

Eurasia and Teaching World History

A Short Conversation with Professor Xinru Liu

XINRU LIU (PhD, University of Pennsylvania) is Professor Emeritus of early Indian History and World History at the College of New Jersey. She is the author of *Ancient India and Ancient China, Trade, and Religious Exchanges, AD 1–600*; *Silk and Religion, an Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600–1200*; *Connections across Eurasia, Transportation, Communication, and Cultural Exchange on the Silk Roads, coauthored with Lynda Norene Shaffer*; *A Social History of Ancient India (in Chinese)*; and *The Silk Road in World History*. Liu promotes South Asian studies and world history studies. In the interview that follows, Professor Liu discusses the concept of Eurasia and teaching it in world history courses.



Lucien Ellington: Many EAA readers teach world history, especially introductory survey courses at the secondary school or beginning undergraduate levels. When introducing the concept of “Eurasia,” especially to educators and students who aren’t familiar with the term, do you begin with a geographical definition? If so, what do you think is the clearest explanation of the term? Do you also attempt a cultural definition of the concept, and if so, can you give us a basic sense of your explanation?

Xinru Liu: We inherit the words “Asia” and “Europe” from the classical age centered in the Mediterranean. “Asia” meant where the sun rose, and “Europe” was the direction the sun set. The geographical boundaries of them changed with the vision of the users of the terms with time. In modern times, the official boundaries—Ural Mountains, Dardanelle Straits, etc.—run through nation-states. In early history, the steppe, the vast area between the sedentary agricultural states to the south, and taiga and tundra to the north, was a center of energy that initiated many major events in world history. Peoples who moved on the steppe, be they hunters-gatherers, chariot-driving farmer-herders, or horse-riding nomads who built large empires, were not aware of the divide between Asia and Europe. The word “Eurasia” thus was invented to make the historical narratives flow. Eurasia, however, leaves out the south shore of the Mediterranean, which was an important geographic component of the stories of Europe and Asia. Therefore, in the world history textbook that I participated in composing, *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart*, we use the phrase “Afro-Eurasia” instead of Eurasia. Afro-Eurasia is a bit awkward, but it defines the geographical scope of the histories taught in classrooms, from the mid-first millennium BCE to early modern times, more clearly.

Lucien: The late historian (and AAS president) Rhoads Murphey asserted in a 1997 essay for educators introducing Eurasia that all the major world religions, including Christianity, are Asian in origin. What are your reactions to this contention? If you were teaching secondary school students who are unfamiliar with the concept “Eurasia,” would you use this assertion in class? Why or why not?

Xinru: The official borders between Europe and Asia have no indication of cultural differences. The three monotheist religions indeed originated in Asia, if we respect the modern concept of Asia and Europe. I think teachers should try to make students understand that history is to study changes with time and space. Geographical distributions of communities with their particular culture, including language, cosmology, religion, material culture, etc., change with time and space. Empires and kingdoms rise, expand, shrink, and face demise. This understanding of history can help students appreciate the change of wording in geography to define the space under discussion.

Lucien: In early world history, ancient Rome, China, and much of the land mass we know today as India are always taught. What are critical examples, in your opinion, of how utilizing the concept “Eurasia” in studying these civilizations might enrich student understanding of each of these “giants”?

Xinru: Introducing to students the field of the Silk Road studies is helpful to connect the ancient political entities. If you choose to use the term “Eurasia,” make sure the students understand that it includes the entire Mediterranean. You want to tell students that it was not the diplomacy of the rulers, but commerce and cultural exchanges that connected the empires and kingdoms. The exchanges between these large cultures also facilitated

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Afro-Eurasia, "The Old World"; (orthographic projection) with national borders. Source: Wikipedia at <https://tinyurl.com/pj7oytd>.

developments of small communities, such as oasis settlements in the Taklamakan Desert and those in the deserts of Jordan, Syria, and the Arabian peninsula. These smaller communities then participated in the exchanges to enhance them and their own economic and social developments.

Lucien: *Some historians who critique the concept of Eurasia when teaching world history, especially early world history, contend that taking this approach inadvertently leads instructors to largely ignore (with the exception of Egypt) other civilizations in what is now Africa and the Americas. What is your reaction to this critique?*

Xinru: I sympathize with this critique. However, Eurasia, or Afro-Eurasia, is only one of the major regions studied in world history. Africa and the Americas should be brought into the narrative. *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* has brought the global approach to the classroom. Other textbooks of world history also try to arrange the teaching of world history in chronological order instead of geographic divisions. I think chronological sequence is a better parameter to connect stories than using geographic or political divisions. The highest achievements of Greek sciences happened in Hellenistic Egypt. This story should be told in the timeline of the spread of Hellenism, but not in Egyptian history nor in Greek history.

Lucien: *I think that many of our readers would enjoy resources that you can recommend that deepen teacher and student knowledge of the topic we just discussed that you think might be especially useful for high school and/undergraduate courses.*

Xinru: Robert Tignor, *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart*, 5th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018) is a concise book for precollege classes.

Xinru Liu, *Silk Road in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Susan Whitefield, ed., *Silk Roads, Peoples, Cultures, Landscapes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019) is a collection of short essays of some fifty authors accompanied by many good pictures. It is a heavy book but good for using in a classroom for students to turn pages. During the pandemic, try to see if an e-book is available. The teacher could select from the 100 essays to illustrate topics of Eurasian history.

Lucien: *Xinru, thanks for the interview! ■*