International
Theory

'Getting Asia right': de-essentializing China's hegemony in historical Asia

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Abstract

International Relations (IR) scholars have taken China's presumed hegemony in pre-modern East Asia as an ideal case to 'undermine' the field's Eurocentrism. If Eurocentric IR is guilty of 'getting Asia wrong', do students of historical Asia 'get Asia right'? Analysts should avoid exotifying differences between the West and the East and 'exchanging Eurocentrism for Sinocentrism'. This article tries to 'get Asia [more] right' by 'disaggregating' and then 'reassembling' taken-for-granted concepts by time, space, and relationality. When 'Confucianism' is understood to justify both war and peace in competition with other thoughts, it does not dictate peace among East Asian states or conflicts across the Confucian–nomadic divide. When 'China' is unpacked, it does not sit on top of an Asian hierarchy. When Korea's, Vietnam's, and Japan's views of their relations with China are examined rather than presumed, cultural legitimacy is thinned out. When 'Asia' is broadened to cover webs of relations beyond East Asia to Central Asia, Confucianism recedes in centrality and pan-Asian phenomena including Buddhism and the steppe tradition come to the fore. The article concludes that a better challenge to Eurocentrism is not to search for cultural differences but to locate Eurasian similarities that erase European superiority.

Mainstream International Relations (IR) theories have long been criticized for their Eurocentrism. For some critics, China is an ideal case to 'undermine' Kenneth Waltz's anarchy.[1] The China-centred tribute system of 'formal inequality' with 'centuries of stability' is contrasted with the European system of 'formal equality' 'marked by incessant interstate conflicts'.[2] However, hierarchy *per se* is not unique to Asia but 'a ubiquitous feature' of international politics.[3] What seems distinctively Asian is the cultural legitimacy granted by shared Confucianism. David Kang

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[1] Hobson 2012, 211.
[2] Kang 2010, 2.
[3] Mattern and Zarakol 2016, 624.

argues that Confucianized states admired and emulated China's civilization and 'hardly ever questioned China's position' in 'an accepted hierarchy'.[4] Feng Zhang and Ji-young Lee champion the concept in their book titles: 'Chinese hegemony' and 'China's hegemony'.[5]

If Eurocentric IR is guilty of 'getting Asia wrong',[6] do students of historical Asia 'get Asia [more] right'? Kang is mindful of the risk of producing an 'orientalist analysis' that exotifies differences between the West and the East.[7] Acharya warns against 'assuming a benign Asian hierarchy and seeking evidence to fit this cultural historicist straitjacket'.[8] A genuinely global IR should eschew all forms of exceptionalism and ethnocentrism.[9]

To avoid such pitfalls, scholars should guard against 'exchanging Eurocentrism for Sinocentrism'.[10] Asian history should not be owned by any 'nation' or 'civilisation'.[11] If 'theory is always for someone and for some purpose', then 'history too is always for someone and for some purpose'.[12] If Eurocentrism takes 'sanitized and top-down' European views of the world as the 'real historical record',[13] works on historical Asia should triangulate histories 'from below' with those 'from the top'.[14] Arguments for China-centred legitimate hierarchy should be built on thorough examination of how China's neighbours viewed the same relations. The horizon should be broadened to cover the full universe of China's relevant relations across Asia. Iver Neumann and Einar Wigen bring the steppe tradition back in because 'a science of International Relations that does not factor in all known types of relations between polities is simply not taking their raison d'être seriously'.[15]

The rest of this article tries to 'get Asia [more] right' by 'disaggregating' and then 'reassembling' taken-for-granted concepts by time, space, and relationality.[16] The next section discusses contradictions in the literature on Confucian pacifism. The ensuing section takes lessons from non-China-focused studies on how to study culture. Culture should not be taken to possess dispositional essence but as reflecting internal differences and cross-cultural interactions and hybridization. Subsequent sections deploy such takeaways to de-essentialize 'China's hegemony' first in East Asia and then the rest of Asia. When 'Confucianism' is understood to justify both war and peace in competition with other thoughts, it no longer dictates peace among East Asian states or conflicts across the Confucian–nomadic divide. When 'China' is unpacked, it no longer sits on top of an Asian hierarchy. When Korea's, Vietnam's, and Japan's views of their relations with China are

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[4]Kang 2010, 2, 8–9, 74.
[5]Zhang 2015; Lee 2017.
[6]Kang 2003.
[7]Ibid., 59.
[8]Acharya 2003/2004, 162.
[9]Acharya 2014, 647.
[10]Suzuki 2009.
[11]Zarakol 2022, 271.
[12]Lawson 2012, 219.
[13]Suzuki 2011, 2.
[14]Lawson 2012, 214.
[15]Neumann and Wigen 2018, 252–53.
[16]Somers 1994, 607.

examined rather than presumed, cultural legitimacy is thinned out. When 'Asia' is broadened to cover webs of relations beyond East Asia to Central Asia, Confucianism recedes in centrality and pan-Asian phenomena including Buddhism and the steppe tradition come to the fore. Most of all, such a panoramic perspective reconstitutes 'China' as a plural and pluralist entity that embodies hybrid Chinese and steppe traditions and coexist in bipolarity and multipolarity. The article ends with a concluding thought that a better challenge to Eurocentrism is not to search for cultural differences but to locate Eurasian similarities that erase European superiority.

The culture turn's contradictions

The culture turn in studies of historical Asian IR has generated a burgeoning literature, but not without discontents and contradictions. Kang contends that shared civilization created a peaceful 'Confucian society' among China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan.[17] Robert Kelly highlights a 'Long Peace' 'rooted in shared, war-reducing Confucian ideals'.[18] Hendrik Spruyt maintains that 'Confucianism formed the foundation of the East Asian belief system' which witnessed 'a remarkable absence of major power conflict' for 'millennia'.[19] Yaqing Qin suggests that benevolence characterized China's foreign policy 'without much change for 2000 years'.[20] Astrid Nordin takes 'harmony' to stand in for the 'Chinese system'.[21]

Even dissenters concur that Chinese culture is Confucian and Confucianism prescribes pacifism. The dispute is over culture's effect: if the above scholars take Confucianism as the cause for East Asia's peace and stability, Yuan-Kang Wang, a structural realist, treats it as the foil that is eclipsed by power calculation. He asks if 'Confucian culture constrain[ed] Chinese use of force in the past' and concludes that 'Chinese power politics was not rooted in culture, but rather in the anarchic structure of the international system'.[22] Fei-ling Wang likewise presumes that Confucianism means peace, but the real 'nature of Chinese power' is 'a Confucianism-coated Legal [ist] authoritarian or totalitarian autocracy'.[23] Legalism provided a 'powerful inner logic' which 'predestined and compelled' China to 'seek constant expansion'.[24]

Some analysts reconcile the contradictions by making Confucianism congruent with both harmony and conflicts. Feng Zhang coins the term 'Confucian relationalism' which encompasses both 'instrumental rationality' and 'expressive rationality' – the former refers to 'consequentialist means-end calculation' and the latter embodies 'Confucian relational affection'.[25] He finds that China's coercive policies are 'compatible with both'.[26] Such an approach, however, deprives culture of its causal value – as x cannot be a cause when it is correlated with both y and not-y.

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[17]Kang 2020, 72, 74.
[18]Kelly 2012, 408.
[19]Spruyt 2020, 84, 89, 90, 93, 94, 97.
[20]Qin 2010, 36–37.
[21]Nordin 2016, 162–63.
[22]Wang 2011, 3, 184.
[23]Wang 2017, book subtitle, 39; also Zhao 2015, book title.
[24]Wang 2017, 46.
[25]Zhang 2015, 7, 9.
[26]Ibid., 41.

Xuetong Yan rescues Confucian peace by borrowing from the Christian theory of 'just war'.[27] Confucians are 'not opposed to all war[s]' but support 'just wars' against those who go 'against benevolence and justice'.[28] However, as Iain Johnston points out, the rhetoric of righteous war 'shifts the responsibility for war-like behavior onto the enemy' so that one's use of force is 'never illegitimate'.[29] In Yan's account, the Confucian classic, the *Mencius*, is aware that 'using force and pretending to benevolence is the hegemon'.[30] Another classical text extensively cited, *Stratagems of the Warring States*, advocates annexing territory and 'annihilating the inhabitants' because the survivors would otherwise 'seek to restore their state and annex you in turn'.[31] It is difficult to square annexation and annihilation with just war.

Ji-young Lee moves from Confucian thought to tribute practices. Tribute practices were supposed to be so habituated to be 'unthinking' and 'unspoken'.[32] Yet, she notes that norms were systematically broken. First, Confucian tributes should not involve 'economic exploitation' 'akin to taxes' and 'imperialism' as common for 'barbarian' Mongols.[33] However, the Ming dynasty 'adopted some of the most notorious Mongol practices, including demanding human tribute as well as large amounts of goods', blurring 'the line between imperialism and … benign hegemony'.[34] Second, the investiture ritual should signify China's respect for the political autonomy of the receiving country. However, the Ming 'employed coercive diplomacy' to 'extract Korean compliance', and even considered annexing Korea.[35] Third, only Chinese emperors could claim to be the 'Son of Heaven' while 'barbarians' could not. However, Manchu emperors claimed the title, then demanded and received submission.[36] Lee concludes that '[b]oth the Ming and the Qing crossed the boundaries of what was accepted as legitimate… tribute practices'.[37]

What should we make of such contradictions? Does Confucianism prescribe peace? It turns out that these are the wrong questions to ask.

De-essentializing culture

Cultural works that are not directly China-focused point to the common problem of inadvertent essentialization. Ann Swidler contends that it is wrong to take culture as the 'unmoved mover' pushing human action in a consistent and predictable direction; rather, culture provides a 'toolkit' for 'strategies of action'.[38] Cultural wisdom typically 'comes in paired adages counseling opposite behaviors' to 'justify

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[27]Yan 2011, 35, 41, 252–59.
[28]Ibid., 35, 41.
[29]Johnston 1995, 68.
[30]Yan 2011, 49.
[31]Ibid., 131.
[32]Lee 2017, 59, 62.
[33]Ibid., 50.
[34]Ibid., 50, 81–83.
[35]Ibid., 50, 84, 141.
[36]Ibid., 49, 135.
[37]Ibid., 141.
[38]Swidler 1986, 274, 277.

almost any act'.[39] Christian Reus-Smit similarly emphasizes that culture is not internally coherent and externally bounded, but 'polyvalent, multilayered, riven with fissures, often contradictory'.[40] Peter Katzenstein likewise rejects any presumption of culture's 'dispositional essence'.[41] Culture should be understood as both internally 'pluralist' with multiple traditions and externally 'plural' in coexistence with other civilizations.[42] George Lawson warns against using culture as as delivering 'essential truths', 'timeless categories' and 'unchanging reality'.[43] Margaret Somers' critiques of critical identity studies are particularly instructive: works that bring in women and minorities turn out to normalize 'categorical identities' that are just 'as fixed and removed from history' as mainstream works.[44] To better avoid the essentialism trap, Somers 'disaggregates' and then 'reassembles' cultural categories by the 'destabilizing dimensions of time, space and relationality.[45]

This article follows the above lessons to examine arguments about 'China's hegemony' in historical Asia. The time dimension means that any claims about the Confucian peace lasting for 'millennia' or 'thousands of years' are suspect.[46] Teleological history is a key intellectual obstacle in China studies. The literature suffers from the tendency to generalize from the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) eras back to millennia of Chinese history. Scholars should be mindful that the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), which promoted Confucianism, also invaded northern Korea and northern Vietnam. This prior history of colonization sheds much light on Sino–Korean and Sino–Vietnam relations in more recent times. The space dimension suggests that territoriality could be fluid, both within and across cultures and polities. The relationality dimension points to the necessity of examining cultural legitimacy on the receiving end and with all webs of relevant relations.

Subsequent sections will de-essentialize the Confucianism-based 'Chinese hegemony' by disaggregating and reassembling the plural and pluralist elements of 'China', 'hegemony', and 'Asia'. Patrick Jackson cautions that even the very term 'China' – along with 'the West' – presumes 'civilizational essences'.[47] 'China' is disaggregated by identifying its duality as both the singular 'central kingdom' and plural 'central states'. Cultural hegemony is disaggregated by taking seriously contesting voices from China's neighbours. 'Asia' is reassembled by 'yoking'[48] or reconnecting East Asia with Central Asia. Against the backdrop of an interconnected Asia, 'China' is reconstituted as a hybrid as well as plural and pluralist entity but essentialized as the singular centre of the world.

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[39]Swidler 1986, 277.
[40]Reus-Smit 2018, 12, 30.
[41]Katzenstein 2010, 11.
[42]Ibid., 1.
[43]Lawson 2012, 205, 208.
[44]Somers 1994, 605, 611, 622.
[45]Ibid., 607.
[46]Nordin 2016, 162–63; Spruyt 2020, 84, 89, 90, 93, 94, 97.
[47]Jackson 2010, 198.
[48]'Yoking' means connecting two or more sites of difference such that one side of each becomes defined as inside the same entity. Jackson and Nexon 1999, 314.

De-essentializing 'China'

If we avoid teleology, Chinese culture is 'plural, not singular'[49] and 'full of para-
doxes and tensions'.[50] Chinese history is often presented in terms of clean dynastic
cycles, which begin with Xia (a mythical period), Shang (1600–1046 BCE), and
Zhou (1045–256 BCE), through Qin (221–206 BCE), Han (202 BCE–220 CE),
Jin (265–420), Sui (581–618), Tang (618–907), Song (960–1279), Yuan (1279–
1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1911), and ends with the Republic of
China (1912–1949) and the People's Republic (1949–present). This gives the
impression of a seamless web of unity. Henry Kissinger reifies 'the singularity of
China' and its 'cultural cohesion' grounded in Confucianism.[51] He believes that
'[e]ach period of disunity was viewed as an aberration', so that '[a]fter each collapse,
the Chinese state reconstituted itself as if by some immutable law of nature'.[52]

The Chinese term for 'China', *zhongguo*, belies the above view. '*Zhongguo*' is
generally taken to mean the singular 'Middle Kingdom', but it originally referred
to plural 'central states' in the classical era.[53] 'China' was born out of the Spring
and Autumn and Warring States periods (771–221 BCE), which gave birth to
not just Confucianism, but also Legalism and the Sunzian art of war. The Qin
dynasty's First Emperor (r. 246–210 BCE) ended plurality by annexing and exter-
minating other warring states in 'a story of world conquest'.[54] Such 'world con-
quests' – often euphemistically dubbed 'unification' – were also carried out by
Han's Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE), Tang's Emperor Taizong (r. 626–649), and
Ming's Emperor Yongle (r. 1402–1424).[55] Peter Lorge wryly remarks that,
'[h]owever compelling the idea of a unified empire was in the abstract', competing
states 'did not reflexively or "naturally" condense into a large, territorially contigu-
ous… state following a period of disunity'.[56] Jianxiong Ge bluntly points out that,
'unity – this sacred term – has been repeatedly associated with war'.[57] Yinhong Shi
calls Emperor Wu a 'warlord' whose pursuits should lead us to doubt whether
Chinese are really so Confucian.[58] He finds a 'non-Confucian tradition that is
"more Napoleonic than Napoleon and more Clausewitzian than Clausewitz"'.[59]
Mao Zedong, who argued that 'political power grows out of the barrel of a gun',
made no disguise for his denigration of Confucianism.[60]

When periods of plural 'China' are studied in their own right rather than pre-
sumed as mere interregnums, they are international systems of competing inde-
pendent 'central states' with dynamics of both war and peace. Iain Johnston's
classic work on the competition between the Confucian-Mencian and parabellum

[49]Ge 2018, 95.
[50]Pines 2012, 5.
[51]Kissinger 2012, 5, 19, 60.
[52]Ibid., 6–7.
[53]Hui 2005, 1.
[54]Brooks and Brooks 2015, 15.
[55]Shi 2011, 6.
[56]Lorge 2005, 27, 9.
[57]Ge 1994, 184.
[58]Shi 2011, 13.
[59]Ibid., 6.
[60]Mao 1972, 61.

strategic cultures is an apt illustration of within-culture tensions.[61] China's own plurality and contradictions undercut the presumption of 'China's hegemony' as an 'unchanging reality' lasting 'for millennia'.

De-essentializing China's hegemony among Confucianized states

Focusing on only the Ming-Qing eras, Kang, Zhang, Lee, and Spruyt find a deeply legitimate China-led hegemony institutionalized with the tribute system. Peace was embodied in Confucian norms. From top-down, China had no desire to seek 'expansion against its established neighboring states'; from bottom-up, Vietnam and Korea voluntarily submitted to the China-centred 'tribute system' because they admired Confucian civilization.[62] Confucian beliefs and practices were so accepted that they were 'unthought'[63] and 'unspoken'.[64]

Legitimacy is relational and must be verified by the voices of those 'at the receiving end of Chinese hegemony'.[65] John K. Fairbank, who introduced the tribute system as a 'scheme of things entire', heavily relied on Chinese official sources which described every foreign mission as 'coming to pay tribute'.[66] He was aware that the 'Chinese world order' was a 'unified concept only at the Chinese end and only on the normative level, as an ideal pattern'[67]: 'When we find that [the U.K.'s] Lord Macartney… is faithfully enshrined in the Chinese records as a tributary envoy, what are we to think of the preceding millennia of so-called tributary missions?'[68]

Interestingly, works that champion China's hegemony in fact contain much evidence for neighbours' contradictory reactions that refute the genre's overall claim but affirm broader lessons on culture. Zhang observes that the tribute system was 'constantly revised, challenged, or avoided by different actors'.[69] Lee's painstaking research of Korean state letters, court documents, and personal essays shows that Korea's Ming policy 'vacillated markedly – from compliance (in 1370), to a failed challenge (in 1388), back to compliance (in 1392), and then to another attempt at challenge (in 1398)'.[70] Even instances of compliance were complicated by resistance. Her analysis provides the firmest support for Swidler's observation: 'savvy' (i.e. not 'unthinking') Korean leaders employed 'cultural resources for purposes of power politics' and 'manipulated' 'tribute practices to ensure and protect their political independence' against Chinese control.[71] Kang challenges sceptics to produce evidence that Confucianized neighbours were 'placating China culturally while inwardly seething with resentment'.[72] Seo-hyun Park – along with Lee and Zhang –

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[61]Johnston 1995.
[62]Kang 2010, 2.
[63]Spruyt 2020, 7, 9.
[64]Lee 2017, 59, 62.
[65]Suzuki 2009.
[66]Fairbank and Têng 1941, 137.
[67]Fairbank 1968, 12.
[68]Fairbank and Têng 1941, 137.
[69]Zhang 2015, 8; Kang 2020, 73.
[70]Lee 2017, 172.
[71]Ibid., 2, 11, 69, 103.
[72]Kang 2010, 12.

points to 'double-faced diplomacy'.[73] Koryo's King Kongmin 'wanted to be considered an equal to the Ming empire within Korea'.[74] When the Ming's envoy arrived to deliver an imperial edict and install a tomb-stone signifying Korea's subordinate status, Kongmin avoided receiving the envoy and threw away the tomb-stone afterwards.[75] In 1370, he agreed to become a Ming tributary but also ordered a military campaign to disputed territory against the Ming's warning.[76] Choson Korea formally launched the 'sadae (serving the great)' policy 'upon hearing the Yongle emperor's invasion of Vietnam' so as to escape a similar 'punitive expedition'.[77] King T'aejong urged his officials to both 'serve [the Ming] with utmost integrity' and 'strengthen … fortifications and store … supplies'.[78] The king complained that he had to 'endure' the Ming and restrain his 'anger'.[79]

The temporal dimension sheds further light on such tensions. The Han dynasty conquered Choson in 109–108 BCE but Koguryo took over the last commandery by 313.[80] The Sui dynasty invaded Koguryo in 598–614 but collapsed from over-expansion. The Tang succeeded at vanquishing Koguryo with Silla's assistance in 668 but Silla soon took over the entire Korean peninsula. The Mongols again seized northern Korea in 1258 but Koryo recovered it in 1356. The Ming demanded the 'return' of this territory in 1388 and Koryo almost went to war to defend it. War was averted after the commander staged a coup, established a new Choson dynasty, and pledged submission to the Ming in exchange for keeping the disputed territory without a fight.[81]

Vietnam similarly emphasized its 'separation from and parity with China'.[82] Kang observes that 'Vietnamese monarchs styled themselves "king" when communicating with China's rulers, but "emperor" when addressing their own subjects',[83] usurping a title that should be strictly reserved for the Chinese emperor. Kang asks why 'the far more powerful' China did not attack neighbours 'despite having the logistical and organizational capacity to wage war'.[84] Spruyt has a ready answer: Vietnam dealt an 'ignominious defeat' to Ming invasion and Qing intervention.[85] Again, pre-Ming history is instructive: the Han dynasty annexed Nan Yue in 111 BCE and established the circuit of Jiaozhi in northern Vietnam. The Sui dynasty marched on to Champa in central and southern Vietnam in 605. After the Tang's collapse, Dai Viet declared independence in 966. The Song invaded Dai Viet in 981 and 1077 but was driven back. In the following centuries, China 'continued to harbor a sense of entitlement' to Vietnam.[86] It was only after the Ming's

[73]Park 2017, 75.
[74]Lee 2017, 88.
[75]Ibid., 88.
[76]Ibid., 87.
[77]Zhang 2015, 76.
[78]Ibid., 76–77.
[79]Ibid., 77.
[80]Larsen 2008, 26
[81]Kang 2010, 63.
[82]Vuving 2009, 81.
[83]Kang 2010, 103.
[84]Ibid., 82.
[85]Spruyt 2020, 121–22.
[86]Womack 2010, 192.

failed re-annexation in 1407–1428 that China no longer 'consider[ed] Vietnam a lost province to be regained'.[87] The Qing too would be defeated when it marched to Vietnam in 1788.

Japan, which had its own ideology of 'Middle Kingdom'[88] based on Shintoism rather than Confucianism, is the most problematic. Kang argues on p. 1 that 'Japan was a part of the Chinese world', but acknowledges on subsequent pages that Japan was 'on the edge' and 'the most skeptical of and uncomfortable with China's dominance', 'grimaced at China's centrality', 'never wholly embrac[ed] the Confucian society', and had 'the most conflicted relations with China'.[89] In 1621, the Ming 'expelled Japan from the Chinese world system, making it the "outcast of East Asia"'.[90] Spruyt agrees that Japan placed itself 'at the center of the world rather than at the margins of a China-centered world'.[91] Lee observes that Fairbank moved Japan from the Sinic zone to the outer zone, more distant than the intermediate Inner Asian zone.[92] Going further back in time, Japan first challenged Chinese centrality in a letter to Sui's Emperor Yang (r. 605–617), which began with 'The Son of Heaven in the land of the rising sun addresses a letter to the Son of Heaven in the land of the setting sun'.[93] In 1382, Prince Kanenaga wrote to the Ming that 'now the world is the world's world; it does not belong to a single ruler… How could we kneel down and acknowledge Chinese overlordship?'[94] Ashikaga Yoshimitsu later tried to restore the lucrative tribute trade by signing 'subject, the king of Japan', but he would be denounced by generations of Japanese elite.[95] This background of cold peace rather than warm embrace puts into perspective, first, Toyotomi Hideyoshi's 'lifelong goal to annex China' in the Imjin War (1592–1598),[96] and, second, the enduring Sino–Japanese rivalry that has lasted to the present.

Kang and Lee nevertheless insist that Vietnamese and Korean kings sustained their admiration for Chinese cultural superiority because they used Chinese writing and followed Chinese practices in expressing their grievances.[97] Yet, Kang observes that Vietnam and Korea adopted history writing as 'boundary maintenance' to establish 'a record of autonomy' against Chinese hegemony.[98] Since northern Korea and northern Vietnam were once Chinese colonies, it is not surprising that they learned Chinese – just as modern Vietnamese elites spoke French. Moreover, since Chinese writing was the international *lingua franca* akin to English today, its adoption might not reflect Vietnam's or Korea's submission to

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[87]Ibid., 196.
[88]Park 2017, 72, 73.
[89]Kang 2010, 1, 40, 55, 69, 77.
[90]Ibid., 79.
[91]Spruyt 2020, 126–27.
[92]Lee 2017, 29.
[93]Wang 2005, 141.
[94]Wang 2011, 149.
[95]Ibid., 149.
[96]Ibid., 174.
[97]Kang 2010, 40; Lee 2017, 147.
[98]Kang 2010, 35, 39.

China – no more than the use of English signifies the world's submission to American hegemony today.

This is not to say that there was no cultural admiration. However, Kang finds that Japan's embrace of Confucianism was meant to be an equalizer to dilute China's claim to supremacy, because status rankings should be 'based not on size but on culture'.[99] Japan made 'a distinction between Chinese civilization, which they revered, and the Chinese state, which they often held in contempt'.[100] Similarly, the Vietnamese elite 'lovingly revered Chinese classical culture while at the same time bitterly hating China as a political entity'.[101]

It is also significant that East Asian hierarchy was 'fundamentally plural'.[102] The China-centred tribute system was contested by Japan's, Korea's, and Vietnam's alternative orders. Erik Ringmar highlights 'two East Asian systems' in Tokugawa times (1600–1868).[103] Tokugawa leaders established 'a Japan-centered version of the tributary order' by manipulating relations with Korea (via Tsushima) and the Ryukyu.[104] Kang reckons both that 'the use of the tribute system by secondary states in their dealings with one another' contributed to system stability, and that 'states down the hierarchy had trouble dealing with each other and with determining their own hierarchic rankings'.[105] The latter is more accurate because hierarchy stigmatizes subordinate positions so that powerful rulers strive to be the 'top dog or nobody'.[106]

Whatever remained of China's legitimacy must be completely hollowed out by the Manchu Qing's 'barbarian' identity. As Lee pointedly asks, 'what if China as a country was no longer identified with that Confucian moral authority'?[107] She laments that the Manchus' assumption of the 'Son of Heaven' was 'an attack' on 'socially acceptable practice'.[108] Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese alike 'disqualif[ied] the Qing rulers from the status of hegemon'.[109] In Kang's account, Hayashi Shunsai's 'The Chinese–Barbarian Transformation' published in the 1730s explicitly saw the Manchu conquest as transforming 'China from civilized to barbarian'.[110] Korea, Vietnam, and Japan alike would see themselves as the new centres of Confucian civilization. These sentiments suggest that it is not appropriate to use the terms 'Confucianized states' and 'Sinicized states' interchangeably.[111] Confucianized states saw themselves as 'sharers within a larger circle' of a universal civilization, of which China was only a leading member.[112]

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[99]Kang 2010, 78.
[100]Ibid., 9, 77.
[101]Eric Henry, 2012. Email communications.
[102]MacKay 2019, 599, 607.
[103]Ringmar 2012, 1.
[104]Park 2017, 67.
[105]Kang 2010, 68, 73.
[106]Neumann and Wigen 2018, 245.
[107]Lee 2017, 45.
[108]Ibid., 45, 137.
[109]Ibid., 45, 143.
[110]Kang 2010, 69.
[111]Ibid., 8–10.
[112]O'Harrow 1979, 174.

Indeed, the Manchu Qing presents an existential challenge to the Confucian peace argument. Kang's classic work begins with this statement: East Asia was so stable that 'Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea marked the *only* military conflict between Japan, Korea, and China for over six [sic: should be "nearly five"] centuries' in 1368–1841.[113] He later presents a list of six 'major wars in East Asia':

(1) Chinese invasion of Vietnam (1407–1428);
(2) Japanese invasion of Korea [the Imjin War] (1592–1598);
(3) Manchu conquest of China (1618–1644);
(4) Manchu invasions of Korea (1627 and 1637);
(5) Chinese conquest of Xinjiang (1690 and 1757); and,
(6) the Opium war (1839–1841).[114]

This list omits the Qing's military intervention in Vietnam in 1788.[115] More problematically, Kang counts only the first two wars to prove how peaceful East Asia was.[116] He excludes the next three because the Manchus and the Zunghar Mongols were 'nomads' rather than 'Sinicized states'.[117] The label 'nomads' applies to 'Tibetans, Uighurs and Zunghar Mongols to the West, Khitans and Mongols to the north, and Manchus to the Northeast',[118] the majority of which are presumed to be 'illiterate' and 'scattered, mobile tribes'.[119] Curiously, the 'Manchu' of items (3) and (4) becomes 'Chinese' in item (5). In the genre of Chinese hegemony, the Manchu Qing (1644–1911) generally counts as the leader of the 'Confucian society'.

De-essentializing the Confucian–nomadic divide

The Manchus' boundary-crossing identity calls into question the cultural division of Asia. Kang argues that China and 'Sinicized states' formed a 'Confucian society' because they 'shared ideas, norms, and interests'.[120] China and 'nomads' formed a 'parabellum society' because they had 'vastly different worldviews, political structures, and cultures than the Sinicized states'.[121] That is, shared civilization among Confucianized states produced peace while clash of Confucian–nomadic civilizations engendered war.[122]

Kang wants to divert attention away from 'where the fighting was' as in 'China–nomad relations' towards 'why some states did *not* fight' as among 'Sinicized states'.[123] Given 'the lack of cultural affinity' and growing 'ideological differences'[124] addressed in the last section, it is not obvious that the relative stability in East Asia

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[113]Kang 2010, 1.
[114]Ibid., 83.
[115]Ibid., 102.
[116]Ibid., 83, 86.
[117]Ibid., 88, 90, 93.
[118]Ibid., 142.
[119]Ibid., 144.
[120]Ibid., 8–9.
[121]Ibid., 10.
[122]Ibid., 8–11.
[123]Ibid., 11.
[124]Spruyt 2020, 125.

was based on shared culture. Spruyt acknowledges that East Asian peace is underlined by 'substantial differences in military power' which 'would make overt conflict a fool's errand'.[125] Manjeet Pardesi observes that the power differentials and the long distances between China and its neighbours are enough to make the probability of conflict 'extremely small'.[126] Park argues that 'hierarchical orders endure not because of voluntary consent but because the constraints of hierarchy are a socially recognized fact'.[127]

Moreover, if the steppe is 'where the fighting was', we should expect Central Asian polities to build strong states according to Charles Tilly's war-makes-state dynamics.[128] Kang contends that '[w]hat centralized political authority that did exist among the various Central Asian peoples was often the result of the ruler's personal charisma and strength'.[129] Yet, he realizes that the Mongols 'established enduring administrative institutions', the Manchus developed 'a stable government with laws [and] bureaucratic structures', and the Zunghar Mongols set up 'state-like apparatus of rule'.[130] Ayşe Zarakol takes great length to show that Chinggisid rule exhibited a high – even extreme – degree of centralization.[131] Andrew Phillips details how the Manchus exploited a 'ready-made extractive apparatus' to milk China's vast agricultural and commercial wealth to facilitate conquest.[132] Peter Perdue makes a self-consciously Tillyan argument that the decades-long Manchu–Zunghar rivalry drove both belligerents to engage in 'competitive state-building'.[133] If the Chinese distinction between 'raw' and 'cooked barbarians' is that the former did not pay taxes or supply corvee labour,[134] a critical marker of Mongol imperialism is the imposition of taxes and human tributes which Lee complains about.

Besides being empirically mistaken, the Confucian–nomadic divide also exhibits troubling ethnocentrism that should be eschewed by critics of Eurocentrism. Reus-Smit and Katzenstein condemn Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' for treating 'civilizations as coherent units of world politics, civilizational boundaries as key axes of difference, and civilizational chauvinism as a legitimate marker of identity'.[135] Works on China's hegemony view Confucianized states as coherent units of world politics, the Confucian–nomadic boundary as a key axis of difference, and civilizational chauvinism as a legitimate marker of identity. If Eurocentrism makes a 'pernicious distinction between "state people" and "minorities"' to justify colonization, Asianists should be wary of a similarly chauvinist position that sedentary life meant civilizational superiority over 'nomads'.[136] Suzuki points out 'uncomfortable similarities' between the 'dark

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[125]Ibid., 126.
[126]Pardesi 2017, 272.
[127]Park 2017, 22.
[128]Tilly 1992; Hui 2017, 290–92.
[129]Kang 2020, 76.
[130]Kang 2010, 143, 103, 142.
[131]Zarakol 2022, 80.
[132]Phillips 2021, 125.
[133]Perdue 2005, 549, 18, 518.
[134]Fiskesjö 1999, 143, quoted in MacKay 2016, 480.
[135]Reus-Smit 2018, 45; Katzenstein 2010, 7–10; Huntington 1993.
[136]Reus-Smit 2018, 215.

side' of the English School and the Sinocentric discourse on the 'civilized Chinese' and the 'uncivilized barbarians'.[137] English School scholars fail to see that the much celebrated 'international society' was historically 'Janus-faced': while 'civilized' members treated one another with civility, they were 'entitled to introduce the trappings of "civilization" into "backward" states (by force if necessary)'.[138] Kelley notes that 'non-Confucians could be Confucianized by force for their own good by "righteous war"'.[139] Kang views the genocide of Zunghar Mongols as a 'natural' process of 'bringing order and civilization to largely "wild" areas'.[140] Neumann and Wigen powerfully denounce such 'sedentariocentrism'.[141] Phillips coins the terms 'Confucian man's burden', 'Confucian "civilizing mission"' and 'Confucian assimilation' to call out the hypocrisy.[142]

Reconstituting 'Asia' and 'China'

If the Confucian–nomadic divide is untenable, then East Asia should be 'yoked' back with the rest of Asia. If an international system is defined by interaction capacity, whether cultural, military, or economic,[143] Asia was extensively connected.[144] Zarakol and Phillip chronicle how thick interaction capacity in war, trade, talent, and ideas formed the 'Chinggisid Exchange' and the 'Saharasia' which provided resources to Asian and European empire-builders alike.[145]

If China's hegemony is problematic in East Asia, it is non-existent when Asia is viewed as a whole. Chinese emperors were 'well aware of a world beyond the Sinocentric understandings of China and East Asia'.[146] Even when 'China' was singular and powerful, bipolarity and multipolarity prevailed over hierarchy. The Han, before Emperor Wu's conquests, had signed treaties with the Xiongnu involving the 'exchange of oath letters' and imperial marriages in a 'bilateral relationship of equals' in 198–135 BCE.[147] The Tang likewise 'dealt realistically' with 'their dangerous parity' with the Tujue, the Tibetans, the Khitan, and the Uighurs.[148] It signed a treaty carved in stone inscriptions with the Tibetan empire in 821/823.[149] In Song times, the Chanyuan Treaty between the 'two Sons of Heaven'[150] – the 'Emperor of the Great Song' and the 'Emperor of the Great Khitan'[151] – in 1005 produced peace and prosperity 'for more than 100 years'.[152] The Ming entered into an agreement

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[137]Suzuki 2011, 7, 55, 183.
[138]Ibid., 142.
[139]Kelly 2012, 413.
[140]Kang 2010, 140.
[141]Neumann and Wigen 2018, 79.
[142]Phillips 2021, 119, 190, 192.
[143]Kang 2020, 68.
[144]Pardesi 2017, 251; Phillips 2021, 67; Zarakol 2022, 29, 73.
[145]Phillips 2021, 67; Zarakol 2022, 29, 73.
[146]Zarakol 2022, 9.
[147]Psarras 2003, 136–43.
[148]Wills 1999, 12.
[149]Richardson 1978.
[150]Tao 1988.
[151]Wang 2011, Chs. 3 and 4.
[152]Schwarz-Schilling 2010, abstract.

with Mongol leader Altan Khan in 1571[153] and coexisted in 'bipolar competition' with the Timurids in West Asia.[154] The Qing likewise treated Tsarist Russia with equality in the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk.

Even though Confucianism was not shared beyond East Asia, Buddhism provided the civilizational glue that connected 'the whole of Asia from Iran to Japan' – across West Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and East Asia.[155] As Buddhism spread across Inner and East Asia, it forged 'a common identity' among diverse ethnic groups,[156] offering a shared faith, shared values, shared institutions, even shared diplomatic tools.[157] In diplomatic relations, monks were appointed as envoys and Buddhist items were exchanged as precious gifts.[158] If Buddhism is chosen as the primary cultural marker, Buddhist Asia might well resemble Christian Europe.

After 'the Buddhist conquest of China'[159] from the first century on, famous Chinese monks such as Faxian (337?–422?), Xuanzang (600?–664), and Yijing (635–713) travelled to India and returned with eyewitness accounts that depicted India as a 'holy land', 'a civilized and advanced society', even 'the center of the world'.[160] Faxian's *Notes on the Country of the Buddha* (*Faguo ji*) 'consider as a matter of fact' that the designation 'Central country (*Zhongguo*)' could 'only refer to Madhyadeśa', the sphere of operation of the Buddha in central northern India.[161] Faxian and his fellow-monks also referred to themselves as coming from the 'borderlands' (*biandi*)'.[162] It is remarkable that Chinese Buddhists subverted China's standard of civilization by treating India as the centre and Buddhism as superior.[163]

The Mongol Chinggisid legacy also served as a 'shared ecumene' connecting the entire Asia, not just at the height of the empire but also after its breakup.[164] Zarakol contends that the supposedly Chinese Ming emperors who overthrew the Mongol Yuan dynasty were acting like 'Chinggisid sovereigns' or 'khans', not unlike the Timurids.[165] Timothy Brook points out that Lee 'shoehorns' Qing–Korean relations into the 'tributary system' and leaves out Central Asian influences, especially 'the Chinggisid model'.[166] The critical demands that the Manchus imposed on Korea in 1637 – sending two royal princes as hostages, providing troops and supplies for Manchu military campaigns, desisting from building defence fortifications, and refusing sanctuary to refugees from Manchuria – are 'elements of Chinggisid

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[153]Wang 2011, 142.
[154]Zarakol 2022, 226.
[155]Sen and Mair 2012, 55.
[156]Wong 2003, 82.
[157]Sen and Mair 2012, 55.
[158]Ibid., 58, 60.
[159]Wong 2003, 93.
[160]Sen and Mair 2012, 6, 50.
[161]Cheng 2018, 143–45, 149.
[162]Ibid., 149.
[163]Ibid., 151.
[164]Zarakol 2022, 229.
[165]Ibid., 101.
[166]Brook 2018, 7.

practice' but uncharacteristic of Chinese tradition.[167] The demand that Korea sent tribute every year may seem like a classic feature of Chinese hegemony, but is in fact 'heavily inflected by Chinggisid expectations', which regarded tribute as 'a significant form of state revenue that was intended to be onerous for the tribute-sender'.[168] When East Asia is not seen in China's image, what is taken for granted as Chinese may well be Central Asian and hybrid.

Even Chinese culture reflects entrenched Central Asian influences. Neumann and Wigen restore the steppe as 'the willfully overlooked "dirty origin"' of Chinese as well as European state formation.[169] The Shang's conquest of northern China was made possible by the war chariot that came from the steppe around the thirteenth century BCE.[170] In the Warring States era, the state of Zhao adopted the mounted cavalry in 307 BCE in the face of the Qin's wars of conquest.[171]

Hybridization ran so deep as to include intermarriages. Han's Emperor Gaozu (r. 206–195 BCE) initiated a policy of marrying princesses to Xiongnu rulers to maintain bipolar peace. The Xianbei Tuoba who dominated Northern China in the fifth century cultivated marriage ties with fallen ruling houses. The Sui's and the Tang's early emperors emerged from this mixed-blood elite and claimed the titles of 'the Sage Khan' and the 'Great Khan' as well as the 'Son of Heaven'.[172] The Tang Emperor Taizong (r. 626–649) further entered into a diplomatic marriage with the then formidable Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo (r. 629–649?).

Given the extensive 'yoking' and hybridization, how did the essentialized identities come about? Why do Chinese records make such a sharp Confucianized-versus-barbarian distinction? Reus-Smit and Katzenstein suggest that, where seemingly unified categorical identities exist, we should explore how 'cultural meanings and practices are constantly amplified or silenced, mobilized or suppressed',[173] and how 'political and discursive coalitions succeed in imposing a singular view … over alternatives'.[174] Joseph MacKay points out that what really 'endured for more than two thousand years' was not political and cultural homogeneity and continuity but the 'persistence of a single imperial Chinese identity'.[175] This identity formation is traceable to the early dynasties' encounters with the steppes, when the need for 'ontological security' motivated civilizational Othering.[176] Qin and Han founders found the steppes 'unconquerable and ungovernable',[177] undermining their claim to 'singularity and universality'.[178] Han's Emperor Gaozu was personally besieged by the Xiongnu in 200 BCE. If the 'Son

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[167]Ibid., 7.
[168]Ibid., 7.
[169]Neumann and Wigen 2018, 256.
[170]Ibid., 89.
[171]Ibid., 95; Hui 2005, 86.
[172]Ge 2018, 102–103.
[173]Reus-Smit 2018, 187–88.
[174]Katzenstein 2010, 1.
[175]MacKay 2016, 474.
[176]Ibid., 471, 477, 491.
[177]Ibid., 477.
[178]Pines 2012, 34.

of Heaven' could not really rule 'all under heaven', a face-saving solution was to cast those beyond his rule as being beyond the pale of civilization and not worthy of his rule.[179] Steppe polities were depicted as 'China's political–cultural opposite': 'migratory rather than sedentary, diffuse rather than hierarchical, violent rather than harmonious, and natural [uncivilized] rather than historical'.[180]

When the balance of capabilities shifted, the dehumanized Other – depicted as having 'human faces but animal hearts' who were 'not of our kind'[181] – could be subject to mass killing, even 'genocide'.[182] Once the Han had built up its strength, Emperor Wu would no longer tolerate 'symbolic equality with the Xiongnu'.[183] He readily abandoned peaceful coexistence and switched to a policy of conquest, killing, or capturing 489,500 Xiongnu in 133–91 BCE.[184] Fast forward in time, the Qing dynasty engaged in 'genocidal violence' of 600,000 Zunghar Mongols in Xinjiang.[185] The pattern has continued even after yesterday's 'barbarians' have become today's 'minorities'.

These processes explain why and how the Confucian-barbarian faultline was constructed and essentialized, and why and how the borderlands became war-prone. The same imposition of essentialized unity has also buried what Phillips calls China's 'barbarian authorship'.[186]

Conclusion

The above analysis suggests that efforts to escape Eurocentrism easily 'get Asia wrong' by falling for other forms of ethnocentrism. The deep historical analyses in the genre of 'Chinese hegemony' unearth important multivocality in cultural practices. However, authors overlook their own findings which are inconsistent with the overall drive to demonstrate that the East was marked by hierarchy and stability while the West was marred by equality and war. The most recent pan-Eurasian IR works uncover similarities from extensive cross-cultural interactions, borrowings, and hybridization. They may present a deeper existential challenge to Eurocentrism by erasing European superiority: European civilization had 'dirty origins' from the steppe[187]; Western colonizers were originally backwards and had to learn Asian precedents to successfully colonize Asia.[188] Acharya may have counted on the 'deep sense of legitimized hierarchy' in East Asia to help construct global IR,[189] but Eurasian similarities are more consistent with the goal of 'pluralistic universalism'.[190]

[179]Hui 2020, 109–11.
[180]MacKay 2016, 471–73.
[181]Jiu Tang shu [Old Tang History], 194A, 5162, in Liu 1975.
[182]Hui 2023, 395; Perdue 2005, 155, 285.
[183]Wills 1999, 12.
[184]Psarras 2003, 150.
[185]Phillips 2021, 192.
[186]Ibid., 297, 313.
[187]Neumann and Wigen 2018.
[188]Phillips 2021, 59.
[189]Acharya 2014, 651–52.
[190]Ibid., 647.

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