Few people today seem to know very precisely where East Asia is, what exactly makes it “East Asian,” or why any such broad regional identification should matter anyway as more than only some empty geographic abstraction. Surely it is the nation-state instead (if not the multinational corporation) that is everywhere the essential unit of international affairs. In East Asia, this means specifically China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. If, as of 1942, a majority of Americans notoriously “could not locate either China or India on an outline map of the world,” most Americans today surely have a sharper mental image of China and India, as presumed nation-states, than they do of either East or South Asia as regions.1

One leading authority on Asian-American history insists, correctly, that “there are no Asians in Asia, only people with national identities, such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, Vietnamese, and Filipino.” Asia, a label that conventionally includes both an enormous continent and far-flung island chains such as Japan, Indonesia, and the Philippines, is much too large and heterogeneous an area for the label “Asian” to signify much more than “not European.” “There is no cultural or historical entity that can rationally be subsumed under this single term,” concludes one modern geographer.2 From a purely geographic perspective, physically contiguous Europe would seem to be a more logical component of Asia (part of the same continent) than the widely scattered island archipelagoes. As a final absurdity, East Asia—the subregion that includes quintessentially “Asian” China and Japan—actually falls outside of the scope of what was originally designated Asia altogether.
According to the so-called father of history, Herodotus (ca. 484–428 B.C.), Asia began at the Nile and extended only as far as India. “East of India it is empty,” he reported. For Herodotus, Asia was effectively coterminous with the Persian empire. By his own definition, Herodotus himself was born in Asia (modern Turkey), and he observed with more than a touch of irony that even the woman who supposedly gave her name to Europe, Europa, also “came from Asia.” As for the name Asia, Herodotus confessed that he was uncertain about its origin but repeated the opinion of “most Greek authorities . . . that Asia is named after the wife of Prometheus.” In modern East Asian languages, this all too obviously foreign term, “Asia,” is merely reproduced phonetically, as in the Chinese “Yaxiya,” Japanese “Ajia,” or Korean “Asia.” There is no native East Asian word for Asia—or, by extension, for an East Asia that is clearly only a subcategory of the whole.

Premodern East Asians had never heard of East Asia—by any name. However, if, in Herodotus’ day, Asia was an unknown alien concept in East Asia, “Japan,” “Korea,” and “Vietnam” did not exist at all yet, either as native or as foreign ideas. These names had not yet been coined, there were no independent states or countries in the places now designated by those labels, and the Stone Age populations who inhabited these regions had not yet coalesced into recognizable “nations.” China, it is true, had a lengthy head start and was in some important senses already in familiarly identifiable existence in Herodotus’ lifetime (Confucius died in China at about the same time that Herodotus was born into the Hellenic world), but only as a cluster of contending principalities rather than a single nation-state called “China.”

China was first unified into one empire (and even then it was a classic multiethnic conquest empire rather than an ethnically homogeneous nation-state, as modern imagination would have it) by the series of conquests completed by the kingdom of Qin in 221 B.C. These Qin conquests, in turn, set off political, military, and economic repercussions that impacted what we think of today as Vietnam and Korea directly and indirectly reverberated as far as the Japanese islands. The various peoples inhabiting what we now think of as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam were each subsequently transformed over the course of the next roughly 1,000 years from obscure prehistoric societies into members of a broadly (though far from completely) uniform East Asian civilization under the looming shadow of this enormous Chinese empire.
By the tenth century, when the fall of the Tang dynasty in China in A.D. 907 and the rise of a new Song dynasty in 960 marks a major watershed (between what might be styled the early imperial and later imperial epochs), Japan, Korea, and Vietnam had each generated independent native states and begun to evolve along their own, sometimes quite divergent, historical trajectories. By then, our familiar modern East Asian framework of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese “nations” was already in place (although I will argue strenuously in what follows that ethnic nationalism is a misleading and generally pernicious concept that should be applied to the history of early East Asia only with extreme caution). Our study will focus on this critically formative period that falls between the third century B.C. and the tenth century A.D., when a distinctive East Asian region first took shape.

For, if there is no meaningful “Asia,” there is a reasonably coherent East Asia (however arbitrary and exotic the English label “East Asia” itself may be). This East Asia could even be said to be older than the nation-states it subsumes and in some ways more fundamental. As Jared Diamond points out in a recent Pulitzer Prize–winning book, Guns, Germs, and Steel, “The world’s two earliest centers of food production, the Fertile Crescent and China, still dominate the modern world, either through their immediate successor states (modern China), or through states situated in neighboring regions influenced early by these two centers (Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and Europe), or through states repopulated or ruled by their overseas emigrants (the United States, Australia, Brazil).” East Asia—the modern countries that can trace some degree of evolutionary continuity back to the earliest Neolithic and Bronze Age developments in what is now China—may even be said to represent the single most important major alternative historical evolutionary track to Western civilization on the face of this planet, with a continuing history of success that can rival what we call the West.

This implies neither the inevitability of some future conflict, East versus West, nor that “never the twain shall meet.” None of these differences are primordial or fixed, and difference, anyway, need not breed antagonism. However, it does mean that East Asian history should be considered roughly comparable in scope and importance to the history of the West. We need to take East Asia seriously. For centuries, the Chinese empire—the self-styled “Middle Kingdom” and
the largest individual state in East Asia—was also the single most economically developed state on earth. As recently as 1800, China was still “probably the richest country in the world.”

This traditional material wealth was paralleled by cultural sophistication. Tsien Tsuen-Hsuin estimates, for example, that until 1500 (if not later) China produced more books than all the rest of the world combined. Furthermore, this profusion of written documents is only one measure of premodern China’s overall level of achievement, crude when compared to the exquisite subtleties of a Tao Qian poem or a Guo Xi painting but relatively easy to quantify. The rise of the industrialized modern West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is true, did profoundly shatter this old Sinocentric global balance, but in recent years East Asia has once again become rather conspicuously successful. There is every reason to believe that East Asia may now be recovering some of its former economic importance.

It bears emphasizing, moreover, that despite the preceding emphasis on China, East Asia is, internally, a tremendously diverse region, as richly complicated as the West. No two places in East Asia are altogether similar. Even China, by itself, is a realm of many realms, and in this book we will be especially concerned with the emergence of the quite different places we call Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

We also need to avoid the error of what might be called reverse segregation. East Asia has never, not even in the Stone Age, existed in total isolation from other parts of the Old World. East Asians are not fundamentally different from other human beings. We are all, everywhere, one people. To say otherwise would be poor science, un-Christian, un-Confucian, un-Buddhist—and dangerously racist. There have always been important movements and exchanges linking the disparate parts of the world together, starting with the initial dispersion from Africa that presumably originally populated every corner of this planet (although a respectable body of scholarship does still question the “out of Africa” origins of Homo sapiens). The common origins of humanity, at some more or less distant point, can hardly be doubted.

However, it is also true that, especially in high antiquity, when long-distance transportation and communication really were slow and awkward, East Asia was largely left to its own devices, free to blaze its own evolutionary trail without much reference to other models. This
book is an attempt to explain how—and to what extent—early East Asia became a coherent world-within-a-world.

It has been observed that the absorption of what we think of now as southern China into a Chinese empire that had previously been concentrated only in the north parallels the Roman expansion of Hellenistic civilization into Western Europe. The spread of East Asian “civilization” to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam might be viewed as merely a further, weaker extension of the same process by means of which East Asian civilization had already (and was still continuing to) spread, also incompletely and imperfectly, within what we now think of as China itself.

No tool was more critical to the spread of this common East Asian civilization than the extension, throughout the entire region, of the Chinese script and classical written language. East Asia may, in fact, be defined precisely as that part of the world that once used Chinese writing. In addition, although some experimentation with writing in local vernacular languages had already begun during the early period under consideration here, classical Chinese remained the most prestigious written language throughout the East Asian region until as late as the nineteenth century—the visible insignia of a common literate standard of civilization.

The shogunal library in Edo (Tokyo) Japan, for example, according to its last catalog compiled in 1864–1866, still contained 65 percent “Sinological” (i.e., Chinese) material. In Korea, classical Chinese remained both the official and the most prestigious written language until China’s shocking defeat in the Sino-Japanese war of 1895, which shifted dominance over the Korean peninsula from China to Japan and sparked novel sentiments of modern nationalism in Korea. In Vietnam, the prestige of Chinese letters was only undermined by French colonial policy and colonial force, beginning in the 1860s, and even then encountered some resistance. Within China itself, the final abandonment of the classical written language and move to a modern Chinese vernacular was associated with the radical westernization of the May Fourth movement in the early twentieth century.

The consequences for premodern East Asia of this shared literary language, and the common textual canon composed in it, were profound. In Japan, for example, it is said that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholars “thought of [classical] Chinese civilization as their own.” Yet, on the other hand, even in China itself the society
described in those classical texts had long since evaporated into history (to the extent that it was ever more than an imaginary projection). The world of the Confucian classics was remembered and cherished by Chinese (as well as Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese) scholars, whose idea of reform invariably seemed to mean a return to idealized antiquity, but for many illiterate Chinese villagers and practical-minded shopkeepers, the literary golden age of the textual past must have often seemed remote.

Everywhere in premodern East Asia, including internally within China, we find shared “universal” East Asian core elements overlapping local cultural peculiarities—at multiple levels. The broad “national” distinctions among China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam that seem so glaring today are only one level of local variation—tremendously important, to be sure, but also to some extent deliberately exaggerated for political purposes. It is no great overstatement to say that the nations of East Asia, like all other nations everywhere, were semiconscious political creations.

Vietnam is an interesting case in point. Until the very end of the period covered in this book, there literally was no Vietnam, and the territory that is today northern (since Vietnam’s own southward expansion is yet another, later story) Vietnam was merely a remote southern salient of the Chinese empire. The people who lived there were no less “Chinese” than many of the people who lived elsewhere within the empire, albeit (as was also true of many if not all other parts of the empire) with an undertow of local popular subcultures and languages.

Even within that southernmost part of the Chinese empire that would eventually become exclusively Vietnamese, there existed simultaneously a considerable range of ethnocultural variation, stretching from the educated local Chinese imperial elite at one extreme to residual tribal minorities at the other. Nor should it be supposed that these tribal minorities preserved the essence of some eternally distinctive Vietnamese national identity, since they were themselves internally diverse and scarcely distinguishable from the tribes on what is today the Chinese side of the border. In 939, however, local strongmen achieved what turned out to be permanent political independence, and what would eventually (in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) come to be known as Vietnam was born.

The dynamic process of ethnogenesis in East Asia, of which the foregoing is an interesting example, will be a major recurring theme
throughout this book. In general, primordial ethnonational distinctions are all chimera—that is, imaginary monsters. This is to say not that nations do not exist and are totally a figment of our imagination but only that they are created and evolve through both deliberate and unintended human action. Nothing has simply “always been that way.” Too easily do we take China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam as permanent fixtures of our mental landscape. In fact, they are each the product of a lengthy evolutionary process, whose final shape was, to a surprising extent, clarified only in the twentieth century.

Moreover, although I spoke of a “final shape,” this too is illusory. There can be no final shape prior to extinction. The historical process does not end. Today, the forces of modernization have seemingly obliterated many of the old local differences, yet most of the “nations” in the world today did not exist 100 years ago and are new creations. Everywhere, the pace of change, interaction, and innovation has accelerated enormously. History continues to unfold. East Asia—China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam—will be remade again in the twenty-first century. Yet the past is not thereby rendered irrelevant. What East Asia has been in the past will continue to play a role in shaping what it may become in the future. The Buddhists call this “karma.”