Shadow of the Silk Road – Colin Thubron

Not all members of the group finished the book – it was perhaps rather long to read in four weeks in the summer when gardens cannot be neglected!

We all appreciated the quite poetic quality of the writing and found some of the historic details (such as paper-making and silkworm cultivation) fascinating. Landscapes were also vividly evoked and the cultural diversity of the areas travelled through was striking. We were full of admiration for Thubron's courage in undertaking a journey that was often quite dangerous.

However, the wealth of detail and information was sometimes rather overwhelming and we all felt that to fully appreciate the work it would need to be read in long sittings – armed with a dictionary and encyclopaedia (or computer and internet!). One member found the author too “shadowy” and would have like to feel more engaged with him.

The encounters with local people, whilst fascinating, were also somewhat depressing. Many yearned for material objects from the West yet saw the English-speaking world as a threat to their culture. Islam and its attitude to women is seen as a constant problem for many young Moslems Thubron met and many Chinese were frightened to talk about the Cultural Revolution despite having suffered (or had families that suffered) under it.

In summary, we agreed that this is a book that digs deep into the culture of several countries olaong the Silk Route which deserves more time for a more careful reading to fully appreciate