Lecture 11. Heyday of the Silk Road

“Silk Road” as Metaphor
--Term invented by German engineer/geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen
--Popular among world historians; emphasizes transnational cultural & economic interactions

Central Asia in World History
--Rise of steppe nomadism in first millennium BCE
--Homogeneous material culture spread among many disparate peoples
--Xiongnu: steppe nomad confederation; first invasion of Han occurred in 201 BCE
--Han policies alternated between appeasement and armed confrontation (under Emperor Wu)

Silk Road Trade Route
--Kushan Empire: nomad confederation, ruled Afghanistan/Pakistan in 1st-3rd c CE
--Linked Chinese world to Indian Ocean and Roman Empire
--Kushan conversion to Buddhism fostered spread of Buddhism to Central Asia & China
--Silk Road as avenue for spread of Buddhist religion & its material culture
--Also an avenue of technological transfer (silk and paper to west, sugar and cotton to east)

Sogdian Merchant Network
--Iranian in culture & language, Sogdians became dominant merchant group along Silk Road
--Sogdians as example of trade diaspora (merchant network united by common origins, language, religion, and culture)

Turfan: Oasis town, rose to major prominence in 6th century (midway between Sogdia and China)
--Tang conquered Gaochang in 640 & incorporated territory into imperial administration
--Shift in orientation of Turfan from Sogdia/Persia to China after Tang conquest
--Yet Sogdians remained major merchant community at Turfan (and among foreign merchants at Tang capital of Chang’an)

An Lushan Rebellion & Demise of Silk Road Trade
--Rebellion (755-63) crippled (nearly ended) dynasty
--Marked passing of Chinese presence on Silk Road corridor (displaced by Islamic culture & religion)