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### Hierarchy and Legitimacy in International Systems: The Tribute System in Early Modern East Asia

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# **Hierarchy and Legitimacy in International Systems: The Tribute System in Early Modern East Asia**

DAVID C. KANG

*The East Asian “tribute system” from 1368 to 1841 comprised an enduring, stable, and hierarchic system, with China clearly the hegemon, in which cultural achievement was as important as economic or military prowess. Most significant is the recognition that the Chinese tributary order was in fact a viable and recognized international system with military, cultural, and economic dimensions that all intersected to create a very interesting and stable security system. Recently it has become fashionable in historical circles to question the viability of the tributary system in part because scholars have become increasingly aware of the realities behind Chinese rhetoric. However, more nuanced studies and new interpretations only serve to underscore the centrality of the system for its participants. This paper demonstrates that there is a hierarchical relationship—generated by a common culture defined by a Confucian worldview—in place in the context of China and the*

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*East Asian states and helps clarify the distinction between an international system based on polarity and an international society based on culture.*

Although anarchy—the absence of an overarching government—is a constant in international life, international relations scholars are in fact increasingly aware that “every international system or society has a set of rules or norms that define actors and appropriate behavior,”<sup>1</sup> what Christopher Reus-Smit calls the “elementary rules of practice that states formulate to solve the coordination and collaboration problems associated with coexistence under anarchy.”<sup>2</sup> The current Westphalian system, for example, is composed of sovereign nation-states that interact with each other in a ritualized and institutionalized manner.<sup>3</sup> In this Westphalian system, equality is taken for granted, both as a normative goal and also as an enduring reality of international politics. That is, once accepted into the system, all nation-states are considered equal, and the “balance of power” is seen as a fundamental state of the world. Kenneth Waltz’s confident assertion that “hegemony leads to balance” and does so “through all of the centuries we can contemplate” is perhaps the default proposition in international relations.<sup>4</sup>

Yet inequality has been just as prevalent in international politics and hegemony as much as balance has characterized international systems.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the East Asian “tribute system” from 1368 to 1841 provides an interesting contrast to the Westphalian system, as it comprised an enduring, stable, and hierarchic system, with China clearly the hegemon, in which cultural achievement was as important as economic or military prowess. Built on a mix of legitimate authority and material power, the China-derived tribute system provided a normative social order that also contained credible commitments by China not to exploit secondary states that accepted its authority. This order was explicit and formally unequal but informally equal: secondary states did not believe nor did they call themselves equal to China, yet they had substantial latitude in their actual behavior. China stood at the

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Krasner, “Organized hypocrisy in nineteenth-century East Asia,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 1 (2001): 173–97, 173.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Reus-Smit, “The Constitutional Structure of International Society and the nature of Fundamental Institutions,” *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 555–89, 557; John Ruggie, “Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis,” *World Politics* 35, no. 2 (1983): 261–85.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas Osiander, “Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth,” *International Organization* 55, no. 2 (2001): 251–301; Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Darel E. Paul, “Sovereignty, Survival, and the Westphalian Blind Alley in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 217–31.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 77.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Kaufman, Richard Little, and William Wohlforth, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (London: Palgrave, 2007).

top of the hierarchy, and there was no intellectual challenge to the rules of the game until the nineteenth century and the arrival of the Western powers. Korean, Vietnamese, and even Japanese elites consciously copied Chinese institutional and discursive practices in part to craft stable relations with China, not to challenge it.

This does not imply, however, that violence was rare in East Asia. Violence was plentiful, but it tended to occur between China and the semi-nomadic peoples on its northern and western borders, not between China and the other Sinicized states.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the Sinicized states that accepted Chinese civilization, nomads accepted the larger rules of the game but not Chinese notions of cultural achievement.

The nomads and the East Asian states both operated within a unipolar system, but whereas the states accepted Chinese authority, the nomads did not. Such a distinction is negligible in William Wohlforth's argument that associates unipolarity with stability in East Asia.<sup>7</sup> Yet China's relations with the nomads were characterized by war and instability, whereas relations with the Sinicized states were characterized by peace and stability. Unipolarity cannot account for both of these outcomes. What this paper demonstrates is that there is a hierarchical relationship in place in the context of China and the East Asian states that was generated by a common culture defined by a Confucian worldview. These Sinic states possessed a shared sense of legitimacy that presupposes, in the context of Confucianism, that relations operate within an accepted hierarchy. The research presented in this paper helps clarify the distinction between an international system based on polarity and an international society based on culture.<sup>8</sup>

This article contains three overarching themes. First, almost all actors in East Asia accepted a set of rules, norms, and institutions about the basic ways in which international relations worked. Known as the "tribute system," and involving in particular a hierarchic rank ordering based on status, these rules, institutions, and norms were taken for granted as the way in which political actors interacted with each other. Largely derived from Chinese ideas, these ideas and institutions had become the "rules of the game" by the fourteenth century. Most significant is the recognition that the Chinese tributary order was in fact a viable and recognized international system with

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<sup>6</sup> An extraordinary diversity of peoples, cultures, and polities existed on the northern steppes, and for expositional ease I refer to these in the text as "nomads," although the term is far from satisfactory.

<sup>7</sup> William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 5–41. See also Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Arise," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (Spring 1993): 5–51; Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security* 30 (2005): 7–45; Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is Not Pushing Back," *International Security* 30 (2005): 109–39.

<sup>8</sup> On international society, see Barry Buzan, "From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School," *International Organization* 47, no. 3 (1993): 327–52; Richard Little, "The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 3 (2000): 395–422.

military, cultural, and economic dimensions that all intersected to create a very interesting and stable security system. Recently it has become fashionable in historical circles to question the viability of the tributary system in part because scholars have become increasingly aware of the realities behind Chinese rhetoric. However, more nuanced studies and new interpretations only serve to underscore the centrality of the system for its participants. That is, we can easily acknowledge that, at the time, all actors saw and utilized the system in their own culturally specific ways, but this does not mean they rejected the legitimacy of the system.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the system was explicitly hierarchic, and cultural achievement was as important a component of the rank order as was military or economic power. China was the hegemon, and ranking derived from cultural achievement and social recognition by other political actors, not from raw size or military or economic power. By hierarchy I mean a rank order of prestige and, just as importantly, the legitimacy of the rank order as accepted by secondary states. All political units in the system played by these rules. Some states accepted Chinese ideas and civilization, and it was essentially these states that comprised an inner circle based largely on Confucian ideas. For these states, Chinese civilization provided a common intellectual, linguistic, and normative framework in which to interact and resolve differences. Even political groups that rejected Confucian notions of cultural achievement—such as the nomads—accepted the more basic rules of the game and the way hierarchy was defined, and they identified their own ideals and cultures in opposition to the dominant ideas and institutions of the time.

Finally, these rules and norms were consequential for diplomacy, war, trade, and cultural exchange between political units in East Asia. Far more than a thin veneer of meaningless social lubricants, the tribute system and its ideas and institutions formed the basis for relations between states. The tribute system, with its inherent notions of inequality and its many rules and responsibilities for managing relations among unequals, provided a set of tools for resolving conflicting goals and interests short of war.

Using the cases of Korean, Japanese, and nomadic relations with China to show variation, this paper argues that hierarchy and legitimacy were key components to this international order. Korea was a willing participant in the Chinese world and self-consciously adopted and copied Chinese ideas, norms, and values. Japan was the liminal, or boundary, case: although clearly deriving many of their domestic ideas, innovations, writing, and cultural knowledge from China, Japanese elites were always skeptical of China's central position. Indeed, Japanese scholars and officials often made an explicit distinction between Chinese civilization, which they revered;

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<sup>9</sup> John Wills, for example, identifies institutions in addition to beliefs and values and in particular identifies many exceptions, modifications, and changes in the tribute system, warning against "overgeneralizing" the tribute system model. John E. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to Kang-shi, 1666–1687* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 21–22, 173.

and the Chinese state, which they often held in contempt. The various nomadic tribes and clans vigorously clung to their own cultural and political ways, although they interacted with China for purposes of trade, and various nomadic leaders did sometimes buy into the system and sought investiture from the Chinese for their own purposes.

The research presented in this paper extends Iain Johnston's pioneering work about the sources of Chinese grand strategy, where he identifies two deeply enduring Chinese worldviews that encompass central paradigmatic assumptions about the nature of conflict, the inevitability of violence, and the enemy. Calling one worldview "Confucian," and the other "parabellum," he argues that China and nomads operated in a parabellum strategic culture that, "[views] the best way of dealing with security threats is to eliminate them through the use of force."<sup>10</sup> Yet important as Johnston's work is, he does not address a key issue: why those threats arose mainly from actors on China's northern and western frontiers instead of from powerful states to the east and south such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. These Sinic states, which shared China's Confucian worldviews, had far more stable and peaceful relations with China. Within the larger tribute system, early modern East Asia—like nineteenth century Europe—operated in two very different international societies based on two different sets of rules: one that included the Sinicized states and another that regulated relations with the "uncivilized" nomadic world.<sup>11</sup>

Arguing that early modern East Asia actually included an international system and that the system was hierarchic and legitimate requires two brief literature reviews. The first section of this paper will clarify the theoretical ideas of hierarchy and legitimacy, especially in the context of competing definitions of both concepts. The second section discusses contending explanations and criticisms of the tribute system, arguing that the tribute system is an international system, as conceived by contemporary international relations scholars. A third section describes the empirical reality of the tribute system and the smaller Confucian society within it, emphasizing Korea's acceptance of hierarchy within anarchy that provided a purpose to the social order, and the role of legitimacy in the hierarchy. A fourth section considers a plausible rival explanation for the stability of relations based upon the distribution of capabilities. The fifth section focuses on the relationship between the nomads and China, arguing that endemic confrontation resulted from cultural differences. The concluding section poses new areas for research.

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<sup>10</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), x.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Keene argues that nineteenth-century Europe was operating in the context of two very different international societies: there was one set of rules that applied to the European states, and there was a very different set of rules that regulated Europe's relations with the outside, "uncivilized" world. Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

## HIERARCHY AND LEGITIMACY

Following Richard Ned Lebow and William Wohlforth among others, I define “hierarchy” as a rank-order based on a particular attribute.<sup>12</sup> Thus, hierarchy is an ordinal measure from highest to lowest and “refers to some kind of arrangement or rank, among people, groups, or institutions.”<sup>13</sup> Key to this definition is the social nature of hierarchy. For one actor to be at the top of a hierarchy necessarily implies that others must be below. Just as important, then, as exploring the top of the hierarchy is exploring whether or not secondary states view hierarchy as legitimate.

There are numerous other definitions for “hierarchy” in international relations, and the definition used in this research is meant to be neither definitive nor exclusive but is merely one common type of hierarchy we find in international relations. Perhaps the most common alternative definition of hierarchy in international relations comes from Kenneth Waltz’s juxtaposition of hierarchy and anarchy as diametrical opposites a generation ago.<sup>14</sup> Still others define hierarchy contractually, as an external restriction on a state’s sovereignty or what David Lake calls “a bargain between the ruler and the ruled premised on the former’s provision of a social order of value sufficient to offset the latter’s loss of freedom.”<sup>15</sup> Max Weber defines hierarchy as a set of offices with a chain of command linking each office together.<sup>16</sup> Each of these definitions captures one element or aspect of hierarchy, and none need be the exclusive definition.

Indeed, even though the Westphalian system is comprised of formally equal units, we see substantial hierarchy even today. For example, any mention of “leadership” in international relations is an implicit recognition of this form of hierarchy.<sup>17</sup> After all, leadership necessarily implies that there are followers and that there is a rank order placing leaders above followers. Followers and leaders are not equal in voice, responsibility, standing, or influence. “Leadership” implies more responsibility than followers and that the leader has more right or ability to set the course of action for the future than

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<sup>12</sup> William Wohlforth, “Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great-Power War,” *World Politics* 61 (2009): 28–57.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> David A. Lake, “Escape from the State of Nature: Authority and Hierarchy in World Politics,” *International Security* 32, no. 1 (2007): 47–79, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Wendt and Daniel Friedheim, “Hierarchy under Anarchy: Informal Empires and the East German State,” *International Organization* 49, no. 4 (1995): 689–721, 697.

<sup>17</sup> The question of leadership is prevalent in the international relations literature. See, for example, Joseph S. Nye, “Transformational Leadership and U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2006); Robert G. Sutter, “China’s Rise: Implications for U.S. Leadership in Asia,” *Policy Studies* no. 21 (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2006).

do followers. Thus, debate about the future of U.S. leadership or questions about Japanese or European leadership implies a hierarchy of states.

It follows then that hegemony is one type of hierarchy. Hegemony arises from the acceptance some states have for the leadership and greater responsibility, influence, and role of another state.<sup>18</sup> The simple fact of a state's material preponderance connotes only primacy or unipolarity, and hegemony implies more than mere size. Hegemony is the legitimate influence and authority of one state over other states, where one actor has the "power to shape the rules of international politics according to its own interests."<sup>19</sup> Although realists often equate primacy with hegemony, an alternative formulation of hegemony emphasizes "the social, or *recognized*, status of hegemony."<sup>20</sup> For example, John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan note that although material incentives are one way that hegemonies assert control over other nations, "the exercise of power—and hence the mechanism through which compliance is achieved—involves the projection by the hegemon of a set of norms and their embrace by leaders in other nations."<sup>21</sup> As Jonathan Joseph observes, "The concept of hegemony is normally understood as emphasizing consent in contrast to reliance on the use of force."<sup>22</sup>

Stable hierarchy or hegemony is thus a social phenomenon that requires both a social order that secondary states accept and also a credible commitment on the part of the dominant state not to exploit the secondary states if they accept the dominant state's authority.<sup>23</sup> That is, crafting a set of norms and rules that are viewed as legitimate by secondary states is an integral task for the dominant state. As Michael Mastanduno notes, "The most durable order is one in which there exists a meaningful consensus on the right of the hegemonic state to lead, as well as the social purposes it projects."<sup>24</sup> This consensual view of hegemony focuses on why secondary states would defer

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<sup>18</sup> Jack Donnelly, "Sovereign Inequalities and Hierarchy in Anarchy," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 2 (2006): 154, fig. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Mastanduno, "Hegemonic Order, September 11, and the Consequences of the Bush Revolution," *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* 5 (2005): 177–96, 179.

<sup>20</sup> Ian Clark, "How Hierarchical Can International Society Be?" (manuscript, Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, Wales, 2009), 6. For realist versions of hegemony, see Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion," 11–12; M. Haugaard, "Power and Hegemony in Social Theory," in *Hegemony and Power: Consensus and Coercion in Contemporary Politics*, ed. Mark Haugaard and Howard H. Lentner (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 62.

<sup>21</sup> John G. Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, "Socialization and Hegemonic Power," *International Organization* 44, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 283–315, 283.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Joseph, *Hegemony: A Realist Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

<sup>23</sup> David A. Lake, "American Hegemony and the Future of East-West Relations," *International Studies Perspectives* 7 (2006): 23–30, 28. See also Ian Hurd, *After Anarchy: Legitimacy and Power in the United Nations Security Council* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 78–79.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Mastanduno, "Incomplete Hegemony: The United States and Security Order in Asia," in *Asian Security Order: instrumental and normative features*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 145.



to the hegemon rather than the structural position of the hegemon itself.<sup>25</sup> Hegemony is a form of power itself, and derives in part from the values or norms that a state projects, not merely from the state's military might and economic wealth. As David Lake argues, "Pure coercive commands—of the form 'do this, or die'—are not authoritative. Authority relations must contain some measure of legitimacy . . . an obligation, understood by both parties, for B to comply with the wishes of A."<sup>26</sup>

Norms and beliefs are not epiphenomenal to material power; that is, they are more than a convenient velvet glove over an iron fist.<sup>27</sup> Legitimacy in itself is a form of power, but it derives from the values or norms a state projects, not necessarily from the state's military might and economic wealth.<sup>28</sup> As Ian Hurd argues, "The relation of coercion, self-interest, and legitimacy to each other is complex, and each is rarely found in anything like its pure, isolated form . . . the difficulties attending to an attempt to prove that a rule is or is not accepted by an actor as legitimate are real, but they do not justify either abandoning the study . . . or assuming ex ante that it does not exist."<sup>29</sup> Dominant states, like individual leaders, lead through a combination of bullying, bribing, and inspiring.<sup>30</sup> Although coercion can substitute for legitimacy in certain instances and for a short while, they are both intertwined, as well. Legitimacy is stronger when backed by coercive capacity, and coercion seen as legitimate is also more effective.<sup>31</sup> Lake notes that "despite their clear analytic differences, political authority and coercion are hard to distinguish in practice . . . there is no 'bright line' separating these two analytic concepts, and I offer none here."<sup>32</sup>

In sum, "hierarchy," as I define it, involves a rank order of states, and anarchy and hierarchy are not incompatible. In this way, hegemony is a form of hierarchy that involves more than material power; it also involves a set of norms—a social order—that secondary states find legitimate, thus making it a social system as well. Legitimacy itself is distinct from material power, and although the two are intertwined, legitimacy grows out of the social purpose

<sup>25</sup> Ian Clark, "Towards an English-School Theory of Hegemony" (manuscript, Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, Wales, 2009); B. Cronin, "The Paradox of Hegemony: America's Ambiguous Relationship with the United Nations," *European Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 1 (2001): 103–30.

<sup>26</sup> David Lake, "The New Sovereignty in International Relations," *International Studies Review* 5 (2003): 303–23, 304. See also Clark, "How Hierarchical Can International Society Be?" 14.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Hurrell, "Rising Powers and the Question of Status in International Society" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, New York, NY, 15–18 February 2009), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Donnelly, "Sovereign Inequalities and Hierarchy in Anarchy," 142.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Hurd, "Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics," *International Organization* 53, no. 2 (1999): 379–408, 389, 392.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Samuels, *Machiavelli's Children: Leaders and their Legacies in Italy and Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Ian Hurd, "Breaking and Making Norms: American Revisionism and Crises of Legitimacy," *International Politics* 44 (2007): 194–213, 194.

<sup>32</sup> Lake, "Escape from the State of Nature," 53.

a state projects. These distinctions are important in helping us categorize and explain the different patterns of international relations found in early modern East Asia.

### THE TRIBUTE SYSTEM AND ITS CRITICS

In addition to clarifying the theoretical concepts that guide this research, it is also important to place my argument about the tribute system in the context of the existing historiographical literature. This article's overarching argument about the stabilizing role of the tribute system and hierarchy in early modern East Asia stands in contrast to three main ways in which scholars have generally viewed the tribute system. From the time of John Fairbank onward, scholars have generally viewed the tribute system either as functional or symbolic or have dismissed outright the idea of a tribute system. Yet while there was no eternal and unchanging tribute system that functioned the same way everywhere, there certainly was a tribute system, and it is worth taking seriously as an overarching set of rules that governed international relations at the time.

The functionalist view sees the tribute system as a set of arbitrary and somewhat comical rules that were simply a means by which states could trade with each other. That is, the institutions and beliefs of the early modern East Asian international system are viewed as merely a set of rationalizing conventions or rules allowing actors to coordinate or pursue their interests, such as an agreement that all cars drive on the right side of the road. As long as some type of coordination occurs, the substance of the rules is thus relatively unimportant, and it is just as likely that everyone could agree that all cars should drive on the left side of the road. Viewing the tribute system as essentially functional, John Fairbank first popularized the notion that "tribute was a cloak for trade."<sup>33</sup> Arguing that tribute was "not exactly what it seemed," Fairbank saw the tribute system as an "ingenious vehicle" for the creation of trade between states.<sup>34</sup> James Hevia concludes, "what virtually all those who followed Fairbank [and Teng], faithfully reproduced was an insistence upon seeing the tribute system as dualistic in nature."<sup>35</sup>

Other scholars view the tribute system as symbolic, a substance-free set of acts that masked "real" international politics based on military power and commerce. This view sees the tribute system as unimportant in explaining the power politics that "really" motivated East Asian states. In this view,

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<sup>33</sup> John K. Fairbank and S.Y. Teng, "On the Ch'ing Tributary System," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6 (1941): 139, 141.

<sup>34</sup> John K. Fairbank, quoted in James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>35</sup> Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 14.

secondary states engaging in the outward acts of hierarchy, emulation, and deference were at heart merely engaging in a rational cost-benefit calculation. This symbolic view of the tribute system sees smaller states surrounding China as not powerful enough to actually deter or defeat China by the force of arms; so rather than defy China and risk invasion and conquest, these smaller states chose the path of placating China culturally, while inwardly seething with resentment and wishing they had the power to have challenged China if they could.<sup>36</sup> In his review of this literature, Liam Kelley points out that many scholars have attempted to “look beyond the ‘rhetoric’ of the tribute system in the hope of finding an understandable ‘reality.’ Surely there had to be a logical reason why foreign kingdoms accepted a position of inferiority in this relationship.”<sup>37</sup>

Finally, a number of scholars have challenged the tribute system’s very existence. These scholars argue that the tribute system was applied in so many different ways at different times that generalizing beyond any particular case caricaturizes the actual history of the time. They also argue that projecting modern concepts backwards into East Asian history makes no sense and that the tribute system, states, and even the notion of a “Korea” or a “China” are meaningless in their proper historical context. James Hevia warns that identifying ideas as “China” or the “tribute system” results in “modernist models of behavior and institutional forms such as the state [that] are projected onto the past.”<sup>38</sup> In his careful study of Vietnamese envoy writings, Kelley avoids using the concepts known as “China” or “Vietnam” because those terms did not exist in antiquity. He notes that “the names Vietnam and China are now laden with nationalistic concepts that evoke a world of ethnic boundaries and distinct cultures [that did not exist at the time].”<sup>39</sup>

These criticisms are important, and we should take them seriously. However, the first two criticisms—that the tribute system was either functional or symbolic—are problematic in that they ask us to dismiss and ignore quite a bit of what officials, scholars, and governments actually did and said at the time. Also, both criticisms literally posit centuries of self-delusion on the part of Chinese officials. Hevia notes that emphasizing the tribute system as merely symbolic leads to a disparaging view of Chinese bureaucrats. “Caught up in illusion, unable to rationalize beyond a certain point, China’s

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Keith W. Taylor, “China and Vietnam: Looking for a New Version of an Old Relationship,” in *The Vietnam War: American and Vietnamese Perspectives*, ed. Jayne Werner and Luu Doanh Huynh (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 271.

<sup>37</sup> Liam Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 18.

<sup>38</sup> James Hevia, “Tribute, Asymmetry, and Imperial Formations: Rethinking relations of power in East Asia” (paper prepared for the USC US-China Institute Conference, History and China’s Foreign Relations, University of Southern California, 17 February 2008), 11.

<sup>39</sup> Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars*, 26.

bureaucrats can only distinguish between appearances and reality when the two mesh . . . . while even the most clearheaded drifted unawares."<sup>40</sup>

In fact, why would the tribute system receive so much energy, time, and thought if it were purely symbolic, and nobody, neither Chinese nor foreigners, believed in it? Were Ming and Qing officials so blinded by their own delusions that they could not see Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Mongolian, Siamese, and other envoys smirking at them while going through these rituals? As this article will show, there is ample evidence that Korean and other envoys believed in what they were doing. Furthermore, numerous rulers of secondary states used the basic institutional and discursive forms of the tribute system in their relations with each other. If the tribute system was merely an instrumental means for placating China, this begs the question of why other states, such as Korea, Vietnam, and Japan used these same ideas and institutional forms in their own relations with each other. Perhaps most consequentially for these arguments remains the question of why was there so much stability in the system and, in particular, between the Sinic states. That is, the functionalist and symbolic views of the tribute system overlook one significant fact: these rules and rites were intimately involved with ordering diplomatic and political relations among a number of actors.

Perhaps more important is to ask whether we can usefully apply modern concepts such as states or international systems to East Asian history. This is an important issue, and certainly some modern ideas, such as maritime borders, did not exist centuries ago. However, other concepts such as the tribute system certainly existed and were used for centuries, and this essay will show that one can reasonably make an argument that China and Korea were states as we think of them today—that is, as governments defined over territory with a monopoly over domestic violence. Furthermore, these political units conducted formal diplomatic relations with each other using a set of agreed upon rules and institutions, and to call this anything other than international relations would be difficult. Although political and social identities have certainly changed substantially over the past six hundred years, it is still possible to attempt to provide some type of general explanation and categorization for how relations worked at the time, while being self-conscious enough to note that differences and exceptions occurred.

In sum, what few scholars have done is take the tribute system as a set of international rules and ideas similar to the Westphalian international system that orders our contemporary world. If we do this and ask what were the principles and institutions that guided international relations in historical East Asia and how did this affect behavior of the units, we might take more seriously the norms, rules, and institutions embodied in the tribute system. More than just a simple choice between “war or tribute,” the tribute system

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<sup>40</sup> Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, 189, quoted in Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 15.

ordered the way officials and scholar in smaller states and the Sinic states, in particular, thought about and acted in their relations with the Chinese hegemon.

### THE TRIBUTE SYSTEM AND THE CONFUCIAN SOCIETY

By the fourteenth century, the tribute system had evolved into a set of rules, norms, and institutions with China clearly the hegemon, resulting in a clear hierarchy and very long peace. For example, from the founding of the Chinese Ming dynasty in 1368 to the fall of the Qing in 1911, Korea faced no military threat from China. The rules of the game and the hierarchy were explicitly defined. The surrounding states benefited from the system; China appeared to have no need to fight, and the secondary powers no desire to fight.<sup>41</sup> The simple explanation for why this system was stable is that China was a status quo hegemon, and the other states in the region knew and accepted this. China had written the rules of the game for international relations and was the source of many domestic political and social institutions in the region.

This Confucian international order in East Asia encompassed a regionally shared set of formal and informal norms and expectations that guided relations and yielded substantial stability. The tribute system emphasized formal hierarchy among nations while allowing considerable informal equality.<sup>42</sup> As long as hierarchy was observed and China recognized as dominant, there was little need for interstate war. Sinic states, and even some nomadic tribes, used some of the hierarchy's rules and institutions when interacting with each other. Status as much as material power defined one's place in the hierarchy: China sat highest, and secondary states were ranked by how culturally similar they were to China—not by their relative power.

The core of the tribute system was a set of institutions and norms that regulated diplomatic and political contact, cultural and economic relations, and that explicitly stated a relationship between two political units in particular. In contrast to the modern Westphalian ideal of equality among nation-states, the tribute system emphasized the “asymmetry and interdependence of the superior/inferior relationship,” and inequality was the basis for all relations between two units.<sup>43</sup> The tribute system was formalized in two key

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<sup>41</sup> Even the nomads valued Chinese stability, and John Mears notes, “Nomadic confederacies . . . seemed best served by the preservation of a stable Chinese regime.” John Mears, “Analyzing the Phenomenon of Borderlands from Comparative and Cross-Cultural Perspectives” (manuscript, Southern Methodist University, 2001), 8, <http://www.historycooperative.org/proceedings/interactions/mears.html>. See also Perdue, *China Marches West*, 521.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Keyes, “The Peoples of Asia: Science and Politics in the Classification of Ethnic Groups in Thailand, China, and Vietnam,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 4 (2002): 1163–203; Magnus Fiskesjo, “On the ‘Raw’ and ‘Cooked’ Barbarians of Imperial China,” *Inner Asia* 1 (1999): 139–68.

<sup>43</sup> Hevi, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 124, 132–33.

institutions: recognition by the superior state, known as “investiture,” and the sending of embassy envoys to the superior state. Investiture involved explicit acceptance of subordinate tributary status and was a diplomatic protocol by which a state recognized the legitimate sovereignty of another political unit and the status of the king in that tributary state as the legitimate ruler.<sup>44</sup> Tribute embassies served a number of purposes: they stabilized the political and diplomatic relationship between the two sides, provided information about important events and news, formalized rules for trade, and allowed intellectual and cultural exchange among scholars. Missions themselves could be vast, comprising hundreds of people—scholar-officials, interpreters, physicians, alternates, messengers, and assistants.

For example, when the Chinese emperor established a tributary relationship with another country or community, that act established the sovereignty of that country in Chinese eyes and entitled the recipient rights of entry into China. The *Da Qing tongli* (Comprehensive Rites of the Great Qing) begins the section on receiving envoys with reference to the ancient Zhou dynasty (1027–481 B.C.): “In the *Rites of Zhou* the Grand Conductors of Affairs (*Daxingren*) handled the rites and ceremonies of the guest. Kingdoms external to the nine provinces were called foreign kingdoms (*fanguo*).”<sup>45</sup> As in the modern Westphalian system, this mutual recognition of legitimacy and sovereignty was the key diplomatic aspect of the tribute system. Classifying foreign kingdoms as *guo* (country) shows both difference and similarity: *guo* was the designation for Qing itself, so foreign kingdoms are viewed as similar, albeit unequal, units.

The tributary was expected to use the Chinese calendar in all communication to the emperor, send diplomatic missions or embassies to China at regular intervals, and present documents or tallies that allowed access to China’s borders. Different regulations and rites, however, applied to different categories of visitors, according to status. For example, more exalted diplomats were excused from kowtowing and were also allowed to trade privately, benefits denied to lower-status officials.<sup>46</sup> Hevia notes that “the superior/inferior relationship is signified as such in several ways . . . superiors initiate, set affairs in motion, are a source; but inferiors bring affairs to completion.”<sup>47</sup>

Yet beyond these measures, China exercised little authority over other states. “When envoys bowed before the Chinese emperor, they were in effect acknowledging the *cultural* superiority of the Chinese emperor, not his

<sup>44</sup> Geun-Ho Yoo, *Chosŏnjo taeoe sasangui burum* [Flows of Ideologies on Foreign Relations during the Chosŏn Period] (Seoul: Sungshin Women’s University Press, 2004).

<sup>45</sup> *Da Qing tongli*, quoted in Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 118.

<sup>46</sup> Zhenping Wang, *Ambassadors from the Islands of Immortals: China-Japan Relations in the Han-Tang Period* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 124.

*political* authority over their states.”<sup>48</sup> Relations with China did not involve much loss of independence, as these states were largely free to run their domestic affairs as they saw fit and could also conduct foreign policy independently from China.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, China simply did not “dominate” Korea for at least two millennia before 1900: Korea was de facto independent, and its Sinicization was most pronounced when Korean Neo-Confucians quite self-consciously imposed that as an ideology on Korea, apart from whatever the Chinese might have wanted.<sup>50</sup>

Although the Ming dynasty restricted Japan to one mission every ten years, Japan actually sent tribute missions in 1404, 1405, 1406, 1408, 1433, 1434, 1451, 1465, 1476, 1483, 1493, 1506, 1520, 1538, 1547, as well as two “unknown years” between 1408 and 1432.<sup>51</sup> Yet even though the Japanese had a visceral resistance to the subordinating rituals required by the formal tributary conditions China mandated, the Chinese example as a normative precedent remained very important even for the Tokugawa (1600-1868).<sup>52</sup> In this respect, there is really no difference between Japan on the one hand and Korea and Vietnam on the other. Even for the latter two, which had regular tributary relations with China, China in general and the Chinese as individuals seldom thought of these tributaries as anything but validations of their own self-regard. Yet Korea could not forget about China for a day! Japan was no different, except in the dimension that its relationship was more cultural and economic, much less political, and not at all military; and the cultural relationship was with Chinese literature, not with China itself.

### The Confucian Society

Korean and even Japanese elites consciously copied Chinese institutional and discursive practices in part to craft stable relations with China, not to challenge China. These states, along with China (and Vietnam) composed a Confucian society where values, goals, and standing were mutually shared and recognized. The core principles of Confucianism involved kingdoms that “shared certain governmental, ritual, educational, literary, intellectual, and social practices with the other members of this same category, the proof of which could be found in the existence of a body of ‘institutional records’

<sup>48</sup> Gregory Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought and Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 36.

<sup>49</sup> Seung-chol Son, *Chosŏn sidae hanil gwangyue yonku* [Korea-Japan relations during the Chosŏn period], (Seoul: Jisungui Sam, 1994); Etsuko Kang, *Diplomacy and ideology in Japanese-Korean relations: from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 6–9.

<sup>50</sup> Thanks to Bruce Cumings for this point.

<sup>51</sup> Kenneth Robinson, “Policies of Practicality: The Chosun Court's Regulation of Contact with the Japanese and Jurchens, 1392–1580” (PhD diss., University of Hawaii, 1997), 31.

<sup>52</sup> Marius Jansen, *China in the Tokugawa World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

that recorded such practices, as well as the presence of 'wise men' who maintained those records."<sup>53</sup> Confucianism is thus a set of ideas based on ancient Chinese classic philosophical texts about the proper ways by which government and society were to be organized. "The term 'Confucian monarchies' hardly conveys the breadth of the civilization that these countries shared," Alexander Woodside notes, pointing out that, "all three societies [China, Korea, and Vietnam] were governed by a scholar elite with a particular type of historical consciousness."<sup>54</sup>

A shared Confucian worldview had a measurable impact on state relations. Perhaps most significantly, the more Confucian states, such as Korea, held higher rank in Chinese eyes, and this afforded them different diplomatic, trade, and access privileges with China. Korea was no stronger than Japan but was ranked more highly by virtue of its relations to China and its more thorough adoption of Confucian ideas. Korea in particular was seen as a "model" tributary and was unquestionably near the top of the hierarchy.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Korea's rank in the Ming hierarchy of tributary states was a point of pride, and Korean elites "saw their relationship to China as more than a political arrangement; it was a confirmation of their membership in Confucian civilization."<sup>56</sup>

Chosŏn-Ming relations were quite close, with Korea annually dispatching three embassies to China from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, whereas Japan was restricted to one mission every ten years. This stable relationship continued under the Qing, and Hevia notes that "Korea emerges in Qing court records as the loyal domain par excellence. In the *Comprehensive Rites*, Korea appears first among the other domains, and imperial envoys dispatched to the Korean court are always of a higher rank."<sup>57</sup> States or actors that rejected Confucianism could still partake of the tribute system, albeit at lower rank and with lower privileges.

Furthermore, all four of the most Sinicized countries (China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam) used the same word for "history," (Chinese: *shi*; Japanese: *rekishi*; Korean: *sa*; Vietnamese: *su*) the original meaning of which

<sup>53</sup> Liam Kelley, "Vietnam as a 'Domain of Manifest Civility' [Van Hien chi Bang]," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34, no. 1 (2003): 63–76, 68.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander Woodside, "Territorial Order and Collective-Identity Tensions in Confucian Asia: China, Vietnam, Korea," *Daedalus* 127, no. 3 (Summer 1998): 191–221, 193.

<sup>55</sup> Peter I. Yun, "Rethinking the Tribute System: Korean States and Northeast Asian Interstate Relations, 600–1600" (PhD diss., UCLA, 1998); So-Ja Choi, *Myŏngchong sidae chungban kwanggyesa yŏngu: Study on Sino-Korean Relations during Ming-Qing Periods* (Seoul: Ewha Woman's University Press, 1997).

<sup>56</sup> Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail: Ming China and the First Great East Asian War, 1592–1598* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 43; Jahyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler, eds., *Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 68.

<sup>57</sup> Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 50.



implies royal secretaries who, “wrote and preserved the government ordinances and princely genealogies of ancient Chinese rulers.”<sup>58</sup> Woodside observes that “history writing became a major form of ‘boundary maintenance’ by Vietnam and Korean centers and their elites against Chinese hegemony.”<sup>59</sup> It is notable that distinctiveness between explicitly unequal states was maintained in part through literature and not force of arms and that such writing used Chinese and Confucian ideas.

Korea in particular was a centrally administered bureaucratic system based on Chinese and Confucian ideas. This cultural relationship included language and writing, a calendar, literature and art, educational system, and political and social institutions, in addition to the accepted norms and rules for international relations focused on here. Like the equating of contemporary modernity with Westernization, Chinese ideas had a measurable impact on subordinate states’ domestic, as well as international, behavior. They developed complex institutional structures and a civil service with “embryonic bureaucracies, based upon clear rules, whose personnel were obtained independently of hereditary social claims, through national meritocratic civil service examinations.”<sup>60</sup> For example, Korean (and Vietnamese) political institutions, such as the six ministries and state council, were identical to those in China. So extensive was the acceptance of its subordinate position and Chinese ideas, Korea duplicated the court dress of the Ming dynasty officials for its own, except that Korean dress and emblems were two ranks lower (in the nine-rank scheme).<sup>61</sup>

Another notable feature of early modern East Asia was the absence of internecine religious wars between different types or sects of Confucianism. As Woodside points out, “There were no Huguenot wars . . . no large-scale holy wars, religious inquisitions, or St. Bartholomew massacres in Chinese, Vietnamese, or Korean history,” calling the avoidance of religious wars “their greatest historical achievement.”<sup>62</sup> Although explaining why this was the case is an important research task, my goal in this essay is instead to take for granted the Confucianism in the region and use it to explain the international relations of the time.

Japan was more ambivalent toward China than was Korea, was clearly the most hesitant of the Sinicized states about accepting Chinese ideas and Chinese dominance, and was the most interested in finding alternative means of situating itself in relation to the other states. Yet at the same time, Japan remained far more Confucianized than the rest of the political units—such

<sup>58</sup> Woodside, “Territorial Order,” 199.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Alexander Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the Hazards of World History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>61</sup> That is, the court dress of a rank 1 (the highest rank) Chosŏn official was identical to that of a rank 3 official at the Ming court.

<sup>62</sup> Woodside, “Territorial Order,” 194, 204.

as the Mongols or other nomads—in the region. In this way, Japan sat at the edge of the Confucian society.

Early in its history, Japan experimented with a Chinese-style governance system and sent tribute missions to China.<sup>63</sup> With the promulgation of the Taiho Code in 701, Japan during the Heian era (749–1185) introduced a Chinese-style government utilizing a bureaucratic system that relied heavily on imported Tang dynasty institutions, norms, and practices. John Wills notes that “the real story of the 600s was a great flow of Japanese students of Buddhism and of Chinese traditions and political practices to China.” Japan’s university system by the eleventh century was based on a curriculum that studied the Chinese classics, as was the organization of its bureaucracy, and the capital city of Kyoto was modeled after the Tang dynasty capital of Chang’an in China.<sup>64</sup> Yet early attempts to import Chinese bureaucratic approaches in the eleventh century failed in the smaller, more backward environment of Japan.<sup>65</sup>

The Chinese example as a normative precedent, however, remained very important, even for the Tokugawa Japanese.<sup>66</sup> Japan and China continued to trade informally, with up to ninety Chinese ships visiting Japan each year during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and Japan importing over one thousand Chinese books each year.<sup>67</sup> When Tokugawa shoguns were looking for legal and institutional models for how to structure their own government and society, “they were usually Chinese in origin,” such as the “Six Maxims” first issued by Ming founder T’ai-tsu in 1398, as well as Qing and even Tang and Song legal and administrative codes.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the *Tokugawa jikki* (the official annals of the Tokugawa era) contains numerous references to Japanese legal scholars consulting with Chinese and Korean scholars as they attempted to interpret various Chinese laws and precedents and modify them for Tokugawa use.

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<sup>63</sup> The seventh century *ritsuryō* (code-based) state was explicitly modeled on the Tang bureaucracy. William Wayne Farris, “Trade, Money, and Merchants in Nara Japan,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 53, no. 3 (1998): 303–34, 319.

<sup>64</sup> Wills, “South and Southeast Asia, Near East, Japan, and Korea,” in *Ancient China: The Chinese Civilization from its Origins to Contemporary Times*, vol. 2, ed. Maurizio Scarpari (forthcoming), 10; Donald Shiveley, et al, *The Cambridge History of Japan: Heian Japan*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>65</sup> Kenneth Grossberg, “From Feudal Chieftains to Secular Monarch: The Development of Shogunal Power in Early Muromachi Japan,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 31, no. 1 (1976): 29–49.

<sup>66</sup> Jurgis Elisonas, “The inseparable trinity: Japan’s relations with China and Korea,” in *The Cambridge History of Japan: Early Modern Japan*, ed. John Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 235–300.

<sup>67</sup> Oba Osamu, *Sino-Japanese Relations in the Edo Period*, trans. Joshua A. Fogel (Tokyo: Toho Shoten, 1980), <http://chinajapan.org/archive.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Jansen, *China in the Tokugawa World*, 65, 228.

## Legitimacy of the System

Mastanduno points out that “hegemony is unlikely to endure if it is primarily coercive, predatory, or beneficial only to the dominant state. In other words, leaders need followers.”<sup>69</sup> Coercion and consent are factors often present at the same time, and often practical decisions are also considered most appropriate.<sup>70</sup> It is still possible, however, to consider what observable implications might reflect the legitimacy of the system. If secondary states did not believe or accept these larger institutions and norms of the tribute system, we would expect them to abandon the system’s use in instances where China was either absent or had no direct interest. For example, legitimacy might be reflected in evidence that secondary states voluntarily adopted Chinese and Confucian ideas, in an absence of evidence that Koreans or the Japanese were smirking at the Chinese behind their backs, and in the use of the tribute system by secondary states when dealing with other states.

In fact, Korea sought to emulate Chinese practices, but there is little evidence that the aim was to build up capabilities in order to match and rein in Chinese power, neither was there Chinese pressure on Korea to change its domestic practices. On the contrary, Korean emulation was voluntary and had the effect of ramifying the Chinese-dominated order. Indeed, there is extensive evidence that Korean elites viewed Confucianism as both legitimate and appropriate. In his study of the founding of the Chosŏn dynasty, John Duncan contends that “proposals were based on the reformers’ understandings of historical Chinese and Korean systems,” including the Ch’in (249–207 B.C.E.), Han, and T’ang, as well as from the preceding Koryŏ dynasty.<sup>71</sup> Korean government and scholarly writings throughout the centuries are replete with references to Chinese dynasties, Confucian thought, and the writings of numerous Chinese scholars. According to Martin Deuchler, “To the social architects of early Chosŏn, the adoption of ancient Chinese institutions was not an arbitrary measure to restore law and order, but the revitalization of a link with the past in which Korea itself had a prominent part.”<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, Wills observes that Korean elites “eagerly import[ed] Chinese books and ideas.”<sup>73</sup>

The best evidence of this cultural borrowing comes from Korea’s adoption of the examination system as a means for selecting scholar-officials as government bureaucrats. This key institution was borrowed directly from

<sup>69</sup> Mastanduno, “Incomplete Hegemony,” 145.

<sup>70</sup> Ian Hurd, “Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics,” *International Organization* 53, no. 2 (1999): 379–408, 389, 392.

<sup>71</sup> John Duncan, *The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 208.

<sup>72</sup> Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: a study of society and ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 107.

<sup>73</sup> Wills, “South and Southeast Asia,” 18.

China and represented an institutional manifestation of the highest of Confucian ideals: a government run by talent, not heredity; civil servants selected through a public competition (*munkwa*) assessing candidates' qualifications as represented by their knowledge of Confucian classical texts; *munkwa* open (in theory) to all males, and held at regular, fixed intervals.<sup>74</sup> The examination system was used in Korea since the Silla dynasty of the eighth century, although it became fully incorporated into public life under the Chosŏn dynasty. One can even identify a key agent of diffusion: Korean scholar Ch'oe Ch'i-won (857-?), spent seventeen years in Tang China, passed the Chinese civil service examination in 874, and later returned to Korea, bringing back many Confucian ideas and texts to the Silla dynasty. And, in some ways, over the centuries, Korea became more Confucian than China itself. The Songgyungwan Confucian academy was founded in 992 A.D., and by the time of the Chosŏn dynasty, Korea had almost ten times as many Confucian academies (*sowon*) per capita as did China.<sup>75</sup>

In an attempt at transparency and meritocracy, by the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty, an extensive system had developed to protect the candidates. Candidates' names were concealed from the examiners before the test; and after their completion, the tests were recopied into other handwriting before examiners saw them, in order to assure anonymity. The exams were collected by different officers than those who recorded and read them and were also read by more than one examiner, to ensure fairness in grading.<sup>76</sup> Kelley's conclusion from his comprehensive study of Vietnamese scholar officials could easily apply to Korea: "Vietnamese envoys passionately believed that they participated in what we would now call the Sinitic or East Asian cultural world, and that they accepted their kingdom's vassal status in that world."<sup>77</sup>

Further evidence for the legitimate acceptance of Confucianism is the extensive discussion in the historical records of Korea, Japan, and other Sinic states about Confucianism, civilization, and states' and societies' roles. There is little evidence that such discussion was merely a façade designed to fool Chinese diplomats. One good example of the explicit acceptance of Confucian ideas about civilization came in the wake of the Manchu (Qing) conquest of China in 1644. The Qing conquest caused extensive debate within China and also in the surrounding states about whether the new

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<sup>74</sup> At the beginning of the dynasty, there was a corresponding military examination system (*mukwa*) that was comparable to the civil service exam. It rapidly became marginal to the government, prompting Eugene Park to note, "The late Chosŏn period saw the total dominance of the civilian Confucian scholar-officials in politics . . . when the state finally needed the military—during the nineteenth-century conflicts . . . —the effectiveness of its military men was minimal." Eugene Park, *Between Dreams and Reality: The Military Examination in Late Chosŏn Korea, 1600–1894* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>75</sup> Woodside, *Lost Modernities*, 23.

<sup>76</sup> Woodside, *Lost Modernities*, 2.

<sup>77</sup> Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars*, 2.

dynasty was legitimate and whether it was Confucian. For example, in a 1786 memorial to Korean King Chongjo (1776-1800), Pak Chega, a noted official, wrote, “Our country served the Ming as a tributary subject for more than two hundred years . . . even though the Qing have now ruled the world for more than one hundred years, the descendants of the Chinese and their etiquette still prevail . . . thus, it is quite incorrect to rashly call these people [Manchu] ‘barbarians.’ . . . if we want to revere China, there is no greater reverence than to put the Chinese ways into practice.”<sup>78</sup>

Significantly, the Japanese did accept notions of Confucian civilization, even while they grimaced at China’s centrality in the system. For example, a major Japanese book published in 1730 was titled *Ka’i bentai* (The China-Barbarian Transformation). The author saw the Manchu conquest as transforming Ming China from civilized to barbarian. David Pollack writes, “Until modern times the Chinese rarely troubled themselves about Japan; the Japanese, however, were preoccupied with China from the beginning of their recorded history . . . for the Japanese, what was ‘Japanese’ had always to be considered in relation to what was thought to be ‘Chinese’ . . .”<sup>79</sup> Implicit in the Korean and Japanese debates about the Qing is both the idea and the acceptance of what constituted Confucian civilization.<sup>80</sup>

Indeed, Kelley reports that he “found no evidence of mockery or belittling of the tributary relationship in any of the poetry that Southern [Vietnamese] envoys composed. One finds instead that this relationship and the concepts on which it was based were part and parcel of these envoys’ understandings of the world and the way it worked.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, a mix of legitimate acceptance and rational calculation motivated states such as Korea to lend their submission to China.

Further reflecting the acceptance of the tributary system as legitimate is the fact that Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and other states used the institutions of the tribute system and also replicated these rank-orders in their own relations with other political units. Ostensibly, if the institutions of the tribute system were merely a means of placating China, states would have abandoned use of the tribute system whenever possible. However, the tribute system was the region-wide political framework that allowed for diplomacy, travel, and official and private trade between all the states in the region. By the early fifteenth century, the Korean Chosŏn court had divided foreign contacts—such as envoys from Japanese, Jurchens, and Ryukyus—into

<sup>78</sup> Pak Chega, “On Revering China,” in *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization: From the Seventeenth Century to the Modern Period*, vol. 2, ed. Peter Lee (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 87.

<sup>79</sup> David Pollack, *The Fracture of Meaning: Japan’s Synthesis of China from the Eighth through the Eighteenth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>80</sup> Angela Schottenhammer, “Japan: The Tiny Dwarf? Sino-Japanese Relations from the Kangxi to the Early Qianlong Reigns,” Working Paper Series no. 106 (Singapore: Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 2008), 10.

<sup>81</sup> Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars*, 93.

four grades, and several statuses within these grades: various Mongol tribes were rank 4, the Ryukyus rank 5.<sup>82</sup> Kenneth Swope observes that “when addressing states such as Ryukyu they [Korea] considered to be inferior in status within the Chinese tributary system, they implied . . . paramouncy. Japan they regarded as an equal or as an inferior depending upon the occasion.”<sup>83</sup> These grades corresponded not only to different diplomatic statuses and rights but also entailed different trading and commercial rights, regulated Japanese and Jurchen contact, and covered issues such as repatriation of traders and sailors who had been shipwrecked in Japan. Japan maintained tribute relations with other states as well, most notably with the Ryukyus.<sup>84</sup>

Arrighi, Hui, Hung, and Selden note, “The China-centered tributary-trade system can often mediate inter-state relations and articulate hierarchies with minimal recourse to war. Japan and Vietnam, being peripheral members of this system, seemed more content to replicate this hierarchical relationship within their own sub-systems than vie directly against China in the larger order.”<sup>85</sup> Thus, even though Japan only sporadically accepted tributary status from China, the system as a whole was stable because Japan accepted Chinese political, economic, and cultural centrality in the system; it also benefited from international trade and the general stability that brought. Indeed, it was only with the arrival of Western imperial powers and the implosion of the China-dominated system in the late nineteenth century that Japan challenged China’s position again.

### Credible Commitments Not To Exploit

As noted previously, a key aspect of the tribute system was the superior state’s explicit recognition of the legitimacy and sovereignty of the inferior state. Although a state, hypothetically, could always change its foreign policy, the tribute system on the whole provided a range of flexible institutional and discursive tools with which to resolve conflicts without recourse to war. Defining territory and establishing the legitimate sovereignty of different political units are two of the most basic tasks in international relations. A good indicator of the stability in the system was that the borders between Korea and China were relatively fixed and did not significantly

<sup>82</sup> Kenneth R. Robinson, “Centering the King of Chosŏn: aspects of Korean maritime diplomacy, 1392–1592,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 59 (2000): 109–25; Kang, *Diplomacy and ideology in Japanese-Korean relations*, 50–51.

<sup>83</sup> Kenneth Swope, “Deceit, Disguise, and Dependence: China, Japan, and the Future of the Tributary System, 1592–1596,” *International History Review* 24, no. 4 (2002): 757–82, 763.

<sup>84</sup> Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu*.

<sup>85</sup> Giovanni Arrighi, Po-keung Hui, Ho-fung Hung, and Mark Selden, “Historical Capitalism, East and West,” in *The Resurgence of East Asia, 500, 150, and 50 Year Perspectives*, ed. Giovanni Arrighi, Takeshi Hamashita, and Mark Selden (London: Routledge, 2003), 259–333, 269.

change during the five centuries under review. Clear boundaries between states provide evidence of the status quo orientation toward each other. In this way, borders are a useful indicator of a state's acceptance of the status quo because "political divides [are] the result of state building."<sup>86</sup> Yet settled borders are not mere functionalist institutions designed to communicate preferences—they also inherently assume the existence of two parties that recognize each other's legitimate right to existence. According to Alexander Wendt and Daniel Friedheim, "Recognizing the sovereignty of subordinate states imposes certain restraints on dominant states."<sup>87</sup>

By the eleventh century, Korea had established the Yalu River as its northern border. The affirmation of this border and Korean acceptance of tributary status in the fourteenth century precluded a war between the new Ming Chinese and Chosŏn Korean dynasties. Near the beginning of the Ming dynasty in 1389, the Ming notified Koryŏ that it considered the area of northeastern Korea that had been under direct Mongol control (the Ssangŏng Commandery) to be part of its territory. Koryŏ decided to fight the Ming over the demarcation of the border; this campaign, and General Yi Sŏnggye's unwillingness to fight it (preferring negotiation), led to the fall of Koryŏ and, three years later, the creation of a new dynasty, Chosŏn.<sup>88</sup> Yi immediately opened negotiations with China, and the Ming did indeed settle for Chosŏn's tributary status. Significantly, in exchange for entering into tribute status with China, Chosŏn Korea retained all territory previously held by Koryŏ.

In fact, the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, *wako* pirate incursions along the coast, and a resurgent Ming China might have prompted a full militarization of the new, fourteenth century Chosŏn dynasty. Yet the opposite occurred: the founding of the Korean Chosŏn dynasty in 1392 heralded an intensification of Confucian practices, and "scholar-officials . . . became directly involved in policymaking at all levels."<sup>89</sup> This intensification of Confucian practices has been called the "Neo-Confucian revolution," when scholars imposed their ideas about proper government and society over the objections of the military class. The founders of the new Chosŏn dynasty were not outsiders rebelling against an established order—in fact, they came from the educated elite—and their dissatisfaction was driven by a desire to intensify Neo-Confucian practices, not overturn them.<sup>90</sup> In his "Admonition

<sup>86</sup> Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (1997): 211–42, 214; Bruce Batten, *To the Ends of Japan: Premodern Frontiers, Boundaries, and Interactions* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

<sup>87</sup> Wendt and Friedheim, "Hierarchy under Anarchy," 704.

<sup>88</sup> Young-Soo Kim, *Kŏngukui chŏngch'i: yŏmal sŏncho, hyŏkmyŏnggwa munmyŏng jonbwa* [The Politics of Founding the Nation: Revolution and Transition of Civilization during the Late Koryŏ and Early Chosŏn] (Seoul: Yeehaksa, 2006).

<sup>89</sup> Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 292; Yoo, *Chosŏnjo taeoe sasangui burum*.

<sup>90</sup> John Duncan, "The Social Background of the Founding of the Chosun Dynasty: Change or Continuity?" *Journal of Korean Studies* 6 (1988–89): 57–58.

to the New King,” the Inspector-General wrote, “The reason for the falls of Kings Chieh and Chou is that they lost virtue and ruled by force . . . King Yu of Hsia demonstrated his virtue by building his palace low . . . Emperor Wen of Han displayed his exemplary attitude by being thrifty . . . How much less should the sovereign be careless in his expenditure in Korea, whose land is squeezed between the mountains and the sea and whose population and taxes are not numerous!”<sup>91</sup>

Chosŏn founder Yi Song-gye looked to Ming China for legitimacy with his own aristocracy, who were skeptical of Yi’s humble origins. In this case, investiture from Ming China not only stabilized Chosŏn Korea’s border and territory, but diplomatic recognition also provided the Chosŏn king with domestic legitimacy. Thus, the Chosŏn “Founding Edict,” explicitly used the Chinese calendar, and the initial memorials also made explicit reference to Chinese dynasties of the past.<sup>92</sup>

Relations between China and Korea were close and stable for 250 years, with the two sides exchanging numerous envoys and regularly trading. By the fifteenth century, Korea’s long northern border—along both the Yalu and Tumen rivers—was essentially secure and peaceful, and these two rivers have formed the border between China and Korea ever since. The Changbaishan/Paektusan area was negotiated in 1713.<sup>93</sup> In the late 1880s, the Chinese reopened the issue of the border. In the course of these negotiations, the Koreans presented documents and maps from the 1710–13 negotiations with which to document their case. Rather than risk losing, the Chinese abandoned the negotiation and never returned to the table, and the Korean status quo stood (see Figure 1).

Resolution of disputed territory and location of the border could have been achieved through a military clash, as could the subsequent negotiations three and four centuries later. That it did not was in part a result of calculations that a war would be costly, to be sure. But more importantly, the way in which resolution was achieved used the institutions of the tribute system to both negotiate a resolution and to establish diplomatic relations between two sides of unequal power. Gari Ledyard contends that “Chinese ‘control’ was hardly absolute. While the Koreans had to play the hand they were dealt, they repeatedly prevailed in diplomacy and argument . . . and convinced China to retreat from an aggressive position. In other words, the tributary system did provide for effective communication, and Chinese and

<sup>91</sup> *T’aejo Sillok* [Annals of King T’aejo’s reign], “Admonition to the New King,” 1:40a-42b, quoted in Peter Lee, ed., *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization: From Early Times to the Sixteenth Century*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 483–5.

<sup>92</sup> Ki-baek Lee, *A New History of Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 189.

<sup>93</sup> Gari Ledyard, “Cartography in Korea,” in *Cartography in the Traditional East and Southeast Asian Societies*, ed. J.B. Harley and David Woodward (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 290.



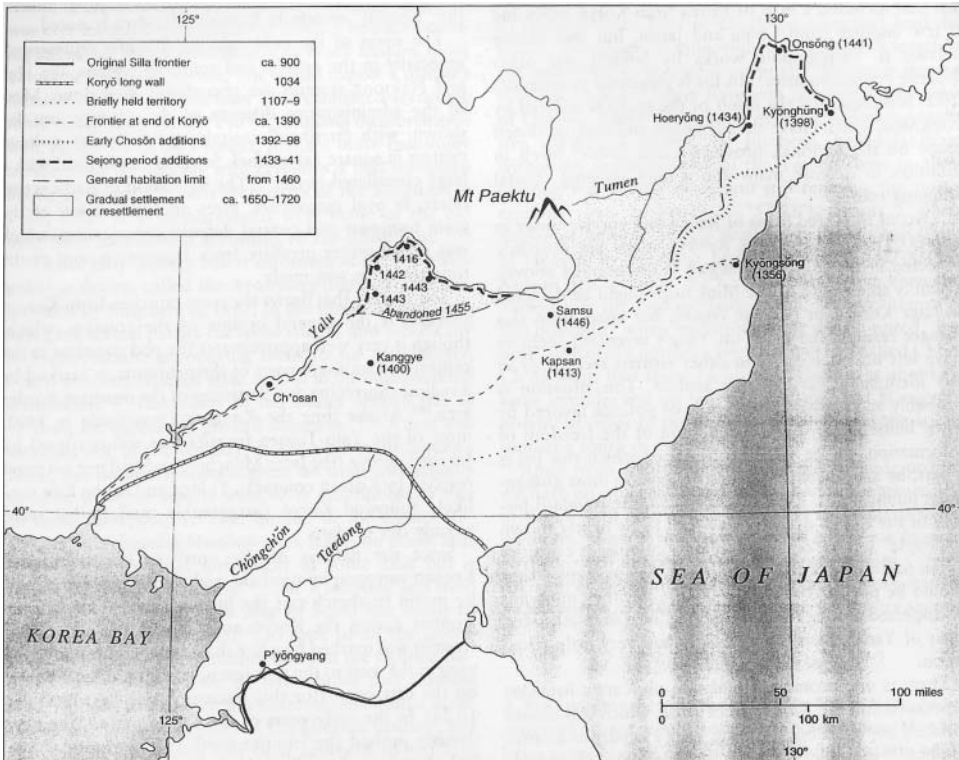


FIGURE 1 Korea's border with China, 900-1720.<sup>94</sup>

Korean officialdom spoke from a common Confucian vocabulary. In that front, the relationship was equal, if not at times actually in Korea's favor."<sup>95</sup>

Systemic stability seems to have been good for the political regimes in each of these Sinicized East Asian countries that, in comparative perspective, were remarkably long-lived. Tellingly, this was the case even more for the weaker states. The East Asian experience may be the pacific obverse of "imperial overstretch." Rather than being foolish for relying on bandwagoning and regional diplomatic order rather than constant self-strengthening and displays of resolve and commitment, these states in retrospect appear quite canny.<sup>96</sup> Pamela Crossley noted that "this set of institutional and discursive practices provided a wide range of tools with which to mediate conflict in East Asia."<sup>97</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Gari Ledyard, posting, *Korea Web*, 21 March 2006, [http://koreaweb.ws/pipermail/koreanstudies\\_koreaweb.ws/2006-March/005455.html](http://koreaweb.ws/pipermail/koreanstudies_koreaweb.ws/2006-March/005455.html).

<sup>96</sup> Thanks to Greg Noble for this point.

<sup>97</sup> Pamela Crossley, personal communication to author, 15 February 2008.

## PLAUSIBLE RIVAL EXPLANATIONS

The most likely alternative explanation for the stability of the system would come from those who see the tribute system as merely symbolic and emphasize the relative capabilities of states as explaining state behavior. This approach would involve two basic hypotheses: that for material reasons, China, despite being the most powerful actor in the system, was unable to conquer Korea or Japan; and that Korea and Japan deferred to China's centrality because they saw little chance to defeat China militarily and thus preferred compromise to fighting.

There is, however, a fair amount of evidence that China actually did have the material and logistical capabilities to conquer Korea if it had wanted; the only war between Korea, Japan, and China in the five centuries under study involved the Ming dispatch of one hundred thousand troops to defend Korea against a Japanese invasion (the Imjin Wars of 1592-98). Not only could the Ming send massive numbers of troops to Korea, at virtually the same time and on the other side of China, it intervened in border disputes in Burma, suppressed a major troop mutiny in the northwestern garrison city of Ningxia, and used another two hundred thousand troops to crush an aboriginal uprising in Sichuan.<sup>98</sup> Rather than being constrained, the Ming had more than adequate logistical and military resources to move against Korea had it so desired. For its part, Japan was able to send one hundred fifty thousand troops on seven hundred ships to Korea; this is further evidence that when they decided to fight, these states had the capacity to do so on a massive scale that, "easily dwarfed those of their European contemporaries," involving men and material ten times the scale of the Spanish Armada of 1588.<sup>99</sup>

There is little evidence that China was merely deterred by effective Korean military preparations. Chosŏn Korea had been so peaceful for two centuries that on the eve of the Imjin War of 1592, it had less than one thousand soldiers in its entire army.<sup>100</sup> Kenneth Lee observes, "After two hundred years of peace, Korean forces were untrained in warfare and were scattered

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<sup>98</sup> Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail*, 15.

<sup>99</sup> Kenneth M. Swope, "Crouching Tigers, Secret Weapons: Military Technology Employed During the Sino-Japanese-Korean War, 1592-1598," *Journal of Military History* 69 (2005): 11-42, 13. The Spanish armada consisted of 30,000 troops on 130 ships and was defeated by 20,000 English troops, as noted by Samuel Hawley, *The Imjin War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), xii. See also Stephen Turnbull, *Samurai Invasion: Japan's Korean War, 1592-1598* (London: Cassell, 2002); Jang-Hee Lee, *Imjin uae-ransa yŏngu* [Research on the History of the Imjin War] (Seoul: Asea Munwhasa, 1999).

<sup>100</sup> Eugene Park, "War and Peace in Premodern Korea: Institutional and Ideological Dimensions," in *The Military and Korean Society*, ed. Young-Key Kim-Renaud, Richard Grinker, and Kirk W. Larsen, Sigur Center Asia Papers no. 26 (Washington, DC: The Sigur Center for Asian Studies, George Washington University, 2006), 1-14, 6.

all over the country in small local garrison troops. Koreans were totally unprepared on land."<sup>101</sup> Ki-baek Lee describes the quality of the Korean military in 1592 as "meager and untrained."<sup>102</sup> After the Imjin War, stability returned. Eugene Park notes that "the late Chosŏn state maintained an army no bigger than what was dictated by internal security," estimating the Korean military in the eighteenth century comprised only ten thousand "battle-worthy men."<sup>103</sup>

Prominent is the lack of empirical evidence that either China or Korea considered war against each other a likely possibility. If realist considerations of relative capabilities were the key factor in the Korea-China relationship, we should find in both Korean and Chinese historical records extensive discussion among strategists about possible military actions and debates over how best to deal militarily with each other. These are, however, absent in the Chosŏn and the Ming veritable records. Particularly significant is that both Korea and China have extensive records of just such military calculations about how to deal with the nomads on their northern borders.

Perhaps most difficult to explain is Japanese general Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea in 1592. Here a much smaller state invaded a close ally of the dominant power in the system. Japan and Korea ostensibly should have allied together to balance China, yet the opposite occurred. Korea certainly never allied itself with other states, such as Japan, to balance China, even when at the beginning of the Imjin Wars China deeply suspected that very possibility. It took three months of intense Korean diplomacy to convince Ming China that Korea was not conniving with Japan against China.<sup>104</sup> That a balancing strategy would ever have occurred to Korea is doubtful because China was the only pole in the East Asian state system. Furthermore, why Hideyoshi decided to invade Korea remains unclear, although most scholars point to status or economic—not military—considerations. For example, Swope argues that "Hideyoshi craved recognition and homage from foreign rulers. This goal should not be trivialized."<sup>105</sup> And as Elizabeth Berry concludes, "[Hideyoshi] was clearly less interested in military dominion abroad than in fame."<sup>106</sup> Hideyoshi himself wrote to Korean King Sŏnjo in 1590, stating, "I plan that our forces should proceed to the country of the Great Ming and compel the people there to adopt our customs and manners . . . Our sole desire is to have our glorious name revered in the three countries [of China, Korea, and Japan]." To this, Korean King Sŏnjo replied, "Our two countries have always kept each other informed of all national events and affairs . . . This inseparable relationship between

<sup>101</sup> Kenneth Lee, *Korea and East Asia: the story of a phoenix* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 99.

<sup>102</sup> Lee, *A New History of Korea*, 210.

<sup>103</sup> Park, "War and Peace in Premodern Korea," 6.

<sup>104</sup> Gari Ledyard, "Confucianism and War: The Korean Security Crisis of 1598," *The Journal of Korean Studies* 6 (1988–89): 81–117, 84.

<sup>105</sup> Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail*, 64–65.

<sup>106</sup> Berry, *Hideyoshi*, 212.

the Middle Kingdom and our kingdom is well known throughout the world . . . We shall certainly not desert our lord and father country and join with a neighboring state . . . Moreover, to invade another state is an act which men of culture and intellectual attainments should feel ashamed . . . ”<sup>107</sup>

Significantly, if Hideyoshi's decision had been based on views that Japan was militarily capable of conquering China, we should see ample evidence of strategic discussion among Japanese generals and Hideyoshi about how Japan compared to China in terms of its military capacities, Ming leadership or organizational capabilities, or the strategic situation that Japan faced with respect to China. Notably absent, however, is any Japanese assessment of the relative military capabilities of the two sides, about which Berry concludes, “There is no evidence that he [Hideyoshi] systematically researched either the geographical problem or the problem of Chinese military organization.”<sup>108</sup> In sum, the burden of proof is on those who believe that the distribution of capabilities was the main factor in international relations at the time not only to supply a plausible hypothesis that explains the patterns of stability and violence but, more importantly, to provide empirical evidence that would substantiate those claims.

#### CIVILIZATION AND THE OTHER: NOMADS

Coexisting with these major Sinicized states were many different types of political units that resisted China's civilizational allure, most notably the various pastoral, highly mobile tribes and semi-nomadic peoples in the northern steppes (variously known as Mongols, Khitans, and Uighurs, among others). To thoroughly discuss these peoples and their foreign policies is beyond the scope of this paper, and the main point here is to contrast their cultures and identities with those of the Sinicized states.<sup>109</sup> The nomads were less centrally organized due to the ecology of the steppes, which favored mobility and thus made tribal domination difficult. What centralization did exist was mainly due to the personal charisma and strength of the ruler, thus

<sup>107</sup> Toyotomi Hideyoshi and King Sōnjo, quoted in Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail*, 58.

<sup>108</sup> Berry, *Hideyoshi*, 216.

<sup>109</sup> China-nomad relations have been the focus of extensive research. See David Wright, “The Northern Frontier,” in *A Military History Of China*, ed. David A. Graff and Robin Higham, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002), 57–80; Perdue, *China Marches West*; Pamela Crossley, *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Thomas Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China, 221 BC to AD 1757* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Jagchid Sechin and Van Jay Symons, *Peace, War, and Trade Along the Great Wall: Nomadic-Chinese Interaction through Two Millennia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Anatoli M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

“tribal rivalries and fragmentation were common.”<sup>110</sup> Even the Zunghar empire that emerged in the late seventeenth century had only “an increasingly ‘statelike’ apparatus of rule,” and never developed the same centralization or institutionalization as did the Sinicized states.<sup>111</sup>

China (and Korea) and nomads existed along a vast frontier zone, and the disparate cultural and political ecology of the various nomads and China itself led to a relationship that, although mostly symbiotic, never resulted in a legitimate cultural or authoritative relationship between the two. These nomads had vastly different worldviews and political structures than the Sinicized states; they rejected Confucian ideas of civilization such as written texts or settled agriculture; they played a different international game by different rules; and thus they experienced difficulty in crafting enduring or stable relations. The frontier was only turned into a border when states such as Russia began to expand eastward in the eighteenth century, and the nomads were left with nowhere to move.<sup>112</sup>

As David Wright asks, “Why all the fighting?”<sup>113</sup> Although popular imagination sees the nomads prowling like hungry wolves outside the Great Wall, attacking randomly and whenever possible, there was in fact a logic that supported Chinese (and Korean) interactions with the nomads.<sup>114</sup>

At its core, the Chinese-nomad relationship was about trade. Nomads needed three things from agricultural China: grains, metals, and textiles. They would trade, raid, or engage in tribute to gain them. Peter Perdue points out that “it was almost never the ambition of a steppe leader to conquer China itself. Steppe leaders staged raids on the Chinese frontier to plunder it for their own purposes.”<sup>115</sup> For its part, China used offense (as Johnston emphasizes), defense (the Great Wall), trade, and diplomacy in attempting to deal with the nomads. Thomas Barfield argues that when trade was more advantageous, the nomads traded; when trade was difficult or restricted, they raided China’s frontier towns to get the goods they needed.<sup>116</sup> The Chinese weighed the costs of warring with the nomads against the problems of trading with them. As Sechin Jagchid and Van Jay Symons write, “When

<sup>110</sup> Perdue, *China Marches West*, 520.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 518.

<sup>112</sup> The Manchus were the major exception. Descended from Jurchens, the Manchus were never Mongols, and for long stretches of time their economic agenda was comparable to Chosŏn, Ming, and other more settled societies. Indeed, the Manchu conquest of the Ming was more opportunism than design; and while ruling China and absorbing some of the traditional Han institutions, the Manchus retained unique Manchu elements, as well. Although Manchu worldviews and identity never completely Sinicized, the Manchus used many of the institutional forms and discursive style of traditional Chinese dynasties in dealing with neighboring states. See Mark Elliot, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

<sup>113</sup> Wright, “The Northern Frontier,” 58.

<sup>114</sup> Kenneth Robinson, “From Raiders to Traders: Border Security and Border Control in Early Chosŏn, 1392–1450,” *Korean Studies* 16 (1992): 94–115.

<sup>115</sup> Perdue, *China Marches West*, 520.

<sup>116</sup> Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*; Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*.

the nomads felt they were getting too little or the Chinese felt they were giving too much compared to the relative power of each participant, war broke out.”<sup>117</sup>

However, endemic frontier skirmishes stemmed not only for material reasons but also for reasons of identity and deeply held cultural beliefs. Nomads were willing to trade with the Chinese and Koreans, but they had no intention of truly taking on Chinese norms and cultures as did Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. This led to a “chasm between Chinese and nomadic perceptions of themselves and each other . . . ”<sup>118</sup> David Wright concludes, “China’s failure to solve its barbarian problem definitively before the advent of the Manchu Qing dynasty was a function neither of Chinese administrative incompetence nor of barbarian pugnacity, but of the incompatibility and fixed proximity between very different societies, ecologies, and worldviews. Many statements in historical records strongly suggest that the Chinese and the Nomads had clear ideas of their differences and were committed to preserving them against whatever threats the other side posed.”<sup>119</sup>

Chinese-nomad relations highlight the importance of ideas to the outbreak of violence. Material power is important, just as important as the beliefs and identities that serve to define a group, state, or people. China was able to develop stable relations with other units that adopted similar civilizational identities: states that conducted diplomacy in the Chinese style and states that were recognizable and legitimate to the Chinese. It was much harder to establish stable relations with political units that rejected China’s vision of the world.

## THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

China historically was an enduring, acknowledged, and stable hegemon in the past, and it enjoyed fairly widespread legitimacy as a cultural, economic, and diplomatic leader. Today, as China increasingly appears poised to return to its position as the most powerful country in East Asia, there is a corresponding question about whether or not China can enjoy the legitimacy that it once held. That is, as China has grown increasingly powerful and self-confident, there is intense speculation about how it might live and act in a modern, Westphalian world.

Most notable are questions about whether China can adjust itself to the Western international norms and rules that have come to dominate the globe and whether China will attempt to challenge the position of the United States as a global hegemon. Capitalism, democracy, human rights, and other ideas

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<sup>117</sup> Jagchid and Van Jay Symons, *Peace, War, and Trade Along the Great Wall*, 1.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>119</sup> Wright, “The Northern Frontier,” 76.

have now become accepted as the international norms and rules of the game. Contemporary countries can choose not to follow these norms, but to ignore them is to step clearly outside accepted boundaries of contemporary international relations. Today, for example, few authoritarian states trumpet their authoritarianism with pride; almost all claim to be some form of democracy and justify their rule based on some special need or circumstance. Similarly, few human-rights violators acknowledge their injurious actions with pride; they tend to rationalize their abuses with some other justification. As the twenty-first century begins, it is not yet clear how China will fit into this system. Some observers suspect that the Chinese government and people, with their different history, an authoritarian political system, and current tensions with other countries, have not yet completely accepted or internalized these Westphalian ideas.

Yet to date China has not provoked the same type of fear and balance-of-power politics nor challenged the existing order in the way some scholars predicted it would three decades ago when China began its economic reforms. The region as a whole has adjusted to China's increasing economic and political clout and has moved closer to it economically, diplomatically, and even politically. In the 1970s China was relatively isolated and had few diplomatic relationships with states in the region, but today China has normalized its relations with every country in the region and has joined numerous multilateral and international institutions, such as the World Trade Organization and the United Nations. In economic terms, within a generation's time, China has eclipsed the United States as the main trading partner of every country in the region, including longtime U.S. allies Japan and South Korea, and U.S.-China economic relations are now deeply intertwined.

It should also be noted, however, that these past three decades of increasing regional stability and integration do not predict anything about the future. That is, although China has not yet caused fear and intense threat perceptions on the part of its East Asian neighbors, this could change. Furthermore, although China has embarked on a very clear policy of reassuring its neighbors and attempting to make very clear that its economic and political development need not be a threat to the region or the world, these assurances are met with some skepticism around the region. Will China show restraint, wisdom, and a willingness to provide leadership and stability for the region? Or will it merely use its power to pressure and bully other states? That has not yet become clear and is the source of other regional states' uneasiness with China's rise. Many are willing to give China a chance and wait and see, but few take the Chinese government's statements at face value.

Thus, more important for future stability than the regional balance of power and whether China continues its economic and political growth is the question of whether the East Asian states can develop a clear and shared set of beliefs and perceptions about one another's intentions and their relative positions in the regional and global order. That is, although it is natural for

contemporary scholars to focus on yardsticks such as economic size and military spending, more important factors are the intentions and beliefs that states have about one another. Key factors in international relations are what the hierarchy is in terms of a rank order of states and whether or not states view one another's relative status in that hierarchy as legitimate.

By these criteria, then, China has a long way to go before becoming a leader. China may already be—or may soon become—the largest economic and military power in East Asia, but it has virtually no cultural or political legitimacy as a leading state. The difference between China at the height of its hegemony five centuries ago and China today is most clearly reflected in the fact that nobody today thinks that China is still the civilizational center of the world. Although China may have been the source of a long-lasting civilization in East Asia in the distant past, today it has no more civilizational influence than modern Greece. Ancient Greek ideas and innovations had a central influence on Western civilization, and Greek concepts such as democracy and philosophy continue to be influential today. Yet contemporary Greece has no discernible soft power, and few people look to Greece for leadership in international relations. In the same way, few contemporary East Asian states or peoples look to China for cultural innovation or for practical solutions to present-day problems. Although Beijing evokes the earlier times of cultural dominance to instill national pride and support the soft power efforts from Confucian Institutes to overseas television outlets, behind this pride lies the attempt to wipe away the humiliation felt when European powers sought to obliterate the foundations of the well-tended tribute system that held the key to China's role in maintaining regional stability. Yet the real question is not whether China reaches back to its past for guidance, but whether other states and peoples will accept it.

Can China ever return to its position as a center of cultural and political innovation, to which other states admiringly look as model, guide, and inspiration? There is grudging respect for Chinese economic accomplishments over the past three decades, to be sure. But there is just as much wariness about Chinese cultural and political beliefs. Will Chinese nationalism become brittle, confrontational, insecure, and defensive, or will it eventually return to the self-confidence of centuries ago? The Chinese people—as evidenced by the hysterical response to protests about Tibet in the spring and summer of 2008—show that they are far from comfortable with their own position in the world and how they are perceived by others. Will the Chinese Communist Party cling to its power indefinitely, or will it eventually find a way to craft some type of peaceful transition from authoritarianism?

It is impossible to predict how Chinese beliefs about their place and role in the world will evolve, and it will depend on an enormous number of factors: how the Chinese Communist Party responds to changing domestic and international circumstances; whether domestic economic growth continues in any manner whatsoever for the next few decades or whether China



experiences an economic crisis of some kind; domestic Chinese actions toward its own people; how society changes given the one-child policy, increasing levels of education and rates of foreign travel, and the current domestic inequalities; and how specific incidents with other regional and global actors are resolved. That is, Chinese society and its views about itself, its economy, its government, and its relations with neighbors are all still in flux and as yet have not achieved the stability that would allow us to predict China's future with confidence.

As I wrote seven years ago:

Historical precedents may not be tremendously helpful . . . . A century of chaos and change, and the increased influence of the rest of the world and in particular the United States, would lead one to conclude that a Chinese-led regional system would not look like its historical predecessor, because willingness to accept a subordinate position in the Sino-centric hierarchy will depend on beliefs about how a dominant China would behave in the future. . . . [and] it is not clear if China is willing to make more adjustments to calm fears or further integrate into the globalized modern world.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: the need for new analytic frameworks," *International Security* 27, no. 4 (Spring 2003), 67, 70.