

***The Silk Roads: A New History of the World***. Peter Frankopan. Bloomsbury. 2015. 672 pp. (ISBN-13: 9781101912379) [Translated into Korean by Lee Jaehwang, ***Silkrod Segyesa***, Chaekgwa hamkke. 2017. 1024 pp. (ISBN-13: 9791186293898)]

Peter Frankopan's book *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* has been translated into Korean, and published just a month ago in a big volume of 1,017 pages from the 656 pages of the original. This has added fever not only to the academic arena but also to the growing interest in the Silk Road in Korea. This eloquent translation provides another advantage of enhanced readability.

The book is based on Frankopan's basic understanding of the Silk Road that "for millennia, it was the region lying between East and West, linking Europe with the Pacific, that was the axis on which the globe spun". This network of pre-modern times became what it was as hundreds of ancient trade routes gradually connected throughout history, but they turned into an image embracing many things at once, a collective product of humanity and its past, and an outcome of combinations of each and every human being's intelligence. Thus, the plural form "Silk Roads" is convincing. Frankopan tries to demonstrate this notion of diverse roads in twenty-five thematic chapters, correcting the imbalanced Eurocentric perspective that has thoroughly dominated the writing of world history.

In such histories, the Middle hemisphere, in contrast to the Eastern and Western hemispheres, is "orientalized" and "othered", described purely to highlight the dangers faced by traders from the West who wished to access Middle and Eastern hemispheres. They are typically featured as a necessary line to get from ancient Greece and Rome to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. This perspective is a relatively recent development, however, a product of the colonial and civilizing discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In recalibrating the view of history and the world, Frankopan draws attention to an oft-ignored corner of the world and turns it into a model for the writing of neocentric historiography, focusing on inner Asia from the Aegean Sea to the Himalayas. Frankopan makes the compelling argument that the interactions among peoples in this core of civilization were far more central to global affairs than the developments of their Eurocentric counterparts. In arguing that trade-based globalization has been a reality since before the written record, Frankopan unfolds his narrative by highlighting the multilateral nature of exchange within the region. He offers an account of the

early interactions between European and Asian parties, one not based on domination and subjugation, but rather, a mutually beneficial relationship between the participant peoples, regions, nations, and companies.

As long as globalization is to be conceived as the transnational exchange of people, goods and ideas, then, argues Frankopan, this took place long before the maritime era of 1492 with the appearance of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE. Alexander's campaign in the East brought Greek culture to the Indus valley. Christianity spread along the Silk Roads under the Romans. Islam more obviously did, too. Scientific advances, philosophical ideas and much else was cross-fertilized by exposure to ideas from both East and West. However, starting with a chapter called "The Creation of the Silk Road", and beginning with Alexander the Great hardly makes sense. The Achaemenid empire, "the largest the ancient world had ever seen", is only superficially mentioned and its rulers are taken into consideration simply as "enemies". Also, the most ancient core of the Silk Road, lying in the heart of China, during the two millennia before Christ, is totally absent.

The general perspective is also challenging. Despite Frankopan's clear intention to subvert Eurocentric historiography, the continent remains central in his narrative. Throughout the book, the basic frame is us (the West) vs them (the East). When indulging in this dichotomy, Frankopan is hyper-critical towards the "us", but this does not make the dichotomy less present. Indeed, Frankopan concludes his chapter on the rise of Europe as the dominant global power through its "entrenched relation with violence and militarism" by stating, "Europe's distinctive character as more aggressive, more unstable, and less peace-minded than other parts of the world now paid off".

Given the history of their often violent involvement in the region, this highly negative portrayal of Europeans by Frankopan is somewhat justified. However, his attempt at writing a "Eurasian-centric" history ends up only replicating many of the weaknesses associated with Eurocentrism. Additionally, despite claiming to write a history of whole civilizations and continents, the roles of Africa, the Americas, and even China and the Korean Peninsula in his world history are minor at best, entering his narrative only when they have come under the influence of the Europeans. Equally problematic is his representation of the diverse inhabitants of the Eurasian land mass as a homogenous whole rather than as a collection of largely autonomous sub-regions and peoples. There is, for example, no such place as the "Arab speaking-world" and yet Frankopan consistently utilizes this as short-hand for the region.

Frankopan also seeks to soften the image of Genghis Khan and his Mongol

armies. Wherever they established themselves, arts and crafts flourished. “Blanket images of the Mongols as barbaric destroyers”, he writes, “are wide of the mark, and represent the misleading legacies of the histories later which emphasized ruin and devastation above all else”. From the Mongols, Frankopan moves briskly via the Black Death, the voyages of Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus, and the establishment of the great European empires, on to the modern period. By now the book has lost focus. It was good to be reminded, early on, of Persia’s centrality in a world gone by, when both the Greeks and the Romans cast a covetous eye on its wealth and prosperity. However, suddenly Frankopan extends his discourse to the Nazi-Soviet truce of 1939-41. Moreover, he explains Iran and Iraq as unstable or violent places, a la George Bush’s “axis of evil”. In many ways, unlike his original idea of “a new history”, this is an old-fashioned history, written from above, with an emphasis on wars and conquests, and scant interest in the lived experience of the bulk of humankind.

Frankopan’s approach is somewhat too wide, and the imbalance is visible in the book structure: 14 chapters deal with the long period from Alexander the Great to the 18th century. However, the connections between events are lacking in some cases and important historical periods, such as the Enlightenment, the Renaissance, and 19th-century colonialism, are simply mentioned in passing. The second half of the book turns rather rapidly to 19th-century Western imperialism and its consequences in Asia. The canvas is too broad to be wholly satisfying, while the conclusion that “new silk roads are rising again” is not really convincing.

Certainly, this book will give a catalyst to Korean academia, where cultural and historical curiosity is on the rise from Gyeongju via Persepolis to Istanbul. However, as for the Central Asia that Frankopan cites in his conclusion, the region of fabled entrepôts like Samarkand and Bukhara, it certainly has the attention of both Russia and China. Far from being at the heart of a new Asia, sullen and misruled Central Asia languishes, for now, on the periphery. The Silk Roads are still to be fully discovered, as it was for Xuanzang, Hyecho, Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta and Zheng He.

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