

GLOBAL ASIA:

YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW



Angkor Wat Temple in Siem Riep Cambodia. The Khmer Empire's King Suryavarman II built Angkor Wat between A.D. 1113 and 1150 to honor the Hindu god Vishnu. Photo by Kim Seng.

Early Modern Empires of Asia

By Dr. Anand A. Yang, The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington

Editor's note: This article is the first of four featuring pieces by Dr. Anand A. Yang.

Large, complex and opulent empires dominated parts of Asia between the 15th and 19th centuries, an era historians characterize as the early modern period because it featured continuities and ruptures with the ancient past and beginnings auguring the modern age. Formidable polities emerged in China and India in this transitional period. None matched the scale and scope of the Mongol Empire, although the Ming and Mughal empires were sizable and their economies the richest and largest in the world.

The Ming Empire encompassed more than 60 million people in the late 14th century and well over 150 million in the early 17th century. Its numbers skyrocketed because of advances in rice cultivation, the spread of people and agriculture into frontier areas, and the enhanced productivity generated by New World crops such as corn, sweet potatoes and peanuts.

In the early 15th century, the Ming briefly ventured out into the high seas. They dispatched fleets that reached as far as the Persian Gulf and east Africa in pursuit of commerce and culture almost a century before Vasco da Gama's voyages. The world beat a path to China's door in the 16th and 17th centuries, European traders, in particular, to procure porcelain and silk in exchange for their New World silver.

In the early 17th century, the Ming collapsed. Its demise came at the hands of Manchu forces, who had been invited in to Beijing ostensibly to restore order, but stayed on to establish the Qing dynasty. Thereafter, a succession of emperors in the late 17th and 18th centuries extended the empire into Tibet, Xinjiang and Mongolia, their conquests creating China's present-day boundaries and multiethnic mix.

Japan, an archipelago about 100 miles from Asia's continental coast, twice repulsed Mongol invasions in the late 13th century. Its location enabled it to steer clear of many of the dynamics of Eurasian history for centuries, its longstanding, complex relationship with China notwithstanding.

In 1600 the Tokugawa Shogunate centralized state power and ushered in 250 years of stable rule. While the shogun (generalissimo) exercised power from his Edo (Tokyo) stronghold, the emperor, the symbolic head of state who embodied continuity in an imperial line dating back to ancient times, remained in Kyoto. Although the country was increasingly involved in global trade, Tokugawa leaders restricted the Western presence to Nagasaki, which also served as their window on the West. Similarly, China and Korea had only limited access.

Mughal rule endured because its institutions and stratagems were well-calibrated to manage the country's huge and diverse population. The Emperor Akbar (reigned 1556-1605 CE), for instance, adroitly bridged the religious divide with his overwhelmingly Hindu subjects through their incorporation into the Mughal administrative structure and strategic alliances. Understandably, the Mughal era was a time of extraordinary Indo-Islamic

synthesis and syncretism, manifested stunningly in such realms as art and architecture, music and literature.

The Mughals were one of three major Islamic "gunpowder" states—the Safavid and Ottoman empires were the other two—that commanded substantial populations and territories. As long as the Mughal Empire was robust (and it was until the early 18th century when its subjects totaled more than 100 million) European powers were held at bay.

That balance of power changed as Mughal central authority waned and breakaway successor states emerged. Economic stagnation and rebellions compounded problems, as did growing European encroachments, their quest for trade and revenues increasingly embroiling them in the affairs of successor states. By the end of the 18th century, Britain was the dominant power in South Asia.

In Southeast Asia, where states were relatively weak and sparsely populated, the Golden Age of kingdoms gave way to polities and societies shaped by religions (Buddhism and Islam) and commerce (the trading world of the Indian Ocean). In mainland Southeast Asia—in contrast to its maritime region—Theravada Buddhism took root in areas known today as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. Vietnam was also significantly influenced by Mahayana Buddhism and by neighboring China, against whose political domination successive rulers struggled.

Islam was much more pervasive across the Malayan peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago after the 13th century. States in that region were also configured by their involvement in the trading networks that extended from East Asia to the Middle East. Melaka (Malacca), which became a major port city in the 15th century and the hub from where Islam spread across the region, epitomized the importance of commerce and religion in the making of insular states and societies in the early modern age. Much of this maritime world was dominated first by the Portuguese and then the Dutch in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Philippines, however, followed a different trajectory, its takeover by Spain in the 16th century leading to Hispanization and large-scale conversions to Roman Catholicism.

Western colonialism and imperialism in Asia is the topic of the next essay.

