Did Confucius Dream about the Balance of Power?

New Orientalism in Search of the World Majority

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DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2025-23-4-192-217

Abstract
Amid the growing debate about the World Majority, one key question is: what countries does it comprise? Some suggest that the World Majority's countries constitute civilizations in which the history of interstate relations "has never been understood in terms of competition, fierce struggle, or anarchy, which can be counterbalanced only by power predominance of individual states or alliances." This article considers that thesis in light of East Asia's traditional tributary system, and the degree to which it retains influence on modern China's views on international relations. Foreign policy ideas, characteristic of Sinocentric East Asia, are analyzed using classical ancient and medieval texts, some unfamiliar to IR specialists. The results

cast doubt on a historical-tradition-based conceptualization of the 'World Majority.'

Keywords: international relations theory (IRT), tributary system, Westphalian system, East Asian political thought, anarchy, hierarchy, alliances, balancing, bandwagoning, hegemony, moral pragmatism.

"Extreme is my decay.
For a long time, I have not dreamed,
as I was wont to do,
that I saw the duke of Zhou."

Confucius. *Analects*, 7:5
(Translated by James Legge)

Political thought either explains (conceptualizes) or justifies (legitimizes) political action. In the first case, the constraints and incentives for research are primarily theoretical and methodological. But in the second, scholars may be guided by pressing contemporary issues, leading to careless generalizations and ungrounded conclusions. The more sensitive the issue, the higher the risk of such error.

A glaring example of such generalization was provided by Timofei Bordachev following the November 2024 Valdai Club conference. Contrasting the World Majority countries' vision of international politics with "traditional European reasoning characterized by categorical judgments and the search for conflict as the most important driver of change in the world economy and politics," he claims that the history of interstate relations in these countries "has never been understood in the European conceptual framework: competition, tough struggle and anarchy, which can be counterbalanced only by power predominance of individual states or alliances." He describes the non-European way of thinking as reflecting a "geographical environment... where there can be no permanent allied relations and no conflicts of high ideological charge" (Bordachev, 2024).

This suggests two important methodological theses. Civilizations can be categorized based on which models of historical-political thinking they ***do not possess*** (negative essentialization). And Western IR is unable to adequately explain and describe the political thought and behavior of the World Majority countries.

Doubts about the universality of Western theories are far from new in IR (see, for example, the already classic works of Acharya and Buzan, 2007; Hobson, 2012). But East Asia, with its special reverence for history and written records, provides a uniquely useful basis for analyzing the history of IR thought, including the above claims regarding it.

Discussion of East Asian (mainly Chinese) political thought, and its influence on political behavior, probably began with the article by Qin Yaqing (2007) on the ideological and philosophical foundations of a potential 'Chinese school of IR.' Gradually, others joined and expanded the discussion (see a brief overview of some of the arguments in: Kozinets, 2016, pp. 107-108; Kang, 2020). However, even before that, Russian sinologists had discussed two different lines of traditional Chinese thinking about the world order: the universalist and expansionist 'world-building monarchy'; and the contractual, isolationist system of equal states (e.g., Goncharov, 1986, pp. 5-6, 12).

Quite illustrative is the discussion between John J. Mearsheimer and Yan Xuetong on the relationship, in the Chinese historical and modern political tradition, between power (including the nature and effectiveness of the balance of power) and morality, between norms and behavior, and between hegemonic aspirations and their containment (Dialogue, 2013; Mearsheimer, 2014; Yan, 2016). Both scholars eagerly turned to historical evidence for their positions, which are equally distant from each other's and from Bordachev's. Mearsheimer maintains that China's historical policy is that of a great power: "China has behaved just like other great powers, which is to say it has a rich history of acting aggressively and brutally towards its neighbors," using Confucian maxims to ideologically and morally justify that aggression (Mearsheimer, 2014). Yan Xuetong, on the contrary, considers Confucian (and any other) morality to have real limiting or stimulating effects on foreign policy behavior (Yan, 2016, pp. 6-8).

I suggest expanding this discussion by turning to works that are fairly well known to East Asia scholars, but not to IR experts.

EAST MEETS WEST: IS THE WORLD A PUBLIC REALM OR A BATTLEFIELD OF POWER POLITICS?

In late August 1880, upon returning from a diplomatic mission to Tokyo, Chosŏn official Kim Hongjip presented King Kojong with the *Strategy for Korea* (朝鮮策略) authored by Chinese diplomat Huang Zunxian. This "policy paper par excellence" (Hirano, 2005, p. 3) is considered emblematic of Chinese foreign policy thinking of that period. It analyzed Korea's international situation, identified Russian expansion as the main threat,[1] and proposed countermeasures.

Huang Zunxian identified Russia as the main threat on several grounds: its enormous size, the strength of its army and navy ("more than a million elite soldiers and… more than two hundred large ships"), and its "natural-historical" expansionism. Regarding the latter, the *Strategy* emphasized that Russia was inexorably approaching Korea's borders and warned: "If Russia wants to seize [new] territories [in East Asia], it will certainly begin with Korea" (Huang, 1880, pp. 47-48). To counter Russian expansion, the *Strategy* recommended that Chosŏn "keep close to China, build ties with Japan, ally with the United States, and pursue a policy of self-strengthening" (Ibid).

For IR specialists, Huang Zunxian's arguments strongly resemble (in some cases, almost verbatim) Stephen Walt's determinants of external threat perception, formulated more than a century later: aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability, and offensive intentions (Walt, 1985, p. 9). In fact, Huang Zunxian's proposal of external balancing (international alliances) and internal balancing (self-strengthening), against the would-be regional hegemon (Russia), parallels Kenneth Waltz's balance-of-power theory (1979, p. 168). The term 'balance of power' (均勢) was familiar to Huang Zunxian (Huang, 1880, p. 53).

The *Strategy* produced a very strong impression on the Chosŏn political establishment. Wang Kojong ordered its wide distribution.

[1] This was apparently the first holistic conceptualization of the 'Russian threat' in East Asia.

It was met with hostility by traditionalist Confucians,[2] but inspired modernizers for many years. In the fall of 1885, young Korean intellectual Yu Kilchung compiled a *Treatise on Neutrality* (中立論), proposing a foreign policy based largely on the *Strategy*. In his view, international relations are altogether predatory: "The desire of the strong to annex the weak, the desire of a great state to absorb a small one—this is a natural impulse of human nature" (Yu, 1885, p. 321). And states are aggressive: "[hidden] in the depths of the soul of each state, the blades (i.e., warmongering) have not dissipated" (Ibid, p. 325). Yu Kilchung was skeptical about the effectiveness of the balance of power: "The Russians have long had their eye on us but have not yet dared to move. Although it is believed that [they] are restrained by the balance of power, in reality they are afraid of China"[3] (Ibid).

Doubting the effectiveness of bilateral treaties, Yu Kilchung proposed creating a system of multilateral agreements that would guarantee Korea's neutrality and at the same time promote "the self-preservation of other countries" (Ibid, pp. 326-327). He essentially construed an East Asian collective security system based on mutual treaties and guarantees. China was to lead this system, given its moral and military authority. In fact, Yu Kilchung called for ensuring Korea's security primarily at the expense of China (Huh, 2017, p. 58), since in such a configuration the latter would lose its exclusive position as Korea's suzerain.

Huang Zunxian and Yu Kilchung's ideas are still in demand today—at least in South Korea. Yu Kilchung's influence is seen in South Korea's interpretation of 'middlepowermanship' (Shin, 2012, pp. 138-139), and the provisions of the *Strategy* are used by publicists to describe China's own expansion into the Asia-Pacific region and means of counteracting it (Chosun Ilbo, 2013).

Yet Huang Zunxian's and Yu Kilchung's insights are not flawless as evidence against the claim that in East Asian political thought

[2] It sparked a massive and fierce petition campaign against the political innovations and against Kim Hongjip himself.

[3] In this regard, his theorizing lagged behind practice: Korea had already tried to "ally with France to protect itself from Russia" in the 1860s (Vradiy, 2015, p. 77), as well as "contain the Qing with the help of Russia" (precisely when Yu Kilchung was writing—hence the work was not published at the time).

the concept of alliances and balancing did not exist. After all, they interpreted not only the *empirical experience* of Chinese and Korean interactions with Western powers, but also the *theoretical postulates* of Western thinkers. Huang Zunxian must have been familiarized with the 'balance of power' in Japan (where it had become firmly entrenched in political discourse (Hirano, 2005, p. 28)) while serving in the Qing embassy. Yu Kilchung, like many East Asian thinkers of that period, was fascinated by the ideas of social Darwinism, so his idea of the "survival of the strongest" in the international arena was inspired—at least partly—by Western concepts.

Who, then, should Huang Zunxian and Yu Kilchung (and dozens or hundreds of other East Asian modernizers) be considered: renegades who rejected tradition, or innovators who relied on that tradition? After all, both the *Strategy* and the *Treatise* are replete with references to the history of Sino-Korean relations, giving special importance to the centuries of uninterrupted friendship (Huang, 1880, p. 48; Yu, 1885, p. 325), which contradicts Bordachev's claim of the absence of "permanent allied relations" in East Asia. Of course, in both cases, the relations in question are those between a suzerain and a vassal. However, as will be shown below, these relations did not differ much from the asymmetric patron-client alliances described by James Morrow (1991) a century later.[4] Anyway, to understand whether the East Asian political tradition rejected (or shared) Realpolitik, it is necessary to turn to the preceding—imperial—period.

INTO THE PAST: 'SERVING THE GREAT' OR BANDWAGONING WITH THE HEGEMON?

The international relations of the Sinocentric civilization are called the 'tributary system'[5] (Fairbank, 1968), and generally modeled as

[4] Nor have they necessarily changed that much in the meantime. Prominent Russian Korea expert Alexander Vorontsov once witnessed a Chinese historian trying to convince his American counterpart that China had always come to the aid of Korea, fighting major wars three times (in the 600s, 1600s, and 1950-1953) to repel invaders, and there is no reason to suspect that it would not do so again were Korea (the DPRK) threatened again.

[5] In China, the term 冊封體制 ('the system of distributing appointments,' i.e., investiture) was and is still commonly used.

concentric circles, with China (the Middle Kingdom) in the center, surrounded by internal vassals, external vassals, and finally foreign 'barbarians.' The further from the center, the less 'civilized' (i.e., subject to Chinese socio-political influence), and the more Chinese policy towards them relies on 'military force' (武)—termed 'pacification', like that of internal disturbances—rather than 'culture' (文).[6] External (non-Chinese) polities, sufficiently "civilized" to recognize the Middle Kingdom's unconditional primacy, were included in this system as vassal tributary states. At different times, these included Japan, Korea, and various states in Central, South, and Southeast Asia. While autonomous in domestic policy, their rulers received investiture, regnal seals, and regnal calendar mottos (or permission to use Chinese ones) from the Chinese emperor. Per the principle "a retainer cannot engage in foreign relations/diplomacy" (人臣無外交) in the classic Confucian *Liji — Book of Rites* (禮記), tributary rulers had no formal right to conduct foreign policy[7] beyond regular tributary missions to China. This complex system of ritual-symbolic relationships was based on the principle of "serving the Great" (事大), meaning unconditional recognition of China's moral and political primacy.[8] The civilizational (cultural, economic, and military) superiority of the Middle Kingdom over its vassals ensured the coherence and stability of the Sinocentric structure of international relations. For instance, China's script served as a political and literary *lingua franca*, its political institutions were taken as models, etc.

This system resembles Walt's "world of bandwagoning" taken to the absolute (or absurd) (Walt, 1985, p. 14). Weaker states have no ability to deny or challenge the hegemon's supremacy; just as there are not two suns in the sky, there cannot be two Sons of Heaven

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6 This dichotomy between culture and military power parallels the above-mentioned discussion between Yan Xuetong and Mearsheimer.

7 For example, until the end of the 19th century, Korea did not use the term 外交 ('diplomacy, foreign policy') at all (Min, 2018, p. 179).

8 In Korean historiography since the late 19th century, this principle (now known as *sadaejuŭi*, 사대주의, 'the ideology of serving the great') has almost always been interpreted as discursively consolidating Chinese domination over Korea, depreciating the Korean nation. The word has gradually taken on a more general meaning of 'political servility' towards any power.

in the Celestial Empire. However, in contrast to Walt's model, the absence of alternatives to the hegemon eliminates the very possibility of power competition. (Though, hypothetically, a single defeat by an aggressor from outside the system may signal a power transition (ibid.).) Absent an external threat, the other participants in such a system have mainly 'neighborly relations' (交隣); this term, going back to Mencius and somewhat different from the modern睦隣, is often associated with the principle of 'serving the great.' Ambassadors from China's neighbors were more likely to meet each other at the Imperial Court than their countries' troops were to meet on the battlefield. Competition between external vassals was reduced to rivalry for the Chinese emperor's favor, which was greater the more 'cultured' (i.e., Sinicized) they became.

Chinese traditional thought simply could not posit the internationalness of relations between polities, so there was no need for a theory of international relations (Qin, 2007, pp. 322-324). The paternalistic nature of the world order—'unequal but benign' (Ibid, p. 330)—reproduced ideal family relations. "The father should be the father and the son should be the son"[9] both within China and in its relations with neighbors. In such an 'international family' there—allegedly—could be no thought of 'harsh struggle and anarchy' or of 'conflicts of high ideological intensity.' "There is extensive evidence that East Asian units did not balance power and that smaller units did not ally to balance a larger threat" (Kang, 2020, p. 81).

To Sinicize China's neighbors and extend the range of this model's operation, sophisticated means of nonviolent cultural influence were developed. Jia Yi (200–168 BC), a dignitary of the Han Empire, in a report similar in structure and logic to Huang Zunxian's Strategy, proposed 'five baits' (五餌) to pacify the Xiongnu tribes that were terrorizing the empire. Inviting the Xiongnu elite to the court, it was necessary

[9] Part of one of Confucius's most famous aphorisms about the principles of governing a state (Analects, 12:11). Numbers in the references to Chinese and Korean classical works indicate chapter (卷) and section or page in the original edition (except Tao Te Ching, which has no chapters). The numbering for Chinese works has been verified via the Chinese Text Project website (https://ctext.org/zhs).

to "seduce[10] their eyes" with luxurious clothes, chariots, and a lavish escort; "seduce their lips" with an exquisite feast in their honor; "seduce their ears" with various amusements and performances; "seduce their womb/souls,"[11] by providing them with comfortable accommodation that "surpasses all that [they have had] before;" and "seduce their hearts" through the Emperor's "parental kindness and affection." And then the Xiongnu would submit without a fight (Xin Shu, 4:4).

Other means of nonviolent political control included dynastic marriages and the exchange of high-ranking hostages. Liu Jing, another dignitary of the Han Empire, suggested that the emperor marry his daughter to the Xiongnu leader in order to addict him (and his descendants) to wealth and luxury. Their behavior would change over time "due to greed for valuable things." He also proposed sending rhetoricians "to delicately instruct them in the rules of conduct and ritual" (Shiji, 99:6).

Dynastic marriages not only influenced the elites of neighboring states, but also offered justifications for those neighbors' annexation, as when the Mongol Yuan Empire in the 14th century tried to incorporate Koryŏ on the basis of several generations of marriages between Koryŏ princes and Mongol princesses. As for exchanging hostages, it was sometimes condemned in China and in neighboring countries. The 12th-century Korean *Histories of the Three Kingdoms* states that "exchanging...sons as hostages is unworthy of the behavior of even the Five Hegemons"[12] (Samguk sagi, 45:1397). Yet the practice continued.

The system of center-periphery (Middle Kingdom vs. barbarian aliens) relations was codified during the Han Empire (202 BC—220

[10] In the English-language literature, this term is usually translated as 'to corrupt', but 壞 also means 'to seduce' or 'to win the favor' of someone. The latter translations better describe this approach and its similarity to 'soft power.' ("Seduction is always more effective than coercion, and many values like democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities are deeply seductive" (Nye, 2004, p. x).)

[11] Remarkably, 腹 translates to both 'belly/womb' and 'soul.'

[12] The Five Hegemons were five strong principalities of the Spring and Autumn period (770-481 BC) that were peripheral to the Middle Kingdom and acted independently of the Zhou Empire. Traditional historiography treats them ambivalently. They defended the Middle Kingdom from external barbarians, but they also seceded from the Zhou kingdom, making themselves traitors and usurpers in traditional Confucianism.

AD) based on the even older socio-philosophical principles of the Zhou ritual. Until the end of the 19th century, they underwent no significant change, despite the serious revision of Confucianism in the 1000s-1200s and various regional political upheavals (Qin, 2007, p. 323). At the end of the 19th century, in the minds of East Asian intellectuals, the imaginary tributary model of world order encountered the no less imaginary Westphalian model, producing the works of Huang Zunxian, Yu Kilchung, and many other authors of that period (Larsen, 2013, p. 233).

However, over such a long period, the political reality of the Celestial Empire often differed from the model. China saw periods of fragmentation, when state entities ruled by "native Chinese" (華) and barbarians (夷) competed for hegemony.[13] While China sometimes defeated the barbarians, other times its government was vassalized or overthrown by them. Would-be Sons of Heaven had to "look both strong and potentially dangerous" in order to attract bandwagoning; client states would abandon their patrons for stronger alternatives at the slightest sign of weakness; and international disputes were resolved by strength—all characteristic to the "world of bandwagoning" (Walt, 1985, p. 14). In this environment, alliances were indispensable.

As early as the Han period, Chao Cuo (c. 200–154 BC) described alliance-building as follows: "…to serve the strong [is] the disposition of a small state; [to enter] into an alliance with a small one in order to attack a large one [is] the disposition of a state equal [in strength to its rival]; to use barbarians…to attack barbarians [is] the disposition of the Middle Kingdom" (Han Shu, 49(19):22). Later, his concept was reduced to the textbook phrase 'use barbarians against barbarians.' Huang Zunxian's and Yu Kilchung's understanding of 'balance of power' is often traced to this saying (see, for example, Hirano, 2005, p. 29; Vradiy, 2015, p. 77). But that is, obviously, not quite correct: Chao Cuo clearly distinguished between bandwagoning ("serving the great"), balancing (uniting against an equal), and wedging (between barbarians) (see, e.g., Wang, 2013, p. 222).

[13] The turbulent events of the 200s-300s AD provided the basis for the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a cornerstone of the Chinese (and general East Asian) cultural code.

In Chinese historiography, the strategy during periods of dissolution was often described as 'keep distance from the strong and align with the weak' (离强合弱). Kissinger's *rapprochement* with China similarly aligned the U.S. with the weaker side against the stronger USSR (Kissinger, 1979, p. 178). Cheng Yawen, of Shanghai University, now similarly argues that the weaker China and Russia should align against the stronger U.S.: "What would be the result of allying with a stronger major power to eliminate a relatively weaker one? History provides classic examples: the Northern Song Dynasty allied with the Jin Dynasty to destroy the Liao, only for the Jin to turn around and destroy the Northern Song; similarly, the Southern Song allied with the Mongols to defeat the Jin, only to be later conquered by the Mongols themselves" (Cheng, 2025).

In their discussion of Cheng Yawen's article on the *Sinification* portal, Thomas Geddes and James Farquharson (2025) placed it in the broader context of the debate on the conflict in IR between interests and values (indeed, one of the sections of Cheng Yawen's article is named as such). This conflict in its various guises is equally characteristic of East Asian and Western sociopolitical and moral thought. However, in the spirit of Confucian historiography, a small comment is required before moving on to the discussion of morality.

HISTORIOGRAPHER'S COMMENTARY[14]

The tributary model acquired a new perspective when IR scholars entered the discussion and compared its structural characteristics (the distribution of relative power and political equality/inequality of its actors) with those of the Westphalian model. The long life of the tributary system and the vagueness of its geographical boundaries (both still debated by historians—see Kozinets, 2016, p. 111) exposed examples of political behavior that was neither benign nor peaceful.

This has allowed realists to claim that the tributary system has operated differently in various periods of the balance of power, but

[14] Per the standards laid down by Sima Qian, *Annals* are only factual regnal chronicles, while *Historiographer's Commentaries* (史論) are special sections in Confucian historical works dedicated to the authors' judgements and discussion of moral issues and political behavior.

that difference was determined exclusively by the actors' relative power. The system was indeed hierarchical when power was distributed asymmetrically: a "crude relationship of power between the strong and the weak" was established, "masked [by] benign Confucian rhetoric" that served as "the facade of [a] tribute system" that "disproportionately served its [own] interests" (Wang, 2013, p. 209). But "when power symmetry existed between political actors, diplomatic parity became possible" (Wang, 2013, p. 209).

Realists see the abovementioned ill-fated Song Empire as the strongest evidence for this thesis. In 1005, through the Chanyuan Treaty, the Song recognized the Khitan Liao Empire as equal. The Liao ruler was titled Emperor, and the Song actually paid the Liao a regular tribute. (This was officially termed "assistance with military expenditures" (Wang, 2013, p. 217), although the Khitans themselves were less ceremonious in internal correspondence, directly stating: "Gold and silver were submitted as tribute to support our army" (Tao, 1988, p. 29).) Subsequently, in the 12th century, the Song Empire was forced to recognize itself a vassal of the Jurchen (Jin) Empire.

The latter refutes Qin Yaqing's claim that East Asian relations were not conceptualized as international. In fact, the system governed not its participants but the relations among them, making these relations—and their perception by autonomous actors—truly international. The ban on vassals' foreign policy was in fact ignored for almost the entire existence of the system; it held only during the Ming and Qing Empires (and even then not absolutely; Korea and Japan regularly exchanged embassies until 1811, when the Koreans stopped due to the expense). The concept of 'equal treaties'—'equal in ritual' (同等之禮)[15] or 'concluded in jasper and silk' (玉帛)—existed in China long before the Chanyuan Treaty of 1005 (Kozinets, 2016, p. 110).

The Middle Kingdom's management of vassals was repeated by the vassals themselves vis-a-vis their own vassals, with China deliberately motivating them to this end. When the king of Koguryŏ complained to the Wei Emperor in 504 that the Paekche and Wuji peoples were

[15] This is what Yu Kilchung called the Korean-Western treaties of 1885. Subsequent historiography would term them the exact opposite.

blocking tribute to the Imperial Court, he was sharply rebuked and ordered "to use all measures of violence or pacification to… restore peace among the people of the eastern areas,… so that tribute revenues are not interrupted…" (Samguk sagi, 19:529).

The political upheavals of the 1000s-1200s, caused by the Song's reduced status, had a significant impact on Chinese political thought. Faced with the Emperor's obvious incapacity for world-building by spreading his virtue abroad, Song philosophers declared his prime mission to be domestic: the harmonization of his own state. Only after its accomplishment could he set about harmonizing All Under Heaven (Goncharov, 1986, pp. 262-263). This further devalued military force, as a foreign policy tool, in the eyes of Confucians.

Under later dynasties, when the state's borders almost reached those of All Under Heaven, harmonizing the state ceased to be a means to an end, and became the end itself. This ruled out equal international relations, making the neighbors' nominal and symbolic vassalage a tool for Chinese rulers' domestic political legitimization. The Song "diplomacy of equals" practice was condemned as morally reprehensible, both from an ideological and practical points of view (Goncharov, 1986, pp. 264-266). Today, Cheng Yawen's lamentations of the Song's political shortsightedness cited above seem to reflect those attitudes.

Vassalage did not always ensure security (Wang, 2013, p. 213)—neither from aggressive neighbors nor from China itself. At the end of Korea's unification in the mid-7th century, the already doomed Paekche and Koguryŏ kingdoms continued to send tributary missions to the Tang court (Samguk sagi, 22:608-609; 28:728), although the offensive alliance between the Tang Empire and the Korean state of Silla was no secret to them. Vassalage did not guarantee China's security even during periods of its unconditional forceful dominance. For example, Silla recognized its vassaldom and the Tang's superior power, yet it still retook by force the parts of Korea that had been occupied by the Tang after the defeat of Koguryŏ and Paekche. The King of Silla feared that such behavior might be immoral: "For our sake the Tang army defeated the enemy. If we fight against them, will Heaven forgive us?"

But his closest adviser, Kim Yusin—described in the *Histories of the Three Kingdoms* as a paragon of Confucian virtues—replied: "Although a dog fears its master, if the master steps on the dog's paw, the dog bites the master. How can we, when faced with difficulties, not [try] to save ourselves?" (Samguk sagi, 42:1130).

Thus, it is not even entirely true that stability and peace have been guaranteed when China is strong, a belief shared by idealists[16] and realists[17] alike.

Furthermore, while realists recognize the tributary system's flexibility (Wang, 2013, p. 217), they try to explain it exclusively through changes in the balance of power. They cherry-pick the most vivid cases of power politics in action (such as the period of Song-Liao-Jin rivalry) and extend them to the entire East Asian history. However, this causal mechanism is questionable if states use diplomacy instead of force.

Realists also overlook internal cultural-political factors. For instance, the Song's weakness vis-a-vis the northern nomads may have been a product of its "reasoned pacifism" and commitment to culture rather than military force (Fairbank, 1992, pp. 109, 117). In the Song, military officials were subordinate to civilian ones, and the military was less prestigious than scholarship.

Realism holds that China should have welcomed discord between its neighbors, yet in fact it constantly sent them rescripts calling for reconciliation.

When the Koreans discovered in 1712 that a Qing official had erroneously drawn part of the Sino-Korean border in favor of Korea, the Koreans were compelled by morality and righteousness to inform (albeit with some hesitation) the Qing government of the mistake (Chesnokova and Trubninkova, 2025, p. 109).

Realist logic also cannot comprehend the subtleties of East Asian diplomatic protocol, which envisioned mutual legitimation through

[16] "When China has been strong and stable, order has been preserved" (Kang, 2003, p. 66).

[17] "Apparent peace among the Confucianized states can be explained by Chinese power domination over lesser states—there was no need for war because the weaker states had already submitted to China" (Wang, 2013, p. 214).

definition of status[18] and allowed the weaker side to make rather demonstrative gestures symbolizing its ambitions. (See the story of the *Tower of Bright Snow* (明雪樓) as a symbol of Choson's cultural resistance to the Qing (Gale, 1902; Chesnokova, 2017, p. 119).)

Realists are also unable to explain why the Ming Empire, at the height of its power and influence, relinquished political and economic expansion in favor of an isolationism that ultimately crippled it.

Realism's main weakness, though, is its treatment of the tributary system as *political behavior* (following Fairbank) rather than *ideological construct*, ignoring Qin Yaqing's remark that this system is an ideational construct and should be considered precisely as such (Qin, 2007, pp. 327-328).[19]

This explains why realists use just two quotes from Confucius and Mencius, about the possibility of just wars, to conclude that Confucianism has stimulated rather than restrained Chinese practice of Realpolitik (Hui, 2011; Wang, 2013, p. 213; Mearsheimer, 2014). Mearsheimer goes even further, insisting that claims about Confucianism's inherent peacefulness "do not reflect how Chinese elites have actually talked and thought about international politics over their long history… There is little historical evidence that China has acted in accordance with the dictates of Confucianism" (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Therefore, to explain the Tang Empire's recognition of Silla's reconquest of Korea, realists would claim that China was distracted by confrontations with the Tibetans and Turkic peoples. But a Confucian (at least if he is Korean) will cite the Chinese commander Su Dingfang: "The Silla sovereign is benign and loves [his] people, and his dignitaries [show] loyalty in serving the state. Those of lower rank serve their seniors as fathers or elder brothers. [Therefore], although [the country] is small, it is impossible to figure out [how to conquer it]" (Samguk sagi, 42:1330). This emphasis on morality and virtue, over military force, was repeated generation after generation. Naturally, one of the

[18] For example, Wang distinguishes (incorrectly, to my mind) between real age and political status in relations between the Song and Liao Emperors "[Physical] seniority, not status, determined how each emperor was addressed" (Wang, 2013, p. 217).

[19] Only Kirk Larsen (2013) seems to regard both the tributary and Westphalian systems as imagined, i.e., constructed.

tasks of the *Histories of the Three Kingdoms* was to legitimize Silla's military unification of Korea and succession by Koryŏ; another was to assert—in the context of an indirect dispute with Koryŏ's radical 'nativists,' who had called for Koryŏ's greater independence, even at the cost of conflict with China's "barbaric" empires (see below)—Silla's doctrine of ritual vassalage to China.

RETURNING TO THE ROOTS: VIRTUE ETHICS, OR A WAR OF ALL AGAINST ALL?

While the roots of Western IR theory are traditionally located in Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War,* those of Chinese IR theory can be traced in the earliest Chinese historical works. The oldest chronicle, *Chunqiu (Spring and Autumn Annals)*—believed to have been compiled by Confucius himself—is strangely silent on morality and virtue, while descriptions of wars and foreign policy (including military alliances) make up almost two-thirds of the chronicle (Deopik, 1999, pp. 217, 241). Next in value and chronological order is *Zhan Guo Ce (Strategies of the Warring States)* from the 1st century BC. It, too, does not discuss morality, but deals with the diplomatic techniques of warring kingdoms. It contains key ideas of the School of Diplomacy (縱橫家), also known as the School of Vertical and Horizontal Alliances. The two main representatives of this school—and political adversaries—were Su Qin (380-284 BC), who built a 'vertical alliance' of six kingdoms against the hegemonic Qin state, and Zhang Yi (before 329-309 BC), an advisor to the Qin whose 'horizontal' alliances with the same kingdoms sought to split the anti-Qin bloc.

The names of these alliances reflect both their geography (the minor kingdoms ran from north to south, while the Qin was located to the west of them all) and their structure (*Han Feizi* describes the difference between them: "a vertical alliance is the unification of many weak ones to attack one strong one; a horizontal alliance is service (subordination) to one strong one to attack many weak ones" (Hanfeizi, 49:11)).

Zhan Guo Ce was so 'non-Confucian' in character that, after the Han, it was classified as a 'dangerous' book (Vasilyev, 1968, p. 9-10). However, the concept of vertical and horizontal alliances has survived in

the political thought of China and its neighbors, albeit as an example of political treachery and baseness (縱橫). In a letter to Silla king Munmu, Tang commander Xue Ren-Gui reproached him for "not following righteousness/justice/morality, neglecting goodness, and listening to talk about the vertical and horizontal" (Samguk sagi, 7:222-223).

The 'intellectual delegitimization' of the School of Diplomacy, if it ever actually took place, was seemingly part of the Han Empire's rethinking of all preceding intellectual heritage (including Confucius) (Tseluiko, 2024). This involved reassembling imperial ideas, now based on condemnation of the tyrannical Emperor Qin Shi Huang, on morality and virtue, and on the attendant limits to autocracy, cruelty, and belligerence.[20]

The Qin Empire's negative example became crucial to Confucianism. Today, researchers rightly note that the Chinese treated 'barbarians' with disdain and arrogance, emphasizing their inherent cruelty, rudeness, and greed (Wang, 2013, pp. 217-219). China's Confucianized neighbors did the same: in the *Ten Injunctions* (訓要十條) (attributed to the founder of the Korean state of Koryŏ), Khitai (not yet equal to the Chinese Emperor or suzerain of Koryŏ) is called "the land of birds and beasts," i.e., savages (Chesnokova, Kolnin and Glazunova, 2023, pp. 252-253). But such attitudes and epithets were more often connected to the Qin Empire,[21] which was described as a barbaric country, a predator "like a wolf and a tiger" (豺虎), "devoid of moral principles" (無道). These invectives became a stereotypical designation of the hostile Other in East Asia. They were deployed by Silla commander Kim Yusin against Koguryŏ and Paekche (Samguk sagi, 41:1309), and by Huang Zunxian (Huang, 1880, p. 48), and Yu Kilchung (Yu, 1885, p. 325) against Russia. Today, South Korean publicists equate modern China with the aggressive Qin Empire (Cosun Ilbo, 2013).

[20] This logic can also be traced in Yan Xuetong's concept, which distinguishes between tyrannical and hegemonic types of world order. Tyrannical world order is fundamentally immoral. Hegemonic world order ensures a relatively more peaceful existence, although it is still based on distorted morality (Yan, 2016, pp. 23-24).

[21] Which seems to be historically wrong, since the Qin largely inherited the customs and rituals of the Zhou Empire, which was an undisputed moral and institutional model for Confucius and generations of his followers.

Confucianism as political thought formed in chaos, anarchy, and brutal struggle that were eventually contained by centralized rule. While Western political philosophy tries to organize anarchy (including in international relations), Confucian philosophy seeks to harmonize it. It attributed a civilizing mission to the Empire, aphoristically described by Confucius as the settlement of a noble man among barbarians: "If a superior man dwelt among them, what rudeness would there be?" (Analects, 9:13).

The moral and ethical content of the IR system ritualized East Asian diplomacy, forming a complex system of symbolic communications. It included not only the traditional notion of 'serving the great', but also the parallel principle of 'serving the small' (事小),[22] consonant with Taoist 'self-abasement': "a great state, by condescending to small states, gains them for itself; and small states, by abasing themselves to a great state, win it over to them" (Tao Te Ching, 61). In practice, this created a multi-level dynamic hierarchy with interdependent ritual-political relations, which inclined the participants towards peaceful methods of influence rather than violence. In this system, investiture, and other privileges granted by the suzerain, legitimized him as much as they did the vassal, and the vassals could use the suzerain's interests to elevate their international status. If there were several claimants to hegemony, vassals could hedge between them (as the DPRK did between the PRC and the USSR). Relations between the Chinese and Korean states provide ample examples of such interdependence.

In the 6th century, the rival Chinese kingdoms of Wei and Liang vied for the attention of Koguryŏ, which sent embassies to both Wei and Liang, and received lavish gifts and high titles in return. Koguryŏ was then quite powerful; a century later, the Sui Empire tried and failed to conquer it.

Later, the competition between the Song, and the Khitan states of Liao and Jin convinced Koryŏ's intellectual and political elites that Koryŏ was their equal in culture, civilization, and power (Breuker,

[22] Mencius coined both terms to denote world-building strategies but saw 'serving the small' as morally superior and as dependent upon a deeper understanding of the principles of world order (Mencius, 梁惠王下).

2010, p. 256). Koryŏ thus took some rather bold (and not always successful[23]) actions and proclaimed its ruler the Son of Heaven. At the height of this sentiment—and amid the Song's clear decline in the early 1100s—some of the Koryŏ nobility demanded that King Injong proclaim Koryŏ an empire and attack the Jin (Breuker, 2010, p. 408). This ended in disaster,[24]but the point is that the idea of several emperors (equal, sovereign rulers within one international system) did not seem treasonous to Koryŏ's Confucian elite, which would have been happy for their ruler to become one such emperor.

Such political opportunism based on moral imperatives[25] could be called *moral pragmatism*. Within its framework, following morality is *beneficial*, since it provides relative security and even prosperity, while force alone cannot guarantee them and generates irresponsible aggression.[26] Moral behavior must be supported by power, but this stems less from strength than from virtue. The use of force is permissible, but only as a last resort when facing an inevitable threat. After all, in both the Imjin War (1592–1596) and the Korean War (1950–1953), China came to its vassal (Chosŏn) or ally (the DPRK)'s aid only when the vassal/ally was on the verge of total defeat, presenting an immediate threat to China itself. Moreover, memory of the dire consequences of these interventions (Ming Empire's collapse and China's nearly being targeted by U.S. nuclear strikes (see Dingman, 1988–1989)) may explain China's current wariness of alliances.

In Chinese tradition, morality (義) and profit/interest (利) seem antagonistic, incompatible like water and oil: according to Confucius, "the superior (noble) man thinks of virtue (righteousness/justice/

[23] Koryŏ not only scornfully rejected Liao's offer of investiture, but also considered attacking it to reclaim the 'ancestral lands of Koguryŏ.' When Liao shifted to demands and then to force, the Song (Koryŏ's official overlord) refused to come to Koryŏ's aid.

[24] After the king's refusal, the supporters of the idea rebelled, but were suppressed and executed by Kim Pusik, who later authored and compiled *Histories of the Three Kingdoms*, becoming the first Korean historiographer.

[25] For instances of such behavior in the history of Sino-Korean relations, see Robinson, 2017, p. 95; Chesnokova, 2017, pp. 117-119; Wong, 2021.

[26] According to *Samguk Sagi*, the Sui Empire and the Koguryŏ state collapsed precisely due to their excessive confidence in their military might (Samguk sagi, 22:603, 619).

morality); the small man thinks of comfort (benefit/advantage/profit)" (Analects, 4:11). However, such a rigorist approach (which still cannot be downgraded to the proverbial 'greed is bad') has been questioned by various Chinese philosophers,[27] and now seems to be in disfavor. At the 23 October 2024 BRICS summit, Xi Jinping said that "a man of virtue regards righteousness as the greatest interest" (Xi, 2024). This is yet another example of moral pragmatism since here the (national) interest is imbedded in righteousness and virtue (i.e., values), while righteousness and virtue are designated as the core interest. Russian sinologists have actively discussed the 'rehabilitation of benefit/interest' in China's foreign policy lexicon (Zuenko, 2024), but this discussion seems to have remained confined to a narrow circle of sinologists and have gone almost unnoticed by IR experts (more on morality in Chinese current political discourse see: Kubat, 2018; Global Times, 2025).

The discussion about East Asian traditional foreign policy thought is far from over. At this point, its participants seem to be moving away from radical positions. David Kahn has proposed a compromise, albeit extremely vague, idea: "There is nothing essential about China that is either exclusively warlike or peaceful. Rather, different issues at different times with different adversaries can lead to a different propensity to use violence" (Kang, 2020, p. 78). Still earlier, the tributary system was similarly described by Zhang Feng (2009), who is believed to have coined the term 'moral realism.' In general, the postmodernist idea, that uncertainty and contingency underlie the world order, is increasingly penetrating discussions of East Asia: "The study of East Asian history shows that international orders are probably more contingent—and the range of political units more diverse—than the individualistic, sovereign and equal, states-in-anarchy assumptions that underlie virtually all ostensibly universal theories of international relations (Kang, 2020, p. 89).

[27] Beginning with the Mohists, who in the 5th–3rd centuries BC maintained that virtuous (i.e., value-based) behavior was beneficial for both the individual and society (and, ultimately, for the entire All Under Heaven),) and thus contributed to the Chinese reading of 'common good' (Bonch-Osmolovskaya, 2024).

This discussion and its impact on the foreign policy behavior of modern China and East Asian countries would benefit from greater Russian involvement. So far, Russian experts—despite their knowledge and experience—have confined themselves to overviews (Grachikov, 2012, 2019; Lomanov, 2025) and detailed articles related more to domestic than to foreign policy (Denisov and Adamova, 2017; Lomanov, 2017, 2023; Bashkeev, 2023).

CONCLUSION: NEVER SAY NEVER

The above evidence is, of course, far from exhaustive. It is meant to illustrate my argument, not to substantiate a Confucian Theory of International Relations.

Yet it amply demonstrates that alliances, as a means of either containing or strengthening a would-be hegemon, are not only recognized in East Asian political thought, but are foundational to it. Anarchy was also recognized, but considered contradictory to the proper world order, and thus subject to pacification (primarily through the civilizing influence of the cultural hegemon, but also through the conclusion of alliances and use of force if necessary). Crucially, these ideas emerged in East Asia independently of the West—hence East Asian thinkers' acceptance (to varying degrees) of Western IR concepts in the late 1800s.

The primacy of morality and virtue in Confucianism drove it towards thinking about what *ought to be*, rather than what *is*, with major effects on political development throughout the region. The reproduction of Chinese imperial institutions (including elements of the tributary system)—by vassals, rivals, and even invaders—testify to the attractiveness and utility of the system's teachings,[28] but also point to a potential for the 'ideologically-intense conflicts' that Bordachev rejects. "It is not surprising that units that rejected Confucianism and Sinic notions of cultural achievement are engaged in conflict with those that embraced Sinic culture" (Kang, 2020, p. 81). Morality itself cannot guard against value-based conflicts, as it always asserts the priority of *certain* values.

[28] Qin Yaqing's (2007, pp. 327-328) argument is also largely based on the primacy of *ought to be* over *is*.

Value-based conflicts have occurred in many of the countries of the World Majority—from 'Confucian civilization' and beyond. In China, there has been Maoism and its export. In Iran, the Islamic revolution and its export. In the DPRK, a foreign policy identity is built on anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism.

In historical and political analysis, it seems meaningless to reduce traditional Western and Eastern IR thought to the Westphalian and tributary systems, respectively, and those in turn to an 'anarchy of equal sovereignties' and 'hegemonic hierarchy,' respectively. Both models describe political reality, and perception thereof, only within certain spatial and temporal limits.

Equally flawed are attempts to define the political culture of a country or group of countries by attributes that they *lack*. Ascribing certain 'non-Western thinking' to all (or even some) non-Western countries is akin to 'new Orientalism', i.e., to the 'categorical judgment' that is typical, as Bordachev claims, of the traditional European reasoning (Bordachev, 2025).

It thus seems methodologically problematic to define the World Majority based on something beyond Russia's current foreign policy interests. The 'majority' has insufficient agency (Safranchuk, 2025) and—given its cultural, political, and especially historical diversity—cannot be seen as a unified international community or analytical unit.

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