

Does Culture Matter? The Logics and Counter-logics of Culture in State Finance, Taxation and Tributary Trade Policies during the Ming Times c. 1370-1600

Dr. Jerry C. Y. Liu

Introduction

Linear and structural interpretations of culture often assign it a progressive or teleological end, which guides the culture towards a specific direction. A culture under such theorizations thus is considered as path dependent, or in the Toynbean cause-effect mode, falls into patterns inevitable, invariable, and predictable. Max Weber ascribed the causes of capitalism (though not thoroughly) to the new Protestant ethic, or more specifically, a spirit of hard work for the inner-worldly ascetic man of a vocation, and his rational economic activities (i.e. the rational utilization of capital and capitalistic organization of labour). Adhering to the Weberian line, Landes holds that culture makes all the difference in deciding over the wealth and poverty of nations, scientific culture is the reason why the West has won. Huntington and Harrison argue cultural values are the things that matter in shaping economic progress.¹

Economic historians dissatisfied with such determinist simplicity on the other hand bring up contradictory arguments. For instance the recent reappraisal of those same qualities of Confucian values such as loyalty to one's family, harmony and concern with shame and "face" had made historians, social scientists and Chinese intellectuals in the past regard Confucianism as an impediment in the modern transformation of Chinese

¹ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, London, Thames and Hudson, One Volume Edition, 1972; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Surrey, Routledge, 1930 (Translated by T. Parsons, Second Edition 1992), 58; David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, London, Abacus, 1998; L. E. Harrison and S. P. Huntington eds., *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, New York, 2000.

economy. The same virtues are also responsible for both the economic failure and success of East Asian countries in the 1950s and 1980s respectively. They thus put forward the question that how can cultural attitudes simultaneously hinder and promote economic changes?² How do we determine empirically that one culture has a better ethic than another? And how do we measure thrift on a society-wide scale?³ Questions like these are certainly stimulating and worth thinking, but still they are at some risks of oversimplifying the intriguing nature of culture when treating the delicate interactivity between culture and economy.

Geertz's interpretation of the logic of culture summed up the incommensurable nature of culture,⁴

Referring as it does both to formal principles of reasoning and to rational connections among facts and events, "logic" is a treacherous word; and nowhere more so than in the analysis of culture. When one deals with meaningful forms, the temptation to see the relationship among them as immanent, as consisting of some sort of intrinsic affinity (or disaffinity) they bear for one another, is virtually overwhelming... when we try to treat these properties as we would sweetness or brittleness, they fail to behave, 'logically,' in the expected way... One cannot run symbolic forms through some sort of cultural assay to discover their harmony content, their stability ratio, or their index of incongruity; one can only look and see if the forms in question are in fact coexisting, changing, or interfering with one another in some way or other.

A cultural historian engage seriously in the study of the interactivity between culture and economic-political development would also add, if

² R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Zhange and the Limits of European Experience*. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1997, 2; and Harriet T. Zurndorfer, "Confusing Confucianism with Capitalism: Culture as Impediment and/or Stimulus to Chinese Economic Development", The 3rd GEHN Conference in Konstanz, Germany, 3-5 June 2004.

³ P. H. H. Vries, "The Role of Culture and Institutions in Economic History: Can Economics be of Any Help?", The 3rd GEHN Conference in Konstanz, Germany, 3-5 June 2004.

⁴ Clifford Geertz, op. cit. (1973), 404-405.

economic and political factors such as capital, market, competition and power control may at different times and occasions be considered as favourable or unfavourable to the function of a political economic system, or to different systems, why then must cultural ideals or values be set into an one-way-effect interpretation to the practice of political economy? Why can there not be logics and counter-logics within a culture that are vying constantly for the acceptance and rejection of elites and commoners? Most would agree that culture is by no means static and predetermined, but constantly changing in response to internal and external challenges. For different state economy decision-makers, the impacts of a same set of cultural values upon economic development can also be taken as conducive and obstructive under varied socio-spatial-temporal frameworks. They are subject to the interpretations and reinterpretations of various individuals, economists, politicians, and scholar gentries. The key is which version would prevail within a specific socio-economic-political and historical context, and to whom would it be appealing to.

The paper does not pretend to have answers to questions listed above. By looking into the compiled works on statecraft and Ming officials' transcripts and memorials to the emperors, the paper aims merely to derive the documented cultural logics and counter logics in the state finance, taxation and tributary trade policies of the Ming China (c. 1370-1600). By analyzing the rationale behind the Ming officers' policy debates, it puts China's cultural logics into a direct "consistency test", especially in cases that involve explicit or implicit conflicts between cultural ideals and material interests in the processes of decision-making in the economic policy (i.e. what values would be prioritized over others during the Ming). Putting it in another way, would the idealistic concept of virtuous or benevolent rule still play an upper hand when they were in direct contradiction with the state's physical profits and interests? We

intend to show not the “determining nature” of culture in the development of economy, but culture did condition the practice of Ming policymakers in its own “logical” way.

Virtuous Rule as a Dominant Cultural Logic of the Ming State Political-Economy

Morality and virtue was closely associated with the legitimacy of state rule in China. The Confucian ideological commitments assigned a high priority to the rulers to maintain popular welfare. As Wong argues, “There is no early modern European government equivalent to the late imperial Chinese state’s efforts at dictating moral and intellectual orthodoxy, nor were such efforts particularly important to Europe’s state-making agenda, as they were in China.” The Chinese efforts to reach the minds of the commons and peasants contrast strongly with that of the Europeans (who left such matters to the religious authorities).⁵ Governments in China manifest a peculiar characteristic of self-restraint that could hardly be found in Europe. Such a self-restraining feature was also reflected on Chinese states’ idealistic governing principle, which Confucius termed “the rule of virtue 爲政以德” or “the rule of benevolence”. By this he meant that instead of using political interests and criminal punishments as the standards of governance, the rulers or politicians should “guide people with virtue, and rule them with rites or courtesies”.⁶ The Confucian doctrine was employed later by the leading Confucian Dong Zhong-Shu 董仲舒 (179-104 BC), a prime minister in the Earlier Han Dynasty, whose political philosophy tied the “Mandate of Heaven” (the “way of *tien* or nature”) closely with the behaviours of the

⁵ R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Zhange and the Limits of European Experience*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1997, 97.

⁶ *The Analects* 論語. Section 2. (Taipei, 啓明書局, Reprints.)

rulers (action of humanity).⁷ With the institutionalization of Confucianism as the dominant political ideology, the rule of virtue thus became a central governing principle in China especially after the Han. Such a principle emphasized the ethical ties and moral commitments between the rulers and the ruled, whilst connected the occurrences of warfare and natural disasters tightly with the misrules of the emperors.⁸

Under such a virtuous ruling principle, heavy taxation and over-exploitation of people was deemed as immoral; and political non-doings in contrast would allow people to prosper naturally. Confucian teaching, as a device that was designed also for the ruled, even endorsed the right of the plebeian to rebel against the corrupt government and to restore the political order. As Deng points out, “because of the lack of law to control state corruption, when the ruling class failed to represent desirable moral and policy standards, the ruled were entitled to rebel and replace unpopular regimes at the people’s wills.” This moral justification for peasant rebellions had become a common belief at the grass-roots level of Chinese society, and in a deteriorating socio-economic situation plebeian uprisings were almost expected to occur. This attitude towards mass rebellions, which reveals a heavy humanistic cultural intervention of in Chinese political economy, would have been almost unimaginable in Europe.⁹ It was based on such a moral-ethical oriented cultural logic that the Chinese central bureaucracy adopted a policy of least intervention and minimalist state

⁷ “If the committing of evil and crimes by monarchs brings calamities to the people, Heaven will deprive the monarchs of the power to rule,” Dong argued in his *Many Dewdrops of Spring and Autumn* 春秋繁露. Quoted from Gang Deng, *The Premodern Chinese Economy: Structural Equilibrium and Capitalist Sterility*, London and New York, Routledge, 1999 (b), 109.

⁸ Jin Guan-Tao 金觀濤 and Liu Qing-Feng 劉青峰, *The Origins of Modern Chinese Thought—The Evolution of Chinese Political Culture from the Perspective of Ultrastable Structure (Vol. I)* 中國現代思想的起源—超穩定結構與中國政治文化的演變, Hong Kong, Hong Kong Chinese University, 2000, 61. (Title Translated by the Author.)

⁹ Gang Deng, op. cit. (1999 (b)), 242-245, quote page 242.

on many historical occasions. The Ming China was of no exception. To try to be more specific, and as to be illustrated later, *the rule of virtue or benevolence when reflected on Ming state economic, coastal and foreign trade policies can be summarized as (a) the emperor and central officials' self-restraint to conform to ethic codes of thrift, frugality in both individual behaving and collective decision-makings; (b) the adherence to the principles of minimalist intervention, or light land taxation and labour levy; (c) low commercial tax in domestic and foreign trades; and (d) non-aggressive and non-profit-making approach to tributary trades and overseas commercial activities.*

Evidence concerning this pervasive moral-ethical based cultural logic can easily be drawn from the memorials of the bureaucrats to the Ming emperors. For instance, the officials often took natural disasters such as floods, famines, and the like as evidence of misrule. As collected in the *Transcripts of the Royal Ming Memoranda* 皇明疏鈔, Shang Lu 商輅 (1414-1486), a central civil official of the Ming, advised the emperor “To Develop Virtuous Policies and Pacify the Abnormal Catastrophe”; another official Yang Yan 楊言 suggested that the emperor should “Rectify his Own Misdeeds so as to Appease the Natural Disasters”; He Qi-Ming 何起鳴 on the other hand titled his memorial as “An Urge to Self-cultivation for Turning the Will of the Heaven”; and Qin Wu 秦武 encouraged His Majesty to “Invigorate the Sacred Aspirations in order to Respond to the Natural Calamity”.¹⁰ One needs not look into the content, but the titles of the letters, to grasp their ethical arguments. Virtuous rule was so taken for granted, or commonsensical, not only for the bureaucrats and the emperor, but also for the commons and peasants. Whether it was scientific and profitable to the state or not by making such

¹⁰ Sun Xun 孫旬 ed. *Transcripts of the Royal Ming Memoranda* 皇明疏鈔. d. 1584. (Collected in the *Compilation of the Sequel to Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries* 續修四庫全書. Vol. 463-464. Shanghai, 上海古籍出版社, 1995 Reprints.).

connections between the emperor's misdeeds and natural disasters, was obviously not the central concern for the bureaucrats. Any defiance of the ethical code shall directly threaten the legitimacy and authenticity of political rule. Such an overpowering cultural logic left the emperor and bureaucrats little choice but to conform to it, or they should soon expect riots to be justified, and new rebellious manifesto to be promulgated. In fact, Zu Yuan-Zhang himself was a farmer originally before he revolted against the Yuan.

Chart 1: Classification on Letters from Chinese Civil Officers to the Emperor in the Ming Times (c. 1367-1572)

Classifications		Number of Letters		Percentage	
1. Virtuous Rule	1.1 Sacred Teachings, Rites and Ancestral Instruction	265	224	29.5 %	24.9 %
	1.2 Reclining Luxuries, Pleasures and Tributes		41		4.6 %
2. Judiciary, Honouring the Decency and Impeaching the Misconducts		192		21.4 %	
3. Civil Service and Current Affairs		104		11.5 %	
4. Finance, Taxation and Labour Recruitment		76		8.5 %	
5. Infrastructure, Welfare and Social Orders		64		7.1 %	
6. Military and Security		133		14.8 %	
7. Feudal Awards and Palace Affairs		65		7.2 %	
Total		899		100 %	

Source: Sun Xun孫旬ed. *Transcripts of the Royal Ming Memoranda*皇明疏鈔. d. 1584. (Collected in the *Compilation of the Sequel to Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries*續修四庫全書. Vol. 463-464. Shanghai, 上海古籍出版社, 1995 Reprints.); Jia San-Jin賈三近ed., *Transcripts on the Royal Ming Memoranda in Jia-Jing and Long-Qing Reigns (1522-1572)*皇明兩朝疏鈔, Zhang Han張瀚ed., *Selective Compilations of the Royal Ming Memoranda*皇明疏議輯略, d. 1551.¹¹

¹¹ The duplicated titles in the three edited transcriptions have been excluded. The classifications used above are the total of the titles categorized under the original sub-heading of the following: 1.1 Sacred Teachings, Rites and Ancestral Instruction: The Ruling Principles of an Emperor君道, Sacred Teachings聖學, Following the

A statistical breakdown of three major compilations of the 899 Ming official memorials provide the historical mapping concerning what political-cultural atmosphere the Chinese politicians were operating under around the year 1450.¹² In *Chart 1*, among all the official correspondences to the throne between 1367 and 1572, there were nearly 30% of them addressing issues specifically about the tradition of virtuous rule. Most of the letters were reminders for the emperor to obey the sacred teachings, rituals, or ancestral instructions, and to reject

Ancestral Instructions法祖, Self-cultivation脩省, Ritual Ceremonies禮儀, Courtesies to the Subjects禮臣; 1.2 Reclining Luxuries, Pleasures and Tributes: Heresy and Religious Preferences好尚, Inspection Tours巡幸, Pleasures玩賞, Tributary Gifts貢獻, Extra Labours and Exploitations差遣; 2. Judiciary, Honouring the Decency and Impeaching the Misconducts: Correcting the Infringement弼違, Assisting the Integral援直, Jail and Criminal刑獄, Discipline風紀, Honouring the Loyal and Merits表忠(旌功), Treacherous Officials and Powers權姦, Impeachment糾劾; 3. Civil Service and Current Affairs: Orders命令, State Affairs國是, Current Policies時政, Responding Strategy召對, Employment用人, Accepting Advises納諫, Selecting the Able銓選, Assessment考課, Civil Service System制科; 4. Finance and Taxation: Financial Expense財用, Taxation征榷, Labours賦役, Horse Trading Policy馬政, Land Cultivation屯田; 5. Infrastructure, Welfare and Social Orders: Rivers and Canals河渠, Water Transportations漕運, Topography輿圖, Famine and Relief荒政, Astronomy and Calendar曆律, Schools學校, Customs風俗, Pacifying Bandits彌盜, Constructions營繕; 6. Military and Security: Military Preparation武備, Frontier Defence邊防, Punitive Expedition征討, River Defence江防, Pacifying and Administering the Foreigners撫治; 7. Feudal Awards and Palace Affairs: Crown Prince儲貳, Queens and Concubines宮闈, Suzerain and Vassals宗藩, Awarding Noble Titles賞爵, Collateral Relatives of the Emperor外戚, Eunuch近幸. See Sun Xun孫旬ed., op. cit. (d. 1584); Jia San-Jin賈三近 et al eds., *Transcripts on the Royal Ming Memoranda in the Reigns of Chia-Ching and Long-Ching (1522-1572)*皇明兩朝疏鈔, d. 1586. (Collected in the *Compilation of the Sequel to Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries*續修四庫全書. Vol. 465. Shanghai, 上海古籍出版社, 1995 Reprints); Zhang Han張瀚ed., *Selective Compilations of the Royal Ming Memorials*皇明疏議輯略, d. 1551. (Collected in the *Compilation of the Sequel to Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries*續修四庫全書. Vol. 463. Shanghai, 上海古籍出版社, 1995 Reprints.)

¹² Although the percentages presented here are derived from a calculation of the compiled letters selected by the Ming editors rather than of their absolute numbers, it is reasonable to project such ratios to the actual proportion of correspondences circulating among the state bureaucracy during the Ming period (since the ratios of letters under similar subheadings generally conform one another among all three compiled versions). At the very least, the figure certainly stands for the authentic view of how the Ming civil officers or literati (here the editors) visualize the weight or balance among various public affairs, to which they thought the rulers should dedicate their efforts accordingly.

unnecessary luxuries, pleasures, as well as tributes from abroad. The second largest category regards the judiciary, honour and impeachment of bureaucrats, which accounts for another 21.8% of the communications. Since the contents of the letters were circulating mainly on issues of promoting the integral conducts and suppressing the disloyal or indecent behaviours or corruptions of the bureaucrats, memoranda under this heading can be taken as the reciprocal moral and ethical restraints among the civil officials. Surprisingly, the proportion of these two categories alone outweighed all other “practical” issues, and occupied over one half of all the memorials. Beyond these two headings, there are only 11.1 % of the correspondences addressing directly the issues of major current affairs and state policies; some 8.5 % of the letters tackle problems of the state finance and taxation; another 7.1 % deal with issues of the infrastructure, custom and social order; and 14.8 % discuss the military and security matters. Not only are the ratios of the “non-virtuous-centred” memorials low, even in communications regarding finance, taxation, and security issues this overpowering moral cultural argument still overshadows the context. The focus of official letters reflects very much the virtuous ruling principle of the Ming.

Cultural Logics through State Finance and Taxation

By looking into the documentation of the Ming’s fiscal, taxation and foreign trade policies, we try to illustrate here how the idealistic cultural principles had been translated into the economic practices of the Ming governments. We have argued that light tax had been a benign gesture of the Chinese government demonstrating its adherence to the principle of benevolent governance and a minimalist state. The rulers of the Ming frequently expressed a commitment to light taxation, which they

honoured.¹³ By the late 16th century, in the face of society's resistance to the earlier over mobilization, Ming had become a physiocracy in the sense of a state minimizing its activities. In 1400 with a population of, at most 100 million, the expenditure of the Ming state amounted to 100 million taels. In 1600, with a population of 150 million with a higher per capita income, expenditure had fallen to 50 million taels or less.¹⁴ According to Braudel, the sum total of taxation may represent some 10% to 15% of gross national product for 15th century Venice. And in a larger, more extensive and less urbanized territory than Venice, the fiscal tension could be lower, that is, perhaps 5% to 10%.¹⁵ (This supposedly does not include any surtaxes and service levy.) The figures at the Chinese side seem relatively lower. In the 15th and 16th China, the total payment of formal taxation (including the regular land taxes, surcharges, surtaxes, portions of the service levy collected on the land, and un-collectible items absorbed into it) was in general less than 10% of the agricultural output (not national product). For a huge empire with a well-established bureaucracy and a costly infrastructure, an overall tax level of 10% of agrarian output is indeed low.¹⁶ The figure in the Qing Period was even lower, which stayed at about 2% to 4% GDP, or less than 5.6% agricultural output. (On the contrary, in Europe the percentage of central government expenditure in contrast started to rise after 1500. It reached 22% of national income in 1760 Britain, and 35% for Prussian-Germany.) Perhaps as Mark Elvin suggests, the higher economic productivity achieved in Sung times, and the perfection of new techniques of political control, such as the civil service examination system based on Confucian ideology, might have reduced the costs of

¹³ R. Bin Wong, op. cit. 1997, 102.

¹⁴ S.A.M. Adshead, op. cit. (2000), 185-186.

¹⁵ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century. Vol. II, The Wheels of Commerce*, London, Phoenix Press (Translated Edition by Siân Reynolds), 532.

¹⁶ Ray Huang, op. cit. (1974), 166-175, 183.

control per head of population.¹⁷ But one cannot disregard the cultural facet with the direct testimony of the Ming state. Some textual analyses might help us realize how (though not exactly how much) the Ming's virtuous rule and self-restraining nature might have affected its taxation.

As soon as Tai-Zu ascended to the throne, a series of "benevolent measures" were introduced in 1368: an edict ordered the local officials to help settling the people, cut down the taxes, exempt the levied service, investigate the range of natural disasters, reallocate the land, release the stored grain, and give amenity to minor criminals.¹⁸ Similar commands were given by the emperor Yong-Le's in 1402 and Ren-Zong in 1424,¹⁹ and in fact in almost every enthronement edict of later emperors. Under the Ming, the "Confucian tenet that the nation's wealth should be 'preserved within the people' was taken to its literal extreme, interpreting it to mean that any financial gain to the government was bound to be a loss to the governed."²⁰ Two of Tai-Zu's remarks exemplify our point. Firstly, on February 8, 1371, there were officials who advised that the government should broaden its sources of income and increase the expense of the state. Tai-Zu however disagreed,²¹

The heaven and earth create the wealth to nurture the people, therefore he who be an emperor should take the providing of people's living as his prime responsibility. Even by cutting the unnecessary spending and lightening the taxation, one still fears that he might have exploited the public, never mind increasing the service levy and taxation... The emperor is the lord under

¹⁷ Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, London, Eyre Methuen, 92.

¹⁸ "Edict of Amenity to the People beneath the Heaven after Succeeding the Yuan Dynasty 初元大赦天下詔", in Fu Feng-Xiang 傅鳳翔 ed., d. 1522-1566. *The Royal Ming Edicts and Decrees 皇明詔令*. (Taipei, 文海, 1984 Reprints), Vol. I.

¹⁹ "The Enthronement Edict of the Emperor Cheng-Zu 成祖即位詔"; "The Enthronement Edict of the Emperor Ren Zong 仁宗昭皇帝即位詔", in Fu Feng-Xiang 傅鳳翔 ed., op. cit. (d. 1522-1566), Vol. 7.

²⁰ Ray Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1974, 187.

²¹ *Veritable Records of Tai-Zu 太祖實錄*, c. 1399, Vol. 135.

the heaven; therefore he should conserve the wealth to those living beneath the heaven. How could he use the need of people as an excuse and take advantage of them in secret? [My Translation]

On hearing the words of the emperor, “those who made the advice felt ashamed, and thereafter no one dare to argue on the basis of wealth and profit,” the *Records* so documented. Another example occurred on January 26th 1387, when Tai-Zu reiterated his economic ideal of light taxation and a controlled budget to the officials in the Ministry of Treasury. This is how he argued,²²

Those who are good at managing money never exploit people to profit the office, but only generate wealth to enrich the people. In previous dynasties, the officials who were in charge of managing the state’s finance did not realize this principle. They exploited and eroded the interest of the public and extorted every single penny in the name of generating wealth and enriching the country... What they did not understand is that the money they earned was limited, yet the harm they did to people was incalculable. Our state already has a fixed taxation system, the money spared will be abundant if you retrench the spending and control the budget. Decrease the conscripted labour, for it shall keep the farmer yielding and the woman weaving. Be generous to those who fulfil their duties and suppress the opportunists at the bottom of the society. Make the idle and lazy people work hard in the field, then farmers shall speed up their work and few will have to live on other’s support. In this way, every household will naturally be supported and the storage shall be abundant. You Ministry of Treasury must always be alert not to harm the integrity of the state merely for the acquisition of wealth. [My Translation]

This is almost a reversal of Weber’s theory of the European Reformation in the 16th century, by which it presumably justified an attitude of absolute ruthlessness in acquisition of wealth. The Ming’s fiscal policies derived from the above moral guideline were basically

²² *Veritable Records of Tai-Zu* 太祖實錄, c. 1399, Vol. 177.

aimed to save the expense of the state and decrease the tax burden of people. A fixed tax quota system was introduced by Hong-Wu in 1377, after the monarch dispatched teams of officials to tour the 178 local tax stations and assigned the local revenue quotas. Such quotas set at the beginning of the dynasty had hardly been changed throughout the period of the Ming.²³

With regard to financial issues, “frugality” and “avoidance of any unnecessary spending” were almost the identical overtone of all official memoranda. In his memorial to the emperor, the Minister of Treasury (in 1528) He Tang何瑭 suggested,²⁴

Your Majesty should behave in a frugal manner and set model for the world beneath the Heaven. You should ask all civil officials to save their expense and cherish their well-beings; prohibit them from any extravagant behaviour; and punish whoever spoils this good custom. In this way people’s wealth will not be wasted, their mind will not be confused, and the state’s policy of ruling by rites and education shall be achieved. [My Translation]

Such is the pervasive logic characterizing the Ming’s economic practices. Statecraft and virtuous rule in China usually went hand in hand. Since the public approval was usually identified with the classical spirit, concerns for benevolence often preoccupied the minds of the bureaucrats (at least at the facial level). Here *History of the Ming* gives a good example showing that the Ming civil administrators in particular were willing to bend their policies and procedures to suit the concept of benevolent rule. In 1521 a man named Shao Jing-Bang邵經邦 was

²³ Ray Huang, op. cit. (1974), 47

²⁴ Ho Tang何瑭, “Memorial on the Exhausting Wealth of the People民財空虛疏”, in Sun Xun孫旬ed. *Transcripts of the Royal Ming Memoranda皇明疏鈔*. d. 1584. (Collected in the *Compilation of the Sequel to Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries續修四庫全書*. Vol. 463-464. Shanghai, 上海古籍出版社, 1995 Reprints), Vol. 38.

appointed as the tax collector at the inland port Jingzhou 荊州. Although the commodity tax was collected according to a “prescribed ad valorem schedule,” the court also assigned an annual quota to each port, basically as a general target of collection. In three months, Shao’s collections had fulfilled the quota. He therefore suspended the taxation altogether, and for the rest of the year commercial vessels were allowed to call at the port free of duty. Officials like Shao were often commended by the Ming bureaucrats and later historians as model officers, who extended the emperor’s magnanimity to the people. In a modern sense, Huang is maybe right that the officials were guilty of laxity and courting personal favour among the taxed at the expense of legality and administrative efficiency.²⁵ However, for the Ming officials, fiscal precision was merely a marginal technical consideration compared to the principle of benevolent governance. Under the specific historical context, Huang’s accusation might seem harsh to a bureaucrat who had not only completed his task that the state had assigned, but also given something “morally extra” to the emperor’s subjects.

Cultural Logics through Foreign and Tributary Trade Policies

A. On Foreign and Coastal Policies

Before cruising into the Ming’s tributary trade policy, one should have a wider picture about its foreign and coastal policies in general. Differing from the European states of the 15th century, which seemed to regard people outside the European territory inapplicable to the internal ruling principles, the Ming’s foreign policy was clearly an extension of its benevolent governance. (At least it was expressed as a diplomatic

²⁵ Zhang Ting-Yu 張廷玉 et al. *History of the Ming* 明史, Vol. 206, No. 94; also Ray Huang, “Fiscal Administration During the Ming Dynasty”, in Charles O. Hucker ed., *Chinese Government in Ming Times: Seven Studies*, New York and London, Columbia University Press, 1969, 73-128, quote page 74-75.

formality.) Following the code of virtuous rule, overseas colonialism and material exploitation of the remote barbaric states was something almost unimaginable to the Chinese rulers. Even over-labouring its own people was taken as morally inadequate, let alone exploiting the subject peoples beyond its political jurisdiction. Thus, contra European expansionist and colonist activities after the 15th century, the Ming China had adopted a non-aggressive foreign policy. Was China not powerful enough militarily, and financially to carry out an expansionist policy at the Ming times? This question is indeed critical, for unless evidence shows that the Ming state was fully capable of adopting an aggressive strategy, then the emperor and officials' elegant and eloquent moral speeches would always remain to be bluffing, or disguising their inability of implementing an aggressive policy. For evidence of the overpowering ethical imperative, again we need to move into the stream of history.

October 30, 1371, Tai-Tsu太祖 convened Ministers of the central government and Magistrates from the provinces at the Feng-Tien Gate奉天門, where basic instructions on national defence and foreign policy were given by the Emperor,²⁶

For the barbarian states beyond the seas, they must be chastised if they do menace China, but you must not think of taking arms against those which do not threaten China. There is an old saying that the expansion of territory does not endure peace, and over labouring the people is the cause to disorder. The Sui Emperor Yang invaded Liuchiu 琉球 at his own will. For vainglorious he endangered the lives of people and exhausted China... His deeds were recorded in history and were mocked by later generations. Thus, it is my will that we shall never invade those little barbarian states at the periphery of the world beyond the mountain and across the sea, if they do not menace China.

²⁶ Chen Jen-Hsi陳仁錫 ed., "The Instruction of Emperor Tai-Tsu—Succumbing the Barbarians太祖高皇帝寶訓—馭夷狄", *Collections on the Royal Ming Records concerning State Affairs*皇明世法錄, d. 1630. Vol. 6, 164. (Taipei, 學生書局, 1965 Reprints.)

Only the Hu 胡 and Rong 戎 at the north and west have been a danger to China for generations that we have no alternative but to be alert and on guard against them. You ministers must bear these in mind and understand my intention. [My Translation]

Tai-Tsu's command of 1371 was promulgated again in 1395 in its final form of *The Royal Ming Ancestral Instructions* 皇明祖訓, within which he gave further accounts of this non-expansive and non-aggressive policy. He even made it “constitutional” through his preface that “not a single word should be altered”. Enlarging from the explanations about the remoteness and barrenness of the barbarian states, Zhu added,²⁷

It is my concern that descendants in later generations might rely on the wealth and power of China and launch military actions simply for the sake of conquest. Or they might turn greedy in seeking military glory and bring casualties to people without due causes. Therefore, do bear in mind that you must not do so. [My Translation]

Tai-Tsu then listed fifteen states, which China would never invade. These include Korea, Japan, Greater and Lesser Liuchiu, Annan, Cambodia, Siam, Champa, Sumatra, Xiyang, Java, Pahang, Baihua, Sir Vijaya and Brunei.

As the Portuguese yelled “Eastward Ho”²⁸ after Diaz rounded the Cape of Good Hope, a century before, the Ming emperor on the contrary commanded on seal of the maritime door on his own coastline. As early as 1372, Tai-Zu had already ordered the closure of the coast. On January 13, the government re-registered a total of 112,730 soldiers and landless people, who use to be assigned as the “shipping household 船戶” under the rule of Fang Guo-Zhen 方國珍 (a warlord defeated by Hong-Wu 洪武),

²⁷ See Zhu Yuan-Zhang 朱元璋, “The Royal Ming Ancestral Instructions 皇明祖訓” in *Literature on the Foundation of Ming Dynasty 明朝開國文獻*, d 1368-1398. (Taipei, 學生書局, 1966 Reprints.)

²⁸ David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, London, Abacus, 1998, 79.

and dispatched them to different *we*衛 (guarding station) of the Ming. Tai-Zu “still prohibit residents at the coastal areas to sail to the sea in private,” so documented the *Veritable Records of Tai-Zu*.²⁹ No further accounts were given concerning such restrictions. Ten years later (1381), prohibitions on the sea were reiterated: as the *Records* put it, “Residents at the coastal areas are forbidden to communicate with other states in private over the sea.”³⁰ Foreign trades were certainly included. On the 15th of February 1384, the Ming’s close door policy was carried into its extreme, when Tai-Zu commanded Tang He湯和 to inspect the coastal cities in Zhejiang and Fujian provinces. Despite the acknowledgement that the local residents’ livings were clearly put under suffers, a new order was given, “In order to prevent the pirates, people are banned from fishing in the sea.”³¹ Although restrictions on fishing and tributary trade at the trade ports were lifted at a later stage, private communications and commercial activities in foreign states were “officially prohibited” throughout the Ming Period (1368-1644).³²

²⁹ This is the earliest record in Ming history, which mentioned the closure of the Ming coast. As it wrote, “still” prohibit, it is clear that such a policy must have been made before 1371 (probably between 1369 and 1370). Since there is no direct historical record ordering this restriction, the exact dating remains disputable. *Veritable Records of Tai-Zu* 太祖實錄, c. 1399, Vol. 70, in Dong Lun董倫 and Xie Jin解縉 et al eds., *Veritable Records of the Ming* 明實錄. (Taipei, 中央研究院歷史語言研究所, 1984 Reprints.)

³⁰ *Veritable Records of Tai-Zu* 太祖實錄, c. 1399, Vol. 139.

³¹ *Veritable Records of Tai-Zu* 太祖實錄, c. 1399, Vol. 159.

³² It is recognized that the effectiveness of Ming China’s bans over the sea has often been questioned. As Deng argues, under the Ming’s ban on the maritime activities, private and even official involvements of maritime trade simply continued in the form of smuggling operations, while the reiteration of restriction itself also suggests that the enforcement of maritime ban was by no means absolute. However, it should also be noted that serious pirate threat and rampant sea smuggling activities only existed in the early and after the mid-Ming periods, and that between 1380 and 1450, or even 1500 (i.e. a significant eighty- to one-hundred-year period before the European expansion), only very few cases of pirate raids, or private and official smuggling operations had been recorded. Therefore, although private maritime sectors had not been entirely destroyed between 1380 and 1500, maritime trades as well as the development of private shipbuilding technology had to be operated under substantial official-legal constraints, and the scale of such smuggling operations remain significantly small. It is not an overstatement that overseas trade during this period

It seems that, according to the above-cited records, piracy on the sea had been key influence to the Ming's decision on the closure of its coastline. In addition to these accounts, during the period of 1369-1374 there were at least thirty-two major incidents of sea robberies and military contacts between the pirates and the Ming coastal guards that were documented in the *Records of Tai-Zu*. Evidence showed that pirates from Japan, Korea, and the remaining forces of Fang did cause great disturbances at the southeast coastal areas, and might be one of the key reasons for bringing about the close door policy of the Ming.³³ The question, however, is can such disruptions explain the overall "closure" of China for the following two hundred and fifty years under the rule of the Ming, one of the most powerful regimes in Chinese history? Was the Ming navy and military force never powerful enough to cope with the off-coast piracy? Ying's research into the Ming's coastal defence system provides an overall picture for the state's coastal defence and naval power.

As documented in the *Veritable Records of Tai-Zu*, the naval force of the Ming was established in as early as 1370, when Tai-Zu commanded to set up a navy of 24 *wei*, with each *wei* was attached a fleet of 50 warships, and 350 soldiers for their maintenance (more soldiers could be recruited during warfare). In 1372, another 660 large seagoing vessels were built to guard against the pirates, while hundreds of multi-oared speedy ships were constructed to chase the pirates into the ocean. In Ying's calculation, between 1370 and 1387, there were 59

was a life-risking business. Even though the time span of maritime control represents only a small fraction of Chinese history in a long-term, it nonetheless occurred at the critical juncture before the European expansion. See Gang Deng, *Chinese Maritime Activities and Socioeconomic Development, c. 2100 BC-1900 AD*, Westport and London, Greenwood Press, 1997, 88-90; and Gang Deng, op. cit. (1999 (a)), 137.

³³ See Ying Zhang-Yi 尹章義, "Tang He and the South East Coastal Defense in the Early Ming Period 湯和與明初東南海防", in Wu Zhi-He 吳智和 ed., *Treatises on the Studies of Ming History 明史研究論叢*, Taipei, 1984, Vol. II, 145-221.

guard stations established at the coast of Zhejiang province alone (that is an average of about one guard station for every ten miles), with a total of 62,000 soldiers. A similar scale of military force was also set up in the Fujian province. With the Ming fleets chasing the pirates off the sea, and the guard stations defending the possible ravage at the coast, piracy was evidently under control in around 1380. The occurrence of pirate raids decreased substantially after 1374. Between 1374 and 1382 there were hardly any accounts of pirate attack documented, while only sporadic events were reported between 1382 and 1500. Hence, in 1382 when military officers in the Fujian guard stations suggested that the emperor construct more warships, Tai-Zu replied, "Nowadays there is no warfare beneath the heaven, and what on earth will we need to build more warships for?"³⁴ Wu concludes similarly that after the Hong-Wu and Yong-Le 永樂 reigns (1403-1424) and before the arrival of the "new pirates" from the West in the 16th century, the Ming's off coast had been very much under control.³⁵ In fact, the Ming's military power in the early 15th century was far more than capable of being defensive. Needham compared the Ming and the European naval power,³⁶

In its heyday, about 1420, the Ming navy probably outclassed that of any other Asian nation at any time in history, and would have been more than a match for that of any contemporary European State or even a combination of them. Under the Yung-Le emperor it consisted of some 3,800 ships in all, 1,350 patrol vessels and 1,350 combat ships attached to guard stations (*wei* 衛 and *so* 所) or island bases (*zhai* 寨), a main fleet of 400 large warships stationed at Xin-jiang-ko 新江口 near Nanjing, and 400 grain transport freighters. In addition there were more than 250 long-distance 'Treasure-ships' or galleons, the average complement of which... overstepped 1,000 in the largest vessels.

³⁴ Ying Zhang-Yi 尹章義, op. cit. (1984), 162-163

³⁵ Wu Qi-Hua 吳緝華, op. cit. (1984), 129.

³⁶ Joseph Needham, op. cit. (1971), Vol. IV Part III, 484.

Ming China's military power in the first half of the 15th century was indeed formidable, and certainly far more than being capable of adopting either a defensive or non-aggressive foreign policy. On the land, despite the strong oppositions from the ministers, between 1403 and 1424 Cheng-Zu 成祖 launched five major attacks to the Mongols with some 100,000 to 500,000 soldiers each. And as the Minister of Defence Chiu Chun 邱濬 testified in the late 15th century,³⁷

After Tai-Zung's 太宗 six [five] military expeditions in person hundreds of miles beyond the Great Wall, not even one barbarian dared to confront his thunder like forces with their mantis arms, but all scurried like rats...During this past one hundred years, all enemies succumbed and the threats at the frontiers were eliminated. [My Translation]

Although the situation at the north may have been somehow underplayed (as there was at least one major setback in 1449, when the emperor Ying-Zong 英宗 was captured by the Mongols during his northwards expedition), it is fair to say that throughout the 15th century, a barbarian invasion to penetrate the Great Wall was even less likely than the pirates raids at the southeast coast. It is such confidence that enabled Cheng-Zu to order the seven great expeditions of Zheng He during the first three decades of the 15th century. As Prince Henry of the Portuguese began, in the year 1415, to carry out the plan he had so much at heart, sending two or three ships every year to discover the African coast beyond Cape Nam,³⁸ Cheng Ho had cruised into the Indian Ocean, Arabic Sea, and arguably reached the East coast of Africa. Recent research by Gavin Menzies even suggests that one of the

³⁷ Chiu Chun 邱濬, "Succumbing the Barbarians 馭夷狄", in Chen Zhih-Long 陳子龍 etc, op. cit. (d. 1628-1644), Vol. 73.

³⁸ *A General Collection of Voyages and Discoveries, Made by the Portuguese and the Spaniards, during the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, London, Published by W. Richardson, J. Bew, T. Hookham, J. and T. Egerton, and C. Stalker, 1789, 10.

Admiral's fleets had explored South America and Australia and sailed into the Caribbean. It may have even achieved a round-the-world voyage between March 1421 and October 1423, one hundred years before Ferdinand Magellan.³⁹

B. On Foreign and Tributary Trade Policies

Turning to the Ming government's practice and attitude towards foreign or tributary trades, it should be noted that basing on its foreign and coastal policy all forms of foreign communication were restricted exclusively to the official level, and all legal commercial activities from abroad must be conducted under the tribute system. According to the *Law of the Great Ming* 大明律, "People who exit the gateway of the frontier without a 'land passport 路引' will receive a corporal punishment of a hundred laps by a thick stick, and be jailed in prison for three years." The sea, as part of the state's frontiers, of course comes under the same law.⁴⁰ Under the Ming's coastal policy (or in fact the general security policy), all ships, of all purposes, were only permitted to go to the sea if they obtained the "official ticket or document 號票文引". And all foreign ships were allowed to board and come to China, only if they could show the tribute permissions or memorials (called "*kanhe* 勘合"⁴¹) issued and

³⁹ In a lecture to the Royal Geographical Society in London, Gavin Menzies backed up his hypothesis with what he said were secret pre-Columbian maps showing results of the Cheng Ho's voyage, ancient Chinese artefacts and remains of gigantic shipwrecks in Australia and the Caribbean. Menzies also described how with a commercial software package called Starry Night, he reconstructed the Chinese celestial navigation system and traced what he thinks is the epic round-the-world voyage of Cheng Ho from March 1421 to October 1423. See John Noble Wilford, "Did Chinese beat out Columbus? U.K. Historian Thinks So", *The New York Times*, March 18, 2002

⁴⁰ Wu Qi-Hua 吳緝華, "The Connectivity between the Ming's Restriction over the Sea and its Isolation Policy—A New Research on the Causes for the Sea Restriction Policy 明代海禁與對外封鎖政策的連環性—海禁政策成因新探", in Wu Chih-He 吳智和 ed., *Treatises on the Studies of Ming History* 明史研究論叢, Taipei, 1984, Vol. II, 127-143.

⁴¹ "*Kanhe* 勘合" is the official tributary permission issued by the Ming government to the foreign states, which was separated into two corresponding parts. Each of the two

renewed by every Ming emperors. So were the tributary groups from the land. In other words, throughout the rule of the Ming, the communications between China and foreign states, be it diplomatic or commercial, were strictly controlled by the Ming state via the implementing of the tributary system. And such a tributary trade was maintained exclusively official until 1567, when the Ming government eventually opened three trade ports to private Chinese (still not foreign) civilian participation. After centuries of “barbarian invasions”, the Ming state wished to minimize the threat from foreigners, and the tribute system suited perfectly to such an isolationist policy. By carefully limiting the entrance of foreigners and foreign embassies, the Chinese government hoped to reduce the possibility of friction. China under the Ming wished “neither to forcefully expand nor diminish its territory and sought to impress this view upon the barbarians. Its primary goal was to protect the Chinese farmers” from periodic barbarian raids on the land border and from the sea.⁴²

However, scholars have long disputed about the profitability of the Ming’s tribute system, or tributary trade. The proponents of a profitable tributary system claim that it was an economic design to benefit certain privileged groups and Chinese officials, or to achieve state monopoly on international trades. Because many of the tribute envoys were in fact poorly disguised trading missions, and tribute embassies frequently brought with them sorely needed products to the Ming. As Rossabi argues, in the case of Hami and Central Asia, the most common tribute offerings were horses, camels, animal pelts, jade, Mohammedan blue,

parts was kept separately by the Chinese government and the foreign states, listing the name of embassies, the amounts and kinds of tributary goods that the embassies were to deliver that year, as well as the seal of the Ming state and serial number of the permission. The Chinese officials at the sea ports would then collate the two parts of “Keng-Ho勘合” at the embassies’ arrival and allow them to tribute. Chen Gao-Hua陳高華 and Chen Shang-Sheng陳尙勝, *The History of Chinese Overseas Communication中國海外交通史*, Taipei, 文津出版社, 1997, 172.

⁴² Morris Rossabi, op. cit. (1973), 27.

sal ammoniac, and knives, all of which were of value, or even essential, to the Chinese economy. Besides, instead of minimizing contacts, the Yong-Le emperor even sent embassies to attract tribute envoys and increase the profits of trade. He thus concludes, the view that "China's foreign relations and the tribute system were based exclusively, or even primarily, on self-defence and isolationism is inaccurate. Economic motives played as important a role."⁴³ Opponents of the profitable tribute system on the other hand insist that the tributary trade, although involved transferring of goods, did not indeed benefit the Ming court. For John Fairbank, "The important thing to the rulers of China was the moral value of tribute. The important thing for the barbarians was the material value of trade." Since the main purpose for the tributary trade is to show the benevolence of the self-sufficient Middle Kingdom, the value of the offered objects was certainly balanced, if not out-weighed, by the imperial "gifts" to the missions and vassal rulers.⁴⁴ T. F. Tsiang also held that "it must not be assumed that the Chinese Court made a profit out of such tribute"; while Levi went so far as to claim that economically, "the tribute system was a deficit enterprise for the government."⁴⁵ In order to resolve the dispute, it is necessary that we go through some qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Four cases can be put forward to support the early Ming's non-profit-making attitude towards foreign trade. Firstly, in the question of favouring the privileged groups and officials, it should be noted that after Tai-Zu prohibited all private overseas communications, he soon turned

⁴³ Rossabi, Morris. 1973. *Ming China's Relations with Ha-mi and Central Asia, 1404-1513: A Reexamination of Traditional Chinese Foreign Policy*. Ph D in Columbia University, University Microfilms. (Shelf mark in the British Library: 15595.c.30.), 35-36, 323.

⁴⁴ J.K. Fairbank, "Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West", *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. I No. 2, February 1942, 129-149, quote page 139.

⁴⁵ Quoted from Morris Rossabi, op. cit. (1973), 30-31.

his eyes to the local officers and gentry. On January 22 of 1372 the emperor warned against bureaucrats that,⁴⁶

Recently, I heard that Li Xing 李興 and Li Chun 李春, the commanders of the guard station in Fujian Xinghua 興化, sent people overseas privately to trade. Was there nobody at the coastal guard stations aware of their so doing? If I do not prohibit and caution them, then everyone would be deluded by the profit and be trapped by the criminal law. [My Translation]

The emperor obviously sensed the potential corruptions at the local level, and wanted to leave people no illusions of any possible official conspiracy. Secondly, concerning the state domination of trade, one should note the case of February 14, 1394. On that day, Tai-Zu banned all foreign incenses and ritual products from coming into China, and prohibited their use in all popular ritual practices. Those remained in the market were commanded to be sold out in three months or face rigid punishments.⁴⁷ This case again shows that “profits” from foreign trade were not of Tai-Zu’s main concern. The point is well made by Wu. At the Ming’s time, foreign incenses had been commonly used in the ceremonies of Chinese folk religious. To increase the tariff income or official monopoly on foreign trade, the Ming government could have encouraged the popular use of foreign incenses and expand the market. Then the state may raise the tariff rate and control the supply, or even monopolize it as a new state enterprise. However, instead of expanding the internal market, the Ming forbade all usage of the foreign incense in the ritual ceremonies, which made no sense to the idea of profit making and state monopoly.⁴⁸ Thirdly, there is a direct statement from Tai-Zu that

⁴⁶ *Veritable Records of Tai-Zu* 太祖實錄, c. 1399, Vol. 70.

⁴⁷ *Veritable Records of Tai-Zu* 太祖實錄, c. 1399, Vol. 231.

⁴⁸ Wu Qi-Hua 吳緝華. 1984. “The Connectivity between the Ming’s Restriction over the Sea and its Isolation Policy—A New Research on the Causes for the Sea Restriction Policy 明代海禁與對外封鎖政策的連環性—海禁政策成因新探”, in Wu

ordered the favourable treatment to foreign envoys and tributary trade. When receiving the tribute embassy from Soli's 瑣里 (at today's Coromandel Coast of India) in 1372, the emperor explained that "States from the West seas were the so-called remote vassals, whose envoys travelled across the sea for countless months and years to pay their tribute. Thus, whatever amount their tributes are, the principle is to reward them more than they pay." The envoy was then given the agricultural calendar, money, fabric, and yarn weaved of golden silk string.⁴⁹ The fourth case shows both Tai-Zu's sense of pragmatism and idealism. In his conversation to the embassy of Java in 1380, the emperor expressed plainly to the envoy,⁵⁰

As the ruler of the Chinese and all foreigners, my ruling principle is to make no distinction between the state from near or far. Your country locates at a small island of the remote sea, and frequently sends embassies to China. Although in the name of tribute you come, in reality you are here merely to make profit. However, I shall still treat you with courtesy. [My Translation]

Indeed, it should not be assumed that the Ming rulers were naïve. Although the bureaucrats were full of the idealistic and ethical thinking, they did understand well the possible benefits that the tributary trade could have brought about to the country. In other words, the Ming rulers were adhering to their moral principles with a full consciousness that it was limiting their own material good. Such a policy only testifies to the existence of a forcefully idealistic logic of benevolent rule, which differs hugely from the profit-making one. The principle of treating foreign embassies with benevolence and favouring the tribute trade was maintained by the later Ming governments. On November 14, 1403, the

Chih-He 吳智和 ed. *Treatises on the Studies of Ming History* 明史研究論叢. Taipei, 大立, Vol. II, 127-143.

⁴⁹ Zhang Ting-Yu 張廷玉 et al. *History of the Ming* 明史, Vol. 325, No. 213.

⁵⁰ *Veritable Records of Tai-Zu* 太祖實錄, c. 1399, Vol. 134.

envoy of Lani刺泥(today's Gajarat at the west of India) came to pay their tribute. During their stay members of the embassy traded privately with the local people, and the officer in charge therefore suggested the emperor to levy their goods. However Yong-Le disagreed, here is how he replied,⁵¹

Tax on commerce is a means that the state applies to suppress those opportunists at the bottom of the society, is it for making profit? Now the foreigners admire our righteousness and come from afar, if only for trivial profit we might gain by damaging their interests, then how tremendous we shall lose by humiliating our own integrity. [My Translation]

Notions of “profit” and “interest” were obviously downplayed by the Ming rulers in the 15th century in their intersection to the virtuous ruling principle. There was no sense of commercial protectionism, and there was no intention of economic exploitation on foreign or tributary goods. In 1405, in order to show his benevolence, Yong-Le even sent back the 10,000 tales of gold indemnity (and cancelled another 50,000 taels) from Java, after the King of west Java mistakenly attacked Zheng He's troops and caused some 170 casualties. The emperor condemned the attack by an edict and gave his account to the Ministry of Rites, “What I requested from these people from afar is the confession of their wrong doings, do I really want their gold?”⁵² It was probably difficult for the 15th or 16th century Europeans to understand such a dominant Chinese cultural logic that valued “benevolence” over 60,000 taels of gold. Profit for profit's sake was deemed as immoral, and was certainly not a justifiable basis for the pragmatics of state policy. Unlike the European mercantilism, throughout the period of the Ming, overseas Chinese merchants were

⁵¹ *Veritable Records of Tai-Zung*太宗實錄, r. 1402-1424, Vol. 24; Zhang Ting-Yu張廷玉 et al. *History of the Ming*明史, Vo. 81. No. 57.

⁵² Zhang Ting-Yu張廷玉 et al. *History of the Ming*明史, Vol. 324, No. 212..

seen as outlaws or “de-Sinicized expatriates” who betrayed “national integrity” for profit, therefore should receive no protection from the state.⁵³

Reading the official letters, one soon finds that China’s moral principle did play a crucial role in restricting the import of tributary goods. Memorials advising the emperor not to receive luxurious goods and rare treasures from abroad echoed one another. As the Minister of Personnel (between 1500-1501) Ni Yue倪岳 recounted, during the Cheng-Hua成化 reign (1465-1487) the emperor Xiang Zong憲宗once turned down the tribute of rare birds and sea stones from Korea; and in 1488, the Hong-Zhi弘治emperor too rejected the tribute of jade and treasure stones from the westerners. Both emperors meant to “show their reverence to frugal norms, and were praised by people from near and far about their righteous rule, benevolence and civility.”⁵⁴ In a practical term, as the officials Ni Yue, Zhang Chong張翀and Zhang Lu張祿all agreed, adding up the manpower levied, the accommodation provided, the food supplied (to both the labours and the tribute embassies), and the cost spent to recruit the carts, horses, and carriage drivers for transportation, the fees would outweigh the value of the tributary goods on hundredfold. Never mention the distaste and hatred it begot from the public. In his memorial, Zhang Lu even calculated the cost for raising a lion, “A lion eats two goats everyday, which account for 60 goats per month, and some 700 goats per year. This would equal some 500 taels of silver per year.” Such is the reason why the officers often concluded that they should restrict the occasion of foreign tribute, to decline all extra

⁵³ See Gang Deng, *Maritime Sector, Institutions, and Sea Power of Premodern China*. Westport and London, Greenwood Press, 1999, 134-135.

⁵⁴ Ni Yue倪岳, “Memorial on Stopping the Foreign Tributes止貢夷疏”, in Sun Xun孫旬 ed., op. cit. (d. 1584).

contribution, and to avoid disturbing people's lives.⁵⁵ Qualitative evidences on the whole suggest that the tribute system was by no means a profitable enterprise.

At the quantitative side, the studies of the Ming's revenue income seem very much in line with our attitudinal analyses. With a fixed quota on land taxes, the regular land taxation of the Ming produced a steady 30 million taels silver per year in the 15th and 16th century, which comprised up to 75% of the state's total revenue income.⁵⁶ The salt revenue is the second largest item, which generated approximately some 10% of this amount in comparable monetary value. It then follows the miscellaneous incomes (here comprised of all state revenues other than the land taxes and the salt revenue), which make up the remaining 15% of annual revenue. The figure of 1570 to 1590 shows that the Ming's miscellaneous income was of a total of 3.78 million taels of silver, within which the revenue from commerce and industry shared some 943,000 taels. And of the 943,000 taels, the inland customs duties stood for 340,000 taels; the local business tax made up 150,000 taels; and the maritime tariff (that was repeatedly exempted by Hong-Wu and Yong-Le to demonstrate their magnanimity) contributed only 70,000 taels. Thus as Huang rightly suggests, throughout the Ming Period international trade was never

⁵⁵ Zhang Chong張翀, "Memorial on Refusing Extra Tributes so as to Declare the Utmost Honesty to the Public停免額外貢獻以昭大信疏"; Zhang Lu張祿, "Memorial on Rejecting Rare Objects so as to Cultivate the Sacred Mind卻異物以養聖心疏", in Sun Xun孫旬ed., op. cit. (d. 1584).

⁵⁶ Only a general conjecture can be made as to the monetary value of the taxation. The commutation rates varied widely. In South China however, most commutations fell within the range of between 0.5 and 0.7 taels per picul. In north China 0.8 taels to 1 tael per picul could be accepted as the normal range. The surcharges (about 7% covering spoilages and transportation), surtaxes, and the absorption of other revenues could raise the average value of the "picul". If one then assumes that the average value of all "piculs", in kind and silver, was 0.8 taels, the total value of the regular land taxes would be slightly more than 21 million taels. The total collection of service levy throughout the empire was probably 10 million taels. Even if it was only partially absorbed by the land taxes, the service levy should at least have raised the total revenue from agricultural land to 25 million taels, or even close to 30 million taels. Ray Huang, op. cit. (1974), 86, 175.

regarded as a primary source of state income, “the payment termed ‘award’ exceeded the value of the merchandize several times over, and was compounded by the cost of the entertainment lavished on the personnel of the embassy.”⁵⁷ Even at the Ming’s most prestigious reign Yong-Le, with about thirty foreign states coming to “trade” under the tribute system once every one to three years, and with each embassy restricted to only one to three ships, which carried less than three hundred people, the maritime profit was almost marginal to the Ming state.⁵⁸ It is fair to state that the Chinese maritime sector no matter how sophisticatedly developed still lay within the threshold of the land-based or agrarian dominant economy.⁵⁹

With the continuous internal opposition motivated by the principle of virtuous rule, and without the profits from the colonies to “reward” (if not in a full sense “support”) the expeditions, Zheng Ho’s voyages had to come to a halt sooner or later. Even if the cost of the exploration was not

⁵⁷ The miscellaneous incomes includes a) the revenues from commerce and industry: inland customs duty (range from 0.2% to 3% of the goods), the local business tax, maritime tariff (range from 20%-30% of the goods), store franchise fees, excise on wine and vinegar, stamp tax on real estate transfers, forest produce levy, government mining, fish duty; b) the administrative incomes: sale of rank; ecclesiastical license fees, payment for ‘rationed salt’, common post money, incense fees at national shrines, commutation of punishments, profits from minting money; and c) the commutation of services and supplies: speed-the-delivery money, artisan payment, reeds tax, material supplies to the four bureaus, horse payment, commutation of capital guard duty, commutation of personal attendance, savings from postal service, calendar paper, kitchen service fees due to the court of imperial entertainments. Ibid., 46, 38, 227-265.

⁵⁸ Chen Yu-Ying 陳玉英, “Research of the Ming’s Tributary Trade 明代貢舶貿易研究”, in Wu Chih-He 吳智和 ed., *Treatises on the Studies of Ming History 明史研究論叢*, Taipei, 1984, Vol. II, 343-398.

⁵⁹ As Deng argues, there was the “agricultural fundamentalism” of pre-modern China, which can be realized in several aspects. Firstly, agriculture was recognized as being the fundamental sector of Chinese economy. Secondly, farming as an occupation received great respect and farmers were accorded considerable dignity. And thirdly, to encourage and protect agriculture was considered the dominant economic policy for government. Gang Deng, *Chinese Maritime Activities and Socioeconomic Development, c. 2100 BC-1900 AD*, Westport and London, Greenwood Press, 1997, 60; and Gang Deng, *Development Versus Stagnation: Technological Continuity and Agricultural Progress in Pre-modern China*, Westport and London, Greenwood Press, 1993, 14-18.

as high as many had assumed, such campaigns could hardly escape the label of “a sin for extravagance and over-mobilization,” for those expenses were morally unjustifiable. At Yong-Le’s death, an edict of Ren Zong 仁宗 in 1424 ordered “all the treasure ships to the western oceans to be stopped... All civilian artisans to be discharged and return to their hometowns... and all sea-going junks under construction to be discontinued.”⁶⁰ Despite the seventh expedition, the Ming voyages ceased to proceed after Zheng He’s death in 1433. In 1473, when the emperor Xiang Zong 憲宗 was again “tempted” to deploy an expedition and ordered to search the navigation map of Cheng Ho in the state archive, the code of virtuous rule once more came to play a decisive role. Liu Ta-Hsia 劉大夏 (1436-1516), the Deputy Minister of Defence withheld the navigation map in secret (and supposedly burnt it later). For three days the clerk in charge could not find the map, and when the Minister of Defence Shang Chong 尚忠 inquired in anger how could the document in the state archive simply disappear? Liu replied,⁶¹

The Three-Guarantees 三保 [Zheng He’s] west expeditions had cost hundreds of thousand of money and grain, and caused more than ten thousand military and civilian casualties. Even though he had brought back some rare treasures, what good would it do to the state? This is particularly a misrule at that time, and it was the responsibility of all high-ranking officers to remonstrate against such a policy. Although there was once such a file, it should by all means be destroyed to eradicate that misrule. Why are you still investigating its existence? [My Translation]

⁶⁰ “The Enthronement Edict of the Emperor Ren Zong 仁宗昭皇帝即位詔”, in Fu Feng-Xiang 傅鳳翔 ed., op. cit. (d. 1522-1566), Vol. 7.

⁶¹ Yan Cong-Jian 嚴從簡, *Records on Journeys to Foreign Territories 殊域周咨錄*, d. 1574, Vol. 8 (Collected in the *Compilation of the Sequel to Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries 續修四庫全書*. Vol. 736. Shanghai, 上海古籍出版社, 1995 Reprints.); and Hsu Yu-Hu 徐玉虎, op. cit.

As documented, the Minister listened in astonishment and said to Liu, “Your Excellency are really a person of virtue, my position will soon be yours.” Later Liu indeed became the Minister of Defence, and the map of Zheng He was never found in the Ming Court ever since.⁶²

Was the Ming not financially powerful enough to afford an expansive foreign policy in the 15th century? Su’s calculation on the annual expense of Zheng He’s may shed some light. According to the *Record of Long-Jiang Shipbuilding Yard* 龍江船廠誌 of the Ming times, the construction of a 400 *lio* 料 (a Ming measuring unit for burthen) warship costs roughly 75 taels of silver for the labour service. Taking this as a basis, a 2,000 *lio* treasure ship of the Great Admiral would cost some 375 taels for the labour needed. Assuming with Su Yang-Ming that the cost of physical materials for shipbuilding equals the cost of labour required, then a fleet comprises 100 treasure ships, and 200 warships of 400 *lio* would mount to a total of 100,000 taels. And if we triple that cost to include the expense needed for the expedition, it would cost the Ming court a maximum of 300,000 taels per year to maintain such a fleet (Note: every expedition of Cheng Ho lasted about two years.)⁶³ This estimation conforms roughly to the above recount of Liu Ta-Hsia, the Deputy Minister of Defence. Although in an absolute term the expense is a huge sum of money, in proportion, it stands for only 1% to 1.2% of the Ming’s annual revenue income (300,000 out of 25-30 million taels, see footnote 53). It would not be difficult at all for the empire to raise such amount of money either by expanding its foreign trade or by extracting “extra resources” from abroad, had it decided to adopt an aggressive foreign policy. If we take account of what O’Brien and Pomeranz both agree, the extra-continental profits were about 7% of gross investment by late 18th

⁶² Yan Cong-Jian 嚴從簡, Ibid.

⁶³ Su Ming-Yang 蘇明陽, “A Historical Account of Cheng Ho’s Westward Expeditions (I) 鄭和下西洋歷史漫談(一)”, *The NTOU Newsletter* 海洋大學校訊, Vol. 113, Jan. 2002.

century Britons,⁶⁴ such a “free lunch” could have been more than enough to maintain the enormous fleet of the Ming to their encounter with the ships of Vasco da Gama in the late 15th century. Yet again, a seemingly instrumental decision-making that was based on the economic rationale of excessive cost and insufficient return was in fact bounded within the moral-ethical oriented logic at a deeper level. The adherence to a cultural logic of non-aggressive and non-profit-making policy not only outweighed the Deputy Minister’s “crime” to destroy a critical state archive, but also potentially the huge extra overseas resources, labours and profits. By 1500, regulations aggravated the existing punishment to a capital offence for building a sea-going junk with more than two masts. And the 1521 edict of Shih-Zong世宗 imparts that a large number of the sea-going vessels docked at the Zhang-jia Bay張家灣 had been left unused and damaged for a long time; many of them were waiting to be fixed, and many to be sold out.⁶⁵ By 1525 coastal authorities were enjoined to destroy all ocean-going ships and to arrest their owners. The formidable navy of the Ming eventually came to disintegrate.

Counter Logics of Culture in State Economy

Given such cultural logic accounts established, it should again be emphasized that cultural logics did not determine the historical economic development, and that there had been co-existing counter logics of culture in Chinese state economic policy. As early as in the Earlier Han periods, Huan Kuan’s桓寬 *Treatise on Salt and Iron Monopoly*鹽鐵論 had recorded a series of controversial debates between the central officials and local scholars. In Huan’s treatise, disputes concerning the state’s

⁶⁴ Kenneth Pomeranz, op. cit. (2000), 186-188, 264-285.

⁶⁵ “The Enthronement Edict of the Present Holy Emperor今聖皇帝即位詔”, in Fu Feng-Xiang傅鳳翔ed., op. cit. (d. 1522-1566), Vol. 19.

economic and military policies reflect exactly the factual contradictions between the logic of practices and idealistic cultural values. On the issue of state monopoly of salt and iron, while the central officials held that “the state should monopolize the transaction of salt and iron, and utilize the increased income to supplement the military expense at the north”, local scholars on the other hand advised the emperor to “base his rule on benevolence, virtue and righteousness” and not to consider too much about “issues of profits and war expense.”⁶⁶ Whilst the state officers accused the local scholars of “holding to hollow words and being incompetent of providing pragmatic strategies” to secure the north boundaries, the local scholars on the contrary treated the central officials with contempt and blamed them for discarding the virtue of righteousness and “being preoccupied by notions of interest and profit.”⁶⁷ The records expose precisely the conflict between logics of pragmatism and idealism in traditional China, and interestingly enough, the so-called idealism here emerged not from the central officials (the authentic top), but from the local scholars (the bottom). The idealistic logics of local scholars in this case had checked the pragmatic power of the state.

Several cases can be derived to illustrate such counter logics of culture in state economy during the Ming. Firstly, as shown earlier, the vast amount of official memorials writing to impeach the misconducts and correct the infringement of treacherous officials and powers impart that the bureaucrats’ were continuous breaching the moral principle. The self-restraint policy proved to depend also on the goodwill of the rulers. The third emperor Cheng-Zu 成祖 (r. 1403-1424) attempted to achieve quite the opposite. As Huang suggested, the lavish expense and outward expansion of Cheng-Zu (without substantial reward from overseas) may

⁶⁶ Huan Kuan’s 桓寬, *Treatise on Salt and Iron Monopoly* 鹽鐵論, d. BC 81 (Taipei, 台灣商務, 1965 Reprints), Vol. 1 No. 1.

⁶⁷ Ibid., Vol. 5 No. 27.

have surpassed the financial capacity that his government could afford: military invasion to Vietnam; five major northwards attacks to Mongols with 100,00 to 500,000 soldiers each; the extravagant palace constructions that took 10,000 artisans and nearly one million labourers twelve years to complete; reconstruction of the canals; plus the well-known Zheng He maritime expeditions, left his successors little choice but to adopt a minimalist policy.⁶⁸

At the issue of preventing maritime smuggling in the Ming China, it was recorded in *History of the Ming* that because of Zu Wan's 朱紈 (a civil official of the late Ming) integrity and firm attitudes in banning the smuggling activities, he was falsely charged and sentenced to death by those who harboured the smugglers. Thereafter no one in the central government dared to speak up for the closure of the coastal areas.⁶⁹ Here while honouring the candidness of Zu, it revealed at the same time the treacherous natures of other officers. Many of them surely had not stood by the moral-ethical based cultural logic. On the other hand, Elias has attributed the beginning of civilizing process (in terms of self-discipline and self-control) in the 18th century Europe to the surge of a courtly rationality. To him, the "man of reason" was the product of the "pressure of court life, the vying for the favour of the prince or the 'great'; then, more generally, the necessity to distinguish oneself from others and to fight for opportunities with relatively peaceful means, through intrigue and diplomacy."⁷⁰ Therefore, civilization is "not 'reasonable'; not 'rational', any more than it is 'irrational'. It is set in motion blindly, and kept in motion by the autonomous dynamics of a web of relationships, by

⁶⁸ Huang Jen-Yu 黃仁宇, op. cit. (1993), 219-220, 254-255; and Yang Kuo-Chen 楊國楨 and Chen Chih-Ping 陳支平, *The New Compiled History of the Ming* 明史新編, Taipei, 昭明出版社, 1999, 77-79.

⁶⁹ Zhang Ting-Yu 張廷玉 et al eds, *History of the Ming* 明史, d. 1672-1755 (Taipei, 中華書局, 1981 Reprints), Vol. 250 No. 93.

⁷⁰ Norbert Elias, *The Civilising Process*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994 (Translated Edition by Edmund Jephcott, First Published in 1939), 190.

specific changes in the way people are bound to live together.”⁷¹ To put it in another way, officials were not civilized simply for the sake of wanting to be civilized, apart from the ideal of becoming civilized, such a process was also the result of a combined considerations such as gaining self-interest, prestige, and power of control.

Commenting on Yu’s assertion on concept of “Confucian merchants”, Zurndorfer has rightly argued that it is just as true that these same merchants, who operated within an institutional framework in which Confucian teachings were the norm, also gambled, cheated, depended on fortune-tellers, treated their less-fortunate inferiors with contempt in order to conduct their business.⁷² Much more examples can be found in non-official histories and literatures. In the famous book of the Ming scholar Wu Jing-Zi 吳敬梓, *Nonofficial History of the Mandarin* 儒林外史, it depicted a bucketful of misconducts of the Ming mandarinate. Instances such as “county magistrates who abuses their power and maltreated the folk people”; “local gentry who bribed the official for personal benefits”; and “military generals who went to brothels and covered up prostitutes” did not seem uncommon during the late Ming periods.⁷³ As summarized in the preface of the 1736 edition, Wu’s book reflected the Ming mandarin’s pursuit of fame and wealth. “There are those who flatter and insult people and vie for their own fame and wealth; there are those who rely on their fame and wealth and turn proud and arrogant; and there are those who pretend to be disinterested in names and wealth, and are however mocked by others for their pride and idealism.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid., 167.

⁷² Harriet T. Zurndorfer, op. cit., 2004.

⁷³ Wu Jing-Zi 吳敬梓, *Nonofficial History of the Mandarin* 儒林外史, d. 1745-1749 (Taipei, 聯經, 1991), No. 1, 4, 42.

⁷⁴ Ibid., Preface.

Merchants certainly knew well how to exploit the very best of their money. According to Guo, in Qing periods, merchants who accumulated hundred thousand taels of silver and indulged themselves in wine drinking and sexuality seemed nothing unusual. Local tyrants who forcibly occupied people's houses and lands and took over other's wives or daughters as concubines were not difficult to find in the local records.⁷⁵ All these clearly indicate the existence of "counter cultural logics", which was reacting to the dominant value system at both elite and popular levels. One should not overlook the dark yet realistic side of history and over-romanticizing the past simply to exaggerate the function of idealistic cultural logics. If there had been forceful moral-ethical based cultural logics in China, under such an umbrella, different social groups may still hold varied worldviews that constantly challenge the dominant cultural ideals.

Concluding Remarks

How do we treat the contradictory logics and counter logics within a specific cultural context? The real motives behind the vast official accounts of an idealistic cultural rationale for state economic and trade policies are indeed difficult to pin down. Hippocrates Chinese rulers and officials might be (actually we know many were), talking beautifully in one disguise and doing something quite opposite in the other. Yet, there were also real moralists who actually died for their integrity and virtue principles. The question is we do not know which group had more affiliates at its side. What a historian can do is to go through the "consistency check" of what those officers had said, and what they actually had done via records available and wishing to spot clues of

⁷⁵ Guo Ying-De 郭英德 and Guo Chang-Bao 過常寶, *Local Tyrants in Ancient China 中國古代惡霸*, Taipei, 台灣商務, 1999, 44.

inconsistency and the estimate the probably tendency. One can also put their beautiful statements into a “consistency test” and see if the idealistic concept of virtuous rule still prevailed in most cases when they were in direct conflict with real material profit and interest. But one cannot deny entirely the vast amount of historical records of cultural idealism simply by casting his/her “reasonable doubts” to the policy-makers’ motivations, or history would always be someone’s guess against somebody else’s. To us, if politicians can be Hippocrates for most of their lifetimes so be it.

Going through the official records of decision-makings of the Ming state’s fiscal, coastal and foreign trade policies, there did exist counter rationales to the principle of benevolent rule; there were cases of immorality, behaviours of luxury, extravagance, corruption, and profit-interest-calculation; and there were assertion for the pursuit of wealth and power, and thoughts and actions of aggressiveness and expansionism. Nevertheless, it seems fair for us to say the overtone of the state economic policy makers had been reflecting generally to its central ruling principle of virtue. And the stories being told were that traits like the emperor and central officials’ self-restraining nature and conformity to moral ethical codes; the adherence to the principles of minimalist state, or light taxation and labour levy; low commercial tariff in domestic and foreign trades; and non-aggressive and non-profit-making approach to tributary trades seem to usually outweigh the counter set logics of culture. In many cases the insistence on benevolent measures (rather than disguise of inability) did prevail when they were in direct contradiction to the state’s potential increase of wealth and power.

Taking the Yong-Le emperor as a case of potential break-through for the Ming’s non-aggressive policy (not so much on profit-making), one can imagine how difficult it was even for a Chinese ruler to turn against the tide of the dominant cultural logic. The huge military force organized to conquer the Mongols in the north, the great expeditions of Zheng He,

the mass mobilization of labours for public and royal constructions, and the powerful coastal guards and navies almost all fell to pieces after Cheng-Zu's death at the opposition of the bureaucrats and people. Even when Yong-Le was still alive, five major rebellions had occurred to articulate the farmers' dissatisfactions for the emperor's over-mobilization. Seeing in this way, Cheng-Zu's efforts may be taken as counter cultural logical measures that were eventually suppressed by the extensive cultural repercussion (i.e. constant opposition of his officials and farmer rebellions), which obviously valued the logics of a non-aggressiveness, non-profitable overseas activities, and minimum interference of people over the accumulation of wealth and power of the state.

What can be concluded from our study, however, is not that the dominant cultural logics of China would always decide over the path of its economic development. Yes, culture matters, but not in a determinist way and an invariable or inevitable pattern of path dependency. Rather, there had always been both logics and counter logics within a cultural system, and there had been contradictory forces of interpretations and reinterpretations of cultural values. The same set of culture values can be taken as of conducive and obstructive to various individuals, groups, and different political-economic systems in different historical contexts. And within a cultural system, there are different sets of cultural values that are favourable and unfavourable to the development of political economy. The question is under what condition would the counter logics of culture gain enough momentum and break loose the existing construction of meaning system. Cultural values cannot be lifted above their original meaning-making context and simply be transplanted into somewhere and some time else. It is certainly contradictory when one sees Protestant ethic such as thrift, frugality, and inner-worldly asceticism, which were considered as conducive to the development of a capitalist society, had become virtues of a constraining nature for the Ming's

economic development when they were applied to Chinese bureaucrats' benevolence rule.

Culture should not be taken as a one-way-effect to the economic practices neither, as it had never been. How do we know that China would not have been brought into another period of socio-political chaos and economic slowdown caused by farmer rebellions, "IF" the emperors and central officials had indeed disregarded the embedded inner cultural logics and raised the tax level in land and maritime commercial activities? Question like this is not only counter-factual but also counter cultural-logical, which cannot possibly be answered. To us what's more useful is not an overall generalization of the cause-effect relations between culture and economy, but a more document based analysis of a specific socio-economic-political and spatial-temporal context. Positioning oneself within that specific context, it is easier to understand which version of cultural interpretation and/or reinterpretation would be more likely to be prioritized, and to whom they would be attracted. The same forceful cultural argument for a light taxing and minimalist state of the Ming officers did not prevail in the late Qing China when facing the overpowering European colonialists. What was upheld instead is almost an opposite policy rationale—the acquisition of power and wealth by all means in a shortest period of time.

Still we do not have an answer as to exactly how much the real reduction of taxation, labour levy and state expense had been that was conducted on the basis of the moral-ethical-oriented cultural logic during the Ming times. And we do not know how concepts of thrift, frugality, benevolence, and virtuous rule can be measured and quantified in precision in different societies. Yet, by the historical records given, one can hardly overlook that the Ming rulers' ideal of minimizing the state's intervention and upholding its moral commitment to people had played a significant role in the economic decision-makings.

Economic practices that are often regarded as decided over by the interest-profit-calculating rationality are after all not so “economic” as many have imagined. In order to appeal to their colleagues and subject peoples, the Ming politicians would have to negotiate under the overpowering cultural framework. Such a framework, which was characteristic of its moral-ethical oriented cultural logics, formulated the basis of political and economic dialogues in most cases. To put it in another way, not only the Ming officials often felt the need to justify their moral grounds for adopting a pragmatic or utilitarian approach, or at least to interpret their pragmatism in a morally and ethically compatible terms to win over the heart of the people, but quite “naturally” they would select a cultural explanation for their own economic actions and decisions. Cultural dictum had permeated most official documentations. By not doing so, the politicians would expect to lose not only their political credibility, but also personal integrity.

In sum, there had been the delicate inter-subjectivity between culture and economy. Cultural values are expressed and maintained through the function of institutions (here the state and officialdom). And culture influences the practice of policymakers by saturating into their way of thinking and by containing them within certain value systems (supported by the institution), within which an economic policy is set into cultural rather than pure political-economic debates. Such a dialogic mode of theorization is important in the sense that it provides an alternative, a more complicate theoretical outlet for the often one-sided narrative of either cultural or material-institutional determinist interpretation of history. It shifts the focus from the oppositional tensions between culture and economy to the integrative and inter-connective relations between them.