

SECOND EDITION

Asian Cultural Traditions



Carolyn Brown Heinz
Jeremy A. Murray

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Long Grove, Illinois

*To Chloe, Bella, Emily, and Zoe,
and to all of our students*

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PREFACE

It has been almost twenty years since the first edition of *Asian Cultural Traditions* was published in 1999. In many ways, changes have been rapid and almost bewildering to the student of Asia, with economies and geopolitics shifting considerably. But the cultural traditions of the region have continued to shape the lives of billions of people who live in the region, even while those cultures are adapted and transformed for changing times. We aimed to capture both the changes and continuities of the histories and cultures of the region in this revised and updated edition.

College and university instructors have used this book as an introductory companion to courses on Asian cultures across several disciplines since its publication. An impetus to begin work on a revised and updated edition of the book has come from the constructive comments of instructors who have used the book in their classes, and from written reviews from sixty students in Prof. Murray's classes. We have considerably updated and revised the text to reflect new developments in scholarship as well as changes in the region and the world. We have also added chapters on Central Asia, Korea, and Southeast Asia, included new images and maps, and added a section of color plates.

This second edition is a collaboration between an anthropologist specializing in India and a historian specializing in China, and this pairing has been lively and rewarding. We hope that the reader benefits from our enjoyment in working together, and that this volume carries on the interdisciplinary spirit of the first edition.

We are grateful to Waveland Press for the hard work of its production team, and especially Jeni Ogilvie, in tracking down artwork, snaring infelicities and errors in the manuscript, and making better writers of both of us. Tom Curtin, senior editor at Waveland, has supported this project since the launch of the first edition with encouragement and sage advice; he also has a remarkably good eye and we thank him for making the book beautiful, inside and out.

We are grateful to several readers of chapters, including Morris Rossabi and Cheehyung Harrison Kim. Sinwoo Lee clarified the puzzle of romaniza-

tion of Korean, and we have followed his advice. Above all, we are grateful to the hundreds of students who have read the book over the years and shared with us their likes and dislikes; we have rewritten it with these opinions in mind and hope that future students will continue to let their opinions be known. We are listening.

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PART I

Land and Language

1 ASIA AS CULTURED SPACE

2 TONGUES, TEXTS, AND SCRIPTS

The Study of Asia

If ever there was a time when Asia could be ignored, that time is not the present. At the end of the twentieth century—a century plagued by war, dominated in its first half by the great European colonial empires in their heyday and in the second half by the “Cold War” between the US and the USSR—most of the old certainties had slipped away. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, economic and political weight is shifting eastward, to Asia.

An argument could be made that the last 400 years, the centuries of European dominance, have been the aberrant ones. Prior to this period, the great civilizations of Eurasia—China, India, the Middle East, and Europe—maintained a balance of power for many centuries. There were occasional interruptions in this balance by ambitious empires of conquest. The European one from 1700 to 1950 is only the most recent; before that, the Mongols in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries went thundering in every direction from their Central Asian homeland, conquering China, Iran, Afghanistan, and India, and threatening Europe. But these civilizations absorbed the blows, civilized the invaders, and carried on, enriched by the new cultural strands contributed by the foreigners.

Asia is in such a period of recuperation now, in which great and ancient civilizations, after enduring humiliation and defeat at the hands of colonizing European powers, are absorbing the cultural contributions of the invaders and recasting their civilizations. Meanwhile, the old balance is being restored. Once again there are European, Middle Eastern, Indian, and Chinese cultural spheres.

By “Asia” we mean, in this book, only “monsoon Asia”—the geopolitical regions of South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia (see Map I.1). Our focus is not nationalist, but cultural. We do not take as given or eternal the nation-states that have emerged in the postcolonial world, enduring as those may prove to be. Hard at work as they are at proving ancient natural rights to present borders, none of the current outlines of Asian nation-states, with the single exception of Japan, have a time depth of even a century.

Our subject here is rather more amorphous; it is those old civilizations themselves. Not, of course, “Asian civilization,” for there is not and never has been such a thing. Like “the Orient” and “the East,” “Asia” has always been something of a fiction created by Europeans whose capacities to truly engage with a culture stopped at the eastern edges of the Greek world. Beyond lay “Asia,” the “East.” In fact, the word Asia appears to come from the Assyrian word for east, *asu*. In recent times the simple dichotomy between “the West” and “the East” has contrasted European civilization with all the rest of Eurasia, lumped as “the East.” However, we tend to think, more subtly, of the



Map I.1 Geopolitical regions of Asia.

West as a plural place, but the Japanese playwright, Masakazu Yamazaki (Yamazaki 1996), looking at the history of European civilization, marveled at its early cultural—if not political—unity. Founded on ideas and institutions originating in Greece and Rome, the dominant unifying force of Western civilization from Constantine through the eighth century was Christianity, a fusion of Judaic and Hellenic traditions that gave a common cultural overlay to an ethnically diverse array of peoples in the far west of Eurasia. Even as this unity began to erode at the end of the eighth century, English, Germans, French, Italians, and others continued to think of themselves as sharing in Western civilization even though no single nation could claim to be the heartland of this pluralized civilization.

Nothing like this cultural unity ever existed in Asia. Despite the fact that nearly all rulers claimed to be monarchs of the whole world, no ruler ever conquered it all—though of all peoples, the Mongols came closest to doing so (see chapter 3). Nor is there any one religion that provided a unifying creed for Asia as Christianity did for Europe. One might be tempted to speak of a “Buddhist civilization” in the same vein as one speaks of “Christian civilization” in the West, except for the fact that India, which gave birth to Buddhism, after a dozen centuries repudiated it, and even in China, to which it spread, it never triumphed against Confucianism.

Far more, even than Europe, the regions of Asia we focus on in this book are places of extraordinary and perplexing diversity. The peoples of this vast region have no common political system, no common language, no common history, religion, culture, geography, climate, or economy. To study Asia is to study its diversity. In fact, accounting for that diversity is part of the subject matter of this book. We explore this diversity in several ways. First, we examine it as it exists *spatially*. The cultures of Asia are distributed across a geographically complex expanse whose features partially account for the extraordinary differences we find in human communities. The Himalayas present a barrier between South and East Asia, which ensured that they developed along different lines largely in isolation over 4,000 years. Though they knew about each other in vague ways, there was never an Indian conquest of China or a Chinese conquest of India or any war between them of any great significance (a brief border war occurred in 1962). Yet there were periodic interconnections of profound importance. The Chinese sent emissaries to India to bring back knowledge of Buddhism. The Japanese sent shiploads of courtiers and students to bring civilization from China. Small rulers in Southeast Asia similarly sought ideas of statecraft and kingship from India, and traders from India who settled in Southeast Asia brought along family priests who brought Sanskrit culture, sacred texts, and the art of writing to emerging kingdoms in the valleys and islands there.

The second way of exploring Asia's diversity is in terms of *cultural evolution*. Early states emerged by 2300 B.C.E. in the Indus valley and by 1700 B.C.E. in China, but nonstate cultures have persisted throughout Asia and present problems of integration into modern nations that have, in a way, "captured" peoples who would prefer to remain independent (see chapter 4). Before the period of nation-states defined by boundaries drawn on maps, there were extensive frontier regions between powerful states where small-scale ("tribal") societies lived unmolested or with only cursory acknowledgment of some distant centralized power. The luxury of independence is now lost to these peoples.

A third form of diversity in Asia is *linguistic* (see chapter 2). When William Jones went to India in 1784 and began studying Sanskrit, he made a discovery that would change the way the world thinks about language. The Sanskrit language, he wrote, bore resemblances to both Greek and Latin more far-reaching than possibly could have occurred by chance; they must have all sprung from some common source. His discovery of a great family of languages that spread from England to North India enthralled Europe and was the late-eighteenth century's version of moon rocks; he lectured on the "Indo-European language family" to audiences of over a thousand on his return to England. Tracing the complex family tree of this language family was one of the preoccupations and accomplishments of nineteenth-century linguistics. Only now are equivalent breakthroughs beginning to be made in another great language family, Sino-Tibetan.

The search for sacred texts, which occupied Chinese, Japanese, and Southeast Asian intellectuals for better than half a millennium—India was the source for most of them—involved difficulties of translating mutually unknown languages and deciphering each other’s exotic texts. India had one script, China another. Those who came in search of civilizing texts—Japan to China, Southeast Asia to India—had the problem of fitting scripts meant for one language to their own very different ones. Japan, with its polysyllabic language, could have had a better neighbor than China to borrow a script from; India’s would have suited much better. Southeast Asia’s Sino-Tibetan languages would have done well with China’s logographic script, meant for monosyllabic languages, but the texts they were borrowing were Indian. Thus it went.

India and China are the two foundational civilizations of Asia. These two civilizations were creating their characteristic profiles during the pivotal first millennium B.C.E. Over a thousand year period, both China and India were developing concepts of social order and institutions of civil society that have characterized them into the present. During this period, the Indian caste system was taking form. The Chinese centralized state had its earliest instance under the First Emperor, Qin Shihuang, who became one model of the authoritarian emperor ruling under the Mandate of Heaven. In India, Emperor Ashoka embodied the ideal ruler, the *dharma*raja (“righteous king”) responsible for moral order in the state. The Upanishadic philosophers, Buddha, and Confucius lived and taught during the middle centuries of the first millennium B.C.E., and their philosophies became as foundational for their civilizations as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were for Europe. All these thinkers lived within a few centuries of each other during a period sometimes called “the axial age” because it was a kind of axis or pivotal point in history. Both civilizations were decisively configured during this epoch in ways that civilizations in later centuries expanded, elaborated, and reformed.

Southeast Asia and Japan came under influence from India and China, respectively, in the following millennium (the first millennium C.E.), so that the earliest forms of the state and court culture in those hinterlands resembled the more advanced cultures from which they borrowed. The early states of Southeast Asia borrowed, along with sacred texts and scripts from India, concepts of the sacred kingship, the *devaraja* or “god-king.” They accepted first Hinduism and, later, Buddhism. Japan borrowed everything it possibly could from China: books, script, urban planning, Confucianism, Buddhism, and the imperial system—but without the undesirable feature of the Mandate of Heaven that could be withdrawn by Heaven in the case of a successful rebellion. The imperial dynasty founded during the period of borrowing from China, but subsequently projected backward in time to the Sun Goddess, has survived into the present; Emperor Akihito is the 125th emperor of Japan. Of course, both Southeast Asia and Japan made these cultural borrowings their own in unique ways, but their affinities to India and China remain clearly visible even in the present.

Culture Areas of Asia

The terms we have been using—South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia—are fairly recent geopolitical terms that began during World War II and have come into increasing use in the postcolonial period as modern Asian nations have formed regional associations for trade and military security reasons (see map I.1). Such maps represent current political alignments, more than long-term cultural affinities, and lay on desks at the US State Department.

Anthropologists more typically use the concept of “culture area.” Behind the culture area concept is the assumption of a geographical region with some degree of environmental unity within which local societies have made similar cultural adaptations. For instance, humid lowland riverine regions of Southeast Asia have been cultivated by wet-rice methods that have supported a number of small states. By contrast, the cooler uplands support much smaller populations of slash and burn tribal cultivators.

Societies within a single culture area, it is assumed, will share similar political, economic, and religious institutions. Thus, in the Indian cultural sphere we find small, unstable kingdoms where the king models himself after Shiva or Vishnu, his capital is a replica of Heaven, and the Brahman supports the state with appropriate sacrifices and interpretation of sacred texts. Society is hierarchically organized in a moral order based on elaborate codes of rank and honor. The state in the Indian cultural sphere often looked like sacred theatre, as Clifford Geertz describes in a famous study of one of the more byzantine Indic states, the Balinese:

It was a theatre-state in which the kings and princes were impresarios, the priests, the directors, the peasantry, the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience. The stupendous cremations, teeth-filings, temple dedications, the pilgrimages and blood sacrifices, mobilizing hundreds, even thousands of people and great quantities of wealth, were not means to political ends, they were ends themselves, they were what the state was for. Court ceremonialism was the driving force of state politics. Mass ritual was not a device to shore up the state; the state was a device for the enactment of mass ritual. To govern was not so much to choose as to perform. Ceremony was not form but substance. Power served pomp, not pomp power. (Geertz 1980:13)

In the Chinese cultural sphere, by contrast, we find a striving toward perfect centralization and the realization of Confucian norms of the state-as-family. There is a secular quality to the state not seen in the Indian cultural sphere. The state is a problem in management, and bureaucratic machinery has been elaborated to facilitate its effective operation. Scholarship was similarly practical, unlike in India, where books explored metaphysics, the nature of the soul, the doings of the gods, the conduct of rituals, but rarely applied itself to practical matters of governing. You search in vain in India for a historical textual account of the day-to-day workings of a given king; in China, such state

archives are absolutely overwhelming. The minute directives from one minister to a subordinate scholar-official in his local office are preserved in meticulous detail. The Chinese literally invented bureaucracy and created a system for recruitment into that bureaucracy that set generation after generation of young men studying for years to pass the examinations that would open the doors of government to them. Nothing like this ever emerged in India.

These cultural traditions led to the China and India of the present—together almost half the world's people. Jay Taylor, writing in 1987 about the two “Big Sisters” of Asia, contrasted them thus: India has a chaotic but viable democracy, while China has a command politics of the elite. China has been obsessed with uniformity and the doctrinaire, while India has been tolerant of all heresies. Art and literature are more viable and alive in India than in China, even though literacy is high in China and low in India. The Chinese emerge from their ancient classics as sober and down-to-earth, the Indians as mystic and sensual; China is a political society, while India is a spiritual one. These are broad strokes for comparing two very complicated nations, but they capture the “Dragon” (China) and the “Wild Goose” (India) with some clarity.

China and India, of course, are not the sum total of Asia's cultural diversity. In the “lands below the winds,” the islands of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, live speakers of Austronesian languages, a vast language family distributed from Madagascar (off the coast of Africa) to Easter Island (off the coast of South America). This vast ethnolinguistic category contains folk at every level of social complexity, from hunter-gatherer bands of Semai in Malaysia to small-scale tribal societies like the Iban, Dayak, Tana Toraja, Ilongot, and Ifugao, to state societies like those of Java and Bali.

Organization of the Book

The diversity can be overwhelming, and no single book can bring order to all of it. In this one we have tried simply to sketch the more significant and enduring profiles. We have divided the book into six parts, each with a brief introduction. After this brief introduction, part I looks at the natural environment of monsoon Asia, a region of mountains, rivers, lowland valleys, islands, and volcanoes that limit and shape what is humanly possible. The next chapter takes on the complicated matter of languages, texts, and scripts, focusing on the major language families whose speakers are by no means able to speak to one another, but whose linguistic histories suggest common origins in the ancient past.

In part II we turn to peoples who have remained on the peripheries of the great states—for most of the time. These are the “invasion and aversion” cultures, which seemed to have an approach-avoidance relationship to the settled societies that were growing in power and with which they had complicated trade and political relations. In Central Asia, nomadic groups like the Turks and Mongols herded sheep, goats, and yaks, used camels and horses for trans-

port, but needed to trade with settled agricultural peoples for grain and other goods. But as we see in chapter 3, the Turks and Mongols (and also Tibetans) were fierce warriors capable of thundering across grasslands and mountains to conquer the rich states on their peripheries. Other, smaller groups wanted only to keep out of the way, willing to adapt to rugged environments in order to maintain their independence from grasping states short on labor (chapter 4). None of these groups escaped the drawing of borders, but numerous ones are in politically vulnerable positions straddling borders and practicing subtle forms of resistance sometimes referred to as “the weapons of the weak” (Scott 1987).

Part III is devoted to South Asia, part IV to East Asia, and part V to South-east Asia. The introductions to each section are brief explanations of the approaches taken, different in each case. Finally, part VI summarizes the modern era of colonialism and postcolonialism.

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