Introduction

What Is East Asia?

The country with what is probably already now the world's single largest national economy is located in East Asia, and three of the world's five largest economies are also Asian — two of them (China and Japan) specifically East Asian.[1] In addition to having the world's largest economy, the People's Republic of China also now has the world's second largest military budget, and is clearly an emerging superpower. Although not nearly as huge as China, some of the smaller East Asian states such as South Korea can also boast astonishing recent success stories. 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 already as an emerging junior player), dominated much of the planet economically, militarily, politically, and even culturally.

A hundred years ago China was a collapsed and failed state, and, within East Asia, Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam were all colonies of foreign powers. Only Japan appeared moderately successful. Even well into the mid-twentieth century, East Asia still 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, 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, first South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, then the People's Republic of China, and recently even (to some extent) Vietnam have all joined Japan – though each in characteristically different ways – in achieving dramatic levels of modern economic 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 fundamentally unprecedented departure from past human experience, the recent economic strength exhibited by East Asia is really more 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 a thousand years beginning around 500 CE

China was probably the wealthiest country in the world, not merely in aggregate total but possibly also in per capita terms. Even as late as the year 1800, when the Industrial Revolution was beginning to dramatically accelerate 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%).[2]

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 actually made a significant impact on China long before those technologies transformed Europe. Paper and printing, especially, 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.[3]

Although, when compared with China, the other countries of premodern East Asia were each much smaller in size – 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 – each made its own notable 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). Japan, as already mentioned, became perhaps the first non-Western society in the world to successfully modernize. Despite its relatively small size, in the modern era Japan long eclipsed China and became regionally dominant. For much of the late twentieth century Japan was a notably harmonious and peaceful society and the second most important economic power in the entire world, after the United States, and for a while even appeared poised to become "Number One."[4]

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 about the region's importance. China is a rising superpower, and although the People's Republic of China actually still remains quite poor and underdeveloped in per capita terms (that is, on average), parts of what is sometimes called "Greater China" compare favorably with conditions 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 the United States. Taiwan and Singapore are both predominantly ethnic Chinese places that have also achieved notable economic success. Singapore's per capita income is substantially higher even than Hong Kong's, and Taiwan's is above Canada and the European Union as a whole.[5] Japan, although it has recently been surpassed by China in terms of the total size of its economy, probably still 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, as an unpredictable and sometimes belligerent nuclear power nonetheless compels global attention. Vietnam has enjoyed rapid economic development in recent decades, and was the scene of much conflict, and a focal point of global attention, in the late twentieth century.

East Asia is therefore a critically important region of the world; but what is East Asia? Asia, in its entirety, is actually not a coherent entity. The concept of Asia is one that we have inherited from the ancient Greeks, who divided the world broadly into two major parts: Europe and Asia. For the Greeks, however, this original Asia meant primarily the Persian Empire. As the scope of Asia expanded 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, for example, two-thirds of the world's total population and 80 percent of the world's production were all located in Asia. Asia was nothing less than the entire Old World minus Europe. If Asia as a whole is not a very meaningful label, however, 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.[6]

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 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. At a very mundane level – but actually 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 or 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 traditionally 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 Early Modern and Modern (notably under certain recent communist regimes) than ancient tradition. Throughout much of history the whole of the Eurasian world 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 southern Manchuria in 415 CE, archeologists have found both local Chinese and non-Chinese artifacts, the earliest firmly dateable pair of horse stirrups, and five Roman-style glass items that may have originally been crafted on the shores of the Mediterranean. Chinese silks were buried in central Sweden (in western Europe) in the late eighth–early ninth century, together with a small statue of the

Map Introduction.1 East Asia Physical

Buddha that may have come from what is now Pakistan.[7] 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 provided a powerful model for successor empires everywhere from the Ottomans on the eastern Mediterranean to the Manchus in China.[8]

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.[9] Perhaps it is no coincidence that the pattern of Japanese history – which included a medieval period featuring hereditary warrior elites living in castles 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 Greater China (including the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore), Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Each of these places is different. Two of them may be considered outliers. Singapore is especially remote, located geographically in the midst of Southeast, rather than East, Asia. Because Singapore has a majority Chinese population, however, it can plausibly be considered as a distant outpost of Greater China, and therefore East Asia. Vietnam, meanwhile, also presents something of a borderline case. Although northern Vietnam was long actually part of the Chinese Empire, Vietnam as a whole occupies a transitional zone that straddles both East and Southeast Asia. Something of Vietnam's unique identity is suggested by its old French colonial label, "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 high 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 that ancient Greece and Rome left for modern Italy, France, Britain, Germany, and "the West." This volume, 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, perhaps not entirely coincidentally, to be chronologically parallel to the period that also witnessed what has been called "the birth of Europe"[10]).

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 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 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 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. It may be well 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."[11] 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 alone 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 export-led Pacific Rim economic growth, the East Asian nations have all more recently become each other's largest trading partners, and often enthusiastic consumers of each other's modern pop culture. In the post-Cold War era the East Asian region may, to some extent, even be recoalescing.

This in no way diminishes the East Asian countries' simultaneously accelerating participation in the larger global community, or the attraction of American and Western pop culture, nor does it eliminate internal East Asian rivalries. Hostilities in East Asia are frequently internal. Yet, the ghost of a long-shared logographic writing system does still hover over the region. The various East Asian languages all have extensively shared vocabularies. China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam are each different countries having 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, which is nonetheless also sometimes considered the "most Confucian" country in Asia.

If East Asia is arguably still at least a moderately coherent cultural region today, on the other hand, it has also always been internally diverse. Not only are the major nations of East Asia 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 (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 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 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 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 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 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, 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. Many had identifiably non-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) observed in the thirteenth century, "folk songs and national customs also have a new sound each generation."[12] 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 Chinese word for 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.[13] 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 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 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) word *Cīna*, which in turn may have derived from the name of the important northwestern frontier Chinese kingdom and the first imperial dynasty, Qin. Not only did the Chinese people not call themselves Chinese, moreover, 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."[14]

To be sure, as already mentioned, the ancient Chinese certainly did 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 "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 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."[15]

Zhongguo – "the central country" (or "countries," since the Chinese language has no grammatical distinction between singular and plural), a term which is often 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 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 in north China. Even as late as the third and fourth centuries CE, some five hundred years after the first imperial unification 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 state of Wu (whose capital was the city that is today called Nanjing, just upriver from modern Shanghai) in 280 CE, for example, a children's verse predicted that someday "*Zhongguo* [the north] will be defeated and Wu [in the south] shall rise again."[16]

Today, *Zhongguo* is probably the closest Chinese-language equivalent to the English word China. Even so, both the modern People's Republic, on the

mainland, and the Republic of China (confined to the island of Taiwan since 1949) are still officially known, not as *Zhongguo*, but by a hybrid combination of the two ancient terms *Zhongguo* and *Huaxia*: *Zhonghua*.

Many outsiders today find the implicit 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. 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 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 (quite naturally) not use this Greek word, there was no native 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 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."[17]

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 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 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.[18]

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. 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 post-dynastic 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 very ancient, and

much 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 – 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 its final shape during the nineteenth century.[19]

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 Koguryŏ (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 quite 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 word Han, written 漢, which just happens to sound like the Korean Han 韓.) 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 is more of an authentic native-language name than either China, Japan, or Korea, but the story of how it got that name may still come as something of a surprise. The name was first proposed from Beijing in 1803. Prior to that time, it had commonly been called Annam, or Dai Viet (Great Viet), among other names. The new nineteenth-century name Vietnam was intended to evoke the glorious memory of an independent ancient (ca. 207–111 BCE) kingdom called Southern Viet (pronounced *Nam Viet* in Vietnamese and *Nan Yue* in modern Mandarin Chinese). Because the capital of that ancient Southern Viet kingdom had been located at the site of the modern city of Guangzhou (English: Canton), in what is now China, however, it did not seem entirely proper to revive it in 1803 for the name of a country lying south of China's border. The old name was therefore altered slightly by changing it from Southern Viet to South of Viet, an adjustment that was achieved in both Vietnamese and Chinese simply by transposing the word order from *Nam Viet* to *Viet Nam* (Mandarin: *Yue Nan*).[20]

The reason why the capital of the ancient kingdom of Southern Viet was located north of modern Vietnam in what is now China, meanwhile, was because the earliest Bronze Age kingdom that was called Viet (Mandarin: *Yue*), 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