

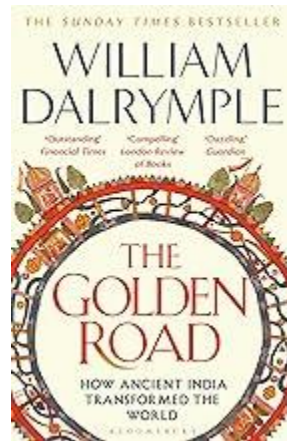
The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World

William Dalrymple

London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024

ISBN: 978-1-4088-6443-2

482 pp.



From where I write, in northeast Thailand, less than half a kilometre away is a remnant of the Khmer empire, which once ruled this region. It is a temple known as Prang Ku (other sites are similarly known). It is an *Arogayasala* or hospital. In fact, it most likely united a number of state services, including health and religious support and, presumably, access to officials and troops. Prang Ku were built at a time of high prestige for what is now Cambodia (and with whom we are, alas, at war) and the greatest achievement of its people, the Angkor Wat temple complex. I am fortunate enough to have visited it and one of the first impressions the visitor receives is how unlike most Buddhist art and architecture it is – indeed, it is clearly based on Hindu concepts. It then becomes increasingly obvious that the whole country and its society is quite strongly influenced by Indian ideas. One of the results of this is that when we were building our house here, one of the compulsory spiritual events to prepare the way was to invite a Brahmin priest to pacify the local spirits and gods so that we could subsequently live peacefully here.

While we are familiar with the presence of Indian culture all around (my university address is Ramintra Road, for example), not everyone is so aware. This is the basis of noted historian William Dalrymple's latest book, which aims to outline in detail the myriad influences of Indian culture, religion, trade and science on the world around them. He begins by attempting to dispel as mostly myth the concept of the Silk Roads which have linked China with the rest of the world and replace it with the eponymous Golden Road, which places India as the centre of the ancient world, bridging east and west. This is conducted with the assistance of an obvious degree of learning which is further indicated by the better part of 200 pages of endnotes. It is learning worn lightly, because the text itself reads more like a work of popular history rather than academic. This is characteristic:

those who know his work from previous books on Indian history or through the podcast Empire which he presents together with Anita Anand will know how willing he is to be discursive about any particular historical circumstance. They will also know that he seems to have had a relative involved in pretty much any series of events the presenters are involved in relating.

This style can be both a benefit and a drawback. It is a benefit in that it makes his prose very easy to follow and to enjoy – which is necessary because there is such a wide range of people, countries and places to juggle with and place into some kind of order. However, it does mean that he can slip into what seems to be irrelevancy. I made mental notes half a dozen times to include an example of this in this review but looking at them now, I see that they are all just too long to quote. They may be gems of vignettes describing statues or temples or any of a dozen other examples of cultural production but they test the limits of the underlying theme. To restrict myself to a single example, consider the well-known case of the Chinese monk Xuanzang, who travelled to India to study Buddhism and collect sacred texts for translation for the home parish. This was successfully achieved and the story conflates with the story of the empress Wu Zetian (624-705 CE), who subsequently used Buddhism and Buddhist texts to buttress her own position, legitimize her rule and generally achieve her own goals. At what point does this story, lovingly told but at length, change from being an Indian one to a Chinese one? Perhaps if I did not know the story so well I would have more patience to letting Dalrymple come to the end of it but it is not an obscure one. The same may be said of the chapters dealing with Southeast Asia – I am not an expert in Southeast Asian history but I do have above average knowledge of it. Perhaps the book is not intended for me. It does come with an extensive series of admiring blurbs, with adjectives such as ‘tremendous,’ ‘terrific,’ ‘mind-boggling,’ ‘engaging’ and so forth liberally strewn through them. The book is treated as a thrilling and well-told story and for many people that will be perfectly sufficient. Others will wonder whether all the effort that has been put into researching and writing the book has been well invested, considering that the text provided does not really sustain the central thesis. Yes, certainly, India has been influential and important in the past but at what point do we call the subcontinent India? Many parts of the region have strong links with other places through migration, trade, shared cultural attributes and so forth. Is Borobodur properly described as Indian-influenced when (it is argued) its shape was influenced by two texts that originated from within an Indian polity? Dalrymple himself acknowledges what has long been clear in Southeast Asia, that individual states chose those parts of Indian influence that were deemed useful in some way and ignored the rest. It is possible to argue that Indian influence was achieved through a version of soft rather than hard power, as might be said for the Cholas, but he does not make this as a sustained argument. Possibly, he was too taken up with the beauty of a statue or a reminiscence of when he himself was present at one of the historical sites.

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