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Frances Wood. *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. 270 pp. \$29.95 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

The "Silk Road," emblematic of Eurasian cultural and economic exchange, is a popular subject which merits an inexpensive, compact history. Such a book might well include a number of features: the expertise of a knowledgeable specialist on Eurasian history, compelling writing, thematic and chronological coherence, geographical and topical balance, and a generous selection of illustrations. Sad to say, this attractively produced effort by Frances Wood, who heads the Chinese section at the British Library, fails to meet most of these criteria.

The problems begin with her failure to articulate what she is attempting. Beyond the title, we have only a misleading jacket blurb declaring that the book "presents an overall picture of the history and cultures of the Silk Road." In fact, Wood provides her readers with an incoherent and impressionistic kaleidoscope of the Silk Road, where causation and explanation of historical change have little place. Furthermore, hers is a Silk Road that, once past a few Roman authors and Alexander the Great, is largely confined to East and what is now the Chinese part of Central Asia. For Wood, Transoxania (e.g., today's Uzbekistan) is really the western end of the route. Yet she does deserve credit for her ambition to encompass not only the earlier history but also the "discovery" and study of the Silk Road in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. About a third of the chapters focus on the latter, although in fact a great deal more of the book is twentieth-century material, since she draws so heavily on modern travelers in the early chapters as well. This leaves little room for the largest part of the story.

Her text is largely long quotations from travelers and other "primary sources" old and new, arranged very roughly in chronological and topical sequence. Her own words often are little other than precis from a relatively small number of secondary sources. Most of chapter 6 derives from Edward Schafer's excellent *The Golden*

Peaches of Samarkand. Far too much in the later parts is based on recent popularizations of the "Great Game" rivalry for Central Asia, in which the story is often told with greater flair. That said, the modern section of the book is the most coherent, since Wood is able to focus on single individuals in sequence and does not have to deal with the messy task of trying to synthesize from diverse and fragmentary sources.

The problems of her cut-and-paste approach are apparent in chapter 1's overview of physical and human geography. She assumes that twentieth-century descriptions are adequate for conveying a flavor of life and surroundings which can be generalized across the millennia and different geographic zones. It matters little to her whether one uses a late thirteenth-century source (e.g., Marco Polo) or one from the 1920s (e.g., C. P. Skrine) and whether one description concerns the desert whereas an adjoining one the geographically distinct steppes. While many of the long quotations are evocative and come from sources often ignored in other accounts, a number are badly chosen for a general readership as they do little more than catalogue names of ethnic groups. When Wood herself writes, she often prefers to catalogue, rather than analyze and selectively illustrate.

Too many of the subsequent chapters have no clear theme but begin in the middle of one topic and end abruptly with another. The scope of the book naturally requires a certain amount of backtracking to pick up threads and develop them in different ways. Yet one has to question decisions about initiating a discussion of, say, Buddhism, in one chapter but only in a later chapter explaining Buddhist beliefs and, at that, falling back on quoting a textbookish summary. Surely some of this could have been better organized, and surely Wood could have articulated something so basic in her own words.

Those familiar with Wood's ballyhooed earlier book, *Did Marco Polo Go to China?*, in which she argued he did not, naturally will be interested to see how she treats the Venetian's account here. While she belabors some of her earlier arguments, nothing here refutes her critics' judgment that she failed to make her case. Indeed, she often quotes Marco Polo, but her selectivity is curious, since she consciously avoids some of his most valuable passages. In part she seems merely to be creating opportunities to twit him for inaccuracies. Thus we get his description of Khotan, where she is amazed that he could not have mentioned its silk and jade, yet fails to note that in immediately adjoining passages Polo in fact twice mentions jade's being an important product elsewhere in that region. At the same time, she freely reads into Polo an assertion that his uncle and father met Qubilai Khan in Karakorum (the text does not specify; likely it was a different location). While she admits the importance of Polo in shaping European views of Asia, it is curious to see her repeating as fact the dubious assertion that Columbus took Polo's book on his first voyage to America.

Although willing to criticize those whom she does not like, she is quite inconsistent. She reiterates Hedin's penchant for killing off his staff and animals, although she might have used a little more caution before tarring all his expeditions with his ill-conceived foray into the Taklamakan. Yet she presents without comment his description of how he desecrated a Zoroastrian "tower of silence" in Iran. One hopes that the point here was to let him condemn himself in his own words. It is unclear whether in quoting Langdon Warner she wants him to justify or condemn himself for his vandal-

ism at the Mogao caves. I sense she in fact empathizes with him. On the other hand, she points the finger at him as the one who was the focus of Chinese anger about foreign plundering of relics, even as she is silent about Aurel Stein's also having been a major target of such philippics.

The book has a curious, "orientalist" tone, despite a perfunctory reference to Edward Said. She is probably making the reasonable assumption that, post-colonial criticism notwithstanding, the general reader still wants oriental exoticism and occasional barbarism. For example, chapter 9 meanders in a curious way from the Timurids and Ming (obscuring key parts of the story) to Matthew Arnold's "Sohrab and Rustum" and an image of Ingres' "Odalisque." It seems not to have occurred to her to tell the reader that Arnold's poem, with its nineteenth-century "orientalist" imagery, in fact is based on a section of the ancient Persian epic, the "Shahnama," a discussion of whose translations and transmission along the Silk Roads would have much enriched the narrative. Although illustrated with a number of Persian miniatures, the book contains precious little about Persian Islamic culture.

The publisher deserves mixed marks, with compliments for the design and lavish use of color illustrations. There are also a decent index and two clear end-paper maps. However, an editor should have caught a substantial number of errors in fact (e.g., Tamerlane was not a Chingizid; Hedin did not show up in China for his last major expedition in 1937), occasional captions that make no sense, and footnotes which refer to books other than the ones that must have been the source for the passages to which they are attached.

One imagines that this book was conceived in anticipation of the British Library's outstanding Silk Road exhibition mounted in 2004. Other publications also appeared in conjunction with it, among them a lovely catalogue (*The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*) edited by the head of the Library's International Dunhuang Project, Susan Whitfield (and including an essay by Wood), and Whitfield's own elegant introduction to Aurel Stein (*Aurel Stein on the Silk Road*). Both of those volumes have a great deal to offer the general reader, and certainly the former has material for the specialist too. It is a shame that Wood's book cannot stand in the same distinguished company.

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