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**PERFORMING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: TWO EAST ASIAN
ALTERNATIVES TO THE WESTPHALIAN ORDER**

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ABSTRACT

PERFORMING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: TWO EAST ASIAN ALTERNATIVES TO THE WESTPHALIAN ORDER

The problems of the international system inaugurated at Westphalia, 1648, are well known, but particularly acute in the face of the challenges of globalization. Even if a world government is impossible to achieve, we need new ways of providing world governance. This the Westphalian system, with its guarantees for state sovereignty and decentralized decision-making, cannot achieve. By contrast, two East Asian international systems -- the tributary system of imperial China and the sankin kotai system of Tokugawa Japan -- provided better means of achieving collective outcomes. In this article these three systems are contrasted and compared through an analysis of the way they were performed in front of different audiences.

KEYWORDS: international system, Westphalia, tributary systems, sankin kotai, globalization, performativity

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1. INTRODUCTION

An important concern of the English School was the comparative study of international systems, and Adam Watson's *The Evolution of International Society* constitutes a landmark achievement.¹ It is only by comparing the operations of various systems over time, Watson believed, that it is possible to understand the different ways in which international relations can be organized. Hence his study of the international systems of classical civilizations – from the Sumers onward – and his interest in non-European systems, such as that of imperial China. In practice, however, the comparative study tended to become the story of how one system, the Westphalian, came to conquer all others. There is a Whiggish slant and an undeniable ethnocentrism to the investigations. The treatment of the international system of imperial China is a good example. Watson's discussion occupies a mere eight pages in his book, is restricted to the political processes which gave rise to the Han empire, and is based on paltry sources.²

As a result, despite the wide scope of the research, the work of the English School, as exemplified by Watson, comes across as triumphalist. The Westphalian system won out, the argument tended to be, not only since European powers were able to militarily dominate non-European, but also since the Westphalian system was preferable on normative grounds. International systems, Watson argued, can be arranged on a continuum ranging from pure empire at the one extreme to pure anarchy at the other.³ Many systems, including the international system of the post-World War II era, can be found somewhere on the middle of the continuum. This *via media* had a number of attractive features. The post-war version of the Westphalian system gave the right of "sovereignty" and "self-determination" to states which formally were treated as equals. And yet the system as a whole was ordered and given meaning by the two super-powers, the *modus vivendi* they worked out, and the social and cultural power they exercised. As a result, the Westphalian system was a "society," in some ways resembling a domestic society, with rules governing the conduct of its constituent parts.

Since 1992, when *The Evolution of International Society* first appeared, the world which Watson described has been dramatically transformed. The Soviet Union is no more and in the wake of military fiascoes and financial turmoil the relative power of the United States has weakened. New powers, China in particular, are on the rise. Ongoing processes of globalization seem to demand tighter cooperation among the units which comprise the

1 Adam Watson, [1992], *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2009). For a discussion, see Buzan & Richard Little, "Introduction to the 2009 Reissue," pp. ix-xxxv. I am grateful to Mohd Azhari Abdul Karim, François Gemmene, Vilho Harle, Jorg Kustermans, Shogo Suzuki, Yana Zuo, two anonymous reviewers, and audiences at Sciences-Po, Paris; USM, Penang; and the Universities of Antwerp and Tampere, for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

2 Watson's treatment of China, pp. 85-93, is based on a "paper on the states system of ancient China written for the British Committee by Geoffrey Hudson, and the subsequent discussion." Watson's comments on political philosophers draws on the work on Vitaly Rubin, "a Soviet scholar." The cover of the 2009 edition, showing William Alexander's picture of George Macartney's audience with the Qianlong emperor in 1793, is not actually discussed in the book itself.

3 Watson, *Evolution of International Society*, pp. 4, 13-18.

system, while simultaneously undermining the power and viability of those very same units. These changes, and others like it, provide *prima facie* reasons to return to the concerns of Watson and the English School. If the Westphalian order indeed is weakened, or disappearing, we need to understand more about the alternatives to it. And, this time, we need to study these alternative systems without Eurocentric bias and with better attention to primary sources.

This article is an attempt to undertake such an investigation as far as two alternative systems are concerned: the so called “tributary system” of Imperial China and the *sankin kotai* system of Tokugawa Japan.⁴ In order to compare their main features, we will consider the way the respective systems were *performed*. After all, all societies – international as well as domestic – provide numerous quasi-theatrical settings where social actors act out roles before the eyes of various audiences. As we will argue, such performances have both pedagogical and constitutive functions. That is, they demonstrate to the participants themselves, as well as to the audience members, how the systems work and remind them of the rules that constrain the actors. In addition, however, the performances create the rules through which the interaction itself is governed. Performativity, thus understood, is a form of governance; it is a way of constructing meaningful social worlds and of organizing inter-state relations.

To anticipate the conclusion: the Chinese and the Japanese systems resembled the Westphalian in their ability to combine overall order with a great measure of self-determination vested in their constituent units. To this extent they exemplified the kind of *via media* of which Adam Watson would have approved. Yet in both cases this was a *via* of an entirely non-Westphalian kind. The two East Asian cases were hierarchical rather than egalitarian; they allowed sovereignty to be shared and functionally divided or made relative to the time and place in which it came to be asserted. Moreover, they provided a place for the participation of other entities than states, such the Dutch East-India Company, the first truly multinational company. As we will argue, these are features which make the Chinese and the Japanese systems curiously well suited to twenty-first-century realities.

4 Neither case was discussed by Watson, and referred to only in the context of the spread of the Westphalian system. See Watson, *Evolution of International Society*, pp. 271-276.

2. THE TRIBUTARY SYSTEM OF IMPERIAL CHINA

In the Ming dynasty, from the mid-fourteenth-century, an independent international system was developed in relations between imperial China and its East Asia neighbors, but including also several European states.⁵ Although the system was strongly hierarchical, China laid no claims to sovereignty over neighboring countries, and instead its power was predominantly cultural and economic. The so called “tributary system” of East Asia assured both peace and prosperity, and it was highly stable, lasting more or less unchanged for some five hundred years.

The pre-eminence claimed by the Chinese was more than anything founded on the country's superiority in matters cultural and economic.⁶ China, the Chinese themselves believed, was the center of the world, and the symbolic center of China was the Emperor. Although his power was circumscribed in a number of ways, the Emperor was responsible for maintaining the elaborate set of rituals which kept Heaven and Earth in harmony with each other.⁷ Much of his time was taken up placating spirits and ancestors, praying at shrines and making offerings. And if some natural calamity were to occur, it was regarded as a direct result of him failing in his ritual duties. Playing his part in this cosmic drama, the Emperor represented not only the Chinese people, but mankind at large, before the powers of Heaven.

An important aspect of these rituals concerned relations with foreigners. The official chronicle, the *Collected Statutes*, record the names of the tributary states; how often they were obliged to undertake missions; what routes they should take to the capital; and what gifts they should bring. During the Ming dynasty some 123 states were mentioned, although some showed up only once and some of the more obscure kingdoms featured on the list indeed may well be fictional.⁸ During the Qing dynasty the records become more accurate with a core group of states regularly undertaking missions: Korea, Siam, the Ryukyu islands, Annam (central Vietnam), Sulu (the Philippines), Burma, Laos, Turfan (Xinjiang), as well as various Mongolian rulers and Tibetan monasteries. But there were also European countries on the list: Holland, Russia, Portugal, the Papacy and England.⁹

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- 5 The Chinese tributary system can be traced further back in time, at least to the Han period. Cf. Yongjin Zhang, “System, Empire and State in Chinese International Relations.” *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 05 (2001), p. 52. However, as Wills points out, it was during Ming that a Sino-centered international system first came into being. John E. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K'ang-hsi* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1984), p. 14. The classical treatment of the tributary system is by John K. Fairbank and his students. See John K. Fairbank & S. Y. Teng, “On The Ch'ing Tributary System,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6, no. 2 (June 1941), pp. 135-246; John K. Fairbank, “Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (February 1942), pp. 129-149. Cf. Allen Chun, “The Meaning of Crisis and the Crisis of Meaning in History: An Interpretation of the Anglo-Chinese Opium War,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica* 55 (1983), pp. 169-228.
- 6 For an overview, see David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 45-46.
- 7 Fairbank, “Tributary trade,” pp. 131-32. On the cultural and ritual background of this system in ancient China, see Zhang, “System, empire and state,” pp. 46-51.
- 8 Fairbank & Teng, “The Ch'ing Tributary System,” pp. 149-50.
- 9 Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, pp. 25-37; Fairbank & Teng, “The Ch'ing Tributary System,” p. 174.

The Chinese authorities were never surprised that the foreigners showed up at their door. "When our Dynasty first arose," as the *Collected Statutes* of the Qing dynasty noted, "its awe-inspiring virtue gradually spread and became established. Wherever its name and influence reached, there was none who did not come to Court."¹⁰ For the authorities, the gifts the foreigners brought, and the rituals they performed, were symbols of their submission to the world-order maintained by the Emperor. The foremost duty of all visitors was to recognize the Emperor's unique position and to thank him for the ritual work he performed on behalf of mankind. To give tribute was a great privilege graciously bestowed on the foreigners and the means by which they were admitted to share in the benefits of China's civilization.¹¹

It is easy to see what the Chinese gained from this set-up. Through the tributary missions the validity of their world-view was internationally recognized. The uncouth foreigners really did show up and they really did submit themselves to the Emperor's demands. And the authorities were quick to publicize this fact both in China itself and to foreign courts. On their way to the capital, the delegations flew a flag proclaiming them to be "bearers of tribute to the Emperor of China," and once they arrived in Beijing, mass scenes were staged involving a number of different foreign missions.¹² During the New Year's celebrations, or the Emperor's birthday, it was obvious to the whole world that China indeed was the "Middle Kingdom" and the Emperor the "Son of Heaven."

But the system had advantages for the foreigners too, explaining why they bothered to undertake the often long and arduous journey.¹³ Whenever a new king ascended the throne of a tributary state, he sent an envoy to China to obtain a mandate from the imperial Court.¹⁴ Once he had received his insignia, he became the unquestionable ruler of his country, recognized by the Emperor of China himself. To offer thanks for this favor, a tributary mission was dispatched, and the trip was then repeated at regular intervals in subsequent years, re-emphasizing not only the submission of the tributary state but also the recognition granted to its ruler. In addition, however, the trip to China was an excellent opportunity to engage in trade. The delegations often brought goods with them to sell, yet since the Chinese authorities had little understanding of commercial activities, trade was never officially encouraged.¹⁵ And it would be incorrect to view the tributary missions *merely* as trade delegations. The recognition they granted had a great symbolic value both to the Chinese state and to the foreigners.

10 Quoted in Fairbank & Teng, "The Ch'ing Tributary System," p. 159. Cf. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, p. 19.

11 Fairbank & Teng, "The Ch'ing Tributary System," p. 138.

12 William W. Rockhill, *Diplomatic Audiences at the Court of China* (London: Luzac & Co., 1905), p. 30; J. J. L. Duyvendak, "The Last Dutch Embassy in the 'Veritable Records'," *T'oung Pao* 34, no. 3, Second Series (1938): 223-227. John Barrow, *Travels in China, Containing Descriptions, Observations, and Comparisons, Made and Collected in the course of a short Residence at the Imperial Palace of Yuen-Min-Yuen, and on a subsequent Journey through the Country, from Peking to Canton* (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1804), p. 66.

13 Fairbank, "Tributary trade," p. 133; Fairbank & Teng, "The Ch'ing Tributary System," pp. 138-39.

14 Sometimes an heir-apparent was included in a tributary mission, a political device which effectively helped refute the claims of any rivals. Fairbank, "Tributary trade," pp. 135-36.

15 Chun, "The Meaning of Crisis," pp. 213-214; Fairbank & Teng, "The Ch'ing Tributary System," p. 167.

For European countries, however, it was above all the prospect of trade that made them show up.¹⁶ The commercial revolution, beginning in the sixteenth-century, brought merchants, predominantly Dutch, who wanted to purchase the many exotic, Chinese, goods; and the industrial revolution, beginning in the late eighteenth-century, brought merchants, predominantly British, who wanted to dump their manufactures on the enormous Chinese market. Yet the Chinese authorities, stubbornly, limited trade to a few select places on the Mongolian border for the Russians, and to the “factories” at Guangzhou, for Europeans coming to China by boat.

An assessment of the economic effects of the Chinese tributary system must thus acknowledge that the system was tightly controlled by imperial bureaucrats who were notoriously skeptical of trade. The economy was always subordinate to political ends. Yet during periods when the power of the scholars temporarily was weakened and the eunuchs of the court gained influence, extraordinary commercial ventures did indeed take place – such as Zheng He's trading missions to the Indian Ocean in the 1410s and 20s.¹⁷ At other times, despite official controls, trade expanded dramatically both within China itself and in relation to the rest of the world.¹⁸ In the eighteenth-century in particular China developed an elaborate mass market in a very wide range of consumer goods. Indeed, it was largely in order to get access to this market that the Europeans arrived in their ships.

Politically speaking, the system created a large demilitarized zone across East Asia. China was occasionally threatened by outsiders, such as the Manchus who brutally overthrew the imperial regime in the seventeenth-century; and towards the end, weakened by European intrusions, the Chinese were unable to deal with domestic rebellions such as the Taiping. Yet, broadly speaking, the system as a whole was predominantly peaceful: *Pax Sinica* assured that the participating countries did not go to war against each other.¹⁹ The dissemination of Chinese culture provided a common framework for organizing relations and solving conflicts. The Chinese would occasionally intervene to support its allies, such as during attacks on the principalities in Malacca, and there was even cooperation with the Dutch in the 1640s in ridding the Chinese coast of pirates and rouge traders.²⁰

Yet the tributary system did not entail imperial domination. “In reality his Majesty possesses but little actual power in those northern regions beyond the Great Wall,” said one European visitor, Garnet Wolseley, in describing the relations between China and Mongolia in 1860.²¹ “But by a judicious exercise of condescension and a certain undefined assumption

16 Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, p. 72. However, European countries – Portugal, Holland and Russia – with territorial possessions in East Asia always had slightly larger agendas. And representatives of the Papacy show up in China in order to defend their right to propagate the Christian faith.

17 Duyvendak, *China's Discovery of Africa*, pp. 1–35.

18 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001),

19 Kang, *China Rising*, pp. 37-40.

20 Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, p. 38-47.

21 Garnet Wolseley, *Narrative of the War with China in 1860; to Which Is Added the Account of a Short Residence with the Tai-Ping Rebels at Nankin and a Voyage from Thence to Hankow* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862), pp. 220-221.

of authority, he is able to maintain a nominal sovereignty over those countries,” and he “succeeds in having his supremacy recognized by the annual visit of a deputy from the Grand Lhama bringing some trifling tribute.”²²

3. THE *SANKIN-KOTAI* SYSTEM OF TOKUGAWA JAPAN

A once-common European stereotype designated Tokugawa Japan as a “military dictatorship” of a distinctly “Oriental” type.²³ In such a country, Europeans were convinced, autocrats ruled with a firm grip. And yet the historical facts fit badly with this preconception. For one thing, the Emperor, Japan's ostensible ruler, was completely sidelined, confined to his palace in Kyoto and left in charge only of ceremonial duties. The real ruler was instead the shogun in Edo, except that after the first generations of Tokugawa rulers, the shoguns too lost much of their power and various chamberlains took charge of state affairs.²⁴ Intermittently, Tokugawa Japan was an empire with an empty throne; an absence where one would expect the political power to be.

Even more disturbingly from the point of view of the traditional stereotype, Japan was *not* a unified country.²⁵ The era that preceded Tokugawa, the “Warring States period,” had featured 150 years of perpetual warfare between assorted regions and groups, but even once the country was pacified after the battle of Sekigahara, 1600, unification did not follow. Instead Japan remained divided into some 250 plus regions, the *han*, led by their respective daimyo.²⁶ The Tokugawa family controlled the biggest such regions and the largest cities, and other regions were closely allied to them, but over many *han* – at times as many as 3/4 – they had no direct influence.²⁷ The respective daimyo raised their own taxes, they had their own armies, police forces, legal and educational systems, and they pursued independent social and economic policies. In fact, the *han* even had their own currencies, and at the end of the Tokugawa period there were hundreds of separate forms of exchange

22 Wolseley, *Narrative of the War*, pp. 220-221.

23 See, for example, G.B. Sampson, *Japan: A Short Cultural History*, 1931, discussed in John W. Hall, “Rule by Status in Tokugawa Japan,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1974), pp. 39-49.

24 Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002), p. 45.

25 Mark Ravina, “State-Building and Political Economy in Early-modern Japan,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 4 (November 1995), pp. 997-1022; Jansen, *Making of Modern Japan*, pp. 32-62, 127-158; Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan* (University of California Press, 1995); John W. Hall, “The Bakuhan System,” in *The Cambridge History of Japan, Vol. 4: Early Modern Japan*, ed. John Whitney Hall and James L. McClain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

26 Totman talks about “client states.” Totman, *Early Modern Japan*, pp. 43-44; Ravina uses the term “compound state.” Ravina, “State building and political economy,” pp. 1017-19. As he points out, the term *han* was never used in the Tokugawa period. Instead terms like *kuni* and *kokka*, “county” and “state,” were preferred. The French translator of Thunberg, used “province” or “canton” for the *han* and “prince” or “souverain” for the daimyo. Carl Peter Thunberg, *Voyage en Afrique et en Asie, principalement au Japon, pendant les années 1770-1779* (Paris: Chez Fuchs, 1794), pp. 336, 351. Fortune refers to the shogun as “Tycoon” and to the daimyo as “princes of the empire.” Robert Fortune, *Yedo and Peking: A Narrative of a Journey to the Capitals of Japan and China* (London: John Murray, 1868), p. 81. The number of domains, and of daimyo, changed throughout the period; over 500 existed at least briefly, and at any point there were slightly more than 250. Jansen, *Making of Modern Japan*, p. 49.

27 Jansen, *Making of Modern Japan*, p. 42.

in circulation.²⁸ And while the shogun reserved the right to put down peasant rebellions wherever they occurred, his military power was restricted by the fact that he could not tax more than his own territory.²⁹

When measured by the accepted definitions, Tokugawa Japan was not a state as much as a *system* of states. This was particularly the case after 1635 when the Japanese closed themselves off from most official contacts with other countries.³⁰ There were no external military threats, and since no Japanese were allowed to travel abroad, few of them had more than a hazy notion of the outside world. Japan, we could say, was an *international* system and the *han* had *international* relations with each other. And yet, during Tokugawa this international system was peaceful and economically prosperous. It was a decentralized system without anarchy, and a highly successful example of governance. How did the Tokugawa regime do it?

There were, first of all, a small set of regulations regarding military matters that applied equally to all regions. According to the, so called, “Code for the Military Houses,” 1615, each *han* was only allowed one castle town; they could not build new fortifications or repair old ones; and, since it was an important means of forging alliances, the daimyo had to seek official approval for the marriages of their family members.³¹ Most notoriously, the system of *sankin kotai*, “alternate attendance,” required them to reside in Edo every second year and to keep their families there on a permanent basis.³² Some thirty percent of Edo’s population – up to 300,000 people – constituted such official hostages.³³ In Edo the daimyo held court and maintained their own bureaucracies in compounds which more than anything resembled embassies.³⁴

The *sankin kotai* system also facilitated governance by imposing a shared cultural and social framework on the the daimyo and their retainers.³⁵ Apart from the first generation of leaders, all future daimyo were born in Edo and growing up there they naturally came to identify with the capital. They spoke the Edo vernacular, were versed in its arts, and embraced its urban ways. Eventually returning to their *han*, they carried with them an outlook shared by other daimyo.³⁶ In addition, they participated in the same

28 As Thunberg noted, “the monies used in these countries are very varied; in addition to gold and silver, many are of copper or even iron.” Thunberg, *Voyages*, p. 344. Cf. Jansen, *Making of Modern Japan*, p. 49; Ravina, “State building and political economy,” pp. 1013-1017.

29 Ravina, “State building and political economy,” pp. 1001-1003.

30 This isolation was never complete. Toby discusses the reception of foreign delegations from Korea and the Ryukyu islands. Ronald Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 3-22, 242. Cf. Jansen, *Making of Modern Japan*, pp. 63-95.

31 Jansen, *Making of Modern Japan*, pp. 56-57.

32 Hall, “Bakuhan system.”

33 Constantine N. Vaporis, “Lordly Pageantry: The Daimyo Procession and Political Authority,” *Japan Review* 17 (2005), p. 3. See also Constantine N. Vaporis, “To Edo and Back: Alternate Attendance and Japanese Culture in the Early Modern Period,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 23, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 25-67.

34 For a description see Engelbert Kaempfer, [1729], *The History of Japan: Together with a Description of the Kingdom of Siam*, vol. 1 (Glasgow: James MacLehose & Sons, 1906), p. 75.

35 Hall, “Rule by status,” pp. 39-49; Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 158-163.

36 Jansen, *Making of Modern Japan*, p. 128.

system of prestige.³⁷ In Tokugawa Japan each social class was sharply distinguished from the others, and the samurai – the leading class – were subdivided into a large number of separate ranks. These one-time warriors were pacified as they were transformed into status-conscious holders of official titles. The daimyo too were divided into several different categories and honours were bestowed on them according to their position.

Assessing the Tokugawa order from an economic point of view, a first thing to note is that its officials, just as in China, were sceptical of trade. In addition, each *han* imposed its own customs duties on imports, and permits and passports were required for inter-*han* travel.³⁸ And although markets existed in all factors of production, the rigid social stratification set limits to the flexibility of the labor market. Yet despite these obstacles the economy was booming. This was especially the case in the eighteenth-century when economic growth and quick urbanization created a mass market in a long range of products and services. Rice, and many other staples, were traded in Osaka on behalf of the entire country.³⁹ The order imposed by the *Pax Tokugawa*, and the creation of a national elite culture in Edo, contributed greatly to this result. But so did unintended consequences of the system, such as the creation of a national grid of highways required for the transportation of the daimyos and their retainers back and forth to Edo.

Politically speaking, the international order of Tokugawa Japan assured peace for some 250 years. There were peasant rebellions to be sure, but between 1615 and 1868, when the *han* in the south rose up and overthrew the government, there was no major organized violence. The contrast with the preceding period of “warring states” could not have been sharper. Combining a loose, centrally organized, framework with great regional variation, the system was structured yet at the same time highly flexible. Focusing on a few military variables, the *sankin kotai* system worked to deter potential rebels, but above all the system operated through its social and cultural consequences.

37 Hall, “Rule by status,” pp. 39-49; Ikegami, *Taming of the Samurai*, pp. 193-194; Jansen, *Making of Modern Japan*, pp. 96-126.

38 Jansen, *Making of Modern Japan*, pp. 60, 128. And as Kaempfer points out, obtaining a passport might require the giving of expensive “gifts.” Kaempfer, *History of Japan*, p. 158.

39 “Osaka is to Japan,” said Thunberg, “” “what Paris is to the rest of Europe.” Thunberg, *Voyages*, pp. 350-351.

4. PERFORMING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Briefly stepping back from these historical descriptions, consider how international systems can be contrasted and compared. All political systems, let's stress, contain ritual settings and ceremonial occasions where, wittingly or unwittingly, the basic assumptions of a certain way of organizing political relations come to be acted out.⁴⁰ Social systems are *performed*, as it were. Examples include the swearing in of a new president; the singing of a national anthem; a televised debate; a street demonstration; the laying of a wreath at the grave of an unknown soldier; the triumphal return from exile of an opposition leader.⁴¹ In international political systems too similar dramas are constantly being performed. Consider the signing of a peace treaty, a summit meeting, an exchange of ambassadors, a test of nuclear weapons, or the publication of pictures of tortured enemy soldiers.

The performances staged on such occasions have both pedagogical and constitutive functions. By watching the staging of the drama, the actors themselves, as well as members of the audience, are reminded of the rules that apply in their respective political system. The performances tell stories of political norms and values; they tell us how citizens and rulers are expected to behave and how power is distributed and compliance assured.⁴² But in addition, through the performance, rules and meanings are being *created*. This takes place as precedents are set, reputations made, and as conventions and standard operational procedures are developed. By adopting a role and understanding its requirements, each actor learns how to play its part, but also who to go on playing.⁴³ These performances, like all performances, take place in front of audiences that react to, and judge, what they see before them. By recognizing a certain actor as a valid performer, and by giving their approval of a performance, the audience bestows legitimacy on him or her or it. In this way a certain political order comes to be maintained, but also constantly, and creatively, re-created.⁴⁴

This is not least the case in relations between states. International political performances too have both pedagogical and constitutive functions: they simultaneously remind us of, and invent, the rules that apply to the interaction between the actors. The

40 On "performativity" see *inter alia* Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy," *Sociological Theory* 22, no. 4 (December 2004), pp. 540-573; Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, PAJ Publications, 1982); Clifford Geertz, "Centers, Kings and Charisma: Reflections of the Symbolics of Power," in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays In Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), pp. 121-146; Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State In Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). In international relations theory the concept of performativity has been developed above all by Cynthia Weber. See Cynthia Weber, "Performative States," *Millennium* 27, no. 1 (1998): 77-95. Cf. Mark Laffey, "Locating Identity: Performativity, Foreign Policy and State Action," *Review of International Studies* 26, no. 3 (July 2000): 429-444.

41 Cf. the examples provided by Alexander, "Cultural Pragmatics," pp. 560-562; Geertz, "Centers, Kings and Charisma," pp. 142-146.

42 Weber, "Performative States," pp. 77-95.

43 On "convincing performances," see Alexander, "Cultural Pragmatics," pp. 567-568.

44 On "theatre and authenticity," see Alexander, "Cultural Pragmatics," pp. 547-549. On the recognition of identities, see Erik Ringmar, *Identity, Interest and Action: A Cultural Explanation of Sweden's Intervention in the Thirty Years War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 75-91.

meaning given to international politics is expressed in, and nothing apart from, such performances; anarchy is what the performances of states make it. Although international audiences – global “public opinion,” “the eyes of the world” – are not always actively watching the proceedings, they are nevertheless constantly imagined, and often enough addressed, by the actors. Thus understood, performativity is an often neglected source of international governance. When taking part in a play we quite willingly assume a role which requires us to do, and not to do, certain things. In a play, interaction and cooperation with others is not a problem but instead a prerequisite for the existence of the play in the first place. We follow the script not since we necessarily are law-abiding but since it provides recognition of our identities and provides our actions, and ourselves, with a sense of purpose and direction. Cheating is not an issue to the extent that it deprives the play of meaning. This explains how cooperation can develop also in systems without central authority.⁴⁵

In addition, for students of international politics performativity provides a direct means of describing, and assessing, various international systems. We assume the role of theater critics, as it were: by observing the performances staged before us, we come to understand how the respective systems work and what the differences are between them. In this way we can compare the performances of individual actors as well as the plays – the political systems – as a whole. Seizing on this possibility, we will briefly investigate the performativity of the international systems of Westphalia, imperial China and Tokugawa Japan.

45 Compare George Herbert Mead, [1932], *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 144-164.

5. THE THEATRUM MUNDI OF WESTPHALIA

In the culture of early Modern Europe the metaphor of the stage, the *theatrum mundi*, was a common way to make sense of social interaction.⁴⁶ Often it referred to the superficiality and vanity of human pretensions: “the world is a stage,” as Shakespeare explained, “and men and women merely players.”⁴⁷ But in addition, the metaphor was used in political contexts, including attempts to make sense of the new international order that was emerging in the seventeenth-century. After the Treaty of Westphalia, 1648, the state was established as a sovereign, self-directing, political entity constrained only by the actions of other states.⁴⁸ The state was an actor, that is, who acted and interacted with other state actors on the what came to be known as “the world stage.”

This personification was achieved through the recycling of a well-established medieval trope. In the Middle Ages, political relations, like all human associations, were understood through the metaphor of the *corpus*, the body.⁴⁹ Guilds and fraternities were bodies, but so were cities and kingdoms, and all bodies were ultimately incorporated into the universal body which was the body of the Church. In early modern Europe, the sovereign state found it useful to adopt this body language and to use it for its own purposes.⁵⁰ It was common to talk about the “body politic,” and to endow this body with “arms,” “legs,” “stomach” and a “heart.” Naturally, it was the king, or the “head of state,” who directed the state’s overall movements. On the international stage, the king personified the state and interacted with other kings who personified theirs.

Through their repeated interaction, the actors formed a system of states in which rules – such as the rules of diplomacy – and standard operational procedures – such as the mechanics of balances of power – were developed which regulated relations between them. In performative terms, the states constituted a theater company which regularly put on performances together. Ever since, the logic of the Westphalian system has regularly been performed at international conferences, in the assembly halls of inter-governmental organization, and, lets not forget, in various theaters of war.

If the world was a stage, the stage could also be considered a world. This was never more the case than in the *masques* regularly staged at European courts.⁵¹ In these plays the performers would sometimes dress up in the roles of various countries in order to illustrate the political dynamics of the day. Occasionally the rulers themselves would join in the

46 On the idea of *theatrum mundi*, see Stephen L. Collins, *From Divine Cosmos to Sovereign State: An Intellectual History of Consciousness and the Idea of Order in Renaissance England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

47 *As You Like It*.

48 On the origins of the system in the medieval era, see Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1988).

49 Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, [1957] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 3-23; Frederic W. Maitland, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Political Theories of the Middle Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900), pp. *vii-xlv*.

50 Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, pp. 23-41.

51 Orgel, *Illusion of Power*, pp. 10-11.

performance. On the stage before them, the audience could literally see their state acting and interacting with other states. In the guise of Bellona, Queen Elizabeth I would attack a treacherous enemy; or alternatively, if political circumstances required, dress up as Justitia and conclude an honorable peace.⁵² At a ritual joust after his coronation in 1617, the Swedish king Gustav Adolf assumed to role of Berik, an ancient Gothic warrior, and declared that he would take revenge for all the injustices his country had suffered at the hands of foreigners.⁵³

Formal equality was one of the organizing principles of these performances. All states have the same rights and obligations; all states, as states, are the same, much as all actors have the same status as members of their profession. And yet, obviously, not all states play roles of equal importance. Some are major actors, others have smaller parts, and many are mere extras. The big actors influence the small actors in various – sometimes dramatic – ways, but never enough for a permanent, hierarchical, order to emerge between them. The drama has no playwright or director, as it were, instead the actors make up their lines, and their way of delivering them, as they go along. They are self-authoring and self-directing.

This self-authoring and self-directing feature is invoked by Realist students of world politics who see the state as governed by nothing but the expediency of *ragionne di stato*. What this analysis ignores, however, is the performance through which both the identities of the actors and their goals come to be constructed. Identities are defined as actors are recognized by other actors, as well as by members of the audiences they are addressing, and goals are defined only within the context of the performance in which the actors take part. The state, precisely because it looks after its self-interest, must act to protect the narrative integrity of the play in which both its self and its interests come to make sense. For this reason, Westphalian actors have usually been constrained by rules of reciprocity, civility and law.

Take, for example, the rules governing diplomacy. Since the states on the Westphalian stage have no predetermined ranking, their representatives have been notoriously sensitive regarding matters of precedence. Handbooks on diplomatic practice provide extensive discussions on how they should be treated, seated and addressed, and the diplomatic squabbles over etiquette are legendary. Indeed the peace conference at Westphalia itself was seriously delayed since the delegations failed to agree on the punctilios of the protocol. In order to avoid similar trouble, ambassadors at the Diet of Regensberg, 1630, were each given precedence over the others exactly twice in ten days, and at the the Congress of Ryswick, 1697, the diplomats first dispensed with tables and sat on chairs in a ring, and then they dispensed with chairs and negotiated standing up.⁵⁴ It was

52 Orgel, *Illusion of Power*, pp. 55-61.

53 Ringmar, *Identity, Interest & Action*, p. 160.

54 John Watson Foster, *The Practice of Diplomacy as Illustrated in the Foreign Relations of the United States* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co, 1906), pp. 15-20; Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, pp. 217-19.

only at the Congress of Vienna, 1815, that it finally was agreed that the delegations should be seated according to their alphabetical order (in French).⁵⁵

Conflicts such as these make no sense but for the presence of an audience. Who exactly this audience includes is never made explicit, but in early modern Europe it comprised other states and their representatives, as well as the educated readers of newspapers and books.⁵⁶ Today the audience includes all human beings who can be reached by TV and the internet, forming a “global public opinion” which passes its judgment on the performances before them. Although the power of an actor to move public opinion indeed can be regarded as “soft,” it is no less real, and often far more useful, than the power wielded by military hardware.⁵⁷

6. IN THE AUDIENCE HALL OF THE CHINESE EMPEROR

By contrast, the international system of imperial China was not egalitarian and it did not comprise actors who were self-authoring and self-directing. Instead relations between the participants were sharply hierarchical and when they arrived at the imperial court they were given pre-written scripts and strict stage-directions.⁵⁸ Dramatic tension was created through the interplay between a center and a periphery: it was the center that attracted the periphery, creating an international system which was ordered in relationship to it.

The all-important stage of the Chinese tributary system was the audience hall of the Emperor. During the Qing dynasty, the audience hall in question was usually the one at the Yuanmingyuan, the imperial residence located north-west Beijing, but occasionally the audience hall at the Forbidden City was used, or the one at the imperial summer retreat in Chengde, north of the Great Wall. Regardless of the location, the ritual was always governed by the same protocol.⁵⁹ Each foreign mission was not to exceed one hundred men, of whom only twenty were allowed to proceed to the court. A mission coming by sea could not consist of more than three ships. On their way to the capital, each delegation was fed, housed and transported at the Emperor’s expense, and in the capital they stayed in the official “Residence for Tributary Envoys,” where they were given a statutory amount of silver, rice and fodder. Both coming and going they were accompanied by imperial troops who both protected them and controlled their movements. The tributary gifts themselves,

55 Foster, *Practice of Diplomacy*, pp. 19-20.

56 On newspaper-reading and ability to visualize the nation, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, New Edition* (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 41-49.

57 See the contributions to Felix Berenskoetter and Michael J. Williams, eds., *Power in World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2007).

58 On the role of hierarchy, see Chun, “The Meaning of Crisis,” 178-179, 183-185. For a theoretical treatment, see David A. Lake, “Anarchy, Hierarchy, and the Variety of International Relations,” *International Organization* 50, no. 1 (Winter 1996), pp. 1-33.

59 On European reactions to the *koutou*, see Rockhill, *Diplomatic Audiences*. On the British mission of 1793, see Earl H. Pritchard, “The Koutow in the Macartney Embassy to China in 1793,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (February 1943), pp. 163-203. On Dutch and Portuguese mission, see Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, pp. 38-169.

the rules stipulated, should consist of “products native to each land,” although rare and strange items might be included if they could be interpreted as omens of good fortune. Receiving these gifts, the Emperor returned gifts of an even greater value, thereby giving proof of his power and benevolence.

A few days before the audience took place, the delegations were debriefed by court officials who asked detailed questions about their countries of origin and their respective rulers.⁶⁰ The tributary gifts were then inspected and the foreign diplomats instructed in the etiquette to be followed in his imperial presence. On the day of the audience, the foreign envoys were woken up at 3 A.M. and taken to the court, where they were given tea and sweetmeats and required to wait for several hours. When the moment finally arrived, they were led into a great hall with a throne placed on an elevated platform. This was where the Emperor was seated although, as during the audience of the British diplomat George Macartney in 1793, he sometimes was hidden behind a screen. Suddenly, Macartney recalled, “slow, solemn music, muffled drums, and deep-toned bells were heard at a distance.”⁶¹ Then the music intermittently stopped, “during which several persons passed backwards and forwards, in the proscenium or foreground of the tent, as if engaged in preparing some *grand coup de théâtre*.” When the music began again, “instantly the whole Court fell flat upon their faces before this invisible Nebuchadnezzar.”⁶²

The ritual they performed was the *koutou*, the “three kneelings and the nine head-knockings.”⁶³ As a Russian diplomat, Count Ismailoff, described it in 1720:

They all went down on their knees, and, after the lapse of a few minutes, bent their heads thrice to the ground. After this all arose upon their feet, then again kneeled and prostrated themselves three times. In this manner they kneeled thrice, and performed nine prostrations.”⁶⁴

In relations with European powers, the *koutou* was a source of constant diplomatic tension. While the Dutch and the Portuguese happily performed the ritual – doing whatever it took to protect their trading privileges and their territorial possessions in East Asia – the British and the Americans stubbornly refused to comply.⁶⁵ By throwing themselves on the ground, they believed, they humiliated themselves and their country. “In no religion,” as

60 George Leonard Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China, Volumes 1 & 2* (London: Bulmer & Co, 1797), p. 134.

61 George Macartney, *Our First Ambassador to China: An Account of the Life of George, Earl of Macartney*, ed. Helen H. Robbins (London: John Murray, 1908), pp. 314-315.

62 These quotes are from Macartney, *Our First Ambassador*, pp. 314-315.

63 Pritchard, “The Kotow in the Macartney Embassy,” pp. 164-65.

64 Rockhill, *Diplomatic Audiences*, p. 28.

65 On the Portuguese missions see Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, pp. 82-144. On the Dutch missions, see Henriette Rahusen-de Bruyn Kops, “Not Such an “Unpromising Beginning”: The First Dutch Trade Embassy to China, 1655-1657,” *Modern Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (July 2002): 535-578; Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, pp. 38-81, 145-169. On the Macartney mission of 1793 see Staunton, *An Authentic Account*; Barrow, *Travels in China*. Compare the discussion in Rockhill, *Diplomatic Audiences*, pp. 31-32; Pritchard, “The Kotow in the Macartney Embassy,” p. 188.

Macartney put it, “has the Divinity ever been addressed, I believe, with stronger exterior marks of worship and adoration than were this morning paid to the phantom of his Chinese Majesty.”⁶⁶ This is a *pons asinorum*, a “bridge for asses,” exclaimed the *New York Times* in 1859 when the American diplomat, John Ward, was on his way to Beijing.⁶⁷ And yet the ritual itself was common enough at court: the Emperor *koutou-ed* to Heaven and to his mother; officials *koutou-ed* to the Emperor, and friends might *koutou* to each other as a sign of respect. As the Chinese authorities saw it, to refuse to *koutou* was a sign of stupidity, ignorance, or both. The *koutou* was the ritual means by which the foreigners repaid their host for his hospitality; it inserted them into the Chinese political and cultural order and provided a contribution to the continued harmony between Heaven and Earth. The *koutou* in no way established the Europeans as inferior since, in the eyes of the Chinese, their inferiority already was a well-established fact.

Once the *koutou* was completed, the diplomats approached the Emperor and placed a letter from their respective sovereigns on a table in front of the throne. Next the Emperor spoke to them, thanking them for undertaking the long and arduous journeys, and wishing them good luck on their trips back home. This completed the audience and the various delegations were treated to a banquet where, as a sign of particular benevolence, they might receive food from the Emperor's own table or maybe a fish from one of his lakes. During the coming days, several additional banquets with court officials would follow, or perhaps a performance of a troupe of acrobats, a firework display or, in the winter, a skating competition.⁶⁸ These entertainments completed, the foreign delegations were rather unceremoniously told to return home.

66 These quotes are from Macartney, *Our First Ambassador*, pp. 314-315.

67 “American Diplomacy at Peking: History of the Expedition; the Battle of the Taku Forts; the Journey to the Capital; Satisfactory Result of the Journey,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1859.

68 Andreas Everardus van Braam, *An Authentic Account of the Embassy of the Dutch East-India Company to the Court of the Emperor of China in the Years 1794-1795* (London: Phillips, 1798), pp. 193-194.

7. ON THEIR WAY TO EDO

The international systems which was Tokugawa Japan resembled the Chinese system in a number of ways. Here too dramatic tension was created through the movement from a periphery to a center. But in the case of China, as we saw, it was the audience at the imperial palace which mattered, while the trip there was strikingly unceremonious. By contrast, in the case of Japan, the annual processions of the 250 plus daimyos to and from Edo were grand affairs. These trips took the form of long processions which, in case of the larger daimyo, could include up to 2,500 people, and which, for distant regions, might take up to fifty days to complete.⁶⁹ Worried about a build-up of military forces in Edo, and concerned about the costs involved, the shoguns periodically sought to restrict the number of soldiers a daimyo could bring, but the restrictions had little effect. For the *han* it was a matter of prestige to send as many men as possible, and often they would hire temporary laborers to swell the ranks just as the procession entered Edo or the home capital. This, the spectators were supposed to conclude, is a particularly powerful daimyo hailing from a particularly rich region.⁷⁰

A Dutchman, Engelbert Kaempfer, observed one such delegation – from the “prince of Kijnokuni” – when he himself was on his way to Edo in 1691.⁷¹ An hour after daybreak, he reported, they saw the forerunners, carrying heavy luggage, and about noon came the prince himself, “with a very splendid and numerous retinue” of no fewer than one thousand people, “all following their Prince and Masters with that silence, order and tranquillity, as could not but amaze us in such a multitude of people.”⁷² The “long train of the servants and armed retainers,” said Robert Fortune, an American who witnessed a procession in 1860, may be seen “covering the road for miles.” “It is not unusual for a cortège of this kind to occupy two or three hours in passing by.”

First comes the prince himself in his *norimon*, followed by his horse and retainers, armed with swords, spears, and matchlocks; then follow a number of coolies, each carrying two lacquered boxes slung across his shoulder on a bamboo pole. After these again there is another *norimon*, with an official of some kind; then more coolies with boxes, more retainers, and so on. The number of the followers is often very large, and depends upon and is regulated by the wealth and rank of the Daimio.⁷³

69 Jansen, *Making of Modern Japan*, p. 131.

70 When Kaempfer encounters the procession of the powerful rulers of Kijnokuni, “We held still about twenty paces from his *Norimon*, and in token of respect alighted from our horses, and took off our hats.” But when it only was the small procession of the Prince of Nagatto, with a retinue of 300 Men, and 20 led-horses, and only eight footmen before his *norimon*, “[w]e pursued our journey without alighting from our horses.” Kaempfer, *History of Japan*, p. 112.

71 Kaempfer, *History of Japan*, pp. 102-103.

72 Kaempfer, *History of Japan*, pp. 102-103.

73 Fortune, *Yedo and Peking*, p. 42.

A *norimon* was a palanquin in which the daimyo and other men of importance were carried by, depending on their rank, between six and twelve men. For a European the *norimon* is a very agreeable and flattering way to travel, said Carl-Peter Thunberg, a Swedish botanist going to Edo in 1791, “all we had to do was to eat, drink, sleep, read, write and let ourselves be carried.”⁷⁴

Given the frequency of the trips back and forth, and the many people involved, different processions would sometimes run into each other, causing bottlenecks and problems with accommodation. Kaempfer was much annoyed by an ambassador from the Tokugawa court who traveled right before them “which gave us not a little trouble, and obliged us often to leave our ordinary Inns,” and “to dine at an obscure village.”⁷⁵ If two or more daimyo travel along the same road, Fortune noted, “they would prove a great hindrance to one another, particularly if they should happen to meet at the same post-house or village.”⁷⁶ For this reason the respective delegations announced their visits well in advance by putting up sign boards on bamboo poles, “signifying in a few characters what day of the month such and such a lord will be at that place to dine and sleep there.”⁷⁷

Everywhere the processions attracted great attention. When entering a new *han*, they were met by officials who “offered us everything which could be useful to us during our voyage,” and who accompanied them until they entered the next *han*, where the representatives of that prince came to offer the same services.⁷⁸ The roads were swept clean – or, in the summer, watered to keep the dust down – and decorative sand was piled up along the sides.⁷⁹ In villages and towns along the way the processions were greeted by large crowds, and ushers commanded people to get down on their knees as a sign of respect.⁸⁰ Aware of the attention they attracted, the daimyo and their retainers tried their best to put on a good show. The soldiers would crouch together and walk in synchronized steps; at particular points along the way they would look sideways at the people in an impressively intimidating fashion; the lance-bearers were particularly admired and the tallest and most handsome men were usually picked for this task.⁸¹ Not surprisingly, the delegations were frequently portrayed by *ukiyo-e* artists and “playing procession” was a popular, Tokugawa-era, children's game.⁸²

When they eventually arrived in Edo, the various processions presented themselves to the shogun in an audience which in some respects resembled the one at the imperial

74 Thunberg, *Voyages*, pp. 331-332.

75 Kaempfer, *History of Japan*, p. 163.

76 Fortune, *Yedo and Peking*, p. 43.

77 Fortune, *Yedo and Peking*, p. 43.

78 Thunberg, *Voyages*, pp. 336-337.

79 Kaempfer, *History of Japan*, p. 150. Cf. Thunberg, *Voyages*, pp. 337-338.

80 Fortune, *Yedo and Peking*, p. 42; Thunberg, *Voyages*, pp. 336-337. In a sign of utmost respect, Thunberg added, “some even showed us their backs.”

81 Vapolis, “Lordly Pageantry,” pp. 29-30. Cf. Kaempfer, *History of Japan*, pp. 102-103.

82 Children in the Tokugawa period seem both to have staged their own processions and played boardgames with procession themes. Vapolis, “Lordly Pageantry,” p. 4. In 1860, Fortune witnessed a group of children, dressed up in European military costume who, with great seriousness, recreated the procession of such a Dutch delegation. Fortune, *Yedo and Peking*, pp. 15-16.

court in Beijing, but with none of the cosmological significance. Here too the visitors were asked to “move on their hands and feet humbly and silently towards the Emperor's seat,” and Kaempfer called the proceeding “very awful and majestic,” and yet he also described it as a short and simple affair.⁸³ Thunberg too described the *koutou*-ing but says the whole ceremony lasted only a few minutes.⁸⁴ Afterwards the Europeans were taken to an antechamber where they were gawked at by members of the court. We assumed, said Thunberg, that the shogun himself was among the spectators, but since even his own subjects do not always know what he looks like, we did not recognize him.⁸⁵

8. THE THREE PERFORMANCES COMPARED

Comparing the three international systems, a number of conclusions can be drawn. Strikingly, in China and Japan the performances took place in relation to a symbolic center which attracted and organized the units which constituted the system. Movements across space have had political functions in Europe too. In the Middle Ages, for example, kings would often travel around their domains, collecting taxes and taking symbolic possession of the land through their physical presence.⁸⁶ In China and Japan, by contrast, the center stayed fixed, and the power of the rulers was made manifest by the fact that others were made to move towards them. In Europe the kings, making their progress, were put on ostentations display, but in China and Japan the rulers were hidden from public view and, in the case of Japan, occasionally entirely absent. In Europe, the rulers asserted their power by, seemingly, being everywhere at once; in China and Japan, the rulers asserted their power by being invisible and/or inaccessible.

But there are also important differences between China and Japan. In China it was the audience at the imperial palace which mattered, and the trips there had no particular performative meaning.⁸⁷ The delegations were limited in size and the diplomats often complained bitterly about being locked up in their vehicles and unable to see any of the country they were passing through. Clearly they had no chance to show off. Instead it was the Chinese authorities that used them as props in the drama they were staging. Another crucial difference is that the daimyo traveled themselves, and remained in Edo for extended periods, whereas in the Chinese system, the kings stayed put and their servants went for short stints to Beijing. As a result, the Japanese system was periodically physically and militarily realigned while the Chinese system stayed physically and militarily the same.

83 Kaempfer, *History of Japan*, pp. 87-88.

84 Thunberg, *Voyages*, pp. 376-378.

85 Thunberg, *Voyages*, pp. 376-378.

86 The rulers mark it, says Geertz, “like some wolf or tiger spreading his scent through his territory, as almost physically part of them.” Geertz, “Centers, Kings and Charisma,” p. 125.

87 On the endless complaints of the Dutch mission of 1795 in this regard, see Duyvendak, “The Last Dutch Embassy,” pp. 223-227.

The Westphalian system, by contrast, did not involve movement toward a center. Instead the performance took place on a proper stage. This stage, however, was itself mobile and was often in fact transferred from one physical location to another – to yet another congress, world summit or theater of war. The Westphalian stage belonged to a traveling theater company, as it were. The productions, furthermore, were organized without the help of any one director or script-writer. As a result it was never entirely clear who had the right to enter the stage; who, that is, could legitimately lay claims to statehood. If this right was denied them, aspiring actors would sometimes take up weapons to fight for the recognition they felt was their due.⁸⁸ An additional problem concerned the interminable struggles for pre-eminence. Since order among the actors was not predetermined, everything depended on the performances they could pull off and how they were judged by the audiences they were addressing. During the squabbles regarding diplomatic etiquette at an international conference, this competition was (largely) peaceful, but often enough the same struggles were relocated to military arenas.

By contrast, in the Chinese tributary system questions of membership were never an issue. Here everyone could be included, not only states, but business corporations too – like the Dutch East-India Company which sent several tributary missions to Beijing in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries.⁸⁹ As the Chinese authorities saw it, the more people who participated in the audiences the better. In addition, since all actors had a pre-written script to follow, there was no need for individual interpretations. In fact, in the Chinese system, the tribute-bearers are in some respects best considered as members of the audience and the emperor as the only real actor. This is also why visitors to Beijing often were roughly treated and badly housed. According to the Chinese, they were merely the servants of the king who had sent them and could safely be treated as such. According to the Europeans, by contrast, the diplomats personified the state – for the purposes of the performance, they *were* the state – and as such they had to be treated with the greatest respect. This explains the repeated spats over the issue of the *koutou*.⁹⁰ According to the Europeans, if the diplomat *koutou*-ed, the state itself *koutou*-ed. According to the Chinese, the servants of a foreign prince had better *koutou* in his imperial presence, and besides, the inferiority of the foreigners was already an independently established fact.

The Japanese system combined features of the Westphalian and the Chinese systems. Just as on the Westphalian stage, the rulers were actors in their own right, and matters of prestige and standing were constantly on their minds. Yet there was never an illusion that they shared the same status. On the contrary, the various *han* were clearly ranked and labeled in terms of their wealth and their relations of fealty, or otherwise, to the Tokugawa rulers.⁹¹ There was a given place for them all in the social system administered by the Tokugawa regime, and the processions to and from Edo were their way of laying claims to this pre-allotted social location. The system of prestige locked the daimyo in, but it also protected them from what in the Westphalian system turned out to be a devastating

88 See, for example, Ringmar, *Identity, Interest & Action*, pp. 185-186.

89 Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, pp. 38-81, 145-169; Kops, "Unpromising beginning," pp. 535-578;

90 Chun, "The Meaning of Crisis," pp. 211-212.

91 Hall, "Rule by status," pp. 48-49.

military competition. In performative terms, the processions were staged consecutively, one after the other, rather than in the same place at the same time. It was only when two processions occasionally, and by mistake, ran into each other that diplomatic complications ensued.

Compare the understanding of space which these performances presuppose. Space, in the Westphalian system, was territorial and atomistic. Here borders were crucial since they determined the size and shape of a state – which people it included and excluded, and the resources to which it could lay claim. On Westphalian maps the territorial claims of states were mutually exclusive and taken together they were entirely exhaustive. Corresponding to this either/or conception of space was a binary notion of sovereignty: each state either had complete sovereignty over a certain piece of land or none at all. Sovereignty made each state inviolable, but for this very reason relations between them were constantly contested. The states were “free” but freedom made wars, and threats of wars, into a perennial feature of the system.

By contrast, in the Chinese system space was relational rather than territorial. Here the geographical area which a state occupied was less important than its relationship to the state in the center of the system. Everyone was watching the action taking place in front of them and no one cared much about what went on behind their backs. Sovereignty in a relational system is not a binary notion: land can have several masters or no master at all. Sovereignty can be shared and functionally divided, or relative to the time and place in which it comes to be asserted. What mattered in the Chinese system were relations between the units rather than the units themselves. Since the relations themselves were not negotiable, the only question was which unit that should occupy which role.

9. THINKING BEYOND WESTPHALIA

Members of the English School, including Adam Watson, were surely correct in emphasizing the essentially constructed nature of relations obtaining between the units that make up an international system. All political systems are staged, we argued, and in an international system anarchy is nothing apart from the performances through which it is expressed. Yet the English School, and Watson in particular, exaggerated the inevitability of the Westphalian system and their treatment of non-European international systems was superficial at best. Looking at the history of Westphalia again, this time from a less Euro-centric perspective, what we notice is the contingency of this victory. The Westphalian order was perfectly well adapted to a world which now rapidly seems to be changing. A study of the way international relations are performed allows us to think more creatively about this transformation in *mis-en-scène*.

Although international systems are difficult to compare with respect to their economic and political consequences, the order imposed by *Pax Sinica* and *Pax Tokugawa* did create a presumption regarding peace which contrasts favourably with the presumption regarding war of the Westphalian system.⁹² And although officials in both China and Japan viewed commerce with a sceptical eye, peace was in both cases conducive to economic development. Clearly, economic relations benefited from the order which both system produced. Much as in domestic political systems, having a well-defined script, predetermined roles, and one set of stage directions improves governance. What should make the two East Asian systems attractive also to a Westphalian mind-set, however, is the fact such system-wide governance always was combined with a large measure of self-governance in domestic affairs. After all, the political centres interfered little or not at all in the business of the states making up the respective systems.

In addition there are several features which make the two East-Asian systems particularly well suited to twenty-first-century realities. What really mattered here, from a systemic point of view, were the relations obtaining between the constituent units and not the units themselves. As a result, sovereignty could be shared and functionally divided without logical contradictions, or made relative to the time and place in which it came to be asserted. Moreover, a relational conception of space fits well with a world which the process of globalization now seems to be de-territorializing. Today overlapping jurisdictions are increasingly a reality, making the either/or conception of sovereign look *passé*. In our world too other entities than states – multinational companies or NGOs – are politically important, much as the Dutch East-India Company played a role in the international systems of both imperial China and Tokugawa Japan.

And yet, moving away from a Westphalian world is potentially associated with some considerable costs. Political atomism, non-intervention and an either/or conception of sovereignty have provided the framework within which modern conceptions of politics have developed, not only between states but also within them. Democratic political institutions, to take the most obvious example, assume that power is in the hands of a particular *demos*,

92 Kang, *China Rising*, pp. 37-40.

and that this body has the power to make authoritative and binding decisions. Similarly, international democracy, for what it is worth, could surely not survive in a world which is hierarchically ordered, even if only loosely and benignly so. The United Nations was founded on the idea of self-determination, but in a globalizing world national selves are not atomistic units which plausibly can claim to determine themselves.