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The Origin of the Interstate System: The Warring States in Ancient China[1]

GERALD CHAN

The current literature on international relations has us believe that the modern state system originated in the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 which ended the Thirty Years' War in Europe. This article tries to go beyond conventional thinking by probing further into history for the true origin of the interstate system. It argues that, at least in the Chinese case, the interstate system can be traced to the Spring and Autumn as well as the Warring States periods (722-221 B.C.). It concludes that the assumption in the current literature reflects an Anglo-American-centric view and thus excludes other possible explanations.

KEYWORDS: **international relations; interstate system; state sovereignty; Warring States; Westphalia**

Dr. Gerald Chan is Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Co-Editor of *Political Science* journal, School of Political Science and International Relations, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. His recent publications include *Chinese Perspectives on International Relations: A Framework for Analysis* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) and *International Studies in China: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Nova Science, 1998).

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[1]"Warring States" in the subtitle is used in a shorthand way to cover the Spring and Autumn as well as the Warring States periods in the Zhou dynasty (722-221 B.C.).

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Events in the past, if not forgotten, can serve as lessons for the future.
—Chinese proverb

This paper is a first attempt at analyzing the study of interstate relations in ancient China. The current literature on international relations has us believe that the modern state system has its roots in the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 which ended the Thirty Years' War in Europe. As one scholar has noted, this belief "certainly contains partial truth,"[2] implying that there is something extra which goes beyond this conventional understanding. This paper follows this lead and probes further into history for the true origin of the interstate system. It suggests that, at least in the Chinese case,[3] the interstate system can be traced to the Spring and Autumn as well as the Warring States periods (722-221 B.C.).[4]

The principal line of argument here is that statehood, as defined in terms of the Westphalian system, can be found in the state system in ancient China. The secondary line of argument is that the constitutional parts that make up the modern or contemporary state system, such as colonialism, balance of power, diplomatic manipulation, collective security, and inter-

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[2]According to Zhao Suisheng, in his *Power Competition in East Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), xii.

[3]Apart from the Chinese case, there are also others. See, for example, the various systems in ancient Greece and in the Middle East, as discussed in Yale H. Ferguson and Richard W. Mansbach, *Polities: Authority, Identities, and Change* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

[4]The two historical periods covered here are: *Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn) and *Zhanguo* (Warring States). The former derives its name from *Chunqiu* or the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, an extremely bare chronicle which records occurrences in the period from 722 to 481 B.C. However, our knowledge of this period comes almost entirely from a work known as *Zuozhuan*, which is in part a commentary on *Chunqiu*. *Zuozhuan* also begins with entries for the year 722 B.C. While *Chunqiu* ends with 481 B.C., the latest entry in *Zuozhuan* is for 464 B.C. Various dates (481 B.C., 475 B.C., 468 B.C., 464 B.C., 453 B.C., and 403 B.C.) have been used by scholars to designate the end of the Spring and Autumn period or the beginning of the Warring States period. The state of Qin completed its conquest of all the other states and began its dynasty in 221 B.C., making this year the last of the Warring States period. See Herrlee G. Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China: The Western Chou Empire* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 47 nn. 17, 18, 19; Hsu Cho-yun, *Ancient China in Transition: An Analysis of Social Mobility, 722-222 B.C.* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1965), 1 n. 1; and Chen Jiarong, *Zhongguo lidai zhi xingzhi shengshuai luanwang* (The rise and fall of Chinese dynasties) (n.p.: Xuejing shudian, 1989), 113.

state conferences and treaties, can also be found in ancient China. This paper offers an explanation as to why, despite the existence of such a system in China which stretched over a period of some five hundred years, there is little or no effort made to challenge the conventional wisdom in our current understanding of the origin of the interstate system. Consequently this paper calls for a readjustment to our existing perception.

The Commonly Accepted Story: The Westphalian System[5]

The Treaty of Westphalia brought an end to almost one hundred fifty years of continuous fighting in Europe and marked an end to an era of religious wars. This turning point in history was found in the mutual recognition of one another's sovereign rights (in addition to the separation of the powers of the church and the state). The major European powers at that time, including France, Sweden, Germany, and Austria, embraced the principle that every ruler had the right to prescribe the laws and religion of his or her subjects. Accordingly, they agreed to abstain from interfering in one another's domestic affairs. Thus occurred the birth of the modern state system. In this respect, the United Nations system in existence since the end of World War II can be seen as structured by the Westphalian legacy.

This Westphalian system is unique in human history in at least two ways: (1) it is the first international (or, more accurately, European) system to achieve global scale; and (2) it is based on the dominance of a single type of unit, that is, the sovereign territorial state.

The Thirty Years' War, which ended with the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia, was a complex of extended conflicts including hegemonic and religious strife, civil wars, and banditry. In some regions in Europe in which the wars were fought, up to a third of the population was devastated between 1618 and 1648. As the representatives of the major powers of

[5]This section is largely taken from the program of "From Pragmatic Solution to Global Structure" (An international conference to mark the 350th anniversary of the Peace of Westphalia: 1648-1998, held at the University of Twente, Enschede, Holland, July 16-19, 1998), 3, 8, 29.

Europe gathered in Müster and Osnabrük in the 1640s, it was first of all to end this dreadful situation. They could hardly have guessed that the basis for a decentralized system of sovereign, juridically equal states which they created would act as the foundation of today's global political system. In a sense, 1648 was not a victorious moment in history: there were no victors, only losers who worked out a pragmatic settlement to try to prevent further losses.

An Alternative Story from China[6]

China under the Zhou dynasty (1027-221 B.C.)[7] established a rather elaborate feudal-aristocratic[8] system governed by the King of Zhou. Under the system, five orders of nobility were introduced: *gong* (dukes), *hou* (marquis), *bo* (earls), *zi* (viscounts), and *nan* (barons). To protect the reigning house and to facilitate the rule of the King, thousands of vassal states or principalities were created and nobles were put in charge of them. Small states or principalities were considered as protectorates of, and thus dependent on, the larger ones. As long as the King was powerful, these states or principalities were in all respects submissive to the imperial reign. This expansion of the rule of Zhou has been described as "military colonialism" and the states so created were called "city-states."[9]

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[6]For a more detailed account, see Tong Shuye, *Chunqiu shi* (Chunqiu history) (Taipei: Taiwan kaiming shudian, 1969). Some paragraphs in this section borrow heavily from Wang Tieya, "International Law in Ancient China," in *Collected Courses of the Hague Academy of International Law* (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1990), 208-13.

[7]According to Dr. Ling Wing-tim of the National University of Singapore, there are altogether eighteen versions of the starting date of the Zhou dynasty, the earliest being 1130 B.C. while the latest being 1027 B.C. Personal communication.

[8]Richard L. Walker argued that "the usual characterization of this period of Ancient China as a feudal period is entirely misleading—it distracts attention from the dynamics and focuses it on rather meaningless, if still persistent, titles and relationships." See his *The Multi-State System of Ancient China* (Hamden, Conn.: The Shoe String Press, 1953), 18.

[9]Du Zhengsheng, *Zhoudai chengbang* (The city-states of the Zhou era) (Taipei: Lianjing chuban shiye gongsi, 1979), chap. 2. The term "city-states" (*chengbang*) is a rather apt description of the states concerned because the rulers of these states built protective walls around the area or city under their control. However, the term "*chengbang*" was not used in classical history books of the early Qin period (around 220 B.C). Rather, characters such

Table 1
Conquest and Absorption of States during the Spring and Autumn Period

State	Rank under Zhou system	Number of states conquered or absorbed*
Lu	Marquis	11
Song	Duke	8
Wei	Marquis	5
Qi	Marquis	12
Qin	Earl	31
Chu	Viscount	37
Wu	Viscount	6
Yan	Earl	1

*The numbers are the average of two separate counts by two Chinese scholars. For a different count, see Chen Jiarong, *Zhongguo lidai zhi xingzhi shengshuai luanwang* (The rise and fall of Chinese dynasties) (n.p.: Xuejing shudian, 1989), 115.

Source: Richard L. Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China* (Hamden, Conn.: The Shoe String Press, 1953), 27.

Upon the accession of King Ping to the throne in 770 B.C., the House of Zhou turned weak, and vassal states or principalities became increasingly powerful and independent. The smaller ones sometimes served as affiliated states (*fuyong*) or vassal states (*shu*) and sometimes as buffer zones between strong neighbors. One by one, the smaller states or principalities were swallowed up by larger ones, although the bigger ones sometimes broke up into smaller states out of their inability to control such large borders—a case of "overstretch" in modern-day terminology.[10] Of the 1,773 states or principalities set up in the area where the House of Zhou

as "*guo*" (translated literally as "state" in the contemporary sense) and "*jia*" (translated as "family") were used. At that time these two Chinese characters denoted political entities rather than the contemporary understandings of the terms "state" and "family." For example, Mencius referred to political entities when he used the phrase "*qiansheng zhi guo, baisheng zhi jia*" (political entities of a thousand chariots, political entities of a hundred chariots). Ibid., 3.

[10]"Overstretch" is a concept popularized by Paul Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987). Soon after the end of the Spring and Autumn period (722-481 B.C.), in 403 B.C., Jin had expanded its area beyond the point of effective control that it broke up into three new states: Han, Zhao, and Wei. See Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China*, 27-28.

established their power,[11] only about 170 were left after 722 B.C. and of this number only 12 were of any significance, including Lu, Zheng, Wei, Song, Qi, Chen, Cao, Cai, Qin, and Zhou. Table 1 shows the number of states conquered or absorbed by larger ones. Of these, Qi, a great power[12] under Duke Huan, was officially recognized in 651 B.C. as *ba* (protector, hegemon, or overlord)[13] of a league or confederation, sanctioned by the Zhou court. In 632 B.C. Duke Wen of Jin became another *ba*.[14] They ruled with their increasing military strength, paying little or no regard to the decrees of the King. After moving its capital eastward to Loyang from a location near Xi'an in 770 B.C., the House of Zhou started to lose its effective rule over the country. The vassal states acknowledged allegiance to the King only when convenient.

As the subordinate relations between the King and his feudal lords lost their significance, mutual relations among vassal states began to flourish, and practices and usages began to emerge in response to the need to conduct interactions. At some stage these states were quite autonomous and independent, to the extent that, as claimed by Hsu Cho-yun, "all the states enjoyed de facto sovereignty."[15] Occasionally, the power of a greater state would be able to influence the policy decisions in the councils of smaller ones. On the whole, however, the states guarded their sovereign powers jealously. They waged wars, changed allies, and made treaties to suit their interests.[16] Sovereignty was warily protected, as permission had to be sought in order to pass through the territory of a state. This was typical of the rise of the interstate system in ancient China.

In simple terms the contemporary understanding of sovereignty consists of three basic elements: territory, people, and government. Within the

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[11]Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China*, 20.

[12]A great power was commonly rendered as "*wansheng guo*," literally a country of ten thousand four-horse chariots. Ibid., 41.

[13]"Overlord" is a term used by Hsu, *Ancient China in Transition*, 53.

[14]For a book-length treatment of the rise and fall of the hegemons (*ba*), see Chao Fulin, *Baquan diexing: Chunqiu bazhu lun* (Rise and fall of hegemony: On hegemons in Chunqiu) (Beijing: Sanlian chubanshe, 1992).

[15]Hsu, *Ancient China in Transition*, 5.

[16]Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China*, 24.

states, principalities, or city-states during this period of ancient China, the existence of a group of people under the management of a government was evident. What made a defined territory of a state in ancient China then can be seen from the building of protective walls to demarcate the boundary of physical control. Two types of walls were built at that time: an inner wall called "*cheng*" which extended three *li* (Chinese miles)[17] from the center of power of the ruling court; and an outer wall called "*guo*" which extended seven *li* from the center of power. The area in between *cheng* and *guo* was known also as "*guo*" (a Chinese character meaning "state" in the modern sense but referring to political entity then) and the people living and working within the *cheng* constituted the populace of this particular political entity (called "*guoren*"),[18] including the aristocrats, whereas those living and working outside (*ye*) were regarded by the people in this entity as "outsiders," known as "*yeren*" (people from the outside) or "*biren*" (people from faraway places).[19] Although the idea of this boundary as understood then was quite different from the contemporary idea of a state boundary, the sense of a bounded territory was apparent among the political entities in those periods of ancient China.[20]

An interesting aspect of the *guoren* is their participation in the politics of the state. *Guoren*, together with the aristocrats and the ruling king or duke, formed a kind of a tripartite system to govern the state. They could participate in the process of the establishment or abolition of a kingship or dukeship, influence the diplomacy of the state, discuss the relocation of the capital, and even enter into the decision-making process relating to war and

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[17]One *li* (Chinese mile) is roughly equal to 1/3 of a mile or 1/2 of a kilometer.

[18]The term "*guoren*" gradually fell out of use in the Warring States period. See Zhao Shichao, *Zhoudai guoye guanxi yanjiu* (A study of the relationship between *guo* and *ye* in the Zhou era) (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1993), 311.

[19]For a book-length treatment of the relationship between *guo* and *ye*, see ibid.

[20]Du, *Zhoudai chengbang*, 123. Zhao Shichao even suggests the emergence of *lingtu guojia* ("territorial state"). See his *Zhoudai guoye guanxi yanjiu*, 242-54. The full form of the ideogram "*guo*" (state) in fact consists of people, land, and weapons contained within a physical boundary. Thanks to Dr. David Wang, my former colleague at the East Asian Institute, Singapore, for pointing this out to me in December 1998. The origin of *guo* can be traced to the Xia dynasty. See Ge Jianxiong, *Tongyi yu fenglie: Zhongguo lishi de qishi* (Unity and division: The revelation of Chinese history) (Beijing: Sanlian chubanshe, 1994), 30.

peace. In the struggle for power between the king and the aristocrats, *guoren* often held the balance of power. This power relationship, which varied from one state to another, did not survive the demise of the state system in those periods. The "democratic" phenomenon was short-lived, due largely to the lack of institutionalization, with the participation of *guoren* in politics limited to consultation and verbal expression of their opinions.[21]

The hegemonic (*ba*) system lost its raison d'être when King Zhuang of Chu became the third hegemon. The system became largely irrelevant when Wu emerged in 482 B.C. as China's leading military power, which was in turn defeated and annexed by Yue from the south nine years later. Thereafter a period of ferocious warfare began, as remaining polities sought to eliminate one another. In 403 B.C. Jin was partitioned, leaving Qi, Qin, and Chu as contenders. In 334 B.C. Chu destroyed and occupied Yue. In 286 B.C. Qi annexed Song. Owing to military skills and organization, Qin proved to be the ultimate winner, formally ending the Zhou dynasty by occupying that polity in 256 B.C. and conquering the remaining independent states between 230 and 221 B.C.[22]

In an essay entitled "Traces of International Law in Ancient China" written in 1881, William A.P. Martin found the following evidence among the states in the Spring and Autumn period (722-481 B.C.):[23]

* A family of nations carrying on intercourse, both commercial and political
* An exchange of embassies, with a form of courtesy

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[21]Du, *Zhoudai chengbang*, 33, 132-33. See also Zhang Bingnan, *Shang Zhou zhengti yanjiu* (A study of the political system in Shang and Zhou) (Shenyang: Liaoning People's Press, 1987), 65-72.

[22]Derk Bodde, "The State and Empire of Ch'in," in *The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C.-A.D.220*, vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 40-53, cited in Ferguson and Mansbach, *Politics: Authority, Identities, and Change*, 188. For a quantitative account of the capabilities of the seven great powers in the Warring States period, see Bau Tzong-ho, "*Ho Tsung* and *Lien Heng* as Hostile Strategies in the Chinese Warring States Period," *The Annals* (Chinese Association of Political Science, Taipei), no. 14 (December 1986): 189.

[23]For an introduction to William A.P. Martin and his essay, see Wang, "International Law in Ancient China," 206-7, esp. nn. 6, 7. See also Joseph Tsu-tien Wu, "China's Earliest Encounters with and Adaptations to Western International Law," in *Reform and Revolution in Twentieth Century China*, ed. Yu-ming Shaw (Taipei: Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, 1987), 10-14.

* Treaties solemnly drawn up and deposited in a sacred place called Meng Fu
* A balance of power studied and practiced, leading to a combination to check the aggressions of the strong and to protect the rights of the weak
* The rights of neutrals to a certain extent being recognized and respected
* A class of men devoted to diplomacy as a profession

Hsu Cho-yun made an estimate of the frequency of wars during 722-464 B.C. in the Spring and Autumn period and arrived at a total "war score" of 1,211.5 for the 259-year period. This war score was calculated by counting as one point any single campaign in which each of the thirteen major powers was involved, and half a point when each small state was involved. Of the 259-year period, only 38 years were found to be peaceful.[24]

During the Warring States period, only sixteen states were conquered by the seven great powers of the time, and six of these were in turn overcome by Qin. However, despite the smaller number of states involved, Hsu found that the frequency of conflicts in this period was not much less than that in the Spring and Autumn era. In fact the wars in this period were in general longer in duration and on a larger scale.[25] The war score during this period (463-222 B.C.) was found to be 468.5 and, of the 242-year span, 89 years were found to be peaceful years.[26]

In the absence of a higher authority during the Spring and Autumn as well as the Warring States periods, war was the final arbiter.[27] Martin studied the laws of war which he claimed existed during those times:[28]

* In the conduct of war, the people and property of noncombatants were required to be respected;
* In legitimate warfare, the rule was that an enemy was not to be attacked

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[24]Hsu, *Ancient China in Transition*, 56, table 5.

[25]Ibid., 62.

[26]Ibid., 64, table 6.

[27]Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China*, 99.

[28]Ibid., 209. The fact that numerous wars were fought during those times means that the study of war might have received much attention from historians. One historian, Liu Boji, has identified seventeen types of wars. See his *Chunqiu huimeng zhengzhi* (Politics of covenants in the Spring and Autumn period) (Taipei: Zhonghua congshu, 1962), 449-58.

without first sounding the drum, and was given time to prepare for defence;
* A war was not to be undertaken without at least a decent pretext;
* The preservation of the balance of power was always recognized as a just cause;
* The right of existence was in general held sacred for the greater states which were held in fief from the Throne;
* The rights of neutrals were admitted and to a certain extent respected.

Some of Martin's findings suggest the existence of elements of balance of power, rudiments of civil rights, and procedures for dealing with interstate conflicts. Further illustrations in the areas of diplomacy, conferences, and treaties are illuminating.[29]

Diplomacy

Diplomatic activities were the most conspicuous during the Spring and Autumn as well as the Warring States periods. As the central power lost control, the vassal states at times engaged in varied diplomatic activities on a more or less equal footing. These included diplomatic notes or written reports sent from one court to another. They were recorded under various terms such as "*chao*," a court visit paid by one ruler or prince to another; "*hui*," meetings of officials or nobles of different states; "*pin*," missions of friendly inquiries sent from one state to another; "*shi*," emissaries sent from one state to another; and "*shou*," hunting parties where the representatives of different states combined business with pleasure.[30]

On very important occasions, the rulers or princes took up the matters personally. In most cases, however, diplomatic activities were carried out by *xinren*.[31] These were special envoys, ambassadors, or messengers. They

[29]These areas are chosen for further analysis partly because of the availability of source materials and partly because activities in these areas serve as good indicators for gauging interstate relations. To be sure, the concepts of diplomacy, conferences, and treaties are much more well-developed in the international relations literature in the West than elsewhere, but that does not preclude the fact that the practices of diplomacy, conferences, and treaties are also common in other cultures or systems of states.

[30]Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China*, 75.

[31]"*Xinren*" were today's diplomats. Some were professionals, while others undertook their duties only part-time. They were normally treated according to *li* (ritual rules). Sometimes,

Table 2
Diplomatic Missions by Lu Outside Its Borders, 720-521 B.C.

	720-701	660-641	600-581	540-521
Number of missions	7	8	10	15
Total mileage involved	780	1,650	2,580	6,360
Average miles for each mission	112	206	258	454
Missions by the Duke of Lu	7	5	4	3
Missions by Duke's family	0	2	0	0
Missions by officers of Lu	0	1	6	12

Notes:
1. The four time peirods were chosen arbitrarily.
2. The distances are presumably in Chinese miles.

Source: Richard L. Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China* (Hamden, Conn.: The Shoe String Press, 1953), 15.

had no privileges of exterritoriality, but the sanctity of their person was, as a principle, fully observed. Despite the lack of permanent legations, the frequency of diplomatic exchanges provided the near equivalent, and the stay of temporary envoys might be long enough to accomplish the purpose of residential legations.

The scope of these activities can roughly be gauged from the diplomatic missions sent by one of the smaller states called Lu to its neighboring states.[32] These activities increased in intensity over time. Richard L. Walker, author of a seminal work on the multistate system in ancient China, has compiled table 2.

The art of diplomacy and military strategy was fairly developed during those periods. One famous diplomat, known as Lu Zhonglian, helped to settle peacefully many important and complicated disputes among states, so much so that his name has remained synonymous with dispute-settler or peace-maker up to this day in Chinese communities. Su Qin and Zhang Yi were two noted strategists. The former successfully made efforts to form a

wars were raised as a result of the maltreatment or assassination of *xinren*. See Liu, *Chunqiu huimeng zhengzhi*, 290-93.

[32]Lu is often cited because of the availability of historical source materials relating to its activities.

defensive alliance of six states against Qin, the most powerful state at that time, in the so-called "perpendicular alliance," while the latter worked for Qin and succeeded in persuading the six states to dissolve their perpendicular alliance and to form a "horizontal alliance" in its place with the six states, taking Qin as their superior.

Conferences

In conducting interstate activities, conferences were often convened and participated in by the rulers of the states or their representatives. The conferences were sometimes called "*meng*," the purpose of which was to settle disputes; to discuss trade, communications, and cultural exchanges; to form collective security; and, more usually, to organize the leagues of states, which were also called "*meng*." The result of the conference was sometimes again called "*meng*," meaning the covenant or pact.[33]

A conference or *meng* appeared to be the most popular institution in the interstate relations during the Spring and Autumn as well as the Warring States periods. According to *Chunqiu Zuozhuan*, a history classic,[34] over sixty major conferences were convened to discuss a wide range of issues such as the establishment of a kingship, princeship, or dukeship; the setting up of capitals; military defence; war preparation; the pacific settlement of disputes; the renewal of friendships; and so on.[35]

One of the most well-known conferences, known as the "*mibing*" (disarmament) covenant,[36] was held in 546 B.C.[37] Before the convening of the

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[33]Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China*, 82; and Wang, "International Law in Ancient China," 211. Liu Boji has identified nine types of meetings or conferences and twenty types of covenants or pacts. See his *Chunqiu huimeng zhengzhi*, 430-40.

[34]See note 4 above.

[35]Zhang, *Shang Zhou zhengti yanjiu*, 61-62.

[36]Tong, *Chunqiu shi*, 222. For an interesting account of this *mibing*, see Sun Tiegang, ed., *Zhuhou zhengmeng ji: Zuozhuan* (Rivalries among princes: Zuozhuan) (Taipei: China Times, 1998), 143-49.

[37]An earlier *mibing* (disarmament) conference, organized by Hua Yuan, an official of Song, in 579 B.C. among three states (Jin, Chu, and Song) failed, due to the fact that Chu violated the agreement three years later by invading Zhang and Wei to its north. See Zhang Chuanxi, *Zhongguo gudai shigan* (History of ancient China) (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1985), 81-82; Chen, *Zhongguo lidai zhi xingzhi shengshuai luanwang*, 124-25; and Chao, *Baquan diexing*, 241. The peace treaty signed at this disarmament conference could be one

conference, a constant state of war had been causing dreadful sufferings for the ordinary people. During a period of some seventy to eighty years, Zhang suffered under seventy wars and Song under more than forty. The two sizable rivals, Jin and Chu, were exhausted.[38] This gave rise to anti-war sentiments and a cry "to stop the war of barons"—a kind of general peace movement. This movement led to the convening of a conference for the purpose of disarmament and the establishment of a league of all the states as a means to end the war. The idea originated from Duke Xiang Shu of the state of Song, who undertook shuttle diplomacy to various courts in order to make the proposal. The states approved his idea, and the scheme of convening a conference for that purpose was generally accepted. The leaders of fourteen states assembled at the capital of Song in 546 B.C.[39] After long and heated debates, a preliminary agreement was finally reached and a covenant signed, although the two most powerful states, Qin and Qi, declined to sign because of a dispute over who should sign first. The conference did, however, secure a period of peace for about forty years,[40] but failed to attain its original goal of disarmament, as the states continued to distrust each other and their armaments increased exponentially thereafter. The trust and agreement which had previously been achieved could not sustain the feelings of insecurity as a result of a shift in the balance of power among the states involved.[41]

Interestingly, some 2,500 years later when the League of Nations was established at Versailles in 1919, the league of 546 B.C. was noted and studied by scholars in the West, although there were disputes as to whether this league was the "first league of nations," based on the reasons that this league (1) was not composed of sovereign states, (2) did not set up any organization, and (3) had a goal limited to disarmament.[42] A paral-

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of the earliest in the world. See Bo Yang, *Zhongguoren shigang* (History of the Chinese) (Hong Kong: Xingguang chubanshe, [1977]), 153.

[38]Zhang, *Zhongguo gudai shigan*, 81-82.

[39]Chao, *Baquan diexing*.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China*, 56-58.

[42]Evan Morgan, "A League of Nations in Ancient China," *Journal of the North China Branch*

lel can also be drawn between this league and the Treaty of Westphalia.[43] On both occasions, the main purpose was to end wars in an "anarchical" environment and to engage in disarmament.

Treaties

In every community of states, treaties constitute important instruments regulating mutual relations. China, in the Spring and Autumn as well as the Warring States periods, was no exception. It has been reported that more than 140 treaties were reached in the Spring and Autumn period, of which 72 were bilateral.[44] These agreements dealt mainly with political matters, including political friendships, mutual aid, alliances, leagues, and so on. Their texts were always couched in brief language, but usually contained three parts: the preamble, which stated the purpose of the treaty; the articles, which set forth the mutual obligations of the parties; and the oath, which provided in the last part of the treaty that "the wrath of God will fall upon the state which violates this sacred agreement."[45] Treaties were concluded with solemn formalities, especially those personally signed by the rulers of the states. States were bound commonly by good faith, but sometimes guarantees such as bondages, strategic marriages, or exchange of hostages were secured for the enforcement of treaty stipulations.

The Chinese System and the Anarchical World[46]

Several reasons have been cited for rejecting the practices and usages during these two periods of Chinese history as constituting international law; hence, many argue that the Chinese interstate system should not be

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of the Royal Asiatic Society 57 (1926): 50-56, cited in Wang, "International Law in Ancient China," 212 and n. 25.

[43]Ferguson and Mansbach, *Politics: Authority, Identities, and Change*, 187.

[44]Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China*, 82.

[45]Wang, "International Law in Ancient China," 212.

[46]The term "anarchical world" takes its cue from Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977), to refer to the international or global system as it is understood today.

viewed as constituting the "international system." First, the states in these two periods were not sovereign states. Second, such practices and usages were not systematic in nature and had no connection at all with the present principles and rules of international law. The interstate system in these two periods came to an end in 221 B.C. when the entire country was unified under the rule of the Qin Emperor. From that point onwards, these practices and usages disappeared and there were no further traces of international law in China until the mid-nineteenth century.[47] Third, the ancient Chinese sovereign state system was a closed, unique, and isolated case.

The first reason concerning sovereignty has been discussed earlier. Experts argue that the state system in ancient China did possess the three commonly accepted components of sovereignty: a territory, a people, and a government.[48]

The second reason carries some weight. Whereas the systematic nature of that state system can be debated, the lack of a connection between the Chinese system and the current principles and rules of international law, overwhelmingly dominated by the Western value system, is obvious. However, this situation may change, although the change can be expected to be incremental and protracted, when the effects of the rise of China gradually pass on from its international behavior to the current norm of international law. A case in point is the Chinese view on human rights, whereby the Chinese view poses a significant challenge to that of the West. If the West and China are to engage constructively with each other in a meaningful way, then mutual accommodation of each other's ideas is clearly necessary.

The third reason of uniqueness and closeness can hardly be justified as valid if mutual learning for Western societies as well as for Asia were to have a place in the academic world and if increasing interdependence, transparency, and openness are the order of the day. After all, only one sighting

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[47]Wang, "International Law in Ancient China," 213. But Wang also queries whether the practices and usages can be called quasi-international law, meaning something similar to international law.

[48]The concept of state sovereignty, which this paper frequently refers to, is again well developed in the Western literature. The common understanding that sovereignty includes land, populace, and governance is well accepted among scholars, including those in China.

of a black swan refutes the statement that "all swans are white."[49]

A current debate among some Chinese scholars will further aid our understanding of the origin of the interstate system.[50] The debate concerns the question as to whether or not international relations existed in pre-modern China, that is, before the mid-nineteenth century.[51] Those who argue that they did exist often refer to the system that prevailed in ancient China during the two periods of Chinese history discussed here. At one point during the Spring and Autumn as well as the Warring States periods, China was divided into over one hundred small, self-contained states in which statesmen used such military strategies as "*hezong lianheng*" (vertical and horizontal alliances, a balance-of-power strategy in present-day terminology) to manage their external relations. They also used conflict resolution mechanisms (mostly domination of small states by large ones) to regulate and stabilize their state-to-state relationships.[52] A recent study in the West has pointed out that warfare in China began more than four thousand years ago: the first Chinese civil war happened in 2193 B.C. and the first interstate war in 2146 B.C.[53] A recent study in China has also pointed out that this geographically confined "Chinese village" shares some interestingly similar features with the contemporary "global village," such as colonization, independence, bilateral wars, regional wars, alliances, peace negotiations, disarmaments, the rise and fall of hegemons, and

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[49]The measures that I have used in this paper to gauge the state system in ancient China are concepts that are well developed in the international relations literature in the West. Apparently there have been no refutations of these concepts found in the international relations literature in China, nor have there been alternative concepts proposed or developed by Chinese scholars to properly replace them.

[50]The analysis in the rest of this section is a revised version taken from my book, *International Studies in China: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Nova Science, 1998), 7-10. An early version appears in "International Studies in China: Origins and Development," *Issues & Studies* 33, no. 2 (February 1997): 41-43.

[51]See Xi Laiwang in *Shijie lishi yanjiu dongtai* (Study of World History), 1988, no. 6 and *Huang Huai xuekan* (Huang Huai Journal), Social Science Edition, 1991, no. 1; and Yang Zheng in *Shijie lishi yanjiu dongtai*, 1989, no. 3.

[52]K. J. Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis*, seventh edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 35.

[53]Claudio Cioffi-Revilla and David Lai, "War and Politics in Ancient China, 2700 B.C. to 722 B.C.," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 39, no. 3 (September 1995): 467-94.

so on.[54] However, those scholars who argue otherwise point out that the system referred to was only an interstate system within a *regional* or even *subregional* context, certainly not *global* in the true sense of the word.

Some of the Chinese viewpoints on what constitutes international relations in this debate clearly differ from the contemporary, general understanding of the concept of international relations. The latter can be traced to the beginning of the world capitalist system and to the state system that emerged in Europe around the time of the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. The kind of interstate and transnational relations at the global level that emerged afterwards certainly did not exist in premodern China. During those historical times in China, a Chinese emperor would often reign over territories that came under strong Confucian influence, sometimes with rival kings, princes, or warlords competing with one another over land and resources. The small states that they controlled could be regarded as sovereign states in modern-day terms, as those states satisfied the definitions of sovereignty as a government exercising political control over a population within a geographically defined territory.[55] However, these states only existed in a regional or subregional context, not a global setting.[56] Chinese history has witnessed periods of unity under one emperor or ruler, and alternative periods of disunity in which systems of states competed with each other for control and influence.

The debate among some Chinese scholars hinges on the definitions of "international relations" and "sovereign state," and whether or not a regional scope and preindustrial European experiences are deemed as necessary and sufficient conditions for these definitions. Surely the current literature and scholarship on international relations (IR) in the wider world would find difficulty in accepting such a Chinese historical interpretation of the above-mentioned terms. This is due to the fact that contemporary IR

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[54]Pang Yu, *Shijie zhengzhi da qushi* (Great trends in world politics) (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Press, 1994).

[55]This situation has been acknowledged by some scholars in the West. Apart from Holsti cited in note 52 above, Charles Tilly has said that "an internally hierarchical and externally autonomous Chinese empire [has been in existence] for a millennium." See Charles Tilly in *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 3 (September 1995): 811.

[56]Xi in *Huang Huai xuekan*, 47-48.

studies are dominated overwhelmingly by the West, especially the United States,[57] which traces the origin of "mainstream" IR only to the modern European state system,[58] paying little attention to indigenous scholarships elsewhere.[59] However, most historians tend to agree that power politics were actively at play during those historical times in ancient China.

According to Professor Chen Lemin of the Institute of European Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the first time that China encountered anything resembling "international" was when it came into conflict with Western imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century.[60] This is quite accurate when viewed from the global political perspective in which the issue of competing sovereignties comes to the fore. However, from the perspective of transnational relations, the history of China's international relations dates back much earlier to the trading links established between China and the outside world. Trade was conducted with the nomadic tribes to the north during the Spring and Autumn as well as the Warring States periods; with countries to the west through the Silk Road some two thousand years ago; and with those to the south and southwest via the sea starting from the Qin dynasty.[61] This transnational trading pat-

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[57]Ken Booth and Steve Smith, eds., *International Relations Theory Today* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). Stanley Hoffman once said that the discipline of IR was "born and raised in America" and dominated by the United States because of the "political preeminence of the United States." See Stanley Hoffman, "An American Social Science: International Relations," in *International Theory: Critical Investigations*, ed. James Der Derian (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 240. For a recent Chinese view, see Wang Yizhou, "The U.S.-Centered International Political Science," *Er-shiyi shiji* (Twenty-first Century) (Hong Kong), no. 49 (October 1998): 148-58.

[58]Perhaps a case of "cultural imperialism," a term used aptly by Johan Galtung in his seminal essay "A Structural Theory of Imperialism," *Journal of Peace Research* 8, no. 2 (1971): 81-118.

[59]In reviewing Stephen Chan's chapter on "Beyond the North-West: Africa and the East" and A.J.R. Groom's chapter on "The World Beyond: The European Dimension," in *Contemporary International Relations: A Guide to Theory*, ed. A.J.R. Groom and Margot Light (London: Pinter, 1994), both of which look beyond the Anglo-American tradition, Steve Smith, Professor of International Relations at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, says that "many readers of the book will doubtless feel somewhat embarrassed, as I did, about knowing so little about what was being done outside a small geographical area." See his book review in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 154.

[60]Chen Lemin, "International Relations Studies in the West," *Guowai zhengzhixue* (Foreign Political Studies) (Beijing), 1987, no. 1:57.

[61]*China White Paper on Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation (1997)* (Beijing: China

tern occurred much earlier than the formation of the European state system. The rise of capitalism and trading networks on a transcontinental, though limited, scale thus preceded the West's gun-boat diplomacy in the mid-nineteenth century.[62]

Conclusion

Several observations can be made from the above analysis. First, the assumption that the European state system in the seventeenth century represents the origin of the interstate system is dubious. This assumption stems from an Anglo-American-centric view that is based on Eurocentrism. The partiality of this view is the cause of an apparently biased understanding of the origin of interstate relations, as depicted in the current IR literature in the West. There is a need to go beyond this one-sided view of the world. This observation does not suggest the complete rejection of the Anglo-American school of IR; there are so many major contributions made by this school to the study of IR that should be recognized, learned, and treasured. What is deficient in this school is its myopia, which prevents it from making a concerted effort to reach out to other cultures and experiences in order to draw more balanced (and, in some cases, correct) conclusions. One such case in point is the origin of the interstate system: the Anglo-American-centric view only looks toward the Westphalian system and therefore presents a misleading picture to students of IR as to the origin of the system.

Second, differing views on this and other issues will continue to exist in this world of incomplete and imperfect understanding, and the best way to move forward in order to achieve some sort of objectivity is to enter into intersubjective dialogues. This points again to a need to look beyond the

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Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation Press, 1997), 3. The white paper reports that in 500 B.C. the wearing of Chinese silk became a fashion among the aristocrats in the city-states in ancient Greece.

[62]See Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills, eds., *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

Anglo-American perception so as to gain a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of world affairs.

Third, there is a divide between IR studies on the one hand and the study of history on the other. The two branches of knowledge have traditionally been at odds with each other over the use of methodology and approaches. However, by taking a serious look back into history, especially the histories of other cultures, as this paper has tried to suggest and demonstrate, can yield fruitful, if sometimes disturbing, results.