Sui-Tang China and its Turko-Mongol Neighbours: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580-800 by Jonathan Karam Skaff. Oxford University Press, August 2012, 416 pages. ISBN: 978-0-19-973413-9, Hardback, £55.00

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In this work, the elaboration of his PhD thesis (University of Michigan, 1998), Jonathan Skaff throws open Inner Asia in the Sui-Tang period, exposing rich north-south interaction and exchange in an area usually viewed as an imperial periphery. This broad swathe of pastureland extending from the Yellow River to the Gobi Desert is best known as the area of the Great Walls, and as such has often been divided away into a line between essentialized binary opposites. This tendency, fostered by Sima Qian, the influential Han dynasty historian, has been most conspicuous in the Confucian sino-centrism of the Chinese dynastic histories and the work of later scholars, such as John King Fairbank, inspired by these to seek an intrinsic and clearly bounded 'Chinese' identity and worldview.[241] In response, materialist approaches to Inner Asian nomadism by Sechin Jagchid, Thomas Barfield and others have developed discourses based on a sharp separation between 'steppe' and 'sown' economies, approaches which have effectively emptied the frontier of its peoples and networks. Skaff, via detailed case studies sifted from the Tang standard histories and enriched by documents from Turfan and the Arabic histories of Western Asia, effectively repopulates this part of eastern Eurasia. In separating the extensive administrative material of Chinese historical works from their value-laden narrative he demonstrates the breadth and significance of interactions occurring within the borderlands and presents a model for future approaches to this material. Here the vitality and complexity of settlements in this region becomes clear, both in terms of their strategic role for powers based in the steppe and the Central Plains, and in their own right as the locus for cultural and economic exchange.

As Skaff demonstrates, this area was at times a key asset of the Türk Empire, not only as rich pasture which could be made available to clients, but as a staging point for military action undertaken from north of the Gobi. When controlled by the Tang, this pasture was not only denied to those forces, but made available for a range of other functions and clients, including the breeding of horses by the Tang court, the productivity of which at times eliminated the need for the large-scale horse trade central to the materialist thesis, and opened opportunities to build a variety of relationships with breeders around the region. Control of and access to this area was intertwined with the allegiances of its heterogeneous populations, many of whom were by no means limited or defined by nomad/sedentary or Chinese/Other oppositions. As Skaff demonstrates, many individuals were aware of their positions among multiple overlapping linguistic and cultural groupings, and able to identify, negotiate and deploy key elements of these as occasion required, through investiture, trade, diplomacy, marriage and other forms of interaction and patrimonial relationship. This, he argues, was in part because the logic behind these was familiar across Eurasia – his

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[241] On Sima Qian's textual placement of northern peoples in a fixed and oppositional relationship with the people of the Central Plains, see Nicola Di Cosmo, Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Powers in East Asian History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 315-16.

work rejects models of Chinese (and steppe) exceptionalism, siting the region within a multipolar Eastern Eurasian complex, rather than on the edge of a Sinic zone.

Where aristocratic actors could extend military and cultural power and make flexible use of these elements, they could attract clients both within and beyond the borderlands. Dependent on contacts between individuals at many levels, these patrimonial relationships were in a state of continuous negotiation, siting the region far nearer the locus of power than has generally been appreciated. Skaff's case studies, informed by Geertz's 'thick description' approach, identify shifting groups of individuals who took part in and influenced these processes, from Türk qaghans and Han warlords to interpreters and traders combining Sogdian names with selected elements of Chinese language and education.

Skaff argues that the involvement of the Tang court was affected by friction between two broadly defined groups of civil and military officials. A northwestern faction, largely owing their careers to regional patronage or military success, tended to favour interaction with peoples and polities in and beyond the borderlands. Competing with them for the emperor's attention, and favouring what Skaff defines as an 'exclusivist' approach to the borderlands, were networks of mainly civil officials with roots in the northeast, whose careers were linked to Confucian literati patronage and connections through academies and the examination system. While Sui-Tang successes depended on balancing these constituencies, the standard histories on which historians of Eastern Eurasia often depend were largely informed by the interests of the latter tendency, and as such reflect a court-centred, didactic approach. Thus the rebellion of An Lushan in 755, a member of the northwest group, fed into 'exclusivist' discourses, unbalancing both policy and historiography. In presenting this division of the court the work perhaps misses an opportunity to extend to court networks the ambiguity and negotiability of identity that are so persuasively granted to borderland peoples. This is nonetheless a small criticism of a work that does a great deal, not just in breaking vital new ground on this region and period, but in developing fruitful approaches to utilizing the vast resources of the Chinese standard histories.