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David C. Kang. East Asia before the West: Five centuries of trade and tribute. New York: Columbia University Press. 2010.

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David C. Kang. *East Asia before the West: Five centuries of trade and tribute*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2010.

As the second part of David C. Kang's successive research project (begun with his 2009 *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia*), this text, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* explores how East Asia developed and examines the nature and history of the region's international decision making. *East Asia Before the West* discusses the unique diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations at play among the four main states in historical East Asia: China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. The author also tries to contrast the experience of these "sinicized" countries to their relations with the nomadic tribes of the northern and northwestern borders, suggesting that there are not only military or commercial explanations for historical events but also that certain cultural interactions contributed to development of the East Asian international order.

Kang begins his book with a brief examination of the Imjin War (1592-1598), a major conflict between China, Korea, and Japan. The author seeks to understand why and how these three major powers in East Asia enjoyed a peaceful coexistence for the three hundred years both before and after the Imjin war despite "having the military and technological capability to wage war on a massive scale" (p. 1). His attempts to answer this question then serve as a brief historical background to introduce the book's main themes, including the cultural roots of Chinese hegemony and a study of the "tribute system," which, as Kang emphasizes, bears practical significance for the whole of East Asia.

Chapter two, "Ideas: Hierarchy, Status, and Hegemony," explores the importance of these key concepts and uses them as a way of clarifying the ideas that inform the rest of the book. By studying various definitions offered by different philosophers and historians, Kang concludes that the distinctions between these terms are significant in helping "categorize and explain different patterns of international relations found in early modern East Asia" (p. 24). Kang provides in the subsequent chapter, "States: The Confucian Society," a historical overview of East Asia, focusing on China's role in the making of international order in the region. Here, the author makes two central arguments: first that there is no eternal, unchanging China and second that other secondary states in East Asia chose Confucianism and Chinese models more for their own needs than from Chinese pressure. Specifically, he claims that the Chinese practices provided other states with a wide range of "institutional and discursive hierarchic tools," (p. 52) the use of which permitted such states to consolidate their own rule and to present themselves to China as states worthy of treatment as such. Says Kang, based on formal recognition and regulated by a set of accepted norms, national states of varying sizes and power coexisted in a multinational system in East Asia.

The next chapter, "Diplomacy: The Tribute System," is a particularly well-argued one that explains how the tribute system of China, with the cooperation of Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, was created and maintained for almost six centuries. This system emphasized formal hierarchy among countries, yet it also allowed "considerable informal equality" (p. 54). In contrast to the modern Westphalian ideal of equality among nation-states,¹ the Chinese tribute system, in which China was understood to be the superior state, was based predominantly on two key moves: the "recognition [of the subordinate state] by the superior state" and the "sending of embassy envoys to the superior" state (p. 56). Instead of a form of political or military hegemony, China exercised little authority over other states, and this sino-centric tribute system was based overwhelmingly on subordinate states formally recognizing China's cultural superiority. Here, Kang underscores a crucial aspect about the Chinese style tribute system: in return for acknowledging its dominant role in East Asia, China respected the political sovereignty and relative independence of its subordinate states

¹ In the Westphalian system, the national interests and goals of states and nation-states were widely assumed to go beyond those of any citizen or any ruler. States became the primary institutional agents in an interstate system of relations.

on fundamental issues such as government institutions, legal systems, and economic policies. Furthermore, within this system, there was a set of rules and institutions which developed over time to build “an overarching framework” (p. 81) for organizing external relations among political actors in the region.

In his chapter on war (pp. 82-106), Kang analyzes major military confrontations in the history of East Asia and reviews them in chronological order. Through these wars, it is evident that there is a major difference between Asia and contemporary Europe and that patterns in the pre-modern East Asian system are difficult to reconcile with the Western balance-of-power theory² (p. 84). Kang emphasizes through his choice of the subtitle for the chapter that attention should be paid to the long periods of peace between the wars, though he also admits that plenty of violence existed between the realms and tribes along China’s long northern and western frontiers. Although there had been a vibrant and integrated system of trading and foreign relations in East Asia from the Song era of the tenth century to the end of the Qing dynasty in the nineteenth century, which are discussed in chapter six (p. 107-138), no such system existed among the neighboring pastoral nomads of China, whose role in the history of the region Kang also explores. Based on his examination of a variety of nomadic peoples beyond China’s borders, Kang concludes that for such peoples, the Chinese tribute system was unhelpful in that nomadic peoples comprised no “state” to speak of and did not, therefore, always fit into this system. In addition to which, the Chinese government typically considered such peoples a threat to the territorial and cultural security of China and therefore spent significant effort attempting to deal with these people through offense, defense, trade, and diplomacy (p. 145). Certainly, the author tries hard to avoid oversimplification of the complex problem, suggesting that China always had “different security concerns,” among them was “protecting” itself from the perceived threat of the “uncivilized barbarians” (p. 142). Clear evidence of this perpetual concern of China includes, for instance, China’s building of the Great Wall and the ongoing Chinese military actions against various nomadic tribes and states on its borders.

The concluding chapter is entitled “Lessons: History Forward and Backward,” which may well reflect Kang’s primary purpose of this book. In this sense, his history of East Asian foreign relations before Western colonialism should not be simply understood as a historical narrative but as a focused attempt to inform readers about a regional system predicated on different cultural assumptions than those of the West. Although in contemporary East Asia, the Western model of “balance of power” is now operative, East Asians seem not to be particularly anxious about China’s ascendancy, perhaps because many of them understand the history of the region and China’s place in that narrative.

East Asia Before the West is valuable scholarship which attempts to put the historical relations of different countries in the region under scrutiny and probe for a proper approach with which to provide the reader a coherent view of the region. This book will be a valuable contribution to any library and is worthwhile reading for anyone interested in the history of political relations in East Asia; it is also certain to provide the reader with a more comprehensive understanding of modern day East Asia and current situations in the region.

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² Balance of power theory asserts that national security is enhanced when military capabilities are distributed so that no one [state](#) is strong enough to dominate all others. If one state gains inordinate power, the theory predicts that it will take advantage of its strength and attack weaker neighbors, thereby providing an incentive for those threatened to unite in a defensive [coalition](#).