The Mandala Culture of Anarchy:
The Pre-Colonial Southeast Asian International Society

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Abstract

Throughout the years, study on pre-colonial Southeast Asian international relations has not garnered major attention because it had long been seen as an integral part of the China-centred tribute system. There is a need to provide greater understanding of the uniqueness of the international system as different regions have different ontologies to comprehend its dynamics and structures. This paper contributes to the pre-colonial Southeast Asian literature by examining the interplay that had existed between pre-colonial Southeast Asian empires and the hierarchical East Asian international society, in particular during the 13th-16th Century. The paper argues that Southeast Asian international relations in pre-colonial time were characterized by complex political structures with the influence of Mandala values. In that structural context, the Majapahit Empire, one of the biggest empires at that time had its own constitutional structures of an international society, albeit still sought close relations with China.

Keywords: Pre-Colonial History, Southeast Asia, Mandala, Tributary System

Introduction

Throughout the years, study on pre-colonial Southeast Asian international relations has not garnered major attention because it had long been seen as an integral part of the China-centred tribute system. Moreover, Southeast Asia has often been regarded as a political "backwater" compared to East Asia because Southeast Asia as a region is seen as relatively "passive", always subjected to the influence of great powers (Peng Er & Teo 2012, p.2). It is often said that under the Chinese hierarchical order, Asian international relations was seen as stable and regional order had been achieved until the arrival of the Western powers in the 19th Century (Kang 2007). However, pre-colonial Southeast Asian countries were far from peaceful and stable under the tribute system. Fierce competition for survival and domination had characterized the balance of power politics throughout the pre-colonial era (Shu 2012b, p. 46).

For that reason, there is a need to provide greater understanding of the uniqueness of the international system as different regions have different ontologies to comprehend its dynamics and structures.