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The Nature and Linkages of China's Tributary System under the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Abstract.

The current landscape of Global History literature appears dominated by a rather asymmetrical dichotomy between Eurocentric analyses of the cumulative emergence of the West and global history which reduces the significance of this transition by blending it into very long-term perspectives. This 'synecdoche syndrome' – whereby a part and the whole are often equated and compared – belies the real nature of human history, which, up to the XIX century at least, was grounded in the presence of a plurality of coexisting world-systems. Each of these systems revolved around a multilayered cultural, economic and political relationship between centre(s) and peripheries. It is through both a synchronic and diachronic comparative study of such systems that the theory of structural systemic transformations may be refined.

This essay contributes to this endeavour by offering an exploration of what can be considered as the architrave of the pre-modern East Asian world, namely the tributary system established by the Chinese Empire. The complex set of policies that regulated the implementation and supported that system represent the most consistent world-system in human history, spanning two millennia despite several systemic breakdowns. The achievement was rendered possible by a foreign policy which will be interpreted here as a peculiar form of ethnocentric centripetal hegemony. Especially during the Ming and Qing dynasties, China's interaction with weaker political units of the East Asian world was geared toward a form of power which aimed at maintaining systemic stability as a function of the Empire's survival. In this context tribute performed a threefold role in keeping internal and external threats under check: it enhanced the ideological legitimacy of the Emperor's rule of 'All Under Heaven', it strengthened his military credibility by guaranteeing the flow of military resources, and it offered the state an economic channel thorough which to pursue appeasement policies. The versatility of the system permitted China to adjust its foreign relations within several, diverse theatres of action. Interpretations envisaging too monolithic dynastic cycles should therefore be tempered by an understanding of the Empire's hegemonic posture as standing – at the same time, but in relation to different systemic units – at various points on a spectrum running from systemic stabilization to systemic breakdown. Utter failure only featured when the ideological underpinnings of the system were eventually undermined.

Introduction¹

For the first time in human history, in our age the socially constructed notion of 'world' is synonymous with spatial dimensions of the planet.

This theme, generally approached under the heading of 'Globalization', has attracted wide attention among social scientists in recent decades, but most analyses lack historical perspective.² Economic and global historians like Jared Diamond, John Hobson, William McNeill, and André Gunder Frank,³ instead, place the evolution of the planet into one single, meaningful unit for study on a spectrum ranging from 5,000 years ago to the 1820s. At the heart of their vision is an analysis of long-term inter-continental connections shaping human societies such as we know them today. 'Eurocentric globalization' contends that an integrated world system of global breadth originated as an outcome of the European states' impulse to expansion overseas.⁴ Oliver Cox and Immanuel Wallerstein observe the roots of a "European world economy based upon the capitalist mode of production"⁵ in the XVI century. Denis Flynn and Arturo Giráldez, on the other hand, identify 1571 as "the specific year during which global trade was born."⁶ Critics of this loose concept of globalization point out the limited impact that pre-modern

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Patrick O'Brien for his unfailing help with this work. I also thank Gang Deng, Carlos Miranda and Barry Van-Wyk for having commented upon earlier drafts of the paper. Any faults remain my own responsibility.

² Z. Bauman, *Globalization. The human consequences* (Cambridge, 1998).

³ J. Diamond, *Guns, germs and steel. A short story of everybody for the last 13,000 years* (London, 1998); J. Hobson, *The Eastern origins of Western civilization* (Cambridge, 2004); W. McNeill and J.R. McNeill, *The human web: a bird's-eye view of World History* (London, 2004); A.G. Frank, *ReOrient: global economy in the Asian age* (Berkeley, 1998).

⁴ G. Parker, 'Europe and the wider world, 1500-1700: the military balance', in *Europe and the wider world, 1500-1700: the military balance*, ed. G. Parker (Cambridge, New York, 1991), p.160.

⁵ I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (New York and London, 1974), p. 67; S. Hier, 'The forgotten architect: Cox, Wallerstein and world-system theory', *Race & Class*, XLII, 3, (2001), p.77.

⁶ D. Flynn and A. Giráldez, 'Cycles of silver: global economic unity through the mid-eighteenth century', *Journal of World History*, XIII, 2, (2002), p.393.

long-distance trade had even on European economies,⁷ and prefer the 1820s as the date for big bang theories of global economic history, an argument based on the premise that “the only irrefutable evidence that globalisation is taking place is a decline in the international dispersion of commodity prices.”⁸

The debate appears to be polarized between the authors who emphasise the role of the western part of the European continent in the ‘unification’ of the whole planet (albeit structured around a fundamental core-periphery axis⁹) and those focussing on the systemic long-term approach, which sees this phase of Western pre-eminence as a transient cycle. But in reality our planet has been the home of *multiple* ‘worlds’ all across human history for millennia. Examples abound. The Romans of the II century AD considered the world to end with the *limes* of the Empire, beyond which official maps indicated that ‘only lions lived’. At the other extreme of the Eurasian continent, another mighty civilization – Han China – saw itself as the sole existing ‘world’, an attitude which would permeate its relations with other societies for thousands of years to come. “Within [her] world, China did not see herself as one state among others, but as the only civilized entity that had to live with uncivilized ‘barbarians’.”¹⁰ The fact that both empires were in fact as aware of the existence of each other as they were of their own direct political challengers, the Parthians and the Mongols respectively, shows that major pre-modern societies’ understanding of themselves as *unicum* had

⁷ P. O'Brien, 'European economic development: the contribution of the periphery', *The Economic History Review*, XXXV, 1, (1982), p.3.

⁸ K. O'Rourke and J. Williamson, 'When did globalisation begin?' *European Review of Economic History*, VI, (2002).

⁹ *The Development of Underdevelopment in China*, ed. P. Huang (New York, 1978), pp.132.

¹⁰ Z. Chen, 'Nationalism, Internationalism and Chinese Foreign Policy', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 14, February, (2005), p.37.

more to do with ideology than factual evidence. Even Romans and Chinese maps did not discriminate between myth and reality.¹¹

Throughout history, separate world systems coexisted at the same time, and this occurred partly because their inhabitants socially ‘imagined’ and theorised their existence.¹² In this light, Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas Hall’s contention that “only by studying very different world-systems can we formulate a theory of structural transformations” acquires new weight.¹³ Abu-Lughod’s *Before European hegemony* also goes in this potentially illuminating direction, as does – to some extent – a more recent text edited by Giovanni Arrighi.¹⁴

It is within this context that I propose to offer a contribution to the interpretation of what might be described as the most consistent world-system in human history, lasting for over two millennia despite several systemic breakdowns, namely the East-Asian ‘sinocentric order’.¹⁵ In particular, the analysis will focus on the tributary system established by the Chinese Empire, especially under the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. Between 1368 and 1911, China’s interaction with the geopolitical units of the East Asian world was geared toward a form of power which aimed at maintaining systemic stability as a function of the Empire’s survival. China’s *ethnocentric centripetal hegemony*, or tribute system, performed a threefold role in keeping internal and external threats under check: it enhanced the ideological legitimacy of the Emperor’s rule over ‘All Under Heaven’, it strengthened the state’s

¹¹ *The Cambridge History of China. The Ming Dynasty, 1368 - 1644, Part I*, ed. D. Twitchett and F. Mote (Cambridge, 1988), p.392.

¹² B. Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London, 1991).

¹³ C. Chase Dunn and T. Hall, 'Comparing world-systems: concepts and working hypotheses', *Social Forces*, LXXI, 4, (1993), p.856.

¹⁴ J. Abu Lughod, *Before European hegemony: the world system A.D. 1250-1350* (New York and Oxford, 1989); G. Arrighi, 'States, markets, and capitalism: East and West', in *States, markets, and capitalism: East and West*, ed. G. Arrighi (London, 2005).

¹⁵ *The Chinese world order. Traditional China's foreign relations*, ed. J. Fairbank (Cambridge, 1968).

military credibility, and it offered him an economic channel thorough which to pursue appeasement policies. The versatility of the system permitted the Celestial Empire to adjust its foreign relations within diverse theatres of operation for two millennia.

I will focus on the last two dynasties in order to examine the workings of the Chinese world-system at a time when its European counterpart was establishing its global dominance. As China re-emerges today as a world power on a truly global scale,¹⁶ studying the nature and linkages of its traditional foreign policy may constitute a useful exercise and contribute historical perspective towards the evaluation of the challenges and opportunities laying ahead.

Map 1 – The Qing Empire in Asia at the end of the XIX century



¹⁶ H. Kissinger, *Does America need a foreign policy? Toward a diplomacy for the twenty-first century* (London, 2001).

1. A systemic ideology for East Asia

China has only recently become another nation-state in the family of nation states.¹⁷ For millennia, and from the Confucian point of view, there was only civilisation and barbarism. Civilisation was the Empire without neighbours and the Chinese state was not a state in the conventional Western sense; rather, it administered civilised society *in toto*.¹⁸ The sheer geographical extent and cultural-economic prowess of China soon translated into a belief of moral superiority¹⁹, which led by Han times (206 BC – 220 AD) to the formulation of a long-lasting sinocentric cosmology. The fact that this “was a view mainly about Chinese world order, not about inter-national or inter-state relations”²⁰ suggests not only that we are facing a specific and highly self-conscious form of world-system, but also that this system worked according to principles which are heterogeneous in comparison to those that emerged in Europe after the Peace of Westphalia.

Japanese scholars might object by citing the presence in East Asia of a “multiplicity of political jurisdictions that appealed to a common cultural heritage and traded extensively within their region,”²¹ but they seem to underestimate the constraints that China posed for the sovereignty of the lesser powers within the system. The main point of the Treaty of Westphalia was the formal codification of the two principles whereby European kings would be ‘*superiorem non recognoscentes*’ and ‘*in regnos suos imperatores*’ – that is fully independent and free from any need for recognition by an external political or moral authority. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Vatican delegate Fabio Chigi failed to sign

¹⁷ L. Pye, 'China: erratic state, frustrated society', *Foreign Affairs*, LXIX, 4, (1990).

¹⁸ M. Mancall, *China at the center: 300 years of foreign policy* (Basingstoke, 1984), p.22.

¹⁹ T. Evans, 'The PRC's relationship with the ASEAN regional forum. Realpolitik, regime theory or a continuation of the Sinic zone of influence system?' *Modern Asian Studies*, 37, 3, (2003), p.762.

²⁰ Chen, 'Nationalism, Internationalism and Chinese Foreign Policy', p.37.

²¹ Arrighi, 'States, markets, and capitalism: East and West', in *States, markets, and capitalism: East and West*, ed. Arrighi p.122.

the treaty, which became the foundation of a new system of international relations in the Old Continent and – in due course – across the globe. The contrast vis-à-vis the Far Eastern scene could hardly be sharper, given that John Fairbank equates the ‘investiture’ by the Middle Kingdom of a claimant to the throne of a peripheral country with the recognition in Europe by the Pope or by the concert of powers.²² The East Asian world, therefore, did not develop along the Western lines of formal equality among nations and substantial plurality of centres of power. Rather, it displayed an unipolar and hegemonic structure.²³ Sections 2 and 3 respectively, will provide evidence of the extent of direct Chinese political-military and economic interventions in the affairs of other states, and will suggest that it was a recurrent feature of the system, and that it could be powerful, both in benign (the Ming defence of Korea against a Japanese invasion in the XVI century) and malign ways (the Qing attack on Kashgaria in the XVIII century). Section 4 will subsequently build on data to offer a more comprehensive picture, and introduce the necessary theoretical qualifications for the peculiar Chinese model of hegemony.

As the next sections will deal with the remaining three of the four sources of power envisaged by Michael Mann in his seminal work,²⁴ I will now focus the analysis on the fourth one, namely control over society by *ideological* means. This form of power was in fact masterfully employed by the bureaucracy of the Empire to reduce transaction costs for the maintenance of order within the polity²⁵. Generations of scholars, and

²² J. Fairbank, *Trade and diplomacy on the China coast* (Cambridge, 1953), p.30.

²³ But see D. Wilkinson, 'Unipolarity without hegemony', *International Studies Association*, (1999), p.153.

²⁴ The political, economic, social and military sources, as explained in M. Mann, *The sources of social power. A history of power from the beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge, 1986).

²⁵ See E. Rawski, *Education and popular literacy in Qing China* (Ann Arbor, 1979); S. Finer, *The history of government from the earliest times* (Oxford, 1997).

even emperors²⁶, actively lectured, wrote and proselytized in support of the political *status quo*. For example, the Ming and Qing states shared with local élites a common agenda to promote public order, moral leadership, and popular welfare.²⁷ A memorial recorded in the Ming Veritable Records informs us that: “If instructors are appointed to guide the training of the native people, to provide correct models [...] then day by day the students will be thoroughly imbued with what they see and hear.” [And] The Emperor said: “Teachers act as models. Using Chinese ways to change barbarian ways – there is nothing more important than this. Order the Ministry of Personnel to select suitable personnel”²⁸.

Ideological exhortation did not expire at the borders of the Empire, not only because China had a strong power of attraction vis-à-vis neighbouring less developed societies, but also because the Empire’s frontiers themselves were blurred and porous. Fairbanks noted that “the graded and concentric hierarchy of China’s foreign relations included peoples and countries which we may group in three main zones: first, the Sinic Zone, consisting of the most nearby and culturally similar territories, Korea and Vietnam, the Ryūkyū Islands, and, at brief times, Japan. Secondly, the Inner Asia Zone, consisting of tributary tribes and states of the nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples of Inner Asia, who were on the fringe of the Chinese culture area. Thirdly, the Outer Zone, consisting of the ‘Outer barbarians’, generally at a farther distance over land or sea”²⁹.

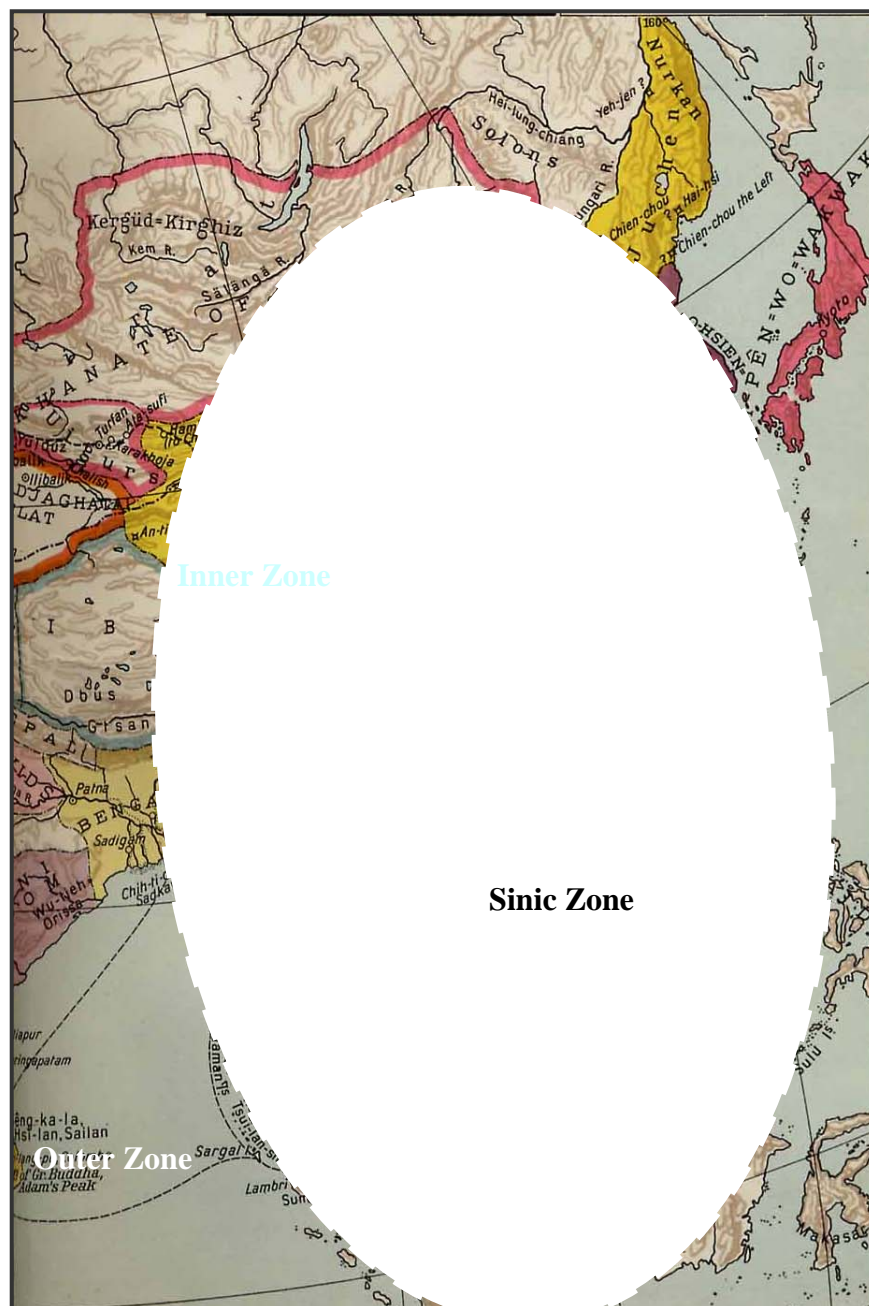
²⁶ Kangxi’s ‘Sacred Edict’, a collection of sixteen maxims for the guidance of daily conduct according to Confucian principles, is a famous example.

²⁷ H. Zurndorfer, “Imperialism, globalization, and public finance: the case of late Qing China”, second GEHN conference, Irvine, California (15-17 January, 2004), p.4.

²⁸ Memorial dated 26th July 1425, in G. Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource* (Singapore, accessed June 2005).

²⁹ *The Chinese world order. Traditional China's foreign relations*, ed. Fairbank, p.2.

Map 2 – Approximation of the three zones of Ming China's influence,
XV century



What begins to appear from this description is that the East Asian world system can be conceived as a *function* of the internal interests and workings of the Chinese Empire. The Confucian cosmology, so actively promoted to permeate the vast and polarized society of China³⁰ with ideals of benevolence and respect for hierarchy, would and should operate beyond the borders. After all “the Emperor claimed the Mandate of Heaven to rule all humankind”³¹ and the relationship between the sole existing civilization with the ‘barbarians’ could not but aim at their conversion through the extension of Chinese culture.³² It is difficult to prove that China’s cultural impact, through which her dominating influence spread to her neighbours, was based on policy. However, in Ming texts on foreign relations, fragments can be found of a coherent strategy: for example, foreigners could be attracted to pay homage to China by the obvious superiority of Chinese culture.³³ The system would thereby replicate itself, as demonstrated by the case of the king of Choson Korea, who acted at once as a tributary of the Emperor of Ming China, and as a patron in relation to smaller ‘subjects’, constructing a Korean world order built from expedience, interaction, and Chinese concepts.³⁴ Similarly, as David Marr observes, China’s overwhelming size, coupled with cultural admiration, led Vietnam’s rulers not just to accept the tributary system, but also to somehow extend it in the shape of a Vietnamese ‘proxy order’. “The subtlety of this relationship was evident from the way in which Vietnamese monarchs styled themselves ‘kings’ when communicating with China’s rulers, but ‘emperors’ when addressing

³⁰ 85% of peasants, vis-à-vis some 5% of higher class government officials, according to G. Deng, *The premodern Chinese economy* (London and New York, 1999).

³¹ J. Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar. Qing guest ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham and London, 1995), p.10.

³² Chen, 'Nationalism, Internationalism and Chinese Foreign Policy', p.37.

³³ J. Wills, *Embassies and illusions. Dutch and Portuguese envoys to K'ang-hsi, 1666-1687* (Cambridge, 1984), p.19.

³⁴ K. Robinson, 'Centering the King of Choson: aspects of Korean maritime diplomacy, 1392-1592', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 59, 1, (2000), p.122.

their own subjects or sending messages to other Southeast Asian rulers.”³⁵

This looks like an East-Asian variant of Gramscian super-national hegemony as a form of power including “a combination of coercion and consent.”³⁶ In this light, Confucian culture performed two interrelated functions: it constituted an ideological glue blending together the world-system,³⁷ and it fostered consent among the lesser units of the system with respect to the Chinese dominance in the international arena. Thus, Confucian precepts for managing an agrarian empire created a widely shared base of cultural, economic, and political practices that gave people throughout the Empire – and beyond its immediate borders – elements of a shared identity. Many differences (linguistic, culinary, religious) distinguished people across East Asia, but they co-existed in a common and shared set of Confucian values. Secondly, and consequently, “it must be safely assumed that a common culture among members facilitated the emergence and operation of extra-territorial institutions that operated to regulate inter-state relations and sustain the system. Indeed, the evidence suggests that responses to challenges encountered in solving problems of cooperation, conflict, and coexistence included an elaborated, informed web of codes which was formulated and followed by member states in their mutual relations with the Chinese system.”³⁸ Tributary relations, whereby the absolute supremacy of China’s ‘Son of Heaven’ was acknowledged by foreign rulers by presenting ritual tribute to the Emperor and performing the kowtow

³⁵ D. Kang, 'Hierarchy, balancing, and empirical puzzles in Asian international relations', *International Security*, 28, 3, (2003), p.174-175.

³⁶ P. O'Brien, 'The governance of globalization: the political economy of Anglo-American hegemony, 1793-2003', report by CESifo, (Munich, 2003), p.2.

³⁷ A. Acharya, 'Will Asia's past be its future?' *International Security*, 28, 3, (2003/04), p.156.

³⁸ Y. Zhang, 'System, empire, and state in Chinese international relations', in *System, empire, and state in Chinese international relations*, ed. Y. Zhang (Cambridge, 2001), p.47.

(kneeling three times, each time bowing the head to the ground thrice),³⁹ was but a first step towards sinicizing and neutralizing barbarians.⁴⁰ This objective was pursued with such care that it could be achieved even when China was herself conquered by the Mongols and the Manchus.⁴¹ Thomas Pereira, a Portuguese missionary who spent seventeen years in the Qing Empire and held several high government posts noted: “The Tartars [Manchus] were ... completely under the influence of Chinese customs. From the beginning of the world, China had never received foreigners in its empire except as tribute bearers”⁴².

The conscious, long-running and successful deployment of these ideological instruments by Chinese elites, both at home and abroad, suggests that it is grossly over-simplistic to state that the important thing to the rulers of China was just the ‘moral’ value of tribute⁴³ or the flattery involved with it. Such a statement correlates to the similar superficial understanding recorded by the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), who remarked how “the Chinese themselves (who are by no means ignorant of the deception) delude their king, fawning with devotion, as if truly the whole world paid taxes to the Chinese kingdom, whereas on the contrary tribute is more truly paid to those kingdoms by China.”⁴⁴ But by concentrating solely on ritual and material dimensions of the tributary exchange a more significant aspect of the system is obscured, namely its capacity to endure by virtue of its perceived legitimacy. Chinese leaders remained East Asian hegemons for thousands of years not least because they managed to convince others that their preferred policies served

³⁹ Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar. Qing guest ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Fairbank, *Trade and diplomacy on the China coast*, p.31.

⁴¹ See, for example, *China under Mongol rule*, ed. J. Langlois (Princeton, 1981).

⁴² *China and her neighbours, from ancient times to the Middle Ages : a collection of essays*, ed. S.L. Tikhvinskiaei and L.S. Perelomov (Moscow, 1981), p.12.

⁴³ Fairbank, *Trade and diplomacy on the China coast*, p.33.

⁴⁴ J. Fletcher, 'China and Central Asia, 1368-1884', in *China and Central Asia, 1368-1884*, ed. J. Fletcher (Cambridge, 1968), p.208.

interests that went beyond the national interest of the world power.⁴⁵ Foreigners were brought under peaceful control both by treating them with honours and materials, and by explaining the justice of a Confucian system whose moral purpose was to promote a social order of cosmic harmony.⁴⁶ The following extract from a letter by the King of Champa to the Imperial Court evokes the widespread trust in the international influence obtainable by adhering to the Chinese culture: "I humbly pray that the Emperor will be compassionate and confer upon me [...] musical instruments and musicians. Thus, Annam will know that our Champa is a region to which China's culture extends and is a place which provides tribute to China. Thereafter, Annam will not dare to oppress or maltreat us."⁴⁷

The effectiveness of this 'soft power'⁴⁸ approach *ante litteram* is best appreciated by taking into consideration the persistence of the East Asian sinocentric world-system. Human history presents few other cases of a civilization twice conquered and containing ethnically and culturally heterogeneous peoples that preserves itself and incorporates the invaders firmly into its cosmology. To paraphrase Polybius, up to the XIX century "*Sina capta, barbaros coepit*". In other words, East Asia could (and did) endure several *systemic breakdowns*, but this powerful cultural-ideological factor prevented *systemic collapse* up until China was overwhelmed by the technically more advanced and *non-absorbable* Western power and culture. Again, the example of Korea shows that the policy of submission was at first formulated in response to the changed geopolitical situation of Choson facing the powerful Chinese Ming dynasty.

⁴⁵ G. Modelski and W. Thompson, *Leading sectors and world powers. The co-evolution of global politics and economics* (South Carolina, 1996), p.55.

⁴⁶ Zhang, 'System, empire, and state in Chinese international relations', in *System, empire, and state in Chinese international relations*, ed. Zhang, p.56.

⁴⁷ Letter dated 5th September 1371, in Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*.

⁴⁸ J. Nye, "Soft power and the struggle against terrorism", conference at the LSE, London (2005).

However, by the sixteenth century – a time of *decline* of Chinese influence – Choson moved from the status of simple tributary to that of model tributary, and this was due to its full adherence to the cultural and ideological postulates of the tribute system⁴⁹.

Ultimately, the Chinese scholarly elites' flexible employment of ideological power is indicative of a *realistic* posture vis-à-vis internal and international challenges. Fairbank⁵⁰ noted, for instance, how in a comparatively short period of time the gentry's loyalty to the Qing grew to resemble that of Ming times, regardless of the fact that the Manchus were in effect imposing alien rule over China. More to the point, "arguments in favour of non-offensive strategies were not based on *a priori* Confucian-Mencian strategic cultural preference rankings or some moral-political aversion to offensive uses of violence, but on contingent strategic arguments."⁵¹ This point has however been examined in depth by Alastair Johnson,⁵² who disputes the approach of much secondary literature – which emphasises a Chinese approach to security derived from the views of Mencius, and which downplays the role of force and upgrades the role of moral example. Choson suggests that on the international scene the Middle Kingdom's relations with other polities of East Asia varied greatly and appears to have been organised "to deal with context-specific situations"⁵³. As the next section will suggest, despite the prominent role accorded by historians to ideology, political and military interference featured just as prominently.

⁴⁹ China would reward this status dispatching higher rank Imperial envoys to the Korean Court, a policy started by the Ming and followed by the Qing: between 1637 and 1881 Korea sent a total of 435 special embassies to the Qing Court; Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar. Qing guest ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* p.50.

⁵⁰ J. Fairbank, *China. A new history* (Cambridge/MA, London, 1992), p.145.

⁵¹ A. Johnston, *Cultural realism. Strategic culture and grand strategy in Chinese history* (Princeton, 1995), p.176.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 57-58.

⁵³ Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar. Qing guest ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793*, p. 51.

2. China: a 'shy hegemon'?

According to most Western secondary literature, traditional Chinese strategic thought deemphasised violence⁵⁴, and saw the tribute system as based on ideological or economic premises. I argue a) that the Middle Kingdom complemented the ideological basis of its power with a pragmatic use of realpolitik; and b) that the system encompassed a wide range of political relationships, from total subjugation, to equality, to 'barbarian' superiority.⁵⁵ Furthermore, these variations were not simply a matter of progression from offensive strategies to defensive, and then to appeasement⁵⁶ – but constituted different approaches simultaneously employed by the Empire to act within the heterogeneous geopolitical theatres on its borders. In other words, China's "clear inclination toward the use of force was mediated by the leaders' assessment of relative power."⁵⁷ Finally, attention should be paid to the other East Asian rulers' relationships with the military might of the Celestial Empire, showing how the endurance of the tributary system relied heavily on their – politically driven – voluntary adherence to that system.

Fairbank estimated that at the height of the Ming dynasty, under the Yung-lo Emperor (1403-1425), some 50 tributaries communicated with China by sea, of which about 15 remain unidentified. The list includes Ryūkyū, Korea, Japan, Annam, Cambodia, Siam, Champa, Java, Samudra, Calicut, Malacca, Bengal, Ceylon, Brunei, and the Philippines. Turning to the tributaries communicating by land, and passing over the discontinuous relations with the Mongols, the Ming annals mention 38 tributaries of the western region (communicating via Hami), including

⁵⁴ Johnston, *Cultural realism. Strategic culture and grand strategy in Chinese history*, p.62.

⁵⁵ Yun, 'Rethinking the tribute system: Korean states and Northeast Asian interstate relations, 600-1600', p.14.

⁵⁶ Y. K. Wang, 'Offensive Realism and the rise of China', *Issues & Studies*, 40, 1, (2004), p.186.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Tibet, Turfan, Rum, and Samarkand⁵⁸. Not surprisingly, during the sixteenth century there was a thinning out of the number of embassies noted by the Court, beginning with those coming from the most distant lands, while the embassies from Central Asia remained relatively numerous until the last years of the Ming dynasty. Following the dynastic precedent, soon after the establishment of the new Qing dynasty, the system was re-established, and between 1662 and 1911 well over 500 tribute missions are said to have called at Beijing from some 60 different countries⁵⁹.

Map 3 – Geographical position of the Southern tributaries of the Chinese Empire, XIX century



⁵⁸ J. Fairbank, 'On the Ch'ing tributary system', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 6, 2, (1941), p.155.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

As the shrinking of the tribute system during times of dynastic decline demonstrates, the East Asian sinocentric order did not rest on any intrinsic Chinese tendency for peaceful management of its relations with neighbours,⁶⁰ although it is true that its moral underpinnings such as ‘impartiality’ and ‘inclusiveness’ contributed to the legitimacy of the system centred on an Emperor “verily soothing those outside, [looking] on all equally.”⁶¹ China could indeed operate with impartiality, as when the Ming admiral Cheng Ho ruled that Malacca – a favourite tributary at Court – had no real claim to Palembang, which had always been a dependency of Java.⁶² Nonetheless, Ming and Qing policymakers had far greater confidence in military power to achieve security than in Confucian-Mencian notions of international rectification, value, or benevolence, or such idealised concepts of ‘not fighting and subduing the enemy’. Ultimately, the cultivation, preservation, and application of military power was tied to the crucial problem of *credibility*,⁶³ which is often underestimated in secondary Western literature. Even though Chinese power tended to intrude into the internal affairs of tributary states only when the developments threatened the position or person of satellite leaders in the relations with the Emperor,⁶⁴ such interventions could be political and outspoken. For example, the Ming Veritable Records quote a letter dated 5th September 1371 in which Emperor Hung-wu intervenes – at the request of the king of Champa – on a border dispute between Champa and Annam. “Now, without authority, arms have been taken up and there has been great loss of life. This shows failure in the duty of serving the Emperor and failure in properly handling relations with

⁶⁰ Acharya, 'Will Asia's past be its future?' p.154.

⁶¹ Hung-Wu Emperor's letter to the King of Champa, 11th January 1370, in Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*.

⁶² *The Chinese world order. Traditional China's foreign relations*, ed. Fairbank, p.58.

⁶³ Johnston, *Cultural realism. Strategic culture and grand strategy in Chinese history*, p.215.

⁶⁴ Mancall, *China at the center: 300 years of foreign policy*, p.35.

neighbours. I have already sent a despatch to the king of Annam ordering the immediate cessation of hostilities.”⁶⁵ Until well in the XIX century peripheral polities would appeal to Beijing against external threats: in January 1849 the British Secret Department translated a Chinese Imperial edict “complaining of the arrival of men of war and a foreign physician at the Ryūkyū Islands.”⁶⁶

Ming political influence was grounded in four main military achievements: the extermination of the former Mongol Yuan rulers, the campaign against Annam, Cheng Ho’s awesome maritime voyages, and the defence of Korea from a Japanese invasion in the late XVI century. It is interesting to note how skilfully such accomplishments were magnified, as they resonated in the official documents sent by the Court to foreign countries. As the Veritable Records show, a mere two years since his accession, the first Ming Emperor was already engaging in this policy of building credibility and compliance: “All under Heaven is now at peace, but I fear that the *yi* [peoples] in the four directions have not heard of this. Thus, I have sent envoys to report this to the various countries”⁶⁷. Yung-lo Emperor’s readiness to use force was even more manifest, as can be gathered from the following letter, which was sent, presumably with Cheng Ho’s 1407 fleet, to reprimand the king of Java for his massacre of several Chinese envoys: “You should immediately send 60.000 ounces of gold to redeem your crime, so that you may preserve your land and people. Otherwise we can not stop our armies from going to punish you. The warning example of Annam is there.”⁶⁸ Clearly, the Imperial government was acutely aware of the hegemonic status achievable

⁶⁵ Hung-Wu Emperor’s letter to the King of Champa, 5th September 1371, in Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*.

⁶⁶ Chinese Imperial Government Edict, January 1849.

⁶⁷ Hung-wu Emperor’s letter to the King of Champa, 14th March 1369, Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*.

⁶⁸ G. Wang, *Community and nation: essays on Southeast Asia and the Chinese* (Sydney, 1981), p.72.

through sea power⁶⁹ and its disposition to use it in order to leave a lasting impression of might can be seen in the spectacularly successful Chinese attack on Ceylon in 1411, which probably involved several thousand men.⁷⁰

The Qing dynasty's realistic foreign policy stance is even clearer and reflected the Manchu perception of the Empire's environment. The societies of East, South East, and South Asia remained under the jurisdiction of the Board of Rites, the traditional government agency for dealing with tributary relations and the performance of the broad spectrum of rites that transmitted Confucian culture beyond the immediate control of the Emperor over China Proper⁷¹. In this context, the 1757 military attack against the rebellious Kashgaria was a deliberate show of force, in the belief that an unpunished offence to the Manchu Court might encourage rebellion in other quarters.⁷² Similarly, Nepal's 18 quinquennial missions to China were not a gesture of friendship, but as an obligation imposed upon her by the Chinese commander after the small Himalayan kingdom lost a war to a Chinese army in 1782.⁷³ In their dealings with Central Asia, and specifically with the Mongol tribes, the Qing established an altogether new office, known as *Li-fan Yuan*, usually called 'Mongolian Superintendancy', but perhaps more properly translated – in view of both the exact meaning of the title and of the nature of the institution – as the 'Barbarian Control Office'⁷⁴. This institutional innovation and the signing of an official treaty with tsarist Russia at Nerchinsk in 1689 – the first occasion in which China tacitly dealt with a

⁶⁹ Modelski and Thompson, *Leading sectors and world powers. The coevolution of global politics and economics*, p.52.

⁷⁰ R. Ptak, *China and the Asian seas* (Aldershot and Brookfield, 1998), p.24.

⁷¹ Mancall, *China at the center: 300 years of foreign policy*, p.18.

⁷² *The Chinese world order. Traditional China's foreign relations*, ed. Fairbank, p.19.

⁷³ T. Maanandhara and T.P. Mishra, *Nepal's quinquennial missions to China* (Kathmandu, 1986), p. 9.

⁷⁴ Mancall, *China at the center: 300 years of foreign policy*, p. 17.

foreign power on equal terms⁷⁵ – is evidence of the Empire's capacity to cast aside ideology to achieve external security.

This consideration leads to our second point of analysis: China's flexibility in the interpretation of her own tributary system in relation to the different challengers and to the general condition of the Empire. Both the Ming and the Qing employed diplomacy and ideology precisely because they were more realistic than policies which overstretched Imperial resources. Such resources were perennially scarce because an essential component of the Confucian ideology to contain internal unrest was, in fact, the concept of *minben*, or "the people as the foundation". This translated into a fiscal policy whereby the rate of land tax in China would be kept considerably below the 10% mark, compared to the 30-50% of European states and Japan.⁷⁶ Clearly, such a 'night-watchman type' of state would not exclude military interventions to settle political conflicts from time to time, but it avoided conquests that could not be supported by the taxes available to the state. The focus, therefore, was on political influence,⁷⁷ in order to preserve the stability of the system and reduce the transaction costs facing the hegemon. Non-coercive security strategies were employed particularly with respect to China's traditional objectives in the South,⁷⁸ where preventing the growth of a strong power and keeping the area free of influence from any challenger seldom required military dominance. There, the focus was on influence through the right to legitimise the accession of tributary rulers, on affirming the goals of peace and stability in the neighbourhood, and on manipulating trading

⁷⁵ J. Spence, *The search for modern China*, (New York, 1999), pp. 67 and following.

⁷⁶ Deng, *The premodern Chinese economy* and Y. C. Wang, 'The rise of land tax and the fall of dynasties in Chinese history', *Pacific Affairs*, IX, 2, (1936), p.201.

⁷⁷ *The fall of great powers. Peace, stability, and legitimacy*, ed. G. Lundestad (Oslo and Oxford, 1994), p.239.

⁷⁸ N. Chanda, 'China and Cambodia: in the mirror of history', *Asia-Pacific Review*, 9, 2, (2002), p.2.

networks.⁷⁹ The Empire's capacity to achieve its goals without – or even *despite* – the use of arms is evident in the case of Burma, which successfully resisted a Qing invasion, but continued to send tributary missions to China.⁸⁰ In its dealings with Central Asia – where the Chinese culture-based theory of the Son of Heaven's supremacy had to come to terms with the geographical fact of nomadic Inner Asian fighting power⁸¹ – the use of force became the rule, rather than the exception. However, in this case too, besides the application of the balance of power doctrine,⁸² the tributary system could twist to accommodate diplomatic and economic security strategies, especially when China was in a weak state or when the use of force was considered unnecessary or excessively costly.⁸³

The evidence produced suffices to qualify the representation of pre-modern China as a 'shy' hegemon, but one further point needs to be made in order to clarify a third reason for the endurance of the system. In fact, besides the ideological premises of the tributary system and pressures exerted by the Imperial Army, an important factor was the voluntary compliance of the East Asian kings, who derived from the sinitic ceremonial of enfeoffment an important political and symbolic advantage for their ruling houses vis-à-vis the élites that surrounded them. They added such Court-bestowed Chinese titles to the substantial ones that they held in their own country. "The Chinese titles were not, however, meaningless. In some cases possession of the Chinese titles helped bolster the legitimacy of one among several rival claimants to power, and

⁷⁹ *The fall of great powers. Peace, stability, and legitimacy*, p.239.

⁸⁰ Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar. Qing guest ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793*, p.52.

⁸¹ *The Chinese world order. Traditional China's foreign relations*, p.3.

⁸² Zhang, 'System, empire, and state in Chinese international relations', in *System, empire, and state in Chinese international relations*, ed. Zhang, p.49.

⁸³ C. Holmes, 'What the Chinese learned from Sun-tzu', report by USAWC Strategy Research Project, (Carlisle, 2000), p.5.

the Chinese might feel obligated to assist bearers of its titles by diplomatic or military means”⁸⁴ – as in the cases of Malacca and Siam⁸⁵.

Only by understanding this point it is possible to reconcile, for instance, Annam’s staunch opposition to Chinese political interference⁸⁶ and her kings’ acceptance of imperial enfeoffment edicts which would ostentatiously read as follows: “It is found appropriate that he inherit the throne [...] thus, I am *ordering* that you, Ri-jian, inherit the fief as the king of the country of Annam.”⁸⁷ The prestige gained locally by rulers formally invested by the Ming and then Qing emperors is a further illustration of the political dimension of the tributary system, which permitted China not only to maintain peace (especially along her southern borders), but also to profit tangibly from her role as the legitimizing hegemon in the system. Between 1379 and 1385, for example, the Koreans sent 18 costly embassies to a very demanding Ming government in Nanking; they persistently sought good relations with the Chinese and requested a formal patent of investiture for their king, since such a formal investiture by the Ming Court bolstered the weak legitimacy of the Koryo rulers⁸⁸. Nevertheless, the sustainability of the system’s stability over the long term was achieved by the Middle Kingdom thanks not only to her masterful employment of ideological and political means, but also through her capacity to extract economic resources from the system.

⁸⁴ *The Cambridge History of China. The Ming Dynasty, 1368 - 1644, Part I*, ed. Twitchett and Mote, p.393.

⁸⁵ *The Chinese world order. Traditional China's foreign relations*, ed. Fairbank, p.58.

⁸⁶ *The Cambridge History of China. The Ming Dynasty, 1368 - 1644, Part I*, ed. Twitchett and Mote, p.229.

⁸⁷ Hung-wu Emperor’s letter to the King of Annam, 10th May 1370, in Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*. Emphasis added.

⁸⁸ *The Cambridge History of China. The Ming Dynasty, 1368 - 1644, Part I*, ed. Twitchett and Mote, p.167.

3. The economics of the tributary system

It is widely assumed that the tributary exchanges between the Imperial Court and the peripheral states resulted in a net economic loss for the former. The expense of entertaining missions in Beijing was not inconsiderable, and the value of goods bestowed by the Emperor on the visiting envoys was supposed to be higher than that of the gifts he received⁸⁹. Evidence of this imbalance is traceable in the periodical attempts by the Chinese Ministry of Rites to restrict the fiscal burden by reducing the number of missions admitted. The Ming Veritable Records, for instance, contain a recommendation to the very enterprising Siamese government requesting a cutback on its far too frequent embassies (ten between 1371 and 1374).⁹⁰ The fact that, at a superficial glance, ‘*kudos*’⁹¹ was all that the Imperial Court seemed to expect in order to balance the accounts has led several authors to argue that China’s economic power was basically used to buy peace⁹². In this section I propose to problematize this picture by indicating that at least four modes of economic interaction can be analysed within the flexible interface of the tributary system: *tribute extraction*, *sinocentric tributary exchange*, *appeasing trade*, and *reversals of tribute*. These forms of economic intercourse were often employed contextually, so as to fine tune the Middle Kingdom’s relations with its neighbours.

Tribute extraction

The most striking example of geoeconomic realism in China’s foreign policy is represented by the several occasions in which the

⁸⁹ E.T.C. Cheow, 'An ancient model for China's new power: paying tribute to Beijing', *International Herald Tribune*, Date, 2004.

⁹⁰ H. G. Cho, 'The trade between China, Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia in the 14th century through the 17th century period', *International Area Review*, 3, (2000), p.72.

⁹¹ Fairbank, *Trade and diplomacy on the China coast*, p.29.

⁹² “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”, *Ibid.*, p.33. Emphasis added.

equanimity of the Imperial government was replaced by strictly cost-effective policies. These could range from a reduction in the costs of hosting foreign embassies (after 1406 the Yung-lo Emperor bestowed only two banquets for eleven separate missions from the strategically unimportant kingdom of Java⁹³) to enforced compliance with substantial tribute demands. The Qing emperors displayed such posture with regards to countries pertaining to both the sinic zone – especially Korea – and the outer zone, such as Kashgaria. In the latter case, after the 1757 slaughter of the envoys sent by the Manchu Court to establish the tribute that the ‘vassal’ would have to pay,⁹⁴ a bloody war was waged to underscore the military consequences of disobedience. However, contrary to general expectations, the deeply neo-Confucian and ethnically Chinese Ming dynasty also adopted similar policies. After 1387, the Korean Koryo Court “was pressed to comply to the heavy tribute demands of the Ming, very reminiscent of the Yuan period. Tribute was [...] requested in a context where political and military power played the major role. In other words, the Ming was threatening Koryo to extort tribute”.⁹⁵ Similarly, from the mid-XVI century and up to the very last decades of Ming rule, the peripheral Southern province of Yunnan was required to offer annually to the Court some 2,000 liang of gold in tribute – enough to cover the annual salary of some 650 low-ranking state officials⁹⁶.

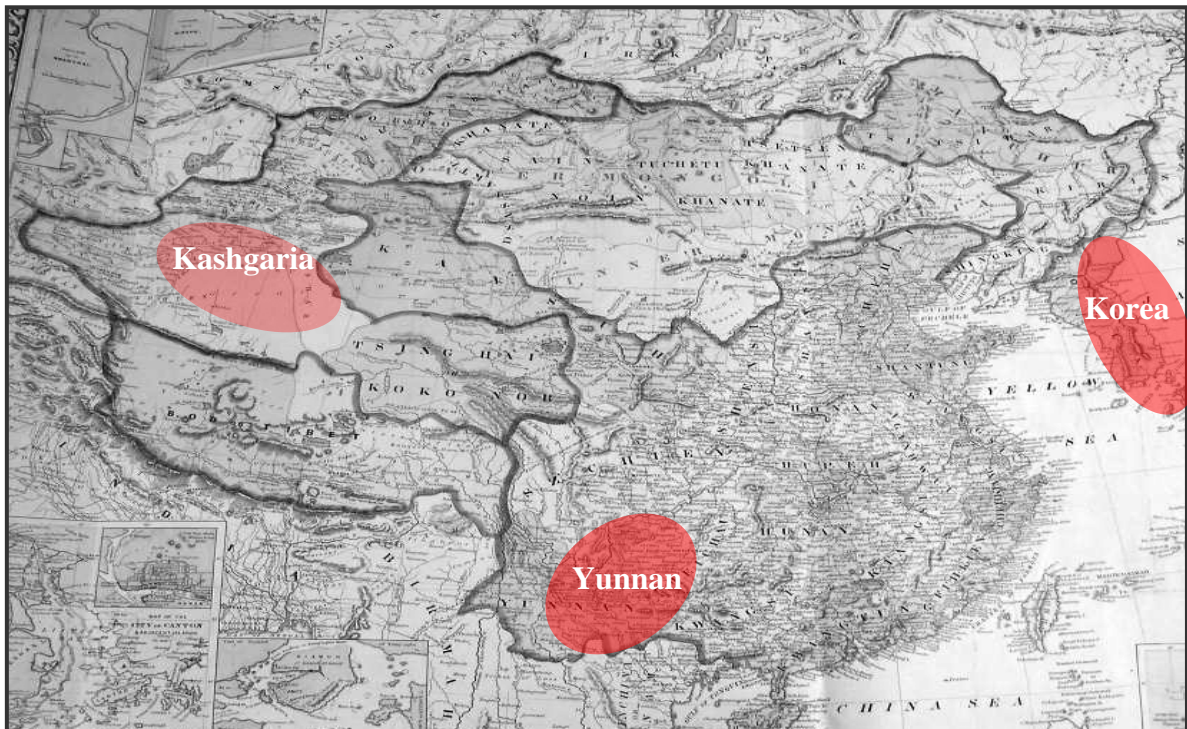
⁹³ Wang, *Community and nation: essays on Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, p.78.

⁹⁴ *The Chinese world order. Traditional China's foreign relations*, ed. Fairbank, p.219.

⁹⁵ Yun, 'Rethinking the tribute system: Korean states and Northeast Asian interstate relations, 600-1600', p.202.

⁹⁶ From a memorial by the Yunnan Regional Inspector Pan Jun dated 15th October 1618, in Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*. The calculation is based on the Inspector's explanation that “for every liang of gold, it has been necessary to expend 10 liang of silver”, thus bringing the amount to approx. 27.000 taels of silver. Huang's estimates that Ming salaries for low-ranking officials were of 60 piculs of grain a year and Feuerwerker's notes that the average price for a picul of grain was 0,7 taels under the Ming, lead to an annual salary of 42 taels for each official. See R. Huang, *Taxation and governmental finance in sixteenth-century*

Map 4 – The Chinese Empire under the Qing dynasty and some of its 'net' tributaries



Sinocentric tributary exchange

As much as it is relevant to note China's willingness to operate and militarily support forms of crude tributary extraction, the magnitude of such mode of interaction is nonetheless modest in comparison with the amount of non-coercive international economic activities channelled through the tributary system. Such activities are generally equated with trade, whereby – as the sinologist Hou Ren-zhi put it – “no tribute meant no trade; tribute brought recompense.”⁹⁷ Nonetheless, the degree of state intervention in relation to these commercial contacts⁹⁸ and the

Ming China (London, 1974), and A. Feuerwerker, 'The state and the economy in late imperial China', *Theory and Society*, XIII, 3, (1984).

⁹⁷ *China and her neighbours, from ancient times to the Middle Ages : a collection of essays*, ed. Tikhvinskiaei and Perelomov, p.182.

⁹⁸ Such intervention, apparent in the form of frequent bans on private trade, often reached the level of state monopoly on the traded goods, as well as on the

frequent asymmetry stemming from them to the advantage of the Chinese, recommend prudence in the unqualified use of the term 'trade'. In fact, especially with regards to the interactions occurring during times of bans on private commerce – when merchants who wanted to trade inside the Middle Kingdom had to come as part of a diplomatic mission bringing tribute to the Emperor,⁹⁹ and the prices and quantity of goods to be traded were determined by the Chinese¹⁰⁰ – it is the notion of 'sinocentric tributary exchanges' which appears to capture the inner workings of the system. Indeed, trade in a capitalist form is precisely the widespread virus¹⁰¹ which constantly undermined the tributary system and ultimately acting as a crucial cause for the failure of the East Asian system – once the Western commercial intrusion joined forces with such local private interests.

Under the Ming dynasty, the Imperial government repeatedly promulgated and – more or less efficiently – enforced prohibitions against private commercial contacts with foreign peoples. A memorial dated 3 December 1390 reads: "As, for ages past, it had not been permitted to pass China's gold, silver, bronze, cash, silks and weapons [abroad] and, because at this time in Guangdong/Guangxi, Zhejiang and Fujian there were foolish people who did not know of this and frequently engaged in private trade, the Emperor ordered that a strict prohibition be implemented"¹⁰². As can be gathered, once again the fundamental reason underpinning the Imperial foreign policy – in this case with regards to the economy – lies in the control of international intercourse as a

transportation of them. This occurred, as will be pointed out, both on the supply side (the Chinese government's monopoly on tea and control on incoming missions) and on the demand side (foreign rulers and élites monopolizing commercial intercourse with China).

⁹⁹ *The Chinese world order. Traditional China's foreign relations*, ed. Fairbank, p.208-9.

¹⁰⁰ M. Rossabi, 'The tea hand horse trade with Inner Asia during the Ming', *Journal of Asian History*, IV, 2, (1970), p.146.

¹⁰¹ K. Sugihara, 'Historical capitalism, East and West', in *Historical capitalism, East and West*, ed. K. Sugihara (London and New York, 2003), p.278.

¹⁰² Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*.

function of China's own stability. Such strategy sought to reaffirm three fundamental conditions: a healthy trade balance for the Empire, its access to locally scarce military goods, and a peaceful exportation of goods sufficient to defuse risks of armed incursions for pillaging purposes.

To consider the Middle Kingdom an autarchic economy is, at best, factually distorted. Similarly, it would be incorrect to assume that cross-border exchange only occurred to bestow refined Chinese products on the less developed 'barbarians'. Indeed, foreign rulers were eager to obtain Chinese material goods, but the Chinese were equally anxious to acquire certain crucial imports,¹⁰³ especially silver (employed to store savings and to handle internal economic transactions) to buy horses, and other products of Central Asia's pastoral economy that were not available locally in sufficient quantities.¹⁰⁴ What is interesting is to note how, for long periods of time, China was able to obtain such goods in large amounts without jeopardizing state finances. The first means used to achieve this remarkable equilibrium, especially under the Ming, was the extensive adoption of paper money as form of payment, altogether a case of proto-seigniorage. The Ming Veritable Records contain abundant references of this practice: "The envoy [...] sent by the country of Siam [...] offered tribute of horses, elephant tusks, sulphur, pepper, laka-wood and other products. It was Imperially commanded that clothing and paper money, as appropriate, be conferred upon the envoys"¹⁰⁵. The Court presented paper money to nearly every Asian tribute mission in the early Ming period. The foreign envoys used the gift to trade with the Chinese merchants at the College of Interpreters and at the border. Since the foreigners spent the paper money in China, the Court lost nothing, at

¹⁰³ Yun, 'Rethinking the tribute system: Korean states and Northeast Asian interstate relations, 600-1600', p.15.

¹⁰⁴ Mancall, *China at the center: 300 years of foreign policy* p.19-20.

¹⁰⁵ Memorial dated 4th November 1389, in Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*.

least until the inflation of the currency in the middle of the XV century persuaded foreign envoys to demand gifts in kind or silver.¹⁰⁶

The second policy designed by Ming rulers to guarantee gain in international exchanges was the creation of state monopolies over the most crucial commodities produced in the Empire. Particularly relevant to our analysis is the relationship between state control over tea exports and the Empire's vital need for foreign horses. As Morris Rossabi remarks, "even a cursory look at China's horse policy prior to the Ming indicates her eagerness for foreign horses",¹⁰⁷ justified by the need to defend her northern and western borders from the raids or invasions of the frontier peoples. The Chinese army had a decidedly disadvantageous position in battles with the border tribes. Its cavalry was no match for that of the Mongols or the Central Asian peoples, and its supply lines could not sustain prolonged incursions into enemy territory¹⁰⁸. Those same Inner Asian tribes coveted tea, as it remained fresh longer than other beverages, contained fewer impurities than water and was mildly stimulant, particularly after prolonged exposure to the cold.¹⁰⁹ There is no doubt that, given this context, several Imperial governments *motu proprio* favoured and initiated the tea-horse trades, and official 'Tea and Horse Offices' were established in border areas as early as under the Sung dynasty (X century AD). "Government control of tea was, in Chinese eyes, the first step in the creation of a rational and effective horse policy. Hung-wu Emperor, in the fourth year of his reign, imposed a 10% tax in kind on all tea. The remainder, with the exception of a small amount for the producers' personal consumption, was saved for government use. The Emperor also ordered his soldiers to cultivate tea on idle land. The

¹⁰⁶ M. Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia. From 1368 to the present day* (London, 1975), p.76.

¹⁰⁷ Rossabi, 'The tea and horse trade with Inner Asia during the Ming', p.136.

¹⁰⁸ Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia. From 1368 to the present day*, p.18.

¹⁰⁹ Rossabi, 'The tea and horse trade with Inner Asia during the Ming', p.141.

soldiers obtained 20% of the tea and government officials received the rest”.¹¹⁰ Indeed, the Chinese mandarins believed that a well thought-out state tea policy would control the barbarians better than tens of thousands of well-armed soldiers.¹¹¹ The Chinese and the peoples of Inner Asia agreed upon an exact rate of exchange, and though this rate fluctuated, the two parties negotiated it before engaging in ‘gifts in reply’ transactions.¹¹² Frequently, the Chinese government obtained concrete economic advantages by maintaining tea prices beyond China’s borders at an artificially high level in order to enhance buying power in terms of horses.¹¹³ The strategic importance of this mechanism is well described by Xuan-zong Emperor, who stated in 1431 that “China has certainly not initiated trade because she is short of horses and cattle. On the contrary, the barbarians are entirely dependent on China. If we were to discontinue trade, they would undoubtedly become embittered. Thus the Court’s authorisation of trade is also an expression of conciliatory humanness. Or, more concretely: at the beginning of the Ming era horse trading was organised in the East and tea trading in the West. All this was done in order to stabilise the frontiers and cut down on defence expenditure.”¹¹⁴

These sinocentric tributary exchanges, however, also contained a distinctively repressive aspect, the examination of which further sheds light on the Middle Kingdom’s understanding of international economic intercourse as a function of the Empire’s stability. Evidence of this is the preferential treatment granted to those tributary states which supplied strategically war-related materials to Beijing. Although the Ming and Qing

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p.142.

¹¹¹ *China and her neighbours, from ancient times to the Middle Ages : a collection of essays*, ed. Tikhvinskiaei and Perelomov, p.186.

¹¹² Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia. From 1368 to the present day*, p.71.

¹¹³ H. Creel, 'The role of the horse in Chinese history', *The American Historical Review*, 70, 3, (1965), p.668.

¹¹⁴ *China and her neighbours, from ancient times to the Middle Ages : a collection of essays*, ed. Tikhvinskiaei and Perelomov, p.183.

Courts, for example, tended to reject undue embassies, both turned a blind eye at Siam's over-enterprising activities, even regarding trade conducted during off-tribute seasons as part of the tributary trade of the Siamese Court.¹¹⁵ Such behaviour might well be linked with the large shipments of rice reaching China from Siam: the transportation costs of the Siamese rice were lower than those of rice brought to the coast from certain inner Chinese provinces.¹¹⁶ The relevance of this relationship (Siam could export perhaps as much as 60.000 tons of rice a year¹¹⁷) appears in its full potential if one considers the need to feed the large garrisons protecting the Inner Asian border and the three proto-industrial macro-regions of Lingnan, Fujian, and Guangdong under the Qing¹¹⁸. "In 1722, at the start of at least a decade of a continuous flow of Siamese rise in Southeast China, the Siamese were granted permission for tributary trade also to Amoy and Ningpo",¹¹⁹ besides the traditional port of Canton.

A second example of the primacy of strategy over ideology is represented by Japan and the Ryūkyū islands. Japan had always been on the periphery of the East Asian system, until Shogun Yoshimitsu (1358-1408) submitted to become a vassal of China, thus starting a series of 19 tribute mission to China between the early XV century and 1547.¹²⁰ In this relationship, swords were the staple commodities of export to China both in volume and value:¹²¹ "In 1485 Japanese envoys brought in as many as 38.610 swords to China, [...] more than enough to equip [...] seven divisions of the Ming cavalry. Accepting tribute, the

¹¹⁵ S. Viraphol, *Tribute and profit: Sino-Siamese trade 1652-1853* (Cambridge, 1977), p.142.

¹¹⁶ Mancall, *China at the center: 300 years of foreign policy*, p.19-20.

¹¹⁷ Viraphol, *Tribute and profit: Sino-Siamese trade 1652-1853*, p.90.

¹¹⁸ K. Pomerantz, *The great divergence. China, Europe and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton, 2000), chap. 4.

¹¹⁹ Viraphol, *Tribute and profit: Sino-Siamese trade 1652-1853*, p.142.

¹²⁰ Cho, 'The trade between China, Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia in the 14th century through the 17th century period', p.85-86.

¹²¹ Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia. From 1368 to the present day*, p.74.

Empire somehow failed to notice how the influence of Satsuma Japanese over the Ryūkyū islands, formerly an autonomous sinicised vassal of China,¹²² became outright dominance by the late XVI century. Given that national defence was the primary objective in Chinese foreign policy and that an important reason for the dispatch of envoys was the acquisition of military intelligence,¹²³ it seems unlikely that the Emperor's officials never understood the situation. Probably, the Imperial government was well aware of the fact that the Ryūkyū's tribute connection was being employed as a façade by the Japanese to keep exchanging goods with China without formally accepting vassal status for Japan. Perhaps, the preservation of Ryūkyūan deference to the Emperor, and the strategic relevance of these 'mediated' exchanges with Japan outweighed all other considerations.

Appeasing trade and reversal of tribute

Trade with China seems more vital to many of the neighbouring peoples than it was to the Empire itself. Accordingly, foreigners would generally be willing to trade on terms set by the Chinese, and their fear of losing their trade would keep them from causing trouble¹²⁴. Even when the state lost its vigour, the tributary system – albeit deteriorated – was not abandoned; it continued to serve the interest of the Empire. But the terms were now open to negotiation, whereas earlier they had been dictated by the Court.¹²⁵ Chinese military weakness did not, however, prompt invasion: war was only marginally profitable and risks were high. More extensive trade in Chinese goods and from a better negotiating

¹²² G. Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu: identity and ideology in early modern thought and politics* (Honolulu, 1999).

¹²³ Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia. From 1368 to the present day*, p.21.

¹²⁴ *The Chinese world order. Traditional China's foreign relations*, ed. Fairbank, p.254.

¹²⁵ *The Cambridge History of China. The Ming Dynasty, 1368 - 1644, Part I*, ed. Twitchett and Mote, p.558.

position was a far more appealing prospect for peoples in the borders.¹²⁶ A clear example is offered by the decline in Imperial power from 1549 to 1644, when the Ming appeased the Mongols by accepting their demands for trade and tribute¹²⁷. In extreme cases, this could turn into a form of outright reversal of tribute, with Imperial subsidies, gifts, titles and edicts of praise being issued to attract or pacify various khans or lamas¹²⁸.

It would be wrong to portray the endurance of the tributary system as a mere product of Chinese far-sightedness and political skills. Its resilience is due just as much to the convergence of interests at *both* ends of the exchange. The Imperial Court refrained from levying taxes on tributary goods,¹²⁹ and foreign rulers gladly participated because they desired the valuable objects bestowed by the Chinese, as well as the opportunity to trade in other Chinese goods such as tea and silk.¹³⁰ Indeed, every member of an embassy was allowed to carry some 2,000 taels of silver or ginseng for purpose of private trade¹³¹. The bulk of this side trade was mainly carried out to benefit the original owner of the foreign goods, usually the ruler or members of the aristocracy of a vassal state. In the case of Siam, the so-called ballast cargo belonged not only to the Siamese king, but also to various members of the nobility whose interests were represented by members of the tribute mission¹³². An important factor in ensuring the durability of the tributary system, therefore, was the role played by foreign elites in providing a complementary check upon private trade – namely, enforcing the ban among their own population. When this failed, the likelihood of systemic decay increased steadily. For example, in 1527 Japanese tribute envoys

¹²⁶ Mancall, *China at the center: 300 years of foreign policy*, p.44.

¹²⁷ Wang, 'Offensive Realism and the rise of China', p.186.

¹²⁸ *The Chinese world order. Traditional China's foreign relations*, ed. Fairbank, p.254.

¹²⁹ An example is contained in a Memorial dated 5th November 1371.

¹³⁰ Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar. Qing guest ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793*, p.10.

¹³¹ *The Chinese world order. Traditional China's foreign relations*, ed. Fairbank, p.107.

¹³² Viraphol, *Tribute and profit: Sino-Siamese trade 1652-1853*, p.34.

were again permitted to trade once each decade, but the families that had formerly organised such official embassies were no longer powerful enough to monopolise the trade with China. During the 1530s and 1540s small trading fleets from Japan began to develop contacts along the China coast, and Chinese merchants set up offshore trading centres to accommodate them.¹³³ Consequently, very little trade between China and Japan took place within the framework of the tribute system after 1533. Indeed, although private trade under the Ming and Qing became even more covert than it had been under the Sung or the Yuan, embodied in the overseas Chinese diaspora and marginalised in southern Chinese coastal areas,¹³⁴ it became a real challenge to the tributary system. The Empire was always fighting an uphill battle against covert private trade. Chinese traders were more willing to trade directly with their foreign counterparts than with the government because transactions were conducted on an equal footing, whereas the Imperial government, by 'politicising' the exchange, placed the outsiders in disadvantageous positions at the outset¹³⁵. By the second decade of the XIX century many areas in South-East Asia, formerly known in Chinese annals as 'tributaries', were indicated as 'trading states'¹³⁶.

4. The endogenous determinants of the East Asian order

Previous sections have aimed to offer a picture of the Ming and Qing Empire as the hegemonic actor in the pre-modern East Asian world-system. In light of an analysis which separately examined the ideological,

¹³³ *The Cambridge History of China. The Ming Dynasty, 1368 - 1644, Part I*, ed. Twitchett and Mote, p.492.

¹³⁴ Sugihara, 'Historical capitalism, East and West', in *Historical capitalism, East and West*, ed. Sugihara, p.278.

¹³⁵ *China and her neighbours, from ancient times to the Middle Ages : a collection of essays*, ed. Tikhvinskiaei and Perelomov, p.197.

¹³⁶ Viraphol, *Tribute and profit: Sino-Siamese trade 1652-1853*, p.159.

politico-military and economic sources of Chinese power, it seems appropriate to endorse David Kang's proposition that East Asian regional relations have historically been more hierarchic, peaceful, and stable than those in the West.¹³⁷ Indeed, a comprehensive empirical quantification of all cases of warfare in pre-modern East Asian history has yet to be compiled, but what appears beyond doubt is that between 1368 and the late XIX century no attempt was ever made to challenge the Middle Kingdom's status as the pivot of the system. Unlike Europe, where the formal parity of all sovereign nations had been acknowledged since the XVII century and the balance of power prevented the emergence of a continental empire, in China a neo-Confucian system of international relations reinforced the impossibility of international intercourse based on terms of legal equality. Indeed, whoever wished to enter into relations with China was expected to do so as China's vassal, officially accepting the hegemony of the Chinese emperor.¹³⁸

The term 'hegemony' was used originally to describe the relationship of Athens to the other Greek city-states that joined in the Delio-Attic Alliance against the Persian Empire.¹³⁹ Athens originally directed the combined efforts of the alliance without securing permanent political power over the lesser cities, and later pursued an imperialistic policy – as exemplified in the famous discussion between the Athenian ambassadors and their counterparts from Melii, reported in Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*. In essence, the term 'hegemon' (from the Greek *εγηνων*, meaning 'the one who leads') expresses the idea of international leadership towards the achievement of a mutually rewarding political objective. The step from such minimalist influence to a fuller one,

¹³⁷ D. Kang, 'Getting Asia wrong: The need for new analytical frameworks', *International Security*, 27, 4, (2003), p.66.

¹³⁸ T. Chiang, 'China and European Expansion', *Politica*, 2, 5, (1936), p.3.

¹³⁹ *Two hegemonies : Britain 1846-1914 and the United States 1941-2001*, ed. P. O'Brien and A. Clesse (Aldershot, 2002).

whereby hegemony extends to profiting the leader *at the expenses* of lesser polities, is clearly a short one and the Latin rendition of the Greek term – *imperium* – evokes this transition. Contemporary theories still grapple with the subtleties of differentiating empire from hegemony, generally envisaging a scale of hierarchical institutions of the sort of that proposed by David Lake: spheres of influence, protectorates, informal empires, and empires¹⁴⁰. To put it in Immanuel Wallerstein's words, 'hegemony' means more than mere leadership but less than outright empire, and a hegemonic power is a state able to secure compliance for its set of rules on the interstate system, and thereby create political order¹⁴¹.

As remarked above, Ming and Qing China certainly fits this description, as it played the most significant role in shaping the pre-modern East Asian system. Nonetheless, considering that the historical time-frame requires a comparison with the contemporary European experience (rather than with that of Athens or Rome), it is necessary to observe that the Chinese Empire displayed a peculiar hegemonic posture vis-à-vis its Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, and British competitors. Indeed, while the European kingdoms struggled for hegemony in the Old Continent by appropriating material resources through military expansion overseas, China constructed a tributary system pursuing only partially similar goals and employing a very different strategy. Clearly, the sheer size of China is sufficient to undermine the utility of such contrast, but it is still important to acknowledge that the evaluations produced in this work suggest that the tributary system must not be construed to be a doctrine of conquest or universal dominion, for it militarily imposed very little on foreign peoples who chose to remain outside the Chinese world.¹⁴² This

¹⁴⁰ Acharya, 'Will Asia's past be its future?', p.153.

¹⁴¹ *Two hegemonies : Britain 1846-1914 and the United States 1941-2001*, ed. O'Brien and Clesse.

¹⁴² Chiang, 'China and European Expansion', p.3.

is really the crucial difference in any comparison with pre-modern Europe. Frequently, the example of Admiral Cheng-Ho's fleets is used to contend otherwise, but even a superficial empirical evaluation would indicate that Yung-lo Emperor's aggressive foreign policy was an exception to his father's long-abided rule not to threaten a broad spectrum of neighbouring countries. Accordingly, from this historical analysis stems my definition of China as a *centripetal hegemon*, or else a *systemic pivot which projects its power internationally with the strategic objective of ensuring its own political durability by stabilizing – not conquering – the system, maintaining leadership and reducing transaction costs*.¹⁴³

This vision collides with George Modelski and William Thompson's rather schematic dynastic-cycle model, which would predict that as the empire consolidates it will adopt increasingly expansionist, coercive strategies.¹⁴⁴ In fact, the wisdom of the Imperial governments' restraint becomes apparent once it is noted how no pre-modern Empire could assert effective control over an extensive landmass, especially one in which the fastest speed of information transmission resembled that of the ancient Persian Empire.¹⁴⁵ Again, besides the Empire's bureaucracy – and supported by it – it is the Confucian ideological element that was eagerly seen to obtain grassroots support to dynastic stability, an invaluable asset, since ruling a vast polity like China by physical force would rapidly incur prohibitive costs.¹⁴⁶ Confucianism was more

¹⁴³ One may wonder how this definition may apply to the Qing empire, when China – under the leadership of the Manchu invaders – effectively increased in size by some 40 percent. The answer comes by noting that in this case it is not the Empire which conquers extra land, but rather an external territory (Manchuria) which conquers the Empire.

¹⁴⁴ Johnston, *Cultural realism. Strategic culture and grand strategy in Chinese history*, p.56-57.

¹⁴⁵ And this still under the late Qing, in Finer, *The history of government from the earliest times*, p.1147.

¹⁴⁶ The case of the draconian first dynasty, the Qin, was a well remembered precedent. See also Modelski and Thompson, *Leading sectors and world powers. The coevolution of global politics and economics*.

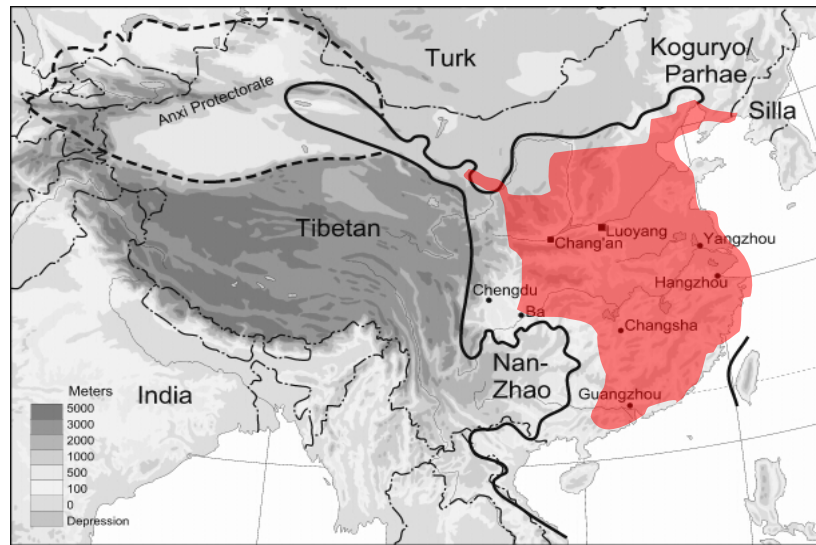
concerned than anything else with the balance of political and economic power between the state and the peasantry, the latter being the critical section of the population for the survival of the Empire, for it provided its main sources of tax revenue¹⁴⁷ and military manpower. Thus, here lies the ultimate reason for the centripetal posture of China's hegemony: the Empire's delicate unity was heavily reliant upon social consent, which in turn flowering from the conscious 'indoctrination' of Chinese peasants. Extending the boundaries of the polity to include peoples accustomed to different societal stratifications would loosen the grip of Imperial power with potentially damaging consequences. Not even the Qing Court, despite the remarkably cosmopolitan nature of its Grand Council,¹⁴⁸ could avoid refining the ideological tool and employing it on an unprecedented scale. Hence, the further qualification of China's model of hegemony: it was centripetal due to the *ethnocentricity* of the Empire. For the dynasty not to collapse due to overstretch syndrome,¹⁴⁹ the extension of Imperial borders should not excessively outstrip the core agricultural zones. A cursory look at long-term historical trends seems to corroborate this point:

¹⁴⁷ Deng, *The premodern Chinese economy*, p.118.

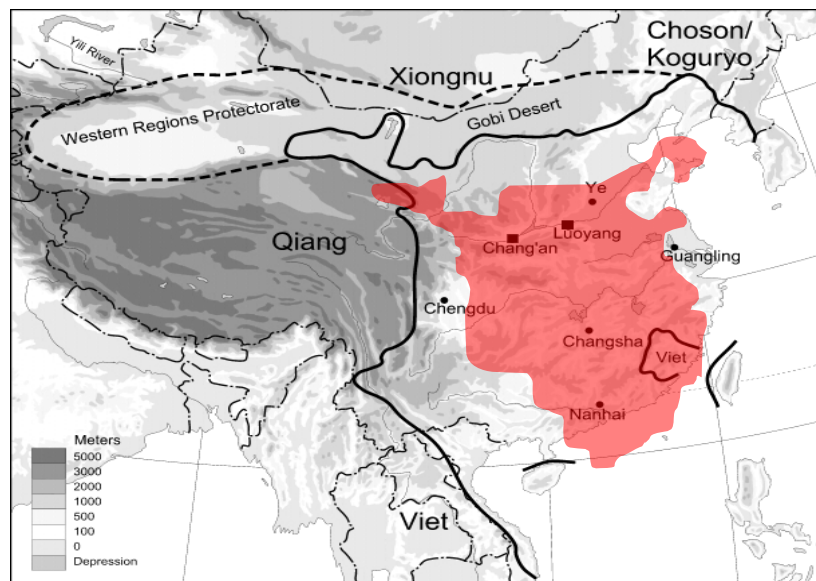
¹⁴⁸ Comprising Manchu, Han, and Muslim officials, in Finer, *The history of government from the earliest times*, p.1138.

¹⁴⁹ P. Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the Great Powers* (New York, 1987).

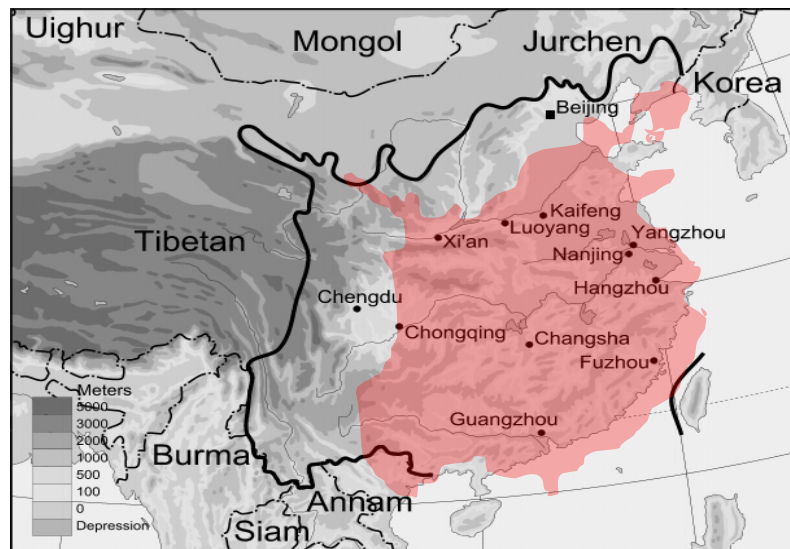
Map 5 – Approximate proportion of farming area (red) relative to Han borders



Map 6 – Approximate proportion of farming area (red) relative to T'ang borders



Map 7 – Approximate proportion of farming area (red) relative to Ming borders



By displaying the proportional extension of the Empire's borders and cultivated land over the successive dynasties, these maps, based upon Gang Deng's analyses,¹⁵⁰ point to the consistency existing between the Empire's enlargement and the population of Confucian-trained, mostly ethnically 'Han' peasants. The tributary system maintained stability at the borders, offering a range of tools to prevent external disruption from hindering Inner China's stability. As has been remarked in previous sections, hegemony, in the Gramscian sense, has ideological as well as material dimensions: Confucianism acted as a glue that bound China with East Asia,¹⁵¹ but in doing that it also reinforced China's own unity. So conceived, the tribute system fulfilled its essential strategic function: the maintenance of Chinese imperial supremacy.¹⁵² In fact, even a dynastic meltdown, such as that occurred in 1683 after a prolonged period of defensive maintenance by the Ming, could not cause the ultimate failure

¹⁵⁰ Deng, *The premodern Chinese economy*, see Figure 3.6.

¹⁵¹ Acharya, 'Will Asia's past be its future?', p.156.

¹⁵² R. Dellios, 'Chinese forms of regionalism: organic and orchestrated', conference at University of Warwick (16-18 September, 1999).

of the system. Only short-lived turmoil ensued, and the new, ethnically alien, rulers rapidly revived the system and moved towards a newly vigorous proactive stabilization. In conclusion, the Qing were but the last dynasty employing a most refined tributary system to preserve the same political unity and cultural centrality already associated with the Zhou, Han, Tang and Ming predecessors.¹⁵³

Concluding remarks

This study has offered an exploration of some traits of Imperial China's interaction with its international environment. Although my principal objective has been to offer a problematized vision of the East Asian sinocentric tributary system as a versatile channel for China's heterogeneous foreign policies, an important secondary purpose is behind the analysis. Unity was the strategy underlining China's geopolitical as well as geoeconomic interests. Unity is the recurring element in Chinese history, and its manifestations appear prominent today in the PRC's dealings with Taiwan. In the light of this approach to foreign affairs, scholarly investigations may contribute relevant historical perceptions to diachronic comparisons between Western and Chinese international outlooks. Such systemic comparative efforts could prove very insightful in identifying similarities and differences between today's incumbent hegemon – born in denial of empire – and its potential medium-term challenger, heir to a legacy of bimillenary imperial centrality.

¹⁵³ Roger Des Forges and Luo Xu, "China as a non-hegemonic superpower? The uses of history among the 'China Can Say No' writers and their critics," *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 33, 4 (2001), pp. 483-507.483.

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