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Asian expansions

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[Asian Expansions: The Historical Experiences of Polity Expansion in Asia](#)

Reviewed item:

Reviewed title: Wade, G. (ed.) 2014. *Asian Expansions: The Historical Experiences of Polity Expansion in Asia*, Routledge, ISBN 9780415589956

Reviewed by Victoria Hui

Asian Expansions, according to the editor Geoff Wade, is intended to initiate a schema to compare polity expansions in Asia and Europe (pp. 1, 3, 18). It is noteworthy that most of the historians contributing to the volume object to Wade's comparative enterprise. The only exceptions are Peter Perdue (ch. 2) and Victor Lieberman (ch. 5), who are already renowned for highlighting "Eurasian similarities"^[1] and "strange parallels."^[2] Wade is at pains to point out in the introduction that chapters on China, Vietnam, Siam (Thailand), Burma, and Gowa (absorbed by Indonesia) in fact provide evidence for similarities across Asian and Western expansions. This reviewer, a political scientist who compares Chinese and European state formation, agrees. Historians of Asia who insist on Asian uniqueness or European exceptionalism seem to have stylized conceptions of Social Science analyses and European experiences, which are in fact nuanced and diverse. The very existence of such misconceptions makes it imperative that scholars persist with cross-fertilization.

The tensions among the contributors are so pronounced that Wade feels compelled to justify his choice of terms in the introduction: were historical Asian entities "states"? Did they engage in "expansions"? Are such terms so "Eurocentric" that adopting them would automatically contaminate analyses of Asia? William Cummings rejects such terms and derides the "schematic models" that "social scientists have constructed" as "arbitrary" and "inaccurate," tending to "blind us to what is unique and, ultimately, illuminating about individual states" (pp. 222, 224). Jacques Leider likewise prefers to focus on the "amazing" differences between neighboring Burma and Siam to illustrate the futility of identifying similarities farther afield with other regions (p. 203).

To minimize controversy, Wade opts for the term “polity” rather than “state”. Cummings argues that Gowa was an “empire” or “chiefdom” rather than a “state” given the limits of its administrative development whether in its bureaucracy, codified law, or taxation (pp. 224, 228). He suggests that the term “state” as understood by “social and political theorists” is either inaccurate, incomplete, or unhelpful because it implies “rational planning, rule-making, consistency and predictable behavior” and omits “contingency [and] unintended consequences” (p. 224). The historian should therefore “abandon this classificatory mire and move on to more fertile fields (p. 224).

This is, however, an inaccurate understanding of the term “state” as used by social scientists, most notably, Charles Tilly whose name is almost synonymous with the literature on European state formation. [iii] Wade follows Tilly’s definition of states as “coercion-wielding organizations that... exercise clear priority in some respects over all other organizations within substantial territories” (p 25, fn. 3). Such a transhistorical definition is not limited to European states of the twenty-first century but “includes city-states, empires, theocracies, and many other forms of government” over the past five thousand years (ibid). It is also a mistake to presume that social scientists ignore contingencies. Perdue correctly cites Tilly on historical events as “[b]y-products of social interaction, tacit constraints, unintended consequences, [and] indirect effects” (p. 32).

Cummings insists that “polity formation” is “an ongoing process rather than something that is achieved at a particular historical moment” (p. 215). Such a conception is perfectly consistent with Tilly’s work on the *processes* of state formation. Tilly is well-known for problematizing how “France” or “Germany” or “Britain” came into being and how other once independent polities disappeared from the map. His research agenda converges with Cumming’s study of how Gowa built up its empire, ceded to the Dutch East India Company, and became a part of Indonesia.

Indeed, all the contributing chapters examine the very Tillyan question of how modern “China,” “Vietnam,” “Thailand,” “Burma” came into being. How did “China” extend from the Yellow River valley to southern China and Inner Asia (Wade, Perdue) and Taiwan (Andrade)? How did “Vietnam” achieve independence from Tang China, resist further invasions from the northern neighbor, and extend its rule to Champa, thus expanding its territorial reach from 110,000 to 370,000 square kilometres over a millennium (Lieberman, Whitmore, Momoki)? How did “Siam” and “Burma” likewise extend from river valleys to uplands, constructing overarching states in their respective north-south corridors (Lieberman, Koizumi, Leider)? Can we use the term “expansion” for these cases?

Jacques Leider contends that the term is inappropriate because it suggests a “streamlined” and “teleological” narrative of conquest with “a clear point of departure and an arrival point where ‘expansion’ will be declared to have succeeded or failed” (p. 184-5). Such a conception of “expansion” is too restrictive to be Eurocentric – as one would be hard-pressed to find European cases that fit the bill, certainly not Britain or France or Germany. The “halting but persistent and accelerating trends” as described by Lieberman (p. 93) is far more common in both Asia or Europe. Lieberman nevertheless rejects the term “expansion” and favors “integration.” Wade thus laments that scholars obviate the need to explain Asian expansions by using alternative terms such as “consolidation,” “coalescing,” and “opening up” (pp. 2-3).

Historians do not use the term “expansion” because it risks “reading the present into the past by misplacing labels and categories” (Leider, p. 198). But are we making the same mistake by categorically rejecting some terms only because they were first developed to study Europe? Lieberman acknowledges that his analysis of the “politics of integration” takes as “its end point the contemporary states of Burma, Thailand and Vietnam” and “one could argue that this approach essentializes the nation and reads history backwards” (p. 98). Although Lieberman believes that historical trends were “quite contingent,” such an approach gives the impression of “inevitable culmination” (p. 98).

Historians refrain from the term “expansion” also because this term is rarely used in historical records, at least not in those written by victors. Military actions are routinely justified with “ethical and moral validation” (Wade, p. 14). Siam asserted that Arakan deserved conquest because it “had not bent in humble submission” (Leider, p. 187). Qing China eroded the local autonomy of native chieftains in Yunnan,

Guizhou, Sichuan, and Huguang because they exhibited an “evil nature” (Wade, p. 85). A Chinese official celebrated the conquest of Xinjiang as “a pacifying, civilising process” (Perdue, p. 48). Vietnam’s Confucianized officials likewise “urged expansion by bringing ‘civilisation’” to Champa (Whitmore, p. 139). But why should scholars take such rationalizations at face value? If historians are troubled by Europeans’ claim of the White Men’s Burden, should we be equally critical of Asians’ claim to “bring civilization to backward barbarians”?

A ready corrective is to examine history from the bottom-up as well as the top-down. Leider takes just such an approach, analyzing the Siamese conquest of Arakan “both from the point of view of the Burmese rulers who conquered the country and from Arakanese perspectives” (p.185). The result is a conflicting analysis: While Leider maintains that Siam’s “marching order” was “ideologically sound and politically arguable” (p. 187), the detailed description tells of long-lasting Arakanese resistance that has persisted to this day under the modern ethnic term “the Rohingyas” (p. 204).

Vietnam best embodies the contradicting perspectives between conquerors and conquered. Momoki notes that Vietnam’s national narrative glorifies both resistances to Chinese invasions and its Southern Advance to Champa (p. 144). In Perdue’s chapter, the same Vietnamese official, Le Quy Don, simultaneously denounced Chinese invasion of Vietnam and approved Vietnamese invasion of Champa “with a prodigal enthusiasm” (pp. 48-49). Just as Ming’s emperor Yongle claimed that his “concern [in invading Vietnam] was only that rebellious bandits not go unpunished and that the suffering of the people not go unrelieved” (Wade, p. 14), Vietnam’s Thanh-tong denigrated Champa people for “delight[ing] in chaos and act[ing] contrary to the Way” (Whitmore, p. 134). And like Ming China, Vietnam did not perceive any contradiction between restoring the Way and committing what Lieberman calls “genocide” (p. 97).

Thus, despite their intentions to the contrary, various contributors in fact offer detailed accounts of how Asian states multiplied their size by actual war or the threat of war. Even though such processes were rarely accomplished by military force alone but always complemented by diplomatic rituals (even marriage alliances as in Gowa), administrative measures, trading rights, and cultural assimilation, this was not unlike European expansions.

If we can establish the legitimacy of studying Asian states and their expansions, we may move on to examine the “processes, conditions, mechanisms, limitations, [and] reversals... involved” in Asian expansions (Wade, p. 2) Adopting Lieberman’s phrase, why were some expansions halting but eventually successful while others were halted altogether?

As it turns out, the “question of causation” for the “ratchet-like nature of integration” (Lieberman, pp. 98, 106) is exactly what scholars of state formation study. Tilly argues that European states were driven by the exigencies of war to enhance their administrative-extractive capacity to recruit bureaucrats, register populations, conduct censuses, raise revenues, build armies, and buy weapons so that they could defeat weaker neighbors and crush rebellions. It is a golden rule for social scientists that “money forms the sinews of war” (Andrade, p. 57). Likewise, in Asian expansions, successful states were those that “overhaul[ed] their administrations periodically to magnify their resource base” (Lieberman, p. 98). Indeed, Asian states were ready materials for such state-building because Confucianism provided not only ideological justifications for expansion but also the administrative technology to facilitate consolidation of newly conquered territories.

Lieberman, Whitmore, and Momoki converge on Vietnam’s secret for success: “the Chinese-modeled administrative and military systems” (Momoki, p. 145). “Dai Viet’s greatest period of expansion followed the neo-Confucian revolution of the mid-1400s” (Lieberman, p.106). The resulting bureaucratic efficiency “brought the resources, human and material, of the realm into its armed forces” and “allowed the capital to bring outer and newly acquired territories more directly under its control” (Whitmore, pp. 136, 120). Likewise, “a more solid state consolidation with coercive extractions” was instrumental to Siam’s victories against Burma (Koizumi, p. 180). Extending this logic, Burma had a “troubled aftermath” after an “undemanding conquest” of Arakan because the Burmese state commanded limited administrative-

extractive capacity so that the “sheer corruption of local officers” turned routine extractions into over-taxation and drove the population into “exodus” (Leider, pp. 186, 192, 195).

From the perspective of war-driven state formation, even maritime expansion was not a European monopoly. Although Andrade advocates the “maritime exceptionalist model,” he in fact concludes that “geopolitical competition” stimulated interest in maritime expansion in East Asia as in Europe. When “China,” “Korea” and “Japan” experienced “interstate rivalries” rather than unity, Asian rulers would actively search for maritime revenues (pp. 52, 64-65).

In all, despite the explicit objections by some contributors to using the terms “states” and “expansion” and to social science comparisons, all the chapters in fact support “Eurasian similarities.” This is not to say that Asia is just like Europe – comparisons are not restricted to identical twins. As Lieberman puts it: “alongside idiosyncrasies -- which, of course, can be enumerated for Japan and Southeast Asia as easily as for Europe - - the basic trajectories, dynamics and chronologies of integration were similar...” (p. 108)

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[i] Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

[ii] Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800–1830*, Volume 1. Integration on the Mainland, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

[iii] Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990-1992*, Blackwell 1992.

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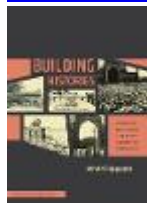


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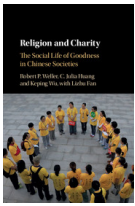
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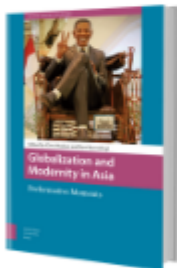
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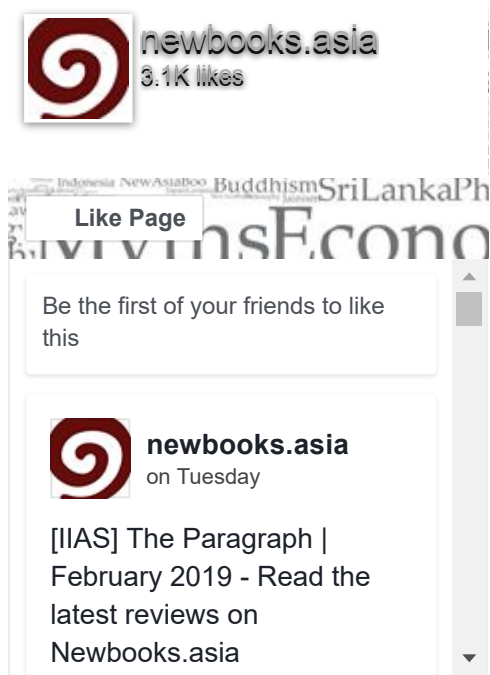
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