



The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction

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The phrase "silk road" evokes vivid scenes of merchants leading camel caravans across vast stretches to trade exotic goods in glittering Oriental bazaars, of pilgrims braving bandits and frozen mountain passes to spread their faith across Asia. Looking at the reality behind these images, this Very Short Introduction illuminates the historical background against which the silk road flourished, shedding light on the importance of old-world cultural exchange to Eurasian and world history.

On the one hand, historian James A. Millward treats the silk road broadly, to stand in for the cross-cultural communication between peoples across the Eurasian continent since at least the Neolithic era. On the other, he highlights specific examples of goods and ideas exchanged between the Mediterranean, Persia, India, and China, along with the significance of these exchanges. While including silks, spices, and travelers' tales of colorful locales, the book explains the dynamics of Central Eurasian history that promoted Silk Road interactions--especially the role of nomad empires--highlighting the importance of the biological, technological, artistic, intellectual, and religious interchanges across the continent. Millward shows that these exchanges had a profound effect on the old world that was akin to, if not on the scale of, modern globalization. He also disputes the idea that the silk road declined after the collapse of the Mongol empire or the opening of direct sea routes from Europe to Asia, showing how silk road phenomena continued through the early modern and modern expansion of the Russian and Chinese states across Central Asia.

Millward concludes that the idea of the silk road has remained powerful, not only as a popular name for boutiques and restaurants, but also in modern politics and diplomacy, such as U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's "Silk Road Initiative" for India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction Details

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Latique says

As the title states, a very short introduction indeed. With easy-to-understand terminology, divided sections, and the occasional picture - the book sets the groundwork for readers to be able to (hopefully) glean some information about the Silk Road(s). A quick read that can be beneficial to anyone interested in the Silk Road, history, anthropology, linguistics, and/or distribution of material goods. Recommended for students high school age and older, scholarly readers, and leisurely readers.

Beth says

Informative.

David Nichols says

Most of the Oxford Very Short Introductions make good bathtub reading and serviceable reference books. THE SILK ROAD is something different: an engaging short history that also introduces a new analytical concept. James Millward proposes that we use “Silk Road” as a Eurasian analogue of “Columbian Exchange,” a shorthand term for the network of trade and cultural exchanges that linked Europe, the Middle East, India, and East Asia from about 3000 BCE to the early modern era. This network distributed throughout the Old World such things as horses from Central Asia; paper-making, sericulture (silk-raising), and other skills from China; wine-making from Europe; and citrus fruits and the humoral theory of disease from India. Silk-Road exchanges created the wealthy and cosmopolitan, if also violent and chauvinistic, societies that dominated Eurasia by the 16th and 17th centuries, and provided Europe with the tools it used to conquer or dominate the rest of the world thereafter. For a more extensive review of this book, see the following blog essay:

<http://happenedstrangely.blogspot.com...>

Bernie Gourley says

Millward’s emphasis is in pointing out that the Silk Road was neither predominantly about silk nor was it the single route that the word “road” implies. While silk was certainly a product that traded on this transportation network, it wasn’t necessarily the most important commodity by value-- and certainly wasn’t in terms of its effect on the world. More broadly, the author presents a Silk Road that defies neat delineations and definitions, a Silk Road that is often more of a conceptual bridge than a literal transportation route.

The book consists of six chapters. The first describes the territory serviced by this network, and particularly Central Eurasia which served as the bridge between East and West. This is the Silk Road as connective tissue allowing dispersion of ideas, technologies, products, services, and art between regions separated by vast distances and cultural gulf.

While chapter one deals in the space of the Silk Road, chapter two explores time periods in which the Silk Road flourished. This begins with Indo-European nomads as far back as 3000 BC / BCE, and proceeds through various eras seeing changes in the route and the products moving along it. Most of these eras, e.g. the classical Silk Road period and the time of the Mongol Empire, are defined by burgeoning use of the network. However, Millward does ask how dead was the period from the 3rd to the 5th AD / CE which is normally considered a dead spot in Silk Road history. It should be noted that modern history is addressed mostly in the last chapter, which considers whether the Silk Road remains relevant in today's world with its very different transportation and communications infrastructures.

Chapter three is about the biology of the Silk Road. A considerable portion of this chapter is devoted to human dispersion and the legacy of events in Central Asia as seen in human DNA. However, the author also examines the spread of horses, grapes, and dumplings. The approach of focusing on a few key commodities is repeated in chapters four and five. (These three chapters form the core of the book.)

Chapter four reflects on the role of the Silk Road in dispersion of technology. Silk is presented in this chapter, but not so much as pashmina and bolts of cloth, but rather in terms of sericulture—the technology of producing silk. The second product to be evaluated herein is paper, and it's argued that paper was a more important commodity than was silk. Medicine and military technology are also examined in this chapter as among the biggest global game changers of the Silk Road.

Chapter five is about the spread of art along the Silk Road. One of the most interesting parts of the book, for me personally, was a discussion of stories and myths that spread via the Silk Route, and which can be seen in various cultures along the way. The lute (and stringed instruments that sprung from it) is also considered as a key artistic commodity of trade. There is also an extensive discussion of visual motifs seen along the Silk Road, as well as the blue-and-white porcelain that was a popular product, ultimately becoming widely copied.

As discussed above, the last chapter is about the present and future of the Silk Road. Entitled "Whither the Silk Road," the author suggests that this trade network didn't become irrelevant with the rise of transportation by sea and air and new modes of communication—though it has changed considerably.

There are a small number of graphics, including maps as well as photos and pictures that depict examples of commodities and technologies relevant to discussion of Silk Road trade. There are also sections devoted to references, advice on further readings, and a page of relevant websites.

I'd recommend this book for anyone who wants a brief overview of the Silk Road. If you're a history buff and want to dig deep and see broadly, it seems there are some very well-regarded books of a much more detailed nature. I can't comment on said books, but I know there is more than one award-winning book on Silk Road trade and cultural interactions. This, as the subtitle suggests, is much more of an outline of the subject. That said, I think the author does a good job of picking a few exemplary commodities, technologies, and arts, and focusing on them. Thus, one does get some of the insights of a book that drills down, just not along as broad of subject matter.

Tso William says

I remember an author writing on Tibet names his book as ?? (i.e. sky-burial), referring to the Tibetan burial

practice of leaving dead bodies in the mountain to decompose. As the bodies become rotten, vultures come to fight and pick the juicy parts of the bodies. Tibet, the author says, is one of such dead bodies. because like them, she is powerless to prevent the Communist China, the Western countries and rest of the world to pick the parts of Tibet that suit their interests.

Silk Road is not unlike Tibet in this regard. Just as Millward says that Washington referred to Silk Road as the historical friendship between India and Pakistan, Beijing also referred to Silk Road as the historical tie between China and Iran. China's recent *One Belt, One Road Initiative* is another of such instance. By narrowly focusing on the economic resources, as if Central Asia is a big oil field or waiting to be exploited, it is a moribund echo of what once was a vibrant trade route involving not just trading of silk and goods but also exchanges of ideas and cultures.

Silk Road is interesting in its own right. It does not *link* the so-called East and West because it is itself *part of history*. Without it, the world does not only look different from the present one because the world as it is would not even exist. All in all, it is not a dead body waiting to be exploited.

Bob says

A quote: (pp 22-23)

Darius the Great (r. 521 – 486 BCE), of the Achamenid dynasty, added both northwestern India and southeastern Europe to his Persian Empire. But Darius nearly foundered when he marched north against the Scythians, despite an army hundreds of thousands strong. To the Persians' surprise, the nomads simply melted away before them. Darius called the Scythian ruler a coward; according to Herodotus his Scythian adversary replied that "In our country there are no towns and no cultivated land, fear of losing which, or seeing it ravaged, might indeed provoke us to hasty battle." His supply lines dangerously overextended, Darius ultimately retreated in ignominy, having fallen to the oldest trick of the Central Asian nomads: the tactical retreat.

Jean Dory says

This IS a very short book--it is easily readable and can be consumed in just an afternoon. It is, however, a great intro to Silk Road history, touching on everything from the geography, environment, and ecology to the growth and decline of empires, to the spread of religions, to the trade routes, trading partners, and products which were traded, and much more. I would highly recommend this book to someone who just wanted a simple overview of this history.

litost says

The author broadens the definition of the Silk Road to include the transmission of goods, ideas and people, during any time period, across the Eurasian continent(s). It began to sound like a description of Globalization. The author is extremely erudite and has a lot to teach me, but I'm not currently ready for those lessons. I was looking for the history of a specific time and place, and stories of those adventurers who

followed the Silk Road.

Luca says

I've read a shedload of books and papers on the topic for a little project of mine and they more or less repeat the same things. This one stands out. It covers many more angles and does that in much fewer pages. In the words of Yo-Yo Ma, 'a must read for any aspiring enlightened global citizen'.

Steve Carroll says

great intro to the silk road that connected the East and West in antiquity. covers the transmission of art, goods, technology and its affect on the people of the 'stans as well as the nomadic people of the region. surprisingly engaging.

Ray LaManna says

With all the talk of a new Silk Road being developed by China I thought I might learn about the "old" Silk Road... and I learned a lot about the interplay of cultures, geography, and religions in this concise little book. The Very Short Introduction series is really good, written by experts for literate, engaged people who are not experts but want to learn more about the world.

Dee says

"Very short" hardly seems to cover it. This book is tiny, but it crams *so much information* in there. Yet despite the concepts, evidence and examples flying at you thick and fast, it never feels overwhelming; in fact, it's an inspiration to further knowledge acquisition. Part of that is the clear, careful, yet charming style, but also the structuring of the book by broad theme rather than geographically or chronologically assisted in cutting to the heart of those concepts.

A fantastic book to start exploration of the topic, but possibly also a good touchstone for the more knowledgeable to see other pieces of the puzzle that might not have made their radar yet.

John says

A history, written to counter the notion that the silk road ever stopped being an active thoroughfare by a historian who has fun with his subject. My only reservation is the paucity of maps---the historical overview would have been much easier to follow had there been some convenient way to keep track of all the place names and peoples he mentions. Here are a couple of highlight passages:

"Today, like much of Kashgar's old city, the bazaar has been sanitized, organized, modernized, and

harmonized into a dim echo of its former self, but not long ago you could buy apricots, saffron, tea, Bollywood-themed circumcision-party invitations, auto parts, farm tools, felted throw rugs, silk, and SIM cards..."

"The earliest depiction of lutes--with long narrow necks and small bodies--are found in cylinder seal carvings from Akkadian Mesopotamia (2370-2110 BCE) and on a boundary stone from Susa (western Iran). The lutes are played by men, sometimes naked, often in proximity to wild animals." (He suggests these to be signs of a "shamanistic" ritual)

He also has a lot to say about filled dumplings.

Phil says

Excellent short introduction to the history of a complex region.

Carlton says

I was disappointed by this work, clearly by a very knowledgeable author, who could not be bothered to use proper English, but instead writes in opaque academic prose. I did not finish, as it was just not enjoyable wading through this turgid account.
