

New Turns on the Silk Road

Peter B. Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xii, 178 pp. ISBN-10: 0195338197; ISBN-13: 978-0195338195.

Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xii, 154 pp. ISBN-10: 0195338103; ISBN-13: 978-0195338102.

Xinru Liu and Lynda Norene Shaffer, *Connections Across Eurasia: Transportation, Communication, and Cultural Exchange on the Silk Roads*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007. x, 252 pp. ISBN-10: 0072843519; ISBN-13: 978-0072843514.

Whether you are new to the study of the “Silk Roads” and Central Asia and wanting a general introduction or are an instructor looking for updated and comprehensive teaching resources, all three of the books under review here have a lot to offer. Both the *Silk Road in World History* and *Central Asia in World History* hail from Oxford University Press’s series the New Oxford World History which promises “an informed, lively, and up-to-date history of the world” and to present “local histories in a global context” telling events “through the eyes of ordinary people.” Seemingly, the lives of “ordinary people” described in these histories of the Silk Roads and Central Asia are anything but ordinary. Xinru Liu and Peter Golden draw their readers into the complex worlds of their respective topics making the Silk Roads and Central Asia accessible even to an unfamiliar reader. Both Golden and Liu are noted specialists, the former having written extensively especially on the early Turkic peoples and the latter having published several earlier volumes on the Silk Roads. The volumes of the Oxford series on world history are also available in electronic format.

These books are appropriate for introductory undergraduate history courses because of their readability and chronological format. Peter Golden’s volume on Central Asia works particularly well as an introduction to Central Asia, but it also would fit neatly into a course on the Silk Roads as a means of highlighting the

peoples who existed in the central regions of Eurasia and who often were responsible for the success or failure of routes. Golden notes that the region of Central Asia is not one of historical delineation, and is better defined based on the ecological zones of the steppe and deserts with their oases where peoples of varied linguistic and religious backgrounds interacted and blended over the centuries. One of the key distinctions he makes is between nomadic peoples of the steppe and agrarian groups of the oases. This distinction as well as the one between Persianate and Turkic linguistic groups are fairly typical in the literature on Central Asia and give students a basic framework for understanding the region that can then be problematized. If an instructor would like to extend the chronology of a course beyond the Mongol conquest, Golden’s volume is useful because it shows the continuities between the Mongols and the Timurids, alliances between political and religious leaders, and the faltering of nomadic supremacy with the advance of the Russian and Qing empires. The book closes by providing insight into the imperial struggle that laid the foundation for the Great Game and the contemporary situations that renew and reinvent our fascination with the bygone days when nomads ruled the steppe.

Some of the features that stand out in the Oxford volumes are the suggested further readings, websites, and chronology provided at the end of the text which are useful to those who want to explore certain topics in greater detail. Likewise, the images featured in the volumes were carefully selected to reinforce some of the major themes being discussed (such as items made from silk in Liu’s volume and images related to pastoral life in Golden’s volume), thus allowing readers to get a sense of the diversity of art and architecture associated with the Silk Roads and Central Asia.

Liu’s 2011 publication and her 2007 collaboration with Shaffer cover much the same ground, however with more detail in the earlier and longer book. In that volume, they begin with an exposition of the ecological zones and geography that affected the development and often determined the location of the routes of exchange. This allows them to take a more detailed look at some of the empires that flourished along the Silk Roads, explore in depth the exchange of other

commodities in addition to silk, such as ceramics, spices, and horses, clearly map out the diversity of trade routes (including the maritime routes) that appeared in Eurasia down through the Mongol conquest, and understand the intricate sharing and co-opting of ideas from religion to governance. If one's primary interest is in silk as a commodity or in a concise narrative of the Silk Roads then the 2011 Oxford volume would fulfill those needs. Both Liu and Shaffer have specialties in Chinese history as well as world history; so they are careful to include different perspectives. Even in the 2011 volume, Liu titles her first chapters "China looks West" and "Rome looks East." Having a specialty in the early history of South Asia, she follows these with a detailed focus on the Kushan Empire and its adoption of Buddhism.

As a teaching resource *Connections Across Eurasia* remains the better option. Rather than having one long chronology at the end of the text, *Connections Across Eurasia* opens each chapter with a detailed chronology that allows the reader have an easy reference for dates and important events within the topical chapters. Likewise the maps offered in this volume are more frequent and better suited to understanding the geographical complexity of the routes of the Silk Roads. *Connections Across Eurasia* also provides suggestions for further readings, but these follow each chapter making it very simple to see which readings would be appropriate for specific topics.

I recently taught a lower division undergraduate lecture course on the Silk Roads, and opted to assign chapters from *Connections Across Eurasia* and *Central Asia in World History* along

with excerpts from relevant primary source documents. The balance between the two books worked well for giving the students a general background on the geography and ecological zones of the regions of the Silk Roads, as well as the religious, linguistic, and cultural composition of the populations. Typically the chapters could be a good basis from which to expand on in the lectures. The books themselves were good resources for the students to refer to when studying for exams. Nearly all of the primary sources (e.g. selections from Zhang Qian, Marco Polo, Rashid al-Din) that my students read for the course were described in the text of these books, thus opening up discussion of how we reconstruct the past. Based on feedback from my students, I would definitely use both of these books again in the future. Likewise, I would consider assigning Liu's 2011 publication, especially if I was teaching a seminar where students needed to gain a quick knowledge of the Silk Roads before moving into a more in-depth study.

— Jennifer Webster

About the author

An M.A. in International Studies — Comparative Religion, **Jennifer Webster** is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the History Department at the University of Washington. Her research seeks to understand the evolution of several major shrine locations in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan from the time of the Russian conquest to the present day through an analysis of both oral and written sources. She has taught courses on the Silk Road, the early modern Middle East, and pilgrimage and shrines in the Islamic world.
