

# THE SILK ROAD BY LAND AND SEA

## A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Peter Nolan

CHINA'S President Xi Jinping has made the policy of the 'New Silk Road by Land and Sea,' which would connect the Middle Kingdom with the West, a key part of China's international relations. For over 2,000 years, China has had a close relationship with the surrounding regions of Asia. It has had deep long-term trade and cultural interactions with Central Asia through Xinjiang, and with South-east Asia through the South China Sea (Nan Hai). Xinjiang and the South China Sea constitute China's "doorways" into Central and Southeast Asia, respectively.

In his March 2014 address at UN-ESCO, President Xi stressed the importance of an appreciation of history for mutual understanding:

history tells us that only by interacting with, and learning from, others can a civilization enjoy full vitality. If all civilizations

can uphold inclusiveness, the so-called 'clash of civilizations' will be out of the question and the harmony of civilizations will become reality.

It is with this in mind that I will undertake to examine in this essay some aspects of China's relationship with the territories along the Silk Road prior to the global transformation set in motion by the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain.

### THE LAND ROUTE

The Western Region (Xi Yu), or Greater Turkestan, is the heartland of the Silk Road by land. It spans a territory that stretches for around 1,000 miles from Yu Men Guan ("Jade Gate") in China's Gansu province to the Oxus River (Amu Darya) in western Uzbekistan, and is divided in two by the Tian Shan-Kun Lun Mountain Ranges. "Inner Turkestan" in Xinjiang and "Outer Turkestan" in Central Asia

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*A fortress on the Silk Road*

have been intimately interconnected for over two millennia through trade and the inter-mingling of the diverse people who live in the Greater Turkestan region.

The Silk Road developed during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), when Europe was united under Roman rule. China's imports from Central Asia consisted of a wide variety of goods, including warhorses, spices, fragrances, wine, precious stones (e.g. lapis lazuli), gold, silverware, and glassware. The main body of China's exports consisted of silk yarn and silk fabrics. Although

silk textiles were China's main export to Central Asia for a long period, the region also had its own ancient textile industry, much of it for export. Moreover, Central Asia developed its own paper industry, also based on improved-upon Chinese technology, substituting cotton fiber for silk.

During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD) trade with Central Asia reached new heights. A groundbreaking 1956 book by Laurence Sickman and Alexander Soper, entitled *The Art and Architecture of China*, explains that "goods from China were to be found

in market towns throughout the Near and Middle East. [...] A never-ending stream of camel caravans carried Chinese goods across the highways of Central Asia.” On the return journey, caravans carried exotic goods back through the gates of the Great Wall. In the seventh and eighth centuries, the Chinese capital Chang’an (modern Xi’an) was the greatest city in the world. As Sickman and Soper describe it,

the streets were filled with the cosmopolitan populace befitting the capital of such an extensive empire. There were priests from India, officials and merchants from Persia and the kingdoms of Central Asia, Turks, Arabs and traders from Mesopotamia. [...] There grew up side-by-side the Buddhist and Taoist temples, Muhammedan mosques, Manichean and Nestorian churches.

**B**uddhism reached China in around 120 BC by means of both merchants and missionaries along the caravan routes through Central Asia into China. For half a millennium after the fall of the Han Dynasty (220 AD), Buddhism became firmly implanted in China. As Sickman and Soper indicate: “the desert road that linked China with the West [...] played a role of ever increasing importance as a

high road for ideas and art forms that poured into China.” The era from the fourth to the eighth century can be considered as the ‘Buddhist Age,’ not only in China but across the whole of Asia, serving as a cultural unifying force never matched before or

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since. In Central Asia, Buddhism came under attack following the Arab conquests of the seventh century. Many Buddhists retreated to Xinjiang, strengthening the already important role of Buddhism in the region. The influence of Buddhism in China was, however, severely checked by violent attacks between 841 and 845 AD. According to official accounts, 4,600 monasteries and 40,000 shrines were destroyed during these years. Thereafter, it never regained its position as a nationwide organized religion akin to that of Christianity in Europe.

Following the Arab conquest of Persia and Transoxiana in the seventh and eighth centuries, Islam replaced Buddhism as the belief system across Central Asia. Despite many vicissitudes, it remains at the heart of Central Asian culture, with little trace of the millennia-long Buddhist era remaining in the region today.

**T**he Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century across most of Asia wrought great destruction, including that of both Islamic and Buddhist artifacts. However, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a vast territory from China to the Middle East was part of a united empire under the Mongols. After the violence of the conquest was over, Central Asia enjoyed relative peace and prosperity, benefiting from its position at the crossroads of civilizations in the heart of the Mongol empire.

It was the unity achieved under the ‘Pax Mongolica’ that made Marco Polo’s journey across Central Asia possible. The Venetian explorer encountered a long sequence of vibrant commercial cities, including Baghdad and Basra (in today’s Iraq), Tabriz, Yazd, and Kerman (in today’s Iran). Marco Polo wrote in detail about the vibrant oasis cities along the Silk Road in Xinjiang, including Yarkand, Pem, Charchan, Kashgar, and Khotan. Of Kashgar he writes:

[It] was once a kingdom, but now it is subject to the Great Khan. It has villages and towns aplenty. Its inhabitants live by trade and industry. They have very fine orchards and vineyards and flourishing estates. Cotton grows here in plenty, besides flax and hemp. The soil is fruitful and productive of all the means of life. This country is the starting-point from which many merchants set out to market their wares all over the world.

**T**he trade routes across Central Asia stimulated an era of great prosperity in Anatolia, at the western terminus of the Silk Road. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, China supplied raw silk to the Middle East and Europe in huge, seemingly limitless amounts. In 1370 the Muslim Turk Timur seized power in Central Asia and founded a dynasty that ruled the region from 1370 to 1507. Although his campaigns extended from Xinjiang to Syria, the core of the Timurid empire was Transoxiana. This period was by many accounts the most glorious chapter in the history of Central Asia. It witnessed a renewed flourishing of long-distance trade, including trade with the Ming Empire.

From the ninth century through to the fifteenth century, Central Asia made tremendous scientific and artistic progress. The region produced towering intellectual figures who made fundamental advances in mathematics, astronomy, geography, medicine, and philosophy, including al-Khwarizmi (783–847), al-Farghani (798–865), al-Khwarajandi (eleventh century), al-Biruni (973–1048), Ibn Sina or Avicenna (980–1037), Ulag Beg (1394–1449), and al-Quschi (1402–1474).

Under the Yuan Dynasty, China’s Mongol rulers made extensive use of scientists from Central Asia. Kublai Khan introduced doctors from Cen-

tral Asia to his court and ordered Ibn Sina's *Canon of Medicine* to be translated into Chinese. Both the Yuan and Ming Dynasties made extensive use of astronomers from Central Asia. There was an 'astronomical Silk Road,' with Muslims from Central Asia playing an important role in Chinese astronomy. For instance, the first Ming Emperor, Tai Zi, established a Muslim Astronomical Bureau in 1368, headed by Jamal al-Din from Bukhara. The Bureau operated alongside the traditional Chinese astronomical bureau.

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The vast Chinese economy experienced continued commercial development and prosperity in the late Ming (1368–1644) and early Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, which stimulated continued trade with Central Asia through Xinjiang. The eastward expansion of the Russian Empire after the sixteenth century stimulated Russian demand for goods produced in South Asia and traded through Central Asia. The Ferghana Valley under the Khoqand Khanate experienced rapid economic development in this period. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, increasingly large quantities of Russian goods were taken from Orenburg to the Khoqand Khanate (1709–1876) and further

transported by thousands of Khoqandi merchants across the Tian Shan to Kashgar, Yarkand, and other Xinjiang cities. From there, a significant percentage of these goods was transported on to more distant markets in China and India. These Khoqandi merchants returned to the Ferghana Valley with Chinese goods such as tea bricks, silk textiles, porcelain, silver, and rhubarb—the last of which was used for medicinal purposes and as a dye.

**THE MARITIME ROUTE**

China's internal trade and commercialization were highly developed from early in its history, with the total value always greatly exceeding the value of international trade. The latter was only heavily restricted by the Chinese government during relatively brief periods, most notably during the early Ming dynasty, while in parts of the Qing Dynasty (between 1757 and 1842) European merchants were confined to trade only through Canton (Guangzhou).

However, apart from these limitations, international trade from China with and through the Nan Hai continued relatively unimpeded throughout most of China's history. Although dwarfed by domestic trade in terms

of its total value, the Nan Hai trade occupies an important place in the history of both China and Southeast Asia. The Nan Hai encompasses the area that today includes China's Guangdong, Guangxi and Hainan provinces, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. In fact, the Nan Hai can be considered historically as a single region. One of Asia's leading historians, Wang Gungwu, has written that the Nan Hai "is remarkable for its near-Mediterranean nature. Its main trade route from one end in the northeast to the other in the southwest lies in the path of the two monsoons and is, therefore, eminently suited for monsoon sailing." The South China Sea was the main trade route of what may be called the Asian east-west trade in commodities and ideas. Quoting Wang once more:

It was the second Silk Route. Its waters and islands straits were as the sands and mountain passes of Central Asia; its ports were like the caravanserais. It became to the southern Chinese what the land outside the Jade Gate was to the northern Chinese.

Trade across the Nan Hai from China to Southeast and South Asia is of great antiquity. Trade between China and Southeast Asia, as well as with South Asia and the Middle East,

was already well developed by the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). It expanded greatly during the Tang Dynasty (618 AD–907 AD) and continued to grow to even greater heights during the Song Dynasty (960–1271 AD).

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Chinese ships were engaged in long-distance trade across the Nan Hai and beyond from an early point in history. Chinese merchants may have reached Ethiopia and East Africa as early

as the first century BC. Chinese ships were sailing to Penang in Malaya around 350 AD, to Ceylon by around 400 AD, and by the fourth century they were probably coming to the mouth of the Euphrates in Iraq and calling at Aden.

There are large quantities of Chinese coins on the East African coast, with the earliest ones dating from around 620 AD. East Africa also contains hoards of Chinese porcelain shards. In 1955, British archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler wrote:

I have never seen so much broken china as in the past fortnight between Dar es Salaam and the Kilwa Islands, literally fragments of Chinese porcelain by the shovelful. I think it is fair to say that as far as the Middle Ages is concerned from the tenth century AD onwards the buried history of Tanganyika is written in Chinese porcelain.

As early as the Tang Dynasty there were large numbers of foreign merchants and sailors in the port cities of Southern China. From Roman times up until the fourteenth century, Arab merchants dominated trade between Southeast Asia across the Indian Ocean. They were also important in trade across the Nan Hai. Indians, Persians, and merchants from Southeast Asia itself, also played a role in trade across the Nan Hai.

However, it was Chinese merchants that played the central role in this trade. When the first Europeans entered into trade with China in the sixteenth

century, they encountered flourishing trade across the Nan Hai, observing that it was conducted mainly by Chinese. A classic study from 1941 by J.K. Fairbank and S.Y. Teng even argues that “native Chinese commercial expansion stemming from the Mongol period, or probably much earlier, paved the way for the European invasion of China by sea.”

The main Chinese export across the Nan Hai was traditionally silk, but porcelain and tea became increasingly important during the Tang and Song dynasties. A wide array of goods were imported by China from lands beyond the Nan Hai, including products not only from Southeast Asia, but also from Persia, Syria, Arabia,

East Africa, and North India. The southern Chinese cities of Yangzhou, Guangzhou, Ningbo, and Wenzhou were among the most important ports involved in the Nan Hai trade.

Quanzhou (in Fujian province) is considered by many experts to be the terminus of the old Maritime Silk Road. It was arguably the most important port in the Nan Hai trade until at least the Yuan Dynasty. Indeed, in the view of scholars such as Angela Schottenhammer, it deserves the label “emporium of the world” between the tenth and fourteenth centuries.

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Between 1405 and 1433, the Chinese government organized giant fleets to undertake seven diplomatic expeditions, ranging from Borneo to East Africa. They were all under the command of Zheng He, who was born of a Yunnanese Muslim family, with a father who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. The first expedition contained 62 great sailing ships and carried a force of around 30,000 men. The first stop was Malacca. The next stop was Palembang in Sumatra, a city long known to the Chinese. The fleet then sailed across the Indian Ocean to Calicut, before returning to China. The second expedition, in 1405, went to Java, Calicut, Ceylon, and Siam. The third expedition, in 1409, made a similar journey.

These three expeditions visited places around the Nan Hai and in the Indian Ocean—all of which were already well known to the Chinese. The prosperity of the south Indian cities was “in part due to the fact that they were the meeting-place for Arab ships coming from the West and Chinese ships coming from the East,” as C.P. Fitzgerald wrote in his groundbreaking 1972 book entitled *The Southern Expansion of the Chinese People*. The final four expeditions went much further afield, visiting Hormuz, the Persian Gulf, the Maldives, and covering the whole coast of East Africa, including Mogadishu and Mozambique.

The main purpose of the expeditions was to deepen Chinese knowledge of the outside world. Although Zheng He’s ships were armed, including gunpowder weapons, and the fleet was of great size, no effort was made to establish foreign forts or colonies. According to a prominent Western historian writing in 1970, the entire operation was that of

a navy paying friendly visits to foreign ports [...]. Indeed, the term navy is hardly applicable to the Chinese fleets, which were more like assemblies of merchant fleets than of a nationalized trading authority.

Nonetheless, Zheng He’s fleet was an official government expedition, which had no direct relationship to the long-term trade conducted by Chinese and foreign merchant shipping across the

Nan Hai. By the middle of the eighteenth century, foreign trade by sea had increased greatly, both with Southeast Asia and with Europeans. Chinese junks compared favorably in size with their European counterparts. The biggest junks might have been of 1,000 tons, carrying a crew of 180 men. In a seminal work entitled *East Asia: the Modern Transformation*, historians J.K. Fairbank, E.O. Reischauer, and A.M. Craig wrote that

hundreds if not thousands of these sturdy merchantmen plied annually between Amoy or Canton and the Straits of Malacca, south in winter, north in summer. They followed detailed sailing directions through numerous ports of call [...]. The trade with Southeast Asia was carried on in Chinese vessels and [...] was entirely in Chinese hands.

Over time, communities of Chinese people developed in the lands around the Nan Hai. They mainly traveled there due to trade-related activities. Indeed, Fairbank wrote that by the time of Zheng He’s expeditions in the fifteenth century “the flow of Chinese sea trade and migration into the ports of Southeast Asia had already assumed important dimensions.” Long before European ships entered the Nan Hai, he added, “Chinese trading junks were the principal carriers in the international commerce of East Asia.” Unlike the later activities of European merchants, the activities of Chinese mer-

chants in the lands around the Nan Hai were, according to Fairbank, “seldom aided by naval or political action by the Chinese government.” Wang Gungwu aptly described the community of Chinese overseas traders as “merchants without an empire.”

Under traditional shipping technologies, without modern maps and navigation aids, the waters of the Nan Hai were extremely dangerous. Chinese ships have crossed the dangerous seas of the Nan Hai for more than 2,000 years. China was already making large ocean-going boats by the Han Dynasty, or even earlier. The Western Han (206 BC–8 AD) rulers established and maintained close navigational and commercial ties with Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, and India. When Zheng He made his voyages through the Nan Hai, the routes he followed had been known and used by Chinese mariners for several centuries. China already regarded the Nan Hai and its islands as being under its authority and control by the time of the Han Dynasty. During the Tang Dynasty, the Xisha and Nansha Islands were placed under the jurisdiction of Qiongzhou Prefecture (now Hainan Province). As well-respected Chinese scholar Shen Jianming has argued, the central Chi-

nese government in both the Ming and the Qing Dynasties “invariably considered itself to have sovereignty over both the South China Sea Islands and their adjacent areas.”

Chinese naval patrols regularly sailed the Nan Hai during the era when northern Vietnam was a Chinese province (111 BC–938 AD). The Chinese navy continued to patrol in the Nan Hai during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. As early as the Song Dynasty, Chinese maps included the islands of the Nan Hai as lying within China’s boundaries. Official maps of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties continued to include the islands of the Nan Hai as part of China. In 1932, 1935, and 1947, the

Nationalist Government conducted three large-scale surveys of the Nan Hai. Its 1948 map included standardized names of most of the islands and adopted the famous U-shaped intermittent line to indicate China’s sovereignty over the Nan Hai. China’s post-1949 government continued to follow this practice in official maps of the People’s Republic of China. It is worth noting, however, that there is a dispute, even within China, about the precise meaning of the ‘dotted lines’ around the Nan Hai. Some consider

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that they apply to China’s sovereignty over the whole area within the line, whilst others argue that China’s sovereignty only applies to the islands and island-like features.

### THE TRIBUTE SYSTEM

The tribute system has existed since ancient times—even before the unification of China under the Qin Dynasty (221–207 BC). It lasted until the late nineteenth century. The last tribute mission was sent from Liu Qiu (Okinawa) in 1875, from Annam in 1883, from Korea in 1894, and from Nepal in 1908. Under the tribute system, representatives of “barbarian people” formally presented gifts at the Chinese court in recognition of the “benefit” their country might receive from Chinese civilization.

Although the main body of international trade took place outside the tributary system, it was intimately bound up with trade between China and the outside world. According to the aforementioned 1941 study by Fairbank and Tang, tributary missions were protected by the Emperor during their journey to and from the capital. They were also allowed to trade in special markets in the city that were supervised by government officials, in order to ensure

just and fair trade [...]. If there are any who buy on credit and intentionally delay [payment], cheating or seeking ‘squeeze,’ with the result that the foreigners wait a long time, they, together with those who trade with them in private, will be condemned; and will be put in the cangue for one month in front of their shops.

The same study underscored the fact that relations between the Son of Heaven and the tributaries were on an ethical basis and hence reciprocal:

the tributaries were submissive and reverent, the Emperor was compassionate and condescending. These reciprocal relationships required formal expression. Presentation was a ritual performance, balanced by forms of imperial hospitality and bestowal of imperial gifts.

All those countries and regions that wished to enter into a relationship with China needed to do so as, according to T.F. Tsiang,

China’s vassal, acknowledging the supremacy of the Chinese Emperor and obeying his commands thus ruling out all possibility of intercourse on terms of equality [...] must not be construed to be a dogma of conquest or universal dominion, for it imposed nothing on foreign peoples who chose to remain outside the Chinese world. It sought peace and security, with

both of which international relations were held incompatible. If relations there had to be, they must be of the suzerain-vassal type, acceptance of which meant to the Chinese acceptance of the Chinese ethic on the part of the barbarian [...]. It must not be assumed that the Chinese court made a profit out of tribute. The Imperial gifts bestowed in return were usually more valuable than the tribute.

At one time or another, the countries and regions that came to China under the tribute system encompassed a large part of Central Asia, Northeast Asia, and Southeast Asia, in addition to countries and regions further afield. A detailed list of tributaries from the Ming Dynasty in 1587 includes “tributes sent to the Court by 38 countries of the Western regions (Xi Yu).”

The countries and regions sending tribute included Kashgar, Herat, Bukhara, Kashmir, Tabriz, Samarkand, Turfan, Isfahan, Khorasan, as well as the ‘Kingdom of Rum’—and even Mecca. The lands around the Nan Hai and those from farther afield along the Maritime Silk Road sent tribute missions to China’s rulers from as early as the Han Dynasty. The detailed list of tributaries compiled in 1587 includes those from Annam, Siam, Champa, Burma, Java, Brunei, Borneo, the Philippines, Malacca, Calicut, Bengal, Ceylon, Syria, Hormuz, and the Maldives.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Chinese government’s policy of the ‘New Silk Road by Land and Sea’ has the development of infrastructure and commercial relationships at its core. Infrastructure building, in order to support commerce and foster social stability, was a foundation-stone of China’s own long-term prosperity over the course of more than 2,000 years. In many important ways, China’s newly enunciated policy thus builds on the history of ancient trade networks and cultural interaction between China and Central and Southeast Asia.

Europe is in the Far West at the terminus of these networks. Before the nineteenth century, the interaction between China and Europe was mostly indirect: mainly through intermediary trade systems.

These trade systems involved not only Chinese people, but also large numbers of inhabitants of the regions that lie between China and the Far West. Although their numbers were tiny compared to the vast Chinese population, substantial trading communities from Central and Southeast Asia, including Buddhists, Arabs, Muslims, Persians, and Indians, settled in China’s western and southern coastal regions. A significant number of Chinese people settled in regions outside China—especially in the lands around the Nan Hai.

China’s traditional international trade was tiny compared to the vast volume of internal trade. However, it was highly significant in terms of the deep inter-connections between China and the regions immediately around it to the West and the South. Mainly through trade relations, a long-term symbiotic two-way flow of culture took place between China and these regions, which helped to weave them together in a complex cultural tapestry.

From the collapse of the Roman Empire up to at least the sixteenth century, China’s level of commercialization, urbanization, technology, and culture was much ahead of that in Europe. The gap only narrowed significantly thereafter. Through China’s trade and cultural interaction with Central and Southeast Asia, a longterm flow of technologies took place from China to Europe, helping to nourish the revolution in military and naval technology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, through which the West achieved its colonial conquests. It also contributed

greatly to the Industrial Revolution, through which Europe vaulted ahead of China in the space of only half a century after 1800.

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Through this double revolution, the West rose rapidly to dominate the whole global political economy—including that of Central and Southeast Asia. However, the period since the European Industrial Revolution is only around 200 years. The West’s massive impact upon the regions between it and China over the past two centuries is a thin veneer layered on top of a deep, complex ‘lacquer’ of interaction

between China and these regions. This interaction is of great antiquity, stretching back more than 2,000 years.

The world is now moving into a new age, no longer dominated by the countries of the West, which contain only a small share of the global population. The era since the Industrial Revolution can increasingly be seen as a relatively brief and exceptional period in the history of the human race. ●