East Asia, (400–1800)

I. New Kingdoms in East Asia

A. Chinese Influences

1. Korea, Japan, and Vietnam were all rice-cultivating economies whose labor needs fit well with Confucian concepts of hierarchy, obedience, and discipline. While they all adopted aspects of Chinese culture, the political ideologies of the three countries remained different. None of them used the Chinese civil service examination system, although they did value literacy in Chinese and read the Chinese classics.

B. Korea

1. The Korean hereditary elite absorbed Confucianism and Buddhism from China and passed them along to Japan. The several small Korean kingdoms were united first by Silla in 668, and then by Koryo in the early 900s. Korea used woodblock printing as early as the 700s, and later invented moveable type, which it passed on to Song China.

C. Japan

1. Japan’s mountainous terrain was home to hundreds of small states that were unified, perhaps by horse-riding warriors from Korea, in the fourth or fifth century. The unified state established its government at Yamato on Honshu Island.

2. In the mid-seventh century, the rulers of Japan implemented a series of political reforms to establish a centralized government, legal code, national histories, architecture, and city planning based on the model of Tang China. However, the Japanese did not copy the Chinese model uncritically: they adapted it to the needs of Japan and maintained their own concept of emperorship. The native religion of Shinto survived alongside the imported Buddhist religion.

3. Women of the aristocracy became royal consorts, thus linking the court with their own kinsmen. A constitution that influenced Japanese political thought for centuries was developed in 604 when Siuko, a woman from an immigrant aristocratic family, reigned as empress, taking over for her husband at his death in 592.

4. During the Heian period (794–1185), the Fujiwara clan dominated the Japanese government. The Heian period is known for the aesthetic refinement of its aristocracy and for the elevation of civil officials above warriors.

5. By the late 1000s, some warrior clans had become wealthy and powerful. After years of fighting, one warrior clan took control of Japan and established the Kamakura Shogunate, with its capital at Kamakura in eastern Honshu.
D. Vietnam

1. Geographical proximity and a similar, irrigated wet-rice agriculture made Vietnam suitable for integration with southern China. Economic and cultural assimilation took place during Tang and Song times, when the elite of Annam (northern Vietnam) modeled their high culture on that of the Chinese. When the Tang Empire fell, Annam established itself as an independent state under the name Dai Viet.

2. In southern Vietnam, the kingdom of Champa was influenced by Malay and Indian as well as by Chinese culture. During the Song period, when Dai Viet was established, Champa cultivated a relationship with the Song state and exported the fast-maturing Champa rice to China.

3. East Asian countries shared a common Confucian interest in hierarchy, but the status of women varied from country to country. Foot-binding was not common outside China. Before Confucianism was introduced to Annam, women there had a higher status than women in Confucian China. Nowhere, however, was the education of women considered valuable or even desirable.

II. Centralization and Militarism in East Asia, 1200–1500

A. Political Transformation in Japan, 1274–1500

1. The first (unsuccessful) Mongol invasion of Japan in 1274 made the decentralized local lords of Kamakura Japan develop a greater sense of unity as the shogun took steps to centralize planning and preparation for the expected second assault.

2. The second Mongol invasion (1281) was defeated by a combination of Japanese defensive preparations and a typhoon. The Kamakura regime continued to prepare for further invasions. As a result, the warrior elite consolidated their position in Japanese society, and trade and communication within Japan increased, but the Kamakura government found its resources strained by the expense of defense preparations.

3. The Kamakura shogunate was destroyed in a civil war, and the Ashikaga shogunate was established in 1338. The Ashikaga period was characterized by a relatively weak shogunal state and strong provincial lords who sponsored the development of markets, religious institutions, schools, and increased agricultural production.

4. The delicate artistry and the simple elegance of architecture and gardens were influenced by the popularity of Zen Buddhism, which emphasizes meditation over ritual.

5. After the Onin War of 1477, precipitated by conflict over succession upon Yoshimasa’s retirement, the shogunate exercised no power and the provinces were controlled by independent regional lords who fought with each other. The regional lords also carried out trade with continental Asia.
III. Japanese Reunification

A. Civil War and the Invasion of Korea, 1500–1603

1. In the twelfth century, with imperial unity dissolved, Japan came under the control of a number of regional warlords called daimyo.

2. Warfare among the daimyo was common, and in 1592, the most powerful of these warlords, Hideyoshi, chose to lead an invasion of Korea.

3. Although the Korean and Japanese languages are closely related, the dominant influence on Yi dynasty Korea was China.

4. Despite the creative use of technological and military skill, the Koreans and their Chinese allies were defeated by the Japanese.

5. After Hideyoshi’s death in 1598, the Japanese withdrew their forces and, in 1606, made peace with Korea.

6. The Japanese withdrawal left Korea in disarray and the Manchu in a greatly strengthened position.

B. The Tokugawa Shogunate, to 1800

1. In the late 1500s, Japan’s Ashikaga Shogunate had lost control and the country had fallen into a period of chaotic wars among local lords; a new shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, brought all the local lords under the administration of his Tokugawa Shogunate in 1600.

2. The Tokugawa Shogunate gave loyal regional lords rice lands close to the shogunal capital in central Japan, while those lords who had not been supporters of the Tokugawa were given undeveloped lands at the northern and southern extremes of the islands. The Japanese emperor remained in Kyoto but had no political power. This political structure had an important influence on the subsequent development of the Japanese economy.

3. The decentralized system of regional lords meant that Japan developed well-spaced urban centers in all regions, while the shogun’s requirement that the regional lords visit Edo frequently stimulated the development of the transportation infrastructure and the development of commerce, particularly the development of wholesale rice exchanges.

4. The samurai became bureaucrats and consumers of luxury goods, spurring the development of an increasingly independent merchant class whose most successful families cultivated alliances with regional lords and with the shogun himself. By the end of the 1700s, the wealthy industrial families were politically influential and held the key to modernization and the development of heavy industry.

C. Japan and the Europeans
1. Jesuits came to Japan in the late 1500s, and while they had limited success in converting the regional lords, they did make a significant number of converts among the farmers of southern and eastern Japan. A rural rebellion in this area in the 1630s was blamed on Christians. The Tokugawa Shogunate responded with persecutions; a ban on Christianity; and, in 1649, the closing of the country.

2. The closed country policy was intended to prevent the spread of foreign influence but not to exclude knowledge of foreign cultures. A small number of European traders, mainly Dutch, were allowed to reside on a small island near Nagasaki, and Japanese who were interested in the European knowledge that could be gained from European books developed a field known as Dutch studies.

3. Some of the “outer lords” at the northern and southern extremes of Japan relied on overseas trade with Korea, Okinawa, Taiwan, China, and Southeast Asia for their fortunes. These lords ignored the closed country policy, and those in the south, in particular, became wealthy from their control of maritime trade.

D. Elite Decline and Social Crisis

1. Patterns of population growth and economic growth also contributed to the reversal of fortunes between the inner and outer lords. Population growth in central Japan put a strain on the agricultural economy, but in the outer provinces, economic growth outstripped population growth.

2. The Tokugawa system was also undermined by changes in rice prices and in interest rates, which combined to make both the samurai and the regional lords dependent on the willingness of the merchants to give them credit.

3. The Tokugawa shoguns accepted the Confucian idea that agriculture should be the basis of the state and that merchants should occupy a low social position because they lacked moral virtue, but the decentralized political system made it difficult for the shogunate to regulate merchant activities. In fact, the decentralized system stimulated commerce so that, from 1600 to 1800, the economy grew faster than the population and merchants developed relative freedom, influence, and their own vibrant culture.

4. The ideological and social crisis of Tokugawa Japan’s transformation from a military to a civil society is illustrated in the Forty-seven Ronin incident of 1702. This incident demonstrates the necessity of making the difficult decision to force the military to obey the civil law in the interests of building a centralized, standardized system of law with which the state could protect the interests of the people.

IV. Mongol Domination in China, 1271–1368

A. The Fall of the Yuan Empire
1. In 1368, the Chinese leader Zhu Yuanzhang brought an end to years of chaos and rebellion when he overthrew the Mongols and established the Ming Empire. The Mongols continued to hold power in Mongolia, Turkestan, and Central Asia, from which they were able to disrupt the overland Eurasian trade and threaten the Ming dynasty.

2. The Ming Empire was also threatened on its northeastern borders by the Jurchens of Manchuria. The Jurchens, who had been influenced by Mongolian culture, posed a significant threat to the Ming by the late 1400s.

V. The Early Ming Empire, 1368–1500

A. Ming China on a Mongol Foundation

1. Former monk, soldier, and bandit, Zhu Yuanzhang established the Ming Empire in 1368. Zhu’s regime established its capital in Nanjing and made great efforts to reject the culture of the Mongols, close off trade relations with Central Asia and the Middle East, and reassert the primacy of Confucian ideology.

2. At a deeper level, the Ming actually continued many institutions and practices that had been introduced during the Yuan. Areas of continuity include the Yuan provincial structure that maintained closer control over local affairs; the use of hereditary professional categories; the Mongol calendar; and, starting with the reign of the Yongle emperor, the use of Beijing as capital.

3. Between 1405 and 1433, the Ming dispatched a series of expeditions to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean under the Muslim eunuch admiral Zheng He. The goals of these missions were to reestablish trade links with the Middle East and bring Southeast Asian countries and their overseas Chinese populations under Chinese control, or at least under its influence.

4. Zheng He’s expeditions retraced routes that were largely known to the Chinese already. The voyages added as many as fifty countries to China’s list of tributaries. However, there was no significant increase in long-distance trade and the voyages were, overall, not profitable.

5. Many historians wonder why the voyages ceased and whether or not China could have gone on to become a great mercantile power or acquire an overseas empire. In answering this question, it is useful to remember that the Zheng He voyages did not use new technology, were not profitable, were undertaken as the personal project of the Yongle Emperor, and may have been inspired partly by his need to prove his worth.

6. The end of the Zheng He voyages may also be related to the need to use limited resources for other projects, including coastal defense against Japanese pirates and defense of the northern borders against the Mongols. The end of the Zheng He voyages
was not the end of Chinese seafaring: it was only the end of the state’s organization and funding of such large-scale expeditions.

B. Technology and Population

1. The Ming saw less technological innovation than the Song; in the area of metallurgy, the Chinese lost the knowledge of how to make high-quality bronze and steel. Reasons for the slowdown in technological innovation include the high cost of metals and wood, the revival of a civil service examination system that rewarded scholarship and administration, a labor glut, lack of pressure from technologically sophisticated enemies, and a fear of technology transfer.

2. Korea and Japan moved ahead of China in technological innovation. Korea excelled in firearms, shipbuilding, meteorology, and calendar making, while Japan surpassed China in mining, metallurgy, and novel household goods.

C. The Ming Achievement

1. The Ming was a period of great wealth, consumerism, and cultural brilliance.

2. One aspect of Ming popular culture was the development of vernacular novels like *Water Margin* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The Ming was also known for its porcelain making and for other goods, including furniture, lacquered screens, and silk.

VI. The Later Ming and Early Qing Empires

A. The Ming Empire, 1500–1644

1. The cultural brilliance and economic achievements of the early Ming continued up to 1600. But at the same time, a number of factors had combined to exhaust the Ming economy, weaken its government, and cause technological stagnation.

2. Some of the problems of the late Ming may be attributed to a drop in annual temperatures between 1645 and 1700, which may have contributed to the agricultural distress, migration, disease, and uprisings of this period. Climate change may also have driven the Mongols and the Manchus to protect their productive lands from Ming control and to take more land along the Ming borders.

3. The flow of New World silver into China in the 1500s and early 1600s caused inflation in prices and taxes that hit the rural population particularly hard.

4. In addition to these global causes of Ming decline, there were also internal factors particular to China. These included disorder and inefficiency in the urban industrial sector (such as the Jingdezhen ceramics factories), no growth in agricultural productivity, and low population growth.
B. Ming Collapse and the Rise of the Qing

1. The Ming also suffered from increased threats on their borders: to the north and west, there was the threat posed by a newly reunified Mongol confederation, and in Korea the Ming incurred heavy financial losses when it helped the Koreans to defeat a Japanese invasion. Rebellions of native peoples rocked the southwest, and Japanese pirates plagued the southeast coast.

2. Rebel forces led by Li Zicheng overthrew the Ming in 1644, and the Manchu Qing Empire then entered Beijing, restored order, and claimed China for its own.

3. A Manchu imperial family ruled the Qing Empire, but the Manchus were only a small proportion of the population and thus depended on diverse people for assistance in ruling the empire. Chinese made up the overwhelming majority of the people and the officials of the Qing Empire.

C. Trading Companies and Missionaries

1. Europeans were eager to trade with China, but enthusiasm for international trade developed slowly in China, particularly in the imperial court.

2. Over the course of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch gained limited access to Chinese trade.

3. By the seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company had become the major European trader in the Indian Ocean.

4. Catholic missionaries accompanied Portuguese and Spanish traders, and the Jesuits had notable success converting Chinese elites. The Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) used his mastery of Chinese language and culture to gain access to the imperial court.

D. Emperor Kangxi

1. Kangxi (r. 1662–1722) took formal control over his government in 1669 (at the age of sixteen) by executing his chief regent. Kangxi was an intellectual prodigy and a successful military commander who expanded his territory and gave it a high degree of stability.

2. During the Kangxi period, the Qing were willing to incorporate ideas and technology from Mongolian, Tibetan, Korean, and Chinese sources. The Qing also adapted European knowledge and technology—mapmaking, astronomy, and anatomical and pharmaceutical knowledge—taught by the Jesuits who frequented Kangxi’s court.

3. The Jesuits were also affected by their contact with China. They revised their religious teaching to allow Chinese converts to practice Confucian ancestor worship and they transmitted to Europe Chinese technology, including an early form of inoculation against smallpox and the management techniques of the huge imperial porcelain factories.
E. Chinese Influences on Europe

1. The exchange of ideas and information between the Qing and the Jesuits flowed in both directions.

2. The wealth and power of the Qing led to a tremendous enthusiasm in Europe for Chinese things such as silk, tea, porcelain, other decorative items, and wallpaper. Jesuit descriptions of China also led Europeans such as Voltaire to see the Qing emperors as benevolent despots or philosopher-kings from whom the Europeans could learn.

F. Tea and Diplomacy

1. The Qing were eager to expand trade, but they wanted to control it to be able to tax it more efficiently and to control piracy and smuggling. To do so, the Qing designated a single market point for each foreign sector: the market point for those coming from the South China Sea (including the various European traders) was the city of Canton. This system worked fairly well until the late 1700s.

2. In the late 1700s, the British East India Company and other English traders believed that China’s vast market held the potential for unlimited profit and thought that the Qing trade system (the Canton System) stood in the way of opening up new paths for commerce. At the same time, the British Parliament was worried about the flow of British silver into China and convinced that opening the China market would help to bring more English merchants into the trade and bring about the end of the outmoded and nearly bankrupt East India Company.

3. In 1793–1794, the British sent a diplomatic mission led by Lord Macartney to open diplomatic relations with China and revise the trade system. The Macartney mission was a failure, as were similar diplomatic embassies sent by the Dutch, the French, and the Russians.

G. Population and Social Stress

1. The peace enforced by the Qing Empire and the temporary revival of agricultural productivity due to the introduction of American and African crops contributed to a population explosion that brought China’s total population to between 350 million and 400 million by the late 1700s.

2. Population growth was accompanied by increased environmental stress: deforestation, erosion, silting up of river channels and canals, and flooding. The result was localized misery, migration, increased crime, and local rebellions.

3. While the territory and the population of the Qing Empire grew, the number of officials remained about the same. The Qing depended on local elites to maintain local order but was unable to enforce tax regulations; control standards for entry into government service;
or prevent the declining revenue, increased corruption, and increased banditry in the late 1700s.

**VII. Conclusion**

**A. Political Comparisons**

1. Japan retained greater political independence from China than did Korea and Vietnam but its political system was ultimately based on a warrior aristocracy.

2. Between 1500 and 1800, China and Russia grew dramatically, both in territory controlled and population.

3. Despite being headed by an emperor, Japan’s size, homogeneity, and failure to add colonies disqualify it from being called a true empire.

4. Japan made greater progress in improving their military than did China.

5. Where Mongol military activity reached its limit of expansion, it stimulated local aspirations for independence.

6. In China, Korea, Annam, and Japan the threat of Mongol attack and domination encouraged centralization of government, improvement of military techniques, and renewed stress on local cultural identity

**B. Cultural, Social, and Economic Comparisons**

1. Buddhism became the preferred religion in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam but universal esteem for Confucian thought and writings created Chinese influences in all three regions.

2. As they expanded, both China pursued policies that tolerated diversity while promoting cultural assimilation.

3. While Chinese leaders were willing to use foreign ideas and technologies, they tended to see their own culture as superior.

4. Merchants occupied a precarious position in both China and Japan.

5. Trade between China and Europe received active Mongol stimulation through the protection of routes and encouragement of industrial production.

6. The Mongols ruled with an unprecedented openness, employing talented people irrespective of their linguistic, ethnic, or religious affiliations, generating an exchange of ideas, techniques, and products across the breadth of Eurasia.
Focus Questions

**Question 1:** How did China influence East Asia?

**Question 2:** To what extent do shared practices justify thinking of East Asia as a unified cultural region in the post-Tang era?

**Question 3:** How did Japan respond to the Mongol threat?

**Question 4:** How did Japan respond to domestic social changes and the challenges posed by contact with foreign cultures?

**Question 5:** In what ways did the Ming Empire continue or discontinue Mongol practices?

**Question 6:** How did China deal with military and political challenges both inside and outside its borders?