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**WAR AND PEACE IN EARLY MODERN EAST ASIA:
HIERARCHY AND LEGITIMACY IN INTERNATIONAL SYSTEMS**

Project on:
Globalization and the
National Security State

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**War and Peace in Early Modern East Asia:
Hierarchy and Legitimacy in International Systems**

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War and Peace in Early Modern East Asia: Hierarchy and Legitimacy in International Systems

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Abstract

Between 1368 and 1841 – almost five centuries – there were only two wars between China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. These Sinicized states crafted stable relations with each other, and most of the violence and instability arose between these states and the nomadic peoples to the north and west of China and Korea. Building on the “new sovereignty” research in international relations, I argue that the status quo orientation of China and established boundaries created a loose hierarchy within anarchy that had much to do with the period of peace. Built on a mix of legitimate authority and material power, the China-derived international order provided clear benefits to secondary states, and also contained credible commitments by China not to exploit secondary states that accepted its authority. Korean, Vietnamese, and even Japanese elites consciously copied Chinese institutional and discursive practices to craft stable relations with China, not to challenge it. International systems based on legitimacy and hierarchy are not unique to early modern East Asia, and incorporating these insights into our theories of international society has implications for the contemporary world as well.

War and Peace in Early Modern East Asia: Hierarchy and Legitimacy in International Systems

From 1368 to 1841 – from the founding of the Ming dynasty to the arrival of Western powers in Asia – there were only two wars between China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan: China’s invasion of Vietnam (1407-28), and Japan’s invasion of Korea (1592-98). These four major territorial and centralized states developed stable, peaceful, and long-lasting relations with each other. The more powerful these states became, the more stable were their relations. China was clearly the dominant military, cultural, and economic power in the system, and it had written the international “rules of the game,” but its goals did not include expansion against its established neighboring states. These smaller states emulated Chinese practices and to varying degrees explicitly accepted Chinese centrality in the region. How did these four states craft such stable and peaceful relations for over five centuries?

Building on the “new sovereignty” research in international relations, I argue that the status quo orientation of China and established boundaries created a loose hierarchy within anarchy that had much to do with the period of peace. That is, the culmination of successful state-building produced a remarkably enduring and stable peace, much as status quo orientations and resolution of border conflicts has led to peace in contemporary Europe. Built on a mix of legitimate authority and material power, the China-derived Confucian international system provided a normative social order, clear benefits to secondary states, and also contained credible commitments by China not to exploit secondary states that accepted its authority. This order was explicitly and formally unequal, but informally equal: secondary states were not allowed to call themselves equal with China, yet had substantial latitude in their actual behavior. China stood at the top of the hierarchy, and there was no intellectual challenge to the rules of the game until the 19th 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 central claim does not imply, however, that violence was rare in East Asia. There was plenty of violence, 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.¹ In this way, I extend Iain Johnston's (1995) 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 "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."² 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 arising 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. Early modern East Asia – like 19th century Europe – operated in two very different international societies based on two different sets of rules: one which included the Sinicized states; and a different set of rules that regulated relations with the "uncivilized" nomadic world.³ This paper does not attempt an explanation for Chinese-nomad conflict, but instead focuses on explaining the lack of violence between the four Sinic states.⁴

This research is theoretically important for four reasons. First, the early modern East Asian experience suggests that hegemony can be associated with peace across regions, and that international stability may not be a function only of the contemporary era, such as the *Pax Britannica* in the 19th century and the *Pax Americana*/long peace after 1945.⁵ After all, much of

¹ 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.

² Johnston 1995, x.

³ Keene (2002) 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.

⁴ China-nomad relations have been the focus of extensive research, including Wright 2002; Perdue 2005; Mears 2001; Crossley 1997, 2006; Barfield 1989; Jagchid and Symons 1989; Khazanov 1984.

⁵ Owen 1994, Waltz 1990, Singer and Wildavsky 1993.

world history has involved hegemons building hierarchy and establishing order, and studying these relations in different historical contexts promises to truly universalize our theories and our evidence. Second, legitimate authority was as important as raw material power in the constitution and stability of the system itself. Leadership and hegemony result from a combination of inspiration, coercion, and incentives, and all are important factors. Third, if contemporary states also care about legitimacy in addition to power, then merely describing the world according to its power polarity is unlikely to explain the cause of potential conflict. For example, while most scholarly discussion about China's rise has focused on whether the balance of power can remain stable, perhaps just as important is whether China finds the current U.S.-dominated order to be legitimate, and whether other major powers accept China's place in that order.⁶

Finally, international relations scholars have largely overlooked East Asia as they search for theoretical ideas and evidence. For example, Aaron Friedberg's famous 1994 article compared modern Asia to the past 500 years of European history, concluding that, "for better or for worse, Europe's past could be Asia's future."⁷ Yet we know little about East Asian history itself! This paper attempts to de-universalize political analysis, because close examination reveals that the European experience was neither first, nor was it universal.⁸ As Susanne Rudolph has observed, "there appeared to be one race, and the West had strung the tape at the finish line for others to break."⁹ Few scholars have taken East Asia on its own terms and not as a reflection of Europe, and few have crafted theories that can explain East Asia as it actually was.¹⁰

It is difficult in one essay to comprehensively discuss the Confucian world order and its manifestation through the tribute system in four states over five centuries. Instead, I will examine four key features that highlight the nature of the system and the way in which it mediated conflict among the actors: a hierarchy within anarchy that proscribed certain subordinate state behavior and

⁶ Goh 2007.

⁷ Friedberg 1993/1994, p. 7.

⁸ Kaufman et al., 2007; Osiander 2001.

⁹ Rudolph 2007, 2; Buzan and Acharya 2007.

¹⁰ Exceptions are Johnston 1995; Hui 2004.

provided a purpose to the social order; benefits to secondary states that ensured their participation in the system; credible Chinese commitments not to exploit secondary states, and China's goal for legitimacy and recognition, not material gains, in its position at the top of the hierarchy.

I. Hierarchy and Legitimacy in International System

It is increasingly accepted that, “every international system or society has a set of rules or norms that define actors and appropriate behavior,”¹¹ which Christopher Reus-Smit calls the “elementary rules of practice that states formulate to solve the coordination and collaboration problems associated with coexistence under anarchy.”¹² Two increasingly studied aspects of systems are hierarchy, and the incorporation of legitimate authority as well as material power in the constitution of international orders.

Recent research on the “new sovereignty” in international relations has increasingly posited the existence of hierarchies within an anarchic international system.¹³ Hierarchy is an external restriction imposed on a state, what David Lake calls an “authority relationship – a form of hierarchy within systemic anarchy.”¹⁴ That is, one state cedes to another state the right, or control, over an action. Hierarchy is not an absolute, but can range from minimal authority, such as a sphere of influence, to complete hierarchy, such as a formal empire. Wendt and Friedheim note that, “control can range from proscribing a particular policy while still permitting significant local autonomy...which define behavioral expectations for each party.”¹⁵ Although the extent of hierarchy may vary by situation, scholars are increasingly accepting the possibility that authority relationships will exist within international orders.

A stable hierarchy requires three components: a social order that legitimizes the system, benefits to secondary states that ensures their participation, and a credible commitment on the part of the dominant state not to exploit the secondary states if they accept the dominant state’s authority.¹⁶ That is, crafting a set of norms and rules that are viewed as legitimate by secondary

¹¹ Krasner 2001, 173.

¹² Reus-Smit 1997, 557; Ruggie 1983.

¹³ Weber 2000; Paul 1999.

¹⁴ Lake 2003, 311.

¹⁵ Wendt and Friedheim 1995, 697.

¹⁶ Lake 2006, 28.

states is an integral task for the dominant state. Especially in systems in which one state has preponderant material power, “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.”¹⁷ Thus hierarchy is not merely based on the relative coercive capabilities of states, but involve legitimate authority, as well. 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...and an obligation, understood by both parties, for B to comply with the wishes of A.”¹⁸

It follows that dominant states, like individual leaders, lead through a combination of bullying, bribing, or inspiring.¹⁹ Even in hegemonic orders, Ikenberry and Kupchan note that although material incentives are one way that hegemons 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.”²⁰ 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. For example, in the contemporary world there have been concerns about a loss of U.S. legitimacy abroad, and Ian Hurd notes that, “there is a striking consensus in IR theory that American power is enhanced when it is seen by other states as legitimate.”²¹

The links between material power and legitimacy are complex, and neither is likely to exist in its pure form. While legitimacy is a form of power itself, it derives from the values or norms that a state projects, not necessarily merely from its military might and economic wealth. As Lake notes,

¹⁷ Mastanduno 2003, 145.

¹⁸ Lake 2003, 304.

¹⁹ Samuels 2003; Lebow 2008; Wohlforth forthcoming.

²⁰ Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990, 283; Gilpin 1981.

²¹ Hurd 2007, 194.

“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.”²²

In addition to a social purpose, secondary states need believable assurances from the dominant state that it will not abuse its position and exploit smaller states. There has been extensive research on the problem of crafting credible commitments in international relations, but I focus here on one key task – setting mutually recognized borders.²³ Clear boundaries between states are a good indicator of their status quo orientation toward each other. In this way, borders are “political divides [that are] the result of state building,” and they are a useful indicator of a state’s acceptance of the status quo.²⁴ Yet borders are not mere functionally rationalist institutions designed to communicate preferences – they also inherently assume the existence of two parties that recognize each other’s legitimate right to existence. Demarcation of a boundary is thus a costly signal that a state intends stable relations with a neighbor, and Wendt and Friedheim note, “Recognizing the sovereignty of subordinate states imposes certain restraints on dominant states,”²⁵ while Beth Simmons notes that, “when they are mutually accepted, [borders] drastically reduce external challenges to a government’s legitimate authority...and clarify and stabilize transnational actors’ property rights.”²⁶

Viewing international systems in this way provides a new lens on many ideas in the international relations literature. For example, both power transition theory and research on status quo or revisionist states see satisfaction with the existing system as a key element of stability.²⁷ Iain Johnston and others have defined a status quo state as one that accepts the “formal and informal rules of the major institutions in the international system,” and also accepts the distribution of power in the system.²⁸ Although much attention has been paid to whether a state is comfortable

²² Lake 2007, 53. See also Hurd 1999.

²³ Fearon 1995.

²⁴ Baud and Van Schendel 1997, 214; Adelman and Aron 1999; Batten 2003.

²⁵ Wendt and Friedheim 1995, 704.

²⁶ Simmons 2005, 827. See also Fravel 2005.

²⁷ Organski and Kugler 1980.

²⁸ Johnston 2003, p. 11.

with its relative power, just as important is a state's acceptance of the rules of the game and its position within those rules.²⁹

In sum, hierarchy involves some proscription on the part of the subordinate state, and also involves a set of legitimate norms, or rules of the game, provision of benefits to secondary states, and a credible commitment from the dominant state not to exploit secondary states.

II. Why Early Modern East Asia?

In a “brush-clearing” study such as this, intended to map the initial contours of a large, relatively understudied region over many centuries, it is important to be self-conscious about the scope and limits of inquiry. We should avoid making sweeping claims that present either an unbroken chronological continuity or an encompassing geographic component. When studying East Asia, it is sometimes seductive to claim that behavior is immutable, permanent, and unchanging from the ancient mists of time up to the present era. Yet East Asia has changed as much as any other part of the world: some traits have historical roots, others do not, and all are constantly evolving depending on circumstance, situation, institutional constraints, political and economic exigencies, and a host of other factors. There is no “eternal China” existing unchanging outside of time, space, and dimension, nor was there a one-size fits all model of diplomacy that has been applied identically in every situation since time immemorial. The Confucian order and the tribute system evolved over centuries and were selectively used in different times and places by different actors. Thus, it is critically important to avoid simplistic research by carefully deciding what is an appropriate geographic and chronological era to study, and to be aware that an explanation for one era is not meant to apply across all history and all regions.

²⁹ Legro 2007; Kugler 2006.

Chronologically, I focus on the Ming and Qing Chinese dynasties up to the Opium wars between the U.K. and China (1368-1841) – early modern East Asia –because it represents the culmination of centuries of state building in East Asia, and the East Asian international system was at its most complete and developed. This study makes no attempt to explain earlier historical periods, such as the 7th century Tang dynasty, nor does it explain the long and uneven evolution of the East Asian international system. The tribute system was never universally nor similarly applied, and there were variations and exceptions throughout history, but its most complete manifestation occurred during the time studied in this essay.³⁰

Geographically, this essay focuses on the four major, Sinicized states – China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. I do not explain China-nomad relations, nor other complex and vibrant regions, such as Southeast Asia, which were influenced by Indian as much as Chinese ideas.³¹

Perhaps the greatest contrast to this early modern era were the three centuries preceding it, which witnessed the breakdown of central control in China, the Mongol Yuan invasions, and widespread instability throughout the region.³² Yet at the same time, the Yuan set the stage for the subsequent five centuries by reestablishing “centralized, unified rule in China, laying the foundation for the provinces of modern China...and restoring a single tax and legal system on the country.”³³ Each era merits study in its own right, but it is important to carefully explore one epoch before beginning comparisons, and to avoid careless conclusions and dubious claims: what was true for early modern East Asia may not have been true a millenium earlier.

China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan were centralized, territorial units with a bureaucratic apparatus separate from society that conducted formal international relations with each other, and for whom international recognition as a legitimate nation was an important component of their existence (table 1). These Sinic states constituted the inner core of the Chinese-dominated system

³⁰ Yun 1998.

³¹ Lieberman 2003; Abu-Lughod 1991.

³² Rossabi 1983.

³³ Crossley 2008, 7.

where Chinese cultural, economic, and political influence was direct and pervasive, although they retained their own unique indigenous cultures, as well. These states are recognizably the same political units today, and more importantly, were recognizable to each other at the time. As Karen Wigan notes:

Compared to most countries in the late twentieth century...China, Korea, and Japan are among the most venerable nations in the world; although their boundaries have shifted over time, and the style of their imagining has been continually debated, the notion of nationhood has resonated long and deeply with the majority of each country's inhabitants...this sense of region is quite different from what might be encountered elsewhere in Eurasia or Africa, where national space is often complicated...by cross-cutting affiliations from a colonial or pre-colonial past.³⁴

Table 1. East Asian States and Their Dynasties, 13th to 19th Centuries

	1300	1400	1500	1600	1700	1800
China	1368-1644: Ming			1644-1911: Qing		
Japan	1333-1573: Ashikaga			1600-1868: Tokugawa		
Korea	1392-1910: Chosŏn					
Vietnam	1225-1400: Tran	Le: 1428-1778 (Trinh and Nguyen factions: 1543-1778)			Nguyen: 1792-1883	

These four states were centrally administered bureaucratic systems, with Korea and Vietnam particularly emulating the Chinese model.³⁵ Although this is most clearly reflected in the tribute status of Korea and Vietnam, emulation was much more thorough than that. 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.”³⁶ Both Korea and Vietnam also borrowed Chinese political institutions such as the six ministries and state council, and they both also experienced a “Neo-Confucian revolution” in the 15th century, when scholars imposed their ideas about proper

³⁴ Wigan 1999, 1187.

³⁵ Woodside 2001.

³⁶ Woodside 2006, 1; Lieberman 2003, 341; Karnow 1997, 117.

government and society over the objections of the military class. With the founding of the Korean Chosŏn dynasty and the intensification of neo-Confucian practices, “scholar-officials...became directly involved in policymaking at all levels.”³⁷ These institutional forms were in existence many centuries earlier and were inherited by the post-1300 states for further development and application. This form of government included a calendar, language and writing system, bureaucratic system, and educational system, and was derived from the Chinese experience.³⁸

Of the major states in early modern East Asia, Japan had the most complex relations with China. Japan was clearly a state as early as the 7th century, but the Chinese influence – although constant and powerful – was mitigated and had less an impact in Japan than in Korea or Vietnam. A scholarly consensus has developed over the past twenty years that, “Premodern ‘Japan’ is not a figment of the essentializing modern imagination: it was a real country with real boundaries, yet it was never isolated from the world around it.”³⁹ Although central control broke down during the warring states era (*sengoku*: 1467-1568), “the idea of ‘Japan’ as a single country remained fairly strong.”⁴⁰ Indeed, at no time did any of the potential rulers attempt to create a shogunate independent of the emperor system.⁴¹ As Mary Berry points out, “the heads of the shogunates adhered to the principles of rule associated with the imperial state: that the emperor was head of a united country ruled by law under a central administration.”⁴² The only issue was who would be the most powerful actor, not who would reign: one might say that there was a Japanese state, but it was a politically dysfunctional one.

Hideyoshi conducted a national land survey and implemented a national system of taxation in the late 16th century. The Tokugawa bakufu (1600-1868) continued this centralizing trend. Although there remained important exceptions to centralized power, the bakufu had complete

³⁷ Deuchler 1992, 292.

³⁸ Woodside 1998.

³⁹ Howell 2004/05, 760; Batten 2003; Hall 1966; Yamamura, 1990, 11.

⁴⁰ Batten 2003, 42.

⁴¹ Steenstrup 1991, 239; Grossberg 1981, 2.

⁴² Berry 1982, 15.

authority in foreign affairs, military matters, control of the currency and national highway system, and over the religious life of Japan.⁴³ Land registers, maps, and a national census were implemented continuously from 1716 onward, and “rapid growth of state power was reflected in a recentralization of authority.”⁴⁴

In sum, this study focuses on an era when these four states had successfully emerged in East Asia. I make no attempt to explain the grand sweep of history, nor to explain the variation that occurred in the space between India and Russia.

III. Measuring East Asian Wars

Was East Asia really as peaceful as I claim? Some scholars emphasize the violence in early modern East Asia, claiming the Ming dynasty engaged in over 300 wars during its existence.⁴⁵ In addition, a dominant strand of Korean identity consists of a “master narrative” depicting the Korean experience as “one of almost incessant foreign incursions.”⁴⁶ However, a number such as “300 wars” requires more careful categorization. All anarchic systems are potentially violent, all states use force when they deem it effective, and early modern East Asia was no exception.

Measurement of wars is no simple task. Although the Correlates of War project has defined war as “*sustained combat* between/among military contingents involving substantial casualties (with the criterion being a minimum of 1,000 battle deaths),” such distinctions are almost impossible to make in premodern times.⁴⁷ Not only were there rarely any counts of battle deaths, sharp distinctions between states and non-state actors is difficult, and many political units such as Mongol tribes rarely had written documents, resulting in an over-reliance on Chinese sources simply because they are available.

⁴³ Toby 2001, 202.

⁴⁴ Batten 2003, 44.

⁴⁵ Zundorfer 2004.

⁴⁶ Duncan 2002, 432.

⁴⁷ Sarkees, Wayman, and Singer 2003, 58; Gleditsch et al. 2002.

Yet we must begin somewhere, and the most comprehensive record of Chinese use of force is the *Zhongguo lidai zhanzheng nianbiao* (Chronology of Wars in China Through Successive Dynasties.).⁴⁸ This chronology lists 336 external Chinese uses of force between 1368 and 1841, or more than one every two years.⁴⁹ The PLA counts incidents by year, and often wars lasted over a number of years. For example, the PLA lists China's support of Korea during the Japanese invasion of 1592-98 as four separate incidents.

I examined all Chinese uses of force from the founding of the Ming dynasty in 1368 to the Opium wars between the U.K. and China in 1841, when the changing international system resulted in the breakdown of the China-dominated East Asian order. After listing the year and a brief description of the conflict, I then coded two basic categories: which political units were involved, and what type of conflict they fought. I coded for four general types of political units:

1. Conflict with “nomads,” which included all the polities to the west and north of China, including Tibetan polities as well as the range of Mongol, Khitan, and other peoples on the steppe
2. *Wako*, or pirate raids
3. Conflict between the Sinic states of Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and China
4. “Non-Chinese” conflicts or diplomatic initiatives, such as Zheng He's voyages.

I coded six general types of conflicts:

1. *Border skirmishes* (that resulted in fewer than 1,000 battle deaths or were not intended as conquest)
2. *Interstate Wars* (Chinese involvement in wars of conquest or major mobilizations)
3. *Pirate raids*
4. *Non-Chinese conflicts* that did not involve Chinese dynasties, or Chinese diplomacy
5. *Internal conflict* (farmer's riots, rebellions, mutinous provincial officials, etc.)
6. *Regime consolidation* where one dynasty was establishing control

Following the “Correlates of War” project, I coded conflict as a “border skirmish” when there were fewer than 1,000 battle deaths, or when the conflict was a result of local conditions not

⁴⁸ PLA 2003. To supplement and extend the database, I used a number of other sources, chief among these Kohn 1999.

⁴⁹ The entire dataset in English, created from the author's translation of the *Zhongguo lidai zhanzheng nianbiao*, along with a detailed discussion of different sources, how to measure wars in East Asia, and caveats about using PLA sources, is available at the author's website (xxx...).

aimed at major territorial expansion. Sometimes the data contained an actual casualty count, but often there was none. In that case, a qualitative judgment was made based on the evidence at hand. For example, instances of border skirmishes include the rescue of Chinese envoys to Burma detained by a local chieftan on the border in 1405; a Chinghai tribe's theft of tribute intended for China which resulted in a Chinese attack in 1430; a Chinese attack on Tartars in 1546 that resulted in 27 Tartar deaths; and a Tartar raid on Liaoyang in southern Manchuria in 1563 that was repulsed by the Chinese with a loss of 75 Tartar lives and the capture of 50 horses.

Conflicts coded as interstate war include China's support of Korea during the Japanese invasion of 1592 with 100,000 troops; and China's total elimination of four Zunghar Mongol tribes and establishment of formal institutional control of Ili valley in 1757. Pirate raids include a 1372 attack by *wako* that resulted in the Chinese capture of 12 boats and 130 people; and a *wako* raid in 1552 that looted several villages in Huangyan County and escaped before Chinese troops could retaliate.

Following again the "Correlates of War" project, the decision when to code conflict as "imperialism" and hence interstate war, and when to call conflict "regime consolidation" and hence internal conflict also depends on a qualitative judgment as to when consolidation of control occurs. For this dataset, I have used the accepted dates for the start and end of dynasties: before the accepted date for the founding of a dynasty, I coded conflict between the old and new dynasty as interstate war. After the date of dynastic transition, I have judged the new dynasty to have effective control, and all remaining conflicts between the new and old dynasties are coded as regime consolidation. Clearly, a more fine-grained categorization is possible, and certainly further research will add detail to many of the incidents only briefly analyzed in the dataset. But as a first cut with which to begin analysis, the database reveals a number of interesting findings:

Overall, the most stark distinction is the relative absence of conflict between the Sinicized states, and the relative prevalence of conflict between China and nomads on its north and western

borders. Only 12 out of 336 conflicts of any type (3.57 percent) involved China, Korea, Vietnam, or Japan (Table 2). When counting wars and not incidents, China and Japan fought one war during this time, and Vietnam and China also fought only one war.⁵⁰

Table 2. Chinese Opponents, 1368-1841

Ming Dynasty		
Type	Number	Percent
Conflict with nomads	200	71.94
Wako pirate raids	60	21.94
Sinic conflicts*	11	3.96
Non-Chinese/diplomatic	7	2.52
Total	278	100.00
Qing dynasty		
Conflict with nomads	52	89.66
Wako pirate raids	0	0.00
Sinic conflicts	1	1.72
Non-Chinese/diplomatic	5	8.62
Total	58	100.00
Total, 1368-1841		
Conflict with nomads	252	75.00
Wako pirate raids	60	17.86
Sinic conflicts	12	3.57
Non-Chinese/diplomatic	12	3.57
Total	336	100.00

*Sinicized states = Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and China.

(Source: author's dataset, based mainly on author's translation of PLA 2003; and Kohn 1999; Perdue 2005; and Park 2006).

In contrast, 252 conflicts of all types occurred between China and nomads (75 percent). Finally, pirate raids (60 cases) were five times as likely as was conflict between the Sinic states.

The most prevalent type of conflict was skirmishes along states' frontier borders between states and non-state actors such as nomads (Table 3).⁵¹ Over 66 percent of uses of force (225 cases) were border skirmishes on China's northern and western frontiers. For example, Ming Emperor

⁵⁰ The only previous Japanese use of force on the continent came nine centuries earlier, in 663 AD, when Tang and Silla crushed Yamato Japan forces sent to support Paekche.

⁵¹ Van de Ven 1996, 737; Waley-Cohen 1996; Shu 1995.

Wanli (1573-1620), who sent troops to aid Korea against the Japanese, engaged in the *Wanli san dazheng* (three great wars of the Wanli emperor). The other two “wars” were the suppression of a mutiny on the northern frontier and eradication of an aboriginal chieftan in the southwest – incidents typical of border maintenance but not approaching major interstate war, and hence designated as “skirmishes.” There were also occasional skirmishes along China’s southern border involving Burma, Shan tribes, or other peoples, but as Frederick Mote notes, “the southern frontier truly presented no threats to the security of Ming China, but troublesome disputes among unruly peoples along that boundary often led to requests for Chinese intervention...”⁵²

Table 3. Type of Conflict, 1368-1841

Ming dynasty		
Type	Number	Percent
Border skirmishes	192	69.06
Interstate war	26	9.35
Pirate raids	60	21.58
Non-China or diplomacy	13	
Internal conflicts	264	
Regime transition	23	
Total non-internal use of force:	278	100.00
Qing dynasty		
Border skirmishes	33	56.90
Interstate war	25	43.10
Pirate raids	0	0.00
Non-Chinese or diplomacy	10	
Internal conflicts	120	
Regime transition	57	
Total non-internal use of force	58	
Totals, 1368-1841		
Border skirmishes	225	66.96
Interstate war	51	15.18
Pirate raids	60	17.86
Total	336	100.00

(Source: author’s dataset, based mainly on author’s translation of PLA 2003; Kohn 1999; Perdue 2005; and Park 2006).

⁵² Mote 1999, 611.

15.18 percent of conflicts (51 cases) could be considered major wars, or wars of conquest. These wars generally did not involve the Sinic states, and most of the incidents come from Qing China's 7-decade expansion into the western Xinjiang area at the expense of a number of Mongol tribes such as the Zunghars.⁵³ Similar to both the American and Russian continental expansions, Perdue concludes that the "Qing project was to eliminate the ambiguous frontier zone and replace it with a clearly defined border..."⁵⁴ Some former Ming tributaries in Tibet, northwestern China and Central Asia were conquered and eventually reorganized as new provinces (for example, Qinghai and Xinjiang).⁵⁵ The Qing dynasty asserted control over Tibet in the 17th and kept it to the end, and territory under direct Chinese administration prior to the 17th century was perhaps about half of what it claims now.

Thus, the comparative "peacefulness" of early modern East Asia was limited to relations among the major states, and even a conservative assessment of Chinese military history reveals that the large majority of conflicts were in fact border skirmishes, and not major interstate war. The stability and relative peacefulness of Chinese, Korean Vietnamese, and Japanese relations is striking, and is the puzzle that motivates this research.

IV. The Social Order of the Confucian Order

By the 14th century, the Sinicized states had evolved a set of rules, norms, and institutions with China clearly the hegemon, which resulted in a clear hierarchy and very long peace. The rules of the game and the hierarchy were explicitly defined. The surrounding states benefited from the system, and conflict tended to occur not to check rising Chinese power but rather as order within

⁵³ For example, George Childs Kohn (1999, 565) finds only eight Chinese wars over the time period in question, including the Manchu invasions of China and Korea and border wars with Burma.

⁵⁴ Perdue 2005, 520.

⁵⁵ Giersch 2006.

China itself was decaying.⁵⁶ China appeared to have no need to fight, and the secondary powers no desire to fight. 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 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. With the main institution of the “tribute system,” the Confucian order emphasized formal hierarchy among nations while allowing considerable informal equality.⁵⁷ As long as hierarchy was observed, and China recognized as dominant, there was little need for interstate war. Sinic states, and even many nomadic tribes, used some of its rules and institutions when interacting with each other. Status as much as 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. This social order also contained restraint by China, and benefits to the secondary states.

1. Hierarchy: limits on secondary states

A key element of hierarchy is the proscription of certain behaviors by subordinate states. These limits on behavior can involve both coercion and legitimacy. In early modern East Asia, although states were largely free to do as they pleased, there were some limits on their actions. Perhaps most significant was the explicit recognition that China was at the top of the hierarchy. Other states were not allowed to call themselves equal of China, although this had little impact on their daily functioning.

⁵⁶ Even the nomads valued Chinese stability, and John Mears (2001, 8) notes that, “Nomadic confederacies...seemed best served by the preservation of a stable Chinese regime.” See also Perdue 2005, 521.

⁵⁷ Keyes 2002; Fiskesjo 1999.

This proscription was formalized in two key elements of tributary diplomacy: recognition by China, known as “investiture,” and the sending of embassy envoys to Beijing. Investiture involved explicit acceptance of subordinate tributary status, and was a diplomatic protocol by which the Chinese emperor recognized the status of the king in tributary states as the legitimate ruler of those states.⁵⁸ Envoys to China followed numerous rituals and used the Chinese calendar, marking events such as birthdays or other significant events. Investiture and envoys were also practical, however – embassies were frequently a means for extensive trade between China and tributaries, and investiture was important both for domestic legitimacy in the tribute state, as well as confirmation of their status with China.

This hierarchy was rank-ordered, based in part on how culturally similar these states were with China. Korea and Vietnam were no stronger than Japan, but they were viewed more highly by virtue of their relations to China and their more thorough adoption of Chinese ideas, Korea being seen as a “model” tributary.⁵⁹ Vietnam first entered into a tributary relationship with China upon its independence in the 10th century, and from that time on, “Song [Chinese] rulers unquestionably placed the Vietnamese kingdom at the top of a hierarchical system of relationships with leaders along the southern frontier.”⁶⁰ Wills notes that “the [Vietnamese] Le kings sent regular tribute embassies, were meticulous in the use of seals and terminology, and prepared their own tribute memorials and accompanying documents in quite respectable literary Chinese.”⁶¹

There are other examples of behavioral limits. China chose the formal name of Vietnam – not the Vietnamese themselves – because the original name was identical to the historical name of a Chinese province, and thus, “Viet Nam...one of the most passionately cherished national names of our times...was invented within the red walls of the Forbidden City of Beijing.”⁶² Korean court

⁵⁸ Yoo 2004.

⁵⁹ Yun 1999; Choi 1997, 2005.

⁶⁰ Anderson 2007, 8.

⁶¹ Wills n.d.

⁶² Wills, n.d.

dress was also identical with the court dress of the Ming dynasty officials, with the exception that the dress and emblems were two ranks lower (in the nine-rank scheme) in Korea.⁶³

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 *political* authority over their states.”⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ Indeed, China simply did not “dominate” Korea during 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.⁶⁶

These states also replicated these rank-orders in their own relations with other political units. Korea, for example, explicitly ranked its relations with other countries: various Mongol tribes were rank 4, the Ryukyus rank 5.⁶⁷ Swope notes that, “when addressing states such as Ryukyu they [Korea] considered to be inferior in status within the Chinese tributary system, they implied...paramountcy. Japan they regarded as an equal or as an inferior depending upon the occasion.”⁶⁸

2. The social order and benefits to the secondary states

Michael 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

⁶³ That is, the court dress of a Rank I (the highest rank) Chosŏn official was identical to that of a Rank III official at the Ming court.

⁶⁴ Smits 1999, 36.

⁶⁵ Son 1994; Kang 1997, 6-9.

⁶⁶ Thanks to Bruce Cumings for this point.

⁶⁷ Robinson 2000; Kang 1997, 50-51

⁶⁸ Swope 2002, 763.

followers.”⁶⁹ Incorporation into the Chinese world left the secondary states free to pursue domestic affairs and diplomacy with each other as they saw fit, and also brought economic and security benefits at a cost lower than engaging in arms races or attempting to develop a counterbalancing alliance against China. There were both material and normative aspects to this order, among them trade, domestic legitimacy, and “civilization.”

China’s strength allowed it to provide benefits to lesser states that agreed to play by the system’s rules. Given China’s economic and technological dominance, surrounding states were generally eager to trade with China.⁷⁰ Regional trade expanded with Chinese strength, and contracted when China was weak. For example, after the Qing court established full control of Taiwan in 1683, it lifted restrictions on shipping to Japan, and trade expanded dramatically, and Deng estimates forty ships a year traded between the two countries.⁷¹ China provided benefits to lesser states that agreed to play by the system’s rules, and indeed tributary trade was a net loss for the Chinese government. Gregory Smits notes that, “China, in effect, purchased the participation of surrounding states by offering them incentives...”⁷² Trade served as a double-edged instrument of system consolidation, for it facilitated not only more intense state-to-state interactions but also the development of domestic state institutions. The picture that emerges is one in which early modern East Asia involved an elaborate trading system, governed by laws and protocols, with states attempting to control, limit, and benefit from trade.⁷³

For neighboring states, Chinese recognition was also an important domestic and international signal. During times of domestic unrest, when authority was unclear, Chinese recognition as rightful ruler was a powerful legitimizing tool.⁷⁴ Indeed, when Vietnamese, Korean, or occasionally Japanese ruling houses were in transition, one aspect of consolidation of political

⁶⁹ Mastanduno 2003, 145.

⁷⁰ Hamashita 1997.

⁷¹ Deng 1998; Ishii 1998.

⁷² Smits 1999, 36.

⁷³ Hamashita 1997.

⁷⁴ Kang 1997, 18.

control involved investiture from China. This external recognition of the rightful ruler sent a clear signal to other potential political opponents about who was likely to succeed; in practical terms, it gave the invested ruler access to China and the benefits that derived from tributary status.

Yet acceptance of Chinese hegemony was not merely instrumental, it also involved a social purpose. China essentially defined what was “civilization” in East Asia, and unlike the nomads, who traded and fought with China but resisted cultural emulation, Korea, Vietnam, and even Japan borrowed heavily from Chinese culture as well as from its economic and political institutions. This cultural relationship included language, writing, literature and art, and political and social institutions, in addition to the accepted norms and rules for international relations focused on here. Indeed, the Chinese cultural and social milieu equated to more than mere international status as observed through the tribute system. Like the equating of contemporary “modernity” with Westphalian “westernization,” Chinese ideas had a measurable impact on subordinate states’ domestic, as well as international, behavior. Korea and Vietnam altered their own domestic social and political arrangements based on the Chinese model.

These states 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. On the contrary, emulation actually had the opposite effect of ramifying the Chinese-dominated order. Status was defined as civilization, which essentially meant Chinese ideas and institutions. Being Sinicized meant being a “civilized” state, with deep links to the highest centers of learning and domestic institutions that reflected that learning. These were solutions to real world problems, but critically they were also *Chinese* solutions.

In Korea, for example, the Mongol invasions of the 13th century, *wako* pirate incursions along the coast, and a resurgent Ming China might have prompted a full militarization of the new 14th century Chosŏn dynasty. Yet the opposite occurred – the neo-Confucian revolution saw Confucian scholars become increasingly influential and the military increasingly marginalized, as

the new dynasty sought to establish domestic order and international stability. 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.⁷⁵ “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.”⁷⁶

Regarding Vietnam, Whitmore notes that, “while the Vietnamese violently rejected Ming political control, these literati equated Ming models with modernity.”⁷⁷ Although the 15th century Ming occupation was relatively short, it had a lasting effect on Vietnam, hastening the centralization and organization of the state. Lieberman notes that the “Chinese model probably appealed to the literati and to their royal patrons because it promised a variety of practical benefits: Chinese bureaucratic techniques offered to curb regionalism in an unfavorable geographic environment, [and] to strengthen central control over local units...”⁷⁸ The complexity of emulation and difference is reflected in famous Vietnamese nationalist poems from the 11th and 15th centuries. These poems celebrated victories over China even while they were written in Chinese using a Chinese literary style, and used China as a basis for defining what was Vietnam.⁷⁹ As Brantly Womack observes, “The Chinese court innovated and refined its institutions and ideology to face the challenge of preserving central order for the common good...[Vietnamese rulers] faced the same problem, and China provided an agenda of ‘best practices.’”⁸⁰

Thus, it was a mix of legitimate acceptance and rational calculation that motivated Korea and Vietnam to lend their submission to China. The costs and benefits of incorporation into the Chinese world created powerful incentives for states to maintain good relations with China.

⁷⁵ Duncan 1988/89.

⁷⁶ Deuchler 1992, 107.

⁷⁷ Whitmore 1997, 675.

⁷⁸ Lieberman 1993, 513.

⁷⁹ Vuving 2001; Taylor 1999, 151.

⁸⁰ Womack 2006, 132-3.

Furthermore, few states felt threatened by China, and they desired Chinese stability. They understood China's goals, and worked within an overarching set of largely Chinese norms and practices, not against them. The legitimacy of this order played an important role in stabilizing relations between actors. The explicit acceptance of China as dominant and the source of civilization, and the norms embodied in the various institutions, were not mere window-dressing – they were central to the conception of these states' emerging identities as influential and legitimate political entities.

3. Commitment not to exploit

A key aspect of legitimate hierarchy is a credible commitment on the part of the dominant state not to exploit the subordinate states. The Confucian order provided a range of flexible institutional and discursive tools with which to resolve conflicts without recourse to war, and a good indicator of the stability in the system is that the borders between Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and China were relatively fixed, and did not significantly change during the five centuries under review.

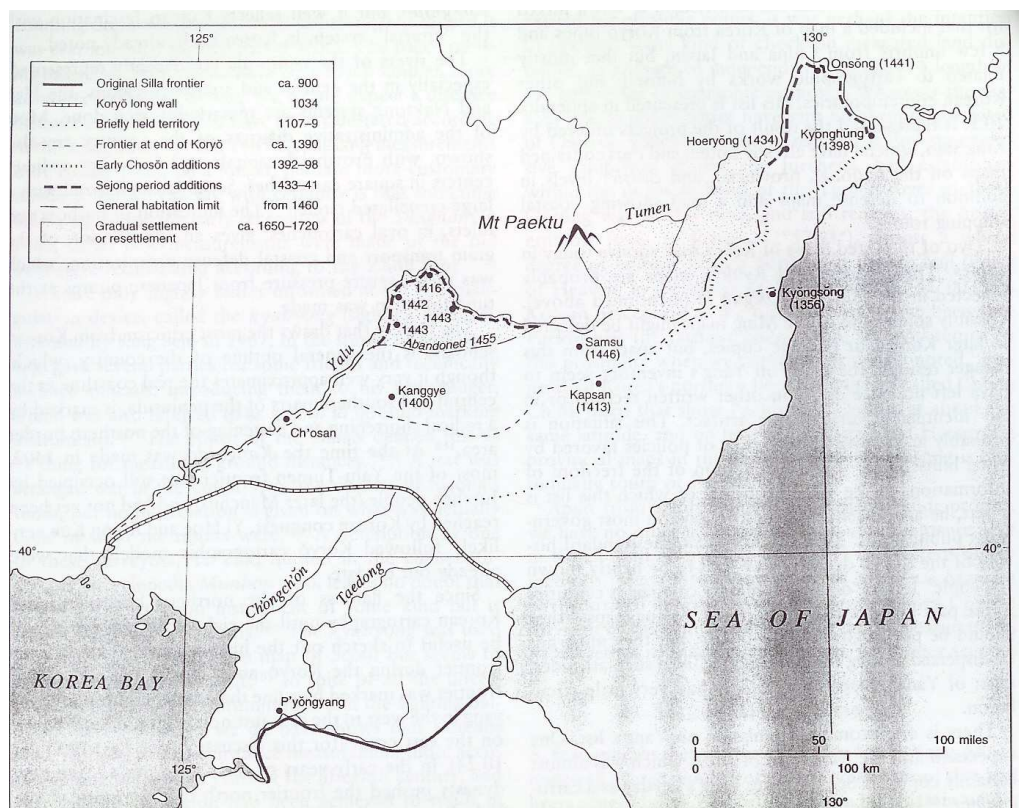
By the 10th century, Korea and China had established the Yalu river as their border, and it was affirmation of this border and Korean acceptance of tributary status in the 14th century that precluded a war between the new Ming Chinese and Chosŏn Korean dynasties: Near the beginning of the Ming dynasty in 1389, the Ming had sent an expedition against the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392) to recover territory that it alleged had been annexed by the Mongols, whom the Ming had already driven from China. Koryŏ decided to fight the Ming over the demarcation of the border, and it was this campaign, and General Yi Sŏnggye's unwillingness to fight it (preferring negotiation), that led to the fall of Koryŏ and, three years later, the creation of a new dynasty, Chosŏn.⁸¹ 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

⁸¹ Kim 2006; Roh 1993; Lee 2004; Ha 1994.

all territory previously held by Koryŏ, and relations between China and Korea were close and stable for 250 years, with the two sides exchanging numerous envoys and regularly trading.

By the 15th 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 1713.⁸² 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 (Figure 1).⁸³

Figure 1. Korea's border with China, 900-1720.



Source: Ledyard 1994, 290.

⁸² Ledyard 1994, 290.

⁸³ Personal communication from Gari Ledyard, October 30, 2007.

Gari Ledyard notes that:

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 Korean officialdom spoke from a common Confucian vocabulary. In that front, the relationship was equal, if not at times actually in Korea's favor.⁸⁴

Systemic stability seems to have been good for the political regimes in each of these Sinicized East Asian countries which, 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, in retrospect these states appear quite canny.⁸⁵ 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.”⁸⁶

Of course, there was variation: Korea and Vietnam were most comfortable with the Chinese-oriented system, while Japan has always been most conflicted about its relationship with China – genuine cultural admiration, and yet a sense of unease and even competition. Yet Japan and Korea certainly never allied together to balance China, even if 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.⁸⁷ It is doubtful a balancing strategy would ever have occurred to the smaller states, because each had their own separate relationship (tributary or not) with China, and China was the only pole in the East Asian state system. Chosŏn Korea had been so peaceful for two centuries that on the eve of the Imjin War

⁸⁴ Ledyard 2006.

⁸⁵ Thanks to Greg Noble for this point.

⁸⁶ Crossley, personal communication, February 15, 2008.

⁸⁷ Ledyard 1988-89, 84; Han 1999.

of 1592, it had less than one thousand soldiers in its entire army.⁸⁸ After the Imjin War stability returned, and 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 18th century comprised only 10,000 “battle-worthy men.”⁸⁹

4. Legitimacy

Although dominant or hegemonic states can often exploit secondary states, China appears to have wanted was legitimacy and recognition from secondary states, not necessarily material benefits such as wealth or power. As noted above, trade did not necessarily favor China, and indeed was often a net loss. Militarily, China was content to coexist with the Sinic states as long as they were not troublesome. Yet recognition of China as dominant was important, and a challenge to legitimate authority was a key factor in the cause and resolution of the one war between China and Vietnam during this time.

As noted previously, Vietnam had been a tributary state of China since the 10th century, and Vietnam and China demarcated their border in 1079, “which has remained essentially unchanged to the present day.”⁹⁰ The Vietnamese and Chinese had agreed that “the Quan Nguyen and Guihua prefectures [were] two sides of a ‘fixed border’ (*qiangjie*) region between the two states.”⁹¹ A 15th century Vietnamese map shows the “official [route] for Vietnamese embassies traveling to the Chinese capital of Beijing. Going north from the capital, the map... moves past the walled city of Lang-son to the great gate on the Chinese border leading into Guanxi Province.”⁹² When China and Vietnam signed their modern treaty in 1999 they agreed upon essentially this same border.

China had not initially had designs on colonizing Vietnam, the preceding four centuries had seen a stable relationship between the two, and indeed the first Ming emperor Hongwu (r. 1368-

⁸⁸ Park 2006, 6.

⁸⁹ Park 2006, 6.

⁹⁰ Taylor 1999, 147.

⁹¹ Anderson 2007, 145.

⁹² Whitmore 1994, 492.

1398) explicitly listed Vietnam (along with Korea, Japan, and 12 other states) in his guidelines for future generations as “not to be invaded.” However, although China had invested the Tran dynasty (1225-1400) as rulers of Vietnam, that dynasty lost control in the 1390s. A member of the Tran royal family appealed to China for help in overthrowing the usurper, and China initially sent troops and an envoy merely to restore a Tran as king. The party was ambushed and wiped out just over the border, at Lang-son. To avenge this humiliation, the Chinese sent a punitive force of 215,000 into Vietnam in 1406. After an easy victory, the Chinese emperor made a “disastrous decision” to incorporate Vietnam into China.⁹³ The occupation failed after two decades, and in return for independence, Vietnam immediately re-entered into a tribute relationship with China in 1428 and even helped ferry Chinese troops back home.

This incident, and the centuries of stability between China and Vietnam that both preceded and followed it, reflect the legitimacy of the system more than the military balance between the two states. Had China wanted to conquer Vietnam but simply lacked the power to do so, we should find Chinese court debates in the following centuries about whether to invade Vietnam, and arguments about the futility of so doing. Yet during both the Ming and Qing dynasties, the sporadic discussion in the Chinese court about Vietnam concerned “normal” events about an accepted political actor, not whether China could conquer Vietnam. Furthermore, if Vietnamese independence were only a function of military power, we should also find Vietnamese forces fortifying their border in an effort to deter China, and Chinese troops preparing and planning for an attack on Vietnam, yet this was also not the case in the subsequent centuries.

Just as significantly, Vietnam immediately entered back into a tributary relationship with China, and continued to send envoys to China on a regular basis until the late 19th century. Had Vietnam’s independence been purely based on military power, there is no reason for Vietnam to have conducted such elaborate rituals, nor to explicitly acknowledge China as dominant, nor to

⁹³ Chan 1988, 230.

continue sending scholars to study in China. Embassy missions were a vital part of the tributary relationship, and the Le dynasty (1428-1778) initially sent embassies every year, which eventually settled into a pattern of one embassy every three years.⁹⁴ As Victor Lieberman notes, “Convincing China that Vietnam was ‘civilized,’ and therefore not in need of Chinese occupation and instruction, presented another practical benefit of self-Confucianization.”⁹⁵ Even when Vietnam was driven by internal factionalism, both sides retained the royal throne, which had been invested by China. Brantly Womack notes that, “...it should be emphasized that if China were still an active threat, then Vietnam’s political task would have been military cohesion, and its intellectual task would have been one of differentiation from China [not emulation].”⁹⁶ Although Vietnam fought numerous wars with its Southeast Asian counterparts, China-Vietnam relations remained stable and peaceful until the 20th century.

The important point is not that legitimacy-based hierarchy is always peaceful, as that is clearly not the case. Rather, conflict and use of force is possible, and authority considerations as much as power considerations may be the cause. East Asia was notable, however, in that the hierarchy was explicit and unambiguous, and this is part of the explanation for why the region was relatively stable.

⁹⁴ Whitmore 2005, 6.

⁹⁵ Liberman 1993, 513.

⁹⁶ Womack 2006, 132-3.

V. Japan: Accepting the International Order

Japan was more ambivalent toward China than were Korea or Vietnam. Japan sent envoys to China from the 6-9th centuries, and early attempts to import Chinese bureaucratic approaches from the 7th to 11th centuries failed in the smaller, more backward environment of Japan.⁹⁷ Formal tribute relations did not resume until 1404-1543.⁹⁸ However, although Japan had the most reservations about acknowledging China as the dominant state, Japan also unquestioningly accepted the rules of the game. Japan's goal was to replace China as the top of the hierarchy, not to re-write the rules of the game.

Although Japanese had a visceral resistance to the subordinating rituals required by the formal tributary conditions that China laid down, the Chinese example as a normative precedent remained very important even for the Tokugawa (1600-1868).⁹⁹ David Pollack writes that, “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’...”¹⁰⁰ There is really no difference in this respect between Japan on the one hand and Korea and Vietnam on the other. Even for the last two, which had regular tributary relations with China, China in general and Chinese as individuals seldom thought of these tributaries as anything but validations of their own self esteem. 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 military not at all, and the cultural relationship was with Chinese literature, not with China itself.

In over four centuries, Japan challenged their place in the Confucian order only once, in 1592. The Japanese invasion of Korea involved half million men and over 700 ships, and “easily

⁹⁷ The 7th century ritsuryō (code-based) state was explicitly modeled on the Tang bureaucracy. Farris 1998, 319; Shively 1999.

⁹⁸ Elisonas 1988.

⁹⁹ Jansen 1992.

¹⁰⁰ Pollack 1986, 3.

dwarfed those of their European contemporaries,” involving men and material ten times the scale of the Spanish Armada of 1588.¹⁰¹ After the Japanese initially routed sparse Korean forces and drove north past Pyongyang, China intervened and pushed the Japanese all the way back down the peninsula, and it soon became clear to both sides that Japan could not hope to conquer Korea, much less China.¹⁰²

Why Hideyoshi decided to invade Korea remains unclear, but most evidence points to either status, economic, or domestic political considerations. Berry sees a desire for greater status: “He [Hideyoshi] was clearly less interested in military dominion abroad than in fame,” while Swope notes that Hideyoshi demanded a dynastic marriage with one of the Chinese emperor’s daughters along with the resumption of tribute trade.¹⁰³ Deng sees a Japanese desire to reenter into tribute status with China, writing that, “Trade is also shown because of the fighting over the ability by tributary states to pay tribute. Hideyoshi invaded Korea, a Ming vassal state, to force China to allow Japan to resume a tributary relationship, and threatened that a refusal would lead to invasion of China itself.”¹⁰⁴ Hawley emphasizes continual war as a way for Hideyoshi to quell internal dissension among his followers.¹⁰⁵ Notably absent is a Japanese assessment of the relative military capabilities of the two sides, and Berry concludes that, “there is no evidence that he systematically researched either the geographical problem or the problem of Chinese military organization.”¹⁰⁶

The Chinese would never acknowledge equality, but did consider granting Japan investiture at a status similar to certain Mongol leaders, and below that of Korea and Vietnam.¹⁰⁷ Korea – and China – sent minor officials to negotiate with the Japanese, because, “the Koreans valued highly the tributary system and their place within the first rank of tributary states. As the Japanese held lower

¹⁰¹ Swope 2005, 13. The Spanish armada consisted of 30,000 troops on 130 ships, and was defeated by 20,000 English troops, as noted by Hawley 2005, xii. See also Turnbull 2002; Lee 1999.

¹⁰² Hawley 2005, 409; Swope 2002.

¹⁰³ Berry 1982, 216; see also Swope 2002.

¹⁰⁴ Deng 1997, 254.

¹⁰⁵ Hawley 2005, 22-24, 76.

¹⁰⁶ Berry 1982, 278.

¹⁰⁷ Swope 2002, 769.

rank, the Koreans would have jeopardized their status had they sent royalty as envoys.”¹⁰⁸ Kenneth Swope notes that, “Hideyoshi could have extracted trade concessions had he accommodated himself to the established rules. Hideyoshi, however, in bidding for recognition as the equal of the Ming, was trying to alter an established system; the Ming were not willing, and could not yet be forced, to agree to such changes.”¹⁰⁹ In 1598 Japan retreated from Korea without gaining anything.

Thus, Japan’s sole revisionist attempt was a disaster. Thereafter, although Japan remained formally outside the tribute system, it did not challenge the system. As Alex Roland notes, “The Tokugawa shogunate turned inward and gave up war, not the gun.”¹¹⁰ Swope writes, “because the Tokugawa maintained order in Japan, piracy was not the problem it had been in the past and the two states co-existed in relative peace until the late nineteenth century.”¹¹¹

For the next two centuries Japan avoided confronting China. For example, due to Ming loyalists, China felt compelled to conquer Taiwan in 1683 and remove to Fujian almost all of the local Han inhabitants (of course, immigration quickly resumed, despite periodic repression).¹¹² The Japanese Tokugawa regime was deeply involved in Taiwan – Ming resistance leader Zheng Chenggong had been born in Japan of a Japanese mother; Japanese traders and pirates were active in Taiwan; and Taiwanese trade with Japan in the 17th century comprised fifty ships a year. Zheng made five separate requests for Japanese assistance between 1648 and 1660, yet the Tokugawa chose not to become involved.¹¹³

Another kingdom between China and Japan, the Ryukyus, gave tribute to both China and Japan. The two most powerful East Asian states both claimed suzerainty over the same Ryukyuan territory, but at least through the late 19th century they never came to blows over it. Gregory Smits notes that, “in 1655, the [Japanese leadership] formally approved tribute relations between Ryukyu

¹⁰⁸ Swope 2002, 780.

¹⁰⁹ Swope 2002, 780, Berry 1982, 217.

¹¹⁰ Roland, 2005.

¹¹¹ Swope 2002, 781.

¹¹² Roy 2003, 17-19

¹¹³ Osamu 1980; Deng 1997, 254.

and Qing, again, in part to avoid giving Qing any reason for military action against Japan.”¹¹⁴ The Japanese pressured the Ryukyu to actually increase the rate of tribute missions to China, hoping to indirectly “increase its trade with China and thereby relieve ongoing financial woes.”¹¹⁵ So careful were Japanese authorities to hide their involvement in the Ryukyus that when Chinese envoys visited the islands, Japanese officials hid in a small village outside of the capital.¹¹⁶

Arrighi, Hui, Hung, and Selden note that, “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.”¹¹⁷ Thus, even though Japan only sporadically accepted tributary status, the system as a whole was stable because Japan accepted Chinese political, economic, and cultural centrality in the system, and also benefited from international trade and the general stability it brought. Indeed, it was only with the arrival of Western imperial powers and the implosion of the China-dominated system in the late 19th century that Japan challenged China’s position again.

Implications for Further Research

All states use force if they deem it effective for dealing with threats, and East Asia was no different from Europe in this regard. Yet states may also care about legitimate authority, as well, and both power and authority are key aspects of international orders. The relative importance that states place on power and legitimacy will depend on the nature of the particular international system. It is reasonable to hypothesize that all systems incorporate hierarchic elements of power and authority, and that the Confucian order was hardly unique.

¹¹⁴ Smits 1999, 21.

¹¹⁵ Smits 1999, 22.

¹¹⁶ Sakai 1964, 392.

¹¹⁷ Arrighi, Hui, Hung, and Selden 2003, 269; von Verschuer 2000.

Indeed, the appropriate comparison to the East Asian Confucian order is probably not Westphalian Europe, but the US-dominated western hemisphere during the Monroe doctrine. Like China in East Asia, the U.S. quickly became the dominant state in the Western hemisphere, and also created a set of norms and institutions that governed how smaller states were to interact with the U.S. After the U.S. settled its borders with Mexico and Canada, war between states in the Americas became rare, although the U.S. has consistently intervened throughout the hemisphere when stability has been threatened, or when smaller states did not recognize the United States' status as hegemon. Because there have been fewer major wars in both the Americas and East Asia, scholars have naturally overlooked them when studying war and peace – but precisely because they offer different structures and norms than the European experience, studying these and other international systems is a promising avenue for further research. Europe may actually be the anomaly, not the norm, in international relations.

Focusing on legitimacy and hierarchy also promises to provide new insights on contemporary issues, such as China's emergence in the global system. Although China may have been the source of the Confucian international order centuries ago, that order has been replaced by a Westphalian one, and few scholars expect the 15th century order to revive itself in the 21st century. Thus, as China develops, whether it finds the current norms and rules of the U.S.-dominated Westphalian order to be legitimate may be more important for stability than how the distribution of capabilities evolves. Just as important as China's views will be other great powers' views of China's role. If China can find a status that it and others accept, the future will more likely be stable. If China eventually finds the current order to be illegitimate and its status is not fair, the future will likely be more conflictual.

Finally, the research presented here also lays out a theoretical and substantive agenda for studying status, hierarchy, and history within East Asia itself. Further research on the material, institutional, and cultural aspects of this “longer peace” promises to have implications for theories

of war, trade, stability, international systems, and institutions. Although one article cannot explore in detail every aspect of variations within the tribute system, studying the manner in which status and power coexisted, and the range of institutional and discursive practices that existed in early modern East Asia, promises to shed light on how institutions develop, and why some states emerged so early and managed to survive for so long. The tribute system was never a “pure” institutional form, and there were numerous exceptions and deviations from it over the millennia in East Asia. Further research on the normative, economic, political, and social aspects of the Confucian order promises to be quite interesting.

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