Susan Whitfield *Life Along the Silk Road*

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Susan Whitfield  
*Life Along the Silk Road*  

Writing in a style somewhat reminiscent of Edward Schafer’s “The Golden Peaches of Samarkand,” Susan Whitfield produced a neat little book entitled *Life Along the Silk Road*. This publication constitutes a welcome addition to the growing scholarly literature in English on Central Asia. This region of the world presents a formidable challenge for Western historians. During the last three millennia this area of the world served as the homeland for a motley assortment of nomadic peoples who frequently terrorized their more sedentary civilized neighbors. Just trying to identify who was where during what period of time (and for how long) can vex the most dedicated historian.

Fortunately, for students of Asia, a fairly impressive number of delightful books appeared recently offering extremely helpful information about this mysterious region. This especially proves true for conditions in this area during the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618-906 AD). These publications became possible because of the accessibility of thousands of manuscripts plundered by Western and Japanese adventurers in the first decade of the twentieth century. Yet it took quite a while before these Dunhuang manuscripts successfully inspired scholars to reveal their contents.

Susan Whitfield offers ten well-balanced biographies in this volume. She also included a Preface, map, annotated bibliography, and index. The biographies deal with four women and six men, each from a distinctive social class and profession, who lived from the 9th through the 10th centuries. Five are Han Chinese and the others are Sogdian, Tibetan, Uighur, Kashmiri and Kuchean. The men are a merchant, a soldier, a monk, a horseman, an official and an artist. The women are a princess, a courtesan, a nun and a widow. They also lived in different cities along the Silk Road and some, such as the merchant, travelled from Samarkand in the west to Changan in the east. The balanced mix of people, profession and social status allowed Whitfield to infuse each biography with ancillary information pertaining to religion, flora and fauna, medicine, housing, food, scenery, and so forth. She also was quite faithful to report major historical events for each “tale.”

Susan Whitfield appears extremely well-qualified to conjure up this assortment of tales concerned with *Life Along the Silk Road*. She supervises the International Dunhuang Project at the British Library. This
project recently made available on the Internet to scholars everywhere over 50,000 pre-eleventh century Silk Road documents. This represents a veritable cornucopia of materials that will keep scholars busy for many decades. Amongst several impressive titles credited to her, she is listed as co-author of *Dunhuang and Turfan: Contents and Conservation of Ancient Documents from Central Asia*. Having ready access to this material and obviously very intimate knowledge of its contents, doubtless accounts for the delightful wealth of personalized information contained in these “tales.”

This book’s most obvious strength is its descriptive details. Whitfield not only offers matters on the lives of human beings, she infuses her narrative with delightfully elaborate descriptions embracing an amazing plethora of topics. The Sogdian merchant’s story which opens this book affords Whitfield that chance to describe where the Sogdian people lived, their distinctive clothing, what products were traded and how people in the 8th century AD bargained. As the merchant in question traveled to Xi’an, this allowed Whitfield to include a description of the travel conditions, the terrain traversed, the cities visited (along with restaurants, hotels, food eaten and entertainment enroute). As the merchant Nanaivandak was a follower of Mani, this chapter included an insightful synopsis of Manicheanism. All of the remaining chapters follow a similar pattern. The sum total amounts to a fantastic depiction of multiple facets of life, flora, fauna, and geophysical conditions in Central Asia during China’s Tang and early Sung periods.

Susan Whitfield also highlights the historical events of all regions involved during this time period. This entails a considerable amount of research. The Chinese historical details were probably the easiest to identify due the massive records that Chinese officials maintained so astutely during these centuries. But Whitfield evidently had access to other historical documents, as her tales provide intimate historical matters well beyond the Chinese traditional accounts.

The book is embellished with high quality colorful and helpful illustrations. Some of these are taken from rather standard sources, but others represent new items. Photographs of the region are beautiful. The maps are helpful. The paintings, reproductions of texts, textiles, and ceramics that are included all serve to enhance the attractiveness of the book.

Alas, *Life Along the Silk Road* contains some weaknesses. It generally suffers from a lack of scholarly professionalism. Whitfield offers not a single footnote nor does she document any of her sources. Rather, she offers a “Further Reading” section, which hardly accounts
for where she obtained the details included in the text. So, in some respects she conjures up these ten tales with massive details concerning life on the Silk Road from the 8th through the 10th Centuries, yet she alone knows which if any of these details are authentic. That the book contains some factual errors that can be documented suggests that Ms. Whitfield might have better served the world if only she, as a scholar, had taken the time to provide normal documentation for this very interesting book.

RONALD R. ROBEL