

Takeshi Hamashita. *China, East Asia, and the Global Economy: Regional and Historical Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

The tribute system,¹ used to describe the concept of the Asian world order with China as its center, has been in use since the nineteenth century. Westerners perceived this system to be the underlying cause of China's failure to challenge Western dominance during that century.² John King Fairbank's elaboration of the system, underscoring the restraining power of rituals and the universal preeminence of Chinese emperors, renders it one of the major theoretical frameworks through which to conceptualize China's foreign relations. This theory, however, slights the autonomy of the vassal states and assigns the role of protestant to Westerners, who "were trying consciously or unconsciously to demolish the established scheme of things"³ and impose upon Asia a European order that included a "balance of power among ... nation states,"⁴ thus subtly romanticizing Western dominance in East Asia.

Written within the theoretical framework of the tribute system, Takeshi Hamashita's work *China, East Asia, and the Global Economy: Regional and Historical Perspectives* develops and challenges Fairbank's hypothesis of Tribute System. This work is a collection of eight articles (chapters 2-9) written from 1976 to 2008, in which Hamashita explores the commercial function of the tribute system, deemphasizes its rituals, and restores the agency of tributary states. Effectively functioning in Asia and successfully subsuming the Euramerican treaty system, the tribute system was neither merely an ideal, abstract pattern nor an obstacle to China's modernization but a substantive bulwark against Euramerican imperialism encroaching upon Asian principles of world order. Thus, the research greatly challenges the Eurocentric approach to Asian history.

In the first two articles, Hamashita admits that the tribute system was a Sinocentric conception of the world, which, wrapped up in Chinese ideas and terms, granted China the power to instruct "the four corners of the world in the power and dignity of ceremony" (32). However, whereas established views interpret the tribute system as an exclusivist, assimilative ideology, Hamashita stresses its inclusive mechanisms, which integrated diverse regions through relationships of mutuality, such as trade, with little concern for the administrative procedures associated therewith, as long as those involved in such interactions upheld the ceremonies of the tribute system. Therefore, he contends that this system helped weave commercial networks and facilitated trans-regional economic and cultural interactions in Asia.

The case study of Ryukyu⁵ shows the economic centrality of the tribute trade system and the autonomy of tributary states in negotiation with China. Ryukyu was one of the

¹ The tribute system is the Asian world order with ancient China as the center. Other regions in Asia had to pay tribute to maintain their diplomatic and economic relationships with China. This system provides both an administrative means to control China's interests as well as a means of providing exclusive trading priorities to those who paid tribute from foreign regions. Scholars contend that the defeat of China in the Anglo-Chinese wars in 1840s and 1860s symbolizes the collapse of the centuries-old tribute system and saw the establishment of Western treaty system in Asia.

² Feng Zhang, "Rethinking the 'Tribute System': Broadening the Conceptual Horizon of Historical East Asian Politics," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2, no. 4 (2009): 549.

³ *The Chinese World Order; Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, ed. John King Fairbank and Ta-tuan Ch'en. Harvard East Asian Studies (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 3.

⁴ *The Chinese World Order; Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, 9.

⁵ Ryukyu is present-day Okinawa, which is located at the intersection of the South China Sea and East China Sea. Ryukyu kingdom (1429-1879) was a tribute state of China, but Japan invaded the islands in 1609 and officially annexed the kingdom in 1872.

vassal states maintaining the closest tributary relationship with China and remaining the best documented state in the system, thanks to Ryukyu's official document, *Lidai baoan* 1424-1867.⁶ After entering China's tribute system in 1372, Ryukyu simultaneously maintained a tributary relationship with Korea, Siam, and Japan during different periods and helped build commercial networks across East and Southeastern Asia, thus stimulating the flow of commodities and migrants through official tributary and private trade. In 1839, Chinese Emperor Daoguang attempted to reduce the frequency of tribute missions to reduce expenses associated with tributary trade and strengthen control over tax revenues derived from coastal trade, marking a shift in China's commercial focus from tribute trade to mercantilism (91). Ryukyu protested this change, citing the economic benefit of the trade system to the tributary states. Hamashita also maintains that the reform reflected "the resiliency of the system and its capacity to shape hybrid outcomes" (92).

The flexibility of the system further manifested itself after the Anglo-Chinese wars in the nineteenth century, an Era of Negotiation that saw the transition from Asian tribute order to Western European treaty order—and one that was constructed upon an ideal of hierarchy extending outward from a center to periphery, as opposed to upon "the concept of national sovereignty—sovereign, territorially defined nation-states" (91). However, the tribute system never ultimately yielded to the treaty system but instead internalized the treaty system (or was internalized by it, depending on one's perspective). To Hamashita, "Treaty relations remained subordinated to historic principles of the Chinese world order associated with suzerainty and the tribute trade order" by the end of the Qing dynasty (113). The newly opened Chinese ports under the treaty system were situated within long-used trading regions and routes in Chinese history, so European powers were forced to compete for space in long-developed Chinese commercial networks. The extension of European diplomatic norms and treaty negotiations into Asia was a function of Asians' own choice; for example, Korea tried adroitly to combine tribute, treaties, and East Asian international relations to defend its interests (100).

The tribute order, thus, became the historical context of the treaty system in Asia. Though the treaty system was based upon bilateral relationships, European nations had to consider suzerain China as a concerned party in negotiations that included any historical vassal states, such as Korea. Chinese merchants also received special tax relief in trade with former tributary areas within the European controlled customs system because of the dual identities of these areas as Chinese vassal states and Western notion of independent nations. When China adopted the language of the treaty system to negotiate the trade agreement with Korea in 1883, it reformed the tribute system and reaffirmed its suzerain-vassal relationship with Korea. The agreement reduced the one-sided financial burden of tribute trade on the Qing government and increased revenue through the coexistence of tariff trade and tribute trade. Meanwhile, the agreement granted Chinese merchants the right to trade within Korea, while Koreans were denied access to interior China. The significance of the tributary principle became more salient when Japan attempted to abandon it. Japan tried but repeatedly failed to renegotiate its tributary relationship with Korea, in order to separate Korea from its tributary relationship with China and to participate directly in a bilateral relationship with Qing government; eventually, Japan abandoned negotiation in favor of direct action and staged a military advance that violated the core principles of the international order in East Asia and thus destabilized Asian world order for half a century.

⁶ Hamashita introduces the document in this way: "The *Lidai baoan* is a compilation of manuscripts, written in Chinese, relating to Ryukyuan contacts with China, Korea, and eight Southeast Asian countries (or more precisely, port towns), covering the 444 years from 1424 to 1867." Takeshi Hamashita, *China, East Asia, and the Global Economy: Regional and Historical Perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 2008, 58.

Hamashita closely examines both the commercial and financial consequences of the treaty system. Specifically, he demonstrates how treaty ports weaved commercial networks and redirected new trade routes throughout Asia and between Asia, Europe, and the Americas. For example, Hong Kong, which Hamashita closely investigates, became the transit port for migration, the entry point for Western capital and trade and the settlement point for financial transactions among merchants and immigrants. The financial consequence of the treaty system was more complicated. The flow of silver was crucial under the tributary system, which interconnected Asia and the other four world economic spheres and facilitated migration across Asia. Asia long dominated the world silver market and shaped the financial flows throughout the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In the late nineteenth century, however, a silver shortage and the high price of silver in Asia (the reasons for which Hamashita explores in chapter seven) led to the dominance of bills of exchange on London banks. With no actual transfer of bullion, bills of exchange became the pivot of the global commercial and financial networks. The barter trade upon the flow of Indian opium, American cotton, and Chinese tea, buttressed by credit networks centered in the money market of London—which was supported by the British cotton industry—paved the way for British capital into China and incorporated Asia into a new international trade. However, the Asian financial network still functioned after the advance of foreign capital. Hamashita explicates the financial web weaved by Shanxi bankers to undergird Chinese merchants' business across East and Southeast Asia and to provide them with better access to capital and credit than that which Japanese merchants had access to.

Hamashita greatly challenges the Western portrayal of a passive and static Asia and restores to Asia its due agency, particularly the agency of the vassal states in China's tribute system. Such states traded and negotiated with (and protested against) both China and the Euramerican powers, taking advantage of both tribute and treaty systems in order to reap profits for themselves. However, Hamashita's research is not flawless. By regarding countries or groups of people such as immigrants as the basic units of the examination, Hamashita obscures individuals' roles in history. Moreover, this study concentrates on China's foreign trade, but the effect of the tribute system on its internal market is unclear. How did it affect ordinary Chinese, the rural majority, and China's overall market economy? And what is the significance of private trade within the tribute system and its influence on Asian economy? These questions remain unanswered and await future researchers in this field.

This short review by no means does justice to the complexities of Hamashita's research on the Asian and world economy. Utilizing the archives of the Dutch East Indies, China, and Hong Kong, four-hundred-year old official records of Ryukyu, individual works, the research of Japanese scholars, and English-language monographs, Hamashita was among the first to historically document the Asian economic zone and examine its linkage with the world economy as early as the sixteenth century. This work is valuable for historians seeking to better understand not only China and Asia but also global economic transformations in the early modern period.

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