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Roundtable Review 17-45

Hendrik Spruyt, *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies*. Cambridge University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781108867948.

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 Introduction by Dylan Loh, Nanyang Technological University

The traditional foundations of international order are undergoing fundamental changes, wrought simultaneously by American unilateralism, the rise of China, decaying international institutions, and the open disregard for international law and norms by major powers. This has led to suggestions that the Western-underwritten order is dying, if not already dead.¹ This perceived terminal decline has also shifted analytical inquiries toward alternative frameworks. There is now significant academic and policy-oriented interest in mapping non-Western trajectories and dimensions of international order.² For example, scholars and policy elites in China are increasingly invoking Chinese philosophical-political concepts like *Tianxia* as a direct alternative to the Westphalian system, arguing that a Sinocentric regional order offers a more inclusive, less binary approach to global governance.³

In *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies*, Hendrik Spruyt asks when and where the dominance of this Westphalian gaze began, what other ways of imagining political order have existed, and how the rest of the world become ‘modern’? Spruyt examines the role of “collective beliefs” in shaping the conduct of world politics across three premodern Eurasian regional orders where “non-European orders...were based on shared sets of beliefs regarding the nature of the material and social world around them” (5).

While not a study of the Westphalian system per se, Spruyt’s monograph offers a historical–sociological investigation into how the Sinocentric order, the Islamic cultural-historical community, and the empires of Southeast Asia that constructed generally stable political orders based on universalist claims rather than territorial sovereignty. The book focuses on two major objectives. First, Spruyt aims to demonstrate how collective beliefs influenced the political organization of several non-Western international societies, suggesting that these beliefs were made “real” through material manifestations in rituals, dominant narratives, architecture, and institutions. Second, he discusses how these societies conducted their inter-polity relations and confronted the European Westphalian state system.

He challenges structural realism’s core assumptions of the international system, which argues that order hinges primarily on the distribution of power and that politics can be understood by generally applicable categories like anarchy and hierarchy.⁴ Spruyt contends that such scholarship misconstrues the non-

¹ Stacie E. Goddard, Ronald R. Krebs, Christian Kreuder-Sonnen, and Berthold Rittberger, “Liberalism Doomed the Liberal International Order: A Less Legalistic System Would Help Protect Democracies,” *Foreign Affairs*, 28 July 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/liberalism-doomed-liberal-international-order>.

² Dylan M. H. Loh, Lucas de Oliveira Paes, and Ayşe Zarakol, “Non-Western Visions of International Order,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, 29 (2026): <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-032824-084913>.

³ Tingyang Zhao, *All Under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*, translated by Joseph E. Harroff (University of California Press, 2021).

⁴ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Addison-Wesley, 1979), 88–89; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Western world and fails to recognize that international societies fundamentally revolve around shared conceptions of the political and social world.

Furthermore, he contends, these universalist systems are not necessarily at odds with the territorially delimited vista of the Westphalian system. Indeed, a central argument of the book is that the encounter between “the West and the rest” was not an encounter of two static systems, but a bidirectional process in which both sides redefined their identities. Spruyt challenges the narrative that non-European polities could not adjust to the Westphalian system. On the contrary, he found plenty of evidence demonstrating considerable adjustments to external pressures, such as the Qing adopting international diplomatic protocol through a rump foreign ministry (*Zongli Yamen*) and the adoption of modern cartographic practices by Siam, among others. In any event, by creating the “other,” European powers were able to justify imperial practices and bring the Westphalian project to its full articulation within Europe itself and beyond.

The four reviewers, Kevin Blachford, Avinash Godbole, Ayla Göl, and Joseph MacKay largely agree that Spruyt has produced a remarkable and significant work that opens important new avenues for investigation in the field of global IR, international orders, and order-making. Blachford praises the book for creating an interdisciplinary approach that includes anthropology, history, and sociology to explain how shared meanings shape political order. He applauds Spruyt’s willingness to break away from Westphalian-centric interpretations of history and his critique of Western colonial relations.

Blachford argues, however, that Spruyt’s challenge to the discipline of IR rests on a “simplistic and outdated” interpretation of the field, setting up strawman figures of neo-realism and neo-liberalism while overlooking the strides made by post-colonial and critical theories. Blachford raises concerns about essentialism, particularly in Spruyt’s grouping of the Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal empires into a single community that may risk overstating the internal cohesion of the Islamic world. Finally, he notes that since Spruyt does not theorize Euro-Indigenous encounters as central, defaulting instead to a comparison of “the West versus the rest,” the book does not discuss how global order was shaped in a “co-constitutive manner” through constant negotiation between diverse polities.

Avinash Godbole focuses his review on Spruyt’s chapter that deals with the Sinocentric tributary system. He questions whether the ritualistic behavior of tributary states was truly a reflection of shared collective beliefs or simply a realist calculation where smaller neighbours performed rituals primarily to avoid aggression from a mightier power. Alastair Iain Johnston has advanced this argument regarding strategic culture.⁵ Godbole suggests that the sense of cultural superiority in the tributary system may have been a matter of aggrandized self-perception in China rather than a consensus-driven reality. He expresses scepticism regarding the collective nature of these beliefs, arguing that they were likely limited to a small

⁵ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton University Press, 1998).

group of elites rather than being shared by the public in undemocratic societies. Finally, Godbole notes the contemporary implications of Spruyt's work, pointing out that China's modern behavior in the South China Sea and the Belt and Road Initiative often appears more in tune with realism and national rejuvenation than with the historical norms of peaceful conduct.

Ayla Göl reinforces the critique of ethnocentric biases in international relations that have historically categorized non-European polities as uncivilized. Regarding Islamic international society, however, she challenges Spruyt's narrative by identifying the caliphate as a central hegemonic actor, arguing that the existence of multiple Islamic empires actually signalled a clear political hierarchy, somewhat echoing Blachford's critique. Additionally, she identifies the Ottoman Empire as a distinct case due to its geographical proximity to Europe and its strategic adoption of Western state models. Ultimately, she asserts that the ongoing exclusion of Turkey from the European Union illustrates the shifting and arbitrary nature of Westphalian standards for civilization, which continue to function as instruments for maintaining asymmetric power relations.

Joseph MacKay's review is perhaps the most generous. Somewhat dissimilar to Godbole, he calls Spruyt's account of East Asia, "exemplary." He points out that Spruyt's reliance on the tributary system model elides debates within the new Qing history that are more skeptical of the "Tributary model." MacKay also identifies what he calls "three ambiguities" in the text: social-theoretic, historiographical, and the status of Western modernity. MacKay notes that the conceptualisation of meaning in Spruyt's work appears to vary, with beliefs sometimes acting as cognitive scripts and other times as tools to manipulate circumstances. Finally, MacKay questions Spruyt's suggestion that cosmological justifications have receded in the modern West. Drawing on the work of Bentley Allan,⁶ MacKay suggests that Western modernity may be enchanted by different scientific and rationalist cosmologies that still hold us in their sway.

In his response, Hendrik Spruyt conveys appreciation for the insightful critiques of his colleagues. He responds to charges of essentialism by invoking Max Weber's methodology of ideal types, arguing that such analytical constructs are necessary to capture the logic of an order while recognizing constant modification. To explain how diversity and stability coexist, Spruyt utilizes the concept of language games of Ludwig Wittgenstein, upon whose work he also draws upon in the book. He argues that international orders share a common discourse comprised of a shared repertoire of utterances and rituals that allows for deviations, adjustments and instrumental manipulation. Spruyt further defends his focus on the tributary system, countering Godbole's suggestion that it was merely a reflection of material power.

He maintains that the performative script of the tributary ritual allowed polities to maintain a "façade of supremacy" even when the private reality was one of autonomy or even extortion as the scripts could be tweaked to different users and for different audiences. Responding to Göl's review, Spruyt clarifies that while he agrees that the caliphate conferred connotations of supremacy; the reality was a plurality of

⁶ Bentley B. Allan, *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

empires that each utilized universalist narratives to legitimate their authority, often in direct competition with one another. Finally, Spruyt acknowledges the need for further exploration into the interconnections between Southeast Asian polities and the mutual influences between these international orders. He agrees with the reviewers that the deployment of historical narratives in contemporary politics merits continued discussion, as they continue to inform policy preferences today.

Spruyt concludes by framing his work as an invitation to rethink how Western perspectives structure global order and to question why certain systems are perceived as more natural or legitimate than others. By synthesizing these four scholarly critiques, the roundtable offers a comprehensive evaluation of *The World Imagined*. This study recovers the historical-cosmological frameworks of non-Western systems while providing the analytical tools, rooted in history and sociology, to examine the unique ideological underpinnings of our contemporary political landscape. Ultimately, it invites us to meditate on the current and future fate of our order by looking backward to look forward.

Contributors:

Hendrik Spruyt is Norman Dwight Harris Professor of International Relations Emeritus at Northwestern University and author of *The World Imagined* (Cambridge, 2020), best book award ISA-Theory, and best book award APSA-Politics and History; *Contracting States* (Princeton University Press, 2009), with Alexander Cooley; *Ending Empire* (Cornell University Press, 2005); and *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors* (Princeton University Press, 1994), best book award APSA-Politics and History.

Dylan M.H Loh is Associate Professor at the Public Policy & Global Affairs programme at Nanyang Technological University. He is the author of *China's Rising Foreign Ministry* (2024), published by Stanford University Press, and focuses on Chinese foreign policy, conceptions of international orders and the practice of diplomacy.

Kevin Blachford is a Lecturer in Defence Studies Education at the Joint Services Command and Staff College for King's College London. His research covers areas of historical international relations and questions of international order. He is currently working on a monograph on hierarchy and empire in late antiquity.

Avinash Godbole is Associate Professor and Associate Academic Dean at JSLH, O. P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat. His research interests are in the fields of Chinese Foreign Policy, Environmental Changes in China, Minorities in China, Domestic Politics in China, China's Asia strategy and India-China Relations.

Ayla Göl is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the School of Humanities, York St John University, UK. She holds a PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), where

she had an early career position at the Department of International Relations. She graduated from the Faculty of Political Science, Ankara University in Turkey. Dr. Göl is also a Senior Fellow at the Higher Education Academy. She is the author of *Turkey Facing East: Islam, Modernity and Foreign Policy* (Manchester University Press, 2013) and numerous articles in journals such as *Nations and Nationalism*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Information and Education Technologies*, and the *Global Discourse* as well as book chapters on Turkey, the Middle East, and international relations.

Joseph MacKay is a Fellow (Senior Lecturer) in the Department of International Relations, Australian National University. He holds a PhD from the University of Toronto. He works on the history of international theory and the history of international ordering. He is the author of *The Counterinsurgent Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), and his research has appeared in the *Review of International Studies*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *International Theory*, the *Journal of Global Security Studies*, and *Social Science History*. His current book project looks at the modern, western history of reactionary international thought.

Hendrik Spruyt's latest book, *The World Imagined*, argues for the importance of examining collective beliefs in constructing international political order. Through re-examining the very foundations of International Relations (IR), Spruyt develops a way to consider international societies across history and outside the confines of a limited Westphalian narrative. He opens new ground in creating an interdisciplinary approach, including anthropology, history, IR, and sociology, to explain how shared meanings and constructivist understandings of international society shape political order. This interdisciplinary approach examines the political order of three non-European international societies, all of which differed from the European Westphalian system in key ways. Crucially, they all sought universal forms of political rule. He examines an East-Asian Sino-centric order, the Islamic cultural-historical community, and the collective imagination of order within the polities of Southeast Asia. By examining these political orders from early modernity to the late 19th century, Spruyt makes an important step in expanding the historical case studies that are commonly used within IR. He questions the normality of the Westphalian state and criticizes Western colonial relations for imposing or shaping other societies into a Westphalian straitjacket. It is this willingness to break away from the limited Westphalian-centric interpretation of history, and the inclusion of a diverse range of political orders, which makes this book a worthwhile read for any scholar of IR.

The World Imagined begins by setting out a direct challenge to an ahistorical and rationalist model of IR. Spruyt examines a range of actors, including the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires to show the importance of recognizing the cultural basis of power, in which ideas and collective beliefs can work to shape understandings of international order. This "cultural understanding of international society" offers both an explicit challenge to a positivist and rarified empiricist view of history (4), and works as a corrective to the English School's tendency to see the expansion of international society as an uncomplicated process of a Westphalian diffusion outwards from a core of European nation states.¹ The benefit of this approach is that it recognizes how international systems are not just "suspended in time," but that the meaning of the state, domestic and foreign, and the international, can all change over time (33). A focus on collective beliefs in shaping international order therefore recognizes that political order is subject to constant negotiation and interrogation (64).

This attempt to offer a nuanced constructivist challenge to positivism does however rest on a simplistic and outdated interpretation of IR as a discipline. The narrative sets up a somewhat strawman figure of neo-realist and neo-liberal discourse, which does not consider how the discipline has already moved far beyond Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* with its limited hyper-rationalist and ahistorical perspective.² This approach can be seen with the figures Spruyt directly references, such as Martin Wight, Robert

¹ Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds., *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford University Press, 1984); Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit, *The Globalization of International Society* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

² Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Waveland Press, 1979).

Keohane, Robert Gilpin, Henry Kissinger, and of course Waltz (19-23).³ Whilst these figures have undoubtedly played a large part in historically shaping the discipline of IR, it is questionable whether they are taken seriously by a contemporary audience outside of a parochial and American-centric university setting. The great strides IR has made in embracing post-colonial and critical theories in the last two decades suggests that an outdated rationalist Westphalian model is an odd place to start with discussing the contemporary field of IR.⁴

In challenging a rationalist and positivist view of IR, *The World Imagined* also critiques the English School view of Europe as a self-contained international society in which others must join when civilized (47).⁵ Spruyt borrows from and amends an English School view of international society to include consideration of polities which are not just restricted to “sovereign, territorially demarcated states” (52). This recognition of a wider range of polities, which do not simply match the rationalist state, means that Spruyt is able to broaden the English School’s engagement with history to include political orders outside of Europe, such as the Chinese tributary system. His focus on collective beliefs and shared meanings illustrates how international societies can share webs of meaning and be viewed as civilizational assemblages or civilizational complexes (54). This perspective recognizes that regional political orders can be shaped by cultural values rather than just the traditional neo-realist understanding of the distribution of material power. The Chinese tributary system, for example, was built on a lingua franca and cultural hegemony that was able to regulate affairs between diverse polities (160).

Spruyt then builds upon this observation to contrast the Westphalian notion of sovereign states as an organizational principle against non-Western examples which aspired for universal rule. The Westphalian recognition of territorial limits to political rule is then understood as standing in direct “tension with the logic of universal empire” (2). This dichotomy between Westphalian limited rule to non-Western universalism therefore opens up a way to create a comparative study of international orders across time and from across diverse cultures.

The comparison between a Westphalian order of homogenous territorial states against an Asian order of hybridity (336), is however, perhaps overplayed and results in an orientalist examination of non-Western polities.⁶ This can be particularly seen with the grouping together of the Safavids, the Ottomans, and Mughals as an Islamic cultural-historical community. These polities are grouped together as examples of polities which believed in an Islamic form of universal rule. Although Spruyt adds the caveat that there were

³ Martin Wight, *International Theory: the Three Traditions* (Leicester University Press, 1994); Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Princeton University Press, 1984); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1981); Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored* (Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

⁴ See other recent works such as Andrew Phillips, *How the East was Won* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); Ayse Zarakol, *Before the West: the Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁵ Bull and Watson, *The Expansion of International Society*.

⁶ It is reminiscent of the approach of Samuel P. Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon and Schuster, 1996).

“significant variations” between these three actors, they are still taken to have a collective belief system which was relatively stable and they can therefore all be understood within an ‘Islamic cultural frame’ (73). While Spruyt focuses on the shared collective belief systems, this grouping together of such diverse actors does appear essentialist in nature because they are defined by just one characteristic, their Islamic faith. This is a limited lens to understand a polity such as the Ottoman empire which included many subordinated Christian subjects, such as Moldavia, Wallachia, Transylvania, the Georgian kingdoms and principalities, as well as cities such as Dubrovnik.⁷

The Ottomans also developed intertwined relations with rival Christian powers, such as the Portuguese and Venetians, but did not form any type of religious based alliance with the Safavids against Christian rivals, as might be expected by taking such an essentialist lens. This creates an underlying tension throughout the whole of this work in which a Westphalian order is contrasted to that of ‘the other.’ Spruyt explicitly acknowledges that the non-Western international societies included in this study existed conterminously with the emerging Westphalian territorial states (74). But the recognition that European society was forged with and through these encounters is not theorized as central to the investigation. Instead, we are left with a West versus the rest comparison. This is a shame because Spruyt’s arguments on recognizing the role of constant negotiation and polities other than the state suggest that more could be said about the role of encounters between Europeans and the non-West in shaping political order in a co-constitutive manner.

The World Imagined makes a positive step forward for IR theory in developing our understanding of how cultural meanings and cognitive framing work to shape political order. This emphasis on shared beliefs and common organization based on cultural values suggests that there is more to international order than just the traditional IR focus on the rules and norms used to regulate conflict. Theorists of the English School in particular would benefit from building upon this work and engaging with Spruyt’s arguments on how we understand the concept of international society. *The World Imagined* will also prove a useful addition to debates on global IR. Spruyt ends this book by asking “What is it about the present typically Western understanding of how the social and political world hinges together that appears to be ‘more real’ or ‘more accurate’ than other views?” (352). This is an admirable and difficult question to consider, and Spruyt has opened important avenues of investigation in asking this fundamental question.

⁷ Ali Balci, “Bringing the Ottoman Order Back into International Relations: A Distinct International Order or Part of an Islamic International Society?,” *International Studies Review*, 23, (2021), 2099.

The ordering principle of the world underwent the most significant historic change from the late-nineteenth to the middle of twentieth century. This change happened for several reasons, including the universalisation of the concept of sovereignty, the creation and usage of weapons of mass destructions in a true sense in the two world wars, and the advance of nuclear weapons and creation of rivalries based on power. Subsequently, the global understanding of what it means to be powerful also changed substantially. Hendrik Spruyt has written on the subject of transitions from empires and kingdoms to sovereign states closely. His first two books, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change* and *Ending Empire: Contested Sovereignty and Territorial Partition* deal with this issue.¹

In *The World Imagined*, he challenges the notion that the universalist empires outside of Europe were stuck in their imagined glories and incapable of change as well as unwilling to do so. He does this by looking at variables like the ways in which they governed, derived legitimacy, understood the role of violence, and related to others in their vicinity and beyond. He argues that structural realism, the most dominant theory of international relations in the last 75 odd years, takes a thin view of the society and does not adequately consider the role played by “cultural perspectives, morality, or normative considerations” (4).² Based on its positivist and thus biased approach, structural realism takes a materialist view and treats itself to be universally and historically valid despite several criticisms (51). Thus, he takes a constructivist approach to studying international relations wherein ideas inform interests (37). This is not the first constructivist criticism against realism and undoubtedly will not be the last one. This review raises questions about some of the contestable claims of the book and some of its conceptual shortfalls. In general, it focuses on the section dealing with China and treating the tributary system as a benchmark for international relations.

The World Imagined looks at China’s tributary system, the Islamic empires including the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal, and the Southeast Asian empires to understand their understanding of their identity and place in the world. It concludes that although the details vary, all these empires displayed universalist tendencies and imagined themselves at the center of this universe. It needs to be asked here why these diverse regimes across these diverse times and geographies and cultures had universalist tendencies. What sort of legitimacy did they derive by calling themselves universalist and was the tendency to declare oneself universalist a process of appeasing the emperor himself and seeking benign considerations and concessions on his behalf?

¹ Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change* (Princeton University Press, 1996); Spruyt, *Ending Empire: Contested Sovereignty and Territorial Partition* (Cornell University Press, 2005).

² Structural realism, by definition, is about the organizational structure of the world. Kenneth Waltz is the preeminent scholar in this field. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Waveland Press, 1979). In *Man, the State and War* (Columbia University Press, 1954), Waltz tries to identify the causes of war at different levels. Also see, Hans J. Morgenthau’s seminal work, *Politics among Nations* (Knopf, 1948), which takes a Hobbesian view of the world in that it reflects the human beings who prioritize self-interest above everything else. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Norton, 2001), John J. Mearsheimer argues that perpetual peace is a myth and conditions of anarchy will lead to insecurity and thus to cycles of great power competition.

If ritualistic behavior was routine, as the author argues, was this recognition of the need to do so by smaller, less powerful neighbors based on realist considerations, i.e., the realization that it was better to perform rituals in order to avoid aggression from a disproportionately mighty power? Or was the idea of universalism necessary for these regimes themselves in order to strengthen their own legitimacy at home by telling their own people about the universal appeal of the leader and the regime. Propaganda, after all, is as old as politics.

As the author argues, the notion of *yi* (or barbarians) gave China and its tributary system a kind of superiority complex with the result that China portrays itself as being on a civilizing mission.³ Even today, most of the discourse that China propagates through its several white papers on its minority provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet, has China's role in development, stability, growth, and prosperity as the central focus. In a way, it attempts to show how the Han Chinese nation is bringing prosperity to the previously nomadic parts of China. So the sense of superiority continues. Even for outsiders, since the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the official narrative focuses on "telling the China story well"⁴ and so on. The external propaganda is about projecting how benign as well as beneficial the Chinese development strategy is for the world. Thus, the idea is to present that China as the country that offers the civilizing and developmental benefits to the world through projects like the BRI.

The proponents of the tributary system argue that it "contributed to three and a half centuries of peace between China and Vietnam," and the author uses this argument to debunk realism as well as liberalism by noting that if this is correct, then "the sole emphasis on the distribution of military power and economic interdependence in contemporary debates is misguided" (91). However, historically China was vastly different from what it is today and the nature of war, weapons, and the speed of deployment has changed.⁵ China's own behaviour is realist in its construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, and its language through initiatives like the BRI is of liberalism and pro-globalization from its own perspective or neo-colonialist debt-trap diplomacy from the perspective of its critiques. China treats Asia in a hierarchical sense, more frequently so in the last decade or so, and it has also caused a bloody conflict and an ongoing tension with India, thus breaking down the norms of peaceful conduct in Asia as such.⁶ China's behaviour

³ For detailed discussion on the tributary system and the Chinese perceptions of order see Mingming Wang, *Empires and Local Worlds, A Chinese Model for Long-term Historical Anthropology* (Routledge, 2009). For a recent Chinese interpretation along these lines see, Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton University Press, 2013). Asim Dogan's 2021 book, *Hegemony with Chinese Characteristics: from Tributary System to Belt and Road Initiative* (Routledge, 2021), highlights the hegemonic aspects of the tributary system.

⁴ For more, see: https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/telling-chinas-story-well/.

⁵ On this debate, see, for example, David C. Kang, "Hierarchy, Balancing, and Empirical Puzzles in Asian International Relations," *International Security* 28:3 (2003/2004): 165-180; Jeffrey W. Legro, "What China Will Want: The Future Intentions of a Rising Power," *Perspectives on Politics* 5:3 (2007): 515-534.

⁶ For more see, Vijay Gokhale, "The Road from Galwan: The Future of India-China Relations", Carnegie India Working Paper, 10 March 2021, at: <https://carnegieindia.org/2021/03/10/road-from-galwan-future-of-india-china->

is at odds with the reality of the modern world order which is grounded in the construct of sovereign equality. Similarly, China's demand that it be treated as an exception is also at odds with the modern history of rise of major powers.

How can we achieve peace if China, the US, the UK, Japan, France, and maybe India start taking universalist positions in the modern world? Would that not also amount to anarchy? In that sense, it is easier to debunk realism, as the author does at the beginning of the book. Chinese officials and scholars from China like Tingyang Zhao have argued that “the inclusiveness and accommodation of a Sino-centric system that combined order with difference would be less conflictual than the Western understanding of international relations as state anarchy” (161).⁷ However, in the modern world, with modern armies with their capabilities to deploy rapidly and to destruct and kill on a mass scale, it is hard to imagine a hierarchical order having either better explanatory power or better acceptability across the vast, connected globalised geographies of today. This is one of the major reasons for the perception gap between China and the United States. China's own understanding of its place in the world today is very much grounded in its understanding of its own history and its historic pre-eminence among its neighbours.⁸ China's interpretation of its history is also linked with its discourse on national rejuvenation and with that of the party's centrality to the whole process.⁹

In places the author seemingly takes contradictory positions. For example, at one we read that, “the tributary system could take on various meanings depending on the context of the relationship,” but then are told that “the system nevertheless provided a coherent framework that guided political actors” (96). It is hard to imagine a system that is both open to interpretations and able to give a coherent framework.

In many places the author includes quotations from previous works which include several major claims without adequate critical evaluation. For example, the author quotes Harvard historian John K. Fairbank's assertion that “first, that Chinese superiority over the barbarians had a cultural rather than a mere political basis; it rested less upon force than upon the Chinese way of life embodied in such things as the Confucian code of conduct and the use of the Chinese written language...” (89). Such forms of cultural superiority

[relations-pub-84019](#). On the nature of India China border dispute and the reasons for the lack of settlement see Manoj Joshi, *Understanding the India–China Border; The Enduring Threat of War in High Himalaya* (Hurst, 2022).

⁷ See, for example, Tingyang Zhao, “Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept ‘All-under-Heaven’ (Tian-xia),” *Social Identities* 12:1 (2006): 29–41.

⁸ Zheng Wang's *Never Forget National Humiliation* (Columbia University Press, 2012) discusses how the historic memory of opium wars shapes the politics and identity question in China. Japanese occupation is at the center of the Chinese political memory and the Nanjing Massacre is seen as its pinnacle. In 2014, Chinese legislature approved marking of 13th December as the National Memorial Day for remembering the victims of the Nanjing Massacre.

⁹ Xi Jinping's *Chinese Dream* and the speech he gave during his visit to the national museum shortly after he took over the party role in Fall 2021 focused on the future targets of the country and how achieving those would prove the superiority of the Chinese governance system. For more see, Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 39.

were neither accepted without contestation nor in their entirety. It is highly possible that the performative aspect of the rituals, of performing the act without really believing in it, represented realist thinking on the part of the tributary states. Thus, cultural superiority may well have been the matter of aggrandized self-perception in China. That is why the empire's collapse after the Opium War was so sudden as well as brutal. While the Western understanding of the tributary system may be inadequate, the sense of superiority that the tributary system accords to China is also wrong.

Across the three geographies discussed in this book, the author argues that rituals have a meaning and utility in developing a collective belief system, or the *mentalités collectives*, in the region. He also mentions, rightly so, that rationalist theorists doubt the explanatory utility of such rituals and performances in general (329). An explanation of how the rituals help in building mutually acceptable norms and rules of peaceful conduct in areas where there is parity between actors would have been useful. All the rituals discussed in this book are based in relations that are inherently unequal and hierarchical, in most cases where suzerain relations were common.¹⁰ These rituals take several forms including annual tributes, architectures that denoted hierarchy and limited access to spaces, and the other performative aspects of the ritual wherein the acts themselves mattered more than the sentiment behind the acts (115). Some of the other rituals also included "...three kneelings and nine knockings of the head on the ground or nine prostrations. Tributary states also committed themselves to not receive envoys from states outside the system" (90).

The book's core argument concerns notions of shared beliefs and collective imaginations in the Chinese and Islamic and the Southeast Asian empires. Whether these beliefs were actually shared among the masses as well or were limited to the perceptions of the ruling elites is not entirely clear. Most were grounded in religious sentiments, and thus belonged to the domain of faith. In that sense they were not based on reason. Second, since the societies in these empires were far from democratic thus it is debatable whether these beliefs were consensus driven, or even whether they were chosen in a democratic manner whatsoever. The regimes that saw themselves as being the center of the universe and at the top of the hierarchy were themselves undemocratic at home. In that sense, the "collective" in the belief system was possibly only limited to a small group of people.¹¹

Thus, instead of being reflections of public opinion, these shared beliefs and collective imaginations were a product of the emperor's consultations with a relatively small group of advisors. In this context, it is an ironic fact that the churches possessed one third of the land in France or that these churches were able to command the construction of majestic cathedrals while the people starved (330). Between the periods discussed in the book and now, the era of enlightenment and the ensuing vigorous and violent transition that was also accompanied by the debates on social contract. Through this debate on the role of religion in governance and the autonomy of state, the state's relationship with the society underwent a significant

¹⁰ Suzerainty is treated as being the basis of China's relations with its tributary regions, and ethnicities. Dawa Norbu discussed this extensively in his book, *China's Tibet Policy* (Routledge, 2001).

¹¹ On Chinese emperors and elites, for example, see Yuhua Wang, *The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of State Development* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

change. It is beyond doubt that the rituals, embedded as they were in the sermons of emancipation and afterlife, were nothing but methods for controlling unsuspecting benign masses. In that sense, the idea of collective belief demands a more stringent critical scrutiny than what is accorded in the book.

Despite the critical comments above, this book is a great read. After all, great works should be able to raise questions even as it answers some of them. In that sense, it is a valuable addition to the debate on transitions from suzerainty to sovereignty across the world. It has not been an easy transition, especially for the former universalist empires and the past certainly casts its shadow on the future of geopolitics in these regions.

In the discipline of International Relations (IR), orthodox narratives identify ‘the Peace of Westphalia’ (1648) as the iconic beginning of the current sovereign territorial states system. Based on an interdisciplinary approach, Hendrik Spruyt in *the World Imagined* offers a fascinating account of the polities in the rest of the Eurasian continent beyond the Westphalian system in the early modern period until the late nineteenth century. Taking a socio-historical and contextual study of international societies, he explains the political development of the three most prominent empires of the Islamic world (Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal), the Chinese Empire, and dynasties in East and Southeast Asia. The book consists of four main parts in ten chapters. This review focuses on Part I, ‘Beyond the Westphalian Gaze’ and Part III on ‘The Islamic Cultural-Historical Community.’ The territoriality of the emerging ‘European system of sovereign states’ had tension with the universal logic and claims of the Eurasian empires in Asia and the Middle East, which in principle set no territorial limits to their authority. Spruyt suggests that his study “presents us with the means to better understand not only the historical non-Westphalian world but our own modern world as well” (33). In contrast to his Western background, I as a non-Western woman, read his identification with “us” as the Western scholarship and mind-set, and “our” as the modern Western world. Nevertheless, I particularly agree with his critique that the establishment of IR as a discipline encompassed ethnocentric biases that depicted non-European polities as ‘uncivilized’ and ‘irrational’ in the nineteenth century and fostered a particular European superiority that justified colonial expansion.¹

The World Imagined demonstrates how collective beliefs (religion, culture, and cosmology) influenced the political organization of several early modern, non-Western, international societies in Eurasia. It tactfully explores the dual function of collective belief systems. Spruyt notes on the one hand how they manifested “in rituals, dominant narratives, architecture, and institutions” that inform their “inter-polity relations”; and, on the other hand, he argues that these universalist polities “confronted the European powers and the Westphalian state system” (xii). By doing so, Spruyt deconstructs three fundamental positivist misconceptions. The first is that all systems are inevitably also social systems; the second is that the polities in Eurasia that “made universalist claims to rule were incompatible with the Westphalian system”; and the third, is that “the Western polities (the Euro-American states) came to define themselves, their identities as nation-states, and the Westphalian system because of, and through, the encounter” (9). Consequently, orthodox narratives claim that the expansion of the Westphalian system was unilateral and that it enforced the colonization of the ‘Others,’ which were unwilling to adjust. Thus, the book questions whether these different polities were indeed “unwilling and unable to adjust with the European state system” (18).

By reducing the understanding of the state system to a simple dichotomy between ‘inside and outside,’ positivists advocate that ‘nations’ beyond the borders of a state constitute ‘them’ – the others. Thus, inclusion and exclusion are spatially defined in the Westphalian system, while anarchy is the main realm of

¹ Ayla Göl, “Europe, Islam & *Pax Ottomana* (1453–1774)” in Shogo Suzuki, Joel Quirk, and Yongjin Zhang, eds., *International Orders in the Early Modern World: Before the Rise of the West* (London: Routledge, 2014): 34–54.

“interactions between states” (31). Hence, Spruyt’s socio-historical and inter-disciplinary study challenges the dominant positivist narratives that claim all that polities, Western and non-Western alike, including Greek cities, Chinese warring states, and tribal configurations, act “similarly, if placed in a similar structural environment” (25). Moreover, these claims do not recognize the complexity and multiple sources of international order. Positivists fail to explain why the decline of Great Britain and the rise of the United States led to cooperation and alliance in the twentieth century, while the decline of US and the rise of China instead have created concerns for competition and animosity in the twenty-first century (23).

As Spruyt highlights, the persistence of collective beliefs and alternative visions of order challenge positivist views in IR. He writes, “Constructivist theory has convincingly demonstrated how international systems are also social systems. It has demonstrated as well that ideas and interests are inextricably linked. Similarly, the English School has championed the need for historical analyses and contextual nuance” (35). Through a Geertzian “thick description” of culture and collective beliefs that underlie political orders, the book provides alternative insights into the interactions of Eurasian empires (44). This account is also based on the early English School scholars’ exposition of the expansion of European international society from a socio-historical comparative perspective.²

After defining “international societies as a set of polities that share foundational collective beliefs – a collective imagination regarding the nature and purposes of political and social organization,” Spruyt states that the understanding of international societies is thus explicitly not restricted to systems that consist of “sovereign, territorially demarcated states” (52). His methodology is grounded in the insights of the Annales School and Émile Durkheim, who pioneered the study of collective beliefs, *mentalités collectives*, to explain social and political order (36).³ Such methodology equips Spruyt’s study to offer a timely challenge to ethnocentric readings of history based on bifurcation and dichotomies. He argues that the territorial demarcation of internal and external politics that characterizes “the nation of citizens versus the alien ‘Other’ was less rigid and clear-cut in non-European international systems” (40).

Furthermore, Spruyt highlights the contradictions between Hedley Bull and Martin Wight as the early scholars of English School whether the universal claims of non-European polities to rule could be reconciled with “the de facto recognition of [other] autonomous polities” (47). Spruyt states that “[w]hat appeared as a paradox was only so in the minds of those accustomed to the European view of order” (48). His suggestion highlights the ethnocentric biases of the European mind-set that positivist IR scholarship has reproduced until recently. Spruyt has an overall optimistic view that the trend toward global history has aided in making the study of international relations ‘less Eurocentric’ (51). However, it is too late in the twenty-first century, and too little given the persistence of the Islamic-Western dichotomy in general and

² Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (Columbia University Press, 1977); Martin Wight, *Systems of States*, ed., Hedley Bull (Leicester University Press, 1977).

³ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by Josephy Ward Swain (George Allen and Unwin. Project Gutenberg e-book 41360); George Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* (University of Chicago Press, 1980).

problematizing the Middle East in particular.⁴ I offer two critical reflections via Spruyt's study of the Islamic international society and the Ottoman Empire.

The Existence of the Islamic International Society?

The World Imagined outlines the interactions between polities and societies that were influenced by Islam within a shared ideological and political space. By acknowledging the existence of “the wide diversity in practices” in Islam, an “Islamic world,” indicates “the heterogeneity of ethnic groups, and the plurality of religious beliefs that populated the region” (168). The study focuses on the Ottoman Empire (c. 1300–1922), the Safavid (Persian) Empire (1502–1736), and the Mughal Empire (1526–1857) in the Muslim world before the rise of European powers. To analyze how these three non-Westphalian empires interacted with each other as well as with the non-Muslim European states, Spruyt identifies ‘the Islamic world’ as a unit of analysis within which “Islamic society shared a common set of beliefs, a common discourse through which they understood the world.” As part of an Islamic international society, “the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires” were equal powers in which “no single hegemonic actor created the rules and norms that informed this international society” (169).

I depart from Spruyt's account here in order to address a critical confusion stemming from the interpretation of polity and community. In terms of a unified Muslim community, all three empires were part of the religious community (*umma* in Arabic and *ümmet* in Turkish) and, hence, were all equal socially and spiritually, but not politically in terms of the caliphate. As Spruyt also acknowledges, the plurality of Islamic empires by definition proves the existence of a political hierarchy within a non-European context. I argue that the political power of the caliphate reflected the authority of a single hegemonic actor. Furthermore, if authority and “Islamic rule pertained to the community of faithful wherever they might reside” and not necessarily in a territorially demarcated region, the caliphate's symbolic power becomes even more crucial (219). Thus, I disagree with the claim that it is just “a matter of debate whether the caliphate (*khalifa*) refers to the office of the caliph concerning the religious community, the *umma*, or whether it has territorial connotations” (210, 172). On the contrary, the caliph's authority was one of the critical aspects of a hegemonic power in the Islamic world that was more than a debate.⁵ Accordingly, any claim about ‘an ideally unified Islamic community’ without a single hegemonic actor and power struggles within this international society is incorrect. Indeed, “Ottomans and Mughal rulers claimed to represent the Sunni community in its entirety,” while the Safavid dynasty was a challenger to promote Shia Islam that indicated a power struggle for hegemony (172).

Spruyt's narrative nevertheless exposes the fluidity and complexity of interactions within the Muslim world and between the Islamic and Christian international societies by challenging a simplified dichotomy

⁴ Ayla Göl, “Imagining the Middle East: The State, Nationalism and Regional International Society,” *Global Discourse* 5:3 (2015): 379–394. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2015.1053191>.

⁵ Huseyin Yilmaz, *Caliphate Redefined: The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

between *Dar al-Islam* (the House of Islam) and *Dar al-Harb* (the House of war) (190, 218). Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals all created military patronage states and used the symbols of power in the forms of architectural designs, coins, and spiritual realms. As acknowledged in the book, they created not only a shared cultural space that linked the temporal authority to the sacred but also the patriarchal structure in which “no women occupied the highest offices in the Ottoman, Safavid, or Mughal empires” (206). Given this hierarchical and patriarchal nature of non-Westphalian polities, I further question the level of tolerance and civility, contrary to Spruyt’s overstatement that they “had been well established in the Eurasian and Islamic ecumene before the European enlightenment” (209). In short, I turn Spruyt’s argument that the plurality of Muslim polities did not mean the absence of ‘Islamic international society,’ but that it might have meant the existence of hierarchy and hegemonic power within Islam, especially the rule of the Ottoman Empire over six centuries stretching to three continents, on its head.

The Ottoman Turks’ Encounter with European International Society

The World Imagined shows that the galactic empires of Southeast Asia and the Chinese Empire did not constitute ‘states’ in either the form of the Westphalian sovereign, territorial polities or “in the Weberian sense of bureaucratic, rational administration with a monopoly of force” (59). The case of the Ottoman Empire differed from other Eurasian polities.⁶ As the ‘Sick man of Europe,’ the Ottoman Empire was historically integrated into the European system of states and stood at the geographical margins between Europe and Asia. The Sublime Porte shared a common characteristic with other non-Western polities in that it was a multi-ethnic empire, not a ‘homogeneous’ society like the other early modern polities. But, it was the only Islamic Empire that survived the twentieth century. Its proximity to the European society of states introduced the patterns of diplomatic, trade and military interactions. The Ottoman Turks later imitated the Western form of state and modernized the *millet* (nation) system at the beginning of the twentieth. Spruyt rightly concludes that increasing pressures from the European colonizing powers led to major transformations in the Ottoman political and cultural order during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, as I explain below, while Spruyt focuses on the spatiality of international societies, the temporality dimension is also relevant to the question of whether these pressures brought changes in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (174-175).

Spruyt again challenges positivist views when understanding Islamic Shari’a and the Ottoman legal code. He warns others to be cautious “when comparing Western legal systems with Shari’a, and deriving implications from the latter for the conduct of international relations” (236). Within the Islamic international society, the rulers learned how to delimit authority by *de facto* recognizing the principle of territorially. As in the case of the Ottoman *Kanun* (law) and the Sultans’ legal codes, these were codified in parallel with Shari’a and exercised equally. Therefore, even if the Islamic empires did not follow the straight European path, they gradually learned to act according to the Western principles of sovereign equality, territorial limitations of authority, as well as the legitimacy of treaties with non-Muslim states. However,

⁶ Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (University of California Press, 1996).

while the nineteenth-century Ottoman Turks had started to imitate the Westphalian state system, the community's religious character – *umma* – as a transterritorial entity proved more challenging. Although the homogenization of Muslim Turks within the territorial borders of the modern state as required by the nation-state was achieved at the beginning of the twentieth century, the ambiguous place of Turkey within the European system of states remains unresolved in the twenty-first centuries. As Spruyt argues, if “the mode of differentiation depends significantly on a priori self-identification” (54), Turkey's European Union (EU) candidacy not only indicates the self-identification of the Turks with Europe but also highlights the legacy of exclusion by Europeans.

One of the most important findings of this book is that the exclusion of the Ottomans from the Law of Nations – i.e. European society of states or international society – was caused by Western powers' perception of the Ottoman rulers' 'Eastern' ignorance and inability to adjust to the Westphalian system. Throughout the nineteenth century, the politics of exclusion resulted from the arbitrary nature of the European criteria for being regarded as 'civilized' (244). This is a critical argument that contextualizes the debates on Turkey's EU candidacy in contemporary politics. Given that the book's primary focus is on spatial, territorial dimensions of the Westphalian system, the continuity of inclusion and exclusion in European international society reminds me of its temporality. Under the legacy of the Ottomans' encounter with Europeans, modern Turks continue to be subject to asymmetric power relations because Turkey is 'not a Christian nation' and still does not meet the European “standard of civilization” (246). Similar to relations between colonial power politics and positivist views that Islamic polities are 'uncivilized,' doubts about Turkey's membership prove the perception of the European powers that Turkey is unable to adjust to the rules and norms of the EU.

In conclusion, I highly recommend this book to critical readers who want to understand the complex cultural bases of international societies beyond the West. While advancing an alternative understanding of international societies based on the significance of cultural values, shared belief systems, and collective imaginations Spruyt masterfully demonstrates that studying non-Western regional orders allows us to question Western-centric biases “and demystify the collective imagination through which Western views order the world” (332). The book achieves its mission by leaving the reader with an important question: “What is it about the present typically Western understanding of how the social and political world hinges together that appear to be ‘more real’ or ‘more accurate than other views?’” (352). This book recognizes that the non-Western empires and their succeeding states not only had the agency to transform their polities and societies in line with the Westphalian system but that they also continue to influence the evolution of contemporary international society. In this context, the challenges of Turkey's EU candidacy will continue influencing the evolution of global society and the nature of the European project in the twenty-first century.

Hendrik Spruyt's new book explores the role of collective beliefs in shaping the conduct of world politics, in three premodern Eurasian regional world orders. The book is capacious in its intent, aiming to explain international political life anew across centuries of human history, outside the usual Eurocentric disciplinary ambit of International Relations (IR). In so doing, it also aims to explain how these regions went on to encounter the European system of sovereign states and empires, and thus the wracking processes of conquest, extraction, institutional imposition, and political-cultural change by which the resulting transformations occurred. The book also signals a remarkable sea change in Spruyt's own work, previously typified by elaborate and often rigorously formalized rationalist explanations. It is difficult to recall another senior IR scholar who has reoriented this extensively to produce a study of this scale.

In short, Spruyt has written a remarkable and expansive book. But what kind of book is it? To answer, I want to focus on three ambiguities of the text. The first is a social-theoretic matter. The kinds of explanatory work done by beliefs—in effect, the particular meaning of meaning, in this context—appears to vary over the course of the book. Broadly, meanings appear variously as cognitive scripts and as tools or instruments. These senses appear to vary across levels of analysis. The second is empirical or historiographical. The book draws at length on large pools of historical research. Those written histories are often embedded in debates of their own. The book's relationship with these debates is ambiguous. The third concerns the role of the west. The book focuses on Eurasian international systems or orders outside the ambit of European Christendom and (later) the modern west. The status of the west and western modernity, on the book's theoretical terms, seems ambivalent. Below, I address these three in turn, with a focus on Spruyt's account of the East Asian or Sinocentric international order.

First, Spruyt details a theoretical account of “collective beliefs” (36): core orientational frameworks for the political lives of premodern international orders. Drawing the term (*mentalités collectifs*) from the Annales School (59), he focuses on shared political meanings, in the institutionalized life of premodern regional world orders. This account is situated by a careful critique of adjacent accounts from, among others, the English School (for its Eurocentrism) and world systems theory (for its strict materialism) (52). Spruyt is clear that collective beliefs are not monotonic instruction sets for the conduct of political life. Instead, such belief systems are polyvalent and flexible, prone to internal negotiation, contestation, and revision. They do not reduce to fixed, essentialist blinders (71 *passim*). To build out a philosophical orientation for this view, Spruyt draws on a battery of twentieth century philosophers and interpretive social scientists, including Ludwig Wittgenstein (55-56), Hans-Georg Gadamer (65-68), Paul Ricoeur (67), Quentin Skinner (56-57), Clifford Geertz (57-58), and Marshall Sahlins (58, 63, 68).

These sources sometimes vary in their commitments, and Spruyt ranges nimbly across them. Perhaps the key axis of variation is tied to the scale of social activity. At the macro or systemic level, he foregrounds the ability of collective beliefs to hold the social order together. Here, ideas provide shared meanings and expectations. However, at the micro and meso levels, Spruyt sometimes seems to imply a kind of rationalism about ideas. Meanings become tools: not just lenses or senses by which actors interpret the

world, but also implements to manipulate it. These inclinations, which are most visible in the empirical analysis, resemble the culture-as-toolkit formulations found in the work of Ann Swidler, as well as perhaps in more contention-focused formulations of practice theory.¹ Here, culture serves not just to orient actors, but also to adjust, confront, mollify, re-arrange, and otherwise grapple with their environs. The *collective* or unifying qualities of beliefs assert themselves chiefly at the macro level. This variance between scales allows Spruyt to find both deep, integrated belief systems and considerable, even rancorous variation within them, as actors join or exit systems, vie for influence, and make claims against one another. The result is a great deal of explanatory power. He appears quite right, historically speaking. But this leaves a theoretical question about interfaces across scales. How does this unity in diversity itself hang together?

Spruyt's case of China in East Asia is exemplary. His core formulation draws on John K. Fairbank's classic account of a "tributary system" that structured premodern and early modern East Asian diplomacy.² Fairbank's image of the system comprised tribute-paying states that orbited successive Chinese dynasties. It was framed on values termed Confucian, and was enacted through a meaning-generating and trade-enabling system of diplomatic rituals. The discussion also broadly reflects the account more recently updated by David C. Kang.³ In the details of the case, however, we find a more complex range of activity, much of it instrumental. At the micro level, actors adopted or articulated beliefs because they stood to gain from doing so. Elite Chinese families adopted Confucian political values for apparently rational reasons: the celebrated civil service exam system required familiarity with Confucian ideas, providing an incentive for families to adopt and internalize them (98-99). Conquest dynasty elites (Yuan, Qing, and otherwise) actively worked to formalize the Confucian ideological project even though it was initially foreign to them. They did so in order to have formal institutions of rule atop which to place themselves. Indeed, Spruyt is at his best exploring the elaborate political authority structures of the Inner Asian societies that periodically conquered China, which constructed varied and flexible systems of parvenu political authority wherever they went, which was often underwritten by, but not reducible to, large-scale violence (103-108). Ideas here were tools, not simply cognitive scripts. These societies took up the ideas of others and repurposed them to their own ends.

None of this is to fault the book, which handles these welters of historical detail elegantly and accurately. In theoretically terms, Spruyt's account clearly states that we should expect such within-system variation. Collective beliefs are, in a word, flexible—permitting and constraining, rather than caging. The theoretical

¹ Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51:2 (1986): 273-286; Médéric Martin-Mazé, "Returning Struggles to the Practice Turn: How Were Bourdieu and Boltanski Lost in (Some) Translations and What to Do about It?," *International Political Sociology* 11:2 (2017): 203-220. A middle way of sorts might be supplied by broadly pragmatist accounts, for example, Emanuel Adler's *World Ordering: A Social Theory of Cognitive Evolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

² John K. Fairbank and S. Y. Têng, "On The Ch'ing Tributary System," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6:2 (1941): 135-246; John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Harvard University Press, 1968).

³ David C. Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

relationship between the more cacophonous micro and meso levels and the relatively pristine collectivity above them is, however, ambiguous. How do the two shape one another? The question is more specific than that of how agents and structures interoperate, in two ways. First, the metatheoretical assumptions at each level appear different: at the top-level, ideas seem to be things piously followed; below, their role is more polyvalent. Second, the study shows that multiple macro-level systems and their collective beliefs interact with one another, overlapping, colliding, and occupying one another's sites of authority, over centuries. The Sinocentric system was hierarchical but not neatly hegemonic. Hierarchy could be adjusted, inverted, and reinterpreted. Change and contestation were everywhere. We would be mistaken, Spruyt implies, to assume simple continuity from the long persistence of collective beliefs. Instead, adaptive flexibility enabled loose stability. (All this appears to go double in the other cases, where no one hegemon predominated.)

These tensions surfaced in the region's encounter with the west. Western voices explained Chinese decline in orientalist terms: hidebound and rigid, the later Qing dynasty was unable to adapt to western pressures. As Spruyt shows, this is simply not true. Late Qing elites engaged in extensive diplomatic innovation (141-142). Qing intellectuals compared the European international system to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods in ancient Chinese history. This is broadly an analogy that later western scholars drew, the other way (142-143). In short, Qing elites knew exactly what was going on. Instead, what befell them was western intransigence. Europeans had incentives to marginalize the Qing Empire as the incumbent regional hegemon. In contrast, Japan presented no comparable threat and could be safely (if incompletely) socialized into the Eurocentric system of empire building (154-155). It joined the Europeans in dismembering China and also annexed Korea, a former Chinese tributary state. Spruyt's explanation here broadly convinces. But it is also a story in which ideas are instruments, often innovative ones, for manipulating circumstances and dealing with interlocutors. Once collective beliefs are overtly contested, they become harder to discern as shapers of social life.

How then should we understand the gathering or unifying effects of collective beliefs? In the regional case itself, Spruyt argues that in-system variation does not undermine collective belief, because consensus on action is what matters (116). In interregional interactions, collective beliefs served not to unify but to loosely and permeably demarcate regions of the world from one another. In sum, Spruyt does commendable work showing the explanatory power of collective beliefs but leaves us with the question of how they themselves might be mapped out and explained. This need not stop us from taking collective beliefs seriously. Indeed, I will argue below for their wider application. And it is perhaps too much to ask one book to both account for much of human history and build new social-theoretic tools with which to do so. Still, there seems significant scope for further theory-building here.

A second ambiguity of the book is its ambivalent relationship with secondary historical sources. Any study on this scale relies on large quantities of written history. Spruyt's source pool is extraordinary in both scale and specificity. (I learned a good deal about areas of East Asian regional history that I had thought I knew relatively well.) However, it is less clear how we should handle the theoretical load already carried by these

literatures. The so-called “new Qing history” is a useful example.⁴ The new Qing historians draw on previously marginal Manchu language and other regional language records to revise received accounts of the Qing period. They emphasize how much or little the dynasty’s Manchu founders, upon conquering China, adopted Chinese cultural identities and practices. Where prior accounts assumed that the Manchus rapidly became Chinese, shedding their status as conquering outsiders, the new accounts argue they retained a distinct culture and institutional style.⁵ They thus performed Chinese rites mainly at court in Beijing, adopting other languages and practices in their non-Chinese territories and legitimating their rule differently (and opportunistically) before different audiences. While the new Qing history is controversial in China, where it is seen as undermining officially endorsed Chinese cultural continuity,⁶ it represents the state of the art in western academic history of the period.

Spruyt draws on several of these historians at some length, putting them to careful and impressive analytical use.⁷ However, in so doing he elides debates about the literature’s theoretical architecture. For example, these authors generally reject strong claims about a tributary system and position their work on Qing diplomatic practice in opposition to canonical works by Fairbank and others. Spruyt acknowledges Fairbank’s recent critics. However, he does not situate them in these historiographical debates and adopts Fairbank’s terminology for the top-level political culture and structure of the system.⁸ Spruyt’s argument itself remains strong here, but it leaves us with a theoretical ambiguity about his empirical sources. If the Qing were ambivalent or opportunistic about East Asian collective beliefs, what does this tell us about how collective beliefs shaped the late centuries of the regional order?

A third issue is the theoretical or analytical status of the western, Eurocentric international system itself. Each of the systems in this study collided and merged with it—in varying, but consistently destructive ways. That system is also central to Spruyt’s previous work.⁹ Yet here we get only the outlines of a synoptic account of the west itself, as the others encountered it. Generally, its relationship with others was colonial and racist. For the Sinocentric order, the western system loomed into view as a community of militarized

⁴ James Millward et al., *New Qing Imperial History: The Making of Inner Asian Empire at Qing Chengde* (Routledge, 2004); Joanna Waley-Cohen, “The New Qing History,” *Radical History Review* 88:1 (2004): 193–206. See IR-facing reviews in Andrew Phillips, “Contesting the Confucian Peace: Civilization, Barbarism and International Hierarchy in East Asia,” *European Journal of International Relations* 24:4 (2018): 740–764.

⁵ See discussion in Evelyn S. Rawski, “Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55:04 (1996): 829–850.

⁶ Zhiting Li, “‘New Qing History’: An Example of ‘New Imperialist’ History,” *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 47:1 (2016): 5–12; Mario Cams, “Recent Additions to the New Qing History Debate,” *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 47:1 (2016): 1–4.

⁷ See, for example, Peter C. Perdue, “China and Other Colonial Empires,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 16:1–2 (2009): 85–103; Evelyn S. Rawski, *Early Modern China and Northeast Asia: Cross-Border Perspectives* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁸ For a standard critique, which Spruyt cites and discusses, see Peter C. Perdue, “The Tenacious Tributary System,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24:96 (2015): 1,002–1,014.

⁹ Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

trading empires, first as interlocutors and then as imperial dominators. They brought with them new political and economic technologies, namely codified international laws, principles of sovereign exclusivity, and institutions of long-distance trade, that transformed the region in cataclysmic and generative ways (143-152).

The question is whether Spruyt's new analytical framework can be used to understand the modern, western system as well. He seems ambivalent here. I suspect it can. A good point of entry is Spruyt's use of the words 'cosmology' or 'cosmological' to describe encompassing beliefs on which a sense of one's place in the universe, physical, moral, or political, can be drawn. A cosmology is a sense of what the universe *is*, laden with meaning for orienting oneself in it. On the one hand, toward the end of the conclusion, he claims that "Cosmological justifications of political order have largely receded" (350). Spruyt's implication here is a Weberian one: that western modernity is marked by "the disenchantment of the world—its loss of magic."¹⁰ Cosmology falls away, in the face of science, mechanistic progress, and bureaucratic rationality. On the other, Spruyt notes the modeling of western social science, including that of statecraft, on early modern natural science, which itself involved a "collective consciousness" of sorts (332-333). To make sense of the present moment, Spruyt concludes by quoting Susanne Rudolph's call for "theoretical frameworks that combine a demystified, rationalist worldview with an understanding of the phenomenology of the symbolic in societies where the gods have not yet died" (352).¹¹

But whose gods have died, and which are still with us? Another broad view instead sees modernity as differently enchanted and differently cosmological. Bentley Allan's account of western modernity finds premodern cosmologies replaced by scientific ones, but not at any loss of cosmology as such. In Allan's historical international relations, drawn on work in science and technology studies, "Scientific ideas allowed individuals and groups to reimagine their relationships to the cosmos. In so doing, they inspired new ways of thinking about what political life could and should be about."¹² Vast new international systemic dynamics followed. Allan's recursive account of cosmological production also suggests a theoretical origin story for collective beliefs. In contrast, Audra Mitchell inverts all this, finding in modern world politics a concatenation of failed attempts to produce a secular cosmology. These failures mobilize her call for a differently enchanted modernity.¹³ Outside IR, Ayesha Ramachandran finds in early modern European intellectual history a proliferation of cosmological worldmaking projects, scientific and otherwise, that likely echo into the present.¹⁴ Perhaps then we remain enchanted today, if somewhat differently, by science, technology, markets, ideologies of progressive or even revolutionary change, and perhaps above all by the symbolic power of the sovereign, refigured on rationalist-bureaucratic terms. These are different

¹⁰ Max Weber, *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures* (New York, NY: New York Review Books, 2020), 40.

¹¹ Susanne Rudolph, "Presidential Address: State Formation in Asia – Prolegomenon to a Comparative Study." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46:4 (1987): 742.

¹² Bentley B. Allan, *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 18.

¹³ Audra Mitchell, *International Intervention in a Secular Age: Re-Enchanting Humanity?* (London: Routledge, 2014).

¹⁴ Ayesha Ramachandran, *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

enchantments requiring different critical engagements. But they are still vast ideas, prone to holding us in their sway.

By showing us the cosmological past, Spruyt's remarkable new book cracks open the door, his ambivalence notwithstanding, to similarly rethinking the present. We should, perhaps, seize the opportunity to do so.

 Response by Hendrik Spruyt, Northwestern University

First, I would like to express my gratitude to my colleagues, Kevin Blachford, Avinash Godbole, Ayla Göl, and Joseph MacKay, for their generous comments, questions, and insightful critiques. Before engaging these comments, let me situate my motivation for writing this work.

Joseph MacKay astutely points out that this work marks a departure from my earlier books that focused on how international and domestic factors interacted.¹ Macrolevel factors, such as changes in the economic environment or the nature of warfare, affected individual calculations regarding their best interest, and the corresponding alterations in domestic political coalitions led to specific political outcomes, such as state formation, territorial partition and so on. My focus was thus admittedly weighted towards strategic calculation at the expense of ideological or cultural variables. *The World Imagined* instead attempts to address the question of why and how individuals perceive their interests in a particular way, and more broadly why they see the nature of the political and the social world in certain terms. It specifically seeks to show how collective belief systems affected three premodern Eurasian regional orders.

My earlier work was also Eurocentric, in the sense of focusing almost exclusively on cases in that region. Our colleagues in historical studies preceded political science in showing how the study of global history exposed the provinciality and errors of such a limited view.² I have thus tried to correct this omission in my work. While I have tried to avoid the “the West versus the rest” comparison that Kevin Blachford sees in my work, I admittedly can do so only imperfectly.

As Hans-Georg Gadamer reminds us, we cannot escape our own horizons, but studying the past and less familiar cases exposes us to new vistas. Hence, he speaks of a “fusion of horizons.”³ As I tend to see the non-European regional orders as distinct from the western Westphalian system, my interlocutors are likewise connected to their intellectual interests. Avinash Godbole reads my work with particular reference to China, Ayla Göl’s gaze turns to the Ottomans and Turkey. Despite the limitations of our own conceptual backgrounds the exercise remains invaluable. The interjection of the unfamiliar poses the question: why do we see it as unfamiliar? What is distinct from that which we take to be the normal state of affairs? What constitutes the “normal” in the first place? And why do we see it so? If I do tend to take “the West” as a basis of contrast, it is to destabilize the western view that has normalized not only a particular form of

¹ Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors* (Princeton University Press, 1994); Hendrik Spruyt, *Ending Empire* (Cornell University Press, 2005).

² Jerry Bentley, “Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History,” *The American Historical Review*, 101: 3 (1996): 749-770.

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (Bloomsbury, 2013), 171.

international relations discourse, but has also instantiated that particular view, the Westphalian system, as the “normal” form of polity.⁴

Inevitably, the act of grouping a complex of individuals or societies under any set of characteristics raises the specter of essentialism. Blachford’s review raises this as a legitimate question but unfortunately reaches some puzzling conclusions, most particularly in drawing an erroneous parallel between *The World Imagined* and Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*.⁵

Those who take up *The World Imagined* in the hopes of finding reaffirmation of “the Huntington thesis” will be disappointed. Indeed, as I discuss in greater detail in the book (170-175), I explicitly set out to dispel monolithic readings of the Islamic Empires. I further (182-190) challenge the notion that religious differences implied inevitable conflict between Muslim and non-Muslim polities. Ironically, while Blachford, suggests that one of my targets, particularly neo-realist IR theory, presents a strawman and is merely of parochial relevance, his invocation of Huntington, a self-proclaimed realist, suggests the continued appeal of realism and thus the need to counter such narratives as I set out to do. *The World Imagined* in fact challenges Huntington’s argument both in substance and tenor.

In his review, MacKay more accurately finds the variation and multi-vocality in these collective belief systems, which Blachford finds to be absent, to be one of the merits of the book. That is, he notes in his reading the polyvalence and flexibility of the various collective belief systems as well as the ability of agents to incorporate elements from other sources. Likewise, he observes the variation of such *mentalités collectives* over time. If anything, he rightly raises the question how such adaptive variability can enable a loose stability. Göz also reaches a different conclusion than Blachford and finds that *The World Imagined* enables the reader to question Eurocentric biases and shows how the non-Western polities reacted dynamically and creatively to Western pressures and challenges, rather than the orientalist canard that they remained static and intransigent. It is difficult to see how one could interpret these readings as comporting with the views of Huntington, who envisioned an almost inevitable clash of civilizations.

How researchers in general might avoid reductionism when studying collective belief systems presents the more interesting question. When does research become reductionist—focusing on a given trait, and disallowing variation over time and space, and thus overemphasizing stability and perpetuity?

As anthropologists readily admit, there is an inevitable tension between the analytic effort of describing or typologizing a given society and the recognition of differences.⁶ Add to that constant fluidity and agency in

⁴ On normalization and normation, see Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–78*, edited by Michel Senellart (Palgrave, 2009).

⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon and Schuster, 1996).

⁶ While anthropologists are mindful of the dangers of essentialism that come with typologies, they also recognize that “categories and classifications, are inescapable.” Stephanie Sadre-Orafai, “Typologies, Typifications, and Types,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 49 (2020): 193-208, 194.

how individuals negotiate relations, rituals, and the exercise become more difficult still. For example, what marks one indigenous tribe off from another? How might we typologically distinguish the Chiricahua Apache from the White Mountain Apache without eliding their commonalities? Or should they both be grouped as “Apache” as distinct from, say, the Comanche? If we do the latter does this essentialize the Apache as a group? Or should we group Navaho, Apache, and many other indigenous tribes as distinct from the tribes that populate Northwestern Coastal America, and so on? Each of these efforts inevitably engages that tension. But what is familiar to the anthropologist creates anxiety for many in the political science discipline who wish for some foundational anchoring point—which does not exist.

Max Weber’s methodology for constructing ideal types is worth reiterating. His approach to understanding Christianity is particularly relevant since it reflects the very issue that we grapple with when trying to capture the notion of an Islamic ecumene, or a Sinocentric Order, or the logic of the Galactic Empire.

Those elements of the spiritual life of the individuals living in a certain epoch of the Middle Ages, for example, which we may designate as the “Christianity” of those individuals, would, if they could be completely portrayed, naturally constitute a chaos of infinitely differentiated and highly contradictory complexes of ideas and feelings...If we raise the question as to what in this chaos was the “Christianity” of the Middle Ages...we see that here too in every individual case, we are applying a purely analytical construct created by ourselves. It is a combination of articles of faith, norms from church law and custom, maxims of conduct, and countless concrete interrelationships which we have fused into an “idea.” It is a synthesis which we could not succeed in attaining with consistency without the application of ideal-type concepts.⁷

In short, ideal typical approaches emphasize key traits while recognizing that those traits, as well as the coherence of those traits that the analytic construct suggests, are constantly being challenged or reaffirmed, re-enacted, or modified.

However, as Mackay perceptively asks, if variation and fluidity are always present, “How then should we understand the gathering or unifying effects of collective beliefs?” Moreover, if ideas can be instrumentally manipulated with “change and contestation” everywhere, then cognitive scripts are less determinative of action than I have argued.

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of a language game provides insight into how I argue that traits of a given society can be seen as primary while recognizing fluidity, manipulation, agency, and diversity of interpretation.⁸ I regard international orders as units of analysis that share common beliefs—a common discourse through which they understand their world, epistemologically and ontologically. In

⁷ Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, transl. and eds. Edward Shils and Henry Finch (The Free Press, 1949), 96.

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. Anscombe (Basil Blackwell, 1958).

Wittgenstein's terms, these belief systems operate as language games, and like all language games individuals can manipulate understandings as well as create new meanings, even when using unfamiliar words. However, the individuals involved in the exchange understand what is meant by the utterances. They are not mired in a Babylonian confusion of tongues. The shared context of the game is critical in providing the contours and rules of the game.

Imagine a situation in which a student approaches a professor before final exams and expresses his great appreciation of the professor and the class. But what does the utterance mean? If it was expressed by a marginal student, the professor might assume the student is hoping for leniency by fawning, and she will see through the ruse without the need for any reaction. The converse would be true if the student were excellent, and the professor might interpret the utterance as genuine approval.

The nature of the audience plays a key role in providing the context of which utterances are permissible and which are not. What if the expression was made in public before the whole class? Was the student who effusively praised the professor actually being sarcastic and ridiculing the professor? If so, this would present an outright challenge to the authority of the professor, and thus necessitate a reaction by her. If the student expressed dissatisfaction in private, the professor would have the latitude to react or shrug it off as yet one more disgruntled student. But throughout such exchanges both professor and student have latitude in their interpretation of the utterance, as well as their chosen reaction. They also recognize the boundaries of what can be said, and understand the likely reaction that an utterance might provoke when such boundaries are crossed. Within boundaries many variations might be permissible.

In this regard Luke Roberts's work is insightful.⁹ In his study of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Roberts argues that there was a space for the public display of subservience (*omote*) and the private space in which informal behavior and discourse could operate (*uchi*). In the latter sphere, informal arrangements were made regarding what would or would not be tolerated. As Amy Stanley notes, "Double meanings and multiple truths emerged because Tokugawa people were highly conscious of whom they were addressing and where they were situated within a political realm."¹⁰ Privately, the Shogun could allow for considerable autonomy by the Daimyo. Publicly, however, the Daimyo would submit to Shogunate authority.¹¹ Those who read public statements of obeisance would conclude that the Tokugawa stood at the apex of a strict hierarchical system. Those who analyzed the private interactions of the Daimyo and Shogun would conclude that the political system was far less centralized or hierarchical.

⁹ Luke S. Roberts, *Performing the Great Peace: Political Space and Open Secrets in Tokugawa Japan* (University of Hawaii Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Amy Stanley, "Performing the Great Peace," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 73:1 (2013): 216-224, 217-218.

¹¹ As the de-facto supreme leader who was nominally appointed by the emperor, the Shogun stood at the apex of the feudal order. However, in reality he had to grant considerable authority to the Daimyo, the roughly 200 powerful lords of the largest domains.

With that in mind, we should not understand the tributary system as simply a reflection of material power, as Godbole's review seems to suggest. Of course, material factors play a role, but they are not the only variable. I submit that the *sole* emphasis on military power is misguided, and that the tributary system with its performative rituals and economic exchanges played a key role as well. David Kang's observation remains pertinent: Over the span of several centuries, few wars occurred between the polities that were heavily influenced by Confucian views.¹² That said, I concur with Godbole that the Sinocentric system presents a methodological challenge as a test case of the causal primacy of material balances of power over cultural variables.¹³ For that reason, my work included international societies that were distinct from the tributary framework.

To be clear, I do not claim that international societies were *per se* peaceful because they shared a *mentalité collective*. One might discern a western mentality, however defined, as a Christian commonwealth (as some English School scholarship did)¹⁴ or as western and modern in the sense of disenchantment with the world as MacKay notes (following Weber). And nevertheless, this international society was racked by almost continuous warfare. My point is rather that the interaction between the respective polities occurred against the background of a shared repertoire.¹⁵ Contestation occurred against the backdrop of a shared understanding of what was at stake in the conflict. As Mark Dressler argues with regards the Safavid and Ottoman conflicts, "the symbolic order and discursive field in which Ottomans and Safavids...acted cannot be distinguished with clarity...their respective worldviews, self-images, and terminologies were almost identical."¹⁶ By contrast, in the East Asian case the shared understanding of place and hierarchy, shared cultural symbolism and rituals, and the shared means of mutual legitimation of authority tampered the level of warfare.¹⁷

¹² David Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (Columbia University Press 2010), 10.

¹³ The methodological challenge arises from the fact that the two key variables of investigation—the material distribution of power and collective beliefs—correlate with each other. The Chinese dynasties were arguably the more powerful polity in the region and were simultaneously considered the cultural center of that order. For a fuller discussion, see Hendrik Spruyt, "Collective Imaginations and International Order: The Contemporary Context of the Chinese Tributary System," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 77:1 (2017): 21-45. Interestingly enough, Godbole, as many, takes realism as the default position for explaining international relations.

¹⁴ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 16.

¹⁵ For a contemporary example see Khoja-Moolji's work. Although the Pakistani state and the Taliban have dramatically different views about their preferred political order both rely on "shared cultural repertoires, affective pedagogies, and collective memory" in their appeals at popular mobilization. Shenila Khoja-Moolji, *Sovereign Attachments: Masculinity, Muslimness and Affective Politics in Pakistan* (University of California Press, 2021), 195.

¹⁶ Mark Dressler, "Inventing Orthodoxy: Competing Claims for Authority and Legitimacy in the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict," in Hakan T. Karateke and Maurus Reinkowski, eds., *Legitimizing the Order: The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power* (Brill, 2005): 151-173, 151.

¹⁷ On mutual legitimation see Ji-young Lee, "Hegemonic Authority and Domestic Legitimation: Japan and Korea under Chinese Hegemonic Order in Early Modern East Asia," *Security Studies* 25:2 (2016): 320-352; Ji-Young Lee, *China's Hegemony* (Columbia University Press, 2017).

However, as MacKay rightly states, the relevance of the Sinocentric tributary system is hotly debated among scholars. Some of the new Qing historians are more skeptical about the salience of the tributary system when compared to scholars as John King Fairbank who pioneered the early research on the topic.¹⁸

Here again the perspective of the language game might be useful. One reason for this diversity of interpretations arises from the fact that the shared understanding of the language game, the cognitive script in which stations of hierarchy and inferiority were formally set, allowed for informal deviation and challenges. Thus, the manipulation and instrumental use of the tributary ritual by northern and western “barbarians” could be folded into the Ming and Qing performative script of superiority. When the Oirat Mongols paid tribute to the Ming court, as a means of veiled extortion (given that the emperor had to respond with generous concessions as signs of his benevolence), the ritual nevertheless allowed the Ming to maintain the façade of supremacy. The private reality of extortion did not infringe on the public display of deference.¹⁹

Viewing the tributary system as a performative script that could be manipulated, and tailored to particular audiences provides a means to reconcile the different conclusions that scholars have drawn. The tributary cognitive script set the terms of contestation; it formed the rules of the language game in which the players acted, but within that script multiple modalities could be invoked.

Turning to the Islamic ecumene, Göl questions whether the Islamic international society lacked a hegemonic actor, as I aver. She notes that “all three empires were part of the religious community (umma...) and, hence, were all equal socially and spiritually, but not politically in terms of the caliphate.” Her main point seems to be that “[T]he political power of the caliphate reflected the authority of a single hegemonic actor.” She also notes, however, that “as Spruyt also acknowledges, the plurality of Islamic empires by definition proves the existence of a political hierarchy within a non-European context.” By contrast, from my perspective, the plurality of empires would suggest the lack of a dominant power, even though all these empires legitimated their authority by universalist narratives. Moreover, in material terms the Mughal Empire could arguably control military and economic resources that matched those of the Ottomans.

I concur that the caliphate conferred the connotation of supremacy. However, which power represented the legitimate caliphate? The Ottomans no doubt claimed to be the rightful caliphs, particularly following their conquest of the Mamluk empire. But Mughal rulers likewise referred to caliphal authority to legitimate their universalist claims to rule. The Mughal emperor Akbar I (1542–1605), even entertained ideas, “how his armies would cut through Central Asia all the way to ‘Rum’ and bring even the Ottomans to

¹⁸ J.K. Fairbank, “Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 1:2 (1942): 129–149. For some of the new Qing historical research, see Pamela K. Crossley, “The Rulerships of China,” *The American Historical Review* 97:5 (1992): 1468–1483; Evelyn Rawski, *Early Modern China and Northeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2015)

¹⁹ For a more extensive exposition of this point, see Spruyt, *World Imagined*, 115–118, 128–130.

heel and accept their throne from the hands of the Indian Timurids.”²⁰ The Safavid practice of ritual cursing of the caliphs suggests likewise that the Ottoman hegemonic claim to represent the caliphate remained aspirational.

To be sure, Göl’s discussion of the caliphate certainly reaffirms the importance of religion as an important element in framing contestation and legitimation. The Safavid and Ottoman contest revolved around who constituted the legitimate heirs to Muhammad’s legacy. Mughal and Ottoman claims were framed in religious terms as well, even if they were infused with Turkic historical narratives, Persian traditions, and more localized nuances.

All the commentators rightly suggest there are various dimensions that warrant further exploration. There are multiple avenues for further research that *The World Imagined* did not enter. The mutual influences between the various international orders presents one such avenue. I only tangentially related to such interactions and focused particularly on how these non-European international orders interacted with the West. Connections between the Islamic cultural historical community, the Sinocentric order and the Galactic Empires of Southeast Asia deserve more attention. As it is, when compared to the body of literature on the Islamic world and East Asia, there is a dearth of scholars who have studied the interconnections between the polities of Southeast Asia.

Moreover, as Göl and Godbole note, the implications of how historical perspectives are deployed in contemporary politics merits continued discussion. For example, the Turkish government saw in the breakup of the USSR an opportunity to invoke the historical legacy of Central Asian and Turkish connections.²¹ Today scholars in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and some political elites refer to ancient concepts as Tianxia (all under heaven) as a counter to the Westphalian system.²² Tingyang Zhao submits that a Chinese regional system existed before the Westphalian and that, contrary to the Westphalian order, Tianxia is inclusive and avoids the binary division of self-other.²³ In the process, the PRC elides its imperial past and at the same adamantly defends its domestic sovereignty. Critics, such as William Callahan thus argue that “Tianxia is not a posthegemonic ideal, so much as a proposal for a new

²⁰ Peter F. Bang, and Darius Kolodziejczyk, “‘Elephant of India’: Universal Empire through Time and Across Cultures,” in Peter F. Bang, and Darius Kolodziejczyk, eds., *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History* (Cambridge University Press, 2012): 1-40, 25.

²¹ Zeeshan Fida, “Central Asia’s Place in Turkey’s Foreign Policy,” *Policy Perspectives*, 15:1 (2018): 113-125.

²² Mingjian Li, “Rising from Within: China’s Search for a Multilateral World and Its Implications for Sino-US Relations,” *Global Governance* 17:3 (2011): 331-351, 345.

²³ Tingyang Zhao, “Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept ‘All-under-Heaven’ (Tian-xia),” *Social Identities* 12:1 (2006): 29-41.

hegemony.”²⁴ Historical narratives have inserted themselves in contemporary politics by creating mental maps that inform policy preferences, and which are deployed in variant ways across audiences.²⁵

Finally, I am in full agreement with MacKay and Blachford that we need to reflect on the underlying conceptions of western modernity and how such views have influenced our understanding of the social and political world and the nature of international relations. Bentley Allan’s work on the influence of scientific ideas is exemplary in this regard.²⁶ (Unfortunately, I only became aware of his work when *The World Imagined* was already in production.) Others have pointed to the influence of conceptions regarding race;²⁷ notions of linear progress and evolution;²⁸ and perspectives on time.²⁹ Hopefully, my book constitutes an invitation to further work in such areas.

²⁴ William Callahan, “Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony?” *International Studies Review* 10:4 (2008): 749-761, 758. See also, William Callahan, “Sino-speak: Chinese Exceptionalism and the Politics of History,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71:1 (2012): 33-55.

²⁵ David Kang notes how various historical interpretations have inserted themselves into contemporary policy circles. David Kang, *East Asia before the West*, chapter 8. See also, Barry Buzan and Evelyn Goh, *Rethinking Sino-Japanese Alienation: History Problems and Historical Opportunities* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

²⁶ Bentley Allan, *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

²⁷ Alexander Barder, *Global Race War: International Politics and Racial Hierarchy* (Oxford University Press, 2021); Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

²⁸ Peter Bowler, *Progress Unchained: Ideas of Evolution, Human History and the Future* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

²⁹ Andrew Hom, *International Relations and the Problem of Time* (Oxford University Press, 2020).