Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia and the Tribute System

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An overview of the lecture

- The China-centered tribute system
- Southeast Asia in the tribute system
- Legitimacy, trade and protection in a hierarchical system
- The unfulfilled promise of hegemonic stability
- Past and present in East Asia
The China-Centered Tribute System

- The foreign relations of imperial China
  - Hierarchical relationships between China and the rest
    - China as the Middle Kingdom
    - Confucianism and the moral underpinnings of China’s supremacy
      - rule of virtue and the moral authority of the ruler
      - Royal followers + compassionate leader
  - Practical equality between the imperial and foreign courts
    - Value of the tributary items usually outweighed by the imperial gifts
    - China rarely interfered the internal affairs of (distant) countries
The China-Centered Tribute System

- Tributary missions and diplomatic communication
  - China used very strict rules to regulate the tributary missions
    - The frequency of tributes
    - The status of tributary states
    - The routes of incoming tributary missions
  - Two-way communication through the tribute system
    - China received tributes from overseas
    - China sent imperial tallies to tributary states
  - China also sent tributes to other countries when it was weak
    - For example, South Song paid tributes to Jin after its defeat
Southeast Asia in the Tribute System

Southeast Asia had long been an integral part of the tribute system between the 3rd and the 19th century.

- The earliest recorded Southeast Asian tributes was sent by the ancient mainland Kingdom of Funan in the 3rd-6th centuries.

- Booming periods of Southeast Asian tributes:
  - Between the late 6th and early 10th century when China was ruled under Sui and Tang dynasties.
  - The early periods of the Ming and Qing dynasties.
Legitimacy, Trade and Protection in a Hierarchical System

When and why did Southeast Asian countries pay tributes to the Chinese court?
- Except in the Yuan dynasty, tributary missions were mostly voluntary from Southeast Asian countries
- An explanation: survival and dominance in a hierarchical international system

Pattern I: seeking imperial recognition of the new ruler
- Royal succession and dynastic changes in pre-colonial East Asia
- China’s recognition of the new ruler carried considerable weight in the hierarchical order of East Asia
- Siam: Taksin and Rama I in the late 18th century
- Sumatra: the weakened Jambi King in 1377
King Taksin (Chinese: 鄭昭)
- December 28, 1767 – April 6, 1782

After a lengthy investigation, China eventually recognized Taksin as the ‘King of Siam’ in 1781

Rama I
- 6 April 1782 – 7 September 1809
- His first tributary mission brought a letter to the Qing Court, claiming that Taksin on his deathbed ‘exhorted me to rule with care, not to change the old order, to have care for our own sovereign land and to honor the Heavenly Dynasty’

The Chakkri dynasty continued to use Taksin’s surname in its correspondence with China until mid-19th century
Legitimacy, Trade and Protection in a Hierarchical System

- **Pattern II: securing tributary trade with China**
  - Trade revenues were essential to the small trading states in Southeast Asia
  - Tributary trade was the only way to conduct trade with China when private trade was banned: ‘a cloak for trade’ (Fairbank)
  - Tributary trade was controlled/monopolized by the tributary courts
  - Tributary trade was duty-free!

- Three geopolitical areas had been constantly benefited from tributary trade with China
  - Southern Vietnam: Champa → Cochin-China
  - The Gulf of Thailand: Ayutthaya → Siam
  - The Strait of Malacca: Srivijaya → Melaka
Anthony Reid: *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*, two volumes, Yale University Press
Legitimacy, Trade and Protection in a Hierarchical System

Pattern III: requesting protection and arbitration in sub-regional conflicts

- China’s predominance allowed it to play a key role in mediating sub-regional conflicts in Southeast Asia
- Yet, China’s response to these requests varied: military intervention, official tallies, re-ranking of tributary status, quiet ignorance

- Some examples:
  - The paradox of Srivijaya’s tributes to China in the Song dynasty
  - Melaka under China’s protection in the 15th century
  - Dai Viet’s campaigns against Champa and Lan Xang in the late 15th century
  - Burmese request to save the Toungoo dynasty in 1750
Unfulfilled Promise of Hegemonic Stability

Hegemonic stability in international relations
- The predominant state has a big stake in the stability of the international system
- Four hegemonic strategies
  - Socialization
  - Public goods
  - Coercion
  - Institutional building/rules

The Socialization Strategy: Unfulfilled Mission of China’s Culture State
- China’s understandings of its centrality
- The Indianized states of Southeast Asia
- Different understandings of power and supremacy
The Public-Good Provision Strategy: Tributary Trade or Private Trade

- Private trade in pre-colonial East Asia was considered more as a source of instability than a path towards prosperity.

- Tributary trade was able to bring peace and stability.

  ‘peace in the southern ocean (i.e., maritime Southeast Asia) was restored at the time when there was a new Chinese dynasty, deliberately recovering the traditional frontiers of China and, by means of special envoys, announcing its accession overseas in order to revive China’s foreign trade.’

  ---- Wolters (2008)

- Private trade often associated with changes and instability.
Unfulfilled Promise of Hegemonic Stability

- The Coercive Strategy: Unsuccessful Intervention and Unexpected Impact
  - Apart from the Mongol invasion, China carried out relatively few military campaigns in Southeast Asia
  - Two major campaigns against Dai Viet
    - Ming occupation of Dai Viet (1407-1427)
    - Qing campaign against Dai Viet (1788-1789)
  - The Qing campaign against Burma (1765-1770)
  - Dai Viet consolidated its dominance in the east mainland in the late 15th century
  - Siam built a powerful Tai Kingdom in the central mainland around the late 18th century
Qing’s campaign against Burma
(1765-1770)
Southeast Asia and China around the 15th century
The Institution-Building Strategy: Rise and Fall of the Tribute System

- The rise and fall of the tribute system corresponded roughly to the strength of imperial China
- A sudden increase of tributary missions between 1780 and 1840
  - Dai Viet, Siam and Burma increased their tributes to China
History and Present in East Asia

- The rise of China and its implications
  - Balancing against the rising power of China?
  - Bandwagoning with the growing influences of China?

- The structure of IR in East Asia today: hierarchical
  - Superpower: US
  - Rising power: China
  - Great and middle powers: Japan, South Korea, ASEAN

- Balancing and instability
  - A US-oriented mechanism of legitimacy, trade and protection
  - The US hegemony and East Asian instability…?