Introduction

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In 2000, historian Kenneth Pomeranz published *The Great Divergence*, a landmark study which argued that there was no significant economic divergence between the most developed regions of Europe and the most developed regions of China until around the year 1800, much later than scholars had traditionally believed. Although he wasn’t the first to make such arguments (other notable examples include Andre Gunder Frank and Bin Wong), his book was unusually influential.

It’s no surprise that it has aroused a heated debate. A group of scholars defends the standard model of European exceptionalism, arguing that Europe’s technological, scientific, and economic lead over Asia began much earlier than Pomeranz suggests, to wit by 1500. They refer to Pomeranz and others who espouse similar views – most notably Jack Goldstone and Bin Wong – as revisionists, and accuse them of acting out of political correctness and an unreflective aversion to Eurocentrism, rather than scholarly interest. The revisionists have accepted the sobriquet and continue to defend their views. The debate, which has become known as the revisionist debate, seems far from resolution. If anything, it’s becoming increasingly strident.

In Fall 2010, I offered a course at Emory University on this controversy, in which the students read the relevant literature and developed their own research papers on the topic. We decided to publish the results of that research in this special issue of *Emory Endeavors in History*, and I am proud to introduce the papers here. Not all the papers touch directly on the debate, but all of them are informed by it, and readers will find topics ranging from European artists’ depictions of the Middle East during the 1500s to Korea’s remarkable modernization in the 1950s.

The volume starts with an article by Jessica Moore, who takes issue with one of the key figures of the revisionism debate, the late Andre Gunder Frank, who argued, in an influential article, that pre-modern India’s economy was every bit as advanced as that of Europe. Moore argues that Frank’s argument is factually and logically flawed, marshalling an array of statistics and pieces of evidence to back up her claim. She concludes that the revisionist case is not on firm ground when it comes to the Indian Subcontinent. Yet, she recognizes that much work remains to be done to truly answer the question of why Europe did eventually strike out on a divergent path from Asia. We certainly need more evidence from South Asia before there is anything close to a definitive view on the subject.

Heather Karellas examines a different aspect of the revisionist debate, by focusing on the way that the Middle East was represented in Renaissance Art. In 1979, Edward Said published his much debated book *Orientalism*. Heather ties the Orientalism debate to the revisionist debate,

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showing that Said engaged in his own Occidentalism, by reifying European discourse about the East. In fact, as her article argues, although European images of the Asian Other were often hardened and stereotypical, as Said suggests, there were also countervailing tendencies. There existed ways in which artists and philosophers portrayed subtle distinctions among non-western peoples, and in which non-western artists themselves riffed on themes from European art, so that, as Renaissance scholar Jerry Brotton writes, “each artist draws on the aesthetic innovations of the other, making it impossible to say which painting is definably ‘western’ or ‘eastern.’” The early modern period was one in which the many varied peoples of the globe came into closer and closer sustained contact, and stereotypes were, if not obliterated, at least moderated and adapted.

Two articles in this volume touch on one of the most compelling theories to explain the early successes of European colonial powers in Asia: the justly famous Military Revolution Model. Inaugurated by Michael Roberts and modified and championed by Geoffrey Parker, the Military Revolution Model suggests that Europeans possessed, within a global context, unusually effective armaments and military techniques, which explain their ability to dominate many of the world’s shipping lanes and establish colonies across the globe well before the age of industrialization. In a perceptive article, contributor Daniel Sok suggests that military historians have tended to pay too much attention to land warfare and too little to sea warfare in their discussions of the military revolution. He draws on the intriguing work of Greek scholar Nicholas Kyriazis to re-examine the military revolution debate, arguing compellingly that the rise of naval power required fiscal and political adjustments that were quite similar to those brought about by the more terrestrial aspects of the military revolution.

Michael Honig’s article examines the role that the military revolution played in the expansion of one particular European power: the Portuguese. According to the military revolution theory, Portugal’s ability to expand so quickly and effectively in the Indian Ocean region is directly related to the military techniques and technologies that stemmed from Europe’s ongoing military revolution. Yet revisionists have argued, in contrast, that it was not so much superior military power that explains Portugal’s successes, but rather the fact that Portuguese mariners benefited from a power vacuum on the seas, which is to say that existing Asian potentates in the area were relatively uninterested in expanding state power over oceanic space. Honig argues compellingly that that the revisionist theory and the military revolution model are not necessarily mutually incompatible. He suggests a middle way: both factors played a role.

After the Portuguese came the Dutch, whose seaborne empire was a marvel in its day. Daniel Gerstell’s article seeks to explain how the Dutch became so overwhelmingly powerful. He argues that the company’s administrative structure was unusually flexible and supple, and that this was responsible for its success throughout the seventeenth century. For one thing, he says, it was insulated from its own investors, protected by its government charter from meddling by stockholders. At the same time, he notes, it had a strong central administration of its own in Asia, which had unusual autonomy, yet benefited from administrative checks and balances, with the powerful governor-general’s authority limited by a council of advisors, the High Council of the Indies. Another strength was its local adaptability. Its outposts were not cookie-cutter copies of a

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single model but were rather highly adapted to each local political and economic reality. As he writes, “The Dutch seemed to grasp the notion that each territory was unique and thus required a responsive tailor-made form.”

Yet this colonizing company, so powerful in the seventeenth century, collapsed in the eighteenth, and one of the enduring mysteries is why. In an article that is deceptively modest in scope, Brian Goodman investigates this question, and it turns out that he adduces some of the very same factors that Gerstell sees as providing an advantage in the seventeenth century. Goodman claims to treat merely the tea trade of the Dutch East India Company, but the significance of his argument is larger. According to him, the reason the company couldn’t compete with its more nimble competitor, the English East India Company, was because its structure was designed for a different world: the world of armed trade of the seventeenth century. Because the company needed a strong executive arm in Asia, its Asian headquarters in Jakarta, Indonesia, was highly autonomous and, as a result, jealous of its prerogatives. So, whereas the English could trade in China and then sail directly out of Far Eastern waters, Dutch traders were constrained either to buy their tea in Jakarta itself from Chinese merchants or, when they were able to purchase it directly in China, to call in Jakarta before they could take the tea to Europe. As a result of this ponderous trading structure, the Dutch saw their competitors across the English Channel taking a larger and larger slice of the tea trade, which became one of the most profitable parts of the growing English trading empire in Asia.

The second half of this volume jumps ahead to the late nineteenth century, and to one of the key questions of world history: what explains the variable timing of East Asian attempts at modernization? More specifically, why did Japan modernize so effectively and China and Korea so much less so, in the nineteenth century? Many scholars have suggested that Japan, which was the first non-western country to undertake a take-off to modern industrial forms of growth, was unusually poised for the process because it had undergone developments similar to those that occurred in Europe. In his article, Jonathan Wang examines this “proto-industrialization” debate, by referring to Japan’s unusual legacy of sakoku – literally the “closed country.” According to Wang, who draws on an array of Japanese and Western scholars to make his case, sakoku focused Japan’s energies inward. The development of the Tokugawa capital of Edo (present-day Tokyo) was directly stimulated by policies related to sakoku, and the rapid and thoroughgoing economic changes that occurred there became the crucible out of which later industrialization would be forged.

Yayori Takano’s well-written article also addresses the sakoku period, although her question is what prompted the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which saw Japan undertake a series of rapid reforms. The traditional perspective holds that the Meiji Restoration was sparked by the sudden appearance, in 1853, of American warships led by Matthew Perry. On the other hand, she notes more recent scholarship, which has focused instead on economic tumult and political breakdowns that weakened the Japanese state. Takano argues that the sakoku period, in many ways, laid the groundwork for Japan’s response to Perry. Far from being closed, Japan was actually quite engaged with the world, but on its own terms, through its own drive-through window, as it were: the port of Nagasaki, where certain foreign traders were allowed to call, whereas others were excluded. But the arrival of Perry made clear that a new approach was necessary. That’s not to say
that endogamous political and economic pressures weren’t important. Just that the urgency for fundamental reform stemmed from foreign pressure. “Had there been no contact and no pressure from foreign nations,” she writes, “the Japanese would not have approached modernization nearly as rapidly as [they] did.”

Two contributors take on China’s relatively ineffective embrace of modernization. Mark Knapp finds an explanation in what he calls, following the work of scholar James Townsend, “Chinese Culturalism,” a sense that China’s cultural legacy, rooted in Confucianism, is the one core civilization in the world. Distinguishing this culturalism from the concept of nationalism, Knapp investigates its influence on China’s development, drawing on the work of traditional sinologists, like the famous and deeply influential John Fairbanks. In a way, his paper reflects what we might begin to call a new global historical perspective on China. On the one hand, Knapp is persuaded by Pomeranz that China was, until the 1700s, not notably lagging behind the west in technology or economic development. Yet, he also updates Fairbankian ideas about China’s unusual form of “universal kingship,” which was deeply rooted not just in its reigning political philosophies, but in the very institutions with which it undertook relations with the outside world. Whatever you may think of Pomeranz’s argument or Townsend’s notion of culturalism, it is difficult to argue that China did not have significant problems adjusting to a global geopolitical system in which there was no Middle Kingdom.

Laura (Xueshan) Yu takes a different approach to the question of China’s relatively difficult process of modernization by focusing on the issue of elite cohesion. Whereas Japan’s elites, after a brief period of disunity that resulted in the Meiji Restoration, had relative unanimity about the need for reform and the shape that reform must take, China’s elites stayed divided. Its central government – the late Qing state – saw vacillating pushes toward reform and reaction for several decades, with the forces of reaction generally holding the upper hand. The impetus for reform was to be found, not in the central government, but in provincial reformers, who could not, of course, foist their ideas for reform on a center that did not wish for it. The notion that factionalism in the central government was inimical to reform is not new, but Yu cleverly applies the concept of elite cohesion, while at the same time arguing that it carries a certain amount of Eurocentric bias.

The last article in the volume, by Josh Park, focuses on China’s smaller and unduly neglected neighbor, Korea, exploring the factors behind South Korea’s extraordinary economic miracle in the 1960s and 1970s. He notes that in 1962, the country had a per capita GDP rate of around ninety US dollars (in 2009 dollars). By 2009, that figure had risen to more than $17,000, an increase of three orders of magnitude. How did Korea achieve this remarkable feat? Park believes that Korea’s Confucian heritage is partly responsible. Western social scientists have often considered Confucianism to be inimical to sustained economic growth because of its purported hostility to traders. Yet, as Park shows, drawing on the work of more recent social scientists, a modified form of Confucianism actually provided some of the stimulus to growth. Indeed, one can argue, as Park suggests, that the Confucian respect for education is highly adaptive in today’s economy, which increasingly relies upon knowledge-based industries. When we compare the percentage of GDP spent on education in Korea to that spent in the USA, we can see why that the US is beginning to fall behind Asia.
Does that mean that another Great Divergence is before us, with the USA and the European Union stagnating or even declining as the increasingly advanced economies of East Asia and, to a lesser extent, South, Asia rocket forward? It is difficult to say, and history is full of surprises. The next few decades will be eventful ones in world history.