

Material Seals in the Qing Tribute World

The Six East and Southeast Asian Kingdoms under Discussion

This study investigates a previously overlooked aspect of material culture in China's historical tribute system by examining the seals granted by the Manchu emperors to six tribute kingdoms in East and Southeast Asia during the Qing dynasty (1636-1911). It explores the function of the material objects, referred to as "tribute seals" in this essay, between the seal-granter and seal-receiver. Its analysis addresses the question of what bound these kingdoms into a seal-receiving group in the Qing tribute world, while other Qing tributaries did not involve tribute seals. The study argues that the Qing tribute system and the larger world it created would not be fully understood without an explanation of the tribute seals and how they facilitated the relationship between the Qing court and the tribute kingdoms in Asia.

Material Seals and the Qing Tribute World

The tribute system in China's long history provided a framework for external polities to engage with the "Middle Kingdom" or "Celestial Empire," reflecting China's self-centered worldview. This system played a key role in shaping the "Chinese World Order" or "East Asian World Order," grounded in the cultural assumption that subordinate tribute polities acknowledged the authority of the Chinese emperor by paying tribute and adhering to established tribute rules within the Chinese political system. Regardless of whether the emperors on the dynastic throne were ethnically Chinese or non-Chinese through military conquest, they were regarded as the "Son of Heaven," ruling over "All Under Heaven" (Batten 2023, 28; Murphey 2010, 127; Huang 1992, Introduction; and Chen 2019, 171-199). After the expansive growth under the Manchu-ruled Qing dynasty, the tribute system, like Qing territory, "reached its historical peak" and functioned as "an essential mechanism" for trade, cultural exchange, border peace, and cooperation of any kind (Ge 2019, 144; Ma 2019, 123; Chen 2019, 193). Today, the scholarly contribution to Qing tribute studies has reached "an immense number of publications" (Zhang 2025, 61). The "more nuanced studies and new interpretations" (Kang 2010, 591) have established the current scholarship on the operation of China's tribute system and its "world order" before the Western powers, with Japan joining them, broke it down in the late 19th century. In this scholarship, however, the material seals in the tribute relationship have no place they deserve.

A careful reader of the *Jiaqing Chongxiu Yitongzhi* 嘉慶重修一統志 (The Jiaqing edition of the Comprehensive Gazetteer of Great Qing, hereafter referred to as JCY),¹ will discover that among the forty-three tribute polities listed under

¹The title of JCY has also been translated as "The Jiaqing edition of Records of Great Unity of the Great Qing."

“Chaogong geguo” 朝貢各國 (countries under the category of tribute), only six tribute kingdoms – Chaoxian 朝鮮 (Korea), Liuqiu 琉球 (Ryukyu, present-day Okinawa), Xianluo 暹羅 (Siam, present-day Thailand), Yuenan 越南 (Vietnam), Nanzhang 南掌 (Laos), and Miandian 緬甸 (Myanmar) - received the seal from the Manchu emperor (JCY 1842, 1986 reprint, 27065-27415). JCY, an emperor-endorsed compilation to show the glory of the great unity of the Qing Empire, was compiled in 1842, with historical records counted to 1820, and covered the summit period of the Qing tribute system. The inquiry into the seals in this section of the JCY records leads to the search for what the material object, being crafted to be qualified as tribute seals, represented in the court-tributary relationship, why they mattered to the six kingdoms, and what the matter meant to the majority of tributaries in the Qing world who did not have seals in the tribute relationship.

The material items to be engraved artistically by following institutionalized rules had served in the dynastic history of China as official seals. To be a critical part of the political culture, the Qing dynasty developed the official seal system to the highest level in terms of design, decoration, inscription styles, and the government regulations for the seal use. In this seal culture, selected substances, Jade, gold, silver, copper, previous wood, etc., were artifactually carved into various sizes, shapes, weights, and styles of stamping inscription as seals for verifying the nobility and officialdom. The physical differences of the seals marked the status of the entitled seal holder under strict court regulations. The making and use of them for the government’s administrative purposes were under strict instruction and supervision of the court. Thus, official seals represented authority through material expression and non-verbal communication. Imperial governance could not operate at any level without the official seals.

The Qing seal system, embedded in Chinese political culture, was extended to manage the tribute relationship with the six surrounding kingdoms. With a shared cultural value, the seal-receiving kingdoms believed in the seals’ nondiscursive expression of power and relationship that the Chinese political culture bestowed upon them. The emperor-granted seals to the seal-receiving kingdoms were, therefore, not silent physical items but politicized symbols that transmitted non-verbal expressions to regulate what the relationship should be. Not always omnipotent in all situations, the seals did work for the relationship communication in many cases. They served tribute goals differently from other material items that circulated within the tribute system. These included the large quantities of goods presented by the tributaries as gifts to the emperor; the emperor’s rewards in return, which were always of much higher value; and the economically valued commercial goods involved in tribute-related market trade. The examination of these seals in the Qing tribute events reveals that the ideologically based tribute relationship in the Qing World Order needed material objects to signify the tribute hierarchy. At the top of this hierarchy was the superior Qing emperor. A culturally tied tribute group who share the Qing seal culture was placed before a large number of tributaries outside this culture. Thus, the Qing tribute world was not polarized between the emperor and all the

1 tributaries. It had cultural boundaries and status differences, with material seals
2 as an indicator.

3 This study reinforces the increasing body of research that emphasizes the
4 importance of the material aspects of human society and history alongside
5 traditional narratives conveyed through written and spoken words. The new
6 theoretical insights gained from examining China's tribute seals are
7 complemented by a fresh methodological perspective that helps us understand
8 the meanings associated with the granting and receiving of these material seals,
9 which serve mutual objectives in the context of tribute.

12 **Tribute Seals in the *Jiaqing Congxiu Yitongzhi* (Jcy)**

14 The JCY source divided the Qing tribute world into four sections. The non-
15 Chinese Inner Asian peoples - the Mongol, Tibetan, and Uyghur groups – were
16 the internal tributaries by this time (1820) since they were integrated into the
17 Qing Empire (Chia 1993, 60-92). The Central Asian polities were placed
18 separately into *Xiyu* 西域 or “Western land.” The East and Southeast Asian
19 tributaries were the longest and more stabilized members in China's tribute
20 system in history. The Europeans under the name of Holland, *Xiyang* 西洋
21 (which meant “the Western Ocean,” with Italian identified but could include the
22 Portuguese and the Spanish), England, and France came into China since the 16th
23 century from the south and southeastern Asian coastal lines. Russia,
24 exceptionally entering China across the land borders in the North, was included.
25 In the chapter arrangements, Korea and Vietnam were each given an independent
26 chapter among the Asian tributaries. Russia was the only European “tributary”
27 given a simple chapter. Other Europeans were mixed with the Asian tributaries,
28 such as, one among other examples, chapter/*juan* 556 grouped “Miandian,
29 Yingjili (England), Zhengqian, Huluguo, and Machen” together. (JCY, 27065-
30 27415). The chapter groupings reflect the concept and viewpoint of the early
31 Qing court regarding the peoples and polities in the Qing tribute world. The
32 court-issued official seals distinguished the six tribute kingdoms from all others,
33 Asian or non-Asian.

35 *Chaoxian (Korea)*

37 In 1637, after the second Manchu emperor Hung Taiji (r. 1626-1643)
38 defeated Korea. To the surrendered Korean King, the head of the Manchu State
39 titled him as the legitimate king and granted him a golden seal with a turtle
40 handle. When this seal, together with other gifts, was sent to the Korean capital,
41 it marked the complete political submission of the Korean King to the Qing
42 emperor (JCY, 27074-5 and *Qinding daqing huidian* 1899, 1991 reprint, 354).
43 Since then, Korea remained a loyal tributary to the Qing until the Japanese broke
44 that relationship by defeating China and announcing the independence of Korea
45 in 1895.

46 *Liuqiu (Ryukyu, present-day Okinawa)*

Ryukyu Kingdom started to pay tribute to the Qing court in 1649. In 1654, at the tribute event, the Shunzhi emperor titled the Ryukyu King as *Zhongshan Wang* 中山王 (King of Zhangshan). Along with that entitlement, a gold-plated silver seal was granted to the King (JCY, 27113).

Xianluo (Siam, present-day Thailand)

Xianluo started sending tribute envoys to the Qing court in 1654. Tribute continued in 1665 and 1672. In 1673, the Xianluo king, through his tribute envoy, asked the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662-1722) to title him. The emperor agreed to title him as the Xianluo King and granted him a gold-plated silver seal with a camel handle (JCY, 27173).

Yuenan (Vietnam)

The political situation in Vietnam, known as Annam until 1803, was much more complicated. Frequent warfare shifted the leadership between different power families, and the Qing court's seal-granting occurred multiple times due to the complexity of Vietnam's internal power struggles.

Contact between Vietnamese leaders and the Qing court began at the start of the Shunzhi reign (1643-1661), when the first Manchu emperor sat on the Chinese throne in Beijing after the Manchu takeover of China proper in 1644. The King's entitlement to Li Weizheng 黎維正 as the King of Annam, however, did not take place until 1683. A gold-plated silver seal with a camel handle was granted to him along with the entitlement (JCY, 27189). Through the internal wars, the previous seal was lost in 1787, during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (1736-1795). After the Li family defeated the enemy, the Ryuan family, with the support of the Qing troops, the emperor re-titled the head of the Li family at the time, Liweiqi 黎維祁, as the king, and a new seal was granted to him (JCY, 27192-3). In 1789, the Ryuan family head, Ryuan Guangping 阮光平, returned to the Li territory and convinced the Qing military commander Fukangan of his loyalty to the Qing. By Ryuan Guangping's plea, the Qianlong emperor titled him the King of Annam and granted him a gold-plated silver seal with a camel handle (JCY, 27194-5 and *Qinding daqing huidian*, 354).

Ryuan Guangping kept an intimate tribute relationship with the Qianlong emperor. He came to the Qing court himself in 1790, rather than sending his envoy to attend the grand ritual at the Imperial Palace, which was a normal practice for most tribute polities. His assistance to the Qing court in keeping the local orders received the emperor's award of changing tribute intervals from once every three years to once every two years, and the interval of tribute envoy's visit to the Qing court from every six years to every four years (JCY, 27196-7). These changes favored the Ryuan power by receiving more economically valued material goods granted to him as tribute gifts, stronger political recognition of his kingly position, not only in his home country but in the larger regional order, and the beneficial tribute-conditioned

1 market/commercial exchange with China. In addition, the Qing emperor
2 recognized the power inheritance of Ryuan Guangping's son, Ryuan Guangzuan
3 阮光纘 (JCY, 27197), which strengthened the Ryuan family's political status.

4 In 1803, the Jiaqing emperor (r. 1796-1720) changed the country's name
5 from Annam into Yuenan (Vietnam) and titled the Ryuan family head of the time,
6 Ryuan Fuying 阮福映, as the King. The background of this name change came
7 from Ryuan's plea to rename his country from Annam to Nanyue 南越 (southern
8 Yue). The court's discussion of it reviewed the history of the previous local
9 relationship with China's dynastic courts, placed the political implications into
10 the new name to show the imperial court's control of the whole name matter,
11 and manifested the Qing emperor's superior charge of the country, as well as the
12 region. The decision was to give the country's new name as Yuenan 越南
13 (Vietnam or Yue in the south). The new seal that was granted to the "new" king
14 was engraved with the seal inscription as Yuenan to replace Annam on the
15 previous seals. With his new title and new seal, Ryuan Fuying assisted the Qing
16 court in various regional affairs, and the Qing court enjoyed a peaceful time in
17 that region (JCY, 27199-27200).

18 *Nanzhang (Laos)*

19 *Nanzhangguo* started to pay tribute to the Qing in 1730, in the Yongzheng
20 reign (1723-1735). In 1794, King Zhao Wenmeng 召溫猛 asked the Qianlong
21 court to title him as the king. The emperor accepted the plea and granted him a
22 seal (no seal decoration given in the source). Zhao, however, did not stay in his
23 kingdom but wandered in Vietnam. In 1808, the Vietnamese King Ryuan Fuying
24 sent his official to take this seal away from Zhao and handed it over to the Qing
25 authority. The Jiaqing emperor blamed Zhao as a coward who was not able to
26 hold his kingdom together, could not even keep the Qing emperor-granted seal,
27 and should not be allowed to enter the Qing territory (JCY, 27259). The JCY
28 record of Vietnam also counted down this seal handover, to which the Jiaqing
29 emperor praised Ryuan Fuying and confirmed Ryuan's tribute to the Qing court
30 to continue (JCY, 27200). In 1819, a new Nanzhang head Zhaomangtaidula 召
31 蟒塔度臘 sent his tribute envoy to the Qing court and asked the Jiaqing emperor
32 to title him as the king. The emperor accepted the request and granted him a seal,
33 with no description of the design (JCY, 27259-27260).

34 *Miandian (Myanmar)*

35 *Miandian* started to pay tribute to the Qing in 1659. The consistent internal
36 war caused the Qing to send troops to pacify the situation. As late as 1788, the
37 country head Meng Yun 孟隕 stabilized the country and paid tribute to the
38 Qianlong emperor. The emperor recognized his leading status in his home
39 country and received his tribute envoy in audience. In 1790, Meng Yun asked
40 the emperor to title him as the king and to open border markets for his people.
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42
43
44

The emperor issued the entitlement decree to him and granted him a seal, with no description of its decoration (JCY, 27287-27290).



(https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/eoxdzq/empire_of_the_great_qing_1820/)

These six seal-receiving kingdoms were often given a particular mention in the most important Qing documents regarding tribute polities, such as *Qinding daqing huida* (1991, 354-355, and He Xinhua 2012, 111), to show their close relationship with the Qing court. Among these kingdoms, the Korean king was granted the emperor's titling decree and seal without requesting the seal. The leader in other Southeast kingdoms had the pattern of requesting, to which the emperor would issue a decree of authorization with a special written certificate, called *gaoming* 誥命. Even though this certificate confirmed a king's position, the titled king would also ask for an emperor-granted seal to legitimize that authority.

Not every polity that wanted or desired the Qing court to title their king would receive the privilege. The polity Sulu 蘇祿 (in present-day southern Philippines) belonged to such a case. Even though the Sulu expressed the wish to be as intimate as to become part of China, the emperor did not approve issuing a decree and seal to their king (JCY, 27263-5). Thus, the context and the

variation of the seal granting and receiving deserve specific investigations, as the following discussion will unfold.

Russia

The JCY's Russian chapter proves that the Qing court never issued official seals to Russia, the same as to every other European country. But the studies of the Sino-Russian treaties have demonstrated that official seals played a special role in their treaty relationship. In the negotiation for the bilateral Treaty of Nerchinsk, signed in 1689, both sides required the stamp of official seals to verify the Treaty's authenticity. After the treaty articles were agreed upon and the two empires' negotiation officials signed their names on the treaty documents, the seal stamping from both sides finalized the Treaty (Chia Ning 2025, 21-50).

Before the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing between the Qing and Great Britain, which started the unequal treaty in modern China, Russia was the only external power that signed a modern-style diplomatic treaty with the Qing court on equal footing. Through the treaty terms, Russia received many privileges, such as demarcating borders, establishing direct diplomatic correspondence, Tsarist envoys visiting the Qing court from time to time, and having an Orthodox Church, a Russian language school, and students sent by the Russian court to learn Manchu and Chinese in the Qing capital city, Beijing. Russian traders were also given access to the Qing capital market and the newly opened border markets. All these privileges were dreamed of by, but were not allowed to, other contemporary European countries (JCY, 27236-27243, Chia 2017, 163-168, and Chia 2022, 79-98). Since the seal stamps finalized the Treaty of Nerchinsk and the Treaty impacted the Sino-Russian relationship in the post-treaty period until the 19th century, the matter of material culture in the diplomatic culture is proven to be critical.

The significance of material seals in this Russian case, located north of Qing China, differed from the "tribute seals" associated with the Qing relationship with the six kingdoms to the south. These two types of seals differ not only in their applications but, more importantly, in their purposes. The new treaty relationships with Russia contrast sharply with the long-standing court-tributary relationships in East and Southeast Asia, even though the early Qing court always placed Russia on the same tributary list. Unlike the seals granted by the emperor to the six kingdoms, treaty seals did not involve a granting-receiving context. Instead, each of the Qing and Russian empires chose its own official seal to affirm the authority of the bilateral treaty. This comparison offers an important perspective on the scholarly understanding of tribute seals, set against the broader context of seal use in the Qing dynasty.

1 Tribute Seals and the Qing Political Culture

2
3 As a grand cultural project compiled by the Qing court, JCY delineated the
4 comprehensive geopolitical map of the Great Qing Empire. It provided the
5 historical record of how all the lands and peoples came under the Qing emperor.
6 The geopolitical map that JCY depicted had the internal and external parts. The
7 tribute polities belong to the external part, since they were outside the Qing's
8 direct administrative scope. They were still, however, within the Qing-
9 dominated "world order." The tribute seals were material tools to symbolically
10 assist the court in maintaining this order.

11 The seal system in the internal political culture was the foundation of the
12 seal application in the Qing external order. The empire of China, with dynasties
13 ruled by both Han-Chinese or non-Chinese from Inner Asia (nomadic peoples
14 outside the Great Wall) in various historical stages, had kept a strong seal
15 tradition in the political system. It started in the pre-imperial time, before the
16 first imperial dynasty, the Qin Empire (221-207 B. C.). In this seal system, the
17 emperor monopolized imperial seals, which authorized the imperial level of
18 decisions. The official seals under the imperial seals operated the government
19 routines at different levels. Up to the Qing dynasty, the seal system was a solid
20 part of the Qing political system in managing the empire (Du 2013, 1-28, Dai
21 2015, 143-153, Sin 2009, Herbert Franke 1987, 4242-4246, Guo 2003, Chia
22 2017b, 39-56, and He 2012, 321-350). A representative example is that in the
23 Board of Punishment, like in every administrative Board at the Qing court, an
24 official in the position of *Zhangjian* 掌監 (the seal manager) used the official
25 seal to receive and issue documents in the Qing bureaucracy. Without the seal
26 stamps on these documents, the official communication up and down or between
27 equal-level offices would not be able to circulate through the written documents
28 (*Qinding daqing huidian*, 525). To any new official appointment, the court
29 would issue a new seal to the appointee for him to process official works, and
30 the seal for the previous person on the same post would be taken back and
31 destroyed (*Qinding daqing huidian*, 196). Thus, the official seals authorized the
32 official positions (Xin 2009, 1-2), marked the status, rank, title, and authority
33 (Luo 2004, 8), and exercised operating power for the government bureaucracy.

34 In the Qing political system, official seals were divided into five ranks,
35 which were made of different materials, designed with various artistic
36 decorations, inscribed by different writing styles, and labeled by separate
37 language terms according to status and ranks. *Xi* 璽 or *Bao* 寶 were the terms
38 for the emperor-monopolized seals, made by jade and gold, or sandalwood, and
39 with the largest size, heaviest weight, and finest decoration. *Yin* 印 was for
40 higher ranks of officials to authorize their administrative work, made of either
41 gold-plated silver or pure silver, and with various weights, sizes, and decorations
42 according to different levels of authority. *Guanfang* 關防 was for officials to use
43 in frontier affairs and also in the temporary imperial projects. *Tiaoji* 條記 were
44 the seals for officials in the lower level of the bureaucracy, made of copper, in
45 smaller sizes, lighter weight, and with fewer or even no decorations according
46 to official titles (*Qinding daqing huidian*, 293-295). Thus, the seal hierarchy

1 matched the official hierarchy of the Qing bureaucracy. An official seal
2 empowered one's authority level and symbolized status.

3 Engraving, producing, and utilizing the official seals were under the
4 stringent supervision of the Grant Secretariat, a key government office that
5 assisted the emperor directly. The Board of Rites – one of the Six Boards at the
6 central government for the empire-wide administrative system formulated the
7 regulations of the seal administration. Since the Yongzheng reign, the Grant
8 Council – the top policy-making body (*Huangchao tongdian* 1882. 2001 reprint,
9 23:42 and 44) oversaw the application of the official seals. Shangbaosi 尚寶司
10 (the Seal Office, with its first name as Shangbaojian 尚寶監) at the central
11 government managed the seal administration (*Huangchao tongdian*, 23:43), and
12 under the Board of Rites, there was Zhuyinju 鑄印局 (the Seal Engraving Bureau)
13 to produce official seals (*Huangchao tongdian*, 54:47). The Qianlong emperor
14 himself wrote the Seal album, *Yinpu* 印譜, which recorded all official seals with
15 the regulation descriptions. The emperor stated that “there should not be a single
16 day without [using] this Seal Album [in the state affairs]” (*Huangchao tongdian*,
17 55:50). The recorded evidence demonstrates the material side of the Qing
18 political system. The current Qing scholarship has not, but should, give full
19 recognition to this material aspect of the political culture to understand the
20 overall Qing political system.

21 As every official action in the Qing administration required an official seal
22 to verify its legitimacy in internal affairs, tribute seals served different purposes.
23 They were the extension of the Qing seal system in many aspects and were issued
24 only to some tribute polities. To the Qing court, a tribute seal symbolized a
25 king's political submission to the Qing emperor and his willingness to cooperate
26 for regional order in the Qing border areas. To a seal-receiving kingdom, a
27 tribute seal legitimized a king's authority in his kingdom and helped strengthen
28 his position among his enemies with the Qing court on his back. The Qing court
29 did not directly involve the internal governance and administration of the six
30 kingdoms (He 2012, 34-5). The seal from the Qing court kept them in a formal
31 tribute tie with the Qing Empire: all their tribute requests, visits, and trading
32 activities would need the seal-stamped documents to process (He 2012, 345-347).
33 Despite the frequent internal struggles that could disrupt the relationship
34 between the court and the kingdom through one line of its king, the newly
35 established power emerging from internal conflicts would ultimately seek the
36 title and seal from the Qing court to restore the relationship with the same “seal
37 pattern” or “tribute pattern.” The re-granting of the seal would occur once the
38 Qing court recognized the new ruler. (He 2012, 335-343).

39 The six seal-receiving kingdoms, either physically adjacent to China's
40 borders or close enough to influence China's border regions, were, in general,
41 under the influence of Chinese culture and belonged to the Chinese cultural
42 world in which “Chinese civilization provided a common intellectual, linguistic,
43 and normative framework” (Kang, 594). Their high level of apperception and
44 acceptance of the seal's significance was the cultural foundation on which the
45 tribute seals functioned in the Chinese World Order. Korea, Ryukyu, and
46 Annan/Vietnam had closer cultural ties with China. Their tribute envoys enjoyed

1 court-arranged tours of cultural attractions and wrote Chinese-style poems,
 2 based on their positive experiences. This fact reflected their affinity with China
 3 and stands in stark contrast to contemporary European tribute envoys, who noted
 4 negative impressions due to cultural shocks during similar tours (He 2012, 290-
 5 298).

6 In summary, the function of the tribute seals in the case of the six tribute
 7 kingdoms was deeply embedded in political culture, which empowered the
 8 material seals with symbolic representation and a “language” to define authority
 9 and obligation in relationships. This political culture fostered connections
 10 between human polities and physical artifacts, making the seal a valuable
 11 resource to achieve specific political objectives for both the seal-granter and
 12 seal-receiver. The Qing court anticipated the seal to secure the loyalty of tribute
 13 kingdoms and maintain stability along the borders. The kingdom kings viewed
 14 the seal as a prestigious honor, legitimizing their domestic authority, granting
 15 access to material and economic benefits from the emperor’s tribute gifts and
 16 trade opportunities in China, and enhancing their strategic standing among
 17 neighboring powers (Chen 2019, 171-199; Zheng 2006, 72-87). Although the
 18 seal ideal did not always work effectively, the willingness of the seal-receiving
 19 kingdoms to accept the political and cultural framework of China’s tribute
 20 system (Chen 2019, 173-180) distinguished them from other tributaries for
 21 whom the seal held little significance in their relationship with China, and the
 22 Qing court did not involve seals with them. Thus, the function of politicized
 23 material objects must be understood within the appropriate cultural context.²

24 25 26 **The Seal-Receiving Kingdoms in the Qing Tribute World**

27
28 No pre-modern kingdoms and empires existed in isolation; they were all part
 29 of a larger world beyond their physical borders. They survived or thrived by
 30 navigating a “world order” through managing relationships with surrounding
 31 powers. The six kingdoms next to or close to Qing territory in East and Southeast
 32 Asia formed a core group within the tribute-tied Qing World Order. The tribute
 33 seals granted by the emperor served as a key indicator of this group in the Qing
 34 tribute system. Within this group, the seals also distinguished Korea from other
 35 kingdoms.

36 In 1637, the Manchu emperor granted the Korean kings the imperial titling
 37 decree and seal without the king’s request for the seal. Such a pattern continued
 38 through the Qing dynasty. Compared with other kingdoms, which followed a
 39 different pattern for receiving these two honorary items from the Qing court, this

²It should be noticed that Japan in East Asia was for a long time in the Chinese cultural world, but was not among the Qing seal-granting countries. The physical distance was one of the reasons, as Zheng Ronghe pointed out, that Japan did not share a land border with China. In addition, the rising Tokugawa Japan rejected the Chinese world order, even as it followed the same pattern to establish a Japan-centered order in Asia, as Bruce Loyd Batten’s book *To the Ends of Japan* has discussed. Also see Chen Shangsheng’s article regarding Japan in the Ming-Qing tribute system (Zheng 2026, 73). These reasons differentiated Japan from Korea in its relationship with Qing China.

1 was a privilege. To other kingdoms, the emperor often issued only a decree to
 2 the king, and the king would then request the seal. This practice underscored the
 3 seal's significance to a tribute kingdom.

4 The material quality and artistic design of the tribute seals measured the
 5 status of a kingdom in relation to the Qing court. The seal granted to the Korean
 6 king was made of gold. The seal handle was designed in the shape of a turtle.
 7 The written style of seal inscription was *zhiyinzhuān* 芝英篆 in Manchu and
 8 Chinese. The size was a little smaller than the seal for the prince of the first rank,
 9 whose status was just next under the emperor in the Qing noble hierarchy. The
 10 seals for Ryukyu, Annan/Vietnam, and Siam were made of gold-plated silver,
 11 equal to the seals of the prince of the second rank. The handle of their seals was
 12 shaped like a camel, which was traditionally the seal handle made for the non-
 13 Chinese minority heads and was below the rank of the turtle handle in the Qing
 14 seal hierarchy of the seal animals. The seal inscriptions for these kingdoms were
 15 styled with *shangfang dazhuān* 尚方大篆, a writing style inferior to the rank of
 16 *zhiyinzhuān* in the Qing inscription hierarchy (*Qinding daqing huidian* 28:13a;
 17 *Qinding daqing huidian zeli* 63:58b; *Huangchao tongdian*, 54:48; He 2012, 322-
 18 3 and 328-230; Meng and Wei 2008, 78; Lo 2004, 12 and 76-78; and Yao 2019,
 19 88). From the ways of seal granting and the seal status measures, Korea ranked
 20 above the other kingdoms in every seal category. Even though the seals for the
 21 other tribute kingdoms were under the Korean seal, their rank was still high in
 22 the Qing seal system for nobles. During the Qing dynasty, the system of nobility
 23 grew from the nine-rank system in 1636, through the ten-rank system in 1649,
 24 to the fourteen-rank system in 1748 (Cheng 2004, 79). The tribute seal for the
 25 Korean king was almost equal to the first rank, and the seals for the other
 26 kingdoms were to the second rank. The knowledge of seal ranking, reflected in
 27 material measures, informs us of the level of importance of these tribute
 28 kingdoms to the Qing dynasty.

29 In the context of the Qing political culture, only those familiar with Qing
 30 seal culture could perceive the “cipher codes” from the material details. These
 31 details defined the status of the seal holders and their relationship with the Qing
 32 court. Through examining the seals with their details, the commonly held
 33 knowledge regarding Korea's close tribute relationship with the Qing court can
 34 no longer be explained solely by the written descriptions of Korea's prominent
 35 role in tribute rituals, the significant gifts the emperor presented to the Korean
 36 king, and the frequent tribute missions sent by Korean kings to the Qing court.
 37 The material evidence of the seal hierarchy can also demonstrate that prominent
 38 role.

39 Another highlight of the tribute seals to our understanding of the Qing
 40 tribute world is the transition from holding the seal from the previous dynasty,
 41 the Ming (1368-1644), to receiving the seal from the new dynasty, the Qing.
 42 China had a lengthy history with dynasties circling one round after another. The
 43 throne of the new dynasty always continued the tribute system, but was highly
 44 sensitive to the seal transition, which meant the loyalty shift of the tribute polities
 45 from the old to the new ruler. During the confrontation between the rising
 46 Manchu State and the declining Ming dynasty in the early seventeenth century,

the fate of the tribute seals between the two dynasties shed light on the political nature of these material objects. They represented the movement of dynastic change in China's tribute world. Turning in the Ming seal to the Qing authority meant a vital loyalty turning point - the king's political relinquishment of the Ming dynasty.

Korea, the adjacent neighbor of Manchuria - the homeland of the ruling Manchus, was the first kingdom to receive the Qing emperor-granted seal and the only one before the Manchu took over China proper in 1644. The seal transition pre-conditioned this seal-granting event. The rising Manchu State (1616-1643) desired to break Korea's loyalty to the previous Ming dynasty and requested the Korean king to turn the Ming emperor's seal over to the Manchu court. In response to Korea's refusal, Manchu emperor Huang Taiji launched two military campaigns, one in 1627 and another from 1636 to 1637. These wars compelled Korea to surrender the Ming seal. After the defeated Korean king discarded the Ming emperor's seal and took an oath to be an honest Qing follower, the Korean king received the highest-level tribute seal. Korea, a nation with a strong tradition of the Chinese Confucianism (Stanford Encyclopedia 2021), upheld the seal's value. To be the most loyal tribute country to the Qing court (Wang 2009, 59-60 and Fu 2028, 140-150), the seal affected it. At the grand tribute ritual ceremony at the Qing palace, the Korean envoy was always placed at the leading position, followed by other seal-receiving kingdoms, and then by other tributaries. The Qing emperor's envoy to Korea, issuing a titling decree or delivering a seal to the new king, was always at an official rank higher than the envoys to the other seal-receiving kingdoms (He 2012, 138). Such a court practice to the tribute kingdoms distinguished Korea from the other tribute kingdoms and, at the same time, drew a line between the core group of the Qing tribute world and the tributaries outside this group, to whom the Qing emperor did not send envoys or issue seals at all.

The critical seal transition in the dynastic transition was also evident in the case of Ryukyu. The seal granted by the Shunzhi emperor to the Ryukyu king as the Zhongshan King in 1654 was under the condition that the Ryukyu king turn the Ming seal over to the Qing. On the Ryukyu side, it took years for the Ryukyu king to make such a seal-change decision after the first Ryukyu tribute envoy reached the Qing court in Beijing. (Wang 2009, 61 and 176-177 and He 2012, 335-337).

In Annan/Vietnam, the Qing court also dealt with the process in which the Annan leaders refused but eventually turned in the Ming dynasty's seal. The seal shift was, again, viewed as a critical loyalty shift (Sun 2004, 9-12 and Wang 2009, 61-2). In a wartime situation, furthermore, the Qing court took nearly four decades, from 1644 to 1683, to weigh the conflicting Mo family and the Li family to decide who would be the Qing loyalist who would deserve the emperor-granted seal. The 1683 seal-granting to Li Weizheng took place in such a context. In the next stage of the long internal war between the Li family (which had come under the domination of the Zheng family) and the Ryuan family, the Qing court eventually titled Ryuan Guangping king and granted him a seal in 1789 (Sun 2004, 20-37). Ryuan Guangping came to the Qing court himself rather

1 than sending his tribute envoys, making it a unique case vis-à-vis the normal
 2 tribute practice of the king's sending an envoy to the Qing court. The Qianlong
 3 emperor received Ryuan Guangping with high honor. Ryuan's reign (r. 1788-
 4 1792) was the best period of the tribute relationship with the Qing (He 2012,
 5 147-149).

6 For Xianluo, *Qingshigao* 清史稿 (Draft history of Qing) recorded that the
 7 Xianluo king turned over the Ming seals, together with other Ming items, to the
 8 Qing court while asking for a Qing seal to be granted to him from the Shunzhi
 9 court (*Qingshigao* 1998, Volume 4, 3755). This source suggested the voluntary
 10 turning in of the Ming seal. The case further reflects the precondition of
 11 replacing the Ming seal with the Qing seal to establish a tribute relationship with
 12 the newly established Manchu dynasty.

13 To the other two seal-receiving kingdoms, Nanzhang did not start the tribute
 14 as late as the Yongzheng reign. The Qianlong emperor's seal granted to the
 15 Nanzhang king did not happen as late as 1794. Similarly, the war-chaotic
 16 Miandian received the Qianlong emperor-granted seal to become a stabilized
 17 tributary as late as 1788. The Ming seal was not a matter by that time.

18 When the Ryukyu's tribute to China was stopped by the Meiji government
 19 of Japan in 1879 by changing this kingdom to Japan's Okinawa Prefecture,
 20 Vietnam's tribute to China was broken by the Sino-French War in 1884, Korean
 21 tribute to China was upturned by the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), each of
 22 the previous tribute kingdoms destroyed the material symbol of the tribute
 23 relations with Qing China, the emperor-granted seal (He 2012, 348-350).
 24 China's whole tribute system collapsed, and the dynasty came to its last moment
 25 before its final fall in the 1911 Revolution. Tribute seals accompanied the Qing
 26 tribute system from its beginning to its end. This human-created system, rooted
 27 in particular culture, tradition, and worldview in East Asia, needed the material
 28 objects to fulfill its purpose in relation to the peoples and polities across a larger
 29 geographical space, known as the Chinese World Order.

30 In summary, the history of tribute seals reveals the patterns of engagement
 31 between the seal-granting authority, the Qing court, and the seal-receiving
 32 partners, the tribute kingdoms in East and Southeast Asia. Their interaction
 33 through the tribute seals bound the six kingdoms as a core group within the Qing
 34 tribute world. The details of how a seal was crafted signified a kingdom's tribute
 35 rank. The rank influenced the level of privileges, including political support from
 36 the Qing empire, access to valuable gifts from the Qing emperor, lucrative
 37 trading opportunities in Chinese markets, and a strengthened position for a king
 38 within his kingdom as well as among the powers in the surrounding region. The
 39 Qing court, in return, benefited from the cooperation of the kingdoms along the
 40 Qing border areas for peace and security. This pattern of relationship was
 41 different from the other external tributaries, which were geographically distant,
 42 culturally diverse, and not involving tribute seals. To these tributaries, the court's
 43 authority over their tribute was based on enforced ritual commitments and the
 44 gift-exchange and trade opportunities, which, however, did not match the level
 45 of the seal-receiving kingdoms. Thus, by tribute seals, the Qing tributaries were
 46 divided into different relationship groups.

1 Conclusion

2
3 In the Qing dynasty, material objects known as seals were crafted with
4 artistic designs under imperial regulations for political use. The study of such
5 material objects for tribute use contributes to the current scholarship with a
6 material comprehension of the Qing tribute world. These seals “acted” as
7 political connectors between the Qing court and tribute kingdoms, conveying
8 non-verbal messages for expectations and obligations within the cultural
9 framework of the Chinese World Order. They symbolized political control and
10 loyalty. They defined a type of cooperation within the structure of the tribute
11 system.

12 The analytical discussion of tribute seals highlights the human belief in the
13 Chinese political culture that the seals could facilitate tribute interactions and
14 help establish the Qing tribute order. It reveals that the material seals in the ways
15 of granting and receiving became a resource with which the Manchu court tried
16 to control the tribute kingdom, and the tribute kingdoms strove for self-interest
17 politically and economically. It regards tribute seals as both material and visual
18 evidence that should be used as primary sources for understanding history,
19 society, and the Qing tribute system. It proves the importance of material culture
20 in tribute management and practice. It clarifies the meaning and function of
21 tribute seals in bonding the six seal-receiving kingdoms into a specific tribute
22 group within the Qing World Order.

23 Reconstructing the Qing tribute system with a focus on material seals offers
24 a fresh perspective on the study of the Qing tribute system. These seals were
25 more than just inanimate objects; they served as historical evidence and
26 represented relational concepts, status marks, and material means for achieving
27 tribute goals. Consequently, the tribute-oriented Qing World Order was sustained
28 not only through ideological means, military enforcement, economic
29 arrangements, and power-balancing strategies, but also through these entrusted
30 material objects that embodied political and cultural principles.

31 Tribute seals played a crucial role in the Qing dynasty’s tribute
32 administration towards neighboring kingdoms in East and Southeast Asia. They,
33 at the same time, moved these kingdoms to implement their own sturdy rules.
34 These material objects were closely tied to the Qing pursuit of "Middle
35 Kingdom" ideology, the belief in the "Mandate of Heaven," and the tribute goals
36 associated with seal culture. They were also inextricably linked to the kingdoms’
37 quest for self-development through their relationship with the Qing Empire. In
38 this context, tribute seals played a significant role in shaping the relationships
39 among political entities within the region of the Asian continent known as the
40 Chinese World Order. These seals should be acknowledged as important
41 contributors, along with their human designers, who created and entitled them,
42 to the understanding of the Qing tribute system in Asia.
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