

Book Reviews 【書評】

Jack Weatherford:

Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World

(New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004.)

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This is a romance of history in its true sense. Fact is stranger than fiction, they say. History is truly the epic story so extraordinary, awesome, lively, fantastic, and full of surprises. All history books should be written as this one by a great anthropologist and storyteller, Dr. Jack Weatherford,¹ so fittingly extraordinary and engrossing as to be *The New York Times* bestseller in 2004, especially for the following reasons.

“The trend of the times makes the hero, while the hero makes the trend of the times”, they say, but the trend of the times also depends on the hero capturing the times, so the hero-making trend depends on the hero, after all! The well-known dream and ideal about America, that it is the land of opportunity, that everyone can be great, really applies everywhere else as well, including China. This truth is the lesson of history. We remember how Hsiang Yü 項羽, a dolt in both literature and swordsmanship, emerged as a formidable hegemon of the times, as recorded in *The Records of the Grand Historian* 史記, 項羽本紀第七.

But there was the world’s greatest historical example of such self-making against the environment and inheritance, right in China. He arose meteor-like from the remote obscure corner of Mongolia, in the middle of barren nowhere, to become the world’s greatest warrior and emperor. “This noble king was called Genghis

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Khan, who in his time was of so great renown that there was nowhere in no region so excellent a lord in all things”, said Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1395).²

This Genghis Khan 成吉思汗 is also known as the Founding Father of the Yüan 元太祖 (1162-1227). In mere 271 pages (plus meticulous notes, interesting glossary, long selected bibliography, and acknowledgements), Weatherford manages to cover Khan’s story so fantastic. The volume has Part I. The Reign of Terror on the Steppe : 1162-1206 (three chapters), Part II. The Mongol World War : 1211-1261 (four chapters), Part III. The Global Awakening : 1262-1962 (three chapters), and Epilogue, followed by Notes, Glossary, Selected Bibliography, and Acknowledgements. The volume’s overall contents are as follows.

The Mongol army led by Genghis Khan subjugated more lands and people in twenty-five years than the Romans did in four hundred. In nearly every country the Mongols conquered, they brought an unprecedented rise in cultural communication, expanded trade, and a blossoming of civilization. Vastly more progressive than his European or Asian counterparts, Genghis Khan abolished torture, granted universal religious freedom, and smashed feudal systems of aristocratic privilege. From the story of his rise through the tribal culture to the explosion of civilization that the Mongol Empire unleashed, this brilliant work of history is the epic story of how the modern world was made by an obscure man from an obscure corner of the steppe wasteland.

Acknowledgements at the end of the book are a gem. It is here that the author records his enormous debts of gratitude to those in Mongolia who were overwhelmingly helpful to him during his six years in Mongolia doing research on Genghis Khan. The acknowledgements have all the best of humanity concentrated in the rich culture and kindness of Mongolians, showering on the author with their protections, advice, precious gifts, and songs that portray their culture, geography, and history.

² This quotation appears in p. xi, just before the title page of the book.

Some professional historians may possibly quibble on details here and there. Reliability and authenticity of the pieces of evidence in the early version of this volume (in the original Mongolian language), however, were checked and rechecked by both many faculty members of Chinggis Khaan College in Mongolia, where he was conferred an honorary degree of Doctorate of Humanities—a sign of how much trusted his research was—and the Mongolian people in general, during his six grueling years of stay-on research there, as detailed in his Acknowledgements.

Moreover, importantly, this is an engrossing epic history of world significance, well documented (just look at the copious notes and bibliography), written with a bold imaginative stroke, and particularly relevant to China. It is a fabulously sunny epic history, fit to be told by a cultural anthropologist in America the land of opportunity.

This epic history is also a great romance literary work. Can we imagine a romance epic on the world's greatest Chinese hero's rise and fall, comparable to the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 三國志, written by today's cultural anthropologist and storyteller in America the land of all possibilities? This volume should be read by literally everyone. The story should inspire every reader in Taiwan, China, and Asia to rise and make the world, wherever they happen to be as of this moment.