



## Three Interpretation Paths on Understanding Political Relations between Southeast Asian Kingdoms and China from the Mandala System' s Perspective

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**Abstract:** In the late 1960s, some scholars started using the constituent elements of the mandala system, the traditional interstate relations model in Southeast Asia, to explore the official relationship between China and Southeast Asian Kingdoms and gradually formed three interpretation paths. The first is to use the mandala in the geopolitical sense to locate bilateral political relations. The second is about how the political culture with the universal monarch as the core enables Southeast Asia monarchs to join the tribute system. The third focuses on the different understanding of tribute in Southeast Asian countries. They supplement or revise the traditional view that the tributary relationship between ancient China and Southeast Asian Kingdoms was political. However, these three interpretation paths have their limitations. The review shows that scholars ignore the universal kingship of Southeast Asian Kingdoms' discourse system to China. The unilateral policy design and understanding could not convincingly interpret the unique political relationship formed by bilateral interaction. Therefore, the universal kingship claimed by the Chinese emperors and Southeast Asian Kingdoms monarchs must be examined. It should study how the centers of the mandala system smoothly transited between claiming universal kingship and pursuing equality in real politics. It also explores what diplomatic strategies could maintain the subjectivity of the monarchs of Chinese dynasties and Southeast Asian Kingdoms.

**Keywords:** China, mandala system, Southeast Asian Kingdoms, tributary relationship

### Introduction

The political relationship between ancient China and Southeast Asian Kingdoms has historically been conceptualized within the framework of a "tributary relationship." This model, rooted in the "ancient East Asian international system," places the unified "Chinese Empire" at its core, surrounded by peripheral states. Central to this framework are the "Hua Yi order," the "tributary system," and the "central-marginal pattern," all of which stem from a Confucian worldview. The Hua Yi order is a hierarchical ideology derived from Confucian teachings that positioned China, regarded as the pinnacle of civilization (Hua), at the center [1]. Surrounding states, often referred to as the "Yi" or barbarians, were seen as culturally inferior and thus positioned in a subordinate, peripheral role. The tributary system, as an extension of this worldview, required these peripheral states to acknowledge the supremacy of the Chinese emperor through the offering of tribute, thereby reinforcing their subordination and affirming China's cultural and political superiority. In contrast, Southeast Asia operated under a different political framework known as the Mandala system, rooted in Hindu-Buddhist cosmology. This system was characterized by decentralized, overlapping spheres of influence where regional kings, or chakravartins, exerted power not through rigid hierarchy but through flexible and sometimes overlapping control. This system allowed for multiple centers of power, reflecting a more complex and fluid political landscape compared to the rigid hierarchy of the Chinese tributary system.

The traditional view of Sino-Southeast Asian relations as a tributary relationship has been heavily influenced by ancient Chinese official historical records, which often categorized the missions sent by Southeast Asian Kingdoms as tribute missions, thereby labeling these kingdoms — such as Champa, Siam, Dai Viet, Srivijaya, Majapahit, Melaka, and the Laotian Kingdom of Lan Xang — as vassals of China. However, this view has been critiqued for its China-centric perspective, which overlooks several critical factors.

Firstly, this traditional perspective tends to focus on the cultural attractiveness of China while neglecting the role of military and political power balances and the practical political and economic needs that also shaped these interactions [2]. Secondly, it interprets ancient East Asian international relations largely from the viewpoint of China's foreign policy, often ignoring the perspectives and reactions of neighboring countries [3]. Lastly, this perspective falsely presents the East Asian order as monocentric, centered solely on China, without recognizing that Southeast Asian neighbors also asserted their own forms of universal kingship based on Buddhist and Hindu principles [4]. In reality, the traditional East Asian order was multi-centered, with multiple kingdoms claiming central authority within their respective spheres of influence. In recent years, scholars have increasingly recognized the limitations of the China-centric model and have called for a reassessment of Sino-Southeast Asian relations from the perspectives of China's neighbors. This shift acknowledges the complexity of regional dynamics and challenges the traditional tributary model by exploring alternative frameworks, such as the Mandala system.



Quan Hexiu and Qi Wenchuang, for example, have conducted comprehensive literature reviews that examine the evolution of the tributary relationship across different historical periods. Quan argues that scholars should not only focus on China as the central power in this system but also give equal attention to the roles and perspectives of neighboring countries [5]. Qi, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of understanding the regional integrity of the tributary system during the Ming and Qing Dynasties and suggests that scholars should conduct comparative studies of various tributary countries [6].

Wan Xiao has contributed to this discussion by questioning the very existence and nature of the tributary system. He argues that scholars should first determine whether a tributary system truly existed and, if so, what form it took, before exploring other types of relationships that may have existed between China and Southeast Asian Kingdoms [7]. This approach opens the door for considering alternative frameworks, such as the Mandala system, which may better capture the complexity of Southeast Asian political interactions.

Other scholars have focused on bilateral relations to further explore these dynamics. For instance, Liu Xueping's research on Sino-Burmese relations during the Qing Dynasty highlights the suzerain-vassal relationship between China and the Konbaung Empire, providing insights into how these relationships were managed within the framework of the tributary system [8]. Similarly, Wang Yanghong's doctoral thesis on Sino-Siamese relations categorizes the literature into perspectives based on China, Thailand, and other countries, and reviews the representative research on Sino-Thai relations from political, economic, and cultural viewpoints [9].

Despite the dominance of the tributary system theory in historical studies, there has been growing interest in understanding how Southeast Asian Kingdoms perceived their political contacts with China through the lens of the Mandala system. While some scholars have approached this topic comprehensively, others have focused on specific case studies. However, few historians and international relations scholars have systematically reviewed this research [10], [11]. To better understand why Southeast Asian Kingdoms maintained official contacts with China from their perspective, it is crucial to revisit the political ideas and organizational forms of Southeast Asia. This approach highlights the subjectivity of Southeast Asian Kingdoms and challenges the China-centric view. By examining these relations through the Mandala system's perspective, this paper aims to offer a more nuanced interpretation of Sino-Southeast Asian relations, addressing the theoretical and empirical gaps in the existing research.

## **Methods**

The first step in this commentary involved seeking and identifying relevant literature, focusing on sources in Chinese and English due to language limitations. The search strategy used several keyword combinations, including "mandala, Southeast Asian, China, tribute," "tributary relations, Southeast Asian, political theory," and "mandala, Southeast Asian, Confucian order, tributary relation." Databases such as CNKI and ProQuest were primarily used, with additional searches conducted on Google Scholar. These searches yielded a range of essential literature, particularly when using terms like "mandala system, tributary relations, Southeast Asian, China, Ming and Qing" or "tributary relations, Chakravartin." Further literature was identified through a retrieval cycle method, guided by insights from LÜ Zhengang's literature review on English-language works [12].

To ensure relevance, exclusion criteria were applied, filtering out publications that did not address the construction or deconstruction of tribute relations from the Mandala system perspective. The selected literature provided valuable insights into the political relationships between China and Southeast Asian Kingdoms, focusing specifically on the Mandala system. Given the historical nature of most relevant literature, this paper's research methodology primarily employed historical analysis. This approach was critical in understanding the nuanced elements of the Mandala system, aiding in the interpretation of foreign relations concepts and interactive events within the Southeast Asian context.

The purpose of the historical analysis was not to develop a comprehensive theory but to classify and evaluate different interpretation paths based on the elements of the Mandala system. The analysis aimed to assess these paths' effectiveness in explaining the political relationships between China and Southeast Asian Kingdoms.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this paper is centered on the Mandala system, a distinctive pattern of interstate relations that existed in Southeast Asia until the early 19th century. This pattern has been referred to by various terms, such as the Mandala system [13]-[15], mandalas [16], inter-mandala relations [17], or the mandalic system [11]. Despite the different terminologies, Wolters's elaboration of the Mandala concept remains widely recognized [18], [19]. According to Wolters, a Mandala typically involved a king who identified with divine and universal authority and "claimed personal hegemony over the other rulers in his Mandala who, in theory, were his obedient allies and vassals" [19].

Hindu-Buddhist culture significantly influenced the formation of local world orders and interstate interactions in Southeast Asia. In Buddhism, the chakravartin, or universal monarch, is a divine and secular ruler who governs a unified paradise on earth with compassion and justice. The chakravartin's universal kingship is closely tied to the highest status accorded by Buddhism, where the Buddha is the supreme entity in the sacred world, and the chakravartin is his counterpart in the secular world [20]. This concept implies that there can only be one universal monarch within a specific era and space [20]. Therefore, any ruler who successfully claims the center of a Mandala system, a status requiring recognition from others, can also claim the title of chakravartin, or universal emperor [17].

While the theory of the universal monarch suggests a monistic model of the regional system, the actual political landscape was more complex. In practice, the regional political configuration was characterized by the coexistence of multiple central powers, each with well-matched strength, leading to a decentralized and fluid structure. The belief in the centrality

of a local world order underscores the hierarchical nature of the Mandala system. An essential aspect of claiming the title of chakravartin was expanding the "circle of vassalage" [21]. Maintaining this hierarchical relationship relied on the High King's authority and the loyalty of personal vassals of tributary states, with tribute remaining a crucial form of interaction, symbolizing submission and reinforcing the hierarchical order.

In contemporary academic discourse, Kautilya's Mandala model and Tambiah's Galactic Polity model are often referenced when discussing the interactive architecture of Mandala systems [22]. It is crucial to recognize that the regional order shaped by China was not the only system in ancient East Asia; an independent Mandala system also existed in Southeast Asia. This system profoundly influenced the interaction rules and behaviors among Southeast Asian countries, shaping their perceptions of China's identity, role, and political relations [23].

### **Three Interpretation Paths**

The political relations between Southeast Asian Kingdoms and Chinese dynasties have been interpreted through three primary paths within the framework of the Mandala system. These paths include the interactive relationship model, the political culture centered around the universal monarch, and the connotation of different tributary forms.

#### **Identity Positioning of China in the Mandala System**

Wolters was a pioneering scholar in applying the Mandala system theory to explain the official exchanges between Southeast Asian Kingdoms and China. He used this framework to understand why the Ayudhya Kingdom offered to assist China against the first Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592, suggesting that Thailand's diplomatic strategy aligned with Kautilya's Mandala theory [24]. According to Wolters, the Mandala, as a geopolitical concept, was well-established in Southeast Asia, with the Thai monarch perceiving Japan as a significant "rearward" enemy and China as a "rearward" ally. This strategic outlook led Thailand to offer military support to China [24].

Although Wolters' research did not directly focus on East Asian international relations or tributary ties, his interpretation provided a novel perspective on these relationships. His analysis has been supported by scholars such as Pandu Utama, who argued that the Majapahit Kingdom engaged with the Chinese Empire as a major power within its geopolitical Mandala, viewing their relationship primarily as trade connections rather than hierarchical tribute [25]. This view challenges the traditional notion that China dominated pre-colonial Southeast Asia under the tribute system, suggesting instead a more balanced and strategic interaction [25]. Similarly, LÜ Zhengang contended that Southeast Asian Kingdoms, such as Kerajaan Singasari, viewed China not as a Celestial Empire but as another significant Mandala center that could be either an ally or an adversary, depending on circumstances [11]. This perspective is further supported by Myanmar scholars who rejected the existence of suzerain-vassal relations between China and Myanmar, reinforcing the idea of a more balanced geopolitical relationship [26].

#### **Political Culture with the Universal Monarch as the Core**

The concept of the universal monarch, or chakravartin, deeply rooted in Hindu-Buddhist culture, plays a central role in Southeast Asian political thought. This belief influenced how Southeast Asian Kingdoms interacted with China. Mark Mancall highlighted that Thailand's monarch, regarded as a chakravartin, was able to engage with China's Confucian tributary system without compromising his divine status. This compatibility between Siamese political theory and Confucian values allowed Thailand to maintain its autonomy while participating in the tributary system [27]. Prapin Manomaivibool echoed this view, arguing that Siamese political imperatives could accommodate Confucian ideals without significant conflict, enabling a functional tributary relationship [28], [29].

These analyses reveal that Siam's foreign policy was driven by the need to align with the dominant regional power, which, at the time, was China. This alignment was based on the judgment that the Chinese emperor would not challenge the universal kingship of Thailand's monarch, allowing Thailand to participate in the tributary system while retaining its sovereignty [27].

#### **Connotation of Different Tributary Forms**

Tribute, a common diplomatic practice in East Asia, was interpreted differently by China and Southeast Asian regional powers. While China viewed tribute as a means to reinforce its central position in a hierarchical order, Southeast Asian Kingdoms saw it as a strategy to establish or maintain equal relations within their Mandala systems. In these systems, paying tribute was not merely an act of submission but a strategic interaction that allowed for the concentration of resources from vassals and ensured mutual protection [4].

China's approach to tributary relations was characterized by the principle of giving more and receiving less, often rewarding tributary missions generously [30], [31]. For China, this practice demonstrated its benevolence and cultural superiority. However, Southeast Asian Kingdoms, following the Mandala system, interpreted this exchange differently. Martin Stuart suggested that these kingdoms may have viewed the tribute offered to the Chinese emperor as a polite acknowledgment of superior status rather than a sign of vassalage, ensuring the continuation of mutually beneficial trade relations [32].

### **Discussions**

Trends of Interpreting Political Relations from the Mandala System's Perspective: The existing studies on Southeast Asian Kingdoms maintaining official contacts with China based on the mandala system aim to supplement or deconstruct the traditional view that the political relationship between them was a tributary relationship. The divinity of Thailand's monarchs enabled Thailand to join and abide by the Confucian tributary system. Such a view makes researchers think that the tributary system can be extended to Southeast Asia, which should meet the needs of China and Southeast Asian Kingdoms and get the ideological rationalization of both sides. However, according to the practical model of regional

foreign relations shaped by Kautilya's political philosophy and the connotation of various paying tribute forms, Southeast Asian Kingdoms' communication with China focuses on making friends to obtain economic benefits and allies. Both deconstructed the tributary system. The scholars who supported deconstructing the tributary relationship far exceeded those who constructed it.

This review indicates that, after putting forward the entry point to discuss the external relations of the classic mandala polity in Southeast Asia based on the mandala system, their respective theoretical discourse has attracted a group of followers from China, Southeast Asian countries, and Western countries. The number of research cases on bilateral relations is increasing. At first, it was just a discussion of history's political relationship between the Thai and Chinese dynasties. Later, the political relationship between the dynasties in Myanmar's history and the Chinese dynasty and the political relationship between the dynasties in Indonesia's history and the Chinese dynasty was also studied by scholars. Research methods also tend to be diversified. In addition to historical analysis, theory-guided historical analysis, process tracing, and discourse analysis are also adopted. Despite that, only a few researchers reflect and reconsider the interpretation paths regarding deconstruction and construction initiated by scholars.

**The Disparity between Wolters's and Mancall's Interpretation Paths:** Wolters's interpretation path deconstructed the traditional tribute relationship, while Mancall's interpretation path constructed a traditional tribute relationship. The analysis of the role of the universal monarch in the political culture could account for the disparity between the two analysis paths. When Wolters used the mandala as a term for traditional Southeast Asian international relations, he explained it considering geopolitical meaning [24]. However, Southeast Asian rulers favored a religious center for a political mandala that displayed geopolitical calculations [17]. Thus, Wolters linked the mandala political system to religious culture in another research [18], [19]. Although the literature following Wolters's analysis path emphasizes the influence of Indian religious culture when they state the title of the ruler of the center in the mandala system, its aim is only to demonstrate that the political ontology in Southeast Asia is different from that in China. Then, Southeast Asian Kingdoms before the early 19th century understood China's political formation from their unique political world and believed that China was the same mandala as the Southeast Asian Kingdoms, which can be dealt with using Kautilya's strategy. As a result, how the concept of the chakravartin affects the political relations between China and Southeast Asian Kingdoms is not considered.

However, the concept of a chakravartin in Thai political theory is not only treated as the background knowledge for understanding Sino-Thai political relations but is also discussed as a political factor influencing the establishment of Sino-Thai political relations in Mancall's interpretation path. For example, he argues that the Chinese emperor would not challenge the identity of the universal emperor of Thailand, which could establish tributary relations with China [27].

**The Similarity between Wolters's and Martin Stuart's Interpretation Paths:** Wolters and Martin Stuart's interpretation path deconstructed the traditional tribute relationship between Chinese dynasties and Southeast Asian Kingdoms. This similarity should be related to the argument of both interpretation paths that Southeast Asia Kingdoms had constructed a unilateral understanding of the political relations between Southeast Asia Kingdoms and China. Both interpretation paths proposed that Southeast Asian Kingdoms had their political ontology and interactive mechanism different from those of the Chinese dynasties. These differences persisted during the long and multi-level intercourse between Southeast Asian Kingdoms and China. Thus, both interpretation paths argue that Southeast Asian Kingdoms would only understand the identity positioning of China and the meaning of the tribute according to the distinctive background knowledge regarding the political world prevalent in Southeast Asia rather than regulating by the Confucian order [14], [11], [25], [32].

In addition, the unilateral understanding of the political relations mentioned in this literature review lies in that Wolters's and Martin Stuart's interpretation paths only discussed how Southeast Asia Kingdoms understood and positioned their political relationship with China without examining whether such understanding and positioning were jointly recognized and accepted by both parties. Further, they infer this ambiguity avoids political conflict between the two sides.

**Gaps in Three Interpretation Paths:** Although the three interpretation paths are different, they provide a new theoretical perspective and way of thinking. This theoretical perspective no longer regards the exchanges between countries as the foreign relations of traditional China but puts the surrounding countries in an equal position. It also prompts the researchers to realize that the ancient kingdoms in Southeast Asia took the initiative to use an official relationship with China. While their academic principles are recognized, their issues should be addressed. The objective assessment could be a reference for academic circles to conduct similar studies.

**Gaps in the Role of Universal Monarch:** The role of a universal monarch or the chakravartin regulating Southeast Asia Kingdoms' interaction with Chinese dynasties has yet to be fully discussed based on the mandala system. There are three reasons for putting forward this gap. First, based on their understanding of the same political world in Southeast Asia before the early 19th century, the views of the literature mentioned above are separate from those of other scholars. Scholars like Pandu Utama, LÜ Zhengang, and Colin Chia argue that Southeast Asia Kingdoms considered China the center of another distant mandala system; both parties were equal from the perspective of Kautilya's realistic politics. However, Wang Gengwu states that none of the kings of Southeast Asian countries had ever thought of creating a national equality mechanism due to religious sources and applying it to international relations [33]. Rosita Dellios also argues that there was no recognition then of equality among the mandalas because it was ideologically not possible to recognize another chakravartin [17].

Second, in addition to supporting equal relations, certain scholars find evidence that the monarchs of Southeast Asian Kingdoms as universal monarchs were superior to the Chinese emperor. As for the records of Sino-Burmese relations, The Glass Palace mentions that Sino-Burmese relations were sometimes allies and sometimes enemies [26]. Nevertheless, The Chinese Activities in Burma records that the Burmese monarch Anuruddha possessed supreme divine power and

forced the Chinese emperor to agree that Anuruddha brought back the Emerald Buddha, a gift from the god Indra that symbolized universal kingship [26]. Finally, in terms of the records of Sino-Thai relations, King Naresuan's diplomacy of 1592 was interpreted as an important event in Sino-Thai equal relations. Nevertheless, the chronicles compiled and written in the Thonburi and early Bangkok period referred to monarch Naresuan as a chakravartin who ruled over the four great continents [13]. In addition, Yasovarman I of Angkor was called the supreme master of the earth, which had for its limits the barbarians, the ocean, China, and Champa [24].

Finally, the studies of Thongchai Winichakul and Sunait Chutintaranond do not support the opinion that the role of the universal monarch was largely a spiritual factor that could not regulate the diplomatic action of paying tribute. Sunait pointed out that a major motivation behind the Siamese-Burmese wars was the desire of the two states' sovereigns to prove who the true chakravartin was [13]. Thongchai argues that the protection of religion and the pursuit of supreme power are the same [21]. It also means that the religious and political identities of the monarchs of Southeast Asia Kingdoms following the mandala system cannot be separated, which does not conform with Mark Mancal's view [27].

To sum up, it is well-known that the Chinese emperors and the monarchs of Southeast Asian Kingdoms claim universal kingship with the title of Son of Heaven and the Chakravartin, respectively. Scholars have constructed an interpretative framework of equal relations to disintegrate the discourse system that Southeast Asian Kingdoms are China's tributary country based only on China's official historical data. What contradicts this is that the historical materials retained by Southeast Asian Kingdoms also construct the discourse system of universal kingship. This discourse system brought China into the ruling range. Failure to explain this contradiction would weaken the persuasiveness of understanding the political relationship between China and Southeast Asian Kingdoms based on the mandala system.

Thus, it is necessary to comprehensively collect and objectively sort out the records about the exchanges between Southeast Asian Kingdoms and the Chinese dynasties. It is also necessary to briefly elucidate whether the supremacy and uniqueness of the chakravartin in Buddhist theory shape the political relationship among the monarchs who advocate universal kingship in real politics. Nevertheless, more importantly, it should study how Southeast Asian Kingdoms following the mandala system smoothly transitioned between its claiming universal kingship and its pursuit of equality with the influence of limited power in real politics.

Gaps between Unilateral Policy Design and Bilateral Interaction: The important premise for establishing a particular political relationship between countries is that self-identity has become a shared identity in bilateral interaction. The academic community now recognizes that the discourse system embodied by Chinese historical materials alone is insufficient to build a tributary relationship centered on China [34]-[36]. Similarly, using only the mandala system discourse related to China is not enough to build an equal political relationship. If the perception of China's identity within the mandala system did not receive recognition and internalization from China, it would be the unilateral policy design and understanding of Southeast Asian Kingdoms on China's exchanges.

As for whether the Chinese Dynasty and Southeast Asian Kingdoms knew each other's political requirements, the Linxiao incident in 1482 [37], [38] and Rama IV's Proclamation of 1868 [39], [40] showed that Thailand knew China's political position towards Thailand, and China also rejected Thailand's request for equal exchanges. Therefore, it proves that the view that Southeast Asian Kingdoms did not know the negative impact of their exchanges with China on its political positioning is not impeccable.

Therefore, building an interpretation framework that simultaneously integrates the subjectivity of China and the Southeast Asian Kingdoms would help to understand the friendly bilateral relations between China and Southeast Asian Kingdoms before the early 19th century. Even though the Thai side is aware of China's position on its political status, both sources show that the former side maintains a long record of sending envoys to the latter [29]. The suggested research direction is to take Thailand as a case to explore what diplomatic strategies they have adopted to meet the political requirements of both sides.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Through this review, the paper seeks to identify trends, disparities, similarities, and gaps in the literature to find a new angle to study the political relations between Southeast Asian Kingdoms and China before the early 19th century.

This research shows that while criticizing the tributary discourse based on universal kingship in ancient China, scholars should not ignore the same issue in Southeast Asian Kingdoms. In particular, when scholars argue that the discourse related to China affects the official contact between Southeast Asian Kingdoms and China, they should differentiate the reality and imagination of the mandala system and examine the disjuncture between the discourse and actual practice. It also indicates that the unilateral policy design and understanding could not convincingly interpret a certain political relationship formed by bilateral interaction. On the premise of recognizing that the supremacy and uniqueness of the chakravartin apply to the relationship between the centers following the mandala system in mainland Southeast Asia, it is necessary to examine the basis of the accommodation of the political relationship between the Son of Heaven in China and the chakravartin in the Southeast Asian Kingdoms. It should study how Southeast Asian Kingdoms following the mandala system smoothly transition between claiming universal kingship and pursuing equality owing to limited power. Using the historical records of diplomatic conflicts in Sino-Thai exchanges, it also explores what diplomatic strategies could maintain the subjectivity of the monarchs of Chinese dynasties and Southeast Asian Kingdoms.

It must be admitted that this paper has limitations due to language ability. Since the researcher only knows Chinese and English, the researchers in Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, and other countries can only be included in the scope of the review after publishing their research in Chinese and English. It affects the number and representativeness of the literature collected and identified. In addition, the literature reviews related to the topic of this study might be written

in the languages of Southeast Asian countries. These resources might be excluded. In order to develop a more comprehensive and thought-provoking analysis in the coming years, the researcher will actively seek opportunities and look forward to collaborating with Southeast Asian scholars to address these limitations in this research.

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