

It's Just Hierarchy Between States—On the Need for Reciprocity



Daniel A. Bell and Pei Wang

Abstract As the *longest continuously active civilization in the world*, China has a rich legacy in the written world with libraries and writings that go back three millennia. These libraries offer scholars vast archives to analyze the past. For example, in *classical China*, political thinkers developed rich and diverse theories on international politics that took the *hierarchy between states* for granted. We believe that these ancient theories can be mined for contemporary insights, such as the ideal of reciprocity between hierarchical political communities that formed the *tributary system in imperial China*. Under this system, China guaranteed security and provided economic benefits to tributary states, but regardless of its advantages in the past, this system would be problematic in the modern world. The most obvious reason is that the tributary system, by definition gives, the vassal states a secondary status and is incompatible with the ideal of the equality of sovereign states. However, while there may be a case for paying lip service to equal sovereignty, in reality, states are neither sovereign nor equal. The most viable path toward global peace involves a *bipolar world with the United States and China* leading two regional state hierarchies that benefit the weaker states.

Keywords Longest continuously active civilization in the world · A rich legacy in the written world · Libraries and writings that go back three millennia · Classical China · Hierarchy between states · Tributary system in imperial China

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1 Weak and Strong Reciprocity

There are two kinds of reciprocity.¹ One kind—let’s call it “weak reciprocity”—is the idea that hierarchical relations between states should be mutually advantageous. Each state thinks from the perspective of its own position (more precisely, the rulers think of the interests of their own people), and they strike deals or make alliances that are beneficial to (the people of) both states. But weak reciprocity is fragile. Once the situation changes and the deal is no longer advantageous to one of the states, one or both can simply opt-out of the deal. For example, as the Trump administration decided to renegotiate or scrap free-trade accords.

Another kind of reciprocity—let’s call it “strong reciprocity”—is the idea that both states come to think of their alliances from the perspective of both states, no longer simply from the perspective of their own state. The rulers no longer think simply in terms of benefiting their own people, and they are willing to stick with deals or alliances even if (temporarily) the deals may more beneficial to the people of other states.

We are supposed to live in an age of equal sovereign states. The Peace of Westphalia treaty in 1648 set in stone the ideal of equality between sovereign states who are supposed to respect each other’s sovereignty and refrain from interfering in each other’s domestic affairs.

This idea originated in Europe and slowly spread to the rest of the world. In 1945, the United Nations elevated the one person one vote principle to the level of states, with each state given equal representation regardless of size and wealth. Much theorizing in (Western) international relations is based on this ideal of formal and juridical equality between sovereign states.

In reality, however, states are neither equal nor sovereign. It takes only a moment’s reflection to realize that the global order consists of a hierarchy between different states, with some states having more *de facto* power than others. Nobody really cares about the fact Nicaragua didn’t sign for to the Paris climate change accord, but President Trump’s decision to withdraw from this accord may be a global disaster because of the US disproportionate power to set the global agenda.

Even the United Nations expresses the fact of global hierarchy: The most important decisions are often taken at the level of Security Council, which distinguishes between permanent members, nonpermanent members of the Security Council, and ordinary member states. That’s why rising powers such as India and Brazil fight hard (thus far unsuccessfully) for recognition as permanent members of the Security Council.

If theorists of international relations aim to develop theories that explain the behavior of states and (more ambitiously) predict outcomes in the international system, then theorizing should be more attentive to the reality of hierarchy between states.

¹Abridged and adapted from *JUST HIERARCHY: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World* by Daniel A. Bell and Wang Pei. Copyright ©2020 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission.

In both classical India and classical China, political thinkers developed rich and diverse theories of international politics that took the hierarchy between states for granted.² We can mine these ancient theories for contemporary insights.

2 Hierarchical Ideals of Global Order in Ancient China

Ancient Chinese thinkers took for granted the idea of hierarchy in social life. Xunzi (ca. 310–219 BCE) most explicitly extolled the virtues of hierarchy. He is widely regarded as one of the three founding fathers of Confucianism (along with Confucius and Mencius).

Xunzi is particularly critical of economic diplomacy between states on the grounds that it can, at most, generate a weak sense of reciprocity that breaks down once the states' interests are no longer aligned:

If you serve them with wealth and treasure, then wealth and treasure will run out and your relations with them will still not be normalized. If agreements are sealed and alliances confirmed by oath, then though the agreements be fixed yet they will not last a day. If you relinquish borderland to bribe them, then after it is relinquished, they will be avaricious for yet more. The more you pander to them, the more they will advance on you until you have used up your resources and the state has given over and then there is nothing left.³

If a rich country aims to gain friends just by throwing money at them, those friends will be fickle indeed. That said, Xunzi does not deny that “weak reciprocity” grounded in mutually beneficial self-interest between hierarchical powers can be relatively stable and long-lasting.

In an anarchic world of self-interested states, what Xunzi calls the “hegemonic state” (霸), can attain interstate leadership by being strategically reliable:

Although virtue may not be up to the mark, nor were norms fully realized, yet when the principle of all under heaven is somewhat gathered together, punishments and rewards are already trusted by all under heaven, all below the ministers know what they can expect. Once administrative commands are made plain, even if one sees one's chances for gain defeated, yet there is no cheating the people; contracts are already sealed, even if one sees one's chance for gain defeated, yet there is no cheating one's partners. If it is so, then the troops will be strong . . . and enemy states will tremble in fear. Once it is clear the state stands united, your allies will trust you. This is to attain hegemony by establishing strategic reliability.⁴

But strategic reliability must also have a basis in hard power for the hegemon to gain the trust of its allies. A very poor or weak country cannot be trusted to keep its

²This essay is an abridged version of Chap. 3 from, “Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World” written by Daniel Bell and Wang Pei and published by Princeton Press in 2020. In this essay, the focus is on the theories of Chinese political thinkers. An analysis of classical Indian political thinkers is available in Chap. 3 of the above book.

³Xunzi, 10, “Enriching the State” (quoted in Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, 81).

⁴Xunzi, 11, “Humane Authority and Hegemony” (quoted in Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, 88–89).

promises. So with a combination of wealth, military might, and strategic reliability, a self-interested but honest hegemon can establish mutually beneficial interest-based relations with weaker states. If China's "Belt and Road Initiative" provides material benefits both to China and to weaker countries in Central Asia, and China sticks to its contracts even in economically difficult times and shows that it's a trustworthy partner, the initiative can be successful in the short to medium term. Let's call this "weak reciprocity plus"—grounded in nothing more than the self-interest of states.

The most stable (and desirable) kind of international leadership, however, is what Xunzi calls "humane authority" (王), referring to a state that wins the hearts of the people at home and abroad.

At home, Xunzi stresses the need for the proper use of "rituals," combined with effective policies that secure peace and prosperity, as the key to leadership success. He states, "One who cultivates ritual becomes the humane authority; one who effectively exercises government becomes strong."⁵ Setting a good example at home is necessary, but not sufficient. Humane authority can gain the hearts of those abroad by institutionalizing interstate rituals:

If you want to deal with the norms between small and large, strong and weak states to uphold them prudently, then rituals and customs must be especially diplomatic, the jade disks should be especially bright, and the diplomatic gifts particularly rich, the spokespersons should be gentlemen who write elegantly and speak wisely. If they keep the people's interests at heart, who will be angry with them? If they are so, then the furious will not attack. One who seeks his reputation is not so. One who seeks profit is not so. One who acts out of anger is not so. The state will be at peace, as if built on a rock and it will last long like the stars.⁶

Moreover, the content of the rituals depends on the hierarchy of states: "The norms of humane authority are to observe the circumstances so as to produce the tools to work thereon, to weigh the distance and determine the tribute due." The ideal of reciprocity between hierarchical political communities informed the tributary system in imperial China, with the Middle Kingdom at the center and "peripheral" states on the outside. In this system, the tributary ruler or his representative had to go to China to pay homage in ritual acknowledgment of his vassal status. In return, China guaranteed security and provided economic benefits.⁷

In Ming China, the surrounding political communities were divided into five zones corresponding to the "Five Services" system of Western Zhou, and the frequency of ritual interaction (roughly) correlated with the degree of closeness to the center (capital) of China, which was also served to map cultural achievement.

⁵Xunzi, "On the Regulations of a Humane Authority" (9.5). Here we mark an area of disagreement with Yan Xuetong, who criticizes Xunzi's notion of humane authority on the grounds that he neglects to mention that it also needs a foundation in hard power. Xunzi does have an extensive discussion of domestic policies that the humane authority should try to implement, including the need for a complex bureaucracy (see especially books 9 and 13) designed to benefit the people and strengthen the state.

⁶Xunzi, "Enriching the State."

⁷Fairbank and Teng (1941).

What's interesting for our purposes is that the system allowed for both weak and strong reciprocity. The security guarantees to the surrounding states allowed for peaceful relations that benefited both China and its vassal states.

Students of Korean and Vietnamese history will know that there were repeated incursions/invasions by China, but the big picture was relatively peaceful (again, in comparison to similar periods in European history). According to David Kang, there was only one war involving Korea, Japan and China in the five centuries the tributary system was employed during the Ming and Qing Dynasties.⁸

What's even more interesting is that borders were respected even without the notion of respect for the sovereignty of equal states: The borders between Korea, Japan, Vietnam and China were relatively fixed and did not change significantly during those five centuries.

The comparison with European imperialism is even more striking in terms of the dynamic of economic relations. Whereas European imperialism was motivated partly, if not mainly, by the quest for profit, the tribute-trade system was a net loss for China and generally benefited the tribute state.⁹

The imbalance between tribute received and gifts bestowed helped maintain the hierarchical East Asian political order centered on China because it made Chinese vassals understandably eager to have their inferior status recognized, thus entitling them to send tribute.¹⁰

Salvatore Babones comments that “the emperor could even punish vassals by refusing to receive tribute from them—a ‘punishment’ that makes sense only in terms of the disproportionate benefits accruing to the tribute-giver.”¹¹ Clearly, these hierarchical relations satisfy the conditions for weak reciprocity, since they were mutually beneficial, and in some ways even more beneficial to the weaker surrounding states.

The central power offers material benefits and security guarantees to weaker surrounding states, and the weaker states pay symbolic tribute to the leadership of the central power, with the frequency of ritualistic interaction depending on geographical distance from the central power. Such an arrangement can be mutually beneficial, and rituals can help generate a sense of community between the strong and the weak states: What we have termed strong reciprocity.

So, should China try to re-establish the tributary system with surrounding countries today? Yan Xuetong answers firmly in the negative: “any effort to restore the tribute system will weaken China’s capability for international political mobilization.”¹² But why not try?

⁸Kang (2010).

⁹*Ibid.*, 63, 114. See also Ge, *What Is China?* 138.

¹⁰Wang Gungwu, “Ming Foreign Relations: Southeast Asia,” in D. Twitchett and F.W. Mote (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 8: The Ming Dynasty, part 2: 1368–1644* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 301–332), (quote on p. 320).

¹¹Babones, *American Tianxia*, 23.

¹²Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, 104.

3 One World, Two Hierarchical Systems?

Whatever its advantages in the past, the tributary system is problematic for the modern world, even as an ideal. The most obvious reason is that the tributary system, which symbolically enshrines the secondary status and moral inferiority of the vassal states, is incompatible with the idea of the equality of sovereign states.

In reality, as mentioned, states are neither sovereign nor equal, but there may be a case for paying lip service to the ideal of equal sovereignty even knowing it's far removed from reality (and knowing it cannot become anywhere close to reality in the foreseeable future).

The argument for hypocrisy has a long history in political theory.¹³ For example, Plato (in *The Republic*) famously defended the idea of a “noble lie” to persuade those at the bottom of the political hierarchy to endorse an ideal republic run by philosopher kings and queens.

Notwithstanding a history of informal bullying by powerful countries, it has served to constrain legal takeover of territory in the post-World War II era (we prefer this formulation). China itself has become distinctly obsessed with sovereignty in the form of noninterference in the internal affairs of countries precisely because it seeks to avoid a repeat of seeing its territory carved up by foreign powers.

That said, there are limits to the idea of paying lip service to sovereignty. Most obviously, rulers lose the moral right to govern if they engage in massive abuses of the basic human rights of their own people. Earlier Confucian thinkers such as Mencius defended the view that what we'd call today “humanitarian intervention” can be justified if the aim is to liberate people who are being oppressed by tyrants,¹⁴ and the Chinese government has recently signed up to the international accord that enshrines the “responsibility to protect” people from genocide and systematic violations of basic human rights.¹⁵

Second, the ideal of equality of sovereign states should not be used by powerful countries as an excuse to shirk their extra share of responsibility for dealing with global challenges. If we agree that justice requires political leaders to take into account the interests of all those affected by their policies, then political leaders in large powerful countries have a responsibility to consider how their policies affect not only just the current generation of people in the home country but also the effect on future generations, people in other countries, and the natural world.

If large countries launch major wars or make “mistakes” on such issues as climate change and artificial intelligence, it can literally be the end of the world. As one author recently put it, China “shakes the world”;¹⁶ in contrast, nobody would write a book titled “Canada Shakes the World.” So it would be frankly immoral if leaders of large countries proclaim that they look out only for the interests of their own people;

¹³For an argument that “untruths” can be useful despite knowing they are false, see Anthony Appiah, *As If: Idealization and Ideals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

¹⁴See Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy*, ch. 2.

¹⁵Fung (2016).

¹⁶Kynge (2017).

even US President Trump claims that he defends the principle of “America First” rather than “America Alone.”¹⁷ In short, it's fine to pay (hypocritical) lip service to the ideal of sovereign equal states, but large states should not use that as an excuse to shirk what ought to be an extra share of global responsibilities.

There's another fatal flaw with the proposal to re-establish the tributary system in the modern world. Today, powerful countries are not necessarily the most civilized (or advanced) from a moral point of view. The tributary system was founded on the assumption that China was the center of culture and morality, and that China could and should promote its superior civilization among other nations. The closer the country (or “zone”) to Beijing (the capital during the Ming and Qing Dynasties), the more civilized the territory, and conversely, the further away from Beijing, the more wild the barbarians. Nobody seriously holds this view today. However, that's not to deny the value of proximity to powerful countries. In short, the challenge is to reconstitute a de facto form of hierarchy between strong states and neighboring (weaker) states, which provides the conditions for weak and (ideally) strong reciprocity while still paying lip service to the ideal of equal sovereignty of states.

So how could China regain the trust of its neighbors? Obviously, a bellicose approach to solving regional disputes cannot be effective in the long term. At the end of the day, China must set a good model at home. As Yan Xuetong puts it, “For China to become a superpower modeled on humane authority, it must first become a model from which other states are willing to learn.”¹⁸

As a regional leader, China would also try to provide neighboring states with mutual benefits that underpin weak reciprocity. At the very least, this would mean ensuring peace. Whatever we think of China's foreign policy, the fact that it has not launched any wars since 1979 should be a source of comfort. But China should aim for more. Ideally, it should provide the conditions for strong reciprocity by relying on Xunzi-style common rituals that generate a sense of community.

Unlike the tributary system, which implied China teaching its supposed cultural and moral inferiors, the learning curve would work both ways, with “peripheral” states learning from Chinese culture and China learning from neighboring states. The deepest ties between states in a hierarchical system are underpinned by the strongest possible form of reciprocity.

From a realpolitik point of view, the US military hegemony in East Asia is perhaps the main obstacle to the development of an East Asian “*tianxia*” hierarchy led by China.¹⁹ But things could change.

North Korea is currently the major military threat in the East Asian region, but it is possible that the divided Korean peninsula will unify over the next few decades one form or another. At that point, the case for US troops in East Asia would be weakened and a unified Korea would fall under the “natural” influence of China

¹⁷See President Trump's speech at Davos on January 26, 2018, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/01/president-donald-trumps-davos-address-in-full-8e14ebc1-79bb-4134-8203-95efca182e94>.

¹⁸Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, 99.

¹⁹Xuetong (2019).

due to its proximity and superior power in East Asia.²⁰ China need not (and should not) send troops to Korea to replace the Americans, but it could provide security guarantees to Korea, such as protection against invasion by neighboring countries. This kind of scenario may not appeal to Koreans in favor of full sovereignty, but sometimes less powerful countries need to make the best of less-than-ideal solutions.

Canada, for example, was invaded twice by its more powerful southern neighbor (in 1775 and 1812, before Canada became an independent country) and still today many Canadians take pride in being different from Americans. But Canadians know they are a small country (in terms of population and global influence), and the government usually refrains from doing things that antagonize the bigger and more powerful southern neighbor. Canada occasionally objects to US foreign policy as in the objection by the Canadian parliament to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but Canadians would never dream today of, say, inviting the British (or the Chinese) to build military bases in Canada as a buffer against the United States. Such arrangements also benefit the weaker party: Good ties with the Americans are good for Canadians because they don't have to spend that much on their military and the Canadian government can devote more resources to improving the welfare of the Canadian people. So, yes, Canadians are not the equals of Americans on the international stage, but what's the problem if a bit of inequality under the umbrella of an American-led regional "*tianxia*" arrangement benefits the Canadian people?²¹

Still, it could be argued that American military bases in East Asia are really meant to check China's rise. China may well become the biggest economic power in the world over the next few decades, resulting in a greater desire for status and global influence; perhaps the United States has no intention of reducing its military influence in the East Asian region. This kind of situation could lead to a disastrous war between these two major powers.

Jonathan Renshon demonstrates empirically that states attributed less status than they are due based on material capabilities are overwhelmingly more likely (than "satisfied" states) to initiate militarized disputes.²² The policy implication should be obvious: "conflict may be avoided through status concessions before the escalation to violent conflict occurs."²³ In making this statement, Renshon is referring to Russia, but the exact same point applies in the case of China. If the United States genuinely

²⁰For an argument that China and Korea should re-establish a Ming-like system underpinned by the principle that "Ritual lies in the deference of the small to the big and the caring of the big for the small." (春秋左氏传) But without adherence to the formal tributary system, see Orun Kihyup Kim, "Korea's Experiences with Big Neighbors," paper presented at the Berggruen Institute workshop "What Is *Tianxia*?" Peking University, Beijing, China, June 16–17, 2018.

²¹Salvatore Babones puts forward the idea of an "American *tianxia*" appropriate for the modern world, with Canada and other Anglo-Saxon allies in the zone of "internal barbarians." See Salvatore Babones, *American Tianxia: Chinese Money, American Power, and the End of History* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2017), 22. This proposal may work as a defense of an American-led *tianxia* hierarchical system in North America and Europe, but it is a complete nonstarter if China and other "wild" barbarians are meant to endorse such an order.

²²Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, ch. 5.

²³*Ibid.*, 270.

wants to avoid war in East Asia, it should try to accommodate and make concessions to China's desire to establish a regional hierarchy with itself at the head of the table. In the 1970s, the United States courageously cut its official diplomatic ties with Taiwan in order to recognize the preeminent role of China in East Asia, but it should also be prepared to make similar concessions in the future.

In short, the most viable path towards global peace in the region involves a bipolar world with the United States and China leading two regional state hierarchies that benefit the weaker states in those hierarchical relationships. Under this model, both China and the United States would recognize each other's leadership in their respective regions and work together to solve common global problems such as climate change.

But why should other major regional powers such as the EU and Russia accept such an arrangement? The most important reason is that too many global leaders would make it more difficult to coordinate peaceful relations and work on joint global projects. It's fine if Russia and the EU are recognized as less-than-major powers with more say in their own neighborhoods, but they can't be equals with China and the United States on the world stage. There must be a hierarchy of regional hierarchical systems.

4 India: Challenge or Opportunity?

Perhaps the biggest challenge will be India. India's growth rate recently overtook China, and it may well achieve rough parity with China in terms of population and global clout over the next few decades.²⁴ So how can the two countries work together?

The situation may not look promising now as the two countries were on the brink of another border war in 2017 and China's closest partner in South Asia is Pakistan. Also Pakistan and India have always had deep tensions in their relationship. Again, we need to invoke insights that two countries with contiguous borders often regard each other as natural enemies. China went to war in 1962, and they have yet to resolve their territorial conflicts (in contrast, China has peacefully resolved territorial conflicts with eleven other neighboring countries).

But on the bright side, the two countries were both members of the nonaligned movement during the Cold War, and today China is India's biggest trading partner, thus underpinning mutually beneficial relations of weak reciprocity. Furthermore, ties between India and China have been improving since early 2018—China's President, Xi Jinping, suggested that "shared Asian values" should trump the geopolitical differences between the two countries—and India has emerged as the biggest beneficiary of the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.²⁵

²⁴See Rachman (2017).

²⁵Amy Kazmin and Ben Bland, "China and India Use Summit to Push for Improved Ties," *Financial Times*, April 28, 2018; Kiran Stacey, Simon Mundy, and Emily Feng, "India Benefits from AIIB Loans despite China Tensions," *Financial Times*, May 18, 2018. More generally, China has been

History also points the way to a stronger form of reciprocity that underpins lasting peace.²⁶ Buddhism spread peacefully from India to China and reached a point where it became far more influential in China than in India. In the 1920s, the poet Tagore was deeply impressed with Chinese intellectual culture when he visited China.²⁷ The great Chinese intellectual Liang Shuming regarded Indian spiritual culture as the apex of human moral growth.²⁸ The learning was mutual: India benefited from China's paper, gunpowder, and silk. Perhaps China's greatest gift to India, according to Amitav Acharya, was the preservation of Buddhist texts. Chinese and Indian translators lived and worked in China and translated and preserved Buddhist texts. After Buddhism disappeared in India and original Indian texts were lost or destroyed by invaders, Chinese translations preserved Buddhist sutras that could then be re-translated into Sanskrit.²⁹ Buddhism would have been lost to Indians without China, just as Arabs preserved Greek texts on science and philosophy that would otherwise have been lost.

Of course, there are differences between China and India, such as the way they select political leaders, which needs to be respected. But such differences pale in comparison to what ought to be deep mutual respect between two countries, which have thousands of years of history and glorious and diverse civilizations.

The fact that India and China achieved such a high level of reciprocity in the past, begs the question of whether this could be re-established in the future? Once again, we can turn to the insights of ancient thinkers.

If the leaders of these two great Asian powers follow respectful and restrained speech and implement Xunzi's ideas for rituals that generate a sense of community, their diplomatic, cultural, and people-to-people interactions might well (re)generate a strong sense of reciprocity.

It is not impossible to imagine a future world with an Asian hierarchical system jointly led and managed by India and China, to the benefit of both countries as well as smaller neighboring and perhaps even the whole world.³⁰

seeking better ties with its neighbors (at least partly) because the United States has been more aggressively working to counter China's rise.

²⁶The point here is not that strong reciprocity should replace weak reciprocity: Strong reciprocity that is not founded on common economic interests may not be very stable (put negatively, if strong reciprocity imposes (or coexists with) severe financial constraints on one country in relation between otherwise friendly states, it may not be long lasting; we thank Zhang Feng for this point). In other words, the most stable form of reciprocity between states would be founded on both forms of reciprocity.

²⁷<http://english.cri.cn/12954/2016/05/05/2743s926586.htm> Tagore also visited the Forbidden City for a meeting with the "last" emperor. See Reginald Fleming Johnston, *Twilight in the Forbidden City* (Vancouver: Soul Care Publishing, 2008), 335 [orig. pub. 1934]. We will know that India-China relations are on track for ties of strong reciprocity when leading poets and writers from India are invited to meet members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo.

²⁸Shuming (2009).

²⁹Email sent to Daniel on February 24, 2017.

³⁰We do not mean to imply that the ideal of an Asian regional order led by the two most populous countries in Asia is the only politically realistic and morally desirable scenario for Asia's future.

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One can imagine other scenarios, e.g., a security pact between China and Russia or joint patrols of Pacific sea lanes by the United States and China, which also benefit surrounding smaller countries.