Decentering Hegemony and "Open" Orders: Fifteenth-Century Melaka in a World of Orders

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I explain the differences between centered and decentered systems (world orders) by adopting a relational approach to international relations. I argue that centric systems have three characteristics: most meaningful social relations are oriented toward one center; this center establishes the practices governing social relations; and the center recognizes no peers. Conversely, if these attributes are not the chief hallmarks of a social system, then it is decentered. More specifically, I analyze fifteenth-century Melaka to show that simultaneous participation in multiple world orders is a distinct response to hegemony that decenters it. Melaka recognized Ming hegemony but decentered it by also participating in the Persian cosmopolis, and by emerging as a (mini-)center in maritime Southeast Asia. My analysis has two main implications. First, I make the case for "open" orders—multiple, (partially) overlapping orders as viable and long-lasting systems—in contrast to the realist and liberal logics of orders of exclusion/inclusion. Second, this has implications for contemporary Southeast Asian "choices" in the context of the US–China rivalry as these states are likely to "openly" participate in the American and Chinese world orders simultaneously instead of choosing between them. My relational perspective rooted in global history argues against treating historical East Asia as "closed" for such a view is prone to both Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism. Instead, I emphasize the pivotal role played by Melaka—that pursued the strategy of attraction to manage its unequal world—and make the case for "open" orders without flattening power hierarchies or cultural differences.

J'explique les différences entre les systèmes centrés et décentrés (des ordres mondiaux) en adoptant une approche relationnelle aux Relations internationales (RI). Selon moi, les systèmes centrés présentent trois caractéristiques : la majorité des relations sociales significatives sont orientées vers un centre, ce centre établit les pratiques qui régissent les relations sociales et le centre ne reconnaît aucun pair. À l'inverse, quand ces attributs ne constituent pas les principales caractéristiques d'un système social, celui-ci est décentré. Plus précisément, j'analyse la ville de Melaka au quinzième siècle pour montrer que la participation simultanée à divers ordres mondiaux relève d'une réponse distincte à l'hégémonie, qui la décentre. Melaka reconnaissait l'hégémonie de la dynastie Ming, mais l'a décentrée en participant également à la cosmopole perse et en se positionnant tel un (mini)centre de l'Asie maritime du Sud-Est. Mon analyse sous-entend deux implications principales. D'abord, je défends les ordres « ouverts », des ordres multiples, qui se chevauchent (partiellement), tels des systèmes viables et durables, par opposition aux logiques réalistes et libérales des ordres d'exclusion/inclusion. Ensuite, les implications qui en découlent s'appliquent aux « choix » contemporains de l'Asie du Sud-Est dans un contexte de rivalité entre Chine et États-Unis. En effet, ces États participeront probablement « ouvertement » aux ordres mondiaux américain et chinois de façon simultanée, plutôt que d'en choisir un seul. Ancrée dans l'histoire mondiale, ma perspective relationnelle s'oppose à la considération de l'Asie de l'Est historique comme « fermée », car un tel point de vue est aussi bien sujet au sinocentrisme qu'à l'eurocentrisme. Je souligne plutôt le rôle décisif joué par Melaka, qui a continué d'appliquer la stratégie d'attraction pour gérer son monde inégal, et défends les ordres « ouverts », sans aplatir les hiérarchies de pouvoir ou les différences culturelles.

Explicamos las diferencias entre los sistemas centrados y descentrados (órdenes mundiales) adoptando un enfoque relacional de las RRII. Sostenemos que los sistemas céntricos presentan tres características: la mayoría de las relaciones sociales significativas están orientadas hacia un centro; este centro establece las prácticas que rigen las relaciones sociales; y el centro no reconoce a ningún par. Por el contrario, si estos atributos no son los principales distintivos de un determinado sistema social, entonces se trata de un sistema descentrado. Más concretamente, analizamos la Malaca del siglo XV para demostrar que la participación simultánea en múltiples órdenes mundiales es una respuesta distinta a la hegemonía que la descentra. Malaca reconocía la hegemonía Ming, pero la descentraba al participar también en la cosmópolis persa y emerger como (mini)centro en el sudeste asiático marítimo. Nuestro análisis plantea dos implicaciones principales. En primer lugar, argumentamos a favor de los órdenes «abiertos»—órdenes múltiples y (parcialmente) superpuestos como sistemas viables y duraderos—en contraste con las lógicas realistas y liberales de los órdenes de exclusión/inclusión. En segundo lugar, esto tiene implicaciones para las «opciones» contemporáneas del Sudeste Asiático en el contexto de la rivalidad entre Estados Unidos y China, dado que es probable que estos Estados participen «abiertamente» en los órdenes mundiales estadounidense y chino simultáneamente, en lugar de elegir entre ellos. Nuestra perspectiva relacional, arraigada en la historia global, argumenta en contra de tratar la Asia Oriental histórica como «cerrada», puesto que tal perspectiva es propensa tanto al sinocentrismo como al eurocentrismo. En su lugar, destacamos el papel fundamental desempeñado por Malaca—que siguió la estrategia de la atracción para gestionar su mundo desigual—y argumentamos a favor de los órdenes «abiertos» sin aplanar las jerarquías de poder ni las diferencias culturales.

Introduction

International relations (IR) scholarship conceptualizes the imperial Chinese world order as hegemonic (Zhang and Buzan 2012; Kang 2012). Furthermore, China's hegemony is equated with the idea of centrality. For Fairbank (1968, 2, *emphasis added*), who developed the framework of the so-called tributary system, China was "*the* natural center" of the "East Asian world." Similarly, Zhang and Buzan (2012, 19)

argue that "the tributary system is almost inescapably Sino-centric" in a "structural sense," while China sat "at the center" of the "East Asian system" for Kang (2012, 107). Notably, these scholars included Southeast Asia as a part of East Asia in their analyses. Kang (2012, 52) has even argued that the "Malacca Malay Sultanate (a.d. 1398–1511) had perhaps the closest cultural relationship with China," because "the Malay sought Ming investiture to protect them from Siamese pressure to the west."

In contrast to conceptualizing Chinese hegemony as centrality, I argue that fifteenth-century Melaka (ca. 1398–1511) decentered Chinese hegemony by participating not only in the Ming tributary system but also in Islamicate Asia/the Persian cosmopolis.[1] In fact, the then newly founded port-polity/city-state of Melaka in the Malay Peninsula had a much closer cultural intimacy with the Persian cosmopolis and remained culturally distant from the Ming. Melaka's self-conscious and simultaneous participation in these two world orders meant that China was not at the "center" of Melaka's world. In other words, Melaka decentered Chinese hegemony even as it recognized it.

I argue that that the practices of the primary institutions of kingship/investiture and trade show that Melaka's world did not revolve around the gravitational pull of China. While states in the East Asian Sinosphere (Japan, Korea, northern Vietnam, and the Ryukyus) may have been "a part of a larger galaxy of which China was *the* acknowledged center" (Womack 2006, 12, *emphasis added*), this was emphatically not the case for Southeast Asia. Despite the importance of their interaction with China, Melaka's rulers saw themselves "as members of the Muslim galaxy" of the Indian Ocean world that they believed "encompassed the greater part of the civilized world" (Milner 1981, 54, 58). Fifteenth-century Melaka existed in an "interregional-scale international system" (Buzan and Little 1994, 230) stretching from the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea to the China Seas.

I argue that decentering hegemony through simultaneous participation in multiple world orders is a distinct response to hegemony on par with balancing, bandwagoning, hedging, and withdrawal (from the international society). Melaka decentered Chinese hegemony and emerged as a (mini-)center in maritime Southeast Asia. It was Melaka's politicocultural practices—informed by its simultaneous participation in these two orders—that were emulated by other port-polities in the fifteenth-century Malay–Indonesian world.[2] I show the agency of Melaka in decentering hegemony, in creating and maintaining the connections between the different world orders, and in combining them. Consequently, order building is not just a top-down process (created/managed by the great powers alone) as bottom-up processes related to regional actor agency matter. We need to recognize such "open" and overlapping systems that connect/combine different world orders as relatively stable long-lasting geopolitical configurations.[3]

Fifteenth-century Melaka on the southwestern Malay Peninsula was an upstart city-state in a world of multiple large and small polities that competed for trade and status. Melaka could "succeed" only if it "*attracted* traders from [Ming] China, [Majapahit] Java, [Ayutthaya] Siam, and Pasai [in northern Sumatra]" to its port "without being swallowed by one of these established powers" (Reid 1993, 206, *emphasis added*). Consequently, the management of power

asymmetry was at the core of Melaka's approach to the world. Melaka managed its power asymmetry with these established powers by pursuing the strategy of "attraction." More importantly, Melaka also attracted Muslim traders from the Indian Ocean. Although Melaka's tributary relationship with the Ming may have provided it with a degree of protection against Ayutthaya, I argue that Melaka's participation in the Indian Ocean trade, conversion to Islam, and the consequent adoption of a localized Islamicate/Persianate form of kingship also allowed Melaka to decenter Ming hegemony. Simultaneously, this strategy of attracting the Muslim Indian Ocean traders also enabled Melaka to successfully compete with Ayutthaya, Majapahit, and Pasai (see figure 1).

A focus on Melaka is particularly apt because even as the self-referential Sinic worldview may have perceived China to be the center of the world, this was decidedly not the case when viewed from outside the Sinosphere. Melaka's approach toward the world shows that the "lesser powers" are active agents of their own destinies. In historical Asia, there is no need to grant China "too much centrality" in the "shaping" of IR, thereby "assign[ing] the other players reactive positions when they have in fact taken the lead much of the time" (Brook, van Praag, and Boltjes 2018b, 7). Melaka demonstrates that small states can proactively connect and integrate distinct world orders. Analogous to the Qing emperors who simultaneously ruled as Sons of Heaven (in China proper), as Great Khans (in the Mongol steppes), and as Buddhist *cakravartins* ("universal monarchs" in Tibet) (Crossley 2021), I argue that Melaka, a city-state, could also survive and thrive in a world of orders.

Methodologically, this study is rooted in global historical sociology (GHS). I emphasize the connections between different parts of maritime Asia and treat the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea as a single integrated continuum. I adopt GHS's relational approach in which social units as "entities-in-motion are historically constituted and reconstituted via their interactions with other actors" (Go and Lawson 2017, 26). Therefore, I do not treat Melaka as a "fixed" entity. In fact, there was an interaction between Melaka's domestic politics and foreign policy—as demonstrated by Melaka's turn toward Islam—which was conditioned by Melaka's connections with the wider world in which it found itself, including the Strait of Melaka, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean. As such, I take a "global" perspective on Melaka that focuses not just on the Sinic world but on the Islamicate too in addition to approaching Melaka in its Southeast Asian context. My emphasis on relationality and historicism allows me to explain "structural change"—Melaka's decentering of Chinese hegemony—by the way of "configurations" that "arise through interaction and accumulation of changes in intertwined elements of interconnected systems" (Donnelly 2021, 2).

The rest of this paper is divided into five sections. First, I explain the structure of Melaka's fifteenth-century international system—maritime Asia. I argue that this system encompassed multiple orders that overlapped partially and unevenly (across space and time). This helps me show these international orders as "open," and the crucial role played by polities such as Melaka in maintaining this openness that connected different parts of maritime Asia. Second, I discuss the theoretical characteristics of centered and decentered systems/world orders. I draw from the works of IR scholars, global historians, and archaeologists to develop insights into the making and shaping of such systems. Since all international systems are stratified, the lesser powers seek to manage the power asymmetry in their world, and I focus on

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[1] I use Islamicate Asia and Persian cosmopolis interchangeably as Islam reached Melaka in its Persian idiom (Hodgson 1977; Eaton 2021). Some Persian texts reached Southeast Asia in translation in Arabic.

[2] Melaka remained the "model" Malay port-polity for the next five centuries.

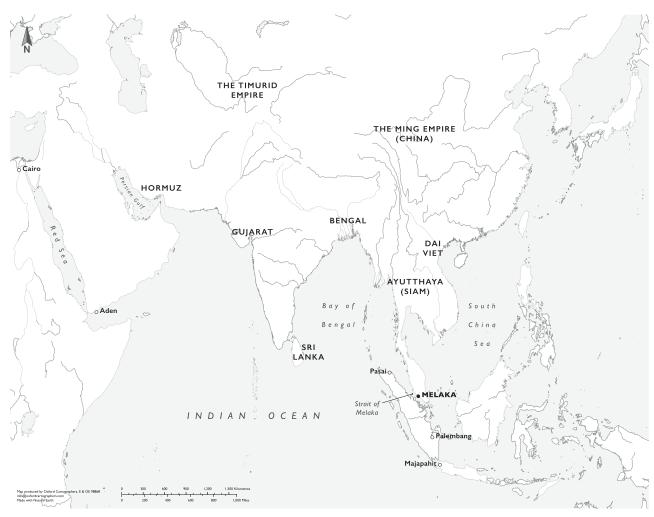[3] On "open"/"closed" systems, see Buzan and Little (2000).

Figure 1. Melaka and fifteenth-century maritime Asia.

"attraction" as a strategy pursued to do so. Notably, I approach attraction as a social relationship in which both parties are drawn to each other.

Next, I provide a brief history of Melaka to show how the city-state changed through its interactions with its wider world as it pursued the strategy of attraction, and how that changed the world around it. Melaka's transformation through interactions with the Persian cosmopolis decentered Ming hegemony. I emphasize three features: Melaka's meaningful commercial and political relations with the polities in the Indian Ocean and the China Seas; the practices embodied in the primary institutions of kingship and trade; and Chinese behavior toward Melaka (and others) that showed awareness of other "centers." In the fourth section, I explain the implications of my findings related to "open" world orders and the management of power asymmetry for IR theory and for contemporary geopolitics. Finally, I conclude by noting that the perspective that emerges from my relational global historical approach avoids essentializing (East) Asia as "closed" and Sinocentric, while keeping the future open-ended too.

Fifteenth-Century Maritime Asia

Some IR scholars of historical East Asia treat it as a unique region with distinctive characteristics that lived in splendid isolation from the rest of the world. In a recent volume, Kang and Swope (2020, 33) argue that a "hierarchical China-centered international order" existed "in East Asia" for over two millennia until the nineteenth century. Not only does their East Asia encompass Southeast Asia, including fifteenth-century Melaka, but this historical East Asia is also treated as a "closed system" (Coe and Wolford 2020, 278). Kang and Swope (2020, 23) also note that even as "other regions had regular interactions with Chinese and other traders (Melaka, for example), they were not in regular constant contact or cultural or social relations."

This perspective of a "closed" region essentializes East Asia as a China-centered region since time immemorial. Millward (2020, 76) has recently noted that decades "after Fairbank . . . some IR scholars and popular writers on international relations have revived the Fairbankean package" of a China-centered East Asia. While Millward (2020, 76, *emphasis original*) acknowledges that several of these scholars are studying historical East Asia to make "the IR discipline less Eurocentric," he is critical of their conflation of the idea of Sinocentrism as a "*world view*" of the Chinese elite "and *world order* as a description of historical reality," especially because Fairbank himself was aware of this difference.

Consequently, I draw upon the work of global historians to explain the structure of fifteenth-century Asia as it historically existed. I make the case for an interconnected Asia while rejecting the view of a closed East Asia. Fifteenth-century Asia was connected politically, culturally,

and commercially. Although some polities had to acknowledge China's hierarchy in the so-called tributary system (even as many did not do so because of the internalization of Sinic ideas as explained later), what is noteworthy is that the Ming did treat some polities such as the Central Asian Timurids as coequals. The Yongle Emperor expressed his political equality with Shahrukh in 1418 in Perso-Islamicate idiom as a "*padishah*" (Main Shah/King) writing to another *padishah* (Fletcher 1968, 212).

Meanwhile, Majapahit, the last of the major "Indianized" polities of Southeast Asia that had existed for nearly a millennium, partook in the "Sanskrit cosmopolis" and composed Sanskrit inscriptions until 1447 (Pollock 2006, 130). Importantly, the Ming tried to "counterbalance" Majapahit's hegemony in Southeast Asia (Wade 2008, 581). Although Majapahit looked to Indic-Sanskrit texts for its theories of kingship, Ayutthaya looked toward Theravada Buddhist Sri Lanka and Hindu–Buddhist Angkor for its own theories of kingship (Hall 2011, 231–36). This Sri Lankan connection gave rise to a "Pali cosmopolis" in eastern Indian Ocean (Frasch 2017, 74).

Ayutthaya also sent forty-eight tributary missions to the Ming (1400–1510) (Reid 1993, 16). It was simultaneously linked to the Indo-Persian commercial networks of the Indian Ocean, and was known by its Persian name, *Shahru'n-nuwi* ("city of boats/canals"), in Melaka (Brown 1952, 64). Interestingly, in 1487, the Ming even asked Ayutthaya to use Persian written in Arabic script (and not its Indic-derived script) for communication (Wade 2019). The Ming was also aware that Islam was practiced in "Champa, Cambodia, Java, and Malacca," and "Persian was used to communicate" with them (Ford 2019, Kindle Loc. 4037). Persian written in the Arabic script was the primary medium of communication in fifteenth-century maritime Asia (Brook 2019, 95).

The Persianate zone was the largest sociocultural ecumene in the fifteenth century that extended all the way to China. While Persians had been visible in Southeast Asia since the Sasanian period (third century), and even made direct trips to China in the ninth century, the Islamization of the Malay world took off only in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries (Milner 1981). As noted subsequently, it was the combination of the Perso-Islamicate tradition of kingship, Sufi ideas, and the increasing Islamization of the Indian Ocean trading networks that explains the timing of this transformation. However, Iran was not the "epicenter" of this Persianate ecumene as the Turko-Mongols and the Indo-Persians played an important role in its development and spread (Green 2019, Kindle Loc. 375). For the moment, it is important to note that at the time of its founding, Melaka lived in an "open" world with several sociopolitical orders (Sinic, Sanskrit, Pali, and Perso-Islamicate) that overlapped in myriad ways.

Finally, in terms of trade, a maritime system spanning the Indian Ocean and the China Seas had existed since the beginning of the common era. There was "no single [economic] epicentre" in this maritime zone "that generated a pulse to which the 'entire' system responded" (Subrahmanyam 2005, 52). While the Ming was certainly one of the cores due to its sheer size and productivity, India also represented a "multicentered core" in addition to some parts of West Asia (Beaujard 2019). Southeast Asia was not a mere "periphery" of these cores (even as the relationship was not symmetrical) because Southeast Asians played a proactive role in the process of connectivity itself.

The Malay world was a "pivotal" region of this system that connected multiple cores (Beaujard 2019). Melakan ships sailed across the Bay of Bengal (Subrahmanyam 2005,

59), and Melaka's rulers personally traveled to China as explained later. Melaka itself was an "entrepot" and "destination" as opposed to a mere "intermediary" (Hall 2011, 313). Additionally, Southeast Asians injected local commodities (spices and metals) into the trading networks.

In sum, fifteenth-century Asia was a highly interactive and connected zone. However, it lacked a single all-encompassing center because the sociopolitical and commercial centers did not have a neat one-to-one correspondence (since some sociopolitical centers were ideational/textual). This system had multiple, shifting, and overlapping axes of hierarchies as opposed to a fixed center.

Centered and Decentered Systems

Centrality is a relational feature of social systems because "'[c]entralization' and 'peripheralization' . . . are interlinked social processes" (Donnelly 2021, 3). Centers are realms of authority—whether physical (as in a polity/ruler) or ideational (as embodied in valued texts or historical memory)—around which social systems are structured. A center is a positional attribute of a system, a "higher-level entity" (Donnelly 2021, 3) that emanates "values, rules, and protocols" (Brook, van Praag, and Boltjes 2018b, 12) to regulate global relations. A center makes "universalistic claims" about its authority often articulated in "universal" terms (Brook, van Praag, and Boltjes 2018b, 12). The modes governing social relationships need not be universal as social systems can have more than one center of authority, each with universal pretensions. "Centers may stand in varied relations to one another and to their peripheries" (Donnelly 2021, 3).

Thus conceived, centralization—a measure of the distribution of relationships in a social system—represents a particular form of hierarchy that explains if the system is oriented toward a particular actor/center.[4] Whether or not a system is oriented toward a particular/single center can be assessed through three features. First, if most "lower-level entities" (Donnelly 2021, 9)—whether other lower-level centers or peripheries—are engaged in sets of relationships with a single higher-level center (or if they follow modes of relations with each other in patterns established by a single higher-level center)—then the social system is "radiationally pattern[ed]" (Zhang 2001, 53). Such structural configurations represent "centric" systems.

Second, centric systems have one solitary "pivot of change" (Darwin 2008, Kindle Loc. 314). The practices embodied in the primary institutions of the international society are shaped by a single center in such systems. A center shapes the modes of interaction (and change) in a centric system by "attract[ing]" and "radiating" influence, "exerting a 'gravitational' pull" on the peripheries (Donnelly 2017, 257). Third, a center does not recognize the existence of "peer polities" in centric systems. "Peer polity interaction designates the full range of interactions" between socially equal entities without "laying stress upon relations of domination and subordination" (Renfrew 1986, 1).

These three criteria—where most meaningful relationships are oriented toward one center that lays down the practices governing social relations while recognizing no equals—are the core characteristics of a centric system.[5] By

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[4] On centrality in network theory, see Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery (2009).

[5] There may be two or more such centers in a system. If these centers coordinate to "run" the system, then the system is bi-/multi-centric. If they do not coordinate—thereby (inadvertently) enabling the lower-level entities to choose/combine/innovate—then the system is decentered.

extension, the social system is decentered if these three attributes are not its chief hallmarks. First, if lower-level entities develop meaningful relations across the same functional area (such as trade) with more than one center (say A, B, and C), then the system is decentered (along that functional area).

Next, if practices related to different functional areas emanate from different centers—with A establishing some rules for trade, with B establishing some rules for diplomacy, and with C establishing some rules for trade and diplomacy—and if the centers do not coordinate to set the benchmarks for the system, then the system is decentered. Lower-level entities in such systems follow multiple and overlapping practices. Such systems may even allow some lower-level entities to set their own practices in one or more functional areas—through innovation/localization for example (Acharya 2018, 33–37)—and emerge as lower-level centers. Finally, if the center behaves in ways that acknowledge the existence of other centers—even if its universalistic discourse denies their existence—then the social system is decentered. There is "no global hegemony" in decentered worlds; instead, there are "multiple, overlapping layers of governance, at global, regional, and local levels" (Acharya 2018, 30).

Centered and decentered systems are not just the structural attributes of the society nor are they simply about the agential strategies pursued by the various entities. They are in fact constituted through the configurations of interactions connecting various lower- and higher-level entities. "If systems are parts of particular kinds arranged and operating in particular ways to produce wholes," then social order is "emergent" out of such "interdependencies and connections that give a system a particular character" (Donnelly 2021, 29).[6] In other words, social order is not immaculately generated by any entity (including the great powers) at a moment of creation. Rather, social order emerges out of the interactions of multiple entities over time, and is therefore accumulative. Since social order is emergent, it is dynamic. These characteristics along with the interactive elements noted above emphasize the "entities-in-motion" aspect of social units.

However, contestation is also an important feature of any social order because these interactions produce centralization/peripheralization as simultaneous processes since the world remains unequal (Hurrell 2007). Consequently, "[w]hat is analytically central is not *whether* practices or relations are egalitarian or inegalitarian, but *how* they are" (Donnelly 2017, 252). How actors negotiate such asymmetries is one of the core features of any international order. While great powers do try to "manage" the international society (Bull 2002),[7] the lesser powers also try to "manage" their unequal international life. Social order is emergent from such interactions.

The decentered political, cultural, and commercial structure of fifteenth-century Asia did not mean that *all* polities were able to successfully pursue decentering strategies. For example, coercion was a part of the Ming naval expeditions. The Ming attacked Palembang in 1407 and established a de-

pendency through a puppet ruler, interfered in the civil war in Java in 1407 to undermine Majapahit, and fought in Sri Lanka in 1411 and captured its monarch. The Ming also invaded/annexed Vietnam in 1406 and threatened Majapahit after explicitly invoking Vietnam (Wade 2008, 595). Since Malay polities were ruler-/*raja*-centric (Milner 1981), such an offensive against Melaka would have been fatal. Therefore, Melaka's turn toward Islam while simultaneously accepting Ming hegemony was an innovative strategy.

Melaka's success cannot simply be attributed to its participation in the Ming tributary system because it has been argued that South and West Asian traders "were primarily responsible for establishing . . . 'Islamic city-states' such as Melaka" (Khan 2018, 220), and that the Chinese might have played a less significant role there than the Gujaratis and the Tamils (Subrahmanyam 2005, 59). If Ming grace was all that mattered, then another polity such as Palembang, a Ming dependency, had better prospects for emerging as the pivotal regional trading center. Geographically, Palembang could also keep a watchful eye on both, the Melaka and Sunda Straits. Furthermore, the Palembang-centered Sriwijaya polity had played the crucial role in connecting the Indian Ocean and the China Sea in prior centuries.[8]

Therefore, as an agential strategy, decentering should be thought of as a distinct response to hegemony. Melaka made no attempt to balance Chinese power through alliances nor did Melaka bandwagon with the Ming.[9] Melaka's active fostering of close ties with the Ming also shows that Melaka did not "withdraw" from the Sinic world (as polities such as Japan had done in some historical periods) (Buzan and Goh 2020). However, Melaka's cultivation of links with the Muslim galaxy while engaging China was not equivalent to "hedging" either.

Hedging is a strategy of prevarication when power dynamics are changing, and threats cannot be easily identified (Lim and Cooper 2015). Hedging seeks to forestall hegemony and focuses on military buildup even if the enemy is not explicitly identified. In contrast, decentering is not about prevarication/uncertainty. It is possible to recognize a power as a hegemon as Melaka did with the Ming while decentering it through domestic political transformation and cultivating close political and commercial links with other important players (from different cultural traditions) without necessarily resorting to military means. Finally, while hedging implicitly assumes that two distinct orders are in the making, and that a choice between them will need to be made at some point, decentering allows for simultaneous and proactive (as opposed to hesitant/uncertain) participation in multiple world orders. Melaka pursued the strategy of attraction to decenter the Ming (and to manage its other rivals) by fostering nonexclusive relations with everyone.

"Attraction" and the Management of Power Asymmetry

Lesser powers have several options to respond to unequal power structures including balancing, bandwagoning, withdrawing, hedging, and decentering. Multiple factors, including the geopolitical environment, domestic politics, and geography, condition this response. Attraction is an important agential strategy that may be pursued to manage power asymmetry. Attraction is a social relationship that draws two parties toward each other as each party derives social benefits from the association (Kenrick 2007). Baldwin (2016, 53,

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[6] Order is "emergent" from the "interactions of multiple state and nonstate actors" for Johnston (2019, 12) too. For Johnston, these multiple orders exist in different functional areas (an order for trade, another for diplomacy, and so on). However, Donnelly (2017, 253) has shown that the same functional area may be stratified along multiple axes, and therefore there may be two (or more) orders in the same functional area such as trade. My understanding of order is closer to Donnelly's than Johnston's. Nevertheless, the title of my paper is inspired by Johnston's article.

[7] Waltz (1979, 194–210) also discusses great power "management."

[8] See Wey and Harun (2018) for a different view that emphasizes the Chinese connection.

[9] On balancing and bandwagoning, see Kaufmann, Richard, and Wohlforth (2007).

168) considers such attraction as a "power resource" in a relational sense that "has little or no meaning except within the context of a particular situation specified (at least) as to scope and domain."

More specifically, Baldwin (2016, 165–71) distinguishes his relational approach from Nye's (2004) concept of attraction as "soft power" drawn from the neoliberal approach. This is because it remains unclear in Nye's analysis whether attraction (as soft power) is an outcome or an undertaking. Waltz (1979, 165–66) also drew attention to attraction while discussing allies, and argued that "[s]uitors alter their appearances and adapt their behavior to increase their eligibility," and that "[o]ne has to become attractive enough in personality and policy to be considered a possible choice." Despite the presence of these relational insights in Waltz's understanding, he remains structural (not relational) (Donnelly 2019). Nevertheless, Waltz is correct to note that attractiveness is a function of both, the characteristics and the policies of a state.

I build upon these insights, and the findings from social psychology, and approach attraction relationally. First, attraction involves "associative learning" (Kenrick 2007, 70). Consequently, there is a trial-and-error quality to attraction as an agential strategy because the initial policy may exhibit resistance (internationally and/or domestically). Therefore, attraction is a long-term strategy that transforms the self and the world around. Second, attraction is associated with "perceived interaction pleasantness" (Berscheid and Reis 1998, 209). Once a relationship has been established through attraction as reciprocity develops, it can outlast the initial reasons behind the establishment of the relationship. Third, there is more to attraction than similarity because "social desirability" matters (Hewitt 1972). When a society is associated with positive traits, it becomes more socially desirable even if it is dissimilar from the self.

Based on this, I argue that Melaka pursued the strategy of attraction to draw trade/traders from across the Indian Ocean, the China Seas, and Southeast Asia, and that all parties benefitted (relationally) from their respective associations with Melaka (even if the reciprocal benefits were not just about trade per se). First, Melaka's conversion to Islam had an element of "trial and error" due to domestic resistance as the fourth ruler (1444–1445) was Hindu.[10] However, he was deposed by force (Borschberg 2020a, 274), and Melaka then continued on its Islamicate path given the domestic momentum already underway, the importance of the Indian Ocean traders, and connections with other local Muslim polities such as Pasai.

Second, Melaka's behavior generated "interaction pleasantness" for the Muslim traders as well as the Ming. Muslim traders were attracted to Melaka because "the negotiation of trade, adjudication of conflicts and formation of diplomatic alliances could be made within an Islamic framework" (Kwa et al. 2019, 65). Melaka's simultaneous participation in tributary rituals also performed a crucial function in the Chinese worldview: it "*functioned* to legitimize" (Hevia 1995, 10, *emphasis original*) the Chinese emperor as the Son of Heaven, and that this was important ideologically for ruling China itself. Melaka also served as a way-station for the Ming navy in the early decades of the fifteenth century. Third, Melaka's behavior was also socially desirable despite politico-cultural differences with China, and Melaka continued with its tributary relationship with the Ming even after the withdrawal of the Chinese navy (in 1433). At the same time,

Melaka's conversion to (and propagation of) Islam also gave Melaka status in the Muslim galaxy.

What should not be overlooked is that these social practices—related to attraction—also generated material benefits as conversion to Islam and Ming investiture were both linked to trade, and because these processes were crucial for state making in Melaka. I argue that despite recognizing Ming hegemony, the practices embodied in the primary institutions of kingship and trade show that Melaka successfully decentered Ming hegemony. Order is emergent from such practices in the English School's approach to IR. International trade was the most meaningful component of Melaka's foreign relations, and the Indian Ocean was just as important for this port-polity as China. Melaka's participation in the Persian cosmopolis meant that China was not the only "pivot of change" in this system, neither for trade nor for kingship. Finally, I show that despite the rhetoric embodied in the language of the tributary system, the Ming was not only aware of other centers of authority (and universalisms), but that this was also evident in the Ming approach toward Melaka (and others).

Melaka's Decentered Fifteenth-Century World

Meaningful Relations with the Ming and the Indian Ocean

Melaka was (re-)founded (ca. 1400) in the eponymous Strait of Melaka by Parameswara, a Malay–Hindu runaway prince from Palembang who was fleeing from Majapahit coercion. At that time, Ayutthaya (from the north) and Majapahit (from the south) were competing for the control of this crucial maritime waterway (Andaya and Andaya 1991, 31–55). After a brief interlude in Temasek-Singapura, where he deposed the local ruler who was a tributary of Ayutthaya, Parameswara established Melaka to its north.[11] Melaka began its political career by paying tribute to both these regional powers. It is important not to think of Melaka's vassalage to Ayutthaya and Majapahit (and later to the Ming) "in a European sense," because "[m]inor rulers" or "*rajas*" in this maritime world "voluntarily submitted themselves to other rulers higher up in the hierarchy," and even "acknowledged more than one overlord" simultaneously (Borschberg 2020a, 263–64). These were after all *mandala* ("circle") style superordinate–subordinate political structures with continually shifting centers. In *mandala* polities, a central king was surrounded by a network of subordinate kings; however, neither the identity of the central realm nor the number of subordinates was fixed, and relations varied over time (Wolters 1999). In other words, while hierarchy existed in the *mandala* world, it was a fluid hierarchy around multiple axes without a fixed center (Tambiah 1977).

Melaka was also in commercial competition with Pasai, the preferred maritime Southeast Asian destination for the Indian Ocean traders. The Islamic port-polity of Pasai founded in the fourteenth century was Melaka's "archrival" in its quest to divert the Indian Ocean trade (Lieberman 2009, 813). "The whole archipelago [maritime Southeast Asia] was a crossroads; where exactly merchants congregated was never a given conclusion, and indeed changed over time" (Ho 2013, 151). As noted above, there is evidence for a "prior" minor settlement in Melaka before "the city's (re-)founding by Parameswara" (Borschberg 2020a, 270). In other words, Melaka's fifteenth-century success cannot be reduced to its favorable geographical position at the

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[10] Melaka's Hindu founder was succeeded by his two Muslim descendants (converts).

[11] On the debate on Melaka's founding date, see Borschberg (2020b). I am interested in the trading polity that converted to Islam while engaging the Ming, and had an association with Temasek-Singapura.

nexus of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea as the port-polity's policies were equally (if not more) consequential. Not surprisingly, Melaka also turned toward the Indian Ocean given its commercial rivalry with Pasai.

As for the Ming, it was China that initially sent a mission to Melaka in 1403 after first hearing about this port-polity from Indian Muslim traders (Wang 2005b, 14). It is likely that these traders encountered difficulties in trading with China through the intermediary of Hindu–Buddhist Ayutthaya, and were therefore favorably disposed toward another non-Muslim polity that welcomed them. In turn, Melaka needed Chinese trade to survive because China was the single, largest economic power in the fifteenth century. Furthermore, on the eve of the Ming voyages that began in 1405, China was looking for a way station en route to the Indian Ocean. Not surprisingly, China and Melaka were attracted to each other.

Melaka needed China because state making in maritime Southeast Asia was "preeminently" a "commercial enterprise" (Lieberman 2009, 812). However, wealth derived from trade "was merely an instrument of [political] power," not "an end in itself" (Wolters 1975, 176; Milner 2008, 57). In the Malay–Indonesian world, ambitious chiefs derived "prestige and luxury goods from trade," and gained political power through their "redistribution . . . amongst clients" (Kathirithamby-Wells 1990, 2). The Malay *raja* was "the *primus inter pares* of leaders" of such "kinship networks" (Andaya 2008, 71; Milner 2008, 40–102). Therefore, Parameswara grasped the opportunity provided by China's mission and responded with his own in 1405.

Since trade with the Ming required participation in the tributary system, Melaka sought and received Ming investiture (and the Ming became Melaka's overlords along with Ayutthaya and Majapahit). The Malay ruler was attracted to the Ming for that relationship brought symbolic and commercial resources for state making that granted him *nama* ("status") in his kinship networks (Milner and Kasim 2018). In turn, the Ming was also attracted to Melaka for the Ming also gained status through association with Melaka. "[F]oreign envoys returning home glorified China's name abroad (since the system admitted only those foreigners whom the court was prepared to impress on a lavish scale)" (Fletcher 1968, 209).

The Ming also convinced Parameswara's envoys of having Melaka incorporated into the Ming realm "as an extension of China's ritual geography" (Brook, van Praag, and Boltjes 2018a, 67). This allowed Melaka to participate in tributary trade on a regular basis and made the Ming the protectors of Melaka. However, the symbolic/ritualistic dimension of Ming protection was more important than actual protection because Ayutthaya was also a Ming tributary, and China's enfeoffment of Melaka's ruler "was partially responsible for heightening tensions" between the two tributaries (Borschberg 2020a, 274).[12] While the Ming certainly admonished Ayutthaya, Melaka could guarantee its physical security only by paying an annual tribute to Ayutthaya (even as Melaka was a Ming protectorate). (The Ming only offered rhetorical support to Melaka when it was threatened by Vietnam in 1481, and later when attacked by the Portuguese in 1511 [Cheah 2012].)

Melaka might not have exactly understood what its ritual incorporation into the Ming realm meant "in terms of the Confucian universal state" (Wang 2005b, 19). However,

Parameswara's "Melaka knew itself to be no parvenu kingdom," for he claimed the legacy of Sriwijaya (Palembang), "the greatest" of the early Malay polities (ca. seventh to thirteenth centuries) that thrived for centuries by commercially connecting the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea (Andaya and Andaya 1991, 35–36). Given Ming's ambitions and power as displayed in the Zheng He voyages (1405–1433), the ambitious rulers of Melaka sought to (re-)establish their connections with the Indian Ocean world as Sriwijaya had done in the past.

In the fifteenth-century Indian Ocean, this meant turning toward Islamic commercial networks. Laffan (2015, 375) has noted that "a Hindu prince from Palembang" adopted Islam "at the moment" when the Ming sought to establish tributary relationship. The desire to manage Ming power was certainly a part of this consideration. Notably, Parameswara's son/successor ruled with the Perso-Islamicate title of Iskandar Shah (1414–1423/24). While the impact of this change for the primary institutions of kingship and trade is discussed subsequently, the turn toward the Indian Ocean was not just about China (as the temporal association with Sriwijaya indicates).

Looking toward the Indian Ocean and Islam also helped Melaka divert trade from Pasai. Given Melaka's "special relationship" (Borschberg 2020a, 274) with China, "[m]erchants wishing to trade in Chinese ports were given special treatment if they first made stopovers in Melaka" (Hall 2011, 308). Melaka's commercial opportunities and conversion to Islam "attracted" wealthy merchants from Pasai itself (Wink 2004, 218). Melaka soon emerged as "a center for Islamic learning" rivaling Pasai and became the premier regional commercial port-polity (Andaya 2008, 71). Conversion to Islam also played an important role in Melaka's contentious relationship with Hindu–Buddhist Ayutthaya (by attracting merchants who were discriminated there as noted earlier). Hall (1981, 229) has referred to Islam as Melaka's "political weapon against Buddhist Siam."

As discussed next, Melaka's distinctive Malayo-Islamic political identity was emulated elsewhere in this maritime world, and Melaka became a local center on matters related to kingship and trade. Melaka's propagation of its political ideas (of Persianate kingship through marriage and Sufi ideas through scholars/traders) along the Java coast also helped diminish the power of Majapahit as new port-polities appeared in Java's coastal regions with *mandala* ties to Melaka instead of Majapahit (Wink 2004, 217). In other words, Islam enabled Melaka to meet the challenges posed by all these polities: the Ming, Ayutthaya, Majapahit, and Pasai.

However, conversion to Islam in Melaka was a gradual process for the Hindu–Buddhist faction re-emerged (briefly) in the 1440s as mentioned earlier (Wake 1983). It is likely that conversion was initially limited to Iskander Shah and his inner circle (as opposed to the entire state). Iskander Shah's marriage to a princess from Pasai may have further aided the port-polity's conversion. According to the Chinese chronicler Ma Huan, who had accompanied Zheng He, Melaka (as a polity) had become Muslim by the 1430s (Wink 2004, 219). By the time of the ruler Muzaffar Shah (1446–1459), the son of a Tamil Muslim princess, Melaka's power was felt throughout the strait, and its Malay–Islamic political credentials became widely known in maritime Southeast Asia.

Muzaffar Shah engaged in active diplomacy to convert other Malay port-polities—such as Kampar, Indragiri, and Minangkabau—to Islam, thus tying them into *mandala*-style relations with Melaka as a mini-center and entrepot for their trade with the Indian Ocean and the China Seas.

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[12] Ayutthaya attacked Melaka in 1407, 1419–1421, 1445–1446, and 1455–1456, and may have coerced/attacked Melaka in 1431. Melaka ended its tributary relations with Ayutthaya after defeating the latter in 1488.

　　　　　　　　　　Fifteenth-Century Melaka in a World of Orders

The conversion of these rulers to Islam brought Melaka fame throughout the Indian Ocean as the Muslim rulers of Yemen, Hormuz, Cambay, and Bengal bestowed the peer title of "Sultan" upon him and sent merchants from their domains to settle in Melaka (Wink 2004, 220–21).

The Indian Ocean was also crucial for Melaka's trade. The Indian market was "almost equally important" as China for Southeast Asian exports—for which Melaka had emerged as the chief collection center for wider distribution—and the region's spices were also in demand in the Middle East and the Mediterranean (Reid 1993, 12). Furthermore, Indian cotton textiles were "probably the most traded [global] commodity" during this period (Riello 2013, Kindle Loc. 446). "Moslem Indian cloth merchants could be certain of attracting all other merchants since Indian textiles were the basic item of trade. . . . Without Indian cloth or spices, Melaka would have been simply one of a number of other ports in the area" (Andaya and Andaya 1991, 43–44, 53). State making in Melaka was linked to the distribution of this prestige good—Indian cotton cloth—among the ruler's kinship networks. In other words, China was not at the center of Melaka's world, neither in terms of meaningful political relationships nor for trade, even as China was important.

"Pivot of Change": The Primary Institutions of Kingship and Trade

KINGSHIP

Given China's significance, the first three rulers of Melaka—Parameswara and his two Muslim descendants—personally went to China multiple times (in 1411, 1414, 1419, 1424, and 1434) to pay tribute to the Ming Emperor (Wang 2005a). Even after the withdrawal of the Ming navy, Sultan Muzaffar Shah sent his own children to China in 1456, showing that Melaka was attracted toward China and not simply coerced or manipulated by it. Melaka sent a total of twenty-nine missions to China until the city-state's conquest by the Portuguese in 1511 (Reid 1993, 15–16). Melaka clearly sought Ming investiture and benefitted politically and commercially from its relationship with China.

However, as observed by Wade (1997, 43), analogous "to the self-aggrandizement of the Ming court depicted in the official Chinese texts, the *Sejarah Melayu* [the Malay Annals] depicted the Melaka court as the superior party in the relationship." In one instance, the *Sejarah Melayu* even claimed—no doubt fabricated—that "the Raja of China drank the water" used for washing the Melakan Sultan's feet to cure himself after falling sick (Brown 1952, 96). The larger point is that Melaka cognitively decentered Ming hegemony through this discursive act. In other words, Melaka did not pay tribute and seek Ming investiture because it had internalized the Chinese worldview. Melaka was not displaying "Confucian relational affection and obligation" while performing this act.[13] According to Stuart-Fox (2003, 94), "for all their acceptance of the Chinese world order, Southeast Asian kingdoms never saw themselves as committed to that order alone," nor did they place "China alone at the apex of international hierarchy," because they always "recognised several potential competing centres of power, and made allowance for shifting power relationships."

While benefitting commercially from their relationship with China, the Southeast Asian polities remained uninterested in culturally partaking in the Chinese world order. This is even though "Zheng He had carried with him thousands of copies of Chinese texts to be distributed to local rulers for their edification" (Stuart-Fox 2003, 86–87). Instead, the *Malay Annals* show the imprint of the Persian cosmopolis. Consequently, Melaka's participation in the Chinese tributary system needs to be understood as a temporary *mandala*-style recognition of a superordinate with minimal politicocultural impact. Nevertheless, the practices of Melaka's *mandala* system and the Chinese world order were commensurable even as they were imbued with different politicocultural meanings. Contra Kang, Melaka's closest cultural relationship was not with the Ming but with the Persian cosmopolis.

The Persian cosmopolis refers to the vast Eurasian zone from "the Balkans to Bengal" (ca. 900—1900) with "extensions" into maritime Southeast Asia (ca. thirteenth to seventeenth centuries) in which "an integrated sense of moral, social, political, and aesthetic order was informed by the circulation of Persian texts considered prestigious and normative" (Eaton 2021, 1). In the Persian cosmopolis, the Persian language was Islamized, whereas Islam itself was Persianized (Arjomand 2008, 7). The Persian poet Ferdowsi's *Shahnama*, "*the* foundational act of the Persian cosmopolis," portrayed Alexander the Great as a world conqueror and as "a quasi-messianic figure" (Eaton 2021, 5, *emphasis original*). Stories of this Perso-Islamicate Alexander/Iskandar had reached Pasai in the mid-1300s, and the *Sejarah Melayu* also contains the Iskandar legend (Renard 1999, 91).

The *Sejarah Melayu* traces the royal descent of Melaka's rulers from Iskandar through the rulers of Sriwijaya via illustrious/mythical Indian monarchs, thereby localizing the Iskandar legend. This "foreign" connection augmented the Melakan local instead of displacing it (Ho 2013, 156). As per the Malay tradition, the rulers of Melaka derived their kingship from this genealogy (not Ming investiture). Instead of kingship being granted by the Chinese "Son of Heaven," Melaka internalized the Persianate idea of the monarch as "God's Shadow on Earth." This idea resembled the pre-Islamic Brahmanic concept of *dewaraja* (God–King association) (Petru 2016). The Sufi idea of the ruler as the "perfect man" who promoted the welfare of his subjects that was circulating in the Indian Ocean was also attractive to the Malay rulers for their affinities with the pre-existing idea of the ruler as a *bodhisattva* (an enlightened Buddhist). It was this combination of Persianate kingship and Sufi ideas that explains the timing of Melaka's Islamization since it fulfilled local needs while plugging Melaka in the Muslim galaxy (Milner 1981).

The *Sejarah Melayu* also emphasizes "the circle of justice," regarded as "the central maxim of Persian statecraft" according to which "there is no kingdom except through men, and no men except through wealth, and no wealth except through cultivation (*'emāra*) and no cultivation except through justice and punishment (*siyāsat*)" (Arjomand 2008, 11–12).[14] The echoes of this "circle of justice" are present in the *Sejarah Melayu* (although its recognition is missing from the extant historical scholarship). It is well known that "the accumulation and control of manpower was the basis of economic and political power" in Southeast Asia instead of territorial control per se (Hall 2011, 13). The *raja*-centered Malay polities' essence was the rulers' subjects (Milner 2008, 55–58). The *Sejarah Melayu* also notes that "where there is sovereignty, there is gold" (Brown 1952, 187). Ho (2013, 151) has interpreted this statement to imply a reciprocal relationship between kingship and wealth/trade.

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[13] In contrast, polities in the Sinosphere may have been socialized into the Sinic worldview (Zhang 2015, 7).

[14] This "circle of justice" drew upon the pre-Islamic traditions of the Middle East.

Furthermore, the *Sejarah Melayu* attributes Melaka's greatness "to the high degree of justice" in the ruler's attitudes toward his subjects, and even speaks of the compilation of "a code of laws in order that there should henceforth be uniform justice in the decisions of" the ruler's ministers (Brown 1952, 59, 63).[15] Notably, Melaka had a dual legal system based on *adat* (or customary law) as well as a legal system informed by Islamic practices in addition to established practices for maritime law (given its dependence on seaborne commerce) (Liaw 1983). Finally, the term used for punishment/fine in the *Sejarah Melayu* is "denda" (Brown 1952, 219), and shows the influence of preexisting Hindu–Buddhist customs. This is noteworthy simply because the Perso-Islamicate idea of punishment/*siyāsat* itself can be traced to "the ancient Indian notion of punishment (*danda*)," which had reached Sasanian Iran centuries earlier (Arjomand 2008, 12).

In other words, Melaka localized Perso-Islamicate traditions into the preexisting sociopolitical substratum of maritime Southeast Asia.[16] Given its commercial and political success, Melaka emerged as what Pollock has referred to as a "cosmopolitan vernacular" (Pollock 2006, 26). Melaka's localized politicocultural customs informed by the Perso-Islamicate global but expressed in the vernacular Malay language were amplified and set the standards for a new Malayo–Islamic identity. Melaka's distinct Perso-Islamicate identity was attractive to many regional port-polities that "became Malay" to share Melaka's politicoeconomic success via formal associations (as in the case of Kampar, Indragiri, and Minangkabau noted above). Even "rulers outside Melaka's political orbit sought to bask in Melaka's glory by adopting Islam and imitating its court structure, music, dance, dress, literature, legal codes, and speech" (Lieberman 2009, 816). Melaka's influence radiated farther than Sriwijaya's ever had (Andaya and Andaya 1991, 55). The emerging port-polities of maritime Southeast Asia turned toward Melaka, and not the Ming hegemon, for their politicocultural practices.

Trade

Analogous to the primary institution of kingship where the Ming Empire was hardly the only pivot of change for Melaka, the city-state also established distinctive trading practices. The Ming had banned all private trade by 1381 as the empire reorganized all foreign trade as tributary trade or "imperial monopoly trade" under state supervision (Wade 2008, 622). The items of trade and the frequency of the tributary missions depended upon the tributary state's political relationship with China.

There were three components of the international trading relationships that thus developed in China (Hamashita 1994). The first was the commercial transaction between the court of the subordinate polity (presented as tribute) and the Ming court (given as the return gift). The second component was licensed trade in the Chinese capital conducted by the merchants who had accompanied the tributary embassy, while the third component was officially sanctioned trade between the Ming and the subordinate polity at specific Chinese ports. The prices of the goods exchanged depended upon their price in the Chinese capital, and the mode of payment for all transactions was the Chinese currency (paper money and silver) or silk.

In contrast to the Ming who "drew most of its revenue from the land tax and gave as little thought to taxing trade as it did to protecting it" (Cohen 2000, 164), Melaka was wholly dependent upon trade and even imported basic staples such as rice from Ayutthaya, Majapahit, and Burma. Although food was imported "free of duty" (Findlay and O'Rourke 2007, 135), Melaka derived 90–95 percent of its revenues from taxing maritime trade (Thomaz 1993, 74). However, unlike the Ming who practiced tributary trade, Melaka practiced "relatively free trade," in the sense that it was lightly and equitably taxed trade that was not controlled by the state. Moreover, there were no royal monopolies in Melaka even as the Melakan ruler owned ships and actively participated in trade (Thomaz 1993, 75). (In contrast, Ayutthaya did exercise royal monopolies and discriminatory trading practices [Kathirithamby-Wells 1990, 5].)

Melaka also invested in port infrastructure and just maritime laws to attract traders from across maritime Asia irrespective of their ethnicities/religions (Khalilieh 2019, 79–87). The Indian Ocean was arguably more important for Melaka since the port-polity could not "live without Cambay [Gujarat], nor Cambay without Malacca, if they are to be very rich and very prosperous," according to the Portuguese diplomat Tome Pires (Cortesão 1944, 45). At its peak, Melaka may have hosted the speakers of as many as eighty-four languages at its port (Wink 2004, 222). Despite Melaka's conversion to Islam, its taxation system did not discriminate between Muslims and non-Muslims (Hall 2011, 312). While Melaka minted its own tin coins, "all currencies were freely traded" in Melaka (Findlay and O'Rourke 2007, 135).

This Perso-Islamicate polity was "remarkably cosmopolitan" (Findlay and O'Rourke 2007, 135), arguably *the* most cosmopolitan city of the fifteenth-century world,[17] and the hinge of global commerce. What is noteworthy is that Melaka's commercial policies and laws were being compiled while the Ming navy was still present in Southeast Asia. Despite being a Chinese tributary and partaking in trade with China on Chinese terms, Melaka had set its own unique standards for managing maritime commerce, as the rules governing trade in Melaka did not emanate from China (see Table 1).

Ming China and Other "Centers"

The early Ming, who were ethnically Chinese, had assumed power (in 1368) after ejecting and displacing their Mongol–Yuan predecessors from China proper. Consequently, the "Ming emperors understood the need to persuade multiple audiences that they, rather than their Chinggisid contemporaries, were the rightful successors to the Yuan dynasty" (Robinson 2016, 13). As they sought to convince their Asian neighbors of their legitimacy and superiority, they encountered multiple sociopolitical orders as explained earlier. Their interactions with the Timurids, and the near-simultaneous expulsion of Muslims from southern China (into maritime Southeast Asia) who had served the Yuan, meant that they were very conscious of the world of Islam and Persianate traditions.

Notably, the Ming voyages were led by Zheng He, with his "Khwarezm descent and his Muslim identity," although there is "nothing in the sources" that shows that he was chosen to lead these missions because of his association with Islam (Brook 2019, 90). However, Zheng He

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[15] This is not to imply that the system was perfect in practice. In the late-fifteenth century, there were complaints about the illegal activities of the Javanese traders in Melaka. See Jones (1997, 84).

[16] On localization, see Wolters (1999).

[17] Melaka was practicing interreligious coexistence long before the end of Europe's religious wars (usually dated to have ended in 1648).

Table 1. The practices of the primary institutions

Primary institutions	China	Melaka
Kingship	1. The Chinese Emperor as the "Son of Heaven" 2. Lesser monarchs seek confirmation/pay tribute	1. "Shadow of God" (Perso-Islamicate); peer "Sultan" status in the Indian Ocean 2. Chinese investiture (not emphasized locally); simultaneous recognition of multiple overlords (and subordinates)
Trade	1. Tributary "imperial monopoly" trade 2. Private (non-state) traders officially banned	1. "Relatively free trade" with everyone 2. Tributary trade with China

"actively recruited Muslims" who were familiar with the Indian Ocean for his naval missions, and the Muslim Ming chronicler Ma Huan even made the pilgrimage to Mecca during one of the missions (Park 2012, 170–76). The Ming was also "reliant upon Muslims who were key to financing and managing both overland trade and, increasingly, the overseas trade throughout the Indian Ocean" (Crossley 2019, 237).

That it was Islam that connected China with the maritime world to its south was also noted earlier since Muslim traders from India had prompted the Ming to establish relations with Melaka. Furthermore, it was Parameswara and his Muslim descendants who went to China to pay tribute. The Ming also used Persian to "proclaim" the Chinese emperor's "power abroad" in the maritime world to its south (Ford 2019, Kindle Loc. 3885). The irony of communicating the superiority of the Chinese Son of Heaven, and to awe and impress maritime Asia in Persian, another "universal language" that was itself the carrier of another world order, the Persian cosmopolis, could not have been lost on the hierarchy-conscious Ming. Indeed, following Krasner, Zhang and Buzan have even referred to the tributary system as "organized hypocrisy" (Zhang and Buzan 2012, 31; Krasner 2001). The discourse of the tributary system in the Chinese textual tradition can then be seen as a cognitive strategy to discursively claim higher status while refusing to acknowledge alternative centers of political authority, even as China's actual behavior clearly demonstrated an awareness of, and interaction with, other centers and universalisms.

This combination of China's discursive strategy and Melaka's participation in Islamicate Asia produced a truly decentered realm. What is particularly noteworthy is that Melaka, an upstart city-state, was able to decenter Ming hegemony by pursuing the strategy of attraction at the peak of traditional China as a world power during the Zheng He voyages. Melaka was clearly more than a mere periphery to a Chinese center. If anything, it was the Chinese tributary system that was just one component of a larger decentered and interconnected world.

Melaka was hardly alone in decentering Ming hegemony. Ayutthaya's simultaneous participation in the Ming tributary system, the Pali cosmopolis, and Indo-Persian trading networks meant that there were other polities in Southeast Asia that were not (exclusive) members of the Sinic galaxy, and therefore, China did not sit at the center of their world either. Furthermore, mere coercion by powerful actors is not enough to generate centric orders. Despite the Ming invasion/occupation Vietnam for two decades after 1406, the Vietnamese were in fact "decentering the Chinese world order by positing a cultural hub" in Vietnam itself (Baldanza 2016, 6). According to Reid (2009), 6), "[i]f we can speak of a Chinese world order, it operated only in Korea . . . [because] Korean kings accepted that they derived their

legitimacy from Beijing . . . and entertained minimal political or economic relations with any other countries except China."[18]

While further research is warranted on why centric orders emerge at certain times and in certain places, Melaka's experience demonstrates that domestic political transformation and close and nonexclusive relations with multiple players from different traditions are capable of decentering hegemony. Melaka's international practices—dubbed "mousedeer diplomacy" by Milner and Kasim (2018, 382) for its proactiveness and cleverness in interactions with stronger powers—show that small state agency can have a transformative impact on international orders.

Implications

The analysis above has two main implications. First, I make the case for multiple, open, and (partially) overlapping international orders as viable and long-lasting systems in contrast to realist and liberal conceptions of order. On the one hand, realist scholars tend to argue that great powers create "bounded" international orders (Mearsheimer 2019). In fact, they supposedly create "orders of exclusion" to keep out not just rival great powers, but also "contrary *ideologies*—ideas about how best to organize domestic societies" (Lascurettes 2020, 9, *emphasis original*). On the other hand, liberal scholars advocate orders of inclusion as liberal orders are "easier to join and harder to overturn," because of the "incentives and opportunities to operate within that order" (Ikenberry 2018, 35).

Even though they reach different conclusions, realist and liberal ideas on order share many similarities. They assume that orders are created by the great powers and give little agency to the lesser states. Furthermore, the great powers create orders during crucial order-building "moments."[19] Finally, order creation is about managing rivalries and the provision of security for them. For Mearsheimer (2019, 12), bounded orders "are designed mainly to allow rival great powers to wage security competition with each other," whereas the "struggle for order" is, "first and foremost, a struggle over how leading states best provide security for themselves" for Ikenberry (2011, 11).

Unlike the realist and liberal logics of orders of exclusion and inclusion, my relational approach points toward "open" international orders in which the lesser states exercise their agency and participate in multiple world orders simultaneously, thereby connecting and combining them. Not only is order emergent and accumulative in my approach instead of being generated during order-building moments, but we also cannot assume a priori that order building is always

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[18] See Hui (2021) for another view on Korea–China relations.

[19] The four most common "ordering moments" in IR are 1815, 1914, 1945, and 1991 (Wohlforth 2018).

motivated by rivalries and the provision of security. In fact, how orders have emerged in different regions at different times in world history must be treated as an empirical issue.

Buzan and Lawson (2015, 265) have argued that "the *problématique*" of war/security has dominated IR because of the peculiar nature of the "global transformation of the nineteenth century." This *problématique* was not at core of Melaka's fifteenth-century world even as war was hardly absent then. Furthermore, China did not exclude Melaka or Ayutthaya despite their different domestic ideologies. Order building in this fifteenth-century world was motivated by the desire to make the trading system work while maintaining distinct politicocultural identities. These were then the shared values of that system around which its decentered "constitutional structure" (Reus-Smit 2009) embodied in the primary institutions of kingship and trade emerged.

Second, my argument related to decentered and open orders has implications for contemporary Southeast Asian "choices" in the context of the budding US–China rivalry. Southeast Asia is often referred to as China's "backyard," and some regional leaders have internalized these perceptions after drawing upon incorrect historical analogies. According to the then Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahathir Mohamad in 2019,

> the Malay states have existed near China for the past 2,000 years. We have survived because we know how to conduct ourselves. … In the past we used to send to China gold and silver flowers every year as a symbol of our being practically, well, subservient to them." (Beddall and Yusof 2019)

However, as argued here, fifteenth-century Melaka hardly thought of itself as China's subordinate. While recognizing China's importance, Melaka decentered the Ming by simultaneously participating in the Persian cosmopolis. Just as Melaka exercised its agency then and helped link different world orders, the smaller states of Southeast Asia are doing exactly that in their very different geopolitical context today. According to Goh (2014), it is Southeast Asia that is managing the great powers by "omni-enmeshing" all of them, and by creating "open" regionalism that connects Southeast Asia with not just China and the United States, but with others such as Russia and India too. Their aim is to prevent any single great power from dominating Southeast Asia.

A decentered yet interconnected and combined order in the twenty-first century will look very different from its fifteenth-century counterpart. While no other polity comparable in size to China existed in the fifteenth century, the coming decentered world is likely to have multiple great powers as material power is unlikely to be concentrated in China alone (or indeed in any other single actor). Nevertheless, some parallels are noteworthy. Economics is at the core of contemporary China's quest to build regional order in Southeast Asia (as opposed to the *problématique* of war/security even as these considerations are hardly absent) (Foot 2020). Furthermore, commerce remains central to state making in Southeast Asia even today, and regional polities are determined to maintain their distinct domestic political identities.

Therefore, even as Waltz (1979, 72) argued that it "would be ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics based on Malaysia and Costa Rica," my analysis of the Malay city-state of Melaka indicates that small state agency can decenter hegemony and combine and integrate distinct world orders. As such, we need to pay closer attention to how small states navigate their world, and the *Malay Annals* deserve further attention (Chong 2012).

Conclusion

Some strands of the historical IR literature approach East Asia as a "closed" international system over the *longue durée*. It is further believed that it was the European "irruption of Westphalian legal norms and the rise of a modernizing Japan, hurried along by European victories on the Chinese periphery" that led to the "opening of the formerly closed system" (Coe and Wolford 2020, 278). This Eurocentric view must be abandoned. When the Portuguese entered Asia after 1498, they violently inserted themselves in preexisting intra-Asian trading networks and quite possibly "used Persian or employed Persian speaking interpreters to correspond with the Chinese" (Liu 2010, 95). In other words, it was the European "outsiders" who joined an interconnected Asia as opposed to "opening" a "closed" East Asian world. Fifteenth-century maritime Asia was a world of multiple, partially overlapping international orders that was connected due to the sheer size of China, the Persian language, Indian cottons, and the proactive choices of pivotal states such as Melaka.[20]

In addition to the Eurocentric view that emphasizes European agency in connecting Asia with itself, the analytically imposed "closed" East Asia is also prone to historical Sinocentrism as it literally places China at the "center." In contrast, my relational/global historical perspective shows that China was not at the center of historical East Asia—especially Southeast Asia—simply because it was a material and cultural powerhouse. Pivotal players such as Melaka exercised their agency proactively and partook in different world orders, thereby decentering the Ming by combining different world orders. This relational/global approach helps me move beyond Sinocentric perspectives without flattening the material power asymmetries between China and others, and without effacing the sociocultural differences between them. Simultaneously, the relational/global perspective keeps the future open-ended as well for there is no reason to simply assume that a rising China will sit at the center of (East) Asia as it becomes materially powerful and starts radiating its cultural influence again. The choices of China's smaller neighbors will be as consequential in determining the shape of the regional order(s) in (East) Asia.

Acknowledgments

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[20] See Zarakol (2022) for a parallel continental Asia based on the Chinggisid legacy.

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