

# History and China's Rise:

## Understanding Changes in International Order

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China's rise today raises questions about the future of the liberal international order. This paper goes back to Chinese history to examine changes in international order. How does an international order change from one type to another? In the last four hundred years, there were two changes in international order in East Asia. The first was the Ming-Qing transition (1616-1683) that catapulted the Manchu Qing dynasty to regional hegemony. The second change was the transformation of the hierarchical tributary order into the Westphalian order after the Opium War (1839-42). The Ming-Qing transition changed system leadership from Ming China to the Qing rulers, but the tributary rules of the game remained in force, albeit with Qing modifications. In contrast, the Westphalian transformation not only ended Qing hegemony but also drastically revamped the rules of the game in the East Asian international system. This paper analyzes these two changes in international order, arguing that power shift holds the key to system transformation in international relations. An international order requires material power for sustenance. When the distribution of power shifts away from the existing hegemon, a new order will emerge to reflect the new reality of power. The final part of the paper will discuss the implications of China's rise for understanding changes in the liberal international order today.

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This article examines the fundamental questions about international order. How does an international order emerge? How is it maintained? And how does it change from one type to another? The issue of international order is becoming increasingly important as China rises in power. Both scholars and policymakers are asking whether a new international order is emerging and whether the current liberal order can survive the China challenge. The existing discussion, however, is grounded in the experience of international order that emerged in Europe after the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 as well as in the liberal order championed by Britain and the United States. As informative as it may be, the European experience is inadequate for East Asia, which has had a separate historical experience of international order rooted in the tribute system. Unlike Europe, where there was a rough balance of power without a hegemon, international order in historical East Asia was typically dominated by a single state. Also unlike Europe, where the concept of Westphalian sovereignty was embedded in the system, the East Asian system operated without the notion of sovereignty. Thus, the international order of historical East Asia was qualitatively different from its European counterpart, but the existing research has not taken East Asia on its own terms, nor has it attempted to develop theoretical insights to broaden our understanding of how different international orders operate.

In the last four hundred years, there have been two changes in international order in East Asia. The first was the Ming-Qing power transition (1616-1683) that catapulted the Manchu Qing dynasty to regional hegemony. The second change was the transformation of the Confucian tributary order into the Westphalian order after the Opium War (1839-42). The Ming-Qing transition changed system leadership from Ming

China to the Qing rulers, but the tributary order persisted, albeit with Qing modifications. In contrast, the Westphalian transformation not only ended Qing hegemony but also drastically revamped the international order in East Asia. Confucian hierarchy gave way to sovereign equality as the key governing principle of the new international order. The Westphalian system of sovereign states has continued to be the dominant form of interactions between political units today.

These two cases can be particularly informative as we contemplate the future of the liberal international order. The Ming-Qing transition demonstrates that the Confucian tributary order was so entrenched that even the new system leader did not attempt to replace it with a different type of order. Instead, it kept tributary rules and modified the order to better serve its interests. But the Westphalian transition not only changed system leadership from the Qing to Western powers but also overturned the tributary order that had dominated East Asia for two thousand years. The nature and character of order were transformed. What explains the continuity of the tributary order and what explains its change?

I argue that power is the foundation of international order. The creation and maintenance of order requires the support of power from the preponderant state or a group of powerful states in the system. Changes in international order are driven by power shift. When the distribution of power shifts away from the current system leader, a new order will emerge to reflect the new reality of power. However, the character of the international order is historically contingent and reflects the values held by the preponderant state or the group of powerful states.

The next section presents a theory of international order that emphasizes the critical role of power in the creation, maintenance, and change of order. I then examine the tributary order of East Asia and use the theoretical framework to analyze the power transition between the Ming dynasty and the Qing dynasty as well as the Westphalian transformation of the tributary order. Finally, I discuss the implications of this research for understanding the China challenge to the liberal international order.

## International Order

Although international politics is characterized by anarchy, there exists some semblance of order that guides interactions between states. What is an international order? Definitions abound, but most emphasize the central role of rules underlying an international order. English School scholar Hedley Bull defines international order as “a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states, or international society,” which is “bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another and share in the working of common institutions.”<sup>1</sup> Liberal scholars also highlight the central role of rules in an international order. “An international order,” writes John Ikenberry, “is a political formation in which settled rules and arrangements exist between states to guide their interactions.”<sup>2</sup> Realist scholar Robert Gilpin associates international order with governance of the system, which entails “the international distribution of power, the hierarchy of prestige, and the rules and rights embodied in the system.”<sup>3</sup> In these definitions, the “rules of the game” give rise to an international order

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<sup>1</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 8, 13.

<sup>2</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 36.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 42. In Gilpin’s formulation, order is purposive and serves hegemonic interests. In contrast, Waltzian realists see

and serve as the “governing” arrangements among a group of states in the absence of a central government above them.<sup>4</sup>

Based on the existing literature, I define international order as a constellation of institutions that structure and govern interactions between political units in the system. Institutions are a set of rules that prescribes acceptable forms of behavior among states and proscribes unacceptable ones.<sup>5</sup>

This definition encapsulates three characteristics of international order. First, order is rules-based. These rules can be formal, as codified in international law, treaties, agreements, or organizations, or they may be informal, as derived from custom and practice. Second, these rules regulate how political units interact with each other. They stipulate acceptable kinds of behavior and forbid unacceptable ones. Third, rules are constitutive of order but are not synonymous with it. The aggregate operation of these rules give rise to an order, which is a property of the system.

Order and governance of the system are closely related. Governance requires a set of rules to regulate the behaviors of political actors, material capabilities to enforce those

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order as an unintended consequence of states pursuing power in an anarchic world. Order is manifested as recurrent formations of balances of power, which are spontaneous and automatic. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, M.A.: Addison-Wesley, 1978). Along the same line, John Mearsheimer views international order as “mainly a by-product of the self-interested behavior of the system’s great powers.” John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 49. On the difference between purposive and unintended order, see Randall L. Schweller, “The Problem of International Order Revisited: A Review Essay,” *International Security* 26, no. 1 (2001): 161-186.

<sup>4</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 23.

<sup>5</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994/95): 5-49 at 8.

rules, and a willingness to exercise power to deter noncompliance or compel compliance.<sup>6</sup>

How is an international order created? How is it maintained? And how is it transformed? Robert Gilpin's *War and Change in World Politics* provides a good starting point to examine these questions.<sup>7</sup> In keeping with the realist tradition, I argue that international order is driven by the distribution of power in the system. Power refers to the material capabilities of political actors. Power can help create, mold, and sustain rules that are accepted by lesser states.<sup>8</sup> According to Gilpin, the distribution of power "determines who governs the international system and whose interests are principally promoted by the functioning of the system."<sup>9</sup> The material capabilities of powerful states are the building blocks of international order, enabling them to establish and enforce rules and rights that influence state behaviors in the system. By regulating how political units interact with each other, the dominant states exercise control over the functioning of the system to secure and advance their self-interests. These rules of the game disproportionately serve the interests of powerful states and help consolidate their position in the system.<sup>10</sup> Christopher Layne writes, "A hegemon acts self-interestedly to create a stable international order that will safeguard its security and its economic and

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<sup>6</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 28-38.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. For an extension of Gilpin, see G. John Ikenberry, ed. *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 171, 181.

<sup>9</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 29.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, in a study of U.S. hegemony, Carla Norrlof notes that far from being altruistic in providing international public goods, the United States "reaps a higher benefit than other states" and "gets more back than it puts in." Carla Norrlof, *America's Global Advantage: US Hegemony and International Cooperation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

ideological interests.”<sup>11</sup> Hegemonic power is agenda-setting power, allowing the dominant state to shape the political environment and limit the range of choices for lesser political actors. Thus, as Gilpin summarizes, “the primary foundation of rights and rules is in the power and interests of the dominant groups or states in a social system.”<sup>12</sup> Great powers play by the rules only when doing so serves their interests. When it does not, they will ignore or change the rules.

Order is maintained through both the exercise of power and the hierarchy of prestige among political actors. First, power is necessary to sustain international order. Power is the anchor of order. Without the support of power, order will not stable. Having a preponderance of material resources gives the hegemon a range of tools to offer both positive and negative incentives to induce others to cooperate and participate in the order. It can reward cooperative behaviors and punish uncooperative ones. Second, in addition to material power, Gilpin highlights the importance of the hierarchy of prestige in sustaining an international order. Prestige is the intangible dimension of power. It is the “reputation for power” and the “perceptions of other states with respect to a state’s capacities and its ability and willingness to exercise its power.”<sup>13</sup> The concept is similar to authority in a domestic society, which refers to the right to rule.<sup>14</sup> A country’s prestige originates from its economic and military capabilities. The dominant state acquired prestige “primarily through successful use of power, and especially through victory in

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Gilpin posits a distinction between prestige and authority, with the former applying to international politics and the latter to domestic politics. But such a distinction is conceptually unnecessary. A country can still have both prestige and authority in international politics. On authority, see David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009).

war.”<sup>15</sup> Having the reputation for power means that the dominant state can usually get what it wants without having to actually use its power. The weaker, aware of the futility of resistance, often yields to the stronger. Thus, the maintenance of an international order is achieved primarily through the hierarchy of prestige in the system, with the possibility of coercion held in reserve. Importantly, prestige is derived from military and economic power and ultimately rests on material capabilities.

To minimize resistance, the hegemon often promotes an ideology that justifies its domination over other actors.<sup>16</sup> Such an ideology advances the legitimacy of hegemonic rule, making it palatable to lesser actors. This ideology usually takes the form of an argument that the hegemon’s continued dominance and the international order it has created will benefit all states in the system by providing security, stability, and prosperity. The United States, for instance, promotes an ideology of free trade, democracy, and liberty. Official U.S. policy statements are often couched in the language of protecting freedom and justice, spreading democratic values, and promoting free trade as the foundation of the U.S. national security strategy.<sup>17</sup> U.S. officials and commentators forcefully argue that the American-led order benefits other states in the system. As Samuel Huntington describes, “A world without U.S. primacy will be a world with more violence and disorder.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>17</sup> For example, the White House argues in the 2002 U.S. *National Security Strategy* that it plans to create “a balance of power that favors freedom.” Similarly, the Pentagon’s *Quadrennial Defense Review* of 2001 makes the point that America’s global leadership “contributes directly to global peace” and that “precluding hostile domination of critical areas” is one of the enduring U.S. interests. George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: White House, Sept. 2002); Donald H. Rumsfeld, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington: Department of Defense, Sept. 30, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “Why International Primacy Matters,” *International Security* 17, no. 4 (Spring 1993): 68-83 at 83.

Why do lesser political actors comply with an international order that is biased against them? First, power asymmetry makes it especially risky for lesser units to challenge the dominant state. Weaker units do not have the capabilities to resist the international order imposed by the dominant state. The expected benefits of compliance outweigh the expected costs of resistance. Second, lesser actors comply with the order because the hegemon provides the public goods of security and economic opportunities in the system.<sup>19</sup> The international order created by the hegemon is the next best alternative to a world in which lesser units may be subject to attacks. The provision of public goods gives lesser actors a vested interest in supporting the order. In the absence of viable alternatives, they accept these rules of the game centered on the hegemon.

Changes in international order are brought on by changes in distribution of power. As power anchors international order, when the balance of power shifts away from the hegemon to another state, the international order will change as well. Gilpin attributes the source of the change to the law of uneven growth. Countries grow at different rates; technology and production tend to diffuse across countries over time. Differential growth results in a redistribution of power in the system. When the distribution of power underpinning the old order has eroded, a “disequilibrium” appears. In this disequilibrium, the power of the rising state has grown incommensurate with the hierarchy of prestige in the system as well as with the existing rules that continue to benefit the old hegemon. Dissatisfied with the old order, the rising state will attempt to change the order now that it

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<sup>19</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 30; Michael Mastanduno, "System Maker and Privilege Taker: U.S. Power and the International Political Economy," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009): 121-154.

has the capabilities to do so. Its increase in power reduces the costs of changing the order and therefore raises its net benefits of doing so. While not ruling out peaceful change, Gilpin asserts that “the principal mechanism of change throughout history has been war or what we shall call hegemonic war (i.e., a war that determines which state or states will be dominant and will govern the system).”<sup>20</sup> The post-war settlement reorders the system to reflect the latest distribution of power and determines whose interests will be primarily served by the new international order. A new equilibrium emerges, thus completing the cycle of change.

Gilpin pinpoints the paramount role of power in building and sustaining international order. However, he does not discuss the character of order that emerges after the hegemonic war, nor does he consider the type of rules that the new system leader adopts to serve its interests. In East Asian history, for instance, Gilpin’s theory does not account for the change in the character of order from tributary hierarchy to Westphalian equality. Why do the structures of governance vary across time and space?

I argue that the nature and character of order are historically contingent and reflects the governing ideology of the dominant state. As Charles Kupchan points out, the nature of a given international order originates from “packages of ideas and rules” that provide order within the political system of the dominant state.<sup>21</sup> The development of these values and ideas is historically contingent and follows the sociopolitical trajectories of the dominant state. Material capabilities enable the strong to project their values and

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<sup>20</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, "The Normative Foundations of Hegemony and the Coming Challenge to Pax Americana," *Security Studies* 23, no. 2 (2014): 219-257. Although Kupchan’s argument is constructivist, he emphasizes the close-knit nature of power and ideas: “Constructivist scholars often distance themselves too far from materialist explanations, failing to appreciate that ideational and normative preferences are often derivative of materialist incentives and socioeconomic trajectories” (p. 222, n. 7).

ideas unto the international order. The architecture of order that emerges in a particular system is path dependent. I now turn to the tributary order of historical East Asia.

### The Tributary Order

International relations in East Asian history was characterized by the tributary order. What is remarkable about this order is its durability: the tributary rules of the game governed interactions among political entities for millenniums. Under the tribute system, tributary polities periodically sent embassies to pay tribute to the Chinese emperor. In court meetings, their envoys performed certain rituals, including the full kowtow (kneeling three times, each time tapping their head to the ground for another three times) to symbolize their submission to the Chinese emperor and to accept their inferior status. When a new ruler assumed power in a tributary polity, the individual had to obtain an imperial patent of appointment from the Chinese emperor in a process known as ‘investiture.’ The legitimacy of rulers of tributary polities came from China. For tributaries, Chinese recognition and investiture had the effect of enhancing the legitimacy of the local rulers, a process similar to diplomatic recognition of states today.<sup>22</sup>

There is a widespread notion that hierarchy was the ordering principle of the tributary order.<sup>23</sup> But it is important to recognize that the principle of hierarchy applies only to lesser polities’ bilateral relations with China. Among the tributary polities, political relations was conducted on an equal footing. For instance, Imperial China’s relations with Korea and Vietnam was hierarchical, but Korea-Vietnam relations was based on the principle of equality. In the idealized tributary order, China sits at the top of

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<sup>22</sup> John K. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842-1854* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1953), 30.

<sup>23</sup> David Kang?

the hierarchical international order, with the tributary polities spread out equally among themselves. Unlike the Westphalian order, there was no “first among equals” in the East Asian tributary order.

The character of East Asia’s tributary order was rooted in Imperial China’s dominant ideology of Confucianism. John K. Fairbank considered the tribute system as an outgrowth of Confucian thinking. Confucianism envisions a hierarchic political and social order within the state, characterized by ritual and harmony. This hierarchic and nonegalitarian domestic order was then projected onto the international order.<sup>24</sup> Chinese emperors used the coming of tribute-paying embassies to justify their rule and to enhance their legitimacy. Upon assuming the throne, the first foreign policy task for Chinese emperors was to get neighboring polities to send a tributary mission to China. In Confucian thinking, the influx of tribute-paying foreign envoys strengthened the legitimacy of Chinese emperor because the tribute symbolized his status as the accepted ruler of all-under-Heaven (*tianxia*).

Paying tribute to a suzerain is not unique to historical Asia; polities in Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere engaged in tribute-paying activities in the past. What distinguished the Chinese tribute system from the rest was an elaborate set of rules, derived from Confucianism, which governed the interactions between Asian polities and China. Tributary institutions, protocols, and rituals constituted the ‘rules of the game’ for those who wished to have diplomatic relations with China.

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<sup>24</sup> John K. Fairbank, ed. *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1968). Tributary relationship had existed in ancient China before the emergence of Confucianism. The subsequent development of Confucianism gave the ‘tribute system’ ideological justification.

What are the contents of tributary “rules of the game”?<sup>25</sup> First, investiture (*cefeng*), the granting of Chinese title on a tributary polity, was the process by which a political actor was admitted to the Chinese world order. Leaders of tributary states could address themselves only as “king”; the term “emperor” was reserved exclusively for China. Rulers of tributary polity received a seal from the Chinese emperor for use in official capacities. When a new leader assumed power, the individual had to obtain an imperial patent of appointment from the Chinese emperor. Before being invested, the new ruler could only address himself as “crown prince” (*wang shizi*) or “Person Temporarily in Charge of State Affairs” (*quan shu guo shi*). Only after the Chinese emperor had invested him could he use the title “king” (*wang*). Rituals and ceremonies were given high importance in the process of investiture. When receiving the imperial edict of investiture, the new ruler had to perform the full kowtow (kneeling three times, each time knocking their head to the ground for another three times) to demonstrate his submission to the Chinese emperor. In theory, the power and authority of local rulers originated from the Chinese emperor. They worked for the Chinese emperor in the Chinese world order. For the tributaries, Chinese investiture had the effect of enhancing the legitimacy of the local rulers, a process similar to the diplomatic recognition of states today.<sup>26</sup>

Second, after being admitted to the Chinese world order through investiture, members were required to send tribute to the Chinese court. Tributary polities periodically sent embassies to the Chinese emperor with goods produced in their own countries. In court meetings, they performed certain rituals, including the full kowtow to

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<sup>25</sup> Chang Chi-hsiung, "Zhonghua Shijie Zhixu Yuanli De Yuanqi [the Origins of the Principles of the Chinese World Order]," in *Dongya De Jiazhi [the Values of East Asia]*, ed. Wu Zhipan and Li Yu (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*, 30.

symbolize their submission to the Chinese emperor. To show the benevolence of China, the emperor would usually lavish the tributary envoys with an abundance of Chinese goods. In Confucian thinking, the influx of tribute-paying foreign envoys strengthened the legitimacy of Chinese emperor because the tribute symbolized his status as the accepted ruler of *tianxia*.

Third, tributary polities were required to use the reign title of the Chinese emperor and adopt the Chinese calendar in their official documents. This is known as “Following the Imperial Calendar” (*feng zhengshuo*). Having a synchronized calendar was important because it demonstrated the unity of all-under-Heaven and strengthened the legitimacy of the Chinese throne. Official documents in tributary polities would use the same reign title and year as those used in China. For instance, during the reign of Ming Emperor Yongle, court documents in Korea would begin the entry with, say, “The Fifth Year of Yongle.”

Fourth, in the Chinese world order, the principle of indirect rule applied to tributary polities. Although the Chinese emperor was the nominal head of *tianxia*, he did not directly rule tributary polities. As most tributary polities were located beyond the frontiers of China, for practical reasons, Imperial China usually did not interfere in their internal affairs. In practice, tributary polities in the Chinese world order enjoyed self-rule and autonomy. But they were not sovereign in the Westphalian sense because they would still need to answer to a higher authority, the Chinese emperor.

Chinese leaders used the tribute system to organize foreign relations in a way that helped the country achieve its security objectives. In the Chinese view, the world was divided between a civilized center and an outer rim of uncivilized ‘barbarians.’ By allowing foreigners to pay tribute, it was hoped, they would be transformed into civilized

peoples and pose no threat. This cultural transformation, as Morris Rossabi notes, served as a “defense mechanism” to protect China from foreign attacks.<sup>27</sup> In this way, the tribute system aimed to achieve stability in the East Asian international order. As Ying-shi Yu points out, “The ultimate goal of the tributary system was to achieve political stability through the establishment of a lasting imperial order in which proper relations between the state and the people could always be maintained.”<sup>28</sup> Tributary states could call for Chinese help if attacked. Imperial China, as the leader of all tributaries, provided the public goods of security. Trading privileges were granted as reward to those who accepted the tribute system or were withheld as punishment to those who refused to obey. Many Asian polities wished to trade with the resource-rich China, but Chinese leaders restricted exchanges of goods and commodities to the tribute system, leaving little room for non-tributary trade. Foreigners wishing to trade with China were required to accept the tributary arrangement.<sup>29</sup>

## Power and the Tributary Order

Power holds the key to creating and sustaining international order. In historical East Asia, it was Chinese preponderance of power that laid the foundation of the tributary

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<sup>27</sup> Morris Rossabi, ed. *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th-14th Centuries* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1983), 1; J. K. Fairbank, "Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (Feb. 1942): 129-149 at 137.

<sup>28</sup> Ying-shih Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 189.

<sup>29</sup> According to Chinese accounts, China did not profit from tributary relations, since what the emperor bestowed upon the foreign envoys was always in excess of what they had brought in to the imperial court. As a self-sufficient empire, China was not interested in foreign lands and desired no foreign goods. Rather, it was foreigners who desired Chinese goods and luxuries. T. F. Tsiang, "China and European Expansion," *Politica* 2, no. 5 (March 1936): 1-18 at 4. This idealized version of tributary trade, however, does not always square with reality on the ground. In practice, China enjoyed the benefits of trade as well. According to one study, during the Qing dynasty the value of Korean tributary goods was actually in excess of the value of Chinese return goods. Chang Tsun-wu, *Qing Han Zong Fan Maoyi, 1637-1894 [Qing-Korean Suzerain-Vassal Trade, 1637-1894]* (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1978). I am indebted to Kirk Larsen for bringing this monograph to my attention.

order. The tributary order took shape in the Han dynasty (206 BC–330 AD) after victory over its archrival Xiongnu.<sup>30</sup> As the fifth-century *History of the Later Han (Hou Han shu)* observed: "Overawed by our military strength and attracted by our wealth, all the rulers presented exotic local products as tribute and their beloved sons as hostages. They bared their heads and kneeled down toward the east to pay homage to the Son of Heaven."<sup>31</sup> Material capabilities enabled Imperial China to create tributary 'rules of the game' to govern interactions among political units, disproportionately serving its self-interests. When not backed by military power, the order usually became unsustainable.<sup>32</sup> As Wang Gungwu points out: "There could not surely be a stable [tribute] system without power, sustained power."<sup>33</sup> In addition to engendering rules and principles, material capabilities also give rise to Imperial China's prestige and authority in the system. In international relations, authority does not exist in a vacuum; it is supported by material capabilities. As Waltz points out, elements of authority that emerge in the system are often derived from the capability that gives appearance to these elements of authority.<sup>34</sup>

Compliance with tributary rules is largely a function of power asymmetry.

Imperial China possessed the material capabilities to impose and enforce tributary rules as well as the accompanying prestige and authority to induce compliance without having to resort to military coercion. As Imperial China maintained security and economic order

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<sup>30</sup> Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China*, 36.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Mark Edward Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 145-146.

<sup>32</sup> Jing-shen Tao, *Two Sons of Heaven: Studies in Sung-Liao Relations* (Tucson, AZ.: The University of Arizona Press, 1988), 4, 8; Mark Mancall, "The Persistence of Tradition in Chinese Foreign Policy," *Communist China and the Soviet Bloc* 349 (Sept. 1963): 14-26 at 18; Gari Ledyard, "Yin and Yang in the China-Manchuria-Korea Triangle," in *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th-14th Centuries*, ed. Morris Rossabi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>33</sup> Wang Gungwu, "Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia," in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 60.

<sup>34</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 88.

in the system, the provision of public goods gave lesser polities an interest in following its lead. Tributary polity could call for Chinese help if attacked. For utilitarian reasons, lesser polities were better off complying with the tributary order than engaging in futile resistance.

Additionally, Imperial China used the Confucian ideology of hierarchy to justify its dominant position and to minimize resistance to hegemonic power. Confucianism considers hierarchy as the natural order of things. When hierarchy prevails, peace will be obtained. Xunzi, a key Confucian thinker, describes the negative consequences to a society without hierarchy: "Where the classes of society are equally ranked, there is no proper arrangement of society; where authority is evenly distributed, there is no unity; and where everyone is of like status, none would be willing to serve the other."<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, foreign relations should be rank-ordered as well. When lesser polities accepted this Confucian justification of the tributary order, compliance would be even stronger.

Lesser polities' acceptance of the tributary order gave Chinese hegemony an aura of legitimacy. Nevertheless, even in cases where rules and principles are built on consensual acceptance, the power and interests of the hegemon remain the principal beneficiary. As Gilpin argues, "Although the rights and rules governing interstate behavior are to varying degree based on consensus and mutual interest, the primary foundation of rights and rules is in the power and interests of the dominant groups or states in a social system."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Xunzi 9:4. John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, 3 vols. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988).

<sup>36</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 24, 34-35.

## Ming-Qing Power Transition

Ming China (1368-1644) was the regional hegemon in East Asia. Its preponderance of power enabled it to create and shape the rules that governed interactions among political entities in the system. Like its predecessors in Chinese history, the Ming adopted the tributary order to regulate its foreign relations, establishing tributary institutions and an elaborate set of rules and protocols to uphold the order. For lesser polities, acceptance of the tributary arrangements was the precondition to developing political and trade relationships with China. Ming power and prestige sustained the order. Virtually all political entities more or less complied with the Ming-led international order. As an indicator of the broad reach of the Ming tributary order, official record in 1587 shows that the country enrolled as many as 123 tributary polities.<sup>37</sup>

In the seventeenth century, a power transition took place in the East Asian international system. The rise of the Manchu state challenged the Ming-dominated tributary order. The Manchus, who originated from present-day northeastern China, had been a vassal of the Ming tribute system. Qing founder, Nurhaci, posthumously named the Great Progenitor (*taizu*), personally led eight tribute missions to Beijing between 1590 and 1611. The Manchus complied with the Ming tributary order because they were weak and divided. The Ming launched two attacks in 1574 and 1583 to punish them for insubordination and raiding Ming territories. To ward off future attacks, a unified Manchu nation would be essential. Beginning in 1583, Nurhachi embarked on a state-building effort. War was central to Manchu state-building as well as its eventual conquest

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<sup>37</sup> J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng, "On the Ch'ing Tributary System," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6, no. 2 (1942): 135-246 at 150. Although some of the entries in the Ming document appear to be duplicates, the large number still indicates the broad extent of the Ming tributary order.

of China. Insecurity wrought by intense competition compelled them to develop the capacity to mobilize resources for war, centralize governing power, implement administrative reforms, and impose taxation.<sup>38</sup> After more than thirty years of endeavors, in 1616 a new state, the Later Jin (renamed the Qing in 1636), was founded. The Manchus were now in a military position to challenge the Ming order.

Dissatisfied with the Ming-dominated tributary order, Nurhaci announced the Seven Grievances in 1618 and set out to attack the Ming, thus starting a process that would eventually result in a change in the East Asian international order.<sup>39</sup> Military power was the building block of the Qing tributary order. The Qing used brute force to coerce Choson Korea into accepting the Qing tribute system. Korea was highly Sinicized tributary state of the Ming, which gave the kingdom its dynastic name Choson (*chaoxian*). The Manchus invaded Korea in 1627 to force the Choson court to send annual tribute. In 1636, when the Choson court refused to receive Manchu envoys demanding recognition of Qing suzerainty, the Manchus invaded again, capturing Seoul and forcing Korean King Injo to perform the kowtow before Hong Taiji, the Manchu leader. The Korean court was forced to renounce allegiance to the Ming dynasty and sent the crown prince to the Qing as hostage. Korea joined the Qing tribute system under military duress.

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<sup>38</sup> For Manchu state-building, see Gertraude Roth Li, "State Building before 1644," in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 9, "Part 1. The Ch'ing Empire to 1800"*, ed. Willard J. Peterson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). The process of state formation is consistent with Charles Tilly's oft-cited maxim that "war made the state and the state made war." Charles Tilly, "Reflections of the History of European State-Making," in *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, ed. Charles Tilly (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 42; Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, Ad 990-1992*, Rev. pbk. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> The Seven Grievances included the Ming killing of Nurhaci's father and grandfather, border incursions, Ming arrest of Manchu envoys, and the Ming strategy of divide-and-rule. *Qing Shilu, Manzhou shilu*, 4:198-201. Qiu Xintian and Kong Deqi, *Zhongguo Junshi Tongshi [General Military History of China]*, vol. 16, Qingdai qianqi junshi shi [Qing military history in the beginning period ] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 1998), 30; Roth Li, "State Building before 1644," 41.

As Manchu power rose, the declining Ming became incapable of sustaining the tributary order. Rising military expenditures forced the Ming government to raise taxes, triggering a series of peasant rebellions. In 1644, when the rebels occupied Beijing, the Ming emperor committed suicide in despair. With the help of a Ming turncoat general, the Manchus took advantage of this opportunity to enter the city and announced that the Mandate of Heaven had shifted to the Qing. However, it would take the Manchus nearly forty years to pacify all Ming resistance until the Qing conquered the last holdout in Taiwan in 1683. The Qing dynasty became the new system leader of the East Asian tributary order.

Like other international order, changes are achieved mainly through war. The victor, as the new system leader, could keep the rules that continued to serve its interests and revise those that did not. As the victor in the hegemonic war, the Qing was able to build a new international order to serve its interests and values. At that time, the tributary rules of the game largely guided how political actors interacted with the center of hierarchy. These rules influenced how the Manchus envisioned the international order and would become the basis with which they constructed the new order. In this way, the institutional design of the Qing rules of the game was endogenous to prior institutional investments in the tribute system and exhibited characteristics of path dependence.<sup>40</sup> Once it became powerful, the Qing did not seek to overturn the international rules of the game and replace them with a brand new set of rules. Rather, they adapted the Ming tribute system to serve their economic and strategic interests.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> This is similar to the argument of historical institutionalism. Orfeo Fioretos, "Historical Institutionalism in International Relations," *International Organization* 65, no. 2 (April 2011): 367-399.

<sup>41</sup> Fairbank and Teng, "On the Ch'ing Tributary System."

The Qing revamped the Ming tribute system by adopting a dual-track arrangement that distinguished vassal states (*shuguo*) from dependencies (*fanbu*). Vassal states were autonomous political units that paid homage and pledged allegiance to the Qing emperor. The Qing acted as the suzerain and held the ultimate authority over the vassal states. Dependencies were conquered territories that were integrated with the Qing administrative structure and enjoyed less autonomy than vassal states, their administrative status somewhere between an inland province and a vassal state. The Qing practiced indirect rule over dependencies through native chieftains and administrators.<sup>42</sup> Diplomacy and tributary affairs with vassal states were conducted through the Ministry of Rites, a practice that followed the Ming precedent and was in keeping with the traditional tribute system. For overland and conquered polities, the Qing designed a new system that grew out of its dealings with the Mongols. Relations with Inner and Central Asian polities such as the Mongols, Tibetans, and Uighurs were handled through the Court of Dependency Affairs (*lifanyuan*), which was renamed from the Mongolian Office (*menggu yamen*) in 1638. Interestingly, the Qing's relations with Russia was also handled through Lifanyuan because it mainly involved Mongolian affairs. As a multiethnic empire, the Qing ruler was an emperor to the Han Chinese, a khan to the nomadic Mongols, and a *chakravartin* (wheel-turning-king) to the Buddhist Tibetans.<sup>43</sup>

Like other Chinese dynastic rulers, Qing leaders saw the coming of tributary envoys as a way to strengthen the legitimacy of their rule. Although the Qing had

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<sup>42</sup> Zhang Yongjiang and Ye Zimin, "Lue Lun Qing Dai De Shuguo [on Qing Vassal States]," *Qing shi yanjiu* (*Study of Qing History*), no. 4 (1999): 50-56; Nicola Di Cosmo, "Qing Colonial Administration in Inner Asia," *The International History Review* 20, no. 2 (1998): 287-309 at 294.

<sup>43</sup> Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Mark C. Elliott, *Emperor Qianlong: Son of Heaven, Man of the World* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009); Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

demonstrated its power on the battlefield, it would take years before its prestige and authority were fully developed. After having occupied Beijing, Qing Emperor Shunzi issued an edict in 1647 asking Ryukyu, Vietnam, Siam, Japan, and neighboring countries to send a tributary mission to China. As Ming loyalists were still resisting Qing rule, these formerly Ming tributary states sat on the fence, hesitant to recognize the new Manchu overlord. To show that the Qing had inherited the Mandate of Heaven from the Ming, the Qing demanded its new vassals to return the Ming seal before granting investiture. Ryukyu sent a mission in 1651 and received Qing investiture. Vietnam became a vassal in 1660 but wavered for six years before returning the Ming seal. By 1750, the Qing had seven officially enrolled vassals: Korea (1637), Ryukyu (1651), Vietnam (1660), Siam (1664), Sulu (1726), Laos (1730), and Burma (1750).<sup>44</sup> Japan, shielded by distance and ocean, decided to stay out of the Qing tributary order. The Qing, whose strategic focus was on the Asian continent, did not press Japan. The total number of Qing tributaries varied by years and was generally lower than that of the Ming dynasty. Many of the polities were conquered and incorporated into the Qing as dependencies. At the height of its power, Qing records listed approximately 30-50 tributary polities and states.<sup>45</sup>

War was central to the establishment and maintenance of the Qing tributary order. Toward the vast steppe in the north, the Qing embarked on a program of expansion and sought to incorporate nomadic Asian polities into the tributary order. The main threat to

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<sup>44</sup> Li Yunquan, *Chaogong Zhidu Shilun: Zhongguo Gudai Duiwai Guanxi Tizhi Yanjiu (on the History of the Tribute System: A Study of Ancient China's Institution of Foreign Relations)* (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 2004), 136-140; Fairbank and Teng, "On the Ch'ing Tributary System," 174.

<sup>45</sup> Fairbank and Teng, "On the Ch'ing Tributary System," 177, 243. Zhang Yongjiang and Ye Zimin, "Lue Lun Qing Dai De Shuguo [on Qing Vassal States]." Note that European countries were also listed as Qing tributary states.

Qing dominance came from the Zunghar Mongols, who were engaged in state-building in Central Asia. A unified Zunghar empire would pose a serious threat to Qing dominance, jeopardizing the northwestern frontier and threatening the allegiance of the Mongol subjects within the Qing empire. To subjugate the Zunghars, the Qing resorted to both diplomacy and force. First, the Qing signed the Treaty of Nerchinsk with Russia in 1689 to demarcate their border. By giving Russia trade privileges, the Qing prevented formation of a potential Zunghar-Russian alliance.<sup>46</sup> Second, the Qing turned Outer Mongolia into a dependency. Internecine conflicts between Zunghar and Khalkha Mongols drove the latter to seek Qing protection. In 1691, Emperor Kangxi convened a tribal meeting at Dolon Nor (Kaiping), 175 miles north of Beijing, to organize the Khalkhas into banners and settled them permanently in fixed territories. The splendid demonstration of Qing military power was enough to induce the submission of the Khalkhas.<sup>47</sup> The incorporation of Outer Mongolia and the establishment of Khalkha banner troops greatly strengthened Qing power.<sup>48</sup>

Beginning in 1690, the Qing launched a series of military attacks against the Zunghars, defeating their leader Galdan's forces at Jao Modo near the Kerulen River in 1696. The growing power of Qing forces frightened Inner and Central Asian polities, prompting them to join the Qing tributary order. Hami became the first Turkic oasis state to join the Qing tribute system. Kokonor (in present-day Qinghai), which had never been under imperial control except during the Mongol Yuan dynasty, submitted to Qing

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<sup>46</sup> Mark Mancall, *Russia and China: Their Diplomatic Relations to 1728* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Perdue, *China Marches West*.

<sup>47</sup> Perdue, *China Marches West*, 175-176; F.W. Mote, *Imperial China: 900-1800* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 875.

<sup>48</sup> Emperor Kangxi considered it a better defense than the Great Wall: "Our dynasty bestowed grace on the Khalkhas, making them defend our north. Their defense is more robust than the Great Wall." QSL Kangxi 151: 677.

authority. Threatened by rising Qing power, the regent of Tibet expressed his gratitude to the Qing emperor for granting him the title "King of Tibet."<sup>49</sup> Qing troops occupied Lhasa in 1720 and established a military presence there, ushering in a period of direct intervention in Tibetan affairs.

The Zunghars remained a powerful force after the death of Galdan in 1697, controlling Zungharia and Turkestan. Logistical difficulties of campaigning far away in the steppe hindered Qing efforts to control the nomads. Qing Emperor Yongzheng launched a failed major attack in 1731, losing eighty percent of the army. To solve the logistical problem, Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735-1796) built a chain of military magazines and supply lines from the interior to the steppe region and furnished each outpost with six month of supplies. Military farms were created around the frontier towns of Hami and Barköl as a jumping point into the steppe.<sup>50</sup> In 1757, the Qing successfully eliminated the Zunghar state and incorporated their territory into the Qing empire. Shortly thereafter, the Qing conquered Turkestan and renamed the new territory Xinjiang.

As the Ming-Qing power transition demonstrates, military force played a central role in establishing and enforcing the tributary order. The Qing took advantage of its preponderant power to impose tributary rules on lesser polities and used military force to crack down on challenges to Qing primacy in the system. Material capabilities sustained the tributary order.

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<sup>49</sup> Perdue, *China Marches West*, 152-200; Jonathan Spence, "The K'ang-Hsi Reign," in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 9, "Part One: The Ch'ing Empire to 1800"*, ed. Willard J. Peterson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 150-156.

<sup>50</sup> Perdue, *China Marches West*; Peter Lorge, *War, Politics and Society in Early Modern China, 900-1795* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 165.

The Ming-Qing power transition bears resemblance to the transition from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana. Although one was violent and the other was peaceful, in both cases, there was no fundamental rewriting of the rules after the transition. The Qing inherited the tributary order from the Ming, while the United States took over the liberal order from Britain. The prior architecture of order persisted despite the change of system leadership. The transition from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana, however, brings forth the question of peaceful change. Existing scholarship suggests that sharing the same values and ideas may be the key reason to peaceful change. For Gilpin, the peaceful transition from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana is actually a Pax Anglo-Saxonica. “In the absence of shared values and interests, the mechanism of peaceful change has little chance of success.”<sup>51</sup> Along the same line, Charles Kupchan notes, “The transition from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana... may have been uniquely peaceful because both orders rested on an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ package of ordering ideas and rules.”<sup>52</sup> The Ming-Qing transition calls this argument into question. Even though the Qing shared the same tributary “package of ordering ideas and rules” with the Ming, the transition was not peaceful. Thus, having shared ideas and values does not necessarily lead to a peaceful change in international order.

It is worth noting that the tributary order was not limited to China. Other Asian polities imitated the language of the tribute system and applied to their foreign policy. This is due to historical contingency. Confucianism provided the vocabulary for states wishing to expand their control over others. Before the arrival of European powers,

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<sup>51</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 209.

<sup>52</sup> Kupchan, "The Normative Foundations of Hegemony and the Coming Challenge to Pax Americana," 221.

tributary order was “the only game in town.” Japan, for example, attempted to fashion its own tribute system, putting itself at the center. The Japanese denied the superiority and centrality of Qing China in Asia. The fall of China to an alien, ‘barbarian’ Manchu dynasty made the task of devaluing China easier. In the eyes of the Tokugawa shogunate, Japan had assumed the central place in the system, surrounded by barbarians who bore tribute to the shogun. Ronald P. Toby writes, "Japan had not only rejected subordination to China, but had claimed parity with China, even superiority over China."<sup>53</sup> The Satsuma fiefdom of Japan invaded the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1609, capturing the king and his advisors and bringing them to Satsuma as "guests" for over two years. As a result of the military coercion, Ryukyu became a vassal of Japan. Yet Japan wanted to exploit the benefits of Ryukyu's tributary trade with China and deliberately kept Ryukyu as a vassal of the Qing dynasty. Japan asked the kingdom to hide the fact of Japanese control from the Chinese. Japanese officials even went into hiding when Chinese envoys visited Ryukyu.<sup>54</sup> To the south, Vietnam fashioned its own hierarchical tribute system in Southeast Asia. In 1815, thirteen countries were listed in Vietnamese court as vassals. Although the inclusion of France and England as Vietnamese vassals appeared amusing, a few relatively weak polities such as Luang Prabang (present-day Laos) and Vientiane (present-day Cambodia) did pay tribute to Vietnam.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 227.

<sup>54</sup> Robert K. Sakai, "The Ryukyu (Liu-Ch'iu) Islands as a Fief of Satsuma," in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 132-134; Ta-tuan Ch'en, "Investiture of Liu-Ch'iu Kings in the Ch'ing Period," in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 162.

<sup>55</sup> Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 234-246.

## The Westphalian Transformation

The East Asian international order may be unthinkable from the perspective of today's Westphalian system of sovereign states, but it was the widely accepted practice during much of East Asian history. China's preponderance of political, economic, and military resources enabled it to act as a system manager, rewarding those who followed the tributary rules and punishing those who disobeyed. Chinese leaders used the tribute system to organize foreign relations in a way that helped the country gain security benefits and obtain deference from lesser states at cheaper costs than using force. This tributary order, however, was transformed in the nineteenth century with the arrival of European powers and replaced with the Westphalian system of sovereign states. The superior military technologies of European powers overcame Qing resistance to the imposition of an outside international order. Sovereign equality supplanted Confucian hierarchy as the ordering principle of international affairs.

The European international order grew out of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 that ended the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). Prior to the war, cross-cutting lines of authority characterized interactions among kingdoms, principalities, city-states, and other political units. The Catholic Church exercised authority through the Holy Roman Empire (962-1806). Rulers shared and competed for authority over a certain territory, with some actors owing allegiance to two or more kings. There was no exclusive control within the ruler's boundaries. The peace treaties of Westphalia gave birth to the principle of sovereignty, which was later confirmed by the Peace of Utrecht (1713) and further

developed by political philosophers and legal scholars such as Vattel.<sup>56</sup> The current international system is built upon the principle of sovereign equality.

Unlike the Confucian hierarchy of the East Asian international order, the Westphalian system emphasizes sovereign equality among states. Stephen Krasner identifies two core norms of the European system of states: Westphalian sovereignty and international legal sovereignty. Westphalian sovereignty refers to the principle that each state is the supreme authority within its territorial boundaries, independent from external interference. In international legal sovereignty, the sovereign state enjoys formal legal equality under international law, a status that is confirmed through recognition by other states.<sup>57</sup>

The principle of sovereign equality clashed with the hierarchical tributary order of East Asia, where there was neither Westphalian sovereignty nor international legal sovereignty. Imperial China was the supreme authority to which vassal polities pledge allegiance, with no formal equality between them. The Qing dynasty did not distinguish between foreign policy from domestic policy nor did it allow permanent diplomatic representatives from foreign countries to be stationed in China. As the concept of sovereignty was utterly alien to the Qing, it attempted to treat Europeans who came ashore as just another tributary entity. For their parts, most Europeans abided by the tributary protocols in their dealings with China and even performed the required kowtow

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<sup>56</sup> Robert Jackson, *Sovereignty* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007).

<sup>57</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Stephen D. Krasner, "Organized Hypocrisy in Nineteenth-Century East Asia," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 1(2001): 173-197.

in meetings with the emperor.<sup>58</sup> Official Qing documents listed Holland as a tributary in 1690, Portugal in 1732, and “the countries of the Western Ocean [Europe]” (*xiyang guo*) in 1764.<sup>59</sup> This was a time when China was still powerful enough to enforce tributary rules.

Under the tributary order, international trade with European countries after 1760 was regulated by the “Canton system.” The guiding principle of this trade system was “hierarchy subordination.”<sup>60</sup> The Qing restricted all maritime trade to Canton (Guangzhou) in southern China and denied European merchants direct access to Chinese officials. European—and later American—merchants were required to conduct business only with a monopolistic Chinese merchant guild called Cohong (*gonghang*), which in turn was held responsible for the foreign crew’s good behavior. If the Westerners had grievances or petitions, they had to be communicated through these Chinese merchants; they could not appeal directly to Chinese officials. These cumbersome procedures, incompatible with the principle of sovereign equality adopted by Western powers, were a source of constant frustration for the Westerners. In the late eighteenth century, a rising Britain became increasingly dissatisfied with the Canton system and decided to change the rules. In 1793, King George III dispatched Lord George McCartney to China to seek expanded trade privileges, diplomatic residence in Beijing, and additional ports for trade.

The clash of the two international orders was evident in the McCartney Embassy. In keeping with tributary protocols, the boats and land-carriages of the mission bore flags

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<sup>58</sup> John E. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K'ang-Hsi, 1666-1687* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1984); Warren I. Cohen, *East Asia at the Center: Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 221.

<sup>59</sup> Fairbank and Teng, "On the Ch'ing Tributary System," 174.

<sup>60</sup> Frederic Wakeman, "The Canton Trade and the Opium War," in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 10 "Late Ch'ing, 1800-1911, Part I"*, ed. Dennis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 163.

with the inscription, “Ambassador bearing tribute from the country of England.” A dispute erupted over whether Lord McCartney should perform the full kowtow in front of Emperor Qianlong. After much haggling, it was decided that McCartney would bend on one knee, as he did in front of the English king. The Qing court rejected every British request. In his letter to King George III, Emperor Qianlong explained:

Our dynasty's majestic virtue has penetrated unto every country under Heaven, and Kings of all nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea. As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures. This then is my answer to your request to appoint a representative at my Court, a request contrary to our dynastic usage, which would only result in inconvenience to yourself.<sup>61</sup>

At this time, Britain was not in a military position to challenge Qing dominance in East Asia. During the reign of Qianlong, the Qing was “the largest, wealthiest, and most populous contiguous political entity anywhere in the world.”<sup>62</sup> As there was not much Britain could do to change the rules, the trade issue remained unresolved for the next fifty years. In 1816, after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, Britain dispatched another embassy led by William Pitt, Lord Amherst, but he was expelled from China for refusing to perform the kowtow. However, Qing power began to decline after the death of Qianlong in 1799, while British power was on the rise as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Britain had colonized India and occupied the strategically important Singapore in 1824, giving it control of the maritime trade between Europe and Asia. In London, the powerful free trade lobby wanted to open up the China market. With

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<sup>61</sup> E. Backhouse and J. O. P. Bland, *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), pp. 322-31.

<sup>62</sup> James Louis Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 31.

growing military power, Britain was in a position to overturn the tributary rules that had dominated East Asia for centuries.

The incompatibility of the tributary order and the Westphalian order was resolved by war. The victor in war won the right to impose a new order. As historian Frederic Wakeman notes, “the English were overwhelmingly superior” while “the armies of the Chinese empire were undermanned and badly trained.”<sup>63</sup> Driven by commercial interests, Britain used military coercion in the Opium Wars of 1839-42 to compel China to change the rules of the game and to open the country for trade. In the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, the Qing was forced to open five ports, cede Hong Kong to Britain, allow extraterritoriality on Chinese soil, pay war indemnity, and adopt diplomatic equality in official correspondence. Thus began the new “treaty system” and China’s infamous “century of humiliation.” By war, Britain forced the Qing to follow the British ways of free trade and diplomacy under Western international law. Military power created this new order and was necessary to sustain it. As Fairbank summarizes, “The treaty system had been set up by gunfire and had to be maintained by gunboat diplomacy.”<sup>64</sup>

The Opium Wars “began an irrevocable change in the structure of the East Asian international order.”<sup>65</sup> Western powers would impose their own conception of international order on East Asia. The tributary order began to crumble. The Qing would continue to lose a series of wars to European powers (Britain, France, and Russia) and was forced to sign a number of unequal treaties that allowed foreign control of Chinese

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<sup>63</sup> Wakeman, "The Canton Trade and the Opium War," 192.

<sup>64</sup> John K. Fairbank, "The Creation of the Treaty System," in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 10 "Late Ch'ing, 1800-1911, Part I"*, ed. Dennis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 232.

<sup>65</sup> Cohen, *East Asia at the Center*, 252.

customs service, extraterritoriality, international concessions within China, and cession of territories. In effect, China was not treated as a state with full sovereignty. By doing so, the European powers violated their own norms of sovereign equality regarding China. Nevertheless, in international politics, material interests often trumped normative concerns, a phenomenon that Stephen Krasner calls “organized hypocrisy.”<sup>66</sup>

### **Implications for U.S.-China Power Transition**

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has pursued a grand strategy of liberal hegemony that aims to spread the liberal international order around the world. The US-led order is characterized by democratic values, free trade, and human rights. The U.S. backed up this order with its preponderance of power, along with a widespread network of alliances (60 treaty allies) and institutions to support it. Liberal elements aside, the current order also enshrines the Westphalian principles of state sovereignty and nonintervention. Through its economic and military power, the US provides the public goods of economic openness, financial stability, freedom of the seas, and international security. Although the US benefits the most from this order, the provision of these public goods gives other states incentives to work within the US-led international order.

The international system is witnessing a power transition between the United States and China. China’s rise is changing the balance of power within the current international order. As power anchors order, the change in the distribution of power will cause a corresponding change in international order. Consequently, the liberal order is in flux. Like other changes in history, the source of the change comes from differential growth in power. China’s economic reforms since 1978 has turned the country from an

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<sup>66</sup> Krasner, "Organized Hypocrisy in Nineteenth-Century East Asia."

economic backwater to a global powerhouse. The infusion of foreign investment and the diffusion of technology into China contributed to rapid economic growth. China has benefitted from the economic openness of the liberal international order, which gave it access to world market, investment, and technology. China's rise is in large part due to its working within, not in opposition to, the current international order.

We can expect China to continue following the rules that benefits its interests and revising those that do not. Most of the rules of the existing order were constructed without China at the table and when China was weak. Now that China has become powerful, Beijing has expressed its willingness to take on a more proactive role in “guiding” and reforming the current international order. On February 20, 2017, President Xi Jinping proclaimed in a national security seminar the “Two Guidances” (*liangge yindao*): Beijing should “guide the international community to jointly build a more fair and equitable new international order” and “guide the international community to jointly maintain international security.”<sup>67</sup> According to Xi, China does not seek to overturn the existing order but rather to move it toward a more fair and equitable direction. Already, China is playing a larger role in the IMF and World Bank. When the existing institutions failed to serve Chinese interests, Beijing took the initiative in creating new institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

As the balance of power underpinning the existing order shifts to China, the rules manifesting the order will adjust to the new power reality. Since the current economic

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<sup>67</sup> “Xi Jinping shouti ‘liangge yindao’ you shengyi” [The deep meaning of Xi Jinping’s first mention of the ‘Two Guidances’], *Zhongguo gaibu xuexi wang* [Web of learning for Chinese cadres], February 21, 2017, <http://www.ccln.gov.cn/hotnews/230779.shtml>

order benefits China, we can expect China to continue advocating for economic openness around the world and revising rules that disadvantage China. In the 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos, against the backdrop of rising anti-globalization sentiment in Britain and the United States, President Xi Jinping signaled that China would be a champion of economic globalization and open markets. He pointed out that the current economic governance structure is “inadequate in terms of representation and inclusiveness” and therefore “we should develop a model of fair and equitable governance in keeping with the trend of the times.”<sup>68</sup>

However, it is in the area of the security order that we can expect more challenges. China has been dissatisfied with the US-led international security order and has embarked on a military buildup to advance its security interests. In the South China Sea, China’s island-building efforts in disputed areas are creating a fait accompli that neighboring states are finding it increasingly difficult to reverse. US freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) in the South China Sea challenges Chinese territorial claims in the area. US security commitment to Taiwan has been a constant source of tension between Washington and Beijing. U.S. insistence that the US-Japan alliance treaty covers the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands incites protests from China. Beijing’s proclaimed aspiration to become a maritime great power puts itself in direct competition with the US navy. These developments presage a more intensified security competition between the United States and China.

The new international order will no doubt look somewhat different from the liberal order. As noted, the character of order is often a reflection of the dominant state’s

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<sup>68</sup> “Full Text: Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the World Economic Forum,” January 17, 2017, The State Council Information Office, [http://www.china.org.cn/node\\_7247529/content\\_40569136.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/node_7247529/content_40569136.htm)

values and domestic order. The US-led order builds on its democratic system and liberal values of openness, freedom, and human rights. The tributary order of historical East Asia is derived from China's Confucian values and hierarchy of society. The Westphalian order is grounded in the historical experience of Western states after the Thirty Years War. Likewise, a China-led order will reflect its domestic values based on its unique political system and historical experience. As Charles Kupchan observes, "emerging powers will want to revise, not consolidate, the international order erected during the West's watch. They have different views about the foundations of political legitimacy, the nature of sovereignty, the rules of international trade, and the relationship between the state and society. As their material power increases, they will seek to recast the international order in ways to advantage their interests and ideological preferences."<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion

Power is the foundation of international order. Rulers of the Ming-Qing dynasties used military force to build a powerful state and to establish the hierarchical tributary order in East Asia. Preponderance of power was the decisive factor in the creation and maintenance of the tributary order. For China, the order provided a vehicle through which hegemonic power was exercised, enabling Chinese emperors to define legitimacy and authority and shape the preferences of secondary polities. Without the backing of power, the tributary order would be difficult to sustain.

Power shift explains change in order. The rise of Manchu power put an end to the Ming tribute system and allowed the Qing dynasty to reshape the tributary order to better

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<sup>69</sup> Charles Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7-8.

serve its interests. The establishment of *Lifanyuan* was a Qing innovation that was designed to rule an enlarged empire. Yet, the outcome of the Ming-Qing power transition was mainly a changing of the guard, with no significant changes to the old rules. This continuity of tributary order was by and large due to path dependency of the historical development of the tribute system. In contrast, the Westphalian transition fundamentally transformed the rules of the game in East Asia. In the nineteenth century, military superiority of European powers compelled the declining Qing state to accept the Westphalian system of sovereign states. Power asymmetry enabled Western powers to impose the Westphalian rules of sovereign states on the East Asian system. The Westphalian order would gradually expand to other East Asian states including Japan, Korea, and Vietnam and became the widely accepted rules of the current international system.

The two cases from East Asian history demonstrates the benefits of expanding the study of international order to non-Western system. The Ming-Qing transition shows that contrary to the existing scholarship, the problem of peaceful change is not simply a matter of shared values and ideas between the declining hegemon and the rising state. The Westphalian transformation reveals that entrenched rules can be overturned by superior power, suggesting that the ‘lock-in’ effect of the liberal order may be overstated.<sup>70</sup> The architecture of order, or the structure of governance, is historically contingent and reflects the values and interests of the dominant states. Material capabilities enable the spread of the type of order that the dominant state prefers. Future

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<sup>70</sup> Ikenberry, *After Victory*.

changes in international order will likely reflect the shifting balance of power and the conception of order envisioned by the rising state.