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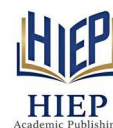
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Inner Asia and China from a World-Historical Perspective: A Review of Cai Weijie's *From Marco Polo to George Macartney: The Eurasian World from the Thirteenth Century Onward*

Sun Rong, Chen Guanzheng

Abstract: Cai Weijie's *From Marco Polo to George Macartney: The Eurasian World from the Thirteenth Century Onward* is an academic collection consisting primarily of book reviews, which systematically introduces cutting-edge scholarship in the field of international Inner Asian historiography over the past three decades. Adopting the “Fourfold Crossing” approach (i.e., cross-regional, cross-chronological, cross-civilizational, and cross-linguistic), this book traces the historical trajectory of Eurasia from the Mongol period onward. Through critical examinations of representative works by scholars such as Peter B. Golden, Sugiyama Masaaki, Timothy May, and Mark C. Elliott, the author engages with core issues including the historical significance of the Mongol Empire, the continuities characterizing the post-Mongol period, the multifaceted nature of the Qing Dynasty as an Inner Asian empire, and methodological critiques of the “Sinicization” paradigm. This book not only serves as a vital portal for Chinese readers to access international Inner Asian studies but also provides a crucial framework of reference for understanding the fundamental question of “What is China”, while demonstrating a model of rational dialogue in addressing academic controversies. Although, as a collection of reviews, it presents certain limitations such as occasional content repetition and relatively limited coverage of Ming history, the volume overall combines scholarly depth with accessibility, offering substantial reference value for researchers in the fields of Inner Asian history, Mongol-Yuan history, Qing Dynasty history, and Eurasian world history.

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Author Biographies: **Sun Rong**, Lecturer, Guangzhou Xinhua University, and Ed.D. candidate, Guangzhou University. Research interests: International Chinese Language Education, Language and Culture. E-mail: nancysun2012@163.com. **Chen Guanzheng** (Corresponding Author), Ph.D., Lecturer, Guangzhou Xinhua University. Research interests: English Language Teaching, Computer-Assisted Language Learning, and Educational Psychology. E-mail: kenchanck@163.com.

标题: 世界史视野下的内亚与中国——评蔡伟杰《从马可波罗到马戛尔尼：十三世纪以降的欧亚世界》

摘要: 蔡伟杰所著《从马可波罗到马戛尔尼：十三世纪以降的欧亚世界》是一部以书评为构成的学术文集，系统性地引介了近三十年来国际内亚史学界的前沿研究成果。该书以“四重跨越”，即“跨地域、跨断代、跨文明、跨语言”为视角，勾勒了自蒙古时代以来欧亚大陆的历史演进脉络。通过评析彼得·高登（Peter B. Golden）、杉山正明、梅天穆（Timothy May）、欧立德（Mark C. Elliott）等学者的代表性著作，作者围绕蒙古帝国的历史定位、后蒙古时代的历史延续性、清朝作为内亚帝国的多元性质，以及“汉化”范式所引发的方法论反思等一系列核心议题展开探讨。该书不仅为中文读者提供了了解国际内亚学研究的重要窗口，也为理解“何为中国”这一根本性问题提供了关键的参照框架，并在处理学术争议时展现出理性对话的典范姿态。尽管作为书评合集，本书存在部分内容重复、对明代历史关注相对有限等可商榷之处，但总体而言，该书兼具学术深度与可读性，对于内亚史、蒙元史、清史以及欧亚世界史领域之研究者具有重要的参考价值。

关键词: 内亚史；蒙古时代；新清史；欧亚世界

作者简介: 孙荣，广州新华学院讲师/广州大学人文学院博士研究生，研究方向：国际中文教育，语言与文化。电邮：nancysun2012@163.com。陈鹤铮（通讯作者），博士，广州新华学院讲师。研究方向：英语语言教学、计算机辅助语言学习及教育心理学。电邮：kenchanck@163.com。

1. Introduction

In contemporary historical research, how to transcend the dual narrative frameworks of “Central Plains-centered” and “Western-centered” and re-understand the relationship between China and the world has become a focus of academic attention. The publication of Cai Weijie’s new book, *From Marco Polo to George Macartney: The Eurasian World from the Thirteenth Century Onward* (Publisher: Guangdong People’s Publishing House, Publication Year: 2025), comes at the right time to provide important intellectual resources for this academic issue. As an academic collection mainly consisting of book reviews, this book not only systematically introduces the cutting-edge achievements of the international Inner Asian historical research community in the past decade or so, but also sketches out the historical picture of the Eurasian continent since

the Mongol era from a cross-regional, cross-period, cross-civilization, and cross-language perspective, demonstrating the author's profound academic foundation and broad global vision.

2. Academic Mission: A Bridge of Knowledge Spanning East and West

The publication of the Traditional Chinese version of “*From Marco Polo to Macartney: Inner Asia and China since the Mongol Era*” in 2020, followed by the release of the Simplified Chinese version in 2025, involved not only revisions to the original content but also the addition of five new works. These enhancements have rendered the book's structure more coherent and its thematic focus more pronounced. The alteration of the subtitle in the Simplified Chinese version to “*The Eurasian World from the Thirteenth Century Onward*” is particularly significant, indicating the author's intent to transcend the somewhat dualistic framework of “Inner Asia and China” and instead emphasize the integrity and interactive dynamics of the Eurasian continent.

Professor Luo Xin of the Department of History at Peking University offers an apt evaluation: “In terms of the author's knowledge preparation, academic vision, and the depth of thought on various topics, it is hard to find a more suitable candidate than Cai Weijie in the Chinese academic circle. Although the collected articles were originally written as book reviews, special topic introductions, and academic reviews, due to the author's own academic conditions, these articles all possess a high professional level, far surpassing general popular science articles and serving as a rare source of consultation for professional researchers.” This statement accurately summarizes the academic value of this book, it is both an introductory guide for general readers and an important source for professional researchers to obtain information on the latest international academic frontiers.

3. Structure and Main Themes: The Internal Logic among the Three Parts

The book is divided into three parts, with a total of twenty-four articles included. The overall structure is clear and the logical hierarchy is rigorous. The First Part, titled “Inland Eurasia, East Asia, Nomads, and the Silk Road in World History”, focuses on defining core concepts and constructing theoretical frameworks; the Second Part, “Pioneers and Legacy of the Mongol Era”, examines the Mongol Empire's role in world history and its profound impact; while the Third Part, “The Post-Mongol Era and Ming-Qing China”, explores the continuation and evolution of Inner Asian historical legacies during the Ming and Qing dynasties following the collapse of the Yuan Dynasty.

3.1 Reconstructing World History from an Inner Asian Perspective

The five articles included in the First Part, although seemingly independent, are all centered around a core issue: how to re-understand and write world history from an Inner Asian perspective. The first article, a review of Peter B. Golden's (2011) *Central Asia in World History*, clearly points out the profound impact of the westward migration of nomadic peoples after the collapse of the Xiongnu Empire on the historical pattern of Eurasia. The subsequent review of Denis Sinor's (2021) edited *Cambridge Early Asian History* systematically

summarizes the academic accumulation of Inner Asian history research before the rise of the Mongols. Notably, when selecting the objects of review, the author also introduced the research results of Japanese scholars such as Lin Junxiong and Sugiyama Masaaki. These studies attempt to transcend the traditional historical perspective that takes settled agricultural civilizations as the standard and instead reconstruct historical narratives from the perspective of the nomadic subjects themselves.

The most notable section in the First Part is the fifth article, titled “Two Interpretations of the Silk Road’s History”. This article presents a comparative review of two works: Liu Xinru’s *The Silk Road in World History* (2010) and James A. Millward’s *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction* (2013). The former argues that the Silk Road declined with the end of the Mongol era, while the latter emphasizes that it remained prosperous despite its ups and downs. This method of comparative reading not only showcases the diversity of academic viewpoints on the same topic, but also reveals the decisive influence of the perspective on historical cognition. From different professional perspectives, one can observe completely different historical pictures. This open academic attitude runs through the entire book and constitutes a significant feature of Cai Weijie’s book review writing.

3.2 Multidimensional Exploration of the Mongolian Era

The Second Part can be regarded as the core of the entire book. It includes eight articles, delving deeply into the historical status of the Mongol Empire from multiple perspectives. The works reviewed cover a wide range: from Sugiyama Masaaki’s macroscopic overview of the historical trends from the An Lushan Rebellion to the Mongolian era, to Gulati (G. D. Gulati) examining the Mongol conquest in Central Asia from an Indian perspective; from the “Genghis Khan Great Exchange” theory proposal by Timothy May, to Okada Hidehiro’s assertion that the Mongol Empire “invented” world history; then from Hans Ulrich Vogel’s re-examination of the academic controversy over whether Marco Polo personally visited China, to Sugiyama Masaaki’s tracing of the long-term historical legacy of the Mongol Empire, all demonstrating the author’s comprehensive grasp of the research field of Mongol Yuan history.

Among the articles in this Part, the one that particularly deserves attention is the eleventh one, “Pearl Earrings from Moghut”, which reviews Thomas Allsen’s (2023) book *The Steppe and the Sea: Pearls in the Mongol Empire*. The author takes the pearl, as a micro-object, as the entry point to examine its symbolic meaning in the political culture of the Mongol Empire and its circulation mechanism as a luxury item across Eurasia. This “looking at the big picture through small details” research approach is highly consistent with the methodological orientation advocated by Cai Weijie, which is to “grasp the macro history through micro-level interactions”. In the book review, the author keenly pointed out that this research still has room for discussion in the gender dimension, such as the connection between pearls and Mongol noblewomen and their role in the marriage dowry system. This criticism not only demonstrates the author’s academic insight but also showcases the constructive nature that a book review should possess as an academic genre.

Regarding the question of whether Marco Polo ever actually visited China, the book also conducts a multi-dimensional discussion. British sinologist Frances Wood published the book *Did Marco Polo Go to*

China? in 1996, raising several doubts: Marco Polo never mentioned customs that should have caught the attention of foreigners, such as foot-binding, tea drinking, and the Great Wall; his name was not found in any Chinese-language documents; and he might have exaggerated his participation in the Siege of Xiangyang (Wood, 1996). Peter Jackson, in his article “Marco Polo and His ‘Travels’”, systematically refuted these doubts and focused on discussing the text nature, writing purpose, content composition, and to what extent it reflects the author’s personal experiences of the *The Travels of Marco Polo* (Jackson, 1998).

And German scholar Hans Ulrich Vogel (2013) provided new evidence from the perspectives of monetary, salt, and tax systems in the history of institutions. The book begins with an introduction that clarifies the structure of the entire work and meticulously reviews the existing literature. Cai Weijie agrees with the mainstream views of Western academia in his book review, namely that Marco Polo did indeed reach China. At the same time, he also points out that more archaeological and documentary evidence is still needed to advance the research on this issue.

3.3 Research on the Internal and External Policies of the Ming and Qing Dynasties

The nine articles included in the Third Part focus on the Ming and Qing China in the post-Mongol era, covering from the evolution process described by Kanda Nobuo et al. in *The Splendor of the Forbidden City: A Complete History of the Ming and Qing Dynasties* from “from a small China to a large China”, to the research by Millward et al. (2004) that examines the characteristics of the Qing Dynasty in Inner Asia through the example of Chengde; from the in-depth analysis of the Eight Banners System and Manchu Identity (Elliott, 2001), to the re-examination of the issue of Manchu Sinicization (Huang, 2011), and then extending to the investigation of the transformation of the information channels and governance mechanisms of the Qing Dynasty (Mosca, 2013). This series of book reviews jointly focus on a core topic: how to understand the Qing Dynasty as a non-Han ethnic ruling empire in the Inner Asian region, and the internal and external policies it formulated.

Among them, the book review of Mark C. Elliott (2014) *Biography of Emperor Qianlong* provides us with another perspective for examining the relationship between Emperor Qianlong and the Macartney Embassy. As the first biography of Emperor Qianlong in the Western academic circle, this work focuses on exploring the governance advantages and limitations brought about by his identity background and personal experiences. While affirming his achievements in governance, it also offers sympathetic understanding for his mistakes. The book points out that Emperor Qianlong actually knew the geographical situation of the West and had some understanding of European countries such as France, Russia, and their internal forces. His indifferent attitude towards the Macartney Embassy was actually intentional; the reason being that at that time, the Qing Dynasty was in a state of peace and prosperity, and the emperor was old and lacked energy, as well as lacking the urgent need to deeply understand the West. Ultimately, this biography summarizes the five major contradictions faced during Emperor Qianlong’s reign: population growth and environmental pressure, corruption of the bureaucratic system, the Manchu tendency in governance, the destruction of some cultural traditions, and the sacrifice of human lives and cultural diversity in some degree to maintain national unity.

Furthermore, Cai Weijie, in his dual capacity as a researcher and an observer, conducted a comparative analysis based on multiple Qing history works and related writings about Emperor Qianlong. He then explored the development of “New Qing History” in North America and the academic debates it triggered in the Chinese context. He pointed out that New Qing History attempts to correct the previous stereotype of the Qing Dynasty as a closed and backward feudal state, instead placing it on an equal footing with the European and Asian empires for examination. This approach forms a certain tension with the mainstream historical views in modern China. Regarding the acceptance of such historical interpretations in the academic community in China, the author advocates for “continuous observation and cautious thinking”. This rational attitude is particularly valuable in the midst of the noisy academic disputes.

4. The Academic Value of the Core Arguments

Upon reviewing the entire book, we can observe several interrelated core arguments put forward by Cai Weijie. These arguments not only summarize the works being evaluated but also constitute the author’s own academic stance.

Firstly, the historical significance of the Mongol Empire as a watershed in world history. Through the evaluation of scholars such as Sugiyama Masaaki and Okada Hidehiro, the author emphasizes that the Mongol Empire played a pioneering role in integrating the Eurasian continent. The two major historical narrative traditions (the Western tradition represented by Herodotus and the Eastern tradition represented by Sima Qian) achieved a true integration for the first time through the “grassland route”. This attempt to reclassify world history from a central Eurasian perspective has the potential to challenge existing paradigms.

Secondly, the continuity of history in the post-Mongol era. After the collapse of the Mongol Empire, its political legacy did not dissipate but was inherited by subsequent regimes. In Central Asia, the Timurid Empire and its successors, the Mughal Empire, continued the line of the Chagatai Khanate; in Eastern Europe, after the rise of the Grand Duchy of Moscow, Ivan IV claimed to be a successor of the Genghis Khan family and established the Russian Empire; in East Asia, the Qing Dynasty not only inherited the legitimacy of the Northern Yuan Dynasty but also incorporated the governance experience of the Mongol Empire into its own ruling practices. This perspective of continuity breaks the traditional narrative based on the rise and fall of dynasties and reveals a deeper historical structure.

Thirdly, the multi-faceted nature of the Qing Dynasty as an Inner Asian empire. By reviewing the new research on Qing history, the author reveals the complex nature of Qing rule: the emperor exhibited different personas in different contexts—acting as a Confucian sage toward the Han people, as the successor to Genghis Khan toward the Mongols, and as a revered monk toward Tibetan Buddhist followers. Chengde, the Qing Dynasty’s “capital of inland Asia”, featured architecture blending Han, Tibetan, and Mongolian styles; Emperor Qianlong constructed the Confucian Temple to project an image of a sage. These details collectively demonstrate that the secret to the Qing Dynasty’s maintenance of a vast empire lay in its flexible and pluralistic governance strategy.

Fourth, a methodological reflection on the “Sinicization” paradigm. Traditional historiography often explains the reasons for the successful governance of China by non-Han regimes through the concept of “Sinicization”. However, this explanatory framework obscures the multi-dimensional aspects of history. Cai Weijie, by reviewing and evaluating the research of multiple scholars, pointed out that the authority basis of the Qing Dynasty’s rule included both the political legitimacy of Confucianism and a unique ethnic sovereignty, namely the Eight Banners System as a mechanism for ethnic isolation and integration, which, while maintaining the identity of the Manchus, ensured the rule of a minority of Manchus over the majority of Han people. This analysis does not simply deny “Sinicization”, but reveals its complexity and avoids the simplistic binary opposition.

5. The Methodological Implications of the “Four Crossings” Approach

Kong Lingwei (2020) ¹ proposed a “Threefold Crossings” interpretive framework, which is highly enlightening. He believes that the academic dialogue between Mongol Yuan history and Qing history should be based on a cross-regional, cross-chronological, and cross-civilizational perspective. Building upon this foundation, this paper expands the framework into the “Fourfold Crossings”, namely, “cross-regional, cross-chronological, cross-civilizational, and cross-linguistic”, provides an effective approach to understanding the methodological significance of Cai Weijie’s works.

Cross-regional means that the exchanges between the Central Plains and Inner Asia during the Yuan and Qing periods should not only be regarded as part of Chinese history, but also as an integral part of world history. Cai Weijie’s tracing of the four major khanates of the Mongol Empire and their subsequent regimes, as well as his attention to the interaction between Russia, India, the Middle East and the Yuan-Qing dynasties, all reflect this broad regional perspective. Cross-chronological means reflecting on the one-dimensional chronological history writing centered on “the orthodox Chinese heartland”, and focusing on the internal continuity of the diverse cultural communities in Inner Asia. From the Mongol Empire to the post-Mongol era, from the Yuan Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty, history is not a simple succession of dynasties, but encompasses deeper continuity. The sketching of the evolution of “from small China to large China”, the indication of the continuation of the martial spirit in the early Ming Dynasty from the Yuan Dynasty, all demonstrate this cross-chronological thinking. Cross-civilizational means treating the diverse roles of different civilizations on the historical stage equally, avoiding the one-sided emphasis on the superiority of a single civilization. The re-evaluation of nomadic civilizations, the revelation of the bias of “evaluating the history of nomadic peoples based on the standards of settled agricultural civilization”, all reflect this equal view of civilizations. Cross-linguistic, transcending the limitations of a single language and systematically analyzing materials from multilingual sources, including Japanese, Mongolian, English, and

¹ Kong Lingwei (2020, September 16). “Kong Lingwei’s Commentary on ‘From Marco Polo to Macartney’: Threefold Crossings in Mongol Yuan History and Qing History”, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_9187486 (Last visit time: April 25th, 2026)

Indian languages, enables us to achieve a deeper understanding of the complexity and diversity inherent in Inner Asian history. This approach enables a more comprehensive grasp of historical developments and effectively avoids biases and one-sided perceptions stemming from geographical constraints.

6. Conclusion

Marco Polo and George Macartney, two Western envoys to China separated by five centuries, their journeys to China and the historical controversies they sparked serve as two pivotal focal points for understanding the evolution of Eurasian history since the 13th century. The former witnessed the prosperity of exchanges between the east and the west under the rule of the Mongol Empire, while the latter experienced the crises and transformations implied during the heyday of the Qing Dynasty. Cai Weijie's work, titled "From Marco Polo to George Macartney", not only bridges a temporal dimension but also shifts the perspective of observation, guiding readers to re-examine the multifaceted nature of China's history through a holistic global historical lens.

6.1 Academic Significance

First, this book provides Chinese readers with a crucial window into the cutting-edge of international Inner Asian studies. The works reviewed encompass the latest achievements of Japan's "East Asian History" tradition, representative research from the American "New Qing History" school, and significant publications by European scholars, a comprehensive overview that remains rare in domestic academic circles. Second, the book offers a pivotal framework for understanding the fundamental question of "what is China". Chinese civilization manifests rich and diverse images from different cultural perspectives (Zhou, 2025). Through a systematic examination of recent advances in Inner Asian history, Cai Weijie reveals the complex dynamics of the Yuan and Qing dynasties on this issue, these regimes inherited the orthodoxy of the Central Plains while exhibiting characteristics of an Inner Asian empire; they upheld the concept of a "unified empire" yet demonstrated features of a "limited state" in their actual governance. This complexity reminds us that any oversimplified interpretation may obscure the rich layers of historical reality.

Third, the book exemplifies rational dialogue in addressing academic controversies. On contentious issues such as whether Marco Polo visited China, the author maintains the objective stance expected of a researcher, presenting well-grounded theoretical arguments through extensive textual analysis. Such a neutral and cautious scholarly approach is particularly commendable in today's academic landscape.

However, as a collection of book reviews, this work also has aspects that warrant further refinement. Firstly, since the articles were originally published in different media sources, some content is repetitive; although the author apologizes for this in the preface, further consolidation and editing during compilation would make the book's structure more concise. Secondly, some reviews focus primarily on content summaries, while the critical analysis of the works' methodological assumptions and theoretical frameworks could be enhanced. Thirdly, the discussion of Ming dynasty history is relatively limited, failing to fully develop a

coherent narrative spanning the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. These issues should likely be identified as areas for future research.

6.2 Practical Significance

As globalization faces challenges and inter-civilizational dialogue has become increasingly vital, the publication of this book demonstrates that China has never been isolated from the global system. The activities of the Inner Asian nomadic peoples profoundly connected East Asia with the Eurasian continent, and the historical legacy of the Mongol Empire and its subsequent regimes continues to shape the contemporary world order. Understanding such historical connections is not only the academic mission of historians but also a crucial pathway to comprehending our current circumstances.

As the author notes, the Mongol Empire “combined the Eastern and Western historical and cultural traditions through the ‘Path of the Steppes’”, and the Central Eurasian perspective “has the potential to become a paradigm for future world historiography”. Cai Weijie’s work represents a solid effort toward achieving this paradigm. For readers engaged in research on Inner Asian history, Mongol-Yuan history, Qing history, or broader Eurasian history, this work combining academic rigor with readability, undoubtedly holds significant reference value.

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ORCID

Sun Rong ^{ID} <http://orcid.org/0009-0001-6266-5628>

Chen Guanzheng ^{ID} <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-9846-865X>

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