Rethinking the IR theory of empire in late imperial China

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Abstract

International relations scholars have recently taken increased interest in empire. However, research has often focused on European colonial empires. This article aims to evaluate imperialism in a non-Western historical setting: Late Imperial China. The article first compares extant international relations (IR) accounts of empire (one broad and one narrow) to theories of the East Asian hierarchical international system. Second, to further specify analysis, I evaluate IR theories of empire against the historical record of the Ming and Qing dynasties, addressing Chinese relations with surrounding 'tributary' states, conquered imperial possessions, and other neighboring polities. I argue that while IR theories of empire capture much of the region's historical politics, they nonetheless underspecify it. Theories of East Asian hierarchy suggest additional mechanisms at work. The historical cases suggest extensive variation in how empires expand and consolidate. I conclude that there is room for further theory building about empire in IR and suggest possible areas of emphasis.

1 Introduction

International relations scholars have recently taken increased interest in empire (Doyle, 1986; Donnelly, 2006; Nexon and Wright, 2007).[1] However, such research has often focused specifically on European colonial empires (Macdonald, 2009). This article sets out to evaluate imperialism as a distinct form of international hierarchy in a non-Western historical setting: the Sinocentric system in East Asia, prior to Western intervention in the region. This context is also the subject of a growing body of research (Hui, 2004; Womack, 2006; Kang, 2010a; Wang, 2011; Zhou, 2011; Ringmar, 2012; Zhang and Buzan, 2012; Zhang, 2014). Such accounts often emphasize cultural or moral suasion linked to China's preeminent place in the Confucian world. However, the two literatures have not been extensively linked, and the theoretical literature on empire has made relatively little use of the historiography of Chinese imperialism.[2]

This paper thus undertakes two tasks. First, it compares extant international relations (IR) theories of empire to theoretical accounts of the East Asian hierarchical international system surrounding what historians commonly call 'Late Imperial China' (Elliott, 2001) – the period comprising the Ming and Qing dynasties. Second, to further specify the comparison, I evaluate IR theories of empire against the historical record of these two dynasties, addressing Chinese relations with surrounding 'tributary' states, conquered imperial possessions, and other neighboring polities.[3]

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1   Some, including Cox (2004) and Mann (2005), focus on putative American empire. Additionally, recent symposia in *International Studies Perspectives* (Ferguson et al., 2008) and the *Journal of International Relations and Development* ('Special Issue: Hierarchy in World Politics,' 2011) address. This 'turn' is linked to a broader trend toward the study of international hierarchies (Wendt and Friedheim, 1995; Lake, 1996, 2009; Cooley, 2005; Hobson, 2005). Such accounts largely differ from critical accounts in postcolonial IR (Barkawi and Laffey, 2006). See also accounts in sociology (Eisenstadt, 1963; Go, 2009).

2   This is perhaps surprising, given that a large number of sources, either in IR or making claims on IR's subject area, treat China as imperial. Historians commonly refer to China as imperial (Fiskesjö, 1999; Elliott, 2001; Mutschler and Mittag, 2008; Perdue, 2009; Brook, 2010; Larsen, 2011a), as do many IR theorists (Nexon and Wright, 2007, pp. 262, 266; Donnelly, 2009, p. 61). A range of additional sources treat contemporary China as imperial, or potentially so (Ford, 2010; Pantucci and Petersen, 2012; Pines, 2012), usually with reference to historical Chinese empire.

3   The study of this case in this way is of interest for two additional reasons. First, the comparative study of historical international systems is itself a growth area (Buzan and Little, 2000; Wohlforth et al., 2007; Donnelly, 2012; Ringmar, 2012). Second, the contemporary rise of China makes historical Chinese international politics a matter of indirect but nonetheless

I argue that while IR theories of empire capture much of the region's historical politics, considerable additional nuance is called for in assessing Chinese empire, especially as regards differing cultural tools for legitimating imperial rule.

I apply two accounts of empire. The first is relatively broad, defining empire as a political structure in which one political unit exerts authority over other political units, which thereby lose their effective sovereignty. This matches popular and some scholarly conceptions of empire. I then consider a narrower account of empire, taken from Nexon and Wright (2007), that specifies the relational structure of imperial rule more closely. This differentiates empire from other forms of international hierarchy by emphasizing a 'hub and spokes' structure and resulting divide-and-rule strategies. Deploying these two accounts in the historical East Asian context allows us to begin to assess the explanatory power of IR theory of empire in non-Western contexts.

I show that theoretical accounts of empire sit imperfectly next to extant theoretical accounts of the historical East Asian international system. While both clearly describe international hierarchies, IR research on East Asia (here I focus on Kang, 2010a) suggests that tribute paying states, those with Confucian political cultures (notably Korea, Vietnam, and sometimes Japan), lost little of their effective sovereignty. While they acknowledge formal Chinese superiority, they remained functionally independent. However, China nonetheless could and did deploy force to back up its claims (Johnston, 1995; Wang, 2011), however limited they sometimes were. If we additionally specify a hub-and-spokes structure, China only ambiguously applied a divide-and-rule strategy. Peripheries were formally separated from each other, and China managed relations with non-Confucian states differently. However, informal periphery-to-periphery relations persisted across the Confucian cultural-political sphere.

Matters are different again if we compare the two Late Imperial dynasties empirically. While both engaged in imperialism, they differed significantly in how they did so. The Ming emphasized the moral suasion that came with a central role in the Confucian worldview. They employed scant expansionist violence within the Confucian sphere, and while they initially

significant interest. The literature on Chinese ascendance is already too large to survey (Friedberg, 2005; see for example Johnston, 2003; Shambaugh, 2005; Kang, 2007; Ross and Zhu, 2008; Schweller and Pu, 2011). For a skeptical view, see Beckley (2012). On China in IR theory generally, see Johnston (2012).

aimed to expand by force into the Eurasian steppe, they gradually turned to insularity, retreating behind strategic fortifications. In contrast, the Qing dynasty expanded enthusiastically to the North and West, rapidly expanding their empire under force of arms. They, too, exerted influence through Confucian ideas of social hierarchy but also deployed quite different ideological tools in culturally different regions of their empire. Moreover, the status of the Manchu Qing as outsiders appears to have attenuated their claims to Confucian superiority.

Taken together, this evidence suggests IR theories of empire usefully describe these cases but nonetheless underspecify them in important ways. There is a need for greater historical nuance in IR theories of empire, especially as regards cultural differences. These two Chinese empires legitimated themselves *as* empires in quite different ways and proceeded differently when legitimate rule was not to be had. These differences had important consequences for how the empires expanded, consolidated, and ruled.

Below, I proceed as follows. First, I review the literature on empire, drawing out two accounts of imperial power structures. Second, I address the IR-theoretic literature on hierarchy in pre-Western East Asia, considering its similarities to and differences from accounts of empire. Third, I compare the account of empire to the historical record. Here, I emphasize the Late Imperial period, comprising the Ming and Qing dynasties, since these form the basis for much of the historical IR literature on the region. I conclude by considering what the East Asian experience tells us about how to theorize empire.

2 Empires and other hierarchies

Since definitions of 'empire' in IR vary, I specify and evaluate two. The first defines the term loosely in terms of hierarchical structures, capturing range of phenomena. The second more closely specifies the relational structure of imperial hierarchy in terms of its hub-and-spokes relational structure.

The broader definition emphasizes empire's hierarchy and pluralistic scope. Doyle (1986, p. 45) defines empire relatively broadly, as 'a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society.' Donnelly (2006, p. 140) specifies empire as 'an extensive polity incorporating diverse, previously independent units, ruled by a dominant central polity.' Taken together, these accounts suggest empire as a centralized international hierarchy, typified by multiple

peripheries and the suspension of their effective sovereignty. Empires, formal or informal, impose persistent rule from a metropole on a plurality of peripheries. Following Lake (2009, pp. 52–53), this rule implicates both security and trade. It is authority or *rule* in the sense that both parties – subordinate and superordinate – recognize that an authority structure is in place (Lake, 2009, p. 57).

A narrower and more precise definition includes these premises but more closely specifies the relational structure of imperial hierarchy. Following Galtung (1971), Motyl (2001, p. 16) notes that empires 'resemble an incomplete wheel, with a hub and spokes but no rim.' The primary political ties structuring an empire run from the metropole to its colonies, the colonies themselves being largely disconnected from one another. On this basis, Nexon and Wright (2007) specify distinctive features of this rimless wheel structure.[4] First, empires rule indirectly, through local intermediaries. Normally, the metropole exerts authority only through these figures, who thus enjoy autonomous bargaining roles. Thus, second, empires engage in 'heterogeneous contracting' with these intermediaries. Separate relationships with each permit empires to negotiate varying rights and responsibilities of rule. This increases flexibility but also necessitates keeping the peripheries separate. Thus, since all such contracts require hierarchical power-political relations, with the core in charge, 'empires face specific problems of legitimating their control' (Nexon and Wright, 2007, p. 254). Chief among these is the need to prevent connectivity or coalition building across peripheries. Dividing becomes a precondition for effective rule.

This distinctive relational structure makes empire different from three other forms of international hierarchy: unipolarity, hegemony, and constitutional order (Nexon and Wright, 2007, pp. 256–58). Unipolarity describes international anarchy in which one state is overwhelmingly or preponderantly more powerful than its peers but lack legitimate authority. States remain power-politically atomized.[5] In contrast, hegemony is typified by legitimated, agreed-upon hierarchical control by one state, which deploys its authority to establish systemic 'rules of the game' (Mastanduno, 2005, p. 179). However, inter-periphery relations remain possible, and subordinates retain a modified form of sovereignty.[6] Constitutional orders are a variation in which the

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4 See also Nexon (2008, 2009), Cooley and Nexon (2013).

5 See for example Wohlforth (1999). For a skeptical view, see Monteiro (2011).

6 See also Gilpin (1983) and Keohane (1984).

hegemon establishes formal institutions to oversee these rules, thereby providing non-hegemonic states with incentive to buy in (Ikenberry, 2001). Empires differ from all of these in emphasizing a distinctive divide-and-rule dynamic.

On either account, empires may be either formal or informal. Formal empires make explicit legal or institutional arrangements specifying the authority structures involved. Informal empires do not, instead relying on implied or informal arrangements. Peripheries retain formal sovereignty, and the authoritative imposition of hierarchy is attenuated, since rules lacking formal institutions are less easily enforced. By extension, informal empire is less easily detected by the observer, since both structures of authority and tools of enforcement are implicit (Lake, 2009, pp. 57–59).[7]

3 Theories of East Asian hierarchy

IR-theoretic research on East Asia before western intervention generally agrees that the region was hierarchical in some way. However, disagreements persist on how steeply hierarchical it was, on the form that hierarchy took, and on why the system persisted.[8] The canonical account among historians, found in Fairbank and Têng (1941) and elaborated in Fairbank (1968b), describes a 'tributary system'.[9] Therein, a central Chinese state held hierarchical superiority over a surrounding group of tribute paying subordinates, including Korea, Vietnam, sometimes Japan, and others.[10] At the system's

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7 On the broadest accounts, often linked to right- or left-wing advocacy, 'empire' can sometimes resemble an all-encompassing category of benevolent paternalistic leadership or pernicious oppression. While rhetorically powerful, such accounts offer little analytical bite, poorly differentiating empire from other political configurations. See review in Motyl (2006).

8 For degrees of hierarchy in historical East Asia, see Zhang (2014).

9 Despite its age, the account has remained remarkably influential. Critiques and revisions, while often thoroughgoing, continue to depart from it (Rossabi, 1983; Hevia, 1995). Historical accounts often use the term 'world order,' eliding terms like 'sovereign,' 'international,' and the like as irremediably Eurocentric. Since IR accounts generally retain these terms, I do was well. Some historians have abandoned the language of tribute altogether (Hevia, 2009). I retain the term here because it remains entrenched in IR scholarship on the period.

10 During the Late Imperial period (from 1368 onward), and sometimes beforehand, these states were bureaucratized and territorially delimited. They thus resembled modern states, despite predating their European equivalents (Woodside, 2009). Borders between China and its tributary states were in many cases formalized before equivalent line-drawing occurred in Europe (Larsen, 2011a, pp. 500–501). Japan was the borderline case, only intermittently sharing the values and institutional frameworks implemented in China, Korea, and (usually) Vietnam, and being less bureaucratically integrated. Other states also paid tribute at various

apex, the emperor was the 'Son of Heaven' (*tianxi*), with a putative mandate to govern 'all under heaven' (*tianxia*). To varying degrees, these states shared Confucian political values that provided shared hierarchical norms. Their rulers recognized the emperor as formally superior and sought investiture from him on entering office. To the West and North were Central Asia and the Inner Asian steppe, where differing values often persisted, and China had relatively little normative influence.[11]

Among the Confucian states, the ritualized practice of tribute payment is said to have served as a way to regulate China's relations with neighboring states, through a shared set of formalized diplomatic and economic practices. The word translated as 'tribute,' *gong*, indicates a symbolic exchange, and represented not extraction so much as an exchange of gifts: symbolic offerings between subordinates and imperial superiors. Supplicants gave *gong* (often exotic or luxury goods), while the emperor gave gifts in kind (*feng*), along with recognition of a subordinate but nonetheless autonomous role for the tribute payer. Gifts given by the emperors often exceeded the value of those they received (Fairbank, 1953, p. 32). The institution thus served as an official vehicle for economic exchange between polities. China disciplined recalcitrant subordinates not by demanding more, but by refusing tribute, since doing so denied subordinates access to legitimacy and trade. Tribute legitimized through ritual (Ringmar, 2012, pp. 9–10).[12] These rituals enacted the emperor's superiority over visitors, who would be made to wait at length, then to prostrate themselves repeatedly (the *koutou*) before the Emperor. Often, ritual occurred in place of substantive diplomatic business, rather than as a facilitating preliminary (Elliott, 2009, pp. 126–130).[13]

However, historians since Fairbank have noted a range of limitations to the account. Historical practice was complex and varied. Participants in the system did not reliably behave as the rules said they should. China did not generally control the domestic or foreign policy of the tributary states.

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times, including Siam (Thailand), Ryukyu (Okinawa), Malaya, Burma, and Tibet. However, these were either smaller or were more peripheral to the system.

11 The *tianxia* system has recently recurred in public political discourse in China. The philosopher Zhao Tingyang (2006, 2009) has articulated a normative *tianxia* theoretical account. For critical accounts, see Carlson (2011) and Chang (2011). For a review, with a brief but spirited defense, see Ren (2010, pp. 111–114).

12 Indeed, China having nothing equivalent to a foreign ministry, visiting dignitaries were overseen by a body called the 'Board of Rites' (Elliott, 2009, p. 130).

13 Tributary relations constituted the normal only workings of the system only: 'The finer points of tributary protocol were put aside when problems were seen as serious' (Wang, 1998, p. 309).

Thus, historians have had difficulty articulating a clear explanation for how and why the system hung together (Hevia, 2009).[14] Historians and IR scholars generally agree that it existed, at least during China's Late Imperial period, and likely occurred in various forms beforehand as well. However, they differ on how and why this hierarchical order persisted.

These ambiguities present a challenge to IR scholars of the period. Kang (2010a) offers perhaps the most systematic account to date, attributing the dynamics of the regional system to a complex interface of ideas and interests, wherein states pursued rank-ordered status within the system. Tributary states recognized China as culturally as well as power-politically superior and located themselves within a hierarchy below it. This permitted regional stability and thus an environment that benefitted all, by facilitating peace and trade. Since Kang's account systematically deals with multiple aspects of regional politics, I emphasize it in this section. Other accounts describe the regional hierarchy as a form of English School international society (Zhang and Buzan, 2012) or attribute the system's structure to a game-theoretic equilibrium (Zhou, 2011). Focusing on a single persistent bilateral relationship between China and Vietnam, Womack (2006) tracks the changing shape of asymmetry in Chinese relations with one of its neighbors.[15]

These accounts have critics. Perhaps most prominently, some doubt that the system was as pacific as Kang and others (see especially Kelly, 2012) suggest. As Johnston (1995, p. 73) has shown, in classical Chinese military texts, 'the sources of state security are varied and include both martial … and civil or nonmilitary … elements'.[16] Successive dynasties could and did go to war and had ideological or theoretical bases for doing. Similarly, Wang (2011, p. xiii), looking at strategic decision-making during the Song and Ming dynasties, concludes that 'relative power concerns were at the

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14 Even Fairbank (1968a, pp. 7–8) notes that imperial rule 'could be maintained over so broad and diverse a terrain and so vast a population precisely because it was so superficial … [R]ulers outside China, or on the fringe, were beyond the reach of the bureaucratic structure of territorial administration'. There is thus a general consensus that the reach of China's influence was geographically wide, but substantively limited.

15 On Chinese civilization in IR more generally, see Katzenstein (2013). The accounts surveyed here explain the structure and persistence of the tributary system, but not its origin. For an IR-theoretic account of China's initial consolidation during the Warring State period, see Hui (2004).

16 Similarly, Crossley (quoted in Kang, 2010a, p. 68) notes that China's 'institutional and discursive practices provided a wide range of tools with which to mediate conflict in East Asia.' Where the rhetoric of tribute failed, force or the threat of it, or the suspension of trade, was employed.

heart of Chinese strategic choices; Confucian culture failed to constrain Chinese use of force.' These arguments suggest that, however stable Late Imperial East Asia may appear, a range of mechanisms likely made it so, ranging from legitimate authority to military coercion.[17]

Nonetheless, these accounts of the East Asian system offer plausible (and likely overlapping) explanations of how and why the tributary system emerged and persisted. However, the purpose of this article is not to adjudicate between existing explanations. Instead, I am concerned to consider the implications of the system, both theoretically and empirically, for explanatory IR theories of empire.

In theoretical terms, it is somewhat ambiguous whether or not the dynamics they describe were systematically imperial, at least on the terms defined earlier. On the relatively broad first definition of empire mentioned earlier, the ideal-type system Kang describes combines elements of both hierarchy and anarchy. It depicts the imperial throne claiming authority over subordinated units in the region. However, authority claims routinely exceeded actual authority, since states retained internal sovereignty, and external sovereignty as well, in the sense that they often controlled their own foreign policy – participation in the system was a form of 'voluntary emulation' (Kang, 2010a, p. 33). States that did not emulate voluntarily, chiefly those in Inner Asia and sometimes Japan, related to the central Chinese state quite differently but (as I will indicate below) were only sometimes subject to imperial coercion. On Kang's account, imperial *rule* was ambiguous, since much of Chinese power was largely symbolic rather than substantive – China could not easily compel its subordinates – and since it was granted by subordinates more or less willingly. Nonetheless, coercion could and occasionally did occur. This suggests much greater complexity than straightforward and legitimate hierarchy.

If we adopt the second and narrower account of empire, matters are different again. Bargaining was clearly heterogeneous in some respects – Kang describes the imperial throne dealing differently with those to the South and East than with non-Confucian polities to the North and West (Kang, 2010a, pp. 141–49). However, within the Confucian political space, a distinction between formal and informal relations persisted. Formally, each subordinate dealt with China separately, implying a divide-and-rule

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17 Kohno (2014, pp. 182, 185, 188) has also been quite critical of Kang's empirical documentation.

dynamic. Since 'official' trade was tied to tribute missions, this dynamic mattered. Informally, however, trade and other relations between subordinated units persisted (Kang, 2010a, pp. 41, 45, 117–18, see also 2012). Thus, on this theoretical account, the status of divide-and-rule strategies is somewhat ambiguous or inconsistent: it was formally and officially present, but informal practices often undermined it. A hub-and-spokes account of empire would expect this to undermine the imperial structure. However, Kang describes (and the historical record supports) a system that persisted despite these informal linkages across peripheries.

4 East Asian hierarchy in historical practice

This ambiguity can be better assessed by returning to the empirical record. Where a comparison between explanatory theories leaves uncertainty, history can help us to better specify the phenomena at work. This section thus surveys the historical literature on Late Imperial China, evaluating it in terms of the definitions of imperialism discussed earlier. It proceeds in two subsections detailing international politics during two historical periods: those of the Ming and Qing dynasties. In each, I emphasize relations with core tributary states, and with polities further afield, using these to document China's frontier or foreign policy.[18] While imperialism clearly occurred under both dynasties, there was a significant degree of variation between the two in terms of how empire building and maintenance occurred. This suggests that theoretical accounts of empire would benefit from recognizing greater variation among empires, and developing tools for differentiating between them.

4.1 Ming international politics

The Ming established their rule after overthrowing the Mongol Yuan dynasty in 1368. The state they established was strong. A bureaucracy of Confucian scholars administered it locally and nationally, largely excluding the traditional nobility. The emperor ruled as 'a supreme autocrat' (Hucker, 1998, p. 9; see also Woodside, 2009). Thus, the state was robust and administratively complex, but differed from modern states in that governance was based on the will of the emperor. The purpose of the legal system was to formalize and carry out the emperor's instructions – it thus

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18   On China's gradual transition from one to the other, see Mosca (2013).

more closely resembled a form of absolutism than strict rule of law ([Langlois, 1998](), p. 172). Still, Ming China more closely resembled a bureaucratically integrated state than an empire. While the emperors claimed authority over 'all under heaven,' their capacity to impose authority abroad, on the states that paid tribute, was varied.

Chinese authorities knew they could not claim effective control over the lands at the margins of their world, as the founding Ming emperor made clear in instructions to his successors:

> The overseas foreign countries … and the very small countries of the southern man are separated from us by mountains and seas and far away in a corner. Their lands would not usefully serve us if incorporated [into the Chinese state]. If they were so unrealistic as to disturb our borders, it would be unfortunate for them. If they give us no trouble and we moved troops to fight them unnecessarily, it would be unfortunate for us. (Quoted in [Womack, 2010](), pp. 120–121)

Most of Chinese policy over the course of the Ming period broadly observed these instructions, exhibiting a sharp distinction between home and abroad, and dealing carefully with the outside world. As [Wang (1998](), p. 307) notes, 'The first Ming emperor believed in tight centralized control over all matters pertaining to relations beyond the borders of his empire.' Ming authorities had mixed relations with their tributary neighbors, but resort to outright force was relatively rare. Relations with neighbors more distant from the Chinese heartland were less stable, but distance often precluded war, and usually mitigated imperial ambitions.

Korea was 'a model Chinese tributary state' ([Clark, 1998]()).[19] Korean kings sent tribute and sought investiture from the inception of the Ming dynasty. Indeed, the only persistent source of difficulty in Sino-Korean relations was the legitimacy of Korean monarchs. During ruptures in the line of succession, the Ming were concerned about who could correctly be invested with the 'right' to govern the Korean peninsula ([Clark, 1998]()). Ming authorities did not view themselves as choosing foreign monarchs. Rather, its role was to formally, symbolically invest those who had an existing claim to the title. This posed problems: they were bound by the rules to

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19 See also [Schwartz (1968](), p. 276): 'only the Koreans seem to provide a fairly convincing example of wholehearted acceptance … by a non-Chinese ethnic group outside the Chinese heartland.'

invest rightful heirs, and by practicality to invest those actually in charge.[20] Thus, even where both polities wanted the system to work, it often had to be navigated carefully. Nonetheless, the two monarchies were in some sense interdependent. Korean kings wanted the legitimacy of investiture, whereas Chinese emperors wanted the appearance of superiority that came with conferring it.

Vietnam offers a more ambiguous example. Here too, there were early difficulties over succession to the Vietnamese throne (Wang, 1998, p. 308). Later, for 20 years in the early fifteenth century, China occupied the country militarily. However, this proved unsustainable, and the two emerged as separate states, with Vietnam adopting the Chinese Confucian political system. In so doing, however, it insisted on independence from China. Vietnam engaged in the rhetoric and ritual of the tribute system. It also too on regional possessions of its own, from whom it received tribute. Thus, Womack observes, 'China accustomed itself to being the middle kingdom among other kingdoms that were inferior but not subordinate'. The turn toward Chinese-style bureaucracy and political philosophy was symptomatic not of Chinese domination, but of freedom from it: 'If China were still an active threat, then Vietnam's political task would have been military cohesion', not institution-building (Womack, 2006, pp. 129, 133). For the most part, Southeast Asia as such was deemed a space of formal influence tempered by noninterference. From 1395 onward, a total of 15 Southeast Asian polities were officially deemed 'not to be invaded' (Wang, 1998, p. 312). This was consistent with the broader Ming preference for avoiding unnecessary conflict.

Ming relations were most problematic with Japan, in part because of the relatively diffuse structure of Japan's government, which often made coherent Japanese foreign policy difficult to achieve.[21] Moreover, Japan was a source of pirates, who attacked the Korean and Chinese coasts (Elisonas, 1991). Most importantly however, Japan instigated a large conflict, the Imjin wars, in an attempt to revise the regional system. In 1592, the Japanese set out to invade China through the Korean peninsula,

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20 A foreign role in succession does not alone indicate a suspension of effective sovereignty. Indeed, in early modern European politics, military intervention to secure dynastic succession was common. China's involvement in investiture was comparatively limited: highly formalized, but rarely if ever coercive (Ruggie, 1993, p. 163; Reus-Smit, 1999, pp. 116–120).

21 Ringmar (2012, pp. 5–6) has characterized early modern Japan not as a state, so much as a hierarchically structured international system, in which regions enjoyed significant autonomy from the capital.

eventually landing almost a million men. The wars went on for seven years before the invading Japanese were repulsed. China thus retained its claim to the top of the regional hierarchy (Turnbull, 2002; Swope, 2005; Fogel, 2009, pp. 29–30). The conflict was exceptional – no other wars on remotely this scare were fought between China and the tributary states during the Ming and Qing dynasties (which together spanned almost five centuries). The Ming formally expelled Japan from the tributary system in 1621.[22]

The Ming regarded the Inner Asian steppe as their greatest security threat. Chinese dynasties had for centuries feared the nomadic empires of the steppe, and the Ming dynasty had been founded through the overthrow of the Mongol-founded Yuan Dynasty. Initially, the Ming claimed the goal of establishing control over the whole of former Yuan possessions, which extended far into the steppe. In the end, Ming frontiers were reduced in almost every direction (Brook, 2010, pp. 28–29). For the remainder of their rule, Ming emperors adopted a range of approaches to the region. Waldron (1990) documents a gradual shift from offensive to defensive policy, linked to increased construction of fortifications along the northern frontier: slowly, the Ming retreated behind a series of barriers that became known collectively as the Great Wall. However, the wall was completed only in the sixteenth century, some two hundred years after the dynasty was founded. The Ming spent much of their early history regarding the northern frontier zone not simply as a threat, but also as a region of potential imperial possessions. For their part, the Mongols sometimes paid tribute and sometimes did not. In the wake of the Yuan collapse, they also failed to consolidate a unified polity that might have threatened the Ming existentially. The result was intermittent warfare, as Mongol groups raided China's frontiers, and the Ming fought to repulse them and sometimes to impose their rule, until the Ming eventually retreated behind the wall (Rossabi, 1998).

Further afield again, China managed relations with a mix of tributary rhetoric and improvization. A series of episodes in relations with the Timurid Empire in Central Asia is illustrative. The founding Ming emperor initiated relations with a letter in 1394. Timur, the empire's founder, sent a gift of some 200 horses in reply. The Ming cataloged them as tribute. Additional gifts followed. In 1395, however, a Ming embassy to Timur's court encountered trouble: the gifts had been intended not as tribute, but as gestures of

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22　The war was unusual enough in the period as to constitute a puzzle unto itself (Kang, 2010a).

largesse – symbolic of Timur's power, not his subservice. The gifts abruptly stopped. When a Ming emperor embassy arrived seven years, their entire caravan was seized. Relations eventually improved under Timur's successor, but no Timurid leader ever recognized Ming superiority. Later Ming correspondence referred to the Timurid ruler as an equal, but Ming official records did not – we know the claim only from Timurid sources. Relations were thus troubled and confused, as the two polities negotiated their coexistence in the absence of shared diplomatic practices (Fletcher, 1968, pp. 206–16; see also: Rossabi, 1998).

Viewed together, the states in the Ming system gave rise to relatively stable systemic dynamics: war occurred rarely and chiefly some in regions rather than others. Where war was least common, the system replicated itself with remarkable stability for almost three hundred years. The states that paid tribute, even when most willing to do so (Korea), ceded little in the way of what we would now recognize as sovereignty. Open imperial expansion in this space was conspicuous for its failure in Vietnam, and otherwise for its absence. Overt revisionism (Japan) was successfully repulsed and punished, but did not lead to expansionist war by the Ming. Elsewhere, imperialist expansionary war was relatively common but was fought chiefly with peoples who did not consistently accept the Confucian worldview. Eventually, this expansionist strategy was abandoned even there. In short, the Ming imperial experience was uneven: military expansion occurred early, but was later abandoned, and the most effective efforts at hegemonic superiority occurred through cultural influence, rather than by way of force.

4.2 Qing international politics

In 1644, Manchu troops entered Beijing and established the Qing dynasty. While the Manchus were perceived as outsiders to China, and while a remnant Ming regime survived for a time in the southern part of the country (Struve, 1984), the new dynasty established otherwise unchallenged rule over the Chinese state. However, despite Qing retention of existing diplomatic mechanisms, and the continued central role of China itself in the region, important aspects of the regional dynamic changed.

The degree to which Qing authorities became Sinicized over the course of their rule is debated.[23] Established research has long argued that the

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23   For a review of the debate, see Perdue (2009, p. 95).

Qing effectively became Chinese – much more so than the previous Mongol conquerors from the North. However, in important respects, the new dynasty was not Chinese. Recent historical research argues they remained distinctively Manchu throughout the period, despite adopting Chinese tools of governance. Rawski (1996) argues that much of Manchu culture remained entrenched after the conquest, appropriating preexisting Chinese administrative and ideological tools to oversee an empire that was nonetheless chiefly their own creation. For Crossley (1999), the Qing imperial ideology was differently articulated to different audiences. Qing emperors presented themselves to their Chinese subjects on the terms of the *tianxia* system, but deployed other narratives elsewhere. They thus retained Inner Asian notions of kinship when addressing Mongol and other steppe peripheries, claimed to be defenders of a specific Buddhist sect in Tibet (Perdue, 2009, p. 96), and so on. This was explicitly a form of divide and rule, predicated on differing mechanisms of imperial legitimation.[24]

The polity created through the Qing conquest thus differed significantly from its Ming precursor. Still, the Qing retained much of the preexisting model when dealing with those parts of the system already within it, including core Chinese territory and neighboring Confucian states. This provides strong evidence for its effectiveness as a generalized mode of rule. This cannot have been easily or intuitively done – the Manchus, once nomads, came from a profoundly different socioeconomic and cultural milieu (Elliott, 2001). The Manchus retained this model because it served their purposes as a means of maintaining regional order. Even then, however, problems persisted.

Relations with the major tributary states were varied and often strained. Korea remained the most Sinicized player in the system, retaining a Confucian domestic political culture, reliably sending tributary missions. However, this presented difficulties of its own for the Qing. For more than a century after the dynastic change, Korean elites persisted in viewing the Manchu-led polity as 'a country ruled by barbarians' (Hwang, 2010, p. 100). Prior to their conquest of China, the Manchus had invaded the Korean peninsula twice, in 1627 and 1636 (Seth, 2010, pp. 146–50). Even

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24 Crossley (1999) goes on to argue that the core ethnonational categories themselves—Manchu, Chinese, and those of other conquered peoples—were themselves largely generated by these multivalent processes of imperial expansion, consolidation, and integration.

after the Qing dynasty was formally established, relations remained imperfect, and Larsen (2011b) has shown that the Qing were forced to use significant levels of coercion to retain Korean compliance. Similarly, Vietnam paid tribute, but nonetheless chafed under Qing imperial tutelage, even as it began to build a smaller imperial project of its own in Southeast Asia (Womack, 2006, pp. 138–39). Japan continued to be the most exceptional of the major states in the region. It remained formally excluded from the regional order. Under the Tokugawa Shogunate, it was the most closed state in the region. For a time, Japan accessed Chinese markets informally through the mediation of the pirate king Zheng Chenggong, on Taiwan (Clements, 2004), until the Qing conquest of Taiwan in 1683. It may be relative isolation, as much as anything else, that precluded conflict between the Qing and the Shogunate.

To the North and West, the Qing inherited no preexisting Ming influence. Here, matters were unambiguously imperial. Qing armies invaded Tibet, Mongolia, and East Turkistan (renaming it Xinjiang) and installed imperial intermediaries. Including these imperially governed areas, the Qing Chinese state soon had double the territory of its Ming predecessor. Power was expressly imposed and sustained by force. The new possessions were governed by native intermediaries or by imperial bureaucrats, with decisions about rule substantially being made in Beijing (Larsen, 2011a, pp. 499–501; Perdue, 2009, pp. 92–94). Visitors to the capital from these territories were overseen not by the Board of Rites, as missions from Confucian states were, but instead by the newly created Bureau of Colonial Dependencies (Elliott, 2009, p. 132). Similarly, Qing relations with the Inner Asian steppe differed fundamentally from the Ming experience. The Manchus came from the steppe and shared much of its political tradition. Perhaps more importantly, they had the military power to subdue it. They were the last Chinese rulers to face significant opposition from Inner Asia. They destroyed the last Inner Asian empire, that of the Zunghars, in the mid-eighteenth century (Perdue, 2005), ending Inner Asian imperialism permanently. These territories were rolled into the new system of imperial administration. However, further afield in Central Asia, beyond the new imperial borders, geographical isolation largely precluded Qing conquest. The Khanate of Khokand, a prominent city-state in the Fergana Valley, claimed sovereignty for itself, not recognizing the Qing emperor's superiority. Much as had the Ming with the larger Timurid Empire, Qing rulers gradually found themselves compelled to treat the distant and powerful

city-state as a political equal (Newby, 2005). Where neither coercion nor a shared culture was available, imperial influence proved impossible.

This reading makes the Qing dynasty both more explicitly imperial and more explicitly Manchu. It also suggests that the polity itself was only ambiguously Chinese. If the new Qing history is correct, China itself was a Manchu political possession:

> [A]t the height of their power, the Qing regarded China not so much as the center of their empire, as only a part, albeit a very important part, of a much wider dominion that extended far into the Inner Asian territories of Mongolia, Tibet, the Northeast … and Xinjiang, or Chinese (Eastern) Turkestan. (Waley-Cohen, 2004, pp. 194–95)

Differing rhetorical displays and coercive strategies toward differing possessions and zones of influence reflect this understanding. Where Confucian ritual and rhetoric, inherited from the Ming, could be deployed to render Korea or Vietnam relatively pliant, the Qing did so. Where a rhetoric of kinship borrowed from the steppe could be deployed, as with Mongols, and other Inner Asian peoples, they did this instead. Throughout, these claims were linked to the possibility of force. Since the various peripheries may well have known that differing rhetorics were in use (and that the Qing leadership were not 'really' or 'purely' motivated by Confucianism, by kinship, or by the other rhetorical tools they used), they may have perceived the Manchu imperial project as only limitedly legitimate. Coercion was required to back it up.[25]

Eventually, the Sinocentric system was destroyed not by disruption or revisionism from within, but by intervention from without, through its encounter with the Eurocentric Westphalian system. The arrival in force of European colonial empires changed the regional dynamic gradually, but irreversibly. While the Russian, Dutch, and Portuguese empires had interacted with China since at least the seventeenth century, the influence of Westphalian values of sovereignty was not immediate or decisive. As Krasner (2001, p. 179) notes, 'In China the Western powers … confronted a problem for which the conventional rules of sovereignty … provided no solution.' However, in the long run, where norms clashed, brute force mattered most. From the beginning

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25 The new Qing history is not without critics. For a canonical polemic against it, see Ho (1998). For a more recent defense of Sinicization, see Huang (Huang, 2011).

of the First Opium War in 1839, and the arrival of the 'black ships' of the US Navy in Tokyo Bay in 1853, the regional dynamic changed permanently. From this point on, one generally does not speak of a distinct East Asian international system or community. China gradually adopted the diplomatic practices of the West, even as it ceded parts of its sovereignty to Western governments. The hierarchical, Sinocentric East Asian system vanished permanently.[26] The political values that replaced it were themselves imperial as well but represented imperialism of a very different kind: that practiced through European colonial expansion. Thus, imperialism as such in the region declined only with the end of European imperialism in the mid-twentieth century.

5 Conclusion: imperial China?

How, and in what ways, were these experiences imperial? In theoretical terms, the standard IR accounts of the East Asian system are ambiguous. As Johnston (2012, p. 61) has noted, these account 'suggest a more eclectic understanding of hierarchy in IR' than to standard theoretical sources on hierarchy as such (Lake, 2009). The analysis mentioned earlier suggests that something similar is true with reference to theories of empire. In both instances, locating accounts in a specific historical experience requires theory to be both more detailed and more specific. Kang's (2010a) account is in some respects consistent with a broad definition of empire. It is also consistent with a narrower, hub-and-spokes account. The center did bargain heterogeneously with surrounding polities, at least insofar as relations differed with tributary and non-tributary states. However, it suggests that much else besides was at work in the region. Formal and legitimate hierarchy interacted with a tacit acceptance of something closer to anarchy in practice. On this account, Chinese authority was real, but circumscribed.[27]

Empirically, matters are more complex. The two Late Imperial dynasties had very different experiences of their dominant roles in the region and went about being imperial in very different ways.

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26 On the East Asian encounter with the West in IR, see Suzuki (2009).

27 Nexon and Wright (2007, p. 258) note that, 'From the perspective of ideal-typical analysis, we need not be overly troubled by the fact that some political communities we think of as empires will not fit our conceptualization, and that some we think of as nonimperial will.' China suggests additionally that much of what occurs within an empire may be underspecified by this ideal-typification.

Under the Ming Dynasty, imperialism was real, but limited. Coercion and violence were only sometimes tools of power-political management. Expansionism was both rarer and less successful than under the Qing. Inversely however, the Ming experience of moral or cultural suasion was much more successful. States with Confucian political cultures participated in the tributary system largely without having to be coerced into doing so. Polities with different political cultures – most prominently the Mongols, and other Inner Asian steppe peoples – were subject first to attempts at coercion, and later to isolation, as the Ming built walls to keep them out, rather than attempting to dominate them. Where distance made both options impossible (as was the case further afield, in Central Asia), relations were confused and *ad hoc*. Ming imperialism was real, but ambivalent, and most successful when it could be undertaken with more persuasion than force.

In contrast, the Qing state was prominently, and indeed enthusiastically, imperial. As Perdue (2009), and others, have argued, it engaged in extensive colonial expansion. It did so chiefly by way of armed conquest and coercion. Their borders expanded dramatically to the North and West. Where the Qing inherited existing tributary relationships from their predecessors, they retained them, but were much more and able willing to back them with force. As Perdue (2005, p. 548) has elsewhere argued, 'Negotiation and incorporation were much more common than repression, but the iron fist always was held in reserve behind the smooth ritual mask.' Ritual persisted, but coercion served to make it convincing.

There was thus a great deal of variation across the two dynasties in how to *do* empire.[28] This heterogeneity is not likely limited to a contrast between these two cases. Perdue (2003, p. 67) usefully summarizes the Chinese practice of international politics over the long haul: 'this "system" was constantly under challenge, breaking down, being reconfigured, and rebuilt. In regard to some regions, like Korea, relations were fairly stable; elsewhere, particularly in the northwest, wide fluctuations occurred.' This should perhaps be seen not as a sign of weakness, so much as of institutional adaptability. As Wang (1968, p. 61) long ago put it, 'Chinese

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28 As Kang notes (2010b, p. 619), variation of mechanisms across China's foreign relations indicates that neither realist materialism nor strictly norm-based explanations can alone explain regional outcomes. Kang points to differing treatment of the Confucian south and east, and the non-Confucian north and west. This analysis suggests that something similar might be said in contrasting the two dynasties, an beyond.

institutions were not as inflexible as they have often been made out to be.'
Indeed, they had to be flexible. Over the course of Chinese history, neither
coercion nor Confucian moral suasion was enough alone to manage re-
gional politics. Successive dynasties had to continually adjust their hege-
monic claims and adjust the tools they used to maintain them. Their
geopolitical achievement lay not in constructing a century-long unbroken
imperial power structure, so much as in persistently and effectively adapt-
ing to quite varied challenges.[29]

Nor is this variety, and occasional ambivalence, reducible to a distinc-
tion between formal and informal empire. Informal empire suggests influ-
ence without formal institutions. Under the Ming dynasty, tributary
relationships often inverted this formulation, at least in relations with the
Confucian states. Instead of imposing informal rule alongside formal sov-
ereignty, the Ming claimed formal rule but limited practical power. During
the Qing period, cultural influence may have been reduced, but was also
more heterogeneous, and remained based on claims to formal authority. It
was reliably backed by force. At all times, the goal was formal imperialism.
What varied was the tools by which it was established.

In sum then, a theoretical comparison of ideal-types suggests not a mis-
match so much as a lack of specification. Theories of empire, broad and
narrow alike, would appear to underspecify the nature of the east Asian
system. Empirically, these Chinese empires varied across dynastic cases. This
suggests a new and potentially fruitful line of inquiry in the IR theorization
of empire. Whereas Nexon and Wright propose an analytically useful
typology of hierarchies, of which empires are one, what is wanted here is a
typology of empires themselves. Empires have expanded, consolidated, and
declined in differing ways. We are owed a theoretical account of how and why
this is so. One important line of inquiry here might concern the tools with
which empires legitimize their rule. Since coercion is costly, empires may face
incentives to make their authority appear legitimate. Both dynasties were at
pains to do so, but did so differently, and to different degrees.

More immediately, it may be worth noting in conclusion a conceptual limi-
tation on the approach taken above. The word 'empire' is in some respects a

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29 Indeed, as Kohno (2014, pp. 185–88) has noted, speaking of an East Asian international
system may be difficult, insofar as unit and system are not always distinct: Japan was often
historically a fragmented space of interacting units, even as it often presented itself to the
outside world as a quasi-unified polity. Something similar may at some times be true historic-
ally of China, at last at its periphery.

western imposition on the region. The Chinese term *tianxia* does not suggest a generic type of polity: there could be only one 'all under heaven'.[30] Ideal-type international structural frameworks, like those employed here, are intended to make sense of world politics across historical and geographical contexts. Imperfect fits are thus to be expected: no analytical framework can be expected to describe all historical instances to which it applies with equal clarity and precision. In some instances, it may be necessary to combine them.[31] My aim here has simply been to indicate where extant inconsistencies between 'empire' and the East Asian system may be sufficiently large to provide opportunity for novel theory building in the future.

Acknowledgements

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30 I thank Lincoln Rathnam for pointing this out to me.

31 Nexon and Wright note that often historically 'empire, anarchy, and other structural conditions combined to produce textures of international politics not comprehensible through any one ideal-typical account of international politics' (Nexon and Wright, 2007, p. 268). Something similar is no doubt true in this instance.

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