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Book Review

Andrew Phillips, *How the East Was Won: Barbarian Conquerors, Universal Conquest and the Making of Modern Asia*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp Xii + 345. $34.99 (paper)

For better or for worse, history changes. To some, this fluid dynamic can present challenges, particularly when it questions previous understandings that sit at the center of our paradigms. While some observers might find this turbulence overly politically-motivated, others take solace from the ever-expanding world of history, that now includes the voices of those often sidelined by more powerful and influential gatekeepers. In world history circles, one central question remains: the so-called Rise of the West or the Great Divergence, wherein Europeans gained a powerful advantage over other groups through economic, technological, and military advances in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *How the East Was Won* looks to provide a new interpretation that fights against standard accounts by centering the Asian experience in light of the three huge empires of the Mughals, the Qing and the British East India Company.

How the East Was Won is a work of international relations and world history, which challenges readers with its dense, theoretical sentences. Andrew Phillips writes in an academic, jargon-heavy style which makes his book less accessible to students but it does provide interesting arguments that could be engaging for graduate students and teachers. The book seeks to answer three questions: why were multicultural empires the norm in early modern Asia? Why were they ruled by minority elites? And how did they maintain their legitimacy? Phillips uses new interpretations built on a strong foundation of scholarly, secondary sources in unique ways.

In contrast to trends of nationalism so prevalent in Europe, in Asia, these empires were ruled by minority conquest elites. Phillips points out that these elites came from "steppe and sea frontiers" and were able to take advantage of economic opportunities to trade in luxury goods, arbitrage, and use military advantages (86). The Mughals, originating in the Afghan/Pamir region, the Manchus in Northeast Asia, and

the British, as sea barbarians, used their control of trade to fund expensive, technologically-advanced militaries that expanded from footholds to rule over large swathes of heterogeneous subject peoples.

As minorities, these conquest elites needed to build diverse coalitions which they did via "define and conquer." Phillips defines this as, "a particular form of cultural statecraft, where aspiring hegemons seek to split allies from rivals, while yoking their allegiances to emerging imperial hierarchies" (47). For the Mughals, that meant incorporating Rajput leaders, while for the Manchus, the creation of the Banner System helped to build a diverse coalition that could benefit from the fruits of conquest. Following the initial phases of "define and conquer," imperial regimes had to shift to "define and rule," which contained two separate aspects of ideology. The imperial elite had to justify its rule through an inward-looking ideology, such as Mughal "genealogical ties to Genghis Khan and Tamerlane," Manchu military prowess, and British civilization (53-54). To their subject peoples, the Mughals emphasized their hybrid and semi-divine character, the Qing emperor as representing various religious leadership roles, and the British as redeeming the "original" Hindu character of India. These ideologies, which embraced local cultural traditions, while also remaining separate from them, created a stable and resilient imperial ideology, as long as it continued to uphold the cultural diversity of the subject peoples.

In India, the Mughals and the British supported the Persianate elites who helped them to build legitimacy within the subcontinent. The Manchus similarly incorporated the Confucian bureaucracy to support their rule, once they had established themselves as the emperors of the Qing Dynasty. By embracing local cultural groups like using the Persian language in administration in India or continuing to use the Confucian exam system in China, conquest elites were able to attract local elites to buttress their legitimacy. As minority rulers in large, complex societies, conquest elites always needed to find collaborators; by embracing local cultural practices, these outsiders showed their readiness to work within a different cultural framework and demonstrated their understanding and appreciation of their subjects.

For Phillips, these three empires utilized slightly different forms of diversity regimes. First, the Mughals relied on a syncretic, semi-mobile form of rule meant to weaken the ties that local elites had over their power centers (the *mansabdar* system, as well as Akbar's religious universalism, are easy examples). The Mughals looked to share identity and power with local elites, creating a stable, imperial system. Second, the Manchus developed a framework of "segregated incorporation," where different groups maintained separate identities that were supported by the Qing rulers, who, in turn, embraced a multi-faceted set of identities and institutions that matched with their subjects (57). Last, the British East India Company used what Phillips calls "ecumenical incorporation," whereby they created a system of legal pluralism that attempted to both redeem India and hold together a religiously diverse subcontinent under their own rule

as the upholders of diversity and protectors of the different religious communities (57). By comparing these different empires and their schemes of legitimation, Phillips shows that their success (and later failure) was due to the slightly different approaches they used to both conquer and then rule.

How the East Was Won has an introduction, seven main chapters, and a conclusion, reference list and index. Each chapter begins with an introduction that lays out its goals and structure, as well as a conclusion that helps to reinforce and restate the arguments. Unlike a more standard work of history, Phillips relies almost entirely on secondary sources; the writing can be extremely precise, descriptive, and also quite dense. Chapter one, "From the Rise of the West to How the East Was Won," argues for a shift in understanding the time by focusing on Asian developments, instead of European changes. Chapter two, "The Eurasian Transformation," examines how these "land and sea 'barbarians'" were able to rule over large, populous, powerful empires as minority elites. Chapter three, "The Rise of Asia's Terrestrial Empires," explores how the Qing and Mughals were able to conquer and then rule over their diverse subjects. Chapter four, "European Infiltration and Asian Consolidation in Maritime Asia, 1600-1700," tries to answer how Europeans were able to move into these areas, the differences between their experiences in South and East Asia, and how those differences affected later European dominance in Asia. In essence, the first half of the book emphasizes the terminology and different players, setting the scene for the comparative section of the book, where Phillips makes his larger argument.

Chapter five, "The Great Asian Divergence: Mughal Decline and Manchu Expansion in the Eighteenth Century," explains how Mughal decline was due to a lack of legitimacy in the imperial order, as constant internecine warfare sapped the state of resources and respect after Aurangzeb's turn toward a more exclusive religious vision. Throughout the book, Phillips emphasizes cultural factors over economic ones, such as Aurangzeb's reimposition of the *jizya* and "abandonment of syncretism," which alienated key elite groups, such as the Rajputs (161). For Phillips, the cause of Mughal decline can be traced to Aurangzeb's Sunni sectarianism, which dissolved and weakened the ties between the imperial center and its diverse subjects. Indo-Persian elites, who had been so instrumental in conquering the empire, were ignored as Aurangzeb pursued his endless Deccan campaigns, leaving the court and capital empty of the imperial apparatus that held the empire together. When the Mughals abandoned their carefully balanced, customized imperial system of syncretism and support, their newly-orthodox attitudes strained their ties with local elites and resulted in a brittle court that soon fractured when confronting more robust invaders.

By contrast, the Qing expanded under Emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong, because of their ability to manage subordinate groups, rewarding them for loyalty and incorporating them in a new imperial culture. Phillips uses an interesting argument, the "Manchu 'apartheid' thus saw the Manchus fortify themselves in walled

garrisons in Beijing and other strategically located cities" (182). For Phillips, the Manchu ability to embrace Confucian values by learning and writing in Chinese, using the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, and following the historical ruling rituals, strengthened their rule over the Han Chinese. While the Qing Emperor might embrace symbols of Chinese culture, Manchus lived segregated from the Han majority, in an attempt to maintain an "otherness" necessary to their legitimating concept of military superiority. The Manchus were also able to placate groups like the Mongols through the establishment of the Lifan Yuan, which oversaw their incorporation in the empire and helped to cement local elites in place as collaborators with the rulers in Beijing. In order to incorporate the Mongols more fully, the Manchus "forged a Faustian pact with the Dalai Lama, underwriting his power, but at the cost of securing his enduring subordination and dependence on the Manchu emperor as his sole protector and patron" (195). In turn, the Dalai Lama recognized the emperor as a Buddhist universal ruler and personification of the Buddha, again binding the Tibetans and Mongols to the imperial system and securing the critical borderlands in the Northwest. By using parts of the diverse cultures they ruled over (Tibetan Buddhism and Confucian scholars), the Qing were able to expand and create an enduring imperial system.

Chapter six effectively ties Phillips' book together, as he returns to the concept of customization as key to these three empires that ruled over two of the major world civilizations. The East India Company (E.I.C.) used local elites to fund their expansion, support their rule, and serve as soldiers for them in a hybrid, modern army. For Phillips, these commonalities with the Mughals and Manchus shows that European empires in Asia were not original in their ruling ideologies, but were, instead, reliant on older patterns and forms of rule. Phillips rejects arguments of Indian military inferiority or economic weakness. Instead, he emphasizes that many battles were bitter victories for the E.I.C. and that local financiers and merchants were instrumental in funding E.I.C. expansion. Phillips argues that the ability to tax the most productive areas of India, borrow money from rich merchants, as well as recruit local professional soldiers, were the three keys to British expansion. Like the Mughals, the British used ceremonial robe ceremonies (*khilat*) to confirm local elites as subordinates. They also maintained Persian as the official language in India until 1837, helping to buttress the identities of Indo-Persian elites who acted as intermediaries between the company and its subjects. Finally, the E.I.C. built educational institutions like the Calcutta Madrassa (1780) and Sanskrit College at Banaras (1791), and funded research into Hindu scriptures and law-codes, emphasizing the differences of their subject people. By using resources to codify and create differences, the EIC was able to maintain ties with Brahmin and Muslim elites; Phillips notes that "the term 'Hinduism' dates from the early nineteenth century… it emerged through a complex interweaving of Western and indigenous agency" (236).

Chapter seven explains that British efforts "to coercively civilize Asian polities" provoked the explosive turning points of the Sepoy Rebellion and the Opium Wars

(248). Whereas previously the British had embraced a similar "define and rule" strategy, in the mid-nineteenth century, they shifted to a new approach. Phillips describes this new ideology as transformational liberalism: "a volatile admixture of liberalism and evangelical Christianity" (257). The attempt to make Asian systems adapt and change to mirror British cultural values and ideas provoked violent backlash. Following the Taiping Rebellion, the British supported the Qing and created the Imperial Maritime Customs Service, a parallel to the tax collection rights secured in Bengal. However, while incursion in India eventually led to the destruction of the empire, in China, the British sought to support the imperial system through administrative reforms that improved Qing finances in a symbiotic relationship.

How the East Was Won works in achieving its goal: to reinterpret the early modern period in Asia as one of hybridity instead of European dominance. The global connections that brought silver across the Pacific and spices and silks around Africa were less a result of European caprice than Asian demand. Phillips wants us to see that local elites were just as responsible for these imperial conquests as the conquerors were. Additionally, once the conquest was done, ruling could only work with elite collaborators, who needed to be appreciated and rewarded through cultural forms they understood. This book will stand as a valuable synthesis of scholarship in comparative history of Asia for years to come.

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