Conclusion

The History of the Overland Routes through Central Asia

The Silk Road was one of the least traveled routes in human history and possibly not worth studying—if tonnage carried, traffic, or the number of travelers at any time were the sole measures of a given route's significance.

Yet the Silk Road changed history, largely because the people who managed to traverse part or all of the Silk Road planted their cultures like seeds of exotic species carried to distant lands. Thriving in their new homes, they mixed with the peoples already there and often assimilated with other groups who followed. Sites of sustained economic activity, these oasis towns were beacons enticing still others to cross over mountains and move through oceans of sand. While not much of a commercial route, the Silk Road was important historically—this network of routes became the planet's most famous cultural artery for the exchange between east and west of religions, art, languages, and new technologies.

Strictly speaking, the Silk Road refers to all the different overland routes leading west out of China through Central Asia to Syria and beyond. Nothing unusual in the landscape would catch the eye of someone flying overhead. The features delineating where the road went were not man-made but entirely natural—mountain passes, valleys, and springs of water in the desert. Not paved, the Silk Road was systematically mapped only in the twentieth century. No one living on these routes between 200 and 1000 CE, the peak period for the Chinese presence, ever said "the Silk Road." Recall that the term "Silk Road" did not exist before 1877, when the Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen first used it on a map (see color plate 2–3).

These routes date back to the very origins of humankind. Anyone who could walk was capable of going overland through Central Asia. In distant prehistoric times, populations migrated along these paths. The earliest surviving evidence of trade goods moving across regions comes around 1200 BCE, when jade traveled from Khotan to Anyang in Henan Province, where the Shang-dynasty

THE WORLD'S EARLIEST KNOWN PRINTED BOOK

Possibly the most famous of all Silk Road documents, the Diamond Sutra is the world's first intact printed book. It is a complete work on seven sheets of paper glued together to form a scroll. Note the gap between the opening illustration of the Buddha preaching and the second sheet of paper, which is all text. The closing dedication gives the date of carving the printing blocks as 868, about 150 years after the first woodblock printed texts appeared in East Asia. The desire to accumulate Buddhist merit was a major motivation for the development of printing. Courtesy of the Board of the British Library.

kings were buried north of the Yellow River. Contact among the different societies bordering central Asia—China, India, Iran—continued through the first millennium BCE.

In the second century BCE the rulers of the Han dynasty sent their first diplomat, a man named Zhang Qian, to the region. The Chinese hoped to negotiate an alliance against their enemy, the Xiongnu people, who lived in what is now Mongolia. The envoy noticed Chinese goods for sale in northern Afghanistan and reported their presence to the emperor on his return. Many books date the beginning of the Silk Road to Zhang Qian's trip. Remember that the emperor sent him for security concerns—not because he valued the trade, which he had not previously known about and which was small in scale. The Han dynasty subsequently dispatched armies to the northwest and stationed garrisons there, always to protect themselves from their enemies to the north. The soldiers in these Chinese garrisons had limited contact with the local populations. The first sustained interactions among the locals, migrants from India, and Chinese soldiers occurred at Niya and Loulan, which is where chapter 1 begins.

In each of the Silk Road communities discussed in this book—Niya, Loulan, Kucha, Turfan, Samarkand, Chang'an, Dunhuang, and Khotan—trade existed, but it was limited. In the third and fourth centuries, of nearly one thousand Kharoshthi documents found at Niya, only one mentions "merchants," who would be coming to the village from China when they could assess the price of silk. The few merchants who were traveling were closely monitored. Local officials issued them travel passes that listed each person and animal in the party and specified exactly which towns they could go to in which order. Chinese officials were not the only ones to supervise the trade; officials at Kucha did so as well. Governments played a major role as the purchasers of goods and services.

Markets existed in these different towns, but they offered far more local goods for sale than exotic imports. At one market in Turfan in 743, local officials recorded three prices (high, medium, low) for each of 350 different items, including typical Silk Road goods like ammonium chloride, aromatics, sugar, and brass. Shoppers could buy all kinds of locally grown vegetables and staples as well as animals, some brought over long distances. A wide array of textiles woven in central China and shipped to the northwest were on sale, because the central government used these textiles as money to pay its soldiers, and they in turn used them to obtain goods at the market.

The massive transfer of wealth from central China to the northwest, where many soldiers were stationed, accounted for the flourishing Silk Road trade when the Tang dynasty was at its strongest, before 755. Two shipments of silk in 745 to a garrison in Dunhuang totaled 15,000 bolts, and later encyclopedias report that, in the 730s and 740s, the Tang government sent 900,000 bolts of silk each year to four different headquarters in the frontier areas of the Western Regions—now modern Gansu and Xinjiang. Much larger in quantity than any documented private transaction, these continuing subsidies underpinned the region's prosperity. Almost immediately after the Turco-Sogdian general An Lushan (or Rokhshan, to use his Sogdian name) rose up in 755, when the Tang government cut off payments to the region, the Silk Road economy collapsed.

After 755, the region reverted to a subsistence trade very similar to that in earlier times. One merchant traveled a small circuit roughly 100 square miles (250 km) in area around Dunhuang. This peddler handled only locally produced goods, and his business consisted largely of exchanging one item for another. His report confirms the dearth of coins in the northwest after 800. This kind of low-level trade persisted long after the height of the Silk Road trade. In the early years of the twentieth century both Aurel Stein and Sven Hedin encountered itinerant traders just like this. These exchanges had little impact on the economic life of people living along the Silk Road. Those who worked the

land continued to do so, and they did not purchase or produce the luxury goods for which the Silk Road is famous.

This book draws on many documents to show that the Silk Road trade was often local and small in scale. Even the most ardent believer in a high-volume, frequent trade must concede that there is little empirical basis for the much-vaunted Silk Road trade. One might interpret the scraps of evidence differently than this book does, but there is no denying that the debates concern scraps—not massive bodies—of evidence.

Because each site is so distinct and preserves materials in different languages, most scholars work primarily on a single Silk Road site. Individually, they notice that their particular site preserves little direct evidence of the Silk Road trade, and they go to great lengths to explain why. This book demonstrates that this same silence about trade holds true for all the Silk Road sites that have produced documents.

The strongest proponents of trade may believe that more evidence lies still undiscovered under the surface of the ground. This point of view is impossible to refute: which of us can say what discoveries lie in the future? In the meantime, though, this book has taken a close, critical look at the evidence at hand, since that is the only way that understanding of the history and trade of the Silk Road will advance. Excavated evidence has received pride of place in this book because it is genuine and firsthand: generalizations about the trade pale in comparison to actual lists of taxes paid by merchants or travel passes granted to merchants on the road. Yes, the evidence is scant and often missing crucial sections. But it comes from a variety of findspots, making this picture of a local, small-scale trade more plausible.

Despite the limited trade, extensive cultural exchange between east and west—China and first South Asia, and later west Asia, especially Iran—did take place as various groups of people moved along the different land routes through Central Asia. Refugees, artists, craftsmen, missionaries, robbers, and envoys all made their way along these routes. Sometimes they resorted to trade, but that was not their primary purpose in traveling.

The most important and the most influential people moving along the Silk Road were refugees. Waves of immigrants brought technologies with them from their homeland and then practiced those skills in their new homes. The frequent migrations of people fleeing either war or political conflicts in their homelands meant that some technologies moved east, others west. The technologies for manufacturing paper and weaving silk were transported west out of China at the same time that the techniques for making glass entered China. Itinerant artists also moved along these routes, bringing sketchbooks and introducing motifs from their homelands.

The first migrants came from the Gandhara region in what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Western Regions and settled in Niya. These Indian refugees introduced the Kharoshthi script and their writing technology, slotted wooden boards, to the indigenous peoples. They also brought their belief system, Buddhism, with them. Early Buddhist regulations prescribe celibacy for monks, but some of the Niya Buddhists married and had children. Living at home, they only visited monasteries to participate in major ceremonies.

The most prominent migrant community in western China by far was the Sogdians, whose homeland was in Samarkand and the surrounding towns of modern Uzbekistan. They formed settlements in almost every Chinese town, where Sogdian sabao headmen supervised the affairs of the local community. Some Sogdian migrants were merchants; they appear so often in fiction that a stereotype of the rich Sogdian merchant took shape.

One of the most detailed descriptions of the Silk Road trade comes from the eight Sogdian Ancient Letters preserved in an abandoned mailbag outside Dunhuang. The letters, which date to 313 or 314, mention specific commodities: wool and linen, musk, the lead-based cosmetic ceruse, pepper, silver, and possibly silk. The quantities are not large, ranging from 3.3 pounds (1.5 kg) to 88 pounds (40 kg), all consonant with a small-scale trade managed by caravaneers.

Caravans frequently moved along the various overland routes. In the third letter, a Sogdian woman named Miwnay reports that she had five different opportunities to leave Dunhuang, where she was stranded by her errant husband. To make ends meet, she ended up tending sheep alongside her daughter, and other Sogdians proved just as flexible in their choice of occupation after settling in China. They farmed the land, worked as craftsmen, practiced veterinary medicine, or served as soldiers.

The historic capital of Chang'an, now called Xi'an, is famous for its Silk Road art. Perhaps the most concentrated find is the Hejia Village hoard, which contains over a hundred beautiful gold and silver vessels combining Chinese and Western motifs. On close examination, many of these objects turn out to be locally manufactured, either by Sogdians in exile or by Chinese craftsmen who adopted Sogdian motifs. Only the jewels are indisputably imported: light and small, they would have been easy to transport overland.

Like other refugees, the Sogdians brought their religious beliefs with them to China. Some Sogdians gave up their original practices—like exposing the dead and then burying the bones in clay containers called ossuaries—and adopted certain Chinese funerary customs, like burying the dead in tombs with a slanting stairway leading down to an underground chamber. In Xi'an and other Chinese

cities, archaeologists have unearthed tombs decorated with scenes of the Zoroastrian afterlife. One held a bilingual epitaph for the deceased composed in both the Chinese and Sogdian languages.

Each community in the Western Regions hosted multiple migrant communities, many of whom continued the religious practices of their homes. Whereas refugees left their homelands because they had no choice, students of religion traveled to learn more and teachers settled in towns where they could attract students. Some of the most detailed travel accounts come from Chinese monks who traveled to India, both by land and by sea, to study Buddhist teachings. They vividly documented the risks of travel. In the early 400s, Faxian's Indian shipmates almost threw him overboard until they realized that only he could speak Chinese and determine where their ship had landed (hundreds of miles off course, as it turned out).

More than two centuries later, the monk Xuanzang crossed mountain passes where many of his companions perished from the cold, and he survived being robbed of all his possessions, even his clothing. He also encountered brigands so busy dividing up loot that they could not be bothered to steal anything from him. He is the rare traveler to say much about thieves. Police reports from Niya document the losses of a handful of refugees who carried pearls, mirrors, fine clothes of silk or wool, and silver ornaments, but do not identify the culprits. One wall painting at Dunhuang captures the palpable apprehension of merchants held up by an armed bandit—until the bodhisattva Guanyin intercedes to save them.

Buddhist missionaries like Xuanzang were among the most important translators. They worked out a system for transcribing unfamiliar terms in foreign languages, like Sanskrit, into Chinese that still remains in use today. Chinese absorbed some 35,000 new words, some technical Buddhist terms, some common everyday words. People who spoke different languages often encountered each other on the Silk Road. Some, like Kumarajiva, had learned multiple languages since childhood. Others had to learn foreign languages as adults, an even more painful process than it is today given how few language learning aids were available.

Surviving phrase books shed light on the identities of students and their reasons for learning languages. Used in monasteries throughout the first millennium, Sanskrit always attracted students, but so too did Khotanese, Chinese, and Tibetan. After 755, more Buddhist pilgrims traveled from Khotan and Tibet to Dunhuang and then onto Mount Wutai in Shanxi; some went in the opposite direction, going all the way to Nalanda, always an important center of Buddhist learning in India.

Some of these pilgrims traveled on their own, while others served as emissaries sent by one ruler to visit another. Envoys have left a clearer documentary

footprint than any other itinerant group. These diplomats carried unusual gifts and letters from one ruler to another; at the same time they brought information about their home societies to their hosts and relayed what they learned on their travels to the rulers who dispatched them. Some were certainly spies.

The Xuanquan wooden slips from Dunhuang document the regular exchange of envoys between the Chinese and rulers to the west at the turn of the Common Era, and diplomats continued to travel in subsequent centuries. At the peak of the Silk Road, all the major powers exchanged emissaries. Chinese envoys traveled to Samarkand, and their Sogdian counterparts went in the opposite direction. The Afrasiab murals at Samarkand give pride of place to envoys, each laden with products from their native lands.

The envoy traffic continued even after the massive contraction of the Silk Road economy after 755. One delegation of seven Khotanese princes was unable to complete their trip because the ruler of Dunhuang would not allow them to leave, as travel had become so dangerous. The delegation's members resorted to impromptu exchanges of locally produced goods to cover their travel expenses, paying with bolts of silk or a sheep or even an antelope skin. Even the Khotanese princes resorted to selling jade to cover their travel expenses.

The documents about the princes' difficulties are among the forty thousand documents in multiple languages preserved in the library cave at Dunhuang, which was sealed sometime after 1002 and serves as a time capsule of Silk Road diversity. The Buddhist librarian-monks who saved the texts collected the teachings of their own religion, of course, but kept all scraps of paper in case they might prove useful in the future. They saved texts written in Sanskrit, Khotanese, Tibetan, Uighur, and Sogdian, and from the religions of Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism. The Diamond Sutra is the most famous of all the writings from the library cave, because it is the world's earliest dated printed book, but other texts are arguably more unusual: think of the talisman made from a sheet of folded paper with excerpts in Hebrew from Psalms or the Manichaean hymns sung in Sogdian but written phonetically in Chinese characters. The entire cave embodies the tolerance of different religions that characterized Silk Road communities for nearly one thousand years.

The monks who sealed off the library cave did not record their reasons for doing so, but they knew of the war between the Buddhist allies of the Dunhuang ruler in Khotan and the Muslim Karakhanids. Even if the fall of Khotan in 1006 did not trigger the closing of the cave, it ushered in a new era for the region, which gradually converted to Islam. Over the following centuries each oasis became a self-contained Islamic state, and the very few men who went to Mecca on the hajj exercised great influence on their return. The European travelers who still managed to travel through the region—possibly Marco Polo, certainly

Bento de Goes—described homogenous, isolated communities very different from the cosmopolitan towns of earlier times.

When Sven Hedin made his first foray into the Taklamakan in 1895, he entered a remote world utterly unknown to Europeans. Thanks to the region's dry climate, Hedin, Aurel Stein, and others were able to recover multiple documents and artifacts from before the coming of Islam. Those same conditions of preservation draw visitors today who hope to catch a glimpse of the latest discoveries from this now lost, once tolerant world.