



A SHORT HISTORY OF

CHINA

AND SOUTHEAST ASIA:

TRIBUTE, TRADE AND INFLUENCE



Martin Stuart-Fox

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By Martin Stuart-Fox


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Allen & Unwin

83 Alexander Street

Crows Nest NSW 2065

Australia

Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100

Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218

Email: info@allenandunwin.com

Web: www.allenandunwin.com

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Preface and acknowledgments

It has taken almost two centuries, but China is once again becoming a great power—at a time when the United States stands alone as the actual global hegemon. Some see the rising power of China as a threat, to regional if not global stability. Others see it as a challenge: how can Chinese ambitions be accommodated? But threat or challenge, Southeast Asia will be a principal arena for the exercise of growing Chinese political influence and military power.

Relations between China and Southeast Asia will thus clearly be crucial in the early years of the twenty-first century. These relations go back over two millennia, during which they were mostly conducted in accordance with a tributary system imposed by China and accepted by Southeast Asian kingdoms. Over this long period, the peoples of China and Southeast Asia came to understand and accommodate each other, despite their very different cultural assumptions and expectations. This is a rich and varied story, which a book of this length can only tell briefly and schematically.

I have approached this task with some trepidation, for relations between China and Southeast Asia have been much studied over the years, from a variety of perspectives. Moreover, I come to this study not as a China scholar, but as someone whose research and teaching have focused on continental Southeast Asia. But then, this is not a book only about China's relations with Southeast Asia, but about the relationship from both sides. It could just as well be titled 'Southeast Asia and China'.

As an historian, my approach is historical, not just because I want to tell a story, but because history continues profoundly to influence relations between China and Southeast Asia. History is central to the way both Chinese and Southeast Asians understand the world.

Western scholars may take history less seriously (and international relations analysts are particularly prone to do so), but no-one disregards history in China or Southeast Asia.

The other important dimension of understanding that we must bring to the study and interpretation of China–Southeast Asian relations is of their respective worldviews. ‘Worldview’ refers to the structure of cognition that shapes both habitual behaviour and considered action in response to confronting situations, for national leaders as for individuals in their everyday lives. Worldviews are built up over time through upbringing (the learning of language, values, etc.), formal education, socialisation and life experience. We all perceive the world through the prism of our individual yet more or less shared worldviews.

What I have tried to do in this book is to show how certain elements of the different ways both Chinese and Southeast Asians viewed the world not only characterised their relationships until the middle of the nineteenth century, but have persisted into the present. This is not to argue that worldview is unchanging. Far from it. All Chinese know that China no longer stands alone as the superior Middle Kingdom, even though this is the name they still call their country. And the peoples and governments of Southeast Asia will hardly accept a return to an outmoded tributary system.

What I maintain is that a new pattern of power relations is emerging, one that harks back in significant ways to earlier times. The era of Western domination in Asia is drawing to a close. The United States has withdrawn from mainland Southeast Asia and will not return, leaving China the opportunity to regain its historic position of regional dominance. Much will depend on how Beijing chooses to exercise what will amount to its *de facto* hegemony; but in arriving at ways of accommodating a much more powerful China, the countries of Southeast Asia will not only naturally respond in terms of their own views of the world, but also reach back into the long history of their

relations with the Middle Kingdom. In fact, I would argue that this is already evident: in the 'ASEAN way' of conducting diplomacy, for instance, and in the steadfast refusal of Southeast Asian nations to enter into any formal balance-of-power coalition to 'contain' China.

As an amateur in the field, I am happy to acknowledge my debt to all those scholars whose research has revealed the varied dimensions of China–Southeast Asia relations. A number of these are mentioned in footnotes and suggestions for further reading, though I have referred there to very little of the journal literature to which I am also indebted. One scholar in particular requires special mention, and that is Wang Gungwu. To Professor Wang, all who write on China–Southeast Asia relations are indebted.

I am most grateful also to the many international relations scholars, political analysts, historians, and diplomats in Beijing, Hanoi, Bangkok, Viang Chan, Manila, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta who kindly gave me of their time. The opportunity to visit these capitals was provided by a University of Queensland Foundation Grant. The International Institute of Asian Studies in Leiden kindly provided me with a Visiting Fellowship to conduct part of the historical research. My thanks, finally, to Robert Cribb, who drew the maps, to Milton Osborne, general editor of this series, and to John Iremonger and all the production team at Allen & Unwin.

Abbreviations

AFPFL	Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BCE	before the common era
BCP	Burmese Communist Party
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CE	common era
Comintern	Communist International
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FDI	Foreign direct investment
GMD	Guomindang (Nationalist Party)
ICP	Indochina Communist Party
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PKI	Partai Komunis Indonesia (Indonesian Communist Party)
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea
ROC	Republic of China
SEATO	South-East Asia Treaty Organization
SRV	Socialist Republic Of Vietnam
UMNO	United Malays Nationalist Organisation
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
Vietminh	Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh (Vietnam League for Independence)
VNQDD	Vietnamese Nationalist Party
VOC	Dutch East India Company
ZOPFAN	Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality

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1 INTRODUCTION



This book sketches in broad outline the history of 2000 years of contact between the peoples and governments of China and the peoples and governments of Southeast Asia. This is an ambitious undertaking that presents some obvious problems. China itself has not always been unified and Southeast Asia is a wonderfully varied region that historically has comprised many more independent kingdoms and principalities than the ten modern states making up the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Moreover frontiers have shifted over these two thousand years, and once powerful independent kingdoms in what is now southern China have disappeared.

Historians do not just recount past events, however: they also interpret them, often by pointing out patterns that impart meaning. The early twenty-first century provides a convenient vantage point from which to do this for China–Southeast Asia relations. European powers have withdrawn from Southeast Asia, and after a period of weakness and humiliation lasting more than a century, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has restored much of China's

former influence and status. The United States is the only power outside Asia that still plays a significant role in shaping regional relations. The reduction of direct foreign interference leaves China and the countries of Southeast Asia freer than at any time in their modern histories to construct their own mutually acceptable relationships.

Until the nineteenth century, relations between China and Southeast Asia were conducted in accordance with what has come to be known as the 'tribute system'. This was a world order that was both sinocentric and orchestrated by China. The weakness of the late Qing dynasty at the end of the nineteenth century was not unusual in the context of Chinese history, as it conformed to the pattern of dynastic rise and decline. The replacement of the Qing dynasty by the Republic of China could even be viewed as the start of a new 'dynastic' cycle. But the move from empire to republic was in response not just to loss by the Qing imperial line of their mandate to rule granted by Heaven, but also to entirely new international pressures that forced China to accept a radically different world order of contending empires and nation-states. Even though these pressures for change had been building for over a century, the transition was a painful one. The collapse of the Qing ushered in a period of turmoil and war that only ended with the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949, at a time when the peoples of Southeast Asia were themselves gaining independence.

Both the PRC and the newly independent countries of Southeast Asia were born into a world divided by the Cold War. Their mutual relations were buffeted by the winds of global competition, to which China in particular reacted with sudden policy shifts. Not until the leadership of Mao Zedong gave way to that of Deng Xiaoping did some predictability come to characterise Chinese foreign policy. In the meantime, the countries of Southeast Asia coped with China in their different ways. Some, like the Philippines and Thailand, relied on American protection. Some, like Burma and Cambodia, sought to win Chinese approval through a policy of strict neutrality. Some, like

Vietnam and Laos after 1975, turned to the Soviet Union. And some, like Indonesia after 1965, eschewed all contact with the PRC.

At the same time as the countries of Southeast Asia were responding so differently to the exigencies of the Cold War, they increasingly realised the need for concerted regional policies. In 1967 Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand formed the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN). Thirty years later, ASEAN grouped all ten Southeast Asian states. A new and important multilateral dimension had been introduced into relations between Southeast Asia and China.

Two events—American defeat in Vietnam and the disintegration of the Soviet Union—had profound impacts on relations between China and Southeast Asia. While the former threw into question American willingness to guarantee the security of mainland Southeast Asian states, the latter deprived Vietnam of Soviet support. Both drove countries that had depended on outside powers (Thailand on the United States; Vietnam on the Soviet Union) to seek accommodation with China.

The impact of both events on China itself was less immediate, though in the longer term, just as significant. The aftermath of the Vietnam War exacerbated China's fear of the Soviet Union, and while the collapse of the Soviet empire removed that fear, it also severely undermined the ideological pretensions of Chinese communism. The CCP regime survived, but only by introducing free market economic reforms and by drawing increasingly on nationalism to legitimise its monopoly of power. China's continuing quest for status as a great power owes nothing now to Marxism–Leninism, but a great deal to China's cultural pride and its reading of its own history.

This brings me to the second purpose of this book, which is to try to interpret the recent history of China–Southeast Asia relations. What I shall argue is that as the influence of extra-regional powers has diminished, and as China's own political, economic and military power has grown, so traditional modes of interaction have come

increasingly to reassert themselves in shaping relations between China and the countries of Southeast Asia. The multilateral dimension of ASEAN–China relations stands in the way of this development going too far, but if it should continue, resulting tensions within ASEAN will test regional solidarity to the limit. How these tensions are dealt with will depend on how aggressively China pursues its strategic goals, how the other two principal interested major powers (the US and Japan) react, and how the ASEAN states singly and collectively move to assure their own interests and security.

The present evolving relationship between China and the countries of Southeast Asia cannot be understood simply in terms familiar to hard-headed realists among international relations analysts.¹ It is not enough to compare political institutions, economic strengths and weaknesses and military force levels: while these considerations are obviously important they do not of themselves determine how states will relate to other states in crisis situations. Other, often emotive, factors come into play, such as national pride or traditional enmity. A good example of how such ‘irrational’ factors influence decisions on interstate relations is provided by the events of 1978–79 that saw militarily weak Cambodia provoke war with Vietnam, which in turn risked war with China by invading Cambodia. In both cases, cultural presuppositions and the histories of relations between Cambodia and Vietnam and Vietnam and China significantly influenced decisions by political leaders that risked, and eventually led to war.²

Cultural and historical influences on international relations decision-making often go unanalysed because their causal impact is difficult to theorise and define. Yet they remain crucial for an understanding of relations between states, for history and cultural presuppositions influence not just strategic and military considerations (when and why force was considered a legitimate or necessary option or response),³ but also how peaceful intercourse with other states should be conducted (including diplomacy, trade, and the treatment of foreign nationals).

The principal way in which cultural factors influence the way states and nations relate to one another derives from how their foreign policy elites understand the world. This worldview, which a foreign policy elite shares for the most part with the broader political elite, includes both how the world is constituted (believed to be in a descriptive sense) and how it should be constituted (in an ideal and prescriptive sense.) They thus constitute systems of belief that are centrally informed by religion. Worldview shapes and is shaped by culture, while its temporal dimension defines how time and history are understood. Both culture and history contribute significantly to our sense of identity. How we think about ourselves as belonging to a community or national group, and how we think about others, using what metaphors and analogies, drawing upon what prejudices and stereotypes, are important cultural influences on international relations. Culture also influences decision-making processes through the education and socialisation of political elites, the politics of personal power and ambition, and the functioning of national institutions (parties, parliaments, ministries of foreign affairs, etc.).

Analysis of such influences on the behaviour of states and nations towards each other reveals many of the presuppositions underlying foreign policy decisions and action. These presuppositions include values, norms, and expectations with respect to the proper conduct of international affairs. Together they constitute what I shall call the *international relations culture* of a traditional polity or modern nation-state. Historically international relations cultures have been much more diverse (take the case of the European powers and China in the nineteenth century) than they presently are in our globalised modern world. Even so, differences in international relations cultures still frequently act as irritants in relations between states. We need to understand, therefore, how worldviews differ and how differences can be reconciled. This can only be done by examining the cognitive assumptions embedded in worldviews, systems of values, and strategic goals. Where these coincide, the conduct of relations between two

states will often not require shared commitments to be spelled out; they will be taken for granted—which may cause some amazement to those who do not share them. An example would be the willingness of certain Southeast Asian states (Thailand, Burma) to make use of ‘family’ metaphors in referring to their relations with China, a form of words that would not come naturally even to fellow members of ASEAN (Indonesia, the Philippines).

In order to understand the current state of relations between China and Southeast Asia and where they are leading, we also need to understand why historically relations took the form they did. Until the nineteenth century, China, by virtue of its size, its economic and military power and the uncompromising nature of its worldview, imposed what amounted to a hegemonic international order on all aspects of its relations with other polities. The question is: why did Southeast Asian kingdoms go along with this? Did they do so for purely pragmatic reasons in order to promote profitable trade? Were there other reasons that had to do with security, both internal and external? Or were Chinese demands not resented because they could be accommodated within Southeast Asian views of the world, and so were not considered outrageous in the way they seemed to be to nineteenth century European envoys?

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, China was forced to come to terms with an entirely different international order, based on a completely different view of the world and of how relations between states should be conducted. This was a world of competing empires, in which the Chinese empire attempted to claim some status, until humiliated by the West and Japan. Yet the Chinese empire remained essentially intact. Even after the fall of the Qing dynasty, though it lost its hegemonic influence in Southeast Asia, China continued to rule over non-Chinese peoples beyond its core cultural area (Mongols, Tibetans, Uighurs). This was a difficult transitional period, even after China became a republic, for the world system of nation-states was itself evolving. Only after the Second World War, when the countries

of Southeast Asia regained their independence, did the United Nations—as a forum of nominally equal sovereign states—come to embody the contemporary world order. It was in this context, in which the Peoples' Republic of China after 1949 was initially a pariah state excluded from the UN, that relations between the new China and the newly independent states of Southeast Asia had to be negotiated. The first stages of this process were complicated by the continued presence of former colonial powers, by the intervention in the region of the United States, by China's revolutionary ambitions, and by the internal politics of Southeast Asian nations. The later stages are still in the process of being worked out. What their form will be into the twenty-first century is unclear, though it is possible to discern certain trends.

What this book will attempt to do, in summary, is to trace the changing relations between China and Southeast Asia from the points of view of both sides. How both sides, as regions—China as unified empire (for most of the time) and Southeast Asia comprising a collection of kingdoms and states—related to each other evolved over time and according to circumstances. The international relations cultures of both China and Southeast Asian polities—comprising cognitive, cultural, political, diplomatic, economic, and military factors—also changed over time. Bilateral interaction between China and Southeast Asian polities came to constitute a set of relationships that I have called a *bilateral relations regime*.⁴ In the modern world, a bilateral relations regime between two states might be given formal expression in a bilateral treaty, but more often regimes rest simply on some sharing of principles, norms and expectations, which presuppose a sensitivity by each party to the other's interests. In large part the principles underlying early bilateral relations regimes between China and Southeast Asian kingdoms were dictated by China, but they came to be accepted by Southeast Asian ruling elites as defining expected behaviour on both sides in matters of diplomacy, security and trade. These bilateral relations regimes evolved not just out of a coincidence of interests;

they also necessarily rested on a degree of compatibility of worldviews and shared historical experience, factors which still impact upon contemporary relations between China and the states of Southeast Asia. To these worldviews and this shared historical experience we shall now turn.