

THE CHINA THAT EUROPEANS DISCOVERED: THE MING DYNASTY
CHINESE WORLD ORDER AND TRIBUTARY STATES

The Ming dynasty, which came after the Mongols and four centuries of northern incursions on Chinese territory, adopted a defensive policy that limited contacts with foreign states, and that seriously affected Chinese foreign relations, both along the coast and on the steppe. Piracy along the coasts and the imposing stone Great Wall erected against the steppe were the everlasting consequences of this close door policy.

The Confucian establishment, who had always looked with contempt at the foreign barbarians and with suspicion at the merchants that traded with them, duly enforced the restrictions to foreign trade which were the hallmark of the Ming dynasty. Chinese tradition considered China to be the centre of the civilized world and clearly established that all those approaching it owed the Son of Heaven ritual obeisance and tribute. This ideal hierarchical model had the Chinese Emperor at its apex, and everyone else subordinate to him and paying homage and tribute. Tributary relations were strictly regulated, and only a few selected foreign states had the right and honour to approach China. The first Ming emperor carefully established the list of authorized tributary states and decreed how often they should send tributary missions to him, as well as the number of ships and persons that they could bring.

Immediately after seizing power, Hongwu notified all recognized political entities that he expected them to send immediate embassies to China, and that in return China would grant them legitimacy and protection. The intensity of the relations of the tributary states with China depended first of all on distance. On the other hand, those officials or merchants who established direct trade relations with foreign countries on their own account were severely punished. Hongwu also established a list of foreign countries that China must never invade. Among them **were China's** close neighbours: Korea, Japan, the Ryukiu islands, and Vietnam, as well as ten others that were further away.

To further restrict and control transactions between China and another country, the tributary trade was only conducted through periodic missions. Japan, for instance,

was only allowed a ship every ten years. And all foreigners had to enter China through one of the three authorized ports to deal with foreign trade: Ningbo dealt with Japanese and Korean missions; Quanzhou (and later on Fuzhou) received the Ryukyu and Philippine missions; and Canton was reserved for South-East Asian ships. All the missions arrived accompanied by a large number of merchants. The ships carried the official tribute, which was sent to the emperor, and a private cargo which, on payment of a commission, could be traded at the port of entry.

After arriving in China, the authorized ambassadors were escorted to the capital, on a trip that usually lasted a couple of months and during which they were showered with gifts by the local officials, slept in state hostels, attended banquets and were given the money necessary for their expenses during the trip. Once in the palace they were required to prostrate themselves before the Chinese emperor. They then exchanged gifts with him, before being escorted out. The gifts China gave to the tributary states were always of greater value than those that China received in exchange, and the cost of looking after all the foreign missions in such lavish style was also very high for China. In 1411, for instance, the king of Malacca visited China with a retinue of 540. Whereas China never regarded foreign relations as a source of enrichment, the tributary states saw them as an opportunity to do some privileged trading. In fact, tributary trade in many ways favoured the supposed vassals.

Ming China, as we have seen in previous lectures, was an extremely rich country, with a flourishing internal trade. The country could live on its own resources and foreign trade was mostly concerned with luxury and medical items. **That's why the** Chinese government could afford a close door policy. But this policy was detrimental to both the global world trade that was emerging and to the coastal Chinese cities that lived on trade, and in the long run will cause very serious trouble to China. Tributary trade also had a perverse effect insofar as it prevented the development of **China's foreign relations** within a legal framework. The tributary relationship, which was unequal and ritual, did not require treaties of any kind, since the essential elements were the periodic visits by the tributary vassal states and their recognition of the cultural and political superiority of China. 16th century world was becoming increasingly global and China lacked the tools to deal with it.

Hongwu's son, Yongle, placed great importance on the maintenance of **China's** tributary relations: the Zheng He **expeditions**, that we'll look at in the next lecture, are a clear demonstration of this. But Yongle conducted foreign relations in a far less restrained manner than his father. He decided to conquer Vietnam, against the

express will of his father who had designated Vietnam as one of the countries that should never be attacked.

In 1406 a great punitive expedition was launched against Annam (North Vietnam), which was conquered and retained at great pains inside the Chinese orbit until 1427.