

REVIEW ARTICLE

OCEAN AND STEPPE: EARLY MODERN WORLD EMPIRES

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J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World. Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), xxi + 546 pp., ISBN 0 300 11431 1.

Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West. The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), xxi + 725 pp., ISBN 0 674 01648 x.

Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field. Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), xv + 239 pp., ISBN 0 801 44209 5.

Maria Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition. Turko-Persian Politics and Acculturation in Medieval Iran*. Brill's Inner Asian Library, no. 19 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), xvi + 424 pp., ISBN 9 004 16031 0.

Also discussed in this review:

Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier. The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2002), xii + 290 pp., ISBN 0 253 33989 8.

Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History. Concepts and Contours* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), ix + 149 pp., ISBN 0 674 01688 2.

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Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen F. Siu, and Donald S. Sutton (eds.), *Empire at the Margins. Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2006), x + 378 pp., ISBN 0 520 23015 9.

In the later seventeenth-century, the cultured elite of Mexico decorated their homes with painted folding screens on the Japanese model, obtained via intermediaries in the Philippines through the Spanish trade (Elliott, 246). By the 1570s, silver from Spanish Peru had already reached China's ports in the southeast. Re-purposed and transferred across the breadth of the empire, it was used to pay labourers building the Great Wall on China's northwest frontier. But it also led to inflation that caused the crash of the innovative Chinese paper currency, and the ensuing social disruptions helped usher in the new Manchu dynasty of the Qing.¹ The early modern era, when the world grew larger through Europe's voyages of discovery, was also the era when the world grew smaller, girded by the interdependent trade routes in fashions, frivolities, luxuries, and human lives that now circled the globe.

Over the last decade, energized by the momentum of current scholarly interests in topics such as slavery, cultural difference, transnational and supra-European history, the mutual gravitational attraction of a multitude of specialists has pulled the field of Atlantic history into a weighty mass, and a shared enthusiasm for comparative history has jolted it vibrantly to life.² Now J. H. Elliott of Oxford University strides magisterially into this universe, undertaking the gargantuan task of comparing the British and Spanish empires in the New World across three and a half centuries. Advancing from the East, with an equally ambitious vision and confident mastery, comes Peter Perdue of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (and, as of 2008, Yale University) to tell the story of Chinese (and, as a foil, Russian) imperial expansion to fill half a continent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Both books have met with wide praise, and have fulfilled scholarly programmes without rival; even a cursory overview of their merits and

¹ Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (2nd edition; New York, 1999) 20.

² Bernard Bailyn's article, "The Idea of Atlantic History," published in *Atlantic History. Concept and Contours* gives a concise bibliography of the published traces of the emergence of the field and its appearance as a topic of discussion at conferences and in journals in Europe (in Germany, the Netherlands, France in 1999) and the United States (at the American Historical Association annual meeting in 2000). An essay by Bailyn by the same name was published in *Itinerario* vol. 20, no 1 (1996), 19-44.

accomplishments would be lengthy. The purpose of this review, therefore, is selective and somewhat tendentious. Among the vast accumulations of evidence and sources, and the complexity of powerful yet subtle arguments constructed by these two landmark works, this review will focus on one question: do these—can these—two stories of world-dominant early modern empires share common conceptual ground? As Victor Enthoven sought in a recent *JEMH* review article to tighten the focus of Atlantic history by looking at recent scholarship on the Dutch experience,³ this review weighs—both optimistically and then more soberly—the opposite proposition: comparison of early modern empire on the global scale.

WORLD EMPIRES IN THE ATLANTIC

J. H. Elliott's immense comparative project across several continents, an ocean, and three centuries, is forbidding to contemplate; for the reader who feels already anxiously at sea upon beginning the 500-page odyssey (either because he knows how immense the background literature is, or has no idea), Elliott begins with a reassuring assertion: "Differences of creed and of national origin paled before the universality of experience that brought emigrants three thousand miles or more from their European homelands to a new and strange world on the farther shores of the Atlantic. Fear and relief, apprehension and hope, were sentiments that knew no cultural boundaries" (xiii). He discusses the motives that brought the Spanish to Mexico and South America and methods by which they established control; he compares these with the British in North America more than a century later.

He finds, for example, that both faced doubts about their moral right to seize the land and war with its people. "The first objection" according to the English settler Robert Gray in 1609, "is, by what right or warrant we can enter into the lands of these savages, take away their rightful inheritance from them, and plant ourselves in their places, being unwronged or unprovoked by them" (quoted in Elliott, 11). Both Spain and England, of course, came up with justifications to overcome these doubts, and for both Catholics and Puritans, that justification was founded in religion. Both could (and did) call on precedents and experiences when the realm had expanded on its own borders: Grenada and Ireland.

³ Victor Enthoven, "Dutch Atlantic History," *JEMH* 10:3 (2006), 221-30.

The project of empire, therefore, was clearly not confined to transatlantic ventures in new worlds among wholly unknown “savages”—a point of comparison important to remember when we move on to considerations of China and Russia.

Very early in their experience in the Americas the Spanish set the framework of what, for historians, is the “archetypal colonial regime” of government, economy, and culture, or more specifically, “the establishment of a seat of government and of rule over the indigenous population; the induction of that population into the working methods of a European-style economy, producing European-style commodities; and the acceptance on behalf of the colonizing power of a civilizing mission, which was to include the wearing of European clothes and the adoption of Christianity” (Elliott, 18-19). The following chapters address each of those aspects of colonization, and their variants in the British colonies, up to the rebellions that began at the end of the eighteenth century. “In both instances,” Elliott writes, “what seemed to colonial elites like the realignment of a disturbed balance in the name of justice and equity appeared to the metropolitan centre to be a demand at pistol point for unacceptable change” (363). The British colonies succeeded in establishing independence (just barely) because they had outside help; the Spanish colonies did not.

What sets Elliott’s book apart from others is not only its deep analysis of colonial history across both North and South America, but also its close attention to—and clear-eyed dissection of—dearly-held myths of colonial history (the inspiring successes of the Puritans, the inexorable decline of Spain; commerce vs. conquest), placing the British colonies not at the center of the story, but as just one of many sites of colonial civilization whose future, in 1600 or 1700, looked rather discouraging. Also extraordinary is Elliott’s combination of political, economic, cultural and intellectual history. In innumerable illustrations, Elliott both fulfils and makes his own Bernard Bailyn’s description of the Atlantic world as “a distinctive regional identity, bearing the indelible imprints of both the settlement era—violent instability, cultural conflict and alienation, racism, and brutal economic dynamism—and the ideals of the later years—self-government, freedom from arbitrary power, and a sense that the world lies open for the most exalted aspirations” (Bailyn, 111).

THE OTHER WORLD EMPIRE: CHINA IN INNER ASIA⁴

The story of China's advance as an empire in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries is less familiar, and Perdue's book squarely refutes the most widely held view, of Chinese isolationism. It was under the Ming dynasty in the fifteenth century that China built massive ships, manned by soldiers, diplomats, and merchants, and sailed south to the Indian Ocean. The suppression of these ventures, and their erasure by official Chinese imperial historians from court records, has been seen as China turning its back on the world at just the time when Europe was beginning its sea ventures in earnest. By emphasizing sea-based empires, historians (both in the western tradition and the Chinese) have depicted a thriving Europe, future ruler of the world, propelled by an admirable curiosity, building its economic might and displaying its military strength across great oceans, while China stagnated for the next two centuries in self-satisfied and haughty ignorance behind its Great Wall (Perdue, 506-511). Not so. For under the Qing in the seventeenth century, China undertook an imperial expansion by land that doubled the size of its empire, gave China many of the boundaries it retains today, and transformed a continent. At its greatest extent, the Qing empire ruled a population of 300 million and encompassed 11 million square kilometers, larger than all of Europe and ten times larger than any contemporary European state except Russia (Perdue, 524).

Qing rule over China began in 1644, when the invading Manchus from the northeast frontier bribed a border captain to let them through the Great Wall, captured Beijing and established their own dynasty, replacing the Ming rulers (native Han Chinese, who had themselves, in 1368, replaced the Yuan dynasty established by invading Mongols in 1271). By 1662, the Qing had established control over all central China, eliminating the last of the Ming loyalists. Under the Qing, China turned

⁴ A short note on terminology in is order: "Inner Asia" is used by specialists of east or south Asia. It most often refers to that part of the steppe closer to China—Inner Mongolia (now within Chinese borders), Outer Mongolia (now the state of Mongolia), and the provinces of western China and those directly bordering them. "Central Asia" also refers to the central Eurasian steppe, but is more often used by specialists in Russia or the Soviet Union. The terms therefore refer roughly to the eastern or western regions of the central Eurasian steppe between the Caspian Sea and Manchuria. In this essay, I use the terms most closely associated with their imperial sphere of influence, though both terms have unavoidably indistinct borders.

away from the sea but expanded the borders of the Empire by land to the west, south and especially the northwest.⁵

The Great Wall itself is not a bad place to begin with misconceptions. As it is most famous—a stone fortification stretching hundreds of miles⁶—the Great Wall was not built until more than two centuries after the invading Mongols had swept down from the north and conquered China. As it currently stands, it is not a border fortification, for it runs just north of Beijing, deep inside the boundaries of modern China. The Ming dynasty built much of the Great Wall; the Qing dynasty expanded the country far beyond it. Their primary adversary for much of this territorial advance was the empire or steppe federation of the Zunghar Mongols—the successors to the great Mongol empire on the eastern Mongolian steppe, and a polity and people that have been so obliterated by modern history that they appear almost as a cipher.

Perdue's project is not only to make clear and available the history of China's imperial defeat of the steppe empires and its annexation of extensive territories beyond its borders, but also quite directly to contrast this history with imperial expansion in the Americas. Just as the Spanish and English were competing in the New World (with the Spanish the early victors, and with vastly greater wealth and imperial apparatus), China and Russia competed for empire on the steppe, China in the role of the imperial front-runner, and Russia as the striving up-and-comer. Perdue not only synthesizes a vast literature in many languages (Chinese, Manchu, Japanese, and Russian), but also recasts it in order to consider paradigm-defining questions with a broad reach. He also tempts us to consider an underlying meta-historiographical project about disciplinary boundaries of fields and expertise by quoting Fernand Braudel: "The question of boundaries is the first to be encountered; from it all others flow. To draw a boundary around anything is to define, analyse, and reconstruct it, in this case select, indeed adopt, a philosophy of history" (quoted in Perdue, 41).

⁵ In the interests of disambiguation, especially for those familiar with Chinese historiography, it ought to be noted that a major historical survey of Qing China, *The Manchu Way. The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, 2001) has been written by Mark C. Elliott, who shares a surname with the author of one the books here under review. References in this review refer to J. H. Elliott, except where specified otherwise.

⁶ Earthen walls as defensive borders on the north of China have a history centuries old.

BETWEEN EUROPE AND CHINA: RUSSIA ON THE WESTERN STEPPE

Perdue effectively explains how the steppe acted as one social-political ecosystem that was being quickly eroded and conquered not only in the east by the Chinese empire but also in the west. Several recent works by Russian specialists help to fill out the story, addressing colonial expansion into the western Eurasian steppe from Europe: Willard Sunderland's *Taming the Wild Field. Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (2004) and Michael Khodarkovsky's *Russia's Steppe Frontier* (2002).⁷

The relation of the Russian state with the steppe and its societies is not a neglected topic; it has been a subject of fulsome interest for more than a century, trumpeted as a proud achievement of the victory of civilization over savagery. The great nineteenth-century Russian historian V. O. Kliuchevsky was not shy to claim that colonization was “*the basic fact of Russian history*”—and yet at the same time he conceived that Russia had done no more than claim its own: Russia is “*a country that colonizes itself.*” (Kliuchevsky, in lectures published in 1904; quoted in Sunderland, 209.) In the eyes of its rulers, the Russian state had an “*affirmed right and duty to expand [its] boundaries*” (Khodarkovsky, 3). And expand them they did—right up until they met the advancing Chinese outposts. The resulting border that was established between Russia and China with the treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689 split the 5,900 mile distance between Moscow and Beijing at the Argun River, to the east of Lake Baikal. From that point on, in the eyes of the imperial centers, there was no longer any unclaimed territory.⁸

Moscow's rulers in the fifteenth and sixteenth century both understood and respected (even adopted) political and social institutions of the Turkic nomads; their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century successors among the Russian elite did not. In the sixteenth century the steppe

⁷ A third recent book impressively undertakes to compare the Russian empire, Ottoman empire, and the British in India: Dominic Lieven, *Empire. The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (New Haven, 2002). Its scope is primarily the nineteenth century. The early modern era in India was the time of the Mughals (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), heirs to conquering Mongols, and thus roughly corresponding to the Yuan and Qing dynasties in China. Lieven's introduction includes a helpful discussion of the history of “*empire*” as a concept.

⁸ It is interesting to note that the negotiations for the treaty were carried on in Latin, at the insistence of Jesuits from China who elbowed their way in by insisting that Mongolian, the common language most accessible and familiar to the Russian and Qing envoys, was unsuitable. The stone border marker set up as a result included inscriptions in Russian, Chinese, Manchu, Mongol, and Latin—half a world away from anyone who could read or understand the tongue of the ancient Roman empire (Perdue, 161-170).

was, for the Russians, a land of wealth and opportunity, culturally advanced, filled with powerful armies and skilled pastoralists. By the late eighteenth century, as the Russian elite adopted French Enlightenment pretensions and European manners, the steppe was transformed in their eyes to an empty wasteland of barbarism, but also a threat: “a void. . . an alien and empty frontier that required colonization, both as a matter of state security and for effective governance.” (Sunderland, 53.)

What is new about these books is placing Russian expansion specifically within the framework of empire and colonialism. When the eighteenth-century elite reframed the steppe as empty—of settlements, people, and civilization—imperial expansion into the steppe was seen in terms of settlement of Russia’s ever expanding and restless population into unclaimed territory. Both the commoners and the military of the previous century knew well that the grasslands were neither empty nor unclaimed. The steppe had to be conquered through continual military investment in the seventeenth century, and the indigenous peoples driven out through sustained and costly effort, as discussed in Carol Belkin Stevens’ new book, *Russia’s Wars of Emergence* (New York, 2007).

Thus, while both contemporaries living in, and modern scholars writing about, the Atlantic colonies had no trouble recognizing that the colonies were conquests by distant European powers, modern scholars of Russia, until very recently, have avoided thinking of Russia’s expansion on the steppe as colonialism and empire-building. Like the Chinese, as Perdue points out,⁹ Russians have seen territorial expansion as a fulfillment of the nation, re-unification of its lands, and the pursuit of its natural and justified borders. Both Perdue and Sunderland, therefore, draw parallels in mindsets (not just in ecology and geography) between imperial conquests of the steppe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the American expansion into the Great Plains in the nineteenth century, and Khodarkovsky argues that “Russia was no less a colonial empire than any of the other Western European powers, even though Russia’s colonial possessions lay not overseas, but within its ever-expanding contiguous boundaries” (6).

What Elliott, Perdue, Khodarkovsky, and Sunderland have in common is a synthetic view that places military-territorial expansion and

⁹ “Use of the term ‘unification’ (*tongyi*), never ‘conquest’ (*zhengfu*), is de rigueur among Chinese historians” (Perdue, 510)—a situation that historians of early modern Russia will find very familiar.

government within a context of economic relations, social history, and intellectual history. They all persuasively show that it was not obvious that the centre had to expand; nor was it a straightforward land grab. Territorial expansion was accompanied by an attempt to categorize the subject peoples and justify the conquest—categories and justifications that have now persisted for centuries. Elliott and Perdue are especially strong in treating the colonial arena as an interdependent whole of roiling, competing interests, where actions or events at one geographic extreme could have repercussions across half a world. Another key approach that the works of Perdue, Sunderland, and Khodarkovsky share is their efforts to speak to a large American and European historiographical tradition by making judicious and explicit comparisons with other studies of contemporaneous empires.

Perdue, for example, draws in not only the United States' absorption of the western frontier but also Fernand Braudel's Mediterranean. Sunderland makes clear that when he is speaking about the colonization of the southern steppe he is keeping in mind studies of the conquest and colonization of Latin America. The comparisons these authors make, though brief, are never facile, as, for example, here: "the imperial agents of St. Petersburg . . . claimed the entire region in the name of "science" [i.e., discovery], "utility," European-style colonialism, and the "Russian way," but they never declared or treated the steppe as a clear-cut colony and for a long time preferred foreign to Russian colonists." As Sunderland points out, though some of the ecological and social effects of Russia's conquest and settlement of the steppe frontier were "comparable to the consequences of imperialism in European settler colonies . . . the migrants' arrival on the Russian plains did not give rise to a [European colonial-style] 'settler society'" (Sunderland, 4).

These authors are also well aware of what makes the steppe so different from the New World. The steppe was not only geographically contiguous, it was also much easier to reach than the transoceanic lands of the Americas. Though likened to an inland sea, one traveled to the steppe by camel or horseback (or, if you were a runaway peasant, on foot) rather than by ship. And, unlike the ocean itself, the steppe was full of people who were not only already well-known to their would-be colonizers and conquerors, but also, in the case of both Russia and China (and Persia and India) had previously conquered and ruled *them*. Europe had never been conquered by the Inca, or paid tribute to the Aztecs. For the Russians (and the Ottomans, whom we cannot discuss here, for lack of space), the idea of ruling the steppe was one that

they inherited from the successful empires that had previously ruled over them.

To apply a paradigm familiar from Atlantic history, China was an empire of conquest, and Russia more like an empire of commerce. Not only did the tsar grant vast powers to the Stroganov family and other entrepreneurs who undertook to explore and exploit the riches of Eurasia, but it was trade—specifically, the rich fur trade with China—that drew the Russians east in the first place (Perdue, 164-165). But free enterprise and local autonomy in Siberia did not sow the seeds of democracy. Nor are there signs—at least, not discovered so far—that the Russian frontier in the wild east bred a rugged individualism, entrepreneurial spirit, and defense of individual liberty, as Frederick Jackson Turner famously argued for the American West. This comparison is, of course, superficial; nevertheless, it serves to remind us of what is unique about the American experience, and what is not.¹⁰

The British and Spanish empires in the Americas and the Russian and Chinese empires on the steppe could be profitably compared on a score of questions. To do so violates Elliott's sage caution that, "a comparison of the history and culture of large and complicated political organisms that culminates in a series of sharp dichotomies is unlikely to do justice to the complexities of the past" (xvi). Nevertheless, expanding the comparative field to four empires may help escape the sharp binaries that Elliott cautioned against, and reviewing these studies together suggests many intriguing (and challenging) contrasts and comparisons: What happened to the native populations and cultures? Were they assimilated, eliminated, or accommodated? Did the imperial government encourage, facilitate, or assume settlement and immigration (British, and Russian, yes; Chinese and Spanish, less so) or simply rule from afar? What was the imperial government like in colonial locales? (Spanish, extensively organized and bureaucratic, but tending to corruption; British, self-empowered, unruly, locally-organized; Russian, little government at all.) What were the governments' taxation policies and strategies for

¹⁰ This begs the parallelisms of China with Spain and Russia with England—a comparison sure to raise eyebrows at least among those who know Russian history, and know that sixteenth-century English explorer-merchants called the Russians a "rude and barbarous kingdom." To further undermine the much-used dichotomy, the Spanish empire was not devoid of commerce, and neither was the Chinese. Elliott begins his study by noting the commercial impetus and entrepreneurial drive of the Spanish explorers (21, 25), and Hernan Cortes in particular, and Perdue describes how the Qing turned to conquest when Ming policies to support commerce with the nomads finally collapsed after centuries of persistent efforts (Perdue, 68-72).

wealth extraction? (What role did plunder, tribute, and trade, in addition to taxes, play?) Did the imperial administration realize the costs of creating the empire, and have accurate methods to determine if imperial investments were profitable? In the context of the gunpowder revolution, how important were outright military engagements and coercion in establishing control? (Were the Chinese cannons on camel-back more than symbolic instruments of force?) How important were missionaries as agents of the imperial culture? (Spanish, very important; British, present but not very important; Russian and Chinese, not an issue at all). How does imperial expansion fit within questions of early modern state-building, of autocracy, “oriental despotism,” imperial monarchy, and the bureaucratic state? Or within the context of nascent definitions of national identity? What were the motives for expansion? What justified the cost and drove the effort?

While volumes could be written on any of these topics (one could envision an extensive series titled “Early Modern Empire and X,” with numerous candidates to fill in the blank),¹¹ this review shall undertake a brief overview of just one thematic cluster that is undeniably central to historians familiar with Atlantic history: slavery, race, and conceptions of civilization and barbarism.

SLAVERY, RACE, CIVILIZATION

Slavery and the forced labour of exiled Africans has been a central concern of Atlantic history. It is a hub of intersecting social, economic, and intellectual history, and the reverse side of the story of the catastrophic demographic collapse of the native populations.¹² Slavery on the western steppe was a phenomenon dating back to antiquity and flourished under the Ottoman Empire. Ever since the Slavic tribes entered Eastern Europe in the early middle ages, they were raided by the more “civilized” societies to the south (according to the Oxford English Dictionary,

¹¹ Although it does not deal with empire per se, the collection of essays, *Religion and the Early Modern State. Views from China, Russia, and the West* (Cambridge and New York, 2004), is already in this vein.

¹² Interestingly, the steppe nomads also suffered very high mortality rates from smallpox. Although they were indigenous to the continent where the pathogen arose, and despite the fact that the Mongols have been credited (or blamed) with bringing bubonic plague across central Asia to the Black Sea coast, and from there to Europe, the steppe nomads in fact were sufficiently isolated that they had not been exposed to epidemics such as smallpox. Perdue, 45-48.

the etymological relationship between the words “Slav” and “slave” dates at least to the 9th century). But the way slavery worked was very different, and ought to provoke questions about the social, economic, and cultural role of bonded outsiders. For Eurasia, slavery was not a part of empire-building or clash of cultures per se. Ottoman slavery in the early modern era was a slavery not of labourers but of status symbols and trusted servants. As described by the distinguished American historian William McNeill, “Turkish slavery did not in the least resemble the slavery Europeans were simultaneously imposing upon plantation field workers in the New World . . . Slaves in Ottoman society . . . were primarily personal servants and bodyguards. Slave women also regularly played the role of concubine, and mothered the heirs of the Turkish ruling class. The sultan himself was the son of a slave mother.”¹³ For the Chinese and Russian empires, the conquered peoples became subjects, not slaves; that is why settling them was critical to the project of conquest and government. As nomads, they were unsuitable subjects because they could not be regulated or taxed. If they were captured and deported as slave labourers, they could have been profitable, and the land would be empty of rival claimants. But the Russian and Chinese imperial governments did not want deported slaves; they wanted productive peasant farmers. Serfs had few rights, but the imperial administrations still understood the difference between subjects and slaves and chose to implement a political economy based on the former, rather than the latter. For the expanding empires of Eurasia, slavery was a known option; it was resorted to de facto only in exceptional circumstances.

Although slavery existed for centuries in the eastern Mediterranean and Inner Asia, slavery there became less important, and less harsh, at exactly the same moment that it was becoming more important and more harsh in the Atlantic world. Four comparative empires give us a spectrum of the increasingly powerful state’s relation to its population: slaves, serfs, subjects, and citizens. While the home populations of western Europe were moving toward becoming citizens, and not merely subjects, in their colonies the European states upheld slavery; in both China and Russia (both later branded as “Oriental despotisms”), there were no citizens, but natives and newly-conquered colonial populations alike were serfs and subjects. Sunderland remind us, “Indeed, until the end of the tsarist era (and beyond) the state displayed the same ‘colonial’ paternalism toward its own Russian commoners that it displayed toward its officially

¹³ William McNeill, *Europe’s Steppe Frontier, 1500-1800* (Chicago, 1964), 27.

colonized non-Russian ‘aliens,’ some of whom [like the Germans sent to the Kazakh steppes] themselves doubled as colonizers” (Sunderland, 4).

For Europeans in the Americas, the encounter with Africans and Native Americans heightened (or created) sensitivities to racial boundaries, and led to efforts to classify and contain people within these boundaries. In Iberian America, mixing of the populations was very common, but so was classification. Elliott writes, “this was a creole-dominated culture” (247), with a proud sense of place and entitlement, but also one that created names and categories for many grades of mixed heritage. For example, “From a Spaniard and Indian is born a *mestizo* . . . from a Spaniard and a *mestiza* is born a *castizo* . . . from an Indian and a *mestiza* is born a *coyote*.”¹⁴ Other terms for the *castas* (racial groups) used in New Spain included *mulatos* (children of creole and African parents) and *zambos* (children with Indian and African parentage) (170). As orderly as this system might have appeared, the children in the next generation, naturally, did not inherit their parents’ *casta*. Mixing and classification were both linked and in tension—the paradox of Spanish American systems of elaborate category-naming was that they flourished just when people in the colonies were becoming too thoroughly mixed to fit into any of the categories.¹⁵

For the vast Eurasian steppe, however, it is not clear that either of the categories “creole” or even “race” make any sense at all. “Race,” “slavery,” “savages,” and “purity of blood” are just some of the entries on this subject in Elliott’s index; none of these appear in Perdue’s. Khodarkovsky reports that the first effort to classify Russia’s newly-conquered subjects was not until 1776, and did not attempt to group them by race, but according to religion, tax status, and ethnic identity. Religion was the first and most important criterion, and of course, religion could be changed through conversion, while race could not. On the whole, the Russian expansion into Asia was not concerned with conversions (unlike the Spanish, who made the spread of Christianity a cornerstone of their empire). For the Russians, there were Christians (i.e., Orthodox), marginal Christians (non-Orthodox, including Catholics and Lutherans), Muslims, and “idol-worshippers.”¹⁶ Inter-marriage between

¹⁴ Elliott, fig. 15 shows four of a series of sixteen paintings that “attempt to devise a taxonomy for the gradations of racial mixture.”

¹⁵ See Susan Deans-Smith, “Creating the Colonial Subject: Casta Paintings, Collectors, and Critics in Eighteenth-Century Mexico and Spain,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 14, no. 2 (2005): 169-204.

¹⁶ It is interesting to contrast the (seemingly) tidy labels of Spanish America with the

Russian princes (even rulers, such as Ivan the Terrible) and daughters of steppe khans (“princesses,” as they were called by the Russians) dated back centuries. There were no problems with (or comments on) the potential racial or ethnic mix, only the religious; the khan’s daughters were baptized as Orthodox upon their arrival in Moscow. (The same was also true for the German princess Sophia, of Lutheran parentage, who was baptized in 1744 on her way to becoming Empress Catherine the Great.)

In the Chinese dominions, religion could not adequately draw the line between colonizer and colonized, for Inner Asia was at the crossroads of the major world religions—Islam, Confucianism, Laoism, Buddhism, Christianity and Judaism—and even within central China, there were difficulties in defining “Us” and “Them.”¹⁷ Race, as it was understood (or enforced) in the Americas, and relying particularly on physical characteristics (like skin color), was not a central category in China. At times, as in Russia, religion was a clear qualifier of “Otherness”. According to Mount Holyoke sinologist Jonathan Lipman, “Islam and Christianity, to take two relevant examples, were pernicious doctrines, sufficient to guarantee [in the minds of Chinese law enforcement officials] that their followers would be wicked, divisive, and disorderly.”¹⁸ Sometimes the Manchu imperial administration used five broad linguistic groups to categorize the people under its rule: Chinese, Tibetans, Mongols, Turkistanis, and Manchus. But though most Muslims were Turkic-speaking, some spoke Chinese, so the categories were consistently confused. And underlying all attempts at ethnic categories was a philosophy that even the most barbarian outsider could become civilized by earnest study of the Confucian virtues. In all, Qing imperial bureaucrats “did not work within a single system of categories or vocabulary, nor did they have a unified and consistent system of precedents to guide them.”¹⁹

messy, overlapping categories proposed by Prince Mikhail Shcherbatov for the Russian empire: “1. Russians and all non-Christians who pay the soul [i.e., individual] tax and provide recruits. 2. Russians and non-Christians who pay taxes but do not provide recruits. 3. Christians other than Russian Orthodox. 4. All kinds of Cossacks and other military settlers. 5. Bashkirs and other savage peoples who practice Islam and 6. Kalmyks and other nomadic idol-worshippers.” Khodarkovsky, 188.

¹⁷ The formulation is Jonathan Lipman’s, from his essay “‘A Fierce and Brutal People’: On Islam and Muslims in Qing Law,” in *Empire at the Margins. Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (2006).

¹⁸ Lipman, “‘A Fierce and Brutal People,’” 85.

¹⁹ Lipman, 83.

The early modern Chinese empire posed the problem of categorization by race or ethnic identity particularly acutely, not only because of the Qing methods of colonizing the steppe, but also because of their dynasty itself. The Qing were, potentially, in an uncomfortable position, since they were themselves outsiders (semi-nomadic warriors from the barbaric north). The Chinese elite certainly saw Chinese culture as superior to Mongol culture of the steppe, but this had to coexist with the reality that the Manchu rulers kept a distinct ethnic identity throughout their two and half centuries in power, and in some respects the Manchu warrior elite had more similarities with the steppe Mongols than with the Chinese intelligentsia. Although they adopted Mandarin as their native language, rather than Manchu, the Manchu maintained separate traditions of battle skills as mounted archers, had distinctly Manchu surnames, they were forbidden from taking up non-Manchu occupations to support themselves, and Manchu women did not bind their feet. Culturally, economically, socially, and militarily, they were apart.²⁰

While scholarship on the Americas treats “race” as mainly a social construction, the centrality of that construction is taken as a given. The examples of the Chinese and Russian empires in Eurasia show just how specific and contingent is the central role of “race” in New World colonialism.²¹ Although in the Chinese tradition there were strong convictions about barbarians and civilized people, and barbarian peoples had sometimes been defined by blood descent (though not associated with skin color or physical markers), there was a strong competing tradition defining civilization as something learned: Chinese literary culture and its values deriving from Confucianism. The Yongzheng emperor himself made the argument in 1730 in the text “Record of How Great Righteousness Awakens the Misguided” that “the difference between peoples is defined by their culture, not by their territory or lineage” (Perdue, 472). For the Spanish and English, African slaves in the Americas, as well as the remnants of the Inca and Aztecs could be (in fact, should be) converted to Christianity, and the creole elite of Mexico City could

²⁰ This is the argument made by Pamela Crossley in *Orphan Warriors. Three Manchu Generations and the End of the Qing World* (Princeton, 1990) and Mark C. Elliott in *The Manchu Way. The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China*. A short version of this argument can be found in Mark C. Elliott, “Ethnicity in the Qing Eight Banners,” in *Empire at the Margins. Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China*. The last native speakers of Manchu are thought to have died out in spring, 2007.

²¹ Credit goes to Jeremy Mumford of the University of Michigan for this insight.

achieve all the cultural refinements of their European models; but they never escaped classification by their darker skin.

INNER ASIA FROM THE INSIDE

There is, also, the question of letting the conquered peoples speak for themselves. This poses a genuine problem for the civilizations of the Americas, when so much of the culture was deliberately destroyed.²² But, although the scholarly silence on the societies of Inner Asia might give the impression that they had little history and left few records, this is not really the case. Tamerlane (Timur) did destroy the archives of the Golden Horde when he rampaged across Central Asia in the late fourteenth century. But a rich cultural heritage still remains; what we have been short on is not only physical access to the records and the expertise to read the languages, but also a compelling reason why we (the western scholarly community) should bother with such an laborious affair.

Particular praise is therefore due to Brill's Inner Asian Library, which since its beginning in 2001 has already reached nineteen volumes. Most of these are of interest directly to specialists—or to those undertaking comparative history who are willing to consider, for example, the mind-boggling global trade network that could eventually link the Venetians in the Mediterranean and the Dutch in the Indian Ocean with the oases of Central Asia.²³ But there is no doubt that this field remains incredibly difficult. The *Cambridge History of Inner Asia* (1990), a massive undertaking reaching over five hundred pages, stopped at vol. 1, in the thirteenth century. The latest news is that the seeming death of the series has not, in fact, come to pass; it has recently been revived and vols. 2 and 3 are now in process (and eagerly anticipated). The Cambridge and Brill series, combined with unique research centers at Cambridge and Indiana University, admirably move this project forward in accumulating a mass of published primary sources and scholarly studies. (Though there are many of good quality, there are not yet enough, for

²² In the one American society with a large written corpus (Mesoamerica) there has been a scholarly revolution in recent decades through reading, editing, and translating such texts. Michael Coe, *Beaking the Maya Code* (New York, 1999) and Matthew Restall, "A History of the New Philology and the New Philology in History," *Latin American Research Review* 38, no. 1 (2003): 113-34.

²³ Scott C. Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and its Trade, 1550-1900*. Brill's Inner Asian Library, no. 3 (Leiden, 2002).

example, to rival the number of studies of Atlantic history that went into Elliott's work.) Then we shall hope for a scholar of Elliott's stature and great ambition to undertake a survey that could frame the entire field, and outline for outsiders its major questions.

At the end of his book, Elliott poses the question whether the Spanish legacy, in contrast to the British, determined the decline of Latin America while the United States ascended to unparalleled power in the modern age. More than any other work, Elliott's survey is in a position to answer, and his answer, not surprisingly, is complicated: "A scrutiny of the record of the two imperial powers in the light of contemporary, rather than later, assumptions, attitudes and capabilities suggests that Spain possessed both the advantages and the disadvantages commonly associated with the role of pioneer" (405). This view should ameliorate the rather dismal view of Latin American history that focuses on its "flaws and deficiencies," and casts the history of the one-time colonies as "a chronicle of economic backwardness and political failure" (404). Inner Asia, too, has been seen as backward and in addition, extremely isolated. Given its history up until the eighteenth century, this historical judgment is particularly ironic: "Religious diversity, linguistic pluralism, and cosmopolitanism characterized the oasis cities. More than anything else, it was the conquest of the region by the 'modern' empires of China and Russia that relegated it to backwardness" (Perdue, 10).

The riches of steppe history remain unexploited. For the field as a whole, as Bailyn put it, "there [are] no large unanswered questions . . . There [is] no integration of the themes that exist[], no concept that would give the details some general significance." Bailyn's original description was written in the past tense, describing the state of "Atlantic history" half a century ago.²⁴ Through it, we may see the road ahead—where historiography of steppe empires might take us. A proper synthetic history of the Eurasian steppe would need to escape the current discouraging paradigm about the steppe empires—of former glory of Genghis Khan or Babur now in a decline that we can only lament and dolefully memorialize. The modern era has cast this entire region into shadow, eclipsing world-shaping developments in early modern history: "the modernization paradigm," Perdue writes, "regards Central Eurasia as an especially isolated region, cut off from the major trends of the modern world by physical and cultural barriers. By contrast, in the 'classical' early modern

²⁴ Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, 6.

perspective, it is seen as the 'crossroads' of Eurasia, linked to all the sedentary societies around it through long-standing networks of trade, conquest, and religious and cultural exchange" (45). We should be grateful to a scholar of inner Asia who builds on Perdue's achievement to place history from the forgotten center of the continent into a framework of world (or, admittedly, Euro-centered) history that we know and understand. To expand the readership of such a potential work, we need the outsiders' daring and probing exploration into the established scholarly empire of Atlantic history. In this case, the European-American academics' discussion of their shared ocean is the "old world;" the Indian Ocean and the Eurasian steppe is the New.

No scholar could master the fields of all the early modern empires; but we should look forward to new trade routes of ideas. The exotica of the new worlds may become an essential staple of the old. Happy the scholar who might, in the Russian steppe or Indian Ocean, discover an idea, craft a concept, or bring home booty with the equivalent trading power of silver, maize, or, better yet, chocolate: beneficial, ubiquitous, and delicious to all.