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Links between China and Rome through Byzantium and Persia: the Nomadic Mediation

Both Byzantium and Persia are a great distance from China, and the links between them are only rarely of historical importance. Sinologists are interested only in periods in which China played a significant historical role. This connection becomes clear if one approaches the subject comprehensively, examining different eras from different aspects. Otherwise we would arrive at the historian's usual answer: from the viewpoint of Chinese historiography, the territory west of the Ural Mountains is nonexistent. Similarly, the lands to the east of the Urals seemed so distant to Byzantine historiographers that they did not consider them. Choosing these two countries may seem incidental, but a comprehensive historical approach reveals the real connection. I suggest that the Iranian steppe region mediated between Europe and Asia throughout the course of history. Since there have been no archaeological researches on this matter so far, this statement may appear too vague, but it is worth considering.

An analysis of this question offers a better understanding of Eurasian history. In most cases we cannot pinpoint the actual role of Byzantium or Persia, only the connection of Asia and the Mediterranean region. We may group Persia and Byzantium together – as the Chinese did – as “western countries”. The steppe region can be examined as well; although Chinese historiography has always been interested in western lands as a whole, we may select specific countries for examination. The connection between Rome and China can be demonstrated through the connection between Byzantium and Persia, since in both cases the tribes of the Iranian steppe acted as mediators, as written in the historiography of these lands.

It is clear to modern Chinese historiography that China was visited for its silk from the beginning. However, the history of the Silk Road, which led to the Eastern Roman provinces, according to Chinese sources, begins after the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.). We may consider the findings at the Hungarian archaeological site of Sirmium (Szőny), where most western artefacts (Chinese silk) on the Silk Road were found. This was the *Silk Road* for

China (*si-chou*), though the term was quite unknown in Europe before the expeditions of Aurel Stein, who died in November 1943. The historical relationship of commerce and history between East and West was not as clear before the dawn of archaeology, at the turn of the century. (Even in Europe only a handful of people know that the term *Silk Road* was actually invented by the scholar Von Richthofen in the 1890's.)

Nor is it common knowledge that certain western sinologists have been protesting against the common belief that in early imperial times the silk trade was considered so important to China that a territory was named after it. The natural trade relations of the steppe people and China changed after the appearance of the horse and silk trades. There are researchers even in China who know that in the 9th century a present of silk in diplomacy as well as in the horse trade was of a military nature, just as it had been as of the 4th – 5th centuries, when the capitals in the north of China were developing. Chinese officials soon saw the disadvantages of trading with “barbarians”; therefore, they opposed all transactions. Short-sighted Chinese officials often missed opportunities to profit from cultural relations, sought so often by foreigners who understood neither the character of these relations nor China's defensive policy.

This essay attempts to understand the birthplace of the silk trade, China, where trading was not a part of the national tradition, and the interests of foreign traders, where Byzantium and Persia come into play. But the Iranian steppe also plays a role in this connection; trade – not just from the viewpoint of historians – seemed natural there, while in China trade was rejected due to tradition and bad experiences. The view commonly held among researchers is that trade was conducted on the Silk Road with China, while Chinese officials, despite constant opposition, were forced to permit it for military reasons.

It is thus possible to determine the time and place of historical trends when they pertain to the Mediterranean world. For the sinologists, researchers and historiographers of the Chinese Empire only places and time periods relevant to China are of importance. Trade was most profitable in times when both China's silk production was adequate and the tribes were able to force China to trade, if reluctantly. Countries neighbouring both agrarian empires and the lands of the steppe tribes required long-distance trade. This is how the Silk Road connected China with the Roman Empires.

The closing date for the period in question is 1253, when the Ottoman Empire invaded Byzantium and broke up the Roman Empire entirely. This event marks the end of the Silk Road connection between China and Rome. The year 1253, however, was as much of a turning point for China and the western countries as 496 was for the Mediterranean world.

The Silk Road seems to have held the same importance in the life of the empire as the major rivers have (the Huang-ho and Yangtze). The Silk Road connected Asia with Europe, meaning the whole world outside China, in every time period. The Silk Road has existed from ancient times, according to Chinese tradition. This is clear from the traditional analogy that the whole world is similarly directed by the rivers in the Sky and on Earth. The Milky Way is similar to the other river, the Silk Road on Earth, flowing through the culture of the world, where it exists in folklore. A Hungarian must set forth the example of the River Tisza, which is traditionally called "fair" (and not dark, as is idealised in historiography). The River Tisza originates in the territory and among the people of Hungary and remains within its ethnic borders. Thus it can be called a "home river" in Hungary. The Danube, though much bigger, flows through several countries; therefore, it is not considered a truly Hungarian river by Hungarians, but a European river.

The most ancient pictures of China, found in tombs and reflecting ancient Chinese views on imperial geography and the steppe frontiers in the north described the connection between China, an agricultural country, and the livestock breeders of the steppe. That connection is why Chinese historiography writes about the people of the steppe, from the Xiongnu era as early as the 3rd century B.C., and describes them as people "accompanying the grass and rivers". Later on as well the Chinese speak of tribes connected with the pastures of the steppes and with the river banks. Their way of life is always connected with the land where rulers' residences were built. This is the same land where villages or temporary settlements can be found. The first written sources of this kind, can be found from around the 9th century B.C. according to "historical records" (Shi-jing).

The Chinese concept of the river must be older than the Silk Road, reflecting the history of the country according to Chinese historiography. At least we may conclude this from the first tombs of the Chinese Empire in this millennium, because during the Wei Dynasty (4th – 5th centuries A.D.) the whole country was represented by a river whose tributaries were named after small states and other geographical locations of pre-imperial times.

According to ancient historical sources this old-style geography has been part of Chinese tradition since the First Emperor (Qin Shi Huang-di), at least as revealed in tombs. As written in historical records, rivers and lakes were indicated by a mineral-like “silver” or “silver-water” (probably arsenic), interpreted by some sinologists as mercury. Every Chinese child knows – as did children in ancient times – that the name of the great heavenly river is the Milky Way. In this case the expression is Tian-ho, sometimes called Silver Road or River, probably with good reason, even if only historians know what this may be. The Ho is nothing else but the denomination of the River Huang-ho. (Unfortunately, no archaeological excavation has proved either the existence of mercury in the First Emperor's tomb or the supposition that the Ho is the cradle of the Chinese civilization of the River Yangtze, as sometimes believed by researchers.)

Tian-ho is simply called Ho almost everywhere and Jiang only sporadically, being only the denomination of Yangtze-jiang. Thus the Heavenly Road clearly indicates the Milky Way in Chinese texts. This is why the Ho, which is the same as the Huang-ho, played a larger historical role in the birth of Chinese civilization, this being probably due to the intercontinental importance of the steppe in the world of that era. The Silk Road was inside the Chinese Empire even if it was not located near the Bayan-kara Mountains; it is generally considered the birthplace and the centre of Chinese civilization. Certain sinologists think that the southern river, the Yangtze-jiang, is more important in Chinese history than the northern Huang-ho, which, in my opinion, has had more influence on the course of history, in general, and on the course of Chinese history, in particular. Moreover, the Chinese name for the Milky Way also supports this conclusion.

From the beginning of Chinese culture, heavenly figures have represented the main processes of the land. As of a certain period, the condition of the empire was reflected by the harmony of similar figures on Earth and in the Heavens. This similarity has existed since the mythical times of Fuxi, as recorded in later works on astronomy. Scholars studying the Milky Way, thus, emphasized the importance of the Huang-ho, the western route of Asian trade, represented for the Chinese by Persia. The road connecting China with Persia was the same as the one leading to Rome.

The section of the Silk Road concerned can be imagined in a time when the existing population, the Iranian tribes, required fame (silk etc.) from China. In this period the earthly Milky Way was the part of the Silk Road

where armies of different tribes could meet. Where Chinese authority was important, these tribes played a certain role, even as late as the Mongol Era. The tribes held absolute power between Persia (East) and Byzantium (West).

Until the 5th – 6th centuries, China maintained close ties with the Roman Empire, though Chinese historiography in the capitals only suggested this must have happened later and did not actually state that it had. All researchers have concluded that it had, since the invading Turkic armies initiated relations northwest of the Chinese empire, links that stretched from western Asia to eastern Europe. This can be seen as a linguistic link between the two territories because the distance is large both in time and historical regions. The connection was mediated by nomadic tribes and traders, the Persians interpreting between Byzantium and the Turkic tribes. They may be regarded as symbols for relations between the two areas by archaeologists and historians alike.

The first time the Chinese turned their attention to the neighbouring parts of the world was during the Wei Dynasty (Toba), during the Northern Dynasties (5th – 6th centuries). The region including Persia and Byzantium was a part of the steppe stretching westwards from China in this period, when the steppe was under Turkic rule, and the Mediterranean states were in contact with the tribes for different reasons. Negotiations between Byzantium and the Turks – let us refer to them as Western Turks – were conducted in Persian by Persian interpreters. The Western Turks may have represented tribes which had pushed westwards from China because they felt strong enough to escape, though some were also allowed to live in northern China as of the mid-7th century. This was the period when Chinese historiography named them Western Turks, though no other nation has used this term for these tribes ever since. Eastern Turks were tribes accepting Chinese protection; they certainly had no need to escape, though they were threatened by assimilation. They settled and ruled – like the Chinese – in agricultural towns. They soon realized that they were the perfect mediators in the long-distance trade between China and Byzantium. The tradesmen and diplomats of the Eastern Turks served both the Roman Empire and China (probably this symbolic or real link existed in other relations as well, but only a few records prove this).

In the first Turkic contacts with China we find Iranian elements from the end of the Han period (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.). (Prof. J. Harmatta was the first to point out this type of contact between Turks and their Persian interpreters

in Byzantium, demonstrating the role of the first Chinese connection during this time, represented by the Soghdian Letters; the first Chinese connection of this type was found in the 5th – 6th centuries.) Though the invasion of Changan is generally considered to have taken place in 317 A.D., after several calculations, Harmatta thinks that it was actually in the 3rd century. Iranians were considered “Hu” by Chinese sources and they were led to victory with Turkic help. According to my researches, Chinese officials invariably attempted to show themselves as the initiators of every event that was thought to benefit mankind in general. Chinese officials of the court believed that these Iranians were not popular within the Chinese and Turkic populations. Yet the tribes of the Turks enjoyed the wares brought by tradesmen from the Roman Empire, and often Iranian tradesmen were on good terms with the Chinese. In actuality, these tribes took it for granted that the Iranians had acquired their wealth through trade. Some Chinese people were thought to be Iranian tradesmen even if they lived near the Chinese population within the Chinese Empire since they were wealthy. The wealth of the Iranian tradesmen represented something alien and thus, was used by the Chinese to classify them. That is why it is so difficult for us to recognize the separate Iranian states as Chinese historiography did not and could not describe them properly. The Iranians were only servants in the eyes of the Chinese and they were treated accordingly. But cooperation with the Iranians was quite natural for the Turks and advantageous as well, as long-distance trade included livestock breeding.

The first Turkic delegation to negotiate with Chinese imperial envoys in 545 was led by a person of Soghd origin, named An No-p'an-t'o, in the state of Northern Zhou before the empire had been unified. This was a period when such negotiations could only be held with official authorization in China, while in the Mediterranean such activity was completely free. Long-distance trade was unrestricted before imperial unity, as proved by objects found in the Persian tombs of China. The silver objects concerned could have been brought into China without official control. These objects, excavated recently for archaeological purposes, were only of artistic value to the Chinese. For the Chinese these tombs showed only the ethnic coexistence of two nations and not the trade between them. Certain Sasanid tribes were granted permission to live in China for longer periods and to settle on Chinese territory providing military defence for the emperor and obeying his commands.

The other end of the road and time is represented by the period when the northern territory of the empire still belonged to China – to the Silk Road, represented by the Way of Armies, the road of tribes and tradesmen – when the Chinese Empire was in regular contact with the Roman Empire including Byzantium in the east and directly connected with the steppe region, populated by Iranian tribes or states.

In this period Asia Minor had links to the northern capitals of China, within the Mongol Empire in the 12th – 13th century. This is illustrated by the Chinese silk and the increasing quantity of western objects found along the Silk Road. Trade between China and Europe was sought by the West and not China, as commerce was despised there. This kind of trade could have been used to introduce Chinese achievements to the West. But objects from western countries were accompanied by scholarly concomitants as well. And this posed a serious threat to Chinese tradition.

Early Arabic and Persian knowledge of astronomy – though viewed as foreign – proved to be useful to China as these nations were better trained in scholarly subjects than the Chinese. Hostility to foreigners was not in evidence earlier in the capitals. In the 13th century contacts with western countries were led by a dynasty of foreign origin. The Chinese Empire consequently was flooded by Mongol / Turkic tribes, and even later China was protected by foreign tribes during the Chinese Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644). Chinese culture spread throughout the empire: Chinese buildings became similar throughout Mongol territory. (The same style in Baghdad and Peking!) The observatory of the Khan had an influence on the whole Empire, including the southern territories, and Chinese scholars wished to show that they were capable of doing anything that others in the empire were.

European traders went to the eastern steppes not only for the silk but for the spices of China and eastern Asia, and mainly for tea, which they could not live without. This happened at a time when the Chinese empire closed its frontiers at least to the north with the help of the steppe tribes. Soon the Mongols were replaced by the Ottoman army in Eurasia, and the role of Byzantium diminished both in the Roman Empire and the provinces as well as on the steppe near China. The Iranian armies of the steppe between the armies and the shores of Asia became separated from China and as a result Chinese Confucianism was allowed to develop. The division between China and the traders of Asia and Europe became permanent and consequently Europe and the rest of Asia ceased to exist for the Chinese. The Chinese

chronicles – once the main sources for western Asia – of this period became so narrow that looking for notes on western countries in the 15th century is futile. The European royal courts expected ever more gifts out of diplomatic contacts, but tradesmen were not able to bring them from the East, least of all from the dangerous lands defended by the nomadic tribes.

The only way for the tradesmen to gain access to luxury items was by sea. But not southwards, because the route between the Mediterranean territories and China was too long and dangerous, so they had to find another way out of this situation and out of Europe as well. Naturally they sought “the islands of India”, the islands of Indonesia, Japan and so on, for exotic plants, spices etc. Their only option was to head westwards, unaware that new continents and people awaited the adventurer.

This is how and why traditional Chinese economics and trade policy helped world history to find the routes of the future, leading to America. It was inevitable that new continents would be found by sea because the land which separated China from Europe was hostile to trade. America was discovered in 1492 because at this time only western traders were able to reach the lands where they found the wares for which they had been forced to travel to China earlier. Europe and the traders obtained what they wanted while China became only an obstacle on land. The Chinese Empire could still only be reached by sea; it was not until the Opium Wars that new routes were discovered. This is, however, another time and story.