

# The Genesis of East Asia

## 221 B.C.–A.D. 907

BY CHARLES HOLCOMBE

HONOLULU: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, 2001

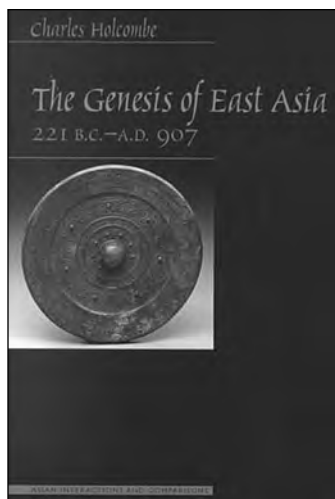
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REVIEWED BY JAMES ANDERSON

In a time when marveling at the modern “rise of China” is a familiar topic of conversation, scholarship on China’s historical place in the world has once again become fashionable. Such scholarship often takes its lead from research on transnational economic and cultural flows in modern world history, although scholars of premodern East Asia are seeking out the historical roots in this region of these supposedly recent phenomena. Charles Holcombe’s *The Genesis of East Asia: 221 B.C.–A.D. 907* is an excellent example of new research that attempts to describe the complex nature of the Chinese cultural impact on the East Asia region. Although the use of *Genesis* as a textbook may present certain challenges in the classroom, Holcombe’s exploration of Sinification, cultural capital, and ethnogenesis in East Asia is thought-provoking and ultimately rewarding.

Holcombe argues that between the rise of the Chinese Qin empire in the third century BCE and the fall of the cosmopolitan Tang empire in the early tenth century, the region we now know of as “East Asia” (modern-day China, Japan, Korea, and Viet Nam) took on many of its prevailing characteristics. The central role China played in the region is never in doubt. As Holcombe writes, “the story of East Asia begins in China”; yet, the author continues, “China itself had many beginnings.”<sup>1</sup> Here, Holcombe makes a claim that will stir up controversy among scholars still committed to the idea that the Central Plain (*zhongyuan*) settlements of North China were the only sources of cultural, political, and social brilliance that radiated out into East Asia. To support his contention, Holcombe has located multiple sites among the states that surrounded the Central Plain region that can lay claim to various aspects of the cultural and religious norms later labeled as “Chinese.”

The other non-Chinese regions of East Asia, through tribute relations, trade, migration, and occasional military conquest, adopted and adapted the essential qualities of Chinese socio-political and cultural norms, including tenets of Confucian thought, the institutions and titles of the imperial court, and the Chinese character-based writing system (which had a significant impact throughout the region). In a related cultural transmission, the teachings of northern Buddhism, and, in some areas, of Daoism as well, spread throughout the Sinitic realm. However, the borrowers of these practices felt no compunction to leave these borrowings unaltered, nor did they necessarily consider these borrowings to be “Chinese.” Rather, these borrowed ideas were, as Holcombe writes, “simply the universal standard of civilization.”<sup>2</sup> Eventually, a community of cultural elites who shared certain practices and institutions would contribute to the state forma-



tion processes behind the emergence of the independent Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese kingdoms by the decline of the Tang dynasty. The end result, as Holcombe writes, was a region “notable for its broad overarching traditional elite community of culture and its rich local popular diversity.”<sup>3</sup>

The value of *Genesis* for researchers and more advanced students of East Asian history is undeniably high, because the author presents a fascinating, nuanced picture of cultural interactions in East Asia. Much of what

Holcombe writes about has been described and discussed elsewhere, but the organization of his points requires prior knowledge of the general geographical areas of East Asia and the cultural groups under discussion. The series editor Joshua Fogel suggests that while *Genesis* is not a textbook, it could be used as such. I would advise against its use as the only text in a classroom of students below the graduate level. However, I have found that *Genesis* provides a wonderful set of topics for weekly discussions in my pre-1600 East Asia survey. I have tried for several semesters to ignore completely the existing nationalist narratives of China, Japan, Korea, and Viet Nam, and instead embrace a holistic “East Asia” approach to this course. Student reticence in the face of these changes has led to a compromise,

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## BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

and I once again structure the course along discreet national histories (if it's Tuesday, it must be early Choson Korea!). However, I follow a week's lectures with discussion sessions devoted to a chapter or part of a chapter in Holcombe. For example, my lecture on Nara Japan is followed by a discussion of Holcombe's chapter on the complex relationship between local custom and elite affinities that underlay Nara period cultural borrowing from the Tang empire. I find this approach by and large successful in a classroom of college undergraduates. I would not necessarily encourage the same use of the book at the high school level with any but the most gifted of students. However, high school teachers who read Holcombe's work will gain a much richer understanding of early East Asia that should, in turn, benefit students.

Holcombe's book is not problem-free. The lack of good maps and other clear illustrations is puzzling. Students reading this text on their own would be well served with a series of regional maps that call attention to the specific points of cultural transmission and state formation that Holcombe raises. I also find it curious that Holcombe uses the term *kanji* in his informative discussion of the Chinese writing system's spread through East Asia. Why not *hanzi*? Does *kanji* better impart the sense of the non-Chinese usage of these characters? Holcombe is careful enough to distinguish Sino-Vietnamese terms (Jiaozhi, Shi Xie, etc.) from Vietnamese terms (Dinh Bo Linh, Ly) in his descriptions of pre- and post-independence Vietnamese kingdoms. Why use the term *kanji* throughout the text?

Holcombe has done the field of teaching premodern East Asia history a great service by writing this book. His examination of East Asia as a cultural whole stimulates discussion and even debate when-

ever I assign *The Genesis of East Asia* in my classes. Although a few students each semester complain that the writing is too scholarly, most find the details interesting and the overall argument stimulating. Students may start the book without knowing much about the basic differences between the peoples of East Asia, but they always finish with a greater appreciation of the intersection between local practices and the underlying cultural blueprint shared by East Asian societies. I credit Holcombe's influence on their understanding of this important regional dynamic. ■

## NOTES

1. Charles Holcombe, *The Genesis of East Asia: 221 B.C.–A.D. 907* (Asian Interactions and Comparisons) (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, with the Association for Asian Studies, Honolulu, 2001), 11.
2. Holcombe, 10.
3. Holcombe, 11.

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