

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

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David Kang's *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* analyzes the economic and diplomatic interactions among China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam – which Kang defines as the four 'Confucian' East Asian countries – before the advent of the 'West' in the mid-19th century. Kang focuses on the period from 1368 to 1841 – that is, on the five centuries preceding the Opium Wars and the forced opening of East Asia to the commercial and political penetration of the West. His basic concern is to explain how, in this span of time, while Europe experienced frequent, bloody conflict, East Asia was extraordinarily peaceful. Kang argues that its stability was, to a great extent, the result of a hierarchical 'tribute system' with China at its center, providing a normative social framework and also credible commitments by China not to exploit secondary states that accepted its authority.

This tribute system consisted of a pattern of interaction between China and its Confucian neighbors, meant to protect Chinese interests in the region. China received tribute missions from the other Confucian states and in exchange provided exclusive trading priorities to those who paid tribute. Kang emphasizes that, during the five centuries considered,

Chinese cultural and economic hegemony in East Asia was virtually undisputed by satellite countries. This hegemonic order, based on an explicit inequality crystallized in the tribute system, helped to keep conflict among the actors involved under control. In particular, Kang explores East Asian relations through three different lenses: 'hierarchy', 'status' and 'hegemony'. While 'hierarchy' is the organizing principle of the 'society' formed by the four actors under examination, 'status' is defined as the 'individual's standing in the hierarchy of a group based on criteria such as prestige, honor and deference' (p.19). 'Hegemony', on the other hand, is defined as a form of hierarchy that involves not only pure material power, but also the recognition by other actors of the greater responsibility and influence of the hegemonic power. Kang argues that the relations between China and the other three Confucian countries are to be read in terms of these three overarching principles – that is, that the East-Asian political system was organized in a hierarchical way, with China being given superior status, such that it was the hegemonic actor to which Japan, Korea and Vietnam paid tribute.

A few significant defects in Kang's analysis should be mentioned. First, in more than one passage of the book, he argues that, in comparison with this 'tribute system' theory, many Western theories of international relations perform poorly when it comes to explaining international relations in East Asia. Unfortunately, however, Kang does not substantiate this claim by considering primary documents, but rather focuses primarily (if not exclusively) on Western sources, as a quick look at the bibliography shows. Kang's reliance on these secondary sources makes *East Asia Before the West* seem rather too much of a 'literature review' – albeit a very rich, well done one, accompanied by intelligent reflection and extremely interesting ideas. Second, Kang's treatment of Western theories itself is also rather inadequate. He contrasts the 1368-1841 East Asian paradigm with the Western system of international relations, in which 'equality is taken for granted both as a normative goal and as an

underlying and enduring reality of international politics' (p.3). This is a surprising claim – while the existence of equality as a normative goal among states may be irrefutable, the same cannot be said of the claim that equality between them is an 'underlying and enduring reality'. Kang also writes that 'Kenneth Waltz's confident assertion that hegemony leads to balance and has done so through all of the centuries we can contemplate, is perhaps the default proposition in international relations' (p.4). He apparently considers Waltz's neorealism the only theory of international relations worth mentioning, since he ignores other theories which despite being 'Western' – and many today seem to treat 'Western' as synonymous with 'biased' – could have provided better analytical tools than neorealist ones. For instance, since the relations between China and the Confucian countries constituted a hegemonic political-economic system, it might have been valuable to analyze it in terms of the hegemonic stability theory developed over the last century by authors such as Robert Keohane and Charles P. Kindleberger. Finally, since the focus of the book is political and not historical – as Kang points out in the very first lines of his preface – perhaps a slightly more extensive discussion of why and to what extent existing theories fail to satisfactorily explain East-Asian relations in the period considered could have been developed.

The twenty-first century world will be unavoidably characterized by further 'west-to-east' and 'north-to-south' shifts in soft and hard power and, given the rapid development of Asia, it is important for scholars of international relations to engage in debate over its particular roles in international relations. Since no serious reflection on the present can undertaken without a profound knowledge of the past – what Thucydides called a 'possession for ever' – Kang's stimulating book will certainly provide much food for further thought and discussion.

