

The tribute system

In addition to these rather ruthless methods, the imperial authorities relied on ritual means to pacify the foreigners. These rituals applied to all foreign relations, including relations with states that were members of the overland system, but they became particularly important in relation to foreigners to the south and the east of the country. Many of these states were very keen on trading with China. Despite the official Chinese doctrine which said that China was self-sufficient in all things needed by man, many Southeast Asian merchants discovered the Chinese to be interested not only in their spices and hardwoods but also in specialty items such as rhinoceros horns and ivory. And there was of course no end of things which the foreigners in turn might buy from China. These foreign traders included Europeans such as the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English who they too arrived in China on ships coming from the south. During the Ming dynasty much of this trade was rather informally organized, but during Qing foreign trade came to be concentrated in the city of Guangzhou, known as "Canton," in the south. From the middle of the eighteenth-century no other ports could be used to access the Chinese market.

Since there was no way for a foreigner to enter China except as a tribute-bearer, tribute-bearers was what all foreigners who showed up in China became. Trade was considered a lowly occupation in China and merchants were, officially at least, regarded as an inferior social class. While farmers toiled in the fields, merchants did not produce anything, and they got rich without breaking a sweat. Lacking a proper economic rationale, the imperial authorities interpreted instead foreign trade in cultural terms. China, they argued, was the most sophisticated country in the world and by comparison everyone else was a barbarian. Barbarians, however, were not to be feared as much as pitied, and the fact that they had

showed up at China's doorsteps proved that they were willing to learn from the Chinese. As such they were to be treated patiently and with benevolence. In addition, the Chinese imagined, the foreigners were eager to thank the emperor, in his capacity as "Son of Heaven," for performing the many ritual duties which maintained order in the universe and peace throughout society. By showing up in China, and by submitting themselves to the rules prescribed by the tribute system, the foreigners assumed their place in this world order. The tribute system was proof positive that China indeed was the "Middle Kingdom" and the Chinese emperor the "Son of Heaven."

A detailed protocol regulated these visits. Each mission was not to exceed one hundred men, of whom twenty were allowed to proceed to the capital while the rest were to remain at the border. On their way to the capital, each delegation was fed, housed and transported at the emperor's expense, and in the capital they stayed in the official "Residence for Tributary Envoys," where they were given a statutory amount of silver, rice and fodder. Both coming and going they were accompanied by imperial troops who both protected them and controlled their movements. Clearly, no foreign visitors saw much of the country they were passing through. In the capital they were debriefed by court officials who inquired about the conditions obtaining in their respective countries; they were also given ample opportunities to practice for the highlight of the visit – the audience with the emperor himself. The tributary gifts which they brought along, the rules stipulated, were to consist of "products native to each land." Often these were quite humble items and in each case the imperial court spent far more on the gifts it gave in return. This was one of the ways in which the emperor showed his benevolence.

The centerpiece of the ritual was the audience with the emperor. On the chosen day, visitors were woken up as early as 3 AM and taken to the imperial palace where they spent hours waiting, sipping tea and eating sweetmeats. At long last, they

were accompanied into a large hall, where many other delegations already had assembled – other foreign envoys but also delegations from all over China and state officials of various ranks. Suddenly the emperor appeared and all the visiting delegations were required to perform a koutou – a kowtow – to symbolize their respect and their submission.[Read more: The kowtow question] The emperor graciously accepted their tributes, spoke kindly to them and gave them gifts in return. Then the delegations exited the assembly hall one by one, while again kowtowing, and the audience was thereby concluded. Already later the same day, the visitors were treated to a sumptuous meal with the emperor in attendance, and delegations which for some reason enjoyed his favors could be served a fish caught in one of the imperial lakes or even a plate of food from the emperor's own table. After dinner there would be entertainment, perhaps a firework display, a horse-based joust or an acrobatics show. During the following days, the delegations were given more gifts, repeatedly wined and dined, even if the emperor no longer made an appearance. After that they were quite unceremoniously told that it was time for them to leave. They were accompanied back to the port where they had entered and reminded, as they left China, to come back again after the stipulated number of years.

During the Ming dynasty there were altogether 123 states which participated in the tribute system, although many of the entities in question showed up only once and some of the more obscure names on the list may indeed have been fictional. During Qing the records became more accurate with a core group of states regularly undertaking missions: Korea, Siam, the Ryukyu islands, Annam, Sulu, Burma, Laos, Turfan, but also the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British. The Europeans were represented by their respective trading companies but they were supported by their governments in choosing the appropriate presents. In general, the closer the country, the more often they had to present themselves at the imperial court. The Koreans were put on a three-years cycle and they

were consequently the most frequent visitors. Since they had to travel so far, the Europeans were supposed to show up only every seventh year, but these regulations were in practice not followed. All in all the Portuguese only made four visits to the imperial court, the Dutch also four, and the British three. The Russians showed up too – altogether some twelve times – but since they were a part of the overland system, particular rules applied to them.

One may indeed wonder why the foreigners agreed to submit themselves to all these stipulations, and the answer is that it was the only way to make sure that they could continue to trade. The envoys who went to Beijing would sometimes find ways to buy and sell things on the sly, but more importantly, their compatriots who remained at the border would set up markets where trade would be brisk for a few weeks. The profits earned in this fashion were more than sufficient to justify the trouble of the journey. Once they had showed up in Beijing, moreover, their countrymen who traded in Guangzhou would be free to pursue their activities as before. In addition, however, there were political gains to be had. Whenever a new king ascended the throne of a state that was a member of the tribute system, he would send an envoy to China and if he was granted an audience the authority of the ruler in question was impossible to dispute – he was, after all, recognized by the emperor of China himself. Returning home the diplomat would bring the emperor's official seal with him as a sign of this new status. Sometimes an heir-apparent was included in a tributary mission, a political device which effectively helped refute the claims of any rivals he might have back home. Who after all was to tell the emperor of China that he had made a mistake?

The tribute system was unquestionably hierarchical. It was China that dictated the terms and no one else was in a position to influence the logic or the institutions that constituted the system. The rituals all emphasized submission

to the imperial throne, yet the relationship which was established in this way entailed, at least in theory, obligations on both sides. More than anything the relationship resembled that obtaining between a father and a son. Just like a son, the foreign visitor should be obedient and respectful, and just as a father, the emperor should care about those who enjoyed his benevolence. Politically speaking, the imperial center controlled the periphery only in the loosest sense. Most obviously, the imperial authorities laid no claims to interfere with the independence of each state in the system. Occasionally, such as in relation to pirates in Taiwan at the end of the eighteenth-century, and in the case of attacks on its allies in Malaya, the Chinese state intervened militarily, but these were exceptions and they concerned inter-state relations and not domestic affairs. [Read more: [Pirates in Taiwan](#)] As long as the foreigners were not making trouble, the imperial authorities much preferred to leave them alone. The units of the system were thus hierarchically ordered but at the same time free to govern themselves.