GLOBAL ASIA:
YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

Genghis Khan Statue by Francois Philipp

Premodern Empires of Asia

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Editor's note: This article is the second of four featuring pieces by Dr. Anand A. Yang.

Empires once dominated most of the world. Two notable examples from the ancient past of Asia are the Han Empire (206 BCE–220 CE) in China and the Mauryan Empire (ca. 321-185 BCE) in India. The former extended across a significant proportion of today's China, the latter over a large part of the Indian subcontinent. Both empires had extensive contacts with the wider world. Han China's ties to Europe and the rest of Asia were facilitated by the Silk Road, across whose many routes people, goods and ideas flowed. Mauryan India's external connections grew during the reign of the Emperor Asoka (268–232 BCE), whose patronage of Buddhism led to its spread beyond India.

The Han dynasty ruled for more than 400 years in the wake of the short-lived Qin dynasty, which forged the lands of several states into a unified empire in early third century BCE. The Qin and Han designed a pattern of imperial rule that remained essentially in place for the next 2,000 years. The historical legacy of the Han is also enshrined in the fact that its name serves as an ethnic designation for the majority Chinese population.

Non-Han rulers emulated the imperial model of state power. For example, the Mongol conquest of China led to the formation of the Yuan (1271–1368 CE) dynasty and the Manchu takeover to the Qing (1644–1911 CE) dynasty. In both interludes, moreover, the rulers and the ruled were involved in complex processes of adjustment and accommodation, and not just a one-way process of sinicization, of non-Han rulers assimilating into the ways of their subjects, as was once believed.

Funan, a state dominated by the Khmers and founded in the first century CE in the Mekong Delta area of today's Vietnam and Cambodia, is a striking illustration of how empires sprang from the melding of cultures, societies and polities in early Southeast Asia. Vibrant until the sixth century CE, Funan was one of the first significant Indianized empires in the region, that is, a state whose politics and culture were shaped by Indian and local ideas and practices. Other empires emerged during the so-called Golden Age period between 800 and 1400 CE, including the powerful Khmer Empire that extended across Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Its once great capital city lives on in its monumental remains, especially the magnificent Angkor Wat complex.

All these empires and the many that followed in their wake were states of a particular kind. They were, to employ a definition of empires advanced by the historians Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, "large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space." Typically headed by emperors, these large-scale political organizations were composed of core polities that dominated peripheral polities and their multicultural and multiethnic populations. The core units monopolized coercive power through elaborate bureaucracies, and developed strategic alliances with local elites. Such institutions and practices were designed to manage large and diverse populations and territories and not to create "a single people in a single territory constituting itself as a unique political community." The latter notion applies to the making of nation states, the political units most of us inhabit today.

All the key elements of empires were present in the making of the Mongol Empire, the largest contiguous empire in history. Its founder, Chinggis (or Genghis) Khan, first unified the different Mongol tribes and then conquered the other nomads of the eastern steppes in the early 13th century. By the time of his death in 1227, most of Central Asia was under his sway, as were parts of the Middle East and Russia. His descendants consolidated and expanded his empire, which eventually extended from East Asia to Europe.

By the late 13th century, their vast empire was divided into four separate polities termed khanates. The most prosperous was the khanate of Khubilai Khan, whose conquest of China established the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368).

The Mongol empire was won on horseback, generally by violent conquests. Once in command, however, Mongol khans established a Pax Mongolica that relied on familiar institutions and practices of imperial rule. Their apparatus of rule included: a remarkably multi-ethnic bureaucracy; alliances with local elites whose authority remained largely intact; and policies aimed at managing the diverse cultures and religions of the empire's enormous population.

The Mongol peace generated an unprecedented level of interactions across Eurasia in the realms of culture, religion, technology, trade, and migration. Their wealth and power continued to excite the popular imagination long after their empire had crumbled. In fact, Christopher Columbus was in search of the Cathay of the Great Khan when he stumbled into the Americas at the end of the 15th century, his fantasies and desires ignited by his images of that fabled land as evoked by the Venetian traveler and merchant, Marco Polo (1254–1324).