

Historicizing China's Rise and International Relations of East Asia


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American University

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WITH THE GROWTH OF CHINA'S RELATIVE POWER VIS-À-VIS THE UNITED STATES, MANY WONDER WHETHER China will replace the United States as the leading power in Asia. As one way to think about this debate, we can historicize the rise of China in the broader view of Asian international relations. Prior to the nineteenth century, the rise of a new Chinese state was always one of the most important sources of international change in the East Asian states system. It is arguable that China's East Asian neighbors Japan and Korea had dealt with the "rising China question" several times prior to the twenty-first century. Is it possible then that we can identify recurring historical patterns in Asian international relations that may help elucidate today's questions? China was the sole great power for centuries in East Asia. How does this affect the process of China's rise now in the American-led hegemonic order? What policy-relevant lessons can we draw from the overall pattern of the way the Chinese hegemonic order worked during the early modern period that many scholars consider a period of "Asia's long peace"?

In this paper, I approach the question of China's rise today historically, and explore its implications for international order, especially in the areas of the U.S. alliance system in East Asia. The goal is neither to suggest that history will repeat itself, nor to predict that a particular future scenario will hold. Rather, the paper surveys how the past history of the Sino-centric tribute system is contributing to the shaping of the rise of China today. It then challenges two popular notions that inform the current debate about a rising China. One is the idea that China's growing power will reestablish regional hegemony on the model of a Sino-centric tribute system, and the other is that Japan and South Korea should make natural security partners against a rising China.

More specifically, I make the following two claims. First, the tribute system is *not* a notion that is comparable with the concept of sovereignty upon which the existing international system

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is built. As such, any invocation of this notion tends to be associated with China's revisionist intentions against the sovereignty norms in today's international politics. Beijing's own invocation of its imperial past in the context of its territorial claims over the South China Sea and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands have, for example, contributed to the speculation that China is seeking to change the status quo and challenging the liberal principles that the current international order rests on. Second, historicizing China's rise highlights the logic of geopolitics found in Asian history as a mechanism for continuity. By the logic of geopolitics, I mean the politics arising from the geostrategic location of the Korean peninsula as the "bridge" between China and Japan. I argue that an in-depth study on the recurring dynamics in Japan and Korea's responses to imperial China suggests that China's growing power and influence may affect America's alliance system, not by openly challenging the U.S. and its allies, but by creating a structural condition for further highlighting the differences in Japanese and Korean responses to a rising China. Further, the overall pattern of international conflicts in China-Japan-Korea relations indicates that the Sino-Japanese strategic rivalry and the contingency situation over North Korea will be troubling hotspots for Asian security, possibly entrapping the United States and China in an unwanted military confrontation.

A mention of the scope conditions of this study is in order. I primarily look at the early modern period in Asian history and the major international events associated with the Chinese hegemonic order between the fourteenth and the end of the eighteenth centuries (the Ming and High Qing periods in China; the Koryo and Choson periods in Korea; the Muromachi, Senkoku, Tokugawa periods in Japan). Rather than presenting details of the historical study, the paper will focus on drawing its key insights. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. In the first section, I will discuss how the images of the past Sino-centric tribute system are affecting China's rise today, while using three recent events as a window into what I call the "politics of the tribute system" in contemporary Asian politics. In the second section, I present my argument about what the tribute system was, challenging some of the existing images that have shaped the debate on a rising China. The third section discusses the lessons drawn from research on China-Japan-Korea relational patterns in early modern East Asia for a policy-relevant analysis that speaks to the contemporary debate on the future of U.S. alliance system and a rising China in East Asia.

The Politics of the Sino-centric Tribute System and a Rising China Today

In recent years, in both popular dialogue and academic discourse, a Sino-centric tribute system and China's imperial past are increasingly perceived as associated with China's future intentions. It is argued that a growing Chinese power will establish regional hegemony modeled on the tribute system.¹ International relations scholar Charles Kupchan notes, "China might attempt to

¹ On the return of a Sino-centric tribute system and international order, see, for example, Charles Kupchan, "The Normative Foundations of Hegemony and the Coming Challenge to Pax Americana," *Security Studies* 23, no. 2 (May 2014): 219-57. Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W.



exercise a brand of regional hegemony modeled on the tribute system.”² In popular dialogue, too, China’s invocation of its imperial past in territorial disputes has led many to suspect that China intends to resurrect “a new face to China’s ancient tributary system where China is the central power and Beijing is the global political pole.”³

These speculations may come as little surprise as people wonder how China will use its power in the future. China’s own invocations of the Sino-centric tribute system took place in the process of China’s engagement with the world, with the prime example being the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony. China chose the glamor of the Tang empire (618-907) and the Ming empire (1368-1644) as key themes in the ceremony in order to convey the message to the world that a ‘real China’ is powerful, confident, prosperous and cosmopolitan. The tributary missions by Zheng He during the Ming period were to highlight the harmony that Confucian values lend to the world, and that China’s rise is not a threat.⁴

At a deeper level, the discourse on the tribute system is being animated in part because China is in the process of defining a new great power identity with its newly acquired power and wealth in the twenty-first century.⁵ It is seeking inspiration from an idealized version of its imperial past, including the influence and respect it enjoyed from its neighbors during earlier centuries. President Xi Jinping defines China’s foreign policy as serving “the ‘Two Centuries’ objective to realize the great rejuvenation of Chinese nation.”⁶ The “Chinese Dream” seeks to promote China’s cultural soft power and modern Chinese values, while he emphasizes that “China should be portrayed as a civilized country featuring rich history, ethnic unity, cultural diversity, and as an oriental power with good government, developed economy, cultural prosperity, national unity and beautiful mountains and rivers.”⁷ China’s dream is presented as a common dream of all of

Norton, 2011), 158; Christopher Ford, *The Mind of Empire: China’s History and Modern Foreign Relations* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2010); William Callahan, “Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony?” *International Studies Review* 10, no. 4 (December 2008): 749–61; William Callahan and Elena Barabantseva, eds., *China Order the World: Normative Soft Power and Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); David Lai, *The US and China in Power Transition* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011).

² Kupchan, “The Normative Foundations of Hegemony,” 253.

³ Dana Dillon, “Countering Beijing in the South China Sea,” *Hoover Institution Policy Review*, June 1, 2011.

<http://www.hoover.org/research/countering-beijing-south-china-sea> See also, Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (New York, The Penguin Press, 2009); Elizabeth Pont, “China’s Dream of Regional Hegemony,” *World Policy Blog*, February 19, 2013. <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2013/02/19/chinas-dream-regional-hegemony>.

⁴ Vishakha Desai, “New ‘Tang’ Dynasty for a Rapidly Rising China?,” *Japan Times*, August 21, 2008.

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2008/08/21/commentary/world-commentary/new-tang-dynasty-for-rapidly-rising-china/>. “Chinese Leader Calls for Great Renaissance,” *Japan Times*, March 18, 2013. http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/03/18/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/chinese-leader-calls-for-great-renaissance/#.U_kUSyi0Lww

⁵ Gilbert Rozman, “Invocations of Chinese Traditions in International Relations,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 17 (2012): 111–24; William Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶ “Important Speech of Xi Jinping at Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference,” Chinese Central Government’s Official Web portal, October 25, 2013.

⁷ “China to promote cultural soft power,” *China Daily* (January 1, 2014).



Asia. Further, the official *China Daily* writes, “The realization of the Chinese Dream is conducive to facilitating the rejuvenation of Asia.”⁸

How about other East Asian neighboring powers’ views on China’s imperial past and the Sino-centric tribute system? How do these notions affect their perceptions of China’s rise? Despite China’s intended message of a peaceful rise, it appears that the discourse on the tribute system is interpreted as China’s intention of changing the status quo, while sometimes contributing to shifts in neighboring powers’ views on the rise of China. There are three events that can provide us with a potential window into this dynamics: the Koguryo dispute between China and the two Koreas, the territorial disputes over the South China Sea, and the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands between China and Japan. What emerges from the developments of these events is as follows.

First, the notion of the Sino-centric system is not simply a question of China’s great power identity, but is also associated with the identity politics of its neighboring countries. The Koguryo dispute shows that differing interpretations over the history related to the tribute system can sensitize what Mitzen called “ontological security.” Ontological security refers to the need of a state to “experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time... in order to realize a sense of agency.”⁹ In other words, given that Koreans have long regarded Koguryo (which existed from 37 BC to AD 668) as the fiercely independent Korean state, the claim that Koguryo was a provincial vassal kingdom of China threatened a Korean sense of ontological security. This flare-up between South Korea and China had substantial effects on the South Korean perception of the rise of China as a potential threat to their national security, a shift from its earlier excitement about China’s rise in Asia.¹⁰ An April 2004 *Korea Herald* poll found that 63 percent of South Korea’s ruling party members viewed China as its most important diplomatic partner. In August, however, a similar poll showed that that less than 6 percent of South Korea’s National Assembly members regarded China as their country’s most valuable diplomatic partner.¹¹

Second, the Sino-centric tribute system is juxtaposed with the rules and norms of the existing international law as exemplified by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the case of the disputes over the South China Sea. In the process of parties to the disputes presenting their own claims, China’s invocation of the territorial rights “since ancient

⁸ “Common Dream of A Better Asian Future,” *China Daily* (July 16, 2013)

⁹ Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12 (3): 341-370.

¹⁰ For details about the Koguryo dispute, see Peter Gries, “The Koguryo Controversy: National Identity, and Sino-Korean Relations Today” *East Asia* 22 (2005): 3-17; Choe Sang-Hun, “Tussle over a Vanquished Kingdom,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2006; The Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, *The 2011 Survey of Public Awareness of Unification* (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2011); The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, “South Korea in a Changing World: Foreign Affairs,” the Annual Survey of 2012 South Korean Public Opinion, 6-7. http://asaninst.org/eng/03_publications/report_detail.php?seq=100740. For an important earlier event, see Jae-ho Chung, “From a Special Relationship to a Normal Partnership?: Interpreting the “Garlic Battle” in Sino-South Korean Relations,” *Pacific Affairs*, 76, vol. 4 (winter 2003/04): 549-68; Hwy-tak Yoon, “China’s Northeast Project: Defensive or Offensive Strategy?,” *East Asia* 16, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 99-121.

¹¹ Scott Snyder, “A Turning Point for China-Korea Relations?,” *Comparative Connections* 6, no. 3 (2004): 109-116; see the chronology section, pp. 115-16. http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/0403qchina_korea.pdf.



times” was considered as challenging international law and the liberal principles that the existing international order rests on.¹² The disputes resulted in “a rapid dissipation of China’s ‘soft power’”¹³ that existed leading up to the Beijing Olympics.¹⁴ Today, China’s neighbors think about the link between China’s imperial past and its current ambitions, where “the main distinguishing feature of Zheng He’s voyages was the size of the vessels and numbers of soldiers they carried, enabling China to impose its will on some lesser territories.”¹⁵ Arguably, the heightened threat perceptions felt by Southeast Asian countries toward a rising China have led to the tightening of their security ties with the United States as part of “rebalancing to Asia” strategy.¹⁶ Third, another example of the linkage between the tribute system and a rising China occurred in June 2013, when China disputed Japan’s sovereignty of Okinawa on the grounds that the Ryukyu kingdom paid tribute to imperial China. Although the Chinese government involvement with this assertion is a question, cases such as these matter, because of its potential to escalate the tension between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute into a crisis mode.

What Was the Tribute System?

Much of these narrative speculations are produced based on the less-than-accurate understanding about the tribute system, especially in the highly politicized contexts of deteriorated relations between China and its neighboring powers over territorial disputes. For example, China is alluding to the notion of Chinese “sovereignty” over the areas that were part of the Sino-centric tribute system. But Chinese documents themselves show that the kingdom of Ryukyu, like many other so-called tributary states, was considered a “foreign” state, as opposed to being part of China.¹⁷ Similarly, it is not accurate, either, to say that the tribute system was none other than one “enabling China to impose its will on some lesser territories.”¹⁸ Then the question is: what was the tribute system?

It was historian John K. Fairbank, the founder of the field of modern Chinese history in the United States, who actually invented the term “tribute system” in the postwar period to give a name to the “normative pattern” he identified in the history of Chinese foreign relations.

¹² See, for example, “The Dragon’s New Teeth: A Rare Look Inside the World’s Biggest Military Expansion,” *The Economist*, April 7, 2012. <http://www.economist.com/node/21552193>; Robert Sutter and Chin-hao Huang, “Setback in Bali, Challenges All Around,” *Comparative Connections* 13, no. 3 (January 2012); Mohan Malik, “History the Weak Link in Beijing’s Maritime Claims,” *Diplomat*, August 30, 2013.

¹³ Amitav Acharya, “Beyond the Chinese Monroe Doctrine,” *East Asia Forum*, July 11, 2011. <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/07/11/beyond-the-chinese-monroe-doctrine/>.

¹⁴ See David Shambaugh, “China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order,” *International Security* 29, no. 3 (Winter 2004/5): 64–99.

¹⁵ “China’s Skewed View of South China Sea History,” *Asian Sentinel*, April 23, 2012.

¹⁶ See, for example, Edward Wong, “China’s Disputes Buttress Influence of U.S.,” *New York Times*, September 22, 2010; and Abraham Denmark, “Could Tensions in the South China Sea Spark a War,” *National Interest*, May 31, 2014.

¹⁷ See Larisa Zabrovskaya, “The Traditional Foreign Policy of the Qing Empire,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 6, no. 3 (1993): 351–58, 352.

¹⁸ “China’s Skewed View of South China Sea History,” *Asian Sentinel*, April 23, 2012.



Pervading the Fairbankian notion is a strong culturalist approach that takes meaning, symbols, and identity infused in the tribute system as the primary mechanisms in explaining the international order of the East Asian states system. According to this view, the hierarchical order in early modern East Asia is a product of the Chinese Confucian culture that emphasizes one's own place in the hierarchy of a larger social structure.¹⁹ Beginning in the late 1960s, however, Fairbank's conceptualization of the Chinese world order faced a serious challenge from a group of historians known as the New Qing.²⁰ Generally speaking, these historians do not deny the existence or importance of the tribute system itself,²¹ but their criticisms against the Fairbankian hierarchy model focus on questioning the notion of China as an essential Confucian state and dispute the culturalist notion of Sino-centrism. The New Qing historiography shows that the notion of an unchanging, monolithic tribute system fails to consider a historically contingent nature of international order and practices across time and space.²²

In the subfield of international relations, liberals argue that the Chinese cultural norms embodied in the tribute system led the East Asian states system to be peaceful. The tribute system is regarded as an organizing principle, the rules of the game and institutions, based on which hierarchy and stability could go hand in hand.²³ On the other hand, realists claim that the tribute system was merely a cover for Chinese coercion and the threat of violence. According to this line of work, military power is the real driver behind the workings of the tribute system designed to generate compliance by its neighbors.²⁴ However, these approaches are insufficient in explaining why some actors accepted the tribute system while others did not, and why they did so at certain times and not at others.

I argue that the tribute system is best understood as patterns of social relationships that emerged in and through diplomatic practices (i.e. tribute practices) that were specific to the early modern Asian world. When we say that the Chinese held hegemonic power, it means that the Chinese view of reality was established as the legitimate vision about how international politics

¹⁹ John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); "Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West," *Far Eastern Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1942); Mark Mancall, *China at the Center: 300 Years of Foreign Policy* (New York: Free Press; Collier Macmillan, 1984).

²⁰ James Millward, et al., *New Qing Imperial History* (London: Routledge, 2004); James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Peter Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Kirk Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Choson Korea, 1850–1910* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

²¹ See, for example, Peter Perdue, "A Frontier View of Chineseness," in Giovanni Arrighi, Takeshi Hamashita and Mark Selden, eds., *The Resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 Year Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 51–77; James Millward, "Qing Xinjiang and Trouble with Tribute," a paper presented at the American Historical Association (January 6, 1995).

²² Kirk Larsen, "Comforting Fictions: the Tribute System, the Westphalian Order and Sino-Korean Relations," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 13, No.2 (May–August 2013), Millward, "Qing Xinjiang and Trouble with Tribute."

²³ David Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Robert Kelly, "A 'Confucian Long Peace' in pre-Western East Asia?," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 3 (2011): 407–30.

²⁴ Yuan-Kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).



ought to work through social interactions in the forms of rituals, routine practices and discourses.²⁵ My tack on the tribute system challenges the existing international relations scholarship that tends to regard it merely as China's tool for projecting either the Chinese Confucian culture or material power.

An in-depth look into the actual interactions between the envoys of imperial China and its neighboring powers shows that the tribute system is better understood in a more sociological way, as emerging from the patterns of interactions.²⁶ In other words, I argue that imperial China dominated East Asia by dominating the mode of social relations, regulating what is socially appropriate and legitimate in the given social world of early modern East Asia. Of particular importance here was the role of tribute practices through which the notion of imperial China's identity as the most significant Other was reproduced, based on which it was able to exert influence over its neighboring powers. The intersubjectivity of who the Chinese emperor was and what that symbolic power meant for other actors' domestic politics was what sustained Chinese hegemony, not brute power or the culture of China alone. Therefore, while the tribute system did give imperial China a certain influence over its neighbors, it was not anything akin to "sovereignty" over them.

As such, while some scholars and pundits seem to equate growing Chinese power with the restoration of the imperial Chinese brand of hegemony from Asia's past—a Sino-centric tribute system, I challenge such a view as *ahistorical*. Such claims not only rest on a specific theoretical approach that tends to disregard the social process of how international order is produced, but are also *not* supported by empirical evidence about the actual workings of the tribute system. The Chinese hegemonic order was enduring in the 14th through the 18th centuries, because Chinese tribute practices were taken for granted by contemporary Asians who believed in the unequal nature of social relations generally in any given setting. Unequal relations among peoples were naturally accepted in pre-nineteenth century East Asia, and the Sino-centric international order emerged through stabilities in these types of hierarchical patterns of social interactions.

In the twenty-first century, however, East Asia is very much part of the international law-based order, whose origin and practices rest on the norm of sovereign equality derived from the European Westphalian state system. The East Asian states system has undergone what Gilpin called 'systems changes,' meaning that there has been "a major change in the character of the

²⁵ For an analysis of the relationship between rituals and power relations, see Ji-Young Lee, "Diplomatic Rituals as a Power Resource: the Politics of Asymmetry in Early Modern Chinese-Korean Relations," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 13, No. 2 (May-August 2013), 309-36.

²⁶ For the documents written by those envoys who were on tributary missions between Korea and the Ming and Qing empires, see *Sa Chosŏn rok yŏkchu* 使朝鮮錄 譯註 [Records of Chinese Envoys to Chosŏn Korea: Translations with Notes], trans. Kim, Han-gyu (Seoul: Somyŏng publisher, 2012); *Shi Chaoxian lu* 使朝鮮錄 [Records of Chinese Envoys to Chosŏn Korea], comp., Yin Mengxia, and Yu Hao (Beijing: Beijing tu shu guan chu ban she, 2003); *Yŏnhaengnok sŏnjip* 燕行錄選集 [Selected Works: Korean Envoys' Visits to Beijing], comp. Sŏnggyun'gwan Taehakkyo (1976); Pak Chi-wŏn, *Yŏrha ilgi* 熱河日記 [Jehol Diary], trans. Li Sangho. (Paju, Korea: Bori, 2004). See also Kim Han-gyu, *Sajo sollok yŏn'gu: Song, Myŏng, Ch'ŏng sidae Chosŏn sahaengnok ū saryojok kach'i* [A study of records on Chinese envoy visits to Chosŏn during the Song, Ming, and Qing periods: evaluating sources] (Seoul: Sŏgang University Press, 2011).



international system itself.”²⁷ The first major international change and departure from the long-lasting Chinese hegemony came in 1895 when Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. In the late nineteenth century, Japan’s victory over China ushered in an era of a Japan-centered imperial order in the region, while incorporating East Asia as part of the Western-led international system.²⁸ By that point the tribute system-related cultural framework was no longer the basis for the boundaries of socially acceptable behaviors in Asia.²⁹ The colonization of much of East Asia by the Western and Japanese imperial powers and Japan’s attempt to build an empire called the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere in the early part of the twentieth century accentuated even more the norm of sovereignty and equality among newly founded states across Asia, including those of China.

Patterns of History: Japan and Korea’s Response to China

Most international relations theory is built on recurring historical patterns derived from the European security dynamic. The balance of power theory is a classic example of this. Turning to recurring historical patterns identified in the East Asian security dynamic might reveal new insights for our understanding of international politics in Asia today. Compared to the European states system, the logic of geopolitics at play in the East Asian theatre throughout history produces at least three broad patterns. First, with the exception of the Cold War era, the East Asian state system was always under one great power at a time- China until the late eighteenth century, Japan in early twentieth century, and then the United States in the postwar era and especially after the end of the Cold War. Therefore, in a region where postwar American rules of the game form the basis for the present regional security order, the U.S. and China’s pledge for “New Type of Major Power Relations” of having two great powers simultaneously will be a new social engineering for East Asia. Overall, when we look at the conditions under which East Asia enjoyed relative stability, they tended to come *after* the initial periods of such international order building efforts. In other words, in pre-nineteenth century Asian history the initial processes leading up to the building of a new order tended to involve war and instability.

Another insight from the logic of geopolitics suggests that the present is a rare moment in the history of East Asia, in that both China and Japan are more or less equally powerful players at the same time in the region. Historically speaking, when their national powers reached more or less similar levels, East Asia experienced a large-scale international war. In the late sixteenth century,

²⁷ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 41.

²⁸ This should not be viewed as the international politics of the Chinese empire being isolated. For example, scholars have shown that complex trading relationships existed. However, when it comes to the rules of the game, it was the first time that Japan had adopted Western-style modernization and began its domination over Asia based on Western tactics.

²⁹ For detailed illustrations of this period, see Kirk Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Choson Korea, 1850- 1910* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008); Key-Huik Kim, *The Last Phase of the East Asian World Order: Japan, Korea and the Chinese Empire, 1860-1882* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980).



after Japan's completion of national unification, Japan and China entered into the first hegemonic war in the history of East Asia. Afterward, the next two hegemonic wars in Asia also involved a declining China and a rising Japan, the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95 and the second Sino-Japanese war of 1937-45. The outbreak of the first Sino-Japanese hegemonic war of 1592-98 was *not* solely a function of the narrowing of the material power gap between the two countries. However, it does tell us that we should pay close attention to the ongoing Sino-Japanese strategic rivalry over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute at this particular point in time.

All of the above-mentioned hegemonic wars involved the Korean peninsula. Geographically, the Korean peninsula was a bridge for an ambitious Japan when it looked toward China in the late sixteenth century and early twentieth century during the second Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45. On the other hand, if Japan feels threatened by the growing Chinese power, the Korean peninsula would be a "dagger at the heart of Japan" from the continent, according to imperial Japan's strategists in the early twentieth century. Since the end of World War II, the presence of U.S. forces in South Korea and Japan has played a role in mitigating the direct effect of these geographical configurations.

The Rising China Moments in Asian History

How did Japan and Korea respond to shifts in the power balance vis-à-vis China in the East Asian states system? For example, how did they respond to a rising China in the fourteenth century (the Ming empire), and in the seventeenth century (the Qing empire)? Granted that the international relations of East Asia during this the early modern period were relatively more inward-looking than other times,³⁰ the simple answer is that contrary to the balance of power theory, there was no external balancing. Throughout most of Asian history, Japan and Korea did not join hands to balance against the Chinese power on a single occasion. Specifically, there were two broad patterns in the ways Japan and Korea responded to imperial China's power throughout the early modern period. First, there were clearly distinguishable patterns of contrasts between Japanese and Korean behavior with respect to the Chinese hegemonic order under the Ming and Qing empires. The Sino-centric tribute system flourished in Sino-Korean relations, but not in Sino-Japanese relations. Korea showed a consistently higher level of compliance and participation, while Japan's responses ranged from low compliance to an outright military challenge, and defiance. That is, if the pattern of Japan's responses to the Ming empire was that of ambivalence, Japan under the Qing empire completely stayed away from and had no official relations with Qing, after challenging the Ming hegemonic order in the late sixteenth century.³¹

³⁰ I wish to thank Gilbert Rozman for pointing this out to me. For international relations of East Asia during other earlier periods, see Morris Rosabi (ed.), *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th-14th Centuries*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1983).

³¹ For Qing-Japan relations, see Norihito Mizuno, *Japan and Its East Asian Neighbors: Japan's Perceptions of China and Korea and the Making of Foreign Policy Form the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century*. Doctoral Thesis (Ohio State University:



Second, in the fourteenth through eighteenth centuries, China tended not to be an offensive power and did not use brute force to expand its territory vis-à-vis Japan and Korea. Notable, however, is China's use of coercive diplomacy vis-à-vis Korea, especially when it felt insecure about its national security in the border region at the beginning and at the end of both the Ming and Qing empires. On the part of Korea, while it consistently took a more accommodating stance toward China, it confronted and even militarily challenged China, when its autonomy and territory were infringed.

In the seventeenth century, for example, how did East Asia respond to a rising China when a new empire called Qing was established in 1644? In the eyes of early seventeenth century East Asia, the rise of Manchu power against the declining Ming signified a power transition, while posing the same type of question that Japanese and Korean leaders ask now in the twenty-first century: How to deal with the rise of a new China? Korean behavior during these years of power transition is quite stunning, between the status quo power Ming and the rising challenger Qing. Despite visible signs of Ming military weakness vis-à-vis Korea as well as vis-à-vis the Manchus, Korea supported Ming even after the first Manchu invasion in 1627.³² When the Qing empire invaded Korea for the second time in 1636, Japan offered its military to Korea.³³ But this offer was declined, and the Japan-Korea deal never materialized.³⁴ Japan did not balance against the rise of the Qing empire *per se*. It contemplated but abandoned the idea.³⁵ Therefore, both Japan and Korea clearly rejected the new order under the Qing empire, which, while militarily powerful, was looked down upon as culturally inferior by the rest of East Asia and thus lacked legitimacy.

Korea, on its part, was forced to directly accept the Qing hegemony after having been invaded twice in 1627 and 1636, but began to act as a new center of the Confucian moral order in lieu of the Ming.³⁶ Japanese behavior is also interesting. In the face of the Qing power, Japan responded by distancing itself from China and began to act as a new center of a miniature international order under the reality of Qing hegemony.³⁷ Japan not only backed away from the Qing hegemonic order, but created its own tally trade system vis-à-vis the Netherlands and Chinese

USA, 2004); Ronald Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1984).

³² MCL 67. For the original classical Chinese text, see *ibid.*, at 22. Also QCL 351. For the original classical Chinese text, *ibid.*, at 320. Kuksa P'yŏnch'an Wiwŏnhoe, comp. and trans., *Mingshi Chaoxian Liezhuan* [K: Myŏngsa Chosŏn Yŏljŏn; Records on Chosŏn in Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty], 2004; and in that same volume, Kuksa P'yŏnch'an Wiwŏnhoe, comp. and trans., *Qingshigao Chaoxian Liezhuan* [K: Chongsago Chosŏn Yŏljŏn; Records on Chosŏn in Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty], 2004. In this article, I use "MCL" for all the references for the former, and "QCL" for all the references for the latter.

³³ Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan*, 113-4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 117 on that ground that there was no such precedent for accepting Japanese military assistance.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 137-40; Mizuno, "China in Tokugawa Foreign Relations," 138 for debates among historians.

³⁶ Etsuko Kang, *Diplomacy and Ideology in Japanese-Korean Relations: From the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, and Hampshire: Macmillan Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Yu, Keun-ho *Chosŏncho taoesasangŭi hŭrŭm* [Flow of Foreign Diplomatic Ideology during the Chosŏn Period] (Seoul: Sungshin Women's University Press, 2004).

³⁷ Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan*.



merchants.³⁸ Similar to the workings of the Chinese tribute practices of having foreigners come to pay tribute, Japan required the head of the Dutch East India Company to pay official visits to its leaders upon taking office, while treating the Netherlands and Ryukyu as its tributaries.³⁹ Further, they requested Korea and Ryukyu to send their embassies to Japan, and upon their arrival, advertised them as if they were sending “tribute-bearing” missions to Tokugawa Japanese leaders.⁴⁰ As such, while Japan under the Chinese hegemonic order in the fourteenth through eighteenth centuries remained a distant neighbor, China tended not to force Japan to be part of the tribute system, which explains the relative peace between Japan and China.

A strategic rivalry between Japan and China is likely to involve the Korean peninsula. One can trace the geopolitical logic of what is known as *lips and teeth* back to the official *Mingshi*, which explains the Chinese decision to send forces against Japan’s invasions of Korea in the late sixteenth century. That is, from the Chinese perspective any hostile foreign power in the northern part of the Korean peninsula near the Liaodong region in Manchuria would pose a direct threat to the defense of Beijing.⁴¹ The Hideyoshi invasions of Korea (1592-98) are referred to as the “First Great East Asian War,” where Japanese unifier and top leader Toyotomi Hideyoshi, having completed the unification of Japan, mobilized the entire country and launched an attack on Korea in 1592.⁴² Korea, utterly unprepared from a long-lasting peace of the previous 200 years, requested military help from Ming China. Historians tell us that some 50,000 to 60,000 Korean and about 100,000 Chinese troops fought against the Japanese expeditionary army.⁴³ The Ming empire’s decision to send troops to Korea resonates with China’s later decision to send troops to North Korea in the Korean War (1950-1953). The Ming empire was not in a position to commit major forces to Korea due to its military engagement elsewhere against the Mongols. But Ming decided to join the war, and the first Ming troops crossed the Yalu and arrived in Korea on the day that the Japanese forces occupied Pyongyang.⁴⁴

Importantly, what the war tells us about an international crisis in East Asia is the way that the domestic political conditions played an important role in initiating the war as well as Japan’s uneven growth of power. Historians explain that Hideyoshi was actually trying to consolidate his domestic authority structure in the eyes of rival warrior lords.⁴⁵ Similarly, it is for domestic political reasons that postwar Ming enjoyed a high level of support from Korea even when its

³⁸ Norihito Mizuno, “China in Tokugawa Foreign Relations: The Tokugawa Bakufu’s Perception of and Attitude toward Ming-Qing China.” *Sino-Japanese Studies* 15 (2003).

³⁹ Tashiro Kazui, and Susan Downing Videen. “Foreign Relations during the Edo Period: Sakoku Reexamined.” *Journal of Japanese Studies* (1982), 289.

⁴⁰ Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan*.

⁴¹ MCL, 49 and 57. Ch’oe, *Myongchong sidae chungghan kwangyesa yongu*, 26-30.

⁴² Jurgis Elisonas, “The Inseparable Trinity: Japan’s Relations with China and Korea,” in John Hall, ed., *The Cambridge History of Japan Vol. 4: Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 272.

⁴³ Kang, *Diplomacy and Ideology in Japanese-Korean Relations*, 107. A bigger number is suggested in Kang for the size of Japan’s expeditionary forces (201,200 men) from a total of 303,500 troops that Hideyoshi mobilized. For the size of the war, see also Swope, “Crouching Tigers, Secret Weapons,” 11. According to Han, the Ming forces after the 1597 invasion totaled some 100,000 men when the number reached the maximum. See Han, *Imjinwaerangwa hanchung kwan’gye*, 140.

⁴⁴ Elisonas, “The Inseparable Trinity: Japan’s Relations with China and Korea,” 279.

⁴⁵ For example, see Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1982).



power was at its nadir. The Korean king was in great need of extra domestic legitimation after his failures in the war, and thus sought to borrow external recognition from the Ming emperor.⁴⁶

Lessons from Asia's Past: China's Rise and the U.S. Alliance System in East Asia

How might the historical patterns identified above speak to today's questions? In particular, how might Asia's history help us to think about the future of the U.S. alliance system and a rising China? First, I argue that the past experiences of the Chinese hegemonic order and its durability suggest that Asia's future is not simply a matter of which of the two, the United States and China, is stronger in terms of military and economic power. There is little doubt that Asia's future hinges in large part on U.S.-China relations. However, as Schweller and Pu show, power transition and a new hegemony involve de-legitimizing the status quo hegemon.⁴⁷ This means that the U.S.-China rivalry is not simply about material power, but about establishing a new set of socially acceptable behaviors.

A June 2014 survey of strategic elites in 11 Asian countries is indicative in this regard. Even while a majority of the respondents believed that China will be the most powerful country in East Asia in 10 years' time, they predicted that it will still be the United States that will continue to be the leader in the world, including those Chinese experts surveyed.⁴⁸ The results suggest that the notion of legitimacy is tied to the international practices, which have been created by the U.S. and other Western powers based on a liberal tradition and ideas, especially since the end of World War II. In thinking about the future of Asia, we should focus on the symbolic as well as hard power of these two powers, i.e., what social purpose the U.S. or China is identified with, and how dominant such a purpose is across East Asia.

Against this backdrop, there are increasing signs that China would not want to merely follow existing Western international practices, but wishes to assert Chinese ways of conducting international affairs in certain areas. In terms of U.S.-China relations, China urges the U.S. to "refrain from imposing your will or model on the other."⁴⁹ As Chinese Ambassador to Washington, DC Cui Tiankai's recent speech to an American audience states:

The United States' presence, interests, and influential role in the Asia Pacific is fully and widely recognized. We certainly welcome a constructive role by the United States in the region. At the same time, I think we have to keep in mind another simple and important fact that China is also a Pacific

⁴⁶ Han, *Imjinwaerangwa hanchung kwan'gye*. On this dynamic, see also Kye, Seung-bum, *Chosŏnsidae Haeoep'abyŏngkwa Hanchungkwan'gye* [The Dispatch of Troops during the Chosŏn period and Sino-Korean Relations] Seoul: P'urŭnyŏksa.

⁴⁷ For this dynamic in the context of today's China and the world, Randall Schweller and Xiao Pu, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline," *International Security* 36, vol. 1 (Summer 2011): 41-72.

⁴⁸ Michael Green and Nicholas Szechenyi, "Power and Order in Asia: A Survey of Regional Expectations," A Report of the CSIS Asia Program (June 2014).

⁴⁹ At the opening ceremony of the 6th round of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, "Xi: World big enough for two great nations," *China Daily* (July 10, 2014).



country, and China is also an Asian country. Geographically China is just situated at the center of the Asian continent and we have been for centuries, much longer than the entire history of the United States ... we are more indigenous than you are. So in this context, I think any attempt to manage or manipulate the regional affairs at the expense of China's legitimate interests in the region cannot be justified.⁵⁰

China's goal is to realize "virtuous interaction" with the United States, India and other major countries. The four basic principles of peripheral diplomacy are articulated as *qin* (closeness), *cheng* (earnestness), *hui* (benefit) and *rong* (inclusiveness),⁵¹ while the Chinese principle of non-interference of internal affairs is highlighted in many areas of its conduct of diplomacy. By projecting Chinese culture and sharing wealth, China is likely to want respect from its neighbors for being a rule maker rather a follower in Asia. Ironically, some of the tensions erupting in recent maritime disputes and confrontations with the U.S. today are a reflection of the Chinese decision to set the rules on Chinese terms rather than those of the U.S., while simultaneously pursuing the cultural soft power strategy in pursuit of respect.

My second argument is that what we know from history tells us that the idea that Japan and the ROK will make logical security partners in the face of common security challenges from China is fairly new and historically unprecedented. In light of the history of Asian international relations, the emergence of the postwar American-led hegemonic order was a major event that shifted the contours of this logic of geopolitics. Specifically, the formation of the U.S. hegemonic order marks the second major international change from the Chinese hegemony in the early modern period, while forming what former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker called the "hub-and-spokes" system of bilateral relationships between the United States and key Asian countries. It is also under this American hegemonic order that China began rising in the late 1970s and has continued to rise.⁵² Under this security architecture, America's alliances with Japan and South Korea have been the two pillars of the United States' projection of its power into the region throughout the Cold War and until today.⁵³

The current Obama administration's Asia strategy known as the "rebalancing to Asia" has two core elements, that is, 1) the emphasis on more engagement with emerging powers such as China, India, and Indonesia, and 2) the need for tightening the US-ROK-Japan tripartite security cooperation. This strategy can be viewed as an effort to hedge against uncertainties, including the relative decline of US power, increasingly assertive Chinese foreign policy and military modernization, the Sino-Japanese rivalry over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the ongoing South Korea-Japan Dokdo/Takeshima islets disputes, Japan's new defense posture, and a possible North

⁵⁰ "Remarks at the releasing ceremony of the "U.S.-China Relations: Toward a New Model of Major Power Relationship," made at the Center for American Progress on February 20, 2014.

⁵¹ Chen Xulong, cited in Jayadeva Ranade, "China's New Policy of Peripheral Diplomacy," Centre for China Analysis and Strategy (May 2014).

⁵² G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West," *Foreign Affairs*, Jan 1, 2008.

⁵³ See, for example, Victor Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).



Korean internal crisis just to name a few. According to the Obama administration's 2012 Strategic Guidance document, by reinforcing strong alliance with countries like the ROK, Japan and Australia at a moment of transition, the rebalancing to Asia strategy from the perspective of Washington meets the US's longtime strategic objective of preventing the rise of any hegemonic power that could obstruct American access to or dominate the maritime domain in the region.⁵⁴ The document states:

While the US military continue to contribute security globally, *we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region*. Our relationships with Asian allies and key partners are critical to the future stability and growth of the region. We will emphasize our existing alliances, which provide a vital foundation for Asia-Pacific security... Furthermore, we will maintain peace on the Korean Peninsula by effectively working with allies and other regional states to deter and defend against provocation from North Korea, which is actively pursuing a nuclear weapon program.⁵⁵

The rise of China and perceptions of a relative decline in American power have highlighted different approaches in Japan and South Korea's conceptions about their own place in the region. Of the Washington-Seoul-Tokyo triangle, scholars, policymakers, and analysts have been most concerned about the weak link between Seoul and Tokyo. Typically the so-called historical issues, such as visits by Japanese politicians' to Japan's Yasukuni Shrine, the "comfort women" issue, or the Dokdo/Takeshima islets dispute have long been blamed for the contentious bilateral diplomatic relationship between Seoul and Tokyo. However, when we take a bird's-eye view of the history of East Asian international relations, these historical issues *per se* are only immediate triggers and there is a more structural reason, in conjunction with Japan's own great power identity question. As Green has put it aptly, "Japan's torn identity between East and West would eventually become more acute because of the rise of Chinese power."⁵⁶ Japan's rivalry with China over the ownership of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is a concrete manifestation of this dynamic. Prime Minister Abe's position over historical issues is also tied to Japan's search for a new identity with a rising China in mind.

The stronger China becomes, the more likely that the existing differences between Japan and South Korea's approach to a rising China will be highlighted. It is worth pondering that Japan and Korea have never formed a voluntary alignment against China. Unlike Japan, the Korean peninsula's geostrategic location is linked more closely with the concern of China's own national security and possible military intervention in the Korean peninsula. Korea understands that stability in the northern part of the Korean peninsula is very important to China for its national

⁵⁴ David Berteau et al., U.S. Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region: An Independent Assessment, Center for Strategic and International Studies (August 2012), 13.

⁵⁵ "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense, Department of Defense" (January 2012), available at http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf (underline added)

⁵⁶ Michael J. Green, *Reluctant Realism: Foreign Policy Challenges in an Era of Uncertain Power* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 26-7. See also Gilbert Rozman, ed. *East Asian National Identities: Common Roots and Chinese Exceptionalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).



security, as is evidenced in the dynamics of the Six Party Talks and China's North Korea policy today. South Korean President Park's effort to improve relations with Beijing is natural and makes historical sense, and is not intended to support China's bid for regional hegemony against the U.S. Due to the primacy of South Korean concern for North Korea and its potential contingency situation. Unlike Korea, Prime Minister Abe's vision of Japan's future and of national pride seems clearly linked to a sense of rivalry with China.

Moving forward, comparatively speaking, it is South Korea's foreign policy than that of Japan that will come under increasing strain with the rise of China, as Seoul will likely to continue to pursue the dual goal of strengthening and upgrading the U.S.-ROK alliance on the one hand and endeavoring to improve Seoul-Beijing relations on the other. During the Lee Myung-bak presidency, many policymakers and analysts assessed that the U.S.-ROK alliance was at its best. Building on earlier blueprints, Presidents Lee and Obama confirmed that the two countries will transform the alliance into a comprehensive strategic one that can go beyond the defense of the Korean peninsula and address regional and global challenges. It is noteworthy, however, that South Korea's China policy during the Lee administration generated much dissatisfaction on the part of Beijing, leading it to criticize the alliance as "left over from the past Cold War era."⁵⁷ While viewing the U.S. rebalancing to Asia strategy as designed to contain China's rise, China has put pressure on South Korea not to join Washington's call for joining the missile defense program, citing South Korea's trading partnership with China.⁵⁸

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored possible lessons that can be drawn from Asian history for America's present alliances with Japan and South Korea. My arguments are as follows. First, the return of a Sino-centric tribute system in the twenty-first century is unlikely, chiefly because no contemporary Asian power, having embraced the norms of sovereignty and de jure equality before international law, would accept the notion that international relations should be conducted based on unequal sovereign rights. Second, the question of whether China will likely replace the U.S. as the leading power is not just about China's material capabilities but also about its ability to construct international practices that can be taken for granted by other actors in international politics. Third, the behavior of Korea and Japan from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries suggests that the logic of geopolitics found in the history of Asian international politics might still be at work, leading them to respond differently to a rising China in the twenty-first century, with important implications for the U.S.'s Asia strategy. ■

⁵⁷ Michael Ha, "Chinese Official Calls Korea-US Alliance Historical Relic," *Korea Times*, May 28, 2008, available at http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/04/116_24932.html

⁵⁸ "Caught in the Middle," *Joongang Daily*, October 7, 2013, available at <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2978497>



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