

Power Pursuits: Interstate Systems in Asia

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Abstract

Examining the patterns of evolution of interstate systems in Asia, this article argues that the relationship of state-builders to nomads stood in much of continental Asia stood in sharp contrast to the relationships between rulers and mercantile-financial elites in Europe. Due to the productivity of wet-rice economies, continental Asian rulers were not dependent on merchants and bankers to raise armies to wage war or suppress rebellions unlike their European counterparts. Hence they had no need to grant bankers and merchants concessions, especially monopolies which is how large volumes of capital are accumulated. Geographic conditions however meant that while the lack of internal frontiers meant that large continental-sized states could be created in China, this was not possible in the Indian subcontinent where a more chequered equilibrium where nomads enjoyed a military advantage in arid and semi-arid tracts meant that trans-subcontinental polities enjoyed only a fleeting existence. In mainland southeast Asia, where dense forests and a difficult terrain insulated the region from nomadic conquests, a third variant of interstate relations emerged.

Keywords

nation-states, empires, wet-rice societies, nomads, warfare

In *Adam Smith in Beijing*, Giovanni Arrighi claims that ‘national states’ are not a ‘European invention’ but an East Asian one. Drawing on the work of historians of East Asia, primarily Takeshi Hamashita, he argues that except for a few states created by European colonialism (the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia), the more important ones in the region—China, Japan, Korea, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam—were constituted as ‘national states’ within the framework of a ‘China-centered tribute trade system’ long before their European counterparts.¹ Notably, though states in East Asia were close enough to influence each other, geographical distances made it too difficult for any of them to assimilate the others and hence there was a ‘near absence’ of military competition except along China’s land frontiers. Even there along the borders where successive Chinese empires suffered incursions by nomadic horsemen till the Qing forces finally defeated them, Chinese efforts were primarily designed to pacify the frontier rather than to extend its imperial realm.² This singular lack of military competition in the ‘East Asian system of national states’ is attributed not only to the overwhelming concentration of economic, political, and military power in China but also to the greater introversion of the East Asian system. In contrast, he argues that the greater dependence of European states on long-distance trade compelled them to seek exclusive control over sea-lanes and it was “this extroversion of the European power struggle [that] was a major determinant of the peculiar combination of capitalism, militarism, and territorialism that propelled the globalization of the European system.”³

The relatively greater importance of short-distance, internal trade in China, was in turn based on the development of wet-rice cultivation under which the greater productivity of land implied

¹ Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (London: Verso, 2007), 314.

² *Ibid.*, 317.

³ *Ibid.*, 320.

that a larger percentage of the population could be engaged full-time in non-food producing activities—in cash crop cultivation, manufactures, and commerce.⁴ At the same time, Chinese migration to ports in Southeast Asia created an overseas trading network in the early second millennium that was ‘as extensive as any contemporaneous European network.’⁵ Hence, as Adam Smith posited over two hundred years ago, China followed the “natural course of things [in which] the greater part of capital...is, first, directed to agriculture, afterwards to manufactures, and last of all to foreign commerce.”⁶ In contrast, Smith held that Europe, symbolized by Holland, followed a path that was “unnatural and retrograde:”

But though [the] natural order of things must have taken place in some degree in every...society, it has, in all the modern states of Europe, been, in many respects, entirely inverted. The foreign commerce of some of their cities has introduced all their finer manufactures, or such as were fit for distant trade; and manufacturers and foreign commerce together, have given birth to the principal improvements of agriculture. The manners and customs which the nature of their original government introduced, and which remained after the government was greatly altered, necessarily forced them into this unnatural and retrograde order.⁷

Intriguingly provocative as Arrighi’s recuperation of Smith’s ‘natural’ and ‘retrograde’ paths of economic development may be, the contrast between the extroversion of the European system of states and the introversion of the East Asian system obscures a crucial issue: successive Chinese empires never had control over sources for the means of exchange and the means of coercion. China was always critically short of coinable metals—copper and silver primarily—but if this could be offset by the inflows of silver from

⁴ Ibid., 321, see also Francesca Bray, *Rice Economies: Technology and Development in Asian Societies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Ravi Arvind Palat, “Historical Transformations in Agrarian Systems Based on Wet-Rice Cultivation: Toward an Alternative Model of Social Change,” in *Food and Agrarian Orders in the World-Economy*, ed. Philip McMichael (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995).

⁵ Arrighi, *Adam Smith*, 322.

⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 57

⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, 57-58

Japan and elsewhere, attracted by the high productivity of the Chinese economy and the range of commodities available there, the same conditions that rendered Chinese agriculture so productive also made it an inhospitable place to breed and raise high-quality horses which were the most important strategic military asset from the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries. Successive Chinese rulers gave ‘much more valuable gifts’⁸ to their tributary vassals because without the high-quality war-mounts they supplied, imperial forces would have been quickly overrun by marauding nomads! Warfare along their land frontiers, furthermore, was no mere sideshow as 192 of the 308 wars the Ming fought in their 276 years of rule, or 62 percent, were against the Mongols alone.⁹

East Asian states, moreover, can hardly be considered to be ‘national states’ before their incorporation into the capitalist world-economy. Despite astonishingly accurate village-level maps and Lo Hung-hsien’s compilation of these maps, the Chinese had no means to depict how “a piece of the earth’s surface relates to, or is situated on, the globe,”¹⁰ and the Kangxi emperor had to wait for Matteo Ricci and the Jesuits to map the extent of his empire.¹¹ Prior to that, conceptions of frontiers were fluid and amorphous: *pei-yang* or ‘northern frontiers’ referred not only to the Liao-ning and Shantung peninsulas, but also included Chih-li, the coastal province where Beijing was located. However, it never included areas beyond the Great Wall, i.e., the truly ‘foreign’ peoples to the north.¹² In other words, though the Chinese had detailed information about local conditions, they did not have the technological means to generate a cognitive picture of the spaces that different

⁸ Ibid., 324.

⁹ Kenneth Chase, *Firearms: A Global History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 35, 148; Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 183-84.

¹⁰ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 6.

¹¹ Theodore N. Foss, “A Western Interpretation of China: Jesuit Cartography,” in *East Meets West: The Jesuits in China, 1582-1773*, ed. Charles E. Ronan and Bonnie B. C. Oh (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1988).

¹² Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), 3, n. 3.

peoples occupied or to mobilize them on the basis of their social identities.¹³ Almost two hundred years later, when the British tried to negotiate the boundaries between Thailand and their new colonial possessions in Burma, they were shocked to realize that the Siamese court thought it was an issue to be decided by the local people rather than by Bangkok¹⁴—again an indication that there was a very different conception of territorial space and social identities from that of the ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’¹⁵ associated with modern nationalism in any of the states of East Asia and that it is inappropriate to talk of ‘national states’ before ‘citizen and secularized national rulers confronted each other directly.’ Before that

state loyalty and identification had either not been required of the common man...or they had been ensured...through religion and social hierarchy...or even through the autonomous constituted authorities inferior to the ultimate ruler or the self-governing communities and corporations which stood like a screen between subject and emperor or king leaving monarchy free to represent virtue and justice.¹⁶

Rulers of East Asian states, in fact, sought to prevent the development of a ‘horizontal comradeship’ among their subjects as we shall see since it could facilitate popular mobilizations against royal dynasties!

In what follows, I will first trace the changed dynamic of state-making across much of eastern Eurasia—from the Atlantic coasts of north Africa through West and Central Asia to China and

¹³ Ravi Arvind Palat, “Spatial Imaginaries of Capitalism: Dynamics of the Northeast Asian Regional Order,” *Asian Perspective* 23, no. 2 (1999): 7.

¹⁴ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 62-65.

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 7. Or as Victor Lieberman puts it in his study of states in Southeast Asia, unlike “nationalism’s leveling emphasis on uniform citizenship and horizontal equality, the precolonial ethos was implacably hierarchic, anti-entropic, obsessed with innumerable particularities of status and privilege determined by one’s distance from the sovereign, hence from the principles of sanctity and morality he embodied.” Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, C. 800-1830*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 41.

¹⁶ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1740: Programme, Myth, Reality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 82.

reaching down to the western and southern parts of the Indian subcontinent—notably the change in the relations between nomads and sedentary peoples. This provides the framework for at least three patterns of interstate relations. In much of north Africa, West Asia, and the Indian subcontinent, where fertile river valleys were intermingled with expansive dry lands which provided a competitive advantage to military entrepreneurs, pan-regional polities were at best short lived and a distinctive culture of statecraft evolved. In continental East Asia, where there was no similar intermingling of dry and fertile zones, pan-regional polities, notably successive Chinese empires, carefully calibrated their relations with nomads on whom they depended for the supply of horses. A third variant evolved in much of mainland and island Southeast Asia where trade links stimulated a close cultural connection with places in the Indian subcontinent and West Asia as well as China but where the former variant of state-craft generally prevailed. Vietnam, with its narrow, elongated shape of course, was the exception and was more imbricated within the China-centered state system.

As we shall see in the last section, an analysis of evolving patterns of inter-state systems provides a forceful refutation of Kenneth Pomeranz's contention that economic structures in Europe and Asia developed along parallel lines and diverged only after the Europeans incorporated the Americas as a different kind of 'periphery.'¹⁷ Large agrarian-commercial empires generated so much tax revenues that Asian rulers, unlike their European counterparts, did not have to depend on loans from business and financial elites to raise armed levies to wage wars and suppress rebellions. Hence, Asian rulers (with the exception of the port-cities) were seldom faced with the compulsion to offer concessions to their mercantile and banking fraternities unlike the Europeans. This European liaison between rulers and mercantile-financial creditors—*liaisons*

¹⁷ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). For a fuller critique, see Ravi Arvind Palat, "Convergence before Divergence? Eurocentrism and Alternate Patterns of Historical Change," *Summerhill* 16, no. 1 (Summer 2010), 42-58.

dangereuses, in Charles Tilly's words¹⁸—led to the development of restrictive trade practices and especially monopolies. And exceptional profits could be reaped and large volumes of capital accumulated only in monopolies as Fernand Braudel argued.¹⁹ As a consequence, economic agencies in Europe operated on an ever increasing scale in contrast to those in societies based on wet-rice cultivation where the size of economic agencies tended to become smaller and more specialized over time. This was the crucial difference between interstate systems in Europe and Asia: the former was predicated on capital accumulation, the latter was not. Tellingly, focusing on the 'noisy sphere' of markets and the realm of circulation, Pomeranz does not enter the 'hidden abode of production' and examine cultivation practices in wet-rice agriculture where the conditions of production dictate a different socio-historical pattern of change.²⁰ Nor does he investigate the role of the state in the economy and the relations between state-builders and the merchantile-financial elite. Finally, one caveat is in order: constraints of space do not permit me here to flesh out fully the processes of historical transformation in societies based on irrigated riziculture and the reader interested in these issues is invited to explore them in the relevant texts cited.

HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Central to a new dynamic of statecraft across much of eastern Eurasia by the end of the first millennium was the growing prominence of light cavalries and mounted archers. By the turn of the first millennium, the speed and maneuverability of light cavalries conferred an insurmountable military advantage on the nomads and waves of nomadic invaders established conquest states across

¹⁸ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 58.

¹⁹ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, trans. Sian Reynolds, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 176.

²⁰ See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1977), 279-80.

most of West, South, and East Asia between the twelfth and the late thirteenth century. “The real scourges” of China and India, Braudel wrote,

comparable to the biblical plagues of Egypt, came from the great deserts and steppes...which are torrid under the summer sun, and in winter buried under enormous drifts of snow...As soon as [nomads] appeared in history, they were what they would remain until their decline in the mid-seventeenth century: hordes of violent, cruel, pillaging horsemen full of daredevil courage.²¹

Nomads of the southern steppe—stretching from North Africa through Arabia and Persia to western India—were intimately connected with neighboring sedentary societies since the earliest times through war, trade, and religion unlike their counterparts in the north (from Hungary to eastern Manchuria) and east Africa which had minimal contact with sedentary peoples and rarely traded with cities.²² The symbiotic relationship between sedentary societies and nomads stemmed from their mutual need for each other. Competitive relations between agriculture and pasture—as well as ecological and climatic conditions—meant that rulers of large agrarian-commercial empires lacked the extended grasslands required to provision their armies with sufficient numbers of high quality horses and their only potential suppliers were the nomads—“the very people against whom the cavalry mounted on imperial horses would be used.”²³ Conversely, nomads depended on sedentary peoples for essential or valued commodities. Ghazan Khan (1271-1304), a Mongol chief, succinctly framed the nomads’ dilemma:

²¹ Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, trans. Richard Mayne (New York: Penguin, 1994), 164.

²² Rene J. Barendse, *The Arabian Seas: The Indian Ocean World of the Seventeenth Century* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 68; Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 30-31.

²³ Denis Sinor, “Horse and Pasture in Inner Asian History,” *Oriens Extremis* 19 (1972): 174.

I am not on the side of the Tazik [Iranian] *ra'iyat*. If there is a purpose in pillaging them all, there is no one with more power to do this than I. Let us rob them together. But if you wish to be certain of collecting grain [*tagar*] and food [*ash*] for your tables in the future, I must be harsh with you. You must be taught reason. If you insult the *ra'iyat*, take their oxen and seed, and trample their crops into the ground, what will you do in the future?...The obedient *ra'iyat* must be distinguished from the *ra'iyat* who are our enemies. How should we not protect the obedient, allowing them to suffer distress and torment at our hand.²⁴

The changed balance of power between nomads and sedentary societies was reflected in a series of conquest states established across west, south, and east Asia between the twelfth and the late thirteenth centuries. In the one hundred and fifty years between the Jurchen conquest of north China in 1126 and the fall of Hangzhou, the Southern Song capital, to Kublai Khan in 1276, nomadic invaders from the Central Asian steppe became rulers of China and much of the Indian subcontinent for the first time, establishing a string of conquest states from the Saljuks in northern Iran through the Ghaznavids in northwestern India to the Khitan and the Jurchen in northern China. Warriors from the dry tracts of the southern subcontinent—the Yadavas, the Kakatiyas, the Hoysalas, and the Sambuvarayas—similarly established a string of conquest states in peninsular India.

If the changed context of war-making held true all across a vast zone, stretching from the Atlantic coasts of North Africa through west Asia and the Indian subcontinent to China, there were significant differences in patterns of state-making within this large quadrant. In a broad swath stretching from North Africa through Arabia and Persia to the Indian subcontinent—Saharasia—fertile river valleys were interspersed with arid tracts with less than 1000 mm of annual rainfall where unreliable harvests, long off-seasons, and extensive grazing lands offered pastoral nomads a competitive advantage. Rulers could never entirely sub-

²⁴ Quoted in Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 268.

due these ‘zones of military entrepreneurship’ or securely cohere them within their polities.²⁵ The constant incursions of armed invaders also meant that aristocracies in Saharasia did not enjoy the longevity of their European counterparts who were shielded from nomadic invaders by the broken forests which hampered their advance.²⁶ To inoculate their reigns from ‘these dangerous diseases of the body politic’²⁷ as Joannes DeLaet, an early seventeenth-century traveler characterized the situation, rulers sought to provide leaders of warbands with access to the wealth of empire by assimilating them into the imperial apparatus through the grant of revenue assignments.

The lack of similar internal frontiers enabled successive Chinese dynasties to rule over a much larger territorial domain administered by an imperial bureaucracy and led to a more regulated relationship with the nomads outside the empire. Since the nomads provided dynasties in Beijing with the means for protection in return for expensive gifts in the form of ‘tribute’ exchanges, with the singular exception of the Mongols, nomadic conquests occurred only when political instability in China led to a situation where there was no government capable of paying tribute.²⁸ Indeed, perhaps the most enduring legacy of the Mongol conquests was the elimination of non-Chinese dynasties ruling over Zhongguo: ‘the Tangut Xi Xia (1227), the Jurchen Jin (1234), and the Tibeto-Burman kingdom of Dali in Yunnan (1254).’²⁹ This was a second variant pattern of interstate relations in eastern Eurasia.

²⁵ Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire, 1500-1700* (London: Routledge, 2002), 67; Jos Gommans, “The Silent Frontier of South Asia, c. A.D. 1100-1800,” *Journal of World History* 9, no. 1, Spring (1998): 4; Stewart Gordon, *Marathas, Marauders, and State Formation in Eighteenth-Century India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 182-208.

²⁶ Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 40.

²⁷ Quoted in Chetan Singh, “Forests, Pastoralists and Agrarian Society in Mughal India,” in *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, ed. David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 26.

²⁸ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 9-11.

²⁹ John W Dardess, “Did the Mongols Matter?: Territory, Power, and the Intelligentsia in China from the Northern Song to the Early Ming,” in *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in*

A third variant emerged in mainland Southeast Asia where hills and dense forests blunted the effectiveness of mounted archers and heavy cavalry as evident from the failed Mongol campaigns and the inherent difficulty of transport between the east and west limited the potential of prolonged conflict between polities and the role of cavalries. Here, the dry zones of the interior, where wet-rice agriculture was practiced, had a demographic and military superiority over the lowlands which were prone to flooding. Political consolidation was particularly difficult in Vietnam where the coastal littoral's narrow elongated shape, was broken into narrow east-west valleys and where there was no north-south artery comparable to the Irrawaddy of Chaophraya rivers.³⁰ The small states on the coasts, finally, were far more dependent on overseas trade and on the control over their much smaller subject populations and represented an important exception.

CONSEQUENTIAL STRANGERS?

Once established, rulers of conquest states faced the same predicament as the rulers they had ousted. All state-builders from the Central Asian steppes—the Ottomans, the Safavids, the Turko-Afghani rulers of the Delhi Sultanate, the Mongols, and the Manchus—as well as the Telugu and Kannada warriors in peninsular India, had to orchestrate a difficult transition as they sought to remake their raiding parties to imperial armies required to control large populated lands. In the steppe, where there had been no distinction between civilian and military life—with equestrian and archery skills being integral aspects of culture—every able-bodied adult male was subject to call-up at short notice and was expected to provide most of his own equipment: horses, weapons, supplies. This was not possible for garrisoned troops and unlike wars waged

Chinese History, ed. Paul Jakov Smith and Richard von Glahn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 117, 20.

³⁰ Pierre Gourou, *The Peasants of the Tonkin Delta: A Study of Human Geography*, trans. Richard R. Miller, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Human Relations Area Files, 1955), 3.

by nomads against sedentary peoples that provided substantial bounties, wars aimed at suppressing internal rebellions were not similarly lucrative.³¹

These problems were compounded by the scale and magnitude of military operations routinely mounted by the large territorial empires of Asia. Unlike in Europe of the time when mounted horsemen numbered in the thousands, in China and India, cavalries numbered in the tens of thousands. Marco Polo records that Kublai Khan dispatched 360,000 horsemen and 100,000 foot-soldiers to defeat the rebellion by Qaidu and Nayan. In the second Battle of Tarain in 1126, when Muhammad Ghuri's forces triumphed over Prithviraj, the victor's forces had 120-130,000 horses and the vanquished 300,000 horses and 3,000 elephants.³²

In this context, Chinggis Khan's intention of turning north China into pasture may have represented a keen strategic insight, but as his grandsons realized, a sustainable polity had to combine sedentary agrarian zones with the nomadic pastoralism of the steppe. Symbolic of this recognition was the rise of a series of new frontier capital cities, combining access to horses with an expanding agrarian base: Ahmadnagar, Beijing, Bijapur, Delhi, Golkonda, Vijayanagar.³³ The location of these long-standing capital cities in frontier areas underlined the mutual dependence of nomads and rulers of agrarian empires. This dependence was so strong that Thomas Jefferson Barfield claimed that if a Chinese dynasty collapsed, the ruling lineage among the Uighur collapsed as well, and that invasions of China took place only when there was no central government capable of paying tribute to the nomads.³⁴ When the Celestial Empire was strong, it established horse markets where its 'most favored barbarians' could obtain essential and prestige goods

³¹ Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 221-22.

³² Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 117, Sinor, "Horse and Pasture," 172-73, André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 145.

³³ Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 234-35, Jos Gommans, "The Eurasian Frontier after the First Millennium A.D.: Reflections Along the Fringe of Time and Space," *Medieval History Journal* 1, no. 1 (1998): 129-30; Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 23-37; Gommans, "Silent Frontier," 15; Sinor, "Horse and Pasture," 176, 80-81.

³⁴ Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 9, 230; Perdue, *China Marches West*, 520-21.

in exchange for horses while other nomads had to rely exclusively on tribute missions.³⁵ The tribute trade system, in effect, was devised to provide ideological cover for the Sons of Heaven to pay protection money to the nomads without having to acknowledge it—an ‘institutionalized protection racket’ as Peter Purdue bluntly calls it.³⁶

The Yuan dynasty initially provided ordinary Mongols, after absorbing their homeland into the Chinese provincial system, with lands and slaves to provide defense against other nomads. By the early fourteenth century, some 300,000 troops were deployed to defend the Mongol border with Turkestan and one-third of all imperial revenues were devoted to the defense of Mongolia. Yet, within less than 50 years, these garrisons had decayed as the allotments were not sufficient to equip the Mongols for war.³⁷

After the Ming overthrew the Yuan, neither the aggressive military campaigns they waged against the Mongols, nor the government controlled trade they instituted to lure the nomads, succeeded for long. Unable to maintain self-sustaining military colonies in the frontier areas due to low yields, no Chinese army could spend more than 3 months in the steppe and the nomads took advantage of this logistical constraint to retain their autonomy. Indeed, when the Zhengtong emperor disregarded advice about being stranded in the steppe without supplies in 1449, he was seized by the Mongols at Tumu and this put an end to Ming campaigns in the steppe.³⁸

The Ming had introduced firearms along the Great Wall, and deployed cannons as early as 1414, against the Mongols but these also proved to be ineffective. The Mongols, quickly learnt to counter firearms and penetrate Ming fortresses as they captured Ming

³⁵ Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 235, see also Herrlee Glessner Creel, “The Role of the Horse in Chinese History,” *American Historical Review* 70, no. 3 (April 1965): 668; Perdue, *China Marches West*, 68-72. Sometimes terms of trade could become onerous for the Chinese as when the Oirats’ emissaries bearing tribute rose sharply from less than a hundred men to over two thousand in the mid-fifteenth century despite Chinese protests because the emissaries had to be fed and rewarded, Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 239-42.

³⁶ Perdue, *China Marches West*, 69-70, 74.

³⁷ Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 221-22.

³⁸ Perdue, *China Marches West*, 58-60. 522.

weapons and developed their own infantries in conjunction with their formidable cavalries.³⁹ The Mongols, indeed, were central to the transmission of military technologies—from weaponry to catapults and siege technologies—across Eurasia: China, India, the Islamic world, and Europe.⁴⁰ Eventually, like their predecessors, the Ming tried to contain the Mongols by trading tea for horses and bestowing imperial titles and ranks on their most favored chieftains.

In southern China and Korea, however, where conditions were not as favorable for cavalry warfare, infantries were more important as the Ming discovered when they sought to repel the Japanese invasion of Korea. The rugged terrain in the south not only hampered the cavalry maneuvers but also did not provide enough pasture for the horses while the forests provided defensive cover to the Japanese to use their muskets to great effect. It was only when the Ming brought their southern-based infantry and their cannons that the Japanese were routed.⁴¹ Later, during Wu Sangui's rebellion against the Qing, the imperial court directed the Belgian-born Jesuit priest Ferdinand Verbiest to cast light cannons that could be easily transported over rugged terrain in Yunnan.⁴²

³⁹ Nicola Di Cosmo, "European Technology and Manchu Power: Reflections on the 'Military Revolution' in Seventeenth-Century China," in *Making Sense of Global History: The 19th International Congress of the Historical Sciences, Oslo 2000, Commemorative Volume*, ed. Solvi Sogner (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget Oslo, 2001); Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 236.

⁴⁰ The Mongol mobilization of military manpower was unprecedented. After they subdued an Iranian-speaking community, the Alans, in the North Caucasus, they transported 10,000 of them to North China—about "4,700 air kilometers from their homeland." Similarly, they took 1,000 Chinese siege engineers to Western Iran—almost 5,200 kilometers. Almost inevitably, these transplanted populations never returned to their homes, Thomas Allsen, "Mongols as Vectors for Cultural Transmission," in *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia: The Chinggisid Age*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo, Allen J Frank, and Peter B Golden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 136. See also Thomas Allsen, "The Circulation of Military Technology in the Mongolian Empire," in *Warfare in Inner Asian History (500-1800)*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

⁴¹ Kenneth M. Swope, "Beyond Turtleboats: Siege Accounts from Hideyoshi's Second Invasion of Korea, 1597-98," *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2006); Kenneth M. Swope, "Crouching Tigers, Secret Weapons: Military Technology Employed During the Sino-Japanese-Korean War, 1592-1598," *Journal of Military History* 69, no. 1 (January 2005): 38.

⁴² Di Cosmo, "European Technology," 131-32.

There was no subcontinental parallel to the mutual balance of terror between sedentary empires and nomads in East Asia. In the more chequered ecological continuum of Saharasia, where zones of low rainfall with unreliable harvests, long off-seasons, and ample grazing grounds made them reservoirs of military labor, several 'zones of military entrepreneurship'—Rajputana, Kannada, and Telugu—developed. But at the same time dense forests constrained the nomads preferred modes of warfare. Abul Fazal wrote in his account of the expedition that Akbar, the Mughal emperor, mounted against Raja Madhukar, that "the country was forest and the marching of the army was difficult, they cut down trees one day and marched the next."⁴³ As a terrain inhospitable to horses limited nomadic penetration, instead of being invaded by waves of conquerors, much of the subcontinent was subject to a series of incursions by small bands of well-organized Turko-Afghan forces.⁴⁴ These conditions precluded the institution of regulated political frameworks like the tea-horse markets or the tribute-trade system to supply horses to subcontinental monarchs who had to purchase large numbers of horses.⁴⁵ This was aggravated by the short lifespan of horses as the extreme differences between the monsoon and dry seasons made the natural grazing season very short and the best times to make hay coincided with the *kharif* (September-October) harvests. The adverse effects of the low nutritional value of the fodder were compounded by the excessive heat and humidity of the weather.⁴⁶

As the marchlands provided sanctuary to recalcitrant satraps and enabled them to preserve their autonomy, it precluded the emergence of a truly pan-subcontinental polity. Noting that Hindu and Muslim rulers of large territorial states titled themselves as *maharajadiraja* or *shah-an-shah* meaning "king of kings" rather than 'king of India,' Christopher Bayly and Burton Stein argued

⁴³ Quoted in Singh, "Forests, Pastoralists," 24.

⁴⁴ Jos Gommans, *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire, c.1710-1780* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 17, Wink, *Slave Kings*, 3.

⁴⁵ For estimates, see Jos Gommans, "Warhorse and Post-Nomadic Empire in Asia, c. 1000-1800," *Journal of Global History* 2, no. 1 (March 2007).

⁴⁶ Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 111-14; Gommans, *Indo-Afghan Empire*, 70-73.

that these states should be seen as clusters of layers of power and privilege rather than centralized despotisms.⁴⁷ Unable to eradicate the local bases of power of the leaders of warbands, rulers sought to incorporate them into the apparatus of empire by instituting a system of transferable revenue assignments (*iqta'*).⁴⁸ If transfers of holders of revenue assignments may convey impressions of an omnipotent imperial bureaucracy, Chetan Singh's study of seventeenth-century Punjab indicates that even when these assignees were transferred frequently, their reassignments were within the same region and, in many cases, they were re-appointed to their former posts after a short interval.⁴⁹ Unlike the European fief, given the high degree of monetization of the economy, the *iqta'* was a salary collected at the source rather than embedded in a subsistence economy.⁵⁰ Requiring holders of revenue assignments to furnish horses and foot soldiers also enabled state builders to "transform their highly efficient but relatively small warbands that made the conquests into the much larger imperial armies that could sustain them."⁵¹ Often the victors, after defeating their rivals, married a daughter of the vanquished thereby transforming the 'simple politics of warfare' into the more 'complex politics of families.'⁵²

To control subordinates, scattered across their domains, rulers traveled constantly and itinerant monarchies implied both surveillance and the construction of roads.⁵³ The moving royal camp was a constant reminder of sovereignty—a warning against any provincial satrap considering sedition, a display of power and

⁴⁷ Christopher A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 13; Burton Stein, "Towards an Indian Petty Bourgeoisie: Outline of an Approach," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 4, (January 1991): PE-14, see also André Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India: Agrarian Society and Politics under Eighteenth Century Maratha Svarajya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁴⁸ Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 81.

⁴⁹ Chetan Singh, "Centre and Periphery in the Mughal State: The Case of Seventeenth-Century Panjab," *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 2 (May 1988).

⁵⁰ André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 12-13.

⁵¹ Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 81.

⁵² Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 159.

⁵³ Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 106.

wealth to inspire awe and allegiance, an exhibition of stately ritual and ceremony. Impressing cultivators and service personnel with their richness, political leaders inspired belief in their unlimited possibilities and thereby won obedience to their will.⁵⁴ Stephen Blake calculated that the Mughal emperors spent almost 40 percent of their time on tours of one year or more while the Safavid rulers of Iran were estimated to have been itinerant for about a third of their reigns.⁵⁵ Moreover, the financial and commercial resources of the major trade routes provided the means to regulate the collection of supplies and revenues. In other words, the control of the imperial highways obviated the need for the army of plundering fields and cities.⁵⁶

A common culture of statecraft within the wider Saharasian zone is indicated by the circulation of bureaucratic and military elites and scholars across many jurisdictions suggesting a common archive of technologies of rule from which borrowings and modifications can be made. New dynastic empires—the Muzaffaris in Cambay, the Rasulids in Aden, and the Mamluks in Cairo—were instituted by foreigners and their slave officers and a shared political culture made it possible for the Maghrebian Muslim scholar, Ibn Battuta to travel across many lands, earning his living as a jurist, and often taking a local woman as his wife or slave-concubine.⁵⁷ The Mughal navy was officered by Ethiopians and Jewish elites are recorded to have occupied important positions in Islamic states from Aden to Spain and to have had considerable in-

⁵⁴ Maurice Godelier, *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics*, trans. Brian Pearce (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); A. Gurevitch, "Representations of Property During the High Middle Ages," *Economy & Society* 7, no. 1 (February 1977); Witold Kula, *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System: Towards a Model of the Polish Economy, 1500-1800*, trans. Lawrence Garner (London: New Left Books, 1976).

⁵⁵ Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 101-02.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁷ Ho, *Graves of Tarim*, 100.

fluence.⁵⁸ From Samudra, in northeast Sumatra, a Hindu *raja* is reported to have sent two Muslim ‘foreigners’ as envoys to China.⁵⁹

This common culture of statecraft included a recognition by rulers they were imbricated within a broader framework of interstate relations, a recognition made manifest by a system of residential diplomacy. Tristram de Paiva, the Portuguese ambassador to the Vijayanagara court of Sadasivadevaraya between 1545 and 1548 noted that ambassadors of the Sultanates of Ahmadnagar, Berar, and Golkonda were also present at the court.⁶⁰ Later, when the first Dutch fleet, sailing from Zeeland, arrived in Aceh on the island of Sumatra in 1601, they carried a letter of introduction—credentials—from the ruler of Anjouan island in the Comoros group off the east coast of Africa. The Sultan of Aceh, in turn, provided them with credentials to present to the Mughal emperor Akbar as they set sail for Cambay, clearly indicating a system of interstate relations in the Indian Ocean world.⁶¹

As these instances show, polities in archipelagic Southeast Asia were imbricated in the wider Indian Ocean cultures of statecraft, especially as commercial ties expanded and rulers of small ports found that there were few better ways of transforming their shady private havens into sultanates than installing a resident Muslim jurist to refashion a grimy pirates’ haven as a new sphere of civilian concourse, boasting a Friday congregational mosque, a court of justice, and a school.⁶² These were, though, far more dependent on commercial ties and had to court maritime trade far more assiduously than the Mughal, Safavid, Ottoman, or Chinese empires.

Mainland Southeast Asia was different yet again. Population densities were considerably smaller here than in China or the subcontinent and settlements remained clustered around five corri-

⁵⁸ Roxani Eleni Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 13-16.

⁵⁹ Bertram Johannes Otto Schrieke, *Indonesian Sociological Studies*, vol. 1 (The Hague: W. Van Hoeve, 1955), 28.

⁶⁰ Phillip B. Wagoner, “Sultan among Hindu Kings’: Dress, Titles, and the Islamicization of Hindu Culture at Vijayanagara,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (November 1996): 860, 63, n.3, 66.

⁶¹ Ho, *Graves of Tarim*, 98, Schrieke, *Indonesian Sociological Studies*, 44.

⁶² Ho, *Graves of Tarim*, 165.

dors—the littoral of South Vietnam, the Red River valley and neighboring deltas, the lower central Mekong and the Cambodian plain, and the Irrawaddy and Chaophraya basins.⁶³ Dense forests and hills hampered east-west communications and separated potential rivals as it limited the opportunities for prolonged conflict. Lower population densities, and concomitantly lower levels of monetization and commercialization meant that the credit mechanisms and monetary resources required to sustain wars and indigenous capabilities to craft firearms were absent in the early to mid-second millennium.⁶⁴ The scarcity of population meant that state-builders competed for populations rather than territory—often abandoning towns and evacuating their subjects rather than wasting available manpower in pitched battles. Indeed, the Portuguese capture of Melaka in 1511 was so easy only because the Sultan abandoned the city thinking that they would adhere to the regional pattern of fighting and leave the city after looting it!⁶⁵

While Dai Viet looked towards Chinese models of administration, military competition between states in the Irrawaddy and Chaophraya basins—between Toungoo Burma and Ayudhya Siam for instance—led to states drawing on a common archive of military and political practices.⁶⁶ By the middle of the second millennium, there were attempts in Burma and Siam to introduce some administrative centralization, to appoint provincial governors, and to standardize some bureaucratic practices though these were often short-lived especially in areas more distant from the political center. In most cases, ostensible governors and tributary chieftains were confirmed in their positions by their nominal overlords as long as they performed the ritual of submission and Thongchai Winichakul says that many wars in mainland Southeast Asia “were not contests between rival kingdoms but wars of punishment

⁶³ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 28-29.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 60; Victor Lieberman, “Transcending East-West Dichotomies: State and Culture Formation in Six Ostensibly Disparate Areas,” *Modern Asian Studies* 21, no. 3 (July 1997): 516.

⁶⁵ Anthony J. S Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 123.

⁶⁶ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 62.

waged by a supreme lord against the defiance of tributaries.”⁶⁷ Outside the five main areas of settlement, smaller polities—Lanna, Luang Phrabang, Vientiane—acknowledged several overlords at the same time: a situation called *songfaifa* in Thai meaning “under two overlords,” or *samfaifa* “under three overlords.”⁶⁸ This suggests that the realms of the big kingdoms of Burma, Siam, and Vietnam overlapped at the frontiers, contrary to claims that they were ‘national states.’ Hence, even if Vietnam introduced civil service examinations, three levels of appointed officials, and bureaucratic prescriptions in the Chinese fashion,⁶⁹ a difficult terrain on their frontiers meant that these neo-Confucian reforms remained reforms on paper especially as distances from the main political centers increased.

Given the importance of supplies of horses and monetary media, rulers in the subcontinent, China, or archipelagic Southeast Asia could not afford to be introverted. The movement of peoples along trade routes and the settlement of peoples from distant places, professing different religious beliefs, and following often incompatible customs in the port-cities also facilitated the creation of a broader political culture and shared traditions of statecraft. Local rulers sought to minimize sources of potential conflict by permitting resident communities of foreign merchants considerable autonomy in managing their own internal affairs, except in cases of conflict or serious crime like homicide when royal jurisdiction overrode such special privileges. Just as modern states create specially designated jurisdictional enclaves—such as export promotion zones and international banking facilities⁷⁰—to attract business, in the absence of a recognized body of international law, this system of *natio*s—the Persian and Arab *milliya*, the Tamil *nagara*—enabled different mercantile communities to adjudicate their differences without recourse to local authorities. Membership in the

⁶⁷ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 83.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

⁶⁹ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 36-37.

⁷⁰ Ronen Palan, *The Offshore World: Sovereign Markets, Virtual Places, and Nomad Millionaires* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 18-21.

natios was variously defined—by religion, by language, by place of origin—with the criteria for acceptance being “descriptive rather than ascriptive.”⁷¹

These *natios* oversaw the daily administration of trade in the ports and other commercial centers—certifying weights, measures and currencies and, more importantly, adjudicating disputes between merchants regarding supplies and finances especially since it was substantially cheaper and faster than petitioning the courts of local rulers—with minimal recourse to local representatives of states. They were responsible for religious performances of their communities, including the disposition of the bodies of the dead—and the cremation of traders from India often led to conflicts with local imams in ports on the Arabian Sea. In cases of conflict with local officials, the *natios* would submit “humble” petitions to the authorities—and could stop conducting business or even abandon the port and transfer their operations to more accommodating locations nearby if their demands were not conceded. Though *natios* were not formally institutionalized, with written regulations and the like, they even acted as ambassadors occasionally and sent delegates to royal courts.⁷²

Local political powers recognized leaders of the *natios*, typically termed *shahbandar* in the sources. In his account of Melaka, for instance, Tomé Pires refers to four such officials—one for the Gujaratis, another for merchants from the Coromandel, Bengal and Burma coasts, a third for traders from the Malay archipelago and the Philippines, and a fourth for the Chinese—both the Muslim Chinese and the Cantonese—as well as the Vietnamese, and those from the Ryukus, and Champa.⁷³ The *shahbandar* not only provided visiting merchants with elephants and small boats for local transport but also, given Melaka’s small size, provided them arms

⁷¹ Barendse, *Arabian Seas*, 88-89.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 90-91.

⁷³ see also Ronald Findlay and Kevin H. O’Rourke, *Power and Plenty: Trade, War, and the World Economy in the Second Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 135-36; Tome Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires: An Account of the East from the Red Sea to Japan: Written in Malacca in 1512-1515*, trans. Armando Cortesao, 2 vols. (Nendeln, Lichtenstein: Kraus Reprints, 1967), 2: 265.

and commanded them in battle.⁷⁴ The *shahbandar* functioned under a royal official, the *bendahara*. Resident merchants from distant lands often also filled these positions—in Bantem, *kelings* from the Coromandel or Gujaratis and an occasional Chinese; in Melaka, Javanese, *kelings*, and Gujaratis.⁷⁵ Similarly, Portuguese records document the activities of autonomous communities of ‘foreign merchants’ in sixteenth-century Kozhikode, who lived in specially demarcated areas and were headed by a leader chosen from amongst themselves—often Muslims in states where the rulers were Hindu as in Kollam and Kozhikode—as well as in the Persian Gulf.⁷⁶

Indeed, without the autonomy granted to *natio*s in the Indian Ocean world, as Charles Henry Alexandrowicz observed, the Portuguese *Estado da India* and the northern European trading companies would have been unable to conduct their operations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷⁷ What distinguished the participation of the Portuguese and the northern European East India Companies in this system of *natio*s was that they were additionally endowed by their states with arms, warships, fortresses, and other attributes of sovereignty unlike the other *natio*s.⁷⁸ If these attributes enabled them to exercise novel claims to sovereignty—notably over the deep seas—it also meant that subcontinental rulers could hold them to these claims and compel them to eradicate acts of piracy over the seas or face punishment on land since the military superiority of the Europeans was limited to the seas.

Just as the Portuguese *Estado*, and the Dutch and English East India Companies functioned as states within the interstate system of the Indian Ocean, they accorded mercantile communities from

⁷⁴ Kenneth R. Hall, “Multi-Dimensional Networking: Fifteenth-Century Indian Ocean Maritime Diaspora in Southeast Asian Perspective,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49, no. 4 (2006): 466-67.

⁷⁵ Schrieke, *Indonesian Sociological Studies*.

⁷⁶ Charles Henry Alexandrowicz, *An Introduction to the History of the Law of Nations in the East Indies (16th 17th and 18th Centuries)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 98; Barendse, *Arabian Seas*, 46-47; Michael N. Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat: The Response to the Portuguese in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 17-18. see also Schrieke, *Indonesian Sociological Studies*, 28.

⁷⁷ Alexandrowicz, *Law of Nations*, 99.

⁷⁸ Barendse, *Arabian Seas*, 87-88.

the Indian Ocean similar privileges in the emerging European states system. The Persian-Dutch treaty of 1631, for instance, negotiated between representatives of the States-General of the United Provinces of the Netherlands and the Court of Ispahan, formalized a 'capitulation régime' and established that the Royal Persian Agent in the Netherlands was to enjoy the status of a commercial and judicial officer (consul) similar to that appointed at that period by European powers in the Ottoman Empire. Article VI of the treaty treats the Agent in the same way as the Agents of European Sovereigns at the Court of the States General, which must have implied the right to appear before the highest authorities of the State including the enjoyment of diplomatic or at least quasi-diplomatic status.⁷⁹

In other words, the 1631 treaty indicated that the Dutch were ready to grant the Persians the same privileges (permission to conduct trade, exemptions from customs duties, immunity of their domicile from local jurisdiction, exercise of their religion within their houses, etc.) they claimed for themselves. At the same time, when representatives of resident communities of merchants from Indian Ocean ports—such as the Armenians from Iran in the seventeenth century—went to European capital cities to negotiate commercial issues, they often claimed to be representatives of kings and were accorded ambassadorial status including the right to import goods free of duties!⁸⁰

The presence of these autonomous enclaves of resident foreigners did not mean that notions of 'national' identity were prevalent. In most cases, identity was based on religion, language, and/or place of origin. The circulation of bureaucratic and military elites, and the occupation of high offices by 'foreigners' suggest that loyalty to rulers was more important than 'national' origins. In nineteenth-century Java, for instance, trial records of a criminal case survive in both the local Cirebonese language and in Dutch. While the accused murderer, an official of the Cirebonese court, is referred to by his title, *Ki Aria Marta Ningrat*, in the indigenous

⁷⁹ Alexandrowicz, *Law of Nations*, 123.

⁸⁰ Barendse, *Arabian Seas*, 87, 90, 299.

records, he is known in the Dutch records simply as *Chinees* indicating that while the Cirebonese identified him by his status and rank in the court, the latter classified him by his 'race' even though there is no indication that the accused thought of himself as a person of Chinese origin.⁸¹ More importantly, even in East Asia, there is no evidence that these states were constituted as 'national' states. John Fitzgerald argued that the promotion of regional differentiation within the shell of formal unity was the key to the longevity of China as a political formation:

The state insisted upon a high degree of formal similarity in its bureaucratic procedures and ritual practices, not because it feared internal differentiation, but out of fear that *undifferentiated* patterns of heterodox belief could at any time sweep across communities and override the barriers of local differentiation which served to contain them. The Empire tolerated variety among localities because it feared mass horizontal communication of the kind we now associate with political nationalism (emphasis in the original).⁸²

To make themselves acceptable to their Buddhist constituencies, the Yuan qaghans (emperors, rulers of khanates), even turned themselves into *cakravartirajas*.⁸³ Similarly, Mary Elizabeth Berry had argued that political consolidation in Tokugawa Japan was accompanied by increasing cultural differences reflected in distinctive clothing and architectural styles, diverse diets and vocabularies.⁸⁴ Nationalism in Korea has similarly been attributed as a response to Western imperialism and Japanese colonialism.⁸⁵ These instances suggest that rather than a single inflexible lexical order-

⁸¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 167.

⁸² John Fitzgerald, " 'Reports of My Death Have Been Greatly Exaggerated': The History of the Death of China," in *China Deconstructs: Politics, Trade and Regionalism*, ed. David S. G. Goodman and Gerald Segal (London: Routledge, 1994), 27-28.

⁸³ Thomas Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 55.

⁸⁴ Mary Elizabeth Berry, "Was Early Modern Japan Culturally Integrated?" *Journal of Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (July 1997).

⁸⁵ James B. Palais, "A Search for Korean Uniqueness," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55, no. 2 (1995).

ing of identities as in contemporary nationalism, there existed multiple, fluid layers of identity.

Briefly put, the increased prominence of light cavalries changed the context of state-making over much of eastern Eurasia. In much of Saharasia, the intermingling of fertile river valleys with arid tracts and dense forests led to the existence of many barriers to the creation of large unified polities and these inhospitable tracts generally separated the states from one another. Here, large polities interacted with each other and even engaged in conflict but distances and the terrain made lasting conquest often unviable. The very reasons that precluded the emergence and consolidation of a pan-subcontinental state however enabled leaders of war-bands to cling tenaciously onto power unless they were ousted by leaders of nomadic war-bands. This common context of war-making and state-making led to shared traditions of statecraft that permitted the circulation of bureaucratic and military elites across the region. As commercial ties grew across the Indian Ocean, these ties often extended to the small states in archipelagic Southeast Asia through the spread of Islam.

A difficult terrain also meant that though lands in mainland Southeast Asia were largely insulated from incursions by nomads, political fragmentation was the general pattern even if some states achieved a fleeting dominance—most notably Toungoo Burma in the late sixteenth century after it conquered much of Siam and Laos to the east and Manipur to the west. Here low population densities and the difficulty of east-west communications meant that populations were clustered in distinct zones and their political ideologies were borrowed from Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism—or from China in the case of Vietnam—and modified by local conditions. Frequent competition between states also created a common archive of political and military practices from which borrowings and adaptations could be made. A large number of the wars here were not so much for land as punishments for defiance by tributary rulers and states on the frontiers of the populated zones often had multiple sovereigns. In the absence of large populations,

the credit mechanisms that conferred great power and influence on bourgeoisies in Europe were also lacking here.

The China-centered tribute system formed a third variant. If dynasties could accomplish political consolidation more easily as they were confronted neither with several ‘zones of military entrepreneurship’ or dense forests, their dependence on the nomads for the means of coercion meant that they were at least as extroverted as other states. The tribute trade system far from being an indicator of a ‘peaceful ascent’ was in fact an institutionalized protection racket. Despite this, as we have seen the Ming fought some 308 wars in their 276 years of rule—or an average of almost 1.12 wars a year—thereby underlining the significance of supplies of good quality horses for the imperial armies.

Finally, overlapping jurisdictions, descriptive rather than ascriptive criteria for group membership, circulation of bureaucratic elites and military personnel across realms, and toleration of local differences all suggest that notions of ‘nationality’ understood as a ‘deep horizontal comradeship’ were absent: there was no pioneering of national states here. Or, as John Darwin puts it,

the difficulty of forming autonomous states on an ethnic basis against the gravitational pull of cultural or economic attraction...has been so great that empire (where different ethnic communities fall under a common ruler) has been the default mode of political organization throughout most of history.⁸⁶

But if empires are the ‘default mode of political organization’ the social and economic conditions in which they were embedded conditioned them and to these issues we now turn.

⁸⁶ John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 23. See also Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

INTERSTATE SYSTEMS, EAST AND WEST

Surveying the origins and development of the European interstate system, Arrighi argued in his *Long Twentieth Century*, that the bourgeoisies controlling Italian city-states pursued a very different path than the territorialist rulers of dynastic empires. Rather than expanding their domains, the bourgeoisie sought to accumulate capital and their success was predicated both upon the balance of power between European states and upon the fact that successful pursuit of power within the European system depended on access to resources outside the system. The balance of power between multiple states ensured a competition for resources that provided relative autonomy to financial organizations which controlled the monetary resources essential for competition within the interstate system and this competition was continually fuelled by resources from outside the system. Hence, control over extra-European resources provided a competitive advantage in the intra-European struggle.⁸⁷

In the sequence of historical progression that he identified, each successive combination of financial and state agencies operated on an ever increasing scale. The power of the Venetian city-state rested on its intermediary role in the East-West trade, a network which it did not control. The greater state- and war-making capabilities of the United Provinces not only enabled them to control the commercial networks of the Europe-Asia trade but also the financial networks created by the Spanish and Portuguese empires. This was superseded by the creation of a world-spanning empire by the still greater state- and war-making capabilities of the United Kingdom that enabled it to control resources and internalize production costs. The compact territorial size, wealth of natural resources, and continental extent of the United States eventually allowed it to supersede the United Kingdom. In each successive case,

⁸⁷ Arrighi, *Adam Smith*, 228-49; Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1994), 27-84.

the organizational capacities of business enterprises and states were much greater than in the preceding stage.⁸⁸

The logic driving the evolution of an interstate system in much of Asia outlined above stands in sharp contrast to the European pattern. States in continental Asia, as we have seen, were at least as extroverted as European states as all of them were dependent on supplies of coinable metals and horses, the most strategic military asset from the late first millennium to about the late eighteenth century. If the productivity of their economies meant that they attracted gold, silver, copper, and other monetary media easily, the case with horses was different. Horses could be obtained from the nomads or from Arabia and as the climatic and environmental conditions propitious for rice cultivation were insalubrious for horses, there was a continuous need to ensure uninterrupted supplies of this vital military asset. Extroversion, however, did not lead to a reliance on financial organizations for the resources rulers required for their power pursuits because the underlying dynamics of societies based on wet-rice cultivation were fundamentally different from those of Europe.

Technological progress in operations associated with wet-rice cultivation due to the natural characteristics of the plant was indicated by the substitution of simple tools for more complex instruments unlike the case in Europe where it was represented by the substitution of labor-power by animal- and mechanical-power. Hence, instead of moving towards large-scale consolidated farming operations, processes of socio-historical change in societies based on irrigated riziculture progressively privileged small-scale operations and the quality of labor rather than capital equipment.⁸⁹ Or, in the words of Thomas Smith, operations associated with wet-rice cultivation, “rather than impelling farming forward to a manufac-

⁸⁸ Arrighi, *Long Twentieth Century*, 27-84.

⁸⁹ Francesca Bray, “Patterns of Evolution in Rice-Growing Societies,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 11, no. 1 (1983): 4-5; Palat, “Wet-Rice,” 57.

turing state of production, served to strengthen its handicraft character."⁹⁰

Since productivity increases were correlated to the skill of cultivators rather than to increasingly complex instruments of production, ownership of large tracts of land may confer political power and prestige but not economic advantage, and there was a tendential decline of the intervention of landlords in the production process. Consequently, the natural characteristics of the rice plant imposed severe restrictions on the ceaseless accumulation of capital in agriculture. "[O]ne did not make a fortune through being a landlord," Francesca Bray wrote, "one became a landlord through making a fortune."⁹¹ Unlike in Europe, these conditions of production favored the tiller of the soil rather than the landlord, and hence class and tenancy relations evolved differently in societies based on irrigated riziculture.⁹²

Lands under wet-rice cultivation had substantially higher yields than lands under the staple crops of Europe and the caloric value of rice was also substantially greater. Whereas one hectare of land produced an average of five quintals of wheat in late eighteenth-century France, a hectare under rice produced thirty quintals of unhusked rice or 21 quintals of edible rice. At 3,500 calories per kilogram, a hectare of rice produced 7,350,000 calories compared to 1,500,000 for wheat and only 340,000 calories of animal protein if the hectare was assigned to raising stock.⁹³ In the light of

⁹⁰ Thomas C. Smith, *The Agrarian Origins of Modern Japan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980), 105.

⁹¹ Bray, "Patterns," 20; Francesca Bray, *Science and Civilisation in China*, ed. Joseph Needham, vol. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 608, see also Peter J Golas, "Rural China in the Song," *Journal of Asian Studies* 39, no. 2 (1980).

⁹² Bray, "Patterns," 13, 19-20, Li Bozhing, "Was There a 'Fourteenth-Century Turning Point?': Population, Land, Technology, and Farm Management," in *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, ed. Paul Jakov Smith and Richard von Glahn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 162-65; Evelyn S. Rawski, *Agricultural Change and the Peasant Economy in South China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 17-18, 20; Smith, *Agrarian Origins*, 2-5.

⁹³ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, trans. Sian Reynolds, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 151; Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 208-9.

these relatively high ratios, it was necessary to reserve a much smaller proportion of the crop for seed than it was in the case of the staple crops of northwestern Europe. Climatic conditions in areas suitable for rice cultivation also made year-round agriculture possible and Chinese and Indian historical sources indicate that for more than a thousand years, it was not uncommon for fields to yield two or three crops a year.

The much greater higher productivity of lands under wet-rice cultivation implied that a much larger proportion of the surplus could be extracted as taxes and rulers of large agrarian empires in China and India developed elaborate systems of taxation and revenue assignments. The Mughals, as Michael Pearson says simply, “had too much money to need to trade off revenue for rights as European rulers had to do.”⁹⁴ Instead of relying on loans or cash advances from urban patriciates to wage wars or to suppress local rebellions, commanders of Mughal imperial forces, for instance, merely drew cash from provincial treasuries to pay the troops under their command.⁹⁵ So too, did the Chinese imperial forces.

The relationship between steady increases in agricultural productivity in lands under irrigated riziculture and corresponding increases in artisanal output was so regular in Ming China that Robert Hartwell even claimed that it was “possible to use a logarithmic power curve formula to project the number of households in a district”⁹⁶ on the basis of the number of cultivating households it contained. As larger numbers of households became engaged in non-agricultural pursuits, the divisioning of labor became proportionately more complex with artisans specializing in ever narrower segments of the production process. These tendencies were evident in south China as early as the eleventh century when weavers of silk textiles were reported to have depended increasingly on the

⁹⁴ Michael N. Pearson, “Merchants and States,” in *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade, 1350-1750*, ed. James D. Tracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 57.

⁹⁵ John F. Richards, “The Seventeenth-Century Crisis in South Asia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 24, no. 4 (October 1990): 628.

⁹⁶ Robert M. Hartwell, “Demographic, Political, and Social Transformation of China, 750-1550,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42, no. 2 (1982): 378-79.

market for their supplies of thread while cultivators of mulberry trees relied on exchange networks for their tools.⁹⁷

Seeing the presence of “relatively *free* markets, extensive handicraft industries, and highly commercialized agriculture,”⁹⁸ Pomeranz assumed that these factors are necessary for the evolution of capitalism and that, in the absence of state intervention, they would generate free markets. Yet, as Karl Polanyi and his collaborators demonstrated more than half a century ago, price-making markets are not trans-historical phenomena and markets are embedded in social institutions.⁹⁹ Indeed, far from free markets being essential to capitalism, Braudel argued that a Smithian market dynamic of an infinite number of buyers and sellers armed with perfect information of market conditions and with no constraints on the operation of the forces of supply and demand would imply that buyers would go from seller to seller to find the lowest possible price. Such a price could only be infinitesimally higher than the cost of production and no real capital accumulation would be possible. Instead, he argued that the ability to accumulate large volumes of capital stemmed from monopolies,¹⁰⁰ and monopolies invoke the relationship between states and mercantile-financial elites. As we have seen, unlike their European counterparts, rulers of societies based on wet-rice cultivation were not dependent on their business and financial fraternities to wage war or suppress rebellions.

Monopolies, additionally, tend to become capital-intensive, large scale organizations. Unlike commercial manufacturing in Europe which was based on the development of labor saving mechanical devices, craft production in societies based on irrigated riziculture placed a higher premium on the acquisition of greater

⁹⁷ Shiba Yoshinobu, *Commerce and Society in Sung China*, trans. Mark Elvin (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 116-17.

⁹⁸ Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, 8. See also R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 6-7.

⁹⁹ Karl Polanyi, Conrad. M. Arensberg, and Harry W. Pearson, eds., *Trade and Market in the Early Empires: Economies in History and Theory* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1957).

¹⁰⁰ Braudel, *Civilization & Capitalism*, 2:176.

skills by artisans specializing in ever-narrower niches of the production process—improving the quality of labor rather than developing better instruments of production. This is evident, most notably, by the stunted development of iron and steel—and metallurgy more generally—in China since 1400. Observing the simplicity of tools used in the production of cotton textiles in India, Robert Orme wrote in the late eighteenth century:

The women ... spin the thread designed for the cloths, and then deliver it to the men, who have fingers to model it as exquisitely as these have prepared it. For it is a fact, that the tools which they use are as simple and plain as they can be imagined to be. The rigid, clumsy fingers of an European would scarcely be able to make a piece of canvass, with instruments which are all that an Indian employs in making a piece of cambric.¹⁰¹

The greater manual dexterity of artisans and their simpler instruments did not mean that their products were inferior to the more capital-intensive manufactures of Europe. While English iron was the most advanced in Europe in the mid-second millennium—and the Spaniards even surreptitiously secured a few English iron cannons for their Armada—the East India Company found that their iron ingots had no market in Japan. In 1615, its officials moaned that “Coromandel Steel was in no esteem; some which came in on the *Hoseander* being considered inferior to Japan iron. English iron would sell still worse, the best Japan iron being but 20 mace the picul [or 10 shillings for 125 pounds].”¹⁰² And a Dutchman had observed a few years earlier that Japanese “Faulchions or Scimeters are so well wrought, and excellently temper’d, that they will cut our European blades asunder, like Flags or Rushes”—an observation tested by a twentieth-century arms collector who used a sixteenth-century Japanese sword to cut a modern European sword in half. The superior qualities of Japanese swords are a clear illustration of the methods of the ‘industrious revolution’ as the steel was

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe*, 298.

¹⁰² Quoted in Noel Perrin, *Giving up the Gun: Japan’s Reversion to the Sword, 1543-1879* (Boulder, CO: Shambala, 1980), 10.

'hammered and folded and rehammered' time and again until the edge of the sword's blade was composed of almost 'four million layers of finely forged steel.' European steel makers could not perfect the technique of varying the hardness of the steel and hence their swords were never as sharp.¹⁰³ As late as the mid-nineteenth century, British observers estimated that bar iron produced in the subcontinent was at least as good, if not better, than English iron and that in 1829, its price was less than half of what iron cost in England.¹⁰⁴

There is widespread consensus among contemporary observers and present-day historians that the skill of craftsmen in societies based on wet-rice production was unsurpassed. As shipbuilders in the subcontinent saw the superiority of Portuguese ships, they quickly adopted the European style of using nails instead of tying planks together and began to caulk their vessels as well. Within a decade of Vasco da Gama's arrival in Calicut, the first Portuguese viceroy reported that vessels 'equivalent to our own' were being constructed in northern India.¹⁰⁵ The manual dexterity of skilled artisans in societies based on irrigated riziculture meant that they could easily copy European devices when these had an advantage, it stunted the development of basic tools and instruments.

However, the emphasis on manual dexterity meant there was little curiosity in European technological developments. In the mid-seventeenth century, Jean de Thevenot observed

that the Indians of Dehly cannot make a Screw as our locksmiths do; all they do is to fasten to each of the two pieces that are to enter into one another, some Iron, Copper or Silver wire, turned Screw wise, without any other art other than of souldering the wire to the pieces; and in opening them, they turn the Screws from the left hand to the right,

¹⁰³ Ibid., 11-12.

¹⁰⁴ Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, 45.

¹⁰⁵ Prasannan Parthasarathi, "Useful Knowledge in the Indian Subcontinent," in *Global Economic History Network* (Leiden, The Netherlands: 2004), 7-8; Geoffrey Vaughn Scammell, "Indigenous Assistance in the Establishment of Portuguese Power in Asia in the Sixteenth Century," *Modern Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (1980): 3.

contrariwise to ours.¹⁰⁶

This method of fashioning screws by soldering wire to pieces of metal underlines the lack of development of tools to cut and drill metal. There also appears to have been no mechanism to convert ‘continuous rotary motion to reciprocating motion’ through the attachment of a crank handle to a crank and connecting rod and hence mints were unable to use animal power in the seventeenth century to stamp coins.¹⁰⁷

Similarly, though ambassadors to emperor Jahangir’s court in the early seventeenth century presented him with mechanical clocks, it failed to stimulate much interest or curiosity. Such clocks, Irfan Habib observes, with their “refined gearing, springs, screws, balances, and escapement,” were at the pinnacle of technical achievement at the time and if they had been copied and manufactured in the subcontinent, it could have led to a wider application of mechanical principles.¹⁰⁸

If the high quality of labor-intensive production met social needs in societies based on wet-rice cultivation, it made them increasingly vulnerable to European artillery especially large cannons. The inability of subcontinental gun-makers to make cannons from cast iron stemmed from the absence of bellows with adequate power to attain sufficiently high temperatures in large furnaces. Unlike in Europe where blast furnaces were mechanically powered, furnaces in the subcontinent were worked with foot- or hand-operated bellows and as these could not impart much air to the furnaces, only small quantities of metal could be melted at one time.¹⁰⁹ Gun-makers attempted to circumvent this problem by casting the stone-chamber and the powder-chamber separately—

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Irfan Habib, “The Technology and Economy of Mughal India,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 17, no. 1 (January 1980): 28.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰⁹ The one exception to this was Assam where by the sixteenth century cast iron cannons were being cast because unlike elsewhere in the subcontinent, the Assamese used blowing cylinders to achieve higher furnace temperatures which they had probably got from Burma. Parthasarathi, “Useful Knowledge in the Indian Subcontinent,” 8.

or, as Jean de Thévenot, a seventeenth-century French traveler observed of the casting of brass cannons, the norm was to “melt the metal in diverse furnaces, so that some of it must be better melted than others when they mingle all together, their cannon commonly is good for nothing.”¹¹⁰ Earlier, in 1525, the Portuguese in Goa noted that they “make little mention of moorish [*sic*] guns, because they are no good on our ships; however if the metal is melted down, better guns can be cast.”¹¹¹ Even when better cannons could be cast, as in China, there was little emphasis on improving its qualities—di Cosmo writes that when a cannon blew up, “the people in charge simply sent in a request for a new one, while in Europe they sent a request for a better one, possibly made by a better supplier.”¹¹² In Europe, where a number of devices originally developed for the cross-bow—such as two crucial parts of matchlocks, the stock and the lock—were modified and applied to handguns, but light artillery in much of Asia continued to be outfitted with inefficient firing mechanisms.¹¹³

This brief bird’s-eye view of processes of socio-historical transformation in societies based on wet-rice cultivation reveal a trajectory of change fundamentally different from those in Europe charted by Arrighi and others. The crucial dependence of large agrarian empires in Asia for the means of exchange—coinable metals and monetary media more generally—and the means of coercion precluded any introversion: their dependence on trade with peoples in central and western Asia was underlined by the Persian

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 152.

¹¹¹ see also *ibid.*, 152-54, Irfan Habib, “Changes in Technology in Mughal India,” *Studies in History* 2, no. 1 (January 1980): 16-21; Irfan Habib, “Technology and Barriers to Social Change in Mughal India,” *Indian Historical Review* 5 (1978-79): 166-67; Habib, “Technology and Economy,” 36-37; Iqtidar Alam Khan, *Gunpowder and Firearms: Warfare in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61-62. Quoted in Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 206, n. 42.

¹¹² Di Cosmo, “European Technology,” 134.

¹¹³ A Chinese observer in the early sixteenth-century observed: “The Franks use guns with great skill. The Chinese, on the other hand, blow off their fingers, their hands, and even their arms,” quoted in Carlo M. Cipolla, *Guns, Sails and Empires: Technological Innovation and the Early Phases of European Expansion, 1400-1700* (London: Minerva Press, 1965), 116; Parker, *Military Revolution*, 189, n. 7.

historian, Abdullah Wassaf, who wrote that it was “a providential ordinance of God that the western should continue in want of eastern products, and the eastern world of western products.”¹¹⁴ Yet, if the pursuit of power required access to resources outside the system, interstate competition in eastern Eurasia—China and the Indian subcontinent—did not confer autonomy to financial organizations, in the first instance, because rulers did not rely on them for their means of coercion as we have seen.

Moreover, the expansion of trade networks generated by the intensification of rice cultivation and the spread of craft production also led to dense networks of trade. The very density of trade networks meant that no single person or agency could monopolize lucrative lines for any substantial length of time.

The small men, because they were small, investing little and profiting less, could never be driven out of business, and the power of the great was circumscribed by the ubiquity of the small. A major reason why, for instance, ‘Abd al-Ghafur was unable to establish a monopoly in his favoured Red Sea trade was that he was unable to cope with the multitude of small traders, many of whom he managed to drive into bankruptcy.¹¹⁵

And just as there was no tendency to create ever larger financial organizations, there were also no economic advantages in creating large agricultural enterprises in the wet-rice growing areas for reasons we have detailed above. Similarly, as we have seen, craft production also devolved into increasing skilled, labor-intensive operations and while the quality of production was exceptional there was little improvement in the basic tools and instruments or in the continued refining of gears, springs, screws and other mechanical devices. In short, unlike the sequence of historical progression in Europe where each successive combination of state and financial agencies operated on a scale greater than in the preceding

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe*, 278.

¹¹⁵ Ashin Das Gupta, “Indian Merchants and the Trade in the Indian Ocean, c. 1500-1750,” in *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, ed. Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 419.

stage, economic organizations in societies based on wet-rice cultivation became smaller and more specialized in time. Herein lay the difference between the two forms of interstate systems.