

devotees. Despite brilliant passages, an anecdotal style, and a careful attempt to define difficult concepts and to translate City and Wall Street jargon into everyday language, turning financial history into easy-to-read history is a problem that sometimes defeats him. There are many passages throughout the book that will be very hard to follow for all but the most dedicated layperson. The book will sell because it is associated with a TV series and because Ferguson has celebrity status as an intellectual. But one suspects that, like *A brief history of time*, it will be a book more displayed on the shelves of middle-class homes than one actually read and understood by the inhabitants. However, a run through the footnotes shows that Ferguson has done an impressive amount of homework (although he has an irritating habit of occasionally failing to reference quotations in the text). So, although the experts are unlikely to think that there is anything seriously new here that might take the subject in fresh directions, the book should make a very good text for students studying the origins and significance of that phase of financial globalization that, as I write, is struggling to survive.

Empires of the Silk Road: a history of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the present

By Christopher I. Beckwith. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. xxv + 472. Hardback £24.95, ISBN 978-0-691-13589-2.

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doi:10.1017/S1740022809990271

This is a provocative book, self-consciously so, which claims for Central Eurasia its rightful place in world history. It does so passionately, without shying away from polemical statements, imbued with the dense knowledge of someone who has spent the best part of the last forty years immersed in difficult, even somewhat arcane, studies on the languages, history, and cultures of the peoples of Central Eurasia.

Readers of the *Journal of Global History* will especially welcome the publication of this book, in nearly equal parts erudite and iconoclastic, since it provides a wealth of new ideas, perspectives, and

information about the political and other formations that flourished in that large portion of the world known as Central Eurasia (a term explained on pp. xix–xx). To illustrate the history of Central Eurasia on the canvas of human history, Beckwith uses colours that are not the shadowy blacks and greys often employed for the sole purpose of bringing out the brilliance of the civilizations that flourished on the peripheries of Eurasia. Although by now one might suppose that the notion of howling hordes of barbarians descending upon serene fields of wheat and prosperous cities to pillage, rape, and burn might be somewhat passé, Beckwith argues that such stereotypes are alive and well.

The book includes an introduction, a prologue, twelve chapters, an epilogue, two appendices that deal mostly with linguistic questions, and 111 endnotes that are, unlike footnotes, meant to address issues that require lengthier treatment. The usual bibliography and index complete the volume. In my view, the book offers its best in the early chapters, in which Beckwith describes the specific traits of what he calls the ‘Central Eurasian Culture Complex’ (p. 12) and builds a truly compelling multifaceted vision of the development of Central Eurasia in world history.

The Prologue sets the scene. Here Beckwith defines the Central Eurasian Culture Complex according to three main directives: common myths, the *comitatus*, and trade. These three elements intertwine to form the mesh that holds together the historical experiences of the peoples of Central Eurasia. Various foundation myths are reported, whose elements appear within and also outside Central Eurasia. (It is a pity, however, that the foundation myth of the Manchu dynasty, which closely conforms to the pattern described, is absent.) The *comitatus*, meaning a group of ‘companions in arms’ that forms the political centre of an empire in the making, and the associated institution of the ‘bodyguard’ corps, have been discussed in the relevant literature for some time, and Beckwith correctly focuses on it as a critical feature of Central Eurasian nomadic (or at any rate non-sedentary) political formations. The third aspect, trade, is also seen as a central unifying theme, which encompasses the long-range ‘Silk Road’ trade, as well as border markets and diplomatic (‘tribute’) missions. In some cases, one might have wished that Beckwith had included references to well-known contributions. For instance, the passages on the commercial and political relationship between the Ming dynasty and the Mongols (e.g.

pp. 344–5) could have been made more interesting by referring to Alastair Iain Johnston's work, *Cultural realism: strategic culture and grand strategy in Chinese history* (1992).

The chapters are organized in chronological sequence but are internally subdivided into thematic sections that treat several questions concurrently. Chapter 5, for instance, places the Avar empire, the Türk empires, the Arab conquest, the Tang (T'ang) dynasty, the Tibetan empire, and the Franks side by side, showing the complexity as well as the integration of Central Eurasia between the sixth and the eighth centuries CE. The following chapter begins with a summing up of the various contemporary empires; then, moving away from strict political history, it shifts to themes such as religion, literacy, and economy. Most subjects are treated in easily approachable – almost 'snapshot' or 'bird's-eye' – short sections, into which a great amount of information is condensed. The advantage of this method is to provide elements of the 'big picture' without trying to weave a full tapestry, an enterprise that is probably futile, or at any rate not very useful given the scale of the study.

The Endnotes should not be missed. They constitute a well of knowledge about issues that have long been debated within the somewhat exclusive clubs of Indo-European linguists, Altaicists, and Central Asian historians. These will not fail to fascinate the reader, even when the occasionally revolutionary and challenging conclusions may be debatable or cannot be appreciated to their full extent.

Assessing the overall value of this book as a scholarly contribution, one must first say that even the reader unfamiliar with the fine points of Inner Asian history will find in it a wealth of useful information, new ideas, and stimulating views, and thus gain a greater awareness and appreciation of the true relevance of Central Eurasia in world history. Second, it asks important questions that need to be addressed by specialists in various disciplines. Daunting questions of continent-wide waves of migration, conquest, and retreat (including the disappearance) of Central Eurasian peoples and the empires that they created are often not being addressed today with a level of attention to the 'connectivity', comparability, and long-term development of these phenomena adequate to the task. Establishing broad paradigms is a difficult and problematic enterprise that also risks producing the wrong ones, and Beckwith rightly exposes a number of mistaken ideas that are still in need of extensive corrective action, such as

some notions about the ancient nomads' 'psychological' or economic condition. The grand scale of Beckwith's work does not allow more than a passing discussion on many of these issues, but the overall message is quite clear: the culture of Central Eurasian peoples is currently deeply misunderstood, and progress very much depends upon asking the right questions and often requires going against the grain of received truths.

One criticism that could be brought up is the limited extent to which this book relies on material culture and archaeological research. Even though Beckwith is fully supportive of their uses and in some cases delves into these areas with obvious relish – such as his treatment of the Western origin of the ancient Chinese chariot – in other cases greater attention to the archaeological evidence would have helped to show the deeper currents of stimulus/diffusion patterns of cultural transfer at the eastern and western ends of Eurasia. Archaeological research on Scythians, Huns, Xiongnu, Avars, Turks, Uighurs, Kitan, and others has produced a wealth of material data, as well as spirited discussions in light of which some of the points proposed by Beckwith could have been strengthened or more finely argued.

This book, however, is not meant to be read as a comprehensive history of Central Eurasian empires, like those of older generations of scholars – (René Grousset's *L'empire des steppes* (1939), William M. McGovern's *The early empires of Central Asia* (1939), and Owen Lattimore's *Inner Asian frontiers of China* (1940) come to mind immediately) nor was this the author's intention. The book builds on Beckwith's own strengths, which are especially relevant to the field of historical comparative linguistics and medieval Central Eurasian history. The last two chapters are written in a more polemical than historical vein, reflecting the ethical and political standpoints that inform the author's views. Judgement on these is perhaps best left to the individual reader. In the Epilogue, the author tackles the idea of 'the Barbarians'; his major point of criticism – namely the inappropriate injection of the Western term and notion of 'barbarian' into Chinese historiography – is argued forcefully and persuasively, and, while solutions may vary, the author's *cri de coeur* ought to be listened to carefully.

In the light of its chronological and geographical scope, of the originality of its ideas, of the ambition of its reach, and of the range of discussions and controversies that it is likely to ignite,

Empires of the Silk Road must be regarded as a major contribution to Central Eurasian and world history.

Power and plenty: trade, war, and the world economy in the second millennium

By Ronald Findlay and Kevin H. O'Rourke. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. Pp. xxvi + 619. Hardback £28.95, ISBN 978-0-691-11854-3; paperback £20.95, ISBN 978-0-691-14327-9.

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doi:10.1017/S1740022809990283

This book's preface starts prosaically: 'you cannot make sense of today's world economy, or indeed of the world more generally, without understanding the history that produced it', a history characterized by what the authors define as 'uneven economic development' (p. xvi). More specifically, the authors seek to expose the relationship between the gradual globalization of the world economy on the one hand and economic and political development on the other during the second millennium of the common era. Their study divides the earth into several interacting 'world regions' and divides its history by three 'great world-historical events': the Black Death, the Columbian exchange, and the Industrial Revolution (p. xxi). As a world history spanning a millennium, it seeks to 'avoid both the Scylla of Eurocentrism and the Charybdis of Sinocentrism' (p. xviii), harnessing an impressive amount of secondary scholarship to do so. The authors' intimate familiarity with select traditions of modern historiography certainly makes for a unique and valuable survey of economic history, but the jarring paucity – if not complete absence – of primary sources and research will put off many historians. Findlay and O'Rourke are, however, commendably honest about this: 'There is a lot in this book ... that will be entirely unremarkable to any moderately well trained historian' (p. xxvi). In effect, the great genius of their enterprise lies precisely in rendering a long and tumultuous period of human history readable for economists, and for this they deserve praise. Unfortunately, however, the book fails to confront economic theory where it is at its weak-

est, in terms of explaining the wealth and poverty of nations.

In this context, the book's title is not incidental, for this is not yet another celebratory history of *doux commerce*. Contrary to the impression given by many economics textbooks, the authors argue, 'the greatest expansions of world trade have tended to come not from the bloodless *tâtonnement* of some fictional Walrasian auctioneer but from the barrel of a Maxim gun, the edge of a scimitar, or the ferocity of nomadic horsemen' (p. xviii). So, while economists all too often neglect the violent complexities of economic history, Findlay and O'Rourke actively aimed to structure their history around a dichotomy lionized by the famous debate between Jacob Viner and Eli Heckscher over whether early modern states pursued power or plenty (pp. 197, 228, 261, 310, 361, *passim*). Historically, the authors clarify, the relation between power and plenty was such that 'achieving either aim would promote further achievement of the other' (p. 191). That said, the authors are not afraid of applying the vocabulary and methodological assumptions of mainstream economics to the historical record. A 'long-run equilibrium of sorts', we learn, was established between the Mamluk successors of Saladin and the sultans of Yemen (p. 99). And, while a 'general equilibrium model' can explain the consequences of the Black Death (p. 117), their explanation of the Industrial Revolution rests on a 'benchmark neoclassical growth model' (p. 317). In short, 'simple neoclassical predictions' often do the trick (p. 112).

It is quite a ride that Findlay and O'Rourke take their readers on, their book nimbly structured and invigorated by memorable episodes from the dustbins of economic history. We are introduced to the pan-continental economic benefits of 'Viking degradations' (pp. 85–6); to the consequences of the '*Pax Mongolica*'; to the Florentine Francesco di Balducci Pegolotti's remarkable statement in the early 1340s that travel by land from Crimea to Beijing was 'perfectly safe, whether by day or by night' (p. 107); and even to the Sultan Iskander Muda's 'monster galley', the most massive wooden vessel in history, named 'the terror of the universe', which notably failed to stand up against Portuguese aggressors in Southeast Asia (p. 201). As a history of world trade in the last millennium, this book is in effect a violent history of 'globalization', conceptualized teleologically, however, as the gradual release of economic forces from the shackles of natural and political barriers; hence the prevalence of phrases