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**Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia and the Tribute System II:
Hegemon and Instability**

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Abstract

Pre-colonial Southeast Asia had long been an integral part of the China-centered tribute system. Yet, the hierarchical relationship between China and Southeast Asia has not been studied from the perspective of international relations. This article contributes to the literature by examining the hegemonic strategies that China had pursued in Southeast Asia. Based on the literature on hegemonic stability, China's hegemonic influences are analyzed according to four theoretical angles: norm socialization, public-good provision, hegemonic coercion, and institution-building. Firstly, China's self-perceived cultural state had not socialized the 'Indianized' states of Southeast Asia. Secondly, despite the vibrant commercial links that the China-centered tributary trade had created, it was not an economic order open to all Southeast Asian countries. Thirdly, the coercive campaigns of China had altered the power balance of mainland Southeast Asia beyond its control. Fourthly, the tribute system was sophisticated and long-lasting, but its institutional influences had not moved beyond the dynastic cycle of China's imperial power. Although the hegemonic power of China was substantial, it had failed to bring long-term stability to pre-colonial Southeast Asia.

Introduction

International relations in pre-colonial East Asia followed a distinctively hierarchical order. With its unparalleled economic, political and military strengths, China stood at the center of this regional hierarchy (Faribank, 1968; Mancall, 1984). The rest of East Asia was incorporated into the regional order through an elaborated institutional framework—the tribute system (Faribank, 1942; Mancall, 1968; Kang 2010). Under this system, foreign countries were invited to pay tribute to China. By submitting to the supremacy of China, foreign rulers were rewarded with official recognition by the imperial court, lucrative tributary trade with China, and, on some occasions, imperial protection in the case of emergency (Shu, 2011). The tributary states were even ranked by China according to their cultural conformity to the Chinese civilization and their loyalty to the imperial court (Kang, 2010: 57-59). It is often considered that the hegemony of China, together with the hierarchical tribute system, had contributed to the long-term peace and stability in East Asia prior to the arrival of European powers around the mid-19th century (see Kang 2007, 2010).

Southeast Asia had long been an integral part of the China-centered tribute system (Reid, 1996; Stuart-Fox, 2003; Wang, 1998a, 1998b; Wolters, 2008). In the eastern mainland, Dai Viet had been a ‘loyal’ tributary state ever since it got independence from China in the 10th century. Its southern neighbor and long-term competitor, Champa, similarly sought a close tributary connection for both economic and political reasons. In the central mainland, the pre-historical Kingdom of Funan sent tributary missions to China as early as in the 3rd century (Stuart-Fox, 2003: 30). Later, the Khmer empire and various Tai and Laotian Kingdoms also pursued active tributary relations with China. Only in the more distant western mainland, the Burmese kingdoms of Pagan, Toungoo and Konbaung dispatched sporadic missions. In maritime Southeast Asia, the trading states of Srivijaya, Brunei, Luzon, Sulu and Melaka all sought close tributary connections with China until the region fell under the European controls in the 16th century. The powerful Javenese Empire of Majapahit, though wary of its vassals’ contact with China, regularly dispatched its own envoys to the Ming court.

For many pre-colonial Southeast Asian countries, tributary trade with China not only brought a steady inflow of wealth but also created a solid foundation for them to thrive on the trade routes (Reid, 1993). In the periods when China was strong and its foreign policy outward-looking, the power balance in Southeast Asia was also more easily maintained (Wolters, 2008: 69). However, Southeast Asian countries were far from

peaceful under the tribute system. Fierce competition for survival and domination had characterized the balance-of-power politics in the pre-colonial era (Shu, 2011). The conflicts between Dai Viet and Champa, between Ayutthaya/Siam and Burma, and among the kingdoms of Sumatra and Java all lasted for several centuries without a clear winner. Different from the experiences of the Confucian world in Northeast Asia (Kang, 2010), the hegemony of China had *not* produced a decisive impact on the sub-regional stability of pre-colonial Southeast Asia.

Why did the undisputed hegemony of China fail to create long-term peace and stability among its tributary countries in pre-colonial Southeast Asia? According to the hegemonic stability theory, a predominant hegemon is conducive to an open economic order and stable inter-state relationship (Kindleberger, 1973; Krasner, 1976; Gilpin, 1981). To achieve such a stable order, the hegemon can employ at least four different strategies, each representing a particular school of international relations theories (see Milner, 1998). The hegemon may project its power and coerce subordinate states to comply; it may provide necessary public goods and motivate other states to follow suit; it may establish multilateral institutions to maintain a desirable inter-state order; it may also create a set of values and norms to socialize its subordinates. Using these theoretical claims as benchmarks, this article aims to find out the reasons behind China's largely failed hegemonic impacts on pre-colonial Southeast Asia.

The rest of the article is organized in the following way. The next section looks into the theory of hegemonic stability, exploring different interpretations of hegemonic stability as well as their critics. Then, China's hegemonic impacts on pre-colonial Southeast Asia are examined from four perspectives. The third section assesses the socialization effect of China's self-perceived centrality on Southeast Asia. The fourth section looks into the link between public goods provision and tributary trade. The fifth section examines the coercive dimension of hegemonic China, focusing on the imperial China's military campaigns in mainland Southeast Asia. The sixth section evaluates the institutional strength of the tribute system. The article is concluded with a summary of main findings and their implications.

The Theory of Hegemonic Stability and Its Critics

The theory of 'hegemonic stability', a term coined by one of its critics (Keohane, 1980), is first articulated around the mid-1970s. At a glance, the theory is simple and straightforward. It posits that a single, dominant power (i.e., the hegemon) is conducive

to stability and prosperity in the world. The theory is normally attributed to three scholars: Charles Kindleberger, Robert Gilpin and Stephen Krasner. While all of them accept the logic of hegemonic stability, the meaning of *stability* differs in their accounts. According to Kindleberger (1973), the experiences of the Great Depression show that only a predominant power is able to create a stable world economy. A stable economic order requires a steady flow of capital, adequate liquidity, stable exchange rate, and coordinated monetary policies, something Lake (1984) refers to as the ‘international economic infrastructure’. For Gilpin (1975, 1981), stability is both political and economic. In political terms, stability is ‘an international system of relative peace and security’ (Gilpin, 1981: 145). In economic terms, stability is a liberal economic order featuring ‘free trade, foreign investment and a well-functioning international monetary system’ (145). In Krasner’s (1976) account, stability is regarded as an open trading structure. It should be noted that the liberal economic connotations of stability, especially concerning financial coordination, were well beyond the reach of pre-colonial Southeast Asia. For the purpose of this article, stability is defined as ‘an open economic order and stable inter-state relationship’ to avoid conceptual misunderstandings.

Behind the theory of hegemonic stability, there is always a question about the intention of the hegemon. Is the predominant power a benevolent or a coercive architect of the world order? The answer to this question matters because a coercive hegemon not only aggressively imposes its will on the subordinates but is more likely to punish the disobedient followers. In contrast, a benevolent hegemon acts like an enlightened leader who guides the rest of the world through crisis and leads them towards prosperity. As Snidal (1985) points out, the original theory of hegemonic stability fails to specify the hegemonic intentions. Nonetheless, Alt et al.’s (1988) game-theoretical model shows that there is no qualitative difference between benevolent and coercive hegemon. A benevolent hegemon may offer selective incentives to reshape subordinate states’ behavior; a coercive hegemon resorts to political or military sanctions to enforce its will. Both approaches are costly to the hegemon itself. So, whether a hegemon is benevolent or coercive only depends on the relative ‘efficiency’ of benevolence or coercion (see Lake, 1993). If necessary, a benevolent hegemon can easily resort to coercion.

Logically, the theory of hegemonic stability is based on the analysis of public goods¹

¹ Public goods differ from private goods because their consumption by one person does not prevent others from consuming it. Because of this, the supply of public goods is prone to the problem of free-rider.

provision. Stable economic and political order is a genuine public good. Every state enjoys the benefits of a stable world but few are willing to bear the cost of it. Because of this, stability is usually in short supply in international political economy. According to Mancur Olson (1965), apart for the rare situation of well-coordinated collective action, only a 'privileged group' has the incentive and the capability to supply public goods because public goods disproportionately benefits the privileged one. The hegemon is the predominant power in world politics. Analytically, it can be regarded as a privileged group since the hegemon has a very high stake in the stable world order. For this reason, the hegemon should be willing to both provide and maintain stability in a world where it dominates. This is the essential logic of the hegemonic stability theory (Gilpin, 1981; Gowa, 1989; Lake, 1993).²

However, the metaphor of public goods is questioned by some. As Conybeare (1984) points out, it is more plausible to conceptualize the international trade relations as a game of prisoners' dilemma than the game of public goods provision. In the prisoners' dilemma game, self-interested players lead to a non-cooperative suboptimal outcome.³ There is no reason to believe that the hegemon is not self-interested. Instead of promoting free trade, the hegemon can use optimal tariff to improve its terms of trade. Moreover, free trade is excludable and therefore not a public good. The hegemon may selectively offer free trade to a sub-group of subordinate states rather than create a global free-trade order. While Conybeare's criticism focuses only on trade, it has important implications for the theory of hegemonic stability. It indicates that the existence of a hegemon may not automatically lead to an open economic order.

In a careful response to these critiques, Gowa (1989) argues that the real hegemon is not myopic. Just like a monopolist company sets price below the short-term maximum, the hegemon may not want to use optimal tariff to exploit its predominant status for short-term benefits. In the long run, free trade brings more benefits to the hegemon. Gowa (1989) also contends that while free trade is not a public good, the enforcement of non-universal trade rules is. Since the third countries can ship their products to a free trade state for further (duty-free) export, the enforcement of non-universal free trade arrangement engenders very high minoring cost. So, the hegemon should prefer a global free trade order to limited free trade deals. However, it is debatable as to what extent a

² It should be noted that Krasner's (1976) theory of hegemonic stability does not employ public goods as the logical framework in his theoretical deduction (see Lake, 1993).

³ The literature on the prisoners' dilemma is extensive and still growing. For an introduction to the game and its impact on cooperation, see Axelrod (1984).

hegemon is far-sighted enough to pursue a free trade world, the enforcement of which could also be very costly. These intellectual exchanges reveal the complexity beneath the simple appearance of hegemonic stability theory.

Even if one accepts the metaphor of public goods, it is still possible to question the theory of hegemonic stability on other grounds. In particular, the provision of public goods does not always require a 'privileged group' such as the hegemon. A small group of actors can also supply public goods and induce collective action (Olson, 1965; Schelling, 1960). As Lake (1984) and Snidal (1985) show, a small group of state may at least resume the responsibility of 'hegemonic cooperation' after the decline of the hegemony. That is, the world may remain stable even without the presence of a hegemon. Keohane (1984) takes this argument a step further, and claims that international cooperation among a small group of countries under a well-defined international regime is plausible 'after hegemony'. This theoretical advancement not only explains the puzzles of 'hegemonic lag' that the world witnessed in the early 1980s as the economic power of the US declined *vis-à-vis* Japan and Germany, but also points to the crucial roles of international regimes in creating and maintaining a stable world order. Yet, the institutional turn has not refuted the plausibility of hegemonic stability. It instead shows that the hegemon should have a strategic interest in establishing an effective international regime to maintain its preferred world order after its decline (Keohane, 1997: 161).

Considering the profound influences of 'cultural hegemony' on postwar intellectuals (see Gramsci, 1988)⁴, it is surprising that the early writers of hegemonic stability has little to say about the ideologies and values that a hegemon may create to maintain its (stable) order. Only briefly does Gilpin (1981: 34) note that 'the position of the dominant power may be supported by ideological, religious, or other values common to a set of states.' Ten years later Ikenberry and Kupchan's (1990) article on 'Socialization and Hegemonic Power' manages to bring scholarly attention to the constructivist aspect of hegemonic power. As their study points out, a hegemon can exercise substantial power and establish preferred international order by socializing the 'substantive beliefs' of other countries. In the international system dominated by a hegemon, the socialization process tends to take place after major wars and political crises or in wake

⁴ 'Cultural hegemony' is a concept developed and expounded by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). It refers to the dominance of a societal culture including its beliefs, norms and values. Gramsci argues that such dominance, though only reflecting the worldviews of the ruling class, leads to the perceived universal validity of its ideology and the acceptance of the *status quo*.

of the hegemonic use of coercive power. To achieve hegemonic socialization, it is more essential to alter the beliefs of elite than to change the public opinion. These arguments enrich the literature on hegemonic stability. They show that a stable world order is no less plausible under hegemonic socialization. An effective socialization strategy is not only compatible with but in need of the benevolent use of material incentives and the coercive means of political sanctions.

In summary, the literature on hegemonic stability offers a sophisticated theoretical framework to assess China's limited hegemonic influences on pre-colonial Southeast Asia. Generally speaking, there are four main hegemonic strategies to create and maintain a stable international politico-economic order: the socialization strategy, the public-good provision strategy, the coercive strategy, and the institution-building strategy. The effectiveness of these strategies is assessed against the experiences of pre-colonial Southeast Asia in the following sections.

The Socialization Strategy: Unfulfilled Mission of China's Culture State

Imperial China's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia was deeply rooted in the Chinese view of the world and its special position within it (Fairbank, 1968; Mancall, 1984). As a number of studies point out, Chinese emperors called themselves the 'Son of Heaven', and indeed considered themselves as the essential link between heaven, the human world and the earth (Fairbank and Teng, 1941; Mancall, 1968; Wang, 1998a; Wang, 2000; Stuart-Fox, 2003). It, then, follows logically that being the mediator between heaven and earth allowed China to rule not only its own territory but also the other human societies standing between heaven and earth. Such unconcealed cultural egocentrism, characterizing many early human civilizations, is perhaps not a sign of Chinese exceptionalism. What made China special are the restrictive moral requirements of traditional Chinese cosmology (see Wang, 2000). According to the Confucian thoughts, real power does not come from the abrupt use of force. Instead, it is derived from the rule of virtue and the moral authority of the ruler. Internally, rule of virtue requires an orderly social hierarchy and a compassionate government; externally, rule of virtue brings barbarians to acknowledge voluntarily the centrality of China (Fairbank, 1942; Wang, 1968; Stuart-Fox, 2003: Ch2). Furthermore, both the social hierarchy and the Chinese centrality should be performed and celebrated through elaborated rituals. Such were the basic ideas behind the China's self-perceived hegemonic power.

Regarding the moral authority that China self-proclaimed, three principles stood out for their importance to pre-colonial Southeast Asia. One of these was the principle of inclusiveness. When Zheng He was sent by the Ming court to Southeast Asia in the early 15th century, he was instructed to persuade all countries to submit to China's dominance. Foreign countries, regardless of big or small, were equally welcomed and treated with respect. This was also the message that the Ming envoy sent to Brunei in 1370. Despite that Brunei was then a vassal of the powerful Javanese Empire Majapahit, the country was invited with the assurance of equal treatment and full protection. That is, Brunei and Java would be treated as equal before the Ming court (Wang, 1968: 51). In addition, China appeared to adopt the principle of non-exploitation in its dealing with Southeast Asia. The inferior status of tributary states was neither an economic burden nor a straightforward political obligation. For one thing, 'the value of the tribute objects was certainly balanced, if not out-weighed, by the imperial gifts' to demonstrate China's 'magnanimity and benevolence' (Fairbank, 1942: 135; Stuart-Fox, 2003: 33). For another, China had 'never [made] any attempt to be precise about what tributary status meant' politically (Wang, 1968: 57). The long-term vagueness indicates that China had rarely exploited the superior position to its own advantage. Tributary countries were sometimes requested to provide assistance in the case of emergency. However, they were mostly allowed to conduct their domestic and foreign affairs without China's interference (Kang, 2010: 55). Last but not least, China also followed the principle of impartiality 'to protect the weak and deter the greedy' in Southeast Asia (Reid, 1996: 22). The Ming's invasion of Dai Viet in 1407 was claimed to fight against the usurpers and to restore the rightful ruler in the country. The Qing's campaign against Burma in 1765-1770 was intended to protect the independent chieftains from the exploitation of the Konbaung king. When Dai Viet and the Laotian kingdom of Lang Xang were in conflict in 1479, China refused to intervene militarily. Instead, the Ming court sent envoys to both countries to instruct them how to keep good relations and protect their peoples (Stuart-Fox, 2003: 92).

Indeed, deep inside China's self-perceived supremacy was the belief that foreign countries submitted to its hegemony not for China's economic, political or military might, but because of their respect for China's culture and civilization. However, whether such a Sino-centric view was really shared by the countries in pre-colonial Southeast Asia is questionable. Most Southeast Asian countries have been culturally influenced more by India than by China. Except in Dai Viet where the long-term Chinese rule produced a different set of social and cultural norms, Confucianism was of

little significance to 'Indianized' Southeast Asian states (Coedes, 1968; Wolters, 1999; Stuart-Fox, 2003). Locating outside the Sinicized circle of Confucian states, these countries had probably interpreted China's self-claimed inclusiveness, impartiality, and non-exploitation in very different ways.

Early Southeast Asian kingdoms adopted many cultural ideas from Hinduism, believing that the ruler was the representative of the greatest god on earth (see Coedes, 1968: Ch2). The aim of the ruler was to acquire as much power as possible, so that his/her kingdom could resemble the heavenly realm and the ruler could claim him/herself the god of it (Stuart-Fox, 2003: 31). The belief in reincarnation also allowed early Southeast Asian rulers to accept the temporary nature of power. Thus, submitting to another powerful kingdom, say as a tributary vassal, was itself considered temporary (Stuart-Fox, 2003: 32). These understandings of the world were very different from the traditional Chinese worldviews outlined above. Nowhere was such difference more evident than in the tributary relations. In pre-colonial Southeast Asia, inter-state relations were also characterized by a suzerainty-tributary structure (Wolters, 1999). However, in contrast to the China-centered tribute system, tributary states in Southeast Asia were supposed to make *real* contribution to the wealth and power of their suzerainty. The subordinate rulers were required to pay a specified amount of valuable local products as their tributes on a regular base, which then constituted the major income of the powerful lord. In return, subordinate states were promised effective protection against other neighboring powers. Moreover, the tributary status was not something to be shameful about because it only reflected the temporary balance of power. When the times change, a subordinate state would build its own tributary network and be a powerful lord capable of extracting wealth from other countries.

In pre-colonial Southeast Asia, China's commitment to inclusiveness, impartiality and non-exploitation was at best misunderstood and at worst resisted. Soon after the Ming envoy invited Brunei to the China in 1370, Java warned Brunei not to pay tribute to China. The Javanese envoys were heard as saying, '[i]f you give your allegiance to China, you will be without us. When Sulu attacks again, you will have to seek help from China' (cf. Wang, 1968: 51). The warning appeared to deter Brunei from seeking further relations with China. In the remaining 30 years of the 14th century, Brunei sent only one mission to China, but continued to pay annual tribute to Java (Wang, 1968: 51). Only after China promised upgraded protection did Brunei resume its tributary mission to the Ming court in 1408. On that occasion the Brunei king not only visited China in person

but brought his family with him. Together they received a splendid reception in the Chinese capital. Declaring that Java should exempt Brunei from tribute, the Chinese emperor wrote a personal poem and inscription to memorize the occasion (Reid, 1996: 23).⁵ Apparently, both sides were satisfied. For Brunei, it won the protection of a regional hegemon. For China, its commitment to inclusiveness and impartiality finally bore fruits. In another case, the son of a recently died ruler of Jambi, then a Sumatra tributary to Java, secretly sought China's recognition of his status as the new king in 1377. The Javanese envoy resided in the Ming court had probably heard this diplomatic exchange (Wolters, 1970: 62-63). The 'betray' of Jambi enraged the Javanese ruler. When the Ming envoys were sent to grant imperial recognition to the new Jambi ruler, they were rerouted to Java and murdered there in 1378.

In short, the pre-colonial hegemony of China had an important cultural dimension. At least in the eyes of Chinese themselves, it reflected the morality of the ruler and his/her rule of virtue that attracted the voluntary submission of foreign countries. Nevertheless, the self-perceived cultural state of China was not shared by most Southeast Asian countries. Under the influences of a different cultural tradition, the tributary relations in Southeast Asia were marked by unquestioned domination and aggressive extraction of resources. China's self-proclaimed commitment to inclusiveness, impartiality and non-exploitation was sometimes misunderstood and even resisted. The socialization strategy of China's cultural state, though influential among the Confucian countries in Northeast Asia (see Kang, 2010), had failed to produce desired impacts on pre-colonial Southeast Asia.

The Public-Good Provision Strategy: Between Tributary Trade and Private Trade

The provision of public goods plays a central part in the hegemonic stability literature. In particular, the hegemon is expected to maintain an open economic order to the benefit of other countries. However, defining the economic order between China and pre-colonial Southeast Asia is not so straightforward. Firstly, there was a long-standing tributary framework that allowed Southeast Asian countries to conduct trade with China free of duty (Fairbank, 1942). Nevertheless, tribute trade was limited by the number of tributary missions that each country was permitted to submit. Secondly, unlimited private trade was officially accepted in certain periods of imperial China, notably during

⁵ The Brunei king died several weeks after the grand reception. He was officially buried in Nanjing (then the capital of China) in 1408, where his tomb is still located. His son was then recognized as the new ruler. A Chinese commissioner was sent to support him during the first several years of his ruling (Reid, 1996: 23). The young ruler visited China in 1412.

the Southern Song and late Qing dynasties (Yoshinobu, 1983; Reid, 1996). However, these periods were marked by the relative decline of China. Allowing private trade can hardly be interpreted as a sign of China's hegemonic strength. Thirdly, the third tributary country (e.g., Ryukyu) also played a non-negligible part in the trade between China and pre-colonial Southeast Asia (Reid, 1993).

To make sense of this complex picture, it is necessary to look into the security implications of trade in pre-colonial East Asia. Imperial China was largely an agriculture-based economy. Instead of promoting trade, self-sufficiency had long been considered as a virtue and an obligation. There was an important security reason behind limiting trade in China. Due to its impact on the concentration of wealth, free trade could easily lead to the political claim of local interests. Such claims not only endangered the unity of the country but also threatened the authority of the imperial court. It was therefore in the interest of the central authority to regulate and control private trade in imperial China. As Tilly (1992: 128) points out, imperial China, like its counterparts in Europe, faced the interplay of two socio-political dynamics: 'the bottom-up building of regional hierarchies based on trade and manufacturing, [and] the top-down imposition of political control.' In Europe, the persistence of bottom-up hierarchies led to its long-term fragmentation after the fall of the Roman Empire. By contrast, imperial China managed to impose a top-down political order at the expense of trade and local economic centers.⁶ Indeed, private trade was often banned during the periods of dynastic consolidation such as the beginning of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Only when the imperial court was financially weak was private trade officially encouraged in an attempt to boost royal income.

A similar trend can also be identified in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. Trade had played an essential part in the state revenues of most Southeast Asian countries. Particularly during the period of the so-called 'age of commerce' (i.e., 1450-1680)⁷, revenues from trade constituted a substantial part of royal income in both maritime and mainland Southeast Asia (Reid, 1993: 217). However, trade in important products was often monopolized by individual rulers. In Burma the royal court controlled the trade of

⁶ Gilpin (1981: 151) also notes, '[t]he Chinese Empire pursued a deliberate policy of preventing the development of economic centers that might break off. Chinese cities were administrative centers responsive to the imperial center; they seldom became commercial centers.'

⁷ The 'age of commerce' is the title of a two-volume study by Anthony Reid (1988, 1993). The study examines the transformation of Southeast Asia as the region experienced a trade boom between 1450 and 1680. This period corresponds roughly to the mid- and late-Ming and the early Qing dynasties in China.

amber, gems, gold, and iron; in Siam the loyal warehouse was the only place where foreigners could buy tin, lead, sappanwood, and saltpeter (Reid, 1993: 248). Even with regard to the trade of less important goods, '[s]trong kings almost invariably squeezed the merchants and drove many of them away' (Reid, 1993: 247). Rather than encouraging private trade, Southeast Asian countries had also pursued the strategy of state dominance in international trade.

Not surprisingly, the China-centered tributary trade suited the both sides quite well. Tributary trade allowed foreign countries to conduct trade with China either at the border city where the tributary missions first arrived or in the market set up next to the Official Residence for Tributary Envoys in the Chinese capital (Fairbank, 1942). Any commercial activities outside these designated markets were strictly forbidden, but tributary trade was duty-free. For China, tributary trade not just minimized the negative implications of unregulated private trade, but also provided a mechanism to show China's benevolence and strength. For Southeast Asian countries, tributary trade ensured that the trade with China was conducted under the proper control of the royal court. Therefore, tributary trade did create some sort of open economic order beneficial to both China and Southeast Asia. Such an economic order even generated some noticeable stabilization impact on maritime Southeast Asia. As Wolters (2008: 69) points out, '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.'

However, tributary trade had never been an economic order open to all. Only officially recognized tributary countries were allowed to conduct trade with China. In addition, there was specific limit regarding the number of tributary missions (and therefore trade) allowed in a certain period of time. In the Qing dynasty, for example, Dai Viet was permitted one tribute in every two years, while Siam was allowed one in three years, Sulu one in five years, Burma and the Laos only one in ten years respectively (Fairbank and Teng, 1941: 175-176). Because of these restrictive rules, tributary trade actually created a group of 'privileged trading states' in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. In the mainland, Champa and Cochinchina in southern Vietnam, Ayutthaya and Siam in southern Thailand had maintained close tributary relations with China for several centuries. All benefited substantially from trade revenues (Wade, 2009; Reid, 1993, 1996; Lieberman, 2003). In the archipelago, close tributary connections with China

helped Sirvijaya and Melaka become the center of insular Southeast Asian trade (Wolters, 1967, 1970; Lieberman, 2009). The centrality of Melaka was so prominent in the 15th century that other Southeast Asian countries all sent their products to Melaka for further export to China. Meanwhile, the eastern trade route via Taiwan and Luzon (i.e., northern Philippines) was abandoned in the late 1420s (Reid, 1996: 34). For those countries which had few or no tributary links, they were forced to rely on a third tributary country, Ryukyu being the most well-known, to keep their trade flow with China (Reid, 1996: 30; Lieberman, 2009: 799; Hamashita, 2011)⁸.

Because of the extensive influences of tributary trade, its decline and the subsequent rise of private trade often brought change and instability to Southeast Asia. When the Song dynasty allowed private trade in the 10th century, there was no immediate impact on the maritime empire of Sirvijaya. Nonetheless, Sirvijaya's hold on the trading ports along the Malacca Strait inevitably loosened as these ports began to pursue their own trade with China. Step by step, 'Song trade expansion stoked local resistance to Sirvijaya's commercial claims' (Lieberman, 2009: 793). The once powerful maritime empire ceased to exist in the 13th century. After almost two hundred years of vibrant tributary trade, the ban on private trade was officially lifted in 1567 under the Ming dynasty. Immediately the abandoned eastern trade route was reopened. Port cities such as Manila, Hoi An, Patani and Batavia prospered as a result. Within a few decades the Portuguese who had occupied Melaka since 1511 were driven out of the pepper trade from western Java and southern Sumatra (Reid, 1996: 38-39). Private trade was again allowed in the Qing dynasty between 1684 and 1717 and from 1727 onwards. Soon foreign merchants retreated from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Siam. One of the main reasons was that the newly established access to Guangzhou made it no longer necessary to buy Chinese goods through Southeast Asian ports (Reid, 1996: 44). As private trade eventually dominated Southeast Asian trade routes, most maritime Southeast Asian countries came to be recognized as 'trading countries' rather than 'tributary states' by the Qing court in the early 19th century (Fairbank and Teng, 1941: 202-203; Fairbank, 1942: 141, 144).

In summary, it is difficult to deny that China had attempted to build an open economic order in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. For several centuries, tributary trade effectively brought Southeast Asian countries into a regional economic network covering almost the whole East Asia. For those countries which had enthusiastically embraced tributary

⁸ For example, Ryukyu agreed to open commercial relations with Palembang in 1428 and with Java in 1430. Then, Palembang was forbidden to keep direct link with China (Reid, 1996: 30).

trade, they often prospered as a result. Nevertheless, tributary trade was never really open to all. Instead of benefiting every Southeast Asian country, it created a group of privileged trading states with special access to the Chinese market. Neither was unlimited private trade capable of restoring order and stability to the region during the periods when China was weak. The security implications of trade had made it difficult, if not impossible, for China to pursue a coherent public-good provision strategy in pre-colonial Southeast Asia.

The Coercive Strategy: Unsuccessful Intervention and Unexpected Impact

The hegemonic impacts of China on Southeast Asia had been more benevolent than coercive in the pre-colonial era. Though China had maintained unmatched military superiority vis-à-vis Southeast Asia, there were very few conflicts between the two sides. For one thing, most Southeast Asian countries were China's tributary states which paid regular homage to the imperial court (Wang, 1968; Reid, 1996; Stuart-Fox, 2003). For another, the main security threats to China had been mostly located on the northern borders of the country. The first Ming emperor even issued a long list of Southeast Asian countries that China should never attack (Wang, 1998a: 311-312). Apart from the Mongol invasions in the 13th century⁹, China waged only three major campaigns against Southeast Asia in a period of over one thousand years between the 8th and the 19th century. These were the Ming occupation of Dai Viet between 1407 and 1427, the Qing campaign against Burma between 1765 and 1770, and the Qing invasion of Dai Viet in 1788-1789.

The two Chinese campaigns against Dai Viet were both intended to restore the ruler recognized by the imperial court. For China, Dai Viet was special because the country had been under direct Chinese rule till the 10th century (Taylor, 1983). When Dai Viet was recognized by the Song dynasty as an independent kingdom, its ruler was awarded the curious title of 'King of Jiao-Zhi Prefecture', indicating a special connection between the two countries (Stuart-Fox, 2003: 45). Indeed, Dai Viet and China once shared very similar bureaucratic structure, written language, and the Confucian rhetoric. Because of such cultural intimacy, China had maintained close connection with Dai Viet throughout the pre-colonial era. A new Dai Viet ruler always sent his/her envoy first to China to seek imperial recognition. China was also keen to play a role in the country's

⁹ Mongol troops were dispatched to Dai Viet in 1257, 1285 and 1287, to Champa in 1281, to the Burmese-Mon Kingdom of Pagan in 1277 and 1287, and to Java in 1293 (Stuart-Fox, 2003: Ch4). These military expeditions ended only in short-term victories. By the end of the 13th century, Mongol troops were mostly pushed out of Southeast Asia.

loyal succession and dynastic change.

According to the Chinese official records, the Ming invasion of Dai Viet was a response to a series of unusual succession occurred in the country (Ming Shi Lu, 1968; see also Wang, 1998a). When the first Ming emperor sent his envoys to Dai Viet in 1369, the Tran dynasty just installed an adopted son of the loyal family as the ruler of the country. The succession was duly confirmed by the Ming court. However, the new ruler was thrown out by a usurper several months later. Nothing was reported to the Ming court. When China found out what had happened, it refused to recognize the usurper and declined his tribute. The official tributes resumed two years later, but the relations between the two countries were not in a favorable condition. The emperor ordered the tributary rituals with Dai Viet to be downgraded. When China's official tallies were dispatched to Champa, Khmer and Ayutthaya (i.e., other tributaries in mainland Southeast Asia) in 1383, Dai Viet was not on the list (Wang, 1998: 310). Similar succession and communication problems occurred again during the reign of the third Ming emperor¹⁰. The emperor was first informed that a relative of the Tran family was installed as the new ruler in Dai Viet. Yet, it turned out that the recognized king was again a usurper and a regicide. The Ming court found the last remaining member of the Tran house and sent him back to Dai Viet. The person was murdered on his arrival (Wang, 1998: 315). Soon a full-scale invasion of Dai Viet was ordered in 1407, in the name of punishing the usurper and restoring the Tran dynasty.

One may reasonably doubt the real intention of the Ming court. After all, the repeated overthrow was a sign of failed Tran ruling (Taylor, 1992: 149). Moreover, the Tran family already ceased to exist by the time of invasion. Still a large number of Ming troops were gathered from ten Chinese provinces, and they were sent to Dai Viet by both land and sea. Initially the military campaign was a success. The usurper was overthrown and his troops were defeated. However, the decision to turn Dai Viet into a province of China turned out to be a disaster (Stuart-Fox, 2003: 82). The occupation drained the Ming treasury over the years, and the occupiers were exploitative and corrupted (Taylor, 1992: 150). Years of resistance followed. At the end China was forced to withdraw in 1427.

¹⁰ The third Ming emperor, Yong-le, was himself a usurper. He was the fourth son of the first Ming emperor. When the emperor died in 1398, the throne passed on to his nephew, Jian-wen. In the following years, bitter distrust emerged between the young emperor and his uncle. In 1402 Yong-le marched his troops to the capital and claimed himself the new emperor.

The Qing invasion of Dai Viet in 1788-1789 was also an attempt to restore a recognized ruler. Officially, it was a response to the plea of the last king of the Le dynasty. Dai Viet had been thrown into turmoil due to the Tayson Rebellion since 1773. Historical records show that there were signs that the political turmoil of Dai Viet could spread into China (Wills, 2001). When the rebel took the Le capital in 1787, the king was forced to take refuge in the nearby Chinese Province. There he asked for the assistance of the Qing court. A combination of internal concerns and external commitment probably led to the decision of invading Dai Viet. Within ten days of receiving the plea, the Qing court ordered the second full-scale invasion of Dai Viet in Chinese history. Troops were dispatched from the nearby provinces. Within a month the capital of Dai Viet was taken and the Le king was restored. However, Nguyen Hue, the youngest of the Tayson brothers, marched from the South. His forces launched an unexpected attack against the Qing troops in the lunar New Year holidays of 1789, and successfully forced them to retreat (Stuart-Fox, 2003: 114). After the Chinese withdrawal, Nguyen Hue dispatched tributary mission to the Qing court for the official recognition of his new kingdom. To repair the bilateral relations, he even went to Beijing in person to celebrate the Qian-long emperor's eightieth birthday in 1790 (Reid, 1996: 48). It did not take long before Nguyen Hue was confirmed as the legitimate King of Dai Viet.

Different from Dai Viet, successive Burmese kingdoms had kept distant connection with China. In the 13th century the ancient Burmese-Mon kingdom of Pagan was fatally defeated by the Mongols (Stuart-Fox, 2003: 60-61). On its ruins the Toungoo dynasty and the ensuing Konbaung dynasty established themselves as powerful kingdoms on the western Southeast Asian mainland. Nonetheless, China had not recognized these powerful rulers as kings during the Ming dynasty (Wang, 1998: 313). Similarly, the successive Burmese rulers showed little interest in establishing close tributary relations with China. Instead, they were busy battling with their regional rival Ayutthaya/Siam to the east, and dealing with small Shan states to the north (Lieberman, 2003).

The Konbaung dynasty of Burma was established in 1752. During its reign, Burma pursued an aggressive state-building policy to bring the periphery vassals and tributaries under its direct control (Lieberman, 2003). At the time, there were a few independent chieftains located on the bordering areas between China and Burma, most of which paid tributes to both countries. As Konbaung tightened its controls, some chieftains turned to China for assistance. The Chinese response, initially only on a local scale, soon triggered a major military confrontation between the two countries (Dai, 2004: 155).

Compared with the late invasion of Dai Viet, the Qing campaign against Burma lasted much longer. Between 1765 and 1770 China sent four batches of forces to invade the country. At the beginning only the local troops were dispatched. As the battle dragged on, the emperor sent his elite Manchu troops to the Southwest border. In response, Konbaung was forced to withdraw its troops from Ayutthaya to fight against the Chinese. In the end, it was the generals on the ground who decided to negotiate a truce to end the conflict between the two countries in 1769 (see Dai, 2004). Back in the capitals neither the Konbaung court nor the Qing court was satisfied with the terms of the truce. It was not until 1790 that the tributary relations between the two countries were resumed.

Although the three military campaigns all ended in China's defeat, they generated some unexpected impacts on the power balance of mainland Southeast Asia. After the Ming troops withdrew from their twenty-year occupation in 1427, Dai Viet was emboldened to assert its sub-regional dominance in the eastern mainland. It invaded Champa to the south in 1471, and marched into the Laotian Kingdom of Lang Xang to the west in 1479. On both occasions China was asked to provide assistance to contain the Dai Viet aggression. However, the Ming court was not in a position to launch another attack against Dai Viet (Wang, 1998: 318). On the southern frontier Champa was fatally defeated and eventually became a vassal of Dai Viet. On the western frontier Lang Xang's capital was taken and its king killed. Only after the Tai kingdom of Lan Na offered military support did Lan Xang manage to drive Dai Viet troops out of its territory. By the end of 15th century a new sub-regional order had emerged in eastern mainland Southeast Asia, with Dai Viet being at the top of it (see Li, 2010).

The Qing campaign against Burma led to a contrasting outcome. In the same year as the Qing troops entered the Burmese border, the Konbaung dynasty of Burma launched its second attack against Ayutthaya. The Burmese troops attacked Tai kingdom from both the north and the south. One year later they sieged its capital. Ayutthaya surrendered in the middle of 1767. Later that year, however, the Qing court dispatched its elite Manchu troops in its third campaign against Burma (Dai, 2004). The Konbaung king was forced to withdraw his forces from their occupation of Ayutthaya to fight against China. Although Ayutthaya was left in a devastated situation after the Burmese withdrawal, a provincial governor, Taksin, managed to reclaim the country and declared himself the King of Siam in 1768. The new Tai kingdom successfully defended itself against another two Burmese attacks in the following twenty years. During the process, Siam unified the northern Tai Kingdom of Lan Na into its territory (Lieberman, 2003). By the

end of 18th century Siam had successfully established itself as a sub-regional power in central mainland Southeast Asia.

It would be naive to conclude that the coercive strategies taken by China reshaped the power balance of mainland Southeast Asia in the 14th and 18th centuries. At most, China's unsuccessful campaigns speeded up the ongoing power transition process at the sub-regional level. To install the rightful rulers and to protect the independent chieftains were claimed to be the main reasons behind imperial China's military aggression. Yet, standing at a higher moral ground, itself being doubted by some, was not enough to compensate the ineffective coercive measures that China had taken. If hegemonic China's benevolent policy of tributary trade achieved something in pre-colonial Southeast Asia, its coercive strategy had ended in failure.

The Institution-Building Strategy: Rise and Fall of the Tribute System

At the center of China's hegemonic power had been the long-standing tribute system. The tribute system was important because it offered an elaborated institutional framework to conduct China's foreign relations in the pre-colonial era (Fairbank and Teng, 1941: 141; see also Fairbank, 1942; Mancall, 1984). Receiving foreign envoys involved the tributary rituals; royal communication with foreign countries employed the tributary rhetoric; international trade was mostly conducted under the tributary framework; and even restored diplomatic relations had to follow the tributary procedures. For China, the tribute system reflected the Confucian views of an orderly hierarchy between China and the rest of the world. For foreign countries, the tribute system provided a unique diplomatic channel to conduct *de facto* equal relations with China (Kang, 2010: 54). For a period of nearly two thousand years, the tribute system had been the institutional foundation of hegemonic China in East Asia (Fairbank, 1968).

Nevertheless, the tribute system is very different from the modern international regime articulated in the hegemonic stability literature (see Keohane, 1980, 1984). First of all, the tribute system was an overarching foreign service of China, covering political, economic and diplomatic areas (Fairbank, 1942). It neither specialized in a particular policy issue nor directly regulated the inter-state relations beyond China. In addition, the tribute system was always bilateral (Mancall, 1965). There was probably a multilateral audience who paid special attention to the tributary relations between their neighboring countries and China. The tribute system never offered a multilateral framework to encourage inter-state cooperation. Despite these notable differences, the tribute system

did facilitate the converging expectations among the tributary countries on China's preferred regional order. The tribute system also relied mostly on the voluntary contribution of China. It was certainly very costly. As the imperial treasury dried up at the end of each dynasty, the tribute system often lost its influences. Hence, it is still possible to explore the hegemonic impacts of the tribute system without imposing the requirement of modern international regimes.

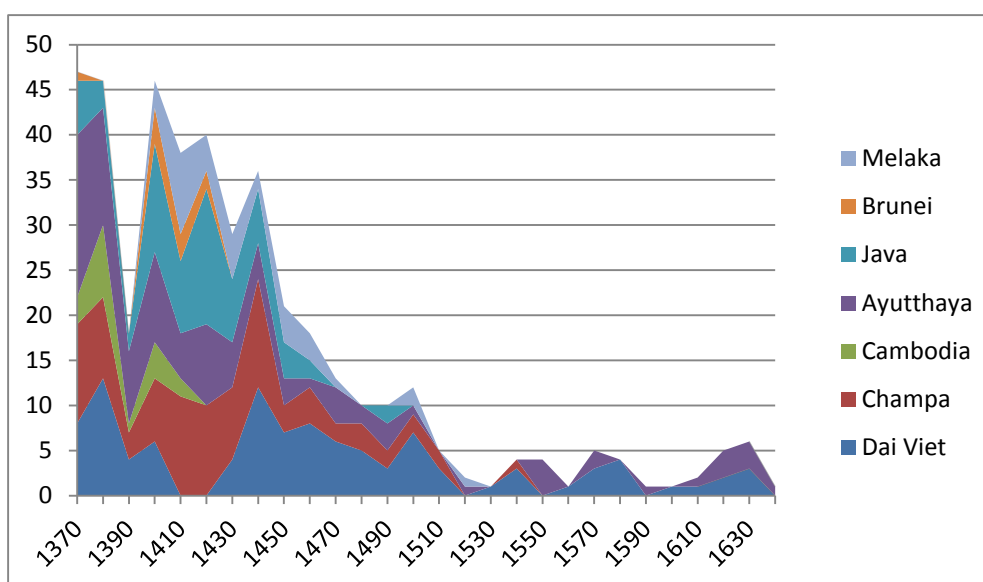
Institutionally, the tribute system was put into practice in the Han dynasty. Historical records show that the first tributary missions probably arrived in China around the 1st century BC (Li, 2004: 16). At that time, it was already established that tributary rulers were awarded with the imperial appointment of a noble rank, and that the tributes were accepted in exchange for imperial gifts. Tributary trade was also an integral part of the tribute system. The first recorded Southeast Asian tributes were sent by the ancient mainland kingdom of Funan. In total, Funan dispatched six missions to China in the 3rd century, then one in the 4th century, and another sixteen in the 5th and 6th centuries (Stuart-Fox, 2003: 30). As China was internally divided during these periods, most of these tributes were probably delivered to the southern Chinese kingdoms.

It was the unification of China under the Sui and Tang dynasties between the late 6th and the early 10th century that revitalized the tribute system. As far as Southeast Asia was concerned, tributary missions from the Gulf of Thailand and the Java Sea were regularly sent to the imperial court throughout the 7th and 8th century (Wang, 1970: 375). Among them, the maritime Southeast Asian kingdom of Sirvijaya managed to establish very close tributary relations with China. Its missions continued well into the first half of the 11th century when China was ruled by the Song dynasty (Wolters, 1970). Nevertheless, after the defeated Song reestablished itself as the Southern Song dynasty in 1127, the number of tributary missions dramatically declined. For one thing, China was no longer perceived as powerful as before. For another, private trade became such an important source of royal income that the imperial court was unwilling to accept tributary missions (Yoshinobu, 1983). The traditional Chinese tribute system further deteriorated under the Mongol ruling. The Yuan dynasty imposed very harsh conditions on the tributary countries, and forced them to pay tax and provide military covée (Wang, 1968: 48). When its demands were rejected, armies were sent to Southeast Asia to enforce these policies.

The early decades of the Ming dynasty were probably the most glorious period of the

tribute system. Partly because of the official ban on private trade and partly because of the grand expeditions of Zheng He, Southeast Asian tributes to China peaked in the early 15th century (see Figure 1). The Mongol version of tribute was abandoned in favor of the traditional Chinese tribute system. Foreign missions were received according to even more elaborated tributary rituals. Tributary trade became so important that some Southeast Asian states (e.g., Java) once sent as many as three missions a year to China (Qiu, 1995: 128, 180). However, as the Ming court moved its capital from Nanjing to Beijing in 1421 and the imperial treasury gradually weakened, China lost the interest in expanding its contact with Southeast Asia. In the decades after private trade was legalized in 1567, only Dai Viet and the Tai kingdom of Ayutthaya continued to dispatch tribute to China.

Figure 1 Southeast Asian Tributes to the Ming court (1370-1640)

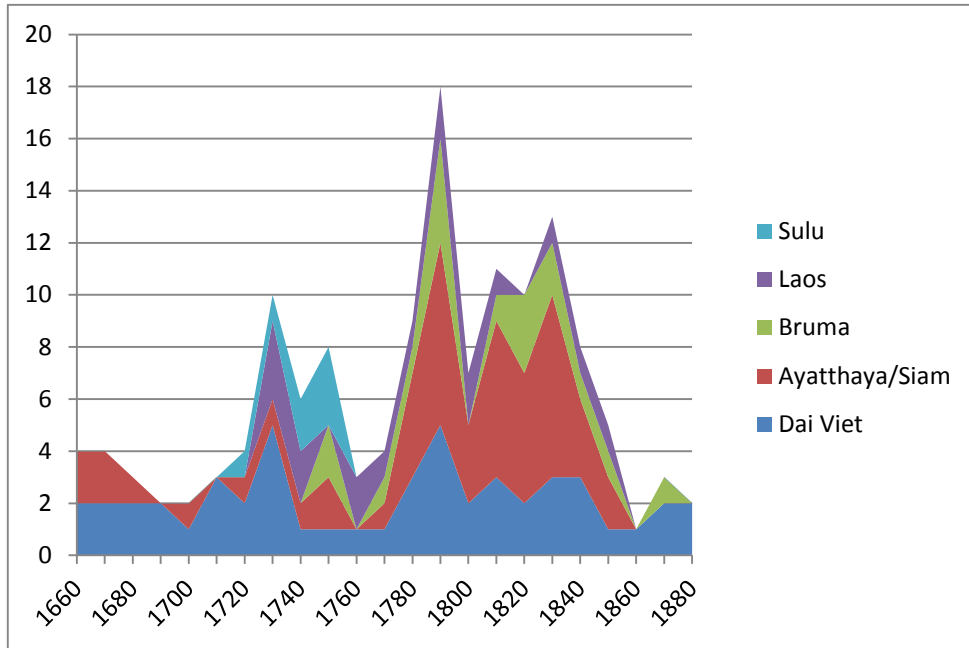


Source: Qiu (1995: 128, 180-182, 232-234, 294-295)

The last Chinese imperial dynasty of Qing inherited many Ming practices of the tribute system, particularly in dealing with Southeast Asia. The institutional context was so close that the Qing court explicitly requested the tributary countries to return the imperial seals granted to them during the Ming period (Fairbank and Teng, 1941: 164). The only difference was that the Qing dynasty no longer used tributary trade to promote its overseas influences. Except an early ban on private trade, tributary trade was gradually replaced by private trade in the late 17th and early 18th century. Still, Southeast Asian countries submitted regular tributes to the Qing court. Among the five designated

tributary countries in Southeast Asia¹¹, the number of missions was noticeably increased between 1780 and 1840 (see Figure 2). However, after the Qing troops were defeated in the Opium Wars in the 1840s and 1850s, the tribute system could no longer function as a hegemonic magnet for Southeast Asia.

Figure 2 Southeast Asian Tributes to the Qing court (1660-1880)



Source: Fairbank and Teng (1941: 193-197)

What factors had contributed to the rise and fall of the tribute system *vis-à-vis* pre-colonial Southeast Asia? Obviously, the hegemonic power of China was the most crucial factor in determining the influences of the tribute system. When China was strong and its foreign policy outward-looking, Southeast Asian countries were willing to pay tributes to its hegemonic influences. When China was weakened by internal division and external competition in the Southern Song, late Ming and late Qing dynasties, tributary missions from Southeast Asia declined. Another factor had also been important: tributary trade. Since private trade was banned in most periods of imperial China, tributary trade offered an attractive alternative for Southeast Asian trading states to maintain their commercial links with China. In the Han, Tang, and early Ming dynasties, tributary trade was probably the most important reason why so many Southeast Asian missions came to China.

¹¹ According to Fairbank (1968: 11), five Southeast Asian countries were officially recorded as the tributaries of the Qing court in 1818: Dai Viet, Laos, Siam, Sulu and Burma.

However, the explanations of hegemonic power and tributary trade stand uncomfortably with the sudden increase of tributary missions between 1780 and 1840 (Figure 2). The Qing dynasty was in decline during this period. Tributary trade had already been replaced by private trade. While Fairbank (1942) argues that commercial reasons explained the sudden increase¹², there were other important political dynamics beneath the scene. One of these was the coercive measures that the Qing had taken against mainland Southeast Asia. Mentioned earlier, large-scale military campaigns were launched against Burma (1765-1770) and Dai Viet (1788-1789). As the clear winner, Dai Viet increased the frequency of its tributary missions to China after 1789 in order to repair the bilateral relations. As the unexpected beneficiary of China's campaign against Burma, the newly founded Tai kingdom of Siam was eager to keep close relations with China after it was recognized by the Qing court in 1781. The Burmese missions also increased briefly after its relations with China were normalized in 1790. Even more notably, Burma again sent more missions to China in the 1820s and 1830s, probably requesting for China's assistance when the country was fighting against Britain.

In short, the tribute system had stood at the center of China's hegemonic influences. Its profound impacts on pre-colonial Southeast Asia show that China had long pursued an institution-building strategy to exert its hegemonic power. Except in the Yuan dynasty, the tributary system offered China a non-aggressive institutional setting to pursue its superiority in Southeast Asia. Its institutional influences corresponded roughly with the hegemonic strength of China. Both the public-good provision strategy of tributary trade and the coercive strategy of military campaigns had generated noticeable impacts on the tribute system. One may even identify a 'hegemonic lag' in the late Qing dynasty when Southeast Asian tributes increased during a period of China's decline.

Conclusion

Throughout the pre-colonial era China had a profound impact on Southeast Asia. Under the tribute system, Southeast Asian countries came to China to pay homage for more than one thousand and five hundred years. Economically, China created a regional economic order centered on tributary trade. Its influences were so prominent that it once encompassed the whole Northeast and Southeast Asia. Politically, China not just exerted

¹² Fairbank (1942: 145) notes, 'I am not aware of political or other circumstances likely to have produced the recorded increase of activity. As far as it goes, this evidence lends strong support to the theory that tribute missions functioned chiefly as a vehicle for trade.'

direct impact on the tributary states but regulated inter-state relations far beyond its borders (see Shu, 2011). Nevertheless, the hegemony of China was not enough to bring stability to pre-colonial Southeast Asia. Neither was the regional economic order completely open, nor did the inter-state relations keep long-term stability among Southeast Asian countries.

This article has examined the largely failed hegemonic strategies that China had pursued in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. Firstly, the self-proclaimed commitment to inclusiveness, impartiality and non-exploitation had not socialized the 'Indianized' states of Southeast Asia. Influenced by a different cultural tradition, pre-colonial Southeast Asian countries were more pragmatic in handling their relations with other countries. In the end, China's cultural state probably had a more attentive domestic audience than overseas influences. Secondly, because of the security implications of international trade, the pre-colonial regional economic order had never been really open to all. Instead, tributary trade created a group of privileged trading states that kept closer relations with China, and allowed them to dominate the trade routes in Southeast Asia. Thirdly, the limited coercive campaigns that China had waged against pre-colonial Southeast Asia ended all in failure. Instead of regulating royal succession and protecting small chieftains, these military expeditions had altered the power balance of mainland Southeast Asia beyond China's expectation. Fourthly, the tribute system was extremely influential, but its rise and fall had not gone beyond the cycle of China's dynastic changes. Despite being enthusiastic participants of the tribute system, most Southeast Asian countries were probably attracted more by China's economic and political influences than by its hegemonic status.

The fact that the undisputed hegemony of China had not produced sub-regional stability in pre-colonial Southeast Asia has important implications in theoretical and empirical terms. Theoretically, it challenges the hegemonic stability literature, and especially the claim that hegemony *always* leads to stability (Kindleberger, 1973; Krasner, 1967; Gilpin, 1981). It is often taken as granted that the hegemon can resort to coercive measures, public-good provision strategies, institution-building mechanism, and socialization efforts to maintain a stable international order. The experiences of pre-colonial Southeast Asia show that stability is not an automatic outcome of an existing predominant power. Instead, hegemonic stability is contingent on a number of conditions. The socialization strategy is more effective within a common cultural background and value system; the public-good provision strategy should follow the

rules of inclusiveness and non-discrimination; the coercive strategy requires consistent goals and effective implementation; and the institutional-building strategy must aim at long-term international order rather than short-term hegemonic superiority.

Empirically, the findings of the article raises many questions about the scholarly optimism that pre-colonial East Asia under the hegemony of China had been a peaceful and stable regional order (Kang, 2007, 2010). It is true that under the tribute system most Southeast Asian countries recognized the superiority of imperial China. Tributary trade also established a vibrant regional economic order to the benefit of many Southeast Asian trading states. However, China's unquestioned hegemon had not brought long-term peace and stability to pre-colonial Southeast Asia. Throughout the pre-colonial era, the politico-economic dynamics at the sub-regional level had been largely self-contained, following its own logic of survival and competition (Shu, 2011). Outside the Sinicized Confucian world, pre-colonial Southeast Asia had not moved beyond in an anarchic state of international relations.

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