

History 3029 Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past

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### Book Review

Liu, Xinru. *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600-1200*. 1st ed. Reprint, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Dr. Xinru Liu is an Associate Professor of Early Indian history and of World History at the College of New Jersey.<sup>1</sup> She also holds a full professorship at the Institute of World History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.<sup>2</sup> She studied at the University of Pennsylvania where she completed her PhD in 1985, which would be published three years later as her first book, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges, A.D. 1-600*.<sup>3</sup> *Silk and Religion* continues this research, exploring the trade of silk and the effect of religion on these transactions between 600 and 1200 AD. Her other publications include further work on analysing the relationship between material culture and religion (such as “A Silk Road Legacy: The Spread of Buddhism and Islam” in the *Journal of World History*<sup>4</sup>) but also research situated within larger frameworks of world history or global trade. Most recently, several books have overtly tied her own research to world history, for example *The Silk Road in World History*.<sup>5</sup>

In the introduction to her book, Liu makes clear that she is dealing with the idea of crossing boundaries, writing that she was dealing with silk samples not related just to China or India and that the “religious forces involved were not only Buddhist.”<sup>6</sup> With this book, she is expanding the scope of her research to include Christian and Islamic theologies and institutions,

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<sup>1</sup> “Xinru Liu – Department Of History,” The College of New Jersey History Faculty, 2017, [history.tcnj.edu/faculty/xinru-liu/](http://history.tcnj.edu/faculty/xinru-liu/). Accessed 31/10/2017.

<sup>2</sup> “Curriculum Vitae”, Home Page Of Xinru Liu, 2017, [www.tcnj.edu/~liux/](http://www.tcnj.edu/~liux/). Accessed 31/10/2017.

<sup>3</sup> Xinru Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges, AD 1-600* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Xinru Liu, “A Silk Road Legacy: The Spread of Buddhism and Islam,” *Journal of World History* 22, no. 1 (March 2011): 55-81.

<sup>5</sup> Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Xinru Liu, *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600-1200* (1st ed., repr. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), vii.

and trade routes created across Asia and into Europe. It is clear that Liu believes that her study has its place within the field of world history, an attitude seen in the opening line of her introduction: “This is a story of silk, and of much more than silk.”<sup>7</sup> She then notes the methodology of world history in reference to how the majority of world history deals with patterns, links or connections made in the time after 1500, when they are most evident. Referencing Patrick Manning’s idea that this treats nations or civilizations as “independent acting units”<sup>8</sup>, she questions whether it is possible to find “a common rhythm of historical development among different regions with seemingly totally different cultures.”<sup>9</sup> Directly after this, she explains the relevance and significance of world history in changing how history is viewed, discrediting the assumption of models of isolated civilizations. From this, and knowing her background, it is admirable and obvious why she so explicitly states how she situates the Silk Trade in world history.

I find the introduction particularly well thought out: it sets up a clear scope and structure of the book. It summarises the analyses she made in her previous book, about the silk trade from 1 to 600 AD, from which this book progresses. Here she also posits a clear thesis: in analysing economic and cultural interactions between societies which traded silk, she sees the “two centres” of silk culture that existed in 600 AD (the Byzantine Empire and T’ang China), progress into “three circles and two monopolies” on the silk trade by 1200 AD.<sup>10</sup> The three circles are the Byzantine empire, T’ang China and the Islamic empire, of which the two former hold monopolies. The following chapters are an analysis of Buddhism and its effects on silk trade; silk usages in Byzantium; the effect of Christianity on the silk trade; the rise of the Islamic empire; and the silk trade under Islamic rule.

Liu begins with Buddhism in India and China, including an explanation of the religion and about the nature of relic worship (as “the simplest, most direct personal link between the Buddha and his followers”) associated with it.<sup>11</sup> As Buddhism spreads and becomes more accessible to masses of people, the demand for sacred religious relics increases. She notes that Buddhist relics “never should have become commodities for sale”, but they were often exchanged

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Manning, “World History, Modern and Ancient: The Literature We Inherit,” unpublished paper, 1993, 6, cited in Liu, *Silk and Religion*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Liu, *Silk and Religion*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 22, 187.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

with another “precious and more widely accepted commodity—silk.”<sup>12</sup> Silk is kept in demand by its “deep affiliation with the religion”, as silk textiles become a feature of relic worship and religious investment.<sup>13</sup> In India, this manifests through clothing. With no sumptuary laws apparent, silk was used as clothing for the gods in Buddhist rituals, as clothing for kings and royals, for Buddhist monks, as well as “low status persons” such as dancers.<sup>14</sup> Liu notes that while India produced its own silks, heavier and rougher than the Chinese variety, India seems to have mainly imported their silks.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, in China, monks stuck to cotton clothing as was strictly specified by their religious texts. It was only due to the expense of importing cotton (and knowledge that Indian Buddhist monks wore silk) that they were persuaded to convert to silk clothing. However, silk had always been a part of state revenue and culture, originally as the medium of transaction within T’ang China despite the presence of a coin currency. With the implementation of stricter sumptuary laws, and an aim to build a bureaucratic hierarchy, silk in T’ang China became reserved for those with high status and for Buddhist rituals.<sup>16</sup> Lastly, Liu analyses the nomad tribes in Central Asia, who used silk as a tool of diplomacy and of currency (in both mundane life and as payment in tombs for the afterlife).<sup>17</sup> The demand from all of these regions was for the quality of Chinese silk, which enabled T’ang China to form a monopoly: “Even the plainest tabby silk was considered precious outside China.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, we see how the spread of Buddhism helped the growth of the silk route.

Next, Liu analyses the silk trade in Byzantium and the effects of the expansion of Christianity. She comments that the similarities of the silk cultures in Byzantium and T’ang China imply mutual influence, probably due to the exportation of Chinese silk to the eastern Mediterranean area by Buddhist pilgrims and missionaries even after it became illegal.<sup>19</sup> Both had a bureaucratic hierarchy and a set of clothing codes to mark officials. Byzantium worked, as T’ang China had, to create a monopoly on Byzantine-produced silk, restricting it to only upper level officials within the empire in order to reinforce the social hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> Lastly, the Byzantine

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 46, 48.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* For details on the sumptuary laws see 63-7, 188-9, 191; for the usage of silk in Chinese funerals see 49, 61, 67-8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* For details on silk as physical currency and for its use for the afterlife see 56-62.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 52, 73, 187. For further notes on the similarities between the two see 187-193.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* For silk as a means to reinforce social order in China (sumptuary laws) see 63-67, and in Byzantium see 79-85, 188; for notes on punishments see 66, 189-191.

empire also used silk as a form of currency and diplomacy; however, unlike in Tang China, Liu suggests that their coin system began to disappear.<sup>21</sup>

Within the empire, silk was used to strengthen the imperial order, as purple-dyed silk became part of the royal insignia.<sup>22</sup> However, as Christian ideas and influence expanded between 600 and 1200 AD, Byzantine people began to look at the success of the empire as God-given (rather than attributable to Imperial power), and so we also see a rise in a culture of worship of saints relics.<sup>23</sup> As Christianity spreads to western Europe, so does silk.

The picture of the silk trade now consists of Chinese silk flowing through Asia and into the Byzantine empire, and of Byzantine silk flowing into Europe, bringing the Chinese silks with it. As Islamic rulers began to conquer Byzantine-owned land, they chose not to close down the silk workshops, which would in turn affect the flow of the silk trade.

Looking at the relationship between Islamic culture and silk, Liu posits that silk usage in Islamic-ruled areas was different: while they inherited a cultural idea of the silk industry from the Byzantine and Sassanid empires, they didn't use the clothing codes and laws that were connected.<sup>24</sup> Arabs were familiar with silk as a source of trade and profit; Muslim traders would supply abundances of raw silk to the Byzantine empire, which kept a strong economic relationship between the two.<sup>25</sup> They also produced their own fine Tirāz silk. However, they were not interested in using silk to distinguish the rulers from the ruled like their influencers had, which is somewhat contradictory given the presence of sumptuary laws; nor was it a part of religion, nor did they monopolise silk. In Islamic regions, providing silk coverings was a prime way of showing piety and political association, a part of "state machinery."<sup>26</sup> Liu concludes the silk trade and Islamic religion were not connected as they had been in Buddhism and Christianity.<sup>27</sup>

However, the actions of the Islamic empire in conquering Byzantine land, and establishing connections to Central Asia, brought their own patterns to the silk trade. The Islamic

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-85.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 87, 92-112. For more detail on the connection between silk and Christian relic worship and rituals, see 113-124.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 77, 146.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 193-4.

empire moved silk from Persia, Iraq, and Byzantium into Europe, but also started silk production in conquered lands by importing samples and workmen to those places. For example, they established silk factories in North Africa, Spain and Sicily.<sup>28</sup> The silks produced could be transported east, towards Egypt, other Islamic-ruled areas and even China.

The two centres of silk culture existing in 600 AD, T'ang China and the Byzantine Empire, that Liu so names due to their monopoly on silk production and trade, see a greater movement of silk due to the expansion of their respective religions. Liu's picture of the silk trade becomes "three circles and two monopolies"<sup>29</sup> by 1200 AD, as the Islamic Empire begins to influence the trade of silk. No longer are there only two centres of silk production and usage, but many, falling under "circles"—or areas—of T'ang China control, Byzantine Empire control and Islamic Empire control. The movement of silk becomes less straightforward: silk flows from China, through Asia, Islamic areas, and to Byzantium; from Byzantine-controlled areas to Europe; from Islamic-controlled areas of Spain and Sicily and into China, and so on. While silk becomes more connected to religious activities in T'ang China and the Byzantine Empire, the Islamic empire embraces many ethnic and religious groups, meaning their silk culture was not dominated by a single religion. The Islamic religion was not an intermediary for trade as Christianity and Buddhism were for Chinese and Byzantine trade.

These conclusions seem logical and well-founded, although it must be noted that Bulliet argues against the emphasis Liu gives to Islamic states, as he claims she relies on weaker sources that portray the role of silk as more "preeminent" than cotton or linen.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, he argues, it could not be comparable to the role of silk in Buddhist or Christian culture. However, his explanation of the lack of silk in Islamic religion mirrors Liu's own analysis—at least in my mind—and I think was exactly the point Liu makes regarding Islamic states and their usages of silk. Nevertheless, the majority of the information and her thought-processes are well explained, especially as she makes sure to situate any new information and conclusions within the surrounding context. For example, when looking at silk culture in the Byzantine Empire, she tells the reader exactly how it has changed by comparing it to pre-600 AD silk culture.<sup>31</sup> However, one aspect is brought up in her analysis which may provide more questions. This is the effect of

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>30</sup> Robert W. Bulliet, Review of *Silk And Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600-1200*, by Xinru Liu, *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 4 (October 1998), 1214.

<sup>31</sup> Liu, *Silk and Religion*, 77.

religions, depending on if they have a proselytising nature or not. Proselytising religions and groups are much more visible in records and so it is easier to analyse their influence. With this comes the implication that their significance may be overstated, when compared to non-proselytising religions that leave no such records. We must ask how this affects the conclusions of the analysis, the picture of the Silk Road we gain and if the influence stated of the religions is skewed. Liu does mention this; however, I would have given more emphasis to this as it is important when evaluating different religions' effects on silk.

I understand the presence of criticism by Bulliet that her analyses seem dense and frustrating, given the detail into which she goes and the geographical scope of the book.<sup>32</sup> The book has a lot of information, squeezing 600 years into 196 pages, and as such it feels like a reader would have to re-read a few times in order to fully understand the complexity of what is said. However, I believe her last chapter works well in trying to combat this. At this point I must state that I don't believe her intention was to form a single cohesive argument which she would apply to all the different silk transactions, as it seems that other critics have implied she should. Her analyses are specific to silk produced in T'ang China and silk produced in the Byzantine Empire, rather than trying to create an overarching linearity.

There is also a chronology provided, divided by geographic region, which dates major political events: overthrow and collapse of rulers, wars or invasions, envoys, and persecutions of religions. As well as this, an index and full map of the whole area covered in the content of the book, are provided for reference. This, at least, helps reduce any confusion there may be on the context surrounding her analyses. Knauer takes issue with the "inadequate" index believing, as I do, that it could be more extensive given the amount of detail and source material in the book.<sup>33</sup> Sources with substantial names are also abbreviated throughout the book (T'ang-ta-chao-lin-chi to TTCLC), with a list of abbreviations before the introduction. These aspects might make the book's arguments relatively more digestible for a wider audience.

Liu's use and inclusion of such varied sources is very complementary to an analysis of this book as world history. Her sources are a mix of original texts—collections of documents, inscriptions or historical records (either translated or not)—and of secondary texts that have already analysed the primary sources and created links which may have inspired some of her own

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<sup>32</sup> Bulliet, Review, 1214.

<sup>33</sup> Elfriede R. Knauer, Review of *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, A.D. 600-1200*, by Xinru Liu, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 2 (May 1997), 482.

thought. Her primary sources are majority Chinese and English languages sources, with some others already translated. Her secondary sources also include French, German, Arabic, and Japanese sources. The sources referenced cover broad geographic areas, time periods, religions, states and empires: from Anglo-Saxon sources to Persian, Indian, Byzantine and Frank, both ancient and medieval; Han Chinese and T'ang Chinese; and Buddhist, Christian, Jewish and Muslim sources. Also included are sources whose scope is broadly regional regardless of cultural or religious differences, such as simply 'the Mediterranean', to very specific narrow scopes such as Chinese-Turkestan. She truly works to be inclusive of as many different sources, having both broad overview histories and analyses of niche aspects, such as the Fatamid uses of Tirāz fabrics.

At first glance her source and reference list may seem too disjointed to inform cohesive arguments. Knauer also notes that there are some misprints.<sup>34</sup> However, what is impressive is the type of sources she works from. They include obvious sources, the immediate starting point for much of her analysis: narrative histories; archaeological and trade route reports; previous studies conducted of relics, inscriptions, and collections of documents (e.g. the letters of medieval Jewish traders); and secondary analyses of the relationship between ancient art and religion, or ancient textiles and politics. However, she also references sources which have obviously contributed much to her understanding, but may not have been the first thought of others in studying the silk trade. These include military and religious histories; records of shipping routes and migration patterns; encyclopedias of ancient clothing, ancient law and ancient textiles; essays on the economic strategies and enterprises of different empires; studies of ancient commercial techniques and foreign policies; and reports which detail the criticisms of previous excavations and studies.

I believe this book to be a good introduction to the expansion of religion and the silk trade between 600 and 1200 AD, as was her intention.<sup>35</sup> It arrives at logical conclusions founded in primary evidence, but also acknowledges that this is not a closed matter. The book inspires more research, introduces new questions and new directions to look at, ending with that there are "surely many gaps to be filled", "many exciting anecdotes" and "many exciting phenomena" to be explored.<sup>36</sup> Liu does not indisputably answer all the new questions revealed by her research, such as exactly why Indian rulers did not attempt to monopolise silk, or about the contradiction

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Liu, *Silk and Religion*, 195.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

present in the Islamic empire of having sumptuary laws but no social hierarchy forming from them. Instead she implies that as further research is conducted, the conclusions formed in this book can be further refined. She also has a very readable and accessible style of writing, with no unnecessary terminology or confusing language.

As mentioned, the chapters are split mostly in terms of religion. Liu tends to define groups of people and the actions of traders by religion: Muslim people, Jewish people, Christian people, Buddhist people. Coexisting with this, she uses geographic or political borders, such as Islamic regions or European market, to analyse the silk market itself. “T’ang China” is used to define the era she is analysing. Against my original expectations, the book does not fall into several distinct arguments for each area with little comparison or connection between them, as Rozycki states he felt.<sup>37</sup> I feel that her method of distinction makes sense, as she is analysing the relationship between silk and religion, the effects of which tend to be area-specific. It is clear that geography and religion are tied very closely together: The Byzantine area is dominated by Christian ruling, the Asian area by Buddhism, and so on. To me, this is the difference between what she analyses and how she analyses it. She uses terms which may imply a nation-centric analysis; however, she consciously works to show the mutually influential relationships and trade among all regions. She does not make generalisations or conclusions based solely on those areas, but uses them to make analyses of trade patterns.

This book, to me, constitutes world history. Boundaries will always be present, and trying not to include boundaries or states can result in confusion; it is going beyond boundaries and examining the influence and relationships of regions or states or empires that makes world history. At one point she compares T’ang China and the Byzantine empire in their use of silk in official capacities. The idea of a comparative study of these two states may imply a nation-centric methodology; however, she uses the comparisons to make connections and trace influences between the two, which is how she arrives at the conclusions explained above. The difference is between what is being put forward—the actual comparisons between the two centres—and how she analyses, or why. This is what makes world history important.

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<sup>37</sup> William Rozycki, Review of *Silk and Religion: An Exploration Of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600-1200*, by Xinru Liu, *Journal of Asian History* 31, no. 2 (1997), 184-5.

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