

31: Asian Developments, 1200-1600

Corinne P. Armstrong

Introduction

In this time period grid that we are looking at, 1200-1600, we always go a little to one side or the other. After all, review is good for you, so occasionally we should get back into the earlier period to confirm the knowledge that you have of what was going on during that time. Sometimes we also overlap a little to the other side. For the most part of this lesson, we will be looking at only selected Asian cultures, primarily states, some kingdoms, after the major Mongol invasions but before the major Western invasions.

We will focus more on some of the major states and their accomplishments, what the people themselves look back to as their Golden Age and some of their great accomplishments, rather than looking at the myriad numbers of peoples in Asia.

There are major people movements during this period after the Mongol invasions. The Mongols were unable to settle in Southeast Asia, or even in South Asia; they primarily settled north of the Himalayas. The Mongols had one of the greatest expanses of any large empire: from China all the way to Europe. In this period there were some more movements of Turkic and Mongol peoples, especially under Timur, also known as Tamerlane, to whom you were introduced before.

Also there were movements of the Thai-speaking peoples, especially those that today we consider the major peoples of Thailand and Laos, for the Mongols came and destroyed the Thai kingdom in the area that is now Southern China, in Yunnan. So the Thai people, loving their freedom, decided: "We'll just move out of here," and they moved south. There are also movements of Muslims, into North India, for instance. We will be looking at these major movements of peoples during this time briefly.

We will also study social and economic dynamics. In certain states this is a time of luxury, of wealth, an explosion of architecture, including monumental architecture, of new literature forms, including the novel. The reason for that was a rising middle class: in China, for instance, it was a merchant class; whereas the scholars would not think of looking at those new-fangled ways of writing. They were not even writing in scholarly Chinese! They were using more ordinary Chinese, adapted to the

writing systems. The new classes were beginning to be literate and were moving up in the world. Does this sound familiar if you think of Europe as well, of what was happening around this period of time? Then there was painting and other types of arts.

But along with the luxury at the top, along with this explosion of high civilization, high culture, there was also death, brutality, slavery, and poverty at the bottom. Massive deaths occurred from invasions. There were famines. Most of mankind has faced periodic famine over a good part of the millennium, especially once they started to depend on agriculture. There was a higher population growth and either drought, locusts, floods, or war.

This is also a time, as I mentioned, of the rising merchant class and of artisans as well, who have to supply the goods for the merchants to trade. There was long distance trade, even maritime trade. The Chinese sailed from China to the east coast of Africa, and on the way up to Mecca as well, without going through intermediaries.

Then we will look at the religious dynamics during this period. This is a time of so-called world religions, i.e., religions that are not tied just to one ethnic group or to one particular locality, but are open for converts, for other people to easily accept them and adopt them. World religions were accommodating themselves to local cultures, including the local religion that was there before they arrived.

There is Hinduism; we will look a bit at the competition between those who follow Shiva and those who follow Vishnu in Southeast Asia.

There is Buddhism: Mahayana Buddhism, replaced in Southeast Asia by Theravada Buddhism, the Buddhism of the elders, the more conservative but more egalitarian Buddhism.

Islam came in, and in this period of time we are looking at particularly in North India. Then in what today is Malaysia, the Malay peoples became Muslim. Islam came into Indonesia, although looking at it, you might not recognize it as Islam. Then, of course, Islam came into Central Asia as well and got firmly established in Persia.

We are not focusing primarily on Christianity at this time, but it came overland into China with the

Jesuits during this period. Again, that will be covered primarily in a later lesson in Module 3B, when we get to the Catholic Reformation and missions. So, although we will mention Matteo Ricci, who got to China, for the most part we will not concentrate on that in this lesson.

Then Christianity also came by the Portuguese, who managed to get around Africa and come into Asia. Who were these traders, and invaders, who came into Asia? What impression did they give of Christianity, as opposed to the Muslim traders who came into Southeast Asia?

In your readings, try to get through all the facts and focus on the reasons behind certain trends. You do not have to memorize every ruler's name; you do not have to become an encyclopedia. The encyclopedia will be there, your textbooks will be there for you later on. Obviously, if you are focusing on a particular part of Asia for your own ministry, or because you have friends from there, you may want to spend more time on the readings. You already know that you have your choice of a number of different areas in which to write on the great civilizations. Look at the factors that are affecting change: personal factors, economic, technological, religious, cultural, military, etc.

There will be some repetition in your reading, a bit of review. I know for some of you this is the first time reading about, let's say, all the myriad kingdoms and empires in Southeast Asia, so it does not hurt to have a short review that goes back. Here are some of the major ones and their development. Again, focus on the things that the peoples themselves are proud of even today: the developments in a Golden Age, or the Great Ages, which set the pattern for today. Sometimes they set it for self-identity today. Why do Thai consider themselves Buddhist? That is part of their self-identity. How do they distinguish themselves from Cambodians, Vietnamese, Burmese, or whomever? You also get a glimpse of the rivalries that some of these groups developed during this period of time and that continue on even today. Perhaps this lesson may help you understand these.

We have included a few texts on China. You get a feel for the life there: family life, ways of governing, education of children. They even talked about prenatal education!

Look at the whole area of religious compromise, accommodation, being able to work together—vs. religious intolerance. We see both approaches. There is an example, for instance, of curing in multiethnic Thailand. Is there any real difference

between the healing practices of Buddhists and Muslims? Or is it more a regional difference? In Indonesia, is this really a case of Hinduized animism and mysticism, or is it really Islam? Those two trends, the two approaches to Islam, Santri and Abangan, are still very much alive in Indonesia today. So it is very relevant.

Review

1. Write your assessment of the role of commerce in the rise, expansion, and decline of the Asian states discussed in today's readings.

One always has to look at the role of trade and commerce. But particularly in this period of time, commerce expanded even more than before. The Silk Road had been there for a long time. There had been trade from China over to the Roman Empire long ago. But now there was even more trade, more items and more trade within Asia; Japan was developing more; there were more states in Southeast Asia. You can see the role of commerce in China under the second Ming Emperor.

There was even maritime trade; however, that was carried out primarily by one of the famous and powerful eunuchs. Not everybody loved the eunuchs, especially not the scholar-officials who felt the emperors of the Ming Dynasty relied on eunuchs too much. By the way, you will see that also in much of the Middle Eastern Islamic states: the role of the Janissaries, the slaves, a special group, as opposed to the strong family lines. Afterward, the Ming Dynasty cut out its maritime trade, so there arose trade by the Japanese. The isolationist tendency probably helped to eventually weaken the Ming Dynasty.

You can also see commerce in Southeast Asia, where Malacca rises up in what today is Malaysia and steals away the trade from Majapahit in the Java-Sumatra area, as one state rises over another. Then there is the great Southern Indian state of Vijayanagar, which has a lot of trade, including in gold, even to the Arab lands of the Middle East and into Europe.

Europe's Crusaders, sent to explore, found that there were lots of things that they would like to bring back home. Not just Mediterranean Europe, but now Central and Northern Europe got much more involved in this trade, all to the wealth of Asia. Later on, of course, you will see commerce and trade affecting the rivalry between European groups: Portuguese, Dutch and others.

2. What factors contributed to the expansion of Theravada Buddhism and Islam in SE Asia, and Islam in India during this period?

Islam was primarily in insular Southeast Asia, including what is today Malaysia, whereas Theravada Buddhism was in Mainland Southeast Asia. Islam also was in India during this particular period, before the Mughal Empire.

We can look at several different factors. With Buddhism, there is that interesting role of the Mon people, who were there before the Burmese people came from the north. They were the educated Theravada Buddhists, the scholars, often the advisors both to the later Burman Empire, such as Pagan, and also to the new Thai states that arose. They took their Theravada Buddhism from the Mon. Mahayana Buddhism in Southeast Asia really remained mainly in Vietnam, although there are a couple of other Mahayana states early on. What could Vietnam do? They had been conquered by China for 1000 years. There were lots of Chinese who came into Vietnam, who remained Mahayana.

But for the most part, Theravada, the more egalitarian Buddhism took over in Southeast Asia—more egalitarian than Hinduism, open to all people. It was a good way to control the people, from the village to the court; there was no need any more to rely upon the Brahman priests for rituals. So Theravada Buddhism began to replace Hinduism there. Buddhism died out in India. Their main source, therefore, of teachings and documents became Sri Lanka, which was Theravada Buddhist, and hence its continued influence into Southeast Asia.

As for Islam, some Muslims will tell you it is never spread by the sword. Do not believe them! But then don't believe that for Buddhism, Hinduism, or Christianity either. The sword is there! We are dealing with human beings. With Islam imposed by the rulers in India, it was good for one's health to change—if you wanted to stay alive in Northern India! Instead of being a Hindu, to become a Muslim was good for your health, because you could get rid of the worst of the caste discrimination if you were from the lower castes. You could escape into Islam. Islam in India, just like Christianity in India, got compromised by the caste situation, but still it was a better option for the lowest of the untouchables in India.

There was *extreme persecution* under the Muslims in Northern India at this period of the Delhi

Sultanate, and even before that there were raids. That did not last the whole time. There was rather a long-lasting repression of Hinduism and Buddhism. In fact, Buddhism was basically wiped out in India, a good part because of Islam; not just because it was absorbed back into Hinduism. There was not just persecution of Hinduism; there was also persecution of wrong Muslims, your enemies.

When we get to Southeast Asia, it is not so much a matter of imposing of Islam by force; it is more a matter of the trade, the new universalism, the multiethnic identity. It was good for the egalitarian, geographically mobile and socially mobile merchant class. They could now relate to Muslims who were Arabs, who were Persians, who were Gujarati Indians, whoever.

There was not so much emphasis on reliance upon priests for rituals. In fact, you could do without rituals as long as your heart was right and you recited the creed, the shahada: there is one God and Muhammad is the messenger or the prophet of God. Pilgrimage to Mecca brought people from all over the Muslim world, and there they all dressed alike and acted alike. There was interplay of internationalism. That was very good for trade, as well. There was ethical concern for traders and the special discounts for your fellow Muslims, and so on.

There were the teachers in the Islamic schools. In Indonesia, even in the rural areas, there were these Islamic boarding schools, the pesantren. There was an openness to having gurus and saints. There was an accommodation to your local beliefs; there was accommodation to local mysticism. One author points out that Islam really spreads in Southeast Asia primarily when you get the Sufi brotherhoods coming in. That was a primary factor: the Sufi missionaries who came to spread Islam came along with the traders. They not only served on the trading ships, but they were also trying to convert others. They formed tight brotherhoods that provided people with a group with which they could identify.

So here you no longer had to rely on priests and kings. You could be mobile geographically. It was good for your business to be Muslim, not just good for your health to stay alive. There was no foreign Pope; rituals and teachings were simple.

However, for those who preferred the more philosophical, in-depth, inner teachings, being able to become one with the Principle of the Universe, or in this case the God of the universe, that approach existed in Sufi Islam as well. You could

have it either way: the simple reciting of a creed and following a few commandments, or going for the mystical, in-depth form.

3. Why did Asian Christianity come so near to extinction just as the Christianity of the West was about to circle the globe? (this is Moffett's question, p. 503)

Moffett lists seven reasons why "Asian Christianity came so near to extinction, just as the Christianity of the West was about to circle the globe," (1998:503). It is a good question to reflect on, not only for what happened then, but also with implications for now, for us, with Christianity.

What are we looking at? Are we investigating true faith, or are we looking at the expansion and decline of institutionalized religion? Sometimes we go around counting numbers. "Europe has lots of Christians." But in fact, you may find more people of true faith among Muslims in Europe than among Christians.

Looking at institutionalized religion, how it fared vis-à-vis the political situation, may not be the same as looking at true faith. Do we really have Christianity anymore in Europe, where it is open, you can practice it, it is not persecuted? In fact, you even have state churches! Is that healthy for the true faith? Or is it merely healthy for institutionalized Christianity?

So I think, first of all, one has to look at the issue we are investigating. Here we are asking about Christianity, not necessarily about an institutionalized religion, not necessarily about the religion of the heart.

I would say one could divide Moffett's answers into two different types: the *external* versus the *internal* factors. External factors include the isolation; he talks about *geographical isolation*. It is true that China is far from Persia, but there was the political isolation as well. On this side is the Roman Empire; you'd better not be found in the Roman Empire because you're under the Persians! Hence politics divided two large empires, even where the physical geography had no obstacles at all.

Of course, there are the *theological isolation factors* as well. Then Moffett talks about numerical weakness. But is that really a cause, or is it a result of the lack of flourishing? Is that a symptom of it? Sometimes you never get a large number of adherents. But where the large numbers were, they

were in decline over this particular period of time for the most part in Asia; not so in the West.

However, in the West Christianity began fine in Europe; and then it was knocked out by the barbarians; then it recovered; then came the Vikings. The situation varied over time. But in Mediterranean Europe and in the Middle East, in the Roman Empire, you could build on the foundation of the Jewish Diaspora. You did not have that in the rest of Asia, and hence there was no base of a large population already there, among whom you could build a church.

Other external factors were the persecutions, and Moffett pointed out how strong the persecution was in Persia. This was before they became Muslims. They were Zoroastrians, striving for purity and avoiding pollution. But they could avoid their enemies, too, by getting rid of them! Another fact was that they met up with other major religions and large populations belonging to these major world religions: religions that had an intellectual tradition, and met the universalistic need that mankind has, once they get beyond their own ethnic groups.

So there are a number of external factors, and even today, over the last century or so, Christianity often has done better among tribal peoples, as in ancient tribal Europe, than it has among people who are Buddhists, Muslims, or Hindus, belonging to another literate world religion.

Among *internal factors*, because of *ethnic introversion* Christianity becomes part of our identity. In order to survive, we do not need to share it with anyone else. If it is yours, it is not mine, because I belong to a different ethnic group. *Dependence on the State*: in order to survive you have to depend upon the State, or else you go down to the catacombs! How much did they accommodate to one particular dynasty or one particular ruler? When that dynasty changed, out went Christianity! How much did they over-depend upon the State? What about the internal church divisions? That could certainly weaken the church; but on the other hand, if there is more than one form of the religion, then in some places one form can bloom, where another form won't even be allowed in. So there is an advantage to diversity of traditions; but not when they are at each other's throat!

What about the question of *theology*? Here Moffett is suggesting that it has been over-rated and perhaps the theology was not so much to blame. However, Moffett then adds a couple of ideas. He

suggests, for instance, that there is a *compromise with evangelism and missionary priorities*: a church that is not going out in evangelism and mission work eventually will die. It is hard to do when you are the persecuted minority! After all, there was persecution in the Roman Empire as well. There is persecution in China now, but they are going out to evangelize. So one has to look also at the theological health, the spiritual health of Christians.

Finally, Moffett brings up the question of the *providence* of God. We do not understand all the mystery of what happens, and why Christianity moved one direction and not another. Does God indeed work on the periphery? Tribal Europe was the periphery. The heart of the world, the heart of civilized mankind was in Asia, China, or Persia and India. Maybe God surprises us sometimes.

What about today? Here is a question to consider. Islam took over from Buddhism, Christianity, even Hinduism in parts of the world. Why can't Christianity? Does it take military conquest? Didn't it happen in the West? You either convert the ruler, or you conquer the people, line them all up, and get them baptized at the point of a spear or a gun. Does it take conquest to get institutionalized religion to change from one major religion to another major religion? If so, what happens to faith?

These are questions for you to consider and to wrestle with as you look at the history of Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist expansion over time.

References Cited

Moffett, Samuel Hugh

1998 *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500*. Rev. ed. Mary Knoll: Orbis.