

«Central Asian Studies World Wide»
Course Syllabi for the Study of Central Eurasia
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David Christian
The Silk Roads in World History (History 680)
Syllabus for the course offered in Fall 2001
San Diego State University
Dept. of History

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HIST 680: Directed Reading on Selected Topics

Fall, 2001: 'The Silk Roads in World History'

Mondays, 17:00-19:40, Adams Humanities Rm. 4157

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Course Content and Goals | 1 |
| Texts | 1 |
| Structure | 2 |
| What Happens in Classes | 2 |
| What Happens Week by Week | 2 |
| Assessment | 3 |
| Essay Topics | 3 |
| Key Dates | 4 |
| General Bibliography | 5 |
| Primary Sources | 5 |
| Secondary Sources | 6 |

Course Content and Goals:

The Silk Roads are much older than most people realize. They have existed for at least 4,000 years, exchanging ideas, languages, people, diseases, technologies, religions, and goods between the eastern, southern, western and northern edges of the Eurasian landmass. Because of the Silk Roads, there were always links between the four quarters of Eurasia and these had a profound impact on the history of Eurasia, the dominant region in recent world history. So, this course is about the Silk Roads *and* about World History. Its first goal is **to explore the prehistory and history of the Silk Roads, in order to understand their broader significance for World History.**

The course has a second goal: **to help you become a better reader of history.** Reading history is a complex skill, and if you read history well you will be acquiring an invaluable research skill. But to read well you have to argue with what you are reading. So we will spend a lot of time discussing both primary and secondary sources on the Silk Roads, and trying to decide how best to evaluate them. Of each book, we will ask: What does it say? What's its 'angle'? What evidence does it

give to support what it says? How reliable is it? Is it different from other works on the same topic? Do I accept its basic argument? Does it add anything new? What's wrong with it?

Texts: Available in KB Books. I have prepared a book of readings of some of the more inaccessible sources on the Silk Roads, and we will study these during the semester. An introductory essay, that lists many other valuable sources, is David Christian, 'Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History', Journal of World History, 21 (Spring 2000), pp. 1-25 (available in Reserve). Valuable for many parts of the course will be a more synoptic study: David Christian, A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia, Vol. 1: Inner Eurasia from Prehistory to the Mongol Empire, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

Structure:

I have prepared a rough list of topics for this course, but we can fine tune the details in early meetings, as they will be shaped in part by the interests of those taken part in the seminar.

What Happens in Classes

The classes will not be rigidly structured, but there will be a standard format we will follow much of the time:

- a) A class member will **summarise the previous week's discussion**: 'What did we learn about the Silk Roads?'
- b) I will give a brief **talk** about a particular aspect of Silk Roads History.
- c) We will **discuss a particular primary or secondary source**, led by a member of the class.
- d) I will be available for **consultation** towards the end of each class period

What Happens Week by Week

WEEK2: **Introductory**: discussion of course and assessments, choose primary texts for 1st essay, & readings for Wk. 3, (Stein, Lattimore, Xuanzang [Beal, Watters, Wriggins], Cable, Fleming, Hopkirk, Marco Polo, Hedin)

WEEK 3: **The modern discovery of the Silk Roads**; discussion of travel accounts of the Silk Roads; bring maps of the Silk roads; report on previous week.

WEEK 4: **Slides: Travelling the Silk Roads today**, Allen Wittenborn, report.

WEEK 5: **Pastoralism**, main text: Sherratt on the 'Secondary Products Revolution' (Reserve), supplementary texts, Barfield, Khazanov, Christian; report.

WEEK 6: **The Steppes in Prehistory: Languages and Migrations**, Allen Wittenborn on the Xinjiang mummies, Mallory, Renfrew, Mair and Christian; report.

WEEK 7: **Persians and Scythians**, the first major era of the Silk Roads, main text, Herodotus, bk.

4, supplementary texts, Christian; report

WEEK 8: **The Chinese borderlands: the Han and Hsiung-nu**, main texts, Ssu-ma Ch'ien & Pan Ku, supplementary texts, histories of Han China, etc.; report.

WEEK 9: **Religions on the Silk Roads**, main text, Xuanzang, Dawson, ed., report.

WEEK 10: **Byzantium and the Silk Roads**, main texts, Texts on the Silk Roads: Priscus, Menander, Constantine Porphyrogenitus; report.

WEEK 11: **Islam on the Silk Roads**, Ibn Battuta, Ross Dun, and see Lapidus, Hodgson; report.

WEEK 12: **Turks on the Silk Roads**, main texts, Menander, Orkhon inscriptions, Tamim ibn Bahr; report.

WEEK 13: **Chinggis Khan**, main text: the Secret History; report.

WEEK 14: **The Mongol Empire & World Systems Theories**, main texts, Dawson, Mission to Asia/Marco Polo; secondary texts, Abu-Lughod, Frank and Gills; report.

WEEK 15: **The Decline of the Silk Roads**; & overview of course; report.

Assessment:

- **Report on a primary source**, evaluating it, commenting, explaining difficulties, plus annotated bibliography of books on the source (20%). This will involve some bibliographical research in the library, and I strongly advise you to consult with Chuck Dintrone (4-4303; email: charles.dintrone@sdsu.edu), a librarian specialising in resources for History.
- **Book Review of a significant secondary source** (30%), the exact work to be discussed in class
- **Large essay** (4,000 words) on a major theme (40%), see list of suggested topics below
- **Participation and Reports on previous week's work** (10%)

Essay Topics:

- When did Inner Eurasian pastoralism originate, and what were its most distinctive features?
- What are the distinctive features of pastoralist states and empires?
- What have been the main differences between Inner and Outer Eurasia, and how have these differences affected the histories of these two large zones?
- What were the most important features of political and military relations along the long Eurasian border between agrarian states and pastoralists?

- What were the most important goods exchanged along the Silk Roads?
- Why did pastoralists usually take an active interest in trade?
- How did languages travel along the Silk Roads?
- How did the Silk Roads shape the overall history of Eurasia?
- Why have historians neglected the history of Inner Eurasia?

Key Dates

| | | |
|-----------------------|--|--------------------------|
| Mon 3 September: | 1st week of classes: Labor Day, no classes | |
| Mon 10 September: | 2nd week | |
| Mon 17 September: | 3rd week | Last day to drop classes |
| Mon 24 September: | 4th week | Slides on the Silk Roads |
| Mon 1 October: | 5th week | |
| Mon 8 October: | 6th week | |
| Mon 15 October: | 7th week | |
| Mon 22 October: | 8th week | |
| Mon 29 October: | 9th week | |
| Mon 5 November: | 10th week | |
| Mon 12 November: | 11th week | |
| Mon 19 November: | 12th week | |
| Thurs 22-23 November: | | Thanksgiving |
| Mon 26 November: | 13th week | |
| Mon 3 December: | 14th week | |
| Mon 10 December: | 15th week | |
| Sat 15-22 December: | | Final Exams |

General Bibliography: (in case you didn't think much had been written about the Silk Roads; though some of these books are about World History and its implications for the Silk Roads)

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