1 Introduction
The East Asian Model of State Formation

The might and wealth of the Sui–Tang empires (618–907) at their peak deeply impressed China's neighbors. Japan, the Korean states, and even (briefly) Tibet imitated the Sui–Tang imperial model, and to a greater or lesser degree adopted the Chinese written language, Sui–Tang political institutions and laws, Confucian ideology, and the Buddhist religion. It was during this era that East Asia – a community of independent national states sharing a common civilization – took shape in forms that have endured down to modern times.

Richard von Glahn[1]

Korea, Japan, and Vietnam should not exist according to the dominant theories of state formation that were inductively derived from the European experience. Yet, by the eighth century CE, more than 7,000 men staffed the Japanese imperial bureaucracy.[2] This bureaucracy included a state council, eight ministries, and forty-six bureaus. A comprehensive administrative hierarchy of provinces, districts, and villages had been established throughout the empire. The court implemented a population census, a centralized tax system, a legal code, and a civil service examination, all based on Chinese Tang dynasty models.

Even by the thirteenth century, European state formation could not compare to that achieved a half millennium earlier in East Asia. The Catholic Church legal office, the Curia, was so advanced compared to thirteenth-century European royal courts that it was a "template for sophisticated administration";[3] others have observed that it "became

[1] Richard von Glahn, *The Economic History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 169.
[2] Patricia Ebrey and Anne Walthall, *Pre-Modern East Asia: To 1800: A Cultural, Social, and Political History* (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2014), 121.
[3] Anna Grzymala-Busse, "Beyond War and Contracts: The Medieval and Religious Roots of the European State," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 23, no. 1 (2020), 9.

the model for the beginnings of state bureaucracies."[4] Yet, the Curia had only 1,000 or so officials and was dwarfed by the complexity and size that the Japanese state bureaucracy had already achieved 500 years earlier. Further state formation in Europe was then driven by competition for territory and survival. As Philip Gorski and Vivek Sharma summarize the literature, "the bellicist paradigm makes war the underlying mechanism driving virtually all aspects of state formation [and] has become the standard narrative of state formation within the social sciences."[5]

What is often overlooked is the extent to which historical China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam became fully functioning states. Each had attained centralized bureaucratic control defined over territory and the administrative capacity to tax their populations, field large militaries, and provide extensive public goods.[6] Moreover, three key institutional features of their engagement with state-building stand out: first, an examination for selecting civil servants on the basis of merit, not heredity; second, institutional organization both of the government itself into regular ministries and of the country into provinces and regions, with appointments controlled from the center; and third, formally negotiated borders as well as rules and norms and institutions for dealing with other states, recognized more widely as the Tribute System. By the tenth century CE, these four main political units in the region were centrally administered, bureaucratic organizations with power defined over a geographic area that conducted formal diplomatic relations with each other.

As well as overlooking the fact that state formation in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam had occurred 1,000 years earlier than in Europe, the well-known narrative of state formation in Europe often ignores that it occurred in East Asia for reasons of emulation, not bellicist competition. These countries did not engage in state-building in order to wage war or suppress revolt; in fact, war was relatively rare, and

[4] Michael Mitterauer, *Why Europe? The Medieval Origins of Its Special Path* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 150.

[5] Philip Gorski and Vivek Sharma, "Beyond the Tilly Thesis: 'Family Values' and State Formation in Latin Christendom," in Lars Kaspersen and Jeppe Strandsbjerg (eds.), *Does War Make States? Investigations of Charles Tilly's Historical Sociology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 98.

[6] China emerged as a state beginning in the second century BCE, Korea and Japan emerged between the fifth and eighth centuries CE, and Vietnam in the tenth century.

there was no balance-of-power system with regular existential threats: The longevity of the East Asian dynasties is evidence of both the peacefulness of their neighborhood and their internal stability. Despite Charles Tilly's famous dictum that "war made the state, and the state made war,"[7] neither war nor preparations for war were the cause or effect of state formation in Korea, Japan, or Vietnam. Instead, emulation of China – the hegemon, which had a civilizational influence across the known world – drove the rapid formation of centralized, bureaucratically administered, territorial governments in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. However, scholars of international relations have not sufficiently investigated how the system affects the units, and, in particular, how hegemonic systems may differ from balance-of-power systems. Moreover, how small, weaker actors support or resist large hegemons has been largely undertheorized in the study of authority relations, power, and legitimacy in the extant literature.[8]

In the chapters to follow, we provide historical evidence of Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese emulation of Chinese civilization, which centrally included state formation. We show how extensively Korea, Japan, and Vietnam borrowed from China from the fifth to tenth centuries and why local elites adopted Chinese models for reasons of prestige and domestic legitimacy. We show that this occurred through conscious, intentional emulation and learning; and that a regionwide epistemic community existed, composed mainly of Confucian scholars as well as Buddhist monks, who interacted, traveled, and learned from each other. So intertwined is the history of China with its neighbors that Charles Holcombe concludes that "the early histories of both Korea and Japan would be incomprehensible except as parts of a larger East Asian community."[9] In his magisterial history of Vietnam, Keith Taylor concludes that "Vietnamese history as we know it today could not exist without Chinese history. The manner in which Vietnamese history overlaps with and is distinguished from Chinese history presents a singular example of experience in organizing and governing

[7] Charles Tilly, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 42.
[8] Chin-Hao Huang, *Power and Restraint in China's Rise* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).
[9] Charles Holcombe, *A History of East Asia: From the Origins of Civilization to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 109.

human society within the orbit of Sinic civilization that can be compared with Korean and Japanese history."[10]

We also show why and how some societies on the Central Asian steppe resisted Chinese influence. Indeed, the fighting that occurred was mostly between different types of political unit, not similar ones. These societies were also free of the competitive pressures that pushed institutional conformity in East Asia up until the nineteenth century. War did not make states on the Central Asian steppe. Rather, China and the peoples of the Central Asian steppe were quite aware of their differences and determined to preserve them as long as possible for opportunistic reasons. Some would even argue that there was a unique symbiotic interaction between Chinese dynasties and those who lived in the Central Asian steppe. Hendrik Spruyt points out, "A unified and prosperous China provided trading opportunities for the steppe tribes or booty by raiding, thereby making unified action by the otherwise loosely organized tribal federation possible. When China was racked by turmoil and civil war, the lack of economic benefits for unified action decreased in the steppe as well."[11] In other words, while confrontation and conflict were frequent, the genuine interest of the steppe nomads in competing against Chinese governance models or seeking to replace Chinese ideas – let alone the "territorial conquest of China proper" – was limited.[12]

1.1 East Asian History and Western Social Science Theory

Why is this important? The research presented here leads to new insights about state formation in all societies, not just those in East Asia. It moves the study of state formation beyond both Eurocentric and Sinocentric preoccupations to become truly comparative in nature. This research casts doubt on whether the bellicist thesis is a universal truth with explanatory power outside the European region in which it was inductively derived. If we are right, the bellicist approach is just one possible causal mechanism that is often applied as a partial

[10] Keith Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 4.
[11] Hendrik Spruyt, *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 101.
[12] Spruyt, *The World Imagined*, 101.

narrative about a particular time and place. Further examination of East Asian history would likely generate different assumptions and theories about international relations, which would probably lead to different conclusions about how politics work and societies are organized in all regions of the world.[13]

Indeed, our work suggests that emulation was likely more important even in European state formation than is commonly recognized, as scholars such as Anna Grzymala-Busse and Philip Gorski are pointing out.[14] It is quite likely that emulation and diffusion were central causal factors in state formation in Europe, Latin America, and other regions; and that the bellicist thesis was less prevalent than has been commonly acknowledged.

Victoria Hui compellingly argues that scholars should "set aside universal theories" and be aware that "competing causal mechanisms and strategic interactions generate multiple equilibria," which are "sensitive to historically contingent conditions."[15] This is especially the case when assuming that the European experience is universal across time and space. The willingness to acknowledge the Eurocentric origins of much of international relations theory is not new since "the median American scholar of IR is deeply comfortable with European examples and analogies and has almost no exposure to Asian examples and history. Thus, when faced with Asian examples, they are considered within the context they are taught: through the European lens."[16] What is new in this book is the deep and extensive empirical evidence we bring to bear that shows that the Eurocentric theories are not universal and, furthermore, a new argument about the causes of state formation that marks a positive theoretical advance.

J. C. Sharman explains how understanding historical Asian polities might help change our long-held assumptions about developments in Europe.

[13] Yuen Foong Khong, "The American Tributary System," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 6, no. 1 (2013), 1–47.

[14] Grzymala-Busse, "Beyond War and Contracts"; and Philip S. Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[15] Victoria Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2–34.

[16] David C. Kang and Alex Yu-Ting Lin, "US Bias in the Study of Asian Security: Using Europe to Study Asia," *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 4, no. 3 (2019), 393.

First, it disconfirms the idea of a single path to military effectiveness, of sequences of necessary and sufficient causes, either technological or tactical, by which war makes states. Second, it undermines stereotypes according to which relatively transient successes by small European polities are too often portrayed as epochal triumphs, whereas mighty, long lived Asian empires are characterized as merely failures waiting to happen.[17]

Shifting the lens through which we view the past of state formation can thus have a significant impact on changing and informing our understanding of how interstate relations work across time and space.

In contrast to the extensive literature on European state formation, there is comparatively less scholarship in the social science literature on state formation in East Asia. Most scholarship on East Asian state formation focuses on what can be called Phase I: the emergence of unified China during and after the Warring States period (475–221 BCE).[18] Yet, this scholarship suffers from two main limitations: temporal and geographic. Temporally, it ignores almost all of East Asian history and focuses on the emergence of China 2,000 years ago as if it were the only event of consequence. This is as if scholars explored the rise of the Roman Empire in the third to first centuries BCE and concluded that nothing of significance then happened in European history until the end of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. In short, there is an overused stereotype of stagnant and endless dynastic Chinese cycles that should have been excised long ago from any serious scholarship on East Asia. Most state formation in East Asia occurred centuries after the initial emergence of centralized Chinese rule.

Geographically, much of the scholarship treats China as equivalent to all of East Asia and barely acknowledges the existence of any other political units in the region. This overemphasizes the role of China in the system. Yet Korea and Japan (and later Vietnam and elsewhere) emerged as states over 1,000 years ago, beginning in the fifth to eighth centuries CE, which can be called Phase II, and they often interacted

[17] J. C. Sharman, *Empires of the Weak: The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 6.

[18] Edgar Kiser and Yong Cai, "War and Bureaucratization in Qin China: Exploring an Anomalous Case," *American Sociological Review*, 68, no. 4 (2003), 513; Dingxin Zhao, "Spurious Causation in a Historical Process: War and Bureaucratization in Early China," *American Sociological Review*, 69, no. 4 (2004), 603–607; and Hui, *War and State Formation*.

with each other without paying any attention to China (Figure 1.1). It may seem odd to suggest *not* focusing on the hegemon. Our point, however, is that more emphasis needs to be placed on the agency that existed across the entire East Asian region. This is all the more necessary if the discipline of international relations is going to widen its inquiry beyond China and Phase I, and address state formation across the breadth of historical East Asia throughout the 1,700 years that encompass Phase II and beyond.

There are notable exceptions to these observations, of course, and we do not mean to be too blunt or sweeping in our claims. Indeed, much of this book builds directly on the insights of scholars who have examined China over time or compared countries in East Asia with each other. Perhaps the most influential among the former category are Dingxin Zhao and R. Bin Wong, both of whom make powerful arguments about how the Chinese state evolved over 2,000 years.[19] In the latter category, Victor Lieberman and Alexander Woodside have written groundbreaking books: Lieberman exploring the sweep of both Southeast Asian state formation, and Woodside reminding us of the "lost modernities" of China, Korea, and Vietnam.[20]

1.2 A Disclaimer and a Defense

This book explores state formation in East Asia across an immense span of time and across an immense geographic region. In so doing, we are mindful of a common criticism (and outdated view) that Korea, Japan, and Vietnam are seen as "little Chinas."[21] Historians such as

[19] Dingxin Zhao, *The Confucian-Legalist State: A New Theory of Chinese History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

[20] Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context*, c. *800–1830*, vol. 1, *Integration on the Mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context*, c. *800–1830*, vol. 2, *Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Alexander Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the Hazards of World History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[21] See, for example, Benjamin Elman, John Duncan, and Hermann Ooms (eds.), *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2002), iii.

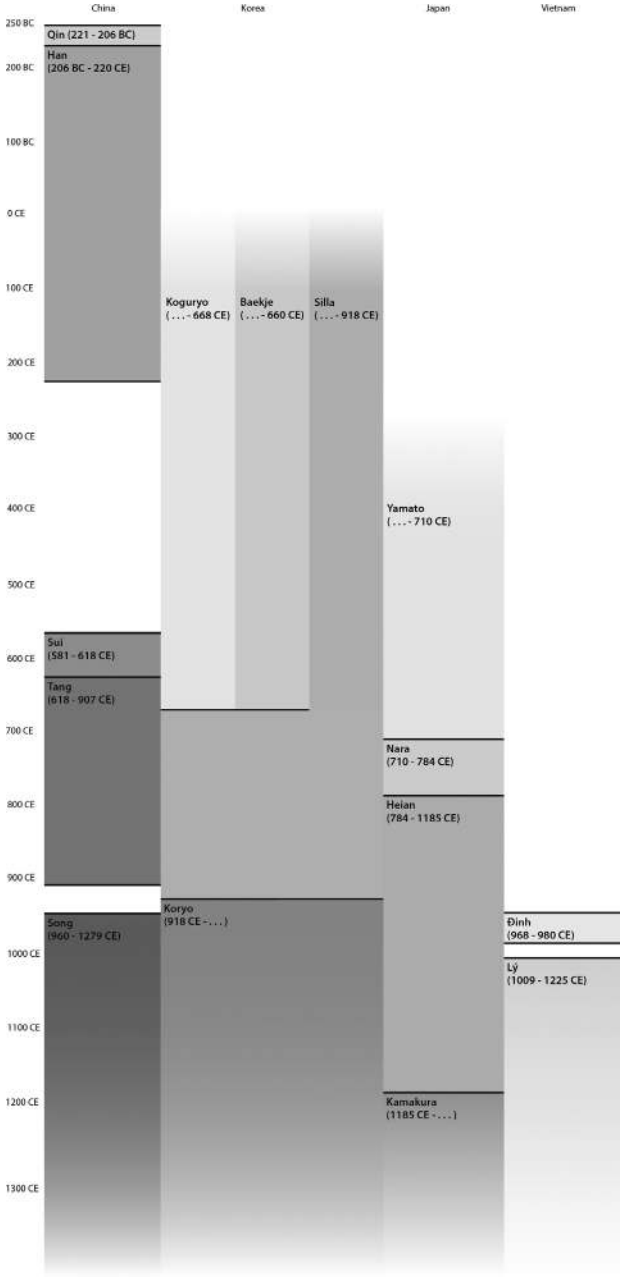

Figure 1.1 East Asian state formation, 200 BCE–1200 CE

Shawn McHale have argued that, even though "it is clear that we can find evidence suggesting that Vietnam fit neatly within the East Asian Confucian world … the influence of Confucianism in Vietnam has been exaggerated and misconceived."[22] Our purpose here is to neither contest nor ignore the considerable subtlety and difference and individuality of each country in East Asia. These countries are all unique, all retain a large degree of agency, and all have their own particular histories, interactions with each other, and cultures. As R. Bin Wong put it years ago, "A book of this scale unavoidably contains descriptions and assessments that some readers will consider incomplete or misleading … differences and similarities are a basis for comparison."[23]

Rather, our purpose here is different: to compare the broad similarities within the region and to contrast that with the major differences in the European region. It is fully possible to both recognize that there were differences among China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam and, at the same time, to acknowledge clear similarities and shared influences across them. For the purposes of exploring over 1,000 years of history in four countries, we will inevitably miss much nuance – and further research should explore each of these countries in depth, with much greater detail and specificity than we could hope to do in one monograph. This book is clearly a work of social science, not history: We are concerned primarily with engaging a major theoretical literature about state formation by bringing new empirical evidence to the discussion. As such, we draw broad patterns and explore systematic differences across regions and across time, while realizing that we are perhaps overlooking particular nuance within the cases that we group together.

This is a relatively understudied area of research, but the findings relayed in this book offer a positive theoretical advance with a new argument about the causes of state formation that has central implications for some of the most fundamental theories of the political science and international relations disciplines. Emulation was likely as

[22] Shawn McHale, "Mapping a Vietnamese Confucian Past and Its Transition to Modernity," in Elman et al. (eds.), *Rethinking Confucianism*, 397.
[23] Wong, *China Transformed*, 7.

important in European state formation as was bellicist competition. Indeed, around the world, more attention should be paid to emulation as a key element of state formation. We hope this book is one contribution to widening our understanding of state formation in all regions and across all epochs, not just East Asia.