

Tim Winter. *The Silk Road: Connecting Histories and Futures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 264 pp. (ISBN: 9780197605066). doi: 10.1093/oso/9780197605059.001.0001.

In front of the modern gates of the historical city of Gaochang in Xinjiang, China, where Albert von Le Coq and his team conducted archaeological surveys just over a century ago, now stands the statue of the 7th-century monk Xuanzang. This revered Buddhist monk journeyed through these lands over a millennium ago on his path to the heartland of Buddhism, India. In many ways, Xuanzang symbolizes the essence of the Silk Road, an ancient network that interconnected not only merchants and free-spirited wanderers of lands but also monks and preachers of spiritual enlightenment. However, the Silk Road is no longer a mere relic of antiquity. In the modern geopolitical reality, the idea of the Silk Road(s) has become a powerful symbol for China's monumental Belt and Road Initiative.

Tim Winter's book, titled *The Silk Road: Connecting Histories and Futures*, is a compelling attempt to present readers with the historical development of the idea of the Silk Road(s). To borrow the author's own words, "My aim is to make the Silk Road at once both strange and more familiar, to unsettle an idea that is too readily taken for granted and, simultaneously, argue for greater analytical precision in how it is used and discussed" (p. X). *The Silk Road* is a companion to Winter's most recent book, *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century* (2019). In this latter work, Winter delves into how China employs the Silk Road concept to shape its foreign diplomacy. Winter's new book, on the other hand, focuses on the origins and the evolution of the Silk Road concept itself.

In the book, the author pursues two courses to achieve this aim. Firstly, he questions the validity of the concept by critically reflecting on its merits and flaws as a historical narrative. Secondly, he offers a "biography of the term" (p. 2) that traces how it has evolved and circulated in the past century and a half as a domain of scholarship, popular culture, government, and international policy. Winter begins his introduction by posing a series of questions that express the same idea: What do we imagine when we speak of the Silk Road, and how legitimate is the term?

The book is divided into five main parts. Part One, titled "Connecting Culture," examines the processes and events that led to the formation and recognition of the Silk Road concept. This part is divided into three chapters (Chapters 2-4). The first provides a pre-history of the term, describing its popularization by Ferdinand von Richthofen in the mid-19th century. Chapter Three continues this historical exploration, following the travels of European and Japanese scholar-explorers in Central Asia. Chapter Four zooms in on the early Japanese scholarship of these connections, highlighting the unique perspective of Japanese scholars on the connections between the East and the West and its role in Imperial Japan's political ambitions.

The idea of a network of trade routes connecting Europe and Asia, popularized in the latter part of the 19th century, fascinated generations of scholars, travelers, and adventurers, resulting in private and corporate expeditions, especially after World War I. Part Two, divided into two chapters, focuses on the journeys and expeditions undertaken in Asia by a number

of adventurers. The book also explores the popularization of historical travelers such as Marco Polo and their reflection in modern popular culture.

Part Three, titled “A Route to Peace?” narrates the history of post-World War II international efforts to achieve global peace through cultural dialogue. It heavily focuses on UNESCO-funded international exhibitions and projects aimed at promoting a better understanding of the Silk Road concept and its potential for fostering peace and intercultural dialogue. Chapter Seven highlights Japanese efforts to promote Silk Road studies internationally, while Chapter Eight delves into the evolution of China's interest in the Silk Road within its political circles, demonstrating how it has come to dominate modern Chinese foreign policy.

Part Four, broadly titled “Geopolitics,” is an attempt by the author to define the concept and role of the Silk Road in modern geopolitics. The book explores the dominant theories in the field, particularly Halford Mackinder's idea of a “pivot” (inner Eurasia) and its surrounding “Inner and Marginal Crescent.” It serves as an opener for a discussion of metaphors applied by various scholars regarding Eurasian geopolitics. Chapter 10 provides a more substantial discussion of China's political aspirations and projects in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative, showing how it appropriates well-established Silk Road metaphors for its geostrategic objectives.

The final part of the book is a broad conclusion where the author summarizes the conclusions reached in the previous parts and outlines his vision of the future of the Silk Road concept. The main emphasis lies on the role of China in developing a dialogue around the concept and its efforts to establish a new political and economic order for the 21st century.

In conclusion, *The Silk Road* is an engaging account of the development of the Silk Road concept and its implications in modern and future geopolitics. While the style can be challenging and at times complex, it mirrors the intricacy of the subject itself. The book raises valid concerns about the entanglement of Silk Road discourses in modern political narratives and the rewriting of history to suit contemporary political agendas, particularly within China.

In this regard, I want to point to the interpretation of Silk Road histories in light of China's domestic politics. On a recent visit to Xinjiang, China, while paying visits to a number of historical sites and museums, I witnessed how the Chinese authorities are trying to reinterpret the local history to support their own, pro-Chinese, interpretation of history counter to the local minorities. In a way, China is exploiting the idea of the Silk Road for an ideological suppression of the local minorities' potential independence claims in Xinjiang.

In my opinion, China's use of Silk Road metaphors to shape its internal policies, especially those related to the sinification of minority-inhabited regions, is a subject that could have been discussed in the present book. Nevertheless, *The Silk Road* makes a valuable contribution to the study of the Silk Road and is highly recommended for those interested in understanding the concept's historical development and its relevance in contemporary and future geopolitics.

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