

East Asian International Relations: Peaceful and Stable for Centuries

By David C. Kang

How did international relations function in East Asia from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries—that is, before the arrival of the Western colonial powers? We typically use European history and European ideas as the basis for thinking about world history and international relations. Ideas that emanated from the 1688 Peace of Westphalia include the independent sovereignty of each nation-state, the inherent equality of those nation-states, and “balance of power.” But, it may be that the European experience was not that universal. In fact, many other regions of the world have functioned in quite different ways. This article draws from my recent book, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute*, published by Columbia University Press in 2010.

In 1592, Japanese General Hideyoshi invaded Korea with more than 160,000 troops on approximately 700 ships, eventually mobilizing a half million troops, intending to conquer China after first subduing Korea. Called the Imjin War in Korea, more than 60,000 Korean soldiers, eventually supported by more than 100,000 Ming Chinese forces, defended the Korean peninsula. After six years of war, the Japanese retreated, and Hideyoshi died, having failed spectacularly in his quest to conquer China and Korea.

The Imjin War easily dwarfed those of their European contemporaries. For example, the Imjin War involved five to ten times more men and material than the Spanish Armada of 1588, which is often described as the “greatest military force ever assembled in Renaissance Europe.” That in itself should be sufficient cause for us to explore the causes and consequences of the Imjin War. Yet even more important for the study of international relations, Hideyoshi’s invasion of Korea marked the *only* military conflict between Japan, Korea, and China for more than six centuries. For three hundred years, both before and after the Imjin War, three of the major powers in East Asia peacefully coexisted, despite having the military and technological capability to wage war on a massive scale.

In fact, East Asia exhibited two historical patterns of international relations, both of which were different from the European experience with the “balance of power.” The four main states of historical East Asia (Korea, Việt Nam, Japan, and China) had generally clear borders with each other and stable relations with very little war. In contrast, those same states had endemic conflict with the various seminomadic tribes and groups that existed along a vast frontier zone to China’s north and west.

In explaining this pattern, I argue that a set of international rules and institutions—known as the tribute system—governed the relations of the states during this period. Emphasizing formal hierarchy and yet allowing considerable informal autonomy, the states in this system had considerable peace and stability in their relations with each other. The tribute system was formalized in two main concepts: “investiture,” in which a secondary state received honorary acceptance from China, and “tribute missions,” in which diplomats and scholars from secondary states would travel to Beijing to exchange symbolic gifts and also to exchange information and discuss important matters. Both involved explicit acceptance of a rank-order in which China was at the top of the hierarchy, and the secondary states were of lower status. The smaller states in the system did not think of themselves as equal to China nor did they call themselves equal. Yet with formal recognition of China’s central position, they had substantial freedom to conduct their own affairs as they saw fit. This pattern was different from the European “balance

of power” system that emerged, which emphasized formal equality of nation-states but entailed endemic conflict with each other.

China, with its dominant cultural, economic, and military power, was clearly the leading state in the premodern East Asian system. However, imperial China’s goals did not include expansion against its established neighboring states with which it had stable borders. These smaller, Sinicized states emulated Chinese practices and, to varying degrees, accepted Chinese centrality in the region. For example, Việt Nam, Korea, and Japan all imported the use of Chinese language and characters for their writing systems, used the Chinese calendar, and, at one time or another, each of these countries also copied the Chinese organizational pattern for their own governments.

For example, Việt Nam and China first demarcated a border in 1079, when the two sides agreed that “the Quan Nguyen and Guihua prefectures were two sides of a ‘fixed border’ (*qiangjie*) region between the two states.” When China and Việt Nam signed their modern treaty normalizing diplomatic relations in

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1999, they agreed upon essentially this same border. Similarly, the Yalu River has formed the boundary between Korea and China since 1034 CE and remains the border today. Ten centuries of the same border is both impressive and leads us to ask why that was the case.

The difference between a border and a frontier is the difference between a line and a space. Borders are fixed—a clear line that separates two different political spaces, with clear rights and responsibilities on both sides of the line. In contrast, a frontier is a zone—an ambiguous area where political control, organization, and institutions gradually diminish and intermingle with other ideas, institutions, rules, and peoples. While some political relationships in early modern East Asia were demarcated by lines that proved to be remarkably stable, other historical relationships—mediated by space—were more conflictual.

My central claim of East Asian stability among states does not imply that violence was rare in East Asia. There was plenty of violence, but it tended to occur between China and the seminomadic peoples on its northern and western frontiers, not between China and the other Sinicized states. This violence occurred in the form of border skirmishes, piracy, and the slow expansion and frontier consolidation of some states—such as China—at the expense of nonstate units. These nomads had vastly different societies and worldviews, and they resisted Confucian cultural ideas. The frontier was only turned into a border when China expanded westward; other states, such as Russia, began to expand eastward; and the nomads were left with nowhere to move.

The system also comprised more than just war and diplomacy, and China as hegemon was more than just a political power. Historical East Asia was also an economic international system, with extensive trade relations and cultural exchange among all the units in the region. From Siam to Java, to Việt

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Nam, Taiwan, and even Japan, all the states traded with each other and particularly with China. Although it is common to view Asian states as historically closed and unwelcoming of international trade, this is a fiction arising from early and relatively unsuccessful Western attempts to join the vast trading network. Western nations did have a difficult time, but new evidence from the past twenty years reveals that, throughout the premodern era, East Asian states had extensive relations with each other.

In sum, we should be cautious about assuming that the European experience is universal. China, Japan, Korea, and Việt Nam are still around in the twenty-first century, and they are recognizably the same states from 500 or even 1,000 years ago. Because the European system of the past few centuries eventually developed into a set of rules and institutions and norms now used by all countries around the world, we have tended to assume that this was both natural and inevitable and that all international systems behave the same way. With the increasing importance and presence of East Asian states in the world, it has been common to apply ideas and models based on the European experience in order to explain Asia and to assign universality to the European experience. It is my hope that this essay and my book will broaden

readers' expectations for what international relations may be like and will expose us to the variety of relations that are possible in the world.

I hope that we can begin to view East Asia as a region with different states and distinct patterns and not simply as a reflection of the Western experience. It is common to use analogies from nineteenth-century Europe, such as the rise of Bismarckian Germany, to predict the future of East Asian relations in the twenty-first century. It is also common for specialists of international relations to know far more about the Spanish Armada, the Holy Roman Empire, Napoleon, and European history than they do about the Chinese tributary system or Japanese foreign relations in the Tokugawa era.

Today there is intense interest in whether these states can craft a stable relationship, especially with China's emergence as an economic powerhouse. Given that these East Asian countries have centuries of history together, it is logical to ask how their relations worked in the past and whether this tells us anything about the present, rather than exclusively using European analogies.

How much of the past affects the present in East Asia? The East Asian tribute system dissolved quickly in the nineteenth century when the arrival of the West and its norms, institutions, and ideas created an enormous challenge to the existing worldviews of East Asian nations. The tribute system is gone, never to return, and it is thus unlikely that patterns of behavior that existed under the tribute system would continue under these Western ideas in the current international system. Still, Western ideas and institutions have not been universally accepted, even within the West—and there have been numerous exceptions and selective adherence to ostensibly universal principles. Thus, it might be worth exploring how much and how deeply East Asian states have internalized these Western notions and whether and to what extent any of East Asia's past history may affect their beliefs and goals in the future.

The difference between China at the height of its hegemony five centuries ago and China today is most clearly reflected in the fact that few people today think that China is still the cultural center of the world. Few contemporary East Asian states or peoples look to China for cultural innovation or for practical solutions to present-day problems. The real questions are not only whether China reaches back to its past for guidance, but also whether other states and peoples will accept contemporary China and believe its current goals and intentions are benign and whether China finds a stable identity for itself within the Westphalian system. ■

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