Patterns of Regional Integration in Pre-modern East Asia

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I

Introduction

When I first began studying Korea as an undergraduate back in the early 1970s, the notion of some sort of regional integration in East Asia was almost unthinkable, despite the fact that the countries in the region had a long history of interstate relations, cultural exchange, migration, and trade. The Cold War regime had divided East Asia into two hostile camps seemingly headed in opposite directions. Japan, South Korea and Taiwan were firmly in the capitalist orbit with rapidly growing market economies, while North Korea, China, and Mongolia were Communist regimes pursuing the construction of socialist economies. There were no formal diplomatic ties, no movement of people or exchanges of culture, and very little trade between the two camps. Yet, by the mid-1990s, East Asian media, scholars, and even some politicians were actively discussing the possibility and desirability of some form of regional integration in East Asia.¹

My purpose here today is to try to provide some historical background for our thinking about regional integration in East Asia. One preliminary task is establishing a definition of East

¹ Much happened to bring about that change. We can talk about how the Nixon era, when changes in U.S. economic policy, the opening of relations with China, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam, and the removal of the U.S. Seventh Division from Korea shook the faith of South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan in the commitment of the U.S. We can note Deng Xiaoping’s changes in economic policy and the ensuing growth of trade and investment among the countries of East Asia, and we point to the demise of the Cold War regime in the 1990s. But I think we also need to keep in mind the growing confidence and self-assertiveness of East Asian peoples in the wake of their substantial economic successes over the past few decades.
Asia. One could, and I often do, include Vietnam because of the political, economic, and
cultural links that existed between that country and China. There is, however, almost no
evidence for historical contact between Vietnam and Korea or Japan—in the case of Korea, I am
aware only of one story of a Vietnamese prince who settled in Korea during the Koryŏ period,² a
few instances of shipwrecked persons, and a few occasions when Korean and Vietnamese envoys
encountered each other in Beijing during the Chosŏn period.³ There appears to have been
considerable trading done by Japanese maritime interests in Vietnam along with other Southeast
Asian countries in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but that brief flurry of
activity came to an end with the Tokugawa establishment of its sakoku policy in 1635.⁴ Thus my
discussion will be limited to China, Korea, Japan and, at times, Mongolia. Temporally, things
began to change radically after the irruption of Western imperialism in the nineteenth century, so
I will confine myself largely to the earlier centuries, from the final few centuries B.C.E. down
through the eighteenth century.

I will address two very basic questions. One, to what extent can we talk about regional
integration in historical East Asia? And two, what were the patterns of interaction that
contributed to regional integration prior to the arrival of Western imperialism in the nineteenth
century? It is my hope that this will make some modest contribution to the ways in which we
think about the prospects for regional integration today.

II

Historical East Asia as a Region: Some Conceptual Issues

Almost all history textbooks that deal with East Asia as a whole mention the geographical
barriers that set East Asia apart from the rest of the world: the deserts and mountains of Central
Asia, the jungles and mountains of Southeast Asia, the deserts and mountains of Mongolia and
the taiga beyond, and the Pacific Ocean. But those same textbooks invariably end up defining

² This was Le Lung-tuong (K. Yi Yongsang), who fled political turbulence in Annam in 1126 and came to Koryŏ,
where he was welcomed by King Kojong who gave him land and a noble title. He was purportedly the founder of
the Hwasan Yi descent group.
East Asia as a distinctive cultural entity, as a region that was given cohesion by the diffusion of Chinese culture, most notably Confucianism, to such peripheral areas as Korea and Japan.\(^5\) The consequence has been the construction of historical narratives that measure Korean and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Japanese development in terms of the adoption of Chinese thought and Chinese institutions.\(^6\)

Throughout most of the second half of the twentieth century, the most influential interpretation of East Asia as a region has been the Fairbankian model of the “tributary system,” according to which China constituted a benevolent, informal empire that was able to exert its influence over such neighboring states as Korea and Vietnam because the peoples of those states were willing to submit to ritual Chinese suzerainty in order to gain the benefits of trade and because they had come to internalize the Confucian value system that purportedly was the underlying basis of the tributary system.\(^7\) The Fairbankian model has come under criticism in recent years for its Sino-centrism and its neglect of the subjective positions of other entities.\(^8\) I find these criticisms to be useful in correcting what was, in my view, an attempt by Fairbanks and his followers to provide a “traditional” precedent to the American attempt to create an informal, or neo-colonial, empire in East Asia. But to those criticisms I would add that the Fairbankian model tended to neglect the realpolitik basis of tributary relations, the iron-fist in the velvet glove. In effect, my analysis will share the basic premises of the realist school of international relations scholars.\(^9\)

An important alternative to the Fairbankian cultural interpretation was offered by the eminent Koreanist Gari Ledyard, who shifted the focus to questions of political influence and

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\(^5\) This is true not only for historians and humanists, but also for many social scientists. See, for example, Rozman, Gilbert, ed., *The East Asian Region* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

\(^6\) It is a fact that imperial era Chinese thinkers, Chosŏn era Neo-Confucian scholars, and even some Tokugawa intellectuals did use Confucian standards to measure themselves and others on scales of “civilization.” Thus, in some ways, it can be argued that twentieth century historical scholarship was built on “traditional” East Asian foundations. It is also true, however, that the kinds of “Confucian” thought that developed in Chosŏn Korea and Tokugawa Japan were quite different from that of late imperial China and that both the Koreans and the Japanese considered themselves to be civilizationally superior to the Chinese, particularly during the Qing era, although sings of this tendency in Korea can even be detected in the Ming era when Chosŏn scholars decried the corrupting influences of the Wang Yangming school in China.


military power in his important article, “Yin and Yang in the China-Manchuria-Korea Triangle.” Simply put, Ledyard argued that the “tributary system” worked well only in the “yang” phases when China was unified and in a dominant political and military position while the “system” was largely dysfunctional during “yin” phases when China was internally divided or militarily weak. Ledyard’s argument is important in that it leads us to focus on the practical political and military basis of the so-called “tributary system,” and it is of particular value for historians of Korea in that it points out that the underlying basis for enduring close relations between China and Korea was the shared interest in containing potential aggressors from Manchuria, be it Koguryŏ, Parhae, the Liao, the Jurchen or the Manchus. Nonetheless, it implies that integration (more precisely political integration in the form of the tributary system), in East Asia was only achieved when there was a strong state in China. Furthermore, Ledyard limited his “yang” phases to only strong Han Chinese states and placed the Mongol Yuan and the Manchu Qing in his “yin” phases.

It is easy to argue, from a China-centered point of view, that periods of Chinese unity and expansion such as the Han and Tang, or even the Mongol Yuan, constituted eras of regional integration. Indeed, it is natural for us in the early twenty-first century to see regional precursors of globalization in those eras. While not necessarily rejecting such a perspective, I am inclined to argue that important aspects of integration in terms of trade, movement of peoples, and the flow of ideas also occurred during periods of division or weakness in China.

What I propose to do here is to examine the patterns of political, economic, demographic, and cultural exchange among the peoples of East Asia during periods of both unity and division in China. What I will argue is that regional integration in East Asia was not necessarily predicated on Chinese hegemony, but rather that periods of relative weakness in China also

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11 It should be noted that tributary relations were hardly a unique feature of East Asia. Tributary relations between weaker and smaller states were common throughout history. It is only in East Asia that we talk about a “tributary system.” That term itself is of modern Western coinage.
12 To this, I would also add that Ledyard contends that Korea was so closely connected to China that changes of dynasty in China resulted in changes in Korea, noting that Silla perished shortly after the fall of the Tang and that Koryŏ met its end not long after the demise of the Yuan. This is a view that was also reflected in a recent paper by Yi Kidong on the political and social factors behind the fall of Silla presented at a conference in Honolulu in June 2009. I, however, would point out that the Koryŏ outlasted the Song by more than 120 years, and that the Chosŏn survived the Ming for nearly two and one half centuries.
exhibited active interchange among the peoples of East Asia and that, contrary to our expectations, periods of relative strength in China sometimes inhibited regional integration.

III

Patterns of Interaction in Historical East Asia

It is difficult to talk about interactions among the peoples of East Asia prior to the rise of the Former Han dynasty in China. There is, of course, an increasing accumulation of archaeological evidence showing the diffusion of artifacts and technology, there are myths and legends—such as that of Kija—that hint at the possibility of flows of people and ideas, and there are occasional references in early Chinese sources of contact with such non-Chinese entities as Old Chosŏn. But coverage of that is beyond the scope of this paper, not to mention my own area of competence. Hence I will begin with the Han dynasty period. Unlike Ledyard, who limited his “yang” periods to those with strong Han Chinese states (the Han, the Tang, and the Ming), I will also take into consideration the powerful non-Han states of the Mongol Yuan and the Manchu Qing. The issue, it seems to me, is not one of ethnicity but of power. It is typical to depict the periods of strong states in China as times when the “tributary system” functioned smoothly—at least from the Tang on. What is often overlooked or downplayed is the aggressively expansionist nature of China-based states, particularly in the 100-150 years after they were founded.

A. Strong State One: The Han Dynasty

The Former Han expanded aggressively under Wu Di (141-87 B.C.E.), pushing as far south as northern Vietnam, north and west to the Tarim Basin, and northeast into Korea, where the Han defeated Old Chosŏn and established four colonies (or commanderies) in its former territories. That, it seems to me, can hardly be regarded as anything other than imperialist aggression. The Later Han replicated much of that under its first few rulers, reconquering northern Vietnam and the Tarim Basin, and even sending an army across the Pamir Mountains. Although some scholars argue that the “tributary system” had its origins in Han times, it is hard
to find any examples of tributary relations except perhaps with the Xiongnu during the Later Han—and even that can be seen as a Han attempt to buy off Xiongnu invaders.

Most scholarship on trade in the Han era focuses on trade within the Han itself, on tribute trade with the Xiongnu and other northern peoples, and on the Silk Road. What is more interesting for our purposes, however, is the trade network that was centered on the Han colony of Lelang in northwestern Korea and that linked China, Lelang, the southern reaches of the Korean Peninsula and beyond to Japan. Trade in this network appears to have involved bronze mirrors, coins, lacquer ware and other luxury/prestige goods from China, iron from Kaya in southern Korea, and bronze items from Japan. This seems to have been the first instance of the triangle trade between China, Korea, and Japan that formed a prominent feature of pre-modern East Asian interstate trade.

It is difficult to say much about the movement of peoples throughout East Asia at this early time. It is clear that there were substantial numbers of Chinese colonists living in Lelang; despite the lack of tangible evidence, we have to assume some degree of interaction between those Han Chinese in Lelang and the native inhabitants both within and without the colony.\(^\text{13}\) We can probably also assume movement of people back and forth across the Korea Strait between Korean and Japan. It is also hard to say much about the flow of ideas and culture beyond the obvious statement that the exchange of goods and movement of people must certainly have entailed some degree of cultural exchange.

2. Weak States in China One: The Interregnum

The interregnum was the nearly four hundred-year period from the fall of the Han up to the rise of Sui when China was divided among many competing states. During this era, the various states based in China were mostly too preoccupied with their struggles among themselves to engage in campaigns of conquest against areas outside of China proper. There were, of course, border tensions between such entities as the Former Yan and Koguryŏ, but there was no sustained imperialist expansion such as seen during periods of strong centralized states in China. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of interstate relations during this period was the development of tributary relations. Although a form of tributary relations had apparently been

established between the Later Han and the Xiongnu, it wasn’t until the interregnum that tributary relations became the norm between states based in China and those outside of China. Koguryŏ, for example, is known to have accepted letters of investiture beginning in the fourth century from the Former Yan and later the Northern Wei, as well as from the Liu Song. Paekche accepted letters of investiture from such southern dynasties as the Eastern Jin, the Liu Song, and the Liang in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries, as well as from the Northern Qi in the late sixth century. Silla, also in the late sixth century, established relations with the Northern Qi and the Chen in southern China. The Wa of Japan, who had for some time been in close contact with Paekche, came into direct contact with China by the fifth century, accepting letters of investiture from such southern dynasties as the Liu Song, the Qi, and the Liang.14

To what can we attribute the rise of tributary relations at this time? One factor was undoubtedly the utility of tributary relations for the rulers of various China-based states who sought to gain prestige and legitimation as advantages in their competition with other China-based states, but at the same time we must recognize that this was the period when the process of state formation was well underway in Northeast Asia, with ancient kingdoms appearing in Korea and Japan.

Trade continued along the Silk Road during this period, with states in China acquiring horses, various agricultural products, and other goods. We can also assume that trade continued with nomadic peoples to the north, but it seems likely that there must have a contraction of trade within China itself given the division of the country and the political instability. It was during these centuries, however, that Paekche appears to have emerged as the major player in maritime trade in East Asia. Paekche, taking advantage of its location in southwestern Korea, was in contact with southern China and with Japan. Relics supposedly identified with Paekche have been found at widely scattered locales along the Chinese coast and as far south as Vietnam. Significant amounts of prestige goods from China, such as gold ornaments and porcelain, have been found in Paekche tombs, while prestige goods from Paekche, including gold jewelry and stoneware, have also been unearthed in Japanese tombs. Some scholars contend that the Koguryŏ—Paekche—Japan alliance of the sixth and seventh centuries represented a revival of the old Lelang—southern Korea—Japan trade network of earlier times.

14 See Lim Ki Hwan, “The Interstate Order of Ancient Northeast Asia: Focusing on the 4th—7th centuries,” Journal of Northeast Asian History (4-1) 2007 for the complex and shifting interstate relations of this era.
This period saw considerable movement of people, at least in Northeast Asia. There is evidence to suggest that some of the Han Chinese colonists in northwestern Korea were absorbed into the Koguryŏ ruling elite after the demise of Lelang in the early 4th century. Wa from Japan were crossing the sea into the Kaya region of Korea, while significant numbers of Paekche persons, along with some Han Chinese, crossed over to Japan where they became important players in the development of the early Japanese state.

The interregnum was also an era of active cultural flows. Although Buddhism first made its way from India via Central Asia into China during the first century C.E., it was after the fall of the Later Han that it really began to put roots down in Chinese society. From there it spread to Koguryŏ and Paekche no later than the fourth century and to Japan via Paekche in the sixth century. By the sixth century, if not earlier, Korean monks were making their way to China. But Buddhism did not come to Northeast Asia in isolation; rather it was simply a central part of a larger package of advanced culture from China that included Confucianism and Daoism. And it was almost certainly during this period that literacy in Chinese became relatively widespread in the area for its utility in conducting relations with states in China, for the maintenance of records and written communications in the newly formed states, and for the study of Buddhism and Confucianism.

3. Strong State in China Two: The Tang

The Sui and the Tang were, like the two Han dynasties, quite aggressive in expanding the territory under their control. China once again subjugated northern Vietnam and the Tarim Basin, brought Tibet under its control, and both the Sui and the Tang launched several major campaigns against Koguryŏ in the northeast, with the Tang finally crushing that kingdom with the help of Silla in 668. The Tang then attempted to impose direct rule over the Korean Peninsula but finally gave up after ten years of war with its erstwhile ally Silla. The Tang period also saw the establishment of regular, full-scale tributary relations with such entities as Silla, Parhae, and Japan. Much is made of the tributary relations the Tang had with Silla as an example of how trade interests and cultural influences brought Silla into the Tang orbit, but the reality was that it was the rise of a rapidly expanding Parhae in Manchuria that led to reconciliation between the Tang and Silla—both Tang and Silla felt threatened by Parhae and came together in an alliance intended to contain that Manchuria-based state.
The Tang was, as is well known, a great cosmopolitan empire that conducted trade not only with its immediate neighbors, but also with the west through the Silk Road and the so-called maritime Silk Road, as well as with Korea and Japan through Paekche and later Silla traders. Large numbers of non-ethnic Chinese lived in the Tang, including people from West Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Korea. The latter included refugees and prisoners from the war in Korea that brought the downfall of Paekche and Koguryŏ, as well as significant communities of Silla ex-patriots that formed in coastal areas of the Tang by the ninth century.

Cultural exchange accelerated during the Tang era. States in Korea and Japan used Chinese legal codes in the process of building political institutions inspired at least in part by the Tang model of government. Large numbers of young men from Silla, Parhae, and elsewhere came to the Tang to study and sit for the civil service examinations. Some of those men returned home after their studies, but others remained in the Tang, often taking positions in the Tang government. Perhaps even larger numbers of monks came from such places as Silla and Japan to study and live in Chinese monasteries, while some East Asian monks also made the long and dangerous trip to India. No small number of Silla monks remained in China where they rose to position of leadership in the monastic community; furthermore, as Robert Buswell has shown, Silla monks played a crucial role in the formation of Chan Buddhism during this era.¹⁵

Stated briefly, the high Tang appears to have been an early age of integration in East Asia and perhaps beyond. I think it important to point out, however, that in many ways the Tang was building on patterns of interaction the developed during the interregnum, be it the tributary form of interstate relations, the expansion of overland and particularly maritime trade, and the spread of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism.


Although the Song managed to restablish unified control over China following a half-century of chaos after the collapse of the Tang in early tenth century, that beleaguered dynasty, under heavy pressure from the Liao, the Jin and the Xi Xia, was not only unable to reestablish control over northern Vietnam or Central Asia but even lost significant stretches of its own territory, first the area around modern Beijing to the Liao and then almost all of northern China

to the Jin. The Song ended up having to pay indemnity, or tribute, to the Liao, the Xi Xia, and later the Jin in order to secure peace along its northern frontier. The Song had intermittent relations with the Koryŏ, first during the late tenth and early eleventh centuries before they were cut off by the Liao and again at the end of the eleventh and twelfth centuries before being severed again by the Jin. The Song had no formal diplomatic contacts with Japan. The defining features of interstate relations during this era were the existence of multiple centers of power in East Asia and the withdrawal of Japan from active participation in the interstate system.

The Song is well known for the development of its economy and for its extensive maritime trade with Southeast, South, and West Asia. What is less well known is that despite the absence of regular diplomatic ties with Korea and Japan, Song merchants frequently crossed the sea to trade in Koryŏ and Japan. The *Koryŏsa* contains numerous mentions of Song merchants arriving at the Koryŏ capital, while trade with Japan had grown to the extent that by the twelfth century hundreds of Chinese merchant families had taken up resident in Hakata and other locales in Kyushu. Japanese merchants also often visited Koryŏ, particularly during the second half of the eleventh century when sixteen Japanese trade missions arrived. Finally, we should not that this was also a time when Arab traders began to call regularly at ports in both China and Korea. Thus, despite the political fragmentation of East Asia, the Song era was one of extensive trade, not only in East Asia but throughout all of Asia.

The tense relations between the Song and its northern neighbors, as well as between the Koryŏ and the Liao and the Jin, seem to have inhibited the movement of people. Nonetheless, Koryŏ sources document the arrival of large numbers of refugees from the vanquished kingdom of Parhae throughout the tenth century as well as persons from the Song who apparently were fleeing the chaos in northern China caused by the Liao and Jin incursions. There was the aforementioned presence of Song traders in northern Kyushu, but I am aware of no evidence of the formation of Song trading communities in Koryŏ, nor of any major movement of people from Korea or Japan to the Song.

Although the Song was an era of important cultural developments, most notably in Confucian thought, there is little evidence of active cultural exchange between the Song and its neighbors. The standard interpretation has been that the Neo-Confucian thought that developed in the Southern Song was not transmitted outside China until the Mongol Yuan era when Koryŏ scholars visiting the Yuan court brought back Neo-Confucian learning to Koryŏ near the end of
the late thirteenth century. Nonetheless, there was a number of Koryŏ men who went to study
and sit for the civil service examinations in the Song during the brief period of renewed contact
between the Song and the Koryŏ at the end of the eleventh and beginning of the twelfth centuries.

Song Ancient Style learning began to spread among the Koryŏ literati in the early twelfth
century and there is also fragmentary evidence to suggest that twelfth century Koryŏ was also
aware of and interested in key concepts of philosophical Neo-Confucianism. Those trends,
however, were cut short by the massive purges of literati at the time of the military coup of 1170.

This period also saw the advent of sophisticated celadon porcelain and moveable metal print in
the Koryŏ, both apparently inspired by Song examples. We know little about culture exchanges
between the Koryŏ and the Liao or the Jin, or between Japan and the Song, the Liao, or the Jin.

5. Strong State in China Three: The Yuan

The Mongol era, which was one of active and far flung conquests, is covered by two
other participants in this conference. Thus I will confine my remarks regarding interstate
relations to noting simply that although the Koryŏ was known as the “son-in-law” kingdom
whose royal family was closely intermarried with the Mongol imperial house, it was under the
Yuan that the forms of tributary relations were most strongly enforced. The temple names of
Koryŏ kings included the character “ch’ung” (loyal); the names of Koryŏ institutions were
downgraded to reflect inferiority to the Yuan; and Koryŏ had to pay onerous tribute to the Yuan,
including precious metals, horse, women, falcons, and other items.

The Yuan era was one of major movement of goods, people, and ideas. Despite the
prevalence of views that Mongols had damaged China’s economy through excessive regulation
and limitation, trade via the Silk Road flourished and such cities as Hangzhou and Guangzhou
developed into major trading and commercial centers. There was active trade between the Yuan
and Koryŏ that resulted in the rise of wealthy and powerful merchants in Kaegyŏng, the Koryŏ
capital. The Yuan dynasty was a multi-ethnic empire than included Mongols, Central Asians
such as the Uighurs, Han Chinese, Koryŏ Koreans, and others. Hundreds of thousands of Koryŏ
subjects lived in the Yuan, many taken back as prisoners during the Mongol invasions of the
mid-thirteenth century, but many others as merchants, as officials in the Yuan bureaucracy, and
as soldiers in the Yuan armies. Furthermore, significant numbers of Mongols, Central Asians,
and Han Chinese settled in the Koryŏ during this time, intermarrying with Koreans and
eventually becoming fully assimilated into Korean society. And despite the Yuan’s two failed expeditions against Japan, by the end of the thirteenth century there appears to have developed significant maritime trade between the Yuan and Japan. The Yuan was also an era of important culture exchanges. There was, for example, the aforementioned introduction of Neo-Confucian thought to Koryŏ, as well as the adoption of Mongol clothing and hairstyles by many Koryŏ elites. What is less well known is that aspects of Koryŏ culture, including clothing, shoes, and utensils, also became quite the rage in urban areas of Yuan, as has been shown by David Robinson. I know of no evidence of direct Yuan cultural influence on Japan—certainly Neo-Confucianism did not make its way there until much later.

6. Strong State in China Four: The Ming

The Ming is not particularly known for its wars of aggression, although it did make repeated pre-emptive strikes against the Mongols and also attempted to reestablish Chinese control over northern Vietnam. Rather the Ming is known as the time when the “tributary system” reached its zenith, with even short-lived participation by Japan, which had not sent missions to China for several centuries. Korea’s Chosŏn dynasty is usually held up as the tributary state par excellence. This, however, is the product of the projection into earlier centuries of the posturing seen in the Korean court after the Ming came to the aid of the Chosŏn against Hideyoshi in the late sixteenth century. The reality is that relations between the Ming and the Chosŏn were very tense and difficult throughout much of the early Chosŏn. That was the result of a number of factors: Ming distrust of the Koreans because of their previous close association with the Mongols, Ming demands for part of Korean territory in the northeastern part of the peninsula (which almost led to war), Ming expectations for tribute at the same level and of the same kinds as that taken by the Yuan, and Ming refusal to let many Chosŏn embassies enter into its territory. Relations were not all that good after the Hideyoshi invasions, either. When the Ming sent an expedition against the Manchus in 1618, it asked the Chosŏn to send forces in support. The Chosŏn court did send a force of over 10,000 men, but with secret instructions to the field commander, Kang Hongnip, to make the decision about whether or not to support the Ming depending on the situation in the field--hardly a case of undying loyalty to the Ming.

One other feature of this period was the effort to establish tight border controls and to limit trade to official tribute missions. This was true not only for the Ming, which designated
specific ports for the entry of missions from such countries as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Japan and also imposed strict limits on the size and number of missions foreign countries could send. The Chosŏn also followed suit, even establishing the death penalty for persons caught smuggling goods across the border with the Ming. These efforts were not totally successful, however. The Ming restrictions appear to have stimulated the growth of illicit trade by Ming merchants, while the arrival of Western traders from Portugal, Japan, Holland, and Spain helped to create a maritime trading community that embraced not only China, but also Japan and such locales as the Philippines. The Chosŏn also formally pursued trade with the Ming through tributary relations (which included substantial private trading on the side by members of diplomatic missions), and sought to control trade with Japan by designating three ports for Japanese merchants and by restricting access to those ports to Japanese merchants who received authorization from the Chosŏn court through its agents in the So family of Tsushima. The Chosŏn court also designated special border markets for trade with the Jurchen. By the seventeenth century, however, some degree of private trading was allowed in special border markets at the point of entry of Chosŏn embassies to the Ming.

Such tight border controls tended to inhibit the movement of people, particularly between the Ming and the Chosŏn. Nonetheless, fairly significant numbers of Jurchens and smaller numbers of Japanese were attracted to settle in the Chosŏn by a government policy that gave land, tax exemptions, and even official sinecures to migrants. There is also anecdotal evidence, such as the story of the Korean ancestry of a Ming general, that suggest at least some movement of people from the Chosŏn to the Ming. In addition, we know of Japanese soldiers who remained behind in Korea after the withdrawal of Hideyoshi’s forces, marrying Korean women and settling down as farmers.

Cultural exchange was also less active during this period, despite Chosŏn anxiety to obtain Neo-Confucian books and other cultural materials. Numerous Korean requests for such materials were rebuffed by the Ming in the fifteenth century. Furthermore, the Chosŏn literati were for the most part not open to new intellectual developments in China such as Wang Yangming Learning.

Overall, the Ming era leaves us with the impression of a general retreat from the relative openness of the Yuan period. Borders were tightly controlled, the movement of people and the exchange of goods restricted, and even intellectual/cultural exchange was less active than before.
Whereas neither the Song nor the Ming was particularly active in expanding its territory, the Qing was a different story. Before setting forth to conquer the Ming, the Qing launched two major invasions in order to neutralize Korea. Then, after it overthrew the Ming, the Qing went on to launch conquests of Mongolia, Central Asia, and eventually Tibet. The Qing, of course, maintained the “tributary system,” with particularly frequent embassies from Korea, the Ryukyus, and Vietnam. There was much resentment toward the Qing in the Chosŏn, both because of the two early seventeenth century invasions and because the Koreans considered the Manchus to be nothing more than barbarians. Nonetheless, the Koreans—fearful of Qing military power—observed the forms of tribute relations throughout the second half of the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century, and beyond.

Generally, when we think of trade during the Qing era, the first thing that comes to mind is trade with the West through the Canton system and the limited trade the Japanese had with the Portuguese and then the Dutch at Nagasaki. And, of course, the there was the trade conducted through tributary relations. What I would like to point out here, however, is the triangular trade that developed between the Qing, the Chosŏn, and the Tokugawa beginning in the second half of the seventeenth century. This trade, which involved silver from Japan, ginseng and other products from Korea, and such commodities as books and silk from China, was quite vibrant, although Korea’s role was diminished after the Qing allowed direct trade with Japan in 1720. On the other hand, trade between Korea and Japan continued through the one port which the Japanese were allowed to use in the post-Imjin War era. Furthermore, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, private merchants known as the Mansang based in northwestern Korea began to engage actively in trade with the Qing, exporting ginseng and other goods in return for such luxury goods as Chinese fur caps.

The Qing was a multi-ethnic empire including Manchus, Han Chinese, Mongols, and Tibetans, not unlike the Yuan. But whereas the Yuan era showed relative openness and free movement of people, the Qing period era featured tight border controls throughout East Asia—not just China and Korea, but also Japan, and even within the Qing itself where the Willow Palisade separated the Manchu homeland from the rest of the country. There was a large number of refugees from Ming China who came into the Chosŏn during and after the Manchu
conquest, but before long the Qing demanded their repatriation, a demand with which the Chosŏn government grudgingly complied. The influx into the Chosŏn of Jurchens and Japanese that had been a feature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries came to an end as well.

Despite the close control of the movement of goods and people across borders, there was considerable intellectual exchange among literati in China, Korea, and Japan. The Koreans and the Chinese, of course, had opportunities to meet during diplomatic missions, either to the Qing or to Korea. Those contacts were important stimuli to Korean thinkers, particularly because of their introduction to the Catholicism and Western science that were available in the Qing. But it’s also important to note that thinkers in all three countries were reading each other’s writings.16 This was an important factor in the rise of Evidential Learning in China, Sirhak in Korea, and Jitsugaku in Japan.

Even though in comparison to the Ming, the Qing era saw stricter border controls and less movement of people, there appears to have greater trade among China, Korea, and Japan—although nothing approaching the level of the Yuan and Sung eras. There was also more cultural exchange, at least compared to the Ming, among the three countries of East Asia, resulting in the rise of similar intellectual movements at about the same time. One wonders if it was not the presence of the Westerners, with their trading activities and their new ideas, that stimulated economic and cultural interchange in the region during the Qing period.

IV
Some Final Observations

Conventional descriptions of “pre-modern” East Asia as a region tend to talk about a China-centered world order realized in the “tributary system,” about how the “tributary system” is a particularly Confucian way of ordering relations among states and peoples, and about how the distinctive cultural traits of Confucianism set the region off from the rest of the world. I have

16 See Mark Setton, Chŏng Yagyong: Korea’s Challenge to Orthodox Neo-Confucianism (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997) for discussion of communication among East Asian literati in the 18th and early 19th centuries.
problems with these notions, particularly in the way in which they tend to essentialize East Asia as somehow unique, as fundamentally different from the rest of the world.

First, I don’t believe that there is any necessary historical correlation between the existence of a powerful state in China presiding over flourishing tributary relations and higher levels of economic and cultural integration in East Asia. To be sure, two of the greatest periods of economic, cultural, and demographic integration in East Asia were times when tributary relations were prominent: the interregnum and the Tang. But the Ming and the Qing were certainly the two eras when tributary relations were most extensively developed, yet they also represent something of a retreat from the more open and active patterns of interaction seen in earlier times. Furthermore, we need to note that Japan has been an historical outlier—even while Japan engaged in economic and even cultural exchanges with China throughout most of the pre-modern era, it withdrew from participation in formal tributary relations with China for almost the entire era except for a couple centuries in the Tang era and again in the Ming.

Second, I think we need to recognize the practical, realpolitik basis of tributary relations. Despite all the verbiage about the benevolent nature of Chinese policy under the “tributary system,” the reality is that strong China-based states tended to expand aggressively at the expense of their neighbors, particularly in the first century or so after their founding. I don’t see how, for example, we can talk about the Former Han invasion of Korea and its establishment of four colonies as anything other than imperialist expansion. Furthermore, all the Confucian style rhetoric notwithstanding, the real glue that held the so-called “tributary system” together was less feelings of loyalty towards a benevolent China than concerns about security (plus, of course, the oft-noted desire for access to Chinese products and China’s advanced culture). As Han Myŏnggi, JaHyun Haboush and others have shown, the discourse on gratitude and loyalty to the Ming that arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Chosŏn (and that has provided much of the inspiration for twentieth century interpretations of the tributary system) had more to do with Chosŏn domestic politics than it did to genuine commitment to the Confucian value of loyalty as vassals to the emperor.

Finally, let me register concern about views that define East Asia in terms of Confucian culture. As we all know, in the 1990s, there emerged a vigorous discourse over Asian values, often expressed as Confucian capitalism or Confucian democracy, as an alternative to the old and by then tired notion that modernity was a uniquely Western phenomenon and, more to the point
here, as the feature that made East Asia a distinctive region. Although the discourse of Asian values lost much of its cachet in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, in recent years the Chinese government has begun resurrecting Confucius and Confucianism and many scholars, both in China and beyond, have jumped on the bandwagon. While much of this has to do with explanations of Chinese culture, Chinese society, and Chinese business, it also has implications for China’s relations with its neighbors. I recently participated in a conference in Seoul dealing with territorial issues in Northeast Asia at which a Hong Kong-based Western scholar made an argument for a return to something approximating the traditional “Confucian interstate order” as the way to overcome conflicts over territory, which appears to be a reflection of the rise of interest in Confucian-inspired approaches to international relations among such Chinese scholars as Yan Xuetong. While this might sound perfectly reasonable to a China specialist seeking to encourage a growingly nationalistic China to pursue a more benign relationship with its neighbors, to a specialist in pre-modern Korean history such as myself it sounds dangerously like an ideological justification for Chinese hegemony over the region, especially given the way, for example, that Chinese scholars and officials have used “tributary relations” to buttress their argument that Koguryŏ (Ch. Gaogouli) was not a Korean state but a Chinese “border regime” or to provide an historical rationalization for Chinese control of Tibet.

I am tempted to say that rather than focusing on historical tributary relations, we should now be focusing on questions of trade, of movement of people, and of flows of culture as we think about regional integration in East Asia. Nonetheless, if there is anything to learn from East Asian historical patterns of integration, it is that the attitude of the power that occupies mainland China has been an important factor. Whereas the Tang and the Yuan were open, cosmopolitan entities whose times saw considerable integration, the Ming and to a large extent the Qing closed themselves off from the outside except for tightly controlled tribute missions. Today’s PRC seems to be both open and closed. It is quite open to trade and generally open to the movement of people in and out of China. It is also somewhat open to outside cultural influences, as long as they don’t threaten to undermine Party control. But the leadership of the PRC seems determined to maintain itself in power, even at the risk of jeopardizing economic and cultural relations, and—at least when seen from the Korean perspective—to hold its neighbors in some degree of

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17 Yan, who has long been known as a hard-headed realist, has recently turned to espousing soft power which he believes China can find in its classical past. See Yan Xuetong, _Ancient Chinese Philosophy, Modern Chinese Power_ (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
contempt. How else do we explain the spectacles of the Chinese police violating the Korean embassy and breaking up press conferences by Korean National Assemblymen? How else do we explain the Chinese rewriting of history in a way that they surely must have known would be a grave affront to the Koreans’ sense of historical identity? And, of course, there is the apparent government complicity in the anti-Japanese riots of 2005. Seen in this light, all the Confucian-inspired talk about soft power and about the tributary system as a model for contemporary interstate relations seems like a thinly disguised call for the recreation of what is imagined to have been an historical tradition of unchallenged Chinese regional hegemony.