

Week 1 - History of International Politics (Oriental) [E]

– Historical Background

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NOTE: The following lecture notes are largely based on the class textbook – Warren Cohen (2000), ‘East Asia at the Center – Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World’, New York: Columbia University Press.

Lecture Title: ‘East Meets West: East Asia before the 1800s’

The time period for this course is from the early 1800s until the present day, a period of roughly 200 years. However in order to understand the background to the 1800s, it is important to discuss East Asia’s relationship with the outside world (non-East Asian countries and regions). In particular, we need to understand how ‘international’ political, social, and economic relationships began to develop and **rapidly** increase in the modern era (after the late 1400s and the early 1500s), for example during and after the ‘**Age of Discovery**’ (also known as the ‘**Age of Exploration**’ – in the 1400s, 1500s, and the 1600s). This will help us to appreciate the background to the major changes and developments that occurred in this region and elsewhere in the 1800s and the 1900s. It will also help us to understand the extent of, and limits to, ‘international’ relations in the East Asian region before the 1800s. In this document, we will discuss how East Asian and non-East Asian countries developed links that, for the first time in history, formed a truly global and ‘international’ system in the areas of politics, economics, **diplomacy**, society, and culture. As the historian Warren I. Cohen (from your class textbook) has stated, *‘East Asia had been in contact with the West for more a millennium (1000 years), largely through overland migrations and trade routes, but occasionally, indirectly by sea. Nothing in the previous experience of the peoples of the region prepared them,*

however, for the *infinitely* more *intensive interaction* of the sixteenth (1500s) and seventeenth (1600s) centuries.’ (Cohen, 2000:215).

Before the ‘Age of Discovery’

Muslim traders from the **Persian Gulf** and India had traded and interacted with the East Asian region for centuries. When Islam first developed as a religion in the Middle East in the 600s, these Muslim traders and their journeys over land and sea helped to spread Islam’s influence throughout different parts of Asia. Within a few hundred years, Islam was the main religion in most of Central or Middle Asia.

The major overland trade **Silk Route** or Silk Road (over 6,500 kilometers long) that connected Europe, North Africa, and West and Central Asia with China (the Middle Kingdom) allowed East Asian and non-East Asian people, religions, cultures, and languages to interact long before Europeans arrived by sea in the 1500s and 1600s. These overland interactions were predominantly centred on profit and not politics, and were limited in comparison to the more extensive **maritime** trade links that developed later. In Europe and the US, school children still learn about the journeys of **Marco Polo** (1254 – 1324), a trader from Venice in Italy – a city which controlled most of Europe’s trade in spices (**the Spice Trade**), a key reason and motivation for European journeys by sea to East Asia, particularly South-east Asia after the late 1400s.

Islam did not become a major religion on the islands of South-east Asia (for example in present day Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines) until the 1200 to 1500 AD period when local rulers, influenced by Muslim traders involved in the Spice Trade (and who had settled in the port cities) gradually **converted** to Islam and promoted the religion to their people. The local rulers also set up Islamic centers in the region and religious teachers from the Middle East arrived by ship to promote Islam. This resulted in Islam becoming the main religion in ‘island South-east Asia’ – a situation that largely continues to this present day.

The Spice Trade

The **burgeoning** Spice Trade and the increased importance of South-east Asian ports such as Melaka or Malacca (overlooking the **strategically vital** Malacca Straits or the

‘Strait of Melaka’) also resulted in the increased **migrations** of different nationalities, particularly Chinese and Indians, who had already been settling in the South-east Asian region for centuries. These migrations had a major influence on the **ethnic make-up** of the countries of South-east Asia such as Malaysia and resulted in more **multi-ethnic**, multi-religious, and **multi-cultural** societies. Gradually, port cities such as Melaka became international **melting pots** where people could influence others and be influenced by materials, beliefs, and ideas from around the world. Examples included religion (including Islam and Christianity), **political ideology**, exotic products, and military technology.

However, rivalries for power, status, and wealth, as well as jealousy between the various ethnic groups, were often **exploited** by groups such as the Europeans (first the Portuguese and then the Dutch). For example, the Chinese (who had migrated in large numbers to places such as present day Malaysia and Indonesia) were often employed as tax collectors. Other Asians (for example from India) were also used as soldiers to **enforce** the Europeans’ laws and to secure their objectives. As a result, **animosity** between local Malays for example and migrant Chinese often resulted in violence and ethnic fighting. This policy of **‘divide and conquer’** benefitted the Europeans for two key reasons, 1) it prevented Asians from **allying** together against them and 2) it permitted the Europeans to present themselves as **honest brokers** who were needed to keep the peace and to prevent conflict between the various ethnic groups.

Ming China (1368 – 1644)

The voyages of **Zheng He (1371-1433)** were an **impressive** display of Ming China’s naval **capabilities**, power, and influence over the South-east Asian region and its trade routes in the century before the Europeans arrived in the early 1500s. The Ming Chinese adventure in maritime power however was a relatively brief affair. Ming China’s preference to focus on domestic affairs rather than on continuing to enhance its maritime power in East Asia would have major **ramifications** for the region’s relationship with the rest of the world. One was that it left the **sea-lanes** open and unprotected for foreign powers such as Portugal to **take advantage of**. Two, its **prioritising** of domestic issues over foreign policy issues made it more difficult for Ming China to match and challenge the European’s naval and maritime **superiority**. This meant that from a European **perspective**, East Asia’s number one **hegemon**, China, could not **effectively project its power** in maritime areas. However Ming China’s

emphasis on domestic problems was arguably a matter of necessity rather than choice. For example, the 1500s were a period of serious domestic instability within China. In particular, major intrusions and attacks from the Mongols in the north (as well as from elsewhere (from the south, the west, and the east – see the map on Page 193) placed a heavy burden on China's armies and on its military spending. For this reason, it is not surprising to see the Ming Chinese prioritise domestic problems over foreign policy concerns such as Portugal's take-over of the key port of Melaka in 1511 and the threat this posed to China's control over vital sea lanes connecting China with the rest of Asia and Europe. It is clear that the Ming Dynasty perceived the Portuguese actions as a threat. However it was not the number one threat to the Ming Chinese. Another reason for Ming China's domestic-orientated approach in the 1500s was the stubborn refusal of the Chinese Emperor from 1522 to 1566 to fully engage in overseas trade (which limited trade revenue) and his decision to deny foreign ships, which he perceived as a security threat, access to Chinese ports. Students should note how outside powers such as Portugal and Spain could benefit if an East Asian country was distracted by domestic problems and could not stay united against an external threat. That is to say that while European countries were not responsible for Ming China's domestic problems they certainly benefitted from them. The Ming Dynasty came to an end in 1644 as a result of domestic instability and persistent attacks by the non-Han Chinese Manchus in the north, problems that the declining Ming Empire did not have enough money to deal with. The new Qing Empire, which was founded by the Manchus and which we will discuss later, lasted from 1644 to 1912.

European Pockets and Outposts in East Asia

Without Chinese protection, wealthy Spice Trade port cities such as Melaka were unable to defend against more powerful outside forces who were eager to increase their share of income from trade and commerce in commodities such as spices and precious metals. By the early 1500s, Portugal, a small country in size but an impressive maritime power began to enforce its presence in the South-east Asian region. This was in a period of significant naval advances by European maritime states such as Spain, Portugal, and then later England and Holland (also known as the Netherlands). Spain and Portugal were at this time the most technologically advanced ship-builders and navigators in the world. Noteworthy developments allowed European states to travel by sea to East Asia. In 1492, Christopher Columbus (representing Spain) discovered and claimed the Americas for Spain. In 1498, Vasco de Gama (representing Portugal) became the first

person to sail around the Cape of Good Hope in southern Africa. In 1510, the Portuguese took control of Goa in western India and held it as a colony until 1961. This behaviour by Portugal in Asia was similar in terms of objectives to actions since 1492 by both Spain and Portugal in Central America and in South America. In 1511, with no Asian power protecting the sea-lanes, the Portuguese captured the key city of Melaka. In 1557, the Chinese permitted the Portuguese, who had increased their naval presence along the Chinese coast, to operate a trading post at Macao next to Guangzhou (often historically referred to as Canton). By the late 1500s, the south-eastern coast of China, in spite of various restrictions imposed by the Ming government, had become a part of the global economic system. Macao, a Portuguese colonial outpost, was also a major trading center. It remained Portuguese territory until 1999 when it was returned to China.

Regarding the significance of Portugal's behaviour in East Asia after 1500, Cohen notes *'Europeans had been present in East Asia for centuries, primarily as traders, occasionally as missionaries as well. Most had come overland, through Central Asia, but others had arrived by sea, on Arab, Indian, or Persian vessels. All had come in peace, adapting to local customs that they were powerless to change. The arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century (1500s) heralded a radical change in the nature of the contacts between Europeans and Asians. The Europeans exhibited a ruthlessness to which many Asian responded inadequately, especially to Portuguese efforts to dominate trade and to Portuguese and Spanish determination to root out Islam. Initially the Europeans benefitted from superior military technology, revealed most obviously in naval warfare but also from the disorganization and relative docility of the peoples of South Asia. The Europeans were not sufficiently powerful to dominate East Asia, but they established important footholds at Melaka, Macao, Nagasaki, and Manila. The establishment of European-controlled emporia in East Asia also signalled a striking expansion of world trade. The goods of Europe, the Middle East, and Africa were available to Asians as never before – and the volume of Asian goods to markets elsewhere in the world soared. And now, the Americas, connected to East Asia by the Manila galleons, also contributed to the explosion of commercial activity, a new market for Chinese silks and porcelains as well as a source of silver. The integration of East Asia into the international economy accelerated.'* (Cohen, 2000:189).

Religion and Trade

European powers such as Spain and Portugal were motivated not only by trade and profit but also by religion and the objective of converting Asians in places such as Japan, China, and the Philippines to Christianity. In Japan, one of the first meetings between the Japanese and the Europeans began accidentally in 1543 when shipwrecked Portuguese sailors swam ashore. A few years later in 1549, a Jesuit missionary, Francis Xavier, arrived and began an initially successful campaign to convert the Japanese. However the Europeans' successes in converting large numbers of Japanese and even gaining administrative control of Nagasaki worried the central authorities in Japan who feared the threat of a potentially disloyal and foreign-influenced political entity in Kyushu. By 1587, the Japanese, under Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536 – 1598), passed restrictive laws, which limited the power and influence of the Europeans in Japan. However the Japanese authorities financially benefitted from foreign trade and therefore initially continued to tolerate missionary activity as long as restrictions and laws were obeyed.

In 1565, Portugal's neighbour and rival maritime power, Spain, established a foothold in the Philippines (named after the Spanish king, Philip II). The Spaniards were now able to challenge Portugal's dominance of the rich spice trade. In 1571, the Spanish took control of Manila, a city that was to become a major trade hub between Japan, China, North, Central, and South America, and South East Asia. Spain's close relationship with the Philippines would continue until the late 1800s when the US took on Spain's role. The Spanish were also determined to introduce Catholicism to the islands and to prevent the spread of Islam.

Catholic Spain's success and growing power in the Philippines, an increasing number of Spanish ships in Japanese waters, the divided loyalty of Japanese converts caused by Christianity, and the co-relation between missionary activity and conquest (in South America for example) concerned the Japanese authorities. As a result, by the early 1600s, the Japanese authorities, under the Tokugawa shogunate (1600 – 1868), issued stronger anti-Christian laws and restrictions. In the 1600s, the Japanese also had come to prefer dealing with Protestant English and Dutch traders. From the early to mid-1600s, both Holland (also known as the Netherlands or the Dutch (nationality)) and England, Spain's enemies in Europe, had emerged as strong rivals to Spanish and Portuguese maritime power in East Asia. The Dutch also sought to benefit from trade in the Far East, especially in the spice trade in places such as Indonesia where now they were no longer afraid to challenge Spain and Portugal. The Dutch and the English were

preferred by the Japanese because they focused more on commerce and less on religion thus posing less of a domestic threat to stability in Japan than the Spanish or the Portuguese. In the words of Cohen, ‘Dutch and English traders brought their goods and left their gods at home’ (Cohen, 2000:198). After a number of years, the English decided that Japan was not profitable enough and focused their interest elsewhere. The Spanish and the Portuguese also believed that the Japanese were too strong and too well organised to be dominated and looked towards weaker states elsewhere in the region. By 1640, only the Dutch were allowed to trade in Japan but under strict conditions. Note for example the enclosed island of Dejima in Nagasaki.

In order to strengthen their position in areas such as Indonesia, Dutch businessmen and the government of the Netherlands established the Dutch East India Company (VOC in Dutch) [note the East Indies and the West Indies] which had the power to fight ‘defensive’ wars, build fortresses, make alliances, and sign peace treaties. One scholar, CR Boxer has observed the strong power and influence of these organisations by describing them as ‘*a state within a state*’ (see Cohen, 2000:201). This is an important point because other countries such as Great Britain developed their own powerful corporations (note the British East India Company). These had a major influence on the behaviour of their countries’ governments and armed forces in the region.

After decades of fighting and rivalry in East Asia between Holland and Portugal in the 1600s, the Dutch eventually replaced Portugal as the dominant power in key spice trade areas such as Indonesia and ‘island South-east Asia’. The Dutch presence in Indonesia would continue until the 1960s. In 1624, Holland set up a trading station in Taiwan (also known historically as Formosa) after some initial resistance by the Ming Chinese authorities. In 1642, the Dutch also eventually drove out their rivals, the Spanish, from northern Taiwan. The Spanish had first landed there in 1626. In 1662, the forces of the new Qing Dynasty (1644 – 1912) were strong enough to force the Dutch to leave Taiwan and to annex the island as part of Qing China. 1641, the Dutch had captured the former Portuguese-controlled key city of Melaka in modern day Malaysia.

Conclusion

South-east Asia and especially island South-east Asia was the key magnet for European

countries interested in trade. The availability of silver and other precious metals from Japan, and from Spanish and Portuguese-controlled Central and South America (after 1492) helped to feed and increase 'international' trade between different regions of the world. People, religions, ideas, and products from all over the world interacted at an **unprecedented** level. Europeans and Asians could now exchange and sample products from all over the world including spices, **textiles**, tobacco, potatoes, **chilli**, **maize**, and the **addictive opium** drug. This development represented the first stage of a powerful global economic system that had both a positive and negative influence on domestic and international politics in East Asia.

However, before the 1800s, the larger mostly non-island **mainland** countries of East Asia (Japan included) were still too powerful for the European countries to control completely. These countries also did not have spices so business men and spice traders did not have the desire nor the **incentive** to engage in **conquest**. At that time, there was an opinion that Europeans would have to pay a **heavy price** in terms of money and **personnel** for little **commercial** gain if they attempted to **occupy** large and control powerful states in East Asia. For these reasons, the impact of a European presence was felt strongest in the **politically fragmented** and weaker islands of South-east Asia, in areas like Indonesia (where Holland was the European power **in control**) and the Philippines (where Spain was the European power **in control**). As we shall see in next week's class, the impact of European (and American) **involvement** in East Asia would change **dramatically** in the 1800s.

Key Points from the Week 1 Historical Background Notes

- Interactions between East Asia and non-East Asians had existed for over 1000 years but it was mostly overland trade and was limited in size.
- The **Age of Discovery** and the **maritime** advances of European states helped to dramatically increase the economic, religious, and political interactions between Europe and East Asia.
- After the 1500s and the 1600s, East Asia was now **integrated** into a global international economic system. East Asian states were therefore more **vulnerable** to international issues and affairs.
- Events and politics in Europe for example now had a **significant** influence on events and developments in East Asia.
- After the 1500s, the Europeans established **footholds** and **outposts** in places like

Melaka, Macao, Manila, and Nagasaki.

- Even though Europeans had developed economic and political links with virtually all the countries of East Asia (including Japan and China), the European presence was strongest in the weaker and politically fragmented islands of South-east Asia. For example, in Indonesia and the Philippines. The Europeans were therefore strongest where resistance and unity was weakest.
- Stronger East Asian states such as China, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand for example remained largely sovereign and independent throughout the 1500s, 1600s, and the 1800s.
- Europeans could benefit if East Asian states were distracted by serious domestic problems.