Aside from the normative goals they share in common with other studies in historical inquiry, revisionist works are usually conceived and produced by their authors expressly for the pursuit of a corrective agenda. Jonathan Karam Skaff’s *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580-800* very much conforms to this template. Early on in the introduction of his study of two-plus centuries of interaction between ethnic majority Han Chinese and their various non-Han, largely nomadic neighbors at the very beginning of the Chinese “early modern” period, Skaff makes his dual objectives known. He states the goals of his study to be, first, that of positing an “integrationist” paradigm, one that denies China its customary position as a dominant “culture island” in its dealings with neighboring polities and, second, that of challenging the assumption that cultural exchange (what he frequently calls “sharing”) within greater East Asia occurred almost exclusively within the Sinic or Chinese cultural zone of China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam and nowhere beyond it (6-7). In making both arguments, Skaff makes an often persuasive case for the integrative importance of Inner Asia, for this was the zone that connected the China of that era with South Asia, West Asia (the modern Middle East), and Byzantium.

Appealing to specialists but also to comparativists, Jonathan Skaff makes his case in *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors* principally through nine rich chapters, exclusive of an introduction and a conclusion, that are divided logically into three parts. Part One is comprised of two chapters that are devoted principally to environmental factors (geography, climate, demography, etc.) and to interethnic relations, respectively. In my view, the most interesting section of either of these chapters is found in the second, wherein Skaff discusses the Sui-Tang construction of the “barbarian,” which became an expansive moniker (designated by numerous terms) that incorporated all frontier peoples, including the Turko-Mongols. Skaff, however, correctly notes that one reason for the deficiencies of this construction in describing accurately the culture of the frontier it purported to record is that its authors lacked a rigorously defined sense of their own Chinese (Skaff prefers and justifies “Han”) identity (54).

Part Two consists of three chapters, wherein Skaff discusses successively Turko-Mongol patrimonial patronage relations; sovereign power as a function of interstate competition; and diplomatic ritual. Organizationally as well as topically, these chapters seem to represent the core of the book and through them Skaff delivers much information that confirms that impression. Particularly noteworthy is the discussion offered fleetingly under the final subheading (“Education and Ideological Exchange”) of the fourth chapter. Possibly recognizing that many of his own contemporaries (many of whom being peers who should know better) remain spellbound by stereotypes of the Turko-Mongol peoples that first emerged as early as the sixth century, Skaff deliberately shatters the image of the invariably crude, brutish, and illiterate nomad. Indeed, we learn that education was valued among Turko-Mongol elites for its utilitarian capital as a status enhancement; that, from as early as the seventh century (and thus earlier than is conventionally believed), the Türks employed what was likely a Sogdian-derived, alphabetic writing system; and that the encouragement of literacy
in Chinese among Turko-Mongol youths taken as hostages by the Sui-Tang imperial courts met with a large measure of acceptance and even enthusiasm.

Part Three, which is the final segment of Skaff’s study, incorporates four chapters, all of which deal with one or another aspect of the intricacies of Sui-Tang/Turko-Mongol diplomacy. Chapter 6 is concerned entirely with matters of investiture, and Skaff demonstrates fully that few other elements of Eurasian diplomatic practice, which was essentially defined by the cultivation of patron-client ties, were more commonplace at that time and yet are so little understood today than is this one. Chapter 7 discusses the negotiation of kinship relations, especially as it was evinced through the mores pertaining to political marriages and through the bonding convention of fictive kinship. Chapter 8 details the material culture that was shared in common by the Sui-Tang and the Turko-Mongol empires, and hardly are we surprised to discover that at the very center of this culture stood the horse. Chapter 9, which bears the title “Breaking Bonds,” is definitely the most engaging among these concluding chapters and it is surely the one that perhaps leads readers primarily interested in medieval Inner Asian militarism and warfare to be most expectant. Under consecutive subheadings, Skaff does discuss famine-producing weather events and human foibles as having been deleterious to the conventional functioning of the patron-client bond in relations between the Sui-Tang emperors and Turko-Mongol elites. He also details the often humiliating rituals of severance, which—being premised from the Turkic standpoint on the assumption “that slain enemies, including rebellious clients, became the supernatural possessions of the slayer or members of his family” (283)—represented a kind of trophyism. However, among his severance factors, Skaff never really affords us information on the sorts of hostilities that either induced or led directly to warfare, let alone any mention of the conduct of warfare itself. Skaff makes no secret that his primary passions lie in the diplomatic instead of in the military sphere of Sui-Tang/Turko-Mongol interactions and the erudition he displays in that circumscribed realm is unassailable. Nonetheless, my only substantive criticism of Skaff’s otherwise masterful analysis is that it overemphasizes the efficacy of cooperation and diplomacy in sealing and sustaining Sui-Tang/Turko-Mongol patron-client bonds almost at the total expense of confrontation and conflict. Just as much as concurrence, discord—especially in the forms of threat and coercion—was also an indispensable ingredient in the vital “glue” that drew the Sui-Tang and Turko-Mongol empires together in unavoidable and continuous historical engagement. The Sui-Tang and the Turko-Mongol polities were, to be sure, functionally inseparable but, not unlike feuding brothers, they oftentimes over the centuries clashed in bloody contestations that turned deadly. As it stands, Skaff has dispensed with competition—albeit seldom the mortally cutthroat variety—in hardly more than a chapter (the fourth) and warfare in barely more than a page (18-19).

Nevertheless, the merits and shortcomings of a given book are best assessed on the basis of what the author has aspired to achieve rather than on what he or she has not. Judged strictly on these terms, one struggles to find any great fault with Jonathan Skaff’s accomplishment. Through his Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors, he has endeavored to nullify or at least mitigate the tyranny of a collection of misguided and outdated theories, which—taken as a whole—have either established or reinforced a host of the gravest misconceptions regarding the subject. To his credit, Skaff makes no case for these theories as