The East Asian Peace

How It Came About and What Threats Lie Ahead

It is now 35 years since more than a century of bloody wars came to an end in East Asia. But what are the deep reasons for this remarkable lasting peace, and how fragile is it amid a new set of regional challenges?

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Source: PRIO Data 1946-2008 (best + low estimates); UCDP data 2009-2013 (best estimates).
Gender and Masculine Honor Ideology: Why They Matter for Peace
By Erik Melander

It is widely acknowledged that problems over historical grievances — especially between China and Korea, on the one hand, and Japan, on the other — and the power transition taking place between China and the US are two issues that threaten peace in East Asia. Less well known is the role that masculine honor ideology, which has a much stronger hold on East Asia than on Europe, could play in causing these two issues to escalate into armed conflict, writes Erik Melander.

Theories about power transition and history problems are prominent in the literature about war and peace in East Asia, and it is often argued that war may occur in East Asia because China threatens to overtake the United States as the most powerful nation in the world (power transition), or because memories of the region’s problematic history make current territorial disputes difficult to manage peacefully (the history problems), especially in the absence of satisfactory apologies on behalf of perpetrators of atrocities — with Japan usually singled out for not adequately apologizing.

Proponents of these ideas seem to assume that the belligerent logics of power transition and history problems always apply, as if they were timeless and unconditioned by other factors. I argue that power transitions and history problems disrupt peace on the first hand if societies with a strong masculine honor ideology are involved. Honor ideology enables history problems and power transitions to generate excessive hostility and fear, which may lead to war. In Europe today, history problems and power transitions are not destabilizing. Traditional masculine honor ideology has abated much more in Europe than in East Asia. This provides a key to understanding why the risk of armed conflict is much greater in East Asia than in most of Europe. This article seeks to explain the role of masculine honor ideology in undermining peace both within and between nations. This has obvious implications for East Asia, not least for Japan’s relations with China and Korea, and for US relations with China. Yet these implications are not spelled out in the articles, partly for lack of space, and partly because so little empirical research has been undertaken so far about East Asian masculine honor ideologies.

Masculine honor ideology is an aspect of gender relations, and studies have found that individuals who endorse masculine honor ideology tend to hold more misogynist views. When masculinity is redefined and delinked from the logic of honor, equality between men and women makes progress. This means that improved gender equality will in the medium to long term be decisive for whether or not peace can take hold in East Asia. A cultural change that is ongoing may render history problems and problems of power transition much less consequential.

HISTORY’S MEANINGS

In East Asia, and in particular in relations between China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, historical wrongs are often and acrimoniously invoked in politics, and territorial disputes serve as focal points for nationalist rhetoric laden with the language of honor. For example, in official Chinese statements, a common lament is that an adversary “hurts the feelings of the Chinese people,” and incidents in ongoing disputes sometimes lead to officially tolerated mass demonstrations involving flag burnings and physical attacks against symbols of foreign adversaries, in particular Japan. In Japan, meanwhile, official attempts at apologizing for historical wrongs committed by Japan are undermined by outbursts of protest by strong conservative elements who deny that Japan has anything for which to apologize.

Sometimes, the historical events themselves are proffered as explanations for why international relations in East Asia seem so difficult and conflict-ridden, but in other parts of the world, equally difficult historical experiences have been overcome, and no longer play any role in fuelling conflict in mainstream politics. Dramatic examples include relations between Germany and France, Germany and Poland, and Sweden and Denmark. In Western Europe, historical territorial disputes are not the focus of active conflict today, and historical wrongs are not discussed in an accusatory manner. A case in point is the renewed territorial dispute between Sweden and Denmark about the island Hesselö in 1983, which was dealt with without any nationalistic overtones, talk about hurt feelings, or flag-burning. Another example is how people and leaders in Germany reacted when demonstrators and media in Greece in 2015 depicted present-day Germany as a Nazi state, and Chancellor Angela Merkel as Nazi officer. Merkel responded with great cool and stated that in discussions with Greece and other European countries, “We Germans do have a special responsibility to deal in an aware, sensitive and knowledgeable way with what we perpetrated under Nazism.”

Both the theory on the role of history problems and the theory of power transition hinge on assumptions about how states assess whether other states have hostile intent. The most straightforward version of power transition theory assumes that states act as if other states always have hostile intent and therefore assessing intent becomes irrelevant, and all that matters are considerations of relative power. This view of state behavior is in line with a hardcore version of the realist school of international relations: offensive realism. According to this school of thinking, states always strive to maximize power and will use opportunities to gain relative power advantages by taking offensive action. This implies that power transitions inevitably represent grave threats that will cause states to consider preventive war by the state descending in relative power, or preemptive war by the ascending power if it believes that the declining rival will launch a preventive war. The main
difference with defensive realism is that it distinguishes between states satisfied with the status quo and revisionist states. In the context of an impending power transition, the ascending state is only likely to be dealt with as a threat if it is assessed to be revisionist. Power transition among status quo powers is less destabilizing.

Hardcore realists disregard ideology and culture. But honor matters. In anthropology and psychology, honor refers to a reputation that entails the right to be given respect and precedence in social interactions. How honor is gained and lost typically differs for men and women. For men, honor follows a reputation for strength and toughness, and to increase and preserve honor men must be prepared to use violence in response to displays of disrespect. A man's failure to react aggressively to an insult can be interpreted as indicating a lack of strength and hence as an inability to protect himself and what belongs to him—including not least his "womenfolk" (Nisbett and Cohen, 1996).

Evolutionary psychologist Todd Shackelford proposes that all men have the psychological mechanisms that produce the behaviors that build or defend honor, and that the circumstances determine whether mechanisms serving to maintain reputation are activated or not. The ubiquity of these mechanisms among men leads Shackelford to speculate that they are evolved responses to the adaptive problem of mate retention (2005). Because of the different parental investment of men and women associated with pregnancy and delivery, and because of paternity insecurity, differences in mate retention behavior have evolved. In particular, violent sexual jealousy and deference of sexual rivals are behaviors that would have been adaptive for men more than for women (Buss 1988; Buss and Shackelford 1997). From an evolutionary perspective, the reproductive capacity of women in particular is a valuable resource that can be stolen in the form of extra-pair copulation, kidnapping or rape. This is a form of theft that has been a constant possibility in the ancestral human past, and the mechanisms of honor are an evolved adaptation to this problem (Shackelford 2005). Honor thus also entails controlling female sexuality. For example, a man loses honor if his wife is adulterous, and his honor can be at least partially restored with violence. For women, honor requires deference to her husband (or father and brothers) and "the avoidance of behaviors that might threaten the good name of the family (e.g., adultery or sexual immodesty)" (Vandello and Cohen 2003).

Honor thus refers to a system in which individuals are assigned status and a right to precedence based on how well one lives up to a code of honor that for men entails deterring or redressing affronts with violence, and for women with chastity and family fidelity. Traditional ideals of manhood everywhere prescribe, at least to some extent, that men have a superior position relative to women, and that men must be warlike and dominant. Real men are supposed to be tough, brave, resistant to pain, and able to steel themselves against the potentially weakening influences of soft emotions. For men, violence is an appropriate response to affronts, and men who back down when challenged lose status. Moreover, the male privileges vis-à-vis women are linked to their role as potential warriors, and these privileges tend to be seen as natural. Moreover, a man of honor must guard the chastity of female family members. Also, women tend to espouse and perpetuate this understanding of what manhood means.

Much of the literature on honor uses the term "honor culture" as a shorthand to refer to societies in which honor norms prevail. For example, it is often stated that an honor culture exists among whites in the South of the United States (Nisbett and Cohen, 1996). However, the evolutionary perspective suggests that elements of honor culture exist in all cultures, and that the prominence of honor in a society, and for a particular individual, will vary with the specific circumstances. Culture and circumstances shape how these psychological mechanisms play out. Societies can make major turnarounds, as can be exemplified with the shift among present-day Scandinavians from the extreme honor ideologies of their Viking ancestors to today's relatively peaceful and gender-equal attitudes (Potts and Hayden 2008).

**Honor Ideology**

Research has established that masculinity and femininity, including notions of honor, vary enormously over space and time. A crucial insight from this research is that honor is often redefined, and that actors in society can intentionally influence such redefinition. Also, it is most fruitful to view adherence to honor norms as varying among individuals rather than among societies, with societal change following from individual change. Hence, this article uses "honor ideology," which is something that an individual can embrace to a greater or lesser extent, rather than "honor culture," since the term "culture" is often understood as immutable. Of course, the degree to which individuals adhere to honor ideology has aggregate effects on the social level, for example, in terms of the frequency of intimate partner abuse in connection to sexual jealousy.

Competition for honor is essentially zero-sum in character, because one person's right to precedence can only come at the expense of the right to precedence of someone else (Frank 1985; Fukuyama 2011). Hence, I argue that individuals who adhere to honor ideology tend to view rela-
tions with others as a zero-sum conflict rather than a positive sum competition. Consequently, when honor ideology is strong, there should be more offensive realists around, and fewer defensive realists, and therefore power transitions will indeed seem particularly threatening.

Strong honor ideology in a society, and in particular among opinion leaders and decision-makers, will also influence how history problems play out. In her incisive analysis of the logic of apologies for past atrocities, Lind (2010) identifies three mechanisms through which state behavior with regard to apologizing (or not) for past atrocities influences an opposing state’s assessment of its intentions. First, apologizing is a costly and hence credible signal of peaceful intent, because it makes it more difficult to mobilize support for future wars of aggression. Strong support for war typically requires that the enemy can be depicted as the aggressive party, so if a state openly admits and actively remembers its own earlier aggression, then attempts to rationalize aggression will be less credible in the future. The relevant audience, whom the government wants to sway, will be more likely to question the necessity of war. Second, apologies are indications of a changed identity, so the apologizing state can be expected to behave differently than in the past. Third, failure to apologize properly communicates lack of respect, which in turn provokes anger and hostility among aggrieved parties. A crucial complication discussed by Lind is that the effect of apologizing is often undermined by a conservative backlash in the apologizing country, since conservative elements tend to be more nationalistic and have an impenetrable view of their country’s past.

Honor ideology plays a role in all three mechanisms. When it is strong, the side considering apologizing will be more reluctant to do so at all, because the logic of honor implies that the apologizing party appears weak. On the receiving side, the transformed identity that the apology indicates may be exploited instead of received graciously, if honor ideology remains strong among the recipients. Hostile or aggressive attacks on someone else’s perceived failure to apologize, and the implied disrespect, are also perfectly in line with the logic of honor. When honor ideology is strong, disrespect must be met with displays of strength, or else honor will be lost. When honor ideology is weak, the disrespect implied by not apologizing will provoke much less hostile behavior, because insults are considered to reflect badly on the insulting party rather than the party being insulted. Finally, the domestic conservative backlash that sometimes undermines the conciliatory effect of an apology is more likely to happen in an apologizing country where opinion leaders are imbued with a strong honor ideology.

Studies have begun to garner evidence of the effects of honor in international relations. For example, Barnes et al (2012) find that honor endorsement predicts taking country-level threats personally and approving of militant responses to terrorism. Barnes et al (2014) argue that one’s strength of identification with a nation mediates the relationship between honor endorsement and support for militant reactions to perceived provocations. Just as endorsers of honor values use interpersonal aggression to discourage affronts, they tend to believe that strong reactions to national threats signal national strength and intolerance of disrespect. Those who endorse honor ideology are thus particularly likely to take perceived affronts to their nation personally. Using survey data on honor endorsement, nationalism, opposition to illegal immigration, and approval of the US war on terror, they find support for this argument. An unpublished study by Dafoe and Caughey (2013) makes use of the fact that previous research has established that honor tends to be more important to white males from the southern United States than to white males from the north. The authors treat the haphazard variation in the cultural backgrounds of US presidents as a natural experiment and analyze the effect of a southern background on US behavior in international militarized disputes. Taking into account other characteristics they find that disputes under southern presidents are approximately twice as likely to involve use of US force.

CONCLUSION

In sum, honor ideology seems likely to be decisive in causing history problems as well as power transitions to lead to war. I propose that the presence of relatively strong honor ideology is a scope condition for both of these theories. This suggests that one of the reasons why history problems and power transition seem so threatening in East Asia, but are seen as far less dangerous in Europe, is that honor ideology has lost so much of its grasp on Europeans. That this is the case can be inferred from numerous measures of gender equality. Even a cursory look at current events will show that power considerations, perceived insults, historical wrongdoings, and so on, play just a minor role among nations in Western Europe. This represents a striking and quite recent historical change, which could presumably happen in East Asia as well — if peace is allowed to endure. Because of the important roles that honor and militarized masculinity play in the logic of conflict generation, a gender analysis of the East Asian Peace is indispensable.

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REFERENCES


