The Chinese Journal of International Politics, Vol. 5, 2012, 55–71
doi:10.1093/cjip/pos002

Authority and Legitimacy in International Relations: Evidence from Korean and Japanese Relations in Pre-Modern East Asia

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Introduction

Is there legitimate authority in international relations? Or, can we reduce most important behaviors to being motivated only by material interests, such as wealth or power? Are state interests the same, and self-evident, across time and space?

The debate about authority in international relations has generally either been purely theoretical, or focused on the contemporary international system.[1] This article takes a different approach. Exploring international relations in eras other than in the Westphalian international system is one way in which scholars may obtain a different view on questions of authority and power. Although a wealth of fascinating research can occur if we take for

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1 David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Martha Finnemore and Judith Goldstein, eds., *Back to Basics: Rethinking Power in the Contemporary World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming); Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Neta Crawford, *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonization, and Humanitarian Intervention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Joseph S. Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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granted the institutional environment and the type and nature of the actors involved, exploring the source and origin of varied international systems and actors within diverse systems may provide a different lens on fundamental theoretical issues such as authority and legitimacy.

Indeed, there are two ways of approaching the issue of how, and whether, to characterize international relations across time and space: One is to argue that the general model of units interacting in anarchy, and balancing/bandwagoning as a result, is a fundamental feature of all international relations.[2] The second is to argue that other types of organization can arise, including different types of institutional or norm-driven orders that do not exactly constitute bandwagoning, but rather a kind of hierarchy.[3] That is, were there different processes, norms, institutions, and countries that were authoritative and consequential for international behavior? Or, were political units in other international systems and other eras essentially motivated and determined by characteristics that would be familiar—or even self-evident—to those studying contemporary international relations, such as the distribution of capabilities and the pursuit of economic wealth?

As a way of approaching these questions, this article examines evidence from the early modern East Asian international system. The research presented here leads to the conclusion that authority is an important aspect of different international systems. Diplomatic, political, and economic relations in early modern East Asia were governed by a particular set of rules, norms, and institutions that many—but certainly not all—political units saw as legitimate and authoritative. That is, the international system, called for convenience the 'tribute system', was consequential of the behavior of the units. Within that system, many political units saw institutions and norms as legitimate and took them for granted.

As empirical evidence, this article concentrates on the Korean and Japanese use of the institutions of the tribute system between themselves. This reveals that the institutions and norms of the tribute system were not utilized simply in relations with China, but that they were fundamental institutions that were widely accepted and viewed as authoritative even when states within it had no dealings with China. That is, even states that explicitly rejected incorporation into the Chinese tribute system—such as Japan—still used the same norms, rules, and institutions of the tribute system, particularly those of a hierarchically ordered view of relations in which not all actors are alike, exchange of ceremonial gifts as the rituals that embody those relations, and symbolic giving of offices to one another of the tribute system.

2 As Kenneth Waltz famously argued, 'hegemony leads to balance', and has done so 'through all of the centuries we can contemplate'. Kenneth Waltz, 'The Emerging Structure of International Politics', *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1993), p. 77.

3 David C. Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

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Section II of this article briefly reviews the literature on authority and legitimacy in international systems, arguing that there are sound theoretical reasons for viewing authority as a fundamental factor in international relations that is as important as power or wealth. Section III then introduces briefly the pre-modern East Asian tribute system as an international order, contrasting essentialist, instrumentalist, and substantive approaches. The key empirical component of this article occurs in section IV, which focuses on Korean and Japanese use of tribute system rules and norms in their trade relations. The article concludes with Section V and a number of questions (but not answers) that might be of interest to political scientists, and hopefully, to historians as well.

Legitimacy and Authority in International Relations

Authority and legitimacy are two sides of an inherently social relationship. Following David Lake, authority can be defined as 'rightful rule', implying a relationship in which, '. . . the subordinate state recognizes both that the dominant state has the right to issue certain commands and that it should, within the limits of its abilities, follow those commands or suffer appropriate consequences'.[4] Legitimacy is the other side of authority and exists in the perception of those who interact with authority. Legitimacy is, thus, the view or belief that some leadership, norm, or institution 'ought to be obeyed'.[5] Authority, then, is a social phenomenon that requires a social order that secondary states accept as legitimate.[6]

In fact, any mention of 'leadership' in international relations is an implicit recognition of this form of authority.[7] After all, leadership necessarily implies that there are followers and that there is a rank order placing leaders above followers. Followers and leaders are not equal in voice, responsibility, standing, or influence. 'Leadership' implies more responsibility than does 'followers', and that the leader has more right or ability than followers to set the course of action for the future than do followers.

It follows, then, that hegemony is one type of authority. Hegemony arises from the acceptance some states have of the leadership and hence greater

4 David A. Lake, 'Escape from the State of Nature: Authority and Hierarchy in World Politics', *International Security,* Vol. 32, No. 1 (2007), pp. 50–51.

5 Ian Hurd, 'Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics', *International Organization*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (1999), p. 390.

6 David A. Lake, 'American Hegemony and the Future of East-West Relations', *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2006), pp. 23–30; Ian Hurd, *After Anarchy: Legitimacy and Power in the United Nations Security Council* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 78–9.

7 The question of leadership is prevalent in the international relations literature. See, for example, Joseph S. Nye, 'Transformational Leadership and U.S. Grand Strategy', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (2006), pp. 139–48; Robert G. Sutter, 'China's Rise: Implications for U.S. Leadership in Asia', *Policy Studies*, No. 21 (Washington D. C: East-West Center, 2006).

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responsibility, influence, and role of another political unit.[8] The simple fact of a unit's material preponderance connotes only primacy or unipolarity; hegemony implies more than mere size. Hegemony is the legitimate influence and authority of one state over others, where one actor has the 'power to shape the rules of international politics according to its own interests'.[9] Although realists often equate primacy with hegemony, an alternative formulation of hegemony emphasizes 'the social, or *recognized*, status of hegemony'.[10] For example, John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan note that although material incentives are one way in which hegemons assert control over other nations, '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'.[11] As Jonathan Joseph observes, 'The concept of hegemony is normally understood as emphasizing consent in contrast to reliance on the use of force'.[12]

That is, crafting a set of norms and rules that are viewed as legitimate by secondary states is an integral task for the dominant state. As Michael Mastanduno notes, 'The most durable order is one in which there exists a meaningful consensus on the right of the hegemonic state to lead, as well as the social purposes it projects'.[13] This consensual view of hegemony focuses on why secondary states would defer to the hegemon rather than the structural position of the hegemon itself.[14] Hegemony is a form of power itself, and derives in part from the values or norms that a state projects, not merely from the state's military might and economic wealth. As David Lake argues,

[8] Although it is common to call the units 'states', in fact, for much of history, state-like units interacted with numerous other forms of political organization that conducted international relations with each other. As John Ruggie has pointed out, much scholarship can only conceptualize alternative systems 'in terms of entities that are institutionally substitutable for the state'. John Ruggie, 'Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations', *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (1993), p. 149. See also Jack Donnelly, 'Sovereign Inequalities and Hierarchy in Anarchy', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2006), p. 154.

[9] Michael Mastanduno, 'Hegemonic Order, September 11, and the Consequences of the Bush Revolution', *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2005), p. 179.

[10] Ian Clark, *How Hierarchical Can International Society Be?* (manuscript, Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, Wales, 2009), p. 6. For realist versions of hegemony, see Christopher Layne, 'The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise?', *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1993), pp. 11–12; Mark Haugaard, 'Power and Hegemony in Social Theory', in Mark Haugaard and Howard H. Lentner, eds., *Hegemony and Power: Consensus and Coercion in Contemporary Politics* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), p. 62.

[11] John G. Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, 'Socialization and Hegemonic Power', *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (1990), p. 283.

[12] Jonathan Joseph, *Hegemony: A Realist Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 1.

[13] Michael Mastanduno, 'Incomplete Hegemony: The United States and Security Order in Asia', in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 145.

[14] Ian Clark, *Towards an English-School Theory of Hegemony* (manuscript, Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, Wales, 2009); B. Cronin, 'The Paradox of Hegemony: America's Ambiguous Relationship with the United Nations', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2001), pp. 103–30.

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'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'.[15]

Norms and beliefs are not epiphenomenal to material power; that is, they are more than a convenient velvet glove over an iron fist.[16] Authority 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.[17] 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'.[18] Dominant states, like individual leaders, lead through a combination of bullying, bribing, and inspiring.[19] Although coercion can substitute for legitimacy in certain instances and for a short while, they are both intertwined as well. Authority is stronger when backed by coercive capacity, and coercion seen as legitimate is also more effective.[20] 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'.[21]

In sum, authority involves a rank order of states, and authority involves more than material power; it also involves a set of norms—a social order—that secondary states find legitimate, thus making it a social system as well. Authority itself is distinct from material power, and although the two are intertwined, authority grows out of the social purpose a state projects and only exists if seen as legitimate in the eyes of others.

The Tribute System in Pre-modern East Asia

Research on pre-modern East Asia as an international system involves addressing directly the issue of the 'tribute system', the term most closely associated with historical international relations in East Asia. Elements of

15 David Lake, 'The New Sovereignty in International Relations', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2003), p. 304. See also Ian Clark, 'How Hierarchical Can International Society Be?', p. 14.

16 Andrew Hurrell, 'Rising Powers and the Question of Status in International Society', paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, New York, February 15–18, 2009, p. 2.

17 Jack Donnelly, 'Sovereign Inequalities and Hierarchy in Anarchy', p. 142.

18 Ian Hurd, 'Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics', pp. 389, 392.

19 Richard Samuels, *Machiavelli's Children: Leaders and their Legacies in Italy and Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

20 Ian Hurd, 'Breaking and Making Norms: American Revisionism and Crises of Legitimacy', *International Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 2–3 (2007), p. 194.

21 David Lake, 'Escape from the State of Nature', p. 53.

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this system first appeared 2000 years ago, and over the centuries the norms and institutions of what became known as the tribute system were refined, made more explicit, and spread beyond China itself. Under this system, international order in East Asia encompassed a regionally shared set of formal and informal norms and expectations that guided relations and yielded substantial stability. The core of the tribute system was a set of institutions and norms that regulated diplomatic and political contact, cultural and economic relations, and that explicitly stated a relationship between the various political units. The tribute system emphasized formal hierarchy among nations while allowing considerable informal equality and freedom for secondary units.[22] In contrast to the modern Westphalian ideal of equality among nation-states, the tribute system emphasized the 'asymmetry and interdependence of the superior/inferior relationship', and inequality was the basis for all relations between two units.[23]

The tribute system was formalized in two key institutions—those of diplomatic recognition by the superior state, known as 'investiture', and the sending of embassy envoys to the superior state. Investiture involved explicit acceptance of subordinate tributary status and was a diplomatic protocol through which a state recognized the legitimate sovereignty of another political unit and the status of the king in that tributary state as the legitimate ruler.[24] Tribute embassies served a number of purposes. They stabilized the political and diplomatic relationship between the two sides, provided information about important news and events, formalized rules for trade, and allowed intellectual and cultural exchange among scholars. Missions themselves could be vast, comprising hundreds of people—scholar-officials, interpreters, physicians, alternates, messengers, and assistants.

Within this system, China was clearly the most powerful, wealthy, and the cultural center. Built on a mix of legitimate authority and material power, the China-derived tribute system provided a normative social order that also contained credible commitments by China not to exploit secondary states that accepted its authority. This order was explicit and formally unequal, but informally equal. Secondary states did not believe they were, nor did they call themselves, equal to China, yet they had substantial latitude as regards their actual behavior. China stood at the top of the hierarchy, and there was no intellectual challenge to the rules of the game until the 19th century and the arrival of the Western powers. Korean, Vietnamese, and

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22 Charles Keyes, 'The Peoples of Asia: Science and Politics in the Classification of Ethnic Groups in Thailand, China, and Vietnam', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2002), pp. 1163–203; Magnus Fiskesjo, 'On the "Raw" and "Cooked" Barbarians of Imperial China', *Inner Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1999), pp. 139–68.

23 James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 124, 132–33.

24 Geun-Ho Yoo, *Chosŏnjo taeoe sasangui hurum* (*Flows of Ideologies on Foreign Relations during the Chosŏn Period*) (Seoul: Sungshin Women's University Press, 2004).

even Japanese elites consciously copied Chinese institutional and discursive practices, in part to craft stable relations with China, and not to challenge it. These rules and norms were consequential for diplomacy, war, trade, and cultural exchange between political units in East Asia. Far more than a thin veneer of meaningless social lubricants, the tribute system and its ideas and institutions formed the basis for relations between states. The tribute system, with its inherent notions of inequality and its many rules and responsibilities for managing relations among unequals, provided a set of tools for resolving conflicting goals and interests short of war. With China at the center of the system, some political units deeply accepted Confucian ideas, while others—such as the semi-nomadic Central Asian peoples—merely used those rules in their relations with one another.

Scholars have generally characterized the tribute system in three general ways: essentialist, instrumentalist, or substantive. The essentialist view of the tribute system is the easiest to dismiss, because I know of no scholar who actually views the tribute system this way. At heart, the essentialist view sees the tribute system as an unquestioned and unchanging set of Confucian ideals that operated the same way and without dissension across time, space, and dimension. This view might also be called the 'Sinocentric' view rather than a 'tribute system', because it only sees relations with China as important, and posits that all states and other political units must interact with China purely on a Confucian, stylized, idealized manner. In this view, there is actually no international politics at all, because everything has already been sorted out.

More consequential for actual scholarship are the other two ways of viewing the tribute system. The first—the instrumentalist view—falls comfortably into contemporary reductionist views that human motivations are both self-evident and the same across time and space. One common research theme in contemporary political science is to explore the 'strategic logic' behind seemingly substantive actions.[25] This approach see the tribute system as a set of arbitrary and somewhat comical institutions and norms that were simply a mask that hid the real motives behind states' and other actors' behavior, almost always involving a 'more basic' goal of wealth or some form of military power. As Ian Hurd writes, 'In international relations studies, talking about compliance secured by either coercion or self-interest is uncontroversial, and well-developed bodies of literature—falling roughly into the neorealist and rationalist-neoliberal schools, respectively—elaborate each of these notions'.[26]

The instrumental view has two variants: one sees the tribute system as akin to an alliance or balancing system, and thus 'truly' realist at its core; another

[25] See, for example, Robert Pape, 'The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 3 (2003), pp. 343–61.

[26] Ian Hurd, 'Legitimacy and Authority in International Relations', p. 380.

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views the institutions of the tribute system as a mask for commercial interests. The instrumentalist view also has a functionalist strand—that is, the institutions and beliefs of the early modern East Asian international system can be viewed as merely a set of rationalizing conventions or rules allowing actors to coordinate or pursue their interests, such as an agreement that all cars drive on the right side of the road. As long as some type of coordination occurs, the substance of the rules is thus relatively unimportant, and it is just as likely that everyone could agree that all cars should drive on the left side of the road. Thus, scholars who view the system as instrumental argue that while some states may rhetorically support the tribute system, their core motivations can be reduced to an attempt to maximize (usually undefined) 'power' or wealth in some way.[27] Viewing the tribute system as essentially instrumental, John Fairbank first popularized the notion that 'tribute was a cloak for trade'.[28] Arguing that tribute was 'not exactly what it seemed', Fairbank saw the tribute system as an 'ingenious vehicle' for the creation of trade between states.[29] James Hevia concludes, 'what virtually all those who followed Fairbank [and Teng], faithfully reproduced was an insistence upon seeing the tribute system as dualistic in nature'.[30]

Similarly, other scholars view the tribute system as purely symbolic or epiphenomenal, a substance-free set of acts that masked 'real' international politics based on military power and commerce. This approach sees the tribute system as unimportant in explaining the power politics that 'really' motivated East Asian states. In this view, secondary states engaging in the outward acts of hierarchy, emulation, and deference were at heart merely engaging in a rational cost–benefit calculation. This symbolic view of the tribute system sees smaller states surrounding China as not powerful enough to actually deter or defeat China by the force of arms; rather than defy China and risk invasion and conquest, these smaller states chose the path of placating China culturally, while inwardly seething with resentment and wishing they had the power to have challenged China if they could.[31] In his critical review of this instrumentalist literature, Liam Kelley points out that many scholars have attempted to, 'look beyond the "rhetoric" of the tribute

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[27] Contemporary scholarship that either explicitly or implicitly reduces the tribute system to power or wealth motivations includes Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Victoria Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010)

[28] John K. Fairbank and Ssu-Yu Teng, 'On the Ch'ing Tributary System', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1941), pp. 139, 141.

[29] James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, p. 10.

[30] *Ibid*., p. 14.

[31] See, for example, Keith W. Taylor, 'China and Vietnam: Looking for a New Version of an Old Relationship' in Jayne Werner and Luu Doanh Huynh, eds., *The Vietnam War: American and Vietnamese Perspectives* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), p. 271.

system in the hope of finding an understandable "reality". Surely there had to be a logical reason why foreign kingdoms accepted a position of inferiority in this relationship'.[32]

These criticisms are important, and we should take them seriously. However, the first criticism—that the tribute system was essentialist, however, is perhaps the easiest to dismiss. It is almost impossible to find any scholar who actually argues that the tribute system was a perfect system that existed for 2000 years and that China's benevolence of its slavish acceptance by everyone everywhere resulted in absolutely no problems at any time. Of course there was contestation, negotiation, bargaining, and culturally specific acceptance of rules within culturally specific interpretations. The same could be easily said about the contemporary Westphalian system; it is hardly an essential set of unquestioned rules, but rather a set of rules designed to help nations coordinate, collaborate, and interact with each other through a set of common understandings.[33]

Rather, the more pertinent question is, did the rules and institutions and norms actually affect the actors' behavior? Did they use these rules, and find them legitimate and authoritative as a means of ordering relations between units? Even a critic of the concept of tribute system, John Wills, concludes that, 'it is crucial to my critique of the tribute system as a master concept that important parts of Qing foreign relations had little or no relation to the institution of the tribute embassy. But the relations with Siam and with Annam were very much within the tribute system ... relations with Siam were managed with far better information about the foreign polity and far more realistic policy making than in most cases ...'.[34]

The instrumentalist approach is also problematic in that it asks us to dismiss and ignore quite a bit of what officials, scholars, and governments actually did and said at the time. Also, both criticisms literally posit centuries of self-delusion on the part of Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and other officials. Hevia notes that emphasizing the tribute system as merely symbolic leads to a disparaging view of Chinese bureaucrats. 'Caught up in illusion, unable to rationalize beyond a certain point, China's bureaucrats can only distinguish between appearances and reality when the two mesh ... while even the most clearheaded drifted unawares'.[35]

In fact, why would the tribute system receive so much energy, time, and thought if it were purely instrumental, and nobody, neither Chinese nor

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[32] Liam Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), p. 18.

[33] Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[34] John E. Wills, Jr., 'Great Qing and Its Southern Neighbors, 1760–1820: Secular Trends and Recovery from Crisis', www.historycooperative.org/proceedings/interactions/wills.html.

[35] James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, p. 15.

foreigners, believed in it? Were Ming and Qing officials so blinded by their own delusions that they could not see Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Mongolian, Siamese, and other envoys smirking at them while going through these rituals? As this article will show, there is ample evidence that Korean and other envoys believed in what they were doing. Furthermore, numerous rulers of secondary states used the basic institutional and discursive forms of the tribute system in their relations with each other. If the tribute system was merely an instrumental means for placating China, this begs the question of why other states, such as Korea, Vietnam, and Japan used these same ideas and institutional forms in their own relations with each other. Perhaps most consequentially for these arguments remains the question of why there was so much stability in the system and, in particular, between the Sinic states. That is, the functionalist and symbolic views of the tribute system overlook one significant fact: these rules and rites were intimately involved with ordering diplomatic and political relations among a number of actors.

Alternatively, can we take seriously the actual substance of the institutions, norms, and rules: did they affect international relations? Did the substance of the roles order and frame the actors' understandings of the situation? Were communication, negotiation, and bargaining easier between actors who understood and accepted the legitimacy of the tribute system than between the actors who disagreed with the rules? Recently, it has become fashionable in historical circles to question the viability of the tributary system, in part because scholars have become increasingly aware of the realties behind Chinese rhetoric. More nuanced studies and new interpretations, however, serve only to underscore the centrality of the system to its participants. That is, we can easily acknowledge that, at the time, all actors saw and utilized the system in their own culturally specific ways, but this does not mean that they rejected the legitimacy of the system.

In sum, what a few scholars have done is take the tribute system as a set of international rules and ideas similar to the Westphalian international system that orders our contemporary world. Few have asked whether China's central position was achieved and maintained purely through coercion and bribery, or whether the country's considerable cultural and intellectual achievements were also important aspects of its leading position in the system. If we do this and ask what were the principles and institutions that guided international relations in historical East Asia, and how did this affect the behavior of the units, we might take more seriously the norms, rules, and institutions embodied in the tribute system. More than just a simple choice between 'invasion or tribute', the tribute system ordered the way officials and scholar in smaller states, and the Sinic states in particular, thought about and acted in their relations with the Chinese hegemon.

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Korea and Japan

The international system of pre-modern East Asia consisted of more than simply China. States and peoples observed the rules and institutions of the tribute system in their mutual dealings, whether or not China was a factor. Acting as more than just spokes in a wheel, the rules of the game were substantive and accepted as legitimate by many actors at the time. Perhaps most significantly, these other states offered no intellectual alternatives to the tribute system and the hierarchic relations among states embodied within it. The cases of Korea and Japan provide a different view and different insights into the tribute system, because neither of these countries was the central, hegemonic, actor. Yet, both were heavily involved in the early modern diplomatic and trading system, and used the institutions and norms of the tributary system as the basis for diplomacy with one another and other states. Goods, ideas, and people flowed back and forth both between Japan and Korea, and China and Southeast Asia as well. Indeed, the cases of Korea and Japan are important precisely because they prove the importance of viewing the tribute system as an international system; also, of distinguishing the tribute system as a general set of rules and norms from the more simplistic 'Sinocentric' view that sees the system as important only in relation to China.

International diplomacy did not function merely for the creation of trade. The tribute system ordered relations with respect to the management of borders, dealing with crises, and regulating a host of other interactions. In general, the tribute system was the political framework that allowed for diplomacy, travel, and official and private trade between all the states in the region. By the early 15th century, the Korean Chosŏn court had divided foreign contacts—such as envoys from Japanese, Jurchens, and Ryukyus—into four grades, and several statuses within these grades. These grades corresponded to different diplomatic statuses and rights, and also entailed different trading and commercial rights. They regulated Japanese and Jurchen contact and covered issues such as repatriation of traders and sailors who had been shipwrecked in Japan. Korea, for example, explicitly ranked its relations with other countries, placing various Mongol tribes at rank 4 and the Ryukyus in rank 5.[36] Kenneth Robinson concludes that the Chosŏn Korean court developed 'a tribute system designed over time in part to organize interactions with a broad collection of Japanese elites and separate them into a multi-level hierarchy for reception and ritual purposes'.[37]

Japan maintained tribute relations with other states as well, most notably with the Ryukyus. The Japanese also devised an elaborate set of rights and

[36] Etsuko Kang, *Diplomacy and Ideology in Japanese-Korean Relations: from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 50–1.

[37] Kenneth R. Robinson, *Policies of Practicality: the Choson Court's Regulation of Contact with Japanese and Jurchens, 1392-1580s* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), p. 6.

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regulations that covered economic relations.[38] Tokugawa Japan's relations with the Ryukyus provide an informative window on its use of the tribute system, and the views of both on China and on the larger rules and norms of the system. The Ryukyus gave tribute to both China and Japan during the 17th and 18th centuries. These two most powerful East Asian states both claimed suzerainty over the same Ryukyan territory, but at least through to the late 19th century, never came to blows over it. Gregory Smits notes that, 'in 1655, the [Japanese leadership] formally approved tribute relations between Ryukyu and Qing, again, in part to avoid giving Qing any reason for military action against Japan'.[39] The Japanese indeed pressured the Ryukyu to actually increase the rate of tribute missions to China, hoping indirectly to 'increase its trade with China and thereby relieve ongoing financial woes'.[40] The Japanese authorities were so circumspect in hiding their involvement with the Ryukyus that when Chinese envoys visited the islands, Japanese officials hid in a small village outside of the capital.[41] Evidence of the ambiguous hierarchy continued—the Tokugawa bakufu accepted Ryukyu tributary status to the Qing, realizing that Ryukyuan 'authority and legitimacy could not be preserved without the bestowal of the title of king [on the Ryukyus] from the Qing'.[42]

In fact, tribute trade was the diplomatic structure that created the political framework within which private and official trade could be conducted. Yet Korea–Japan trade was essentially pluralistic: that is, it was not a state monopoly. Although tribute relations were the key diplomatic institution, both *Daimyo*s and rich Japanese merchants were involved, as were Korean elites and merchants. When a trade mission arrived in Korea from Japan, the first step would be to establish diplomatic credentials, which involved a set of ceremonies. After credentials had been certified and diplomatic protocol followed, 'high volume [official] trade began'. Official trade, as distinct from tribute trade, involved the purchase of goods that had not been exchanged as tribute, but rather been brought by the Japanese. Tribute missions typically remained in Pusan for 85 days while trade was conducted. Korean purchase of excess Japanese cargo began in the 14th century—a choice in the interests of having traders leave happy rather than becoming pirates in effort to recoup their losses elsewhere.[43] Although the Japanese

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[38] Thuan Luc, 'An Early Trade Coin and the Commercial Trade betwen Vietnam and Japan in the 17th Century', May 1999, http://www.charm.ru/coins/vn/nagasaki.shtml.

[39] Gregory Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu*: *Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought and Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i press, 1999), p. 21.

[40] *Ibid*., p. 22.

[41] Robert Sakai, 'The Satsuma-Ryukyu Trade and the Tokugawa Seclusion Policy', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (1964), p. 392.

[42] Norihito Mizuno, *Japan and its East Asian Neighbors: Japan's Perception of China and Korea and the Making of Foreign Policy from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century* (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2004), p. 170.

[43] James B. Lewis, *Frontier Contact between Chosŏn Korea and Tokugawa Japan* (London: Routledge Curzon Press, 2003).

sent 2369 missions to Korea between 1392 and 1608, only 36 of these were Shogunal (the highest diplomatic rank).[44] As official amounts and type of tribute trade between Korea and Japan were fixed by treaty, expansion was available only through private trade. As James Lewis describes it: 'Tribute trade was the oldest and most important component of the trade structure, not for its volume or content but for its symbolism .... Koreans viewed tribute trade as a ''burden'' and a favor extended to needy islanders; the significance was diplomatic not economic'.[45]

Different ranks led to different rights. The highest grade Japanese officials, for example, were allowed to outfit up to three ships for trade with Korea, 'and also move an unlimited amount of that cargo ... but Korean officials severely restricted the volumes of official trade permitted contacts in the two lower grades ...'.[46] Entry into Korea was governed by an official seal, and Japanese officials occasionally attempted to forge diplomatic seals in order to gain better trading benefits. By the 15th century, Korea and Japan had developed elaborate rules governing recognized Japanese envoys to Korea and their status for the purpose of reception—where envoys and traders could land in Korea and where they could travel—the number of trading ships allowed to visit the country, the manner in which trade was to be conducted, and who would actually be allowed to trade. For example, by 1418, copper seals were required to distinguish authorized Japanese traders from pirates. A treaty in 1443 limited the Japanese to 50 ships per year, and required Japanese ships to obtain credentials from the Lord of Tsushima to present Japanese traders in one of the three Korean ports of Pusan-po, Chae-po, and Yon-po.[47] Trade between Korea and Japan was so extensive that by 1494 there were over 3000 Japanese permanently residing around Pusan. Thereafter, Korea restricted Japanese traders and diplomats to the port of Pusan.

The key diplomatic institutions concerning Korea–Japan relations in the literal sense were the Korean *waegwan*, or 'Japan house', that were built as early as 1419. Originally designed to house official envoys and keep them separate from Japanese living in Korea, by the 17th century, the Pusan *waegwan* had evolved into a group of buildings within a compound. As the sole legal place for Japanese envoys and traders to stay while in Korea, official permission was also needed to leave the *waegwan*. In existence until 1876, the *waegwan* housed more than 1000 Japanese, operating continuously other than during the interruption of the Imjin war.

[44] Kenneth R. Robinson, *Policies of Practicality*, p. 2.
[45] James B. Lewis, *Frontier Contact between Chosŏn Korea and Tokugawa Japan*, p. 91.
[46] Kenneth Robinson, 'Centering the King of Chosŏn: Aspects of Korean Maritime Diplomacy, 1392-1592', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2000), pp. 109–25.
[47] James B. Lewis, *Frontier Contact between Chosun Korea and Tokugawa Japan*, p. 21.

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There is a great deal of evidence that both Korea and Japan regarded each other as inferiors.[48] Until the 1876 Kanghwa treaty that re-institutionalized Korea–Japan relations along Westphalian institutions, tribute relations were the diplomatic protocol that governed economic relations between Japan and Korea. Japanese tribute (considered a 'humiliation' by the Tokugawa bakufu, but maintained nonetheless) consisted of an envoy offering a letter (*sogye*) from the Lord of Tsushima addressed to the Korean Third Minister (Sr. 3) in the Board of Rites. A reply, consisting of gifts, was delivered a few days later. Japanese tribute was pepper, alum, sappan wood, gold or silver lacquerware, ink stone cases, figured paper, and other goods from Southeast Asia. Korean gifts in reply included ginseng, leopard and tiger skins, dogs, hawks, linen, white silk thread, oil paper, brushes, ink, ink stones, swords, bamboo saddlebags, fans, combs, oil, honey, starch, juniper seeds, chestnuts, and dates. Following this exchange of letters and tribute trade was a 'tea ceremony', or banquet.[49]

The Japanese followed the same procedure. During the Muromachi bakufu of the 15th and 16th centuries, Japan sent 20 delegations to China, 'but during the same period, hundreds of groups . . . traveled to Korea'.[50] Japan–Korea interactions occurred on multiple levels—not only the central governments, but also regional and local governments as well as common people traded and traveled between the two countries.[51]

After a semblance of diplomatic recognition had been achieved between Korea and Japan, Korea sent 12 envoy missions to Tokugawa Japan between 1607 and 1871. Although the Koreans were clear that these envoys were explicitly *not* tribute missions, the corresponding prohibition on Japanese diplomatic missions to Korea allowed the Japanese to act as if the Korean envoys actually were tribute missions from a supplicant Korea dispatched to Tokugawa. As Norihito Mizuno points out, 'the *bakufu* attempted to exploit the presence of the foreign missions on Japanese soil as a political tool to vindicate the legitimacy and authority of its own regime'.[52]

Given the domestic politics of the new Tokugawa regime and its need for legitimacy, the Tokugawa shoguns preferred to see Korea as a subjugated state after the Imjin war, despite the overwhelming evidence that it was Japan that had lost. Internationally, the Japanese leaders needed to find a way to interact with other states, and the Korean restrictions on Japanese travel provided them with a convenient excuse; they could claim to themselves that they did not send missions to Seoul because it was an inferior nation, rather than because the Korean government denied them the

48 Kenneth R. Robinson, *Policies of Practicality*, pp. 80–81.
49 James B. Lewis, *Frontier Contact between Chosun Korea and Tokugawa Japan*.
50 Charlotte von Verschuer, 'Looking from Within and Without: Ancient and Medieval External Relations', *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (2000), p. 538.
51 *Ibid*., p. 548.
52 Norihito Mizuno, *Japan and its East Asian Neighbors*, p. 36.

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opportunity. As Mizuno points out, '. . . the bakufu were neither ignorant of the implications of diplomatic protocols nor self-flatteringly imbued with a belief in Japan's superiority over Korea. It was obviously aware of the discrepancy between its own ideal vision of relations with Korea and the actual state spelled out through diplomatic protocols'.[53]

What is known is that the first letter that Japanese leader Ieyasu sent, on July 4 1607, was found to be insufferably insulting to the Korean court, to the extent that the court demanded revisions before they would accept the letter.[54] The Japanese tone in this first letter was that of victor to supplicant. Ieyasu had written to the Koreans saying, 'Your country requests restoration of its previous association [with Japan]. Why would my country decline it?'[55] Worse than the tone were the choice of title and the date (era name). Neither the title of the Korean king nor the Chinese era name, *Wangli*, was in the Shogunal letter. It instead used the Japanese era name, *keicho*. Confucian honorifics in diplomacy had specific and well-understood hierarchies. The highest title was 'majesty' (c. *bixia*; j. *heika*; k. p'yeha); followed by 'highness' (c. *dianxia*; j. *denka*; k. *jonha*); and then 'excellency', (c. *gexia*; j. *kakka*; k. *gakha*). Although Ieyasu first used *gakha* in referring to the Korean king, eventually, the Tokugawa shoguns and the Korean kings settled on referring to each other as 'highness', as in letters written to a peer to 'avoid trouble'.[56]

This was not mere diplomatic wrangling about a relationship that would surely have come about another way. Rather, this negotiation over status was central to the diplomatic relations of the two states. The ability to situate oneself on a ranking was critical to the hierarchical order; without it, relations were impossible to normalize. The reflection of status and hierarchy was central to the international relations of the time.

In sum, even the Japanese completely accepted the legitimacy and authority of this type of hierarchic set of rules that defined actors' relations to each other, including the specific rules of nomenclature, calendar, and rankings. Both Koreans and Japanese operated from a shared understanding about the way in which international relations should be conducted and what the different uses of names or titles implied in the hierarchical relations of the time. The contrast with contemporary times is illuminating. Although the leader of a country can be called 'president', or 'prime minister', or even something else, none implies any hierarchy in relation to the other.

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[53] *Ibid*., p. 40.
[54] However, it is quite likely that the letter was forged by the Tsushima clan, which desperately wanted to restore economic relations between Korea and Japan. Ieyasu had abdicated the throne in 1605. Thanks to a referee for pointing this out.
[55] Norihito Mizuno, *Japan and its East Asian Neighbors*, p. 71.
[56] *Ibid*., p. 84. A referee has pointed out that the title the Tokugawa bakufu later employed in their correspondences to Korea was 'Nihon Kokushu'. For the bakufu, the term indicated the Shogun was neither the 'emperor' of Japan, nor a 'king/Kokuo' canonized by Chinese emperor.

But within the tribute system, different titles implied very different standings, and leaders were aware of and sensitive to the nuances.

Trade, foreign travel, and diplomatic relations were all, thus, subject to the tribute system set of rules, and negotiation over status was central to the diplomatic relations of the two states. Secondary countries accepted these norms and rules unquestioningly, and conflict occurred within the system, but not to overturn it. That is, although there were occasional challenges to China's position at the top of the hierarchy—Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea and the Manchu conquest of the Ming, for example—the contenders never sought to actually change the norms and institutions by which ranking was decided and achieved. The ability to situate oneself in a ranking was critical to the hierarchical order; without it, relations were impossible to normalize. No country attempted to develop alternative rules and norms for international relations until the arrival of the Western powers in the 19th century. Arrighi, Hui, Hung, and Selden note, 'The China-centered tributary-trade system can often mediate inter-state relations and articulate hierarchies with minimal recourse to war. Japan and Vietnam, being peripheral members of this system, seemed more content to replicate this hierarchical relationship within their own sub-systems than vie directly against China in the larger order'.[57]

Conclusion

The research presented in this article leads to two basic conclusions. First, different international systems entailed different institutional rules and norms. While basic human motivations may be the same across time and space—status, wealth, and power—there is a wide variety of ways in which these goals can manifest themselves. Perhaps most intriguing is, how do different ideas and rules affect trade, negotiations, bargaining, and even the framing of issues? That is, once scholars take for granted a set of rules, the relevant actors, their goals, and the means by which they communicate with each other, then scholarship about their interactions, bargaining, and negotiation is fairly straightforward. However, what if we have to ask the more fundamental question: how do certain units and ideas become legitimate, or accepted, while others are not? On what basis do units communicate and negotiate? What are the 'taken for granted' ground rules that order and smooth negotiations and interactions—negotiations that are difficult even when both actors accept each other and the rules as legitimate?

After all, Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* and much of the game theory today explicitly take as given like units (usually, 'states') operating

[57] Giovanni Arrighi, Po-keung Hui, Ho-fung Hung, and Mark Selden, 'Historical Capitalism, East and West', in Giovanni Arrighi, Takeshi Hamashita and Mark Selden, eds., *The Resurgence of East Asia, 500, 150, and 50 Year Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 269.

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within an unquestioned institutional structure. But, how would one model interactions between unlike units? What if one had to build a theory of international relations in which there are states, tribes, clans, and kingdoms, all interacting? Is it possible, for example, to call nomadic actions 'balancing behavior' in any meaningful way? How do we theorize about the Tsushima clan that played an instrumental role in Korea–Japan relations over the centuries, yet was never considered a political actor equivalent to the Korean king or Japanese shogun and emperor? Can we model how states, tribes, and religiously based kingdoms interact by simply positing or assuming they think, act, and function like nation-states in the 21st century? The closest analog I can find in the contemporary literature is the scholarship about ethnic violence, which does not assume nation-states.[58] The task there, however, is that it still tends to assume similar units—different ethnicities that vary along similar dimensions, such as size or internal cohesion. That is, can we design models that could meaningful incorporate geographically defined and centrally controlled states such as the Ming or Qing, but also incorporate semi-nomadic polities such as the Mongols or Jurchens?

Second, perhaps we should take the relationships between material power and authority more seriously. Following David Lake, Ian Hurd, and John Ikenberry, there is perhaps more authority and perhaps less pure power politics in the international realm that our current models allow. Few would argue that the United States today is a hegemon purely because of military might and coercive diplomacy, and few today would argue that US legitimacy and authority as a cultural beacon is completely meaningless.[59] In the same way, we would be wise actually to take seriously the substance of the tribute system rules; the ways in which they not only ordered beliefs about international relations, but actually created those beliefs: who is allowed to trade, and why? Why do some states, actors, or political units receive more favorable relations than others? Why did some political units such as Korea and Vietnam accept the authority of the hegemon, while other units—the Mongols—rejected its authority, even to the point of being eliminated from the system?

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[58] James Fearon, 'Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict' in David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, eds., *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[59] David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Systems* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).