sovereignty and military noninterference as independent realities with causal powers, even if it also is important to study the genesis of these norms in their context of social struggle.

Jones’s book is intelligent and thought-provoking and thus recommended to a wide audience of Southeast Asianists.

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East Asia Before the West is the culmination of nearly a decade of cogent and controversial work by David Kang, which, taken as a whole, aims to make two points unequivocally clear: first, that the balance of power is not an immutable law of international relations, and second, that East Asia is different. His first point puts him in line with an overwhelming number of contemporary international relations scholars. His second point though, is somewhat more novel, and with this book he sets out to define how an understanding of early modern East Asian international relations will make this clear.

In this work Kang seeks to address one central puzzle: that for nearly five centuries (1368–1841) the four major states of East Asia (China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam) engaged in interstate war on just two occasions. In order to make sense of this stability, Kang claims that basic rules and institutions, emerging out of Confucian culture, were embraced by key states in the region. This grouping of “Sinicized states” was bound by China’s tributary system and evolved into what he refers to as a “Confucian society,” among which war became “so unlikely as to be almost unthinkable” (p. 11). Kang’s arguments rest on three broad ideas that permeate the entire work. The first is that an inherently social and stable hierarchy, as opposed to an anarchic balance of power, defined the ordering principle of the region. Second, states in early modern East Asia were motivated by concerns of status, prestige, and legitimacy, often to the detriment of material considerations. And finally, while China was undoubtedly preponderant in this period, it was a “hegemon” rather than a “unipole,” meaning that it created and maintained a highly legitimate social order and made credible commitments not to take advantage of secondary
states. With this argument, Kang takes us through five centuries of East Asian history, examining the states, their tributary relations, conflict and commerce, contact with extrasystemic nonstate actors, and concludes with a discussion of the lessons of this history for today and tomorrow.

There are a number of great strengths to this book, the first being its presentation. Not only is it written in Kang’s characteristically lucid and readable style, but he also manages to successfully strike an intricate balance regarding the amount of historical detail, including enough to satisfy the regional expert but not so much as to overwhelm the more casual observer. Its second merit is its boldness. Kang takes on an imposing question with a profound argument in an unflinching way, connecting a large independent variable (Confucian culture) and a large dependent variable (centuries of regional stability). Its third and final strength is its contributions. With this book, Kang fills important gaps in the literature by examining East Asia as a region, while much of the historiography of this era examines single cases or dyads of states.

However, for all its virtues, it is possible that Kang’s analysis will leave the skeptical reader with more questions than answers. The first issue has to do with the separation of coercion from legitimacy, unipolarity from hegemony, or more broadly, the material from the ideational—something Kang’s argument largely rests upon. While he provides many quotations from mandarins, magistrates, and men of letters espousing the ideational attractiveness of Confucian culture, statistics revealing the distribution of material capabilities are sparse, leaving the reader little opportunity to independently decide where the causal power lies. This leads one to wonder whether the system Kang describes is a legitimated hegemony or a more straightforward order based on unipolarity. For instance, he recognizes that conflict tended to occur “as order within China itself was decaying” (p. 84), but does not consider whether this might be simply due to fluctuations in Chinese material capacity. He also only briefly touches upon the fifteenth-century voyages of Zheng He, referring to them as “non-Chinese” conflicts or “diplomatic initiatives” (pp. 88–89), but downplays the important power-demonstration effects these massive undertakings must have had on regional states.

A second issue is the looming potential for endogeneity. It is certainly possible that Confucian norms and an inherently social hegemony resulted in lasting stability in the region. But with China’s con-
quering vast swaths of territory in its north and west, Vietnam’s engaging in numerous external and internal wars and conflicts, and Japan’s being similarly plagued by civil strife, isn’t it equally plausible that states in the region were generally preoccupied with their own affairs? Kang claims that China’s use of force against marginal, peripheral actors is “immaterial” and “unrelated” (p. 85) to peace between itself and the secondary states, but when we consider that China more than doubled its territory over this period (6.5 million to 14.7 million km$^2$), its relevance seems to come to the fore.

A final potential issue has to do with the nature of the tributary system itself. Kang claims that the system was “far more than a thin veneer of meaningless social lubricants” (p. 9) that simply enabled force- and commerce-based international politics to go on unimpeded. Yet he later notes that the “tribute system was the official veneer behind which much larger volumes of private trade occurred” (p. 110). He similarly points out that Vietnam embraced the tribute system to “preserve its autonomy and independence” (p. 37), notes Japan’s expulsion in 1621, and claims that regional states imported Chinese ideas “to centralize authority and extend control over their territories” (p. 43). With all of these questions, the ideational power of the tributary system begins to look somewhat suspect, and one can’t be blamed for wondering how different East Asia is after all.

Potential issues aside, the central virtue of this work is that it injects a thoughtful and intelligent voice into the most important debates in international relations theory—over the nature of anarchy, the motivations of states, and the causes of conflict and stability. For this reason alone, it should be considered required reading for anyone interested in history, international relations theory, and the past and future of the world’s most consequential region.

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Since the first edition of An Introduction to Japanese Society in 1997, Professor Sugimoto has challenged the paradigms of Japanese homogeneity, stereotyped middle-class society, and economic stabil-