

that might stimulate thought or help a researcher judge the limits of comparison. In the end, we still do not know “how Shang society worked.” More attention to the concrete and the specific might have produced a more compelling account.

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Silk, Slaves, and Stupas: Material Culture of the Silk Road. Susan Whitfield. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. 376 pp., 8 photos, 10 maps. Hardback US \$85, £66, ISBN 978-0-520-28177-6; Paperback and eBook US \$30, £24, ISBN 978-0-520-28178-3.

Reviewed by Toby C. WILKINSON, *University of Cambridge*

Susan Whitfield’s new book can best be described in one word: kaleidoscopic. It is full of diverse and fascinating details of selected aspects of material culture from the “silk road,” which here means Central Asia from the first century B.C.E. to today. The book is a pleasure to explore and will delight readers

from a wide sphere despite occasional stylistic detours into academese. However, a coherent scientific agenda or historical narrative built from the kaleidoscope’s glittering fragments proves elusive; this project is designed to inspire interest rather than push forward new explanations of the past.

In structure, the book is divided into 10 substantive chapters, plus an introduction (on which more later). Most chapters are built on a foundation of a single object, each of which provides a foil for discussing wider topics related to the object or that grow out of its origins. Such topics include fluid identities and interaction between cultures, the history of manufacturing techniques and their transmission across vast distances, or processes of (re)discovery and decontextualization of historical objects in the context of the art world. The genre of expansive micro-history is increasingly popular; for example, it was put to good effect for a wide audience in Neil MacGregor's (2010) *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, which was made available over multiple media platforms; other examples abound (cf. publisher Thames & Hudson's more visually-oriented Pocket Museum series). Elsewhere, mainstream history is finally taking the subject of archaeology, "material culture," seriously (Hannan and Longair 2017). In many ways *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas* is the material culture incarnation of one of Whitfield's previous books, *Life Along the Silk Road* (Whitfield 2001), which was a similarly rich and inspiring show-and-tell of Central Asian history, albeit in that case based on individuals figuring in the letters and other textual sources from Dunhuang. Intentionally or not, both books are effectively constructed as rich, didactic exhibitions in book form, guiding the reader to diverse materials and fields of scholarship (including plentiful academic references) which they may not have encountered before. It is a pity that in a book on visually-arresting objects, all of the color figures illustrating the objects in question were gathered together in two plate sections, presumably for reasons of printing economy, rather than opening the chapters in which they are discussed. Maps describing places that objects come from could also have appeared in context rather than grouped together.

Whitfield applies the term "material culture" very loosely to the objects discussed in this book. Each chapter starts from an object or a category of things: "A Pair of Steppe Earrings" (chapter 1) leads to a discussion of the political relations between

China and the Xiongnu; "A Hellenistic Glass Bowl" (chapter 2) found in Hengzhigang in south China allows for a discussion of the technical history of glass; "A Hoard of Kushan Coins" (chapter 3) that originally came from central Asia but somehow made their way to Axum in present-day Ethiopia open a discussion on Indian Ocean trade; "Amluk Dara Stupa" (chapter 4), a religious architectural structure, facilitates a discussion on the transmission of Buddhism between India and China; "A Bactrian Ewer" (chapter 5), made perhaps in the fifth century A.D. in Afghanistan (drawing on Hellenistic Greek motifs), then deposited in a tomb in northern China, provides a foil for discussion of metal and mining; "A Khotanese Plaque" (chapter 6), a wooden plaque from Khotan in the Tarim basin was created as a Buddhist religious object but drew on an eclectic iconography; "The Blue Qur'an" (chapter 7), an exceptional codex, allows discussion of both the medieval world of manuscripts and the modern world of their fragmentation and dispersal; "A Byzantine Hunter Silk" (chapter 8) enables a discussion of the role and transmission of silk and sericulture across Eurasia; "A Chinese Almanac" (chapter 9), an early paper document printed ca. A.D. 877, allows discussion of calendars, power, printing technology, paper, and transmission to museums; and "The Unknown Slave" (chapter 10) draws on a variety of mostly textual traces to discuss the lives of slaves.

This eclecticism is entirely intentional. In her "Introduction," Whitfield outlines a theoretical commitment, common in recent archaeological theory, to eliding person-object boundaries under the title of (material) "things" (p. 3). This flexibility is what allows Whitfield to include slaves and architectural structures (namely stupas) in her rubric; such "things" would be difficult to exhibit in a "real" museum or include in a more restricted study of material culture. Note that, aside from silk and slaves, many obviously organic "things" such as horses, wine, and spices that were commonly traded along these routes are hardly mentioned in the book. The inclusion of the topics of slavery (chapter 10) and the dismemberment of manuscripts (chapter 7 and chapter 9) are very welcome indeed, as too often books of this type

gloss over the dirty parts of history in favor of the sublime aesthetics of art. However, on close inspection, Whitfield's claimed theoretical ambivalence toward the human-object division and the "Material Culture Turn" in the humanities may only be skin deep. In her actual descriptions of objects and their relations to humans, it is clear that humans (as individuals or groups) are the most important agents of history: things have things done to them by humans. The potential for object animism, that is, objects having agency or lives and thus the ability to structure the lives of humans, is never taken beyond the metaphorical.

What unites the diverse particular objects examined, or the categories of things they represent, is the fact that they or the technologies used to make them were somehow transmitted over extremely long distances along the trans-Eurasian trade routes mentioned in the title, the so-called "silk road," to end up far removed from their place of origin. Thus, some general comments on the term 'silk road' must be made here. This reviewer is mostly in agreement with Warwick Ball (1998), who argued some time ago that the term has almost no analytical function because its spatial and chronological boundaries are too indeterminate and it is frequently applied uncritically. As an "invented" term, its main purpose is arguably to draw in crowds with globalist political ambitions or romantic notions of adventure in deserts and other exotic places that go back at least to the orientalist poetry of Shelley and in scholarly circles to the colonialist expeditions and publications of characters such as Ferdinand von Richthofen and Aurel Stein (Chin 2013). Many scholars, including this reviewer, have rightly or wrongly been encouraged to deploy the term to draw upon its aura. Others, such as Peter Frankopan (2015) in *The Silk Roads*, have co-opted it in a way that ignores its original sinological coinage by von Richthofen (Chin 2013). Moreover, the term has been popular with documentary producers in recent years. Whitfield (2007) has actively defended the term in the past, however. As a true scholar of the silk road, she starts this book with Chinese material and again deploys the term in the title to draw attention to the hybridity and time depth of

human interaction across Eurasia and raise the profile of an understudied region (Central Asia). Note she uses the singular "road" in the title of the book despite acknowledging the multiplicity of routes and reproducing a series of maps of these routes (which this reviewer has previously called "pseudo-road maps;" see Wilkinson 2014:98–99).

What Whitfield's book lacks, in contrast to Frankopan's (though his book is problematic for other reasons), is some kind of narrative or red thread drawing the chapters together. There is literally no conclusion; the book finishes abruptly, if poignantly, at the end of the chapter on slavery. Whitfield's apparent overall objectives are only laid out, oddly, in a brief note on transliteration: "If there is one point I would hope readers might take away from this book, it is the commonality of human experience among great diversity" (p. xi). This is a worthy political aim, but not really an analytic or scientific one. This lacunae raises the question: if one is to continue to apply a term like "silk road" (or even "silk routes") at all to a category of scholarship, and if that field aims to understand the dynamics behind trans-Eurasian exchange in the last two and a half millennia, can the *micro*-history approach provide insight into and explanations for what was essentially a *macro*-historical process? Can a kaleidoscope, however enchanting, really help us understand the past? Would this book have been more accurately entitled *A Cabinet of Things from Central Asia and What We Can Learn from Them*? Aside from these questions and criticisms, Whitfield's rich cabinet in book form is nonetheless praiseworthy and highly readable, as well as meticulously researched. And, in case any media producers are reading this review, it would also convert to a wonderfully well-informed documentary film.

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