

East Asia Before the West

Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute

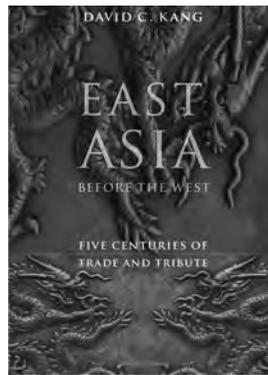
BY DAVID C. KANG

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Reviewed by Thomas P. 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 millennium (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.



A basic example is that of the actions of “countries” in international conflict. European history of this period is that of repeated exertions of control by the great powers, countered by alliances of those who would be ruled; this resulted in the “balance of power” system that prevented a single power from long-term dominance. The result of this is centuries of warfare in Europe. This is generally contrasted (by students of Asian history and politics) by an understanding of the “tribute system” by which China was the accepted hegemon in East Asia.

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.

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This book focuses on the regions of China, Japan, Korea, and Annam/Việt 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 Malaysians, Javanese, Moors, English, and Portuguese), but because of their proximity to China, Japan, Korea and Việt 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 China 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 Việt 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 Hideoshi 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/Daiuyo, 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.

Kang concludes by pointing out that history is not simply a recording of past events; how those events are understood determines present actions. East Asians do not learn history the way Westerners do; the Western view of history in East Asia is often seen as the bringing of “modernity” to a backward region, while the East Asian view is one of interference in long-standing traditions that have interfered with long-standing peace. Frequent, major wars and global conflict possibilities in East Asia did not become prominent until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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East Asian stability for centuries before the arrival of Western merchants and missionaries. While explaining the complex interactions of the political entities of the fourteenth through nineteenth centuries, Kang also points out why an understanding of this period is necessary to understand what the future holds for the modern successors of Asian countries.

East Asia Before the West is also well written. Professor Kang’s accessible prose makes this book potentially useful for a wide variety of classes, including senior high school and beginning college and university survey courses. ■

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