East Asia's Uneasy Long Peace in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines the "Confucian long peace" thesis about historical East Asia. While East Asian peace was long, it was not unbroken. As such, it would be a mistake to focus on only peaceful periods and ignore outbreaks of war. The challenge is to understand both long peace and periodic conflicts. From the Qin and Han dynasties on, ambitious founding emperors were always tempted to control "all under heaven" as much as possible. But campaigns against Vietnam and Korea repeatedly resulted in pyrrhic victories or outright defeats because of Vietnam's and Korea's capacity for resistance. Long peace came on the heels of the hard lesson that campaigns to Vietnam or Korea incurred untold losses of lives and materiel. As each dynasty learned the lesson the hard way, the result was infrequent war and uneasy long peace.

Sub-abstract: The East Asian peace is explained by Vietnam's and Korea's capacity for resistance. The East Asian peace is deep but uneasy.

Introduction

Is Asia Pacific pacific? How deep is the East Asian peace? To the average news consumer, these very questions may be counterintuitive. During the Cold War, sworn socialist brotherhood did bring China and communist Korea together in the Korean War (1950-53) and the two have remained allies to this day. But shared ideology did not prevent the big brother from teaching Vietnam a "lesson" in 1979, or from launching further border clashes until the late 1980s.[1] Today, North and South Koreas are still technically at war. S. Korea and Japan dispute over Dokdo. China and Japan regularly confront each other near the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. China and Vietnam both claim the Spratly islands. China and the Philippines are at a standoff over the Scarborough Shoal. U.S. navy challenges China's claim to sovereignty over the South China Sea.

Although today's East Asia is the site of ongoing conflicts, it is often argued that historical East Asia was the paragon of peace and prosperity. Although shared socialist ideology did not guarantee peace in modern times, it is often presumed that shared Confucian civilization produced a deep peace for over two millennia. It is commonly said that history is the guide for the present, it is no less true that the present reflects legacy of the past.

This paper critically examines the "Confucian long peace" thesis about historical East Asia. The thesis overlooks that while the East Asian peace was long, it was not unbroken. As such, it would be a mistake to focus on only peaceful periods and ignore outbreaks of war. The challenge is to understand both long peace and recurrent conflicts.

[1] Zhang Youxia, who is tipped for promotion to lead the Central Military Commission in 2017, rose through the ranks in the campaigns against Vietnam in the 1980s. Staff reporter 2015. Chinese names follow the Chinese convention of listing surnames first, except for the names of scholars who have published in English.

From the Qin and Han dynasties on (or "since ancient times" in today's political talk), ambitious founding emperors were always tempted to control "all under heaven" as much as possible. China's expeditions against Vietnam and Korea were infrequent but not nonexistent. Despite their relative weakness, Vietnam and Korea commanded the capacity for resistance. Long-distance campaigns against them repeatedly resulted in pyrrhic victories or outright defeats. Periodic conflicts constructed long peace by reaffirming the futility of fighting. Long peace came on the heels of the hard lesson that campaigns to Vietnam or Korea could bankrupt the treasury and drive peasants into rebellions. Each dynasty learned the hard lesson that the superior policy was to maintain peace under fictive familial relations in Confucian terminology. The uneasy peace in the post-WWII era reflects this historical pattern.

Confucian Long Peace?

IR scholars and foreign-policy analysts often presume that East Asia is different from the West – while Europe until the post-war era was always in a state of war with at best fragile peace based on unstable balances of power, East Asia has always enjoyed lasting peace grounded with a peaceful culture. Most notably, David Kang argues that pre-modern East Asia was characterized by peace and stability rather than war and conflicts, and hierarchy rather than anarchy. Robert Kelly more explicitly highlights a "Long Peace" "rooted in shared, war-reducing Confucian ideals."[2] East Asia's long peace is, in turn, commonly attributed to China's adherence to an innately peaceful foreign policy. Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan observe that China "has its own long history of international relations that is quite distinct from that of the West."[3] Yan

[2] Kelly 2011, 408.
[3] Acharya and Buzan 2010a, 2.

Xuetong contends that China's foreign policy was driven by moral authority rather than power calculation.[4] The declaration by China's State Councilor Dai Bingguo that "China never sought expansion or hegemony" is extensively echoed.[5] Former US ambassador to China, Gary Locke, concurs that China "never… tried to invade."[6] Yongnian Zheng suggests that "no armies marched out of traditional Middle Kingdom lands.[7] Huiyun Feng agrees that "China did not expand in history when it was strong."[8] David Shambaugh opines that "China does not have a significant history of … coercion or territorial expansionism."[9] Wang Gungwu underscores that "Chinese history does not provide any convincing argument for an expansionist China."[10]

In contrast, historians of China's military history suggest that China's relations with its neighbors were far from peaceful. Morris Rossabi specifically notes that the prevalence of war in East Asian history "belies [the] thesis about peace and an international system based upon hierarchy, status, and hegemony."[11] Yet, Rossabi misses the nuance of the "Confucian long peace" argument. Kang argues that "the comparative 'peacefulness' of early modern East Asia was limited to relations among the major states."[12] He observes that "[m]ost scholarship on war in historical East Asia has… focused on where the fighting was; that is,… China-nomad relations… But we should also ask why some states did *not* fight."[13] He divides up East Asia into two zones. China and "Sinicized states" formed a "Confucian society" because they "shared ideas, norms,

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[4] Yan 2011, 252-259.
[5] Dai 2010.
[6] Interview with Charlie Rose at http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/12091
[7] Zheng 2010, 305.
[8] Feng 2007, 4, 82
[9] Shambaugh 2004/05, 95.
[10] Wang 1999, 34.
[11] Rossabi 2011, 512.
[12] Kang 2010, 93.
[13] Ibid., 11.

and interests."[14] China and "nomadic" nonstates formed a "parabellum society" because "nomads had vastly different worldviews, political structures, and cultures than the Sinicized states."[15] Kelly likewise zooms in on Confucianized states that did not fight one another although "China was clearly not that peaceful" and fought "non-Confucians."[16] In short, shared civilization produced peace while clash of civilizations produced war. This argument is intuitively appealing to IR scholars because it is consistent with the English School argument that states sharing a common culture can escape the state of war and form an "international society."[17] It also resonates with the democratic peace theory that democracies do not fight each other even though they are not pacifist.[18] The presumption of Chinese exceptionalism is so taken for granted that works on non-Western IR theories routinely contain discussions akin to the "Confucian long peace."

China's Long Peace with Korea and Vietnam

This paper examines the "Confucian long peace" argument on its own terms. First, it focuses on Confucianized states: China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan, that is, it brackets relations between China and Inner Asian regimes[19] and relations among other East Asian polities.[20] In doing so, we should be mindful that "China," "Vietnam," "Korea" and "Japan" are better treated as geographical terms rather than country names. Second, this paper follows the standard definition of peace as the absence of war and brackets the threat of war and non-militarized tensions. We should set aside the expectation that the

[14] Ibid., 8-9.
[15] Ibid., 10.
[16] Kelly 2011, 421.
[17] Buzan and Little 2010.
[18] Russett 1994.
[19] It is a different paper to discuss the Sinicized-nomadic binary.
[20] See Wade 2014.

shared civilization argument – like the democratic peace theory – should theoretically produce warm peace rather than cold peace.

How peaceful was East Asia so defined? Kang's *East Asia Before the West* begins with this statement: East Asia was so stable that "Hideyoshi's [Japan's] invasion of Korea marked the *only* military conflict between Japan, Korea, and China for over six [sic: should be 'nearly five'] centuries" in 1368-1841.[21] Kang adds other conflicts on subsequent pages. In Table 5.1, he lists six "major wars in East Asia":

1) Chinese invasion of Vietnam (1407-1428);

2) Japanese invasion of Korea (1592-1598);

3) Manchu conquest of China (1618-1644);

4) Manchu invasions of Korea (1627 and 1637);

5) Chinese conquest of Xinjiang (1690 and 1757); and,

6) the Opium war (1839-1841). [22]

Kang counts only the first two as "wars between Sinicized states" and excludes the rest because one side was not a "Sinicized state." It is curious that the Manchus count as "nomads" before the conquest of Ming but "Chinese" afterwards—as reflected in the labels "*Manchu* invasions of Korea (1627 and 1637)" but "*Chinese* conquest of Xinjiang (1690-1757)."[23] The list also omits another military venture in Vietnam in 1788. In Kang' account, Chinese records show that the Qing army "[came] back with about 5,000 of their 8,000 men" while Vietnamese records suggest that the Qing sent 200,000 troops who were badly defeated and retreated in disarray.[24] Even if we follow the argument that the

[21] Kang 2010, 1.
[22] Ibid., 83.
[23] Ibid., 83.
[24] Kang 2010, 102.

Manchus became a state actor only after establishing the Qing dynasty over China, a war of such scale should not be excluded. Thus, by Kang's own reckon, there should be three wars involving Sinicized states on both sides in East Asia for the period 1368-1841.

Of course, even if we find three rather than one war over a time span of 474 years, pre-modern East Asia still looked very peaceful. Yet, as critics of the democratic peace theory point out, proponents have the burden to show why a constant cause, shared norms and shared institutions, would produce variable outcomes. Why did shared Confucian civilization fail to prevent the outbreaks of war, however rare they were? Moreover, the usual statement about the "Confucian peace" is that China "never" engaged in aggression. It is thus significant that East Asian peace was long but not unbroken. And if it was not "never" in the period 1368-1841, what about before and after? Kelly studies an even shorter time span of "195 years between 1644 and 1839," even though he acknowledges that he should cover "the longest possible timeline," from Confucianism's "spread first to Korea around 500" to Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910.[25] How did Confucianism spread to Vietnam and Korea in the first millennium?

In order to establish the argument that "China never sought expansion or hegemony"[26] "since ancient times" because of "war-reducing Confucian ideals,"[27] it is necessary to study history in the *longue duree*. Kang presumes that China's borders with Vietnam and Korea were largely settled by the eleventh century.[28] Vietnam and Korea did not suddenly fall from the sky, how did they come into being? What the "Confucian long peace" argument misses is that Vietnam and Korea were so "Confucianized"

[25] Kelly 2011, 414.
[26] Dai 2010.
[27] Kelly 2011, 408.
[28] Ibid., 63, 65, 84.

precisely because they had been subject to lengthy periods of Chinese rule in the first millennium. As David Graff observes,

> "northern Vietnam was administered as an integral part of Western Jin, the southern dynasties, and the Sui and Tang empires. Another outlying area, the Korean peninsula, had been part of the Han empire; it continued to be included in the sphere of Chinese diplomatic and tributary relations, and faced repeated efforts by the Sui and Tang dynasties to establish direct military and administrative control."[29]

China's relations with Vietnam and Korea should be traced back to the first two dynasties, the Qin (221-206 BCE) and the Han (202 BCE-220 CE). Han's Emperor Wu (r. 141-87 BCE) is particularly relevant for the "Confucian peace." It was Emperor Wu who first elevated Confucianism as the state doctrine. It was also Emperor Wu who first invaded Korea in addition to reconquering Vietnam. Wang Gungwu observes that Han's official histories offer "no 'Confucian theory' on foreign relations."[30] Shi Yinhong calls Emperor Wu a "warlord" whose pursuits "should lead us to doubt whether … Chinese are really so Confucian."[31] Shi argues that China's powerful emperors -- from Qin's First Emperor (r. 246–210 BC) through Han's Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BC) and Tang's Emperor Taizong (r. AD 626–649) to Ming's Emperors Hongwu (r. 1368–98) and Yongle (r. 1402–1424) -- in fact constituted a tradition of total conquest that is "more Napoleonic than Napoleon and more Clausewitzian than Clausewitz."[32] John Herman

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[29] Graff 2002: 4
[30] Wang 2002, 132.
[31] Shi 2011, 13; Shi 2010, 278.
[32] Shi 2011, 6. Although Shi does not discuss the Yuan (1279–1368) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties (probably because these are regarded as alien rather than Chinese dynasties), their imperial conquests are consistent with this alternative tradition.

further points out that the narrative of "Confucian civilizing mission" – of Confucian scholar-officials "transform[ing] the lawless … frontier and rescu[ing] the 'barbarians'" – reflected only the "imperial perspective" that was "blind to naked aggression."[33] Remarkably, former Chinese premier Zhou Enlai said as much during his meeting with Henry Kissinger: "In the past, we had an expansionist tradition, and committed aggression against Vietnam, Burma, and Korea."[34] Zhou meant to highlight that "New China" "will not commit such aggression because that is decided by our [socialist] system and ideals."[35] Zhou had no place for "Confucian ideals."

If Zhou Enlai no longer treated Vietnam and Korea as Chinese territories, that was a relatively recent development after Kelly's 1839 or Kang's 1841 end dates. As late as 1883, Qing official Zeng Jize declared to the French that "Vietnam belongs to China."[36] At about the same time, Yuan Shikai "aggressively asserted Chinese control" over Korea.[37]

Because the Han had taken over northern Vietnam and northern Korea as Chinese provinces, later dynasties were repeatedly motivated to "recover" lost territories. It is remarkable that such attempts always ended in pyrrhic victories at best and outright defeats at worst. As Zhou also said to Kissinger: "Two thousand years ago China committed aggression against [Vietnam], and China was defeated … by … two women generals."[38] Between the Han and the late Qing, every episode of domination was met by

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[33] Herman 2007, 12, 230.
[34] Lord 1971, 42.
[35] Lord 1971, 42.
[36] "Tseng Chi-tse yu Fa wai-pu wang-lai chao-hui" (Communications between Tseng Chi-tse and the French Foreign Ministry), CFCC, V, 80, Tseng to French Foreign Ministry, Oct. 15, 1883; quoted in Eastman, 1967, 39.
[37] Suzuki 2009, 172.
[38] Lord 1971, 18.

fierce resistance. And each episode of resistance would be followed by a renewed attempt at domination, albeit centuries later. The result was cycles of domination and resistance.

Let us take a brief sketch of China's relations with "Vietnam" and then "Korea" and "Japan" to give historical context to the East Asian peace.

"Vietnam"

Northern Vietnam was first conquered when Qin armies moved south to the Lingnan region (that is, south of the Nanling mountains, referring to Guangdong and Guangxi) in 214 BC. Qin's control in the southern frontier involved little more than the establishment of isolated outposts. When Qin collapsed, indigenous rulers established the states of Dong Ou, Min Yue and Nan Yue, with the last one straddling present-day Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan and northern Vietnam. When Han's Emperor Wu pacified southern China, he also annexed Nan Yue in 111 BC and established the circuit of Jiaozhi. The Han court sent in centrally-appointed officials but largely left local rulers in place. After the Han's disintegration, southern regimes continued to assert control over Jiaozhi but local populations continued to rebel. The reunified Sui dynasty reconquered Jiaozhi in 602 and marched on to Champa in central and southern Vietnam in 605. As the cycle of conquest and resistance continued, the next Tang dynasty decided to abandon direct administration and declared Annam (Pacified South) a protectorate in 622. After the Tang's collapse in 906, Dai Viet declared formal independence in 966. During the Five Dynasties period, a southern regime Nan Han sought to restore control over Annam but was soundly defeated in 938. During the Song, Dinh Bo Linh proclaimed the establishment of Dai Co Viet (later Dai Viet) in 968 and gained Song's recognition as King of Jiaozhi in 975. The Song invaded Dai Viet in 981 and 1077 but was driven back.

(The latter campaign was in response to Dai Viet's sacking of Nanning in Guangxi in 1076.) After the second failed campaign, the Song court, which generally followed a pragmatic foreign policy along its other frontiers, entered into a boundary agreement with Vietnam in 1078. (Womack 2006: 117) This is how China's borders with Vietnam became "settled by the eleventh century."[39]

During the Mongols' ascendancy, Dai Viet was forced into submission after a Mongol invasion in 1257. But when the Vietnamese rejected a Mongol-appointed king in 1279, the Mongols invaded again with 500,000 troops in 1284. This time, the Vietnamese used guerrilla tactics to harass the invaders under the cover of tropical forests. To prepare for revenge against Vietnam, Khubilai even abandoned a third invasion of Japan. But the third Mongol invasion of Vietnam with 300,000 troops and 500 ships was again defeated in 1287. Nevertheless, Vietnam promptly sent a tribute mission to Yuan's capital Dadu to end the war.

When the Ming came to power, Emperor Hongwu promised Dai Viet that if it accepted tributary status, the Ming would not interfere in its internal affairs. However, in response to a usurpation, Emperor Yongle invaded Vietnam in 1406 and annexed its territory in 1407. Once again, Vietnamese rebelled against foreign occupation. The Ming crushed all rebellions except Le Loi who used guerrilla tactics to deny Ming troops safe movements between the borders and Hanoi. By 1427, Le controlled the entire country except Hanoi. After additional relief forces to Hanoi were defeated, the Ming court decided to withdraw all of its 86,000 forces. Modeling on his predecessor's skilled

[39] Kang 2010, 63, 65, 84.

diplomacy with the Yuan, Le shrewdly sent a tribute mission to Beijing, and the Ming court "accepted at face value his professed willingness to accept Chinese overlordship."[40]

The Vietnamese defeat of the Ming "marked a turning point" in Sino-Vietnamese relations. Before this watershed, China would lose Vietnam only at the nadir of its power and so "continued to harbor a sense of entitlement" to Vietnam.[41] Now that the Ming lost Vietnam at the height of its power, it "did not consider Vietnam a lost province to be regained."[42] The Qing would intervene again in 1788 when the Tay Son usurped the Le dynasty, but Vietnamese forces again defeated Qing forces in 1789. Same as before, when the Nguyen seized the country in 1802 and requested investiture, Emperor Qianlong duly granted recognition in 1803.

"Korea"

Gari Ledyard observes that a powerful, unified Chinese empire always meant trouble for southern Manchuria and the Korean peninsula: Han's Emperor Wu conquered Choson; Sui's Emperors Wen and Yang invaded Koguryo; Tang's Emperors Taizong and Gaozong vanquished Koguryo; Yuan's Khubilai forced Koryo into submission and seized northern Korea; and Ming's Emperor Hongwu threatened an invasion unless Koryo returned northern Korea, earlier ceded to the Yuan.[43]

Han's Emperor Wu's launched China's first invasion of the Korean peninsula, i.e., Choson, in 109-108 BC. Han set up four commandaries but gradually lost control over local officials. The last Chinese commandary was taken over by Koguryo in 313.[44] The region came to be dominated by the kingdoms of Koguryo which straddled southern

[40] Cohen 2000: 159
[41] Ibid., 192.
[42] Womack 2006: 119
[43] Ledyard 1983
[44] Larsen 2008: 26

Manchuria and northern Korea, and Paekche and Silla in southern Korea. In China's ensuing divided eras, northern regimes tried but failed to subjugate this frontier. The next unified Sui invaded Koguryo in 598-614. The extraordinary extractions of grain, corvée, and animals for the campaigns coincided with large-scale flooding in the lower Yellow River valley in 611 and then droughts in 612. The resulting sufferings instigated widespread rebellions. The 614 campaign secured a surrender from Koguryo, but the Sui was already disintegrating from within.

The subsequent Tang dynasty picked up where the Sui left off. After multiple, lengthy campaigns from 645 to 668, Tang armies eventually destroyed Koguryo in 668. What made for this eventual victory was Silla's request for Tang assistance against the Koguryo-Paekche alliance (with Yamato Japan assisting Paekche). With Silla providing "a nearby supply base and a significant infusion of manpower,"[45] the Tang-Silla alliance vanquished Paekche in 660 and Koguryo in 668. But if the Tang had ambition to control the Korean peninsula, it would have to defeat Silla as well—and without a local support base. Moreover, while Tang forces were fighting in the Korean peninsula, the ascending Tibetan empire challenged Tang control in the Kokonor (Qinghai) and the Tarim Basin, and the Eastern Turks rebelled against Tang suzerainty and dominated Mongolia. Thus, when Koguryo rebelled and drove away Tang forces and then Silla came in to take over Koguryo, Tang's hands were too full "to recover what had been won with such difficulty and so quickly lost."[46] The Tang soon moved the recently established Andong (Pacified East) commandary to the west of the Liao River, effectively leaving Silla in uncontested control of the Korean peninsula.

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[45] Graff 2002: 200
[46] Graff 2002: 201

When the Mongols arrived, Koryo fought for three decades until a military coup brought about a turnaround in its Mongol policy in 1258. Submission to the Mongols meant that Koryo had to cede northern Korea and make substantial contributions to the Mongol empire. During the conquest of Southern Song, Mongol warships were built by Koreans as well as Jurchens and defected Chinese. During the Mongol invasion of Japan, Koryo was ordered to build a thousand warships and supply the bulk of the provisions. To ensure compliance, the Mongols stationed military garrisons as well as administrative officials in Koryo. But when Mongol power declined, Koryo was quick to recover northern Korea in 1356.

The succeeding Ming dynasty soon sent an ultimatum to Koryo in 1388 demanding the "return" of northern Korea. The Ming's logic was that it was entitled to all prior Yuan territories. Koryo was now prepared to go to war rather than submit. However, the commander-in-chief, Yi Songgye, dramatically announced the futility of fighting against the Ming and turned his army around to stage a coup. Similar to Vietnamese kings, the new Choson king readily paid tribute to the Ming and then managed to keep the disputed territory without a fight.[47] Thereafter, Korea followed the "*sadae* (serving the great)" policy, which was premised on the ancient Chinese wisdom that small states should serve bigger states out of fear.[48]

"Japan"

If China's relations with Vietnam and Korea were as conflictual as peaceful, its relations with Japan was distant and cold. Kang has a conflicted account of Japan's place in the historical "Confucian society": While he argues on page one that "Japan was a part

[47] Kang 2010, 63.
[48] Larsen 2008, 28.

of the Chinese world,"[49] he acknowledges on subsequent pages that Japan "grimaced at China's centrality," that it was "the most skeptical of and uncomfortable with China's dominance," that it "never wholly embrac[ed] the Confucian society," and that the Ming "expelled Japan from the Chinese world system, making it the 'outcast of East Asia'" in 1621.[50] Japan first challenged China's centrality in a letter to Sui's Emperor Yang (r. 605-617), which began with "The Son of Heaven in the land of the rising sun addresses a letter to the Son of Heaven in the land of the setting sun."[51]

The Yuan was the first China-based power to attack Japan, in 1274 and 1281. If it was difficult enough for China to subjugate the distant Korean peninsula, then it was even more so to invade the farther-away Japanese islands. The Mongols had built a formidable navy with the assistance of defected Song generals during their conquest of Southern Song. They then took full advantage of Chinese and Korean naval capabilities in their invasion of Japan. However, the Japanese "employed a kind of guerrilla warfare at sea, making it hard for the invaders to disembark. Confined to their relatively small vessels – and with their horses too – the invaders fell victim to an epidemic."[52] The Japanese were also aided by storms which rose to wreak havoc with the conquerors. The defeats in Japan – along with defeats in Vietnam in short order (see above) – broke the perception that the Mongols were invincible.

After the Ming took over the Yuan, Emperor Hongwu asked Japan to send tribute missions with this implicit threat in 1376: "The distance which separates us from Japan is nothing but the high seas. It only takes five days and nights to sail with favorable

[49] Kang 2010, 1.
[50] Ibid., 69, 77, 55, 79.
[51] Wang Zhenping 2005, 141.
[52] Horner 2009: 30

winds."[53] But Emperor Hongwu was too preoccupied with the Mongols to carry out this threat. In 1382, Prince Kanenaga wrote to the Ming that "now the world is the world's world; it does not belong to a single ruler… How could we kneel down and acknowledge Chinese overlordship?"[54] His son Emperor Yongle repeated the same threat to Japan in 1418: "Your land is very close to China. As for our forces, on the sea they are masters of ships and oars; on land they are skilled at riding and shooting. Nothing is too strong to be broken; no place is too unassailable to be entered. They are not like the forces of the Yuan in the past, which were strong in riding and shooting but weak in seamanship."[55] As Yongle was also sponsoring Zheng He's great fleet, his "boast about the superiority of the Ming navy over the Mongol navy had some credibility."[56] Nevertheless, Yongle also had his hands full fighting the Mongols and repressing the Vietnamese. Shogan Ashikaga Yoshimitsu later wanted to restore trade to enrich his own coffer in Japan's internal power struggles. As the Ming would allow trade only through tribute missions, he sent an embassy by signing "subject, the king of Japan" in 1401.[57] This was a move that would be denounced by generations of Japanese elite. Official contacts soon ceased. When Chinese and Japanese officials met again, it was in the midst of the Imjin War (1592-1598). Japanese forces overran Korea and crossed into Ming territories in 1592. The Ming-Korea alliance thwarted Hideyoshi's advance but it was a pyrrhic victory.

Japan had no qualms about dominating Korea and China no less because it was culturally distant from the "Confucian society." Shintoism was established as "a Japan-

[53] *Ming shilu leizuan*, quoted in Zhang 2009: 109
[54] Wang 2011, 149.
[55] Wang 1953: 49-51; quoted in Zhang 2009: 113-114
[56] Zhang 2009: 114
[57] Shoji 1990, 435.

centered ideology" in 1587.[58] Matteo Ricci's world map – which did not put China at the center of the world – found receptive audience in Japan.[59] Erik Ringmar speaks of the Tokugawa (1600-1868) and Sinocentric worlds as "two East Asian systems."[60] How subversive this idea was to the China-centered "Confucian society"! The Sino-Japanese wars of the 19th and 20th centuries did not come out of nowhere. Today, Japan remains "part of Asia, but somewhat separate from Asia."[61]

Rethinking the East Asian Long Peace

Why Did Confucianized States Rarely Fight?

Viewed in the *longue duree*, it is clearly not true that China's "goals did not include expansion against its established neighboring states."[62] In studying the East Asian long peace, the question is not "why some states did *not* fight," but why some states *rarely* fought. Acharya suggests that the non-use of force by China "is explained by a lack of capability, rather than imperial benevolence."[63] Womack elaborates that it was repeated setbacks that led China to realize that "expansion… could only lead to eventual defeat, withdrawal, and exhaustion."[64] Altogether, Vietnamese regimes defeated the Song, the Yuan, the Ming, and the Qing. Korean regimes likewise drove out the Sui and the Tang. As Alex Vuving puts it:

> "Despite its infrequency, war played a crucial role… The Chinese cited their past defeats by the Vietnamese to warn themselves about the possible fatal consequences of intervention in Vietnam… On their part, the Vietnamese cited

[58] Ge 2011, 168-170.
[59] Ge 2011, 118.
[60] Ringmar 2012, 1.
[61] Inoguchi 2010, 63.
[62] Kang 2010, 2.
[63] Acharya 2003/2004, 154-155.
[64] Womack 2010c, 123.

> their past victories over the Chinese to bolster their confidence... Peace in traditional Sino-Vietnamese relations… was the institutionalization of the memories of war…"[65]

Kang emphasizes that China was "a preponderant hegemonic power with the material wherewithal potentially to conquer all or most of the system" but largely left the Confucianized states alone.[66] The fact that such wars were rare is proof that shared civilization trumped power calculation. He suggests that "the burden of proof is on those who believe that the distribution of capabilities was the main factor."[67] The "proof" is readily available in existing works.

For the Ming period, Kang suggests that "[h]ad China wanted to conquer Vietnam but simply lacked the power to do so, we should find Chinese court debates about whether to invade Vietnam and arguments about the futility of so doing."[68] Indeed, the Ming's founder Emperor Hongwu (r. 1368-1398) was mindful of the "lesson of Yuan overreach" and warned "future generations" against "abus[ing] China's wealth and power and covet[ing] the military glories of the moment."[69] But Emperor Yongle (r. 1402-1424) sought to "return" Vietnam to a Chinese province. Yuan-kang Wang further meets Kang's challenge by examining the Ming's relative power in terms of "the number of troops and horses, grain production, government budget, fiscal balances, and domestic rebellions."[70] Wang discusses how constant rebellions in Vietnam developed into a financial and military burden.[71] Le Loi's guerrilla warfare further cut off supply lines.[72]

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[65] Vuving 2009, 81.
[66] Kang 2010, 107; also Kelly 2011, 415.
[67] Kang 2010, 106.
[68] Kang 2010, 99.
[69] Womack 2010c, 120; Womack 2012, 41-42.
[70] Wang 2011, 32.
[71] Wang 2011, 154.

At great costs, Yongle's successor decided to withdraw, citing "historical precedents that Vietnam had been a liability when it was annexed in the Han dynasty."[73] As noted above, the Qing again marched to Vietnam in 1788 but was defeated too.

Kang also presumes that "the Ming had more than the adequate logistical and military resources to move against Korea had it so desired" at the end of the Imjin War (1592-1598).[74] Wang shows that Ming power had already gone into a precipitous decline after the defeat by Mongols at Tumu in 1449. Military capability continued to deteriorate over time, reaching "rock bottom during the period from 1549 to 1644."[75] The Ming reluctantly sent forces to defend Korea because Hideyoshi made it clear that his ultimate target was China.[76] Victory came "at a heavy price": "It cost the treasury more than 7.8 million taels of silver, roughly equaling two years of the nation's annual income," causing "a drain on the depleting treasury."[77] War-imposed extractions led to "soaring cases of internal rebellion"[78] – which should not be taken lightly as the Sui collapsed amidst widespread rebellions incited by campaigns to Koguryo. The declining dynasty was so exhausted militarily and financially that it could not resist Manchu invasions in 1618-1644.

The rise of the Manchus in the shadow of the Imjin War also points to the necessity of considering geopolitics from the "global" perspective. The interconnectedness of different fronts suggests that it is not appropriate to study East Asia in isolation from Inner Asia. East Asian states benefited from China's near constant

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[72] Ibid., 154.
[73] Ibid., 155.
[74] Kang 2010, 105.
[75] Wang 2011, 135.
[76] Ibid., 174.
[77] Ibid., 177.
[78] Ibid., 135.

preoccupation with Inner Asian regimes. Even the mighty Tang had to give up the Korean peninsula when it faced new challenges from the Tibetan empire and the Eastern Turks.

Why Did Vietnam and Korea Have the Capacity for Resistance?

If East Asia's uneasy peace was maintained by Vietnam's and Korea's "capacity of resistance,"[79] then how did Vietnam and Korea develop such capacity? The more obvious explanation is that Vietnam and Korea were protected by geographical distances and the rising costs of expansion and administration. As Robert Gilpin points out, "large-scale territorial conquest and empire building [are] prohibitively expensive," because "as a state increases its control over an international system, it begins at some point to encounter both increasing costs of further expansion and diminishing returns from further expansion." [80] Even successful conquests can become millstones that drain the conqueror's economy because territorial expansion also involves administration of conquered territories and repression of rebellious populations. As Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis suggest, the "very practical cost-benefit calculations of military and administrative expense versus local tax revenue income often determined the limits of Chinese imperial expansion."[81]

A less obvious reason but more directly relevant to the "Confucian peace" argument is that the very Confucianization of Vietnam and Korea contributed to their ability to present united resistance. Confucianism as practiced in East Asia was not just a set of empty moral ideals, it was also embedded with the centralized bureaucracy. In

[79] Womack 2012, 38, 48-49.
[80] Gilpin 1981: 121, 106-7
[81] Swaine and Tellis 2000: 28

Kang's own analysis, "it was a model that offered solutions" to the "practical problems" of how to centralize authority and extend control over territories.[82] Paradoxically, Confucianism facilitated not just Vietnam's resistance to China, but also its own expansion to absorb Champa. Compared with its neighbors in Southeast Asia which followed more decentralized mandala-style rule, Vietnam borrowed "the Chinese-modeled administrative and military systems."[83] Lieberman notes that "Dai Viet's greatest period of expansion followed the neo-Confucian revolution of the mid-1400s."[84] Confucianization brought not only Ming-style firepower and standardized training, but also "the resources, human and material, of the realm into its armed forces," producing "a strong, disciplined and centralized army and navy."[85] Although Korea was too geographically confined for its own expansion, the Confucianized bureaucracy likewise facilitated the mobilization of national armies under unified command as well as the teachings of rites and doctrines.

Why are Vietnam and Korea No Longer Chinese?

If Vietnam and Korea were historically parts of China and if China's desire to "recover lost territories" lasted through the 19th century, then how did these two states secure China's eventual recognition of their independence? Vietnam's and Korea's fates are in sharp contrast to other more recent Chinese conquests: not just Manchuria (recall that Koguryo straddled Manchuria and the Korean peninsula) discussed above, but also Yunnan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia beyond this paper. Let us take a quick look at Yunnan which borders Vietnam and thus serves as a telling contrast to Vietnam's

[82] Kang 2010, 43; also Woodside 2006, 26-29.
[83] Momoki, p. 145
[84] Lieberman, p.106
[85] Whitmore, p. 136

trajectory. Until the Ming divided the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau into two provinces, the term "Yunnan" referred to the whole plateau.

"Yunnan." In the first millennium, polities in this region experienced periodic invasions by Chinese regimes and were compelled to offer nominal submission. Han's Emperor Wu became interested in the plateau both because Yelang (which inhabited much of present-day Guizhou, Guangxi, and Yunnan) bordered Han's prime target Nan Yue and because Dian (centered in modern Kunming) was thought to offer an alternative route to the Xiongnu in the north. Han armies secured surrender from Yelang in 110 BC and Dian in 109 BC. By the end of the second century BC, the Han had commandaries on much of the plateau. But in Yunnan as in Vietnam, the Han court left local rulers in place. Also similar to the experience of northern Vietnam, Chinese regimes – even during divided eras – continued to treat Yunnan as a Chinese prefecture. But this region achieved independence much earlier than northern Vietnam. Nanchao (later Dali) was established in 750 and enjoyed the Tang's recognition. Indeed, the Tang courted Nanzhao's alliance in its fierce competition with the then dominant Tibetan empire. But the Mongol era would rewrite Yunnan's history. As Bin Yang puts it, "It is the Mongols who succeeded at what the former great Chinese empires had failed, that is, bringing Yunnan into China proper."[86] Mongol forces quickly defeated Dali in 1253, and then subdued various kingdoms in eastern Yungui after the Song's collapse.[87]

Although the short-lived Yuan dynasty had only tenuous control over the Yungui plateau, the Ming – which strove to restore the Mongol empire – would consider the region a part of China to be recovered from the retreating Mongols. While the Ming also

[86] Yang 2009: 14
[87] Herman 2007: 69

attempted to "recover" northern Vietnam and northern Korea, it was defeated by Vietnam and eventually avoided war with Korea. In Yunnan, in contrast, there was no restored Dali to offer effective resistance. It is also noteworthy that while the Ming after Yongle engaged in retrenchment from Inner Asia and the seacoast, it was determined to absorb the southwest frontier. After each round of rebellions, the Ming court only tightened its grip on this region. The Ming introduced the policy of *gaitu guiliu*, gradually replacing indirect rule by native chieftains (*tusi*) with direct rule by centrally-appointed officials. Native rulers gradually lost their autonomy as Ming officials increasingly intruded into their awards, promotion, punishment, and inheritance. In 1413, a separate province, Guizhou, was created out of the Yungui plateau to facilitate direct control. The Ming also sent in millions of Han settlers – both military colonists and peasant migrants – who gradually outnumbered indigenous populations. In the early Qing, Wu Sangui further consolidated direct rule over Yunnan and Guizhou. After the Qing court repressed Wu's rebellion and reasserted central control, it was no longer in doubt that the two provinces had solidly become Chinese territory.

In light of Yunnan's experience, Vietnam and Korea certainly benefited from longer geographical distances and more united resistance. They also had the fortuity that the Ming had its attention diverted to the Mongols and Yunnan. Nevertheless, late Qing officials continued to assert that Vietnam and Korea belonged to China. Although the Qing's hold over Vietnam and Korea was tenuous, their claims over Manchuria, Mongolia and Tibet were not much stronger. If the Qing dynasty in its dying bed and the Chinese Republic in its baby crib managed to secure other regions, why did Vietnam and Korea escape this fate?

It is possible that French colonization of Vietnam and Japanese colonization of Korea played *some* role in preventing their incorporation into modern China. When Vietnam and Korea threw off the yoke of imperialism, they came to enjoy the post-WWII norm of national self-determination. In the post-war era, international politics was no longer a game of might making right, international recognition came to the aid of smaller states. This is not to say that colonization guaranteed ultimate independence. (Nor does any unintended positive outcome excuse French and Japanese imperialism.) Modern China was remarkably successful at convincing the international community that it had absolute sovereignty over the former colonies of Manchuria, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau.[88] Manchuria and Taiwan were promptly returned to China after the Japanese surrender. And Hong Kong was taken off the 1972 United Nations list of colonies subject to decolonization. Nevertheless, the colonial legacy created third parties that would have complicated any diplomatic efforts at winning international recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Vietnam and Korea.

Conclusion

In modern times, Vietnam and Korea have continued to serve as burying grounds for invading troops, not just Chinese, but also French and American. Not even the U.S. with its superior firepower could easily subdue either Vietnamese or Koreans. If the present is any guide, it is hardly surprising that pre-industrialized China had even more limited ability to dominate these states in the past. What is more surprising is that Chinese leaders have repeatedly failed to learn from history. Each generation has had to re-learn the lesson the hard way. Despite the long record of pyrrhic victories from ancient

[88] I thank Kirk Larsen for bringing up these examples.

times down to the 1980s, the current leadership still holds the mentality that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact."[89]

[89] Kurlantzick 2015.

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