

BOOK REVIEW

***The King's Road: Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road.* By Xin Wen. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. 400pp. \$39.95/£20.00 (paper)**

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doi:10.1017/jch.2024.38

The “Silk Road” and the “tributary system” are among the central historiographical concepts that have contributed the most to our widespread stubborn misunderstanding of Chinese history. Both concern how Chinese peoples and states interacted with others and fit into the history of Eurasia and the world. The term “Silk Roads,” coined in German in the nineteenth century and popularized by the industrial-age geographer Ferdinand von Richthoven, initially suggested that Han and Rome were linked economically by very long-distance trade such as had become a dominant feature of the world economy by Richthoven’s day. The belief that the Silk Road was fundamentally *commercial* fed twentieth- and twenty-first-century neo-liberal fantasies that a golden age of untrammelled cross-continental commerce had foreshadowed post-Cold War globalization. (The “Silk Road” idea has since metaphorically metastasized to take in pan-Eurasian communications of all kinds for all time and evoke a plethora of exoticized imaginaries.)

The “tributary system” model, disseminated almost a century later from the mid-twentieth century work of John King Fairbank, initially held that the Chinese empire forced all foreign trade through diplomatic channels by requiring the payment of “tribute” (the mistranslation used for *gong*) to the Chinese emperor as a pre-requisite for trade. This was framed within a “Chinese traditional world order” hierarchically centered on China as beneficent hegemon. When you think about it, which few have, the Silk Road notion that China was linked since ancient times to a pan-Eurasian trade network, and the “tributary system” claim that all trade with China was imperially controlled and politically motivated, contradict each other. Who was riding those camels? Merchants, monks, or envoys? Xin Wen, in *The King’s Road: Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road*, tells us it was all three—often in the same person.

The modern, even presentist biases of the concepts Silk Road and “tributary system” are clear now. Yet both concepts hinge on being relevant since antiquity: insofar as they cast an essentialized, enduring “China” in the leading role, they require that antiquity for their force. And truly, the historical record does contain kernels, characteristics that inspired the now-conventional Silk Road and tributary models. It’s just that we have misinterpreted them by looking at China through a narrow, singular, Sinocentric lens.

Xin Wen's *The King's Road* offers a convincing corrective to both Silk Road and "tributary system" concepts as applied to medieval China—or, in his useful geographic terminology, Eastern Eurasia. Drawing upon diverse documents from the Dunhuang library cave, Wen describes diplomatic relations and exchanges of goods between 850 and 1000 CE among Dunhuang and its neighbors, a group of polities including Khotan, Turfan, Ganzhou, states in north China, and at times Tibet, Kitan Liao and the Qarakhanids. He describes exchanges largely at ground level, from the perspective of those actually traveling the road and delivering and receiving the goods. From this Dunhuang-centric bottom-up perspective, there was indeed a "Silk Road"—that is, though they did not use the term, medieval Dunhuangers would have immediately agreed with the idea that a vital road linked them to other societies east and west, and that silk was the most important product that moved along it. But from the contracts, songs, royal correspondence, and other texts Wen consults, this Silk Road was not primarily traveled by civilian merchants, as so often imagined. It was for the most part diplomacy between kings, rather than private commerce, that motivated travel and exchange along the desert roads. Thus his title, *The King's Road* (a term actually attested in a medieval source, as "Silk Road" is not).

In this regard, Wen confirms Valerie Hansen's point in *The Silk Road: A New History*—based on earlier Tang era documents from Turfan, Dunhuang and elsewhere—that state policy rather than private trade explains the movement of large quantities of silk and other products between China and Central Asia. But Wen does dispute the common assertion (one that I repeated in my own slim Silk Road volume) that the Silk Road thrived only during eras of broad imperial unification (such as when the Tang, Tibet, Turk, and Byzantine empires were at their peak) and, conversely, that it collapsed along with the empires. To the contrary, Wen argues, the road stayed open and communications among Khotan, Dunhuang, Ganzhou, and states in north China continued very well, thank you, without an imperial hegemon.

And speaking of hegemony, north Chinese states in this era often proclaimed their own centrality and superiority, and required envoys and interlocutors to acknowledge it, with rhetoric that recalls the conceits of the "tributary system." But everybody else made the same claims in similar language, at least some of the time. After the fall of Tang, the Sinophone king of the oasis city of Dunhuang declared himself "White-Clothed Emperor of the Western Han" and "Son of Heaven." The Khotanese "king of kings" likewise claimed to be the Tang successor and styled his communications as imperial edicts under a giant *chi* character in Chinese. Local monarchs across Eastern Eurasia received gifts and pointedly over-compensated the envoys from neighboring courts who presented them, in this way establishing their own primacy in the diplomatic pecking order, like a big-spender picking up everyone's tab at a bar. Wen's work clearly demonstrates that such protocols and expectations were not restricted to a Chinese-centered "tributary system." In fact, everybody across Eurasia was doing it.

The ubiquity of bilateral gifting in association with status marking and diplomacy highlights the mistake that the China field has made since Fairbank, and really since the first eighteenth-century British interactions with the Qianlong court: sensing the weighty semiotics of guest–host relations and the status games that gift exchange with the Beijing imperial court involved, China observers wrongly interpreted and, through the "tributary system" model, enshrined those semiotics and games in the China studies literature as a uniquely Chinese institution. In fact, they were pan-Eurasian (if not more broadly human). Wen maintains that "the idea of the 'tributary system' is not entirely useless, as the centrality of the Tang and the Song was still sometimes acknowledged and

occasionally celebrated in the Dunhuang materials” (298). Though “not entirely useless” is hardly a ringing endorsement, I don’t think Wen goes far enough in debunking the “tributary system.” Wen provides examples of the same pattern of guest–host relations and function of gift exchange from Sinophone regions westward to Iranian and Turkic Central Asia. But analogous cases abound still further afield over time and space. Gifts presented by the Safavid to the Ottoman court—including silks—greased diplomatic wheels while encoding status differences in ways familiar to any student of the so-called “tributary system” in the Ming and Qing, as Sinem Arcaç Casale has shown in *Gifts in the Age of Empire*. Far from being distinctively Chinese, the diplomatic practices of the “tributary system” spanned the Silk Road.

Another of Wen’s contributions is to root these diplomatic protocols in the material realities of the road: he demonstrates quantitatively how much envoys (often Buddhist monks or entrepreneurial commoners) needed to borrow to mount the high risk/high reward embassies that kings retained them—as permanent appointees or free-lancers—to embark upon. The initial outlay for even a small diplomatic mission could cost more than a house, due largely to the high cost of camels and their upkeep. For this reason, travelers would pack only high value, low weight goods (textiles were ideal) to bestow or trade, skimping even on supplies necessary for their own survival. Consequently, it was imperative, and universally understood, that hosts should provide travelers with food, wine, and clothes along the way. It is not unreasonable to extrapolate, then, that the pattern of diplomacy, especially the practice of mutual gift-giving even at the highest levels of inter-polity relations, derived ultimately from the economics of long-distance overland travel by pack-animal, as shaped by human–animal relations. This is one quite profound conclusion emerging from Wen’s refreshingly empirical study of Silk Road communications east and west of Dunhuang.

To Wen’s argument, however, I would add: translating Chinese *gong* as “tribute” and treating such political gift-giving as exceptionally Chinese is more than “not entirely useless”—it is seriously misleading. “Tribute” in English generally refers to a tax, often onerous, levied on a vassal state by an overlord power. *Gong*, on the other hand, was what Chinese monarchs called the gifts they received from other states (or, in late imperial times, from officials as well). For their own purposes of legitimization and propaganda, *gong* meant “gifts given to a superior,” though givers of *gong* did not necessarily see it that way—and as Wen shows, other non-Chinese states used similar hierarchy-encoding terminology, in Chinese or other languages, in reference to the diplomatic gifts they themselves received.

I suggest that we excise the term “tributary system” from our vocabulary altogether, and instead consider practices in geographical China as variations on a universal Eurasian theme. Wen argues that because maritime shipping (like modern fossil fuel-powered shipping) allowed carrying more food and other quotidian supplies, it was fundamentally unlike caravan trade. But I’m not so sure maritime trade mandated a form of host–guest relations very different from precarious camel travel between desert stages. Ibn Battuta, even when arriving by sea (as in East Africa or the Maldives) still demanded and usually got rich provisions from his hosts, who, just like kings on the road from Kaifeng to Khotan, paid up to maintain their “good name.” For that matter, *The Odyssey* is all about how host–guest relations and gift exchange in the first millennium BCE should, and should not, be done. Everywhere he washes up, Odysseus is given a fresh wool tunic (after the slave girls have finished bathing him) and feasted with wine and roasted meat. His hosts later send him on his way with bronze treasure, food, drink, and sometimes a new ship and crew. Xuan Zang received exactly the same treatment across Central Asia,

though with silk instead of wool, grape juice instead of wine, a vegetarian diet and no slave girls that we know of. Clearly, we are looking at an old and wide-spread pattern of guest ritual, diplomacy and gift exchange, associated with travel, with interwoven political and economic implications, that defined status and afforded opportunities for acquiring wealth. Early-modern and later observers who drew conclusions about the connections between politics and trade in dealing with the Ming and Qing courts were not wrong, but by treating the “tributary system” as an exclusively Chinese form of inter-domainal relations, they were blindly fingering just one small inch of the elephant.

Wen’s richly documented work thus helps us integrate states in geographical China (Eastern Eurasia) into a broader historical pattern. And he also contributes generally to that wider understanding. With a nod to Peter Brown’s discussion of “the game of the competing glory of kings” (in “the Silk Road in late antiquity”)¹ and echoes of David Cannadine (*Ornamentalism*), Wen shows with paintings and documents that medieval Eurasian kings “thousands of kilometers apart” dressed alike and eagerly sought similar shiny objects, as well as strategic intelligence about their fellow monarchs, with whom they tended to have more in common than they did with their own subjects. Such acquisitiveness drove the diplomatic-cum-material exchanges of the Silk Road and underpinned the luxury display that enhanced their power. Whether it’s the Koh-i-Noor diamond atop Queen Victoria’s crown, or a Khotanese jade fist dangling from the sash of Song emperor Huizong, distance enhanced the value and power of the pricey adornments favored by Eurasian monarchs.

Should *The King’s Road* be categorized as “Chinese” history? “Eurasian” history? We see the problems with our categories. Today’s CCP history police would fume at the suggestion that Dunhuang has not been part of China for all time. But as Xin Wen notes, Sima Guang, Ouyang Xiu, and the editors of the Song official history thought differently, excluding the city-state from their telling of mainstream history, since neither Dunhuang nor its neighbor Khotan fell under Song dominion and thus lay outside their dynastic scheme. Yet Dunhuang wrote voluminously if not exclusively in Chinese and treasured ties to states in north China. Prioritizing documents from Dunhuang over sources generated by courts of Chinese “dynasties,” and writing from the perspective of Dunhuang and its neighbors allows Wen to escape Sinocentric blinders regarding medieval diplomacy and trade in Eastern Eurasia. Wen does not use the term, but he has in effect applied the approach of Sinophone Studies to medieval Dunhuang, diversifying understanding of Chineseness beyond the myth of a continuous, linearly replicating Chinese state and uncovering fresh revelations about the Silk Road and Eurasian diplomacy as a result. Further applications of such an approach promise a fruitful, and overdue, rewriting of the history of continental Eastern Eurasia.

¹Peter Brown, “The Silk Road in Late Antiquity,” in *Reconfiguring the Silk Road: New Research on East-West Exchange in Antiquity*, edited by Victor H. Mair and Jane Hickman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 15–22.