

East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute, by David C. Kang. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 240 pp., US\$ 28.00, ISBN: 978-0231153195 (paperback)

David C. Kang gained academic attention in the Anglophone world with his book on crony capitalism. In a comparative study of South Korea and the Philippines, he analyzed the intimately intertwined nature of the developmental state and economic interests. Deftly argued, it generated considerable discussion and emulation. Since then, he has written a book on “the rise of China” and has made a case for engagement with North Korea in a volume co-authored with Victor Cha who argues the other side. The book under review encompasses these and much more: a half-millennium worth of East Asian international relations. No one can accuse him of smugly sitting on his earlier achievements.

The scholarly starting point is Kang’s simmering dissatisfaction with the Eurocentric scholarship on international relations. As he states early on, though he had read about the Holy Roman Empire and Napoleon in his student days, “until I started this research, I had never been exposed to any scholarship about the Chinese tributary system or Japanese foreign relations in the Tokugawa era, and indeed I had never even heard of the Imjin War” (p. xii). Whether the reader reacts to the disclaimer as refreshing and reassuring or disturbing and distressing, Kang proposes to analyze East Asia—by which he means China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam— “as a region” over five centuries in about 170 pages. The project is not for the faint of heart; he certainly has *chutzpah*.

In contrast to the Eurocentric model of international relations—based as it is on the post-Westphalian system of sovereign states and the belief in balance of power—Kang argues that the East Asian model of international relations was the tribute system based on peripheral states’ formal subservience to the hegemon China. Paradoxically, observes Kang, the formally equal system generated a series of wars while the theoretically unequal system produced only two wars between 1368 and 1841. Be that as it may, the tribute system, based on status hierarchy and rank order, ensured East Asian peace and stability. He is fully aware that peace hardly reigned on Chinese empires’ northern and western borders but suggests that incidents of “violence occurred in the form of border skirmishes, piracy, and the slow expansion and frontier consolidation

of some states" (p. 10). Put differently, "the nomads were generally more of a nuisance than a threat to China" (p. 10), and Japan, Korea, and Vietnam were generally neither a nuisance nor a threat to the Sinocentric order. He doesn't quite make the normative case for the superiority of the East Asian system but he is clear that the European model fits East Asian history poorly, if at all.

Conscious of his professional identification as a political scientist, Kang expatiates at considerable length on his three central concepts: hierarchy, status, and hegemony. Hierarchy is basically a rank order based on common consensus. "Status is decided by the rules of the game and the norms valued by international society, and it may or may not involve elements of material power" (p. 21). Finally, hegemony "is the influence and authority of one state over other states" (p. 22). Although Kang's conceptual disquisition may seem alternatively obvious or opaque, it is engendered and necessitated by his criticism of other political scientists and international-relations scholars who tend to valorize economic and military power—realism—over more sociological and cultural considerations, such as norms and consensus. The core idea in Kang's delineation of the East Asian model is hierarchy, rather than the Western notion of international relations as anarchy and equality.

Kang stresses the antiquity of the states system in East Asia. The contrast is to Europe and its relatively new states system that dates from the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. "The states of China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan emerged over one thousand years ago as centralized political units, territorial states with internal control that conducted, formal, legal international relations with one another" (p. 26). He characterizes them as Confucian, in the sense of valorizing "proper relationships" and establishing merit-based, rather than hereditary-based, civil service. At the same time, he underscores the malleability and multiplicity of civilizational identification. There is "no eternal, unchanging China" (p. 26). Furthermore, he is aware that there were non-state actors—pirates, nomads, and others—that were salient. Yet by and large he stresses the centrality of the states and their stability. Kang also argues: "the main secondary states of East Asia chose Confucianism and Chinese ideas more for their own reasons than from Chinese pressure" (p. 26). That is, hegemony, not coercion, lies at the heart of the East Asian system of international relations. The author spends some space limning Chinese and Confucian influences on the "secondary states," such as the adaptation of Chinese characters and civil services. To be sure, Chinese influences and Sinification attempts were

more like "grafts" rather than thorough emulation and identification. He is aware that indigenous and other traditions interacted sometimes uneasily with Chinese currents but his stress remains very much on the "enduring and wide-ranging political, social, and cultural influence" of Chinese civilization "on the surrounding states and peoples" (p. 52). The antique states system of East Asia was fundamentally Chinese in character.

What regulated the order of the states in East Asia was the tribute system. "The core of the tribute system was a set of institutions and norms that regulated diplomatic and political contact, cultural and economic relations, and in particular explicitly stated a relationship between two political units" (p. 55). Again, the contrast is to the post-Westphalian European system of equal nation-states, which was essentially anarchy. The unequal system in East Asia was formally hierarchical and asymmetrical and organized and regulated external relations: that is, neither equal nor anarchic. Legitimate hierarchy implied not only formal acknowledgments, such as investiture, but also the norm that China won't "exploit the subordinate states" (p. 62). Consent and legitimacy can be gleaned by the subordinate states' Sinification efforts and their adaptation of the tribute system to deal with one another as well as subsidiary entities. In contrast to the Eurocentric theory that would stress economic and military power, Kang is insistent that cultural norms played a significant part in sustaining the tribute system.

Kang's empirical demonstration of the success of the East Asian system of international relations lies in the long peace it ensured, in contrast to European history "soaked in blood." He makes a convincing case that the theory of balance of power does not apply very well to East Asia, pointing both to deviations in outcome and behavior between the two regions of Europe and East Asia and the essential stability of East Asian political units. To be sure, he is acutely aware that his central assertion is "limited to relations among the major states" of East Asia (p. 84). Clearly, the same assertion cannot be made for the northern and western borders of Chinese empires, though Kang characterizes the violence as "skirmishes along states' frontier borders between states and nonstate actors such as nomads" (p. 90). He discusses the wars that did happen by the Sinicized states, such as the Imjin War, but his stress is very much that "major wars between the Sinicized states were remarkably rare by any measure" (p. 106).

The tribute system contributed not only to peace and stability in the

region but also to extensive economic interaction. “China sat at the center of a vast trading network, and Chinese staple and luxury goods were desired literally around the world” (p. 107). Kang observes that trade was “a doubled-edged instrument of system consolidation” by which he means that it contributed to both inter-state relations and domestic institutions (p. 108). After presenting a conventional categorization of trade—tribute, official, commercial, and illegal—he offers a thumbnail sketch of Sinocentric interregional trade history. He presents a wealth of evidence to suggest that “the economic and diplomatic system of East Asia was far more integrated, extensive, and organized than the conventional wisdom allows” (p. 137). I am not sure about the “conventional wisdom”—I would have thought that what he is arguing is precisely the received view—but he is right to highlight the vibrant intra-East Asian trade and its embeddedness in political and cultural relations and institutions. He is aware that the tribute system played only a small part of the overall trade and economic activities but he prefers to lump almost everything under the rubric of the tribute system.

Kang’s final empirical chapter is on frontiers: nomads and islands. He is aware that the tribute system he describes does not apply to those who were not part of it. He begins with the wise observation that “it is unwise to generalize about the pastoral nomads of various ethnicities, languages, and social structures that populated the vast northern steppe and who ranged from the Pacific Ocean to India and Turkey” but goes on to do so (p. 142). The paucity of data—or even scholarly references—weakens his discussion. More problematically, as has been his wont throughout the book, he minimizes the significance of people and polities beyond the tribute system. So, for example, he writes that “China and Korea established enduring and stable relations with each other but had a much more difficult time dealing with the nomads. This led to endemic skirmishes and instability along their frontiers” (p. 157). Do “skirmishes” include conquests? After all, Mongols and Manchus both conquered Korea, as they of course did China.

In the concluding chapter, Kang notes the rapid and complete collapse of what he has discussed. “The tribute system and the Confucian order, which have roots that are over two thousands years old and lasted in their most fully developed form for well over six centuries, collapsed within the space of a few decades upon the full arrival of European colonial powers in the late nineteenth century” (p. 159). He also discusses the mutual interactions of the past and the

present and closes with a short speculation on the future of China and East Asia.

Allow me two bows to David Kang. In an age of academic hyper-specialization, he has written a reasonable and fluent book on a large topic of some significance, and a short one to boot. He has also rightly questioned the longstanding Eurocentric outlook and in particular the Eurocentric theories of nation-states and their interrelations or international relations. At the very least, after reading the book under review, few would have the gumption to apply hoary old concepts like “anarchy” or “balance of power” to make sense of East Asian international relations. It would be churlish at this point to register my misgivings but I am afraid that he has not gone far enough in his critique of Eurocentric social sciences (including history).

East Asia, after all, is a convenient categorization that became popular in the West in the post-World War II period by redoubtable Harvard historians of East Asia, such as John K. Fairbank and Edwin O Reischauer. Kang is their follower in the sense that he assumes that East Asia is a salient unit that is Sinocentric and incorporates present-day China, Japan, Korea, and (sometimes, though increasingly less frequently) Vietnam. In spite of their impressive achievements, their “area studies” approach had profound flaws. I will focus on the two that affects Kang’s analysis. First, they grossly overestimated the national integration of East Asian polities and treated them as proto- if not actual nation-states. Premodern polities—in East Asia or elsewhere for that matter—did not achieve linguistic, religious, culinary, economic, political, or any substantive form of integration. Yet by and large Kang treats East Asian polities as if they were something like modern nation-states. Wars, from this nation-state perspective, are perforce inter-state activities. Yet as the twenty-first century world is daily reminding us, the hegemony of nation-states is far from a natural state of affairs. Perhaps the single most violent “event” in world history—for the sake of the social scientists, let’s measure it in terms of death tolls, which amounted to at least 20 million—was the mid nineteenth century Taiping Rebellion. As the nomenclature rebellion suggests, however, it’s not war so it’s beyond Kang’s purview. The very term rebellion suggests that Qing Empire was a legitimate nation-state, which is a projection of our present sensibility, as Stephen Platt (2012), among others, has argued. The generic point here is that it’s hard to talk about an inter-state system when the states were so weakly integrated and infrastructurally weak tout court. Sure,

Hideyoshi or the Ming rulers could mobilize hundreds of thousands of soldiers when that goal would have been a pipedream for their coevals in Europe, but these East Asian rulers had trouble collecting taxes or building roads, and not merely because of technological underdevelopment. In any case, when Kang talks about East Asia, he is almost always talking about the elites and their institutional apparatus. I am not sure what it means to cast the region as “Confucian,” for example, when the vast majority of the population was illiterate and almost certainly ignorant of Confucius and Confucianism (which does not deny that Confucian beliefs and rituals slowly spread). Yes, East Asian elites were from time to time self-consciously Confucian but not always and certainly the characterization wouldn’t be appropriate for the peasant masses before the twentieth century. Here I wish Kang had taken a leaf from recent European historiography, which does the best job of criticizing Eurocentric assumptions that long dominated scholarship, even of East Asia, which would include the naturalness of nation-states (see, for example, Weber 1976). It’s a bit like his analysis of trade. Yes, tribute was part of interregional trade but as he recognizes it was only a very small part. To call the system then the tribute system is misleading at best.

Secondly, and more importantly, East Asia is a poor prism to make sense of the territory presently called China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. As Kang’s empirics suggest, the dynamics of the region were not in the Chinese plains—as the East Asia paradigm would suggest—but rather in the peripheries and among the nomads. Here his short shrift of the “skirmishes” betrays serious misunderstanding. Mongols and Manchus, as I said, occupied China (and though of less significance Korea as well). It was only the original “kamikaze” (divine wind) that prevented the Mongol conquest of the Japanese archipelago as well. It’s absolutely true that these “nomads” did not profoundly change the lands they conquered—that’s part and parcel of the weak integration of premodern polities—but they should be analyzed up front and center, rather than as sideshows. As Evelyn S. Rawski (2015) argues, the center of gravity of early modern Japan and Korea places them closer to Mongol, Khitan, Jurchen, Manchu, and other northeastern Asian regimes (see also Robinson 2009). Far from peace and stability, we see intermittent and violent conflicts that led to conquests throughout the region. More strikingly, Japan and Korea (as well as China itself) partook of these “northern” cultures. To insist on Sinification as the major source of external influence does considerable injustice to the

historical formation of Japanese and Korean (as well as Chinese) civilizations. It is not an accident that the sources of Japanese and Korean people hail largely from the north, though the presentist, Sinocentric perspective would cast Mongol or Manchu origins or influences as minor, if not elided altogether. Indeed, East Asia itself was far from operating in splendid isolation and stability (it just won’t do to talk of occasional “skirmishes” by nomads) before the military-backed integration into the European order. Frederick Teggart’s neglected *Rome and China* (1939) is merely one of the pioneers of world history and rightly places East Asia in the cross currents of global affairs and puts these “barbarians” as central forces in the making of the modern world. Be that as it may, East Asia is not the right rubric to make sense of “international relations” in Northeast Asia. Conversely, Southeast Asia—whatever this vast region denotes—is much more central to the dynamics of Northeast Asia than it has hitherto been appreciated (see Reid 2015). We need not only to write history that decenters states—itsself an almost nonsensical task from the older Eurocentric historiography and social sciences—but also decenter China—itsself a largely nominal entity disclosing a continent’s worth of diverse and pluralistic entities—from our conception of premodern eastern Asia.

Let me close by saying that I write the previous two paragraphs from the pose of still bowing to David Kang. After all, why did it take a present-focused political scientist to recuperate a non-Eurocentric narrative of “East Asian” “international relations.” *East Asia Before the West* is a challenge to historians and historical social scientists of eastern Asia.

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