

reveal significant ethnic divides, tensions, and conflicts among non-elites in Georgetown. Creolization was not only contention, but also the negotiated creation of a shared culture.

Nonetheless, De Barros's cultural miscegenation thesis is important and bears further investigation. For example, in the period covered, two generations of children grew up in Georgetown and the number of East Indians increased 56 per cent, to 11.7 per cent of the total urban population (p. 34). Did the multi-ethnic population of children share the experiences of colonial education and urban pastimes to any degree? Did rates of ethnic inter-marriage or births of mixed-race children increase between the 1890s and the 1920s? If such processes could be documented, De Barros's picture of a shared non-elite social world could be more vivid and persuasive.

Scholars of Guyana will find this book indispensable. As a historian of twentieth-century Belize, where much political action focused on Belize City, I found De Barros's book extremely thought-provoking. *Order and Place in a Colonial City* will also broaden the new comparative historiography of the British Empire, in which the Caribbean is too frequently marginalized.

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Roger V. Des Forges — *Cultural Centrality and Political Change in Chinese History: Northeast Henan in the Fall of the Ming*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. Pp. xxi, 422.

Roger Des Forges has told us everything we could ever want to know about northeast Henan during the final years of the Ming dynasty. In this feat of research Des Forges has mined an array of gazetteers, genealogies, memoirs, and biographies and cultivated a rich historical landscape peopled by noble scholars, profligate elites, virtuous women, vile bandits, and heroic rebels. One might ask whether these historical figures actually did justice to their romanticized biographies, and so question the accuracy of this account, but this would be missing the point. Des Forges argues that, beyond simply embroidering historical memory, narrative ultimately causes life to imitate art, and the present to imitate the past.

Des Forges builds his thesis around the idea of centrality in Chinese history and fittingly concentrates his study on northeast Henan — a region long associated with the heartland of Chinese civilization. Contrary to academic trends that have called for a decentering of master narratives and universal theories, Des Forges argues that China cannot be understood without reference to the many levels of centrality that define and sustain the Chinese state and civilization. In China, Henan has historically been regarded as the "Central Province", and Des Forges sets out to illustrate the truth of that perception by demonstrating factors such as the region's disproportionate number of resident Ming princes and accomplished literati. The sense of historical centrality is also supported through reference to the writings of these elites, who consistently represented their experiences in terms of Chinese tradition and sought

solutions to their problems in examples drawn from ancient dynasties. As all of this unfolds, the reader is rewarded with a detailed description of the social and political environment of the region, including the government administrative apparatus, the local elites who ran the state, the commoners who occupied the cities and countryside, and the manmade and natural disasters that increasingly befell them as the dynasty declined. The final chapters detail the rise of Li Zicheng, who emerged from the ranks of the commoners to lead an army that would besiege Henan and eventually overthrow the Ming dynasty.

Des Forges ends this extraordinary account with a conclusion that finally makes clear his thoughts on centrality as a motivating force in Chinese history. The past, it is explained, is comprised of a spiralling interaction of historical events and historiographical representations that “produce a kind of double helix containing the DNA of Chinese history” (p. 319). This is a rather grand claim, and to be fair Des Forges is the first to emphasize that it is just a theory. Yet having made that disclaimer he goes on to suggest that, for example, the student of foreign relations might profitably use the theory to understand not just the nomenclature, but also the deployment, of Chinese nuclear submarines. At this point I feel that Des Forges begins to overstate the causal relationship among historiography, history, and the present. Historiography, to be sure, has a way of giving order to the otherwise random events of the past, and I am prepared to accept that the present too (especially in China) was and is cognitively ordered by history. I am less inclined to believe that the present actually defers to the patterns of history, except when by chance the two meet on common ground. Nonetheless, it is still compelling to note just how often that common ground does occur, and this, if nothing else, makes Des Forges’s ideas worthy of serious consideration.

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Gregory J. Downey — *Telegraph Messenger Boys: Labor, Technology, and Geography, 1850–1950*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002. Pp. xiv, 242.

I received a telegram only once. It was a notification of a scholarship I had won and it was delivered orally, over the telephone. When asked, I agreed that I wanted a copy of the telegram, and it was mailed to me. Missing, of course, was the telegram messenger boy, replete with his natty uniform and bicycle. He was the victim of a myriad of changes in the social organization of communications. I, in fact, was surprised that it was still possible to send a telegram, but primarily I was impressed by its unstated importance, even in the attenuated form of the 1980s.

Only when I read Gregory J. Downey’s *Telegraph Messenger Boys* did I remember and make sense of all of this. Downey’s decision to enter the world of the telegraph by means of the boys who delivered the telegrams allows him to explore a wide range of fascinating questions about technology, labour, gender, age, organization, and, of course, space and time. The work of the messenger boy lasted a full