Stewart Gordon. *When Asia Was the World: Traveling Merchants, Scholars, Warriors, and Monks Who Created the Riches of the East.* Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2008. Pp. 228. Paper $26.00.

Stewart Gordon, a Senior Research Scholar at the University of Michigan, recounts why Asia was enriched by cultural commerce while Europe suffered from stagnation in the arts and other expressions of intellectual achievement between 700-1500 CE. Each chapter relies on primary sources such as memoirs, biographies, and letters, including the Cairo Geniza papers, preserved through the centuries to describe the details of interactions and stories. Gordon seeks to uncover some of the vast social networks found within Asia during the European "Dark Ages" to show the great intellectual spirit it boasted by following closely behind the footsteps of those who lived there. His use of the Social Network Theory helps to show the primary human relationship not as a solo enterprise but as a relationship between two humans and an object that connects them. These relationships and material things are the focus of the stories, and they depict what made Asian societies distinct enough to enrich the rest of the world.

Each chapter is chronologically organized and is based on a separate memoir or biography of one individual, focusing on an important topic in Asia's history. In this way chapter one deals with the spread of Buddhism, monasteries and the contributions of the Silk Road to social networks. The spread of religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam was rapid in Asia at from 500-1500 CE. Xuanzang, a Buddhist monk from Luoyang traveled from Chengdu China, to India, Kashmir, Balkh, Samarkand, Tashkent and other cities to study the diversities in religious doctrine practiced across Asia. Monks were able to depend on the support system of monastic institutions wherever they traveled and sought employment opportunities or housing. Xuanzang was received with high honors; Kings placed high value on spiritual guides in their region as indicated by the gifting of a royal escort, 30 horses, 24 letters of introduction, 500 rolls of silk, a lifetime supply of gold, and an entourage of 1,000 companions to follow the traveler on many journeys lasting over 20 years of his career.

The next chapters focus on the spread of Islam through the experiences of a group of exemplary figures who represent Asia's intellectual, philosophical, and medicinal advances. As an illustration of these cultural strengths, the story of a Muslim named Ma Huan paints a picture of someone who could speak

Arabic, live in Nanjing (East China), and travel as a translator to Cochin, Hormoz, and Mecca all in one lifetime, shows the many benefits available to someone intertwined with these social networks. Ibn Sina, a philosopher and physician in 1002 CE, advanced his skills using books available from the thriving intellectual network of the Middle East. Ibn Sina gained enough expertise and reputation to be summoned by a king for the treatment of an illness. He also authored a medical textbook, describing various ailments and their treatments, which would be used throughout Asia and Europe. Another intellectual example was Ibn Battuta. He gained a positive reputation through receptions at royal courts across the continent for his wisdom about ceremonial court practices, Islamic law, and even styles of dress, which resembled one another from one kingdom to the next. These prosperous intellectual environments gave endless opportunities for employment to passionate and able-bodied travelers. The social network culture of Asia produced breakthroughs in science, math, architecture, technology, and religion from 500-1500 CE.

The greatest strength of this book is its ability to bring back reliable evidence of lives lived 1,000 years ago. It is unusual for social historians to deal with such a diverse concentration of individuals from what may seem like opposite corners of the map. Each story recounted may feel fragmented and incomplete, which is inevitable due to the passing of so much time. Since this book focuses on popular historical figures it is suitable to a larger audience than a typical history monograph. The wide coverage of topics, themes, and dates may at first appear difficult to follow; however the author remedies this with constant reminders to earlier sections of the book, allowing readers to see how prior chapters relate to one another.

The stories recounted in the book describe the social networks found in Asia from 500-1500 CE to show the personal relationships between people and material things, which made Asian societies advanced in learning and capable of influencing the rest of the world. These stories outline many peaceful circumstances where cultural exchange thrived, and do not focus on international conflicts in detail. The notable figures chosen to cover each of the nine chapters bring to life the culture and experience of that time, fusing personal experiences unique to that era with history overall.

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