

BOOK REVIEW

***The Silk Road: Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Iran. A Travel Companion.* Jonathan Tucker. London: I . B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2015. Pp. 220.**

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The ancient Silk Road is attracting renewed attention. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled his action plan to speedily develop Asian economies by developing sea and land routes of the ancient Silk Road by implementing his ‘One Belt One Road’ (OBOR) initiative. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund were created in 2014 by China. Understanding the great significance of the revival of the Silk Road, many Asian and European countries have become AIIB’s members. Negotiations are underway with a number of countries to implement the Silk Road initiatives. This grand plan, it is hoped, would bring enormous prosperity to China's western region and many poverty-stricken Asian lands and peoples – which is the primary goal of the revival of the Silk Road.

The idea of the revival of the ancient Silk Road connecting China with a large number of Asian countries onward to Africa and Europe has attracted the attention not only of businessmen but of writers too. *The Silk Road: Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Iran. A Travel Companion*, written by Jonathan Tucker, is a good addition on this subject. The work is his travelogue, refreshing readers memories about the historical past of the Silk Road and providing new insights. The writer is a British artist making sculptures with a deep interest in the ancient history of Asia. With his long travels along the Silk Road, he narrates a fascinating account of his experiences and observations. Many of his observations of historical records are eye-openers. He also links historical past with the present day situation in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, making critical judgments as he goes along.

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For over 1,500 years, the Silk Road was an important connection linking China with Central Asia, Arab lands, African continent, and Rome in Europe. Many cities grew along the Silk Road, which started around 14-87 BC and maritime routes were discovered by European navigators much later in the fifteenth century. Baghdad, Samarkand, and Merv, for instance, became dynamic cities for trade in goods. Silk was not the only commodity they traded along the Silk Road. The commerce, along the road, transferred ideas, and became conduits for spread of religions, knowledge, and technology. Tucker discovers that Silk Road commerce was driven by three basic factors: desire for benefit, fascination with the exotic, and ambition to enhance political power (p. 3).

The ancient Silk Road trade was truly trans-regional in nature. Since the beginning of the recorded history, the principal trade from India passed through Taxila, now located in Pakistan, and through the present day Khyber Pass to Bamiyan since the beginning of recorded history (p. 10). The Khyber Pass was connected with the Grand Trunk Road to connect the whole Sub-continent up to Calcutta. The Taliban's insurgency cutoff the western wing of the Silk Road after 9/11 and caused an unprecedented damage to trade. Tucker has also described historical past of Kabul and Bamiyan and, in length, several of Central Asian cities.

From Kashgar, the Silk Road went through the Wakhan Corridor over the Pamir Mountains into Afghanistan and Central Asia. The route was followed by Marco Polo during the thirteenth century. Balkh was one of the greatest commercial cities of the entire Silk Road (p. 16). A chapter is devoted to the dawn of Islam in Central Asia around 651 AD and Merv (Turkmenistan) became the base for Arab conquest, which had originated from Kufa and Basra. Merv became the capital of eastern Islamic territories during the Abbasid Caliphate (749-1258 AD) and Ubaidallah ibn Ziyad, Governor of Khurasan, and General Qutaiba ibn Muslim played a decisive role in capturing Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Khujand, and Ferghana in modern day Uzbekistan.

To Tucker, the rise of Islam in Central Asia had a profound impact on politics, trade, and cultural assimilation (pp. 33-47). The Arabs controlled land and trade routes of the Silk Road. (p. 34). Trade and merchants were

regarded very high in Islam (p. 35). It was then that the Tang Dynasty of China attempted to take control of trade routes in the eighth century. Arab and Chinese armies clashed at the river Talas in modern Kazakhstan in 751 AD.

Beautiful structures were built in all important cities. Tucker deplored that almost all ancient cities along the Silk Road were destroyed. He notes that prior to 9/11, the Silk Road was sufficiently safe but now many cities along the Silk Road had been ruined such as Kabul, Bamiyan, Baghdad, and now Damascus and Aleppo in Syria. Musal and Hatra in Iraq are occupied by militants. Cities in Egypt are no longer attractive for tourists. Kashgar faces militant threats. One gets these glimpses of a state of disarray even while going through the preface of the book. Traces of the ancient Silk Road are fading away, the author laments.

Tucker also discusses scientific contributions made by Muslim scholars in Central Asia like al-Khorezmi, Al-Biruni, Ibn Sina, Ulug Beg and poets like Rumi, Nizami, Saadi, and Hafiz. Islamic seminaries (*Madaris*) spread Islamic and scientific knowledge. Today, they are associated with sectarian militancy.

In short, the work creates an important niche about Asia's ancient glory. Analysis is unbiased, by and large. Tucker did not see the fascinating Silk Road through the prism of a preconceived notion and shares, as an artist, what he unearths. The work is a good compendium of ideas and information about people who lived along the Silk Road and how their cities were built and destroyed.

There are forty excellent photographs to refresh readers' memories. Many unique maps of the routes have been drawn. Poems, translated into English, at places, illustrate a particular event. A list of ancient commodities exchanged and traded along the Silk Road, a chronology, glossary, notes, bibliography, and index enrich the work of Tucker. Readers interested in Asia's intellectual heritage must read this account.