

Xinru Liu. *The Silk Road in World History*. New York: Oxford, 2010. Pp. 168. Paper, \$19.95; ISBN 978-0-19-533810-2.

Paul S. Ropp. *China in World History*. New York: Oxford, 2010. Pp. 208. Paper, \$19.95; ISBN 978-0-19-538195-5.

The Silk Road in World History and *China in World History* are offerings in the New Oxford World History series. Among other objectives, the series aims to describe the lives of ordinary people. Readers will welcome the attention to commoners. Xinru Liu, author of *The Silk Road in World History*, uses letters from soldiers to good effect in revealing details of daily life. Liu also uses the contents of tombs to further inquiry into the lives of commoners. Admittedly this is no easy task because evidence from graves tilts portions of this book toward the elites, who had more elaborate tombs than did ordinary people. Paul Ropp, author of *China in World History*, likewise included information about commoners, though this is not the primary aim of his book. The brevity of the narrative might have led Ropp to emphasize political and military matters at the expense of an analysis of daily life. The peasants, the backbone of Chinese civilization, are absent from much of the text. Ropp conveys the desperate poverty of the peasants in the dynastic eras, but the reader learns little about rural life. The transfer of several cultivated plants to China during the Columbian Exchange merits brief treatment, but the reader does not learn how corn, potatoes, peanuts, and the other American crops affected the lives of farmers. In this context, Ropp is right to note that these new crops fueled an increase in population. In his treatment of ordinary people, Ropp is particularly successful in examining the lives of women. He does well to balance treatment of elite women with that of ordinary women. The rise and fall of foot binding receives skillful treatment. Ropp describes the expectation of men that virtuous women be chaste. He notes that during the Ming dynasty the government compensated families of women who committed suicide after the husband's death or who remained celibate thereafter. He calls attention to the movement to end widow suicide and arranged marriages and to promote the education of women.

In addition to their treatment of ordinary people, Liu and Ropp give lucid accounts of the rise of Buddhism and its importance to the Silk Road and to China respectively. Liu examines how Buddhist monasteries furthered trade on the Silk Road. The Silk Road hastened the expansion of Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, and Manichaeism. Ideas followed goods as merchants traveled the network of roads that comprised the Silk Road. Buddhist monks, following the Silk Road on pilgrimage to India, carried silk cloth, which they used in lieu of money. The devout offered silk to monasteries along the Silk Road. Christian churches in Europe obtained silk from the merchants who traveled the Silk Road. European nobles bought silk to make their burial clothes. Muslim traders traveled the Silk Road. The faithful built mosques and laid out tombs along the Silk Road. By building hotels, Muslim proprietors eased the

journey along the Silk Road. Ropp emphasizes that the compatibility between Buddhism and Confucianism enabled the former to gain a foothold in China.

Both Liu and Ropp underscore the importance of Buddhist monasteries in promoting trade along the Silk Road. Placing the history of China in a global context, Ropp devotes space to the relationship between China and the Silk Road. Curiously Liu and Ropp have different conceptions of the Silk Road. Liu, referring to the Silk Road in the singular, must conceive it as a single entity. Ropp, however, refers to the Silk Roads in the plural, evidently revealing his decision to partition the Silk Road into its components. The Silk Road is not a single entity to Ropp but rather a network of roads. To conceive of the Silk Road as a multiplicity of roads is not to negate the value of unifying them into a single entity for ease of reference. Ropp notes that the Silk Road reached the peak of prosperity during the Tang dynasty. The strong Tang state protected the merchants who journeyed along the Silk Road. In contrast, the weakness of the government during the late Tang emboldened nomads from Central Asia to plunder the wealth of the caravans. Similarly Liu examines the effect of geopolitical forces on the Silk Road. The government of the Seljuk Turks fostered trade along the Silk Road by compensating merchants who had been robbed. Although initially destructive, the Mongols assigned troops to patrol the Silk Road to protect merchants. Liu attends to the process by which sea trade supplanted commerce on the Silk Road. Towns along the road, bereft of the profits of trade, went into decline. Ropp brings China's history to the present and in doing so examines the relationship between China and the United States.

Instructors will likely find value in these books. *The Silk Road in World History* should be suitable for an upper-division course or a graduate seminar in economic history or as a supplementary text in an introductory history of China. An instructor might assign the book as a series of readings grouped around the question of how the Silk Road shaped world history. In this context, the book seems suitable for introductory courses on world history. An instructor might be able to derive lecture notes from *The Silk Road in World History*, but the amount of detail might discourage this use. *China in World History* is suitable, unsurprisingly, for an undergraduate course on Chinese history whether introductory or upper-division. The book's focus on political history makes it suitable as a source for lecture notes. Organized by dynasty, *China in World History* might complement the lecturer who structures material by reference to the landmarks in Chinese history. The comparative lack of material on the economy, especially on agriculture, might dissuade the instructor from using the book in a course on economic or rural history. The emphasis on women's issues might make *China in World History* suitable for a course in women's history. This emphasis might attract the lecturer who wishes to broaden coverage beyond political and military affairs.