Introduction

What Is East Asia?

Since the 1960s, East Asia has emerged as one of the most prosperous and successful regions of the world. This East Asian resurgence was led at first by Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, but they were soon joined by the People's Republic of China, and eventually also by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Adjusted for purchasing power parity, in terms of per capita GDP Hong Kong is wealthier than such advanced economies as Sweden, Germany, and Canada, and Taiwan is wealthier than France and the United Kingdom. The People's Republic of China (PRC) remains only modestly wealthy in per capita terms, but, with 1.4 billion people, adjusted for purchasing power parity its total economy is probably now the world's largest.[1] While the PRC is huge, and Japan is also a respectably large sized country, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are all relatively small places – but they punch above their weight in both industrial and cultural importance. Taiwan currently produces more than 90 percent of the world's most advanced semiconductors (computer chips) and over 60 percent of all semiconductors.[2] South Korea is a manufacturing giant (producing, for example, Samsung smartphones and Hyundai and Kia automobiles), and the home of a global pop culture phenomenon (K-Pop). This is a dramatic reversal of the situation that had prevailed a century ago, when a handful of western European powers, together with the United States and Russia (with Japan as an emerging junior player), dominated much of the planet economically, militarily, politically, and even culturally.

A hundred years ago China was mired in warlordism, struggling to modernize, and experimenting with new directions, while Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam were all colonies of foreign powers. Within East Asia, only Japan appeared moderately successful. Well into the mid-twentieth century, East Asia remained largely preindustrial, often bitterly poor, and desperately war ravaged. Even Japan, which almost alone in the entire non-Western world had succeeded in asserting itself as a regionally significant modern power by the early 1900s, had been crushed and left in ruins at the end of World War II. A fresh start was required in Japan, which gained momentum in the 1960s. Since that time, with the conspicuous exception of North Korea, nearly all of East Asia has joined

Japan – though each in characteristically different ways – in achieving dramatic levels of modern economic and cultural takeoff. Beyond any doubt, the rise of East Asia has been one of the most important stories of recent world history.

An argument can be made, moreover, that rather than representing some unprecedented departure from past human experience, the recent strengths exhibited by East Asia are really only something of a return to normal. For much of 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 1,000 years beginning around 500 CE China was perhaps the wealthiest country in the world, not merely in aggregate total but sometimes possibly even in per capita terms. As late as the year 1800, when the Industrial Revolution was starting to dramatically accelerate in Great Britain, and what has been described as a "great divergence" began to emerge (see Section 8.1), 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%).[3]

It is generally acknowledged that such crucial technologies as gunpowder, paper, and printing were all invented in China. Less well-known is the fact that gunpowder, paper, and printing had already made a significant impact on China long before those technologies revolutionized European history. Ming dynasty China (1368–1644 CE) has been called the world's first "gunpowder empire."[4] 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 produced more books than all the rest of the world combined prior to about 1500.[5] Paper and printing also facilitated China's pioneering introduction of paper money.

Although, when compared with China, the other countries of premodern East Asia were each much smaller – in 1800, China's population may have been roughly 300 million, Japan's perhaps 30 million, Korea's 8 million, and Vietnam's about 7 million (and Taiwan and Hong Kong were merely regions of China as of 1800) – each made their own contributions and produced unique variants of East Asian civilization. Korea, for example, pioneered the development of metal moveable-type printing by at least 1234 (although moveable type made of baked clay rather than metal had been experimented with in China as early as the 1040s). As of the eighteenth century, the Japanese city of Edo (today's Tōkyō) had approximately twice the population of Paris, and it has been plausibly argued that "the specific skills, attitudes, roles, capital accumulations, and commercial practices" developed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japan helped facilitate Japan's successful modern industrialization.[6] Vietnam, for its part, developed a unique fusion of East and Southeast Asian cultures – and defeated repeated Mongol attempts at conquest.

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. Japan, as already mentioned, became perhaps the first non-Western society in the world to successfully modernize. Today, there should no longer be any doubt about the region's importance. China is

a rising superpower, with the second largest military budget on earth. Japan, although it has recently been surpassed by China in terms of the total size of its economy, probably remains the world's second most fully mature industrialized economy. South Korea is a breathtaking example of a modern success story, and North Korea, while decidedly less prosperous than the south, nonetheless compels global attention as an unpredictable and sometimes belligerent nuclear power. Vietnam has enjoyed rapid economic development in recent decades, and was the scene of much conflict, and a focal point of global attention, for decades in the late twentieth century.

East Asia is therefore a critically important region of the world; but what *is* East Asia? Asia, taken as a whole, is actually not a coherent or meaningful entity. Although we often imagine Asia to be a continent, Asia includes island chains such as Japan, while the continental parts of Asia are not physically detached from continental Europe. Our conceptual distinction between Europe and Asia derives more from history and culture than from natural geography. The concept of Asia is one that we inherited from the ancient Greeks, who divided the world broadly into two major parts: Europe and Asia (with Africa sometimes distinguished as a third region). For the Greeks, however, this original Asia meant primarily the Persian Empire. As the scope of Asia expanded east beyond Persia and what we now call Asia Minor, Asia came to include so many different cultures and peoples that the label was drained of most of its significance. By the late 1700s, two-thirds of the world's population and 80 percent of the world's production were located in Asia. Asia was nothing less than the entire Eurasian Old World minus Europe. If Asia, taken as a whole, is not a very meaningful label, though, the word can still serve as a useful terminological anchor for certain geographic subregions, such as South Asia and East Asia, which do have more historical coherence.[7]

Even these subregions, of course, must still be somewhat arbitrarily defined. Premodern East Asians 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 suit different purposes. In historical terms, however, and especially in consideration of shared aspects of 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 (meaning-laden and not primarily phonetic) written words many of the ideas and values of what we call Confucianism. East Asia also shared many legal and political institutions, and certain specifically East Asian forms of Buddhism. At a very mundane level – but important in people's everyday lives precisely for that reason – East Asia is distinct as being that part of the world that eats with chopsticks. It is a fundamental premise of this book that East Asia really is a culturally and historically coherent region, deserving attention as a whole, and not just as a random group of neighboring countries defined by some arbitrary lines on a map.

At the same time, East Asia is also part of a universally shared human experience. One of the most significant recent changes in our understanding of

premodern East Asia is a growing realization that it was not always especially closed and isolated, as was once popularly imagined. There have, indeed, been episodes of isolationism in East Asian history, but they were, if anything, more commonly Early Modern and Modern (notably under certain recent communist regimes) developments than ancient tradition. Throughout much of history the whole of the Eurasian world, including East Asia, was surprisingly interconnected.

For example, images of Heracles – the mythical Greek hero – were replicated across premodern Eurasia as far as China. In the tomb of a man buried in what is now northeast China (Liaoning, in southern Manchuria) in 415 CE, archeologists have found both Chinese-style (murals, official seals, bronze and lacquer utensils) and non-Chinese-style (coffin shapes, weapons, and horse gear) artifacts, the earliest firmly dateable pair of horse stirrups (an invention of uncertain origin that would eventually spread across the whole of Eurasia), and five Roman-style glass items. Chinese silks were buried in central Sweden, in western Europe, in the late eighth to early ninth century, together with a small statue of the Buddha that may have come from what is now Pakistan.[8] During the first millennium CE there existed "a common grammar of diplomatic conversations from China to Byzantium," and, with the turn into the second millennium, the Mongol conquests spanned much of Eurasia and provided a powerful model for successor empires everywhere from the Ottomans in the eastern Mediterranean to the Manchus in China.[9]

Recently, it has even been suggested that premodern China was part of a relatively exposed inner core of the Eurasian Old World, in contrast to the comparatively sheltered periphery occupied by Eurasian extremities such as Europe and Japan.[10] Perhaps it is no coincidence that the pattern of Japanese history – which included a medieval period featuring hereditary warrior elites living in castles, semi-autonomous local lords, and institutions reminiscent of vassalage and the fief – in some ways more closely resembled that of Europe than it did China. This is a healthy reminder, too, that even if we do accept East Asia as a coherent cultural area, it is still a very large region composed of several quite different cultures (each of which contains, furthermore, its own internal sub-differences).

Specifically, East Asia will be defined as today consisting of the ethnically and culturally Chinese People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and non-Chinese Japan, North and South Korea, and Vietnam (see Map I.1). Each of these places is different. Vietnam is often not included in East Asia at all. Although the northern core of what became independent Vietnam was long actually part of the Chinese Empire, the entirety of today's Vietnam occupies a transitional zone that straddles both East and Southeast Asia. Something of Vietnam's unique identity is suggested by its old French colonial name, "Indochina."

Despite considerable internal diversity, however, East Asia does have a historical coherence that is roughly equivalent to what we conventionally think of as Western Civilization. The Bronze Age prototype states that first emerged in remote antiquity in the region we now call China provided approximately the same kind of core historical legacy for the modern countries of China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam

Map I.1 Physical Map of the East Asian Core Region

that ancient Greece and Rome left for modern Italy, France, Britain, Germany, and "the West." This book, while paying attention to both the larger global interconnections and to local differences, will attempt to present an integrated history of East Asia as a whole. It will also focus somewhat unusually closely on that period in the first millennium CE when a coherent East Asian cultural region first emerged (and which happens, coincidentally, to be chronologically parallel to the period that also witnessed what has been called "the birth of Europe").[11]

It should be emphasized that no "civilization" is a permanently fixed concrete reality. What we call civilizations are merely abstractions that people imagine around certain historical continuities and agglomerations that seem to us to be significant. Borders are always permeable, all cultures interact and exchange both artifacts and ideas (and often genes), and multiple nested layers of distinction can be discerned everywhere within what is ultimately a single global human community.

In the recent age of globalization, moreover, all such regional civilizational differences are to some extent blurring. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, many of the features that made East Asia East Asian, such as its 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 nation-states 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. It may well be asked, therefore, how relevant the East Asian cultural region still is.

One answer is that East Asia's disproportionate recent economic success, by itself, suggests there is still something distinctive about the region. Some analysts have even invoked a "Confucian work ethic" to explain the East Asian "miracle."[12] While there are good reasons for maintaining a healthy dose of skepticism concerning any simplistic Confucian explanations for East Asian dynamism – starting with the fact that Confucianism itself is a rather nebulous concept – East Asian success has been exceptional and is reason enough to take East Asia seriously. And, although access to modern Western technologies and the enormous U.S. consumer market was certainly an early key to post-World War II export-led Pacific Rim economic growth, the East Asian nations all have more recently become each other's largest trading partners, and sometimes enthusiastic consumers of each other's modern pop culture.

The ghost of a long-shared **logographic** writing system (meaning-laden rather than purely phonetic) still hovers over the East Asian region. Even when Chinese characters are no longer used in writing, the various East Asian languages all still have extensively shared vocabularies. China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam are each different nations with distinctive cultures, but they literally share many of the same words and ideas. South Korea, for example, is a thoroughly modern Westernized country with especially close ties to the United States, but it is nonetheless also commonly described as "the most Confucian society on earth."[13]

Recently, of course, China's alarmingly rapid rise to power and newfound assertiveness has driven other East Asian states to strengthen their ties with the Western democracies in self-defence. The closest East Asian orientations are sometimes now directed towards places outside of East Asia. And even if East Asia is arguably still a moderately coherent cultural region today it has also always been internally diverse. Not only are the major nations of East Asia different from each other, but each nation also contains within itself cascading layers of internal differences. 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 around 2000 BCE, and survived thereafter without interruption to the present day. There is, moreover, 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 (silk, a preference for pork among meats, and the cultivation of rice are some long-standing Chinese 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 with 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 that same formative last millennium BCE, a discernible consciousness of being Chinese (called ***Huaxia***), in opposition to neighboring alien peoples (referred to by various Chinese names), may also be said to have emerged. Thus, the Warring States (403–221 BCE) of the late Zhou era (ca. 1045–256 BCE), though each were independent sovereign countries, could be described as different Chinese kingdoms surrounded by a variety of non-Chinese peoples.

After the Qin unification of those Warring States into the first empire in 221 BCE, an enduring ideal of political unity under a single centralized imperial government was firmly planted. Although China's subsequent remarkable record of 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 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 mixed.

Even after that first imperial unification in 221 BCE, moreover, China continued to change. There have been roughly eighty historically recognized premodern dynasties in the place we call China (although only about a dozen or so were truly major dynasties). Each dynasty was in some sense a separate state, with a separate

name. Many had identifiably ethnic non-Han Chinese rulers. In addition, China has also undergone repeated periods of division since that first imperial unification, and even during extended periods of unity fashions still changed. As Guo Maoqian (fl. 1264–1269 CE) observed in the thirteenth century, "folk songs and national customs also have a new sound each generation."[14] 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 the 1890s. Many scholars believe that the nation-state is an invention of the modern West, and certainly the Chinese word for nation (***minzu***, designating a "people" rather than a country, state, or government) was imported into the Chinese language only at the end of the nineteenth century.[15] 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 (ROC) in 1912. Moreover, the specific country that most of us think of today as "China," which is formally named the People's Republic of China, 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, some of the revolutionary changes introduced after 1949 did not prove to be very durable, and in recent years there has been some revival of older traditions; yet the PRC does mark a sharp break in the continuity of history.

Even the word China is, literally, not Chinese. China and Chinese are English words that we conventionally apply, often without very much precision, to a language (or group of related languages), a geographic region, the civilization that emerged there, and all of the many (each separately named) states that have existed in that region over time, together with their inhabitants. The English word China probably derives from the Sanskrit (Indian) word *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 Chinese, it could be argued that there was no precisely equivalent native-language 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."[16]

To be sure, as already mentioned, the ancient Chinese certainly did have some reasonably coherent self-conceptions. The names by which early Chinese peoples identified themselves were frequently those of specific kingdoms or imperial dynasties (the name of a premodern Chinese dynasty was not the name of its ruling family, but rather the official name of the state), 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 "Chinese," such as *Huaxia* and ***Zhongguo***. Even these, however, were not perfectly synonymous with the English word China. Initially, *Huaxia* seems to have been a somewhat elastic cultural marker, referring not to an ethnicity or state but rather to civilized,

settled, literate, agricultural populations adhering to common ritual standards, in contrast to "barbarians."[17]

Zhongguo – "the central country" (or "countries," since the Chinese language has no grammatical distinction between singular and plural), a term which is sometimes 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 referred only to the royal capital city. Somewhat later, during the Warring States period, *Zhongguo* definitely needed to be understood as plural, because there were then multiple "central" countries. *Zhongguo* long remained more of a geographic description rather than a proper name, referring simply to the country or countries occupying what was imagined to be the center of the world: the Central Plain in what is now north China. (The Japanese court, in a claim to its own centrality, has even been known to use the exact same two-character expression to refer to Japan instead of China).[18] In China, even as late as the third and fourth centuries CE, some 500 years after the first imperial unification in 221 BCE, the entire southern half of what we think of today as China proper could still be explicitly excluded from *Zhongguo*. After the northern conquest of the southern state of Wu (whose capital was the city that is today called Nanjing, just upriver from modern Shanghai) in 280 CE, for example, a verse predicted that someday "*Zhongguo* [the north] will be defeated and Wu [in the south] shall rise again."[19]

Today, *Zhongguo* is probably the closest Chinese-language equivalent to the English word China. Even so, both the modern People's Republic of China, on the mainland, and the Republic of China (confined to the island of Taiwan since 1949) do not use *Zhongguo* in their official names. Instead, they both use a hybrid combination of the two ancient terms *Zhongguo* and *Huaxia*: *Zhonghua*. (For more on China and Chinese identity during a time when it was especially problematic, see Section 3.1.)

Many outsiders today find the conceit that China is the "Middle Kingdom" alternately either offensively arrogant or simply ridiculous. Such ethnocentricity was hardly unique to ancient China, however. Nearly all early civilizations viewed themselves as occupying the center of the world. China may be a little unusual in having this ancient conceit preserved in a name that is still used today, but our own present-day name for the Mediterranean Sea comes originally from a late Latin expression, *mare mediterraneum*, meaning "the sea in the middle of the earth."[20]

Furthermore, it was Westerners who more literarily 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, but there was also no native word in premodern Chinese that was exactly equivalent to it. There are 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 authentic than

the name "Indian" that was mistakenly applied by early modern Europeans to the natives of the Americas. Yet, however problematic these terms may be, like the term American Indian, they remain fundamentally names rather than words meaning "barbarian."[21]

If China is not a Chinese name, then, what about our familiar names for the other East Asian countries? The English word Japan is a distorted version, via Malay, of the Chinese pronunciation (*Riben* in current Mandarin, which can be written *Jih-pen* using an older spelling system) of the two-character name 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 was also from the beginning congenitally tied to Chinese or continental perspectives and influences. The name presumably could only have been conceived from a vantage point outside of Japan, further west, and it seems to have been adopted by the Japanese court in the late seventh century precisely for the meaning of its written Chinese characters.[22]

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. Unlike China, Japan has never suffered foreign conquest and rule (if you exclude the brief post-World War II Allied occupation). Since the dawn of reliably recorded history, Japan has also 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 post-dynastic republics. Yet, on the other hand, Japanese emperors rarely wielded much real power. Court and emperor were often somewhat irrelevant to the overall history of the Japanese islands, and Japan, too, has been divided. Much Japanese "tradition" is, moreover, not really very ancient, and much of it can be traced in part 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***) developed only in the late fifteenth century (although the Japanese had learned to drink tea, from China, centuries earlier). *Sushi*, as we know it today, "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 – and 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 concrete shape during the nineteenth century.[23]

As for Korea, the English name derives from that of the Koryŏ Dynasty (spelled Goryeo in the revised romanization system that is favoured in South Korea today; 918–1392 CE), which in turn was an abbreviation of the name of an even older northern kingdom called Koguryŏ (revised romanization: Goguryeo; roughly first-century–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 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** (revised romanization: Joseon), while South Koreans are inclined to use the name **Han'guk**, the "Country of the Han,"