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Comments on Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*

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When volume 2 of Victor Lieberman's magnum opus first came out a couple of years ago, several colleagues specializing in Southeast Asian Studies called it to my attention and suggested that I read it. They told me that it made use of my ideas (which rather surprised me, since I am in East Asian Studies) and said that I would like it. I certainly found the title intriguing, but never had a chance to read it until being asked to join this roundtable. Now that I have read the book, I find it tremendously invigorating and thought-provoking, so I am all the more grateful for the opportunity afforded by my participation in this roundtable to become acquainted with Lieberman's masterwork.

My chief focus in these brief remarks is on vol. 2, chapter 5, "Integration Under Expanding Inner Asian Influence, I. China: A Precocious and Durable Unity." This substantial chapter amounts almost to a small book by itself. By "precocious," Lieberman is alluding to the fact that the "exposed" zones of China and South Asia created "charter states" some 800 to 1,300 years earlier than did the polities of "protected" zone realms. China and South Asia were "exposed" in the sense that they were open to the powerful, dynamic forces emanating from the Central Eurasian steppes. This is a perception that I myself have long entertained, namely, the notion that – far from being purely barbarous and destructive (as they are usually depicted) – the Central Eurasian pastoralists and nomads were actually the creative dynamo that impelled the growth of civilization around the periphery and that, moreover, were directly or indirectly responsible for the formation of numerous impressive states in the settled lands upon which they impinged.

This unexpected consonance between my own radical view of the development of Eurasian civilization and that of Lieberman was already enough to make me sit up and take note of the working of an extraordinary mind. But to go beyond that and ponder the significance of "durable" in the title of this chapter left me stunned, for it reminded me of the second key concept in the title of one of my own chapters, viz., "recurrent" (see "The North(west)ern Peoples and the Recurrent Origins of the 'Chinese' State," Mair 2005). To think that we arrived at such similar conclusions from completely different

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disciplinary vantage points (East Asian Studies and Southeast Asian Studies) was both humbling and reassuring.

On p. 102, Lieberman refers to "North(west)ern peoples" as a "startlingly original essay," and on p. 104, he states: "To follow Mair again, the early states of Shang and Zhou probably were founded by steppe pastoralists from the northwest who differed from their Chinese subjects not only in ecology and culture, but race." It is extremely gratifying that Lieberman integrated my thesis as a fundamental component of his analysis. On the other hand, it is rather dismaying to me that, by and large, China scholars have paid almost no attention to my essay and most continue to view Chinese civilization as hermetically sealed in a self-contained box.

Another area where my own research intersects with that of Lieberman is on the matter of the written vernacular. On pp. 536 and 543, Lieberman cites my paper entitled "Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages" (Mair 1994) on the lack of writing in regional vernaculars and the role of Buddhism in legitimizing writing in the koine during the medieval period. Lieberman finds a similar situation in Southeast Asia, where religious impulses fostered the development of writing in the local vernaculars.

Overall, Lieberman's familiarity with the best scholarship on Chinese history and civilization is nothing short of astonishing. His purview is also multidimensional, not being restricted to just one or two fields, as even the most ambitious regionally synthetic investigations tend to be, but examining intently the economy, military, trade, technology, and other aspects of Southeast Asia and the great beyond. This admirably broad approach enables Lieberman to see overarching tendencies that escape scholars of less wide-ranging vision. One facet of the past that Lieberman pays extraordinary attention to is that of climate, a quotidian topic that is all too often completely overlooked in historical studies of longue durée. I couldn't agree with Lieberman more that the role of climate in human history if of huge importance.

Lieberman's curiosity about all aspects of the human experience is so dazzlingly multifaceted that there's scarcely a page in the book that does not amaze one by the catholicity of his interests. For instance, I was struck to learn that Lieberman not only knows about the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Caucasoid (or Europoid) mummies of the Tarim Basin (Mallory and Mair 2000), but he is able to put them in a context that is meaningful for the development of Eurasian civilization, including that of China. It is essential to note that the earliest mummies (exclusively Caucasoid [or Europoid]), with apparent minor admixtures from South Siberia among the maternal lineages, were probably Indo-Europeans and that many, if not most or all, of the later Caucasoid (or Europoid) mummies were certainly Indo-Europeans. These primarily Indo-European peoples were subsequently largely supplanted by Turkic (and other "Altaic") peoples who were, like them, what Lieberman calls "Inner Asian conquest elites."

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A key concept in the book, as I have described above, is that Eurasia was divided into a "protected zone" and an "exposed zone." The former consisted of mainland Southeast Asia, most of Europe, and Japan. The latter was composed of China and South Asia, together with most of Southwest Asia, and is defined primarily by subjection to Inner Asian conquest elites. In contrast, the "protected zone" is defined as not being subjected to these Inner Asian conquest elites: "… because of its position along Eurasia's periphery, the protected zone not only remained more insulated from Inner Asian conquest, but also generated charter civilizations appreciably later than much of the exposed zone. These protected-zone features in turn often were associated with smaller-scale, more manageable demographic and political units."

What this is saying, in essence, is that the Inner Asian conquest elites (nomads and agropastoralists) were the driving force of coastal and major riparian civilizations. These Inner Asian peoples are usually characterized as "barbarians," thus it seems counter-intuitive to make such a claim (i.e., that they were the driving force of civilizations), but I believe that Lieberman is right on target in doing so.

The three major fields of research in which I have been engaged for the last several decades are: 1. the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age archeology of Eastern Central Asia, 2. the impact of steppe peoples upon China from earliest times to the present, 3. vernacular Buddhist language and literature. Now, these are not exactly daily household topics for discussion, yet Lieberman has carefully and perceptively examined my findings in all of these areas. Moreover, he has made extremely insightful use of my work in general. It is simply mind-boggling – and tremendously rewarding – that a Southeast Asian historian would not only be aware of, but would interpret in such a profoundly discerning fashion, the work of someone in Chinese Studies. What is even more remarkable is that Lieberman has done the same for the work of countless other scholars in diverse fields. This is what ideal scholarship should be like: expansive, inclusive, and questing within the largest possible framework.

In conclusion, I concur with Victor Lieberman that the study of Southeast Asian history, which actually constitutes a key component of world history, has for far too long been wrongly marginalized and even ignored. I myself have often lamented this sorry state of affairs, but heretofore have not been able to do anything of consequence about it. After all, Southeast Asia is located at a key nexus of trade and shipping between the Near East and the Far East, and is situated between the two giant empires of India and China (it has absorbed fundamental elements of both). Of religions alone, Southeast Asia has assimilated elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.

What Victor Lieberman has accomplished with these two volumes is to bring Southeast Asia squarely and fully into the grand conversation of world history, and he could not have done so in a more coherent, forceful, and spectacular a fashion.

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