

**When Anti-Eurocentrism Becomes Sinocentrism:  
The “Clash of Civilizations” Narrative in Sinocentric IR**

Victoria Tin-bor Hui  
Associate Professor  
Department of Political Science  
University of Notre Dame  
217 O’Shaughnessy Hall  
Notre Dame, IN 46556  
thui@nd.edu

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\*Prepared for presentation at the panel “Why Global IR needs Global History,” the International Studies Association Annual Convention, San Francisco, April 3-8, 2018.

“[T]o be or not to be Eurocentric – that is the question,” declares John Hobson in *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics*.<sup>1</sup> A wave of critical works agitate that International Relations (IR) needs to overcome “its British and North American roots.”<sup>2</sup> Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan champion *Non-Western International Relations Theory*.<sup>3</sup> Arlene Tickner and Ole Wæver introduce *International Relations Scholarship Around the World*.<sup>4</sup> Acharya further calls for a “Global International Relations” that “transcends the divide between the West and the Rest” by building theories “from societies hitherto ignored as sources of IR knowledge” and “integrating the study of regions and regionalisms into the central concerns of IR.”<sup>5</sup> As critical scholars move their gaze from the Western end of the Eurasian continent to the Eastern end, they find in China the poster child for non-Western IR. As Acharya and Buzan observe, China “has its own long history of international relations that is quite distinct from that of the West.”<sup>6</sup> Hobson rejoices that China perfectly “undermines” Kenneth Waltz’s assumption of anarchy.<sup>7</sup> David Kang contends that the East Asian “tribute system emphasized formal inequality between states” and was “marked by centuries of stability,” in contrast to the European system which “emphasized formal equality between states” and was “marked by incessant interstate conflicts.”<sup>8</sup> It is indisputable that China should be integrated into “Global IR.” However, this wave

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<sup>1</sup> Hobson 2012, 344. Hobson, John. 2012. *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Acharya 2014, 647. Amitav Acharya, “Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds A New Agenda for International Studies,” *International Studies Quarterly* (2014) 58, 647–659.

<sup>3</sup> Acharya, Amitav, and Barry Buzan. 2010. *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives On and Beyond Asia*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Tickner, Arlene, and Ole Wæver, eds. 2009. *International Relations Scholarship Around the World*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Acharya 2014, 647.

<sup>6</sup> Acharya and Buzan 2010, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Hobson 2012, 211.

<sup>8</sup> Kang 2010, 2. David Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

of scholarship tends to fall into the “well-known traps” of “excessive nationalism and parochialism.”<sup>9</sup> Relativism means that efforts to escape from Eurocentrism have paradoxically produced Sinocentrism. To establish genuine “Global IR,” scholars must self-consciously avoid “ethnocentrism and exceptionalism irrespective of source and form” and recognize “a broader conception of agency... that includes resistance” on the part of weaker actors.<sup>10</sup>

This paper first highlights the degeneration of the agenda to develop non-Western IR into Sinocentric IR. While Sinocentrism is not inherently more problematic than Eurocentrism, scholars seem unaware of Sinocentrism’s potential to share the worst ills of Eurocentrism. The most troubling is the “civilized Chinese versus barbarous nomads” trope that is similar to Huntington’s infamous “the West versus Islam” talk. The paper further examines how the so-called Confucian peace is based on a racist differentiation of the Confucianized versus the uncivilized. The distinctive peacefulness of the historical Asian order rests with an untenable exclusion of Inner Asian entities as “sub-humans.”

### Sinocentric IR and China’s Rise

To begin with, “the historically close nexus between power and the production of IR knowledge” has been reproduced in the recent turn to Chinese IR.<sup>11</sup> Critical scholars frequently cite Robert Cox’s mantra that “[t]heory is always for someone and for some purpose.”<sup>12</sup> Hobson concurs that Western IR theory is almost “always for the West and for the Western interest.”<sup>13</sup> Tickner and Wæver agree that “the study of international relations is conducted primarily from

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<sup>9</sup> Acharya 2011, 624. Acharya, Amitav (2011) Dialogue and Discovery. In Search of International Relations Theories Beyond the West. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39 (3): 619–637.

<sup>10</sup> Acharya 2014, 647.

<sup>11</sup> Acharya 2011, 625.

<sup>12</sup> Cox 1981, 128. Cox, Robert. 1981. “Social Forces, States, And World Orders.” *Millennium* 10 (2): 126–155.

<sup>13</sup> Hobson 2012, 16.

a specific geopolitical site (the United States) that happens to be the most powerful country in both international affairs and the discipline itself.”<sup>14</sup> If it is true that IR scholarship inexorably reflects the perspective of the most powerful players in global politics, then it is no coincidence that efforts to develop non-Western IR are dominated by research on China. Chinese IR scholars are particularly eager to become “producers” rather than “consumers” of knowledge commensurate with China’s emerging superpower status.<sup>15</sup> As Acharya observes, Chinese scholars’ attempt to construct a “Chinese School” along the model of the “English School” aims to “provid[e] a theoretical basis for China’s ‘peaceful rise’.”<sup>16</sup> To demonstrate that it is in China’s DNA to remain peaceful even when it is dominant, much of the Sinocentric scholarship has zoomed in on Confucian pacifism. It is common for articles and books to outline Confucian concepts such as “benevolence” (*ren*), “virtue” (*de*), “great harmony under heaven” (*tianxia datong*), “kingly authority” (*wangdao*), and so on, and then conclude that China’s historical IR was one of Confucian benevolence.<sup>17</sup> While some scholars maintain modest claims about Chinese peacefulness,<sup>18</sup> others lay bolder claims to the superiority of Chinese benevolence over Western hegemony.<sup>19</sup> However, if “American exceptionalism” finds expression in its “self-serving global

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<sup>14</sup> Tickner and Wæver 2009, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Wang 2009. Wang, Yiwei. 2009. “China: Between Copying and Constructing.” In *International Relations Scholarship Around the World*, edited by Arlene Tickner and Ole Wæver, 103-119. New York: Routledge.

<sup>16</sup> Acharya 2011, 625.

<sup>17</sup> Qin 2010a; Qin 2010b; Ren 2010; Yan 2011. For a critique, see Victoria Hui, “Confucian Pacifism or Confucian Confusion?” in Andreas Gofas, Inanna Hamati-Ataya, Nicholas Onuf, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of the History, Philosophy and Sociology of International Relations*, Sage, 2018, pp. 148-161.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Callahan and Barabantseva 2012; Guo and Blanchard 2008; Li and Worm 2011; Qin 2006, 2010; Ren 2010; Yu 2008. Yu Bin, ‘China’s Harmonious World: Beyond Cultural Interpretations,’ *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 13, no. 2, (2008): 122. Qin Yaqing, ‘Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?’, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 7, no. 3 (2007): 313-40; Sujian Guo and Jean-Marc Blanchard, *Harmonious World and China’s New Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Xuetong Yan confidently claims that the Confucian concept of benevolence “will influence international norms and make international society more civilized.” Yan Xuetong, ‘The Rise of China in Chinese Eyes,’ *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, no. 26 (2001): 37-8.

interventionism ,” we should be wary of Chinese exceptionalism that similarly presents itself as “homogenous, unique, and superior.”<sup>20</sup> If IR scholars are skeptical of the West’s claim to promote freedom and democracy, we should be equally mindful of imperial China’s proclamation to champion Confucian pacifism. An agenda that challenges the unhistorical nature of Eurocentric IR should not conflate rhetoric with history.<sup>21</sup>

### The “Clash of Civilizations” Redux

David Kang develops a refined exceptionalist argument that avoids making an indefensible blanket statement about Confucian pacifism but falls into a worse trap. Historians of China’s military history suggest that China’s relations with its neighbors were far from peaceful. Morris Rossabi 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.”<sup>22</sup> Kang reconciles the Confucian peace with China’s military history by distinguishing between “Sinicized states” and “nomadic nonstates.”<sup>23</sup> He argues that “the comparative “peacefulness” of early modern East Asia was limited to relations among the major states.”<sup>24</sup> 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.”<sup>25</sup> China and the “Sinicized states” of Korea, Vietnam, and Japan formed a “Confucian society” because they

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<sup>20</sup> Acharya 2014, 651.

<sup>21</sup> See Victoria Hui, “History and Thought in China’s Traditions,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 17, 2, June 2012, pp. 125-141; “Building Castles in the Sand: A Review of *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5, 4, Dec. 2012, pp. 425-449.

<sup>22</sup> Rossabi 2011, 512. Rossabi, Morris. 2011. Review of *East Asia Before the West*. *Political Science Quarterly* 126 (3): 511-512.

<sup>23</sup> Kang 2010, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Kang 2010, 93.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

“shared ideas, norms, and interests.”<sup>26</sup> China’s relation with Confucianized states was unequal but peaceful and stable.<sup>27</sup> The neighbors, on their part, voluntarily submitted to China’s hegemonic status because they admired and emulated China’s Confucian civilization. Shared culture and language further facilitated diplomatic exchanges. In sharp contrast, China and “nomadic” nonstates formed a “parabellum society.” Because “nomads had vastly different worldviews, political structures, and cultures than the Sinicized states,” they naturally ‘resisted Confucian cultural ideas’.<sup>28</sup> Robert Kelly adopts this line of analysis, pointing out a “Long Peace” “rooted in shared, war-reducing Confucian ideals”<sup>29</sup> among Confucianized states, even though “China was clearly not that peaceful” and fought “non-Confucians.”<sup>30</sup> Ji-young Lee follows the same “vision of a bifurcated world,” arguing for “distinctively different patterns and logics of international order” in East Asia versus Inner Asia.<sup>31</sup>

This modified Confucian peace argument is intuitively appealing to IR scholars because it is analogous to, first, the English School theory that states sharing a common culture can escape the state of war and form an “international society,”<sup>32</sup> and, second, the democratic peace theory that democracies do not fight each other even if they are not pacifist.<sup>33</sup> Problems emerge if we look deeper into the civilizational division.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>27</sup> Kang 2010, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 10. Many steppe populations were in fact settled agriculturalists with advanced civilizations. The Mongol empire employed Central Asians rather than Chinese to fill its bureaucracy.

<sup>29</sup> Kelly 2011, 408.

<sup>30</sup> Kelly 2011, 421.

<sup>31</sup> Lee 2017, 17. Ji-young Lee. *China’s Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination*. Columbia University Press, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Buzan and Little 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Russett 1994.

It is surprising that scholars who are normally critical of “binary and mutually exclusive categories”<sup>34</sup> do not recognize the problematic nature of this Sinocentric billiard-ball conception of cultures. While it is true that Chinese records repeatedly mention the Confucianized (*hua*) and the barbarous (*yi*), they are self-contradictory about the distinction. Cox acknowledges this ambivalence by citing Wang Gungwu in noting the tension between “the myth of inclusiveness of ‘all-under heaven’” and “a realistic recognition of differences.”<sup>35</sup> Interestingly enough, while Chinese scholars applaud Kang’s claim of Chinese pacifism, they champion the “holist worldview” of “all under heaven” as “different from the Western dualistic view” of “inevitable conflict”<sup>36</sup> and as superior to Huntington’s “splitting world outlook.”<sup>37</sup> Qin Yaqing even argues that “the most distinct feature of Chinese culture” is the rejection of the “either-or dichotomous treatment” in favor of “the *zhongyong* dialectic” which views any opposites as “complementary in nature and inclusive of each other.”<sup>38</sup>

It is even more disturbing that IR scholars who decries the “clash of civilizations” thesis for justifying “European exclusion, chauvinism, and racial superiority”<sup>39</sup> are unaware that the modified Confucian peace commits exactly the same sin. Kang, Kelly, and Lee essentially argue that the shared Confucian civilization produced peace while the clash of Confucian-barbarian civilizations produced war. Cultural differentiation is sinister because it prescribes “a civilizing

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<sup>34</sup> Acharya 2014, 649.

<sup>35</sup> Cox 2010, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Qin 2010a, 42; Ren 2010, 113; Zhao 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Wang 2009, 111.

<sup>38</sup> Qin 2014, 287-288. Qin Yaqing, Continuity through Change: Background Knowledge and China’s International Strategy, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2014, 285–314.

<sup>39</sup> Acharya 2014, 656.

mission in which higher cultures should help lower cultures to ‘improve’.”<sup>40</sup> Hobson condemns this “dark side” of the English School.”<sup>41</sup> As Sogo Suzuki explains, the much celebrated “international society” was historically “Janus-faced” – while “civilized” members treated one another with civility, they were “entitled to introduce the trappings of ‘civilization’ into ‘backward’ states (by force if necessary).”<sup>42</sup> Hobson further points out that imperialism works through “cultural conversion” as well as military conquest, so that the researcher should locate “the key imperial civilizing mission trope where the hegemon takes on the guise of a benevolent father who teaches his children.”<sup>43</sup> Hobson somehow believes that China was not “imperialist”<sup>44</sup> and is blind to the uncomfortable similarities between Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism. Be it the differentiation between the “civilized Chinese” and the “uncivilized barbarians” in the “perceived attainment of Confucian ‘virtue’,”<sup>45</sup> or the characterization of the relations between China and its neighbors as a “benign” one “between father and sons,”<sup>46</sup> Hobson cannot see past his own colored lenses. It does not take very deep reading of Chinese history to realize that Confucian scholar-officials depicted the Xiongnu and other Inner Asian peoples as sub-humans to which Confucian benevolence did not apply. This Han dynasty diagnosis was reiterated through the millennia: The Xiongnu, “with their human faces and animal hearts, are not of our kind. When strong, they are certain to rob and pillage; when weak, they come to submit. But their nature is

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<sup>40</sup> Buzan and Lawson 2016, 514. Buzan, B., & Lawson, G. (2016). Theory, history, and the global transformation. *International Theory*, 8(3), 502-522.

<sup>41</sup> Hobson 2012, 19, 21, 226; also Suzuki 2011, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Suzuki 2011, 142. Suzuki, Shogo. 2011. *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society*. London: Routledge.

<sup>43</sup> Hobson 2012, 211, 25, 201.

<sup>44</sup> Hobson 2012, 211, 25, 201.

<sup>45</sup> Suzuki 2011, 183, 55.

<sup>46</sup> Qin 2010a, 42.

such that they have no sense of gratitude or righteousness.”<sup>47</sup> When barbarians were seen as “enem[ies] of virtue and humanity,”<sup>48</sup> it became a moral duty to send out punitive expeditions to teach them a lesson. The Qing dynasty “exterminated” the Zunghar Mongols because they had “turned their back on civilization.”<sup>49</sup> As Kelly notes, “non-Confucians could be Confucianized by force for their own good by ‘righteous war’.”<sup>50</sup>

Iain Johnston suggests that the turn to civilizational narratives does not have to be the “Huntington redux,” if “civilizational identities are... recognized as complex, malleable, constructed phenomena to be explained.”<sup>51</sup> Alan Patten likewise cautions that civilizations should be seen as “fluid, interactive, and overlapping and as internally contested and heterogeneous” rather than as “determinate, bounded, and homogeneous.” However, the refined Confucian pacifism argument holds only by committing what Patten calls the “dilemma of essentialism.”<sup>52</sup> The differentiation between Confucianized states and nomadic entities must be razor-sharp to make historical Asia peaceful by definitional fiat.

### Peace by Exclusion of the Uncivilized

Kang’s *East Asia Before the West* begins with this statement: East Asia was so stable that “Hideyoshi’s invasion of Korea [the Imjin War] marked the only military conflict between Japan,

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<sup>47</sup> Jiu Tang shu [Old Tang History], 194A, 5162, reprinted in Liu, 1975. Liu, Xu (1975) *Jiu Tang shu [Old Tang History]*. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju

<sup>48</sup> Zhu and Wang 2008, 273. Zhu, Zhongbo, and Ning Wang (2008) ‘Discourses on salt and iron and China’s ancient strategic culture’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2(2): 263-86.

<sup>49</sup> Perdue, 2005: 431-2. Perdue, Peter C. 2005. *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

<sup>50</sup> Kelly 2011, 413.

<sup>51</sup> Johnston 2012, 62. Johnston, A. Iain. 2012. “What (If Anything) Does East Asia Tell Us About International Relations Theory?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 15: 53–78. For a discussion of civilizational narratives in modern Asia, see Katzenstein 2012.

<sup>52</sup> Alan Patten 2011, 735.

Korea, and China for over six [sic: should be 'nearly five'] centuries" in 1368-1841.<sup>53</sup> Kang adds additional wars 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 [the Imjin War] (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).<sup>54</sup>

Kang adopts the widely-cited *Chronology of Wars in China Through Successive Dynasties* published by the People's Liberation Army press which lists 831 campaigns for the period 1368-1841.<sup>55</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I set aside how Kang generates six "major wars," and focus on the differentiation between "Sinicized states" and non-Sinicized nonstates. Kang renders East Asia peaceful by counting only the first two as "wars between Sinicized states." He excludes other "wars" because one side was not a "Sinicized state." However, if the differentiation between "Sinicized states" and "nomadic nonstates" is less rigid and more malleable, then three of the excluded wars on his own list must be added back – the "Manchu conquest of China," the "Manchu invasions of Korea," and the "Chinese conquest of Xinjiang." (The Opium War may stay excluded because it involved a non-Asian power.) Moreover, if "nomadic" regimes cannot be

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<sup>53</sup> Kang 2010, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>55</sup> People's Liberation Army 2003. People's Liberation Army. 2003. *Zhongguo lidai zhanzheng nianbiao* [Chronology of Wars in China Through Successive Dynasties], 3ed. Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press

justifiably excluded, Kang would have to go back to the raw data and re-examine other wars in historical records.

To be fair, Kang examines institutional as well as cultural differences between “Sinicized states” and “nomadic nonstates.” “Nomads” fall under “nonstate actors”<sup>56</sup> because they were “scattered, mobile tribes composed of small number of families.”<sup>57</sup> However, he misses the dynamism of the steppes. As James Millward points out, while “nomads usually lived and herded in small family groups,” they “could form large, militarily powerful imperial confederations” to “unify vast steppe territories and conquer agrarian states to the south.”<sup>58</sup> Such was the case when Inner Asian regimes formed hybrid dynasties in the first millennium, when the Mongols established the Yuan dynasty, and when the Manchus founded the Qing dynasty. Kang lists four criteria for distinguishing between states and nonstates: shared boundaries, state institutions, international rules, and Confucian culture. Do these markers of stateness nevertheless justify the civilized-barbarian distinction?

*Shared Boundaries.* Kang defines states as those “that established political control over defined territory.”<sup>59</sup> Territoriality is an important signifier because “a political entity coherent enough to define itself over geography and to negotiate a fixed... border with another entity requires considerable organization, institutionalization, and a set of ideas shared with the other political entity.”<sup>60</sup> Kang presumes that China’s borders with Vietnam and Korea were largely settled by the eleventh century.<sup>61</sup> He neglects that the Han and subsequent dynasties had

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<sup>56</sup> Kang 2010, 88.

<sup>57</sup> Kang 2010, 144.

<sup>58</sup> Millward 2013, 12. James A. Millward, *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 63, 65, 84.

conquered northern Korea and northern Vietnam and turned them into Chinese provinces. This is why the Ming was motivated to “recover” northern Korea in 1388 (not included on Kang’s list) and Vietnam in 1407. The Ming Dynasty was also suspicious of Vietnamese intention. The 1599 General Gazetteer of Guangxi suggests that the Vietnamese “dare not to encroach on” Ming territory only because of “the superior military force of the native chiefs.”<sup>62</sup> If China’s borders with its Confucianized neighbors were at times contested, those with “nomads” were not always conflictual. When the Ming entered into an agreement with Altan Khan in 1571, the Mongol leader “promised to respect Ming borders.”<sup>63</sup> Territorial demarcation, therefore, does not support the Confucianized-nomadic distinction.

*Shared State Institutions.* It is often overlooked that Confucianism refers to not just a set of norms, but also the model of centralized administration. China’s centralized bureaucracy was “the most advanced technology for social control and administration.”<sup>64</sup> In Kang’s own words, “it was a model that offered solutions” to the “practical problems” of how to centralize authority and extend control over territories.<sup>65</sup> This archetype was widely emulated by all neighbors in Inner and East Asia. Therefore, the Mongols “established enduring administrative institutions,” the Manchus developed “a stable government with laws [and] bureaucratic structures,” and the Zunghar Mongols set up “state-like apparatus of rule.”<sup>66</sup> The Manchus were particularly avid students of the “broader ruling tradition” in China’s dynastic histories.<sup>67</sup> Peter Perdue makes an

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<sup>62</sup> Shin 2007, 56. Shin, Leo K. 2007. *The Making of the Chinese State: Ethnicity and Expansion on the Ming Borderlands*. London: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>63</sup> Wang 2011, 142.

<sup>64</sup> O’Harrow 1979, 174.

<sup>65</sup> Kang 2010, 43; also Woodside 2006, 26-29.

<sup>66</sup> Kang 2010, 143, 103, 142.

<sup>67</sup> Elliott 2005, 61-63. Elliott, Mark C. 2005. “Whose Empire Shall It Be?” In *Time and Temporality in the Ming-Qing Transition*, edited by Lynn Struve, 30-72. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

explicitly Tillyan argument in asserting that the decades-long Manchu-Zunghar rivalry drove both belligerents to engage in “competitive state-building.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, it is curious that Kang uses the label “Chinese conquest of Xinjiang (1690 and 1757),” thereby reducing what Perdue calls a “genocide”<sup>69</sup> into “a natural... process of... bringing order and civilization to largely ‘wild’ areas.”<sup>70</sup> It could be that the state-nonstate distinction was a matter of degree, because Kang suggests that the Zunghars “never developed the same centralization ... as did the Sinicized states.”<sup>71</sup> Yet, Kang also observes that Japan “was clearly less statist in its organization” in comparison to Korea and Vietnam.<sup>72</sup>

*Shared International Rules.* Did international rules divide East Asia into two worlds? Kang’s own discussion suggests a negative answer. “Even political units that rejected Confucian notions of cultural achievement – such as the nomads – accepted the larger rules of the game, the way hierarchy was defined, and the manner in which international relations was conducted.”<sup>73</sup> He then retreats from an institutional argument and returns to a cultural argument. Kang maintains that although ‘nomads’ “accepted the more fundamental aspects of the tribute system, they resisted Confucian cultural ideas, and thus crafting enduring or stable relations with them was difficult.”<sup>74</sup> Yet, as we shall see, China also experienced difficulty in crafting diplomatic relations with Japan.

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<sup>68</sup> Perdue 2005, 549, 18, 518.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>70</sup> Kang 2010, 140.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 8, 107.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 10.

*Shared Culture.* To complicate matters, the acceptance or rejection of Confucian culture was also a matter of degree. After Confucianism was spread to Korea and Vietnam by the Han dynasty's conquests, the Koreans and Vietnamese had taken it as their own. As Kang puts, Korea regarded the ongoing borrowing of Confucian culture as "the revitalization of a link with the past in which Korea itself had a prominent part."<sup>75</sup> What Kang gets wrong about "shared culture" is his conflation of Confucianization with Sinicization. Kang uses the terms "Confucianized states" and "Sinicized states" interchangeably. This follows the Sinocentric tendency to monopolize Confucianism simply because Confucianism was born in northern China. However, Confucianism should be analogous to Christianity in that Confucianized states saw themselves as "sharers within a larger circle" of a universal civilization, of which China was only a leading member.<sup>76</sup> Confucianization, thus, did not necessarily mean acceptance of China's superiority. Indeed, Kang observes that the embrace of Confucianism in Japan was meant to be an equalizer to dilute China's claim to supremacy, as status rankings should be "based not on size but on culture."<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Vietnam and Korea "adopted many Chinese practices in order to preserve... autonomy and independence."<sup>78</sup> Notably, they commissioned "history writing as boundary maintenance... against Chinese hegemony" and "to establish a record of autonomy from China."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>76</sup> O'Harrow 1979, 174; also Woodside 2006, 25. O'Harrow, Stephen. 1979. "Nguyen Trai's 'Binh Ngo Dai Cao' of 1428: The Development of a Vietnamese National Identity." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 10 (1): 159-174. Woodside, Alexander. 2006. *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea and the Hazards of World History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>77</sup> Kang 2010, 78.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 35, 39.

It is worth mentioning an even broader “shared culture” in historical Asia – Buddhism.<sup>80</sup> As Acharya observes, it is “revealing that the key proponents of a Chinese School lean heavily on Confucianism... rather than the more pan-Asian strands of thinking, especially Buddhism.”<sup>81</sup> Buddhism connected “the whole of Asia from Iran to Japan” with a shared faith, values, institutions, and even diplomatic tools.<sup>82</sup> After “the Buddhist conquest of China”<sup>83</sup> from the first century onwards, the famous Chinese monks, Faxian (337?-422?), Xuanzang (600?-664) and Yijing (635-713), travelled to India and returned with eyewitness accounts depicting India as a “holy land,” “a civilized and advanced society,” and even “the center of the world.”<sup>84</sup> As Buddhism spread across Inner and East Asia, it forged “a common identity” among diverse ethnic groups.<sup>85</sup> In diplomatic relations, monks were appointed as envoys and Buddhist items were exchanged as gifts.<sup>86</sup> If Buddhism, instead of Confucianism, is chosen as the primary cultural marker, then most of “nomadic” regimes should be seen as “civilized” like China.

On the whole, Kang’s criteria produce no sharp distinction between “Sinicized states” and “nomadic nonstates,” but only different degrees of stateness. It is true that “nomadic” entities were not fully “Sinicized,” but Korea, Vietnam, and Japan likewise experienced “only partial Sinicization” because “Chinese ideas were grafted—sometimes uncomfortably—onto... vibrant indigenous cultures.”<sup>87</sup> If Korea and Vietnam were nevertheless more “Sinicized” because they

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<sup>80</sup> Kang mentions Buddhism only in passing. Kang 2010, 46-47.

<sup>81</sup> Acharya 2011, 625.

<sup>82</sup> Sen and Mair 2012, 55; Milward, *Silk Road*, 17-18.

<sup>83</sup> Wong 2003, 93. Wong, Bin. 2003. “Beyond Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism.” *Science & Society* 67 (2): 173–184.

<sup>84</sup> Sen and Mair 2012, 6, 50. Sen, Tansen, and Victor H. Mair. 2012. *Traditional China in Asian and World History*. Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies.

<sup>85</sup> Wong 2003, 82.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 58, 60.

<sup>87</sup> Kang 2010, 26, 52.

had been Chinese provinces, Japan and Manchu Qing confounded the civilizational divide. Let us turn to what may be called the “Japan problem” and the “Manchu problem” for Kang’s argument.

*The Japan Problem.* Takashi Inoguchi best captures the “Japan problem” – “Japan is part of Asia, but somewhat separate from Asia.”<sup>88</sup> Kang argues on page one that “Japan was a part of the Chinese world.”<sup>89</sup> However, 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.<sup>90</sup> Lee observes that the Fairbankian model of “China’s world order” sees Japan as moving from the Sinic zone to the Outer zone.<sup>91</sup> Japan first challenged Chinese 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.”<sup>92</sup> In 1382, Prince Kanenaga wrote to the Ming: “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?”<sup>93</sup> Ashikaga Yoshimitsu later tried to restore the lucrative tribute trade by signing “subject, the king of Japan,” but he would be denounced by generations of Japanese elite.<sup>94</sup> Japan’s defiance became hardened after Shintoism was established as “a Japan-centered ideology” and Matteo Ricci’s world map was

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<sup>88</sup> Inoguchi 2010, 63. Inoguchi, Takashi. 2010. “Why Are There No Non-Western Theories of International Relations? The Case of Japan.” In *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, edited by Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, 51-68. New York: Routledge.

<sup>89</sup> Kang 2010, 1.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 69, 77, 55, 79.

<sup>91</sup> Lee 2017, 94.

<sup>92</sup> Wang Zhenping 2005, 141. Wang, Zhenping. 2005. *Ambassadors from the Islands of Immortals: China-Japan Relationships in the Han-Tang Period*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>93</sup> Wang 2011, 149. Wang, Yuan-kang. 2011. *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

introduced at the turn of the seventeenth century.<sup>95</sup> Ringmar speaks of the Tokugawa (1600-1868) and Sinocentric worlds as “two East Asian systems.”<sup>96</sup> However, he does not highlight how subversive the idea was to the China-centered hierarchical worldview. Viewed in the historical perspective, Huntington was not so far off to make Japan its own civilization rather than grouping it with the China-centered Confucian civilization.<sup>97</sup>

*The Manchu Problem.* If Japan “remained on the edge,”<sup>98</sup> the Manchus were curiously members of both the “Sinicized” and “nomadic” worlds. Kang’s “Confucian society” refers to the period 1368-1841, meaning that the Manchurian Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) must be coded as the leader of the “Confucian society.” Yet, Kang also argues that the Manchus were “nomads.”<sup>99</sup> He seems to treat the Manchus as “nomads” before the conquest of Ming but as “Chinese” afterwards—reflected by the labels “Manchu invasions of Korea (1627 and 1637)” but “Chinese conquest of Xinjiang (1690-1757).”<sup>100</sup> Kang cites Pamela Crossley in arguing that the Manchus were “never completely Sinicized.”<sup>101</sup> Indeed, Hong Taiji (r. 1626-1643) imposed an injunction against the adoption of “the ‘Chinese way’ of liquor, leisure, and riding in sedan chairs,”<sup>102</sup> which Manchu elites followed until the dynasty’s collapse in 1911. Nor were the Manchus seen as Confucianized by their contemporaries. In China, Ming loyalists fiercely fought against what they deemed barbarian conquerors. When resistance failed, scores of Confucian scholars committed

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<sup>95</sup> Ge 2011, 168-170, 118.

<sup>96</sup> Ringmar 2012, 1. Ringmar, Erik. 2012. “Performing International Systems: Two East-Asian Alternatives to the Westphalian Order.” *International Organization* 66 (1): 1–25.

<sup>97</sup> Huntington 1993, 28, 45. Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, 3, 1993, pp. 23-49.

<sup>98</sup> Kang 2010, 55.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 149. See also Crossley 2002.

<sup>102</sup> Elliott 2005, 47.

suicide, joined Buddhist monasteries, or fled to Vietnam and Korea. For all the “Confucianized states,” the Manchu conquest was seen as a symbol of the disappearance of Confucian civilization on Chinese land. In Vietnam, the Nguyen court “prided itself on being closer to the Tang model than China itself.”<sup>103</sup> In Korea, the ruling court similarly “positioned itself as a new Confucian ideological center in lieu of the now defunct Ming empire.”<sup>104</sup> Lee examines “what if China .... was no longer identified with... Confucian moral authority?” and finds that “tribute practices” with the Qing “became humiliating drudgery to Korean envoys.”<sup>105</sup> In Japan, Lee finds the same “contempt” for the Manchus.<sup>106</sup> Japan even “saw the Manchu conquest as transforming ... China from civilized to barbarian” – as shown by Hayashi Shunsai’s “The Chinese-Barbarian Transformation” published in the 1730s.<sup>107</sup>

The state-nonstate distinction is thus deeply confounded by the “border-crossing” Japanese and Manchus. If Japan was on the edge like “nomadic” entities, then it is unclear as to why it is considered a “Sinicized state.” If it is true that by definition that “nomads” could not be Sinicized, then the Manchu Qing should be excluded from the “Confucian peace.” Alternatively, if the Manchus could be “Sinicized” by conquering Chinese territory and ruling Chinese subjects, then there must be more than two interstate wars. If the Manchus were shunned as barbarians by “Sinicized states,” then the answer to “why some states did not fight”<sup>108</sup> must lie outside of a shared Confucian pacifism.

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<sup>103</sup> Womack 2010, 206.

<sup>104</sup> Lee 2017, 23.

<sup>105</sup> Lee 2017, 45.

<sup>106</sup> Lee 2017, 22.

<sup>107</sup> Kang 2010, 69.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

In addition to the Manchus who established the Qing dynasty, the Mongols also established the Yuan dynasty and other Inner Asian regimes controlled northern China in different periods. If Inner Asian regimes that succeeded at conquering China are seen to automatically become Confucianized, one has to further ask why the same ethnic groups (especially the Mongols and the Jurchens/Manchus) would accept Confucian civilization when they controlled China and rejected it when they were driven out. In the end, we are left with the argument that there was peace only when other states publicly submitted to China's superior status. Kang makes precisely this point when he quotes Truong Buu Lam in agreement: "The Vietnamese kings clearly realized that they had to acknowledge China's suzerainty and become tributaries in order to avoid active intervention by China in their internal affairs."<sup>109</sup>

### Conclusion

If IR scholars should be mindful of the "to be or not to be Eurocentric" question, they should be equally wary of the parallel "to be or not to be Sinocentric" dilemma. IR theory should, of course, incorporate non-Western perspectives. However, the agenda for "Global IR" should not degenerate into "neomarginalization" when "attempts to respect diversity and become more inclusive in IR theories have led to opposite outcomes."<sup>110</sup> The danger is that the escape from one "-centrism" only runs into another "-centrism." The worst of any "-centrism" is the presupposition that one's in-group is civilized and superior, while "the Other" is barbarous and backward. The problem with the modified Confucian peace argument is that historical East Asia

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<sup>109</sup> Lam 1968, 178; Kang 2010, 102. Lam, Truong Buu (1968) 'Intervention versus tribute in Sino-Vietnamese relations, 1788-1790', pp. 165-79, in John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>110</sup> Acharya 2014, 657.

is made peaceful first by a racist distinction between the Confucianized and the barbarous and then by excluding all conflicts involving the latter. This Sinocentric variant of the “clash of civilizations” is not only morally repulsive, but also empirically untenable.

Efforts to develop “Global IR” should therefore pay the utmost attention to Acharya’s last two principles: eschewing exceptionalism and recognizing multiple forms of agency including resistance of the weak.<sup>111</sup> Even Acharya comes somewhat short in this regard. While he cautions IR scholars that “[s]ome efforts to invoke the Chinese tributary system as the basis of a new Chinese School of IR” raise the possibilities of “cultural exceptionalism and parochialism,” he nonetheless presumes as unproblematic “the East Asian international system among China and its neighbors with its deep sense of legitimized hierarchy.” Even Lee, who observes the prevalence of “resistance,” “defiance” and “contempt” in Korean diplomatic documents, nevertheless views tributary practices as generally accepted.<sup>112</sup> IR scholars should take more seriously historians’ consensus that “China’s neighbors did not accept the imperial center’s definition of hierarchy and subordination, but interpreted ritual relationships in their own way.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Acharya 2014, 649, 652.

<sup>112</sup> Lee 2017, 23, 45-46, 136-137. See also “Review of Ji-Young Lee’s *China’s Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017),” H-Diplo Roundtable Review, Feb. 5, 2018 (<https://issforum.org/roundtables/10-8-China>)

<sup>113</sup> Perdue 2015, 1002. According to Perdue, “‘tribute system’ is an English term, created by Western scholars, to describe a mystical, ineffable Oriental reality which is claimed to be inaccessible to Western or Eastern minds—except the mind of the Oriental scholar himself. This claim to superior knowledge of an ineffable entity is precisely Edward Said’s definition of Orientalist discourse.” Perdue 2015, 1006. How, then, should we understand tribute practices? “‘Tribute’ is a translation of the Chinese term *gong* 貢, meaning the exchange of gifts in return for favors... We could interpret the meaning of *gong* much more accurately if we see ‘tribute’ as a kind of pidgin language: an intercultural means of communication through words, objects and human relations. Like the pidgin of the south China coast, or the many intercultural trading languages of Central Eurasia, including Sogdian, Persian and Mongolian, the terminology and practices of *gong* adapted to local situations in order to facilitate trade and diplomacy. The use of this language in no way implied the unique superiority of China or a fixed understanding of

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the relationship between the emperor and Heaven. Whatever 'cosmological bluster' the emperor and his advisors engaged in, his counterparts attached their own meanings to it." Perdue 2015, 1009