

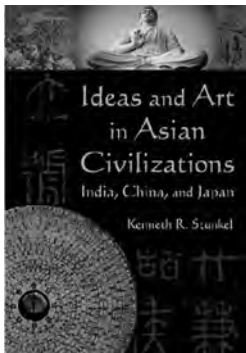
Ideas and Art in Asian Civilizations *India, China, and Japan*

BY KENNETH R. STUNKEL

ARMONK, NEW YORK AND LONDON ENGLAND: M.E. SHARPE, 2012

305 PAGES, ISBN 978-0765625410, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Nancy Hope



Ideas and Art in Asian Civilizations: India, China, and Japan is set apart from other surveys of Asia by a succinct examination of the cosmology and traditions of thought underlying seminal art and literary works from these three cultures. Explanations such as “[the] Chinese way of thinking is profoundly relational rather than sequential” (98) and “[the] poignancy of change is seen as a source of Buddhist enlightenment rather than an obstacle” (232) are sure to assist the reader in understanding the selected works on a deeper level.

The author makes this approach clear from the start, stating that works of art are the “most direct response” to universal concerns, including social and religious organization, relationships between past and present, and between humans and nature (3). He further asserts that the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese answers to such issues as embodied in the arts have value, especially today, because their difference from American traditions will “sharpen knowledge, appreciation and criticism of beliefs and practices normally taken for granted” (6). He therefore makes an effort to contrast Asian and Western systems, noting, for example, the philosophy of John Stuart Mill when discussing the Indian view of individual personality (34). This is an approach that undergraduate and advanced high school instructors will welcome. It is, moreover, matched by top-notch content throughout the book.

The book is hampered by three minor drawbacks, however. Thankfully, errata is not among them, with only four found—the Heian period, dated as “1794–1192” (197), the artist Sesshū called “Sessue” and “Sesshue” (213, 236), and Figure 26.33 titled “*Willows, colors over gold, paper mounted on silk, folds indicating it was an incense wrapper*” when it is *White Plum Blossoms*, one of a pair of two-fold screens, color and gold leaf on paper.

The first drawback is in using the Wade-Giles system for Chinese transliteration, even though the alternate pinyin system has been employed in the West by institutions like the Library of Congress for at least twenty-five years. Spelling the dynasty that succeeded the Shang as “Chou,” for example, will not help the nonexpert reader for whom this book is intended. Perhaps because most of the literature in the annotated bibliography (271–288) is from the mid-twentieth century, the author believed Wade-Giles to be the appropriate choice. Instead, it would have been better to include more recent publications in the bibliography. Another drawback is that not all of the fine distinctions the author insightfully makes are formatted to facilitate learning. How much easier it is to comprehend and retain the bulleted list of eight forces that shaped Japanese thought (194) as opposed to the seven objectives of Indian philosophy that are strung together in one long sentence (28). The last drawback is that sometimes information is introduced without any elaboration, or it is defined much later in the text. For instance, it would have been helpful if at least the date of the “Tokugawa edict of seclusion and exclusion” (231) was given. Likewise, the “dual way”

of *samurai* and *daimyō* is briefly mentioned in connection with the tea ceremony (222), but it is not explained more until three pages later.

Nevertheless, these drawbacks do not negate the quality of information this book presents overall. It would certainly benefit those just beginning their study of Asian civilizations as well as those further down the path. Even more accomplished Asianists will be able to appreciate facts about India, China, and Japan not previously known. The detailed recipe for ink sticks (161) was delightful in this regard. ■

NANCY HOPE, the Associate Director of the Kansas Consortium for Teaching about Asia at the University of Kansas, has been helping K-14 educators learn more about China, Korea, and Japan for the past twelve years.

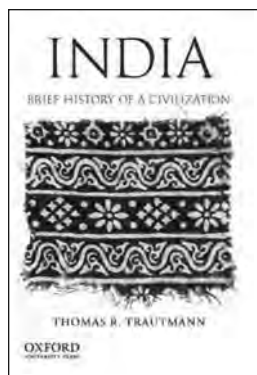
India *Brief History of a Civilization*

BY THOMAS R. TRAUTMANN

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011

248 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0199736324, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Thomas Lamont



Finding the perfect textbook for a survey course can be daunting. Writing such a book is surely exponentially daunting. Thomas Trautmann, Professor of History and Anthropology at the University of Michigan, understands the first point all too well, and he picks up the challenge of the second point with his unassuming yet impressive new book, *India: Brief History of a Civilization*, a book that might work well as a text in an introductory or survey course on India at the college level or as supplementary reading in high school courses on India or

world history. Regardless of how it might be used in the classroom, *India: Brief History of a Civilization* would be a useful resource for teachers and professors who would like to learn more about the origins of Indian civilization and the general outlines of Indian history, especially premodern India.

At the beginning of his book, Trautmann writes that most books that strive to succeed as a textbook in a survey course are “too long, too detailed, and [have] too many names and terms to master for students new to the subject.” His hope is that *India: Brief History of a Civilization* is short enough to be read in a few sittings yet comprehensive in coverage and that it “will give newcomers a quick overview of a very long period, so that in a short time they will acquire a mental map of the history of Indian civilization as a whole, a basic stock of names and technical terms, and a rough sense of the chronology.”

Trautmann is refreshingly humble about the challenge of covering so vast a subject as Indian civilization, and at the start of the book, he essentially warns the reader of the pitfalls at hand while he gently, even warmly, invites the reader to proceed with an open mind. The author sensibly approaches the subject with caution, eschewing spurious generalizations and grandiose claims about Indian civilization, instead preferring to

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emphasize the complexity of Indian civilization. He perhaps wisely avoids altogether the minefield that is Indian historiography. The book also includes a useful bibliography and a section on further reading.

The real strength of this book, however, is its conciseness. *India: Brief History of a Civilization* covers all that its title implies in just over two hundred pages. Although some will surely criticize the book for not spending enough time on certain things, Trautmann has managed to include a veritable cornucopia of material, all very nicely accompanied by many useful maps and effective drawings of well-known artifacts, buildings, and persons. Given Trautmann's expertise in language, this important and interesting topic seems to get a bit more time than one might expect in a book such as this.

Meanwhile, historical topics such as the Partition and the 1857 Uprising get very little time. Occasionally, this reader was distracted by some unnecessary details, such as how the monsoon works—not just how it works in India but how heat inversions in general work. Sometimes the book is perhaps too dense. At times it is so full of detail that I suspect some readers will find it difficult to absorb the material or distinguish between the critical and the merely interesting. However, Trautmann does get right up to the twenty-first century, even if, as advertised, he prefers to dwell much more on the past, the distant past in particular. Thus, teachers who tend to emphasize more recent Indian civilization and history, say the past five hundred years, will likely want to provide supplementary material. In that sense, *India: Brief History of a Civilization* would serve very well as a text in an introductory course on Indian civilization, especially one that is more concerned with the origins of Indian civilization rather than the course of modern Indian history. *India: Brief History of a Civilization* may not be the perfect text for a survey or introductory course on India. But Trautmann is to be applauded for rising to the challenge and producing a worthwhile addition to the field. ■

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Afghanistan: Multidisciplinary Perspectives

A Far Away Home

BY HOWARD FABER

OMAHA: WRITE LIFE PUBLISHERS, 2012

168 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1608080519, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by David E. Huebner



A *Far Away Home* is a candid portrayal of life in Afghanistan over the past fifty plus years. In some countries such a story might be mundane or trivial. However, the life of protagonist Ali takes us through successive oppressors—the Soviets and the Taliban—and the entrance of the US military into Afghanistan in 2001. This is a novel that alternates between anguish and despair to hope and triumph in the face of odds most Americans never face!

While this novel is geared toward middle school students, it resonates well with high

school students. The sentences are uncomplicated and to the point, yet provide vivid pictures and intriguing stories of growing up, living, and surviving in Afghanistan over several recent decades. Indeed, as an adult, I found the saga of Ali's upbringing, with all the struggles and challenges he faced, captivating!

Ali encounters severe handicaps from his birth: a "bent" left leg; the lack of medical help available in the small town of Sharidue, teasing children who mock his handicap; and crude, hand-made crutches. In 1965, when he was eight, Ali and his father, Hassan, make their way in a treacherous journey to Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, to seek corrective surgery for his misshaped leg. But, the trip ends in disappointment with a doctor's diagnosis that there are no available medical procedures in Afghanistan to correct such a deficit. However, with the surprise arrival of medical personnel in Sharidue not long after Ali's trip to Kabul, Ali is able to secure life-changing surgery to correct his medical condition.

Although we might think that Ali's life of ingenuity and resourcefulness does not begin until after this critical surgery, his constant creativity is first noted with the advent of Sharidue's small and new hospital. To get supplies to Sharidue, an airfield is built out of sheer rock over difficult terrain. But Ali stretches beyond the traditions of his village. In a culture accustomed to using cattle for clearing land, Ali suggests horses, and it works! Besides taking up the challenge from the American pilot "Dan" to learn how to fly, Ali manifests his quick inventiveness throughout the novel—from his plan during his teen years to ambush Russian soldiers, to his resistance tactics against the Taliban, to commitment to excellence as Sharidue's only carpenter, to the sweeping of airplane tracks off the runway to fool the Taliban—Ali is a master of quick thinking and ingenuity!

The book takes us through Ali's years of living in neighboring Iran (you will have to read the book to find out how he ended up there), where he marries and has children, his subsequent return to Afghanistan early in 2001, and his role as the village leader and spokesperson to deal with US troops after 9/11. He ignites the courage of his village with his pledge to resist the Taliban and conceives of several plans to thwart the Taliban's attempts to storm Sharidue.

I thoroughly enjoyed the many anecdotes and life lessons in *A Far Away Home*. This quick-read novel is an engaging story of overcoming severe physical challenges, resisting oppressors, and making a better life for Ali's people and family in Sharidue. It is a rewarding story of leadership, hope, love of family, and the struggles of a faraway people. ■

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ERRATA

On page 62 of the spring 2012 issue, in the first paragraph of the article by Jeffrey L. Richey titled "Western Civilization with Chinese Comparisons," an editing error resulted in miscasting the fifth sentence. The sentence should have read, "Either the West was presented as an ideal Confucian meritocracy, in which emperors were selected for their moral worth and were dismissed once calamities cast doubt on their eligibility to rule, or as a romantic paradise over which the Daoist goddess, the Queen Mother of the West (Xiawangmu), presided." The editors sincerely apologize for the error.