

CONTACTS OF CONTINENTS: THE SILK ROAD

The problems and the history of contacts between distant continents in bygone ages and long before the age of fast and easy travel, have always fascinated both professional scholars and the interested public. Was ancient history really nothing but the history of co-existing and isolated geographic, cultural and political “islands?” Already at school we learned too much about migrations of peoples, economic contacts, influences on art styles, conquests, and the rise, expansion and fall of empires to believe that. The (highly improbable) theory that certain archaeological finds in America suggest, or even prove, Mediterranean influence (e.g., the arrival of Phoenician ships), or the alleged Viking discovery of America centuries before Columbus, or Thor Heyerdahl’s adventurous journey to prove South American influence on remote Pacific islands did not fail to cause widespread interest and even excitement (although many scholars still feel that Heyerdahl’s epic adventure, thrilling as it is, failed to prove what it set out to prove). The island of Madagascar is pretty close to the African continent,

but its language exhibits more points of contact with Polynesian than with African tongues. And the blow-bellows used by Malagache smiths are similar to those used in Malaysia and unlike those known to African metalworkers. Clearly the Polynesians, those great ancient mariners, sailed further than originally seemed likely. Musicologists studying the cantillation of the Hebrew Bible in the liturgy of the ancient Jewish communities on the Malabar coast in India discovered to their surprise that it was similar to the cantillation not of the Babylonian but of the Yemenite Jews! This surprise was, of course, no surprise to those who knew anything about trade-winds and shipping routes between South Arabia and the Indian coast. Historians of religion, even more than general historians, studying the spread and expansion of religious ideas and movements have realised long ago that the beginning of all wisdom is a basic knowledge of economic geography.

These general introductory remarks bring us to our main theme: the contacts between East Asian and Mediterranean civilisations. In more picturesque language: between the capitals of the Chinese and Roman empires. Some art objects of evidently Persian origin even found their way to Nara, the 7th-8th century capital of Japan. They were probably brought back by Japanese embassies to the Chinese court, and it is therefore not without reason that the treasure-house of the Shoso-in Temple in Nara considers itself, rather than the ancient Chinese capital Ch'ang-an, to be the real eastern terminus of the "Silk Road." In fact, the great "Silk Road Exhibition" is held this year in Nara.

We might, of course, simply talk in general terms of the history of trade routes connecting East Asia with the Near East and the Mediterranean world. But since the most highly prized and expensive commodity—a luxury item if ever there was one, the very opposite of that necessity of life: salt—transported over this route was Chinese silk, the 19th century German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (uncle of the World War I German flying ace) christened this trade route "the Silk Road." Calling a route by the name of the most important commodity transported on it is no rarity. Thus we refer to the shipping route from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean and from there through the Bay of Bengal and the Straits of Malacca up to the China Sea as the "Spice

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Route.” The nature and unique character of this overland route will be evident to anyone after a brief glance at a geographical map of the area north of Tibet. Hemmed in by impassable mountains (such as the Pamirs) and deserts (such as the Gobi desert, made famous by that intrepid explorer Sven Hedin) there were only very few narrow strips along which people could move. Supplementing our fairly constant and unchanging geographical map (though a location shown as a flourishing city may have disappeared in due course under sanddrifts) with historico-political maps, we see that this area consisted of ever so many small kingdoms and sparse oasis-cities, each trying to make a maximum profit by heavily taxing (a euphemism for blackmailing) caravan traders wishing to cross their territories. To these official tax robbers there should be added the many tribes and groups of highway robbers which made caravan trade a hazardous adventure and which also explain the high value and prices of those goods that did manage to reach their destination.

Today we tend to think of travel as something by means of which people increasingly come into direct contact. But this was certainly not the case with our Silk Road. Merchandise (and, as we shall see in due course, also ideas, especially religious ideas) travelled by indirect contact. As in a torch-race, they were handed over by one group of traders or caravans to another and so on until they reached their final destination. Only rarely did a great power exercise real authority and control over a large area. The *Pax Romana* was such a period for parts of the Western world (including the Near East), and without the *Pax Mongolica* in Asia even the epic travels of the Polo brothers with all their hardships, would not have been possible. Also when Chinese imperial dominion expanded to the West, this authority was more often than not purely theoretical rather than *de facto*, and hence the situation described above prevailed most of the time. Sometimes dramatic historic events changed the power situation. Thus in the middle of the 8th century the Muslims crossed the steppes, pushed into the Pamirs, and at the battle of Talas (in northern Turkestan) decisively defeated the Chinese. Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Balkh were now not merely under Muslim rule but became major centres of Muslim civilisation. In the 10th century a large part of the population was converted to Islam, thus bringing to an end

centuries of the flourishing dominance of Buddhist cultures. (Even today most of the inhabitants of the Tarim basin are Muslims). Chinese prisoners-of-war made at that battle brought the arts of papermaking as well as sericulture to the West, much as, 800 years before, captured Roman soldiers, after a battle in Sogdiana which was won by the Chinese (36 B.C.), may have brought some Roman techniques to the East. Allied with the Muslims were the Tibetans who swarmed out of their mountain stronghold, overran the Tarim basin and Kansu corridor and even reached the gates of Ch'ang-an. What they brought with them was, among other things, the Tibetan form of (Lamaist) Buddhism which left a permanent imprint on Central Asia.

A look at the geographical map also shows that no direct contact was possible between India and China. To the east, swamps, jungles and hostile tribes made travel impossible. The Himalayas and Tibet formed an impassable barrier. The western route was the only possible one: Afghanistan, Bactria, Bukhara, and then linking up with the Silk Road. This was the road along which Buddhism came from India to Central Asia and from there to China, Korea and Japan, and also the route along which Indian monks made their way to the north, and Chinese pilgrim-monks went south in quest of learning and of Holy Scriptures. This was the route taken by Fa-Hsien (departed from China A.D. 399), Hsüan-Tsang (departed 629) and ever so many others. I-Tsing (departed 671) was probably one of the exceptions who took the maritime route. (During his absence from China for several decades he also spent many years in Hindu-Buddhist Sumatra). Surely intermarriages among the heterogeneous and mixed central Asian population produced the bi- and trilingual scholars who would subsequently translate the Sanskrit originals of the Buddhist Scriptures.*

Central Asia constitutes only a small part of the Silk Road (or Roads in the plural, for reasons that will be apparent soon), but it is also the most arduous, impassable, and from a scholarly point of view most fascinating part. The history of the western terminus: Rome, the Near East viz. Mediterranean coast (Palmyra-Damascus-Tyre/Sidon, or Palmyra-Aleppo-Antioch with a possi-

* As for relations between China and India, see also Xinru Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges*, Oxford University Press, 1988.

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ble prolongation to Sardis and Ephesus) as well as of the Middle East (including Iran, which in Roman times also meant Parthia against which Rome lost several important battles, and North India) is well known. The same holds true of the eastern terminus: China. It was via Seleucia, Ctesiphone etc. that the routes from the Mediterranean fed into the roads of Northern Iran, Parthia and Afghanistan which then continued eastward as the central Asian Silk Road. In India it was from Mathura or the Indus Valley that travellers, rather than art styles (Gandhara!), joined the Silk Road via Taxila, Peshawar and Bactria. In Muslim (that is in terms of Chinese chronology in late T'ang) times, the western main stations were Baghdad, Hamadan, Nishapur, Merv, Bukhara-Samarkand-Balkh and Tashkent. Passing the Pamirs, the road split at Kashgar into a northern (Kucha, Turfan) and southern (Khotan, Cherchen) route, both routes skirting the dreaded Taklamakan desert and joining again at Tunhuang in the east whence the road continued to the Chinese capital cities of Ch'ang-an viz. Xi-an. China subsequently went through some turbulent periods and changes of dynasties, and it was only in the Mongol period that the Silk Road regained its former importance, though by then the eastern terminus had shifted northward to the Peking region. It is this Central Asian region which, because the most inaccessible, also became the most intriguing and fascinating "mystery area" for scholars.

Lots of goods, commodities and ideas must have travelled along these routes to the east of the Pamirs, covering far greater distances than their usually changing human carriers. China was interested not only in coloured glass and other "exotic" products of the far West, but also in the powerful horses from the Central Asian Ferghana region (where they constituted the strength of the horse-riding tribes that inhabited the area), not to speak of that mineral of supreme symbolic and commercial value: jade. On the other end of the route the Roman upper class ladies would pay any price for the transparent gossamer cloth in which they could be "dressed and naked at the same time." Unfortunately we do not possess the account books of Roman silk merchants, but we do know the diatribes of the Roman moralists, inveighing against the corruption of morals, the invasion of luxury, and the loss of the stern and sober Roman way of life.

If ever there was a *carrefour de civilisations* it was this central

Asian part of the forking Silk Road between Kashgar and Tunhuang. In the Roman, and then in the Muslim and T'ang, and up to the Mongol periods it was a melting pot of ideas and cultural influences, in addition to its main function as a highway for goods. Most Western readers derive their familiarity with Manichaeism from the spirited polemics of St. Augustine (i.e., western Manichaeism in its Latin form). Specialists were aware that in order to study Manichaeism one would have to know not only Greek and Latin and Coptic and Aramaic, but also a host of Iranian and other languages and dialects (Sogdian, Parthian, Tokharian, Tibetan, Uighur and so on). In the 19th century few scholars suspected that Manichaeism had penetrated to China—obviously along the Silk Road, especially after an 8th-century Uighur ruler converted to that religion—or that the only still-extant Manichaean religious building is in southeast China. A Manichaean tract even somehow managed to get lodged in a Sung-period Taoist canon. Towards the end of the 19th century the eminent French sinologist Chavannes still firmly maintained that the *mo-ni* mentioned in certain Chinese texts were Muslims. The intense Central Asia and Silk Road research around the turn of the century (see below) convinced him that he had been mistaken, and in 1911 he published, together with Pelliot (see below) in the *Journal Asiatique* “*Un texte manichéen retrouvé en Chine.*” The Nestorian form of Christianity travelled from western Asia to China—via the Silk Road. The famous Nestorian *stela* (written mainly in Chinese but having a few lines in Syriac script) now in the “Forest of *Stelae*” in Xian, was originally erected (where?) in the 8th century. Buddhism, mainly in its Mahayanist (including Tibetan Lamaist) but also in Hinayanist forms, flourished in the area which, after the rediscovery of its role and importance, turned out to be an inexhaustible treasure-house of Buddhist texts and works of art. Thus, for example, Kucha seems to have been a centre of Hinayana, Turfan of Mahayana Buddhism. Some caves proved to be Hinayana “enclaves” in a predominantly Mahayana environment. Rarely was the world of Buddhist scholarship seized with such excitement as at the time when a copy of the *Diamond Sutra*, actually the oldest (868 C.E.) dated book (or rather scroll), was found in the “Caves of the Thousand Buddhas” near Tunhuang. In due course developing

sea-trade rendered the difficult and hazardous overland route superfluous. Political changes and shifting ethnic and other factors (for example, the ascendancy of Uighur and Turkish tribes) as well as the increasing Western capacity to produce goods that were once imported from China, and hence decreasing dependency on the Silk Road, caused many once flourishing centres to decline and finally to be forgotten, buried under shifting desert sands. Much as the penetration of Buddhist culture destroyed a great deal of the area's pre-Buddhist Chinese culture, so also the Muslim conquests, especially after the Uighur ruler of Kashgar converted to Islam (10th century), spelled the end of Buddhist culture.

A mixture of populations, cultures and religions also produces syncretisms. (The term "syncretism" was used for a long time in a pejorative sense, meaning an unsystematic and uncritical mixture of different ideas, philosophies, beliefs etc. Today it serves as a purely descriptive term denoting the cultural and religious "mixes" that arise whenever and wherever there is culture contact). What shall we make of a central Asian text which refers to Mani as the "Buddha-Christ of Light" that has descended to save the world? And who will ever know how much Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light, owes to the influence of Manichaeism, the "religion of light" (*ming chiao* in Chinese)? The great authority on Iranian languages, Prof. Mary Boyce, published in 1960 a *Catalogue of the Iranian Texts in Manichean Script in the German Turfan Collection*. Just think of it: a catalogue of texts from one site only, brought to one library only, concerning one religion only and written in one language and one specific script only! In actual fact the Silk Road material consists of sculptures, huge wall-frescoes, temple-banners, wooden figures, and especially texts (manuscripts and printed, complete and fragmentary) in 17 different languages and in 24 different scripts! The material is scattered in musea and collections all over the world (Paris, London, Berlin, Harvard, Leningrad, New Delhi, Seoul, Japan and many more). How this situation came about is part of our story. For it is important to realise that much current "Silk Road Research" is, in fact, "Central Asia Research". As yet unexhausted stores of past, present and future discoveries still wait to be catalogued, analysed, brought to light, translated, photographed and made accessible.

It is not our purpose here to tell in detail the story of the extraordinary research rush on the Central Asian Silk Road area

at the turn of the century. A brief survey must suffice. The research expeditions almost took the form of racing competitions, and we should undoubtedly assume, in addition to scholarly ambitions, also political motives connected with the general climate of power politics of that period. We shall leave it to historians and sociologists (and perhaps also to political scientists) to explain why exactly at that time and with such intensity. The Russians were, perhaps, the first in the field, among them Nicolai Prejalevski, probably the greatest of all 19th-century Russian travellers-explorers, making four trips to Central Asia between 1870-1885 and covering about 20,000 miles. He, like Sir Francis Younghusband, travelled, explored, sighted, mapped (for his government) and described, but did not excavate. Yet his reports, like those of his colleagues and competitors, paved the way for the archaeologists. Sven Hedin too was a traveller-explorer and not an archaeologist. He started his almost legendary career at the age of twenty-five, and continued his epic travels (also through the dreaded Taklamakan and Gobi deserts) for fifty years. His sighting of ruins and his reports proved of the utmost significance to archaeologists, orientalists and art-historians. The Russian botanist Alfred Regel reported (between 1875-80) the existence of Buddhist remains in many of the ruined cities. In fact, he was the first Westerner to see the important remains of Khotcho. Fragments of a 5th-century manuscript from Kutcha, written on tree-bark, caused a sensation among Sanskritists since it was written in Old Indian script and was evidently older than any Sanskrit manuscript known in India. Whilst scholars still quarrelled about the authenticity of the fragments, Sven Hedin had started (1885) on his search of the "lost cities of the Taklamakan desert", and a few years later (1900) Aurel Stein began the first of his great expeditions which would reach a climax with the explorations of Khotan on the southern Silk Road route and of Tunhuang (1906-1909), as well as the excavations in Lu-lan and Niya.

In 1899 Sven Hedin prepared his third expedition. By that time the Russian scholar Dimitri Klementz had made the first real archaeological researches (1898) in Central Asia on behalf of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Petersburg. He had brought back photographs of ruins, manuscripts, fragments of frescoes and

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sundry other objects. It was Klementz's results that triggered off the Central Asian research "stampede", not only from Europe (Sir Aurel Stein operated from his base in India, i.e., under British auspices) but also from Japan. Thus many important objects were brought back by the Otani expeditions (so called because financed by Count Otani though carried out by the archaeologists Tachibana and Nomura); they can be seen in Kyoto and in the National Museum in Seoul. After Klementz's return there was much contact between the academies of Petersburg and Berlin, and although this contact did not result in joint expeditions, it brought about exchange of information and, at least for some time, much mutual assistance. The Germans concentrated mainly on Turfan, and the result of their four expeditions, initiated by the great authority on Indian and Tibetan Buddhism and iconography, Grünwedel, and continued by the efficient Albert von LeCoq (a merchant turned amateur—and ultimately far more than amateur—scholar) is the impressive Turfan Collection in Berlin. Alas, much of this collection, especially the frescoes sawed off the temple walls in Bezeklik and Kyzil, was destroyed by allied bombings during World War II. The extant collection is unfortunately divided between East Berlin (manuscripts) and West Berlin (iconographic material).

The Russians became active again between 1907-1911, and some of their most eminent scholars, such as Colonel Koslov and Sergej Oldenburg, explored the northern route of the Silk Road at about the same time as Sir Aurel Stein and the Frenchman Paul Pelliot. By then research had become such a competitive scramble (not only in terms of scholarly ambition but also in practical terms of carrying off maximum quantities of loot to the "home country"), that the delay of the fourth German Turfan expedition (1913-14) had the unintended but providential advantage of avoiding an encounter and possible confrontation between the Germans, the Japanese, the Russians, Paul Pelliot and Aurel Stein.

One illustration of the atmosphere of competition should suffice here. Stein had already booked tremendous successes as a treasure-hunter in Sven Hedin's "buried cities" in the Taklamakan as well as in many other sites during his first and second (1906) expeditions which also enabled him to strengthen his "cross-cultural Buddhist civilisation" thesis. From wherever he worked he

brought back “large boxes of stucco, frescoes etc.”, “archives of documents”, “frescoes as brittle as pastry”. But his most spectacular success was the caves of the Thousand Buddhas, a holy place near Tunhuang. A local monk (by virtue of being the caretaker monk of the site he was also its “abbot”) had stumbled on a treasure trove of ancient manuscripts and art work, walled up for many centuries. Stein persuaded (a euphemism for bribed) the worthy Abbot Wang into letting him take away over 500 works of art (including painted silks), 3000 rolls of printed material (including the aforementioned Diamond Sutra scroll) and 6000 other pieces. The painted silks, carefully unfolded by the experts at the British Museum, turned out to be large and superb paintings on fine silken gauze. (The Stein treasures can now be admired in a sumptuous, 3-volume *de luxe* edition published by the British Museum). Two years later, in 1907, Pelliot arrived on the spot and bribed Abbot Wang to let him carry off several thousands more of manuscript scrolls, some complete and some fragmentary. These are the core material on which the scholars of the Paris “Tunhuang group” are still working. In 1914 the indefatigable Aurel Stein was back in Tunhuang and succeeded in carrying off 600 more Buddhist manuscript rolls. The Germans and others acted on similar lines and with similar methods and results. Some of the art treasures (paintings and sculptures from Buddhist cave temples) are on exhibit in (West-)Berlin musea, mainly material from the northern route between Kyzil and Kotcho, and have now been published in a beautifully produced album.

The material discovered (and briefly described above) in that small section of what used formerly to be called “Chinese Turkestan” on the great transcontinental Silk Road will obviously provide full-time occupation for a long time to come to historians of culture and religion, Buddhologists, specialists in diverse oriental languages as well as art historians. The fact that in this relatively small area different art-styles can be discerned, that some caves exhibit an art that is clearly influenced by China whilst other sculptures and paintings are “western” (which here means influenced by the Indo-Buddhist Gandhara style) in character, should give much food for thought to students of culture. In 1987 an International Conference was organised by the Chinese Academy of Dunhuang Studies at which scholars from all over the

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world participated. (Japanese scholars are playing an increasingly significant role in these studies). The conference was devoted mainly to the art-styles found in the Tunhuang grottos and left little doubt that we are only at the beginning of our understanding of what really happened, culturally speaking, in this area. And what has been discovered and carried off by Western and other treasure-hunters early in this century may turn out to be only a minor part of what is still awaiting discovery, especially now that Chinese archaeologists and historians have begun to explore the area systematically and with greater technical skill and sophistication than was possible eighty years ago.

At this juncture a few words should be said about the professional “ethics” of the explorers mentioned. No doubt it is easy enough to fault them on many counts and to accuse them of imperialist looting. None of them seems to have indulged in *Ideologiekritik* or to have asked himself questions about great power politics behind his no doubt genuine scholarly enthusiasm and commitment. The haste imposed by the harsh climatic conditions and other difficulties, and especially the prevailing atmosphere of a racing competition, caused much of the work to be done in a less careful (and occasionally more destructive) manner than was unavoidable even by the standards of those days. Certainly much of it was very crude by the standards of the highly developed and sophisticated skills of modern archaeology. There seems to be a general consensus that among all the early explorers working in that area, Sir Aurel Stein was the technically most competent and conscientious.

But the issue goes deeper than that. No doubt much of the Central Asian material will sooner or later return to China—once China has enough financial and technical resources to assume responsibility for proper storage and care of its treasures (e.g., temperature- and humidity control). This would also be in conformity with the general policy of Unesco and its member states. All this, however, should not make us forget the situation at the beginning of the century. How many of the world’s most admired Greek marbles would still exist if that “robber”, Lord Elgin, had not saved them by carrying them off to England and lodging them in the British Museum? How much of the Central Asian Silk Road treasure-trove (paintings, sculpture, manuscripts)

would still exist if the Grünwedels, Steins, Pelliot and other “looters” had not saved and preserved them for posterity?

Again one single illustration must suffice here. After drawing a detailed map of the area around Karakhodcha in the Turfan oasis, Grünwedel concentrated on several ancient cities. One of them (Khotsho or Idikutchari?) was evidently an ancient Buddhist city but yielding also quantities of Sanskrit, Uighur, Mongol, old-Turkish, Chinese, and Tibetan manuscripts and prints, as well as Manichaeic and Nestorian relics, figures of wood and clay, and carefully peeled-off frescoes. The whole lot was transported in 44 cases, partly on the back of camels and partly by waterway, to Petersburg and from there to Berlin. In his report, the visibly agitated Grünwedel writes:

The [old ruins of the] city serve as supplier of building material for modern housing, as a treasure-house where people dig for treasures, as a place of amusement where Buddhist sculptures and frescoes can be smashed to pieces for the greater glory of Allah—though not without the profitable secondary goal to use these as manure for the fields of sugar-cane and cotton situated within the ruins. There is no police, and we must look on quietly as adjacent to our exploration-sites the traditional work of demolition continues. In the given circumstances our work is mentally exhausting and also depressing in the sense that often you have to buy back their loot from the plunderers, and to influence them to behave more sensibly [i.e., less destructively].

Unesco is launching a project on the “Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue”. Perhaps the word “dialogue” should be taken with a grain of salt and as a mere metaphorical flourish due to traditional Unesco jargon, since the Silk Road never served the noble aim of “dialogue”, unless you call all forms of trade relations, profit making, culture contact, and religious and artistic influences a “dialogue”. No doubt all these are considered, at least in our age, not as ends in themselves but as means towards human and intercultural dialogue. But this intercultural dialogue is no longer taking place along the “Silk Road”. Gilgit, Kashgar, Turfan and Dunhuang are visited today by hordes of tourists, engaged in sightseeing rather than dialogue missions. The reader will have noticed that the Unesco project very wisely speaks of Silk Roads

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in the plural. The preceding pages should have made clear why this expression is more correct than the singular. And the important and programmatic expression “Integral Study” highlights precisely what this article hinted at but did not do. We briefly spoke of the western and eastern ends of the Silk Road, but devoted most of our discussion to that relatively small section of the trans-continental trading route that encloses what used to be called Chinese Turkestan. Our reason has been made clear: here the most exciting, unexpected, important—in fact revolutionary—and stimulating (from the point of view of the history of culture, religion and art) discoveries have been made, and are still being made by Chinese scholars who have now taken the lead in the field. It is therefore all the more important that the tempting concentration on the area between the Pamirs and the Kansu corridor should not divert our attention from the “Integral Study” of the Silk Road. Unesco is to be congratulated on its insistence on the “Integral Study”, even if we do not see the importance of the latter in “the renewing of a dialogue between civilisations whose history, along these great arteries, can be traced back 2000 years.” As we already said, such a “dialogue” has never taken place. Rhetoric is one thing, research and the educational raising of historico-cultural consciousness is another. At a recent meeting (February 1988) at the S.O.A.S. (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) some fifty specialists discussed precisely this historico-cultural educational challenge: exhibitions, seminars, TV documentaries, and—above all—a *Historical Atlas of the Silk routes*. The writer of these lines can no longer be counted among the “young people”. But if one of the ideas mooted by the International Equestrian Federation and some youth organisations, to wit a horseback journey over part of the Steppe Route, will be realised, the writer would like to be permitted to participate.

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