

abandoned. Second, he asks how the United States would react to an Islamic fundamentalist rebellion against the Saudi monarchy. Finally, he wonders whether an overstretched U.S. military could still retake the Panama Canal if it fell under the control of a narco-dictatorship. He concludes that a diminished military, increasingly distant from American society as a whole, greatly complicates the effective exercise of might.

But, as Deitchman notes, America's superpower primacy will not last forever. Although post-Renaissance Western culture has dominated the three other main cultures (China, India, and the Middle East) for some 500 years, the aberration is slowly but surely coming to an end: "Because modern technology by its very nature has now become globally available, and technology-based economic strength has also diffused around the world, it appears unlikely that any one of the major regional or even global powers will be strong enough to dominate the others at any foreseeable future time." As a patriotic American, albeit one worried about the nation's moral fiber, Deitchman does not ask whether this would be altogether a bad thing. Democracies, after all, are rather good at getting along with others once they get through the distressingly violent adolescence that Snyder analyzes so well.

—MARTIN WALKER

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**THUNDER FROM THE EAST:**  
*Portrait of a Rising Asia.*

By Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. Knopf. 377 pp. \$27.50

Kristof and WuDunn spent five years reporting from China for the *New York Times* and won a joint Pulitzer for their brave and informative pieces on Tiananmen. Thereafter, based in Japan, they covered Asia as a whole for their paper. Their political, economic, and social reporting—well researched, closely observed, and revealing—was in the best *Times* tradition. When it comes to writing books, though, the writers prove much less surefooted.

*Thunder from the East* seeks to explain the Asian crisis of the late 1990s and to speculate about the region's future. The crisis, Kristof

and WuDunn conclude, "was the best thing that could have happened," because it destroyed the cronyism, bad business practices, and even the ill-advised kindheartedness that had stifled Asian economic development. As for the future, the authors predict (with *perhaps* and *probably* as safety nets) that "Asia is likely to wrench economic, diplomatic, and military power from the West over the coming decades." These conclusions, though plausible, are not particularly original, and they're repeated many times, as if the authors doubt the attention span of their readers.

The book does contain a mountain of fascinating material about the vast territory stretching from Afghanistan to the Pacific, though relatively little about China and nothing about Burma or Hong Kong. Kristof and WuDunn provide an evenhanded analysis of the Japanese massacre in Nanking in 1937, an informative discussion of Asian economic affairs (drawn largely from their reporting for the *Times*), and a chilling account of the region's pollution and its terrible costs and dangers.

But *Thunder from the East* suffers from an



*A Ming dynasty nobleman's badge*

overly personal style (the acknowledgments are a monument to cutesiness), jarring inconsistencies, and, too often, highly dubious generalizations. For example, the authors ascribe some five centuries of slow development in *Asia*, not just China, to misjudgments during the early 15th century, when Ming emperors terminated the Indian

Ocean expeditions of eunuch admiral Zheng He: “A few catastrophic calls by some Chinese emperors in Zheng He’s time . . . helped send all of Asia into a tailspin from which it is only now recovering.” As an even partial explanation of events from Afghanistan to Japan over many centuries, this is paltry. Elsewhere, the authors speak of the

“cold, cruel discipline that . . . is one of the lubricants of Asia’s great economic machine,” fueling the vast region’s “competitive advantage”—and cite as an illustration the practice of selling young girls into prostitution. If that were the key to prosperity, Asia would have taken off centuries ago.

—JONATHAN MIRSKY

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

### *A BISHOP’S TALE:*

*Mathias Hovius among His Flock in Seventeenth-Century Flanders.*

By Craig Harline and Eddy Put.

Yale Univ. Press. 384 pp. \$27.95

As students are quick to complain, good academic histories too often make for amazingly dull reading. To the short list of exceptions for early modern Europe—including Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980), Natalie Davis’s *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), and Steven Ozment’s *The Bürgermeister’s Daughter* (1996)—add *A Bishop’s Tale*.

The Catholic bishop of the title, Mathias Hovius (1542–1620), lived in what became the Spanish Netherlands. As a young scholar, cathedral canon, and, eventually, archbishop of Mechelen, he witnessed the great events of his age—wars and rebellions, Reformation and Counter Reformation. He was nobody exceptional, “simply a flesh-and-blood prelate,” according to Harline, professor of history at Brigham Young University, and Put, senior assistant at the Belgian National Archives. But Hovius left behind voluminous records, correspondence, and a daybook that once ran to 10 volumes (all but one have been lost).

Rather than write a traditional biography of Hovius, the authors set out to immerse themselves and their readers in his world. They

have freely exercised their historical imagination, piecing together hints from the archives to conjecture about the bishop’s close friends, his private conversations, his food and drink, and even his nightclothes. The individuals they depict emerge as believable characters, sometimes drawn with thick brush strokes but real personalities nonetheless. We come to feel considerable sympathy for Hovius himself, even though he hounded his enemies mercilessly and once buried a woman alive for her religious beliefs.



St. Eloi Preaching (1626), by Adriaan De Bie

If Harline and Put know how to make historical figures come to life, they also know a thing or two about plot. The book begins in medias res, on a day that will end with Hovius hiding