

# Critical Dialogue

**State Formation through Emulation: The East Asian Model.** By Chin-Hao Huang and David C. Kang. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 270p. \$105 cloth, \$34.99 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592723001998

— Yuhua Wang , Harvard University  
yuhuaawang@fas.harvard.edu

*State Formation through Emulation* by Chin-Hao Huang and David C. Kang is a highly ambitious and insightful book that offers a fresh perspective on state formation in East Asia over the past two thousand years. The book argues that states in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam emerged not because of war but through emulation, defined as a process in which actors copy from others they respect or admire. The authors contend that these states were formed by copying a significant amount from China, the hegemon in East Asia.

Huang and Kang's argument challenges the conventional wisdom on state formation that focuses on war, which they argue is Eurocentric and cannot explain East Asian states. The authors demonstrate that states in East Asia were formed without much war and did not engage in much warfare after they emerged, in contrast to belligerent Europe. The region's relative peace was due to the tributary system, in which China, the hegemon, committed to protecting Korea, Japan, and Vietnam in exchange for respect and hierarchy. These countries did not pursue a balance of power. However, the central Asian countries did not share the same culture and identity with Confucian China and were the exception to this peaceful arrangement. Historical warfare in the region was hence mostly between the steppe nomads and the Chinese civilization.

The book provides a clear explanation of the mechanisms behind state formation, particularly on why and how emulation happened. The authors argue that rulers in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam emulated China by copying its institutions, writing, and culture to seek prestige and gain legitimacy. These countries also emulated China for strategic reasons. For example, in Korea, rulers relied on the Chinese civil service examinations to weaken the power of the nobility and strengthen the monarch's control of the bureaucracy. As for how emulation happened, historical records show accounts of epistemic communities, including Buddhist monks, Confucian scholar-officials, and

tribute embassies, traveling back and forth between these countries to facilitate learning.

The book ends on an important contemporary note. The authors challenge the popular view that Japanese colonialism created the developmental state and instead argue that developmental states are a modern manifestation of state formation that began more than a millennium ago. The scholar-officials in the past became the professional and technocratic bureaucratic elite of today, and the Confucian examination system evolved into both the actual civil service examination and the highly competitive high school and college entrance examinations in the region. Huang and Kang emphasize that emulation occurring more than a thousand years ago has had a lasting impact on political and economic development in East Asia.

*State Formation through Emulation* is a remarkable achievement that provides a much-needed update to the social-scientific understanding of state formation in two crucial ways. First, traditional state theories are Eurocentric, but recent studies of the state, particularly in East Asia, shift to focus on China. However, as the authors argue, neither a Eurocentric nor Sinocentric view can provide a complete picture. In East Asia, China—despite being the hegemon—is just one country among many. By examining Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian countries, we can learn important lessons that would have been missed by examining China alone. Huang and Kang advocate for studying the region as a whole, rather than any single country. They demonstrate that the intellectual benefits of departing from both Eurocentric and Sinocentric perspectives are significant.

Second, by examining the region as a whole, the book contributes to our understanding of state formation by introducing a new mechanism: emulation. Huang and Kang are certainly not the first ones to investigate emulation in state formation. One of the key mechanisms in the bellicist literature is learning and diffusion. In *Political Transformations and Public Finances* (2011), for example, Mark Dincecco shows that Napoleon's conquest of Belgium, the Dutch Republic, and various Italian polities led to significant administrative changes in these countries, including tax reform, based on the French model. Whereas the bellicist literature emphasizes diffusion through *competition or conquest*, Huang and Kang focus instead on

emulation due to *admiration*. China's dominant status in East Asia meant that there was little competition, and the tributary system ensured that China did not seek to conquer its neighbors. Instead, emulation was driven by the desire for prestige and legitimacy. This book is also certainly not the last book on emulation. In a similar vein, Anna Grzymala-Busse's (2023) *Sacred Foundations* echoes the idea that emulation played a role in European state formation as well. Specifically, she argues that the Catholic Church served as a model for secular rulers, providing templates for administration, taxation, the rule of law, and national assemblies.

The book's attempt to move away from the bellicist tradition is commendable, but at times the authors' departure seems hasty. For instance, they argue that the Chinese Qin state "emerged as a result of hegemony, not as a cause of conquest or war" (p. 36), citing evidence that "main Qin innovations under the first emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi (r. 221–210 BCE), occurred *after* the Qin unification of China, not before" (p. 37; emphasis in original). However, this argument is inaccurate. As Mark Lewis's (2007) *Early Chinese Empires* illustrates, Shang Yang implemented significant economic and administrative reforms while Qin was still one of the kingdoms during the Warring States Period (403–221 BCE). These reforms aimed to prepare Qin for the intense competition and conflicts with the other six kingdoms, demonstrating that war was a crucial factor in the emergence of the Qin state. After Qin conquered China, these practices, such as appointing centrally controlled bureaucrats to the county, became national policy.

Similarly, Korean state formation followed a bellicist logic. In the early seventh century, three kingdoms existed on the Korean Peninsula: Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla. Starting in 660, Silla formed an alliance with the Chinese Tang dynasty to crush Koguryo and Paekche, thereby unifying the Korean peninsula for the first time (p. 61). Although the authors argue that Silla was the most backward of the three kingdoms, the role of external war and violent conquest was indisputable in the formation of the Korean state.

This raises a question about whether East Asia was genuinely peaceful. The authors are correct in their argument that there were fewer external wars in East Asia than in Europe and that most of these wars were between the steppe nomads and China. However, when wars occurred, they were significant in the process of state formation or collapse in this region. The aforementioned war between China and Silla on one side and Koguryo and Paekche on the other was crucial in the making of the Korean state. Similarly, the first Sino-Japanese War of 1895 led to the fall of the Chinese imperial state.

If the tributary system was so effective, one would not expect to see these wars that reshaped the East Asian landscape. One of the issues with the tributary system is

that it was not always credible. When the Tang dynasty was strong enough, the Tang emperor could disregard promises to the three kingdoms and assist Silla in unifying the peninsula. Similarly, when Japan's power grew after the Meiji Restoration, Japanese elites felt confident to compete with Qing China for control over Korea. The tributary system worked until it did not.

As with any great book, *State Formation through Emulation* raises interesting questions. One of the most intriguing is the variation in East Asian state formation across countries and over time. Although Japan, Korea, and Vietnam all borrowed from China, they did so to different degrees and at different times. For example, Japan was most heavily influenced by China's Tang dynasty, which had a profound influence on Japanese culture through Buddhism, writing, and the Tang bureaucracy. However, the Tang dynasty differed from its late imperial successors. The imperial civil service examinations had just emerged and had not yet become the primary channel for bureaucratic recruitment due to resistance from the aristocracy. The Tang emperors were also more constrained than their counterparts in later imperial China because of the influence of the aristocracy.

By contrast, Korea borrowed heavily from China's Song dynasty, during which the examinations had matured and the emperors had more control over the elites. Recent historical research suggests that this Tang–Song transition happened in part due to the demise of the Tang aristocracy during a mass rebellion in the ninth century (see Nicolas Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy*, 2020). Vietnam, in contrast, borrowed from China's Ming dynasty when the examinations became rigid and systematic and monarchical power had reached its peak. This may help explain why Japanese emperors were weaker than their counterparts in Korea and Vietnam and why the civil service examinations in Japan were short-lived and soon co-opted by the nobility, whereas they lasted for centuries in Korea and Vietnam (see Haifeng Liu, "Influence of China's Imperial Examinations on Japan, Korea, and Vietnam," *Frontiers of History in China (Shixue jingwei)*, 2[4], 2007).

The final empirical chapter (chap. 9) attempts to explain why Central Asian countries did not emulate, but the argument presented seems circular. Huang and Kang contend that those countries' distinct cultures and identities made them uninterested in emulating. In this argument, cultural similarity becomes the independent variable, whereas for Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, cultural similarity was the result of emulation. It would be beneficial to identify specific variables that account for the variations in the region and explain how and why these variables operate. Future research should aim to address these questions more explicitly.

Overall, *State Formation through Emulation* is an insightful and significant contribution to our understanding of

state formation in East Asia. I highly recommend it for scholars and students interested in the history and politics of the region and will assign it in any classes that I teach on state-building and historical political economy.

**Response to Yuhua Wang's Review of *State Formation through Emulation: The East Asian Model***

doi:10.1017/S1537592723002013

— Chin-Hao Huang   
— David C. Kang

Yuhua Wang raises an important critique of *State Formation through Emulation*, noting that we move too quickly in our argument against the bellicist mechanism for state formation. Wang's critique points to the deep fissures in the state formation literature and the contested nature of state behavior in international politics more broadly. As such, this exchange has been an important opportunity to truly compare two very different theoretical approaches to social science.

Wang argues that the Qin state engaged in bureaucratic reforms so that it could conquer smaller neighbors and that war was a key determinant in Korea's state formation. Wang also finds that the violent clashes between steppe nomads and China, as well as Japan's accrual of material power after the Meiji Restoration, raise questions about the effectiveness of the tributary system and the extent to which emulation truly reflected state-building practices in the region. To Wang and for most of the theoretical scholarship in international relations, the perpetual state of conflict in a zero-sum, anarchic environment seems to confirm rather than delimit the universalistic logic of bellicism in state formation.

What was perhaps most surprising about Wang's review is that he did not address our core argument: that the extraordinarily long-enduring states in the region emulated a truly massive amount of their religious, social, intellectual, philosophical, scientific, economic, and, yes, political ideas and practices from the hegemonic power—China—over the centuries. The evidence for this is simply overwhelming.

We were also a bit disappointed that Wang did not engage further with the specifics of our book. We dealt in detail with questions of war and order in chapter 4 and explicitly addressed the Tang–Silla alliance in the seventh century (pp. 60–67). Our larger point remains unchallenged: all three Korean kingdoms sought an alliance with the more powerful Tang dynasty, rather than allying together to balance against it. Historian Nadia Kanagawa, whom we quoted (pp. 61–62), points out that “both Paekche and Silla sent envoys to the Tang complaining that Koguryō was preventing them from sending tribute and asking the Tang ruler to take action.” Patterns of alliance and war worked nothing like what one would

expect from the universalist models of contemporary IR such as the balance of power. Furthermore, once Korea was unified, the Tang dynasty relinquished its ambitions to the peninsula. None of this is explainable without understanding the relative position of China in the region and the principles of the tribute system as practiced at the time.

More generally, we have dealt elsewhere with issues of historical and contemporary regional variation in both war and the types of international order and need not repeat those arguments (e.g., see David Kang, *East Asia before the West*, 2010; Chin-Hao Huang, *Power and Restraint in China's Rise*, 2022).

The *longue durée* of peace and stability remains a puzzle for those trying to fit Europe's experience onto the historical realities of East Asian state development. We conclude that deeply institutionalized states in historical East Asia strengthened under the shadow of a hegemonic international system through astonishing levels of emulation and where conflict was relatively rare. We believe both Wang's and our book open up a range of important avenues for future research and look forward to continuing the stimulating dialogues that such questions provoke.

**The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of State Development.**

By Yuhua Wang. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. 352p. \$120.00 cloth, \$35.00 paper.

doi:10.1017/S1537592723001986

— Chin-Hao Huang , Yale-NUS College  
chinhao.huang@yale-nus.edu.sg  
— David C. Kang , University of Southern California  
kangdc@usc.edu

Yuhua Wang's *The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of State Development* identifies a thought-provoking question: How did imperial China endure for so long even as its state capacity seemingly weakened over time? In this magisterial book, Wang relies on innovative historical data—from reading and coding a copious number of epitaphs and genealogical records to compiling new and original datasets on Chinese emperors, taxation, and military conflicts—to advance new claims about the ruler–elite relationship in imperial China. The empirical work is a tour de force, ensuring this is a big book with provocative ideas. It promises to become a crucial work on historical political economy and state formation that everyone should read.

For Wang, rulers are revenue maximizers, but they also seek to extend their grip on power. These two objectives are incompatible, leading to Wang's observation of a “sovereign's dilemma” in which strengthening state capacity through tax collection jeopardizes the ruler's odds of survival. The equilibrium is struck by looking at the role of