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Towards Post Western IRT: A Confucian reading of Northeast Asian international society

“We should look into the minds of Kautilya and Confucius and not just Machiavelli and Marx.

Similarly, we ought to seek theoretical insights from Nehru and Sukarno just as Western theorizing has drawn from Woodrow Wilson and Henry Kissinger.” Amitav Acharya (2001),
Identity without exceptionalism, p.7

International Relations Theory (IRT) has been depicted for the last two decades as an essentially Western discipline, which, while pretending to universality, only speaks from and for Western experiences of international relations (Wæver 1998; Tickner and Waever 2009; Acharya and Buzan 2010).

This article is part of the research agenda set out by Acharya and Buzan, which seeks to expand IRT away from its Western-centered origins to avoid the discipline’s alienating Eurocentrism. Nevertheless, in order to do so, I will not look at current case studies, but will rather investigate Confucian classics and historical Sino-centric order to contribute to the discussion on post-Western International Relations Theory.

Drawing on Confucian teachings, my hypothesis is that studying Confucianism might be relevant to build a post-Western theory of International Relations, and provide analysts with new tools to understand historical political situations in Northeast Asia, and the making of the region. My point is not to interpret current situations in Northeast Asia in light of Confucian teachings but to confront Western-centered IR Theory to other principles and forms of international political thinking and organization. Although the legacy of such historical dynamics still have an impact, to some extent, on current political discussions, it should be recalled that Western penetration into Northeast Asia has introduced alien concepts that have taken root in the region, and that it is also essential to keep in mind the nuanced way in which Confucian teachings have shaped pre-Westphalian Northeast Asia.

This article is based on a reading of the Confucian *Analects* (論語 *Lúnyǔ*) and aims at revealing how Confucianism, through Chinese hegemony, has partly shaped the making of Northeast Asia as a region based on common political and cultural concepts, which it should be noted Confucianism is only one among many.

I will argue here along with Buzan and Zhang that before the arrival of Western powers and the forced opening of Northeast Asian polities in the late 19th century, Northeast Asia functioned as a Confucian international order, which can be described as an international society. When using the word “Northeast Asia”, I refer to China and its former tributary states: modern-day Korea, Japan, Vietnam and the Ryukyu Islands, as well as the semi-nomadic and nomadic peoples present in the region but most of the time excluded from the Confucian society (the so-called “barbarians”, *fān* 番 in modern Chinese).

Rather than postulating the absence of non-Western IRT, I believe that we need to look for the existing political concepts that underlay forms of political organizations in the so-called “non-Western” world. Although they might not be conceptualized as political science or IRT yet, it is central to remember that a scientific discipline or category is an intellectual, social and political construction, and most often a product of a certain intellectual hegemony (Cox 1986).

This article will first outline the debates brought about by the non/post-Western IRT agenda. Following this, I argue that Buzan and Acharya have set the ground for a new research agenda, in which I locate this paper. Nevertheless, I also agree with their critics in that, as Chen pointed out, for them “non-Western IRT promises that Asian states will eventually “catch-up” with their Western counterparts and become parts of the game” (Chen 2011, 9-10). This associates the West¹ with prior or advanced disciplinary modernity, which criteria is a perceived ability to theorize, and the non-West as a late player, whose voice can only be added on top of the first “modern” layer of the discipline.

In the second part, I will show that the case study of pre-Westphalian Northeast Asia is a way to go beyond the Western-centered concept of international society as developed by the English School, in that it enables us to consider the plurality of international societies, and to move beyond the historical momentum of Western international society.

I will then take a closer look, thanks to a reading of the *Analects*, at the notions sustaining this Confucian international society: a different understanding of sovereignty, highly hierarchical and focused on internal autonomy rather than equal recognition, harmony, legitimacy, shared cultural norms and attractiveness of the political system (a notion which resonates in our current era of political “influence”). I will briefly show how these notions were maintained through diplomatic practices. The case study illustrating my arguments is the tributary relationship between the neo-Confucian kingdom of Chosŏn in Korea, and the Chinese Ming (明) and Qing (清) dynasties, from 1392 (foundation of Chosŏn dynasty) to 1876 (Kanghwa Treaty). I will finally underline the centrality of Chinese hegemony behind the tributary system and the shared norms and practices of the region.

¹ The West in this academic context referring mainly to the US and the UK. On this issue, see the following debates: Ravenhill John (2007), In Search of the Missing Middle, *Review of International Political Economy*, vol.15 Issue 1, p.18-29; Smith Steve (2000), The discipline of International Relations: Still an American Social Science?, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 2 Issue 3, p.374-402

There exists a literature in political theory that considers classical Chinese intellectual tradition, but these works rarely tend to provide explicative theories out of Confucian political thought (Hui 2004). We need a specific approach to analyze this tradition because it does not draw a clear line between international and domestic politics, and does not mention the international sphere as such. Most works looking at Confucianism and the Northeast Asian order tend to emphasize the gap between the practice of the tributary system and the ideal concepts behind it. But whether ideal concepts are fully realized in political reality is not a question unique to East Asia, and these concepts still matter in the realization of actual politics and social orders, and inform us *per se* as philosophical notions.

The necessity to undertake a deepened study of the Confucian corpus, and more broadly any form of non-Western intellectual tradition, is a task that could help bridge the gap between IR scholars and area studies scholars, and set the agenda for post-Western IRT. This article will indeed not pretend to reveal all the complexities and puzzles involved in understanding the Confucian corpus. Rather, it will rely on the work and interpretations of the texts by Chinese studies scholars, and pave the way for a common research agenda between the two disciplines.

Non, post, pre-Western International Relations Theory: the terms of the debate

Non-Western International Relations Theory is becoming a growing field in International Relations, as the discipline is compelled to self-questioning with the current shift of power towards Asia, and the emergence of a Chinese school of International Relations (Tickner and Waever, 2009) that accompanies what observers see as the rise of China.

The research agenda on non-Western IRT has first been initiated by a group of scholars in order to overcome the Euro-centrism of IRT, a dominance recalling Robert Cox's statement that "Theory is always for someone and for some purpose" (Cox 1986), and the correspondence between the West's political hegemony over most parts of the world, and its hegemony in terms of knowledge production. Acharya, who described Eurocentrism in IRT as a form of "alienation" (Acharya 2001, 9), started, together with Buzan, a research project aiming to understand "Why there is no non-Western IRT" and to stimulate non-Western, especially Asian-based research to make further contributions to the discipline. They argued that this was promising to "stimulate non-Western voices to bring their historical and cultural, as well as their intellectual resources into the theoretical debates about IR" (Acharya and Buzan 2007, 286). This would lead to a shift in focus, and in fundamental concepts long-established in the discipline and whose concern has been exclusively Western politics and political history. Other authors such as Tickner and Waever (Tickner and Waever 2009) also advocated for "rebalancing the disciplinary Western bias" of IR. As noted by several authors (Buzan and Zhang 2012; Kang 2010), history is a precious resource to enrich IRT; therefore I wish to follow this view on historical perspectives

in Asia, hoping that this study will lead not to “get Asia wrong”², as Kang pointed out as to the inadequacy of the available IR concepts to analyze the Asian region (Kang 2010).

This historical inquiry should nevertheless not lead to the founding of local, Non-western Schools of IR, a flawed project which runs the risk of essentializing presupposed cultural differences and contributing to reproduce even more the enclosing of the field within cultural boundaries. This has been done widely in China (Snyder 2008; see also Chan 1998, 1999; Chen 2004; Callahan 2001; Cunningham Cross 2011; Liang 1997; Min 2000; Qi 2006; Ren 2009; Wang 2008; Wang 1986), but also in Japan and Korea (Choi 2008).

The main argument behind this new research agenda is to look into non-Western historical experiences of politics³, but also look at non-Western intellectual traditions to “find” or “invent” non-Western IRT. Indeed, Sharma argues, “There are Asian classical traditions and the thinking of classical religious, political and military figures such as Sun Tzu, Confucius and Kautilya, on all of which some secondary political theory exists [...] but attempts to derive theory have been rare” (Sharma 2001: 302).

This agenda does not aim to replace Western IRT but considers that “the likely role of non-Western IRT is to change the balance of power within the debates and in so doing, change the priorities, perspectives and interests that those debates embody” (Acharya 2007,437).

While this agenda is intended for International Relations Theory, efforts have also been made in the sphere of IPE to move beyond Western experiences in analyzing international political economic phenomena (Phillips 2005).

Buzan and Acharya’s project sets the ground for a new field of research. Nevertheless, it can also appear as intellectual risky as it postulates that there exists no IR theory developed outside the West, and can lead to the reproduction of a West/non-West dichotomy in which the West is the founder of IRT since it has been able to theorize for a longer time, and that the non-West just catches up with this positivist power of theory. This line of criticism recalls Said’s notion of

² “Eurocentric ideas have yielded several mistaken conclusions and predictions about conflict and alignment behavior in Asia. For example, since the early 1990s many Western analysts have predicted dire scenarios for Asia, whereas many Asian experts have expressed growing optimism about the region's future. It is an open question whether Asia, with its very different political economy, history, culture, and demographics, will ever function like the European state system. This is not to criticize European-derived theories purely because they are based on the Western experience: The origins of a theory are not necessarily relevant to its applicability. Rather these theories do a poor job as they are applied to Asia; what I seek to show in this article is that more careful attention to their application can strengthen the theories themselves.” Kang (2010), p.58

³ “Similarly, one of the foundational debates in IRT, the so-called Realist-Liberal debate, ought to begin not from the Wilsonian critique of the European balance of power system, but from the contestation of ideas during the Warring States period in China which featured a much more powerful and pluralistic debate [...] involving the Dao (anarchic pacifism), Confucian (pro-hegemony based on the concept of the mandate of Heaven but with moral restraints on the ruler’s domestic and foreign policy), Mo-zi (anarchic but not pacifist like Dao, pioneered the doctrine of defensive war to counter offensive hegemonism and the concept of armed neutrality), and the Legalists (pro-hegemony with a strong advocacy for military power without Confucian moral restraint).” (Acharya 2001, 13)

Orientalism, according to which the non-West is denied of its intellectual agency. Different authors have criticized the standpoint taken by Acharya and Buzan.

Shani (2008) argues that critical IRT has mostly remained wedded to Western intellectual tradition and he seeks to look for critical perspectives within non-Western cosmopolitan tradition (Islam/Sikhism). He suggests looking at textual production in order to do so. He rightly argues that “Contra Buzan and Acharya, [...] the ontological premises of Western IRT need to be rethought, not merely “enriched by the addition of new voices from the Global South” (Acharya and Buzan 2007, 247-248), because non-Western IRT is seen as a mimicry of Western discourses (Bhaba 1994, Bilgin 2008) or as “local variations of Western ideas which have acquired theoretical status in the academy” (Shani 2008, 723). This is what Chen refers to when he adds that: “Emerging non-Western IRT in Asia can be understood as a derivative discourse of the modern West reproducing the logic of colonial modernity rather than disrupting it”(Chen 2011,4).

If so, arguing that non-Western notions could enrich IRT is not enough. But they can help us rethink concepts that originate from Western experiences.

Another point on which Buzan and Acharya are challenged is the assumption that looking at non-Western IRT means looking for difference. I agree with Bilgin (Bilgin 2008) who warns about looking for difference between created East/West divisions. According to him, we should instead be looking for ways in which Western and non-Western political ideas have interacted through historical encounters, without postulating a priori a Western vs. non-Western theoretical ground. Amartya Sen adds to this argument by warning scholars against “praising an imagined insularity” since, “given the cultural and intellectual interconnections in world history, the question of what is Western and what is not would be hard to decide.” (Sen 2006, 129)

In this article I take into account these arguments and apply the same intellectual care and scrutiny to theoretical claims about a non-Western historical region, Northeast Asia, as has been applied to Western political theory. It would be illusory to believe that political concepts are exempt from interactions and influences. We look for a better awareness of other traditions of political thought, without neglecting the fact that they are not isolated from intellectual and political interactions.

While it would all the same be flawed to completely reject the relevance of Western critical IRT to analyze non-Western political situations⁴, Bilgin argues that what the scholar should be looking for is “a manner of thinking about world politics that is almost the same but not quite” (Bilgin 2008,10). Instead of non-Western IRT, we should be looking for a post-Western IRT. This refers not merely to enclosing non-Western political experiences in a non-Western IRT that

⁴Could one rightly argue that, in a world where the global spread of capitalism makes social patterns more and more similar, Marxism as an analytical tool cannot be usefully applied to social phenomena located outside the “Western world”, providing that such a distinction is (still relevant)?

would reinforce the West/non-West theoretical dichotomy; instead building post-Western IRT is attempting to build a universal discipline that moves beyond its origins and encompasses all experiences without distinguishing between what is Western and what is not.

Beyond the Western concept of international society

The notion of international society originates from the English school of international relations (Bull 1977; Bull and Watson 1984), and is interesting because it is theoretically malleable.

Bull describes an international society made of sovereign states. While writing in 1977, under a “bipolar order”, Bull introduces another way of thinking about order, not focused on polar stability but on a qualitative paradigm: how much of a society the system is, depending on common rules, concerns and institutions. This society is entirely Westphalian, and rests on the assumption of equal sovereignty between the members of the international society. Distinct from a system of states, an international society exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and values, form a society in the sense that they conceive of themselves to be bound by a common set of rules and that they share the working of common institutions. The element of consciousness and cooperation is needed for an international society to exist. The elements of a society of states coexist with the anarchical character of world politics. Bull asserts that order is not the consequence of contingent factors such as the balance of power, but a consequence of the sense of common interest in the elementary goals of social life between states and the existence of common rules. These may take the form of international law, moral rules, custom or established practices, operational rules or “rules of the game”. The institutions of international society are also essential to the maintenance of international order in their function of concretizing and giving effectiveness to the accepted rules. These institutions, for Bull, are composed of sovereign states and correspond to “as set of habits and practices shaped towards the realization of common goals” (Bull 1977, 74).⁵

In 1984, Bull and Watson added to this definition of international society a second layer: how international society expanded. They describe the contemporary international system as the result of global acceptance of rules and norms of Western international society by the rest of the world (Bull and Watson 1984). This expansion happened, according to them, because of the unwillingness of non-Western rulers to interact with the Europeans on the basis of equality and reciprocity (the “standard of civilization” evoked by Gong 1984). Therefore, although the notion of international society goes beyond the first debate in IRT, it is limited by its Western bias since it clearly defines international society as Western international society.

⁵ For him, these institutions, which he details in the Second Part of *the Anarchical Society*, are balance of power, international law, diplomacy, the managerial system of Great Powers and war.

Nevertheless, it is possible to rethink this notion in light of non-Western historical experience. Indeed, as Buzan and Zhang pointed out, other international societies may well have existed (Buzan and Zhang 2012). Northeast Asia before the arrival of Western colonial powers in 1839 seem to be a qualified candidate for the term, and enables us to challenge, and eventually, reconceive the notion of international society.

Acharya has recalled that non-Western international interactions, based on commerce, political ideas and culture might have been ignored by realists to focus essentially on hegemony and balance of power. For him, as well as for Kang, international systems can develop on the basis of ideational, and not only material, interactions. For instance, and in the line of this article, Tamaki (Tamaki 2007) has emphasized that Confucian norms were an organizing principle of international relations in Northeast Asia. Studying Confucian political theory therefore has the advantage of questioning largely unquestioned concepts of international relations such as anarchy and balance of power, and introducing concepts, such as socially accepted hierarchy, into IRT to rethink international society.

This study does not attempt, however, to use Confucian ethics as a justification for contemporary authoritarian practices, as the defenders of Asian values have done in the 1990s, especially in Singapore and Malaysia. Neither does it aim at using Confucian values, which themselves have various and complex interpretations, as the only explicative variable of international dynamics in East Asia.

Buzan and Zhang (Buzan and Zhang 2012) were the first ones to conceive of a certain period of Northeast Asia history as an international society⁶. The concept of tributary system, introduced by Fairbank in his study of *the Chinese World Order* (Fairbank 1968), faced much criticism. Thus, “rather than abandoning the term, in order to transcend the limits of its traditional usage, [Buzan and Zhang] have chosen to conceptualize it differently: in international society terms, with an emphasis on the cultural element and the social constitution of the tributary system.” They combined the English School approach and constructivism in order to offer a definition of the tributary system as “an international society with its own social structure which embodies complex social relations among participating and constituent states, and which has a particular set of institutions that help to define norms of acceptable and legitimate state behavior.” (Buzan and Zhang 2012, 8).

Historical data suggest that ‘East Asian states and people had historically chosen and established complex institutions and practices informed by their history and culture in dealing with challenges of security, conflict, co-existence and cooperation.’ (Zhang 2012,12; see also

⁶ “We look at the tributary system not just as a structure of strategic interaction and economic Exchange between Imperial China and other participants in the system, but a san articulation of the existence of International society in East Asian constitutive of a social order in East Asian history and politics. (...) We, therefore, conceptualize the tributary system as an international society with its own social structure which embodies complex social relations among participating and constituent states, and which has a particular set of institutions that help to define norms of acceptable and legitimate state behavior.” (Buzan and Zhang 2012,8)

Kang2003, 2008, 2010, 2013). Fairbank used the term “world order” because the polities involved did not work according to the Western concepts of national sovereignty and equality, and thus talking about international relations is somewhat anachronistic. Keeping this in mind, I will nevertheless refer to an ‘*international* society’. Dating this order precisely is difficult, because of the progressive character of its establishment. It was not always hierarchical, and Northeast Asia was all but an unchanging region. Therefore it is relevant to talk about the tributary system from the 15th to the 19th centuries (Kang:190; for evolution of the tributary system see Buzan and Zhang 2012, p.20-23). Polities were divided according to their relations with Imperial China, center of the system (中國, *Zhōngguó*, “Middle Kingdom”, China). The tribute states (Korea, Japan, Vietnam and the Ryukyu Islands) were first in the hierarchy, under the Son of Heaven (天子 *tiānzi*), the Chinese Emperor. Then came the Inner Asian zones (tributary tribes and states of nomadic and semi-nomadic people); the Outer zone, composed of outer barbarians (外野蠻人, *wàiyěmánrén*), which comprised Southeast and South Asia, Europe and sometimes Japan. The complex, hierarchical relations between these different polities under the ultimate authority of the Son of Heaven were sustained by a set of diplomatic practices so deeply embedded in the consciousness of certain political elites, especially the rulers of Choson Korea, that they formed a hegemonic, powerful world view. And indeed, “only insofar as these fundamental institutions and common institutional practices become norms and conventions, constitutive of deep rules of the game in the relations between Imperial China and other constituent states, does the tributary system constitute the social structure and become the articulation of international society.” (Buzan and Zhang 2012,18).

A political reading of the Analects: looking for the shared norms of the Confucian Northeast Asian society

Confucius is the Latin name of Kǒng fūzǐ (孔夫子, 551-479BC approx.). The *Analects* (論語 *Lúnyǔ*) of Confucius were written centuries after Confucius’ death, and represent the core reference of Confucian thought, since it gives a voice to Kǒng fūzǐ and his teachings. How and who wrote the *Lúnyǔ* is subject to debates between sinologists and philologists. (Chen 2013-2014)

Schematically, Confucianism is a holist doctrine which presupposes the unity of the universe and that men have a specific place in this universe so that harmony can be preserved. It thus puts much emphasis of the notions of harmony and proper order. A virtuous man according to Confucian teachings follows two essential principles: the *lǐ* (禮) and the *rén* (仁). The *li* refers to the maintenance of harmony between men and between men and the world through ceremony and rites. The *ren* is translated as perfect virtue, benevolence, humanity (Muller 1990). It commonly refers to the love of all men and politically, the ruler without *ren* cannot rule, and by this Confucianism presupposes that the ruler should not harm his people and should behave humanely, with benevolence towards them.

Confucianism became the Chinese state ideology with the Han dynasty, from around 206BC to 220AC, under which were conducted the first civil service examinations based on Confucian classics. It spread to Korea during the Three Kingdoms period (from 57BC to 668AC), and eventually to Vietnam in 1070.

- *A different understanding of sovereignty*

The notion of sovereignty did exist but its understanding took very different forms according to time and local contexts. Mencius (孟子 Mèngzǐ) himself defined a state as land, government, and people (Mancall 1968). It is difficult to use the term “state” in that it commonly refers, in classical IR, to the Western-born concept of nation-state, and its correlated concepts of national community, full sovereignty, equality in the interactions with other nation-states, that is the assumptions of the Westphalian system. Although China and its tributary states are referred to as “states”, it would perhaps be more exact to refer to centralized polities in which the belonging element was centered on a cultural dimension, thus allowing us to speak of “cultural entities”, as Hsu did (Hsu 1960, 13). This is one way of nuancing the concept of international society, which the fathers of the English School saw as exclusively related to states in the Westphalian understanding. The relation between the tributary states was characterized by great autonomy: indeed, China did not attempt to control its tributary states’ foreign policies, but only intervened to restore order if conflict occurred involving a tributary state.

In an interesting article about the debates on sovereignty in Japan and Korea after the First Opium War (1842) and the arrival of Western imperial powers, Park notes former hierarchical relations remained parallel to new knowledge and practices. According to Park, this is a unique opportunity to trace historically changing notions of sovereignty since it already had in place an indigenous system of relations among independent state actors before coming in contact with the European state system [...] The difference was the organization between Sino-centric hierarchy and Westphalian equality.” (Park 2013, 283)

Sovereignty indeed continued to be understood as the attainment and assertion of the autonomy of the state- more specifically, the ruling regime- to be negotiated vis-à-vis the dominant power (p.284). According to Mancall (Mancall 1968), even the term tributary system or world order are Western, for the Chinese there were only civilization, and barbarians. China was not a state but “rather the administration of civilized society in toto” with the emperor being not the ruler of a country among others but the cardinal point in the universal continuum, the apex of civilization.” (Mancall 1968, 63)

- *A harmonious international society*

Order is the founding principle of any Confucian society. Confucianism does not postulate an anarchic state of the world, and it is possible to extend this perspective to international relations. On the contrary, the concept of (Great) Harmony (*Dàtóng*, 大同) is central to Confucian thought.

Politically, this harmony is based around the emperor, who is considered to have received the mandate of Heaven (天命 *tiānmìng*) and thus is the center of this political cosmology. The appropriate respect to pay to the Emperor is a condition of the preservation of this harmony. The Chinese tributary system postulates an unequal order, but which does not resemble Hobbesian anarchy, Lockean or Kantian society; rather it resembles a Confucian family.

This order presupposes the existence of a society, whose members are bound by rites, norms and Confucian institutions, established and practiced within the tributary system. This universalist view of the world already existed before Confucianism but it was amplified by the introduction of the term *Tiānxià* by Confucians. *Tiānxià* (天下) refers to “an ideal, moral and political order admitting no boundaries- the whole world to be governed by a sage according to principles of rites (*lǐ*, 禮) and virtue (*dé*, 德) [...] No boundary of territory or ethnicity.” (Joseph Chan 2007, 69)

Tiānxià refers to “all under heaven”, presided over by *Tiānzǐ* (天子), the “Son of Heaven”, which includes most of the known world. The main purpose of the Confucian state is to maintain this cosmic harmony. Indeed, “The orthodox line of Confucianism considered the main purpose of the state to be the support and maintenance of the moral, social and cultural order of social peace and harmony.” (Schwartz 1964, 14)”. This harmony cannot be attained without the respect of the five Confucian relations⁷, and the fostering of individual virtue. In ancient Chinese ethics, there is no discontinuity between the virtue of the individual, the virtue of a good society, a good state and ultimately a good world. These all rest on the virtue of the individual (Hsu 1991,160).

Let us refer to the *Lúnyǔ* to find the philosophical expression of such continuity, and the expression of political virtue. In Book 12, on perfect virtue, Yan Yuan says “How can one carry on such a practice [of virtue]?”, Confucius answers: “Do not look at things that do not accord with the rites; do not listen to things that do not accord with the rites; do not say anything that does not accord with the rites; and do not do anything that does not accord with the rites.” The centrality of the respect of the rites (*lǐ*) bears much significance to analyze the importance of tributary diplomacy in establishing tributary relations, which ideationally correspond to the *Dàtóng*.

Further, Zhong Gung asks about perfect virtue. The master says “It is, when you go abroad, to behave to everyone as if you were receiving a great guest; to employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice; not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself; *to have no murmuring against you in the country, and none in your family*” (my emphasis).

Moreover, when Zi Gong asks about government, the Master answers “The requisites of government are that there be sufficiency of food, sufficiency of military equipment, and the

⁷Respect of wife towards her husband, of a son towards his father, of a younger brother towards an older brother, mutual respect between friends, and respect of the minister towards his sovereign.

confidence of the people in their ruler.” Zi Gong asks: “If it cannot be helped, and one of these must be dispersed, which one of the three should be foregone first?” “The military equipment”, says the Master. Zi Gong asks again “If it cannot be helped, and one of the remaining two must be dispensed with, which one of them should be foregone?” The Master answers: “Part with the food. From of old, death has been the lot of all men; but if the people have no faith in their ruler, there is no standing for the state.”

Authority in Confucian political philosophy derives not by means of coercion or election, but rather by means of the virtue of the ruler. If the ruler is virtuous in his rule, and shows benevolence to his people, then they will have faith in him and state power will be secure. If we transpose this to an international level, the authority of the Chinese emperor is secured by his benevolent diplomacy and the legitimacy he is granted by his tributary rulers.

Robert Kelly (Kelly 2012) has demonstrated the existence of a “Confucian peace”, based on shared Confucian norms from 1644 (founding of Qing dynasty) to 1839 (First Opium War 1839-1842), with one exception being the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1788-8. This “cultural restraint” towards peace was only performed between tributary states that recognized and adopted the Confucian diplomatic language, and with non-Confucian polities, China did not restraint from the more classic use of force. Kelly points to the existence of a shared sense of in-group and strong anti-war norm. (Kelly 2012,408)“Confucianism was ethically opposed to the use of force, both at the individual level and as a tool of statecraft, especially between Confucian peoples” (Kelly 2012, 411-412; see also Kang 2010, Woodside 1998).

According to Kelly, “Confucianism promoted a patriarchal rather than competitive (or realist) understanding of regional, non-barbarian relations with China as virtuous superiority, as well as a unique Confucian diplomatic language for Confucian states, which is evidenced by the Confucian practice of diplomatic investiture of tribute rulers (especially with Korea and Vietnam)” (Kelly 2012, 412).

Against this assumption, Callahan argues that “ In current discussions of world order, it is popular to see China as a benevolent and magnanimous empire that provided peace and stability for centuries before the arrival of Western imperialism in the 19th century [...] Yes this comparison of a war mongering Westphalian Europe with a peace-loving imperial China employs a very narrow definition of “war”, as inter-state phenomena and a very shallow understanding of China’s historical experience.” (Callahan 2006, 755) I believe that this criticism is right about the normative pretention of nationalist scholars as to the inherent peaceful character of Chinese diplomacy⁸, but at the same time this line of analysis does not give Kelly’s

⁸ According to some Chinese scholars (Tong 1999), *Tiānxià* has the potential, because of its emphasis on harmony and its understanding of virtuous political relations, of bringing along peaceful relationships between political entities. For these scholars, as opposed to Bull’s “precarious and imperfect” peace, peace is inherent to the *Dàtóng* within the Confucian *Tiānxià*.

arguments the scrutiny they deserve. Indeed, Kelly's argument of the Confucian peace is far from presenting a "peace-loving China" against a belligerent Europe. Rather it emphasizes, through a historical demonstration, the absence of war between China and its tributary states during a restricted and specific period of time and looks for the explanation of such a prolonged negative peace within the tributary system (Japan being quite of an exception, since it kept exiting the tributary system).

Kelly's argument is weakened by its not being clearly linked to the social specificity of the period of peace concerned. Indeed, Confucianism became the state religion in China from 221 BC but only led to a Confucian peace from the Qing dynasty. We should be able to explain why, while there was peace between 1644 and 1839, the same cannot be said about the preceding period. It should be emphasized that peace depended on the solidity of the tributary system and the sense of being part of a common, high cultural sphere, a situation that was only fully developed during the Qing period.

If we choose, like Kelly, to recognize the peaceful character of East Asian international relations thanks to a cultural norm, what matters then is to understand what were the political concepts this Confucian system was based upon, and why it went unchallenged. According to Gong Gerritt, "Though couched in the language of Confucian hierarchical philosophy of Chinese cultural superiority, the tributary system with its implicit Chinese standard of civilization was historically accepted by peoples in East and Southeast Asia as part of an integral, universal, historically proven and thereby acceptably prescriptive world order." (Gerritt 1984,133)

- ***Legitimacy and hierarchy***

Although international society (Bull 1977;Buzan and Zhang 2012) is originally conceived as anarchical, the hierarchical character of the tributary system brings in a different way of conceptualizing what an international society can be. Hierarchy is here defined in cultural (or civilizational) terms, not on material ones. Even when China was militarily weaker than its neighbors and its rulers' authority was facing challenges, this did not lead into a challenge for the hierarchy (Kang 2013). It would be illusionary to pretend that the material superiority of the Chinese empire had nothing to do with its cultural authority. Nevertheless, this authority was rather defined in terms of cultural achievements and political legitimacy. As Kang notes, authority refers to "the rightful rule by which the commands of the dominant actor are obeyed by subordinate actors because they are seen as natural or legitimate in terms of a prevailing set of beliefs learned through political socialization." (Kang 2013,184) Legitimacy is the other side of the coin of authority: located within the perception of those who interact with authority, legitimacy is the belief that some leadership, norm or institution "ought to be obeyed" (Hurd 1999, 390). The question is then "where does Y's willingness to defer to X come from?" (Kang 2013). The quote from the Book 12 of the *Lúnyǔ* ("but if the people have no faith in their ruler,

there is no standing for the state.”) is again revealing of the centrality of legitimacy for Confucian political philosophy.

The movement of the new sovereignty in International Relations Theory has posited the existence of hierarchies within an anarchical international system. The most famous proponent of this argument is David Lake for whom a relationship of authority corresponds to a form of hierarchy within systemic anarchy (Lake 2003, 311), this hierarchy being linked with authority. Nevertheless, Sino-centric world order provides a different understanding of hierarchy in International Relations, diminishing its anarchic character (Johnston 2012, 185). Indeed Johnston talks about a “normative hierarchical tribute system”(Johnston 2010, 189). He refers to Schmid, whose work on Qing-Choson border negotiation during the 18th century, reveal that “during the negotiations at no time did Qing threaten or use military force, and that negotiations were held under the institutions of the tributary system. So unquestioned were the norms, institutions and values that when the Qing envoy an Imperial Decree, Choson resistance vanished.” (Schmid 2008, 136) He adds that mutual recognition of legitimate authority embodied in the tribute system was a central factor.

In the *Lúnyǔ*, the hierarchical character of a harmonious Confucian government is stated in Book 12: “The Duke of Jing, of Qi, asked Confucius about government: Confucius replied: “There is government when the prince is prince, and the minister is minister, when the father is father, and the son is son.” Government thus refers to a situation where each actor is *in his proper place*. Confucius adds” the relation between superiors and inferiors is like that between the wind and the grass; the grass must bend, when the wind blows across it.” In Book 16, “the head of the Ji family was going to attack Zhuan Yu. Ran You and Ji Lu had an interview with Confucius and said “Our chief Ji is going to commence operations against Zhuan Yu.” Confucius said “Ran Qiu! It is not you that are to blame? The last duke of Lu let Duan Yu host the sacrifice to our ancestors at Dong Meng mountains. Furthermore, its territory lies within the boundary of Lu and is a vassal state to Lu. What should there be the reason for Jisun to attack Duan Yu?”

The essence of this international society is constituted by the five relations and the Confucian ethical principles⁹ (*Lizhi* “government according to ethic codes or morality”)¹⁰. Hierarchy is thus not an obstacle to the stability of relations within the system. On the contrary, it is an institution of this Confucian society, since the tributary states could only establish stable relations with China if they accepted the hierarchic principle and tributary relation with the Chinese emperor. Sinicized states thus had a similar understanding of the origin and meaning of legitimacy, which facilitated stable relations within an internalized hierarchy (Kang 2013).

⁹Five Confucian Relationships are those between the ruler and the ruled; the father and the son; the wife and the husband; the elder brother and the younger brother; a friend to a friend.

¹⁰ “ In all three societies [Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese], political power rested upon a mixture of Confucian ethics and Law, especially the three bonds (*san gang* in Chinese, *sam gang* in Korean, *tam cuong* in Vietnamese): subject’s submission to the ruler, children’s submission to the parents, wife’s submission to her husband.” (Woodside 1998, 19)

Ji-young Lee insists strongly on the forms and rituals of the tributary system as an institution of communication and renewal of legitimacy between the Chinese emperor and the Korean king, most notably under the neo-Confucian¹¹ kingdom of Choson Korea (Kang 2013). Larsen also points out the debates among Choson court officials as to the asymmetric domination of the Qing (Manchu) dynasty of China (Larsen 2013). He reveals subtle interactions between normative and material factors. These discussions on the legitimacy of the Qing *in Confucian terms* are notable: Choson scholars considered themselves to be the guardians of Confucianism, and regarded themselves as superior to the Manchu rulers on this basis, although the Manchu dynasty was materially superior to Choson Korea. The Manchu rulers are contested according to Confucian norms. This is a revealing study about the conditions under which materially inferior states regard asymmetric power as legitimate or illegitimate.

- *Consciousness of a shared culture*

It would be flawed to assert that the establishment of a common culture was rapid and led to the exact same cultural patterns in all tributary states. Instead, the spread of Confucianism, written script and other cultural artifacts, as the spread of Buddhism, was slow and uneven. By the 9th-10th centuries, it had spread beyond China to Japan, Korea and Vietnam, with many instances of borrowing, mixing and adapting to existing indigenous practices (Woodside 1998, 191).

The neo-Confucian revolutions in Korea and Vietnam dramatically increased the sense of belonging to a common cultural sphere. Choson Korean state elites notably intensified Confucian practices, according to a new, stricter definition of virtue. This acceptance and worshipping of Chinese civilization was not present in other Central Asian polities that indeed did not belong to the tributary states. The notion of universal kingship and share sense of participation in a high culture was evident; and not so surprisingly, as it is in many ways similar to most civilizations' sense of their cultural superiority – the theoretical roots of Western colonialism should suffice to make the argument.

The attractiveness of this higher culture and of the Sino-centric order is also crucial. If one looks at the Confucian prescription for good government, one sees “the establishment of a universal model that would *attract* foreigners to join and participate” (Hsu 1991, 163 my emphasis). This corresponds to the principle of *Lai Hua* (來化 “come and be transformed”), which presupposed that any barbarian could become incorporated, voluntarily, into Chinese higher culture and become a member of civilization. (Rossabi 1983). Indeed, “Chinese is, however, a more culturally than racially and ethnically defined concept. Non-Chinese ethnic groups, peoples and states can, therefore, be Sinicized- i.e. barbarians can be transformed- in theory, by exposure to Confucianism and to Chinese culture and civilization.” (Schwartz 1998, 14)

¹¹ *Neo-confucianism*: in 15th in the Korean peninsula and in Vietnam, scholars imposed their ideas about proper government and society over the objections of the military class. They deployed a stricter, more rigid version of Confucian principles, emphasizing, among others, the hierarchical relationship between men and women, and focusing on rigid understandings of filial and marital piety. See Woodside 1998.

The *Lúnyǔ* mentions the attractiveness of the political system as the core condition for the system's legitimacy and acceptance. The *Analects* do not evoke coercion as a political tool, but rather offer a universalist conception of government. In Book 10, the *Lúnyǔ* makes it clear that internationally, if the government is virtuous, it will shine by its power of attraction, and, as the virtuous individual cannot have enemies, so won't the virtuous government. "The Duke of Sheh asks Confucius about government, and Master Kong answers: "good government is obtained when those near are made happy, and those who are far off are attracted."

In Book 2, "the Master said: "He who exercises government by means of virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it." In Book 16, "So it is. Therefore, if remoter people are not submissive, all the influences of civil culture and virtue are to be cultivated to attract them to be so; and when they have been attracted, they must be made contented and tranquil."

This passage clearly shows that domestic and foreign politics are intrinsically linked. This greatly challenges IR, which has traditionally drawn a frontier between the domestic and international realms.

Mencius also adds to this conception: he refers to the notion of *I*, on top of *ren*. *I* should be interpreted as social justice. According to him, state government has to be evaluated according to *I* and *ren*. In foreign relations, this means that the best policy for the ruler to seek is good governance at home, for this will attract people of all states and favor the unification under a virtuous king. For Mencius, a bad government is one that interrupts people's lives to conquest other territories. (Richey 2005)

- ***Tributary diplomacy***

Let us now see how this society was sustained by actual diplomatic practices under the tributary system (朝貢體系 *cháogòng tǐxì*).

The relations between the different polities of the East Asian region were strictly bilateral, paying tribute to the Chinese emperor was not merely instrumental but served a normative purpose. Any polity was free to enter and leave the system, as Japan did, since it was based on the acceptance of Chinese cultural superiority and place at the center of the system.

The tributary system has its roots in the special trading arrangements that existed under the Han dynasty (202BC-220). These did not presuppose the sharing of a common culture but the mutual recognition and expedient arrangement to facilitate trade and the fixing of securing issues (Kang 2010, 20).

The tributary system expanded under the Táng dynasty (唐, A.D. 618-907). Indeed, according to Kang "For the Chinese, more importantly, the Táng hegemony (materially) seems a confirmation of their basic cultural assumptions of the superiority of Chinese civilization: that the superior

Chinese moral authority is reinforced undeniably by the unrivaled material power of Imperial China. The tributary relationships embodying political and cultural submission of barbarians thus became the only acceptable normative order that did not contradict the Chinese worldview.” (Kang 2010, 21)

The system was sustained especially under the Qing Empire. Then, the two key elements of tributary diplomacy that guaranteed states their place within the Confucian society were the investiture ceremony, which formalized Chinese recognition of the ruler, and the sending of envoys to Běijīng (北京), which recognized the cultural, and not the political, superiority of China. Non-Chinese rulers, through the following practices, participated in the Chinese world order and recognized the authority of the Son of Heaven: they were given a patent of appointment and an official seal for use in correspondence; they were given a noble rank in Qing hierarchy; they dated their communications according to the Qing calendar; they presented a symbolic tribute (*kung*) of local products; they or their envoys were escorted to the court by imperial post; they performed the appropriate ceremonies of the Qing court, notably the *kowtow*¹²(磕頭kētóu); they received imperial gifts in return; they were granted certain privileges of trade at the frontier and at the capital. (Kang 2010)

The great influence of Chinese culture on its tributary states is evident: “The three East Asian states were centrally administered bureaucratic systems based on the Chinese model. They developed complex bureaucratic structures and bear more than a family resemblance in their organization, cultures and outlooks.” (Kang 2010, 33)

The Chinese cosmo-moral order was adopted by non-Chinese polities, for their led their foreign relations according to a tributary system model. The Choson rulers, for instance, had four grades to deal with entities such as Japan, the Ryukyu and the Jurchens. (Kang 2010, 25) The entire structure of foreign relations in East Asia was Confucian, and the political lexicon derived from Chinese. As an example, the Vietnamese called the Khmers *fan* (barbarians) (Mancall 1968, 69).

The assumption that the Chinese world order laid on the acceptance by its tributary states of the cultural superiority of China has given rise to criticisms. Indeed, Larsen refutes this idea and brings a realist perspective back into the picture. He considers that “there was much to Qing-Choson relations that far more closely resembles coercion and raw power relations than the comforting notions of mutual cooperation and respect based on shared civilizational norms.” (Larsen 2013,6)

Although Chinese hegemony does influence the Chinese world order, I maintain that it would be flawed to use a realist understanding of hegemony and dismiss the fact that Chinese hegemony was cultural and social, and was an accepted institution of the Northeast Asian international society.

¹²*Kowtow*: prostration made by mandarins and others to their superiors, either as homage or worship by knocking the forehead on the ground.

Which kind of hegemony?

It seems indeed inevitable to use the term hegemony to qualify the relationships I have described above. Assuming that hegemony is a concept that can only be applied to “the West” simply reinforces the Eurocentrism we have tried to escape, and make of Northeast Asia a case of historical exceptionalism. Nevertheless, the example of the Confucian society does lead us to reverse the realist puzzle, and think of hegemony as a cultural phenomenon rather than a primarily material one. Indeed, “In general, however, the Confucian moral conviction of a universal cosmic-social order that underwrites the constitutional structure of the tributary system was unquestionably accepted. [...] There was clear acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the authority of Chinese hegemony derived from its cultural achievements and not from material power.” (Buzan and Zhang 2012, 25)

As Buzan and Zhang note, “Because of its strong cultural quality, the Chinese case offers a distinctive if perhaps not unique type of hegemony, which has a certain Gramscian character.” (Buzan and Zhang 2012, 35) It would then be possible to see the Confucian scholarly elites in the tributary states as intellectual moral leaders consenting to and securing the cultural hegemony. David Kang makes an interesting point against this: he argues that the adaptation and contestation of Chinese culture in the tributary states was not unquestioned as is Gramscian hegemony. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the adaptation and contestation still happened in accordance to the Chinese cultural standards. The Gramscian character of Chinese hegemony is relevant; the case of the Choson rulers arguing to maintain the Confucian hegemony in face of Manchu rulers points to their role of intellectual moral leaders reinforcing the cultural hegemony.

This case study thus poses the question of the role of hegemony in the formation of an international society, when the English school has so far focused on anarchical systems¹³. The insights of Clark are relevant: for him, hegemony is a “socially constructed institution of international society”. This fits the Chinese case well because for him the key to hegemony is that other members of the society grant legitimacy to the hegemony. Nevertheless, he still conceives of hegemony within an anarchical society.

In the hierarchical society we are looking at, “Chinese hegemony does not exist outside social recognition by other states” (Buzan and Zhang 2012, 9. Chinese hegemony is conceived by actors within an inherently hierarchical system where the hegemon is legitimate in its sustaining the cosmic harmony. This cosmogony explains how, in this hierarchical society, hegemony is but a fundamental institution that sustains the society. When actors stopped granting legitimacy to Chinese hegemony, with the introduction, starting in Japan, of Westphalian concepts of national sovereignty, hierarchy was questioned and the all society collapsed.

This is not to assert that Chinese cultural and cosmogonist superiority went unchallenged. There was a long process of acceptance, modification, rejection and adaptation to Chinese norms and

¹³ The question asked by Buzan and Zhang thus is “Can we have both hegemony and international society at the same time? This poses a theoretical challenge to the English School, the existing scholarship of which has focused mainly on international societies close to the anarchic end of Watson’s spectrum ranging from anarchy, through hegemony, suzerainty and dominion, to empire. It could be argued that the concept of international society is relevant only to the anarchic side of the spectrum, because hierarchy removes the multi-actor condition required for a society.” (Buzan and Zhang 2012, 30)

culture, but this did not fundamentally challenged the assumption that, for harmony to be preserved, the Son of Heaven was to remain the absolute ruler. Chinese hegemony also worked, as a sub-system, as a tool for rulers within the tributary states to exhibit authority and be granted legitimacy from their people. Confucian cosmogony seems to have been unchallenged and the Confucian principles underlying Chinese authority formed the hegemonic philosophical ground on which relations were established and sustained.

Conclusion

In this article, I have extracted from a reading of the Confucian *Analects* some elements of the political philosophy that sustained Northeast Asian International Relations until 1839. I have revealed how Confucianism, through Chinese hegemony, has partly shaped the making of Northeast Asia as a region based on common political and cultural concepts, although Confucianism was not sole in shaping Northeast Asian political cosmogonies.

Using concepts from IRT that originate from Western experiences and confronting them to Northeast Asian history has led me not merely to offer different, non-Western notions to oppose to Western IRT, but rather to challenge existing IRT and transform its concepts according to political traditions traditionally excluded from the production of IRT knowledge.

I have shown that Northeast Asian history leads us to conceive of a hierarchical international society in which hegemony is a key institution, and is unchallenged, because it corresponds to the philosophical assumptions on which the society rests. The existence of an international society is not contradicted by hierarchy and hegemony, nor do these bring us back to a realist pure power politics perspective. Rather, order is sustained by common institutions with hierarchy and Chinese cultural hegemony as the two main pillars of the international society.

Humble as it is, this article has attempted to answer Acharya and Shani's exhortations to look into non-Western philosophical corpuses to go beyond Western-centered IRT. This is part of a promising and groundbreaking agenda through which scholars from Area Studies and from IR can interact and bridge the gap between the two disciplines. It also promises to rebuild the ontological premises of IRT and open up a global dialogue on what it means to study and conceive of International Relations in a world where we can no longer ignore that differences but also similarities exist in the way we understand politics above the domestic level.

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