

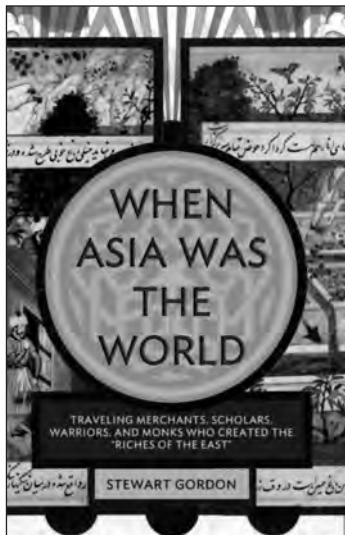
WHEN ASIA WAS THE WORLD

BY STEWART GORDON
CAMBRIDGE, MA: DA CAPO PRESS, 2007
240 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0306815560, HARDCOVER

Reviewed by Gwen R. Johnson

Stewart Gordon's, *When Asia Was the World*, promises to be an important source for both high school teachers and undergraduate instructors in World History and Asian Studies. Having meticulously researched original historic texts and memoirs of the explorers and travelers who traversed Asia from 500 to 1500 CE, Gordon provides a unique multiple perspective lens from which to view the "riches of the East," the interconnection of peoples and cultures, and the spread of ideas and knowledge across a diverse Asian world. In fact, as you read each traveler's account, you begin feeling as though you are a part of the personal journey of that scholar, monk, warrior, or merchant. You are not only observing their actions, but experiencing their inner thoughts and revelations, and participating in their triumphs and losses. Gordon focuses on 'real' individuals along these routes. He comments on the distinctiveness of each traveler's historic journey, then cleverly links their stories across the centuries. He shows the vibrancy and diversity of pre-1500 CE Asia, where the seeds of globalization may have had their beginning—where caravans, ships, and people, from China to Morocco, engaged in trade, philosophical and religious debates, and regional conflicts, and where empires and loyalties rose and fell. While these travelers in Asia were seeking avenues of contact and connection across time and space, Europe was focused inwardly as it entered the darker side of the Middle Ages with little knowledge of the land and people to the East.

This could be just another book about travelers' journeys and explorations, but what sets it apart is the amount of original research that Gordon has done that brings authenticity to his biographical portraits, documents the ordinary life of those living in Asia, and explores the historical changes that took place over a thousand years "when Asia was the world." Most importantly, however, is his underlying message that a sophisticated world of intellectual learning and dialogue, as well as an intricate social-economic networking system, flourished independently from the West. This system brought an interethnic group of people together from across the Asian continent to trade, to share, to debate, and to encourage learning and cross-cultural understanding—an exceptional world that lay beyond the imagination of most Europeans at that time. As Gordon points out, even when contact was made in the sixteenth century, the "Europeans were truly outsiders to the Asian world . . ." (190). They came with a different set of attitudes and assumptions and brought new meaning to the concept of national identity and loyalty. How different from the vast Asian world of 1500 CE with its multi-layered perspectives and interdependent networks where "bureaucrats, scholars, slaves, ideas, religions, and plants moved along

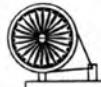


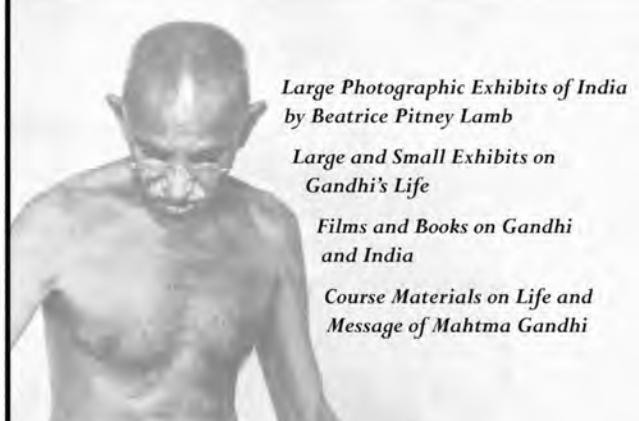
its intersecting routes... [and]... family ties stretched across thousands of miles" (177).

Gordon offers World History and Asian Studies teachers and instructors an exciting way to introduce the Golden Age of Asia "through the eyes" of those who lived and traveled from 500–1500 CE. You can read about the caravans with hundreds of people and animals that kept different regions of Asia connected, stories of nurturing religious discourse in Buddhist monasteries across the Silk Road, and the carrying of plants over these same routes for use in traditional medicine. Readers also learn of the spreading of Islam through trade across the Indian Ocean's maritime routes and the establishing of new urban centers, bureaucratic patronage networks, and legal codes. When you read Gordon's book, it would be very difficult to dismiss the importance of Asia in the development of

the modern world, and harder still to view European "exceptionalism" as the key to and the voice of modernity today. ■

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