



Cultural interaction and reproduction in pre-modern diplomacy

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It gives me great pleasure to attend this forum and to listen to the young researchers' opinions on the important issues concerning cultural reproduction. The presentations and discussions in Session One "Diplomacy as cultural interaction in early-modern East Asia" and Session Two "Negotiating the self and the otherness of the interface of Cultures" are particularly interesting and thought-provoking to me, since they are very closely related with my own research interest, that is diplomacy in pre-modern Asia before the tenth century. The presenters have provided us with new and exciting information on the interface between China, Japan, Ryūkyū, Vietnam, and between the Dutch and Ceylon. Their research methodology is refreshing. They examine the pre-modern international relations from a bilateral and multilateral point of view, not from the unilateral standpoint of either China or the Netherlands. Their presentations have made an important point: the interactions between Asian countries in pre-modern times, whether it was diplomacy, trade, or cultural exchange, cannot be fully understood in the traditional frame work of countries with fixed boundaries and definite cultural and national identities. Not only the boundary lines between countries often changed, over the time the national and cultural identities of their peoples also became blurred, although changes in this area occurred at a rather slow pace.

These changes raise an important question: What was the nature of the relations between Asian countries in pre-modern times? In their efforts to answer this question, modern scholars have often used the framework of a "tributary system". In this system, the Chinese Son of Heaven enjoyed full political prestige and glory when dealing with his "barbarian" neighbors. He was not only the supreme ruler of the Chinese, but also of the "barbarians" who came under his moral influence. Envoys from foreign countries, near and far, humbly offered him their rulers' political loyalty by presenting to the Chinese court state letters which openly

acknowledged the political subordination of their countries to the Central Kingdom, and by offering local products as tribute to the Chinese Son of Heaven. During Chinese court audiences held with full formality, foreign envoys addressed themselves as “subjects” to the Chinese emperor; and they wore Chinese court robes to show their “Sinicization”. Their political loyalty was rewarded with lavish Chinese hospitality: they received generous imperial grants and valuable gifts, and they were treated to court banquets.

This modern tributary theory is helpful and revealing in terms of our understanding of the announced guiding principles of China’s external relations. Moreover, the theory in question examines these relations in the context of oriental history, which is a noticeable breakaway from Euro-centrism, a notion that takes Europe as the center in world history. Naitō Konan and Nishijima Sadao were two famed scholars who made major contributions to the studies of East Asian history and the relations between Asian countries. Naitō Konan raised the concept of “oriental history.” He saw similarities in the political, cultural and economic structures of China, Japan, and countries on the Korean peninsula. And these similarities make it necessary to study the history of East Asian countries, and of their relations with one another as one entity. Naitō Konan examined China’s external relations as a process of Chinese cultural expansion to foreign countries and these countries’ reactions to such expansion. He compared these relations to a concentric circle, with China Proper being its center, expanding territorially in all directions, and annexing its neighbors into the Chinese regime, or bringing them to varying degrees into the Chinese political orbit. Naitō Konan’s research distinguished him from his contemporaries, many of whom adopted Euro-centrism in their research, even though he seems to have replaced Euro-centrism with Sino-centrism, a notion that takes China as the center of the world.

Nishijima Sadao further developed Naitō Konan’s concept of oriental history into a comprehensive theory of “the tributary system.” This theory treats Japanese history as an inseparable part of the East Asian history. It suggests that East Asian countries usually conducted their relations with China through the medium of Chinese tributary arrangements. Ideologically, these arrangements were the embodiment of Sino-centrism, and institutionally, they were the extension of China’s hierarchical domestic social order to the outside world. The use of tributary arrangements in East Asian diplomacy was due to the spread of Chinese influence in the region, which resulted in a degree of homogeneity in these coun-

tries' cultural, economic and political institutions. They, for example, shared the so called "culture based on Chinese characters". They employed Chinese as the official written language. Members of the ruling class and the ordinary people of these countries followed Buddhism and Confucianism. Close economic ties existed among these countries, the exchange of goods being conducted either through "official trade" in the form of tributary arrangements, or through the activities of private merchants who were active from the tenth century onward. Politically, East Asian countries all had a Chinese style legal system at home; and internationally, they interacted with China through tributary arrangements. These countries thus formed a "historical civilization zone," or an "East Asian World." The modern tributary theory is built on the analysis of this world. This theory, however, has some inherent weaknesses. It lacks any sense of change because the theory in question is based on the unified concept of a China-centered world order seen only from the Chinese side. This is not at all surprising, since the primary sources, on which the theory is constructed, are primarily Chinese. These sources often portrayed relations between China and its neighbors as those between a monarch and his subjects. They would not include any record of a foreign envoy's visit, if his visit did not reflect the glory of the Central Kingdom. Consequently, Chinese sources tended to overemphasize the political conformity of foreign rulers to the Chinese court, and neglect their real motives in playing the diplomatic game with China. These sources often described foreign envoys as passive acceptors of a China dominated world order, not dynamic players of the game, who were eager to achieve their own goals.

In reality, however, traditional China's external relations were basically a set of reciprocal relations based on "mutual self-interest," which foreign rulers accepted voluntarily. In these relations, the participating parties all tended to take advantage of their respective external relations to achieve their own political, economic and military goals at home and abroad. It is common knowledge that when any country attempts to establish, to sustain as well as to develop its relations with another country, it usually did so out of its own domestic needs and the needs to cope with the contemporary international situation. A bilateral relationship was feasible only when it had a core of common interest, and when it yielded positive results to both parties involved. Although any country might take the initiative in establishing a relationship with another country, the relationship would not last if it was not reciprocal in nature. Only with a core of common

interests that an enduring relationship could be established in the first place; and the involved parties would want to maintain the relationship. Any successful and lasting bilateral relations must therefore involve “mutual self-interest”.

In certain aspects, the traditional Chinese “tributary system” can be adequately compared to the United Nations, where each member state plays the diplomatic games according to certain internationally established rules. But the motive of the member states in joining the club is their respective “self-interest”. This was certainly the case in China’s external relations in pre-modern times, because in many cases China neither gained real control over its neighbors, nor held a dominant position over them. It was China’s neighbors who decided the timing to contact China. Even though the Chinese court sometimes requested foreign rulers to pay tributes to China on a regular basis, the court was often not in a position to dictate when a relationship should be established. Moreover, the motives for foreign rulers to contact China, or to follow an instruction from China, usually arose out of their own internal needs, rather than from their passive compliance with the Chinese world order. They often stopped paying tribute to China, and ignored China’s instructions when contacting China became less urgent, or when such a contact was considered unfavorable to their own interests. They even clashed with China militarily when there were substantial conflicts of interests. These countries were certainly neither the political nor the military satellites of China.

The tributary theory is also too general to depict the great variations in China’s relations with its neighbors in a precise manner. In a strict sense, a foreign ruler became a member of the Chinese tributary system only when he had formally accepted a Chinese title. In a China - dominated tributary relation, the Chinese emperor was the sovereign, and the foreign ruler his vassal. History, however, has repeatedly shown that Chinese emperor did not always enjoy the supreme position of a sovereign, and many foreign rulers were not always his subjects. This indicates that the establishment of a formal tributary relation required a set of unique conditions, and these conditions did not exist universally. In fact, a real tributary relation occurred only in specific historical periods, and between China and a limited number of countries. In many aspects, a tributary relation was not dominated by China. The relation often reflected a state of delicate equilibrium, which was sensitive to the needs of the involved parties, and to the changes in conditions on both sides. Any tributary relation therefore has to be

understood not only in bilateral terms, but also in multilateral terms. As a matter of fact, when Chinese sources recorded a “tributary relation,” the term actually embraced a wide spectrum of China’s external relations, ranging from total political submission to equality.

The international scene became even more complex when the institutions of China’s neighbors matured and their domestic political situations were stabilized. The attraction of establishing and maintaining a political tie with China started to wane. With this development, the tributary relation between China and many of its neighbors degenerated and gave rise to a new type of diplomatic contact. On the surface, China’s neighbors did not challenge China’s supremacy in world affairs. In reality, however, they paid lip service to China’s tributary system only when they needed official communication with the Chinese court in order to achieve their own goals. The relations between China and these countries evolved beyond the sovereign-vassal framework. China sometimes acted to force its relations with other countries back to the tributary pattern, and as a result destabilized her neighbors. But with a few exceptions, China could sustain the pattern in question only spasmodically.

This important evolution in China’s external relations, however, went almost unnoticed, since most of China’s neighbors were still in favor of maintaining official cultural as well as economic relations with China, which before the eleventh century could be realized only through accepting tributary arrangements. They had no other choice but to stay in the Chinese tributary system. Moreover, foreign envoys’ superficial conformity to the Chinese court protocol further obscured the evolution. Consequently, political conformity to the Chinese court seems to have continued undisturbed, at least in primary Chinese sources, when in fact China’s East Asian neighbors had already shifted the primary aim of their relationships with China from ensuring Chinese political and military support to the desire for cultural and economic relationships. And these subtle but fundamental changes in East Asian diplomacy are apparently beyond the explanatory capacity of the modern tributary theory.

For a better understanding of the international relations in pre-modern Asia, we may regard the diplomacy in the region as a form of dynamic cultural interaction, and use the term “diplomatic culture” to describe the ways in which countries related with one another. Admittedly, both parties in a bilateral relationship would prefer to conduct diplomacy in their own way. And differences in their

approaches to diplomacy sometimes led to contention. But for a diplomatic contact to be completed successfully, neither party should dictate the form or the content of diplomacy. Instead, both parties needed to work out a way of diplomacy mutually acceptable to them. When this happened, the diplomatic culture in Asia evolved. And this process is best described by the theme of this forum: “Cultural reproduction on its interface.”

When studying the process of Cultural reproduction in pre-modern diplomacy, we need to carefully consider the following issues. In international relations, did the interaction between different diplomatic cultures lead to the formation of a new and common diplomatic culture in Asia? If it did, why and in what ways was this new diplomatic culture acceptable to the involved parties? And in what ways was this new Asian diplomatic culture different from the original diplomatic culture of the involved countries? To answer these questions, we need to reconsider some key concepts that we often use in our research. Diplomacy is a suitable example. While its usual definition is the art of using negotiation in bilateral relations to advance the interest of one’s own country, this western concept of diplomacy is apparently unsatisfactory when applied to interpret the interactions between countries in pre-modern Asia. We also need to pay close attention to the current affairs in the world, a world that suffers from an unprecedented economic crisis. The badly damaged economic power of the U.S.A. has shaken the world order that has been so far based on U.S. supremacy. With the United States, Japan, China, India, Russia and other major powers interacting with each other in a way different from the post-WWII norm, a new world order is gradually taking shape in front of our eyes. The formation of this new order is itself a process of cultural reproduction in modern diplomacy, and should serve as an inspiration to our own research.