History of International Relations: Introduction

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Dear reader,

This is a first draft of the introduction to a textbook on the history of international relations that I’m working on. The idea is to compare various international systems and thereby to tell a history of world politics from an explicitly non-European point of view. There will be separate chapters on East Asia, the Mongol empire, the various Muslim khanates, Africa and the Americas. Considering how much material the book covers, this might come across as a slightly mad enterprise, but it is no more mad than current IR textbooks that cover only contemporary issues and Western perspectives. At least our madness is mind-expanding and much more fun.

The book will be published by Open Book Publishers, out of Cambridge, hopefully next year. It will be freely downloadable on-line as a pdf or you can buy it as a regular book. Of course it would be particularly interesting if the book could be widely used in classrooms outside of Europe and North America. All the material I have written so far is available at www.irhistory.info/

I’m very keen to hear your comments on the text. Get in touch: erik@ringmar.net

yours,

Erik


Introduction

International relations as the topic usually is taught at the university has next to no historical depth. In an introductory class your teacher might tell you that the basic rules of international politics were established in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War in the seventeenth-century, or you might hear something about European colonialism in the nineteenth-century and perhaps a word or two about the First World War. Once the class gets going, however, historical references are unlikely to stretch further back than to 1945. It is as though the world was created only some 75 years ago. In addition, international politics as it usually is taught is hopelessly Eurocentric. That is, the discipline takes Europe as the standard by which every other part of the world is measured — although “Europe” here also includes the United States and other places where the Europeans settled. The European model is obviously the most important one, your teacher will imply, since this is the model that went on to conquer the world. The world in which we all live today is the world which the Europeans made in their own image.

One of the most important things you should learn at the university is not to trust your teachers. No matter how smart or well read, your teacher’s perspective will always be only one perspective among many. This is not to say that he or she deliberately is trying to deceive you, but it is to say that there always is another story to tell. In this book we will tell other stories. Our historical perspective goes back to the first millennium CE and our perspective is explicitly non-European. This is a textbook on international politics which takes history seriously and which puts Europe firmly in its place. The reason is simple: history really is quite long and the world really is quite a big place. There are so many other things to talk about. And, as we will discover, this alternative history has left an endless number of traces in our contemporary world. Indeed, if you want to understand anything at all about what is going on in today’s Middle East, in China, in Latin America or anywhere else, a historical and non-European
perspective is essential. This is what this textbook will provide.

This is not to say that there is something inherently wrong with studying European history, or that Europe does not matter. Europe matters too of course, but, as it turns out, not as much as your teacher suggested. It is simply not the case that the history of other parts of the world began on the day the first European colonizers arrived. The Europeans did not, as a previous generation of scholars used to argue, “wake up” the natives of various non-European lands, or “invite them into world history.” Non-Europeans very always plenty awake, thank you very much, and the idea that the history of Europe is equal to history of the world is just ridiculous. In this book it is these non-European histories we are going to tell, and we will try to tell them on their own terms, not as they were impacted by, or had an impact on, Europe. Indeed, a non-European perspective on the past is particularly important in a world which once again seems to be changing. Europe and North America play a far less dominating role in world politics today than previously was the case, and in the future this role is likely to become less important still. This is how changes taking place in our present allow us to gain new perspectives on the past. By learning about history you can learn about the future. And besides, there are such a lot of fascinating things to talk about once you leave Europe and the twentieth-century behind.

Or, differently put, this book is quite a mad undertaking. A textbook in the history of international relations which takes non-European perspectives seriously will always risk turning into a “history of everything that ever happened.” Obviously such a book cannot be written — or it will be just as long as history itself. For that reason we have to simplify and make choices regarding what to include and what to exclude. That is, this textbook too has a particular story to tell, and there are indeed many others. To simplify matters, we will in what follows focus on what we will call “international systems.” An international system is a set of political entities, states, which have sufficiently close connections with each other to be forced to constantly take each other’s decisions into account. We will discuss the international systems of seven different parts of the world:

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East Asia, India, the Mongol empire, the Muslim caliphates, Europe, Africa and the Americas. We will have nothing to say about Australia and the islands of the Pacific Ocean; South-east Asia will be discussed but only in the context of Indian history, and there is no single chapter dedicated to Persia although there are plenty of Persian references in the chapters on India and the Muslim caliphates. We could have said much more about Japan, and about North America before the Europeans arrived. In addition to the seven main chapters, however, there will be one concluding chapter which deals with European imperialism.

And there are also limits in time. We have restricted ourselves to historical events that have left a strong imprint on the contemporary world. Everything we see around us can certainly be retraced to a remote beginning of some kind or another, but some of these traces are more conspicuous than others. What we are interested in are cases where history still is making itself present. In some cases we will have to go back over 1,000 years but in some other cases the story is more recent. This book will tell you only very a little in the end, but that is fine. It is surely better to learn a little than to learn nothing at all. The aim of this book is to open up a world, not to conclusively describe it. And once your appetite has been sufficiently whetted you can go on exploring things on your own. The madness of this undertaking is no more glaring than the madness of teaching international politics as it has been taught up to now. And at least our madness is fun and mind-altering.

One more difference between this textbook and others: international politics as it usually is taught at the university is often replete with references to “theories” of various kinds. Indeed, an ability to “theorize” is often taken to be the difference between a pontificating professor and the comments provided by other, more casual, observers. To introduce students to theorizing is thus regarded as an important obligation of any textbook. Yet in what follows there is next to no discussion of theories and concepts, and what little we need is introduced already in the following sections of this chapter. The reason is that theorizing never can substitute for actual historical knowledge. We cannot
learn about the world from theory but only from historical facts. Once we have the facts at our disposal, we will immediately start thinking about them, analyzing and explaining them, and in this way we will quite automatically come to think in theoretical terms. But this is thinking which is deeply embedded in history, and that makes all the difference to how we proceed. Basically the fourteenth-century historian Ibn-Khaldun had it right. 

[Read more: Ibn Khaldun on assabiya] At first he set out to write a history of the Berber people, but before long he realized that he needed to start thinking about what it is in general that makes empires rise and fall. In this way he came to produce one of the first systematic accounts of international history. Ibn-Khaldun theorized, but he always stayed very close to his historical sources. We will try to do the same.

**International systems**

Throughout this book we will discuss a number of historical examples of “international systems.” [Read more: Arnold Heeren and the idea of an international system] When we talk about a certain part of the world, it is above all the international system of that part of the world that will interests us. An international system, we said, is a system made up of political entities which are so closely connected to each other that they cannot ignore each other’s decisions. The international system constitutes an environment, as it were, which all of its members are forced to take into account. Take the example of East Asia. Here the Chinese empire was always the dominant power, but around China there were other political entities which pursued separate policies of their own. These smaller states — Korea, Japan, the Ryukyus, and so on — obviously had to pay attention to the Chinese, but the Chinese could not afford to ignore their neighbors either — as demonstrated by the fact that the Chinese empire throughout its history repeatedly was in conflict with assorted Central Asian tribes.

An international system consists of “political entities,” we said, and normally we would simply call them “states.” However, “state” is a term used in the context of European politics and for that reason it might be best to try to avoid it whenever we can.
“Political entity” is a vaguer term which serves our purposes better. A political entity might be an independent city of merchants or a community of self-governing peasants, a religious order and even a business corporation. Which kinds of entities that qualify as legitimate members will vary from one international system to another. It is crucial, however, that the political entity in question should have the ability to act independently; to embark on its own actions, in pursuit of its own goals. This is what gives the system an international character. An international system, that is, is not the same thing as a state or even an empire. A state or an empire will contain many different entities to be sure but they are all subject to the same overarching power. In an international system, by contrast, the entities are independent of each other and they can act as they see fit. As a result there will always be a problem of how to organize relations between them. All international systems have a problem of order. This, in the jargon used by traditional scholars of international relations, is “the problem of anarchy.” Within a country anarchy refers to a breakdown of law and order, but in relations between states it refers to a system where power is decentralized and where there are no shared institutions with the authority to enforce common rules. Anarchy is problematic, and potentially disastrous, since it allows each state to think only about itself and to ignore the interests of the system as a whole. The result may be actions that threaten others, leading to increased insecurity and perhaps war.

But we should tread carefully here. Traditional scholars of international relations always have problems thinking outside of the box. That is, they have problems thinking outside of the box which their single-minded focus on Europe has put them into. It is the European international system that is identified as “anarchical” and this is why traditional scholars of international relations are inclined to think that anarchy is a problem of all international systems everywhere. Yet this is clearly not the case. Many international systems have been organized in a radically different fashion, and anarchy is only one options among many others. And this is the beauty of studying international systems from a comparative point of view. By thinking outside of the box, by thinking outside of
Europe, we come to understand how limited our perspective has been. We suddenly have new ways of thinking about relations between states. To study of history is good for the imagination.

But let us think a bit more about the politics of international systems. What matters within an international system is more than anything which power a political entity has acquired, and relations within the system will differ dramatically depending on how power is distributed. By traditional international relations scholars this is often discussed as a question of “polarity.” This metaphor compares an international system to a magnetic field. Much as the north- and the south-pole attract or repel the needle of a compass, the poles in an international system attract or repel political entities. How many poles a system contains depends on the distribution of power within it. Thus we may talk about a “unipolar,” a “bipolar” or a “multipolar” international system. A unipolar system has one powerful state, a bipolar system has two powerful states, and a multipolar system has many powerful states.

The degree of polarity helps to organize the system and to give it a sense of directionality. Since the members are forced to pay attention to each other, they must face each other and thereby face away from non-members. Obviously, the more powerful a state is, the more we must pay attention to it. We often talk about important and powerful states as “central” to the system and less important and powerful states as “peripheral” to it. An anarchical international system where there are many powerful states can be compared to a pool-table where balls are bouncing off each other; a bipolar system with two equally powerful states is like a lever which is balancing on a pivot; and a hierarchical international system with one powerful state can perhaps be compared to a solar system where many small planets are circling around a sun. Clearly it makes a lot of difference whether we live on a pool-table, on a lever or in a solar system.

**An international society**

Thus described international systems have a mechanical quality. When we study an
international system we are looking at political entities from the outside and only at the
relationships of power that obtain between them. But in addition international politics
have what we might best refer to as a "social" dimension. An international system is not
only a system, that is, but also a society of sorts, and political entities have social
relations with each other which resemble those that individual human beings have. This
is obvious, if not before, once we start investigating other international systems than the
European. In order to make sense of this idea, we need to think some more about what
we might mean by a "society."

Consider what always happens when people interact with each other sufficiently
frequently and for a sufficiently long period of time. After a while our actions always
come to form some kind of a pattern. What we do leaves a trace, as it were, and as we
repeatedly do the same thing, we become increasingly predictable in our behavior. This
is how habits are formed, and for society as a whole — when large numbers of people act
in a predictable fashion — this is how customs and norms come to develop. Customs and
norms are rules that we tacitly follow, often without even being aware of it. What is the
case for individuals is true for political entities too. States that interact with each other
sufficiently frequently will come to develop a certain pattern to their interaction. They
too will leave a trace and form norms and customs. This is not to say that they
necessarily must become friends nor that the international system in which they interact
necessarily will be peaceful. Indeed, patterns of interaction can form also between states
which are each other's worst nightmares.

These patterns of interaction are the building blocs by which a society is made. A
society, that is, does not require the existence of shared political institutions. A society
does not have to be established, or sponsored, by a state. Instead societies happen all
the time, quite by themselves, wherever human beings interact. One example are so
called “pre-state societies.” In the jungles of the Amazon, or in the hills of New Guinea,
anthropologists have come across tribes that clearly form well-regulated societies without
having any of the institutions that a state can provide. There are no formal legal
institutions, for example, yet people nevertheless behave sociably and cooperatively much of the time. [Read more: The evolution of cooperation] Anthropological examples such as these are interesting for our purposes since international systems too lack formal legal institutions. After all, you cannot call the police when a neighboring country misbehaves. Yet the fact of the matter is that neighboring countries too behave reasonably cooperatively much of the time, even in fact when it might not be in their own best interest to do so.

Consider the case of diplomacy. In all international systems the members must find a way of relating to each other short of going to war. They must have a way of discussing common concerns, to solve disputes and reach settlements. In response, practices — diplomatic practices — of various kinds come to develop. Thus there may be rules for how negotiations should be carried out, for what constitutes a violation of a treaty, and rituals for how wars should be declared and concluded. Many rules concern the private conduct of the diplomat themselves, how they should be dressed and how they should greet one another [Read more: An incident at Tower Wharf]. Interestingly for our purposes, these diplomatic practices were not formally decided on by any central authority but instead they came to emerge quite by themselves and only much later were they written up as explicit codes.

Or consider international law. We usually think of law as only pertaining to relations within a state. It is only within a state that laws can be made by a legitimate authority, where laws can be properly policed, and where violators can be punished. For these reasons, we would not expect there to be laws in relations between states. Yet all international systems have laws of some kind or another — even if they no doubt are less effective than domestic law. For example, a country which goes to war in defiance of the stipulations of international law will often get away with it, in particular if the state in question is sufficiently powerful. But this is not to say that international law is useless. Rather remarkably, states often do follow the legal stipulations, and not only when it is in their own interest to do so. International law may even be operating in the heat of a

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battlefield. [Read more: Christmas in the trenches]

Putting these observations together we arrive at a description of international 
relations as organized both by means of the mechanics of power and by the practices of
social life. International politics is simultaneously both a system and a society.[Read
more: The English School and anarchical society] Power matters to be sure, and so do 
the relations of power that obtain between political entities, but through the patterns 
which their interaction form norms are established which go on to organize the 
interaction. Some of these norms can be surprisingly strong and together they help 
constitute a powerful sense of a shared identity. In Europe, for most of its history, all 
rulers were officially Christian and as such members of the corpus christianum, the great 
body of mankind united by the same faith. Likewise in the Muslim caliphates all rulers 
were members of the same ummah, the community of those who submitted themselves 
to Allah. But social norms are not sufficiently strong to bring about a lasting peace. As 
we all know, it is certainly possible to fight with people who are very similar to ourselves 
and with whom we interact closely and on a regular basis. Indeed, sometimes it is far 
easier to stay on peaceful terms with complete strangers. This is true in international 
relations as well. Both the corpus christianum and the ummah provided their respective 
international systems with a strong sense of community, yet this did not stop neither 
Christians nor Muslims from killing their fellow co-religionists. Indeed they have 
continued to do so to this day.

Walls and bridges

What we have said up to now applies equally to all international systems but at the same 
time these systems are clearly not all alike. International systems differ from each other, 
often in radical ways. In order to make sense of this variation, we need a way in which 
international systems can be classified. There are many possibilities open to us here but 
let's consider a distinction between systems that are inward-looking from those that are 
outward-looking; those systems, that is, which mainly leave the rest of the world alone
and those that are expansive, and perhaps even aggressive and imperialistic. Although no real-world example fits perfectly with this classification — the real world is far more complex — it still allows us to talk about international systems of two distinct types. As a way to introduce this distinction, consider the difference between two kinds of architectural features — walls and bridges.

We build walls for a number of reasons. A wall sets up a barrier between us and the rest of the world which creates an inside and an outside, an “us” and a “them.” A wall closes off one world from another. The wall protects us from attacks and from outside influences and it limits what outsiders can find out about us. Walls are required in order to create a home. On this side of the wall we are safe and we are with people of our own kind; on the other side of the wall, we are away from home and we interact mainly with strangers. By means of a door in the wall we can control who can go out and who in. If outsiders still insist on getting access, we can close the door and lock it. In the case of a city, the outsiders might set up camp outside of our wall and demand entry, but we can defend ourselves against them from the ramparts. A long-standing favorite of all defenders has been to throw down night soil — yesterday’s toilet buckets — on the besiegers. But walls are necessary for protecting our property too. We put stakes into the ground and build fences around the things that we own. Private property requires walls and good walls make good neighbors. People who previously simply may have wandered onto our land can now be labeled as trespassers and thieves.

There can be walls around international systems too, and these walls can be of different kinds. There are walls built as a sharp demarcation between one international system and the rest of the world, but there are also geographical obstacles which serve as walls — oceans, mountain-ranges or an inhospitable, frozen, wilderness. [Read more: Ne plus ultra] Some walls are mental entities above all but still just as impassable. In any case, the wall creates a world in which life is organized in a certain fashion and lived in a certain way. If the world enclosed is large enough there may never be a reason to venture outside, and if outsiders approach, the wall will help us keep them at bay.
wall allows a certain culture to flourish. Culture, from the Latin cultura, meaning “the tilling of land,” that is, the tilling of land in order to grow plants. It is only if something is protected and nurtured that it can grow. The wall assures not only that the plants are protected but also that they come to develop in their own fashion. Much as a biological species which is confined to its own ecological niche, the culture of one international system might differ sharply from the culture of another and it might evolve according to a logic which is distinctly its own. [Read more: The Movile cave, Romania] In this way the international systems of the Americas evolved in separation from all others, and so, for much of their history, did Europe and China.

An international system such as that of the Mongols, the Muslim khanates and Europe after the year 1500, displays quite a different logic. These systems are not inward-looking and closed but instead outward-looking and expansive. These systems are projects — they reach out to others, explore what is unknown, they invade and conquer. The participants in these systems have things to do and places to go and they can for that reason never sit still for very long. International systems understood as projects are always trying to destroy walls; they undermine them, scale them or break through them by means of breaching guns. Instead the members of these systems are busy building bridges. Bridges connect that which previously has been separated. Bridges make movement possible and thereby contacts and exchange. And when the bridges are used, roads come to be formed and eventually the roads spread out into networks which connect various far-flung places with each other. By means of movements through these networks, we come across things we had not come across before; new vistas open up and new ways of thinking; we develop new tastes and interests. By comparing the new with the previously known, we can chose what we consider to be best. In this way competition is encouraged. This is how markets expand, how goods are exchanged, together with people and ideas.

The outcome is often total devastation. The existing culture, hitherto protected by the wall, is often quite defenseless once the wall has come down. And if the existing

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culture is not actively destroyed, it often falls apart by itself. Compare the way the Muslim invasion radically transformed the cultures of the Middle East, north Africa and the Iberian peninsula in the eighth and ninth centuries CE; or the cultural devastation which the Mongols brought on the Muslim world with the destruction of Baghdad in 1258. Or compare what global capitalism is doing to our contemporary world. Today everyone suddenly seems to have stopped doing what they previously were doing in order to check their phones and watch the same YouTube clips. [Read more: The Communist Manifesto, 1848] And yet, this is arguably how civilization spreads. It is by means of exchange that the best products, practices, techniques and ideas are disseminated. The results are higher living standards and higher standards of most other measures of human well-being. Civilization, from this point of view, is the enemy of culture. As a result of the Muslim invasion, Europeans learned to grow new crops and to do it more efficiently, and they regained access to the long-lost intellectual heritage of classical Greece. [Read more: The translation movement] Along the extensive network of caravan roads maintained by the Mongols, Chinese inventions spread across Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Similarly, today, in the wake of the cultural devastation spread by the Europeans, people around the world are far better educated, in a much better state of health, and with far more opportunities open to them. Cultural devastation is a tragedy, but civilization is a blessing.

The explorer's dilemma

The question remains how these international systems best should be studied. The aim, we said, is to write a history of international relations “from a non-European perspective,” but it is not at all clear what this means and how to do it. First of all, there is not only one non-European perspective but very many, and these perspective do not necessarily correspond to each other. Secondly, it is not at all clear how we ever could gain a perspective on something which is other than our own. Somehow or another we would have to place ourselves outside of ourselves and to look at the world from that point of

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view. Compare what we perhaps could call “the explorer’s dilemma.” The problem for explorers traveling in foreign lands — think the Spanish conquistador Bernal Diaz or the Moroccan globetrotter Ibn Battuta [Read more: Ibn Battuta, the greatest traveler of all time] — is how to make sense of the many strange things they come across. They need to describe what they see, then explain it, first to themselves and then to the people back home who eagerly are waiting for news. Yet many of the things they see may be so radically different, so literally out-of-their-world, that they cannot easily be neither described nor explained. As historians of international systems we are facing much the same problem — of how to describe and explain the radically other.

The explorers dealt with this problem by describing the unknown in terms of the already known. Thus the Spanish conquistadors would compare a tall building in Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, with the cathedral in Zaragoza, and a temple in Cuzco, the Inca capital, with a palace in Granada. In general the natives of the Americas were compared to Muslims, an enemy which many of the conquistadors recently had spent time fighting in Spain. In addition, many events that occurred to them were compared to events they had read about in romances and chivalric tales. [Read more: Tales of the Brave] The problem here is that the strange never is strange for very long. You incorporate the other world into your own world and you do it on your own terms and as it matters to you. Compare the work of a historian. Historians too compare the unknown to the known, the unfamiliar to the familiar, and history writing is always done in terms of their own projects and concerns. This, incidentally, is why history has to be rewritten with each new generation. Yet in this way what we see will necessarily become something different from what it originally was. This, consequently, is the explorer’s dilemma: if you provide an accurate description of what you see, you will not understand it; if you understand it, it will not be an accurate description.

Trying to be more sophisticated about these descriptions does not necessarily help. Explorers and historians may both eventually come to realize that what they have come across is nothing like what they previously have seen. The building in Tenochtitlan
is actually nothing like the cathedral of Zaragoza, the indigenous population of the Americas are not Muslims, and so on. Instead explorers and historians may come to argue, that what they have encountered is the very opposite of what they already know. In this way, they acknowledge differences but at the same time only the kind of differences which their own view of the world allows them to discover. They have brought the radically other into their conceptual schemes, and then they have inverted the schemes in order to accommodate it. The result is the kind of romantic exoticism in which imperial powers always have taken such delight. [Read more: Edward Said and Orientalism] To Europeans, people in Asia in particular were always the opposite of themselves; in fact all of Asia was an inverted, topsy-turvy, world. For example: while the Europeans represented a male, martial, culture, Asians were essentially passive, childish or female; the Europeans were rational and logical, but also superficial, and this made Asians, by definition, “irrational,” “spiritual” and “deep.” Compare historians who explain everything they come across in terms of the most exotic features available. Thus when China’s economy is doing badly, this is because of the country’s patriarchal family-structure, and when China’s economy is doing well, this too is because of the country’s patriarchal family-structure.

Such descriptions are not only incorrect but also condescending and bordering on racist, and although that is bad enough, the most horrendous consequences can ensue in a situation in which an imperial occupier not only has the power to describe what it comes across but also the power to change it. Thus the British in India in the nineteenth-century decided that the Hindu religion was deficient in that it had no proper holy book, no priesthood and no fixed rituals. Yet these problems were straightened out as soon as the British redescribed Hinduism in terms of their own Anglicanism, the Christianity officially endorsed by the British state. [Read more: Ashis Nandy on British colonialism] But Europeans have no monopoly on exoticism and condescending redescriptions. In the eighteenth-century, the Chinese emperors employed European missionaries at their court. While the Chinese had no interest whatsoever in the

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Christian religion, they were very keen to learn more about various European sciences and arts. At his palace complex northwest of Beijing, the emperor had the missionaries construct European palaces where he and his courtiers would dress up in European costumes, prance around and pretend to speak French. A particular attraction was to run around in the European-style maze the missionaries had built for them. [Read more: Santa Fe]

The problem is consequently how to acknowledge something on its own terms and to describe and explain it without distortion. At the same time, we should never make the mistake that the world contains no differences and no mysteries. Not everyone is like us. It it not right to invite other people to become the honorary citizens of a world of which we are the masters. And if we come across obvious differences, we should not seize upon them as an excuse to turn the world upside down. We must allow things to be different without becoming exotic and we must be prepared to explain things in familiar, non-exotic, terms. Obviously none of these challenges can actually be met. There is no conclusive way around the explorer's dilemma. But this is not to say that all suggested solutions to it are equally bad. And at least we are aware of the problems we will encounter.

About this book

I began writing this book while working as a professor of international politics at Shanghai Jiaotong University in Shanghai, China, and I concluded it while teaching at Lund University, Sweden. In a peripatetic existence over the past thirty-five years, I've lived for extended periods of time in Japan, Thailand, Taiwan, the United States, Britain and Italy, and I have at one time or another spoken passable Chinese, Japanese, Thai and French, and gotten by in Russian, Spanish, German and Italian. I speak neither Mongolian nor Arabic and I wish I had studied Latin properly. Since my knowledge of Africa and the Americas always was more limited than my knowledge of Asia and Europe, my friend John Pella, an Africanist, wrote initial versions of these two chapters of the
book, to which I’ve added the results of my own readings. I am very grateful to John for his contribution. I am also indebted to comments from students both in Sweden and in China who have used first drafts of the book in my courses and commented on what they have read.

A word on dates. Throughout the book we use CE, “Common Era,” and BCE, “Before the Common Era,” for all years. This is the standard for scholarship in international history, and it makes sense since we need a way in which events can be related to each other. A word on names. We will generally use the name which a person originally was given by his or her society. Thus we prefer Ibn Sina to “Avicenna,” and Kongzi to “Confucius.” The same applies to place-names, although place-names that are less well-known have been given multiple designations. Thus Guangzhou is also, when first referred to, called “Canton.” A word, finally, on sources. The aim throughout the book has been to rely on indigenous sources, or rather, to rely on contemporary scholarship which draws on indigenous sources. In the case of some international systems this has been easier to do than in others. The important thing to remember though is that the world did not come into existence only once it was described by a European.