

BOOKS *et al.*

ANTHROPOLOGY

More than a merchant's trading route

A vividly illustrated tome traces the cultural impacts of the Silk Road

By Andrew Robinson

Between 1271 and 1275, Marco Polo famously explored the overland journey from Europe to Cathay (China). Much later, the route was dubbed “the Silk Road” by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, referencing the goods and ideas ferried between the civilizations of Rome and China along the ancient caravan path.

Today, the route has a much more complicated significance—hence this tome’s plural title, *Silk Roads*. The book is a copiously illustrated history with lengthy photo captions and short essays by some 80 scholars, edited by sinologist Susan Whitfield, a long-time scholar of the subject.

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Whitfield formerly served as a curator of the Central Asian manuscript collections at the British Library and was the first director of the library’s International Dunhuang Project. This collaborative effort seeks to conserve, catalog, and digitize manuscripts, printed texts, paintings, textiles, and artifacts from Dunhuang and various other archaeological sites at the Silk Road’s Chinese end.

In her introduction, Whitfield (re)defines the Silk Road as a “system of substantial and persistent overlapping and evolving interregional trade networks across Afro-Eurasia by land and sea from the end of the 1st millennium BC through to the middle of the 2nd millennium CE.” Apart from silk, merchants traded in slaves, horses, semiprecious stones, metals, pots, musk, medicines, glass, furs, and fruits—“resulting in movements and exchanges of peoples, ideas, technologies, faiths, languages, scripts, iconographies, stories, music, dance and so on.”

To take just one example from the nearly 500 illustrations in the book, consider a letter in Sogdian script discovered in an ancient watchtower used for observing caravans near Dunhuang. The letter appears in archaeologist Paul Wordsworth’s essay, “Camels and caravanserai: Traversing the desert.” It was written on paper in about 313 AD by Miwnay, wife of a Sogdian merchant named Nanai-dhat who traded with northwestern China from his base in Sogdiana. (Sogdiana was an Iranian civilization encompassing territory in present-day

A gilded Iranian bowl from the late 12th or early 13th century features an oud player and audience.

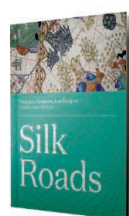
Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, centered on the city of Samarkand.) In the letter, Miwnay blames her husband for leaving her destitute in Dunhuang. “I would rather be a dog’s or a pig’s wife than yours!” she writes angrily. “In a more mildly worded postscript, their daughter Shayn explains that she and Miwnay have been obliged to become servants of the Chinese,” notes Nicholas Sims-Williams in the letter’s caption.

As this letter implies, studying the Silk Road can be—in Whitfield’s word—“daunting.” In addition to histories of Central Asia, China, India, Mesopotamia and the Middle East, the eastern Mediterranean, and North Africa (not to mention the earlier Indus civilization, which, surprisingly, was omitted from this book, despite its trading contacts with Mesopotamia), Silk Road scholarship can involve delving into Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism. The book even contains some science of deserts, mountains, rivers, seas, and steppes. “A plethora of unfamiliar names and places can confuse and befuddle. I beg the reader’s patience to try not to be distracted by these,” Whitfield requests. “Reading one essay or caption may show little, but looking at more will, I hope, start to reveal something of the complex pattern of the Silk Roads.”

To orient readers, a detailed map of trade routes ranging from Western Europe to Japan is repeated at the start of each section with freshly labeled page references to the section’s essays and captions. But the book lacks even a basic chronology of the Silk Roads and their evolution from the 1st millennium BC to the establishment of the International Dunhuang Project in 1994. The absence of such a time sequence is acutely felt, given that Whitfield’s structure deliberately rejects chronology and relies instead on landscape to frame the scholarship, with the book’s five sections

centering on the steppe, the mountains and highlands, the deserts and oases, the rivers and plains, and the seas and skies.

Despite this crucial omission—and an awkward fragmentation of the short essays by the long image captions—*Silk Roads* is a treasure house of fascinating images and hard-won knowledge. It also provides insight into both human diversity and imperial rivalry over a millennium and a half, at a time when the Silk Road is a region of renewed trade and political conflict with China. ■



**Silk Roads:
Peoples, Cultures,
Landscapes**

Susan Whitfield, editor
University of California
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