

Introduction

Empires and Their Space*

Yuri Pines with Michal Biran and Jörg Rüpke

NEBUCHADNEZZAR: Where are you from?

ANGEL: From there, beyond Lebanon.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR: As established by the great king Nebuchadnezzar, the universe ends beyond Lebanon. This view is shared by all the geographers and astronomers.

ANGEL (LOOKING AT HIS MAP): Beyond Lebanon there are still some villages: Athens, Sparta, Carthage, Moscow, Peking. Do you see? (*shows king the map*).

NEBUCHADNEZZAR (ASIDE): I shall also have the Geographer Royal hanged. (*To the Angel*): The great king Nebuchadnezzar will conquer these villages too.

(Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *An Angel Comes to Babylon*, 1953)

This is a book about Eurasian empires and their spatial dimensions. What were the factors that prompted their expansion and caused some of their leaders to embark on ever more costly wars on the increasingly remote frontiers? And, conversely, what were the factors that limited this expansion? How did the builders and custodians of major empires conceive of their space? And what measures did they take to integrate this vast space into a coherent political entity? To what extent were imperial expansion and contraction influenced by common factors – from ecology to ideology, from military and economic considerations to the nature of the ruling elite? How did these distinct factors influence the trajectories of individual empires?

This book is envisioned as the first in a series of focused studies of the common problems faced by the major Eurasian empires throughout history. We start our discussion by outlining the rationale of our project. Then we present our working definition of the term “empire” and briefly outline three waves of empire formation in Eurasia, introducing therewith the empires on which our project – including the current volume – focuses. The largest part of this introduction is devoted to the analysis of ideological, ecological, military, economic, political, and administrative considerations that prompted the imperial

* This research by Yuri Pines was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 568/19) and by the Michael William Lipson Chair in Chinese Studies. Pines is indebted to co-editors (especially Michal Biran, who revised the work twice), to the volume contributors and to many other colleagues, particularly Johann Arnason for their critical comments and suggestions.

expansion and contraction. In a nutshell, we believe that so many causes – domestic and foreign, subjective and objective – influenced the trajectories of individual empires that it is all but impossible to come out with an “one-size-fits-all” explanation of the empires’ spatial dimensions. What is possible is to outline the relative weight of each of these factors and to analyze commonalities and differences in how empires dealt with spatial challenges.

1 Introducing Comparative Imperiology

To understand the background for our endeavor, it will be useful to briefly revisit the changing attitudes to the word “empire” in political discourse at large and in academic circles in particular during the last century. Recall that at the turn of the 20th century, most of the world was ruled by political entities that proudly identified themselves as “empires.” Among the major powers of that age, only France and the United States called themselves republics. Lesser colonial powers – Belgium, Holland, Italy, Portugal, and the then recently battered Spain – were headed by kings. Other great Western powers – Britain, Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary – defined themselves as empires. Among the non-conquered parts of Asia and Africa, imperial titles (or their equivalents) were borne by the rulers of China, Japan, Korea, Annam (Vietnam), the Ottoman Empire, and Ethiopia. To be sure, some of these “emperors” were not awe-inspiring rulers: think of the puppet emperor of Annam, ruling a French protectorate, or the short-lived “Great Korean Empire” (1897–1910), en route to being fully annexed by Japan. Yet the very fact that these leaders sought an imperial title testifies to the enormous prestige of the words “emperor” and “empire” at that time.

This prestige, however, turned out to be short-lived. Few empires survived the vicissitudes of World War I, and even fewer remained intact after World War II. Since the abolition of the short-lived Central African Empire (1976–9), only the Japanese head of the state continues to maintain the title of emperor, but “empire” is absent from the official self-designation of Japan. This is not surprising. Already half a century ago, an author of one study of imperial formations noticed: “Empire has become an ugly word” (Hazard 1965: 1; cf. Garnsey and Whittaker 1978: 1). Being associated primarily with the predatory imperialism of the 19th and 20th centuries, the idea of empire was denounced by liberals and Marxists alike. It was correlated with enslavement, denial of freedom, and “unnatural” subjugation to a supreme authority (Wesson 1967).¹ Needless to say, this intellectual atmosphere did not encourage systematic studies of past empires.

¹ This enmity toward the idea of empire, and the view that it is “unnatural” in distinction to the nation-state, can be traced back to Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803). For him and other late 18th-century critics of the imperial idea, and their failure to influence the 19th-century European political thought, see Muthu 2009.

It is against this backdrop that we can understand the immense audacity of S. N. Eisenstadt, who in the early 1960s undertook a bold project of outlining a political typology of the major imperial formations in human history (Eisenstadt 1963). Back then, few if any scholars followed his lead. Throughout the rest of the 20th century, discussions of empires were overwhelmingly focused on the immediate context of the modern-age imperialism and its historical roots (for a notable exception, see Mann 1986). In the meantime, the rapidly accumulating knowledge of the historical peculiarities of each of the major empires of the past has challenged the very possibility that a single scholar – even as brilliant as Eisenstadt – might create an analytical framework able to satisfy critical historians.² This may have further discouraged the continuation of Eisenstadt’s project.³

And then, after a very long lull in interest in empire, the pendulum started swinging back. Since the beginning of the 21st century, and especially in the last decade, the number of publications related to empires as distinct political formations has increased exponentially. Dozens of collected volumes and monographs have appeared, and the pace of publication has accelerated. These volumes differ greatly in their emphasis. Some introduce different case studies of imperial formations worldwide (e.g., Alcock et al. 2001; Münkler 2007; Gehler and Rollinger 2014), while others are more focused spatially or temporally (e.g., Morris and Scheidel 2009; Cline and Graham 2011; Düring and Stek 2018). Some offer a systematic comparison between a few paradigmatic empires, notably the Roman and Chinese Empires (Mutschler and Mittag 2008; Scheidel 2009; Scheidel 2015), while others try to re-chart world history from a distinctive “imperial” perspective (e.g., Burbank and Cooper 2010; Reinhard 2015a). Some focus on empires as promoters of commercial and cultural interaction (Kim et al. 2017; Di Cosmo and Maas 2018), others explore their administrative systems (Crooks and Parsons 2016a), their policies of cultural integration (Lavan et al. 2016a), their cultural arsenal (Bang and Kolodziejczyk 2012), and the like. One cannot but be impressed by the immense richness of these recent studies.

There are many reasons for the renewed interest in the imperial formations of the past among historians, sociologists, and more recently political scientists. Some are related to immediate political contingencies. What appeared at the beginning of the 21st century as the unstoppable rise of US unilateralism and militarism aroused stormy debates about the relevance of past imperial projects

² Eisenstadt himself may have realized this difficulty. In his comparative study of urbanization (Eisenstadt and Shachar 1987), he opted at least for a co-author.

³ Note that whereas Eisenstadt’s impact on historians remained limited, his book had a larger impact on sociologists. The imperial visions, elites, and strategies that he discovered were the main themes that ultimately led to the civilizational turn of the 1970s and a radical break with structural-functionalism (Johann Arnason, personal communication, 2018).

to the current US trajectory. Social scientists and historians alike participated in subsequent heated exchanges (see, e.g., Mann 2003; Ferguson 2004; Pomper 2005; Calhoun et al. 2006; Münkler 2007; Pitts 2010; Kagan 2010; McCoy 2012; Blanken 2012, and many others). This is an understandable and common phenomenon of what in China is called “using the past to serve the present.”⁴ For social scientists, analyzing early empires through the prism of modern politics may well be advantageous, but for historians there is a major pitfall: contemporary concerns may dictate a selective reading of the past and the glossing over of important phenomena that are irrelevant to current questions. Worse, some scholars may be prone to dismiss previous imperial experiences just in order to reject the dangers of modern imperialism (e.g., Parsons 2010).

Yet immediate contingency aside, other developments in recent decades have brought about the resurrection of interest in empires. The most notable was the weakening of the erstwhile paradigm of the progressive shift from empires to “natural” nation-states. The erosion of certain aspects of nation-state sovereignty in the rapidly globalizing world, most notably the formation of the European Union, caused many scholars to critically rethink the centrality of nation-states in world history. Parallel to that, the bloody conflicts of the 1990s with their element of ethnic cleansing (e.g., in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda) further undermined the nation-state appeal. It is against this backdrop that historians turned to imperial examples, absolving the word “empire” from its previous pejorative connotations (Burbank and Cooper 2010; Lavan et al. 2016b). Other scholars questioned the empire/nation-state dichotomy, arguing that at least in some cases empires acted not as an antithesis but as direct precursor to nation-states (Kumar 2010; Berger and Miller 2015; cf. Malešević 2017). As explorations of the imperial trajectories of the past advanced, scholars were able “to shed ourselves of the nineteenth-century baggage which tended to present the great agrarian empires as avatars of stagnation” (Bang and Bayly 2011b, 8). The road to open-minded exploration of the past empires had been cleared.⁵

It is these later trends that inform our project. We want to address Eurasian empires by focusing on their own dynamics: neither through modern, nor through post-modern (Negri and Hardt 2000) lenses; neither as an antecedent to nation-states, nor as a foil to current superpowers or transnational organizations. Empires are fascinating in their own right: owing to their past prestige,

⁴ For instance, much of research on early empires in the 19th-century United Kingdom was intrinsically linked with the contemporaneous imperial project (see Bayly 2011). Historically, astute empire builders worldwide were keen students of past precedents (for one example, see Elliott 2005).

⁵ For a good example of changing attitudes toward empires, see a highly positive account of the imperial enterprise in Yuval N. Harari’s popular *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Harari 2015, 188–208).

their lasting cultural impact, their remarkable successes, and also to their failures and the historical lessons that can be learned from these. A systematic comparative analysis of major imperial formations in the past will contribute, so we hope, not just to the nascent field of “comparative imperiology,” but also to broader studies of Eurasian and global history.

Our project, of which the current volume is the first publication, is aimed to further develop “comparative imperiology” by proposing systematic analyses of certain aspects of empire-building. We want to single out common problems faced by major imperial polities and to investigate how different empires in various parts of the world and in distinct periods of imperial formation tackled those problems. Rather than producing a single volume that would try to amalgamate the entire imperial experience across time and space, we aim at a series of publications with well defined sets of questions addressed by all the contributors. The current volume, which deals with the questions of imperial space and its perceptions, is the first step in this direction.

2 What Is an Empire?

One of the trickiest questions for authors and editors of comparative studies of empires is the definition of empire. The long history of the term “empire” and of its derivative and related terms (Latin *imperium*, *imperator*, or modern “imperialism”) creates inevitable terminological confusion (see, e.g., Reynolds 2006). Not a few theorists reject the possibility of producing an adequate definition at the current stage of our knowledge. For instance, Johann Arnason (2015, 494) plainly states: “Given the enormous variety of imperial regimes, and the unsatisfactory state of comparative research, we cannot begin with a general definition of empire as a category.” This is a fair assessment (and a fair criticism of comparative research), but it cannot serve as a starting point for a comparative volume. After all, without producing at least a temporary working definition of what an empire is we cannot proceed toward selecting case studies for a comparative endeavor. Although not all of the comparative volumes start with the discussion of what an empire is, several authors and editors did provide useful answers. For instance, Burbank and Cooper proposed:

Empires are large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new peoples. (Burbank and Cooper 2010, 8)

Burbank and Cooper contrast the empire with the nation-state, which “proclaims the commonality of its people” and “tends to homogenize those inside its borders and exclude those who do not belong.” The problem of this juxtaposition, however, is that nation-states are a relatively recent phenomenon, and it is not

clear how to apply the distinction between empires and smaller-scale states in pre-modern periods. This may lead to some questionable conclusions, such as the one reached by Reinhard (2015b, 15): “in the period 1350–1750, there are only ‘empires’ throughout the world.”

One of the most sophisticated recent discussions of empires and states is that by Goldstone and Haldon (2009). They concluded that empire is:

A territory . . . ruled from a distinct organizational center . . . with clear ideological and political sway over varied elites, who in turn exercise power over a population in which a majority have neither access nor influence over positions of imperial power. (Goldstone and Haldon 2009, 18–19)

Goldstone and Haldon’s construct is surely more impressive than a minimalistic definition according to which certain states were empires “because they identified themselves as empires” (Kagan 2010, 9). However, it still poses an immediate problem, well identified by Goldstone and Haldon themselves: it turns an empire into “the typical formation by which large territorial states were ruled for most of human history.” Once again, the definition becomes so inclusive as to undermine the possibility of meaningful discussions of imperial peculiarity.⁶

The inclusiveness of the above definitions is mirrored in a great variety of recent volumes that discuss imperial formations (e.g., Alcock et al. 2001; Reinhard 2015b; and even, despite their attempts to narrow the definition of empires, Bang and Bayly 2011a). This inclusiveness is understandable and even laudable as an antidote to the narrow Eurocentric discussions that dominated studies of empires until the relatively recent past (of which Doyle 1978 is a paradigmatic example). However, eagerness to recognize a great variety of pre-modern and early modern polities as “empires” creates a new set of methodological problems. Sheldon Pollock complained:

The term [empire] has become so elastic that scholars can speak, without qualification, of a Swedish or a Maratha empire in the seventeenth century, a Tibetan or a Wari empire a millennium earlier. (Pollock 2006, 177)

Pollock’s complaint is understandable. At times, it seems that the number of polities that can be qualified as “empire” is almost limitless. Should, for instance, the Athenian *thalassokratia* count as an empire?⁷ Or regional regimes

⁶ In distinction from most other analyses of the term empire, Münkler (2007, 9) proposes to start with a temporal rather than spatial definition. He qualifies as empires polities that “have gone through at least one cycle of rise and decline and had begun a new one.” It is an interesting interpretation, but not necessarily useful in determining the distinctions between empires and other large polities. Besides, even a short-lived empire – such as Qin (221–207 BCE) in China or that of Alexander the Great – could have a tremendous long-term impact.

⁷ For an excellent discussion which tends to answer negatively, see Morris 2009; cf. Smarczyk 2007.

on Chinese soil during the periods of political fragmentation, even when they controlled just a single province far away from the traditional loci of imperial authority (Schafer 1954)? Or sub-Saharan Ghana (7th–11th centuries) (Tymowski 2011)? Or the “Angevin empire” (1154–1204) (Gillingham 2016)? Or the “kinetic empire” of the Comanches in the 19th century (Hämäläinen 2008)? The answers to each of these questions may well be positive.⁸ But there is an obvious danger that by trying to cast our net as widely as possible, we weaken our ability to identify distinctive imperial cultural and political repertoire. Therefore, as the first step it would be advisable to focus only on major imperial polities, the qualification of which as empires is less controversial. Having properly understood their patterns of functioning, we may then utilize these understandings for analyzing other imperial and quasi-imperial cases.

This need to narrow the definition of empire was noticed recently by Bang and Bayly, who proposed a concept of “world empires”:

We have emphasized those that could credibly be called world-empires; in other words, vast empires that dominated their wider worlds and were able to absorb many of their competitors and reduce them either to taxpaying provinces or tributary client kingdoms. Their rulers saw themselves as universal emperors, claiming supremacy over all other monarchs. (Bang and Bayly 2011b, 6–7)

We consider Bang and Bayly’s narrower definition as a step in the right direction. In what follows we shall confine ourselves to what they define as “world empires.” Two of their points – the universalistic pretensions of the empire’s leaders and their ability to dominate their wider world – fit well with each of the case studies discussed in this volume. Moreover, as we shall argue below, it is precisely the avowed desire to attain “universal” rule – at the very least within the empire’s macro-region – that distinguished the empires from other expansive territorial states or European colonial powers. Without at least a pretension to maintain superiority over its neighbors, an empire loses its most essential imperial feature.

This understanding explains why we have opted to leave European colonial powers out of this volume. (The only exception is Russia, which, as Burbank [Chapter 10] demonstrates in this volume, was primarily indebted to the Mongolian, or in Burbank’s definition, “Eurasian” mode of empire-building.) Europe did not lack individual emperors who tried to dominate the entire continent (and not just their overseas colonies): Charles V (1500–58) (Tracy 2002) and most notably Napoleon (Woolf 1991) come immediately to mind. Yet they were exceptions, not the rule. For most of the time, European colonial empires could satisfy themselves with a status of equality with other major continental powers, or, at most, strive for the *primus inter pares* type of

⁸ For the most extreme example of inclusive approach, see the recently published *Encyclopedia of Empire* with over 400 entries (MacKenzie 2016).

dominance (as was observable in the case of Great Britain). This normative acceptance of equality with neighboring states distinguishes European colonial empires from their Eurasian predecessors. Hence, for the time being, we prefer not to discuss these case studies and focus on the empires with less equivocal universalistic claims.

3 Eurasian Empires: Spatial and Temporal Distinctions

Our exploration of “world empires” is limited to the Eurasian continent (including North African regions that were ruled from time to time by Eurasian empires). This spatial focus is not fortuitous. Eurasia comprises no less than five macro-regions – namely, Europe, the Near East, the Indian subcontinent, the steppe belt of Inner Asia, and continental East Asia – that are useful for the comparative study of empires. The macro-regions as defined here are primarily a heuristic construct: namely, vast areas within which human interaction (and the resultant cultural cohesiveness) is usually higher than with the outlying areas. The boundaries of the macro-regions are defined primarily by topography and ecology, especially in the case of the Indian subcontinent and East Asia, in which mountain ranges and deserts separate the agriculturally productive heartland from other macro-regions. In the case of Europe and the Middle East, topography is less inhibitive of intensive contacts and the borders of the areas to the north and to the east of the Mediterranean are less clearly defined. This said, for most of human history, these areas were sufficiently politically and culturally distinct to merit treating them as two separate macro-regions. As for the Inner Asian steppe belt, it is distinguished from other Eurasian areas less by topography and more by a peculiar climate and soil quality that make most of this huge region less productive agriculturally but exceptionally fit for pastoral nomadism. Nomadic mobility and the lack of natural barriers between the steppe and other macro-regions allowed the steppe empires to penetrate other macro-regions (and even to rule parts of them) more easily than was possible in other cases. These penetrations and borrowings from sedentary neighbors notwithstanding, the nomads continuously maintained their distinctive political culture (Biran, Chapter 6, this volume), which allows one to speak of the steppe belt as a specific macro-region.

These five Eurasian macro-regions were selected for this study because of the exceptional importance of imperial formations in their history.⁹ First, each had an imperial experience of over twenty centuries. Second, major empires established in each macro-region had a profound impact on the political, social,

⁹ To be sure, other parts of the Eurasian continent, such as Southeast Asia, also had their own imperial or quasi-imperial experiments, but, arguably, these were usually shorter and less consequential for their macro-region’s history. Hence, these areas are not discussed in our volume.

and cultural history of their respective realms. Third, and importantly for our endeavor, these major empires are usually well documented (through transmitted texts, paleographic sources, and material evidence, or at least through the accounts of their neighbors, biased as they may be), which allows meaningful reconstruction of their distinct trajectories and their political and cultural repertoire. Moreover, although our study does not focus on modern and current politics (except for the final part of Burbank's Chapter 10), it is worth noticing that the imperial past continues to influence the present-day dwellers of each of these macro-regions in myriad ways.

Speaking of macro-regions is furthermore heuristically convenient because most (but not all) of the empires self-styled as “universal” were focused primarily on ascertaining their direct or indirect control over their macro-region, while accepting – openly or tacitly – that areas beyond their immediate realm could neither be fully incorporated nor even meaningfully subjugated. It should be immediately emphasized here that the Eurasian macro-regions were by no means isolated from each other. Some exceptionally powerful imperial polities – from the Achaemenids to the Romans, the Caliphate, and, most notably, the Mongols – were able to transcend, even if briefly, their macro-regional boundaries. More importantly, the rise of the earliest empires in the three western and two eastern regions was an inter-connected process (see below). Moreover, aspects of the imperial repertoire could travel across Eurasia (sometimes even from one edge to another). We should not err by over-emphasizing macro-regional exclusivity. This said, the basic political trajectory of imperial (and non-imperial) formations in each of the macro-regions was usually more indebted to the region's indigenous political culture than to outside influences.

Speaking in macro-historical terms, it may be useful to discern three periods in Eurasian imperial history. The first, spanning the middle of the 1st millennium BCE to the first centuries of the Common Era (but with much earlier antecedents in Mesopotamia), can be called the age of early or “first-wave” empires. In Mesopotamia, the first quasi-imperial polities had already appeared by the end of the 3rd millennium BCE, and by the end of the 2nd millennium BCE territorial expansion had become a regular feature of governance, especially in the case of Assyria (*c.* 1300–609 BCE). This expansion radically intensified in the last century and a half of the so-called Neo-Assyrian Empire and its successor, the Neo-Babylonian Empire (609–539 BCE). The latter was taken over by the Achaemenids (539–333 BCE), who dramatically expanded the territory under their control, becoming, arguably, the first “world empire” in Eurasian history (Briant, Chapter 1, this volume). The Achaemenid realm spanned the entire area between the Indian subcontinent and Europe. Their imperial enterprise (inherited and briefly reenacted with even more grandeur by Alexander the Great [356–323 BCE], “the last of the Achaemenids” [Briant 2002: 876]) had profound influence

on both fringes of the Near East. In the east, it may have contributed to the formation and functioning of the Maurya Empire (late 4th to early 2nd centuries BCE), the first imperial entity on the Indian subcontinent (Pollock 2005). In the West, through Alexander's intermediary, it contributed first to the Hellenistic empires (Strootman 2014), and ultimately to the Roman Empire, the single most successful continental imperial enterprise on European soil (Spickermann, Chapter 3, this volume).

Independent of these developments, a parallel process of imperial formation started on the opposite edge of Eurasia. Early dynastic entities in continental East Asia, the Shang (*c.*1600–1046 BCE), and Zhou (*c.*1046–255 BCE), were not empires but contained the seeds of the future imperial repertoire much like early Mesopotamian quasi-imperial entities. The disintegration of the Zhou polity brought about a prolonged period of intense inter-state competition, during which the ideal of political unification of “All-under-Heaven” as the only means for ensuring lasting peace came into being. The Qin unification (221–207 BCE) was the realization – albeit violent and much maligned in later generations – of this common ideal. The Qin model, modified under its heir, the Han dynasty (206/202 BCE–220 CE) became the foundation of subsequent Chinese imperial regimes (Pines, Chapter 2, this volume). Parallel to the Qin unification, the formation of the first nomadic empire – that of the Xiongnu – took place. This empire was preceded by a long period of political experimentation among earlier nomadic polities and the fashioning of a nomadic culture that stretched across the Eurasian Steppe (Khazanov 2015), but the scope and relative stability of the Xiongnu empire were novel in the steppe. The simultaneous appearance of East Asian and Inner Asian empires was not accidental, although the precise nature of the relations between the two processes is still debated (Barfield 1989 vs. Di Cosmo 2002) (Map 0.1).

These first-wave empires played an exceptional role in the subsequent history of their respective macro-regions. They were a source of inspiration for future empire builders. Their political repertoire and its associated cultural symbols were utilized and reinterpreted by numerous political entities within their macro-region and beyond. Their memories lived for centuries and in some cases for millennia to come; their cultural impact is perceptible well into our days. These were also among the most innovative and audacious imperial polities in human history. Aside from synthesizing, adapting, and modifying institutions and practices borrowed from their predecessors and from subjugated contemporaries, these empires had to develop new modes of rulership and a new cultural repertoire to deal with their extraordinary broad space. Having no clear imperial precedents in their respective macro-regions, the leaders of these early empires were most prone to improvise, to develop novel methods of governance, and also to stretch the limits of territorial expansion, as discussed in section 4.