

Encarta Historical Essays reflect the knowledge and insight of leading historians. This collection of essays is assembled to support the National Standards for World History. In this essay, R. Bin Wong of the University of California, Irvine, analyzes East Asia's political order from the 16th to the mid-19th century and explores the aspects and dynamics that lead to its later role in the European-dominated world.

East Asian Political Order, 1500s to -1800s

By R. Bin Wong

Between the 16th and early 19th centuries, East Asia was a vast and heavily populated part of the world with a political order quite distinct from that of Europe. By analyzing the many aspects of this political order, we can recognize some of the dynamics that affect how it became part of a European-dominated world order in the second half of the 19th century. Specifically, we can understand how Chinese officials initially perceived European demands for increased trade and residence in China.

China sat at the center of East Asia's political order. Its demographic and territorial weight dictated that relations between the Chinese state and its neighbors were unlikely to resemble those typical of early modern European rulers. Europeans competed with each other for territory through war making and marriage alliances. But China did not dominate other regimes in East Asia through the power of sheer size alone. Rather, distinct dynamics characterized the empire's relations with each of its neighbors. Collectively, China's relations with governments in Southeast, northeastern, and inner Asia formed a system of political relations largely different from relations among Europeans. The Chinese state's approach to foreign relations was heavily influenced by official views of domestic order. Therefore, to understand how Chinese officials conceived relations with others, it is important to consider how they sought to rule their own subjects.

Chinese Domestic Order

By 1500, China already had a political ideology and institutions drawing on principles and practices elaborated over the course of nearly two millennia. Joining the emperor in the capital were a set of central government ministries and administrative offices. The

core of domestic administration rested with more than 1,300 county magistrates, who formed the bottom layer of a vertically integrated bureaucracy that spanned the empire. Responsible for sustaining local order, collecting taxes, and promoting popular welfare, county magistrates relied on a small staff of professional secretaries and clerks, and occasionally an assistant magistrate. Officials also depended on local elites—wealthy landowners, merchants, and men who had passed civil service examinations but were not serving in government—to fund and manage granaries and schools, as well as to finance temple, road, and bridge repairs. Through these and other activities, local elites extended the effective reach of the state. In general, such people were more abundant in wealthier areas. As a result, official efforts and resources were especially important in more peripheral areas.

A tremendous diversity characterized Chinese local customs, including language dialects, cooking practices, and worship of particular deities. But the construction of domestic social order depended on the promotion and recognition of some general social practices that officials and elites could all identify as distinctly Chinese. Examples of these include Chinese kinship relations, wedding and funeral rituals, and agricultural technologies. The degree of cultural coherence conceived and often achieved within China contrasts strongly with the conditions in early modern Europe. In Europe, a gap existed between the shared high culture of elites that crossed political borders and the myriad local popular cultures that lodged within small territories. This gap was not systematically bridged until the 19th century. Distinctive national cultures were then created through a combination of state and elite projects to define national characters and popular affirmations of customs and practices that distinguished them from others. In late imperial China, elite culture was more strongly connected to popular culture, and this link was reinforced by the state. Beyond those areas where Chinese institutions of local order could be constructed, officials relied on a different repertoire of strategies to promote political stability and beneficial economic relations.

China and Southeast Asia

China's southward expansion reached the ocean but did not incorporate the region we today call Southeast Asia. Chinese influence was strongest in Vietnam, the northern part of which was a Chinese dependency from the 1st through the 10th centuries. The Vietnamese government that was subsequently formed became part of the tribute system. Through this tribute system, the Vietnamese emperor and other Southeast Asian rulers made ritual presentations of exotic and precious goods to the Chinese government. These tributes symbolized their acknowledgement of Chinese superiority. This system of diplomatic relations did not keep Chinese armies out of the region completely. Chinese armies fought Burma between 1766 and 1770 and also intervened in Vietnam between 1788 and 1790, when rebellions within the country threatened the ruling family. In general, however, ritual recognition of superiority and inferiority through the tribute system maintained stability without military conflict in spite of the uneven power in Southeast Asia. Chinese practices for recognizing weaker neighbors were emulated by the Vietnamese with respect to some of its immediate neighbors. When the Vietnamese helped drive Siamese forces out of Cambodia in 1813, they referred to themselves and Cambodia in the same hierarchical terms as China referred to itself and Vietnam, respectively.

Mainland Southeast Asia had four major kingdoms during the 17th and 18th centuries. The Burmese, Siamese, and Cambodian kingdoms were more influenced by South Asian Buddhist ideas than by Chinese Confucian ones. Islamic influences also entered Southeast Asia. But unlike the case in South Asia, where Islam was harnessed to a conquering empire, Islam entered Southeast Asia peacefully, spread by a combination of merchants and missionaries. The areas of strongest Islamic influence were along the peninsula and archipelago, where city-states formed parts of an Asian maritime trading world in what are today Malaysia and Indonesia. Unlike the Vietnamese, the small countries of Southeast Asia that chose to offer tribute to China did not adopt Chinese bureaucratic institutions or ideology. Their presentation of tribute was sometimes more related to their participation in Asian maritime trade, as Chinese authorities often allowed additional trade to accompany tribute presentations. The Siamese kingdom

sometimes paid tribute to China, as did Burma and the Laotian kingdom of Nanchang. Other rulers with small territories in what are today Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia, and Burma paid tribute to the Siamese kingdom. Hierarchical relations defined by tributary relationships characterized East Asian diplomacy even when China was not directly involved.

The Chinese government sought to strictly regulate the foreign trade conducted on the empire's maritime periphery because it wanted to assure local domestic order. Some trade took place within the tribute system, while other trade did not. In 1760, the government established a system that limited foreign trade to licensed brokers at the single port of Canton. In contrast to strict government control over foreign traders wishing to trade on China's borders, officials made virtually no effort to regulate the far greater number of Chinese merchants who went to Southeast Asia and managed major retail and wholesale trades. The Chinese state did not seek to benefit from merchant activities in the ways that European states did when their merchants entered this Asian maritime trading system. European success depended in large measure upon following Asian conventions for trade. The Europeans entered this vibrant commercial economy as outsiders. They were unable to reshape that economy until the second half of the 19th century, when they effectively challenged China's approach to foreign relations.

China and Northeastern Asia

The positions of Japan and Korea in China's tribute system were quite different from those of Southeast Asian countries. Chinese records claim that Japan recognized China with tribute presentations as early as the Han dynasty (202 BC-AD 220). In the 8th century, the Japanese used Chinese characters to begin a written language and adopted the Chinese legal code as the basis of their own. By the early 15th century, when tributary relations were encouraged by Japanese rulers, the two countries had a long history in which Japan was conventionally perceived to be the inferior. At this time Japan's central government was in a weak state domestically and had little ability to control Japanese trade with Korea. Korea, which like Japan and Vietnam was heavily

influenced by Chinese political ideas and institutions, negotiated with the leaders of the nearby part of Japan that harbored maritime merchants and pirates. Japanese piracy was periodically a problem for Korea, but those difficulties were dwarfed by Japanese general Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea in 1592. Fresh from his military reunification of Japan, through which he established himself as Japan's most powerful leader, Hideyoshi hoped to conquer Korea and China. Korean leaders asked for help from the Chinese, to whom they paid tribute to aid them against the Japanese. The Chinese agreed, and Hideyoshi died in 1598 without succeeding at his objectives.

The Tokugawa regime, established in 1600, generally avoided affirming any direct diplomatic relations with China. The Japanese government was unwilling to be addressed by the Koreans in a manner that acknowledged a Japanese status inferior to China's. For their part, the Koreans were unwilling to acknowledge the Japanese in any way that implied Japanese equality with the Chinese. Various diplomatic maneuvers created language sufficiently ambiguous to allow both sides to continue relations. More extreme in some ways was the situation of the Ryûkyû Islands, whose government chose to send tribute missions to both China and Japan. In the 18th century, the Japanese militarily established more direct control over the northern parts of the Ryûkyû Islands. They continued to allow the islands their tributary status with China in order to facilitate trade that also benefited the Japanese. From the larger perspective of understanding East Asian international relations, the Ryûkyû example is instructive because it shows how China and Japan could share common elements in their separate orders of influence without conflict. In contrast to the usually peaceful relations China enjoyed with neighbors in Southeast and northeastern Asia were the sometimes strained relations with inner Asia, an area composed of present-day Outer and Inner Mongolia, the Chinese provinces of Xinjiang and Qinghai, and Tibet and Manchuria.

China and Inner Asia

The Chinese empire had a complex relationship with groups along its northern and northwestern borders dating back to early imperial times. In those times the security of

the Han empire was periodically threatened by northern tribesmen. Over the succeeding centuries, numerous Turco-Mongolian alliances of tribes formed to compete with each other and to challenge Chinese troops. At times these alliances took over parts of north China, and at other times they established a greater span of control. The most famous were the Mongols, whose 13th-century conquering of China complemented their successes across a vast territory stretching west to Hungary and Poland. China's final dynasty was established by the Manchus, a semi-nomadic people who entered China from the northeast. Under their Qing dynasty (1644-1911), imperial control of territory spread to include larger stretches of inner Asia. Imperial officials sought to create peace along their northern and northwestern borders in three related ways: (1) form alliances with certain groups against common enemies; (2) seek to subjugate threatening groups by military means; (3) engage many of these groups in the empire's tribute system.

Early in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), there was great anxiety about the Mongols again mobilizing a vast force to invade. The dynasty mixed efforts at military engagement with a strategy of persuading Mongol groups to participate in tributary relations. In later decades, trade and tribute continued to move between the Ming court and Mongol groups amidst Chinese efforts to limit social contacts and regulate economic connections. The Manchus defeated the Ming dynasty in 1644 and created the Court of Colonial Affairs to manage the tributary relations with inner Asian groups, chief among whom were various Mongolians. Certain Mongol groups were Manchu allies in their conquest of China, while other Mongolians were competitors for lands in inner Asia. A combination of military power and moral persuasiveness buttressed appeals to the interests of inner Asian groups in sustaining peaceful and profitable relations with the Qing empire. In addition to tributary relations connecting the throne to various Mongol groups, the Qing dynasty also forged stronger relations with Tibet. The Dalai Lama in Tibet created, with support from the Qing dynasty, a bureaucratized aristocracy, enhancing his powers over Tibetan nobles. Tibetan political leaders accepted a nominal subordination to the Qing empire in return for considerable

autonomy. The Manchu emperors' faith in Tibetan Buddhism enhanced their abilities to effectively communicate with Mongol groups who shared a faith in the same religion.

In the 19th century, the Qing government confronted the growth of Kokand as a regional power on its northwestern border. As the ruler of Kokand expanded his military control over various overland trade routes between China, Russia, and the Middle East, he wished to send tribute missions to Beijing and have his state be recognized as a tributary state. In addition, he sought to increase his government's revenues by taxing merchants at locations that were nominally under Qing control. The emperor agreed to an annual tribute caravan and to three additional points: (1) Kokand was given the right to station a political representative at Kashgar and commercial agents at several other markets; (2) these agents were given judicial and police jurisdiction over foreign traders; and (3) these agents were allowed to levy customs duties on goods imported by foreigners. These agreements with Kokand between 1831 and 1835 parallel concessions the Qing dynasty would make between 1842 and 1844 to European powers who threatened China's seacoast. Negotiating with foreigners along the northern frontier created policies and strategies that were models for subsequent Chinese negotiations with Europeans. The Chinese made treaties with the Europeans that granted Europeans the right to be governed by their own laws and enjoy privileges beyond those granted to diplomatic equals. Scholars conventionally view these Sino-European treaties as indications that the Chinese were treated diplomatically as inferiors.

Less obvious to many observers, Chinese relations with Westerners also initially emerged out of Chinese diplomatic practices that had historically been basic to East Asian political relations. The implications are important. First, Chinese diplomats did not initially anticipate the magnitude of the presence Europeans would mount in China. They imagined a small number of foreigners, restricted to a border region trading site, who could be effectively insulated from nearby Chinese by maintaining separate self-administration. Such a policy not only would keep most Chinese and the few foreigners separated but also save Chinese officials the exasperating task and expense of

controlling the foreigners directly. Second, the flexibility of the hierarchical tribute system is reflected by the ability of northern rulers to rise to considerable military power within its framework. Chinese officials could reasonably imagine the extension of their tribute system to include the new kind of foreigner who arrived along the southern coast. Third, from the vantage point of East Asian political order, it makes good sense to see the expansion of the Qing empire as an elaboration of a Chinese set of diplomatic practices beginning centuries before Manchu rule. Moreover, the China created by the Qing empire has largely survived the Manchus' demise. Some areas that were once part of China's tribute system, notably Tibet and Xinjiang, have been more strongly incorporated into a 20th-century territorial state of China. Fourth, other states in East Asia used the logic of tribute relations with neighboring rulers. In some cases, such as Japan and the Ryukyu Islands, they also incorporated areas with which they had previously engaged in a tributary relationship. Finally, as China's tribute-based relations became increasingly challenged by European powers in the second half of the 19th century, new hierarchies of political relations emerged. Western and Japanese colonialism were no less hierarchical than the East Asian political relations preceding them, but they were more aggressive and often oppressive.

The demise of colonialism has been accompanied by the reemergence of China as a central player in East Asian political relations. Just as China was central to East Asia's political order in earlier centuries, it has again become the major player in the region's international relations. The format and content of the contemporary regional order in East Asia no longer conforms to a Chinese tributary system. However, an understanding of the multiple relations that China and other countries created under that general framework gives us one useful vantage point for considering the continued complexity and variety of the East Asian political order today.

About the author: R. Bin Wong is a professor of history and the social sciences at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* among other publications.¹

¹"East Asian Political Order 1500s to 1800s," *Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2000*.
© 1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.