

Teaching Central Eurasia in Undergraduate Survey Courses: Problems and Strategies

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Abstract: Recent scholarship has challenged narratives of Central Eurasia's relationships with its neighbors in East Asia, South Asia, and Southwest Asia. This scholarship describes the "silk road" as a cross-regional interconnected network of routes that contributed to the development of diverse and dynamic civilizations, while also functioning, from a Central Eurasian perspective, as the foreign trade component of a complex internal Central Eurasian economy. Challenging long-standing narratives of "needy" or "predatory" nomads that militarily overwhelm sedentary empires, scholars of Central Eurasia have moved the region from its place as a distant frontier on the edge of civilization to one at the center of historical globalization. This article discusses the importance of incorporating such ideas into world and Asian history survey courses, which are often taught by nonspecialists who have only encountered Central Eurasia in their respective fields as a periphery, and providing opportunities for students to think critically about historical sources and move past stereotypes of "barbarian" and "civilization."

Keywords Definitions; Misconceptions; Assignments; Transnational themes; History

CENTRAL EURASIA IN WORLD HISTORY

Scholarship on Central Eurasia seeks to reframe the region as an integral and connected current in the larger flow of world history. David Christian wrote in the *Journal of World History* in an article published in 2000 that a study of the "silk road" indicates that scholars need to take seriously the underlying unity of Afro-Eurasian history. He suggests that we should regard modernity itself as an indirect product of the rich synergy created by systems of exchanges rather than one particular regional culture (Christian 2000, 25-6). Four short and accessible books published in the last three years, all by Oxford University Press, allow world history scholars easy access to specific case studies that illustrate Christian's argument and also fit neatly into the organization of undergraduate survey courses: James A. Millward, *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction* (2013); Valerie Hansen, *Silk Road: A New History* (2012); Peter B. Golden, *Central Asia in World History* (2011); and Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (2010). Even if these books are not assigned to undergraduates, the information they contain can be used by instructors to add depth to lectures and as a springboard for creative assignments that highlight cross-regional connections. James Millward's appropriately titled very short introduction has an organization best suited for incorporating discussions of the silk road into a thematic world history course. The book contains chapters such as the "biological silk road" and the "technological silk road" that offer examples of exchanges across Eurasia from ancient to modern times. He incorporates some of the major contributions of Valerie Hansen's 2012 research on the silk road before 1500, while also discussing the usefulness of the term in understanding Eurasian exchanges into the modern era. While most silk road histories end with its decline after the Mongol

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period and the advent of direct maritime trade, Millward suggests that significant exchanges continued through the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries (Millward 2012, 111). In this case, the silk road should not be confined to the first half of a world history survey course that ends in 1500, but should be part of the historical narrative of the early modern and modern eras as well. This connection between the ancient and modern periods is also a benefit of Peter B. Golden's work, whose regional history is not dependent upon a concept such as the silk road, which literally and figuratively moves over time. I hope that this direction of scholarship continues—one that positions the silk road as a feature of the continued global significance of Central Eurasia into the modern period. For pre-1500 silk road studies, Hansen's book contributes several ideas that reframe the role of the silk road in world history. Hansen de-emphasizes the role of merchants while highlighting the long-neglected role of differing states in creating and facilitating these networks (Hansen 2012, 235). Along the way she also critically discusses the evidence available to historians writing about the silk road by explaining and including in each chapter samples of documents such as labor contracts and medical prescriptions. The benefit of these documents, she convincingly argues, is that they were meant to be thrown away as trash and were not compiled into official histories. As such, "they offer a glimpse into the past that is often refreshing, personal, factual, anecdotal, and random" (Hansen 2012, 5). Hansen uses these documents to argue against the prevailing view of the silk road as a series of trade routes, instead showing how the silk road was a superhighway of ideas and technology that was created by a diverse group of immigrants from different cultures, occupations, and classes (Hansen, 2012, 5). As the author of a well-received earlier study, *The Silk Road in World History*, Xinru Liu has also written a teaching supplement for pre-1500 survey courses, entitled *The Silk Road: A History With Documents*. Both Hansen and Liu's recent works offer excellent opportunities to discuss the silk road through a study and analysis of primary sources.

In this essay, I outline a few of the ways in which this recent scholarship can inform teaching. I discuss broad themes, specific historical examples, and possible assignments. These teaching strategies are only a small sample of this recently published rich material that can be easily mined by nonspecialists. The first section discusses geographical terminology and how historians locate and define Central Eurasia. The second outlines strategies for moving students beyond stereotypes of Central Eurasians and highlighting the cultural diversity of the region. The third section takes the investigation of Central Eurasian culture deeper into a study of its production through cultural blending. And, finally, the fourth section makes the case for using the idea of silk road and Central Eurasian exchanges in historical narratives of the twentieth century.

GEOGRAPHY: LOCATING CENTRAL EURASIA AND THE "SILK ROAD"

In my experience, students' lack of familiarity with the geography of Central Eurasia and its political boundaries is complicated even further by the region's multiple names. In introducing students to the distinctions between "Central Asia," "Inner Asia," and "Central Eurasia," I suggest using the resources available on three websites. The website of the *Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies* at the University of Indiana, Bloomington¹ explains the origins of the term "Inner Asia" and the history of the discipline of Inner Asian studies and Central Eurasian studies. As it notes, "Central Eurasia" can be used interchangeably with "Inner Asia" to designate the homeland of the Altaic peoples and the Uralic peoples. Today these peoples can be found in the five independent Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan; the republic of Mongolia; the Xinjiang Uygur, Inner Mongolia, and Tibet Autonomous Regions of the People's Republic

of China, as well as the Manchu lands. The term “Central Asia” is often used to refer to the Islamic part of Inner Asia, meaning the Central Asian republics and Xinjiang.² I adopt the designation “Central Eurasia” in teaching world and Asian history survey classes and illustrate its boundaries using several maps available at the website of *The Silk Road Project* (www.silkroadproject.org). The section on “Maps of the Silk Road” is part of a set of curricula designed for middle and secondary students co-developed by the Silk Road Project and the Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education. The maps and images available on the website are a helpful introductory tool for locating and defining the boundaries of Central Eurasia. The third website I use to introduce and give depth to some of the varieties of Central Eurasian societies is that of the *Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit* at the University of Cambridge (<http://innerasiaresearch.org>). This website has a link to albums that show a wide range of images taken by scholars on their various research trips in Inner Asia. Current albums include photos of Tuvans, the Altai Republic, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang. Taken together, these three websites provide a much-needed supplement to any world history or Asian history survey text.

When discussing Central Eurasia, instructors will also be forced to define the term “silk road.” They should make explicit to students that the concept is a nineteenth century European historiographical construct. The term did not exist before 1877 when the Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen first used it on a map (Hansen 2012, 235; Millward 2013, 4-5). As Hansen notes, no individual flying over the silk road at any point in history would be able to identify its geographical boundaries. Hansen’s approach is to choose eight silk road centers to organize her study, which allows her to examine and analyze the source base for the historical record on the silk road. She concludes that the silk road as a network of exchanges was not significant in terms of international commerce or the exchange of goods. Instead, its main historical contribution was as a “cultural artery” (Hansen 2012, 235). She states, “Refugees, artists, craftsmen, missionaries, robbers, and envoys all made their way along these routes. Sometimes they resorted to trade, but that was not their primary purpose for travelling” (Hansen 2012, 238). In survey courses, I use this concept of a cultural artery not just when discussing the historical process of the silk road trade networks, but also when teaching the history of Central Eurasian cultures into the modern period. How I do so is the subject of the next section.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY: MOVING PAST STEREOTYPES ABOUT CENTRAL EURASIA

Survey courses on Asian history cannot avoid discussing the region of Central Eurasia and its peoples. Yet, instead of understanding the contributions Central Eurasian societies have made in world history, they are often portrayed in history classes as an anticivilizational force due to unrecognized cultural misperceptions and biases (Beckwith 2009, xxi). I ask students to rethink their idea of Central Eurasian nomads as barbarians that disrupt the development of “civilization” instead of contributing to it. Christopher Beckwith’s ambitious 2009 text on the history of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the present, while too fragmented to be useful as a textbook for undergraduate students, offers an interesting way of thinking about the history of the silk road that is missing from world history or Asian history textbooks (Beckwith 2009).

Beckwith defines the silk road as synonymous with the Central Eurasian economy. Central Eurasian peoples lived in three different ecological-cultural zones and practiced three different modes of life that were tightly interconnected in a single economy. It was this economy that created the commercial networks referred to by outsiders as the silk road.

Therefore, what is commonly referred to as the silk road was the international component of that Central Eurasian economy. In Beckwith's definition, world history textbooks that now progressively use the plural term "silk roads" to acknowledge the multiple trade networks are still missing an important element since the term only encompasses one side of the economy. According to Beckwith, the silk road was not a network of trade routes or even a system of cultural exchange but rather created an entire local system of Central Eurasia in which commerce, both internal and external, was highly valued and energetically pursued, and reflected in cultural norms and political organization (Beckwith, 2009, 328). To get at the domestic component, Beckwith uses the Central Eurasian culture complex of *comitatus*. In the Central Eurasia culture complex of *comitatus*, the primary mode of political organization was centered on a select group of elite warriors, who also acted as administrators, who pledged personal loyalty to the ruler but in turn were rewarded with goods, some of which were silk. Thriving commerce and the accumulation of foreign luxury goods were required to meet the demand of the political system. So, Central Eurasia was not a stop or a transition between different places that produced and purchased goods, such as Rome and Han China, it was its own integrated economy that had both foreign and domestic components (Beckwith 2009, 328).

In a different yet complementary critique of the term, Millward mentions that the "silk road" would be better renamed the much-less-romantic "Soghdian Network" (Millward 2007, 29). Not only did these Iranian merchants dominate east-west trade, but Soghdian became the lingua franca of the silk road in farming, artisan, commercial, and diplomatic circles. Millward also notes that the term is misleading for other reasons: 1) silk was only one of many products exchanged, 2) merchants used multiple routes instead of a single one, and 3) Western imports to China were as important as Chinese exports (Millward 2007, 29). In addition, the focus on the east-west direction of the exchanges and the states on the "ends" of the silk road obscures the importance of Indian and Persian empires (Millward 2013, 6-7).

This expanded definition of the silk road also requires a reconsideration of Central Eurasian culture. Beckwith notes that Central Eurasian societies were not composed of "needy" or "predatory" nomads, but rather people who practiced different modes of production and relied mostly on trade in order to obtain desired products. Beckwith argues that steppe people mostly fought amongst themselves and went out of their way to avoid conflict with peripheral states such as China, preferring to maintain a trade relationship. In fact, many times Central Eurasians offended the peripheral states, such as Han China, not through invasion but merely the insistence of remaining independent. Golden's recent work complements this characterization of the nomadic/sedentary relationship. He also notes that urban Central Asia had a rich and cosmopolitan culture that had a symbiotic relationship with its nomadic neighbors, and that the nomads themselves were "no more blood thirsty or covetous of gold or silks than their 'civilized' neighbors" (Golden 2011, 6).

This idea challenges stereotypes of Central Eurasians as "barbarians." Contrary to common misconceptions, Central Eurasians, such as the Huns, the Xiongnu (Hsiung-nu), and the Mongols, were no more cruel or aggressive than their contemporary large conquerors, the Romans, the Persians, or the Chinese. Beckwith notes that all empires throughout history were possessed of multiple personalities. By turn, empires were destructive and constructive, brutal and paternal, exploitative and beneficent, coercive and attractive, conservative and innovative. (Beckwith 2009, 341-355). In a writing assignment meant to stimulate in-class discussion, I ask students to think about the ways in which each of those adjectives could be applied to different world empires throughout history, and more importantly, from

whose perspective would they be used. With Central Eurasians it is often the negative characteristics, such as destructiveness and brutality, that get molded onto some sort of homogenous barbaric Central Eurasian culture and viewed as static and unchanging over many different political systems over centuries (Beckwith 2009, 341-355). Millward also suggests that, contrary to being an anticivilizational force, Central Eurasian could be thought of as “proto-globalizers” who facilitated the cultural, technological, and political advancement of neighboring states (Millward 2013).

The roots of these misconceptions can be traced to problems with historical sources about Central Eurasians—English language textbooks use the term “barbarian” to refer to Chinese descriptions of Central Eurasians. Even using the term “barbarian” in quotation marks is inaccurate in the case of Chinese history, in which the language contained a variety of different designations for foreigners. The English word “barbarian” embodies a complex European cultural construct and was a generic pejorative term for a “powerful foreigner with uncouth, uncivilized, nonurban culture who was militarily skilled and somewhat heroic, but inclined to violence and cruelty, --yet not a savage or wild man. In this case, the English term ‘barbarian’ does not have a single Chinese equivalent” (Beckwith 2009, 356-359). After discussing this problem of translation, I ask students to think about other narratives of “civilization” and “barbarian” that they have encountered in their history classes. How “civilized” was Rome, and how “barbaric” were the Mongols? In which ways could Rome be viewed as barbaric and the Mongols as a civilizing society? I emphasize the multiple personalities of empires and also the multiple sides of cultures. To further illustrate the diversity of cultures and polities engaged in the network of exchanges throughout Central Eurasia, I organize the students into groups and assign chapters from Susan Whitfield’s *Life Along the Silk Road*. Using primary sources, Whitfield reconstructs the lives of a colorful cast of historical actors, from an opening scene with an inebriated Soghdian merchant to a painter of Buddhist art working in the Dunhuang caves. I ask my students to do additional reading on different aspects of the person’s life, such as providing an overview of the history of their hometown or explaining cultural and religious practices. Some of my most interesting presentations have focused on fashion, with students researching and analyzing the various functions and meanings of dress and how those changed over time. All of this additional reading is incorporated into an oral presentation given to the class that provides the backdrop to the personal narrative of a silk road traveler.

CROSS-REGIONAL INTERACTIONS AND CULTURAL BLENDING

This section discusses strategies for demystifying Central Eurasia and placing it within the larger context of world history, while also illustrating the region’s remarkable ability to create cultural hybridity. The idea of Central Eurasia as a cultural crossroads in which identity is fluid and changing is widely accepted in the field of Central Eurasian history. Yet, historical sources often have highlighted the differences between the steppe peoples of Central Eurasia and surrounding sedentary societies. Students should recognize that though it is important to understand the significance of societies defining themselves in opposition to Central Eurasians, they should not take that oppositional relationship as authoritative and adopt the same framework for understanding cross-regional interactions. The historical example that I use to illustrate potential biases in historical sources is the conflict between the Han and the Xiongnu, which is already incorporated into most world history and Asian history survey texts. This example not only shows students the complicated nature of Central Eurasia’s relationship with its neighbors but also requires them to think about how and why stereotypes became part of the historical record. As the early Chinese states of Yan,

Zhao, and Qing expanded northward, Chinese states began to build long walls to secure newly conquered territories and gain pastureland on which to raise horses for chariots and cavalry units. As a result, various northern tribes who lost land formed a powerful coalition in response to the Chinese threat, a process that accelerated after unification under the Qin in 221 BCE. The Xiongnu confederation that later threatened the Han empire, in particular under Emperor Wu (r. 140-87 BCE), arose out of the crisis caused by this earlier northward expansion of Chinese states (Di Cosmo 2002). After discussing this conflict, I have students read a brief selection from the *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)* by Sima Qian (ca. 145-ca. 90 BCE) describing the characteristics of the Xiongnu (Ebrey 1993, 54-56). His description of the Xiongnu as pure nomads whose young boys are able to shoot mice with bows and arrows does not hold up against the archeological evidence of Xiongnu houses, fortifications, and agricultural settlements (Millward 2009, 19). I ask the students what value they can get out of Sima Qian's description and what Sima Qian's document says about the Chinese worldview. If people define themselves by what they are not, then the qualities that Sima Qian emphasizes about the Xiongnu are less historically-accurate ethnography than a glimpse into Chinese self-definition. His description of the Xiongnu mentions their lack of family names, lack of respect for the elderly, and lack of a written language, all elements that were an important part of Chinese culture. These biases about Central Eurasian peoples as pure nomads who were oppositional in culture to the Chinese were written into Chinese historiography; Sima Qian's phrasing for describing the Xiongnu gets reproduced in later descriptions of northern nomads (Millward 2009, 19). Therefore, I have students read the description of the Xiongnu not as an accurate representation of Xiongnu societies, but as a window into Chinese self-definition. Then, for understanding the Xiongnu and other Central Eurasian societies, I draw on recent scholarship of Central Eurasianists, such as that mentioned above.

As another example of cultural fluidity, I use the history of Central Eurasian music. Nathan Light, who has a book on the process of standardizing the Twelve Uyghur Muqam, wrote an article recently about the connection between premodern cultural forms and the process in which modernizing states seek to reinforce and control populations by standardizing these premodern forms and presenting them as static historical representations of a people. The Twelve Muqams is itself a cultural representation that claims premodern origins but could only have been produced in its current form by a modern state. In this sense, modern Central Eurasian cultural production is part of the larger process of modernization (Light 2008; Harris 2008). However, for undergraduate survey classes, I use more general examples to show cross-cultural exchange and interaction. For undergraduate students, music can be an effective tool in identifying and connecting with people of different cultures. Yo-Yo Ma heads such a project. Ma's Silk Road Project does not focus on Central Eurasia, but rather takes the idea of the Silk Road as a metaphor for creating cross-cultural connections through music. And he does not just reproduce these forms, playing standardized historical pieces, but seeks to reinvent and rethink them. Below, I link together several websites that show such a dynamic in Central Eurasia—the cross-cultural connections that have been made and the ways in which outside influences have been reinvented and reused in new ways to form modern identity.

LONDON UYGHUR ENSEMBLE

<http://uyghurensemble.co.uk/en-html/nf-research-article1.html>

This website describes the origins of muqam. A muqam is the melody type used in the Uyghur system that developed over centuries from the Arabic maqam modal system. Large-

scale suites of sung, instrumental and dance music are called muqam. Music in Uyghur culture also has religious significance because of popular Islam. Sufis used music to express and promote their faith. Music also serves central roles in social gatherings. The instruments used in muqam indicate both the particular Uyghur interpretation of the music as well as its outside influences.

For example, the Chinese instrument erhu is thought to have developed from Chinese contact with Central Asia, particularly popularized at Tang court. One of the instruments used in muqam is the ghijek, which developed as a relative of the Persian spiked fiddle—an image of which can be accessed on the Silk Road Project website. According to the London Ensemble, the current form reflects the influence of the Chinese erhu. This example shows that local identity in Central Eurasia is both very specific, most notably that local materials are used to make the instruments, as well as connected to outside cultural influences, including Chinese, Turkish, and Persian. Uzbekistan also has its own versions, the sheshmaqam, videos of which can be viewed at the Smithsonian folkways website. One common instrument is the dutar, used in both Uyghur muqam and the Uzbek Shashmaqam. Music brings Central Eurasian culture alive for students and helps teach them about cultural exchange and cultural production in a memorable and engaging way. I illustrate the above relationships through recordings, images, and videos from the websites listed below.

STANFORD INTERACTIVE WEBSITE

<http://virtuallabs.stanford.edu/silkroad/SilkRoad.html>

AGA KHAN MUSIC INITIATIVE

http://www.akdn.org/aktc_music.asp

SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS

<http://www.folkways.si.edu>

THE SILK ROAD PROJECT AND SILK ROAD ENSEMBLE HEADED BY YO-YO MA

<http://www.silkroadproject.org>

UNESCO: THE UYGHUR MUQAM OF XINJIANG

http://unesco.org/culture/intangible-heritage/10apa_uk.htm

James Millward's short history also has a section on musical exchanges in the chapter, "Arts on the Silk Road." He discusses the muqams while providing an impressively wide survey of the origins and spread of different versions of lutes from Mesopotamia, Persia, Central Asia and East Asia (Millward 2013, 91-98).

BRINGING THE SILK ROAD INTO THE MODERN ERA

Central Eurasia has also made significant contributions to world history in the modern period. Asian modernization is one of the themes that can be used to link Central Eurasia to its neighbors. One of the defining aspects of modernization is the emergence of active states in studying, categorizing, standardizing, and then institutionalizing culture. In the late seventeenth century the Russian and Qing empires partitioned Central Eurasia between themselves (Beckwith 2009, 321). Central Eurasian culture and political systems did not become flattened and absorbed after Russian and Qing conquest, but rather reconfigured in ways that show continuity with the past while also reflecting global trends in modernizing states. One example of Central Eurasia's impact on modern Asia is the way the Soviet Union

reshaped and exported the Uzbek SSR's capital of Tashkent as a model for Asian socialism. In the late 1950s, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai visited Tashkent, which Soviet leaders viewed as the ideal representation of successful Asian socialism. During this time agricultural specialists from the Soviet Union also used cotton seeds imported from Uzbekistan to oversee the new construction of cotton farms and factories in China's northwest border region of Xinjiang. Within China, several newspaper articles discussed Uzbekistan as the model for Xinjiang's post-1949 economic development. Outside of the People's Republic of China, Soviet leaders sought to export the Tashkent model of Asian socialism to South Asia and Southeast Asia. They invited delegations and sent teams to South Asian and Southeast Asian countries from the 1930s on to show other Asian countries an ideal example of Asian socialism (Stronski 2010). This model of Asian modernization was meant to tie East Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia together. After the 1950s, China moved away from Soviet oversight of socialist economic development in Xinjiang and began seeking to export itself as a model of successful Asian socialism to the Third World. I use this example in class in discussing twentieth-century modernization movements to illustrate how Soviet and Chinese leaders sought to reconfigure Central Eurasia by recreating a "Red Silk Road." This relationship was terminated shortly after its formation with the closing of the border and the decline of Sino-Soviet relations. Yet, Mao and Chinese Communist Party members who were disillusioned with Khrushchev's Soviet present remained fascinated by the Soviet past. They continued to study the work of Lenin and Stalin and adapt the Soviet past to the Chinese present throughout the People's Republic under Mao. While historians of the Soviet Union may stress the Soviet leadership's focus on the third world rather than China as a destination for the export of socialism after the 1950s, a Chinese perspective shows the continuing significance of Soviet institutions across the border.

Millward suggests the usefulness of the term "silk road" in characterizing the Sino-Soviet relationship as a whole. The long relationship between India and China, revolving around Buddhism, entailed China's study of another country's religious system, the translation of its textual corpus, the exchange of envoys, and imitation of technology, music and art. Evidence of the shorter-lived but similar relationship between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China in the 1950s can still be seen today (Millward 2013, 115). Marxism-Leninism fulfilled the role of "religion" and involved personnel exchanges and the popularization of Russian film, literature, and music in China. As Millward argues, "China adopted Soviet-style apartment buildings in the twentieth century under circumstances similar to those when it adopted the chair (and much else) from India in the tenth and eleventh centuries. If we look at the silk-road phenomena broadly, we can see quantitative difference but little qualitative difference between the exchange of goods and ideas across Eurasia from prehistoric to early modern times and what we now speak of as 'globalization'" (Millward 2013, 117). Though this is an excellent example of continuity, many historical issues may not be the same for premodern nomadic/sedentary relations or cross-regional networks of exchange and those that existed in the twentieth century, but a comparison of the two periods could be used to launch a discussion among students of how things have changed over time.

CONCLUSION

Recent scholarship by Central Eurasianists offers insights into world history that are not captured by standard texts. This essay has attempted to touch on some of the ways in which these ideas can be used to supplement lectures and assignments in world history and Asian history survey courses for both the premodern and modern periods. Nonspecialists can

discuss the history of Central Eurasia in a way that corrects misconceptions, links Central Eurasia to other parts of the world in new and engaging ways, and offers a narrative that fulfills Christian's call to view modernity as an indirect product of a long history of cross-regional exchanges along silk roads that are still traveled today.

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NOTES

1. *Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies* at the University of Indiana, Bloomington (http://www.indiana.edu/~rifias/RIFIAS_and_Inner_Asian_Studies.htm)
2. The website also provides links to web resources, such as the *Central Eurasian Studies Society*, which publishes the *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, edits the journal *Central Asian Survey*, and holds annual conferences through the *Sinor Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies* at Indiana University (<http://centraleurasia.org/>).