Success and Failure of the Ming Century in Pre-modern History and their Contemporary Implications for the Emerging China-centered Pacific Century

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Abstract

Ming China (1368–1644) was the dominant power in pre-modern East Asia. Focusing on the key features of Ming’s Sinocentric order, this paper examines the reasons that assured Ming’s leading role among the Confucianized nations (i.e. ability and willingness to perform the duties of a humane suzerain) and perpetuated Ming’s problematic relations with the nomads (i.e. refusal to accommodate other cultures). The implications of Ming’s experience to China’s contemporary foreign relations are then discussed in the context of a China-centered East Asia. The paper argues that, in terms of commercial activities, the 21st century is most probably a Pacific Century driven by a strong Chinese economy. However, since the Chinese government 1) demonstrates little intention to shoulder the responsibilities/burdens of international leadership to look after the well-being of other East Asian states and 2) persists in conserving a political system that rejects the liberal values prevailing in other countries, it is rather unlikely to build mutual trust based on shared values between China and its neighbors. Consequently, the Pacific Century will witness a China, although an economic powerhouse, that is unable to attract political partners in the region, and the continuation of disputes/potential conflicts between China and other East Asian states.
Introduction

In spite of persistent U.S. military presence in the region, the China-led geo-economic dynamics in the past decades has paved the way for the re-emergence of a China-centered order. It supports the growing assertiveness of Beijing in recent years on issues with rules that have been determined by the West. Scholars and policy advisers have been attempting to find out how different a Pacific Century dominated by China will be compared with the one that is so far controlled by the United States, and the rational choices to be made by the Chinese government remains the primary concern on which analyses are made. Some warn of a revisionist China that will re-write the rules in favor of securing its national interests, whereas some believe that the liberal order may not be changed as it is the best way to sustain China’s continuous growth.

This paper attempts to look for clues from history, for history has been a core element in the Chinese society, reinforcing the impact of tradition in the preservation of culture generation after generation. Most Chinese people know, to various extents, about the past of their country. This explains why the call to revitalize the Chinese nation promoted by the Chinese government, with the slogan of “China Dream” being the one most explicitly advocated by the administration of Xi Jinping, usually resonate well among the Chinese people. It is hence reasonable to expect that the political elites in China, when in control of policymaking, may design China’s foreign relations with a blueprint consciously or subconsciously influenced by the ideas and the practices in China’s history.

To predict the outlook of a Pacific Century reigned by China, studying the regional order led by Ming China (1368–1644) in pre-modern history may provide some useful
insights because Ming remained the most influential state in the region for nearly three centuries, managing its foreign relations with other states within the Sinocentric system that was backed by both of its military might and ideational power. Nonetheless, Ming China’s experience with foreign countries was not always characterized with successes. The Sino–Korean relationship, through ups and downs, eventually evolved to one that was exemplary between a humane suzerain and a faithful vassal. However, the Ming court was never quite able to establish and maintain cordial relations with the nomads.

This paper looks into the factors that secured Ming’s leadership among the Sinicized states that accepted Confucianism as their national ideology (i.e. ability and willingness to perform the duties of a humane suzerain that demanded no returning of favor) and those that restricted Ming’s options to build positive relations with the nomads who shared rather different ideational backgrounds (i.e. hierarchical mentality and refusal to accommodate other cultures). By relating these findings in history to the current Chinese foreign policies, this paper argues that in spite of its overwhelming material power, China may still find it difficult to forge reliable and long-lasting political alliance with other states in the region, and disputes (even potential conflicts) between China and other states will continue to exist – this is because the Chinese government demonstrates interests mainly in trades with other states of *quid pro quo* nature for the purpose of increasing the national power of China, thereby securing its rule with a non-liberal political system.

There are four sections following the part of introduction. Firstly, the paper employs a holistic approach to explain the rationale and the practice of the Sinocentric system – in order to break the limitation of the traditional Western understanding regarding the tribute system (i.e. in the name of foreign relations, the system was merely a framework
for commercial activities), whereby opening up a new arena to re-examine the Sinocentric system. This is followed by two other sections that analyze Ming’s success with the Koreans and its failures with the nomads respectively. The implications of Ming’s experience to China’s contemporary foreign relations are then discussed in the context of a China-centered Pacific Century in the final section.

**The Sinocentric System**

The Sinocentric system was an institutional construct comprehensively and sophisticatedly designed by the Chinese to manage China’s foreign relations during pre-modern time. It was composed of both material and ideational elements: on one hand, the system was supported by Ming’s military supremacy, which was meant to serve as a deterrent to the challengers. One the other hand, the system was sustained by Ming’s ideational appeal (i.e. Confucianism), or soft power in contemporary terms, which aimed to craft amicable relations between Ming and other states. By design, these two elements of the Sinocentric system were supposed to function inseparably.

*Rationale of the Sinocentric System*

Ming China was indisputably the most powerful state in East Asia for two reasons: its military capability and cultural superiority. Ming’s military supremacy was well known to other countries in the region: on land, the Ming troops defeated the Mongol cavalry and drove them out of China proper for good; at sea, the Ming fleets carrying armed forces sailed seven voyages to places as far as the coast of East Africa. To other states in the region, it was obviously a rational decision not to challenge Ming China by force. This allowed the Ming court to set the rules of an international order to be complied with by other states, building the Sinocentric system.
At the same time, China was considered a highly civilized nation by others as a result of its cultural attainment: Confucianism. The Chinese believed, as did people of other countries in the region, that it was Confucianism that distinguished the civilized Chinese from the barbaric foreigners. Through the process of Confucianization, a stratified civil society that clearly defined an individual’s status and responsibility, coupled with a remarkably effective and efficient government made up of righteous junzi (“exemplar gentlemen”), would contributed to a nation’s civilization, stability, and eventually its prosperity and strength. With such advanced culture, China took up the central position within the international order, and the Chinese emperor, with the “mandate of Heaven”, ruled over not only China but also the world.

In the early study of the subject, China’s foreign relations were defined as ‘suzerain–vassal relations conducted through the ancient forms of the tributary system’, and the nature of tribute was ‘a cloak for trade’ (Fairbank, 1942, p.129, p.138). Such rationalist explanation was widely accepted in academia, and since then ‘tributary/tribute system’ has remained a popular term used by scholars when referring to the institutional framework of China’s foreign relations. However, is it true that the Sinocentric system was merely a strategic model in which China and its vassal states made decisions based on nothing but rational cost–benefit calculations?

It is needless to deny that the strategic intent of China and that of the other states, yet it would be an incomplete account of the Sinocentric system if its ideational elements are ignored. To thoroughly understand the rationale of the Sinocentric system, it is imperative to study and appreciate the Confucian tenets with regard to the senior–junior relationship. Confucius firmly believed in the importance of propriety, and he was
convincing that people must understand their positions and roles in a society such that they would behave properly. Consequently, Confucius thought that human relations were constructed within a social hierarchy, whereby the junior respect and serve the senior, and at the same time, the senior were responsible to look after the well-being of the junior. It has to be noted that the responsibility was not reciprocal toward each other; it was of moral nature and it was mutual and unconditional. This relationship therefore was supposed to be more on people’s morality than on people’s wisdom, for which the emphasis ought to be placed on the importance of moral duties rather than strategic concerns.

In Confucianism, this rationale was discussed in the relationship between a father and his son and that between a prince and his minister. Since the relationship between the Chinese emperor and the king of his vassal state was defined as that between a prince and his minister in the Sinocentric system, the Confucian reasoning was applied. It was the vassal’s duty to serve its suzerain faithfully, and at the same time, the suzerain must shoulder the responsibility to take good care of its vassal. Hence the nature of the Sinocentric order is not about offering a favor to gain a favor in return or making a move to achieve a pre-set goal; it was supposed to be about states’ moral duties between one another – ethics was meant to be one of the building blocks to create and sustain the Sinocentric system that was characterized by the feature of benign hierarchy. The label of “tribute system” therefore is a term only describing one part of the rituals involved in the Sinocentric system; it does not fully profess the meaning of the senior-junior relationship advocated in Confucianism.

Sinocentric System in Practice

Nonetheless, rationale is rationale; whether it can be put in practice is another story –
especially when the rationale includes ideational elements that involve the issue of morality. The material elements can function in a logical fashion – the rational decision-making process of human beings are mechanical thus mostly predictable: one chooses to do whatever to maximize one’s gain and not to do anything that will bring one loss. In addition, it does not take much time for people to learn how to measure benefits against costs. However, ideational elements, those of morality in particular, may lead some people to think in ways that are not in line with rationality. To achieve an ethical goal or to defend a moral value, which may possess little material values in the eyes of the rationalists, they may be willing to sacrifice things with much higher material values that makes the rationalists feel incomprehensible. The effect thus may not be instantly forecasted based on the cause, which is rather different from those cases involving only material factors. Moreover, it takes much longer time to implant ideas of morality into people’s mind in order to generate effective impact on people’s behavior. By incorporating both material and ideational elements, the design of the Sinocentric system therefore was a recipe for making policy implementation a challenging task.

The military power of Ming China was sufficient to make the material elements of the Sinocentric system work as expected, yet there are two key factors to ensure the system function fully: first, whether a common ground could be constructed to nurture shared ideas and values between China and its vassals. Second, whether China would match its words with actions. The first factor was indeed a precondition to guarantee that the Sinocentric system would not be reduced to a tribute system for trading purposes only. The Confucian ideas had to be willingly accepted by the people of China’s vassal states such that a shared understanding (intersubjective culture in constructivist term) could be fostered between them and the Chinese. It took time to achieve such goal – in the case of Ming China–Joseon Korea relations, it took over a hundred years to introduce
and popularize Confucianism in Joseon Korea. It was undoubtedly a process that required passion and patience of the Chinese and the people of China’s vassal states, yet it was an indispensable first step to ensure the effective functioning of the Sinocentric system.

On the contrary, the absence of the first key factor would lead to malfunction of the Sinocentric system. As in those cases where no shared understanding of the Confucian doctrines could be established between China and a foreign nation, China would find it extremely difficult to demand the people of that foreign nation, as China’s vassal, to obey the rules that China set for the world. For the same reason, people of a foreign nation would find it beyond their comprehension to do what the Chinese instructed them to do (rituals such as kowtowing to the Chinese emperor and paying tributes according to the frequency determined by the Chinese court. Some even refused to accept the vassalage status for their countries). The ideational elements under such circumstances simply would not work. Nevertheless, the part of having the opportunity to trade was not difficult at all for both parties to understand. Hence the formality that was designed to support the execution of a core moral duty was wrongly elevated to an activity of primary intention for the vassal and the suzerain: the vassal accepted the suzerainty of China for the purpose of trading commercial goods in China, and China allowed the foreign nations to enter China and pay tribute as its vassals for the goal of buying peace with these nations. The suzerain–vassal relations were therefore maintained based on rational cost–benefit calculations of material interests, and the result was an unstable bilateral relations shadowed in the mirage of the Sinocentric system. Ming’s relations with the Timurid Empire and the Mongols turned out to be typical cases of this scenario.
It was noteworthy that mutual understand did not necessarily produce mutual trust, and this is where the second key factor comes in. If China simply made statements about being benevolent and humane to its vassals but did not act in the way as it claimed, the suzerain’s credit would be discounted and eventually it would be reduced to nobody but a hypocrite. It has to be emphasized that Confucianism was an ideology that rested on a moral high ground. It would sound noble to talk about its doctrines, but to truly think and behave in a Confucian way would not be easy at all – to many people it was a lifetime learning and self-training. In the Chinese history, only a handful of monarchs can be considered genuinely humane by the Confucian standards. For those Chinese emperors who abused the Sinocentric system and bullied or exploited the vassals only led to a clear result: the vassals would not respect or trust the suzerain. They dared not challenge the powerful suzerain; they kept serving China (sometimes grudgingly) simply because they had no other alternatives to deal with the hegemon. Nevertheless, when the Chinese emperor truly cared about and looked after the well-being of its vassals, the suzerain–vassal relations turned out to be amicable, stable, and long-lasting with mutual understanding and trust.

Ming’s Success in its Relations with the Koreans

The Sinocentric system of Ming China worked best with Joseon Korea (1392–1910). However, this is an over-generalized statement: during the 252 years of bilateral relations between the two countries, around three quarters of the time witnessed a Joseon Korea serving its suzerain reluctantly. With abundant evidence in history, it can be proved that the Joseon political elites chose to stay in the Sinocentric system for the purpose of maximizing material gains for themselves and their country. However, change occurred later that made the Sinocentric system function fully as it was designed.
The turning point was the Imjin War (1592–98), in which the Japanese invaded Joseon and Ming came to Joseon’s rescue, eventually driving the Japanese off the Korean Peninsula. Ming’s selfless effort started to be gradually appreciated by the Joseon political elites from 1623, and the Koreans’ gratitude toward Ming remained deep well after Ming’s fall in 1644 and lasted until 1776. Such drastic change as a result of Ming’s action deservedly concluded that it was a success of Ming in managing its foreign relations with Joseon Korea.

The next subsection illustrates how a shared understanding of Confucianism was cultivated between the Chinese and the Koreans, whereby the rules of the Sinocentric system were implemented with comparatively fewer problems in the Ming–Joseon relations. It is followed by two other subsections that discuss the reasons that led to a partially (before 1623) and a fully (after 1623) functioning of the Sinocentric system, based on historical evidence drawn from the primary source of the *Ri Dynasty Annals of Korea* (also known as the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*).

*Shared Understanding of Confucianism*

Confucianism (in the form of Neo-Confucianism) was introduced to Korea in the late 1280s and in the following century, it was promoted nationwide by the Confucian scholar-officials in Korea. When the Joseon Dynasty was founded in 1392, the new ruling regime began to build a Confucian state by establishing the political system and making policies according to the Confucian principles. Moreover, the Joseon political elites initiated the process of self-Sinicization that witnessed the popularization of learning the language of Chinese and the Confucianization of the Korean society.

The language of Chinese was taught and studied systematically in Joseon. Textbooks
written for students at introductory and intermediate levels were printed and distributed nationwide by the king’s order. At an advanced level, students focused on the study of the canonical works of Confucianism to prepare for the civil service examination – for the key subject to be tested in the examination was Confucianism. Candidates were assessed on their knowledge of the Confucian classics, their mastery of the Chinese language in the forms of poetry and prose, and their application of Confucianism in political analysis. This was designed to ensure that the government would operate in a fashion strictly complying with regulations defined by the Confucian principles.

With Confucianism being promoted as the state ideology of Joseon, its ideas permeated to all walks of life in the country and a Confucian social norm was gradually cultivated. The Confucian doctrines provided the Koreans with an effective cognitive context in which their values were shaped, and they constituted the ethical base on which people’s behavior was measured. Soon Joseon was highly commended by the Ming court for its efforts, and the country became honorably known as Sojunghwa (‘Little China’) among the states within the Sinocentric order. In the contemporary terms of constructivism, the national identity of Joseon was formed based on the intersubjective culture of Confucianism. This implied that Joseon willingly accepted the rules of the Sinocentric system set by the Chinese, which substantially saved Ming’s efforts to Sinicize Joseon thus effectively establish the suzerain–vassal relationship between the two nations.

Nevertheless, a solid groundwork did not necessarily produce the intended outcome. For the part of Joseon, the duties that a vassal state was required to perform basically were duly carried out during every king’s rule (e.g. downgrading the title of Joseon’s monarch to the level equivalent to that of a royal prince in China, using the era name of the Chinese emperor for the Joseon calendar, sending tribute missions to Ming
regularly, and providing military support when required by Ming). Joseon was therefore often regarded as an exemplary vassal of Ming. However, the relationship did not reach a humane suzerain–faithful vassal level until the final quarter of the interstate history between Ming and Joseon – or in other words, Joseon did not truly respect Ming and wholeheartedly serve Ming until after 1623. The blame should go to Ming: for in many occasions, the Ming emperor and/or the Ming court did not behave in the way a humane suzerain was supposed to according to the Confucian principles.

*The Suzerain: Words, but No Actions*

Unpleasant experience occurred as early as the very beginning between Hongwu Emperor (reign: 1368–98, founder of Ming) and Taejo (reign: 1392–8, the first Joseon king). Taejo ascended to the throne on 17 July 1392, and he sent an envoy to inform the Ming court of the dynastic change on 18 July. To further demonstrate Joseon’s sincerity toward Ming, Taejo even dispatched an envoy to China on 29 November and humbly asked Hongwu Emperor to name the new dynasty.

Hongwu Emperor, like a senior naming his grandson in a family, conferred the name of ‘Joseon’ to the new dynasty of Korea – but that was about it from the side of Ming, except a promise made by the emperor: Ming would not invade Joseon (along with other 14 vassals), as long as it behaved properly according to the Confucian code of conduct. This might appear to be a privilege Ming granted Joseon, yet in the eyes of Joseon, a superpower not to bully a much smaller and weaker state did not look like an act that embodied the suzerain’s kindness to take care of its vassals. Nonetheless, more serious problems were yet to come.

In early 1396, simply because Hongwu Emperor was not happy with the Joseon
memorial to the throne to celebrate the Chinese New Year, he demanded an official apology from Taejo and insisted that the Joseon court officials responsible for writing the documents to be sent to China for punishment. Taejo then dispatched a mission of four court officials to China in July 1396 to offer explanation and the king’s apology. However, Hongwu Emperor detained the delegation. Although the ambassador was released in March 1397, the other three Joseon officials were executed in November 1397 by the Ming court for their attempt to escape from detention.

When the Ming court further ordered Taejo in May 1398 to turn in another three Joseon court officials, who were suspected for writing the problematic memorial to the throne, the Joseon court was enraged. The Koreans criticized the Ming court for having unreasonably and offensively treated Joseon, and asked Taejo not to send the three court officials in order to demonstrate Joseon’s autonomous power. Nevertheless, Taejo obeyed Ming’s order and sent those three to China on 3 June 1398 – for he firmly believed that a minor state should never turn against a major state, and the minor state would be able to survive only by serving the major state. In spite of this, Taejo never received the imperial investiture from Ming to recognize his legitimate rule of Joseon until his abdication in September 1398.

After Taejo, most of the Joseon kings were forced to make difficult decisions as a result of Ming’s orders of various sorts that actually caused losses to Joseon and its people. During his rule, Taejong (reign: 1400–18) never disobeyed a single order of Yongle Emperor (reign: 1402–24), which was most typically found on the issue of sending horses to support Ming’s military campaigns (between 1403 and 1410, Taejong sent over 15,000 horses to Ming, even though Joseon was not a country that produced horses). To deal with the bellicose Yongle Emperor, Taejong had few choices but to
serve Ming carefully such that Joseon could avoid military conflicts with the superpower – although the king kept emphasizing that he served Ming because he was in awe of Heaven, not Ming.

Another example was Sejong (reign: 1418–50), who had similar experience on the issues of sending horses to Ming. Between 1422 and 1427, as ordered by the Ming emperor, Sejong sent 25,000 horses to support Ming’s military campaigns. In 1432, Sejong even had to obey the order of Xuande Emperor (reign: 1425–35) and sent 6,000 cattle to Ming. In 1450, another 5,000 horses were sent to Ming by the order of Jingtai Emperor (reign: 1449–57). It caused great disturbance to the daily life of the Koreans and serious damage to Joseon’s military capability, for horses at the time were vital to Joseon’s agriculture and defense. In addition, the Koreans were heavily burdened with the expenses to receive and entertain Ming’s envoys. As a result, Sejong was deeply troubled by the fact that from time to time, the well-being of his country and people had to be sacrificed in order to prioritize Ming’s interests.

_The Suzerain: Matching Words with Actions_

Two centuries after its founding, Joseon for the first time truly witnessed the kindness Ming extended to its vassal. It was the Imjin War (1592–8), during which a revisionist Japan attempted to challenge the Sinocentric order. After the Japanese troops occupied the southern half of the Korean Peninsula that included the capital city of Hanseong, Seonjo (reign: 1567–1608) fled to the border province of Pyongan in June 1592 and asked Ming for help. Considering Ming’s duty to its vassal, Wanli Emperor (reign: 1572–1620) dispatched an army of 100,000 soldiers to rescue Joseon.

In view of the level of information technology at the time, plus the power disparity
between China and Japan that was perceived by the Ming court, it would be difficult for the Ming emperor and his ministers to imagine that Japan’s ultimate goal was to invade Ming China and that Japan would pose a national threat to China if the Japanese troops were not stopped in the Korean Peninsula. In the eyes of the Chinese, the Japanese swordsmen were merely a group of pirates capable of nothing but looting in the coastal areas of Southeast China. Therefore, every time when Seonjo said that it was exactly because of his refusal to collaborate with Japan in attacking Ming that had led to Joseon being brutally destroyed by the Japanese intruders, and Joseon actually sacrificed itself to protect Ming by taking a devastating hit from Japan for Ming, he was refuted by the Ming court officials sent by the emperor and the military commanders of Ming fighting the Japanese on Korean soil. They emphasized that it was out of Wanli Emperor’s humaneness and graciousness that Ming troops were sent to rescue Joseon, to which Joseon should be eternally obliged – hence in early January 1593, they demanded that Seonjo should immediately stop making such ungrateful claim.

Seonjo’s view influenced his son, Gwanghaegun (reign: 1608–23), and both did not quite appreciate Ming’s efforts. Predicting that the declining Ming was no match for the rising Manchu, Gwanghaegun attempted to maintain a non-antagonistic relationship with the Manchus while at the same time keeping Joseon as a vassal of Ming. The king’s dual tactics was severely condemned by the Ming court, and the Confucian scholar-officials at the Joseon court felt extremely shameful and thought that the treasonable behavior of Gwanghaegun had completely disgraced their country. They eventually had him dethroned through a coup on 14 March 1623. The queen dowager announced a list of crimes committed by Gwanghaegun during his reign, and he was mainly convicted of being unfaithful to Ming.
From the reign of Injo (1623–49), many Koreans, from the elites or the masses, began to appreciate in general what Ming had selflessly done for Joseon and in particular the good will and humaneness of Wanli Emperor. During the process of power transition in East Asia, the fighting between Ming and Manchu inevitably involved their immediate neighbor, Joseon. Injo and his Confucian scholar-officials chose to remain loyal to Ming, for which Joseon suffered two Manchu invasions in 1627 and 1636–7. Both invasions brought Joseon devastating damages, and as a result of the second invasion, Joseon was forced to submit to the Manchus in January 1637 and became a vassal state of Qing instead of Ming ever since.

Ming collapsed in 1644, yet Joseon’s allegiance to Ming remained unchanged and grew even stronger – as more and more Koreans felt deeply indebted to Ming for what Ming had done to rescue Joseon during the Imjin War. The most prominent example was Hyojong (reign: 1649–59). Throughout the decade of his rule, in spite of Qing’s military supremacy, the king had been unequivocally and actively planning for the Northern Expedition against Qing as vengeance on the Manchus for what they had done to Ming and ultimately, to revive Ming. Sukjong (reign: 1674–1720) also believe that Joseon would have been eliminated by Japan had it not been Wanli Emperor’s kindness to Joseon. According to Sukjong’s deduction, it must have cost Ming an enormous amount of resources to rescue Joseon. Hence, Ming’s rapid decline could be attributed, to a certain extent, to the exhaustion caused by Ming’s involvement in the Imjin War. Sukjong therefore concluded that Ming saved the life of Joseon at the expense of its own, for which the king boldly decided to construct an altar inside the royal palace to honor Wanli Emperor.

From 1705, Sukjong and the future kings held the memorial ceremony in March almost
every year, with all the rituals performed strictly according to the tradition of Ming China. In particular, Qing’s era name was not used in the elegiac address. In 1749, Yeongjo (reign: 1724–76) ordered to expand the altar in order to accommodate the additional enshrinements of Hongwu Emperor and Chongzhen Emperor (reign: 1627–44). It ought to be noted that Hyojong, Sukjong, and Yeongjo were not blind to the power disparity between Joseon and Qing; yet they carried on with their pro-Ming, anti-Qing missions for the restoration of Ming, even at the risk of losing their lives and their country – because they firmly believed in the Confucian ethics, and it was the humaneness of the suzerain, manifested in its unconditional help extended to Joseon in its desperate moment of need, that won the heart of the Koreans. This proved the successful operation of the Sinocentric system between Ming and Joseon from 1623: as the two preconditions were fulfilled (shared understanding, and matching words with actions), the ideational elements of the system were functioning effectively, and Ming was finally revered as a humane leader by a loyal follower – and this was the best result the Sinocentric system could ever achieved.

**Ming’s Failure in its Relations with the Nomads**

To the contrary of its experience with Joseon, Ming China was never able to manage its relations with the nomads in the way that the Sinocentric System was designed for. The reasons that had led to Ming’s failure were embedded in the Sinocentric system: the proper and complete functioning of the system rested on a shared understanding of benign hierarchy advocated in Confucianism between China and a foreign nation, and such intersubjective culture could be nurtured only via an assimilation process known as Sinicization. Those nations that could be Sinicized would become vassal states of China, but the nomads, who possessed distinctive cultures of their own thus refused to
be Sinicized, simply could not be Sinicized. If wars were to be avoided with those ‘barbarians’, the Ming court was left with only two options: either keeping the system nominally in front of the Chinese subject in order to sustain the emperor’s rule under all-heaven, or removing the ideational elements in the Sinocentric system so as to buy peace through commercial trade with the nomads. The following two subsections examine Ming’s relations with the Timurid Empire and the Mongols, supported by historical records documented in Mingshi (History of Ming, 明史) and Mingshilu (Annals of Ming, 明實錄).

*Ming’s Relations with the Timurid Empire*

Timurid Empire (1370–1506) was a powerful state in Central Asia, and under the leadership of Timur (1336–1405) the empire was known for its military power that brought it victories one after another during the process of its territorial expansion to the lands of the Persian, the Indian, the Russian, the Egyptian, and the Turk. In Ming’s historical records, however, documented that the Timurid Empire was a vassal state of Ming and Timur acknowledged Ming’s suzerainty and earnestly paid tributes to the Ming emperor. Considering the military might of the Timurid Empire and Timur’s territorial ambition, this inevitably arouses suspicion.

In August 1394, a Timurid tribute mission arrived in China and paid 200 horses as tribute to the Ming court. The tribute memorial was perfectly written in Chinese literary fashion with extremely humble words, clearly indicating the Timurid Empire’s will to take a subservient role as a vassal of Ming. This greatly pleased Hongwu Emperor. Nevertheless, Fletcher (1968, pp.209–10) questioned the authenticity of the writing and deduced that it was translated with substantial modifications by either a Timurid merchant in the mission or a Ming official who did not dare to present the original to
the emperor – because the writing simply did not match the profile of Timur’s character.

Whether Fletcher’s analysis was justifiable or not is opened for discussion, yet the nominal relationship between Ming and the Timurid Empire in the Sinocentric system can be certainly proved in Timur’s later actions: he detained Ming's ambassadors and delegations in 1395 and 1397. Considering these were the only two missions ever dispatched by Hongwu Emperor during his reign, plus the fact that Hongwu Emperor and Timur were the founders of the two empires, it would not be unreasonable to deduce that from the very beginning, there was no genuine suzerain–vassal relationship ever established between Ming and the Timurid Empire. This conclusion can be further proved by Timur’s decision to invade Ming: in November 1404, Timur led an army of half a million solders and headed toward China. Ming was fortunate to avoid a full-scale war only because the Timurid troops retreated after Timur died on the way before even entering China in February 1405.

The nominal suzerain–vassal relationship between the two nations (i.e. unilaterally claimed by Ming but rejected by the Timurid Empire) continued after Timur’s death. Shahrukh (1377–1447), son of Timur, adopted a pacifying approach to manage Timurid’s relations with Ming: he released the Ming ambassadors detained by Timur, and sent missions to China carrying gifts to the Ming court. Yet in spite of all these peaceful actions, Shahrukh indeed perceived the nature of the bilateral relationship as an equal instead of a hierarchical one. This can be proved in his letter to Yongle Emperor in 1413. In the letter, Shahrukh explicitly suggested the Ming emperor to convert himself into a Muslim. Confucianism was the state ideology of Ming China, and the Confucian doctrine about the civilization–barbarian distinction was the very foundation on which the entire Sinocentric system was built. What Shahrukh did was actually an
open defiance to the hierarchical relationship between China and its vassal, as advocated in Confucianism. In other words, Shahrukh simply did not accept the kind of Timurid–Ming relationship declared by the Ming court. To Shahrukh, the Timurid Empire existed outside the perimeter of the Sinocentric order, and the relationship between the two nations were equal.

Nonetheless, contemporary Chinese scholars understand the Ming–Timurid relations with a different interpretation of the history. As seen in the studies of Chen (1957), Ma (1985), Wang (1989), Zhu (1996), and Jiang (2001), they firmly believe that the Timurid Empire is a vassal state of Ming based on the tributes Timur sent to the Ming court before 1395 – in particular, that tribute memorial to Hongwu Emperor is treated as an important piece of evidence to prove their view. Timur’s decision to invade China is described as a rebellious act of him as a result of his numerous victories in Timurid’s expansion thus his growing ambition to conquer the world. Shahrukh’s decisions to release the detained Ming ambassadors and to send delegations to China are portrayed as a faithful gesture of the Timurid emperor to acknowledge the suzerainty of Ming. The trading activities since Shahrukh’s reign until Timurid’s fall in the early 16th century are invoked to prove the amicable relationship between the two empires within the Sinocentric order. However, such explanation, intentionally or unintentionally, neglects the important precondition that made the ideational elements of the Sinocentric system function: the process of assimilation that imposed Chinese ideas upon the non-Chinese. Other than serving contemporary political purposes, such view can hardly be justified.

*Ming’s Relations with the Mongols*

Ming incorporated the Mongols residing to its northern border into the Sinocentric
system. However, Ming was not able to Sinicize the nomads as the Mongols, for centuries, lived by their own style of life and codes of conduct. They used the language of Mongolian instead of Chinese. Basically the Mongols were a group of people with unique ethnic identity and cultural heritage that shared little commonality with the Han Chinese. To Ming China, it was nearly an impossible task to assimilate the Mongols.

In spite of such gap between the two that was almost unbridgeable, the Ming court went ahead with the same practice of the Sinocentric system – demanding the Mongols to acknowledge Ming’s suzerainty and to pay tributes to the Ming emperor. Considering the past experience of the Han Chinese with the Mongols, it was very likely that the Ming court was well aware of the cultural difference between the Mongols and the Koreans or people of the Sinicized states. However, the Chinese emperor was supposed to be the ‘Son of Heaven’, and by the ‘mandate of Heaven’, the emperor of China should rule ‘all-under-heaven’. This can be explained either by the Ming court’s concern about the regime’s ruling legitimacy among its own subjects, or by the ethnocentric mentality of the Chinese about China’s supremacy over other nations.

Nevertheless, the Sinocentric system did not work well with the Mongols at all. Although a suzerain–vassal relationship was established officially, in reality the Mongols never perceived Ming as a humane senior, nor Ming ever believed the Mongols as a faithful junior. As a matter of fact, the Mongols saw China as a major source of material gains, while Ming always considered the Mongols a potential enemy: the Mongols, on numerous occasions, raised the request of increasing the scale and volume of bilateral trade; the Ming court, either launched military campaigns against the Mongols or enhanced border defense to deter the Mongols’ raids at the frontier (e.g. Yongle Emperor’s five Northern Expeditions against the Mongols from 1409 to 1424,
and the *Nine Garrisons* deployed by the Ming court along China’s northern border between 1398 and 1504).

Malfunction of the Sinocentric system for Ming’s relations with the Mongols eventually led to Ming’s persistent problems of border security, and Ming’s failure was best proved in its relations with the Oirat Mongols and the Tumed Mongols – for the poorly maintained relationships culminated in two crises that were not seen throughout Ming’s history: the Tumu Crisis in 1449 and the Gengxu Crisis in 1550 – in both incidents, Beijing, the capital of Ming, was besieged by the Mongol troops.

The Tumu Crisis was triggered by the growing tensions between the Ming court and Esen Taishi (1407–54), the leader of the Oirat Mongols. Although a suzerain–vassal relationship was established between the two, the Mongols were prone to seeking material benefits from the Sinocentric system. As a result, the number of people in a tribute mission dramatically increased from around 50 to over 2,000 in only a few years’ time (for the purposes of receiving more gifts bestowed by the Ming court, and more opportunities to trade in China). Zhengtong Emperor (reign: 1435–49) issued several edicts to restrict the number of tribute mission members. However, Esen Taishi not only turned a deaf ear to the emperor’s instruction but also specifically demanded rare goods with high value from the Ming court in exchange for the tributes he sent to the emperor. In 1447, Esen Taishi dispatched a tribute mission with 3,000 members to Ming. When they arrived in China, they even exaggerated the number in order to receive more supplies (food, allowance, etc.) during their stay in Beijing and more gifts in return. The Ming Board of Rites verified the headcounts and provided the tribute mission with supplies exactly for 3,000 people, and the Ming court also bestowed gifts for the 3,000 mission members. As for the valuable goods specified in the tribute memorial, the Ming
court eventually offered only one fifth of them.

This infuriated Esen Taishi. He might have ambitions for lands and resources in China, but what the Ming court did this time simply provided him with an excuse to take military action against Ming – in July 1449, Esen Taishi went to the extreme of launching an invasion of China. In the battle at Tumu Fortress, the Mongol troops defeated the Ming army, captured Zhengtong Emperor, and further advanced to besiege Beijing in October. The capital city eventually survived the Mongols’ attack, and Esen Taishi ordered his troops to retreat in 1450. The incident shocked the Ming court and the Chinese people, but the Ming policy toward the nomads basically remained unchanged – to remedy the mistake implied the denial of the Chinese emperor’s ruling legitimacy and the superior status of the Chinese over that of the barbarians. The Chinese would not and could not change the policy – and a century later, Ming suffered another similar blow from the Mongols.

This time it was the Tumed Mongols. Around the mid-16th century, Mongol was ruled by the tribal group of the Tumed, and it reached its zenith under the leadership of Altan Khan (1507–82). Over dozens of times between 1541 and 1549, Altan Khan raised the request of expanding the scale of bilateral trade by opening up more frontier markets. However, ‘the important thing to the rulers of China was the moral value of tribute. The important thing for the barbarians was the material value of trade’ (Fairbank, 1942, p.139). The Ming court squarely rejected all of Altan Khan’s requests. As retaliation, Altan Khan ordered a number of raids in Northern China – yet the Ming court signaled no intention to change its policy. To achieve his goal, Altan Khan decided to invade China.
Gengxu Crisis broke out in 1550. Under the personal command of Altan Khan, a Mongol army of over 100,000 soldiers crossed the Great Wall and attacked Beijing, demanding the Ming court to allow the Tumed Mongols to trade at the frontier of China. To resolve the crisis, Jiajing Emperor (reign: 1521–67) had no choice but to grant the Tumed Mongols special right to trade horses in 1551. Before long, the Tumed Mongols raised a further request to trade cattle and sheep. The Ming court rejected the request, and in 1554 Ming suspended the operation of the horse market without obtaining the Tumed Mongols’ consent. Altan Khan then launched another invasion into China in 1567, pushing the Ming court to reconsider the solution of buying peace. In 1571, a peace treaty was signed between Ming and the Tumed Mongols. Altan Khan accepted the vassalage title of ‘Shunyi King’ conferred by Longqing Emperor (reign: 1567–72), and more importantly, he secured the right for the Tumed Mongols to trade with the Chinese in 11 cities along the border. Since then, there were no more conflicts ever occurred between Ming and the Tumed Mongols until the fall of Ming in 1644. The Sinocentric system in this case eventually served to secure peace between the suzerain and its vassal – however not by the Confucian means of benign hierarchy but by commercial trades that the Confucians usually disdained.

Contemporary Implications

The Ming dynasty is one of the few eras in history that a unified China was able to manage its foreign relations with a set of systematically designed policies. The Confucianism-based Sinocentric system, composed of both material and ideational elements, established an international framework that allowed China to interact with foreign nations in ways more sophisticated than the conventional patterns of war by force or peace by trade commonly seen at the time. Nevertheless, it was also because
of the sophistication in its designing rationale that the outcome was not consistently guaranteed. The ideational elements were mainly responsible for the variation in results – they were different from those with material nature; people with different cultural backgrounds could easily find common understanding in issues related to war and trade. The ideational elements, especially when involving morality, could complicate the situation and lead to different results. It was hard to find an international system in human history that came close to such level of sophistication (and maintained an international order that lasted nearly three centuries); yet its uniqueness was also the source to cause complication. As evident in the previous two sections, the Sinocentric system had brought Ming a mix of success and failure in its foreign relations.

In view of China’s role with growing significance in regional and international affairs during recent decades, Ming’s experience may provide scholars and policy advisors of contemporary international politics with some implications. While speculation about Beijing’s intention in its policies regarding the Korean Peninsula and the Belt and Road Initiative is frequently found in political commentaries, considering the Chinese culture that emphasizes the importance of history, some insights may be gained even from the experience in distant past.

Since the turn of the century, a good number of scholars and policymakers in China have been confidently talking about the return of the Sinocentric order in East Asia with remarks like ‘if the tribute system benefited everyone in the past … a 21st-century China-led East Asia will be in everyone’s interest as well’ (Gries, 2005, p.12). Such thinking, as Stuart-Fox (2004, pp.128–9) concluded, embodied ‘a preoccupation with status based on the hierarchy of power’ and ‘a conviction of the superiority of Chinese example’ that made many Chinese think China would become the leader in East Asia.
again – as seen in the work of Yan Xuetong, who discussed the Chinese understanding of hegemony two millennia ago and made suggestion on how China could lead the world again in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century (Yan, 2011, p.240, pp.244–6). This is why Chung (2012, p.228) called China ‘… a continental nation … with Sinocentric DNA’.

Even though China suffered the ‘century of humiliation’, the rapid rise of the Chinese economy in the past three decades revives and reinforces the Chinese sense of superiority. The growing confidence of the Chinese people, with nationalistic sentiments constantly fostered by the government, is leading the Chinese to believe that the way of the Chinese is going to be the way of the future world. This view in fact shares similarities with that of the Chinese in pre-modern history: the scholar-officials at the Ming court, along with the monarchs, all firmly believed that the way of the Chinese was supposed to be the way of the world – because the Chinese way worked best. If the Chinese political elites of Ming centuries ago when China was at its peak in its national power were convinced that every nation would have to accept the terms set by the Chinese not for showing off China’s hegemonic power but for the benefits the Chinese way brought to other nations, it can be expected that such mentality and behavior of the Chinese may very likely re-emerge in present time.

The Beijing Consensus is how the Chinese government proves to the world that the Chinese way works better than the Western model of Washington Consensus for developing countries ruled by non-liberal regimes. In the name of promoting Chinese culture, the Chinese government has been striving to build the groundwork for the cultivation of shared values with countries not influenced by liberal thoughts. This practice also bears resemblance to the implementation of the Sinocentric system: if there was ever a set of shared values existing between Ming China and other nations, it
would have to be the values of the Chinese (i.e. Confucian values) to be shared with and accepted by other nations – and assimilation was the means to achieve such end. China’s openness to the world since the early 1980 limits to the economic realm only; it does not necessarily imply that the ruling regime is willing to accommodate different political values. The Belt and Road Initiative of the Xi Jinping administration is simply a recent application of the Beijing Consensus with a coherent set of economic policies implemented toward countries situated in regions with strategic values, serving the Chinese government’s political purposes – nurturing shared values by promoting non-liberal ideas, obtaining natural and energy resources, maximizing economic gains, competing for regional influence against the America-led West, but all for the ultimate goal of regime security. This is just another point of similarity between the present and the past: the implementation of the Sinocentric system served the important purpose of legitimizing the rule of the Chinese emperor, not quite necessary among the foreign nations but rather vital among the Chinese people.

In addition, most of the foreign policies implemented by the Chinese government embody little about China’s intention to act as a true leading state that is willing to offer selfless help to others. In other words, China is not offering an ideology with moral values at a level higher than those with a quid pro quo nature. Ming China gave the world Confucianism, an ideology rested on moral high ground. It had a wide appeal among a number of East Asian states in pre-modern time. However, China nowadays has been playing the role of a self-interested hegemon most of the time. What the Chinese government has been doing in developing countries becomes clear that the Chinese assistance is not purely unconditional to the local people. Undeniably there is significant improvement of the national economy of those countries, yet the economic benefits mainly go to the non-liberal government that collaborate with Beijing, and the
people usually have to bear the social and environmental costs as well.

Similarity again can be found in Ming’s history. Although the Sinocentric system was designed based on the Confucian moral principles and China ought to be benevolent to its vassals, Ming was not an altruistic leader in the eyes of the Koreans for a long time, as the Ming–Joseon relations before 1623 were filled with unpleasant incidents. However, had Ming not rescued Joseon from being annexed by Japan in the Imjin War, the Sinocentric system would have merely been a chain to all Koreans – the only feeling they had for Ming would have been fear and hatred, not respect, nor admiration, and definitely not loyalty. Chinese leadership was only truly recognized by other nations when the Chinese political elites faithfully practiced the Confucian principles about the senior’s moral duty to unconditionally look after the well-being of the junior.

In terms of commercial trade, the 21st century is most probably a Pacific Century driven by a strong Chinese economy. However, if the Chinese government is still not willing to shoulder the responsibilities and burdens of international leadership and altruistically look after the well-being of other states in the region, and at same time continues to monopolize domestic political power and keeps rejecting the liberal values prevailing in other countries, mutual trust can be hardly built based on shared values between China and others. Consequently, the Pacific Century will witness a China, although remaining as an economic powerhouse, that is unable to attract loyal political partners in the region, and the continuation of disputes and even potential conflicts between China and other states in the region.
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