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Article

The Use and Misuse of East Asian History in IR Theorizing

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Abstract

The past two decades have witnessed a wave of research into the history of East Asian international relations (IR). Scholars seek to broaden the historical frames of reference in IR for both theory testing and theory generation. The article reviews this recent trend, examining its limitations and exploring future agenda. In studying historical East Asian IR, scholars have different expectations regarding whether their research would support, complement, or undermine mainstream Western IR. The spatial and temporal scope of their historical inquiries, as well as theoretical ambitions, therefore, differ significantly. Scholars no longer treat all East Asian history as simply one case, but as multiple cases with divergent patterns, and they recognize that the system consisted not solely of China but of multiple actors. In addition to contrasting East Asia with Western Europe, they explore also the similarities between East Asia and other non-Western regions. To advance the agenda, however, scholars must scrupulously navigate three tensions. They are: the tension between the "East" and "West"; the tension between the two disciplines of history and IR; and the tension between past and present. Future studies, therefore, must broaden their horizons in order to better transcend ethnocentrism and exceptionalism, refine their methodology both to avoid selection bias and conduct more sophisticated comparisons, and to maintain a proper distance from contemporary politics. Most importantly, they should combine high-quality historical research with cutting-edge IR theoretical trends to construct dynamic theories that could be applied to other regions.

Introduction

If history is, as E.H. Carr suggested, "an unending dialogue between the present and the past," then the development of international relations (IR) studies is a "continuous process of interaction" between theories and histories.[1] IR theorizing is largely based on the experiences of the Western world. However, the West is not synonymous with either the international or the global. In an effort to broaden and diversify the discipline's geographical and historical frames of reference, over the past two decades, IR scholars have paid growing attention to East Asian history.

Their works satisfy two sets of interests. The first consists in anxiety over China's rise and the intense speculation it has fuelled regarding how this "awakened lion" will use its power

[1] Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History*? (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 30.

and what this implies for the future of East Asian IR. Scrutinizing the history of the country and the region in search of clues, therefore, is only to be expected.[2] The second is that of the desire to discover non-Western IR theories. Scholars believe that learning from East Asian history—long understudied by mainstream IR scholars—may open up the discipline, broaden its empirical scope, and generate new concepts and ideas that spark theoretical innovation, thereby challenging the field's enduring Eurocentrism.[3] Particularly for those scholars with the relevant background and expertise, East Asia's long and rich history also offers a fertile source from which to make distinctive theoretical contributions and thus enhance their academic status.[4]

A significant amount of work has been produced, and a variety of approaches have emerged. The first regards Asian history as empirical data that further verifies and supports established (Western) theories. In applying such theories to explain certain "puzzling" historical phenomena in East Asian IR, this approach assumes that established theories are universal, but that East Asian history provides *extra* cases that verify and strengthen their external validity. The second approach challenges Western theories based on East Asian history. It asserts the uniqueness of the East Asian historical experience, and uses the contrast between the "the East" and "the West" to expose the inadequacy of existing (Western) theories and question their acclaimed universality. The third approach focuses on certain specific periods, patterns, and events in historical East Asian IR, and attempts to construct theories that explain them. The fourth approach compares historical East Asia with certain other regional international systems (orders)—not only to expose the limitations of existing Western theories, but also to construct new general theories. While the four approaches vary significantly as regards the scope of their historical investigations and their respective theoretical aspirations, each has its limits and challenges.

This article examines their "use and abuse of history" in developing theories. It first elaborates the four different approaches to using East Asian history, outlines their main features, and discusses their limitations through reviewing certain seminal works.[5] It then examines the challenges this research agenda has encountered, highlighting the tensions between "the East" and "the West," between historical and theoretical research, and between past and present. These tensions suggest that scholars must broaden their horizons in order to transcend ethnocentrism and exceptionalism, refine methodology both to avoid selection bias and conduct more sophisticated comparisons, and maintain a proper distance from contemporary politics. The article concludes with recommendations for future research, advocating a research design incorporating greater spatial and temporal variations, and the construction of mechanism-centred dynamic theoretical frameworks.

Using East Asian History for IR Theory Development: Four Approaches

Acknowledging that historical East Asia differs on several dimensions from the established views of modern Western international systems, existing studies have taken different

[2] See Yu-Shan Wu, "The History-Informed IR Study on the Resurgence of China," in Tse-Kang Leng and Rumi Aoyama, eds., *Decoding the Rise of China: Taiwanese and Japanese Perspectives* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 40–1.

[3] Amitav Acharya, "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2014), pp. 647–69; David C. Kang, "International Relations Theory and East Asian History: An Overview," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2013), pp. 181–206.

[4] Yaqing Qin, "Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?" *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2007), pp. 313–40.

[5] The survey focuses on recently published books in the English world, but not those in Chinese, Japanese, and other languages. These works sufficiently reflect the main features of this emerging agenda and are more accessible to readers of this journal.

approaches to using East Asian history to develop IR theories. Scholars agree that the study of East Asian history may significantly enrich the field of IR, but have different ideas on whether it would strengthen, complement, or undermine mainstream Western IR theories. The following paragraphs examine these approaches in sequence by reviewing certain representative works.

Generalists

The first group of scholars, which can be named "generalists," assume the universal applicability of existing Western IR theories. Testing such theories' empirical validity, rather than developing new ones, is their main concern. The group's favourite historical topics include inter-polity relations during the Spring and Autumn Period, the Warring States Period, and the Song Dynasty; also China's relations with those Inner Asian nomadic polities.[6] Some of them also suggest that, even when "China" was unified and powerful—during the Tang dynasty, for instance—bipolarity and multipolarity still prevailed in East Asia.[7] They thus perceive historical East Asia as a semi-Westphalian system. In this sense, they see China/East Asia as no different from other countries/regions.[8] Meanwhile, they believe that including East Asian cases would further verify and strengthen the generalizability of certain IR theories.

A representative work is Yuan-kang Wang's *Harmony and War*. Using imperial China as a case study, the aim of Wang's research is to test and further verify offensive realism. Wang rejects the connotation whereby the logic of East Asian IR is different from that of the West. According to him, China's grand strategy was functional in the rise and fall of its material power. Like any other great power, the country pursued offensive strategies when it was strong and defensive ones when it was relatively weak. To illustrate his point, Wang examines the Song and Ming dynasties and finds that Confucian culture failed to constrain China's use of force. Because Confucianism is thought to have been most influential in these two dynasties, they provide, Wang believes, the most stringent test whereby to verify his offensive realist view that it was China's position within the historical East Asian international system, rather than any distinctive culture, that exerted overwhelming influence on China's strategic behaviour.[9]

Meanwhile, these studies agree that the IR field may benefit from including cases from East Asian history. As Alastair Iain Johnston suggests, "ignoring East Asian cases in IR might mean that many of the claims in transatlantic IR theory today have external validity problems."[10] Adding previously neglected empirical data could serve to test and further verify existing theories. If a particular theory can sufficiently explain specific patterns of interstate behaviour in historical East Asia, which may often be treated as a test of the hardest

[6] Yu-Shan Wu uses a similar label for this group, see Wu, "The History-Informed IR Study on the Resurgence of China," pp. 41–2.

[7] Victoria Tin-bor Hui, "'Getting Asia Right': De-essentializing China's Hegemony in Historical Asia," *International Theory*, Vol. 15, No. 13 (2023), p. 492. See also Zhenping Wang, *Tang China in Multi-polar Asia: A history of Diplomacy and War* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017).

[8] See Yuan-Kang Wang, "Explaining the Tribute System: Power, Confucianism, and War in Medieval East Asia," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2013), pp. 207–32; Weizhan Meng and Weixing Hu, "Reacting to China's Rise throughout History: Balancing and Accommodating in East Asia," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2020), pp. 119–48; Xiao Wan and Yu-Shan Wu, "How a Rising Power Treats Small States amid Power Transition: Evidence from the Sui and Tang Dynasties Get access Arrow," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2023), pp. 208–40.

[9] Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press 2010).

[10] Alastair Iain Johnston, "What (If Anything) Does East Asia Tell Us About International Relations Theory?" *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 15 (2012), p. 56.

case, scholars may then be more confident about applying it, with minor modifications, elsewhere.[11]

Using the history of IR in East Asia merely as a stock of data, however, underestimates its distinctiveness and downplays its value for theoretical innovation. Historical East Asia differs from the established views of Western systems on key variables of concern to mainstream IR theories, whether it be power distribution, domestic regime types, political-economic modes, or prevailing norms and institutions.[12] Many other scholars believe that existing theories do a poor job of explaining historical East Asian cases, and that the mismatch of theories is due largely to the literature's Eurocentrism. In addition to treating East Asian history as a testing ground, they are keen to use it as a source of inspiration for generating new theories.

East Asian Uniqueness

The second approach, in contrast to the first one, asserts the uniqueness of East Asian history, using it to expose the limitations of existing IR theories and to refute their claim of universal applicability. It thus argues for the necessity of reimagining IR and constructing alternative frameworks.[13] According to this group of scholars, Eurocentric IR is guilty of "getting Asia wrong."[14] It was not just the power structure of the historical East Asian international system, but also its organizing principle that was different from that of Europe. As hierarchy, not sovereign equality, was the essential organizing principle in historical East Asia, the patterns of interaction among polities were also distinctive in important ways.[15] Echoing the recent proliferation of scholarship on international hierarchies, they find a deeply legitimate Chinese-led hegemony, underpinned by a shared sense of "Confucian weness," and perceived as being in a stark contrast to the Western traditions of anarchy.[16] These scholars have hence taken China's presumed hegemony in East Asia during the Ming-Qing periods as an ideal case whereby to challenge existing theories and undermine the IR field's Eurocentrism.[17]

David Kang's works pioneered this approach. According to him, the China-centred system of "formal inequality" coupled with "centuries of stability" is in direct contrast to the European system of "formal equality" that is "marked by incessant interstate conflicts."[18] Although hierarchy *per se* is not unique to East Asia, the cultural legitimacy derived from shared Confucianism makes the East Asian hierarchy distinctive. China's less powerful neighbours accepted its hegemonic authority based on shared Confucian norms and values. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Kang argues, wars were relatively rare among the Sinicized Confucian states of East Asia—China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan—but more common between China and the non-Confucian polities to the north and west of China.[19]

[11] Andrew J. Coe and Scott Wolford, "East Asian History and International Relations," in Stephan Haggard and David C. Kang, eds., *East Asia in the World: Twelve Events That Shaped the Modern International Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 264.

[12] Ibid, pp. 263–4.

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

[14] David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Framework," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2003), pp. 57–85.

[15] David C. Kang, "International Order in Historical East Asia: Tribute and Hierarchy Beyond Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism," *International Organization*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (2020), pp. 65–93.

[16] Ibid, see also Robert E. Kelly, "A 'Confucian Long peace' in pre-Western East Asia?" *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2012), p. 413.

[17] Stephan Haggard and David C. Kang, "Introduction" in Haggard and Kang, *East Asia in the World*, p. 10.

[18] Kang, *East Asia before the West*, p. 2.

[19] Kang, *East Asia Before the West*. See also Robert Kelly, "A 'Confucian Long Peace' in Pre-Western East Asia?" *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2012), pp. 407–30.

However, Kang's thesis provokes fierce debate.[20] Many assert that his historical narrative alone may be inadequate and biased. Chinese rulers have not relied exclusively on Confucianism to expand their influence, having used both hard and soft power to secure compliance from other states.[21] Foreign rulers have paid tribute to China for various reasons, including regime survival, political legitimacy, economic gains, and military protection. Some have even used it as a stepping stone to their own hegemony. As Victoria Hui suggests, historical East Asia has shown "a mixture of peace and conflict, cultural legitimacy and power calculation, hierarchy, and anarchy"—a picture not entirely different from the European experience.[22]

Meanwhile, the methodological design of Kang's work, and of much similar scholarship, does not allow one to claim the primacy of cultural norms over material factors. A frequent criticism is whether or not Chinese cultural hegemony is a mere reflection of China's long-term dominant position in East Asia. The two competing hypotheses remain indeterminate: conflict in the region could be due either to the military prowess of these non-Chinese polities, or to a lack of shared culture, or both.[23] Kang has also failed to give adequate consideration to other competing hypotheses. For instance, Chinese emperors' fear of internal instability may have nurtured an inward-looking strategy rather than one of outward expansion. The logistical and technological difficulties in projecting force, moreover, might have been sufficient to render the probability of conflict with certain polities "extremely small."[24] The economic gains that the relevant sides received from the tribute trade might also have contributed to the stability of the system. East Asian "long peace," therefore, may have multiple causes. Such complexity seems to defy a singular causal explanation.

Kang's thesis is essentially a cultural argument. However, the mechanisms whereby Confucianism or cultural homogeneity can serve as the basis for a peaceful and stable order are not clear. He does not make explicit whether or not the independent variable concerned is that of the specific cultural attributes of Confucianism, or the cultural homogeneity among Sinicized states, or a combination of the two. If a shared cultural framework was what the stability of the order was based primarily on, we can find frequent instances of conflict between those countries that share a culture. Meanwhile, the existing literature offers conflicting views on the role of Confucianism in Chinese strategy. The popular idea of Confucian pacifism asserts that, in following Confucian doctrine, China has historically been a peaceful and benign hegemon. However, many scholars have questioned whether the Chinese are indeed so Confucian or indeed so peaceful.[25] Alastair Iain Johnston's in-depth study of the Chinese classics confounds his initial expectation upon testing a hypothesis regarding the peaceful effect of Confucian culture by showing the effects of the parabellum, or hard

[20] For critiques of Kang's theme, see Amitav Acharya, "Will Asia's Past Be Its Future?," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2003/2004), pp. 149–64; Peter Perdue, "The Tenacious Tributary System," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 24, No. 96 (2015), pp. 1002–14; Masaru Kohno, "Review Essay: East Asia and International Relations Theory," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2014), pp. 179–90. Recently, Kang and his co-author have tried to challenge the proposition that the European experience with war and state-making was universal through examining how emulation of China drove the state formation in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. The work shares many pitfalls outlined below. See Huang Chin-Hao and David C. Kang, *State Formation through Emulation: The East Asian Model* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[21] See Andrew Phillips, "Contesting the Confucian Peace: Civilization, Barbarism and International Hierarchy in East Asia," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 24, No.4 (2018), pp. 740–64.

[22] Victoria Tin-bor Hui, "Pre-Modern Asia and International Relations Theory," in Benjamin de Carvalho, Julia Costa Lopez and Halvard Leira, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 182.

[23] Kang himself seems to acknowledge this multicausality. See Kang, *East Asia before the West*, p. 153.

[24] Hendrik Spruyt, "Collective Imaginations and International Order: The Contemporary Context of the Chinese Tributary System," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (2017), pp. 34–7.

[25] Yinhong Shi, "Wuzhuang de zhongguo: qiannian zhanlue chuantong [Armed China: Millennia-Old Strategic Traditions]," *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics], No. 6 (2011), pp. 4–33.

realpolitik paradigm, on the Ming Empire's strategic choices.[26] Many historians believe that the nature of Chinese political doctrine is "a Confucianism-clad legal [is] authoritarian."[27] Nor is Confucianism a monolithic thought. Congruent with both harmony and conflict, it can be used to justify both war and peace.[28] It does not prescribe peace among East Asian states or conflicts across the Confucian-nomadic divide. In this sense, Kang's theory is underdeveloped.

Even if one accepts Kang's empirical claims, the explanatory scope of his theoretical propositions is unclear. Although his theoretical arguments directly contradict Wang's realist position, what their accounts have in common is that they treat much of Chinese history as remarkably homogeneous. However, imperial China not only engaged in a wide range of interactions with different neighbouring states, but also sometimes changed its strategies towards certain of the same actors during different periods. The task, then, is to explain both patterns within a discrete period, rather than to explain just one pattern, or to attempt to draw conclusions about the entire sweep of history.

Tributary Order and Tribute Practices

The third group suggests that, rather than using East Asian history either to support or challenge existing Western theories, we might first consider how to develop theories of whatever kind that may explain its workings in the first place. Scholars like Feng Zhang and Ji-young Lee attempt to move beyond the debate over the primacy of Confucian culture versus power asymmetry, and to enrich the expanding IR literature on hierarchies by explaining state interactions under the Chinese hegemonic order.[29]

Drawing on insights from the English School, Feng Zhang maps the constitutional structure of Chinese hegemony and its fundamental institutional practices.[30] He then constructs "a relational structural theory" of grand strategic interactions between China and its neighbours through "synthesizing and applying the insights of both Chinese and Western relationalism."[31] Two major ordering and strategic principles he extracts from Confucian relationalism: "the instrumental principle" and "the expressive principle." Taking a holistic approach, Zhang examines Ming China's relations with Inner Asia, as well as with Korea and Japan, analysing the strategies of both the Ming and its neighbours. He argues that the Ming and its neighbours' fluctuating normative and instrumental strategies resulted from the interplay between intense conflicts of interest and the degree to which interactions reciprocated expressions of relative social status.[32]

Zhang's work is theoretically ambitious and empirically rich. It is unclear, however, whether the key findings and theoretical claims that this project validates can be applied

[26] Alistair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[27] Zhao Dingxin, *The Confucian-Legalist State: A New Theory of Chinese History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[28] Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, trans. by Edmund Ryden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 252–9.

[29] Feng Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); Ji-young Lee, *China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

[30] Yongjin Zhang and Barry Buzan argue that the tribute system is "an articulation of the existence of international society in historical East Asia." See Yongjin Zhang and Barry Buzan, "The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2012), p. 8. Alan Shiu Cheung Kwan argues that China and the nomads also formed an "international society" and an adaptable hierarchy. See Alan Shiu Cheung Kwan, "Hierarchy, Status and International Society: China and the Steppe Nomads," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 362–83.

[31] Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony*, p. 21.

[32] Ibid.

to other periods of Chinese hegemony. The matter of the early Ming's historical peculiarities is difficult to dismiss, even if the early Ming period does offer "the best methodological fit in case selection," as Zhang claims.[33] As some of the book's reviewers suggested, adding a vertical dimension to the inquiry would have enriched the study, and comparisons of the Ming and Qing periods may have been particularly promising.[34] Zhang believes that expressive rationality is a theoretical innovation, as existing literature "has hardly any conception of expressive rationality at all."[35] However, its relationship to existing constructivist and psychological explanations and the external validity of the theory requires further elaboration.

Ji-young Lee highlights that China's less powerful neighbours were not passive recipients of Chinese influence or domination, and that China and its neighbours co-constructed the East Asian hierarchy. Making extensive use of primary Korean, Japanese, and Chinese language sources, she presents an impressive account of how domestic political conditions—the domestic legitimation needs of Korean and Japanese rulers—played a key role in the construction of Chinese hegemony during the Ming and Qing dynasties. In particular, Lee's examination of the frequent contestation and mistrust, defiance, and challenge that occurred in the model tributary relationship between the Chosŏn dynasty and Ming China seriously undermines the popular assumption of Kang and many others that compliance was the norm in the tributary order. The book also departs from the bifurcated view of hegemonic order-making either through power or culture, emphasizing that although ideational concerns can coexist with rationalist cost–benefit calculations, actors' cost–benefit calculations never take place outside the specific social context.[36]

Lee effectively demonstrates that establishment of the dominant state's hegemony is a continuation of the less powerful participants' domestic political struggles. As the legitimacy of each side was mutually constitutive, she could have examined more explicitly the Chinese side's similar concerns in regard to domestic legitimation.[37] Meanwhile, the book's primary focus is on a few tumultuous periods. Looking beyond these brief, chaotic periods might have revealed a different picture of Chinese hegemony.[38] Moreover, Lee's domestic political explanations seem oversimplified at times. As Lee acknowledges, the critical historical events discussed in the book can also be explained by other interpretations (such as security concerns and trade benefits), which she failed to deal with in any detail.[39] Whether domestic legitimation (e.g., the need to receive investiture) was an important concern at any given historical moment, and even if it were, whether or not it was only one of many factors that caused such events, or indeed the primary force shaping a particular foreign policy, remains unclear.[40] Further theoretical development is also needed. The book could have engaged more closely with both the extant and emerging scholarship on the strategies of small and medium-sized states in regard to their more powerful neighbours, such as the literature on hedging and soft balancing,

Scholars, ever more aware of the social bases of hierarchy and hegemony, are paying closer attention to the interactions between ideational and material factors in their theory construction. Thus, Zhang and Lee's works are at the forefront of theoretical scholarship

[33] Ibid, p. 12.

[34] Ja Ian Chong, "Roundtable 9-1 on Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History," *ISSF Roundtable*, Vol. XI, No. 1 (2016), p. 12.

[35] Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony*, p. 7.

[36] Lee, *China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination*.

[37] Victoria Hui, "Roundtable 10-8 on China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination," *ISSF Roundtable*, Vol. X, No. 8 (2018), p. 12, pp. 15–7.

[38] Yuanchong Wang, "Roundtable 10-8 on China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination," *ISSF Roundtable*, Vol. X, No. 8 (2018), p. 18.

[39] See Wang, *Harmony and War*, pp. 145–51.

[40] For a rationalist explanation on the evolution of the tributary order, see Zhou Fangyin, "Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2011), pp. 147–78.

on international hegemony. Both make extensive use of primary and secondary sources in multiple languages, and conduct detailed historical analyses that enrich IR scholars' understanding of Chinese hegemony in the Ming and Qing dynasties. They thus stimulate interest in a more ambitious comparative study of Chinese hegemony throughout history, and in a sufficient explanation of the diversity of China's grand strategies. The essential challenge is how to convert a specific description of historical experience into a more general explanation, and test its external validity through more shreds of evidence.

Eurasian Orders

The more ambitious goal of the fourth group is that of developing some general theories through a comparison of patterns of historical East Asian IR with those of certain other regions. IR studies have indeed paid growing attention to various historical international systems beyond Europe.[41] These scholars hold that, in order to progress in theorizing historical East Asian IR, it is necessary to move away from assumptions of Chinese/Asian uniqueness and look instead for patterns of similarities, as well as differences, in the political dynamics across regions. Their expectation is that doing so may help to construct theories of greater generality and broader applications.

The study of historical East Asia is an opportunity to engage in genuine comparisons of different international systems and their basic components.[42] Victoria Hui explores why a unified empire had emerged in ancient China but not in early modern Europe. She develops "a dynamic theory of international politics," contending that international politics are "processes of strategic interaction between domination-seekers and targets of domination," within which there are two competing logics: the logic of balancing and the logic of domination.[43] The self-defeating choices of European leaders can, in turn, be ascribed to the dynamic expansion of Western Europe's commercial economy prior to the onset of state expansion. Their Chinese counterparts, meanwhile, lacking such luxury, turned to solutions that proved more effective in the long run.[44] This theory both pinpoints the differences between the two systems and explains them within a unified framework.

Gradual recognition among IR scholars of the inherent complexity and dynamism of the historical East Asian international system has sparked studies in recent years which assess it comparatively with those of other regions.[45] Such scholars believe that the search for Eurasian commonalities, which neutralize European superiority, rather than East Asian cultural distinctiveness, constitutes a better challenge to Eurocentrism.[46] Here, we examine three recent representative works.

Hendrik Spruyt's *The World Imagined* provides an overview of three historical non-European regional orders: the Sinocentric tributary system; the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Islamic empires; and the Southeast Asian galactic empires. He finds that, in each of these systems, relationships between polities stemmed from specific collective beliefs about the nature of the physical and social world around them. One example is that of how Confucianism formed the basis of the East Asian belief system and political order. Spruyt contends that China and other non-Western polities were not isolated, static, or passive, observing

[41] See Amitav Acharya, "Before the Nation-State: Civilizations, World Orders, and the Origins of Global International Relations," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2023), pp. 263–88.

[42] Andrew Phillips, "The Global Transformation, Multiple Early Moder-nities, and International Systems Change," *International Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 3, (2016), pp. 481–91; Erik Ringmar, "Performing International Systems: Two East-Asian Alternatives to the Westphalian Order," *International Organization*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (2012), pp. 1–25.

[43] Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 33.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ringmar, "Performing International Systems"; Andrew Philips, "The Global Transformation, Multiple Early Modernities, and International Systems Change," *International Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2016), pp. 481–91.

[46] Hui, "Getting Asia Right," p. 495.

that their extensive land and sea trade networks traversed the Eurasian area. He also elaborates on China and its neighbours' innovative and adaptive efforts under Western pressure, with particular emphasis on how longstanding local collective imaginations shaped these practices.[47]

Ayşe Zarakol's *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* argues that Asia, or Eurasia, was a contiguous space, and that the Mongol empires introduced a new type of sovereignty and empire-building that laid the foundations for successive Eurasian world orders. Among them, the Chinggisid world order of the Mongol Empire encompassed Yuan Dynasty China, and the post-Chinggisid world orders included the Ming Dynasty. In spite of its thought-provoking non-Eurocentric narratives, however, the book's heavy reliance on Western revisionist Mongol historiography risks exaggerating the Mongol legacy. A truly balanced historical reading would question whether or not the use of the Mongol repertoire for political legitimation was steadily supplanted.[48] As Feng Zhang and others have shown, Ming rulers legitimized their political authority and sovereignty primarily through Confucian repertoires, whereas the practices that Zarokol attributes to the so-called "Chinggisid model of sovereignty" had hybrid origins. Although aware of Mongol practices, the Ming emperors' policies could well have inherited similar legacies from other periods in Chinese history, such as the Tang Empire.[49] In this sense, her account of a Mongolian legacy in Eurasia lasting more than 500 years perpetuates the Westphalian myth.

Andrew Philips' *How the East was Won* compares the Qing Empire, the Mughal Empire, and the British Raj, explaining how these demographically small and culturally marginalized minority conquest regimes eventually dominated their respective regions. Philips highlights the incorporation of diversity regimes as a key feature and important source of their adaptability and resilience in creating vast multicultural empires. The geographical scope of the study allows for a detailed comparison of both the Western (British) and the Eastern (Mughal and Manchu) actors. Regardless of their differences, each of these empires pursued a similar strategy that he calls "conquest by customization." Meanwhile, although the imperatives of conquest and domination were similar, the religious syncretism of the Mughals, the ethnic segregation of the Manchus, and the communal ecumenism of the Company Raj each offered distinctive solutions to the similar challenges of managing cultural diversity. Philips highlights how Manchu rulers legitimized their authority through segregated incorporation. In comparing three significant imperial projects in Asian history, the book presents a novel theory of the origins and governance of empires, focusing on the nexus between cultural diversity and international order.[50] The insights the book deploys could help us to deal more effectively with contemporary international order management, the central task of which remains that of dealing with differences.

Thus, these recent works highlight how extensively Asia has been interconnected, unveiling the commonalities resulting from extensive cross-cultural interactions, borrowings, and hybridizations. They also underline the potential for change in the ordering principles of world politics, advancing our understanding of hierarchy in global politics. However, the pursuit of similar projects might encounter such serious challenges as data availability and quality. That of interpreting different—even contradictory—historical accounts may also come into play.

[47] Hendrik Spruyt, *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[48] Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[49] Victoria Tin-bor Hui, "'The Rise and Fall of Eurasian World Orders,' the Francesco Guicciardini prize forum," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 6 (2023), pp. 774–81.

[50] Andrew Phillips, *How the East was Won: Barbarian Conquerors, Universal Conquest and the Making of Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2021).

To sum up, scholarly interest in East Asian history having been recently expanded, IR scholars have come to differ on how the region should be analysed—both historically and through existing IR theories. Capturing local peculiarities while maintaining general theoretical validity is somewhat difficult. The four approaches summarized above vary significantly in the spatial and temporal scope of their historical investigation, as well as their respective theoretical aspirations. Each has its limits. The first approach assumes that established theories are universal. Its goal of theory development is hence limited to testing and refining those theories, while scholars' examination of East Asian history is confined to a few specific periods and cases. Critics might complain that this approach ignores the specifics of East Asian history, and hence underutilizes its value for theoretical innovation.

The second approach challenges, provocatively enough, Western theories' claim of universal applicability, and seeks to expose the intellectual bias of mainstream IR scholarship through East Asian history. These studies emphasize the uniqueness (and to some extent imply the homogeneity) of East Asian historical experience. The focus of their empirical research is on contrasting East Asian history with that of the West (in the modern era). Critics might question whether or not this path exaggerates the differences between East Asia and other regions while ignoring the internal complexity, diversity, and volatility of the historical East Asian IR.

The relatively restricted theoretical goal of the third approach is to construct new theories to explain certain patterns in East Asian history, and to confine the scope of empirical research to specific cases in East Asian history, albeit while recognizing the diversity within the East Asian experience. One of the scholars' tasks is to test further the external validity of their theses and to convert their analysis of certain specific local experience into more general propositions that might have explanatory power beyond East Asia.

The fourth approach, which aspires to construct theories that could transcend regional specificities and have general applicability, is the most ambitious. In conducting a comparison of East Asian history with the history of other regions, including the West, its scope of empirical research transcends regional boundaries. This approach entails the serious challenges of dealing with the methodological issue of comparability and selection bias, and the availability and quality of historical data.

Challenges and Future Research Agendas

The expanding literature on historical East Asian IR provides long-awaited sustenance in a field long hungry for alternatives not rooted solely in Western ideas or experiences. But it also brings daunting challenges. To advance the project, scholars must scrupulously navigate three tensions: the tension between the "East" and the "West"; between the two disciplines of history and IR; and between the past and the present.

The "East" vs The "West"

The first tension—between the "East" and the "West," or in other words, "the quarrel between the East and the West"—complicates a non-Western IR project from the start. Critiques of Eurocentrism have been well-constructed, and hence ever more well-received in the IR field. An inclusive struggle for intellectual plurality against Eurocentric intellectual hegemony is indeed a noble cause that should be applauded. However, exceptionalism and ethnocentrism are not exclusive to the West.[51] Various defensive self-narratives at the beginning turn out to create too much exceptionalism and a binary with an "East vs West" frame at their end. Analysts should, taking account of the complexity and dynamism of both

[51] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Amitav Acharya, "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2014), p. 651.

Western theories and East Asian history, avoid exotifying differences between "the West" and "the East."

On the one hand, we must never underestimate the theoretical diverseness of IR. When questioning the validity of Western theories, therefore, we must be specific.[52] Hierarchy and peace are not new to traditional theories of hegemonic stability and emerging theories of hierarchy, or to the history of IR in pre-modern Europe. Exploration of the East Asian hierarchy may thus not fundamentally challenge emerging Western studies on international hierarchy. The failure of a hypothesis, derived from structural realism, to explain China's war behaviours does not constitute a failure of other strands of established Western IR theories. The ineffectiveness of rational theories in explaining the East Asian international system may prove the relevance of certain branches of social constructivism, which is also rooted in Western IR. We should hence not assume that existing (Western) theories cannot, with some revision, subsume the lessons of different regional experiences.[53]

Fading interest in the "big" or meta-theoretical debates in recent years has been accompanied by the rise of "middle-range theories." Yet, scrupulous scholarship that brings understudied historical cases from Asia into conversation with this new trend is only just beginning.[54] As the works of Zhang Feng, Lee, and Spruyt all suggest, the interaction of material and cultural factors in the construction and maintenance of different orders is a promising topic for further study. Many of the studies mentioned above share, to some extent, a similarly binary view that separates culture from power, and ideology from pragmatism—a misleading but common dichotomy among historians and IR scholars.[55] The alternative to choosing between them is the pursuit of more sophisticated explanations, which both identify the relative importance of ideational or material factors in a given context, and examine their confounding effects—accomplished through a unified general theoretical framework applied across different regions and periods. Future research, therefore, should adopt a more nuanced methodological design; one that extends the analysis to different sets of polities while tracing the evolution of the East Asian international system over time, thus to explore the relative salience of competing explanations through isolating/controlling particular causal variables.

Meanwhile, we should not ignore the complexity and dynamism of East Asian history. Working within an explicit theoretical framework, the tendency of most existent works is to focus on particular periods and specific parts of historical East Asia that fit and support their arguments. At times, such authors as Kang, Zhang Feng, and Lee overlook historical evidence—some of which, indeed, is of their own finding—due to its inconsistency with the overall drive to demonstrate certain patterns of East Asian historical experiences. Good theory, however, demands the testing of alternative explanations, and using as many observable effects as possible. Awareness of these methodological issues compels scholars' more scrupulous evaluation of evidence and comparison of patterns across time and space, and their making of discrete claims of appropriate scope within suitable boundaries.

Acknowledgment of these issues does not amount to any downplaying of the distinctive value of studying East Asian history. A viable Global IR will require more than just a greater reliance on non-Western history merely for purposes of additional empirical data, but will necessarily entail an excavation of East Asian intellectual genealogies. Drawing on

[52] Wu, "The History-Informed IR Study on the Resurgence of China," p. 49.

[53] Ibid, pp. 49–50.

[54] Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, "Why is there no Non-Western International Relations Theory? Ten Years On," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2017), pp. 341–70. For a good example on this direction of effort, see Paul Musgrave and Daniel H. Nexon, "Defending Hierarchy from the Moon to the Indian Ocean: Symbolic Capital and Political Dominance in Early Modern China and the Cold War," *International Organization*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (2018), pp. 591–626.

[55] James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Quest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 14–5.

non-Eurocentric histories is an important first step towards "provincialising Europe," but may not, in itself, be enough. Kang contends that IR scholars should take Asia "on its own terms, not as a reflection of Europe."[56] Ironically, as some of his critics have pointed out, his own and many similar works are troubled by the contradiction whereby the very spatial category of "non-West" is already inflected, indeed constituted, by the West. From a more critical perspective, although Kang's work is motivated by avowedly anti-Eurocentric aims, a persistent Eurocentrism nevertheless pervades his analysis. His understanding of order and what constitutes a conflict, along with his methodological statism, all reproduce a deeply Eurocentric framework.[57] It is this failure that limits his efforts to understand Asia in regard to its distinctive history, rather than as a derivative of theories formulated elsewhere. Diversifying cases without expanding the intellectual tools we bring to historical research and theorizing efforts may, in the end, be insufficient to formulate non-Eurocentric alternatives. Theorizing East Asian history on its own terms, and testing these ideas' external validity remains a daunting task, albeit one which would ultimately and essentially refine and expand the vocabulary and wisdom of the IR discipline.

History vs IR

In this light, a genuine, viable non-Western IR requires closer and deeper collaboration between IR theorists and historians. Inextricably entangled, history and IR theories may also be reciprocal. In other words, history provides sources for developing IR theories, while IR theories add analytical depth to understanding history. The relationship between history and theory may hence be better grasped as co-constitutive.[58] All historical narratives inevitably carry a certain amount of theoretical baggage. In addition to collecting empirical data from historical works, IR scholars can also draw inspiration from examining how historians organize their narratives. Nonetheless, different disciplinary habits and orientations make developing "historically informed international relations studies" somewhat difficult.[59] How to manage the gap and tension between the two disciplines thus becomes another challenge.

To construct generalized arguments, most IR scholars continue to rely on historians' existing interpretations. In past decades, however, previous stylized narratives about the region have been seriously challenged and deconstructed. Although IR scholars still stereotype ancient China's foreign relations as a "tributary system," many historians now consider that system either as an outdated topic or indeed a myth.[60] As they have highlighted, when taking into account the perspectives of both China and its neighbours, what has been recorded as a stable and legitimate authority in Chinese history could be translated as domination of weaker neighbours and equality among the stronger ones, according to their respective narrative.[61] We can say that there has, to some extent, been as much debate about the scale, scope, and nature of the tributary order as about the causes of World War I. Cognizant of the multidimensional complexities of any such account of past practices, researchers must, at the outset of their study, give explicit consideration to the historiographical terrain by examining the validity of different accounts, thus to better select and reconcile them.[62]

[56] Kang, *East Asia before the West*, p. 4.

[57] For an insightful criticism, see Sankaran Krishna, "China is China, Not the Non-West: David Kang, Eurocentrism, and Global Politics," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (2017), pp. 93–109.

[58] Yu-Shan Wu, "The History-Informed IR Study on the Resurgence of China," p. 39.

[59] Acharya and Buzan, "Why is there no Non-Western International Relations Theory? Ten Years On," pp. 351–52.

[60] Park, "Long Live the Tributary System!" p. 4; Zhang Feng, "Rethinking the 'Tribute System'," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (2009), pp. 545–74.

[61] Hui, "Pre-Modern Asia and International Relations Theory," p. 182.

[62] Ian S. Lustick History, "Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (1996), pp. 605–18.

The historical practice of Chinese "hegemony," or the tribute system, reveals a multiplicity of trade, military, diplomatic, and ritualistic relationships. Rather than accepting China's definition of hierarchy and subordination, China's neighbours interpreted tribute relationships in their particular ways. Meanwhile, in spite of fluid interpretations and local adaptations, a common and durable cultural framework existed.[63] It was precisely the system's flexibility that engendered such durability and broad applicability to a wide range of situations. In this sense, the tribute system may still be used as a model for framing East Asian IR, but should not be understood as a static and strict hierarchy. Instead, it has multiple, contested, and overlapping dimensions that could accommodate doctrinal variations and diverse actors.[64] The analytical challenge here is to develop a framework that can find a balance between affirmation and denial of the model, and account for both constancy and change.[65]

Meanwhile, we should not try to "shoehorn" every aspect of China's relations with other states into the tributary model.[66] The tribute system is only one of the frameworks whereby East Asian states have historically constructed their relations, and covers only certain actors and some of their practices. Therefore, we must reflect on what the model obscures and what it omits.[67] The history of East Asia is incredibly diverse and complex. The region's international system has not been constant but dynamic. It should hence be treated not just as one case, but as several different systems.[68] Chinese power has seen peaks and valleys, and historical hierarchies surrounding China have taken many forms. China has not always been the foremost nation of an Asian hierarchy; nor has its cultural legitimacy been consistent. It would be wrong, therefore, to regard historical East Asia as a singular hub-and-spoke system dominated by a Chinese centre wherein Confucian values constitute the sole defining characteristic. East Asian hierarchy was also "plural," in both the geographical and temporal sense,[69] and Chinese hegemony has fluctuated greatly over time, having been "ignored, avoided, revised, rejected, and challenged by various actors."[70]

However, discernment of the above dynamism and complexity that historians have highlighted does not refute the value of studying Chinese hegemony, or tributary orders, for general theory construction. Nor does the caution against a Sinocentric view imply China's over-peripheralization. That hegemony is never complete, and that the rules of the hegemon are not always followed, moreover, is no new assertion, but rather an observation that may have profound implications for future theorizing on the variability of international hierarchies. As Kang observes, "scholars write about the Westphalian system and the Western liberal order while recognizing the United States is not the only member and acknowledge that the majority of actors are often unenthusiastic participants."[71] In this sense, the interaction between China and its neighbours is comparable to that between the USA and its small and medium allies.[72] Chinese hegemony, stripped of its proper names, existed for several hundred years over a large geographic space. Examination of the diversity

[63] Hui, "Getting Asia Right," pp. 481–2.

[64] Peter Perdue, "The Tenacious Tributary System," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 24, No. 96 (2015), pp. 1002–14.

[65] See Joseph MacKay, "Rethinking Hierarchies in East Asian Historical IR," *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2019), pp. 598–611.

[66] Joseph MacKay, "The Nomadic Other: Ontological Security and the Inner Asian Steppe in Historical East Asian International Politics," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2016), pp. 471–91.

[67] Saeyoung Park, "Long Live the Tributary System! The Future of Studying East Asian Foreign Relations," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (2017), p. 3.

[68] Kang, "International Relations Theory and East Asian History: An Overview," p. 192.

[69] MacKay, "Rethinking Hierarchies in East Asian Historical IR," pp. 599, 607.

[70] Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony*, p. 8; Kang, "International Order in Historical East Asia," p. 73.

[71] Kang, "International Order in Historical East Asia," p. 68.

[72] See Yuen Foong Khong, "The American Tributary System," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 6, No.1 (2013), pp. 1–47.

and dynamism of relevant practices would provide considerable insights into the mechanisms that create, maintain, defend, ignore, adjust, and undermine international hierarchy. When deconstructing Sino-centric narratives, therefore, we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

In learning from history, besides noting historical complexity, it is also important to avoid the mistake of being "unhistorical, perhaps anti-historical" when developing theories.[73] From the historian's perspective, the unquestioned universality of actors, interests, and conditions might, indeed, be far more contingent or conditional than is currently assumed in mainstream IR scholarship. Historical study and contextual nuance are critical to a proper understanding of different international systems. The evolution of historical East Asian IR unveiled a dynamic pattern, yet most existing theoretical accounts overemphasize certain structural factors. IR theorizing should thus take into account the specific historical and social contexts wherein actors operate and treat their behaviour and interactions as a dynamic evolutionary process. What we need is an historical approach on the part of IR that pays due attention to agency and contingency, and that can explain both commonality and specificity, and continuity and change.

Following Victoria Hui, I propose a mechanism-centred dynamic IR theorizing approach that views the evolution of international systems as processes of strategic and social interaction among actors, and of the interplays of different causal mechanisms as triggered under certain contexts. From this perspective, as Hui suggests, "recurrent causal mechanisms combine differently with varying initial and environmental conditions to produce radically different outcomes." The dialectical workings of various general mechanisms and the interplay among them thus determine the outcome of international politics, contingent on strategies adopted by different actors in a given historical context.[74] Our daunting task is to examine and compare different historical cases in order to identify these mechanisms, and to study patterns of their interactions under certain conditions.

Promoting the dynamic approach of historical IR also requires methodological innovation. The main method adopted by existing research is the comparative study of historical cases. There exist two ways of comparing regional systems. One is that of the "most different" designs adopted by the recent pan-Eurasian approach, which attempts to uncover similarities between different regional systems. The other consists in contrasting different systems to identify key factors that explain their differences, as Kang has tried to do. As the differences between cases are too large to be well controlled, the research design of these studies is often questioned, because any simple explanation would cause significant twist in the historical context. In future, scholars may try the "paired comparisons of uncommon cases" as advocated by Hui, and follow Dingxin Zhao's "in-depth historical approach" that conducts "illustrative comparisons at various points to contrast the dynamics of different historical processes and reveal the underlying regularities."[75] As both of these two approaches emphasize initial and environmental conditions, timing, and path dependence, they would help to "reveal the workings of various general mechanisms and to highlight how similar mechanisms produced drastically different outcomes in different historical contexts."[76]

[73] Paul Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1994), p. 148.

[74] Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*, esp., pp. 8, 142. A recent article by Yuan-kang Wang is a good example of the application of this approach. See Yuan-kang Wang, "The Durability of a Unipolar System: Lessons from East Asian History," *Security Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 5 (2020), pp. 832–63.

[75] Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*; Zhao, *The Confucian-Legalist State*, p. 26.

[76] Zhao, *The Confucian-Legalist State*, p. 26.

The Past vs The Present

While avoiding ahistorical readings of IR, scholars must also be scrupulous with regard to the temporal scope of their theories. Although we may affirm a theory's explanatory power in explaining certain historical events, such a theory may not be transposable to contemporary events. This brings us to another critical point: how to manage the tension between the past and the present.

China's resurgence has fuelled intense speculation as to how the country will use its power, and what this implies for the future of the international order. Looking to East Asia's historical IR for clues, therefore, is only to be expected, and most of the works mentioned above have engaged in discussion on this topic. However, using history to predict the future is a "risky venture."[77] Kang and others' prediction that the peace associated with the pre-modern tributary system signifies a peacefully rising China in East Asia might make historians uneasy, bearing in mind the dramatic and numerous transformations that both China and East Asia have undergone over past centuries. The possible existence of a link between past experiences and current politics, as well as the mechanisms sustaining that link, therefore, merit further exploration, but cannot be assumed.[78]

The narrative of East Asian history, moreover, has interjected itself directly into contemporary debates about China's rise and the future of East Asian international politics. Our view of Chinese and East Asian history, like all historical interpretations, responds to the contemporary world, and involves interjection of the present into the past.[79] Historical narrative and present are hence intervened. The power of the present to inform and creatively disrupt historical inquiry is not new. Instrumental historical interpretations are the preserve of neither Chinese nor Western scholarship.[80] Repeating Robert Cox's oft-cited aphorism, if "theory is always for someone and for some purpose," then "history too is always for someone and for some purpose."[81] We need alternative theories and narratives to challenge and replace Western intellectual hegemony, but in generating these alternative accounts we shall never compromise academic integrity. There is always the danger that scholars may, consciously or unconsciously, cherry-pick events from the past that confirm their own current prejudices. Various interpretations of East Asian history intersect not only with the pursuit of contemporary state interests, but also the political visions of the intellectuals themselves. In a period of political upheaval, such as we are experiencing today, the study of history itself has become intensely politicized. The space that brings IR and history together is thus not just a field of collaborative mutual learning, for it can also be a battleground where bitterly opposed intellectual and political commitments confront each other.[82] New theories are, after all, the product of cumulative research over time. Scholars working on historical East Asia must necessarily attract a critical mass of followers and stimulate a research agenda for others. Yet, there is little progress in collective efforts towards developing East Asian IR theories. This is in large part due to conflicting historical narratives based on nationalism across the region, which remain a "key source of interstate conflict, persistent security dilemmas, and ongoing disputes over territory."[83] History and IR shall also be critical disciplines that should maintain a proper distance from present policy framings. It is, therefore,

[77] Morris Rossabi, "East Asia before the West by David C. Kang," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 126, No. 3 (2011), p. 511.

[78] Wu, "The History-Informed IR Study on the Resurgence of China," p. 51.

[79] Ja Ian Chong, "Popular Narratives Versus Chinese History: Implications for Understanding an Emergent China," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2014), pp. 939–64.

[80] Spruyt, "Collective Imaginations and International Order," p. 45.

[81] Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States, and World Order: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millenium*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1981), p. 128.

[82] An example is the controversy around the New Qing History, see Li Zhiting, "'New Qing History': An Example of 'New Imperialist' History," *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2016), pp. 5–12.

[83] Johnston, "What (If Anything) Does East Asia Tell Us About International Relations Theory?," p. 69.

with a certain awareness of the contentiousness of our analytical categories, as well as of the power dynamics involved in articulating both historical accounts and theoretical agendas, that we advocate the amassing of scholars from divergent backgrounds to promote a collective effort to construct East Asian IR theories based on more inclusive and balanced narratives of East Asian IR histories.

Conclusion

Proactive engagement with the history of the non-Western world is one of the most exciting advances to IR theorizing in recent years. Cognizant of the differences between historical East Asia and the established views of modern Western international systems, existing studies have taken different approaches to using East Asian history to develop IR theory. Scholars in the field vary significantly with regard to the spatial and temporal scope of their historical inquiry, as well as in their aspirations to support, complement, or undermine Western IR theories. These studies nonetheless advance the emerging literature on hierarchy and legitimacy in IR studies, and highlight the importance of social, contextual, and ideational factors in explaining state behaviour and the evolution of international orders.

Rather than the originality of the theoretical claims that they make, the greatest contribution of these studies is perhaps their opening up several potentially fruitful avenues for further research. One such approach in this regard is to examine the divergence and evolution of East Asian international system(s)/state strategies through the lens of cutting-edge middle-range IR theories, and in so doing to expand the project's historical horizons. With the contingent nature, complexity, and flexibility of Chinese hegemony increasingly recognized, scholars no longer treat the entirety of East Asian history as a single case, but as discrete systems with different characteristics which studies have only recently begun to assess comparatively.[84] Future research on historical East Asian IR must hence broaden its geographical and temporal scope by extending analyses to different sets of polities, and tracing the evolution of each system over time. Scholars may, in the process, develop more sophisticated theories on the variability of international hierarchies, and employ more robust methodological designs whereby to identify the relative importance of ideational and material factors and examine their confounding effects within certain contexts.

Another course may be to move beyond the confines of the East Asian experience and engage in cross-regional analysis, thus to test the external validity of such concepts and explanations derived from the East Asian experience, and also to generate new general theories of broader relevance. Identifying and explaining the operations and intersections of multiple sociopolitical mechanisms in different historical contexts requires scrupulous attention to cross-regional synchronic comparisons, as well as diachronic variation. Examining cross-cultural contacts could also be of use in exploring social commonalities and cultural distinctiveness, thus to banish cultural exceptionalism.

To advance the agenda outlined above, scholars must address certain challenges, in particular that of managing the three tensions as summarized above: the tension between the "East" and the "West"; the tension between the two disciplines of history and IR; and the tension between past and present. When exploring the rich history of East Asia through the lens of IR theory, scholars must pay meticulous attention to their arguments' temporal scope and spatial boundaries, thus to set parameters whereby to measure concepts and verify causal claims. Special care must be taken not to overstate one's own or others' findings and arguments, and also to avoid selection bias arising from cherry-picking evidence from the rich historical record which fits predetermined conclusions. Scholars must, as well, pay due attention to agency and contingency, and construct mechanism-centred dynamic theoretical frameworks that can support a historical approach to IR.

[84] MacKay, "Rethinking Hierarchies in East Asian Historical IR."

Whatever its merits or shortcomings, the emerging scholarship on premodern East Asian IR has generated rich empirical accounts, raised provocative questions, and created fresh inspiration for IR theorizing. To take this research to the next level, future studies should continue to broaden their intellectual horizons and proactively bring scholarship on the history of East Asia and other regions into direct conversation with each other, thus to prevail over ethnocentrism and exceptionalism. They should also engage in dialogue—not only with mainstream IR theories and paradigms, but also with history and other social science disciplines. Ultimately, scholars should refine their methodology to avoid selection bias, maintain an appropriate distance from contemporary politics, and, perhaps most importantly, combine original historical research with new IR theoretical trends in order to construct dynamic theories that can be applied to other regions and to IR more generally.

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