

# RETHINKING THE RISE OF EUROPEAN HEGEMONY

## Asia in World History, 1450–1750

By Donald Johnson

**F**OR MOST OF US HISTORY, students have been taught that the advent of European hegemony began with Columbus' famous voyage that moved Europe, because of its exceptional and superior culture, to the forefront of world history. Until recently, twentieth century textbooks have routinely introduced this era as the "Age of Discovery" or the "Age of Exploration" and featured European explorers and expansion. Asians were usually grouped with other non-Europeans as, in Eric Wolfe's definition, "a people without history."<sup>1</sup>

The tacit assumption informing this classification was the innate superiority of European culture, and many contemporary historians, such as Eric Jones, David Landes, and Michael Mann,<sup>2</sup> have continued to preach the gospel of European exceptionalism. Jones argues that European culture was the engine of western dominance and that it was the Europeans' nuclear family structure, later age of marriage, superior sexual discipline, as well as their penchant for rationalism and freedom of thought that made modernity and Western dominance possible. Only Europeans, as heirs to Greek rationalism, were able to conceive of and implement democracy and self-rule, a political system not possible among Asian subjects so used to despotic rule.<sup>3</sup>

In much of traditional teaching about the era after Columbus, Europeans are seen as the center of world history and as those who came to Asia to spread "Western Civilization." Carlton Hayes, the author of one of the most widely used school history textbooks from the 1920s to the 1970s, speaks for many when he writes, "The great Empire of India, almost as populous as China but only half as large in area, received the first lessons in European Civilization chiefly at the hands of England."<sup>4</sup>

Recent scholarship has challenged these long-held assumptions about the timing of western dominance. A growing historical literature convincingly argues that Europe only surpassed Asian economies at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The late Andre Gunder Frank, one of the most innovative contemporary world historians, states that throughout most of history, Asia out-produced Europe and will soon do so again. Frank has demonstrated that as late as 1750, India and China accounted for around sixty percent of the world's manufacturing and the whole of Asia accounted for nearly seventy percent. Throughout this era, India and China, because of their impressive balance of trade advantages, accumulated enormous quantities of gold and silver. Moreover, between 1400 and 1750 these civilizations demonstrated great vitality, not only in the economic sphere, but also in the arts, religion, and literature.<sup>6</sup>

Those of us teaching at all levels need to take seriously the mounting empirical evidence about the period from 1450 to 1750. Clearly the flood of new scholarship severely undermines the long-standing paradigm that western dominance began in 1500. Instead of focusing on how Europe came to dominate Asia, teachers of this era would be far more accurate to focus on three other major themes: the five impressive Asian empires; the vibrant Indian Ocean trading network; and the further spread of Islam. This article will focus on two of these important themes.

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### THE INDIAN OCEAN TRADING NETWORK

The Indian Ocean, encompassing more than a seventy-three million square mile area and almost as large as the Atlantic, has served as an important arena of world trade for thousands of years. By 1450, Indian Ocean trade had become an extensive, sophisticated system of commerce that included many kinds of partnerships, bills of exchange, and intricate systems of credit long before the arrival of European merchants in the sixteenth century. Moreover, by this time, large Asian ships were transporting bulk quantities of less expensive commodities such as textiles and grains. For the most part, the trading network was open to anyone who had capital to invest and was regulated by mostly voluntary rules observed by the many ethnic groups, religions, and cultures represented in the system. As an Indonesian prince observed in 1615, "God has made the earth and the seas, he has divided the earth among mankind, and given the sea in common. It is a thing unheard of that anyone should be forbidden to sail the seas."<sup>7</sup>

The lively Indian Ocean trade flourished along a necklace of cities from Aden and Hormuz in West Asia, through Kilawa and Mombasa along the East African coast, in Cambay, Surat, Goa, Calicut, Madras, Masulipatam, and Bengal in the Indian subcontinent, through Aceh in northern Sumatra, to Malacca on the Malay peninsula, then along the northern coast of Indonesia and on to the rich ports of China's eastern coast. The port cities were thoroughly based on a money economy, with gold, silver, and cowries (brightly marked shells used as currency) serving as the universal currencies.

Although there were a number of diaspora communities in the port cities composed of traders who shared a common culture, it was also customary for merchants from various ethnic and religious groups to cooperate. Arab, Malmuk, Indian, Chinese, and Southeast Asian merchants dominated the Asian trading system. In the northwestern Indian province of Gujarat, Hindus and Muslims worked closely together. Similarly, in many areas Jews and Armenians shared extensive financial dealings. It would appear that the total merchant community, small by comparison to the majority of peasant farmers and generally held in low esteem by most political leaders, tended to share a common

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identity as merchants and financiers. One scholar has written that “nationality stopped east of the cape [of Good Hope].”<sup>8</sup>

There is very little evidence of violence within the Indian Ocean trade prior to the arrival of the Europeans in the system. If a ruler of a major trading port overstepped the bounds of control or used force against the merchants, they would simply pack up and move to friendlier ports.

#### ASIAN EMPIRES FACILITATE TRADE

This “age of commerce,” as one scholar has labeled the era, was fostered by the rise of five great empires that dominated the political realm of Asia: the Ottomans, (1300–1922); the Safavids (1501–1722); the Mughals (1526–1757); and the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911). These large, prosperous empires provided the stability and relative peace that facilitated population growth and the increases in manufacturing output that led to export advantages and expanding zones of relatively free trade. Within Asia, India and China were the major manufacturing centers and both enjoyed favorable balances of trade until the nineteenth century. Both empires greatly benefited from the introduction of Latin American crops such as the potato, maize, and peanuts.

Merchants from the Indian subcontinent played a major role in the Indian Ocean trade. India exported cotton, jewelry, and iron to Southeast Asia and brought back tin, timbers, medicinal drugs, pepper, and spices. As the world’s leading exporter of cotton cloth, India “clothed the world.” By 1400, Indian ports, especially in Gujarat, were exporting cotton cloth to China, Egypt, and Syria. Marco Polo noted the extensive Southeast Asian imports of Indian cloth. By at least 1550, images of Indian deities in central Java were clad in Indian sculpted textile patterns. Patola, a colorful Gujarati cloth, was the monopoly of Malaysian kings and wealthy Philippine merchants as well as Indonesian royalty. Up until 1800, India remained the world’s leading manufacturer of cotton cloth.<sup>9</sup>

During the height of Mughal rule (1526–1707), artisans and entrepreneurs made India what one economic historian has called the “industrial workshop of the world” because:

*Indian economic and financial organization and techniques of production were far more advanced than in Europe. Only in the seventeenth century did European traders attempt to take over some cotton mills and begin to retail cloth in European cities. By the end of the century Indian luxury cloth was so prized by Europeans that France prohibited the import of chintz to protect its own textile industry. In spite of this ban, French consumers continued to buy Indian cloth. Few Euro-*



Fatehpur Sikri, built in honor of Sufi saint Salim Chishti in 1571 by Mughal emperor Akbar, expresses the synthesis of Hindu and Islamic architectural forms. Photo courtesy of Donald Johnson

*pean producers could master the Indian art of mordant dyeing which created cloth of intense colors.*<sup>10</sup>

*Indians were also major shipbuilders, producing the largest vessels in the region. Gujarati ships averaged 300 to 600 tons and some reached 800 tons. By comparison, the ships in Magellan’s round-the-world fleet were only 120 tons.*

The prosperity and stability of the Mughal Empire contributed to the flourishing of trade and manufacturing in the larger trading system. The population of the subcontinent, around 100 million in 1500, had risen to 200 million by 1800. Throughout this era, India maintained a healthy balance of trade surplus with Europe and West Asia.

Indian and Southeast Asia ports were critical in the Indian Ocean trading network. Sailors from West Asia would take the monsoon winds to these ports and wait there for the reverse monsoon to propel them home. Besides being way-stations for the monsoons, those ports were the major transit for goods going on to China and for Chinese goods coming into the Indian Ocean network. Southeast Asian port cities were home to diaspora communities from Europe to China, and many Indians, especially Gujaratis, were significant traders and merchants there.

Malacca, ideally situated on the narrow straits separating modern Indonesia and Malaysia, was a major entrepôt in Southeast Asia and a meeting place for Indian and Chinese trade. There, Indian textiles, jewelry, iron, ivory, and other products, Chinese porcelain, silk, and rice passed through the straits. Malacca was also the center of the rich spice trade.

The Ming and Ching dynasties provided large areas of stability in China that fostered significant increases in manufacturing. The Chinese had mastered double cropping and supported huge cotton, silk, and pottery industries that earned large trade surpluses in the world market. China, in part due to the importation of Latin American crops such as potatoes and maize, experienced an enormous increase in economic production. During Ming rule, its population grew from around 100 million to over 300 million.<sup>11</sup> One contemporary observer exclaimed that Chinese ships in the Bay of Bengal were “like houses with sails like great clouds in the sky [and] a single ship carries several hundred men and has in the stores a year’s supply of grain.”<sup>12</sup> Chinese rulers continued to observe the traditional autonomy of the major port cities, and they sent and received not only Chinese vessels but also those of Arabs, Indians, Southeast Asians, and Europeans.

Beginning in the fifteenth century, European newcomers tried to find some role for themselves in this thriving network. The Portuguese attempted to use force to gain exclusive control over critical trading ports. Initially their firepower seemed decisive, but it soon became apparent that despite superior cannon-mounted warships, the Europeans were too few and too weak to establish lasting control until well into the eighteenth century. They had to find other means to “buy themselves a seat, and then even a whole railway car, on the Asian train.”<sup>13</sup>

At first Asians had little interest in European products, except for gold and silver. The Portuguese, Dutch, and English traders, however, found a niche as “country traders” carrying goods from one country to another within Asia, often using Asian ships, crews, and financing. The Europeans invested their early efforts in seeking trading privileges from powerful rulers—from the Mughal and Chinese emperors and the lesser kings and princes of the Southeast Asian states—and also tried to gain a foothold by playing one local ruler off against another.

One significant advantage the European traders had was their access to Latin American silver. The small European states had almost no products Asians desired. Initially traders paid for spices, textiles, porcelain, and other Asian products with gold and, after the Spanish development of Mexican and Bolivian mines and the Chinese adoption of a silver monetary system, with silver.<sup>14</sup> Japan, a major producer of silver, also participated actively in the Asian trading system. The Spanish exploitation of these vast silver mines after 1500 enabled the fledgling states of Europe to broaden their economic presence in Asia, but they still lagged far behind India and China in economic development. During the era, India and China functioned as the major “sinks” for the world’s gold and silver supply. Between 1600 and 1800, Asia absorbed at least thirty-two thousand tons of silver from the Americas via Europe, three thousand tons via Manila and perhaps ten thousand tons from Japan—forty percent of the world production of this mineral.<sup>15</sup>

For three hundred years after da Gama’s voyage, the European presence in Asia remained modest. As of 1740 there were only about 50,000 Europeans living in all Asia and by 1800 there were no more than 75,000.<sup>16</sup> Even with the advantage of silver, the European trading companies and private merchants remained merely one of several sets of players in the profitable Indian Ocean-China trading sphere until their dramatic policy changes in the last half of the eighteenth century.

#### THE FURTHER SPREAD OF ISLAM IN ASIA; ISLAM IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

The dramatic spread of Islam is another major theme of this era. Between 1450 and 1750, Dar al-Islam extended into much of the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and, to a lesser extent, into East Asia as well. Poets, musicians, writers, and architects forged a genuine synthesis of Islam and Hinduism, and the beliefs and practices of these seemingly incompatible religions deeply influenced both faiths.

Muslims were present in the Indian subcontinent from at least 711, but the major impact of Islam into the subcontinent began with the Afghan raids in the eleventh century. By 1206, the Turkish invaders had established the Delhi Sultanate that nominally controlled the political life of north India until the coming of the Mughals in 1526. After the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258, Delhi developed as one of the most important cultural and intellectual centers of the Islamic world.

Interactions between Hindus and Muslims resulted in both groups adopting some of the other’s customs and practices. For example, Muslims adopted the betel leaf and spices; Hindus enjoyed Persian music and admired miniature paintings. Hindus and Muslims shared similar

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clothing and jewelry and participated in similar life cycle ceremonies, fairs, and festivals. Hindus often adopted forms of purdah (the practice of seclusion of women), and Muslims absorbed aspects of caste. Additionally, local Indian elites began to imitate the ruling Muslims’ penchant for polo, horse racing, and public baths.

Sufism, the belief system that focuses on the believer’s longing to experience unity with the divine through perfect love, had developed in the eighth century as a corrective to Arab legalism. Sufi mysticism was probably influenced by Hindu, Buddhist, and Gnostic traditions. Many Sufi teachers accompanied the Muslim invaders, and the inspired songs and lifestyles of Sufi mystics were decisive factors in the spread of Islam in the subcontinent, especially among the lower castes.

Sufi mystics attracted local people with their simple, austere, spiritual lives, their healing powers, the many village ceremonies they performed, as well as their mystical devotion. Groups of devotees formed around master Sufi teachers, or saints, who instructed through parable, allegory, metaphor, and example. Their poetry was very similar to the works of the Hindu Bhakti poets who also stressed the devotee’s longing to experience unity with the divine through selfless devotion.

Millions of rural farmers in Bengal were drawn to Islam by its egalitarian values and the promise of everlasting life. They were greatly attracted to the Sufi *Pirs* (masters), who exemplified their spiritual commitments by living austere lives and performing healings and miracles. Many Hindus felt the *Pirs* resembled the familiar Hindu holy men. Like those holy men, the *Pirs* officiated at many village ceremonies, ritually killing animals, giving amulets to ward off evil spirits, performing marriages, and being available to anyone.

Many Bengalis regarded the tombs of Sufi saints as sacred sites. Both Hindus and Muslims trekked to visit the tombs and tied colored strings to the nearby trees in the hope they would have children, recover from illness, or better assuage the many other pains of everyday life.

The popularity of Islam in Bengal stimulated a major Hindu Bhakti revival. The enormous influence of Sufis on the Hindu population is evidenced in the teachings of the Bhakti poet/saint Chaitanya (1485–1533) who, although he focused on the Hindu god Krishna as the major vehicle of salvation, echoed the Sufi poets concentration on the individual’s relationship with divinity and acceptance of all castes.

The poet Kabir (1440–1518) also illustrates the close relationship of Islam and Hinduism. Born into a Muslim family in the early fifteenth century, he was also deeply influenced by Hindu Bhakti poetry and the Hindu mystic Ramananda. Kabir espoused a path to divinity that was neither Hindu nor Muslim but drew heavily from the teachings of both faiths.

## THE SPREAD OF ISLAM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA



Maps created by Willa Davis from materials supplied by Donald Johnson.

*O servant, where does thou seek Me?  
Lo! I am beside thee  
I am neither in temple nor in mosque:  
Neither am I in rites and ceremonies, nor in Yoga  
and renunciation.<sup>17</sup>*

Guru Nanak (1469–1539), another important North Indian fifteenth century religious leader, forged a synthesis of Hindu and Muslim faiths into Sikhism, a new religion that incorporated beliefs from both faiths. His teachings, compiled in the Granth Sahib, are the basis for Sikh teachings and beliefs that owe much to each faith:

*There is but one God whose name is true, the  
Creator, Devoid of fear and enmity, immortal,  
unborn, self-existent the True One was in  
the beginning; the True One was the primal age.  
The True One is now also . . .<sup>18</sup>*

The Mughal Emperor Akbar diligently sought to treat Muslims and Hindus equally, and Hindu-Islamic cooperation reached its height under his rule (1556–1605). Fatehpur Sikri, his new capital city, elegantly expresses the exquisite mixture of Hindu and Islamic architecture. Its audience hall, where Akbar often convened religious conversations involving Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Zoroastrians, is built around a huge lotus, one of the quintessential symbols of Hindu purity. Akbar also commissioned Persian translations of the Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and tried unsuccessfully to forge a new religion, *din il ihai*, that combined elements of many faiths.

In the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, Hinduism and Islam reached the height of cultural accommodation that included syntheses in many aspects of culture. The mixture included Kashmir under Badsha Sultan, Bengali mysticism, the poetry of Muhammad-Quli Qutb Shah, Kabir and Nanak, the music of Ibrahim II 'Adil Shah, and the architecture of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughals, especially under Akbar.

However, after Aurangzeb rule ended in 1707, the gradual disintegration of the empire and the increasing military struggles among rival states severely strained the good relations between the faiths. As the eighteenth century wore on, these regional conflicts were joined by the expanding presence of the British, whose political strategy in the subcontinent was to divide the two religious communities in the interest of increasing its political control.

### ISLAM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

By the late fourteenth century, a growing number of Muslim merchants were coming to the flourishing entrepôts of Southeast Asia, often accompanied by Sufi teachers from West Asia and India. Moreover, Muslims living in Southern China, likely fleeing from the Sunni purges in the 1360s settled in Java and formed an important Islamic community. The fifteenth century saw the gradual spread of Islam from Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra, to Malacca, Johar, and Patani on the Malay Peninsula, to Banten on the western coast of Java, to Ternate in the Moluccas. By the seventeenth century, Islam was moving from these established centers to newly developing port cities such as Makasar in Sulawesi and into Borneo and the Moluccas, and all the way to the Philippines where Christian communities were also developing.

The spread of Islam in Southeast Asia was largely peaceful and voluntary. Throughout the area, Muslim merchants, sailors, and Sufi teachers brought their faith to the urban entrepôts along the coast of Sumatra and the northern coast of Java. Islamization and urbanization went hand-in-hand as new trading cities sprang up on both the mainland and the archipelago.

Material considerations contributed to the spread of Islam in the region. Merchants, many of whom were Muslims in direct contact with Mecca and other important West Asian centers of Islam, played an important role in the spread of Islam in the coastal ports. Local political leaders and merchants may have recognized the advantages of aligning themselves with the prosperous Muslims. Malacca, commanding the

straits between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, is a case in point. Its initial ruler, a prince from Palembang in Sumatra, had counted on Chinese support for his reign. However, in 1433, when the Ming decided to reduce their overseas presence and end the voyages of their “treasure” ships, he recognized the futility of expecting Chinese aid. Instead, perhaps in an effort to attract Muslim merchants to his port, he converted to Islam. After the Portuguese conquered Malacca in 1511, many Muslim merchants sought other ports in the Java Sea and western part of the archipelago.<sup>19</sup> In addition, new ports had less connection with earlier, well-established beliefs. Further, local rulers, hoping to increase their power, were not adverse to using Islam to rally their subjects against the Europeans, who often supported one local ruler or another.

By 1500 there was a significant Islamic presence along the coasts of Sumatra, Malaysia, and Java, and during the next century and a half the new faith moved inland. Under the rule of the central kingdom of Majapahit, which the Javanese consider their Golden Age, the kings had remained steadfastly Hindu-Buddhist. However, after Javanese Muslims conquered Madjapahit in 1527, the spread of Islam to the interior accelerated.

Although political and economic factors contributed to the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia, its acceptance in the region, as in the Indian subcontinent, was largely due to Sufi mystics and the way that the Sufi brand of Islam resonated with local, particularly Javanese, mysticism.

As early as the start of the Common Era, the ruling elites had successfully incorporated Hindu and Buddhist religious concepts and practices with their local beliefs and rituals. Hindu deities, such as Siva and Vishnu, as well as the Goddess of the Southern Ocean, were especially popular, as were the Hindu epics, and ancestral spirits were believed to intervene in the lives of the living.

The psychic power of Sufi teachers easily blended with earlier beliefs. People began to link the power associated with Sufi saints with their belief in the power of ancestor spirits and the charismatic power of certain individuals. Further, the graves of Muslim saints, as well as ancestral graves, became important pilgrimage sites. On the political level, the Islamic idea of the king as “shadow of God” fit well with the Javanese belief that the king was an incarnation of the Buddha or Siva.

By 1600, Makasar, a major trading city in eastern Indonesia, had mushroomed from a small village into an urban center of some fifty thousand. A Dutch observer wrote in 1607 of a city where “goats, buffaloes, and pigs abound . . . [and] where women walk naked above the waist.<sup>20</sup> Only forty years later another visitor wrote that in Manaskara “there were no hogs” and “the women are entirely covered from head to foot, in such fashion that not even their faces can be seen.”<sup>21</sup> Clearly, ritual aspects of Islamization, in the short span of forty-seven years, had taken hold among these local people. However, in many ways, “the old culture grew and lived on in a more-or-less Islamic garb.”<sup>22</sup>

On a deeper level, the process of Islamization was far slower and took many generations. Mystical Sufi Islam, especially in Java, gradually blended with the existing Hindu-Buddhist mystical traditions. In this process, the local elite would adopt Islamic rituals and practices, such as burial customs, circumcision, ritual prayers, the hajj, and certain dietary restrictions, but also maintain their earlier, decidedly non-Islamic beliefs in spirits, especially their reverence for Ratu Kidul, the Goddess of the Southern Ocean. At the same time, as the Javanese and other indigenous groups were experiencing a process of Islamization, Arab and other foreign Muslims living in the ports were going through a process of Javanization. These dual processes resulted in an amalgamation of identities: the Javanese thought of themselves as both Javanese and Muslim.<sup>23</sup>

The leaders of Mataram in Central Java, one of the strongest states during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, exemplify the blending of indigenous and Islamic beliefs. Senapati (1584–1601), the first Mataram ruler, before he began to rule, is said to have spent three days in Ratu Kidul’s underwater palace. Sultan Agung, (1613–1645), the most famous Mataram ruler, made a pilgrimage to the burial site of a *wali* (a Muslim holy man believed to have brought Islam to Java) probably to “harness to his purpose the supernatural powers of Islam.”<sup>24</sup> During his rule he hoped to exemplify a “pious Sufi warrior.”<sup>25</sup> When he revised the calendar, he adopted the Muslim year of 354–355 days, but retained the existing Javanese starting date.<sup>26</sup> This kind of Islamization reached its height in Southeast Asia between 1550 and 1650.<sup>27</sup>

The hajj also played an important role in the spread of the faith. Making the hajj fundamentally changed peoples’ lives and impressed them with the vast sweep of Islam and its importance in many significant areas of the world. Muslims who made the hajj also brought Islam to the various areas through which they traveled, connecting local people with the wider world of Dar al-Islam.

To be a part of that great culture with its enormous reach of wealth, power, and cultural richness was extremely attractive and offered those who chose it a new and vast knowledge of the wider world. Mature Islam, by this time, had become a vast network of exchange of the best mathematics, science, literature, and art forms available in the world.

With a precipitous decline of the Mughal Empire after 1707 and the rise of regional powers in the subcontinent, the British East India Company radically shifted its strictly commercial activities in the coastal areas of India to political and military involvement in the internal affairs of states. Meanwhile, by 1800, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Indonesia had become “corrupt, inefficient, nepotistic, over-extended, and was drifting into bankruptcy,”<sup>28</sup> and the Dutch Government was about to embark on new policies in Indonesia. These major shifts in the European presence in the Indian Ocean—from commercial traders to landholders—mark the end of the era under consideration and finally usher in the era of maritime colonial empires in Asia and the “Rise of the West.”

## CONCLUSION

Struggling to make good on the promise of a genuine history of the world, teachers and professors have been making critical evaluations of the long-standing categories of historic periodization. In that effort, the era between 1450 and 1750 requires special attention. No one can credibly question the dominance of Europe after 1800. However, increasingly impressive work by world historians convincingly demonstrates the prominence of Asia economically, culturally, and artistically during the era 1450 to 1750, and the significant interconnections, exchanges, contact, and mutual influence that existed among Asian societies and the wider world. At that time, Western dominance was not preordained because of the superior quality of “western” culture; neither is its future power now guaranteed.

Avoiding presenting any nation-state or region as exceptional requires us to urge students to examine the world balance at particular moments in time and to compare that balance in different eras (periods). In that effort, we must labor to take seriously the millions of people that have been dismissed as “a people without history,” and include their stories in an expanded and genuine integrated world history. For the era 1450–1750, Asia’s story would seem to be at least as important as the “Rise of the West.” ■

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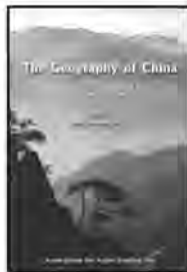
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