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What *Strange Parallels* Sought to Accomplish

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THREE BROAD CONCERNS INSPIRED *Strange Parallels*. First, like many students of Southeast Asia, I was long troubled by the fragmented, kaleidoscopic nature of much precolonial historiography. Curiosity to see if I could detect long term, overarching patterns provided my initial spur.

A second and related goal was to tie precolonial Southeast Asia more securely to world history. Although Chinese and Indian influences obviously were critical to civilizational genesis in Southeast Asia, thereafter local dynamics typically were presented as *sui generis*. But the more I read, the more certain I became that societies in mainland Southeast Asia shared with others across Eurasia a trajectory of political and cultural integration over several centuries. Southeast Asia's isolation – usually considered a barrier to inclusion in world history – suddenly became an asset, because it showed with particular clarity the functional unity of far-flung sectors of Eurasia.

Global comparisons facilitated, indeed mandated, my third quest: to revisit European exceptionalism. Eager to deflate self-congratulatory European claims to uniqueness, scholars have sought Asian analogues to such specifically European features as feudalism, the public sphere, and proto-industrialization. On the whole, these efforts have produced mixed results, frequently because the initial terms of reference proved too narrowly European. But parallel integrations over at least a millennium seemed to offer a more capacious perspective in which European states may be seen as quaint variants on wider patterns. Insofar as each trajectory was in some ways unique, this approach is not necessarily incompatible with European exceptionalism. Indeed, by some key metrics, at the end of the day France – my West European case study – emerged uniquely well integrated. But in other critical respects, both synchronic and diachronic, I have found precious little difference between, say, France, Burma, Japan, and Vietnam.

In short, I have attempted to provide fresh perspectives on both Southeast Asian particularism and European exceptionalism, to develop novel criteria for intra-Eurasian classification, and to reconceptualize Eurasia as an interactive zone.

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What, precisely, do I mean by parallel integrations? Essentially this was the lurching pattern between c. 800 and 1830 CE by which political and cultural isolates cohered to form larger, more cohesive units. Around much of the perimeter of Eurasia, including Europe, Japan, and mainland Southeast Asia, starting in the late first millennium but more especially after 1500, we find a dramatic long-term reduction in the number of independent polities – in Europe from some 500 to 30, in mainland Southeast Asia from about 20 to 3, in Japan (during the 16th century) from some 200 to one loosely integrated imperium. Insofar as larger states required more effective provincial and fiscal controls, while the concentration of resources that issued from centralization aided conquest, external expansion was symbiotic with internal administrative reform. In turn, territorial and administrative consolidation encouraged and drew strength from the conversion of myriad local ethnicities, dialects, and religious practices into cultures that were ever more standardized, literate, and polity-specific. The ensuing sense of what I term "politicized ethnicity" differed from modern nationalism in that it located sovereignty in the ruler, had no concept of civic equality, and continued to derive primary intellectual inspiration from universal religious doctrines. But like nationalism, politicized ethnicity championed a discrete secular culture over those of neighboring peoples, elevated recognized markers as symbols of allegiance, and looked to the capital to define and police cultural boundaries. Thus integration was simultaneously territorial, administrative, and cultural.

In mainland Southeast Asia, Europe, and Japan, these intertwined processes, seen in the abstract and over the long term, were driven by a synergistic mix of material expansion, wider cultural circulation, interstate warfare, and the deliberate and unintended effects of state actions. All served to enhance the attractive and coercive potential of privileged cores, to reduce the autonomy of local centers, to pacify rural society, and to spin webs of economic and cultural interdependence. Most basically, material expansion – under which rubric I include agrarian and commercial growth as well as the post-1500 diffusion of firearms – magnified the physical superiority of emergent political cores (the Southeast Asian lowlands, the Volga-Oka interfluve, the Paris basin, the Inland Sea-Kanto axis) over less favored districts. Agrarian/demographic vitality swelled royal revenues, while trade stoked local enthusiasm for supra-local legal regulation and helped to monetize state operations. At the same time thicker market circuits joined frontier colonization, rising literacy, and new educational networks to quicken the flow of goods, people, and information, diffusing central cultural norms horizontally and vertically. Along with movements of disciplinary reform and the rise of vernacular literatures, these were local, capillary-level processes that did not necessarily rely on royal patronage (cf. Gorski, 2003; Lieberman, 2009). But as interstate competition intensified, it is also true that central authorities frequently began to support specific religious and ethno-linguistic practices in order to enhance popular identification with the throne. Impelled by

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rising military costs, a similar Darwinian logic led states to centralize patronage, to reform fiscal and military systems, and to attempt, usually with mixed results, to grow their economies. In itself, moreover, the expansion of the state apparatus had profound, if at times unintended, economic and cultural effects that, on balance, also favored integration.

But why did far-flung polities, many of which had no contact with one another, frequently march to the same drummer? Why did they all cohere in the mid- to late first millennium, collapse between 1250 and 1470, and resume consolidation from 1500 to 1830 and beyond? Why did successive interregna tend to become shorter and less disruptive? And why did those interregna, in the 14th/15th, late 16th, and late 18th centuries, correlate ever more closely between Southeast Asia, Russia, and France? Between c. 900 and 1250/1300 coordination seems to have derived primarily from the powerful Medieval Climate Anomaly, which at its peak dramatically enhanced monsoon flows in Southeast Asia and extended the growing season in northern Europe. In this early period climate's synchronizing effect probably was reinforced by the demographic benefits of smallpox domestication in outlying sectors of Eurasia. From c. 1250 to 1450 economic and political collapse in much of Eurasia reflected the confluence of: a) institutional and ecological strains rooted in some three centuries of rapid growth, b) the transition from the Medieval Climate Anomaly to the far less propitious Little Ice Age, c) the demographically calamitous Black Death, which intersected with climate in complex, poorly understood ways (Lieberman, 2011). If climate remained influential, after 1450 or 1500 synchronization drew more particularly on post-plague population recovery and expanding oceanic trade. By disseminating European-style firearms, Japanese and New World bullion, and novel technologies, burgeoning trade not only encouraged militarization and Smithian economic specialization, but imprinted on those processes an ever more coherent Eurasian chronology. Although institutional strains and overly rapid growth continued to cause periodic state breakdowns, in one realm after another the declining severity of interregna testified to tighter political and social networks. Among polities in close contact with one another, parallel reforms between c. 1500 and 1800 normally involved imitation of best practices, but even states that lacked such contact often responded to comparable challenges in similar ways. This was the case, for example, with broadly analogous provincial reforms in 16th-century France, Russia, and Siam, and with those institutionalized bars to labor mobility enshrined during the first half of the 17th century in Russian serfdom, the Burmese *ahmu-dan* system, and Japanese status-group divisions. All three of the latter foundational reforms ended decades of pronounced social and political instability.

Naturally, alongside overarching parallels, we find innumerable specific differences in chronology, process, and form between and within European and Southeast Asian societies and between those societies and Japan. In Japan relative isolation and idiosyncratic climate from c. 700 and 1300 yielded political

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and economic rhythms not only distinct from, but also at times counterphasic to, those of Europe and Southeast Asia. Relative isolation and intermittent military incentives also help to explain why Japan combined unusually high levels of commercial and cultural integration with modest administrative centralization and a weak sense of ethnic alterity. Meager buffer zones, greater technological sophistication, and overseas rivalries ensured that military spurs remained far more intense in Europe than in Southeast Asia. In France such spurs joined high levels of social mobility and a peculiar culture of de-sacralization and public opinion to generate notions of popular sovereignty without remote Russian, Japanese, or Southeast Asian analogue. In Burma and Siam geography left integration more secure than in Vietnam. And so on and so forth.

It is precisely this combination of local specificities with ever more insistent convergences that renders the parallels so curious, so intriguing, so demanding of explanation. As European exceptionalism and its corollary, Southeast Asian encapsulation, recede, we begin to sense that peninsulas on Eurasia's northwest and southeast extremities were, in fact, idiosyncratic representations of an increasingly coherent ecumene.

The limits of European-Asian dichotomy become yet more obvious if we consider the distinction between the "protected zone" and the "exposed zone" of Eurasia. The protected zone includes those regions that I just described, namely, western and northern Europe, Japan, and mainland Southeast Asia, all grouped around the rimlands of Eurasia. The exposed zone includes China, South Asia, and Southwest Asia, all closer to the Inner Asian heartland. To be sure, both zones exhibited the same long-term tendency toward more complex, extensive, and well-integrated polities. Both responded to similar climatic and commercial stimuli and after c. 800 CE followed broadly comparable political and economic rhythms. In distinguishing between protected and exposed zones, I have no wish to replace the Europe vs. Asia dichotomy with a new all encompassing binary.

In China, for example, between Han collapse and Qing ascendancy, we find a familiar pattern of progressively shorter and less disruptive interregna, accompanied by administrative refinement and territorial consolidation, with the latter particularly notable after c. 1650. We also see a more or less continuous horizontal extension and redefinition of Chinese ethnicity, family norms, and written culture; and after the late Tang, a substantial narrowing of the once vast gap between elite and mass cultural practices. A final similarity that in varying degrees shaped all other trends was economic growth closely coordinated between China and other sectors of Eurasia, with vitality particularly notable c. 850/900 to 1270, 1470/1500 to 1630, and 1700 to 1830.

But consider three broad differences between China and the protected zone. Most obvious, whereas the protected rimlands imported institutions wholesale from China, India, and the Mediterranean, China itself was a site of primary civilization, which meant that processes of state and culture formation began

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centuries earlier (and, in the absence of external blueprints, necessarily developed far more hesitantly). A "charter state" I define as the earliest extensive indigenous polity in its area to provide a political and territorial charter for subsequent generations. If we consider the empire of Qin-Han (221 BCE – 220 CE) as China's charter state, it antedated comparable formations in the protected zone by anywhere from 700 to 1200 years.

Second, as befit exposed zone areas by definition, in China political development, especially after c. 900 CE, was heavily influenced by alien conquest elites, in this case, martial nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples from Inner Asia. Conquest elites repeatedly recast Chinese imperial geography; moreover, the Manchus – despite, or indeed because of, their alien ethnicity – brought Chinese administration to unprecedented levels of efficiency. If Manchus, like leading Xianbei and Jurchens before them, embraced Neo-Confucianism as a supra-ethnic doctrine, elite cohesion also required that they erect ethnic barriers between themselves and their subjects in ways that contrasted with the assimilative, integrationist thrust of cultural policy in protected zone states and in China itself under Chinese-led dynasties. These two features – civilizational precocity and Inner Asian dominance – were related in that the same physical openness, the same exposure, as gave ancient North China early access to pan-Eurasian technologies, flora, and fauna later opened North China to steppe incursions. Inadequate pasture, the seas, and/or malarial climate left Eurasia's rimlands more insulated in both respects.

A third distinction between China and most protected zone realms was the enormous size of Chinese territories. Yuan and Qing conquests testified to the power of Inner Asian cavalry. More basically, the expanse and solidity of empire under Chinese and Inner Asian dynasties alike benefited from a modestly centripetal geography along with four nonpareil cultural instruments: a precociously modern bureaucracy, logographic scripts, the Neo-Confucian corpus, and civil service examinations. And yet the extraordinary size of Chinese empires set stricter technical limits to centralization than in many protected zone realms and helps to explain why Chinese authorities tended to remain less interested than their protected zone counterparts in fiscal maximization. By minimizing external threats, subcontinental dominion let Chinese empires afford a low-tax regime. Conversely, by minimizing local resistance, light taxes helped the empire hold together. Such features do not mean that governance was less effective than in protected zone realms; on the contrary, cultural instruments joined political controls to foster exceptional levels of stability over vast areas for remarkably long periods. Yet these features do suggest that, despite comparable post-900 trajectories, Chinese state formation often followed an internal logic distinct from that in the protected zone.

In South Asia we also find substantial similarities to individual protected zone realms and indeed to China. Periods of polycentricity between successive Indian empires grew shorter and, in some ways, less disruptive. Indian

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administrative culture became more efficient, especially between c. 800 and 1300, and again during what many global historians now call the early modern era, c. 1500/1550 to 1750/1800. Loosely familiar too were long-term trends in India toward horizontal cultural integration as represented by the transregional thrust of Sanskritic culture, followed by that of *bhakti*, of Perso-Islamic culture, and of brahmanic notions of caste. Finally, integration in South Asia responded to familiar material and climatic influences according to well-known rhythms.

But chronology and geography also distinguished South Asia from the protected zone. For one thing, the Indo-Gangetic plain, like the North China plain, supported a primary civilization in the second millennium BCE, and a charter state by 320 BCE, which was at least 800 years earlier than in any protected zone realm.

Second, like China, South Asia after c. 1000 lay open to ever more insistent Inner Asian incursions. And again, civilizational precocity and Inner Asian exposure were related insofar as Inner Asian invaders followed some of the same routes by which new crops and technologies had entered in the fourth and third millennia BCE.

In political and cultural terms, alien conquest elites were yet more innovative in South Asia, where they introduced fresh administrative systems and Perso-Islamic culture, than in China, where they were often content to perfect existing institutions and to patronize Neo-Confucianism. However, in part because of this very novelty, post-1200 Indian empires remained more fragile. To be sure, Perso-Islamic culture extended well beyond narrow court circles to implicate elites across the subcontinent. But because it generally failed to incorporate the lower gentry and the peasant-warrior class, and the ritual systems they supported, Perso-Islamic culture proved to be a less effective instrument of imperial integration than Neo-Confucianism, whose social penetration was relatively deep. In China, one could argue ironically, Inner Asians' greater cultural poverty, their lack of access to literate systems that could compete with indigenous systems, contributed to their greater political success. In addition, South Asian geography was less centripetal; more frequent warfare precluded a low-tax regime on the Chinese model; and South Asian cultural features – pervasive rural militarization, nested sovereignties, caste, low literacy; and alphabetic, rather than logographic, scripts – proved less sympathetic to centralization than did Chinese political culture. Thus, if its early civilizational genesis and subjection to Inner Asian power had much in common with Chinese experience, India's oscillation between imperial and regional formations also set it apart from both Chinese and protected zone patterns. In brief, South Asia faced barriers to imperial unification more substantial than in China, but less formidable than in Europe or mainland Southeast Asia.

Finally, the protected-exposed zone distinction helps us to rethink the history of archipelagic Southeast Asia, which alone among the regions under review,

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shifted from protected to exposed zone status. Until c. 1570, island trajectories paralleled those in mainland Southeast Asia. Although geography decreed that archipelagic states always were more numerous, small-scale, and fissiparous than their mainland counterparts, Srivijaya and classical Java played a foundational role similar to that of pre-1400 charter states on the mainland, while Melaka, Aceh, Mataram, and so forth paralleled post-1450/1500 revivals in Burma, Siam, and Vietnam. So too the spread of Malayo-Islamic culture recalls the contemporaneous expansion of Burmese, Siamese, Vietnamese – as well as Russian, French, and Japanese – ethno-cultic systems. Above all, until c. 1570 in the archipelago as in all protected realms, geography, in this case maritime distances, precluded sustained external conquest.

In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, however, those same seas that once sheltered the archipelago facilitated European intrusion, and Europeans – "white Inner Asians" – began to modify local development in a fashion reminiscent of Manchus and Mughals on the continent. Like Inner Asians, Europeans used superior military/organizational skills to join extensive territories in novel fashion and to create polities markedly stratified along ethnic lines. If Manchus and Mughals represented successive points in a series extending from alien accommodation of indigenous tradition to external imposition, the Spanish in the Philippines represented a point well beyond the Mughals. Although Dutch cultural influence was weaker than that of the Spanish, the Hollanders' relentless commercial focus and extensive resources ensured that they had a more decisive economic impact. Like its Spanish counterpart, the Dutch commercial-cum-territorial empire of 1840 bore no obvious relation to any pre-European formation. In thus redirecting early modern integration in the archipelago, extra-regional actors decoupled local trajectories from those in mainland Southeast Asia.

In sum, Eurasian comparisons hold two potential attractions. On the one hand and somewhat counterintuitively, they promise to enrich local understandings. That is to say, by multiplying case studies, such parallels make it easier to identify factors influential across a range of societies and to separate common elements from forces that were truly *sui generis*. On the other hand and more obviously, such comparisons modify our view of Eurasia itself. So far as I know, no one has advanced any of these themes: the concept of coordinated Eurasian charter states; progressively milder and more closely coordinated interregna across both Asia and Europe; intra-Asian and intra-European distinctions more marked than those between Europe and Asia; politicized ethnicity as a common European and Southeast Asian mobilizing device; the coordinating Eurasian role of the Medieval Climate Anomaly and of parallel institutional experiments; and the distinction, ever more apt in the early modern era, between protected and exposed zones. Hopefully the following essays will help determine how valid these and other views may be.

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