



ASIAN REVIEW OF BOOKS

BOOKS, ARTS & CULTURE

Salvatore Babones / 12 June 2017 / *Essays, Non-Fiction, Reviews*

"Chinese Hegemony: Grand strategy and international institutions in East Asian history" by Feng Zhang

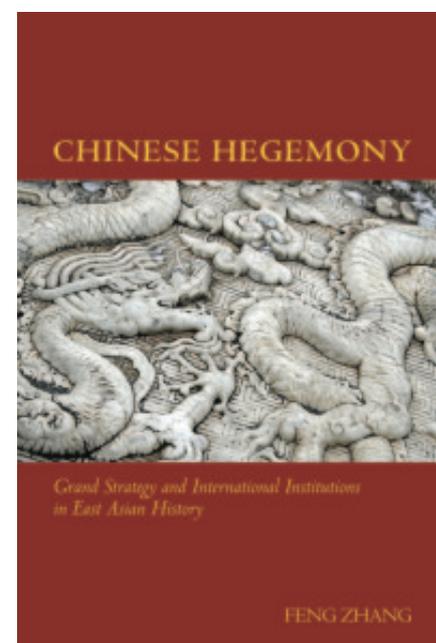


“It is a common rule of propriety that culturally inferior foreign peoples should respect the Central Kingdom.” So begins a 1374 letter from Ming China’s founding Hongwu Emperor to a regional ruler in Japan. It continues: “One principle in both ancient and modern times has been for the small to serve the great.”

Eight centuries later we can hear the echo of this in the words of China’s foreign minister that “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact.” Apparently some things never change.

Another thing that didn’t change for two thousand years from the unification of China in 221 BC to the disintegration of Chinese sovereignty in the 19th century was the simple fact that China was the “central kingdom.” The East Asian world may have included many competing states, but China was always at the center. China’s very name, *Zhongguo*, literally means central state or states (there is no plural inflection in Chinese). That is the origin of the poetic description of China as the Middle Kingdom.

In *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asia*, Feng Zhang explores the geopolitical options available to a big country at the center of the world—and to its neighbors on the edges. He focuses on the period in which a Confucian China was at its strongest and most central, the early Ming Dynasty of the Hongwu and Yongle emperors (1368-1424). China may have been stronger at some points under the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) or the Manchurian Qing dynasty (1644-1911), but the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) was a genuinely homegrown empire ruled over by Han Chinese emperors who embraced a Confucian world-view. If you want to



Chinese Hegemony
Grand Strategy and International
Institutions in East Asian History,
 Feng Zhang (Stanford University
 Press, June 2015)

understand "the real China", you have to understand the Ming.

Zhang understands the Ming as few others can. He has waded deep into the primary sources to harvest real gems like the quotes above. But his argument is much more than a collection of anecdotes, fun as they are. He offers a unified theory to explain Ming China's international relations in terms of "relationality", which he explains as

the dynamic process of connections and transactions among actors in structured social relationships.

In plain English, Zhang thinks it's more important to focus on the connections between countries than on the attributes of the countries themselves (big or small, rich or poor, etc.). That sets him apart from mainstream contemporary international relations theorists, who tend to analyze each country's behavior in terms of its own unique national interest.

Zhang's approach is linked to emerging currents in Chinese international relations theory, which emphasize the maintenance of Confucian harmony among countries through mutual understanding and considerate behavior. Zhang views this Confucian relationalism as "psychologically natural and ethically appropriate." His book is a plea for the world to learn from Ming China how to achieve harmony through ethical relationalism in international relations today.

The Ultimate Social Good

Zhang is nothing if not ambitious. He is looking for the secret of contemporary world peace in the historical *tianxia* ("all under heaven" or "harmonious world") system of early Ming China. For Zhang, the "ultimate social good" to be achieved by an embrace of ethical relationalism is nothing less than "harmony in mutual relations—and in world politics in general." He pleads that

we need more commitment, empathy, affection, and obligation, and less ... calculation to maximize self-interest.

No doubt.

But it can be difficult to find these qualities in early Ming China, even in Zhang's own text. One of Zhang's sources, a 1381 letter from the Hongwu Emperor to Shogun Kanenaga of Japan opens with the classic greeting "You stupid eastern peoples!" To be fair, Zhang considers the period around 1381 a counter-example to his theory, a time when China was seeking concessions from Japan and Japan was seeking to isolate itself from Chinese influence.

In fact, Zhang finds that relations between early Ming China and its neighbors were instrumental—driven by self-interest—nearly 80 percent of the time. He considers this a kind of rhetorical victory, since most Western international relations theory expects countries to be instrumental 100 percent of the time. But the fact that a country could occasionally work for the common good is not shocking to anyone outside the international relations profession. Countries like Norway and Canada do lots of good in the world without a shred of Confucian inspiration for their policies.

Even worse for the relational account of Ming China, Zhang's results show that Ming China's rare periods of Confucian concern for its neighbors were actually characterized by "expressive hierarchy": the civilized big brother (China) looking out for the best interests of its culturally inferior little brothers. In this Chinese brand of ethical relationalism, foreign rulers were expected "to observe the subordinate integrity of loyalty, obedience, and trust-worthiness for serving China." China's role was to show "moral excellence, humaneness, and grace for loving smaller and inferior" peoples. That sounds like a good deal for the Middle Kingdom. It sounds somewhat less attractive for the culturally inferior foreign peoples of the world.

Living as he does in the 21st century, Zhang recognizes that this kind of Confucian

rhetoric no longer has any place in international relations. He advocates a contemporary ethical relationalism based on the principles of national sovereignty and equality among states. But if that is his goal, why look to Ming China for inspiration? China itself certainly doesn't—at least, not in Zhang's telling. Zhang says that contemporary China's foreign policies are "highly self-interested ... and devoid of moral purpose." So much for Confucian culture inspiring an ethical peace and universal harmony.

Relationalism or Hierarchy?

Classical China's international relation strategies are interesting because, despite all their chauvinism, they were successful in reducing conflict and war. Compare East Asia during the years of China's Ming and Qing Dynasties with the equivalent centuries and Europe and you start to see the appeal of Confucianism. Christian Europe was anything but a picture of peace and prosperity. In the 1380s, when the Chinese and Japanese rulers were busy trading childish insults, the kings of England and France were in the middle of a Hundred Years' War. In that most Christian period of European history, even the Pope had an army.

The relative peacefulness of "East Asia before the West", to quote the title of the 2012 book by David Kang that was one of Zhang's inspirations, was remarkable, and Zhang is right to seek to draw lessons from it. But he seems to draw the wrong lessons. According to his own analyses, early Ming China's foreign policy was relational (rather than instrumental) only about 20 percent of the time. It was hierarchical 100 percent of the time. Perhaps the lesson to be drawn is not the benign wisdom of Confucian relationalism but the harsh wisdom of Confucian hierarchy.

Zhang suggests that in "the long-term perspective of world history, the competitive and violent nature of modern international relations ... may turn out to be an anomaly." He seems to be right when he attributes the warlike policies of Western states to Western instrumentalism, the drive to take whatever you can get without

regard to the feelings of others. That drive led to eight and a half centuries of almost continuous warfare, from the First Crusade to World War Two. The wars of the West only ended when a clear hierarchy was finally established: the global order centered on the United States.

Like the East Asian *tianxia* of the early Ming period, today's American Tianxia is a steeply hierarchical system in which the United States plays the central role in world affairs. Also like Ming China, today's America defines the world in its own terms and looks down on "culturally inferior foreign peoples" who do not accept its self-evident truths of human rights, democracy, and private property. In a grand historical reversal, the principles of national sovereignty and equality among states have become the touchstones of Chinese foreign policy. When China was on top, they were the guiding principles of Japan.

In response to that 1381 Chinese letter to the "stupid eastern peoples" of Japan, the Shogun Kanenaga responded with an assertion of sovereign equality:

**The Universe is great and wide, and various countries are created each to have a share in its rule.
The world *tianxia* is the world's world; it does not belong to a single person.**

Now that the shoe is on the other foot, China does the same. In 2016, China (along with Russia) issued a declaration that

the principle of sovereign equality is crucial for the stability of international relations. States enjoy their rights on the basis of independence and on an equal footing, and assume their obligations and responsibilities on the basis of mutual respect.

What goes around, comes around—eventually. But today's China wants to have its cake and eat it too. Its leaders talk sovereign equality in their relations with the United States but retain a large dose of "the small must serve the great" in their relations with

the rest of the world. China's diplomats still seem to believe in Confucian hierarchy, but only if that hierarchy is centered on China. China's One Belt, One Road initiative and other foreign policies make a lot of sense when placed in that perspective. Contrary to Zhang's hope-filled theory of global harmony, ethical relationalism only seems to work where hierarchies are clear. You can't have Confucian harmony without Confucian hierarchy.

As Hobbes would have it, peace comes from order and order comes from above. East Asia was peaceful when China was its Leviathan. When, in the 19th century, that Leviathan finally faltered, East Asia became as bloody as the rest of the world. Peace was only restored by the rise of a new Leviathan, this time on a global scale. Hierarchy brings peace. The secret is to have a good peace, and here is where Confucian principles come into their own. As Zhang documents, Confucian Ming China's preferred relationship with its neighbors was relational hierarchy: central state leadership conducted with concern for the welfare of smaller states. That sounds an awful lot like a script for a harmonious American *Tianxia*.

Salvatore Babones is an associate professor of Sociology & Social Policy at the University of Sydney and a visiting professor of sociology at Nanyang Technological University. He is the author most recently of *Sixteen for '16: A Progressive Agenda for a Better America*. Follow him on Twitter @sbabones.

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