Introduction

*The Great Game and Great Reforms of Asia, 1850–1950*

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The theme of the Great Game for this Special Issue, which focuses on colonialism and anti-colonialism in Central, East, and Southeast Asia, arises from the original Great Game, which involved a clash of the British and Russian Empires in Central Asia in the nineteenth century. There are several important similarities between the newer and original Great Games. Both are located in Asia, they both feature the Great Powers of Europe, and Western imperialism is a prominent feature in both cases. However, they are also quite different. The timeframe of the new Great Game is more recent, many of the players are new, and the approach to it has changed completely. This new Great Game covers East and Southeast Asia in addition to Central Asia. The United States is involved in addition to Europeans and Asians. It includes the rise of nationalist ideologies and fierce battles between international capitalism and communism. And it is more interactive, cross-cultural, and gives agency to those fighting against the imperialists. This helps redefine the Great Game away from competition among the imperial powers to a Game played between the powers and their subject peoples. Because the essays in this issue focus in part on these subject peoples, this Great Game is also a story of important reformers and great reforms. This is a Great Game of ideas as well as action. Even when they failed, these reformers are important to understand because they mark the limits of reform. When reform failed to create needed change, it sometimes gave way to revolution. Thus, revolution and the revolutionaries themselves became an important part of the new Great Game.

East and Southeast Asia, comprising much of the geographical area included in the new Great Game, has become a very important part of the global economy.

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Thanks goes to Dr. Charles Weller, who organized a paper panel for the World History Association Conference in Minneapolis in June 2013 with the same name with these same participants and paper topics, for creatively appropriating the Great Game for the contributors in this Special Issue to use.
since World War II, especially in the last twenty years. From Japan’s recovery and transformation into “Japan Inc.” to China’s more recent emergence as the world’s second largest economy to South Korea’s rapid development to a ring of Southeast Asian nations including Singapore, Vietnam, and several others whose economic performance has produced tremendous wealth, Asia has emerged as the most dynamic region in the world in the 21st Century. As these nations have played a bigger role on the world stage, their influence begs the question of how they accomplished this feat and what the future holds for them. In addition, why did other parts of Asia continue to struggle with political instability and economic stagnation such as Central Asia? Study of the new Great Game can help us understand Asia’s modern foundations, which were built in the postwar period but also in the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th Century when much groundwork was done.

The shadow of Japanese modernization in the late 19th and early 20th Century looms over this Great Game as an early model for others and later as a hegemonic imperialist in its own right. Its expansive influence in Asia is on a par with the Western Powers of the new Great Game: the British, the French, the Russians, and the Americans. And yet the West never recognized Japan as one of the truly great powers. Resentment over this treatment fueled its own Great Game to modernize Asia outside of Western imperialism. The extent to which Japan was both initiator of its own modernity under the threat of Western imperialism and then an imperialist itself, imposing the conditions of modernity upon China, Korea, and a range of other Asian countries is one of the remarkable stories in the 20th Century, maybe even more significant than the original British and Russian Great Game. In addition, those who were missing from the original Great Game, the Central Asians with whom it was concerned, make an important appearance in this Special Issue as far-thinking modernizers and Pan-Islamists, standing ready to use Western and non-Western ideas such as the Japanese model to renovate their states.

In the first article, Jon Davidann studies the Japanese model, and the beginnings of modernity in East Asia and the United States. He points to Japanese innovations in from 1870 to 1900 as impacting Chinese attempts at modernization in the initial decades of the 20th Century. Davidann shows the strong connection between modern thinking and the rise of civic nationalism in East Asia and the United States. Japanese intellectuals, led by Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), brewed a complicated mix of Western and indigenous ideas, rather than simply substituting Western concepts for outdated Confucianism as many historians have argued. The Japanese and later the Chinese, according to Davidann, picked the most useful parts of Confucianism such as Wang Yangming thought, which allowed them to abandon the strictures of orthodox