān* 層檀] and Arabia.

In the foregoing, we provided a general outline of the international relations during the era of Shenzong of the Northern Song and some of the information concerning foreign countries Li Gonglin might have been familiar with when he painted the *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions*. Three crucial points require further explanation. Firstly, in the period between the Xining and Yuanfeng reigns, the relations between the Northern Song and Zhancheng were quite close. A possible explanation for this is the fact that the Song Empire was deeply vexed by its neighbor Jiaozhi, that is, Northern Vietnam. In the ninth year of the Xining reign of emperor Shenzong, Zhang Fanping 張方平 [1007-1091] proposed establishing closer relations with the southern state of Lâm Ấp [*Linyi* 林邑] and its capital Zhancheng, in the hope of turning the latter into a bulwark against the power of Jiaozhi.²⁴ Consequently, during this period, Zhancheng was on close terms with the Northern Song and dispatched a considerable number of tributary missions to the Song court.²⁵ Secondly, it is true that Japan does not figure in Li Gonglin's *Illustrations*. Although there are many records of Japanese visits to Northern Song China, some of which Li may have witnessed first hand, Japan was not a tributary state, a fact that was not lost on officials of this period. Even if emperor Shenzong once summoned Japanese monks to China, he made it abundantly clear that they would be coming on a pilgrimage to the Tiantai Mountain in their capacity as followers of Buddhism and not in order to pay tribute.²⁶ Thirdly, it is rather strange that Li Gonglin did not include a painting of the "Dali Kingdom" in his *Illustrations*. From the beginning of the Northern Song period, the region south of the Dadu 大渡 River had become foreign territory. Consequently the Dali Kingdom "would no longer frequent [China] and was no longer received at the Office of Foreign States [*honglu* 鴻臚]."²⁷ However, it was precisely in the fifth month of the ninth year of the Xining reign that the Dali Kingdom came on its first, and probably only, tributary mission to the Northern Song capital of Kaifeng,

24 Ibid., 276.6761-62.

25 Many records attest to tributary missions from the Zhancheng Kingdom. A description of the tributary missions between the second year of the Jianlong 建隆 [960-963] reign and the first year of the Xuanhe 宣和 [1119-1125] reign can be found in the *Songshi*. See Toqto'a, "Waiguo," in *Songshi*, 489.14079-85. A table listing the items given as tribute by the ruler of Zhancheng is in Li Ze 黎崱, *Annan zhilüe* 安南志略 [*Concise Records of Annam*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), 156-57.

26 Li Tao 李燾, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 續資治通鑑長編 [*Extended Continuation to the Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*], ce 23 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 334.8031.

27 Toqto'a, "Waiguo," in *Songshi*, 488.14072.

an event which attracted considerable attention at the time.²⁸ Nonetheless, this tributary visit is not portrayed in Li's *Illustrations*.

5 Recorded, Imagined, and Remembered: an Analysis of the Ten Countries Depicted in the *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions*

Summarizing the findings above, we can divide the ten countries included in Li Gonglin's *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions* and the inscriptions by Zeng Yu into five different categories on the basis of the available information concerning the diplomatic relations of the Northern Song:

1. The first category consists of countries which actually sent tributary missions to China (4 countries in total): Zhancheng (the middle southern region of Vietnam), Sanfoqi (Sumatra in Indonesia), the kingdom of Boni (Kalimantan in Indonesia), and Chaoxian (this ancient name did not refer to North Korea as is the case in modern Chinese but rather to the Korean kingdom, which covered the whole of the Korean Peninsula and also paid tribute to the Khitan). Although these states occasionally sent tributary missions or individual envoys to China, it is quite possible that their primary goal in doing so was to establish trade relations with the rich and populous Northern Song.
2. The second category is made up of a number of foreign states which had no institutionalized tributary position but may have had contact with the Northern Song through the intermediary of merchants or officials (a total of two countries). While the first of these, the Jurchen (contemporary northeast China) had already begun to have some contact with the Song court in the process of their rise to power and would eventually agree to form a military alliance with the Song against the Khitan a few decades after the reign of emperor Shenzong, in the period of the Xining and Yuanfeng reigns they were still controlled by the Khitan and were not a tributary state of the Northern Song at all. The second state in this category is the Tubo kingdom (Tibet, Qinghai, and the western part of Sichuan). As we already mentioned above, during the Northern Song period, the Tubo kingdom had already collapsed, the remaining factions alternating between an aggressive and conciliatory stance toward the Song, sometimes realigning themselves with tribes close to the borders of China which occasionally posed a threat to the Song empire. As such, it

²⁸ Li Tao, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian*, ce 19, 275.6733.

is highly improbable that any sort of diplomatic mission from a kingdom which no longer existed visited China. In any case, during the period of the Xining and Yuanfeng reigns, Tubo was no longer a tributary state of the Song.

3. The third category refers to countries which may have during a certain period occasionally sent a number of envoys or merchants to China but were not in any sense tributary states of the Northern Song (one country). According to the available scholarship, the only country in this category, the kingdom of Fulin, refers to the Eastern Roman Empire and its capital of Constantinople, which was obviously never a Chinese tributary state. It would take until the fourth year of the Yuanfeng reign, that is to say, two years after Li Gonglin had completed the *Illustrations*, for a self-declared royal emissary to visit China to pay tribute, but this was in all likelihood simply a merchant from the East.²⁹
4. The fourth category consists of tributary states which did not actually exist during the Northern Song period but were either the product of rumors or count as imaginary distant lands construed by the painter or commentator of the *Illustrations* on the basis of a few historical materials (2 countries in total). This applies to Handong 罕東 (in the vicinity of Jiuquan 酒泉 and Dunhuang 敦煌 according to some, closer to Xining 西寧 according to others)³⁰ as well as to the “Western Regions” (as already mentioned above, this term does not designate a single country).³¹ During the whole reign of emperor Shenzong, with the exception of Yutian, the passage West was blocked by the presence of the Western Xia, Khitan, and the remainders of the Tubo kingdom, making it impossible for any state in this region to have become a tributary state to the Song in an institutional sense.
5. In the fifth category we find the purely fictional and imaginary state called “the Kingdom of Women”. The fanciful name itself suffices to rule out the possibility of any actual contact between such a country and the Song court.

29 See Qi Sihe 齊思和, *Zhongguo yu Baizhanting diguo de guanxi* 中國與拜占庭帝國的關係 [*The Relations between China and the Byzantine Empire*] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1956), 17.

30 The “Kingdom of Hanjian” does not occur in the records of the *Songshi*. Moreover, I have not been able to find a single reference to this state in other historical documents of the Song period.

31 An indication for the fact that the term “Western Regions” does not refer to a single state can be found in the “Waiguo,” *Songshi*, vol. 490, where Tianzhu 天竺, Yutian 於闐, Gaochang 高昌, Huihu 回鶻, Dashi 大食, Cengtan 層檀, Qiuci 龜茲, Shazhou 沙州, and Fulin 拂菻 are all referred to as belonging to the “Western Regions.”

If the analysis above is correct, the four countries which did actually come to pay tribute at the Song court during the reign of emperor Shenzong and may have been witnessed by Li Gonglin first hand are Korea, Sanfoqi, Zhancheng, and Boni, the inclusion of the other six states being the product of rumor or contrived on the basis of historical records. It is clear that since the west, north, and southwest had become foreign territory, the Song dynasty could no longer boast the splendor of the sort of universal empire which existed during the Han and Tang periods. The countries which were seen as “tributary states” during the Song period were mostly a number of states and regions in the east and the south. As such, it was only in the period between the middle of the tenth and the thirteenth century [960-1279] that the relation between China and the world came to shift toward the southern maritime routes. This was the beginning of the formation of a veritable trade network in the South Chinese Sea, a development which directly led to the establishment of numerous customs offices in the coastal areas. These developments also explain why works containing information concerning foreign countries such as the *Lingwai daida* 嶺外代答 [*Representative Answers Concerning the Land beyond the Pass*] [1178] and the *Zhufan zhi* 諸蕃志 [*Record of Foreign Countries*] [1225] would later all be produced in the south.

At this time, the Song dynasty was obviously no longer a universal empire comparable to that of the Han and Tang periods. The Song not only had to confront the external menace posed by the Khitan and Tangut but was also faced with rebellions of non-Han ethnic groups in the southwest within its own boundaries and had to tackle various problems on the maritime routes. Nonetheless, throughout Chinese history, the empire’s ruling elites and literati never ceased to imagine China as embracing the whole world and to enjoy the spectacle of “barbarians” coming to pay tribute at the imperial court. The reason for this is simple: the Chinese saw themselves as a Celestial Empire at the center of the universe. Witnessing barbarians from distant lands bowing their heads to pay their respects and pledge allegiance to the emperor while observing their bizarre and savage ways must have filled them with a deep sense of curiosity, self-confidence, and pride. In reality however, just as Li Gonglin’s contemporary Su Shi 蘇軾 [1037-1101] remarked with reference to Korea as well as a number of other countries: “they pretend to come to pay tribute because they admire our righteousness [*yi* 義], but what they are really after is profit [*li* 利].”³²

32 See Su Shi 蘇軾, “Lun Gaoli maishu lihai zhazi 論高麗買書利害劄子 [Notice on the Advantages and Downsides of Buying Books in Korean],” in *Su Shi wenji* 蘇軾文集 [*Collected Writings of Su Shi*], ed. Kong Fanli 孔凡禮 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 35-994.

However, because of the traditional need to “sway the frontier people in bringing them peace and tranquility” and present the Celestial Empire as a superior state, the Chinese of the Song period continued to look down at “barbarian” people from a position of superiority, an attitude which was also visually expressed in paintings. Revealing a sense of condescending pity for barbarian states and satisfying the need to be recognized as a superior universal empire, Li Gonglin’s *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Regions* would seem to fit right into this category of artworks. At a time when China was no longer a universal empire and ceased to have many tributary states, the Song continued to conceive of itself as covering “all under heaven” and to project the image of the myriad states presenting themselves at the imperial court, a procedure which would become something of a tradition in imperial China. Before Li Gonglin’s lifetime, during the reigns of emperor Zhenzong and emperor Renzong, officials at the Office of Foreign States had already produced a painting called “Portrait of the Four Barbarians Reporting at the Court of the Great Song [*Dasong siyi shuzhi tu* 大宋四夷述職圖]”. After Li’s time, on the eve of the downfall of the Northern Song, there were still some who proposed to the Huizong emperor to commission the creation of a series of *Illustrations of Tributary States*, allegedly because the greatness of the Song surpassed that of the period of the Three Dynasties, Han, and Tang and barbarians from outside the empire would “flock to us in pursuit of righteousness, coming as guests from remote lands.” The idea was still that since the influence of China extended far and wide, the image of the great Song empire as enveloping “all under heaven” needed to be propagated.³³ When Liu Kezhuang 劉克莊 [1187-1269] laid eyes on Li Gonglin’s *Images of Ten Countries* (no longer extant) more than a century later in the Southern Song period, after the Chinese territory had shrunk even further, Liu remarked that in his portrayal of people from foreign states as barbarians, Li had “surpassed himself in portraying their vulgar and beggarly appearance” and managed to fill the people of the Song with pride.³⁴

The phrases “vulgar and beggarly appearance” expresses the arrogance involved in the Chinese imagination of different countries, an arrogance meant to produce a sense of self-confidence. In reality, however, in Li Gonglin’s time, the Northern Song was not that rich and powerful anymore, nor were the surrounding states as backward and subservient as the *Illustrations* would lead one to believe. But it was precisely during this long

33 See Weng Yanyue 翁彥約, “Qi bian ji wanguo tuhua biao Zhang chengshu zou 乞編集萬國圖畫表章成書奏 [Memorial to the Emperor on Compiling a Collection of Illustrations of the Myriad States],” in *Songhuiyao jigao*, 67.2666.

34 Liu Kezhuang, “Li Boshi hua *Shi guo tu*,” 102.13.

period of political fragility that an imaginary form of self-consolation gained in importance, simply because it was the only way to make up for a pervasive lack of self-confidence. Therefore, if we are correct in assuming that the *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Myriad Directions* dates from the Northern Song, this work of art can be seen as symbol for the gradual territorial decline of China, disguised as an imaginary sense of self-importance. All of this gave rise to a tradition which continued into the entire Song period (and even well into the subsequent history of China), namely that of “preserving the image of a boundless empire within the awareness of the finite space of the state. Despite the fact that the modern Chinese nation-state broke away from the central imperial system, the traditional idea of China as an empire at the center of the world managed to survive this transformation.”³⁵

Intellectuals from the Ming period would adopt a more critical approach to such imaginary representations. They saw through the Song dynasty images of foreign countries as self-congratulatory caricatures. In a poem, the Ming scholar Han Qia 韓洽 [fl. 1644] noted that whereas the Tang-dynasty artist Yan Like still had sufficient reasons for painting his *Illustrations of Tributary States* during his time, because “the Tang brought order to the world and peace to the myriad states, so that strange lands from all directions presented themselves at the court,” the same could not be said for Li Gonglin. As Han Qia remarked: “It is doubtful whether the many barbarians really came to pay tribute to the Song empire during Li Gonglin’s time.” As such, he suspected that Li had painted his *Illustrations* by imitating previous works of art and that his paintings were not accurate records. He astutely observed that during the Yuanfeng reign of emperor Shenzong, the state had gradually become more stable and prosperous, allowing the ruling elites to enjoy a short period of peace. However, this led to an inflated sense of self-worth and a great deal of quibbling over the best methods to strengthen the state even further. Consequently, the ruling elites lost themselves in fantasies of power and hegemony, while “failing to notice that China was in decline.” In Han Qia’s opinion then, Li Gonglin’s *Illustrations* only served to satisfy the limitless arrogance of the ruling elites and was no match for the *Portraits of Vagabonds* [*Liumin tu* 流民圖] made by the low-ranking official Zheng Xia 鄭俠 [1041-1119] from the same period, which was intended to confront the emperor with the destitution of the homeless masses

35 See Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, *Zhai zi Zhongguo: chongjian youguan Zhongguo de lishi lunshu* 宅茲中國: 重建有關中國的歷史論述 [*Here in China I Dwell: Reconstructing the Historical Narratives of China*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 28-29.

and to urge him to put an end to the reforms which had brought needless suffering to the people.³⁶

6 The Enduring Idea of Universal Empire: the Example of the *Illustrations of Tributary States of the Illustrious Qing*

Unfortunately, critiques such as Han Qia's were a rare occurrence and the artistic tradition of imagining universal empire by means of "Illustrations of Tributary States" would continue uninterrupted. Even the Mongol Yuan dynasty would abide by the same custom, with various "Illustrations of Tributary States" appearing in quick succession as the territory of the Chinese empire expanded again. These images serve as a record of the relations between the growing Yuan dynasty and its neighbors on all sides, while also flaunting the strength of an empire stretching across the Eurasian continent in order to satisfy the vanity of its ruling elites.³⁷ Even during the Ming period, when the Chinese territory had been vastly diminished, many similar paintings continued to see the light of day. Some of these were actual portrayals of the visits of various foreign states to the court, but just as many were imitations of different "Illustrations of Tributary States" throughout history, combining historical knowledge, memories, and imaginary representations in what should have been realistic works of art. In Qiu Ying's 仇英 [ca. 1494-1552] *Zhuyi zhigong tu* 諸夷職貢圖 [*Illustrations of the Various Barbarians Bringing Tribute*], for example, we encounter not only the mythical "Rulers of the Nine Creeks and

36 Han Qia 韓洽, *Ji an shicun* 寄菴詩存 [*Collected Poems from a Monastic Sojourn*] (Ming-dynasty block print), 2.20. This poem is also collected in Shen Deqian 沈德潛 and Zhou Zhun 周准, eds., *Mingshi biecai ji* 明詩別裁集 [*Selected Ming Poems*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), vol. 11, as well as in Chen Tian 陳田, ed., "Xinqian 辛籤," in *Mingshi jishi* 明詩紀事 [*Chronicle of Events in Ming Poetry*] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), vol. 28.

37 In the Yuan dynasty, we find paintings such as Ren Bowen's *Zhigong tu* 職貢圖 (held by the Legion of Honor museum in San Francisco); Qian Shunju's *Zhigong tu* (see Qian Shunju 錢舜舉, *Qian Yutan zhuyi zhigong tu* 錢玉潭諸夷職貢圖 [*Qian Yutan's Illustrations of the Various Barbarians from Tributary States*], in *Xianju congshu* 仙居叢書 [*Collection of Documents from Xianju City*] [Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin meishu chubanshe, 2017], vol. 3); Tang Wenzhi's 唐文質 *Zhigong tu* (see Wang Shidian 王士點 and Shang Qiwen 商企翁, ed., *Mishu jianzhi* 秘書監志 [*Chronicles of the Imperial Archives*] [Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1992], vol. 5, where it is recorded that "in the second year of the Yanyou reign 延祐 [1314-1320], Tang Wenzhi presented his *Illustrations of Tributary States*"; as well as another officially commissioned *Zhigong tu* (see Song Lian 宋濂 et al., "Benji 本紀 [Basic Annals]," in *Yuanshi* 元史 [*History of the Yuan Dynasty*] [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976], vol. 15).

Eighteen Caves,” but also images of long since vanished historical states such as the Khitan and Bohai 渤海 kingdom, and even the purely fictitious “Kingdom of Women.”

Following the unprecedented expansion of the Chinese territory during the Qing period, the artistic tradition of imagining universal empire reached its historical peak. In the middle of the eighteenth century, as an outcome of the reigns of the Kangxi 康熙 [1654-1722], Yongzheng 雍正 [1678-1735], and Qianlong 乾隆 [1711-1799] emperors, the territory of the great Qing empire had gradually grown in size. As a result, the Qianlong era saw the appearance of the *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Illustrious Qing* [*Huangqing zhigong tu* 皇清職貢圖], the most monumental of such works to date, portraying an unprecedented diversity of peoples and states.

More than 300 different countries are represented in the *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Illustrious Qing*,³⁸ including vassal states of the Qing such as Korea, Ryukyu [*Liuqiu* 琉球], Annam, Siam [*Xianluo* 暹羅], Sultanate of Sulu [*Sulu* 蘇祿], Lan Xang [*Nanzhang* 南掌], and Burma [*Miandian* 緬甸], countries which came to establish trade relations such as France, England, Japan, Russia, Holland, as well as regions which had already been incorporated into the Qing territory such as western Tibet, Yili 伊犁, Hasake 哈薩克, eastern Oroqen [*Elunchuo* 鄂倫綽], Nanai [*Hezhe* 赫哲], Taiwan, southern Qiongzhou 瓊州, and various tribes of Miao 苗 and Yi 彝 from the southwest. From the perspective of the Qing ruling elites, it seemed as if “all under heaven” had effectively been enveloped within the empire. As such, they showed nothing but contempt for the *Illustrations of Tributary States* from the time of emperor Yuan of the Liang dynasty, which figured as little as thirteen countries. They even showed considerable disdain for the so-called “flourishing period” of the Tang dynasty, arguing that when Yan Liben painted his *Illustrations of Tributary States*, he was forced to compromise under the pressure of the Turks [*Tujue* 突厥] and Hui [*Huihu* 回鶻], the Tang hardly being a match for the Great Qing empire. This is why in the preamble to the *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Illustrious Qing*, we find a self-congratulatory “Poem Inscribed on the *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Illustrious Qing*” from the hand of

38 I have consulted a Qing-dynasty block-print edition stored in the Harvard-Yenching Library. On the background of the *Illustrations of Tributary States of the Illustrious Qing*, see Qi Guang 齊光, “Jiexi *Huangqing zhigong tu* huijuan ji qi man han wentu shuo 解析〈皇清職貢圖〉繪卷及其滿漢文圖說 [An Analysis of the *Illustrations of the Tributary States of the Illustrious Qing* and the Accompanying Texts in Manchu and Chinese],” *Qingshi yanjiu* 清史研究, no. 4 (2014): 28-29.

the Qianlong emperor dating from the twenty-sixth year of his reign. In this poem, Qianlong arrogantly declares that the Qing already covers “all under heaven,” so that “no-one can remain outside the unity and uniformity of the empire, there is not a single person anymore who is not our kin.” Barbarians from all four corners of the earth came to pay tribute at the court, “for how could Fangfeng 防風 be allowed to show up late to the gathering?³⁹ Had he not already heard the harmonious sounds of all the guests arriving?”⁴⁰

However, in the mid-eighteenth century, the world had already entered into the earlier stages of globalization and the global competition between empires from the East and West had started to unfold. Although China began to acquire more and more knowledge of the world and the states, peoples, and customs of remote places outside its boundaries, the territorial expansion of the empire allowed the image of China as a universal empire to persist, with the ruler of the Celestial Empire continuing to enjoy the satisfaction of seeing the “myriad states presenting themselves at the court.” Perhaps we could say that works of art such as the *Illustrations of Tributary States of the Illustrious Qing* and the *Illustrations of the Myriad States Coming to the Court* [*Wanguo laichao tu* 萬國來朝圖] from the same period are a reflection of how Chinese officials and intellectuals at the time conceived of the relation between China and the world. Throughout the centuries stretching from emperor Yuan of the Liang dynasty’s *Illustrations of Tributary States* to the officially commissioned *Illustrations* from the Qing period, Chinese officials and literati continued to create pictures devoted to the topic of foreign countries coming to pay tribute at the imperial court. The image of an all-encompassing Celestial Empire would continuously serve as a model for the “myriad states,” “foreign races,” “foreign devils,” and even the “Westerners.” Regardless of whether this image is judged to be accurate or merely fictional, it testifies to the persistence of a certain way of imagining China and the world.

Translated by Ady Van den Stock

39 Translator’s note: Reference to the mythological figure of Fangfeng 防風, who was executed by Yu 禹 the Great after arriving too late at a gathering of the sage-king’s vassals following the end of the “Great Flood.”

40 *Illustrations of Tributary States of the Illustrious Qing* (Qing-dynasty block print edition in the Harvard-Yenching Library), preamble, *Tishi* 題詩 [Inscribed Poem] by the Qianlong 乾隆 emperor, 1.

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