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A Historiographical Survey of Sinophone Research into Mediterranean-East Asian Maritime Trade (1st-8th centuries CE)

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Abstract

This article presents an overview of Chinese-language historiography concerning ancient maritime trade between the Mediterranean and East Asia. It examines the impact of institutional structures, political context and wider questions within the Chinese research environment, revealing unique inter-disciplinary intersections and recent trends, including towards the intensive study of numismatic evidence and the centring of the (maritime) Silk Road as the focal point of a growing research community. This article aims to enable future research collaboration, in a contemporary context in which scholars working in China are often more aware of key debates in western scholarship than vice versa.

Keywords: historiography; Indo-Roman; Silk Roads; interdisciplinary; global

Introduction

This article is the result of a collaboration between a British scholar of Western Indian Ocean connections in the first millennium CE and a Chinese scholar working on ancient trans-Indian Ocean networks. As our research developed, gaps between Chinese-language and European-language historiography posed challenges in identifying shared research questions and goals. Despite a long history of international projects, led by both Chinese and European or US scholars, differences in knowledge production continue to generate important historiographical tendencies. What follows, therefore, is an account in

English of Sinophone scholarship about connections between East Asia and the Mediterranean in roughly the first half of the first millennium CE.

Though our focus is on long-distance Indian Ocean communications, overland routes have a longer history of study in China, that underpins key approaches to scholarship on oceanic trade. Our survey therefore begins with the topic of East-West contact in its broadest sense, tracing growing Chinese interest in westward connections up to around the middle of the twentieth century. We then home in on maritime trade, though Silk Road studies continue to be linked institutionally and intellectually to the framing of oceanic mobilities and are, therefore, never fully excluded from our discussion.

Both land-based and maritime connections in the first and early second millennia CE have seen a huge increase in scholarly popularity in the last twenty years. In view of this proliferation of scholarship, we limit ourselves in this present study to work produced in the Chinese language and within China, and addressing Chinese connections with the Mediterranean. It is not possible to do justice to the global field of Mediterranean-East Asian connections in its entirety, though consideration is given where relevant to international scholarship undertaken in collaboration with Chinese scholars and of Chinese responses to external works. Likewise, links with South and Southeast Asia or other parts of East Asia in the early centuries of the first millennium CE are addressed where appropriate.

Such a narrow geographical focus is partially pragmatic in an article-length survey. However, there is also compelling intellectual justification for focusing exclusively on Sinophone study of ancient connections between East Asia and the Mediterranean, or, as this scholarship until quite recently understood its scope, between the empires of China and Rome. The perceived link, in both ancient sources and modern scholarship, between two great empires at opposite ends of Eurasia, gave this specific long-distance connection particular piquancy for scholars of successive generations, just as comparison between China and Rome motivates research today.¹

¹ For example: S.A.M. Adshead, *T'ang China: The Rise of the East in World History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave

Drawing on the legacy of this scholarly tradition, the term ‘the west’ is used broadly here as a counterpoint to ‘China’ in full awareness of the problematics of both. The historic ‘China’ referred to in this article changed size and shape over centuries and was not at all points a single political unit. The ‘west’ is a clumsy shorthand for cultural, political and religious similarities, freighted with generations of unhelpful assumptions about who is, and is not, included. Both terms, however, are currently the best understood and most widely used in the debates discussed, and have such deep use in those debates as to constitute mutually interdependent historical constructs. To limit ambiguity, ‘China’ here refers to those regions of East Asia which, in the ancient and medieval sources discussed, were at that time considered to be ‘inside’ by Chinese authors. With respect to the nineteenth century onwards, it refers to territory under the direct authority of Beijing. The ‘west’ refers to the (mostly) majority Christian regions of western Europe and the settler colonial societies created by modern European expansion in North America and the Pacific. In practice, the particular historiography explored here gives prominence to the US, the UK, Germany, France and Italy.

1. A balance of empires

Chinese records from the second century BCE testify to links between the Central Plain of China and the “Western Regions”, a set of links often referred to as ‘the Silk Road(s)’.² Official Chinese records noted communications with Central Asia, as well as the Roman Empire, termed ‘Da Qin’. This latter term referred to both the historical Roman Empire and a Platonic, semi-mythic western-most-empire-of-the-world, a counterbalance to Chinese ideological self-

Macmillan, 2004); D.A. Graff, *The Eurasian Way of War: Military Practice in Seventh-Century China and Byzantium* (London: Routledge, 2016); F.-H. Mutschler and A. Mittag, ed., *Conceiving the Empire: China and Rome Compared* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); W. Scheidel, ed., *Rome and China: comparative perspectives on ancient world empires* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2011).

² For a recent and sumptuous survey of Silk Road history and studies: S. Whitfield, ed., *Silk Roads: Peoples, Cultures, Landscapes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2019).

perception as the great power in the East.³ From the third century onwards, the term 'Fu Lin' also emerges in Chinese accounts. Fu Lin is often translated as the Byzantine Empire but just as the 'Byzantine' Empire is a historiographical construct for an empire that thought of itself as Roman, so Fu Lin co-existed with Da Qin in Chinese descriptions for centuries – a change of label, not substance.⁴ Fu Lin became the dominant term for the western-most state of Eurasia under the Sui and Tang dynasties (581-907).

Within ancient and medieval Chinese sources, and extending to around the mid-nineteenth century, Da Qin/Fu Lin appears mainly in connection with notices of officials receiving tribute (or things represented as tribute). This fits a wider pattern in ancient historical writing in China, of focusing on the court and imperial succession and seeing things as central or peripheral in relation to these concerns. Our survey begins in earnest when this situation began to change radically.

2. The Emergence of World History (1840-1911)

The swift and violent changes that the start of the Opium Wars in the 1840s brought to China's internal fortunes and external relations, generated intellectual responses often considered to be the beginning of 'modern historiography' in China.⁵ Scholars, many researching history semi-professionally while holding plural professional positions at a time, aimed to meet an increasing demand in China for knowledge of the west. Lin Zexu (1785-1850), for example, was the Governor of Guangxi and Guangdong Province, one of the most significant prefectures in the empire. In this capacity, he was directly involved in the escalating tensions that led to the First Opium War. During this time, Lin also oversaw a Chinese

³ In 1885, Hirth compiled for a western audience references to Da-qin and Fu-lin in Chinese sources and outlined the changing perception of these western regions: F. Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient: Researches into Their Ancient and Medieval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records* (Leipsic [sic]: Georg Hirth, 1885).

⁴ On the artificiality of the term Byzantium, see D. Stathakopoulos, *A Short History of the Byzantine Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014): 1-4.

⁵ For a useful survey of modern Chinese history to contextualise this article, see J.N. Wasserstrom, *The Oxford History of Modern China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

translation of Hugh Murray's *An Encyclopedia of Geography*, published in 1840 in Chinese as the *Atlas of Four Continents*.⁶

Subsequently, in response to China's defeat in the Opium War, Wei Yuan (1794-1857), another prominent thinker, educator and writer, who also held government office, called for a public commitment to 'learn from foreign technologies and utilize them to defeat others in return'.⁷ Published in 1842 in fifty volumes, his *Atlas of Maps of Oceans and Countries* compiled up-to-date knowledge of the world beyond China.⁸ From 1847 to 1848, Wei Yuan also supplemented Lin's earlier *Atlas*, creating a sixty-volume edition that expanded to a hundred-volume edition by 1852.⁹ The hundred-volume edition, now far more than a translation of Murray's text, was the first major work of modern history to examine the countries of the world from a Chinese perspective, from antiquity to the present, using both Chinese and foreign scholarship.

The Second Opium War (1856-60) coincided with a significant peasant revolt, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement (1851-64), inspired by a blend of Confucian and Christian ideology. These events further increased Chinese interest in the western world, its history and its conventions of scholarship. Following the Second Opium War, Britain also gradually became dominant in Hong Kong and influential in the southwestern regions of the country, especially in the modern provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi. In this context, ancient history emerged in both Chinese and British political and intellectual circles as a means of explaining differences in the present and establishing shared narratives of the past. History writing served as cultural mediation.

⁶ H. Murray, *An Encyclopaedia of Geography* (London: Longman, 1834); Lin Zexu [林则徐], *四洲志* [*Encyclopedia of Geography*] (Guangzhou: private publication, 1841).

⁷ “师夷长技以制夷”, cited from Wei's *Atlas of Maps of Oceans and Countries*, 1st edn, 50 vols (Che Garden of Yangzhou: Wei Yuan private publication, 1842), Preface.

⁸ 魏源 [Wei Yuan], *海国图志* *Atlas of Maps of Oceans and Countries*.

⁹ 魏源 [Wei Yuan], *海国图志* *Atlas of Maps of Oceans and Countries*, 3rd edn, 100 vols (Gaoyou County: private publication, 1852).

Joseph Edkins, a British missionary, prominent sinologist and key figure in Sino-British relations in the mid-nineteenth century, tried unsuccessfully to open dialogue with the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom regime in 1861. He later worked for the General Administration of Customs on behalf of the Qing government. His political work was accompanied by substantial scholarly output. Between 1852 and 1861 he edited the *Chinese and Western Almanac*,¹⁰ and in 1886, he published his translation into classical Chinese of two works, *The History of Rome* and *The History of Greece*. The latter, written by Charles Alan Fyffe and published in 1880, described Greece from its origins until the Roman conquest.¹¹ *The History of Rome*, by Mandell Creighton (1877), described Roman history from 753 BCE to 1453 CE.¹² Edkins added maps and chronological tables, significantly titled according to Chinese periodization and including summary information about contemporary Chinese history.

At the same time, western scholars in China were also studying Chinese historical materials concerning ancient Chinese contact with the west. Friedrich Hirth's 1885 *China and the Roman Orient: Researches into Their Ancient and Medieval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records* compiled excerpts from the Chinese official histories addressing contact with the west.¹³ Édouard Chavannes was a leading early scholar of, among other things, the tales of Buddhist pilgrimage from China to South Asia.¹⁴ In 1910, George Coédès, best known as a pioneer scholar of Southeast Asia, published his *Textes d'auteurs grecs et latins relatifs à l'Extrême-Orient*.¹⁵

With growing foreign access to China, the Qing government also launched a "Movement

¹⁰ 中西通书 [*Chinese and Western Almanac*], ed. J. Edkins et al. (Hong Kong: Mohai Press, 1855-61).

¹¹ C.A. Fyffe, 希腊志略 [*The History of Greece*] trans. J. Edkins, 7 vols (Beijing: Imperial Maritime Customs Service Administration, 1886).

¹² M. Creighton, 罗马志略 [*The History of Rome*], trans. J. Edkins, 13 vols (Beijing: Imperial Maritime Customs Service Administration, 1883).

¹³ Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient*.

¹⁴ É. Chavannes, *Mémoire composé à l'époque de la grande dynastie T'ang sur les religieux éminents qui allèrent chercher la loi dans les pays d'occident par l-Tsing* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1894).

¹⁵ G. Coédès, *Textes d'auteurs grecs et latins relatifs à l'Extrême-Orient* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1910).

for Foreign Affairs” (洋务运动), to promote industrialisation in China and to enable Chinese scholars to study western technologies. From the 1860s, this included new schools training children to study abroad and, by the late nineteenth century, China had established a new educational system, in which ‘world history’ (meaning non-Chinese history) was a specific sub-division of research and teaching, as it remains today. China, in addition, increasingly adopted antiquity as a periodisation for both Chinese and external history, giving rise to ‘ancient world history’ as a category. In 1898 reforms led to the establishment of the Imperial University of Beijing, now Peking University, and still China's premier university for the Humanities, followed by further reforms in the mid-1910s, which included the development of early democratic governmental structures, the expansion of private enterprise and renewed interest in European and North American political and social systems. The work of Wang Guowei, a prominent encyclopaedist, historian, archaeologist, educator, painter and socialist, is illustrative of this period, especially his call to combine textual and archaeological evidence in the study of the past.¹⁶

From the mid-1920s, the specific topic of Sino-Roman connections came increasingly into focus. Zhang Xinglang published his first edition of *The Compilation of Historical Materials Concerning Chinese and Western Communications* in 1930.¹⁷ The six-volume book covers topics from astronomy to biology, technology to history, and includes Chinese connections with the Roman Empire. Zhang also translated two versions of the *Travels of Marco Polo* and was a child of the “Movement for Foreign Affairs” educational system, with training in biochemistry alongside his historical interests, and experience studying at Harvard and the Humboldt–Universität, Berlin.¹⁸

¹⁶ 王国维 [Wang Guowei], 观堂集林 [Collection of Guantang], ed. Wu Cheng and Jiang Mengping (Haining, Zhejiang: Miyunlou Publishing House, 1923).

¹⁷ 张星烺 [Zhang Xinglang], 中西交通史料汇编 [The Compilation of Historical Materials Concerning Chinese and Western Communications], 6 vols (Beijing: Furen University Press, 1930).

¹⁸ H. Yule, 马可波罗游记 [Travels of Marco Polo], trans. 张星烺 [Zhang Xinglang] (Beijing: China Geographical Association, 1924).

By 1919, Zhang was Professor in the Department of Chemistry at Peking University and continued his historical research. He was sent to Japan to investigate historical materials concerning the Republic of China and in 1926 he was employed as the director of the Institute of Chinese Studies at Xiamen University. He later served as a professor at Furen University, Tsinghua University, Beijing Normal University and Yanjing University, influencing a whole generation of historians. In the period 1912-49, a scarcity of qualified professors and a growing undergraduate population meant that many institutions shared scholars or employed them in various functions. It was therefore not unusual for scholars, like Zhang, to hold several simultaneous appointments, including in very different disciplines, and to draw on these expertise in their research. This interdisciplinarity remains visible in more recent work on ancient maritime connections between China and the west.

3. The Ancient Past under the Republic of China (1912-1949)

The 1912 Revolution marked a major shift in modern Chinese history and historiography, marked by a continued interest in the West, now increasingly shaped by China's growing adoption of Marxist ideas and, from 1917, by its connection with the newly-founded Soviet Union, which included intellectual exchange in the form of personnel and literature. The revolution was a time of considerable domestic turmoil but the wealthiest eastern provinces prospered and the developments in the formal structures of higher education outlined above were cemented.

In this environment, by the 1930s, more detailed analysis began of Fu Lin, or the Byzantine/late Roman Empire. Chinese scholars reached broad agreement, via wide-ranging debates, that Fu Lin emerged as a label in the Sui-Tang era (late 6th to 8th century) and referred to Da Qin, demonstrating the growing confidence of Chinese scholars in applying modern documentary methods of historical research.¹⁹ Historical linguistics was highly valued but the

¹⁹ For example: 岑仲勉 [Cen Zhongmian] looked for a Khotanese origin for the term: “课余读书记” [“Notes on Extra-curricular Reading”]. 圣心 [*Sacred Heart Newspaper*] 2 (1933): 10-2; 冯承钧 [Feng Chengjun] incorrectly attributed the term to records of a Tang Dynasty traveller, Du Huan: 景教碑考 [*New Textual Research on the*

approach of scholars, who were overwhelmingly trained in non-historical subjects and often, abroad, was above all multi-disciplinary. Work on ancient Chinese sources by western Sinologists also continued, including American Homer H. Dubs' first English translation of the *History of the Former Han Dynasty (Han Shu 汉书)* under the auspices of the American Council of Learned Societies.²⁰

In the period up to 1949, therefore, Chinese scholarship transitioned to modes of documentary criticism methodologically similar to those practiced in the west, though still heavily inflected by the local political and social environment. Chinese scholars were actively interested in the western world and its history, as was the government, giving rise to new opportunities for foreign travel and study. The emergence, during and after the Second World War, of a global geopolitical situation in which the West, in the form of the USA and its allies, actively constructed itself in opposition to the Soviet Union as one of the poles of world power fostered this sense of shared scholarly and governmental priority. Westerners living in China, as well as imported and translated western texts, also fostered a new environment of exchange and sharing. Finally, structural changes in the organisation of higher education gave rise to a clearly defined field of '(ancient) world history'. This early phase established lasting dynamics in Chinese study East Asian-Mediterranean contact. First, such studies often centred empire-to-empire communication. Second, such studies tended to be strongly interdisciplinary. Third, knowledge of the distant past was regularly situated within the context of present political benefits, with deep historical continuities in regional cultures and the longterm, large-scale economic changes discussed in Marxist historical discourse both contributing to a sense that knowing the distant past could directly assist in making policy decisions.

4. Mainstreaming Ancient World History, 1950s to mid-1970s

War with Japan from 1937 paused sustained development in higher education and

Nestorian Stele] (Shanghai: 商务印书馆 [The Commercial Press], 1934), and 拂菻考 [*Textual Research on Fu-lin*] (Shanghai: 商务印书馆 [The Commercial Press], 1935): 96.

²⁰ Pan Ku, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, trans. H.H. Dubs, 3 vols (Baltimore: Waverly, 1938-55).

research, which did not pick up again until the 1950s. In this post-war context, China imitated the pattern of Russian higher education. In 1952, this resulted in the formal separation of world history and Chinese history, at the level of faculty appointments and teaching, recognising a distinction that had already emerged among researchers. With specific faculty and a clear place within a wider framework of history, as a counterpoint to Ancient Chinese history, ancient world history developed rapidly. A new Chinese historiography also began to emerge, rooted in Marxism. In the study of ancient world history, this entailed a focus on topics such as slavery and class structures, including “Rome’s Agriculture in Terms of Cato” by Qi Sihe,²¹ and “Slavery in Rome” by Song Zesheng.²²

This period also witnessed the emergence of scholarship explicitly concerned with long-distance trans-cultural communication from antiquity to the Middle Ages. In 1956, Qi Sihe, published *The Relationship between China and the Byzantine Empire*, initially with a strong focus on the landward routes.²³ In 1964, Zhu Jieqin collected all known notes on Da Qin found in Chinese sources in his *Complete Records of Da-tsin*.²⁴ Landward routes across Eurasia dominated in these studies because these are better reflected than the maritime routes in the documentary sources available at that time. Nevertheless, in 1958, Wang Gungwu published the first edition of “The Nanhai Trade: Early Chinese Trade in the South China Sea”.²⁵ While it is not possible at this early stage to pinpoint direct connections between the growth in

²¹ 齐思和 [Qi Sihe], “从伽图的农业论看罗马农业.” 大公报 [*Dagong Daily*] 1 May 1951: 17-8.

²² 宋泽生 [Song Zesheng], “罗马的奴隶制度.” 新史学通讯 [*New Historiographical Communications*] 9 (1953): 7-9. Other important works included: 孙秉莹 [Sun Bingying], “关于东西罗马帝国奴隶制的崩溃问题” [“On the collapse of slavery in the Eastern and Western Roman Empire”]. 新史学通讯 [*New Historiographical Communications*] 12 (1954): 6-9; 王藻 [Wang Zao], “论罗马奴隶制经济危机发生的原因” [“On the Causes of the Economic Crisis of Slavery in the Roman Empire”]. 东北人民大学人文科学学报 [*Academic Journal of the Humanities of the Northeastern People’s University*] 1 (1957): 129-52.

²³ 齐思和 [Qi Sihe], 中国与拜占庭帝国的关系 (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 1956).

²⁴ 朱杰勤 [Zhu Jieqin], 大秦国全录 (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1964).

²⁵ Wang Gungwu, “The Nanhai Trade: Early Chinese Trade in the South China Sea.” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31/2 (1958): 1-135.

Chinese-language and western scholarship on ancient long-distance trade routes, it is noticeable that interest in long-distance connections was also growing in the West at this time, reflecting the wider context of commercial globalisation and increasingly convenient long-distance travel and communication.²⁶

In the late 1950s and into the 1960s, a series of archaeological discoveries near ancient Chang'an (modern Shaanxi Province) contributed new evidence for ancient trade in the form of coins from the Mediterranean found in Central Asia and northern China.²⁷ In addition, following the dramatic decline in scholarly output caused by the Cultural Revolution (mid-1957-72), a flurry of new articles helped to bring Roman history into mainstream historical discussion in China, particularly focusing on Marxist class struggle and the role of the Roman Empire in world history.²⁸ An increasing confidence interpreting ancient western history in the context of Chinese Marxism and greater use of material evidence alongside texts would shape the next developments in Chinese historiography, as long-distance maritime trade also came more clearly into view.²⁹

²⁶ For example, E.H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study in T'ang Exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

²⁷ For example: 夏鼐 [Xia Nai], “咸阳底张湾隋墓出土的东罗马金币” [“Eastern Roman Gold Coins in the Sui Dynasty Tomb of Dizhangwan at Xianyang”]. *考古学报* [*Journal of Archaeology*] 1 (1959): 67-71; “西安土门出土的拜占庭金币” [“A Byzantine gold coin excavated in Tumen, Xi'an”]. *考古* [*Archaeology*] 8 (1961): 466-7; “赞皇李希宗墓出土的拜占庭金币” [“Byzantine gold coins unearthed from the tomb of Zanzhuang Li Xizong”]. *考古* [*Archaeology*] 6 (1977): 403-6.

²⁸ For example: 易水 [Yi Shui], *古代罗马的奴隶起义* [*Slave Rebellion in Ancient Rome*] (Beijing: People's Press, 1973).

²⁹ The emergence of a distinctive Chinese Marxist historiography of the ancient, foreign world is especially visible in the consciously materialist work of Hu Zhongda, for example: 胡钟达, “关于奴隶社会中奴隶的数目问题” [“On the Question of the Number of Slaves in a Slave Society”]. *光明日报* [*Guangming Daily*], 2 August 1956; “雅典的民主政治及其阶级基础” [“Democracy and its class basis in Athens”]. *历史教学* [*History Teaching*], 6 (1957). These articles entailed disagreement with various western-centric elements of Marxist historiography, including the idea of the Asiatic mode of production and the nature and periodisation of ‘feudalism’.

5. The Rise and Rise of Silk Road Studies and Rethinking the Ancient Economy, 1980s-2000s

From the mid-1980s, postgraduate, doctoral and post-doctoral programmes and government funding for humanities and social science research all expanded. Academic conferences, associations and journals on a wide range of subjects followed, including continued expansion of work on the Roman Empire and connection with it via the 'Silk Road', and a new focus on oceanic routes, more and more often framed, in China and in the burgeoning global field of Indian Ocean studies, as 'the Maritime Silk Road'.

A tremendous boom in Silk Road research began in the 1980s, both inside and beyond China,³⁰ and buoyed by on-going archaeological work in Xinjiang and elsewhere along the 'Silk Roads'.³¹ Scholarship on Roman, Byzantine and other coins discovered in China or along the

³⁰ For example: I.M. Franck, *The Silk Road: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); S. Akiner, "Significance of Silk Roads Today: Proposal for a Historical Atlas." *Senri Ethnological Studies* 32 (1992): 27-32; A. Hasan Dani, "Significance of Silk Road to Human Civilization: Its Cultural Dimension." *Senri Ethnological Studies* 30 (1992): 21-6; V. Elisseeff, *The Silk Roads: Highways of Culture and Commerce* (Paris: UNESCO with Berghann Books, 2001).

³¹ For only a selection of this vast body of work: 齐东方 [Qi Dongfang], "吐鲁番阿斯塔那 225 号墓出土的部分文书的研究—兼论吐谷浑余部" ["Research on some Documents Excavated in Tomb No. 225 in Astana, Turpan—with a Discussion of the Remains of Tuyuhun"]. *敦煌吐鲁番文献研究论集* [*Collection of Dunhuang Turpan Literary Research*] 2 (1983): 62-8; 林梅村 [Lin Meicun], "敦煌出土粟特文古书信的断代问题" ["The Dating of Ancient Sogdian Letters Unearthed in Dunhuang"]. *中国史研究* [*Chinese Historical Research*] 1 (1986): 87-99; 余太山 [Yu Taishan], "条支、黎轩、大秦和有关的西域地理" ["Tiao-zhi, Li-kan, Da-tsin and the geography of the Western Regions"]. *中国史研究* [*Chinese Historical Research*] 2 (1985): 57-74; 蔡鸿生 [Cai Hongsheng], "唐代九姓胡贡品分析" ["An Analysis of Items of Tribute from Nine-Surname Sogdians during the time of the Tang Dynasty"]. *文史* [*Literature and History*], 31 (1988): 99-114; 初师宾 [Chu Shibin], "甘肃靖远新出东罗马鎏金银盘略考" ["A Brief Study of a Crafted Gold and Silver Plate from East Rome found in Jingyuan in Gansu"]. *文物*

landward routes westwards has emerged as almost a separate sub-field of study.³² In addition,

[*Cultural Relics*] 5 (1990): 6-9; 林英 [Lin Ying] and 萨仁毕力格 [Sarenbilig], “族属与等级:蒙古国巴彦诺尔突厥壁画墓初探” [“Clan and Hierarchy: A Preliminary Study of the Turkic Mural Tombs of Bayannur, Mongolia”]. 草原文物 [*Steppe Cultural Relics*] 1 (2016): 124-9.

³² For a selection of authors and works: 郭云艳 [Guo Yunyan], “论蒙古国巴彦诺尔突厥壁画墓所出金银币的形制特征” [“On the Iconographical Characteristics of Gold and Silver Coins from the Turkic Mural Tomb of Bayannur, Mongolia”]. 草原文物 [*Steppe Cultural Relics*], 1 (2016): 115-23; 罗马—拜占庭帝国嬗变与丝绸之路：以考古发现钱币为中心 [*The Roman-Byzantine Empire along the Silk Road, based on Coin Research*] (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2022); 李强 [Li Qiang], “欧亚草原丝路与沙漠绿洲丝路上发掘的拜占庭钱币研究述论” [“A Review of Byzantine Coins Discovered on the Eurasian Grassland Silk Road and the Desert Oasis Silk Road”]. 草原文物 [*Steppe Cultural Relics*] 1 (2016): 109-14; 陈志强 [Chen Zhiqiang], “蒙古国拜占庭金币考古断想” [“Archaeological thinking on Byzantine gold coins excavated in Mongolia”]. 南京政治学院学报 [*Journal of PLA Nanjing Institute of Politics*] 6 (2016): 116-20; 袁炜 [Yuan Wei], “黄金之丘出土钱币研究——兼论大月氏钱币史” [“Research on Coins Excavated in Tillya Tepe—The Numismatic History of Darouzhī”]. 中国钱币 [*China Numismatics*] 6 (2018): 62-9; 李晓嘉 [Li Xiaojia], “试论五世纪前萨珊银币正面王冠之变化” [“Changes on crowns displayed on the Obverse of Sassanian Silver Coins before the 5th Century CE: the Evolution of Crown iconographies on Sassanian Silver Coins”]. In 造币与王朝——国际视野中钱币的影响与改变研讨会论文集 [*Numismatics and Dynasties: Collection of Works on the Influences on and Changes to Coins from an International Perspective*], ed. by 王春发 [Wang Chunfa] (Beijing: Beijing Times Chinese Publishing House, 2021): 167-76: 167; 陈志强 [Chen Zhiqiang], “我国所见拜占廷铸币相关问题研究” [“Research on Byzantine-style Cast-coins in China”]. 考古学报 [*Journal of Archaeology*] 7 (2004): 295-316; 张武一 [Zhang Wuyi], “青海都兰县出土拜占庭金币” [“Byzantine Gold Coins excavated in Dulan, Qinghai”]. 中国钱币 [*Chinese Numismatics*] 8 (2003): 76-8: 76; 张曦 [Zhang Xi], “河北出土的拜占庭金币及相关问题探讨” [“Discussion of Byzantine Gold Coins Unearthed in Hubei and Related Issues”]. 中国历史文化 [*Chinese Historical Cultural Relics*] 5 (2007): 15-25. 罗丰 [Luo Feng], “关于西安所出东罗马金币仿制品的讨论” [“A Discussion of Imitation East Roman Gold Coins from Xi'an”]. 中国钱币 [*Chinese Numismatics*] 4 (1993): 17-9; Chen Zhiqiang, “咸阳隋独孤罗墓拜占廷金币有

other material traces of commercial activity and human mobility became foci for study, including both silk and other textiles and glass, as did evidence for shared or travelling stories and artistic motifs.³³

These studies represented developments for the analysis of long-distance communication, which also mirrored and interacted with similar work in the west.³⁴ Silk Road studies became a forum for international collaborations on an unprecedented scale. Between 1990 and 1995, UNESCO launched five international expeditions under the framework of the 'Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue'.³⁵ In 1998, the International Dunhuang

关问题” [“Issues Related to Byzantine Gold Coins in Dugu Luo's Tomb of the Sui Dynasty at Xianyang”]. 中国钱币 [Chinese Numismatics] 11 (1998): 70-1.

³³ 林英 [Lin Ying], “20 世纪中国与拜占庭帝国关系研究综述” [“A Summary of Studies on the Relationship between China and the Byzantine Empire in the 20th Century”]. 世界历史 [World History] 5 (2006): 118-25; “公元 1 到 5 世纪中国文献中关于罗马帝国的传闻——以《后汉书·大秦传》为中心的考察” [“Tales about the Roman Empire in Chinese Documents from 1st Century to 5th Century C.E.—Centered on The Bibliography on Daqin, The Book of the Eastern Han Dynasty”]. 世界历史 [World History], 3 (2009): 54-62; 唐代拂菻丛说 [Fulin, the Ruler of Treasure Country: Byzantium in Tang Society AD618-907] (Beijing: China Publishing House, 2006); 刘文锁 [Liu Wensuo], “楼兰的简纸并用时代与造纸技术之传播” [“Lou-lan's Age of the Combination of Bamboo Slips and Paper, and the spread of Papermaking Technology”]. 吉林大学边疆考古研究中心编《边疆考古研究》 [Frontier Archaeological Research edited by Frontier Archaeological Research Center of Jilin University] 2 (2004): 406-13; 张绪山 [Zhang Xushan], “六七世纪拜占庭帝国对中国的丝绸贸易活动及其历史见证” [“Sino-Byzantino Silk Trade and its Historical Witnesses in 6th to 7th Centuries C.E.”]. 北大史学 [Peking University Journal of History] 8 (2005): 27-45; “桃花石名称源流考” [“A Study of the Origin of the Name of ‘Peach Blossom Stone’ (Ταυγάστ)”. 古代文明 [Ancient Civilization] 3 (2007): 79-85.

³⁴ For example: E. Laing, “Recent Finds of Western-Related Glassware, Textiles, and Metalwork in Central Asia and China.” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 9 (1995): 1-18.

³⁵ China National Silk Museum, “China National Silk Museum and UNESCO Co-Launch Thematic Collection of the Cultural Exchanges along the Silk Roads: Textiles and Clothing Volume”. *Cision PR Newswire* 11 July 2022 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20220712150339/https://en.prnasia.com/releases/apac/china-national-silk-museum-and-unesco-co-launch-thematic-collection-of-the-cultural-exchanges-along-the-silk-roads-textiles->

Project was inaugurated as one of the most ambitious online archiving and data-sharing initiatives associated with ancient long-distance mobility.³⁶ New scholarly collaborations arose.³⁷ This research gave rise to new claims about the interrelatedness of China and the west, including that first-century CE commercial developments in the Mediterranean might have been directly causally dependent on Chinese political conditions.³⁸ It produced new international networks across Eurasia, including the Union Académique Internationale project, “China and the Ancient Mediterranean World”, founded in 2008 to “[c]ollect and publish objects originating from one cultural sphere found in the other cultural areas through archaeology, especially of Roman artifacts found in China and vice versa” as well as publishing relevant historical texts.³⁹

Within China, Xu Jialing’s “Textual Research on the Westward Spread of Chinese Silk Weaving Technology—From Constantinople to Lyon” demonstrated the dissemination of silk manufacturing techniques, and their penetration beyond Byzantium as far the medieval Frankish Empire.⁴⁰ An Jiayao’s work pioneered scientific analysis of glass as a means to

[and-clothing-volume-367846.shtml](#)> [accessed 5 May 2024].

³⁶ M. Doumy, Han-Lin Hsieh and A. Pineschi, “The International Dunhuang Project”. *British Library* 8 October 2022. <<https://web.archive.org/web/20230528104155/https://www.bl.uk/projects/international-dunhuang-project>> [accessed 5 May 2024].

³⁷ For example: P. Brancaccio and Xinru Liu, “Dionysian tradition and drama in Gandharan art.” *Journal of Global History* 4/2 (2009): 219-44; Fuxi Gan, R.H. Brill and Shouyun Tian, ed., *Ancient Glass Research along the Silk Road* (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2009).

³⁸ P. Beaujard, “The Indian Ocean in Eurasian and African World-Systems before the Sixteenth Century,” trans. S. Fee. *Journal of World History* 16.4 (2005): 411-65: 424.

³⁹ For example: H. Tsuchiya, “The Darel Valley on the Indus and T’o-Li and Fa Hsien: 1998 and 1999 Field Research in the Northern Areas of Pakistan.” In *South Asian Archaeology 1999: Proceedings of the Fifteenth International Conference on South Asian Archaeology, July 5th -9th, 1999*, ed. E.M. Raven (Leiden: Brill, 2008): 401-14. For the UAI project, Anonymous, “China and the Mediterranean World: Archaeological Sources and Written Documents, from the earliest times until the end of the fourteenth century CE”, *Union Académique*, n.d. <<http://www.unionacademique.org/en/projects/73/china-and-the-mediterranean-world>> [accessed 5 May 2024].

⁴⁰ 徐家玲 [Xu Jialing], “中国丝织技术西传考—从君士坦丁堡到里昂”. 东北师大学报 [*Academic Journal of Northeast Normal University*] 6 (1995): 32-8.

understand mobilities by examining the movement of raw materials and techniques for glass making.⁴¹ Zhang Xushan homed in on the direct sea link between the Roman Empire and the East.⁴² The application of new techniques to understand materials on the move, and theoretical approaches to tracing the migration of ideas both moved smoothly between studies of the landward Silk Road and the maritime Silk Road, in an ongoing intellectual interdependence.

The 1980-90s also saw increasingly intense debates about the underpinning theoretical frameworks shaping the history of long-distance trade in antiquity. In 1985 Ma Yong and Li Yining translated Rostovtzeff's *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, originally published in 1926 and deeply enmeshed in the western historiography of long-distance trade and its economic and cultural impact.⁴³ This was followed, in 1990, by Yi Zhaoyin's "Development of the Roman Commodity Economy". This study, which should be seen in part as a response to Rostovtzeff, though also situated within broader debates about the role of private enterprise versus state prerogative, growth versus continuity in the Roman Empire, reevaluated the Roman economy and emphasized significant progress and growth in Roman commerce over the centuries.⁴⁴

⁴¹ An Jiayao, "Ancient glass trade in Southeast Asia". In *Ancient Trades and Cultural Contacts in Southeast Asia*, ed. A. Srisuchat (Bangkok: National Culture Commission, 1996): 127-38; An Jiayao, "The Art of Glass Along the Silk Road." In *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD*, ed. J.C.Y. Watt (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004): 57-66.

⁴² 张绪山 [Zhang Xushan], "罗马帝国沿海路向东方的探索" ["Exploration of the Roman Empire's Sea Route to the East"]. *史学月刊 [Journal of Historical Science]* 1 (2001): 87-92;"拜占庭作家科斯马斯中国闻纪释证" ["Interpretations and Debates on Byzantine Author Cosmas's Awareness of and Sources for China"]. *中国学术 [Chinese Academics]* 3 (2002): 63-91.

⁴³ M. Rostovtzeff, *罗马帝国经济社会史*, trans. 马雍 [Ma Yong] and 厉以宁 [Li Yining] (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1985).

⁴⁴ 裔昭印 [Yi Zhaoyin], "论罗马商品经济的发展水平". *上海师范大学学报 (哲学社会科学版) [Journal of Shanghai Normal University (Philosophy & Social Sciences Edition)]* 4 (1990): 84-6.

6. 2010s onwards: New Opportunities, Fresh Challenges

Since the 2010s, joint projects and publications, bringing together Chinese and Western researchers (as well as wider global networks), have grown in number, benefitting from the increased possibilities for digital communication and, at least until the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, comparatively easy international travel. These have included collaborative centres and seminar series, such as the International Centre for Silk Roads Archaeology & Heritage, a partnership between the University College London (UCL) Institute of Archaeology and North-West University, Xi'an, begun in 2021,⁴⁵ or the French-organised WILDSILKS, founded in 2020 to examine the role of silk and silk-related things and processes in Eurasian history over the *longue durée*.⁴⁶ This organisation has coordinated meetings and publications and runs a blog.

Older collaborations have also borne fruit. In 2017 Qi Dong Fang and Bruno Genito published *West and East, Archaeological Objects Along the Silk Roads* and in 2023, Xinru Liu and Pia Brancaccio released *The World of the Ancient Silk Road*.⁴⁷ The 2017 publication was the result of a connection between the School of Archaeology and Museum of Peking University and the Department of Asian, African and Mediterranean Studies at the University of the East in Naples. In general, however, until the early 2000s Chinese scholars had few opportunities to travel abroad to participate in archaeological excavations and projects. Meanwhile, western researchers have faced barriers in keeping abreast of the much wider field of Chinese archaeology relevant to the context for maritime trade in the first millennium CE, in the form of language and access to local publications. It was for this reason that Chinese scholars from Peking University and Italian scholars from the University of Naples, after a period of deliberation from 2007 to 2010, proposed in 2011 to conduct research on artefacts found in China with clearly 'foreign' origins. The Chinese and Italian scholars consciously sought to integrate their different research methods into the joint publication.

⁴⁵ Anonymous, "Silk Roads." *Institute of Archaeology, UCL* 3 February 2021

<<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/silk-roads>> [accessed 5 May 2024].

⁴⁶ Anonymous, 'En bref.' ANR WILDSILKS n.d. <<https://wildsilks.hypotheses.org/en-bref>> [accessed 5 May 2024].

⁴⁷ Qi Dong Fang and B. Genito, *West and East: Archaeological Objects Along the Silk Roads* (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics, 2017); Xinru Liu with P. Brancaccio, ed., *The World of the Ancient Silk Road* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023).

In another long-term project outcome, a joint online symposium was held on 20 July 2020 by the China National Silk Museum, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and the UNESCO Silk Road Programme to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the UNESCO Silk Road Project, discussed above. Making the most of new technological capacities for data sharing, the conference officially launched the UNESCO Silk Roads Project Digital Archive, allowing for long-term data collection and revision.⁴⁸ It will be hosted by the International Institute for Intercultural Dialogue on the Silk Roads, located at the China National Silk Museum (Hangzhou). Under the organization of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, the China National Silk Museum will be the first major academic project led by Chinese scholars in the field of cultural heritage and jointly implemented by so many countries, supported by UNESCO's "Silk Road Project" and attracting scholars from 14 European countries, 12 in Asia, 2 in the Americas and 2 in Africa with a total of 30 institutions participating worldwide.⁴⁹

Alongside the initiation or continuation of structured collaborative projects, there has also been a move towards translation and bilingual publication by both Western and Chinese scholars, thereby making data as well as methodological and theoretical perspectives more widely shareable. The extensive publication of English-language works by Yu Taishan, for example, has included *A Study of the Relations between China and the Mediterranean World in Ancient Times* and *A Study of the Early Literatures on the Silk Road*.⁵⁰

Bilingual publications, especially in *Revista Instituto Confucio* by David Sevillano-López, have addressed topics relevant to ancient maritime trade, especially the movement of

⁴⁸ Anonymous, "World Heritage Centre Celebrates 30-Year Anniversary of the Silk Roads Project and Launch of the Digital Archive of the Silk Roads." *UNESCO World Heritage Convention* 20 July 2020 <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/events/1531/>> [accessed 5 May 2024]. Project homepage: Anonymous, *Institute for Intercultural Dialogue on the Silk Roads*, n.d. <<https://iidos.cn/en/index.aspx>> [accessed 5 May 2024].

⁴⁹ China National Silk Museum, "China National Silk Museum and UNESCO".

⁵⁰ Yu Taishan, *A Study of the Relations between China and the Mediterranean World in Ancient Times* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 2021); *A Study of the Early Literatures on the Silk Road* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 2021).

Buddhism during the Tang period.⁵¹ Likewise, Barłomiej Szymon Szmoniewski's work has addressed coin evidence linking China and the west.⁵² Furthermore, growing interest within Western academic institutions in regions that may be considered 'liminal' in comparison with traditional politically-focussed histories, including oceanic and island spaces, as well as Chinese and western travel grants and visiting scholarships have all created possibilities for research that cuts across traditional Chinese-Western definitions, including by Chinese scholars and scholars of Chinese descent working at institutions outside China.⁵³

7. Indian Ocean Studies

Another major development that has served to bring researchers globally closer together has been the development of Indian Ocean Studies as a distinct field. Although the concept of the Indian Ocean as a focus of study emerged from the 1970s with the work of K.N. Chaudhuri, from the early 2000s a proliferation of conferences and edited volumes on the subject has generated a fertile environment for the regular exchange of ideas, including detailed work on new finds.⁵⁴ This has included scholars working internationally on subjects from Chinese

⁵¹ D. Sevillano-López, "Monte Wutai, el centro espiritual del budismo en China 五台山, 中国佛教的精神中心." *Revista Instituto Confucio* 30 (2015a): 58-63; "El templo Wulong del monte Tiantai 天台山伍龙寺." *Revista Instituto Confucio* 32 (2015b): 40-3; Sevillano-López and C. Marco Martínez, "La inscripción de la escultura de Maitreya hecha por han Xiaohua (韓小華造彌勒像銘文)." *Boletín del Archivo Epigráfico* 6 (2020): 20-32.

⁵² For example, "丝绸之路 拜占庭金币 玻璃器" ["Byzantine Coins and Glassware on the Silk Road"]. *中外文化交流* [*Chinese and Foreign Cultural Exchanges*] 230 (2015): 137-9.

⁵³ For example, J.D. Lerner and Yaohua Shi, ed., *Silk Roads: From Local Realities to Global Narratives* (Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2020); Dashu Qin and J. Ching Ho, "Chinese Ceramic Exports to Africa during the 9th-10th Centuries: Product Characteristics, Scale and Temporal Variations." In *Riches Beyond the Horizon: Long-Distance Trade in Early Medieval Landscapes (ca. 6th-12th Centuries)*, ed. Hagit Nul (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021): 95-128; Zhao Bing "Chinese-style ceramics in East Africa from the 9th to 16th century: A case of changing value and symbols in the multi-partner global trade." *Afriques : Débats, méthodes et terrains d'histoire* 6 <<https://doi.org/10.4000/afriques.1836>>.

⁵⁴ Most notably, K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

maritime contacts with Africa,⁵⁵ to work on shipwrecks involving Chinese vessels, goods from China or likely evidence for the movement of Chinese sailors across the Indian Ocean.⁵⁶

This move towards maritime history is also visible in work being done within China. For example, Du Jingjing's 2010 Master's thesis on "China and Rome: Sino-Western relations during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties" was among the first detailed works to address maritime connections from a Chinese perspective.⁵⁷ This was followed in 2013 and 2014 by works by Hao Lujie, which aimed to address a mass, rather than a purely academic, readership.⁵⁸ The first case-study in Chinese dedicated to the harbours of Roman-Indian maritime trade was written by Luo Shuai on Muziris, a significant port in ancient south India. "The Western Maritime Silk Road in the Han Dynasty, I: Muziris, the Ancient Port on the Malabar Coast" presented the argument that trade was organized via a system of:

[f]amily consortia, that is, a form of commercial agency that supported long-distance trade organization. The practice gradually spread to India and Central Asia and was eventually acquired by Sogdian merchants.⁵⁹

This work thus cast the trading world of Central Asia as fundamentally dependent on earlier

⁵⁵ D.J. Wyatt, "Cargoes Human and Otherwise: Chinese Commerce in East African Goods During the Middle Period." In *Early Global Interconnectivity across the Indian Ocean World*, ed. A. Schottenhammer, 2 vols (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019): 165-89.

⁵⁶ Jun Kimura, "Archaeological Evidence of Shipping and Shipbuilding Along the Maritime Silk Road." In *The Maritime Silk Road: Global Connectivities, Regional Nodes, Localities*, ed. F. Billé, S. Mehendale and J.W. Lankton (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022): 97-127.

⁵⁷ 杜晶晶 [Du Jingjing], "中国与罗马——魏晋南北朝时期中西关系研究" ["China and Rome: A Study of Sino-Western Relations during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties"], unpublished MA thesis, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, 2010.

⁵⁸ 郝鹭捷 [Hao Lujie], "罗马帝国时期印度洋的海上贸易" ["Maritime trade in the Indian Ocean during the Roman Empire"]. *世界海运* [World Shipping] 8 (2013): 53-6; "从《厄立特里亚航海记》看古代西方海上贸易口岸" ["View of Ancient Western Maritime Trade Ports from the *Periplus of the Erythreian Sea*"]. *世界海运* [World Shipping] 4 (2014): 59-62.

⁵⁹ 罗帅 [Luo Shuai], "汉代海上丝绸之路的西段 (一) —印度西南海岸古港穆吉里斯" ["The Western Section of the Maritime Silk Road in the Han Dynasty (1) - Mugiris, an ancient port on the southwest coast of India"]. *新疆师范大学学报 (哲学社会科学版)* [Journal of Xinjiang Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)] 37 (2016): 60-80.

phases of maritime trade. The hypothesis, which lacks substantial textual and material evidence, has not met with universal approval, but has sparked debate about the connections between the maritime and landward routes and the importance of long-distance trade in the Roman economy.⁶⁰ It also demonstrates the close ties that still persist between the study of Central Asian landward routes and maritime perspectives. Indeed, Indian Ocean Studies focused on the pre-modern and ‘Maritime Silk Road’ (or ‘Southern Silk Road’) studies are often concepts used interchangeably.⁶¹

As part of the developing wave of maritime-focused studies, one theme has been increased textual analysis by Chinese scholars of the first-century CE Roman text, *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, a longstanding focus of western scholarship. Wang Kunxia and Yang Juping provided substantial discussion of the text in “The Mobile World: Maritime Trade in the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*”. While acknowledging the difficulties of interpreting parts of the text, Wang and Yang concluded that a “mass sea transportation route had been formed by the Roman Empire”.⁶² In 2019, inspired by this work, Yuan Ling wrote her MA thesis, “Research on the Commerce Between the Early Roman Empire and the Indian Subcontinent,” focussing specifically on Roman international trade after the third-century crisis.⁶³

Han Xuefei and Lin Ying’s “Daqin Lamp—Trade of Indian Ocean in Late Antiquity” was the first English-language article in China on this subject, appearing in China’s only English-

⁶⁰ 陈思伟 [Chen Siwei], “埃及与印度次大陆的海上贸易及其在罗马帝国经济中的地位” [“Egypt’s Maritime Trade with the Indian Subcontinent and its Place in the Roman Empire’s Economy”]. 历史研究 [Historical Research] 1 (2018): 113-33.

⁶¹ For example, B. Bellina, “Southeast Asia and the Early Maritime Silk Road.” In *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of South-East Asia*, ed. J. Guy (New York City: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014): 22-4; *Maritime Silk Road: Global Connectivities, Regional Nodes, Localities*, ed. F. Billé, S. Mehendale and J.W. Lankton (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

⁶² 王坤霞 [Wang Kunxia] and 杨巨平 [Yang Juping], “流动的世界：《厄立特里亚航海记》中的海上贸易” [“The Fluid World: Maritime Trade in the Voyages of Eritrea”]. 西域研究 [Western Regions Studies] 1 (2017): 37-48.

⁶³ 原玲 [Yuan Ling], “早期罗马帝国对印度次大陆的商贸研究” [“Research on the Commerce Between the Early Roman Empire and the Indian Subcontinent”], unpublished Master’s thesis (Shanxi Normal University, Linfen, 2019).

language journal of peer-reviewed historical research, the *Journal of World History Studies*. Taking as a starting point a single copper lamp excavated in Thailand, this article discusses ancient maritime trade routes and provides substantial translations into English of ancient Chinese religious and geographical sources, and outlines a trans-Western Indian Ocean trading network by linking Roman material with Southeast Asian archaeological discoveries.⁶⁴ Han's subsequent work has focused on Ptolemaic and Roman imperial maritime trade via Egypt.⁶⁵ He has also worked recently on the interaction of religious communities and the activity of religious authorities in the Red Sea trade in Late Antiquity, especially examining religious complexes at the site of Berenike on the Red Sea in comparison to those found in the Roman imperial capital of Constantinople.⁶⁶

8. Glass, textiles and other proxies

Work since the early 2000s has also continued to trace maritime connections between China and the Mediterranean (as well as more broadly, within the 'Indian Ocean Studies' framework), via diverse proxies for human movement, building on research practices developed in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the context of landward routes. It has been shown, for example, that from the ninth century onwards, movement of texts, botanicals and people (carrying knowledge with them) led to changes in West Asian medicine because of contact with China.⁶⁷ Valerie Hansen and Étienne de la Vaissière have emphasised the significance of Chinese technology in changing western historical trajectories, especially paper,

⁶⁴ Han Xuefei and Lin Ying, "Daqin Lamp—Trade of Indian Ocean in Late Antiquity." *Journal of World History Studies* 2 (2018): 28-56.

⁶⁵ 韩雪飞 [Han Xuefei], "古代晚期的红海贸易" ["The Red Sea Trade in Late Antiquity"], *丝绸之路 [Silk Road]* 1 (2020): 74-81.

⁶⁶ 韩雪飞 [Han Xuefei], "《教皇名录集》与君士坦丁时代的红海贸易" ["*Liber Pontificalis* and the Red Sea Trade in the time of Constantine the Great"], *海洋文明研究 [Maritime Civilization Research]* 6 (2021): 128-39.

⁶⁷ A. Respass, "The Abode of Water: Shipwreck Evidence and the Maritime Circulation of Medicine Between Iran and China in the 9th Through 14th Centuries", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2020), DeepBlue, 163150 <<http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/163150>> [accessed 8 July 2021].

and likewise the importance of western cotton, spices and metals for China.⁶⁸ Marta Zuchowska's work has focused on the movement of textiles, not limited to silk.⁶⁹ Glass continues to be studied and presented as another valuable proxy for trade and diplomacy, especially in the sixth and seventh centuries.⁷⁰ Following more immaterial traces, research has examined the spread of Buddhist creation myths to the Western Regions and the sharing of maritime navigational practices, as well as mosque architecture and the movement of artistic motifs from styles of metalwork to the Chinese Feng Huang, and patterns of inter-ethnic marriage.⁷¹

It is also easier and easier to discern, among the close and synergistic links between the study of landward and maritime connections between China and the Mediterranean, a genuinely distinct specialism, that brings together elements of Indian Ocean studies, with its

⁶⁸ V. Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); É. de la Vaissière, "Trans-Asian Trade, or the Silk Road Deconstructed (Antiquity, Middle Ages)." In *The Cambridge History of Capitalism*, ed. L. Neal and J.G. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 101-24: 121.

⁶⁹ "Palmyra and the Chinese Silk Trade." In *Palmyrena: City, Hinterland and Caravan Trade between Orient and Occident. Proceedings of the Conference held in Athens, December 1-3, 2012*, ed. J.C. Meyer, E.H. Seland and N. Anfinset (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2016): 29-38; M. Żuchowska, "'Roman textiles' in the 'Hou Han Shu': a 5th century Chinese vision versus Roman reality." *Anabasis: studia classica et orientalia* 6 (2015): 216-42.

⁷⁰ H. Kinoshita, "Foreign Glass Excavated in China, from the 4th to 12th Centuries." In *Byzantine Trade, 4th-12th Centuries: The Archaeology of Local, Regional and International Exchange. Papers of the Thirty-Eighth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, St John's College, University of Oxford, March 2004*, ed. by M. Mundell Mango (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009): 253-61: 261.

⁷¹ Chen Ming, "The Indian Buddhist Creation Myth and Its Transmission: A Study Based on Buddhist Scriptures in Chinese Translation and Manuscripts from the Western Regions." *Eurasian Studies* 2 (2014): 143-65; A. Sheriff, "Navigational Methods in the Indian Ocean." In *Ships and the Development of Maritime Technology in the Indian Ocean*, ed. D. Parkin and R. Barnes (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002): 209-26; N.S. Steinhardt, "China's Earliest Mosques." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67/3 (2008): 330-61; A.M. Tadjvidi, "Persian and Chinese Art Exchanges Along Silk Roads." *Senri Ethnological Studies*, 32 (1992): 127-34; Lin Ying, "Standing Feng Huang: Some Notes on How Chinese Feng Huang Patterns Spread into Middle Byzantium (843-1204)." In *Byzantium in China: studies in honour of Professor Xu Jialing on the occasion of her seventieth birthday*, ed. S. Günther *et al.* (Changchun: Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations, 2019): 155-72; Li Fang, "Textual Research on Interethnic Marriage in the Eastern Areas of the Western Regions in the Tang Dynasty." *Eurasian Studies* 2 (2014): 269-97.

focus on globality and decentring imperial powers, with Silk Road studies (whether maritime or land-based), with its interdisciplinary fusion of textual and material analysis. Scholars like Bin Yang, Xiong Zhaoimng and Fu Xia now publish mainly on maritime westward links from China, though in all of these cases, it is possible to trace the very different approach to specialisation to that pursued in the west. Scholars working on ancient maritime trade may also publish on modern social or political history, or combine histories of trade with studies of climate change.⁷²

9. One Belt, One Road

Inextricably linked to these changes in the scope, focus and networks of research into China's historic maritime connections with the west are geopolitical developments of the twenty-first century. Since 2008, the CPR's One Belt, One Road initiative has provided an impetus to scholarly research and a source of funding for that research: historical links between China and potential global partners constitute one basis for soft-power diplomacy. In this respect, One Belt, One Road research fits a longer-term pattern, demonstrated in this article, and explored more broadly by Edward Q. Wang, of global history in China developing in tandem with China's opening up, and often serving the state's interests.⁷³

History serving politics is, of course, neither unusual nor particular to China, but it has led

⁷² For example: in the case of 楊斌 [Bin Yang], “当自印度洋返航——泉州湾宋代海船航线新考” [“Sailing Home from the Indian Ocean: A New Analysis of the Song Shipwreck Discovered in the Quanzhou Bay in 1974”]. *海交史研究* [*Journal of Maritime History Studies*] 83/1 (2021): 12-30; “南洋史地：蒲罗中学案” [“A Debate on Puluozhong: An Early Chinese name for Singapore?”]. *华人研究国际学报* [*The International Journal of Diasporic Chinese Studies*] 11/1 (2019): 47-76; Bin Yang, Shuji Cao and Yushang Li, “Mt. Tambora, Climatic Changes, and China's Decline in the Nineteenth Century.” *Journal of World History* 23/3 (2012): 587-607. Xiong Zhaoming and Fu Xia, *Hepu Han Tombs*, trans. M.H.S. Demandt (Singapore: Springer, 2022) offers the first major study of tomb complexes, revealing a distinctive and complex, stratified culture in coastal East Asia in the early centuries CE, giving a far more detailed insight into the participants in maritime networks, rather than relying on generalisations from centres which would become politically dominant only in later times.

⁷³ E.Q. Wang, “Re-Presenting Asia on the Global Stage: The Rise of Global History in East Asia.” In *Global History, Globally: Research and Practice around the World*, ed. by S. Beckert and D. Sachsenmaier (London: Bloomsbury, 2018): 45-66.

to concerns about research conducted under the aegis of One Belt, One Road. It has been argued by policy think-tanks in the US, for example, that China encouraged the concept for the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road from 2013 in order to “boost infrastructure connectivity throughout Southeast Asia, Oceania, the Indian Ocean, and East Africa...and enhance China’s influence across Asia”,⁷⁴ a view closely echoed by German global policy research.⁷⁵ The close connections between government and scholarship have also been reflected on within China, noting the opportunities presented by government interest in long-distance global connections for attracting financial and logistical support for research, but also pointing to the danger of scholarly focus being led by government priorities rather than historical dynamics.⁷⁶

If the cost-benefit analysis of the One Belt, One Road initiative on scholarship into China’s historic connections with the West is still undetermined, however, other obstacles remain to extensive collaboration or historiographical integration between scholars in China and in the West. These include often dense bureaucracy for accessing museum and archive collections on the part of foreigners and restrictions on travel within the country for both foreigners and Chinese citizens, especially to sensitive regions like Xinjiang. Criticism has also been raised concerning the reporting processes in Chinese archaeological excavation reports and the ways in which widely-used practices introduce overlapping layers of uncertainty and, potentially, misinformation.⁷⁷

Conclusion

⁷⁴ M.J. Green, *China’s Maritime Silk Road: Strategic and Economic Implications for the Indo-Pacific Region* (Washington DC: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2018).

⁷⁵ S. Hieber, “Chinas globale Strategie: die Dimensionen der Seidenstraßeninitiative.” *Zeitschrift für Politik* 65/4 (2018): 455-67.

⁷⁶ Wang Yuanyue, Wen Jing and Han Kexin, “Rule Construction for the Belt and Road Initiative – Problems and Solutions.” *Journal of Yili Normal University* 39/1 (2021): n.p.

⁷⁷ A. Selbitschka, “The Pitfalls of Second-hand Information: On the Traditionalist Dogma in Chinese Excavation Reports.” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 79-80 (2015): 31-72.

In many ways, Sinophone research into ancient East Asian-Mediterranean maritime connections traces a journey that is familiar at a global scale and, to some extent, technologically determined: there has been a gradual movement towards international collaborations, to the introduction of scientific techniques to squeeze more out of available source material, and in the direction of greater exchange and familiarity between national and regional scholarly communities. It seems likely that some of these trends will continue as many kinds of scientific analysis become cheaper and more widely available. Electronic communication is unlikely to diminish, and advances in AI, including automatic translation, are likely to make it easier in future to access debates and discussions regardless of language barriers, though the effect of increasingly separate internets inside and outside China remains to be seen. So does the impact of climate change and global effects to mitigate it on the availability and perceived desirability of travel for networking by researchers. In many ways, it is readily apparent that we are all practising our scholarship in the same world, whether in China or the west.

In other ways, Sinophone scholarship in the field of ancient world history very much has its own identity. The very category “ancient world history” is not necessarily obvious in its meaning on first encounter with it from a different system. It is hoped that a brief summary of how it originated and how it fits into a wider division of history in China is, therefore, helpful. The strong emphasis in scholarship in China on breadth, and even diversity of research areas, as well as enthusiasm for scientific analysis in what may, in other schema, be considered humanities research both seem to us as authors to have a connection with the growth of so-called modern historiography in China out of the close links between late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century imperial service and scholarly writing, though such conclusions should not be overstated. It also seems to us that the link between scholarship on land-based and maritime long-distance communication is stronger in Sinophone historiography than in other communities of study, with benefits to Indian Ocean studies in exchange of approaches and evidence and risks, perhaps most obviously in overlooking the difference, when we speak of ‘routes’ or ‘roads’ in both fields of study, between the human capacity to move by land, however unfamiliar, and the basic inhospitableness of travel by open sea. Land travel can be dangerous and maritime travel

comfortable and enriching, but by default they involve distinct engagements with the physical world, and therefore different assessments of risk and gain.

Above all, while recognising that challenges remain, and in some cases are growing, to scholarly exchange in the field of ancient maritime connections, we hope that this study can provide a starting point for new conversations and an explanation for why the research questions in Chinese literature on Indian Ocean mobilities may not closely resemble those that develop out of European, US, Australian or other western historiographical contexts. It seems unlikely, and in any case undesirable, that we will imminently see an end to historiographies that are as distinctive and as internally diverse as the societies that produce them. Setting those historiographies in their historical and social context is one way to ensure that such diversity of perspective is an opportunity, not a barrier.

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