

# *Introduction*

THE MANY FACES OF GLOBAL EAST ASIA

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GLOBAL EAST ASIA IS MUCH more than a handful of powerful countries and rich multinational companies. East Asian globalization is built on a dizzying combination: a very strong and very deep civilizational self-consciousness fused with hypermodernity, wealth, influence, and power. With its focus on global East Asia, this book will view the global square from the perspective of this rapidly rising global center.

Its civilizational status and spectacular modernity enable global East Asia to cater to and merge with the full range of global tastes and styles—from haute couture to soap operas, and from traditional art to Pokémon. East Asian foods have blended into the world's cuisines. East Asian popular culture (television, movies, gaming, music) has become ubiquitous not only elsewhere in Asia but also in the West, as have East Asian religions and ways of thinking. As East Asia has become richer, the movement of East Asians across the world has evolved far beyond the old diasporas of Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese. Global East Asia has become a center of innovation in science and technology, rivaling and in certain areas even surpassing the West. While no match for the United States yet, Chinese military power reaches far beyond the region into the Indo-Pacific. East Asian—and especially Chinese—power and influence also stretch beyond the conventional military and civilian domains into the cyberspace and outer space.

East Asia's position as a global core strikes many people as something new and sudden—used, as we are, to seeing the West as the center of the world. Yet East Asia's global impact has a long and complex history. Some of this history is intertwined with Western expansion, colonialism, and imperialism, while other aspects have emerged independently from and sometimes even earlier than the rise of the West. Japan's economic and military power

dates from the Meiji Restoration of 1868. China's dominance goes back even further: until the late eighteenth century, China was by far the largest and most developed society and economy in the world. In fact, Western expansionism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was in large part driven by the desire to tap into the wealth of China and competition for trade with this then-uncontested center of gravity of the world economic system.

Like any other region, East Asia is an imaginary unit with unclear and seemingly arbitrary boundaries. Undisputedly, Japan, China and Korea are at its core, not only geographically, but also as powers, economies, and cultures. Mongolia and Taiwan are usually also included. Japan, Korea, and China all self-consciously pride themselves on a long history of political unity and independence, a deep civilization, and a strong common and unifying culture. More than perhaps anywhere else in the world, these countries' people see their unity as self-evident, unquestionable, and eternal. This unity is vested not only in the imported notion of the nation but also, and more importantly, follows from the long history of unitary states that shape, represent, rule, expand and defend a country and its people and culture.

The history of these three great nations is connected through war, conquest, migration, trade, piracy, travel, and especially culture and religion. Chinese Confucianism has grown deep roots in Korea and Japan, as has the Buddhism that came to these two countries through China. In Japan and Korea, Chinese writing, literature, and arts have been adopted and perfected to such an extent that they often surpass the Chinese originals.

The nature and the limits of the current boundaries of the East Asian region were informed by the history of imperial expansion and competition before the twentieth century. The last dynasty in China, the Qing Dynasty (1646–1912), was a product of invasion and conquest by a non-Chinese people, the Manchus, whose origin lies in what is now China's Northeast (Manchuria), which borders Korea to the south and Russia to the north. Their empire included not only all of historical China but also large tracts of non-Chinese territories to the north, west, east and south, such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, or Mongolia, which were incorporated into the empire through conquest, trade, settlement, and acculturation. However, elsewhere Qing expansionism ran up against spirited resistance, particularly in Burma (Myanmar), Vietnam, Tibet, and Korea. To the north, the Qing faced direct competition from another, equally aggressive and expansionist empire: Tsarist Russia.

This history continues to mark both the national borders of contemporary China and the boundaries of the region of what we call East Asia. East Asia

as we imagine it today therefore does not include the Russian Far East and the territories beyond the Qing Empire in Central and Southeast Asia. Tibet remains an interesting liminal case. As a contemporary part of the People's Republic of China, it should be included in East Asia. However, because of its long history of independence from the Qing, it is often seen as a part of South Asia or even Central Asia rather than East Asia.

More recently, conflict and warfare in the twentieth century have done more to sever than to reinforce the connections between East Asian countries. The rise of Japan toward the end of the nineteenth century soon led to conflict and open warfare with the great regional powers of the day: the Qing and Russian Empires. Japan's open aspiration to create an empire for itself in East Asia—and later also in Southeast Asia and the Pacific—was justified with an imaginary constellation of Asian or East Asian connections that went together with lofty names like “Pan-Asianism” and the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere.” Yet Japan envisioned empire in a very different manner from the way the Manchus had three centuries earlier when they conquered China and established the Qing dynasty. In the twentieth century, China was no longer the cultural, economic, and political center that empire builders aspired to conquer, control, and make their own; it was instead a peripheral object of colonial ambition of new and more powerful centers. A similar colonial ambition applied to other parts of the Japanese empire in East and Southeast Asia. Unlike the Qing, the Japanese did not bring disparate peoples and cultures together into a unified political imperial structure in their conquest; rather, they enhanced their fragmentation and division by fueling anti-imperial and anticolonial aspirations for independence and nationhood across Asia. When the Second World War was over, the final result was a postcolonial collection of independent nation-states built from the rubble of Japanese and Western colonial empires.

The aftermath of the war also created the new division between Communism and the self-proclaimed capitalist and democratic “Free World.” Not Europe, but East and Southeast Asia became the main theater in which the Cold War turned into open hostility and even acute armed conflict across a “Bamboo Curtain” that ran straight through the East Asian region and even individual nations. In Asia, the hot battles of the Cold War separated China from Taiwan, North Korea from South Korea, and North Vietnam from South Vietnam.

The history of the Second World War, postwar nation building, and Cold War division still informs the political reality of East Asia. Despite the strong

cultural continuities that remain and the many more recent and unparalleled connections forged by investment, trade, exchange, travel, migration, popular culture, and fashion, it is hard to imagine East Asia as a unit, both for the people in the region itself and elsewhere. China and Korea continue to make political hay from the lack of Japanese guilt about the atrocities of the Second World War. North Korea has not only survived the end of the Cold War but has now added a nuclear dimension to its art of brinkmanship. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and even Hong Kong continue to be part of the capitalist and democratic world focused on the United States as a superpower, security umbrella, and cultural and political center, as demonstrated again by the protests and demonstrations in Hong Kong in 2019 and 2020.

Meanwhile, China is fast becoming a superpower in its own right. To China, the United States seems intent on resurrecting the old Bamboo Curtain in East Asia, no longer to thwart communism but simply in order to contain the ambitions of an equal and a rival. As China self-consciously seeks space to grow and expand, it has therefore not been able to turn east but has been compelled to venture farther afield to the west and south to Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, and increasingly also to Australia and Europe.

Since we started working on this book in 2017, the depth of the cleavage between China and the United States has increased remarkably, to the point that globalization itself is under siege. A growth of nationalism, protectionism, and identity politics, coupled with a general distrust of elites, big business, and government has been building up not just in North America and Europe but in Asia as well. When this movement merged with hardline neo-con forces in the Trump administration in the United States, events started to escalate rapidly with no end in sight at the time of writing (May 2020).

The China-US trade war is not principally about unfair trade practices, jobs, or immigration. It is perceived on both sides of the Pacific as a struggle for hegemony, and it is increasingly openly so. The United States is trying to repatriate the global supply chains of its businesses, erect trade barriers, punish Chinese companies, and in general to limit its strategic exposure to China. In Europe, terms like “industrial policy” and “systemic rivalry” have suddenly entered the political debate on China, while the robustness of the alliance with a no-longer-trusted United States is explicitly questioned. China, in turn, has awakened to its strategic vulnerability caused by a dependence on American and European high-tech products, science and technology, and even food; in response, it is increasingly seeking to turn its

Belt and Road Initiative into a sphere of influence and even control. It is highly unlikely that a genuine disentanglement and deglobalization are still possible, even if, like the Trump administration, one is unconcerned about the price tag. However, globalization is without a doubt on the backfoot and antiglobalization can no longer be dismissed as the product of a lunatic fringe: it has become thoroughly mainstream.

With the benefit of hindsight we can now see that the high tide of globalization in the 1990s and 2000s could only happen because, for a brief period after the end of the Cold War, the United States was the sole superpower. Globalization was therefore not, as is often thought, a remedy against conflict between great powers; it was rather a consequence of its (temporary) absence. In a unipolar world, globalization processes could grow relatively unencumbered by geostrategic vulnerabilities that come with realist, zero-sum competition between rivals and enemies. This is not meant to say that in this period globalization was fully uncontested, but rather that geopolitical considerations played only a minor role in assessments of its merits or demerits. In this sense, the current wave of antiglobalization is not a temporary setback but a return to more normal times with competing nation-states as the dominant players once again.

China's state-led globalization and emerging superpower status are fundamentally changing the nature and impact of globalization (or at least contributing materially to such a change). China benefited enormously from the high tide of globalization in the 1990s and 2000s, but its deliberate and selective use of globalization as part of its strategy of strengthening its power has now reached the point that across the world the dangers associated with unfettered globalization are deemed to have become too great.

Free trade is being replaced by trade war. An emphasis on the need for the free flow of data and information are giving way to cyber sovereignty. Global cultural flows are enlisted even more openly to strategies of nation branding, soft power, and influencing. The free flow of people—always the most controversial and restricted aspect of globalization—is deteriorating into demographic contestation: states direct the burden of asylum seekers, refugees, and unskilled migrants to others, while selectively attracting the students, skilled migrants, and tourists that they think they need. What remains are the big global challenges of climate change, environmental degradation, and global health. But, as has been starkly demonstrated by the coronavirus crisis in 2020 and 2021, here too state power and superpower competition come increasingly to the fore as countries try to pick and choose what they do and what