

Let the Materials Speak for Themselves: Using Archaeological Evidence in History Classes on the Silk Road

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ABSTRACT

Study of the Silk Road offers a unique means of conveying the significance of global history and intercultural relations. While our understanding of the Silk Road is restricted by the paucity of written records, rich archaeological findings since the past century reveal the remarkable interchanges among the Eurasian civilizations. Through an analysis of materials remains, including textiles, manuscripts, sculptures, porcelains, and tomb decorations, it is possible to depict their cultural and religious context and to let the objects speak for themselves about their entanglements. In this way, the objects derive insights about the cultural interactions between various civilizations along the Silk Road. By using the archaeological evidence in classes on the Silk Road, these objects together supply an important vehicle that enables students to get a more grounded and holistic understanding of the period and the people they are learning about.

Keywords: *Silk Road, Archaeology, College teaching, Cultural interaction.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Silk Road was one of the least travelled routes in history, however, this network of routes became the world's most important cultural artery for the exchange of art, languages, religions, and technologies. For over two thousand years, the vast region of Central Asia, stretching from the Taklamakan Desert to the Black Sea, stood as essential hubs of trade and exchange. From Xi'an in China to Herat in Afghanistan, from Samarkand in Uzbekistan to Istanbul in Turkey, a chain of trade centers dotted across the spine of the Eurasian continent, creating an extensive system of pathways that linked many civilizations. However, the glories of these once-great cities are long gone; many of them have become neglected places, the names of which are all but forgotten by mainstream historians. [1] Because of the constant movements of peoples and destructions caused by warfare, very few written records, if any, about the history of the Silk Road are available today.

Fortunately, recent archaeological discoveries in Central Asia, particularly in China's Xinjiang region, has created a growing body of material evidence that offers vivid and tangible proof of the Silk Road's communities. [2] Results of archaeological excavations provide a visual gateway to understanding the civilizations and their histories. These glorious materials offer extraordinary pedagogical possibilities. Once facilitated with proper

methodologies, these archaeological findings can function as valuable means for college history classes. This paper describes some of the most famous objects excavated from sites along the Silk Road and discusses the strategies for use these materials in college teaching. The exchanges of the objects with the cultures they encountered, as this paper demonstrates, depict a lively picture of the interactions along the Silk Road, about which textual records are too fragmentary or too sparse. In this way, archaeological evidence offers unique means to comprehend both the continuities and the changes that have occurred over the two millennia of the Silk Road.

2. THE SILK ROAD AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR HISTORY TEACHING

The Silk Road as an academic term for the network of routes that spanned the Eurasian continent was coined by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877.[3] Richthofen, as the first European geographer who incorporated Chinese sources from dynastic histories into a map of the Central Asian region, illustrated the route between China and Europe in Roman times.[4] With the publication of the English version of Sven Hedin's book on his explorations in Central Asia in 1936, *The Silk Road*, the term gained more international acceptance.[5] From its inception, the Silk Road has been

widely used as a designation for overland trade and cultural interactions across Eurasia. In contrast to many conventions that showed the Silk Road as a relatively straight and well-travelled route, historical documents and archaeological investigations have revealed that the Silk Road was “a patchwork of drifting trails and unmarked footpaths”. [6] As the main overland routes that linked East to the West, the Silk Road has casted great impact on the history of not only Eurasia but also the whole world.

The highly diversified history of the Silk Road furnishes instructors of college history classes with rich teaching materials that reveal many interesting aspects of both Chinese and world history. First, the Silk Road depicts the multi-layered dimensions of transregional trade of goods across Eurasia, because it functioned, at least during the first millennium AD, as the most important trade routes of Eurasian transcontinental exchanges of goods. Next to silk, which was indeed not the most traded item, there were many things sold and bought across the vast region of the Eurasian continent, ranging from gold, silver, gems, glass, spices, horses, as well as paper and gunpowder. Even after the long-distance exchanges decreased after the fall of the Mongol empire in the fourteenth century, regional trade continued. China’s trade in silk textiles and tea with partners closer than the Mediterranean, for instance, continued unabated into the nineteenth century. [7] The region of today’s Afghanistan, north Pakistan and northwest India, similarly, played an important role in contributing cotton textiles and wool tapestries.

Second, the history of the Silk Road is in many respects the history of Central Asia and the nomadic peoples living in the region, a topic too often neglected in the history classes. As the grassland of Central Eurasia were home to many nomadic groups, the dynamics of the history of the region, especially the activities of nomadic herders and their interactions with agrarian states shaped trans-continental exchanges. From the prehistoric periods on, tribal speakers of Mongol, Turkic, Iranian, and other languages maintained a pastoralist economy on the steppe areas from Mongolia in the east to the Black Sea in the west.[8] The history of the Silk Road has shown, that these Central Eurasian residents, contrary to many conventional imaginations, were neither exclusively nomadic nor always pastoralist and they enjoyed relations of both urban and farming communities.[9] In different ways, the Central Eurasians participated in and influenced transcontinental economic and other exchanges and update our existing understanding of their nature and history.

Third, next to political and military consolidations, religions also spread along the Silk Road, creating religious realms of shared believes and institutions that transcended political and boundaries. Together with diplomats and merchants, missionaries travelled the same

route to remote areas and established monasteries and converted new adherent. Because many religious personnel were literate, they brought with them also the knowledge of scriptural languages and high culture. Not few missionaries wrote about their journeys, which then provide much important information about the Silk Road. The seventh-century Monk Xuanzang, for instance, left a particularly detailed account of the “West Regions” through his travel en route to India, so that this text stood for centuries as the core of Chinese geographical knowledge about Central Asia and India.[10] Remains of a Tang dynasty (618-907) Nestorian monastery was excavated outside the abandoned city of Gaochang in 1904-05, with fragments of a wall painting depict a Nestorian priest carrying out a Palm Sunday observance.[11] Thus, by focusing on the religions along the Silk Road, the students are introduced into a colorful cultural field that stimulated communications and stretched intellectual connections.

Fourth, for millennia the Silk Road functioned as channels of artistic exchanges. Art, and especially archaeology along the Silk Road have vividly illustrated not only the large array of trade goods but also the people who lived in different oases and cities. The discovery of the ancient city of Loulan by Aurel Stein (1862-1943), for example, included a bold of pale-yellow silk, documents of both wood and paper that recorded trade contracts, wooden architectural fragments with Ionic and Corinthian capitals, and murals with figures of Mediterranean heroines and heroes. [12] Clay or porcelain figures of Sogdian riders on camels are commonly found in tombs of the sixth to the ninth centuries. Their triangular peaked hats and obvious Caucasoid features—large noses, heavy facial hair, bulging eyes—reveal their origin in the region around Samarkand and Bukhara and were thus commonly viewed as non-Chinese. [13] These artistic expressions help the student grasp the cosmopolitan nature of life in the period and understand the continuities and the change that have occurred.

3. THE USE OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE IN TEACHING ON THE SILK ROAD

Since the end of the nineteenth century, different archaeologists and expeditors have made important excavations in a number of burials and ruins along the Silk Road, in particular in the Taklamakan desert and the Hexi corridor, including Loulan, Niya, Khotan, Kucha, as well as Turfan and Dunhuang. The large body of objects discovered in those archaeological sites have greatly enriched our understanding of the cultures of the Silk Road and provide the classroom with many important teaching materials. By combining various materials such as historical records, archaeological discoveries, and material remains, and documentaries,

students receive abundant materials to participate in team discussions and debates, so that they can have a deeper comprehension of the history, culture, economy, and politics of the Silk Road.

3.1. Textiles

3.1.1. Silk Brocade with Characters of “Longevity and Brightness”

Among the many types of silk weavings, probably the one that can best represent the tradition of Chinese silk craftsmanship is the brocade (*jin*), a warp faced compound plain weave of silk. One of the finest examples of silk brocade, unearthed from the site of the ancient Loulan city, is a fabric with patterns of clouds and animals and four Chinese characters woven into the design: “longevity and brightness” (*changshou mingguan*). [14] The main motifs include four beasts and one bird in the clouds, ranging from a bear climbing in the mountain, a tiger with head turned back, a small indefinite beast—probably a wolf, a rose finch perching on the cloud, and a dragon with two wings. Between the tiger and the wolf are the four woven characters. The two characters “*mingguang*” probably refer to the Brightness Palace (*Mingguang gong*) of Emperor Wudi (r. 141 BC-87 BC) of the Han dynasty (202 BC-8 AD), so that the four characters together express the wishes for the longevity and bliss of the owner of the palace.

This fabric is a typical five-colored warp faced compound plain weave, with warp threads in red, blue, yellow, green, and white. Among the silk brocades of the Han dynasty, this type requires the most complicated craftsmanship. Cocoons and seeds from mulberry trees, the main foodstuff of silkworms, were produced in Loulan and the residents acquired basic knowledge of making simple tabby weave, but they did not have the sophisticated looms needed to weave the elaborate silk brocades. This piece of silk textile was clearly of Chinese manufacture. While it is not clear whether the occupant of the tomb could read Chinese, the placement of this fabric indicates that it was a valued item.

3.1.2. Wool Gown with Patterns of Eros, Animals, and Pomegranate Trees

While many silk weavings on the Silk Road were made in Central China, most wool clothes were produced locally or traded from Central Asia. In 1995, a male corpse with elaborate clothes was found in tomb no. 15 of Yingpan southwest of Loulan.[15] The deceased man, buried in the third to fourth centuries, wears a red wool gown with a complex design composed of pairs of facing figures, animals, and trees that were woven into double weave. The design is regular and symmetric in warp direction with a ward distance of 77 cm for each section, which consists of six groups of patterns. The nude figures

were the images of Eros, the god of love, and the trees were pomegranate trees, both were prominent motifs in Hellenistic arts. The oxen and goats under the tree were often seen in Persian ornaments.

Unlike simple weaves with patterns appear on one side, plain weave was applied with red and yellow threads as the warp and weft to form the same pattern but the different colors on both sides. With two interwoven layers, this gown is a fine piece of wool textile which is not woven by local weavers but imported from Bactria, where local craftsmen modified Greco-Roman motifs first introduced by the armies of Alexander of Macedon in the fourth century BC. [16]

3.1.3. Samite Silk with Paired Birds in Pearl Roundel

The samite silk was unearthed from the no. 134 tomb at Astanan in Turfan, dating to the early Tang dynasty (618-907). There are two rows of pattern with pearl roundel and paired birds, both of them in the red ground, with yellow for birds and roundel, and white for pearl and the edge of the bird motif. The bird heads are decorated with star and crescent, while at the their feet are platform formed by pearls. [17] This textile is obviously a typical Persian samite or Sogdian samite. This piece is the one of the very few samite textiles excavated in the same period, which find repeat in the warp direction. As this one has two rows of small patterns, the minor differences in the patterns of the two rows prove that this kind of samite was woven by the loom that can only control repeat in the weft direction but not in the warp direction. Thus, it represents the process of the gradual development of local weaving technologies.

3.2. Sculptures

3.2.1. Standing Buddha of Gandharan India

The Silk Road functioned as the channel for the transmission of Buddhism from Kushan India (50-320) to Central Asia and China. A sculpture of the standing Buddha, in the collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, wears a full-length toga-like garment. [18] In India where Buddhism originated, the Buddha would never wear such garments because a toga was only intended for Roman citizens and the heat of the Indian subcontinent was hardly suitable for wearing a toga. The face of the Buddha was also clearly not Indian nor Chinese, but similar to that of the European. These are because that by the time of the Kushan empire, the Romans, following the footsteps of Alexander and his Asian empire, has established colonial presence in the provinces of western Asia. Those who traded with them, or worked for them, also produced sculptural figures for Kushan patrons in Gandhara, who admired the Roman culture. Thus, the facial features and the toga-like

garment made their way across the Silk Road along with Buddhism to other regions of the Eurasian continent and are evidence for early contacts between Asian and Western cultures.

3.2.2. *A Sogdian on a Crouching Camel*

The rider figure on a crouching camel, excavated from the Tang tomb near Xi'an, wears a triangular peaked felt hat and a round collar robe, both commonly worn by the Sogdians. [19] The camel knees down and raises his neck upwards, in the pose of roaring energetically. The rider turns his face slightly right and gazes at the head of camel with the right hand raised up to make a fist and wield the whip. His obvious Caucasian features—large nose and bulging eyes—are typical Sogdian and stand out as foreign from a Chinese point of view.

This set vividly shows the superb camel taming skills of the Sogdian riders, who during the Tang period were commonly engaged in horse raising, camel leading and attendant services. Similar figures were found in a number of Tang tombs, though in different poses and with different expressions. Such sculptures of Central Asia riders and pack animals demonstrate the cosmopolitan nature of life in this period, in particular in Chang'an, the capital of the Tang. The world city attracted numerous foreign businessmen, who led caravans travelling between the West and the East.

3.3. *Visual Art*

3.3.1. *Mural of a Sogdian King Held an Audience with Ambassadors and Emissaries*

The murals on the western wall of the so-called "Ambassadors' Hall", a square room of an aristocratic Sogdian family in the Afrasiab site in Samarkand, provide a visual introduction to the diplomatic connections of Samarkand. Painted between 660 and 661 during the reign of the Sogdian King Varkhuman, a name that appears in the official Chinese histories, since he was awarded the title of governor of Sogdiana by the Tang emperor Gaozong (r. 649-683). [20] With Varkhuman sitting in the upper-middle position of the mural, forty-two figures, probably ambassadors and emissaries from different countries, march in an impressive procession. While most figures are of Central Asian origin, five Chinese, wearing typical Chinese robes and caps, stand in the center and hold in their hands rolls of silk, skeins of silk thread, and silk cocoons. They are placed in the focal point of the composition, which reflects that the Chinese were important to Varkhuman, since he depended on the Chinese for military support. [21] In the lower-right corner, two men wearing feathered headdresses stand with their hands in their sleeves. Their appearance suggests that they were Korean, probably

from the state of Koguryo (37 BC-669 AD). The figures, including the immediate neighbors and those from more distant places, illustrate the cosmopolitan world in which in the Sogdians lived.

3.3.2. *Mural of Avadana Stories and Jataka Tales from a Kizil Cave*

One site with some of the most impressive murals of Buddhist art is the Kizil caves, which were founded by Albert von Le Coq, the German expeditor who was active in Xinjiang in the early twentieth century. Many of the caves were decorated with paintings of the Buddha, though the majority of them were removed by successive expeditors. Cave 38 at Kizil, dated to ca. 400, is one of the earliest and possibly the most visually appealing one. [22] On each side of the central ridge are rows of diamond-shaped lozenges with edges similar to post stamps. The illustrations alternate avadana stories and jataka tales, which narrate the previous lives of the Buddha. These allegorical tales about the Buddha were intended to teach the viewers, with the help of monks telling related stories, about the relationship between their behavior in this life and effects in future lives.

In these murals, the body of the Buddha was rather thin and it was lined with dark color, so that the muscles became evident. These features were distinctly Indian in style, because the murals were most likely executed by either artists from India or based on sketches from India. Together with the statues, they reflect the characteristics of Buddhism that has just entered China, whereas local adjustments were still yet to come.

3.3.3. *A Paper Illustration Depicting the Manichaean Bema Festival*

Next to the Kizil caves, Albert von Le Coq also discovered some of the most interesting documents about Manichaeism, a religion founded in Iran by the prophet Mani (ca. 210-276). A brilliantly colored illustration, though severely damaged, is from an eighth- or ninth century book excavated by von Le Coq in Turfan. It depicts some laypeople offering melon, grapes and sun-shaped bread to the clergy, who eat the food to transform them into light particles. [23] This is a typical scene in the Bema festival, the high point of the Manichaean ritual year.

Sometime in the 760s, the Uyghur khan adopted Manichaeism as the official religion of his kingdom, making it the first—and the only—polity in world history that named Manichaeism its official religion. [24] Before von Le Coq's discovery of these documents, the only little knowledge about Manichaeism came from Augustine's description in his *Confessions*. Before the Uyghur were converted to Buddhism and later to Islam, their religious world was very much Manichaean.

3.4. Metal Vessels

3.4.1. A Gold-Gilt Silver Cup from the Hejiacun Hoard

In 1970, two large clay pots and one silver pot in the southern suburb of Xi'an. As one of the largest hoards of buried treasures ever found in China, it contains some of the most exquisite and valuable Silk Road artifacts. One of these artifacts is a gold-gilt silver cup with identifiable Sogdian characteristics. [25] The cup has eight lobes, a pearl border trim at the base, and a thumb ring attached to a triangular medallion holding a deer. The exterior of the cup alternates scenes of men hunting, squarely in the Iranian tradition, with portraits of women in Chinese gowns. No information is available about where it was made or who made it. Nor is there any definite evidence of the owner's identity. Judging from the motif of the cup, it is possibly made in China, by Sogdian or Chinese craftsmen. Combining different elements of Iranian and Chinese art, this cup reveals how art and technology were transmitted from the west to the east and offers insight into the wealthiest of Tang Chang'an's dwellers.

3.4.2. A Gold-Gilt Silver Bactrian Ewer from the Tomb of Li Xian

One of the finest metal vessels of the Silk Road is a gold-gilt silver ewer excavated from the tomb of the general Li Xian (502-569) and his wife in Guyuan, Ningxia. The decorative frieze illustrates three scenes, each showing a man and a woman, which depict the judgement of Paris, the abduction of Helen, and the return of Helen. [26] The ewer vividly shows Sasanian Persian techniques and literary motifs from classical Greece with influences from India. [27] Found in northwest China, the characteristics of the ewer reveals that it was probably produced in Bactria in today's northern Afghanistan during the Hephthalite empire (ca. 450-ca. 500). The time when the ewer was acquired by Li Xian is a vital period in both China's history and that of the Silk Road. In the early sixth century, north China and the Hexi corridor were under the rule of the Xianbei, a people of proto-Mongol stock. It was during their reign that the routes from the Yellow River valley to the Tarim were again secured after centuries of warfare, so that traders and pilgrims could travel and Buddhism became embedded in north China. Although no detailed information is available as how this ewer traveled to Guyuan, yet its biography interestingly covers the geographical length of the Silk Road and points to the use of the objects in defining identity for cultures on the Silk Road.

4. INCORPORATING THE MATERIALS INTO CLASSROOM TEACHING

In order to enable students to better understand the contents, the teaching aims to increase the diversity of

material sources, integrate different perspectives of pioneering researches on the Silk Road research, and use various types of documents, bamboo slips, murals, silk weavings etc. To achieve this, the instructor guides the students to comprehensively use relevant texts and archaeological materials. The students are trained to find and use various materials and thus are able to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the development of civilizations on the Silk Road.

At the same time, video materials such as archaeological excavation videos, documentaries, and historical films are used to enrich teaching methods at multiple levels and to enhance the students' interest in learning. On the other hand, specific topics are chosen to enable students to discuss and debate with each other in groups, which enhances the students' active participation in the classroom and stimulate their active thinking. The comprehensive combination of multiple teaching methods encourages the students to have a deeper understanding of the history, culture, economy, politics and other aspects of the Silk Road, and to better understand the historical background and development prospects of the "Belt and Road" initiative.

5. CONCLUSION

The Silk Road passes through a vast region that stretches east and west, north and south, connecting different civilizations that were important in human history. For two millennia, this was a region where pilgrims and merchants had travelled, products and goods were transported and sold, and ideas and traditions were confronted, exchanged, and evolved. It was also a linguistic cauldron that saw different language groups spoken alongside tongues of various dialects. As the cradle of some of the world's greatest religions, it was here, too, that they contended with and influenced each other in myriad ways. Far from being on the periphery of global affairs, this region had been the "very crossroads of civilisation" since the beginning of history. [28] The rich archaeological evidence from the Silk Road have revealed much about its cities and oases, about the people who lived there and travelled its various routes, and about the interconnectedness of cultures. Thus, archaeology is indispensable both in study and teaching the Silk Road.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Hang Lin is the single author of this paper.

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