

World History Midterm Study Guide

Professor Shawn McHale — February 2026

Exam Logistics

- **When:** Thursday, in class (50–75 minutes)
 - **Format:** Choose **one of two essay questions**; write in a bluebook with **pens**
 - **No IDs**, no questions given in advance, no official study guide
 - **Focus:** Trends over time, not precise dates
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TOPIC 1: James C. Scott — *The Art of Not Being Governed*

The Core Argument

Scott argues that the highland peoples of **Zomia** — a vast mountainous region stretching from the highlands of Southeast Asia into southwest China — were not "primitive" peoples left behind by civilization. Instead, he contends that many of their defining characteristics were **deliberate strategies to evade incorporation into lowland states**.

What Is Zomia?

Zomia is the upland massif of mainland Southeast Asia (covering parts of Burma, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and southwest China). It is defined by rugged terrain, ethnic diversity, and a history of escaping state control. Scott borrows the concept (coined by Willem van Schendel) to reframe how we think about the relationship between states and so-called "marginal" peoples.

The State–Zomia Dynamic

Scott's central framework is that **states and stateless peoples are mutually constituting** — you can't understand one without the other.

Lowland "padi states" were built on:

- **Wet-rice (irrigated) agriculture** — which concentrates population, creates taxable surplus, and makes people legible to state administrators
- **Concentrated manpower** — states needed dense, settled populations for taxation, corvée labor, military conscription, and grain production
- **Slavery and captive-taking** — warfare in Southeast Asia was often about capturing people, not territory. Population was the key resource.
- **Legibility** — states needed to count, categorize, and fix populations in place through censuses, permanent settlement, monoculture, and written records

Highland peoples (the "Zomians") exhibited characteristics Scott reads as **state-repelling or state-evading**:

- **Shifting cultivation (swiddening)** — mobile agriculture that is harder for states to tax than fixed-field rice farming
- **Escape crops** — root crops like cassava or tubers that can be hidden underground (unlike standing grain), harvested piecemeal, and don't require centralized storage
- **Physical mobility** — the ability to move, scatter, or fission makes populations hard to capture or govern
- **Egalitarian / acephalous social structures** — lacking permanent chiefs or hierarchy, these societies had no single leader a state could co-opt or hold hostage
- **Oral culture (loss of literacy)** — Scott controversially argues that some groups *abandoned* literacy because written records are tools of state administration; oral traditions are more flexible and resistant to state capture
- **Flexible ethnic identity** — hill peoples could shift between ethnic identities; ethnicity was performed and situational, not fixed by blood. A "Kachin" village might contain six different mother tongues.
- **Millenarian / prophetic religion** — charismatic religious movements (prophets, would-be world-emperors) could rapidly assemble large coalitions of hill peoples, representing an alternative to both state religion and state power

Key Concepts to Know

- **"Friction of terrain"** — distance from the state center is measured not just in miles but in difficulty of access. Mountains, swamps, and forests functioned as barriers to state power.
- **"Shatter zones"** — peripheral regions where refugees from different state collapses accumulated, creating extraordinary ethnic and linguistic diversity
- **Tribes as state effects** — Scott (drawing on Middle Eastern scholarship) argues that "tribes" are not ancient primordial units but are *created by their relationship to states*. States need legible interlocutors, so they fashion or recognize "tribal" identities.
- **Civilizational narratives** — lowland states classified hill peoples on a spectrum from "raw" to "cooked" (Chinese terminology) or "barbaric" to "civilized." Scott challenges this evolutionary framing as self-serving state ideology.
- **Ethnogenesis** — the process by which new ethnic identities emerge. For Scott, ethnic identities in the hills were fluid, strategic, and often the product of political circumstances rather than ancient inheritance.

How Lectures Connect

- **Lecture 6 (Living on the Margins)** extends Scott's framework globally: nomads, maroons

(escaped slave communities like Palmares in Brazil and the Great Dismal Swamp), sea peoples (Orang Suku Laut), and Marsh Arabs all represent communities living *outside* or *on the margins* of state power — using mobility, inaccessible terrain, and flexible social organization as strategies of autonomy.

- **Lecture 4 (Empires: France, China, Burma)** illustrates Scott's point about states' limited reach: pre-modern France, Ming China, and Burma all had *tiny* bureaucracies relative to their claimed territories. Only ~10% of French people spoke French in 1800. A lone magistrate might govern a Chinese county of hundreds of thousands. The gap between state claims and state capacity is the space in which Scott's argument operates.
 - **Lecture 5 (China, Tibet, and Premodern Sovereignty)** reinforces that premodern sovereignty was layered, plural, and non-exclusive — not the territorial, all-or-nothing sovereignty of modern nation-states. This matters for Scott because it means the boundary between "state" and "non-state" was always blurry and negotiated.
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TOPIC 2: Burbank & Cooper — *Empires in World History*

Chapter 1: "Imperial Trajectories"

This is the **theoretical foundation** of the book. Key arguments:

Empires are the norm, not the exception. The world of nearly 200 nation-states is barely 60 years old. Throughout most of history, people lived in empires — large, expansionist polities that **incorporate** diverse peoples while **maintaining difference** among them. This is the fundamental contrast with nation-states, which ideologically seek homogeneity.

The Concept of "Imperial Repertoires"

This is the most important concept from Burbank & Cooper for the exam.

What is a repertoire? A repertoire is the **set of strategies, practices, and institutions** that an empire draws upon to govern diverse peoples across vast territories. Think of it as a toolkit — different empires select different tools depending on their circumstances, and they can adapt, borrow, and modify tools over time.

Why is this concept useful?

1. **It avoids teleology** — empires don't follow a single evolutionary path. They make choices from available options.
2. **It enables comparison** — you can compare how the Ottomans and the Spanish drew on *different* repertoires to solve *similar* problems (e.g., how to manage religious diversity, how to prevent provincial elites from becoming too powerful).
3. **It captures flexibility** — empires borrowed from predecessors and rivals. The Ottomans drew on Mongol, Persian, Byzantine, and Arab traditions. The Spanish combined Roman law, Catholic

universalism, and Reconquest ideology.

4. **It accounts for intermediaries** — empires didn't rule directly everywhere. Repertoires include strategies for working *through* local elites, religious leaders, and other go-betweens.

Types of Polities (from Chapter 1)

Burbank & Cooper distinguish empires from other political forms:

- **Tribes** — not "prior" to states (echoing Scott); they are defined by their *relationship* to states
- **City-states** — Greek polis model; can become empires (as Rome did)
- **Kingdoms** — subordinating others through kinship, tribute, and alliance
- **Federations/Confederations** — layered sovereignty (Switzerland, EU, proposed French West Africa)
- **Nation-states** — ideologically seek to make state and nation coincide; produce homogeneity and sharp inside/outside boundaries

The key insight: **no political form is "natural."** All come and go, transform into each other, and none has a fixed relationship to democracy or tyranny.

TOPIC 3: The Ottoman Empire — A Repertoire of Inclusive Difference

Chapters 5 of Burbank & Cooper + Lecture 7

Origins and Expansion

The Ottomans emerged from the volatile politics of Anatolia after Byzantine decline. Osman (founder of the Osmanli dynasty) began as a raider in Bithynia; his descendants built an empire that **blended Eurasian practices** from Mongol, Turkic, Persian, Arab, and Byzantine traditions.

Key milestones: Capture of Constantinople (1453), making it their capital; expansion into the Balkans, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, and North Africa. Under Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520–66), the empire reached its greatest extent.

The Ottoman Repertoire — Key Institutions

1. The Devshirme ("Collection") A systematic levy of Christian boys from Balkan villages. These boys were taken from their families, converted to Islam, and trained for state service. This was a deliberate strategy to create an elite that was **loyal only to the sultan** — detached from local kinship networks that might compete with central authority. (Lecture 7 emphasizes: "the political danger of kin networks and rivals.")

2. The Janissaries Elite infantry recruited through the devshirme. They served as the sultan's personal guard and the core of the Ottoman army. Strength: fierce loyalty and military effectiveness. Weakness: they were armed and nearby, and could (and did) turn against sultans they opposed — e.g., assassinating Osman II in 1622.

- 3. Sultanic Concubinage and Succession** Sultans reproduced through slave concubines (not wives), ensuring no powerful in-law families could claim the throne. Each concubine produced one son, and the "one mother, one son" rule created a level playing field among potential heirs. The valide sultan (sultan's mother) was a central political figure. Fratricide was legalized to prevent civil wars among brothers.
- 4. Patrimonial Rule** The sultan governed through **vertical, personal ties** — his household of slaves and dependents — rather than through a class hierarchy of autonomous nobles. This is the key structural contrast with Habsburg Spain. Officials could be appointed and dismissed at will; land grants (timar) were temporary and revocable.
- 5. Multi-confessional Governance** The Ottomans allowed religious communities (Christians, Jews, etc.) to govern their own internal affairs under their own religious leaders, who held their positions through sultanic warrants. This "recognized difference" was a pragmatic strategy for governing a diverse empire — and it contrasts sharply with the religious exclusion practiced by Spain (the Inquisition, expulsion of Jews and Muslims).
- 6. Legal Pluralism** Ottoman law combined: Sharia (Islamic law, Hanafi school), kanun (sultanic/administrative law), and community-specific religious law. Different peoples were judged by different legal systems, all under the sultan's overarching authority. Extraterritoriality for foreign merchants was a continuation of Byzantine and Eurasian diplomatic practice.

The "Patrimonial vs. Class Hierarchy" Framework

Burbank & Cooper offer two **ideal types** for understanding imperial power:

	Patrimonial Model (Ottomans)	Class Hierarchy Model (Spain)
Power flows from	Sultan's household downward	Horizontal class ties among nobles
Elite recruitment	Outsiders (devshirme, slaves) dependent on sultan	Landed aristocrats with their own followers
Religious approach	Inclusive; recognized difference	Exclusive; Inquisition, forced conversion
Key vulnerability	Dependents might defect or build their own networks	Nobles can collectively check royal power
Intermediaries	Detached officials, appointed clergy of many faiths	Magnates, church hierarchy

TOPIC 4: The Spanish/Habsburg Empire — A Repertoire of Composite Monarchy

Chapter 5 of Burbank & Cooper + Lecture 8

Origins

Spain was **not a unified state** — it was a composite of separate kingdoms (Castile, Aragon, Portugal, Navarre, Granada). The marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella (1469) united Castile and Aragon dynastically, but not administratively. The Reconquest of Granada (1492) and the expulsion of Jews and later Muslims created a Catholic identity but at enormous economic cost.

Charles V and the Habsburg Empire

Through dynastic marriage and inheritance, Charles V (r. 1516–56) accumulated an enormous collection of territories: Castile, Aragon, the Netherlands, parts of Italy, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Americas. But this was a **composite monarchy** — each part retained its own laws, elites, and institutions. Charles couldn't override the rights of provincial magnates.

The Spanish Repertoire

- 1. Composite Monarchy** — rule through layered dynastic arrangements; local elites kept their privileges in exchange for loyalty to the Crown.
- 2. Religious Exclusivity** — unlike the Ottomans, Spain used Catholicism as the unifying principle of empire. The Inquisition policed orthodoxy. Jews and Muslims were expelled.
- 3. Overseas Expansion as Escape** — constrained by powerful nobles at home, the Crown looked to the Americas as a place where it could exercise more direct, patrimonial control. Viceroyalties and audiencias in the Americas were staffed by Castilian appointees, not local magnates.
- 4. Monopolistic Trade** — all goods had to pass through designated Spanish ports (Cadiz, then Seville). Silver from the Americas financed wars in Europe but was never enough — Spain repeatedly defaulted on its debts.
- 5. Settler Colonialism** — in the Americas, the Crown managed a complex system of royal administrators, indigenous intermediaries, merchant oligarchies, and the Catholic Church.

Lecture 8: Spain, Mexico, and the Philippines — Repertoires in Action

This lecture shows how Spanish repertoires *transformed* as they were applied in different contexts. The conquest of Mexico (Cortés, 1519) and the Philippines (named after Philip II) show the same empire using different tools in different settings: military conquest, religious conversion, indirect rule through indigenous elites, and the imposition of Spanish cultural forms (e.g., the 1849 naming guide in the Philippines that gave families Spanish surnames).

TOPIC 5: The Mongol Empire

Chapter 4 of Burbank & Cooper

Why the Mongols Matter

The Mongol Empire (beginning with Chinggis Khan, 1206) **connected Eurasia** from China to the Black Sea under one ruling family. While not long-lived, the Mongols are important for the **imperial**

technologies they adapted and passed on to later empires (including the Ottomans and Russia).

Chinggis Khan's Repertoire

- **Personal loyalty over blood ties** — Chinggis broke with kinship-based politics by demanding *personal* loyalty, executing disloyal relatives, and promoting skilled followers regardless of origin
- **Meritocratic reward** — the politics of generous reward for ruthless service
- **Religious tolerance** — Mongols were pragmatically indifferent to subjects' religions; clergy of all faiths were spared because of their useful access to spirits
- **Terror as policy** — cities that resisted were destroyed; those that submitted were spared — creating powerful incentives to surrender
- **Trade protection** — Chinggis emphasized security of caravan routes; interference with trade was a *casus belli* (as with the Shah of Khwarezm)

Legacy

The Mongol khanates fragmented, but their repertoires — personal loyalty, religious tolerance, meritocratic service, trade protection, and the politics of inclusion through subordination — were **absorbed and transformed by successor empires**, particularly the Ottomans and the Russian and Chinese empires.

TOPIC 6: Russia and China — Empire-Building Beyond the Steppe

Chapter 7 of Burbank & Cooper

Russia

- Emerged from under Mongol overlordship; Moscow princes used their role as tax collectors for the Mongols to build power
- Transformed Mongol-influenced institutions into a **patrimonial empire**: the tsar as autocrat, land grants (*pomest'e*) binding nobles to service, the Orthodox Church providing ideological legitimacy
- **Moscow's clerics** reimagined the past, claiming descent from Augustus Caesar and rebranding Mongol overlordship as the "Tatar yoke"
- Ivan IV ("the Terrible") took the title *tsar* (Caesar) in 1547
- Expansion eastward into Siberia and eventually up against China

China (Qing Dynasty)

- The Qing (Manchu) dynasty reunited China in the 17th century and expanded west and north
- Used **different repertoires for different peoples**: Confucian governance for Han Chinese, Mongol-style alliances for steppe peoples, Tibetan Buddhist patronage for Tibet

- **The encounter of empires** — Russia, China, and Mongol confederacies competed for control of central Eurasia

Key Comparison

Both Russia and China demonstrate that empires **mixed new strategies into their repertoires** as they encountered new peoples and rivals. The concept of repertoire helps explain why these empires governed different parts of their territory in fundamentally different ways.

TOPIC 7: The Columbian Exchange (Crosby)

Week 7 Reading — Professor McHale specifically flagged this

Alfred Crosby's concept of the **Columbian Exchange** refers to the massive transfer of plants, animals, diseases, peoples, and cultures between the Old World and the New World after 1492.

Key Elements

- **Disease:** The most devastating consequence. European diseases (smallpox, measles, influenza) killed vast numbers of indigenous Americans who had no prior immunity. Population losses of 50–90% in many areas. This demographic catastrophe enabled European conquest far more than military technology alone.
- **Crops and Animals:** New World crops (maize, potatoes, tomatoes, tobacco, cacao) transformed Old World agriculture and diet. Old World animals (horses, cattle, pigs) and crops (wheat, sugar) transformed the Americas.
- **Silver:** American silver (especially from Potosí) became the foundation of global trade networks, connecting the Americas to Europe and Asia.
- **Ecological imperialism:** European animals and plants often outcompeted indigenous species, transforming entire landscapes.

Why It Matters for the Course

The Columbian Exchange connects to the broader themes of imperial repertoires and empire-building: European empires used biological and ecological advantages (often unintentionally) alongside military and administrative tools. The catastrophic population losses among indigenous peoples reshaped the labor systems of the Americas (leading to the importation of enslaved Africans) and the balance of power between empires.

Potential Essay Themes & Connections

When studying, think about how these topics connect:

1. **Compare imperial repertoires:** How did the Ottoman and Spanish empires solve similar problems (governing diversity, managing elites, securing succession) in fundamentally different ways?
 2. **States and their margins:** How does Scott's argument about Zomia connect to Burbank & Cooper's analysis of how empires manage difference? Both highlight that the boundary between "inside" and "outside" the state is negotiated, not fixed.
 3. **Repertoires across time:** How did later empires (Ottoman, Russian, Chinese) borrow from and transform the Mongol repertoire? What changed and what persisted?
 4. **The global consequences of inter-imperial competition:** How did the Ottoman-Habsburg rivalry drive Spanish expansion overseas? How did the Columbian Exchange reshape the global balance of power?
 5. **The concept of "difference" in empire:** Why do Burbank & Cooper argue that empires are defined by their **maintenance of difference** among subject peoples? How does this contrast with nation-states' drive toward homogeneity? How does Ottoman tolerance compare to Spanish exclusion — and what were the strategic advantages of each?
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Quick-Reference: Key Terms

Term	Definition
Imperial repertoire	The set of strategies and institutions an empire draws upon to govern diverse peoples
Composite monarchy	A polity composed of separate kingdoms/territories united under one dynasty but retaining distinct laws and institutions (e.g., Habsburg Spain)
Patrimonial rule	Power exercised through the ruler's personal household and dependents, rather than through an autonomous nobility
Devshirme	Ottoman levy of Christian boys for conversion and training as state servants/Janissaries
Zomia	The highland massif of mainland Southeast Asia, framed by Scott as a zone of state evasion
Padi state	Scott's term for lowland states built on wet-rice agriculture and concentrated manpower
Friction of terrain	The idea that distance from state power is measured by difficulty of access, not just miles
Shatter zone	A peripheral region where diverse refugees from state collapse accumulate
Ethnogenesis	The process by which new ethnic identities emerge, often through political circumstances
Columbian Exchange	The transfer of organisms, peoples, and cultures between Old and New Worlds after 1492

Term	Definition
Kanun	Ottoman administrative/sultanic law, supplementing Sharia
Timar	Ottoman land grant to military servitors in exchange for service
Janissaries	Ottoman elite infantry recruited through the devshirme

Good luck on the exam, Hazuki! Focus on being able to explain concepts in your own words and draw connections between readings and lectures. Professor McHale wants to see that you understand trends over time, not memorized dates.