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*What Is the East?**Theorising Sovereignty and World Orders  
in Asia and Eurasia***Introduction**

Imagine you are in one of those situations often depicted in fantasy novels where you discover a portal that will take you to another parallel universe. You step through to find a world that is in many ways very much like ours. Most of the superficial details are the same: there are roads, houses and bicycles. The technology is familiar. The sun, the clouds, the trees, they all look the same. Yet something feels different. To figure out what, you step into a bookstore and pick up a general history book to understand this world better (your old phone does not work in this universe, though you see other people using theirs). You order a bubble tea and settle in the bookstore's café. Soon you make a startling discovery. In this universe, it was not England that was the first site of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century but Japan!

<sup>1</sup> What is more, in this universe, the Third Estate Rebellion had gone nowhere in France, but the Chinese Revolution of 1794 had succeeded, fundamentally transforming the Chinese state in directions (republican, vegetarian, anti-tax) later emulated by other states in Asia and the rest of the world. To make a long story short, in this world, it had been Asia that experienced the radical lift-off in the nineteenth century that we associate in our universe with 'the West'. It is 'the East' that is considered to be the centre of gravity in this parallel universe, not Europe or the West.

You run back to the history section to understand what caused this difference. You find a lot of books dealing with 'The Rise of the East', complete with some critical authors even questioning whether the Industrial Revolution was just a historical accident that could have happened in other places – for example, England. Most others maintain, however, that it was the specific qualities of Eastern culture, going

<sup>1</sup> See Collins (1997); Goldstone (2000, 2002, 2015).

back centuries if not millennia, that had made these breakthroughs to modernity possible, so it is unthinkable for these developments to have happened in the West. Europe lags behind because it just does not have those qualities, they suggest, but it can still learn from ‘the East’. Hopefully, most academic books allow, one day European countries will also catch up. Some say these days they are getting close. You do notice, however, that there are also some more disturbing books in the popular non-fiction section, books that raise disturbing questions about the innate abilities of whites or the suitability of Christian cultures for technological innovation.

What is especially odd about these debates, you observe with alarm, is that the historical facts they are working with up until that fateful turn in the eighteenth century are not that different. In terms of major events, their history looks more or less the same as ours until the mid-1700s. Yet scholars in this parallel universe have woven a completely different narrative around the same basic facts, using them to explain instead why it was Asia that was destined to rise and Europe that was to lag behind. Historically, Europe has always been politically fragmented and religiously intolerant, these books argue. European cultures have always exaggerated small cultural and religious differences to the level of major conflict and then fought for decades, if not centuries. It did not occur to European rulers to maintain standing armies until much later than the rest of the world, so each war was long and costly to fight, depriving regular people of basic sustenance, which is why there had been little in the way of political development in this region until Asian models were imported into the area. Yes, the continent was once unified as the site of a great empire – Rome – but most people think it has stagnated ever since, for more than a millennium, unfortunately.

Less Asiacentric scholars in this parallel universe allow that Europe has had its moments since Rome: there were historical periods in which it even produced great works of art and architecture. The fifteenth century was such a glorious moment of Greco-Roman revival in the south. But even such scholars have to note that, sadly, these bursts of innovation and individualism in Europe were dead ends until Asian models were imported into the region in the nineteenth century. In any case, most of these great works of European art have been destroyed in conflict, the books note, especially, in the twentieth century, by radical Christianist terrorist groups whose ideologies yearn for the so-called golden age of Christianity, the period which came after the fall of

Rome. The historical fabric of most European cities has also been destroyed due to unplanned urbanisation induced by the rapid industrialisation of European countries in the twentieth century, which was undertaken in an effort to catch up with Asia. Most European cities are now overcrowded, overbuilt and ugly. Venice, a one-time centre of attraction for travellers from around the world even in this universe, was cemented over some decades ago for the construction of a large shipping port, you find out. Even though some scholars here do suggest that the Greco-Roman revival in the Italian peninsula was equal in creativity to the Timurid Renaissance in western Asia, very few people in this universe seem to have studied or written about Florence, compared, say, to Samarkand. The titles of some recent books do suggest, however, that critiques of Asiacentrism may have opened up some space in the departments of history for that sort of thing, just as parallel critiques of Eurocentrism did in our universe.

Further perusing the 'Rise of the East' bookshelf, you notice that these books do not all agree as to when Asia took off. Some date Asian greatness back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These books argue that the Empire of Genghis Khan<sup>2</sup> essentially seeded the entire continent for its eventual take-off by facilitating the exchange of ideas, know-how and skills across the continent. Other books, found under the heading of 'International Relations', date the emergence of the modern order back to the thirteenth century, to *Pax Mongolica*. These books underline how unusual it was for the Mongol khanates, which did not share the same religion, to exist relatively peacefully side-by-side in the fourteenth century. This was the beginning of modern international relations, they argue, when rational state interest trumped religious affiliation. Yet others point to the aforementioned Timurid Renaissance<sup>3</sup> in the fifteenth century as the real turning point for Asia, a period when not only Asian art flourished via new leaps of

<sup>2</sup> Even in our universe there are those who argue that the Mongol Empire made the modern world. See, for example, Weatherford (2004).

<sup>3</sup> There was a 'Timurid Renaissance' in our universe as well, but, apart from art historians who study it, most are unaware of this period between the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries. Some historians object to calling this period a 'renaissance' because in our universe it seems a dead end, unlike the Italian counterpart. I submit that an actual person living in the fifteenth century, if somehow given the opportunity to compare the art and science of the two, would not necessarily rank them in the way we would. For more, see, for example, Lentz and Lowry (1989). See also Chapter 4. Of course sophisticated

creativity but also astronomy and mathematical sciences, setting the stage for Asian innovations centuries later. Some scholars, however, are sceptical that sources of Asian take-off can be dated so far back. They suggest that the strong centralised states built throughout Eurasia in the sixteenth century were the real engine of Asian development. Some of these books suggest that the foundations of the modern international order were forged in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century peace treaties between western Asian states such as the Ottomans and the Safavid, and even label the modern international order ‘Zuhabian’.<sup>4</sup> Yet others are sceptical that this is the point of divergence, pointing out that Europe was also building relatively strong centralised states around the same time. This group of scholars are in favour of dating the divergence of the Asian and European paths to a later period, for example in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century developments of Asian industrialisation and subsequent global military expansion.

Now let us step back through the portal, back to our universe, where, as you know, history went another way entirely. Our modern international order, which emerged in the nineteenth century,<sup>5</sup> has been made possible by ‘the Rise of the West’, and it is Europe/the West that has occupied its core seat of privilege for the last two centuries. Not only has this fact continuously shaped our politics in the present, but it has distorted our understanding of world political history and thus also our *theories* about international politics. Many have invariably read the conclusion of the story into that history. This is why I suggested that thought exercise: I want you, as the reader, to consider how the same historical facts could look very different if filtered through the lens of a different ending to the story. This does not mean the ‘facts’ of history are meaningless or subject to infinite interpretation but rather that the same ‘facts’ take on different meanings depending on the eventual outcome. Imagine you are wearing a red suit to a job interview. Your day goes well, you get the job: the red suit becomes part of your success story, something that made you stand out. Or your day goes badly, you do not get the job: the same red suit becomes part of the

cultural activity in Central Asia goes back even further; see, for example, Starr (2013).

<sup>4</sup> After the Treaty of Zuhab (or Kasr-ı Şirin) in 1639, which affirmed the Peace of Amasya of 1555.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Buzan and Lawson (2015).

narrative as to why you failed, something that made you stick out like a sore thumb. In both scenarios, you are wearing the red suit, but the story around it changes depending on how your day ends, though it is not even clear if the suit had any causal impact whatsoever. We are all susceptible to this kind of attribution error. This is why it is a good idea to approach even well-established historical narratives of causality with a degree of scepticism.

### The Need for a New History of ‘The East’ in International Relations?

This book explores how the history of international relations in Asia and Eurasia could be written if we did not read into that history its eventual conclusion: that is, ‘the Rise of the West’ and ‘the Decline of the East’.<sup>6</sup> What if we were in the parallel universe I posited earlier, where it was Asia or Eurasia or ‘the East’<sup>7</sup> that was the desirable ‘brand’ in world politics rather than Europe or the West? What if liminal countries<sup>8</sup> such as Russia or Turkey emphasised their historical connections to Asia or the East rather than to Europe or the West? What if China was more interested in a grander narrative of Asia, instead of a Sinocentric view of East Asian regional order(s)? What if we did not read back into (Eur)Asian history the inevitable stench of ‘failure’ of the nineteenth century, and what if we did not assume that

<sup>6</sup> See also Phillips (2021); Sharman (2019); Spruyt (2020).

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the terms ‘Asia’, ‘Eurasia’ and ‘the East’ are themselves are problematic and Eurocentric, but this cannot be avoided. The concept of ‘Asia’ was introduced to ‘Asia’ in the seventeenth century, for example *yaxiya* in the Chinese context, as brought in by Jesuit missionaries. The concept did not become widely used there until the nineteenth century. See Korhonen (1997, 2001, 2008, 2014 and so forth). The term ‘Eurasia’ has its own political baggage, some of which I discuss in the Epilogue. For a discussion on ‘the East’ as a stigmatising label, see Zarakol (2011). In the parallel universe where ‘East Asia’ took off, we might not be using these concepts at all but some other ones. The labels used throughout this book should be taken with these caveats and should be understood more as geographic terms used for mutual intelligibility, even when I refrain from using scare quotes. And of course had ‘Asia’ come to dominate globally instead of Europe, our periodisation of history would be different as well, but these are objections I will have to bracket off for this project. For more about periodisation biases, see Davis (2008); Goldstone (1998).

<sup>8</sup> By liminal countries I mean those who are caught in between the East and the West (though there is a plausible argument to be made that this description applies to all countries in Eurasia). For more on this, see Zarakol (2011).

Asia was just a residual category, a variant of ‘not-Europe’, but rather saw it as a space with its own history and sociopolitical dynamics, not defined or constructed entirely by encounters with European colonialism? What would that history look like? That is the history I aim to recover in this book, starting in the thirteenth century with the creation of the Empire of Genghis Khan and ending soon after ‘the General Crisis’ of the seventeenth century,<sup>9</sup> before European take-off.

*Before the West* thus provides what we do not yet have: an account of the history of Eastern ‘international relations’<sup>10</sup> that understands actors of the past in that part of the world primarily through their relations with each other and not with Europe.<sup>11</sup> Though the recent turn towards global IR has raised the field’s interest in the history of international relations outside of Europe, even this turn has its blind spots. As long these persist, our theorising about both the past *and* the future will suffer. Let me underline three such blind spots that the historical account in this book addresses directly.

First, in IR accounts, actors and states outside of the West are almost always only compared to the West (and rarely to each other).<sup>12</sup> The case for the importance of the East in world politics is often made by showing how Asian or Eurasian<sup>13</sup> actors were contributors to

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Parker (2013); Parker and Smith (1997); see also Goldstone (1991). Not every region discussed in this book experienced this crisis evenly. More on this in Chapter 5.

<sup>10</sup> See also Brook, van Praag and Boltjes (2018), which has similar aims, but as an edited book it cannot offer a fully integrated account.

<sup>11</sup> The account offered here inevitably leaves many things out. For instance, its geographic focus is limited: there is not much Africa or America in it, and it also mostly leaves out south-eastern Asia and the Pacific. Because it is interested in actors with universal empire claims, it cannot cover other types of actors or political arrangements such as mercantile guild cities. Thus, it is not a exhaustive history but an alternative or supplemental one to that already existing in IR. I hope others will fill in the blanks in other ways. See also Brook, van Praag, and Boltjes (2018).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, otherwise excellent books such as Phillips and Sharman (2015); Hui (2005); Park (2017). Spruyt (2020) is the exception in that it compares Sinocentric, Islamic and South East Asian political orders. This problem is not specific to IR. For example, in attempting to learn about land-grant systems across Asia, I could not find any comprehensive source that compared different Asian polities with each other, but comparisons of each arrangement with European feudalism do exist.

<sup>13</sup> The term ‘Eurasia’ essentially separates northern Asia from our imagination (as the word Middle East does for south-west Asia). In the following pages, whenever I say ‘Asia’ alone, it should be understood to refer to the whole

European take-off.<sup>14</sup> While we desperately need such accounts to underline that European development was not endogenous, they do not necessarily give us a full picture of Asian politics in history as it would have been experienced and understood by the actors of the time. To put it another way, ‘how the East contributed to Western development’ narratives make Asia only a supporting player in the story of the West. We also need historical accounts where the East is the *protagonist* in its own narrative. The account in this book does not assume that Asian actors’ interactions with Europeans must have been the most important ones for them just because (western) Europe would eventually come to dominate the globe in the nineteenth century. Historical actors could not see into the future. They would have evaluated their interactions based on the information available to them at the time, as well their own understandings of their history which framed their world view in various ways. However, we also need to avoid the projection of modern national(ist) myths back onto the past. Though some narrative bias in favour of threads that lead to the present day is inevitable, the reader should not assume any kind of equivalence or intrinsic continuity between present-day actors and historical counterparts who bear similar names and/or have been claimed by modern nationalist histories.<sup>15</sup>

Second, in IR, non-Western states and peoples are frequently understood as without *international* politics or an interest in the world at large until Europeans brought them into a global order in the nineteenth century: that is, they are understood to be local actors only. It is true that in recent years, the rise of China (and ‘the Rest’), as well as the growing criticism about the Eurocentrism of traditional IR theories, has increased interest in studying the history of other parts of the world from an IR perspective, especially that of East Asia. Welcome as such efforts may be, most of them also still suffer from the assumption that

continent. Every now and then I will say ‘Asia and Eurasia’ to remind the reader that I am talking about both, because I realise that present-day usage reserves Asia for East Asia alone (and sometimes the ‘subcontinent’).

<sup>14</sup> Again see, for example, otherwise excellent books such as Anievas and Nisancioglu (2015); Hobson (2004).

<sup>15</sup> This is not to say there is no continuity. The modern ‘nation’ should be thought of as a pool to which hundreds of streams have contributed; the modern nationalist project picks one of these around which to emphasise historical continuity and erases all the others. By doing so it corrupts our understanding not only of the present but also the past.

all non-European orders were only *regional* not only in practice but also in aspiration.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, in studying non-European orders as regional we tend to impose on to the past today's regional divisions<sup>17</sup> and sometimes also today's national historiographies and myths.

The way we have introduced Chinese historical international relations into IR theorising is illustrative in this regard.<sup>18</sup> Studies often seem to take at face value<sup>19</sup> the modern idea of 'China' as 'a unique unitary cultural-political entity that, though ruled by an "emperor" (*huangdi* 皇帝), was never "imperialist"'.<sup>20</sup> But this only works if we accept the Chinese practice of 'writing prior (often inimical) states into the history of the current one'.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the concepts we use to understand Chinese regional international relations historically are modern constructs themselves, as introduced first by European Sinologists.<sup>22</sup> As Milward observes, it was John King Fairbank who articulated the view of the 'historical East Asian world order that had endured from ancient times until the nineteenth century'.<sup>23</sup> It is from this account that we get the usual description of Chinese world view: 'The world, also known as *tianxia* 天下 (all under Heaven), was Sinocentric. Chinese civilization was superior to non-Chinese (barbarian) culture, its centrality validated by Confucian belief.'<sup>24</sup> It is also from Fairbank that we get the description of 'the tributary system': 'Chinese emperors imagined themselves sovereigns over the whole world (*tianxia*) and required foreign emissaries to acknowledge this fact. Outlying states had to express fealty to the Chinese emperor through a court visit, a kowtow and presentation of symbolic local

<sup>16</sup> Much of the recent literature on historical orders in Asia, whether English School or not, also assumes this region-ness. For exceptions see Kang (2003, 2010); Spruyt (2020) (but even these books do not deviate too far from regions as understood in our day). Focusing on the historical precursors of present-day regional dynamics is of course helpful in some ways, but this also downplays the 'international' ambitions of Eastern actors and the extent to which Asia has been interconnected through time. Pardesi (2019) makes a similar critique.

<sup>17</sup> Modern notions of what constitutes a 'region' can usually be traced back to nineteenth-century developments and categories.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Zhang and Buzan (2012); Buzan and Zhang (2014).

<sup>19</sup> Hui (2005, 2020) avoids many of these traps. <sup>20</sup> Millward (2020, p. 72).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> This is not to say they are completely wrong, but they need further historical scrutiny, especially if they are being presented as the antidote to the Eurocentrism of the discipline.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 74. <sup>24</sup> Ibid.



goods (*gong* 貢 or tribute). In return, they were allowed to trade with China.<sup>25</sup> It was only after losing the Opium Wars that China is supposed to have realised the reality of the larger world and gave up its traditional Sinocentric beliefs.<sup>26</sup> Gradually, Fairbanks' conceptual schematic emerged as *the* history of China: 'Sinocentric China, *tianxia*, the tributary system, Sinicization and the eternal nature of China as a continuous civilization-state became received wisdom; the claim that a benevolent China presided for centuries over a uniquely peaceful East Asian world order was ritually repeated without much thought and little evidence.'<sup>27</sup> This questionable description has now made its way into IR and foreign policy discussions. It does not receive much push-back from China, either, in that it offers a Sinocentric conception of East Asian history which can also come in handy to justify the present-day foreign policy choices of the PRC such as the 'Belt and Road Initiative'.<sup>28</sup>

As we will also see in Chapter 3, the reality of the 'tributary system' was much more complicated. Gifts coded as tribute by the 'Chinese'<sup>29</sup> court did not necessarily come from parties that considered *themselves* a part of a tributary system or shared a Sinocentric world view. More importantly, there has not been one eternal, unchanging 'Chinese' world view. Nobody would get away with claiming such a thing about Europe, so why should any other part of the world be any different? What was considered 'the world' by 'Chinese' rulers underwent profound changes during the Yuan Dynasty (Mongol rule), expanding well beyond what we call 'East Asia' today, and the subsequent Ming understanding very much reflected that expansion, especially in the early decades of the dynasty. In other words, there have been historical periods where dynasties ruling the area we now call China have been well aware of a world beyond the Sinocentric understandings of China and East Asia; they were not introduced

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 75.    <sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 76. A similar reification happened to the concept of a 'millet system' in the Ottoman Empire. See Zarakol (2020b).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. See also Benabdallah (2020).

<sup>29</sup> Even the term 'Chinese' is rather anachronistic when mapped back onto the historical periods under consideration here. To avoid this problem, I refer to specific dynasties instead of ethnicities or country names where possible in the book, but here I am deferring to lay usage.

to a broader world by Europeans for the first time in the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup>

This brings me to the bigger issue of describing all non-Western international orders as ‘regional’. The implicit assumption in much of the IR literature is that only European states had the imagination of having ‘international relations’ beyond their region and creating ‘international orders’ of a global scale.<sup>31</sup> In a sense this is true by definition because it was the Europeans who ‘discovered’ the Americas, and any order before the ‘discovery’ of the Americas was literally not global. Nations in the sense we understand them also did not exist until at least the eighteenth century, so it is misleading to speak of ‘international relations’ or ‘international orders’ before then as well (not that this stops anyone from speaking about Europe using these terms). Yet if we abstract from ‘international relations’ to inter-polity relations and think about ‘international orders’ as universalising *world* ordering arrangements, then we can be more open-minded about what sorts of ‘world orders’ have existed outside of Europe. This book will show that there were also Eastern actors who had aspirations – for better or worse – to create orders that spanned the world in all its multiplicity. When they thought about the world, they were not thinking just in terms of their immediate neighbourhood (however, that was understood) or just in terms of their co-religionists. Such actors did in fact exist in Asia/Eurasia,<sup>32</sup> and, as we shall see, not only did they aspire to universal sovereignty but they also came close to dominating (and thus ordering) the world – such as it existed – from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Neither the dreams nor the sins of universal world order and empire projects can be attributed solely to Western or European actors.

Third, the problem in the IR literature runs even deeper than just assuming that only Europeans created international orders and everyone else was content to sit in their regional, cultural or religious silos. Even the emergence of ‘sovereignty’ is considered by many to be

<sup>30</sup> See Cheng (2020), who extends this critique to the pre-Mongol period.

<sup>31</sup> Bull (1977) argues this explicitly. See also Bull and Watson (1984). However, there is also a long-standing acknowledgement in the English School literature that regional international orders have existed outside of Europe. See, for example, Wight (1977); Buzan and Little (2000).

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps elsewhere, too. By making the argument about Asia exclusively I am not implying an absence of such ambitions in other locales. See also Eaton (1993).