

REVIEW ARTICLE

RECYCLING HISTORY

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VALERIE HANSEN, *The Silk Road: A New History*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xi + 304 pp.

We historians of China talk a lot about the importance of material culture. Bowls, shoes, objects made of iron or porcelain or cloisonné: these increasingly figure in the stories we tell ourselves, our readers, and our students. These objects, either in their own physical reality or in our historical reconstructions, are often whole: plates, bowls, robes, incense burners. As actors in many of our stories, they are (or are reconstructed to be) intact and functional tools.

What we do not often narrativize in explicit terms is what makes up the bulk of the material historical record: broken things, fragments, dust. History is mostly made out of garbage. Of course we know this already, and it will not come as a surprise to any readers of this article. But how often do we celebrate it *as* a scatter of broken things, *as* garbage, rather than briefly holding it in place while we try to glue it back together and set it in narrative motion?

In Silk Road studies, we have a model for charting a path into a new kind of material historiography. Not: Here is a book that sat on that shelf of this scholar's library. Instead: Here is a rotting, ripped scrap of paper, let us engage with it as scrap, and in doing so embrace the garbage heap as writing surface and storybook, the scatter of broken bits as historical archive, without immediately narrating them back into pristine wholeness. The history of the Silk Road, as Valerie Hansen tells us in her recent *The Silk Road: A New History*, was “most commonly written on recycled paper.”¹ It is richer and more self-reflexive than many other historical fields because of this, and is well worth a serious look by historians of other regions and periods for its thoughtful and innovative consideration of the historical craft of turning the raw materials of many media into a compelling historical account.

There are some consistent approaches to writing histories built on archives of the discarded. A study of recycled objects is a study of objects in motion. It necessarily pays attention to the media through which this movement happens (time, space) and the sort of movement happening (circulation, translation, preservation) at any given point in the object's life. The main themes and approaches in Silk Road studies tend to coalesce around points of concern with these media and forms of motion. They consequently function as useful landmarks when mapping any kind of a journey

¹ Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History*, 24.

through this enormous and diverse field of inquiry, and we will use them as touchstones as we attempt to chart such a path in the following pages.

First, a word of caution: fragmentariness does not just characterize the raw material of Silk Road historiography; it also describes the kind of knowledge grasped by anyone attempting to produce something like a comprehensive picture of Silk Road studies as a field. It is a daunting task, as important work on the region and its histories is spread across books, essays, and journals published in many different countries and languages. Many scholars working on Silk Road history come to it as experts in one or more of the linguistic, geographic, or cultural specialties that collectively compose it: they might begin and primarily identify as scholars of Chinese or Tibetan studies, for example. This trans-disciplinarity dramatically expands the body of literature that is significant to Silk Road studies and written by contributors to the field. The body of relevant work is so expansive, in fact, that at times it may not seem to cohere as a “field” at all. In addition to the complication mentioned above, the practical challenges of communication across the vast geographic, temporal, disciplinary, and linguistic spaces of Silk Road studies undermines a sense of the field as a coherent body of historiographical work. A “State of the Field” of Silk Road studies may thus be a misnomer. For these reasons, I make no claim here to anything like an exhaustive synthesis of current work on Central Eurasian and/or Silk Road histories. Instead, I offer some reflections based on my own exploration of recent work on these topics, informed by time spent reading, writing, and teaching within and about them. I will focus on recent synthetic histories of the Silk Road, which tend to share a similar set of concerns and approaches. In the pages below, let us then consider some of the themes that emerge most frequently in work in the field. We will take Hansen’s book (a recent and excellent contribution) as our guide: it both synthesizes existing scholarship and incorporates innovative readings of primary documents in ways that help transform the story.

TIME TRAVEL

The fragment functions both as palimpsest and synecdoche, occupying a position that is simultaneously rooted in the past and present. In order for something to be considered a fragment, the observer presupposes the prior existence of a greater whole of which it was once a part. Thus, a fragment is also fundamentally a time traveler. For historical fields that celebrate and build themselves upon the fragmentary, including Silk Road studies, this constant motion between the past and present is fundamental to the work of its practitioners. Historians of the Silk Road face multiple overlapping pasts that constantly vie for attention.

One of those pasts is that of the field itself. Hansen’s book opens with an introduction that lays out the major trends and themes of classic Silk Road history and proceeds to upend or subvert many of them in turn. The “Silk Road” was not really a road, and was not dominated by trade in silk.² And speaking of trade, though stories about the Silk Road tend to focus on its significance as a conduit of transregional exchange and sale of goods, the trade conducted on it was small in

² This is a corrective mentioned in many of the most recent comprehensive Silk Road histories.

volume and mostly local. Communities along the routes of the region were largely agricultural, not commercial.³ Another narrative that has dominated popular and scholarly interest in Silk Road studies has been the world-historical importance of the route or routes as early conduits of exchange between early China and Rome. Hansen subverts this as well, noting that the extant material and textual evidence offers little basis on which to suggest significant contact between the Han dynasty and ancient Rome.⁴

After this usefully synthetic and corrective introduction, Hansen's succeeding chapters proceed in a chronological order that extends roughly from the second and third centuries through the early eleventh century, though the narrative occasionally forays beyond these temporal boundaries. Many Silk Road histories published in the last ten or fifteen years focus on what we might consider a medieval period,⁵ concentrating on the seventh through twelfth centuries and wrapping things up about when we arrive at Mongolian conquests of Eurasia in the thirteenth century.⁶ By framing this later story within two chapters devoted to earlier societies along the Silk Road, Hansen helps readers understand some of the ground from which later transformations in currencies, record-keeping, language, and commerce emerged, without attempting to cover a time frame so broad as to necessitate a superficial treatment of each period. Each chapter explores a different Silk Road site notable for the documentary record it has preserved. Readers thus trace the paths taken by explorers before them, through northwest China via Niya, Kucha, Turfan, Dunhuang, and Khotan, before turning to Samarkand (in today's Uzbekistan), Mount Mugh (in today's Tajikistan), and Chang'an (in today's Shaanxi Province). This also serves as a kind of corrective to existing scholarship in the field: while many previous Silk Road histories have tended to focus on art, and to approach the topic from a perspective that is highly informed by art history, Hansen's book instead focuses on documents, not only placing them at center

³ Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 4.

⁴ Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 20.

⁵ I do not invoke the term "medieval" here to signal a particular position with respect to ongoing debates about periodizing world history (including concerns about extending "modern" and/or "European" temporal concepts beyond the contexts they originally described): that issue deserves its own extended review essay. Because so many of the sources used to research and teach Silk Road history are travel accounts penned by individuals whom historians generally describe as having lived in a "medieval" period, and (as I will briefly discuss below) encounters among people from different geographic, linguistic, and cultural spaces have been crucial in accounts of Silk Road history, I feel less discomfort than I ordinarily would about using the term here.

⁶ For comparison, some synthetic Silk Road histories span vast temporal ranges: Xinru Liu's *The Silk Road in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) covers the period from the seventh century BCE through the fourteenth century, and James A. Millward's recent *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) covers the span from ca. 3000 BCE through the nineteenth century. In contrast, Susan Whitfield's *Life Along the Silk Road* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), a different kind of project that is discussed in greater detail below, focuses on the eighth through tenth centuries.

stage, but also using them to trace the spaces and contours of that stage and the structure of the book itself.⁷

The careful reader will notice several parenthetical evocations of equivalence in the preceding paragraph. The shape of these evocations is so familiar as to render them largely unnoticeable: X-City-Of-The-Past (equivalent to Y-City-Of-Today). This is a form of time-travel, a way of mapping the past onto the present and an invitation to the reader to use that map to travel across the temporal spaces glued together with the technology of the parenthesis. I inhabit the space between those parentheticals (the space of time travel) deliberately and in tribute to Hansen's work: many of the chapters explicitly bring the reader into today's incarnation of the pre-modern spaces treated in the book. In doing so, they draw the reader's attention to cities and routes as living communities by evoking his perceptive experience of urban life. The rewards of this strategy are clear when Hansen finally channels that visceral response into a reading of Silk Road texts. This association with modern experiential counterparts creates a dialogue between the past and the present in the study of the region and brings the old cities and their documents further to life.⁸

A moving evocation of the Silk Road as a human, lived space is one of the many strengths of Hansen's book, and is a narrative habit shared by some of the most readable and teachable of recent Silk Road literature. This is a crucial point: as anyone who has taught the history of the Silk Road or of Central Asia (which are often connected as teaching fields) can attest, it can be one of the most difficult of historical contexts through which to guide students in a classroom setting.⁹ It is easy to get bogged down in heaps of unfamiliar names and terms and dates of revolutions large and small, with students losing the big picture and missing any sense of the human beings and daily lives and loves to which names refer. We who teach the history of this region try to counteract this in several ways. We pay special attention to deciding what *not* to mention in class so as not to overwhelm our students. We strategically combine offerings from some of the excellent primary-source readers that have become available for aspects of Silk Road and Central Asian history.¹⁰ We

⁷ Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 5. There are some wonderful examples of this art-forward model of Silk Road history that I keep at hand: Susan Whitfield and Ursula Sims-Williams' exhibition catalog *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith* (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2004) has been a constant companion informing my writing and teaching on the subject.

⁸ Millward's *The Silk Road* also moves between his lived experiences and those along the Silk Road, especially in the transitional spaces at the opening and closing of chapters. It is a remarkably effective narrative strategy.

⁹ I use the term "Central Asia" here as a placeholder for the many regional identities that overlap in different institutional and historical approaches that incorporate attention to this geographic area: Central Eurasia, Inner Asia, West Asia, Turkestan, etc. The trickiness of these toponyms is often one of the first problems that those of us who teach undergraduate or graduate courses in the history of this area pose for our students.

¹⁰ Some primary source readers that are particularly useful in this context are Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela's excellent *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Morris Rossabi's *The Mongols and Global History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011); and the Internet Medieval Sourcebook hosted by the Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies and (as of the writing of this review) edited by Paul Halsall: <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.asp>>. Some excellent assignable short pieces that introduce interesting primary sources are also available in Jeff Sahadeo and Russell G. Zanca, *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

excerpt the writing of travelers like Ibn Battuta (fl. 1325–1354), Marco Polo (1254–1324), and Xuanzang (ca. 596–664). We try to convey some of the flavor of classic “Great Game” historiography while warning students to be critical of “Great Game” narratives.¹¹ Sometimes we assign a straightforwardly fictionalized historical account and use it to introduce some interesting monks, princesses, merchants, and other Silk Road figures while dutifully devoting some class time to discussing the differences between fictional and nonfiction forms of historical narrative.¹² Some of us spend some time at the end of a course invoking modern or contemporary history as a way to integrate modern fiction and other documentary materials that students can connect with.¹³ We look for affordable, concise, but reliable historical overviews that we can recommend to those students who can’t grasp the complexities of individual lives along the Silk Road without having solid timelines and political and imperial arcs and general overviews in which to anchor them.¹⁴ Because the best of recent synthetic histories help us do this, it has become possible to teach the histories of Central Eurasia and of the Silk Road in new ways, in creative ways, and in ways that make the task possible for non-experts in the field.

It is useful to keep these pedagogical questions in mind as, when it comes to Silk Road history, we are all students of a sort.¹⁵ We are all time travelers. The best synthetic histories honor both of those facets of the reader while giving us enough critical insight into the potential misreadings of Silk Road documents to help the field feel vibrant and transformable, to celebrate a broken archive of parts and fragments. Hansen’s book accomplishes this last task wonderfully.

SPACES

When things break, the pieces spill and fall in space as well as time. Broken bits have to end up somewhere, whether it’s a garbage pile or bench to be glued or screwed back together. One must understand the nature of the spaces in which this

¹¹ In addition to Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, some useful books in this vein include Peter Hopkirk’s *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (New York: Kodansha International, 1992) and *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Treasures of Central Asia* (London: John Murray, 2006). Both are known by various other titles that correspond with different editions of the text, but these are the most recent paperback editions accessible to North American students.

¹² Susan Whitfield’s work has long been an excellent resource for humanizing Silk Road history in a pedagogical context. Her *Life Along the Silk Road*, being a fictionalized account, is best paired with lectures and/or supplementary reading drawn from *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith* that describes many of the documents and artifacts around which the stories in *Life Along the Silk Road* are woven. It is uniquely effective at conveying Silk Road history as a human history of lived experience and daily life.

¹³ For example, Chingiz Aitmatov’s *Jamilia* (London: Telegram, 2007) and Hamid Ismailov’s *The Railway* (London: Harvill Secker, 2006).

¹⁴ Some good short introductions to the history of the region include Peter B. Golden’s *Central Asia in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Liu’s *The Silk Road in World History*.

¹⁵ This is, of course, true of all historical fields — but the particular linguistic, documentary, and other demands of working on such a region work against the acquisition of anything like a sense of comprehensive mastery of all aspects of Silk Road history in a way that is perhaps stronger than in many other fields.

breaking, fixing, and discarding happens if one is to understand a narrative built on the broken parts.

As much as Silk Road historiography invites a kind of narrative time traveling, it is also characterized by a deep commitment to the significance of spatiality in its stories. The attentive reader of synthetic Silk Road histories understands that each of these histories is also effectively a map or guidebook through different sorts of Silk Road space. The structure of Hansen's book, as mentioned above, is fundamentally spatial: the chapters are rooted in particular localities from which valuable historical documents have been unearthed. Many of these sites were oasis towns where water and food were readily accessible, where records were made and kept, and where people were making a living. The oasis town is one of the most assertive spaces in Silk Road studies, understanding oasis not simply in the sense of a watery break from the desert heat, but as a stopping-over place, a trading post, and an in-between spot to be visited for rest and commerce between trips. This emphasis on interstitial spaces (such as Samarkand and Khotan) is perhaps one of the reasons that an emphasis on activities on-the-move (trade, commerce, military activity) has so dominated Silk Road historiography and overwhelmed a sense of Silk Road towns as permanent dwelling spaces, even though many people made their long-term homes and lives there.

People also met their deaths along the Silk Road, and the literature is studded with descriptions and excavations of the tombs and burial sites that collectively compose a kind of sandy necroscape. Some of these tombs have functioned as archives, preserving physical evidence of the occupations and preoccupations of the people who lived, worked, and died in the cities in which they were found. Because the narrative structure of so many Silk Road histories is at least partially determined by the excavated documentary archive, we can extrapolate from each of them a kind of tomb-traveling diachronic map of death with the author as our guide. While we're exploring the Tang capital of Chang'an with Hansen, for example, we stop with her to look closely at the tombs of Sogdian migrants who moved to the city.¹⁶ In Khotan, we pause at the Shanpula cemetery to admire the textiles and other material objects that have been excavated. (Until about 300 CE, mass burials were still being undertaken here.) Hansen points us to evidence in the Khotanese deathscape of material exchanges with people living and dying to the west. This is such a rich story as to make one wish that more Silk Road scholars would foreground the ways that death has shaped their landscapes.

In addition to bodies and their material traces, documents and visual illustrations were also stored in the spaces of the Silk Road. To explore these stores, caves are our dark archives, and the Dunhuang caves have long been the paradigmatic cases of these Silk Road spaces. It's probably not too much of an exaggeration, in fact, to take the Dunhuang caves as metonyms for the Silk Road itself: "If you are going to visit any Silk Road site," urges Hansen in the sixth chapter of her book, "make it Dunhuang."¹⁷ Roughly forty thousand documents have been retrieved from Cave 17, the "library cave" (or as Aurel Stein called it, "The Polyglot Library," the destination of his Second Central Asian Expedition in

¹⁶ Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 143–47.

¹⁷ Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 167.

1907): materials in Chinese, Khotanese, Sanskrit, Sogdian, Tibetan, Hebrew, and Uighur have all been retrieved from this storeroom. Hansen's book discusses not just the documents and paintings found in the Dunhuang caves, but also how they were built and financed. Cave as metonym, as microcosm, as museum, as tomb. Because Dunhuang has so dominated the Silk Road narrative, many of the cavedwellers buried within it (as memories if not bodies) — Aurel Stein, Wang Yuanlu, etc. — have haunted the Silk Road narrative as ghostly presences.

City, crypt, cave: these are just a few of the many types of space that characterize the landscape of Silk Road studies. Though they are vital and important, the reader of most Silk Road histories comes away from accounts of these spaces with a clear sense that they are physical aspects of the Silk Road landscape that preexist and predetermine any history we might write with or about them. As we move forward, however, it would be a welcome development if this spatially-dominated literature established more of a dialogue with other emerging approaches to spatiality in history. While much of the extant Silk Road scholarship takes spaces for granted (even as it acknowledges the transformations and fluidity of those spaces over time), there has not been, to my knowledge, a significant engagement with work that conceives spaces as being produced by the practices and everyday activities of people rather than preexisting them.¹⁸ How did people who were engaged in commerce and agriculture produce Samarkand (for example) as a city? How is the emergence of a Silk Road space as a “burial site” produced by the people excavating the space and narrating its history, and how does it transform the kinds of Silk Road history that it is possible to write? (More broadly: how does the excavation of an area transform it, producing new forms of space that are then read back into histories of the area?) If we understand a cave not as a solid portion of a physical landscape, but as a form of space that is actively produced (by archaeologists, priests, worshippers, painters, historians, etc.), might that change the kinds of histories we write about areas like Dunhuang? The broken shard creates the trash heap as a space. The scholar of Silk Road history produces “the Silk Road” as a space. Characters written on a piece of paper transform that paper into the space of a page. To understand Silk Road spaces this way is to create the possibility of a history not just of movements of entities through these spaces, but also of the spaces themselves as objects that emerge and recede in time.

CIRCULATIONS

For a historian, fragments are not just in motion: they embody motion itself. A ripped document, broken piece of pottery, or rotted bit of fabric refuses to stay put when integrated into a historical narrative: it is constantly circulating in space and time, being translated into different contexts, and engaging its observer in efforts to arrest the ongoing processes of decay that continually break it further apart.

¹⁸ Though it covers a very different period and region, Fabio Lanza's *Behind the Gate: Inventing Students in Beijing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) is perhaps a methodological touchstone here. Lanza's book is an excellent example of recent work that accomplishes just this kind of revision of spatial history, inspired in part by the spatial critiques of Henri Lefebvre.

Recent Silk Road scholarship emphasizes not just the spaces that made up the region and its pathways, but also the entities that lived in and traveled through them.¹⁹ In many cases it was these circulations that were responsible for producing the documentary archive by which we know about the people, languages, and other currencies of Silk Road history.

Foremost among these beings circulating within and among Silk Road sites and the works about them are people. Though studies of the region have focused on the importance of travelers and merchants exploring and trading across central Eurasia, Hansen emphasizes the significance of refugees and immigrants. Her book both begins and ends with migrants. The first chapter, focusing on the sites of Niya and Loulan, opens with documentary evidence of early contact among local people and migrants from modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. These migrants were seminal in documenting early Silk Road life, introducing to local inhabitants of the Krorania Kingdom (fl. 200–400 CE) both a script (Kharoshthi) and a technology for record-keeping on wood. Hansen's repeated invocations of the importance of thieves, bandits, refugees, and immigrants to the community of Silk Road inhabitants is an important reminder that most of the migrants moving across central Eurasian landscapes until the thirteenth century did not leave a substantial documentary account of their travels. Some, however, did. Buddhist travelers and translators who moved along the silk routes are another key group for Hansen, as they have been for many scholars of Silk Road studies. Some, like the Kuchean translator Kumarajiva (344–413), the sea-traveling monk Faxian (active 350–414), and the land-roving monk Xuanzang facilitated the circulations of languages and terms across the region, and a few left important accounts of their journeys and their work.²⁰ Other Buddhist travelers produced a different kind of text, scrawling graffiti along the stones they passed in their travels and leaving behind a fascinating material archive of Buddhist terms and images.²¹ Collectively, these Buddhist migrants offer a reminder that the Silk Road landscape comprised more than its popularly depicted shifting sands and grape-dripping oases: rock, sea, and paper were also important surfaces across which people moved and, in many cases, left traces of their travels.

Of course, no synthetic account of Silk Road history would be complete without invoking the explorations of previous generations of Silk Road historians and archaeologists who left records of their journeys, from Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta to nineteenth- and twentieth-century explorers like Aurel Stein (1862–1943) and Sven Hedin (1865–1952). Hansen follows the best of recent Silk Road literature in

¹⁹ I am using the rather static spatial language here that characterizes the dominant approaches in Silk Road studies, but if we were to take seriously the point above about space as being something that emerges from lived practice rather than preexisting it, we might instead describe the entities as actively producing the spaces they move among.

²⁰ Hansen discusses Kumarajiva at length in Chapter 2 (56–82); Xuanzang in Chapter 3 (83–111); and Faxian on 160.

²¹ See Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 30–31 for a description and photo of Buddhist graffiti on the Karakorum Highway. For more information on graffiti from the Karakorum Highway, including several images, see the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften website here: <<http://www.rzuser.uni-heidelberg.de/~u71/kara/welcome.html>>. For more examples of historical graffiti from a range of sites, see the Musawwarat Graffiti Archive online: <http://musawwaratgraffiti.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/graffiti/links/links_graffiti_of_the_ancient_world.html>.

treating their accounts critically, assessing them as historical documents in the context of their production. Her contextualization of Stein's practices within the broader trends of academic archaeology in which he was working is especially helpful.²²

Merchants were also circulating among the roads and towns of the Silk Road, and a concern with trade and exchange of goods in this region has dominated interest among historians for some time. Hansen devotes much of the third and fourth chapters of her book to the Sogdians, who she calls the "most important foreign community in China at the peak of the Silk Road exchanges."²³ The Sogdians stand as the exemplary merchants in Silk Road histories, embodying a picture of the historical Silk Road as a space of long-distance trade among itinerant merchants and traders hailing from distant empires and exchanging goods from caravans or in markets brimming with exotic wares. Here again, Hansen offers a useful corrective to this dominant view. The documentary record, she urges us, points to a view of Silk Road history dominated by small-scale local exchanges, not large-scale long-distance trade. Communities along the silk routes were largely agricultural instead of commercial: most people worked the land rather than engaging in trade.²⁴ Many Sogdians lived permanent, settled lives in Turfan and other towns, where they took up professions that included farming, running hostels, and practicing veterinary medicine.²⁵

Not only were people who were making a living on the Silk Road circulating, but the media by which they supported themselves were also in constant movement. Much of the scholarship on Silk Road history pays special attention to the circulation of these currencies and their translations: coins, grain, and silk defined spaces of Silk Road business in the course of their circulations and use as media of payment and modes of exchange. They are also part of the documentary archive of Silk Road studies, and Hansen pays special attention to reading these objects, and the images inscribed upon or woven into them, as material sources that can enrich and transform the story offered by the textual record. She puts records of payment, inventories of traded goods, and tax receipts into a particularly productive dialogue with these materials as a way to contextualize the history of commodity exchange and payment across the Silk Road.

Hansen consolidates these circulations at various points in her book under the rubric of "cosmopolitanism." More specifically, she describes certain spaces where many of these forms of circulation converged, such as Turfan and Dunhuang, as "cosmopolitan" in nature or feel.²⁶ The invocation of cosmopolitanism in discussions of pre-modern spaces, communities, or approaches is also a move that characterizes recent work on global history. For a reader who is interested in

²² Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 176–77.

²³ Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 21.

²⁴ Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 4.

²⁵ Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 21.

²⁶ This is particularly notable in Chapter 3 (on Turfan; especially p. 83) and Chapter 6 (on Dunhuang) of *The Silk Road*.

bringing Central Asian stories more directly into dialogue with other contemporary and modern histories, this will likely be refreshing; indeed, it is also a language that has been used by recent scholars of Tang history.²⁷ For other readers, the application of “cosmopolitanism” to describe Chang’an or Turfan might instead feel like a move (similar to invoking the “global” as a transhistorical descriptor) that obscures the differences and particularities of encounter in different historical contexts. This is a constant tension in recent Silk Road studies that admirably aspire to a synthetic, comprehensive view of the history of the region: is it possible to, on the one hand, maintain careful attention to the historical and local context within which descriptors like “global” or “cosmopolitan” have emerged and avoid using them indiscriminately or defining them so broadly as to render the terms ultimately meaningless, while still integrating the history of the Silk Road more organically and with more immediate presence into our collective stories about the past and its shaping of the present?

This is a particularly difficult balance to strike when a significant part of one’s archive consists of fragments. Identification of a fragment inevitably entails removing difference, integrating a pluripotent piece into a more solid, knowable, and contextualized whole. It solidifies and defines, usefully closing off possibilities for the object. In a way, a cosmopolitan approach means bringing together fragments into a whole that is by nature polyvocal. The practice of Silk Road history is, in this sense, fundamentally cosmopolitan: it identifies and reads fragments together as a hybrid whole. On the other hand, the kind of whole that “cosmopolitanism” creates is defined by its contrast with a more univocal approach: to culture, to religion, to language, to fashion, to life. “Cosmopolitanism” loses its meaning unless there is something more unitary to contrast it with. (This is further complicated by the positive value judgment that is often inherent in naming a setting or entity “cosmopolitan”). For Silk Road historians, identifying bodies of fragmentary evidence and collectively representing them as evidence of cosmopolitanism thus does at least two things simultaneously. It makes early and medieval cultures more immediate to modern readers and emphasizes the plurality of Silk Road spaces. At the same time, though, in defining some Silk Road contexts as “cosmopolitan” and thus hybrid, it simultaneously characterizes other Silk Road cultures as univocal — and given the value judgments involved, perhaps less vibrant and relevant for a modern reader. This is something worth keeping in mind as we move into the next decades of work in the field.

TRANSLATIONS

One of the most pervasive themes in current Silk Road scholarship is the importance of translation in shaping Silk Road lives and the histories of them. I use the term “translation” here to characterize at least two different spheres of knowledge and practice: movement and rendering among languages and scripts (what we commonly think of as linguistic translation), and movement across

²⁷ For one of many recent examples of this trend, see Mark Edward Lewis, *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

physical and spiritual worlds, across body and spirit (what we tend to think of as ritual and religious practice).

Hansen follows a trend in recent Silk Road scholarship by emphasizing the importance of textual translators and translation to life along these central Eurasian routes. Indeed, the importance of linguistic translation in shaping modern Silk Road studies is so profound that it has already appeared in some form under all of the rubrics discussed above. Translations were *recycled*: recent scholars emphasize the special significance of multilingual textual fragments left by Silk Road translators in informing not just what we know of the region, but also how we understand the languages and scripts used therein. Similarly, translated texts have been *time travellers*, posing special challenges for scholars undertaking the rendering of ancient and medieval Silk Road scripts into modern texts and languages. Translated documents characterized the many *spaces* of Silk Road life, being produced and stored in the makeshift archives of caves, tombs, and trash heaps. Terms and their translations *circulated* among texts and languages; in tracing these movements, Silk Road scholars have attempted to trace the histories of the people producing them. Translation is also key to understanding the discussion that comes, below: charting the history of these translations has presented problems for scholars, in that the material conditions of the *preservation* of traces of linguistic translation has helped determine what we can know of Silk Road languages and their users.

If judging solely by recent synthetic histories of early and medieval Silk Road communities, multilingual and translated texts make up the most significant section of the extant documentary archive, if not in sheer numbers of texts, then certainly in terms of the amount of attention devoted to these sorts of documents in Silk Road narratives. Examples of these translated texts abound in Hansen's book. In addition to the extant materials in Chinese, Sanskrit, and other languages that were created by Buddhist translators like Kumarajiva, Uighur kaghans were creating (or ordering the creation of) trilingual texts in Sogdian, Uighur, and Chinese.²⁸ Immigrants to the Kroranian Kingdom (fl. 200–400 CE), as mentioned above, were rendering the local spoken dialect (which had not previously been written down) into Kharoshthi script on wood and leather. In the seventh and eighth centuries, Islamic conquest was bringing Arabic and Persian texts into dialogue with documents in other languages. By the thirteenth century, Mongolian conquest had further complicated written and spoken dialogue across the linguistic landscape.

Translation was not only necessary across language worlds for those who lived along the Silk Road, but also across the worlds of body and spirit. Along with

²⁸ See Hansen, *The Silk Road*, Chapter 3. I follow the convention in Silk Road histories by using the term "Uighur" here, though some scholars have raised the concern that invoking "Uighur" as an ethnic or linguistic category in pre-modern histories is anachronistic, preferring instead to use "Turkic" or "Chagatai Turki" to denote some scripts that are otherwise referred to as "Uighur" or "Uyghur." I mention this here to signal it for readers as a live issue, and perhaps an unsurprising one: in a field so deeply characterized by a historiographical practice that involves attempting to reconcile the names of people and places across languages and associated scholarly conventions, this is one of many similar issues facing the historian attempting to synthesize a history of Silk Road documents and communities.

histories of art and image, the histories of religious practice in this context have dominated recent synthetic works on the Silk Road, which tend to emphasize the region as a space of encounter among different forms of early and medieval worship. Buddhist, Manichaeist, Christian, Zoroastrian, Islamic, Sufi and many other forms of religious practice shaped Silk Road history in various periods, some at the same time, and their coexistence tends to be invoked as one thread of the evidence supporting a characterization of Silk Road life as cosmopolitan. Hansen adds further texture to this story, emphasizing both the syncreticism of religious life at many points along the Silk Road, and also the many different forms of each of these individual bodies of religious belief and practice that existed simultaneously. Though Silk Road scholars have long emphasized the significance of Buddhism in shaping the history of the region, for example, Hansen emphasizes the diversity of practices that came collectively to be gathered under the “Buddhist” category. Some Buddhists living at Niya in the third and fourth centuries, Hansen notes, married, had children, and lived with their families — and not, as is often thought, in celibate monastic communities.²⁹ Islam also receives special attention in this history: in Hansen’s description of Khotan, the first city in what is now Xinjiang to convert to Islam, she notes a major transformation in the region with the Islamic conquest of the Buddhist kingdom in 1006.³⁰ The stories of Silk Road Sogdians are given a fascinating treatment in Hansen’s hands as well. Emigrating from the Iranian world and settling in Chang’an, they brought Zoroastrian beliefs and practices with them. They worshipped at fire altars and ritually sacrificed animals. Though some opted for Chinese-style burial after death, others followed Zoroastrian tradition and left the fresh corpses of family members in the open so that the flesh could be eaten by wild animals (the bones cleaned and the body thus purified) before burial.

Many of these facts can be found in a wide range of recent Silk Road histories, including books, museum exhibits, and internet-based resources. The challenge for scholars writing about forms of Silk Road worship (a challenge that is not always met successfully) is to depict the landscape of everyday, individual practice. Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and other forms of worship might potentially be integrated together into a lived experience that was an assemblage of different and not necessarily contradictory parts. A good deal of the resources available for studying and teaching synthetic Silk Road history introduce Buddhism, etc. as distinct and discrete belief systems that (for the most part) peacefully coexisted: the individual people tend to fall out of the story as anything more than believers in or practitioners of this or that “ism.” Granted, it is exceptionally difficult for a historian to extricate individuals from the fragmentary Silk Road textual and material record and fully realize them as characters in a sustained narrative that is supported by documentary evidence. Still, with some care and creativity it can be done: Hansen and Whitfield (in *Life Along the Silk Road*) largely avoid this pitfall by placing narrative emphasis on individual practitioners living with multiple forms and elements of worship.

²⁹ Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 51.

³⁰ For a discussion of this see Hansen, *The Silk Road*, Chapter 7 (199–234).

PRESERVATIONS

The theme of recycling has been at the center of our exploration, and perhaps no aspect of contemporary Silk Road studies is more clearly germane to this recycling history than a concern with preservation, conservation, and decay of evidentiary objects in the field. Hansen's book is part of a large and growing body of literature that repeatedly acknowledges the significance of Silk Road sites as repositories of material objects. The "reading" of these objects as historical documents was briefly discussed above: here, fabric and coins become documents just as texts are treated as physical objects. Hansen's book pays special attention to shaping of Silk Road history by documents, the conditions of their storage and preservation, and the circumstances of their discovery. As she states early in the book, *The Silk Road: A New History* is unlike most other Silk Road studies in basing so much of its narrative on documents rather than surviving objects of visual art.³¹

Much of the Silk Road was, in a sense, paved with paper. It was a highly valued and valuable material, and used pieces would be repurposed rather than discarded. Because of this, some of the most fascinating documents in Silk Road history have been found on sheets of paper that were recycled into shoes, clothing, statuary, or wrapping material.³² Other writing surfaces were also used to produce documents that have survived into the twenty-first century: scripts on stone, leather, and wood help comprise the collective archive of Silk Road texts. Because many of these texts have been excavated from tombs, trash heaps, or other archaeological sites, Silk Road studies tends to merge the methods and evidentiary conventions of text-based history and archaeology more organically than many other historical fields.

Water is another material that has been crucial to recent Silk Road history, and as more than the medium of seaborne trade and maritime encounters. Scholars writing about the region have tended to situate the materiality of their texts within the shifting landscape and climate of the regions from which they have been unearthed or otherwise discovered. Thus wet and dry become crucial descriptors of spaces and documents, as the distinction can determine whether communities survive as knowable entities in the historical record or simply disappear. This is integral to the materiality of artifacts in recent Silk Road histories: scholars pay attention to documentary matter, in part, out of an interest in its putrefaction and decay. Irrigation and flooding in Khotan produced a damp environment that was inimical to the preservation of paper and wood.³³ The aridity of Turfan, in contrast, contributed to the survival of many textiles and paper documents about daily life that would have disappeared in wetter conditions.³⁴ Thus climate becomes crucial to the historian who might not otherwise be interested in environmental history, helping determine the possibility of knowing about the past: here, rot becomes a historical actor moving in the same local networks as tax records, clothing, and bones.

³¹ Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 5.

³² Millward (*The Silk Road*, 72–76) also discusses the importance of paper to Silk Road history.

³³ Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 199.

³⁴ Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 92.

The language of “actors” and “networks” invoked above is my own way of reading the material issues at stake in contemporary Silk Road studies: these are not terms that you will typically find in the pages of recent scholarship on central Eurasia and its spaces of encounter. This is one productive direction in which Silk Road studies might move in the coming years: for a scholarly field so fundamentally steeped in concerns with objects, materiality, and the artifactual, there has been surprisingly little explicit engagement with a wider literature on the conceptual, narrative, and ontological challenges and opportunities of writing object-oriented histories. How, for example, might a scholar of the medieval history of Turfan engage with and expand the narrative possibilities of Actor-Network Theory?³⁵ How different might a history of Dunhuang look if actors like Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot did not dominate the account, but instead shared the stage with an equally present and coherently individuated group of silk wrappings, bacteria, dogs, and bones? (The work of recent speculative realists and object-oriented ontologists could help here).³⁶ In what way might thinking of textiles from Miran or Yingpan in terms of the “tool-being” of Heidegger and his interpreters help activate the objects and artifacts in Silk Road histories? And how does the digitization of Silk Road documents (most notably, perhaps, by the International Dunhuang Project) create a new materiality for the field, transforming the nature of the texts and images being studied and producing new kinds of histories and ways of constituting and connecting archives as a result? How might we understand the digitization of documents as a new condition of preservation, a new kind of “climate” for Silk Road studies, bringing with it different forms of materiality with their own modes of rot and decay that shape knowability?

CONCLUSIONS: A MONK’S HABIT, A BURQA, DARTH VADER, AND A BUSINESS SUIT

So where does this leave us, we who are attempting to navigate synthetic Silk Road studies as readers, researchers, and teachers? And where does this leave the field as we move forward together with it?

When we invoke the phrase “Silk Road,” we are simultaneously invoking its history. This is made explicit in the tendency of recent synthetic Silk Road studies to incorporate introductory matter on the origin and subsequent uses of the term “Silk Road” as a prelude to any further narrative. But it has been perhaps equally powerful beyond academic contexts. For a broad range of musicians, writers, and thinkers, the phrase “Silk Road” acts as an attractor for bringing together diverse

³⁵ Many works by Bruno Latour can be cited here, but *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) is a good start.

³⁶ Some of the most helpful of recent interventions into speculative realism and object-oriented ontology include Graham Harman’s work, especially *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002); *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005); and *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Pahran, Vic.: Re.press, 2009). The collected papers in Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne, Australia: re.press, 2011) are also very helpful. These are but a handful of examples of from a rich and growing field.

groups of people and evokes a sense of exchanges and networks in unusual spaces. In modern parlance, “Silk Road” can thus mean any space of encounter.

In bringing images of sand, camels, and caravans immediately to the minds of many listeners and readers, the phrase “Silk Road” simultaneously evokes the significance of physical landscape, the environment, and natural resources therein — and, increasingly, versions of landscapes, environments, and resources that exist in the very different materiality of websites and databases. The online program of a recent TED conference on the Silk Road in Istanbul, for example, included references to a “Digital Silk Road” and described a concluding talk that referred to the conference as a “caravan of ideas.”³⁷ One project featured at this conference considered issues of trust in hybrid cities on the “new Silk Road.” This project required the viewer to wear an interactive, full-body “DataVeil” with a design inspired by “eastern and western traditions, like a traditional monks’ habit, a burqa, Darth Vader, and a classic stripe business suit.”³⁸ There is a lot to unpack in this heterotopic list, but I will focus here on just one feature of the text. By invoking inspiration from what it calls “eastern and western traditions,” the project description rehearses a trope common to scholarly and non-academic work alike: the phrase “Silk Road” tends to evoke the meeting of generalized and largely uncritical ideas of “East” and “West.” Encouraging or cultivating that tendency can undermine our efforts to encourage a greater sensitivity to cultural and historical categories and their contextual rootedness among our students, readers, and colleagues. On the other hand, though habits, burqas, Darth Vader, and striped business suits may seem at first like an absurd hodgepodge, the list embodies just the kind of encounter across space, time, and textual and written cultures that scholars of Silk Road history have celebrated in their work on central Eurasian towns and texts as meeting places. In many ways, this is where one future of Silk Road studies lies: as a tool for creating connections between entities that we otherwise might not bring together in our thinking and our work.

When teaching, we often try to encourage students to make such creative connections in their work, and a number of the recent Silk Road histories described above do that admirably. If I had to assign just one of them in the context of an undergraduate course, I would choose Hansen’s *The Silk Road: A New History*. When I read, I like to see the historical sausage being made; and when I teach, I like to emphasize the importance of the materials and craft of the historian in creating historical narratives. Hansen’s volume excels in drawing attention to the craft elements of writing Silk Road history without overwhelming the reader with so many details that the main narrative structure gets lost. I hope that Hansen’s sensitivity to the material archive of Silk Road history, and her willingness to challenge some of the entrenched assumptions of that history, are a sign of broader changes coming in the field. I hope we see more historians bringing Silk Road studies together with the conceptual tools from other fields in new trans-disciplinary combinations. I hope the expanding number of focused studies coming out of recent Silk Road scholarship eases some of the challenges of doing the

³⁷ Material on the TEDxSilkRoad conference, convened in April 2012 in Istanbul, can be found here: <<http://www.tedxsilkrad.com/>>.

³⁸ You can see a video that describes this project here: <<http://vimeo.com/28421926#>>.

deeply multilingual and polyarchival work that Silk Road history demands, freeing up more time and energy for scholars to experiment with writing more creative histories of the region and its transformations. Finally, I hope this will result in the possibility of writing synthetic Silk Road histories in the future that offer very different narratives and perspectives, and that the major contributions to the field twenty years from now look even more different from one another than they do today. In the meantime, we are off to a good start.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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