CIVILIZATION AND EMPIRE

China and Japan’s Encounter with European International Society

Shogo Suzuki
This book critically examines the influence of International Society on East Asia, and how its attempts to introduce ‘civilization’ to ‘barbarous’ polities contributed to conflict between China and Japan.

Challenging existing works that have presented the expansion of (European) International Society as a progressive, linear process, this book contends that imperialism – along with an ideology premised on ‘civilizing’ ‘barbarous’ peoples – played a central role in its historic development. Considering how these elements of International Society affected China and Japan’s entry into it, Shogo Suzuki contends that the two states envisaged a Janus-faced International Society, which simultaneously aimed at cooperative relations among its ‘civilized’ members and at the introduction of ‘civilization’ to non-European polities, often by coercive means. By examining the complex process by which China and Japan engaged with this dualism, this book highlights a darker side of China and Japan’s socialization into International Society which previous studies have failed to acknowledge.

Drawing on Chinese and Japanese primary sources seldom utilized in International Relations, this book makes a compelling case for revising our understandings of International Society and its expansion. This book will be of great interest to students and researchers of international relations, international history, European studies and Asian Studies.

Shogo Suzuki is lecturer in Chinese Politics at the University of Manchester. His research focuses on International Relations with reference to East Asia, Chinese and Japanese foreign policy and Sino-Japanese relations.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International Law, Rights and Politics</td>
<td>Rein Mullerson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developments in Eastern Europe and the CIS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Logic of Internationalism</td>
<td>Kjell Goldmann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coercion and accommodation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia and the Idea of Europe</td>
<td>Iver B. Neumann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A study in identity and international relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Future of International Relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters in the making?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructing the World Polity</td>
<td>John Gerard Ruggie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essays on international institutionalization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy</td>
<td>Stefano Guzzini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The continuing story of a death foretold</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Relations, Political Theory and the Problem of Order</td>
<td>N.J. Rengger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond international relations theory?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War, Peace and World Orders in European History</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edited by Anja V. Hartmann and Beatrice Heuser</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Integration and National Identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The challenge of the Nordic states</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadow Globalization, Ethnic Conflicts and New Wars</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A political economy of intra-state war</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Security Analysis and Copenhagen Peace Research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edited by Stefano Guzzini and Dietrich Jung</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing International Relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niklas Luhmann and world politics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edited by Mathias Albert and Lena Hilkermeier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Civilization and Empire
China and Japan’s Encounter with European International Society
*Shogo Suzuki*
Civilization and Empire
China and Japan’s Encounter with European International Society

Shogo Suzuki
For my parents
Contents

List of illustrations x
Acknowledgements xi
Series Editor’s Preface xiv

Introduction 1

1 Socialization into International Society 11

2 The East Asian International Society 35

3 Acquiring knowledge: Chinese and Japanese perceptions of European International Society 56

4 Learning the competence and skill to be a ‘civilized’ state: state reconfiguration in China 89

5 Learning the competence and skill to be a ‘civilized’ state: state reinvention in Japan 114

6 Demonstrating ‘civilized’ identity: dismantling the Tribute System 140

Conclusion 177
Notes 184
Bibliography 218
Index 236
List of illustrations

List of figures

1.1 Functionalist concept of socialization 13
1.2 Socialization into European International Society 15
1.3 ‘Die Südsee ist das Mittelmeer der Zukunft’ 22
1.4 Stages of socialization 31
3.1 ‘Another “Sick man”’ 70
5.1 Adopting European weapons 116
6.1 Shooting China in the name of ‘civilization’ 176

List of tables

1.1 The processes of socialization 16
2.1 Constitutional structures and fundamental institutions in European International Society and the East Asian International Society 40
Acknowledgements

Writing my first book has proved to be an interesting experience for me. I feel a slight sense of anxiety when I become conscious of the fact that I am about to present my own opinions to a much wider audience than my Ph.D. thesis, on which this book is based. Most of all, however, I am humbled to realize that the writing of this book could not have been completed by myself. I feel a deep sense of gratitude when I recognize just how many individuals and institutions have helped me throughout the years of researching and writing for this book, and it is therefore my pleasure to be able to thank them here.

My first thanks must go to my two principal supervisors, Yongjin Zhang and Kathy Morton. Both of them had the unenviable task of having to guide a student who had no background in International Relations, and it is testament to their dedication to scholarship and education that I have got this far. I continue to be deeply indebted to their generous help and guidance, and hope that our fruitful working relations will continue in the future. This book is also a fruit of their labours, although I am of course solely responsible for any errors.

Institutional support is of course indispensable to conduct successful research, and for this I should also like to thank the Australian Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, the Australian National University (ANU), and ultimately the Australian taxpayers for supporting my doctoral research and allowing me to spend four very happy years in Canberra. During my fieldwork in China, I benefited greatly from the support extended by Beijing University and Professors Xu Kai and Wang Xiaqiu. In Japan, I was helped immensely by the Institution of Oriental Culture at the University of Tokyo, and Professors Tanaka Akihiko and Hamashita Takeshi. I also salute all my teachers at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Leeds, for giving me the necessary skills, intellectual stimulation, and encouragement for studying China and East Asia when I was an undergraduate student.

I am also delighted to be able to thank many colleagues and friends who provided me with intellectual and moral support. I am indebted to all members of staff in the Department of International Relations at the ANU,
but I should like to thank in particular Tomoko Akami, Chris Braddick, Lorraine Elliott, Greg Fry, Stuart Harris, Colin Jeffcott, Paul Keal, Pauline Kerr, Heather Rae, Chris Reus-Smit, Peter Van Ness and Tianbiao Zhu for their help and inspiration. Most of all, I am deeply grateful – even if I may not have seemed so at the time – for their ability to be my toughest critics in order to push me further to improve my ideas and analyses. In this spirit, I should also like to thank my Ph.D. examiners Professors Ian Clark and Richard Little for their perceptive comments. I should also like to extend my gratitude to Chris Hill and Amrita Narlikar at the Centre for International Studies, University of Cambridge (where I spent two years as a post-doctoral fellow) for their help and encouragement in turning my original manuscript into this book. I also say thank you to Markus Gehring, Barak Kushner, Richard Ned Lebow, Tadokoro Masayuki, John Swenson-Wright and Robert Weatherley for their games of tennis and beers at Cambridge. My special thanks also to Amy Chen, Wendy Cooke, Matthew Ham, Mary-Lou Hickey, Lynne Payne (who formatted the manuscript), Farnaz Salehzadeh and Wendy Slaninka for their administrative support and good company. During the time spent researching and writing for this book I have had the opportunity to meet wonderful individuals who have provided help, inspiration and friendship. This is my greatest asset of all. Scholarships and grants can help pay for one’s research, but no amount of money can buy good friends. My thanks go to Mike Boyle, André Broome, Michelle Burgis, Malcolm Cook, Thuy Do, Nicole George, Ayla Göl, Sarah Graham, Miwa Hirono, Craig Meer, Gavin Mount, Joel Quirk, Wynne Russell, Len Seabrooke, Taylor Speed, Reiko Take, Shannon Tow, Darshan Vigneswaran and members of the ANU IR ‘lunchtime group’ (you know who you are!). I also extend my deep gratitude to my aunt and uncle Fujimori Hideyo and Fujimori Sadayoshi, who housed and fed their strange half-Western nephew, as well as Iwase Misako and the rest of the Suzuki clan for their company during my time in Japan. I should also mention a special word of appreciation for my friends outside academia. Lyma Balderama, Josie, Izumi and Kizaki Braddick, Stefan Knollmayer, Anna Rajander and the night-watchmen at the Coombs Building (Peter Adams, Grant Rebbeck, and the late Joe Wigham) all played a crucial role in reminding me of the world outside universities and prevented me from becoming even more eerie and unsociable, for which I am grateful. My thanks and apologies also for the many people I have probably forgotten to mention. In preparing this book, I have benefited greatly from the help and patience of my editors, Heidi Bagtazo, Lucy Dunne and Amelia McLaurin at Routledge. I also gratefully acknowledge the kind permission granted by Routledge, Iwanami Shoten in Japan, and Hergé/Moulinsart to reproduce the illustrations in this book. Finally, I should like to thank my immediate family. I am grateful to my brother and his family for gamely putting up with my inability to explain or ‘summarize’ clearly what I do for a living; I hope this book will help them
and my one-year old niece Mia understand what my academic career is all about. My biggest debt, however, is to my parents. They provided considerable moral and financial support for my very long student career which took me all the way to China, Japan and Australia. Their faith in me has always been a source of strength, and I therefore dedicate this book to them in loving appreciation.

Shogo Suzuki
Ilkley

On the opening day of the Beijing Olympics

All Chinese names in this book, unless cited from other works, are transcribed in the pinyin romanization system. Japanese long vowels are indicated by a macron (such as Ōkuma Shigenobu or Ryūkyū), except for well-known names such as Tokyo. Surnames precede given names for both Chinese and Japanese individuals.
Although it is now almost *de rigeur* to acknowledge that the study of international relations emerged and developed within the constraints of a Westphalian straitjacket, important aspects of this insight have not yet been fully digested. When thinking about international relations, despite the recent flurry of interest in empire, for most scholars, the image of states operating in an anarchic arena is what first comes to mind. This image still often remains the default position in International Relations. Thanks to the constructivists there is now at least a general acknowledgement that anarchy represents a largely empty signifier and requires further specification. But this development was largely anticipated by the first generation of English School theorists who made three significant moves that helped to loosen the straps of the Westphalian straitjacket. First, they acknowledged the importance of a sociological approach and examined international relations in the context of an anarchical or international society where the behaviour of states is constrained by norms and institutions. Second, they stressed that history reveals how international societies have taken many different forms across time and space and they observed, for example, that the long-established East Asian international society had very different characteristics from the international society that emerged in early modern Europe. Third, they asserted that during the modern era, the European international society expanded, overtaking existing international societies and eventually establishing a global international society.

Because each of these moves builds on the previous one, it is the third move that has the most extensive consequences for the field of international relations. Moreover, in the 1980s, when the English School first highlighted the importance of trying to understand the expansion of the international society, there were no other theorists focusing on the issue. Indeed it is an area that remains under-researched and under-theorised. However, there is now a growing interest in this subject and a concomitant recognition that there are significant flaws in the way that the English School initially addressed the issue. These flaws all flow, ultimately, from the fact that the English School approach reflects an excessively Eurocentric perspective. The European international society did not emerge fully formed within the confines of
Europe and then extend to the rest of the world. On the contrary, the European international society was very much shaped by its encounters with the non-European world. The English School, for example, largely ignored the fact that colonization was a crucial institution within the European international society and, as a consequence, this vital aspect of the expansion story is very substantially underplayed. There was also a failure to acknowledge that the Europeans had a variety of contacts with the non-European world long before the putative expansion of the European international society occurred. In Africa and Asia, these early encounters all took place on terms established by the indigenous populations of these regions. In other words, the Europeans had to find ways of inserting themselves into long established international societies. But because these earlier practices are not highlighted by the English School its account only focuses on the end of what is, in fact, a much longer and more complex process.

In this book, Shogo Suzuki, while acknowledging the importance of the English School’s contribution to understanding the establishment of the modern international society, goes on to reveal significant weaknesses in its theoretical framework as well as the resulting empirical account of how the East Asian international society was absorbed into the emerging global international society. At the theoretical level, he draws on the work of constructivists who have now looked in some depth at the way socialization takes place in the international arena. But he then extends this framework and this allows him to track the very different ways in which China and Japan became socialized into the expanding international society, generating an account that is very much more nuanced and sophisticated than existing English School assessments. Suzuki’s framework also allows us to see that both China and Japan had been completely socialised into the long entrenched East Asian international society and how, in many important respects, this society was profoundly different from the European international society. Suzuki demonstrates that only by understanding how the East Asian international society operated is it possible to comprehend the significance of the very different strategies and responses that were adopted by China and Japan when they confronted the European international society. What Suzuki shows is that although both countries had a remarkably good understanding of how the European international society operated, paying particular attention to the balance of power, diplomacy and international law, they reached very different conclusions about how to respond.

On the one hand, the Chinese dismissed European assumptions of superiority and hoped that they could draw on their knowledge of developments in Europe to consolidate their own power position and thereby preserve the East Asian international society. On the other hand, the Japanese came to the conclusion that they had no alternative but to follow in the wake of the Europeans. While recognizing that, from the European perspective, the Japanese were not yet a civilized people, key Japanese decision-makers believed that if Japan implemented the correct practices such as engaging in
European forms of diplomacy and justifying their actions on the basis of European international law then Japan would eventually be identified by the Europeans as a ‘civilized’ state. These particular strategies correspond to what Suzuki identifies as the ‘light’ side of the European international society. But he goes on to argue that the Japanese were also fully aware of what he depicts as the ‘dark’ side of international society which he associates, for example, with the use of force to punish the misdemeanours of the ‘uncivilized’ members of the international society, or alternatively to colonize them. The Japanese implemented these darker practices at least in part to secure European recognition that Japan constituted a ‘civilized’ state and could become a full member of the European-based international society. But both sets of practices, the light as well as the dark, had the effect of undermining the structures of the established East Asian international society and, almost inevitably, they brought Japan into violent conflict with China, thereby ending several centuries of peaceful interaction.

Suzuki is careful not to overstate his case. He does not suggest that we can use his framework to provide a comprehensive or complete understanding of international developments in East Asia at the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the meeting of the European and East Asian international societies did play a very important role in international developments at that time and the merging of these societies unquestionably generated some very substantial tensions in the region that have not yet been dissipated. The English School has tended to gloss over the darker side of international society and Suzuki performs a useful service in exposing it. But even more important is his vivid demonstration that to understand the emergence of the contemporary international society it is essential to understand the international societies that have been displaced.

Richard Little
University of Bristol
Introduction

This book is about China and Japan’s socialization into the European-dominated international order in the late nineteenth century. In the discipline of International Relations, this subject has primarily been examined by scholars who work in the intellectual tradition of the ‘International Society’, or ‘English School’ approach. Here, China and Japan’s entry into European International Society is examined primarily through studying the process by which both states adopted the European-originated ‘standard of civilization’, particularly international law and European-styled diplomatic institutions. It is commonly argued that the ‘standard of civilization’ constituted the social criterion that had to be fulfilled to gain legitimate membership of the Society as a ‘civilized’ entity. Hence, English School scholars have examined both states’ domestic reforms aimed at satisfying this ‘standard’ and allowing them to enter the Society as legitimate members. China and Japan’s attempts to conform to this ‘standard’ are said to reflect both states’ desires to assume ‘civilized’ status on the Society’s terms, as well as the existence of a process of socialization where members of the European international order attempted to shape these two newcomers to conform to the norms of the social group.

This book departs from these conventional investigations by examining a particular aspect of China and Japan’s socialization into European International Society that has to date been overlooked: the rise of Japanese imperialism and the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war of 1894–95. My starting point is a small number of English School studies which have pointed to the existence of a dualistic mode of interaction within European International Society. The English School has conventionally conceptualized International Society as a society which aims for the tolerance and coexistence of its members, as exemplified by constitutive norms such as sovereignty. Such views, however, have been criticized for their narrow, Eurocentric standpoint which only examines inter-European relations and fails to account for the very different, far less tolerant mode of interaction which dictated European states’ relations with non-European polities. As pointed out by Edward Keene, in the context of the late nineteenth century when China and Japan encountered and were incorporated into the Society, there existed a firm
belief in the superiority of European ‘civilization’ and a concomitant belief that the European states had a moral duty to spread the blessings of European civilization, by force and outright colonization if necessary. This gave the mode of interaction which applied to ‘barbarous’ non-European polities a decidedly coercive, expansionist character.

The main aim of this book is to take these claims seriously and examine how these structures affected China and Japan’s entry into European International Society. It is thus intended as an empirical inquiry conducted within the broader theoretical framework of the English School approach (as can be deduced from my use of the term ‘European International Society’), complemented by the analytical insights of constructivism, which shares a sociological approach to understanding international politics similar to the English School. As will be discussed further below, existing English School accounts of this process remain rather sanitized and ‘top-down’. They are primarily ‘success stories’ by which the non-European polities faithfully reproduced institutions which supposedly facilitated toleration and coexistence within European International Society. However, as I will argue in the chapters that follow, this process entailed a much darker aspect to it than is often assumed. What is of particular importance here is the fact that as Japan increasingly associated itself with the Society, it began to emulate the Society’s ‘civilized’ members by engaging in imperialist policies designed to demonstrate that it had attained a level of (European) ‘civilization’ high enough for it to qualify to play a part in its forcible dissemination in Asia. This, ironically, was to result in war between China and Japan in 1894–95, the first time since the late sixteenth century. One of the main aims of this book, then, is to explicate the role European International Society played in the rise of Japanese imperialism in the late nineteenth century, thus actually disturbing the many years of relative peace which had pervaded Sino-Japanese relations.

This last point may not come as a particular surprise to students of Chinese or Japanese history. The late nineteenth century remains an important turning point in Sino-Japanese relations, and indeed continues to weigh heavily on the minds of both the Japanese and Chinese. Statesmen from the two sides regularly make references to the ‘history of friendship and exchange covering 2,000 years’, and it is this ‘juxtaposition of a two-thousand-year, predominantly peaceful relationship on the one hand, and a fifty-year relationship of acrimony on the other, [which] appears to have set the tone of postwar Sino-Japanese relations’. These statements are based on the assumption that Sino-Japanese relations were of a peaceful nature for a remarkable period of time, and only became conflictual from 1895 onwards. Similarly, historians have attempted to explain Japanese aggression during this period by attributing the changes in China and Japan’s bilateral relations to Japan’s ‘modernization’, or more accurately, its entry and socialization into the European-dominated international order. Christopher Howe, for instance, notes that following its encounter with the European order, ‘Japan
first came to terms with a Western political and economic order that it was powerless to resist but then, having done this, subordinated China by the same Western methods. Similarly, in his authoritative study of Japanese colonialism in Korea, Peter Duus also states:

The adoption of an expansionist policy was intimately linked to the timing of Japan's decision to modernize. The Japanese chose to tread the path toward 'civilization' and 'enlightenment' at precisely the moment in history when the nation-states of Western Europe were in the midst of frenzied territorial expansion across the globe ... The global reach of Western imperialism could not help but influence both the character of Meiji modernization and the thrust of Meiji foreign policy. It provided the context in which the Meiji leaders acted and a model for them to follow.

These arguments, however, beg a number of questions. In contrast to realist arguments which posit a timeless anarchical international realm characterized by continuous power politics and competition among states for survival, Duus's claim that the Western powers provided a 'model' for Japan to follow suggests that something was 'learned' which made the Japanese adopt imperialist policies. But what exactly was learned from the European international order and its members to cause the hostilities that would overshadow such a long period of 'friendship and exchange'? It is also worth considering the Chinese case as well; as the European-dominated international order had also expanded to China before Japan, it is equally plausible that the Chinese were subjected to similar forces that caused Japan to emulate the European powers. Did the Chinese also 'learn' similar lessons from the Japanese? If so, did this also contribute to the deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations? If not, why?

Examinations of English School works lead to similar intellectual frustrations. While English School authors are not unaware of the intertwined nature of imperialism and the expansion of the Society, their references to this are somewhat perfunctory, to say the very least. With reference to Japan's coercive diplomatic conduct towards its Asian neighbours following its encounter with the Society, Hidemi Suganami states:

Meiji Japan's intercourse with these countries closely resembled that between the Western Powers and the Tokugawa authorities in both form and substance: in form, it was based on treaty obligations; in substance, it was an exercise in power politics ... this stage of Japan's foreign relations is one in which she began to apply what she had learnt from the West in her external affairs.

In similar fashion to arguments forwarded by some historians, Suganami's statement again opens up the possibility that it may be more appropriate to