ible, Khubilai chose instead to regard tribute submission as political submission. When an independent ruler refused to send tribute on Khubilai’s order, as Kertanegara, king of the eastern half of Java, did in 1289, Khubilai was more than prepared to dispatch a large force—a combined Mongol-Javanese force of over one hundred thousand soldiers, according to the dynastic history—to punish him and force his state into submission. By the time that force arrived, however, Kertanegara had been assassinated by one of his own vassals. His son-in-law was able to capitalize on the chaos and rally local militia to drive the Mongols out. As we shall note later in this chapter, Zheng He was likewise prepared to use military means to force Southeast Asian rulers into a tribute relationship when they resisted.

What is to be learned from this survey of the foreign policy initiatives of the early Ming emperors is that China depended on the international system of tributary gift exchange for its prestige and its prerogatives. This may have been political theater, but it mattered to the actors involved, especially the emperors, for whom diplomatic exchanges broadcast a Sinocentric order made visible by the rituals of tribute submission. Especially for emperors facing legitimacy deficits, the performance of the rites of tribute submission demonstrated their claim to authority over all-under-Heaven. That this theater played to a domestic audience is simply further evidence of the political complexity of this system of interstate relations.

POWER AND THE USE OF FORCE

· Yuan-kang Wang ·

Although the Ming emperor claimed supremacy or suzerainty over other polities in East Asia and beyond, China’s imperial government did not function as a central government over them, capable of enforcing agreements or monopolizing the legitimate use of force. Those polities had their own military forces and governing structures and competed with China for resources and territories; some even went to war against China when circumstances made war desirable and unavoidable. Like international systems elsewhere, in other words, the structure of political relations in this part of the world was anarchic, that is, without a central authority capable of imposing its will on all other states. Tribute submission structured that system as a hierarchy in which China, or its emperor, was universally acknowledged as occupying the apex, but the history of Asian international relations was animated in reality by this tension between anarchy and hierarchy.
Under Ming rule, China’s preponderance of power over its neighbors enabled it to impose its tributary system to govern its interactions with other states. It justified its position of dominance in that system using the Confucian ideology of hierarchy. A popular conception of the tribute system takes the pattern of deference in the political interactions between China and other Asian polities as a basis for declaring the system to have been one characterized by harmony and order, and in which these benefits were not based on military coercion. The American political scientist Samuel Huntington was vulnerable to this popularization in asserting that “Asians generally are willing to ‘accept hierarchy’ in international relations.” Because of this, he avers, peace and stability characterize Asia’s past. David Kang has similarly asserted that “East Asian regional relations have historically been hierarchic, more peaceful, and more stable than those in the West,” although he also noted in his later book that to declare that “stability was the norm in East Asian international relations” is to gaze down from the hegemon’s position. “China does not have a significant history of coercive statecraft,” agrees David Shambaugh. “The tribute system may have been hegemonic, but it was not based on coercion or territorial expansionism.” Writing about the global backlash against America’s post-9/11 overreactions, Zbigniew Brzezinski even proposed that there may come a new regional order in Asia, one “with China at the helm,” and conjectured that this order would be harmonious by virtue of drawing on the memory of “a deferential tributary system.”

This view of a benevolent tribute system, often contrasted with the conflict-ridden balance-of-power politics of the Westphalian system, relies not just on the hegemon’s perspective but on a literal acceptance of the Chinese rhetoric of imperial benevolence, impartiality, and other values claimed by Confucianism, and it assumes that the system was monitored by purely cultural factors and Confucian norms. Confucian thinkers may have hoped at one time that obliging foreigners to submit to the rites of gift exchange would transform them into civilized peoples, and that they would internalize that submission so thoroughly as to themselves rule out the possibility of threatening China’s position. This casts the system as a “defense mechanism” to protect China from foreign attack, as Morris Rossabi suggested. Our argument is that material power, rather than cultural hegemony, was the decisive factor in the creation and maintenance of the tribute system. We propose that it is analytically more powerful to understand the tribute system as a means that Chinese rulers used, not to Confucianize a benighted barbarian world, but to organize foreign relations in a way that helped their state achieve its security objectives. Cultural and
economic factors can supplement the power-based explanation, but they do not replace or refute power as the key to understanding the nature of political relations in historical Asia.

Material capabilities, including military might, enabled China to set the tributary “rules of the game” in ways that disproportionately served its self-interest. Although the Ming regime was not averse to using force to impose compliance on neighboring states, it recognized the high cost of doing so, as is evident from the founding Ming emperor’s designation of fifteen countries to the east and south as “not to be invaded.” This declaration was motivated not by magnanimity but by strategic necessity, given the new dynasty’s ongoing vulnerability on its northern border. This was the zone where the dynasty was at war with the Mongols for most of its first two centuries, and where China found itself least able to impose the protocols of the tribute system. Ming armies marched into Hami in 1391 to prevent that oasis state from being dominated by the Mongols but had to withdraw for logistical reasons. Emperor Yongle nevertheless managed to establish a tributary relationship with the strategically located state, under which Hami’s rulers provided intelligence about Central Asia to the Ming court in return for a security commitment.

Under Yongle and his grandson Xuande, the regime’s strategy to solve its principal security concern was to take an offensive and expansionistic posture toward the Mongols. Preponderant power allowed them to sustain campaigns against Mongols to the north. Their strategy included relocating the national capital from Nanjing to Beijing and building the Grand Canal to link the two. Between 1410 and 1424 Yongle personally led five large-scale offensive campaigns against the Mongols, allegedly mobilizing as many as half a million troops. These activities suggest that the early Ming rulers aimed to assert irredentist claims on the realm of the former dynasty and conquer the Mongol steppe. Ming troops traveled a great distance and advanced as far as the northern shores of Kerulen River and Tula River in present-day northern Mongolia. These military offensives weakened the dynasty’s adversaries but failed to subjugate the Mongols. The Chinese were not accustomed to campaigning on the steppe, at times failing to locate and engage the Mongol main forces. Logistical problems forced them to withdraw.

To the south, Emperor Yongle invaded the tributary state Dai Viet in 1407 to punish a usurper, and after the country was pacified, he decided to expand his war aims and annex it. The Ming was eventually forced to withdraw after twenty years of occupation and revolt. The same reliance on force lurks within the accounts of the Zheng He voyages. The sheer size and armament of these expeditions—a reference in 1427 notes that “ten
thousand crack troops had earlier been sent to the Western Ocean\textsuperscript{52}—attest that the logic of force was at work on the ocean as it was on land. The arrival of the fleet at a port was a demonstration of Chinese naval power sufficient to prompt most coastal rulers to comply with Ming requests to participate in the tribute system. Even the threat of sending a naval force could be used to persuade a ruler who was not interested in conforming to Chinese requirements, a threat the Ming court used against Burma in 1409.\textsuperscript{53} To Qing historians of the Ming, the situation was crystal clear: “Those who did not submit were pacified by force.”\textsuperscript{54} This occurred most conspicuously in Palembang in 1407, in Ceylon in 1410, and in northern Sumatra in 1415.\textsuperscript{55} Even minor skirmishing of the sort that happened when Ming troops “went ashore to trade” in western Java in 1407 and were killed by Javanese attests that Zheng’s forces were perceived as belligerents and a threat to local security. Lest the local ruler presume that he could remain independent of Ming demands, he was issued with this order: “Immediately pay 60,000 ounces of gold to compensate for lost lives and atone for your crime. This is how you will protect your land and your people. Fail to comply and there will be no option but to dispatch an army to punish your crime. What happened in Annam”—a blunt reference to the Ming willingness to invade Dai Viet (here referred to as Annam, meaning “the pacified south”) only a few years earlier—“can serve as an example!”\textsuperscript{56} The only region beyond the range of Ming force was West Asia, which was too far from China to matter to its hegemonic position at the top of the hierarchy of East Asian states.\textsuperscript{57}

Korea is often singled out as the model tributary state, yet the reestablishment by the Ming of its tributary relationship was not smooth, taking more than three decades to complete. Bilateral tensions were high because Koryŏ maintained contacts with the Mongols of the Northern Yuan, who were still militarily active. Sandwiched between the defeated hegemon (the Mongols) and the up-and-coming hegemon (the Ming), the Koreans were careful not to antagonize their two powerful neighbors and sought to maintain friendly relations with both. The Ming court, concerned about a possible Koryŏ-Mongol alliance, demanded that the Koryŏ break off relations with the Mongols, a demand the Koreans were not able to meet.\textsuperscript{58} Both went to the brink of war in 1388, when the Ming expanded into the Liaodong peninsula to an area claimed by the Koryŏ. King U of the Koryŏ mobilized the country and dispatched an expeditionary force of 38,830 soldiers to attack the Ming.\textsuperscript{59} Conflict was averted when the Korean general Yi Songgye turned the army back and removed King U from power. After ruling from behind the scenes for four years, General Yi took the throne and founded the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910). Ming China and Cho-
sŏn Korea then went to the brink of war in 1398 over three Korean memorials that Emperor Hongwu found offensive. Not to be bullied, the Chosŏn court made a decision for war. A palace coup in Korea and the death of Emperor Hongwu in 1398 averted the impending conflict. When the succession issues were resolved in both countries, Ming-Chosŏn relations were finally brought into the tributary framework in the early fifteenth century. In exchange, the Chosŏn court gained security, recognition, and nonintervention. Chosŏn’s policy of “serving the great” (sadae) was not an easy one. Ming China’s tribute demands for strategic items such as horses turned out to be no small burden on the Koreans. The reality of asymmetric power between a hegemon and a weak state determined the content of the tributary relationship.

Beyond Korea lay Japan. There too the threat of military force was on display in the Ming’s effort to bring the island into the tributary system. Japan’s Prince Kanenaga, apparently annoyed by the condescending tone of a Ming diplomatic letter, imprisoned and executed some of the envoys sent by Hongwu in 1369 demanding tribute. The Ming court threatened invasion but was reminded by the Japanese of the Mongols’ failed attempts to conquer Japan in 1281. A letter sent by Kanenaga in 1382 explicitly denied the legitimacy of Chinese dominance: “Now the world is the world’s world; it does not belong to a single ruler. . . . I heard that China has troops able to fight a war, but my small country also has plans of defense. . . . How could we kneel down and acknowledge Chinese overlordship!” In response, the Ming denied trade privileges. Eager to trade with the Ming, the shogun Yoshimitsu sent a mission in 1399 and addressed himself as “your subject, the king of Japan.” Because this departed from Japanese tradition, his successor quickly repudiated the arrangement in 1411. Neither government, however, was able to stop the flow of trade voyages, and so the Ming had to “retain the pretense that the voyages were official tribute missions signifying Japan’s acquiescence in China’s claim to hegemony.”

However tempting it has been for some commentators to treat the tributary system as an all-encompassing framework generating stability for all, not all of China’s foreign relations can be generalized within the tributary rubric. Ming-Tibetan exchanges, for example, were mainly spiritual and ceremonial. The Ming court invited several Tibetan clerics to perform Buddhist rituals and awarded titles to them. Some, such as the Fifth Karmapa Lama, rejected Ming titles. Others, notably Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, refused to travel to the Ming court. Though some Tibetan lamas and hierarchs did bring tribute, one can hardly conclude that Ming relations with Tibet fell neatly within the Chinese tribute system. Indeed, the conduct of Tibetan leaders at the time sup-
ports the view that Morris Rossabi enunciated decades ago, that “neither in the economic nor in the political realms did the Tibetans perceive themselves to be subjects of the Ming court.” As for generating stability for all, although long periods of peace did occur in some areas, the Chinese waged protracted wars with the Mongols, invaded Yunnan and Dai Viet, and engaged in power politics that did not correspond to the idealized tributary system.

Rather than seeing the tribute system as a paradigm to explain China’s interactions with other Asian polities, we maintain that it is better treated as a historical arrangement that actually needs to be explained. The key to understanding the reality of the tribute system is the fundamental condition within which it operated: the asymmetry of power between China and the tributary polities. Economic interests and cultural considerations were also at play, but it was Chinese preponderance of power that made many Asian polities accept the tributary arrangement. Indeed, in those periods in which China’s claim to hegemony was not backed by military power, the system became unsustainable. As Wang Gungwu has pointed out, “There could not surely be a stable [tribute] system without power, sustained power.”

Most state ideologies, including Confucianism, evade the moral cost of military success, but submission is only ever forced. The use or threat of force against China’s neighbors had to be overwritten at the level of rhetoric as an account of civilizational transformation from barbarism to culture and then choreographed in diplomatic protocol as the willing tendering of tribute upward to the moral apex occupied by the Chinese emperor. But that was not why tributaries acceded to these terms, nor why they sometimes turned against them. To see matters otherwise is to fail to recognize the Confucian state as the military hegemon it had to be.

CIVILIZATIONAL RHETORIC AND THE OBFUSCATION OF POWER POLITICS

· Geoff Wade ·

Confucian political philosophy does not celebrate the use of force, either by the state or between states, and yet as we have noted, coercion and military force were hardly absent from Ming foreign policy calculations and practice. The dissonance between power politics and moral philosophy was addressed via an elaborate web of rhetoric upholding a China-centered worldview. It consisted of a number of components we might collectively call “civilizational rhetoric” that depicted the emperor (and