

THE TRIBUTARY SYSTEM

The Tributary System was the traditional Chinese system for managing foreign relations. By establishing the rules and controlling the means and symbolic forms by which foreign countries entered into and conducted their relations with China, the Chinese found in the tributary system an effective mechanism for exacting compliance from neighboring states and peoples on important matters of political, defensive, economic, and diplomatic concern to China.

According to the usual practice, foreign peoples would be granted permission to establish trade and contact with China on the condition that their ruler or the ruler's emissaries demonstrate their subservience to the Chinese emperor by personally bearing him tribute. On presenting the tribute, usually a largely token offering of native products or rare and precious commodities, they were also to perform an act of ritual obeisance (anglicized as "kowtow"), which consisted of three kneelings and nine prostrations or bows of the head to the floor in the presence of the emperor. In return, the Chinese ruler would formally invest the foreign ruler with the nominal status of a vassal. As proof of this status, the ruler was provided with an imperial letter of patent, a seal of rank, and the Chinese calendar, important symbols of legitimacy and acceptance into the civilized Sinocentric world order. In addition, the emissaries received lavish gifts of cloth, silks, gold, and other luxuries that often far exceeded the value of what they had brought. For as long as this relationship was maintained, the tributaries were awarded legal trading privileges and the right to render tribute in the future. Obviously, the very profitable advantages of tribute-trade, as it came to be called, served as a powerful economic inducement, perhaps the real reason why nonChinese acquiesced to the otherwise inferior status imposed on them by China.

On the Chinese side, the economic motive provided only a secondary purpose, although it did occasionally serve as a useful, if disguised,

expedient for material exchange. To the Chinese, the system served constantly to reaffirm their own ethnocentric worldview that posited the Middle Kingdom (*Zhongguo*) as the source and center of civilization and the Chinese emperor as the supreme and universal ruler who governed by the will or "Mandate of Heaven" (*tianming*); [and that] beyond the bounds of China proper, there existed a vast array of culturally inferior, less civilized barbarians, who were inevitably attracted by the brilliance of China's superior civilization. Consequently, it was only natural to expect barbarians to seek its irresistible benefits, or, put another way, "to come and be transformed" (*lai hua*) by it. Thus, the system explained and accommodated this unequal relationship and erected an artificial separation between China and the outside world. The system was also in large measure an extension of the Confucian social and political order, which was hierarchical, conservative, emphasized ritual and ethical behavior, and cast the emperor as the "son of Heaven" (*tianzi*), the ultimate exemplar of virtue and patriarch of a China-centered family of nations.

The system reached its apogee during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), when contacts with more than a hundred different tributaries were recorded as a result of the vast overseas expansion at the time of the great maritime expeditions of the early 1400s. Although these maritime ties did not long endure, at their height embassies arrived with regularity from countries in South and Southeast Asia, such as Bengal, Sri Lanka, Sumatra, and Java, and from as far away as Hormuz and the east coast of Africa. Tribute from the latter included zebras and even giraffes. During these years, Japan entered the system for the first time, but only until 1549. In the following years, the Western European trading countries of Portugal, the Netherlands, and England also began to arrive and were gradually fitted into the tributary system as well.

—Roland L. Higgins, *EAH*