(mis)interpreted Islamic text and practice. Working against this persistent Orientalist strain, the author attempts to wrest focus onto Muslims as “active agents of humanity, and not just subjects of history.” Finally, a historian of the Southeast Asian Maritime Zone, considered from the fifth century BCE to the second century CE, examines the realpolitik of Asian pastness.

**Charlotte Eubanks** is an associate professor of comparative literature, Japanese, and Asian studies at Penn State. They are the author of *Miracles of Book and Body: Buddhist Textual Culture in Medieval Japan* (2011) and *The Art of Persistence: Akamatsu Toshiko and the Visual Cultures of Transwar Japan* (2019).

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**The Matter of Time**

**LING ZHANG**

World history travels from east to west; for Europe is the absolute end of history, just as Asia is the beginning.

—Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*

In place of a past distorted to suit the triumphal narrative of nation, we have substituted an equally mythic past now subservient to the demands of modernity, whether our attitudes toward modernity are adulatory or insurgent. What we have created is a “pre.”

—Smail and Shryock, “History and the ‘Pre’”

The *premodern* is a derivative term of the *modern* and is used to stand for the time periods and qualities of human societies that are deemed not only prior to but also lesser than the modern. It is what gives birth to the modern and, more important, what the modern discards as its inferior self, a troubling other, and a historical shadow. Nothing about the premodern is not viewed through the eyes of the modern. And in such eyes, the premodern appears archaic, exotic, disgusting, and sometimes fearsome—qualities that make the premodern either a matter of irrelevance or a target of exorcism. These qualities of the premodern are often made to be associated with things Asian (as well as things African, Middle Eastern, etc.). Scholars and the general public alike, and zealous cultural consumers in particular, often turn to things Asian to discover
the abundance of the premodern, be that beautiful or ugly, inspiring or suffocating.

Hence, to question the virtue, utility, and implication of the premodern is to question two entwined issues: first, the hegemony of modernity, and second, the hegemony over the modern by the West. Underneath the first hegemony lies our obsession with modernity and our teleological faith in a better present and an even better future. This is a matter of where humanity heads through time. Underneath the second hegemony lies our struggle over the right and power to define time. This is a matter of who leads the way and points the direction of the arrow of time. Both matters are fundamentally concerned with time, a domain to which studies of history devote themselves.

In this contribution, I shall speak as a Chinese historian and share some of my observations on how historians of Asia struggle with the second hegemony, the dominance of the West over time. At the end of the contribution, I shall call attention to the first hegemony. I shall point out that the premodern–modern divide, the Western hegemony of time, and our struggle with that hegemony are fundamentally products of our conception of time as a single linear entity and of our conception of the history of humanity as a teleological progression.

I am a historian of China, trained in the field of Tang-Song history (seventh to thirteenth centuries). This brief statement of my professional identity means different things to different audiences. Scholars of European history, and of “Western civilization” in general, would hear a temporal equivalence to the “High medieval” in their own historical timeline. Some scholars of China who study the comparison between Asia and the West would hear the end of the Chinese Middle Age and the dawn of a Chinese early modern era. Other scholars of China who resist the Eurocentric premodern–modern–postmodern periodization would locate my work in an extraordinarily long and ill-defined “Middle Period” (800–1400 CE or 220–1600 CE). This notion, “Middle Period,” should signify nothing about value or judgment but only a series of temporal periods: early, middle, and late. Last, but not least, upon hearing my statement, yet other Chinese scholars would question why I stick to the old-fashioned dynastic model of state politics and why I choose not to adopt more fluid conceptions of social or cultural time.

These diverse reactions reveal two issues in regard to our relationship with time. First, we historians perform our identities: not merely identities of race and ethnicity, of gender and sexuality, of class and political ideology, or of space and geopolitical belonging, but identities about time. We are subjects of time. When asked what we do, we historians often answer
that we study change and continuity—meaning in time. When asked about our key methodology that is different from those in other disciplines, we repeatedly emphasize historicization and contextualization—placing things back in time. No doubt, wrestling with time and our “timely” subjectivity is our discipline’s prime and even primordial obsession. Second, as time’s “nomadic subjects” (to adopt feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti’s [2011] term) who perform multiple timely identities, we recognize time’s constructed nature and our subjectivation by multiple constructed times.

(Throughout the contribution, I use time and times primarily to mean one or multiple constructs of time, as in the “hegemonic Western time” and “Asian times.”) But those temporal constructs are not equal. While many constructs hold little power over us, some have successfully seeped into our unconscious, shaped our historical thinking and writing, and asserted dominance over the ways we perceive the world and imagine the future.

So, the real questions are, Which temporal construct matters, and who dominates it? When confronting these questions, historians of Asia like me often reach a troubling realization. We and our historical narratives have already been inducted into and have thus become subjects of the modern West’s conception and construct of time. This Western time has become our primary timely identity, and its hegemony has been established through the linear framework of premodern–modern–postmodern. It is into this framework that we try to fit diverse Asian times and Asian histories or from this framework that we try (often unsuccessfully) to pluck them out. We have become either faithful disciples of Hegel or his insurgent prisoners—or, often unwittingly, both.

Our struggle with the hegemonic Western time has produced several responses. Herein I shall briefly introduce three that I find most interesting. The first response is to demonstrate that the Western time and its premodern–modern–postmodern framework are not only not unique to European experiences but shared by, or perhaps, even better, represented by, Asian experiences. In other words, the premodern–modern transition can be identified in Asian histories, in some cases even earlier and more powerfully than in the West. Various Marxist historical narratives about Asia, the debate about the Great Divergence, and the search for the first globalization shaped by the Silver Way are exemplary cases. This response, which I call decolonizing–recolonizing, which itself should make an interesting subject matter for postcolonial studies, seeks to embody the hegemonic Western time and replace the European dominance by equal, if not better, historical agents of Asia. Its core message is that Asia is no less modern and thus no more premodern than the West. This response retains terminology like the premodern and the modern. Hence
the Western framework of time remains legitimate and meaningful.

The second response, which I call separatist, is to abandon the Western time and periodizational framework and to create new times and new frameworks. The aforementioned formulation of a “Middle Period” in the early–middle–late framework for Chinese history can be seen as one example. This formulation seeks not only to delink time from the Eurocentric, progressive, modernist teleology but also to treat time as a vehicle of history that does not signify socioeconomic, political, and cultural values but only the directionality of time's flow. The downside of this formulation, however, is that it has not developed a different metanarrative about time. Its early–middle–late framework functions as a substitute for the European periodization of the ancient, the medieval, and a part of the early modern—the historical eras that are generally known as the premodern. Although covering a “giant expanse of time,” this temporal framework is not expansive or all-encompassing enough to handle modernity. Hence the formulation does not deny Chinese history’s eventual arrival to modernity, where China is no longer separated from the West but converges with it in time. Such a separatist attempt is not thorough enough to expel the Western time from Chinese history. The premodern–modern divide prevails. Hegel still rules.

The third response is to redefine the criteria for historical inquiries and drastically expand human time so that the existing premodern–modern–postmodern framework may no longer hold true and has to collapse. I discern this approach in the recent debate on the Anthropocene, a concept that proposes a hypothetical geologic epoch in which humans act as the dominant geologic agent in shaping the surface of the Earth. Debating when such an epoch started, scholars of the West first eye the mid-twentieth century and the Industrial Revolution. They then push the starting point back to the Enlightenment, then further back to the Age of Discovery, and even further back to earlier periods. To confront such European claims (once again!) to define and represent human history, social scientists and natural scientists of Asia (led by archaeologists and geologists, with historians as their followers) have begun to search for the Anthropocene in the Earth strata of Asia. They push the onset of the Anthropocene further back in time. Some locate it to the beginning of agriculture, ten thousand years ago, when agriculture saw high concentration in Asia (and Africa and the Americas). This competition for the origin of the Anthropocene, if successful, may indeed displace the existing Eurocentric premodern–modern–postmodern framework; it may establish a new meta-framework of time that encompasses all humans and their histories in the still ongoing Anthropocene.
This response, which I call expanding–displacing, has two problems, though. First, the concept Anthropocene does not purely concern the matter of time but instead carries a strong environmentalist impulse to identify historical environmental damage and attribute responsibility. Expanding the temporal scope of the Anthropocene and bundling it with the histories of Asia may deflect our attention away from the tremendous damage done by the West and modernity. To use the Anthropocene as a mere concept signifying planetary, panhuman time not only causes the concept to lose its environmentalist, political potency but also lets the West and the modern off the hook.8 The second problem is that when stretched too long, the Anthropocene will inevitably demand subdivision. The temporarily displaced premodern–modern divide may re-emerge to serve the purpose. Hence the premodern–modern–postmodern framework may regain prominence within the meta-framework of the Anthropocene.

These three responses showcase diverse ways in which historians of Asia struggle with the hegemonic Western time.9 Despite their limitations and weaknesses, they are all meaningful efforts. And I confess that, with caution and awareness of their downsides, I deploy all three of them in researching and teaching, depending on which intellectual battle I am fighting.

Nevertheless, none of these responses have exhausted our struggle over the matter of time. None of them have displaced or delegitimized the premodern–modern–postmodern framework. As much as they have combated the second hegemony, that is, the Western dominance over time, they have not confronted the more fundamental hegemony—a single linear conception of time with modernity serving as the anchor. All three responses accept the validity of modernity, taking it both as a historical consequence to which our long marches across the treacherous premodern have finally reached and as a hopeful premise for a more progressive future to which we can look forward. Rather than radically entertaining that “we have never been modern” (to playfully adopt Bruno Latour’s provocation) and hence that there is no conceptual ground or need for the derivative term premodern, these responses to the struggle over the matter of time show that we, historians of Asia, want to be modern and that we want to walk that progressive, teleological path (like the West). In our academic practices, we produce diverse historiographies that actually perform our subjugation by single linear time—either by making our histories more modern or more relevant to our quest for modernity or by dwelling in this unquestioned modernity (here and now) while criticizing or fantasizing about the premodern located somewhere else (there
As long as we continue aspiring to be modern, as long as we continue placing faith in the linear progression of time, the premodern–modern–postmodern framework (or its variations) will remain. Hence the concept of the premodern will perpetuate. It will continue fueling historians’ desire to substantiate the modern–premodern divide, to search for premodern qualities in things Asian, and to discard what they deem inferior, unprogressive, and unmodern into history’s dumpsters.

To seek emancipation from the hegemony of single linear time, our fundamental concern must shift from who dominates time to which temporal construct matters and, ultimately, to what other temporal constructs we may entertain. This last question is, I propose, what our future struggle over the matter of time should target, where our collective intellectual energy should be channeled.

I want to use philosopher Manuel De Landa’s book title *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* to inspire us to entertain a thought experiment. Let us imagine many nonlinear histories of Asian things and Asian experiences. Such histories do not always occur over the chronological courses of millennia, centuries, decades, years, and months. They may take shape along, around, and through the movements of the sun and moon; the cycles of seasons and stars; rains brought by tropical storms; land paved by weathering mountains; bodies of humans interacting with those of animals; minerals and chemicals traversing water, air, and earth; and music and art created by both human minds and inorganic objects.

To offer an example: in my current research about a multispecies, ecological history of east China, I observe long-term changes to the velocity and intensity of the water flow in a river and examine how such changes have affected the region’s microclimate and ecosystem. From there I investigate the interactions between the ecological and the socioeconomic (e.g., the rivalry between the fishing industry and the timber industry). And such interactions open a door for me to look into different levels of governmental interventions and complex competition among political forces, economic forces, social forces, and ecological forces. How many historical actors are at play? How many “times” are involved? My embrace of the coexistence of multiple modes of being and their entanglement compels me to radically accept the existence of plural times. What is the speed of a river? How long does a particular species of fish take for spawning? When do cypress, oak, fir, and chestnut trees pollinate to nourish plankton that feed fish and shrimps? Living with these different actors and times, human beings of that region have developed different senses of those times. Should those plural times and multiple senses of them be thrown into a humancentric, West-centric, and modernistic conceptual
sausage maker, to be chopped, ground, mixed, and squeezed into a string of content-ambiguous links—premodern, modern, and postmodern? No, I refuse to produce such a history. I hope the historical narrative I produce will be a rich dish made of diverse ingredients with distinct temporal characteristics.

As an environmental historian, my imaginations are a peculiar kind. To me, to challenge the hegemony of modernity and the hegemony of the West must go hand in hand with a revolt against humancentrism, which is deeply grounded in (again, Western) Enlightenment humanism. Historians focusing on other issues and concerns, however, may generate other kinds of imaginations for histories that enjoy different agents, shapes, textures, rhythms, and dynamics. Imaginations as such demand us to notice, conceive, and construct various types of times. These times will less likely appear as a single straight line with an arrow pointing toward a specific direction. Instead, they will appear as multiple and intersecting lines; or as spiraling or winding lines; or as circles or triangles; or as spiders’ webs; or even as three-dimensional balls, cubes, and irregular forms. It is these diverse conceptions of time that can give birth to more robust histories, which can take human and nonhuman beings toward a myriad of interesting places, not necessarily toward one single, teleological end.

Imagination is the key. It is the key to unlocking the chains that have tied things Asian and historical narratives of Asia to the Western conception of time, to the progressive teleology, and to the qualities of the premodern—archaic, exotic, disgusting, and fearsome. As historians of Asia, we have the intellectual obligation to radically imagine alternative temporal possibilities. Of course, how to use our human languages (especially English, the hegemonic lingua franca of our time) and their linear written forms to represent our imagination of nonlinear times and histories is a challenge. But before we are scared away by the challenge or dismiss it outright, let’s first wrestle with the matter of time with imagination.

**Ling Zhang** is an associate professor of history at Boston College and a distinguished visiting professor at Shanxi University. She is the author of *The River, the Plain, and the State: An Environmental Drama in Northern Song China, 1048–1128* (2016) and the coeditor of the Studies in Environment and History book series from Cambridge University Press.
NOTES

1. Historians have written extensively to critique modernity, Eurocentrism, and Western hegemony. I shall only name a few publications that I think most relevant to my analysis in this contribution, as my recommendation to readers as follow-up readings: various essays in “Historians and the Question of ‘Modernity,’” a roundtable of American Historical Review 116, no. 3 (2011); Chakrabarty (2008); and Pomeranz (2013). Scholars advocating “deep history” and European medieval scholars have made powerful critiques of the hegemony of modernity; see Smail and Shryock (2013) and Davis (2008). See also various essays in “Decolonizing the Middle Ages,” a special issue of the Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 30, no. 3 (2000), and Symes (2011).

2. Such comparison has generated a series of questions, such as if China developed a scientific revolution, why China and Asia didn’t develop scientific and industrial revolutions, who reached modernity first, and who enjoyed the potential but failed to reach modernity first.

3. To name only a few examples: Frank 1998; Pomeranz 2000; Parthasarathi 2011; a small but very popular volume by Gordon and Morales (2017); and the argument that the “sprout” of capitalism had existed in China during the Ming-Qing period, which is widely endorsed by Marxist historians in China.

4. Before the popularization of the term Middle Period, historians of China had long questioned the meaning and utility of applying European periodizational terminologies to Chinese history, for example, the term medieval. See Barrett (1998) and Brook (1998). The recent effort to install the term Middle Period has been collectively made through three large-size, international “Middle Period China Humanities” conferences, respectively at Harvard University in 2014, Leiden University in 2017, and Yale University in 2020 (canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Whereas the first two conferences used the term to refer to the period between 800 and 1400, the third conference drastically expanded the term to cover 220–1600. Pondering the meaning of the term, the program of the third conference says, “By general agreement among American and European scholars, China’s ancient history ended in 220 CE with the passing of the first long-lived dynasty, the Han; similarly, scholars agree that modern China begins in 1600 as the Ming dynasty weakened and the Qing dynasty of the Manchus was taking shape. But does it make sense for scholars to treat the centuries between 220 and 1600 as a single period? Did people living across this time span experience life in the same way? Is it meaningful to think of a single traditional China?” Driven by these questions, the conference aimed to offer the historians of China (like
me), who are “stuck in the middle” (literally the title of the conference), “a chance to think about the most meaningful ways to divide up this giant expanse of time.” See https://ceas.yale.edu/3rd-Middle-Period-China-Humanities-Conference.

5. https://ceas.yale.edu/3rd-Middle-Period-China-Humanities-Conference.

6. The “deep history” movement championed by Smail and Shryock (2011) precisely aims to complicate and collapse the single linear framework of time. It, however, has not yet generated strong impact on studies of Asian history (based on my rather ignorant observation).

7. The literature on the Anthropocene debate is enormous. Here I shall only mention a few publications that either introduce hypotheses of an early Anthropocene and its association with Asia or problematize and critique those hypotheses. See Lewis and Maslin (2015), Balter (2013), Ruddiman (2003, 2007), Smith and Zeder (2013), Hudson (2014), and Mikhail (2016).

8. This is not to deny that Asia is not only a victim of planetary climate change and environmental degradation caused by Western imperialism and capitalism; it is also a perpetrator, because in the past century, more and more Asian countries (especially Japan, China, and India) have followed the path of the West and launched their resource-wasteful, ecologically damaging modernization projects. Renowned writer Amitav Ghosh (2016a) points out such dual roles that Asia plays in the Anthropocene in his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*.

9. They are certainly not the only ways that scholars of Asia have used. I have witnessed many other meaningful experiments that aim to escape or challenge the dominance of the Eurocentric, single linear framework of time. For example, Timothy Brook (2009, 382) suggests that we suspend our obsession with duration (“suspending the flow of time”) and try “a different way of approaching time: not as duration but as moment.”

10. To this Fa-ti Fan (2016, 946) makes a poignant critique: “Modernity narratives have failed to imagine Asia (without marginalizing it or turning it into the Other), and Asia has failed to imagine itself (without falling into the trap of Western modernity).”

11. In her critique of modernity, historian of medieval Europe Carol Symes (2011, 715) expresses a similar sentiment: “A few [un-Modern] sites will be ‘restored’ as romantic refuges, but most will become wastelands where the detritus of Modernity is dumped.”

12. Readers should notice that, here, I take a new materialist stance and make an “ontological turn” to shift from seeing time solely as human construct to acknowledging time as an ontological entity intrinsic to
every material-discursive being. I will not unravel this theoretical shift, because this short A&Q contribution does not aim to and so is not the place to introduce the theoretical development of the new materialism and the ontological turn.

13. My fellow environmental historian Alan Mikhail (2016) has offered an excellent critique to the Enlightenment, Eurocentrism, humancentrism, and their impact on the discourse of the Anthropocene.

14. In his response to the roundtable review of his book by Julia Adeney Thomas, Prasannan Parthasarathi, Rob Linrothe, Fa-Ti Fan, and Kenneth Pomeranz, Amitav Ghosh (2016b) offers a thoughtful reflection on the significance of imagination that I highly recommend to readers.

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**The Politics of Premodernity**

**TAMARA SEARS**

In September 2017, the British Museum inadvertently sparked a social media backlash on Twitter when, in responding to a query about how to design exhibition labels to maximize accessibility, the curator, Jane Porter, replied that “Asian names can be confusing, so we have to be careful about using too many.” Facing a horde of hostile comments pointing out the imperial legacies and cultures of looting upon which museum collections were built, Porter quickly qualified her response by pointing to the fact that “dynasties & gods have different names in various Asian