

Q&A

Kublai Khan, from Land to Ocean

Kublai Khan's Yuan dynasty, like the Mongol empire, is thought of as a land power. A new work of popular history argues that its real strength and wealth came from the sea.

CHRISTOPHER COTTRELL — FEBRUARY 27, 2025

HISTORY

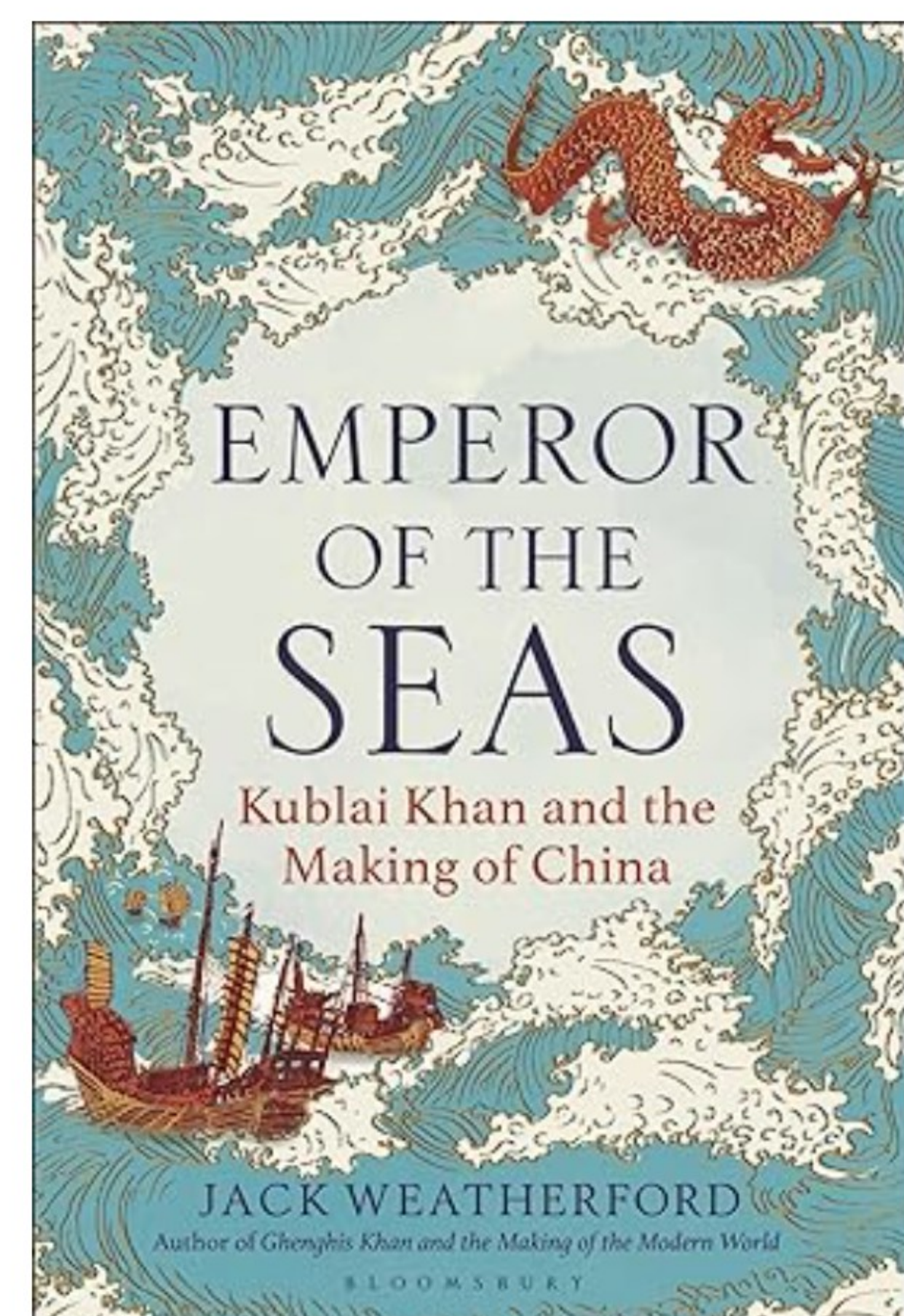
MONGOLIA



While many books have been written on Kublai Khan, none have framed him in terms of sea power. [Emperor of the Seas: Kublai Khan and the Making of China](#) (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2024) is anthropologist and author Jack Weatherford's latest historical account of the vast Mongol empire that rampaged across the 13th and 14th centuries, from Baghdad to Beijing, with control of the oceans as its central theme.

Weatherford's first three books on Mongolia — [Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World](#) (2004), [The Secret History of the Mongol Queens](#) (2010) and [Genghis Khan and the Quest for God](#) (2016) — chronicle the storied saga of the Mongol empire, and its successive Khanates from 1206 to 1368. *Emperor of the Seas* now contextualizes how Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, overtook the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) navy, combining it with his own navy to become the first master of seas across Asia. Favoring powerful storytelling over academic prose, the book also details how Kublai Khan's grandson, Temür Khan, the second and last Yuan emperor, opened this into a powerful ocean trade empire, however short-lived.

China scholars might have much to quibble with when it comes to Weatherford's Chinese primary sources, but by his own admission, he is not a Sinologist, nor a reader of Chinese language. A retired anthropology professor from Macalester



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College in Minnesota, Weatherford was first known for his groundbreaking [work](#) on Native American history. He was also a special advisor to the U.S. senator and astronaut John Glenn, and has received two medals from the Mongolian government for his popular history books about their country: the Order of the Polar Star and the Order of Genghis Khan.

I caught up with the author first by a Zoom call, then over lunch in Phnom Penh, where Weatherford lives. Sipping tea and dining on local fare in a restaurant facing the muddy Tonle Sap river, we talked about Mongolia's spiritual relationship to the ocean, China's "Great Wall of the Sea," and how a Yuan dynasty envoy's dispatches from the Khmer empire led him to research the book in Cambodia.

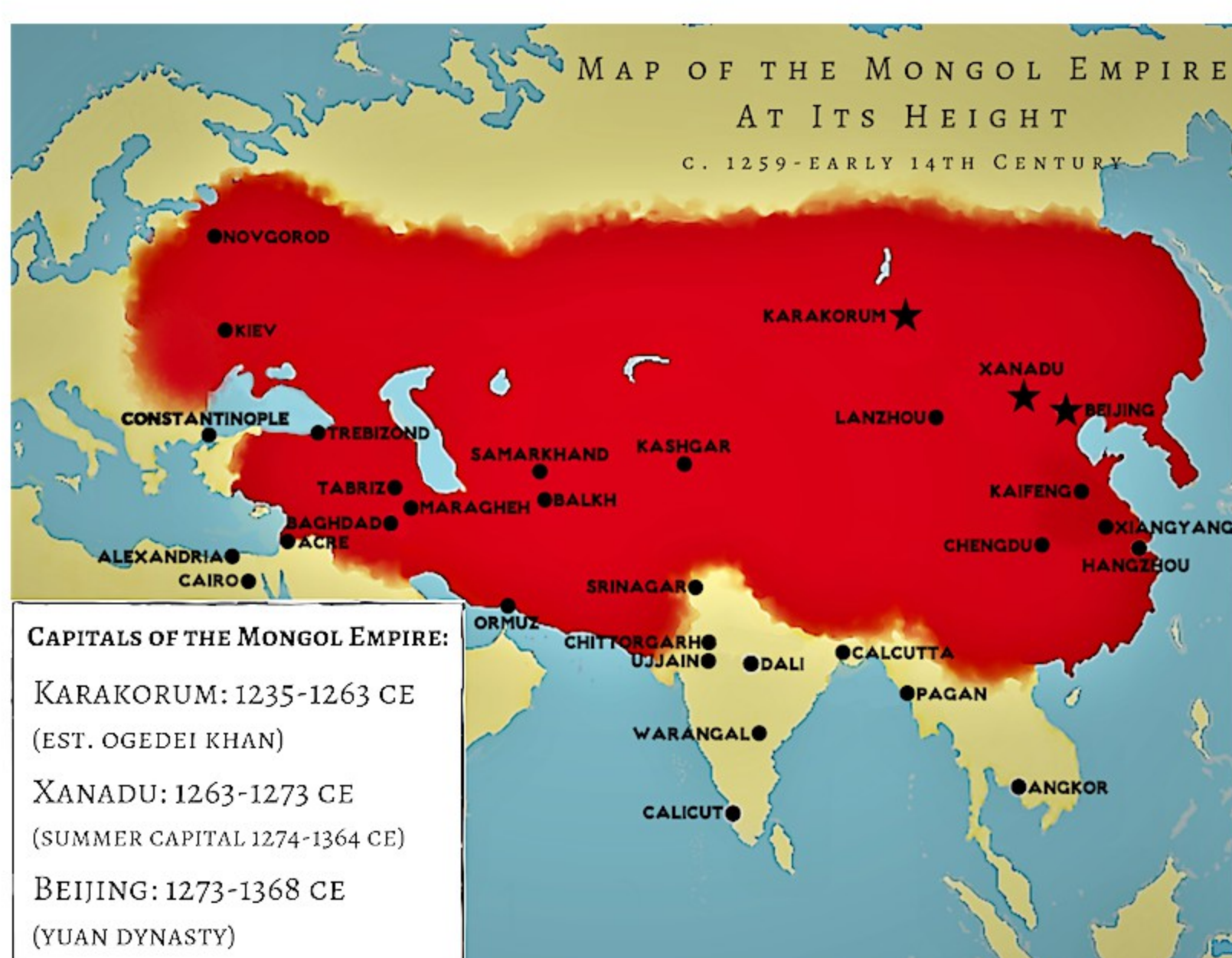
“ History has been professionalized as reporting what other historians have said. By repeating them — arguing with this one, supporting that one — it becomes more about historians and less about history. ”

—*Jack Weatherford*

How did you move from being an author of Native American history to one of Mongolian history?

As a student [in the 1950s and 1960s] I became interested in Mongolia, but as an undergraduate I wrote it off, because it was closed off during the Cold War. I had an interest, but instead focused on Native American tribes later on after PhD study in Germany because I wanted to highlight tribal people's contributions to world history. Then Mongolia opened up in the 1990s. At that point I thought, I'm too old. I was over 50, and it was my childhood dream. But I became interested intellectually, and thought, OK here's another tribe that succeeded in every way you could imagine. And when I went there in the 1990s, there wasn't much difference between their lives and those of the peoples on Native American reservations.

So it was the continuity of nomadic Asian tribes who had migrated to the Americas, and their historical cousins, who drew you back to Mongolia?



The Mongol empire at its height in the time of Kublai Khan, late 13th century. (*Arienne King*)

I did not see it as a major shift in my life to pursue this. I just saw it as a different light coming in. I had no idea I would end up doing four books on Mongolia. I didn't even think I'd do one. I wasn't there for that. I was there for the nostalgia of my youth. It's like the high school reunion and suddenly there she is. Oh my god, she never spoke to me in high school, but now I'm going to go up and say hi. At an emotional level, that's how I felt.

I'm not a China or Chinese expert, but for this book I draw on the official account from the Ming

Dynasty (1368-1644) on the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), the *History of the Yuan* (元史), doing so with a sense of Mongolian culture and history. That's just one source that I've revisited that demonstrates how China, because of its Mongolian emperor Kublai Khan (1215-1294) and his grandson Toghon Temür (1320-1370), became the first world empire to dominate seas from the Bering Strait to Hormuz. In fact, one of Temür's special diplomatic envoys to the Khmer Empire led me here [to Cambodia] on my research, then the pandemic hit and I stayed.

Why Mongol sea power?

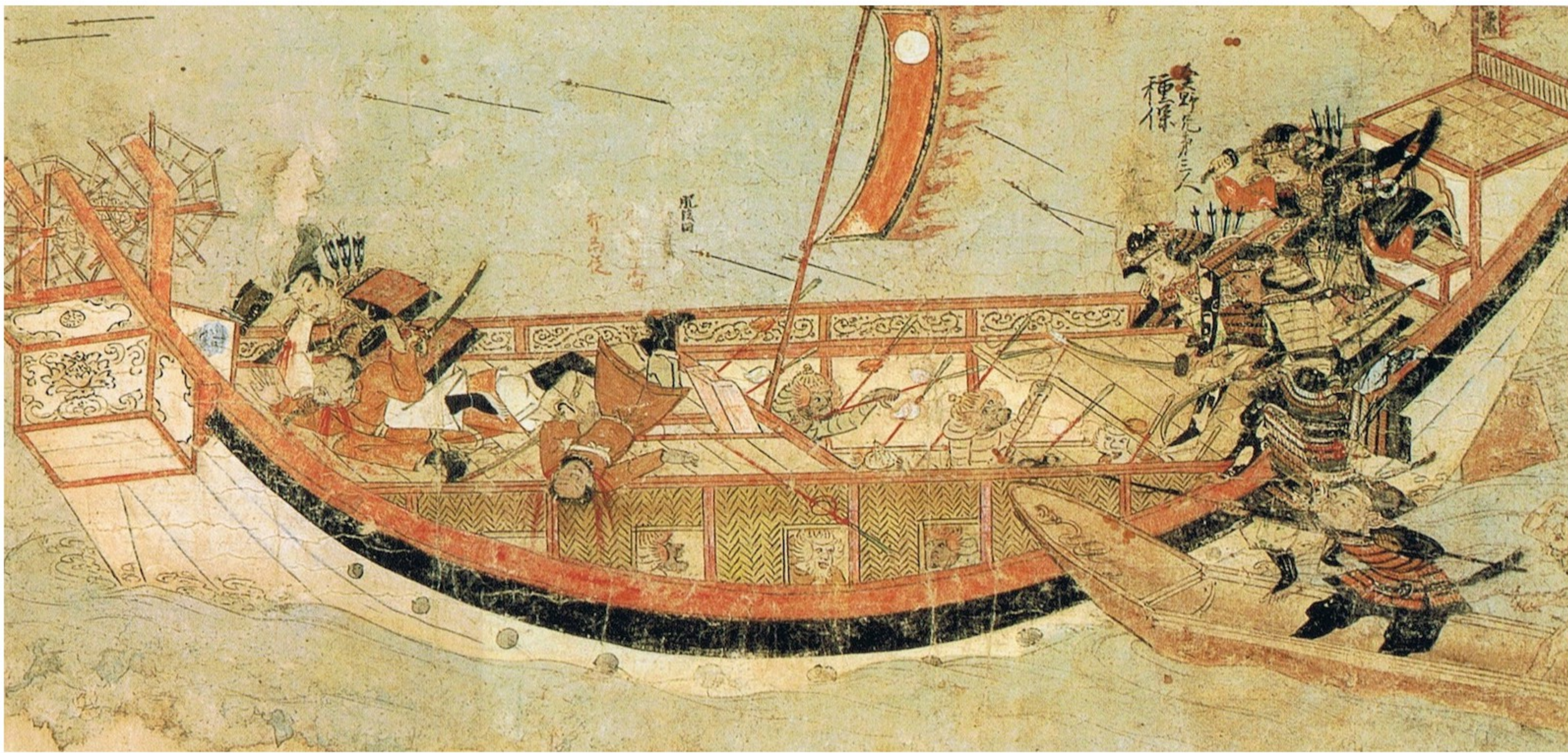
I thought I was going to conclude my writing about Mongolian history with my third book. I didn't quite realize that as the Mongol land conquest came to an end, its ocean power was opening. From early on I already had the importance of water in mind. The ocean or *Da Lai* (as in Dalai Lama) is a very important Mongolian spiritual concept.

It was slowly coming together, turning from the decline of the land empire to the oceans, and Kublai Khan is a pivotal figure. He's probably the most famous emperor of China known outside of China, although not nearly as highly respected inside China. Although a lot has been written about Kublai Khan, I wanted to write about him and the sea. Most scholars of China think of it as a continental land power, but I wanted to look at it in a different light.

What surprised you most about the story of Kublai Khan at sea?

When I first thought of China and the ocean, I thought of [Zheng He](#) and the Ming dynasty. All you hear about the Mongols at sea is their defeat, the typhoon kamikaze, the dramatic story of their two invasions of Japan. Sometimes people know about the invasions of Vietnam or even Java, which is almost unknown. In my mind too, Kublai Khan was a failure at sea. But as I looked closer at it, I realized he still controlled those seas. He did not control the land of Japan or Vietnam, but he controlled the sea because his navy was so large. It was the navy that defeated the Southern Song dynasty. Yes, they were defeated on land by the Mongolian army, but that was because the ships were always breaking through.

The Southern Song depended on what they called the "Great Wall of the Sea." This was before the Ming dynasty rebuilt the Great Wall in the north. This Great Wall of the Sea was a defensive navy wall. They literally chained the ships together to blockade a port or city or river. The Mongols were more aggressively orientated — they didn't have a strong sense of a defense. They realized they had to break through this wall of ships with their own offensive navy that could also destroy the walls of cities, for example.



Detail from "Battle of Koan" by Takezaki Suenaga, where Japanese soldiers repel the Mongol naval invasion, c.1293. (public domain)

To go from the time of Genghis Khan, when Mongols could not swim and were still crossing rivers on inflated goat skins, to having the most powerful navy in the world that sailed all the way to the Strait of Hormuz and back — it's a total revelation. But the sea power that grew in Kublai Khan's life came into greater realization under the rule of his underappreciated grandson, Temür Khan (Emperor Chengzong). He was the one who turned the navy into a peaceful endeavor through trade, and I wanted to give him credit for that. I think Kublai Khan was realizing at the end of life that he didn't know what to do with his massive navy and all this land that he controlled. He still thought in the old-fashioned way: you use a navy to conquer land. But his grandson saw that it was also for trade.

So the Mongols created a superhighway of the seas, and this has an echo in the present era, when China is attempting to become an ocean power once again. Yet the world acts as though that never happened before, that it's something totally new in history for this continental power to go to sea when they controlled the largest route in the world before Europeans discovered the Americas.

Did the Mongol control of ocean economics not create a vacuum in the Eastern Mediterranean and into the Indian Ocean?

Yes, and that vacuum is what sucked in the Europeans, and gave rise to European colonial power. They were desperately trying to recreate the Chinese routes and get access to those goods again.

When China pulled back from the sea in the early Ming dynasty, they lost this system?

They still had the ability to launch those naval expeditions, but they were vastly expensive, and didn't bring in the resources that were anticipated. There was also a prejudice in the early Ming dynasty against almost everything Mongol and Yuan. In the Ming, the eunuchs were in charge of trade, but there were other powers rising, especially the old Confucianist polity. One way to stop the eunuchs was to cut them off from their sea trade that enriched them.

You researched and wrote most of this book while living in Mongolia?

My home is on Bogd Khan mountain; I live in a valley on the far side, about one hour from Ulaanbaatar. Most of the research for this book was done by drifting around, tracing the route of the Mongol conquests. I also spent some time in Sri Lanka, which pushed my thinking about Western colonial powers versus the Chinese expeditions. I do not want to be an apologist for China, but in Sri Lanka I saw the brutality of western colonialism versus a more open attitude of the Chinese, bringing in arts and things like that.

In Vietnam I saw some old Mongol defensive stakes in the riverbed of the Red River — some very clumsily and quickly made from chopped trees, others well refined because they had been the pillars of houses. And in Cambodia I saw a report from one of Temür Khan's envoys, named Zhou Dagan. He had lived in Angkor Thom for a year and wrote a dispatch, which is why I came to do research in Cambodia. I tried to find out the names of the Mongols who led the expedition, especially their clan orientations and ethnicity.

Why do you write history the way you do, with dramatic and literary flair?

The word history has “story” in it, and we forget about that. As we have professionalized everything in the world, history has been professionalized as reporting what other historians have said. By repeating them — arguing with this one, supporting that one — it becomes more about historians and less about history. For me history is not primarily about ideas or buildings or things, it's about people. Who are they, what are they doing, how and why did they make that thing they made? What were they feeling, what were they thinking? That's the story, and more important than the unfolding of historic trends. It's human beings struggling with life. ■



Jack Weatherford at the Sombok Restaurant, Phnom Penh, January 2025. (courtesy of author)



Christopher Cottrell is an editor and writer who focuses on Indo-Pacific history and current affairs. He has contributed to *The Boston Globe*, CNN, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *The South China Morning Post*. Cottrell holds an M.A. in Pacific Islands history from the University of Hawaii, Manoa, spent 18-years in China and a total of 28-years in Asia and the Pacific Islands. He currently lives in Thailand.