

Global Asia: The Mobility of Historical Space

Global Asia is a way of seeing historical space.¹ The central idea is that social space is essentially mobile and has been conceived, documented, described, organized, and contained as bounded territories inside historical processes of social control over mobility. That idea builds on Michel de Certeau's theory of space and place,² which became more useful in the 1980s-1990s, when rapidly accelerating human mobility spawned studies of globalization³ as it undermined the authority of Area Studies.⁴ All kinds of boundaries unraveled then; "remapping" was rampant. There was a vast "revisioning" of the world.

I followed that trend into a quest for new ways to see, map, and historicize Asia. The critical first step was to appreciate how much modern knowledge production obeyed imperial and national imperatives to lock all the mobilities that animate everyday life (à la de Certeau) inside iron frames of state territory.⁵ David Held's notion of "globalization" helps to unlock spatial history as "a process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions – assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity, and impact – generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power."⁶

But globalization as we know it today was a very long way off in ancient times, where Global Asia must begin. Global Asia perspectives on historical space must therefore incorporate rather than obey globalization theory.⁷ One feature of that theory is relevant, however: forces of mobility do indeed expand in scale – in speed, distance, volume, and complexity – and in local impact -- over time. And as the scale of mobility increases, so does the local impact of mobile elements that travel among places in their reach, as their reach expands spatially over time.

That expansion is very slow for a very long time; it can only be seen clearly with a very long-term historical perspective. With a long-term vision of historical time, we can see mobility accelerating in specific periods; from ancient times to the present, under the influence of a great many forces, of all kinds of people, and of many forms of knowledge, from military to sciences

¹ John Berger, *Ways of seeing*, London: British Broadcasting Corp. : Penguin Books 1973, c1972

² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press, 1984.

³ David Held and Anthony McGraw, editors. *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate*. Polity Press, 2000.

⁴ David Ludden, "Area Studies in the Age of Globalization," *FRONTIERS: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, Winter 2000, 1-22.

⁵ David Ludden, "Maps in the Mind and the Mobility of Asia." *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2003, pp. 1057–78. The "iron frame" comes from my appreciation of Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space*. University of Chicago Press, 2004.

⁶ *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, and Culture*, edited by D.Held, A. McGrew, D. Goldblatt, and J. Perraton, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, p.55.

⁷ Immanuel Wallerstein is the founder of globalization theory. See *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the 16th Century*. NY: Academic Press, 1974.

and engineering to philosophy, from arts to history and geography; all active in processes of spatial transformation.

A useful chronology for a mobile spatial history emerges when we identify periods of accelerating mobility, unpack forces that propel them, follow routes among the central places that form them, describe their local impact, and situate them in longer spatial trends. By following routes of travel among places in mobile space, we can see how social forces of mobility and territorial control interact to shape and reshape human living environments.

Using that spatial lens, we can focus on people who travel known routes among places where they settle, invest, organize mobility, and connect places to one another to form territorial clusters that expand spatially as mobility expands. The most dramatic expansion before industrial modernity came in the thirteenth century, when Chinggis Khan mobilized social forces which had been at work from ancient times. Medieval spaces of Eurasian mobility came to light in Janet Abu-Lughod's *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (OUP 1989) which follows merchants along routes among central places from Europe to China.⁸

Those spaces began to develop in ancient times, when armies marched out of core central places on old routes across north China, north India, and Persia, and sailed among Mediterranean ports. Documented spaces of mobility first emerge in classical imperial territories, structured territorially by vertical ranks of social, political, and cultural status, and also traveling routes that formed networks among central places, with emperors and capital cities at the highest rank.⁹ Around and through those mobile spaces of imperial territory, nomads rode and walked around the steppes to settle, trade, and raid in Persia, India, and China, and all around Africa and the southern Mediterranean, forming mobile spaces anchored in oasis central places in arid lands. Ancient sailors also traveled up and down the Persian Gulf and Red Sea and among ports around the Indian Ocean.

By the early centuries of the Common Era, there were two circuits of Asian mobility that intersected in the western steppe; one in the west, around the western steppe and Arabian Sea; the other in the east around the eastern steppe and Java Sea; together, they interlaced and filled out territorial clusters along routes from the Mediterranean to the Pacific. The ancient Arab world traveled the western circuit, connecting Roman clusters with Africa and Asia. Buddhist monks traveled the eastern circuit, across the steppe, from India to China, forming sinews of Buddhist territory. Typhus and plague also traveled the western circuit, which delivered Asian goods to Roman consumers through Arab spaces, left Roman coins in southern India, and carried the pandemics that crippled the Roman empire.¹⁰

A thousand years of vast nomad spatial creativity began before the Fall of Rome. It lasted into the fifteenth century, when Timur became the last imperial steppe nomad warrior and Ibn Khaldun penned the only social theory ever to appreciate the historical role of nomads. The nomad millennium began with the third century collapse of the Han, the rise of former nomad Parthian rulers in Persia, and Indo-Scythian and Kushana expansion across the western steppe

⁸ This work has been poured into my courses since 2015. [Here is the link to my syllabi.](#)

⁹ Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

¹⁰ Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*, Princeton University Press, 2017.

into India. Nomad spaces then expanded more forcefully after 600 CE, when Turkic horse warrior pastoralists rode, conquered, traded, and settled in waves across the steppe, moving west from Mongolia into Persia and south into India, clustering in mountains that would later form Afghanistan;¹¹ and at the same time, Arab nomads, warriors, and merchants rode, conquered, traded, and settled in waves across arid north Africa, Syria, and Persia, along routes into the western steppe and India.

Those two nomad migrant waves mingled in Indo-Persia and in the western steppe; Turkic and Arabic language speakers spread across Indo-European language zones, transforming linguistic and cultural territories in mobile circuits featuring Islamic cultural forms.¹² Trade routes shifted overland to connect Byzantium, Caliphates, and Turkic warrior domains with Tang China and peninsular India. By the eighth century, merchants routinely traveled routes that Janet Abu-Lughod traced from Cairo eastward (western Europe connections came later). In the eighth century, a ship filled with Chinese porcelain sank off the coast of Belitung Island in the Java Sea, and Abbasid and Tang armies fought an epic battle at the Talas River in Kyrgyzstan, dramatizing the value of seaborne and overland mobility between Persia and China.

Centuries of mobility after 600 produced conditions of possibility for the Mongol integration of Eurasia. Three centuries of warm and wet weather from 900 to 1200 fed a “southernization” of the Asian population, which included Turkic migrations into India and southern travels of the militant Brahmanism that drove Buddhism out of India. Increasing agrarian productivity in the tropics increased trade around the Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea, East Africa, and Persian Gulf. Expansive Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Islam became prominent territorial technologies.¹³

In the thirteenth century, Mongols, Turks, Chinese, and Persians carried Chinggis Khan’s traveling social power along routes and to places of territorial order formed in earlier centuries. Their major spatial contributions were to expand mobility around the Caspian into Ukraine and across the Black Sea into Europe – which delivered bubonic plague to the West – and also to accelerate a technology trend which had begun before and would spread widely around regions of Mongol influence, from the Ottoman west and Europe to Russia, India, China, and Korea, increasing the size and power of mobile military forces fed by an increasing accumulation of commercial wealth and portable monetary taxation. Mongols helped spread and refine ways to use military power to create investment opportunities and build infrastructure for generating more commercial wealth to finance imperial mobility into ever-expanding frontiers.¹⁴

¹¹ David Ludden. “The Centrality of Indo-Persia in Global Asia and Historical Formation of Afghanistan,” in *Afghanistan*, an Association of Asian Studies Roundtable Volume, edited by Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, 4, 1, 2021, 57-59.

¹² Anatoly M. Khazanov and Andre Wink. *Nomads in the Sedentary World*. Taylor & Francis, 2001.

¹³ David Ludden, “[Spatial History in Southern Asia: Mobility, Territoriality, and Religion](#),” in *Flows and Frictions in Trans-Himalayan Spaces*, edited by Gunnel Cederlöf and Willem van Schendel, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022, pp.29-52. “[The Decline of Buddhism, Revisited: The Rise of Hindu Territorial Hegemony, c.950-1250](#),” in *Clio and Her Descendants: Essays for Kesavan Veluthat*, edited by Manu V. Devadevan, Delhi: Primus Books, 2018, 132-162.

¹⁴ Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*. University of California Press, 1994. Andre Wink, “Post-Nomadic Empires: From Mongols to Mughals,” and David

In post-Mongol centuries, the accumulation of mobile military power in old imperial territories around the steppe produced the great Asian empires that conquered nomad space and increased commercial mobility and accumulation inland and overseas. And as trade increased, so did struggles over strategic spaces, like the Crimea, where Ottomans drove out Europeans,¹⁵ who then sailed the Atlantic to join the Asian commercial boom¹⁶ and fortified ports to control mobile wealth in what became the world's most strategic spaces, on coastlines connecting on all the continents.¹⁷

Asian seaports anchored the oceanic mobility of global capitalism.¹⁸ They also became beachheads for the inland travels of imperial armies of industrialization.¹⁹ More and more Asian products began traveling inland routes to ports around the world, to supply consumers and feed industrialization.²⁰ Modern imperial territory evolved as wealth flowed up the ranks of central places through the infrastructure of railways, port cities, and metropolitan capitals, to lock the spatial ranks of wealth and power in an iron frame. All kinds of capital accumulated in the upper ranks, enriching those above, fostering struggles to move up from below. National movements and mentalities developed in aspiring spaces of inequity, and national state development regimes have maintained their basic design.

As a result, today's ever-increasing mobility – of all kinds of people, commodities, ideas, technologies and pathogens – inhabits a world of spatial inequity and conflict,²¹ where people

Ludden, "The process of empire: frontiers and borderlands," in *Tributary Empires in Global History*, edited by Peter Fibiger Bang and C.A. Bayly. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp.131-150.

¹⁵ Alan Mikhail, *God's Shadow: Sultan Selim, His Ottoman Empire, and the Making of the Modern World*. New York: Norton, 2020.

¹⁶ Anthony Reid. *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*. Yale University Press, 1990,

¹⁷ David Ludden, "Mobility and Migration around the Bay of Bengal," in *Cambridge History of Global Migrations*, Vol.1, edited by C.A.P. Antunes and Eric Tagliacozzo, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, pp.162-178.

¹⁸ [CAPASIA](https://www.eui.eu/research-hub?id=capasia-the-asian-origins-of-global-capitalism-european-factories-in-the-indian-ocean-1500-1800-1) – "The Asian Origins of Global Capitalism: European Factories in the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800." CAPASIA's ambition is to recast the narrative of global economic change and capitalism by bringing into striking view the significance of Asian ports in the Indian Ocean. In particular, the project focuses on the so-called 'factories', pre-modern Asian trading ports controlled by the European East India companies. URL: <https://www.eui.eu/research-hub?id=capasia-the-asian-origins-of-global-capitalism-european-factories-in-the-indian-ocean-1500-1800-1>

¹⁹ David Ludden, "A Spatial History of Seaports in South Asia," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 44, 2, 2024 (forthcoming).

²⁰ Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric That Made the Modern World*. Cambridge University Press, 2013, and *How India Clothed the World: The World of South Asian Textiles, 1500-1850*. BRILL, 2013.

²¹ David Ludden, "Empire Meets Globalisation: Explaining Historical Patterns of Inequity in South Asia," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47, 30, 28 July 2012, 213-221, and "Imperial Modernity: History and Global Inequity in Rising Asia," *Third World Quarterly*, 33, 4, 2012, 581-602. Republished

move into more privileged central places to get ahead, making the world ever-more urban, making the biggest cities gargantuan. A Global Asia view of the world today highlights the role of accelerating, expansive mobility – which can now be truly called globalization – in routinely inflecting everyday life, disrupting territorial order, fostering inequality, and provoking state violence. My own work is now focusing on people who live on the underside of those trends New York City and Dhaka, cities in the higher and lower urban ranks, on opposite ends of global supply chains, woven together by massive container ships, jumbo jets, and the internet; and in Palestine, India, and Myanmar, where nations remain hard at work enforcing spatial inequity.

in *Identity, Inequity and Inequality in India and China: Governing Difference*, edited by Ravinder Kaur and Ayo Wahlberg, Routledge, New York, 2014, 9-30.