

## Central Asia in World History

BY PETER B. GOLDEN

NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011

192 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0195338195, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Reuel R. Hanks

This volume, one of the geographically themed books in the *New Oxford World History* series, is a welcome addition to the quite limited number of works on Central Asian history written for high school students and college undergraduates. Peter Golden is an accomplished scholar of the region, and he offers a broad sweep of historical development, ranging from the earliest era of oasis civilization to the modern era. The narrative is organized around basic themes that include the tension between agrarian and nomadic lifestyles, the complex and multilayered social fabric of Central Asian societies, and the recurrent infusion of new cultural markers and peoples via invasion and trade. For students encountering the region for the first time, Central Asia's crucial position as a conduit in world affairs unfolds in the centuries-long interplay of Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Turks, and Mongols. This story is ably presented in just over 100 pages, providing a concise but engaging rendering of this region's fascinating past.

In a short account covering several millennia, discussion of some periods invariably must be limited in scope. A weak spot in Professor Golden's book is the slim account given the Soviet period and the past twenty years, representing the aftermath of independence for the five former USSR Central Asian republics. Only the last seven pages or so are devoted to a quite brief overview of Soviet policy and the problems faced by the arc of states lying between the Caspian Sea and the Tien Shan. Yet the major crises plaguing this portion of Central Asia, be they environmental, economic, social, or political, all stem from policies and mismanagement wrought by Soviet ad-

ministrations. Examples include the destruction of the Aral Sea with its associated ecological and health problems, persistent episodes of ethnic violence in the Fergana Valley, and the continuing failure of the national leadership in the era of independence to establish social and political institutions in most of these countries that contribute to civil society and stability. Likewise, there is little information on the pivotal place of Afghanistan in post-9/11 Central Asian development strategy and stability. In the rare instance where students encounter coverage of Central Asia in the Western media, these issues are likely to be the focus, and a fuller presentation of their origins and consequences would be useful. A minor quibble is that the book contains five good maps, but there is no listing of these in the front matter. Introductory-level students would be more likely to make use of these resources if there was a quick-reference list at the beginning of the volume or at the beginning of the chapters in which they appear.

This work will be useful to teachers covering world history (tenth grade or above); those providing a unit on Asian history, especially the pre-modern era; and is a valuable addition to a study of Middle Eastern or South Asian history to 1800. It will serve nicely as the fundamental text in a course devoted exclusively to Central Asia, if bolstered with a few supplemental articles covering the last two centuries. ■

REUEL R. HANKS is Professor of Geography at Oklahoma State University and Editor of the *Journal of Central Asian Studies*. A Fulbright Scholar in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 1995, he has published more than a dozen articles and book chapters on Central Asia, Islam in Central Asia, foreign policy, and political geography. He is the author of *Uzbekistan in the World Bibliographical Series* (ABC-CLIO, 1999), *Central Asia: A Global Studies Handbook* (ABC-CLIO, 2005), and *Global Security Watch: Central Asia* (Praeger International, 2010). He has taught at Tashkent State Economics University, Samarkand State Institute for Foreign Languages, KIMEP (Almaty, Kazakhstan), and Eurasian National University (Astana, Kazakhstan).

米  
日  
友  
誼

THE  
U.S.-JAPAN  
FOUNDATION

Elgin Heinz  
Outstanding  
Teacher Awards

**Recognizing Teachers Who Further Mutual  
Understanding Between Americans and Japanese**

The United States-Japan Foundation seeks applicants  
for its 2012 Elgin Heinz Outstanding Teacher Awards.  
Applications are open to all full time pre-collegiate teachers in  
the United States and are due February 1, 2012.

Application instructions are available on our  
web site at: [www.us-jf.org](http://www.us-jf.org)

United States-Japan Foundation  
145 East 32nd Street  
New York, NY 10016  
(212) 481-8757

## Bamboo People

BY MITALI PERKINS

WATERTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS: CHARLESBRIDGE PUBLISHING, 2010

272 PAGES, ISBN-10: 1580893287, HARDBACK

Reviewed by Sara Van Fleet

*Bamboo People* is a coming-of-age story about two teenage boys caught up in the Burmese government's brutal regime and its systematic repression of ethnic minority groups. The story touches upon each boy's struggle to maintain a sense of morality, identity, and compassion in a world filled with cruelty and injustice. It is a tale that addresses current conditions of human rights abuse and inequality inside Burma; it would be an effective novel to use in the classroom to engage and teach about these issues while bringing a greater understanding of Burma and mainland Southeast Asia to young adults.

The story is told in two parts. The first is from the perspective of Chico, the teenage son of a Burmese physician imprisoned without a trial for what the government calls "crimes against the state." The crimes consist of his medical care for individuals labeled enemies by the government. Chico's mother is trying to survive without her husband's income and at the same time trying to protect her only son from being seized by the military and forced into fighting.

Chico loves to read and dreams of being a teacher, but his mother insists that he stay hidden inside their home for his own protection. When he eventually answers an advertisement for teachers, he shows up for the interview only to be met by a hostile group of soldiers who force him at gunpoint into a truck and take him to a recruitment base deep in the jungle. There, Chico is trained in guerilla warfare and sent out on a mission to seize arms from a stronghold belonging to the Christian Karenni tribe, an ethnic minority group forced out of their traditional villages inside Burma and into refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border.

As they proceed on their mission, Chico's small group wanders off the main path and triggers a land mine, killing Chico's companions and gravely injuring Chico. Tu Reh, a Karenni boy about the same age as Chico, discovers him. Several years before, Tu Reh watched his village burned by the Burmese military, and since that time, he has been in hiding, training to fight for Karenni independence and dreaming of revenge. Tu Reh's companions urge him to kill Chico, but Tu Reh's father, a leader of the Karenni resistance, tells him that he must decide for himself what is the right thing to do, and the fragile relationship between the two boys begins as Tu Reh reluctantly saves Chico's life and returns with him to his camp.

The second part of the story is told from the perspective of Tu Reh, who is torn between loyalty to the Karenni and what he comes to know about the Burmese boy with eyeglasses that he has rescued. Both boys have been told many horrifying stories about the inhuman characteristics and crimes of the other's ethnic minority group, but as they gradually come to know each other and learn about their personal histories, they are forced to come to terms with their own truths. Tu Reh risks suspicion and ostracism for protecting and caring for Chico but in the process learns to stand up for what he believes is right and for what he envisions for his own, as well as the Karenni, future.

Chico owes his life to Tu Reh and the Karenni villagers who nursed him back to health. He soon realizes that, just like his father, the Karenni are labeled enemies of the state in order to satisfy the political goals and agenda of the ruling Burmese military elite. It turns out that the two boys have more in common than they thought.

Although the vast majority of Burmese military recruits come from poor families with little to no formal education—a government strategy aimed at avoiding resistance from the small Burmese middle class—Perkins's choice of the educated Chico, who has a soft spot for *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, will resonate with young adult readers in the US. Both Chico and Tu Reh must grapple with the adult world of suffering, brutality, warfare, and injustice, but they are also teenagers, falling for the girl next door, sneaking off for a swim in the river, and dreaming of their futures.

*Bamboo People* is a compelling story, and while there are a few moments of didacticism, Perkins tells the tale with sensitivity and insight. This would be an excellent work of fiction to use in the classroom to engage young adult readers in global human rights issues as well as Southeast Asia-specific content. ■

SARA VAN FLEET is Associate Director of the University of Washington Southeast Asia Center. She is a Cultural Anthropologist focusing on the contemporary cultural issues of mainland Southeast Asia.

## Association for Asian Studies, Inc.



### Enjoy the benefits!

#### With membership comes:

- Fellowship and intellectual stimulation of your peers
- Networking opportunities with over 7,000 scholars across all disciplines
- Reduced Annual Meeting registration fee
- Annual subscriptions to the *Asian Studies Newsletter* and *The Journal of Asian Studies* (print and online)
- Discounts on all other AAS publications
- Eligibility for grant programs
- Access to the "Member Only" sections of the AAS website. Features include:
  - AAS Member Directory – search and contact all current AAS members
  - *Journal of Asian Studies* online
  - View job listings



[www.asian-studies.org](http://www.asian-studies.org)

**JOIN  
TODAY**  
LOW FEES FOR STUDENTS!



Formed in 1941, AAS is a scholarly, non-political, and non-profit professional association open to all persons interested in Asia and the study of Asia.