

## TEACHING THE SILK ROAD: A JOURNEY OF PEDAGOGICAL DISCOVERY

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Four years ago the rasher of the two of us, A.J. Andrea, a historian who specializes in long-distance travel and cultural encounters before 1492, suggested to William Mierse, an art historian and archeologist specializing in the late Hellenistic World, that sometime in the future we should jointly teach a course on the Silk Road. At the time Andrea was preparing the third edition of Volume I of *The Human Record* (1998)—now into a fourth edition—a global history source book that emphasizes travel and cultural exchange as two of its main themes, and the idea seemed exciting. Given our respective schedules, we concluded that the spring semester of 2000 would be the first mutually convenient term in which we could offer the course, and we would do so as a seminar for first-year students. It all sounded so nice and easy—until we began to plan our syllabus.

As we mapped out the course, several problems became obvious:

- (1) There is no textbook, good, bad, or mediocre, on the Silk Road.
- (2) There is no way, even with a textbook, that we could cover in depth and in any reasonable chronological fashion the 1,500 years or so during which the Silk Road flourished—especially within the context of a seminar.
- (3) It would be necessary for us to introduce our students to several key and quite different disciplinary perspectives, namely anthropology, archeology, art history, and history, without unduly confusing them—a tall order.
- (4) In all probability our first-year students would know absolutely nothing about the Silk Road, the lands over which its many routes ran, and the multiple cultures that played key historical roles in its long history, and we were right—not one of them had ever heard of a Parthian, a Tangut, or even a Uighur (as difficult as that might be to believe).
- (5) Of all the gaps in the students' knowledge, the most critical would be basic geography—as we have learned in our combined half century of teaching.

With the naive optimism, perhaps, of John of Plano Carpini setting off for the court of the Great Khan, we decided to forge ahead, regardless but not mindless of the perils that lay ahead. Like Friar John, we also had faith—in our case, faith that there were some resources that we could use and maybe even some skills we could call upon. First the resources:



- (1) Video programs—the teacher’s lifeline! There exist twelve fifty-five-minute video programs on the Silk Road. Divided into two six-part series, they were produced respectively in 1990 and 1992 and aired on the Discovery Channel. The earlier series—a less satisfactory series—is *The Silk Road: An Ancient World of Adventure*; the later series—and somewhat better—entitled simply *The Silk Road*, is a joint production of NHK of Japan and CCTV of China. Neither is ideal, but there they are.
- (2) Andrea’s global history sourcebook contains a fair number of sources, both documentary and artifactual, that relate to the Silk Road and the many cultures that were involved in Silk Road interchanges, and these sources could serve as bases for class discussion and student exploration.
- (3) The University of Vermont (UVM) has an excellent collection of Asian art slides from which Mierse could extract many examples of artistic evidence of cross-cultural encounters and exchanges along the Silk Road.
- (4) Regardless of the fact that there was, at the point in which we were preparing our syllabus, no single textbook or book of any sort in print on the Silk Road, there were a few books and special journal issues (all of which appear in the annotated bibliography below) that could serve as guide posts, or maybe even oases, along the Silk Road. As our momentary lapse into the past tense suggests, several books on the Silk Road appeared subsequent to the start of our seminar, and they also appear in our appended bibliography. Would that they had been available to us!
- (5) Vermont is a rural state, but it is not that far from major museums—museums that hold materials relevant to the Silk Road, the two most important being Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts and Harvard’s Sackler Museum. The former has one of the richest collections in the world of East Asian artifacts; the latter is the proud (embarrassed?) possessor of several Mahayana Buddhist frescoes and a kneeling Bodhisattva lifted from the Mogao Caves of the Thousand Buddhas near Dunhuang in the Gobi Desert, as well as many other artifacts relevant to the Silk Road. Visits to both museums would have to be fit into the schedule.

The skills we believed we could call upon were less tangible but, we hoped, just as real. Apart from our respective disciplinary perspectives, training, and professional research, both of us emphasize geographical knowledge in all our courses—so we at least know how to use maps and, what is more, help students to learn how to use them.

As we prepared our syllabus, we decided on several basic strategies and tactics:

- (1) Although this was a seminar, it was composed of first-year students; we would, therefore, meet three times a week in fifty-minute segments, in order to allow us to deal with the material in easily handled pieces. In our view, a three-hour, once-a-week session would not work at an introductory level.



- (2) There is no way we could teach 1,500 years of Silk Road history seriatim without its degenerating into a series of "one damn thing after another." So strict chronology was out, even though both of us professionally are slaves to chronology. We would not abandon chronology totally, inasmuch as we would quite often hand out chronological charts to help students sort out the cast of characters, but we would not follow a strict chronological sequence from the late second century B.C.E. to around 1400 C.E.
- (3) Given our concerns about chronology, we would approach the Silk Road geographically, moving from Chang'an (modern Xian) to Antioch, from China to the Mediterranean. As we moved westward, we would deal with various historical and artistic phenomena as we encountered them along the Silk Road. For example, when we reached the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, we would consider the transit of Mahayana Buddhism into China along the routes of the Silk Road and the creation of Buddhist art along those same roads. In other words, place and not chronology would drive the sequence in which we dealt with materials. For that reason, we would deal with the thirteenth-century Mongol empire long before we discussed the Parthian empire, which took shape a thousand years earlier in Iran and Iraq.
- (4) Having decided on a geographical rather than chronological approach to teaching the Silk Road, we would focus the course around those twelve fifty-five-minute videos that move the viewer from modern Xian to the Pamir Mountains in far western Chinese Turkistan. (Unfortunately, they go no farther.) But we would not show them in class. After all, this was to be a seminar, and even if it were not, we believe the classroom is no place for videos. So students would have to view them outside of class at our media center, just as they read assigned books and articles outside of the classroom.
- (5) A seminar must emphasize writing and informed discussion. Students would have to write weekly papers that critique each of the twelve video programs.
- (6) But these are first-year students, who need a lot of guidance. Therefore, we must provide them with focus questions and lists of terms to help them view these programs profitably. To be honest, the programs are not easy to follow, inasmuch as they assume a general knowledge of Chinese history and an easy familiarity with Chinese place names—most of which never appear in Roman letters on the screen. Moreover, created by Japanese filmmakers in collaboration with a state television network of the People's Republic of China, the programs have cultural and ideological layers that students need help in identifying and deconstructing.
- (7) Seminars must emphasize both individual and group exploration. Although all written work should be done individually—and each student would write about fifty typewritten pages over the course of the semester—there is great value in group think, when it is properly channeled. Therefore, we would divide the



seminar into four four-person study groups, which we would name the "Han," the "Kushana," the "Parthians," and the "Romans," after the four empires that dominated portions of the Silk Road in its first age of efflorescence. Each group would be urged to assemble weekly to view and discuss the video program of the week, using focus questions to guide their collective study and analysis of the program. Moreover, each week a single group would be charged with the responsibility of leading class discussion on the assigned video program. At the same time, every student would be required to compose privately an individual paper—a paper that would be read, commented upon, and returned for revision.

- (8) We are academics who are wedded to our respective disciplines, and we must, therefore, introduce students to the ways in which we use evidence and reconstruct the past. Therefore, each week we would have to devote one fifty-minute class to the analysis of several relevant documentary sources from *The Human Record*—that is, sources relevant to the video program of the week; we must equally devote one class each week to studying relevant artistic and archeological artifacts. In looking at artifacts, especially works of art, it would be necessary to show students that they had to analyze these images just as deeply and thoroughly as the textual documents they were reading. In other words, the art we incorporated into class could not be seen or used as peripheral illustrations to jazz up a subject that we feared would otherwise bore the class.
- (9) Given these imperatives, we decided to discuss the video of the week on Monday and receive the students' papers that day; we would discuss the documents of the week on Wednesday, and Friday would be given over to the art and artifacts of the week. Focus questions would be handed out to the students prior to the Wednesday class, and they would be asked to use these questions to guide their analysis of the documents to be discussed. Unlike the Monday class, we would not ask them to study the documents within their respective study groups, but they could, if they so wished. Inasmuch as we would be taking a road trip to the museums of Boston and Cambridge in April, the Friday session in which the students would learn to use their eyes to read these pieces of art would be crucial to the seminar's success, and for this reason no study questions would be handed out ahead of time and the art and artifacts shown the students would be sprung upon them in our now-darkened classroom. Each Friday's exercise would be aimed at helping students learn to dissect images, to understand visual language, and then to see how that language can be joined with textual evidence (Wednesday's matter) to form a richer understanding of a given period or phenomenon. This would mean working slowly and deliberately, but the goal was worth the effort.
- (10) In light of all of the preceding, it became clear to us as we outlined our course that the seminar would be driven more by methodology than content. (And we use that term with a full knowledge of its Greek roots—"a study of modes of



inquiry.") Given the vast and amorphous nature of the chosen subject, our primary goal would have to be twofold: to help our students become aware of how historians, art historians, archeologists, and anthropologists use evidence critically and to assist those same students in developing their own critical skills. Obviously, in the process of studying all of this evidence as they conceptually traveled across Asia, they would become quite knowledgeable about the Silk Road and its place in the history of trans-Eurasian cultural exchange.

- (11) Finally, we decided that before we could progress in this course, we had to make sure that everyone knew some basic geography. Without it, all else would be useless. For this reason, we would devote, possibly to our students' chagrin, the first several weeks of the course to mapmaking.

We began our mapmaking on the floor with crayons and blank pieces of paper. All of us—professors included—took a half hour to draw *from memory* a map of Eurasia, with fifteen key items—such as the Black Sea, China, and Mongolia—clearly delineated. We then taped up the maps and held a nonjudgmental critique. Each person, including the two graphically challenged professors, explained her or his map, and none was perfect. Some, of course, were less perfect than others. One even placed India in Siberia. The tone we tried to set was light, even humorous, but still serious. The sole point we tried to make was that everyone needed to do some basic work on geography. We then asked students to redraw their maps at home—again, largely just outlines of Eurasia—and to sketch in the major routes of the Silk Road. To aid them, we directed their attention to various historical atlases and several books on the Silk Road that have excellent maps. (See the bibliography below.) While engaged in this second map project, which was due the next class, the class received a third project: Over the course of a full week each person was to draw yet a larger and more detailed map with fifty sites clearly delineated on the map—all of those sites, of course, being relevant to the Silk Road. Most of the students put quite a bit of effort into those maps, but when we received them we still were not satisfied. A major problem for most was scale; Central Asia was about as broad as the area from the Atlantic to the Rhine in too many maps. Neither of us was happy with any of the maps handed in on the third go-around. What to do? We then required each of the four groups to create a single collaborative map. Those four maps, which were handed in fully four weeks into the semester, were worth the effort and time. We now knew that our students had at least a reasonable grasp of the basic geographical face of the regions of Eurasia touched by the Silk Road.

While all of this map work was taking place, we stayed active on other fronts. Early on we asked the class to view—outside of class—the video program *Riddle of the Desert Mummies*, which deals with Caucasian mummies discovered at various sites in the eastern region of the Tarim Basin between Mongolia and Tibet; the mummies, which are variously dated, indicating a long period of residence in this desert region,



date in some instances as far back as 4,000 years B.P. Our purpose in assigning this program was twofold: to help students discover that regularly traveled, long-distance routes crisscrossed Inner Asia well before the reign of Emperor Han Wudi (r. 141-87 B.C.E.), who is often credited with providing the impetus that led to the initial opening of the Silk Road; and to begin to help students learn how archeological sites and artifacts are interpreted, used, and even misused. Discussion of this film, which was led by Mierse, was quite eye-opening for many students, as they saw how archeologists piece together and evaluate evidence. We also had students read Andrea's Prologue to *The Human Record*, which deals in some detail with how the historian uses documentary and artifactual evidence. As the resident historian, Andrea prepared questions for each of the four groups to help them understand what documentary sources are and how one uses them critically. On his part, Mierse led discussion in a subsequent class on a piece of art that is also included in *The Human Record's* Prologue, in order to help the students see how an art historian studies a piece of art and the types of questions he asks of the object. With these three introductions to the ways in which one uses various sorts of evidence, we believed our students were ready to begin looking critically at an interpretative study of the Silk Road—the video programs—and at some of the evidence that scholars use in their reconstruction of the past.

For twelve weeks we traveled, video program by video program, from Chang'an through the Gansu Corridor, by way of Dunhuang and the oasis towns along the periphery of the Taklamakan Desert, to the Pamirs, visiting along the way numerous sites and cultures relevant to the Silk Road. For the first four of those weeks we provided the focus questions for each Monday's discussion and required each of the four study groups to lead discussion on one question. Additionally, each student passed in on Monday a one-page (no more) typed analytical essay that addressed the core issue raised by that week's program. This issue had also been given them the previous week along with a list of key terms and focus questions. The paper would be read and commented on by both professors and handed back on Wednesday, with a typed revision of the paper due the following Monday. Thus, once we were fully operational, each student passed in two essays each Monday—a revision and a first effort.

For the fifth and subsequent weeks of our video odyssey, we asked one of the four study groups to undertake, in full consultation with us, the duty of preparing the study sheets and leading the entire Monday discussion. With eight remaining programs and four study groups, each four-person team would have two chances to show its stuff. Members of the group-of-the-week would first view the program and then meet with both of us to work out exactly what they would put on those study sheets and what classroom tactics they might employ while leading discussion. Of key concern, of course, was the big question: What issue would be the essay topic of the week? Needless to say, we, the professors, had to review the video program of the



week so that it was fresh in our minds and so that we could provide guidance to the study group. We used this review session, normally scheduled for Friday afternoon at Andrea's house, as an opportunity to discuss at leisure where we had gone that week and where we were headed in the near and not-so-near future. These regular pedagogical and social interludes were in keeping with the traditions of the caravansaries of the Silk Road that offered opportunities for both business and pleasure to weary travelers.

On each Wednesday we explicated documents, ranging from Chinese poems describing the realities of life along the western frontier to the eyewitness accounts of such Silk Road travelers as Zhang Qian, Faxian, William of Rubruck, and Marco Polo. As noted, the texts always were related to Monday's video program. Students who had never heard of Manichaeism or Nestorian Christianity prior to entering our seminar were now explicating Manichaean documents from Turfan and a document detailing the reception of Persian Nestorian monks in Tang China.

On Friday these same students studied images that related to themes raised in the previous two classes. Students who a few weeks earlier had had no idea whatsoever of the basic outlines and beliefs of Buddhism were now discussing the iconographical qualities that delineated the artistic traditions of Theravada, Mahayana, and Tantric Buddhism.

By early April the class was ready for its road trip to Boston and Cambridge. But well before then Mierse had contacted the East and South Asian curators at the Museum of Fine Arts and the Sackler to arrange our own meeting with them to go over exactly what we would be showing our students at each museum. Because we would be visiting on a Saturday, when the curators would not be available to us, it was necessary for them to brief us on what our students should see and also to provide us with information that we had not previously had. For example, the East Asian curator at the MFA, Dr. Wu, pointed out that a ceramic camel from the era of the Sui Dynasty on display bears two stringed instruments. Well, we both knew that, but what we did not know was that one instrument was of Persian origin, whereas the other originated in India. Both made their way to China (and to Japan), where they were adopted and modified. As serendipity would have it, we were pointing out this instrument-bearing Bactrian camel to our class just as we were studying the Silk Road video program that deals with the influx of musical instruments and traditions into China and Japan from lands far to the west. In like manner, the curator showed us how Chinese crafters of porcelain imitated the look of Roman glass. With this knowledge, Mierse was able to lead the class first to an exhibition of Roman glass and then to a piece of Sui Dynasty ceramic, thereby allowing the students to discover the connection for themselves. It is one thing to talk about syncretic connections along the Silk Road, but when properly used, nothing rivals a good museum for making those connections clear and concrete.

The six or so hours spent at these two museums deserve their own lengthy essay. Suffice it to report here, the experience was worth every penny paid by UVM for the



van and assorted expenses and the two eight-hour roundtrip drives that we took in order to plan and then execute this road trip (not to mention the frustration of trying to park ["pahk"?] the van in Harvard Square). Judging from our students' expressions of appreciation and the quality of their post-visit papers, this was a winner.

In summary, thanks to a fair amount of planning and good luck, as well as the availability of such key resources as the Silk Road video programs, carefully selected documentary and artistic pieces of evidence, and two first-class museums within driving distance, we were able with some success to travel some 1,500 years through time and about 5,000 miles across Eurasia, and to visit with a variety of cultures and states that were significant in the long and convoluted history of the Silk Road. And we achieved all of this without having followed a strict chronological sequence.

### Select Bibliography

Bentley, Jerry H. *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Inasmuch Bentley's book deals with cultural encounter and syncretic exchange across the Afro-Eurasian World prior to 1500, it is must reading for any person engaged in a study of the Silk Road. All of its chapters, not just Chapter 2, "The Era of the Ancient Silk Roads," are important. Each student was required to purchase the paperback edition of this book and to write a critical review of it as an end-of-semester project.

Christian, David. "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads: The Silk Roads in World History." *Journal of World History*, 11 (Spring, 2000), 1-26.

Although this important article appeared only weeks before the end of the semester, we quickly incorporated it into our syllabus as required reading and the subject of a class-long discussion. Christian's main thesis is that "trans-ecological" routes of exchange, which linked regions of pastoralism with regions of agriculture, crisscrossed the steppes of Eurasia for several millennia prior to the opening of the "trans-civilizational" Silk Roads and continued to feed the main arteries of the Silk Roads into modern times.

Foltz, Richard C. *Religions on the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

The title says it all. Although this book is rather brief (186 pages) and therefore covers the religions under consideration in less detail than a specialist might wish, it is ideal for the novice, especially a student. Although Foltz employs the now largely abandoned Wade-Giles system of Romanization of Chinese (e.g. Tun-huang rather than Dunhuang), which might confuse students, we would have adopted it as a text had it been available when we began the seminar.



Franck, Irene M. and David M. Brownstone. *The Silk Road: A History*. New York: Facts on File Publication, 1986.

No longer in print, this is a good overview of the Silk Road through the ages, with generous quotations from extant sources, several helpful maps, and good but not lavish illustrations. Our library copy was placed on reserve for student reference. Even if this book were still in print, we would probably not adopt it as a core text because of its ponderous detail.

Hopkirk, Peter. *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia*. Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.

This book, which details the exploits of those late-nineteenth and twentieth-century Western explorers and scholars who began the process of recovering the history (and artifacts) of Central Asia's Silk Road, is well worth the reading. It is in print as an inexpensive paperback. We chose not to adopt the book, despite its small price, because we did not wish to deal in detail with the Silk Road as a magnet for modern adventurers and scholars. At the same time, we did have to share with our class a few stories regarding Langdon Warner, the man who secured (stole?) the treasures from Dunhuang that we viewed at Harvard's Sackler Museum.

Lawton, John et al. "Traveling the Silk Roads," *Aramco World*, 39 (July/August 1988).

This special issue is, as is true of everything done by *Aramco World*, lavish with its color illustrations, and it also has a finely executed map. Its articles, written for a general audience, are quite good—as an introduction to the several main routes of the Silk Road and the role of silk in driving commerce along these many roads. When we requested multiple copies of this issue, we were initially assured that we would receive (gratis, of course) back issues—subscriptions to *Aramco World* are free (write: *Aramco World*, Box 469008, Escondido, CA 92046-9008). Apparently back issues did not exist, and we received photocopies. Despite *Aramco World's* generosity, we were disappointed, because the oversized map and color illustrations did not reproduce well. Our single bound library copy was put on library reserve and proved valuable for student reference.

*Orientations*, 27 (April 1996) and 30 (April 1999).

This magazine for collectors of Oriental art has several special issues devoted to the arts of specific regions of the Silk Road. Issue 4 of Volume 27 centers on the Buddhist art of the Tangut Xia (Xixia) empire (ca. 928-1227); issue 4 of Volume 30 centers on the art of the Turfan Oasis. Despite the technicality of some of its articles, we opted to require our students to read the issue on Turfan, where archeological digs since the early twentieth century have uncovered large caches of artifacts and



documents that have forced an essential reinterpretation of the history of the Silk Road and the peoples, goods, and ideas that traveled along it. Thousands of fragments of Manichaean texts found there, for example, have revolutionized our understanding of this world religion that found a pathway from Persia to China along the routes of the Silk Road.

*The Silk Road: An Ancient World of Adventure* (published by Central Park Media, 1990, 1992, and 1998; for further information see <[www.centralparkmedia.com](http://www.centralparkmedia.com)>). This joint production of Japanese (NHK) and Chinese (CCTV) state television runs to thirty fifty-five minute segments—a total of 1,650 minutes of footage! Viewing the entire series is almost the equivalent of trekking the 4,000 or so miles from Chang'an to Antioch.

When we taught our seminar, only the first twelve segments were available, leaving us at the Pamirs—only halfway across the Silk Road. Subsequently an eighteen-unit Silk Road II appeared on the market, carrying the story and the viewer south into India and west to the Mediterranean. We found the first twelve units useful but flawed, whereas the last eighteen are quite a bit better, probably because certain political subtexts become irrelevant outside of the lands encompassed by the People's Republic of China.

The twelve segments that our students viewed do a good job of showing the landscape and built environment of the various main sections of the classic Silk Road that lie within the borders of the PRC. The videos also give a good idea of the rigors of travel along these routes, but they have their shortcomings. All too often Chinese names and historical events are mentioned without any context, the assumption being that the viewer knows the basic outlines of Chinese history and can recognize the names and events. As noted in our essay, students need guide sheets in order to follow these programs with any success. By implication these twelve programs also seem to help perpetuate certain myths: viz. that most merchants traveled the length of the Silk Road—to the contrary, goods generally moved from one merchant to another along these routes; that there was a single road with only a few forks and branches—in fact, it was a network of connected caravan routes; that the same basic routes were open and used continuously for over a millennium and a half—routes opened, closed, and shifted due to many factors.

The last eighteen units, which we hope to use in future seminars on the Silk Road, appear to have corrected or avoided some of the flaws of the earlier productions. Chronological sequence is still a problem, as viewers jump back and forth by centuries and even millennia as they travel across the Silk Road, but this is unavoidable—as we discovered when we chose, like the video producers, to adopt a geographic framework for our seminar. Teachers are, therefore, cautioned to provide clear chronological handouts to help their students avoid being lost in the constant mixing of historical eras. If one has time to show only two or three of these programs, we recommend



Episode 4, "Xuanzang's Travels in India," Episode 11, "The Sogdian Merchants," and Episode 12, "The Glory of Samarkand." All are well worth viewing.

Whitfield, Susan. *Life Along the Silk Road*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

This excellent book, which is based on the author's profound scholarship, brings the Silk Road alive by recounting in fascinating detail the lives of ten individuals who flourished at different times and in different places along this vast network of Central Asian trade routes. A work that must be read by any serious student of the Silk Road, we would have adopted it if it had been available when the course began. Its inexpensive price (\$19.25 for a hardcover edition) makes it even more attractive.

Wriggins, Sally Hovey. *Xuanzang: A Buddhist Pilgrim on the Silk Road*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996.

Wriggins tells the epic story of the Silk Road's most famous traveler, the early seventh-century Buddhist monk who trekked to India in successful search of (almost six hundred) sacred sutras. Xuanzang's adventures, which Wriggins narrates clearly and in detail, deserve retelling for many reasons, not least of which is that the record of his sixteen-year-long pilgrimage provides vivid glimpses of the social, cultural, and political complexities of East, Central, and South Asia during one of the Silk Road's golden ages. Richly illustrated and filled with excellent maps, this is a book that every Anglophone student of the Silk Road should read.

A reasonably priced (\$26) paperback edition is now available (ISBN 0-8133-3407-1), making it an excellent choice for adoption as required reading in any course on the Silk Road. Student reaction to the book has been unanimously positive. Richly illustrated and filled with excellent maps, students praise it for its readability and the author's obvious empathy for Xuanzang and love of her subject.