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TRIBUTARY TRADE AND CHINA'S RELATIONS WITH THE WEST

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UNTIL a century ago, China's foreign relations were suzerain-vassal relations conducted through the ancient forms of the tributary system. This traditional Chinese basis for diplomacy was finally turned upside down by the "unequal" treaties of the period 1842-1858, but vestiges of the old Chinese way of dealing with the barbarians survived much longer and today still form a considerable though latent portion of the heritage of Chinese diplomats. It is of course a truism that tribute was not exactly what it seemed, and that both diplomacy and international trade were conducted within the tributary framework. The following essay offers a preliminary interpretation of the origin, function, and significance of this great Chinese institution.¹

CHINESE CULTURAL DOMINANCE IN EAST ASIA

The tributary system was a natural expression of Chinese cultural egocentricity. Ever since the bronze age, when the civilization of the Shang dynasty (c. 1500-1100 B.C.) had first appeared as a culture-island in the Yellow River basin, the inhabitants of the Chinese state had been surrounded by barbarian peoples of inferior culture. At no time were they in direct contact with an equal civilization, for all of Eastern Asia—Korea, Japan, Annam, Siam—became culturally affiliated to the Middle Kingdom, while India and the Near East remained cut off by the arid land mass of Central Asia. Separated from the West, the Chinese empire grew by the acculturation of its borders. Its expansion was the expansion of a way of life. Where the Chinese agrarian way of life could not be followed, as upon the arid pasture land of the Mongolian steppe, there the expansion of the empire usually stopped.² Over the wet rice land toward the south it continued through many centuries.

From this age-long contact with the barbarians roundabout, including both the nomads of the northern steppe and the aborigines of the south, the Chinese

¹ This article is chiefly based upon the data presented in J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng, "On the Ch'ing tributary system," *Harvard journal of Asiatic studies*, 6 (1941), 135-246.

² This topic has been analyzed at length by Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian frontiers of China* (New York, 1940). For a bibliography on tribute in general see Fairbank and Teng, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-43.

were impressed with one fact: that their superiority was not one of mere material power but of culture. Such things as the Chinese written language and the Confucian code of conduct were signs of this culture and so great was their virtue, so overwhelming the achievements of the Middle Kingdom in art and letters and the art of living, that no barbarian could long resist them. Gradually but invariably the barbarian in contact with China tended to become Chinese, by this most flattering act reinforcing the Chinese conviction of superiority. On their side the inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom, themselves largely descendants of barbarians, stood always ready to judge a man by cultural rather than by racial or national standards. After centuries of solitary grandeur as the center of Eastern Asia, the Chinese developed what may be called, by analogy to nationalism, a spirit of "culturism." Those who did not follow the Chinese way were *ipso facto* inferior, and dangerous when strong, and this view was supported by (or emanated from) an entire cosmology and a well-balanced system of ethics. Without venturing too far into earlier history we may try to note certain of the ideas which supported this "culturism."

An interpretation of Chinese political theory may well begin with the dictum that man is part of nature, not, as in the modern west, in conflict with nature. Possibly this Chinese view of mankind as subordinate and fitting into the unseen forces of the universe arose from geographical environment. On the broad surface of the North China plain human initiative was less important than the weather, and natural calamity, whether drought or flood, could not be avoided as easily as in ancient Greece or Western Europe, where the sea and a wooded terrain usually offered some reward to human initiative in a time of trouble. Conceivably this may account for the passive acceptance of natural calamity on the part of the Chinese farmer and it may also have something to do with the lack of anthropomorphism in Chinese religion. At all events the early religion of the Chinese appears to have been animistic, concerned with the spirits of land, wind, and water. The activity of nature was observed, and it was but a short step to the conclusion that the activity of man must be made to harmonize with it.

The harmony of man with nature in the present had its obvious corollary in the continuity between the present and the past. This sense of continuity, so evident in the great tradition of Chinese historical writing, must probably be associated with the high degree of influence ascribed to the ancestors. Each generation, as it passed from the scene, was believed to have joined the unseen forces of nature which continued to influence human life. It was in this belief that the oracle bones were used in the Shang period to ask the ancestors'

guidance. The reverence and respect paid to one's forebears ("ancestor worship") is one of the best known features of Chinese society. With it went a deep respect for the example of the ancestors, with which, as with the forces of nature, one's present conduct should accord.

THE ETHICAL BASIS OF THE EMPEROR'S POWER

From this point of view the function of the ruler clearly emerges. Being in his person only human but in his office something more, the Son of Heaven mediated between the people and the unseen forces of which we have been speaking. This is not the place for a documented analysis of the position of the Chinese emperor and it must not be thought that his position can be easily described in Western parlance. But, as a rough interpretation, it may be said that the emperor's position was midway between the mass of mankind and the universal power of Heaven. It was his function to maintain the all-important harmony between them. This he did first of all in a ritualistic manner, by conducting sacrifices like those performed annually until a short time ago at the Altar of Heaven in Peking, and by a multitude of other ceremonial acts. This activity of the ruler is an unbroken tradition from the earliest time and is most spectacularly demonstrated in the modern period in the institution of ritual responsibility. According to this doctrine it was felt that natural calamity—in other words, disharmony between man and nature—was the result of the emperor's inattention to the rites. When calamity occurred, the emperor therefore was quick to issue a penitential edict—a custom which has seemed to uncomprehending Europeans certainly quaint and perhaps silly. This ritual responsibility was a doctrine which held to account not the person but the office. In other words the emperor must play his ceremonial part in the cosmos and in playing this part he represented all mankind; and since the activities of man and nature were so closely related, any failure in the emperor's ceremonial observances was soon likely to be manifest in an irregularity of natural processes. Ceremonial conduct was therefore all-important. Intention, being less tangible, mattered little. This Chinese view of responsibility pervaded the entire administrative system and made its activities often unintelligible to foreigners.

To this ancient idea of the ruler's ritual function was added the idea of his right conduct as a basis for his authority. This development, associated with the name of Confucius (b. 551 B.C.), in reality first arose at the beginning of the Chou dynasty (c. 1122 B.C.) to justify the establishment of its control in succession to the alleged degenerate last king of the preceding Shang dynasty. A theory of right was sought as a sanction for a new exercise of

might. Confucius, among others, sought to supply a new rational and ethical basis for the ruler. Unlike the impersonal legalist doctrine by which the Warring States were finally regimented into a unified empire in 221 B.C., Confucianism sought to make use of the power of moral example. Right conduct for all persons consisted in the performance of the proper rites and ceremonies and the preservation of the proper social relationships according to status. Thus it was the duty of the minister to be loyal, and of the son to be filial, and of each person in society to preserve the social order by acting as demanded by etiquette. It was therefore particularly the duty of the ruler as the one man who represented his people before Heaven to set the model for the rest of mankind. There was felt to be a certain virtue or power in right conduct such that it could move others. The virtuous ruler—that is, the one who did the right thing—merely by being virtuous gained prestige and influence over the people. In this way Confucius and his followers defined an ethical basis for the exercise of political authority.

THE EMPEROR'S RELATIONS WITH THE BARBARIANS

By a logical expansion of this theory the emperor's virtuous action was believed to attract irresistibly the barbarians who were outside the pale of Chinese civilization proper. "The kings of former times cultivated their own refinement and virtue in order to subdue persons at a distance, whereupon the barbarians (of the east and north) came to Court to have audience." So reads an official statement of the Ming period about 1530.³ A century and a half later the first Manchu edition of the Collected Statutes records that "When our Dynasty first arose, its awe-inspiring virtue gradually spread and became established. Wherever its name and influence reached, there was none who did not come to Court."⁴

Thus the relationship between the emperor and the barbarians came to symbolize the actual historical relationship between China as the center of culture and the rude tribes roundabout. This relationship was clearly recognized and formed the theoretical basis for the tributary system. The first tenet of this theory—and this is an interpretation—was that the uncultivated alien, however crass and stupid, could not but appreciate the superiority of Chinese civilization and would naturally seek to "come and be transformed" (*lai-hua*) and so participate in its benefits. To do this it was chiefly essential that he should recognize the unique position of the Son of Heaven, the One Man who constituted the apex of the Chinese scheme of things.

³ Fairbank and Teng, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

This conformed with the fundamental dogma that China was the center of the human scene and that the emperor exercised the mandate of Heaven to rule all mankind, Chinese and barbarian alike.

Secondly, the relationship which thus inhered between the outer barbarian and the emperor was by no means unilateral and indeed could hardly exist except on a reciprocal basis. It was the function of the emperor to be compassionate and generous. His "tender cherishing of men from afar" (*huai-jou yuan-jen*) is one of the clichés in all documents on foreign relations. The humble submission of the foreigner came in direct response to the imperial benevolence, which was itself a sign of the potent imperial virtue.

TRIBUTE AS A FORM OF COURT RITUAL

Finally, it was unavoidable that these reciprocal relations of compassionate benevolence and humble submission should be carried out in ritual form, without which they could hardly be said to exist. Tribute thus became one of the rites of the Court, a part of the ceremonial of government. In fact the presentation of tribute was not a rite monopolized by barbarians. Tribute (*kung*) was also received by the Court from the provinces of China proper. Its presentation by the barbarians was a sign of their admission to the civilization of the Middle Kingdom—a boon and a privilege, not an ignominious ordeal. The formalities of the tributary system constituted a mechanism by which formerly barbarous regions outside the empire were given their place in the all-embracing Sinocentric cosmos.

This will appear most plainly from an analysis of the rules and regulations of the tributary system as published in the various editions of the Collected Statutes.⁵ First of all the tributary ruler who tendered his submission was incorporated into the charmed circle of the Chinese state by several forms. An imperial patent of appointment was bestowed upon him—a document which recognized his status as a tributary. A noble rank was also conferred upon him, sometimes, as with the Mongol princes, a relatively high rank in comparison with those of Chinese subjects. An imperial seal was also granted him, to be used in the signing of his tributary memorials. Such memorials and other communications were to be dated by the Chinese dynastic reign-title—that is, the Chinese calendar was extended over the tributary state. A tributary envoy who died within the Middle Kingdom received unusual Confucian honors: a funeral essay was recited and burned at his grave, where sacrificial offerings were made, and later a stone was placed above it with an imperial inscription. Even for the burial of an at-

⁵ Cf. regulations translated in *ibid.*, pp. 163-73.

tendant of the mission, if he died at the capital, a wooden coffin and red satin were supplied.

REGULATIONS GOVERNING TRIBUTE MISSIONS

The tribute missions themselves were carefully limited in size but, within the limit, were well provided for. The officers and servants of a mission were not to exceed one hundred men, of whom only twenty might go to the capital while the rest remained at the border under the care and on the provenance of the local authorities. A mission coming by sea should not consist of more than three ships, of one hundred men each. On the way to the capital the mission received its keep and transportation, the latter being supplied by the men, horses, boats, and carts of the imperial postal service; this was really a service of transport and communication maintained in each province for imperial use by a system of postal tallies. At the capital the mission was lodged at the official Residence for Tributary Envoys—a collection of hostelries—where statutory daily amounts of silver, rice, or fodder were paid from the imperial treasury for the maintenance of men and animals. When an envoy returned to the frontier he was escorted by a ceremonial usher. Both going and coming he was accompanied by troops who combined protection with surveillance.

In the court ceremonies there was an exchange of courtesies. The tribute mission was entertained at banquets, not once but several times, and banqueted also in the presence of the emperor, from whom they might receive tea or even delicacies of the table. On their part the tributary envoys performed the *kotow*. European participants were inclined to feel that this ceremony more than made up for the imperial benevolence which filtered down to them through the sticky hands of their official supervisors. The *kotow* in principle is a knocking of the head upon the ground, in itself an act of surrender, but the full *kotow* as performed at court was a good deal more. It consisted of three separate kneelings, each kneeling accompanied by three separate prostrations, and the whole performed at the strident command of a lowly usher—"Kneel!", "Fall prostrate!", "Rise to your knees!", "Fall prostrate!", and so on. An envoy went through this calisthenic ceremony not once but many times, since it was the chief means by which he repaid the imperial board and lodging and his official supervisors were charged to see that he did it before the emperor with accomplished ease. It was the rite above all others which left no doubt, least of all in the mind of the performer, as to who was the superior and who the inferior in status. Yet it should not be forgotten by egalitarian westerners (who invariably did forget) that the *kotow*

was merely a part of the universal order of Confucian ceremony which symbolized all the relationships of life. The emperor performed the kotow to Heaven and to his parents, the highest officials of the empire performed it to the emperor, and friends or dignitaries might even perform it mutually to each other. From a tribute envoy it was therefore no more than good manners.

The tribute itself was no gain to the imperial court. It was supposed to consist of native produce, a symbolic offering of the fruits of the tributary country. "Things that are not locally produced are not to be presented."⁶ Rare and strange items might be included in it, like the auspicious giraffes which were brought from Africa in the early Ming period as unicorns (*ch'i-lin*), omens of good fortune,⁷ but there was little benefit to the imperial treasury in anything that a tribute mission might bring. The value of the tribute objects was certainly balanced, if not out-weighted, by the imperial gifts to the various members of the mission and to the vassal ruler. The expense of a mission was not inconsiderable, but the court was repaid in kudos. Tribute was ordinarily presented at the time of a great audience at New Years, when the bureaucracy of all the empire paid reverence to the Son of Heaven and when the dramatic submission of foreign lands could most effectively reinforce the imperial prestige within China proper.

WHAT MADE THE TRIBUTE SYSTEM WORK

This brings us to the interesting question, what made the tributary system work? Why did missions from neighboring states come to the Chinese court year after year, century after century? Something more tangible than the imperial virtue must lie behind this impressive and persistent institution. The question is essentially one of motive. Without a constant incentive on both sides, the system could never have functioned as it did.

The motivation of the court is not difficult to see. The ruler of China claimed the mandate of Heaven to rule all mankind. If the rest of mankind did not acknowledge his rule, how long could he expect China to do so? Tribute had prestige value in the government of China, where prestige was an all-important tool of government.

More than this, the tributary system was a diplomatic medium, the vehicle for Chinese foreign relations. Whenever a new ruler ascended the throne of a tributary state, he was required by the regulations to send an envoy to obtain an imperial mandate from the Chinese court. By imperial command he

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁷ J. J. L. Duyvendak, "The true dates of the Chinese maritime expeditions in the early fifteenth century," *T'oung pao*, 34 (1939), 341-412.

was then appointed ruler of his country, and the imperial patent of appointment was given to his envoy; after receiving this document, the new ruler sent a tribute mission to offer thanks for the imperial favor. In other words, his regime was recognized. In the Far Eastern scene this recognition, or perhaps we might say "investiture," by the Middle Kingdom was probably at times quite comparable to recognition in Europe by the concert of powers. It might help to establish a claimant upon his throne. A recognized vassal might appeal in time of need for Chinese help, as did the king of Malacca after his ousting by the Portuguese in 1511. Chinese influence abroad was also exerted through personal contact with tributary rulers, who sometimes came to court. In the ancient period this had been a chief form of submission; when the chieftain of the Hsiung-nu visited the Han or when the king of the Uigurs or of Korea came to the Mongol court, they placed themselves literally under the imperial control. In later periods such activity grew rare, although several visits of kings of Malacca and such places are recorded in the Ming period, perhaps for the junket. Sometimes the heir-apparent of a tributary state might appear in a mission, an almost equally useful custom.

THE FUNCTIONS OF CHINESE ENVOYS

Even more important was the tradition of sending Chinese envoys abroad. Chang Ch'ien, who was sent to the "Western Regions" in the years 138-126 B.C. to gain for the Han an alliance against the Hsiung-nu (Huns), is only the most famous of these envoys. Even before the time of Chang Ch'ien, the first emperor of the Han had sent Lu Chia on an official mission to Nan Yüeh, the region of Canton, and numerous envoys were later sent to deal with the Hsiung-nu of the northern steppe. Under the T'ang such an emissary was called "an envoy to foreign countries" (*ju-fan shih*); under the Sung, "an envoy with a state message" (*kuo-hsin shih*). The Mongols in the course of their expansion sent officers of this sort in all directions, to the Uigurs and Japan, and to Annam and various countries of southeastern Asia. This diplomatic activity is of course to be expected. It is unfortunate that it has not been studied systematically.

One function of these envoys was to confer the imperial seal and recognition upon vassal rulers. Plainly such a formality could be two-faced and of use to China as a mere cover for practical negotiations. Another function was to make condoling inquiries when the local ruler had suffered a bereavement or had himself died. In 55 A.D. after the death of the dangerous and troublesome chieftain of the Hsiung-nu, the Han sent a lieutenant-general "to go and offer condolences," and it is further recorded that he went "in

command of an army.”⁸ Thus all types of international intercourse, if they occurred at all in the experience of China, were fitted into the tributary system—spying out the enemy, seeking allies, and all manner of negotiations, including the threat of force.

TRIBUTE AS A DEFENSE MEASURE

At different times tribute served different purposes, and the system could be used by China for defense quite as much as for aggression. Broadly speaking under the Sung it appears to have been used mainly on the defensive, while under the Mongols it served for expansion and under the Ch'ing it promoted stability in foreign affairs. In the first of these periods, one of weakness, it has been suggested that the suzerain-vassal relationship was an isolationist device, a means of avoiding the dangers inherent in foreign relations on terms of equality.⁹ In a sense this is the secret of the whole system, that outsiders could have contact with China only on China's terms. These terms were in effect that the outsider should acknowledge and enter into the Chinese scheme of things and just to that extent become innocuous. So China tried to gain political security from her accepted cultural superiority. Tribute was a first step toward sinicizing the barbarian and so absorbing him and apparently the dogma of superiority waxed when China grew weak. This interpretation, if supported by further research, may indicate the perennial value of the institution to the Son of Heaven.

If tribute had this obvious political value for the Chinese court, what was its value to the barbarian? Did the tributaries subscribe to the Chinese view of their position, or is the whole great tradition partly an official Chinese myth, foisted with great consistency upon the emperor's subjects and later historians? When we find that Lord Macartney, sent by George III in 1793 to demand trade concessions, is faithfully enshrined in the Chinese records as a tributary envoy, what are we to think of the preceding millennia of so-called tribute missions? Why should an upstanding barbarian come and kotos? The answer is partly, of course, that he had little choice in the matter, being obliged either to accept the conditions of the gargantuan Middle Kingdom or stay away. But the unbroken continuity of tributary relations with China argues for a strong and consistent motivation on the foreigner's part as well as on that of the court, and this motivation seems clearly to lie in trade, so much so that the whole institution, viewed from abroad, appears to have been an ingenious vehicle for commerce.

⁸ Cf. *Ta Ming chi-li*, ch. 32, pp. 1-3, partially translated in Fairbank and Teng, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

⁹ Cf. T. F. Tsiang, "China and European expansion," *Politica*, 2 (Mar., 1936), 3-4.

TRIBUTE AS A CLOAK FOR TRADE

That tribute was a cloak for trade has been axiomatic ever since merchants from the Roman orient reached Cattigara in 166 A.D. claiming to be envoys of Marcus Aurelius. Testimony on the subject abounds, particularly regarding the sham embassies of merchants on the Central Asian caravan routes. The Kansu governor reported in 1502 that there were more than 150 self-styled rulers (*wang*) trading with China from the western regions and the Jesuit Benedict de Goetz who crossed Central Asia a century later in 1604 described how the caravan merchants "forge public letters in the names of the kings whom they profess to represent" and "under pretense of being ambassadors go and offer tribute to the Emperor."¹⁰

So fundamental was this commerce that the regulations for tribute devote a whole section to it.¹¹ Tribute missions arriving at the frontier normally included merchants, either as private individuals or as agents of the tributary ruler, who often monopolized the trade. They brought with them commercial goods which they were allowed to sell to the Chinese merchants at the frontier emporium, or alternatively, they might at their own expense bring these goods duty free in the train of the envoy to the capital and sell them there at a special market set up at the Residence for Tributary Envoys. This market lasted for three or five days, according to the regulations of 1690, and was carefully superintended by officers of the Board of Revenue. Trade outside of the official market and trade in certain types of goods were both strictly prohibited. The contraband list included works of history, implements of war, saltpetre, and copper and iron—things which might weaken the defense of the realm. Meanwhile for independent foreign merchants who did not come in the train of an embassy there were emporia on the frontier—such as those for Korea on the Manchurian frontier, and for the western area near Chengtu and Lanchow where there were one or two markets a year, each lasting twenty days. These appear to have been similar to the market set up in the eighteenth century at Maimaichen for the caravan trade with Russia. For the maritime nations the market was at Canton. Foreign merchant vessels were forbidden to carry away contraband goods, or Chinese passengers, or rice and grain beyond the needs of the ships. Exports in a tribute vessel, however, were exempt from customs duty. In these terms the tributary system was made to cover foreign trade, as well as diplomacy.

This sketch is of course only a faint reflection of the plethora of rules and regulations on the subject of tributary trade. Considering their extent, and the

¹⁰ See Fairbank and Teng, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-70.

extent of the trade, it seems anomalous that foreign trade could be considered in Chinese theory to be subordinate to tribute, but so it was. It was officially regarded as a boon granted to the barbarian, the necessary means to his sharing in the bounty of China, and nothing more. No doubt this quixotic doctrine reflected the anticommercial nature of the Chinese state, where the merchant was low in the social scale and beneath both the farmer and the bureaucrat who lived off the produce of the land. It was strengthened perhaps by the self-sufficiency of the empire which made supplies unnecessary from abroad. At all events, it was the tradition that foreign trade was an unworthy object for high policy, and this dogma was steadily reiterated in official documents down into the nineteenth century. Meanwhile foreign trade developed and grew ever larger within its ancient tributary framework.

TRIBUTE VERSUS CHINESE MARITIME TRADE

This brings us to a paradox in the history of modern China and one of the fundamental reasons for the collapse of the Confucian state. Trade and tribute in the Confucian view were cognate aspects of a single system of foreign relations. 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. The rub came when the foreign trade expanded and finally in some cases eclipsed tribute entirely, without changing the official myth. Tribute continued to dominate Chinese official thought after trade had begun to predominate in the practice of Chinese foreign relations. In the modern period the Confucian bureaucracy tried to treat the new trading nations of the west as mere tributaries. Naturally they failed, being incapable of changing their immemorial theory to fit a new situation. The paradox in this tragedy lies in the fact that the new situation to which the Chinese government could not adjust itself had been created largely by the maritime trade of Chinese merchants. China had been for too long a continental empire, accustomed to relations across a land frontier. Her new maritime relations caught her unprepared and destroyed her ancient defense, the tributary system.

This thesis is frankly an interpretation, in some respects perhaps a truism, and yet one which requires careful examination. Having presented above a brief interpretation and summary of the tributary system and its working without any effort to explore the bewildering minutiae of the regulations at various periods and the inevitable inconsistencies among them, let us now turn to the trend of foreign relations under the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties (1368-1911).

THE CHENG HO EXPEDITIONS

The high point of tributary activity in China came early in the Ming period. Between the years 1403 and 1433 seven imperial expeditions were dispatched into the waters of southeastern Asia and the Indian Ocean.¹² They were under the general superintendence of the eunuch Cheng Ho and are said to have included as many as 60 vessels and 27,000 men at a time. Some forty states were included in their points of call and most of them sent back envoys with the Chinese fleets and became enrolled as tributaries. These included Pahang, Kelantan, and Malacca on the Malay peninsula; Palembang (ancient Srivijaya), Samudra, Lambri (modern Achin), and Aru in Sumatra; Ceylon, Cochin, Chola, Calicut, and several other places on the southern coasts of India; Barawa and Mogadisho on the Somali coast of Africa; Aden and Djofar in Arabia, and the ancient port of Hormuz on the Persian Gulf. These distant places of Africa and Arabia were visited but a few times and by few vessels, yet the fact remains that representatives of the Chinese court touched there in the early fifteenth century, a generation before the Portuguese came into the Indian Ocean around the Cape. A party from one Chinese expedition even saw the sights of Mecca.

To call these Chinese voyages spectacular is an understatement, but it is not easy to comprehend their object or to understand the reason for their complete cessation after 1433. Professor Duyvendak,¹³ the closest student of the problem, has pointed out that they were the work of palace eunuchs, a group whose considerable power depended upon the imperial favor, and that the flow of vassal envoys and rare objects, "unicorns" (giraffes) and black men among them, was well calculated to please the imperial fancy. The cessation of the voyages was dictated, he suggests, partly by their expense, which plainly must have been considerable when one includes the largesse bestowed upon prospective tributary rulers to win them over. No scholar has as yet ventured a complete explanation; the Chinese historian's tradition that they went to seek out a vanished claimant to the throne does not give us much satisfaction. The suggestion now seems in order, that these official voyages cannot have been entirely unconnected with the private Chinese trade which we know had been expanding for some time into the waters of southeastern Asia. This commercial background deserves attention.

We know, first of all, that tribute from this area did not begin at the time of Cheng Ho. "Java" (perhaps then Sumatra) sent tribute as early as 132

¹² These have been studied particularly by Professors Pelliot and Duyvendak in a series of monographs in *T'oung pao*, espec. vols. 30 and 34.

¹³ See J. J. L. Duyvendak, "The true dates . . .", *op. cit.*, 395-99.

A.D.¹⁴ A regular and extensive maritime trade with China from the regions of the Indian Ocean had begun at least as early as the T'ang period (618-906) under the aegis of the Arabs, and under the Sung it had attained very considerable proportions. Mongol fleets had swept the seas of Java and Malaya in the time of Kubilai¹⁵ and by the end of the fourteenth century a number of states in Malaya had become regular tributaries of the Ming. They included Java, Brunei (in Borneo), Pahang on the Malay peninsula, Palembang and Samudra on the island of Sumatra, and even Chola from the Coromandel coast of India in 1372. It is patent that Cheng Ho after 1403 was following well known commercial paths. He was "exploring," for the most part, the established sources of trade and tribute rather than terra incognita.

DECLINE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN TRIBUTE

The striking fact is, however, that tribute from southeast Asia declined after the time of Cheng Ho, although trade did not. This is most significant. In the early fifteenth century the official Ming list of tributaries from which tribute missions were received included Japan, the Philippines (Lü-sung, i.e. Manila), Cambodia, Java, Pahang on the Malay peninsula, and Achin and Samudra on the island of Sumatra. Later, under the Ch'ing, none of these places was listed as tributary.¹⁶ But in the 1818 edition of the Ch'ing Statutes these various places, Japan, the Philippines, and the others just mentioned, were listed in a special section as "trading countries" (*hu-shih chu-kuo*), i.e. countries that traded with China but did not send tribute. Of course this is understandable in the cases of Japan, the Philippines, and Java (Batavia), where the Tokugawa shōgunate, Spain, and Holland respectively could not easily be considered tributary (although the Dutch had actually sent tribute as recently as 1794). But this classification is less logical in the case of the small places of Malaya. The full list of "trading countries" in 1818 was as follows: Chiang-k'ou (i.e. Siam), Cambodia, Yin-tai-ma (perhaps Chantebun?), Ligor, Jaya (Chiaya), Sungora, Patani, Trengganu, Tan-tan(?), Pahang, Johore, Achin (defined as the same as Samudra, by error), Lü-sung (the Philippines), Mindanao, and Java (Batavia). Most of these were small

¹⁴ C. S. Gardner in W. L. Langer, ed., *An encyclopedia of world history* (Boston, 1940) p. 134.

¹⁵ W. W. Rockhill, "Notes on the relations and trade of China . . .", *T'oung pao* 15 (1914), 419-47.

¹⁶ The official Ch'ing lists published in the five editions of the Collected Statutes between 1690 and 1899 included only Korea, Turfan, Liu-ch'iu, Holland, Annam, Siam, the countries of the Western Ocean, Burma, Laos, and Sulu, and not even all of these at one time; these tributaries of the Manchus were fewer in number, although it must be admitted that they were more substantial political entities than were some of the small islands and out-of-the-way principalities induced by Cheng Ho to become vassals of the Ming.

kingdoms under petty sultans, similar to the states of Pahang and Achin which Cheng Ho had enrolled as Ming tributaries. Why were they not now listed as vassals of the Ch'ing?

GROWTH OF CHINESE TRADE

The answer plainly lies in the fact that it was no longer they who came to China but the Chinese who went to them. Chinese trade with southeast Asia had developed since the days of Cheng Ho to the point where the barbarians, or the Arab traders of the region, no longer came to Canton to obtain the products of the Middle Kingdom. Instead, the great junk fleets of Amoy and Canton now carried Chinese produce into all parts of the archipelago. The list of "trading countries" made out in 1818 really constitutes a catalogue of the ports of call on the two great coastal trading routes down the Malay peninsula and through the Philippines, respectively. Indeed it shows an almost one-to-one correspondence with a list of the trading countries of the region made by the British founder of Penang about 1788: Siam, Chantebon, Chia, Sangora, Pattany, Ligore, Tringano, Pahang, Jahore, and others including Acheen.¹⁷

That Chinese junks had long been the local carriers of Malayan trade hardly seems to require documentation, although it is a much neglected subject. The Portuguese at Malacca after 1511, the Spanish at Manila after 1571, and the Dutch at Batavia after 1619 had all found Chinese traders much in evidence, and it is not too much to say that the early European trade in eastern Asia was actually grafted onto the junk trade which already flourished there in Chinese hands. The British and French East India companies appear to have been well aware of the desirability of tapping this local commerce. Manila, indeed, lived upon it, the cargoes of the Acapulco galleons coming not so much from the Philippines as from the vast storehouse of China, whither the Spanish themselves were not allowed to go.¹⁸ In short it seems incontestable that the migration of the Chinese into southeastern Asia which has been one of the significant phenomena of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is merely the later phase of the Chinese commercial expansion which began much earlier.

To this early maritime trade it would seem that the tributary system had been on the whole successfully applied. The system had developed on the land for operation across easily controllable land frontiers, and every

¹⁷ Letter of Capt. Francis Light in *Journal of Malayan branch of the R.A.S.*, 16, part 1 (July, 1938), 123-26.

¹⁸ See W. L. Schurz, *The Manila galleon* (New York, 1939).

approach to China from the continental side had offered convenient points of control like the Jade Gate on the west or Shanhaikuan on the north. Under the Ch'ing the missions from Korea were required to enter via Fenghuang-ch'eng and Shanhaikuan, those from Annam via P'ingyang or T'aip'ingfu in Kwangsi, and those from Burma via Yunch'ang or T'engyüeh in Yunnan.¹⁹ Over maritime tributaries a similar control had been established by requiring missions from Liu-ch'iu to enter only at Foochow, those from Sulu only at Amoy, and those from Siam only at Canton; the Dutch were reprimanded for coming to Fukien instead of Kwangtung. The greater volume of maritime trade had led to the growth of foreign communities in the seaports like those of the Arabs at Zayton and Canton, but these communities had been kept under control through their own headmen in their own restricted quarter, and trading operations had been supervised by Chinese officials. So long as the foreign traders came to the frontier of China, whether by land or by sea, tributary forms could be preserved and tribute missions could be sent to the capital either on the initiative of acquisitive merchants or rulers or at the instigation of the face-seeking Chinese bureaucracy.

CHINESE TRADE AND THE DECLINE OF TRIBUTE

These observations offer some support for the hypothesis that the first blow at the Chinese tributary system was struck not by the Europeans who refused to accept tributary status after 1500 but by the expansion of Chinese trade even before that time. We know in a general way that the Arabs who had once dominated trade between China and southeast Asia were supplanted by Chinese merchants, that traders from the southeast by degrees no longer came to China, that the Chinese went to them. As this foreign-carried trade dried up, tribute probably dried up with it.

If we look at the great fifteenth-century voyages of Cheng Ho in this light, perhaps we can regard them as an effort to bring the sources of Chinese maritime trade back into the formal structure of the tributary system so as to make the facts of foreign trade square with the theory that all places in contact with China were tributary to her. Foreign places communicating by land, like Samarkand, Isfahan, Arabia, or the Kingdom of Rum in Asia Minor, were enrolled as tributaries of the Ming although contact must have been extremely tenuous (particularly after the Kingdom of Rum, for example, had ceased to exist). Was it not logical to enroll similarly the places communicating by sea? Mixed motives naturally must be assumed, but this desire to preserve the traditional system may well have been one of them.

¹⁹ See Fairbank and Teng, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-76.

In any case the tributary system gradually ceased to operate by sea although it continued to do so by land. From the first it had been a passive system, the Middle Kingdom waiting for the barbarians to approach, and it could not be maintained when the Chinese were themselves active. By the beginning of the nineteenth century its demise was officially acknowledged in the case of the "trading countries" of southeast Asia which traded without sending tribute, and which were so recorded in the Collected Statutes of 1818.

THE TRIUMPH OF TRADE OVER TRIBUTE

The predominance of trade over tribute in the early nineteenth century may also be evident in the fact that the number of recorded tribute missions showed a decided increase.²⁰ From 1662 to 1761 the total of recorded embassies was about 216. In the following century from 1762 to 1861 it was about 255. This increase must be examined as a possible index of greater commercial activity taking the form of tribute missions. The statutory frequency of these missions was as follows: from Korea annually, Liu-ch'iu every two years, Annam every three, six, or four years (the regulations changed), Siam every three years, Sulu every five years, Laos and Burma every ten years, Holland every eight and later every five years, the Western Ocean (Portugal, etc.) indefinite. How did this square with practice? With perhaps a couple of exceptions, Korea sent tribute every year steadily until 1874 and so may be left out of account. Tribute from Liu-ch'iu was recorded in some 70 years out of the 144 years from 1662 through 1805, that is, on the average almost exactly as required by statute. But in the next 54 years from 1806 to 1859, tribute from Liu-ch'iu instead of being biennial was recorded 45 times, on the average in five out of every six years! This is doubly significant when we remember that the Liu-ch'iu islands, in themselves unimportant, served as an entrepôt for trade between Japan and Korea on the one hand and China on the other, in this period before either Japan or Korea were open to foreign trade. Tribute from Annam was recorded 45 times in the 200 years from 1662 to 1861, somewhat less than an average of one in four years, which agrees fairly well with the shifting regulations for Annam. There was no significant increase. Siam was recorded as sending tribute only 11 times in the 115 years from 1662 to 1776, an average of about one year in ten instead of one in three as required by statute. But in the next 77 years from 1777 through 1853, Siamese missions were recorded 38 times, on the average every other year, and half again as frequently as the regulations prescribed! Here again significance is added by the fact that Siamese tribute

²⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 193-98, table 5.

came by sea along the main coastal route connecting Canton with southeast Asia and the Straits. Tribute from Burma came only 3 times before 1788; from then until 1853 it came 13 times, an average of once in five years instead of once in ten years as prescribed. Tribute from Laos came 17 times between 1730 and 1853, averaging somewhat better than the statutory decade. Sulu is recorded only 7 times, between 1726 and 1754 and may be left out of account.

From these data the fact stands out that tribute missions coming by sea, from Liu-ch'iu and from Siam, increased remarkably in the half century beginning about 1800. They became decidedly more frequent than required by statute and pending further investigation we must suppose that their motivation was commercial. 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. Whether the commercial profits were gained by the tributary rulers and their merchants or by Chinese merchants and officials remains to be investigated. At least in the case of Siam the missions came over a route dominated by the Chinese junk trade. The arrival of this tribute at the Chinese court was therefore an ill omen, a sign of the rising tide of maritime trade conducted by Chinese merchants, with the help of which the merchants of the west were about to burst the dike of the tributary system and invade the Middle Kingdom. It is a fascinating question whether the court was not, on the contrary, lulled into a false sense of security by this increased barbarian submissiveness. Possibly this prostitution of the tributary system for commercial ends served to confirm the Chinese idea of superiority just when it was most urgently necessary to get rid of it.

EUROPEANS AND THE TRIBUTARY SYSTEM

The problem of the Europeans in the tributary system must be viewed against this larger background. Perhaps the most amazing thing about the European menace is the fact that it was not at first clearly recognized. In the latter days of the Ming, Matteo Ricci and his Jesuit colleagues had interested the Confucian literati with maps of the world showing strange countries to the west, and many of Ricci's transliterations of these place names have survived in modern Chinese usage. But this new knowledge presented to Chinese scholarly circles in the period about 1600 did not survive long, or at least did not retain its significance, after the establishment of the Manchu dynasty and it was generally disregarded during the eighteenth century. This

is one of the puzzles of Chinese intellectual history, and without venturing upon an explanation it may be strikingly illustrated.

CHINESE IGNORANCE OF EUROPEAN GEOGRAPHY

The countries of the Western Ocean were irretrievably confused with one another even in the official publications of the imperial government.²¹ From medieval Europe via the Arabs had come the term Fo-lang-chi, a transliteration for Franks, the Europeans in the Near East at the time of the Crusades. When the Portuguese appeared by sea after 1500 they were therefore identified as Fo-lang-chi, and this term was also applied to the Spanish after their arrival in the Philippines; since Portugal was under Spanish rule from 1580 to 1640, this confusion was no doubt inescapable. The arrival of the French created a further terminological enigma by the similarity of France and Franks. Time and again Fa-lan-hsi, Fo-lang-hsi, Fu-lang-hsi and similar transliterations for France were perspicaciously identified by Chinese scholars with Fo-lang-chi, the Portuguese-Spanish. Meanwhile the term Kan-ssu-la for Castilla, the Spanish, had also been applied to the Portuguese; and two tribute missions sent by the king of Portugal in 1670 and 1727 had been recorded in official works as from the two separate countries of Po-erh-tu-chia-li-ya and Po-erh-tu-ka-erh, respectively. But in the meantime the Jesuit missionaries in China had identified themselves as coming from Italy, I-ta-li-ya, and yet by their use of the Portuguese settlement at Macao as a port of entry they had become associated with Portugal. Consequently as late as 1844 the name I-ta-li-ya was being applied to the Portuguese at Macao, and when a genuine Italian turned up in 1848 his country had to be identified as I-ta-li, an entirely new and separate country from I-ta-li-ya. There were also other ways of referring to Portugal in addition to the five just mentioned. It would have taken a strong mind to identify Fo-lang-chi, Kan-ssu-la, Po-erh-tu-chia-li-ya, Po-erh-tu-ka-erh, and I-ta-li-ya as all referring to the same small western country.

Confusion was not confined to the books. Just as Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans look much the same to the western man in the street, so the westerners in China as in Japan were indistinguishable in their common outlandishness. The colloquial term Hung-mao-fan, "Red-haired barbarians (or foreigners)," was applied to both the Dutch and the English, whose blue eyes, red complexions, beak noses, and tawny hair made them all indiscriminately exotic.

Since Ricci's map of the world had not gained acceptance, the native

²¹ See sources cited in *ibid.*, 232-33.

habitat of these Europeans remained shadowy. They all arrived by sea from the southwest and the Collected Statutes of 1818 therefore opined that their location was "in the southwestern sea," the same as Siam, Sungora, Ligor, Patani, Johore and way stations on the route to the Straits. One of the Portugals (Kan-ssu-la, Castilla), however, was in the northwestern sea, as were also Sweden and Denmark. The exact location of the Western Ocean (Hsi-yang) was a bit hazy, since the term had originally been applied to the waters west of Borneo and into the Indian Ocean on the ancient western trade route. This went down the Indo-Chinese-Malayan coast and was distinguished from the eastern route through the Philippines and Moluccas. When the early Europeans used the term Western Ocean to refer to the Atlantic it was not illogically objected that the Western Ocean, as known to the Chinese, had been sailed through from end to end by the expeditions under Cheng Ho without anyone noting a trace of Europe. A compromise was finally worked out by referring to the Indian Ocean as the Little Western Ocean, Hsiao-hsi-yang, while the Atlantic became the Great Western Ocean, Ta-hsi-yang. Ta-hsi-yang, incidentally, was another of the names of Portugal.²²

The relations between these miniscule kingdoms in the western sea were naturally difficult to keep straight, particularly when they were not too permanent in actual fact and were differently described by the patriotic members of each nationality when they visited Chinese ports. An official work compiled in the 1750's under the direction of the highest officials of the empire, for example, in describing the various barbarians illustrated in its pages made these statements: that Sweden and England were dependencies of Holland; that Sweden (Jui) and England (Ying-chi-li) were shortened names for Holland (Ho-lan); that France was the same as Portugal; that I-ta-li-ya (instead of Holland) had presented tribute in 1667, and that the Pope himself came to do so in 1725. These deviations from truth seem to represent the average degree of error in the minds of Chinese officials of the period. How long this confusion persisted was strikingly shown by the Imperial Commissioner Ch'i-ying in November of 1844 just after he had negotiated the treaties, with Britain, the United States, and France which opened China to the west. No one in China should have been better informed than he about the barbarians. He explained to the emperor that France (Fo-lan-hsi) was the same as the Fo-lang-chi (Portugal) of the Ming period;

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 187, 232. For a pertinent discussion of the reasons for the failure of Ricci's map to gain acceptance see Kenneth Ch'en, "Matteo Ricci's contribution to and influence on geographical knowledge in China," *JAO*, 59 (Sept., 1939), 325-59, especially pp. 347 *et seq.*

that under the influence of Matteo Ricci, the great Jesuit the French had been induced to give up Macao to the Portuguese, even though France was ten times as strong.²³ France, of course, had never held Macao. This whole cock-and-bull story probably illustrates the Paul Bunyan quality taken on by the legend of Matteo Ricci, who had already become the tutelary deity of clocks (*li-ma-tou p'u-sa*).

UNPREPAREDNESS FOR THE WESTERN INVASION

The vagueness of the Confucian mind regarding the West was no doubt a product of lack of interest and lack of contact combined with distaste. Out-land merchants on the fringe of the empire were heard of more than seen, printed sources of information regarding them were few and out of date; as merchants they were beneath attention, and as barbarians with powerful arms they were pleasant to forget about entirely. The Westerners in China had never been many and in the eighteenth century they were effectively quarantined. The decadent part-half-caste community of Macao remained walled off on its peninsula, the "Thirteen Factories" at Canton were outside the city walls, from which foreigners were excluded. After the early eighteenth century foreign trade was not allowed at other ports. Moreover the trading community at Canton was not only quarantined but insulated. All foreign intercourse with the Chinese authorities was mediated through the official trading monopolists, the hong merchants, and the swarm of linguists, compradores, and shroffs who specialized with them in the conduct of barbarian relations. This special class of functionaries was not a literate class, and it intervened between the foreigners and the scholar-bureaucrats of the imperial administration. There was therefore no one in a position to write intelligibly about the west. In fact, the use of pidgin English as the chief medium for exchange of ideas made it rather difficult, so to speak, to make any China-man savvy.

The European tribute embassies which penetrated the veil of Chinese exclusiveness were relatively few and far between. After the first abortive Portuguese embassy of 1520-21 there were only about seventeen Western missions, so far as we now know, which got as far as an audience with the emperor.²⁴ They all occurred in the years between 1655 and 1795, and six of them were from Russia, an Asiatic power in a somewhat different category from the maritime West. There were four from Portugal, after the first one; three (or perhaps four) from Holland; three from the Papacy; and

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-90.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-89, table.

one from Britain under Macartney in 1793. All but the last appear to have performed the kotow. (The second British ambassador, Lord Amherst, in 1816 failed to obtain audience.) Of these various embassies only four occurred after 1727 and the last one, that of the Dutch in 1795, fit perfectly into the traditional tributary system.²⁵ The established order was not challenged by this contact.

The only other western contact aside from trade was that of the Jesuit missionaries, but after 1725 their defeat in the rites controversy and the imperial denial of papal claims had made them impotent at court, long before their dissolution in Europe in 1773. The Lazarists who succeeded them at Peking in the late eighteenth century were not influential and the few Catholic priests who persevered in the provinces reached only a small group.

SUMMARY

In this way the Chinese state of the early nineteenth century was left intellectually unprepared against the commercial invasion from the West. First, Chinese native trade had expanded into southeastern Asia and the tributary system had not managed to keep up with it. Thereupon commerce from the West had begun to flow into these channels of native trade; the resulting increase of commercial activity in the Far East had led to an increase after 1750 in the sending of tributary missions to China. Thus the new western trade with Asia indirectly stimulated the old-style tributary activity of countries like Liu-ch'iu and Siam, and this strengthening of the ancient tributary forms, through which foreign contact continued to be mediated, left the scholar-officials of China intellectually blind to their danger. This interpretation deserves active testing among the voluminous sources now available.²⁶

²⁵ This Dutch embassy has been carefully studied by Prof. Duyvendak, "The last Dutch embassy . . .", *T'oung pao*, 34 (1938), 1-137, 223-27; 35 (1940), 329-53.

²⁶ See Fairbank and Teng, *op. cit.*, pp. 206-19 for a list of some 35 Ch'ing works on maritime relations which await further study.