

MERCHANTS & TRADERS

Old World Contacts Fourth Period: 1350 CE - 1500 CE

THE CHINESE TRIBUTE SYSTEM

China's Ming emperors regarded the conduct of foreign trade as an important facet of political power and prestige. The point of articulation was the Chinese tribute system. Foreign states wanting to trade with China had to pay tribute to the emperor at specified ports of call (Canton being the designated locale for envoys from Southeast Asian states). This tribute was not merely a material gift or donation. Ming emperors regarded it as an act of political submission with feudal overtones. When they established trade relations with China, envoy states acknowledged Ming overlordship. During the 15th century, numerous Southeast Asian rulers, including the kings of Java, Siam and Champa (present-day Vietnam), sent tribute missions to China. The Ming government regarded private commerce with foreigners as illegal, synonymous with piracy.

The overtly political context of China's trade relations with outsiders had an important cultural impact on countries in Southeast Asia, many of which imported various Chinese customs along with trade goods and theoretical vassal status. Champa, which maintained close contact with China, was sending students to study there by 1371.

The tribute system also encouraged Chinese immigration to envoy states during the 14th and 15th centuries. Cambodia, for example, had a resident Chinese population by the 1300s. The Ming government sent some individuals to foreign countries specifically to act as their official representatives. Other emigrants left China in search of new commercial opportunities in the port towns linked into the ecumenical trading zone. Some of these opportunists became advisers to local Southeast Asian potentates. Others sought their fortunes as pirates and smugglers. As middlemen and cultural brokers, the Chinese trade communities in Southeast Asia continued to prosper even after Europeans began to arrive in the area.

Enthusiastic proponents of the tribute system, the early Ming emperors funded seven massive maritime expeditions into foreign waters between 1405 and 1433. The underlying purposes of the so-called Treasure Ship voyages remain a matter of scholarly debate. One clear reason for mounting the expeditions, however, was to extend the scope of China's political influence by expanding her network of trade ties with foreign states. Like the Portuguese vessels that sailed into the Indian Ocean in the late 15th and 16th centuries, the Ming ships carried both cargoes of trade goods and an impressive armoury of weapons. Unlike the Portuguese, the Chinese were less interested in military conquest than in collecting new tribute states through enticement and intimidation, and in securing and reinforcing Chinese influence in the countries of Southeast Asia.

1. Why did the imperial policy influence the development of Chinese merchant communities in Southeast Asia?

2. How was China's approach to trade different than other societies?