

# Introduction

Morris Rossabi

Globalization has become so identified with the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that it seems to overshadow earlier eras of international relations. Many in the modern world have associated such contacts with recent times, a view that prevailed in education as well. For example, most so-called World History courses in secondary schools and community colleges placed Europe at the center, considering other civilizations principally when they interacted with the West. A global history perspective would reveal that globalization, in the form of East-West relations that significantly influenced both, far predated the twentieth century.

The World History Association pioneered such a global history approach. Established in the 1980s, it founded the *Journal of World History* as an exemplar of the latest research that links political, cultural, and social interactions among civilizations. Textbooks with an emphasis on global history have proliferated over the past few decades. Many simply provide the history of individual civilizations in separate chapters, but a few have attempted to integrate developments in one part of the world with other regions. Such efforts at global history have gone beyond the previous Eurocentric views.

Study of the Silk Roads, in particular, offers a unique means of conveying the significance of intercultural relations. Although most historians date the origins of the Silk Roads with the Han dynasty mission of Zhang Qian to Central Asia in the second century BCE, contacts between China and Central Asia no doubt preceded that time, as evidenced by scraps of silk (which only the Chinese then knew how to produce) in Middle Eastern tombs centuries before Zhang's expedition. From the second century BCE, to the sixteenth century CE, Silk Roads commerce persisted, with some notable exceptions. Caravans

ceased to travel in significant numbers when China or Iran were weak or faced chaotic conditions and could not protect merchants and other travelers journeying across Eurasia. Even during those turbulent eras, fragile connections were maintained, as individual traders, missionaries, and entertainers continued to travel, despite the hazards.

The Tang (618–907) and Yuan (1260–1368) witnessed the efflorescence of the Silk Roads. Edward Schafer, as early as the publication of his *Golden Peaches of Samarkand* (1963), drew attention to the remarkable exchange of ideas, goods, and techniques during the Tang. Schafer's exhaustive examination of literary texts, encyclopedias, and histories yielded a cornucopia of data confirming the wide range of Tang Silk Roads trade. Commerce and tribute in the forms of animals, birds, drugs, aromatics, jewels, relics, and books reached China. Most of these items were luxuries; few, generally bulky essentials were suited for such long-distance trade because of their heavy weight or burdensome volume. Together with products came tribute of slaves, dwarfs, and exotic-looking individuals, who impressed the Chinese and played minor roles in Chinese history. At the same time, Chinese inventions filtered their way westward. The secrets of silk production, a Chinese monopoly, had been revealed to the Byzantine empire even before the Tang, and Chinese captives introduced paper to Arab armies in Samarkand in the mid-eighth century. Chinese weavers and gold craftsmen survived the Islamic invasions in Bukhara and transmitted Chinese motifs and designs.

The Silk Roads trade constituted a relatively small sector of the Chinese economy, but it had great influence on Chinese culture. The Tang rulers invited Turkic musicians and dancers from Central Asia, the real nexus of the Silk Roads, to perform at court, leading to fads for foreign music, dance, and costume. The Chinese adapted and adopted Middle Eastern musical instruments, borrowings that enriched Chinese music. Central Asian music appears to have influenced Li Bo, one of China's greatest poets. The rhyme and irregular meters of Turkic music characterized some of his poetry, not really a surprise, as he was born along China's northwestern border. His family was "engaged in trade," and his work "shows the marked influence of Central Asian culture."<sup>1</sup> Even stronger evidence of the fascination with foreigners that resulted in substantial impact on Chinese culture is the Tang tricolored ceramic figurines.<sup>2</sup> These exquisite objects, which were often buried with prominent figures (still another indication of how valued they were), frequently depicted Silk Roads travelers. Members of the Chinese elite prized the Central Asian and Middle Eastern merchants, entertainers, and guardian figures portrayed in these ceramics, as evidenced by the number of

these ceramics discovered in tombs. Similarly clear indications of the prestige accorded to facilitators or facilities of Silk Roads trade were the tricolored ceramic horses and camels, some of which were quite sizeable. These animals were essential for Eurasian commerce, and it is thus no accident that ceramicists would choose to portray them.

Perhaps the most lasting cultural impact of the Tang Silk Roads was the introduction of foreign religions. Buddhism had first been transmitted to China via the Silk Roads oases during the Han dynasty. In the following centuries, teachers and translators had brought Buddhist texts and translated them into Chinese. The pace of interaction with Buddhists outside of China accelerated during the Tang, as such renowned pilgrims as Xuanzang traveled to India and Central Asia to study with great Buddhist masters and to collect Buddhist artifacts and texts. Travels by these pilgrims naturally contributed to greater Sino-Indian interaction not only in religion but also in trade and cultural and artistic transmission.<sup>3</sup>

However, the Tang also witnessed the arrival of a profusion of Middle Eastern religions. The early Tang court did not try to exclude or discriminate against foreign religions. Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism—Iranian religions—reached China, and believers constructed a few of their temples in Chang'an, the Tang capital. Neither attracted many adherents, but Manichaeism went northward to convert many Uyghur Turks, serving as the foundation for the Uyghur empire (744–840).<sup>4</sup> Nestorian Christianity also arrived via merchants and clergy, but it too did not take hold in China. Like Manichaeism, Nestorianism eventually became popular north of China, particularly among Mongol women. Islam was, by far, the most important foreign religion to attract a Chinese constituency. Muslim communities formed mostly in Northwest and Southeast China, and Arab, Iranian, and Turkic Muslims played important roles in the government and economy of Tang China. However, when the Tang declined, both the court and many in the populace blamed foreigners and their religions for the country's problems. Starting around 845, the court, as well as rebels, targeted and attacked Buddhism and other foreign religions. Most foreigners reacted by avoiding China, leading to four centuries of limited intercultural contact along the Silk Roads. Trade between the Northern Song (960–1126), the succeeding great Chinese dynasty, and its closest neighbors, including oases in modern Northwest China along the Silk Roads, persisted, as did artistic interchanges, specifically in the production of textiles, but the long-distance trade reaching to Iran and the Middle East dissipated. The nearby oases sent horses, jewels, and incense as tribute and brought horses, camels, copper utensils, and bullion for trade while the Chinese provided gifts,

as well as trade, of silk, lacquer ware, tea, paper, and porcelain, among other goods.

The rise and expansion of the Mongol empire set the stage for the great renewal of the Silk Roads trade. By carving out the largest contiguous land empire in world history, the Mongols imposed a Pax Mongolica on Eurasia, permitting relatively easy travel from one region to another. Although the various Mongol Khanates in Russia (the Golden Horde), Iran (the Ilkhanate), Central Asia (Chaghadai), and China (Yuan dynasty) were occasionally in conflict with each other, they generally continued to protect trade caravans, leading to considerable East-West contacts. Merchants, missionaries, adventurers, astronomers, interpreters, military commanders, and rulers, among others, traveled along the oases and cities through Eurasia. As in the Tang, trade items consisted of luxuries and thus did not have a tremendous impact on the economies of the great Asian civilizations of that era. To be sure, the oases and individual merchants profited from the Silk Roads trade, but it hardly made a dent on what might be called the Gross Domestic Product of China, Iran, the European states, and others involved in this commerce. Nonetheless, the extensive flow of travelers, goods, ideas, and artifacts contributed to cultural interchanges in such fields as astronomy, medicine, agronomy, and the arts. Iranian astronomers and physicians came to China while Chinese textiles, porcelains, and agricultural texts reached Iran.

Peace and commerce provided opportunities for considerable cultural exchanges and influences, but the significance of such interactions, particularly for China, ought not to be exaggerated. China benefited from the introduction of Iranian astronomical instruments and conceptions and medical precepts, and Chinese motifs and designs appeared in Iranian tiles, illustrated manuscripts, and pottery. However, neither culture was fundamentally altered because of its borrowings from the other. Thus, the Ming dynasty, which compelled the Mongols to withdraw from China, adopted policies to avert any “barbarian” invasions and scarcely differed from most traditional Chinese dynasties. Moreover, the Safavids, who reestablished indigenous rule in Iran in the early sixteenth century after three hundred years of Mongol and Timurid domination, restored Iranian civilization with only traces of Chinese influence. The Russians who eliminated the last vestiges of so-called Tartar rule, also in the early sixteenth century, show little direct influence from the Mongols.

Despite this caveat, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries produced an astonishing number of travelers and travel accounts. The Franciscan John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck voyaged from Europe to the Mongol encampments in East Asia to persuade the “barbarians”

to convert to Christianity and to cease further incursions on the West. Their reports offered invaluable information about Mongol customs, beliefs, and practices. Marco Polo provided perhaps the most renowned travel account in world history. The Nestorian Christian Rabban Sauma departed from Dadu (modern Beijing) on a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands and eventually served as an ambassador from the Mongol rulers of Iran to propose an alliance with the Europeans against the major Islamic dynasty in the Middle East. He wrote descriptions of Naples, Rome, Paris, and Bordeaux and of his dialogues with the College of Cardinals. Other travelers who capitalized on the Pax Mongolica to undertake lengthy journeys included Ibn Battuta, a voyager to many regions in Asia and Africa, and Zhou Daguan, the astute recorder of Cambodian society.

Although all of these contacts among China, Central Asia, and the Middle East did not end with the collapse of the Mongol empire, the number of travelers along the Silk Roads diminished. The Ming dynasty imposed restrictions on foreign trade and tribute. Zheng He's expeditions (1405–1432), the greatest naval journeys until Columbus's time, were magnificent sea voyages that reached the east coast of Africa, but they were aberrations and were rapidly halted after the death of their most supportive emperor. Similarly, Chen Cheng's embassies to Herat, Samarkand, and fifteen other oases and states, ended with the demise of the same emperor, and the Ming court dispatched no further official envoys to Central Asia. Silk Roads trade continued on a lesser scale through the early sixteenth century because of the demand for Chinese silk, porcelain, and tea in nearby oases such as Turfan and the more distant empire ruled by Tamerlane's (or Temür's) descendants. Starting in the early sixteenth century, considerable turbulence along the Silk Roads, the emerging competition of the sea route from Europe to East Asia, and Safavid Iran's conversion to Shi'ism and the ensuing conflicts with its neighbors, the mostly Sunni Ottoman Turks and the Central Asian Khanates, impeded and then led to a near cessation of the land-borne East-West caravan trade. Cultural contacts between China and Central Asia and the Middle East also diminished, although Middle Eastern dynasties collected Ming porcelains, now found in the Topkapi museum in Istanbul and the Ardebil shrine in Iran, which influenced motifs and decorations on Turkish and Iranian pottery.

By the seventeenth century, overland trade had shifted to a northerly route, from China via Central Asia and Siberia to Russia, undermining some of the traditional oases and towns through which merchants had traveled. Towns such as Samarkand, Turfan, and Khotan declined in population and influence. Russo-Chinese trade substituted for Central

Asian and Middle Eastern commerce, with Tsarist Russian merchants eager to obtain traditional items such as silk, porcelain, and tea, as well as rhubarb, a new product which they could sell at sizable profits to Europeans who valued its purported medicinal properties. Prospective Russian interpreters, translators, and envoys traveled to Beijing to study Chinese and Manchu, the language of the rulers of China in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), and a Russian ecclesiastical mission catered to their spiritual needs. Meanwhile, Central Asia, bereft of the profitable Silk Roads trade and enduring religious and political schisms often leading to conflict, became weaker and more vulnerable to the expansionist desires of Qing China and Tsarist Russia. The Qing conquered eastern Central Asia by 1760, and the Russians encroached gradually on western Central Asia, first gaining control over the nomadic Kazakhs and then the major towns and oases by around 1870. As the Qing itself began to decline in the mid-nineteenth century, the British and the Russians sought to play a greater role in eastern Central Asia and to replace the weakening Manchu dynasty.

Growing foreign interest in Central Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led adventurers, archaeologists, and scientists to explore the region. To be sure, trade along the old land routes did not flourish, but as one observer noted, there were “Foreign Devils on the Silk Road.” Aurel Stein, Paul Pelliot, Nikolai Przevalski, and Albert von le Coq were a few of these “devils” who braved desert heat and mountain chill to find and explore some of the archeological and artistic treasures of the Silk Roads. They discovered such spectacular sites as Dunhuang, Bezeklik (near Turfan), and Kyzyl and carried away some of the beautiful sculptures and paintings to their native lands, controversial actions which many Chinese considered to have been pillaging of their artistic, not to mention religious, heritage.

In the twentieth century, the main centers of the old Silk Roads trade encountered more turbulence. China underwent two revolutions—the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the communist defeat of Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist regime in 1949. Iran was ruled in a dictatorial fashion by the Pahlavi dynasty until a revolution in 1979 brought to power Islamic fundamentalists who currently govern the country. Eastern Central Asia became relatively independent after the Qing dynasty’s collapse, but the communist government reestablished control over the region (known as Xinjiang since 1884) in 1949–1950. The region has faced considerable unrest, as more and more Chinese have moved in. Estimates vary, but the Chinese, who constituted about 10 to 15 percent of Xinjiang’s total population in 1950, now make up about 45 to 50 percent, leading to tensions between the primarily Turkic and Muslim community and the Chinese settlers. After a decade

of intermittent conflicts, the Soviet Union established jurisdiction over western Central Asia by 1928. Soviet leaders suppressed the local people, their culture, and Islam, though they introduced modern educational and health practices. In 1991–92, five Central Asian republics broke away from Russia and founded independent countries.

After four centuries of relative obscurity, with the collapse of the Silk Roads and perceptions of these areas as minor regions, the 1990s witnessed a revival and a renewed view of their significance. This change of attitude was partly based upon the discovery of abundant quantities of virtually untapped mineral and natural resources. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, in western Central Asia and the Caucasus, are endowed with considerable petroleum reserves, and Turkmenistan, also in Central Asia, has natural gas deposits. North Xinjiang (or Ili) is the site of the Karamai oil fields. Because all these regions are landlocked, pipelines are essential, and many of the great powers, seeking this oil, have different views about the routes. China has already worked out an agreement for a pipeline to Xinjiang, but the other pipelines are under negotiations, with some states favoring a route through Iran, others through the Caucasus and Turkey and still others, via Russia, to the West. The twenty-first century may witness the substitution of the Oil Routes for the Silk Roads as major economic sectors.

The glorious history of the Silk Roads offers extraordinary pedagogical possibilities. In an article entitled “The Silk Roads: An Educational Resource,” published in *Education About Asia* and later in *From Silk to Oil*, a curricular package that my collaborators and I developed for secondary school teachers, we described some of these possibilities. Several of the units we developed for *From Silk to Oil* can be adapted and used for community colleges, but greater detail and different methodologies are required for colleges and universities.

The essays in this work, produced by professors who participated in a National Endowment for the Humanities–funded seminar at the East-West Center of the University of Hawaii, offer just such assistance for instructors who are not necessarily specialists on Asia or intercultural relations or trade. The authors, who have taught Silk Roads units or courses, provide positive and successful strategies for teaching and secondary source research. All suggest bibliographic references for professors and students, furnishing the basic sources without overwhelming instructors with a plethora of texts. Some contribute personal recollections of life or visits along the Silk Roads or broader historical and philosophical discussions related to this romanticized link between East and West.

Pedagogic assistance comprises the bulk of the essays, which offer a variety of approaches to the instructor for a variety of courses and disciplines. The first chapters take a geographic approach to incorporating

the Silk Roads into existing courses. Professor Racel furnishes guidance on the incorporation of Silk Roads studies into a one-semester World History course. She shows how study of the Silk Roads can lead to insights not only about global interconnectedness but also about specific regions. Professor Carlson discusses the role of the Silk Roads in European history, focusing on trade products, particularly silk, but also such other commodities as porcelain and even tulips. Discreet study of these goods as they were transmitted from East to West leads to greater understanding of economic interrelationships among civilizations. She shows that it is impossible to study European history in isolation from the rest of the world.

In a tour de force essay on the historical significance of the Silk Roads to Chinese identity, Professor Foster points to a new way of analyzing Chinese civilization. Scholars have often studied Chinese history in isolation, with only limited reference to other cultures and civilization. Professor Foster challenges this paradigm and shows that from earliest times other lands repeatedly influenced China. Starting with the chariot and bronze technology and moving to the introduction of Buddhism and Islam, among other religions, to the arrival of Iranian astronomers and physicians, the so-called Middle Kingdom has interacted with neighbors, as well as far-flung lands, via the Silk Roads. Professor Foster demonstrates the value of studying Chinese history and civilization from a Eurasian, or even global, perspective.

The next chapters turn to ways to incorporate the Silk Roads into disciplines other than history. Two political scientists provide links between the Silk Roads and globalization and other contemporary issues. Professor Parrish associates the Silk Roads with globalization, but he also shows how the modern identities of groups such as the Uyghurs, Mongols, and Tibetans have been shaped by both accurate and imagined connections with reputed forebears, who were often related to the Silk Roads. In addition, he pleads for incorporation of Chinese and other Asian concepts into political theory courses. Like many of the other essayists, Professor Guo emphasizes the interdependence of the world and the scholarly disciplines, an insight inspired by study of the Silk Roads. He then focuses on analysis of the Silk Roads as a means of understanding contemporary China and shows that the myth of a monolithic, isolated, and exclusionary traditional China does not jibe with its involvement with its neighbors and the wider Asian world, via the Silk Roads. He confirms that China and the other Asian civilizations borrowed technologies and ideas from each other, but in each case adapted and adopted these features to blend in with their own societies. Similarly, he trusts that students and policymakers will recognize that the



current U.S. model presented to the world as a market economy and democracy may deviate considerably from the original, just as China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia each altered and adopted a different form of Indian Buddhism. He concludes that no single development model will suit the world's diverse cultures and that the U.S. paradigm for democracy may not be appropriate for all.

Professor O'Mara introduces the use of visual culture as a means of understanding cultural interactions among different civilizations. A study of material remains, including sculptures, porcelains, and tomb decorations, reveals the remarkable interchanges among the Eurasian civilizations. Art history can examine the motifs, shapes, and techniques of these art works and can derive insights about the interconnectedness of West Asia and East Asia during specific historical eras. Because of the paucity of written texts describing such contacts, these objects assume even greater importance in documenting the relations of the various civilizations along the Silk Roads. Thus, art history supplies a vital vehicle for a greater understanding of cultural borrowing and adaptation.

Two chapters take a thematic approach to addressing the Silk Roads, providing lenses through which to approach the subject in any class. Professor Bai offers philosophic reflections about contemporary issues of globalization and identity, focusing on the Chinese model. He makes the interesting point that the Chinese traditionally emphasized culture rather than ethnicity in determining identity, which certainly has contemporary repercussions. He also makes an argument for the beneficial nature of nationalism. Professor Ronald Frank offers ways of introducing students to the lifestyles and culture of the pastoral nomads, a vital but little studied group in Silk Roads history. He shows that most students of the Silk Roads have focused their attention on the sedentary peoples who lived in well-defined territories. Yet nomads often transported goods from one part of Eurasia to another, and students can understand a different way of life by studying the herders. Professor Frank demonstrates that most studies view the pastoral nomads through the lens of the sedentary civilizations. Thus, a true Silk Roads perspective needs as far as possible to examine the nomads' history and their contributions to Eurasian trade from their own viewpoint, albeit the few sources that reflect the herders' perceptions limit historians. Nonetheless, Professor Frank offers some useful interpretations about the pastoral nomads' role along the Silk Roads.

The next four chapters focus on alternative pedagogical strategies and the nuts and bolts of teaching courses on the Silk Roads. Professor Diamant developed a service-learning program that emphasized the Silk Roads' association with current concerns about globalization. He

drew out such themes from Silk Roads history as identity, assimilation, and intercultural borrowing and applied them to a modern world that requires peace and understanding among ethnic and national groups. He combined travel to the region with service requirements for students, hoping to instill the values of true globalization and intercultural understanding. Professor Frost capitalized on travel as a means of helping students develop insights about the Silk Roads. She led a tour to Northwest China, one of the cradles of the Silk Roads. The students' experiences, combined with reading of important texts, challenged their perceptions about identity. They observed a China in which imams played significant roles, the food was more Middle Eastern than Chinese, and even the craftsmen produced items, such as rugs, that are more often associated with the Islamic world than China. In short, they learned that China was a multiethnic and multireligious society, shaped, in part, by the Silk Roads.

Professor Moore discusses the ease with which instructors and students can incorporate primary sources on the Silk Roads. The voyagers' accounts she cites are colorful and exciting and can help students to understand narrative writing as well as to assess the reliability of what on the surface seem fantastic accounts. In short, study of these texts promotes critical thinking and the development of criteria for assessing reliability. Professor Moore also provides a useful compilation of the best translations of the travelers' accounts. Professor Wendelken adds a pedagogical essay that covers an often neglected but vital feature of the Silk Roads—proper consideration of geography. Silk Roads trade and cultural interactions cannot be understood without a clear knowledge of the environments through which merchants, pilgrims, missionaries, envoys, and entertainers traveled. Descriptions of the hardships they endured and the triumphs they experienced are essential for insights about topography, climate, and economy. Professor Wendelken also offers a guide to maps, which provides the needed insights and shows how instructors can use these graphic representations to bring the Silk Roads to life.

In the final chapter, Professor Zhang gives a vivid account of Khotan, one of the most important sites on the Silk Roads, to which she and her family were sent during the Cultural Revolution in China. She shows both the idealism that influenced many Chinese during this era but also the bleakness of the Silk Roads oases. Her frightening description of getting lost in the Taklamakan desert echoes the recollections of many survivors and probably reflects the thoughts of those not fortunate enough to have found the right path to safety.

In sum, these essays provide a wide choice of approaches for introducing students to the Silk Roads. Some of the pedagogical articles describe trips and service-learning efforts that lead to active involvement in the Silk Roads region, while others provide guidance on maps, art works, and bibliographies for studying its history and culture from home. Still others emphasize content such as a consideration of the impact of the Silk Roads on Chinese history or a survey of the importance of religions or nomads in linking cultures in Eurasia. Finally, one offers a haunting, firsthand account with a marvelous sense of place of one of the major Silk Roads oases. In short, these essays offer invaluable starting points for studies of globalization, economic and political interactions among civilizations, and religious, artistic, and cultural diffusion.

### Notes

1. Elling O. Eide, "On Li Po," in *Perspectives on the T'ang*, ed. Arthur Wright and Denis Twitchett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 389.

2. See Jane Gaston Mahler, *The Westerners among the Figurines of the T'ang Dynasty of China* (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1959).

3. See, for example, Liu Xinru, *Silk and Religion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

4. The latest work on the subject is Michael Drompp, *Tang China and the Collapse of the Uighur Empire: A Documentary History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).