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ANCIENT CHINESE DIPLOMACY

Diplomacy is not a new activity in human history. As man has been interacting with each other and has formed political entities called states, diplomacy has been used. It served for most part of history as a non-violent means of achieving the foreign objective of Monarch Empires, Polis or States.

Ancient China is a historical state whose modern day successor is the People’s Republic of China (under the Communist Party) and the Republic of China (Taiwan).

In pre-modern times, the theory of foreign relations of China held that China was the Middle Kingdom, the center of world civilization, with the Chinese emperor being the leader of the civilized world. This view saw China as equivalent to all under heaven. All other states were considered to be tributaries, under the suzerain rule of China. This political theory was largely accepted in East Asia, often even in periods of Chinese weakness, as in the Song Dynasty, when it did not accord with actual power relationships. There were periods when Chinese foreign relations could sometimes take on isolationist tones, because of the view that the rest of the world was poor and backward and had little or nothing to offer.

Nevertheless, China was, from very early history, a center of trade. Many of China’s interaction with the outside world came via the Silk Road. This included during the 1st and 2nd century CE, contact with representatives of the Roman Empire, and during the 13th century contact with Marco Polo.

Chinese foreign policy was often aimed at containing the threat of the so called “barbarian” invaders (such as the Xiongnu, Mongols, and Jurchen) from the north. This could be done by Military means, such as active offense (campaigns into the north) or a more passive defense (as exemplified by the Great Wall). China also practiced heqin, “peace marriage”. Chinese officers distinguished between “cooked barbarian” (foreigners influenced by Chinese culture, such as Koreans) and “raw barbarians”. In some periods, Chinese foreign policy was especially assertive. One such case was during the voyages of Zheng He during the Ming dynasty.

One issue of the Western embassies to China was to kowtow. Western diplomats understood that kowtowing meant accepting the superiority of the Chinese emperor over their kings, something unacceptable. The first diplomatic contact between China and the West occurred in 1665, when Russia explorers met the Manchus in what is today northeastern China. Using the common language of Latin, which the Chinese knew from Jesuit missionaries, the Chinese emperor and Russian tsar negotiated the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689, which delineated the border between Russia and China, some of which exists to this day. This view of the world changed radically during the Qing dynasty when China had to face the realities of its weakness and European strength. The Qianlong emperor was famous for rejecting an offer of trade by the British diplomat George Macartney in 1793, an action which angered Britain and would contribute to the Opium war. During the latter half of the 19th century, China had to learn the subtleties of European system of diplomacy. Although China’s long term goal through this period was to regain its former stature, its short term goal was simply to survive. Possessing a weak army, it resorted to using international law and conflict between the different European nations to maintain a tenuous self-existence.

RELATIONS WITH ROME

Sino-Roman relations started first on an indirect basis during the 2nd century BCE. China and Rome progressively inched closer with the embassies of Zhang Qian in 130 BCE and the military expeditions of China to Central Asia, until general Ban Chao attempted to send an envoy to Rome around 100 CE. Several alleged Roman embassies to China were recorded by a number of ancient Chinese historians. The first one on record, supposedly from either the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius or the later emperor Marcus Aurelius, arrived in 166 CE.

The rapid growth of Roman commerce with ancient China likely would not have been possible without two major preceding developments, first by Alexander the Great and the ancient Greeks, and second by the spread of embassies of the Han Dynasty into Central and Western Asia.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRADE LINKS

The first major step in opening trade links between the East and the West came with the expansion of Alexander the Great deep into Central Asia, as far as the Ferghana Valley at the borders of the modern day Xinjiang region of China, where he founded in 329 BCE a Greek settlement in the city of Alexandria Eschate “Alexandria the Furthest”, Khujand (also called Khozdent or Khojent – formerly Leninabad), in the modern state of Tajikistan. The Greeks were to remain in Central Asia for the next three centuries, first through the administration of the Seleucid Empire , and then with the establishment of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom in Bactria. They kept expanding eastward, especially during the reign of Euthydemus I (230-200 BCE), who extended his control to sogdiana, reaching and going beyond the city of Alexandria Eschate. There are indications that he may have led expeditions as far as Kashgar in Xinjiang, possibly leading to the first known contacts between China and the West around 200 BCE. The Greek historian Strabo writes that “they extended their empire even as far as the Seres (China) and the Phryni”.

Zhang Qian’s Embassy

The next step came around 130 BCE, with the embassies of the Han Dynasty to central Asia, following the reports of the ambassador Zhang Qian (who was originally sent to obtain an alliance with the Yuezhi against the Xiong-Nu, but in vain).The Chinese emperor Wudi became interested in developing relationships with the sophisticated urban civilizations of Ferghana, Bactria and Parthia : The son of Heaven on hearing all this reasoned thus: Ferghana (Dayuan) and the possessions of Bactria (Daxia) and Parthia (Anxi) are large countries, full of rare things, with a population living in fixed homes and given to occupations somewhat identical with those of the Chinese people, but with weak armies, and placing great value on the rich produce of China.

The Chinese subsequently sent numerous embassies, around ten every year, to these countries and as far as Seleucid Syria. Thus more embassies were dispatched to Anxi (Parthia), Yancai (who later joined the Alans), Lijian (Syria under the Seleucids), Tiaozhi (Chaldea) and Tianzhu (northwestern India). As a rule, rather more than ten such missions went forward in the course of a year and at the least five or six.

Trade with the Roman Empire followed soon, confirmed by the Roman craze for Chinese silk (supplied through the Parthian) from the 1st century BC, even though the Romans thought silk was obtained from trees.

With the expansion of the Roman Empire in the middle-East during the 2nd Century, the Romans gained the capability to develop shipping and trade in the Indian Ocean. Several ports have been excavated on the coast of India which contains Roman remains. Several Romans probably travelled farther to the East, either on Roman, Indian or Chinese ships. The first group of people claiming to be an embassy of Romans to China is recorded 166, sixty years after the expeditions to the Chinese general Ban Chao. It came to Emperor Huan of Han China, “from Autun (Emperor Antoninus Pius), king of Daqin (Rome).”

The existence of China was clearly known to Roman cartographers of the time, since its name and position is depicted in Ptolemy’s Geographia, which is dated to c. 150. It is located beyond the Aurea Chersonesus (“Golden Peninsula”), which refers to the Southeast Asian peninsula. It is shown as being on the Magnus Sinus (“Great Gulf”), which presumably corresponds to the known areas of the China Sea at the time; although Ptolemy represents it as tending South-east rather than North-east. Trade throughout the Indian Ocean was extensive from the 2nd century, and many trading ports have been identified in India and Sri Lanka with Roman communities, through which the Roman embassy passed.

Other embassies may have been sent after this first encounter, but were not recorded, until an account appears about presents sent in the early 3rd century by the Roman Emperor to the Emperor Taitsu of the kingdom of Wei (reigned 227-239) in Northern China. The presents consisted of articles of glass in a variety of colors. While several Roman Emperors ruled during this time, the embassy, if genuine, may have been sent by Alexander Severus; since his successors reigned briefly and were busy with civil wars. Another embassy from Daqin is recorded in the year 284, as bringing “tribute” to the Chinese empire. This embassy presumably was sent by the Emperor Carus (282-283), whose short reign was occupied with war with Persia.

China gave birth to one of the four greatest ancient civilization of the world and has a recorded history of about 4000 years. In feudal times the Chinese created a civilization that led the world, but China lagged behind the West after the Industrial Revolution. In 1840 Britain launched the Opium war and forced open the door of China with its warships and cannons. After that, other Western powers such as France, Russia, Japan, Germany and the United States also invaded China successively, and as a result the country lost almost all of its national sovereignty. Statistics show that between 1840 and 1949, the imperialist powers had forced 1,175 unequal treaties on China. The history of China’s diplomacy in that period of more than a century was full of humiliation.

In order to fight for their national independence and liberation and for democracy and freedom, the Chinese people made endless sacrifices. In 1921 the Communist Party of China was set up. Led by the Communist Party, the Chinese people overthrew the rule of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism after 28 years of armed struggle, and founded the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Thereupon the Chinese people stood up and became masters of their own destiny, and China’s diplomacy began a new chapter.

After the founding of New China, the basic objectives of its diplomacy included: to secure national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, maintain world peace, and strive for an international environment favorable to the country’s development. At that time the socialist countries headed by the Soviet Union and the imperialist countries headed by the United States were in relentless confrontation. The United States refused to recognize the Government of the People’s Republic of China, and it even went further to impose political containment, economic blockade and military threat against China. In face of such a situation, China openly declared that it sided with the socialist camp, strived to enhance the alliance with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, and firmly opposed the US policy of aggression and war. The Common Program of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, which served as the interim Constitution in the early days of the People’s Republic, stipulates, “The principle of the foreign policy of the people’s Republic of China is the protection of the independence, freedom, integrity of territory and sovereignty of the country, upholding of lasting international peace and friendly cooperation between the peoples of all countries, and opposition to the imperialist policy of aggression and war.”

In conformity with new changes, the new Constitution enacted in 1982 summarizes the basic principles of China’s foreign policy as the following: “China adheres to an independent foreign policy as well as to the five principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence in developing diplomatic relations and economic and cultural exchanges with other countries; China consistently opposes imperialism, hegemonism and colonialism, works to strengthen unity with the people of other countries, supports the oppressed nations and the developing countries in their just struggle to win and preserve national independence and develop their national economies, and strives to safeguard world peace and promote the cause of human progress.”

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