

Smart Talk No. 16

Presenter

David C. Kang

Moderator

Daeyeol Ku

Discussants

Chaesung Chun
Jun-seok Kim
Sungbae Kim
Dong Sun Lee
Sook-Jong Lee
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This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Talk.

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Historical East Asian International Relations

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On July 8, 2011, the East Asia Institute hosted a Smart Talk with Professor David C. Kang (University of Southern California) who presented his research on the international relations of East Asia before the West affected the order of the “Sino-centric world.”

Summary of the Seminar

In outlining his research, Professor Kang found that in international relations, all the models, theories, and history were derived from European experiences and thus he focused on whether there was a separate international system in East Asia. The research centered on the Chinese Ming and Qing-eras and analyzed the wars that took place between East Asian states (China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam) to measure the relationship between each country. The results show that compared to European states, East Asian states had more stable borders and set rules of diplomacy.

This East Asian-style of international relations was a hieratical system that centered on China. As the “Middle Kingdom,” China had legitimacy as the hegemon not only because of its massive economy and population that surpassed any other in the world, but also because of its soft power that was generated by the powerful influence of Chinese civilization.

The fact that these East Asian countries maintained relatively stable relations although they could mobilize large numbers of troops, show that this East Asian order had a powerful effect across the region. These findings widen the discussion about international relations by suggesting that there are more models of dip-

lomacy other than the European-based theories.

Some discussants disagreed with the methods that Professor Kang used to reach his conclusion. The data that he presented does not consider the number of actors involved, particularly as it groups all the different tribal groups on the northern border of China as “nomads.” Also, the intensity of each war was not factored in to provide a more accurate picture of international relations in historical East Asia. The discussants also pointed out that the research did not take into account the fact that countries in East Asia were more focused on defensive capabilities as opposed to offensive ones, highlighting their limited capacity to make war.

Some agreed that war was relatively rare in East Asia but this was because historically, China’s security concerns were focused on its northern borders rather than on Korea, Japan, or Vietnam.

In response, Professor Kang gave his view on how culture and norms affected international relations in East Asia. He first explained that there are two ways to understand the tributary system of historical East Asia: the Instrumentalist view and Substantive view. The Instrumentalist view, advocated by most modern political scientists, maintain that strategic calculation of power and interests are behind all culture and values when applied to international relations. The Substantive view, however, holds that states and people in historical East Asia genuinely thought that there was value to such legitimacy and followed that order. Professor Kang holds to the Substantive

view in assessing historical East Asia and the characteristics of this East Asian order was that there was an assumption of inequality between states. Yet there were also a set of rules and norms to deal with this reality of inequality. Not only was this international order relevant in relationships between China and other Confucian states but also among other states as well.

Some participants though favored a more complex view of historical relations in East Asia. Rather than either a substantive or instrumentalist perspective, relations tended to encompass both cultural links and power. The way in which the Chosun Dynasty King Gwanghaegun in Korea balanced northern tribes against China while also paying tribute to the Ming is an example of the complexity that existed in historical international relations.

One participant believed that Confucianism should not be regarded as the common denominator in East Asia today. It may have been an important part of Chinese doctrine but now, in the modern era, Confucianism has evolved and diversified to signify many different values. Confucianism is too complex and broad for it to serve as the framework for a regional consensus. Today in East Asia, business interests rather than Confucianism have stronger ties to bring countries together.

Another discussant suggested that the significance of China's role in the Sino-centric world was exaggerated by historians who needed an ideological justification for security interests. Others pointed out that modern day China is trying to recreate that legitimacy by crafting an image of a benign hegemon but it would be a daunting trend if China were to be culturally coercive in this process. In today's East Asia, China's relations with North Korea resemble the old Tribute system and if this trend spreads to other countries that could also become a source of conflict.

China's future relations with other countries will therefore depend on how China defines itself. If China defines itself as a nation state, then the current system will continue. However, if it creates a more encompassing concept, then China's future could change. The difference between China of the past and modern day China is that it is no longer a civilization and does not have content that others look to for ideas. The legacy and values of the past were wiped out by the Cultural Revolution and Communist rule. If China wants to create soft power as a rising power, it should seek to possess that content. ■

About the Speaker

David C. Kang

David C. Kang is Professor at the University of Southern California, with appointments in both the School of International Relations and the Marshall School of Business. At USC he is also director of the Korean Studies Institute.

Kang's latest book is *East Asia: Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (Columbia University Press, 2010). He is also author of *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (Columbia University Press, 2007); *Crony Capitalism: Corruption and Development in South Korea and the Philippines* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), and *Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies* (co-authored with Victor Cha) (Columbia University Press, 2003). Kang has published numerous scholarly articles in journals such as *International Organization* and *International Security*, as well as opinion pieces in the *New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and numerous Korean and Chinese newspapers. Kang is also a regular consultant for both multinational corporations and U.S. government agencies.

Professor Kang was previously Professor of Government and Adjunct Professor at the Tuck School of Business, Dartmouth College. He has been a visiting professor at Stanford University, Yale University, Seoul National University, Korea University, and the University of Geneva. He received an A.B. with honors from Stanford University and his Ph.D. from Berkeley

Moderator

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Discussants

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