

cargoes, and pollution.

The author does not provide a definitive answer to the central question, other than noting the role of the waterways in the long history of economic globalization and recurrent challenges facing the Straits of Malacca. There is a fairly complete presentation about the inadequacy of co-operation on the part of the countries that heavily use the straits for trans-hemispheric trade on the one hand, and competition among the littoral states in Southeast Asia for benefits from the straits on the other. The book would have been a lot more valuable if it had looked into possibilities for international co-operation to make the straits more of a gateway and less of a choke point, at least over the technical aspects the author so aptly presents in the book.

The book is strongly comprehensive. It challenges the reader to be conscientious about the historical legacies and mindful of information that usually eludes standard textbooks of international relations. The vast scope of the book, however, is at times its weakness, in the sense that more space should have been devoted to elaborating some important points the book touches upon. A case in point is that the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and how the organization has or has not tackled issues related to the Straits of Malacca deserves good scrutiny, rather than a mere one-sentence mention on page 202. Another example that readily comes to mind is that one has to deal with the United States' persistent demand for "freedom of passage" (of its military ships, including nuclear-armed ones), which matters as much to thinking about security of the Straits of Malacca as does the rise of Japan and China as dominant economic players in the region. In other words, one cannot ignore highlighting the role of the United States in discussing security in the straits areas in particular and maritime Southeast Asia in general, in spite of its withdrawal from Vietnam in 1972. These points, however, do not diminish the value of the book too much. After all, there is high value in having a book like this one that offers a focused review of a spot in southeast Asia and precisely how strategically important it has become.

The book is well structured and highly readable. I recommend the book be included in the reading list for an upper division undergraduate and lower division graduate courses on the southeast Asia and Asia-Pacific regions.

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Cultural Centrality and Political Change in Chinese History: Northeast Henan in the Fall of the Ming, by Roger V. Des Forges. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003. xxi, 422 pp. \$75.00 US (cloth).

In the spring of 1644, the rebel forces of Li Zicheng, the self-styled "New Prince of Shun," surrounded the Ming capital in present-day Beijing and threatened to attack unless the emperor of China agreed to negotiate. With his troops having

either been diverted to the northeast border to resist the advancing Qing armies or self-destructed in front of Li's forces, the Chongzhen emperor (r. 1628-44) was clearly not in a strong position to make demands. The Ming ruler, however, did manage to take one last stand. One evening, he and a servant climbed up Coal Hill, just north of the palace, and hanged themselves. With this last kick of defiance, the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) in effect came to an end.

On one level, this admirable book by Roger Des Forges, a historian at the State University of New York at Buffalo, can be read as an extended background study of the uprising of Li Zicheng and the fall of the Ming. Even though Li did not originally come from Henan province, the book's geographic focus, he did take advantage of the deteriorating economic conditions in the region to recruit followers and to gain momentum as he continued to plot against the state. By laying out in great detail the administrative and social structures of northeast Henan (with chapters focusing on "The State," "The Elite," "The Masses," etc.) and the military activities of Li Zicheng in Henan, Des Forges offers in this book a comprehensive view of not only how a local region in Ming China functioned [for comparison see John W. Dardess, *A Ming Society: T'ai-ho County, Kiangsi, Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996)], but also how the eventual corrosion of such structures resulted in — and was in turn the result of — collective actions aimed at political change.

On a broader level, this book is not simply about political revolutions; rather, it is about how a particular set of discourses shaped — and was in turn shaped by — political change. As Des Forges explains, the people of Henan have long viewed themselves as occupying the central province (*zhong zhou*) located at the heart of the central plain (*zhong yuan*). During the Ming, not only did the elite of northeast Henan — home of some of the most symbolically significant sites in Chinese history — continue to consider their region as the preeminent cultural centre of China, they also frequently invoked experiences from earlier dynasties "to situate themselves in time and to exert their influence in space" (p. 313). This effort to create ties with the past was apparently not confined to members of the elite; even rebels in the region would seek to associate themselves with the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) — long recognized as one of the most powerful ruling houses in the history of China — to legitimate their call for political change. But this so-called Han discourse, in which members of all social strata participated, according to Des Forges, did not remain unchallenged. As the uprising of Li Zicheng spread, it also became clear that it would be his advantage to associate himself with the Li ruling house of the Tang period (618-907). This shift in the discourse from the Han to the Tang, Des Forges suggests, is indicative of the dialectical relationship between cultural discourse and political change, not only toward the end of the Ming but indeed throughout the imperial period in Chinese history.

On the whole, this book has made a compelling case for viewing "Chinese history through the eyes of the Chinese themselves" (p. xvii). Although the term "Chinese" should be understood as contested, it remains the case that in China in the later imperial period, educated men generally shared the belief that the past was "a cultural storehouse of experiences and models they could invoke not only

to defend the status quo but also to initiate effective change" (p. 316). And while it might not be possible for present-day historians, working in any field, to break away from the shadows of Euro-American historiography, it remains a worthy goal, as Des Forges suggests, to understand the internal dynamics of individual discourses as well as the relationship between cultural beliefs and assumptions, on the one hand, and political actions and transformations, on the other.

But while this book is deeply learned and generally persuasive, there are areas that demand clarification. First, even though the term "cultural centrality" is used in the title and throughout the text, it remains unclear to me whether Des Forges means to use the term strictly to refer to the "belief" by the people of Henan that the province has long been a cultural centre or more broadly as an analytical concept to refer to the "conditions" of being the cultural centre [as in the case when he speaks of China's or Henan's "quest for cultural centrality" (p. xv)]. To frame my question differently, is "cultural centrality" a meaningful concept outside the imagination of the agents studied in this book? Second, although Des Forges is brilliant in focusing our attention to the importance of the past as a "cultural storehouse," his argument that the constant references made by the people of Henan to the Han dynasty amounted to a distinctive *quest* for cultural centrality remains unconvincing in part because the relationship between the two is never fully demonstrated and in part because educated men in other regions no doubt also frequently drew links to the past. Third, even though Des Forges maintains specifically that men and women, the elite and the masses, all participated in the Han discourse and thus the quest for cultural centrality, it would be worthwhile to distinguish between officials and other members of the elite who consciously took part in this discourse and others (such as most women) who did so at best indirectly.

In sum, while this book is not written for the general reader, historians [non-specialists might find Des Forges's theorization of world history (p. 321) especially intriguing] would no doubt find much to learn and to reflect in this labour of love.

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Building Culture in Early Qing Yangzhou, by Tobie S. Meyer-Fong. Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2003. xv, 208 pp. \$49.95 US (cloth).

This study deals with aspects of the cultural history of Yangzhou in the period 1645 to 1700, the years when the city established itself as a distinct cultural centre. The book is organized around four built objects: a bridge, a tower, a hall, and a temple. Tobie Meyer-Fong argues that elite consecration and maintenance of these sites was central to the creation of new social and cultural identities. For Meyer-Fong, as for her subjects, famous sites are only one aspect of a network of texts, actions, and personal relationships that defined elite interaction in

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