

The Silk Road in World History

BY XINRU LIU

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Reviewed by James A. Anderson

Professor Liu has written a comprehensive and engaging survey of Eurasian trade through the era of Mongol conquest in the thirteenth century. Her study is truly global; the book covers both East Asian and Mediterranean termini along the extensive commercial network now known as the Silk Road. The reader learns of the vast differences between the sedentary and nomadic communities of Inner Asia, as well as their centuries-old interaction that facilitated trade opportunities even in the midst of territorial conflict. The names of the principal actors in Silk Road history, Han, Xiongnu, Sogdians, Kushans, Persians, and Romans, to name a few, will be familiar to some and mysterious to others, but the author provides guidance for uninitiated readers. Liu not only offers short descriptions of each society, but she also contextualizes the rise and decline in significance of each group within the larger Silk Road network. The author's efforts to incorporate a wealth of material in an easily discernible framework have produced a text suitable for classroom use in lower-level college surveys and high school AP and honors courses.

Liu pays close attention to the New Oxford World History series theme of presenting local history in a global context. Broad themes of commercial and cultural exchange are discussed, but the author also offers specific examples of merchants, adventurers, and local officials who lived or traveled among the peoples of the Silk Road. The author takes a similar approach when discussing the articles circulating in Silk Road trade. Liu mentions that trade in luxury goods gave the Silk Road its allure, but she reminds the reader that everyday necessities also found markets along many of these same routes. Liu's approach follows recent developments in world history scholarship with her focus on interregional connections and not the exhaustive "coverage" of people, places, and events in Silk Road history. Instructors could effectively augment the classroom use of Liu's text with detailed firsthand accounts by well-known travelers such as Xuanzang, Marco Polo, or Ibn Batutta for lively discussion sections.

One of the book's strengths is Liu's use of primary sources. She provides a wide array of first-hand observations that should inspire students seeking genuine voices from the distant past. Liu's own adeptness with sources in multiple languages brings a greater depth to this type of interregional scholarship. Another strength of the book is Liu's strong familiarity with this region of Eurasia, gained through her long career in this field of research. Here, the reader benefits from a scholar with a deep but also wide-ranging understanding of a region under multiple political regimes and subject to successive waves of cultural influences. For example, Liu's earlier scholarship on the topic of Chinese silks and the particular purple dye prized at both ends of Eurasia for Buddhist and Byzantine religious vestments exemplifies the type of cultural dialogue through trade highlighted throughout this book.¹

As for possible areas for improvement, there are points in this already short text that could use pruning, or at least further clarification. Sections on early Islamic empires of Central Asia could be more clearly described, and the short section on maritime links to the Silk Road during the Pax Mongolica could receive more attention. Overall, however, Liu has done a very balanced job of surveying the various pre-modern states that played leadership roles in the development of Silk Road trade.

Xinru Liu has done the field of world history a great service by presenting such a clear and comprehensive picture of the commercial and cultural interaction along the Eurasian Silk Road network of trade routes. While many instructors may be aware of this first period of globalization, few understand its complexity and interconnectedness as well as Professor Liu does. Her book will remain a standard in the classroom for years to come. ■

NOTES

1. See Xinru, Liu. *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600-1200* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007).

JAMES A. ANDERSON is an Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. A historian of pre-modern China and Việt Nam, Anderson's first book is *The Rebel Den of Nung Tri Cao: Loyalty and Identity Along the Sino-Vietnamese Frontier* (University of Washington Press, 2007). Anderson is currently engaged in research for a new book on the southwestern Silk Road between China and northern Southeast Asia during the ninth through thirteenth centuries. Anderson is the co-editor, with Nola Cooke and Li Tana, of the volume *The Tongking Gulf Through History* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

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