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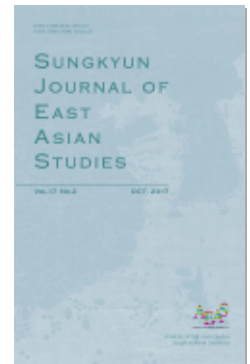
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*China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian  
Domination* by Ji-Young Lee (review)

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## BOOK REVIEW

Ji-Young LEE, *China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. 304 pages. ISBN: 9780231179744 (Hardcover). 60.00 USD.

The tributary system in early modern East Asia is a topic that has recently been attracting much scholarly interest across disciplines and has thereby greatly expanded the horizon of our knowledge on various aspects of that system and related practices. At the moment, historians are most in need of a theoretical framework that can shed new light on those details and forge them into a larger argument. Ji-Young Lee's *China's Hegemony* is therefore a timely contribution to the field, as the book exemplifies how a scholar of international relations (IR) can help historians better understand a topic by offering theoretical insights.

Historians have typically studied the relations between two countries in East Asia at a time, between China and Korea or Korea and Japan, for example, but *China's Hegemony* is to be commended for its ambition and erudition in including China, Japan, and Korea together in a single volume. Contrary to existing scholarship that primarily relies on Chinese sources in approaching the tribute system, and therefore tends to be Sinocentric, this book draws on a vast array of primary and secondary sources in English, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese, directing our attention to the roles China's neighboring states have played in shaping the character of the tribute system.

*China's Hegemony* challenges dominant views in IR scholarship, particularly those of realists and constructivists who emphasize material power and culture respectively. Pointing out the limitations of these views in explaining the fluctuations of a country's foreign policies over time, this book underscores domestic political legitimation in Japan and Korea as a force that determined the ways in which these states reacted to China's hegemony at specific historical junctures. The author does not consider Korea and Japan as mere recipients of Chinese hegemonic authority, but contends that these neighboring states could comply with, defy, or even challenge Chinese hegemony depending on the domestic political context. In other words, Lee argues, Chinese hegemony was not something that was unilaterally imposed by the preponderant state upon its neighbors, but was generated through an interactive process in which neighboring states made foreign policy decisions based upon their own domestic considerations.

*China's Hegemony* can be roughly divided into two parts. The first two chapters are an overview of relevant IR theories and concepts. Chapter one introduces theoretical issues regarding the tribute system, China's symbolic domination, hegemony, and the implications of the author's own practice-oriented approach to the tribute system. Chapter two explains that neighboring states' various responses to Chinese hegemony, ranging from compliance, to defiance, and even to overt challenges, rested on their own domestic political legitimation strategies along with hegemonic ideological resonance or dissonance with local

notions of legitimacy.

Chapters three to five present an empirical analysis of particular historical junctures in Korea and Japan that vividly illustrate the significance of domestic politics in mapping out international relations. These chapters are substantially informed by prior historical works on the subject. But in this book, Korea and Japan are juxtaposed in the author's own comparative perspective, and the relevant historical literature is interpreted to support the author's thesis that challenges prevailing theories in the field of IR. Chapter three focuses on late fourteenth-century Korea and early fifteenth-century Japan, showing that Korea's aggressive policies toward China at that time were closely intertwined with domestic power struggles, while in Muromachi Japan, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu's (r. 1368–1394) unusual acceptance of Ming investiture as the King of Japan was associated with a legitimization strategy formulated to mobilize the external authority of the Ming emperor to enhance shogunal authority after the civil war of the preceding period. Chapter four explores the domestic political conditions in Korea and Japan during and after the Imjin War (1592–1598), Japan's outright challenge to Ming hegemonic order. The war represented Toyotomi Hideyoshi's (1537–1598) desire to forge a "Japanocentric world order" built on the symbolic authority of the Japanese emperor and the notion of Japan as *shinkoku*, "the country of the gods." Lee suggests that Hideyoshi's urge to enhance his domestic legitimacy and to control the powerful daimyo houses after unification can best explain the outbreak of the Imjin War. In the case of postbellum Korea, Chosŏn exhibited an unusually ready compliance with Ming authority, symbolized by the emergence of the phrase "the debt of gratitude toward Ming for Korea's national survival," a phenomenon prompted by King Sŏnjo's (1567–1608) efforts to re-establish his domestic legitimacy, which had been weakened by his feeble response to the Japanese invasion. Chapter five addresses the contrasting behaviors of Korea and Japan toward Qing hegemony. Lee examines Chosŏn King Injo's (r. 1623–1649) seemingly "irrational" pro-Ming policy vis-à-vis the rising Manchu power before his surrender to the Qing in 1637, arguing that Injo's domestic legitimacy deficit, stemming from his accession to the throne through a coup d'état, necessitated his reliance on the authority of the Ming, despite the fact that it was in decline. Tokugawa Japan, in contrast, to enhance its domestic authority distanced itself from the Qing and created a self-proclaimed miniature tributary order centered on Japan instead of China.

The conclusion shifts the focus to contemporary international politics, predicting that American hegemony in East Asia might have staying power despite its relative decline in material capabilities vis-à-vis China, since American ideology, rather than Chinese, resonates more deeply with the political ideologies and values of East Asian countries.

The author's emphasis on domestic political considerations in China's neighboring states as a key element in framing their foreign policies, however, sometimes seems oversimplified. As Lee notes, different interpretations (such as external security concerns, trade benefits, or ideology) exist to explain the critical historical events discussed in this book, but the author selectively highlights ones that focus on domestic political factors, while other explanations are quickly

dismissed without adequate consideration. Therefore, it is at times uncertain whether domestic legitimation (the need to receive investiture, for example) was a significant requirement at a particular historical moment, and even if it was, whether it was simply one among many factors that caused such events, or constituted the central force shaping a particular foreign policy orientation.

The ambiguous treatment of the significance of culture is another issue with this book. *China's Hegemony* generally downplays the role of culture or ideology in the operation of tributary relations among East Asian countries (49, 169). In the author's opinion, East Asian international relations, although couched in Confucian terms, were never an arena where Confucian ethics dictated the behaviors of the hegemon or tributary states. It was rather the realpolitik concerns of those countries, which never excluded the possibility of coercion, military conflict, or intervention during times of tension (80, 133). Similarly, Lee maintains that adherence to tributary practices was not driven by reverence for Chinese culture, but was rather a naturalized, taken-for-granted behavior in the domestic societies of the tributary states. Built on this line of argument, this work consistently maintains that the foreign policies of the tributary states were largely determined by domestic political concerns rather than respect for Chinese culture (60). However, elsewhere the author presents arguments that seem to acknowledge the importance of culture in understanding the critical events mentioned in this book (51, 167). In other words, she oscillates between her own emphasis on the need for domestic legitimacy and the existing paradigm of cultural importance. To cite an example, the author often states that cultural resonance or dissonance between China and neighboring states determined the way in which those neighboring states responded to Chinese hegemony, in conjunction with domestic political considerations (51, 60). This cultural resonance, in my view, strongly represents the influence of Confucian ideas in neighboring states. Lee does not trace how this resonance changed over time in either Japan or Korea, which would be necessary in order to explain the gradual change in diplomatic attitudes of Korea and Japan. In addition, what the author considers as the distinct issue of domestic legitimacy is not easily separable from the underlying current of Neo-Confucian ideology. The role of domestic politics should be duly noted, but the ideological factor remains a useful lens for explaining the enduring system of tributary relations beyond the particular periods in which the need for domestic legitimation became more salient.

The third issue is the author's explanation of contrasting diplomatic orientations of Chosŏn Korea and Tokugawa Japan under Qing hegemony. In chapter five, as mentioned earlier, Lee focuses on King Injo's ready compliance toward the Ming despite the rising power of the Manchus, which was in stark contrast to Tokugawa Japan's efforts to build a miniature world order with Japan at the top. However, as is well known—and mentioned in passing by the author—Chosŏn also presented itself as *Chunghwa*, the true and single inheritor of the essence of Neo-Confucianism after the demise of the Ming, especially during the eighteenth century. In this respect, it was not only Japan but also Korea that tried to build a cultural order with itself at the center. It might be possible to link the

emergence of this trend to domestic political considerations in Chosŏn, as the author does for other particular historical junctures.

*China's Hegemony* includes only a few stylistic errors. The author's way of citing an edited volume may, however, be a point of concern for some historians, since the book often provides only the name of the editor and the title of the volume in a footnote, omitting the title of the cited article in that edited volume or the name of the article's author.

Such quibbles notwithstanding, *China's Hegemony* is not only a vital contribution to the field of IR but also a very informative book for historians. To anyone interested in a comparison of diplomatic behaviors of Korea and Japan toward China in the early modern period, this book is essential reading.

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