

Michal Biran, Jonathan Brack, and Francesca Fiaschetti, eds. *Along the Silk Roads in Mongol Eurasia: Generals, Merchants, and Intellectuals*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020.

The writers of biographies of Chinese and West Asians of traditional times face considerable hurdles. It is difficult to produce works in Asian history such as Garrett Mattingly's *Catherine of Aragon* or Amy Kelly's *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings* or many European figures. The Asian sources offer details about the public endeavors of prominent individuals but often provide scant information about their lives. Anecdotes that would illuminate flesh and blood characters are frequently inaccessible. For example, sources about emperors and khans perhaps deliberately omit the details of their private lives and instead focus on their roles in government. Too much personal information might reduce these "mighty figures" to human size, instead of their importance as a Son of Heaven or a figure blessed by Tenggeri or the Sky God.

My own experiences in writing biographies of East Asians reveal some of the difficulties. In writing biographies of Khubilai Khan and Rabban Sauma, I found that the Chinese sources were fairly silent on their private lives. Marco Polo and Persian histories provided useful personal details, but inferences from the limited biographical sources were essential and provided a means of understanding Khubilai. Discussion of the two men's times offered an opportunity to design a panorama of the social and economic backgrounds of their society.

This is precisely the value of *Along the Silk Roads in Mongol Eurasia*. The fifteen sketches of gener-

als, merchant, and intellectuals in the book yield insights in the broad panorama of Mongol-ruled China and Central and West Asia. The reader may not emerge with an intimate knowledge of the specific individuals, except for one or two for which there is abundant information. Yet he or she would get information about the territorial scope of the Mongol empire and the numerous groups they encountered, which marks the book's important contribution. The fifteen biographies include Chinese, Mongols, Qipchaqs, Arabs, Europeans, and Iranians. The reader would also learn about the significant roles played by women in Mongol-ruled Asia.

Three of the sketches concern women who gained considerable power in their respective domains.

The lack of biographies of specific groups is revealing. Of the four merchants, none is Chinese. Could this reflect the attacks of scholar-officials who displayed negative attitudes about merchants and thus omitted mention of traders in their accounts? Similarly, no Chinese women are included. Few Chinese women, even the renowned painter Guan Daosheng, were accorded biographies in the Chinese histories.

More important, however, is to emphasize the quality of the biographies in this

volume, which can serve as models for future works on scientists, painters, craftsmen, and doctors of the Mongol period. The illustrations are well chosen, and the bibliographies for each essay are extensive.

The book is worthy of the Philip E. Lilienthal imprint of the University of California Press. Lilienthal was an excellent editor, and I remember him and Sheila Levine, another splendid editor at the Press, with great fondness.

- Morris Rossabi

