

Book Review

- Timothy Brook, *Great State: China and the World*, New York: HarperCollins, 2020. Pp. xxii + 442. Notes and Index. \$32.50 (hardcover).

Timothy Brook stands as one of the premier historians of China who has crossed over beyond the small fief of sinology to reach a larger audience, through his fascinating book of world history and early modern art, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2007). Along with Valerie Hansen, Kenneth Pomeranz and Jurgen Osterhammel, Brook fits into the current generation of China scholars whose work has embraced the global/world turn in history scholarship. *Great State* is Brook's latest entree in an oeuvre that has spanned the material culture of the Ming (*The Confusions of Pleasure*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), early modern world trade (*Vermeer's Hat*), the Yuan-Ming world (*The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2013) and map-making (*Mr. Selden's Map of China: Decoding the Secrets of a Vanished Cartographer*, New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013). In many ways, *Great State* is a standout book, particularly as it offers new stories to China scholars, from the layman to the specialist. However, Brook does not completely succeed in his mission to clearly link the thirteen portraits to his concept of China as a great state. As with his other books, Brook's prose shines throughout, particularly with his lovely translations of Chinese geographical names: Shanhaiguan—" . . . the Gate of the Mountains and Seas," (132), "a high region the Mongols call Tengri Tagh, the Mountains of Heaven" (72).

According to Brook, "Great State is an Inner Asian concept. It is not a term that Chinese today will recognize," (7). Following the Yuan concept of universal rule over humanity, successive Chinese dynasties have sought to embrace a similar worldview. Here, Brook draws upon ideas from Owen Lattimore, Peter Perdue and Thomas Allsen, in thinking of the post-Yuan world of China as distinct in its multi-ethnic approach and more universal reach, extending the empire beyond the reach of the four seas and the mountain chains that China sees now as its natural geographic boundaries. Brook does not claim to write an international history of China; instead, this is to be " . . . a series of intimate portraits of people, Chinese and non-Chinese alike, to exemplify how the world has mattered to China, how China has mattered to the world, and how China has always been in the world" (9). One can hear the echoes of Valerie Hansen's *The Open Empire: A History of China to 1600* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000). Brook's purpose is "to reduce the distance that Chinese

and non-Chinese are accustomed to place between themselves” (12). Again, Brook embodies the current historical trend of seeing national histories through a global lens and looking to break down monolithic and binary divisions between the Chinese self and the non-Chinese other.

The book is structured with portraits that pair Chinese and non-Chinese actors in stories that take place in China and abroad. By placing information on the paired actors in the chapter titles themselves (Chapter 1: The Great Khan and His Portraitist, Chapter 2: The Blue Princess and the Il-Khan, etc.), Brook demands his reader adapt to his thinking of China as interconnected instead of isolated. For teachers of East Asian or world history, this will not be anything new; however, for a casual reader interested in learning about China, this concept may be surprising.

Throughout the book, Brook uses different types of historical information; drawing on climate analysis in Chapter 1 when talking about the Little Ice Age and Khubilai Khan, using genetic analysis to separate plague strains in Chapter 3, or discovering that documents housed in the Potala palace “were faked in the eighteenth century and inserted in the archives in order to create a paper trail attesting to a historically close relationship between Tibet and the emperors of China” (104). Brook also has a good sense of humor, as when he translates a fifteenth century Korean-Chinese language textbook with the title of *My Khitan Buddy* (133). For teachers of world history, any of these chapters would make an interesting case study for use in a lecture, and, in tandem with the text, could help show students how different research methodologies can go beyond just examining primary sources and archaeology.

Great State spends three chapters on the Yuan Dynasty, five on the Ming, four on the Qing and one chapter on the Republic. The book jumps around the world, from Persia (Chapter 2) to Sri Lanka (Chapter 4), to Macao (Chapter 6) and Bantam (Chapter 7), to Tibet (Chapter 10) to Ostend (Chapter 11) and Johannesburg (Chapter 12) before ending in Shanghai (Chapter 13). While some might find this approach somewhat scattershot, as it seems to look for as many connections between China and the world as possible, I found it interesting to see so many interactions with China occurring beyond the borders of the Middle Kingdom.

Because Brook has spent his life studying the Ming, it is no surprise that his chapters dealing with the more modern period lack a bit of the heft of the earlier parts of the book. Khubilai Khan gets time in the spotlight as the founder of the Yuan Dynasty in Chapter 1. By bringing his sharp eye for art history, Brook points out the heavy furs the emperor is wearing in the portrait, linking the sartorial choice to the cold climate during the Little Ice Age (29), as well as the “slaves from the Kunlun Mountains” (34) when describing the black man accompanying him on the hunt, extends the connections beyond Asia into the Indian Ocean World of East Africa. In Chapter 4, Brook focuses on one episode during Zheng He’s voyages when he helped a “regime change” in Sri Lanka. Brook’s view on the

motivation for Yongle's tribute missions echoes the interpretation of F.W. Mote (*Imperial China 900–1800*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) when Mote suggests that the episode of bloody tanistry reflects the partially-Mongol origins of Ming rulers, as well as the need for legitimacy for Yongle after killing his nephew. For the teacher who is interested in the political purpose of the Chinese tribute system, Brook sums it up well: "Recognition from foreign rulers was not just decorative diplomacy; it showed Heaven's will" (85). Throughout the book, Brook manages to distill insights like this, which illustrate both his erudition and style.

This book would be useful for history majors in a methods class, or for graduate students in a seminar on East Asian historiography. For secondary school teachers, it is useful and fun to find many other stories of Chinese history beyond those so commonly presented in textbooks. By digging deeper into the political methods employed by Zheng He, teachers can present the complexity of interpreting tribute missions, as "friendship diplomacy or missions of imperial domination" (93). It is Brook's focus and ability to pull us down to the level of inspecting the notes on the margins of a map or the threads in a tapestry before pulling us out to the ten thousand foot view that set his writing apart from so many other historians. For high school students, this virtuosity and the profusion of references would be overwhelming and confusing; for the specialist, this verve is enthralling. Another reason I would not recommend this book for introductory students in a survey course is that it deliberately and clearly breaks the rules of the genre: Brook directly addresses his reader throughout with the use of "I" as well as an imagined dialogue that ends Chapter 5. For some readers, this may be a step too far; for me, it was entertaining and liberating to see such a professional scholar step outside the norms of history writing and employ creativity in such a novel way.

As a new history book on Chinese trade, diplomacy, and foreign relations, Brook must take contemporary China into account, which he does in the epilogue, a strong entry for students who have learned about Chinese history for a semester and want a brief account of where China stands at the moment. In particular, the recaps of how China came to rule over Xinjiang and Tibet are worthwhile and critical of the ruling regime. To see Brook confront the current Uyghur genocide, or to describe China's support of new United Nations member-states as a new form of colonialism, shows that Brook is unafraid of criticizing China for its aggressive role in foreign policy. Teachers of world history who want to expand their knowledge of China and its interactions over the last seven centuries should look no further than this title, for its new stories, its use of different historical research methods, and Brook's fine prose and writing.

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