

Asia in a Nordic nutshell

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The work of Professor Niels Steensgaard (b. 1932) is probably the best Nordic contribution to the history of Asia, although his work is not widely known. His name has no more than two hits in the Library of Congress online catalogue, and he has published in strange places. You will search in vain for his CV or biography on the World Wide Web. Steensgaard's work is for the connoisseur. Where to look? If you read Danish, go first to Den store danske encyclopædi and open your mind to Steensgaard's four-page history of 'Asia'. It is a model of how to condense a wide-ranging account of a long time span.

Agricultural societies

Steensgaard begins by explaining that Asia is not a social or economic unit, but a category invented by the Greeks. Only from the outside, or as a reflection of an outside view, can Asia be imagined as a unit. He then presents Asia's three core areas: Mesopotamia/Iran, China, and India, and how they developed script cultures and administrative traditions up until 500 AD. This is the first of three periods in the history of Asia, which Steensgaard names the 'age of agricultural societies'. The three core areas were all densely populated peasant societies. Contact between them was slow, depending either on seafaring or crossing the Central Asian steppe lands.

Nomadic conquests

The next period 500–1500 AD was characterised by nomadic invasions from the steppe lands. Steensgaard calls it the 'age of the nomads'. The key to the success of nomadic societies was the invention of the stirrup, allowing full exploitation of horsepower in both peace and war. Out of symbiotic trade between peasants and cattle-breeding nomads grew conflicts where the latter sometimes gained the upper hand. While the peasants depended on peace and stability, the nomads used force and mobility. Of the three core areas, China was initially the most vulnerable, since Persia could defend itself and bar the way to India. Each new nomadic invasion led to the estab-

lishment of an empire that went through periods of expansion, stabilisation and decline.

The periods of stabilisation provided the safety needed for the expansion of caravan trade on a system of paths called the Silk Road. In West Asia, the Arabic conquests in the 7th century played a similar role, putting an end to the cultural diversity of the Middle East, and establishing an empire stretching from Spain to the outposts of China. Later conquests were made by Turks and Mongols, whose armies invaded all three core areas. In the 13th century, Genghis Khan and his sons built the largest empire the world has ever seen. Although short lived, it opened up for trade and cultural exchange on a previously unprecedented scale. Tamerlane's attempt to recreate the Mongol empire in the 14th century led to the establishment of the Mogul state in India in 1526.

European ships

Steensgaard's third period, 1500–1945 is the 'age of the ships'. Ships took over from caravans and sea lanes from the Silk Road, but curiously the Asian states did not take as much interest in sea power as the European kingdoms did. Sea trade was left to Arabs and peoples on the continent's periphery. This left the sea open for European trading companies in the period of Arab decline, when the continent was dominated by three relatively stable 'gun powder empires': the Ottoman, Safavid and Mogul. By the 18th century, for unknown reasons, these

empires all declined, and this made Asia vulnerable to seaborne invaders from the West, reinforced by new industrial technology. The Western empires, however, did not last much longer than the Mongol one. Steensgaard ends by taking note of the large scale industrialisation of Asia since the 1970s and the region's expanding role in a global system of trade.

Analysis with both hands

Once having digested Steensgaard's 'Asia in a nutshell' article, you may want to read his early criticism of one failed and one Eurocentric multi-volume 'universal history' (*Journal of Modern History* 1/1973). The failed project dealt with the whole world, but not the whole man, while the Eurocentric one dealt with the whole man, but not the whole world. Steensgaard thought the task would be to carry out research 'within a global frame of reference together with comparative research'.

You next want to see how this idea had developed into a programme ten years later. Find *Tradition og kritik. Festskrift til Svend Ellehøj den 8. september 1984* [Tradition and critic. Festschrift to Svend Ellehøj on 8 September 1984], published by *Den Danske historiske Forening*. Its last chapter is a programmatic article spelling out Steensgaard's innovative approach to global history, a combination of linkage and comparison. *He set as a task for himself to grasp the entire pre-modern world with his two hands, one linking societies together, the other comparing each society with a model. Steensgaard is convinced that it is impossible to compare societies directly with each other. Societies are much too complex for this but they can be set up against a model.*

Steensgaard's first hand was eminently equipped for linking societies together, since he had made extensive studies of pre-modern flows of silver, discovering the parallel fluctuation of its value all over the world. With his other hand Steensgaard set up a simple model of exploitation, allowing him to describe how the relationship between exploitative and exploited classes was organized in different so-

cieties. Using this two-hand approach, *Steensgaard became one of the pioneers in a thriving field of global world history* which includes Fernand Braudel, William H. McNeill, André Gunder Frank, Alfred W. Crosby, Philip Curtin, Kenneth Pomeranz, Steven Topik, C.A. Bayly, John Darwin, and others.

However, Steensgaard's later work has been well hidden from readers of the English language as well as from his Danish compatriots. He used his innovative method in two masterly volumes of the Aschehoug and 'Bra Böcker' world history, first published in Swedish and Norwegian (but not Danish) in 1984–85 and since revised and translated into multiple languages, including French, but not English. Steensgaard's two volumes provide a comprehensive and nicely ordered view of world history from 1350 to 1750 – and it is not a Euro-centric view. It puts Europe in parentheses while analyzing linkages and modes of exploitation in the rest of the world – and Europe's growing role in it. Find time to read his two volumes along with John Darwin's *After Tamerlane* (Bloomsbury Press 2008).

Finding his way

Niels Steensgaard started teaching at the University of Copenhagen in 1962 and became professor there in 1977. According to the *International Who's Who* his favorite pastime is "losing my way in large books or towns." In reality his work testifies to an impressive talent for finding ways to the hilltops with the widest, most far-reaching views. Steensgaard has found his way through archives, scholarship, trade routes and societies. When finishing your reading of his popular works, you may turn to his classic study *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: the East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974). There is no better way of seeking to understand Asia's current rise than to explore what the Asian world looked like before the invasions from the West.