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Article

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Non-Western Interpolity Orders and Sociocultural Forces: the *shi* in the Early Modern East Asian Order

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Abstract

Who shaped the historical interpolity orders of the pre-modern non-Western world? Existing scholarship attributes the creation of international order to states and empires. In contrast, drawing on historical sociological critiques of state-centrism, I argue that transnational sociocultural forces also played a pivotal role in shaping non-Western interpolity orders. I substantiate this argument by analyzing the rise and order-making activities of the literati class *shi* in early modern East Asia, whose practices and identities fundamentally reshaped the region's interpolity relations. First, I show that beginning with the Song period, the *shi* in China, Korea, and Vietnam emerged as a transnational sociocultural force increasingly autonomous from the state, generating a symbiotic form of state. I then demonstrate how the *shi* shaped the East Asian order in two interrelated ways: by influencing the foreign policy orientations of symbiotic states and by reinforcing the normative foundations of tributary relations between China and its neighbors. The case of the *shi* illustrates that a historical sociological approach to sociocultural forces can uncover more complex dynamics within non-Western interpolity orders, moving beyond state-centric models, while also contributing to the globalized historical sociology and offering theoretical and practical insights for the study of international orders more broadly.

Introduction

Which actors beyond the state participated in order-making in the non-Western historical interpolity orders? Recent studies have expanded the study of non-Western historical interpolity orders prior to the nineteenth century and analyzed, for example, Chinese hegemony, the Qing multicultural imperial order, Southeast Asian mandala states, the Chinggisid orders, Islamic interpolity order, and Indian interpolity order.[1] Despite its

[1] Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Hendrik Spruyt, *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Andrew Phillips and Christian Reus-Smit, *Culture and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, *Re-Imagining International Relations: World Orders in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese, and Islamic Civilizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Feng Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); David C. Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Ali Balci and Tuncay Kardaş, "The Ottoman

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achievements, however, there is one conspicuous problem in the literature that curiously escaped critical scrutiny: state-centrism. This is surprising given its close association with Eurocentrism.[2] Despite efforts to highlight the distinctiveness of non-Western polities, most studies remain centered on state-like institutions wielding coercive power, such as dynasties and imperial courts.

This paper addresses the lingering problem of state-centrism in non-Western interpolity orders. Focusing on early modern East Asia, I argue that the socio-cultural elite *shi* played an equally important order-making role as dynastic states.[3] Here, early modern East Asia refers to post-Song regions inheriting the Sinic classical heritage (*zhonghuawenwu*), including China, Korea, and Vietnam. I use Sinic rather than Chinese to highlight this shared tradition.[4] The Song period serves as a temporal marker because of momentous political, economic, and cultural transformation in East Asia.[5] Despite growing analyses of the East Asian order through concepts like hegemony, tributary system, and heterogeneous contracting, little attention has been given to social forces beyond the state.[6] In contrast, Gu Yanwu (1613–82), a Qing *shi*, attributed a distinctive order-making role to social forces outside the state apparatus, in particular his fellow *shi*, by proclaiming that "preserving the moral order of the world (*tianxia*) is for even the lowest person to take responsibility for."[7] The *shi* defined themselves as cultural and moral exemplars, shaping the classical Sinic heritage. Investigating their order-making role will broaden the state-focused study of the early modern East Asian order and beyond.

This study of East Asian sociocultural elites is not meant to assert a uniquely East Asian feature of its international order. Rather, as Zheng Chen has recently advocated, an international relations (IR) study of East Asian history should use its distinctive and complex features not to advance exceptionalist or essentialist claims but to generate insightful and manageable theoretical tools for studying IR wherever they are applicable.[8] Likewise, this study offers broader contributions to both the study of other, in particular non-Western, historical interpolity orders and to more general theoretical and practical issues in the analysis of international order. First, this study shows that a similar historical sociological analysis applies to other non-Western interpolity orders. The state-like central political institution in many non-Western interpolity orders was confronted with various social actors. For example, even the warrior class of centralized conquest dynasties such as the Mongols and Manchus had a social logic for defining their group identity that was not captured by the logic of state institutions.[9] Other sociocultural elites, such as Islamic

International System: Power Projection, Interconnectedness, and the Autonomy of Frontier Polities," *Millennium*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2023), pp. 866–91.

[2] Julian Go and George Lawson, "Introduction," in Julian Go and George Lawson, eds., *Global Historical Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 1–34; John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 185–6.

[3] For convenience, I will only indicate the modern Chinese transliteration of the regular classical Chinese nouns. Proper nouns will follow the transliteration of the respective modern country. Also, while *shi* has other synonyms in non-Chinese societies, I adhere to the word to reflect its common usage in pre-modern East Asia.

[4] Sixiang Wang, *Boundless Winds of Empire: Rhetoric and Ritual in Early Chosŏn Diplomacy with Ming China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), pp. 15–6.

[5] Luo Yinan, "A Study of the Changes in the Tang—Song Transition Model," *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies*, No. 35 (2005), pp. 99–127.

[6] Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony*; Kang, *East Asia before the West*; Ji-Young Lee, *China's Hegemony* (La Vergne: Columbia University Press, 2016); 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; 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), pp. 3–36.

[7] Gu Yanwu, *Daily Learning*, Vol. 13, https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=614214.

[8] Zheng Chen, "The Use and Misuse of East Asian History in IR Theorizing," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2024), pp. 306–22.

[9] Paul D. Buell and Judith Kolbas, "The Ethos of State and Society in the Early Mongol Empire: Chinggis Khan to Güyük," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 26, No. 1–2 (2016), pp. 43–64; Mark C. Elliott,

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jurists and Tibetan monks, also shaped their respective interpolity orders.[10] The historical sociological analysis will reveal this complex network of social actors, in which the state is embedded and which could have played an important role in establishing order.

Second, the argument of the paper will provide broader theoretical and practical insights on the role of social actors in shaping international orders in general. European historical sociology has examined how modern states and international orders emerged through complex interactions with social actors who contested and coordinated with state institutions.[11] However, these social actors, such as classes, gentry, nobility, and bureaucrats, were often defined by their socioeconomic status or their links to the state. In contrast, the sociocultural elite *shi* defined themselves self-consciously in moral and cultural terms and institutionalized its tradition in part independently of the state. The sociocultural definition of this social actor will thus broaden the categories for studying social actors who are independent of state institutions, while furthering the call for Global Historical Sociology that seeks to examine both European and non-Western interpolity orders and their interrelationships.[12] Also, with the new conceptual tools, historical sociological works will be able to more effectively engage the state-centric framework of paradigmatic theories like realism and some theories of hierarchy, and show that the social actors with prominent intellectual and cultural resources are crucial in shaping the power, institutions, hierarchical statuses, identities, and norms of an international order. Likewise, they will show that the transformation of both global and regional East Asian orders today will, in part, hinge on whether rising powers such as China can cultivate their own partnerships with new global sociocultural forces.

In the following, I first review major works on non-Western interpolity orders, focusing on East Asia, to highlight the insufficient analysis of non-state social actors. Second, I will combine both historical works on state-society relations in early modern East Asia and historical sociology in IR to conceptualize the sociocultural force of *shi* and explain how they shaped a distinctive form of state and interpolity order. Third, I will demonstrate how the moral and cultural competence of the *shi* shaped their interpolity order and, in particular, provided it with a strong normative foundation. Finally, I will discuss the broader significance of this argument by exploring the role of sociocultural forces in other non-Western interpolity orders and their broader theoretical and practical implications for studying international order.

The Persistence of State-Centrism in the Studies of Non-Western Interpolity Orders

Recent works on non-Western historical orders have expanded a traditionally Eurocentric discipline of IR. However, even a brief review reveals that their main analytical focus still remains on centralized state-like actors, with limited attention to social actors. Ayşe Zarakol's study of multiple Eurasian world orders examines Mongol sovereignty, emphasizing centralized Chinggisid institutions, but other social actors play only a minor

The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

10 Samy A. Ayoub, *Law, Empire, and the Sultan: Ottoman Imperial Authority and Late Hanafi Jurisprudence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Timothy Brook, Michael van Walt van Praag, and Miek Boltjes, eds., *Sacred Mandates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), pp. 90–154.

11 Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1981), pp. 126–55; Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992); Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London, New York: Verso, 2003); Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Philip S. Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

12 Go and Lawson, "Introduction."

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role in legitimizing or adapting this sovereignty.[13] Hendrik Spruyt explores non-Western international orders and the role of actors like Islamic jurists in shaping collective beliefs, but their sociological makeup and relationship with central states remain underdeveloped.[14] Andrew Phillips and others analyze how diversity regimes regulate cultural multiplicity, but largely depict non-Western imperial centers as controllers of these regimes, with non-state actors in a subordinate role.[15] Similarly, Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan focus on interstate war and diplomacy in Chinese, Indian, and Islamic international orders, offering little sociological analysis of social actors.[16] In a recent work, Acharya adopts a civilizational analysis of world orders to go beyond a focus on anarchical competition of states. On the surface, it attempts to go beyond the limits of state-centrism. However, there is no sustained sociological analysis of non-state actors who created and transmitted the very civilizational traditions under examination.[17] In short, these works either implicitly adopt a state-centric focus or fail to propose a concrete theoretical framework for analyzing non-state social actors.

State-centrism similarly dominates studies of early modern East Asian interpolity order. Many analyses of China's hegemonic power attribute hegemony to the Chinese state. For example, David Kang states that "'Hegemony' is a form of hierarchy, arising as it does from the acceptance by some states of the leadership and greater responsibility, influence, and roles of another state."[18] Similarly, Zhang Feng conceptualizes Chinese hegemony as hierarchical reciprocity between dynastic states.[19] While Zhang acknowledges Neo-Confucian ideology's influence on Chinese foreign policy, he does not examine its sociocultural origins beyond the state.[20] This state-centered focus on China's moral and cultural supremacy is common among scholars of Sino-centric hierarchy.[21] At the same time, even critics of the Sino-centric thesis remain within a state-centric framework.[22] One of the strongest critiques comes from New Qing History scholars, who challenge Chinese hegemony by emphasizing the Qing Empire's coercion and multiculturalism. However, their focus remains on the Qing imperial court and its governance of multiple constituencies.[23] In another example, Tommy S. H. Chai questions the model of China-centered hegemony by revealing heterarchical structure in Southeast Asia, but his focus squarely remains on the central political authorities of various kingdoms.[24]

13 Zarakol, *Before the West*.

14 Spruyt, *The World Imagined*.

15 Phillips and Reus-Smit, *Culture and Order in World Politics*.

16 Acharya and Buzan, *Re-Imagining International Relations*.

17 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.

18 Kang, *East Asia before the West*, p. 22.

19 Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony*.

20 Feng Zhang, "Confucian Foreign Policy Traditions in Chinese History," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 8, No.2 (2015), pp. 197–218.

21 Zhang and Buzan, "The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice"; Lee, *China's Hegemony*.

22 Fangyin Zhou, "Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2011), pp. 147–78; Nianshen Song, "'Tributary' from a Multilateral and Multilayered Perspective," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2012), pp. 155–82; Brantly Womack, "Asymmetry and China's Tributary System," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2012), pp. 37–54; Yuan-Kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

23 Ruth W. Dunnell and James A. Millward, "Introduction," in James A. Millward, Ruth W. Dunnell, Mark C. Elliott, and Philippe Forêt, eds., *New Qing Imperial History* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1–13; Phillips, "Contesting the Confucian Peace"; Evelyn S. Rawski, *Early Modern China and Northeast Asia: Cross-Border Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

24 Tommy S. H. Chai, "Rethinking East Asia's Historical Order: Heterarchy in China–Southeast Asia Relations," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2025), pp. 246–66.

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Some studies of the East Asian order do adopt a historical sociological approach but remain largely state-centric. These works examine state-society relations, focusing on how centralized states appropriated socioeconomic resources to compete with each other, but with little attention to social actors beyond the state. David Kang and Chin-Hao Huang's analysis of East Asian state formation largely follows the state-centric framework, although they emphasize emulation as a distinctive mechanism of state formation in East Asia.[25] A few New Qing historians also followed the state-centric historical sociology as they analyzed the link between the Qing state-making and its Eurasian conquest.[26] Inho Choi's work on the *shi* is a notable exception, forming the basis for the following discussion. However, it focuses only on Sino-Korean relations and provides limited empirical evidence.[27]

In sum, studies of non-Western international orders, particularly early modern East Asia, focus on states, their relationships, and state formation. This state-centrism likely stems from the enduring influence of Weber's definition of the state as the monopolistic organ of legitimate violence, which also shaped European historical sociology.[28] While this approach highlights key aspects of non-Western interpolity orders, it overlooks the role of influential social actors. A new theoretical framework is needed to incorporate autonomous social actors in order-making. In what follows, I will develop this framework by conceptualizing sociocultural forces and applying it to early modern East Asia.

shi as a Sociocultural Force

My theoretical framework builds upon Choi's adaptation of Robert Cox's conceptualization of social forces. Cox proposes a tripartite model—social forces, forms of state, and world order—where each influences the others without a central unit. Social forces refer specifically to socio-economic classes such as workers and capitalists. The forms of state are determined by the interaction between state institutions and these independent social actors, and by the influence of a world order such as hegemony.[29] Crucially, social forces, often transnational, play an independent role in shaping interpolity and world orders alongside states.[30] Thus, changes in interpolity orders involve not only the processes of state formation or the balance of power among them, but also the character and transformation of social forces. Cox's example is Pax Britannica and 19th-century liberal internationalism, driven by transnational manufacturing capitalists and later challenged by industrial workers advocating welfare states and protectionism.[31] Similarly, Teschke examines how the decline of absolutist elites and the rise of the capitalist class transformed early modern patrimonial states and territorial conquest-driven anarchy into the liberal state and a managed balance of power system.[32]

Choi argues that the evolution of early modern East Asian interpolity order was likewise shaped by prominent social forces influencing both the forms of state and interstate relations.[33] The elite literary class called *shi* was such a prominent social force. They held significant political and social roles across East Asian states and actively shaped interstate

[25] Chin-Hao Huang and David C. Kang, "State Formation in Korea and Japan, 400–800 CE: Emulation and Learning, Not Bellicist Competition," *International Organization*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (2022), pp. 1–31.

[26] Evelyn S. Rawski, "The Qing Formation and the Early-Modern Period," in Lynn A. Struve, ed., *The Qing Formation in World-Historical Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), pp. 207–41; Perdue, *China Marches West*, pp. 518–46.

[27] Inho Choi, "'Chinese' Hegemony from a Korean Shi Perspective: Aretocracy in the Early Modern East Asia," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2022), pp. 347–74.

[28] John M. Hobson, "The Two Waves of Weberian Historical Sociology in International Relations," in Stephen Hobden and John M. Hobson, eds., *Historical Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 63–81.

[29] Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders," pp. 135–41.

[30] Ibid., p. 141.

[31] Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders," p. 141–2.

[32] Teschke, *The Myth of 1648*.

[33] Choi, "'Chinese' Hegemony from a Korean Shi Perspective."

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relations. Choi also broadens Cox's concept of social forces, moving beyond its economic focus. Unlike Cox's neo-Marxian framework, the *shi* defined themselves in socio-cultural terms. While their economic base was important, the *shi* identity was primarily defined by their own evolving cultural and moral ideals and practices.[34]

Some historical sociological works have examined the sociocultural power of non-state actors. Philip Gorski shows that Calvinist discipline provided an alternative power source for the Dutch Republic against Spain.[35] Michael Mann identifies the network of ideological power led by sociocultural elites as one of four major power structures in world history,[36] and Bentley Allan analyzes transnational intellectual associations in shaping new international orders.[37] However, Gorski views sociocultural power primarily as a complement to state power rather than an independent force. Mann and Allan assign greater autonomy to transnational sociocultural networks, but they conceptualize these actors weakly as networks and associations, without clearly defining their sociological make-up and relationship to states. In contrast, I define the *shi* by their distinct sociocultural identity, rooted in morality and literary representation, and examine how their practices shaped the forms of state and interpolity order in early modern East Asia. This approach broadens historical sociology by redefining social forces beyond purely socioeconomic terms.

The *shi* consciously defined themselves as a sociocultural force early in the classical Sinic tradition. Mencius, when asked about their role in political economy, stated that the *shi* practiced the ethical and cultural ideals of former kings, defining them by sociocultural function rather than socioeconomic status.[38] Thus, *shi* identity could not be reduced to economic background. As a result, the *shi* included people of heterogeneous economic backgrounds, ranging from landed aristocrats to impoverished local scholars. While economic resources were important for cultural production, the *shi*'s authority stemmed from their sociocultural function. Nor were the *shi* solely scholar-officials for the state as seen in pre-Qin texts where many refused state service.[39] Even though the state and *shi* were interdependent, the *shi*, when not employed by the state, still possessed independent authority through their morality and cultural representation. Christopher Leigh Connery further theorized this distinct sociocultural identity, showing that the *shi* defined themselves through literary representations of excellent morality. While often aligned with the state, their core identity rested on intersubjective moral evaluation, with the criteria of evaluation and textual representation of morality existing independently of the state. The *shi* were a sociocultural force defined by personal morality and literary capacity, the latter essential for the textual representation and evaluation of morality.[40] The *shi* used the Sinic classical heritage to create the textual representation of their morality, while reinventing the heritage through their ongoing literary appropriation. This cultural definition might make the *shi* seem like an amorphous conceptual category, as anyone with classical literary skills could claim the status. However, rigorous intersubjective evaluation ensured that only a select cultural elite qualified, maintaining their real collective presence in society. At the same time, this evaluative process made *shi* identity constantly contestable. While their higher cultural standing sometimes led to moral hazard and complacency, no *shi* were ever completely free from the charge that he is not worthy of the name. As Ari Daniel Levine argues, this

[34] Christopher Leigh Connery, *The Empire of the Text: Writing and Authority in Early Imperial China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), pp. 98–103.

[35] Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution*.

[36] Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, pp. 341–72.

[37] Bentley Allan, *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 29–74.

[38] Irene Bloom, *Mencius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 63–4.

[39] Ibid., pp. 61–2; Edward Slingerland, *Analects* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), p. 15.

[40] Connery, *The Empire of the Text*, pp. 79–81, 91, 95–107.

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contestation was inherent to the *shi*, whose identity relied on the continuously reinterpreted classical Sinic tradition.[41]

The *shi* created a moral and cultural authority independent of the political power of the state by dominating the textual production of what it meant to be a moral human agent. They were the primary wielders of symbolic power, making even emperors and kings follow the *shi* ideals of personal morality in order to maintain legitimacy. For instance, even the powerful Tang Taizong's legitimacy was built on imperial restraint promoted by Tang court *shi*.[42] The *shi* symbolic power extended to non-Han conquest dynasties and non-Chinese polities. For example, the Manchu rulers of the Qing had to adopt *shi* cultural ideals to govern, even as they preserved their ethnic identity.[43]

The distinctive character of the *shi* influenced the form of state and interpolity or world order in East Asia. First, it created a symbiotic form of state. This metaphor reflects the enduring coexistence of distinct entities bound by both cooperation and competition. Similarly, the *shi* and the state worked together to establish social order through shared morality, institutions, and rituals while also competing for resources and authority.[44] The state regulated the *shi* by controlling the civil service examination and granting salaries and honorary titles.[45] In return, the *shi* influenced rulers' legitimacy and morality through the exam standards, remonstration, memorials, and discipline of rulers' daily lives.[46] This symbiotic form of state prevented the state from monopolizing cultural symbols, economic regulation, and even legitimate violence.[47] The state had to share power with the *shi*. At the same time, this relationship made governance more efficient, as the state relied on the *shi* and local elites to maintain order and mobilize society despite a relatively small bureaucracy.[48] The symbiotic state was lean yet highly effective.

Second, the *shi* shaped interpolity order by influencing state's foreign policy and by establishing a solid normative foundation for interstate relations. As for state's foreign policy, the symbiotic form of state required the rulers of the state to consider *shi* preferences in foreign policy. When their interests diverged, the *shi*'s autonomous power could limit the state's ability to mobilize resources. As a result, states lacking *shi* support had an incentive to avoid military conflict while those with *shi* backing could mobilize beyond the central state's institutional capacity.

The *shi* also strengthened the normative foundation of interpolity order by institutionalizing and internalizing tributary relations. They institutionalized tributary norms and practices and internalized the interstate norms into the domestic politics and daily lives of the ruling elites through their knowledge of the Sinic classical tradition and moral disciplines. As diplomatic envoys, the *shi* shaped the diplomatic culture and habitus of early modern East Asia, which embodied the *shi*'s emphasis on personal morality and literary

[41] Ari Daniel Levine, *Divided by a Common Language* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

[42] Jack Wei Chen, *The Poetics of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 210–66, 378–84.

[43] Elliot, *The Manchu Way*, pp. 210–9.

[44] Youngmin Kim, "Chungguk hugi cheguk shigi chibae ellit'ŭŭi chŏngch'esŏng" ("The Identity of the Governing Elite in Late Imperial China"), *Aseayŏn'gu* (*The Journal of Asiatic Studies*), Vol. 56, No. 1 (2013), pp. 119–52.

[45] Benjamin A Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 13–45; Gregory N. Evon, "Korea's Aristocratic Moods," *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2011), p. 261.

[46] Peter K. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), pp. 90–4; Doo-Hwan Ji, "Chosŏnshidae kyŏngyŏn'gwan yŏn'gu" ("The Change of Office of Emperor's Learning"), *Han'guk'angnonch'ong* (*Journal of Korean Studies*), No. 31 (2009), pp. 157–77.

[47] Ho Kim, "Ŭisarŭi chogŏn'gwa han'gye" ("Conditions that Could Sanction 'Righteous Killing'"), *Yŏksawa hyŏnshil* (*Quarterly Review of Korean History*), No. 84 (2012), pp. 331–62.

[48] Masahiko Aoki, "Historical Sources of Institutional Trajectories in Economic Development: China, Japan and Korea Compared," *Socio-Economic Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2013), pp. 233–63; Youngmin Kim, *A History of Chinese Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), pp. 79–81; Roy Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 121.

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capacity. Similar to the modern diplomatic field's role in shaping the modern international order,[49] the *shi* reshaped interpolity order by creating a distinct diplomatic field with their culture, identity, and practice. As a result, when they became the main protagonists of diplomacy, they tended to strengthen the normative and moral aspects of interstate relations because their habitus was deeply immersed in the importance of personal morality in ordering the world.

The influence of the *shi* on the interpolity order may not seem as prominent as the states who usually appear as the main protagonists on the dynastic records and often employ the *shi* to seek its goals. However, the long-term moralization of the interstate order and the specific form it took is difficult to make sense without understanding the nature of the *shi* sociocultural force. The elaborate rituals, rigorous protocols for documents, poetry exchanges, habits and emotions in tributary relations all stemmed from the Sinic classical tradition, which the *shi* continuously recreated and transmitted. Even when the state recruited the *shi* for its aims, their involvement constrained interstate conduct to *shi*-defined cultural forms. This specific long-term and form-shaping role can be understood in terms of Aristotelian distinction of efficient, material, formal and final causes.[50] While the *shi* were not always the immediate efficient cause of changes, they served as the formal and material causes by providing cultural forms and their embodied manifestations, enabling the moralization of interpolity order.

In sum, the *shi*, as a sociocultural force, created a unique Coxian triangle in early modern East Asia—the sociocultural force of *shi* moral elites, the symbiotic state, and a moralized interstate order. The precise extent of *shi* influence requires further study beyond this paper. However, I will show that since the Song period, the *shi* emerged as a transnational sociocultural force in China, Korea, and Vietnam, reshaping the East Asian order. Japan and Ryukyu, though influenced by the Sinic heritage, are excluded from this study. This is partly due to space limitations but mainly because the *shi* did not dominate their elite strata.[51]

The *Shi* and East Asian Order-Making

The Growth of the Shi and Symbiotic State in China, Korea, and Vietnam

The *shi* first emerged as a sociocultural force in pre-Qin China but gained stronger cultural and political influence during the Song dynasty. According to Peter Bol's intellectual history, it is during the Southern Song period that the *shi* adopted a more exclusively cultural and moral definition of its collective identity separable from hereditary status and government positions.[52] Owing to their close association with aristocratic status and the government hierarchy, the *shi* prior to the Southern Song period did not fully develop an independent cultural and political authority separate from government position and aristocratic pedigree.[53] In contrast, following the collapse of the Tang aristocratic order and the expansion of the *shi* from bureaucratic centers into local society, the Southern Song *shi* came to possess a much stronger identity as morally cultivated literati with autonomous authority.[54] They were engaged in the project of creating the moral order of the entire

[49] Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Frédéric Mérand, "Pierre Bourdieu and the Birth of European Defense," *Security Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2010), pp. 342–74.

[50] Milja Kurki, *Causation in International Relations: Reclaiming Causal Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 219–22.

[51] Hun Park, "The Emergence of the 'Political Culture of Confucian Literati' in 19th-Century Japan," *Seoul Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol.1, No.1 (2015), pp. 141–73; Gregory Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), pp. 118–32.

[52] Peter K. Bol, *This Culture of Ours: Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Sung China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 34. The Southern Song period started from the year when the previous Song court lost their northern territory to the Jin.

[53] Ibid., pp. 76–175.

[54] Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, pp. 300–42; Nicolas Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016).

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cosmos, grounded in their own cultural resources, institutional foundations, and dispersed local social networks. Neo-Confucianism played a pivotal role in this transformation. Neo-Confucian thinkers emphasized the cultivation of personal morality as a more fundamental means of ordering the cosmos than the actions of the central government. This emphasis stood in contrast to the agenda of centralized political reforms and encouraged the *shi* to pursue collective moral self-cultivation within local communities, while also establishing extensive translocal networks of practice through institutions such as local academies (*shuyuan*).[55]

The expansion of this more autonomous *shi* group can be seen in the numbers. The number of people taking the civil service examination is a good proxy for the growth of the *shi*. While it might seem merely as a gateway for power, it was more of an appropriation of a government institution by the *shi* in order to build their sociocultural networks and maintain a rigorous criteria to test the literary and moral competence of the fellow *shi* in following and perusing the Sinic tradition as the relevant education and the examination itself were supervised by the *shi*.[56] During the Song period, there was a paradoxical trend: while the number of officials holding civil examination degrees declined, the number of examination candidates surged. In 1046, there were approximately 7200 degree-holding civil officials, but by 1213, that number had dropped to around 5100. Meanwhile, the number of examinees rose dramatically—from about 79 000 at the end of the 11th century to 400 000 by the close of the Southern Song in 1279.[57] This growing disparity left hundreds of thousands of classically educated literati, both degree-holders and non-degree-holders, without official positions. Alongside the Song, its northern rivals, Liao and Jin, too established their own examination systems.[58] In the case of Jin, at least 5000 highest degree holders along with tens of thousands examination candidates have existed since 1185, creating a self-sustaining literati community.[59] A later Qing estimate indicates that by 1800 there were more than a million lower degree holders without official positions.[60] The gap between the limited number of official positions and the growing ranks of educated literati meant that these surplus *shi* had to redirect much of their political energy and ambition toward their local contexts during the later imperial periods of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing. Neo-Confucianism lent legitimacy to these local political activities, framing them as integral to the broader process of cosmic order-making.[61] In other words, the parallel collective existence and legitimation of the *shi* on their own terms outside the government bureaucracy gave this sociocultural force an independent power over the state. Whether within and without the government, the Neo-Confucian *shi* viewed their local acts as parts of the grander cosmic order-making which is based fundamentally on personal morality and encompasses institutional acts of the central state. More specifically, interstate diplomacy, too, was part of this cosmic order-making.

The rise of independent *shi* authority meant that Chinese rulers increasingly needed to accommodate, and often adopt, certain elements of *shi* practice and identity in order to govern effectively. Neo-Confucian *shi* explicitly argued that legitimate political leadership required adherence to their moral cultivation program, aimed at realizing one's moral

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[55] Youngmin Kim, "Political Unity in Neo-Confucianism: The Debate between Wang Yangming and Zhan Ruoshui," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (2012), pp. 246–63; Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, pp. 229–36.

[56] Peter K. Bol, "The Sung Examination System and the Shih," *Asia Major*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1990), pp. 149–71.

[57] Bol, "The Sung Examination System and the Shih."

[58] Bing Li, "Innovation of the Imperial Examination Systems of the Liao, Jin, and Yuan Dynasties and Their Political and Cultural Influences," *Frontiers of History in China*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2023), pp. 341–64.

[59] Peter K. Bol, "Seeking Common Ground: Han Literati Under Jurchen Rule," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (1987), pp. 478.

[60] William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 151.

[61] Kim, *A History of Chinese Political Thought*, pp. 116–29.

nature, which is the endowment of *li*, thereby contributing to the ordering of the cosmos.[62] As a result, the Neo-Confucian program of self-cultivation, once adopted by the Yuan court as the orthodox curriculum, exerted considerable influence on dynastic rulers. For instance, Zhen Dexiu's Neo-Confucian text, *Extended Meaning of the Great Learning*, was translated into Mongolian and utilized to educate Yuan emperors.[63] The Ming founder further emphasized the role of *shi* as educators of rulers and commoners alike, actively promoting Zhen's self-cultivation teachings. He also strengthened local schools and granted partial autonomy to local elders, recognizing their authority independent of local administrative structures.[64] Although the orthodox status of Neo-Confucianism was challenged during the Qing dynasty, the *shi* continued to exert considerable cultural and literary influence. Qing emperors themselves adopted various *shi* practices, such as poetry composition, and sought to engage *shi* literati in governance.[65] In short, throughout the late imperial period, Chinese states maintained a symbiotic relationship with the *shi*.

The growth of the *shi* in Korea followed a similar trajectory, with Neo-Confucianism significantly enhancing their authority. Elements of *shi* identity emerged as early as the Tang period,[66] and historical records from the Koryŏ dynasty clearly indicate the presence of a moral and cultural *shi* elite group respected by the dynastic rulers.[67] However, the *shi* strongly asserted their independent moral and political authority only after Neo-Confucianism spread rapidly, driven by social upheaval from military rule and Mongol invasions in late Koryŏ. The social unrest forced aristocratic families to relocate from the capital to local areas. Along with the increasing numbers of unemployed *shi* with examination degrees, their relocation expanded the aristocratic social and cultural networks in localities beyond the capital.[68] As in Song China, these educated elites established extensive translocal networks that sought to bring order, through collective moral cultivation, to the local societies devastated by years of chaos, and explored a theoretical language for channeling their political aspirations beyond the confines of the central state and toward more universal ends beyond their immediate locales.[69]

The influx of Neo-Confucian thought and practice provided such a theoretical language and practical tools for these translocal *shi* networks to rebuild Koryŏ society from the bottom up through local activism and personal practice.[70] Its emphasis on personal morality was particularly appealing to the late Koryŏ *shi*, offering them broader political significance as agents of social regeneration and encouraging their engagement in self-cultivation and local community-building.[71] As in China, Neo-Confucianism elevated personal and communal moral cultivation as fundamental contributions to the cosmic moral order, allowing the *shi* to assert that their local activism was more essential than service in central government.[72] Additionally, rigorous Neo-Confucian moral practices, such as prolonged

[62] Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, pp. 128–37.

[63] Ibid., p. 138.

[64] Ibid., pp. 145–6.

[65] Kai-Wing Chow, "Identities and Literary Culture in Qing China: Manchu Emperors as Chinese Poets, Readers, and Publishers," *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2019), pp. 359–82.

[66] Tŏkyŏng Kwŏn, "8,9segi kunjaguge on tangnara sajŏl" ("A Characteristic of T'ang Envoy Dispatched to Silla"), *Shillamunhwa* (*Silla Culture*), No. 25 (2005), pp. 93–120.

[67] *Koryŏ History*, Biography Vol. 6, "Ch'oe Sŭngro," http://db.history.go.kr/id/kr_093_0010_0020_0030.

[68] Sang Min Lee, *Yŏmalsŏnch'o tŏk'yŏngjŏlch'unggwa yugyo inyŏmŭi chedohwa kwajŏng yŏn'gu* (*Reconciling Enlightenment and Punishment*), Ph.D. dissertation, Yonsei University, 2023, pp. 22–9.

[69] Ibid., pp. 8–21.

[70] Hyun Kyu Park, "Koryŏmal sŏngnihakkwa ijehyŏnŭi suyong kwajŏng" ("A Comprehensive Study on the Process of Lee Jehyeon's Reception of Neo-Confucianism"), *Hanmunhakpo* (*Literary Sinitic Studies*), No. 13 (2005), pp. 21–42.

[71] Lee, *Reconciling Enlightenment and Punishment*, pp. 36–68.

[72] Saek Yi, *Literary Writings of Mokŭn*, Vol. 5, "Record of P'oŭn's Villa," http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_BT_0020A_0470_010_0060_2008_010_XML; Lee, *Reconciling Enlightenment and Punishment*, pp. 29–54.

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mourning rituals, distinguished the Korean aristocratic *shi* from commoners.[73] Though the *shi* in principle defined their identity in moral and cultural terms, in Korea the cultural and economic capacity to adopt such an identity was usually limited to prominent lineages who regularly occupied influential positions in government and local society.[74] Neo-Confucianism was adopted by Korean aristocratic families, both to uphold their lineage and contribute to broader societal order.

Neo-Confucian thought and practice developed further during the subsequent Chosŏn period (1392–1910). The Chosŏn *shi* established a rigorous disciplinary regime and unique ethos that sharply distinguished them from conventional bureaucratic elites. Their intensified discipline fostered greater independence from bureaucratic institutions, as the rigor of their learning granted them social and political authority even without direct governmental roles.[75] Like their Song counterparts in China, they built a network of academies serving as the cultural and institutional foundation of their power.[76] Consequently, Korean monarchs became subject to the moral discipline of the *shi*, compelled to adhere closely to Neo-Confucian standards.[77] The discipline was conducted through the intense loyal lectures and remonstrations by the prominent Neo-Confucian scholars who pressured the king and the king's heir to cultivate their minds and bodies. The discipline put the prominent Neo-Confucians like Yi Yulgok and Yu Hŭich'un in a teacher-master position who could freely scold the king with the remarks like "why is the king ruining the country with the poor remarks."[78] At the same time, the Korean court enlisted the Neo-Confucian *shi* to complement the central court's bureaucratic capacity to create social order.[79] In short, the rulers of the Korean state had to maintain a symbiotic relationship with the *shi*.

Vietnam also saw a gradual rise of the *shi*, although more slowly and less extensively compared to China and Korea. The region was under Chinese administrative control for nearly a millennium before establishing its independent polity in the early 10th century. During Chinese rule, Confucian education and elements of *shi* culture were introduced,[80] but the Vietnamese political elites were primarily influenced by Buddhism and other local spiritual traditions, thus rarely adopting a distinct *shi* identity.[81] After independence, Vietnamese regimes began laying institutional groundwork for the growth of a *shi* class. The Lý dynasty (1009–1225), for instance, introduced civil service examinations based on the Sinic classical texts in 1075 and established a state-sponsored school for their study.[82] However, these early institutions did not immediately foster a substantial *shi* class due to their limited scale and operation.[83]

[73] Sang Min Lee, "Koryŏshidae yŏmyoŭi shihaenggwa hyo yulli pyŏnch'ŏn'gwajŏng" ("Practice of Yeomyo"), *Yŏksawa shirhak* (*History and Practical Thought*), No. 66 (2018), pp. 199–241.

[74] John B. Duncan, *The Origins of the Choson Dynasty* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000); Evon, "Korea's Aristocratic Moods"; James B. Palais, "Confucianism and The Aristocratic/Bureaucratic Balance in Korea," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1984), pp. 427–68.

[75] Insuk Yun, *Chosŏn chŏn'giŭi sarimgwa sohak* (*Sarim and the Elementary Learning in Early Chosŏn*) (Goyang-si: Yeoksabipyeongsa, 2016), pp. 49–75.

[76] Yun, *Sarim and the Elementary Learning in Early Chosŏn*, pp. 255–76.

[77] Martina Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015), pp. 68–75.

[78] Hŭich'un Yu, *Miamilgi* (*The Diary of Miam*) (Seoul: Tonghwach'ulp'ansa, 1977), p. 248.

[79] Lee, *Reconciling Enlightenment and Punishment*, pp. 132–58; Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*, pp. 216–23.

[80] Jaehoon Han, "Han'gukkwa pet'ŭnamŭi yugyo suyonggwa yegyo shihaeng pigyo" ("Comparison of Accepting Confucianism and Implementing Ritual Norms in Korea and Vietnam"), *Han'guk'ak* (*Korean Studies*), Vol. 43, No. 3 (2020), pp. 193–234; Seong Beom Kim, "Pet'ŭnam yuhagŭi sasangsajŏk t'ŭgisŏng" ("Historical Specificities of Vietnamese Confucianism"), *Yuhakyŏn'gu* (*Confucian Studies*), Vol. 29 (2013), pp. 449–82.

[81] John K. Whitmore, "Social Organization and Confucian Thought in Vietnam," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1984), p. 298; In-Sun Yu, "Pet'ŭnam yŏjoŭi sŏngnipkwa yugyoinyŏmŭi hwangnip" ("The Foundation of Vietnam's Le Dynasty and Confucian Ideology"), *Tongayŏn'gu* (*East Asian Studies*), Vol. 48 (2005), pp. 5–58.

[82] Yu, "The Foundation of Vietnam's Le Dynasty and Confucian Ideology," pp. 16–7.

[83] Ibid., p. 18.

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The first significant expansion of the Vietnamese *shi* occurred during the Trần dynasty (1225–1400) amid increased tributary demands from Yuan China. To manage frequent diplomatic interactions with the Yuan court, Vietnam required literary officials skilled in writing diplomatic documents, negotiating with envoys, and entertaining the Chinese emperor. As a result, literati trained in the Sinic classics rose to prominent government positions and came to be known as "*shi* of literary training" (*wenxue zhishi*).[84] By the mid-13th century, commoners educated in Neo-Confucian texts began taking civil service examinations to enter the royal administration, indicating an expanded institutional and cultural basis for the Vietnamese *shi*. This period produced prominent scholars who maintained *shi* practices and identities independently of court employment, transmitting their learning to subsequent generations.[85] Furthermore, the Trần aristocracy's dismissive attitude toward the *shi*—calling them "pale-faced scholars" overly influenced by Chinese ideas—highlights the awareness of the different political and cultural identities between the aristocratic royal warrior clan and the *shi*.[86] All of these changes indicate that the Vietnamese *shi* have developed an independent sociocultural identity and economic base outside the court. Despite these developments, however, the Trần government remained dominated by an aristocratic warrior elite, relegating the *shi* officials to a relatively marginal, supportive role.[87]

A more fundamental change took place during and after the Ming occupation (1407–27) that significantly increased the demand for *shi* and provided resources for their expansion.[88] The initial developments were further advanced under the subsequent Vietnamese Lê dynasty (1428–1789), which continued relying on the *shi* to centralize state power and stabilize social order. Supported by a prosperous agrarian economy and centralizing monarchs, the newly recruited *shi* asserted their political legitimacy as societal reformers against indigenous traditions and aristocratic power. They also adopted a more orthodox Neo-Confucian outlook than their predecessors, emphasizing personal morality as essential for securing government legitimacy and local order, mirroring trends in China and Korea.[89] The growth of the Vietnamese *shi* was institutionalized through the regularization of the civil service examination under Lê Thánh Tông (r. 1460–97), held every 3 years since his reign.[90] By the early 16th century, the estimated number of examination-eligible *shi* exceeded 70 000, far surpassing available positions in the central bureaucracy.[91] This surplus suggests that a substantial group of *shi* engaged in political and cultural activities outside central court institutions. This expansion proved to be short-lived, interrupted by wars and dynastic changes, and the status of *shi* learning declined rapidly after Lê Thánh Tông,[92] but the *shi*'s power in both the central bureaucracy and the local communities finally gained a more permanent footing with the seventeenth-century literary revival by the Trịnh lords.[93]

84 Yu, "The Foundation of Vietnam's Le Dynasty and Confucian Ideology," pp. 25–6.

85 Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 147.

86 Ibid., p. 155.

87 Ibid., pp. 138–9; Keith W. Taylor, "Vietnamese Confucian Narratives," in Benjamin A. Elman, John B. Duncan, and Herman Ooms, eds., *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asia Institute, 2002), pp. 344–5.

88 Kathlene Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 63–79.

89 John K. Whitmore, "Literati Culture and Integration in Dai Viet, c. 1430–c. 1840," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (1997), pp. 665–87; Minoru Shimao, "Confucian Family Ritual and Popular Culture in Vietnam," *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko*, No. 69 (2011), pp. 57–96.

90 Yu, "The Foundation of Vietnam's Le Dynasty and Confucian Ideology," pp. 50–2.

91 Nola Cooke, "Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Confucianization in Historical Perspective: Evidence from the Palace Examinations (1463–1883)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1994), p. 280.

92 Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, pp. 238–9; K. W. Taylor, "The Literati Revival in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1987), p. 4.

93 Taylor, "The Literati Revival in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam."

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By the 18th-century Qing period, the Vietnamese *shi* attained a literary and moral competence comparable to their Chinese and Korean counterparts, although without the same degree of autonomy from the central state. Their competence is attested from the recognition of the literary and moral virtues of the Vietnamese *shi* envoys in numerous poetic exchanges with the Chinese and Korean *shi* luminaries.[94] Additionally, the Vietnamese *shi* actively engaged with contemporary intellectual movements, such as Kaozheng learning, contributing to transregional knowledge production.[95] At the same time, the *shi* in Vietnam did not enjoy the same socioeconomic and institutional independence from the state as the Korean and Chinese *shi* even as they influenced the Vietnamese rulers through cultural means. The *shi* expansion under Lê Thánh Tông was driven primarily by the monarchy's goal of strengthening governmental control rather than a bottom-up initiative from the *shi*. Similarly, the Trịnh literary revival aimed more at reinforcing central governance than providing an autonomous foundation for the *shi*.[96] Moreover, the Neo-Confucian emphasis on personal morality and local activism was less influential, and Vietnam did not develop a network of academies to disseminate Neo-Confucian philosophy and discipline.[97] Consequently, the Vietnamese *shi* had less secure institutional basis and the metaphysical support to imbue their local actions with the political significance of cosmic order-making independent of the state.

In sum, from the Song period onward, a distinctive group of *shi* emerged in China, Korea, and Vietnam, collectively forming a transnational sociocultural force. In China and Korea, the growth of the *shi* as an independent moral and political authority was supported by the increasing numbers of educated elites who were unemployed, as well as by the widespread adoption of Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucian thought provided an ideological framework that imbued local community activism and personal morality with broader, order-making significance. Notable differences existed in the social composition of the *shi* between China and Korea. Korean *shi* maintained a stronger aristocratic identity, whereas the Chinese aristocracy had largely faded after the Tang dynasty. Nevertheless, in both countries, the *shi* served dual roles: they acted as both a counterbalance to and a collaborator with the central state in establishing social and cosmic order. Consequently, a form of symbiotic state matured during the Yuan and Ming periods, compelling Chinese and Korean dynastic rulers to recognize the symbolic authority and disciplinary power of the *shi* over themselves. In contrast, the Vietnamese *shi* maintained closer alignment with their central rulers, as their expansion was actively promoted by dynastic leaders pursuing stronger central governance. However, similar to their Chinese and Korean counterparts, the Vietnamese *shi* emphasized personal morality as fundamental to social order, engaging in order-making practices distinct from state-directed activities. The substantial number of unemployed Vietnamese *shi* further indicates the existence of an educated sociocultural group engaged independently in order-making through personal moral cultivation. Thus, by the seventeenth century, all three countries had developed various forms of symbiotic states alongside influential *shi* sociocultural forces. These forces actively participated in constructing societal order and willingly assumed significant roles in tributary diplomacy. In the following discussion, I will explore how these *shi* groups shaped the interpolity order in East Asia.

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[94] Hankyu Kim, *Tongashiaŭi ch'anghwaoegyo* (*Poetics of Diplomacy in East Asia*) (Koyang, Korea: Sonamu, 2019), pp. 169–266; Sŏkhoe Kim et al., *Hanwŏl sashin ch'anghwashimun* (*Korea-Vietnam Envoy Poetry*) (Seoul: Global Contents, 2013); Susumu Fuma, *Chosŏnyŏnhaengsawa chosŏnt'ongshinsa* (*Korean Envoys to Qing China and Japan*), trans. Rosa Sin et al. (Seoul: Sungkyunkwan University Press, 2019), pp. 816–34.

[95] Kathlene Baldanza, "Books without Borders: Phạm Thận Duật (1825–1885) and the Culture of Knowledge in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Vietnam," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (2018), pp. 713–40.

[96] Taylor, "The Literati Revival in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam."

[97] Alexander Woodside, "Classical Primordialism and the Historical Agendas of Vietnamese Confucianism," in Elman, Duncan, and Ooms, eds., *Rethinking Confucianism*, pp. 116–43.

Shi as the Maker of the East Asian Order

The growth of *shi* in China, Korea, and Vietnam shaped the early modern East Asian order in two primary ways. First, the emergence of the symbiotic state, associated with the growth of *shi*, significantly altered interpolity relations. While possessing centralized mobilization capabilities, the symbiotic state shared power and authority with the *shi*, who served as the primary source of political legitimacy. Consequently, foreign policy decisions by these states were influenced heavily by the need to secure *shi* support. As Zhang Feng points out, Confucian culture and rhetoric could drive states toward either aggressive or restrained foreign policies, depending on perceptions of neighboring states by decision-makers.[98] The *shi* were instrumental in shaping this cultural influence on foreign policy. Thus, a state's ability to mobilize effectively depended on whether its goals aligned with those of the *shi*. When state objectives diverged from *shi* preferences, the *shi* restricted state mobilization; when objectives coincided, they actively supported mobilization.

Although a comprehensive analysis of the *shi*'s influence on foreign policy and mobilization lies beyond this paper's scope, several prominent examples illustrate their impact. A notable example is the shift in foreign policy from the early Ming to the mid-Ming period. As David Robinson and Ayşe Zarakol have highlighted, early Ming emperors were closely connected to the Eurasian Chinggisid tradition and pursued territorial and diplomatic expansion through alliances across Eurasia.[99] In contrast, *shi* bureaucrats frequently criticized the emperors' expansionism and their close relations with Chinggisid allies.[100] During the early Ming, imperial ambitions generally prevailed, often aided by Chinggisid partnerships. However, by the late fifteenth century, *shi* bureaucrats and other *shi* outside state institutions increasingly dominated Ming foreign policy, steering the state's focus toward East Asian neighbors and domestic stability.

Several factors contributed to this foreign policy reorientation during the Ming period. A crucial turning point was the Tumu incident, in which the Ming's elite military forces were devastated and the emperor himself was captured by the Oirat Mongols.[101] This military disaster severely undermined the emperor's martial credibility and provided the *shi* with an opportunity to challenge and delegitimize imperial military leadership. Leveraging this opportunity, the *shi* successfully redefined imperial leadership, shifting the emphasis away from military prowess toward moral cultivation and social order.[102] Moreover, the hereditary military household system, which the early Ming emperors had inherited from the Mongols, grew increasingly dysfunctional. This dysfunction necessitated alternative approaches to military recruitment and funding.[103] The bureaucratic management of military affairs was also gradually handed over to the *shi* bureaucrats. All these elements made the *shi* officials, along with their extra-state military secretariat, the dominant military actors with their own military culture. As a result of this *shi* ascendancy, the Ming state's focus shifted away from expansive Eurasian engagements toward pressing concerns related to border defense, maritime security, and internal stability.[104] These new priorities aligned closely with the *shi*'s broader agenda emphasizing socioeconomic development and moral order within the Chinese mainland.

Another notable example of the *shi*'s influence on foreign policy was the centuries-long reluctance of Korea to use military force during the mid-to-late Chosŏn period. The Chosŏn

[98] Zhang, "Confucian Foreign Policy Traditions in Chinese History."
[99] David M. Robinson, *Ming China and Its Allies: Imperial Rule in Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Zarakol, *Before the West*, pp.101–10.
[100] Robinson, *Ming China and Its Allies*, pp. 86, 113–38.
[101] David M. Robinson, *Martial Spectacles of the Ming Court* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 85.
[102] C.K.H. Wong, *New Military Culture of the Mid-Ming Literati: Its Origins, Development, and Legacy*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oxford, 2020, pp. 21–34.
[103] Wong, *New Military Culture of the Mid-Ming Literati*, p. 36.
[104] Ibid., pp. 35–44, 194–243.

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state was deeply intertwined with the Korean *shi*, as they were instrumental in its founding—indeed, the creation of the state itself was largely driven by the *shi* sociocultural force for its own sake. As a result, bureaucratic centralization and state-building occurred only insofar as they did not challenge the fundamental social structure dominated by the landed aristocratic *shi*. During the early Chosŏn period, characterized by political consolidation, limited militarization served the interests of the *shi*, who concurrently occupied the role of state-nobility.[105] Consequently, the early Chosŏn state demonstrated greater military capability and maintained a relatively proactive military stance.[106] However, once this initial consolidation was completed, the state-nobility no longer saw the need to sustain a centralized standing army, leading to a significant reduction in military mobilization. As a result, even in the face of severe external threats from Japan and later Manchuria, the Chosŏn state largely failed to mount effective military responses. This persistent lack of central mobilization created a lasting impetus for maintaining stable, peaceful relations with neighboring states—including the Manchu Qing—even when these neighbors represented a profound ideological threat to the Korean *shi*.[107]

Beyond influencing the foreign policy orientation of the symbiotic states, the *shi* more directly shaped the interstate order by reinforcing the normative character of bilateral tributary relations. They contributed to this normative foundation not only by serving as diplomats but also by establishing institutions and practices that upheld stronger interstate norms. To demonstrate this more direct influence of the *shi* on the East Asian order, I will examine Sino-Korean and Sino-Vietnamese relations separately, as each tributary relationship was primarily bilateral in nature.

In the case of Sino-Korean relations, the growth of the *shi* and their engagement in diplomacy contributed to the centuries-long process of institutionalization and internalization of the tributary relationship, thereby greatly enhancing its normative character. By institutionalization, I refer to the development of regularized practices, rules, rituals, and other conventions. These increasingly elaborate sets of practices and other conventions transformed Sino-Korean relations into an enduring institution that transcended dynastic change and simultaneously accelerated the process of internalization. By internalization, I mean the ways in which the norms of reciprocal tributary hierarchy came to be ethically binding within each state's domestic context, eventually becoming emotionally and corporeally entrenched in the everyday lives of those involved.

The initial emergence of the *shi* as an independent sociocultural force in the Song, Liao, Jin, and Koryŏ polities was closely tied to the early institutionalization of Sino-Korean tributary relations. A key moment in this process occurred with the first regularization of tributary exchanges between Liao and Koryŏ. Prior to this, the frequency of Korean missions to China had never been clearly specified. Following a series of military conflicts and diplomatic negotiations, Liao and Koryŏ agreed in 1022 to formalize their relations by sending three Koryŏ missions to Liao annually.[108] This regularization followed the introduction of the civil service examination in Koryŏ in 958—a reform driven in part

105 Duncan, *The Origins of the Choson Dynasty*, pp. 205–6.

106 Jong-soo Kim, "Hullyŏndogam sŏlch'i mit unyŏngŭi tongashiajŏk t'ŭksŏng" ("A Study on Hunryondogam"), *Changsŏgak* (*The Royal Archive*), No. 33 (2015), pp. 31–3.

107 Ibid., 46–52; Jong-soo Kim, "Chosŏnhugi chunganggunjeŭi unyŏnggwa sukchongdae yangbanch'unggullon" ("The Operation of the Central Military System"), *Kunsayŏn'gu* (*Military Research*), No. 141 (2016), pp. 83–111.

108 *Koryŏ History* Hyŏnjong [1022/08/03]. The date for *Koryŏ History* and *The Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* is in the order of the reign year, lunar month, and day (plus # of the article for the latter). Only the reign name and the date will be referred hereafter for both sources. The entries for *Koryŏ History* are found at https://db.history.go.kr/goryeo, and those for *The Veritable Records* at https://sillok.history.go.kr/; Donghun Jung, "Koryŏ,kŏran,kŭm kwan'gyeesŏ chogongŭi ŭimi" ("The Meaning of Tribute"), *Chindanhakpo* (*Chingdan Journal*), No. 131 (2018), pp. 51–82.

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by the growing need for literary *shi* who could compose specialized diplomatic prose.[109] On the surface, the examination might appear as a state-led co-optation of the *shi*, but the state's reliance on a specific literary form for diplomacy reflects a deeper necessity: adherence to a shared regional practice of civilized conduct continually reinvented and transmitted by the *shi*. The gradual rise of Koryŏ *shi* as literary and diplomatic specialists in the preceding century thus provided the sociocultural foundation for more sustained and formalized tributary relations with Liao. On the Liao side, the regularization of tribute was supported by its own institutional developments, such as the establishment of an empire-wide civil service examination in 988 and routine diplomatic exchanges with the Song dynasty, which also required the literary skills of the *shi*.[110] After the fall of Liao to the Jin, the framework of regular tributary exchange, along with elaborate rituals and document protocols, was inherited by the Jin-Koryŏ tributary relationship. For nearly a century, the two polities enjoyed a stable relationship facilitated by *shi* expertise in maintaining a sense of civilized order between Jin emperors and Koryŏ kings.[111] Although tribute exchanges with the Song were less frequent, Koryŏ continued to send envoys, and the *shi* envoys played a vital role in affirming Koryŏ's civilized status through poetic exchanges with their Song counterparts.[112] These literary interactions not only affirmed shared cultural values but also laid the groundwork for the later institutionalization of envoy poetry exchange as a diplomatic convention. Once again, it was the literary sophistication of the *shi* in both Koryŏ and Song that made such practices possible. The early institutionalization of Sino-Korean tributary relations was thus deeply intertwined with the expanding sociocultural force of the *shi* across the region.

The next major phase of institutionalization came with the more intrusive tributary relations under the Mongol Yuan dynasty. From the outset, the sociocultural force of the *shi* played a pivotal role, as the two dynastic courts anchored their relationship in the Sinic classical tradition through the literary versatility of both Chinese and Korean *shi*. Following the Mongol conquest of Koryŏ and much of East Asia in the 13th century, it remained uncertain whether these new foreign rulers would uphold the established Sinic tradition and recognize Koryŏ's autonomous place within it. At this critical moment, the Koryŏ *shi*, supported by Han Chinese *shi*, orchestrated a ceremonial act of surrender that cast the Korean king as a loyal vassal submitting to a virtuous emperor. Their aim was to encourage the Mongol conquerors to embrace classical norms and sustain the tributary framework while respecting Koryŏ's autonomy. The Mongol rulers eventually found this model compelling. As outsiders to the region's culture and politics, they too needed a tested framework for managing newly conquered neighbors.[113] Also, the Yuan and Koryŏ *shi* turned the new and invasive Mongol practices such as marriage ties and imperial guards into elements of the virtuous suzerain-vassal relationship by rewriting and embedding them within the rhetoric and practices of the Sinic classical tradition. They did so by reinventing their domestic court practices so that the closer contact imposed by the Mongol practices could manifest as the stricter actualization of the idealized suzerain-vassal relationship.

[109] Rahel Plassen, "10segi koryŏŭi taeoegwan'gyewa kwagŏjedoŭi shihaeng" ("10th Century Goryeo's Diplomatic Relations and the Examination System"), *Han'guksaron* (*The Bulletin of Korean History*), No. 67 (2021), pp. 1–50.

[110] Li, "Innovation of the Imperial Examination Systems of the Liao, Jin, and Yuan Dynasties and Their Political and Cultural Influences"; David Wright, *From War to Diplomatic Parity in Eleventh-Century China* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 100–97; Nicolas Tackett, *The Origins of the Chinese Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 31–45.

[111] Donghun Jung, *Koryŏshidae oegyomunsŏ yŏn'gu* (*Study of Koryŏ Diplomatic Documents*) (Seoul: Hyean, 2022), pp. 270–317.

[112] Sunmo Jung, "Puksongsahaengŭl t'onghaesŏ pon pagillyangŭi munhaksajŏk wisang" ("Literary Historical Position of Park Inryang"), *Han'guk'anmunhakyŏn'gu* (*Korean Literary Sinitic Studies*), No. 46 (2010), pp. 5–57.

[113] Sixiang Wang, "What Tang Taizong Could Not Do: The Korean Surrender of 1259 and the Imperial Tradition," *T'oung Pao*, Vol. 104, No. 3–4 (2018), pp. 338–83.

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Accordingly, they created new ceremonial rites for the Chinese emperor conducted by Koryŏ kings, new reception rites for the Chinese envoys, and new investiture document and seal for the Korean kings. Diplomatic correspondence and Korean governmental rhetoric were also reshaped to more closely align with the idealized image of a loyal vassal state.[114] These new institutions and practices deepened the internalization of tributary norms by giving the tributary relationship a stronger normative force that led Koryŏ ruling elites to voluntarily follow its norms. A key sign of the stronger tributary norms was the emergence of the reciprocal duty of "serving the great" (*shida*) and "caring for the small" (*zixiao*). The phrases simultaneously appear in Koryŏ records only twice before the late Yuan period and were used simply in order to placate the invading Mongol force with no sense of reciprocal duties. In contrast, a 1339 Korean memorial explicitly invoked the two duties as a reciprocal couplet, urging the Yuan to fulfill its duty of care in recognition of Koryŏ's excellent conduct of serving the great.[115] This connotation of reciprocal duty was persistently attached to the couplet throughout the later Sino-Korean relationship. In sum, the creative agency of the *shi* transformed an abrupt imposition of foreign practices into a foundation for the further institutionalization and internalization of the tributary relationship.

During the Ming period, the growing prominence of the *shi*, along with their rigorous ideals of ritual, literary practice, and personal morality, further deepened the institutionalization and internalization of tributary relations. Drawing on their mastery of the Sinic tradition, the *shi* of late Koryŏ and Chosŏn established institutions that infused tributary relations with a strong sense of ethical obligation. At the very outset of Ming-Chosŏn relations, the prominent Korean *shi* Kwŏn Kŭn used his literary and moral virtues in a poetic exchange with the first Ming emperor to advocate for an inclusive interpolity order that recognized Chosŏn as a civilized member—countering the emperor's initial exclusionary vision and laying the groundwork for deeper institutionalization and internalization.[116] In coordination with the Ming court and its own *shi*, the Korean *shi* developed an extensive set of ritual manuals—for receiving Chinese envoys, imperial edicts, and gifts; for sending memorials to China; and for conducting celebratory rites for Chinese emperors within the Chosŏn court.[117] They also compelled Korean monarchs to cease conducting sacrificial rites for Heaven, arguing—based on a revised interpretation of the Sinic classics—that such rites were the exclusive prerogative of emperors.[118] This more systematic institutionalization produced a disciplinary effect, internalizing tributary norms even at the level of the individual mind and body of the Chosŏn ruling elite. The disciplinary effect was evident in the Chosŏn court ceremonies for the Chinese emperor, where the Chosŏn king showed extreme attentiveness to the esthetic precision of his performance. In one case, a Korean king was deeply ashamed upon realizing he had worn improperly colored shoes during a rite in front of a Chinese envoy—likely a *shi*.[119] Furthermore, the Korean *shi* and monarchs even adjusted the emotional tenor of the ceremonies for the Chinese emperor when they coincided with mourning rites for deceased members of the royal family.[120] These

114 Jongsuk Choi, "Koryŏshidae chohaŭi ŭirye kujoŭi pyŏndonggwa kukka wisang" ("The Structural Change of Joha Ritual"), *Han'gungmunhwa* (*Korean Culture*), No. 51 (2010), pp. 223–64; Donghun Jung, "Myŏngch'o oegyojedoŭi sŏngnipkwa kŭ kiwŏn" ("The Constructed Tributary System"), *Yŏksawa hyŏnshil* (*Quarterly Review of Korean History*), No. 113 (2019), pp. 343–80; Jongsuk Choi, "Koryŏhugi chashinŭl iro kanjuhanŭn hwaiŭishigŭi t'ansaenggwa naehyanghwa" ("The Emergence and Introversion of Hui Consciousness"), *Minjongmunhwayŏn'gu* (*National Culture*), No. 74 (2017), pp. 161–220; Jongsuk Choi, "Koryŏhugi chŏnhyŏngjŏk chehuguk oegyoŭiryeŭi ch'angch'ulgwa monggol imp'aekt'ŭ" ("The Creation of 'Typical' Diplomatic Ritual"), *Minjongmunhwayŏn'gu* (*National Culture*), No. 85 (2019), pp. 153–89.

115 Kojong [1232/04/12], [1232/09], Ch'unghyewang [1339/06/05].

116 Wang, *Boundless Winds of Empire*, pp. 2–6.

117 Choi, "The Creation of 'Typical' Diplomatic Ritual."

118 Jongsuk Choi, "Chosŏn ch'ogi chech'ŏllyewa kŭ kaesŏl nollane taehan chaegŏmt'o" ("Controversy about Wongu Ritual"), *Chosŏnshidaesahakpo* (*Journal of Chosŏn History*), No. 67 (2013), pp. 43–84.

119 Sejong [1426/01/01#1].

120 Sŏnjo [1581/01/01#1]; Munjong [1450/08/01#3]; Injo [1635/12/16#1].

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ceremonies demonstrate the extent to which tributary norms had been internalized—even disciplining the emotional expressions of the Chosŏn court.

One of the most significant institutional innovations introduced by the *shi* during this period was the envoy poetry exchange. Drawing on their literary mastery of the Sinic tradition, Chinese and Korean *shi* envoys institutionalized poetic exchange as a regular component of diplomatic encounters, often publishing the exchanged verses in anthologies.[121] The close connection between this institutional practice and the *shi*'s literary capacity is evident in the fact that the first anthology of envoy poetry was compiled shortly after the Ming *shi* replaced palace eunuchs as the principal actors in tributary diplomacy. While the Ming court initially relied heavily on eunuchs as imperial envoys to Korea, it began appointing literary *shi* in their place during the Zhengtong reign (1435–49).[122] The first envoy poetry anthology appeared in 1457, soon after this transition.[123] The Korean court, for its part, was also keenly aware of the importance of engaging Ming *shi* in these poetic-diplomatic exchanges and deliberately selected *shi* officials through the civil service examinations with this role in mind.[124] The envoy poetry exchange significantly elevated the normative meaning of Sino-Korean tributary relations by cultivating an idealized vision of a shared interpolity order. It also closely linked the *shi*'s individual literary and moral virtues to this order, as its idealized form could only be expressed through the cultivated character of the *shi*. Their personal virtues thus came to represent not only themselves but also the ethical stature of their respective states and the interpolity order they collectively upheld. This fusion of ethical values across different levels—individual, state, and international—created an intimate bond between the moral integrity of the Chinese and Korean *shi* and their responsibility to sustain the tributary order. In doing so, it deepened the internalization of tributary norms within both courts.

The spread of Neo-Confucianism among the Korean *shi* further deepened the internalization of tributary norms.[125] As Neo-Confucianism emphasized the moral personality as the foundation of cosmic and political order, tributary diplomacy became embedded within a broader Neo-Confucian regime of performing and disciplining the personal morality of the *shi* and their kings. For instance, the prominent early Chosŏn *shi* Yang Sŏngchi submitted a diagram of Neo-Confucian self-cultivation to the king, which included the duty to "serve the Chinese state with proper rites."[126] In this way, the norms of the tributary institutions were woven into the personal moral cultivation of the Chosŏn monarchs. As the demands of discipline increased, the Korean kings gradually developed an introspective consciousness that evaluated the sincerity and quality of their minds in serving the Ming.[127] This introspective awareness aligned closely with the Neo-Confucian view that self-reflection was the foundation of proper political order.[128]

The *shi* played an ambiguous and somewhat paradoxical role in the subsequent Qing-Chosŏn relationship. On the one hand, their deep internalization of tributary norms initially led the Chosŏn court to resist the Qing, viewing them as subhuman barbarians and

121 Wang, *Boundless Winds of Empire*, pp. 201–26.
122 Jung Donghun, "Chŏngt'ongjeŭi tŭnggŭkkwa chosŏn-myŏng kwan'gyeŭi k'ŭn pyŏnhwa" ("Emperor Zhengtong's Enthronement"), *Han'gungmunhwa* (*Korean Culture*), No. 90 (2020), pp. 97–127.
123 Wang, *Boundless Winds of Empire*, p. 201.
124 King T'aejo [1392/08/23#2]; King Sejong [1431/04/12#6]; King Chungjong [1534/02/24#1].
125 Deuchler, *Under the Ancestors' Eyes*; Yun, *Sarim and the Elementary Learning in Early Chosŏn*; Woongsup Song, "Chungjongdae sadaeŭishikkwa yugyohwaŭi shimhwa" ("The 'Sentiment of Worship'"), *Chosŏnshidaesahakpo* (*Journal of Chosŏn History*), No. 74 (2015), pp. 363–405.
126 King Tanjong [1454/01/27#1].
127 King Sŏngjong [1487/09/27#5].
128 Sunkyu Lee, "Chuhiŭi kong kaenyŏmgwa chiyŏkchabalchuŭiŭi ch'urhyŏn" ("The Changed Meaning of Gong and Political Ethics in Zhu Xi"), *Han'gukchŏngch'iyŏn'gu* (*The Study of Korean Politics*), Vol. 22, No. 1 (2013), pp. 135–62.

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unforgivable enemies of the Ming, and to adopt a policy of "punishing the north."[129] On the other hand, the existing tributary institutions were preserved by the *shi* on both the Qing and Chosŏn sides, allowing the two courts to gradually restore a sense of normative relationship. These opposing tendencies eventually gave rise to a more abstract understanding of tributary institutions—one increasingly detached from the actual Chinese court.[130] This shift was captured by Pak Chiwŏn, a prominent late 18th-century Korean *shi*, who acknowledged the Qing as the legitimate ruler of the world, even while criticizing the harms inflicted by the Manchu barbarians.[131] In this view, the Qing emperor as an institution was legitimate, even if the person occupying the throne was considered a harmful barbarian.

From its early beginnings in the Song period, the growing normative character of Sino-Korean tributary relations could not have taken shape without the sociocultural force of the *shi*. Their competence in appropriating the Sinic tradition allowed them to sustain institutional continuity across diverse political regimes and ethnic boundaries, while gradually intensifying normative obligations. While it is true that the practical demands of interstate management drove the expansion of the *shi*'s diplomatic role, it was ultimately their identity as a sociocultural elite—defined by literary refinement and moral cultivation—that propelled the long-term moralization of the tributary relationship. Their literary and ethical virtuosity enabled the Chinese and Korean states to conceive diplomacy not merely as a tool for interstate stability, but as a domain worthy of personal moral commitment. Over time, their role as moral elites—especially with the later influence of Neo-Confucianism—allowed tributary relations to reach deep into the minds of both kings and *shi*, shaping their inner moral worlds. This internalization and institutionalization became so powerful that it nearly jeopardized the survival of the Chosŏn court during the Qing invasion of 1636–37. Although some senior officials and even the king were inclined to accept the Qing's demand to recognize them as the new suzerain, they were compelled to resist by a group of righteous and youthful *shi* who insisted on preserving their moral integrity at all costs.[132] Once institutionalized and internalized, the strong normative force of tributary relations persisted—even in dealings with the Qing, whom the Korean *shi* had initially denounced as sworn enemies and uncivilized barbarians.

Turning to Sino-Vietnamese relations, the *shi* also played a role in promoting the institutionalization of tributary relations, though to a lesser extent and at a later date than in the Sino-Korean case. This institutionalization also led to a partial internalization of tributary norms, as tributary institutions came to hold normative significance among both Chinese and Vietnamese ruling elites. The Vietnamese *shi* began to exert influence on diplomatic practices during the Yuan period. Two examples illustrate this influence. One is Lê Tắc, a Vietnamese *shi* living in exile during the Yuan period, who presented *A Brief History of Annam* to the Yuan court. Although not an official envoy, Lê Tắc's work reveals an attempt by the Vietnamese *shi* to portray their polity as a civilized equal to China.[133] Another example is the literary heroism of Mac Dinh Chi, a Trần court envoy who traveled to Beijing in 1308 and engaged with both the Yuan emperor and *shi*. Vietnamese records recount how Mac Dinh Chi impressed the Yuan court with his upright Confucian virtue and literary brilliance.[134] Both figures drew on the shared Sinic classical tradition to present Vietnam as a civilized polity and to reshape tributary relations—from a hierarchy grounded

[129] Injo [1636/12/17#2]; Tae-Yong Huh, "17,18segi pukpŏllonŭi ch'uiwa puk'angnonŭi taedu" ("Unfolding of 'Plan for Northern Subjugation' in 17, 18th Century"), *Taedongmunhwayŏn'gu* (*Journal of Eastern Studies*), Vol. 69 (2010), pp. 373–418.

[130] Yŏngjo [1737/05/27#1], [1772/10/27#2]; Chŏngjo [1795/09/29#6].

[131] Chiwŏn Pak, "Yŏrhailgi Kwannaejŏngsa Hojilhuchi," http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_BT_1370A_0050_000_0010_2003_001_XML.

[132] Injo [1636/12/17#2], [1637/01/20#2].

[133] Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam*, pp. 41–7.

[134] *Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet*, Vol. 6, "Trần Anh Tông," https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=813962.

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in cultural inequality to a normative relationship grounded in the reciprocal exchange of cultivated virtues between equals.

The Vietnamese *shi*'s expertise in the classical tradition also played a crucial role in reestablishing shared tributary norms with the new Ming court that had replaced the Yuan. The initial relationship with the Ming was tense, marked by the brief occupation of Vietnam. After Lê Lợi, the founder of the Lê dynasty, expelled the Ming forces in 1427, the two countries experienced several border skirmishes, partly triggered by political instability within Vietnam. During the Jiajing reign (1521–67), the Ming court even considered launching another invasion. It was ultimately the collaboration between Ming *shi* officials and the Vietnamese *shi* and court that defused the crisis and led to the normalization of tributary ties. In 1540, they orchestrated an elaborate submission ceremony that persuaded the Ming emperor to recognize the newly established Mac regime—which had overthrown the earlier Lê dynasty—as a loyal vassal, while allowing it considerable autonomy.[135] In the late 16th century, however, the Mac were overthrown again by the restored Lê court. With the assistance of the *shi*, the Lê regime once again staged a carefully choreographed diplomatic performance in 1596 to reestablish tributary relations with the Ming in the form of another highly ritualized submission ceremony modeled on the earlier Mac precedent.[136] Once relations were restored, the Lê court dispatched the esteemed *shi* Phùng Khắc Khoan to the Ming court to secure a more prestigious investiture title for the Lê ruler. During his mission, Phùng Khắc Khoan engaged in literary exchanges with the Ming emperor, Chinese *shi*, and even Korean *shi* to demonstrate Vietnam's civilized status.[137] Despite recurring dynastic turbulence and periodic tensions with the Ming court, the Vietnamese *shi* preserved the core tributary institutions through their cultural mastery, cultivating a reciprocal sense of duty between the Ming suzerain and the Vietnamese vassal.

It was in Vietnam's relationship with the Qing that the influence of the Vietnamese *shi* on institutionalizing and internalizing tributary norms reached its peak. After the 17th-century conflicts between the northern Trịnh lords and the southern Nguyễn lords subsided, greater emphasis was placed on internal governance, which led to the rising social and political prominence of the *shi*.[138] This heightened status of the *shi* contributed to the more rigorous institutionalization of tributary relations. With peace established on both sides, tributary missions became regularized, accompanied by deliberate government efforts to select distinguished literary *shi* to represent Vietnam's civilized status. These missions were marked by elaborate preparations—including tributes, gifts, diplomatic documents, and envoy attire. In turn, the Qing often dispatched their own literary luminaries as envoys to Vietnam.[139] This mutual emphasis on refined literary and ritual norms transformed tributary exchanges into deeply institutionalized practices, requiring significant financial and human investment. A hallmark of this intensification was the development of the envoy poetry exchange. Like their Korean counterparts, Vietnamese *shi* envoys to the Qing regularly exchanged poems with Qing *shi*, giving rise to a distinctive genre of envoy poetry in the 18th and 19th centuries. The literary and moral virtuosity of the Vietnamese *shi* elicited the recognition by the Chinese *shi* who praised the envoys for the shared civilized writing and poems with silken beauty whose quality was perhaps second only to Korean ones.[140] These frequent poetic exchanges fostered a shared sense of belonging to a literary commonwealth (*tongwen*), which in turn reinforced the internalization of tributary norms. Successive Vietnamese envoys to the Qing expressed their acceptance of the Emperor's

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135 Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam*, pp. 130–58.
136 Ibid., pp. 174–8.
137 Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam*, pp. 179–203.
138 Taylor, "The Literati Revival in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam."
139 Liam C. Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), p. 67; Kim, *Poetics of Diplomacy in East Asia*, pp. 177–81.
140 Kim, *Poetics of Diplomacy in East Asia*, pp. 190–203.

civilizing influence and the cultural prestige of the Chinese mainland not out of submissive deference to a powerful neighbor, but from a sense of shared identity within an interpolity order grounded in classical tradition—much like the Korean experience.

In sum, the presence of the *shi* as a sociocultural force was crucial to the establishment of Sino-Korean and Sino-Vietnamese tributary practices and institutions as the foundational normative structure of interpolity relations. In the Sino-Korean case, the development of the Chinese and Korean *shi* gradually transformed tributary relations into institutionalized and internalized norms grounded in voluntary moral commitment. The normative force of these relations became so deeply embedded—through the institutions and daily practices shaped by the *shi*—that diplomatic norms came to regulate even the bodily comportment, emotional expressions, and introspective awareness of Chosŏn kings and officials. While Sino-Vietnamese tributary relations were more contentious, the Vietnamese *shi* still enabled the establishment and restoration of tributary institutions and internalized tributary norms by appropriating the idealized image of suzerain-vassal relations in the shared Sinic tradition. During the Qing period, these relations also became highly institutionalized and internalized through the collaborative efforts of Vietnamese and Chinese *shi*, who cultivated a sense of belonging to a shared classical tradition. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the relatively weaker autonomy of the Vietnamese *shi*—compared to their Korean counterparts—likely resulted in a less intensive internalization of tributary norms. Unlike in Korea, there were no efforts to align domestic bureaucracy with the idealized image of a vassal state, nor was there a strong Neo-Confucian disciplinary regime to inscribe tributary norms into the bodies and minds of Vietnamese rulers. As a result, a distinct Vietnamese imperial identity and set of practices persisted alongside tributary engagement.[141]

Sociocultural Forces in Interpolity Orders

Beyond early modern East Asia, other non-Western interpolity orders also featured sociocultural forces as central actors. First, as Ayşe Zarakol has shown, the spread of Chinggisid absolute sovereignty across the Islamic region had to contend with the jurisprudential authority of Islamic jurists (*ulama*).[142] However, what remains underexplored is a sociological account of how Islamic jurists shaped interpolity orders both prior to and following the rise of Chinggisid polities. Many scholars of Islamic law have studied the independent authority of jurists in relation to the state, and their authority was likely rooted in their identity as a sociocultural force, grounded in their mastery of legal texts and their autonomous tradition of interpretation.[143] As this paper has done for early modern East Asia, a sociological study of the interaction between juridical sociocultural forces, Islamic polities, and interpolity order would significantly deepen our understanding of Islamic interpolity orders.

A second case for historical sociological analysis is the interpolity orders shaped by Tibetan Buddhism following the Mongol conquest of Eurasia. Upon expanding into the Tibetan region, Mongol rulers began sponsoring Tibetan Buddhist sects and forming patron-client ties with Tibetan lamas. As a result, the legitimacy of both Tibetan polities and various Chinggisid rulers across Eurasia—including Khubilai Khan of Yuan China—came to rely on the symbolic technologies of legitimation provided by highly trained Tibetan

141 Byung Wook Choi, "19segi pet'ŭnamŭi tanilminjok mandŭlgi" ("Creation of One People in the 19th-Century Vietnam"), *Tongbugayŏksanonch'ong* (*Journal of Northeast Asian History*), No. 23 (2009), pp. 73–97.

142 Zarakol, *Before the West*, pp. 135–41.

143 Wael B. Hallaq, "Juristic Authority vs. State Power: The Legal Crises of Modern Islam. Journal of Law and Religion," *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2003), pp. 243–58; Khaled Abou El Fadl, "The Place of Ethical Obligations in Islamic Law," *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2004), pp. 1–40; Mohamad El-Merheb, "'There Is No Just Ruler at This Time!'," in Karina Kellermann, Alheydis Plassmann, and Christian Schwermann, eds., *Criticising the Ruler in Pre-Modern Societies* (Göttingen: V&R unipress 2019), pp. 349–76.

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Buddhist monks. This model of legitimation was later adopted by the Manchu Qing, who sought to forge broader political alliances with Mongolian aristocratic groups.[144] Tibetan legitimation typically involved receiving teachings and blessings from revered Tibetan lamas. To perform this symbolic function, Tibetan lamas and monks underwent extensive lifelong training in chanting, interpreting Buddhist texts, and conducting ritual ceremonies.[145] The specialized textual and ritual expertise cultivated within the autonomous institutions of Tibetan monasteries suggests that Tibetan monks constituted a distinct sociocultural force that, in conjunction with centralized polities, helped shape Eurasian interpolity orders. A historical sociological approach that highlights their independent role and authority can once again push the study of Eurasian interpolity orders beyond implicit state-centrism.[146]

The cases of Islamic jurists and Tibetan monks as sociocultural forces in shaping their respective interpolity orders are just two examples where the historical sociological approach can help enrich the analysis of non-Western interpolity orders. The active participation of independent sociocultural elites in interpolity orders is, in fact, a recurrent historical phenomenon. As Michael Mann has argued, networks of religious practices and institutions in world history have historically constituted a distinct ideological form of power, separate from military, economic, or political power—networks that often relied on sociocultural elites whose authority stemmed from specialized textual and cultural expertise.[147] A historical sociological analysis of these sociocultural elites can illuminate how networks of ideological power independently shaped non-Western interpolity orders, while also contributing to ongoing studies of sociocultural forces in European international orders. One caveat is that the study of sociocultural elites may need to be complemented by the study of more populist sociocultural forces once the analysis moves into the modern era, when technological development has empowered various non-elite groups, such as the current global network of right-wing groups, with the wherewithal to influence global politics.

Beyond non-Western historical interpolity orders, the category of sociocultural force deepens our general understanding of how social forces shape international orders, offering both theoretical and practical insights. By extending the notion of social force—typically framed in socioeconomic terms—it highlights more diverse channels through which social forces can influence both the state and the international order. Moreover, each sociocultural force has a unique way of defining itself and shaping the state and the international order, as the *shi* did with the symbiotic state and the moralized tributary order. Thus, studying diverse sociocultural forces and their distinctive political thought will reveal alternative configurations of social force, state, and international order that remain underexplored in current scholarship.

This new historical sociological concept of sociocultural force carries significant implications for paradigmatic theories such as realism, liberalism, constructivism, and certain state-centric theories of hierarchy. With regard to realism, historical sociology has already broadened its conventional focus on the struggle for power among state actors. It has demonstrated that a state's power is often tied to the rise and fall of particular socioeconomic forces, such as the industrializing capitalist class. Similarly, sociocultural forces can also shape the power dynamics of states. In particular, the moral and cultural influence of sociocultural forces appears to play a key role in shaping what is commonly referred to as a state's soft power. As the *shi* did with their respective states and the broader regional order, such forces can help states draw neighboring polities to their causes while articulating the normative foundations of interstate order.

144 Brook et al., *Sacred Mandates*, pp. 90–154.
145 Ibid. pp. 93–4; Ruth Gamble, *Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 263–5.
146 Phillips, "Contesting the Confucian Peace"; Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror*, pp. 223–80.
147 Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, pp. 341–72.

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Likewise, sociocultural forces play a crucial mediating role in shaping institutions, interstate hierarchies, and the identities and norms of states. Liberal theories often overlook the role of diffuse social actors in the creation of liberal international institutions and their hegemonic influence, but studies on international practices have shown that it is often actors with specific sociocultural characteristics who provide the human infrastructure for these institutions.[148] Examining these actors as sociocultural forces can shed light on how their distinctive habits and cultural dispositions are shaped within their domestic contexts and later affect international institutions. Similarly, rationalist and constructivist theories of hierarchy often explain the emergence of interstate hierarchy either through rational bargaining among states or by constructing differentiated statuses between them.[149] Yet, just as the *shi* mediated interstate negotiations and helped determine the "civilized" status of states, sociocultural forces likely play a crucial role in the formation of hierarchy. Clarifying their role can help identify which types of actors are crucial to the formation of hierarchy and how their capacity to shape interstate hierarchies is cultivated through their interactions with the state. In constructivist accounts of state identity and norms as well, sociocultural forces serve as crucial mediators. As key producers of symbolic power in international orders, sociocultural forces are particularly well positioned to shape the identities and norms of states. For instance, the *shi* devised rituals and practices—such as poetry exchanges—that helped shape the identities of China and its neighbors as partners bound by reciprocal tributary obligations. In sum, when sociocultural forces attain sufficient autonomy from the state, they help shape the power structures, institutions, hierarchies, identities, and norms of an international order—in ways that may align with or diverge from state interests and capacities, depending on the nature of their relationship with the state.

Finally, the study of sociocultural forces—exemplified by the *shi*—offers valuable insights into the potential transformation of the current global and regional orders driven by the initiatives of rising powers such as China. For example, although the Chinese state is actively seeking to lead the transformation of the existing global and regional East Asian orders through initiatives such as the community of shared future and peripheral diplomacy, these efforts are likely to encounter significant challenges due to the absence of tangible transnational sociocultural forces capable of supporting them. The cultural power of the imperial Chinese states could only come about thanks to the existence of a highly disciplined group of the transnational *shi* with ritual, literary and moral excellences. Unfortunately, no such sociocultural elites that are willing to partner with the Chinese state are in sight yet. At the same time, the alternative world order envisioned by Chinese officials need not be driven by the Chinese state itself, but rather by a new global sociocultural force—comprising intellectuals, citizens, and artists—who have embraced the cultural and political heritage of the pre-modern *shi*. The efforts by comparative political theorists to explore Confucian democracy in East Asia is an example of what such a new sociocultural force might do even against the wishes of the Chinese state who is still mostly reluctant to embrace a thorough democratization of its country.[150] A genuine Chinese capacity to reshape the global order—and more immediately, the regional order in East Asia—is likely to emerge only if the Chinese state can find a way to tap into the globalized sociocultural force sympathetic to the *shi* heritage, by making meaningful concessions to its autonomous political and normative power, as past East Asian states once did with their own *shi*. Such a vision holds

[148] Inderjeet Parmar, "Transnational Elite Knowledge Networks: Managing American Hegemony in Turbulent Times," *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2019), pp. 532–64; Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders*; Jérémie Cornut, "Diplomacy, Agency, and the Logic of Improvisation and Virtuosity in Practice," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2018), pp. 712–36.

[149] David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders*; T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William Curti Wohlforth, *Status in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[150] Sungmoon Kim, *Confucian Democracy in East Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Stephen C. Angle and Yutang Jin, eds., *Progressive Confucianism and Its Critics* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

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particular promise in East Asia, where the *shi* heritage remains very much alive in the habits, sentiments, social practices, and intellectual discourses of many societies.[151]

Conclusion

A historical sociological approach holds significant promise for advancing the study of both non-Western and Western interpolity orders and their interconnections. It expands the conventional focus on centralized, state-like entities to include the agency of more diverse and complex actors. The case of the *shi* as a sociocultural force shaping state formation and interpolity order in early modern East Asia illustrates the potential of this approach. The rise of the *shi* contributed to the emergence of symbiotic states, whose capacity for mobilization was shaped and, at times, limited by their intricate relationship with these sociocultural elites. The *shi* also helped establish a more robust normative foundation for the Sino-Korean and Sino-Vietnamese tributary relationships. Although further empirical research is needed, this initial exploration underscores the critical, and often overlooked, role of sociocultural forces in shaping international order. Extending this approach beyond East Asia, historical sociological analyses of other Western and non-Western interpolity orders will uncover far more intricate dynamics that have been concealed by lingering state-centric assumptions, while simultaneously enriching the theoretical repertoire of historical sociology. Only with a clear understanding of the power and role of various sociocultural forces in both the West and the non-West can the globalized historical sociology of the interrelations of different historical interpolity orders be fruitfully advanced. This enhanced historical sociological analysis foregrounds the often-overlooked role of sociocultural forces in shaping the defining features of international order—an aspect that is not only theoretically indispensable but also essential for understanding and navigating contemporary transformations in both global and regional orders.

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151 Philip J. Ivanhoe and Sungmoon Kim, eds., *Confucianism, A Habit of the Heart: Bellah, Civil Religion, and East Asia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017).

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