TRIBUTE AND TREATIES: EAST ASIAN TREATY PORTS NETWORKS IN THE ERA OF NEGOTIATION, 1834–1894

BY

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Introduction: The Beginning of the Era of Negotiation

From the 1830s to the 1890s, the nations and regions of East Asia entered into a period that can be called the Era of Negotiation, one characterised by multilateral and multifaceted intra-regional negotiations. Three sources account for the era’s dynamism. The historical issues they present, however, originate in general not from the conventional understanding of the so-called initial period of modern Asian history as Asia’s ‘forced’ opening as a result of the ‘impact of the West’ but rather from a point of view focusing on internal changes in the East Asian region. The period can be summarised as follows:

1) The beginnings of change in the historical international order of East Asia, that of tribute relationships centred on the authority of the Qing emperor. Tributary states and trading nations (hushi guo) on the periphery of the Qing empire, backed by their own new economic strength, no longer strove to maintain as close a relationship with the Qing as before, and, in each of them, internal confrontation set in between reformist and conservative factions. A variety of negotiations were consequently opened with the Qing empire.¹

2) The impossibility, under Qing rule, of continuing to implement as strong a centralised control as in the past. As central authority declined, criticism and resistance mounted against the rule by aboriginal officials (tusi/tuguan) of ethnic groups and against the rule by the Court of Colonial Affairs (Lifen Yuan) of ‘barbarian areas’ (fanbu). As a result of weakened control, economic activity in the coastal trading region picked up, and various forces on the periphery began to advance their claims.

3) Exploitation by local officials and merchants in South China in opposition to the weakened Qing centre, facilitated by the changing East Asian regional tributary order, of American and European efforts
to conclude treaty relations with East Asian countries. This created at least the appearance of nations, the entities required for the establishment of treaty ports and conclusion of treaties, in East Asia and thus extended the European diplomacy of treaty negotiations into Asia.

The changes in any one of (1) internal relationships within the East Asian region, (2) relationships within the Qing sphere of influence, or (3) relations between East Asia and Europe and America, would have been sufficient to delineate an historical era. Focusing on the appearance of these three trends as one complex whole and viewing the sixty-year period from the 1830s to the 1890s as the Era of Negotiation allows a more complete understanding of the conceptual underpinning of the East Asian regional order, one which manifested itself through the process of negotiation.

The most direct expression of the special characteristic of this era was the increased dynamism in relations within the East Asian region, centred on the ties between treaty ports. One interpretation has referred to this special characteristic as the coexistence of tribute and treaty relations. This expression, predicated as it is on a view of the tribute relationship as the conceptual basis of the East Asian international order centred on China and of the treaty relationship as the principle underpinning international relations in Western Europe, naturally treats this period as one of transition in East Asia from the tributary order of the old era to the treaty order of the new. The tribute system, however, was essentially an expression of the Chinese world order (huayi), an historically evolved hierarchy of ‘civilised’ and ‘barbarian’ peoples, which brought East Asia as one broad region under a particular geopolitical relationship of rule. Intellectuals in the nations and regions of East Asia shared the ideal of a Middle Kingdom (Zhongguo), and it is difficult to imagine that this would disappear easily, bound up as it was with their own identity. The concept of the treaty relationship, on the other hand, was derived from Western European international relations, and although international relations based on the concept of national sovereignty — sovereign, territorially defined nation states — required the creation of the formality of these conditions in non-European societies, such a correspondence of forms was all that was produced. The internal and external relations of East Asia were by no means governed by the treaty relationship.

From the situation that actually developed out of the process of interaction between these two concepts, this essay will argue that not only were tribute and treaty relationships not mutually contradictory, but the tribute concept internalised the treaties. The concepts of East and West did not spatially overwrite each other, but rather it