

*Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* ties in with Thomas Allsen’s recent (and, one hopes, future) projects that unfold the magnitude of the cultural, economic, and scientific vitality of the Mongol Empire of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Exploring areas as diverse as historiography and cuisine, Allsen’s work releases the Mongols from their traditionally-assigned, dubious status as conquerors who simply facilitated sedentary achievements by creating conditions (the so-called *pax mongolica*) favorable for the meeting of one sedentary civilization with another. *Culture and Conquest* affirms the distinctive role of the Mongol courts—in this case, the Il-qans in Iran and Yuan China—as active promoters of cultural exchange and as patrons of scientific and intellectual endeavors. The reasons for the Mongols’ conscious advancement of such cultural exchange arose out of necessity (the need to co-opt specialists from agrarian societies to help them run their realms), out of imperial demands (seeking political and economic gains), and out of courtly behavior (the desire to increase their majesty). The Mongols’ open-mindedness, being, as Allsen puts it, “free from parochialism and bias” that so characterized high cultures, also enabled them to embrace such undertakings with greater ease.

Such claims may not be entirely unfamiliar, but they are presented here in a new fashion. Usually, discussions of cultural dynamics under imperial confines are limited to an individual sphere (political, economic, intellectual, etc.). Here, Allsen manages to integrate additional dimensions in order to paint a more complete picture. First, he provides the reader with some background for the political and economic ties between Iran and China. From the mid-1260s, Hülegü in Iran and Qubilai in China (both sons of Chinggis Qan’s fourth son, Tolui) established an alliance against their common rivals, the Ögödeid-Chaghadaiid alliance supporting Qaidu and the Jochids of the Golden Horde. The Yuan and the Il-qans not only helped each other against their enemies, but also, perhaps unconsciously at first, shared ideas about administering their respective empires: both Iran and China inherited a more-or-less well-defined territory, inhabited by an ancient civilization, and thus faced similar challenges.

In 1286, Qubilai Qan, wishing to demonstrate his support for Arghun, the recently-enthroned Il-qan, sent Bolad Aqa, a Mongol commander, to Iran. This embassy became the turning point in the relationship between the two states. Bolad remained in West Asia for the next 30 years (never to return home, and therefore, Allsen suggests, he would not secure a proper biographical entry in the Chinese chronicles) and became, in Allsen’s words, “the major conduit of cultural exchange between Iran and China.” In China, Bolad Aqa, titled *ch‘eng-hsiang* (“chancellor”), had enjoyed a military career, acted as *ba ‘urchi* (in charge of the royal kitchen), and, among other positions, was an official in the Censorate and in the Office of the Grand Supervisors of Agriculture. In Iran, Bolad became an invaluable source of information for the Il-qanid rulers, especially through his association—the nature of which is still not entirely clear—with Rashid al-Din, the noted vizier and compiler of one of the most impressive historical endeavors, the *Jami al-tavarikh* or *Collected Histories* of the Mongols, Turks, Chinese, Indians, Jews, Arabs, and Franks. Bolad instructed Rashid on many subjects, ranging from Mongol history to Chinese agriculture and geography, and even explained to the Il-qanid court the Chinese monetary system, leading to the (failed) attempt to introduce paper currency in Iran. The relationship between Bolad and Rashid, which Allsen puts it, “free from parochialism and bias” that so characterized high cultures, also enabled them to embrace such undertakings with greater ease.

What follows is a presentation of the exchange of some of the cultural “resources” between Iran and China in the fields of historiography, geography and cartography, agriculture, cuisine, medicine, astronomy, and printing. The issues explored are as diverse and as broad-ranging as one has come to expect from Allsen. They range from the influence of the Chinese fashion of historiographical compilation on Rashid al-Din’s *Jami al-tavarikh*, to the Il-qans’ familiarity with the Chinese method of pulse diagnosis and the Chinese medicinal uses of various grades of cinnamon; they extend from techniques of calendar calculation and map-making, to the introduction of a new variety of eggplant into the Chinese menu.

Naturally, Allsen does not presume to be an expert in each and every one of these topics. He therefore reviews and reintroduces the
relevant secondary literature, and offers his own reading of the primary sources. Allsen’s notable erudition and proficiency in the languages (especially Persian and Chinese) required to explore such topics renders an account that is unique in its approach and wide in scope, but at the same time very detailed. The result is a substantial contribution to our understanding of the workings of Iran and China under Mongol rule. Indeed, the Mongol Empire emerges as a setting for numerous encounters between different traditions, in material culture, in intellectual and scientific explorations, in agricultural techniques, and in dietary practices. This traffic was not without its influences, although these are sometimes hard to assess. In most cases, traffic in goods and ideas would not give birth to a new cultural blend, nor, it seems, was its purpose to generate one. In the majority of examples, Iran and China were satisfied by knowing of the other, by fulfilling fundamental curiosities; and by establishing the court’s image and prestige (probably, primarily in its own eyes) through more or less exotic projects, and not by wishing to cultivate new, alien ideas in order to meld them into their own modes of thinking.

The makeup of Culture and Conquest calls for a condensed description of the various spheres of interaction, and indeed, occasionally there is a feeling of reading a chapter in an on-going project and not necessarily the final project itself. The book also compels the reader to present more questions: What of other shared influences, such as art, religion, ritual, or other manifestations of political behavior? What was Central Asia’s role in this exchange? Were Mongol courts in Central Asia able to absorb, or to filter, some of the traffic going to or from China? And was Central Asia able to supply its own body of specialists, at least in later times, after the initial phase of the Mongol conquest? The scarcity of contemporary Central Asian sources may render these questions unanswerable, and yet, hopefully, some of them will be addressed in Allsen’s future, and much anticipated, publications.

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NOTES

1See, for example, Allsen’s Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire (Cambridge University Press, 1997), and his Technician Transfers in the Mongolian Empire (a lecture given at the Ninth Annual Central Eurasian Studies conference in Bloomington, on April 13, 2002, since published under the auspices of the Department of Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington).


A History of Inner Asia by Svat Soucek attempts to offer “a comprehensive survey” (p. x) of the vast heartland of Eurasia that the book blurb refers to as “a confusing area.” Soucek’s book is designed as a short and readable overview of Inner Asia from the seventh through twentieth centuries, yet those without prior background in the history of the region may feel overwhelmed at the outset by the “historico-geographical survey” (pp. 3-29) that is densely packed with place names of the past and present.

Historians may find Soucek’s definition of Inner Asia puzzling. By limiting his definition to six countries and one autonomous region in the People’s Republic of China (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Mongolia; Xinjiang), Soucek has apparently selected regions based on the importance of their relationship to Russia (and the former Soviet Union). Thus, Tibet is glaringly absent. Yet, Afghanistan also is not included in the author’s definition, in spite of the nineteenth and twentieth-century history of Afghan-Russian relations and Afghanistan’s importance as a crossroads for religions and commerce.

Soucek expends little time beyond pages ix-x in presenting an argument for his very limited geographical approach. It would have been useful to know his opinion of Denis Sinor’s cultural definition of Inner Asia as it is presented in Sinor’s “Introduction” to The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia (1990). Other possibilities go unexplored. For example, Cyril Black et al.’s definition of Inner Asia in the 1990 volume The Modernization of Inner Asia includes Afghanistan, Iran, and Tibet in addition to Soucek’s designated areas. (The Black volume does not even appear in Soucek’s bibliography).

Soucek does attempt to differentiate “Central Asia” from “Inner Asia,” viewing Inner Asia as the broader, more inclusive term. Yet, he omits the more recent term “Central Eurasia,” a term that some