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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Studying historical international orders through system encounters

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Abstract

How can we explain interactions between historical international orders? Despite growing interest in the role of marginal interactions in the evolution of international orders, scholars struggle to account for their contingency. Enduring commitments to substantialist approaches limit our ability to theorize the link between micro-level interactions in system encounters and macro-level international order, and vice versa. I argue that conflicts in system encounters can be explained as manifestations of a process through which international orders and their differences are constituted and negotiated. International orders and their differences exist in concrete instantiations only in the context of system encounters. Building on a practice-relational approach to international order, I propose that system encounters are characterized by a series of crises that challenge the taken-for-granted nature of established practices, prompting actors to articulate the relevant differences between them. I illustrate this process in the context of the Russian, Dutch, and British embassies to China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and show how the relevant differences between the East Asian and European international orders can be reconstructed from those interactions. This paper advances the study of historical international orders and has important implications for how we think about conflicts in system encounters.

Keywords: diplomacy; East Asia; Europe; historical IR; international order; practice theory; system encounters

Introduction

How can we explain interactions between distinct international orders? Much of the scholarship in historical international relations has revolved around documenting and examining historical international orders, the differences between them, and, to a lesser extent, their interactions. Yet, what I will call system encounters deserve more attention. Prominent accounts of such encounters, most notably that of the British embassy under George Macartney to China in 1793, have shaped a narrative of clashes between pre-formed and fixed entities whose differences are reconcilable only by conflict or convergence. More recently, scholars have begun to revisit the role of encounters in the historical evolution of the international system as a bidirectional process with the potential for mutual transformation.[1] However, how exactly international orders figure in these interactions and how these interactions figure in the (re)constitution of international orders has yet to be fully explained.

Examining the European embassies to China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this paper argues that disputes over diplomatic practices and their meaning, including the handling of official gifts and letters, courtly ritual, and the sending and receiving of embassies, should

[1]Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit, eds., *The Globalization of International Society* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

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be understood as manifestations of a process whereby the differences between distinct international orders in Europe and East Asia were constituted and negotiated. Traditional approaches to international order fail to adequately account for the dynamics of system encounters and their significant contingency because they lack an appropriate theoretical apparatus for analysing system encounters at the micro level.

Disputes over the *koutou*, a ritual consisting of nine prostrations, constitute perhaps the most well-known aspect of the premodern European embassies to China.[2] Citing established diplomatic practices at European courts, Russian and British envoys opposed the ritual, an integral element of practices of tribute diplomacy, which led to disputes and prevented the European embassies from achieving their stated objectives. These conflicts tend to be attributed to the differences between two distinct worldviews, making the outcomes of system encounters appear as inevitable and predetermined. In doing so, scholars not only overestimate the potential of system encounters for serious conflict but also fail to account for variation in outcomes and the processes through which they are produced.

Building on a practice-relational conception of international order as configurations of relations that are simultaneously governed by and constituted through practices, this paper develops a novel explanation of rule-conflicts in system encounters as manifestations of micro-level processes through which international orders and the differences between them are constituted and negotiated in response to the problematization of established diplomatic practices. Interactions prompted actors to clarify their relevant identities as representatives of sovereign rulers engaged in 'an affair of State'.[3] Presented with the opportunity to avoid practices of tributary diplomacy by declaring his embassy a purely commercial enterprise, the Russian envoy in 1656 responded that he was no merchant, but a representative of the tsar.[4] Clarification of actors' relevant identities invoked established diplomatic practices as relevant to their interaction, which is evident in frequent references to practices shared with neighbouring states by both European envoys and Chinese officials. Explaining to the Russian envoy in 1676 why he could not be received by the emperor in audience before handing over the tsar's letter to the Ministry of Rites for inspection, a Chinese official went as far as suggesting that deviation from established practices would threaten the emperor's identity and status among other sovereigns.[5] Invoking established practices brought them into direct contact, challenging and problematizing their taken-for-granted meaning. Nowhere is this evident more clearly than in the negotiations around the *koutou*.

Though the *koutou* differed from courtly ritual at European courts,[6] it was not the ritual itself that was objectionable, but the lack of a reciprocal equivalent and thus its directional character. In 1720, a Russian envoy agreed to perform the *koutou* on the condition that Chinese envoys travelling to Russia would perform the same ritual at the tsar's court[7] and in 1793 Macartney indicated that he would be willing to perform the ritual if a high-ranking official would do the same in front of a portrait of the king.[8] The directionality of diplomatic practices also emerges as a central concern from actors' justifications and explanations of their actions elsewhere, including the insistence of European envoys on and the rejection by Chinese officials of Chinese embassies to European courts. Thus, rather than structural differences, this paper concludes that it was the directionality

[2]I use Pinyin spelling for transliterations of Chinese words and names throughout the paper.

[3]The expression comes from an explanation given by Nikolai Gavrilovich Spafarii, the Russian envoy in 1676, for why he was willing to perform the *koutou* in personal capacity, but not as a representative of the tsar. John F. Baddeley, *Russia, Mongolia, China: Being Some Record of the Relations between Them from the Beginning of the XVIIth Century to the Death of the Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, A.D. 1602–1676* (Burt Franklin, 1919), 2: p. 399.

[4]Baddeley, *Russia, Mongolia, China*, 2: p. 145.

[5]Yuriĭ Vasil'evich Arsen'ev, 'Stateĭniĭ Spisok Posol'stva N. Spafariĭa v Kitaĭ', sec. 2, *Vĭestnik Arkheologīi i Istorii (Izdavaemyĭ Arkheologicheskim Institutom)* 17 (1906), pp. 162–339 (p. 224).

[6]Courtly ritual at European courts was itself far from universal at the time, though disputes over differences reflected 'participation in a shared cultural practice'. Jan Hennings, *Russia and Courtly Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 249.

[7]John Bell, *Travels from St. Petersburg in Russia, to Diverse Parts of Asia* (W. Homer, 1764), 2: pp. 4–5.

[8]Earl H. Pritchard, *The Crucial Years of Early Anglo-Chinese Relations, 1750–1800* (Pullman, 1936), p. 335.

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of the underlying diplomatic practices that constitutes the relevant difference between the historical international orders in East Asia and Europe.

International orders exist in their concrete instantiations only in the context of system encounters. Drawing on published collections of primary sources and historiography detailing the Russian, Dutch, and British embassies to China, this paper makes several contributions to the study of historical international orders. First, this paper offers a framework for analysing the role of encounters in the historical evolution of the international orders by linking micro-level interactions to macro-social configurations. Second, this paper demonstrates the utility of practice-oriented and relational approaches for avoiding the 'essentialism trap', charting a way forward for the historical international relations and Global International Relations research programmes.[9] Third, by reconstructing the relevant differences between the East Asian and European international orders from their interactions, this paper demonstrates that the study of system encounters can be a valuable tool in the comparative study of historical international orders more generally. Empirically, this paper contributes to our understanding of premodern diplomatic relations between China and European polities, specifically that Macartney's embassy in 1793 marked the end of a nearly 200-year period of repeated encounters, rather than the beginning of Sino-European diplomacy.

Following this introduction, I situate my argument in the scholarship on historical international orders. I then outline a practice-relational approach to international order. Building on this approach, the next section outlines an explanation of system encounters as a process whereby repeated moments of crisis problematise established practices and prompt actors to articulate the differences between international orders in response. The empirical part of the paper illustrates this process in the context of the Russian, Dutch, and British embassies to China between 1618 and 1816, followed by a brief discussion of how my findings compare to existing characterisations of international order in Europe and East Asia. The conclusion summarises my argument, discusses the broader implications, and identifies areas for future research.

Encounters between historical international orders

Studies of system encounters remain relatively rare in the scholarship on international order. Mainstream theories of international order are almost exclusively conceived from an implicit assumption of international order as a *singular* thing, rendering questions about encounters moot. Even though the existence of multiple international orders has been the historical norm, universal institutions and norms that have characterized the so-called Liberal International Order since 1945 are, to paraphrase Spruyt, being mistaken for the ontology of international order.[10]

Expansion and convergence

Any discussion of system encounters necessarily begins with the recognition of the existence of multiple historical international orders and a body of works associated with what is now known as the English School. This literature examines encounters between historical international orders in the context of the global expansion of a European society of states.[11] The expansion narrative describes a 'process of rational incorporation', whereby non-European states were admitted to a growing society of European states by accepting its rules.[12] While Bull and Watson caution that the evolution and expansion of European international society were 'simultaneous processes, which

[9]Michael Barnett and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Global international relations and the essentialism trap', *International Theory*, 15:3 (2023), pp. 428–44.

[10]Hendrik Spruyt, 'Historical sociology and systems theory in international relations', *Review of International Political Economy*, 5:2 (1998), pp. 340–53.

[11]Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, *The Expansion of International Society* (Clarendon Press, 1984).

[12]Christian Reus-Smit and Tim Dunne, 'The globalization of international society', in Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit (eds), *The Globalization of International Society* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 25.

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influenced and affected each other',[13] Wæver writes that it is not clear whether Bull and Watson study the expansion of a European core whose code, or rules, remained essentially constant, 'or whether these changes in extension actually entail transformations of the code'.[14] The lack of a more prominent role of non-European international orders in this process can be at least partially explained by the English School's distinction between international system and international society, a group of independent polities 'which not merely form a system … but also have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements'.[15] This distinction effectively denies international orders outside of Europe equal ontological status and any independent effect on the outcomes of encounters, as the editors and contributors refer throughout the book to European international *society* but non-European international *systems*.

Countering the narrative of inevitable European victory, scholars have pointed out that pre-modern encounters were characterised by European inferiority and subsequent adaptation to prevailing local rules and practices.[16] Such accounts simply present a reverse version of a process of rational adaptation, incorporation, and convergence and play down the tensions that are at the centre of this study. Similarly, while some scholars have argued that increasing contact between world regions created, at least temporarily, parallel governing arrangements prescribing divergent forms of interaction within and across international orders, nearly all of these accounts end with the eventual convergence on the Western model of international relations.[17]

Conflict and coexistence

Comparative studies take different historical international orders more seriously in their own right, and, to the extent that they consider encounters between them, tend to pay more attention to questions about how the differences between them shape their interaction. Because international orders are conceived of in essentialist terms as relatively fixed and pre-existing entities, such approaches tend to emphasize conflict as the inevitable result of fundamental differences, an idea most prominently articulated in the clash of civilizations thesis.[18] This issue is particularly pronounced in the case of the European and East Asian international orders, which have been portrayed as opposite types of international order.[19] This view is central to accounts that explain the failure of the Macartney embassy in 1793 and the outbreak of the first Anglo-Chinese war in 1840 as the result of incompatible principles of international politics and cultural differences.[20]

[13]Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, 'Introduction', in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society* (Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 6.

[14]Ole Wæver, 'International society – theoretical promises unfulfilled?', *Cooperation and Conflict,* 27;1 (1992), pp. 97–128 (p. 112).

[15]Bull and Watson, 'Introduction', p. 1. For an explanation of the rationale for this distinction, see Barry Buzan, 'From international system to international society: Structural realism and regime theory meet the English school', *International Organization*, 47:3 (1993), pp. 327–52. For an early critique, see Alan James, 'System or society?', *Review of International Studies*, 19:3 (1993), pp. 269–88.

[16]Shogo Suzuki et al., 'Introduction: The rest and the rise of the West', in Shogo Suzuki et al. (eds), *International Orders in the Early Modern World: Before the Rise of the West* (Routledge, 2013).

[17]Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). For an extension of Keene's argument, see Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society* (Routledge, 2009).

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

[19]Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2000); David C. Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

[20]Pritchard, *The Crucial Years of Early Anglo-Chinese Relations, 1750–1800*; John King Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842–1854* (Harvard University Press, 1953); Alain Peyrefitte, *The Immobile Empire*, trans. Jon Rothschild (Knopf, 1992).

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While the scholarship on diversity regimes challenges the idea that differences are a source of conflict and disorder, most of this scholarship is concerned with the internal stability of international orders rather than encounters between them, and it is not clear if and to what extent regimes developed to manage diversity internally are capable of managing external differences.[21] Though Phillips and Sharman's observations regarding the significant compatibility between international orders is an important contribution to a field of study that has predominantly focused on differences, it is not clear how their argument applies to the more contentious interactions examined here.[22]

Mutual transformation

A third iteration of this literature focuses more explicitly on contacts between international orders. Common to most is an understanding, implicit or explicit, that encounters themselves played a crucial role in the constitution and transformation of international orders. Reus-Smit and Dunne argue that the globalisation of international society was accompanied by qualitative transformations and that the European international society was itself a product of 'diverse civilizational engagements and encounters'.[23] Individual contributions to this edited volume expand on this notion in the context of different issue areas. Welsh, for example, argues that 'the Eurocentric system was neither stable nor mature, but in a constant state of development as a consequence of encounters with the non-European world'.[24] As Zhang puts it very eloquently in the context of Sino-European relations, 'With the growth of European knowledge of the civilizational and imperial Other, China became increasingly an inescapable component in the European understanding of itself.'[25]

Yet, the continued reliance on essentialist and substantialist conceptions of international order has greatly complicated a better understanding of how encounters are governed by distinct international orders and how they shape them in turn. Thus, much of the most recent scholarship on the topic suffers from a disconnect between encounters (micro level) and international order (macro level). As a result, Reus-Smit and Dunne acknowledge that they provide 'no explicit theory of international social change'.[26] Similarly, while Spruyt argues that encounters between the European and non-Western international orders were bidirectional, this process is conceived primarily in terms of non-Western actors' capacity for adaptation.[27]

Scholars of historical international relations, law, and sociology have argued that key institutions of modern international order, such as sovereignty, territoriality, and certain aspects of diplomacy emerged not in Europe but in the context of imperial and colonial encounters.[28] While this scholarship provides important empirical evidence for the generative potential of encounters, it does

[21] Christian Reus-Smit, 'Cultural diversity and international order', *International Organization*, 71:4 (2017), pp. 851–85; Andrew Phillips and Christian Reus-Smit, *Culture and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Andrew Phillips, *How the East Was Won: Barbarian Conquerors, Universal Conquest and the Making of Modern Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[22] Andrew Phillips and JC Sharman, *International Order in Diversity: War, Trade and Rule in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[23] Reus-Smit and Dunne, 'The globalization of international society', p. 30.

[24] Jennifer M. Welsh, 'Empire and fragmentation', in Timothy Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit (eds), *The Globalization of International Society* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 145.

[25] Yongjin Zhang, *Reimagining the International: Chinese World Ordering before the West* (Bristol University Press, 2025), p. 128.

[26] Reus-Smit and Dunne, 'The globalization of international society', p. 28.

[27] Hendrik Spruyt, *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[28] Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jordan Branch, '"Colonial reflection" and territoriality: The peripheral origins of sovereign statehood', *European Journal of International Relations* 18:2 (2012), pp. 277–97; Turan Kayaoglu, *Legal Imperialism: Sovereignty and Extraterritoriality in Japan, the Ottoman Empire, and China* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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so at the expense of an explicit theory of international order. Perhaps the most elaborate articulation of the idea of transformative interactions between international orders is Mulich's work on change in international systems. Reconceptualising international systems as overlapping networks, Mulich argues that imperial expansion resulted in the reconfiguration of those networks by altering repertoires of practice.[29] Nevertheless, his focus remains firmly on marginal interaction, and he says little about the relational configurations themselves.

Thus, while system encounters are being increasingly recognised for their importance, they have yet to be fully unpacked. Existing studies approach system encounters with conceptions of international order that cannot appropriately account for the micro-level dynamics of encounters. Conversely, those studies that have examined the dynamics of encounters in greatest detail frequently work without an explicit theory of international order.

International order as practice

Practices, as analytical categories, have certain characteristics that make them particularly useful for studying system encounters. First, practices always have a double existence as both context-specific *and* general patterns of actions.[30] Applied to international order, a concept frequently criticised for being an analytically vacuous catch-all term, this double existence establishes a conceptual link between international order as an expression of system-level characteristics and the context-specific actions of relevant actors. Second, practices are simultaneously constitutive and regulative.[31] Socially meaningful identities are constituted through the repeated performance of practices. Conversely, practices derive their 'social effectiveness' from the shared meaning they embody, governing interaction by defining the range of socially acceptable actions.[32]

I define international orders as configurations of relations among polities that are simultaneously produced through and governed by international practices (Figure 1). Specifically, I focus on diplomatic practices, the practices constitutive of polities and the relations between them *as such*, anchoring practices that provide the very basis or structure for interaction.[33] I do not distinguish between international system, international order, and international society, following others in their assessment that this distinction is unsustainable.[34] Despite the centrality of the distinction to the English School and its continued use, I have explained above how it denies non-Western international orders equal ontological status. The practice-relational approach presented here further reinforces the idea that all international systems are social systems.

The idea of diplomatic practices as the anchoring practices of relations among polities is reflected in Neumann's observation that 'diplomacy is what states do [and] states are what diplomacy does'.[35] Similarly, Sharp has argued that 'international relations and diplomacy may be spoken of as if they were the same thing'.[36] Though Leira expresses reservations about the transhistorical reference to 'diplomatic practices', Jönsson and Hall identify the constitutive dimensions

[29] Jeppe Mulich, 'Transformation at the margins: Imperial expansion and systemic change in world politics', *Review of International Studies*, 44:4 (2018), pp. 694–716.

[30] Vincent Pouliot, 'Practice tracing', in Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel (eds), *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[31] Nicholas G. Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (University of South Carolina Press, 1989), p. 52.

[32] Pouliot, 'Practice tracing', p. 237.

[33] Ole Jacob Sending and Iver B. Neumann, 'Banking on power: How some practices in an international organization anchor others', in *International Practices*, ed. Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 119 (Cambridge University Press, 2011); Yaqing Qin, 'Diplomacy as relational practice', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 15:1–2 (2020), pp. 165–73.

[34] Iver B. Neumann, 'Entry into international society reconceptualised: The case of Russia', *Review of International Studies*, 37:2 (2011), pp. 463–484 (p. 466); Spruyt, *The World Imagined*, p. 35; see also Reus-Smit and Dunne, 'The globalization of international society'.

[35] Iver B. Neumann, *At Home with the Diplomats: Inside a European Foreign Ministry* (Cornell University Press, 2012), p. 3.

[36] Paul Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 107.

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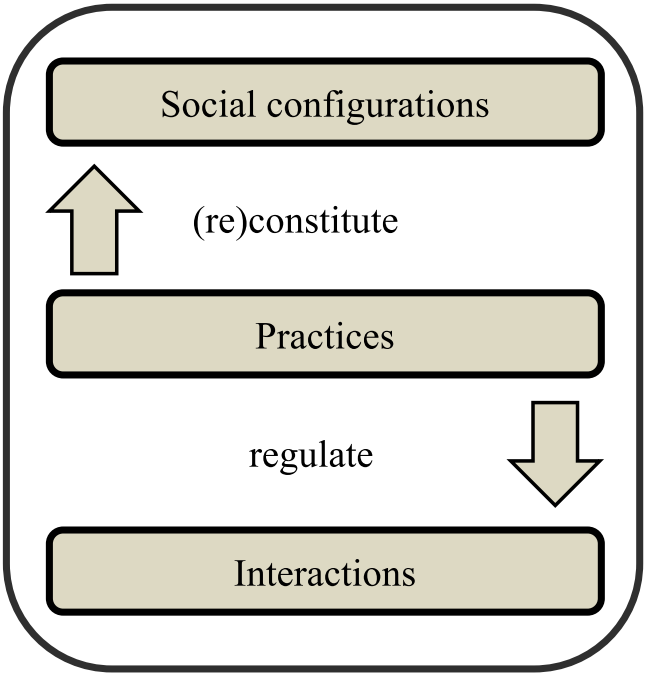


Figure 1. A practice-relational approach to international order.

of diplomacy as transhistorical rather than uniquely modern.[37] To further hedge against an anachronistic reading of premodern practices, I follow Adler and Pouliot's recommendation to let practitioners themselves define 'what counts' as international practice, and justify the distinction between diplomatic practices and other forms of interaction based on how European envoys and Chinese officials conceived of their activities.[38]

Among the essential dimensions of diplomacy identified by Jönsson and Hall, I will focus on diplomatic practices related to recognition and representation. While communication was, without a doubt, an important aspect of diplomacy, it was also an aspect of nearly any other form of interaction. The centrality of recognition and representation to diplomacy, moreover, is widely recognized. Pouliot and Cornut define diplomatic practices as the enactment of claims to 'represent a given polity to the outside world' and recognition and representation are further implied in Sharp's notion of 'relations of separateness'.[39]

The directionality of international practices

Notwithstanding the ubiquity in global history of what we now call diplomacy, the world of orders that existed prior to the global transformations of the nineteenth century was characterized by variations in diplomatic practices. Appropriating the idea of directed and undirected ties in social network analysis,[40] I propose that we may distinguish between directional and non-directional diplomatic practices. Non-directional diplomacy entails the mutual engagement between polities through the same set of diplomatic practices. The enduring existence of status hierarchies, both

[37]Halvard Leira, 'A conceptual history of diplomacy', in Costas M. Constantinou et al. (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy* (Sage, 2016); Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[38]Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, 'International practices', *International Theory,* 3:1 (2011), pp. 1–36 (p. 6).

[39]Vincent Pouliot and Jérémie Cornut, 'Practice theory and the study of diplomacy: A research agenda', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50:3 (2015), pp. 297–315 (p. 299); Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations*, p. 10.

[40]Stephen P. Borgatti et al., *Analyzing Social Networks* (Sage, 2018), pp. 12–13.

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historical and contemporary, can be explained by variation in the *quality* of diplomatic practices (e.g. the specific protocol for court ceremonies), rather than by variation in the *type* of practices.[41] The resulting relations are between mutuals, albeit not necessarily equals. Directional diplomatic practice, by contrast, entails the *mutual* engagement between polities through *different* practices. Directional diplomacy does not imply a one-sided relationship, but that the practices through which A engages B are different from those through which B engages A, in the sense that they embody different meanings.[42] Directional diplomatic practices create relationships that are fundamentally unequal.

Advantages of a practice-relational approach

I am not the first to propose a practice-oriented approach to international order. While most of that scholarship focuses on contemporary or more recent international orders,[43] or is conceptual in nature,[44] the approach presented here builds in important ways on Lee's practice-oriented account of the tribute system.[45] With a few notable exceptions, such as Ringmar's study on international orders as performances and Bank's study of Anglo-Chinese relations from the Macartney embassy to the late nineteenth century, practice-oriented approaches have not widely been used in studying either historical international orders or encounters between them.[46]

Most importantly, a practice-relational approach is capable of overcoming agent-structure and stability-change dichotomies that have traditionally plagued studies of international order.[47] Centring practices leads us away from order and stability as its central quality,[48] and towards 'ordering' as an ongoing process.[49] Instead of stability, we may speak of episodes of temporary stabilization in the sense of an 'ongoing production and reproduction of social arrangements'.[50] International orders are produced and reproduced through the continuous enactment of established practices.[51] In turn, change in and transformation of international orders are the result of sustained contestation and deviation from established practices. By incorporating the mechanisms of both stabilisation *and* change, a practice-relational approach to international order allows for a more dynamic conception of system encounters.

System encounters as moments of crisis

International practices can be understood as manifestations of taken-for-granted views of how relations among polities *are* and *should* be organized.[52] Under normal conditions, their study

[41] Quentin Bruneau, 'Rethinking international order in early modern Europe: Evidence from courtly ceremonial', *International Organization*, 77:4 (2023), pp. 691–720.

[42] Cf. Ji-Young Lee, *China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination* (Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 47.

[43] Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, 'Pragmatic ordering: Informality, experimentation, and the maritime security agenda', *Review of International Studies*, 47:2 (2021), pp. 171–91.

[44] Emanuel Adler, *World Ordering: A Social Theory of Cognitive Evolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[45] Lee, *China's Hegemony*, chap. 1.

[46] Erik Ringmar, 'Performing international systems: Two East-Asian alternatives to the Westphalian order', *International Organization*, 66:1 (2012), pp. 1–25; David E. Banks, 'Fields of practice: Symbolic binding and the Qing defense of Sinocentric diplomacy', *International Studies Quarterly,* 63:3 (2019), pp. 546–57.

[47] Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, *International Practice Theory*, 2nd. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); David M. McCourt, 'Practice theory and relationalism as the new constructivism', *International Studies Quarterly*, 60:3 (2016), pp. 475–85.

[48] Aaron McKeil, 'On the concept of international disorder', *International Relations*, 35:2 (2021), pp. 197–215.

[49] Adler, *World Ordering*; Bueger and Gadinger, *International Practice Theory*.

[50] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West* (University of Michigan Press, 2006), p. 39.

[51] Rey Koslowski and Friedrich V. Kratochwil, 'Understanding change in international politics: The Soviet Empire's demise and the international system', *International Organization*, 48:2 (1994), pp. 215–47 (p. 216).

[52] Spruyt, *The World Imagined*; Hendrik Spruyt, 'Historical international orders', in Stacie E. Goddard et al. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of International Political Sociology* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

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is complicated by the fact that practices are carriers of implicit knowledge 'which is rarely verbalised and is hence not easily readable from signifiers, speech, and discourse'.[53] I argue that system encounters are best understood as moments of 'crisis and controversies',[54] akin to Dewey's idea of the problem-situation, in which the taken-for-granted meaning of practices is challenged.[55] In system encounters, 'structures or routines fail to provide for what is necessary for proceeding by everyday routine',[56] necessitating conscious reflection on the part of the practitioners.[57] System encounters are characterised by repeated mismatches between the expected and experienced social effects of practices.

The first such challenge in system encounters regards the clarification of relevant social identities and practices. Established practices not only define the limits of socially acceptable action but also define the very identity and position of actors in social configurations are dependent on their competent enactment.[58] Differences may result in the mischaracterisation of actors' identities or the nature of their interaction, prompting actors to intervene to correct it by making explicit who they are in relation to one another and what type of interaction they are engaging in. In the case of the European embassies to China, European envoys and Chinese officials clarified their identities as representatives of sovereign rulers (as opposed to merchants) and the relevant practices as the affairs of state (as opposed to commerce).

This initial clarification of relevant identities as sovereign representatives and associated practices was an important first step in system encounters in that it invoked established diplomatic practices as the relevant systems of meaning through which actors made sense of the actions of their counterparts as well as their own. Having clarified their mutual identities as representatives of sovereign rulers engaged in affairs of state, Chinese officials and European envoys drew on diplomatic practices established among East Asian and European polities respectively to engage each other.

By invoking established diplomatic practices, actors in system encounters brought international orders into direct contact. Rather than following a logic of consequence or appropriateness, actions in system encounters follow a logic of practicality wherein knowing and doing are one and the same.[59] Mutual engagement along established diplomatic practices produced moments of crisis, which prompted actors to further justify and explain their actions as well as their pragmatic attempts to respond to such crises, thereby articulating the relevant differences between distinct international orders. Through negotiations of possible compromises specifically, actors indicate not just *what* they are willing to do, but *why* they are willing to do *some* things but not others.

Alternative explanations

Others have explained the dynamic and outcomes of China's encounters with Europeans as a function of either power-political and strategic calculations or domestic politics. Unlike during the nineteenth century, it was China that set the terms of engagement in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[60] Where strategic incentives existed, scholars are quick to point out that the Qing readily

[53] Christian Bueger, 'Pathways to practice: Praxiography and international politics', *European Political Science Review*, 6:3 (2014), pp. 383–406 (p. 386).

[54] Bueger, 'Pathways to practice', p. 395.

[55] Dewey clarifies that a problematic situation is really an 'indeterminate situation' that 'becomes problematic in the very process of being subjected to inquiry'. John Dewey, *Logic, the Theory of Inquiry* (1938; Henry Holt and Company, 1991), p. 107. For a discussion of pragmatism in international relations, see Gunther Hellmann, 'Pragmatism and international relations', *International Studies Review*, 11:3 (2009), pp. 638–62.

[56] Bueger, 'Pathways to practice', p. 396.

[57] Ted Hopf, 'Change in international practices', *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:3 (2018), pp. 687–711.

[58] Adler and Pouliot, 'International practices'.

[59] Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); McCourt, 'Practice theory and relationalism as the new constructivism'.

[60] Yongjin Zhang, 'Curious and exotic encounters: Europeans as supplicants in the Chinese imperium, 1513–1793', in Shogo Suzuki et al. (eds), *International Orders in the Early Modern World: Before the Rise of the West* (Routledge, 2013).

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abandoned rigid practices of tribute diplomacy. For example, Perdue argues that shared strategic interests account for the successful negotiation of the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689.[61] Andrade similarly points out it was the utility of Dutch naval forces to the campaigns against Ming–loyalist resistance that earned the Dutch permission to trade in Fujian every two years, outside of the regularly scheduled tribute embassies.[62]

Focusing instead on domestic politics, Banks argues that foreign relations were subordinate to domestic considerations in explaining the willingness and ability of the Qing to compromise.[63] Wills argues that domestic politics frequently were 'the primary explanation, even the sufficient cause' for decisions on foreign relations.[64] Both the decision to open Chinese ports for maritime trade (1684) and the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) coincided with the consolidation of Qing rule following the defeat of the Revolt of the Three Feudatories and the conquest of Taiwan in 1683.[65]

I do not deny the importance of both strategic considerations and domestic politics. What neither the power-based accounts nor the domestic politics narrative can explain, however, is why diplomatic practices received so much attention from the actors in system encounters, why some compromises became available but not others, and why they took their specific form.

Methodology and sources

I follow an abductive approach that develops the explanation presented above from anomalous empirical observations against the backdrop of prior theoretical knowledge.[66] The choice to examine encounters between international orders in East Asia and Europe was informed by their characterisation as different, if not opposite, forms of international order, constituting a setting in which we should expect those differences to manifest clearly.[67] My choice to focus on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reflects an observation that European encounters with China prior to the nineteenth century are curiously missing from International Relations scholarship.[68] This period also coincides with episodes of significant transformations within the East Asian and European international orders, making questions about the role of system encounters in the constitution and negotiation of their differences all the more interesting.

This paper examines published textual sources detailing interactions between European envoys and Chinese officials.[69] These include journals composed by members of the embassies, published collections of official documents and reports, and reproductions of archival sources in the works of historians.[70] These texts, many of which fall under the category of 'ego-documents', are especially

[61] Peter C. Perdue, 'Boundaries and trade in the Early Modern world: Negotiations at Nerchinsk and Beijing', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 43:3 (2010), pp. 341–56.

[62] Tonio Andrade, 'An accidental embassy: How two minor Dutch administrators inaugurated an alliance with the Qing Dynasty of China, 1661–1662', *Itinerario*, 35:1 (2011), pp. 77–95.

[63] Banks, 'Fields of practice'.

[64] John E. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K'ang-Hsi, 1666–1687* (Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 39.

[65] Pamela Kyle Crossley, 'The Qing unification, 1618–1683', in Stephan Haggard and David C. Kang (eds), *East Asia in the World: Twelve Events That Shaped the Modern International Order* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[66] Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans, *Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research* (The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[67] Kang, *East Asia before the West*; Ringmar, 'Performing international systems'.

[68] Suzuki et al., 'Introduction'; Zhang, *Reimagining the International*.

[69] Similar to Larsen, I use 'Chinese' as a shorthand designation for officials of the Qing Empire, not their ethnicity. Kirk W. Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Chosŏn Korea, 1850–1910* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), p. 18.

[70] Enlisting the work of historians can amplify the problem of selection bias. Jørgen Møller and Svend-Erik Skaaning, 'The Ulysses principle: A criterial framework for reducing bias when enlisting the work of Historians', *Sociological Methods & Research*, 50:1 (2021), pp. 103–34; Ian S. Lustick, 'History, historiography, and political science: Multiple historical records and the problem of selection bias', *The American Political Science Review*, 90:3 (1996), pp. 605–18. I manage this issue by considering historiography based on a variety of primary sources and whose theoretical claims run counter to my own. Indeed, most historians referenced in this paper are very critical to the idea of the tribute system.

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useful for my purposes of reconstructing the meaning of practices in system encounters because they contain the relevant individuals' descriptions of interactions, including explanations of and justifications for their actions.[71]

The analysis of practices is complicated by the fact that embodied knowledge is never directly accessible and needs to be inferred indirectly from observable actions, statements, and descriptions.[72] While scholars note that textual sources are appropriate for the study of practices that cannot be directly observed,[73] it raises questions about whether this constitutes analysis *of* practices or of discourse *about* practices.[74] I justify my use of textual sources because I consider not only their content but specifically their relation to 'the practices necessary to produce them'.[75] This is rather straightforward in the case of documentation of European embassies in Chinese records, because such records were an important element of the administration of tributary relations, or the official depositions made by European envoys upon their return. Even travel journals require us to reflect on the context in which they were produced, specifically the fact that they would not exist, *in this form*, without an embassy taking place and established practices against which certain observations became legible as something worth recording.

Readers will notice that the sources from which I reconstruct the interactions between European envoys and Chinese officials are skewed towards the European perspective, a limitation I duly acknowledge.[76] Beyond the limited number of books reproducing excerpts from court records and other Chinese and Manchu sources in translation,[77] I have relied heavily on the work of historians, who have drawn on both Chinese and Manchu sources. However, Chinese records of the embassies tend to be very brief.[78] One possible explanation for the difference in the level of detail may lie, once again, in practices. For Chinese officials, the arrival of embassies was likely a routine affair, obviating the need for detailed description. The journal of Tulišen, a Qing envoy to the Torghut Khan in 1712–1715, presents a stark contrast, supporting my reasoning here.[79] His journal is very detailed, mirroring the European journals, and reflects a concern with 'documenting the foreign'.[80]

European embassies to China, 1618–1816

The early modern period (ca. 1500–1800) is an important yet understudied part of global history among scholars of international order.[81] Brook's assertion that the seventeenth century was 'an age of second contacts, when sites of first encounter were turned into places of repeated meeting' is a particularly apt characterization of interactions between European polities and China during

[71] Bueger, 'Pathways to practice', p. 402.

[72] Andreas Reckwitz, 'Praktiken und diskurse: Eine sozialtheoretische und methodologische relation', in Herbert Kalthoff et al. (eds) *Theoretische Empirie: Zur Relevanz Qualitativer Forschung* (Suhrkamp, 2008).

[73] Bueger, 'Pathways to practice'; Bueger and Gadinger, *International Practice Theory*; Pouliot, 'Practice tracing'.

[74] I would like to thank Halvard Leira for challenging me on this point.

[75] Bueger and Gadinger, *International Practice Theory*, p. 153. This also aligns with Ringmar's understanding of practices as discourse-plus-agent. Ringmar, 'Performing international systems'.

[76] The author lacks the language skills necessary to access Chinese and Manchu source directly.

[77] Lo-shu Fu, *A Documentary Chronicle of Sino-Western Relations, 1644–1820*, vol. 1 (University of Arizona Press, 1966); E. Backhouse and J. O. P. Bland, eds, *Annals & Memoirs of the Court of Peking (from the 16th to the 20th Century)* (W. Heinemann, 1914).

[78] As recent as 2010, Perdue asserted that 'there seems to be no primary report in the Qing sources of what happened at Nerchinsk'. Perdue, 'Boundaries and trade in the early modern world', p. 349.

[79] Tulišen, *Narrative of the Chinese Embassy to the Khan of the Tourgouth Tartars in the Years 1712, 13, 14, & 15*, trans. George Staunton (Murray, 1821).

[80] Jenny Huangfu Day, 'From Envoy Journals to Legation Reports: Regulating Knowledge of the World in Late Imperial and Modern China', *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, 16:1 (2022), pp. 91–122 (p. 102).

[81] I use this periodization as a convenient shorthand and acknowledge its limitations. Jerry H. Bentley, 'Cross-cultural interaction and periodization in world history', *American Historical Review*, 101:3 (1996), pp. 749–70; Jack A. Goldstone, 'The problem of the "early modern" world', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 41:3 (1998), pp. 249–84.

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Table 1. Select Russian, Dutch, and British embassies to China and relevant events, 1618–1816.

Year(s)	Event	Year(s)	Event
1618	First Russian embassy to China	1689	Russo-Chinese Treaty of Nerchinsk
1654–1658	Second Russian embassy to China	1691	Fourth Russian embassy to China
1655–1657	First Dutch/VOC embassy to China	1720–1721	Fifth Russian embassy to China
1665–1667	Second Dutch/VOC embassy to China	1727	Russo-Chinese Treaty of Kiakhta
1676	Third Russian embassy to China	1730–1732	Qing embassies to Russia
1680	Qing delegation to Batavia	1793	First British embassy to China
1684	Opening of Chinese ports	1795	Fourth Dutch/VOC embassy to China
1685–1687	Third Dutch/VOC embassy to China	1816	Second British embassy to China

this time.[82] It was a period that witnessed deliberate and systematic efforts by European rulers to establish relations with the Chinese emperor.

Between 1618–1816, Russia, the Dutch East India Company (VOC), and Britain dispatched several embassies to China (see Table 1).[83] With the exception of the first Russian embassy in 1618, of which no records have been found in Chinese sources,[84] China treated and recorded all embassies as tribute embassies. However, the dynamics and outcomes of these interactions varied. The Russian embassies to China were in some ways both the most contentious and most successful. After a series of failed embassies in 1618, 1656, and 1676, characterised by significant disputes over diplomatic practices and occasional military clashes on their frontier, the conclusion of the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) marks an extraordinary success not replicated in China's relations with any other European polities at the time.

The Dutch embassies were less contentious because Dutch envoys performed the ceremonials required at the Chinese court, including the *koutou*. Nevertheless, differences between the two sides manifested in how the two sides understood the nature and purpose of embassies, limiting real achievements. Rather than being resolved by treaty, these differences became irrelevant following the opening of maritime trade in Chinese ports in 1684, after which the Dutch reverted to exclusively commercial activity in China.[85]

Not unlike the Russian embassies, the two British embassies in 1793 and 1816 featured intense disputes over courtly ritual and the nature of diplomacy. Though the Qianlong emperor received Macartney in audience, the embassy's requests were denied. A second embassy in 1816 failed over the ambassador's refusal to adhere to practices of tribute diplomacy and marked an important turning point in Anglo-Chinese relations.[86] Thus, in all three cases, interactions produced manifestations of distinct international orders, but variation in both dynamics and outcomes demonstrates the inherent contingency of system encounters.

[82]Timothy Brook, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (Bloomsbury Press, 2008), p. 8.

[83]My analysis excludes the Portuguese embassies. While the first Portuguese envoy arrived on the Chinese coast in 1517, the Ming initially conceived of the Portuguese as merchants local to Southeast Asia, rather than a tributary state, and it was not until the late seventeenth century, after Russia and the VOC had dispatched multiple embassies, that additional Portuguese embassies arrived in China. Jorge Manuel dos Santos Alves, 'The first decade of Sino-Portuguese diplomatic relations following the foundation of Macau', *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on the Portuguese and the Pacific*, 1995, pp. 305–13; Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*.

[84]Vincent Chen, *Sino-Russian Relations in the Seventeenth Century* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1966).

[85]A final Dutch embassy arrived in 1795, though this embassy had its origins in what can only be described as a 'ruse'. J. J. L. Duyvendak, 'The last Dutch embassy to the Chinese court (1794–1795)', *T'oung Pao*, 34:1 (1938), pp. 1–137 (p. 13); Tonio Andrade, *The Last Embassy* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

[86]Hao Gao, *Creating the Opium War: British Imperial Attitudes towards China, 1792–1840* (Manchester University Press, 2020).

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Clarifying the affairs of state

Encounters between European envoys and the Chinese court played an important role in clarifying who exactly they were in relation to one another and what types of relations they were engaged in. Leading the second Russian embassy to China in 1656, Fedor Isakovich Baĭkov[87] carried gifts and a letter from the tsar containing his credentials as well as a proposal to establish relations with the Chinese emperor through the exchange of ambassadors.[88] Officials from the Ministry of Rites, the imperial bureaucracy responsible for managing foreign embassies, instructed him to surrender the embassy's gifts to the emperor in accordance with the established practices for the reception of foreign envoys, which he refused citing established custom at the Russian court.[89] The officials proposed that if Baĭkov had only come to trade, he may 'deal with those articles as you please'.[90] But Baĭkov was not a merchant and his primary concern was not trade: 'I am sent by my Great Sovereign to yours not for trade, but as bearer of His Majesty's gracious letter.'[91] This distinction also mattered to the Chinese officials. When Baĭkov complained that attempts to take the embassy's gifts amounted to robbery, Chinese officials explained that if the products were indeed gifts to the emperor, rather than merchandise, '*we take from you the royal gracious gifts … **because** they were sent by your great Lord to ours*'.[92]

The distinction between the social identities of envoys and merchants and diplomacy and trade as their corresponding types of interaction is perhaps most surprising in the case of the Dutch envoys, of which scholars have said that they were 'representatives of a company, not of the state'[93] and as such not beholden to the same constraints as other European envoys.[94] Yet, when Chinese officials asked the Dutch ambassador Pieter van Hoorn about trade in 1666, he stated that matters of trade were not handled by him, the ambassador, but by his second in command, and that it was not custom for envoys to participate in trade.[95] By the time of the British embassies to China in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the distinction between the affairs of state and trade had become even more pronounced. The East India Company's (EIC) 'sovereign awakening'[96] prompted the state to take back control through the establishment of the Board of Control in the India Act of 1784.[97] The clear distinction between company matters and affairs of state went so far that, in 1793, Macartney sought full control over the EIC's Canton factory for the duration of his embassy.[98]

Actors not only distinguished between the activities of trade and the affairs of state, but between their personal and professional identities. Having offered to perform the *koutou* to receive his

[87] I use the Library of Congress's standard for romanizing Russian.

[88] Natal′ia Fedorovna Demidova and Vladimir Stepanovich Miasnikov, *Russko-Kitaĭskie Otnosheniia v XVII veke: Materialy i Dokumenty, 1608–1683* (Nauka, 1969), 1: p. 167.

[89] For an excellent account of the Qing guest ritual, see James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Duke University Press, 1995).

[90] Baddeley, *Russia, Mongolia, China*, 2: p. 145. Two successful trade missions in 1658–1662 and 1668–1672 suggest that had Baĭkov taken this offer, he would likely have made a significant profit. Mark Mancall, *Russia and China: Their Diplomatic Relations to 1728* (Harvard University Press, 1971).

[91] Baddeley, *Russia, Mongolia, China*, 2: p. 145.

[92] Baddeley, *Russia, Mongolia, China*, 2: p. 145, emphasis added.

[93] Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, p. 52.

[94] Andrew Phillips and JC Sharman, 'Company-states and the creation of the global international system', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:4 (2020), pp. 1249–72.

[95] Olfert Dapper, *Gedenkwürdige Verrichtung der Niederländischen Ost-Indischen Gesellschaft in dem käiserreich Taising oder Sina* (Bey Jacob von Meurs, 1674), p. 314.

[96] Swati Srivastava, 'Corporate sovereign awakening and the making of modern state sovereignty: New archival evidence from the English East India Company', *International Organization*, 76:3 (2022), pp. 690–712 (p. 698).

[97] Henry Dundas, who, as Secretary of State, would later become a main proponent for an embassy to China, was key in the development of the India Act, in particular the clauses that 'concerned the desire of government to oversee the political and diplomatic functions of the Company'. Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History* (Routledge, 2014), p. 124.

[98] Hosea Ballou Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company, Trading to China 1635–1834* (The Claredon Press, 1926), 2: p. 215.

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personal gifts, Nikolai Gavrilovich Spafarii in 1676 firmly refused doing the same for the emperor's gifts to the tsar 'because it is not my affair, but *an affair of state*'.[99] Travelling through Russia to deliver an imperial edict to the Torghuts (Kalmyk Khanate) in 1712–1715, a Qing envoy faced a similar dilemma. When the Governor of Yeniseĭsk urged Tulišen to accept some minor gifts, he declined, explaining that 'the officers of the Chinese empire, *when employed on service by their sovereign*, dare not accept of the smallest present'.[100] During preliminary negotiations about trade in the context of the second Dutch embassy to China (1665–1667), van Hoorn told officials in Fuzhou that while he was willing to abide by Chinese customs, he ought not to be restricted in his duties as ambassador since in this function he represented the Dutch state 'and would rather die than suffer it some insult'.[101] When provincial officials broached the issue of the *koutou* shortly after Macartney's arrival in 1793, he told them that while he was intent to please the emperor, he had certain obligations arising from his role as ambassador and thus had to keep to 'what might be agreeable to my own King'.[102] Van Hoorn and Macartney, like Baĭkov and Spafarii, came to China as the representatives of their sovereigns, not in their private capacity, and as such were subject to limits of socially acceptable action arising from diplomatic practices.

Invoking established diplomatic practices

When the first Dutch embassy, led by VOC merchants Peter de Goyer and Jacob de Keyser, arrived in China in 1656, they were told that 'no Forreign Embassadours are to bow their heads before the Emperours Throne, unless they be such as are a Kin to him that sent them, without which they would have no great credit and reputation with the Emperour'.[103] Tribute diplomacy was exclusive to the domain of sovereign rulers, which posed problems for the Dutch envoys. The envoys' explanation that '*Holland* was never Governed by any one single person, but by a select number of chiefest [States General] of the Countrey' and that the ambassadors were acting on orders of the Governor General of Batavia, did not help the case.[104] An anomaly even in the European context, this form of government was foreign to the Chinese court.[105] Faced with the possible failure of their embassy, the envoys were 'forced to make use of the name of the Prince of *Orange*, as if they had been sent by his Highness'.[106] Claiming to be envoys engaged in affairs of state was hugely consequential, as it invoked sets of established practices that would henceforth govern encounters.[107]

European envoys and Chinese officials both clearly explained and justified their actions with respect to established diplomatic practices shared with neighbouring polities. In 1656, the Russian ambassador Baĭkov refused to hand over the tsar's gifts to the Ministry of Rites prior to the imperial

[99] Arsen'ev, 'Stateĭniĭ Spisok Posol'stva N. Spafariĭa v Kitaĭ', p. 309, emphasis added.

[100] Tulišen, *Narrative of the Chinese Embassy to the Khan of the Tourgouth Tartars in the Years 1712, 13, 14, & 15*, p. 68, emphasis added.

[101] Dapper, *Gedenkwürdige Verrichtung der Niederländischen Ost-Indischen Gesellschaft in dem käiserreich Taising oder Sina*, pp. 254–55.

[102] George Macartney, *An Embassy to China: Being the Journal Kept by Lord Macartney During His Embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-Lung, 1793–1794*, ed. John L. Cranmer-Byng (Longmans, 1962), p. 85.

[103] Johannes Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces to the Grand Tartar Cham Emperour of China*, trans. John Ogiley (John Macock, 1669), p. 116.

[104] Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces to the Grand Tartar Cham Emperour of China*, p. 116.

[105] As a 'republic in an age of increasing absolutism', the Dutch Republic was an anomaly among European polities. J. L. Price, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century* (St. Martin's Press, 1998), p. 18.

[106] Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces to the Grand Tartar Cham Emperour of China*, p. 116. The British East India Company faced a similar problem in its relations with the Mughal Empire. Phillips and Sharman, *International Order in Diversity*, p. 151.

[107] According to Wills, it was not until 1680 that China became aware of the difference between Batavia and Holland. John E. Wills, *Pepper, Guns, and Parleys; the Dutch East India Company and China, 1622 [Id Est 1662]-1681* (Harvard University Press, 1974).

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audience, stating that 'all the neighboring states that are in relations with our great sovereign' follow a practice of exchanging gifts *after* the presentation of their credentials during an audience.[108] With respect to the *koutou*, Spafarii similarly stated that 'it was customary in all countries in the world to bow to the sovereign in the ordinary way', by which he meant standing.[109] Wills attributes Dutch envoys' frequent references to the 'law of all nations' and 'the custom of all princes' to European diplomatic practices.[110] Spafarii's refusal to follow instructions to surrender the tsar's letter and the embassy gifts to the Ministry of Rites, citing established practices at European courts,[111] was met with an explanation by Mala, a vice president of the Ministry of Rites, that 'if the emperor now took you before him, then *all the surrounding sovereigns* would no longer call the emperor emperor'.[112] Not only did Mala clarify that practices governing China's relations with neighbouring polities served as the blueprint for how the Russian embassies were understood, but he also pointed to the constitutive dimension of practices and the anticipated social effects of deviating from them. When, in 1816, Chinese officials mentioned that ambassadors from Japan and Siam performed the *koutou* without resistance in an effort to convince Lord Amherst to agree to the ceremony, he remarked that 'analogies made with the courts of Portugal or Russia would have been more appropriate'.[113]

It is clear from Nieuhof's account that de Goyer and de Keyser did not actually believe that they represented the 'King of Holland' but invoked his name to salvage their embassy. In retrospect, the VOC authorities at Batavia as well as the envoys themselves may have wished to rethink this claim. While it ensured an imperial audience, it made the Dutch Republic 'the first European power to be received into the tribute system', inadvertently limiting the prospect for the primary motivation behind the Dutch embassies: trade.[114]

The evidence for the reception of European embassies, including the Russian embassies, according to practices of tribute diplomacy is overwhelming.[115] The Chinese imperial court recorded all European embassies as tribute embassies.[116] Pritchard writes with respect to the British embassies, but applicable to the Russian and Dutch embassies too, 'that the sending of a mission and the delivery of presents enrolled the sender upon the list of tribute sending nations *as effectively* as a performance of the kotow'.[117]

[108] Demidova and M͡iasnikov, *Russko-Kitaĭskie Otnosheniia͡ v XVII veke*, 1: p. 177.

[109] Baddeley, *Russia, Mongolia, China*, 2: p. 354.

[110] Wills, *Pepper, Guns, and Parleys*, p. 200.

[111] N. N. Bantysh-Kamenskiĭ, *Diplomaticheskoe Sobranie D͡iel Mezhdu Rossiĭskim i Kitaĭskim Gosudarstvami s 1619 Po 1792-ĭ God* (Tipografi͡a Imperatorskago Universiteta, 1882), p. 29.

[112] Arsen'ev, 'Stateĭniĭ spisok posol'stva N. Spafariĭa͡ v Kitaĭ', p. 224. Bantysh-Kamenskiĭ identifies Mala as a vice president of the Mongol Office (*Lifanyuan*). According to Mancall's brief sketch of Mala's biography, he had previously served in the *Lifanyuan* but had become a vice president of the Ministry of Rites earlier in 1676. Bantysh-Kamenskiĭ, *Diplomaticheskoe Sobranie D͡iel Mezhdu Rossiĭskim i Kitaĭskim Gosudarstvami s 1619 Po 1792-ĭ God*, p. 29; Mancall, *Russia and China*, p. 84.

[113] Caroline Stevenson, *Britain's Second Embassy to China: Lord Amherst's 'Special Mission' to the Jiaqing Emperor In 1816* (ANU Press, 2021), p. 191. When asked by Heshen whether Italy and Portugal were tributaries of England, Macartney rejected the comparison to tributary relations. Macartney, *An Embassy to China*, p. 121.

[114] John L. Cranmer-Byng and John E. Wills, 'Trade and D]diplomacy with Maritime Europe, 1644-c. 1800', in John E. Wills (ed.) *China and Maritime Europe, 1500–1800: Trade, Settlement, Diplomacy, and Missions* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 187.

[115] Even the Russian embassies, which Crossley and others argue fell outside of the tribute system, were administered jointly by officials from both the Ministry of Rites and the *Lifanyuan*. Pamela Kyle Crossley, 'Guest ritual and Qing international relations', in Timothy Brook et al. (eds), *Silk* Roads *Sacred Mandates: Asian International Relations since Chinggis Khan* (University of Chicago Press, 2018). On the division of labour between the two bureaucracies, see Ning Chia, 'Lifanyuan and Libu in the Qing tribute system', in *Managing Frontiers in Qing China: The Lifanyuan and Libu Revisited*, ed. Dittmar Schorkowitz and Ning Chia (Brill, 2016).

[116] Fu, *A Documentary Chronicle of Sino-Western Relations, 1644–1820*, vol. 1.

[117] Pritchard, *The Crucial Years of Early Anglo-Chinese Relations, 1750–1800*, p. 382.

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Articulating differences

Wills argues that part of the reason why the Dutch failed to comply with Chinese expectations for tribute embassies was because the court had 'done little or nothing to explain this concept to them'.[118] As manifestations of taken-for-granted views of the world, it is not clear why such practices would require an explanation in the eyes of the Chinese court. However, encounters between practices produced a mismatch between the expected and actual social effects of practices that prompted further elaborations, clarifying the relevant differences between the two international orders. Three areas are particularly instructive: courtly ritual, the exchange of gifts, and the understanding of the purpose and nature of embassies.

Though often presented as an issue of immutable and irreconcilable cultural differences, attempts to negotiate the ritual for the reception of foreign envoys at the Chinese court demonstrate that the ritual was not objectionable in and of itself, but because it lacked the reciprocal character of courtly ritual at European courts. Russian envoys in 1676 and 1720 proposed that Chinese envoys coming to Russia should perform the same ceremonies at the tsar's court.[119] Macartney also proposed to the Imperial Legate Zhengrui that an official equal to the ambassador's rank 'shall perform before His Britannic Majesty's Picture … *the same ceremonies*'.[120] Zhengrui rejected the proposal and Macartney declined a proposal by two lower-ranking officials willing to complete the ritual.[121]

Hevia explains that this proposal was 'incomprehensible because the ambassador of a foreign king (like the king himself) was categorically distinct from and inferior to a servant of the emperor'.[122] When the Chinese emperor dispatched envoys to invest foreign rulers with the title of 'king', they did not perform the ceremonies of the receiving court. Instead, the emperor's envoys were received ceremoniously in a setting made to replicate an audience at the Chinese imperial court to administer the foreign ruler's *koutou* before the imperial patent and gifts instead of performing courtly ritual before the foreign ruler.[123]

Another area in which the differences between the two international orders became clear is in the exchange of gifts. Though gifts were an important aspect of both East Asian and European international relations, the practice was not equivalent.[124] For the Europeans, gift exchange was reciprocal and, though the value of a gift could establish unequal status, the meaning of a gift did not change depending on the direction in which it moved. In the context of tributary diplomacy, the meaning of a gift changed depending on the direction in which it moved. During a dispute over the meaning of the gifts carried by the Macartney embassy, Zhengrui reportedly argued that they were tribute to the emperor, whereas the embassy's interpreters insisted that they were 'not tributes (*cong-so*), but presents (*sung-lo*)'.[125] This exchange perfectly encapsulates Lee's observation about the character of social relations in the tribute system, namely that 'the meaning of A sending (as opposed to receiving) tribute to B signified that A acknowledged B's position to be superior to that of A'.[126]

Finally, much more subtle, but no less relevant, was the discrepancy in how the two sides understood the purpose and nature of embassies. Russian and British embassies sought not only to station

[118] Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, p. 45.

[119] Arsen'ev, 'Stateĭniĭ spisok posol'stva N. Spafariĭa v Kitaĭ', 226; Bell, *Travels from St. Petersburg in Russia, to Diverse Parts of Asia*, 2: pp. 4–5.

[120] Pritchard, *The Crucial Years of Early Anglo-Chinese Relations, 1750–1800*, p. 335, emphasis added. Amherst repeated the same proposal in 1816. Stevenson, *Britain's Second Embassy to China*, p. 195.

[121] Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, p. 100.

[122] Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, p. 165.

[123] Ta-Tuan Ch'en, 'Investiture of Liu-Ch'iu kings in the Ch'ing period', in John K. Fairbank (eds), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Harvard University Press, 1968); Allen J. Chun, 'The Ching tribute system as guest ritual: A preliminary description', in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Sinology* (Academia Sinica, 1986).

[124] Mark Häberlein, 'Material exchanges: Gifts, tribute and corruption', in Dorothée Goetze and Lena Oetzel (eds), *Early Modern European Diplomacy* (De Gruyter, 2024).

[125] Macartney, *An Embassy to China*, p. 97.

[126] Lee, *China's Hegemony*, p. 47.

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resident ambassadors in Beijing, but such proposals were always tied to the offer for the Chinese emperor to reciprocate by stationing one of his ambassadors at the respective courts. As early as the first Russian mission to China in 1618, the Chinese emperor declared in a letter to the tsar that 'by my custom … I neither leave my own kingdom nor allow my ambassadors or merchants to do so'.[127] On the return journey from Jehol to Canton, Sung-yun, an official assigned to the embassy, similarly explained to Macartney that China 'never sends ambassadors to foreign countries'.[128] It becomes clear that what was lacking in the proposed exchange was the element of movement in the direction of the centre.[129]

More generally, all European embassies went to Beijing expecting to negotiate with the imperial court agreements in the form of treaties. Following their imperial audience in 1656, de Goyer and de Keyser voiced concerns that 'as yet they had done very little in their business'.[130] In 1666, van Hoorn became irritated by the fact that his compliance with courtly ritual did not result in opportunities for 'real negotiation'.[131] Macartney similarly urged Heshen in 1793 for opportunities to 'explain to him fully my Sovereign's instructions to me, and to enter into negotiation upon the points contained in them'.[132] Both the Dutch and the British had made the same mistake. The letters the envoys had been given were generally kept vague, with an implicit understanding that it was their task to negotiate the details. The Chinese imperial court, however, treated them as petitions which were either granted or rejected but did not constitute a basis for negotiation. Negotiation implied a non-directional process among mutuals. The Chinese, however, 'did not negotiate with vassals'.[133]

Revisiting historical international orders in East Asia and Europe

Emerging from these disputes and subsequent explanations of the meaning of practices is an idea of two international orders whose key difference is in the nature of diplomatic practices. Encounters between European envoys and Chinese officials demonstrate that practices of tribute diplomacy, shared among East Asian polities, had a distinctly directional nature, as is evident from the refusal to send envoys abroad, the changing meaning of gifts depending on the direction in which they moved, and the treatment of letters from other sovereigns, and embassies more generally, as petitions. I am not suggesting that relations between China and other Asian polities were one-sided. However, China and its neighbours engaged each other through different practices appropriate for and constitutive of their relevant identity vis-à-vis one another.

Diplomatic practices shared among European polities, by contrast, were non-directional. They were characterized by a lack of direction, or a more symmetrical form of reciprocity, as is evident from the insistence on the mutual exchange of envoys and negotiations as a mutual process. While the specific forms of courtly ritual, the frequency of embassies, or the value of gifts all were significant to convey the relative status of a particular ruler,[134] the acts of sending and receiving embassies and gifts did not alter the identities of the sender and the receiver.

My findings constitute a refinement of existing characterizations of distinct international orders in East Asia and Europe and the differences between them, not a radical revision. The notion of asymmetrical relations among Asian polities is not new, though I argue that the concept of

[127] Baddeley, *Russia, Mongolia, China*, 2: p. 72.
[128] Macartney, *An Embassy to China*, p. 160.
[129] Chun, 'The Ching tribute system as guest ritual'; Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*.
[130] Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces to the Grand Tartar Cham Emperor of China*, p. 131.
[131] Wills, *Pepper, Guns, and Parleys*, p. 107.
[132] Macartney, *An Embassy to China*, p. 147.
[133] Stevenson, *Britain's Second Embassy to China*, p. 306.
[134] Bruneau, 'Rethinking international order in early modern Europe'; Häberlein, 'Material exchanges'.

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(a)symmetry is more static than that of directionality.[135] This paper builds, in particular, on notions of the importance of spatial movement in practices of tribute diplomacy.[136] In addition, this paper intervenes in debates about the validity of the tribute system as a tool to describe and analyse historical East Asia. The invocation of established diplomatic practices by Chinese officials, the fact that European embassies were received in the same spaces and through the same practices as tribute embassies from Korea and other Asian polities, and the explicit articulation of the meaning of these practices in response challenge the insistence by New Qing historians that the Qing employed a variety of approaches in their foreign relations and that, therefore, there was no tribute system.[137] Moreover, in contrast to culturally-essentialist conceptions of the tribute system, a practice-relational approach is perfectly compatible with the observation that compliance with the tribute system as well as the configuration of relations among China and its neighbours varied across different periods of East Asian history.[138]

While the insights are doubtlessly relevant for our understanding of historical East Asia, they are perhaps even more important for revising outdated views of early modern Europe. Despite numerous challenges, the widely discredited Westphalian myth remains the only explicit model of international order in early modern Europe. Ironically, 'It is precisely because Europe is by and large taken for granted as the centre of geographical and intellectual attention … that it remains conceptually underexplored.'[139] This paper is not intended to accomplish this task but suggests some possibilities for the renewed study of international order in early modern Europe.

Relatedly, this paper also intervenes in debates about the boundaries of European international order, specifically Russia's position in relation to it. According to conventional accounts, Russia did not become part of a European international order until the reforms of Peter I in the early eighteenth century. Yet, a focus on diplomatic practices demonstrates that Russia had been part of European diplomatic networks much earlier.[140] This suggests further that relations between China and Russia have been unduly excluded from the scholarship on premodern Sino-European relations, with potentially dramatic implications. Conventional narratives about Sino-European relations, including that Macartney's embassy in 1793 marks the beginning of diplomacy and that China had no treaties with European powers until the nineteenth century, are *only* possible *because* of the exclusion of the Russian embassies.[141]

Conclusion

International orders exist in concrete instantiations only in the context of interactions between them. Disputes over courtly ritual and the nature of relations among sovereigns in the context of European embassies to China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were not the inevitable result of incommensurable differences between pre-formed and fixed international

[135] Ji-Young Lee, 'Diplomatic ritual as a power resource: The politics of asymmetry in early modern Chinese-Korean relations', *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 13:02 (2013), pp. 309–36; Lee, *China's Hegemony*; Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[136] Chun, 'The Ching tribute system as guest ritual'; Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*.

[137] Peter C. Perdue, 'The tenacious tributary system', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 24:96 (2015): 1002–14; Ruth W. Dunnell and James A. Millward, 'Introduction', in Ruth W. Dunnell et al. (eds), *New Qing Imperial History: The Making of Inner Asian Empire at Qing Chengde* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2004).

[138] Victoria Tin-bor Hui, '"Getting Asia right": De-essentializing China's hegemony in historical Asia', *International Theory*, 15:3 (2023), pp. 480–98; Morris Rossabi, 'Introduction', in Morris Rossabi (eds), *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th-14th Centuries* (University of California Press, 1983).

[139] Benjamin Herborth and Patrick Nitzschner, 'Europe in historical international relations', in 1st ed., Benjamin De Carvalho et al. (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations* (Routledge, 2021).

[140] Hennings, *Russia and Courtly Europe*. Kirchner calls the Danish-Russian treaty of 1562 'Russia's first and temporarily successful attempt to be regarded and treated as a member of the European family of nations'. Walther Kirchner, 'A milestone in European history: The Danish-Russian treaty of 1562', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 22:59 (1944), pp. 39–48.

[141] Zhang's claim that 'none of the European embassies in the 17th century in Beijing challenged the ceremonial supremacy of the Son of Heaven' completely ignores or mischaracterizes the Russian case. Zhang, *Reimagining the International*, p. 120.

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orders in Europe and East Asia but are best understood as manifestations of a process through which the differences between them were constituted and negotiated.

My argument and findings have important implications for the study of historical international relations. First, by defining international order in a way that captures the micro-level dynamics of system encounters, this paper provides a framework for advancing efforts to reexamine and reinterpret the historical evolution of the international system as a process of mutual transformation rather than unidirectional expansion.[142] More broadly, practice-oriented and relational approaches, such as taken in this paper, offer a way out of or around the 'essentialism trap', which Barnett and Zarakol identify as a significant obstacle to aspirations of the Global International Relations programme.[143]

Second, this paper also supports and expands on Ringmar's claim that the examination of system encounters can be a powerful tool for the comparative study of international orders.[144] The emerging outlines of the European and East Asian international orders that can be reconstructed from the interactions in the context of the Russian, Dutch, and British embassies to China advance our understanding beyond traditional anarchy/equality-hierarchy and symmetry-asymmetry dichotomies in subtle but important ways. Because system encounters prompt actors to explain and justify their actions, similar approaches may be even more productive for examining historical international orders that are less well studied, including in Africa and the Islamicate world, and 'problematic' cases in which the separation between international orders, both geographically and qualitatively, is less clear.

I have shown above that the European and East Asian international orders and the relevant differences between them only took shape through interactions. The insight that differences between international orders cannot be properly understood independent from interaction has far-reaching implications for both how we think about historical encounters and contemporary question of international order. With respect to historical encounters, this paper raises questions about the extent to which the occurrence of violent conflict represents the preferred problem-solving mode of European empires, rather than the inevitable result of essential differences. With respect to contemporary questions in international politics, it challenges deterministic narratives about the inevitability of conflict over competing visions of international order.

Lastly, while Tremml-Werner and Hellman claim that prioritizing political relations as distinct from other forms of interaction imposes an ahistorical separation of roles that frequently 'overlapped in one and the same actor',[145] the distinction drawn between diplomacy and other forms of interactions by both European envoys and Chinese officials provides a strong rationale for the continued importance of studying diplomatic relations and *international* orders.[146]

The explanation of system encounters and the underlying practice-relational approach to international order suggest several directions for further research into historical international orders and interactions between them. First, extending the approach and explanation to other cases would help establish what Pouliot calls its 'validity of analytical generality'.[147] Second, a practice-oriented approach constitutes not only a useful theoretical framework, but also a powerful empirical strategy for the mapping of historical international orders. Finally, while this paper has focused on explaining the logic and dynamics of system encounters, more research is needed to explain how differences are managed, why encounters produced certain outcomes, and to what extent interactions produced feedback effects.

[142] Dunne and Reus-Smit, *The Globalization of International Society*; Mulich, 'Transformation at the margins'.

[143] Barnett and Zarakol, 'Global international relations and the essentialism trap'.

[144] Ringmar, 'Performing international systems'.

[145] Birgit Tremml-Werner and Lisa Hellman, 'Merely "ad hoc" diplomacy? A global historical comparison of early modern Japanese–Spanish and Qing-Russian foreign relations', *Diplomatica*, 2:1 (2020), pp. 57–78 (p. 66).

[146] The narrow focus on interstate relations has been criticized for both imposing an ahistorical and Eurocentric reading on the past and ignoring a large number of historically prevalent actors and forms of interaction, leading some scholars to prefer the term world order. Ayşe Zarakol, 'Rethinking international order', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 38:2 (2024), pp. 200–08.

[147] Pouliot, 'Practice tracing', pp. 251–52.

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