Feng Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History*

(Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2015), 280p, €45.00,
ISBN 978 0 80479 389 6

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Received: 1 December 2015 / Accepted: 24 December 2015 / Published online: 24 February 2016
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Feng Zhang is a Fellow in the Department of International Relations in the Australian National University's School of International, Political and Strategic Studies, College of Asia and the Pacific. His latest work, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History*, aims at achieving three main goals. The first is to go beyond the traditional description of the hierarchical system centered on imperial China. Second, Zhang wants to show the expressive side of China's strategy, determined by the great influence of Confucianism over Chinese politics in that time. Finally, Zhang argues that the Chinese tribute system was far from representative of the entire East Asian international society. Moreover, it was a very fluid system of relations that countries could join or leave at different moments. In the first part of the book, Zhang outlines the theoretical relational framework he builds to identify the main variables, or the "fundamental institutions of Chinese hegemony", that influenced the interaction between China and Japan, Korea and Mongolia. After describing how those relations changed over time, he provides a more detailed discussion of the above-mentioned variables. The final part of the book revolves around the lessons that can be drawn from the past to understand contemporary China's rise and behavior in international relations. Yet, it is important to point out that this is not a simple historical comparison. Rather, the final discussion on today's China is based on the application of the theoretical framework built and used to analyze the three cases cited above.

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Zhang describes two kinds of logic that guide China's behavior in building a hierarchical system of relations in East Asia.¹ The first is an expressive logic that seeks to establish relations for the sake of doing so, because of various degrees of perceived cultural and moral affinity and clash of interests. The second is an instrumental logic that simply aims at maximizing China's own interests. According to Zhang, one should expect China to adopt more expressive behavior when the clash of interest is low. When such a clash is significant, China prioritizes the instrumental aspect of the relationship. From the other side, China's counterparts can adopt four different strategies—exit, access, deference and identification—to respond to Chinese actions. Choosing one strategy over the others depends on the level of clash of interests and the degree of Chinese expressivity. The relational approach presented in the book heavily draws from constructivist theories of International Relations in describing the interaction between the actors in the system.

To test his theory, Zhang poses five questions at the end of each of the chapters about Sino-Korean, Sino-Japanese and Sino-Mongol relations. They aim at evaluating the relationship between expressivity and clash of interests. In particular, he asks whether and what kind of hierarchical relations were established, and if the narrative analysis of the interaction between China and its counterparts is an effective way to carry out this evaluation.² By answering those questions, Zhang shows that China's tribute system can be seen as an international society on its own, but that its solidity and the influence of its institutions greatly varied across time periods. Naturally, when China and the relevant counterpart had no significant clash of interest, and they both adopted a prevalently expressive approach to each other, the tribute system and its fundamental institutions were the strongest. On the contrary, when the other countries opted for exit strategies, the system became smaller in terms of influence over regional politics and scale. During periods of change in the system, China and the other countries implemented what Zhang labels as "communicative diplomacy" aimed at exploring how and if the tributary relationship was meant to continue, change or cease. Another important institution, directly drawn from Hedley Bull's classic work on the institutions of the international society, is war. The description of the role of war in China's tribute system is very interesting as it can be considered a Confucian declination of the concept of just war. Indeed, Zhang uses the adjective "appropriate" instead of "just" to make clear that China could recur to war or threaten war to punish the actions of another country that went against the balance of the Confucianism-informed tribute system. War, fought by China and other countries within the system against external threat, was also a way to preserve the integrity of the tribute system and China's centrality within it. Finally, trade existed in parallel to the tributary exchange of goods between China and other countries. It, however, had a rather marginal function and was not always considered in a positive way. For example, when envoys from a country not trusted by the Chinese emperor were sent to the imperial court, they were usually prohibited from trading along the way.

¹ pp. 30–44.

² pp. 153–73.

In the final chapter of the book, Zhang presents the innovative aspects of his relational framework in more depth.³ In particular, he builds a link between ethical relationalism and critical IR theory by putting forward a distinctively Confucian declination of it based on coexistence, interdependence and cooperation among international actors. In the process, however, the hierarchical element is put aside. Zhang argues that this is because, on the one hand, sovereign equality is the cornerstone of today's international politics, and, on the other hand, there is no room for hierarchical relations in Confucian relationalism. In the very last part of the book, Zhang looks at modern China through the lens of his model of relationalism. In the brief analysis offered there, he touches on some of the main features of Chinese diplomacy: a heavily instrumentalist attitude and the lack of a set of values, like Confucianism and revolutionary Communism in the past, that could make China politically and ideologically attractive for other countries. Consistent with his critical approach, he does not stop at describing how the situation is today, but also suggests how relations between China and other countries ought to be. Were the international community more responsive to China's still-too shy attempts to develop a more expressive diplomacy, it would be possible trigger a positive change in relations between China and the world.

Zhang's work features many interesting elements. There is no doubt that the main one is the in depth description of imperial China's tribute system, which greatly helps the reader to gain a better grasp of the nature of this system and its evolution. The relationship between expressive and instrumental logic in the relations between China and the other three countries taken into consideration is explained clearly, and is well-grounded in the historical evidences that Zhang relies on. His discussion on the role of war, trade and other activities outside the bilateral tributary relationship further helps to contextualize the shifts between instrumental and expressive strategies. As Zhang himself acknowledges, *Chinese Hegemony* fits perfectly within the growing literature on East Asian international society along with the works of Barry Buzan, Zhang Yongjin and David Kang (Buzan and Yongjin 2012; Kang 2010). Another admirable feature of the book is the attempt to provide more than a simple historical study and comparison. The theoretical framework developed by Zhang is both solid and flexible, and, as his correct observations on today's relations between China and other countries show, can be applied in different historical contexts from the one it was built on.

Nevertheless, there are some undeniable problems that originate more from Zhang's commendable ambition to make the most out of his work rather than from specific flaws in it. Indeed, one might easily arrive at the end of the book and find oneself disappointed by the lack of an equally thorough analysis of today's situation. That would have really made Zhang's work an important contribution to the field. While the work on the Ming dynasty era stands out for precision and clarity, these two elements slowly fade away as the transition from the analysis of the historical cases to the contribution of the relational framework to modern IR happens. Probably, the reason for this lies in the way Zhang discards some elements, such as the focus on hierarchy, and emphasizes others, especially the normative

³ pp. 174–91.

aspect, during the discussion on how his conceptual framework can be applied to different contexts. It is not clear how talking about what “it ought to be” is worthy without developing the tools to understand what “it is”. How should we understand interstate violence today within his framework? What is the relationship between state sovereignty and the “plea for humanness” of his Confucian relationalism?⁴ Beyond being generally more receptive and more responsive, are there specific actions that other countries could take to push today’s China towards less instrumental behavior? More generally, neglecting international hierarchy deeply undermines any possible application of Zhang’s otherwise interesting theory. A normative argument must pay a proper deal of importance to hierarchy and equality. Zhang also creates confusion in his attempt to challenge what he from time to time defines as a “Eurocentric approach to IR theory”. While he correctly points out that discarding the influence of Confucianism in Asia is like making the same mistake in the case of Christianity in Western Europe, his argument in the book is not consistent with such a claim. Indeed, many of the elements that he claims are unique of the Confucian approach are hardly so. For example, classical realism, from Thucydides to Morgenthau, has never shied away from talking about social conventions and their role in constraining the selfish side of human nature. Thucydides’ famous opera on the Peloponnesian war is indeed also an investigation of the relationship between *phusis* (human nature), *nomoi* (social conventions) and *stasis* (the chaos resulting from the breaking of social conventions) (Lebow 2003). After admitting that Confucianism acknowledges the legitimacy of self-interest, more work on this aspect would be required to verify if Confucianism offers a vision different from Arnold Wolfers’ analysis of a nation’s “possession goals” and “milieu goals” (Wolfers 1962). Another issue that deserves more attention is if and how Confucian *yi* (義) differs from constructivism’s “appropriateness” (March and Olsen 1989; Wendt 1999). It is thus clear that the initial claim of offering a new set of alternative or enriching ideas is not supported deeply enough.

In conclusion, *Chinese Hegemony* is a good work that makes a great contribution to our understanding of imperial China’s tribute system through an innovative and flexible theoretical framework. The several nuances featured in the relations between the Middle Kingdom and the three neighbors taken into consideration show that it is not possible to generalize the dynamics of China’s tribute system, as has happened in the work of other scholars. Yet, it fails to provide much needed insights about contemporary China’s foreign policy. Being overly ambitious exposes Zhang and his work to the critique of being too vague. The initial precision and solidity of the argument is not consistent throughout the book, especially when the subject of the discussion is modern China. This is probably because the framework he developed draws (too) heavily from Confucianism. Thus, when it is applied to a different context it suffers from this strong cultural imprinting. Although they are two completely different kinds of book, if Zhang had included some recommendations on how China and other countries should act to improve their relations, like Lyle Goldstein did in his recent work on China–US relations, that would have helped to make his work more relevant for those who look at contemporary China

⁴ p. 183.

(Lyle 2015). Doing so would also have made his framework appear more credible as a tool usable beyond the specific context of ancient China.

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