

International Relations Theory and East Asian History: An Overview

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*Long understudied by mainstream international relations (IR) scholars, the East Asian historical experience provides an enormous wealth of patterns and findings, which promise to enrich our IR theoretical literature largely derived from and knowledgeable about the Western experience. The intellectual contributions of this emerging scholarship have the potential to influence some of the most central questions in international relations: the nature of the state, the formation of state preferences, and the interplay between material and ideational factors. Researching historical East Asia provides an opportunity to seek out genuine comparisons of international systems and their foundational components. This introduction surveys the field and sets out to frame debate and the intellectual terms of inquiry to assess progress and guide future research. Theoretically, the essays in this issue provide insights on the emerging literature on hierarchy in international relations, and move beyond simplistic assertions that power “matters” to explore the interplay of material and ideational causal factors. Methodologically, scholars are no longer treating all East Asian history as simply one case, while also becoming more careful to avoid selection bias by avoiding choosing selective evidence from the rich historical record. Collectively, the empirical cases discussed in this volume span centuries of history, include a wide variety of political actors across East Asia, and represent an exciting wave of new scholarship. **KEYWORDS:** IR theory, East Asian history, hierarchy, balance of power, methodology, case selection*

AS EAST ASIA'S POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE HAS increased over the past generation, East Asian cases have increasingly become central in theorizing about issues as diverse as economic development, balance-of-power politics, and democratic transitions. Indeed, scholars are increasingly pointing out that East Asian

cases may cause scholars to revisit accepted theories and findings in their theoretical literatures (Acharya and Buzan 2009). As Alastair Iain Johnston argues, “Ignoring East Asian cases in IR might mean that many of the claims in transatlantic IR theory today have external-validity problems, and including these cases/observations might mean our theories of IR require serious revision” (Johnston 2012, 56).

One of the most fruitful areas of research in this vein is the historical international relations of East Asia. Long understudied by mainstream IR scholars, the East Asian historical experience provides an enormous wealth of new and potentially different cases, patterns, and findings, which promise to enrich our IR theoretical literature largely derived from and knowledgeable about the Western experience. The intellectual contributions of this emerging scholarship have the potential to influence some of the most central questions in international relations: the nature of the state, the formation of state preferences, and the interplay between material and ideational factors.

The Western international system grew and spread out of something that preceded it that was quite different. Because of the triumph of the nation-state system, it is forgotten that other international orders have existed, and might exist again. The current international system is actually a recent phenomenon in the scope of world history, but to date it has generally been studied from within: scholars studied European history to explain how this European model for international relations developed over time (Deudney 2007; Krasner 1999; Nexon 2011; Philpott 2008; Ruggie 1993; Spruyt 1994). The best way to study the current system, however, is to compare it to another international system. Yet this sort of comparison requires a very long historical perspective or a look at systems that truly antedate the gradual triumph of the Westphalian order.

In this way, researching historical East Asia provides an opportunity to seek out genuine comparisons of international systems and their foundational components.

However, attention to East Asian history by international relations scholars is still in its first phase (Hui 2005; Johnston 1998; Kang 2010a; Kelly 2012; Wang 2010; Womack 2010). This introduction surveys the field and sets out to frame the debate and the intellectual terms of inquiry to assess progress and guide future research (Kang 2003, 59; Vasquez 1997). Theoretically, the essays in this volume provide insights on the emerging literature on hierarchy in international relations, and move beyond simplistic assertions that power

“matters” to explore the interplay of material and ideational causal factors. Methodologically, scholars are no longer treating all East Asian history as simply one case, while also becoming more careful to avoid selection bias by avoiding choosing selective evidence from the rich historical record. Collectively, the empirical cases discussed in this volume span centuries of history, include a wide variety of political actors across East Asia, and represent an exciting wave of new scholarship.

Theory: Hierarchy and Interests

There are two main ways East Asian history provides insights into international relations theorizing. First, much of this new scholarship builds on and provides insights into issues of hierarchy, status, and legitimacy in international systems. Second, the debate over mono-causal explanations such as power or ideas is becoming stale, and most interesting scholarship studies the interplay and relative importance of material power and ideational factors in explaining actor behavior.

Hierarchy

The Waltzian approach that reduces international relations to instrumental pursuit of material power by identical units under an anarchic system remains an enduring way for some scholars to view international systems (Waltz 1993, 1997; Mearsheimer 2001; Walt 1987). However, many scholars are increasingly arguing that the international system is actually characterized by inequalities and differentiation, not sameness. In this new literature, states are differentiated according to functions, specializations, and degrees of authority among them. These differentiations and inequalities lead to relations of superordination and subordination among states—that is, hierarchies (Goh 2008; Lake 2009). While hierarchy can be imposed purely by coercion, it is also possible that hierarchy involves elements of legitimate authority. Hegemony, for example, is increasingly being interpreted as a type of hierarchy (Clark 2009; Donnelly 2006, 154, fig. 2; Mastanduno 2005). More than simple military predominance, John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan argue that “the exercise of power—and hence the mechanism through which compliance is achieved—involves the projection by the hegemon of a set of norms and their embrace by leaders in other nations” (Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990, 283).

Closely related to the concept of hierarchy is status, or social standing. Iain Johnston, William Wohlforth, and others define status as “an individual’s standing in the hierarchy of a group based on criteria such as prestige, honor, and deference,” where status is an inherently relational concept and manifests itself hierarchically (Johnston 2007, 82; Wohlforth 2009). Perhaps the most important type of status is authority. Authority is defined as rightful rule, by which the commands of the dominant actor are obeyed by subordinate actors because they are seen as natural or legitimate in terms of a prevailing set of beliefs learned through political socialization (Bell 1975). Legitimacy represents the other side of the coin of authority: located within the perception of those who interact with authority, legitimacy is the belief that some leadership, norm, or institution “ought to be obeyed” (Hurd 1999, 390). Put this way, the interesting question is no longer how can *X* make *Y* do this, but rather, where does *Y*’s willingness to defer to *X* come from?

As David Lake argues, “Pure coercive commands—of the form ‘do this, or die’—are not authoritative. Authority relations must contain some measure of legitimacy . . . an obligation, understood by both parties, for B to comply with the wishes of A” (Lake 2003, 304; Clark 2009, 14). States negotiate their relative statuses, and their respective roles (Hurrell 2008). Richard Ned Lebow calls status hierarchies “honor systems,” arguing that “honor is inseparable from hierarchy . . . the higher the status, the greater the honor and privileges, but also the more demanding the role and its rules” (Lebow 2008, 64). Status, authority, and legitimacy are all social because actors grant each other these things—they are inherently relations; none can be achieved in isolation or demanded¹ (O’Neill 1999).

This leads to two clear causal hypotheses:

H1: If two states mutually agree on their relative statuses—as well as their capabilities—the relationship will be stable even if there are substantial differences of material capabilities.

H2: If two states do not agree on their relative status, they will be more conflict-prone, regardless of the balance of power.

From this perspective, the interesting question then becomes *how* did actors of unequal power and status negotiate their relations? What sustained or prevented such relations? Why do some states grant other states high status, but others do not?

Those who use hierarchy and status in their scholarship do not argue that they are universal phenomena that obtain everywhere across time. Rather, these are mid-range causal hypotheses that explore when and why hierarchy might obtain, and what kind of status actors pursue in international affairs and how. There is certainly a fair amount of scholarship that sees some parts of the East Asian historical experience as reflecting elements of hierarchy. Brantly Womack characterizes the “remarkably resilient” China-Vietnam relationship from 1968 to 1985 as “a patriarchal one of unequal but stable roles that guaranteed China’s recognition of Vietnam’s autonomy and Vietnam’s deference to China’s superiority” (Womack 2010, 186). Similarly, Iain Johnston writes that scholarship on historical East Asian international relations “suggests a more eclectic understanding of hierarchy in IR than provided in Lake’s important work on the subject,” while Robert Kelly finds a “lengthy period of peace among Confucian states, plus strong evidence that this peace was based on their shared Confucianism” (Johnston 2012, 61; Kelly 2012, 16).

Power and Ideas

A second recurring theme in the literature on East Asian history is a nuanced view of causal factors that moves well beyond simple assertions that privilege material conditions. In fact, the most sophisticated theoretical treatments from both the rationalist and constructivist paradigms have concluded that understanding preferences and identity is vital to being able to draw any conclusions about state behavior in international relations. Although rationalists take ideas as given, while constructivists endogenize them, James Fearon and Alexander Wendt note, “the rationalist recipe . . . embraces intentionality and the explanation of actions in terms of beliefs, desires, reasons, and meanings. . . . There is little difference between rationalism and constructivism on the issue of *whether* ideas ‘matter’” (Fearon and Wendt 2002, 55, 59). In fact, it is only the strictest of materialist theories that ignore the importance of ideas, and those approaches have come under increasing criticism from a variety of theoretical perspectives. As Robert Powell writes, “Although some structural theories seem to suggest that one can explain at least the outline of state behavior without reference to states’ goals or preferences . . . in order to specify a game theoretic model, the actor’s preferences and benefits must be defined” (Powell 2002, 17; 1999).²

In contrast, some realists continue to provide a monocausal approach to international relations, emphasizing the relative distribu-

tion of capabilities as the central factor in international relations (Mearsheimer 2001). Yet pinning down realists to a clear set of causal arguments is fairly difficult. This should not be that surprising, given that Waltz himself rejected the notion of falsifying tests and clear causal hypotheses, arguing that “falsification won’t do. . . . It is a little used method. . . . Balance-of-power theory does not say that a system will be in equilibrium most or even much of the time. Instead, it predicts that, willy nilly, balances will form over time” (Waltz 1997, 914, 916).

Waltz’s protestations notwithstanding, it is probably safe to say that three central causal claims have emerged from the realist approach: balancing, polarity, and exploitation. The first is the balancing hypothesis. As Waltz writes, “overwhelming power repels and leads others to balance against it” (Waltz 1997, 916). That is, generally smaller states will arm themselves—“balance”—or search for allies with which to confront a dominant power or, in Walt’s important revision, a potential threat (Walt 1987).³ Yet just as quickly the balancing hypothesis wavers and disappears: sometimes states fail to balance. In fact, balancing is probably conditional on other factors beyond threats and is not a universal law. Realists tacitly admit just that: when confronted with an empirical absence of obvious balancing, realists have added adjectives to save the balancing hypothesis: soft balancing, underbalancing, mercantile realism that does not engage in military but economic competition, and even prebalancing (Heginbotham and Samuels 1998; Layne 2006, 8; Paul 2005; Schweller 2004).⁴

In fact, there is an enormous theoretical and empirical literature criticizing the balancing hypothesis (Legro and Moravcsik 1999; Nexon 2009; Schroeder 1994; Vasquez 1997). William Wohlforth and his collaborators surveyed over 2,000 years of world history in regions as diverse as Mesoamerica and the Indic region, providing evidence that “fatally undermines the widespread belief that balancing is a universal empirical law in multi-state systems and the equally pervasive tendency to assign explanatory precedence to balance-of-power theory” (Wohlforth et al. 2007, 156). Wohlforth and his collaborators pointed out that

mainstream BoP [balance-of-power] scholarship encompasses nearly every hypothesis ever advanced about when states balance and when they don’t. Many of these hypotheses contradict each other. For this reason, the overall BoP literature, like any other diverse literature, cannot be tested. . . . It is antithetical to the

purpose of holding theory to empirical account. (Wohlforth et al. 2009, 382)

A second common realist claim is that different distributions of capabilities are systematically associated with different levels of stability: bipolarity is seen as more stable than multipolarity, and unipolarity is the most unstable of all. Yet this claim is also deeply contested within the literature. For example, twenty years ago Kenneth Waltz predicted multipolarity would overtake US unipolarity, arguing that “unipolarity appears as the least stable of international configurations” (Waltz 1997, 915; 1993). Yet today the “unipolar moment” is being reinterpreted as “stability” (Ikenberry 2004; Layne 2006; Wohlforth 1999). So frustrated was historian Paul Schroeder with the unwillingness of realists to make clear causal claims, he concluded,

[Realism] appropriates every possible tenable position in IR theory and history for the neo-realist camp. The category of non-neo-realist theory and interpretation is empty. [Realists] succeed, in fact, in rendering neo-realist theory immune to empirical historical falsification, but at the cost of rendering it otiose and irrelevant for historical explanation. (Elman, Elman, and Schroeder 1995, 194)

A third common realist claim is that large states exploit small states to extract gains. Yet it is just as clear that large states do not always exploit smaller states: sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. That is, as with balancing or polarity, exploitation is conditional on other factors. While it may seem intuitively obvious that power is “the ability of states to use material resources to get others to do what they otherwise would not,” it is also just as obvious that more powerful countries often have difficulty imposing their will on weaker countries, leading to a “paradox of power” or “Goliath's curse” (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 40–41; Sechser 2010; Baldwin 1989). It is perhaps just as obvious that there are numerous types of power, many of them nonmaterial. Consensus on the right of one state to lead—i.e., hegemony—is a form of power itself, and it derives from the values or norms that a state projects, not necessarily merely from its military might and economic wealth. Discursive power—the power to set an agenda or define the issues—is also a form of power.

An approach that emphasizes hierarchy rather than the distribution of capabilities can illuminate many of these seeming inconsistencies. In fact, the propensity to balance, the effects of polarity, and

the extent of exploitation are probably all conditional on specific relationships between states and their beliefs about each other. For example, the opposite of balancing is bandwagoning, or allying oneself with the greater power. Realists acknowledge that sometimes states bandwagon, but they find this both perplexing and unlikely (Schweller 1994). An alternative theoretical perspective would argue that bandwagoning is better understood as a kind of hierarchy. That is, balancing as a strategy is conditional, and often balances do not form because of a particular normative or ideational relationship between the actors. Similarly, we can unravel a general claim about potential exploitation by larger powers by being clearer about these conditional causal mechanisms. A hierarchy perspective helps explore when and under what conditions larger states may forego extracting gains from a smaller state in favor of deference and mutual recognition of their relative statuses. In short, there are sound theoretical reasons to think that states value more than simply the accrual of material capabilities for their own ends.

Not only are there numerous forms of power, actors in international relations have numerous motivations in addition to the accrual of material capabilities. As noted earlier, while it may be intuitively plausible that states value material gains, it is just as plausible that states desire status from their peers, and wealth and stability for their citizens (Lebow 2008; Wohlforth 2009). James Fearon notes that it is also reasonable to assume that states pursue and satisfy a number of goals, such as “maximizing the per capita income of its citizens” (Fearon 1998, 294). If it is self-evident that “power matters,” it is just as self-evident that states and peoples value other goals as well, and scholarship should be sensitive to both material and ideational factors.

In fact, although coercion can substitute for legitimacy, they are both intertwined as well (Lebow 2008). Lake notes that “despite their clear analytic differences, political authority and coercion are hard to distinguish in practice . . . there is no ‘bright line’ separating these two analytic concepts, and I offer none here” (Lake 2007, 53). In this sense, norms and beliefs are not epiphenomenal to material power; that is, they are more than a convenient velvet glove over an iron fist (Donnelly 2006, 142; Hurrell 2009, 2). Legitimacy in itself is a form of power, but it derives from the values or norms a state projects, not necessarily from the state’s military might and economic wealth. As Ian Hurd argues, “The relation of coercion, self-interest, and legitimacy to each other is complex, and each is rarely found in anything

like its pure, isolated form. . . . The difficulties attending to an attempt to prove that a rule is or is not accepted by an actor as legitimate are real, but they do not justify either abandoning the study . . . or assuming *ex ante* that it does not exist” (Hurd 1999, 389, 392). The task is to explain how states of vastly different power negotiated their relations with each other. What were the material, institutional, normative, and relational elements that were involved? How did this occur?

An example will emphasize the difficulty of making simple claims based on a factor as vague as “power.” Andre Schmid’s detailed account of eighteenth-century Qing-Chosŏn border negotiations emphasizes the vast difference in material power between Korea and China, but also ends up confirming important aspects of the normative hierarchic tribute system. Schmid shows that during their negotiations, at no time did Qing threaten or use military force, and that negotiations were held under the institutions of the tribute system. So unquestioned were the norms, institutions, and values that when the Qing envoy revealed an imperial decree, Chosŏn resistance “vanished.” Schmid writes, “In the face of a direct imperial command, [an appeal] to the emperor through the Board of Rites lost all legitimacy” (Schmid 2007, 136).

Schmid’s account ends up in fact confirming a multicausal explanation with the mutual recognition of legitimate authority embodied in the tribute system as a central factor. Border negotiations were successful and even slightly in Chosŏn’s favor, the border was not demarcated by force, and it remained stable from 1714 to the end of the Qing in 1911 (Roehrig 2009).⁵ If the imperial edict carried an explicit or implicit threat of “do this or die,” then it is coercive. But we have no evidence that this was the case. The key intellectual question is why was a Qing imperial edict—a simple piece of paper—viewed as legitimate by Koreans? Why would they negotiate within, and take for granted, a set of institutions and norms if power were all that mattered?

Methods:

Biased Selection, Scope, and Boundary Conditions

In addition to being self-conscious about their theoretical approach, scholars of East Asian history have a second responsibility to be careful with their methodology as they explore empirical cases. In particular, scholars need to be cognizant of whether empirical cases

might have been selected for reasons that make the evidence more or less confirmatory. That is, careful attention to both scope and boundary conditions is particularly important in historical research. It may seem self-evident that 2,500 years of East Asian history is not simply one case, and that East Asian history is not simply the history of China. Yet there is also almost no work that puts East Asian states and Central Asian peoples in a comparative context, leading to a view of China as an “empire without neighbors” (Elisseeff 1963). There is also perhaps less attention to careful delineation of different eras and epochs, and patterns within and differences between those eras. The most important step for future research is to make careful claims about specific eras and specific regions, with clear scope and boundary conditions that set out the parameters for measuring and assessing causal claims while avoiding selection bias by cherry-picking evidence to fit predetermined conclusions.

We are now far beyond the idea that the East Asian international system was constant; rather, it can be treated as a number of different systems, thus permitting cross-system comparisons. An example of this kind of leverage can be found by looking at the work of three scholars. Victoria Hui, Yuan-kang Wang, and David Kang all explore patterns of warfare in distinct eras of historical East Asia. Hui focuses on the “Warring States” era of ancient China (656 B.C.E.–221 B.C.E.), Wang on “medieval East Asia” of the tenth–twelfth centuries, and Kang the “early modern” era of the fourteenth–nineteenth centuries. All three scholars explicitly reject any notions of an essential and unchanging region. Hui argues that eventual Qin domination was the result of “agential strategies . . . and historical contingencies”; Wang notes in his essay that the “idea of a hierarchical East Asia derives from the region’s history from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century. . . . But China was always dominant in history and the East Asian system was not always hierarchical”; and Kang argues that “the greatest contrast to this early modern era were the three centuries preceding it. . . . What was true in the 17th century may not have been true a millennium earlier (Hui 2004, 176–177; Kang 2010a, 15). Their scholarship reveals variation across periods: in some there is stable hierarchy (Kang); in others unstable multipolarity (Wang); and in others multipolarity that leads to unipolarity (Hui).

How can these be reconciled? The systems were in fact different, and other boundary and scope conditions were operating. Both stable hierarchy and balance-of-power competition are conditional on other factors. Hierarchy is stable conditional on shared or mutual recogni-

tion of relative status; balancing is conditional on the absence of those dynamics. The key question, then, is whether certain eras exhibit greater evidence of hierarchy. More specifically, who were the relevant actors, and why did some of them emulate and adapt Chinese ideas, while others did not? What prompted economic interaction, cultural diffusion, and political emulation in some peoples but not others, and what were the implications for international relations?

Although research on these questions is only in its initial stages, some intriguing possibilities have surfaced. Hui is exploring an era in which emergent states with far more rudimentary technology, political and social organization, and economic means were interacting within what is now central China. Confucius and Sun Tzu actually lived during this time, the ideas and institutions of a tribute system had not yet emerged, and Chinese civilization as conceived of today was only incipient (Eisenstadt 1982). Hui argues that although the international system at the time was multipolar, universal domination resulted from a domestic process of “self-strengthening reforms.” Quoting Sun Tzu that “to bring the enemy’s army to submit without combat is the highest skill,” Hui cites Qin reforms in agriculture, state-building based on meritocracy that removed the nobility from administration and resulted in an unprecedented capacity for direct Qin rule, and universal military conscription as eventually providing Qin by the third century B.C.E. with the power to establish hegemony in what is now central China (Hui 2004, 189).

While in Hui’s case the boundaries of the system were fairly clear and restricted to what is today central China, Wang researches an era over a thousand years later in which the cultural, economic, and political system was far more diverse and much larger than simply China itself. Chinese civilization had emerged as a regionwide influence. States began to emerge on unified China’s periphery in the fourth century C.E., such as Silla and Paekche on the Korean peninsula, and the early Nara state in Japan; by the tenth century Annam to the south, Burmese and Tibetan kingdoms to the west, and various polities to the north, such as the Liao. The spread of Confucianism, Buddhism, written script, and other cultural artifacts was intermittent, slow, and uneven, but by the ninth and tenth centuries had spread beyond China to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Some societies borrowed, modified, and mixed Chinese ideas with their own ideas to form unique and vibrant cultures.

A key decision, then, is where to focus: Wang finds balance-of-power dynamics, in part by emphasizing Chinese interactions with

culturally dissimilar northern polities. Kang researches an era in which China, Korea, and Vietnam underwent what has been called a “neo-Confucian revolution,” in which elites in many countries intensified Chinese ideas in their own political, economic, and social practices (Woodside 2006; Elman, Duncan, and Ooms 2002). Some countries in this system had made extraordinary advances in political organization and centralization, writing and institutionalization of ideas, economic exchange ranging literally thousands of miles by sea, and by now had a history of centuries of interaction. Coexisting with these 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 and western steppes (variously known as Mongols, Khitans, and Uighurs, among others).

In short, these were different systems, with different characteristics. The question of how to geographically and temporally bound research is not self-evident. Simply accounting for the evolution and growth of the system over time is a task in itself. As states rose and fell, changes in the distribution of capabilities as well as the uneven spread and adaptation of cultural ideas and economic, political, and social institutions and practices created different systems over time.

A second key methodological consideration is biased or selective use of evidence. The methodological mistake of choosing your cases to fit your answers is a constant potential problem when scholars have such a rich history from which to choose (Geddes 1990). One example of this problem lies in a debate about the levels and patterns of East Asian conflict during the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries. In previous work, I identified two broad patterns during this time:

China’s relations with the Central Asian peoples on its northern and western frontiers were characterized by war and instability, whereas relations with the Sinicized states on its eastern and southern borders were characterized by peace and stability. Unipolarity—Chinese military and economic predominance—cannot account for both of these simultaneous outcomes. (Kang 2010a, 10)

Explicitly acknowledging *both* patterns is important, because as Peter Perdue notes, “crucial events of the fifteenth century [are treated] as a single process, while most historians discuss them separately” (Perdue 2012). Morris Rossabi (2011) and Victoria Hui (2012) do not challenge the empirical claim that China fought far

more along its northern and western frontiers than it did along its eastern and southern borders.⁶ Rather, they differ on the interpretation of those patterns. Hui argues that “There were as many wars in an East Asia allegedly dominated by the tribute system as in a Europe unable to implement the Westphalian peace,” while Rossabi cites the Qing expansion along its western frontier as evidence that “belies” the peacefulness on its eastern borders (Hui 2012; Rossabi 2011).

Yet these are somewhat puzzling claims, because the task is to explain both patterns within a discrete time period, not to explain just one pattern or attempt to draw conclusions about the entire sweep of history. For Rossabi, wars on China’s northern and western frontiers apparently disconfirm the peacefulness of its eastern and southern borders. For Hui, it is not clear how she measured war and whether she has bounded her claim either over time or across space. Some of the confusion can be sorted out by being aware of biased selection of cases: If one is interested in war, it is natural to look where there is fighting. But that leads to selecting on the dependent variable—an overweighting of war—and a biased explanation for the overall patterns of *both* conflict and stability. Just as important as explaining why there was war in some areas is to explain why there was peace in other areas. Either Hui and Rossabi both believe in an essentialist China that behaved the same way everywhere at all times, or they are creating a strawman by accusing others of just such a mistake. The proper question is, what explains simultaneous patterns of stability and instability?

In fact, an approach that emphasizes hierarchy can explain both patterns. A hierarchic perspective would expect to find stability between units that were able to craft mutually legitimate understandings of status, and it would also expect to find conflict between those actors that could not do so. Central Asian polities and East Asian states both operated within a unipolar system, but whereas the states accepted Chinese authority, the semi-nomadic polities did not. Generated by a common Confucian worldview, Sinic states possessed a shared sense of legitimacy that presupposes that relations operate within an accepted hierarchy, and the institutions of the tribute system played a stabilizing role in their relations (Kang 2010b, 593). It would not be surprising from this perspective that those Central Asian polities that rejected Confucianism and Sinic notions of cultural achievement were unable to arrive at stable relations with China.

In sum, claims about regional order are likely conditional: *X* occurs, conditional on certain scope and boundary conditions obtaining, and is not a universal phenomenon. Being aware of these methodological issues will enable scholars to more carefully make discrete claims, assess evidence, and compare patterns across time and space. Perhaps most significant for the essays in this volume, the tribute system—and hierarchical relations in general—is effective only when both sides believe in the legitimacy of its norms and institutions and work within that worldview. Indeed, a key scholarly focus is thus why some polities accepted and embraced Chinese ideas while others did not; this central question informs most essays in the volume.

The Cases: Contributions to the Special Issue

The contributions of this special issue run the gamut from the self-consciously realist, with an emphasis purely on the distribution of capabilities at one end, to those focused mainly on normative or ideational factors at the other end. The most careful defender of a straightforward realist approach is Yuan-kang Wang. Wang argues that material power was “the foundation of the tribute system . . . [the] raw reality of power masked by the benign Confucian rhetoric.” Focusing on a roughly two-century period from 960 to 1234, Wang looks at medieval China and in particular the Song Dynasty’s interactions with the powerful Liao kingdom to the north. After fifty years of war, Song and Liao managed an uneasy truce. This era was a “multistate system,” in which the Song existed among a number of states of roughly similar power. Wang argues that a landmark treaty between the two in 1005 demonstrated “Chinese pragmatism in adapting the tributary framework to foreign relations,” which was a “result of power symmetry between China and its rivals.”

Wang contrasts his balance-of-power explanation with an explanation based on an enduring Chinese worldview that emphasizes peaceful relations, often called “Confucian pacifism.”⁷ Wang is convincing in his criticism that Chinese attitudes were not universally peaceful, and that these beliefs changed across time and that leaders selectively applied these attitudes in Chinese relations with other polities (Johnston 1998). As powerful as Wang’s approach is, however, it does not provide an adequate test of hierarchy. Hierarchy is *relational*, and the key question is not what the Chinese thought, but what peoples in other countries thought. Negotiating mutually legiti-

mate relative status involves interrogating the beliefs of both parties. One way to adjudicate competing theoretical claims is to ask how both hierarchic and balancing theoretical approaches would explain why fighting occurs between some actors and not others.

In fact, a hierarchic approach would expect Song and Liao to have difficulty negotiating any type of stable status relationship with each other, because they came from different cultural perspectives and Liao rejected Chinese civilization. Wang notes that the Song described nomads on their northern borders in “subhuman terms,” emphasizing the cultural and social differences between the two societies. Central Asian peoples never accepted Chinese civilization, even when they were much weaker, and Wang, Peter Perdue, and Iain Johnston show in other work that centuries later relations were no more stable between the two sides (Wang 2010; Perdue 2005; Johnston 1998). In contrast, Wang points out that the Korean Koryō kingdom engaged in tributary relations with the Song but not Liao. But Koryō valued Chinese civilization, Liao did not. Adapting and merging many aspects of Chinese civilization with their own beliefs, it would not be surprising that Koryō was more capable of crafting stable relations with the Song than were polities that rejected Chinese beliefs and practices. Both a hierarchic and a balance-of-power explanation would expect fighting between two polities that were unable to negotiate mutually legitimate relative statuses.

Wang has provided a useful corrective in showing that the Chinese use of the tribute system was not universal, and that Confucianism was not an ideology that eschewed war under any and all circumstances. Chinese leaders in the tenth century were as pragmatic as leaders anywhere, and they adapted their policies to fit the realities of the situation. Wang adds to the scholarly literature by more clearly explicating a realist approach to one era in Chinese history. Yet we still have much to learn about the conditions under which multipolarity and the distribution of capabilities determined, interacted with, or were even subordinated to the ideas and institutions of the tribute system.

Kirk Larsen also follows a basically realist approach. Larsen describes both the traditional East Asian tribute system and the Western Westphalian system that overturned it as “comforting fictions.” Larsen takes a firmly materialist stance, arguing that both East Asian and Western ideals were simply velvet gloves over iron fists that pursued power rather than interests, norms, or values, in order to “describe and justify power asymmetry.” Larsen’s sensitivity to

material power dynamics is similar to Wang's and provides a balanced approach to the era he studies. Where Larsen differs is in his attention to the fact that power requires justification as well. Arguing that Qing and Western powers both ignored claims to Korean independence and sovereignty when self-interest dictated otherwise, Larsen concludes that Korea's attempts in the late nineteenth century to use either historical tribute relations or Western notions of sovereignty to protect their independence were ineffective.

Indeed, Larsen's nuanced argument reveals the complex interplay between material and normative causal factors. Larsen notes how Chosŏn Koreans used Confucian ideas to evaluate the current rulers of the Qing Dynasty, and how they evaluated the legitimacy of Qing claims based on existing notions of authority, culture, and civilization. Larsen writes, "The writings of Chosŏn Koreans contain expressions of the sentiment that Korea was a better guardian and practitioner of 'Chinese' culture and civilization than even [Qing] China was." On one hand, this is not remarkable: both Qing and Chosŏn used the institutions and norms of the tribute system in their interactions, and if both sides believed in the legitimacy of the tribute system, it would explain why neither Qing nor Chosŏn used threats in their relations. On the other hand, that Chosŏn leaders debated Qing Confucian legitimacy *is* remarkable if the relationship was only about domination and coercion: If Koreans groaned under the boot of Chinese domination for purely reasons of coercion, why would they care about whether the Qing were "civilized," and why would they evaluate themselves and the Qing using Chinese ideas? Although Larsen emphasizes the material basis of Chosŏn's relations with foreign powers, his detailed research also reveals that material conditions do not ineluctably lead to predictable interests, goals, and norms, and an important theoretical issue is to explore whether, how, and under what conditions lesser powers view asymmetric power as legitimate or illegitimate.

James Anderson's article about the long-enduring Vietnam-China border moves toward the middle of the theoretical spectrum by placing as much emphasis on ideas and institutions as it does on material power. Changes in the distribution of capabilities influenced relations between the two sides, but within a larger context of accepting the prevailing world order. Yet Anderson's key contribution is to move beyond simply military balance to show how tribute relations moderated risk between the two sides and stabilized the China-

Vietnam relationship over the centuries, even as their relative capabilities shifted over time. Particularly important was the negotiated status within the Chinese tribute system that established Vietnamese regional independence while it maintained a check on Chinese incursions, as expressed through diplomatic relations such as honorific titles. For example, in the 1540s, ruler Mạc Đăng Dung accepted a title of Ming frontier administrator while his son ruled as king of the Đại Việt kingdom, “in effect claiming his territory existed both within and beyond the authority of the Ming court.”

Anderson’s focus on the ambiguous frontier zone between them sheds light on the process by which the two sides slowly created a border over the centuries and continually recalibrated their relationship. “Tribute missions were important opportunities to negotiate the balance of status and authority existing between the Chinese and Vietnamese rulers” (Kelley 2005). Noting that trade and other cultural flows were important elements of the China-Vietnam relationship, Anderson says in his essay,

By 1086 a clear border had been mapped out between the two states, the first such court-negotiated border in China’s history. After the establishment of this court-negotiated border, there would still be challenges to the Đại Việt’s insistence on self-rule. However, the existence of a formal border between the two polities was successfully challenged only once in the next eight hundred years.

Other contributions to this special issue are sensitive to the material distribution of capabilities as well, but they more centrally emphasize causal dynamics of hierarchy and status. Park, Lee, and Robinson find stability arising despite widely unequal distributions of capabilities; they find very little balancing behavior by the smaller states; and they find far less exploitation by the larger power than might be expected in a world ruled purely by coercion and domination. In each of these cases hierarchy is associated with differential power, states are negotiating their statuses with each other, and questions of legitimacy and authority are forefront to the explanation.

Questions of different systems and different eras come sharply into contrast in much of the nineteenth century. Seo-Hyun Park looks at changing conceptions of sovereignty; she argues that Japan and Korea came up with a different mix of definitions based on different roles within the tribute system and different domestic political exi-

gencies, and that in both the tribute system and the Westphalian system, Korea and Japan pursued similar goals of autonomy and mitigating vulnerability against more powerful countries. According to Park, Korea's ruling regime "derived much of its authority and legitimacy from its close ties to Chinese (or universal) civilization," and thus Korea was more hesitant to abandon the traditional manner of international relations in responding to the arrival of the West, while Japan had historically been more insulated from the China-centered order and was more open to considering new modes of relations. Thus, between 1882 and 1895, the Korean court faced more external and domestic political barriers in embracing economic, diplomatic, and political reforms that could potentially have allowed it to modernize in ways that would have sustained or extended its independence as a nation. Korean domestic debates between the traditional ruling regime and reformers were never fully reconciled, resulting in a hesitation in Korean foreign policy that ultimately left it without any means to respond to Western and eventually Japanese imperialism. In contrast, the Japanese had much earlier on engaged in civil war and regime change that overthrew the existing order by 1868, and "Western political concepts such as privilege, right, and sovereignty were carefully studied and reconstructed during this time to connote the power of the state." In contrast to Korea, Japan embarked on a rapid series of diplomatic and domestic modernization reforms in areas that ranged from the military, education, and domestic political structures.

Emphasizing not only differences in material power but also norms and continual negotiation between unequal units, Ji-Young Lee argues that rhetoric and discourse are more than simply "cheap talk" that masked a fundamentally coercive relationship. Lee begins with a puzzle: "How did Korea manage and continue to survive as an independent state for nearly two thousand years, not annexed to China, when it shares a border with this powerful, often expansionist imperial neighbor?" Lee's argument centers on the form and rituals of the tribute system that communicated meaning to both Korea and China. Lee argues, "the ritual of investiture communicated China's authority including its potential for coercion on a regular basis, and importantly, in a symbolic manner that was acceptable to Korea's identity as a Confucian society." Lee examines the sixteen instances of Ming investiture of Chosŏn Korean kings—a diplomatic ritual by which the Korean king received formal approval from the Chinese emperor to rule—to argue that this was a key institution that

reinforced stability between the two unequal entities by communicating asymmetric power through symbolic means. She argues that “rituals help manage authority relations first and foremost by signaling on a regular basis whether the social contract of the hierarchy is being honored or in need of renegotiation.”

Kenneth Robinson’s contribution shows that hierarchy and stable relations are not simply equivalent to economic interdependence. Korea penetrated and actually administered its relations with the Jurchen tribes to its north in deeply integrated ways in order to craft stable relations with them. Chosŏn-Jurchen relations were not simply an arms-length diplomatic relationship; it was close, multifaceted, and administered through appointments and arrangements that were tightly coupled. Robinson contrasts the diverse and intricate manner of Korean interactions with various Jurchen tribes to the north, Japanese to the east, and other political units during the Chosŏn Dynasty. The Japanese were divided into four reception grades, based on a complex mix of factors, including their proximity to the Japanese king and “their importance in controlling piracy and trade, and other aspects of identity.” These grades correlated to differential trading and visitation rights, as well as access to the ports or to the capital and the Korean king. Similarly, the Korean court organized relations with the various Jurchen tribes to their northeast through administrative appointments to stabilize relations on their border and regulate trade and other interactions between Koreans and Jurchens. Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Korean court gave at least 675 Jurchens over twenty-two different types of positions. These nominal civil or military appointments held no official responsibilities, but they did place Jurchens in a hierarchy of diplomatic and contact status that also provided differential trading, visitation, and other rights and privileges in Korea.

Robinson’s work is perhaps the most contextualized of the papers in this volume, and captures the institutions of hierarchy. The wide range of ways in which the Korean kingdom dealt with the various types of political actors comprised more than just the tribute system, it was almost a parallel set of states and integrated organizations. These institutions and relations varied depending on size, economic importance, and the cultural identity of the actors, as well as their potential capacity for war. There were in fact multiple hierarchical tribute systems, “frameworks for managing interaction and trade with people to the northeast and to the south and sites for the royal performance of moral practice.” As with Anderson’s discussion

of Vietnam, Robinson's scholarship shows that Korea also re-created hierarchic relationships using the institutions and ideas of the tribute system with lesser polities on its own periphery.

Conclusion

The articles in this special issue reveal potential for new theoretical insights to arise from exploring historical East Asia. At stake is nothing less than the way we conceive of international relations. The East Asian region was as vast and long lasting as was the European region. Yet in many ways the patterns of conflict, the patterns of interaction, and the norms, institutions, and ideas that developed in East Asia were quite different from those in Europe. As scholars explore this rich history through the lens of international relations theory, the unquestioned universality of actors, interests, and conditions is seen to be far more contingent or conditional than is currently accepted in conventional international relations scholarship. If different international systems can be characterized as much by contingent agency (in Hui's words) or different fundamental organizing principles (Kang), then entire bodies of scholarship must be reconfigured. At best, how the balance of power operates is conditional on the particular configuration of normative orders, existing institutions, and interests. Explicit recognition of the vast temporal and geographic region, and that East Asian history is not "just one case" but is in fact extraordinarily diverse, is also important.

Just as significant a finding is that hierarchy may be a recurring or even fundamental feature of international systems. If this is the case, continued attention to the normative order as well as power differentials of various international systems is important. In East Asia observed regularities often appear much more to conform to the nature of hierarchy than to the distribution of capabilities.

Industrialization, democratization, globalization, the spread of nuclear weapons, and utterly different collectively held ideas have doubtless altered patterns of interaction today from those that characterized past systems. But the question is, altered from what? Implicit in arguments about the causes of systemic change is some baseline expectation about how multistate systems work. For nearly three centuries, that baseline has been provided by balance-of-power theory. The articles in this volume reveal that this practice is no longer tenable. Concentrated power is not "unnatural." The unipolar structure of the current international system is not historically

unusual, and its effects should therefore not be theoretically surprising (Wohlforth et al. 2007, 179). The normative order and institutions of an international system are as important as the concentration of power for understanding how unipolar systems work.

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Notes

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1. Rationalists also take honor and status as important elements in international relations. Yet rationalists tend to view status as mere “information,” or uncertainty about type, rather than contending normative views about legitimacy.

2. The entire “bargaining theory of war” literature emphasizes ideas.

3. Levy argues that “hegemonies do not form in multistate systems because perceived threats of hegemony over the system generate balancing behavior by other leading states in the system” (Levy 2004, 37).

4. For counterarguments, see Brooks and Wohlforth 2005.

5. An example of a border demarcated by force and not considered legitimate is the contemporary Northern Limit Line between North and South Korea. This is purely demarcated by force, with continual clashes along the border as a result.

6. Kirk Larsen (2012) writes that Ming China had “critical moments in which the Chinese dynasty possessed both the capability and the momentum necessary to complete aggressive expansionistic designs [against Chosŏn] but decided not to do so.”

7. Wang writes that “Because Confucianism emphasized peace, harmony, and stability in sociopolitical relations, some believe that absence of warfare characterized China’s relations with neighbors throughout most of history.”

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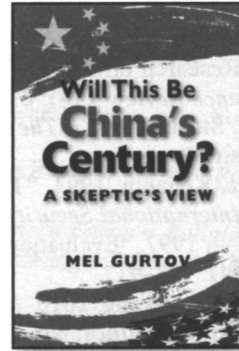
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