Social Positioning and International Order Contestation in Early Modern Southeast Asia

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Abstract   Identities and ideas can lead to international order contestation through the efforts of international actors to socially position themselves and perform their identities. International actors try to shape the world to suit who they want to be. To substantiate this argument, I examine the contestation of international orders in early modern Southeast Asia. The prevailing view portrays a Confucian international order which formed a consensual and stable hierarchy in East Asia. However, instead of acquiescing to hegemonic leadership, both Siam and Vietnam frequently sought to assert their equality and even superiority to the Chinese dynasties. I argue that both polities engaged in political contention to define their places in relation to other polities and the broader social context in which they interacted. I examine how international order contestation emerged from efforts to define and redefine background knowledge about social positioning, social categorization, and the political ontologies and beliefs about collective purpose on which they are based. I claim that agents seek to interact with others in ways that reify their sense of self, and challenge the background knowledge embedded in performances of other actors that threaten their ability to perform their identity. I also argue against theories that attribute international order contestation to hegemonic decline or the breakdown of a tacit bargain, which assume that orders are held together by a dominant power. One implication is that hegemony and hierarchy are based on dominant ideas, not dominant states.

Why and how does identity affect the contestation of international orders? In short, I argue that international actors try to shape the world to suit who they want to be. International orders are sets of institutions and practices in international politics. These patterns of action are based on tacit beliefs that also define the identities of different actors and how they are positioned relative to each other. What is said and done in international politics has implications for the relations between agents, the social context in which they exist, and the identities an actor can maintain. This can lead to contestation of international orders as international actors try to perform their identities in interactions with each other. To substantiate this argument, I empirically examine episodes of contention between Siam, Vietnam, and imperial China during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1912). I find that contention over their relations and the international orders in which they interacted was central to how the disputes unfolded. My findings further explicate how the interests of actors, and strategies used to pursue them, are defined by background knowledge—the collective beliefs taken for granted within a social context. The reproduction of international orders and the ideas they embody are thus at stake in identity-driven

struggles over social positioning. This has implications for theories of hegemony and hierarchies in international politics.

I define and develop the concepts of social positioning and background knowledge. I outline how they help us understand the creation and contestation of international orders, and how to observe them at work in international politics. I then develop a framework for analyzing background knowledge and international order contestation, using the example of the mandala international order in Southeast Asia. In the empirical section, I examine key instances of contention in international relations (IR) between Siam, Vietnam, and imperial China, tracing these processes to show that social positioning is integral to both the constitution and the contestation of international orders. I conclude by contrasting my argument to explanations derived from hegemonic order theory and theories of international hierarchy and orders as based on rational bargains.

The first main contribution of this paper is to examine how struggles to define and entrench dominant ideas are linked to the contestation of hierarchies and hegemonies. International orders are conventionally seen as imposed by a state with dominant military and economic power. International orders are thus described with terms like "US-led" or "Pax Britannica." My argument rejects this conventional wisdom. Instead, what is hegemonic is the background knowledge that enables some actors to claim a social position of superiority and induces others to recognize it. Thus, hegemony is produced through social processes that entrench specific *ideas* as dominant, and actors become hegemons through performances that draw on those ideas.[1] Hegemony is about dominant ideas, not dominant states.

A second contribution is to specify more systematically how ideas and identities affect international orders and can be the subject of disputes in international politics. Ideas have often been treated as norms to be complied with or violated, or as constitutive structures that affect politics in abstract ways.[2] But this overlooks the need for ideas to be embodied in action for them to affect the social world, and consequently agents' efforts to do things and make claims about what those actions mean. Political performances represent the background knowledge that defines the social world in different ways. Disputes can thus emerge because performances and interpretations of them potentially alter that background knowledge. Hence, international order contestation takes the form of political struggles to either maintain a specific vision of social reality or alter it.

By focusing on the politics around practices and the performances of them, I move beyond well-established claims that collective beliefs, culture, and norms are the basis of international orders. I do this by examining the performances and political contention through which specific sets of beliefs *become* collective, and are both reproduced and contested by actors.[3] The substantive ideas that constitute international orders are not merely dictated by the powerful, nor do they form monolithic,

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1. Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf 2018; Cox 1983, 171–72; Nexon and Neumann 2018, 673–76.
2. McCourt 2016.
3. Compare Spruyt 2020, which underplays this politicized aspect of culture and collective beliefs.

incommensurate cultures that are impervious to interaction and change.[4] Instead, they are interpreted, manipulated, and contested by agents throughout the social hierarchy. Furthermore, international orders matter because they set the terms of *both* consensus and contention.

More specifically for the historical period studied here, these ideas move us beyond the controversy around whether a "Chinese tribute system" really existed or if participants genuinely believed in it. Empirically, I directly examine how and why the Confucian order's diplomatic practices were subject to repeated contestation and negotiation.[5] It was because of the dominance of Confucian ideas that they could be used strategically to advance political interests, even by the Manchu conquerors of China, who inserted themselves into the order rather than overturning it. The shared tacit acceptance of dominant ideas is also why their reinterpretation is both possible and worth contesting. It is entirely possible to think outside the dominant ideas, but they nonetheless define what is perceived as rational and feasible, and exclude alternatives as radical and impractical. My argument thus moves toward examining culture as a "highly complex … realm of symbolic meanings and practices" and beyond outdated essentialist conceptions that have been standard in IR research.[6] This is an important move given the potential for identity and culture to fuel conflict in twenty-first-century international orders and the need to better grasp these challenges.

Social Positioning and International Orders

Background knowledge and *social positioning* are central concepts for my argument. Background knowledge is enacted through patterns of action (that is, practices) that "embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world."[7] As the set of taken-for-granted assumptions on which actions are based, background knowledge passes for the objective description of reality. Social positioning is a type of performance, a meaningful action that draws on background knowledge in an attempt to enact specific relations between actors, as well as between the actor and others collectively. Through social positioning, agents express their identity and demand recognition of it from others.

These efforts to enact relations with others and place oneself within a social setting can be contentious. An agent's identity exists only through its performance and recognition by others, a process that both constitutes that identity and tells others about it.[8] Furthermore, since others have their own identities to perform, they will not always respond in ways that validate one's self-image. B may try to force A to

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4. Reus-Smit 2018.
5. Van Lieu 2017.
6. Reus-Smit 2018, 47; on this problem in China-oriented scholarship, see Callahan 2012.
7. Adler and Pouliot 2011, 4.
8. Ringmar 2012, 2; see also Butler 2005, 33–38.

conform with B's definition of A's identity. Routine interactions are potentially contentious because if who we are is how others relate to us, then being related to in undesired ways also threatens our sense of self.[9] As I argue, this dynamic characterized Vietnam's efforts to assert its social position relative to China, challenging China's centrality in the Confucian order. The Chinese dynasties simultaneously used that centrality, and the power this social position gave them over collective identity and meanings, to impose and reinforce unequal relations.

These dynamics affect international orders because social reality exists only through the continual performances that represent and reify it, and thus the stability of constructs like identities and institutions is an illusion created by repeated practice.[10] International politics is made real through the continual performance of activities like diplomacy, war, and trade. A performance implicitly claims to be part of accepted practices, even as it may reinterpret or assert a specific version of them. Furthermore, just as an action is meaningful by reference to background knowledge inferred from past patterns of action, what is performed today can become the basis for future practices. Hence, actors' attempts to shape social domains to facilitate the performance of their identities may result in political contention over legitimate practices and the meanings conveyed through them. Seemingly trivial disputes over issues like diplomatic protocol can become politically charged because of their implications for actor identities and the international order itself. This also means that for an actor to pursue its interests or try to change the rules, it must first enter the political game and play it according to the collective background knowledge.[11]

Background Knowledge and Symbolic Power

I break down background knowledge into three layers, where the more tacit layers are the basis for more surface-level ones. The deepest, most tacit layer is *political ontology*: beliefs about what exists in the world, how it works, and the nature of power and rule.[12] Forming the next, less tacit layer are beliefs about the *collective values* of international politics, the external dimension of the moral purposes that states ought to individually pursue.[13] These beliefs about the nature of power and politics, and what they are legitimately used for, are the basis for *social categorization*: beliefs about how agents are grouped and stratified. Social categorization leads some agents to be recognized as having specific identities and privileges, and to enjoy relations of superiority to others. Accordingly, some actors are classified as "rogue states" or "barbarians," while others are considered normal or as examples to follow.[14]

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9. Pratt 2017.
10. Adler and Pouliot 2011, 18.
11. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 98–100.
12. Allan 2018, 33–34.
13. Reus-Smit 1999.
14. Adler-Nissen 2014.

Background knowledge defines the orthodox patterns of thought and action in an international order, which are constituted and maintained through symbolic power.[15] Symbolic power is the relative ability of an agent to define the collective meanings and interpretations of the social world. It enables actors to influence what is regarded as the correct background knowledge, and thus how others socially position them. Symbolic power relies on collective recognition of specific social assets as connoting competence and efficacy. Battleships, gender equality, sacred relics, or triple-A credit ratings can all confer symbolic power, depending on the background knowledge in a social context. Symbolic power thus affects whose performances tend to be more compelling, and who has greater influence on evolution and change in dominant ideas. Symbolic power makes it more likely, but does not guarantee, that one's performances are recognized as credible interpretations of background knowledge and the intersubjective social reality.

This has self-reinforcing tendencies because social positions of dominance and privilege by themselves create symbolic power. Someone regarded as a leader or a master can improvise and alter standards through their practices. This is how it becomes possible to revise the basic understandings of the social context. Conversely, those in inferior social positions are more likely to have their innovations viewed as deviant or incompetent.[16] However, symbolic power is not just for hegemons, as some studies suggest.[17] Everyone draws on symbolic power to perform their identities, since recognition is necessarily based on tacit beliefs about social categorization that are applied throughout a social context.[18] Vietnam used its symbolic power in the Confucian order to contest how China recognized it, from the title given to the Vietnamese ruler to the name China should use for the country. These were salient issues of political contention because the two polities subscribed to the same collective background knowledge and its proper performance was at stake in their interactions.

Symbolic power faces an exchange rate when agents relate and interact across different social contexts. Agents can face situations where they must perform a different self, or where they are perceived differently by others who take different background knowledge for granted. Differences in the scripting, setting, and performance of international practices reflect differences in background knowledge on which different international orders are founded.[19] The congruence of different collective beliefs and the social positioning they produce determines how well symbolic power and a prestigious position in one social context can translate into another. One implication is that agents may contend over what social context their relations should be placed in. As I elaborate, Siam attempted to enact relations with China within the mandala order, and later the European order, because these social contexts were structured by

15. Bourdieu 1991, 168–70.
16. Pouliot 2016, 56.
17. Musgrave and Nexon 2018; Nexon and Neumann 2018.
18. Bourdieu 1991, 224.
19. Ringmar 2012, 18.

background knowledge allowing Siam to socially position itself in a relatively equal relationship. Contention resulted when China sought to conduct relations within the Confucian order, in which it claimed a position of immutable superiority.

International Orders, Hegemony, and Hierarchy

Social positioning reveals that what is said and done in international interactions is what generates the abstractions like hegemony, hierarchies, and social contracts that existing theories of international ordering focus on. Conversely, it is through social positioning that hegemony and hierarchy actually affect international politics. In recent work, hegemony is considered a "particular kind of international hierarchy,"[20] which produces and legitimizes inequalities. Hierarchies depend on naturalized beliefs about social categorization and stratification, which in turn rely on the deeper layers of background knowledge. In standard explanations, international orders rest on hegemonic imposition or bargained hierarchies, and contestation results from the decline of a hegemon or its tacit bargain with subordinates. I argue instead that identities and clashing visions of the legitimate order are the key issues. If an actor finds itself misrecognized according to the prevailing ideational structure, and thus unable to maintain its sense of self within that structure, it is more likely to have contentious interactions with agents who want to reproduce the order or try to impose its practices in their relations. International actors will thus tend to defend international orders that induce others to recognize their identity, and contest those that deny it to them. This helps explain why Vietnam was more likely to acquiesce to subordinate positioning within the Confucian order, whereas Siam resisted and tried to interact with China using non-Confucian practices instead.

Social positioning addresses the motives, means, and opportunities for agents to contest international orders. Some writers suggest that actors may adopt subordinate positions and comply with dominant orders without being overtly threatened or coerced because the dominant actors have ideational resonance or cultural attraction.[21] I argue instead that this compliance results from the greater symbolic power that some agents have to interpret and define background knowledge. This allows them to influence collective beliefs about social categories and how they are defined, thus making their superiority appear to be a natural feature of the world. Actors with less symbolic power, whose social positions are based on that specific background knowledge, are drawn into enacting practices that reinforce those beliefs—and the social inequalities they imply.

Conversely, claims of superiority and leadership must resonate with those cast as followers. Social categorization must be continually justified by understandings of fundamental values, and the political ontology they are based on. Claiming social

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20. Bially Mattern and Zarakol 2016, 634–37; Ikenberry and Nexon 2019, 396.
21. E.g., Ikenberry 2011; Kang 2010.

position as a hegemon is a process of successfully performing relations of superiority to others according to intersubjective background knowledge. Hegemony is exerted not by constant coercion but by closing off alternatives and inducing others to act in ways that reproduce background knowledge and reify the hegemon's superiority.[22] Hence, the notion that dominant actors gain legitimized authority actually understates the ideational power of hegemony. A dominant social order, and the social placements and power relations that go with it, is not something that actors can choose to engage with or not. Subordinated actors have little alternative but to work within the dominant ideas if they are to pursue their interests at all.[23] To trade and have diplomatic interaction with imperial China, other countries had no choice but to enact the required practices, and thus to reinforce the Confucian background knowledge according to which they were positioned as inferior tributaries. More importantly, alternatives would have been perceived as impractical, and for actors sharing the Confucian background knowledge, radical—even unthinkable.

Hence, rather than an equilibrium, focal point, or institutional pact, hegemony and hierarchy are contingent phenomena that are only as stable as their continued performance. The ongoing complicity of the subordinated must be continually induced and maintained, and this occurs through practical actions and their politicized interpretation. This is one way in which hegemony imposes a definition of social reality, creates schemes of perception, and dismisses alternatives, even without the conscious action or knowledge of either the dominant or the dominated. Going along with the ceremonies that the powerful neighbor demands to maintain diplomatic and commercial exchange appears as simply the pragmatic way to do things. Hegemonic ideas are powerful because they define the mainstream at a tacit level. But this tacit dimension is also what makes it possible to subvert and change dominant ideas through the reinterpretation and slippage of shared understandings. This also implies that long-entrenched international orders can change relatively quickly when dominant ideas shift.

Recent work has specifically addressed what the Confucian international order can tell us about hegemony and hierarchy. Both Ji-Young Lee and Seo-Hyun Park focus on domestic legitimation, arguing that China's position as hegemon depended on the extent that participating in Confucian international ordering practices was considered to support the domestic legitimacy or autonomy of other rulers in the international system.[24] My argument is complementary in addressing where these perceptions of legitimacy come from and how they are both affected by and influence international politics. It also builds on Lee's insight that China's ability to act as a hegemon was contingent on outside recognition of its symbolic power.[25] Similarly, Zhang emphasizes the "expressive rationality" of maintaining relations between Confucian polities

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22. Musgrave and Nexon 2018, 602.
23. Pouliot 2016, 265–71.
24. Lee 2017; Park 2017.
25. Lee 2017, chap. 2.

for their own sake and the various strategies pursued through those relations.[26] Social positioning suggests that expressive and instrumental motives are necessarily intertwined. Unequal relations were pursued by Chinese dynasties because they were necessary to perform a social position of superiority to foreign polities, which was a key part of China's self-conceived identity. My argument complements this work by theorizing the politics around the backdrop of dominant ideas against which these dynamics played out.

Furthermore, while existing work uses a concept of hegemony as legitimate authority, it tends to stop short of examining where this perception of legitimacy comes from. I address this issue by laying out how background knowledge is enacted, contested, and reproduced through relations between agents. Social position as a hegemon is established through dominant ideas that powerful actors can influence but do not entirely control. This has further implications for hegemonic order theories. IR scholarship has largely overlooked that a hegemonic transition took place with the fall of China's Ming dynasty, the Manchu conquest of Beijing in 1644, and the proclamation of the Qing dynasty. The Manchu empire then used the material and symbolic assets gained from conquering China to socially position itself as the new hegemon of the Confucian international order, within that existing background knowledge. Hegemonic decline is supposed to lead to a breakdown of order, but while the seventeenth century's decades-long wars to rule China raged, commerce between other polities actually increased.[27] Moreover, that the Manchu empire inserted itself into an existing order instead of overturning it contradicts power transition theory. Conceptualizing hegemony in terms of dominant *ideas* helps make sense of why the dominant military power adapted itself to the existing international order instead of revising it.

Social position is also distinct from status because it is not just about relative rank but can also be about being included in a specific group, or distancing oneself from specific others. Both status and social positioning see international actors as seeking to perform and assert relations of superiority to or equality with others.[28] However, social positioning covers a wider range of practices, because an agent might also want to position itself as either part of or distinct from a group, even if this also draws it into relations of inferiority.[29] In theories that assume agents want to maximize status, it is unclear how an agent could choose between being a leading member of a low-status group or a marginal member of a prestigious group. Hence, rather than just a *vertical* dimension of status, social positioning implies that agents also aim to maintain and pursue social relations compatible with self-conceived notions about who they are and where they should stand in *horizontal* terms. While this is congruent with theories of ontological security, I emphasize that rather

26. Zhang 2015, 7–11.
27. Shipping between Japan and Southeast Asia was significant throughout 1604–1710; see data in Reid 1993, 18, 290.
28. Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014.
29. Zarakol 2011, 46–56.

than routinizing relations and the social context,[30] agents may seek to change and destabilize them to facilitate identity performance. Social positioning implies that actors may disagree about what relations should exist between themselves and others, and consequently the background knowledge on which those relations are based.

In summary, background knowledge shapes the identities agents can perform, enticing them to adopt an order's tacit understandings so as to gain "social power to project a credible performance on the world stage."[31] But in social life and in international politics there is no fourth wall separating the audience from the stage. The audience is not passive, and their interests are implicated in the performances they see.[32] They respond with their own performances, enacting their claims about what the social order really means and where they and others rightfully fit within it. And as far as they can, they marshal their various power resources to shape background knowledge so that the international order it produces will induce others to recognize their identities. Through social positioning, agents exert symbolic power to define the background knowledge of social categorization by enacting hierarchy and differentiation based on it. This has knock-on effects because the issue of what makes someone admired or ostracized is directly connected to tacit beliefs about collective values and how to attain them. Claims of superiority or equality necessarily involve making comparisons with others and claims about the legitimate basis of standing in the wider social context. Thus international orders are both reproduced and contested through these continual interactions.

Observing Social Positioning

I operationalize my theory by drawing out observable implications. The claim is that social positioning and specific configurations of background knowledge are necessary to make sense of how political interactions produce outcomes. First, we should observe that performing identity and inducing recognition from others is an important political consideration. Choices of actions to be taken will be based on what performance would be enacted for relevant audiences. Further evidence of this would be that plausible or even potentially more effective alternatives were *not* pursued because they would have been less effective performances of the desired identity. Actors should also react negatively to performances by others that are interpreted as refusing recognition on their desired terms. They might overtly express displeasure, cut diplomatic and economic ties, issue threats, or engage in militarized disputes.

Second, I expect to observe international actors attempting to claim positions, and place others, in ways consistent with the identity the actor performs. An actor might

30. Mitzen 2006.
31. Adler 2010, 200–201.
32. Ringmar 2016.

claim a desired social position by behaving as if they already hold it. Similarly, an actor will seek to position others through performances that categorize or rank them. Examples include stigmatizing another actor based on their identity or actions and seeking to put others in the "place" the background knowledge specifies.

My empirical approach combines the methods of process tracing and discourse analysis. I begin by examining the identities agents sought to enact and the background knowledge these identities and performances were based on. I then examine the political implications of how actors represent the relations between themselves and the social order on which those relations are based. In their interactions, international actors are engaged not just in performing identities but also in reproducing the social context in which they exist. As "one can never do only one thing in social life,"[33] it makes little sense to say that a given action has only one effect or motivation. Being focused on processes, I do not specify a variable to be tested and other causes to be excluded; rather I focus on showing that my theory is useful relative to other explanations and illuminates crucial aspects of social phenomena.[34] Empirically, I thus aim to show that without social positioning, the disputes themselves could not arise, and the choices made by actors affecting the course of events cannot be adequately explained.

This period and region are a least likely case for order contestation driven by social positioning, as the standard view is that "there was no intellectual challenge to the ideas of status, hierarchy, and Chinese civilizational centrality."[35] This was also a period when China's material primacy was at its strongest.[36] Thus it presents a strong test for a theory of international order contestation that emphasizes disputed social positioning. Bringing in evidence from Siam and the mandala international order of Southeast Asia also makes a novel empirical contribution. In much of the existing research, polities that were part of this system are merely folded into the analysis of East Asia.[37] While other international systems are viable cases for further research, early modern Asia is a key source of evidence for theorizing international hierarchies, so this history has important implications for how hierarchy is understood in IR. My argument suggests that the picture of consensual Confucian harmony is exaggerated and obscures the political processes that imposed this hierarchy. I emphasize instead how actors were drawn into unequal relations, which they nevertheless contested and resisted.

Siam's Social Context: Mandalas and Dynasties

The Siamese kingdoms of Ayutthaya (1351–1767) and Rattanakosin (1782–1932) consistently "strove to gain recognition as great powers."[38] Siam primarily interacted

33. Pouliot 2016, 11.
34. Jackson 2016, 157–58; Pouliot 2015, 252–59.
35. Kang 2010, 55.
36. Zhang 2015, 12–15.
37. E.g., Kang 2010, 49–53.
38. Wyatt 1984, 62.

in the social context of the mandala international order, which was the dominant form of political organization in most of what is today considered Southeast Asia. Although Chinese records portrayed polities like Siam as tributaries, it is unlikely this view was shared by those polities themselves, or that they recognized China as a regional hegemon. Indeed, the desire of some Southeast Asian polities to seek tributary and alliance relations with the Chinese dynasties was precisely because powerful states like Siam did not defer to China and often pursued strategic goals at odds with Chinese preferences.

For Siam and its Southeast Asian neighbors, international politics was structured by background knowledge about the nature of power, rulership, and sovereignty that was distinct from the Confucian world. It reflected a mix of Hindu and Buddhist influences, which were "pervasive" in Southeast Asia.[39] In its political ontology, the mandala order considered it "natural that there should be innumerable rulers."[40] A ruler's power and authority were considered to radiate from the capital and diminish with distance. A mandala polity's sovereignty could overlap with that of its neighbors or engulf other kingdoms.[41] Consequently, borders were seen as zones rather than lines, and thus "sovereignty and border were not coterminous."[42] One practical consequence of this political ontology is that conquest was primarily about subordinating rivals, thus absorbing their power as one's own, rather than eliminating them or occupying their territory.[43] Therefore, mandala polities were highly decentralized. For example, when in the 1820s the British asked Siam to clearly define its boundary with colonized Burma, the response from Bangkok was that the border was a matter for local rulers to decide.[44]

In the mandala order, collective purpose was linked to notions of virtuous kingship and concepts of power in the hybrid Hindu–Buddhist political ontology. A key concept of power was merit (*bun*), a personal attribute which was demonstrated by a ruler's competence and efficacy in governance and warfare, which ideally enforced divine law (*dhamma*). Merit was crucial in conducting international (or more precisely, inter-sovereign) affairs, and it could be used to justify rebellions or contest royal successions.[45] Rulers are not powerful because of their armies; they have armies and win battles because of their merit. Merit is both demonstrated and increased by performances such as building Buddhist monuments, supporting the clergy, possessing sacred artifacts, and winning victories in war and politics. As practical enactments of the ruler's power, ceremony and ritual are also crucial, and in some mandala polities were themselves arguably the purpose of the state.[46] Similar

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39. Tambiah 1976, 114.
40. Wyatt 1997, 693–94.
41. Anderson 1990, 17–77; Thongchai 1994, 74–80.
42. Thongchai 1994, 77.
43. Chutintaranond 1990, 91; Tambiah 1976, 111.
44. Thongchai 1994, 64–65.
45. Baker and Phongpaichit 2017, 111.
46. Geertz 1980.

to absolutist Europe,[47] the defense of a divinely ordained sociopolitical order was the mandala order's collective moral purpose. Different political ontologies account for the different institutional and political practices that prevailed in the respective international orders.

The order thus structured both diplomatic and violent contests over social positioning. In the Thai version of the mandala polity, the king's legitimacy is inherent in his high birth, which is proof of superior merit accumulated in past lives. Rulers in the Thai region sought to claim the attributes of the *cakravartin*, the world conqueror in Indic cosmology, which was a point of contention and rivalry with Burma. Royal titles painted the king as a semi-divine entity, holding sovereign power over life, the land, fertility, and wealth.[48] Performing competently as a virtuous ruler demanded the defense of the sociopolitical order and the punishment of violators of the divine law amid a cosmos assumed to be inherently chaotic.[49]

The mandala order's hierarchy was flexible and shifted according to fluctuations in relative power.[50] Indeed, the distinction between domestic and international was fuzzy because mandala polities used practices of shared, ambiguous, and overlapping sovereignty even as they sought to assert preeminence over each other. Relations of superiority and inferiority within the mandala system involved "oppressive protection" as rulers sought to gain vassals.[51] Meanwhile, materially weaker rulers sought to protect their autonomy by paying tribute to multiple powerful patrons and playing them off against each other.[52] One example I examine later is a conflict between Siam and Vietnam over the allegiance of Cambodia. These practices expressed and reproduced background knowledge that structured this international order differently from others it coexisted with. It contrasts with the Westphalian concept, where any given location has only one sovereign whose authority is uniform throughout. It also differed from the Confucian political ontology in which the Chinese emperor claimed universal sovereignty, which was benevolently delegated to foreign tributaries.

Viewed through their understandings of the political world, Siam and other Southeast Asian rulers saw China as another polity like themselves, equal in formal status, even if it was more powerful.[53] The political ontology of the mandala order did not rely on the Chinese emperor or any other earthly figure to give kings their authority. It is thus improbable that the kings of Siam and Burma, the Malay sultanates, or the maritime empires of Srivijaya and Majapahit needed Chinese investiture for domestic legitimacy, or regarded the Chinese emperor as having special authority in the region. These rulers would have seen an amicable

47. Reus-Smit 1999, chap. 5.
48. Chutintaranond 1988; Tambiah 1976, 86–91.
49. Tambiah 1976, 39.
50. Dellois 2003; Geertz 1980, 124–25.
51. Scott 2009, 45–63.
52. Thongchai 1994, 83–88.
53. Reid 2009, 11.

relationship with a powerful neighbor and major export market to be in their interest. But this is very different from accepting or internalizing the Chinese interpretation of a subordinate vassalage relationship. Similarly, differences in political symbolism allowed China to strategically interpret interactions with the mandalas as showing their acceptance of subordinate status and the Chinese vision of world order. Thus, consistent with the general pattern of interaction between agents with different concepts of international politics, both sides attempted "to organize each other into … their own hierarchies of metaphysically meaningful orders."[54]

TABLE 1. *Background knowledge components of the mandala and Confucian orders*

	Mandala	*Confucian*
Social categorization	Flexible hierarchy based on fluctuating power	Civilized–barbarian distinction
Collective purposes	Sociopolitical ordering; virtuous kingship	Relational propriety
Political ontology	Hindu–Buddhist cosmology	Sinocentric Heaven–Earth cosmology

These differences in background knowledge persisted despite extensive and deep interactions between the mandala and Confucian regions, with regular interpersonal, commercial, and diplomatic exchanges. Ambiguity helped the parties avoid direct clashes over social positioning. Significant numbers of Chinese emigrants settled in Southeast Asia, and rulers in the mandala order generally delegated trade with China, Japan, and Ryukyu to these Chinese intermediaries.[55] Diplomatic communications were translated between languages using the forms and honorifics appropriate to the intended recipients, thus conveying the appearance of mutual recognition of identities. Practices that accommodated both sets of background knowledge reconciled conflicting interpretations of relative social positioning without having to resolve them.[56]

Moreover, both sides needed these transactions. Trade with China was crucial for the economies and royal treasuries of Southeast Asian polities.[57] Frequent "tribute missions" are thus evidence of China's commercial importance rather than of allegiance to Chinese hegemony. Chinese dynasties actively sought visits from foreign envoys because in Confucian background knowledge these performances confirmed the emperor's domestic legitimacy and China's apparent position of social supremacy. In 1371, the Ming dynasty banned private trade and travel, which had the effect of forcing other states to interact through the practices of tributary diplomacy. Although enforcement was often ineffective, the trade ban also gave Southeast Asian rulers a semi-monopoly on this lucrative revenue stream through the goods carried

54. Hevia 2009, 83. This refers to the comparable encounter between Britain and Qing China.
55. Reid 1993, vol. 2, 205.
56. Erika 2004, 41.
57. Reid 1993, vol. 2.

and exchanged on embassy missions.[58] These interactions were interpreted within the Confucian order's background knowledge as showing subordination to the Son of Heaven. But from the other side of the transaction, it was a profitable exchange with a powerful mandala in a world of many allegedly supreme monarchs.

While smaller polities in Southeast Asia did seek alliance relationships with the Chinese dynasty, this only emphasizes the fact that the major polities of the region did not defer to China or see it as having any special authority. The Majapahit empire's attack on the Malayu kingdom in southern Sumatra in the late fourteenth century was partly provoked by Malayu's attempts to gain Chinese recognition in 1370. Conquering Malayu forestalled the possibility that a Chinese-supported ruler might become a future threat.[59] Similarly, in the early fifteenth century, the Malacca sultanate sought to fend off Siam's influence by allowing China to use its strategically located port as a base for the voyages of the Ming dynasty's treasure fleet.[60] Malacca thus invited frequent visits by a heavily armed naval fleet and supported China's performances of international supremacy to protect its own position in the region.

Siam's Assertions of Social Positioning

Ayutthaya was the preeminent Siamese kingdom from the fifteenth century until its destruction by Burmese armies in 1767. It interacted regularly with East Asia and profited from its brokerage position as the chief entrepôt for trade between the Indian and Pacific oceans.[61] While the Qing dynasty attempted to limit Ayutthaya to one embassy every three years, this was effectively ignored. Envoys invented pretexts to dispatch embassies, such as the lunar new year or the emperor's birthday, and expanded the missions' cargo capacity with ships beyond the limits China tried to impose.[62] Officials in southern China abetted this and tended to apply trade-restricting edicts from the capital less stringently, since Ayutthaya was an important source of staple goods like rice.[63] Using Chinese intermediaries, ships under Ayutthaya's royal warrant also traded with Ryukyu and Japan, and Japanese rulers in turn authorized their own "red seal" ships to trade with Ayutthaya.[64] However, while Chinese dynasties tried to place Siam in the Confucian order, Siam did not recognize Confucian background knowledge, the social categorizations based on it, or the subordinate position it was assigned in this social context. Instead, the mandala background knowledge in which Siamese political authority operated maintained that any hierarchy was contingent and no monarch was necessarily superior.

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58. Stuart-Fox 2003, 77; Wade 2019, 91. The Qing lifted the ban in 1684 but reimposed it in 1717.
59. Stuart-Fox 2003, 77.
60. Wade 2019, 115.
61. Baker and Phongpaichit 2017, chap. 4.
62. Viraphol 1977.
63. Cushman 1993, 90.
64. Reid 1993, vol. 2, 18.

This refusal to accept Chinese dynasties' positioning of Siam as a subordinate vassal is borne out in how Siam sought to perform the relationship. Instead of showing any special regard or submission, the Siamese court treated Chinese envoys with similar dignity and held similar ceremonies as with envoys from Mughal India and Persia.[65] Moreover, Chinese envoys were not necessarily treated with deference if they conveyed unacceptable social positioning claims. In 1482, a Ming envoy sent to Ayutthaya to grant investiture (from the Chinese perspective) demanded that the king of Ayutthaya kneel facing north to show his submission to the Chinese emperor. The envoy was imprisoned, and according to Chinese records, after "the Siamese repeatedly sought [his] submission … his anger and indignation caused him to fall sick and he died."[66] As only Chinese sources are available, it is unclear whether the envoy was executed or otherwise deliberately killed, precisely because Ming officials were averse to recording evidence that "tributary" countries rejected Chinese superiority.[67] But most importantly, if deference to the Chinese dynasty or ideational acceptance of the Confucian hierarchy were important for Ayutthaya's authority,[68] it is implausible that the envoy would have been imprisoned at all.

Furthermore, kings in Siam had their own interests that often contradicted those of the Chinese dynasty. In 1511, Portugal attacked and conquered the Malacca Sultanate. The Ming considered the Portuguese a threat, and tried to order Ayutthaya to aid Malacca, attempting to place both in the Confucian order, where all foreign kings are the Chinese emperor's vassals. Instead, Ayutthaya granted the Portuguese commercial privileges, traded with them for guns and mercenaries, and urged them to exact "vengeance" on Malacca's sultan.[69] Coupled with the fact that Malacca had relied on the Ming for protection against Ayutthaya's influence, this again casts doubt on claims that Siam and other mandalas accepted the hierarchic authority of the Chinese dynasties.

In one important episode, the king of Ayutthaya sought to directly perform an equal relationship with the Ming dynasty. In 1592, as Japan invaded Korea with the aim of conquering China, King Naresuan (r. 1590–1605) offered to send Ayutthaya's navy to aid the Ming against Japan. Naresuan believed that Japan's expansionist leader would disrupt trade and, with strategic logic based in a mandala political ontology, reasoned that this distant "rearward enemy" should be countered by allying with a "rearward friend," that is, China.[70] He thus took for granted relative equality between the countries.

This interaction merits a more detailed examination, since it is used to show that other countries "bought into the Chinese role as system manager" and regarded its

65. Stuart-Fox 2003, 94.
66. Wade 2000, 254–55.
67. Ibid., 255.
68. As argued in Kang 2010, 67–68.
69. Cheah 2012, 69; Wyatt 1984, 88.
70. Wolters 1968.

hegemony as legitimate.[71] Instead, this was a social positioning struggle in which Ayutthaya's performed identity as an equal of China threatened China's performance of its position as Confucian hegemon. This can be seen in the Ming court's internal discussions leading to the decision to reject the alliance offer on 6 February 1593, as recorded in the imperial gazette. The Chinese Ministry of War initially recommended accepting the alliance and involving the Ayutthayan navy in a direct attack on Japan, which prompted an intervention from the governor of the southern Chinese provinces of Guang-dong and Guang-xi, who emphasized that Siam was a *yi* country, a term describing "culturally inferior foreign peoples":[72]

> Siam is situated far to the west and it is over 10,000 li from there to Japan …
> Considering the length of the sea journey and the unpredictable nature of the
> Yi, the request should be denied.

The Ministry of War responded by deferring to the judgment of the governor, citing his greater experience in relations with Southeast Asian countries, and admitting that an alliance of this kind was unprecedented:

> The writers on military strategy have noted many aspects in which mistakes can
> be made, but they have never noted one of these as being a situation where great
> and dignified China relies on the strength of the Yi from the islands. Imperial
> orders should be sent praising their loyalty and righteousness and advising
> respect for their motives.[73]

This internal debate shows two main issues at stake. First, the Ming court was concerned about the social positioning implications of China's being seen as needing help from an uncivilized country in a war against Japan. Ayutthaya's social categorization in this out-group is cited by China's southern governor as a key reason to distrust and reject the alliance offer. Second, Ming officials were concerned that relations would be harmed by this decision and perceived a need to mollify Naresuan's "indignant" envoys.[74] A decline in embassies to China in the following years may reflect Naresuan's unhappiness at being rebuffed.[75]

From a materialist and security standpoint, it is puzzling that the Ming court rejected an alliance offer that its military officials had initially welcomed. Ayutthaya was considered a significant military power, and Chinese officials specifically knew that Naresuan had an experienced navy similar in strength to that of Japan.[76] A review of first-hand European accounts of Ayutthaya's military concludes

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71. Kang 2010, 70.
72. Zhang 2015, 198.
73. Quotations from the *Ming Shi-lu,* translated by Wade, n.d. <http://www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/wan-li/year-21-month-1-day-6>.
74. Wolters 1968, 166.
75. Promboon 1971, 197.
76. Baker 2003, 48; Promboon 1971, 196.

that "for observers who had seen warfare in Europe, these armies seemed colossal."[77] Neither were Ayutthaya and Japan as remote as the Ming's southern governor strategically argued. Indeed, in 1592 Naresuan's army included a unit of 500 Japanese mercenaries.[78] Diplomatic relations and trade links between Siam and Japan were already well established, and these grew tremendously in the decades after the war.[79] Moreover, China had cooperated with Ayutthaya in an attack on Burma the previous year.[80] Why was an alliance against Japan different?

Furthermore, if a Chinese hegemonic order accurately depicts early modern Southeast Asia, it is unclear why Ayutthaya's ruler and his envoys would have been aggrieved at being turned down. Why not welcome the invitation to free-ride on order maintenance? I argue that this episode is better explicated as a clash over relative social positions and the background knowledge that should define them. For China, being seen as needing the help of an "uncivilized" country in a war with Japan would have undermined its own claims of social supremacy. This was especially dangerous because this performance would be highly visible to audiences in the Confucian order. In communications with Korea, Chinese officials strategically framed the alliance offer as showing China's authority over subordinate countries, implying that China had ordered Ayutthaya to mobilize, when in fact it was Ayutthaya's initiative.[81] From Ayutthaya's perspective, within the mandala-based understanding of appropriate international behavior, China's refusal to treat it as an equal was unacceptable.

Siam's move to adopt European diplomatic practices in the nineteenth century can also be viewed as an effort to maintain social position across international settings. Siam's contact with Europe was not new. In 1681 and 1684, Siam sought to forge an alliance with France's Louis XIV against the Dutch, whose trade and colonial activities in maritime Southeast Asia were threatening Siam's interests. But in the mid-nineteenth century, with its putative peers India and China defeated by Europeans, Siam's elites grew "anxious about its position among modern nations" and engaged in efforts to adapt and appropriate European practices. This was "not simply a reaction to the colonial threat,"[82] but part of a strategy to claim social position and build symbolic capital in European social settings by performing Siam's modernity and level of civilization for the Western audience. The fact that Britain and France considered Siam a buffer state between their Asian colonies is thus irrelevant to my argument. Social positioning explicates the decisions of Siam's leaders, not whether their strategies succeeded, and would still apply in a counterfactual where Siam had been colonized.

77. Baker and Phongpaichit 2017, 100.
78. Ibid., 122–24.
79. Reid 1993, vol. 2, 18, 249; Yoshiteru and Bytheway 2011.
80. Wade 2000, 268.
81. Cho 2017, 95–96.
82. Loos 2006, 21–24; Thongchai 2000, 529.

For Siam, the European international order appeared to offer membership in a society of sovereign equals. This desire to position itself as a modern, "civilized" country saw it seeking to use European practices in its bilateral diplomacy with China, leading to another social positioning dispute. In 1854, Siam suspended diplomatic missions to China after its envoys were assaulted and robbed on their journey through China by Taiping Rebellion soldiers fighting to overthrow the Qing dynasty. Siam took this step amid heightened concern with its position in the global hierarchy. During previous embassy missions, Siam's envoys paid close attention to the relative prestige of the ceremonies for different countries, noting that European ambassadors were accorded much greater respect and dignity. John Bowring, the British governor of Hong Kong, also met Siam's envoys and encouraged them to take this chance to revise their mode of conducting diplomacy with Beijing.[83] When the Qing dynasty pressed for a resumption of embassy missions in 1862, Siam demurred. A royal proclamation of 1868 declared that the "shameful" practice was abolished because it had been wrongly construed as paying tribute to China and demonstrating Siam's subordination.[84]

However, China continued to push for an embassy mission, generating friction. Siam's rejection of one such request, in 1884, pointedly "expressed deep regret that China did not wish to promote friendship with Siam."[85] In 1886, a high-level meeting took place at Siam's legation in London aiming to forge a compromise. The physical setting itself reflected Siam's adoption of the European practice of stationing a resident ambassador abroad instead of sending envoys. Siam proposed a European-style treaty that would have placed China and Siam on a formally equal footing. The Qing counter-proposed an unequal treaty with extraterritorial privileges that would give it the same standing in Siam as the European empires had.[86] Negotiations stalled, and the Qing dynasty collapsed in 1912 before any conclusion was reached.

This social positioning struggle both tangibly manifested and contributed to changes in the institutions and practices of international politics at the end of the nineteenth century. By repudiating the previous mode of diplomacy, Siam aimed to stop performing practices that were now clearly seen as enacting a subordinate position.[87] Siam's proposal of a European-style treaty, with the implication of sovereign equality, was meant to confirm the equal relationship that Siam insisted had always existed. In response, the Qing sought to claim the social superiority to which they felt entitled, by establishing in Westphalian form the same relationship with Siam that European empires enjoyed.

Siam also sought to show that it measured up to European notions of civilization. Two royal tours of Europe by King Chulalongkorn, in 1897 and 1907, positively

83. Erika 2004, 35–37.
84. Ibid., 38; Thongchai 2000, 533.
85. Koizumi 2009, 56.
86. Ibid., 62.
87. Compare Pouliot 2016, 64.

affirmed Siam's social positioning (from Siam's perspective at least) through its king being treated as an equal by European royalty.[88] Siam also participated in World Fairs aiming to show off its technological progress, to the disappointment of American organizers in St. Louis in 1904, who desired a more culturally exotic exhibit.[89] Formal equality thus masked the imposition of a different, racially stigmatized inferiority in the Eurocentric world. For Siam, though, it also offered a more privileged position in comparison with other "Orientals," a dynamic similar to the experiences of Turkey and Japan.[90] And this contrasted with a Confucian order in which the conjunction of formal and social hierarchy meant that Siam could only ever be an inferior outsider. Thus the European international order had a logic of social stratification that appeared *relatively* less threatening to Siam's identity.

The social positioning efforts of Siam in the European order can also be compared to Vietnam's attempts to position itself in the Confucian order. Both faced the dilemma that performances asserting their membership in the prestigious social category of "civilized" countries reinforced background knowledge that also justified their relative inferiority within that group.

Vietnam in the Confucian Hierarchy

"Vietnam" in the early modern era refers to the polity of Dai Viet, which saw itself as the southern realm of the civilized world, understood as ranging, "however thinly, from Manchuria to the Mekong."[91] Thus, at least from the Vietnamese perspective, "Chinese" civilization is a misnomer; it was their civilization, too. The early Lê dynasty (1427 to mid-sixteenth century) and the Nguyen dynasty (1802–1887) both emphasized Confucian ideals of political legitimacy and social organization.[92] Social positioning relative to the Chinese dynasties was asserted with reference to the Confucian background knowledge and within that system of meanings.[93] Dai Viet's "southern" elites sought to demonstrate their cultural competence in interactions with the Chinese "northern" realm, and took umbrage at being categorized as uncivilized foreigners.[94] The reliance of Vietnam's own identity on Confucian background knowledge meant that social positioning inside the category of "civilized" countries was of primary importance. Vietnam tolerated China's assertions of superiority even while seeking to reduce and obfuscate that inequality.

Vietnam's rulers conceived of themselves as southern emperors of a distinct and independent realm within the core of civilization.[95] They consistently positioned

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88. Englehart 2010, 430–33.
89. Thongchai 2000, 541–42.
90. Suzuki 2009; Zarakol 2011, 105–108.
91. Woodside 1998, 196.
92. Whitmore 1984, 306.
93. Lieberman 2003, vol. 1, 341; Woodside 1971.
94. Kelley 2006, 317.
95. Kelley 2005.

themselves as equals to the Chinese emperor by using the same set of institutional and symbolic practices, such as imperial titles and dates based on the reign of Vietnam's emperor. After conquering Dai Viet's capital in 1407 and finding that southern records and documents all reflected this heretical notion of equality between the two emperors, the Ming condemned these claims of equality as "presumption and duplicity."[96] A long-standing narrative prevalent in Vietnam was that the North could not sustain its conquests of the South because they violated the natural order of Heaven.[97] With reasoning based in Confucian ontology, the distinctiveness of southern customs justified the realm having its own celestially ordained southern emperor. But from the Chinese perspective, these differences—such as short hair, chewing betel nuts, and cooking with fish sauce instead of soy sauce—were deviations that marked the southern realm as civilizationally deficient and an ethno-cultural other.[98]

Theories of international hierarchy as a rational bargain see the East Asian order as stabilized by an "explicit and unambiguous" hierarchy.[99] Confucian cultural affinity is argued to have provided reassurance for Vietnam against exploitation by the Chinese dynasties, who would provide public goods in return for adherence to the Confucian international order. In fact, the hierarchy was often deliberately muddied and made ambiguous. A clearly subordinate relationship was inconsistent with the southern assertions of two equal emperors, at the same time as equality was incompatible with the northern claim of supremacy. These conflicting, strategic interpretations show that the shared Confucian culture was not always a source of consensual and harmonious hierarchy but could also be a bone of contention between the South and North.

Claims of equality by another state which could competently perform the idioms of Confucian civilization were threatening to Chinese dynasties' efforts to perform relational superiority and their "exclusive right" to the position of celestial emperor.[100] The Ming dynasty could not ignore such claims as they could with Southeast Asian mandala polities, but had to rationalize and deflect them. With the definition of social reality at stake, Ming leaders applied structural coercion through their greater symbolic power over shared meanings, identities, and diplomatic practices.[101] Two key points emerge from this dynamic. First, symbolic dominance was possible even when the Chinese dynasty was unwilling to use force or suffered military defeats against Dai Viet. Second, the Confucian order's background knowledge created situations where enacting China's relative social positioning was a motivation for war.

96. Wang 1998, 316.
97. Lieberman 2003, vol. 1, 376.
98. Baldanza 2016, 108; Kelley 1998, 5.
99. Kang 2010, 101.
100. Baldanza 2016, 78.
101. Lee 2017, 80.

For China, recognition of Vietnam's emperor as a tributary ruler meant an obligation to support that subordinate. Performing social position as Confucian hegemon thus drew the Ming dynasty into Vietnamese struggles for the southern throne. In 1400, the Tran dynasty of Dai Viet was overthrown. A Tran claimant fled to China and convinced the Ming emperor to restore him as ruler, but when he returned to Dai Viet, the claimant and his escort of Ming soldiers were ambushed and killed. Faced with this affront, the Ming invaded and annexed Dai Viet in 1407. The Ming soon faced a rebellion led by Lê Loi, who proclaimed himself the first emperor of the Lê dynasty in 1427. Having defeated the Ming armies, forcing them to withdraw from Dai Viet's territory, Lê Loi sought to normalize relations. For its part, the Ming needed to end the war and rationalize Dai Viet's independence in a manner consistent with the Chinese emperor's social position as ruler of all under Heaven.

Lê had based his justification for rebellion and his legitimacy as ruler on Confucian political doctrines, to appeal to Dai Viet's societal elites.[102] But if Dai Viet wanted to place itself inside the core of civilization, as its self-image demanded, it had no choice but to accept a position of inferiority to China. Lê Loi thus sought and was granted recognition by the Ming dynasty as "king" of Dai Viet.[103] Formally, this positioned the South as a subordinate tributary to the Ming, and in Chinese records this was interpreted as "surrender" although Lê Loi had clearly prevailed on the battlefield. China had greater symbolic power to impose its definition of the relationship, and Dai Viet had to accept inequality to gain recognition of its social positioning as both independent and inside the "civilized" social category.

A century later, this question of whether Dai Viet was inside or outside civilization came up for review in Beijing. In 1536, the Chinese court debated whether to attack Dai Viet after Mac Dang Dung came to power, deposing the Lê dynasty. As with the events that led to the 1407 invasion, if Dai Viet was a subordinate kingdom that shared China's culture and civilization, performing the Ming dynasty's position as Confucian hegemon obligated it to restore the Lê regime. Although China's Jiajing Emperor (r. 1521–1567) preferred this course of action, many Chinese officials viewed a war as too costly and unlikely to succeed.[104] To make their case, these officials recast the relationship: they argued to the emperor that Dai Viet was actually a foreign and uncivilized realm where "usurping power is quite normal," and China thus had no obligations there.[105] Furthermore, they negotiated with Mac for a peace settlement they could present to the emperor (and the official record) as a victory. They "coached" Mac to compose a sufficiently humble letter of surrender, while issuing threats using "Confucian allusions and ideology."[106] In this way, Chinese officials engineered a compromise: Mac would be recognized as a

102. Baldanza 2016, 80–82.
103. Ibid., 70.
104. Ibid., 78–79.
105. Quoted in ibid., 104.
106. Ibid., 141, 147.

"pacification commissioner" and legitimate ruler of Dai Viet in a way that allowed the Ming to claim victory and perform its hegemonic supremacy.

However, this was a downgrade in rank, which the restored Lê rulers later attempted to reverse. The main sticking point was that the title of "pacification commissioner" was used to recognize frontier chieftains of non-Confucian polities. This was in line with the official logic that the Ming did not have to intervene in Dai Viet's internal power struggles to perform the social position of hegemon. But it amounted to denying Dai Viet's claim to be a civilized realm steeped in Confucian culture, something integral to the self-image of its societal elites. In 1597, Dai Viet contested this by sending one of its top Confucian scholars as an envoy, performatively asserting its civilized status to the Ming emperor and attempting to rhetorically coerce greater recognition from China.[107] Background knowledge hence defined not just the order but what were seen as rational and feasible strategies to contest it. Military calculations and outcomes were rationalized in terms that fit the background knowledge, and the use of both armed and diplomatic force followed the tacit understandings of political ontology, fundamental values, and social categorization.

Naming and Positioning Vietnam

Another illustration of social positioning dynamics came in the early nineteenth century, when the Nguyen dynasty was established in Vietnam. In contrast to the more pluralist Tay Son dynasty which they ousted, the Nguyen re-emphasized Confucian ideology to appeal to northern Vietnam's elites. At this time, ruling China as the Qing dynasty, the Manchu empire was using Confucian world ordering practices to conduct diplomacy with its eastern and southern neighbors. By inserting themselves into the Confucian order, they took advantage of existing practices to assert superiority in the region. This was consistent with the Manchu "heterogeneous contracting" strategy of ruling a culturally diverse empire according to each group's concepts of political legitimacy.[108]

Seeking formal recognition from the Qing dynasty in 1802, Vietnamese emperor Gia Long (r. 1802–1820) disputed the name for his country. He insisted that China stop referring to his kingdom as Annam, which connoted its history as a Chinese province, and sought the name Nam Viet instead, implying a more equal social position. Nam Viet was the name of a kingdom which in the second century BCE had ruled both Gia Long's existing territory and the Qing's southern territories. Interpreting this as a threatening signal, the Qing emperor ordered the tightening of border security in the south.[109] The name Viet Nam was a compromise produced by this contention over how the northern and southern emperors would recognize

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107. For a detailed analysis of this encounter see ibid., chap. 7.
108. Phillips 2018.
109. Baldanza 2016, 1–4.

each other and their respective realms. This instance of contentious negotiation of social positioning emphasizes that interests, as well as strategies to secure them, are defined by the background knowledge of the actors.

Vietnam also attempted to position itself as more civilized and prestigious than China through its superior embodiment of classical culture, and by stigmatizing the Qing's Manchu identity. Gia Long's successor, emperor Minh Mang (r. 1820–1839), admonished his court officials for dressing in Qing dynasty fashions and took to criticizing the Qing emperor's poetry, which he declared uncultured and unrefined.[110] He also ordered nine bronze cauldrons installed at his imperial palace in Hué, using a symbol of China's ancient emperors to assert that he was the true successor to their legacy.[111] These symbolic moves by Vietnam show how the Qing dynasty's dilemma of maintaining a distinct Manchu identity while performing as Confucian emperor, which was necessary to maintain legitimacy in China,[112] extended into its relations with polities within the Confucian order.[113] The strategies Vietnam pursued for social positioning also reinforce that it was the Confucian background knowledge that was hegemonic, not necessarily the rulers of China. For Vietnam to conceive of its identity through Confucian background knowledge was thus not necessarily the same as deferring to China's rulers.

Conflict with the Mandalas

Vietnam's moves to position itself in the Confucian order damaged its relations within the mandala order, sparking conflict with Siam for influence over Cambodia and Laos. In 1805, Vietnam forged a tributary relationship with Cambodia and attempted to promote Confucian civilization by destroying Buddhist temples in Cambodia. This policy led factions in the Cambodian nobility to seek military support from Siam. For Siam, this was an opportunity to reinstate the patronage relationship broken off by Cambodia's alignment with Vietnam.[114] Furthermore, by defending the Buddhist faith and thus demonstrating its power to uphold the mandala order's collective values, warfare was a form of "merit-making" that improved Siam's social position.[115]

The dispute was aggravated because to Siam, Vietnam's efforts to perform an identity that was staunchly Confucian appeared as a hostile move to claim superior social position. Minh Mạng's attempts to perform the role of Confucian emperor in diplomacy with Siam were perceived as irrational and arrogant, and stoked tensions. Minh

110. Yu 2009, 105–106.
111. Woodside 1998, 198.
112. Elliot 2001.
113. See Wang 2017 on the case of Korea.
114. Chandler 1972; Woodside 1998, 208–209. On their relations with Laos, see Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn 1998, 96–108.
115. Chutintaranond 1988, 52–53.

Mạng insisted that Siam address him in correspondence as "emperor" and its own ruler as "Buddhist king." This prompted Siam's King Nangklao (Rama III, r. 1824–1851) to remark to his court that Vietnam was being even more demanding than China, adding, "I think the Vietnamese are crazy as can be."[116] During a series of militarized disputes in 1833, Nangklao again assessed that Minh Mạng was a "tyrant" who "wants to raise himself up to be superior. What kind of good relations is that?"[117] This perceived hostility escalated tensions, and when a rebellion broke out within Vietnam that year, Siam seized the opportunity not only to reassert its influence over Cambodia but also to invade Vietnam.[118] The result was a destructive fourteen-year war between Siam and Vietnam (1833–1847).

Relations remained tense even after the war, and there was no diplomatic contact until 1879, after Vietnam had become a French protectorate. In the context of European imperialism, Siam was acutely conscious that issues of social positioning were now also charged with implications for sovereignty. This time, the fact that Vietnam used the same Confucian symbolism as China was an opportunity for Siam to prove to Europeans that its relationship with both countries had always been as equals.[119] The question of what titles to use in correspondence was complicated by considerations about the hierarchical meanings they might have when translated. Although the highest title for a ruler in the mandala world translated as "king," in European languages this implies a lower rank than a Confucian "emperor," the title both Vietnamese and Chinese rulers claimed. The solution was to phonetically transcribe, rather than translate, the titles (like Vietnam's *hoang te* and Siam's *somdet phra chao*), allowing them to "deliberately evade" questions of formal hierarchy while maintaining protocol.[120] Agonizing over titles, translation, and what ceremonies to hold for the exchange of diplomatic letters was not mere vanity. Recognition by European powers hinged on demonstrating the country's historical sovereignty and absence of formally subordinate relations with other states. As with its attempt to establish Westphalian relations with China, examined earlier, Siam was acutely aware that the relationship it performed with Vietnam was being watched by a wider audience and could have implications for positioning in the European international order.

Rethinking Hierarchies, Hegemony, and International Orders

In this section I offer my argument against standard explanations for the creation and contestation of international orders. These are derived from two major theories of international orders, which see them as products of hegemonic ordering or

116. Eiland 1989, 119.
117. Ibid., 130.
118. Kathirithamby-Wells 1999, 584–86; Rungswasdisab 1995, 65–72.
119. Koizumi 2016, 151–52.
120. Ibid., 149.

hierarchical authority established through rational bargaining. I then discuss how social positioning relates to cultural theories of international orders. My claim is that social positioning subsumes other explanations and is a necessary part of understanding action, not that it is always the most important. Furthermore, my argument suggests that military or economic advantage is not pursued for its own sake but ultimately serves interests in performing and securing identities.

Hegemonic order theories attribute international order contestation primarily to hegemonic decline. In power transition theory, challenges to international order occur when changes in relative power result in a mismatch between the order's hierarchy of prestige and the material distribution of power.[121] Since the hegemon's material advantage is what maintains the order, which is assumed to be biased toward the incumbent hegemon's interests, these theories expect the order to be challenged when the hegemon weakens.

This may seem to fit the decline of the Qing dynasty and Siam's move into the European order. But the key problem is that it does not explain the difference between Vietnam's and Siam's responses to the encroachment of European powers and China's hegemonic decline. Structural realism argues that revisionism follows from one's position in the material hierarchy. If so, then actors in similar secondary state positions like Siam and Vietnam should have responded similarly to China's decline in the late nineteenth century. But while Siam seized the opportunity to break off relations based in the Confucian order, Vietnam continued attempting to use Confucian practices of diplomacy with Siam in 1879. Not only did this take place under the noses of its French colonizers, it also came well after the point when China's decline should have been obvious. The Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) devastated China—even a conservative estimate of 20 million deaths makes it the deadliest civil war in history—and the Second Opium War resulted in Beijing being occupied by British and French forces, who destroyed the emperor's Summer Palace in 1860. Why did Siam get the message but not Vietnam?

Social positioning resolves this puzzle by focusing on the political implications of Vietnam's social positioning being tied to the Confucian order. Vietnam's leaders tried to salvage their investment in a social order structured by Confucian background knowledge, where they could claim a prestigious position as part of the core of civilization. In contrast, Siam's social positioning did not rely on symbolic capital specific to the Confucian social context. More, the European order was politically useful for the interests of Siam's elites, who were "sometimes in conscious competition with encroaching imperial powers" in using European imperial practices.[122] Along with Westphalian concepts of sovereignty, these facilitated a political project of centralizing a highly disaggregated mandala polity and extending Siam's territory southward to the Malay Peninsula.

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121. Gilpin 1981, 33.
122. Loos 2006, 3.

Another approach has been to theorize international orders as hierarchies formed through tacit bargains. In this view, more powerful actors make bargains to provide public goods for subordinate states in exchange for their deference and compliance with the rules set down by the dominant actor. Hierarchy is sustained as long as the trade-off continues to be seen as mutually beneficial.[123] This implies that contestation by subordinate actors occurs because the hegemon has overstepped the bargain, breaking the social contract.[124] In his influential work on early modern East Asia, David Kang uses this approach to argue that the dynasties of China made credible commitments "not to exploit secondary states that accepted its authority."[125] Shared values and culture are also said to have driven acceptance of Chinese superiority.[126] However, there are both empirical and conceptual problems in applying this bargained-hierarchy theory of international orders to early modern Southeast Asia.

Empirically, the notion that Siam and other states accepted China's hierarchic authority relies on accepting imperial China's portrayal of its foreign relations as the final word. In fact, Siam's rulers generally saw an economic interest in maintaining friendly relations, but their identity conception precluded accepting a subordinate social position. The mandala order as a coherent realm of social relations independent of the Confucian order is further evidence that such an authority relationship likely did not exist. But even allowing that Siam may have accorded some measure of deference to the Chinese dynasties, in the late nineteenth century we again run into the problem that Siam and Vietnam should have reacted in the same way to the evident decline of China's relative power, yet they reacted in opposite ways.

Conceptually, treating hierarchy as the opposite of anarchy is also problematic because it overlooks the inequalities of power and position that are the defining feature of hierarchy. Relative position and unequal power should be central to hierarchy studies. But they are ignored in theories that read consent and authority into an absence of revolt, and assume the existence of choices and alternatives that less powerful agents do not have. Siam and Vietnam did not consent to subordination, but it was baked into the practices they adopted to claim position in the European and Confucian international orders. Indeed, their efforts to challenge subordination by trying to show their competence and excellence in the practices of the respective orders had the effect of reinforcing the background knowledge by which they were judged as inferior. Most significantly, this included the ethnic and cultural discrimination embedded in dominant understandings of what it meant to be "civilized," whether in Eurocentric or Sinocentric terms.

123. Ikenberry 2011, 70–75; Lake 2009, 10–14.
124. Lake 2009, 32.
125. Kang 2010, 2.
126. Zhang and Buzan 2012, 23–26.

The dyadic focus of social contract models of international hierarchy also fails to capture how a wider audience sees and reacts to actors' performances on the social stage of international politics. An interaction between two international actors can be observed by others and have implications for their relations with third parties, and their position in the wider social context. It does not take place in isolation from wider social ties and structures. Accounting for the wider context is needed to make sense of why Vietnam acquiesced to China's refusals to upgrade its formal ranking, whereas Siam resented being treated as an inferior and in the nineteenth century became even more insistent about its equal positioning.

Shared culture is often theorized as integral to international orders. But only by unpacking culture can we specify what influence it might actually have on international orders and their contestation. Typically, culture is argued to account for cooperation and peace in the Confucian order, contrasted with the aggression and violence China inflicted on those deemed to be barbarian threats.[127] However, cultural difference does not explain Siam's long resistance to Confucian influence along with its strategic but willing adoption of Eurocentric modernity. The root of this problem is an outdated essentialist concept of cultures as self-contained wholes, impervious to mixing, and deeply constitutive of agents' worldviews.[128] Culture is one possible source of background knowledge. But social positioning, as a theory oriented toward enacted practices, is needed to make sense of culture's politicized interpretation and influence on relations and performances, and through them the constitution of international orders. The concept of social positioning thus provides a theoretical framework that helps lay out in more concrete and systematic terms how culture might be reflected in the content of background knowledge of political ontologies, collective purposes, and social categorization.

Conclusion

States seek to perform their identities on the world stage, and this requires them to position themselves in specific ways relative to others and within international social domains. Thus, they are driven to contest or reinforce international orders, and the background knowledge that constitutes and structures them, in ways that facilitate their social positioning efforts. International orders are both reinforced and challenged as a result of these struggles for social positions that support the performance of identity. To flesh out these arguments, in this article I have reinterpreted existing views of Vietnam in the Confucian order while exploring the interactions of Siam and Southeast Asia's mandalas with Confucian polities.

Given the vast time period covered, this treatment of the mandala order in Southeast Asia is necessarily partial and simplistic. The fact that this study is

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127. Johnston 1998; Kelly 2012.
128. Reus-Smit 2018, 7.

based on secondary and translated sources in English highlights that early modern Southeast Asia is fruitful ground for further research going beyond this limited view. This might address events I do not examine, such as the Qing invasion of Vietnam during the eighteenth-century Tay Son period. The influence of Islam on Asia's historical international orders is another issue left out here. Politicized ambiguities like those highlighted here may also be seen in the contentious interpretation of whether Malay kingdoms historically accepted vassalage to Siam. Southeast Asian history has much more to offer for developing theories of international politics, particularly amid calls for a more global IR.[129]

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129. Acharya and Buzan 2019, 309–16.

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