The Eurasian Silk Road: Its historical roots and the Chinese imagination

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The Eurasian Silk Road: Its historical roots and the Chinese imagination

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Abstract

This article takes a long historical perspective on the Silk Road, attempting to see it from a Chinese point of view. It focuses on five themes that figure in the Chinese imagination of the Silk Road, all rooted in China’s history. These include influences that came to China via the Silk Road in prehistoric and early historic times, patterns of military expansion of Chinese power in the Western regions, the threat of invasion from the northern and north-western frontiers, commercial exchanges and individual travel. Individuals journeyed across the Silk Road for diplomatic, military, commercial and sometimes religious reasons and the various themes overlap to some extent. Some myths are also dispelled: first, the Silk Road was not one route but many; second, other commodities besides silk travelled along it and third, the maritime Silk Road should also be included in the concept. Under Mongol rule, the route was at times an unbroken corridor between East and West on which many people travelled in both directions. When the Mongol empire broke up, travel overland was restricted again, which may have been why China took to the seas in the Ming. At present, China is building a New Silk Road to connect with the rest of the world in a more integrated way than ever before. The focus of this article is on establishing the patterns of the past in the hopes that it will contribute to the discussion of whether these patterns will be repeated in the present or if we are in completely uncharted territory.

China’s perspective on the historical Silk Road is such a large topic that one would need several volumes to do it justice. This article focuses on certain key themes that figure in the Chinese imagination of the Silk Road, all rooted in China’s history and the history of her interaction with Eurasia and the rest of the world in premodern times (roughly before 1800 CE). The first of these themes is that while the term “Silk Road” is relatively new in origin, having been coined by the geologist Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905) in 1877,1 the Silk Road itself, defined collectively from the Chinese perspective as the various overland routes extending from China’s north-western and western frontiers to Central Asia and beyond, was a corridor for the exchange of goods and the transfer of information dating back to prehistoric times. It was the route by which many foreign influences came into China during the formative years of Chinese civilisation. The second theme is that beginning with the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), China’s state expansion into the north-western and western frontiers tended to be sporadic, with military expeditions and the establishment of protectorates undertaken by ambitious emperors during the early years of strong dynasties, such as the Han and Tang, when there was ample wealth to support these operations. When these campaigns became overextended and the regime’s wealth drained away from the provision of essential goods and services to the populace in China’s political centre, however, the state tended to withdraw from such far-flung activities in order to deploy its limited resources on more pressing domestic concerns. In this way, we can see that while China had no lack of interest in

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1 It was used in its German form (die Seidenstraße) on a map of Central Asia to indicate the trade route between East and West. The map was published in Ferdinand von Richthofen, China: Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1877).
other parts of the world, her priority was to look after her own people at home. Hence, at times of internal crisis, she tended to abandon her foreign interests to focus attention on domestic concerns. Third, because China’s northern and north-western borders were susceptible to attack by nomadic raiders and other foreign invaders, the frontier regions to the north, north-west and west came to be seen as potential sources of danger to the empire’s peace and security, particularly at times of disorder, division and weakness at home. The fourth theme is that certain commodities tended to be encountered on Silk Road travels or traded along that route, such as grape-wine, jade and horses, and by virtue of their mention in poetry and historical accounts these became associated with and incorporated into the Chinese imagination of the Silk Road. The final theme to be discussed here is that often independently of major political and economic events, certain individuals traversed the long distances separating the East and West over the centuries. They each had their own reasons for travel, whether on military or diplomatic assignment, for religious purposes or commercial profit. The prose accounts and poems left behind by these individuals, and others inspired by them, are repositories of the images of the Silk Road and are responsible for their transmission down to the present. All these images, including stories of legendary figures, exotic products, geographic features and the emotions associated with distant travel such as fear, loneliness and hardship, help us trace the historical roots of China’s imagination of the Silk Road.

Although the various themes enumerated above can be categorised as political, military, diplomatic, economic, commercial, social, cultural and individual, they are not easily separated from each other. Instead they often overlap and intersect with each other. For example, military expansion (theme 2), which sometimes took place in response to military threats from outside (theme 3), also went hand in hand with officially sanctioned state commerce in the form of tribute and led indirectly to private trade (theme 4). Moreover, individuals who travelled for their own particular reasons (diplomatic, commercial, religious: theme 5) often mentioned in their travel accounts and poetry features associated with the different themes. Discussions of commodities and commercial aspects (theme 4) inevitably involve both official trade linked with the state (theme 2) and unofficial and private trading (theme 4). It is thus impossible to separate the political and diplomatic dimensions of the Silk Road from the economic and commercial, or from the social, cultural or individual. The themes also do not align themselves strictly in chronological order. Therefore, as these themes are discussed below, efforts to discuss them separately have been made, and the examples are ordered sequentially where possible. There is inevitably some overlap of categories and discussion of items out of time sequence.

Before elaborating on the five themes enumerated above, two important aspects of the Silk Road should be kept in mind, not least because they dispel some of the myths that have been associated with the Silk Road in the past. First, the Silk Road is not a single road with a definite starting and ending point traversing the whole of Eurasia, but a set of different shorter routes that fluctuated over time. Moreover, individuals often sojourned on portions of the route. Very few travelled its entire length; most of the travel and traffic across the Silk Road was done on a relay basis. Travellers also took different routes at different times, skirting around natural obstacles such as mountains and deserts in response to seasonal and climatic changes, as well as fluctuating political and military conditions. As Valerie Hansen says, “the ‘road’ was not an actual ‘road’ but a stretch of shifting, unmarked paths across massive expanses of deserts and mountains.” It is thus often referred to as the Silk Roads (plural), to express this multiplicity of routes. In recent years, scholars have also included the sea routes joining China to Southeast Asia, India, Arabia and East

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3 The Silk Road was approximately 3,850 km (2,392 miles) as the crow flies from today’s Xi’an (the capital region in the early dynasties) to Samarkand; it was 7,250 km (4,505 miles) to Istanbul and 8,500 km (5,282 miles) to Rome.


Africa in the concept of the Silk Road, called the “marine Silk Road.”
This development probably underpins the concept of the “One Belt, One Road” policy of the Chinese government today, which seeks to combine the overland and maritime routes into one. It should be noted that the modern Chinese term for “Silk Road,” *sichou zhi lu* 絲綢之路, did not come into use until the term became popular in the West; in premodern times, ever since the Han dynasty, the overland region traversed by those routes was called the “Western Regions” (*xiyu* 西域). The term for the maritime regions to the south, leading to Southeast Asia, India and further west, was the “Western Oceans” (*xiyang* 西洋) from the Five Dynasties period (907–960) onwards.

Second, despite its name, the Silk Road was a route along which many other goods besides silk, as well as ideas, technologies and religions, travelled across Eurasia. In Valerie Hansen’s view, “Silk” is even more misleading than ‘road,’ inasmuch as silk was only one among many Silk Road trade goods. Chemicals, spices, metals, saddles and leather products, glass and paper were also common. The various products are discussed below not only in the context of theme 4 but also in other sections.

The first theme concerns the Silk Road as a conduit of influences in the prehistoric and early historic periods. Despite the relatively recent origin of the “Silk Road” as a term, the route itself, as a corridor for travel as well as the transfer of goods and information across Eurasia, is an ancient phenomenon, going back before history itself. Chinese civilisation is sometimes portrayed as originating in isolation, in the “cradle of the East” on the Central Plain near the bend in the Yellow River. However, in recent years, archaeologists have found increasing amounts of evidence of important influences coming into China via Central Asia as early as the second millennium BCE. Bronze technology, for example, for which the Shang period (ca. 1570-ca. 1045 BCE) has become famous, is now thought to have come into China along this route:

On the basis of new archaeological and archaeometallurgical evidence, more and more scholars have come to argue that bronze metallurgy was introduced into China from the Eurasian steppe through Northwest China during the third millennium BC.

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8 Liu Yingsheng 劉迎勝, “Dongyang” yu “Xiyang” de youlai 東洋“與”西洋的由來 (The origins of the terms “Eastern Oceans” and “Western Oceans”), in Zhang He xia Xiyang 600 zhounian jianjian huodong chubei lingduo xiaozu. 鄭和下西洋600週年紀念活動畫冊. (1905–2005) (Beijing: Haiyang chubanshe, 2005), 73.

9 Ferdinand Von Richthofen uses the term in an article about the history of the Silk Road in which he talks about other trade goods as well as silk. See, “Über die centralasiatischen Seidenstrassen bis zum 200 n. Chr.” *Verhandlungen der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde* (1877, 4: 96–122. The article is available online at: https://archive.org/stream/verhandlungerder1877#page/96/mode/2up, passim. See Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 6–7, and her caption to colour plate 2–3, which reproduces Richthofen’s map. This topic came up in 1888 when UNESCO launched its major project, the “Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue,” a description of which can be found at: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001591/159189E.pdf. According to Liu Yingsheng, in his book on the Maritime Silk Road, the organisers of the project debated whether it should be called the “Silk Road,” as opposed to the “Porcelain Road,” the “Incense Road,” or some other designation. However, it was finally decided that the Silk Road was the only term with the power to represent all other trade goods, as well as religions, ideas, technologies and other intangibles that travelled on this route. Liu Yingsheng, *Silu wenhua: Haishang juan* 丝绸之路: 海上卷. (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin, 1995), 7.

10 Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 5.


The chariot is also thought to have come into North China from the Caucasus region before 1200 BCE.\textsuperscript{14} It is argued that grains such as wheat were imported from outside\textsuperscript{15} and that domesticated animals such as sheep and goats, not to mention horses, came from Central Asia.\textsuperscript{16} Human remains with Europoid features have been found in Central Asia, dating from as far back as 2000 BCE.\textsuperscript{17}

As we move into the historical period, we have other examples of early contact with places along the Silk Road. For example, a collection of 755 pieces of jade was found in the Shang dynasty tomb of Fu Hao 妇好 (d. ca. 1200 BCE), consort of the king Wu Ding 武丁 (r. 1250–1192 BCE). Some of these jades date from the Neolithic period, thus showing that this Shang dynasty court at Anyang of Fu Hao was a collector of jade pieces that to her were already ancient.\textsuperscript{18} The archaeological report of the tomb’s excavation says that most of the jade was from Khotan, an important Silk Road city in the west of present-day Xinjiang province. Jessica Rawson doubts that they could have come from so far away (3,000 km), suggesting instead that they were from other nearer sources of nephrite, such as those in Kuanbian (in present-day Liaoning) or Liyang (in present-day Jiangsu).\textsuperscript{19} Rawson also makes a point of discussing the “exotic” influences on these jades, meaning influences from places that are today within the Central Plain of China rather than distant sites in Turkestan. Her evidence confirms that China was less homogeneous in prehistoric times than is usually thought.

The Chinese cultural centre experienced influxes of people who originated from outside, but who assimilated and became part of the centre. Some of these held onto their own identity and way of life. As early as the Shang period (ca. 1570-ca. 1045 BCE), there were “other contemporary cultures,” such as the one at Sanxingdui 三星堆, discovered in 1980.\textsuperscript{20} “The Tribute of Yu” chapter (Yu gong 禹貢) in the Shang shu 尚書 or Shujing 書經 (Book of Documents or Book of History), which purports to describe the situation in the Xia 夏 period (estimated to date from 1900 to 1300 BCE and to be contemporaneous with the Erlitou culture),\textsuperscript{21} refers to the various diverse ethnic groups in the regions surrounding the political centre of the empire during this period.\textsuperscript{22} Valerie Hansen speaks of the “diverse ethnic groups [that] once inhabited the area” of Xinjiang and Gansu at the Chinese end of the Silk Road from at least 1800 BCE.\textsuperscript{23} Whatever the source of the Fu Hao jades, it is clear that the Silk Road was already a highway for the transfer of information and goods in prehistoric and early historic times.

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\textsuperscript{18} Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所, *Yin-xu Fu Hao mu 妇好婦好墓 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1980).*

\textsuperscript{19} Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, with the assistance of Carol Michaelson (London: British Museum Press, 1995), 417.


\textsuperscript{23} Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 13.
With regard to the second theme, Emperor Wudi of the Han period (Han Wudi 漢武帝, r. 141–87 BCE) was one of the most famous of the ambitious emperors who launched military expeditions beyond the north-western frontier. These expeditions were partly for military expansion and partly for self defence, but they may also have been motivated by trade. China was frequently under attack from the north by the Xiongnu, a nomadic people from beyond its northern borders. Establishing military protectorates in these outlying regions helped to secure China’s borders, divide potentially threatening groups from each other\textsuperscript{24} and keep the lucrative trade routes safe and open. In the words of Michael Loewe, Wudi’s aims were:

- to launch offensive campaigns into Asia; to rebuild, reequip, and extend the garrison lines of the north; to found commanderies in newly penetrated territories; ... and to foster the growth of trade along the routes that would be known as the Silk Roads.\textsuperscript{25}

These periodic expeditions help to account for the panhandle shape of the Chinese empire during these expansive periods (see Figure 1).\textsuperscript{26}

It was in this context that Emperor Han Wudi famously dispatched the diplomat Zhang Qian 張騫 on an expedition in 139 BCE to negotiate alliances with smaller states on China’s northern borders, which were also under attack by the Xiongnu. Zhang Qian was one of the individual travellers

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\textsuperscript{24} Yu Ying-shih points out that the Han protectorates separated the Xiongnu from the Qiang 羌 people. He also mentions the “divide and rule” policy that China practiced at the time (Yu Ying-shih, “Han foreign relations,” in Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, \textit{The Cambridge History of China}, Vol. 1. \textit{The Chi’in and Han Empires, 221 BC–AD 220} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 377–462, 391 and 403–405).


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referred to in theme 5, who left behind a travel account with an enduring influence on the Chinese imagination of the Silk Road. He was sent to negotiate an alliance with the Yuezhi 月支, an Indo-Scythian people who were hereditary enemies of the Xiongnu based in the Gansu corridor.\textsuperscript{27} Unfortunately, on his way to find this polity, he was captured by the Xiongnu and held against his will for ten years. By the time he escaped, the Yuezhi had moved away from the Xiongnu, far westward across the Pamirs into Bactria. Not one to shirk his duty to the emperor, Zhang Qian travelled all that distance to make contact with them, only to find that they were no longer interested in an alliance with China. On his way back, he was captured by the Xiongnu again, this time for only one year, finally arriving in China in 126 BCE.\textsuperscript{28} Despite having failed in his official mission, Zhang Qian brought back much knowledge of Central Asia, including news of the so-called Heavenly Horses from Ferghana. He is also responsible for introducing alfalfa and wine made from grapes into East Asia. The account of his travels that he wrote for the emperor, later incorporated into both official histories, the Shi jì 史記 and the Han shu 漢書 (and still extant in these two versions),\textsuperscript{29} set the model for all subsequent Chinese official and unofficial travel accounts. It is often said that he “opened the Silk Road” but, as we have seen, routes through Central Asia had already been operational for many centuries before his journey. In fact, his own account revealed to the court the existence of a southern route to the West through present-day Yunnan, Burma and India to Bactria.\textsuperscript{30}

During the Han period, silk found its way into the Roman empire via the relay trade. Some have argued that this trade was on such a large scale that the Roman economy suffered as a result of the eastward drain of precious metals. According to Yu Ying-Shih, “There is considerable evidence to show that silk was an article of luxury apparel in Rome in the early days of the empire, and it has sometimes been suggested that payment for these imports wrought considerable damage to the Roman economy.”\textsuperscript{31} Nishijima Sadao concurs, noting that “Silk was so much in demand in Rome at this time that it is said to have been literally worth its weight in gold.”\textsuperscript{32} However, there is disagreement as to whether it actually drained Rome’s economy.\textsuperscript{33} While this point is still being debated, it is true that remnants of Han silk have been found in Central Asia; thus, the crucial role that this region played in the silk trade is not in doubt. As Yu Ying-shih says, “the initiative for the conveyance of silk from China to the states of Central Asia came from the Asian confederacies.”\textsuperscript{34}

In the Later Han period, the general Ban Chao 班超 (32–102 CE) served as protector-general of the Western Regions, leading military expeditions between 91 and 101 CE into Central Asia and across the Pamirs.\textsuperscript{35} He sent his subordinate Gan Ying 甘英 even further ahead in 94 CE, as envoy to Da...
Qin 大秦 (the Roman Orient). Having reached as far as Tiaozhi 條支, perhaps Babylonia (Mesoopotamia), however, according to the account in the Hou Han shu 後漢書 (History of the Later Han), Gan Ying was dissuaded by the Parthians (called in the Chinese sources people from Anxi 安息) from continuing his journey. After receiving their warnings about the length and dangers of the journey, he turned back and returned to China.36 This story is consistent with the view that the Parthians jealously guarded their role as middlemen in the trade with Rome.37

Such far-flung military expeditions could not be sustained or supported by China’s supply lines in the long term, especially after the dynasty began to decline. Although agricultural garrisons provided locally produced food for the troops on these expeditions, thus avoiding the need to transport everything from Central China, procuring provisions for the soldiers and members of diplomatic missions was a perennial problem. As Yu Ying-shih says, “Han had to enlarge its system of colonies if it was to support these armies.”38 Towards the end of the Later Han, the story of Hami, which had been the site of a flourishing colony in 73 CE, was typical of other places in Central Asia: “After 153, as Han power declined, rebellions broke out again and again, and the Hami colonies were gradually abandoned.”39 Even tributary relations were considered a financial burden. Yu Ying-shih notes that periodic efforts were made “to downgrade [the] administrative establishment in the Western Regions” because of the “financial strain,” due partly to the pressure on the Han to provide financial aid to the tributary states.40 Thus, part of this second theme is that such ambitious military expeditions to the north-west ultimately overstretched the empire’s resources and usually had to be abandoned. Diminished financial resources had other internal ramifications as well, such as the failure to keep up flood defences, leaving the empire vulnerable to natural disasters; the resulting floods and famines could lead to rebellion, accelerating the demise of the regime “Towards the end of the dynasty, palace revolutions and disturbances became increasingly frequent, and an agrarian crisis led to a peasant revolt in 184 CE.”41 This situation was typical in later dynasties as well, providing the most important reason why China tended ultimately to withdraw from ambitious foreign campaigns: there were pressing matters at home that needed to be dealt with, and these were given priority.

The Tang (618–906 CE) was another period when China engaged in ambitious military activity in Central Asia. Under Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756), General Gao Xianzhi 高仙芝 (d. 756) led an army across the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush in 747 to break up an alliance between the Arabs of the Abbasid Caliphate and the Tibetans. This campaign led to a disaster for China in 751 when the Chinese army lost to the Arabs in the Battle of Talas. From then on, China virtually withdrew from Central Asia.42

Another theme often associated with the Silk Road, particularly in the Han dynasty, was that women were often abducted or traded in exchange for peaceful relations with the nomads on the northern frontier. Numerous imperial princesses and other noblewomen were unhappily betrothed to Xiongnu leaders as part of the policy of appeasing the nomads through marriage alliances (heqin 和親). The famous Western Han beauty Wang Zhaojun 王昭君 (Wang Qiang 婿) of the Western Han was one of these princesses. She was a palace lady in the harem of the Han Emperor Yuan (Han Yuandi 漢元帝). According to one story,

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37 This role of the Parthians as middlemen is questioned by Manfred G. Raschke in his “New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East.” This work is in the collection, Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt, Geschichte und Kultur Roms in der neueren Forschung, II Principat [Rise and Fall of the Roman World: History and Culture of Rome in Recent Research, 2nd Principat], ed. Hildegard Temporini (Berlin: Gruyter, 1978), Vol. 9, part 2: 604–1361. See Yu Ying-shih, “Han foreign relations,” 462.
38 Yu Ying-shih, “Han foreign relations,” 410.
40 Yu Ying-shih, “Han foreign relations,” 420–421.
she refused to bribe the Chinese court painter Mao Yen-shou 毛延壽, who therefore made her portrait ugly. As a consequence, she was not admitted to the imperial presence. Emperor Yuan saw her only after she had been promised to the Hsiung-nu king, and regretted losing her, but it was by then too late to prevent it.\textsuperscript{43}

\textbf{Figure 2} is a scene from the tragic story of Cai Yan 蔡琰, or Cai Wenji 蔡文姬, of the Eastern Han period (25–220 CE). She was abducted by invading Southern Xiongnu tribes in about 190 CE and

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Fig2}
\caption{Cai Yan returns to China, leaving her children behind. Reproduced from Wikimedia Commons, available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CaiWenji-return150d-pi90_percent.jpg. This work is in the public domain.}
\end{figure}

enjoyed cold, loneliness and homesickness while she lived among them. Although she was eventually ransomed 12 years later and allowed to return to China, she was not permitted to take with her the two children she had given birth to during her captivity. The painting portrays the moment when she had to hand them over, presumably to her Xiongnu husband, before leaving. She vented her sorrows in her "Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute."  

With this topic, we have moved gradually into the third theme, which is that the Silk Road was sometimes seen as a source of danger from nomad raids and foreign invasion. During the interval between the Han and the Tang (618–907), often termed the “Period of Division,” various political and military leaders tried to reunify the empire but none succeeded. While the south tended to divide into multiple kingdoms, the north tended to be overrun by nomadic peoples and tribal confederations entering China from the west. Examples of these peoples were, in addition to the Xiongnu, the Di 氐, Jie 羯, Qiang 羌 and Xianbei 鲜卑. The rulers of the Northern Dynasties, from 36 to 550 were Tuoba (Toba) 拓跋 people, a tribe of the steppe federation of the Xianbei.  

The rise of Islam and the subsequent Muslim conquests in other parts of Asia and Africa from the 7th to the 13th centuries did not directly result in conquest, but had indirect influences in China. They inspired travel and trade across India and Central Asia during the Tang and Song periods, as well as along the sea route to Southeast and East Asia. They thus helped to link China into the Indian Ocean trading system. Arab and Indian merchants who arrived at Quanzhou 泉州 on the coast of Fujian province in China were the main source of information for Zhao Rugua’s 趙汝适 Zhu fan zhi 諸蕃志 of 1225 CE, a treatise that describes the major ports and polities on the maritime Silk Road as well as the trade goods that changed hands in this trade. During the next century, the Arab traveller Ibn Battuta was able to find Muslim colleagues in most of the ports and cities where he travelled throughout India, Central Asia and Southeast Asia, and also found co-religionists in the southern part of China.  

Most of the journeys described so far were confined to either the western or the eastern ends of the Eurasian landmass. As noted above, very few people travelled the whole distance across. This situation changed during the Mongol period when almost the entire region was united under the Great Khan, and the so-called Pax Mongolica prevailed. The Mongol conquest thus afforded intercontinental travel on a scale never seen before, extending even as far as Western Europe. The friars John of Plano Carpini (1180–1247), sent by Pope Innocent IV, and William of Rubruck (d. ca. 1255), under orders from Louis IX of France, journeyed eastward to the Mongol capital of Karakorum on diplomatic missions in 1245–1247 and 1253–1255, respectively, hoping to stop the Mongols’ advance towards Europe, gain an understanding of their ways and motivations and convert them to Christianity. Slightly later, Rabban Sawma (c. 1220–1294), a Uighur Nestorian Christian from Khanbaligh (the Mongol name for Beijing), travelled in the other direction between 1275 and 1288, reaching as far as Paris and Bordeaux. Marco Polo also covered large

44 The painting, “Cai Wenji Returns to Her Homeland (Wenji gai Han tu 文姬歸漢圖),” is by an unknown author supposedly dating from the Southern Song (1127–1279). It is found at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CaiWenji-return110jpg900_vehicle.jpg. The caption given there seems incorrect; it could be Cai Wenji and her Xiongnu husband, but I doubt that she is “peaceful and content,” given that she has to give up her children. (Source: CHINA Art Pic Stock (China Artistic Publisher, Beijing Panoramic Visual Pic LTD.) Cat: p127, CD41: img0198, purchased and donated by Kosi Gramatikoff.) For other illustrations and the collection of eighteen poems, see Robert A. Rexor and Wen Yong, Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute (Hu jia shiba pai 胡笳十八拍): The Story of Lady Wen-chi, A Fourteenth-Century Handscroll in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974). The series of poems (called “The Lamentation”) is also included in the anthology Liu Wu-chi and Irving Yucheng Lo, ed., Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry (New York: Anchor Books, 1975), 36–39, a work which also contains a biography of Cai Wenji on 537–538.  


amounts of ground between Venice and China at around the same time (1271–1295) although his travels were largely for commercial purposes. When the Mongol empire broke up into the various khanates and warred with each other, travel became more difficult.\textsuperscript{47} Travel and trade increasingly went by sea in the 14th–15th centuries. This contrast between the unified and fragmented empire in the beginning and end of the Mongol period shows how important political homogeneity, economic freedom and religious tolerance along the Silk Road were for facilitating travel, communication and exchange.

Theme 4 concerns the commodities that travelled back and forth along the Silk Road. We have already seen how the images of exotic goods such as grape-wine, alfalfa and jade came to be associated with the overland route as early as the Han period. One of the most common commodities to be imported into China was horses. In the Shang and Zhou (ca. 1045–221 BCE) periods, “horses had to be used for chariots by all armies,” and the many chariot burials testify to their use for this purpose.\textsuperscript{48} During the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), military encounters with the northern nomads stimulated the use of cavalry: “By the end of the fourth century BCE, Chinese states were already adopting cavalry warfare, which meant a rising demand for horses.”\textsuperscript{49} This trend continued throughout the Qin (221–206 BCE) and Han periods, and later as well. Horses were key commodities traded across the Silk Road, in the early periods often in exchange for silk, while in later periods for tea.\textsuperscript{50} Hansen notes the high-value China placed on Central Asian horses:

\begin{quote}
Among the most treasured gifts were the horses that grazed in the Central Asian grasslands; because they roamed free, they were always stronger than the smaller, less powerful Chinese breeds that ate fodder hand-carried to their stables.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

Imports into China via the overland Silk Road also included incense, precious stones, hides, fine woods, spices, ivory, glass, fine wool, linen fabrics and other textiles, as well as new comestibles such as grapes, pomegranates, sesame and broad beans, to mention a few.\textsuperscript{52} Ideas and inventions also came into China, including the astronomical and mathematical learning of India and West Asia.\textsuperscript{53} In addition to silk, China exported tea and porcelain (in later periods), cultural products such as books and paintings, gold, silver, lead, tin and even copper coinage.\textsuperscript{54} China’s intellectual exports during various periods included the secrets of silk manufacture, papermaking, the equine shoulder harness, gunpowder and porcelain technology.\textsuperscript{55}

The various individuals (theme 5) travelled for a variety of reasons according to their different roles: diplomat, soldier, pilgrim, missionary, merchant and so forth. We have already seen that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47} Rabban Sawma experienced some of this difficulty during his travels when his way was obstructed at various times during his journey. He was unable to attain his ultimate goal of travelling to Jerusalem because of political unrest. See Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis Budge, \textit{The Monks of Kublai Khan, Emperor of China} (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1928).
\item \textsuperscript{48} Chariot burials are discussed in Robert Bagley, “Shang archaeology,” 203.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Liu Yingsheng notes that “silk-for-horses trade relations” (si-ma maoyi guanxi 絲馬貿易關係) were formally established between China and Central Asia after Zhang Qian’s diplomatic missions in his Siyu wenhua: Cangyuan juan 絲路文化: 草原卷 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin, 1995), 55. Liu probably means after Zhang Qian’s first mission, dated ca. 139-ca. 126 BCE. The second mission probably returned to China in 115 BCE when he was appointed “Superintendent of State Visits”; Zhang Qian died in 113 BCE. The tea-horse trade begins in the Tang period. See Yang Fuquan, “The ‘Ancient Tea and Horse Caravan Road,’ the ‘Silk Road’ of Southwest China,” \textit{The Silkroad Foundation Newsletter}, 2004, 2 (1), http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/newsletter/2004vol2num1/tea.htm.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Hansen, \textit{The Silk Road}, 16.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Nishijima,” “The economic and social history of Former Han,” 579.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Nishijima,” “The economic and social history of Former Han,” 579.
\item \textsuperscript{55} These intellectual exports are discussed in the various volumes of Joseph Needham’s \textit{Science and Civilisation in China}. A list of these volumes can be found on the website of the Needham Research Institute: http://www.nri.org.uk/science.html. See also L. C. Goodrich, Joseph Needham and Gwei-djen Lu, “Efficient equine harness: The Chinese inventions,” \textit{Physis: Rivista di Storia della Scienza}, 1960, 2: 344–345.
\end{itemize}
some left behind travel accounts or poetry that testify to the other themes. The diplomat Zhang Qian was sent as a result of the expansion policy of Han Wudi (theme 2), sought an alliance against the Xiongnu (theme 3) and mentioned the goods and commodities on the Silk Road (theme 4); the legends and poetry written about Wang Zhaojun and Cai Yan concern theme 3. The Silk Road also served as a source of spiritual inspiration. The spread of Buddhism to China from the 1st to the 8th centuries CE encouraged travel and exchange across the Silk Road, bringing Central Asian missionaries and translators to China, as well as inspiring Chinese monks to travel the other way. An Shigao 安世高 (fl. c. 148–180 CE), a Parthian prince, and Kumārajīva (344–413 CE), a scholar and translator from oasis of Kucha, are two of the most well-known Central Asian Buddhist monks who travelled to China and undertook the work of translation and teaching. Of the Chinese Buddhist monks who went to India to learn about their faith and collect relics and manuscripts, Faxian 法顯 (337–c. 422) was the first one to venture there and return to China, to spend the rest of his life translating the scriptures he brought back. He left via the overland route in 399 CE and returned by the sea route in 414 CE; thus he may have been the first “One Belt, One Road” traveller, going out by land and coming back by sea.56 In his translation work, in Nanjing, he was aided by another missionary, Buddhhabhadra (394–468 CE), from Central India. During the Tang period, the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (c. 602–664) travelled to India via the overland route in 629 CE and returned by the same route in 645.57 Another Tang Chinese monk, Yijing 義凈 (635–713), who travelled to India and back entirely by sea between 671 and 695, wrote biographies of 56 other monks who travelled to the birthplace of Buddhism during the 7th century, thus giving us an idea of how many devoted monks made the pilgrimage to India and other Buddhist countries to study the religion and bring back texts and relics for the faithful.

Numerous soldiers went out on military campaigns into distant and inhospitable western regions and their feelings and experiences far away from home find expression in a genre of Tang frontier poems. The images in one famous poem by Wang Han 王翰 (687–735), quoted below, recall the Han journey of Zhang Qian, while making its own contemporary point. The poem is called the “Song of Liangzhou” (Liangzhou ci 凉州詞), named after a town at the Chinese end of the Silk Road:

“Song of Liangzhou” (Liangzhou ci 凉州詞)58

葡萄美酒夜光杯, Lovely grape wine in a jade night-glowing cup,
欲飲琵琶馬上催, I long to drink; the pipa music urges my horse on.
醉臥沙場君莫笑, Drunk, sprawled out on the sandy field; don’t laugh at us,
古來征戰幾人回? How many have ever returned from battle since time began?

The images of grape wine, jade cups that glow in the dark, the pipa (a musical instrument that came into China from Central Asia)59 and references to soldiers drowning their sorrows in drink


59 It is not exactly clear when the pipa was introduced into China, but it was probably from Egypt or Mesopotamia. There seem to have been several types of instrument resembling the modern pipa at different times, from the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) to the Sui (589–618) dynasties. See, John Myers, The Way of the Pipa: Structure and Imagery in Chinese Lute Music (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1992), 6–12.
occur often in Tang poetry. They capture some of the Chinese imagination of the Silk Road, as does the mood of the melancholy soldier who must fight on in a foreign territory, surviving without letters from home and not knowing if he will ever see his family again.

The careers of individual soldiers and other travellers sometimes overlapped and intersected with each other. It was a common practice for people to write “occasional poems” to each other to send friends off on long journeys. The Tang frontier poet Cen Shen 岑參, when he was in the service of General Gao Xianzhi (mentioned above), wrote such poems to friends to send them off westward to the frontier, as well as eastward back home to the Tang capital. It was rarer for diplomats from different states to meet each other in faraway places, but there were a few such chance encounters. In one example, the early 15th century Ruy González de Clavijo, Spanish ambassador to the Timurids, describes seeing Chinese ambassadors in Samarkand at the Timurid court in around 1404. They were ambassadors belonging to two different Chinese embassies, one that had arrived in 1397 and the other in 1404. They were detained on account of a letter from the Chinese emperor, which Timur interpreted as condescending. Clavijo observes that when Timur realised that the Spanish ambassadors had been given lower priority seats than the Chinese, he moved them to higher seats out of contempt for the Chinese:

Those lords now conducting us began by placing us in a seat below that of one who it appeared was the ambassador of Chays Khán, the emperor of Cathay. Now this ambassador had lately come to Timur to demand of him the tribute, said to be due to his master, and which Timur year by year had formerly paid. His Highness at this moment noticed that we, the Spanish ambassadors, were being given a seat below that of this envoy from the Chinese Emperor, whereupon he sent word ordering that we should be put above, and that other envoy below ...  

The Chinese ambassadors were held hostage for another three years because of Timur's anger.  

Another serendipitous encounter occurred when the Timurid ambassador Ghiyāth al-Dīn Naqqāsh arrived in Beijing on an embassy to China in 1420. There he met the two chief Chinese ambassadors he had formerly encountered when they visited Herat: Li Da 李達 and Jangqwa. Their meeting is recorded in two surviving documents, one is a letter from the Ming Emperor Yongle (r. 1403–1424) to the Timurid ruler Shāhrukh (r. 1405–1447) in 1418 and another is the travel account of Ghiyāth al-Dīn Naqqāsh. Li Da's name occurs twice in Emperor Yongle's letter: first, alone: “We formerly sent as envoys Amīr-i Sarāy (Palace Emir) Lida with his retinue ...”; and then with Jangqwa: “Now Lida and Jangqwa with their retinue have been specially sent ...” Fletcher translates this letter from Persian because the original Chinese letter is lost,  

60 Guy Le Strange, The Embassy of Clavijo to Tamerlane, 1403–1406, Broadway Travellers series (London: Routledge, 1928), 222. It seems that Clavijo was not aware that the Mongols had already been expelled by a new Chinese dynasty, the Ming, and that it was no longer ruled by a Khan, but by a Chinese emperor. The time of Clavijo's visit coincided with the beginning of the third Ming emperor's reign, Yongle (r. 1403–1424), but the ambassadors had been sent by the first Ming emperor, Hongwu (r. 1368–1398).


Fletcher does not go so far as to suggest Jangqwa might be Chen Cheng, but it seems possible, especially because of the similarity with Jan-daji in Ghiyāth al-Dīn Naqqāsh’s account and the association with Li Da (Li-dali). K. M. Maitra, trans. A Persian Embassy to China; Being an extract from Zubdatu’t Tawarikh of Hafiz Abru. Lahore, 1934; reprint New York 1970, 118.

62 Fletcher, “China and Central Asia,” 213.

63 According to Fletcher, the letter does not appear in the Chinese sources because the emperor’s attitude towards Shāhrukh was so conciliatory. Fletcher, “China and Central Asia,” 213 and 353, n. 50.

64 Fletcher translates this letter from Persian because the original Chinese letter is lost, hence the use of the Persian word for eunuch (Amir-i Saray) and the non-Chinese spelling Jangqwa. The account of Ghiyath al-Din Naqsh mentions seeing both Li-daji (probably Li Da) and Jan daji in Beijing; it is tempting to speculate that Jan daji is the Chinese traveller Chen Cheng 陳誠, who served on three embassies to Herat during this period, but this cannot be proven.  
Chen Cheng’s diplomatic missions to Timur’s successor Shāhrukh, who ruled from Herat (in present-day Afghanistan), are very important for our knowledge of the Silk Road. He went on three of these missions, in 1414–1416, 1416–1418 and 1418–1420.\(^6\) The diary of his first journey to Herat, *Xiyu xingchengji* 西域行程記, provides an extremely valuable day-by-day account detailing his route along the Silk Road. Although for descriptions of the places he visits, one has to rely on his other work *Xiyu fanguo zhi* 西域番國志, the account of his route gives us the rare opportunity to map the 149 stops he makes along the route. Another Silk Road activity, the maritime expeditions of Zheng He 鄭和 (1405–1433), constitutes a significant chapter in global history, in which seven Chinese naval expeditions sailed to Southeast Asia, India, the Middle East and Africa.\(^6\)

### Conclusion

The pattern of expansion and retreat we saw in the Han and Tang, as well as the other features of this brief sojourn into China’s past images of the Silk Road, shows that there is no shortage of curiosity, ambition or innovation in China. According to this pattern, China tends to withdraw from foreign entanglements if there is trouble at home in order to concentrate her resources on domestic concerns. It is ingrained in Chinese culture, even before the time of Confucius in 500 BC, and then confirmed in the sayings of the great sage, that the needs of the people come first. This is not only for humanitarian but also for practical reasons, both political and economic. The alternative is desperation, starvation and revolution. The most frightening word in Chinese civilisation is “chaos” (*luan* 亂). In order to avert disaster and hold onto power, the people must not be allowed to suffer or starve, and society must not be left to decay or crumble.

This realisation goes a long way to explain what may appear to be erratic behaviour on China’s part even today. In my view, it explains why China stopped launching maritime expeditions to far-flung places in the 15th century — there were troubles at home that needed attending to and the treasury was out of money for such extravagances. It explains in part why China closed itself off from the rest of the world at the beginning of the People’s Republic in 1949, needing to regroup and put its own house in order. Finally, it may also go a long way towards explaining the waves of change in Chinese foreign policy, sometimes opening to outsiders and at other times closing. It is often difficult to balance fulfilling the needs of the people (and thereby holding onto power) with the achievement of growth and prosperity and participation in the world economy as an equal, on a par with other world powers. At present, China is accomplishing this balance quite well, and its current ascendancy is a great source of Chinese pride.

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### Competing interests

Sally Kathryn Church declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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