

The Development Path of China-South Korea-Japan International Relations From the New Hua-yi System

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The Hua-yi system represents an enduring international order in East Asia, dating back nearly two millennia, structured and developed within the framework of Chinese culture. While the contemporary international system predominantly follows the Westphalian model, mainstream international relations theories are primarily grounded in it. However, Western theories have proven inadequate in explaining the longstanding Hua-yi system in East Asia comprehensively. Adopting a positivist stance, this paper undertakes an examination of the theoretical underpinnings of the Hua-yi system through an analysis of its connotations and historical development. It elucidates the system through the lenses of hegemony stability theory and constructivist cultural perspectives. Present-day East Asian nations are urged to engage dialectically with the Hua-yi system and uphold its practices of “cultural soft border”. Amidst the global trend of multi-polarization, East Asian nations should realign with East Asian perspectives and interests, endeavoring to establish a neo-Hua-yi system with responsibility at its core.

Keywords: hegemony stability, constructivism, Hua-yi system, tribute system, East Asian order

Introduction

This paper explores the rationale behind the traditional Hua-yi system and its continued influence in China, South Korea, and Japan, comparing it with Western international systems to offer insights for contemporary cooperation in East Asia. Shaped by the Hua-yi worldview and Chinese culture, the traditional East Asian order has endured for nearly two thousand years, exhibiting unique organizational structures and developmental patterns. Despite past studies scrutinizing its form and evolution, less attention has been given to its theoretical underpinnings. Alastair Iain Johnston highlights the relative neglect of East Asian international relations in Transatlantic IR theory, noting various oversights or misunderstandings in its analysis (Johnston, 2012). The current international system, based on Westphalian principles, differs from East Asia’s historical system, challenging the applicability of Western theories in the region. Due to significant historical, cultural, and institutional disparities between East and West, research within Western frameworks may not accurately capture East Asia’s historical reality. Therefore, embracing an Eastern perspective is essential for understanding and reconstructing the East Asian order.

While recognizing the historical significance of the Hua-yi system in traditional East Asian relations, our reassessment of its international worldview does not intend to revive the ancient order or justify China’s leadership in East Asia. Rather, our goal is to extract its positive elements critically to contribute to a pluralistic

and inclusive future international system guided by East Asian wisdom. East Asian countries should draw inspiration from the “Cultural Soft Boundaries” of the Hua-yi worldview, fostering international cooperation with greater inclusivity.

For research scope and methodology, this paper takes the Hua-yi system as the main subject of study, focusing on China, South Korea, and Japan, and follows a positivist approach, combining historical research and international relation research methods to explore the inspiration and application of the ancient East Asian system in contemporary. For research questions, I will try to address the following questions in the article: What is the role of Hua-yi system in East Asia history? What are the differences and connections between Hua-yi system and Western democratic system? What are the differences and connections between China, South Korea, and Japan’s Hua-yi worldview? What is the feasibility of the Hua-Yi system to East Asia? What is its implication for the study of international relations today?

Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

This paper compares Eastern and Western international relations concepts, utilizing hegemony stability theory and constructivism. It examines China’s relationship with neighboring countries within the Hua-yi system through the lens of hegemony stability principles. While some studies equate the Hua-yi system with the hegemonic system, this paper clarifies their relationship and argues that hegemony theory alone cannot fully explain the Hua-yi system. It explores the differences between the Eastern Hua-yi system and the Western hegemonic system. Additionally, it analyzes how constructivism aligns with the stability maintenance mechanism of the Hua-yi system, shedding light on its long-term stability factors.

The following studies on the ancient East Asian international system are representative of American scholarship: John King Fairbank and Deng Siyu’s *On the Ch’ing Tributary System* (1941), John Wells and John King Fairbank’s *The Chinese World Order* (1968), Tan Chung’s *China and the Brave New World: A Study of the Origins of the Opium War 1840-42* (1978). Fairbank’s views on the tributary system and his Sino-centrism theory became mainstream in European and American scholarship until the 1980s. The British school, meanwhile, characterized the East Asian international order using the concept of “international society”, emphasizing its uniqueness based on culture rather than power politics (Buzan, 2018). The West has primarily interpreted the East Asian international order through the lens of international anarchy, using Western theories of hierarchy to portray ancient China as the regional hegemonic power.

Korean scholars, including Kim I-an in his work *Sam San Jae Jip* (1854), propose that Joseon and China represent the Centerline orthodoxy. After the Manchu Dynasty entered China, Joseon was regarded as the only orthodoxy of “Hua”, while Manchu China was labeled as the “Yi” (Kim, 1999). South Korean research on the Hua-yi concept often focuses on “Little China” and the ideology of Sadaejuui. Some contemporary Korean scholars suggest that Sadaejuui, emphasizing loyalty to China, hindered the modernization of the Joseon Dynasty.

Among the influential results of Japanese research, Sadao Nishizima’s *Ancient China and East Asia* (1983) treated the East Asia as a world with a self-regulating history that existed before modern times. Seizaburo Nobuo’s book *The History of Japanese Diplomacy* (1980) put forward the idea that a unique international order different from West existed at the time of the founding of Asian countries in the 18th and 19th centuries (i.e., the Hua-yi order), and this idea became a fundamental viewpoint that had influenced the scholarship of East Asian countries ever since.

Chinese scholars have made significant contributions to understanding the Hua-yi system. For instance, Huang Zhilian's "A Study of the Ritual System of Tian Chao" (1992, 1994, and 1994) offers insights into the historical tribute system, highlighting China's ritual-based rule over its neighbors. He Fangchuan's work, "On the Hua-yi Order", defines the Hua-yi order as an ancient international relations system with China at its core (He, 1998). While Chinese scholars have extensively explored China's centrality in the Hua-yi system and its relations with neighboring countries, there is a need to expand the scope to include international political implications. This paper aims to address this gap by examining Sino-centrism in East Asia, South Korea's and Japan's perspectives of China, and the East Asian international order from a hegemonic viewpoint.

Hua-yi Worldview, Hua-yi Order, and Hua-yi System

The Hua-yi concept embodies the worldview of ancient China and its neighboring nations. "Hua" symbolizes Chinese civilization, primarily represented by Confucianism, while "Yi" denotes the tribes, ethnic groups, and countries surrounding China. Over time, the concept of Hua-yi has evolved through three stages: initially based on geographic distinctions, then civilizational differences, and eventually cultural disparities. In ancient times, distinctions such as "Xia" and "Yi" were rooted in geography. According to *Origin of Chinese Characters* (986 A.D.), "'Xia' is the people of midland region; 'Yi' is the people of the East" (Xu, 986 A.D.). As Chinese civilization progressed, rulers often viewed neighboring peoples as inferior and backward, labeling them as "Dong-yi" (Eastern barbarians), "Xi-rong" (Western barbarians), "Nan-man" (Southern barbarians), and "Bei-di" (Northern barbarians). Gradually, criteria for distinguishing "Hua" from "Yi" based on civilization emerged. With the ascendancy of Confucianism, the focus shifted to whether neighboring states adhered to Confucian rites of governance. The dualistic Hua-yi worldview embodies a "center-edge" dichotomy, encompassing ethnicity, nationhood, cultural identity, and exclusion. This dichotomy, emphasizing distinctions between self and other, was not limited to ancient China but extended to neighboring nations as well.

The Hua-yi system, reflecting center-marginal dualism in ancient East Asia, emerged from power dynamics among countries and became a shared cultural belief and code of conduct between the central dynasty and neighboring countries (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 2000). This historical phenomenon is evident in the tribute order centered on China in East Asian history, ensuring regional stability for over two thousand years. While some scholars oppose the term "Hua-yi" due to its implication of national superiority conflicting with modern principles of sovereign equality, it remains significant as a unique East Asian historical system. Recognizing historical ethnocentrism and discrimination, this paper focuses on studying the Hua-yi worldview and system without delving into the concept of a Hua-yi order driven by power dynamics. It aims to explore the continuity of the Hua-yi worldview in major East Asian countries today and the rationale behind its historical existence, offering insights for establishing international relations in East Asia.

The Realistic Performance of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Hua-yi Worldview

The historical legacy of the Hua-yi system continues to shape modern East Asia due to three main factors. Firstly, China's geographical isolation fostered the system's development in a relatively closed environment. Secondly, the concept of grand unification established a tribute system, defining clear responsibilities and obligations among nations. Thirdly, centuries of interactions between China and neighboring countries formed a robust historical foundation for the Hua-yi system, emphasizing courtesy and cultural identity over material gains.

China differentiated its relationships through etiquette and tribute exchange, choosing cultural influence over coercion, thus shaping a world order based on mutual respect and the tribute system.

Confucianism, introduced to the Korean peninsula in the 4th century A.D., brought with it the Chinese Hua-yi worldview, which gained prominence by the late 7th century under Unified Silla. This worldview emphasizes racial consciousness, with Korea seeing itself as “Little China” with superior culture. In modern South Korea, influenced by Confucianism, the Hua-yi mentality has fostered national cohesion and patriotism, driving rapid economic growth, known as the Miracle on the Han River. This integration of Confucian culture has led to an open, pluralistic form of Korean nationalism. During the Joseon period, scholars adapted Confucian philosophy to suit local needs, contributing to its development. In contemporary times, South Korea has blended European and American cultures with its own, leading to phenomena like the “Korean Wave”, which boosts cultural identity, soft power, and enhances global cultural influence and national image.

The legacy of the Hua-yi worldview in Korea has drawbacks, notably political dependence on major powers, cultural influence, and a tendency to look down upon neighboring countries. Historically, the Joseon Dynasty relied on Ming military support against Japan, while modern South Korea depends on US military assistance against North Korea. Culturally, Joseon valued Chinese language and Confucianism while disparaging neighboring ethnic minorities. In modern times, Korean language is influenced by foreign words, and Western culture is prevalent, leading to cultural westernization. This ethnocentric emphasis has resulted in authoritarianism, exclusivism, and governmentality in Korean nationalism, potentially fostering extreme patriotism and affecting diplomatic strategies.

The Japanese concept of Hua-yi originated from the absorption of the Chinese worldview. The establishment of Japanese feudal dictatorship and national culture largely resulted from learning Chinese philosophy during the Sui and Tang Dynasties. However, after breaking off relations with the Ming Dynasty, Japan became detached from the Hua-yi system. Subsequently, there emerged a strong desire to establish a Japan-centered East order, marking a shift in Japanese national consciousness towards independence from the Hua-yi system, particularly towards the end of the Shogunate rule.

In 1588, after Japan’s basic unification, Taiko Toyotomi Hideyoshi invaded Joseon for its refusal to attack the Ming Dynasty, resulting in failure. In January 1597, a Japanese army of 140,000 invaded Joseon again to overthrow the Ming-dominated Hua-yi order. Influenced by China, Japan’s interpretation of Hua-yi depicted itself as advanced (“Hua”) and others as backward (“Yi”). Unlike China, Japan used military force rather than cultural influence to assert dominance, shifting between “Hua” and “Yi” positions based on each country’s strength. This approach bred narrow nationalism and posed a modern security risk in East Asia. Before the mid-19th-century Western invasions, the Hua-yi concept and East Asian international order underwent significant changes. However, some elements endured: the Hua-yi worldview’s influence on the traditional East Asian order, East Asian countries’ egocentrism, and China’s dynastic focus alongside Korea and Japan’s national interests.

During the modernization of Asian countries, De-Sinicization efforts aimed to establish unique national identities, cultures, and languages by reducing Chinese cultural influence. Measures included abolishing Chinese characters from daily use and renaming cities, such as the South Korean capital. Countries sought cultural independence to reduce Chinese sway, aligning politically and culturally with the West to distance themselves from traditional Chinese systems and Hua-yi influence. This pursuit led to the positioning of China as the “other”,

observed not only in Japan and Korea but also in regions like Taiwan and Hong Kong, reshaping regional attitudes toward Chinese culture and fostering mistrust in regional cooperation.

The Hua-yi System and Western Democratic System

Europe is incomprehensible without talking about slaves and vassal economies. Likewise, China is incomprehensible without talking about its uncivilized peoples at home and its vassals abroad (Braudel, 2002). John King Fairbank characterizes the ancient East Asian order as a “concentric circle” structure of three circles. Chinese scholar He Chuanfang regards the Hua-yi order as the most comprehensive international order globally from the Han to the late Qing Dynasties, with monism as its central principle. Wang Zhengyi proposes the “triple structure” theory, viewing the East Asian international order as a “center-half” and “half-edge” structure. Taiwanese scholar Zhang Qixiong uses the concept of “Chinese world empire” to describe the traditional East Asian international order, and he concludes the order as: “Hua + Yi = Centaline + Vassals = China + Kingdoms = Suzerain state + Tributary state” (Zhang, 2010, p. 106). Various definitions highlight the horizontal system between China and neighboring countries in the ancient East Asian order, reflecting the essence of the Hua-yi system. China aimed for conceptual domination, cultural identity, and ritual submission over neighboring states, refraining from significant interference in their internal affairs. Regular tribute missions-maintained responsibilities and obligations between countries, with peripheral nations showing obedience to the central dynasty through tribute. Tribute prioritized courtesy over tangible profit, alleviating financial pressure on tribute-paying countries (Feng, 2011). This reciprocal exchange aimed to uphold the formal relationship of responsibility and obligations between the tribute-paying state and the core state.

The West’s discovery in modern times broke the isolation between East and West, pushing China from its traditional center (Hua) to the periphery (Yi) of the global international order. East Asian nations were forced to adopt the Western concept of “equality of sovereign states” and become modern nation-states. However, this shift coincided with nearly 400 years of Western dominance and exploitation of non-Western countries, resulting in a “center-marginal” structure similar to the Hua-yi system. Despite advocating for the “equality of sovereign states”, Western hegemony reinforced a sense of “Western superiority and Eastern inferiority”, marginalizing non-Western countries. This view often presents the historical Hua-yi system as an order dominated by Chinese hegemony, drawing parallels with classical Western hegemonic systems like Roman, Portuguese, Dutch, and British hegemonies.

Hegemony stability theory, a key perspective in Western political economy realism, suggests that hegemony involves one country’s absolute dominance in the international or regional system. This theory posits that the dominant country can use its strength to uphold the existing international order (Robert, 2001). Historically, the stability of the Hua-yi system has been linked to the strength of the central state within the system, which is consistent with hegemony stability theory. Nonetheless, the Hua-yi system also exhibits distinctive characteristics.

Firstly, according to the hegemony stability theory, hegemonic transitions typically involve war. However, in East Asia, historical records show no instances of countries challenging China, with regime change wars occurring solely within China and not involving other nations. Secondly, the theory emphasizes that superior military and economic strength underpin hegemonic stability. In contrast, the Hua-yi system relied less on military conquest and more on cultural attractiveness and persuasion. Ancient Chinese dynasties prioritized investment in culture over the military, with military power primarily used for maintaining domestic order. As a

result, culture played a significant role in sustaining the system, replacing the traditional reliance on military strength.

In European history, the rise of the nation-state fragmented vast imperial territories into smaller modern states, shaping the Western landscape dominated by small states, except for the emergence of the United States as a new empire. The Western nation-state model emphasizes achieving national prosperity through competition with neighboring states, affirming borders through inter-state struggle. In contrast, Eastern states pursued continuous integration and unification, with China playing a dominant role in the Hua-yi system. However, coercion and oppression were less pronounced compared to the Western model, which relies heavily on hard power. The Eastern Hua-yi system emphasizes the role of culture in maintaining stability, resulting in lower costs for the central dynasty. Hegemonic stability theory falls short in explaining the factors contributing to the long-term stability of the Hua-yi system.

Western international relations theories on system stability and peace can be broadly categorized into several paradigms: (1) the breakdown of international anarchy, (2) peace under hegemonic governance, (3) intra-regional parity, (4) stability through multilateral mechanisms, and (5) identity realization within the international system (Haas, 1953). The fifth point, identity within the international system, is believed to closely align with the stability maintenance model of the Hua-yi system.

According to Alexander Wendt's constructionism, international society is not only material but also cultural. Culture is "constructed from different socially shared ideas about the relationship between self and other" (Wendt, 1992, p. 391). Specific cultural forms, such as norms, rules, institutions, customs, ideologies, habits, laws, etc., are constructed by shared knowledge. Thus, interstate relations are determined not only by material forces but also by mutual cultural identity. A classic example of how interstate relations are determined by interstate cultural identity is that "One nuclear weapon of North Korea is much more dangerous to the United States than ten atomic bombs of Britain" (Wendt, 1999, p. 43). Historically, East Asia's stability has relied on Confucianism and a sense of responsibility in tribute relations. According to Wendt, international society comprises three cultures: Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian, symbolizing war, competition, and cooperation, respectively. While Lockean culture prevails in the Westphalian system, the Hua-yi system blends Lockean and Kantian cultures in interstate relations. However, Wendt's framework assumes a rigid boundary between "self" and "other", unlike the fuzzy boundary view of the Hua-yi system. Hence, constructivism offers only partial insight into the stability mechanism of the Hua-yi system.

The Western democratic political system has established a unified global framework of international rules, but fundamental differences between East and West continue to shape their distinct approaches to international relations. Rooted in the Confucian ritual system, Eastern countries prioritize cooperation, exemplified by the maintenance of the cooperative network of the Hua-yi system through Confucian rituals amidst dynastic changes. In contrast, Western civilization, influenced by extensive maritime trade interactions, tends towards a competitive orientation. It's essential to acknowledge that alliances are strategic and temporary, while conflict remains a permanent aspect of global affairs.

The Neo-Hua-yi System and the Pluralistic & Inclusive Development of the Future International System

Acknowledging, reflecting on, and drawing inspiration from history are essential tasks. We must be vigilant about the historical legacy of the Hua-yi system and make deliberate choices about what to inherit. Elements like

unequal hierarchy, Chinese-centric consciousness, unequal diplomatic etiquette, and cultural superiority should be discarded. However, aspects such as holistic thinking, openness, tolerance, and principles of cooperation and mutual benefit are worth preserving. In international politics, the existence of dominant powers is common, but the current U.S.-dominated system faces challenges in various regions. As countries develop, the influence of the United States may weaken, leading to a decentralized or polycentric system. However, many countries are not fully prepared for this transition. The decline of the United States may reduce the attractiveness of the “American model”, impacting regions and countries like Japan and South Korea, which have increasingly pursued independent policies despite being U.S. allies.

The world is undergoing significant changes, with East Asia playing a prominent role across political, economic, security, and cultural domains. Centralized power in the international order is inherently unstable, given the diversity of global society. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a “responsibility deficit” in international cooperation, emphasizing the importance of responsibility in maintaining order, a key aspect of the Hua-yi system. Therefore, this paper advocates for prioritizing responsibility in the future pluralistic international system, where countries gain benefits through responsible actions rather than solely relying on power. A neo-Hua-yi system should reject traditional hierarchical structures, oppose regional hegemony, and refrain from interfering in other countries’ internal affairs. Instead, it should prioritize East Asian interests and values, promoting peace, cooperation, and cultural exchange. By decoupling power from interests and linking responsibility to benefits, East Asia can contribute its wisdom to transforming the international system, fostering “Rising in Peace” as the cornerstone of East Asian order—marked by political stability, economic cooperation, and cultural exchange.

Conclusion

The Hua-yi system emphasizes the importance of a unified perspective when considering East Asia, rather than a fragmented one. While some scholars criticize it as an unequal imposition by China on its neighbors, such views lack substantiation and tend towards a victim mentality. However, this paper acknowledges the system’s shortcomings, including its solidification, negative aspects, and the impact of its state-centric ideology on the region. While the central dynasty held a higher status, mere ritual status does not indicate inequality within the system. China’s role as the central state provided political, economic, cultural, and institutional models for other states, contributing positively to regional history, despite its drawbacks.

The Hua-yi system differs fundamentally from the Western democratic political system, making simple categorization challenging based on Western political theory. While hegemonic stability theory offers insights into China’s role within the Hua-yi system, it does not fully capture its predominantly cultural essence. In this system, cultural identification supersedes hegemonic power, a perspective shared among East Asian states. Constructivism partially explains stability maintenance mechanisms from a cultural construction perspective. However, cooperation in East Asia faces obstacles due to complex realities and institutional factors, impeding regional development. Advancing cooperation requires establishing a common value identity and a model of regional collaboration rooted in East Asian principles. Exploring the existence of such a model in East Asia and how it can be constructed draws insights from the historical legacy of the Hua-yi system.

For policy recommendations, China should avoid Sino-centrism and objectively assess its cultural relationship with Japan and Korea. South Korea’s influential cultural industry underscores the importance of cooperation with Chinese culture to promote common Asian values. Japan should embrace inclusivity and

abandon past ideologies like the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. East Asian countries should prioritize regional interests, bridge cultural divides, and promote common values. A neo-Hua-yi system should emerge, emphasizing shared responsibility and cultural cooperation among China, South Korea, and Japan, which will be crucial in shaping a pluralistic and collaborative future international system.

The study of the Hua-yi system extends beyond its historical context, encompassing its collapse in the modern era, its present legacy, and the actions of East Asian countries to maintain independence from Chinese culture. Additionally, questions about the future structure of a neo-Hua-yi system to challenge hegemonic frameworks remain open for further exploration.

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