International Order and Change in East Asian History

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How does an international order change from one type to another? The rise of China raises questions about the future of the liberal international order. Optimists hold that the current order will persist because it is easy to join but difficult to overturn. The West can socialize China into norms of cooperation and assuming a status quo identity that will uphold the liberal order.\(^1\) Pessimists, on the other hand, foresee the coming end of the liberal order because the material power undergirding the order has declined. It would be unrealistic to expect an illiberal China to uphold the liberal order which it did not participate in building.\(^2\) Most studies, however, are limited by their reliance on the Western experience. What can we learn from East Asia’s own history?

In the last four hundred years, there were two major changes in international order in East Asia: the Ming-Qing transition (1616–83) and the Westphalian transformation (1839–1911). The Ming-Qing transition changed system leadership from Ming China to the Qing hegemon, but the tributary

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rules and institutions persisted. In contrast, the Westphalian transformation not only changed system leadership, but also overturned the tributary order that had guided interpolity interactions in East Asia for numerous centuries. Confucian hierarchy gave way to sovereign equality as the governing principle of the East Asian international order. The Ming-Qing transition demonstrates that entrenched rules and institutions can survive a violent power transition, and yet the Westphalian transformation shows that an entrenched order can still be overturned and replaced with a new set of rules. What explains the continuity of the tributary order and what explains its change?

Building on Gilpinian realism, I argue that power is critical to creation, maintenance, and change of international order. When the balance of power undergirding an international order shifts away from the hegemon, a revised order will emerge to update the reality of power. However, the rights and rules embodied in the order are historically contingent and reflect the political ideology held by the preponderant state or a group of powerful states. Whether an order will persist or not depends on the extent of shared political ideology between the outgoing and the incoming hegemon.

The next section offers a rules-based definition of international order and presents the argument for a power-based theory of order transition. I then compare and contrast the Ming-Qing transition with the Westphalian transformation, highlighting the importance of power shift. Finally, I discuss the implications of this research for understanding the China challenge to the liberal international order.

Power and International Order

Although international politics is characterized by anarchy, there exists some semblance of order that guides interactions between states. Definitions of “order” abound, but most emphasize the central role of rules undergirding an international order. English School scholar Hedley Bull defines international order as “a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states, or international society,” which is “bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another and share in the working of common institutions.”

also highlight rules. According to G. John Ikenberry, “International order refers to the organizing rules and institutions of world politics. It is the governing arrangements that define and guide the relations among states.”

Constructivists point to the constitutional role of rules and institutions. Andrew Phillips defines order as “the constellation of constitutional norms and fundamental institutions through which cooperation is cultivated and conflict contained between different political communities.” Although Waltzian realists equate order with the balance of power, other realists stress its rules-based essence. Henry Kissinger defines order as “a set of commonly accepted rules that define the limits of permissible action and a balance of power that enforces restraint where rules break down, preventing one unit from subjugating all others.”

Robert Gilpin associates international order with governance of the system, which entails power, prestige, and “the rules and rights embodied in the system.” In these definitions, the “rules of the game” give rise to an international order and serve as the “governing” arrangements among a group of states in the absence of a central government above them.

Following these rules-based conceptions of order, I define international order as a constellation of institutions that structure and govern interactions between political units in the system. Institutions are a set of rules that prescribes acceptable forms of behavior among states and proscribes unacceptable behavior.

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This definition is similar to Kai He and Huiyun Feng’s definition of order as “a normative and institutional arrangement among sovereign states that governs their interactions in the power-based international system.” But there are two important differences. First, because norms and rules are analytically similar, I combine them into institutions. Sovereignty, for instance, is both a norm and a rule of the international system and is often considered as an institution. Second, my definition applies to all anarchical systems composed of autonomous political units and is not restricted to a system of sovereign states. Doing so opens up possibilities of studying historical international orders and allows for “fruitful macrohistorical comparisons that might illuminate the broader nature and workings of international orders.”

To study changes in international order, we need to identify how it is created and maintained. Robert Gilpin’s *War and Change in World Politics* provides a useful starting point. For Gilpin, international order and governance of the system are closely related. Governance requires a set of rules to regulate the behaviors of political actors, material capabilities to enforce those rules, and a willingness to exercise power to deter non-compliance or compel compliance.

In Gilpin’s formulation, international order has three components: (1) the distribution of power, (2) the hierarchy of prestige, and (3) the rules and rights embodied in the system. Of these, the distribution of power is the most critical. As Gilpin points out, the distribution of power “determines who governs the international system and whose interests are principally promoted by the functioning of the system.” The material capabilities of the hegemon are the foundation of international order, enabling it to establish rules and rights that influence state behaviors. Hegemonic power is agenda-setting power, allowing the dominant state to shape the political environment and limit the range of choices for lesser political actors. By cre-

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Order is maintained through both the exercise of power and the hierarchy of prestige among political actors. First, power is the anchor of order. Without the support of power, order will not be stable. Having a preponderance of material resources gives the hegemon a range of tools to offer both positive and negative incentives to induce others to cooperate and participate in the order. It can reward cooperative behaviors and punish uncooperative ones. Second, in addition to material power, Gilpin highlights the importance of the hierarchy of prestige in sustaining an international order. Prestige is the intangible dimension of power, or the “reputation for power.”

The concept is similar to authority, which refers to the right to rule. Although constructivist scholars distinguish between authoritative power and coercive power, Gilpin makes clear that it is material power that ultimately matters in international politics. A country’s prestige, or authoritative power, originates from its economic and military capabilities. Having the reputation for power means that the dominant state can usually get what it wants without having to actually use its power. The weaker, aware of the futility of resistance, often yields to the stronger. Authoritative power does not exist in a vacuum; it is highly correlated with coercive power. Authoritative power without material capabilities is unsustainable.

Changes in international order are brought on by changes in the distribution of power. As power anchors international order, when the balance of power shifts away from the hegemon to another state, the international order will change as well. Gilpin focuses on changes in the governance of the system or what he calls “systemic change,” which refers to “changes in the international distribution of power, the hierarchy of prestige, and the rules and rights embodied in the system.” The source of the change is attributed to the law of uneven growth. Differential growth results in a redistribution

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17. Gilpin posits a distinction between prestige and authority, with the former applying to international politics and the latter to domestic society. But such a distinction is conceptually unnecessary. David Lake develops the concept of authority in international relations, see David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).
18. See, for example, Reus-Smit, “Cultural Diversity and International Order,” 88–9; Phillips, *War, Religion and Empire*.
20. As Waltz points out, elements of authority that emerge in the system are often derived from the capability that gives appearance to these elements of authority: Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 88.
of power in the system. When the distribution of power anchoring the old order has shifted, a “disequilibrium” appears. The power of the rising state has grown incommensurate with the hierarchy of prestige in the system, as well as with the existing rules that continue to disproportionately benefit the old hegemon, causing the problem of status inconsistency. Dissatisfied, the rising state attempts to change the old order now that it has the capabilities to do so. Consequently, the order starts to break down. While not ruling out peaceful change, Gilpin asserts that “the principal mechanism of change throughout history has been war or what we shall call hegemonic war (i.e., a war that determines which state or states will be dominant and will govern the system).”22 The postwar settlement reorders the system to reflect the latest distribution of power, determining whose interests will be primarily served by the new international order. A new equilibrium emerges, thus completing the cycle of change.

Gilpin pinpoints the supremacy of power in creating, sustaining, and changing an international order. His theory explains the cyclical rise and fall of hegemons in world history. Of the three components of international order (the distribution of power, the hierarchy of prestige, and the rules and rights embodied in the system), he seems to assume an automatic link between changes in the distribution of power and modifications in the rules and rights of the system.23 But this assumption is empirically wrong. Some power transitions involve a change in the rights and rules of the system, while others do not. For instance, the change from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana does not entail a significant alteration in the rights of rules of the system, nor does the change from the Ming to the Qing tributary order, as we shall see later. In contrast, the change from the tributary order to the Westphalian one involves a significant revision to the rights and rules of the system, replacing tributary hierarchy with sovereign equality. Gilpin refers to this type of change as interaction change, which entails “changes in the rights and rules embodied in an international system.”24 What, then, drives interaction change in the system?

Borrowing insights from historical institutionalism,25 I argue that changes in the rights and rules of the system are historically contingent and reflect

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22. Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics, 15.
23. Phillips, War, Religion and Empire, 6, n. 9. Phillips distinguishes between “positional change,” which does not involve a change in the rights and rules, and “institutional change,” which entails a revision of the rights and rules.
24. Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics, 43.
the political ideology of the dominant state. They are historically contingent because institutional designs tend to follow the logic of path dependence. Once a set of rules is chosen, as time progresses, it would become costlier to invent alternative rules than continuing on the trajectory of the existing arrangements. Extant rules can persist despite changes in the distribution of power. Historical contingency, however, is not sufficient in explaining interaction change. We also need to consider the political ideology of the rising state. At the end of the power transition, the dominant state is circumscribed by its political ideology as it envisions the structure of governance for the international system. Its domestic political system provides the roadmap to devise the rights and rules that guide interactions between political units. As Charles Kupchan points out, the nature of a given international order originates from “packages of ideas and rules” that provide order within the political system of the dominant state. The development of these values and ideas follows the sociopolitical trajectories of the dominant state. Material capabilities enable the dominant state to project their values and ideas unto the international order. When there is no significant difference between the political ideologies of the rising and the declining state, extant rules and institutions tend to persist. Interaction change will be evolutionary. When there is a significant difference, they will be replaced with new ones reflecting the political ideology of the new hegemon. Interaction change will be revolutionary.

The Ming-Qing Power Transition

International relation in East Asian history was characterized by the tributary order centered on China. This order was remarkably durable: for numerous centuries, tributary rules and institutions governed interactions among political entities in the East Asian system. Unlike the Westphalian order emphasizing sovereign equality, there was no “first among equals” in historical East Asia. China often held supreme authority over autonomous tributary polities. Material capabilities enabled China to create and enforce tribu-

tary rules and institutions to govern the system, disproportionately serving its self-interests. When not backed by military power, the order would fall apart.28 Imperial China’s political ideology of Confucianism gave shape to the character of the tributary order. Confucianism envisioned a hierarchical sociopolitical order as key to the stability of the world. Chinese leaders then projected this line of Confucian thinking onto the international scene.29

From the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, Ming China (1368–1644) was the regional hegemon in East Asia. The Ming preponderance of power enabled it to create and maintain the tributary order. An official record in 1587 shows that the Ming enrolled as many as 123 tributary polities.30 In the seventeenth century, the Manchu state rose in power and challenged the Ming order.31 The Manchus, who originated from present-day northeastern China, had been a tributary polity of Ming China. Manchu leaders, acknowledging Ming suzerainty, received official titles from the Ming court and were given access to border markets and lucrative trading privileges as rewards. Manchu founder, Nurhaci, posthumously named the Great Progenitor (taizu), personally led eight tribute missions to Beijing between 1590 and 1611. Beginning in 1583, Nurhachi embarked on a state-building effort. Incessant infighting among Manchu groups compelled their leaders to develop a state, prompting them to mobilize resources for war, centralize governing power, implement administrative reforms, and impose taxation.32 The invention of the Manchu script (adapted from Mongolian) in


30. J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng, “On the Ch’ing Tributary System,” Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 6, no. 2 (1942): 135–246, 150. Although some of the entries in the Ming document appear to be duplicates, the large number still indicates the broad extent of the Ming tributary order.

31. Prior to 1635 when the term “Manchu” was formally adopted, the people there were known as Jurchens. To maintain simplicity in the text, I use “Manchu” throughout (albeit anachronistically).

1599 helped forge a nation. In 1616, after more than thirty years of endeavors, a new state, the Later Jin (renamed the Qing in 1636), was founded. The Manchus were now in a military position to challenge the Ming order.

As Manchu power rose, a disequilibrium between the distribution of power and the hierarchy of prestige emerged. Dissatisfied with the Ming-dominated tributary order, Nurhaci announced the Seven Grievances in 1618 and set out to attack the Ming, thus starting a process that would eventually change the East Asian international order. In preparation for ruling the enlarging domain, Manchu leaders enlisted the help of Chinese advisors, who suggested adoption of Confucianism as state ideology. They helped write imperial edicts in a way that conformed to the Confucian norm of benevolence and righteousness. To win over large numbers of Chinese military leaders and civilian administrators, the Qing adopted a public stance that was “more Chinese than the Chinese” to sustain its claim as the legitimate ruler of China.

Military power was the building blocks of the Qing tributary order. As Andrew Phillips points out, “it was largely on the basis of the Qing Empire’s military predominance that order in East Asia rested.” The Qing used brute force to coerce Choson Korea, a highly Sinicized tributary state of the Ming, into accepting the Qing tribute system. The Manchus invaded Korea in 1627 to force the Choson court to send annual tribute. In 1636, when the Choson court refused to receive Manchu envoys demanding recognition of Qing suzerainty, the Manchus invaded again, capturing Seoul and forcing Korean King Injo to perform the kowtow before Hong Taiji, the Manchu leader. The Korean court was forced to renounce allegiance to Ming China and to send the crown prince to the Qing as hostage. Under military duress, Korea became a Qing tributary state. For the Qing, in keeping with Confu-

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35. Phillips, War, Religion and Empire, 162.
Chinese ideology, acquiring the first tributary state strengthened the legitimacy of the Qing imperial enterprise.

Korea’s submission coincided with declining Ming power. Lacking military capabilities, Ming China was incapable of sustaining the tributary order, nor did it rescue Korea from Qing attacks, as it did in the Imjin War (1592–8) when Japan invaded Korea. In 1644, the Qing, taking advantage of Ming peasant rebellions, conquered Beijing and became the new leader of the East Asian international order.

Interaction change was evolutionary, as the Qing shared the Ming political ideology of Confucianism. The Qing adapted the Ming tribute system to better serve its interests by implementing a dual-track arrangement that distinguished vassal states (shuguo) from dependencies (fanbu). As in the traditional tribute system, vassal states were autonomous political units that paid homage and pledged allegiance to the Qing emperor. The Qing acted as the suzerain and held ultimate authority over vassal states. Diplomacy and tributary affairs with vassal states were conducted through the Ministry of Rites, a practice that followed the Ming precedent and was in keeping with the traditional tribute system. By 1750, the Qing had seven officially enrolled vassal states: Korea (1637), Ryukyu (1651), Vietnam (1660), Siam (1664), Sulu (1726), Laos (1730), and Burma (1750).36 At the height of its power, Qing records listed approximately thirty to fifty tributary polities and states.37

In addition to vassals, the Qing created a new category: dependency. Dependencies were conquered territories that were integrated within the Qing administrative structure and enjoyed less autonomy than vassal states did, their administrative status lying somewhere between an inland province and a vassal state. The Qing practiced indirect rule over dependencies through native chieftains and administrators.38 Relations with Inner and Central Asian polities such as the Mongols, Tibetans, and Uighurs were handled...
through the Court of Dependency Affairs (lifanyuan). Interestingly, the Qing’s relations with Russia were also handled through lifanyuan because they mainly involved Mongolian affairs. As a multiethnic empire, the Qing combined a repertoire of Confucianism, steppe traditions, and Buddhism to rule a variety of subjects. The Qing ruler was an emperor to the Han Chinese, a khan to the nomadic Mongols, and a chakravartin (wheel-turning-king) to the Buddhist Tibetans.39

Military might enabled the Qing to expand the tributary order. Toward the vast steppe in the west, it embarked on a massive program of expansion to conquer nomadic polities, transforming them into dependencies. In 1691, Outer Mongolia, overawed by the splendid demonstration of Qing military might and seeking protection from Zunghar attacks, submitted to the Qing as a dependency.40 Beginning in 1690, the Qing launched a series of military attacks against the powerful Zunghar Mongols, defeating their leader Galdan’s forces at Jao Modo near the Kerulen River in 1696. The growing military might of the Qing frightened Inner and Central Asian polities, prompting them to join the Qing tributary order. Hami became the first Turkic oasis state to acknowledge Qing suzerainty. Kokonor (in present-day Qinghai), which had mostly been out of imperial control except during the Mongol Yuan dynasty, submitted to Qing authority. Tibet also became a member of the Qing tributary order. Threatened by rising Qing power, the regent of Tibet expressed his gratitude to the Qing emperor for granting him the title “King of Tibet.”41 Qing troops occupied Lhasa in 1720 and established a military presence there, ushering in a period of direct intervention in Tibetan affairs. In 1757, the Qing eventually destroyed the Zunghar Mongols and incorporated their territory into the Qing empire. Shortly thereafter, the Qing conquered Turkestan and renamed the newly acquired territory Xinjiang.

Like other international orders, changes were achieved mainly through war. The Ming-Qing transition, however, changed system leadership but not the constellation of rules. The Qing, as the new system leader equipped


with a preponderance of material capabilities, had the options of keeping the rules that continued to serve its interests and revising those that did not. Then, as before, tributary rules largely guided how political actors interacted with the center of hierarchy. Before becoming powerful, the Manchus were a tributary polity of the Ming order. This historical contingency influenced how the Qing envisioned the new international order. Maintaining the existing rules was less costly than inventing new ones. As such, the Qing chose to keep most of the existing rules and institutions. In this way, the institutional design of the Qing order followed a path dependence logic.

The Ming-Qing case contrasts with the order transition from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana. On the one hand, both involved a changing of the guard without fundamental alteration of the rules and principles undergirding the order. The Qing took over the tributary order from the Ming, while the United States inherited the liberal order from Britain. The prior architecture of order persisted. This similarity is largely due to path dependency and the shared political ideology between the outgoing and incoming hegemon. Both the Ming and the Qing adopted Confucianism as their governing ideology, while Britain and the United States shared a liberal ideology.

On the other hand, the Ming-Qing transition raises questions about the existing scholarship on peaceful change. Most analysts suggest that sharing the same values and ideas may be the key to peaceful change. As Gilpin indicates, the peaceful transition from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana was actually a Pax Anglo-Saxonica because both Britain and America shared the same values: “In the absence of shared values and interests, the mechanism of peaceful change has little chance of success.” Along the same lines, Charles Kupchan notes, “The transition from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana . . . may have been uniquely peaceful because both orders rested on an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ package of ordering ideas and rules.” The Ming-Qing transition challenges this line of argument. Even though the Qing shared the same tributary “package of ordering ideas and rules” with the Ming, the transition was not peaceful. What was at stake in the Ming-Qing transition was about system leadership, not about the content of the rules. Having shared ideas and values does not necessarily lead to a peaceful change in international order. The peaceful transition from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana might have more to do with system structure than with shared values. The rise of

42. Fairbank and Teng, “On the Ch’ing Tributary System.”
43. Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics, 209.
German power might have prompted Britain to concentrate its resources in Europe instead of opposing the United States in North America, where Britain lacked the military capabilities.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{The Westphalian Transformation}

East Asia’s tributary order of Confucian hierarchy was overturned in the nineteenth century and transformed into the Westphalian system of sovereign equality. European powers defeated Qing China and imposed a new set of rules to regulate interactions among East Asian states.

The European international order grew out of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 that ended the Thirty Years War (1618–1648). Prior to the war, cross-cutting lines of authority characterized interactions among kingdoms, principalities, city-states, and other political units. The Catholic Church exercised authority through the Holy Roman Empire (962–1806). Rulers shared and competed for authority over a certain territory, with some actors owing allegiance to two or more overlords. There was no exclusive control within the ruler’s boundaries. The peace treaties of Westphalia gave birth to the principle of sovereignty, which was later confirmed by the Peace of Utrecht (1713) and further developed by political philosophers and legal scholars such as Emerich de Vattel.\textsuperscript{46} The Westphalian order of sovereign states would subsequently spread to the rest of the world and become the foundation of the current international system.

Unlike the East Asian order of Confucian hierarchy, the Westphalian order emphasizes sovereign equality among states. Stephen Krasner identifies two core norms of the European system of states: Westphalian sovereignty and international legal sovereignty. Westphalian sovereignty refers to the principle that each state is the supreme authority within its territorial boundaries, independent from external interference. In international legal sovereignty, the sovereign state enjoys formal legal equality under international law, a status that is confirmed through recognition by other states.\textsuperscript{47}

These two norms of sovereignty clashed with the tributary order of East Asia. First, contrary to the norm of Westphalian sovereignty, Imperial China was the supreme authority to which tributary polities pledge allegiance.

\textsuperscript{45} Mearsheimer, \textit{The Tragedy of Great Power Politics}, 246.
Although China practiced indirect rule over tributary polities, it retained the ultimate say in their domestic affairs. As the emperor ruled all-under-Heaven, Imperial China did not distinguish between foreign and domestic policy. Tributary rulers were tantamount to ministers (chen) working for the emperor under the Chinese world order. Second, formal, legal equality with Imperial China was ruled out. The Chinese emperor enjoyed the highest ranking. Tributary rulers received recognition and legitimation from the Chinese emperor and periodically dispatched envoys to pay tribute to the emperor, but they were not allowed to have a permanent diplomatic presence in the Chinese capital. Tributary rituals and the full kowtow left no doubt that it was the Chinese emperor who held supreme authority over tributary polities.

As the concept of sovereignty was utterly alien, the Qing attempted to treat Europeans who came ashore as just another tributary entity. Official Qing documents dutifully listed Holland as a tributary state in 1690, Portugal in 1732, and “the countries of the Western Ocean [Europe]” (xiyang guo) in 1764. For their parts, most Europeans abided by the tributary protocols in their dealings with China and even performed the obligatory kowtow in meetings with the emperor. This was a time when China was powerful and had the military capabilities to enforce tributary rules. The Qing empire was the largest continental empire in the world, with a total population of 291 million in 1786. Qing territorial size dwarfed that of any European country, its population was three times the size of Europe’s total population, and its economy was the largest in the world, estimated to be at least four times larger than that of Great Britain.

Under the tributary order, international trade with European countries was regulated by the “Canton system.” The guiding principle of this trade system was “hierarchy subordination.” After 1760, the Qing restricted all maritime trade to Canton (Guangzhou) in southern China and denied Eu-

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51. Elliott, Emperor Qianlong, 141.
European merchants direct access to Chinese officials. European—and later American—merchants were required to conduct business solely with a monopolistic Chinese merchant guild called Cohong (gōngháng), which in turn was held responsible for the foreign crew’s good behavior. If Westerners had grievances or petitions, they had to be communicated through these Chinese merchants; they could not appeal directly to Chinese officials. Westerners chafed at these cumbersome procedures but had no capabilities to overturn them.

In the late eighteenth century, a rising Britain became increasingly dissatisfied with the Canton system and decided to change the rules. In 1793, King George III dispatched Lord George McCartney to China to seek expanded trade privileges, diplomatic residence in Beijing, and additional ports for trade. The clash of the two international orders was evident in the famed McCartney Embassy. In keeping with tributary protocols, the boats and land-carriages of the mission bore flags with the inscription, “Ambassador bearing tribute from the country of England.” A dispute erupted over whether Lord McCartney should perform the full kowtow in front of Emperor Qianlong. After much haggling, it was decided that McCartney would bend on one knee, as he did to the English king. In his letter to King George III, Emperor Qianlong rejected every British request:

> Our dynasty’s majestic virtue has penetrated unto every country under Heaven, and Kings of all nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea. As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country’s manufactures. This then is my answer to your request to appoint a representative at my Court, a request contrary to our dynastic usage, which would only result in inconvenience to yourself.53

At the time, Britain was not in a military position to challenge Qing dominance in East Asia. During the reign of Qianlong, the Qing was “the largest, wealthiest, and most populous contiguous political entity anywhere in the world.”54 As there was not much Britain could do to change the rules, the trade issue remained unresolved for the next fifty years or so. In 1816,

after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, Britain tried to change the rules again by dispatching another embassy led by William Pitt, Lord Amherst, but he was expelled from China for refusing to perform the kowtow. However, by this time Qing power was declining while British power was rising as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Britain had colonized India and occupied the strategically important Singapore in 1824, giving it control of the lucrative maritime trade between Europe and Asia. In London, the powerful free trade lobby wanted to open up the China market. The incompatibility of the tributary order and the Westphalian order would later be resolved by war, with the victor winning the right to impose a new order.

The Industrial Revolution changed the military balance of power and made order transition possible. With growing military might and state-of-the-art gunboats, Britain was in a position to overturn the tributary rules that had dominated East Asia for centuries. Driven by commercial interests, Britain used military coercion in the Opium Wars of 1839–42 to compel China to change the rules of the game and to open up the country for trade. Superior military power was critical to the change of international order. As Frederic Wakeman notes, “the English were overwhelmingly superior” while “the armies of the Chinese empire were undermanned and badly trained.”

In the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, the Qing was forced to open five ports, cede Hong Kong to Britain, allow extraterritoriality on Chinese soil, pay war indemnity, and adopt diplomatic equality in official correspondence. Thus began the new “treaty system” and China’s infamous “century of humiliation.” By war, Britain forced the Qing to follow the British ways of free trade and diplomacy under Western international law. Military power created this new order and was necessary to sustain it. As Fairbank summarizes, “The treaty system had been set up by gunfire and had to be maintained by gunboat diplomacy.”

The Opium Wars “began an irrevocable change in the structure of the East Asian international order.” As there was a significant difference between the political ideology of the East and the West, interaction change was revolutionary. The rights and rules of the East Asian system were replaced with Westphalian ones. The Qing would continue to lose a series of wars

57. Cohen, East Asia at the Center, 252.
to European powers (Britain, France, and Russia), forced to sign a number of “unequal treaties” allowing foreign control of Chinese customs, extraterritoriality, international concessions within China, and cession of territories. In effect, the European powers did not treat China as a state with full sovereignty, thus violating their own norms of sovereign equality, a phenomenon that Stephen Krasner calls “organized hypocrisy.”\(^{58}\) In international politics, material interests often trump normative concerns.

**Implications for a United States-China Power Transition**

At present, the international system is witnessing a power transition between the United States and China. China’s rise is changing the balance of power undergirding the current international order. As power anchors order, change in the distribution of power will cause a corresponding alteration in international order. The question is: what kind of change is China likely to bring about?

We can expect China to continue following the rules that benefit its interests and revising those that do not. Most of the rules of the existing order were constructed without China at the table and when China was weak. Now that China has become powerful, Beijing has expressed its willingness to take on a more proactive role in “guiding” and reforming the current international order to make it “fair and equitable.”\(^{59}\) Already, China is playing a larger role in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). When the existing institutions failed to serve Chinese interests, Beijing took the initiative in creating new institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

As the balance of power underpinning the existing order shifts in China’s favor, the rules manifesting the order will adjust to the new reality of power. To analyze China’s challenge to the liberal order, He and Feng propose to “examine the international order transition through different layers and various categories” and distinguish between economic, security, and political orders.\(^{60}\) In the economic order, China has benefited from the openness of

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60. He and Feng, “Rethinking China and International Order,” this volume.
the liberal order, which gave it access to world market, investment, and technology. We can expect China to continue advocating for economic openness around the world and revising rules that disadvantage it, as President Xi Jinping did in the 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos.\textsuperscript{61} In 2018, amidst US President Donald Trump’s threat of an intensifying tariff war, Xi reiterated the importance of an open global trade system and vowed to “say no to protectionism and unilateralism” at the APEC summit in Argentina.\textsuperscript{62}

However, it is in the area of security and political order that we can expect more challenges from China. In lieu of unipolarity, China has called for a multipolar world and the “democratization of international relations.” In the security order, China has been dissatisfied with US dominance in East Asia and has embarked on a military buildup to advance its interests. The US security commitment to Taiwan has been a constant source of tension between Washington and Beijing. The US insistence that its alliance treaty with Japan covers the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands incites protests from China. In the South China Sea, China’s island-building efforts in disputed areas are creating a fait accompli that neighboring states are finding increasingly difficult to reverse. Beijing’s aspiration to become a maritime great power puts it in direct competition with the US navy. These developments presage a more intensified security competition between the United States and China.

A rising China will attempt to revise the political order dominated by the United States. China does not accept the political components of the liberal order centered on democracy and human rights. China has opposed the US strategy of liberal hegemony, arguing that each country should adopt a political system suitable to its own national circumstances. A China-led international order is not likely to emphasize democracy and human rights. Of the current political order, China is most likely to uphold the Westphalian norm of sovereignty and non-interference. The historical experience of the “century of humiliation” has made Chinese leaders particularly sensitive to any infringement on sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The new international order will no doubt look different from the liberal order. As noted, the character of order reflects the political ideology of the dominant state. A China-led order will reflect its domestic values based on


its unique political system and historical experience. As Charles Kupchan observes,

emerging powers will want to revise, not consolidate, the international order erected during the West’s watch. They have different views about the foundations of political legitimacy, the nature of sovereignty, the rules of international trade, and the relationship between the state and society. As their material power increases, they will seek to recast the international order in ways to advantage their interests and ideological preferences.63

Conclusion

Power is the foundation of international order. Rulers of the Ming-Qing dynasties used military force to build a powerful state and establish the hierarchical tributary order in East Asia. Preponderance of power was the decisive factor in the creation and maintenance of the tributary order. For China, the order provided a vehicle through which hegemonic power was exercised, enabling Chinese emperors to define legitimacy and authority and shape the preferences of secondary polities. Changes in order are rooted in power shift. The rise of Manchu power put an end to the Ming tribute system, allowing the Qing dynasty to reshape the tributary order to better serve its interests. Yet, the outcome of the Ming-Qing power transition was mainly a changing of the guard, with no significant change to the rights and rules embodied in the system. This continuity of tributary order was by and large due to historical contingency and the mutually shared political ideology of Confucianism. In contrast, the Westphalian transition fundamentally transformed the East Asian order. The military superiority of European powers compelled the declining Qing state to accept the Westphalian system of sovereign states.

The two cases from East Asian history demonstrate the benefits of expanding the study of international order to the non-Western system. The Ming-Qing transition shows that, contrary to the existing scholarship, peaceful change is not simply a matter of shared values and ideas between the declining hegemon and the rising state, but is more likely an outcome of structural constraints faced by the existing hegemon. The Westphalian

63. Kupchan, No One’s World, 7–8.
transformation reveals that entrenched rules can be overturned by a supe-
rior power, suggesting that the “lock-in” effect of the liberal order may be
overstated.\textsuperscript{64} The character of order is historically contingent and reflects the
political ideology of the dominant states. Material capabilities enable the
spread of the type of order that the dominant state prefers. Future changes
in international order will likely reflect the shifting balance of power and the
conception of order envisioned by the rising state.

\textsuperscript{64} Ikenberry, \textit{After Victory}. 