

A History of East Asia

Third Edition

The third edition of this ambitious book begins by asking: What is East Asia? Today, many of the features that made the region distinct have been submerged under revolution, politics, or globalization. Yet in ancient times, what we now think of as China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam had both historical and cultural coherence.

Thoroughly revised and updated to include recent developments in East Asian politics, with new illustrations and suggestions for further reading, this book traces the story of East Asia from the dawn of history to the modern age. New discussion questions at the end of each chapter encourage readers to reflect, while a glossary, pronunciation guide, and parallel timeline enable a closer engagement with this complex subject.

Charles Holcombe is an experienced and sure-footed guide who encapsulates, in a fast-moving and colorful narrative, the connections, commonalities, and differences of one of the most remarkable regions on earth.

Charles Holcombe is Professor of History at the University of Northern Iowa. Having spent a year researching Six Dynasties China at Kyōto University in Japan, his awakening interest in East Asian interconnections led him to write *The Genesis of East Asia, 221 BC–AD 907* (2001). He won the Regents' Award for Faculty Excellence at the University of Northern Iowa (2007).

“Finally, a textbook that makes sense of 2,000 years of East Asian history in a coherent, comprehensive, and easy-to-read narrative. This finely written book is the ideal introduction to the complex history of the peoples, religions, civilizations, and countries that make up today’s dynamic region of East Asia.”

Patrick Jory, University of Queensland, Australia

“The new edition of Holcombe’s book masterfully balances comprehensiveness with clarity. With up-to-date research and an engaging narrative, it makes the complex histories of East Asia accessible, captivating both students and scholars. This is an essential resource for understanding the region’s rich past and dynamic present.”

Gilbert Chen, Towson University, USA

“The third edition of *A History of East Asia: From the Origins of Civilization to the Twenty-First Century* gives an accurate and comprehensive account of a wide variety of historical and modern developments in East Asia. It is indispensable reading for anyone interested in the region. I strongly recommend it.”

Gabriel Jonsson, Stockholm University, Sweden

“*A History of East Asia* is consummate scholarship that is beautifully written, meticulously organized for educators, handy for researchers, and accessible to university students and general readers. Holcombe’s updates and discussion questions in the third edition are especially helpful for teachers, while new readers will find a perfect entry point to learn about East Asia’s past and present.”

Gregory Evon, University of New South Wales, Australia

“Holcombe’s text remains the best work on the subject for university students. Holcombe writes with compelling ease about topics as wide-ranging as Bronze Age Sichuan and K-pop outfit BTS’s recent global domination. Through it all, he wrestles with and builds a strong case for East Asia as a region worth ongoing attention and study.”

Jeff Kyong-McClain, University of Idaho, USA

“Holcombe presents an integrated narrative of East Asian history in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It focuses on a shared East Asian culture and experience but balances this focus vis-à-vis the distinctiveness of its national and regional components. It is an excellent survey, accessible for the novice and illuminating for the specialist.”

Jon Felt, Brigham Young University, USA

“A concise yet well-integrated narrative of East Asia that introduces readers to the complexities of the region’s past and present. Coverage of key events of the early 2020s and discussion questions are a welcome addition in the third edition. *A History of East Asia* is well suited to self-study and highly recommended for introductory classes on East Asian history.”

Jeong Min Kim, University of Manitoba, Canada

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From the Origins of Civilization to the Twenty-First Century

THIRD EDITION

CHARLES HOLCOMBE
University of Northern Iowa





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Contents

	<i>List of Figures</i>	page xi
	<i>List of Maps</i>	xiii
	<i>Preface to the Third Edition</i>	xv
	<i>Pronunciation Guide</i>	xvii
	<i>Timeline: Dynasties and Major Historical Periods</i>	xxi
	<i>Glossary</i>	xxiii
	Introduction: What Is East Asia?	1
	Questions for Discussion	12
	For Further Reading	12
1	The Origins of Civilization in East Asia	14
	1.1 The First East Asians	16
	1.2 East Asian Languages and Writing Systems	18
	1.3 Bronze Age China	26
	Questions for Discussion	30
	For Further Reading	30
2	The Formative Era	31
	2.1 Zhou Dynasty China (ca. 1045–256 BCE)	31
	<i>The Hundred Schools of Thought</i>	35
	Confucianism	35
	Daoism	40
	Legalism	42
	The Art of War	44
	2.2 First Empire: “The Faults of Qin” (221–207 BCE)	45
	2.3 The Han Empire (202 BCE–220 CE)	50
	<i>The Romance of the Three Kingdoms (220–280 CE)</i>	56
	Questions for Discussion	59
	For Further Reading	59

vi	Contents	
3	The Age of Cosmopolitanism	61
3.1	China in Division	61
	<i>The Sixteen Kingdoms (North China, 304–439)</i>	61
	<i>The Southern Dynasties (South China, 317–589)</i>	66
	<i>Northern Wei (North China, 386–534)</i>	69
	<i>Cosmopolitan Elite International Culture</i>	73
3.2	Buddhism Comes to East Asia	74
	<i>Indian Origins</i>	74
	<i>Buddhism’s Spread to China</i>	77
	<i>Buddhism and the Birth of East Asia</i>	82
3.3	The Emergence of Korean Kingdoms	
	(ca. 2000 BCE–313 CE)	84
	<i>Three Kingdoms Korea (313–668)</i>	87
3.4	Yamato Japan (ca. 300–645)	91
	Questions for Discussion	96
	For Further Reading	96
4	The Creation of a Community: China, Korea, and Japan (Seventh–Tenth Centuries)	98
4.1	Chinese Imperial Restoration: The Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) Dynasties	98
	<i>The Consolidation of Tang Rule</i>	101
	<i>The Harmonization of Diversity</i>	104
	<i>Domesticating Chinese Buddhism</i>	108
	<i>Watershed: The Mid-Tang Crisis</i>	111
	<i>The “Transmission of the Way,” and Growing Commercialization</i>	114
4.2	The Birth of Korea: Unified Silla (668–935)	117
	<i>The Unification of the Korean Peninsula (668)</i>	119
	<i>Silla</i>	121
4.3	Imperial Japan: Nara (710–784) and Early Heian (794–ca. Tenth Century [–1185])	123
	<i>The Taika Coup (645)</i>	124
	<i>Nara (710–784)</i>	126
	<i>Early Heian (794–ca. Tenth Century [–1185])</i>	130
	Questions for Discussion	134
	For Further Reading	134
5	Mature Independent Trajectories (Tenth–Sixteenth Centuries)	136
5.1	Late Imperial China: The Song (960–1279), Yuan (1271–1368), and Early Ming Dynasties (1368–ca. Sixteenth Century [–1644])	136
	<i>The Song Dynasty Situation</i>	136
	<i>Economic and Social Change</i>	140

	Contents	vii
	<i>Neo-Confucianism</i>	144
	<i>Mongol Tempest: Chinggis Khan (ca. 1162–1227)</i>	146
	<i>The Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368)</i>	148
	<i>The Early Ming (1368–ca. Sixteenth Century [–1644])</i>	152
5.2	Confucian Korea: Koryŏ (918–1392) and Early Chosŏn (1392–ca. Sixteenth Century [–1910])	154
	<i>Koryŏ (918–1392)</i>	154
	<i>The Era of Mongol Domination (1270–1356)</i>	156
	<i>Early Chosŏn (1392–ca. Sixteenth Century [–1910])</i>	158
5.3	Warrior Japan: Late Heian ([794–] Tenth Century–1185), Kamakura (1185–1333), and Muromachi (1333–1568)	160
	<i>The Rise of the Warriors</i>	160
	<i>The Gempei War (1180–1185)</i>	162
	<i>The Kamakura Shogunate (1185–1333)</i>	164
	<i>Muromachi (1333–1568)</i>	167
	Questions for Discussion	170
	For Further Reading	171
6	Early Modern East Asia (Sixteenth–Eighteenth Centuries)	173
6.1	Late Ming ([1368–] Sixteenth Century–1644) and Qing (1644–Eighteenth Century [–1912]) Dynasty China	174
	<i>Late Ming Consumer Culture</i>	174
	<i>The Manchu, Qing, “Gunpowder Empire” (1644–Eighteenth Century [–1912])</i>	180
6.2	The Hermit Kingdom: Late Chosŏn Korea ([1392–] Sixteenth–Nineteenth Centuries [–1910])	189
6.3	The Reunification of Japan (1568–1600) and the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1868)	193
	<i>Three Reunifiers</i>	194
	<i>The Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1868)</i>	197
	<i>The World Turned Upside Down: Early Modern Economic Development</i>	201
	Questions for Discussion	204
	For Further Reading	204
7	Dai Viet (Vietnam before the Nineteenth Century)	206
7.1	The Origins of Civilization in Vietnam	206
7.2	Chinese Imperial Frontier	210
7.3	Dai Viet	214
7.4	Champa	219
7.5	Vietnam Reaches the Mekong	221
7.6	The Last Dynasty	222
	Questions for Discussion	224
	For Further Reading	224

8	The Nineteenth-Century Encounter of Civilizations	226
8.1	Industrialization and the Rise of New Great Powers	227
8.2	The Nineteenth-Century Impact on China	229
	<i>The Opium Wars</i>	230
	<i>Domestic Rebellions</i>	234
	<i>The Tongzhi Restoration (1862–1874)</i>	236
	<i>The Treaty Ports</i>	239
	<i>The Boxer Rebellion (1898–1900)</i>	241
8.3	The Nineteenth-Century Opening of Korea	244
8.4	The Meiji Restoration (1868–1912): Japan “Leaves Asia”	250
	<i>Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan (1853–1854)</i>	251
	<i>The Meiji Restoration (1868)</i>	252
	<i>Meiji Modernization</i>	256
	The Meiji Constitution	258
	Industrialization	261
8.5	The French Colonization of Vietnam	264
	Questions for Discussion	266
	For Further Reading	266
9	The Age of Westernization (1900–1929)	268
9.1	Empire’s End: Republican Revolution in China	269
	<i>The 1911 Revolution</i>	271
	<i>The May Fourth Movement: Science and Democracy</i>	272
	<i>The Warlord Era, 1916–1928</i>	278
9.2	Korea under Japanese Rule, 1905–1945	282
9.3	Japan: Taishō Democracy	286
9.4	“Our Ancestors the Gauls”: French Colonial Indochina	292
	Questions for Discussion	295
	For Further Reading	295
10	The Dark Valley (1930–1945)	297
10.1	The Rise of Japanese Ultranationalism	297
10.2	Manchukuo	300
10.3	Nationalist China	304
10.4	The Rise of Mao Zedong	306
10.5	World War II in China	308
10.6	World War II in the Pacific	313
	Questions for Discussion	319
	For Further Reading	319
11	Cold War East Asia	321
11.1	The People’s Republic of China	321
	<i>Chairman Mao’s New China</i>	324
	<i>Nixon and Mao</i>	329
	<i>Deng Xiaoping and Market-Based Economic Reform</i>	331
	<i>Tiananmen</i>	336

	Contents	ix
11.2 Korea Divided	339	
<i>The Korean War</i>	341	
<i>North Korea</i>	344	
<i>South Korea: Syngman Rhee and the First Republic (1948–1960)</i>	348	
<i>Park Chung Hee and the Industrialization of South Korea</i>	350	
11.3 Postwar Japan	354	
<i>The Allied Occupation</i>	354	
<i>Economic Recovery and the “Developmental State”</i>	359	
<i>Trade Wars, and the End of the Japanese Miracle</i>	363	
11.4 Vietnam	365	
<i>The French Withdrawal</i>	366	
<i>American Intervention</i>	369	
11.5 The End of the Cold War	373	
Questions for Discussion	373	
For Further Reading	374	
12 Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Overseas Chinese	376	
12.1 Hong Kong	377	
12.2 Taiwan	383	
Questions for Discussion	394	
For Further Reading	395	
13 Globalization, and the Resurgence of East Asia	396	
13.1 China in the Age of Globalization	397	
<i>Xi Jinping</i>	403	
13.2 South Korea: Democratization and Globalization	409	
13.3 Japan	415	
<i>Japanese Globalization</i>	416	
<i>Twenty-First Century Japanese History</i>	420	
13.4 Socialist Republic of Vietnam	424	
13.5 Concluding Thoughts	427	
Questions for Discussion	428	
For Further Reading	428	
<i>Character List</i>	431	
<i>Notes</i>	451	
<i>Index</i>	485	

Figures

1.1 Pair of Western Zhou Dynasty bronze jars	page 28
2.1 Eastern Han Dynasty bronze model horse and carriage	51
3.1 Northern Wei Dynasty funerary statuette of a horseman	71
3.2 Giant Buddha at Yun’gang Grottoes, Datong, China	77
3.3 Bird-shaped Korean earthenware vessel, second–third centuries	85
3.4 Golden crown from Silla, Korea, fifth–sixth centuries	90
3.5 Japanese <i>haniwa</i> figure of a warrior, ca. 500 CE	93
4.1 Calligraphy by the Chinese Buddhist monk Huaisu, 777 CE	111
4.2 Bronze statue of Maitreya (the Future Buddha), seventh-century Korea	118
4.3 The Great Buddha of Nara, eighth-century Japan	129
5.1 Examination compound, Guangzhou (Canton), China	143
5.2 Ma Yuan, “Viewing Plum Blossoms by Moonlight,” Song Dynasty China	144
5.3 Detail from the thirteenth-century <i>Heiji Scroll</i> Japanese warrior tale	163
5.4 The Golden Pavilion, Japan	168
6.1 Humble Administrator’s Garden, Suzhou, China	179
6.2 Portrait of the Qianlong Emperor in ceremonial armor on horseback	185
6.3 Portrait of the Jesuit missionary Nicholas Trigault by Peter Paul Rubens	187
6.4 Wrestling scene, after Kim Hong-do, nineteenth-century Korea	192
6.5 Calligraphy by Chinese-born Zen monk Nangen, seventeenth-century Japan	198
6.6 Hokusai, <i>The Great Wave at Kanagawa</i> , Japanese woodblock print	202
6.7 Photograph of a nineteenth-century Japanese samurai	203
7.1 Dong Son bronze drum	208
7.2 A Cham Bodhisattva, ninth–tenth centuries	220
8.1 Arrival of the Japanese emperor at Shinbashi Station, 1895	227
8.2 The Shanghai Bund, ca. 1932	241
8.3 Ninth U.S. Infantry in Beijing, 1901	243
8.4 Kojong, emperor of Korea, ca. 1904	246

8.5	West Gate of Seoul, ca. 1904	249
8.6	Korean women with a sedan chair, 1919	250
8.7	Itō Hirobumi, the first prime minister of Japan	259
8.8	Silk-reeling factory built at Tomioka, Japan, in 1872	262
9.1	Dr. and Mrs. Sun Yat-sen	270
9.2	Beijing, ca. 1925	275
9.3	Deng Xiaoping in France, 1920	277
9.4	Japanese naval squadron bombarding Port Arthur, ca. 1904	282
9.5	Showroom of the Mitsukoshi Dry-Goods Store, Japan, 1911	287
9.6	Advertisement for Kirin beer, 1937	288
9.7	Japanese novelist Natsume Sōseki on ¥1,000 banknote	289
9.8	Caricature of Europeanized Vietnamese playing tennis	293
10.1	The Japanese battleship <i>Yamato</i>	298
10.2	Mao Zedong and Zhu De at Yan'an, ca. 1938	309
10.3	Bombing of Shanghai at the start of World War II	311
10.4	Surrender ceremony aboard the USS <i>Missouri</i> at the end of World War II	318
11.1	Mao era propaganda poster	326
11.2	President Nixon meets Chairman Mao, 1972	331
11.3	War weary Korean girl by a stalled M-26 tank during the Korean War	345
11.4	Satellite photograph of East Asia at night	347
11.5	Park Chung Hee at the time of the 1961 military coup in Seoul	350
11.6	The Toyota Toyopet, Japan's first export automobile	360
11.7	Ho Chi Minh declaring Vietnamese independence, 1945	367
11.8	Buddhist self-immolation, Saigon, 1963	371
11.9	Evacuation of Saigon, 1975	372
12.1	Michelle Yeoh and Jackie Chan at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival	378
12.2	Hong Kong demonstrations against new national security law, 2020	383
12.3	Japanese-built presidential palace in Taipei, Taiwan	385
12.4	Chiang Ching-kuo, Chiang Kai-shek, and Song Meiling	390
13.1	<i>Goddess of Democracy</i> statue in Tiananmen Square, 1989	399
13.2	Xi Jinping	404
13.3	BTS performs at the GRAMMY Awards in 2022	414
13.4	Abe Shinzō and Barack Obama at the G7 summit in 2016	423

Maps

1.1 Physical Map of the East Asian Core Region	<i>page</i> 5
1.1 Language families, languages, and major dialects of Chinese	19
2.1 The Warring States, 350 BCE	36
2.2 The Qin Empire, ca. 210 BCE	46
2.3 The Han Dynasty under Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE)	54
2.4 The Chinese Three Kingdoms and East Asia in 250 CE	57
3.1 States and peoples in 410 CE	62
3.2 Three Kingdoms Korea, ca. 500 CE	88
4.1 East Asia in 650 CE	113
5.1 East Asia in 1054 CE	138
5.2 The Mongol world empire, ca. 1300	149
6.1 East Asia in 1800	188
7.1 Contemporary Vietnam	207
7.2 Lingnan, ca. 400 CE	212
7.3 Dai Viet, ca. 1200 CE	216
8.1 Shanghai and vicinity, ca. 1930	240
8.2 Tokugawa Japan, ca. 1860	254
8.3 French Indochina	265
10.1 Manchuria, ca. 1920	301
10.2 East Asia in early 1937	310
10.3 World War II in East Asia and the Pacific	316
11.1 The People’s Republic of China	323
12.1 Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Macao	379

Preface to the Third Edition

This book is designed to deliver a concise but comprehensive introduction to the histories of China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam – with particular emphasis on their connections, commonalities, and distinctive differences. The author first became intrigued by those East Asian commonalities and differences while spending an academic year doing dissertation research on Six Dynasties China at Kyōto University in Japan. This awakening fascination led to the publication of the author’s earlier study, *The Genesis of East Asia*.¹

While it is hoped that this volume may be readable simply for pleasure and general interest, it will undoubtedly often be used as a classroom textbook, especially for introductory survey courses on East Asia. For that purpose, chapters or sections of chapters can be skipped if they fall outside the parameters of a particular course. For example, Vietnam is often not included in East Asia (and was not included in the first edition of this book). In this third edition, discussion of Vietnam prior to the nineteenth century remains concentrated in a single chapter, which instructors can simply choose not to assign. A counterargument could be made, however, that Vietnam is in some ways closer to the East Asian core and less of an outlier than Japan, and Vietnam is certainly both fascinating and important. Some readers may be especially interested in the chapter on pre-nineteenth-century Vietnam.

For the reader’s convenience, a pronunciation guide, timeline, glossary, and newly updated suggestions for further reading are provided. New for the third edition, questions for discussion have also been added. No prior knowledge about East Asia is necessary, but it is hoped that even seasoned experts may find some nuggets of interest in these pages.

Significant new developments in East Asia over roughly the past decade made it necessary to update the second edition or risk becoming dangerously out-of-date. Prominent among the recent developments are major new directions taken by the People’s Republic of China under the leadership of Xi Jinping, after he rose to power in 2012–2013. Xi Jinping was still something of an unknown when the second edition of this book was prepared, but since that time his tenure at the top has changed China profoundly.

The opportunity has also been seized to do more than merely add coverage of recent events, and to completely restructure the presentation of material following the end of World War II. What had previously been four separate chapters on Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and China since 1945 have now been replaced by an integrated chapter on the Cold War era in East Asia (1945 to roughly 1990), a stand-alone chapter on Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Overseas Chinese (intended to highlight the importance of Hong Kong and Taiwan, which had been relegated to a mere subsection of a chapter about China in the second edition), and a concluding chapter on developments in East Asia since the 1990s. Although the most sweeping changes for this third edition involve the post-1945 material, the entire volume has also been revised with an eye towards making improvements wherever possible, and there are numerous new and different illustrations. East Asia is, if anything, globally more relevant and important now than ever, and it is hoped that the reader will find this a welcome introduction.

Pronunciation Guide

(Where not indicated otherwise, pronunciations are approximately as might be expected by American English speakers.)

Chinese

East Asians normally simply do not use the Roman alphabet, but for the purpose of transcribing the sounds of East Asian words in our alphabet a number of different spelling systems have been devised. For Mandarin Chinese, a spelling system called *pinyin* is increasingly standard. In pinyin, the vowels and diphthongs (two vowels that combine to form a single syllable) of Mandarin are pronounced approximately as follows:

- a* as in **ah**
- ai* like the **igh** in **sigh** or **high**
- ao* like the **ow** in **how now brown cow**
- e* like the **u** in **but**
- ei* like the **ay** in **May day**
- i* as in **police** or like the **ee** in **feet** – except in the combinations *chi* (where it sounds more like the **chi** in **chirp**), *ci* (where it sounds more like the **si** in **popsicle**), *ri* (where it sounds more like the **ur** in **urban**), *shi* (where it sounds more like the **shou** in **should**), *si* (where it sounds more like the **si** in **sibling**), *zhi* (where it sounds more like the **Ge** in **German**), and *zi* (where it sounds more like the **zi** in **ziggurat**)
- o* like the **ou** in **ought**
- ou* like **oh**, or the **o** in **Oklahoma**
- u* like the **o** in **who** or the **oo** in **hoot**

Some exceptional combinations follow:

- ui* sounds more like **oo-eigh** rather than **oo-ee**
- yan* sounds like **yen** (rhymes with **Zen**) rather than **yahn**

-ian (in such words as *bian*, *lian*, *nian*, etc.) sounds like **-ee-en** (as in **Zen**) rather than **-ee-ahn**

yi sounds no different from a solitary *i* (as in *police*) – in other words, the *i* sound in isolation, or at the beginning of a word, is by convention spelled *yi*

A few unusual consonants in pinyin follow:

c sounds like the **ts** in the Russian title **Tsar** (the word *cui* therefore sounds like **ts-oo-eigh**, pronounced together quickly)

q sounds like the **ch** in **chance** (*Qin* therefore sounds like **cheen**)

x sounds like **hs** or the **s** in **see** (*Xia* therefore sounds like **hs-ee-ah**, pronounced together quickly)

zh sounds like the **j** in **jay** (*zhou* therefore sounds just like the familiar English name **Joe**)

Each Chinese syllable also always has a distinct tone, which is not, however, normally indicated in writing and therefore cannot be guessed from the spelling.

There are a number of alternate Chinese spelling systems still in circulation (though they are not used in this book) and several old, irregular spellings (and associated pronunciations) that have become conventionally established in English usage such as Peking for Beijing, Canton for Guangzhou, Sun Yat-sen for the man more commonly known in Mandarin as Sun Zhongshan, and Chiang Kai-shek for Jiang Jieshi.

Japanese

The vowels and diphthongs in Japanese are pronounced approximately as follows:

- a* as in **ah**
- ai* like the **igh** in **sigh** or **high**
- e* as in **ten**
- ei* like the **ay** in **May day**
- i* as in **police**
- o* as in **oh**, or the **o** in **Oklahoma**
- ō* (with a macron) is pronounced just like *o* but is sustained for twice the duration
- u* is like the **o** in **who** or the **oo** in **hoot**
- ū* (with a macron) is pronounced just like *u* but is sustained for twice the duration

When other vowels appear next to each other in Japanese, they are each pronounced separately rather than combined into a single-syllable diphthong. For example *ii* is pronounced **ee-ee**.

After an initial *s*, the *u* in Japanese is often also nearly silent. *Sukiyaki*, for example, sounds more like s'kiyaki.

Korean

The vowels and diphthongs in Korean are pronounced approximately as follows:

- a* as in **ah**
- ae* like the **a** in **hat**
- e* as in **ten**
- i* as in **police**
- o* like the **o** in **orbit**
- ö* like the **au** in **caught**
- u* like the **o** in **who** or the **oo** in **hoot**
- ü* like the **u** in **put**
- ui* like **we**

Note also that in Korean pronunciation, the consonant pairs *ch/j*, *k/g*, *p/b*, *r/l*, *s/sh*, and *t/d* are not necessarily clearly distinguished (technically, in one widely used spelling system, they are distinguished with the aid of an apostrophe, e.g., **ch'** represents the English **ch** sound and **ch** the English **j** sound, with *tch*, *kk*, *pp*, *ss*, and *tt* indicating further subtle shades of difference). Chosŏn, for example, therefore sometimes appears spelled as Joseon (with the *ö* sound being represented by *eo*), Koguryŏ as Goguryeo, Paekche as Baekje, and Silla as Shilla.

Vietnamese

Vietnamese is the only East Asian language that is normally written today using the Roman alphabet. The standard Romanization system is called *quốc ngữ*, which means “national language.” In addition to special marks indicating five of the six tones (like Chinese, Vietnamese is a tonal language, but, unlike Chinese, the tones are conventionally indicated in writing), several other diacritical (accent) marks are also used to distinguish different pronunciations. For example, the letter *d* written with a line through it (Đ, đ) is pronounced like the English letter *d*, but without a line through it a *d* sounds more like the English letter *z*. Unfortunately, because the Vietnamese diacritical markings are complicated, they are frequently dispensed with in English-language publications, as is usually the case in the present volume. Without the diacritic markings it is not always possible to know how to correctly pronounce a Vietnamese word.

Distinctive vowels and diphthongs in Vietnamese include:

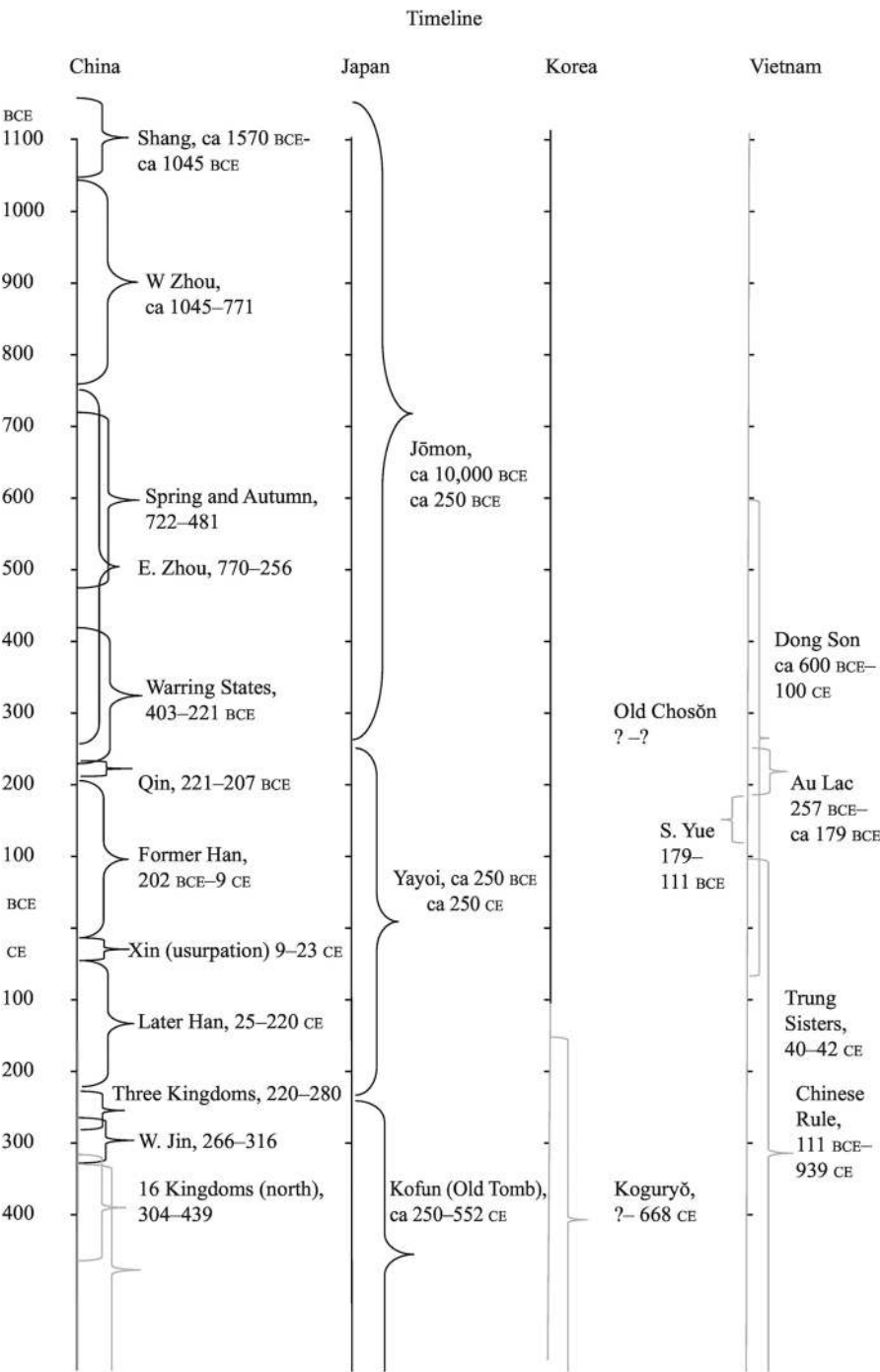
- a* is pronounced as **ah**, or as in **father**
- â* and *ă* are shorter in pronunciation than *a*
- e* is pronounced like the **a** in **average**
- ê* is pronounced like the **ay** in **say**
- i* is pronounced as like the **e** in **creek**
- o* is pronounced **aw**
- ơ* is pronounced as in **uh** or **fur**
- ô* is pronounced as **oh**, or as in **go**
- u* is pronounced as **ooh**, or as in **root**
- ư* is pronounced as in **should**
- ia* is pronounced as **eeah**

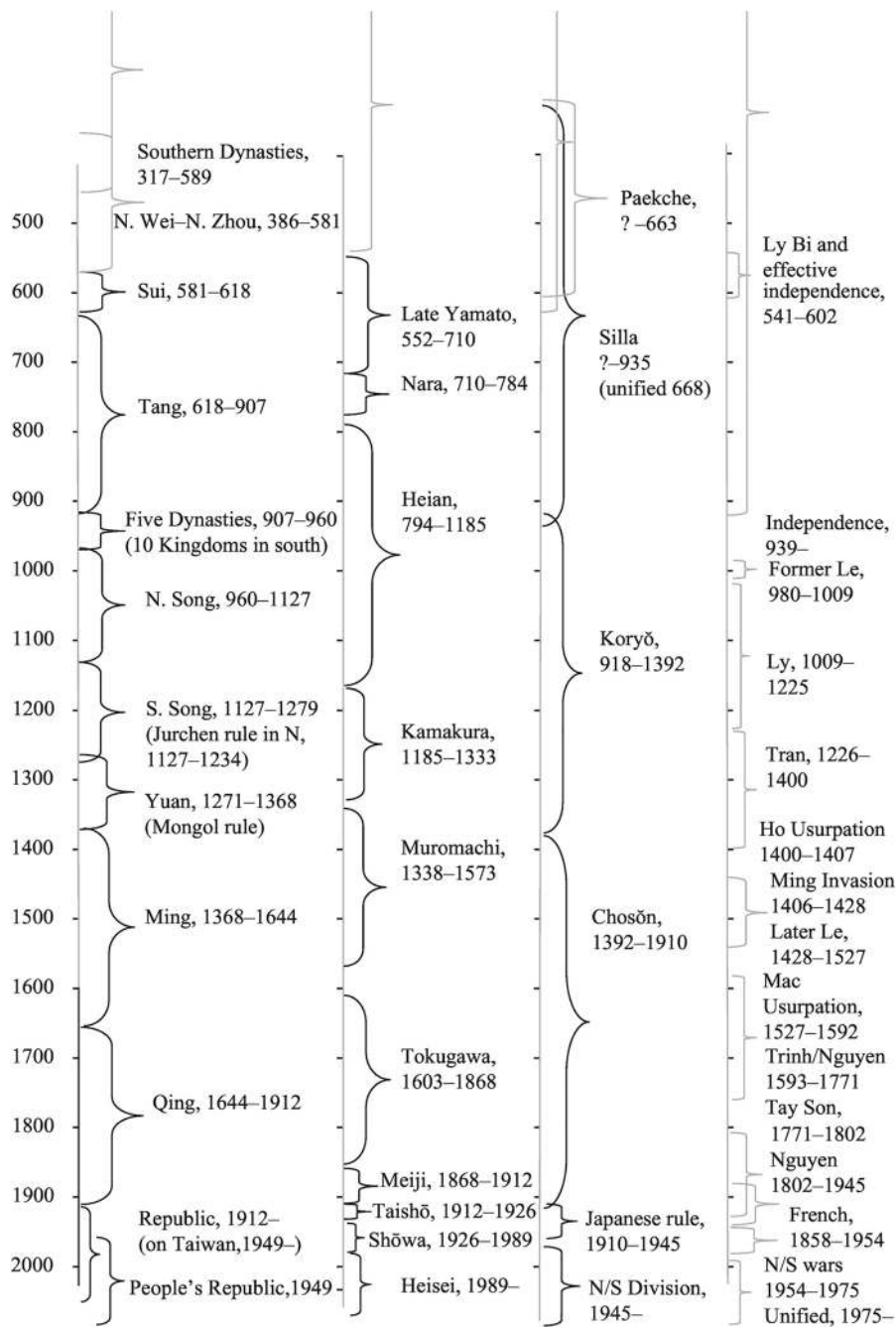
ua is pronounced as **üah**
ua is pronounced **ooah**

Distinctive consonants and consonantal combinations include:

- c, k, and q* are pronounced as in **cat**, or like the **k** in **thank**
- d* is pronounced as **z**
- ḏ* is pronounced as **d**
- g* is pronounced as in **good**
- kh* is pronounced something like the **h** in **hut**
- ng* is pronounced something like **nuhguh**
- nh* is pronounced something like **ny**
- r* is pronounced like the **zh** in Doctor **Zhivago**
- s* is pronounced **sh**
- t* is unaspirated, and pronounced like the **t** in **standard**: almost a **dull** sound
- th* is pronounced as the English letter **t**
- tr* is pronounced **tch**
- x* is pronounced as **s**

Timeline: Dynasties and Major Historical Periods





Glossary

Altaic	A major, somewhat hypothetical north Eurasian language family, possibly including the Turkic, Mongolic, Manchu, Japanese, Korean, and other languages
Amaterasu	The Japanese sun goddess
Annam	A premodern name for Vietnam (in French colonial times, specifically central Vietnam)
Bakufu	The military “tent government” of the Japanese shōguns
Bodhisattva	An altruistic enlightened Buddhist being (Sanskrit)
Bushi	A Japanese “military gentleman,” or samurai
Chaebŏl	A post-World War II South Korean conglomerate (written with the same two Chinese characters as the pre-World War II Japanese word <i>zaibatsu</i>)
Cham	Austronesian-speaking people living in what is today central Vietnam
Chanoyu	The Japanese tea ceremony
Chosŏn	Korea
Cochinchina	European name for southern Vietnam
Comintern	The Communist International, an organization based in Moscow from 1919 to 1943 (English abbreviation)
Daimyō	“Great name”: the lord of a regional domain in late premodern Japan
Dao Tong	The Neo-Confucian “Transmission of the Way” (in Chinese)
Dhāraṇī	A Buddhist magical formula (Sanskrit)
Enka	A popular sentimental modern Japanese musical style
Falun Gong	A new “traditional” Chinese religion, founded in 1992 and currently banned in the People’s Republic of China
Guandong	Chinese for “East of the Passes,” with reference to early twentieth-century Japanese military activity, usually referring to Manchuria (and frequently spelled “Kwantung” in older publications)
Guanzhong	The region “Within the Passes”: a Chinese geographical area roughly corresponding to modern Shaanxi Province

xxiv	Glossary
Guomindang	The Chinese Nationalist Party, alternatively spelled “Kuo-Min-Tang” in the older Wade-Giles spelling system (and abbreviated either GMD or KMT)
Guoyu	The Chinese National Language, or Mandarin
Hakka	“Guest Families” (Mandarin: <i>Kejia</i>): a Chinese sub-ethnic group
Han’guk	“The Country of the Han”: Korea
Han’gŭl	The Korean alphabet
Hanzi	Chinese characters or written symbols
Hiragana	A Japanese syllabary, or set of phonetic written symbols representing complete syllables
Hu	A generic Chinese name for northern non-Chinese peoples, used especially during the Age of Division
Huangdi	The Chinese term for <i>emperor</i>
Huaxia	China
Hwarang	“Flower Youths”: aristocratic young warriors in Silla (Korea)
Jinshi	“Presented Scholar”: the highest degree in the late imperial Chinese examination system
Juche	The modern North Korean ideology of self-reliance
Junzi	Literally the “son of a Lord” but used by Confucius to refer to anyone who behaved as a proper gentleman should (in Chinese)
Kami	Japanese gods or spirits
Kantō	Japanese for “East of the Passes,” referring to the largest Japanese agricultural plain in the vicinity of modern Tōkyō
Katakana	A Japanese syllabary, or set of phonetic written symbols representing complete syllables – now chiefly used to write Western loanwords
Keiretsu	Post-World War II Japanese enterprise groups
Kokutai	Pre-World War II Japan’s “national polity”
Kolp’um	Aristocratic “bone rank” in Silla (Korea)
Kuo-Min-Tang	The Chinese Nationalist Party, alternatively spelled “Guomindang” in pinyin (and abbreviated either GMD or KMT)
Kwantung	Chinese for “East of the Passes,” with reference to early twentieth-century Japanese military activity, usually referring to Manchuria (and now spelled “Guandong” in pinyin)
Li	“Courtesy,” “propriety,” “rites,” or “ceremony” (in Chinese)
Li	The organizing “principle” or “principles” for <i>qi</i> , or “matter,” in Neo-Confucian philosophy (in Chinese) (note: this word <i>li</i> is written with an entirely different character from the preceding <i>li</i> , meaning “courtesy”)
Lingnan	“South of the mountain ranges,” a region of early imperial south China that included the modern provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi and what is now northern Vietnam
Logograph	A nonphonetic written symbol, such as a Chinese character, used to represent a word in a particular language (a newly coined English term)
Maripkan	Early native Korean royal title
Minzu	The modern Chinese word for “nation,” in the sense of “a people”

MITI	The Ministry of International Trade and Industry in post-World War II Japan (English abbreviation)
Nihon	Japan
Nirvāṇa	“Extinction,” or Buddhist enlightenment (Sanskrit)
Nom	A system for writing the Vietnamese language, derived from Chinese characters
Pinyin	Literally, “to spell the sound”: the modern phonetic system for spelling Chinese using the Roman alphabet that was developed in the People’s Republic of China
Qaghan	A supreme Mongol and Turkic title, meaning roughly Khan of Khans, or Great Khan
Qi	The basic matter or substance of the universe according to Neo-Confucian philosophy (in Chinese)
Qipao	“Banner gown”: a Chinese female fashion that derived from Manchu clothing styles (in Chinese)
Qiren	“Banner People”: an alternate name for the Manchus (in the Chinese language)
Quoc ngu	System of writing Vietnamese using the Roman alphabet
Ren	The Confucian virtue of humanity (in Chinese)
Rōnin	Japanese masterless samurai
Rujiao	The “Teachings of the Ru,” or Confucian scholars (in Chinese)
Saṃsāra	The cycle of existence: birth and death (Sanskrit)
Sankin kōtai	The alternate attendance system for daimyō in Tokugawa Japan
SCAP	Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers during the postwar occupation of Japan (English abbreviation)
Shangdi	“The Lord on High”: the supreme ancient Chinese deity (and a term sometimes also used as a Chinese translation for the Christian God)
Shintō	“The Way of the Spirits”: the indigenous Japanese religion
Shōgun	“General”: the premodern Japanese military overlord
Śramaṇa	A Buddhist monk (Sanskrit)
Sūtra	A sermon attributed to the Buddha (Sanskrit)
Taigi meibun	The moral obligation of fulfilling the role proper to one’s title or status (in Japanese)
Taiji	The “supreme ultimate” in Neo-Confucian philosophy (in Chinese)
Tatami	The floor matting in late premodern Japanese buildings
Tennō	“Heavenly Sovereign”: the standard Japanese imperial title
Tianming	The Chinese Mandate of Heaven
Tianxia	Chinese for “Under Heaven,” referring to the royal or imperial realm
Tianzi	Chinese for “Son of Heaven,” referring to the supreme ruler
Tonkin	European name for northern Vietnam
Tripitaka	The “Three Baskets,” or the complete set of Buddhist Scriptures (Sanskrit)
Uji	A Japanese lineage or descent group
Viet Cong	Southern term for Vietnamese Communists

xxvi	Glossary
Viet Minh	League for the Independence of Vietnam
Wuwei	The Daoist principle of nonaction (in Chinese)
Xiao	The Confucian virtue of filial piety (in Chinese)
Yangban	The “two orders” of premodern Korean civil and military aristocracy
Yuan	The modern Chinese currency (also known in the People’s Republic of China as <i>renminbi</i>)
Zaibatsu	The great business conglomerates of pre-World War II Japan
Zhong	The Confucian virtue of loyalty (in Chinese)
Zhongguo	The “Central Country” or “Middle Kingdom,” that is, China