



When Asia Was the World

Stewart Gordon

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While European intellectual, cultural, and commercial life stagnated during the early medieval period, Asia flourished as the wellspring of science, philosophy, and religion. Linked together by a web of religious, commercial, and intellectual connections, the different regions of Asia's vast civilization, from Arabia to China, hummed with commerce, international diplomacy, and the brisk exchange of ideas. Stewart Gordon has fashioned a fascinating and unique look at Asia from A.D. 700 to 1500, a time when Asia was the world, by describing the personal journeys of Asia's many travelers—the merchants who traded spices along the Silk Road, the apothecaries who exchanged medicine and knowledge from China to the Middle East, and the philosophers and holy men who crossed continents to explore and exchange ideas, books, science, and culture.

When Asia Was the World Details

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Author : Stewart Gordon

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From Reader Review When Asia Was the World for online ebook

Nina says

This book was great for students new to the subject of Medieval Asia (although I suppose that label is too Eurocentric). Gordon's greatest strength is also his greatest weakness. The book is very readable, and, in focusing on just a handful of themes throughout a work spanning several centuries, Gordon keeps the material relatable. However, it was almost too easy, if that makes sense. I mean, no reader wants the work to be so obtuse that you can't grasp the fundamentals (especially for someone like me, who knows very little about the intricacies of the Asian world and Asian culture), but, still, I feel like the subject called for some much needed complexity. I just can't believe that Asia was that simplistic. Honor ceremonies, trade, Buddhism, and Islam. That's about all you need to grasp Gordon's thesis, and that just seems too simplistic (dare I say, too juvenile?) for me. However, one of Gordon's concluding points was bringing in a comparative lens in order to understand the beginning of European and Asian interaction, so he may have set up a simplistic Asian culture in order to compare and contrast the dichotomy between a culture that fostered communication across ethnic, religious, social, and physical boundaries by having a relatively simple shared culture, and the more destructive, violent divisions favored by European culture.

Shira says

It was reassuring to see that Xians, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists agreed that travel is a necessary part of becoming an educated person.

Shira Destinie
MEOW Date: Saturday, June 9. 12014 H.E. (Holocene Era)

Will says

When Asia Was the World: Traveling Merchants, Scholars, Warriors, and Monks Who Created the “Riches of the East” by Stewart Gordon is a book that encompasses the whole of the ancient Asian culture in a way that is different from other books. This book uses nine different stories of specific ancient Asian peoples as examples of life in the entirety of the continent at the time. What amazed me about this book was that the author didn't necessarily use “famous” ancient figures, with the exception of a few, but used common people that had typical lives during that period. The author collected the information through peoples memoirs, biographies, and autobiographies, as well as other primary and secondary sources from that time. My favorite of the nine stories was the story of Xuanzang, a Chinese Buddhist Monk because this story shared insight on how those deeply involved in a religion spent much of their time and the stages that a popular religion faces, such as the rise, fall, and times of major influence.

The book's organization is perfect because it's as if you are reading a set of nine short stories, not ten chapters of a history book. This made it feel more like a story, with the history intertwined, versus fact after fact with no real plot. I had almost forgotten it was a history book until the last chapter where it tied all of the points together, and I realized how much I learned, how interested I am in this topic, and that I wasn't bored with the information. The presentation made the book less overwhelming than most history and other

nonfiction books.

Overall, I was very pleased with this book as a whole. It made me more interested in getting deeper understanding of the subjects in the book, such as religion and trade, and helped me see that the world didn't stop during the Dark Ages, only Europe did. Asia thrived as a continent and community. If you are looking for a book to read to get started on studying Asia, or just looking for a good history read, I highly recommend reading this book.

Amy Dance says

Fascinating. started the book to learn more about Ibn Batutta, but also learned much about others who travelled through Asia in the Middle ages, & religions, trade, customs of the region.

Chris says

When Asia Was the World is a book that brings up a lot of interesting concepts, but in the end, is somewhat unsatisfying. Gordon presents 9 narratives of travelers throughout Asia between 500 and 1500. His subjects travel for a wide range of reasons—political, economic, religious, diplomatic, military—and while separated in time, their journeys overlap and show how interconnected the vast area of land and water actually was. Each traveler is interesting, although some are certainly more interesting than others. However, I was constantly reminded of high school history textbook sidebars while reading. Their stories felt like little summaries tacked on the side of the text, and although there was a bit of overarching narrative at the end of the work, it seemed laughably oversimplified. I kept feeling like I would have been better off reading the actual writings of the people involved, rather than Gordon summarizing them for me and wrapping things up with a neat little bow. I'm not an expert on medieval Asia, and I'll happily buy into the theory that it was far more interconnected than I knew, but I have studied enough to understand while some customs were pan-Asian, there was a great deal more cultural diversity than is presented in this work. The last of the narrative chapters presents a different view of Asia, that of a Portuguese explorer and trader who tried to establish contact with the Chinese government. The Portuguese certainly were imperialistic, and made no effort to understand local customs, but the contrast between the cosmopolitan Asian traders with several major religious and hundreds of cultures and languages, all cooperating peacefully and happily vs the bumbling white guy walking in and pissing everyone off is simply incorrect. In this work, when Asian empires crushed local kingdoms, it was considered part of the wonders of trade and travel, but when a Westerner does it, it is clearly the fault of their white/western/Christian worldview. Actual history, both inter-Asian trade, and Western expansion into Asia was a great deal more complicated than that. I don't really appreciate my history being dumbed down just to make the point of "Asia was really advanced between 500 and 1500".

Alex says

Great book that explores the lives of merchants, doctors, monks, leaders from 600 to about 1500 throughout Asia. Most of them are regular people (except Babur, the conquerer of Kabul and Afghanistan) and their stories survived to depict life in Asia. This is a book about regular people. With the exception of Babur, these people didn't kill or do any of the deeds usually glorified in history except travel and keep a log of their travels. Ibn Fadlan's trip to nowadays Russia, Ibn Battuta's trips through Asia, Abraham the Jewish merchant from Tunisia who ended up working on the western coast of India, the Buddhist monk who traveled from

China through Central Asia to Southern India...great snippets of regular people's lives. I highly recommend it if you want to learn about history through the eyes of normal people.

Sweta P says

This book is very informative and entertaining. If you care about history, you will adore this book.

Peter Tillman says

First-rate history of Asia from about 500 to 1500 CE, compiled from the memoirs and correspondence of 8 travelers and traders, plus the contents of one shipwreck. 4+ stars. Best history book I've read in a long time.

I picked this one off the shelves at the library, just because the title sounded interesting. Unfortunately , the first chapter, about a Buddhist monk's travels in the early 7th century, was a fine sleep-aid, so I put it aside for a month or more. (I just tried that one again again, and failed again.)

This past week, I needed a thin book I could carry into the concert hall and doctor's office. Fortunately, things picked up with Chapter 2, about an early Islamic ambassador (to Russia!) circa 921 AD. Quite a trip & story! The next chapter, about Ibn Sina, a famous Islamic physician and philosopher in the early 11th C. is also fascinating. Ibn Sina cured the King of Bukhara, and gained access to the Royal Library, thousands of books on all topics, in an important but hardly major city. The Islamic world really was the center of civilization then.

Around a thousand years ago, a small cargo ship sank between Java and Borneo. It was rediscovered by fishermen in 1996, and systematically salvaged by German archaeologists. This and other shipwrecks revealed wide-ranging trade networks in that era. The Intan shipwreck was loaded with tin and silver ingots: tin from Malaya, the silver bars stamped with Chinese guarantees of purity. Ceramics were everyday wares made in China. The government there encouraged their export, to pay for the wood products, aromatics and spices they imported from Java and other island nations. Gold from Sumatra, glass and ceramics from Arabia, iron pots, spearheads and ingots from China were also in the cargo. Very likely the ship also carried cottons from India and silks from China, but none survived. From the cargo, the ship was probably headed for Java, but never made it.

Abraham bin Yiju (correspondence 1120-1160 CE) was a Jewish trader from what is now Tunisia. He was apprenticed to a master trader in Aden, and eventually moved to a small port on India's Malabar coast, married a local girl (non-Jewish, which caused problems). They had a daughter and son. In 1148, Christian Crusaders captured his Tunisian family and abducted them to Sicily. They were destitute. Abraham tried to help them, but could get no response. Years later, his family was able to escape to Yemen and (eventually) to Egypt. Around 1150, he moved to Yemen, arranged a marriage for his daughter, and then moved to Egypt to be near her in his old age. Bin Yiju's story (and many others) were preserved because the Jewish custom of the time was to save any paper with the name of God written on it. Tens of thousands of these documents were preserved in the Cairo synagogue. Scholars are still researching them.

Ibn Batuta (memoirs 1325-1356) was a famous traveler in the medieval Islamic world. Even I had heard of him! There weren't many places in the 14th century Islamic world (and quite a few beyond) that he didn't

visit: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Bat... His five-volume memoirs are still in print, and widely studied. His and other similar stories demonstrate that educated men could travel freely and find employment in many Islamic kingdoms throughout Africa and Asia then.

It's interesting to read about these men, their lives and work from a millennium ago. The details have changed, but human nature hasn't. Gordon is a good writer, and his text moves right along. Except for that unfortunate Buddhist monk he opens with....

Will says

3.5 stars.

Don says

The quick summary of this book is that it looks at what is going on in the Asia, from the Middle East to China, from the equivalent period in Europe between the fall of Rome and the Age of Exploration. That time in Europe, frequently referred to as the Middle Ages (sometimes derisively as the Dark Ages), there's a gap in political and philosophical thought, work in mathematics and sciences, and writing of literature. Essentially, in the West, you skip nearly 700 years between the writings of Augustine until Aquinas shows up. This book demonstrates how such aspects of culture and civilization were thriving in Asia during this time, where thinkers and scholars built on the work of the classical thinkers, built on mathematics and astronomy (inventing the number/concept of zero for example; and notice how we use Arabic numbers, not Roman numerals), and traveled among vast empires.

The way the author presented the information, each chapter focusing on one individual and that person's work and travels throughout Asia also made the book fascinating. It allowed the reader to identify with certain individuals based on what the reader brings to the book.

Highly recommended read; short book for history, illuminates many of people in the "West" on a history that we would not have received during most of our formal education.

Grace Tjan says

A clear and concise survey of several historical personalities that represent medieval Asia. It is a rather quick read as none of these figures are covered in depth. Perhaps this book is better read as an introduction to the subject. Interested readers can learn more from the books quoted in the bibliography.

The author emphasizes the idea of inter-connectedness between Asian nations based on shared institutions and customs, especially those inspired by Buddhism and Islam, the two great Asian religions of the period.

But I suppose the same case could be made for medieval Europe, with its Christian and Roman-based institutions such as the church, the Latin language and Roman law. What made Asia unique in this respect?

Priyanka says

Rating: 4.5 out of 5 stars

Genre: Non-fiction / translated biographies

Age Recommended: 13 and up

It's this time of year again... summer assignments. This book wasn't as boring as I expected it to be, and I enjoyed reading the accounts of people who lived many centuries ago. However, the author could have done a better job linking the different chapters of the book to each other, as they were all independent stories, and the only thing similar about them was the fact that they all took place in Asia and were in consecutive time periods.

This book focuses a lot on the change and continuities over time in the Asian world from 500 to 1500 CE. Some chapters discuss the evolution of religion as an ideology of empires, and others cover the political and social effects of religion.

My favorite chapter in this book is chapter eight, because while it discusses Islam, a sensitive topic in society today, it also clears up a lot of the mystery surrounding this religion and its way of thinking.

Here is an excerpt from my assignment that talks about the a possible reason for the decline of an empire.

The later destruction of the royal library (140) showed an almost Nazi-like hatred for things of the past, or things of other cultures. It displayed a very rapid decline in the levels of tolerance that rulers had for people of other cultures, or people from other world regions.

This decrease in tolerance also led to “whole regions permanently altered (141)” and the “end of Buddhist culture (141)” which was inevitably detrimental to Asia in the long run. It led to the failure of conquest because of the lack of belief in an ideology, followed by great wars that split kingdoms up even more.

All in all, I enjoyed this book and would definitely recommend this for people who like history.

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Patricia says

How could this book not be entertaining with chapters entitled "Monasteries and Monarchs", "Ingots and Artefacts", "Treasure and Treaty" etc.? The first tells the story of the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang (618-632) and his travels to India in search of original Buddhist sutras. "Ingots and Artefacts" tells the story

of the Intan shipwreck (circa 1000 CE) with its amazingly diverse cargo, and "Treasure and Treaty" the story of the great 'treasure ships' of the Ming Dynasty (early to mid- 15C) that carried an army of 20,000, ships for horses, trade goods and travelled as far as the coast of Africa. Other chapters cover intra-Asian trade in the 12-13th centuries, the travels of Ibn Fadlan, travel and adventure. In short, it's an ideal book for those interested in easy-to-read stories drawn from Asian history, archaeology, and other such sources.

I work in an Asian history museum and have recommended this book to our trainee docents as an easy introduction to a well-selected range of colourful and entertaining stories drawn from Asian history.

digbybare says

Overall, a very euro-centric view of Asian history. Mostly focusing on Western Asia, and the elements with the biggest impact on European history (e.g. Islam), with only token mentions of the events in East Asia/South-East Asia/Indian subcontinent. It's fitting that the last account given is of a European trader, as if to drive home the point that all of the history given in previous chapters only matter in the context of how they eventually came to affect Europe.

Gordon tries to use the memoirs of certain representative figures as a springboard to explore the time period, but not often successfully. Mostly, it's just a book summarizing these various memoirs.

Hosam Diab says

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