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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tansen Sen, Victor H. Mair. *Traditional China in Asian and World History.* Key Issues in Asian Studies Series. Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 2012. Illustrations. 113 pp. $10.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-924304-65-1.

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Published on H-Asia (May, 2013)
Commissioned by Sumit Guha

China in World History

This slim volume, with a main text of just eighty-one pages, has a big purpose. Its goal is to reframe for students the way we look at Chinese history by highlighting the recurring impact that foreign peoples had on China's early historical development. In this, it joins a number of other works that have taken aim at the long-lived cliché of China as an insular civilization. These include Joanna Waley-Cohen's *Sextants of Beijing: Global Currents in Chinese History* (1999) and Valerie Hansen's *The Open Empire: A History of China to 1600* (2000). While Hansen ends her account in the late Ming period and Waley-Cohen takes the story to the end of the twentieth century, Tansen Sen and Victor H. Mair stop with the last of Zheng He's voyages in the early fifteenth century. In doing so, they emphasize the earlier manifestations of China's interaction with other civilizations.

To make their point, Sen and Mair divide the book into five chapters. The first chapter sets the stage by describing early Chinese accounts of foreigners. Each of the remaining chapters is devoted to a specific period and focuses on a particular manifestation of Sino-foreign contact characteristic of that time. Chapter 2 addresses the period through the Bronze Age dynasties and emphasizes the Mesopotamian and Central Asian origins of bronze metallurgy and chariot technology. Chapter 3 traces the story of foreign contact by moving forward to the Han period and examining the development of the various trading routes conventionally referred to as the Silk Road that connected the Chinese empire with Western states. Recognizing its cultural impact, they devote the fourth chapter to the arrival and spread of Buddhism in China. The central thread of this chapter is the complicated way that Chinese assumptions of cultural superiority interacted with recognition of India as a pilgrimage site while China gradually emerged as a Buddhist center in its own right. The final substantive chapter focuses on the "age of commerce," taking the story from the mid-eighth to the early fifteenth century. Besides these substantive chapters, Sen and Mair provide useful supplementary material: a chronology that includes highlights of Chinese and world history; a glossary of important terms; and an appendix with translations of three representative texts that contain Chinese views of different cultural regions (an excerpt dealing with the Xiongnu from the *Shiji*, a passage from Faxian's record of his pilgrimage to India, and a description of Mecca by a Chinese Muslim who accompanied Zheng on his voyages). For its length, the book also contains a significant number of illustrations, including maps and photographs of representative material objects.

Both authors have published important research examining various aspects of China's international connections. Mair is well known for his work on South and Central Asian cultural influences on Chinese literature as well as his more recent publications on the ethnography of prehistoric and Bronze Age China. Sen, for his part, has published on the Sino-Indian relationship in the context of the spread of Buddhism. It is not surprising, given the authors' expertise, that this book is very effective at providing a decentered vision of Chinese history. However, its brevity, which on first pass, makes the book eminently accessible, also creates a problem.

The decision to move from prehistory to the fifteenth century has the great advantage of allowing the authors to address a wide variety of international connections and demonstrate that the dialectical relationship between indigenous and external influences was more the rule than the exception. The dynamic included technology transfer, religious influence, and commercial relations over the course of approximately 3,500 years. However, the long span of time on which the authors draw to develop the larger argument also imposes a heavy burden in summarizing the historical narrative to connect the examples. Complex events are necessarily compressed to

the point that a reader without prior knowledge could have trouble making sense of the story. One example is the account of the development of neo-Confucianism. In the space of a single, short paragraph of four sentences, the text moves from a characterization of Zhu Xi's philosophy to Wang Yangming's critique and then to the orthodox criticism of Wang as a "crypto-Buddhist" (pp. 64-65). Regardless of one's position on how to interpret the Zhu-Wang debate, it is hard to imagine an inexperienced reader understanding what was going on. In some cases, the truncation has the potential to mislead as in the account of the Daoist-inspired rebellions at the end of the Eastern Han period, where the authors distinguish between three Daoist movements: Great Peace Daoism, Heavenly Masters Daoism, and the Yellow Turban Rebellion. While a knowledgeable reader will understand the relationships (both actual and conceptual) between these, the brief summary might suggest to the newcomer that the three were much more distinct than they were. The same problem appears in the accounts of other moments of pre-fifteenth-century history.

Traditional China in Asian and World History is part of the Key Issues in Asian Studies series, which has as its goal the production of introductory texts on "broad subjects" suitable for use in "survey courses" (p. vi). The book's focus on China's place in a wider world certainly qualifies as a pressing topic. The tension between the value of the text's argument and the necessary truncating of the narrative to fit the short format, however, raises the question of the most useful way to integrate the work into a classroom setting. Unless one's lectures constitute a detailed narrative of early Chinese history, I do not see this as a realistic substitute for a course's survey textbook. Of course, the ground rules of the series create the problem. The ambition to cover broad topics in a very short format risks sacrificing comprehensibility. Nevertheless, I do think that the work could serve as a text for discussion if assigned toward the end of a survey course on early Chinese history. In that context, its argument emphasizing China's place as an important node in a larger global web might serve as a launching point for a conversation about historians' choices in framing a national history. Coming at the end of a survey course, students would presumably be better placed to appreciate the questions that the authors raise.

If the text is used in this way, instructors should take note of some technical issues with the book. Teachers can address these with supplementary materials, but the publisher should deal with them when the volume goes to a second edition. First, despite the authors' admirable desire to provide illustrations, the production undermines this inclusion, especially when it comes to maps. Many of the maps are reproduced in gray at a reduced size that makes it impossible to read them without a magnifying glass. Second, the noting of sources is a little erratic. While the main noting convention, in which references to other scholarship appear in parenthetical notes and explanatory comments appear in endnotes, seems perfectly reasonable, decisions of whether to provide source notes in specific cases strike me as a bit arbitrary. This is especially the case when surrounding language in the text suggests that there is a specific reference in mind, as in the following example referring to a shift of government policy away from active overseas engagement after Zheng's voyages: "Some scholars have suggested that this change in the Ming court's foreign policy resulted in the seclusion and decline of Chinese civilization" (p. 77). Clearly, the authors have some specific scholars in mind since this is, after all, a relatively uncommon view. Why these sources are not identified, while sources for other assertions are, remains unclear.

Sen and Mair have undertaken the worthy goal of transposing a growing body of scholarship that emphasizes China's continuous role as part of a larger global network into the accessible format of the short survey. The main question is how best to integrate their vision into a course curriculum. My suggestion is that it serves best as an assertion of an important interpretive position rather than as the backbone of a syllabus.

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Citation: Anthony DeBlasi. Review of Sen, Tansen; Mair, Victor H., *Traditional China in Asian and World History*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. May, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36499

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