A History of East Asia
From the Origins of Civilization
to the Twenty-First Century

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Introduction: What Is East Asia?

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, three of the world's five largest national economies were in Asia, and the second and third largest, China and Japan, were both specifically East Asian. This represents an astonishing reversal of the situation that had prevailed a century earlier, when a handful of Western European powers, together with the United States and Russia (and with Japan already as an emerging junior partner), dominated much of the planet economically, militarily, and politically. As late as the mid-twentieth century, East Asia still remained largely preindustrial, often bitterly impoverished, and desperately war ravaged. Even Japan, which had succeeded in asserting itself as a regionally significant modern power by the early 1900s, was left crushed and in ruins by the end of the Second World War in 1945. A fresh start was required in Japan, which gained momentum beginning in the 1960s. Since that time, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and eventually even the People's Republic of China have all joined Japan — though each in characteristically different ways — in achieving dramatic levels of modern economic takeoff. Beyond any doubt, the economic rise of East Asia has been one of the most important stories of recent world history.

A persuasive argument can be made, moreover, that rather than representing some fundamentally unprecedented departure from past experience, the recent economic rise of East Asia is really more of a return to normal. For much of human history, China — the largest single component of East Asia — enjoyed one of the most developed economies on earth. Especially after the disintegration of the western Roman Empire, for a thousand years beginning around 500, China was probably the wealthiest country in the world, not merely in aggregate total but also in per capita terms. Even as late as 1800, as the Industrial Revolution was beginning in Great Britain, China is still estimated to have accounted for a larger share (33.3%) of total world production than all of Europe, including Russia, combined (28.1%).

It is well known that such crucial technologies as gunpowder, paper, and printing were all invented in China. Less well known is that paper and printing actually had a significant impact on China long before those technologies transformed Europe.
Paper and printing helped to make books, and therefore also knowledge, relatively widely available in premodern China. It has been seriously suggested that China may have even produced more books than all the rest of the world combined prior to about 1500.  

Although, when compared to China, the other countries of premodern East Asia were each relatively quite small in size – in 1800, China's population may have been roughly 300 million, Japan's perhaps 30 million, and Korea's 8 million – each made its own notable contributions and produced unique variants of East Asian civilization. Korea, for example, pioneered the development of metal movable-type printing by at least 1234 (although movable type made of baked clay rather than metal had been experimented with in China as early as the 1040s). Japan, remarkably enough, became perhaps the first non-Western society in the world to successfully modernize. Despite its relatively small size, in the modern era, Japan in many ways eclipsed China to become regionally dominant in East Asia, and for much of the late twentieth century Japan was the second most important economic power in the entire world, after only the United States.

Even when East Asia was at its relative poorest and weakest in the early 1900s, it continued to be globally significant. World War II, for example, began in East Asia, at a bridge near Beijing in 1937. Today there should no longer be any doubt of the region's importance. China is a major rising world power, and although it remains poor and underdeveloped in per capita terms, parts of what is sometimes called Greater China already compare favorably with almost anywhere else on the planet. Hong Kong, for example, which is now a semiautonomous region of the People's Republic of China, today enjoys a per capita income above that of such highly developed countries as Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, Switzerland, or indeed all but a handful of the world's most prosperous lands. Taiwan and Singapore are both predominantly ethnic Chinese places that have also achieved notable economic success. Singapore now even has a higher per capita income than the United States. Japan, although it may have recently already been surpassed by China in terms of the total real size of its economy (measured in terms of purchasing power parity), probably still remains the world's second most fully mature industrialized economy. South Korea is a spectacular example of a modern Pacific Rim success story, and North Korea, while decidedly less prosperous than the south, as an unpredictable and sometimes belligerent nuclear power nonetheless compels global attention.

East Asia is therefore a critically important region of the world; but what is East Asia? What makes it East Asian? Asia as a whole is actually not a very coherent cultural geographic entity. The concept of Asia is one that we have inherited from the ancient Greeks, who divided the world broadly into two parts: Europe and Asia. For the Greeks, however, this original Asia was primarily just the Persian Empire. As the scope of Asia expanded beyond Persia and what we now call Asia Minor, it came to include so many different cultures and peoples that the label was drained of most of its significance. By the late 1700s, for example, two-thirds of the world's total population and 80 percent of the world's production were all located in Asia. This Asia was nothing less than the entire Old World minus Europe. If
Asia in its entirety is not a very meaningful term, however, the word can still serve a useful purpose as a terminological anchor for certain geographic subregions, such as South Asia and East Asia, which do have more historical coherence.⁵

Even these subregions, of course, must still be somewhat arbitrarily defined. Premodern East Asians certainly did not think of themselves as either Asians or East Asians. Today the U.S. State Department lumps Southeast Asia and even Oceania together with East Asia under its Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Geographic regions can be defined in many ways, and a variety of labels applied to them to suit different purposes. In historical terms, however, and especially in consideration of shared premodern culture, East Asia is most usefully defined as that region of the world that came to extensively use the Chinese writing system, and absorbed through those written words many of the ideas and values of what we call Confucianism, much of the associated legal and political structure of government, and certain specifically East Asian forms of Buddhism. It is a fundamental premise of this book that East Asia really is a culturally and historically coherent region, deserving of serious attention as a whole, and not just as a random group of individual countries or some arbitrary lines on a map.

At the same time, East Asia is also part of a universally shared human experience. In the current age of globalization, of course, the planet today is especially closely interconnected — but global human ties actually go back to the very beginning of human existence. Such interconnections always remained reasonably active, particularly within the Eurasian Old World. At the opposite extreme of focus from this global perspective, East Asia itself (like Western Europe) is also composed of several independent countries, each of which in turn contains various internal levels and types of subdivision.

Specifically, East Asia today includes what is sometimes called Greater China (the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and somewhat more peripherally, Singapore), Japan, and Korea. In addition, Vietnam presents a marginal case, because it occupies a transitional zone that straddles both East and Southeast Asia. Vietnam did have significant historical ties with China. One book about Vietnam published in the mid-twentieth century was actually even titled Little China.⁶ At that time, however, Vietnam was perhaps most commonly referred to as Indochina, a composite designation (reflecting both Indian and Chinese influences over a mosaic of indigenous cultures) that appropriately conveys something of Vietnam's true hyphenated cultural complexity. Because Vietnam is typically included in surveys of Southeast Asia, it will not be comprehensively covered in this book.

East Asia has an historical coherence as a civilization that is roughly equivalent to what we think of as Western civilization, with the Bronze Age prototype that first emerged in high antiquity in the region we now call China providing approximately the same sort of core historical legacy for the modern countries of China, Japan, and Korea that ancient Greece and Rome left for modern Italy, France, Britain, Germany, and what we think of somewhat vaguely and imperfectly as "the West." This volume, while paying due attention to both the larger global interconnections and to local differences, will attempt to present a relatively integrated history of
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East Asia as a whole. It will also, somewhat unusually, focus relatively closely on that period in Middle Antiquity (beginning roughly in the third century BCE) when a coherent East Asian cultural region that included China, Japan, and Korea first emerged.

It should be emphasized, however, that no such “civilization” is a permanently fixed and isolated concrete reality. What we call civilizations are merely abstractions that people imagine around certain historical continuities and connections that someone has decided are significant—they have no hard reality. Borders are always permeable, all cultures interact and exchange both artifacts and ideas, and multiple nested layers of distinction can be discerned everywhere within what is ultimately a single global human community.

In the present age of globalization, moreover, all such regional civilizational distinctions are to some extent blurring. Since the twentieth century, many of the features that made East Asia East Asian, such as the unique writing system, Confucianism, and traditional-style monarchies, have been sometimes quite self-consciously challenged, rejected, or abandoned in the name of either (or both) universal modernization or local nationalism. The various nations of modern East Asia are today, in some ways, both more different from each other and, at the same time, paradoxically, more like every other successful modern country on the planet than may have been the case (at the level of the educated elite anyway) in premodern times. Yet the legacy of the old vocabulary does live on. South Korea, for example, is simultaneously a thoroughly modern, Westernized country with especially close ties to the United States, which is also sometimes called the “most Confucian” country in Asia! The very fact of dynamic modern economic success being so disproportionately concentrated in the East Asian region by itself suggests also that there may still be something distinctive about East Asia.

If East Asia remains a moderately coherent cultural region even today, on the other hand, East Asia has also always been internally diverse. Not only are the major nations of East Asia often sharply different from each other but each nation also contains within itself cascading layers of internal differences. And East Asia has changed greatly over time, too, most obviously and abruptly in the modern period but also throughout history. There was no timeless, traditional continuity in premodern East Asia.

As an illustration of this ongoing process of change, we might ask ourselves a surprising question: how old is China? It is often supposed that Chinese civilization is the oldest continuously existing civilization in the world, having emerged out of the late Stone Age (the Neolithic), flowered into the full glory of Bronze Age civilization beginning as early as 2000 BCE, and survived thereafter without interruption to the present day. In fact, there is some truth to this popular story. Though it may be difficult to pinpoint many aspects of late Stone Age culture that can still be observed today (although silk, a preference for pork among meats, and the cultivation of rice could be cited as conspicuous long-standing cultural markers), it is highly significant that the very first writing samples to be found in the area of China, dating to approximately 1200 BCE, were already written in
an archaic version of the same Chinese language, and the same Chinese writing system, that is still used today. In this sense, China is very old indeed.

The earliest books written in that Chinese language, produced over the course of the last thousand years BCE, formed the nucleus of a deeply cherished literary canon that remained continuously fundamental to what we call Chinese civilization, at least until the start of the twentieth century. During the course of that same formative last millennium BCE, a discernable consciousness of being Chinese (called Huaxia), in opposition to neighboring alien peoples such as the Rong, Di, Man, and Yi, may also be said to have emerged. Thus the Warring States of the late Zhou era (403–221 BCE), though each were independent sovereign countries, could also all be described as being different Chinese kingdoms surrounded by various non-Chinese peoples.

After the Qin unification of these Warring States into the first empire in 221 BCE, an enduring ideal of unity under a single centralized imperial government was also firmly planted. Although China’s subsequent remarkable record of enduring political unity is sometimes explained in terms of presumed ethnic and cultural homogeneity (it is too easy to assume that the Chinese are naturally unified because, after all, “they are all Chinese”), it may well really have been more the other way around: China’s present-day relative ethnic and cultural homogeneity is the end product of millennia of political unity. Certainly the early Chinese Empire’s population was quite mixed.

Even after that first imperial unification in 221 BCE, however, China continued to change. There have been roughly eighty historically recognized premodern dynasties in the place we call China (although only about a dozen are considered to have been truly major dynasties). Each dynasty was in some sense a separate state. Many had identifiable non-Chinese rulers. In addition, China has also undergone repeated periods of division since that first imperial unification, and even during periods of great unity, fashions still changed. As Guo Maoqian (fl. 1264–1269) observed in the thirteenth century, “folk songs and national customs also have a new sound each generation.”

Premodern China was far from static.

If China can be called an ancient civilization, at the other extreme, it is also possible to argue that the very concept of a Chinese “nation” did not even exist until about 1900. It is generally believed that the nation-state is an invention of the modern West, and certainly the word nation (minzu, designating “a people” rather than a country or state) was imported into the Chinese language only at the end of the nineteenth century. China first attempted to reconfigure itself as a modern Western-style nation-state only with the overthrow of the empire and establishment of the Republic of China in 1912. Moreover, the specific country that most of us think of today simply as “China,” which is more formally known as the People’s Republic of China (PRC), dates only from 1949. Nor was this merely a new name for an old reality: in the entire history of the planet, there can have been few revolutionary ruptures that were intended to be as total and sweeping as that of the New China following its 1949 “liberation.” In hindsight, of course, many of the revolutionary changes imposed after 1949 did not prove to be very
Chinese writing
durable, and in recent years, there has even been some revival of older traditions;
yet the PRC still does mark a sharp break in the continuity of history.

Even the word China is itself, literally, not Chinese. The English word China
probably derives from the Sanskrit (Indian) Cīna, which in turn may have derived
from the name of the important northwestern frontier Chinese kingdom and first
imperial dynasty, Qin. Not only did the Chinese people not call themselves Chi-
inese, it could be argued that there was no precise native-language equivalent term
at all, at least before modern times. One distinguished scholar has even gone so far
as to claim that the concept and word China simply “did not exist, except as an
alien fiction.”

To be sure, the ancient Chinese did already have some reasonably coherent
self-conceptions. The names by which early Chinese people identified themselves
were frequently those of specific kingdoms or imperial dynasties, such as Qin,
Chu, or Han, but there were also a few more all-encompassing ancient Chinese-
language words that we might reasonably translate into English as “China” or “Chi-
inese,” such as Huaxia 华夏, which has already been mentioned, and Zhongguo 中國.
Even these, however, were not perfectly synonymous with the English word China.
Initially, Huaxia seems to have been a somewhat elastic cultural marker, referring
neither to race nor ethnicity nor any particular country but rather to “civilized,”
settled, literate, agricultural populations adhering to common ritual standards, in
contrast to “barbarians.”

Zhongguo — “the central country” (or “countries,” since the Chinese language
does not make a grammatical distinction between singular and plural), which is
often more quaintly rendered as the “Middle Kingdom” — in a somewhat similar
manner also contrasts the civilized countries in the center against an outer fringe
of barbarians. Initially this term Zhongguo may have really referred only to the
royal capital city. Later, during the Warring States period, Zhongguo definitely had
to be understood as plural because there were multiple “central” countries then.
This term Zhongguo long remained more of a geographic description rather than
a proper name, referring simply to the countries in what was imagined to be the
center of the world: the Central Plain area of north China. Even as late as the third
and fourth centuries CE, some five hundred years after the first imperial uniformation
in 221 BCE, the entire southern half of what we would think of today as China
proper could still be explicitly excluded from the Zhongguo. After the northern
conquest of the southern (Chinese) state of Wu in 280, for example, a children’s
verse predicted that someday “Zhongguo [the north] will be defeated and Wu [in
the south] shall rise again.”

Today Zhongguo is probably the closest Chinese-language equivalent to the
English word China. Even so, both the modern People’s Republic, on the main-
land, and the Republic of China (confined to the island of Taiwan since 1949) are
still officially known, instead, by a hybrid combination of the two ancient terms
Zhongguo and Huaxia: Zhong-hua 中華.

Many Westerners today find the implicit conceit that China is the Mid-
dle Kingdom alternately either offensively arrogant or simply ridiculous. Such
ethnocentricity was hardly unique to China, however. Nearly all early civilizations, in fact, viewed themselves as occupying the center of the world. While China may be a little unusual in having this ancient conceit preserved in a name that is still used today, our own name for the Mediterranean Sea also comes originally from a Latin expression meaning “middle of the earth.” We have merely become accustomed to the name, no longer understand much Latin, and have forgotten what it means.

Furthermore, it was Westerners who more literally referred to foreigners as barbarians. Barbarian is an English word that derives from an ancient Greek expression for those unintelligible “bar-bar” noises emitted by strangers who were so uncivilized as not to speak Greek. Not only did the ancient Chinese naturally not use this Greek word, there really was no word in classical Chinese that was exactly equivalent to it. There are, indeed, several Chinese terms that are commonly loosely translated into English as “barbarian,” but this (as is often the case with translations) is a little misleading. More precisely, they are all generic Chinese names for various non-Chinese peoples. The word Yi, for example, was used for non-Chinese peoples in the east. Such names were often no more accurate or authentic than the name Indian that was mistakenly applied by early modern Europeans to the natives of the Americas, yet like the term American Indian, they remain fundamentally names rather than words meaning “barbarian.”

If China is not a Chinese name, then, what about our familiar names for the other East Asian countries? The English word Japan is actually a distorted version, via Malay, of the Chinese pronunciation (Riben in current standard Mandarin, which can also be spelled jih-pen in an older spelling system) of the two-character name 日本 that in Japanese is pronounced Nihon (or Nippon). This name Nihon—the “Origin of the Sun”—is, however, a genuine early native Japanese name for Japan, although one that could probably only have been conceived from a vantage point outside of Japan, further west, and that may have been first used by immigrants to Japan from the continent. The name was apparently consciously adopted by the Japanese court in the late seventh century for the favorable meaning of its written characters.  

In some ways, it could be argued that Japan has been less chimerical as a country and has displayed more historical continuity since antiquity than China. Since the dawn of reliably recorded history, Japan has had, quite uniquely in the entire world, only one ruling family. There has been only one Japanese dynasty, in contrast to China’s roughly eighty dynasties and two postdynastic republics. Yet on the other hand, Japanese emperors have rarely wielded much real power, court and emperor have often been quite irrelevant to the overall history of the Japanese islands, and Japan, too, has been divided. Much Japanese “tradition” is, moreover, not really so very ancient, and important parts of it ultimately can be traced to foreign origins. Japanese Zen Buddhism, for example, is an especially Chinese form of what was originally an Indian religion. The quintessentially Japanese art of the tea ceremony (chanoyu) was born only in the late fifteenth century, although the Japanese had learned to drink tea from China centuries earlier. Sushi, as we know it, “began as a street snack in nineteenth-century Edo-era Tokyo.” The Japanese national sport
of Jūdō was invented, as such, only toward the end of the nineteenth century - by the same man who would also serve as Japan's first member of the International Olympic Committee. Even the Japanese nation-state itself arguably only took its final shape during the nineteenth century.  

As for Korea, the English name derives from that of the Koryŏ Dynasty (918–1392), which in turn was an abbreviation of the name of an even older northern kingdom called Koguryō (roughly first-century to 668 ce). In this respect, our English name Korea somewhat resembles the probable derivation of our name for China from the early dynastic name Qin. Just as Qin is not quite really entirely synonymous with China, neither is Koryŏ exactly the same thing as Korea. Today, North Koreans prefer to invoke the memory of the oldest legendary Korean kingdom, Chosŏn, while South Koreans are inclined to use the name Han’guk, the "Country of the Han," the name of the peoples who were the inhabitants of the southern parts of the Korean peninsula in the early historical period. (The Chinese today are also called the Han people, but this is an entirely different Han, written 诶, which just happens to sound like the Korean Han.) Although Korea is today an exceptionally good example of an ethnically homogeneous modern nation-state (marred by political and ideological division, north vs. south, since 1945), it can be argued that Korea, as such, never really existed prior to the first unification of the peninsula under native rule in 668.

Vietnam will not be exhaustively surveyed in this volume, but the story of how Vietnam got its name is nonetheless relevant and fascinating. The name Vietnam was first proposed, incredibly enough, from Beijing in 1803. Prior to that time, what we think of as Vietnam had most commonly been called Annam. (Still later, as a French colony, it was widely known in the West as Indochina, as previously mentioned.) The new nineteenth-century name Vietnam was consciously intended to evoke the memory of an ancient (208–110 BCE) kingdom called Southern Viet (pronounced Nam Việt in Vietnamese). Because the capital of that ancient Southern Viet kingdom had been located at the site of the modern city of Guangzhou (in English, Canton), in China, however, nineteenth-century Vietnam was obviously somewhat farther south. When the old name was revived, it was therefore slightly altered by changing it from Southern Viet to South of Viet. This adjustment was achieved in Vietnamese (and in Chinese) simply by transposing the word order: from Nam Việt to Việt Nam. The reason, then, why the capital of the ancient kingdom of Southern Viet was, somewhat surprisingly, located north of modern Vietnam in what is now China, was because the very earliest Bronze Age kingdom called Viet (in Chinese, Yue 園), from which all of these names presumably ultimately derived, had been located even farther north, in the vicinity of the modern Chinese Province of Zhejiang, almost halfway up the coast of what is today China! Early Chinese texts, in fact, referred to most of what is now southeast China as the land of the "Hundred Viets."

This story helps illustrate just how far from being static and unchanging traditional East Asia actually was. Not only was Vietnam a new name in 1803, but the total assemblage of territory and ethnic groups that now make up Vietnam was also rather new and unprecedented at the time. Independent Vietnam had
originated (in the tenth century) only in the Red River valley area of what is now the north. After centuries of southward expansion (and sometimes division), when a new emperor finally unified all of Vietnam at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was in some ways "a kingdom . . . that had never before existed."15

To say that Vietnam did not exist before the nineteenth century is, of course, at some levels as absurd as trying to claim that China did not exist until modern times either. Yet in fact, neither China nor Vietnam had really existed previously under precisely their present names and current configurations, despite their genuinely ancient pedigrees. No country, people, or civilization exists unchanged forever. These are dynamic ancient streams that have continually been renewed. History is all about change, and East Asia has experienced as much change as almost any comparable region. This is the story of East Asian history.

For Further Reading
