

# Hegemon and Instability: Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia under the Tribute System<sup>(1)</sup>

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## Abstract

Under the tribute system Southeast Asia had long been dominated by China in the pre-colonial era. This article examines the hegemonic influences that China had exerted on pre-colonial Southeast Asia. Based on the literature of hegemonic stability, China's influences are analyzed according to four theoretical perspectives: norm socialization, public-good provision, hegemonic coercion, and institution-building. Firstly, China's self-perceived cultural state had not socialized the 'Indianized' states of Southeast Asia. Secondly, despite the vibrant commercial links that China-centered tributary trade had created, it was not an economic order open to all Southeast Asian countries. Thirdly, the coercive campaigns that China waged in mainland Southeast Asia had altered the sub-regional power balance beyond its control. Fourthly, the pre-colonial tribute system was sophisticated and long-lasting, but its institutional impacts had not escaped the dynastic cycle of China's imperial power. These findings not only challenge the view that the China-dominated regional hierarchy had been stable and peaceful, but also raise questions about the applicability of hegemonic stability in a non-Western pre-colonial context.

## 1. Introduction

International relations in pre-colonial East Asia followed a distinctively hierarchical order. With its unparalleled economic, political and military strengths, China stood at the center of the regional hierarchy (Faribank, 1968; Mancall, 1984; Kang 2010). The rest of East Asia was incorporated into the regional order through an elaborated institutional framework—the tribute system (Faribank, 1942; Mancall, 1968). Under this system, foreign countries were invited to pay tribute to China. By submitting to the supremacy of China, foreign rulers were rewarded with the official recognition by the imperial court, lucrative tributary trade with China, and, on some occasions, imperial protection in the case of emergency (Shu, 2012). The tributary states were even ranked by China according to their cultural conformity to the Chinese civilization and their loyalty to the imperial court (Kang, 2010: 57-59). It is often considered that the hegemony of China, together with the hierarchical tribute system, had contributed to the long-term peace and stability in East Asia prior to the arrival of European powers in the mid-19th century (see Kang 2007, 2010).

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

For many pre-colonial Southeast Asian countries, tributary trade with China not only brought a steady

inflow of wealth but also created a solid foundation to thrive on the Asian trade routes (Reid, 1993). During the periods when China was strong and its foreign policy outward-looking, the power balance in Southeast Asia was also more easily maintained (Wolters, 2008: 69). However, Southeast Asian countries were far from peaceful and stable under the tribute system. Fierce competition for survival and domination had characterized the balance-of-power politics throughout the pre-colonial era (Shu, 2012). The inter-state conflicts between Dai Viet and Champa, between Ayutthaya/Siam and Burma, and among the kingdoms of Sumatra and Java all lasted for several centuries without a clear winner. These conflicts were further complicated by the distinctive political structure in pre-colonial Southeast Asia—the Mandalas, where loosely-controlled vassals frequently led to conflicting political claims and overlapping jurisdictions (Wolters, 1999; Stuart-Fox, 2003). Different from the experiences of the Confucian world in Northeast Asia (Kang, 2010), the hegemony of China had *not* produced a decisive impact on the sub-regional stability of pre-colonial Southeast Asia.

Why did the undisputed hegemony of China fail to create long-term peace and stability among its tributary states in pre-colonial Southeast Asia? According to the hegemonic stability theory, a predominant hegemon should be conducive to an open trade order and stable inter-state relationship (Kindleberger, 1973; Krasner, 1976; Gilpin, 1981). To achieve a stable order, the powerful hegemon can employ at least four different strategies, each representing a specific school of modern international relations theories (see Milner, 1998). The hegemon may project its power and coerce subordinate states to comply; it may provide important public goods and motivate other states to follow suit; it may establish multilateral institutions to maintain a desirable inter-state order; it may even create a set of values and norms to socialize its subordinates. Yet, hegemonic stability is a contemporary international relations concept of Western origin<sup>(2)</sup>. To what extent it is applicable to pre-colonial Southeast Asia remains an open question. Aware of this possible caveat, the article intends to conduct a theory-guided historical analysis to achieve two objectives: firstly, to understand China's hegemonic presence in pre-colonial Southeast Asia based on the claims of hegemonic stability; secondly, to conduct a history-informed

reassessment of the hegemonic stability theory in a non-Western context.

The rest of the article is organized in the following way. The next section discusses the intellectual development of hegemonic stability theory, exploring different theoretical interpretations as well as their critics. The intention is to show that hegemonic stability is an evolving theoretical framework capable of communicating with novel evidence. Then, the hegemonic impacts of China on pre-colonial Southeast Asia are examined from four perspectives. The third section assesses the socialization effect of China's self-perceived cultural state in Southeast Asia. The fourth section explores the link between public goods provision and tributary trade in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. The fifth section examines the coercive dimension of hegemonic China, focusing on the imperial China's military campaigns in mainland Southeast Asia. The sixth section discusses the changing institutional strength of the China-centered tribute system. The article is concluded with a summary of the main findings and a discussion about their implications for the hegemonic stability theory.

## 2. The Theory of Hegemonic Stability and Its Critics

The theory of 'hegemonic stability', a term coined by one of its critics (Keohane, 1980), is first articulated around the mid-1970s. At a glance, the theory is simple and straightforward. It posits that a single, dominant power (i.e., the hegemon) is conducive to stability and prosperity in the world. The theory is normally attributed to three scholars: Charles Kindleberger, Robert Gilpin and Stephen Krasner. While all of them accept the logic of hegemonic stability, the meaning of *stability* differs in their accounts. According to Kindleberger (1973), the experiences of the Great Depression show that only a predominant power is able to create a stable world economy. A stable economic order requires a steady flow of capital, adequate liquidity, stable exchange rate, and coordinated monetary policies, something Lake (1984) refers to as the 'international economic infrastructure'. For Gilpin (1975, 1981), stability has both political and economic connotations. In political terms, stability is 'an international system of relative peace and security' (Gilpin, 1981: 145). In economic terms, stability is a liberal economic order featuring 'free trade, foreign invest-

ment and a well-functioning international monetary system' (145). In Krasner's (1976) account, stability is simply considered as an open trading structure. It should be noted that the contemporary understandings of liberal economic stability, especially concerning capital liquidity and financial coordination, were well beyond the reach of the pre-colonial era. In this article, stability is defined as *open trade order and stable inter-state relationship* in order to make a realistic assessment of China's hegemonic impacts on pre-colonial Southeast Asia.

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

Logically, the theory of hegemonic stability is based on the model of public goods provision<sup>(3)</sup>. Stable economic and political order is a genuine public good. Every state enjoys the benefits of a stable world but few are willing to bear the cost of it. Because of this, stability is usually in short supply in international political economy. According to Mancur Olson (1965), apart for the rare situation of well-coordinated collective action, only a 'privileged group' has the incentive and capability to supply public goods because public goods disproportionately benefit the privileged one. The hegemon is a predominant power in world politics. Analytically, it can be regarded as a privileged group since the hegemon has a very high stake in the

stable world order. For this reason, the hegemon should be willing to provide and maintain stability in a world where it dominates. This is the essential logic behind the hegemonic stability theory (Gilpin, 1981; Gowa, 1989; Lake, 1993)<sup>(4)</sup>.

However, the metaphor of public goods is questioned by some. As Conybeare (1984) points out, it is more plausible to conceptualize the international trade relations as a game of prisoners' dilemma than the game of public goods provision. In the prisoners' dilemma game, self-interested players lead to a non-cooperative suboptimal outcome<sup>(5)</sup>. There is no reason to believe that the hegemon is not self-interested. Instead of promoting free trade, the hegemon may well use an optimal tariff to improve its terms of trade. Moreover, free trade is excludable and therefore not a public good. The hegemon can selectively offer free trade to a sub-group of subordinate states rather than create a global free-trade order. While Conybeare's criticism focuses only on trade, it has important implications for the theory of hegemonic stability. It indicates that the existence of a hegemon may not automatically lead to an open trade order.

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

Even if one accepts the metaphor of public goods, it is still possible to question the theory of hegemonic stability on other grounds. In particular, the provision of public goods does not always require a 'privileged group' such as the hegemon. A small group of coordinated actors can also supply public goods and induce collective action (Olson, 1965). As Lake (1984) and Snidal (1985) show, a small group of states may at

least resume the responsibility of ‘hegemonic cooperation’ after the decline of the hegemony. That is, the world may remain stable even without the presence of a hegemon. Keohane (1984) takes this argument a step further, and claims that international cooperation among a small group of countries under a well-defined international regime is plausible even ‘after hegemony’. This theoretical advancement not only explains the puzzles of ‘hegemonic lag’ that the world witnessed in the early 1980s as the economic power of the US declined *vis-à-vis* Japan and West Germany, but also points to the crucial roles of international regimes in creating and maintaining a stable world order. Nevertheless, the institutional turn has not refuted the plausibility of hegemonic stability. It shows that the hegemon should have a strategic interest in establishing an effective international regime to keep its preferred world order (Keohane, 1997: 161).

Considering the profound influences of ‘cultural hegemony’ on postwar intellectuals (see Gramsci, 1971)<sup>(6)</sup>, it is surprising that the early writers of hegemonic stability have little to say about the ideologies and values that a hegemon may exploit to maintain its (stable) order. Only briefly does Gilpin (1981: 34) note that ‘the position of the dominant power may be supported by ideological, religious, or other values common to a set of states.’ Ten years later Ikenberry and Kupchan’s (1990) article on ‘Socialization and Hegemonic Power’ manages to bring scholarly attention to the constructivist aspect of hegemonic power. As their study points out, a hegemon can exercise substantial power and establish preferred international order by socializing the ‘substantive beliefs’ of other countries. In the international system dominated by a hegemon, the socialization process often takes place after major wars and political crises or in wake of the hegemonic use of coercive power. To achieve hegemonic socialization, it is more essential to alter the beliefs of elites than to change public opinion. These arguments further enrich the literature on hegemonic stability. They show that a stable world order is no less plausible under hegemonic socialization. An effective socialization strategy is not only compatible with but also in need of the benevolent use of material incentives and the coercive means of political sanctions.

The advancement of hegemonic stability theory in the past four decades has greatly enhanced our understandings of the international order dominated

by a hegemon. Overall, the theoretical debates point to four hegemonic strategies that are conducive to a stable politico-economic order. Firstly, the hegemonic state can use the socialization strategy by creating a set of norms and values to socialize the substantive beliefs of subordinate states. Secondly, the hegemon may employ the public-good provision strategy by maintaining an open trade order to the benefit of all states. Thirdly, the dominant state can resort to the coercive strategy to force subordinate states to follow its hegemonic wills and comply with its preferred international order. Fourthly, the hegemon may pursue the institution-building strategy by establishing a stable international regime to regulate international politico-economic relations beyond the rise and fall of its power. Derived from the theoretical debates, these hegemonic strategies are not the *de facto* foreign policies of a hegemon, but they together provide a useful benchmark to examine the hegemonic influences of a predominant state.

However, it should be noted that two historical periods—the British Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the United States after the Second World War—disproportionally inform the early thinkers of hegemonic stability (Kindleberger, 1973; Krasner, 1976; Gilpin, 1981). Today, *Pax Britannica* and *Pax Americana* remain the key words one finds in the literature. Though it might be an exaggeration to call it ‘ethnocentrism’ (see Grunberg, 1990), it is hard to deny the Western origin, if not bias, of hegemonic stability. This raises an important question on whether the theory is similarly applicable in a non-Western pre-colonial context<sup>(7)</sup>. Without assuming the universal validity of hegemonic stability, this article intends to assess some of its analytical assumptions through a theory-guided historical analysis of pre-colonial Southeast Asia.

In summary, hegemonic stability offers a sophisticated theoretical framework to understand the hegemonic impacts of a predominate state. The socialization strategy, the public-goods provision strategy, the coercion strategy, and the institution-building strategy each provide a useful perspective to decode the hegemon’s special roles. Admittedly, hegemonic stability is an evolving theoretical framework of a distinctive Western origin. Its intellectual development in the past decades shows that active communication with constructive critiques and novel evidence has

contributed to the advancement of hegemonic stability theory. Adopting a similar attitude, the following sections apply the four hegemonic strategies to explore the special impacts of China on pre-colonial Southeast Asia.

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

Imperial China's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia was deeply rooted in the Chinese views of the world and its special position within it (Fairbank, 1968; Mancall, 1984). As a number of studies point out, Chinese emperors called themselves the 'Son of Heaven', and indeed considered themselves as the essential link between heaven, the human world and the earth (Fairbank and Teng, 1941; Mancall, 1968; Wang, 1998a; Stuart-Fox, 2003). It, then, follows logically that being the mediator between heaven and earth allowed China to rule not only its own territory but also the other human societies standing between heaven and earth. Such unconcealed cultural egocentrism, characterizing many early human civilizations, is perhaps not a sign of Chinese exceptionalism. What made China special are the restrictive moral requirements of traditional Chinese cosmology. As Wang (2000: 168) notes, during the first enduring empire of the Han dynasty the Chinese views of the world underwent a dramatic transformation from 'a cosmology of the conquering... that justified violence into a moralized cosmology of Heaven'; correspondingly, the understandings of the emperorship also changed from 'a conquering political power to a vehicle for... ethical ideals'. Similarly according to the Confucian thoughts, real power does not come from the abrupt use of force. It is instead derived from the rule of virtue and the moral authority of the ruler. Internally, rule of virtue requires an orderly social hierarchy and a compassionate government; externally, rule of virtue brings barbarians to acknowledge voluntarily the centrality of China (Fairbank, 1942; Wang, 1968; Stuart-Fox, 2003: Ch2). Furthermore, both the social hierarchy and the Chinese centrality should be performed and celebrated through elaborated rituals. These cultural understandings formed the essential norms and values behind the China's self-perceived hegemonic power.

Although the moral connotations of Chinese cos-

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

Indeed, deep inside China's self-perceived supremacy was the belief that foreign countries submitted to its hegemony not for China's economic, political or military might, but because of their respect for China's culture and civilization. However, whether such a Sino-centric view was shared by the countries in pre-colonial Southeast Asia is questionable. Most Southeast Asian countries have been culturally influenced more by India than by China. Except in Dai Viet where the long-term Chinese rule produced a different set of social and cultural norms, Confucianism was of little significance to the 'Indianized' Southeast Asian states (Wolters, 1999; Stuart-Fox, 2003). As Coedes (1968: 15) points out in his revered work *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, these countries practiced 'the arts, customs, and religions of India' and used 'Sanskrit as their sacred language'. More importantly, 'Indianized' Southeast Asian states had adopted 'an organized culture... founded upon the *Indian conception of royalty*' (15, emphasis added). Locating outside the Sinicized circle of Confucian states, these countries had probably interpreted China's self-claimed inclusiveness, impartiality, and non-exploitation in very different ways.

Among the many cultural ideas that early Southeast Asian kingdoms learned from India is belief that the ruler was the representative of the greatest god on earth (Coedes, 1968: Ch2). The aim of the ruler was to acquire as much power as possible, so that his/her kingdom could resemble the heavenly realm and the ruler could claim him/herself the god of it (Stuart-Fox, 2003: 31). The religious belief in reincarnation in Hinduism and Buddhism also allowed early Southeast Asian rulers to accept the temporary nature of power. Thus, submitting to another powerful kingdom, say as a tributary vassal, was considered temporary (Stuart-Fox, 2003: 32). These 'Indianized' understandings of the world were very different from the traditional Chinese worldviews outlined above. Nowhere was such difference more evident than in the suzerainty-tributary relations. In pre-colonial Southeast Asia, interstate relations were similarly characterized by a tributary structure (Wolters, 1999). Different from the China-centered tribute system, tributary states in Southeast Asia were supposed to make substantive contribution to the wealth and power of their suzerain. The subordinate rulers were required to pay a specified amount of valuable local products as their tributes

on a regular base, which then constituted the major income of the powerful lord. In return, subordinate states were promised effective protection against potential threats. Yet, the tributary status was nothing to be ashamed of because it only reflected the temporary balance of power. When the times change, a subordinate state could establish its own tributary network and be a powerful lord capable of extracting wealth from other countries.

Given these contrasting understandings of tributary relations, the China's commitment to inclusiveness, impartiality and non-exploitation was at best misunderstood and at worst resisted in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. Soon after the Ming envoy invited Brunei to the Chinese court in 1370, Java warned Brunei not to pay tribute to China. The Javanese envoys were heard as saying, '[i]f you give your allegiance to China, you will be without us. When Sulu attacks again, you will have to seek help from China' (cf. Wang, 1968: 51). The warning appeared to deter Brunei from seeking closer connection with China. In the remaining 30 years of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Brunei sent only one mission to China, but continued to pay annual tribute to Java (Wang, 1968: 51). Only after China promised upgraded protection did Brunei resume its tributary mission to the Ming court in 1408. On that occasion the Brunei king not only visited China in person but brought his family with him. Together they received a splendid reception. Declaring that Java should exempt Brunei from tribute, the Chinese emperor wrote a personal poem and inscription to memorize the occasion (Reid, 1996: 23)<sup>(8)</sup>. Apparently, both sides were satisfied, though for different reasons. In the Chinese eyes, its moral commitment to inclusiveness and impartiality finally persuaded a foreign ruler to pay homage to the Middle Kingdom. For Brunei, to win the protection of a regional hegemon against neighboring powers was probably more in line with its 'Indianized' logic of tributary relations. In another case, the son of a recently died ruler of Jambi, then a Sumatra tributary to Java, secretly sought China's recognition of his status as the new king in 1377. The Javanese envoy resided in the Ming court had probably learned this diplomatic exchange (Wolters, 1970: 62-63). The 'betrayal' of Jambi enraged the Javanese ruler. When the Ming envoys were sent to grant imperial recognition to the new Jambi ruler, they were rerouted to Java and killed there in 1378.

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

#### 4. The Public-Good Provision Strategy: Tributary Trade and Private Trade

The provision of public goods plays a central part in the theory of hegemonic stability. In particular, the hegemon is expected to keep a stable economic order to the benefit of other countries. Based on the experiences of the UK in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the US after World War II, the literature claims that the hegemon should pursue the goals of global trade liberalization and open trade order (see Krasner, 1976). However, defining the trade order in pre-colonial Southeast Asia is not so straightforward. Firstly, there was the long-standing tributary framework that allowed Southeast Asian countries to conduct duty-free trade with China (Fairbank, 1942). Yet, tributary trade was limited by the number of tributary missions that a country was permitted to submit to the Chinese court. Secondly, unlimited private trade was officially allowed only in certain periods of imperial China, notably the Southern Song and late Qing dynasties (Shiba, 1983; Reid, 1996; Heng, 2009). These periods were marked by the relative decline of China. Thus, allowing private trade can hardly be seen as a sign of China’s hegemonic strength. Thirdly, some third tributary countries, such as Ryukyu, also played a key part in the pre-colonial trade between China and Southeast Asia (Reid, 1993).

To make sense of this complex picture, it is necessary to consider the security implications of trade in

pre-colonial East Asia. Imperial China was generally an agriculture-based economy. Instead of promoting trade, self-sufficiency had long been considered as a virtue and an obligation. There is an important security reason behind limiting trade in China. Because of its potential impact on the concentration of wealth, free trade could easily lead to the political claim of local interests. Such claims not only endangered the unity of the country but also threatened the authority of the imperial court. Therefore, it was in the interest of the central authority to regulate and control private trade. As Tilly (1992: 128) points out, imperial China, like its counterparts in Europe, faced the interplay of two socio-political dynamics: ‘the bottom-up building of regional hierarchies based on trade and manufacturing, [and] the top-down imposition of political control.’ In Europe, the persistence of bottom-up hierarchies led to long-term fragmentation after the fall of the Roman Empire. By contrast, imperial China managed to impose a top-down political order at the expense of trade and local economic centers<sup>(9)</sup>. Indeed, private trade was mostly banned during the periods of dynastic consolidation such as the beginning of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Only when the imperial court became financially weakened was private trade officially encouraged in an attempt to boost royal income.

A similar trend also characterized pre-colonial Southeast Asia. Trade had played an essential part in the state revenues of Southeast Asian trading countries. Particularly during the period of the ‘age of commerce’ (i.e., 1450-1680)<sup>(10)</sup>, revenues from trade constituted a substantial part of royal income in both maritime and mainland Southeast Asia (Reid, 1993: 217). Because of its significance, international trade in valuable goods was typically monopolized by the rulers. In Burma the royal court controlled the trade of amber, gems, gold, and iron; in Siam the loyal warehouse was the only place where foreigners could buy tin, lead, sappanwood, and saltpeter (Reid, 1993: 248). Even with regard to the trade of less important goods, ‘[s]trong kings almost invariably squeezed the merchants and drove many of them away’ (Reid, 1993: 247). Rather than encouraging private trade, Southeast Asian countries had similarly pursued the strategy of state dominance in pre-colonial international trade.

Under these circumstances, the China-centered tributary trade suited both sides quite well. Tributary

trade allowed foreign countries to conduct trade with China either at the border city where the tributary missions first arrived, or in the market set up next to the Official Residence for Tributary Envoys in the Chinese capital (see Fairbank, 1942). Any commercial activities outside these designated markets were strictly forbidden, but tributary trade was free of duty. For China, tributary trade not just minimized the negative implications of unregulated private trade, but also provided a mechanism to show China's benevolence and strength. For Southeast Asian countries, tributary trade with China ensured that international trade was conducted under the proper control of the royal court. Hence, tributary trade did create some sort of open trade order beneficial to China and Southeast Asian trading states. This open trade order even generated some noticeable stabilization impact on maritime Southeast Asia. As Wolters (2008: 69) notes, 'peace in the southern ocean (i.e., maritime Southeast Asia) was restored at the time when there was a new Chinese dynasty, deliberately recovering the traditional frontiers of China and, by means of special envoys, announcing its accession overseas in order to revive China's foreign trade.'

However, tributary trade had never been an economic order open to all. Only officially recognized tributary countries were allowed to conduct trade with China. In addition, there was specific limit regarding the number of tributary missions (and therefore trade) permitted in a certain period of time. In the Qing dynasty, for example, Dai Viet was permitted one tribute in every two years, whereas Siam was allowed one in three years, Sulu one in five years, Burma and the Laos only one in ten years respectively (Fairbank and Teng, 1941: 175-176). Because of these restrictive rules, tributary trade actually created a group of 'privileged trading states' in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. In the mainland, Champa and Cochin-China in southern Vietnam, Ayutthaya and Siam in southern Thailand had maintained close tributary relations with China for several centuries. All benefited substantially from the steady inflow of trade revenues (Reid, 1996; Lieberman, 2003; Wade, 2009). In the archipelago, the close tributary connection with China helped Sirvijaya and Melaka become the center of maritime Southeast Asian trade (Wolters, 1967, 1970; Lieberman, 2009). The status of Melaka was so prominent in the 15<sup>th</sup> century that all other Southeast Asian countries sent their

products first to Melaka for further export to China. Meanwhile, the eastern maritime trade route via Taiwan and Luzon (i.e., northern Philippines) was abandoned in the late 1420s (Reid, 1996: 34). For the countries which had few or no tributary links, they were forced to rely on third tributary countries, Ryukyu being the most well-known, to keep their trade flow with China (Reid, 1996: 30; Lieberman, 2009: 799)<sup>(11)</sup>.

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

On the whole, it is difficult to deny that China had attempted to build an open trade order in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. For several centuries, China-centered tributary trade brought Southeast Asian trading states into a regional economic network covering almost the whole East Asia. In the periods when



China was strong, vibrant tributary trade not just attracted a large number of Southeast Asian trading states, but also brought wealth and prosperity to the region. It is thus tempting to conclude that imperial China had provided the much-needed public goods—an open trade order—in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. However, the open trade order stipulated in the hegemonic stability theory refers to an economic order based on unlimited private trade rather than regulated tributary trade. In pre-colonial Southeast Asia, tributary trade was never an economic order really open to all. Instead of benefiting every country in the region, it created a group of privileged trading states with special access to the Chinese market. Yet, as the ban on private trade was lifted at a time when Chinese hegemony was in decline, unlimited private trade was unable to restore regional order and stability.

These empirical anomalies raise doubt about the applicability of hegemonic stability in a non-Western context. Trade had special security implications in the pre-colonial era. In order to maintain the domestic political order, both Chinese and Southeast Asian rulers preferred controlling rather than encouraging private trade. On the other hand, unlimited private trade often came to dominance when the region was marked by political changes and disorder. Apparently, the hegemon could not count on private trade to build a stable economic order in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. Though tributary trade was not a completely open trade order, it had created vibrant commercial links in pre-colonial Southeast Asia.

## 5. The Coercive Strategy: Unsuccessful Intervention and Unexpected Impact

The coercive strategy is usually taken as granted in the hegemonic stability literature. It is assumed that the disparity of capacity allows the hegemon to effectively enforce its wills on subordinate states. Instead of the actual coercive strategies, the literature pays more attention to the difference between coercive and benevolent hegemon (see Snidal, 1985; Alt et al., 1987; Lake, 1993). The hegemonic influences of China on Southeast Asia had been more benevolent than coercive in the pre-colonial era. Although China had maintained unmatched military superiority *vis-à-vis* Southeast Asia, there were very few conflicts between the two sides. For one thing, most Southeast

Asian countries were China's tributary states which paid regular homage to the imperial court (Wang, 1968; Reid, 1996; Stuart-Fox, 2003). For another, the security threats to China had been located mainly on the northern borders of the country. The first Ming emperor even issued a long list of Southeast Asian countries that China should never attack (Wang, 1998a: 311-312). Apart from the Mongol invasions in the 13<sup>th</sup> century<sup>(12)</sup>, China waged only three major campaigns against Southeast Asia over a period of over one thousand years. These were the Ming occupation of Dai Viet between 1407 and 1427, the Qing campaign against Burma between 1765 and 1770, and the Qing invasion of Dai Viet in 1788-1789<sup>(13)</sup>. Had China succeeded in enforcing its imperial wills on Southeast Asian countries through the use of physical coercion?

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

According to the Chinese official records, the Ming invasion of Dai Viet was a response to a series of unusual succession occurred in the country (Ming Shi Lu, 1968; see also Wang, 1998a). When the first Ming emperor sent his envoys to Dai Viet in 1369, the Tran dynasty just installed an adopted son of the loyal family as the ruler of the country. The succession was duly confirmed by the Ming court. However, the new ruler was thrown out by a usurper several months later. Nothing was reported to the Ming court. When China found out what had happened, it refused to recognize the usurper and declined his tribute. The official tributes resumed two years later, but the relations between the two countries were not in a favorable condition. The emperor ordered the tributary rituals with Dai Viet

to be downgraded. When China's official tallies were dispatched to Champa, Khmer and Ayutthaya (i.e., other tributaries in mainland Southeast Asia) in 1383, Dai Viet was not on the list (Wang, 1998: 310). Similar succession and communication problems occurred again during the reign of the third Ming emperor<sup>(14)</sup>. The emperor was first informed that a relative of the Tran family was installed as the new ruler in Dai Viet. Yet, it turned out that the recognized king was again a usurper and a regicide. The Ming court found the last remaining member of the Tran house and sent him back to Dai Viet. The person was murdered on his arrival (Wang, 1998: 315). Soon a full-scale invasion of Dai Viet was ordered in 1407, in the name of punishing the usurper and restoring the Tran dynasty.

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

The Qing invasion of Dai Viet in 1788-1789 was another attempt to restore a recognized ruler. Officially, it was a response to the plea of the last king of the Le dynasty. Dai Viet had been thrown into turmoil due to the Tayson Rebellion since 1773. Historical records show that there were signs that the political turmoil of Dai Viet could spread into China (Wills, 2001). When the rebel took the Le capital in 1787, the king was forced to take refuge in the nearby Chinese Province. There he asked for the assistance of the Qing court. A combination of internal concerns and external commitment probably led to the decision of invading Dai Viet. Within ten days of receiving the plea, the Qing court ordered the second full-scale invasion of Dai Viet in Chinese history. Troops were dispatched from the nearby provinces. Within a month the capital of Dai Viet was taken and the Le king was

restored. However, Nguyen Hue, the youngest of the Tayson brothers, marched from the South. His forces launched an unexpected attack against the Qing troops in the lunar New Year holidays of 1789, and successfully forced them to retreat (Stuart-Fox, 2003: 114). After the Chinese withdrawal, Nguyen Hue immediately dispatched tributary mission to the Qing court for the official recognition of his new kingdom. To repair the bilateral relations, he even went to Beijing in person to celebrate the Qian-long emperor's eightieth birthday in 1790 (Reid, 1996: 48). It did not take long before Nguyen Hue was confirmed as the legitimate King of Dai Viet.

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

The Konbaung dynasty of Burma was established in 1752. During its reign, Burma pursued an aggressive state-building policy to bring the periphery vassals and tributaries under its direct control (Lieberman, 2003). At the time, there were a few independent chieftains located on the bordering areas between China and Burma, most of which paid tributes to both countries. As Konbaung tightened its controls, some chieftains turned to China for assistance. The response of the Qing court, initially only on a local scale, soon triggered a major military confrontation between the two countries (Dai, 2004: 155). Compared with the late invasion of Dai Viet, the Qing campaign against Burma lasted much longer. Between 1765 and 1770 China sent four batches of forces to invade the country. At the beginning only the local troops were mobilized. As the battle dragged on, the emperor sent his elite Manchu troops to the Southwest border. In response, Konbaung was forced to withdraw its troops from Ayutthaya to fight against the Chinese. In the

end, it was the generals on the ground who decided to negotiate a truce to end the conflict in 1769. Back in the capitals neither the Konbaung court nor the Qing court was satisfied with the terms of the truce (Dai, 2004: 168-170). It was not until 1790 that the tributary relations between the two countries were restored.

Although the three military campaigns all ended in China's defeat, they generated some unexpected impacts on the power balance of mainland Southeast Asia. After the Ming troops withdrew from their twenty-year occupation in 1427, Dai Viet was emboldened to assert its sub-regional dominance in the eastern mainland. It invaded Champa to the south in 1471, and marched into the Laotian Kingdom of Lang Xang to the west in 1479. On both occasions China was asked to provide assistance to contain the aggression of Dai Viet. However, the Ming court was not in a position to launch another attack against the country (Wang, 1998: 318). On the southern frontier Champa was fatally defeated and eventually became a vassal of Dai Viet. On the western frontier Lang Xang's capital was taken and its king killed. Only after the Tai kingdom of Lan Na offered military support did Lan Xang manage to drive Dai Viet troops out of its territory. By the end of 15<sup>th</sup> century a new sub-regional order emerged in the eastern Southeast Asian mainland, with Dai Viet standing at the top of it (see Li, 2010: 93).

The Qing campaign against Burma led to a contrasting outcome. In the same year as the Qing troops entered the Burmese border, the Konbaung dynasty of Burma launched its second attack against the Tai kingdom of Ayutthaya. The Burmese troops attacked the country from both the north and the south. One year later they besieged its capital. Ayutthaya surrendered in the middle of 1767. Later that year, however, the Qing court dispatched the elite Manchu troops in its third campaign against Burma (Dai, 2004: 158-159). The Konbaung king was forced to withdraw his forces from their occupation of Ayutthaya to fight against China. Although Ayutthaya was left in a devastated situation after the Burmese withdrawal, a provincial governor, Taksin, managed to reclaim the country and declared himself the King of Siam in 1768. The new Tai kingdom successfully defended itself against another two Burmese attacks in the following twenty years. During the process, Siam unified the northern Tai Kingdom of Lan Na into its territory (Lieberman, 2003). By the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century Siam had success-

fully established itself as a sub-regional power in central mainland Southeast Asia.

It would be naive to conclude that the coercive strategy pursued by China reshaped the power balance of mainland Southeast Asia in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the contrary, China's unsuccessful campaigns had accelerated the sub-regional power transition beyond its hegemonic control. To install the rightful rulers and to protect the independent chieftains were claimed to be the major reasons behind the use of physical coercion by the Ming and Qing courts. However, standing at a higher moral ground, itself being doubted by some, was not enough to compensate the ineffective implementation of coercive measures. Despite its superior military capacity, China had failed to pursue a coercive strategy to enforce the imperial wills on pre-colonial Southeast Asia. These failures further constrained China's hegemonic influences on the power structure of mainland Southeast Asia in the following decades.

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

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

Nevertheless, the tribute system is very different from the modern international regimes articulated in the hegemonic stability literature (Keohane, 1980, 1984). First of all, the tribute system provided an institutional framework of China's foreign services,

covering political, economic and diplomatic areas (Fairbank, 1942). It neither specialized in a specific policy issue nor regulated regional matters beyond China. Secondly, the tribute system was built on bilateral inter-state relationship (Mancall, 1968: 65). There was probably a multilateral audience who paid special attention to the tributary relations between their neighboring countries and China, but the official communication within the tribute system was always bilateral. Thirdly, the tribute system never offered an institutional framework to encourage international cooperation or regional governance. Given these noticeable differences, one may reasonably doubt whether the hegemonic stability theory can be fruitfully applied to the tribute system. However, it should be noted that the tribute system had facilitated the converging expectations of tributary countries regarding the regional order preferred by China. The costly tribute system also relied mostly on the voluntary contribution of the Chinese court. Without imposing the requirement of modern international regimes, it is still possible to examine the hegemonic impacts of the tribute system.

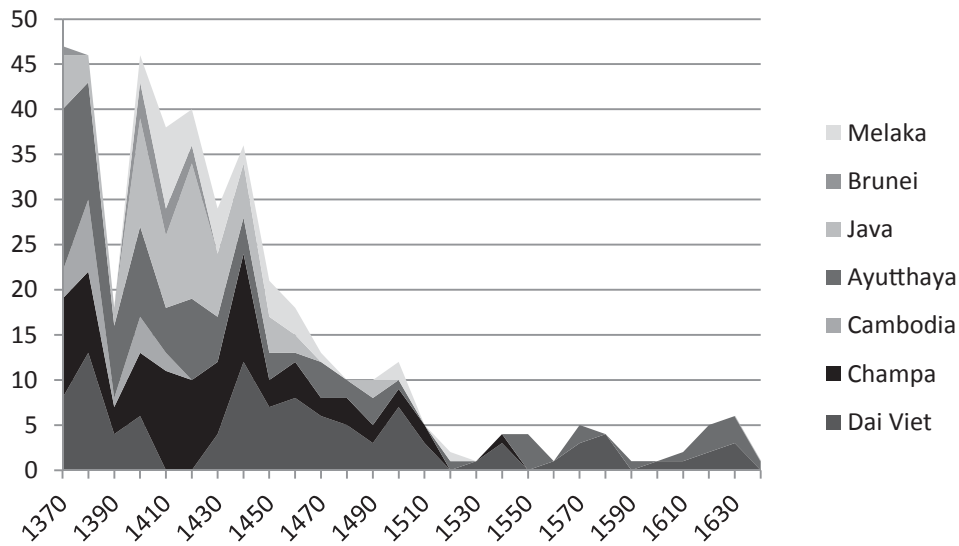
Institutionally, the tribute system was put into practice in the Han dynasty. Historical records show that the first tributary missions probably arrived in China around the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC (Li, 2004: 16). Even at that time, it was established that tributary rulers were awarded with the imperial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

It was the unification of China under the Sui and Tang dynasties between the late 6<sup>th</sup> and the early 10<sup>th</sup> century that revitalized the tribute system. As far as Southeast Asia was concerned, tributary missions from the Gulf of Thailand and the Java Sea were regularly dispatched to the imperial court throughout the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century (Wang, 1970: 375). Among them, the maritime Southeast Asian kingdom of Sirvijaya managed

to establish very close tributary relations with China. Its missions continued well into the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century when China was ruled by the Song dynasty (Wolters, 1970). Nevertheless, after the defeated Song reestablished itself as the Southern Song dynasty in 1127, the number of tributary missions dramatically declined. For one thing, China was no longer perceived as powerful as before. For another, private trade became such an important source of royal income that the imperial court became unwilling to accept duty-free tributary missions (Shiba, 1983). The traditional Chinese tribute system further deteriorated under the Mongol ruling. The Yuan dynasty imposed very harsh conditions on tributary countries, and forced them to pay tax and provide military covée on a regular base (Wang, 1968: 48). When these demands were rejected, armies were sent to Southeast Asia to enforce such policies.

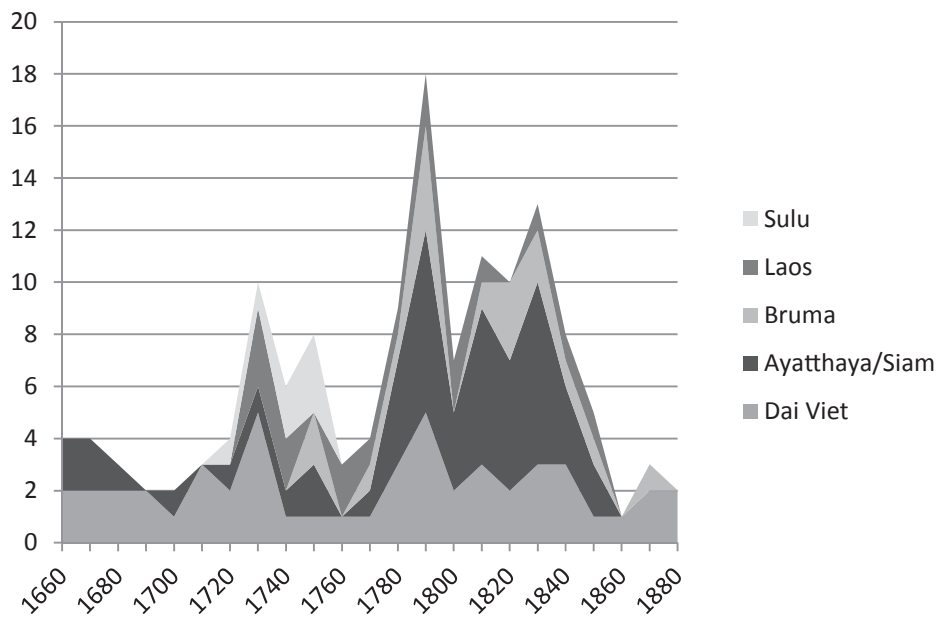
The early decades of the Ming dynasty were probably the most glorious time of the tribute system. Partly because of the official ban on private trade and partly because of the grand expeditions of Zheng He, Southeast Asian tributes to China peaked in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century (see Figure 1).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

The last Chinese imperial dynasty of Qing inherited many Ming practices of the tribute system, particularly in dealing with Southeast Asia. The institutional context was so similar and the Qing court explicitly requested the tributary countries to return the imperial seals granted to them during the Ming period (Fairbank and Teng, 1941: 164). A key difference was that the Qing dynasty no longer relied on tributary trade to promote its overseas influences. Except for an early ban on private trade, tributary trade was gradually replaced by private trade in the



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

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



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

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

late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Still, Southeast Asian countries sent regular missions to the Qing court. Among the five designated tributary countries in Southeast Asia<sup>(15)</sup>, the number of missions was even noticeably increased between 1780 and 1840 (see Figure 2). However, with the Qing's defeat in the Opium Wars and the European colonization of Malay, Burma and Vietnam, the tribute system ceased to be a hegemonic magnet for Southeast Asia after the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

What factors had contributed to the rise and fall of the tribute system *vis-à-vis* pre-colonial Southeast Asia? Obviously, the hegemonic power of China was the most crucial factor in determining the influences of the tribute system. When China was strong and its foreign policy outward-looking, Southeast Asian countries were willing to pay tributes to its hegemonic influences. When China was weakened by internal division and external competition in the Southern Song, late Ming and late Qing dynasties, tributary

missions from Southeast Asia declined. Another factor had also been important: tributary trade. Private trade was banned in most time of imperial China. During these periods, tributary trade offered Southeast Asian trading states an attractive alternative to maintain their commercial links with the Chinese market. In the Han, Tang, and early Ming dynasties, tributary trade was probably the most important reason why so many Southeast Asian missions came to China.

Nevertheless, the explanations of hegemonic power and tributary trade stand uncomfortably with the sudden increase of tributary missions between 1780 and 1840 (Figure 2). The Qing dynasty was in decline during this period. Tributary trade had also been replaced by private trade. Though Fairbank (1942) argues that commercial reasons explained this sudden increase<sup>(16)</sup>, there were other important political dynamics beneath the scene. One of these was the coercive measures that the Qing had taken against mainland Southeast Asia. Mentioned earlier, large-scale military campaigns were launched against Burma (1765-1770) and Dai Viet (1788-1789). As the clear winner, Dai Viet increased the frequency of its tributary missions to China after 1789 in order to repair the bilateral relations. As the unexpected beneficiary of China's campaign against Burma, the newly founded Tai kingdom of Siam was eager to keep close relations with China after it was officially recognized by the Qing court in 1781. The Burmese missions also increased briefly after its relations with China were normalized in 1790. Even more notably, Burma again sent more missions to China in the 1820s and 1830s, probably requesting for China's assistance when the country was fighting against Britain.

In summary, the tribute system had stood at the center of China's hegemonic influences. Its profound impacts on pre-colonial Southeast Asia show that China had long pursued an institution-building strategy to exert its hegemonic power. Except in the Yuan dynasty, the tributary system provided China with a non-aggressive institutional setting to maintain its superiority *vis-à-vis* Southeast Asian countries. Notably, both the public-good provision strategy of tributary trade and the coercive strategy of military campaigns had produced noticeable impacts on the tribute system. There was even a 'hegemonic lag' in the late Qing dynasty when Southeast Asian countries increased their tributary missions during a period of

China's decline.

However, the tribute system had never gone beyond an institutional framework of China's foreign services. Although tributary trade partially contributed to a vibrant trade order in pre-colonial Southeast Asia, the tribute system as a whole had not achieved the long-term stability of the region's international relations (Shu, 2012). Contrary to the theoretical prediction that international cooperation could be maintained 'after hegemony' (Kohane, 1984), the institutional impacts of the tribute system corresponded roughly with the hegemonic strength of China. As the imperial power waned at the end of each dynasty, the tribute system lost its appeal to most Southeast Asian countries. The bilateral nature of the tributary relationship and the financial reliance on the imperial treasury were probably the main reasons behind this dynastic cycle. In retrospect, the long-standing tribute system was sophisticated and influential, but it had not fulfilled the institution-building potentials of hegemonic China.

## 7. Conclusion

Throughout the pre-colonial era China had a profound impact on Southeast Asia. Under the tribute system, Southeast Asian countries came to China to pay homage for more than one thousand and five hundred years. Economically, China had created a vibrant regional economic order centered on tributary trade. Its influences were so prominent that tributary trade once encompassed both Northeast and Southeast Asia. Politically, China had not only exerted substantial influences on the tributary states but also regulated inter-state relations far beyond its borders. Nevertheless, the hegemony of China was not enough to bring economic and political stability to pre-colonial Southeast Asia. The regional trade order was never completely open, nor did the inter-state relationships keep long-term stability among Southeast Asian countries.

This article has examined the largely failed hegemonic strategies that China had pursued in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. Firstly, the self-proclaimed commitment to inclusiveness, impartiality and non-exploitation had not socialized the 'Indianized' states of Southeast Asia. Influenced by a different cultural tradition, pre-colonial Southeast Asian countries were more pragmatic in handling their relationship with

other states. In the end, China's cultural state probably had a more attentive domestic audience than overseas influences. Secondly, because of the security implications of trade, both China and Southeast Asian countries had adopted a policy of state monopoly in pre-colonial international trade. As a result, the regional economic order under tributary trade had never been open to all. Instead, it created a group of privileged Southeast Asian trading states that kept close relations with China, and allowed them to dominate the trade routes of Southeast Asia. Thirdly, the coercive campaigns that China had waged against pre-colonial Southeast Asia ended all in failure. Instead of enforcing the imperial wills of regulating royal succession and protecting chieftains, these military expeditions had altered the power balance of mainland Southeast Asia beyond China's control. Fourthly, the tribute system was long-standing and influential, but its rise and fall had not gone beyond the cycle of China's dynastic changes. Despite being enthusiastic participants of the tribute system, most Southeast Asian countries were attracted more by China's temporary economic and political influences than by its hegemonic status in the regional order.

The fact that the undisputed regional hegemony of China had not brought long-term prosperity and stability to pre-colonial Southeast Asia has important implications in both empirical and theoretical terms. Empirically, the findings of the article question the scholarly optimism that pre-colonial East Asia under the dominance of China had been a peaceful and stable regional order (Kang, 2007, 2010). It is true that under the tribute system most Southeast Asian countries recognized the superiority of imperial China. Tributary trade also established a vibrant regional economic order to the benefit of many Southeast Asian trading states. However, China's unquestioned hegemony had neither led to a fully open trade order nor produced the long-term stability of inter-state relationship. Throughout the pre-colonial era, the politico-economic dynamics in Southeast Asia had been more or less self-contained, following its own logic of survival and competition (see Shu, 2012). Outside the Sinicized Confucian world, the hegemonic influences of imperial China should not be taken as granted.

Theoretically, the article raises some important questions about the hegemonic stability theory, and especially the claim that hegemony always leads to

stability (Kindleberger, 1973; Krasner, 1967; Gilpin, 1981). It is often assumed that the hegemon may resort to socialization efforts, public-good provision policies, coercive measures, and institution-building mechanisms in order to maintain a stable international order. The experiences of pre-colonial Southeast Asia lend support to the theoretical critics that stability is not the automatic outcome of an existing predominant power (see Conybeare, 1984). Indeed, hegemonic stability appears contingent on a number of specific conditions. The socialization strategy is probably more effective within a common cultural background and shared value system; the public-good provision strategy must consider the politico-economic implications of public goods and follow the principles of inclusiveness in the international system; the coercive strategy requires consistent objectives and effective implementation to enforce the hegemonic wills; and the institutional-building strategy should aim more at long-term international order than short-term hegemonic superiority.

In addition to the conditional nature of hegemonic strategies, China's failed hegemonic influences also cast doubt on the applicability of hegemonic stability in a non-Western context. Informed mainly by the history of the British Empire and the post-war US hegemony, the hegemonic stability literature may have overemphasized the importance of free trade in a stable international economic order (see Krasner, 1967; Gilpin, 1981; Lake, 1984). In pre-colonial East Asia, private trade was commonly treated as a source of political instability rather than an indication of economic stability. Indeed, both China and Southeast Asian countries preferred regulated tributary trade to unlimited private trade in a stable regional economic order. By conducting a theory-guided historical analysis, the article is able to identify the discrepancies between theoretical claims and empirical anomalies. Future research should follow this approach and encourage more communication between Western international relations theories and non-Western empirical realities (see Wohlforth et al., 2007).

#### NOTE

- (1) This is the second of two related articles that explore the pre-colonial relations between Southeast Asia and China. This article focuses on the China's hegemonic impacts on pre-colonial Southeast Asia, and the other article (Shu, 2012) examines the strategic responses of Southeast Asia to the

China-dominated regional hierarchy. The author wishes to thank Paul Bacon and Haolan Zheng and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions and comments.

- (2) The author wishes to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this important issue.
- (3) Public goods differ from private goods because their consumption by one person does not prevent others from consuming it. Because of this, the supply of public goods is prone to the problem of free-rider.
- (4) It should be noted that Krasner's (1976) theory of hegemonic stability does not employ public goods as the logical framework in his argument (see Lake, 1993).
- (5) The literature on the prisoners' dilemma is extensive and still growing. For an introduction to the game and its impact on cooperation, see Axelrod (1984).
- (6) 'Cultural hegemony' is a concept developed and expounded by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). It refers to the dominance of a societal culture including its beliefs, norms and values. Gramsci argues that such dominance, though only reflecting the worldviews of the ruling class, leads to the perceived universal validity of its ideology and the wide acceptance of the *status quo*.
- (7) On non-Western theories of international relations, see Bilgin (2008), Acharya and Buzan (2010).
- (8) The Brunei king died several weeks after the grand reception. He was buried in Nanjing (then the capital of China) in 1408, where his tomb is still located. His son was recognized as the new ruler. A Chinese commissioner was sent to support him during the first several years of his ruling (Reid, 1996: 23). The young ruler visited China again in 1412.
- (9) Gilpin (1981: 151) also notes, '[t]he Chinese Empire pursued a deliberate policy of preventing the development of economic centers that might break off. Chinese cities were administrative centers responsive to the imperial center; they seldom became commercial centers.'
- (10) The 'age of commerce' is the title of a two-volume study by Anthony Reid (1988, 1993). The study examines the transformation of Southeast Asia when the region experienced a trade boom between 1450 and 1680. This period corresponds roughly to the mid- and late-Ming and the early Qing dynasties in China.
- (11) For example, Ryukyu opened commercial relations with Palembang in 1428 and with Java in 1430. At the time, Palembang was forbidden to keep direct link with China (Reid, 1996: 30).
- (12) Mongol troops were dispatched to Dai Viet in 1257, 1285 and 1287, to Champa in 1281, to the Burmese-Mon Kingdom of Pagan in 1277 and 1287, and to Java in 1293 (Stuart-Fox, 2003: Ch4). These military expeditions ended only in short-term victories. By the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Mongol troops were mostly pushed out of Southeast Asia.
- (13) Between 1405 and 1433, the Ming court had seven times sent Zheng He and his grand fleets to Southeast Asia and beyond. Evidence shows that these voyages were not shy of displaying forces, but its scale was much smaller than the Ming's invasion of Dai Viet around the same period (see Wade, 2005).
- (14) The third Ming emperor, Yong-le, was himself a usurper.

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

- (15) According to Fairbank (1968: 11), five Southeast Asian countries were officially recorded as the tributaries of the Qing court in 1818: Dai Viet, Laos, Siam, Sulu and Burma.
- (16) Fairbank (1942: 145) notes, 'I am not aware of political or other circumstances likely to have produced the recorded increase of activity. As far as it goes, this evidence lends strong support to the theory that tribute missions functioned chiefly as a vehicle for trade.'

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