

PAVING THE SILK ROAD: TRENDS IN SILK ROAD HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Abstract

This paper examines changes in historical narratives of Silk Road historiography, focusing on scholarly articles published since 1995. I argue that scholarly interest in the Silk Road increased following the end of the Cold War and the warming in relations between Western nations and the former Soviet Socialist Republics of Central Asia and the People's Republic of China. In particular, the field of world history stimulated increased awareness of and writing on the role of pre-modern trans-Eurasian trade and cultural exchange in world history. My analysis of Silk Road historiography between 1995 and 2013 principally focuses on articles published in the *Journal of World History*, selected for their exhibition of the changing trends in Silk Road history during this time-frame.

Introduction

The Silk Road has played an important role in the field of world history. Coined in the 1870s, the term "Silk Road" most commonly refers to the trade routes, occasionally including sea routes, across the Eurasian continent that connected East Asia with the Mediterranean world between the 2nd century B.C.E. and 15th century C.E.¹ In this paper, I will examine the trends in Silk Road historiography and the role of material culture in Silk Road research by analysing articles published in the *Journal of World History* relating to the Silk Road, supplemented by major English language secondary books and journal articles. My focus on articles appearing in the JWH is intended to consider how the Silk Road has been utilised as a world history narrative since the end of the Cold War. Writing on the Silk Road, historian David Christian noted its 'immense popular appeal' and 'central place in recent writings on world history.'² Despite this, he also noted a lack of Silk Road 'theory' and the general nature of scholarship on a complex issue of cross-cultural trade and cultural exchange.³ Examining changes in Silk Road writing fills a historiographical gap and, more broadly, provide a useful insight into the various changes and influences on world history in the 20th and early 21st centuries.⁴

1 Andre Gunder Frank, 'On the Silk Road: An 'Academic' Travelogue,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25.46 (1990), 2536-2539, (p. 2536).

2 David Christian, 'Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History,' *Journal of World History*, 11.1 (2000), 1-26, (p. 4).

3 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

4 Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in History and Theory*, 2nd edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016) p. 1.

World History Narratives and the Silk Road

In the words of Tamara Chin, ‘we are heirs to two Silk Roads: not the ancient and the modern, but the invented and reinvented.’⁵ Since the coining of the term ‘Silk Road’ in the early Twentieth century by German geographer, Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905), interest in cultural exchange across the Eurasian continent has sustained the popularity of the concept.⁶ Historian Frances Wood, in *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia*, notes the misleading nature of von Richthofen’s ‘Silk Road,’ which provokes images of continuous trade between China and Europe.⁷ Accounts of the travels of Marco Polo (c. 1254-1324) and Xuan Zang (c. 602-664), alongside more modern explorers-cum archaeologists Aurel Stein (1862-1943) and Sven Hedin (1865-1952), have boosted the Silk Road’s popularity.⁸

The invention and reinvention of historical narrative is characteristic of history, reflecting present needs as much as it does past events. Evidence of cultural exchange and narratives constructed around the Silk Road are relevant in today’s increasingly interconnected yet disjunctive world, not least in the recent formulation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as it seeks once again to assume a central role in world history.

Beyond geopolitics, the Silk Road remains of considerable interest in the field of world history, largely due to the role of steppe empires in the history of Eurasia’s ‘great civilisations’.⁹ Examining cultural exchange and its historical depiction offered a new way for historians to examine history, opening new understandings and theoretical approaches to world history. Material Culture has also been especially important in Silk Road historiography, revealing long lost information on the religious, artistic, economic and environmental impact of the Silk Road.¹⁰ How these discoveries and records have been discussed in historiography has shaped current understandings of the Silk Road’s role in trade and exchange in pre-modern Eurasia.

5 Tamara Chin, ‘The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877’, *Critical Inquiry*, 40.1 (2013), 194-219, (p. 194).

6 Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia: From Antiquity to the Turkish Expansion* (Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1998), p. 153.

7 Frances Wood, *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia* (London: British Library, 2003).

8 Sally Hovey Wriggins, *The Silk Road Journey with XuanZang* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2004), p. xiii.

9 Halford John Mackinder, ‘The Geographical Pivot of History’, *The Geographical Journal*, 20.4 (1904), 421-437, (p. 427).

10 Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 238, William H. McNeill, ‘The Changing Shape of World History’, in *World History: Ideologies, Structures, and Identities* ed. by Philip Pomper, Richard H. Elphick and Richard T. Vann (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), p. 27.

Ever since Ferdinand von Richthofen, the ‘father of the “Silk Road” concept’, coined the term in the late 19th century, Silk Road historiography has reflected the contexts in which it has been constructed.¹¹ Richthofen’s ‘*Seidenstrasse*’ initially served as the background for his geographical work on China and Inner Asia, particularly modern Xinjiang.¹² Similarly, subsequent researchers using the Silk Road as a foundation for broader narratives of trans-Eurasian trade and exchange have approached the topic from their own academic backgrounds and contexts. From Richthofen’s immediate successors, to later twentieth-century Soviet and Chinese writers, through to more recent Western academics, the Silk Road has held various meanings while maintaining many common traits.

To analyse the narratives of Silk Road historiography in world history I have selected articles published in the *Journal of World History* (JWH). The JWH was selected for its role as the principal publication in world history, and therefore most likely to indicate common trends in the field. Articles from the JWH were selected for their reference to the Silk Road in their title and relevant discussion of issues pertaining to Central Eurasian trade and exchange routes. Based on JWH keyword and index search, I selected 13 articles for analysis in this paper from the journal’s first publication in 1990. Although my argument focuses on articles from the JWH, I have included works published outside of the journal for their importance in contextualising broader trends in Silk Road historiography. Including these works provides greater insight into the formation of a world history narrative in the JWH articles that utilised the Silk Road. These works by renowned world historians provide greater insight into the formation of a world history narrative on the Silk Road that was constructed around the end of the Cold War.

Inception of the Concept

Nineteenth century interest in Central Asia reflected the political and academic climate of British and Russian imperial rivalry, the so-called ‘Great Game’. Expeditions by European scholars, such as Richthofen, were tied up with the imperial ambitions of their sponsors, often reflecting ideological beliefs and economic designs.¹³ Scholarly interest in the region continued until the Second World War, popularised, most notably, by Richthofen’s student Sven Hedin’s travel diaries written for a popular audience. From the late 19th to early 20th centuries, the term Silk Road was also introduced into the Chinese language through the publication of Hedin’s geographical works in Chinese newspapers.¹⁴

11 David C. Waugh, ‘Richthofen’s “Silk Roads”’: Toward the Archaeology of a Concept’, *The Silk Road*, 5.1 (2007), 1-10, (p. 3).

12 Waugh, p. 3.

13 Chin, p. 212.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 217.

At the height of the Cold War, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, (USSR, 1922-1991) and government of the PRC, restricted western access to Silk Road sites that had been popularised by Western archaeologists in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries.¹⁵ Research into Central Asian history did not cease, however, as Soviet and Chinese scholars investigated Central Asia throughout the better part of the 20th century. Most notably, Soviet historians of Central Asia continued research into the Central Asian Soviet states, influenced by the work historian V.V. Barthold.¹⁶ Whereas Chinese academic sources are more easily accessed by Chinese speakers, or via translations of works written in English, the Soviet works in their native language remain largely inaccessible to western scholars ignorant of the Russian language.¹⁷

Close on the heels of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, historian Andre Gunder Frank published 'The Centrality of Central Asia' in *Studies in History* in 1992.¹⁸ In his article, Frank stressed the importance of cross-Eurasian trade to world history, highlighting the facilitatory role Central Asian travel routes played in connecting the pre-modern world.¹⁹ Not alone in his interest in Eurasian trade and exchange, Frank was joined by JWH editor Jerry Bentley, among others, in arguing for a broader understanding of Afro-Eurasian interaction in world history.²⁰ Frank's article followed the publication of sociologist Janet Abu-Lughod's book *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*, in which she argued that the modern world system had its roots in a thirteenth century world economic system.²¹ Abu-Lughod posited that trade between various economic centres across Afro-Eurasia in the thirteenth century world system was characterised by several coexistent and cooperative cultural systems.²² Similarly, Frank also argued for the existence of a pre-modern world system, his expansion of sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein's world system theory. For Frank, as for Wallerstein, a world system describes a world interconnected by trade and economic exchange.²³

The 1990s saw a resurgence of western scholarship into Central Asian history and thus a revived interest in the Silk Road. Central Asian and Silk Road history was

15 Wood, pp. 165-179.

16 David Christian, 'Reviewed Work(s): Central Asia in World History by S.A.M. Adshead, *Journal of World History*, 6.1 (1995), 127-129, (p. 127).

17 Christian, (1995), p. 127.

18 Andre Gunder Frank, 'The Centrality of Central Asia', *Studies in History*, 8.1 (1992), 43-97.

19 Xinru Liu, 'A Silk Road Legacy: The Spread of Buddhism and Islam', *Journal of World History*, 22.1 (2011), 55-81, (p. 55).

20 Jerry H. Bentley, 'Hemispheric Integration, 500-1500 C.E.', *Journal of World History*, 9.2 (1998), 237-254, (p. 239); William H. McNeill, 'World History and the Rise and fall of the West', *Journal of World History*, 9.2 (1998), 215-236, (p. 223); Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 12.

21 Abu-Lughod, p. 5-6.

22 Abu-Lughod, pp. 354; Linda Rose, 'Reviewed Work(s): Before European Hegemony: The World System, A. D. 1250-1350 by Janet Abu-Lughod', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 113.1 (1993), 135-136, (p. 135).

23 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (New York: Academic Press, 1974), p. 347.

placed in the context of the growing field of world history, reinvigorated by prominent world historians, namely, William H. McNeill. It is no surprise then that the JWH, first published in 1990, should contain many seminal and noteworthy contributions made by leading Central Asian and world historians to the Silk Road subject.

JWH Articles, 1995-2000

The JWH's first article on the Silk Road, Xinru Liu's 'Silks and Religions in Eurasia, C. A.D. 600-1200', was published in 1995. Liu's interest in the Silk Road stemmed from her background specialising in Chinese history and skills in the Chinese language and Sanskrit. Central to Liu's argument is the interconnection between silk production and trade with social, political and religious exchange across Eurasia. These cultural spheres, directly linked parts of China with Central Asia and the Islamic world, and Europe indirectly via Byzantium and Persia.²⁴ Liu placed her research of silk in the context of world history, arguing that only within a 'Eurasian scope' can the implications of the ancient silk trade be understood.²⁵

Although Liu was predominantly interested in the ancient silk trade in 'Silks and Religions', she also spared room in her introduction to consider the heightened interest in the Silk Road. She attributed this interest to several factors, the long distances and large areas involved in trade as well as the many works of art uncovered by archaeologists and art historians connected to Silk Road trade, particularly those uncovered in China's Xinjiang province.²⁶ Liu also identified distinct differences in scholarly approaches to the Silk Road between Chinese and Western scholars.²⁷ She stated that, as might be expected, Chinese scholars focused on the export of Chinese silks before the 13th century to the West, while Western scholars have focused on the Mediterranean trade, primarily of Byzantine silks.²⁸

Liu's article shares a common interest in the scholarship surrounding Central Asia's facilitatory role in trans-Eurasian trade with the other articles on the topic published between 1995-2000. David Christian's review of S.A.M. Adshead's *Central Asia in World History*, in the same 1995 issue of the JWH as Liu's work is such an example.²⁹ In the short review, Christian mentioned the legacy of Central Asian studies from early Russian scholars to more recent names in world history such as McNeill and Thomas J. Barfield.³⁰ His interest in Adshead's work focused on the definition and 'schematic' of world history proposed by the former.³¹

24 Liu, (1995), p. 28.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 26

27 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

29 Christian, (1995).

30 *Ibid.*, p. 127, p. 129.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

While Liu and Christian addressed the importance of cross-cultural interaction in pre-modern Eurasia in their works, popular interest in the Silk Road also saw a revival. This is indicated by Hugh R. Clark's 1998 review of writer Sally Hovey Wriggins' travelogue of 9th century Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, Xuanzang's journey to India.³² Clark noted that Wriggins was not an academic nor did she consider her book a scholarly work, rather she described her fascination with Xuanzang's journey along the Silk Road as part of a lifelong interest in Buddhist art.³³ Clark's review of Wriggins' book contains some of the alluring ideas associated with the Silk Road in popular imagination, mainly journey to the exotic 'lands farthest out'.³⁴ While Christian and Liu considered the developing Silk Road historiography, Wriggins' book indicated the popularity of general Silk Road histories intended for the general public.

The following year saw the publication of Nicola Di Cosmo's 'State Formation and Periodization in Inner Asian History'.³⁵ The focus of Di Cosmo's research was to better understand the formation of the large confederations of nomadic steppe peoples which had a significant impact on Eurasian history between 1000 to 1500 AD.³⁶ Whereas other historians had focused on the economic interactions between the nomadic and agricultural political blocs to explain the formation of steppe empires, Di Cosmo argued that state formation was a response to social crisis.³⁷ Di Cosmo's argument that the changing social makeup of nomadic people groups influenced their formation of 'nomadic-type states' emphasised an analysis of social structures and hierarchy.³⁸ Like Liu and Christian, Di Cosmo was interested in analysing the earlier scholarship undertaken both in his own field of Central Asian history and in world history. Di Cosmo noted a 'measure of consensus' between world historians on the criteria needed for world history periodisation in the works of McNeill and Bentley in his discussion of the historiography of 'Inner Asian' history.³⁹

Continuing the discussion of Silk Road historiography, Christian published his work on the topic in 2000, tracing the greater awareness of the importance of Eurasian interaction in world history from Frank's seminal article.⁴⁰ While Christian's article focused on the trans-ecological exchanges between nomadic and pastoralist

32 Hugh R. Clark, 'Reviewed Work(s): Xuanzang: A Buddhist Pilgrim on the Silk Road by Sally Hovey Wriggins, *Journal of World History*, 9.1 (1998), 119-121.

33 Clark, p. 119.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

35 Nicola Di Cosmo, 'State Formation and Periodization in Inner Asian History', *Journal of World History*, 10.1 (1999), 1-40, (p. 1).

36 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

39 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

40 Christian, (2000), pp. 1-2.

societies across Eurasia, he spared several pages to consider the development of Silk Road historiography. In addition to the scholarly interest in the Silk Road, Christian highlighted the popularity of general histories by Luce Boulnois and I.M. Franck and D.M. Brownstone.⁴¹ Despite the rising popularity of the Silk Road, Christian stated that the topic is surrounded by a ‘high level of generality’ due to the daunting level of linguistic and technical skill needed to specialise in the area.⁴² The different approaches and perspectives of historians and archaeologists is another reason why there remains little Silk Road ‘theory’.⁴³ As a result, Christian argued, historians remain focused on literary sources and the civilisations that produced them while archaeological evidence provides more information on nonliterate societies.⁴⁴ The remainder of Christian’s work is taken up by his analysis of the trans-ecological exchanges between nomadic and pastoralist societies across Eurasia.⁴⁵

Reflected in these early articles published between 1995 and 2000 is the importance of cross-cultural interaction in pre-modern Eurasia stressed by world historians such as McNeill and Bentley.⁴⁶ Frank, McNeill and Bentley’s influence on world history and Silk Road scholarship is particularly noticeable in these early articles, their works cited by Liu, Christian and Di Cosmo.⁴⁷ As a result, the research and analysis of Silk Road historians was strongly influenced by and reflected the trends shaping world history discourse during the 1990s through to early 2000s, which promoted an interest in historiography and challenged narrow, geographically restricted histories. Whereas Liu and Di Cosmo balanced the structures of their articles between research and analysis of historical scholarship, Christian’s 2000 article focused on historiographical analysis.

JWH Articles, 2001-2011

The majority of Silk Road related articles published after 2000 did not contain a strong historiographical focus. Compared with the focus on world history and Silk Road historiography typical of Liu, Christian and Di Cosmo’s works, Tansen Sen’s 2001 article on Tang China’s interactions with India lacked this feature.⁴⁸ What is

41 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

46 William H. McNeill, ‘World History and the Rise and Fall of the West’, *Journal of World History*, 9.2 (1998), 215-236, (p.223); Jerry Bentley, ‘Hemispheric Integration, 500-1500 C.E.’, *Journal of World History*, 9.2 (1998), 237-254, (p. 253).

47 Liu, ‘Migration and Settlement of the Yuezhi-Kushan: Interaction and Interdependence of Nomadic and Sedentary Societies’, *Journal of World History*, 12.2 (2001), 261-292, (p. 264); Christian, (2000), p. 2; Di Cosmo, p. 1-3.

48 Tansen Sen, ‘In Search of Longevity and Good Karma: Chinese Diplomatic Missions to

interesting in Sen's article is the inclusion of individuals in his analysis of various strands of exchange between China and India. Sen argued that the personal motivations of individuals were important factors in driving cross-cultural interaction, a level of analysis missing in earlier articles.⁴⁹

Sen acknowledged the intersections between individual interests and larger institutionally driven interactions between Tang China and India during the 7th century C.E.⁵⁰ By focusing on three individuals directly involved in driving this long-distance exchange, Tang emperor Tai Zong (598-649), Buddhist pilgrim Xuan Zang, and imperial envoy Wang Xuance, Sen attempted to understand the various motivations that drove such long-distance interactions.⁵¹ Sen's article emphasised religious conviction as well as desire for foreign items, as motivators for the individuals and collectives discussed in his work.⁵² Although Sen's article lacked an analysis of historiography typical of earlier JWH Silk Road articles, there is a continuity between them: Sen consulted Liu on his research and relies on the world history frameworks put forth by Bentley.⁵³ And, while focusing on the individual's role in driving interregional trade and exchange, Sen, like Christian, also noted the importance of technological and ecological exchange along the Silk Road.⁵⁴

In the following issue of the 2001 volume of the JWH, Liu published her work on the migration of the Yuezhi nomadic confederation from northern China to Bactria in Central Asia.⁵⁵ The Yuezhi, living North of China, greatly impacted Han Chinese efforts to establish connections in the Steppe and western regions, particularly in the modern-day province of Xinjiang. The impact of this interaction was far greater on sedentary societies than nomadic, Liu argued, citing examples of the spread of ideas, fashions, technology and agriculture as evidence.⁵⁶ Whereas her previous work balanced analysis of both Silk Road historiography and research, the main focus of Liu's 2001 article was tracing the linguistic legacy that migrations of nomadic groups left upon sedentary societies.⁵⁷

Liu's reliance on etymology to trace migrations and interactions between societies is indicative of the importance of linguistic research in her research of Central Asian and Silk Road history. In the article, Liu credited her interest in Silk Road exchange to the

Middle India in the Seventh Century', *Journal of World History*, 12.1 (2001), 1-28.

49 Sen, p. 3.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 1; p. 3.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

55 Liu, (2001).

56 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 261.

significant work of Frank and others in highlighting the important role of the Eurasian system to world history.⁵⁸ She also praised the work of Christian and Di Cosmo in their articles on the topic published in the JWH.⁵⁹ On the need for further research, Liu wrote that ‘more [...] was necessary in order to understand how the changes that took place in Central Asian oases or the steppe actually affected great events in world history.’⁶⁰

Sen and Liu’s articles indicate a shift in the focus of histories of the Silk Road and Eurasian cross-cultural exchange from discussion of historiography to detailed analysis of primary evidence focused on relatively short time periods and events. Thomas Barfield continued the discussion of Central Asia in world history in his 2001 review of UNESCO’s *History of Civilizations of Asia* project and Victor Mair’s *The Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Peoples of Eastern Central Asia*.⁶¹ Barfield credited the fall of the Soviet Union and China’s greater openness to the outside world as reasons for the new awareness of the importance of Central Eurasia to world history.⁶² Although eager for more research into the region, Barfield noted how the reviewed works still ‘var[ie]d greatly in quality’ relying on outdated bibliography and contain[ed] several factual errors.⁶³

Continuing a closer analysis of cultural interaction, James R. Corcoran reviewed Richard C. Foltz’s book about the religions of the Silk Road.⁶⁴ Although Foltz’s book was published in 1999, Corcoran’s review was printed in the JWH in 2002 a few years later.⁶⁵ As Corcoran stated in his review, Foltz’s work is one of few on the two thousand year history of numerous religious traditions that spread along the Silk Road.⁶⁶ Like Liu’s 1995 work on the role of the silk trade in Christian, Islamic and Buddhist spheres, Foltz too considered the interrelated development and close connection between trade and the spread of new ideas by travellers along the Silk Road.⁶⁷

58 *Ibid.*, p. 291.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 291.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 291.

61 Thomas Barfield, ‘Reviewed Work(s): History of Civilisations of Central Asia, Volume IV, the Age of Achievement: A.D. 750 to the End of the Fifteenth Century, Part One: The Historical, Social and Economic Setting by M.S. Asimov and C.E. Bosworth; The Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Peoples of Eastern Central Asia by Victor Mair’, *Journal of World History*, 12.2 (2001), 462-464.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 462.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 463-464.

64 James R. Corcoran, ‘Reviewed Work(s): The Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century by Richard C. Foltz’, *Journal of World History*, 13.1 (2002), 211-213.

65 Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

66 Corcoran, p. 211.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 213.

Published in 2010, Roxann Prazniak's 'Siena on the Silk Roads' examined cross-cultural exchange between Europe and Asia through art and music.⁶⁸ Prazniak's work, like Sen's, moved away from the discussion of historiography common to the early Silk Road articles and almost exclusively dealt with the spread of artistic ideas in the 14th century. Citing the works of Bentley and Janet Abu-Lughod, Prazniak examined the impact of the new relationship between Europe and Central and East Asia brought about by the Mongol conquests.⁶⁹ By using the world map mural painted by Sieneese artist, Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Prazniak examined the changing European worldview and influence of Asian art techniques in the 14th century.⁷⁰

The 2011 volume of the JWH featured the latest articles in the journal to focus on the Silk Road, including Liu's work on Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road and reviews by Foltz and Yang Bin. Foltz reviewed Christopher Beckwith's lengthy and significant work on the empires of the Silk Road, describing it as a 'must read for students of world history.'⁷¹ In his voluminous work, Beckwith, like Franke, emphasised the role of Central Asian peoples in the development of arts and sciences in world history. Beckwith considered a big picture approach in his revision of the 'more or less unitary received view of Central Eurasians and Central Eurasian history'.⁷² According to Beckwith, Silk Road commerce waxed and waned according to the strength of Central Asian empires.⁷³ In the same issue, Bin reviewed Johan Elverskog's noteworthy study of the interactions between Buddhism and Islam in Central Asia, comparing the early development of their respective religious communities.⁷⁴ Foltz and Bin's reviews pointed towards scholarship conducted outside of the journal and focused on different yet equally important aspects of Silk Road history.

Returning to her more customary analysis of historiography, Liu credited Frank's emphasis of the centrality of Central Asia for the increased attention world historians have paid to the region since the early 1990s.⁷⁵ However, she echoed Christian's sentiments in his 2000 article concerning the daunting number of languages and historical literature involved in studying the Silk Road.⁷⁶ Liu continues to address her research questions concerning the facilitatory role of Central Asian trade routes in influencing

68 Roxann Prazniak, 'Siena on the Silk Roads: Amrogio Lorenzetti and the Mongol Global Century, 1250-1350', *Journal of World History*, 21.2 (2010), 177-217.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 180, p. 216.

71 Richard Foltz, 'Reviewed Work(s): Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Asia from the Bronze Age to the Present by Christopher I. Beckwith', *Journal of World History*, 22.3 (2011), 580-582, (p.582).

72 Beckwith, p. viii.

73 Beckwith, p. xii.

74 Yang Bin, 'Reviewed Work(s): Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road by Johan Elverskog', *Journal of World History*, 22.4 (2011), 825-828, (pp. 825-826).

75 Liu, (2011), p. 55.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

historical events, in particular the spread of Buddhism and Islam. In highlighting the complexity of religious life and conversion, Liu points out the influential role of Central Asian merchants, missionaries and scholars in Buddhist and Islamic history.

The articles from the JWH examined in this paper show a considerable degree of agreement on the main issues important to the Silk Road. Most historians emphasise the importance of cross-cultural exchange and interactions in pre-modern Eurasia. The focus of each historian differs depending on their perspective, apparent when comparing Christian's treatment of theory and historiography with Prazniak's interest in artistic motifs. Similarly, historians of China and India, Liu and Sen, had greater interest in the role of these cultures and civilisations.

Although the articles analysed in this chapter share many common features, by placing the Silk Road and Eurasian exchange within the context of world history, a change in focus is apparent between earlier and later articles. Liu, Christian and Di Cosmo considered the themes and systems proposed by leading world historians in relation to their own topics and research. In comparison, Sen, Prazniak and Liu's 2001 articles are less concerned with these broader theoretical and conceptual issues, instead they focused on the nature of cross-cultural exchange.

Despite these differences, each historian agreed on the importance of cross-cultural interaction and exchange in world history, predominantly relying on literary sources in their research. Interestingly, there was little debate over these issues present in the pages of the JWH aside from some critique of Adshead by Christian in his 1995 review and of Beckwith by Foltz in his review published in 2011.⁷⁷ One must look outside the journal to find arguments made by historians such as Adshead, critiquing Frank's view of a pre-modern world system.⁷⁸ Frank and Abu-Lughod's seminal works appear in the bibliographies of many of the articles, indicating the influence of their research on world historians publishing the JWH.

Beyond the JWH: 2011-2013

From 2011 to 2017, no more articles were published in the JWH dedicated to Silk Road history, indicating a silence on the trade route in recent years. This contrasts with the most recent research on Silk Road-related topics in other publications. More recently published works exhibit greater analysis of material culture and economic change, thanks to their use of both archaeological and literary sources.

As documentary evidence has been the dominant focus in traditional historical research, approaches to material culture were initially shaped by anthropologists and archaeologists.⁷⁹ Art historians have also contributed to discourse on the use of objects

77 Christian, (1995), p. 128; Foltz, (2011), p. 581.

78 For Adshead's critique of Frank's argument see, S.A.M. Adshead, *T'ang China: The Rise of the East in World History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 11-20.

79 Karen Harvey, 'Practical Matters', in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed. by Karen Harvey (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 2.

in historical research, their focus being the aesthetic quality and production of artwork, where issues of provenance are also important. Such an approach is described by Karen Harvey as ‘object-centred’, utilising detailed descriptions and consideration of the emotional and psychological dimensions of a particular object or group of objects.⁸⁰ In comparison, an ‘object-driven’ approach looks at material culture as evidence of the social and cultural contexts in which items were manufactured.⁸¹ Such an approach is strongly associated with anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s concept of ‘thick description’, aimed at ‘reading’ objects and events for their symbolic forms by which members of a culture communicate with one another about their attitudes towards life.⁸²

As much as historians’ research is driven by their interests, the nature of their sources limits, and to an extent, can determine the narrative they construct. One such example is the archaeological discoveries made in the ancient Oasis towns of the Tarim Basin, used by Valerie Hansen in her analysis of Silk Road trade. Hansen examined multiple objects in her book on Silk Road trade between the 2nd century B.C.E and 10th century C.E. Examples include her analyses of thousands of slips of wood and bamboo used in both official and private correspondence by Chinese garrison troops, and ceremonial dolls made of scrap paper.⁸³ Her consideration of archaeological evidence highlights the difficulties facing historians interested in incorporating material evidence in their writing. For example, the documentary evidence from Chinese oasis garrisons required hours of painstaking reorganisation from discarded piles in which they were discovered, their cord bindings long since deteriorated.⁸⁴

In a presentation at Williams College in Massachusetts, Hansen discussed her interest in material evidence recovered by archaeologists, stating that archaeological evidence can ‘expand’ on historical knowledge based on well-known sources.⁸⁵ Hansen drew on the ideas of historian Marc Bloch, co-founder of the *Annales* journal, in her analysis of these sources.⁸⁶ In accordance with Bloch’s approach to historical sources, Hansen distinguished between intentional sources, such as an historical chronicle, and non-intentional sources, such as discarded items or writings.⁸⁷ In her study, Hansen focused on non-intentional sources recovered from archaeological digs, incorporating them into her argument that minimal long distance trade occurred between Europe and China along the Silk Road between the 2nd century B.C.E. and 10th Century C.E.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

82 Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p. 36.

83 Hansen, p. 15.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

85 Valerie Hansen, The Silk Road: A New History, *YouTube* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOnQN141hzE&index=40&list=WL&t=566s>> [accessed 8 September 2017], (2:01).

86 *Ibid.*, (2:27).

87 *Ibid.*, (2:40).

Focusing on the Tarim Basin Oasis towns, she argued that trade was local and based on a subsistence economy with occasional influxes in foreign trade from migrants and foreign armies.⁸⁸

While Hansen argued that trade between China and the West was almost so minimal as to be not worthy of special mention, she did state that the Silk Road remains highly important in cultural history. As a travel network, she stated that it was 'one of the least travelled routes in human history...', while its historical importance lies in its role as the 'planet's most famous cultural artery for the exchange between east and west of religions, art, languages, and new technologies.'⁸⁹

Similar appraisals of trade and exchange in the Tarim Basin are evident in historians' contributions to the special issue of the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (JRAS) in 2013. This special issue was dedicated to the analysis of textiles as money on the Silk Road, to which Hansen contributed. Helen Wang and Eric Trombert also discussed how items other than coins functioned as a means of exchange on the 8th Century Silk Road. Wang utilised economic and anthropological approaches to money in her article on textiles, noting how textiles met the various requirements for use as money.⁹⁰ Based on surviving Tang dynasty (618-907 C.E.) economic records she argued that a multi-currency system was in place across the Chinese sphere of influence, with bronze coins serving as the standard unit of account, and textiles and grains as circulated currency.⁹¹

Like Hansen's work using non-intentional sources, Trombert utilised sales reports from Dunhuang to consider how various items were used as a form of currency during the 8th and 9th centuries CE. His sources came from both monasteries and local government, each providing different examples of sales in Tang-dynasty Dunhuang. In his article, Trombert was mainly interested in material culture, primarily textiles, for their role in the Dunhuang economy.⁹² However, his analysis of how textiles and grain were exchanged can also throw light on the social life of Dunhuang, particularly between religious and secular life.

While revealing how grain was used as money in Dunhuang during the 8th and 9th centuries C.E., Trombert's research also considered the role of various material items as money. In particular, textiles, mainly cotton, wool and hemp, take centre stage

88 Hansen, pp. 238-239.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 235.

90 Helen Wang, 'Textiles as Money on the Silk Road?', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 23.2 (2013), 165-174, (p. 166).

91 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

92 Eric Trombert, 'The Demise of Silk on the Silk Road: Textiles as Money at Dunhuang from the Late Eighth Century to the Thirteenth Century', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 23.2 (2013), 327- 347, (p. 327).

as necessary items in everyday exchanges.⁹³ Trombert's article is object-driven rather than object-centred due to his analysis of the social agents involved in exchanging grains and textiles. As a result, he drew a distinction between items used in secular and religious exchanges, reflecting the differing needs and customs associated with either facet of Dunhuang society.⁹⁴

Hemp served as a common form of money for transactions with the Dunhuang's Jingtū Buddhist monastery, whereas silk was preserved for decoration and gift giving.⁹⁵ The Jingtū monastery was an important economic centre for Dunhuang, owning considerable amounts of farmland and coming into possession of goods bequeathed to the monastery by faithful lay people.⁹⁶ In comparison, secular society used silk as money in long distance travel, and Chinese officials received their payment in bolts of silk.⁹⁷ While silk was held in high esteem by both sectors of society, it served different roles in religious and secular life.

While the research conducted by Wang and Trombert made headway in understanding the varied usage of textiles and grains on the Tang Dynasty Silk Road, research into currency on the Silk Road remains focused on coinage.⁹⁸ Wang attributed this to the preponderance of work done by numismatists interested in the large number of coins discovered in archaeological digs by Aurel Stein.⁹⁹ However, the study of coins discovered along the Silk Road has also revealed more than just evidence of various economies along the trade route.

Of particular importance to establishing a timeline for kingdoms and empires in Central Asia has been the various coins produced by rulers and distributed by merchants. Historian Richard N. Frye indicated the important work established by linguists and numismatists in researching civilisations, such as the Kushans, who would otherwise be lost to history without the material evidence of their existence.¹⁰⁰ Although there is little documentary evidence from the Kushan empire (1st-3rd centuries C.E.), making the historian's work difficult, material culture aids in the reconstruction of the empire's history. The Kushans ruled Bactria, an area roughly correspondent to modern Afghanistan and Pakistan. What little is known about their empire was deduced from coin inscriptions issued by Kushan rulers.¹⁰¹ Issued coinage not only indicates the presence of monied trade among the Kushans but also reveals the mixed cultural

93 *Ibid.*, p. 330.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 330, p. 333.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 329.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 332.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 337, p. 328.

98 Wang, p. 171.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

100 Frye, p. 133.

101 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

heritage of the empire, a blend of Greek, Indian and Steppe cultures.¹⁰² Additionally, evidence of coins native to Persia, Rome or China are indicative of the long distances items covered as part of trade and exchange across pre-modern Eurasia.

Although material culture has a significant presence in Silk Road research, documentary evidence remains the dominant source for historians interested in the ancient trade routes. A quick glance at the sources in the JWH articles discussed previously highlights the scanty-to-non-existent reliance on any archaeological evidence by most historians. In particular, David Christian, Christopher Beckwith and Richard Foltz maintain the focus on written sources typical of the disciplines' approach to research.¹⁰³

In the historical field, material culture initially tended to be the domain of economic historians, following the trade and exchange of goods and money in the development of economies.¹⁰⁴ Material culture often draws on a wide range of specialisations, as economic and art historians as well as archaeologists and museum curators make vital contributions to research into historical items. Though silk, and silk production, is important to understanding the role of material culture in Silk Road historiography, it often overshadows the importance of other items. Due to the paucity of written sources for the pre-Islamic period of Central Asia and the Silk Road, material culture has played a vital role in shaping our historical knowledge of these areas. Material culture can also play a significant role in reconstructing the history of peoples and their cultures with little to no documentary evidence of their existence.

The JRAS articles indicate a change in Silk Road historiography from 2011 that has focused on material culture and the details of economic exchange along the Silk Road. The study of material culture in Silk Road history has been relatively small and recent compared with the majority of histories of the trade route which have appeared since 1992 and which rely on documentary evidence. Like its use in history more broadly, the use of material culture by Silk Road historians has relied on the methodological work of anthropologists and economists. In particular, the economic aspect of material culture has been the most common focus of Silk Road histories. An object-driven approach has thus been most popular as it is most useful for determining broader aspects of historical society and economy. Art historians have also researched Silk Road material culture, focusing on the aesthetic value and methods of production of various items.¹⁰⁵

102 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

103 These historians' major works on Silk Road history, David Christian, 'Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History', *Journal of World History*, 11.1 (2000), 1-26; Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), do not have a material focus, instead discussing social, political and cultural topics.

104 Burke, p. 67.

105 An analysis of the role of art history in researching into Silk Road material culture is beyond the scope of this paper and would require further research to fully appreciate the contribution of this field to Silk Road historiography.

The Silk Road Today

In the decades following Frank's 1992 article on the centrality of Central Asia, the Silk Road has seen a revival in interest in this topic not only in the JWH but in the public imagination as well. Works by historians and non-historians alike include books by Luce Boulnois and Sally Wriggins that promote the idea of travel to far off and exotic places. Sven Hedin, the Swiss geographer who spent many years travelling in the Tarim Basin between the late 19th and early 20th centuries detailed his accounts in several books written for a general audience.¹⁰⁶ Travel and tourism remain an important part in shaping ideas of the Silk Road today, utilised by the Central Asian republics and the PRC for attracting tourists.¹⁰⁷ Even Hansen's peer reviewed book on the Silk Road contains a review on the back cover, stating how the reviewer was inspired to travel to Central Asia after reading the work.¹⁰⁸

While modern popular Silk Road narratives share with other academic works the topics of unity and cultural diversity, they differ in their approach to these narratives. This is most evident in the contrast between Western neo-liberal conceptions and the nationalism of the PRC.¹⁰⁹ Western narratives commonly focus on neo-liberal ideals, such as ethnic diversity and religious tolerance, when discussing the Silk Road and the oasis city states of Central Asia. This is despite the important role played by conflict in shaping the region's cosmopolitan culture.¹¹⁰ Historians such as Christian and Barfield encourage the emphasis on cultural similarities to dissuade the dangers of nationalistic histories of Eurasia.¹¹¹ With China's diplomatic cultural and economic expansion into the United States, Europe and Japan towards the end of the Cold War, the Silk Road was once again reinstated as a symbol of peaceful East-West interaction.¹¹² More overtly political, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) promotes the cultures of Western China and Central Asia under the online Silk Road Initiative, subtitled 'Dialogue, Diversity & Development'.¹¹³

106 Hedin's works that involve travel and exploration of Silk Road sites include: *My Life as an Explorer, The Silk Road: A Thousand Miles Through Central Asia* and *The Wandering Lake: Into the Heart of Asia*.

107 Cynthia Werner, 'The New Silk Road: Mediators and Tourism Development in Central Asia', *Ethnology*, 42.2 (2003), 141-159, (p. 141); Audrey Ronning Topping, 'China's Heritage on the Silk Road', *World Policy Journal*, 25.4 (2008), 152-166.

108 Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

109 Harm Lagenkamp, 'Contested Imaginaries of Collective Harmony: The Poetics and Politics of "Silk Road" Nostalgia in China and the West' in *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*, ed. by Yang Hon-Lun & Michael Saffle (Beaverton: University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 260

110 Tansen Sen 'The Intricacies of Pre-Modern Asian Connections', *Association for Asian Studies*, 69.4 (2010), 991-999, (p. 991).

111 Barfield, p. 462.

112 Chin, p. 217.

113 The UNESCO Silk Road Online Platform, *Silk Road: Dialogue, Diversity & Development*

While western narratives focus on international and intercultural dialogue and exchange, Chinese narratives take a different focus. Most recently, the PRC's 'One Belt One Road' economic initiative has utilised historical narratives of the Silk Road as inspiration for the initiative's goals of expanding trade links between China, Africa and Europe. This plan to 'revive' the Silk Road, can be traced back to Hedin's bid for the reopening of commercial routes between Europe and China in the early 20th century.¹¹⁴ The impact of the PRC's efforts at paving a new Silk Road is a common media topic. For example, a 2017 BBC News documentary series has highlighted the impact of China's expansion on Xinjiang's Uighur Turk minority.¹¹⁵ Additionally, narratives of the Silk Road in the PRC reflect the Beijing government's attempts at integrating ethnic minorities into the Chinese nationalist narrative. Expression of minority culture is dictated by the PRC, evidenced by the Chinese media's representation of non-Han Chinese as either cultural oddities needing modernisation or, as barbaric troublemakers.¹¹⁶ What is more, popular depictions of minority culture is made to suit 'Han exoticism', limiting any reference to the Islamic legacy of Uighur culture in Xinjiang.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have examined how historians have approached the topic of the Silk Road by placing it within the context of world history and researching its material culture. The trade route has been a tool for imperial expansion, a cosmopolitan ideal and even used as a metaphor for human progress (by anarchist geographer, Elisée Reclus).¹¹⁸ Influenced by ideas from world history, histories of the Silk Road emphasised cultural interaction across Eurasia. Scholars such as Frank, McNeill, Christian, Liu and others have called for a better understanding of the important, even central role, of Central Asia and the Silk Road in shaping world history. While trade has remained of vital importance to understanding trans-Eurasian interaction, scholars have successfully expanded their academic interest to include the spread of academic and religious ideas, as well as linguistic, technological and ecological exchange. While this is a promising indicator for the future study of exchange and interactions in pre-modern world history, popular ideas of the Silk Road remain distant from the historic reality. Additionally, political narratives continue to be vitally important to the construction of Silk Road narratives.

Most recently, historians such as Hansen and Trombert have taken a different approach to the Silk Road, concentrating on material culture in Xinjiang over a

<<http://en.unesco.org/silkroad/unesco-silk-road-online-platform>> [accessed 25 July 2017].

114 Chin, p. 216.

115 Carrie Gracie, China Invests \$124bn in Belt and Road Global Trade Project, *BBC News* <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39912671>> [accessed 9 June 2017].

116 Lagenkamp, pp. 257-258.

117 Lagenkamp, p. 248.

118 Chin, pp. 217-218.

shorter time frame. Hansen's book, published in 2012, and the JRAS special issue of 2013 indicate a new perspective on the Silk Road that differs from the world system approach seen in Frank, Christian and Abu-Lughod's works. Art historians too have taken an interest in the spread of artistic ideas along the ancient trade routes, focusing on production and artistic motifs. Even more recent narratives have a world historical context, specifically with a cosmopolitan flavour, that espouses neo-liberal ideals of democracy and free market economics.¹¹⁹

The Silk Road runs like a thread through all of these issues, which are significant both in geographical area and chronological length. It remains a useful term by which to evoke the many aspects of Afro-Eurasian history for both specialists and the general public, conjuring ideas of cross-cultural trade and interaction. If any one aspect can be said to characterise the history of the Silk Road and Inner Asia, it is movement. Migration, conquest, trade, missionary journeys and pilgrimages all contribute to a sense of continual movement. As a result, the Silk Road remains an important part of the historiography of Eurasia, invoking images of movement and change that are not only physical but which also span across cultures and through the sands of time.

Biographical Note

Alexander Sutherland is a recent University of Waikato graduate with a First-Class MA in History. Alexander's main areas of research interest are cultural history and the history of ideas, focusing on cross-cultural exchange between East and West. He is currently tutoring at the University of Waikato while looking into doctoral study and fills his spare time studying modern and ancient East Asian languages.

119 Lagenkamp, p. 244.