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*Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* is a book about historical Asian international politics during the early Ming period. The author offers an in-depth examination of Ming China’s relations with its Asian neighbors—Sino-Korean, Sino-Japanese, and Sino-Mongol relations, based on which he concludes that incomplete hegemony best characterizes the nature of China’s place in Asia at that time. Speaking to the debates on the tribute system, the book criticizes the existing structural approaches that tend to ignore the role of agents and their interactions. According to this book’s arguments, the strategic choices that Ming China and its neighbors made—which is the phenomenon that the book aims to explain—were the institutional effects of what he calls “tributary diplomacy.” But the tribute system did not encompass the whole range of actors’ strategic choices; there were other institutional dynamics such as war, trade, and communicative diplomacy.

The goal of this book is to present a “relational theory of grand strategy,” in an effort to offer a new perspective on the tribute system and hierarchy in Asian international politics. The selection of early Ming China and its respective relations with Korea, Japan, and the Mongols was theoretically determined based on the author’s measure of China’s material capability relative to other actors. The book proceeds to show that there were two types of grand strategies on the part of imperial China: instrumental relational grand strategies and expressive relational grand strategies. Both strategies rest on the idea that “hierarchy may also become a state strategy to create such a relational structure [of authority relations] in foreign relations” (6). The difference between the two strategies hinges on whether Chinese rulers’ establishment of relations with others was driven by ethical and emotional reasons or in pursuit of interests, gain, or advantage. China’s strategies interacted with those of its neighboring powers in Asia, which were categorized into four types—identification, deference, access, and exit. Of the strategies of the latter, identification refers to a situation of closest ties between imperial China and its neighbor, in which China adopted a hierarchical status role as a superior for ethical and emotional reasons while its neighbor chose to embrace its inferior role and had a low level of interest conflict with China. The conclusion of the book shows that the only strategy that was present in all of the case studies was deference. That is, at least at one point during the early Ming period actors adopted a strategy
of complying with tributary practices that worked to restrain their behavior, despite having a high level of interest conflict with China.

To appreciate the book’s significance and contents fully, it is necessary to situate the book at the intersection of history and political science. Scholars in both subfields of diplomatic history and international relations have long argued in favor of “bridging the gap” between the subfields. Yet they have also recognized methodological and other practical difficulties associated with such endeavors. When it comes to the topic of historical Asian international politics, a paucity of such cross-disciplinary work in the literature may originate at least from two kinds of challenges. For a scholar of international relations, the first hurdle that he or she faces is the question of using Asian language primary sources as a way of generating new knowledge and adding new insights to specific historical events.

On this first question, undoubtedly *Chinese Hegemony*’s use of Chinese primary sources such as *Ming shi* made the book’s empirical chapters rich and compelling. Each of the empirical chapters offers illustrations of China’s interactions with its neighbors to a degree that would be appreciated by historians who seek to understand the big picture of Asian regional dynamics. For example, chapter 4 depicts China-Japan relations during the early Ming-Muromachi period. The treatment of the bilateral relations surrounding Ashikaga Yoshimitsu’s receipt of Chinese investiture is more detailed and richer than Wang Yi-t’ung’s important work on a similar topic, for example.1 Taken together, the empirical chapters suggest that China’s Asian neighbors adopted varied strategies, which suggests a more nuanced approach than the simple neorealist notion of bandwagoning, a common way of understanding the behavior of the weak in the field of international relations.

The second challenge that this type of cross-disciplinary work faces is concerned with the question of translating numerous historical details into social science concepts. Compared to the literature that draws on European history, the research program of historical Asian international relations is in the pioneering stage in the field of international relations. International relations scholars have begun to pay attention to Asian history only in recent years and are in the midst of debating whether and how major international relations concepts such as hegemony and institutions may work as parallel notions befitting empirical details pertaining to early modern East Asia. In that regard, one of the potential contributions of this book is to apply social science terminologies and concepts to historical details of early Ming China and its neighbors’

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