

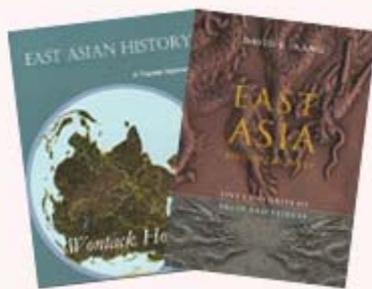
GLOBAL ASIA

Volume 6 Number 2 Summer 2011

Book Review

Polar Opposites:

Two New Histories of East Asia



East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute

By David C. Kang

Columbia University Press, 2010, 240 pages, \$27.50

East Asian History: A Tripolar Approach

By Wontack Hong

Kudara International, 2010, 478 pages, \$39.95

Reviewed by John Delury

Powered by China's inexorable rise, East Asia is increasingly looked upon as a pillar in a multipolar world. As China takes its stand and Asia steps out from the shadow of the West, scholars are taking another look at the long history of East Asian relations before that shadow was cast. Two recent books, by University of Southern California political scientist David Kang and former Seoul National University economist Hong Wontack, advance sweeping reinterpretations of the structure of international relations in Asia up to the 19th century. Both authors are looking for clues to what a more Sino-centric East Asian order might look like in the decades to come.

David Kang's *East Asia Before the West* reconstructs a lost world of "tributary relations" that, he argues, prevented war and promoted commerce between the Big Four of Confucian East Asia — China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam — for some five centuries. Kang believes that it was the fact that these "Sinic states" had shared Confucian values, ritually acted out in the tributary system, that explains why four powerful states so rarely went to war. He presents his findings as a challenge to contemporary theories of international relations and the modern, Westphalian system of nation-states on which such theory is based.

Hong Wontack's *East Asian History: A Tripolar Approach* offers an even more ambitious reinterpretation of East Asian history as a contest between three poles — Chinese, Mongolian

and Manchurian. Hong dismisses Kang's vaunted "tributary system" as merely a glorified extortion racket through which Ming Dynasty emperors paid northern raiders not to attack them. For reasons of face, the Chinese employed the euphemism "receiving a tribute mission" to describe their payoffs to threatening Mongolian and Manchurian tribes. Hong argues instead that the key development in East Asian international relations prior to 1800 was the evolution in Manchuria of a "dual system" for ruling steppe nomads and Chinese settlers alike, a process that started in the 4th century and culminated in the rise of the Manchu Qing Dynasty.

Hong keeps the Manchurians front and center throughout his telling of 3,000 years of East Asian history, whereas David Kang relegates nomads to secondary status as non-Confucian, non-state actors. Both narratives culminate in the Qing Dynasty era, when China was last dominant. For Kang, Qing China marked the apotheosis of harmonious Confucian tributary relations, a unipolar system in which China, the hegemonic power, left other states alone in return for a modicum of symbolic respect. For Hong, the Qing represents the consummation of Manchu-led hybrid governance that finally ended warfare between East Asia's three competing poles.

So which more accurately describes East Asian relations prior to the 19th century: Kang's Pax Confuciana or Hong's Pax Manchuriana? And what difference does it make in how we anticipate where an increasingly China-centered Asia might be headed?

Pax Confuciana

Kang argues that East Asian Confucian states did a better job in achieving the elusive goal of modern international relations: make trade not war. More interesting still, Kang insists that they did so for over 500 years despite defying all the rules of contemporary international relations theory.

Kang's book is premised on a great question: Why didn't Confucian states go to war? To find the answer, he examines the record of diplomatic relations between China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam as carried out through the tributary system from the mid-14th to mid-19th century. Kang finds that the key feature of the tributary system was hierarchy in form combined with flexibility in practice. All states formally recognized a hierarchy with China, as the fountainhead of Confucian civilization, at the top, but in their actual relations they demonstrated flexibility and mutuality. Most importantly, China did not attempt to exert imperialistic dominance over the other states, but rather, accepted purely symbolic recognition of its supremacy.

Kang's strong claim is that this system worked much better to prevent war in East Asia than did the Westphalian system in Europe, where formal equality failed to stop the actual power imbalances from erupting into war. As Kang defines "states" and "war," East Asia's "major states"

only went to war twice — Ming China's occupation of Vietnam in the early 15th century and Japan's occupation of Korea in the late 16th century. For Kang's argument, these are the exceptions that prove the rule: Confucian states possessed the military means to wage war with one another, but, except on these two occasions, chose not to.

Kang is taking aim at the sacred cows of both realist and liberal interpretations of international relations. Realism teaches that, because states exist in a condition of "anarchy" where all are equally sovereign, strong states seek to exploit their hegemony, and weak states form alliances to defend themselves. The best that realist statesmen can achieve is a "balance of power" where mutual self-interest prevents full-scale war. Liberalism says that there is a better way not only to prevent conflict, but also promote justice, prosperity and peace. Since liberal democracies recognize one another's equal claim on sovereignty and grow increasingly interdependent through trade, they will abjure war in favor of international law. But in East Asian history according to Kang, Confucian states followed neither realist nor liberal teachings, and yet their alternate approach to international relations — the tributary system — did a much better job, over a longer period of time, than the Westphalian system at maintaining peace and promoting commerce among independent states.

Defying liberal precepts, East Asia's system was explicitly hierarchical and its governments undemocratic, yet states chose commerce over conflict. On the other hand, contrary to the assumptions of realism, the system was dominated by a hegemon, China, which left weaker states alone, even though smaller states never formed alliances to counterbalance China's superiority. With the exception of China's invasion of Vietnam, Beijing did not harbor territorial ambitions on bordering Confucian states. And with the exception of Japan's invasion of Korea, the other states accepted China's position as the "preponderant state" and saw no need to create horizontal alliances. With the rise of China today and the emergence of a more Sino-centric East Asian order, Kang hints that a post-Westphalian system, influenced by traditional East Asian norms for keeping the peace, is a real possibility.

East Asia Before the West is an elegant mixture of political science and history. But from a strictly historical perspective, Kang's argument hinges on his problematic bifurcation of East Asia into two distinct spheres: Confucian, Sinic states and nomadic non-state actors. Although his main purpose is to posit and explain a remarkable 500 years of peace between the former (China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam), he does devote a chapter to the nomads. However, they serve mostly as the exception that proves the rule of Confucian Peace. Kang's contention is that violence occurred almost exclusively between nomads and Sinic states, rather than among Sinic states, precisely because the nomads were never integrated into the tributary system. Hong's East Asian History, with its longer time span and relentless focus on things Manchurian, raises thorny questions about whether Kang's bifurcation is tenable and if the Pax Confuciana was really so peaceful.

Pax Manchuriana

First off, Kang's picture of tributary peace is complicated by a more careful look at East Asia before the 14th century, when East Asia Before the West picks up the story. Powerful states founded by non-Chinese, semi-nomadic peoples along the northern steppe dominated north China for 450 years prior to the Ming Dynasty. The Liao, Jin and Yuan Dynasties can hardly be dismissed as "non-state actors." Nor do these dynasties fit comfortably into Kang's categories of "Sinic" or "nomad." Rather, as Hong demonstrates, they were new models of "dual system" regimes that dated back to the 4th century. Tributary relations co-existed with warfare, including invasions of the Korean Peninsula by the Liao in the early 1000s and the Yuan in the 1200s.

Kang sidesteps this problem by starting his narrative of East Asia after the overthrow of the Yuan by the Ming in 1368. But even looking only at Kang's "five centuries of trade and tribute" starting with the Ming, the distinction between Sinic and nomad breaks down, and the Pax Confuciana seems to be less than meets the eye. As Hong's "tripolar" approach makes clear, a major reason why China did not invade Korea or Japan is simply that it was preoccupied defending the northern border against the primary security threat from Mongolia and Manchuria. Ming China enjoyed some breathing room early on, which is precisely when it acted aggressively toward both Korea and Vietnam. The Ming founder challenged the faltering Koryo Dynasty for control over the Liaodong Peninsula and bordering areas of Koryo territory. Indeed, Korea's Choson Dynasty was created when a Koryo general defied orders to march against the Ming.

In the case of Vietnam, Ming invaded in 1407, but after two decades abandoned the occupation and pulled their troops back. By then, the Ming had already commenced a series of massive military mobilizations against the Mongols to take the fight to the steppe. In 1449, Mongols crushed Ming forces and even captured the Emperor, triggering construction of the Great Wall. The threat from the northern steppe was unrelenting, punctuated by a Mongolian raid on Beijing in 1550. By the 1590s, as Ming forces flooded into Korea to stop Hideyoshi's advance, a new regime in Manchuria was emerging that would fatally threaten Beijing. Kang assures the reader that "the nomads ... always existed in the shadow of China," but Hong's tripolar approach gives quite the opposite impression: it is the Ming that shivers in the shadows of looming invasion from the Mongolian and Manchurian steppe.

And then there is the Great Qing Empire. Kang describes the Qing's tributary system simply as that of the Ming "with modifications." But the consensus view among Chinese historians is closer to Hong's description of the Qing as a Manchu-led hybrid regime that finally unified the three East Asian poles into one imperial state. This Pax Manchuriana was purchased at a very bloody price. During its 17th-century rise, the Qing invaded Korea twice, massacred Chinese cities in the initial conquest, fought a second war to consolidate control over south China, and staged an

amphibious attack on Taiwan. During its 18th century expansion, the Qing sent troops to Vietnam, Burma and Tibet to assert influence from afar, and expanded into the northwest, bringing most of what is now Xinjiang and Qinghai provinces into Beijing's dominion (including a genocidal war against a branch of western Mongols).

The Qing's wars of conquest and expansion cannot be separated from the tributary system, which they used to consolidate their gains and project their power. Most notably, the Qing transformed tributary relations into a multipolar system. The Qing ruler took on different tributary guises to assert supremacy over various constituencies. He was simultaneously the imperial Son of Heaven to Confucians, Great Khan over the Mongols, Patron of the Lamas for Tibetans, and warrior chieftain of the Manchus. Early on, the Qing created a novel political institution, the Bureau of Colonial Affairs, to manage foreign relations in accordance with this new approach. The Qing more than "modified" the tributary system — they revolutionized it. And they spilt a great deal of blood along the way.

Beyond Westphalia?

How will China behave as it returns to position of dominance in East Asia? How will the countries of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia respond to China's resurgence? These are the burning questions of international relations, but no one knows the answers. More political scientists and economists should follow Kang and Hong's lead, and make a serious study of East Asia's long and complex history as a way to shed light on these questions. But historical knowledge has limitations as a guide to the future. Hong's tripolar approach has many merits as an explanatory framework up to the Qing, but then ceases to be of much analytical help in the final chapters of his book where he discusses the 20th century. Kang's Confucian Peace hypothesis might be valid for a stretch of the mid-Ming dynasty, but breaks down when tested by the full 500-year history of the Ming and Qing periods. After all, historians will only claim to know where East Asian relations are headed after they've gotten there. Clio can be a stingy muse.

John Delury is Assistant Professor at Yonsei University's Graduate School of International Studies in Seoul and a book review editor for Global Asia.