Hierarchy as the Constant in East Asian International Relations

and the Possibility of an International System based on Ideational Power

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Mainstream international relations theories, especially the various branches of the dominant realist school developed from the experiences of the West, hold that anarchy is the default setting of world politics, and that the distribution of capabilities, or material power, is the foundation of the international system. This paper revisits this conventional wisdom derived from realism, and argues that hierarchy replaced anarchy as the constant in international relations with ideational power as its foundation. Empirical evidences from international relations in historical East Asia serve as convincing examples demonstrating that hierarchy has been the norm of international relations in this part of the world, and that ideational power, instead of material power, has been the foundation of such international system.
Puzzle and Structure of the Paper

The idea that sovereignty is indivisible and that a sovereign state holds the supreme authority within its borders and governs itself without any interference of outside forces is widely accepted as the norm in international relations. And in the field of international relations, another commonly accepted feature, anarchy, results from the Westphalian system composed of sovereign states that are considered equal to each other. Sovereignty is also conceptualized as something that is indivisible, and there is no higher authority above national sovereignty. However, the notion of indivisible sovereignty and an anarchical international system made of equal sovereign states with no higher authority above does not seem to apply to some parts of the world. This is the starting point of the research in this paper.

The puzzle that I seek to answer in this paper derives from my understanding of the international system in historical East Asia, which functioned in a very different way from the West and the contemporary world that we IR scholars are familiar with and accustomed to. The norm in East Asian international system had been hierarchy and not anarchy. In such system, the territorial states operated in an orderly hierarchy, and not all of them were equal to each other. Also, a higher authority did exist above states’ sovereignty. The various states
requested and accepted the investiture of another state which dominated the hierarchical system, and this implies the fact that part of their sovereignty was separated and surrendered to a foreign country, and that there existed a higher authority above states’ sovereignty. Furthermore, these states did so not because of the coercion or threat from the dominating state, but mainly because they voluntarily participated in such a hierarchical system.

All of these observations above counter the conventional wisdom and the widely accepted notions of sovereignty and anarchy, and bring up some puzzling questions. If sovereignty is integral to a state actor and is indivisible, why would a state surrender parts of such ultimate authority to govern and control itself to a foreign state and voluntarily be a subordinate to the latter? This demolishes the Westphalian international system of anarchy composed of sovereign states equal to each other. And if the equality of sovereign states does not exist anymore, meanwhile there is an unequal relationship among the state actors, then such a system has a hierarchical structure. But I also hope to understand how such hierarchy is established, and what is its foundation. Therefore, the most fundamental puzzle that this paper seeks to answer is, why would states be willing to surrender parts of their sovereignty, and enter a hierarchy and accept subordinate positions in the international system?

To address this puzzle, I firstly review the literature on anarchy and hierarchy in
international relations, and the foundations of these two concepts. It is demonstrated that anarchy is not the default setting of international relations, and hierarchy actually often exists. Also, hierarchy is not necessarily built on material powers. Ideational power is more important for hierarchy to be maintained. I argue that material power could be a necessary condition, but is not a sufficient condition for a hierarchy to exist. Then I address the case selection of this study. I apply a most-likely-case design to conduct a plausibility probe to examine my proposed theory in this paper that ideational power is more important than material power for a hierarchy to emerge and to last. Although a hierarchy could still be formed with the use of solely material power, I argue that such hierarchy would be less stable and peaceful than one based on ideational power. Considering the different combination of ideational power and material power (see figure 1), there would be three scenarios where hierarchies could be established: hierarchy mainly based on material power; hierarchy mainly based on ideational power; and hierarchy based on both strong ideational and material power. Three eras in historical East Asia that are representatives of these three scenarios are the case studies used in this paper to examine the theory. The results still show that hierarchies with stronger ideational power are more stable and peaceful than hierarchies mainly based on material power. The paper ends with a conclusion and implication section.
I argue that IR scholars need to reconsider the idea that anarchy is the default setting of the international system, as we do observe the presence of hierarchies in various parts of the world throughout history. Kenneth Waltz, the founder of neorealism or structural realism, sees national politics as hierarchical, while international politics as anarchical (1979: 113). However, it is not always correct to perceive international politics as anarchic and chaotic without hierarchical order, while domestic politics is constantly hierarchical. The notion of

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1 For instance, if we look into most democracies in the world, it’s easy to find that their constitutions are designed in a way to prevent a hegemony from emerging in the domestic political system and there is always a proper means to ensure checks and balances among the branches of government. The executive, legislative, and judicial branches are independent of each other and that the ultimate political power does not concentrate on one
international anarchy without a central authority or without order and governance, if given careful reconsideration, cannot be said to be true, because “every international system or society has a set of rules or norms that define actors and appropriate behavior” (Krasner, 2001: 173). An international system with authoritative institutions cannot be said to be anarchical (Hurd, 1999). If we accept that some authoritative international institutions exist, then the international system is not an anarchy, as it has parts that are governed.² Hurd also recognizes the concept of legitimacy as an ordering principle at the international level. Although the traditional default setting of the international system is anarchy and the lack of legitimate authority; however, in reality, legitimate authority exists and we should consider that the international system is not entirely anarchical but a system of authority.

Then Bull and Watson argue that, there exists an international society that is made of independent states, and this international society is more than just a group of states; these states form a system with common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations (1984: 1). Based on that argument, Bull (2002) lists diplomacy as one of international

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² Hurd (1999: 401) argues that in this case the accepted norm of sovereignty is the institution present in the international system.
society’s primary order-creating institutions in world politics, and sees diplomacy as evidence of the presence of an international society. In the eyes of the scholars of the English School, international relations is not entirely anarchic and chaotic, and they see order and common institutions that govern the interactions between members of the international society.

With the presence of order in international society, various international organizations can be equipped with the authority as well as legitimacy to function similarly to what a government would do in the realm of domestic politics. Therefore we see most of the states abide by international laws most of the times, and that there are international tribunals to do justice. The United Nations’ Security Council has the authority to issue binding resolutions to member states of the United Nations, and it is also charged with the ultimate authorization whether to approve the use of force to resolve a crisis, and that there are regulations limiting state actors’ use of force to launch wars to settle disputes, or to develop or to use weapons of mass destruction. Actors in international relations do not challenge these practices frequently, and this is the evidence that these institutions have evolved into the norms that are generally recognized as well as accepted in the international society. Therefore, given the

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3 The other four are: balance of power; international law; great power; and war.
4 According to Chapter 5, Article 25 of the UN Charter, the Members of the United Nations agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council in accordance with the present Charter. Also, Chapter 7 grants the Security Council with the power to enforce its resolutions.
5 These are the privileges of the UN Security Council according to Chapter 7 of the UN Charter.
presence of such order and recognized norms, as well as the international organizations that function similarly to the institutions of domestic governments,\textsuperscript{6} one can hardly say that the international relations system is anarchic. Hierarchy should be the constant in international politics.

**Hierarchy as the Constant of International Relations and Its Ideational Foundation**

In this paper, hierarchy is conceptualized as an international system, regional or global, which has multiple actors with one center of power that is recognized by all other participants as legitimate. In this system, there is “a rank order based on a particular attribute” (Kang, 2010: 17). And more importantly, hierarchy exists when the ruler possesses authority (legitimacy, or rightful rule) over the ruled (Lake, 2009: 51). Within the hierarchical system, the leading state actor, or the hegemon,\textsuperscript{7} provides order and stability as well as the rules that govern the interaction and relationship among the participants. Hierarchy needs not to always be a global system; in fact, more often do we observe the existence of a regional hierarchy. Also, considering the powers possessed by the leading figure of a hierarchical system, such powers are not just about the distribution of material capabilities; ideational or normative

\textsuperscript{6} I argue that such international organizations function similarly to domestic governments in a sense that they also provide governance in certain aspects of the life in international politics, hence there is also order among the state actors in their interactions.

\textsuperscript{7} In this paper I use hierarchy and hegemony interchangeably, as I conceptualize the two terms to be very similar, according to Mastanduno (2005: 179), that hegemony has authority, while unipolarity does not. Similar to Mastanduno’s words, I also conceptualize hierarchy to be a system that needs authority and legitimacy to be its foundation.
power is also important in the formation and the stability of hierarchy.

Hierarchy is not formed just because of the use of force and coercion by the dominant state; it is a result of voluntary acceptance and recognition from the followers. Existing international relations literature, especially from the realist school, mainly defines the hegemon or great power as the state actor with the most material power, and the distribution of capabilities is crucial to outcomes in international relations (Dunne and Schmidt, 2008: 98). Rarely does the existing IR literature address power in non-material forms, aside perhaps from the idea of “soft power” (Nye, 2004). Historically, diplomacy in the Western World was also seen conducted through the influence of other actors through soft power, such as the Byzantine Empire’s soft power came from its clients’ admiration of its culture (Cohen, 2013: 23). Granted, considering the need for the dominant state to maintain the order within the hierarchical international system, and the expectations from the subordinates for it to do so, part of the feasibility of the establishment of a hierarchy depends on the material (especially military) power of the dominant state. Yet the legitimacy of that state to be accepted to sit on the top of the hierarchy needs not always be based solely on the material capability. For example, Zhao Shuisheng points out that, despite being a significantly militarily stronger power, China’s centrality in the tributary system was based on its civilization and culture, and the order in that system was maintained by the strength of the Chinese civilization (2013: 32).
Therefore, I argue that material power is perhaps a necessary condition, but definitely not a sufficient one for a stable hierarchical system to emerge. In fact, this paper argues that if we compare cases of hierarchical systems with superior material power, those hierarchies led by dominant states with not only superior material power but also significant ideational power are far more stable and peaceful than those led by dominating states with only material capabilities but lack of ideational attraction. Also, for the cases of hierarchies primarily based on only one kind of power, those based on ideational power would be more stable and peaceful than those based on material power.

Such concept emphasizing the importance of ideational power is echoed by other scholars as well. For instance, Ian Clark (2009) suggests that there are two accounts of power, the material and the social. The social one is really about the power derived from the fact that the status of hegemony has to be recognized and bestowed instead of being possessed unilaterally by a state actor. Lake (2009) shares a similar view that authority of the ruler is not self-claimed, but rather is conferred by the ruled.

Also, for a hierarchy to be formed, some sense of legitimacy must be present for a state actor to be recognized by all other state actors as the accepted leader of the system, and that such legitimacy the dominant state possesses is backed by its superior ideational power that
proves to be attractive to all other members of the hierarchical system. Similarly, Hurd (1999) argues that legitimacy and authority matter in international politics. Hurd defines legitimacy as the normative belief held by an actor that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed (1999: 381), which is subjective to the actor’s perception. Legitimacy contributes to compliance by providing an internal reason for an actor to follow a rule. When an actor believes a rule to be legitimate, compliance is no longer driven by fear or by self-interests, but instead by moral obligation (Hurd, 1999: 387). The narration and explanation of the stable and lasting peace among East Asian states by Robert Kelly (2011) also identifies that the shared Confucian values and ideology helped bind the states in that region together and formed a sense of “imagined community” that served as the foundation of that system.

**Why East Asia? A Most-Likely-Case Design to Support the Argument**

Continuing from the previous section of this paper which develops a deductive reasoning and argues that ideational power is the foundation for the formation of an international system, some empirical cases are ideal evidences to support such argument. For example, in East Asia’s long history, Confucianism has been the dominant ideology for centuries (Kelley 2005; Kang, 2010; Kelly, 2011). Though it was firstly adopted by Chinese empires to serve as their national ideology, various other states in East Asia would then go on
to accept that set of ideas and values, and gradually enter the Confucian cultural sphere. Korea, Vietnam, Ryukyu, and Japan are the states that have been influenced by Confucian values more than other Asian states, and David Kang (2010) terms these states the “Sinicized states.” Even tribes and other ethnic groups not originated from the China proper would later gradually accept some of the Confucian values and rituals after they occupied or conquered these territories, albeit with different extent. In this way, the region of historical East Asia provided us a stage where most of the actors in the system shared similar values and were placed in the same hierarchical international order in which the members were ranked according to their cultural assimilation with the hegemon (usually the Chinese empires) which had the highest level of civilization, or was the most Confucian society, as recognized by all other members. Within such hierarchical system, cultural achievement was the source of status and ranked order for the members within the system (Kang, 2010: 8). Borrowing from Benedict Anderson’s (1991) term, this shared culture and Confucian ethical values created an “imagined community” — a Confucian community — among these East Asian states. Therefore, these cases of different eras of East Asian hierarchical international systems could be the most likely cases to do a plausibility probe to examine the hypothesis proposed in this paper that an ideational-power based hierarchy is more stable and peaceful than a material-power based one.
The shared Confucian ideology and values were the most important elements that bound the East Asian states together and contributed to their peaceful interaction (Kelly, 2011). Such interaction between the East Asian states, namely, how they conducted diplomacy, was well documented and preserved, and this provides the necessary empirical evidences supporting the argument that there has been a hierarchical international system in historical East Asia and that such hierarchy was mainly based on ideational power. Also, the fact that these countries shared the same writing script (Chinese characters) and similar institutions (meritocratic examination system and government structures) illustrated clearly the ideational foundation of such community.

In order to better capture the ideational power in such hierarchical relationship, such as authority and legitimacy, a direct observation would be the subordinates’ attitude, their words, and their behaviors, when they were interacting with other states, especially with the dominant hegemon in the hierarchical tributary system. There is a risk if we only look at how the hegemon unilaterally views the hierarchical relationship. Also, because legitimacy is backed by ideational power and attraction, instead of coercion, and serves as the foundation of authority in an international system, hence authority is essential for the followers, to recognize and respect the status and the superior position of the hegemon, or the leader of the hierarchical system. Diplomacy is not just the interaction among states, but in Hedley Bull’s
narration, it is also an order-creating institution and norm in the international society (2002).

In the cases of historical East Asia in this paper, I examine and compare the international relations systems as well as the practice of diplomacy among the states in three eras to reveal that there has been a hierarchical order, and that ideational power, instead of material power, served as the foundation of such hierarchy.

The empirical evidence that this paper applies to support the argument that there has been a stable hierarchical international system in East Asia and that such hierarchy has usually been based on ideational power mainly comes from the various secondary sources that interpret the interactions and relationship between China and its vassal states within the tributary system. The practice of diplomacy among East Asian states has been well documented in the history of these Sinicized states, as they followed the Chinese tradition of recording their history in detail. Although these Sinicized states are known to have well-documented history in their archives, however, due to the current logistical constraints at this stage I am not able to personally visit the archives and gather primary sources for this research. This is one of the major restrictions of this research at this stage. Yet I believe that through careful interpretation of these original documents in the secondary sources used in this paper, I can still have a clear understanding of how the subordinates perceived their interaction with the dominant power and their attitude toward such hierarchical relationship.
Examples such as Liam Kelley’s *Beyond the Bronze Pillars* (2005) illustrating Vietnamese tributary envoys’ positive attitude towards China and acceptance of their country being subservient to a dominant power, and Alexander Woodside’s *Lost Modernities* (2001) documenting how Vietnam and Korea voluntarily adopted China’s meritocratic civil service examination that was considered modern, all successfully capture the role of ideational power or attractiveness of Confucianism and Chinese civilization in interactions among these countries in a hierarchical system.

**Case Studies: Historical East Asian International Relations in Three Eras**

I have selected three eras of East Asian history that had a hierarchical international system as the case studies to be the empirical evidence supporting my theoretical argument, and each of the hierarchal systems had a different foundation that it was based on. Then the interactions and diplomatic relationships between the states in these three hierarchical systems are reviewed to illustrate the nature of that hierarchy. The first case, the tributary system under the Northern Song Dynasty of China (960 – 1127 A.D.), was a hierarchy mainly based on ideational power. The second case, the conquest of East Asia by the Mongols in the Yuan Dynasty of China (1271 – 1368 A.D.), was a hierarchical system that was primarily material-power based. Last but not least, the case of the Ming Dynasty of China (1368 – 1644
A.D.) and the tributary system that centered on it, was a hierarchy that had strong ideational as well as material power. How the states within these three different hierarchical systems perceived such relationship and interacted with the hegemon serves as the empirical evidence that would demonstrate that ideational power is more valid than material power as the foundation of a hierarchy.

The Northern Song Dynasty (960 – 1127 A.D.) was a dynasty that controlled the China proper, or inner China, and maintained the tributary system with its neighboring states in the Korean Peninsula and Indochina following the practice of previous Chinese dynasties. In the tributary system, participating states paid tributes to the dominating power, China, and recognized the ruling Chinese dynasty’s authority and legitimate position as the leader of the East Asian international system, and the Chinese emperors would recognize the right of the vassal states’ leaders to rule in their respective territories and officially bestow them titles to signify their authority. It is clear that such diplomatic relationship is a hierarchical one with a clearly ranked order. Such system operated in a ceremonial way, and the states arranged themselves hierarchically according to their cultural similarity with China (Zhao, 2013: 32).

Despite the fact that we observe a hierarchy in this era of historical East Asian diplomacy, the Northern Song Dynasty is considered the weakest dynasty of China in terms
of its military capabilities. China during the Song dynasty was simply one of the great powers in the system, not the only super power (Wang, 2010; Kwan 2015). Furthermore, the primary enemies of the Northern Song Dynasty were the steppe nomads in the north and the west that would later establish their own regimes, such as the Liao dynasty established by the Khitan people, and Western Xia regime, established by the Tangut people. This implies that the Northern Song Dynasty would be less likely to use military forces to deal with its subordinates in the tributary system. As such, this hierarchical system could be considered one that was primarily based on and maintained by the ideational power of the hegemon. Empirical evidence showed that the Northern Song Dynasty, though militarily weaker than its predecessor that ruled the China proper lastly, the Tang Dynasty, yet still managed to maintain the tributary system led by Chinese empire as it inherited the “heavenly mandate” and was considered the legitimate leader of the hierarchical system. Furthermore, the Song dynasty was the era in Chinese history that the Confucian ideology enjoyed a revival and developed to its most prominent status.

The Northern Song dynasty also entered a hierarchical relationship with its neighbors on

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8 The official national strategy of the Northern Song dynasty is known as “zhong wen qing wu” (重文輕武) or “value letters and belittle arms,” and “qiang gan ruo zhi.” (強幹弱枝) or “strong trunk, weak branches.” This means the emperors and his ministers in the capital city commanded the military forces stationed in the periphery of the empire, and the status of the bureaucrats and literati was higher than that of the generals and soldiers.

9 For more detailed account of this argument, see “songdai caogong tixi yanjiu” (宋代朝貢體系研究, or Study of the Song Dynasty’s Tributary System) by Huang Chun Yan (2014).
its northern and western frontiers. As its relative power declined compared with previous Chinese dynasties, Kwan (2015) argues that since the Northern Song dynasty was only one of the great powers in the system, along with the Liao and the Western Xia, diplomatic rituals and protocols also reflect that fact, and diplomacy became regularized and formalized as diplomatic treaties became the primary institution governing the interaction among the Northern Song and its nomadic neighbors. This situation is similar to what Raymond Cohen describes about the diplomacy through negotiation and conciliation conducted by the Roman Empire in its decline (2013: 21-24). An example came from the reaction of the Northern Song when it was facing the challenge of Western Xia, a regime established by the Tangut people, which was one of the nomad tribes in the northwest frontier of the Northern Song.

The Western Xia regime unilaterally referred to its leader as “emperor” in one diplomatic letter to the Northern Song, and such title was unacceptable to the latter, as it was considered a direct challenge to the precedence of the Northern Song. Using the title “emperor” in the diplomatic letter by the Western Xia implies that its leader now shares the same title with the emperor of China, which monopolizes the heavenly mandate, and this means that the two states are now in an equal relationship. This dispute derived purely from the ideational basis and did not involve material capabilities, which demonstrated the fact that status mattered and occupied an important position in international relations during that
period of time. This evidence shows that material capability is not all that states care about in international relations. Eventually the dispute ended with the Western Xia recognizing the Northern Song’s status as emperor and withdrawing its unilateral usage of the title. The Northern Song then again officially bestowed upon the Western Xia the title of “sovereign of the kingdom of Western Xia” which was the title to be used in their diplomatic relationship afterwards (Kwan, 2015: 16). Also, the Northern Song dynasty differentiated its foreign relations with other states on the basis of status and precedence, but not material power (Franke, 1983: 120). It was during this era that Chinese became the “lingua franca” of diplomacy in East Asia, and the standardization of the practice of diplomacy in terms of the language and formats of the treaties were modeled on the Chinese examples (Franke and Twitchett, 1994: 20; Kwan, 2015: 17).

Then here I find it necessarily to bring in another piece of IR literature, *Harmony and War* by Yuan-Kang Wang (2010), that also addresses East Asian international system during the Song dynasty. In this study Wang analyzes interactions between state actors in the system from a purely structural realist perspective, and he fails to identify various evidences in his narration that a hierarchy actually existed during that era, and he also fails to provide unbiased narration of the history which should reveal the function of ideation power in international relations.
From a structural realist standpoint, Wang believes that state actors’ behaviors are conditioned by the anarchical international system, where there is no higher authority above states (2010: 5). However, in his own accounts of the interactions between East Asian states, especially during the Song dynasty when there is no single dominating great power that could establish hegemony in the system, even in this multipolar and anarchical setting, the states were still managed to form a hierarchical structure. For example, he mentions that the bilateral relationship between the Northern Song Dynasty and the Liao dynasty established by the Khitan people, as well as that between the Song and the Jin dynasty established by the Jurchen people, were both “uncle-nephew” relationships. In the former case the Song rulers were required to call the Liao rulers uncle in their earlier peace settlement (Wang, 2010: 67), while in the latter case, both the leaders of the Northern and Southern Song dynasties were required to address the Jin leaders uncle (Wang, 2010: 73; 92) and to recognize that the Jin is the “superior state” (Wang, 2010: 89). When there was an “uncle” or “superior state” in the relationship among the state actors, such system could not be said to be anarchical anymore. A hierarchy clearly existed.

Such unequal hierarchical uncle-nephew relationship was mainly based on the distribution of capabilities among the relevant state actors in the system, and the more
material power a state had, the higher its status was in the hierarchy, as these state actors formed such hierarchical relationships only after wars between them were over and the results of whom were the victors decided. However, as a structural realist who should focus on power and the structure of the international system, Wang does not provide a good measurement of power, hence does not clearly address the question of whether in the systems that he analyzes there was actually balance of power, or what the distribution of power was like in those eras. In short, for a structural realist, Wang does not actually operationalize well the things that he should be concerned the most, such as the measurement of power, distribution of capabilities, and balance of power, as these are the systematic features that should condition state actors’ behavior according to the theory that he believes in. Wang does not make these features better measurable or observable. Instead, his measurements of power are primarily indirect proxies of the things that he claims to be measuring, such as that he relies on “assessments by key decision makers” and “anecdotal data on state capability” (Wang, 2010: 32). In fact, the dynasties that he analyzes in his work, namely, the Song, Liao, Jin, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, all had well-documented history that covered the states’ actual military power, population, and taxation income, and these data should be readily available, as these dynasties were included in the Chinese official histories (zhengshi, 正史).

Also, if the arguments based on structural realism were valid in Wang’s case, then in the
multipolar anarchical system composed of the Northern Song, Western Xia, and Liao, with the latter being the more powerful actor, theoretically the weaker former two actors should have cooperated to balance against the stronger Liao. However, this balance of power did not happen. And the explanation provided by Wang actually proves to be supporting my ideational power argument, instead of his realist material power argument. Wang suggests that the balance of power did not happen because “the Confucian culture of hierarchy impeded rational policymaking” of the Song leaders (2010: 60). So here a realist scholar acknowledges that culture, a form of ideational power, actually functions, and has more influence than the material structure, and refutes his realist belief that only material power matters while culture and other ideational factors would have little effect in international relations.

Returning to the hierarchy consisted of Song, Liao, and Jin, it is clear that an uncle-nephew bilateral relationship is not equal and anarchical at all, yet Wang fails to acknowledge that such dyad was hierarchical, and this system was not anarchic. There existed a clear ranked-order and the relationship was inscribed in formal treaties. This situation is similar to how Kwan (2015) describes the relationship between China in the Han and Tang dynasties and the regimes established by the steppe nomads in China’s northern and western frontiers. During those periods of times, the Chinese imperial courts would send out female
members of the royal family to marry the leaders of these nomadic regimes, thus forming a familial tie. He argues that the practice of intermarriage has been institutionalized that it could be considered one of the institutional tools that formed an international society in historical East Asia (2015: 9). Here we can see that both in Wang and Kwan’s works, they show that actually China was still able to form or enter a hierarchical relationship with other non-Sinicized polities of the nomads through the establishment of familial kinship, whether it was through intermarriage, or through the proper titles stipulated in formal treaties. And since in those cases we can clearly see which state had higher status (being the uncle or the superior state), there was no more equality among the state actors, hence anarchy did not exist in those settings, and these were hierarchical relationships.

However, one thing that needs to be noticed is that, in such hierarchical relationships between China and the nomadic regimes, in fact the actors enjoying the higher status usually because of their superior material power, and these relationships were only nominally familial. The titles of uncle and nephew were only used to mark the proper positions of the respective actors in the system, and the uncle did not possess superior ideational power over the nephew. The superior position of uncle was conferred because of the state actor’s stronger material power. Unlike the hierarchies that China formed with its more Sinicized and Confucianized neighbors in the east and the south, these hierarchies with the nomads were not sustained by
China’s superior ideational power, but were rather more contingent on China’s material capabilities. When China became weaker, then such hierarchical system would be less stable and peaceful. The same applies to the situations when China in the Song dynasty was not the most power actor in the system and the Liao and Jin dynasties were more powerful.

There were two sets of hierarchies that existed at the same time in the Northern Song dynasty, with one mainly based on ideational power, while the other was based on material power. The tributary system that the Northern Song dynasty formed with Korea and other regimes in Southeast Asia had China’s superior ideational power, such as Confucian ideology, culture, and political institutions, as its foundation. The nominal familial hierarchies that the two Song dynasties entered with the Khitan Liao and Jurchen Jin dynasties were actually shaped by the actors’ relative material capabilities. The latter case would collapse soon, as a hierarchy primarily based on material power and maintained by coercion instead of ideational attractiveness and the subordinates’ voluntary recognition of the hegemon’s superiority could not be stable and peaceful. Here the two sets of hierarchies during the Song dynasty serve as the cases where the independent variable varies, namely, the hegemon’s ideational power was different in the two cases, in order to show that the dependent variable also varies with the independent variable. However, one thing to be noticed is that the hegemons in the two systems still possessed stronger material power over the subordinates in both cases. In the
case of Song-Sinicized States hierarchy, where the dominating power, the Northern Song dynasty, was stronger than its subordinates in both material and ideational powers, the relationship was sustainable and peaceful, until the Northern Song dynasty was conquered by the Jin dynasty. However, in the case of Liao/Jin-Song hierarchy, the dominating states (Liao and Jin) did not possess superior ideational power and such system was based on their stronger material power, which made the hierarchy unstable and more violent.

The Yuan Dynasty (1271 – 1368 A.D.) which ended the Southern Song Dynasty, the successor to the Northern Song Dynasty, was established by the Mongols, and it was the first non-Han dynasty that ruled the entire China proper. Therefore, unlike previous Chinese dynasties which considered themselves the protector of the Confucian civilization, and thus were considered by their subordinates the center of the world order and enjoyed a superior status, the Yuan Dynasty controlled its hierarchical system in East Asia not through the attractiveness of ideational power, but mainly through military coercion and conquest. This is the case of a material-power based hierarchy, and it is used to support the hypothesis that the more the hierarchy is based on material power, the less stable and peaceful it is. In this era, we observe the Yuan Dynasty nominally incorporated the Korean Peninsula as one of its provinces, while previously Korea had been a semi-independent vassal state which operated under the tributary system led by the Chinese dynasties. Moreover, the Yuan dynasty did this
in the hopes of using Korea as a stepping stone in its various attempts to conquer Japan, another member of the community of the Sinicized states, although Japan was perhaps less Sinicized and less eager to participate in the China-led tributary system than other East Asian states. Prior to the failed invasions of Japan, the Mongols also invaded Korea multiple times to force Korea to surrender to become its vassal state, while previously Korea entered a hierarchical tributary system led by Chinese dynasties because it was attracted by China’s ideational power. In the interaction between China and its subordinates in this era, peaceful means of diplomacy such as negotiation and dispatch of tributary envoys were replaced by military campaigns and wars of conquest in the hierarchy led by the Yuan dynasty. The Yuan Dynasty only lasted for less than a hundred years (to be more precise, 97 years in total), which is significantly shorter than most of the previous Chinese empires. These are the evidences that suggest such hierarchy maintained by military power and coercion was neither stable nor peaceful.

However, despite the overwhelming material power possessed by the Yuan dynasty, we could also observe evidence that for such super power which sustained its dominance of the system mainly through coercion, it sometimes still needed to rely on tools with ideational power to bolster its rule, as it realized that material power alone was not sufficient to

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10 Compare with Tang Dynasty’s 289 years (618 - 907), the Northern Song Dynasty’s 167 years (960 - 1127), Ming Dynasty’s 276 years (1368 - 1644), and Qing Dynasty’s 268 years (1644 - 1912).
maintain its hierarchy. For instance, Dardess (2003) argues that the Yuan dynasty as an expansionist empire, as its territory expanded, its rulers found that Confucian ideology and intelligentsia could help them govern the empire better. He also points out that the Yuan dynasty was actually the first dynasty of China to institute the civil service examinations based on Neo-Confucianism developed in the Song era (Dardess, 2003: 128). Similarly, Birge (2008) also suggests that the laws in the Yuan dynasty actually had path dependent effects that influenced the Chinese legal tradition in subsequent dynasties, and some of the Confucian features in the Yuan laws that lasted in the Ming and Qing dynasties were firstly incorporated into Chinese laws in the Yuan dynasty. She notices that the changes in the laws, especially the heritance laws that made a shift to a more Confucianized and patrilineal form, in the Yuan dynasty had lasting effects on the laws in the Ming and the Qing dynasties. There was a path dependency, as these innovations did not fade away, but were instead preserved in subsequent eras. This case of the Yuan dynasty’s rule and dominance of East Asia showed that, despite a hierarchy was established primarily through the use of material power and military coercion, yet sometimes the rulers found ideational power useful to their rule and provided stability to the system, which strengthens my argument that for a sustainable hierarchical system, the dominant super power could not only rely on one form of power, especially the use of material power, as ideational power provides legitimacy and authority that would be essential for a hierarchy to be stable and peaceful.
Finally, the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644 A.D.) that ended the Yuan Dynasty and restored the dominance of the Han ethnicity over China was an example of a hegemon with both superior ideational power and material power. The Ming Dynasty proved to be militarily strong as it conquered the Yuan Dynasty, which held the largest territory of all Chinese dynasties and was considered militarily the strongest dynasty in Chinese history. After conquering China, the Ming Dynasty was then able to establish a strong naval fleet that went on seven maritime voyages and defeated the wokou (Japanese pirates) that were harassing China’s coastal areas. On the other hand, the Ming Dynasty of China was also considered at the height of the East Asian tributary system (Swope, 2009).

From the ways how subordinate states accepted the Confucian values and were submissive to China in their practice of diplomacy that were revealed in official documents as well as secondary sources that interpreted their diplomatic relationship, we can see that they did so because they believed that it was legitimate for China to be on the top of that hierarchy and they voluntarily accepted China’s authority.\footnote{For a more detailed account, see Liam Kelley’s *Beyond the Bronze Pillars* (2005), which nicely illustrates the thoughts of the Vietnamese envoys to China’s Ming Dynasty and their interaction and relationship with the Chinese officials through examination of the Vietnamese envoy poetry. This book shows that the Vietnamese officials at that time sought to assimilate themselves with their Chinese counterparts and practiced Confucian culture just as the Chinese did. Moreover, they recognized and accepted their country’s subservient position in the hierarchy led by China.} The hierarchy in this era, namely the tributary system led by the Ming Dynasty, was ranked ordered, and based on how culturally
similar the participants in the system were to China. The states such as Korea and Vietnam embraced Confucianism and were eager to participate in the tributary system (Kelley, 2005). They were also the ones that were granted the most tributary missions to China, which signified that their status was higher than other members of the system. This era is the case demonstrating that a hierarchical system that is based on both ideational and material power is the most stable and peaceful. The hierarchical tributary system which was based on both ideational and material power led by Ming China lasted for 276 years, and would be inherited by its successor, the Qing Dynasty, until an outsider of the system, the British Empire, opened war with China in 1839 that marked the beginning of the collapse of this hierarchical system.

During this period of time, diplomacy between China and Vietnam and Korea clearly revealed the fact that the international system in East Asia was a hierarchical one. Vietnam acknowledged that it was a vassal of Ming China as documented by Vietnamese tributary envoys in the poetry they composed en route the missions to China which illustrated their world view and attitude towards China (Kelley, 2005: 2). And when they met their Korean counterparts who were also on diplomatic mission to the Ming dynasty’s capital, they exchanged poems which would show their shared “brotherly comaraderie” (Kelley, 2005: 183) as they both “followed the same patterns of poetry and documents,” namely, the Chinese/Confucian culture.
Here is another case that could bolster the argument presented in this paper that diplomacy between China and its vassal states was based on a hierarchical order and that its foundation is the superior ideational power of China. Empirical evidence from the Zhongguo lidai zhanzheng nianbiao (中國歷代戰爭年表, or Chronology of Wars in China Through Successive Dynasties) revealed that there were actually only two wars happened between the Sinicized states in the Ming Dynasty, with one being Chinese invasion of Vietnam from 1407 to 1428, while the other was Japanese invasion of Korea from 1592 to 1598. Among these two cases, what happened after the Chinese were defeated and withdrew from Vietnam proved to be counterintuitive.

Wang’s interpretation (2010: 151-157) of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam was purely realist, as he only focuses on the Ming leaders’ argument in the onset of the war that the Chinese force was more powerful thus could easily win the war, and that the economic resources after the annexation of Vietnam would be lucrative to the Chinese, and downplays the rationale for such war which was originally a righteous war conforming to Confucian ideology that aimed at restoring Vietnam’s legitimate ruler. Also, he fails to address the counterintuitive aftermath of the war, and chooses to only focus on analyzing the war itself,

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12 The data came from table 5.1 on page 83 of Kang’s East Asia Before the West (2010).
which clearly (mis)guides the readers into his biased realist narration, as wars could always be explained better from a realist perspective. Here I suggest that the more important part of this case should come from the counterintuitive action of Vietnam to remain in the hierarchical tributary system and recognize Chinese superiority, which clearly contradicts the structural realist prediction.

During the war, the Vietnamese successfully resisted Chinese conquest, hence demonstrated that they were powerful enough in this military confrontation with their suzerain. According to the conventional wisdom, or the structural realist perception, the distribution of capabilities shifted in favor of Vietnam, and the victorious Vietnam should be no longer willing to remain subordinate to China, which was after all defeated. In this sense this should be the least likely case for my argument to be valid. Yet after the victory, Vietnam continued to pay tribute to China, which it just defeated, and accepted to be a member on the second tier of the hierarchical tributary system. This is a strong and convincing evidence that here in East Asia, authority was the cause of stability, and the explicit hierarchical order explained why the region has been relatively stable (Kang, 2010: 101). This also echoes Kelly’s (2011) observation that Confucianism’s respect of hierarchical order is one of the key elements of East Asia’s long peace. In sum, this hierarchy observed in historical East Asia diplomacy in the Ming Dynasty was based on not just its material power, but more
importantly, it was the superior ideational power of the leader, China, that maintained such hierarchical system and made other members voluntarily accept such ranked order.

**Conclusion**

In sum, I argue that hierarchy is omnipresent in international relations, and this paper calls on further modification of existing international relations theories or the establishment of a new school of international relations theory to better reflect this reality. The empirical evidences of a stable and peaceful hierarchical international system could be found in historical East Asia, and this paper takes the relationships between state actors in three eras of East Asian history to illustrate the fact that hierarchy better explains international relations than anarchy, and empirical evidences illustrate that such hierarchical system was primarily based on the superior ideational power of the hegemon. In conclusion, this paper defies the assumptions of traditional Western international relations theories, especially the dominant realist school, and demonstrates that more often do we observe hierarchies in the international system. Possibilities other than anarchy exist in international relations. If existing international relations theories cannot explain these stable hierarchies, then the main theoretical implication this paper proposes here is that perhaps a newly developed international relations theory is needed to account for the experiences of the East.
Furthermore, this paper also contributes to the existing literature on historical East Asian international relations. I compare the two sets of hierarchies that both involved the Song dynasty of China, and show that the hierarchy based on ideational power was more stable and peaceful than the one based on material power. And I then show the contrast of how hierarchy based mainly on material power was less stable and peaceful than hierarchy based on ideational power with the Yuan and Ming cases. Also the timeframe that I cover in this study is longer than previous works of other scholars, as I attempt to provide a more continuous account of the changes in the East Asian system in my study. Moreover, I have included a variety of hierarchies with different combinations of ideational power and material power as my case studies, whereas the previous works only showed the cases where their only independent variable did not vary, hence could not inform the readers other possible outcomes. They focused on only one type of power functioning in their studies (with Kang and Kelly more on the ideational, and Wang solely on the material), but in my study, I look at both material and ideational powers, and show different results when my independent variable varies. There are different combinations of the mixture of material and ideational power in hierarchical systems, and I show that the more the hierarchy is based on ideational

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13 I have covered the history from the Northern Song dynasty of China (960 A.D.) until the end of Ming dynasty (1644 A.D.), for a total of nearly seven hundred years. In contrast, previous works such as Kang’s (2010) *East Asia before the West* covered the time from the Ming till late Qing dynasty (1368-1841), Wang’s (2010) *Harmony and War* addressed the Song and Ming dynasties (960-1279 and 1368-1644), and Kelly’s (2011) *Confucian Long Peace* only studied the Qing dynasty before the arrival of Western powers (1644-1839). I also cover a dynasty (Yuan) that has not been studied in East Asian IR literature much, and include the dynasties established by the nomadic people like Liao and Jin as well.
power, the more peaceful and stable the system is. These are the new additions brought into the literature by this paper.

Eventually, the prospect of the research is that I intend to further extend the timeframe in this study in the future to also cover the Tang dynasty that came before the Song, and the Qing dynasty that succeeded the Ming to provide a more complete and continuous account of how the international system in this part of the world changed over time. The hierarchical East Asian tributary system began to mature and involved more state actors from the Tang dynasty, when its emperor received the title “heavenly Khagan” from various Turkic nomads in its western frontiers. While the tributary system led by the Qing dynasty which was established by the non-Han Manchu people could serve as a contrast to the previous non-Han Yuan dynasty to observe how they adopted the Confucian ideology differently in their strategy of dominating the hierarchy, as the hierarchical tributary system in the Qing dynasty was more stable and peaceful than that of the Yuan era. Furthermore, my researches on hierarchical international systems and their ideational foundation could also be expanded to other regions of the world by including more other cases, to increase the external validity of my findings, and to make my theory more generalizable. Previous case studies of Western IR showed that ideational power was also influential, and a polity that claimed superior ideational power could wield its influence over other materially more powerful entities. An
example is the study of the Papal State’s moral authority over Holy Roman Emperors by Hall (1997).

Finally, an implication, or policy recommendation, that could be drawn from this research is that, despite a hegemon is in decline in terms of its material capabilities, a hierarchical order could still be maintained provided that it holds superior ideational power and that its status as leader of the hierarchy continues to be accepted by other members of the system and is recognized as legitimate. In present-day East Asia, the relative distribution of capabilities (material power) might be gradually shifting in favor of China in the long term; however, nowadays few states in East Asia imitate the institutions or culture of the People’s Republic of China, and its current values and ideology do not prove to be attractive to its neighbors. If a hierarchy is established purely based on material foundations, history tells us that it would not be likely to last very long, as the case of the Yuan dynasty in this paper reveals. On the other hand, the U.S. might be in decline in its material power, however, as long as it upholds its values that are appealing to the states in East Asia, the prospects that it could maintain its current status as the hegemon of the hierarchy in this region would remain positive, just as the case of the Northern Song dynasty of China suggested.
Bibliography


