

## EAA INTERVIEW WITH THE 2006 FRANKLIN R. BUCHANAN PRIZE WINNERS



Martin Amster. Photo by Trey McArver.

# Martin Amster and Morris Rossabi



Morris Rossabi. Photo by Mary Rossabi.

This is our tenth interview with Franklin R. Buchanan Prize winners. The Association for Asian Studies awards the prize annually for the development of outstanding curriculum materials on Asia. The 2006 prize was awarded for the teaching guide *From Silk to Oil: Cross-Cultural Connections Along the Silk Road* (funded by the US Department of Education and produced by the China Institute in America, 2005). Project directors included Morris Rossabi, Nancy Jervis, and Marleen Kassel. Others crucial to the development of the project included Martin Amster, editor, Ronald G. Knapp, managing editor, and Lier Chen, editorial assistant. The following is an interview with City University of New York History Professor Morris Rossabi, and China Institute Program Coordinator Martin Amster.

**Lucien:** *Marty and Morris, congratulations to both of you as well as the many others who worked on this fabulous curriculum guide. Marty, since you are affiliated with the organization that published From Silk to Oil, please briefly describe the China Institute for readers who may not be aware of it.*

**Martin Amster:** China Institute was founded eighty years ago by a group of Chinese and American educators, including Hu Shih, a central figure in China's May Fourth Movement, and the philosopher John Dewey. We're a non-profit educational institution promoting understanding and appreciation of Chinese history and culture, past and present. We're also the oldest bicultural organization in America focusing exclusively on China.

We offer all sorts of activities for adults and kids, including lectures, exhibitions in our gallery, and classes in language, literature, painting, calligraphy, and *taiji*.

Our corporate affairs program keeps the business and financial communities abreast of the latest developments in China's economy.

In 2006 we became home to one of the first Confucius Institutes in the US. Established in conjunction with China's Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban), this training program is designed to meet the increasing demand for qualified Chinese language teachers.

I'm part of China Institute's Teach China program. Teach China works with K-12 educators. We give professional development courses, workshops, and summer institutes, and we research and formulate curriculum.

*From Silk to Oil* is one result of our curriculum work. It was about four years in the making—from the planning stages in 2001 to publication in spring 2005. Many initial activities were funded by the Freeman Foundation, though it was ultimately brought to fruition through a grant from the US Department of Education.

"A good beginning and a good ending" (*shan shi shan zhong*) is a Chinese proverb that very much applies to *From Silk to Oil*. Morris Rossabi and Marleen Kassel, its first project director, conceived and planned the book. Our 2001 Silk Road study tour gave us a core of educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to create most of the twenty-three units. Lier Chen shepherded the manuscript through multiple versions and classroom field testing. A terrific group of scholar/advisors patiently responded to all our questions. Nancy Jervis, China Institute's vice president, oversaw the final stages of the project. Managing editor Ron Knapp worked night and day to see *From Silk to Oil* through the final months of production. As I said, "*shan shi shan zhong*."

**Lucien:** *Morris, a plurality of our readers teach some form of World History. The Silk Roads are mentioned, often in a desultory way, in every textbook I've ever seen. Obviously, given the time you've spent developing From Silk to Oil, you strongly believe the Silk Roads are a significant World History topic. What are the most important reasons you think the Silk Roads deserve more attention in World History than perhaps they've garnered?*

**Morris Rossabi:** The Silk Roads offer an invaluable means of teaching World History and of expanding teachers' and students' hori-

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zons. The time during which the Silk Roads operated provides a remarkable span with which to explore Eurasian history. Their origin has been traditionally dated as the second century, BCE, and the so-called Oil Roads, the modern version of these routes, continue to the present. Teachers thus can refer to more than two thousand years of contacts among East Asian, Central Asian, West Asian, and even European civilizations and cultures. In addition, recent archeological discoveries and reevaluations of texts yield further confirmation of the significance of such interchanges. Teachers of history, art history, literature, and current events can, with great profit, incorporate study of the Silk Roads into their World History, Art History, English and Literature, and Comparative Governments curricula—and simultaneously enliven discussions of past and present interactions among seemingly disparate cultures.

The Silk Roads surely offer an extraordinary group of colorful individuals whom students can use as touchstones to gain insights about intercultural exchanges. Official envoys, Buddhist pilgrims, Turkic entertainers, Iranian craftsmen, and European adventurers, not to mention merchants from various lands, traveled along these routes, and a few wrote firsthand accounts of their journeys, providing valuable descriptions and analyses of the religions, customs, arts and crafts, products, and political systems of the regions they traversed. Teachers can assign selections from these accounts in order to help students understand how travelers conceived of the “Other” and how these written descriptions often shaped their peoples’ perceptions of foreigners.

Such studies will enable students to notice the importance of the diffusion of ideas, religions, technology, artistic motifs, and political and administrative systems, as well as to gain an appreciation of the significance of political and military relations across Eurasia. The fundamental principles of Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism, not to mention Nestorianism, Zoroastrianism, and other religions, can be studied as part of a unit on the Silk Roads. The Westward transmission of such Chinese inventions as paper and silk can be readily incorporated into such a unit. The study of the reverse transmission of Iranian astronomy and medicine to China can show students that the image of the Middle Kingdom as isolated needs to be reconsidered. Teachers can also use recent museum exhibitions, such as *The Legacy of Genghis Khan* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to demonstrate the transmission of motifs and techniques between China and Iran. Teachers do not need to be reminded of the political significance of the Silk Roads region, particularly during the Mongol Empire and in contemporary times.

In short, the Silk Roads offer a useful pedagogical tool for the study of integrative history.

**Lucien:** *Although many varieties of intercultural contacts occurred because of the Silk Roads, their existence enabled interactions between two important forces, Imperial China and elements of the Islamic world. Morris, how do you see study of this particular nexus assisting teachers and students to understand more about historical and contemporary China and Islam?*

**Morris Rossabi:** Travels along the Silk Routes required stable and powerful states in China and West Asia, particularly in Iran. Without such political authorities serving to protect caravans, trade and journeys across Eurasia diminished. It is no accident, for example, that the Silk Roads flourished during the Tang and Yuan dynasties. During those two eras, the Silk Roads facilitated contacts between China and the Islamic world.

Both Tang China and West Asia benefited from such relations. China not only received aromatics, spices, and other valuable goods, but also obtained the services of Muslim merchants to foster trade with much of Asia. Iranian silversmiths introduced new motifs and shapes into Chinese art; Muslims played a useful role in the empire’s horse administration; and Islam became an established religion, to which a few Chinese converted. At the same time, such Chinese inventions as paper were transmitted to West Asia; Chinese ceramics were traded or sent as gifts to Central and West Asia; and Chinese silk remained highly valued in Asia, although China’s monopoly on silk production ended by the sixth century at the latest.

Perhaps as important, Muslims began to settle, often in communities with co-religionists, in China, a trend that accelerated through the Yuan dynasty. Most such settlements were either on the Southeast coast or in the Northwest, and many in these communities were

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either merchants or artisans. When the Mongols came to power in China in the thirteenth century, they recruited Muslims for important positions in their government. Thus, by the end of the Yuan dynasty, Muslim communities were established in numerous locations in China.

However, the Qing dynasty witnessed the incorporation of the largest number of Muslims. Qing occupation of the Northwest in the eighteenth century increased the size of the Muslim population within China's borders. The new groups differed from the Hui, the ethnic Chinese Muslims, because they were principally Turkic speakers and had a different ethnic background. Conflicts arose between the Muslims and the Qing starting in the nineteenth century, and occasional contretemps, particularly between the Turkic Muslims and the Chinese government, persist into the present.

These indigenous Muslim communities kept China in sporadic touch with the larger Islamic world, influencing both. During the Mongol era, Iranian astronomy and medicine reached China, while Chinese art influenced Iranian art, and Chinese agricultural texts were translated into Persian. In the succeeding Ming dynasty, the eunuch Zheng He led seaborne expeditions, often stopping in areas with large Muslim populations. From the late Ming on, the West, Russia, and then Japan superseded the Islamic world as the most sig-

nificant countries in China's foreign relations, a dramatic deviation from about one thousand years of Chinese history.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 marked the onset of renewed Chinese involvement with the Islamic world. China now plays a role, principally economic at this time, in Central Asia, Iran, and the Arab world, not to mention the Islamic lands in Africa. It will be interesting to observe how its growing involvement with Islamic countries shapes the government's relationship with its own Muslim minority.

In sum, the study of the historical and contemporary relations between China and the Islamic lands along the Silk Roads will prove of great value to secondary school students in World History courses. We have done our best to provide assistance with our curricular guide *From Silk to Oil*.

**Lucien:** *Marty, have you received any specific feedback from educators or students who are using the guide? If so, please share some anecdotes with our readers. Were there any uses of the guide in particular classes that surprised you?*

**Martin Amster:** We've received lots of gratifying feedback, and demand for the book has been steady—so much so that last year we sought and received funding for a second printing from the Mark and Anla Cheng Kingdon Foundation.

*From Silk to Oil* is being used both in the classroom and for training teachers. One instructor sent me photos of his undergraduate education students playing our Silk Roads board game. It's called "Oases, Towns and Caravans." In it one gets to be a Silk Roads merchant facing the hazards of travel through the Tarim Basin in northwest China.

Programs for Advanced Placement teachers have taken a shine to it. It's also found a place in seminars conducted by NCTA (National Consortium for Teaching About Asia). Copies have been requested by organizations that don't exclusively deal with Asia but who are, for instance, interested in helping teachers incorporate international affairs into their classrooms.

Although *From Silk to Oil* is designed primarily for high school global studies, *Teach China* has also been working with a group of New York City middle school teachers to adapt some of the material to their needs.

Since *From Silk to Oil* was published, my colleagues and I have done a lot of outreach focusing on the Silk Roads and related issues of human geography, geopolitics, and cultural exchange. From the questions we get, I'm always surprised at how hungry teachers are for interesting and accurate curriculum on China and East Asia as well as the Eurasian world of the Silk Roads. Hopefully, *From Silk to Oil* satisfies some of that need.

**Lucien:** *Marty and Morris, my thanks to you and your colleagues for a great guide, and to both of you for this interview!* ■



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