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The Road That Never Was: The Silk Road and Trans-Eurasian Exchange

Khodadad Rezakhani

The Silk Road, or Silk Route, is a name used today to refer to a supposed trade route of ancient Eurasia, its use bringing different images to mind. These are often of camel caravans on dusty roads, forbidding deserts, and exotic towns and “oases.” The concept as a whole tends to ignore realities such as geography and ecology, as well as political units, facts that become lost among the more potent romantic notions. While itineraries are presented at some length, actual places are forgotten, and it is supposed that a conventional “beginning” in China and a vague “destination” somewhere along the Mediterranean are enough. On the way, places such as Transoxiana, the Pamirs, Iran, and indeed the whole of the Near East are simply brushed aside and not much discussed. The Silk Road has then become a grand narrative that serves mostly to obscure important details and sometimes even more. As one modern historian similarly opposed to the idea of the Silk Road has suggested, “‘The Silk road’ now has become both band wagon and gravy train, with an endless stream of books, journals, conferences and international exhibitions devoted to it, reaching virtual mania proportions that is almost unstoppable.”¹

This is why I am suggesting not only that the concept of a continuous, purpose-driven road or even “routes” is counterproductive in the study of world history but also that it has no basis in historical reality or records. Doing away with the whole concept of the “Silk Road” might do us, at least as historians, a world of good and actually let us study what in reality was going on in the region. Such a scheme would not be meant to deny or take away one of the useful concepts of world history.² Indeed, the regions of Transoxiana, the Pamirs, and Turkistan / Tarim basin are great crucibles for the study of world history, and their study is quite central to understanding the progression of history and historical relations. However, it might be time to rethink the artificial and nostalgic concept of the Silk Road and bring out what this narrative tends to conceal.

The Idea of the “Silk Road”

To start, we should briefly sketch out the history of the concept itself. The starting point of the “Silk Road” seems to have been the discoveries made by celebrated nineteenth- and twentieth-century European scholar-adventurers such as Sven Hedin and Sir Aurel Stein who

1. Warwick Ball, *The Monuments of Afghanistan: History, Archaeology, and Architecture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 80.

2. After all, *world history* is all about cultures and their interaction, and as the editor of the *Journal of World History* recently stated in a private conversation, the requirement for publishing an article in the journal is to somehow have it address a “cross-cultural” theme, although it is open to debate what *cross-cultural* really means.

found and described the great Buddhist art in the caves of Dunhuang and various towns in Chinese Turkistan.³ These curious European scholar-adventurers—for at the time the two professions were quite close and almost indistinguishable—brought to the attention of the Europeans the rich artifacts of these regions and created a lot of curiosity about them. Of course, the discoveries were soon followed by attempts to protect these artifacts, mostly in Western museums, an action interpreted as robbery by Chinese officials, who eventually banned excavations by Europeans.⁴

It was about the same time that the German explorer and scholar Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen gave the name “the Silk Road” (*die Seidenstraße*) to the commercial route that passed through the Tarim basin and into Transoxiana.⁵ Of course, historians are no strangers to names given to ancient concepts by modern scholars. The Byzantine Empire was never called that by its inhabitants, nor did anybody in the Middle Ages know that they were living in such a period. As for the Silk Road, in Europe a few Greeks might have heard of the Stone Fort in Central Asia and the Chinese had gathered some sketchy information on the lands that lay beyond the domain of the Da-Yüeh-zhi, but neither the Greco-Romans nor the Chinese were fully aware of the other’s existence.⁶ They, of course, knew of the existence of another entity often neglected in the modern tales of the Silk Road, and this shall be discussed further below. What is amazing about the Silk Road, however, is its pervasive influence and the continuous use of its manufactured boundaries and cultural markers in defining modern geographical and ethnopolitical concepts.

But how is “Silk Road” defined? This might be a case where scholarly and popular descriptions of a historical subject are so intertwined that it is difficult to tell them apart. Popular sources provide the easiest and most unadulter-

ated descriptions of the concept. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* gives us this description: “Silk Road, also called Silk Route: ancient trade route that linking China with the West, carried goods and ideas between the two great civilisations of China and Rome. Silk came westward, while wools, gold, and silver went east. China also received Nestorian Christianity and Buddhism (from India) via the Route.”⁷ Notice the almost exclusive insistence on China and Rome as the “two great civilisations” linked by the Silk Road, while what lies in between—Central Asia, Iran, and Mesopotamia/Syria—is ignored. Whereas Buddhism is clearly marked as an export of India (which, contrary to common definition, is NOT on the Silk Road), the source for Nestorian Christianity is not mentioned, obviously suggesting its origin to be in “Rome.” One could base a whole case on this description alone, but let us proceed.

Another entry in the same encyclopaedia, this time in the “roads and highways” section, becomes a lot more descriptive, providing geographical and temporal limits:

The trade route from China to Asia Minor and India, known as the Silk Road, had been in existence for 1,400 years at the time of Marco Polo’s travels (c. AD 1270–90). It came into partial existence about 300 BC, when it was used to bring jade from Khotan (modern Hotan, China) to China.^[8] By 200 BC it was linked to the West, and by 100 BC it was carrying active trade between the *two civilizations*. At its zenith in AD 200 this road and its western connections over the Roman system constituted the *longest road on Earth*. In Asia the road passed through Samarkand to the region of Fergana, where, near the city of Osh, a stone tower marked the symbolic watershed between East and West. From Fergana the road traversed the valley between the Tien Shan and Kunlun Mountains through Kashgar, where it divided and skirted both sides of the Takla Makan Desert to join again at Yunnan. The road then wound eastward to Jia-

3. For information on this art, see, e.g., Li Jian, *The Glory of the Silk Road: Art From Ancient China* (Dayton, OH: Dayton Art Institute, 2003).

4. For an excellent book on these details, see Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980). The book’s subtitle is quite telling of the attitude taken toward these discoveries by Chinese officials.

5. Ferdinand von Richthofen, *China: Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien*, 5 vols., 1877–1912 (*China: The Results of My Travels and the Studies Based Thereon*) (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1877). Von Richthofen was incidentally Hedin’s teacher.

6. Ball, *Monuments of Afghanistan*, 81.

7. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Silk Road,” www.search.eb.com/ (accessed 20 October 2008).

8. Notice the objectification of the “it” (the *Road?*) that is “used,” suggesting the existence of a (paved) road of some manner utilized for the purposes of transportation.

yuguan (Suzhou), where it passed through the westernmost gateway (the Jade Gate, or Yumen) of the Great Wall of China. It then went southeast on the Imperial Highway to Xi'an and eastward to Shanghai on the Pacific Ocean. From Kashgar, trade routes to the south passed over the mountains to the great trading centre of Bactria and to northern Kashmir.⁹

The use of the “West” as the civilization at the other end of the Silk Road is quite significant, as it is obviously meant in its modern, “Western” European sense, while the actual description concerns only Transoxiana. In general, the “West” (capitalized or lowercased) in works relating to the “Silk Road” and to Chinese outside relations depends greatly on the audience for which they are written. Thus in Zhang Xushan’s “China and the Byzantine” and similar works, the “West” is used in translations and references, implicitly creating the illusion that the “west” of the Chinese sources such as the *Shiji* refers to the “West” as understood by the modern reader.¹⁰ By comparison, Wang Tao’s “Parthia and China” seems more careful in using the “west,” realizing that many of the references are actually to Anxi and other lands in the Near East and Central Asia, indeed *west* of China, but far to the *east* of the West.¹¹

The reference to the “symbolic” boundary of East and West also leaves one to wonder to whom this symbol would have appealed, as one might ponder too whether the ancients understood these concepts in their modern sense. In the descriptions, the Near East is left out completely, while even the rest of Transoxiana past Bukhara, including important locations such as Marv, is not mentioned. Historically this makes sense, since, as I argue, the itinerary described in the Chinese sources is a description not of the “Silk Road” but simply of one of the many routes to Transoxiana, apparently preferred by the Chinese envoys.¹² The routes from Transoxi-

ana to Iran and the rest of the Near East were not much taken by these Chinese envoys, and, consequently, they are presented as what they truly were: a series of trade routes connecting various regions and not necessarily a single, unified, and identifiable *road*. Some would argue that, indeed, the Chinese interest in Central Asia was more diplomatic than commercial, and thus Chinese envoys would have avoided some of the most important “trade stations” on the so-called Silk Road, another curious piece of information if we are to believe the traditional Silk Road narrative.¹³ As expected, the description of the system from the Near East to the Mediterranean would follow the same pattern as above. Therefore in the standard narrative of the Silk Road, the thousands of kilometers separating the shores of the Mediterranean from Bukhara and Samarkand are conveniently neglected.

The popularity of the concept of the Silk Road has also resulted in a proliferation of output from all walks of scholarship and art. A simple search for books about the Silk Road will bring up not only *Life along the Silk Road* by Susan Whitfield and *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia* by Frances Wood but also *Rebuilding the Silk Road: Encouraging Economic Cooperation in Central Asia; the Role of the Asian Development Bank* and even the newly published *Pre-history of the Silk Road* by Elena Kuzmina and Victor H. Meir. Journals dedicated to the Silk Road, including the *Journal of Silk Road Art and Archaeology* or *Silk Road Studies*, have become quite popular. However, one seldom finds works dedicated to the actual history of the region. Urban sites along the Silk Road are commonly described as “oases,” whose main importance and *raison d’être* seem to have been the Silk Road itself. This would then run counter to the reality, the existence of ancient cities and centers of civilization millennia before any supposed “opening of the Silk Road.”¹⁴

9. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “roads and highways,” www.search.eb.com/ (accessed 20 October 2008) (emphasis added).

10. Zhang Xu-shan, “China and the Byzantine: Trade-Relations-Knowledge, From the Beginning of the Sixth to the mid-Seventh Century,” *Ιστοριογεωγραφικά* 6 (1998): 155–344. Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

11. Wang Tao, “Parthia and China: A Historical and Archaeological Investigation,” in *Idea of Iran: The Age of the Parthians*, ed. Vesta Sarkhosh-Curtis and Sarah Stewart (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

12. One can speculate about the Chinese motivations to come to the East: “[Chinese] activities in Central Asia were invariably diplomatic and military efforts to out-manoeuvre the steppe nations.” Ball, *Monuments of Afghanistan*, 81.

13. *Ibid.* Ball might be going too far in describing the Chinese interest in trade as almost nonexistent, since their interest in Central Asian horses is known. That this was itself a military purpose barely conceals the diplomatic/foreign policy concerns of the Chinese empires.

14. In fact, archaeology shows us the ancient history of urbanization in the region. Pierre Leriche tells of the high level of urbanization in the Oxus region before even the arrival of the Greeks. Pierre Leriche, “Bac-

The opening of the Silk Road itself is a matter of much debate as well. Conventionally, the arrival of the Chinese envoy of Emperor Wuti is given as the date of the opening of this trade route.¹⁵ However, efforts to stretch this date earlier are constantly made, taking it even to the time of Alexander the Great.¹⁶ Another issue, often central to the modern academic study of the Silk Road, is the effort by many scholars to enter their own areas of interest and expertise into the concept of the Silk Road, as if it is an elite club whose membership would bring the neglected history some manner of prestige and exposure.¹⁷ Of course, this is directly related to the shortcomings of Eurocentric historiography, which has for long pushed the history of non-European lands into the shadows.

Historiography of the Silk Road

As mentioned above, the concept of the Silk Road was introduced by nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European explorers, and the name, in its German form, *die Seidenstrasse*, was coined by von Richthofen. However, the concept and even the name have gained a life of their own ever since, transformed by scholars to suit their needs. The earliest use of the name as the title of an important book is Hedin's own *Silk Road* in 1936.¹⁸ Yet the name seems to have proliferated only in the 1960s, when Luce Boulnois published his popular, and to date most complete, survey of the Silk Road.¹⁹ At this point, apart from Stein's original studies of the art of Dunhuang and Turfan, as well as some work by Paul Pelliot and Albert von Le Coq and by

others in the early decades of the twentieth century, very little archaeology had been conducted in the region, and the information included in Boulnois's book is based on Greco-Roman and medieval texts and early-twentieth-century discoveries.²⁰ That little work has been done is due mainly to the ascendance of the Chinese Communist Party and its efforts in stopping Western access to the treasures of the Silk Road, something also made obvious by the fact that European exploration in the region stopped in the early 1950s.²¹ Several reports of explorations and even a Japanese account of the Silk Road were published in the 1960s and 1970s.²² It was probably in anticipation of the coming craze, but also in response to Chinese protectionism, that Peter Hopkirk wrote his *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road*, about the cultural policies of the Chinese government in limiting access to the country's ancient sites. One could argue that much of the early interest in the exploration of Central Asia was a desire to discover the "wild, unexplored lands" and an interest in finding exotic animal and plant species. The explorers of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries seem to have had an interest and insatiable desire to conquer Central Asia and take its trophies home, much as their brethren had in discovering the North and South Poles or "undiscovered" African jungles.²³

However, the true fascination with the subject seems to have been the political events of the late 1980s and the early 1990s. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the independence and creation of the new political realities of Uzbeki-

tria, Land of a Thousand Cities," in *After Alexander: Central Asia before Islam*, ed. Joe Cribb and Georgina Hermann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 121–48. The history of Bactria as a whole goes back at least to the early Bronze Age, with vast settled populations and widespread agriculture and irrigation. See Pierre Leriche and Vincent Fourniau, eds., *La Bactriane au carrefour des routes et des civilisations de l'Asie Centrale* (Paris: Maisonneuve and Larose, 2001); and Osmund Bopearachchi and Marie-Françoise Bous-sac, eds., *Afghanistan: Ancien carrefour entre l'Est et l'Ouest* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005).

15. Sima Qian, *Historical Records*, trans. Raymond Dawson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

16. Yang Juping, "Alexander the Great and the Emergence of the Silk Road," *Silk Road* 6, no. 2 (2009): 15–22.

17. Of the many articles published in various issues of the *Silk Road*, see, e.g., Staffan Rose, "Korea and

the Silk Roads," *Silk Road* 6, no. 2 (2009): 3–14; and Yang Fuquan, "The 'Ancient Tea and Horse Caravan Road,' the 'Silk Road' of Southwest China," www.silk-road.com/newsletter/2004vol2num1/tea.htm. Study of the Silk Road extends even to modern times. See Kirill Nourzhanov, "Politica of National Reconciliation in Tajikistan: From Peace Talks to (Partial) Political Settlement," in *Silk Road Studies*, vol. 4, *Realms of the Silk Roads: Ancient and Modern*, ed. David Christian and Craig Benjamin (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), 161–80.

18. Sven Hedin, *Die Seidenstrasse* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1936); Hedin, *The Silk Road*, trans. F. H. Lyon (London: Routledge, 1938).

19. Luce Boulnois, *La route de la soie (The Silk Route)* (Paris: Arthaud, 1963).

20. Most important, see Sir Aurel Stein, *Innermost Asia: Detailed Report of Explorations in Central Asia, Kan-su, and Eastern Iran* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon,

1928); and Stein, *Ancient Khotan: Detailed Report of Archaeological Explorations in Chinese Turkestan*, 2 vols. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1907). See also Paul Pelliot, *Carnets de Pékin, 1899–1901 (Notebooks of Peking, 1899–1901)* (Paris: Collège de France, 1976); and Frances Wood, *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 212–22.

21. Wood, *Silk Road*, 243.

22. The most popular are Robert Collins, *East to Cathay: The Silk Road* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968); Ryoichi Hayashi, *The Silk Road and the Shoso-in* (New York: Weatherhill; Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1975); and Irene M. Franck and David M. Brownstone, *The Silk Road: A History* (New York: Facts on File, 1986).

23. See Wood, *Silk Road*, 165–79. Wood titles this chapter "Asia Held Them Captive in Her Cold Embrace: Explorers on the Silk Road."

stan, Tajikistan, and other Central Asian states, a need for creating a history arose. This is when the Institute of Silk Road Studies was founded in Japan and its journal was launched (1990). Much of the archaeology and textual analysis of the history of Central Asia and Chinese Turkestan that was done after this point was presented in the context of the Silk Road. Many of the new works were done by native scholars of Central Asia and occasionally China and Japan.²⁴

This might be the point when even scholars noticed that the concept of the Silk “Road” and the image it resonates of a single, paved highway were problematic. So definitions of the Silk Road and its description started changing. In some cases, the plural “Roads” was preferred to the singular “Road,” even as far as making von Richthofen’s singular *Die Seidenstrasse* into plural *Die Seidenstrassen*.²⁵ The definitions are also constantly tweaked and refined, from the simple “bridge between Eastern and Western cultures” to the more sophisticated, but essentially too broad to be useful, “long- and middle-distance land routes by which goods, ideas, and people were exchanged between major regions of Afro-Eurasia.”²⁶ One is reminded of the remark of Warwick Ball, when he says, “Now virtually all discussions of western trade with the East revolves around it, with the ‘Silk Road’ being the glib answer to all questions of trade and communication.”²⁷

Directions have now also reached a point of saturation, forcing new historians to define “northern,” “central,” “southern,” and “sea” routes of the “Silk Road,” which itself seems to

magically stay the same despite the different directions constantly attributed to it.²⁸ Other efforts are to study the “civilizations” of the Silk Road in a diachronic manner and using cues from both comparative historiography and classical literature.²⁹ Of course, the romanticization of the concept is always present and popular, even in huge undertakings of scholarship and effort.³⁰ Other scholars approach the concept of the Silk Road from a decidedly Central Asian point of view and present the Silk Road as the unifying force of the region, while commenting less on the issue of connections to the West and even admitting that no one traveled the whole length of the “Route,” although its existence is not doubted at all.³¹ Scholarly works also present an exact itinerary of the Silk Road, although without much reference to how the exact stations have been identified.³²

From all the descriptions, academic or general, we learn several things about the Silk Road: (1) it connected China and Europe; (2) it facilitated the trading of silk; and (3) it passed from China to Transoxiana and then somehow made it to the Mediterranean, its “final destination.” However, what we do not learn is how it became connected from Transoxiana to Europe and how exactly the goods traveled over all these lands without being intercepted along the way.³³ We also do not hear of any good reasons why gold and silver went eastward, as if they were regular trading goods, and why Nestorian Christianity, itself a heresy under the late Roman and Byzantine empires, should have gone to China from Rome.³⁴ It is also quite confusing how India

24. Muqi Che, *Silk Road: Past and Present* (Beijing: New World, 1989); Y. F. Buryakov, *The Cities and Routes of the Great Silk Road* (Tashkent: Sharg, 1999). Even more technical issues are studied under the same umbrella. See Katsumi Tanabe, *Silk Road Coins* (Kamakura, Japan: Institute of Silk Road Studies, 1993).

25. David Christian, “Silk Roads or Steppe Roads,” in Christian and Benjamin, *Silk Road Studies*, 4:67–94.

26. The first definition is used as the subtitle of the *Silk Road*, the newsletter of the Silk Road Foundation. On the second definition, see Christian, “Silk Roads or Steppe Roads,” 69.

27. Ball, *Monuments of Afghanistan*, 81n4.

28. Michael Underwood, “The Northern Silk Road: Ties between Turfan and Korea,” in Christian and Benjamin, *Silk Road Studies*, 4:95–104; Fuquan, “Ancient Tea and Horse Caravan Road.” David Christian decided to exclude “Sea Silk Road” from his descrip-

tion, a decision even he admits is arbitrary. See Christian, “Silk Roads or Steppe Roads,” 69. See also Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, “Introduction: The Silk Road, Ancient and Contemporary,” in *Along the Silk Road*, ed. Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 21.

29. Susan Whitfield, *Life along the Silk Road* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

30. Jonathan Tucker has written a work that reads like a love letter to China. See Jonathan Tucker, *The Silk Road: Art and History* (London: Philip Wilson, 2003), especially 18–19.

31. On the issue of connections to the West, see Wood, *Silk Road*.

32. Yang Juping, “Alexander the Great and the Emergence of the Silk Road” *Silk Road* 6 (2009): 15–22. Many other exact-sounding itineraries are also pre-

sented, while no reason or explanation is given for considering the route from the Gulf of Aqaba to eastern Egypt as part of the same “highway” that starts in Changan. Unfamiliarity with the geography of the region is evident in most of these accounts, which I comment on later in this article.

33. An excellent list of “traded goods” is provided in Tucker, *Silk Road*, 16–17. Of course, it is basically a list of all the agricultural and manufactured goods ever produced in Eurasia during the past three millennia.

34. The issue of the Silk Road as a road for exchanging ideas and religions has been the new trend, or scapegoat, in the study of Central Asia. This is basically the main promise of the following: Wood, *Silk Road*; Whitfield, *Life along the Silk Road*; and Luce Boulnois, *Silk Road: Monks, Warriors, and Merchants* (Hong Kong: Odyssey, 2005).

fits into the whole picture, since it really is not on the way between China and Europe.³⁵ Why is it that the itinerary between China (Xi'an/Changan) and Transoxiana is described in such detail, but the three thousand kilometers between Samarkand and the Mediterranean is just brushed over? There is also a cultural component involved: oftentimes, efforts to connect the “great civilizations” of the Mediterranean and China are so great that even chronologies are sacrificed in order to connect Alexander’s campaigns to the “opening” of the Silk Road under Emperor Wu-ti.³⁶ More pronounced is the total ignorance of another civilization lying on the way from “China” to “Rome,” that of Iran, which oftentimes controlled many parts of Central Asia itself.³⁷ Some of these questions should be explored.

Silk and Economy in Eurasia

An essential issue in the study of the Silk Road is the silk itself. The name “Silk Road” would imply that the major trading item was silk, produced in China, and that the main consumer, if it was Rome, was a great power and a great market.³⁸ It is supposed that silk appeared in Rome during the time of Augustus, and its secret was kept in China until two monk-envoys of Emperor Justinian managed to smuggle silk worms out of China in the sixth century.³⁹ Meanwhile, silk was held to be quite valuable, and the Persians, major enemies of Rome in all avenues of life, appear to have profited greatly from this trade that merely passed through their lands.

There are major problems with these assumptions. The first, mentioned before, is the supposed, but never really convincingly proven, preeminence of Rome in the world economy and the capacity or “pull” of its market in at-

tracting and directing the silk trade and its *Road*. The second, and even more obvious, problem is that silk was commonly woven in western Asia, namely, in Damascus and Mosul, for years and even centuries before Justinian’s supposed cunning plan. Silk threads, not originating from China, have been found in various sites in Transoxiana, and descriptions of their production exist in Indian and Middle Persian sources from the third century:

The country of Ta-ts’in (Syria) is also called Li-chien (Li-kin, Re-kam, Petra) and, as being situated on the western part of the sea, Hai-hsi-kuo (country of the western part of the sea). Its territory amounts to several thousand li; it contains over four hundred cities, and of dependent states there are several times ten. . . . The country contains much gold, silver and rare precious stones, . . . corals, amber, glass, . . . gold-embroidered rugs and thin silk cloth of various colors. They make gold-colored cloth and asbestos cloth. They further have “fine cloth,” also called “down of the water sheep”; it is made from the cocoons of wild silk-worms.⁴⁰

The Chinese, whom we can trust in recognizing silk, casually relate that silk was known in the region and was woven in various styles, and they make sure to mention the type of silkworm from which the silk was taken. The evidence seems conclusive enough. There are also no particular signs of the rise of trade in AD 200, as is usually claimed. This would have been particularly odd, since that date is almost the start of the famous “crisis of the third century” in Rome, one marked by inflation and economic downturn in particular, thus making it quite hard to believe that at the exact same time, Rome could have afforded to send its gold and silver eastward to buy silk.⁴¹ In fact, it seems that the Chinese

35. Of course, the “southwestern” route highlighted by Fuquan might be the answer to this question. See Fuquan, “Ancient Tea and Horse Caravan Road.”

36. Juping, “Alexander the Great.”

37. This is quite remarkable, particularly in many accounts of non-European scholars of the Silk Road. Juping manages to credit Alexander the Great, the Macedonians of Bactria, the whole of the Hellenistic East, and the Chinese with the “opening” of the Silk Road, all without bothering much with the Parthians, for example, who were the receivers of the supposed emissary of Wu-ti and thus instrumental in opening the Silk Road. Juping, “Alexander the Great.”

38. Ten Grotenhuis, “Introduction: The Silk Road,” 16. Pliny’s estimate of 100 million sesterces per year for the purchase of silk is evoked to make this point even stronger. One might wonder not only about the accuracy of the amount but also about its application: was this spent only in the city of Rome or all around the Roman domains?

39. Procopius, *The Wars, Volumes 1 and 2*, trans. Henry Bronson Dewing, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914–16).

40. Friedrich Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient: Researches into their Ancient and Mediaeval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records* (Chicago: Ares, [1885] 1975). This history was partly written during the fifth century AD and embraced the period 25 to 220 AD.

41. Mireille Corbier, “Coinage, Society, and Economy,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. 12*, ed. Iorwerth E. S. Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 425.

emperors usually used their monopoly on silk production to acquire enough silk to be given away as gifts to foreign emissaries and kings. Instead, Chinese paper and chinaware are the items most commonly desired and mentioned in Western and Indian sources. Sogdians, the major traders between China and Transoxiana, were also very interested in Chinese glassware. Farther to the west, trade items famously include spices, coming from India and the islands beyond it.⁴² So silk, therefore, seems to be a low priority in the list of trade items.

“Silk Road” and the Ancient Economy

The first concern worthy of mention is the problem of anachronism in the study of ancient history, particularly when economy is concerned. In the past three hundred years, Europe (and here I mean Europe’s North American, African, and Australian extensions) has been the world’s most significant economic player. Along with the Industrial Revolution has come an amazing economic pull that has made Europe the main purveyor of wealth around the globe.⁴³ Today, much of the rest of the world produces cheap goods so Europe can consume.

The prominence of the present situation has caused many to take the economic ascendance of Europe for granted and consider it as a historical reality extending to the ancient period. Thus it might sound incredible to suggest that the situation was not so just a relatively short time ago, indeed before 1500 and the rise

of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls “the modern world-system.”⁴⁴ A mere five hundred years ago, Europe was not the major consumer in the world market, nor was its economy the richest. Quite the contrary, Europe was actually one of the poorest regions in the world, left well out of the global economy.⁴⁵ The world economy was actually dominated mostly by China, both as a consumer and as the major producer; other players were India and various powers of Central Asia and Iran, as the forces dominating West Asia (the Near East).⁴⁶ In short, the world economy was actually concentrated mostly in Asia.⁴⁷ It was from Asia that traders went to Africa and established colonies and extracted resources. It was for the sake of getting goods to southern and western Asia more quickly that the Chinese started their famed ocean expeditions.⁴⁸ The world economy, whether producing or consuming, was mostly an Asian affair. What trickled down from this system often went to Africa first, where a few strong, centralized powers also played a role in this economy. Europe, in reality, was the last receiver of such benefits. The reason was quite simple: Europe had very few resources, and the few that it had were used to maintain its own population.⁴⁹ Europe was geographically isolated, surrounded by water on three sides, and quite overpopulated as well. So the first thing to keep in mind is that in the so-called heyday of the Silk Road, when Marco Polo provided accounts of “the Silk Road” to the Europeans, Europe itself was effectively an

42. Tucker gives a list of items traded out of China. See Tucker, *Silk Road*, 16; and also Michael Loewe, “Spices and Silk: Aspects of World Trade in the First Seven Centuries of the Christian Era,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 2 (1971): 166–79.

43. The issue of the West’s rise is obviously an ever-present question in modern historiography and in almost any major work of European history, and even some of those not concerned directly with European history are written in response to it. This would extend from Max Weber and his *Protestant Ethics* to David Landes’s *Wealth and Poverty of Nations* and Joseph Needham’s wonderment about the Western capability for science. It also gives one Eric Jones, *The European Miracle*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). At the same time, it is the main reason for the existence of the fields of global history and world history.

44. It is fair to point out that even Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis mentions this fact. See ten Grotenhuis, “Introduction: The Silk Road,” 18. See also Immanuel

Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

45. Many have commented on Europe’s position, including John M. Hobson in his *Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29–31 and part II, 99–159. An economically oriented argument is Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). For a more militant discussion of Europe’s position in world history, or lack thereof, before the modern period, see Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

46. A study of the Indian economy beyond colonialism is still lacking, despite some attempts limited mostly to the period immediately before the arrival of the Europeans. See Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32 (1990): 383–408. For another version, arguing still within Wallerstein’s model but

for the Mongol Empire, see Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

47. Frank, *ReOrient*, 5–8.

48. Hobson (*Eastern Origins*, 29–48) expresses this position, if rather too forcefully.

49. For the Roman economy, see Richard Duncan-Jones, *Structure and Scale in the Roman Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially pt. 2. Sadly, there has been a general tendency, part of a greater Eurocentric leaning in history, to equate “ancient economy” with “Roman economy.” See, e.g., the famous work of Moses Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, 2nd ed. (London: Hogarth, 1985). This has in turn hindered our understanding of the economy in the ancient world as a whole, resulting in a lack of comparative models for the real ancient world economy.

economic backwater, not the powerhouse we are so used to thinking of today.⁵⁰

Second is the issue of the *Greco-Roman world*. While modern and postmodern criticism of Eurocentric historiography might have made it easier for some to accept the above suggestion, it is much less common for experts of classical civilization to accept a similar status for their beloved subject of study.⁵¹ After all, we grow up hearing of the Greek city-states, the Athenian Empire, Rome, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Marcus Aurelius, Constantine, and Justinian. Greece is the center of democracy, and Rome is commonly thought of as the most significant of ancient empires.⁵² We think of Roman hegemony as *world hegemony* and consider Rome to have been “the World.”⁵³ We consider Cicero to have been the greatest orator of the ancient *world* and Homer and Virgil to be its greatest poets. Greco-Roman cities are “classical cities,” and their collapse is considered to have triggered the Dark Ages.⁵⁴ In short, few dare not to think that Rome was the greatest, or at least one of the greatest, civilizations of the ancient world.

But the facts are against such a perspective. Again, the problem is that we are looking

at the issue from a European, and regrettably a Eurocentric, point of view. Indeed, Rome was the greatest power in ancient Europe and even the Mediterranean. However, our automatic equation of ancient Europe with “the World” gives us a myopic vision of Rome. Being the greatest power in Europe was indeed important, and Rome was certainly a great power operating in a limited geographical expanse. Factually, it was operating in the resource-poor lands of Europe with limited access to the rest of the world, where the most convenient way of contacting the rest of the world was effectively blocked by Rome’s major enemy to the east.⁵⁵ So we have to realize that despite its hegemony of the *Mediterranean world*, Rome was also not the greatest player in the whole of the ancient world.⁵⁶ Considering both of the above points, we might then allege that the effort to extend the “Silk Road” to reach the Mediterranean world itself serves to further aggrandize the position of the classical Greco-Roman world, as the predecessor of Europe, in world history.⁵⁷ In noticing the geographical problems of the Silk Road, we can further emphasize this point and understand part of the modern fascination with the concept.

50. Ten Grotenhuis, “Introduction: The Silk Road,” 18. Whatever its value, at least some suspicion has been raised about Marco Polo’s travel, which, in my opinion, is often the source of much inspiration for the whole concept of the Silk Road. See, e.g., Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998).

51. On Eurocentric historiography, see Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); but also see Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

52. Of course, there has been some space given as of late to China. See, e.g., Jialing Xu, “Narratives of the Roman-Byzantine World in Ancient Chinese Sources,” in *Byzantine Narrative: Papers in Honour of Roger Scott*, ed. John Burke with Ursula Betka, Penelope Buckley, Kathleen Hay, Roger Scott, Andrew Stephenson, *Australiensia 6* (Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2006), 497. After all, it is hard to forsake the greatness of an empire whose commerce Rome was so eager to receive, not to mention the culture of one out of every five persons in the world today.

53. Apart from the aforementioned “ancient economy” to refer to Rome exclusively, it is quite common to hear of the term *ancient world* to refer to Rome, and maybe Greece. For example, again Finley’s *Politics in the Ancient World* is wholly concerned with Rome. Wallace Caldwell’s *The Ancient World* is confined to Europe, save Babylon and Carthage. John Gray Lan-

dels’s famous *Engineering in the Ancient World* is concerned exclusively with Rome and Greece as well, not even mentioning the Egyptians, the Babylonians, or the Chinese. Wallace Everett Caldwell, *Ancient World* (New York: Reinhart, 1957); John G. Landels, *Engineering in the Ancient World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). The “world” was Rome, and supposedly all roads (including the Silk Road) led to Rome.

54. An alternative take on this is of course emerging, best detailed and exemplified in Hugh Kennedy, “From Polis to Madina: Urban Change in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria,” *Past and Present*, no. 106 (1985): 3–27.

55. The study of Roman conflict with the various Iranian powers has been a most productive field of ancient history. See Engelbert Winter and Beate Digna, *Rom und das Perserreich: Zwei Weltmächte zwischen Konfrontation und Koexistenz* (Berlin: Akademie, 2001); and Geoffrey Greatrex and Sam N. C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, pt. 2, *AD 363–630: A Narrative Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Since the concern of the Romans was often their Eastern adversaries, it has automatically been assumed that the opposite was also true, although one could argue against this assumption.

56. Even if the coin finds in the region are considered, the amount of Roman/Byzantine coinage (the basis for many claims) is quite negligible. Many of the coins date from the time of Theodosius II (408–50) and Heraclius (610–41). Fifty-six gold coins in more than

150 years is not much. Besides, gold coinage, even in Byzantium, was a hindrance to trade and commerce because of its high value. Cécile Morrisson, “Byzantine Money: Its Production and Circulation,” in *The Economic History of Byzantium*, ed. Angeliki E. Laiou (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2002). For the situation of money in eastern Central Asia before the advent of Islam in the region and for a discussion of the “Western” coins found in the region, see Helen Wang, “Money in Eastern Central Asia, before AD 800” in *After Alexander: Central Asia Before Islam*, eds. Joe Crib and Georgina Hermann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 399–412.

57. That the whole field of late antique/medieval history seems to thrive on the question of how “Rome” became “Europe” and the Mediterranean is central in this discussion. See Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Of course, the discussion started with Henri Pirenne. Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958).

Geography and the Silk Road

Most general descriptions presuppose that the Silk Road started in China (from various points, but mostly Changan) and continued to “Rome.”⁵⁸ Many sources go through a rather detailed itinerary of the route. A general description usually goes like this:

The routes all started from the capital in Changan, headed up the Gansu corridor, and reached Dunhuang on the edge of the Taklimakan. The northern route then passed through Yumen Guan (Jade Gate Pass) and crossed the neck of the Gobi desert to Hami (Kumul), before following the Tianshan Mountains round the northern fringes of the Taklimakan. It passed through the major oases of Turfan and Kuqa before arriving at Kashgar, at the foot of the Pamirs. The southern route branched off at Dunhuang, passing through the Yang Guan and skirting the southern edges of the desert, via Miran, Hetian (Khotan) and Shache (Yarkand), finally turning north again to meet the other route at Kashgar. Numerous other routes were also used to a lesser extent; one branched off from the southern route and headed through the Eastern end of the Taklimakan to the city of Loulan, before joining the northern route at Korla. Kashgar became the new crossroads of Asia; from here the routes again divided, heading across the Pamirs to Samarkand and to the south of the Caspian Sea, or to the south, over the Karakorum into India; a further route split from the northern route after Kuqa and headed across the Tianshan range to eventually reach the shores of the Caspian Sea, via Tashkent.⁵⁹

Curiously enough, almost no source really gives a full itinerary, namely, one farther west than the Caspian Sea or at most Mesopotamia.⁶⁰ One would expect that the route connecting China to Rome would pass through Mesopotamia, probably Palmyra or one of the designated

Persian-Roman border points (Callinicum, Dara, etc.) and reach Antioch or Caesarea, or even end up directly in Constantinople or the city of Rome itself. Instead, most descriptions stop somewhere to the east of the Caspian Sea in Transoxiana, merely mentioning its continuation to Rome without designating any final destination. In some cases, Ephesus is given as a final destination, while others simply mention the route passing over the Iranian plateau (as if it is just another oasis), ending in the Mediterranean cities of Antioch, Tyre, Sidon, and Aleppo.⁶¹

To explore the history of the Silk Road, scholars go back to the textual sources that talk about contacts between China and Europe in premodern times. A basic point of departure is the body of Chinese sources describing the West.⁶² To start with the travels of Zhang Qian, he is sent by Wu-ti to conclude an alliance with the Yüeh-zhi against the Xiongnu, sometime between 138 and 116 BCE.⁶³ In his description, he tells of the following places: “The Son of Heaven on hearing all this reasoned thus: Ferghana (Dayuan) and the possessions of Bactria (Daxia) and Parthia (Anxi) are large countries, full of rare things, with a population living in fixed homes and given to occupations somewhat identical with those of the Chinese people, but with weak armies, and placing great value on the rich produce of China.”⁶⁴ So this first mission actually reached as far “west” as Anxi, the Chinese name for Parthia and brought back certain “blood-sweating horses,” along with some information about the region.⁶⁵ These expeditions apparently made the Chinese familiar with the Takla Makan desert and the Tarim basin, the areas they soon came to dominate. In the first century CE, Ban Chao led an expedition and

58. Wood, *Silk Road*, 36–47.

59. This itinerary can be found in various sources, including Whitfield, *Life along the Silk Road*, 22–25.

60. Juping, “Alexander the Great,” 16, is an exception. His description of the Road thus crosses chronological boundaries by hundreds of years. Tucker also provides a full map (*Silk Road*, 12–13), although he does not elaborate.

61. On Ephesus as a final destination, see Juping, “Alexander the Great,” 17. Ten Grotenhuis (“Introduction: The Silk Road,” 18) gives no explanation, besides the obvious “exotic” overtone, for ending a route in a landlocked city like Aleppo.

62. All translations of Chinese sources are from Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient*. Occasionally, I also use other commentaries or corrections.

63. As Ball (*Monuments of Afghanistan*, 81) points out, the purpose of even this important event, which served to “open” the Silk Road, was mostly diplomatic rather than commercial.

64. Taishan Yu, “A History of the Relationships between the Western and Eastern Han, Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties, and the Western Regions,” *Sino-Platonic Papers* 131 (Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 264.

65. An-xi is usually associated with Parthia. See the discussion in Étienne de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traditions: A History*, trans. James Ward (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 25–28. It is not known whether this refers to the satrapy of Parthia (northeastern Iran) or it is the general name for the Parthian Empire. Given that Parthia is mentioned right after Fergana and Bactria, its immediate neighbors, it is safe to assume that the satrapy was meant. This point has a great relevance to the issue at hand, as the assumption that it refers to the empire of the Parthians (in fact the Arsacids) might have caused much later confusion.

invasion of the western regions of China that guaranteed the Chinese control of the Tarim basin. He also sent envoys to the West (Daqin?), which never reached their destination.

In the 9th year of Yung-yüan of Ho-ti [97 CE] the tu-hu [governor] Pan Ch'ao sent Kan-ying as an ambassador to Ta-ts'in [Roman Syria], who arrived in T'iao-chih [Babylonia], on the coast of the great sea [Persian Gulf]. When about to take his passage across the sea, the sailors of the western frontier of An-hsi told Kan-ying: "The sea [Indian Ocean] is vast and great; with favorable winds it is possible to cross within three months—but if you meet slow winds, it may also take you two years. It is for this reason that those who go to sea take on board a supply of three years' provisions. There is something in the sea which is apt to make man home-sick, and several have thus lost their lives." When Kan-ying heard this, he stopped.⁶⁶

The same sources mention more Chinese embassies, and a few from the king of Anxi and from Daqin, bringing tributes and asking for an opening up of commercial relations. However, none of the Chinese sources mentions any lands beyond Daqin. This, based on the modern Chinese interpretation, has been treated as Rome. Yet as early as the late nineteenth century, Friedrich Hirth was suggesting that this is actually Roman Syria, indeed one of the few sites on the Euphrates.⁶⁷

Quite a few modern works of scholarship have been published presenting surveys of Chinese sources that mention Rome or Byzantium.⁶⁸ The issue most of these works face is that, in many cases, they seem to confuse the ancient Chinese idea, and knowledge, of the "West" with what one knows today about the *West*, or Europe to be exact. This seems to stem, at least partially, from a lack of familiarity with the geography of the lands that lie in

between. In a recent example, the author of an article goes through the Chinese sources (mentioned above) to argue for the Chinese knowledge of the West and the importance of that knowledge for trade relations between China and Rome/Byzantium.⁶⁹ Beginning with a general introduction to the Roman and Chinese empires, the author proceeds to provide quite modern information about the two empires for the whole of the article's first half, based on the classical sources widely available, and not from a comparative point of view. Among these is the previously mentioned idealized view of the Silk Road, presented as such: "People traveled peacefully on the Silk Road and preached their beliefs in different religions."⁷⁰ Ignoring non-Chinese and Roman sources is very common in this article and in similar ones, as are factually incorrect assertions such as dating the rise of Buddhism and Nestorianism in Transoxiana to the first two centuries of Islam.⁷¹ However, most of the article is dedicated to quotations from the Chinese chronicles, in an attempt to assign various Chinese names to the real geographical places. For example, the Chinese name "Li-Kan" is argued to be a form taken from "Seleucid," the name of the Hellenistic dynasty that ruled Syria, Iraq, and Iran after Alexander. The problem is that in 14 BC (when the name first occurs in the Chinese sources), the Seleucid Empire no longer existed, and thus it would have been quite unusual for the source that has just become familiar with the area to use an expired name.⁷² The author argues that another Chinese term for Rome, Fu-lin, is from "Syriac or Persian *Ephraim*," which is supposed to be the Syriac or Persian name for Rome.⁷³ Apart from the fact that Syriac and Persian are unrelated languages, one should notice that Ephraim is a personal name, and in neither Syriac nor Per-

66. For 25–220 CE, see Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient*, chaps. 86, 88.

67. Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient*, 151–57.

68. For a survey of the sources, see Chen Zhi-Qiang, "Narrative Materials about the Byzantines in Chinese Sources," in Burke et al., *Byzantine Narrative*, 505–21. Examples of articles trying to extract descriptions of "Rome" or "Byzantium" are discussed later, but one can look at Zhang Xu-shan, "China and the Byzantine: Trade-Relations-Knowledge, from the Beginning of the Sixth to the Mid-Seventh Century," *Ιστορικoγλωσσικα* 6 (1998): 155–344.

69. Xu, "Narratives of the Roman-Byzantine World," 497–504.

70. *Ibid.*, 498.

71. The presence of Buddhism in Central Asia from the time of the Kushans is a well-known fact, supported by archaeology. See Andre Godard and Joseph Hackin, *Les Antiquités bouddhiques de Bâmiyân* (Paris: G. van Oest, 1928).

72. The last Seleucid king of Syria, Philip II Philorhomaeus, was killed by the Romans in 63 BCE. Cassius Dio, *Dio's Roman History*, trans. Earnest Carey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960–69), 36.17.

73. Xu, "Narratives of the Roman-Byzantine World," 503.

sian is it used to refer to Rome. Quite possibly, the author was aiming to derive the name from Middle Persian Hrōm (Rome) and confused it with Ephraim in the process. Such works simply add to the total number of writings “demonstrating” the Chinese knowledge of Rome/Byzantium.

In another article, evidence from the *Wei-Shu*, a chronicle of the northern Qi dynasty (386–549 CE), is used to describe Daqin, the usual name for Rome. The capital of the country is defined in this way: “The royal capital of the country is divided into five cities. . . . the king resides in the central city. In the king’s city, there are eight ministers established for governing the eastern, western, northern, and southern quarters of the country.”⁷⁴ Anyone familiar with the history of the ancient and late antique world, beyond China and Rome, will be amazed by this description of the capital of Daqin. The supposed usual capital of Daqin (in Hirth’s opinion, Roman Syria) is supposed to be Antioch-on-the-Orontes in the extreme northeastern corner of the Mediterranean. Yet the capital city mentioned by the chronicle does not border any seas, as Antioch does, nor was Antioch divided into five cities.⁷⁵ However, Ctesiphon (Syriac Mahoza and Arabic Mada’in, both meaning “the Cities”) was indeed divided into five cities. Also, it is a well-known fact that the Sassanian administration had divided the country into four *kusts* (quarters), each with a general and an administrator.⁷⁶ So it simply seems that Daqin is actually referring to an area a little farther east than Roman Syria, actually non-Roman Syria and Mesopotamia, and its capital in Ctesiphon.

In the *Jiu-Tag-Shu* (*The History of the Tang Dynasty*), a mention is made of the defeat of the Fu-lin by the Chinese general Xian-Zhi.⁷⁷ The Chinese in turn were later defeated, and some of their prisoners were taken into western Asia. Normally, because of modern assumptions, all

subsequent references to Daqin or Fu-lin are taken to refer to Rome, without critical evaluation of the sources. In the above example of the war with Fu-lin, one easily realizes that the Chinese could not have been engaged in a border war with the Romans, farther to the west. Instead, this seems to be a direct reference to the Chinese contacts along their western borders, with a power that is most likely none other than Iran. However, the desire to brush over the enemies of the Romans has led modern scholars to conveniently ignore the presence of the large landmass between China and Rome and instead aim for the forging of a direct connection.⁷⁸

In *Wei-lo*, written about 430 CE, another description of the western regions is given: “From the city of Ar-ku [Uruk, modern Warka], on the boundary of An-hsi one takes passage in a ship and, traversing the west of the sea, with favorable winds arrives [at Aelana, modern Elat, on the Gulf of Aqaba] in two months.”⁷⁹ Arguments have prevailed for many decades regarding the rendition of various geographical terms in the Chinese sources, usually by referring to the possible Middle Chinese pronunciations of the modern Chinese characters.⁸⁰ But here, without needing to understand much Middle Chinese, one can see the oddity in the interpretation of the geographical description provided above. This also serves to demonstrate the argument that the identification of Anxi with the Arsacid Empire instead of the satrapy of Parthia is at the root of many of the misunderstandings present in analyzing Chinese geographical evidence. By identifying Ar-ku with the ancient city of Uruk, at the edge of Anxi (here seen as the Arsacid *Empire*), the modern interpretation has arrived at the Gulf of Aqaba on the Red Sea. Now, even with ancient navigation systems, it would never have taken anyone two months to pass the Gulf of Aqaba. However, if we consider that the Chinese toponym *Anxi* referred to the *province* of Parthia, as is the most plausible ex-

74. *Wei-Shu*, vol. 102, quoted in Chen Zhi-Qiang, “Narrative Materials about the Byzantines,” 506.

75. George Elderkin and Richard Stillwell, *Antioch-on-the-Orontes*, 3 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1934–38).

76. Rika Gyselen, *Four Generals of the Sasanian Empire* (Rome: Istituto italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, 2001).

77. Quoted in Chen Zhi-Qiang, “Narrative Materials about the Byzantines,” 508.

78. Ball correctly points out that the Chinese and the Greeks (or Romans) would have known about each other sparsely and through many intermediaries. In his words: “Despite technology existing in ancient China far in advance of anything in the West, most of it did not reach the West until up to a thousand years

later—evidence, surely, of a lack of direct trade.” Ball, *Monuments of Afghanistan*, 81.

79. Quoted in Chen Zhi-Qiang, “Narrative Materials about the Byzantines,” 510 (commentaries are Chen Zhi-Qiang’s).

80. See the interesting, but as usual inconclusive, arguments in Wang, “Money in Eastern Central Asia,” 90–101.

planation when compared to similar geographical terms such as *Dayuan*, one can argue that Ar-ku is a city to the west of Parthia, possibly Gurgan (Hyrkania, Parthian *Wurkan*). Now, with Gurgan being situated at the southeastern corner of the Caspian Sea, one can easily imagine that crossing over to Caucasus, at the opposite end of the Caspian, might have taken the ancient navigators the alleged two months.

The unfamiliarity with the geography of Transoxiana, the Iranian plateau, and Mesopotamia has led scholars to easily accept the identification of the “western countries” (in the Chinese sense) with the modern western lands, meaning Europe. This is made further apparent by considering that the descriptions of the West, which start by giving the distances from An-xi, are assuming that the term *An-xi* refers to the whole empire of Parthia, instead of the satrapy of Parthia, in northeastern Iran. Consequently, all distances, given in relation to the western borders of An-xi in Chinese sources, are counted from the western borders of the empire in Mesopotamia, instead of the western borders of Parthia proper. If we consider that *Anxi* refers to the province of Parthia and that the terms *Daquin* and *Fulin*, and others for areas to the west of it, actually refer to the various other satrapies of the Iranian Empire, then we might have a much better sense of the information that the Chinese sources provide.

Turning to Greco-Roman sources, there is a famous description of the route to Seres by Pliny. In it, the Roman historian describes a route from Scythia (the Roman term for Caucasia) that passes a range bordering a sea (either the Caucasus Mountains or the Elburz Mountains).⁸¹ Full of fanciful details such as cannibals, Pliny’s account is similar to those of Strabo and Ptolemy, all essentially describing the easternmost region of which they were aware, namely, Central Asia. However, this has not stopped modern scholars from considering these descriptions to be of China.⁸² Nor has there been any doubt in suggesting that the Chinese, by giving the title of Daqin (the Great

Qin) to “Rome,” show that they knew of a great power, similar to their own, in Rome. Again, the interpretations both curiously ignore the presence of a power—and, even more important, the large geographical unit that is the Near East and Iran—in between the two “empires” of their concern.

Another Greco-Roman source, the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (*Periplus tes Erythras Thalasses*), dates to the first century AD and describes the navigation routes in the Red Sea and the sea trade to India.⁸³ Scattered mentions of trade with the East are also found in the works of Roman and Byzantine historians, the most famous of which is a statement by the sixth-century Byzantine historian Procopius. He notes that it was “impossible for the Ethiopians to buy silk from the Indians, for the Persian merchants always locate themselves at the very harbors where the Indian ships first put in, (since they inhabit the adjoining country) and are accustomed to buy the whole cargoes.”⁸⁴

Considering this and similar statements, one can see the problem with the image of a trade route that connected Rome with China and back. In bringing evidence of trade, scholars quote page after page from the Chinese chronicles about trade with the West, and then they bring evidence from the Roman sources about trade with the East. In the process, what they ignore is that the West and the East in question differ from the cultural terms assigned by modern scholarship to denote Western and Eastern civilizations. The Chinese sources, in fact, are talking about trade, and diplomacy, with Transoxiana and Iran, and the Roman sources are concerned with trying to enter into some of this trade. The problem is thus: the proverbial buck stops in western and southern Asia, and it never really reaches the West, the *Roman Empire*, *Western civilization*, or *Europe*. However, there still remains the question of the “Near East,” the three thousand kilometers of land lying in between Transoxiana and the Mediterranean. When one looks at the sources closely, it is easy to see that they don’t “talk” to each other. The Chinese

81. On the Roman term for Caucasia, see Wood, *Silk Road*, 43.

82. *Ibid.*

83. *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, 2 vols., trans. William Vincent (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1800–1805).

84. Procopius, 1.xx.12.

source materials, and the modern scholars who use them to show China's western relations, talk about the "West," while the actual descriptions end in Transoxiana and occasionally at the Caspian Sea or, rarely, the Persian Gulf. The Roman sources also refer to the Chinese and Indian trade, while Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau lie in between, blocking the way. Indeed, when one looks at it, the Road or the Route or even the routes never lead to *Rome*. They either lead down to India via Bactria or just end up in the Iranian plateau. Even Mesopotamia is too far to go, and Chinese envoys are discouraged by crafty fishermen from reaching it.⁸⁵

This then brings us to a famous romantic idea about the Silk Road, and that is its utility as a main route of transport for ideas and religions.⁸⁶ Of course, the discovery that ignited the idea of the Silk Road, the paintings of the Dunhuang caves, had a religious, specifically Buddhist, nature. Further discovery of Manichaean and Nestorian manuscripts in the caves and towers of Turfan, Kashgar, and Khotan also strengthened the idea of the Silk Road as the main avenue for the exchange of ideas and religions.⁸⁷ The notion was, and continues to be, quite romantic. After all, we like to think of premodern times as a period of religious bigotry and conflict, and a "route" through which religions freely traveled and interacted is quite attractive. It is also quite curious, and spiritually fulfilling, for the European reader to learn that a "European" religion like Christianity not only survived but also thrived in the lands beyond the dominion of the Saracens and heathens. This indeed was an incentive for many medieval European missions, like those to the Mongol court by various popes, who might even have

fancied the Mongols and their empire as the rise of the kingdom of "Prester John."⁸⁸

But nostalgia aside, one should notice that the Christianity in question was Nestorianism, a sect that was expelled from Roman Syria and found a home in no less a place than Ctesiphon, the capital of the Sassanian Empire.⁸⁹ It was indeed from here that patriarchs like Mar Ishoyyabh III sent missions of conversion to Transoxiana and India.⁹⁰ Such missions do not seem to have been part of any conscious effort of the Roman emperor or the Roman/Byzantine Church to spread the Christian faith in Transoxiana. Instead, among the few fragments of a Bible found in Turfan is a translation of the psalms into Middle Persian, and various biblical fragments translated into Sogdian.⁹¹ Of course, there were some isolated efforts, mostly by the Vatican, to make contacts with the unknown powers beyond the Islamic world to create alliances against the Muslims, but they never really succeeded.⁹² Indeed, even as far as the time of the Mongol *il-khans* Gaykhatu and Arghun, the Christianity adopted by the rulers is Nestorianism. Of course, Manichaeism also took refuge in Transoxiana, away from the persecution of the Sassanians, and its spread was greatly curbed by the rising power of Buddhism in the region.

The connections between Central Asia and China are of course undeniable, as are the connections between this region, Central Asia, and the Iranian plateau and the powers that came to dominate it. The Bactrians, who originally dominated Central Asia, were culturally under the influence of Iran, as becomes quite obvious even under foreign powers such as the Kushan kings.⁹³ The Sogdians, who later came to dominate Central Asian trade, also were

85. For 25–220 CE, see *Hou-Han-shu*, chaps. 86, 88.

86. A good example of the view that the Silk Road was a way of exchanging ideas is Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999).

87. Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road: Gnostic Texts from Central Asia* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1993).

88. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 111.

89. On Nestorianism, see Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, trans. Miranda G. Henry (London: Routledge-

Curzon, 2003). On the Sassanian Empire, see Scott McDonough, "A Second Constantine? The Sasanian King Yazdgerd in Christian History and Historiography," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1 (2008): 127–41.

90. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 64–65.

91. Friedrich Carl Andreas, "Bruchstücke einer Pehlevi-Übersetzung der Psalmen aus der Sassanidenzeit," *Sitzungsberichte der Berliner Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin: Berliner Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1910): 869–72. Jes Asmussen, "The Sogdian and Uighur-Turkish Christian Literature in Central Asia before the Real Rise of Islam: A Survey," in *Indological and Buddhist Studies: Volume in Honour of Professor J. W. de Jong on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Luise

Anna Hercus, F. B. J. Kuiper, T. Rahapatirana, and E. R. Skrzypczak (Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies of Australian National University, 1982), 11–29.

92. Igor de Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971).

93. Sassanians, for example, politically controlled Bactria for much of late antiquity. See Nicholas Sims-Williams, "The Sasanians in the East: A Bactrian Archive from Northern Afghanistan," in *The Idea of Iran*, vol. 3, *The Sasanian Era*, ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 88–102. Their artistic and cultural influence can also be observed in many reliefs. See Frantz Grenet, Jonathan Lee, Philippe Martinez, and François Ory, "The Sasa-

great vehicles for contact between China and Central Asia, well into Islamic times.⁹⁴ In the remarkable correspondence remaining from the last king of Sogdiana, who in the eighth century was trying to resist the Islamic invasion, there are interesting references to the presence of a Chinese general in the region, apparently sent to help King Dewaštič.⁹⁵ Thus Central Asia was quite closely tied to its neighbors and enjoyed a special position as a center of artistic production and economic activities. However, it was not merely a collection of oasis stations along a “Silk Road” that served to connect the great civilizations at the opposite ends of Eurasia.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the notion of the Silk Road (even Roads, land bound or seaborne) as an identifiable route of commercial contact between China and Rome/Byzantium/Europe is an unsupportable one. Chinese sources, apart from a few possible references to Rome, never indicate an effort by the Chinese to connect to the modern “West” as we know it. Europe (or the Greco-Roman world), despite its desire to be connected to the Chinese market, never manages to do so. More significantly, it has been argued that the characterization of the Central Asian population and domain, as well as Iran and Mesopotamia, as mere means of transit of goods from China to Rome is an anachronistic and largely Eurocentric view of world history. By making these regions mere transit stations for connecting the two “greatest empires of the ancient world,” the popular concept of the Silk Road has essentially deprived the scholarship of the opportunity to study each of these regions in its own context. While the study of Europe

becomes more concentrated and regionalized, even in its earliest stages, the lumping together of “Central Asia” and indeed the rest of Eurasia east of Rome has caused the creation of a vague, all-purpose concept, convenient for holding unfamiliar details of history, but at the same time detrimental to the study of history, or world history, as a whole.⁹⁶ By undoing the Silk Road, we might then be able to better study the histories, cultures, languages, and religions of Eurasia in a deeper manner and with the same scholarly scrutiny that European history has thus far enjoyed. S

nian Relief at Rag-i Bibi,” in Cribb and Hermann, *After Alexander*, 243–67. Great improvements in the study of Bactrian have been made recently, some of which is summarized in Étienne de la Vaissière, “Merchandises Bactriennes?” (unpublished manuscript). Many thanks to de la Vaissière for his study. The publication of the Bactrian documents (BD) by Sims-Williams is of course primary in our present understanding of the Bactrian society in late antiquity. See Nicholas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan, I. Legal and Economic Documents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan II: Letters and Buddhist Texts*, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*, vol. 2, pt. 4 (London, 2007).

94. For the best account to date of the Sogdians’ activities from the earliest period to medieval times, see de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*.

95. Frantz Grenet and Étienne de la Vaissière, “The Last Days of Panjikent,” *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 8 (2002): 155–96.

96. For a completely new way of imagining early European history, see Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*.