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# The 'Silk Road': Historical Perspectives and Modern Constructions

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## Abstract

As it is frequently the case in the modern world, the term 'Silk Road' or 'Silk Roads' is of colonial provenance. The elaborate network of ancient routes originating in the fourth millennium BC and linking various parts of the Eurasian landmass through Central Asia was re-imagined and reinvented in the late nineteenth century as a 'Silk Road' connecting China with the Roman Empire, thereby undermining the role of the steppe with its various nomadic and oasis cultures which had always been at the heart of this Eurasian system of trade and other exchange. Ever since, historiography has focussed on the role of sedentary civilisations in this system of exchange, with a particular emphasis on China and the West, thus undermining the role of other sedentary civilisations such as India. Contrary to the dominant narrative, the antiquity of the Eurasian trade network goes back to several millennia before the rise of either the Han Empire or Rome. Whereas this network did connect the agrarian civilisations, this happened primarily through the agency of central Asian intermediaries whose culmination is represented by the rise of the vast Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century. The idea of the 'Silk Road(s)' is thus anachronistic in the sense that it is a backward projection of present into the historical past, especially in view of the fact that silk was only one among several important items of exchange, such as horses, cotton, precious stones, and furs.

## Keywords

Silk Road, Central Asia, Eurasian network, trade, Nomads, India, China, Roman Empire

## I

Like so much else in the modern world, the dominant historical narrative of the 'Silk Road' originating in the late-nineteenth century—a period when, owing to its historically unprecedented success in colonising the bulk of the non-Western world, the West was at the apogee of its power and hegemony and had the intellectual resources and autonomy to redefine and reinvent not only the present but also the past in terms that were in sync with its idea of its own place in the history of the world—is a narrative that rests on a number of underlying assumptions, presumptions, and certitudes which have as much

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obfuscated and obscured as they have explicated and illuminated our understanding of the history of Eurasia over the last several millennia.[2] Notwithstanding the fact of important scholarly contributions seeking to question at least some of its defining features, the Silk Road narrative has been tenacious enough to continue its journey to our own times without undergoing any fundamental change over the last several decades, and has perhaps become even more powerful and resistant to careful historical enquiry because of its enthusiastic embrace by the world of commerce, journalism, and international politics. In the last few years, China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) project, which derives its legitimacy from the 'Silk Road' narrative, has contributed enormously to its resurgence.

The narrative rests on some basic premises, such as: the Silk Road, covering a distance of more than 10,000 km, came into existence after being 'opened' in the second century BC under the great Han emperor Wudi;[3] it connected China with the Roman Empire, the 'East' with the 'West', from that time onwards; China and the Roman Empire were only the terminal points of this road which in effect connected all the great sedentary civilisations of Eurasia, namely, China, India, Persia, the Roman Empire, and, later, Europe;[4] it involved organised trade promoted and protected by the great sedentary empires which arose in the above-mentioned regions from time to time; silk, especially that produced in China, was the most important commodity traded on this route;[5] and after one last gush of activity on this route during the period of the Mongol Empire, the rise of European maritime trade with Asia from the turn of the fifteenth century virtually put an end to trade along the Silk Road, thus closing the fate of what was supposedly the most important land route in the history of the pre-modern world.[6]

## II

This article seeks to argue that most of these premises rest on rather shaky grounds both in terms of evidence and method. The origins of this Eurasian network of routes

[2] Tamra Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877", *Critical Inquiry*, 40, No. 1 (Autumn 2013): 194–219, (The University of Chicago Press).

[3] Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road* (John Murray, 1980), 14–17.

[4] Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11. The Silk Road was a system of commercial routes, on both land and sea, that linked various peoples from China to the Mediterranean. New communities of traders settled along these routes to meet the demand for luxury goods at either end of this route system. The merchants often organised themselves into caravans—trading teams that carried goods on pack animals or carts. To host the caravans, beginning around the early first century BCE during the reign of the Han emperor Wudi, caravan cities started to form along the trunk routes of the Silk Road. Since the Han court took great interest in the goods coming from the west, guaranteeing their safety was high on the agenda of this powerful emperor.

[5] The more enthusiastic proponents of this view often make sweeping assertions without much evidence. For example, this is what J. Thorley has to say: 'Ezekiel seems to have been familiar with silk, and Isaiah may have heard of the Chinese. By 15 B.C. we are on firmer ground, for in that year Mithridates II of Parthia made an alliance with Wudi, the great Han emperor of China, designed at least in part to facilitate commerce between the two powers, who were for the first time within direct commercial reach of one another. Half-way through the following century Julius Caesar possessed silk curtains'. J. Thorley, "The Silk Trade Between China and the Roman Empire at Its Height, 'Circa' A. D. 90–130", *Greece & Rome, Second Series* 18, no. 1 (April, 1971): 71–80.

[6] James A. Millward, *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 110–14.

lie in a much earlier period than is usually acknowledged; tracing its beginnings to the initiatives of either a Han Emperor in the second century BC or the Roman Empire later is an outcome that flows mainly from the entrenched assumptions about the relative roles of sedentary versus nomadic cultures in the history of the Eurasian continent.[7] Whereas the rise of the great sedentary empires such as the Achaemenid, Mauryan, Han, Parthian, and the Roman certainly provided a major impetus to trade and other forms of exchange across the Eurasian continent, their disintegration from time to time did not lead to the demise of Eurasian trade networks, partly because this trade was primarily a private enterprise and not a state-sponsored one and could, therefore, continue as long as the basic order and protection was available along the routes, and partly because it entailed a considerable amount of exchange within Central Asia.[8] An enduring trend in historiography to accord primacy to the role of large sedentary empires in the economic history of the world as a whole, and not just in that of trade, undermines the equally important role of smaller states as well as that of stateless groups.[9]

What is described as the Silk Road or Roads was in reality the entire network of land routes connecting various parts of Eurasia with its core in Central or Inner Asia.[10] Whereas the great sedentary civilisations of the pre-modern world were indeed connected with one another through this intricate network of land routes passing through Central Asia—just as they often were through the maritime routes from a very early period—it is the various nomadic and oasis peoples of Central Asia, and not the sedentary civilisations themselves, who played the critical role in building those connections

[7] Luc Kwanten, *Imperial Nomads: A History of Central Asia, 500–1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979). This is one of those books which seek to underline the historical significance of Central Asia. It asserts that conventional historiography ignores 'the fact that Central Asia had a tradition of its own and that, as in other areas of the world, economic, social, and political developments were closely interwoven' (p. xiv).

[8] David Christian, "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History", *Journal of World History* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 1–26; Yale H. Ferguson and Richard W. Mansbach, *Globalization: The Return of Borders to a Borderless World?* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 44.

[9] For an account that asserts the centrality of Central Eurasia to world history, see Christopher I Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[10] According to James A. Millward, 'The narrow conception of the silk road as an east–west route between China and Rome likewise obscures the fact that there was not one "road" but rather a skein of routes linking many entrepôts. Historians think of the silk road more as a network than as a linear route; to map it by simply drawing a couple of horizontal lines across the center of Eurasia and the Indian Ocean, as textbooks tend todo, gives a false impression.' Millward, *The Silk Road*, 21. According to Maria Snyder:

> "In point of fact, the web of ancient routes that make up this "road" more resembles the Paris Metro than any east-west highway. A complete history of all these trade routes would encompass the last three thousand years in every kingdom between the western China/Iran and Mongolia/India routes." The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia by Frances Wood Review by: Maria Snyder, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 623–24.

Another scholar says: 'The Silk Road is not a clearly defined area, but rather convenient shorthand for the diverse land and sea trade routes that formed an extensive network covering most of Eurasia and parts of Africa. Silk in the form of both yarn and finished textiles was always instrumental in the development of this trade network, but there were other important goods as well, such as horses, incenses, spices, and later tea'. Warner A. Belanger, "The Silk Road in World History by Xinru Liu", Book Review, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70, no. 4 (November 2011): 1156–57.

and keeping them alive for trade and other forms of exchange over the millennia.[11] Moreover, connecting the sedentary civilisations with one another was by no means the only function of this network of routes, since a large part of the exchange was either between the nomadic peoples and one of those civilisations or, less frequently, between the nomadic and oasis cultures of Central Asia. The ecologically complementary nature of the exchange wherein the quintessential products of the nomadic lands were exchanged for those of sedentary civilisations provides ample corroboration of this long-term trend, even as it helps explain the longevity of this network and the critical role played by the various peoples of Central Asia in its working throughout the long course of its history, for without this complementarity the nomadic and oasis cultures could not even have effectively participated in this system of exchange, let alone dominating it for so long.[12]

Before the coinage in 1877 of the term 'Silk Road(s)' at the hands of the German traveller and geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, this network had never been described in terms of a road or route from China to the Mediterranean, nor was silk ever seen to be the dominant commodity of trade along it.[13] It was thus clearly an anachronism aimed at a reconstruction of the past so as to put the West at the centre of world history and to establish that all roads led to the West. The Silk Road narrative thus suffers from what could appropriately be described as a congenital defect in the sense of its being retrospectively conceived as some sort of pre-modern highway linking the East with the West. There is too much emphasis here on the existence and significance of links between the West and the rest, so to speak, giving the unavoidable impression that it was these linkages which provided the critical force in the history of the world as a whole as well as in the economic history. It is pointed out here that the elaborate network of routes linking the different regions of Eurasia was multi-centred and was oriented as much north–south as east–west, so there is little reason to see its *raison d'être* in terms of the Roman Empire or Europe, just as it is unwarranted to see its primary role in history as that of connecting the sedentary civilisations with one another.

We mentioned earlier how much of the historiography on the subject tends to see the Central Asian network purely from the perspective of sedentary civilisations. One of the results of this lacuna is that trade and other forms of exchange between the far-flung regions of the steppe and the agrarian zone is not accorded the importance it deserves.[14] This system of exchange 'predated the more familiar "trans-civilizational" exchanges

[11] See, René Grousset, *L'Empire des Steppes: Attila, Gengis-khan, Tamerlan* (Paris: Payot, 1938). And, Luc Kwanten, *Imperial Nomads: A History of Central Asia, 500–1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979).

[12] Highlighting the importance of this trans-ecological exchange, Philip D. Curtin asserts that 'goods normally pass across the ecological divide with greater intensity than they do in more homogeneous environments'. Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 16.

[13] Frances Wood, *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2002), 9.

[14] Christian, "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads?", 33. As he puts it: 'Focusing on the trans-ecological branches of the Silk Roads suggests the need for a revised account of the Silk Roads history. It suggests, first, that Silk Roads originated deep in pre-history. Second, it suggests a different account of their functioning in the classical era. Third, it helps explain the changing geography of the Silk Roads during the second millennium of the modern era'. *Ibid*.

and was equally integral to the functioning of the entire system'.[15] The consequence of this perspective is that the great antiquity of the network is undermined and its origins are traced to the rise of large sedentary empires, since trade between the sedentary civilisations is thought to have started only after the rise of those empires in the middle to the late first millennium BC.

Among the biggest reasons for disproportionate emphasis on the exchanges between the sedentary civilisations is that most of the available literary sources on the subject are from China, India, Persia, and the Roman Empire. Moreover, the earliest of these sources are from the late first millennium BC when many great sedentary empires came into existence. The trans-civilisational trade and other forms of exchange had four major periods of activity: the late first millennium BC, the early centuries of the Common Era, the sixth–eighth century, and the Mongol period of the thirteenth–fourteenth century.[16] The fact that the conventional historiography of the Silk Road usually traces its origins to the first of those periods is a clear reflection of its sedentary predilection, in as much as 'rivalry between the steppe and the sown, between nomads and sedentary farmers, may well be one of the oldest conflicts of modern civilization'.[17] Thus, it is a history of trade between sedentary civilisations, and Inner Asia was just an incidental presence necessitated by the fact that the 'Silk Road' passed through it. In reality, however, 'One phenomenon, which unites the history of the Middle East, Europe, South and East Asia is the role of nomadic peoples from the Eurasian Steppe in the affairs of the sedentary peoples in the surrounding countries'.[18]

## III

The origins of the land routes of Central Asia go back to pre-history. By the beginning of the third millennium BC, the grasslands of Central Asia were occupied by pastoralists constantly on the move, which facilitated exchange among them. According to David Christian, 'the emergence of mobile pastoralist lifeways should probably be regarded as the real explanation for the origin of the trans-Eurasian network of exchanges that the Silk Roads came to symbolize'.[19]

The mobility of the steppe pastoralists was considerably enhanced by their use of horses from an early period. Thus, evidence shows that in some parts of Inner Asia, the practice of horse riding goes back to around 4000 BC.[20] It was part of what Andrew Sheratt has described as secondary products revolution,[21] and gave impetus to the

[15] Christian, "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads?", 1.

[16] *Ibid*., 36.

[17] Denis Sinor, *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

[18] Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran, eds., *Mongols, Turks and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2005).

[19] Christian, "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads?", 10.

[20] *Ibid*.

[21] A. Sherratt, "Plough and Pastoralism: Aspects of the Secondary Products Revolution," in *Patterns of the Past,* I. Hodder, G. Isaac, and N. Hammond, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 261–305.

exchange of items like hides, livestock, and wool with the agrarian communities on the frontiers of Central Asia, which shows that 'significant trans-Eurasian exchanges of goods, cultures and ideas precede the conventional date for the origins of the Silk Roads by at least two millennia' and that 'these exchanges took place almost entirely through the mediation of pastoralist communities living in the inner Eurasian Steppes'.[22]

There is evidence to show that the metal-producing areas of the Caucuses used to exchange goods with neighbouring pastoralists as early as the Bronze Age.[23] In the third millennium BC, the Mesopotamian civilisation had trade links with Central Asia.[24] The Harappan civilisation also had a flourishing trade with parts of Central Asia, at least in its mature phase (2500–1900 BC);[25] lapis lazuli and turquoise were the two principal items procured by the Harappans from there. There is evidence to show, too, that China had trade links with the Tarim Basin in the second millennium BC,[26] and that it used to receive substantial quantities of jade from what later came to be known as Khotan and Yarkand, particularly during the Zhou period.[27] Indeed, the earliest finding of Chinese silk from outside China is from Sapalli in Bactria.[28] Therefore, 'it seems reasonable to conclude that by 2000 BCE the network of exchanges we know as the "Silk Roads" was already functioning as a system of vigorous and widespread exchange within and sometimes beyond the Inner Asian steppes'.[29]

Interestingly, under the Xiongnu Empire of the steppe, the great rival of the Han, trade within Central Asia as also that with China had become a regular affair in the second century BC.[30] The Noinula tombs from Northern Mongolia, going back to the first century BC, have thrown up objects such as 'wool fabrics, tapestries, and embroideries brought to north Mongolia from Sogdiana, Greek Bactria, and Syria. From the Han Empire to the South, a huge quantity of various kinds of silk cloth, embroideries, quilted silk and lacquer-ware and Bronze jewellery came to the Hun headquarters'.[31]

[22] *Ibid*; According to Franck and Brownstone: 'at a very early time nomads were bringing to the cities copper tin and turquoise from Iran, gold from the Altai Mountains of Mongolia, lapis lazuli and rubies from Afghanistan, furs from Siberia, incense from Arabia, cottons from India, and their own products like wool, hides, and livestock. In the Process, they carved out the main routes across Asia, among them the Silk Road'. Irene M. Franck and David M. Brownstone, *The Silk Road: A History* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1986), 39.

[23] E. N. Chernykh, *Ancient Metallurgy in the USSR: The Early Metal Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 159.

[24] T. F. Potts, "Patterns of Trade in Third-Millennium BC Mesopotamia and Iran", *World Archaeology* (Ancient Trade: New Perspectives) 24, no. 3 (February 1993), 379.

[25] Ferguson and Mansbach, *Globalization: The Return of Borders to a Borderless World?* 44.

[26] Franck and Brownstone, *The Silk Road: A History*, 39–45.

[27] E. E. Kuzmina, "The Prehistory of the Silk Road", in *Encounters with Asia Series*, Victor H. Mair, ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 4.

[28] Christian, "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads?" 13.

[29] *Ibid*., 14.

[30] John Coatsworth, Juan Cole and Michael P. Hanaganet, et al., *Global Connections: Politics, Exchange, and Social Life in World History*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 139.

[31] Evgeny Lubo-Lesnichenko, "The Huns," in *Nomads of Eurasia*, V. N. Basilov, ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), 47; and see E. D. Phillips, *The Royal Hordes: Nomad Peoples of the Steppes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 114–20.

All this clearly shows that 'it was not Han Wudi who launched a new phase of the Silk Roads history toward the end of the first millennium, but rather the pastoralist Xiongnu, under their first great leader, Shan-yu-Maodun'.[32]

Despite all this evidence, the Silk Road narrative ascribes the beginnings of this network to the efforts of the great Han emperor Wudi, who sent an expedition led by Zhang Qian to Central Asia in order to collect information and to forge an alliance with the Yuezhi against the Xiongnu.[33] A large number of scholars continue to adhere to this line of argument merely on the basis of Zhang Qian's journey. Now, Zhang Qian's was definitely a pioneering endeavour so far as the Han imperial policy is concerned. With the emergence of the Han Empire in the second century BC, the core of the Chinese territorial expanse had, for the first time, come under a unified system of governance and administration.[34] Whereas the earlier Chinese dynasties had faced threats from the nomads of Central Asia and had been compelled to adopt various approaches to deal with that threat, the advent of the Hans represents a watershed in the evolution of Chinese imperial policy towards Inner Asia, both because the borders of the Empire on the northern and north-western sides had reached the zone that gradually separated the sedentary China with the nomadic steppe, thereby necessitating a more vigorous defence strategy and measures, and also because of the emergence of the large Xiongnu Empire based in Mongolia and extending to much larger parts of eastern Central Asia.[35] Essentially on a military and diplomatic fact-finding mission, Zhang Qian reached as far as Bactria in northern Afghanistan, where he noticed the presence of goods like a specific kind of bamboo and cloth from the Shu region of south-west China.[36] These goods had reportedly reached there from India, and no one was even aware of their Chinese origin.[37] Apparently, they had reached India from Yunnan—which, incidentally, was not a part of the Han Empire—via Burma, which evidently shows that land-based trade network was already in place in the second century BC, and thus puts a question mark against the prevailing notions about the emergence of the Silk Road. Later, on Zhang's advice, the Emperor sent an expedition to explore this route, but it failed to secure the passage because the people of Yunnan saw it as an intrusion without any benefit for themselves.[38] Meanwhile, Zhang had failed to forge a Chinese alliance

[32] Christian, "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads?" 17.

[33] For example, Xinru Liu says: 'There followed the Han government's active sponsorship of the silk trade with the West and the opening of the Silk Roads. During the following decades and centuries there was considerable change in the frequency of the caravans and the volume of trade carried; but important principles had been established, and experience had shown the Han Chinese that a foreign market existed for their products'. 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): 177.

[34] Yingshi Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1967), 9.

[35] See Nicola di Cosmo, "Han Frontiers: Toward an Integrated View", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129, no. 2 (April–June 2009): 199–214.

[36] Liu, *The Silk Road in World History*, 8.

[37] *Ibid.*

[38] *Ibid*., 8–9.

with the Yuezhi against their common enemy, the Ziongnu, as the Yuezhi had comfortably settled in this new area and had no desire to resume their fight with the much stronger Xiongnu.

That the Han forays into Central Asia were motivated primarily by strategic considerations of a great empire of the ancient world and not by those of opening a route to that region, leave aside to the Mediterranean, is reflected in the excitement that Zhang Qian's reports of 'blood sweating horses' found in what is now Ferghana and descended from a heavenly breed.[39] Horses had been acquired by China from the steppe even in earlier periods, since, by the middle of the first millennium BC, the nomad cavalry from eastern Central Asia had become so major a threat to the pre-Han states in northern China as to require intensified focus on cavalry.[40] However, for the Han Empire pitted against the nomad warriors equipped with superior cavalry, ensuring a steady supply of good horses from their natural habitat of the Central Asian grasslands had become all the more important.[41] It is significant, however, that great as the Chinese need was for superior quality horses, the emperor sent a military expedition, and not a trade delegation, to acquire the 'heavenly horses'. The subsequent failure of this expedition to secure horses caused a rethink in the Han strategy and led to a restoration of the old system of exchange in which horses from Central Asia were traded for Chinese goods. The attempt to acquire horses through force was obviously prompted by the desire to alter the terms of trade between the steppe and the sedentary world by taking away the principal advantage of the nomads *vis-à-vis* the agrarian civilisations. As we know, horses would remain crucial to the Eurasian system of exchange, as 'Central Eurasian tribal people's comparative advantage in rearing and riding horses ensured their military superiority over settled agrarian societies of the Eurasian rim until as late as the eighteenth century in some places'.[42] In fact, 'China's relationship with northern steppe peoples and the silk road centered on the horse as much as on silk'.[43]

In addition to its genesis in the neglect of the evidence for earlier trade between the steppe and the sedentary zones, the tendency to attribute the beginnings of the Inner Asian trade network to the Han initiatives arises from the fact that the earliest Chinese records about it are from this period, as also from the fact that the strategic responses of a large sedentary empire are projected as commercial endeavours in retrospect. As Raschke has put it quite appropriately:

> neither far-sighted governmental planning nor aggressive mercantile capitalism was responsible for the development of the silk trade. It was the evolution of steppe nomadism and the resulting social and political consequences which created a demand for Chinese goods

[39] Millward, *The Silk Road*, 45; Richard L. Smith, *Premodern Trade in World History* (London: Routledge, 2009), 132.

[40] Christian, "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads?", 15.

[41] For nomadic warfare, see N. di Cosmo, ed., *Warfare in Inner Asian History 500–1800* (Leiden: Brill 2002), especially his introduction (pp. 1–29).

[42] Millward, *The Silk Road*, 47.

[43] *Ibid*., 45.

> in Siberia and which initially brought Chinese garrisons to Eastern Turkestan, astride the roads to the West.[44]

Moreover, references in the Chinese sources to the West or Western regions are often taken to mean the West in the sense of the Roman Empire or Europe, even when it is entirely clear from their very context that these terms signify only the different regions of Central Asia or some adjoining lands.[45] It is evident that Central Asia had been connected with the sedentary zones of Eurasia much before the rise of the great empires of the ancient world. As Valerie Hansen has put it:

> These routes date back to the very origins of humankind. Anyone who could walk was capable of going overland through Central Asia. In distant prehistoric times, populations migrated along these paths. The earliest surviving evidence of trade goods moving across regions comes around 1200 BCE, when jade travelled from Khotan to Anyang in Henan province, where the Shang –dynasty kings were buried north of the Yellow River. Contact among the different societies bordering central Asia – China, India, Iran – continued through the first millennium BCE.[46]

## IV

Thus, the Eurasian trade network centred upon Inner Asia predates the rise of the great sedentary empires, though it certainly received major impetus from that rise. Closely related to this is the question of the relative roles of the nomadic and oasis peoples of Central Asia and that of the sedentary civilisations.[47] Just as the former played the dominant role till the second century BC, they continued to do so for almost two millennia more, that is, the time till that network remained in place.[48] By the first century CE, both the land-based and maritime trade networks in Asia were firmly in place, and the Kushan Empire emerging from Central Asia and the kingdom of Funan based in present-day Cambodia and Vietnam had played a key role in this process.[49] It should come as no surprise, then, that the period of the Kushan Empire, roughly the first two centuries of the first millennium, witnessed vigorous trade and other forms of exchange, both east–west and north–south, since this ancient empire built by one of the Yuezhi nomadic tribes arose from Inner Asia to eventually encompass large parts of the Indian subcontinent. In fact, it has been widely argued that in the history of ancient India, trade with the Roman Empire, Persia, as well as China achieved its peak

[44] Manfred G Raschke, "New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East", in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Romischen Welt, Geschichte und KulturRoms in der neuerenForschung, II Principat* [Rise and Fall of the Roman World: History and Culture of Rome in Recent Research, 2nd Principate], Hildegard Temporini, ed., Vol. 9, part 2 (Berlin: Gruyter, 1978), 604–1361.

[45] Khodadad Rezakhani, "The Road That Never Was: The Silk Road and Trans-Eurasian Exchange," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 3 (2010): 422.

[46] Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 236.

[47] Stephan Barisitz, *Central Asia and the Silk Road: Economic Rise and Decline over Several Millennia* (Vienna: Springer, 2017), 17.

[48] Barisitz, *Central Asia and the Silk Road*, 17.

[49] Tansen Sen, "The Intricacies of Premodern Asian Connections", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 4 (November 2010), 991–999: 992.

during this period.[50] The detailed accounts of Indo–Roman trade given in *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* pertain broadly to the Kushan period. Archaeological evidence in the form of numerous finds of Roman objects and coinage in the Kushan sites clearly supports the account of the Periplus. In the Gandhara region alone, four hoards of second-century Roman coins have been found.[51] At Ahin Posh Tope in Jalalabad, too, several Roman coins of the same period have been found.[52] The Begram Hoard is the largest Kushan find of luxury items brought from Rome, Central Asia, and China.[53]

By the time the Periplus was written by around AD 70, the Kushan Empire had reached close to Taxila; the port of Barbaricum on the mouth of the Indus was still in the possession of the Scythians, but the bulk of goods traded from there travelled through the Kushan dominions.[54] Turquoise, lapis lazuli, silk, and furs brought from Central Asia were exchanged at Barbaricum for goods brought from the Roman Empire. According to Dio Cassius records, Emperor Trajan received embassies 'from the Indians', which in all likelihood were from the Kushans.[55] It has even been suggested that the Romans and the Kushans may have had some kind of alliance against the Parthians,[56] and that Emperor Trajan may have had the desire to meet Kushan Emperor Vima Kadphises, when on seeing India-bound ships in the Persian Gulf he expressed regret at not being able to visit India because of old age.[57]

[50] Buddha Rashmi Mani, *The Kushan Civilization: Studies in Urban Development and National Culture* (Delhi: BR Publishing Corporation, 1987), 195.

[51] Rafi us Samad, *The Grandeur of Gandhara: The Ancient Buddhist Civilization of the Swat, Peshawar, Kabul and Indus Valleys* (New York: Algora Publishers, 2011), 270. About a hundred Roman coins have been found from various regions in Gandhara. *Ibid*.

[52] Paula J Turner, *Roman Coins from India*. University College London Institute of Archaeology Publications, Vol. 21, Occasional Publication, no. 12, p. 46.

[53] Michelle Ying and Ling Huang, eds., *Beyond Boundaries: East and West Cross-cultural Encounters* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011–2012), 16.

[54] Sinor, *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, 173.

[55] 'For a great many embassies came to him, and the people of India, who had already made overtures, now made a treaty of friendship, sending among other gifts tigers, which were then for the first time seen by the Romans, as also, I think by the Greeks. They also gave him a boy who had no shoulders or arms, like our statues of Hermes. And yet, defective as he was, he could use his feet for everything, as if they were hands: with them he would stretch a bow, shoot missiles, and put a trumpet to his lips. How he did this I do not know; I merely state what is recorded. One of the Indians, Zarmarus, for some reason wished to die,—either because, being of the caste of sages, he was on this account moved by ambition, or, in accordance with the traditional custom of the Indians, because of old age, or because he wished to make a display for the benefit of Augustus and the Athenians (for Augustus had reached Athens);— he was therefore initiated into the mysteries of the two goddesses, which were held out of season on account, they say, of Augustus, who also was an initiate, and he then threw himself alive into the fire'. Cassius Dio, *Roman History*. Loeb Classical Library Edition, Vol. VI (1917): 307.

[56] J. Thorley, "The Roman Empire and the Kushans", *Greece & Rome, Second Series* 26, no. 2 (October. 1979): 181–90.

[57] *Ibid*., 189; the actual statement of Dio Cassius is: 'Then he came to the ocean itself, and when he had learned its nature and had seen a ship sailing to India, he said: "I should certainly have crossed over to the Indi, too, if I were still young." For he began to think about the Indi and was curious about their affairs, and he counted Alexander a lucky man'. Cassius Dio, *Roman History.* Loeb Classical Library Edition, Vol. VIII (1925): 417.

## V

Within this larger 'East–West' narrative, trade between the Roman Empire and the Han Empire or later between the Byzantine Empire and the Tang Empire, and still later between Europe and China has been projected as the principal function and guiding force of the Silk Road. It is argued here that, in the first place, the bulk of the trade along these land routes was localised in nature, that the evidence for direct trade links between the Roman Empire and Han China is almost non-existent, and that it remains highly insufficient till the emergence in the thirteenth century of the vast Mongol Empire, which for the first time brought the far-flung parts of Eurasia under a broadly common political and economic architecture.[58] It is obviously not a coincidence that we have a Marco Polo only in the thirteenth century, because in earlier periods, making such a long journey through the land routes of the continent either for trade and commerce or for other purposes would have been a nearly impossible proposition. Indeed, of the goods that did reach the West from China or vice versa in the early centuries of the first millennium, the bulk did so via India and not through the Silk Road.[59] Therefore, the imagery invoked by the Silk Road of long and tortuous caravans of camels laden with goods travelling all the way from Mongolia to the shores of the Mediterranean is decidedly a romanticised version of continental trade in the pre-modern world.[60] As Raschke says:

> Long caravans of camel burdened with silk lumbering through the desert, ships laden deep with spices and jewels running before the North-East monsoon, Western merchants exchanging bags of gold and silver coins with Chinese and Indian traders for exotic and precious luxuries of the Orient in remote markets at the edge of the known world: all pictures which induce a poetic rather than a critical turn of mind. The study of Rome's trade with the East appears in modern works of synthesis as a curious and unnatural combination of fantasy and statistics, romance and economic theory. Much is asserted, little is proven.[61]

As said earlier, the Silk Road passing through Central Asia is seen to have connected China with the Roman Empire, and much has been written about trade between the two.[62] From the available evidence, however, it is evident that these great sedentary

[58] David F. Graf, "The Silk Road Between Syria and China", in *Trade, Commerce, and the State in the Roman World*, Andrew Wilson and Alan Bowman, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 447.

[59] Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire* (London: Routledge, 2016), 154.

[60] Even a popular version of the Silk Road narrative, such as *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction*, is aware of the contradictions involved when under a subhead 'neither silk nor road', it says: 'Traditionally, the term "silk road" is used to refer to a road, or roads, between East Asia and the Mediterranean, and spanning the centre of the Eurasian continent, a region now known variously as Central Eurasia, Central Asia, Inner Asia, Transoxiana, and sometimes as the 'stans (Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan). We imagine strings of laden camels labouring over that road across grasslands, deserts, and mountain passes, stopping at oasis cities where bazaars overflow with silks and spices. Despite these vivid images, however, it is far from clear exactly what, or where, that "silk road" was'. Millward, *The Silk Road*, 20.

[61] Raschke, "New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East", 605.

[62] Thorley, "The Silk Trade between China and the Roman Empire at Its Height", 71–80. Cf., most recently, M. Loewe, "The Former Han Dynasty", in *The Cambridge History of China I*, D. Twitchett and M. Loewe, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 103–222: 165–68.

civilisations of the ancient world had only the vaguest idea about each other at this juncture. On the Chinese side, the mention of Li Kan is commonly construed to refer to the Selucid Empire, the descriptions of a large state called Daqin from the Hou-Han (the later Han) period in works like Hou-Han-shu, Hou-Han-chi, Wei-lieh (in the San-kuo-Chih), Chin-shu and Wei-shu (and Pei-shih) for the Roman Empire, and the later mention of Fu-lin is taken for the Byzantine Empire.[63] Hou-Han shou is, however, a work compiled in the fifth century, long after the demise of the Han Empire; in the considered opinion of many scholars, therefore, its testimony for a much earlier period is not reliable.[64] Similar objections are raised about other works mentioned above. Whatever the reliability of these sources might be, it is clear that the Chinese did not possess any direct knowledge of the Selucid or the Roman Empire, nor were there any direct contacts between the two regions. In AD 97, Gan Ying was sent out by General Ban Chao reportedly on an embassy to Daqin, but he could reach only as far as Mesopotamia, before turning towards the Persian Gulf, where he was told by the Parthians that further journey westward was a long and hazardous sea journey. It is claimed by many that the Parthians deliberately misled Gan Ying to maintain their position of intermediaries between China and the Roman Empire. The only other evidence cited for any direct trade relations between the two powers during this period is the recorded visit in AD 166–67 by an envoy who claimed to have been sent by Anton, who is thought to be either Antoninus Pius or Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.[65] 'The Da Qin emissary presented ivory and rhinoceros horn, typical products of Southeast Asia'.[66] It is generally believed that 'this envoy was an imposter who claimed to be from a distant, barely known place in order to receive permission to trade'.[67]

The Roman Empire, too, had a very vague knowledge of China. Indeed, even the geography of Central Asia, through which the Silk Road is supposed to have passed, was not at all clear to the Romans. Written in the first century AD, Pliny's *Natural History* shows very little understanding of the geography of Central Asia, leave aside that of China, even though an entire volume of this monumental work of the antiquity is dedicated to Asia.[68]

Similarly, Ptolemy's *Geography* written in the second century is only marginally better than Pliny's *Natural History*, insofar as the geography of Central Asia or China is concerned. The extinct work of Marinus of Tyre, heavily drawn upon by Ptolemy, mentions the Stone Tower somewhere in Bactria on the basis of the accounts of a Macedonian merchant Maës Titianus, who is supposed to have been stationed there in

[63] D. D. Leslie and K. J. H. Gardiner, "All Roads Lead to Rome: Chinese Knowledge of the Roman Empire," *Journal of Asian History* 29, no. 1 (1995): 61–81.

[64] For example, see Raschke, "New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East", 604–1233.

[65] Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 18.

[66] *Ibid*.

[67] *Ibid*.

[68] Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History of Pliny,* translated by John Bostock and H. T. Riley, Vol. VI (London: George Bell and Sons, 1893), 35, 59–62, 107, 117 132; 208, 465, 466. In fact, it is possible that Pliny confused India with Seres, since he mentions the latter as producing the best kind of iron—a product that India was widely known to excel in: 'But of all the different kinds of iron, the palm of excellence is awarded to that which is made by the Seres, who send it to us with their tissues and skins; next to which, in quality, is the Parthian iron'. *Ibid*., 208.

order to carry out trade with China.[69] However, those very accounts mention that the land of the Seres (silk people, which is taken to mean China) did not even begin in this region, and that the Sera metropolis was much farther away, requiring a seven-month-long journey.[70] Thus, Ptolemy fails to locate the 'land of the Seres'.

It has been appropriately said by Duncan Campbell that 'As far as the Roman geographers were concerned, China (or, at any rate, the land of the Silk people) remained *terra incognita* well into the second century (and beyond)'.[71] Even Xinru Liu, a strong proponent of the Silk Road narrative, does concede that the Romans did not have any clear understanding about the location of China, 'because traders did not need to travel very far east to purchase silks and other luxuries', and the 'Roman traders made their purchases at depots near the eastern side of the Mediterranean'.[72] However, she then paradoxically goes on to assert that 'traders of various Asian nationalities travelled the silk routes to caravan cities near the Mediterranean to supply these Roman depots with such things as silks from China and spices from India'.[73] Elsewhere, she asserts that 'in territories controlled by the Roman Empire, the bulk of goods arriving from the East came via Central Asia'.[74]

*In the Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus,* it is mentioned that in the town of Batnae, 'a great crowd of every condition gathers for the fair, to traffic in the wares sent from India and China (Seres), and in other articles that are regularly brought there in great abundance by land and sea'.[75] *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* from the first century AD mentions Thina, which is taken to mean China, not as a vast country but as 'a very great inland city' and adds that 'It is not easy to get to this Thina; for rarely do people come from it and only a few'.[76] The location of this inland city indicated by the

[69] Jeffrey D. Lerner, "Ptolemy and the Silk Road: from Baktra Basileion to Sera Metropolis," *East and West* 48, no. ½ (June 1998): 9–25.

[70] Duncan B. Campbell, "A Chinese Puzzle for the Romans," *Historia: ZeitschriftfürAlte Geschichte*, Bd. 38, H. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1989), 372.

[71] *Ibid*., 373.

[72] Liu, *The Silk Road in World History*, 20.

[73] *Ibid*.

[74] *Ibid*, 41.

[75] Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: Bohn's Classical Library, 1911), Book XIV, p. 11. The passage reads: 'There is a town in Anthemusia called Batnae, built by the ancient Macedonians, a short distance from the river Euphrates, thickly peopled by wealthy merchants. To this city, about the beginning of the month of September, a great multitude of all ranks throng to a fair, in order to buy the wares which the Indians and Chinese send thither, and many other articles which are usually brought to this fair by land and sea'. *Ibid*; Hannah M. Cotton and Guy M. Rogers, eds., *Rome, the Greek World, and the East: Volume 3: The Greek World, the Jews, and the East* (Fergus Millar Papers) (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[76] Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei: Text with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 91. The full statement in the Periplus reads as: 'Beyond this region, by now at the northernmost point, where the sea ends somewhere at the outer fringe, there is a very great inland city called Thina from which silk floss, yarn and cloth are shipped by land via Bactria to Barygaza and via the Ganges river back to the Limyrike. It is not easy to get to this Thina; for rarely do people come from it and only a few. The area lies right under Ursa Minor, and, it is said, is contiguous with the parts of the Pontus and the Caspian Sea where these parts turn off, near where Lake Macotis, which lies parallel, along with {sc. The Caspian} empties into the ocean'. *Ibid*.

author of the Periplus suggests some city in Central Asia, and not any place in China.[77] Goods, including silk, travelled from this Central Asian city southwards into the Indian subcontinent to Barbaricum and Barygaza.[78]

The ancient city of Palmyra is often claimed to have been the main Roman *entrepôt* for the caravan trade along the Silk Road from China to the Roman Empire. Yet, there is no evidence to show any direct land route between Palmyra and China. As Gawlikowski has put it:

> There is strictly nothing to suggest that the Palmyrenes were interested in the land route through Iran and Central Asia, the celebrated Silk Road. They headed instead to the Gulf to take delivery of sea-borne Far-Eastern goods. Some even risked themselves at sea, going in their own ships to the country then called Scythia, i.e. the Saka kingdoms in North-West India channelling trade from India and China.

Thus, goods travelled from Palmyra to the Persian Gulf and from there to Scythia (north-western part of the Indian subcontinent). Fergus Millar has argued that 'there is no real evidence of an established Ancient 'Silk Road' running across Iran to western China', and then expressed astonishment at the fact that 'The idea that the 'Silk Road' existed in the Classical period is extraordinarily persistent'.[79]

The Greek classical work, the *Parthian Stations of Isidorus of Charax*, is mistakenly taken to be referring to Roman trade with Central Asia when it actually refers to the route through Parthia to Alexandrapolis in Arachosia (Kandhar), which was at the borders of India and the Parthian Empire.[80] William H. Schoff, the translator and commentator of this work, says:

> The Parthian Stations of Isidore of Charax, fragmentary as it is, is one of the very few records of the overland trade-route in the period of struggle between Parthia and Rome. As the title indicates, it gives an itinerary of the caravan trail from Antioch to the borders of India, naming the supply stations, or, as they would now be called, the caravanserais maintained by the Parthian Government for the convenience of merchants. While the record contains little more than the names of the stations and the intervening distances, an examination of the route followed leads to numerous inferences concerning the relations of the Parthian monarchy with its subject states and with neighboring foreign powers.[81]

[77] *Ibid*.

[78] *Ibid*.

[79] Fergus Millar, "Looking East from the Classical World: Colonialism, Culture, and Trade from Alexander the Great to Shapur I," *The International History Review* 20, no. 3 (September 1998): 507–31, 528.

[80] *Parthian Stations of Isidore of Charax: An Account of the Overland Trade Route Between the Levant and India in the First Century B.C.,* the Greek Text with a Translation and Commentary by Wilfred H. Schoff (Philadelphia: Commercial Museum, 1914). The reference to Arachosia and Alexandropolis occurs in the following statement: 'Beyond is Arachosia, 36 schoeni. And the Parthians call this White India; there are the city of Biyt and the city of Pharsana and the city of Chorochoad and the city of Demetrias; then Alexandropolis, the metropolis of Arachosia; it is Greek, and by it flows the river Arachotus. As far as this place the land is under the rule of the Parthians'. *Ibid*., 9.

[81] *Ibid*., 17.

About the value of this work in establishing the presence of Roman trade with China through Central Asia, Campbell has appropriately said that 'there is no sign here of the great silk caravans of popular belief, plying their trade across the deserts of Iran and Turkestan'.[82] Similarly, Millar asserts:

> a traveler who continued on his journey would have arrived, as the subtitle of the English edition implies, in India, or rather modern Pakistan, not at the borders of China, which lie more than 1,000 kilometres north-east of Kandahar, beyond the Hindu Kush and the Pamirs.[83]

He then goes on to conclude 'the historical existence of an established "Silk Road" in the centuries between Alexander and Shapur I remains an open question'.[84]

## VI

The archaeological evidence of a 'Silk Road' connecting China and the Roman Empire is particularly weak; only a few stray findings of silk are available from some sites, and it is not even clear that silk thus found is of authentic Chinese variety, for '…most of the beautiful silks found in Europe that are labelled "Chinese" were actually woven into the Byzantine Empire (476–1453 CE). One scholar who examined a thousand examples dating between the seventh and thirteenth century found only one made in China'.[85] Similarly, Iran had also become a large producer of silk quite early; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Iran had a large silk trade with Europe encouraged by the state, especially under Shah Abbas I.[86] It should be remembered that even in the ancient period, 'China was not the only manufacturer of silk in Pliny's day' and that 'the ancient Indians wove silk from the wild silk moth, a different species of silkworm than the one the Chinese had domesticated'.[87] Even if it is conceded that the silk fragments found at Palmyra, for instance, did originate in China, this would not lend much support to the idea of a 'Silk Road' passing through Central Asia and reaching all the way to China. All that it might suggest is that there was a gradual diffusion among the sedentary civilisations of their specialised products. According to Valerie Hansen, 'Had the trade between China and Rome been as significant as Pliny contended, some Roman coins would presumably have been found in China', and 'the earliest coins unearthed in China are from Byzantium, not Rome, and date to the 530s and 540s'.[88]

In any case, the volumes of silk received in the Roman Empire through India could not have been as large as they are often claimed to be. The statements of Pliny deploring the drain of bullion from Rome on account of trade with India and the East as a

[82] Campbell, "A Chinese Puzzle for the Romans," 372.

[83] Millar, "Looking East from the Classical World," 528.

[84] *Ibid*.

[85] Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 20.

[86] Linda K. Steinmann, "Shah Abbas and the Royal Silk Trade 1599–1629", *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)* 14, no. 1 (1987): 68–74.

[87] Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 19.

[88] *Ibid*, 20.

whole have been employed to the service of the 'Silk Road'. In Pliny's *Natural History,* there are two passages of this kind. The first passage talks about the maritime trade between Egypt and India, which according to Pliny caused a drain of 50 million sesterces to India.[89] The second passage refers to Roman trade, primarily in luxury items, with India, China, and the Arabian Peninsula resulting in the drain of 100 million sesterces.[90]

Quite apart from the fact that these figures have been disputed, there is the obvious inference that Chinese silk, which reached the Roman Empire through India, could have accounted for only a small part of this trade, and that it is primarily with India that this trade was carried out. There is, of course, ample evidence to establish this, since the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* gives a very detailed account in this regard. Hence, there is little justification in juxtaposing these figures with the historical narrative of the Silk Road.

Yet, so great has been the emphasis on Chinese–Roman trade and on silk in the ancient world that the considerable amount of trade between India and China in which the Indian cotton was usually exchanged for the Chinese silk has been largely ignored. In fact, in the context of India-China trade, there is as much justification for calling the trade network cotton roads as silk roads, for cotton was the principal item of export from India to China as well as to much of the rest of the world, a fact that is generally ignored in the Silk Road narrative.[91]

*The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* does, of course, mention the trade in silk from Bactria and the neighbouring parts of Central Asia to Barygaza and Barbaricum,[92] the two principal ports in western India during this period. Thus, whatever amount of silk originating in China might have reached the Roman Empire did so through India and not via the 'Silk Road'; 'the Romans did not know of the silk's Chinese origins'[93] because there was no direct contact between China and the Roman Empire.[94]As Duncan B. Campbell has put it, 'We may be fairly certain that western travelers seldom came within sight of China, far less her northern frontier'.[95] According to another scholar:

> 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 Yuezhi, but neither the Greco-Romans nor the Chinese were fully aware of the other's existence.[96]

[89] Millar, *Rome the Greek World and the East*, 280.

[90] *Ibid*.

[91] Stephen F. Dale, "Silk Road, Cotton Road or…. Indo-Chinese Trade in Pre-European Times" *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2009): 79–88; Richard M. Eaton, Munis D. Faruqui, David Gilmartin, and Sunil Kumar, eds., *Expanding Frontiers in South Asian and World History: Essays in Honour of John F. Richards* (Delhi: Cambridge University of Press, 2009), 79–88.

[92] Xinru Liu says: 'Thus the seafaring trade of the Roman Empire finally connected with the Central Asian Silk Road through the ports of Barygaza and Barbaricum'. Liu, *The Silk Road in World History*, 40.

[93] Liu, *The Silk Road in World History*, 34.

[94] *Ibid*.

[95] Campbell, "A Chinese Puzzle for the Romans," 373.

[96] Rezakhani, "The Road That Never Was," 420–33. Warwick Ball, *The Monuments of Afghanistan: History, Archaeology, and Architecture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 81.

Campbell laments the 'fascination amongst western scholars for linking the histories of imperial Rome and imperial China, despite the natural buffer which 2000 miles of Parthian dominions presented' and asserts that 'the complete absence of direct evidence has never been a deterrent'.[97]

The fascination continues for the post-Roman Empire period as well.[98] It is often argued that the rise of the Tang Empire in China in 618 AD and of the Abbasid Caliphate in 750 AD again gave a strong impetus to trade between along the Silk Road, from Eastern China to the Mediterranean. At its zenith, the Abbasid Caliphate included parts of Central Asia and engaged in military conflicts with the Tang, the most important being the battle of the Talas fought in 751 AD. With their boundaries so close to each other, it should be no surprise that some trade happened between the two empires. However, this trade rarely meant movement of goods from Eastern China to the Mediterranean, but was mainly a continuation of the Chinese exchange with Central Asia, which, as asserted earlier, existed for several millennia and had little to do with the rise of the 'Silk Road'. In any case, the bulk of the long-distance Eurasian trade during this time was being conducted along the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean in which traders from different parts of Eurasia participated, and not along the 'Silk Road'.[99] As earlier, India and Indian merchants continued to be a key player in this maritime trade as well.

## VII

It is argued here that as far as the structure of trade is concerned, it is erroneous to assume the predominance at any stage of silk as an item of exchange along what is described as the Silk Road.[100] Trade along these land routes of Eurasia had a dual complementary character, an ecological one between the steppes of Central Asia and the sedentary civilisations, on the one hand, and between those civilisations themselves, on the other, such that the important commodities and products of the steppe were exchanged for those of the agrarian zones, even as the specialised items of each of those zones were traded with the other. While the typical products of Central Asia like horses, furs, hides, and gems were traded for textiles, metals, gold, and silver of the sedentary civilisations, among the latter the exchange generally involved textiles, spices, jewellery, and glassware.[101]

[97] Campbell, "A Chinese Puzzle for the Romans," 371.

[98] See Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T'ang Exotics* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985); Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2010).

[99] Mark Edward Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty* (Massachusetts: Belknap press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

[100] Again, even James A. Millward agrees: 'In fact, there were many things traded and many ideas transmitted across Eurasia, some of which (the domesticated horse, cotton, paper, and gunpowder) had a far greater impact than silk. Moreover, long-distance exchanges continued after they no longer principally involved silk'. Millward, *The Silk Road*, 21.

[101] For a comprehensive account of glass trade, see Carol Meyer, *Glass from Quseir al Qadim and the Indian Ocean Trade.* Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

The Mongol Empire was able to provide impetus to trade and other forms of exchange on the land routes of Eurasia[102] mainly because that empire was simply the culmination of the long-prevalent conflictual yet complementary relationship between the steppe and the sedentary world, albeit heavily tilted in favour of the nomads.[103] The rise of the Mongols represents a historical tradition 'that began with the Hsiung-nu (Xiongnu) and culminated in the formation of the Mongol world empire',[104] since 'at least from the time of Xiongnu one can speak about an imperial nomadic worldview that saw the steppe as its center and distinguished itself from its sedentary neighbors'.[105] In the past, the nomads had often conquered parts of the sedentary world, but only the Kushans had succeeded in creating an empire which integrated large parts of Central Asia with the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent.[106] Equally significantly, their empire too had witnessed a significant increase in trade and other forms of exchange along the Eurasian network, especially between India and the Roman Empire.[107]

Just as the birth in the nineteenth century of the idea of 'Silk Road' linking the 'East' with the 'West' emanated from modern Western attempts to reconstruct the history of Eurasia along lines that were in consonance with the West's ideas of its own role in the history of the world, its purported demise at the hands of European maritime trade in the fifteenth century emanates from those very attempts.[108] It is doubtless not a mere coincidence that in both the birth and demise of the Silk Road, it is the Western agency which is claimed to have played the critical role.[109] Thus, the Silk Road supposedly came into existence in the second century BC as the crucial link from China to the soon-to-rise Roman Empire and faded into oblivion once Europe was able to build direct maritime links with India and China.

It is argued here that this narrative is fundamentally flawed. The land-based Eurasian trade network had faced stiff competition from maritime trade throughout the course of its history; it had not only survived but also flourished, partly because trade then, as now, needed both kinds of network.[110] Depending upon considerations about variation in distances, economies of scale, costs and benefits of the two modes of exchange,

[102] 'Relatively open trade across Asia was to happen for a third time with the establishment of the Mongol Empire over most of northern Asia after 1250the opportunity that made it possible for Europeans like Marco Polo to visit China freely for about a century afterward'. Christian, "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads?" 37.

[103] Highlighting the conflictual aspect of this relationship, Denis Sinor has said: 'In political conflicts humans oppose humans and the motives for action are multiple and difficult to define. Yet the complexity characteristic of such actions should not be allowed to obscure the basic nature of the opposition between Inner Asia on the one hand and any of the sedentary civilizations on the other'. Sinor, *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, 4.

[104] Kwanten, *Imperial Nomads: A History of Central Asia, 500–1500*, 287.

[105] Amitai and Biran, *Mongols, Turks and Others*, 6.

[106] Ball, *Rome in the East*, 155.

[107] Jacopo Maria Pepe, *Beyond Energy: Trade and Transport in a Reconnecting Eurasia* (Berlin: Springer, 2016), 89.

[108] Millward, *The Silk Road*, 110–14.

[109] 'With the fall of Constantinople in the mid-15th century, the Silk Road was decisively cut for a time. Though trans-Asian travel and trade would resume, the Silk Road would never recover'. Franck and Brownstone, *The Silk Road*, 4.

[110] Millward, *The Silk Road*, 110–14.

political differences between various states, military conflicts, etc., much of the trade had, in fact, involved both land and maritime routes at different stages, even if the volumes of long-distance trade along the land routes remained much smaller than those along maritime routes.[111] Given this long-term state of affairs, therefore, the advent of direct European maritime trade with Asia did not lead—and could not have led—to the demise of land-based trade, unless it is assumed that either the entire Eurasian trade or at least the overwhelming part of it was meant for Europe or that European powers had replaced all or most other players from the maritime trade, which would clearly be untenable. Notwithstanding their evident untenable nature, such assumptions remain embedded in historiography and distort our understanding of the past.[112] This clearly flies in the face of a good deal of empirical evidence showing that trade along the Eurasian land routes continued to flourish till the eighteenth century, and in some cases even shifted from the seas to the land.[113]

It should be noted that apart from trade and other forms of economic exchange, the 'Silk Road' narrative entails cultural, technological, and even epidemiological exchanges about which much has been written. Of course, the land networks of Eurasia enabled and facilitated all forms of exchange throughout the course of history. This article, however, deals with only trade and other forms of economic exchange.

It is thus evident that the contemporary discourse on the 'Silk Road' does not have sufficient historical evidence to back it. The article has argued that Eurasian land routes, which have existed for several millennia, cannot justifiably be described as the 'Silk Road', for such a term had no existence in history. What is a bigger problem is that the projection of the 'Silk Road' into the remote past, with emphasis on links between the 'East' and the 'West', undermines the historical role of sedentary civilisations other than those of Europe and China, especially India, in creating and maintaining economic and cultural links across Eurasia and beyond, and that it ignores the role of Central Asia and its nomads in human history because of its inherent privileging of sedentary civilisations.

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[111] *Ibid*.

[112] See Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Despite showing a nuanced understanding of the history of Central Asian network after the fifteenth century, Soucek says: 'Thanks to its "central" position, Central Asia used to be the hub of world trade passing through the Silk Road network. The discovery of the maritime route between Atlantic Europe and the Orient at the dawn of the modern era turned this advantage of centrality in the Eurasian continent into the disadvantage of a landlocked area'. *Ibid*. p. 288.

[113] See Muzaffar Alam, "Trade, State Policy and Regional Change: Aspects of Mughal-Uzbek Commercial Relations, C. 1550–1750", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 37, no. 3 (1994): 202–27.