

ON THE ILLUSIVENESS OF IDENTITY POSITIONING OF CHINA IN THE MANDALA SYSTEM^{©Σ}

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Emperor Qianlong's identity construction and historical analysis concerning the Mandala System, guided by a case study on social acquisition mechanisms. The author argues that Emperor Qianlong did not recognize or share the identity setting regarding China's role in the Mandala System, a unilateral policy design and understanding of Thailand's monarchs. The rewriting of imperial letters from China led to the misconception that the Chinese emperor internalized the country's role identity. This resulted in Thailand's monarchs following the teachings of Kautilya's Arthashastra and engaging in political exchanges with China. However, the diplomacy between Thailand and the Ming dynasty during the Imjin War is not a convincing case to prove that the Mandala System influenced Thailand's diplomacy with the Chinese dynasty. The author suggests that theoretical thinking regarding diplomatic strategy can help provide an interpretation framework that integrates the subjectivity of China and Southeast Asian Kingdoms before the early 19th century.

Keywords: identity construction and state formation, Kautilya's Mandala system, ancient Chinese, and Southeast Asian order system

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ILUSINYA KEDUDUKAN IDENTITI CHINA DALAM SISTEM MANDALA

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ABSTRAK

Makalah ini mengkaji konstruksi identiti Maharaja Qianlong dan analisis sejarah berkenaan Sistem Mandala, dipandu oleh kajian kes mengenai mekanisme pemerolehan sosial. Penulis berpendapat bahawa Maharaja Qianlong tidak mengiktiraf atau berkongsi tetapan identiti mengenai peranan China dalam Sistem Mandala, reka bentuk dasar unilateral dan pemahaman raja-raja Thailand. Penulisan semula surat empayar dari China membawa kepada salah tanggapan bahawa maharaja China menghayati identiti peranan negara. Ini mengakibatkan raja-raja Thailand mengikuti ajaran Arthasasthra Kautilya dan terlibat dalam pertukaran politik dengan China. Bagaimanapun, diplomasi antara Thailand dan dinasti Ming semasa Perang Imjin bukanlah kes yang meyakinkan untuk membuktikan Sistem Mandala mempengaruhi diplomasi Thailand dengan dinasti China. Para penulis mencadangkan pemikiran teori mengenai strategi diplomatik dapat membantu menyediakan rangka kerja tafsiran yang mengintegrasikan subjektiviti China dan Kerajaan Asia Tenggara sebelum awal abad ke-19.

Kata Kunci: *konstruksi identiti dan pembentukan negara, sistem Mandala kautilya, order sistem purba China dan Asia Tenggara.*

Introduction

Studying the political relations between powerful kingdoms in Southeast Asia and feudal dynasties in China is essential for understanding international relations in East Asia before the early 19th century. Scholars have discovered a distinctive pattern of interstate relationships in Southeast Asia during this time, known as the mandala system. Different names, such as mandalas (Chutintaranond 1990; Roberts 2011), inter-mandala relations, the mandalas (Shu 2012), inter-mandala relations (Dellios 2019), or the mandalic system (LÜ 2017). The first scholar to apply the mandala system theory to explain the official exchanges between Southeast Asian Kingdoms and China was Wolters (1968), who tried to answer why the monarch of the Ayudhyan Kingdom offered to help China against Japan in 1592. Some scholars (Manggala 2013; LU 2017; Chia 2022) support Wolters' analysis, stating that Southeast Asian Kingdoms viewed the Chinese dynasties as the centre of another mandala world or the *udasi* in its geopolitical mandala, and both sides conducted official exchanges equally. However, Chinese official archives recorded unequal communication, so evaluating the identity positioning of Southeast Asian kingdoms regarding China remains an issue worthy of attention.

Currently, there are three main theoretical research paths in Southeast Asian regional relations: mandala, upstream-downstream exchange, and highland-lowland research paths. Research indicates that the latter two research paths do not contradict the traditional mandala research path, which focuses on interactions in the sense of "strong material, weak culture". This traditional path is more suitable for discussing the external relations of Southeast Asian kingdoms (LV Zhengang and Zhang 2022; Zhengang 2022). However, Zhengang (2022) points out that achieving absolute objectivity and neutrality in research position and orientation is difficult when the mandala, as the theoretical research path in the field of Southeast Asian regional relations, tends to centre on the most potent lowland kingdom while undervaluing independent small countries.

Regarding examining foreign relations of Southeast Asian kingdoms in the pre-colonial period using the perspective of the pattern of interstate relations, Li (2014) believes that analyzing from a peripheral perspective is a revision of the "Huayi hierarchical order" structure that is China-centric. On the other hand, Winichakul (1994) argues that it is paradoxical to consider tributes sent by vassal states to Siam as a sign of vassal according to the mandala, the hierarchical system of power relations, but when it comes to Siam's practice of vassal etiquette towards Chinese emperors, Thai scholars argue that this is not a sign of vassal.

While existing literature has examined the advantages and drawbacks of the mandala system's viewpoint, it needs to give more attention to the tendency to lean towards Southeast Asia kingdom centralism. The scholars acknowledge that more than relying on Chinese historical materials is needed to establish a tributary relationship centred on China. Furthermore, it is crucial to note that evaluating the mandala system's research perspective from the standpoint of Southeast Asian Kingdoms' subjectivity is incomplete without considering the one-sided policy design and comprehension of China's exchanges by Southeast Asian Kingdoms, which is insufficient to foster an equitable political relationship.

This paper aims to comprehensively understand the unilateral policy design and Southeast Asian Kingdoms' identity positioning in the Mandala System regarding China's official exchanges. It focuses on the Chinese emperor's response to identity positioning and the impact of a rewritten letter on practising unilateral identity politics. Moreover, the study briefly examines Thailand's diplomacy with the Ming dynasty during the Imjin War as the first case to demonstrate the influence of the Mandala System on Thailand's diplomacy with China. In summary, this paper explores the elusive nature of identity positioning in the Mandala System concerning China and the interaction between Thai monarchs and Emperor Qianlong to bridge the existing gap.

Methodological Explanations

This research utilized qualitative methods, specifically an instrumental case study, for several reasons. The complex social setting of Thai culture's influence on views of the world order and its impact on China's identity positioning in the Mandala System, as well as the influence of Chinese culture on Emperor Qianlong's response to this positioning, were crucial factors. The case selection was based on relevance and expertise. Due to their roles as policymakers and significant players in diplomatic interactions, Qianlong Emperor, and Thailand Monarchs (such as King Taksin and Rama I) served as examples. The unit of analysis was the Sino-Thai diplomatic interaction within the triangular relationship between China, Thailand, and Burma during the Thai-Burmese War from 1759 to 1810, with a focus on the teachings of Kautylya's Arthashastra as mentioned by Wolters.

For this paper, we used two types of data sources: archival data and secondary historical sources. We focused on Chinese and English literature due to limitations in language abilities for literature search. Thai archives were primarily based on dynastic chronicles about Rama I, while the Chinese archives related to this study have been published and are easily accessible online. We mainly relied on qualitative historical analysis for our data analysis.

Theorising State Acquisition and Social Identity Construction

The basis for this study's theoretical framework is Alexander Wendt's social acquisition interaction mechanism, which pertains to the formation of national identity. Wendt explains that identity is created through both internal and external factors. The process of identity formation is influenced by two concepts: "the self" and "the other." Identity is a relational concept, with social actors constructing their identities through interactions and relationships (Wendt 1999, 282).

This paper studies national identity at the level of inter-state interaction. Therefore, when employing Wendt's identity construction theory, the main concern is the role of identity in Wendt's national identity classification. Role identity refers to the identity cognition of the self-relative to the other, so it can only exist in a specific situation or interaction with the other" (Wendt 1999, 285). The role identity is more of a relational concept, which is not inherent to the state or itself, but rather an identity obtained through long-term and continuous interaction between the state and other actors in the international system, thus possessing a more constructive nature.

When examining the development of identities in international relations, Wendt focuses on two main factors: the interaction between countries and between the

international system and countries. He emphasises the latter more, but his argument emphasizes the significance of social acquisition as a mechanism for shaping national identity. This perspective provides a valuable contribution to the field of study.

According to constructivism, cultural selection shape's identity formation through social acquisition, which involves an interactive mechanism. This mechanism can be broken down into four stages. *Firstly*, the self-acts based on a predetermined understanding of the situation, indicating to the other party (the second state) the role the self will play and the corresponding role the other will play. The self tries to convey the definition of the situation to the other. *Secondly*, the other reflects on the meaning of the self's actions. If the other revises their original idea due to the self's behaviour, then identity formation through acquisition occurs. *Thirdly*, the other acts based on their new understanding of the situation, informing the self of their role and the corresponding role of the self. *Finally*, the self-interprets the other's behaviour and prepares a response. (Wendt 1999, 416).

Constructing national identity through social interaction involves how one perceives oneself through the eyes of others. When two states, A and B, interact, they view each other as equal allies. State B will use State A's perspective to understand and adopt State A's identity, leading to a sense of self-identity. State B will also view State A as an ally and adjust its policies accordingly. It is important to note that State B must be willing to identify and internalize State A's identity accurately. Role identity is formed through mutual confirmation between the self and others and is constructed through inter-state interaction. Therefore, it requires recognition from others, not just self-understanding. Some identities may remain subjective if the other actor cannot adopt the self's identity.

In the upcoming section of this paper, we will begin by introducing the Mandala system and its main component, identity politics. This system has significantly impacted how Southeast Asia's world order functions and has dramatically influenced the rules of behaviour and interaction. Moving forward, we will analyse the response of the Qianlong Emperor to the Thai monarch's diplomatic efforts based on identity politics. Specifically, we will examine whether the Qing dynasty internalized the assumed identity from a social acquisition mechanism perspective. Lastly, we will consider the factors that influenced the Thai monarch's use of identity politics towards China, focusing on the rewritten royal letter from the same social acquisition mechanism perspective.

The Identity Politics in the Mandala System

The mandala system was a hierarchical interstate relations framework from Hindu-Buddhist culture and Indian political philosophy in ancient Southeast Asia. It was recognized and followed by great powers, including the Angkor Kingdom, Majapahit Kingdom, and ancient Thailand and Burma kingdoms. Scholars believe that based on geopolitical calculations, identity politics rules political interactions among countries within the system (LÜ 2017).

The concept of Mandala refers to a circle that surrounds Mount Sumeru, the central mountain of the universe and includes four continents. *Jambudipa*, also known as the southern continent, is the world of men and the only place where the Buddha could have been born. Ancient Southeast Asian countries accepted this cosmic idea, and powerful kingdoms in the region believed themselves to be the centre of the universe. Rulers sanctified Mount Meru as the centre of the universe and established prominent temples on top of the mountain. These rulers believed that a heaven inhabited by *Śakro devānām* Indra was located on the mountain, while the Kingdom sheltered by God was located

below the mountain. This belief in the centre of the world order was the starting point for establishing hierarchical state-power relations.

In a hierarchical power structure, the leader of the kingdom claims to be Siva, or the king who upholds dharma (the moral law), as well as the *chakravartin* (universal monarch) and *bodhisattva* (buddha-to-be) (Tambiah 1977). Originally, *chakravartin* referred to a ruler of the world. In Buddhism, it refers to rulers who can govern with *Dharma* or protect the development of Buddhism (Park 2002). During the period of Mahayana Buddhism, *chakravartin* became part of the Buddhist system and eventually became a Buddhist God. Buddhism aimed for a unified paradise on earth, where the ideal Buddhist monarch, a divine and secular universal monarch, is considered at the top of the hierarchy. All other rulers should pay tribute to and follow the law of the Buddha taught by the universal monarch (Gesick 1976).

Each kingdom in Southeast Asia saw itself as the central power in the region and aimed to emulate the behaviour of a *chakravartin*, or universal monarch. However, only one person could hold this title at a time, and there was no concept of equality between independent polities. As a result, it was impossible to recognize another *chakravartin* according to the ideology of the time (Dellios 2019).

In Southeast Asia, the king was believed to have a protective role in maintaining cosmic order. Becoming a high king involved possessing virtuous and spiritual power, resembling a Hindu *devaraja* or a Buddhist *dharmaraja*. However, Lieberman (1993) notes that pre-colonial Southeast Asia was marked by inter-state competition for survival and domination, making military power necessary. In times of evenly matched military power, multi-centre competition became a defining feature of ancient Southeast Asia. In international relations, universal monarchs refused to accept subservience to monarchs of other countries unless defeated on the battlefield.

Regarding the practical matters of state security, the Mandala system relies on secular calculations of geopolitics. Kautilya's Mandala of States provides foreign strategy options based on identity politics for monarchs who desire to be universal monarchs or kings of kings. According to The Arthashastra, the monarch should control the "field of the *chakravartin*." To achieve this goal, Kautilya recommends that the conqueror of the Mandala Centre assess allies, enemies, and neutrals based on whether they threaten to maintain hegemony. The monarch can then choose diplomatic strategies such as peace, war, neutrality, war preparation, alliance, or separation.

According to D. G. E. Hall, the political philosophy of Kautilya, introduced to Southeast Asia by *Brahman*, played a crucial role in the region's courts (Hall 1979). O. W. Wolters also believed that Kautilya's strategic theorizing was a long-standing tradition of diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Wolters used the concept of Mandala to explore the history of internal relations in Southeast Asia from the 1960s to the 1980s, and he included Kautilya's Mandala of states as a model for the external relations of Southeast Asian kingdoms (Wolters, 1968, 1982, p. 44). Scholars have found evidence of identity politics in the foreign relations of Southeast Asian kingdoms, such as the founding king of Angkor, Jayavarman II, who was officially described as "the conqueror of the circle of his enemies" (Higham 1989, 259).

In terms of applying identity politics to the political relationship between Southeast Asian kingdoms and Chinese dynasties, the existing literature can be categorized into two interpretations. The first type is based on direct historical evidence, such as the

Chinese Activities in Myanmar book from the 1770s. This book recorded the fluctuating relationship between the Burmese monarch and the Chinese emperor, which was sometimes close, sometimes estranged, sometimes allied and sometimes hostile. According to this record, their communication was not solely based on tribute but rather an equal relationship. The second type of interpretation is based on indirect evidence, where studies such as LÜ (2017), LV (2017), and Manggala (2013) suggest that Southeast Asian kingdoms followed the Mandala system and adopted Kautilya's strategy to establish their Chinese identity, due to the lack of indigenous data in Southeast Asia.

In Southeast Asia, the mandala system was shaped by Hindu-Buddhist culture and Indian political philosophy. However, it is essential to note that terms like "mandala system" were developed by modern scholars and do not necessarily prove their existence in the region. Instead, they serve as a helpful tool for explanation. To fully understand the bilateral political relationship, research should focus on one side's perspective and examine how the other side identifies and internalizes its identity setting. This will provide a more convincing theory constructed through interpretive tools.

China's Response to Identity Positioning in the Mandala System

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Thailand faced a threat to its national security from Burma. To address this issue, King Taksin, Monarch Rama I, and Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty had interactions which can be studied to understand the Southeast Asian kingdoms' connection to Chinese identity.

Emperor Qianlong's Reaction to King Taksin's Alliance Proposal

In 1768, King Taksin declared himself the King of Siam after establishing the port of Thonburi as the headquarters for defeating the Burmese forces. He sent Chen Mei, a Chinese merchant who had traded between Siam and China, to establish official relations. The Governor-General of Liangguang sent a letter to King Taksin, delivered by Mac Thien Tu, the chief of Hatien. The letter ordered King Taksin to capture the Burmese chief and send them to the Celestial Court, as the Qing Dynasty was fighting against Burma, and they were a common enemy. According to Chinese archives, King Taksin sent a letter to propose two requirements to the Qing Dynasty: the Thai side was willing to cooperate with the Qing army in attacking Myanmar, and he hoped to purchase sulphur, iron pots, and blunders.

Upon receiving the message, Emperor Qianlong responded to King Taksin on behalf of the Governor-General of Liangguang. The message clarified that blunderbusses are military weapons and have never been permitted to be sold abroad. Nonetheless, Emperor Qianlong consented to purchase sulphur and iron pots from Thailand. Additionally, the proposal for a joint attack on Burma was explicitly declined.

Regarding the Qing Dynasty's refusal, they claimed that the Celestial Court ruled the world, and their nation was prosperous with robust and influential citizens. The Chinese government believed that if they intended to eliminate Burmese bandits, they would be invincible with their army's help and not rely on small overseas countries' assistance. The Thai side could attack Burma independently. Additionally, it was not the Thai side's place to inquire about the Chinese government's plan to eradicate Burmese bandits (Dong and Qin 1985, 20-22).

Essentially, the Chinese army could not reach Thailand due to geographical barriers. This situation made it challenging for the Chinese army to collaborate with the Thai side

in real time in their efforts against Burma. As a result, China viewed this situation as unbeneficial (Dong and Qin 1985, 15-16).

In 1781, a draft of a royal letter in the Thai language indicated that Sino-Thai relations were based on equality, according to research by Erika (2007). The tone of the Thai version of the letter was equal, leading scholars to interpret it using the Mandala system theory. This theory suggests that the Thai side included China in the Kautilya geopolitical Mandala and viewed China as an ally when proposing cooperating on military operations against Burma. However, China's response did not recognize Thailand as an ally and followed an unequal discourse system.

Emperor Qianlong's Reaction to Monarch Rama I's Political Request

In 1789, the Qing Dynasty informed Rama I through a Thai messenger that the Burmese king, Meng Yun (Bodawpaya), had expressed his regret for past actions and pledged his loyalty to the Chinese emperor and government. As Thailand and Burma were tributary states of the Qing Dynasty, the court ordered them to make peace and avoid conflict. This news made it clear to Rama I that China held a strong position in Sino-Burma relations. As a result, during the Siamese embassy's visit to congratulate the Qianlong Emperor on his birthday in 1790, the envoys made an official request for the emperor to intervene and compel the Burmese to return Mergui, Martaban, and Tavoy to Siam.

These locations served as crucial points along Thailand's trade routes, connecting with the Indian Ocean and bringing significant economic advantages. Following Burma's occupation of the region, these places became strongholds of Burma, posing a threat to Bangkok's capital (Wenk 1968, 119) and holding strategic importance. Despite several attempts, Rama I was unable to reclaim them.

The response of Emperor Qianlong to Rama I's request, was that the kings of Burma who occupied those lands in the past were not the current kings of Burma. Furthermore, the occupied land was not considered the 'territory' of the Zheng family. It should be noted that Rama I was known as Zheng Hua in the official records of the Qing Dynasty, succeeding Zheng Zhao, or King Taksin, as his son. Burma has already changed leadership, and Thailand has also succeeded with a different surname. Given the time that has passed, both sides should focus on defending their current borders. Emperor Qianlong's response indicates that he did not have the territorial consciousness of a modern country and was unaware of Rama I's ambition to revive the Ayutthaya dynasty. Most importantly, Emperor Qianlong's response rejected the political request of Rama I.

Based on the royal letter of Khamhap in Thai, written in 1784 and 1786, the Thai side believed during Rama I's reign that the political relationship between China and Thailand was one of equality rather than hierarchy (Manomaivibool 2017). However, when Rama I applied the Mandala geopolitical approach to interact with the Qing Dynasty, Emperor Qianlong's political reaction did not align with the Thai side's perception of the Qing Dynasty's identity.

In discussions about Thailand's use of identity politics against China, the academic community should be aware of Thailand's diplomatic involvement in the Imjin War. This case has been cited multiple times in studies, including those by LÜ (2017), Dellios (2019), and Zhengang (2022), since Wolters used it in the early stages of developing the "Mandala" theoretical paradigm. However, research by Japanese scholar Kenako Kimura suggests that the Siamese envoy's proposal to Ming Dynasty to help attack Japan in the

Imjin War was planned by the Minister of War of the Ming Dynasty, Shi Xing (Zhou 2017). Zhou Ying's research, which is based on the Poem Tablet of Lingyan Temple as key evidence and other archival documents, indicates that Cheng Pengqi, who passed the imperial examination at the county level, advised the Ming authorities to adopt Cheng's proposal to persuade Siamese envoys to present the proposal to the Ming Emperor that Siam was willing to send troops to Japan. Therefore, it was not the Thailand monarch who ordered the proposal repeatedly cited by the academic community to support Kautilya's strategy; the Chinese side planned it. However, the proposal was ultimately rejected by the Ming authorities.

King Taksin and Rama I saw the political relationship between China and Thailand as equal and likely used Kautilya's tactics to handle China. However, Emperor Qianlong considered Thailand a tributary state of the Qing Dynasty. His response to the requests of the two Thai monarchs indicates that their perception of China's identity could be less realistic and achievable.

The Role of Adapting the Credential in the Illusiveness of Identity Positioning of China in the Mandala System

The misinterpretation resulting from the Thai diplomatic mission translators altering the imperial edict of the Chinese emperor has impacted the perspective of Thai monarchs regarding the political ties between China and Thailand. This misinterpretation has created the false belief that the Thai monarch can place China's identity within the mandala system on an equal footing.

There is evidence in the archives that the Thai side altered the Qing emperor's credentials. Specifically, this alteration pertains to the coronation of Rama I by Emperor Qianlong, which took place in China in 1787. The coronation letter bestowed upon Rama I by Emperor Qianlong was brought back to Thailand by a delegation. It was later translated into Thai, resulting in two versions of the investiture edict.

According to the Chinese version of the investiture edict, the Qing Dynasty was believed to have inherited the mandate of Heaven to rule the world, and Siam had always paid tribute to China. The edict expressed sympathy on behalf of the Qianlong emperor for the loss of Thailand due to the invasion of Burma. It also mentioned that Zheng Hua (Rama I), the son of Zheng Zhao (King Taksin), had demonstrated sincerity towards the Qing dynasty by sending an expedition to China per his father's wishes. The edict referred to Rama I as the chief of the Siamese nation and stated that Emperor Qianlong invested him with the title of "the king of Siam" because he had complied with the tribute regulations, protected his territory and people, won the support of his subjects, and because the descendants of the Ayutthaya dynasty were in exile due to the war. Lastly, the edict noted that the king of Siam was expected to defend his fiefdom to match the profound intention of Emperor Qianlong's cherishing of overseas countries (Dong and Qin 1986, 4-5).

The National Library of Thailand has two separate copies of the Thai translation. The first excerpt includes a letter written by the Emperor of the Qing Dynasty to the ruler of Ayutthaya, expressing his desire for lasting friendship between China and Thailand. The Chinese emperor was pleased that the ruler of Ayutthaya had sent envoys from afar to seek hong and chinking, as per tradition. As a result, the Emperor of the Qing Dynasty bestowed upon the ruler of Ayutthaya the title of 'the king of Siam' and granted a Camel Seal to seal the royal letter. The ruler of Ayutthaya was urged to manage his land, people, and property responsibly so as not to cause any worry to the Qing emperor. The second

excerpt details the Qing emperor's pleasure at Rama I as envoy to Chimkong, which helped to strengthen the bond between China and Thailand. The Qing emperor accepted the gift joyfully and returned the gesture (Manomaivibool 2017; Thiphakorawong 1990).

When comparing the Chinese and Thai versions of Emperor Qianlong's investiture edict, it is clear that the Thai version has made some changes to create a more equal tone. Firstly, the derogatory language towards the Thai monarch in the Chinese version has been removed, and both monarchs are referred to with the prefix "Somdet Phra Chao," which means "noble, supreme", and "God."

Secondly, while the Chinese version implies that the Thai king can only receive seals from the Chinese emperor, the Thai version focuses on the seal's value as a voucher for official communication. Thus, the political meaning has been removed, and the seal is used to seal the royal letter.

In addition, 'the fiefdom' was adapted to 'the land'. In the eyes of the Emperor of the Qing Dynasty, the Thai monarch guarded the fief for the son of Heaven as a vassal. Nevertheless, rewriting the word 'land' can be said to eliminate the political affiliation between the two sides.

Finally, the Thai side received an imperial edict from Emperor Qianlong that was essentially a letter to Rama I to maintain the friendship between the two sides. The short version of the Thai letters only mentioned the exchange of gifts between the two sides but did not mention the issue of obtaining the political title.

The investiture edict from Emperor Qianlong demonstrated the universal kingship of the Son of Heaven, and the envoys of Rama I did not challenge it during their visit to Beijing. However, upon returning to Bangkok, the royal letter from Emperor Qianlong was rewritten to comply with the prestige of the Thai monarch. This rewriting likely led to the perception in the Thai monarchy that Qianlong Emperor recognized and internalized the role identity set by the Thai monarch and was willing to interact with him equally. As a result, it was perceived that China might not be a Celestial Empire but rather a significant mandala centre in the distance that played the role of a neutral country or ally and a target for help in times of need.

Conclusion

This paper analyses the elusive nature of identity positioning in the Mandala System between Thailand monarchs and Emperor Qianlong of China. We focus on the main reason for this phenomenon from the perspective of social acquisition mechanisms regarding identity construction.

Scholars now believe that before the early 19th century, Southeast Asian kingdoms had unique political perspectives regarding their dealings with China. They saw China and Southeast Asian kingdoms as part of the same Mandala, which could be approached using Kautilya's strategy. However, the case of Sino-Thai exchanges shows that China did not positively respond to Southeast Asian kingdoms' positioning of themselves concerning China, which did not lead to any significant political influence on bilateral exchanges. This was primarily due to wishful thinking by Southeast Asian kingdoms. Similarly, the fact that the Thai side rewrote their letters of Chinese emperors to maintain the prestige of Southeast Asian monarchs in the tributary relationship also played a role in the illusory nature of Southeast Asian kingdoms' identity regarding China. This suggests that the academic community needs to move beyond the debate about tributary

and equality relationships. Instead, exploring an interpretation framework that integrates the subjectivity of both China and the Southeast Asian Kingdoms before the early 19th century is more helpful. Looking at diplomatic acts such as rewriting credentials can provide theoretical thinking from the aspect of diplomatic strategy.

So far, academics have suggested that Thailand used Kautilya's strategy when proposing diplomacy to China during the Imjin War. However, they should have realized that the Chinese orchestrated the diplomatic move and convinced Thai diplomats to present it to their emperor. As a result, relying on this case as evidence may need to be more convincing.

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