

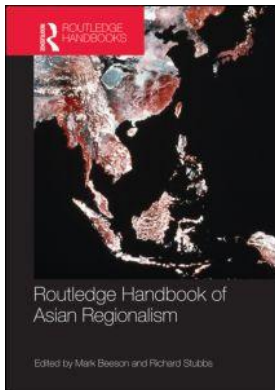
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East Asia when China was at the centre

The tribute system in early modern East Asia

David Kang

In 1592, Japanese General Hideyoshi invaded Korea with more than 160,000 troops on approximately 700 ships, eventually mobilizing 500,000 troops, intending to conquer China after first subduing Korea (Swope 2005: 41). More than 60,000 Korean soldiers, eventually supported by 100,000 Ming Chinese forces, defended the Korean peninsula. After 6 years of war, the Japanese retreated and Hideyoshi died, having failed spectacularly in his quest to conquer China and Korea.

Thus, the Imjin War ‘easily dwarfed [the wars] of their European contemporaries’, involving men and material five to ten times the scale of the Spanish Armada of 1588, which was described in Renaissance Europe as the ‘greatest military force ever assembled’ (Turnbull 2002; Hawley 2005: xii; Swope 2005: 13). In itself, that should be interesting enough for students and international relations (IR) scholars to explore the history of East Asia. Yet even more important for the study of IR, Hideyoshi’s invasion of Korea marked the *only* military conflict between Japan, Korea and China for more than six centuries. For 300 years both before and after the Imjin War, Japan was a part of the Chinese world. That the three major powers in East Asia – and indeed, much of the rest of the system – could peacefully coexist for such an extended time span, despite having the military and technological capability to wage war on a massive scale, raises the question of why stability was the norm in East Asian international relations.

In fact, from 1368 to 1842 – from the founding of the Ming dynasty to the Opium Wars between Britain and China – there were only two wars between China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan: China’s invasion of Vietnam (1407–28), and Japan’s invasion of Korea (1592–8). These four major territorial and centralized states developed 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, but its goals did not include expansion against its established neighbouring states. By the fourteenth century, these Sinicized states had evolved a set of international rules and institutions known as the ‘tribute system’, with China clearly the hegemon and a presumption of inequality, which resulted in a clear hierarchy and very long peace.¹ The surrounding states benefited from the system, and cultural, diplomatic and economic relations were both extensive and intensive.² These smaller Sinicized states emulated Chinese practices and to varying degrees accepted Chinese centrality in the region.

Built on a mix of legitimate authority and material power, the 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 were not allowed to call themselves – nor did they believe themselves – equal with China, yet they had substantial latitude in their actual behaviour. China stood at the top of the hierarchy, and there was no intellectual challenge to the rules of the game until the late 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.

The East Asian historical experience was markedly different from the European historical experience, both in its fundamental rules and in the level of conflict among the major actors. The European ‘Westphalian’ system emphasized formal equality between states and balance of power politics, and was marked by incessant interstate conflict. In contrast, the East Asian ‘tribute system’ emphasized formal inequality between states and a clear hierarchy, and was marked by centuries of stability among the core participants. Although there has been a tendency to view the European experience as universal, studying the East Asian historical experience as an international system not only allows us to ask new questions about East Asia, but it also provides a mirror for our own international system in the contemporary era. After all, much of world history has involved hegemony building hierarchy and establishing order, and studying these relations in different historical contexts promises to provide new insights into contemporary issues.

Although anarchy – the absence of an overarching government – is a constant in international life, IR scholars are increasingly aware that, ‘every international system or society has a set of rules or norms that define actors and appropriate behavior’ (Krasner 2001: 173), which Christian Reus-Smit calls the ‘elementary rules of practice that states formulate to solve the coordination and collaboration problems associated with coexistence under anarchy’ (Reus-Smit 1997: 557). Rarely have we explored East Asian international relations from this perspective.

Indeed, we tend to take for granted the current set of rules, ideas and institutions as the natural or inevitable way that countries interact with each other: passports that define citizenship, nation states as the only legitimate political actor that is allowed to conduct diplomatic relations, borders between nation states that are measured to the inch, and, perhaps most centrally, the idea of ‘balance of power politics’ as the basic and enduring pattern of international relations.

Yet this current international system is actually a recent phenomenon in the scope of world history. These international rules and norms arose among European powers only beginning in the seventeenth century. In 1648, the great powers of Europe signed a series of treaties creating a set of rules governing international relations that became known as the ‘Peace of Westphalia.’ Over the next few centuries, the European powers gradually regularized, ritualized and institutionalized these ‘Westphalian’ definitions of sovereignty, diplomacy, nationality and commercial exchange. For example, although diplomats and merchants occasionally carried various types of identifying credentials before the nineteenth century, it was not until 1856 that the US Congress passed a law giving the Department of State sole power to issue official documentation of citizenship, and only after the First World War did passports become commonplace (Lloyd 1976).

One outgrowth of this particular Western system of IR is that equality is taken for granted, both as a normative goal, and also as an underlying and enduring reality of international politics. In this current system, all nation states are considered equal, and granted identical rights no matter how large the disparity in wealth or size. In fact, the notion of equality is deeply woven into our modern thinking about domestic rights, international rights and individual ‘rights of man’, from French philosophers to the US Declaration of Independence that ‘holds these truths to be self-evident ... that all men are created equal’.

In IR, the idea of equality is most clearly expressed in the belief that the ‘balance of power’ is a fundamental process: too powerful a state will threaten other states and cause them to band

together to oppose the powerful state. This idea – that international relations is most stable when states are roughly equal – conditions much of our thinking about how international politics functions. In this way, the European experience, in which a number of similarly sized states engaged in centuries of incessant interstate conflict, has now become presumed to be the universal norm. Thus, Kenneth Waltz's confident assertion that 'hegemony leads to balance' and has done so 'through all of the centuries we can contemplate' – is perhaps the default proposition in international relations (Waltz 1993: 77).³

Yet these patterns, ideas and institutions are actually specific ideas from a specific time and place, an Enlightenment notion from the eighteenth century. That is, there is as much inequality as equality in international relations, both now and in the past. And in fact, there are actually two enduring patterns to IR, not just the balance of power but the opposite idea – that inequality can be stable – also exists. Known as 'hegemony', the idea is that under certain conditions a dominant state can stabilize the system by providing leadership. Both equality and inequality could be stable under certain conditions, or they could be unstable under other conditions. Important for us to realize is that even 'anarchic' systems differ, and different anarchic systems develop different rules, norms and institutions that help structure and guide behaviour.

Because the European system of the past few centuries eventually developed into a set of rules, institutions and norms that are now used by countries around the world, we have tended to assume that this was both natural and inevitable, and that all international systems behave the same way. With the increasing importance and presence of East Asian states in the world, it has been common to apply ideas and models based on the European experience in order to explain Asia. 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' (Friedberg 1993: 7). 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' (Buzan and Acharya 2007; Rudolph 2007: 2). 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.⁴

We care about the history not only because of how it might broaden our understanding of the past, but also because of what it might mean for contemporary issues in East Asia. Knowing East Asian history helps us put in context and make sense of the region's economic dynamism and interconnected relations in the past half-century. Today's East Asian system is often discussed as if it emerged fully formed – like Athena from the head of Zeus – in the post-Second World War and postcolonial era. However, as this chapter will show, many East Asian countries have been deeply economically integrated and interconnected, geographically defined, centrally administered political units for much longer than those of Europe. To explain East Asian international relations in the twenty-first century, we might begin by exploring how the region got to where it is today.

What is 'East Asia'?

When studying East Asia, it is sometimes seductive to claim that behaviour is immutable, permanent and unchanging from the ancient mists of time up to the present era. This is understandable, because many East Asian countries have a long history of cultural achievement, state formation and economic vibrancy – and were identifiable more than 1,000 years ago as the countries they are today: China, Japan, Korea and even Vietnam.

However, East Asia has changed as much as any other part of the world: some cultural traits have historical roots, others do not, and all are constantly evolving depending on the circumstance, situation, institutional constraints, political and economic exigencies, and a host of other factors. We should avoid making sweeping claims that present either an unbroken chronological

continuity or an encompassing geographic component. Indeed, East Asia has a long and complex history of international relations, stretching back over 2,500 years to the ‘Warring States’ era in what is now China (475–221 BCE). Unified political rule emerged after this period in China; in Korea the Silla dynasty (AD 57 – AD 938) had unified the peninsula by AD 668, and Korea was ruled by one government from that time up until 1945 – a period of more than 1,300 years. The ‘Nara’ state in Japan (710–794) began centralized rule that ultimately became the modern Japanese state. Centralized rule also emerged in what is now northern Vietnam in 968, when a man named Đinh Bo Linh allied himself with a Cantonese warlord, defeated other local warlords and received the title of ‘Commandery prince’ and later ‘king’ from the Song Chinese rulers. That proto-Vietnamese kingdom eventually became what is today known as Vietnam. Even while these kingdoms were emerging more than 1,000 years ago, on other frontiers in East Asia there remained the famous semi-nomadic tribes on the north and west of China.

My goal in this chapter is not to survey the entire rich history of more than 3,000 years of East Asian international relations – that would be a huge task even for one entire book. Rather, this chapter will focus on the five centuries that preceded the arrival of the West: the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Ranging from the founding of the Ming Chinese dynasty in 1368 to the Opium Wars between the UK and China (1368–1842), this era represents the culmination of centuries of state-building in East Asia, and the East Asian international system was at its most complete and developed.

The geographical domain of East Asian international relations studied in this chapter focuses mainly on the four Sinicized states of China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan. These countries were the major actors in the system, and they constituted an international society that clearly knew the rules for membership, how status is evaluated and the rules of the game. The entire early modern East Asian region began with Manchuria in the north, the Pacific to the east, the mountains of Tibet to the west, and the nations of Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia to the south.

The tribute system in East Asia

This chapter contains three overarching themes: first, almost all political actors in East Asia accepted a set of unquestioned rules and institutions about the basic ways in which international relations worked. Known as the ‘tribute system’, and involving in particular a hierarchic ranking based on status, these rules were taken for granted as the way in which political actors interacted with each other. Largely derived from Chinese ideas over the centuries, by the fourteenth century these ideas and institutions had become the unquestioned ‘rules of the game’.

Within this system, cultural achievement in the form of status was as important a goal as was military or economic power. The status hierarchy and rank order were key components of this system; and ranking did not necessarily derive from political, economic or military power. China was the unquestioned hegemon, and status derived from cultural achievement and social recognition by other political actors, not from raw size or military or economic power. All political units in the system played by these rules and did not question them. Even political units that rejected Confucian notions of cultural achievement – such as the nomads – accepted unquestioningly the larger rules of the game, the way hierarchy was defined, and the manner in which international relations was conducted, and they defined their own ideals and cultures in opposition to the dominant ideas and institutions of the time.⁵ Movement up and down the hierarchy occurred within the rules, and it was not until the arrival of Western powers in the nineteenth century that there was an alternative set of rules for how to conduct international relations.

Second, within this larger set of rules and institutions existed a smaller *Confucian society* made up of China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan. I use the term ‘society’ to mean a self-conscious political

grouping where shared ideas, norms and interests to determine membership in the group. Their interests may not be identical, and indeed group members' goals can often conflict, but they share the same basic understandings about what are the criteria for membership in the group, the values and norms of the group, and how status is measured. These four states accepted Chinese ideas and were culturally similar; although many other political units existed in the system, and although those other states used the larger rules of the game, it was essentially these four states that comprised an inner circle based mainly on Confucian ideas.

Within this Confucian society, however, Japan was the liminal – or boundary – case. In fact, Japan sat at the edge of the society of Sinicized states, and was clearly the most hesitant about accepting Chinese ideas and Chinese dominance, and the most interested in finding alternative means of situating itself in relation to the other states. Although clearly deriving many of their domestic ideas, innovations, writing and cultural knowledge from China, the Japanese were always sceptical of China's central position. Indeed, Japanese scholars and officials often made a distinction between Chinese civilization, which they revered, and the Chinese state, which they often held in contempt. Yet at the same time, even while the Japanese were hesitant and sceptical about viewing themselves as a Confucian, Sinicized, state, it remained far more Confucianized than the rest of the political units in the region, such as Siam or the Mongols, and Japan challenged the existing order only once in more than 500 years.

Another notable difference between Europe and early modern East Asia was the absence of internecine religious wars in East Asia between different types or sects of Confucianism and Buddhism. As Alexander Woodside notes, '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' (Woodside 1998: 194, 204).

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

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 obviously 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; China appeared to have no need to fight, and the secondary powers no desire to fight.⁶ 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 (Fiskesjo 1999; Keyes 2002). As long as hierarchy was observed, and China recognized as dominant, there was little need for interstate war. Sinicized states, and even some nomadic tribes, used some of its 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 in particular explicitly stated a relationship between two political units. 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 (Hevia 1995: 124, 132–133). The tribute system was formalized in two key 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 (Yoo 2004). 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 – composed of scholar-officials, interpreters, physicians, alternates, messengers and assistants – could comprise hundreds of people.

For example, when the Chinese emperor established a tributary relationship with another country or community, this 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 (1027–221 BC): ‘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*)’ (Hevia 1995: 118). 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, although 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. However, different regulations and rites applied to different categories of visitors, according to their status. For example, more exalted diplomats were excused from kowtowing and were also allowed to trade privately. These benefits were denied to lower-status officials (Wang 2005). As James Hevia notes, ‘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’ (Hevia 1995: 124).

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’ (Smits 1999: 36). 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 (Son 1994).

The Confucian society

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. These states, along with China, 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” that recorded such practices, as well as the presence of “wise men” who maintained those records’ (Kelley 2003: 68). ‘Confucianism’ is thus a set of ideas based on ancient

Chinese classic philosophical texts about the proper ways in which government and society were to be organized. Woodside notes that: ‘The term “Confucian monarchies” hardly conveys the breadth of the civilization that these countries shared’. He points out that, ‘all three societies [China, Korea, and Vietnam] were governed by a scholar elite with a particular type of historical consciousness’ (Woodside 1998: 193).

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 (Yun 1998). Indeed, Korea’s rank in the Ming hierarchy of tributary states was a point of pride, and they ‘saw their relationship to China as more than a political arrangement; it was a confirmation of their membership in Confucian civilization’ (Haboush and Deuchler 1999: 68; Swope 2009: 43).

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’ (Hevia 1995: 50). States or actors that rejected Confucianism could still partake of the tribute system, albeit at lower rank and with lower privileges.

Korea and Vietnam, in particular, were centrally administered bureaucratic systems based on Chinese and Confucian ideas. This cultural relationship included language and writing, 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, behaviour. 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’ (Woodside 2006: 1). For example, Korean and Vietnamese political institutions – such as the six ministries and state council – were identical to those in China. So extensive was Korean acceptance of their subordinate position and Chinese ideas that Korean court dress was 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.⁷

Japan was more ambivalent towards China than was Korea, while also clearly the most hesitant of the Sinicized states about accepting Chinese ideas and Chinese dominance, and 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 in the region, such as the Mongols or other nomads. 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.⁸ 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. 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 modelled after the Tang dynasty capital of Chang’an in China (Shiveley 1999). Yet early attempts to import Chinese bureaucratic approaches in the eleventh century failed in the smaller, more backward environment of Japan (Grossberg 1976).

However, the Chinese example as a normative precedent remained very important even for the Tokugawa Japanese (Elisonas 1988). Japan and China continued to trade informally, with up to 90 Chinese ships visiting Japan each year during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Japan imported more than 1,000 Chinese books each year (Osamu 1980). When Tokugawa shoguns were looking for legal and institutional models on which 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 T'ang and Song legal and administrative codes (Jansen 1992: 65, 228). 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.

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. For example, by the early fifteenth century, the Korean Chosŏn court had divided foreign contacts – such as envoys from Japanese, Jurchens and Ryukyus – into four grades, and several statuses within these grades: various Mongol tribes were rank 4; the Ryukyus rank 5 (Kang 1997; Robinson 2000). Swope notes 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' (Swope 2002: 763). 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. As well, Japan maintained tribute relations with other states, most notably with the Ryukyus (Smits 1999).

Borders between states

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 Vietnam and China were relatively fixed, and did not significantly change during the five centuries under review. Clear boundaries between states are a good indicator of their status quo orientation towards 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 (Baud and Van Schendel 1997: 214; Batten 2003). 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.

By the eleventh century, Korea had established the Yalu River as its northern border, and it was affirmation of this border and Korean acceptance of tributary status in the fourteenth century that precluded a war between the new Ming Chinese and Chosŏn Korean dynasties. In 1389, near the beginning of the Ming dynasty, the Ming notified Koryŏ that it considered the area of northeast Korea that had been under direct Mongol control to be part of its territory. 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 (preferring negotiation), that led to the fall of Koryŏ and, three years later, the creation of a new dynasty, Chosŏn (Kim 2006). 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’ (Deuchler 1992: 292; Yoo 2004). 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 (Duncan 1988–9: 58–59).

Relations between China and Korea were close and stable for more than 500 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 (Figure 5.1).

The Vietnam-China border was also clearly demarcated. This took place in 1079 and ‘has remained essentially unchanged to the present day’ (Taylor 1999: 147). At that time, 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’ (Anderson 2007: 145). A fifteenth-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

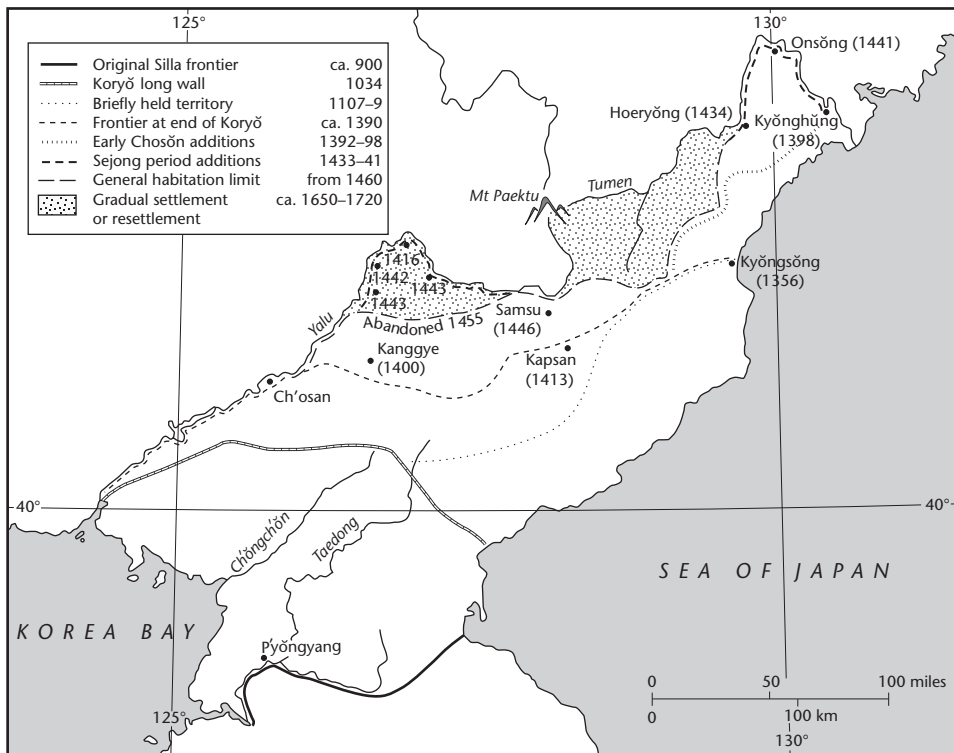


Figure 5.1 Korea’s border with China, 900–1720
Source: Ledyard 1994: 290.

city of Lang-son to the great gate on the Chinese border leading into Guanxi Province' (Whitmore 1994: 492). When China and Vietnam signed their modern treaty in 1999 they agreed upon essentially this same border (Figure 5.2).

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, instead of constant self-strengthening and displays of resolve and commitment, in retrospect these states appear quite canny.⁹

Difficulties with a realist explanation for historical East Asian relations

The most likely alternative explanation for the stability of the system would be that which sees the tribute system as merely symbolic – and to explain the behaviour of the state instead by emphasizing the realist factor of the state's relative capabilities. This realist 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.

However, there is 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 Ming dispatch of 100,000 troops to defend Korea against a Japanese invasion (the Imjin Wars of 1592–1598). Not only could the Ming send massive numbers of troops to Korea – at virtually the same time and on the other side of China, the Ming intervened in border disputes in Burma, suppressed a major troop mutiny in the northwest garrison city of Ningxia, and used another 200,000 troops to crush an aboriginal uprising in Sichuan (Swope 2009: 15). Rather than being constrained, it appears 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 150,000 troops on 700 ships to Korea; 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 (Swope 2005: 13).

There is also 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 1,000 soldiers in its entire army (Park 2006: 6). Kenneth Lee observes: 'After 200 years of peace, Korean forces were untrained in warfare and were scattered all over the country in small local garrison troops. Koreans were totally unprepared on land' (Lee 1997: 99), while Ki-baek Lee describes the quality of the Korean military in 1592 as 'meager and untrained' (Lee 1984: 210). 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 10,000 'battle-worthy men' (Park 2006: 6).

Notable 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 their relationship, we should find in the historical records of both Korea and China extensive discussion among strategists about possible military actions, and debates over how best to deal militarily with each other. However, these are absent in both 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.



Figure 5.2 Vietnam's border with China, 1079–present
Source: Kelley 2005.

Perhaps most difficult to explain is Japanese General 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 together with other states – such as Japan – 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 (Ledyard 1988–9: 84). It is doubtful that a balancing strategy would ever have occurred to Korea, 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 notes that, 'Hideyoshi craved recognition and homage from foreign rulers. This goal should not be trivialized', and Elizabeth Berry also concludes that, '[Hideyoshi] was clearly less interested in military dominion abroad than in fame' (Berry 1982: 212; Swope 2009: 64–65). Hideyoshi himself wrote to the 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]' (Swope 2009: 58).

Korean King Sŏnjo replied:

Our two countries have always kept each other informed of all national events and affairs... This inseparable relationship between 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...

(Swope 2009: 58)

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. However, notably absent is any Japanese assessment of the relative military capabilities of the two sides, and Berry concludes that, 'there is no evidence that he [Hideyoshi] systematically researched either the geographical problem or the problem of Chinese military organization' (Berry 1982: 216). 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 – to not only supply a plausible hypothesis that explains the patterns of stability and violence at the time, 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, Uighurs and others). A thorough discussion of these peoples and their foreign policies is beyond the scope of this chapter, and the main point here is to contrast their cultures and identities with those of the Sinicized states.¹⁰ The nomads were less centrally organized due to the ecology of the steppes, which favoured mobility and thus made tribal domination difficult. What centralization did exist was mainly due to the personal charisma and strength of the ruler, and thus 'tribal rivalries and fragmentation were common' (Perdue 2005: 520). Even the Zunghar Empire, which

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 (Perdue 2005: 518).

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 authority 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 were playing a different international game by different rules, and thus crafting enduring or stable relations was difficult. The frontier was only turned into a border when other states such as Russia began to expand eastward in the eighteenth century, and the nomads were left with nowhere to move.¹¹

As David Wright (2002: 58) asks, ‘Why all the fighting?’ 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 to Chinese (and Korean) interactions with the nomads (Robinson 1992).

At its core, the Chinese–nomad relationship was about trade. Nomads needed three things from agricultural China: grains, metals and textiles, and they would trade, raid or engage in tribute to gain them. Peter Perdue notes 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’ (Perdue 2005: 520). For its part, China used offence (as Johnston emphasizes), defence (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 (Khazanov 1984; Barfield 1989). 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 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’ (Jagchid and Symons 1989: 1).

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...’ (Jagchid and Symons 1989: 4).

David Wright concludes that:

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

(Wright 2002: 76)

Chinese–nomad relations highlight the importance of ideas to the outbreak of violence. Material power is important, but just as important are 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.

International trade in early modern East Asia

The East Asian system was not only a political system, and there were also extensive economic interactions that bound these states together. All states in the system used the same Chinese-derived international rules and norms in their dealings with each other. With China unquestioningly at the centre of the system, some states deeply accepted Confucian ideas, while others – such as the Southeast Asian polities – merely used those rules in their relations with each other.

China sat at the centre of a vast trading network, and Chinese staple and luxury goods were desired literally around the world. The Ming era saw a rapid economic expansion of the Chinese domestic economy and market, and cotton, silk and sugar became commodities available for sale throughout East Asia. A national Chinese internal market developed, aided by Ming efforts to build an extensive canal system that linked the north and south, and subsequent Qing investment in a series of roads that linked the east and west. Perhaps the most famous international trade route was, of course, the ‘Silk Road’ that connected China to the Middle East and beyond by way of Central Asia. In existence for well over 2,000 years, that ancient trade route was the source for the transfer of many innovations, ideas and goods from and to China and the outside world. Yet probably more important in terms of volume was the vast maritime trade connecting Japan, Korea and Northeast Asia to China and Southeast Asia, as well as India and the Middle East and even Europe, and traders have plied the oceans in search of profits and riches for centuries.

Indeed, China as hegemon was the key to the success of the system. 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. A key component was the economic benefits to be had from engaging in trade.

The system was geographically quite wide. China was the central trading focus of most East Asian states, but extensive trade also existed between states ranging from Japan to Java and Siam, and at times even including India and the Middle East. Trade with the West (initially mainly the Portuguese and the Dutch) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was at most a minor portion of overall East Asian trade, and only became consequential in the nineteenth century as European powers moved into Asia both politically and economically.

Far from being a barrier, the ocean connected the entire region, and provided the means for linking states, peoples and cultures. In fact, the various Pacific trade routes stretched from Japan and Russia down through China, wending their way past the Philippines and Malaysia into Indonesia, thus connecting them. The countries in this system were part of a thriving, complex and vibrant regional order. As Janet Abu-Lughod writes:

The literature generated both in China and abroad gives the impression that the Chinese were ‘not interested in’ trade, that they tolerated it only as a form of tribute, and that they were relatively passive recipients... This impression, however, is created almost entirely by a literal interpretation of official Chinese documents... Upon closer examination, it is apparent that much more trade went on than official documents reveal, and that tribute trade was only the tip of an iceberg of unrecorded ‘private’ trade

(Abu-Lughod 1989: 317)

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 the various states and kingdoms of early modern East Asia were involved in an elaborate trading system, one governed by national laws, diplomacy and

protocols, with states attempting to control, limit and benefit from trade. Thus, early modern East Asia was interconnected diplomatically, culturally, economically and politically.

This is contrary to the conventional Western perspective that views historical East Asia as uninterested in trade and largely consisting of isolated and autarkic economies. This Western perspective came about in part because of a superficial understanding of the full nature of East Asian trade networks, and partially because Western states had a much more difficult time trading in East Asia than did their East Asian counterparts. The emerging new consensus holds that, far from the West's bringing trade and interaction to a somnolent East Asia in the seventeenth century, there existed a vibrant East Asian economic trading system well before the West arrived. China and its neighbours had far more interaction with each other than has been traditionally acknowledged. Recent scholarship is finding that trade, both private and tributary, made up a significant portion of both government revenues and the national economies. Furthermore, trade tended to expand region wide following increases in Chinese power, and tended to contract when China was preoccupied with internal troubles.

Conclusion

The East Asia international system was hegemonic, unipolar and hierarchic with a rank-order that emphasized cultural achievement. This was different from the European system, which emphasized principles of equality, was a multipolar region comprised of numerous states of similar size, and experienced a pattern of balance of power. The East Asian system proved to be stable and endured for centuries. However, with the arrival in force of the Western powers during the nineteenth century, the system collapsed quickly as East Asian states struggled to adapt to the challenges posed by the West. The arrival of the West – its norms, institutions and ideas – created an enormous challenge to the existing worldviews of East Asian nations.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, as East Asian states are becoming once again powerful, coherent and dynamic in their own right, it has been common to ask whether these states are now completely Westernized or whether any strands from the past run up to the present. How the past affects the present is surely an open question, and it is unlikely that there will ever be a definitive answer. But it is worth asking whether East Asia's past has any effect on its modern preoccupations, perceptions, goals or intentions. Perhaps the most prudent conclusion to draw is one that avoids either extreme. That is, East Asian peoples want what most people in modern societies want – security, safety, status and wealth. Furthermore, all states – including China – unquestioningly accept the basic Westphalian norms and institutions that govern contemporary international relations. That is, there are still some things that make us all the same. Yet at the same time, how East Asian states, cultures and values have evolved – and the specifics of how East Asian peoples view themselves, their relations with their neighbours and their place in the world – may also be partly a function of their own particular history, and we would be wise to acknowledge that fact.

Notes

- 1 I should note I am using the modern social science term 'hegemon,' not the Chinese term, *bawang* (霸王), which refers to a powerful person at a time when there is not a legitimate dynasty in place, such as Xiang Yu before the Han Dynasty was established. Thanks to Liam Kelley for this point.
- 2 Even the nomads valued Chinese stability, and John Mears notes that, 'Nomadic confederacies... seemed best served by the preservation of a stable Chinese regime' (Mears 2001: 8). See also Perdue 2005: 521.

- 3 See also Osiander (2001); Mearsheimer (2001); Kaufman et al. (2007). On balancing in East Asia, see Friedberg (1993–94), Betts (1993); Brzezinski and Mearsheimer (2005).
- 4 Exceptions are Johnston (1995) and Hui (2004).
- 5 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.
- 6 Even the nomads valued Chinese stability, and John Mears notes that, ‘Nomadic confederacies... seemed best served by the preservation of a stable Chinese regime’ (Mears 2001: 8). See also Perdue (2005: 521).
- 7 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.
- 8 The seventh century ritsuryō (code-based) state was explicitly modelled on the Tang bureaucracy. William Wayne Farris, ‘Trade, Money, and Merchants in Nara Japan,’ *Monumenta Nipponica* 53 No. 3, (1998), pp. 303–334, p. 319.
- 9 Thanks to Greg Noble for this point.
- 10 China–nomad relations have been the focus of extensive research, including Khazanov (1984); Barfield (1989); Sechin and Symons (1989); Wright (2002); Perdue (2005); Crossley (2006).
- 11 The major exception were the Manchus. 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, they retained unique Manchu elements as well. Although Manchu worldviews and identity never completely Sinicized, they used many of the institutional forms and discursive style of traditional Chinese dynasties in dealing with the neighbouring states. See Elliot (2001).