

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.

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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.

Historical sources in the case of Africa. A problem when it comes to studying African history is the lack of written sources. In the case of north Africa there are plenty of sources in Arabic – indeed the city of Timbuktu, in today's Mali, had a number of universities with large libraries. Other states, such as Ethiopia, had a written language already in the first centuries CE. However, as far as the rest of Africa is concerned, we have to rely on archaeological evidence, on oral traditions and on accounts left by European traders and explorers who began to appear in the fifteenth-century. Statues and art. Gold, artifacts.