

Rome and China: points of contact

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Review by

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Eurasian studies or Silk Road(s) studies are to be counted among the liveliest and most attractive subjects in recent scholarship. This short and concise volume is no exception to the trend. It has been carefully and expertly edited, and is pleasant to read. It should be considered part of the indispensable background reading in university courses dealing with the Silk Road, providing at the same time a useful introduction for a wider audience. As suggested by the title, its main aim is to explore cultural interconnectivity between the two major empires of the first centuries of our era, namely Rome and China, spanning over eight centuries and over ten thousand kilometres (the approximate distance from Rome to Xi'an). The four chapters, written by two young brilliant scholars and an acknowledged specialist, Samuel Lieu, examine these encounters and connections, dealing either with "physical" itineraries (maritime and land trade routes), and with a wider circulation of ideas, as in the case of the spread of Christianity and Manichaeism into Central Asia as far as China.

The first chapter (MacLaughlin and Kim) serves as an introduction, insofar as it sets the premises for further discussion, by providing a general outline of geographical and environmental characteristics of the different territories, and commercial routes, described by classical geographers. It then highlights Chinese attempts at pursuing official and diplomatic contacts with Rome and vice versa, which were made all the more difficult by hostile powers like the Parthian Empire or the Kushan Kingdom, but also by natural hindrances, such as deserts or mountain chains. Together with well-attested Sino-Parthian contacts, the introduction focuses on two famous episodes recorded in Chinese annals, namely the failed embassy of Gan Ying in AD 97, which sought to establish a contact with Rome, and a successful one in AD 161-4, when Rome was ruled by Antun (i.e. Marcus Aurelius Antoninus) and some Roman envoys were received by the emperor in Luoyang. These contacts, so scantily attested, and yet so fascinating as the origin of a number of legends (for example, the story of the last legion defeated at Charrae which sought in the East), were unfortunately truncated by the smallpox epidemic that devastated the Roman Empire in the same years and raged in China as well.

Whereas, from the perspective of a Western-oriented reader, there is little doubt about the actual nature and state of affairs in the Roman Empire and its Byzantine continuation, things become much more obscure and confused when we turn to consider China, its geographical expanse, and its dynastic alternation, not to mention the various kingdoms or khaganates that populated the steppe of Inner and Central Asia. Such is the case of the two central chapters, which examine the Xiongnu Huns and which cast light on the diplomatic relationships between the Byzantine and the Sasanian Empires, including different peoples living in Central Asia.

In chapter two, Kim provides a short outline of the Xiongnu Huns, the powerful and mighty adversaries of both the Hans and the Romans, tracing their origins as a polyglot and multi-ethnic confederation, which came to rule over various Indo-European or Altaic groups and was finally able to reach and threaten the Roman Empire in the middle of the fifth century. Yet, the Huns were able to transfer to the conquered Germanic tribes and, in the final analysis, to the Romans their quasi-feudal system, thus laying the foundations of the new political framework of the European Middle Ages. These features had been inherited from the Chinese, when the Xiongnu developed a more complex political system, with the royal clan and other leading families linked by marriage ties. It is also possible to detect other Chinese influences, often not devoid of cosmological features (for example the orientation or the division into Eastern/Western rulers). Particular importance is given to historical Chinese sources, such as Sima Qian (2nd-1st century BC), the *Hou Hansu* and the *Wishu* (5th century AD), which represent a precious source that permits us to reconstruct their particular customs. Conversely, although better known, more attention could have been paid to Greco-Roman sources, for example observing that some peculiar customs which are there narrated as ethnographic curiosities might have reflected actual practices, as documented by archaeological evidence.

The next chapter, once again jointly written by MacLaughlin and Kim, is, in the view of this reviewer, the most stimulating of the entire volume. It deals with diplomatic strategy and commercial exchanges at the eve of the Middle Ages, and elucidates the importance of the Bactrian and Sogdian regions, which became a crucial pawn in these complex dynamics. Commercial wars to obtain the monopoly of the silk trade and its consequent profits were indeed more complicated than appears in the famous and legendary episode recorded by Procopius, about the monks who stole and hid silk cocoons in their socks, and they often intertwined with political upheavals and actual wars. The chapter, thus, discusses to a greater extent these topics, recorded in Byzantine and Chinese sources as well, and we are presented with fascinating topics such as the past splendours of the Roman-Byzantine Empire, the decline and fall of the Hephthalites, the cunning negotiations of the Sasanians, the emergence of the Göktürks and of the Avars and their final success in establishing diplomatic contacts with the heirs of the Romans (as a curiosity, it might be worth mentioning that the Avar embassy to Justin II is also recorded by the poet Corippus in his *Panegyric for the successor of Justinian*).

Lieu's final chapter discusses (allegedly Nestorian) Christianity and Manichaeism, by providing a useful and smart account of the Chinese sources, starting from the renowned bilingual (Chinese and Syriac) stele erected in 781 and excavated in 1623 in a neighbourhood of the ancient imperial capital city of Chang'an (modern Xi'an), to the lavish array of documents found in the Mogao caves at Dunhuang and in the oasis of Turfan. Lieu concentrates on political and ecclesiastical nomenclature and proper names, considering also the intermediation of Syriac, as, for example, in the colophon written on the stele which still bears the date according to the Seleucid calendar, or in later Central Asian or Mongolian tombstones. Particularly remarkable is the rendering of the name *Qwstntynws* (*Constantinos*) as *Juxin*, which literally means "being constant in faith". Similarly, with Iranian languages, we find cases such as the name *Sengjia Cenwen* to 'translate' Simon Peter, where the word *Sengjia* must be understood as derived from Sogdian *sang* ("stone") rather than from Sanskrit *samgha* ("monk"). Another interesting note concerns the idealized use of the name Daqin, instead of the more usual Fulin, to identify the Roman Empire as the motherland of Christianity. It might be useful to add that some later accounts of Manichaeism (discussed by Lin Wushu in 2011) likewise state that it was a religion originating from Daqin.

Lieu's concluding remarks open the path for further hints and new investigations. Whereas martyr literature (either Christian or Manichaean) has not been found so far, because it probably was not so attractive for a Chinese audience, a recent discovery of a new Manichaean document from Shagwan (Fujian province) containing a hymn to St. George and celebrating his martyrdom, can provide a

remarkable testimony of the Manichaean syncretistic attitude, but can also bear witness to a sort of transformation within Christianity itself, which probably assumed some features of folk religion.

Although in the opinion of this reviewer the bibliography could have been augmented, for example including more non-English contributions, this book proves to be excellent. It also demonstrates the vitality of such studies and above all the indispensable need for interdisciplinary collaboration involving specialists from various fields. In this regard, we would like to point out the recent Italian project *Serica* “Sino-European Religious Intersections in Central Asia. Interactive Texts and Intelligent Networks”, funded by the Ministry of Education, University and Research and led by this reviewer together with Andrea Balbo (University of Turin). This project aims to develop global research about the Silk Road by means of a historical study of material culture artifacts, artistic products and texts in various languages, that mediated to Europe the knowledge of the Middle and Far East. Together with the creation of a digital library equipped with innovative semantic web and artificial intelligence tools and a diachronic array of geolocalized interactive maps, the project also involves a broad-spectrum dissemination of research results, which might be attractive and usable in the perspective of sustainable tourism as well.

Authors and Titles

- 1) *Hyun Jin Kim* – Introduction
- 2) *Raoul McLaughlin and Hyun Jin Kim* – Roman envoys and trade ambassadors in Han China
- 3) *Hyun Jin Kim* – The Xiongnu Huns from China and the East to Europe and the Roman Empire
- 4) *Raoul McLaughlin and Hyun Jin Kim* – Sogdian ambassadors of the Göktürks and the Eastern Roman Empire
- 5) *Samuel Lieu and Hyun Jin Kim* – ‘Nestorian’ Christians and Manichaeans as links between Rome and China
- 6) *Hyun Jin Kim* – Conclusion
- 7) Bibliography