CHAPTER ONE

CHINESE WORLD ORDER: PERSPECTIVES AND FRAMEWORKS

China’s foreign relations in pre-modern and early modern history have often been framed within one of two mutually exclusive and historically distinct structures of inter-state relations; the traditional tribute system of suzerain-vassal relations between the states of East Asia, and the “modern” or “Western” system referred to as international law interpreting states as sovereign and equal members of a larger international society. The topic of this book is distinctively how the latter of these, as a system of theories and practices of inter-state relations, contributed to a world-view, or maybe we may even refer to it as a cluster of world-views, by different groups of Chinese intellectuals in the latter half of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th until the revolution and the establishment of the Republic in 1911-12. The terms used here for delineating international law as a “modern” and a “Western” system of international relations seem to indicate that one envisions China passing through a historic transformation when the ancient modes of inter-state relations are exchanged for a “modern” structure and model for conducting and interpreting such relations. The process of transformation in the intellectual interpretation of international relations in general and China’s role and membership in the community of states in particular was indeed for a large part a process of adopting terms and concepts from international law as a theoretical framework. I hope, however, in this book to be able to show that the native Chinese discourse on these topics involves far more both in terms of traditional and modern ideas and frameworks, both indigenous and foreign, than the simplistic idea of a dichotomy of incompatible and mutually exclusive interpretations of inter-state relations seems to indicate.

The adoption of the term “modern” brings to mind a transformation of the Chinese national orientation and identity in international relations from an ancient, “outdated”, or even “redundant” system no
longer viable in a “modern” age to a new and updated universalist system imported from abroad. Undoubtedly, to some intellectuals in late Qing China international law also appeared to be the universal system of international relations for the new age to come. The fact that international law was among the areas referred to as Western studies (xixue 西學) delineated this international system along with the “modern” and “Western” modes of thinking about the state and the nation in late Qing intellectual circles. Our perspective here, however, is not to impose such a unilateral interpretation of “modernity” and “Western” on the entire spectrum of contributions to the Chinese discourse on these questions. We shall also be careful not to impose the idea of a linear evolution from a traditional (Chinese) to a modern (Western) world-view onto the study of the reception of international law in China. We shall be aware of the pitfalls of Eurocentrism when approaching the question of how an evidently foreign, Western European and North American, philosophy of the state in inter-state relations is approached and interpreted in the Chinese intellectual environment. In early works on the flow of goods and ideas between the West and the East a Europe-centred interpretative framework has too often been called upon to understand the development and substance of the object to be studied.¹ The risk of doing this is even greater when addressing a topic involving the adaptation and interpretation of what initially is an intellectual and political framework developed in the European context and introduced into China as such. I concur with Kenneth Pomeranz and R. Bin Wong, however, that we cannot eschew “many of the most important questions in history (and in contemporary life)” for the simple fear that we either evoke the dangers of Eurocentrism or the “postmodern” fear of cross-cultural comparison altogether. “It seem much preferable instead to confront biased comparisons by trying to produce better ones”.² I sincerely hope that this book may contribute to an understanding of how a distinctively Eurocentric system of perception was utilized to become the framework for an indigenous Chinese discourse on these issues.

¹ This tendency is most emphatically refuted in recent works on international trade and diplomacy; such as Hamashita 2003, Pomeranz 2000, Pomeranz&Topik2006, Toby 1991, Wills 1984, Wills 2005, Wong 1997.