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I was on my way to Kenya several years ago when a friend, the late Paul Kreisberg, urged me to read Philip Snow's *Star Raft*. Snow tells the tale of the Chinese eunuch Zheng He's extraordinary voyages early in the 15th century, many years before those of Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus. Crossing the Indian Ocean, Zheng He's fleet called at ports in East Africa, where, it appeared, the Chinese had been trading for centuries. On my own voyage, wandering north from Mombassa along the coast of Kenya, I came across the remains of a 13th century Swahili village where, to my astonishment, I found Chinese coins and shards of Chinese pottery recently uncovered by archeologists. As a historian of 20th century American foreign policy whose most daring previous feats had been forays into 18th and 19th century Chinese-American relations and the world of art historians, I realized it was time to broaden my education. With the encouragement of my editor, Kate Wittenberg, I decided to study the international relations of East Asia since they began. What follows is a taste of what I've learned, traveling through the history of that region.

Some readers may be as surprised as I was to find that Shang dynasty rulers, c. 1500 BCE, maintained a zoo containing exotic animals—a rhinoceros, for example—obtained from other parts of Asia. Most will be intrigued by evidence of the changes in "Chinese" identity, the changes in what it meant to be Chinese, as the original "Chinese" conquered or were conquered by their neighbors—and enlarged their gene pool.

I discovered that by the 7th century BCE, during the Zhou dynasty, the Chinese had already developed a sophisticated collective security system and that contacts between Han China and the West, seaborne as well as across the famed Silk Road, began approximately 2,000 years ago. Perhaps most striking for students of China will be the persistent record of Chinese imperialism, of Chinese efforts to expand and to dominate their neighbors whenever they had sufficient power—and sometimes when they didn't.
Contact with alien societies had a major impact on China. Lovers of Chinese food will learn that it was undistinguished before being seasoned by spices from India and, much later, the introduction of the chili pepper from the Americas. Indian influence on Chinese culture, especially art and religion, as well as cuisine, was enormous.

The cosmopolitan nature of Tang China was extraordinary: merchants from all over Eurasia and north Africa could be found in the major cities—Arabs, Christians, Jews, and Persians mixed with the local people. In later years, Armenians dominated the region’s trade with the West.

Of course, China was never the whole story of events in East Asia. I was astonished to discover that Tibet had been a major power from the seventh through ninth centuries CE, frequently invading China and decimating Chinese armies. I had never realized how dependent Japan had been on Korea for its early development, how much of Japanese culture derived from Korea—or that Japanese military involvement on the Korean peninsula had occurred as early as the fourth century CE. I knew about the Mongol conquest of China, but not that Kubilai Khan’s mother was a Christian.

Americans and Europeans are familiar with the narrative of Western imperialism in Asia. They are less likely to know that Egyptian and Ottoman Turkish fleets came to the defense of their Muslim brethren, helping them to fight the Portuguese in India and the Dutch in Sumatra. They probably will be less surprised to learn that wherever the Muslims and Christians gained control of societies in Southeast Asia, the status of women was diminished. The key role played by the Americas in the early years of contact between Europe and Asia was to supply the silver, shipped on galleons from Acapulco to Manila, that fueled the worldwide economic expansion of the late 16th century. The story of the U.S. involvement in East Asia has been the subject of most of my previous work, but I was not aware that the U.S. Constitution had shelled the city of Danang in Vietnam in 1846. I knew of American sympathy for the Korean victims of Japanese imperialism. I did not know that a Korean Youth Army School had been established in Nebraska in 1909. I suspect every reader will discover something new and interesting in the pages that follow.

I am not so arrogant as to believe that I have mastered the history of all the countries of East Asia and their relations with each other and the rest of the world since the beginning of time. Specialists on every country of the region and every period I have covered doubtless will be appalled at the brevity of my treatment of issues on which they have written countless monographs. Some will be troubled by the lack of detail in a landscape painted with so broad a brush, by my apparent lack of appreciation of the subtle distinctions they have portrayed so painstakingly. To them, I apologize. I can only thank them for those monographs without which my task would have been impossible. I trust they will find my work useful in their teaching.

The reader should be warned that many of the issues I discuss are the focus of debates among historians. I refer to some of these in my notes. Usually, however, I choose my course without burdening the narrative with reference to possible alternatives. Several of my previous writings have been historiographic. This book is not. Much as I would like specialists to read it, on this occasion they are not my primary audience.

My wife, Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, and my friend, Akira Iriye, insist that I also owe specialists an explanation for my idiosyncratic conceptualizations and methodology. Most scholars referring to "East Asia," a relatively recent construct, limit themselves to the countries of the northeast, to China, Japan, and Korea. Southeast Asia, for no compelling reason, is perceived as a separate entity. I am aware that parts of Southeast Asia are linked more closely to the Indian subcontinent than to China and the northeast generally, but some—most obviously Vietnam—are not. As I studied events in the region, I concluded that the separation created more problems than it solved, that important parts of the story involve relations between north and south. And so, stretching myself geographically as well as chronologically, I chose to conceive of East Asia most broadly, to include the south.

Less easily justified is my central conceit that contemporary modes of analyzing international relations cast light on the interactions of ancient political entities. Having begun my study of world affairs with Hans Kohn and Karl Deutsch more than forty years ago, I am not unaware of the range of theories of nationalism or of the fact that scholars consider the nation-state to be of modern origin. I am deliberately applying the vocabulary of modern world affairs to relations among the peoples of early Asia as a means of rendering the past less exotic. I realize that some of my colleagues may object, but I believe the understanding gained outweighs the theoretical precision lost. Mankind’s means of communica-
tion, items of trade, and weapons of choice have changed radically over the centuries, but few would deny that the quest for wealth and power is universal chronologically as well as spatially. I chose to underline that reality by using language familiar to students of contemporary affairs.

Finally, although Iriye has taught me much about the importance of cultural relations and of non-state actors in international relations, I must concede that I have written primarily about states. To the extent that I have transcended this limitation—and readers will find frequent reference to cultural relations—it is doubtless because I knew he would be looking over my shoulder.

I hope readers will share my delight in discovering the extensive involvement of the peoples of East Asia in world affairs even before the beginning of recorded history. For some of them contact with the outside world has been constant for at least 4,000 years. For most of that time, their civilization and the sophistication of their management of foreign affairs surpassed that of the strangers who came in quest of their treasures. More recently, for a few hundred years, some fell victim to the superior discipline and technology of others, but the twentieth century has marked the recovery of their independence and their standing in the world community. Today, China and Japan claim a place among the world's great powers. Many other states of East Asia experienced extraordinary growth late in the twentieth century, only to be set back by the financial crisis that swept the region in the late 1990s. Until then, the twenty-first century had promised to be Asia's century. It may yet be.

Warren I. Cohen
June 2000
The Emergence of an International System in East Asia

In the Beginning There Was China

The origin of the state in East Asia remains shrouded in the mists of pre-history, but archeologists continue to find bits and pieces, potsherds, textiles, and bones, promising that someday we will be able to explain this and other ancient mysteries, to penetrate the fog of the distant past. For now we must be content to estimate that in the course of several thousand years before the so-called Christian Era, somewhere around 2000 BCE, people living in what is now east central China did create something akin to a state. Mesopotamia, Egypt, and South Asia had developed urban civilizations earlier, probably hundreds of years earlier. The Chinese state appears to have evolved independently, although before very long, perhaps three thousand or so years ago, contact with peoples far to the west is evidenced by the import of a variant bronze technology, the so-called “lost wax” method of casting. Recent discoveries in western China of the burial sites of Caucasians dating from around 1200 BCE suggest the possibility of other cross-cultural influences early in the history of the Chinese people.1

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<td>Destruction of Troy</td>
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Zhou Dynasty in north China  
1122–221 BCE
David becomes king of all Israel  
1000 BCE

Perhaps most striking to the modern reader, however, is the relative speed with which an international system developed in East Asia, foreshadowing much of what is known of the practice of international relations. Theoretical works written by Chinese more than two thousand years ago are still studied today in military academies in the United States as well as China. Critical concerns that have challenged policymakers throughout the ages—the role of morality in foreign policy, the balance of power, questions of when to use force and when to appease, and of appropriate military strategy when force is the option chosen—were debated by Chinese analysts throughout much of the Zhou Dynasty (c.1122–221 BCE). Realpolitik and Machtpolitik as concepts of international politics may evoke images of amoral Germanic statesmen, of Otto von Bismarck and Henry Kissinger, but the Chinese were practicing—and criticizing—them while Central Europe was still populated with neolithic scavengers.

The path to an understanding of the emergent international system leads through more than a thousand years of Chinese history. From archeological evidence we know something of the material culture, even the religious practices of the ancient peoples of Central Asia, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia, but the earliest indications of statecraft are to be found in China. The Chinese call these formative years, 3000–221 BCE, the Sanhai or Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, Zhou) era. For most of these years there are at least traces of records of the contacts between the Chinese and their neighbors, including the nomadic peoples of Inner Asia and especially the relations of the first “Chinese” to those ultimately absorbed into the Chinese state. It should never be forgotten that the early Chinese did not expand into empty space, but rather by force into territories already occupied by peoples of similar race and language. Like all the world’s empires, the Chinese Empire was based on conquest, the subjugation of militarily inferior peoples whom the Chinese portrayed as subhuman to justify their own conduct.

Archeologists and students of ancient Chinese history, examining objects such as pottery, stone tools, bronze, and oracle bone inscriptions, have concluded that several similar but discrete neolithic cultures, includ-

ing the Xia, Shang and Zhou, existed simultaneously in north China in the second millennium BCE. The Xia were the first to organize a political entity that might be called a state. Leaders of that entity had a conception of boundaries and distinguished between those who accepted their rule and the “others.” Members of the Xia state identified themselves as the Hua-Xia (flowers of summer) and disdained those who did not, who were different, whether living among them or outside the borders of their state. With creation of the state came the conception of the defense of its people and its boundaries, necessitating military power.

The Xia had external relations with culturally similar people such as those who lived under Shang and Zhou rule. They also encountered dissimilar peoples, some speakers of Indo-European languages to their west, some of nomadic stock. These contacts were often warlike, involving the expansion and contraction of Xia influence, sometimes peaceful, such as the exchange of goods, intermarriage, and diplomacy. But at the dawn of the twenty-first century, despite extraordinary archeological work by scholars of the People’s Republic of China, we still know little about the details.

In mid-fifteenth century BCE, with the defeat of the Xia by their eastern neighbors, the Shang, the record improves. The recent recovery of thousands of Shang oracle bones provides precious insights into foreign relations, as well as into the Shang view of the world in which they lived. It is apparent, for example, that during the nearly five centuries in which they dominated north China, Shang rulers perceived of a world order in which their territory was at the center, ringed by subordinate states.

By the time of the emergence of the Shang state, the people of north China had evolved a settled agrarian style of life in which most lived clustered around a local leader. Inscriptions on oracle bones and bronzes indicate that they had developed a written language, recognizable to modern scholars as Chinese. A highly sophisticated indigenous art, most notably painted pottery and bronzes, had emerged from local neolithic cultures. Shang bronzes, cast by a unique piece mold method, were the most complex technologically that the ancient world had ever seen, far surpassing bronze age works of contemporary Mesopotamia—and incomparably imaginative.

The state was a monarchy imposed on a shifting federation of autonomous groups whose loyalty depended on the leadership ability of the king—or shared lineage with him. The king was central and the compo-
sition of the state varied in accordance with his ability to attract and hold allies. The state was also a theocracy, in which the king was the main diviner. One historian, David Keightley, has described Shang China as a “politic-religious force field” whose authority fluctuated over areas and time. At the head of both the political and religious orders stood the king.

In brief, more than 3,000 years ago, just as Cretan civilization was spreading across the Aegean to Greece, a people were creating the institutions of a state in China, defining themselves and their borders, and attributing differences to, “objectifying,” those who were not members of their state. Those who lived beyond the frontier were understood to be culturally different, “barbarians.” The state was perceived as encompassing all of the civilized world and its king proclaimed supremacy over all of that world and exclusive access to the supreme divinity. Here was the foundation of the later Chinese conception of the relationship between the emperor and the ruler of the heavens.

Groups drawn into the Shang state, such as the Zhou who eventually destroyed the Shang dynasty, accepted the king’s claim to universal dominion. As subjects are wont to do, some offered tribute, sending gifts to their ruler. Conceivably this practice evolved into the elaborate tributary system of a later time. Such gifts had symbolic value, attesting to the monarch’s overlordship—and may have had economic value as well. Some peoples to the east and south were absorbed through cultural expansion, mixing with the Shang until they were indistinguishable. Others, who resisted assimilation into Chinese civilization, tended to move beyond the frontiers, or opposed Shang rule by force. Oracle bone inscriptions offer evidence of extensive military campaigns, but also suggest that diplomacy and intermarriage were frequent instruments of external relations. Defense of the state was the king’s responsibility in the most literal way: he was expected to lead his followers and his allies into battle.

Archaeologists have also found evidence of trade between the area controlled by the Shang and other peoples to the south, both coastal and interior. The clay used by potters, the copper and tin used in making bronze implements, the cowrie shells that may have been a form of currency, gold and precious jewels found in ornaments, were all imported. The art historian Sherman Lee has determined that a Shang bronze currently at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco was modeled after an Indian rhinoceros, supporting reports that the Shang maintained a royal zoo containing exotic animals obtained from other regions of Asia.

The emergence of the Shang state and the exercise of its power forced people on the periphery to organize for their defense. Oracle bones record frequent border skirmishes with the Qing to the west and several major battles with a people called the Guifang, probably nomads to the north. But when the Shang dynasty fell, the attack came from within, from the Zhou, who were members of the Shang state, but sufficiently marginal to constitute a separate core of power by the eleventh century BCE. Less sophisticated than the Shang in civilized refinements, the Zhou expanded aggressively alongside the Shang, formed important alliances with political entities surrounding the Shang, and defeated them in battle at mid-century, approximately 150 years after Achilles and Agamemnon sacked Troy. Building on Shang accomplishments, the Zhou dynasty ruled China, at least nominally, for the next 800 years. Population estimates are necessarily crude, but it is likely that the Xia controlled lands in which the people numbered in the hundreds of thousands, that millions came under Shang dominion, and that by the end of the Zhou dynasty in 221 BCE, China’s population was in the vicinity of fifty to sixty million.

Students of ancient China consider the early or Western Zhou dynasty to be the wellspring of Chinese civilization. Notions of the central kingdom and the universal state had appeared perhaps as early as the Xia era, and certainly under the Shang; but they were articulated most explicitly by the Zhou, who claimed that China was the only state, that its authority extended to all under heaven. Certainly they were aware of others beyond their rule, but such independent status was deemed temporary. Central to the universe was the Zhou state whose management was supervised by heaven. The Zhou developed the concept of the mandate of heaven, of a contractual arrangement between the ruler and the heavenly power, allowing the king to rule only so long as he served the people well. They did so to legitimize their rule, to explain why they had seized power from the Shang.

The Zhou had long been a Shang tributary. They succeeded in overthrowing their powerful overlords by winning allies among groups all around the periphery of the state. Once in control, they adopted Shang material and political culture, winning Shang collaboration as well. The Zhou organized a central bureaucratic administration and maintained a royal army to cope with unrest at home or major barbarian raids on the frontier. On the periphery, relatives and allies of the king were awarded control of local people, becoming feudal lords. Their dominion was over
MAP I. ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS, C. 1000 BCE

a specific population rather than a territory and they were frequently sent with their people into new areas as military colonists. Initially weak, the feudal lords gradually increased their power at the expense of the center, ultimately reducing the Zhou king to but nominal suzerainty.

The Zhou were markedly aggressive and expanded the area of Chinese civilization enormously. Neighboring peoples were conquered and assimilated into the central kingdom. A newly conquered territory would quickly be occupied by a garrison that likely composed the entire populace; led by a Zhou feudal lord, an entire feudal realm moved and became a military colony, overwhelming but not obliterating the local culture, absorbing local collaborators into the political elite. Whether the means of expansion was military or diplomatic, achieved by force or intermarriage, barbarians had the option of assimilation. The success of pacification in the border lands was linked to cultural fusion, to Zhou willingness to accept and integrate local culture and elites rather than impose the Shang-Zhou hybrid found at the center.

After approximately three hundred years of extending its power, the Zhou dynasty overreached itself. As it pressed eastward toward the coastal regions, unassimilated Rong barbarians rose in the west, feudal lords emboldened their own powers rather than support the king, and both capital and king fell to the barbarians in 770 BCE. The surviving heir to the throne fled east to a new capital in the vicinity of modern Luoyang and the dynasty survived for more than five additional centuries. Real power, however, had passed to feudal realms that became de facto independent states.

Clearly, the early or Western Zhou, like the Shang and Xia before them, had been deeply involved in foreign affairs. They fought and formed alliances with foreign peoples, seized foreign lands, intermarried with foreigners, and learned from foreign cultures. Indo-Europeans were among the tribute bearers at the Zhou court c. 1000 BCE. Many of these foreigners were absorbed into China, becoming Chinese, but they also had an impact on what it meant to be Chinese. As Chinese rule extended over other peoples, as the Chinese had contact with and assimilated foreigners, China's culture as well as Chinese geography changed.

By the eighth century BCE, other incipient states had come into being on territory claimed by the Zhou—and on its borders. In the later or Eastern Zhou period (c. 770–221), a multistate system began to develop in the region. The first three hundred years are known to the Chinese as the Spring and Autumn period, followed by the age known, for reasons that quickly become obvious, as that of the Warring States.

As Zhou power ebbed, the relative peace the Chinese and their neighbors had enjoyed since the overthrow of the Shang disappeared, remaining but a glorified memory to men and women made desperate by avaricious rulers and increasing disorder. To Chinese intellectuals like the great Confucius (c. 551–479), the days of the early Zhou were a golden age somehow to be recaptured.

Deprived of their base of power in the west, the Zhou kings became dependent upon feudal lords, remaining rulers in name only. Regional leaders arrogated power to themselves and governed their own fiefdoms. The pattern was similar to feudalism as it later developed in Europe. The master of each locality organized the territory he controlled as though it were a state entirely separate from all others. But by the eighth century BCE the tradition of a unified China was firmly rooted and most, certainly the more powerful of the king's erstwhile vassals, aspired to establish a new dynasty in place of the Zhou. More than five hundred years passed before the leader of the Qin state succeeded. Throughout the Spring and Autumn period—and for long afterward—no state was strong enough to conquer all others. No ruler dared claim the mandate of heaven.

At the outset of the Spring and Autumn era, the struggles were primarily diplomatic. Diplomacy was an art much studied and much written about. Military encounters were governed by elaborate rules of chivalry. They required gamesmanship rather than warfare. Concerning themselves little with the lot of the common people, lords great and small maneuvered among themselves, jousting for advantage. Alliances were made and unmade as several states demonstrated might sufficient to disrupt the existing order without any state being able to dominate the empire. But by the fifth century warfare had intensified, diplomacy had fallen by the wayside, and demagogues were appealing for popular support in their need for infantry.

Central to the political disequilibrium of the period was the rapid rise of the state of Chu, the major power in the Yangzi River valley. In less than three centuries Chu conquered and absorbed forty-two other states. Considered semi-barbarian by Chinese of the central plain, the expansion of Chu culture was, according to the Chinese historian Li Xueqin, a major event of Eastern Zhou times, changing the ethnic mix of those considered Chinese. Chu efforts to unite all of China were stopped only late
in the seventh century by a coalition of northern states led by Jin. Confronted by a stalemate, the northern states agreed to accept Chu into the structure of Chinese states, but Chu persisted in its attacks and attempts to absorb the territory of its neighbors.

One response to Chu aggressiveness is particularly fascinating: the creation by the Chinese of the institution of the "Hegemon" to direct their embryonic international system. In 681 BCE a conference was convened by Duke Huan of Qi, a leading state in the northeast, out of which came the first recorded collective security arrangement, joining all of the eastern and central states. The obligations mutually undertaken were sanctified by the authority of the Zhou king. A few years later Duke Huan was named hegemon, or director of collective security for the member states. The system survived him and relative peace lasted approximately 200 years, but the league was never as central to the international system after his death. Leadership shifted from Qi to Jin and then the institution disappeared at the onset of the Warring States period toward the end of the fifth century.

Another interesting phenomenon of the Spring and Autumn era was the rise of a class of intellectuals, political theorists who aspired to be advisers on national security to the various feudal lords. Guan Zhong, architect of the Hegemon system, was one of the most successful. Confucius, who never attained the post he sought, is doubtless the best remembered of the breed. His contemporary, Sun Wu (Sun Zi), the military strategist from the state of Qi, continues to be studied in military academies all over the world.

Confucius came to manhood as the existing order was disintegrating. He was eager to find the ear of a powerful ruler, to advise him on how to reestablish order with justice in his own state and in all of the civilized world. He was persuaded that the Zhou had devised an international system that had functioned satisfactorily, assuring the wellbeing of the people. Much of his teaching was designed to restore that order. Peace and security were his highest priorities. To achieve peace and security, no subterfuge was denied to diplomats. Repelled by the warfare around him, Confucius nonetheless accepted the idea that force might be necessary to punish unruly or disloyal feudal lords or barbarians who stirred trouble within the state or on its frontiers. For him, as for national security intellectuals over the next two thousand years or so, the ends justified the means.

Sun’s guide to military strategy, Sun Zi’s Art of War (Sun Zi Bing Fa), was written about 500 BCE. Although it often has been perceived as a text on how to gain victory without going to war, the political scientist Iain Johnston has argued persuasively that Sun always assumed the centrality of military power in achieving state security; that his stratagems were designed to gain a position of overwhelming superiority before attacking. Like Confucius, Sun opposed the aggressive use of force for expansionist purposes—he feared the drain on the resources of the state—but he had little use for diplomacy or static defense. He did not consider virtuous conduct a high priority in warfare. The wise leader, with absolute flexibility as to means, first maneuvered as necessary to ensure victory, and then went to war. Confucian discomfort with violence as an instrument of state power may have dominated Chinese rhetoric, but Sun’s approach prevailed in practice.

Before the Spring and Autumn period exploded into that of the Warring States, Chinese contacts with non-Chinese peoples—beyond the Chu, Qin, and Yue who pressed on their periphery—increased. Horse nomadism had appeared by the eighth century, if not before, and the Chinese began to trade for horses. Collisions and trade with the Xiongnu, fierce Turkic-speaking nomads of the north and west, began in the lifetime of Confucius. The Xiongnu craved Chinese grain, wine, and silks. The Chinese wanted horses. When both sides were satisfied with the terms of trade, they exchanged goods in peace. When either side was dissatisfied, conflict ensued. The pattern continued for centuries.

These contacts with nomadic cultures beyond the pale affected Chinese culture in many different ways. Chinese art was influenced by an animal style that originated in Siberia and probably reached China via the Xiongnu or other Inner Asian peoples. The "lost-wax" technique of bronze casting, inferior to Shang technology, came to China from the West. Glass beads came from Egypt. The historian H. G. Creel has noted that Chinese silk was one of the principal commodities in the foreign trade of the Roman Empire. Clearly the universe in which the Chinese functioned was expanding beyond their earlier conceptions. The need to reinvent their place in the world was increasing, but from early in the fifth century to late in the second, the Chinese were too busy fighting each other. The Zhou peace had collapsed completely.

Historians estimate that during the Spring and Autumn era, 170 distinct political entities existed in China. Only seven of these survived to
the advent of the Warring States period—seven large states that owed
their size and presumably their wealth and power to the absorption of
the smaller states around them. These states were all “Chinese,” although
some doubtless had “barbarian” antecedents. Their people spoke and
wrote mutually intelligible languages and shared most elements of Chi-
inese culture. But they considered themselves to be independent states
and preserved their separateness with military fortifications and customs
restrictions. Each had its own army, led by professional generals. Each
had professional diplomats, trained in the art of intrigue, making and
breaking alliances. Together they controlled virtually all of north China.

The political order that existed throughout the years of nominal rule
by the Eastern Zhou was a multistate system that grew increasingly
apparent as Zhou power evaporated. Treaties were signed and violated,
embassies and hostages were exchanged, and a nascent system of inter-
national law came into existence. But the idea of a universal kingdom,
that there could be only one ruler under heaven, persisted nonetheless.
As the larger states devoured the smaller, their lords dared to call them-
selves kings and each imagined himself the man who would reunify
China, the founder of a new dynasty. Gradually Qin, the most westerly
of the states, a people with probable Rong barbarian roots, emerged as
the most powerful. In 236 BCE Qin destroyed the remnants of Zhou rule
and the other states were faced with the likelihood of destruction unless
they united in opposition to Qin aggression. For thirty-odd years they
rarely stood together, usually appeased and cooperated with Qin, until
one after another they were conquered. Qin succeeded in reunifying
China in 221 BCE under the rule of the man who called himself Qin Shi
Huangdi, the Qin Emperor.

As Qin moved toward dominating China, the Xiongnu began to press
on the frontier of several Chinese states. Reserving the bulk of their
infantry to fight among themselves, the Chinese attempted to contain
Xiongnu expansion by building walls to keep them out. These were the
walls later connected by Qin Shi Huangdi as the first Great Wall of China,
a boundary drawn between China and the nomads. But as yet the
Xiongnu were an unorganized force, more of a nuisance than a threat to
the security of any of the Chinese contenders for hegemony.

Throughout the incessant warfare of the age, the common people suf-
f ered terribly. They fought and died, had their land overrun, their crops
robbed, their families ravaged. It was a cruel world in which brute force
and cunning prevailed over virtue and decency. Sun Wu would not have
been surprised. It was the kind of world Thomas Hobbes envisioned
when he wrote The Leviathan many centuries later. Then and ever after,
confronted with such conditions, some people have found solace in other
worldliness, seeing the will of Heaven at work. Others sought more tem-
poral explanations for human suffering, and still others devised plans and
arguments for reducing human misery.

Confucius had longed to restore a golden age of peace that he imag-
inized his world had once enjoyed under the Zhou. For three centuries
after his death, conditions deteriorated and the search for peace, for order,
became more urgent. Two themes gained centrality in the writings of
Chinese intellectuals during the Warring States era and variations on
these themes have dominated the discourse of analysts of international
relations for thousands of years afterward. One argument, for which
the classic exponent was Mozi (c. 480–390), a contemporary of Socra-
tes, focused on the need for a balance of power to protect small and
weak states against potential aggressors. The other, expounded by Men-
cius (c. 371–289), a contemporary of Aristotle, and perhaps even earlier
by Laozi (c. 6th century BCE), was universalist, seeking a unified world
state, specifically the unification of the known world under one Chinese
government.10

Mozi perceived the universe as pluralistic and accepted the multistate
system of his time. His objective was to protect the weaker states by pre-
serving the system. Part of his approach, unsuccessful when he used it—
and forever after—was to argue the disutility of aggression. He insisted
that the victors as well as the vanquished paid too high a price in war-
fare. The cost of war, even when won, was enormous in terms of human
suffering and the impact on the economies of the states involved. War
was not only disruptive of the world order; it also had destructive effects
on those who chose to wage it. These were not arguments likely to appeal
to the men who dreamt of unifying the entire world under their rule—
or even to lesser men who saw an opportunity to seize a piece of land,
whether to increase their wealth, their power, or their security.

Mozi also had advice for the rulers of smaller states on how to sur-
vive in a hostile, anarchic world. He concentrated on developing defen-
sive schemes and emerged as a military strategist as well as a philoso-
pher and political theorist. But all his brilliance was to no avail as the
warring states warred on until only the Qin survived.
Laozi and Mencius sought respite in universal kingship. A good king would bring small states under his benign protection. Attracted by his kindness and his righteousness, weak states would flock to him. Mencius rejected the concept of a balance of power as it was known in the days when Duke Huan served as Hegemon. Competing alliances would inevitably provoke war. China—the world—needed a virtuous king to unify the known world and bring peace.

Other Chinese intellectuals in the declining days of the Eastern Zhou debated whether moral influence would suffice or power would dictate the outcome of world affairs. If one argued that the world was a murderous place in which force determined outcomes, another argued that aggression bred retaliation and that only moral force could bring peace. Clearly they anticipated the concerns of modern international relations theorists. But also resonant with readers today would be the work of another breed of ancient Chinese analysts whose sole concern was the enhancement of state power. Shang Yang (4th century BCE), the great Lord Shang, devised strategies for acquiring the wealth and power necessary to achieve control in the anarchic Chinese world. It was his advice that ultimately led to Qin hegemony in the third century BCE.

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**TABLE 1.2. Some Notable Dates of the Ancient World: 600–200 BCE**

(Dates are approximate. Events in boldface are referred to in text)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mayan civilization in Mexico</td>
<td>600 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyrus the Great founds Persian empire</td>
<td>538 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parthenon in Athens consecrated</td>
<td>438 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peloponnesian Wars</td>
<td>431–404 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choson kingdoms in north Korea</td>
<td>400–108 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander the Great invades India</td>
<td>327 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingdom of Parthia founded</td>
<td>249 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in modern Iran and Afghanistan)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China unified under Qinshi Huangdi</td>
<td>221 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannibal crosses the Alps</td>
<td>218 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rise of the Xiongnu led by Modun</td>
<td>209 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han Empire in China</td>
<td>206 BCE–220 CE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Qin had been viewed with contempt by the Chinese states of the central plain because of their suspect ethnicity. Living on the western frontier of Chinese civilization, among the Rong barbarians, they had developed a distinct culture. But as Qin troops marched through the rest of China, they adopted many of the ways of the conquered people, becoming more "Chinese" at the same time that their political dominance of China changed what it meant to be Chinese.

Qin success is usually attributed to the reforms of Shang Yang, especially those which weakened hereditary landholders and increased the power and efficiency of the central government. Shang's ideas had been rejected by the ruler of his native state, but the Qin had a reputation for receptivity to outside talent and he won a place for himself as adviser to the Qin ruler. The Qin state also had a geographic advantage over the plains states, based as it was on the rocky prominences of modern Shaanxi and Sichuan. It was simply easier to sweep down from the hills across the plain than it was to fight one's way up into the centers of Qin strength.

The Qin conquest was complete in 221 BCE and all of the Chinese culture area, all of the states that had viewed themselves as Chinese, were unified. The Qin king now ruled the entire Chinese world, the entire "civilized" world. To reign over "all," however, it was not enough to be a king (wang). Assigned the task of finding a grander title, advisers to the Qin ruler pronounced him First August Emperor, Qinshi Huangdi. The emperor then proceeded to eliminate feudalism, replacing the feudal system of the Eastern Zhou, not unlike that which later evolved in medieval Europe, with a centralized bureaucracy that governed through commanderies established over the length and breadth of the land.

Qinshi Huangdi and his principal advisers conceived of the sociopolitical order as all-embracing, controlling all activity. They standardized weights and measures, coinage, script—and attempted to standardize thought. Dissident thought and argument was prohibited. Books other than those approved by the emperor were burned. Dissenters were executed. The Qin people would be as one.

But Qinshi Huangdi was not content to rule over all of China. He was aware that there were other peoples beyond the frontiers and he pressed northward against the Xiongnu and even more aggressively to the south. Qin China seized parts of modern Inner Mongolia and Gansu to the north, most of Guangdong and Guangxi, and part of Fujian to the south. In addition to placing military outposts in these outlying regions, colonists were sent, often involuntarily. The Yue people, related to the Vietnamese, were driven further south, resisting assimilation every step of the way.

In 209, only a year after the First August Emperor's death, the great Maodun rose to organize a powerful Xiongnu confederation. Once united the Xiongnu not only resisted assimilation into China, but also constituted a major threat to China's security—a threat that waxed and waned for centuries, until nomadic horsemen overran China.

Pressed by the Xiongnu to the north, resisted fiercely in the south by the Yue, the Qin empire survived its first ruler by only a few years. Weakened by excessive military expansion, the regime could not suppress internal rebellions and fell to rebels in 206 BCE. Out of the rebel forces emerged the founder of the Han Dynasty.

There are two points about China's place in the world to be noted at the end of the third century BCE. First, the affairs of the Chinese people had ceased to be a model for international relations theory. China now existed as a single state and external affairs, whether war, diplomacy, trade, or cultural interaction, meant contact with alien cultures—to be found in Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, India, Central Asia, and along the Mediterranean, as well as among the nomads of the north. Second, a large, centrally controlled and militarily effective China now loomed as one of the great powers of the ancient world, along with Rome, India, and the Parthians who dominated Inner Asia. For the peoples of East Asia, and for travelers from afar, China was the force to be reckoned with, the state to which tribute would be paid or against which resistance had to be organized. The power of Han China dictated the international system of the region.

Other Rooms, Other Voices

Elsewhere in East Asia people had roamed for thousands of years before the Christian Era. Although most lived happily ignorant of the existence of the Chinese Empire, Koreans, like the Vietnamese to the south, felt the pressure of the eastward Chinese drive. They were among the "barbarians" the Chinese colonized, especially during the era of the Warring States. The state of Yen, with its capital near modern Beijing, pushed into
southern Manchuria driving the indigenous people before it. In the third century BCE, as Qin crushed its rivals, Chinese crossed the Yalu and set up the state of Choson as a haven for refugees. When the Qin collapsed toward the end of the century, still more Chinese fled to the Korean peninsula. Similarly the rise of the Xiongnu pushed the Koreans southward and eastward. As with billiard balls, those bumped down the peninsula bumped those who preceded them, some of whom crossed over to the Japanese isles.

By the fourth century BCE the Koreans had access to bronze weapons, some from China, some from Inner Asia, but their level of political organization remained the stone age village. The Korean historian Ki-baik Lee suggests that several such villages, or “walled-town states” had combined to form a “confederated kingdom.” Their material culture indicated Siberian as well as Chinese influence. Bronze casting, for example, was marked by use of Scythian-Siberian rather than Chinese technology. Similarly Korean combware, the earliest known pottery on the peninsula, appears to derive from Siberian styles, probably via Mongolia. Not until the Yen invasion c. 300 BCE were the Koreans subjected to the overwhelming force of Chinese culture. Again like the Vietnamese, however, they resisted assimilation, maintaining a continuous sense of themselves as not Chinese.

Of Japan in the years of the Zhou and the Qin, little is known. The earliest identifiable culture, the Jomon, produced a unique art with no evidence of continental influence. On the other hand, rice and the knowledge with which to construct an agricultural economy seems to have come across the East China Sea as early as the fifth century BCE. About two hundred years later, a more complex Yayoi culture emerged—with much stronger mainland influence. The earliest stimulus to change came from immigrants driven off the continent by the advancing Chinese empire. These were followed by Koreans who crossed the Tsushima Strait to Kyushu, fleeing pressures generated by the Chinese, but bringing with them elements of Chinese culture as well as their own. These migrations, too, were an important part of the international relations of East Asia on the eve of the Han Empire. Leading to the formation of Yayoi “kingdoms” in Japan, bringing an awareness of China, they set the stage for diplomatic relations between Japan and China.

Southeast Asia in pre-Han days arguably included much of China south of the Yangzi where many of the people were more closely related to the Thai and Vietnamese than to the Chinese. They resisted Chinese encroachment, resisted assimilation, and sometimes fled. By the end of the third century BCE, Chinese troops occupied much of the coastline.

Although island Southeast Asia lacked coherent settlement in pre-Han days, some of the peoples of the mainland had entered the bronze age and developed agricultural economies several hundred years before—certainly by the fifth century BCE. The region in the vicinity of the modern Thai-Cambodian border appears to have been the most highly developed politically. The bronze Dong-san drums found in much of mainland Southeast Asia probably originated in Yunnan or Vietnam and owed nothing to Chinese techniques, which they almost certainly antedated. Their dispersion through the region is evidence of trade mechanisms and routes that had been developed before the Han—patterns for which China was irrelevant, although Malay sailors were frequenting coastal China by the third century.

Those parts of Southeast Asia contiguous with China could not resist its influence, and were continuously forced to react to Chinese pressures. At its steadily expanding borders, China behaved as any imperialist power would: exploiting weaker people and seizing their territory. Island Southeast Asia, however, was beyond the ken of Chinese leaders and few Chinese traveled to the farther reaches of the mainland. Trade was not yet an important means of cross cultural contact as the first Han emperor ascended to the throne in 206 BCE. In brief, Southeast Asians experienced the Chinese as aggressors or, more likely, not at all.

Empire of the Han, Challenge of the Xiongnu

Bereft of the forceful leadership of the First Emperor, the Qin teetered under the pressure of rebellion—the inevitable result of imperial overreach and the oppression and exploitation of their people. As Qinshi Huangdi lay in an enormous tomb near modern Xi'an, accompanied by thousands of terra-cotta warriors, the empire collapsed, ceasing to exist by the end of the year 206 BCE. Soon the unity achieved by the Qin was threatened by the reemergence on Chinese soil of multiple kingdoms, perhaps as many as twenty, several with antecedents in the Warring States era. After several years of battling among these, the two most successful “kings” agreed to divide the country between them. One of them,
Liu Bang, a man of peasant origins, in due course violated the agreement and succeeded in destroying his rival. Undisputed as master of China, in 202 he took the title of emperor. Having previously declared himself King of Han, he became Han Gaodi, founder of the Han empire.

The Han empire might fairly be said to comprise two dynasties, the Former Han (206 BCE–9 CE) and the Later Han 25–220, divided by the reign of Wang Mang, long written off by Chinese scholars as a usurper. The fifth emperor, who took the dynastic name of Han Wudi, ruled a united China for more than fifty years, from 141–87 BCE. Wudi was one of the greatest imperialists of all time, building an empire larger than that of Rome at its mightiest. Under his leadership an aggressive China struck out in all directions, ultimately seizing control of parts of Korea, Mongolia, and Vietnam—and much of Central Asia. China was manifestly the regional hegemon, a position of dominance the Chinese came to see as their birthright.

At the outset, however, the brilliant future of the Han was by no means assured. Han Gaodi’s empire was relatively weak. He was fortunate to prevent the breakup of China into the loose confederacy espoused by his rivals and to reaffirm the principle of a single imperial entity. But even after he prevailed in the civil strife that followed the collapse of the Qin, the territorial integrity of China was threatened. To the north the Xiongnu had united under the leadership of Maodun and Gaodi’s regime lacked the strength to defend its people against nomadic raids. To the south, in modern Fujian, Guangdong, and Guangxi, areas claimed by the Qin rejected Gaodi’s rule. He was forced to acknowledge the independence of the king of Donghai in Fujian. The man who controlled Guangdong and Guangxi proclaimed the kingdom of Nanyue and Gaodi lacked the resources to stop him. External enemies would have to be appeased. Separatism on the periphery required at least temporary acquiescence. The first task was to consolidate power in China’s heartland—and that took about sixty years.

Qinshi Huangdi had been relatively successful in containing the nomadic Xiongnu. But led by Maodun, who came to power just before the collapse of the Qin, the Xiongnu succeeded in penetrating and circumventing the “Great Wall.” Given the military technology of the day, Chinese troops were no match for the speed and maneuverability of Maodun’s cavalry. Xiongnu raids for grain and cloth, badly needed products of sedentary Chinese society, were incessant.

Han Wudi, having demonstrated his prowess on the battlefield against all other challengers following the collapse of the Qin, decided to attack the Xiongnu and put an end to their depredations. The results were disastrous, very nearly costing him his life. Complicating efforts by the Han to cope with the Xiongnu threat was the uncertain loyalty of Han border forces. Ambitious generals occasionally defected to the Xiongnu, choosing a share of the spoils over possible defeat and death at the hands of the Xiongnu or their own vindictive superiors. There was little sense of being Han Chinese, of the need to defend the motherland against the foreign invader. A military solution to the problem was beyond reach.

Initially, appeasement of the Xiongnu was the only option available. The Xiongnu state was offered recognition as an equal. Concession after concession was granted, allowing the nomads increasingly favorable access to Chinese goods until it became clear that China was a de facto tributary of the Xiongnu. Gifts of food, wine, and silk in increasing quantities were sent to Maodun and finally a woman of the Han imperial family, designated a princess, was given to him in marriage. All of these gestures won Maodun’s agreement not to invade Han territory, but he and his heirs frequently demanded more. In 177 BCE the Xiongnu launched a major invasion. Peace was purchased by opening border markets, but proved no more lasting than before. There were annual raids, and major attacks in 166 and 160, all of which indicated the failure of the Chinese to meet the expectations of the militant horsemen. Traditionally, Chinese historians have blamed the constant friction on nomad greed. The anthropologist Thomas Barfield has argued that Xiongnu leaders depended on the distribution of Chinese goods to hold the support of their followers. He contended that they established a “deliberately predatory policy” and cultivated a “particularly violent reputation” to maximize their bargaining position with Han China. Others, more sympathetic to the Xiongnu, have criticized Chinese efforts to cheat and manipulate their less sophisticated neighbors, insisting that when the nomads were allowed to obtain the commodities they needed, peace was possible.

Han Wudi ascended to the throne in 141 BCE at a time of relative equilibrium in Han-Xiongnu relations. Chinese defenses had held since approximately 160. By mid-century all of the major independent Chinese kingdoms had been eliminated and their populations brought under control of central government commanderies, adding to the security of the borders. Initially, Wudi maintained the appeasement policy of his pred-
cessors which, backed by growing Chinese power, had achieved stability on the frontier. Among his advisers, however, a disinclination to continue paying tribute to the Xiongnu was emerging: the price of peace was too high. Perceiving that the balance of power was tilting in China’s favor, the emperor decided to take the offensive.

One problem of which Han strategists were very much aware was the extent of Xiongnu dominance of Central Asia, of the area the Chinese called the Western Regions. Control of the caravan routes carrying goods to Southwest Asia and of the oasis states along the way gave the Xiongnu access to valuable resources, human and material. In 139 BCE, Zhang Qian set out from the court on a journey to the Far West to seek alliances for the Han, to attempt to win away supporters vital to the Xiongnu and to find a source of desperately needed war horses. His efforts failed. Captured along the way by the Xiongnu, he spent ten years as their prisoner, but upon his eventual return to China he provided Wudi with valuable intelligence. Zhang undertook a second mission to the West in 115. On the basis of the information he provided about trade opportunities and the potential for finding allies among the states of the Western Regions, Wudi concluded that China’s destiny lay in westward expansion. The deployment of Han troops to the northwest and the colonization of areas in the vicinity of modern Dunhuang—where remnants of ancient walls and forts still stand—was critical to the success of the campaign against the Xiongnu and evidence of Wudi’s ambitions.

The operations against the Xiongnu began in 134 BCE with a trap designed to capture their leader. The trap failed and was followed by a series of battles costly to both sides. In 129, fullscale war began. Gradually Wudi’s forces drove the Xiongnu out of their grazing areas in China’s Yellow River heartland toward a region north of the Gobi Desert. For the next fifty years, the Han and the Xiongnu struggled for control of the West, for the wealth of the caravan routes and the support of the oasis city-states. The Han military expeditions advanced further and further to the West, reaching Sogdiana and Ferghana, in the vicinity of modern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, making contact with the Persian empire.

What gifts of silk and gold and marriageable princesses did not accomplish was achieved by the conquest of Ferghana in 107 BCE. When Ferghana rejected Chinese demands for horses, the emperor and his advisers recognized that the credibility of the empire was at stake and committed the resources necessary for a military victory—which came
despite the extraordinary logistical problems of projecting power so far from the heartland. Many of the lesser states of the region benefited from the demonstration and chose to pay homage to the Han. Xiongnu influence was virtually eliminated.

The Xiongnu had fallen on hard times as a result of the successful challenge by Han Wudi. They lost control of cultivated land as well as grazing land. Subject peoples, sensing Xiongnu decline, perhaps assuming Chinese support, revolted. Sources of revenue were lost as was access to iron weapons. Tensions among the Xiongnu, submerged by the charismatic Maodun, less successfully by subsequent leaders, surfaced anew in the face of adversity. By 70 BCE rivalry between two brothers divided the Xiongnu into two separate kingdoms, one in Inner Mongolia and one in Outer Mongolia. The kingdom in Inner Mongolia soon became an ally of the Han, a relationship which survived to the end of the Former Han dynasty.

The decline of the Xiongnu was demonstrated dramatically in 51 BCE when Hu-han-yeh, the leader of Inner Mongolia, appeared at the Han court to pay homage to the emperor. His son remained at the court as a hostage to his good behavior. In return, the Chinese protected him from his brother and other enemies and sent provisions of food and silk for his people. Hu-han-yeh requested a Han princess in marriage but settled for a lady-in-waiting. She and her offspring are believed to have helped the Xiongnu court continue its pro-Han policies for the remainder of the century. A Han-Xiongnu military alliance was signed c. 43 BCE with the Xiongnu of Inner Mongolia serving as China's first line of defense against their northern brethren. Throughout the last years of the Former Han, the Xiongnu of Outer Mongolia chose not to challenge Chinese power.

The relationship between the Han and their Xiongnu allies served the security ends of both regimes. For the Xiongnu, access to Chinese goods was of enormous importance, compensation for their role as mercenaries of the empire and the nominal homage they paid to the Han emperor. The nomads were not interested in becoming Chinese nor did the Han press sinicization upon them. Nonetheless, at the principal points of contact, some nomads accepted elements of Chinese culture—and some Chinese became more like the Xiongnu. The most useful paradigm is probably that of the "Middle Ground," developed by Richard White in his study of early contacts between the Indians of North America and European traders. On the frontiers a culture emerged that was neither Chinese nor Xiongnu, but a melding of both, evidence of mutual accommodation.

It was during these years that the Chinese developed practices for managing foreign affairs traditionally referred to as the tributary system, a system of enormous political importance to Chinese ruling elites and of great economic importance to those regimes that accepted tributary status. Under the system, non-Chinese—"barbarian"—states accepted a nominally subordinate place in the Chinese imperial order. They demonstrated this subordination by sending missions to the Chinese court and paying homage to the Chinese ruler to whom they presented acceptable gifts. Usually they left hostages, presumably members of their ruling families. In return they received gifts from the emperor, often more valuable than those they had submitted, and opportunities for private trade.

Obviously, the greater the Chinese need for the submission of the tributary state the greater its potential threat to Chinese security or importance as an ally the greater the value of the goods sent back with the tribute mission. The system appears to have been expensive for the Chinese, but the symbolic submission of the barbarian state was more palatable politically than outright appeasement and less problematic than endless warfare on the periphery. To the barbarians, ritual submission was a price they grudgingly paid in exchange for Chinese bribes and access to trade. Yu Ying-shih, the leading authority on Han foreign relations, argues that the tribute system was a net loss to China at the state level, although individual Chinese profited.15

The various states of the Western Regions, of Central Asia, were drawn into the tribute system as part of the Han crusade against the Xiongnu. But in the course of sending troops westward, Chinese officials and entrepreneurs recognized the magnificent commercial potential of links to the area. They found some Chinese goods already available and a great hunger for more. The Han conquest of Ferghana brought a flurry of envoys from the west bearing tribute for the emperor in 102 BCE, but the states of the Western Region remained wary of Xiongnu retribution until Hu-han-yeh, too, paid homage to the Han emperor. After 53 BCE the system was greatly strengthened and remained effective until the end of the Former Han.

The trade dividend derived from Han expansion to the west brought the Chinese into contact with India, Parthia, and Rome. Chinese silks reached Rome via India and over the Silk Road from the Han capital at Chang'an across the Tarim Basin through Samarkand to Iran, Iraq, and Syria, the eastern reaches of the Roman Empire. Most of the Chinese
products that reached Egypt and other Mediterranean countries passed through Parthian and Indian middlemen. The bulk of the products of the Roman Empire and the Western Regions found in Han China were luxury goods, used by the court to enhance its prestige, but of little consequence for its subject people.

The Han ruling class was well aware that a world existed beyond the control of the Chinese empire; that the emperor did not rule all under heaven. The emperors and their advisers understood that some neighbors could be subjugated and absorbed, that the character of the relationship to others would depend upon the extent of Chinese power at a given moment, and that still others would remain distant, touching China rarely, perhaps only indirectly. To enhance the legitimacy of the dynasty, all peoples might be declared part of the tributary order, but little was expected of those outside the reach of Chinese power. The critical areas were those recently conquered, presumably pacified, and those in the hands of peoples only nominally friendly, whose allegiance to China depended on the local power balance. Toward these areas the Han looked anxiously, eager to see tribute missions testifying to their loyalty, ever fearful of desertion. They knew that the sinocentric regional order they desired depended on variables over which they had limited influence and they recognized the existence of peoples who might fail to appreciate the superiority of Chinese culture and Chinese rule. And they did not hesitate to use military power whenever they met resistance. 16

The Koreans and China’s southern neighbors benefited but temporarily from Han preoccupation with the Xiongnu. As Han power grew in the reign of Wudi, China’s outward thrust could not be contained. Large parts of Korea, modern southeast and southwest China, and Vietnam fell under the occupation of Han troops.

Although Chinese influence in Korea was longstanding, dating back hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years, the Koreans had maintained a separate identity. In the Warring States era and again during the last years of the Qin, Chinese emigrated to the Yalu region to escape the tribulations of warfare at home. Early in the second century BCE, after a failed revolt against the Han, more Chinese fled to Korea, to the vicinity of the ancient kingdom of Choson at P’yongyang. In 195 BCE they seized control of the kingdom and established their leader Wei Man (Wiman) as king. For nearly seventy years Choson remained on the periphery of Han concerns, dominating most of the rest of Korea and brokering contact with China.

By 128 BCE, Wudi would tolerate Korean independence no longer, but a Han offensive was thrown back by the Koreans. Over the next two decades, as the Xiongnu threat subsided, the Chinese brought more and more pressure to bear, finally overcoming—but not ending—Korean resistance by 105 BCE. On Korean territory the Chinese established four commanderies or occupation districts, one of which was abandoned in 81 BCE as an economy measure, two of which eventually surrendered in the face of Korean resistance and the growing power of the Korean kingdom of Koguryo. The fourth, Luolang, located in the northwest, around modern P’yongyang, lasted until 313 CE when the Chinese were finally driven out by Koguryo forces.

Luolang functioned as a Chinese enclave in Korea, in which the Chinese lived the good life imperialists have enjoyed throughout history while exploiting indigenous peoples. It became a center of high Chinese culture, little of which seems to have affected the native population. The extraordinary quality of objects, particularly lacquers, found in Luolang era tombs indicates just how splendidly Chinese officials, merchants, and scholars managed their expatriate existence. Luxury items imported from Sichuan and from parts of the Roman Empire have been found in Luolang. It is perhaps not surprising that some wealthy Chinese, seeking to live the good Chinese life away from the tax collectors of the central government, chose to retire there. And before the colony reverted to Korean control, it became a staging post between Japan and Han China, foreshadowing a role Korea would play through much of its subsequent history. 17

While one set of Han armies was marching into Korea, others moved south toward the east coast and modern Guangdong and Hainan Island, into Guangxi and Vietnam, southwest into Yunnan, toward India. China’s motives for the attacks varied, as the rationalizations for imperialism often do. Nanyue was invaded and the city of Guangzhou seized in 111 BCE in response to the murder of a Chinese-born queen. Doubtless some other provocation would have been found in due course. Nine commanderies were established to maintain order in the south—although efforts to subdue Fujian were abandoned because of the difficult terrain and fierce local resistance. Elsewhere in the south Han advances were limited by tropical diseases, Southeast Asia’s best protection against Chinese aggression. Forays into Yunnan appear to have been driven by economic interests, by the quest for a passage that would permit direct trade with India, cutting out the tenacious Parthian middlemen who domi-
nated the southern and southwestern trade routes out of Central Asia. In most of the south, as in Korea, the local people resisted assimilation—although they could not be unaffected by various aspects of Chinese culture, ranging from Confucianism to the iron technology that provided the Han with a military advantage over its neighbors.

The cost of Han imperialism was enormous and, perhaps inevitably, a debate emerged among the emperor’s advisers and public intellectuals that will seem only too familiar to modern readers. Was the empire expending too much of its resources on military and foreign affairs? Could it afford further expansion? Was an aggressive foreign policy in China’s interests? Who was benefiting from Chinese imperialism at whose expense? These kinds of issues, disagreements over the proper distribution of social and economic resources, are perennial, but Wudi’s policies spawned not only critics but also the world’s first recorded public debate on foreign policy, the Yantie ban or Salt and Iron debate of 81 BCE, a few years after the end of his reign.  

The salt and iron monopolies were the most important sources of revenue for the Han government. The state, unfriendly to private enterprise, to nongovernmental repositories of wealth and power—which thrived nonetheless—controlled these two industries and used their huge proceeds to maintain its armed forces, initially for frontier defense but ultimately to underwrite expansion. The foreign policy debate of the last century BCE focused on the use of those funds and included a challenge to the state monopoly. Opposition to government policy came primarily from Confucian scholars who were profoundly troubled by the constant resort to force in foreign affairs and by what they perceived as the misuse of state funds, the senseless loss of life among the Chinese people, and the waste of labor. In the traditional Confucian-Mencian discourse, the would-be reformers argued that if the emperor and his ministers were more virtuous, military means would not be necessary to win the submission of the Xiongnu or other barbarians. Military expansion, they contended, had weakened China rather than assuring its security. They were troubled by the accumulation of great wealth by those who profited from foreign trade and the ostentatious displays of luxury by the newly rich and by the court. Distinguishing between the court and the state, these critics contended that expansion and the import of barbarian goods served the interests of a privileged few and not the interests of the Chinese people. They were critical of what they perceived as extravagant entertainments at the capital, designed to impress foreigners.

The Han government rejected these claims and charges. Han administrators demonized the Xiongnu, insisting they were not responsive to virtue, but only to overwhelming military power. Frontier defense required a large and aggressive army which, in turn, required the revenues of the salt and iron industries. Border posts and expeditions to protect caravans merely facilitated the movement of local products, ultimately enriching the entire empire, benefiting all of the Chinese people. With a few minor concessions, such as the termination of peripheral commanderies, one in Korea in 82 BCE and the one on Hainan island in 46 BCE, the government prevailed. Discontent with government policy persisted, however, and the continuing debate over foreign policy was reflected even in Han tomb decoration. Retrenchment from the expansiveness of Han Wudi proved necessary as the cost of empire began to exceed the capacity of the government to maintain it, even before Wudi’s death.

On the other hand, with the submission of the southern Xiongnu in 51 BCE, the Chinese enjoyed unprecedented peace on their northern border. For much of the century the country enjoyed an economic boom, as promised by the government. One historian refers to an “explosive” development of commerce as an upwardly mobile population clamored for consumer goods, especially luxury objects that provided material evidence of success. Explosive trade, wealthy merchants, and what Thorstein Veblen 2,000 years later would label “conspicuous consumption” added up to a Confucian scholar’s nightmare.

Han administrators also found that foreign adventures once embarked upon were not so simple to terminate. Moreover, the men who thought they were determining policy in the capital had not anticipated the extent to which their gallant generals might expend lives and treasure on the frontier, involving the empire in affairs in which it had little if any interest. Critics insisted that the government stop rewarding army officers for winning battles in distant lands, seizing unwanted territory, and increasing China’s commitments, but the state of communications limited the court’s control of its advancing forces. And if an alliance was signed, how could the Han refrain from honoring it simply because its minor ally provoked a scrape in which China had no stake? What would happen to China’s credibility with other, more valuable allies if it failed to honor
its commitment? If China sent a princess to wed a foreign leader, to demonstrate the sincerity of its friendship, could it stand by idly if she were endangered? The contentious city states of the Western Region provided a constant series of headaches for Chinese policymakers.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1.3. Some Major Figures of the Ancient World</th>
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<td>(Dates are often approximate. Names in boldface are discussed in text)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hammurabi of Babylon</th>
<th>1810–1750 BCE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tutankhamen of Egypt</td>
<td>1400–1352 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cyrus the Great of Persia</td>
<td>585–529 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama)</td>
<td>563–481 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confucius</td>
<td>551–479 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pericles of Athens</td>
<td>495–429 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mozi</td>
<td>470–391 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socrates</td>
<td>469–399 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plato</td>
<td>428–348 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aristotle</td>
<td>384–322 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mencius</td>
<td>371–289 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alexander the Great of Macedon</td>
<td>356–323 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asoka of India</td>
<td>269–238 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qingshi Huangdi</td>
<td>260–210 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hannibal of Carthage</td>
<td>247–183 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Judah Maccabee</td>
<td>190–162 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Han Wudi</td>
<td>170–87 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Julius Caesar</td>
<td>162–44 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jesus of Nazareth</td>
<td>6 CE–10 CE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caligula</td>
<td>14–41 CE</td>
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<td>Marcus Aurelius</td>
<td>121–180 CE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cao Cao</td>
<td>180–230 CE</td>
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<tr>
<td>St. Augustine</td>
<td>354–430 CE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attila the Hun</td>
<td>406–453 CE</td>
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The remaining years of the Former Han dynasty were marked by consolidation and retrenchment, a defensive rather than an offensive posture. Mounting opposition to the costs of empire, complaints about mal-distribution of wealth, and the absence of any plausible threat after the submission of the southern Xiongnu undermined the expansionists. The central government attempted to rein in its more adventurous military officers, refusing them rewards and rejecting opportunities to engage potential enemies. Occasional battles could not be avoided, but it was clear that the court accepted these challenges reluctantly. Overtures for new alliances, as from Sogdiana in Central Asia, were rejected, and relations with Kashmir terminated. Instead of costly and logistically problematic expeditions into increasingly more distant lands, China moved toward the establishment of colonies along its new and extended frontiers. One product of the attempt to reconcile political and economic policy was the development of agricultural garrisons which could provide for frontier defense and feed themselves. Remains of some of these are still visible today in China's Far West.

Increasing Chinese diffidence in Central Asia was indicated by the decision not to seize the opportunity provided by the defeat of a major adversary in 36 BCE. A Xiongnu leader had aligned his forces with those of Sogdiana and together they were trying to dominate the region, interfering with Han operations there, murdering Han diplomats who sought to negotiate with them. Leading a force of primarily local, non-Chinese troops, a young Han officer attacked and defeated the Xiongnu-Sogdian raiders, killing their leader. Han Wudi would have lavished rewards on his officers and exploited the occasion to strengthen his outposts in Central Asia. His successors were more than content to be rid of the irritant, unwilling to capitalize on the achievement. Fearful of encouraging others who would be heroes, the emperor's men had scant praise and few gifts for the victor.

Another indicator of the changed climate of opinion among Han policymakers was their ambivalent response to provocations by Yunnanese locals who resisted assimilation. Although troops were sent from time to time in an effort to keep open trade routes to India, the court was divided. Again the issue was whether it was appropriate to spend Chinese treasure and Chinese lives in a region so remote from the Han heartland. Were the interests served worth the cost? Increasingly, as Han officials and intellectuals imagined the borders of their society, they were disinclined to include lands to the west that had been forced to submit to the empire by Wudi's armies.

In the last years of the Former Han, one powerful leader, Wang Mang, persisted in the vision of a greater Chinese empire. Wang, nephew of the
empress dowager Wang Zhengjun, was named regent—a post held previously by several of his uncles—in 8 BCE. The emperor Chengdi (r. 33-7 BCE), Zhengjun’s son, was weak and uninterested in governing. The Wang family filled the vacancy. Forced out of office by a new emperor in 7 BCE, Wang returned in 2 BCE. In the midst of a succession crisis a few years later, he assumed the title of acting emperor. In 9 CE he brushed aside the Han and proclaimed himself emperor of a new dynasty over which he reigned for fifteen years until his defeat and death in 23 CE opened the way for a Han restoration, the years of the Later Han. Although Wang is dismissed by most Chinese historians as an inept and murderous usurper, at least one modern historian has argued persuasively that Wang demonstrated "impressive mastery" of foreign affairs. It was the flooding of the Yellow River that undermined his efforts at home, leading to peasant rebellion and his ignominious end.

As the Western world entered the Christian era, the Chinese under the rule of the Former Han, Wang Mang, or the Later Han, faced familiar problems of frontier defense and the restlessness of unassimilated peoples within their borders. The Xiongnu stirred again, despite a powerful pro-Chinese faction led by a half-Chinese princess. In 9 CE they broke the peace that had lasted more than a half century. Wang Mang responded by mobilizing his forces, demonstrating that China had the will and the might to resist armed intrusion, and then negotiated an agreement that successfully precluded major Xiongnu attacks for the remainder of his reign. Dissatisfaction with Chinese suzerainty in the Western Regions was also chronic, but Wang Mang yielded nothing. In 13 CE Karashahr killed the Chinese protector-general assigned to the area and in 16 CE ambushed a punitive expedition, but Wang Mang’s forces succeeded in reasserting Chinese control. Similarly, Chinese troops seized territory in the vicinity of Kokonor, overcoming the Qiang state there.

In the northeast, more trouble was brewing for the Chinese empire as the aggressive Korean tribesmen of Koguryo, centered on the upper reaches of the Yalu in Manchuria, challenged the Chinese occupation of northwestern and central Korea. Wang Mang had attempted to enlist Koguryo against the Xiongnu, the traditional Chinese policy of using barbarians against barbarians, but Koguryo attacked China instead. Chinese tactics, including the murder of the Koguryo leader, succeeded and in 12 CE China reestablished its hegemony over much of Korea.

As civil war wracked China in the last years of Wang Mang’s reign, his achievements in foreign affairs inevitably unraveled as well. Beyond the core of Chinese speaking peoples—and even at the edges of that entity—only Chinese power could hold the loyalty of the empire’s subjects. The Xiongnu and other nomadic peoples of the northern frontiers were not voluntary tributaries of China; nor were the Koreans, the various peoples of the Western Regions, the Vietnamese, or the hostile tribes of Fujian, Guanxi, Guangdong, and Yunnan. When the Xiongnu had been stronger, the Chinese had brought them tribute. The others were willing enough to leave the Chinese alone, eager only to be free of Chinese administrators and their enforcers. When internal strife weakened China, distracted Chinese imperialists, non-Chinese—and some Chinese—went their own ways, asserted their independence and, in some instances, tried to recoup earlier losses. It was this struggle for dominance with those who had freed themselves of Chinese oppression and exploitation that marked the early years of the Later Han.

The founding emperor of the Later Han, Guang Wudi (r. 25-57) necessarily focused his attention on internal affairs, on consolidation of his power at home. His preoccupation with domestic affairs assured continued slippage on the frontiers of the empire. Unable and unwilling to confront a renewed challenge by the Xiongnu, he attempted to appease them. His policy failed. The Xiongnu persisted in raiding Chinese settlements, driving off Chinese farmers. Before long they had moved into territory long considered Chinese. The Han empire was contracting.

When several states of the Western Regions proposed reestablishment of the Chinese protectorate to defend them against Yarkand, the area’s dominant power of the moment, Guang Wudi refused. Presumably he was deterred by the high cost of foreign adventure and frontier garrisons. Several leaders of the Western Regions promptly submitted to the Xiongnu, seeking the protection China would not provide. On the other hand, when the Vietnamese rebelled against the flow of Chinese immigrants into their land, an able Chinese general crushed the rising and followed his military success with the forced sinicization of the people of north Vietnam. Had the general required additional support from the capital, the outcome might well have been different.

Fortune favored the emperor. Once again (c. 50 CE) the Xiongnu divided regionally into northern and southern factions, spurring diplo-
matic and military action by China. Each of the Xiongnu factions was interested in enlisting Chinese support against the other. Once again the Chinese chose to join forces with the southern Xiongnu, who ultimately surrendered to the Han, accepting tributary status to their ultimate gain. Efforts to send back Chinese who had fled from regions under Xiongnu control failed, however, and the presumably friendly southern Xiongnu continued to exist as an independent state within China’s borders. Guang Wudi’s generals called for an attack on the northern Xiongnu, to eliminate the persistent threat, but he refused, perfectly content to hold a strong defensive position buffered by the southerners who remained in a state of tension with their brethren to the north. His generals feared a Xiongnu reconciliation; he did not, confident of his policy of divide and conquer. In the long run they were right, but not before Guang Wudi went peacefully to his grave.

Although the Xiongnu long constituted the greatest threat to the Chinese empire, there were other “barbarians” who gave the Han grief. Among these were the Wuhan and the Xianbi, both of whom operated in the north, occasionally allied or subordinate to the Xiongnu, occasionally at war with them. With both of these, Guang Wudi’s appeasement policy was successful, at least in his lifetime. The Wuhan gladly entered the tribute system in 49 CE and in the same year, a major Xianbi leader accepted a Chinese bribe.

In Guang Wudi’s reign, the dynasty was firmly established and he, for one, would have considered his foreign policy a success. He left his people enjoying peace with the Xiongnu threat in particular greatly reduced. He had minimized the empire’s commitments in Central Asia and his armies had kept hostile forces in the region at bay. The Vietnamese had been taught a lesson and the difficulties posed by other obstreperous tributaries were relatively minor. Direct trade links with India had been established. His generals were not altogether happy, but they gave him less trouble than his in-laws. It was not a bad record.

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<tr>
<th>Table 1.4. Some Notable Dates of the Ancient World: 200 BCE–200 CE</th>
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<tr>
<td>(Dates are approximate. Events in boldface are referred to in text)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Yayoi Culture in Japan</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Maccabean revolt against Romans</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Carthage destroyed by Romans</strong></td>
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The remaining years of the Later Han were marked by increased contact with the outside world, not all of it friendly. Trade relations spread from Japan to the east and westward across Central Asia all the way to Rome. The impact on Chinese culture was profound, from the adaptation of Mediterranean lead glazes on Chinese ceramics to what some scholars have called the Indianization of China through the influence of Buddhism. The recurring theme in China’s foreign relations, however, was struggle with its immediate neighbors, the “barbarians” who surrounded them, the Xiongnu, the Qiang (often called Tibetans or proto-Tibetans), the Wuhan, Xianbi, and Man.

The extent of trade relations and the volume of the trade itself depended largely on China’s relative power at any given time. Han troops paved the way for merchants as they marched north, south, east, and west. And the merchants, as they developed ties to the economies of distant cities, facilitated expansion. Indeed they sometimes served as the advance agents of empire. The relationship between the tributary system and trade was equally important. Many peoples that accepted tributary status did so in anticipation of using tribute missions as vehicles for trade. Similarly, extensive private trade was conducted by Chinese envoys traveling to the outer reaches of the empire, especially to the Western Regions. When Chinese power was in decline or when the court sought greater economies in foreign relations, the tributary system, a financial liability to the state, shrunk, Chinese troops were less evident on the periphery, and Chinese merchants went forth less boldly.
Silk was, of course, the Chinese product most treasured abroad. The frontier nomads, the Indians, the various peoples of Central Asia, and inhabitants of the Roman Empire all found ways to obtain Chinese silk. Much of the trade ran over the fabled Silk Road, through the Gansu corridor, around the Tarim Basin, into what is now Xinjiang, and on to India, Syria, and Rome itself. It was an extraordinarily hazardous journey, over mountains and through the terrible Taklamakan Desert. The northernmost route, north of the Tianshan Mountains, was the least desolate, but its semi-pastoral terrain harbored nomadic bandits. South of the mountains ran a double track, a necklace of oases populated by Indo-Europeans, on either side of the nearly dry Tarim River. Merchants who survived sandstorms and lack of water often fell victim to bandits, but they drove their camel caravans on because of the enormous profits to be made.

For many years the Parthians served as middlemen between China and both India and the Roman Empire, but before the end of the first century CE, the Han established direct, official trade with India. Even before, some of India’s trade with Rome was in Chinese silk. And at the oases along the Silk Road, Chinese and assorted foreign merchants mingled—a critical point of contact between cultures that brought new religious and philosophical visions as well as exotic goods such as Baltic amber, Red Sea pearls, and grape wine from Central Asia back to the Chinese heartland.

Some international trade was seaborne, often carried by boat to and from intermediate points in Southeast Asia. Sumatra, Malaya, Burma, Ceylon, and India moved goods across the waters to and from China and Chinese vessels plied the same waters. Much of China’s trade with Rome in the days of the Later Han went by sea via India as both sides tried to cut out the Parthians and the tariffs they imposed. Indeed the Chinese perceived Rome to be a maritime country. The modern city of Guangzhou (Canton) was the port of entry for most goods coming from the south by sea. Chinese and Korean mariners sailed the waters between their countries, competing with overland carriers in the movement of goods. And, of course, all contact with the Japanese islands was by sea—although often via Korea. Japanese missions to the Han in 57 and 167 CE, for example, are believed to have come through Korea.

Clearly trade brought the Chinese into contact with much of the rest of Eurasia. The Han, like most Confucian-influenced dynasties, did not encourage such activity. Indeed, merchants were forced to overcome a variety of government obstructions and taxes. But then, as so often in the years to follow, the ingenuity of the merchants prevailed.

Foremost among the foreign ideas to reach China in the years of the Later Han was Buddhism, which entered through the trade routes, most obviously along the Silk Road from Central Asia. Buddhist monks from India and Ceylon sailed to Vietnam and then walked into China. By the time of Guan Wudi’s death Buddhist influence had reached east central China and a Buddhist monastery could be found in the capital by the end of the first century CE.

Initially Buddhist teaching and religious activity was wholly foreign dominated. Indian texts were translated into Chinese by Parthians, Sogdians, Khotanese, Iranians, and assorted Central Asian barbarians as well as Indians. The best known of these was a Parthian monk who reached Luoyang in 148 and taught there for twenty years. Buddhism, especially Mahayana Buddhism with its bodhisattvas, intrigued Chinese intellectuals and the court aristocracy. It was exotic, interesting, and it seemed to fill a need not met by traditional Confucian, Daoist, and animist beliefs. Monasticism appealed to the Chinese. Entering the country peacefully, posing no apparent threat to the authority of the state, Buddhist teachers encountered no resistance. Indeed, foreign monks were in great demand in the capital and in 166 Buddhism was formally introduced at court. The emperor included the Buddha among the recipients of his religious sacrifices. Mid-second century appears to have been a time of great interest in things foreign and a time when the court amused itself by imitating fashions from India and Parthia, from the “west.” But Buddhism was very much more than a fad. It was becoming a major element in Chinese intellectual and religious life as it gradually permeated mass culture.

As new ideas and products flowed into China, old problems persisted. An empire the size of the Han would almost always have problems of frontier defense. When the Xiongnu were united, China’s borders were never secure. When the raids came, as they did almost inevitably, the debate over China’s response settled into a familiar pattern. Could barbarians be used against barbarians? Could China divide the Xiongnu and play one faction off another? Were there other nearby barbarians who could be induced to assist in the suppression of the nomads? Could China launch an offensive against the Xiongnu? Would it be a better use of Chinese resources to concentrate on a static defense of critical areas? And if
the Xiongnu were momentarily weak or divided, some other peoples at some other point on the frontier would covet Chinese territory or wealth, whether it be grain or silk or iron tools. There could be no rest for the leaders of a hegemonic empire.

A little more than a decade after his death, the Chinese court reversed Guang Wudi's decision to leave the Western Regions outside the empire's defensive perimeter. His policy had been questioned at the time and the rise of northern Xiongnu influence in the area strengthened those who argued for a more expansive policy. In 73 ce a Han offensive began, but despite success in driving a wedge between the Xiongnu and the remaining peoples of the area it took sixteen years for China to regain its dominance in Central Asia. A number of oases states resisted the reassertion of Chinese authority. The principal Chinese administrator, the Protector General of the Western Regions, and his forces were massacred in 75 ce by troops from Kucha and Karasahr in the Tarim Basin.

Once again the court debated the wisdom of offensive campaigns. The Xiongnu had not been particularly aggressive. Indeed they had been weakened by battles with the Xianbi and had pulled back far from the frontier with China. Several of the emperor's advisers argued that it would a waste of imperial resources to chase after them, a mistake to send Chinese troops so far from home. They contended that the potential benefits were not worth the cost. The emperor rejected their advice. Joined by the southern Xiongnu, the Han launched a massive offensive and crushed the northern Xiongnu. For more than a half a century, China enjoyed the dominance it regained in Central Asia. Indeed in 76 ce its victorious generals marched to the Caspian Sea and, searching for the Mediterranean, may have had a scouting party reach the Persian Gulf.

But into the vacuum created by the defeat of the northern Xiongnu rode the Wuhuan and Xianbi. And while the Han was pursuing the northern Xiongnu, the southern Xiongnu resumed tormenting them. But the next major problem came in Korea, where the kingdom of Koguryo, having progressed in the organization of its resources, attacked Han bases in 106, driving the Chinese westward. In 132 the Chinese regained some of the lost territory, but they knew they now had another formidable antagonist.

When the Xiongnu attacked Dunhuang, along the Silk Road, in 119, Chinese strategists saw another challenge to their influence in the Western Regions. This time advocates of a new campaign were overruled. Instead, the prevailing argument called for merely reinforcing bases such as Dunhuang and tightening Chinese control of roads and mountain passes. This static defense proved sufficient until mid-century—and it allowed the Han to reserve forces for confrontation with the Xianbi closer to home.

The Xianbi, like the Wuhuan, had little contact with China before the Han dynasty. They ranged across modern inner Mongolia, separated from the Chinese by the Xiongnu and the Wuhuan, who more often than not were allied with and subordinate to the Xiongnu. Relations between the Chinese and the Xianbi began in 49 ce when Guang Wudi bribed a Xianbi leader and won Xianbi support against the Xiongnu and Wuhuan.

It was another classic example of the Chinese practice of yi yi zhi yi, the use of barbarians to control barbarians. The Xianbi agreed to join the tributary system, but their price was very high. One historian estimates that Han gifts to the Xianbi were twice the value of the tribute the Xianbi delivered to the Han court. Nonetheless, before the century was over, the Xianbi had resumed raiding well-stocked Chinese frontier communities every winter, seizing the grain, cloth, and iron implements nomadic peoples could not produce for themselves.

In 110 the Chinese offered the Xianbi better trading opportunities, but the terms proved unsatisfactory and both the demands and the raids continued. By mid-century, the Xianbi had created a powerful nomadic confederation, cast off all pretense to tributary status, and posed a major threat to China's northern border. Aided by Han defectors and possessed of iron weapons despite Chinese efforts to ban their sale, they attacked with impunity. After many years of passive response and failed efforts at appeasement, in 177 the Han, supported by the Xiongnu, mobilized a large expedition to send against them. In 180, following the death of the principal Xianbi leader, the confederation crumbled and the Chinese had a brief respite on that edge of their frontier.

Again, the critical point is that the men responsible for China's security could never rest. Somewhere in the empire or on its fringes, there was almost always trouble. In addition to the Xiongnu, Xianbi, Wuhuan, and various peoples of the Western Regions, there were, closer to the heartland, the Qiang of the northwest and the Man of the south who became increasingly difficult toward the close of the second century CE. Chinese troops were almost constantly on the march, trying to preserve
the empire by intimidating nomadic raiders, pacifying buffer states, and suppressing peoples in the provinces who resisted assimilation.

The assumption that all conquerors would welcome the blessings of Chinese civilization was a delusion that came early and is not likely ever to disappear entirely. Beginning with the Yellow Turban rebellion in 184, the Han dynasty began to come apart. The death of Emperor Lingdi in 169 triggered a great struggle for power involving regional governors, the empress, various family members, and the court eunuchs. Amidst turmoil within the borders of the empire and around the periphery, the warlord Cao Cao eventually emerged as the dominant figure and in 220 the last Han emperor was forced to abdicate in favor of Cao Cao’s son. The empire shattered and China ceased to exist as a single entity for more than three hundred years until reunited by the Sui in 589. In the interim a succession of competing kingdoms ranged over the territory of the once mighty Han empire and other polities rose to challenge China’s preeminence in East Asia.

For most of the roughly four hundred years of the Han Dynasty, Former and Later, and the Wang Mang Interregnum as well, China was the paramount power in East Asia. Obviously, the Han had little influence on Japan or the islands of Southeast Asia. Much of continental Southeast Asia was beyond China’s reach. Parts of Inner Mongolia, Korea, and Manchuria were under Han control, but other parts remained in the hands of fiercely independent people who occasionally yielded to superior Han forces, but were quick to reassert themselves at the first opportunity. Nomadic cavalry, especially that of the Xiongnu and Xianbei, provided nearly constant grief for the Chinese, but during this era their peoples were unwilling to surrender their way of life, to leave the steppe, to settle down long enough to supplant China in the region. China’s strength waxed and waned over these centuries, but the relative sense of oneness of the Chinese people preserved China’s dominance.

China’s strategists practiced all the tricks of their trade and debated all of the central issues of international relations. They argued among themselves about when to appease and when to fight, about the value of various parts of the empire and the cost of maintaining it, about the usefulness or trustworthiness of this or that barbarian. They created an ingenious but expensive tributary system that greatly enhanced the status of the throne and proved to be a reasonably successful means of hold-

ing alien forces in China’s orbit. They built and sustained Chinese power for four hundred years, despite weak emperors and court intrigues, but the rot within the empire ultimately undermined their efforts and the unity of China.

Also of great significance during the centuries in which the Han ruled was the greatly expanded scope of China’s foreign affairs. The international relations of East Asia ceased to be primarily war and diplomacy involving various parts of China and the Xiongnu. Han contacts spread across the length and breadth of East Asia, including the islands. They reached by land and by sea to India and Ceylon. And as a harbinger of the distant future they reached across Central Asia and the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean, to the great civilizations of Egypt and Rome, as well as those of India and Parthia. Han China’s international contacts, through diplomacy, trade, and warfare, touched every part of the then civilized world. Not least were the cultural connections that brought fresh ideas from India and the West to China and vice versa. Of the cultural transfers that occurred in these years, the most enduring was Buddhism, which spread in its various forms to much of Central Asia and East Asia, as well as to China itself. East Asian culture was never the same.

The Diffusion of Power

China

The great and much feared Cao Cao was able to pass control of the Han capital to his son, who renamed the dynasty Wei, but he did not succeed in subduing two other pretenders to the succession. Three kingdoms, Wei, Shu Han (home of the legendary hero Zhuge Liang), and Wu, vied for dominance over the Chinese empire, but for a half century no one of them could succeed. The struggle between Cao Cao and his rivals provided the basis for the single most popular Chinese novel, the fourteenth-century Sanguozhi yanyi or Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

China’s disunity of necessity shrank its role in world affairs. There was still cultural exchange, trade, war, and diplomacy, but a divided China could not regain its empire, let alone transcend the heights achieved by the Han. Nonetheless, weak neighbors in Vietnam, Yunnan, Manchuria, and Korea learned not to trifle with the Chinese. Strong neighbors, such as the Xianbei and Qiang, however, soon moved across the northern and
seized the Wei throne and declared himself first emperor of the Jin Dynasty, Jin Wudi. In 280 he succeeded where the Wei had failed: he defeated the Wu and reunited China, however briefly. Although the Jin Dynasty lasted, at least nominally, until 317, it began to fragment with Jin Wudi's death in 290. The restoration would have to wait three hundred more years. Indeed, the worst was yet to come.

Of the several "barbarian" peoples, primarily nomadic, who gave the Chinese grief in the fourth century, the Xiongnu, Xianbei, and Qiang were the most prominent. As early as 281, the Xianbei began edging into north China. Further west, the Qiang moved across the frontier in 296. The history of China in the fourth century is that of a people constantly beset by nomadic raiders, many gradually abandoning their lands north of the Yangzi and fleeing south. In 311 the capital at Luoyang was sacked by a Xiongnu war party and in 316 the Xiongnu destroyed the kingdom of Jin. Some Chinese fled to the Gansu corridor; but most went south in one of the largest mass migrations in world history. They established a new capital at the site of modern Nanjing for a regime called the Eastern Jin in 317. Fighting between the "barbarians" controlling north China and the "Chinese" of the south continued until the late sixth century with the Yangzi holding as a dividing line for most of that period.

The indigenous peoples of south China were none too pleased by the influx of immigrants from the north and tensions between them were frequent. By sheer weight of numbers the Chinese from the north forced the pace of sinicization of the south. The newly arrived northerners monopolized the principal government positions, but were preoccupied initially with recovering their homeland. Wisely, they did not interfere with the holdings of the local elites and were able to mute their hostility. The only major uprising was a peasant rebellion in 400, which they managed to survive. On the other hand, the northerners were never able to muster support in the south sufficient to enable them to mount a successful expedition across the Yangzi.

In North China, various groups of nomads vied for power, each controlling a chunk of territory for a relatively brief period, establishing ephemeral kingdoms and dynasties. At mid-century, a Qiang army marched in from the west, slowly overcoming all resistance, and by 376 the Qiang were in control of all of North China. Their leader, Fu Jian, determined to do more than rape and pillage, set up a civil authority modeled after that of the Chinese, relying heavily on Chinese advisers. He won
Chinese support for his efforts and in due course came to think of himself as the founder of a new Qin dynasty that would reunify China and restore the empire to the heights of splendor achieved under the Han. But the million man army he led southward was repelled by the Eastern Jin in an epic battle in 383. His regime in the North collapsed soon afterward.

The regime in the South appears to have reached the peak of its power early in the fifth century under the leadership of the usurper Liu Yue, but the dynasty he founded fell to a succession of military men a generation later. Liu led the most successful southern foray into the North, seizing Luoyang and Chang'an in 417, but with his home base insecure, he was forced to surrender both cities. Another modicum of stability was achieved by Xiao Yan, the "Martial Emperor" in 502, whose reign lasted almost to mid-century when his capital was overrun by "barbarians" from the North. The last of the southern states was established in 557, surviving until the Sui conquest and reunification of China in 589.

In the North it was the Northern Wei dynasty (386–535), ruled by Turkic-speaking former nomads (Tuoba or Tabghach), that provided the most interesting regime between the fall of the Han and the founding of the Sui dynasties. Although its efforts to conquer the South failed, it had succeeded in eliminating its competitor states in the North and checking the rise of new nomadic forces in Manchuria and Mongolia. In the middle of the fifth century, its troops had reopened some of the caravan routes in Central Asia. Now dominant over the Chinese with whom they shared the North China plain, many of the Tuoba stopped resisting assimilation and willingly adopted Chinese culture. On the one hand they taught the Chinese the military tactics that had facilitated nomadic dominance. On the other, they learned language and philosophy from the Chinese and found some of the comforts of sedentary Chinese life to their liking.

The Northern Wei emperor Xiao Wendi (r.471–99) liked the amalgam of Chinese and nomadic culture that he found and encouraged his officials to marry Chinese women—and took several Chinese wives himself. Perhaps best known for his successful land reform, facilitated by the distribution of land abandoned by Chinese who fled south, he is also remembered for mandating Chinese dress at court and Chinese as the official language. Over time he insisted upon the sinicization of surnames and required the study of the Confucian classics. In 493 he moved his capital south to Luoyang, the last capital of the Han, a further symbol of his aspiration to rule as a Chinese emperor.

Not all of Xiao Wendi’s followers were pleased by his deviations from their native culture. His son and heir apparent resisted and was executed. The emperor’s reliance on Confucian scholars for advice further alienated Tuoba elites, but the opposition was intimidated and contained throughout his life and for a quarter of a century afterward. In 524, several military men, leaders of the institution least receptive to forced sinicization, revolted. Out of the resulting strife came several lesser and competing states, all largely sinicized, but headed by families skeptical about continuing the process. All of these states were, however, sufficiently Chinese, sufficiently well-versed in the appropriate rites, to be considered by the South as suitable partners in diplomatic discourse. Ambassadors were frequently exchanged.

In 577 the North was reunified by a state calling itself the Northern Zhou. A few years later, one of its generals usurped the throne, a prelude to his march south and the reunification of China in 589. Yang Qian, founding emperor of the Sui, is believed to have been of Xianbei origin, and was married into the Xianbei aristocracy of the North, but he claimed to be Chinese. He was obviously sinicized enough to gain the support of or at least acquiescence of Chinese North and South and to restore the glory of the Chinese empire.

Of course, if Yang Qian and all of the erstwhile Tuoba, Xianbi, Xiongnu, and Qiang of North China were now Chinese, the definition of what it meant to be Chinese was demonstrably more elastic than in an earlier time when a "barbarian" was a "barbarian." If they dressed like Chinese, walked like Chinese, talked like Chinese, then they had to be Chinese.

In the nearly four hundred years during which "barbarians" and their descendants ruled North China, the international relations of the region were reminiscent of the Warring States era. Across China in both epochs there were usually several states, usually at war with one another, less than identical ethnically, and clearly functioning independently. All became one people under the overwhelming power of first the Qin and the Han, and in 589 the Sui. But these latter years, labeled the Six Dynasties period by Chinese historians, were different in the absence of anything that might be called an international system. No institution comparable to the hegemon emerged. On the contrary, with the exception of the diplomatic gestures of the late sixth century, the competitiveness of the various political entities that comprised China approximated the anarchic system imagined by later day proponents of realist theory.
But the most striking difference between the years of the Six Dynasties and any preceding period in Chinese history was the extraordinary influence of an utterly foreign system of thought, the Buddhist religion, Indian in origin. There could be no more impressive evidence of East Asia’s involvement with South and Central Asia than the way in which Buddhism swept into China, winning over large numbers of Chinese and most nomadic peoples before being carried on to Korea and through Korea to Japan. And in Southeast Asia, a variant form won millions of additional believers. John King Fairbank once argued that Buddhism “constituted a far more serious challenge to Chinese civilization than the mere conquest of the land by ‘barbarian’ invaders.”

It is never easy to understand why a new belief system is attractive to a given people at a given time. Clearly, for Chinese who had seen their land overrun by nomads, who had been driven from their homes, who witnessed massacres and the destruction of great cities, customary beliefs and habits were inadequate. Confucian explanations about the lack of virtue on the part of their leaders brought little solace. Maldistribution of wealth, long a problem in Chinese society, could not be assuaged by familiar political and religious practices. Buddhism brought the promise of personal salvation. At a time when the suffering of the average Chinese peasant was great and there seemed no respite from the everyday misery of existence, Buddhism brought hope of a future and better world. In brief, it would be reasonable to assume that the Chinese people turned to Buddhism for solace that could not be found in traditional Chinese civilization. Buddhism could be seen as Karl Marx would later describe religion generally, as the opiate of the masses.

The problem with this explanation of Buddhism as balm for the afflicted masses is that it was not they who were initially attracted to it. Among Chinese, it was the rich and the aristocracy who had been attracted during the years of the Later Han and who remained the principal adherents of Buddhism until the eighth or even ninth century—a much happier time when Buddhism demonstrated mass appeal. Equally difficult to fit into the Marxist equation is the fact that Buddhism was even more attractive to the victorious nomad warriors of the North. The “barbarians” of the Northern Wei became the great patrons of Buddhism in China in the fourth century, more than a hundred years before it became popular in the South. It was the Wei who patronized the great Buddhist sculp-

ture at Longmen, near Luoyang—two of the finest examples of which can be found can be found in museums in New York and Kansas City.\(^7\)

Again, Chinese civilization survived the Buddhist intrusion, but it was a very different Chinese civilization than the one Confucius or Han Wudi had known. The study of Buddhist scriptures affected Chinese learning and ultimately Chinese literature. Buddhist monasteries and temples popped up everywhere, sometimes so rich and powerful as to challenge existing centers of economic and political power. Chinese art was changed irrevocably, both in terms of medium and subject. Sculpture, never before important, was given enormous impetus by the demand for statues of the Buddha and the various bodhisattvas. One bodhisattva evolved into Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, arguably the most worshipped figure in Chinese history before—and since—Mao Zedong. The Buddhist scriptures provided subject matter for painters as well as calligraphers. And who can imagine Chinese architecture without the Buddhist reliquaries known as pagodas? Finally, Buddhism provided an engine for cultural exchange. Thousands of Buddhist missionaries entered China from Central, South, and Southeast Asia, bringing information about their homelands and the roads they traveled and the objects to be found there. Similarly, thousands of Chinese made the pilgrimage to the homeland of the Buddha where they studied and brought knowledge of China. Chinese troops may not have ranged as far and as successfully as they did under the Han, but China was by no means cut off from the rest of Asia during these centuries of travail.

### Table 1.5. Some Notable Dates of the Ancient World 200–600 CE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Three Kingdoms era in China</td>
<td>220–264 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamato Kingdom in Japan</td>
<td>350–587 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goths sack Athens, Sparta, and Corinth</td>
<td>268 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partition of Roman Empire</td>
<td>285 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean Three Kingdoms (Koguryo, Paekche, Silla)</td>
<td>313–668 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six Dynasties in China</td>
<td>317–589 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constantine the Great reunites Roman Empire</td>
<td>324 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Visigoths invade Italy</td>
<td>401 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Franks under the Merovingians</td>
<td>431–751 CE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Korea

But the story of the international relations of East Asia in these years is much more than the story of China. Certainly as interesting and complex were developments in and near Korea, which experienced its own era of Three Kingdoms, and which rose to challenge China for dominance in Northeast Asia. Despite the increasing influence of Chinese culture on the peoples of the Korean peninsula and their relatives on the Manchurian side of the Yalu, they resisted Chinese political influence, cooperating with China only when they were attempting to destroy each other. All three kingdoms—Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla—were aggressive and expansionist. Koguryo in particular was hostile to China and its skilled horsemen posed a serious challenge to Chinese defenses.

Koguryo had emerged as a political entity in the upper reaches of the Yalu River during the days of the Later Han, the first of the Korean kingdoms to acquire a metal culture. Another Korean people, the Puyo, also emerged in Manchuria and were perceived by the Chinese as a threat comparable to that of the Xianbi and Koguryo. In fact, Puyo sought ties to China, hoping to enlist China against Koguryo and the Xianbi. Han records indicate that Puyo sent emissaries to China almost every year beginning mid-first century CE. When Wei dynasty forces defeated Koguryo c. 245, Puyo provided assistance to the Chinese. Puyo managed to maintain a separate identity but was overrun by the Xianbi and Paekche in 346 and ultimately absorbed by Koguryo.

Early in the fourth century, Koguryo took advantage of China’s internal strife and drove the Chinese out of Korea, ending four hundred years of Chinese domination. Given China’s size and proximity, it was inevitable that China would remain a shadow over Korean affairs for all time, but China never regained the degree of control it had enjoyed under the Han. Nonetheless, the Chinese retained sufficient strength to thwart Koguryo’s initial efforts to become the major power in the region.

The kingdom of Paekche emerged on the Korean peninsula in the third century CE and quickly established an alliance with the Wa people of Japan. Soon Koguryo was being squeezed by the Xianbi coming out
of Mongolia and Paekche pushing up the peninsula. In 342 and again in 371, Koguryo fell under those pressures. Enter the kingdom of Silla, formed c.350 on the east coast. Threatened by Paekche and its Japanese allies, Silla looked to Koguryo for support. With Silla engaging the Japanese, Koguryo leaders were able to regroup their forces for a massive offensive in all directions. They occupied Liaodong and took control of most of Manchuria. They drove Paekche’s forces out of their territory and invaded Paekche itself. Before they were finished, they crushed the Japanese army that had attacked Silla. At the outset of the fifth century, the Koguryo and Silla alliance was dominant, but southwestern Korea remained under the control of Paekche and its Japanese ally.

While China remained divided, Koguryo maintained contacts with both North and South, manipulating the Chinese with relative ease. But pursuing a classic balance of power strategy, Silla, fearing that it would be swallowed by its powerful ally, switched sides in 485, forming an alliance with Paekche that endured for more than a hundred years. Nonetheless, in 475, Koguryo attacked and defeated Paekche, which fell despite aid from both Silla and China. One Korean historian has referred to the last quarter of the fifth century as Koguryo’s Golden Age. Indeed, Koguryo’s days of primacy in Northeast Asia appear to have lasted at least until the middle of the sixth century.

In 551, Silla and Paekche attacked Koguryo, succeeding in regaining some of the land Paekche had lost in 475. But Paekche had little time to rejoice. In 555, Silla turned on its ally, seeking access across the peninsula to China via the Yellow Sea. As any armchair analyst might have predicted, Paekche allied itself with Koguryo to fight Silla. But if Silla could not conquer Koguryo as the two vied for dominance in the region, it could and did drive Koguryo off the Korean peninsula. However, diminished, Koguryo remained a force to be reckoned with—as the Chinese learned again early in the seventh century. Not until 668 did a united China under the Tang Dynasty succeed in defeating Koguryo, providing the opportunity for Silla to unite all of Korea for the first time.

To a world accustomed to wars driven by ideology and religion, the constant bloodshed up and down the Korean peninsula and in Manchuria where Koguryo was centered may seem meaningless. But of course none of the peoples involved thought of themselves as Koreans. All could see the virtue of increasing their holdings by taking from others. All recognized the value of defending what they had from any who came to take it from them. The emergence of kingdoms in this era certainly gave the ruling class in each of them a sense of identity and a stake in the survival of the regime. It ceased to be a Hobbesian world of everyman against all others, but it was very much the anarchic world of the realist theorists. The only restraint was the superior power of an adversary.

There seems to be little to distinguish one Korean regime from another except geography and the sequence in which they learned to make weapons and organize their society. All adopted Chinese-style bureaucracy. Buddhism traveled from China to Koguryo and on down the peninsula—and ultimately across the sea to Japan. All sought to learn from China, to trade with China, and to resist Chinese efforts to control them. In the end, sameness facilitated unification, but as in China, it required conquest to accomplish it.

Japan

The final actor in the Northeast Asian drama was Japan. While Six Dynasties sprawled over China and Three Kingdoms vied over Korea, the Japanese began to cohere as a people. It is evident that Japan became a major player in the balance of power in Korea and as such could have an impact on Chinese ambitions.

Japan’s earliest connections with the continent were, of course, prehistoric, and primarily with China and Korea. Much of the contact with China had come through Korea and some very likely through the Ryukyu Islands. Archeological evidence suggests that the southernmost Japanese isle, Kyushu, had encountered Korea as early as 3000 BCE. Indeed, rice cultivation and metallurgy, both introduced from the continent, provided the foundation of the Yayoi culture that developed about the same time as the Han empire. Most students of ancient Japan believe that the Yayoi culture was a fusion of the earlier Jomon (cord pottery) civilization, little affected by continental influences, and that brought by Korean refugees from Chinese aggression during the Qin and Han dynasties.

Relying on Chinese records and archeological discoveries in Japan, historians estimate that by the time of the Later Han dynasty, there were at least thirty small states across the Japanese islands, many of these with formal diplomatic relations with China. Chinese influence was evident in wheel-thrown pottery and in bronze and iron implements, probably brought over by Koreans. Han urban culture, presumably flowing from
the Han commanderies in northwest Korea, reached the Japanese islands. In the first century ce, trade between China and Japan increased, continuing the transfer of technology from the continent. The Japanese—or people of Wa—were considered by the Chinese to be tributary peoples. For Japanese leaders, official recognition of their rule by the Han enhanced their stature among their followers. According to Chinese records, the third century Wei Dynasty, at the request of a Queen Himiko of Wa, served as a mediator in Japanese politics.

The rapid changes in Japan during the Yayoi period would not likely have occurred had the islands not become involved in foreign affairs. Jomon culture appears to have been stagnant and it was the flow of immigrants from the mainland, new technologies brought by them or obtained through trade that brought about the transformation. There is even evidence of Japanese contacts with the islands of the South Seas—the discovery of sea shells peculiar to those waters in Yayoi burial urns. Participation in the international relations of East Asia was the ingredient essential to Yayoi development.

In the last half of the third century, one of the Japanese states, Yamato, unified Japan. It evolved much as the Zhou Dynasty had, partly by force of arms, partly by diplomacy—the incorporation of its competing clans into the central administration. Its power, both material and intellectual, derived from continental imports and it was therefore eager for continued intercourse with the Asian mainland. China, however, was disintegrating and formal contact between Japan and China was lost for more than a century. It was to Korea that the Yamato state looked to meet its need for iron and the modern technology of the day. It was also to Korea that the Yamato elite looked for the pleasure of luxury goods and urban culture. The huge tombs (Kofun) they built appear to have been a version of those built in Koguryo and by the fourth century they were being filled with objects imported from Korea.

Given its needs and desires—and the likelihood that the ethnic differences that divide Japanese and Koreans today did not exist in the fourth century—Yamato did not hesitate to involve itself politically and militarily, as well as economically and intellectually, in the affairs of the Korean peninsula. The small Kaya (Mimana to the Japanese) federation in the vicinity of modern Pusan looked to the warriors of the Japanese islands for protection. Yamato troops were stationed there and the Yamato court perceived Kaya as its colony—and its vital foothold on the mainland.

The rise of Koguryo in the fourth century had important ramifications for Japan. When Koguryo wiped out the Chinese commanderies in northwest Korea early in the century, many of the Chinese who lived there eventually made their way to Japan, adding to the existing ethnic mix and bringing their skills and elements of their culture. When Koguryo threatened Paekche, Paekche looked to Japan for assistance. When Silla arose late in the century and threatened Kaya, Japan attacked. Aligned with Paekche, Japan defeated Silla in 391, but in 399, Silla turned to Koguryo for assistance and together they drove the Japanese back, although they retained a foothold in Kaya until mid-sixth century. Japan's ties to Paekche remained strong because of Paekche's need for a counterweight to the Koguryo-Silla alliance and Japan's need for access to Korean supplies of iron and apprehensions about Silla's intentions.

The Yamato state appears to have reached its peak of power and prosperity in the fifth century when, with the help of Paekche, it reestablished direct ties with South China. Chinese records list thirteen tribute missions from Japan between 413 and 562, ten of them between 428 and 478. The Yamato elite once again had assured access to Chinese luxuries, especially silk. But it was also clear that it recognized the advanced state of Chinese learning and institutions and that its missions were also designed to study China, to discover the sources of Chinese wealth and power, to be adopted for the advancement of Japan. Much was gained by these journeys to China; nonetheless Korea remained the principal conduit for the Chinese culture that reached Japan. Korean artists taught the Japanese how to glaze pottery. Immigrant technicians from Korea increased rice production. Paekche sent teachers who introduced the Chinese writing system to Japan. And not least, Buddhism reached Japan through Korea, influencing Japanese art and architecture as well as religion.

Military and political gains were less striking. The Japanese did learn mounted warfare from the Koreans, but they and their allies in Paekche could not overcome the Koguryo-Silla alliance. While Japan and Paekche courted South China, Koguryo and Silla found friends in North China. Japanese military aid sustained Paekche when it was attacked by Koguryo in 455, but could not save it in 478; nor did an appeal for Chinese help bring an adequate response. Neither military nor political setbacks, however, appear to have stymied the flow of goods, technology, and technicians to Japan.

And this pattern continued all through the life of the Yamato state.
Political and military affairs in Korea were not striking successes. Even Paekche relieved Japan of part of its Kaya protectorate in 512. Still uneasy about Silla, Yamato chose not to alienate Paekche by rejecting its “request.” An army mobilized for operations in Korea in 527 was needed first to quell domestic unrest. It reached Korea eventually, stayed briefly without seeing action, and left when Kaya chose accommodation with Silla—which swallowed the erstwhile Japanese protectorate in several stages before the end of the century.

Japanese military involvement in Korean affairs continued, but there were no major invasions for many years. In 540, the Yamato leaders, already divided by a succession crisis, had one of those classic foreign policy debates. Should troops be sent once more against Silla? Recent sorties had been unsuccessful. There was little reason to believe an expedition would be more fortunate in 540. The limits of Yamato military power had been surpassed. Restlessness in various parts of the state was noted and the conclusion reached that troops would not be sent. The government would concentrate on domestic affairs, strengthening its control and improving the welfare of the people. Yamato interests in Korea would be managed diplomatically with support from Paekche. Military aid was sent to Paekche in 552 in exchange for teachers—of Buddhism and Confucianism—and technicians, but there were also diplomatic exchanges with Silla and Koguryo as well.

The shifting Yamato focus toward the home isles did not prevent civil war in 587—and the Yamato clan was defeated by the Soga clan on the eve of the Sui reunification of China. And while the Soga reformed Japanese government to their own tastes, Japan became a less significant participant in the international relations of Northeast Asia, where a reunified China in all its glory was confronted by an aggressive Koguryo.

**Southeast Asia**

There is not yet a great deal of evidence to document Southeast Asia’s involvement in world affairs in these early years. Only the Vietnamese kept records, Chinese penetration was limited, and archaeological sources require further analysis. Coherent, stable political entities do not seem to have existed in the islands or on the mainland outside of the territory of modern Thailand and Vietnam before the seventh century ce. But there is enough information to indicate that the region was enormously important for international trade, primarily between India and China, but also involving East Africa, the Persian Gulf, and the Roman Empire. There is abundant evidence of the Chinese role in North Vietnam and of Indian influence in Borneo, Java, and Bali as well as the mainland. Malay sailors appear to have been central in the carrying trade, familiar along the China coast and also the coast of East Africa where they established a community on Malagasy that has endured to this day.

Vietnam is probably the most fascinating arena for the student of the region’s foreign affairs in the days of the Later Han and during the chaotic years of China’s disunion, before the coming to power of the Sui. Han troops seeking to secure trade routes to India and to pacify the unruly peoples of southern China and its frontier pushed into Vietnam during the glory days of the Former Han. Vietnamese rulers, bowing to force majeure, accepted tributary status within the empire. When the Former Han came under the control of Wang Mang, many Han leaders sought refuge in Vietnam. Northern Vietnam, beset by Chinese troops, was awash in Chinese settlers, lost much of its original culture, becoming increasingly sinicized by the third century ce. It also developed a stable political regime in collaboration with Chinese administrators. Nonetheless, whenever China’s grip loosened, as in the sixth century, the Vietnamese were quick to reassert their political independence—although some of those rebelling against China’s control were themselves descendants of earlier Chinese immigrants.

But it is Vietnam’s role in the coastal trade between India and China that stands out in this era. From the time that trade began through to the middle of the fourth century, merchant vessels hugged the coasts in both directions. Cargoes were usually unloaded at either the Bay of Bengal or the Gulf of Thailand side of the Malay Peninsula for land transit and then restowed on board craft at the far coast to continue the voyage. Facilitating this commerce was the great entrepot that emerged in the first century ce on the southern coast of Vietnam, near modern Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). The Chinese called it Funan. It appears to have been a small state with its capital in what is now Cambodia and a seaport on the Mekong, in Vietnam.

Kenneth Hall suggests that Funan’s success was based on its ability to produce surplus food with which to feed the seamen and merchants who sought a congenial harbor at which to anchor until the monsoon winds shifted and allowed them to continue their voyages. Depending upon
MAP 6. SOUTHEAST ASIA, C. 450 CE
the time of arrival, the delay could be measured in months. Funan served them well and it became the stopover of choice for Persian Gulf sailors as well those from China and India, reaching its peak in wealth and power early in the fourth century. Hall also notes the extraordinary opportunity for cultural exchange occasioned by having so many foreign visitors in Funan and in contact with each other.

The essential element in all of this trade was Chinese silk and men came from all over the known world, bringing goods with which to tempt the Chinese in exchange. Wealthy Chinese developed a taste for exotica that did not disappear when they fled the "barbarian" hordes that drove them from North China. Denied access to the overland caravan trade by the North, they simply turned to the sea. Glass and stone beads from India and the Persian Gulf, peacock feathers, horns and tusks from unknown animals, and tortoise shells that could be ground into powders restoring potency to aging Chinese men—a desire second only to immortality—all found their way to China. Eventually goods native to island Southeast Asia, camphor and spices, won the favor of the international traders who passed through Funan.

Funan's years of preeminence in the international commerce of East Asia were numbered, however. In mid-fourth century, Malay seamen developed an all maritime route that bypassed both the Malay peninsula and Funan, slipping instead through the Strait of Malaka. By the sixth century, Funan was reduced to a backwater and in due course Malaka took its place as the entrepot of choice.

Further north along the Vietnamese coast, in the vicinity of modern Hue or Da Nang, was another political entity called first Linyi and then Champa by the Chinese. From the Chinese perspective the people of Champa existed to torment them. From the sinicized Vietnamese of the north, they elicited little more affection. They appear to have been maritime nomads of Malay-Polynesian stock who, apart from fishing, trading, and occasional piracy, devoted much of their energy to raiding the borders of the once mighty Han empire. As always and everywhere, when the Chinese were strong, they intruded on Champa space. When the Chinese were weak, as they were in the third and fourth centuries, the Cham raids increased in frequency. In 446 a rejuvenated South China joined forces with its Vietnamese vassal and destroyed the Cham center at Hue.30

By the end of the sixth century, a reunited China stood ready to dominate East Asia once more. At the same time, trade networks across Southeast Asia, especially on the islands were exploding. Political entities were coalescing. Indian influence, following trade and Buddhist missionaries, was growing rapidly in Southeast Asia. The stage was set for one of the great cosmopolitan eras of world history.

Conclusion

Diplomacy, trade, cultural transfer, and warfare—the stuff that students of international relations write about—has been the story of human existence. Neolithic men and women negotiated arrangements with each other, exchanged goods and services, influenced each other's ideas about art and religion, and fought each other when they were not satisfied with the results. Perhaps it all began as Hobbes suggested, man against man, total anarchy. And then came families, clans, tribes, villages, towns, cities, and countries—constantly engaged in diplomacy, trade, cultural transfer, and warfare, always aware of others who, whether they became friends or enemies, were different. So it was with East Asia in ancient times.

The first political grouping worthy of being called a state emerged on the North China plain about four thousand years ago. The people who lived there gradually assumed an identity we call Chinese. They expanded by absorbing their neighbors, sometimes by peaceful assimilation, sometimes by conquest. Among them the principal differences seem to have been geographic, specific points of origin, east or west, north or south of ground zero. The Shang pushed aside the Xia and, in due course, the Zhou swallowed the Shang.

As the Zhou polity weakened, it spawned several smaller states, frequently at odds with each other and with new political entities emerging on their periphery. Of necessity, the art of statecraft evolved, ultimately engaging the finest minds in the country, including Confucius and Mencius, Laozi and Mozi. An extraordinary interstate system was created, an institutionalized balance of power, guided by a "hegemon." Eventually, however, diplomacy failed, the system collapsed, and the age of the Warring States ravaged the land, ending only when the overwhelming power of the Qin brought unification in 221 BCE.

As a unified state, China quickly became, under the Han, one of the world's great powers, conquering an empire that surpassed that of its Roman contemporary. Having stopped warring on each other, the Chi-
nese struck out against their neighbors, challenging or being challenged by the Koreans and Vietnamese, as well as the various peoples of Inner Asia, of whom the Xiongnu were the most formidable. Under Han Wudi (r. 141–87 BCE), Chinese imperialism dominated East Asia and established a standard to which would-be imperialists might aspire forever after.

The growth of the empire facilitated trade and cultural exchange with virtually all of the known world. Chinese silks were treasured throughout Asia and across Inner Asia to the Mediterranean, eventually in Rome itself. Ceramics from the Mediterranean, pearls from the Red Sea, amber from the Baltic, were prized in China and Buddhism entered the land, foreshadowing the striking influence India was to have on Chinese culture. In ideas as well as material goods, the Han empire facilitated cultural transfer, not least the spread of the Chinese writing system and Confucianism in East Asia.

And then there was the tributary system, variations on which can be found in much subsequent Chinese history. In its most obvious form, a foreign ruler paid homage to the Chinese emperor by sending an embassy or appearing himself at the Chinese court. Once there he would present gifts to the emperor and very likely leave a hostage or hostages, perhaps even his son. In return the Chinese would lavish gifts upon him, more often than not of a value in excess of those received, and permit private trade. The tributary system was at once a formula for diplomatic intercourse, a symbol of peace and friendship between unequal sovereign states—a nonaggression pact or even alliance, and a vehicle for trade relations. The Chinese received acknowledgment of their superiority, at least nominal, and assurances of the vassal states’ good behavior. The tribute bearers obtained insurance against Chinese aggression, the possibility of protection against other enemies, access to Chinese goods, and a significant profit through the exchange of presents itself. It was a system the Chinese found useful when they lacked the will or the power to crush or occupy another state. But it was an expensive system and there always those at court who argued it was cheaper to fight or even ignore a given group of foreigners—and times when the critics won the debate. The existence of the tributary system should not be allowed to conceal the fact that the Chinese were masterful practitioners of Realpolitik.

The principal challenge to Chinese power during the Han dynasty and in the three and a half centuries that followed was provided by the nomads of Inner Asia, especially the Xiongnu and the Xianbi. Military technology throughout these years provided nothing for Chinese arsenals that would enable them to cope with horse cavalry. China prevailed over the nomads when the latter were divided, preferably when they fought among themselves. On the occasions when the nomads formed great confederations or the Chinese were themselves divided, the Xiongnu, Xianbi, or others could not be contained and China would suffer frequent raids at best and death, destruction, and defeat at worst. Appeasement, enmeshing some of the nomad leaders in the tributary system, was at times successful, but extended periods of peace were few. Total, final, Chinese dominance over the horsemen of Inner Asia was many centuries away.

Elsewhere in East Asia, groups of people came together much as the Chinese had, slowly forming larger and larger political entities and becoming involved as active participants in the international relations of the region. Of these the Koreans were the first and most important; by the fourth century CE they were able to beat back Chinese aggression and they generally held their own for some long time thereafter. Awakened by Korean refugees from struggles on the Korean peninsula, the peoples of the Japanese isles also created a coherent regime under the direction of the Yamato clan. Troops from Japan fought on the Korean peninsula, forming alliances, controlling territory, working closely with one Korean kingdom against others, becoming a force to be reckoned with. In Southeast Asia, Vietnam and Champa were already major players, the former in its constant struggle against Chinese imperialism and the latter as the critical entrepot for the India-China trade. By the end of the sixth century it was evident that Chinese diplomats were facing a much more complex world, with cultural and economic challenges, as well as military and political ones, on a scale they had never before known.