Introduction

This book explores what we might gain by looking at Chinese history from the periphery rather than from the core. The project of "de-centering China" is intended to counter the tradition of conceiving of Chinese history in terms of an unbroken sequence of dynasties, an organizational structure that emphasizes long-term historical continuity at the expense of downplaying the significance of ruling houses and dynastic policies. This book questions the dominant theme in modern historiography, which treats Chinese history as a linear narrative centered on the culture of the Central Plain and its original inhabitants, the Han Chinese.[1] I argue that while what others have described as the "history of the nation" serves the interests of the modern nation-state that is the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC), its emphasis on China as the history of the Han Chinese creates new problems for the state as it tries to create a tighter bond with its ethnic minorities.

De-centering China

The primary task in de-centering Chinese history is to examine it from the perspective of the periphery, and not the core. There is no lack of evidence from ancient times onward of intensive interactions between frontier and indigenous peoples (presently identified as the "Han Chinese") in the Central Plain (*zhongyuan*), which is widely considered to be the "cradle" or core region of Chinese civilization.[2] Migrants from its northern and

[1] See, for example, Ping-ti Ho's *Cradle of the East: An Inquiry into the Indigenous Origins of Techniques and Ideas of Neolithic and Early Historic China, 5000–1000 BC* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), and his Chinese-language book, *Huang tu yu Zhongguo nongye de qiyuan* (The yellow earth and the origins of Chinese agriculture) (Kowloon: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1969). The dominant view of Han identity as a historical concept is presented by Xu Jieshun, "Understanding the Snowball Theory of the Han Nationality," in *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority*, ed. Thomas S. Mullaney, James Leibold, Stéphane Gros, and Eric Vanden Bussche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 113–27.

[2] For the purposes of discussion, "Central Plain" will also be designated as "China."

western frontiers moved into the Central Plain, and their descendants eventually established states that ruled north China from the third to the seventh century. Later, conquest regimes from the northeast occupied first parts then all of north China and, in the thirteenth century, the Mongols successfully conquered the south and incorporated it into their empire. Yet we know relatively little about the peoples who headed the "sixteen barbarian states" who ruled north China in the third to fifth centuries, or the Khitan Liao, Jurchen Jin, and even the Mongol Yuan, because they left few written records, leaving most ordinary people to believe that the militarily superior frontier peoples eventually succumbed to the culturally superior Han Chinese; that is, that Central Plain culture triumphed over the culture of the frontier.

This thesis is rarely subjected to critical scrutiny, with the exception of an essay by Victor Mair. Scrutinizing the states ruling over the Central Plain, Mair declares that "both the institution and the periodic reinstitution of dominant political entities in the territory ... have inordinately been the result of initiatives taken by north(west)ern steppe peoples and agro-pastoralists."[3] Mair proposes that the *locus* or dynamic center of Chinese history was not north-central China (the Central Plain) but the Ordos, "the zone of consummate interface between the settled and the steppe."[4] Recognition of the importance of this interaction has led others to analyze Chinese history in term of its relations with the "Turko-Mongolian" or "Central Eurasian" world.[5]

Victor Lieberman expands on this point. Tracing the long-term political evolution of Eurasian states, Lieberman places China in the "exposed zone," which was vulnerable to Inner Asian invasions and conquests. Inner Asian regimes such as the Sui successfully unified the north and south after the fall of Han, while the Mongols and Manchus reversed political atomization, incorporated China into large empires, and brought Chinese administration to "unprecedented levels of efficiency."[6] For Lieberman, the frequency and intensity of Inner Asian influence is the critical factor that distinguishes China's historical

[3] Victor Mair, "The Northwestern Peoples and the Recurrent Origins of the 'Chinese State,'" in *The Teleology of the Modern Nation-State: Japan and China*, ed. Joshua A. Fogel (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 83.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 81.
[5] Christopher Beckwith, for example, places China on the fringes of his history, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). See also Jonathan Karam Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[6] Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), vol. II, p. 103.

evolution from the major Eurasian patterns. From the perspective of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the focus of this book, the primary Inner Asian influences come from northeast Asia.

One of the primary obstacles to studying China from the periphery is the paucity of records that are not written in Chinese (and hence from a Chinese perspective). The Chinese possessed what Peter Perdue called the "hegemony of inscriptions."[7] As Endymion Wilkinson has observed, the treatment accorded non-Han peoples in many of the standard dynastic *Histories* was "prejudicial." Terms for these peoples were "written with animal and other significs to underline their bestial nature," and it was assumed that those resisting acculturation needed "further education."[8]

Chinese texts dominate the existing historical record of northeast Asia through the first millennium CE, making it difficult for scholars to directly access the voice of frontier peoples. The scarcity of documents in the language of the conquerors also hampers study of the tenth- to fourteenth-century conquest regimes. Because "few specimens of the Khitan and Jurchen scripts have survived," and the texts written in Tangut and Mongol rarely outlived the empires that commissioned their invention, there are vast gaps in the historical documentation of these empires.[9]

The project of "de-centering China" requires documents. This book makes extensive use of Japanese, Korean, and Manchu-language texts, all of which present non-Chinese perspectives, and draw upon the divergent interpretations presented in the abundant secondary historical literature in Japanese and Korean. De-centering also entails analyzing the cultural engagement of Japanese and Korean elites with ritual and ideological elements originating in China. The term "sinicization" encapsulates the underlying issue. The borrowing of institutions, a system of law, and bureaucratic practices was also historically important in the parts of Europe encompassed by the Roman empire, yet acknowledgment of this historical legacy does not prevent historians from studying European nations as separate entities, each with its distinctive evolutionary path. Japanese and Korean state rituals, succession practices, and discourse distinguishing themselves from their neighbors evolved along separate paths. The same was true of the Manchu Qing.

[7] Peter Perdue, "Military Mobilization in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century China, Russia, and Mongolia," *Modern Asian Studies* 30.4 (1996): 782.
[8] Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A New Manual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), p. 643.
[9] Quotation from Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. VI: *Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368*, ed. Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 31.

Japan and Korea as northeast Asia

The dominant consensus separates Korea and Japan from the Manchurian plain that nurtured the Khitan Liao (907–1125), Jurchen Jin (1126–1234) and Qing (1644–1911) dynastic houses that ruled China for over half of the millennium before the Republican Revolution. As part of East Asia, Korea and Japan are usually seen as culturally if not politically subordinate to China, in contrast to the Khitan, Jurchen, and Manchu conquest regimes. "East Asia," a term popularized in the 1960s in the United States by John K. Fairbank and Edwin Reischauer, included China, Japan, Korea, and "to a lesser extent, Vietnam." It was defined, most importantly, by a shared culture and "primary system of writing" derived from "ancient China."[10] The National Defense Education Act (1958), which funded "regional studies" in American universities, institutionalized "East Asia" (defined as China, Japan, and Korea) as a major academic field.[11] Although the concept of "East Asia" has been critiqued for its Sinocentric biases and essentialization of historically fluid relationships, it retains a considerable presence in the scholarly literature.[12] The notion that adopting/adapting Chinese practices and institutions makes the borrower "Sinicized" has come under sustained scholarly attack, but not yet in the PRC. I argue instead that Korea and Japan are better understood by classifying them with the Manchurian states which constituted China's northeast frontier.

From the tenth to fourteenth century, much if not all of the Chinese-speaking world was actually situated at the periphery of empires based not in the Central Plain but in the northeast.[13] Yet virtually all studies of the Khitan, Jurchen Jin, and Mongol empires view them only within a

[10] Edwin O. Reischauer and John K. Fairbank, *East Asia: The Great Tradition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), p. 3.

[11] See the discussion of the historical antecedents in Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 124–25, 128–29, 132–33, and on the federal funding of the field, pp. 166–67. US government funding of secondary education focusing on strategically important languages has caused the teaching and research on Vietnam to be shifted from "East Asia" to "Southeast Asia."

[12] Recent examples of works include Charles Holcombe, *The Genesis of East Asia, 221 BC–AD 907* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), and David C. Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

[13] Kiyohiko Sugiyama, "The Qing Empire in the Central Eurasian Context: Its Structure of Rule as Seen from the Eight Banner System," in *Comparative Imperiology*, ed. Kimitaka Matsuzato (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2009), pp. 87–108, argues in favor of calling Qing a "Central Eurasian state." For maps of the Liao, Jin, and Mongol empires, see Maps 7, 17, and 50, pp. 118–19, 236–37, and 425 in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. VI.

Chinese framework.[14] One exception to this observation is David M. Robinson's study of the fourteenth-century Korean Koryŏ kingdom during the last days of the Mongol empire, when the Korean peninsula was subjected to Mongol overlordship.[15] Robinson focuses on a major event, the Red Turban movement, which disrupted law and order beyond north China and spread into the northeast. Robinson also underlines the degree to which Mongol–Koryŏ relations – which included significant inter-marriage between the ruling houses – epitomized the Mongol success in incorporating the elites of different subject peoples.[16] Here and elsewhere, the Mongol achievement in unifying the steppe and sown regions introduced "a matrix of political, economic, military, cultural, technological and ethnic connections that differed qualitatively from earlier periods."[17] Mongol policies were a harbinger of developments under the Qing.

Robinson's monograph depicts a region with multiple state players. His statement that "In Northeast Asia, Jurchen, Mongol, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese interests intersected (and would continue to intersect until the last days of imperial East Asia)" is the starting point for my research on a period several centuries after the fall of the Yuan empire. This multi-state framework demands analysis of materials produced by the different state actors. Kenneth M. Swope's thought-provoking survey of the Japanese, Korean, and Chinese accounts of the events following Toyotomi Hideyoshi's 1592 invasion of Korea nicely illustrates the benefit of taking this point seriously. Swope uses these different records to illuminate many aspects of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean interaction that would otherwise remain hidden from view, such as the autonomy enjoyed by the Chinese and Japanese negotiators, whose misrepresentations to their superiors brought on a diplomatic debacle in 1595 that prompted Hideyoshi to launch a second massive Korean campaign.[18] The episode reminds us of the perpetual need to

[14] For example, the most influential body of essays on these empires was published as vol. VI in *The Cambridge History of China*.
[15] David M. Robinson, *Empire's Twilight: Northeast Asia Under the Mongols* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2009).
[16] Remco Breuker, "Within or Without? Ambiguity of Borders and Koryŏ Koreans' Travels during the Liao, Jin, Song and Yuan," *East Asian History* 38 (2014): 56, argues that Koryŏ elites re-oriented themselves to Yuan as the "new wellspring of civilization."
[17] D. Robinson, *Empire's Twilight*, p. 289.
[18] Kenneth M. Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail: Ming China and the First Great East Asian War, 1592–1598* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), chapter 5; Kenneth M. Swope, "Deceit, Disguise, and Dependence: China, Japan, and the Future of the Tributary System, 1592–1596," *The International History Review* 24.4 (2002): 757–82.

interrogate official documents, which have their biases and are edited with internal political agendas.

What Swope calls the "First Great East Asian War" set off a sequence of events that was to alter the geopolitical balance of the region and batter the Korean peninsula, which occupied a strategic position between the Ming and the rising Jurchen/Manchu regime. Korean historians treat the period from Hideyoshi's invasion to the second Manchu invasion of Korea (1637) as one of national disaster and humiliation. Japanese specialists view this failed invasion as a minor episode in the events that led to the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate. The same events are all but ignored in histories of China, yet had the outcome been different, the Japanese might have made a lasting impact on Korea and thus eroded the foundations of what became the Qing empire.

Japan and Korea shared many attributes with the northeast conquest regimes. Both were populated by groups that originated in northeast Asia.[19] By virtue of its geographical position, the northeast was linked to the steppe and responsive to shifts in the political fortunes of the steppe nomads. Operating in a multi-state political arena which included the Central Plain regimes along with other entities in the region, ambitious leaders of northeast Asian states viewed China as a source of cultural and political capital that would support their own political aspirations. They were happy to do whatever was required to obtain the books, commodities, and customary symbols of legitimation that they sought, while preserving their political independence and cultural identity. Over time, this region's relations with China ran the whole gamut from petitioning for investiture to using military superiority to extract tribute from China, and, in some cases, capturing and governing former Chinese territories.

Japan and Korea were no different. Like the Chinese states, they also waged military campaigns (with varying success) against the northeast states. There were instances (in the fifth and seventh centuries) when the Yamato court sent troops to the Korean peninsula to aid its ally in intra-Korean conflict, others (in the seventh century) when Korean states allied with Chinese states against their internal rivals, and still others (in the tenth and eleventh centuries) when the Korean regime was forced to choose sides in conflicts between Chinese and northeast frontier states. Even though its insular status helped to shield Japan, the Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281 reinforced elite fears that Japan's security from continental military threats could not be guaranteed. For Korea, the

[19] Although specialists talk about Southeast Asia as a possible place of origin for the Japanese people, there seems to be consensus concerning the northeast Asian origin of many Japanese.

geopolitical situation from the tenth century onward was merely an exaggerated version of earlier circumstances which obliged peninsular states to exercise nimble diplomacy to survive pressures from powerful neighbors.

Beyond national history

Chinese national histories treat Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea as part of the Wanli reign, when the emperor's refusal to attend to affairs of state, increasing military campaigns to repress unrest along the empire's borders, growing factional struggles within the Ming court, and deepening fiscal deficits presaged dynastic decline.[20] Written with the assumption that history is the record of the rise and fall of dynasties, this traditional understanding of the sixteenth century fails to capture historic transformations occurring within China's economy and society stimulated by the boom in maritime trade.

This book analyzes the events of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the period of the Wanli reign, within a dynamic regional and global context that spurred China's advance toward early modernity. Unlike Lieberman, I link Tokugawa Japan and Chosŏn Korea (part of his "protected zone") with Ming China and the Jurchen Later Jin state, to consider how the actions of one affected the others. *Contra* Lieberman, who argued that the Inner Asian factor simultaneously functioned as a creative stimulus to innovations in state formation and as a hindrance to military modernization and long-term fiscal and administrative centralization,[21] I argue that the entire region advanced along these lines in response to innovations introduced by European traders, and that abandoning the constricting limits of national history clarifies the chronology of stimulus-response.

Cultural borrowing and sinicization

Like the northeast Asian conquest regimes, Korea and Japan avidly imported political and religious concepts and institutions from the Central Plain society. Many scholars (including Fairbank and Reischauer) cite the use of Chinese writing as a sign of Chinese cultural hegemony. In recent scholarly debates within the PRC, use of Chinese writing is also frequently taken to indicate that a state was under the spell

[20] See Ray Huang, *1587: A Year of No Significance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).
[21] Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, pp. 622–27.

of Chinese culture.[22] Rulers wishing to establish diplomatic relations with Central Plain states communicated in Chinese, using forms that were dictated by the Central Plain states to ensure that superior–inferior status hierarchies were observed. The borrowers, however, seem to have understood and subverted the complicated protocol governing written communications in fairly short order.

Japanese and Korean belong to a different language group from Chinese. The process of accommodating their own languages to Chinese writing took several centuries. Substantial numbers of texts indicating that Koreans had successfully adapted Chinese writing to their own language appear only in the sixth and seventh centuries, even though Chinese writing must have entered the Korean peninsula soon after 108 BCE.[23] Similarly, although the earliest texts inscribed with Chinese characters discovered in the Japanese archipelago date from the first century BCE, evidence of a substantive upsurge in literacy comes only in the seventh century.[24]

The task of translating (both literally and figuratively) Chinese-language texts and adapting the Chinese writing system to their own spoken languages was accomplished through a complex of practices that Japanese called *kundoku*, "reading by gloss," which "involved preserving the visual *kanbun* (Chinese) text while arranging it into Japanese word order during the reading process." Borrowed from the Korean peninsula and brought to Japan in the seventh century by Paekche scribes and refugees,[25] *kundoku* allowed Japanese to develop their own interpretive traditions of Chinese texts.

Awareness of the gap between Chinese and their own spoken languages probably stimulated the Japanese and Koreans to innovate. Like the other northeast states, the Japanese and Koreans eventually created their own

[22] See the Epilogue for concrete arguments concerning historical "ownership" of Gaogouli/Koguryŏ based on precisely this criterion.

[23] David B. Lurie, *Realms of Literacy: Early Japan and the History of Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), pp. 199–201; a notable exception, p. 197, is the Kwanggaet'o stele inscription, dated 414 CE, which shows "extensive command of writing by Koguryŏ affiliates by the early fifth century." See Ju Bo Don, "Problems Concerning the Basic Historical Documents Related to the Samhan," in *Early Korea*, vol. II: *The Samhan Period in Korean History*, ed. Mark E. Byington (Cambridge, MA: Korea Institute, Harvard University, 2009), pp. 95–122, on the Chinese texts which form the major sources for early Korean history.

[24] Lurie, *Realms of Literacy*, p. 3. Lurie focuses on the existence of individuals who could read and write, i.e. communicate, in Japanese using the Chinese writing system, which is an intellectual activity that is separate from writing a Chinese text in accordance with diplomatic protocols set by the Chinese state, as will be discussed in what follows.

[25] See Lurie's detailed examination of *kundoku* in chapter 4 of his *Realms of Literacy*.

writing systems.[26] In Japan, gradual processes of graphic simplification, expansion of literacy, and development of printing supported the creation of new syllabaries, *katakana* and *hiragana*, which appear in written documents beginning in the tenth century.[27] The Korean alphabet, *Han'gŭl*, was commissioned in the fifteenth century by the king, Sejong, to enable commoners to express themselves in writing without mastering Chinese characters.[28]

Rather than promoting acculturation, adopting and reading Chinese texts may paradoxically have reinforced recipients' determination to assert their own identities. Recent studies show that culture recipients such as the Koreans and Japanese used Chinese forms to contradict or challenge the Sinic position. An example is a letter sent in 600 CE to the Sui in which the Yamato ruler flouted Chinese rules and used his native title, rendered phonetically. His break with the protocol of the time signified his wish to display his "independent authority and dignity," i.e. to challenge the Sinocentric world order.[29] Similarly, although *Nihon shoki*, one of the earliest histories produced in Japan (720), was written in "classical Chinese," one of its main themes was to portray Japan as "an equal of China," "an empire, like China, worthy of respect."[30] Similar assertions of self-identity appear in Manchu-language and Korean documents. It is for precisely this reason that, I argue, we should examine both sides of exchanges between the Central Plain and the northeast.

An abundance of documentary materials allows us to pursue this research agenda. Korean and Japanese elites responded to political, economic, and cultural exchanges with Chinese regimes in ways that parallel the actions of northeast conquest regimes, and reinforce recent work on the dynamic impact on China of groups originating along its northern frontiers. Moreover, the extensive secondary literature produced by Korean and Japanese historians presents scholarly interpretations that

[26] On the commissioning of a writing system by the northeast conquest regimes, see Franke and Twitchett, "Introduction," pp. 30–33.

[27] Yoshihiko Amino provides a social history of these syllabaries and *kanji* in his "On Writing," pp. 123–43 in Amino, trans. Alan S. Christy, *Rethinking Japanese History* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2012).

[28] See the "Introduction," pp. 2–3, and other essays in Young-Key Kim-Renaud, ed., *The Korean Alphabet: Its History and Structure* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

[29] Zhenping Wang, "Speaking with a Forked Tongue: Diplomatic Correspondence between China and Japan, 238–608 AD," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 114.1 (1994): 28–29. Wang notes that the Sui court mistook the phonetic rendering of the title as the Yamato ruler's personal name, and accepted a missive that they would have rejected had they properly understood the text.

[30] John R. Bentley, "The Birth and Flowering of Japanese Historiography from Chronicles to Tales to Historical Interpretation," in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. II: *400–1400*, ed. Sarah Foot and Chase F. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 62.

differ not only from those of Chinese authors but also of modern China specialists. This book synthesizes information from secondary literature in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and English.

Primary and secondary sources

Views of long-term historical shifts in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese history are drawn from a number of sources and the work of many scholars. There is an abundance of scholarship on the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Primary sources and secondary literature in Japanese provide detailed information on Hideyoshi's invasions of Korea. Compilations of excerpts from Ming and Chosŏn official documents relating to the Hideyoshi invasion and to Sino-Korean relations ease the scholar's task.[31] Contemporary historiography written in English, Japanese, and Korean also gives divergent views concerning events.

The primary sources tracing Nurhaci's emergence as a regional leader, the relations between his Later Jin state, the Chosŏn dynasty, and the Ming are also multi-lingual and multi-national. Chinese records include the *Ming shilu* (Veritable Records for the Ming dynasty) and *Da Qing shilu* (Veritable Records for the Qing dynasty), chronologies of each reign that summarize key state deliberations and decisions.[32] For at least the period before 1644, the official record was initially written in Manchu, a script invented in 1599 and revised in the 1630s. Manchu writing, referred to after 1644 as *Qing wen* 清文, became one of the two documentary languages of the Qing state.

Voluminous Manchu-language documents for the period after 1644 are scattered in library collections in Taiwan, China, Japan, Europe, and the United States.[33] The pre-1644 records are fewer in number but have

[31] Li Guangtao, comp., *Chaoxian renzhen wohuo shiliao* (Historical materials on the Japanese invasion of Chosŏn), 5 vols. (Taipei: Institute of History and Philology, 1970); Wu Fengpei et al., comp., *Renzhen zhi yi shiliao huiji* (Collected historical materials on the Japanese invasion) 2 vols. (Beijing: Quanguo tushugan wenxian suowei fuzhi zhongxin chubanshe, 1990); Wang Qiju, comp, *Ming shilu: Lingguo Chaoxian pian ziliao* (Materials in the *Ming shilu* relating to Chosŏn) (Beijing: Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu, 1983) and Wang Qiju, comp., *Qing shilu: Lingguo Chaoxian pian ziliao* (Materials in the *Qing shilu* relating to Chosŏn) (Beijing: Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu, 1987); Li Guangtao, comp., *Ji Mingji Chaoxian zhi [Dingmao lühuo] yu [Bingzi lühuo]* (Ming and Chosŏn records on the 1627 and 1636 invasions of Chosŏn) (Taipei: Institute of History and Philology, 1972).

[32] The *Ming shilu* is also available in the Scripta Sinica full-text database online.

[33] For an overview of the scholarly repercussions, see Mark C. Elliott, "Manshūgo bunsho shiryō to atarashii Shinchōshi" (Manchu language archives and the New Qing History), in *Shinchōshi kenkyū no aratanaru chihei* (New perspectives on Qing history), ed. Hoyosa Yoshio (Tokyo: Yamakawa shuppansha, 2008), pp. 124–39.