REVIEW ARTICLE

OCEAN AND STEPPE: EARLY MODERN WORLD EMPIRES

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Also discussed in this review:


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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

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.