

Sino-European Encounters – The Long-term Perspective

In this brief paper I shall be dealing with Sino-European encounters by land, mainly – but not exclusively - from a European position. As we move forward in time I shall narrow down the scope from a European to a North European and Swedish horizon.

According to a Greek source from the 5th century BC, ascribed to Ktesias of Knidos, who had spent many years as a prisoner of war in Persia, we learn that the *Seres* and the *Indoi* of the North are people of such high stature that one meets persons with 13 elbows, and they live for more than 200 years. Both the text and its content are obviously very confused and may originally refer to India rather than to China. Be that as it may. What is important is that we here meet the name Σηραεσ for the first time in the classical literature of the Mediterranean world. The origin and etymology of the ethnonym *Seres* is much debated and remains unclear in its details to this day. With time it became more and more connected to a great but unknown and fabulous country at the extreme east of the known world – a country which produced the most famous of all imported products – the silk. It is quite possible that the ethnonym *Seres* somehow is connected to the word, or rather one of the words, for *silk*. What we do know for sure however, is that at the dawn of Western-Eastern commercial relations the term *Seres* did **not** indicate China or the Chinese but rather one of the minor peoples at the North-Western border of China, the Wu-sun 烏孫, who served as the first “relay-station” of the caravan routes from China proper to the Mediterranean world. From the Western horizon these faraway suppliers of the coveted merchandise at an early stage obviously became identified also as the producers of the silk they were selling.

Herodotos, the father of Western historiography, who wrote in the 5th c BC, never mentions China, but describes the northern trade route from the Pontic steppe all the way to what probably is the beginning of the Gansu corridor. To him the Issedones blocked the view into the Chinese heartland - a pattern that we see repeating itself time and time again practically all the way up to the beginning of the Mongol Empire.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact time or even century of the beginning of the silk trade between China and the West. The well documented silk finds from Pazyryk in Eastern Siberia stem from the period 5-3rd centuries BC and may perhaps be superseded by the finds at Toprak-kale close to the old Urartu, which was conquered by the Medes in 585 BC. Also within the Greek world finds of what may be Chinese silk seem to testify to early trade relations with China. I

am thinking of the finds from Alkibiades' (or one of his relatives'; Alkibiades died 404 BC)) tomb in Kerameikos in Athens, and from the mausoleum in Vergina claimed to have been intended for Philipp II (died 339 BC). It is interesting to note that the Greek word for the kind of silk used as shrouds is *sindon* (σινδων), of which the first part again is considered to be connected with a word for China.

As the Han 漢 dynasty came to power in China in 206 BC the political unity and relative stability in the country created the necessary prerequisites for an increased trade with the Western Territories 西域 (what we today call Central Asia) and beyond. During the 200 years immediately preceding and following the beginning of Western calendar, i.e. during the height of the Roman and Han Empires, the references to Chinese silk in the Roman literature, especially in the poetry, become very frequent. Virgile (-70 - +49), Horace (-65 - +8), Propertius (-30 - +15) and Ovid (-43 - +18) all sing about the almost indecently transparent silk coveted and loved by the s.c. light guard of Rome.

While the historians of the classical world in both West and East were struggling with their insufficient data, business along the various routes of the Silk Road went on unconcerned of these learned troubles.

Without directly mentioning the *Seres* already Herodotus in his fourth book has a detailed description of the s.c. northern trade route, which started from the Greek dominated area in the forest zone at the Pontic steppe, continued via the river Don to Central Asia, passed north of the Tianshan 天山 range, and finally via Turfan 吐魯番 or Hami 哈密 reached the Gansu corridor. The Southern Route went through the passes in Pamir and passing the Taklamakan desert either in a northern branch via Aqsu 姑墨 and Kucha 龜磁 or in a southern branch via Yarkend 莎車, Khotan 于闐, Niya 泥雅, Charqliq 姑墨 and Miran 屯城, finally connected to the Gansu corridor. At the eastern end of the desert there was a connecting road between the northern and southern branches. Roughly in the middle of that road we find the ruins of the famous and cosmopolitan city Loulan 樓蘭 once situated along the shore of the "Wandering Lake", which centuries later was to create such a stir among the geographers of the time.

The very concept "Silk Road" or better the "Silk Roads" is not especially old. It was coined in the 1870-ies by Sven Hedin's teacher of Asian geography in Berlin, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905) as a designation of that wide passage, which over the Asian continent joined the Far West with the Far East. We are thus not dealing with one single well-defined road, but rather with a number of routes, often defined as the Northern and the Southern one – the southern one in its turn being split into a Northern and a Southern branch. In due

time these land routes got a competitor through a real Southern sea-route from Southern China, via India and the Persian Gulf and further to Syria and Byzantium. It goes without saying that the intensity of trade, types of commodities and the exact extension of the roads has varied considerably during the impressively long existence of these trade relations. It is also important to make it clear that these enormously distant roads, which once joined the Roman and the Chinese Empires, of course never were operated by one and the same camel caravan all the way. Instead there was a number of “relay stations” naturally enough situated within the jurisdiction of various small states, where reloading was made, taxes paid and new caravans took over. This type of trade made it possible for many cities and small states along the Silk Road to make considerable earnings and to reach a high material and cultural standard – a fact to which some of the ruined cities in the Taklamakan desert, rediscovered during the 19th and 20th centuries, bear ample witness.

These early contacts between East and West, which go back several hundred centuries BC, also at an early stage led to the fact that rather foggy notions about the far-away Other began to conceptualize. Already in the fourth book of the Greek historian Herodotos (400 BC) we find references to the Scythians, an Iranian Central Asian people, which in the West were fighting with the Persian great power, and in the East had contacts with and gave and received impulses to/from the Chinese realm. However, Herodotos does not mention China or the *Seres*. If we go a bit further forward in time the picture changes somewhat. Alexander the Great and his conquest of large parts of Central Asia and India during the 4th c BC dramatically had changed the Western horizon, and through Indian and other sources the existence of a great eastern power probably no longer was a matter of conjecture – in spite of the fact that up till then there had been no direct conflicts or contacts with that power. From the 1st century BC and forward the references to China in the Roman literature are abundant. The immediate interest in China from the Roman side was the Chinese silk, which via the Silk routes was imported to Rome in great quantities. It was the highest fashion – not least among the Roman light guard - to dress in the soft, beautiful and almost indecently transparent Chinese silk. Many are the Roman poets and literary men who complain about this luxurious waste and about the moral decline of the time. Vergilius, Horatius, Ovidius..., all of them lived at this time and they all have one or several references to the silk and China. In one of his elegies Propertius (50-15 BC) writes about the frustrated lover:

Quid relevant variis serica textilibus?

How may the Chinese with their gay textiles comfort (the unhappy lover)?

The Greek geographer Strabo (BC58 - AD21) in his comprehensive work has many references to China, but the picture is unclear and he does not seem to

have had any detailed knowledge about the real conditions of the country he is mentioning so often.

It is from this time on that the *Seres* start to become a household word also among the professional geographers of the time. The most celebrated of them, *Strabo* (-58 - +21), who wrote in Greek, often refers to the *Seres* in terms that reveal that it is no longer the *Wusun* 烏孫 which are intended, but rather a big country North-East of India. In his *Chrestomathy* Strabo speaks of a mountain range which separates the *Sakas*, the *Scythians* and the *Seres* in the north from the *Indians* in the south. In a number of similar works like the anonymous *Periplus* from the 1st c. AD, the *Geography* by Ptolemaios (a century later) and many others the *Seres* are mentioned, often in connection with the silk or silk-production, but none of these works has any detailed information about the land of the *Seres* to share with us. To the Greek and Roman readers of the time China remains an enigmatic entity hiding in the clouds of ignorance, but still taken for granted out there somewhere in the east at the very beginning of the world.

The Byzantine Empire seems to have had close trade relations with China. A number of Byzantine coins found in China and along the routes in Central Asia eloquently testify to this fact. Consequently, the Byzantine historians were in a slightly better position to provide new information about the Far East compared to their elder Greek and Roman colleagues. An interesting example is provided by Theophylaktos Simocatta (7th c) who happens for the first time in Western literature to mention the name of one of the Three Kingdoms on the Korean peninsula, the Koguryô 高句麗. Theophylaktos gives the name Μουκρη, which beautifully supports a slightly older reference from a Turkic royal tomb inscription in Turkic runic script found in Tsaidam in present day Republic of Mongolia. The inscription speaks of the *Bökli* in a context that clearly shows that Koguryô 高句麗 is intended. Again these two references help us to explain an otherwise unintelligible self-designation used by the Koguryôs and which has come down to us in Chinese transcription as 莫離 *mâk ljie*.

Such encounters between the Far East and the Far West, in which a Western source helps us to understand an East Asian philological enigma are a rare thing, but they do exist and show that not everything that was written about the countries beyond the Issedones belongs to the realm of myths.

From the Chinese side the interest in the surrounding world was at the beginning of their historiography fairly limited. Everything on the other side of the Chinese borders was in a way “barbarian” and did not necessarily deserve attention apart from purely military considerations. References to the Far West and the Byzantine Empire therefore do not start to appear in some abundance in Chinese historiography until the 7th and 8th centuries, i.e. during the expansive Tang dynasty. However, already from the first century BC in the Chinese chronicles we may in surprising detail follow the development along the Silk routes from

China proper all the way up to the Pamir and Western Turkestan – i.e. the part of the West that lay immediately within the Chinese political sphere of influence. Even in *Shiji* 史記, the first of the impressive row of Chinese chronicles, compiled by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145-86 BC), we find a short note on a state as far west as Parthia, but Rome itself is not mentioned. The Daqin 大秦 mentioned in the Chinese chronicles (*Hou Han shu* 後漢書) from the 1st century AD and on is generally assumed not to indicate Rome but rather Syria and in some later confused texts perhaps Byzantium.

Independently of the diligence and possible lacking interest or source materials of the historiographers, the trade and cultural exchange continued uninterrupted along our trans-Asian trade routes. In a westerly direction flowed silk and spices and eastwards glass, copper, lapis lazuli and precious and semi-precious stones. Along with the material goods these routes transported and disseminated also fashion, techniques, religions and systems of thought. All the goods, material or immaterial, did not end up only at the “end-stations” China or Rome. Quite a lot of it remained along the road. So e.g. we find that in Inner Asia, or Innermost Asia to use a British term, more or less Western religions like Manicheism, Zoroastrianism and Nestorianism had taken root and flourished together with the southern Buddhism and the eastern Confucianism. Consequently, it was not only the big “end stations” Rome/Byzantium and China that contributed to the flow – also great civilizations “along the road” gave large, sometimes the largest, contributions. Seen from a Western perspective the Iranian linguistic and cultural complex stands out as perhaps the most interesting and productive. The Achaemenid Persia already at the time of Herodotus constituted a cultural and political great power in the Middle East, and fought not only with the Greeks but also with their distant tribal relatives the Scythians, who were scattered over large areas north and east of the Black Sea. The art of the westernmost Scythians shows strong influence from Greek artistic traditions, while their Scythian kinsmen, who lived further to the east around the Altai mountains, show strong Chinese influences instead of the Greek one. It is these eastern Scythians who are archeologically very well documented because of the fact that their tombs in Pazyryk in eastern Siberia immediately after they had been closed became deep frozen and remained so for 25 centuries. All organic material, including textiles and the corpses, is wonderfully preserved and immediately scientifically “readable”. The s.c. Scythian animal style, so cherished by both the western and the eastern Scythians, has served as a model and source of inspiration for the later s.c. Ordos bronzes, which have been excavated in the Ordos area in the bend of the Yellow River. The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm has a wonderful collection of Ordos bronzes – probably the finest outside of China. At any rate, the Ordos bronzes serve as a fine and early example of artistic features – an intellectual flow, if you

like – that has flowed from tracts under Greek influence in the west to the central parts of China.

It is fairly safe to define the western termini of the Silk Road as Rome, Byzantium and Syria with an additional branch towards southern Russia and a small trickle leading up to northern Europe and Scandinavia. Where then was the eastern terminus? Often the end station somewhat rashly is given as the capitol of the Chinese empire – a notion that varies in accordance with the period discussed: Loyang 洛陽 under Han 漢 or Zhangan 長安 under Tang 唐 or Khanbalyk/Beijing under Yuan 元. As a matter of fact, the trade route continued further north and north east – at least from the 5th century and onwards. It continued from Zhangan up to and through the Korean peninsula and crossed over to the Japanese islands. From the beginning of the 7th century until 926 there existed north of the Korean peninsula on an area that reached the Sungari river a kingdom called Bohai 渤海 (Parhae in Korean), which normally is considered to be the cultural and political heir of the defunct kingdom of Koguryô 高句麗. Bohai 渤海 was a fairly well developed state and constituted one of the easternmost receivers of the Silk Road system. Possibly Bohai like earlier Paekche 百濟 and later Silla 新羅 served as a re-exporter of material and intellectual Silk Road goods to the Japanese islands.

The connection of the Korean peninsula to the Silk Road system in fact constituted only a continuation in historical time of the old northern and north-western contacts with Asia which had existed since late Paleolithic (maybe 20.000 BC) and early Neolithic times (ca 3000 BC). Theories have been put forward claiming that the Korean peninsula, and later also the Japanese islands had been overrun by a people of “horse riders” coming from the north – a theory often referred to in order to explain certain abrupt changes in ceramic style and in some archeologically definable social conditions. This theory about the horse riders from the north, who by the way allegedly brought the horse to Korea and Japan, is far from uncontroversial, and one does well in referring to it with much caution.

From what we have seen so far it is evident that personal encounters between people from China and the Mediterranean during the early periods were extremely few – if they existed at all. The written sources keep silent about it and the scanty information we have is difficult to confirm or obviously corrupt. This is probably valid both for the story about Chinese envoys allegedly having reached Rome in 27 BC, and the story recorded in *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (318,2919-20) reporting that “the King of Daqin 大秦王, Antun 安敦 (identified with Marcus Aurelius Antonius 161-180), had sent envoys (probably by sea) to China bringing various kinds of merchandise with them. None of these reports

can be verified from other sources. And to make things worse, our Roman historiographer Florus has a solidly established reputation of being an unscrupulous liar. Whether the “envoys” from the King of Daqin 大秦王 were really envoys or just audacious merchants is hard to decide.

It thus seems that the encounters between China and the Mediterranean mainly were of an “indirect” nature – information about the far-away *Other* being re-loaded together with the silk bundles from caravan to caravan and transmitted from traveler to traveler. One could of course choose to see as an “encounter” also the sudden invasions of Eastern Europe by the Huns, originally the result of a long chain- reaction due to political and military unrest between the sedentary China and her aggressive nomadic neighbors, or the equally fateful battle at Talas in 751 when the westward expansion of the vigorous Tang China was checked by the advancing Arab forces.

At any rate, this basically impersonal, as it were, quality of the Sino-European encounters continued all the way up to the Mongol Empire with its surprisingly favorable conditions for travel. I need not here go into details about the famous travelers like Marco Polo, Wilhelm of Rubroek or Plano Carpini, who greatly contributed to making China known in the West.

The debacle of the Mongol Empire created conditions unfavorable for travel or trade along the old trans-Asian routes, and the Silk Road never again recovered its former significance as a link between China and the West. From a Western point of view the following three or four centuries were fairly barren as far as contacts by land with China were concerned. The Issedones, so to speak, had returned and blocked the view again.

During the 1600-eds China was a well-known entity also in Northern Europe. Even in Sweden China and Things Chinese were the topics of academic dissertations. But this knowledge was practically all due to intensified contacts with China by sea. In Northern Europe contacts by land with China were mostly handled by Russia through her newly acquired Siberian territories. Chinese and Russian interests clashed in the Far East and when peace was restored by the treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689 better conditions finally were created for peaceful encounters between the two empires.

By an odd twist of fate it was the Swedish prisoners of war in Russia, who during the first three decades of the following century benefited – if that is the correct word – from the young and fragile Sino-Russian peace. The prisoners of war from the Swedish debacle at Poltava in 1709 were sent by the thousands to Siberia and many of them were used by the Russians as qualified members of various expeditions sent out to explore the natural resources of Inner Asia. Many

of them never returned home, but some of them did and had remarkable stories to tell. So e.g. Captain Johann Philipp Strahlenberg (1676-1747) used his many years as a prisoner to gather reliable information about Siberia and Central Asia. After his return to Sweden he published in Stockholm in 1730 a map and a book on the geography, history and ethnography of Inner Asia – a work which still today serves as an important source of information. His colleague Lorenz Lange (?-1752) entered into Russian service and ended up as a highly placed Russian diplomat in Beijing, where he is reported to have been received in audience by the Kangxi Emperor himself. Mr Lange later on was expelled from China for having established unofficial contacts with Korean diplomats at the Chinese court. That must have been the very first encounter between a Swede and a Korean. Lorenz Lange died in Irkutsk in 1752 as vice-governor of Siberia. Finally we must mention Johan Gustaf Renat (1682-1744), who was captured by the Dzungarian Oirat-Mongols and held a prisoner for 18 years in Kuldja in the Ili valley in present day Xinjiang新疆 Province of China. He gradually won the confidence of the Oirat Khan and soon became a confidant of that Mongol ruler. At one occasion Mr Renat even led 5000 Mongol troops in the battle of Lükchun against a Chinese army three times as large. The battle ended with disaster for the Oirats and Renat eventually was sent home to Sweden with great honors from his Mongol benefactor. Among the presents he brought with him home were two unique Mongol maps – still kept at the university library in Uppsala, and two (out of originally 20) Uighur slave girls, both of which eventually were married to young Swedes in Stockholm. The prisoners returned from Siberia and Central Asia by the thousands, and during the middle of the 18th century Sweden probably was the country in Western Europe where first hand knowledge of Inner Asia and the westernmost borders of China was most eminent and most widely spread among the population.

While the former Swedish prisoners at home were telling their stories in huts and manors all over the land, their younger countrymen together with colleagues from many other European countries already were engaged in building up a prosperous sea-trade with China. This time it was not silk but porcelain that was coveted by the Europeans. So the circle is closed. The following century would offer different types of encounters. This time the old Silk Routes, fragmented and clogged by sand through centuries of disuse, would again be trodden by travelers – but travelers of a different kind: scientists, explorers and treasure hunters in an unholy alliance. Also in this context little Sweden came to play a crucial role, but that, I believe, is a very different story.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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