East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute

Thomas Dolan
David C. Kang examines East Asia during a time when relations between centers of power were well established but before the Westphalian concepts of “states” and “countries” were established. Kang presents a detailed study of the politics and history of the region that challenges the Eurocentric assumptions so often accepted by teachers and students in the West; how power was exerted and trade was conducted between China, Korea, Japan, Việt Nam, and other regions; and the various nomadic cultures in the middle of the second millennia (itself a Western concept). By focusing on the period encompassed by the Ming and Qing dynasties up to the Opium Wars, Kang limits his book to that period of “early modern China” before the large-scale undermining of the power structure in East Asia brought about by European, Japanese, and American intrusions.

Kang’s detailed and well-researched book about East Asia during this time shows that although conflicts did occur, and in some cases on scales which dwarfed the size of European wars of the time, those conflicts were rare, and in many cases the participants acted not to undermine Chinese power but to support it. The result was a political system that generally minimized inter-state conflict and dealt with other concerns such as piracy, looting by groups of smaller-than-state size, and showed a general lack of concern with some geographic regions, which are now seen as sources of conflict.
This book focuses on the regions of China, Japan, Korea, and Annam/Viet Nam because they are the ones that most reflected Chinese cultural and diplomatic practices. Other areas in East and Southeast Asia were also part of the tribute and trade regimes of the time and are included in the detailed statistics on trade levels (as are the Malayans, Javanese, Moors, English, and Portuguese), but because of their proximity to China, Japan, Korea and Viet Nam are given the most detailed coverage.

One early point Kang makes is that the Chinese domination of East Asia was not one of colonization. While there were regular diplomatic exchange missions, the only imposition made on tribute countries was an expectation of reciprocity not an imposition of language, clothing, etc. One major exception was renaming what had been Annam after 1802; in a delightful anecdote, Kang provides a quote from Chinese historian John E. Wills, who explained that while the new leader in what had been Annam wanted to call the region Nam Viet, the Qing government objected because that term in Chinese conflicted with a Chinese reference to a border region, so the name was changed to Viet Nam. This is actually quite similar to the objections Greece made in 1991 over the naming of the Republic of Macedonia (formed after the breakup of Yugoslavia) because of the similarity with the region formerly known as Macedonia and the modern Greek state by the same name.

In discussing warfare in East Asia during the period encompassed in the book, Kang points out that European claims of a “Long Peace” (attributed to John Lewis Gaddis) in the post-World War II era pale in contrast with the much less frequent conflicts in East Asia. The only major interstate conflict was the Imjin War (Japan’s invasions of Korea, with goals of conquering China, led by Hideyoshi Toyotomi in 1592–93 and 1597–98). While other small-scale conflicts did occur, these generally dealt with nomadic groups rather than organized states or governments.

Kang’s book leads to an interesting discussion on the differences between “frontiers” and “borders,” which reinforces his thesis. Borders in many cases are easy to recognize (coastlines, rivers, mountain ranges), and such demarcations can provide limitations on territorial claims. They do not stop diffusions of belief systems; Confucianism and Buddhism were not limited by them. Nevertheless, borders are tangible and defensible.

Frontiers, on the other hand, only provide a distinction between “us” and “them,” between civilization and barbarians. Kang cites Yale historian Peter Perdue’s description of the westward expansion of the US as a comparison. In discussing frontiers, Kang brings his story of East Asian politics into the present time by applying the concept of frontiers to modern maritime claims.

The historic record makes little reference to territorial claims of unpopulated collections of rock such as Dokdo/Taeshima (the Korean and Japanese names for the same island), the Senkaku/Daiyu, or the Spratley/Paracel Islands. A few major islands (Tsushima, for example) were large enough to support populations and thus were worth controlling but only in the modern era, with the recognition of resources like oil, guano, and fishing rights, are the uninhabited islands seen as territory needing control.

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