THE SHAPE OF THE WORLD: EURASIA

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Our purpose here is to enrich the student's understanding of Western civilization by pointing out its interconnections with Asia throughout history. The origins of what we call Western civilization are really in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Asia Minor (Anatolia, or Asiatic Turkey), Phoenicia (modern Syria, Lebanon, and Israel), and the Aegean. Influences on early Western civilization came also from ancient Persia, still farther east. The Greeks and the Romans had their major connections not northward (until quite late in the Roman Empire) but eastward, from where, they realized, most of the wealth and the sophisticated ideas came; all of the world religions, including Christianity, are Asian in origin.

THE EURASIAN LANDMASS

Eurasia is a single landmass. Europe is really a geographical expression and a cultural entity rather than a separate continent. Asia extends southwest to the Suez Canal and the Dardanelles. But the great classical civilizations of East and South Asia grew up far to the east, a long and difficult distance from Europe. After the decline and disappearance of classical Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Persia, and after the fall of Rome, civilization in the West grew up largely in isolation from what was going on at the other end of the Eurasian landmass. That western Europe and eastern Asia are joined together has been of lesser importance than that the center of Eurasia is occupied by the world's largest steppe and desert, surrounded at the eastern end by the world's highest mountains. These have remained formidable barriers, and the sparse and varied populations that lived in what has been called
"the dead heart of Asia" often made their living by preying on travelers or raiding trade caravans. It was not a safe route.

Marco Polo and some half-dozen of his contemporaries made that journey safely because they traveled to China under the protection of the Great Khan during the reign of the Mongols, who in the thirteenth century had conquered most of Eurasia and imposed their rule on it, the Pax Tartarica, or Pax Mongolica. Unfortunately, their reign lasted only a short time—less than a century—and with its collapse the empire fell apart into rival local kingdoms and general disorder. Later travelers to the East had to go the long way around, by sea, but that route was not developed until the end of the fifteenth century, and very few people made the journey until considerably later.

**CROSS-EURASIAN CONNECTIONS**

Long before Marco Polo's time, the civilizations at the western and eastern ends of the Eurasian landmass had acquired their own distinctively different forms and styles. Polo brought back to Europe hard information about China for the first time. Many people read, or heard about, his travels, but not many took his account literally. But in fact the tales he told were reasonably accurate, apart from the bits about magic, which was a feature of nearly all medieval tales. It is said that when, on his deathbed, his confessed to him to "take back all those terrible lies," Polo replied, "I have not told the half of what I saw." But although his tales were discounted, they sparked the Age of Discovery and the search for a sea route to those fabled rich civilizations in the East: India, China, the Spice Islands of Southeast Asia, and what Polo referred to as "Cipangu" (Japan), which he could only describe as hearsay. Marco Polo and his tales were widely known, and obviously many must have more than half believed them; Columbus carried with him a copy of Polo's journal. But until da Gama's voyage in 1498, from Lisbon to Calicut on the southwest coast of India, the major civilizations of Europe and Asia grew up largely in independent spheres.

Not entirely so, however. The clearest evidence of a very early Indo-European connection is probably contained in the languages of North India and of Europe. They are all descended from a common ancestor, as becomes clear by comparing words and their meanings in Sanskrit with their equivalents in modern English, German, and French, as well as in classical Greek or Latin, and with the modern languages of north India. The common an-
cestor language was that of the Aryans, who probably originated in what is now Iran. One group of them went east and ended up in India. Other groups went west, among them the Dorian invaders of Greece (hence the origins of classical Greek), the Hittites, who moved into what is now Turkey, and the Kassite invaders of Mesopotamia, all in the centuries around 2000 B.C.E.

INDEPENDENCE OF ASIAN CULTURAL SPHERES

After the Aryan diaspora, the civilizations of the East and the West largely developed in their own ways, but not without significant contact. As a whole, Asian civilization developed earlier, and was more advanced and varied than that of the West, which was attracted to "the riches of the Orient."

India remained in more or less unbroken contact with the West both before and after the Aryan migration. In the fourth century B.C.E., Alexander the Great invaded India and brought back much information about it. The Greeks subsequently maintained extensive trade with India, not only in goods but in ideas as well, for they recognized India as an important center of religion and philosophy. The Romans too were acquainted with India, and imported goods and medical knowledge on an even larger scale than did the Greeks. As in later centuries of East-West trade, the Westerners found it hard to come up with goods to exchange for Asian spices, cottons, silks, porcelain, and tea, products of more highly developed cultures whose people had little interest in the often cruder Western commodities. Much of what the West imported from Asia thus had to be paid for in cash, and one finds hoards of Roman coins at many sites along the west coast of India and Sri Lanka and as far east as Malaya.

Christianity was among the West's exports to India. In fact, the Church of South India, still a thriving enterprise, claims to be the oldest Christian church in the world, founded, it is said, by Thomas the Apostle (he of the doubts). India was certainly part of the Hellenic world, or of the world known to the Mediterranean people of New Testament times. Ships engaged in trade with India made the voyage from the Gulf of Suez regularly. It is not surprising, then, that Christianity reached South India very early, and remained as another link between the two worlds.

Connections to the east of India were much weaker. Cathay, as Polo called China, lay so far beyond the mountains and deserts of central Asia that no Westerners had ever been there or talked to anyone who had. Until Marco Polo's time, the West did not learn
much more about it than Herodotus knew in the fifth century B.C.E., which was very little: “As far as India the country is peopled, but beyond that no one knows what sort of country it is.”

At the more or less contemporaneous height of the Roman and the Han Dynasty empires, between the second century B.C.E. and the second century C.E., when both empires were reaching out in search of conquest or probing beyond their frontiers, there were some tantalizingly near misses at direct contact. The Romans ran a long campaign in central Asia from the first century B.C.E. to the first century C.E. to conquer the Parthians (Persians) of Iran. Roman legions were fighting in western Persia while the Chinese were making contact with other groups in eastern Persia. The two armies might well have met, and the two empires might have cooperated against their common enemy. If they had, it would have made a great difference in the subsequent shape of both the Chinese and Roman civilizations. In 166 C.E., a group of jugglers who turned up at the Chinese court claimed to have come from a great empire to the west ruled by someone whom the Chinese transcribed as “An-dun,” presumably one of the Antonys; the dates fit. Earlier, in 42 B.C.E., the Chinese army fought with local forces near what is now Tashkent, far beyond its normal range. In their accounts of the battle the Chinese expressed curiosity about how their opponents, when hard pressed, would crowd together and hold their shields overlapping above their heads, walking away from their tight spot with spears pointing outward. This is in fact an accurate description of the Roman testudo (tortoise) formation. The troops were probably local auxiliaries rather than Romans, but the hand of imperial Roman training is clear.

Although the Chinese had heard tales from travelers of a great empire somewhere to the west on the shores of a great ocean, and knew that this was the destination of much of the silk China exported, they knew very little about its people or culture. The silk went west through a long series of central Asian and Near Eastern middlemen before it ended up in Rome. The Romans were equally ignorant about China; they called it Seres, the Latin word for silk. Pliny and other Roman historians complained about the drain of Roman gold to pay for Chinese silk and Indian spices and cottons.

With the fall of Rome (476 C.E.), the West lost direct touch with Persia and India, and Europe withdrew into itself. After the fall of the Han Dynasty in China (220 C.E.) and the fall of the Guptas in India (540 C.E.), Asia experienced a period similar to, but of shorter duration than the European Dark Ages. While India at
this period was politically fragmented, its sophisticated culture and external trade, especially to Southeast Asia, continued to flourish. In the seventh century, China, under the Tang Dynasty, witnessed a glorious revival and the resumption of contacts westward. But for all their interest in the wider world and their welcoming of foreigners, the Chinese were able to learn very little of what Western civilization was like. They were curious enough about the foreigners who showed up at the Tang capital, near modern Xian, to sculpt and paint them with great care. But Tang China did not reestablish contact with the sources of the civilization from which these people had come. Perhaps the most important East-West communication during the millennium between the fall of the Han and Marco Polo’s journey was the accidental result of a Tang military expedition into central Asia in 751 C.E. The expedition was repulsed near Samarkand by a Turkish force, which captured several Chinese. It was these captives who introduced to the West the recently developed Tang art of printing and the earlier (Han period) invention of paper. The returning expedition, however, brought back to China very little knowledge of what lay beyond the mountains and the great deserts of central Asia at the western end of Eurasia.

Indian connections with areas and cultures to the west were closer, but also more troublesome. Turks, Persians, Afghans, and other central Asian groups that had converted to Islam swept into India first as raiders and then as conquerors, beginning in the eleventh century C.E. Most of these groups brought with them an infusion of Persian culture that began to blend with older Indian culture. Under the Mughal Dynasty (c. 1526–1707), North India (the south remained beyond their control) became still more open to and maintained close touch with areas to the west and with the emerging states of Europe. Italian craftsmen worked on the Taj Mahal, and many Europeans traveled to India. The Mughal emperors were cosmopolitan figures who corresponded with European monarchs, and under their rule new ideas and techniques were exchanged with the West.

ROLE OF ASIA IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WEST

Europeanists often do not adequately acknowledge the importance of Asian influences on the West. Montesquieu based his vision of the well-ordered society largely on what he had learned, via the early Jesuits, about the Chinese state. Voltaire spoke of China as having achieved the Platonic ideal, a state ruled by
philosopher-kings. He and his contemporaries of the Enlighten-
ment were astonished to learn that in China official posts were
open only through competitive examination, and that only edu-
cated men had access to power. The Europeans of the Enlighten-
ment admired China as a better governed, better ordered society
than their own. Indirectly, their views of China and India influ-
enced the American children of the Enlightenment and helped
shape the Jeffersonian vision of an educated citizenry. During this
period the Confucian order gained wide admiration among Euro-
peans, who were enamored with all things Chinese: paintings,
furniture, flowered wallpaper, and gardens.

Indeed, well before the Enlightenment, it was the material
wealth of Asia that sparked the Age of Discoveries. There had
always been a stream of trade, both overland and across central
Asia and via sea by Arab vessels from India to western Asia. On
the east coast of the Mediterranean, in trade bases like Tyre,
Sidon, or Antioch, Asian goods were picked up by the Venetians,
who distributed them to northern Europe. When the Venetians
captured Constantinople on the pretext of engaging in one of the
Crusades, they gained still greater access to the source of Asian
goods; strategically located at the northern end of the Adriatic,
Venice grew rich as the supplier to Europe. It was no accident
that the Polos were Venetian merchants. It was Venetian and
western and central Asian Muslim trade profits as well as Polo’s
tales of Cathay that inspired the voyages of Columbus, Magellan,
Drake, and da Gama. In fifteenth-century Portugal Prince Henry
the Navigator developed the ships and the technology to pursue
this trade. The Portuguese worked hard at it for over a century,
and were richly rewarded when da Gama returned to Lisbon with
the first cargo of spices, sold for an immense profit, most of it in
Amsterdam. When news of da Gama’s return reached Venice, the
ruler there declared official mourning, realizing that the Venetian
trade monopoly had been broken. Portuguese profits inspired the
Dutch and then the English to likewise develop their sea trade
capabilities.

The birth of modern Europe, with the revival of trade and
towns, the rise of an urban merchant group, and the technologi-
cal revolution beginning with the Renaissance, owed something to
the lure, the example, and the stimulus of trade with Asia. Euro-
peans would not have been able to develop the sea routes and to
found their colonial empires without their use of earlier Asian
discoveries: gunpowder, the compass, ships with watertight com-
partments, multiple masts, and a sternpost rudder instead of the
awkward and unseaworthy steering oar. Arab, Indian, and Chinese innovations in ship design and rig were basic to the later success of the Europeans. Although the credit frequently goes to the Arabs, mathematics, perhaps the most basic tool of all for modern science, is an Indian innovation, as are algebra (though the term is Arabic) and “Arabic” numerals. The Arabs merely transmitted them, as they did other Indian innovations, such as the concepts of zero, infinity, and the decimal system. The finest steel and cotton cloth also originated in India.

CONCLUSION: ASIA AS HALF THE WORLD

Asia accounts for between half and two-thirds of the population of the world; as far as we know, it has always been so from the beginning of recorded time. Its modern population surges, since the seventeenth century, have kept it in the position of demographic dominance which it occupied in Roman times and before. Asia also comprises two of the world’s major centers of civilization, India and China, whose models spread respectively to Southeast Asia and to Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. The Mediterranean, the third major world center, has been involved with and influenced by the civilizations of Asia throughout its history. Europe’s ongoing and enriching contacts with Asia are of fundamental importance to the modern world.