

insights into the self-perceptions of Georgian intellectuals during the early modern period and their motivations for seeking cultural transformation.

Although it lacks an argument that might change our understanding of the material he investigates, Grove's detailed study is valuable for a number of other reasons. It gives us a wide-ranging introduction not just to Georgian astrology, but more generally to early modern Georgian scientific learning. As such, it is clearly a precursor to future, perhaps more conceptually oriented, work. By assembling together these materials from a range of different archives, Grove reminds us of the role of astrology in premodern cultures as a mediator among different kinds of knowledge. Although he does not explicitly make this claim, the material Grove assembles suggests that astrology's role in the early modern Caucasus was analogous to the role played by critical theory in the humanities today: it brings different disciplines into dialogue with each other and thereby proposes new relations between humanity and creation.

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China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative, Africa, and the Middle East: Feats, Freezes, and Failures. Edited by Jean-Marc F. Blanchard. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 291 pp. (ISBN: 9789813340121) doi: 10.22679/avs.2022.7.1.013

While the recent years have witnessed a surge of literature on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), only little attention has been given to analyzing the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI). Covering vast regions stretching from East Asia to Europe, the MSRI involves dozens of countries and concerns hundreds of billions of dollars in trade. Jean-Marc F. Blanchard's latest edited volume *China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative, Africa, and the Middle East: Feats, Freezes, and Failures* aims to discuss the actual processes and the multi-dimensional consequences of the MSRI in Africa, the Middle East, and North Africa (MENA). With in-depth case studies, the contributors focus on selected countries within Africa and MENA to examine "how politics and economics interact to shape participant country attitudes towards the MSRI, its implementation, and its political and economic effects" (p. 3).

The volume opens with Blanchard's comprehensive introduction that briefly outlines the background of the MSRI and traces the history of Africa-China and MENA-China ties and their drivers from 1949 through the present. The eight core chapters can be geographically divided into two groups that are devoted to the African and MENA countries, respectively. The first group, comprising chapters 2 to 5, focuses on MSRI projects in Africa. As the chapters collectively reveal, the most important feature of the MSRI in Africa consists of seaport projects, ranging from Lamu in Kenya, Bagamoyo and Dar el Salam in Tanzania, and the Doraleh Multipurpose Port in Djibouti as well as various seaports in Madagascar,

Mozambique, and Senegal. Following the seaport projects are airports, railway projects, highways, power generation and distribution projects, oil and water pipelines, and industrial parks. Involving numerous Chinese firms, these projects open up new opportunities for greater trade with and inside Africa. Moreover, the chapters demonstrate that along with “the MSRI’s promise to boost connectivity at the regional and continental level”, the projects are still confronting “headwinds linked to poor logistics and policy coordination, security challenges, debt sustainability, and project viability” (p. 55). The authors remind us that we should not intuitively assume that “a country’s domestic or foreign policies are hostage to economic links with China”, but be aware that “diverse variables are operative” and “African states are not as weak as is commonly assumed depending upon the context and the nature of their economic relationships with China” (pp. 83-84). Certainly, close diplomatic ties and MSRI projects may promise economic benefits, as in the case of MSRI projects in Tanzania, but more often “politics and individual personality surpass economics as drivers of project initiation and implementation” (p. 139).

To a great extent, MENA countries play a significant role in China’s MSRI because of the region’s importance for China’s oil and gas supplies. MSRI projects in the region, similar to those in Africa, also focus on transportation infrastructure. But due to China’s voracious energy appetite, more attention has been paid to energy infrastructure including oil pipelines, coal-fired power generation plants, refineries, petrochemical plants, and power distribution facilities. For China, MSRI projects in MENA enhance China’s economic interest in the region and these projects stand as a way to improve China’s position vis-à-vis the US while helping to combat extremism, terrorism, and separatism. For MENA countries, the MSRI promises secure and increased access to their biggest market in terms of oil and gas and brings Chinese investment, loans, and infrastructure construction capabilities. Although both China and MENA are optimistic about the potential of China’s scheme, its realization depends on many factors. While China enjoys a strong base for cooperation in MENA, some countries, such as Iran, see “certain negatives to a continuing one-sided and expanded economic relationship with China and faces constraints on what it can finance” (p. 183). Other countries, like Egypt, are moving closer to China, yet it is too definitive to conclude that these countries “ha[ve] bound [themselves] exclusively to China or that China or Chinese companies will recklessly throw resources at the MSRI” (p. 269).

With systematic studies of the net benefits of MSRI projects in different countries, the case studies analyze the implementation and/or failure of MSRI projects to evaluate the drivers of a particular country’s policies and to unpack the factors driving its domestic and foreign policy decisions. Throughout the volume, the contributors invite readers to delve into various projects and decision-making processes to reconsider the MSRI. Next to economic links, other issues are also relevant in explaining the stance of particular countries toward the MSRI, including “domestic political needs and national interest perceptions of leaders, internal security imperatives, development ideologies, external security threats, China’s interests and situation, and the availability (or not) of appealing alternatives such as international financial institutions (IFIs) or the United States (US)” (p. 3). Some of these

points, as argued by David M. Lampton et. al. in their analysis of China's Pan-Asia Railway project in Southeast Asia, are also adopted by Southeast Asian countries to maximize their interests in dealing with China.⁴

Much of the discussion is convincing and stimulating, yet as most case studies concentrate on policy-making and the implementation of infrastructure projects, critical readers may wonder how history and culture are involved in the process, though this point has been occasionally touched upon in Conrad John Masabo's chapter on Tanzania in China's MSRI. As Tim Winter recently points out, China is actively adopting the past as a mechanism of heritage policy and artfully uses history and heritage to exercise its geocultural advantage.⁵ Because the MSRI and its broader version, the BRI, are firmly based upon the history of the ancient Silk Road, the importance of the historical and cultural aspects shall not be overlooked.

Clearly structured and fluently written, this volume stands as a pioneering work on China's MSRI in Africa and MENA. The contributors acknowledge the promises and benefits of the MSRI for African and MENA countries, yet they also keenly remind us that the MSRI is under pressure and new actions need to be taken. The detailed examinations of MSRI projects are well-suited for introductory overview while they also include direct policy implications that will certainly inspire observers and decision-makers.

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Pious Peripheries: Runaway Women in Post-Taliban Afghanistan. By Sonia Ahsan-Tirmizi. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021. 239 pp. (ISBN: 9781503614710). doi: 10.22679/avs.2022.7.1.014

Pious Peripheries examines the dialectic of construction, resistance, and lived experience among marginalized Afghan women. Ahsan-Tirmizi draws on rich ethnographic research to study the marginalization of women and the evolution of gender politics since the last Taliban regime (1996–2001). Her insider status and linguistic ability enable her to collect many first-hand accounts, often told in the words of runaway women, of the disciplining of their everyday life in abusive relationships. The timing of this publication is significant as the world is pondering the future of women's rights after the fall of Kabul to Taliban forces in August 2021.

In eight concise and highly readable chapters, Ahsan-Tirmizi contextualizes the struggles of runaway women within the fields of feminism, gender studies, and politics of

⁴ David M. Lampton, Selina Ho, and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).

⁵ Tim Winter, *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).