

JI-YOUNG LEE:

China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination.

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Some fifteen years ago I submitted an article for publication concerning the implications of the tributary (or tribute) system of foreign relations in the Sino-Japanese peace talks held in the midst of Japan's invasion of Korea in the 1590s. One of the peer reviewers smugly proclaimed that the tribute system was dead as a field of inquiry, having long been discredited as a mere fiction. Fortunately, the other peer reviewer, as well as the journal's editor, did not find the subject so passé and they recommended publication. The ensuing years have witnessed the emergence of a veritable cottage industry of works on the supposedly moribund tribute system, many of them engagingly combining the fields of international relations, political science, and history. The present work continues this trend and adds a new spin of sorts, by focusing not on the hegemonic power, China, but rather on China's tributary neighbours, most notably Korea and Japan. The author's stated purpose is to explore the implications of China's rise in light of its historical hegemonic role in East Asia. In particular she argues that, "neighboring actors' pursuit of political legitimation in domestic power struggles was at the heart of Chinese hegemony and variations in its receptivity" (p. 2).

Like many other recent authors such as David Kang, Feng Huiyun and Yuan-kang Wang, Lee endeavours to use China's past to offer some predictions about current and future behaviours, while also challenging dominant theoretical models in international relations, the vast majority of which are derived from European or American experiences. But she also challenges the conclusions of some of her predecessors in the field. Lee contends that current arguments positing that China will look to its tributary past to shape future actions are grounded in the "mistaken belief that the tribute system was a tool for projecting power and culture" (pp. 2–3), and highlights the fact that other states were not passive recipients of Chinese cultural and political domination. Indeed, the crux of her argument is that domestic politics were in fact the key variable in determining the receptivity of neighbouring states to China's hegemonic tributary claims. When Chinese legitimation served domestic political goals, its neighbours were more likely to bow to China's demands and accept symbolic subordination; when the domestic environment favoured aggressive action or defiance, the smaller states were more likely to reject China's claims of universal hegemony. As Lee puts it, "the kind of hegemonic power imperial China exercised in early modern Asia did not always lead China to determine international outcomes; what it did was regulate the range of international choices that other actors could make as a result of domestic consequences" (p. 13). In extreme cases, such as during the ascendancy of Toyotomi Hideyoshi in Japan in the 1580s–90s, this could lead to outright war with China.

In the process she builds upon a considerable body of recent and classic works in history and international relations, while also drawing upon primary sources, most significantly the diaries of envoys between China and its neighbours. She believes that these sources, along with the official histories, imperial proclamations and diplomatic correspondence, offer the best evidence for tributary relations as ongoing and evolving "practices" rather than a concrete system of foreign relations. The various actors understood the basic significance of the practices while also recognizing

their inherent malleability. She concludes that understanding the tribute system is the key to understanding early modern East Asian international relations, but argues that previous scholars have got things wrong by tending to perceive it primarily as a projection of Chinese power. Thus, she contends, her position offers a key corrective by noting that, contrary to most scholars, the international environment in early modern East Asia was characterized by relatively stable hierarchy generated by hegemonic authority, whereas domestic politics moved through a spectrum that extended from hierarchy to anarchy with the latter often prevailing (p. 169). This is a key insight and follows the lead of David Kang in particular in suggesting alternative frameworks for understanding historical international relations and applying them to contemporary contexts.

However, for all the book's strengths, there are a few shortcomings. Though they do not necessarily detract from the overall argument, there are numerous errors in Romanizing Chinese names, terms, and phrases. In some cases terms are Romanized in other languages, like Japanese, but this is not explained. At times, historical sources are misidentified such as when Lee refers to the *Mingshi* and the *Qingshi gao* as the *Veritable Records* of the Ming and Qing dynasties respectively. She also has a tendency to misrepresent or oversimplify the arguments of others to make her own seem more original, as when she contends that the existing argument concerning the Ming intervention in Korea in 1592 is that it was due primarily to a sense of tributary obligation (p. 133). While scholars, including myself, have certainly noted this as a factor, I do not know of a single source that argues it was the main factor, nor is that the scholarly consensus. In fact, the work as a whole connects dots provided by previous scholars more than it offers entirely new insights.

Nonetheless, informed by international relations theory and buttressed by historical examples culled from primary and secondary sources, this is a highly readable book that continues to expand our understanding of the tribute system in East Asia and its implications for modern foreign relations in the region. It is recommended reading for scholars in the fields of international relations, history, and political science, as well as informed general audiences. It is also accessible enough to be used in the classroom, though certain sections, especially chapter 2, tend to swamp the reader in names and theoretical debates that will be of more interest to specialists than more general readers.

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BINBIN YANG:

Heroines of the Qing: Exemplary Women Tell Their Stories.

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On page 1, Yang sets out her goal as follows: "This book carves out a new terrain of research in the discourse of female exemplarity through a major shift in focus, namely, from a predominantly male-authored biographical tradition to women's autobiographical practices uncovered from the newly available corpus of their writings". Yang does an excellent job in fulfilling her promise, and the book is refreshing in several respects.